UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

FROM THE SOIL, TO THE PEOPLE: THE RURAL QUESTION IN CHINESE LITERATURE 1940-2010

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

Jennifer S. Macasek

December 2022

The Dissertation of Jennifer S. Macasek
is approved:

_____
Professor Christopher Connery, chair

_____
Professor Gail Hershatter

_____
Professor Hunter Bivens

_____
Peter Biehl
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

Table of Contents:

Abstract

From the Soil to the People: The Rural Question in Chinese Literature 1940-2010

Jennifer S. Macasek

From the Soil, to the People shows how representations of rural society and the rural environment in Chinese literature from the 1940s to the present illuminate changing attitudes towards community, land, and modern life. It spans the explicitly political and state-regulated literature of the 1950s-1970s, literature produced under the relaxed guidelines of the 1980s, and literature written amid the increased commercialization of the 1990s and early 2000s. Conventional scholarship often separates these periods to examine them in isolation or focuses on pre- and post-socialist literature while ignoring the socialist period in between. In contrast, *From the Soil, to the People* uses "the rural question" to bring these disparate periods together, examining a persistent sociopolitical challenge through vastly different literary contexts.

From the Soil, To the People examines the relationship between formal shifts in the literary portrayal of rural society with changes in the social, economic, and political conditions for both rural society and literary production. Close readings of 2-3 canonical novels from each era serve as vantage points, revealing signs of shifting ideologies of the rural that allow a longer timeline to emerge. Examining traditional literary categories including characterization and description across an 80-year period of monumental change, *From the Soil, To the People* argues that the relationship

between literary production and historical change was not simply a matter of the representation of reality or a blueprint for an ideal society.

From the Soil, *To the People* breaks down monolithic, timeless approaches to thinking about rural life through its historicization of particular moments in literary production across place and time in an environment of constant, yet not linear, change. Tracing the fluctuations of rural ideologies across these changes shows moments of both forward movement and circular return. Questioning linear narratives of rural modernity and progress that persist in the present day, *From the Soil, To the People* opens up space to imagine new forms for "modern" life amid increasing skepticism that urban modernization is the only future for the human species.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the guidance and support of so many. First, thank you to my advisor Professor Christopher Connery, who helped me navigate many ups and downs throughout the process, always trusted that I was on the right path, and shared resources and guidance that helped me address a wide-ranging topic with precision and depth. Thank you to my dissertation committee members, Professors Gail Hershatter and Hunter Bivens. The coursework I took with Professor Hershatter and her patient, encouraging, and precise guidance helped me develop a historical consciousness that became foundational to how I formulated my research questions. Thank you to Professor Bivens for coursework that gave my work theoretical depth and context, for key conversations at moments when I felt stuck that helped me move forward, and for encouraging me to share my work with a broader audience. Thank you to my Qualifying Exam committee members, Professors Emily Honig and Loisa Nygaard. Professor Honig's coursework and perceptive questions helped me to better understand the relationships between social and political structures and the humans who live under and shape them. Professor Nygaard's coursework and guidance shaped my understanding of the relationships between humans and the land we live and work on, relationships at the heart of this project. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to work with this dedicated group of advisors, and I hope my work is better for it.

Thank you to the faculty and staff of the Literature Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz for coursework with depth and breadth across

time and space, professional development, and pedagogical training. Special thanks to Professors Vilashini Cooppan, Renee Fox, Carla Freccero, Susan Gillman, Kimberly Lau, G.S. Sahota, and Zac Zimmer. Words cannot express my gratitude to our Graduate Advisor, Janina Larenas, who guided so many of us through rough waters to solid ground. Thank you to faculty who welcomed a student from outside their discipline or institution into their courses that were so fruitful for me: Professors Lisa Rofel, Yiman Wang, Ban Wang, Tanner WouldGo, and Eve Zyzik. Thank you to my teacher and mentor Tingting Wu for giving me the opportunity to share my love of Chinese language and literature with the students of UCSC. Thank you to my teachers, friends, and colleagues at Shanghai University and the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, especially Professors Wang Xiaoming, Luo Xiaoming, and Zhu Yu, and my fellow students and friends Hao Yuman, Wang Leiguang, and Deng Jian.

Thank you to my graduate student comrades, colleagues, and friends who provided crucial intellectual challenges, writing support, pedagogical exchange, labor solidarity, and most importantly, friendship. Special thanks to Lara Galas, Tara Thomas, Kate Ross, Xiaofei Gao, Evan Grupsmith, Stephanie Montgomery, Melissa Brzycki, Yizhou Guo, Kenan Sharpe, Eric Sneathen, Jared Gampel, Rachel Voss, Clara Qin, Azucena Lucatero, and Katherina Feng.

Thank you to my mentors at the University of Pittsburgh who sent me on this path so long ago: Professors Susan Andrade, Gabriella Lukacs, Xinmin Liu, and Susan Smith. Thank you to the first teachers who encouraged me in reading, writing,

and asking good questions: Sue Atchley, Cindy Pearson, and Marjorie MacKeown. Thank you to friends and family near and far whose unwavering support has made this possible, especially Maria Norman, Molly Dillon, Molly Exten, Elliott Mower, Adrian Brenneman, Eliza Dreier, Leslie Root, Emily Race, Elisabeth Reynolds, Brian Madden, Erin Sanford, Matt Macasek, Susan Walker, Gary Walker, Marlene Walker, Pamela Macasek, and Albert Macasek. I have the deepest well of gratitude for my parents, Michael and Cynthia Macasek, who sent me into the world with a love of learning and a sense of adventure. Thank you for always believing in me. Thank you to my partner J. for being my home no matter where we are in the world, and to our two cats for providing love, entertainment, and warmth throughout this long process.

Introduction

The term *nongmin* 农民 (peasant) was not commonly used in China until the early twentieth century. Myron Cohen has argued that intellectuals, reformers, and revolutionaries needed to create the idea of a backward peasant as the constituency of the "old society" to justify their desire to build a "new society" (151). At the end of the long twentieth century, the problem of the peasant, and rural society more generally, remains. Wen Tiejun, one of the foremost scholars, activists, and specialists on rural China in the postsocialist era, has described the current situation in the countryside as the *sannong wenti* 三农问题 (three-dimensional problem) of rural China" (287). According to Wen, these problems are "rural people, rural society, and rural production." He also argues that addressing the rural question has been at the center of the Chinese twentieth century. To the Nationalists in the 1920s, rural society was a subject of reform. To early Communists, it was a source of revolutionary potential, and for the Communist state after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, rural society became the focus of continual political campaigns and modernization efforts. After the Reform and Opening policy was put into place in 1978, rural society faced continued rapid socioeconomic change amid rapidly accelerating urbanization due to economic, social, and political forces.

My dissertation, "From the Soil to the People: The Rural Question in Chinese Literature 1940-2010," is concerned with the rural question across the Chinese twentieth century. I am interested in how this question has been reflected in literature

under different historical and political circumstances, specifically the fiction produced from the 1950s to the present.[1] I trace shifts in how the rural is portrayed in literary content and through literary form under a constantly shifting political environment for literary production. At the same time, I examine the relationship between shifts in the literary portrayal of the rural with changes in the material, social, and political-economic conditions of rural society, which for the purposes of this project includes both the rural population and the land with which their lives have been inextricably intertwined.

As both Cohen and Wen have noted, the rural question has been at the center of a long century of the Chinese project of modernization, taking the role of scapegoat, vanguard, or target for reform at different stages in the process. As Chinese society has entered the twenty-first century, this question has not disappeared, although the stakes have shifted. For example, most of China's industrial working class are rural migrants, and their lives are still deeply connected with rural life. From the early twentieth century to the present there has been a concerted effort from the perspective of the state, intellectuals and writers, academic sociologists, and literary critics to construct a coherent discourse on the peasantry. Creating a hegemonic definition of the land, the peasant, progress, the past, the modern, is often

[1] While my work generally addresses the theme of the rural question throughout the twentieth century, the primary texts and contexts are from the period of 1940-2010. The earlier twentieth century has been addressed more thoroughly in the literature (see X. Han; D.Wang "Fictional Realism" for notable examples). My focus on 1940-2010 highlights the relationship between and divide between the socialist and post-socialist periods in political, economic, and social organization alongside of literary form.

in service of creating a national Chinese identity, of creating a legible past that can inform a better future. What becomes most clear through an exploration of these narratives is the capacity of both the people and the land to exceed that control. Attention to narrative form, characterization, figurative language, and description across a nearly 80-year period of monumental change shows how rural fiction often undermines the narrative of linear progress so essential to twentieth century ideologies, while also not rejecting it outright in favor of a romantic return to a timeless and unchanging rural society. At the same time, it shows how the narrative of linear progress and the narrative of timeless rural society are often constituted through each other.

In an era of ongoing urbanization, whether driven by economic and social forces or state planning, as well as an increased urgency of attention to the relationship between people and land in the face of climate change, these texts show the power of literary representation in times of extreme change. They demonstrate the importance of attentiveness to aesthetic qualities such as the beauty and ugliness of life and how these qualities are defined in different historical moments. This is not a time to reject the rural in the service of progress or development, nor is it a time for a romantic return to the rural as a refuge from the challenges that modernity brings. Instead, a commitment to reading the rural—paying attention to the relationships between the past and the future, the rural and the urban, the people and the land, the seer and the seen—provides a rich soil for the growth of a better understanding of the current conditions of life, what it is and what we may want it to become.

Overall approach to the dissertation

My dissertation analyzes representations of the peasantry, the rural environment, and historical change in Chinese short stories, novellas, and novels about the countryside from the 1950s to the present. Throughout, I demonstrate how shifts in literary forms reflected changes in peasant life and relationships to the land and established a national image of the peasantry, with varying ideological implications. I trace the ways in which changes in these literary forms reflected historical and political change, whether directly due to top-down guidelines for literature during the Mao era, or indirectly due to the experimentation during the relaxed standards of the 1980s and the increasing pressures of the market in the 1990s and 2000s. I am also interested in the relationship and mutual influence between literary representation of the peasantry and landscape and changes in policy and daily life. In addition to my examinations of changes in literary form, I trace shifts in government policy towards the peasantry and analyze changes in the content of the literature that accompanied these political movements. Across each era, the peasants experienced fundamental changes in land ownership and usage, labor value, everyday life, and conceptions of human nature and values. Scholarship on twentieth century rural China has examined how state policy was implemented in rural villages in both the socialist and postsocialist eras,[2] the impact of the sent-down youth on rural China

[2] See Brown, Brown and Johnson, Hershatter, H. Li, Unger.

and how rural China impacted the sent-down youth,[3] and how intellectual debates surrounding the peasantry in the postsocialist era depicted vastly different opinions on which direction China should take and how it should develop.[4] My work acknowledges these questions and examines how the literary creations surrounding these issues shed light on or complicate them.

For example, socialist realist novels such as Zhao Shuli's 赵树理 (1906-70) *Sanliwan* 三里湾 (*Sanliwan Village* 1955) or Liu Qing's 柳青 (1916-1978) *Chuangye shi* 创业史 (*The Builders* 1960) show peasants working together to achieve common goals and educating those who are resistant to the new world.[5] Many novels from the postsocialist era, like Yan Lianke's 阎连科 (1958-) *Ding zhuang meng* 丁庄梦 (*Dream of Ding Village* 2005) or Yu Hua's (余华 1960-) novel *Xiongdi* 兄弟 (*Brothers* 2008) portray peasants lying and cheating their neighbors to make money

3 See Bernstein, Bonnin, Honig and Zhao.
4 See Anagnost, J. Cao, Coase and Wang, Day, Oi, Wen.
5 The concept of socialist realism is used broadly here. The term "socialist realism" was less popular in China than in the Soviet Union and Europe. "Revolutionary literature" and "revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism" were more common. I use the broad term to gather together developing and often in flux definitions of a literary form that in its most basic definition argued that a truly realist literature would necessarily demonstrate a grasp of revolutionary politics and their centrality to depicting society. These narratives generally follow a linear style influenced by both the bourgeois Western novel and the soviet socialist realist literature. However, under the umbrella of socialist literature, there were often debates over character traits, plot points, and themes, with relative openness and restrictions at different periods from 1942-1978. By using this umbrella term, I refer to all literature produced under the changing guidelines of the socialist state. I am not only interested in the common questions of how tone, content, and style are both directed by and evade political control. I am also interested in the ways that socialist realism creates a space for new imaginations of political possibility for characters and readers.

or develop property. I ask how literature about the peasantry reflects social and political changes and examine the gaps between the images portrayed in literature and the conditions that inspired them. I also study the correlations and contradictions between literature and history to explore the ways that these ideologically constructed images of the peasantry may have influenced policy, social values, and individual aspirations.

Through this engagement with literary, historical, and social science research on the peasantry and the countryside in the twentieth century in China, my work bridges a gap between two common approaches to the analysis of twentieth century Chinese literature. While many literary studies of twentieth century Chinese literature reference historical studies, these are often relegated to footnotes and not taken as a subject that exists in context with literary texts. On the other hand, historical studies may focus on literature to exemplify historical trends or evidence, but not pay as much attention to issues of form and style, although these issues often have historical and political significance.[6] By historicizing literature, noting shifts in style, form, and content, I examine both historical trends and literary qualities and the ways they intersect. I therefore combine close reading with historical studies to look at the gaps between art and history as well as the alignments.

6 See Bonnin, DeMare.

Historical context

In a nation striving for modernity, whether through socialism or capitalism, for revolutionaries or reformists, the peasant has represented both a target for change and a measure of progress.[7] From the reform period of the late Qing through the Republican Era, Chinese intellectual and political leaders were concerned with how to develop a modern nation-state. Prasenjit Duara has noted the importance of recognizing this nationalism as an attempt at creating a singular linear narrative of History that often ignores, purposely or subconsciously, the complexities of history that do not fit the narrative (4). If the modern nation-state requires a modern citizenry, how did the creators of the Chinese nation-state plan to create this citizenry? Although many of the debates around the creation of the nation occurred in urban centers such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Nanjing, China's population was still 80 percent rural at the time of these debates. Whether styled as "the people," "commoners," "villagers," or "peasants," reforming this population was seen as central to the project of creating a modern nation-state.

Myron Cohen explains how the term “peasant,” though it existed in the pre-imperial and imperial period, acquired its contemporary meaning as a loanword from the Japanese, who used the term in their readings and translations of Western political and sociological texts. The fresh emptiness of the term "peasant" allowed these elites

7 See Y. Zhang for an excellent discussion of the complexity of the term modernity as it has been applied to the twentieth century in China. Here I am using the term in a relatively simplistic way, to describe industrialized society.

to fill it with whatever content they desired: usually the idea of a backwards, ignorant, pitiable figure that needed an elite class to lead it into modernity. Cohen suggests that contemporary Chinese social scientists such as Fei Xiaotong were the only ones to recognize positive qualities worthy of preserving in rural life, while for the Communists and other modernizers rural life needed to be completely revolutionized.

As the Communists gained power in rural areas during the war against Japan and the ensuing civil war with the Nationalists (1937-1949), it became clear that winning over the peasants was key to gaining control of the nation.[8] The socialist modernization programs initiated under Mao both depended on peasant grain and attempted to transform how that grain was produced. Although these programs were often initiated with the stated goals to bring peasants out of poverty into prosperity and modern citizenship as equal members of the Chinese nation, they often led to exploitation, especially in the form of grain extraction.[9] Postsocialist (1978-present) shifts in land management and cultivation were encouraged to increase production, yet have led to increased inequality and a massive rural to urban migration that has left no part of the country unaffected.[10]

8 See Kelliher, Selden.
9 See Ash, Brown, Thaxton, Wemheuer and Manning.
10 See footnote 6 above, also Chan and Selden, Coase and Wang, Martin, H. Yan.

Literary context

In this environment, it is no wonder that the rural question is and has been a major focus of literary and artistic production in China throughout the twentieth century. Early twentieth-century writings on rural life ranged from ethnographic and sociological texts by Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 (1910-2005) and Chen Hansheng 陈翰笙 (1897-2004), to short fiction including the pastoral and nostalgic work of Shen Congwen 沈从文 (1902-88) and the satirical and critical writing of Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936). These writings were contemporaneous with various Nationalist government efforts to reform the peasantry, from attempted eradication of superstition and religion to increased efforts to provide schooling and health care.

In Communist-run base areas during the civil war with the Nationalists in the early 1930s and after the Communist Party gained control in 1949, the government enacted radical changes in the ownership and management of land from private holdings to different kinds of collectives. At the same time, it implemented cultural programs and literary policies to change peasant culture to adapt to these changes and even to turn peasants into writers through education and writing workshops. The literary production that accompanied these efforts included socialist realist novels and short stories written according to the guidelines of the state. Socialist realism in China was inspired by Soviet Union policies, but was reworked in Chinese Communist literary thought, including Zhou Yang's 周扬 (1909-89) "Socialist Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism" (1933) and Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 (1893-1976) "Yan'an

Talks on Art and Literature" (1942).[11] Both works argued that writers needed to write not to illustrate political dogma, but instead should ground their narratives in a thorough examination of the realities of life gained by experience, especially among the working class. Later, the concept of "revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism" also encouraged depicting the world not just as it is, but as it should be, leading to what some have suggested is the blind idealism of the literature of the era.[12] Dramatic early land reform novels including *Taiyang zhao zai Sanggan heshang* 太阳照在桑干河上 (*The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River* 1954) by Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904-86) and *Baofeng zhouyu* 暴风骤雨 (*Hurricane* 1948) by Zhou Libo 周立波 (1908-79), comic short stories and novellas such as *Li Shuangshuang xiaozhuan* 李双双小传 ("A Brief Biography of Li Shuangshuang") from the period between 1949 and the Cultural Revolution by Li Zhun 李准 (1928-2000), and the optimism of Cultural Revolution works by Hao Ran 浩然 (1932-2008) both demonstrated the shifts in literary policy coming from the center and depicted peasant heroes and enlightened cadres overcoming backwards thinking to create a new and better countryside.

After Mao's death, agricultural production shifted from collective ownership to household production, while relaxed control of the literary world led to a flourishing of rural memoirs and fiction written primarily by youth who had been sent to the

11 See Chung and Falchikov, B. Wang "Words and Their Stories."
12 See B. Wang, "Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism," King "Milestones."

countryside during the Cultural Revolution and earlier as part of a mass state campaign that encouraged students to work alongside and learn from the peasants.[13] Compared to the socialist realist rural fiction that preceded them, these works were much more varied in style, tone, and content. Gao Xiaosheng's 高晓声 (1928-1999) satirical yet empathetic depiction of peasant difficulties in adjusting to reform signaled a return to the critical realist style of Lu Xun.[14] Zhang Chengzhi's 张承志 (1948-) elegiac depictions of his experiences in Inner Mongolia, Mo Yan's 莫言 (1955-) experiments with magical realism, darkness, and violence, and the ambiguity of Han Shaogong's 韩少功 (1953-) fragmented memories have been categorized as part of the *xungen* 寻根, or "roots-seeking" movement, in which writers explored rural life and folk belief to explore the deep history of Chinese culture. Works from this period show a multitude of attitudes towards the peasantry, rural life, and the possibility of social and cultural change or progress.

In 1990s Chinese literature experienced an increase in mass-market fiction and consumerism that was focused on urban narratives, sensationalism, genre fiction, television, film, and the internet. At the same time, writers, editors, and readers still maintained an interest in rural life. Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Jia Pingwa 贾平凹 (1952-), all writers associated with the roots-seeking movement, continued to publish novels exploring rural life in the 1990s to great acclaim. In the 2000s, Yan Lianke's

13 See Z. Cao, Bonnin.
14 See Feuerwerker, Ch. 5.

Dream of Ding Village explored the effects of the AIDS crisis on a village in contemporary rural China, and Liu Zhenyun's 刘震云 (1958-) short fiction addressed the increasingly common phenomenon of leaving the village and returning, tracing these journeys through detailed depictions of intergenerational relationships and everyday life. Many of the works in this period adopted a more cynical and satirical tone than the ambiguous, nostalgic, or elegiac tones of the 1980s fiction.

Focus on the peasant

Throughout my examination of rural literature across the twentieth century, a focus on depictions of the peasant plays a central role. Since Lu Xun's *A Q zhengzhuan* 阿 Q 正传 "The True Story of Ah Q," (1921), depictions of the peasant in the twentieth century have often been either explicitly intended to be read as symbolic of the Chinese national character or interpreted symbolically by readers who superimpose this role onto the characters regardless of the author's intent. "The True Story of Ah Q" has been widely discussed as an early twentieth century allegory about the faults of the Chinese people as a whole (Feuerwerker Ch. 3). The image of "Ah Q" has re-emerged in discussions of peasant literature ever since, whether as a foil (liberated peasants are no longer bumbling idiots like Ah Q) or as an ongoing symbol of peasant backwardness: Han Shaogong's character Bing Zai in *Ba ba ba* 爸爸爸 ("Ba ba ba" 1985) has been read as a contemporary Ah Q, implying that by the end of the twentieth century perhaps nothing has changed in the character of the

peasant, or of the nation, after all (Lau).

Yet despite the centrality of the peasantry in the literature itself, much of the scholarship on this literature has instead focused on the author of the text, the role of the intellectual within the stories, or both. Studies of rural literature have addressed the role of the intellectual not simply as the center of interest, but rather as a figure through which the peasant is represented, examining the sometimes-problematic nature of this representation. The question of how to represent the peasant and who can do so, and why, has stimulated debate among writers and scholars since the earliest articulations of the Communist policies toward art and literary production, and it continues to the present. While these inquiries have proven to be important and fruitful, they also tend toward an overemphasis on the writer and his or her role as an intellectual and spend less time exploring the representations of the peasantry and of rural life created by that writer outside of the lens of accuracy or ideology.

Due in part to these questions of representation, much of the scholarship on rural literature is focused on the accuracy of these portrayals and the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the authors' perspectives. This trend can be found in studies that focus on the socialist realist era, such as Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker's work on Zhao Shuli, and the postsocialist era, such as Huang Yibing's work on Zhang Chengzhi.[15] The general concerns of these critics lie more in tracing shifts in intellectual history rather than in the themes of the work themselves, leaving room for much more work to be done on the rural texts of both socialist realism and the postsocialist period. For example, what

15 See Feuerwerker Ch 4, Y. Huang Ch. 4.

is the significance of peasant subjectivity in these narratives, compared to the narratives in which the peasants are simply objects to be described and analyzed? Does depicting peasants as subjects or objects necessarily align with a particular political position or consequence? I suggest that these alignments may not be as clean as one might assume. How is the depiction of the peasantry dependent on literary form? To answer these questions, my work moves beyond the intellectual writer and instead combines close readings of the texts and sociological context to understand how these texts were both influenced by and helped to create a complex history of overwhelming political, economic, and social change.

Human relationship to the land and depictions of land

However, a thorough examination of the rural problem as seen through the history of literature demands a scope that moves beyond the image of the peasant. Also crucial to this conversation is an understanding of the relationship of literature to land and landscape. Raymond Williams's classic text, *The Country and the City*, demonstrates how central imaginations of the land and of its residents have been to Britain's understanding of itself as a nation and as an empire. Throughout this classic text, he deconstructs and historicizes the recurring ideology of the "timeless rhythm of agriculture and the seasons" (Williams 2). He traces the increased ability of capitalism to determine the ways that land is both used and imagined, while at the same time determining the sole identities and purposes of the land's inhabitants.

Similarly, in China, descriptions and imaginations of the peasant have been inextricably caught up with descriptions of the land. Building on Williams's insights, I argue that the ideological character of descriptions of land and peasant during the socialist period have certain distinctive features compared with capitalism. While one effect of capitalism on the imaginary of the land and the peasant is to erase the laborer and focus on visual consumption of the landscape in determining the value of rural land and society, socialism tends to highlight the importance of the laborer and labor's role in transforming the land. What I take from Williams is his style of interrogation, although my conclusions may follow a different path. I do not want to paint capitalist and socialist ways of managing labor and the land as polar opposites. For example, as Kojin Karatani suggests, a modern scientific perspective on landscape transforms both people and land into objects to be controlled, not subjects able to determine their own futures. This perspective can be found across both capitalist and socialist aesthetic portrayals of landscape. Therefore, my work pays attention to the ways that "modernization," including socialist modernization, may share some characteristics with European capitalist modernization and the historical roots of those similarities.

Early sociological texts such as Fei Xiaotong's *From the Soil,* and the genre of *xiangtu xiaoshuo* 乡土小说 (native land literature) that was a major fixture of the early twentieth century, see the land as a constituent part of peasant identity. In the PRC era, attitudes towards the ability of the peasant to modernize and reform were also applied to the land itself. Mao's version of a fable from classical literature in

which a foolish old man was able to move a mountain despite the disparaging remarks of others became a metaphor for the revolutionary spirit. However, the metaphor in this fable was also applied literally to the land: stories about the model agricultural village Dazhai constantly used the fable to describe the feats used to transform the land and increase productivity (Mittler Ch. 4). Finally, the ambivalence towards and even abjection of the peasant in the post-Mao era occurred alongside heated debates over how to manage the land, whether that be debates over land-use and property rights or environmental preservation.[16] All of these dynamics, in each period, have been reflected in literature, yet they have also been influenced by literature. For example, in the socialist period, Mittler has demonstrated how the "Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountain" and its appearance in novelizations of the agricultural model village of Dazhai helped to disseminate the ideological values at stake in the program, while the image of the timeless peasant depicted in some roots-seeking literature and 1980s films depicting rural life was congruent with and helped to justify national policies of privatization of land as a means to reform "backwards" peasants. My research asks whether there are continuities across these periods in conceptions of the human relationship to the land. In contrast to an ecocriticism which often avoids or evades the human and the social, or a socio-political form of reading that avoids or evades the natural or sees the natural as exclusively a metaphor for the individual psyche, my approach looks at how land and people are mutually constituted in rural literature and argues that this constitution is a

16 See Ash and Edmonds, Day, McKinley and Griffin.

historical process.

Form, content, and the imaginaries of history, the present, and the future

Representations of rural life in literature are deeply entangled with ideologies of temporality: whether that be the concept of rural society as timeless, the vanguard of the future utopia, or stagnant and ridden with trauma. Fredric Jameson's work on history and form has shown the ways in which literary form can be shaped by historical, political, and economic change and how close attention to form can bring to light dynamics that might not be visible otherwise.[17] From nativist literature to socialist realism to post-Mao modernist and other experimental forms, depictions of the peasantry and the land have reflected and shaped dominant ideologies of temporality.

As I analyze the shifts from socialist realist fiction to the experimental forms of postsocialist-era literature about the countryside, I am particularly interested in the concept of realism and how it shifts over these periods. Scholarly literature on socialist realism has been concerned with how "real" it was. This scholarship has examined questions regarding the backgrounds of writers on peasant subjects, the difference between socialist realist stories and their source material,[18] the fluctuations in guidelines for socialist realism that shifted from "realism" to "romanticism,"[19] and

17 See Jameson, “Marxism and Form.”
18 See Feuerwerker, DeMare.
19 See Chung and Falchikov, B. Wang, “Words and Their Stories.”

the effects of the strict formulas of the Cultural Revolution.[20] Socialist realism has often been compared negatively with "critical realism," associated with the 1920s and 1930s writer Lu Xun and some writers from the postsocialist era, due to its distance from lived reality.[21] However, when judged by the goals of socialist realism itself, its formal qualities reveal a different logic—not simply the representation of reality, but rather the production of reality through its attempts to change culture and worldviews. It is not my aim to valorize critical realism, socialist realism, or the experimental stylistic choices of postsocialist writers about the peasant. Rather, I am interested in the ideologies of the peasant, rural society, land, and chronology that these forms project and produce through their stylistic choices, content, and themes.

Recent English-language studies tracing themes throughout twentieth century Chinese literature have examined issues of humanism, psychology, and history and trauma,[22] yet these studies often struggle to incorporate the socialist realist era with the literatures that came before and after. This trend is shifting, as a few monographs focused on socialist realist literature have begun to appear in English in recent years.[23] Although these works do provide some interesting analysis of the texts, they often devote significant attention to justifying the need to study a literature that in the past had been dismissed as propaganda, which can detract from their ability to thoroughly address the work itself. In addition, due in part to the relatively recent emergence of

---

20 See P. Clark, Mittler, Pang, Lan Yang.
21 See Qi and Wang, Widmer and Wang.
22 See Button on humanism; Larson on psychology; and Berry, Braester, and B. Wang "Illuminations from the Past" on history and trauma.
23 See King "Milestones," Cai "Revolution," Van Fleit Hang, Yang.

interest in socialist realist work, these works often start and end within the socialist period, and rarely cross over into the postsocialist era.

This renewed focus on the distinctive ways that socialist realism constructs the peasant, land, and temporality also helps examine the postsocialist literary imaginaries in a new light. It is common for scholars to compare these writings to the early twentieth century native soil fiction of Shen Congwen and the critical realist style of Lu Xun,[24] but examining them in the context of their more immediate predecessors provides a new perspective for understanding their formal experimentation and the way it affects how the thematic material is perceived.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One, “Collectivity as form in Zhao Shuli’s *Sanliwan Village*,” turns to the "revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism" of depictions of everyday life and political change in the 1950s and early 1960s. Analysis of *Sanliwan Village* shows how Zhao Shuli’s formal choice to disperse the action of the novel among a wide variety of characters diverges from the major trend at the time to feature a central socialist hero as the narrative and moral focus of model socialist realist novels such as Li Zhun’s *Li Shuangshuang*, and Liu Qing's *The Builders.* This form allows Zhao to put into literary practice the political belief that socialism needs to be built collectively, not solely within changes in the consciousness of individuals. The

24 See Widmer and Wang.

process of building is also reflected in the novel's treatment of the landscape of the village, which is transformed throughout the novel from individual family plots into collectively managed farmland in part to facilitate a plan to construct a canal through the village.

Chapter Two, "'A just and thorough knowledge": re-historicizing the rural in Zhang Chengzhi's *Rivers of the North,"* explores the ambiguities of the experimental forms of 1980s fiction and how writers in the roots-seeking movement used ambivalence towards history and morality to address the immediate past and navigate a rapidly changing present. Using primary texts such as Zhang Chengzhi's *Beifang de he* 北方的河 (*Rivers of the North* 1984) and Mo Yan's *Hong Gaoliang* 红高粱 (*Red Sorghum* 1987), it interrogates different approaches to the representation of rural life in this period of great economic and political change and relaxed political guidelines for artistic production. Examining various ways of portraying rural life, from grounded idealism to grotesque realism, this chapter argues that writers in this period both contributed to and wrote against the mainstream image of the peasant as a timeless figure, while depictions of land in these diverse texts often function as symbolic representations of an unknowable other in contrast to the city's mundane routines.

Chapter Three, "'The village has withered:' capitalist realism in Yan Lianke's *Dream of Ding Village,"* engages the rural imaginaries of the 1990s and 2000s, examining how the rural was highlighted or obscured in the literature of an increasingly commercial culture, especially looking at the ways sensationalistic tone

and narratives both satirized and succumbed to increasing market pressures. Examining primary texts including Yan Lianke's *Dream of Ding Village* and Yu Hua's *Brothers,* it explores how writers depicting rural life responded to and participated in the commercialism and sensationalism of the literary world in this period, while also navigating the ongoing chaotic and complex changes in rural life. Examining the role of explicit sexuality, scatological irreverence, and absurdist tragicomedy, it argues that these often extreme portrayals of rural life depict critiques of modernity, while at the same time submitting to its hegemony.

"From the Soil to the People: The Rural Question in Chinese Literature 1940-2010," breaks down monolithic, timeless approaches to thinking about rural life through its historicization of concrete, particular moments in literary production across place and time in an environment of constant, yet not linear, change. Tracing the movement of rural ideologies across these changes shows moments of both forward movement and circular return. Questioning linear narratives of rural modernity and progress that persist in the present day, this work opens up space to imagine new forms for "modern" life amid increasing skepticism that urban modernization is the only future for the human species.

Chapter 1: Collectivity as form in Zhao Shuli's *Sanliwan Village*

Introduction

As we have seen in the introduction, the rural question was central to the Chinese state-building project, and consequently became central to state goals for literary production. While pre-revolutionary rural Chinese literature often took the form of depicting tradition and seeking an essential quality of Chinese culture, following the perspective of anthropologist Fei Xiaotong, revolutionary literature had the explicit goal of constructing peasants as the subject of history (Mao "Talks," Apter and Saich 130). However, across both periods, "how to concretely describe a village also encompassed the challenge of how to narrate China" (He 41). Therefore, as the state's goals for peasant mobilization shifted from military mobilization and land reform to the post-49 project of building a new nation, the topics of rural novels shifted as well. Pre-49 revolutionary novels that demonstrated peasant military valor or the violent struggles of land reform[1] gave way to the collectivization novel, which narrated the more subtle struggles of transforming the countryside after the Communist Party had gained control.[2]

---

1 For more on these texts, see DeMare, Volland Ch. 2.

2 In this chapter I am indebted to the work of Cai Xiang "Revolution" (33-34), Krista Van Fleit Hang (7), Richard King "Milestones" and other recent studies of Chinese socialist fiction for their elaborations on the ways that the content and form of these texts was continuously in flux throughout this period, as opposed to some earlier portrayals of socialist fiction as homogenous propaganda. Although norms for literary

The metaphor of spring was common in pre-1949 land reform novels: the long winter of exploitation in the countryside was over, and the peasants were awakening to new life. This trope was not unique to Chinese socialist realist novels, having been a common Soviet trope (Volland 39). The central text of this chapter, Zhao Shuli's *Sanliwan Village*, develops this seasonal metaphorical structure further. Most of the events of the novel take place in September, during the harvest season. The seeds of land reform that were planted in the early days of the revolution were ripening into a more thorough collectivization. For the state, the collectivization movement was the time to harvest all the efforts put into the revolution — life was no longer a struggle to survive. Rather, it was a time to ripen, to progress into the next stage in history and build a new nation.[3]

This chapter reads *Sanliwan Village* as a particular moment in the process of narrating a village and narrating China. *Sanliwan Village* was based on Zhao Shuli's experience observing and participating in early collectivization efforts in Shanxi in 1951-1952 (Feuerwerker 137). During this period, rural production policy was shifting from one that relied on *huzhudui* 互助队 (mutual aid teams) in which peasants retained household land they had received in land reform and shared labor,

---

production were overall dictated by the state, these norms were continuously modified and debated. This allows for an analysis that examines the particularities of any given work for how it contributed to the debates and visions that made up this complex period of literary creation.

3 For examples of both the rhetoric of nation-building in the early 1950s and various campaigns to enact this project, see Strauss 2006. For a case study of this period in a northern village, see Friedman et. al Ch. 5.

to one that encouraged *nongye shengchan hezuoshe* 农业生产合作社 (agricultural producer's cooperatives)[4] in which land, labor, animals, and tools were shared in common, while each peasant received shares of the harvest based in part on what and how much they contributed.[5] The novel depicts this process in a model village, showing the struggles activists faced when convincing more conservative villagers to join the cooperative. The conflict materializes around the struggle to build a canal that will help to irrigate the cooperative's agricultural efforts. Good land that is perfectly situated for the canal is owned by one of the most conservative families in the village. Through inter- and intra-household organizing, the family reluctantly agrees by the end of the novel to join the cooperative.

Sanliwan Village's narrative structure helps Zhao demonstrate the importance of the collective action of the peasantry in creating this new world. While other revolutionary rural novels follow the Soviet model of centering the action around a model hero who valiantly struggles to bring his entire community into the socialist future,[6] *Sanliwan Village* disperses these actions among a set of mostly younger villagers. In part through organizing their parents, in part through joining households through courtship and marriage, these activists create the material change in land management that is necessary for the village's goal to build the canal. *Sanliwan*

4 These were later renamed lower producers cooperatives after the higher producers cooperatives and communes were created.

5 For more on the changes in rural policy throughout the 1950s described above, see Hershatter 130-136, MacFarquhar 153-184, Wemheuer 100-104, and Hou, Ch. 2. As discussed later in this paper, the exact nature and pace of these changes was vigorously debated among party officials.

6 See K. Clark, J.Huang, Volland, for more analysis of this trope.

Village therefore moves on from the major tropes of the land reform novel and differs from other canonical rural novels from the early socialist period such as Liu Qing's *The Builders* and Li Zhun's *A Brief Biography of Li Shuangshuang*. While all of the novels share the vision of describing and encouraging socialist transformation in the countryside, their strategies for implementing that vision differed. *Sanliwan Village* both builds on and breaks away from realist and socialist realist traditions in an attempt to create a new novel form for a new world. Through both formal structure and the content of the narrative, *Sanliwan Village* puts into practice the theory that socialism needs to be built collectively, not solely within changes in the consciousness of individuals.

The novel's title, *Sanliwan Village*, sets up an expectation that must be realized throughout the novel: the focus of the action is the village as a whole, comprising its people, its land, and how the activity and labor of the people change the land. The novel documents a transition from people acting in their own private interest to acting in the public interest, literally becoming part of a co-operative and ideologically transforming their relationships to their community. At the same time, land used as individualized personal property is transformed into the co-operative: more concretely, because of this process, an infrastructure project—building the canal—is made possible. The novel's use of this specific goal materializes a series of values that were important at the time: modern scientific farming, increases in production, and working for the common good as opposed to individual interest. The process is described incrementally and challenges are faced and surmounted along the

way. The following analysis traces this process as it emerges through peasant organizing and changes in ideologies and use of land. “Building the collective village, building the collective novel” explores how the collective subject of the novel is formed and changes throughout the text, while “Transforming the land” examines the role of land and landscape in narrating the village. Throughout, I ask what vision of a village is being put forth by the text at this moment in history? During a time of changing attitudes towards the political nature of the peasant and rapid policy change around land management and use, what can this novel tell us about a particular imaginary of rural subjectivity through its depiction of the peasant relationship to the land?

Building the collective village, building the collective novel

The following is a discussion of key scenes that build the image of a village as a whole unit: “Sanliwan is a model village—they established their work early and had many skillful cadres with substantial experience” (Zhao 2).[7] This description of Sanliwan Village from the very beginning of the text shows the reader that there is already a certain amount of ideological buy-in in the village — the collectivization

7 三里湾是个模范村-----工作开辟得早，敢不多，而且干部的能力大，经验多。 (note: all translations are adapted from the Gladys Yang edition.)

process does not need to start from scratch. At the same time, it hints that even in a village that is already on the road to socialism, there will still be challenges.

The lack of a central figure through which to experience the events of the novel helps the reader to maintain a birds-eye view of the village as a whole, observing on a large scale the ways that collectivization transforms the social and geographic structure of an entire village. This narrative viewpoint becomes literal and spatial in Chapter 15: *Zhandegao, kandebian* 站得高，看得遍 (Standing on high, looking over everything).[8] Deputy Village Head Zhang Yongqing takes the visiting Section Chief He to the top of a hill to view the entire village:

> Under the midday sun, the buildings in the village looked like doll's houses put down in large or small yards among clumps of trees. Though it was just over a *li* away, you could see everything there quite clearly--the mill for husking grain and the millstones, donkeys, fowl, dogs, grown-ups and children… (66)[9]

The reader takes on the role of Section Chief He, being guided through the village by the narrator. As He "sees everything quite clearly," the novel also attempts to help the reader see everything clearly—from political meetings to conflicts within the home, from changes in land use to changes in labor practices. The novel does this through depictions of inter-generational, interpersonal, and inter-family conflict and negotiation. Moving between public and private space, between individual and

8 The chapter title was translated as "A Bird's-eye View of the Village" in the Yang edition.

9 在将近晌午的太阳下看来，村里的房子，好像事先做好了一座一座摆在秘密不匀的杂树林下，摆成大大小小的院子一样，山顶离村子虽然还有一里多路，可是就连碾、磨、骡、驴、鸡、狗、大人、小孩。。。。。都能看得清清楚楚。

collective, the novel traces how Sanliwan Village undergoes cooperativization from the perspective of the collective: a collective that is made up of a variety of individual parts. Relationships between father and daughter, neighbor and neighbor, party members and outsiders, and educated and uneducated youth show that socialism is not something that can be built within the consciousness of a single figure. Instead, it must be built through relationships—it is a social process.

An early scene depicts an easy, almost natural collectivity in the village. Chapter 10 depicts the threshing-floor in the early harvest season: the sounds of hammering, women gossiping as they work, and children playing. At first glance, the reader sees how the threshing ground is divided into three groups of workers: members of the cooperative, the mutual aid groups, and individual farmers. The novel describes how much more efficiently the work is being done by the groups who are working together, but there is an affective appeal to the reader in the descriptions of the children playing while their parents work: "Laughing and shouting children were racing across and around the threshing-floor…The children were fighting or turning somersaults on the sheaves" (47).[10] All of the children, regardless of whether they come from cooperative families, mutual aid families, or individual farming families, are playing with the cooperative's children, because that is where the action is most lively and fun. The narrator writes "because children are not limited by the boundaries of economic categories, they were drawn in by the group of cooperative's

10 小孩们在场里场外跑来跑去闹翻天。。。在谷穗堆里翻着筋斗打闹。

children early on" (47).[11] This scene helps to show that although some families need to be guided more directly into the cooperative, there is already momentum there—it just needs to be encouraged and channeled. This mirrors one of the typical transformation narratives of the socialist realist novel as described by Katerina Clark: a progression from spontaneity to consciousness. Clark writes:

> The spontaneity/consciousness dialectic [is] the structuring force that shapes the master plot…In this dialectical model, 'consciousness' is taken to mean actions or political activities that are controlled, disciplined, and guided by politically aware bodies. 'Spontaneity,' on the other hand, means actions that are not guided by complete political awareness and are either sporadic, uncoordinated, even anarchic...or can be attributed to the workings of vast impersonal historical forces rather than to deliberate actions. (15)

While in this scene it is just hinted at, this transformation process is elaborated throughout the novel and will be the subject of further analysis in the following discussion.

From spontaneity to consciousness: activism in the space between home and village

The action of the novel revolves around a few families in the village and the omniscient narration shifts often between the minds and motivations of different characters. The younger generation weaves in and out of relationships, eventually finding the proper marriage partners. The older generation is reluctant to take the next steps towards collectivization. As the novel moves from subplot to subplot, it always

11 因为孩子们不受经济单位的限制，早被社里的小孩队伍吸取了。

shows how the peasants' lives are intimately interconnected: political action takes place within the home, while personal conflict and reconciliation are worked out in public. Decisions about romance are weighed with political considerations and have material consequences for achieving the political goal of growing the cooperative.

Clark's description of how the transformation from spontaneity to consciousness occurs in socialist realist literature emerges in *Sanliwan* as spontaneous inclinations towards collectivization (which should be encouraged) or towards personal gain (which should be discouraged) are politicized through the actions of the novel and transformed into a self-conscious, organized effort to expand the cooperative and build the canal. While this spontaneity is most clearly portrayed through multiple scenes of natural collectivity among children as discussed above, for the young adult characters whose development is central to the novel's plot, it looks more like the transformation from a naive desire to change their parents' minds about the commune and find suitable marriage partners to more concentrated efforts to achieve these goals developed over the course of the novel through interpersonal conflict and self-reflection.

Through the negotiation of romance and marriage, the novel portrays a set of changing social values: old criteria for a good match (education, property, family reputation) are giving way to new (political knowledge, bravery, manual skills). These changing mores occur against a background of the Marriage Law of 1950, "one of the most dramatic and far-reaching attempts by a state to reshape 'traditional' marriage and family structures and relations into those seen as more compatible with

the ‘modern’ world and with a specific political ideology” (Diamant xi). The law emphasized willingness in marriage, prohibited bigamy and child marriage, allowed for divorce and mediation, and encoded parental responsibility towards children. Although it was enforced and interpreted differently in urban and rural contexts and across different regions of China, the increased freedoms it granted provided a fruitful resource for writers seeking to depict a modernizing China.[12]

While tracking these interpersonal movements and decisions, the novel created an image of a “new peasant” that went beyond the more basic aspects of organizing families to join the cooperative. These changing value systems are demonstrated through a sort of love triangle that exists between three young activists whose families are at the center of much of the plot of the novel: Ma Youyi, Fan Lingzhi, and Wang Yumei, the younger sister of Party Secretary Wang Jinsheng. Both Fan Lingzhi and Ma Youyi have had a rudimentary amount of education, while Wang Yumei was not able to go to school. Both young women have an interest in Ma Youyi because he is a member of the Youth League and because he is well-educated. However, over time they realize he is not willing to stand up to his family in the service of the goals of socialism, so the attraction of his education wanes. A long digression into Fan Lingzhi’s thought processes on the matter narrates her changing consciousness:

> Lingzhi was in two minds about Youyi—both keen and not keen on him…it depressed her to think of the future, and this depression arose from a misconception: she felt a man who had studied should be better in every

12 For further analysis of the Marriage Law, its interpretation, and impacts, see K. Johnson, Diamant, Hershatter.

> respect than one who had not….Unfortunately, several months had gone by without the least sign of [political] progress on Youyi's part, and this was what depressed her. (93)[13]

At this moment in the narrative, Fan Lingzhi is disappointed in Ma Youyi, but she does not know what to do about it. She forces Ma Youyi to make a self-criticism for not standing up to his parents about their mistreatment of their daughter-in-law, but with regard to the progression of their relationship, nothing changes.

After a scene in which Fan Lingzhi works with Wang Yumei's second-oldest brother Wang Yusheng, on improving inventions for the cooperative, Fan Lingzhi's romantic attentions shift. Wang Yusheng does not have as much schooling as she does, but he is a hard worker and an intelligent inventor. However, at first she does not give in to her feelings due to her perception of his shortcomings: "Lingzhi couldn't help thinking how clever he was. But for his unfortunate 'lack of schooling' she would have considered him as a possible husband" (123).[14] Later, after days had gone by and Youyi had still not completed his self-criticism, Lingzhi continued to mull over her conundrum. Finally, she came to a conclusion: "She started comparing the two of them, and Yusheng beat Youyi in every respect. Yusheng gave all his thought to building socialism, Youyi to obeying his feudal-minded mother. 'I must start considering Yusheng!' she decided" (137).[15]

---

13 有翼这个人，在灵芝看来是要也要不得。。。可是一想到最后该怎么样就很苦恼。她这种苦恼是从她一种错误思想生出来的。她总以为一个上过学的人比一个没有上过学的人在各方面都要强一点。。。可惜几个月来就连有翼一点进步的影子也看不到，便觉得很苦恼。

14 要不是有个"没文化"的缺点，简直可以做自己的爱人了。

15 她又把有翼和玉生比较了一下。这一比，玉生把有翼彻底比垮了-----她从两

Fan Lingzhi's ongoing shift in consciousness does not happen instantaneously. At varying points in the latter half of the novel, she revisits this problem and slowly changes her mind. By the end of this chapter, she confesses her feelings to Wang Yusheng and finds out they are reciprocated. By the end of the novel, the two decide to get married. As Lingzhi makes her decision, a binary emerges between traditional peasant knowledge, manual labor, and invention on the one hand and abstract formal education on the other. By holding up Wang Yusheng as the more suitable choice for Fan Lingzhi, the novel critiques the viewpoint that a formal education would automatically lead to the correct ideological line or the ability to help push the village forward. At the same time, this binary is somewhat transcended by Fan Lingzhi herself, who has both an education and political consciousness. Cai Xiang has read a scene in which Fan Lingzhi lends her math skills to Wang Yusheng to improve his inventions as a reinforcement of the nation's commitment to scientific knowledge as a foundation of national modernization (*Revolution* 64). In this sense, Fan Lingzhi's progression throughout the novel perhaps most thoroughly provides a model for the transformation of consciousness desired by state ideology at the time.

Like Fan Lingzhi, Wang Yumei is also frustrated with Ma Youyi. For Wang Yumei, education becomes not just a standard for a good mate, but also something Yumei desires for herself. Throughout the novel, Wang Yumei must overcome her own envy of Fan Lingzhi and Ma Youyi's education and come to see her own worth

---

个人的思想行动上看，觉着玉生时时刻刻注意的是建设社会主义，有翼时时刻刻注意的是服从封建主义的妈妈。她想，就打一打玉生的主意吧！

as a productive member of the co-operative. Her eventual acceptance of Youyi's proposal happens on her own terms: not because of his education or perceived status, but because over time she and Lingzhi have convinced him to put revolutionary goals before his conservative family's pressure. In the end, Yumei accepts Youyi's proposal, but only after she has convinced him to break out from the influence of his conservative parents:

> There are some things I like about you, and some things I don't like…You're my teacher in night school, yet you're tied to your mother's apron-string…But most important of all, I belong to the co-op, while your family hasn't joined, and you needn't think I'm going to leave the socialist road and take the capitalist road!" (144-145) [16]

Throughout the novel, both young women continue to draw attention to the contradiction between Ma Youyi's youth league membership and activism and his inability to stand up to his family. Although it takes him multiple reprimands and a rejected proposal to change, he eventually does. When he and Yumei break off their portion of their family's land to join the co-op, his parents have little choice but to come along with them.

As the young people negotiate the complexities of courtship, their efforts to organize their own parents to join the co-op are intertwined. While many village families were part of the co-op at the beginning of the novel, some of the people holding out were impeding progress. "One great weakness of their co-op was the fact that they had too

16 因为你有赞成的地方，也有不赞成的地方。。。一方面你是我的文化先生，另一方面你还是你妈手里的把戏。。。更重要的是：我是社员，你家不入社，难道我愿意从社会主义道路上返到资本主义上去吗？

many people to too little land--and poor land into the bargain" (11).[17] Ma Duoshou (Ma Youyi's father)'s resistance is of special concern because the Ma family holds land that is crucial to the village's goal to build a canal to help irrigate farmland and transition the village towards more modern farming. The Ma family only chooses to join the cooperative once two of their four children's families break off their shares of the family property and join the cooperative, thereby making it impossible for the rest of the Ma family to have enough labor to profit from their high-quality land. [18] Through these intra-family struggles, older, more resistant villagers are convinced by their children of the necessity of the way forward. They do not necessarily wholeheartedly accept the new values being put forth by the party, but they no longer see any alternative. An entire chapter towards the end of the novel is devoted to a debate over the usefulness of this strategy and the ability of the Ma family to change. Party Secretary Wang Jinsheng and his younger sister Wang Yumei are at odds over whether Wang Yumei and Ma Youyi splitting off their property is truly the best strategy for winning over Youyi's parents. Jinsheng worries:

> "[earlier], they wouldn't take the socialist road themselves and were doing their best to stop others from taking it. Now they've put down their names for the co-op—that's a tremendous step forward. If Youyi still insists on splitting off, won't that look as if he doesn't trust them? (164) [19]

---

17 原来他们村里的农业生产合作社有个大缺点是人多，地少，地不好。
18 See Y. Yan for a discussion of the consequences of family division of property in the socialist period. I will discuss his work further in the following section on land in Sanliwan Village.
19 那时候，他们不止不愿走社会主义的路，反而还想尽办法来阻碍别人走社会主义道路；现在他们报名入了社，总算是进了一大步。有翼在这时候还要坚持分家，不是对这种进步表示不信任吗？

However, Wang Yumei eventually convinces him that the best way for the families to move forward with the co-op is to do it independently. Otherwise, if she lived with Ma Youyi's parents even as part of the co-op their old ways would persist and she would still be under their control. This debate demonstrates a few dynamics that are rare among Chinese socialist novels. Wang Yumei is younger than Wang Jinsheng, and he is the Party Secretary. In all respects, he would be expected to know best how the village should move forward and what his younger sister should do. By allowing her to have the final say here, the novel shows that she is fully capable of expressing her wishes for more radical change, and that those wishes should be respected.

In contrast, in Li Zhun's *Li Shuangshuang*, a novel from the Great Leap Forward about a young woman's contributions to her village's collective transformation, the titular heroine Li Shuangshuang's proposed changes to the village and the family structure need to be approved by external party voices. When she writes a big character poster arguing the village should build a canteen, her husband laughs at her, while the Old Party Secretary has the final word:

> Your wife Li Shuangshuang's poster is excellently written. Her suggestion will be really useful for our entire township's Great Leap Forward. It's not the case that she doesn't know anything, actually she knows a great deal. I'm going to take this poster with me. The township Party Committee will hold a special meeting to discuss this idea. (335-336) [20]

20 你爱人李双双这张大字报写得好得很，这个建议对咱们全乡大跃进要起很大作用。人家不是不懂什么，是懂得很多。你给我吧，我要把这张大字报拿走了，乡党委要专门开会研究这个建议。

While in both texts, conflict is worked out through discussion, there is a clear top-down authority in *Li Shuangshuang* that does not occur in *Sanliwan Village.* The trend of young activists being firmly guided by party higher-ups is echoed in *The Builders,* a collectivization novel that will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

Another holdout against cooperativization is Fan Lingzhi's father, Village Head and party member Fan Denggao. Party officials and activists are concerned that by not joining the cooperative despite his party membership, Fan will discourage other villagers from entering by weakening their faith in the party's policies. Although Village Head Fan Denggao's resistance to joining the cooperative is criticized in a party rectification meeting, it is not until he has a conversation with his daughter, Fan Lingzhi, in their own living room that he decides not only to join the cooperative but also to contribute his two mules rather than selling them for cash before he joins. At the party meeting, Fan first attempts to defend his actions:

> After the land reform, when the Party told me to produce more on my land, I produced more. Yet, now that I've produced a little more than most, everyone says I have capitalist ideas. I haven't had enough schooling, so I don't know what to do, and I only hope the Party will tell me again! What does the Party want me to do now? (181)[21]

The narrator has already disclosed that "Fan had been so set on his counter-attack that, instead of preparing to criticize his own faults, he had thought only of how to

21 土改过了，党要我努力生产我就努力生产。如果生产得多了一点了，大家又说我是资本主义思想。我收的教育不多，自己不知道该怎么办，最好还是请党说话！党又要我怎么办呢？

retaliate" (115).[22] Therefore, Fan's frantic tone appears disingenuous, and he completely elides the real reason he is criticized: that he uses his production surplus to buy mules, hire labor, and conduct petty trade. Cooperative Chairman Zhang Leyi, responds to Fan Denggao's complaint:

> With your better land and better conditions [after land reform], in a few years you got yourself a mule. Then you let Huang Danian and Manxi do your farming, while you drove that mule out to trade. Soon you turned one mule into two, and hired Wang Xiaochu as your mule-driver, so that you could stay at home as boss. Think for yourself—what sort of outlook is that! (116)[23]

Chairman Zhang's criticism of Fan is premised on bringing to light what Fan Denggao has left out in his narrative of his behavior since land reform. Zhang's list of Fan's mistakes accelerates in a linear speed, as if he were driving down a capitalist road. Joe Huang has read this scene as one that demonstrates coercive methods for encouraging peasants to participate in the cooperatives—Fan Denggao is being threatened with the loss of his Party status if he does not go along with the Party's plan (242).

However, Fan is not fully convinced in this moment. He returns home from the meeting in a huff: "he filled his bowl in silence and took it to the porch" (117).[24] Later that evening in a conversation with his daughter and his wife, Lingzhi continues to persuade him:

---

22 范登高只想倒打一耙，所以准备的是另一套话，并没有准备真正检讨错误。
23 不过你已经占了好地，生产的条件好，几年来弄了一头骡子，便把土地靠给黄大年和王满喜给你种，你赶上骡子去外边倒小买卖，一个骡子倒成两个，又雇个小聚给你赶骡了，你回家来当东家！你自己思想这叫什么主义？
24 自己默默地舀一碗饭躲到大门过道里去吃。

> If Dad, as a Party member, sells his mules before joining the coop, the villagers are bound to get wrong ideas. And if others who join follow his example, why the whole Party and Youth League—not to say all the cooperative members—will be against him!" (121)[25]

She appeals to his sense of leadership and pride, but also his material interest: "The cooperative sets a fair price and pays you one-tenth every year, so it's not much different from selling them and putting the proceeds in the bank" (121).[26] Although he does not give in by the end of this exchange, by the next day he fully commits to joining the coop. This shows how organization must happen both publicly in political settings like party rectification meetings and within the home, and both negative consequences and material benefit could be used to change someone's mind.

This exchange also demonstrates how the socialist era introduced new spatial ways of life for women. They were able to emerge (with others, but also alone) from the home into community spaces like schools and meetings (Hershatter 66). The novel's opening scene shows Wang Yumei at school and describes her return home, while Fan Lingzhi's movement back and forth between home, the co-operative headquarters, and political meetings becomes a central part of both her romance with Yusheng and her ability to mobilize her father to join the co-op. He Gaixia, the love interest of the hero of *The Builders*, and the aforementioned Li Shuangshuang also move regularly between their homes and public space and this movement drives their

---

25 我爹是党员，再入社以前先卖骡子，那还怎么能叫群众不发生误会呢？要是准备入社的人跟着我爹卖起牲口来，恐怕全体党，团员，全体社员都会反对他！

26 社里给你公平作价，每年按百分之十给你出息，还不跟你卖了把钱存在银行差不多吗？

political engagement and development. These new spatial experiences came alongside official policies to promote organizing within the home (Hershatter 132), organizing that would not be possible without experiences like going to school or attending public meetings.

The narrative arc of the young people's courtship decisions demonstrates a more thorough change in political consciousness than that undergone by Fan Denggao or Ma Duoshou. These changes do not happen quickly—they grow and change over the course of the novel as the three also engage with their families and the work of collectivization. There is an ongoing accumulation of experiences that needs to happen in order to catalyze internal change. Fan Lingzhi and Wang Yumei both take on increasingly important roles in the work of the cooperative over the course of the novel. For Lingzhi, this work brings her into close contact with Wang Yusheng, and she is able to see first-hand that his intelligence and work ethic, while not based in formal schooling, are admirable. For Wang Yumei, she is able to get over her own regret at not being able to attend school and develop a confidence that enables her to assert her own political demands when faced with Youyi's proposal. Through debates with Lingzhi and the struggle session with his parents over their mistreatment of his sister-in-law, Ma Youyi finally realizes that he cannot both please his parents and participate in the work of collectivization. While all of these youth are engaged in political organizing and political education, the novel uses their interpersonal interactions to demonstrate their changes in consciousness. In this way, it shows how their changes in political consciousness have permeated their entire

lives, and how those changes lead them to influence each other. This lateral, not top-down, mode of political education is rare in novels of this time.

Consciousness and Character

Sanliwan Village, like many other socialist novels, relies on conflict between the forces of progress and the resistance of old ways to depict the challenges of developing political consciousness. These conflicts are worked out between characters and within them. Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker has suggested that character was an essential focus of narrative value in this period because character was "regarded as the site where the moral and political issues of the story are supposed to be fought out and resolved" (121). Reading socialist literature, therefore, requires an attention to character that has been de-emphasized in western literary theory (Woloch 6). In his analysis of nineteenth century European social realist fiction, Alex Woloch notes how these novels mirror the sociopolitical changes their authors were trying to document in formal ways: minor characters, representing figures who do not fit the developed sense of the bourgeois hero, are actively drawn into the novel and then subordinated through various strategies: their flatness, their symbolism, and their eventual disappearance. Regardless of the author's desire to incorporate these figures into the novel, they continue to disappear. Woloch argues that this subordination is parallel to the way in which the working classes are subordinated to the needs of the bourgeois classes. Interestingly, he also notes that the nineteenth century social realist novel

attempts to represent characters from every class, yet only succeeds in developing the bourgeois characters with full interiority. Mirroring the "competing pull of inequality and democracy within the nineteenth century bourgeois imagination," in the abstract, "any character can be a protagonist," however, in the material sense "only one is" (31).

The twentieth century socialist novel in China has roots in the nineteenth century bourgeois novel—both indirectly through its engagement with Soviet socialist realist fiction, and directly: Zhao Shuli and many educated youth of his generation read Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and others. A close reading of *Sanliwan* expands the ways that socialist fiction can be read differently from western bourgeois fiction, despite its myriad influences and similarities. Woloch's demonstration of how nineteenth century novels make the working class invisible through the differentiation of major and minor characters is relevant here as a clear contrast to Zhao Shuli's formal choices. In form and content, Chinese novelists faced similar problems of where to grant attention within narrative space. Yet in a different political contest, with different stakes, Sanliwan's use of character-space reflects a different set of commitments and even possibly a different political reality. Unlike the asymmetry of focus found in the western realist novel between major and minor characters noted by Alex Woloch (32), Zhao maintains a symmetry between his multiple characters. While no author can actually give equal weight to every person in the setting they are trying to represent, and Zhao is no exception, the way he balances multiple plot lines featuring multiple characters does break free from the more

obvious asymmetry Woloch traces in the fiction he analyzes. Minor characters are not written off—they do not disappear. Rather, a set of characters who share the major spotlight all eventually "disappear" into the cooperative at the end.

At the same time, much of the scholarship of socialist realism has focused on the nature of the socialist hero, the protagonist. While socialist realist fiction has often been compared to the bildungsroman, this novel departs from the major tropes of both socialist realist fiction and the bildungsroman in a way that integrates a political ideology with stylistic choices. Nicolai Volland has argued that in Chinese socialist literature, "the valorization of the collective…replaces the individual as the agent of [socialist] cultural practice."[27] He further argues that "the collective" is "ultimately represented by the socialist state" (13). Moreover, the state is usually embodied in the "socialist hero:" either through the centering of party members from the outside who are sent to the village to mobilize, thereby depicting the state as the representative of collective goals and the agent for achieving them, or through the consistent need for higher officials to guide and legitimize local heroes' actions. Joe Huang's comments on *The Builders* are helpful here: he is reluctant to call the novel's central figure, Liang Shengbao, a hero because he never acts on his own intention—rather, "He is merely faithfully executing official policy and is perfectly well aware that the Party is behind him" (246).

---

27 Volland argues that socialist writing in China, including rural fiction, is cosmopolitan in the sense that it is international and modern. This part of his argument is less central to what I am thinking about here and therefore I have de-emphasized it in quoting him. For more details on that argument, see Volland (1-19).

However, *Sanliwan Village* is notable in that it focuses on many of the peasants of the village, not cadres from the outside or a single local hero. Zhao's ability to center the peasantry led his work to be lauded from an early stage. Zhou Yang, the most prominent literary critic of the time, wrote in 1946 that Zhao "doesn't stand outside of the struggle, rather he is in the middle of it. He takes a side in the struggle: the side of the peasants. He is one of them."[28] *Sanliwan Village* depicts peasants who absorb the goals set by the party and advocate for those goals within their own community. Organizing happens in formal party rectification or all-village meetings, but it also happens within the home and the family. The process of collectivization relies not only on individual peasant families choosing to join the cooperative, but also inter-family social change in the form of divorce, divisions of family property, and marriage. In that sense, the collective that becomes the subject of the novel is one that is in a dialectical relationship with the state, not simply a target for state mobilization. Cai Xiang's suggestion that the collective mediated between the peasant and the state is therefore a more apt depiction of the role of the collective in this novel (*Revolutions* 48). While Cai is not as concerned with who is the primary agent of cultural practice in these works, this formulation helps us to see that that agency comes from the peasants, while also allowing us to see the ways in which it was mediated by the state.

---

28 "他没有站在斗争之外，而是站在斗争之内，站在斗争的一方面，农民的方面，他是他们中间的一个人" (qtd in Ding 171).

Cai Xiang has noted that unlike many of the socialist novels written in the 1950s, Zhao Shuli's *Sanliwan Village* was not a bildungsroman. While there is a considerable and ongoing debate in literary studies about what constitutes a bildungsroman,[29] Cai's use of the term to describe socialist novels resonates most directly with Marc Redfield's discussion of how the process of the protagonists's self-cultivation in these novels usually involves the integration of the self with the community, which for the earliest *bildungsroman* was often the nation (25). In socialist realist literature, the "prototypical plot" builds on the hero's quest, interpreted by Cai as a *bildungsroman*, as described by Katerina Clark in her work on the Soviet novel:

> [In socialist realist fiction] The hero's quest typically has a dual goal. On the one hand, he has before him a task in the public sphere. He may, for instance, aim to supervise the construction of a dam or to raise production yields. But his second, and more important, goal is to resolve within himself the tension between 'spontanaeity and 'consciousness.' Since the public and private goals are fused, the hero's personal resolution becomes a historical allegory. (162)

Clark has noted the way in which some Soviet socialist realist novels more directly take on the tropes of the *bildungsroman*, often translated as the "novel of formation," but she argues that the socialist realist novel is a "politicized" version that will never be a perfect fit because "the hero's progress is neither individual nor self-valuable" (16-17). While the bourgeois bildungsroman often depicts the formation of a middle-class young man through introspection, the socialist realist novel takes as its subject a

29 See Redfield Chapter 1 for a summary of this debate.

worker, peasant, or cadre, who experiences formation through their engagement with the world, not their withdrawal from it.

In contrast to both the bourgeois bildungsroman and the prototypical socialist realist novel, *Sanliwan Village* did not show the evolution of a particular cadre or village hero leading the way to socialism. This has led to interesting challenges for critics analyzing the text in the context of socialist literature: He Guimei writes that the character who might have been called the "hero" in a different socialist text, Party Secretary Wang Jinsheng, is barely present in the novel. In this context, it is surprising that He suggests that Wang Jinsheng as the most likely hero at all, when it is his youngest sister Wang Yumei who is the center of the opening chapters of the book and who shares the major action of the text with her peers: all members of the Youth League but none of which holds a position of leadership in the cooperative or the Party. Yet the desire to find a "hero" in the text persists for critics, even in the negative sense.

In place of a central hero, *Sanliwan* shows how a diverse variety of peasants with regard to gender, age, class position, and ideological alignment are transformed, or formed, together as their village shifts from one focused on household agriculture and mutual aid to the cooperative. It shares with the *bildungsroman* the dual process of cultivating the "self" and integrating with the nation, and it shares with the "prototypical" socialist realist plot the combination of an external public goal and an "internal" goal of resolving spontaneity and consciousness. But the multiplicity of the village as "self" fundamentally changes the ways that cultivation happens in the

novel's narrative structure and events. The progression from spontaneity to consciousness is no longer solely a process undergone by a hero, but rather becomes one carried out both within and between characters.

In addition, the forms of knowing and of acting that are necessary to do the work of building the future are not the same as those in a western "bildungsroman" or novel of education — the process of education in Sanliwan involves the incorporation of party guidelines and formal education (Fan Lingzhi's math skills) with local knowledge (Wang Yusheng's inventions and the traditional farming knowledge discussed in the next section). This process of incorporation is symbolized through the marital union of Fan Lingzhi and Yusheng, who fall in love while using her math skills to make his inventions more efficient. Fan Denggao, Lingzhi, Wang Yumei, and Ma Youyi all go through periods of education and transformation in the novel, and any of these individual narratives could have been written as a bildungsroman. Yet by weaving together their interconnected stories, the novel suggests that a collective needs to be built collectively. The work needs to happen in public venues and private ones. Trickery, manipulation, and berating those who lag behind is discouraged, but engaging the self-interest of those who lag behind may be necessary. In this novel, it is not necessary or possible to get everyone in the village to be full participants ideologically in the collectivization process, but it is considered a victory when enough have joined to create momentum and for the canal to be built.

Who is the peasant? controversy and critique in the afterlife of Sanliwan Village

The novel was criticized at the time for its focus on material change rather than changing the consciousness of the peasants. Zhou Yang argued that the novel "doesn't emphasize or perceptively address the inner nature and contradictions of the peasants. Contradictions are resolved too easily" (Zhou "Jianshe").[30] While there is a scene where Fan Lingzhi and Ma Youyi, Ma Duoshou's son, commit to struggling their reluctant parents into joining the cooperative, in the end, neither Fan Denggao or Ma Duoshou has a complete change of consciousness at the root of their decisions to join the cooperative. Instead, Fan and Ma still act on self-interest. They only see that joining the cooperative in the end will be more financially beneficial than staying on the outside. At the same time, this is the extent of villainy in the novel. Unlike other land reform or even collectivization novels where "backwards" characters actively undermine the collectivization process and even go undetected at the end of the novel,[31] Zhao's "villains" come around, although to varying extents. The real question at stake for critics, however, was that if these novels are truly meant to be guidelines for building a new world, not simply descriptions of the processes and challenges, a focus primarily on peasant self-interest and material change might not be enough to have lasting effects.

---

30 在他作品中所展开的农民内部或他们内心中的矛盾就都不是很严重，很尖锐的，矛盾解决得都比较容易。

31 see Volland 52-53 for discussions of how this works in Hurricane and the Soviet novel Virgin Soil Upturned.

Zhao's depiction of the collectivization process was also criticized at the time for making this process seem too easy (He "Cunzhuangli" 218). This criticism came from believers in the revolution who argued that the struggle was often more violent and challenging than the process portrayed in *Sanliwan*. Interestingly, modern critics have made similar arguments that the process portrayed in the novel did not line up with the more violent reality (King 6), yet they make this argument to criticize that reality, not encourage it. Many scholars of socialist literature have distanced their analysis from whether or not it was true to life (Cai *Revolutions*; Volland), and instead focus on what ideologies were being represented in these texts. While this approach is generally useful and mine in large part aligns with it, I am still interested in examining the effects of Zhao's decision to present the collectivization narrative in this less violent way. Perhaps he truly believed that those going down the capitalist road could be reformed, or that if those people could only see the benefits of collectivism after they experienced it, they would be convinced. He acknowledges the variety of attitudes towards collectivization that existed and suggests that in the end all peasants could be brought around to the idea that collectivization was in their best interests.

The new Chinese nation needed the peasants to see themselves as part of the nation and to act in support of its ongoing development. Pragmatically, one major example of this support that had an ongoing impact on peasant-state relations until its dissolution in 1985 was the 1953 law enacting the unified purchase and sale of grain to the state, eliminating private markets. State requisition of grain was meant to

support industrialization in the cities, the highest priority for nation-building during the revolutionary period. Collectivization was meant to facilitate grain production. Ideologically, the collectivization novel was meant to imagine, encourage, and further this process, connecting the disparate local environments to a national identity and national goals, and raising peasant self-consciousness (Cai *Revolutions* 52, 66).

There was also a fear that peasants would not be able to get over an attachment to small landholdings, which would inhibit the greater goal of industrialization (Kelliher 397). Without the peasants, there could be no collectivization, and without the collective, the modern peasant identity that the state was trying to create would not have a vehicle for its creation. From the 1920s onward, there were debates in the Chinese communist party about the nature of the peasantry: were they radical or reactionary? Revolutionaries or petty bourgeoisie? (Kelliher 390). Because these questions were never fully resolved, tracing how they played out in the literature of the time can help to show how these views were changing at different moments in time. *Sanliwan Village*, written to fulfill party requirements by a writer with a particular interest in the peasant population, is a snapshot of a particular moment in these debates, and many of the problems within the novel reflect larger concerns about the nature and future of the peasants in the mid-1950s. For example, the debates over "middle characters" which plagued Zhao Shuli's later career brought up the problems of whether the emphasis in literature should be on the "new peasant," one who wholeheartedly embraces and enacts the party's vision for a modern China, or on describing the resistance and challenges of peasants influenced by the "old

society" as a strategy for learning to overcome that resistance. Early echoes of those debates arise in this novel, although they would not become fully realized until the 1960s (Feuerwerker 141). In a way, Zhao's stylistic choices in *Sanliwan Village* may foreshadow how his view of revolutionary change came to differ from the party line to his own detriment. As the cultural revolution set the narrative trope of hero-veneration in stone, more nuanced approaches to socio-political change were also rejected.

As discussed before, Volland has suggested that the party is the representative of the collective in socialist cultural production, while Cai has focused on the way the collective mediates between the peasant and the party-state. In *Sanliwan Village*, the party-state's goals are depicted as an ongoing work in progress, and so is the collective. As an individual in a bildungsroman might, the collective grows and changes—remakes itself—throughout the course of the novel. We do not get to see the finished project of a fully collectivized Sanliwan, but we see both the collective and the peasants who act within it as agents capable of forming their own histories and futures.

Transforming the land

The previous section discussed how the transformation of rural subjectivities and the development of new collective subjects in *Sanliwan Village* were developed through the novel's narrative structure. In the following discussion, I elaborate how

the transformation of land in the text from family management to cooperative management is depicted through literary description, engaging scholarship that ties ideologies of land to the process of nation-building. The peasant and the land are not fully separate entities: changes in social experience are linked ideologically and materially with changes in land use. In creating its vision of peasant life, the novel therefore describes how that life was shaped by and shaped its surrounding environment. The reformation of the peasantry depicted in the novel happens in part through the reformation of the village and its relationship to the land. As family relationships change, so do their relationships to land usage change. Changes in consciousness accompany material change.

During the early 1950s, when the action of *Sanliwan Village* takes place, official interpretations of the nature of the peasant, and simultaneously state policy towards rural life and land management, were in flux. Debates arose around whether the countryside was ready for mass collectivization of land. On one side, Bo Yibo and Liu Shaoqi were concerned that collectivizing agriculture would not succeed without first developing the technological infrastructure to manage collectivized land (Friedman et. al 122). Another major concern was the peasant mindset discussed in the first section of this paper: would they be able to give up long-held attachments to personal/family property and the value of increasing family wealth? On the other side, Mao Zedong and others argued that infrastructure was not necessary to begin the process of collectivization and that cooperatives were not being built quickly enough

(ibid 123). [32] Novels like *Sanliwan Village* and *The Builders* were written and set amidst these changes, during the period in which cooperatives and collectives were encouraged but still voluntary. Although *Sanliwan Village* was published in 1955 after the state's commitment to mass collectivization was solidified in 1953, and *The Builders* was published in 1959 after collectivization was made mandatory in 1957, they reflect the contradictions and challenges faced by the peasants and the party-state en route to this path.

The centrality of change and conflict in the family unit in *Sanliwan* connects both metaphorically and materially to changes in land management. There are two primary goals for the socialist activists in the novel: convince more families to join the cooperative (emotionally aligning themselves with the nation and its socialist goals) and add their family plots to the collectively managed lands, facilitating the ability of the village to build a canal for irrigation to increase production (materially aligning themselves with socialist goals). Socialist rural policy with regard to issues of marriage, family, and gender roles simultaneously acquiesced to traditional values and underwent substantial change.[33] These policies also changed the fabric of the community and its relationship to the land. As various young couples divorce, remarry and split off from living in large family compounds, they also make their own decisions about when and how to join the cooperative, released from the

32 For an in-depth analysis of these debates, see Hou, especially Ch. 2.
33 "State initiatives worked through compromises with the local environment, gaining traction by appealing to locally understood norms and meanings" (Hershatter 66).

pressures of their parents and in-laws.34 In the novel's present, the land is divided between the land of the families that have already joined the cooperative and the land of the families who are still holding out. As discussed above, those like the Fan and Ma families with better quality land are less willing to join the cooperative. Changes in romantic situations such as Ma Youyi and Wang Yumei's marriage and splitting off from the Ma family lead to changes in land management that benefit the cooperative. In this way, we can see that the psychological and socio-political changes discussed in the first half of this paper were mirrored by and interwoven with material change. In sum, as the individuals in the village come to see themselves as part of the cooperative, they also change their perception of the value of land: from an individualized asset to a public good.

Much of the English-language scholarship on Chinese peasant literature has focused on issues of representation of the peasantry.[35] Yet another central feature of rural literature throughout the Chinese twentieth century is the important role the land plays in defining an imaginary of the nation. If narrating the village is narrating the nation, narrating Sanliwan Village would not be possible without narrating the dirt

---

34 For a detailed ethnographic study of the changes in family division of property throughout the socialist period and onward, see Yan. Yan argues that the socialist encouragement of earlier breaking off of the family eroded patriarchal systems.
35 The definitive text in English is Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker's *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-representation and the peasant "other" in Modern Chinese Literature*. See also Richard King's reading of The Golden Road and Krista Van Fleit Hang's reading of "Li Shuangshuang." Cai Xiang's *Revolution and Narrative* discusses landscape briefly (see discussion below), but it is largely focused on the development of the revolutionary subject. Han Xiaorong's *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant* focuses on pre-1949 discourse but focuses primarily on the concept of "the peasant" and representation.

beneath the peasants' feet. The novel's primary action of organizing peasants to join the co-operative would be hollow without the concrete necessity of collectivizing the land. The nuances of the transformations of the relationships between the peasants and the land suggest that although landscape is essential to thinking the modern nation-state and its literature, rural life in its concrete experiences and its representations in literature does not fit clear narratives of national development or images of what the nation is or should be. Land is always escaping the boundaries of its representation as "landscape."

Chinese-language discussions of landscape in modern literature have been deeply influenced by Karatani Kojin's "The Discovery of Landscape" in his *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature.* Karatani's text seeks to demonstrate how "modernity" is constructed in Japanese literature in order to denaturalize and critique it. Karatani argues that the "discovery of landscape" in the modern Japanese novel was fundamental to the development of the concept of the modern nation-state (36-37). Influenced by concepts of western scientific rationality, Japanese artists and writers began to see the land and "the people" as objects to be studied and acted upon.[36] This analysis has proven useful to Chinese scholars of landscape in the twentieth century as well, who have noted the ways in which depictions of the land in Chinese aesthetic production help to build a sense of national identity. Cai Xiang

36 "Both the landscapes and the 'ordinary people' (what I have called people-as-landscapes) that realism represents were not "out there from the start, but had to be discovered as landscapes from which we had become alienated (29)."

argues that landscape description in socialist Chinese literature served to create a sense of "common feeling" among members of the nation (37), while Zhu Yu writes:

> The discovery and delineation of "landscape" has an implicit relationship with the nation-state and the national subject...Compared to a simple reliance on racial (blood) relationships, community benefit, and the form of modern life, 'landscape' points towards a deeper, more universal modern 'identity,' a mechanism of aesthetic recognition, and sometimes a mechanism of differentiation (31).[37]

However, the affective relationship of the people to the land in *Sanliwan Village* is more muted than that conveyed by the descriptive language of both the native soil and war mobilization fiction of the 1920s-1940s. David Der-Wei Wang has argued that native soil fiction such as the work of Shen Congwen "hinges on the simultaneous (re) discovery and erasure of the treasured image of the homeland" ("Imaginary Nostalgia" 109), while Cai Xiang has suggested that war mobilization fiction may depict a beautiful landscape in order to heighten the sense of threat from class or national enemies (40-41). While landscape is a key factor in building a relationship between the reader and the nation in all of these genres, the collectivization era is unique in the ways that it portrays land primarily in a utilitarian sense. There is a de-emphasis of the concept of a love of land, and instead an emphasis on what can be done with it -- how it contributes to larger material goals of increasing production and modernizing the nation.

---

37 所谓"风景"。。。的发生与界定，和现代民族国家以及国民主题建构有着隐秘的联系。。。相比于单纯的血缘关系，共同利益以及直接的现实生活形象，"风景"指向一种更深的，更普遍的现代认同，一种审美性的承认/认同机制，有时亦是一种区隔机制。

In the following analysis, I look at how description of the land and landscape in *Sanliwan Village* differs from the "discovery of landscape" written about by Karatani. I suggest that the text does not reproduce the delineated subject/object relationship at the heart of Karatani's argument, as well as Cai and Zhu's interpretations of Karatani, but instead depicts a more complex interaction and transformation of those roles that may suggest a more differentiated concept of identity under the modern nation-state. I examine three scenes in which land and landscape comes to the foreground in *Sanliwan Village*: the visiting party official's introduction to the village referenced at the beginning of this paper, the narrativized transformation of relationship of Wang Xing, a local farmer, to his work in the vegetable garden, and the planning and revealing of the visiting artist Liang's paintings of the village. The clear division of the relationship between the viewer as subject and the landscape/the peasant as object *is* present in *Sanliwan Village*, embodied in the form of the visiting party official and visiting artist, who see and depict the village as an object of social and economic change. However, the novel also describes the land through the eyes of the peasants — as something to be used, understood, and transformed. The novel moves between these views and depicts peasants responding to and directing the outsider's gaze.

In Sanliwan, there is little to no description of land that is not tied immediately to the plot or event. However, that does not make the description less meaningful. Looking back to Chapter 15, "Standing on high, looking over everything," we see Sanliwan Village through the eyes of Section Chief He. Zhang

talks Section Chief He through the entire landscape, methodically naming each hill, flat, and riverbank:

> "So many names!" exclaimed He, "how can anyone remember them?" Zhang replied: "I'm only giving you the bigger place names. Each big name refers to several smaller ones—for instance, between Green Dragon Back and Dragon Neck you have Persimmon Turn, the Sheepfold, Red Slope, the Liu Tombs, and the Mountain God Temple. (66) [38]

The final place discussed is a hill across the river, when Section Chief He says:

> "That has nothing to do with Sanliwan. Let's get back to Sanliwan!" Zhang replies: "No, it does have something to do with Sanliwan, for that canal they are planning in Sanliwan will have to carry water from just opposite Green Dragon Skull to the foot of the hill west of Dragon Bend." (67)[39]

The description is brief, to the point, utilitarian. There is no waxing poetic over the color of the hills or the ways the river flows. In this scene, the land being described is in flux — the canal will allow the village to irrigate formerly dry flats and reclaim sandy fields for agriculture. And it is growing: areas once considered external to Sanliwan are now becoming connected via the canal. But those changes are all man-made, and they all have a use. The human relationship to the land is not romanticized, but it is essential.

This feature of Zhao Shuli's writing has been noted by critics. Ding Fan argues that Zhao Shuli's avoidance of excessive description was part of his goal to

---

38 "哪来这么多的地名！叫人记也记不住!" 张信说："我说的都是大地名，每个大地名指的地方还有好多小地名———像从这青龙背往龙脖上走，中间就还要经过什么'柿树腰'、'羊圈门口'、'红土坡'、'刘家坟'、'山神庙'"

39 "那是三里湾以外的事了，我们还是谈三里湾吧!" 张信说："不！这些都与三里有关系！三里湾计划要开的水渠，就得从青龙脑对这边把水引到回龙湾西边的山根下来。"

focus on the peasantry themselves, to make his writing accessible to local people, and to avoid "art for art's sake:"

> The liveliness of Zhao Shuli's rural fiction narratives and characters helps to strengthen his novels' readability, while the disappearance of "landscape description" [compared to earlier twentieth century romantic and realist rural fiction] leads to the loss of "the symbolism of pure literature," allowing his novels to further the development of popular fiction. (174)[40]

He Guimei takes this analysis one step further, as she suggests that Zhao's direct description in this scene portrays the land as the peasants themselves would see it, further fulfilling his commitment to write with the perspective of the peasants in mind:

> This emerging panorama of Sanliwan is not distanced from the novel's characters...the scene that we see here is part of the characters' lives...the narrator is neither an emperor hovering above the world of the novel nor establishing the premise of interior perception, the distance between the character's inner state and the outer world. Rather, it reveals the horizontal relationship between the novel's characters and their lifeworlds (43).[41]

While Ding and He emphasize how this lack of lyrical description leads to a more direct focus on peasant lives, I am additionally interested in the effect that Zhao's minimal descriptions of land has on our understanding of what land means in this time. A lack of aesthetic, metaphorical, symbolic, or emotional description of land in *Sanliwan Village* does not mean that land is not meaningful in the text. On a grander

---

40 赵树理的乡土小说故事和人物的生动性大大强化了其小说的可读性，而"风景画"的消失却又使其乡土小说失却了某种纯文学的标记，使其乡土小说向通俗小说发展。

41 这种呈现出来的三里湾全景，并未与小说人物分离开来，...这里看到的景观，也是他们自己生活的一部分...这里的叙述人不是高于小说世界的上帝般的存在，也不存在建立在人物内心与外在世界互相疏离这一前提上的内心透视法则，而显示的是小说及其人物与生活世界的横向延展关系。

scale, land is described throughout the novel not as a metaphor for any one character's interiority, but a structural parallel for the transformation of the peasant community. Both peasants and land are described as works in progress, undergoing a process of transformation. In minimizing landscape description and focusing on actions related to the land, the novel is showing the land as part of a dynamic historical process, not a static other to be admired, reviled, or controlled.

This narrative technique reflects Lukacs's position in his influential essay, "Narrate or Describe." Although Lukacs is focused primarily on the bourgeois realist novel, and his analysis of description tends to focus on urban settings and character traits rather than land and landscape, what is relevant here is Lukacs's emphasis on description as a static act: "Description debases characters to the level of inanimate objects (133)…when men are portrayed through the descriptive method, they become mere still lives (138)…a character appears as a finished 'product (139)." Both Lukacs (140) and Karatani (34-39) suggest that the use of description is aligned with the rise of the rational social sciences, and both suggest that this obscures the dynamic, historical processes inherent in human activity and necessary for political change. In a socio-political context that sees change as a necessary force, Zhao Shuli's avoidance of description takes on another level of meaning. He is not only focusing on the peasant or the development of popular fiction, he is making a formal choice that allows him to focus on action and change rather than static analysis.

However, this narrative style was not adopted in every rural novel written in the socialist period in China. *The Builders* regularly relies on landscape description to

set the scene and mood for different chapters and assist in characterization. The novel opens with spring dawning on the village:

> Early one spring morning before the peasants living along the Tang Stream wakened from their slumbers, the sound of the rising waters became audible; the ice and snow on Mount Zhongnan were beginning to thaw. On both banks of the stream, in Xiabao village, in Huangbao town, in the near hamlets on the northern plain, roosters in thatched cottage compounds among the misty paddy fields greeted each other and the dawn. Heard from the road winding across the plain, the gurgling of the stream and the crowing of the roosters had a soft elegance which enhanced the hush that falls shortly before daybreak. The air was fresh and fragrant; it gave a feeling of exceptional coolness and ease…Liang the Third was one of the few old men in Xiaobao Township in a position to enjoy this morning beauty. (25) [42]

We then find out that Liang the Third has been out along the road collecting manure to fertilize his fields. The language is evocative; with descriptions of sound, sights, and even the feeling of the air, the reader may feel like they are standing next to Liang the Third experiencing the beauty of the morning. Yet despite Liang's position, there is no description of his own reaction to the scenery. He could appreciate the morning, but he is focused on other things. The description is not there for Liang the Third, it is there for the reader. The reader sees the sleeping village at the beginning of spring and knows that more is coming. Within the genre of socialist rural fiction,

---

42 早春的清晨，汤河上的庄稼人还没睡醒以前，因为终南山里普遍开始解冻，可以听见汤河涨水的呜呜声。在河的两岸，在下堡村、黄堡镇和北原边上的马家堡、葛家堡，在苍苍茫茫的稻地野滩的草棚院里，雄鸡的啼声互相呼应着。在大平原的道路上听起来，河水声和鸡啼声是那么幽雅, 更加渲染出这黎明前的宁静。
空气是这样的清香，使人胸脯里感到分外凉爽、舒畅。。。
梁三老汉是下堡乡少数几个享受这晨光的老人之一。

the reader knows the village will wake up and experience the changes that are on the horizon. But unlike the situation in *Sanliwan Village*, this process is viewed from afar.

Throughout the text, there is a stronger sense that the transformation the village will undergo will happen under the close guidance of party policies from above. Cai Xiang argues that more desolate depictions of landscape in collectivization novels of the 1950s (including the foreboding mountain that looks over the villages in *The Builders*) helped to support the party line that the countryside was in need of transformation through re-building and reform *gaizao* 改造 (43-44). The hero of *The Builders*, Liang the Third's adopted son Liang Shengbao, is an active organizer of his local mutual aid team, but throughout, he seeks guidance from higher-ups to support his plans. When narrating the struggles of the poor peasants, Liu Qing inserts party slogans into the text: "Chairman Mao had led the way brilliantly: Land reform had been carried out, the Party had gone through a rectification campaign and was ready to push on. The peasants were determined to go forward with the Party" (136).[43] Both *Sanliwan Village* and *The Builders* show a process of the peasants' goals coming into alignment with the party's, but the outsider's gaze is the most common one taken throughout *The Builders.*

Zhao tracks the human relationship with the land and changes in that relationship throughout the novel. This happens on a large scale, mostly from the perspective of the party-state, as we have seen through the planning walks and

43 毛主席英明：一边查田定产，一边政党，准备往前走哩。他们要坚定跟着共产党往前走！

conversations with Section Chief He, and through the canal that is made possible when private families join the cooperative. However, Zhao also acknowledges the ways this relationship with the land changes for the peasants. One narrative that runs through the novel is the story of an older villager, Wang Xing, who had once been in charge of growing vegetables for the old landlord Liu. His proficiency is described with the same attention to detail given to peasant labor throughout the novel:

> The Deputy Team Leader, old Wang Xing, was filling a basket with day lily buds from both sides of a ridge. Since these had been left til rather late, some of them were already beginning to flower. (Day lilies for eating are best picked before they open). As he gathered the buds, he was explaining to the man picking the eggplant the importance of knowing what work was most pressing. Eggplant wouldn't spoil with a little delay, but no time should be lost in picking the day lilies. (55)[44]

The passage demonstrates Wang Xing's expertise and shares that expertise with the reader by showing how Wang Xing shares it with other laborers. Later, when the plans for the cooperative and the modernization of farming are being discussed in the village more broadly, Wang Xing worries that his hard-earned knowledge will become obsolete: "By that time everyone will be using machinery…will our knowledge be any use then?" (126)[45] He is reassured by painter Liang: "The heavy work will be done by machine, but the finer work will still have to be done by hand. Of course, by then we shall have learned new skills, but the new ones nearly always

---

44 副组长王兴老汉，正提着个篮子摘垄道两旁的金针花苞因为摘得迟了一点，有好多已开了花（金针是快要开花时候就应摘的，开了花就不太好了），一边摘着一边给那个摘茄子的人讲做活应懂得先后，说茄子迟一会摘不要紧，应该先摘金针。

45 到那时候都用了机器，我们的技术还有没有用呢？

grow out of the old" (126).[46] Sigrid Schmalzer has written about how socialist agricultural policy in China attempted to integrate both local knowledge and "modern scientific knowledge" throughout the socialist period. Old peasants were seen as repositories of knowledge and experience in some circumstances, although this knowledge and experience had to be examined and approved in light of the current scientific and political context (Schmalzer Ch. 4). While the majority of agricultural discourse in the socialist period was focused on implementing modern scientific techniques, Schmalzer suggests that this discourse differed from agricultural reforms in capitalist and postcolonial regions in that it "insisted that science and technology not be divorced from social and cultural revolution" (119). The description of Wang Xing's engagement in his work with the land is not solely the rational, scientific objectification of agricultural practice, but rather acknowledges his subjectivity and integrates him into the nation-building process.

As we have seen, *Sanliwan Village* does not engage in much lyrical description of land, nature, or village life. In fact, one of the few places of lyrical description in the novel emerges under the brush of the visiting painter. In this it diverges from both the rural literature that came before and after it, but also some of its contemporary socialist rural novels such as *The Builders.* This lack of description is a formal choice that facilitates the novel's ability to shift often between insider and outsider views of the village. In this way, it depicts a different kind of modern view of

46 大的耕种方面用机器，小的细致工作还得用手工。自然到那种条件下工作要新的技术，可是新的技术往往都是从旧技术基础上进不成了！

land and landscape. Land (and metaphorically the nation) is not solely an external object to be acted upon, but rather an integrated part of rural life — both changing and being changed by the peasants. This portrayal therefore allows for the construction of a peasant subjectivity in which peasants can be part of the nation-shaping process, not solely the objectified other. In this way, Zhao balances the insider's gaze with the outsider's and emphasizes the lived experience of his subjects and the political goals at the heart of his work.

Once again, this connects back to Zhao's "standpoint" discussed in the first section of this chapter. Writing from within the peasantry, from a parallel viewpoint rather than looking down from afar, Zhao shows working with the land is an everyday activity. It is valorized but not fetishized. This value appears to be something that is re-created every day through work. It is not an empty image simply to be admired. From the scene looking down over the village to Wang Xing's demonstration of the labor that produces that village, Zhao moves back and forth between the outsiders' and the insiders' gaze. For some readers, perhaps urban readers, the figure of He, the outsider, is a stand-in, and we do look down upon Sanliwan Village as he does. At the same time, however, we are immersed within the lives and actions of the villagers in other chapters.

Historicizing the land

Land in the novel also has a history — a past, present, and future. When referencing land use in the novel, the village's former landlord family, the Lius, are often brought up. In the list of names above, the Liu Tombs still retain their status as a local landmark. In a discussion of land use in the village, the Liu name returns again, this time with back-story:

> Once out of the maize, they could see Lao-wu's plot. Sanliwan had always sold vegetables to the hill villages on the east and west, but the market garden had been started by Liu Lao-wu, the traitor, who had taken advantage of his family's position to force the peasants to give right of way to vegetable vendors straight from the ford to here. (58)[47]

Despite its reactionary past, the land still retains Liu's name in the new world. Here, it functions as a reminder of what the village is working towards by acknowledging what it is moving away from.

Future imaginaries of the land occur in multiple forms throughout the novel: it is narrativized through verbal descriptions of the plan for the cooperative given by Deputy Village Head Zhang Yongqing to Section Chief He and put to paper in the notebook of Wang Jinsheng and the blueprints worked on by Fan Lingzhi and Wang Yusheng. Yet the future of land in Sanliwan is most clearly envisioned through the planning and reveal of three paintings created by the visiting artist referred to as Lao

47 穿过了这段玉蜀黍地，便看见老五园。三里湾自古就向东西两边的山庄上卖菜，不过菜园子是汉奸刘老五家开的，就在这块地方。那时候，刘家用自己的威风，压着大家给他让一条卖菜的路, 从船头起通到这里。。。

Liang 老梁: *Sanliwan Today*, *Sanliwan Tomorrow*,[48] and *Socialist Sanliwan*.[49] As these paintings emerge through the encounter of outsider painter and local peasant, they also help symbolize the function of art in bringing together peasant, land, and the imagined nation. The role of visual art in village China has a long history that goes alongside that of opera. It was a way of communicating external ideas to the people, of creating historical pride and religious belief (Taubes). During the All-China Congress of Writers and Artists in 1949, the artist and critic Jiang Feng advocated for the use of visual imagery, including "posters, cartoons, woodcuts, lianhuanhua (serial picture stories), and nianhua (New Year's prints)" to promote socialist ideology among the mostly illiterate, mostly peasant masses (Hung 155). Throughout the socialist period, it was common to send writers and artists from the city to the countryside to both inspire local villagers with imagery that promoted state policies and to research material that would influence creative production including literature, visual art, and films. At the same time, artists sent to the villages were expected to both participate in various local campaigns and gain material for their work (Friedman et al. 133-134).

Midway through the novel, Lao Liang unveils a painting of the village in its present form. On first glance, Ma Youyi excitedly describes what he sees in the painting. Like Zhang Yongqing's description of the village to Section Chief He

---

48 The second painting is called "Next Year's Sanliwan" in the original text, but analysis in English consistently uses the Gladys Yang translation of "Sanliwan Tomorrow"

49 现在的三里湾，明年的三里湾，和社会主义的三里湾。

discussed above, it is a list of names: "Why, that's Sanliwan!…The Upper Flats, the Lower Flats, Lao-wu's Plot, Sandy Creek, Thirty Mou Field, Hilt Field, Dragon Neck—it's all there to the life!" (89).[50] In the spirit of the artistic trends of the time, the painting is done in a realist style.[51] Consistent with the narrative description, it is relatively emotionless. At first, there is a timeless or ahistorical element to these descriptions: Lao-wu's Plot still contains the name of the old landlord, while Dragon Neck calls to mind folkloric traditions. However, this static scene soon becomes one in motion: Wang Yusheng asks Comrade Liang if he could paint "things that don't exist yet":

> I mean something like the canal…It'll start from here in the Upper Flats, pass Sandy Creek, run south by the foot of the cliff, and then branch out to water the Lower Flats…When both Upper and Lower Flats are irrigated, we shall harvest much richer crops. Can you paint a Sanliwan like that? (89).[52]

Lao Liang agrees: "A very good idea! We can call that 'A Better Sanliwan' or 'Sanliwan Tomorrow' (89)."[53] The conversation continues as the group gathered around the artist begins to shout out other goals for the village, including the use of

---

50 这是三里湾呀！。。。上滩，下滩，老五园，黄沙沟口，三十亩，刀把上，龙脖上。。。真像！

51 See Tang 76-80 for a thorough discussion of how the pursuit of realism in Chinese socialist visual art combined both a commitment to portraying the totality of a historical situation and representative formal choices: "Realism in this understanding described an epistemological project more than an aesthetic style or visual technique, although its advocates would often embrace representational art, believing that it at once facilitates the cognitive process and enables the artist to present his insight in accessible and public-oriented terms" (79).

52 "比方说：三里湾开了渠。。。水渠从上滩这地方开过，过了黄沙沟，靠崖根往南开，再分成好多小支渠，浇着下滩的地。。。上下滩都变成水地，庄稼比现在的更旺。能不能画这么一个三里湾呢？"

53 "你想得很好！那可以叫'提高了的三里湾'，或者叫'明年的三里湾'。"

tractors, two-story buildings with electricity, trucks, and a highway. Lao Liang agrees to paint a third painting that will show the long-term goals of what the village is working towards. Art here is a collaborative process, not a single-authored masterpiece.[54] And while each painting will show the landscape of Sanliwan, these landscapes will be populated with signs of human-driven progress, from the canal to the tractors.

A later scene where all three landscapes of Sanliwan are revealed to the peasants is a momentous event, but at the same time, it is an anomaly among the more concrete portrayals of everyday life that make up the rest of the plot. It is a moment when the whole village comes together, and like the threshing scene discussed above, children play a central role in demonstrating that togetherness:

> That morning the co-op youngsters rigged up the platform in Flagstaff Compound…The elder children recognized Sanliwan the moment they saw the new pictures and explained them to the little ones. Then they dashed back to the village to spread the news…Apart from spreading it to the collective, each child went home to tell his own parents and grandparents. (124) [55]

Once again, the children provide liveliness to the narrative and exude a sense of joy in the new world that is being created. In addition, this scene continues the trend throughout the novel of combining organizing both in and out of the home, even when that organizing is done by the smallest members of the community.

---

54 The practice of encouraging peasant feedback sessions for new works of art in the countryside was initiated in Yan'an (Ho 68).

55 九月十号是休息日。这天早晨，社里的青年们在旗杆院搭弁子。。。大一点的孩子一看就认得是三里湾，指指点点先给小的讲解，讲解了一阵就跑到村里去宣传。。。集体宣传了还不算，又都分散回家去拉自己的爹爹、妈妈、爷爷、奶奶。

The paintings are described through narration, and it is one of the few places where the novel indulges in more pastoral language: “the painting in the middle showed an early autumn scene of luxuriant, dark green crops…The canal, brimming with water, branched out to irrigate all the Lower Flats…and both Upper and Lower Flats were dotted with people watering the crops (124-125).”[56] The third painting, as planned, shows Sanliwan with tractors farming on a much larger scale: “it looked very much like one of our present state farms” (125).[57] This painting most clearly demonstrates the purpose of educating peasants about and encouraging their support of state policy—Cai Xiang has read it as a moment in which “the local in reality has already been assimilated into the national imaginary of modernity” (57). However, the focus of the villagers is on the middle painting, Sanliwan’s post-canal near future. There is excitement and exclamation over all the things that will become possible once the canal is built, while people point to different parts of the canal to imagine what they would do there, from washing vegetables to washing clothes. In this way, the painting becomes a catalyst to help more families decide to join the cooperative and help to build the canal, which is reinforced in a meeting held later in the day: “The pictures had already aroused general interest, and Chang’s talk made the villagers even keener” (126).[58] The scenes surrounding the murals bring together the

56 第二张挂在中间，画的是个初秋景色：浓绿色的庄稼长得正旺。。。渠里的水很饱满，从堤岸上留下的缺口处分了好几条支渠。。。不论上滩下滩，庄稼缝里都稀稀落落露出几个拨水的人。
57 一切情况很像现在的国营农场。
58 老梁的三张画一挂出来就已经把大家的兴趣提起来了，再加上他这一讲，大家响应的劲头就更大了一些。

wide angle lens and the close-up, the outsider's view and the insider's view. A modern countryside cannot be closed off from the outside and needs a vision of future change—it is not unchanging and static. So even if Zhao's focus is primarily a lateral one, from the perspective of the peasants, he also needs to portray the way the peasants interact with the outside.

This scene has also been discussed as a temporary moment in which landscape description plays a bigger role in the text than it does throughout the rest of the narrative (Sa 220). That is the case with regard to aesthetic description, but still the description tends towards the utilitarian. More importantly, the scene is a place for teleological, rather than simply spatial thinking. It helps the villages to imagine a future for Sanliwan, something they can all work towards. The paintings draw a cultural thread between the remote village, the larger nation, and the outside world and communicate to illiterate peasants the ideas of the socialist revolution and what it can bring to the village. They are an imagining—a work in progress. They bring inspiration. Showing *Sanliwan Today*, *Sanliwan Tomorrow*, and *Socialist Sanliwan* at the same time echoes a dynamic often seen in cultural production later in the socialist period, including the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Matthew Johnson writes:

> Films produced during the Leap often tended to blur the line between past, present, and future in a way specifically intended to mobilize audiences by instilling in them the belief that "the future was now," and that conditions of material want and poverty were soon to be consigned to the dustbin of history" (220).

In a similar vein, Richard King has used the paintings as a symbol of the work of socialist literature more broadly, which he argues portrays an optimistic future, despite the distance between that future and the often less ideal realities at the time:

> Where present reality was much less than ideal, in terms either of material conditions or popular concurrence with official policy, [socialist texts and their writers] were responsible for indicating a way to transcend hardships and reservations, and for encouraging the reader to trust in enlightened and concerned leadership to bring what they described to reality (8).

In contrast, there is a clear definition of the present, the near future, and the socialist utopian future in the presentation of this paintings. The intent to mobilize audiences is the same, but there is more attention to the fact that it will be a process. Joe Huang highlights this more clearly in his discussion of the three paintings, especially the relationship between the second and the third:

> The peasants, the leadership reasons, after seeing some results of collective labor, will begin to entertain the notion that that day will finally come. This hope, this expectation, it is anticipated, will sustain their will to work hard, help them to forget immediate hardships, and enhance their confidence in the party policy (240).

There is more of a focus on the potential for historical change and developing an ideology of progress. In that sense, the paintings can symbolize the work of artistic production under socialist politics, including literary production. But rather than read them as a simple formula that masks a difficult reality with utopian ideals, I want to focus on how they imagine the revolution as a work in progress, both visually in the text and through the construction of the text itself. Zhao Shuli's *Sanliwan Village* depicts a socialism that is open and flexible, ongoing, with a clear direction. Through the images of the paintings and the more concrete work of organizing, this direction

becomes desirable to the people in the village. There is an affect of hope created throughout the text and a joy in the process of working towards that goal.

Conclusion

Sanliwan is not just a reiteration of the development of national pride through the description of collectivization in a rural village. While *Sanliwan Village* does depict the process of a locality aligning itself with national goals, the direct line from the village to the nation is less prominent. If developing a romanticized image of the nation is a central feature of twentieth century Chinese rural fiction, what do we make of the lack of romanticization in Zhao's work? In this novel, land is valuable not because of some ideal of its purity, its beauty, or its unique essence, but rather due to what it produces and its potential. Land in Sanliwan is valuable because of the ways it is used by humans. In some ways, this is a perfect embodiment of the socialist modernization project: production, utility, and futurity are all key values associated with becoming a modern nation. At the same time, it differs from depictions of the same processes written by others. There is no pastoral here, a pastoral that is a key feature of other rural Chinese novels.

Sanliwan Village describes an idealized version of these changes without overlooking the challenges and conflict they caused. The relationship between youths, their parents, family property, the cooperative, and party goals throughout the novel shows how all of these changes are interconnected and how *Sanliwan Village* in both

form and in content foregrounds that interconnection. This is especially necessary when comparing socialist literature to post-socialist literature about rural life, which at heart was more fragmented both in form and in content. This novel is an experiment in creating a national narrative in which “the people” and “the land” have an active, dynamic relationship with one another. As the village of Sanliwan develops a collective consciousness imagined in part through the medium of the paintings, the villagers put those images into practice through the process of collectivizing the land needed to build the canal. It represents a moment in socialist rural literature where these processes can be seen in the composition of the text through the balance of insider and outsider views, the interaction of young activists, their conservative parents, and established party leaders both within and from outside the village, and the attention to action over passive description. The novel’s decentralized approach allows for a more participatory mode of building a new society that diverges from the dominant narrative of party-driven change.

“A just and thorough knowledge”: Peasant, Land, and History in Zhang Chengzhi’s *Rivers of the North*

Introduction

Zhang Chengzhi's novella *Rivers of the North* begins with the phrase "I believe that a just and thorough knowledge will sum up everything for us" (44).[1] This paragraph, written by an anonymous narrator who does not return again in the novella, reads like a manifesto. Within the long and complex history of "our country," the narrator writes, "a certain natural environment and a certain creative power...will ensure the descent of lively, healthy newborn life into this world..." (44).[2] The narrator expresses an unequivocal hope for a better future based on a thorough understanding of the past. This preface demonstrates a belief that runs throughout the novella: that the past, the present, and the environment are deeply intertwined, and only a thorough understanding of this can bring a people into a better future. The process of understanding is mirrored in the protagonist’s determination to become a graduate student in cultural geography, a field that studies human development in its environmental context.[3] Success in this field requires the student to obtain a depth

1 All translations are modified from *Zhang Chengzhi xiaoshuo xuan*, a bilingual edition of the text.我相信，会有一个公正而深刻的认识来为我们总结的。（45）
2 历史悠久的国度。。。有一种血统，一种水土，一种创造的力量使活泼健壮的新生婴儿降生于世。。。（45）
3 This character is never named in the novella and is usually referred to as *ta* 他 (he). Throughout this paper I will refer to him as “the student.”

and breadth of understanding, which he attempts through an exhaustive study of the Chinese landscape and its people through both experiential travel and formal learning.

Rivers of the North is part of the roots-seeking literature movement, in which Chinese writers in the 1980s used Chinese traditions and depictions of rural life to question official historical narratives and seek individual enlightenment or spiritual meaning. However, while many of the roots-seeking texts purposely seek to defy or question the ability to know and understand history or find meaning in life, *Rivers of the North* posits that understanding history is essential to finding meaning, even if the definition of what it means to understand history diverges greatly from socialist-era conceptions of the term. The student's process of developing understanding as depicted in the text can be read as a possible example or blueprint for the process of gaining knowledge referenced in the preface. The novella's commitment to the pursuit of understanding in a literary and intellectual environment in which the possibility of understanding was often questioned or rejected can also be read as a political commitment in the Marxist tradition of "interpreting the world in order to change it." Mao Zedong's famous essay, "On Practice: On the Relation Between Knowledge and Practice, Between Knowing and Doing" (1937)[4] uses the same word for knowledge, 认识, as Zhang Chengzhi uses in the preface, to discuss the interwining relationship between practice and knowledge that is essential to man's ability to change the world. While the knowledge and practice obtained in this novel

4 实践论: 论认识和实践的关系——知和行的关系

is narrated through personal experience and does question official Maoist narratives of history, both the student's journey and the textual portrayal of that journey embraces and furthers the political goal of understanding the world to change the world.

Rivers of the North, like other roots-seeking texts, engages the peasantry, the countryside, tradition, and history. The narrator is on a quest that is both spiritual (finding his relationship to and role within what he sees as the long progression of Chinese history) and material (attempting to get into graduate school). The novel's particular version of "seeking roots" diverges from the representatives of the genre discussed above in its attention to historical detail and its commitment to seeking knowledge as a method for enacting change. Although *Rivers of the North's* tone is lyrical and impressionistic, Zhang Chengzhi's work does not incorporate as many of the innovations with time, perspective, and memory that characterize other roots-seeking fiction. These experiments have led the movement to be characterized as one that challenges the possibility of historical understanding. Like many of the other works that emerged from the roots-seeking movement, *Rivers of the North* is concerned with long history and cultural developments over an extended scale. These themes do put the novella in conversation with the movement's attempts at seeking meaning in the "primal" cultural characteristics of the Chinese people and their long history. However, *Rivers of the North* is also rooted in the present, not shying away from the more recent past of the Cultural Revolution and the conundrums faced by the generation attempting to move forward with their lives from that period. It

grapples with, rather than dismisses, the meaning of the recent past. The engagement of the book's characters with the past and struggles within the present engage change and development, not simply a deep-rooted continuity of some Chinese "essence." In this way, Zhang Chengzhi's works provide a bridge between the socialist realist era and the roots-seeking tradition. They have more faith in the possibility of representation and of historical change.

The novella uses the formal characteristics of a Bildungsroman to describe the process of a former red guard and sent-down youth's adjustment to the postsocialist period and his attempt to be admitted into a graduate program in geography.[5] Chapters one and two document the student's travels through the countryside in which he once lived and worked as a sent-down youth, addressing the changing nature of the peasantry, the changing relationship of humans to the environment, and the complexities of addressing history in a period of great political and economic change. The student meets a young woman photographer who accompanies him on his journey, working on a series of her own photographs of the Yellow River Basin to submit to magazines in Beijing. Chapters three through five describes the student and the photographer's return from their travels to Beijing, where the student continues to study for the graduate school entrance exam spending time with his mother and brother and catching up with old friends, while the photographer attempts to get her

5 Hong Zicheng has noted that the novella was one of the most common and powerful literary forms of the Chinese literary scene in the 1980s. He suggests part of its popularity may have stemmed from the urgency many writers felt to explore the past and express the complexities of the present (286).

work published. The novella is narrated in third person. Although it is primarily focalized through the perspective of the student, some sections are also told through the perspective of the photographer. The story is told chronologically, and the details of the events of the text take a backseat to both the student's and the photographer's reflections on their experiences, their pasts, and their hopes and dreams for the future.

Zhang Chengzhi, as a former red guard, was one of only a few writers of the time who depicted the revolutionary period, especially the Cultural Revolution, in a generous light. The text addresses the hardships and violence of that time through conversations between the student and the photographer, but it also sees value in the revolutionary spirit of the student's youth. While other works in the roots-seeking movement depict what often seems like insurmountable divides—a past which cannot be explained, a chasm between intellectual and peasant, or unbridgeable differences in the cultural milieux of the countryside and the city—*Rivers of the North* attempts to make connections between these disparate categories and to use these connections to imagine a better future.

This chapter investigates how *Rivers of the North* attempts to create a path for the development of the "just and thorough knowledge" it calls for in the preface. It moves beyond the primarily abstract and ideological analysis and the focus on the intellectual that characterizes much of the academic literature on the roots-seeking movement. Instead, I examine how the novella's engagement with the peasantry, the environment, and history demonstrates a kind of knowledge-seeking that stands out in a literary period otherwise characterized by ambiguities in representation of the

peasantry, land, and time. Throughout, attention to the novella's language, including its use of dialect and dialogue, its lyrical description, and its inter-subjectivity depicted through dual focalization and dialogue between the student and the photographer shows how the novel challenges yet retains a commitment to perceptions of the truth. "The sent-down youth and the peasant in the 1980s" suggests that the novella's engagement with the peasantry disrupts mainstream ideological perspectives on the historical changes in peasant life and the nature of the peasant that contextualized both the roots-seeking debates and policy debates among intellectuals and party officials in this era. "'The purity and harmony of nature:' the role of the environment in *Rivers of the North"* argues that the novella's sustained engagement with and historicization of the environment serves as a corrective to the challenges of a rapidly urbanizing society. Finally, "'A just and thorough knowledge:' *Rivers of the North's* search for totality in a fragmented society" shows how the novella's depictions of the peasants, the land, and history help it to challenge roots-seeking movement trends and mainstream ideologies of rural life, arguing for the continued importance of attention to the present realities of rural life and the environment as an essential spiritual resource in contemporary Chinese society.

Background and literary contexts

Rivers of the North was published in the first decade of the Reform and Opening period. Mao's death in 1976 and the fall of the Gang of Four later that year

signaled the end of the Cultural Revolution. By 1978, Deng Xiaoping had initiated the "Reform and Opening" policies. These policies began a shift from a state-driven socialist economic system to a market-based economic system. In the countryside, this meant decollectivization of village land, the end of class labels and class-based political and economic organization, and the end of the sent-down youth movement. The sent-down youth movement was a strong influence on Zhang Chengzhi, who was part of the program. The program, which was initiated by the state in the early 1960s and gained momentum in the Cultural Revolution, was made up of urban youth who voluntarily or involuntarily "went to the people" during the Cultural Revolution and who left their schools, their families, and their homes to live with, work alongside, and learn from the peasantry. When the Cultural Revolution ended, many of these students, no longer youth, sought to re-enter their schooling and return to the cities.[6] Roots-seeking literature was significant among the sent-down youth writings as its writers not only drew from their experiences as sent-down youth, but also sought in those experiences a deeper meaning, whether that could be construed as spiritual worth, cultural foundations, or individual fulfillment. This search for greater meaning has been understood as a response to the social, cultural, political, and economic whiplash that arose as a result of the end of the Maoist era and the rapid changes brought on by Deng Xiaoping's market reforms.

---

6 Important book-length studies of the sent-down youth movement include Bernstein, Bonnin, and Honig and Zhao. The introduction to Z. Cao also provides a useful summary of sent-down youth studies published in China, including Mi, Y. Ding, and X. Liu.

The texts that emerged from this historical event took many forms, from the melodramatic depictions of the sent-down youth as victims known as *shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学 (scar literature) to realist, almost reportage-like attempts to document the experience both in fiction and memoir, to *xungen wenxue* 寻根文学 (roots-seeking literature), which was known for its attempt to delve into Chinese folk tradition and history, using experimental forms to address an identity crisis both within the former sent-down youth and the Chinese people at large.[7] The movement took its name from an essay by Han Shaogong titled *Wenxue de gen* 文学的根 ("The Roots of Literature" 1985). In the essay, Han argues that for great literature to develop, it needs to be rooted in local traditions: "if the roots are not deep, the leaves cannot flourish" (76).[8] He suggests that the urgency of this movement is partly in response to the longer twentieth century tradition of looking to western literary trends that began with the May 4th movement, partly a reaction to a more recent interest in foreign authors, and partly a reaction to the homogenization of globalization. He writes: "the cities, other than Shanghai's Cheng Huang temple or Beijing's palace walls, are covered in forests of tall buildings, wide asphalt roads, multicolored neon lights. North and South are the same, they have no personality. History is shortened

7 Cao Zuoya's Out of the Crucible: Literary Works About the Rusticated Youth looks at the writings of sent-down youth together, examining them primarily for their content and themes rather than the literary forms they took. However, other literary critics have focused on the ways in which these writings differed from one another, and terms like scar literature and roots-seeking literature were in common use as the various schools emerged, not monikers given in retrospect (See also Hong Zicheng, Chapter 17).

8 根不深，则叶难茂。(quotes from this essay are all my translation)

and changes too easily." (81).[9] Instead, "the countryside is the past of the city, it is the museum of ethnic history" (81).[10] Han Shaogong does not simply reduce the countryside to a homogenous rural tradition, but rather gives many examples from different regions and ethnic groups. He also emphasizes that seeking roots does not mean closing oneself off from the outside. Rather, in understanding the other, writers can come to understand themselves better. Overall, this is an aesthetic and spiritual quest—it is not about the material conditions of the countryside, but rather the cultural traditions it represents and the author's desire for those conditions to inform the future of Chinese identity.

Roots-seeking literature, despite its metaphysical aims and forms, still engages with the peasant and the countryside, and has been interpreted as part of the long twentieth century history of Chinese rural fiction by chroniclers of that history such as Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker and Ding Fan. Yet despite the genre's attention to the peasantry and the countryside, scholars of roots-seeking literature including Feuerwerker, Li Qingxi, and Jing Wang have focused primarily on the formal methods that roots-seeking writers used to undermine earlier twentieth century commitments to realist representation. In her discussion of the roots-seeking writers and their experimental styles, Feuerwerker questions whether these works can even be discussed as a part of a linear tradition of representing the peasant that can be

9 而城市呢，上海除了一角城隍庙，北京除了一片宫墙，那些林立的高楼，宽阔的沥青路，五彩的霓虹灯，南北一样，多少有点缺乏个性；而且历史短暂，太容易变换。
10乡土是城市的过去，是民族历史的博物馆。

traced back to Lu Xun and the early twentieth century (188). She argues that Lu Xun, Zhao Shuli, and even the post-1978 writer Gao Xiaosheng share an interest in history and politics in their representations of the peasant and the countryside, using variations on realist forms to discuss issues of reform, revolution, and class struggle. She suggests that the roots-seeking movement, in contrast, distances itself from historical specificity and the realist form. Feuerwerker notes that while these works also focus on the relationship between the educated writer and the peasant other, their use of folklore, memory, and alternative conceptions of time represents a shift away from the socialist realist writers' concern with the peasant's role in history into a reflection on tradition, the subconscious, and the stubbornness of old ways. The relationship between the roots-seeking movement and the more explicitly political socialist realist tradition that preceded it is one of reaction and rejection. One connection between these works and their socialist realist predecessors is the way the roots-seeking writers question the accuracy of representation in socialist realist texts by undermining the possibility of representation itself (Feuerwerker 190). Li Qingxi's analsyis of the roots-seeking movement further characterizes it as an innovative, avant-garde literary movement that went further in exploring the nuances of human experience than the earliest post-Mao literary movements such as scar literature, a more heavy-handed, visceral recounting of Cultural Revolution experiences that often clearly defined its characters as victims or perpetrators. Li argues that roots-seeking literature, in its experiments with form, spirituality, and the everyday, allowed these authors to escape simplistic ideological narratives and achieve philosophically

innovative results, such as the ability to perform self-critique and the renewal of spiritual identity due to that critique (114). Li further argues that roots-seeking works are anticultural, that their focus on "things-in-themselves" brings them outside of the specifics of place and time (122).

In my analysis of these texts, I am interested in returning the focus to how these literary works do grapple with the nature of the peasant, the human relationship to the land, and the specifics of place and time, even as the imaginaries of the peasant and land both take forms never before seen in twentieth century rural fiction. Land is often used symbolically, gazed at from a distance through misty fog. Images of the peasant are also often seen from afar, although what is seen differs from author to author within this movement. Still, these images are representations, and closer attention to what is being represented in addition to how it is being represented can help understand broader shifting attitudes towards the rural in the 1980s beyond the realms of literary experimentation or spiritual seeking. Although these stories do not demonstrate linear time or concrete progression towards a better future like the socialist realist novels do, place and time are often marked in subtle ways. Roots-seeking short stories, novellas, and novels often worked with long historical timelines, shifting back and forth between the early twentieth century, the more immediate revolutionary past, and the vagaries of the present. As roots-seeking writers attempted to deconstruct objective narratives of linear history, they relied on experiments with form.

For example, Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* is precise about names and dates as his

narrative shifts between telling the story of his grandfather's defense of their village from the Japanese, brief moments throughout the socialist period, and the present. However, the narrative shifts time periods every few pages, and what happens during those years is often hinted at rather than explicitly described in a linear way. Han Shaogong's *Guiqulai* 归去来 ("Homecoming" 1985) depicts a narrator, a former sent-down youth, who is revisiting the place where he was sent. The narrator is unsure if he is dreaming or experiencing reality. He is unsure if what he remembers about his past is accurate, as what he remembers is not confirmed by the people he meets. *Red Sorghum* takes place across the twentieth century, with a narrator who seems to be located in a present although it is unclear when that present is. The narrative references dates and events, but time passes in strange ways. These approaches to history deconstruct the narratives of linear time that were so important to socialist era ideologies of progress and call into question humans' ability to perceive time or even reality itself. Instead of an escape from history, these roots-seeking works investigate it. However, this investigation is not the thorough search of a police detective, but rather one of a spelunker making a map of a cave in the dark. Yet Mo Yan and Han Shaogong's explorations of history seem to be impressionistic without coming to conclusions. Zhang Chengzhi's *Rivers of the North* makes a more concerted effort to connect the student's investigations in the present to a larger narrative of historical change over long periods of time, giving history a logic that is not the same as the progressive linearity of socialist or capitalist development, but that does move forward.

At the same time as the roots-seeking movement sought spiritual renewal through a return to folk culture, it also saw in the return to Chinese traditions seeds of violence and superstition. Roots-seeking writers explored what they saw as the primitive or even primal nature of Chinese traditions and the peasantry who embodied these traditions. These portrayals could be dark and chaotic, questioning the possibility of human progress that was so central to socialist development and postsocialist modernization efforts. Peasant cultures depicted in some of these texts were portrayed as irrational and cruel. For example, Han Shaogong's "Ba Ba Ba" 爸爸爸 (1993) features a mentally and physically handicapped "moron," Bing Zai, who can only speak in curses and causes two inter-village wars, yet who is also worshipped as a god by his fellow villagers. Joseph Lau has argued that Bing Zai's ability to survive attempted ritual sacrifice and poisoning, alongside of the villagers' worship of him, suggests that there is a backwardness, cruelty and vulgarity in traditional Chinese culture that has continued to the present (Lau 35). The dual trends of spiritual revitalization and emphasis on cruelty and violence came together in *Red Sorghum*, in which the narrator describes the story of his grandparents across the span of the twentieth century. The narrator's grandfather is described as a cruel and murderous leader, but these traits are held up as admirable and lost in the present era, compared to current generations who are portrayed as weak. Sexual violence and interpersonal violence are portrayed as a means of demonstrating one's power. *Red Sorghum,* in its sexual and scatological excess, glorification of superstition, and valorization of tyranny, has been discussed by Jing Wang as suggesting a correction to

an "empty modernity" and the power and persistence of tradition (189) The cruelty and chaos of these texts does not characterize all roots-seeking literature. Ah Cheng's *Qi Wang* 棋王 (*Chess King* 1984), for example, has a more peaceful tone that suggests a Daoist existentialism rather than nihilistic excess. Ah Cheng's work is more aligned with the spiritual themes of the movement, yet his work also calls into question rational ideologies of progress through showing what he perceives as its emptiness. Literary scholars have interpreted these texts as reactionary in their glorification of violence and their lack of interest in the progress narrative of social development that was important at that time, while at the same time noting the texts' interest in developing a sense of freedom through the rejection of both social and literary norms (J.Wang 217-218). This freedom is often cast as the development of individual intellectual freedom, something that was perceived to be suppressed during the socialist era.

As a corrective to the focus on subjectivity and freedom that characterizes much of the literary scholarship on the roots-seeking movement, Huang Yibing's work on the literature of the 1980s, including the roots-seeking movement, provides a critical paradigm that moves beyond simple binaries that contrast post-Mao literature about subjectivity and self-development with reductive depictions of socialist novels as repetitive tales of collective dominance over individual will. Huang sees a crisis of consciousness in 1980s and 1990s writers between the ideals of the Cultural Revolution and their skepticism about those ideals based on their experiences during that period. He suggests this conflict led them to become "cultural bastards" rather

than "legitimate successors of the revolutionary cause" (10). His argument does not rely on a simplistic individualism, but rather examines how each writer's literary consciousness is reflective of history. His analysis of Zhang Chengzhi's *Rivers of the North* is primarily significant in that it demonstrates how Zhang's work connects the individual to society, and connects Zhang's idealism to a concrete goal, that of furthering the nation's maturation (116). He argues that this is primarily a spiritual project, and Huang sees Zhang's eventual turn to religion and religious writing as a logical outcome of Zhang's aims (124).

The sent-down youth and the peasant in the 1980s

In an early scene in *Rivers of the North,* the student is returning to the countryside where he once worked as a sent-down youth. He is planning to apply to graduate school in geography, and he hopes to supplement the textual studies he must do to prepare for the exam with field studies of the features of land and water he reads about. To get to his destination, he must share a bouncy truck ride with a group of peasants he assumes are coming home from "successful sales expeditions to the free market" (50).[11] He thinks to himself: "All of them were peasants: simple, prosperous, lovable, liberal-minded peasants" (50).[12] The novella is written in third-person limited, often focalized through the student's perspective, sharing his thoughts and

11 他估计这些农民全都是从自由市场得胜回乡的。(51)
12 全是农民。朴实的，小康的，可爱的，自由主义的农民。(51)

perceptions. By describing the peasants through the perspective of the student, with an overwhelmingly positive, bordering on patronizing tone, the narrative emphasizes the distance between the student's perception and the possible realities of the situation. This is not the omniscient, ostensibly objective description of a traditional realist or socialist realist narrative. The student has absorbed the language of the times: the peasants are coming home from the "free market," and are "liberal-minded," reflecting the 1980s ideals, discussed further below, that decollectivization will stimulate the peasants' innate self-interest and therefore the rural economy.

The peasantry in *Rivers of the North* is depicted neither as a historically contingent class nor as a manifestation of timeless Chinese culture. The novella repeatedly emphasizes that the student shares a ride with a group of peasants on a "Liberation"[13] brand truck. This simple detail brings the revolutionary period into the novella in a subtle way from the beginning, reminding us that the peasantry is not timeless. They have gone through a process called "liberation," whether or not that "liberation" was fully realized. The Liberation truck recalls a specific point in time in Chinese history, yet its link to the present is unclear. By not taking a direct stance on "Liberation" here, Zhang diverges from other post socialist fiction about rural life and the recent past, which often more explicitly mocks or satirizes socialist language.

On the truck, the student develops a special interest in a young man among them: "Scrutinizing the young man with interest, he noted his calm and honest demeanor. A real self-contained, sincere country lad, and quite muscular as well"

13 解放牌卡车 (51)

(54).[14] While the student imagines himself to have an easy camaraderie with the young man, speaking to him in his own dialect, the narration describes the young man's blushes and discomfort with this interaction with an educated youth. The effort the student must put into maintaining this sense of familiarity is described through dialect. The speaker only knows three words in the local dialect, yet while talking with the young man he takes "every possible opportunity" to use those three words (66).[15] The student's unabashed admiration for the country lad and his fellow peasants reads as a bit naïve. The student seems to admire the simplicity of a life measured by the consistent rhythms of market days and truck rides home. At the same time, the traits the student is reading into the peasantry serve as an implied contrast to the urban other: the student and his friends discussed more fully later in the novel. Whereas the peasants are sincere and self-contained, the urban youth are uncertain about their identities and can be underhanded in their relations with one another. Whereas the peasants are strong, the students are weak. The divide between the simplicity of country life as perceived by the young man and the complexity of modern life for a young urban intellectual is reflected in the distance between the student's perception and what the reader sees. However, the distance between the two seen by the reader and ignored by the student is not exactly a wholesale rejection of the possibility of community between an urban youth and a peasant. Despite the

14 满怀兴趣地端详着那小伙儿安静老实的模样。真是个安分的朴实后生，浑身肌肉鼓鼓的。(55)
15 和那后生攀谈着，不断地使用“嗌、解下、相跟上” 三个山西词。(67)

awkwardness of the student's earnestness, the novel is not ridiculing him. Instead, taking the bildungsroman as form, the novel traces the student's movement from naiveté to maturity. The commitment to the long, painstaking work of understanding stated in the introduction to the novella helps to frame this awkwardness as a moment on a longer path of understanding, not a static state of embarrassment to reject in its entirety. The solution is not to retreat to the city and the student's more comfortable milieu there. Instead, the student must continue on his journey of education.

In the following chapter, the student meets a young female photographer from Beijing on the train and invites her to join him in a visit to an old peasant friend. The student tells the photographer about an old man he had met in a town where he had worked two years previously. At that time, the man told him he was working to divert river water towards a grove of poplars he had planted to sell when they were grown and provide for his granddaughter after his death. During the visit, he finds that the old man has died but his granddaughter continues to care for the poplars. They share a simple meal with her. As they leave "they caught sight of a blue checquered headcloth flashing in the distant grove of poplars" (156).[16] This poetic image is more than just a pastoral fantasy. It also suggests that the girl will continue to nurture the poplars that are her legacy. This scene does not indulge in the fantasies of easy camaraderie seen in the earlier conversation between the student and the "country lad." The student is compelled to acknowledge the death of the old man and the passing of time. The narration shows us his reflections on these changes:

16 他们远远地看见一幅蓝格子头巾正在河滩的青杨树林里闪动。 (157)

> You died, naturally and quietly. You never reaped the benefits of this grove of trees…the poplars are still young and tender…You'd forgotten long ago that you ever spoke your feelings to a "youngster," now you've gone and died, ever so quietly. I know you must be at peace, because my heart is at peace right now. (154)[17]

The student has moved beyond a simplistic objectification of peasant life to a more thoughtful reflection on how things have changed for the student, the old man, and the young peasant woman. Although the novella seems to be skeptical of an overly idealized depiction of the student-peasant interactions, this skepticism is balanced with a sincerity that could be read as hopeful.

The novella's juxtaposition of the peasant and the student ways of life leads more to a complex understanding of the whole, in which both parts coexist without merging into the other. However, while the students seem to learn from the peasants and the free and open air of the countryside, it is unclear whether the peasants have anything to gain from their interactions with the students. In fact, as shown in the examples above, despite the novella's comfort with the interiority of the student and the photographer, it makes no attempt at depicting the interiority of the peasants they interact with. The collective bildungsroman of *Sanliwan Village* discussed in the previous chapter has given way to the limited perspective of young urban intellectuals. In this text, understanding the countryside and the peasant is still key to understanding the nation, but the peasants do not play an active role in constructing

17 你死啦，自然而平和。你没有指望上这片小树林子。。。你早忘了曾经对一个尕娃讲过你的心事，你就这样悄悄地死啦。但我相信你一定非常宁静，因为此刻我的心里一片宁静。(155)

the narrative.

Regardless of the student's pleasure in the countryside and his admiration of rural life, and despite his often mentioned “six years in the countryside” during the sent-down youth movement, he does not seek this life for himself. Michel Bonnin's historical study of the sent-down youth movement mentions Zhang Chengzhi's work in his argument that admiration of the peasants rarely led to a sent-down youth’s desire to stay in the countryside after the end of the movement (287). All in all, less than 10% of sent-down youth remained in the countryside in 1980, when there were no longer any legal requirements to stay (176). Contextualizing the novella in its historical moment and its place in the roots-seeking literary movement is crucial to understanding the students’ ambivalence towards peasant life and the ways that Zhang addresses it. Studies of the sent-down youth have repeatedly discussed their mixed reactions to the experience: while some rejected it as a waste of time and energy, others felt they gained strength and insight from the experience (Z. Cao 210-211). Many developed compassion for the peasants they worked and lived with, but others expressed horror at what they saw as peasant backwardness (Bonnin, 275-279). Though some stayed in the villages at the end of the Cultural Revolution, many could not wait to make it back to the cities they came from.[18]

---

18 One major example of the zhiqing desire to return home was the Xishuangbanna protests in 1978, which began with an open letter to Deng Xiaoping documenting accidents, abuse, and ill-treatment on military farms, but which expanded to strikes, petitioning, and demonstrations involving tens of thousands of zhiqing. These protests received national media attention, and they were one of the factors leading to the end of the program. (Z. Cao 188-189, Bonnin 144-148)

The student's "lost-ness" depicted in the novella suggests an alienation that the peasants do not seem to experience, and the ways the novel captures this structure of feeling is picked up on and discussed by many critical treatments of the novel. Chinese scholarship has focused primarily on the student's journey of maturation, suggesting that the novella demonstrates the lost nature of the sent-down youth generation, in that it is difficult for them to find a place in society (Huang 10). The student's interactions with the environment and the peasant are discussed in passing as a means for the student to deepens his maturation process and helps him work through his feelings of lostness (Cai "Yi ge lixiang"). However, in my reading above, the novella does not simply use peasant life as a tool to overcome a student's individual existential crisis. Instead, it seems to seek a balance between these quite different ways of life.

Questioning history and defining the present: constructing the image of the peasant in postsocialist debates on the rural question

To better understand what is at stake in depicting the peasant in *Rivers of the North* and roots-seeking literature more broadly, it is necessary to look at the historical context and ideological debates over the nature of the peasant during the 1980s. The ambivalence the sent-down youth felt towards their past and their relationships with the peasantry reflected the monumental changes that were taking place in the way that the Chinese countryside was organized economically, politically,

and culturally in the 1980s. The relationship of "the people" to "the land" was changing. The heavily politicized nature of these changes means that even today, historians and social scientists still debate "what happened" in addition to "what we should do about it." Decollectivization began in some regions as early as 1979 and was formally implemented across the country in 1982. Large, collective land holdings were broken into smaller family plots. While claims in the national press and research from some historians has suggested that decollectivization was initiated by peasants, others argue that it was in fact a top-down policy that was enforced at the county level. Ronald Coase and Ning Wang's *How China Became Capitalist* supports the former claim, focusing on early evidence of decollectivization in 1978 and 1979, long before it became an official national policy in 1982. However, they also acknowledge that at the time of the 1982 implementation of the household responsibility system, when collective farming was completely disbanded, there were areas where collective farming was still deemed successful and where it might have continued were it not for this uniform policy (51). The claim that the policy was enforced from the top-down is based in part on this evidence.[19] The difficulty in determining the "correct" answer stems in part from a lack of consistent records across different localities; however, the narrative of whether the peasants or the state initiated decollectivization was not simply a matter of historical accuracy. The late 1970s and early 1980s was a time when reformers attempted to argue that communist efforts at collectivization were unnatural, and that the peasants would thrive and be more profitable if allowed to

19 Studies supporting this claim include H. Li and Unger.

work household plots. If these changes were demanded by the peasants, the government could claim that the new system was more in line with human nature and in the peasants' best interests. Although significant increases in productivity did occur from 1978-1982, by the mid-1980s there was a widening gap in income and living standards not only between rural and urban populations, but within the rural population itself.[20]

Alongside changes in land usage from collectivization to homestead plots, the official class terminology that dominated peasant identity-making, local hierarchies, and even material conditions in the period from 1949-1978 also dissolved. In the socialist period, land reform policies classified all village residents based on their pre-revolutionary property ownership and used these new class labels to determine how villagers would receive benefits such as good jobs and educational opportunities. The poor and lower-middle peasants were now at the top of the local hierarchy in the socialist period, while former landlords and landowners faced the redistribution of their property and the lowest priority in opportunities for social advancement (Unger 41). However, class language was also used to inspire villagers to accept what might seem like irrational central government demands, such as providing grain quotas to the state to support socialist modernization in the cities. The government suggested that poor and lower-middle peasants' "innate political nobility" and commitment to building socialism were reasons to enact otherwise detrimental policies. Therefore, as class language dissolved, most peasants were not sorry to see it go (46). However, in

20 See Unger, Jacka et. al.

the postsocialist period, privilege and wealth became more concentrated among cadres and their family connections, as well as families who had knowledge, power, and resources before the revolution, which had in some cases been passed down through generations and reemerged once liberalization and privatization occurred (Unger 136, note 10). In addition, governmental economic benefits including grants of land rights were often allocated based on families' previous successes, exacerbating income inequality by investing in the rich, while depriving poor families of resources. A regressive tax system exacerbated these problems (140-142).

These material changes are key to understanding ideological debates about the nature and character of the Chinese peasant at the time, debates which surrounded and informed roots-seeking writers. Both literature and the past were analyzed by whether or not they conformed with "human nature," a term that often was a mask for the self-interest cultivated under capitalist ideology. As class language dissolved while class inequality widened, the ideological image of "the peasant" that circulated among intellectuals and within the central government began to shift. Historian Alexander Day has written about how the documentary television series *Heshang* 河殇 (*River Elegy* 1988), suggested that peasant dependence on the state was a major factor in China's perceived "backwardness" in comparison to the west. This dependence would need to be eliminated for China to develop as a modern nation (13).[21] Day argues that this position, held primarily by postsocialist-era liberals, replaced the Maoist

[21] Alexander Day's *The Peasant in Postsocialist China: History, Politics, Capitalism* was instrumental in the development of this project and provides crucial context for the literary texts discussed throughout this and the following chapter.

dialectical understanding of peasant action in historical context, in which peasants could be either conservative and self-interested based on their status as small property owners or a revolutionary class (see also Kelliher). Under the liberal view, peasant self-interest was no longer conservative but progressive, and needed to be further cultivated to fully modernize China. Peasant backwardness was blamed for what liberals called the continued feudalism of the socialist state, which they cast as an authoritarian dictatorship (Day 28). This was in part because peasants, liberals argued, could not represent themselves politically, and therefore depended on a dictator-like benefactor, leading to personality cults (32). This tendency was cast as an unchanging innate quality of the peasantry extending from the socialist era back through Chinese dynastic history, which disregarded peasant engagement in the changes of the socialist period and enabled a call for market intervention into village society.

Roots-seeking literature and the image of the peasant in the postsocialist era

Alongside of the sociocultural turmoil, roots-seeking literature played its own role in creating an understanding of what the peasant and the countryside had been and could be. The literature of the roots-seeking movement did not directly engage with policy level debates about the peasantry, but it was asking similar questions about the nature of the peasant, the possibility of historical change, and the legacy of the socialist era. As liberal intellectuals depicted the peasantry as historically

dependent on the state, blamed them for the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, and argued they should be encouraged to develop their innate potential to become self-sufficient rational economic actors, many of the roots-seeking stories depicted peasant irrationality, brutality, and superstition.[22] These depictions could serve to support the liberal call for reform or instead, present a pessimistic sense that reform might not be possible. These less-than-flattering views of peasant characters may have been a reaction to the socialist realist literature of writers like Zhao Shuli and Hao Ran that only allowed "good heroes" and "bad villains" in narratives that inevitably ended in the victory of communist ideals.[23] Roots-seeking writers wanted to critique what they perceived as state-directed official narratives with political motives. At the same time, these so-called antipolitical narratives may subtly support the postsocialist-era government's new political-economic ideology, which requires all of China's residents to become a part of the market economy. By taking a deep look at Chinese culture and finding it lacking, these narratives may cause the reader to look for alternatives, and the "modernization" and "marketization" alternatives are close at hand. Yet in the pessimism of these depictions, there is also a nihilistic skepticism that reform is even possible or that it would be beneficial, which could point toward a different critique of market reforms which emerges more fully in the texts discussed in the next chapter.

---

22 Michael Duke writes, "[Mo Yan's early short stories] consistently portray the Chinese countryside as a nighmarish world" (Duke 48).

23 Cai Xiang's *Revolution and its Narratives* discusses the different degrees of villainy in Zhao's *Sanliwan Village* and Hao's *The Golden Road*, in which he argues that early depictions showed villains who could be reformed, while later depictions received a much harsher treatment. K. Clark (221) and Egan (234) also note this shift.

However, not all of the roots-seeking deconstructions of official history lead to a neoliberal quest for self expression and self sufficiency. There is also in these fragmenting narratives room for explorations of alternative ways to face the future.

Much writing on the roots-seeking movement has noted its portrayal of peasants not as a class with a historical contingency as they were seen in the socialist period, but rather as "somehow embodying or emblematic of what in [the writers'] view were enduring characteristics of Chinese culture" (Feuerwerker 189). These enduring characteristics could have both positive and negative connotations for 1980s writers. For example, Feuerwerker discusses how the villagers in Wang Anyi's 王安忆 (1954-) *Xiaobao Zhuang* 小鲍庄 (*Baotown* 1985) are known for their *renyi* 仁义 (virtue), a Confucian term for ethical behavior that helps to give the village a timeless feel. Yet under the logic of virtue, the villagers' behavior is not only described through kind acts such as taking in orphans or helping one another after a flood, but also as passive and stagnant, such as when a character refuses to divorce his insane wife because it would go against virtue (230-231).

The suggestion that there is a timeless character to the peasantry corresponds with Day's analysis of 1980s attitudes towards the peasant, which relied on these descriptions of a static nature of the peasantry to deny any possibility that progress was achieved during the years from 1950-1978 and to support the need to reform the peasantry for China to develop. However, Feuerwerker argues that this portrayal contrasted "the [socialist period's] ideological construct of the generic peasant as revolutionary vanguard, as masters of the nation" (195). The 1980s construct of the

"timeless peasant" ignores material conditions as much as its proponents argue that Maoist constructions of the peasant ignored these conditions. As discussed in the previous chapter, historical studies of the peasantry from the 1950s-1970s suggest that the peasants did have a class and historical particularity that was effaced in the dominant discourses of the 1980s. They were both targets of and participants in socialist campaigns that transformed their lives. Day clarifies the importance of historical specificity in Mao's class analysis of the peasantry, especially in the way it determined the power and property imbalances within the peasant class and its potential for becoming a revolutionary vanguard.

In addition, by looking at the previous chapter, we can see that the image of the peasant as “master of the nation” was not as unambiguous as 1980s characterizations of the period make it seem. While my analysis of *Sanliwan Village* showed peasants collectively working towards local and national goals through organizing each other at the local level, I also discussed images of the peasant from texts such as *Li Shuangshuang* and *The Builders* in which even the heroes of the story require tempering and guidance from higher up party officials. In these texts, the socialist peasant was capable of acting as a historical agent and participating in change, yet both heroes and villains required substantial guidance, prodding, or humiliation as a foundation for changing their views. In many of the roots-seeking texts, especially the texts set in timeless or ambiguous settings such as Han Shaogong’s *Ba ba ba,* the party official is nowhere to be found. In this sense, there may be more continuity between some socialist images of the peasant and these roots-

seeking texts. Socialist-era skepticism about the revolutionary nature of the peasant has given way to a more complete image of the impossibility of the peasant's ability to enact change.

A close reading of a 1988 Chinese critique of *Rivers of the North* helps to demonstrate how the liberal ideologies of progress discussed above emerged in literary critique and shows how the novel does not fit cleanly within those ideologies. Earlier, I discussed how some depictions of the timeless peasant in roots-seeking literature could be construed to support the need for market reforms in the countryside. Li Shulei's critique all but states this outright, although he is more interested in the way that the novella treats history than the way it describes the peasantry. There are echoes of the *River Elegy* narrative in this critique of *Rivers of the North,* specifically in the way that Li blames the perceived backwardness of Chinese society on the persistence of tradition. Li argues that *Rivers of the North*'s glorification of history and tradition reinforces this backwardness and contributes to China's continued stagnation. His reading of the scene in which the student calls the river his father serves as a key basis for this argument. He calls the river a totem in a derogatory way, suggesting that the student's belief in the river's vitality is an empty belief that prevents belief in the self (85). He argues that this is due to the limits created by Chinese society's historical reliance or dependence on the river, benefitting from it but also subject to its whims (85).

Li Shulei's emphasis on individual self-determination also calls to mind the *suzhi* 素质 (quality) discourse of the post socialist period, in which peasants were cast

as "low-quality," thereby explaining the slow rate of development in China's rural areas (Anagnost 190). Li suggests that the student's affection for the countryside romanticizes this backwardness. Furthermore, romanticizing backwardness inhibits the ability of Chinese people to become modern and support China's ability to develop as a modern nation (85). This article was published in the same year as the documentary *River Elegy*, demonstrating the prevailing ideology of the time. *Rivers of the North*, published only four years earlier, is perhaps one of the last literary works that would venerate history and/or peasant life for some time.

Li Shulei's article reproduces the dominant liberal narrative towards the peasantry and history, making it not particularly remarkable except insofar as it shows how widespread that narrative could be, and how it moved between policy and literary circles. However, the pervasiveness of this narrative highlights the anomalous nature of *Rivers of the North*. Li's article is also a misreading in that he conflates the student's thoughts and experiences with the viewpoint of the author. Although the novella undoubtedly venerates the countryside and describes the value of informing the future with a full understanding of history, the main character's romantic enthusiasm for these things is implicitly critiqued within the novella itself. At the same time, the novella's distancing of the narrative viewpoint from the student's may also imply a critique of the dominant values of the world the student inhabits. His inability to fit in may demonstrate as many problems with the growing materialistic and pragmatic attitudes of his peers as it does with his admittedly naive enthusiasm for rural life.

But if the 1980s discourse is centered on an essentialist view of Chinese culture as defined by its peasant character, as the *River Elegy* conversations described above suggest, the question then becomes whether this culture is something to be embraced or rejected. Feuerwerker suggests that roots-seeking literature differs from other twentieth century literature due to its "movement beyond the confines of explicit ideology and the concomitant destruction of peasants as a politicized literary category" (188). Although *Rivers of the North* is not located within "the confines of explicit ideology," in contrast to other works, it seems to see a peasant ethic as an ideal still worthy of admiration and even adoption.

"The purity and harmony of nature:" the role of the environment in *Rivers of the North*

As discussed above, 1980s political discourse about the peasantry and the land focused on returning collectively owned land to individual peasant households as a means of increasing production by engaging peasant self-interest. For the former sent-down youth and the roots-seeking literature that emerged from this movement, land was more often something to be looked at rather than engaged with. Land and landscape took on symbolic value in these texts. *Red Sorghum* uses imagery of the dense, sticky sorghum grown in the fictional Shandong township where the novel is set as a backdrop for scenes of murder, invasion, resistance, and lustful trysts. The narrator describes the sorghum's vitality as a metaphor of the spirit of his home

region:

> Northeast Gaomi Township is easily the most beautiful and most repulsive, most unusual and most common, most sacred and most corrupt, most heroic and most bastardly, hardest-drinking and hardest-loving place in the world…In late autumn, during the eighth lunar month, vast stretches of red sorghum shimmered like a sea of blood. Tall and dense, it reeked of glory; cold and graceful, it promised enchantment; passionate and loving, it was tumultuous (4).[24]

Mo Yan's countryside is one of extremes, and the crop that is used as both sustenance and to make alcohol is described as the source of those extremes. Throughout the text, the sorghum is imbued with an almost supernatural power, described as "living spirits," capable of staring, mothering, thinking. It seems to determine the people's lives more than they have any power to guide or direct it.

Han Shaogong's short story *Homecoming* opens with the first-person narrator visiting a mountain village:

> Much of the dirt path had been washed out by water running down the slope, leaving jagged ridges of hearth and mounds of pebbles, like a body stripped of skin and flesh, with sticks of dry bone and lumps of shrivelled innards fully exposed. (1)[25]

Here, the reader immediately loses their own footing, unclear where this narrator or narrative will go. Land is not a source of life here—it is dangerous, imbued with terror and violence. This sense of uncertainty and discomfort is maintained throughout the text. Has the narrator been to this village before or not? He thinks it is

---

24 高密东北乡无疑是地球上最美丽最丑陋、最超脱最世俗、最圣洁最龌龊、最英雄好汉最王八蛋、最能喝酒最能爱的地方。。。八月深秋，无边无际的高粱红成洸洋的血海。高粱高密辉煌，高粱凄婉可人，高粱爱情激荡。

25 看到土路一段段被洪水冲过，冲毁得很厉害，留下路面一道道深沟和一窝窝卵石，像剜去了皮肉，暴露出人体的筋骨和脏器。(69)

his first visit, yet he remembers the scenes and the villagers remember him. The instability of the land between the young man's feet mirrors his discomfort from and disconnection from his possible past life.

In a shift from the human relationship to the land in the socialist period that was focused on land use and the human ability to transform the land, aesthetic portrayals of land in the 1980s more often demonstrated a disconnected and sometimes antagonistic relationship between humans and land. Rey Chow comments on this in her analysis of 1980s films set in the countryside:

> What the tranquil, stupendous presence of mountains, valleys, rocks, sand, and water in contemporary Chinese films suggests is thus not exactly the harmony between man and nature but the gigantic capacity of nature for indifference and destructiveness. In spite of the "earth-moving" efforts of human revolutions, these films seem to say, human life, especially in the "backward" rural areas, remains pathetically subjugated to the vast permanence of the land and the stubborn tenacity of its forces (40).

The land's indifference to people is reflected in indifference to the land in 1980s literary and political discourse. Much scholarship on roots-seeking literature focuses on the sent-down youth and their experiences and debates over the nature of the Chinese peasantry and how it should develop, mirroring sociological and political discourses of the time. Scholars of roots-seeking literature have historically paid little attention to the role of landscape in these works, despite its continued presence as discussed in the two above examples. Land is a difficult category for thought in this period, as changing policies towards land management, increased urbanization, and changing emotional attitudes towards the land all complicated attempts towards theorizing it. It is undervalued in the search for modernity that drove 1980s

discourses—although it exists, it's unclear what one should do with it.

While *Rivers of the North* does have scenes of nature in its "tranquil, stupendous presence," the text does not fully engage in either the socialist imagery of the land as something to be conquered and transformed nor the roots-seeking image of the land as indifferent, wild, or destructive. Instead, it focuses on the relationships between the humans and the land from a variety of perspectives: the young peasant woman tending the poplar grove, the photographer's artistic gaze, the student's academic and poetic understandings. The scene of the young woman tending her father's poplar trees demonstrates a relationship between human and land that is mutually beneficial. In some ways this mirrors the socialist model, although the transition to privately managed property is reflected in the solitude of the young woman. This is not a collectively managed resource. The photographer sees the land through the composition of a photograph. Later her work is described by another student in the city: "The ancient, desolate loess plateau. A grove of trees whose lust for life is so strong it leaps out at one. And the serene pottery jar—what a shame it's broken" (238).[26] They argue over the meaning of the pottery jar. He sees it as a metaphor for the brokenness of the generation of sent-down youth, she suggests it represents life more broadly instead. In the end, he recognizes that the problems faced by their generation are not unique in the long history of humankind. The integration of the land, the artifact, and the photographer's gaze is what gives the land meaning in

26 苍凉古老的黄土高原。生的欲望强烈得逼人的一片树林。端庄、美好、宁静的陶罐子，可惜它碎了。（239）

this moment.

The student's experience in the countryside is shaped by his engagement with the land and the natural environment as much as with the peasantry. The novella opens not with a focus on students or peasants, but with an exploration of the landscape that they all depend upon for life: "He gazed steadily at the river sparkling below" (Zhang 44).[27] The gaze matters here. It is not only important that the river exists, but that it is seen. Later it will matter that the river is classified according to official taxonomy through the student's geographical studies, but it will also matter that the river is translated into poetry through the student's aesthetic pursuits. In one of the most powerful passages in the book discussed more fully later in this chapter, the student dives into the river and is nearly carried away. In this novella, the natural world is something to be seen, understood, explored, and appreciated. The opening description of the river continues:

> The turbid yellow river water fiercely reflected the blazing sun of the plateau. The sky was vast and blue, and as clear as if it had been scrubbed. The loess caps—the ridges and knolls—pressed on the sky like the waves of an ocean. (46)[28]

Here, the scientific terms, which we have just learned as the student studied them, are brought in as both a corrective and a complement to their poetic description. The student combines the geographer's gaze and the poet's: calling to mind both a modern way of experiencing the world and an ancient one. The student's attempt to embody

---

27 他一直望着那条在下面闪闪发光的河。(45)
28 那浑黄的河水在高原阳光的曝晒下，反射着强烈的光。天空又蓝又远，清澄如洗。黄土帽——梁和峁像大海一样托着那蓝天。(47)

both identities while refusing to choose one or the other is characteristic of the novella itself, which itself does not seem to choose between the past and the future, the city and the country. The description then moves from the river to the land:

> These pale, yellow, almost white waves melted into and became one with the sky. He felt alive and refreshed, aware of the purity and the harmony of nature. Humming 'the sky was azure,' a line from a folk song, he felt wonderfully at ease. (46)[29]

The descriptive language here is vivid and adoring. The student's eyes take in the water, the land, the sky, and the liminal areas where these elements touch. The description calls to mind the landscape poetry of Wang Wei, in which the waves of a river can move the sky.[30] Through this allusion, Zhang also calls to mind the Buddhist principle of questioning perception, and he draws our attention to the long history of writing the human relationship to the land in Chinese literature. Through his close attention to nature, the speaker is not absent, he is present. His inspiration to sing a folk song calls to mind the people who populate the land, reminding us that the people and land coexist—that the value of the latter does not outweigh the value of the former. Unlike western fantasies of a wilderness untouched by people, the land here is only beautiful because it is observed.

Zhang Chengzhi's decision to begin the novella by immersing the reader in the student's perceptions of the environment suggests the student's separation from society, supporting my earlier assertion that the student's differentiation from the

---

29 淡黄的，微微泛白的梁峁的浪波和天空溶成了一片。他觉得神清气爽，觉得这大自然既单纯又和谐。“蓝格莹莹的天”，他哼了声民歌，心里觉得很舒服。(47)

30 For example, Wang Wei’s “Du he dao qinghe zuo.” (Quan Tang Shi 125:67)

norm is an attempt at critiquing that norm. In the spirit of the long, transnational tradition of pastoral literature, the countryside's breadth, freshness, and power is contrasted with the dirty, claustrophobic anxieties of the city. In the countryside, the student's idealism and hope can blossom and develop. When he returns to Beijing halfway through the novella, he must face the anxieties and realities of making a living in modern society. In his short story, “Lü ye” 绿夜 (“Green Night” 1982), Zhang writes about the “clamorous, bustling city…machines roaring day and night beside his simple flat” (4),[31] contrasting it with “the dazzling, rich green” (2) of the grassland.[32] Throughout both texts, Zhang continues to contrast the purity of the countryside with the coarseness of the city. The reference to "the purity and harmony of nature" also hearkens back to pre-modern Chinese literature and philosophy, which often looked to nature as a source for understanding how the world fit together in harmony (Elvin 321). Perhaps by emphasizing the vastness of nature, Zhang Chengzhi is asking the reader to take the standpoint of this wide gaze in his or her attempt to gain the just and thorough knowledge that is desired in the preface.

From this wide standpoint, however, nature is not timeless. The rivers are described as the source of civilization, yet they also exist beyond civilization. Shortly after visiting the young woman with the poplar trees, the student and the photographer find a piece of 4,000-year-old pottery in the river. The evidence of this pottery suggests that there is no nature in the present that is separate from the lives

31 攘往的都市。。。简易楼下日夜轰鸣的加工厂。(5)
32 明亮而浓郁的绿色 (3)

and actions of people, whether that is the material culture of a civilization buried thousands of years in the past, or the present cultivation of natural resources to ensure the future survival of the present society. Rural life in Zhang Chengzhi's *Rivers of the North,* therefore, is not separate from nature, and it is not timeless and unchanging. The discovery of the pottery creates a continuity from the long-ago past to its material persistence in the present through the grandfather planting the trees and the granddaughter tending them. In this way, the novella creates a depiction of historical change that is influenced by human action and has future potential that would not be possible without that action.

"A just and thorough knowledge:" *Rivers of the North's* search for totality in a fragmented society

In the 1980s, many writers, whether from the roots-seeking movement, the avant garde literature written from the perspective of alienated urban dwellers, or even the more traditionally realist fiction and memoirs, were occupied with understanding and describing a society that no longer made a pretense of cultural or political coherence. Zhang Chengzhi's *Rivers of the North* does not deny this confusion, but it also seeks to move beyond it. The novella, from the introduction onward, is concerned with long timelines that stretch back into the past, but plants seeds with the intention of their future cultivation. The novella's faith "that a just and thorough knowledge will sum up everything for us" is put into practice throughout the

text. The student travels between the countryside and the city; works through his relationships with the peasants, the photographer, his urban friends, and his family; and learns to describe the geography he so desperately desires to study in both academic and poetic terms. Although the novella focuses primarily on the student's journey, the student is never an isolated consciousness.

Most of the critics of the roots-seeking movement examine it primarily with regard to its abstract goals: its search for existential and spiritual meaning for the self and the nation. Huang Yibing notes that Zhang Chengzhi's work differs from other roots-seeking texts in its commitment to understanding the relationship of the individual to the community, yet the connection to the community in his analysis is primarily through reading the narrative of the maturation of the individual as a metaphor for the maturation of the nation. Yet these critics rarely engage deeply with the subjects of this work beyond the consciousness of the often intellectual narrators or main characters. For example, Huang Yibing's analysis reads the presence of the rivers in the text as "aspects of the protagonist's psyche" and "Chinese national symbols" which are "fused into the protagonist's own subjectivity" (114). While these symbolic resonances of the landscape are important to understanding the text, it is also important that the rivers exist within the text outside of the student's consciousness. In reading *Rivers of the North,* one must recognize that the novella's engagement with the land and the people is an essential part of both its search for meaning and its ability to create meaning. Through third person narration and focalization that shares both the student's and the photographer's consciousnesses, the

novella creates a level of distance from and self-reflection about the student's relationship to the land and the people. This distance helps provide perspective that lets the reader obtain a deeper sense of understanding of the whole world of the novella that the student does not always have access to.

One way a broadening of perspective is made possible in the novel is through interactions between characters. The narration, sometimes focalized through the student, sometimes through the photographer's eyes, and sometimes distanced from both of them, allows a shifting of perspectives that shows that the "modern" world does not exclusively belong to the individual and their desires, but is rather built via the individual's interactions with the other, whether that other is other human beings, the environment, or the past. For example, the novel uses the student's relationship with the photographer to help temper the student's idealism in his search for a deep understanding. Much of this critique comes from the narration's occasional focalization through the eyes of the young woman photographer from Beijing whom he meets in Shaanxi. She is a talented and hardworking artist who has been pursuing her craft for some time, so she is often uncomfortable with the student's passion and optimism, which she sees as naive, idealistic, and ignorant of the work it takes to achieve a goal like acceptance into a graduate program or writing a poem. Although she also has an eye for beauty, her passion is quieter and it is supplemented by the hard work she feels the student lacks. However, she doesn't seem to think his goals and passions are unattainable—she just questions whether he will be able to develop the patience she believes is necessary for him, or anyone, to be able to succeed. Her

description and experience of the artistic process is often accompanied by physical fatigue. The persistent hard work she argues is necessary for either artistic or academic success can take a toll. While at times this appears to be gendered—at one point the novella suggests that women are weak, sickly, or not cut out for ambitious intellectual or artistic pursuits—there is also a critique of the student's seemingly endless energy. Perhaps if he incorporated some of that energy into work instead of ideas, he might actually be able to achieve them. If the student's journey models the path humanity must take to achieve the deep understanding necessary for a better future, the photographer's critique, and even the awkwardness of the student's early exchanges with the peasant young man, suggest that we have a long way to go.

The student's maturation through humility is also developed in a scene in which the student leaps into the Yellow River to swim across it, something he had also done years prior as a young Red Guard and sent-down youth. This scene recalls a famous poem written by Mao, "Shuidiao getou: you yong" 水調歌頭：游泳 ("Swimming" 1957). Mao's exuberant poem commemorates his own youthful swim across the Yangtze with the language of boundless ambition: "I care not that the wind blows and the waves beat/It is better than idly strolling in a courtyard/Today I am free!" (Tay 645).[33] The student's hopes as a Red Guard, to see the world and build a revolutionary future, could have been expressed in the same tone. Like Mao, the description of the ease of crossing the river in his youth also suggested the ease of

33 不管风吹浪打，胜似闲庭信步，今日得宽馀

achieving his larger goals. Ten years later, we see the student's tendency towards fantasy and blind idealism begin to develop into a more mature, grounded understanding of both history and nature. As a youth, he swam the span of the powerful river easily. In trying to recreate that moment, he nearly loses control and drowns midway across. He also begins to recognize that his aging body cannot emerge from the wild river unscathed. He realizes that does not understand everything, and he is not always in control. *Rivers of the North* has many of these moments of understanding, when the main character underestimates or misunderstands nature, the peasantry, or the ways in which they are intertwined. In both cases, the main character nearly goes under, literally or metaphorically, yet he survives. In this survival lies a new humility and a new understanding. This humility reassures us that despite our knowledge that we are far away from the "just and thorough knowledge" we desire, progress is possible.

Part of developing a thorough knowledge in the text involves reflecting on and integrating an understanding of history—not as a glorified or abject past, not as an unknowable and mystified past, but something to understand and learn from. Amid a cultural discourse that suggests the nature of the peasant and the countryside has not changed for thousands of years, and a literary movement that often blurs the relationship between narrative and history, *Rivers of the North* grounds itself in both the long-distant and recent past. The fragment of ancient pottery that ties human civilization to the history of the rivers, the "Liberation" brand truck that leaves a trace of the revolutionary language ubiquitous in the socialist era but now faded like the

peeling slogans painted on walls during the Cultural Revolution, do not depict history as a succession of major events, but rather an accumulation of sedimented experience. In another early scene in the novella, we learn that the student was once a Red Guard. Later, we see how history as understood by the student conflicts with history as understood by the photographer, who tells him her father was beaten to death during the Cultural Revolution. Reflecting on his youth, the student thinks, "In those days you did not understand tears, did not understand the toll life exacts; you did not know that history also has its pain" (126).[34] The pain of the past does not lead to a rejection of the concept of understanding — rather, through the relationship between the student and the photographer and his ability to listen to her, it gives him a deeper understanding of history than he is able to realize on his own. For Zhang Chengzhi, an understanding of history is rewritten in the post-Mao era, one that neither fits a liberal agenda of the rejection of history and tradition as a barrier to progress, nor depicts history explicitly as the basis for a continuation of class struggle. At the same time, this is not a veneration of history or a nostalgia that desires an impossible return to the past. It's a sitting with the past, an openness, an engagement with pain, and a space for hope.

The novella's engagement with the environment furthers the possibility of understanding. It is deeply concerned with the human experience, but it acknowledges that that human experience cannot be fully examined without attention to human surroundings, whether that is the countryside that has historically fed us or

34 你那时不懂得眼泪，不懂得代价，你不知道历史也有它的痛苦。(127)

the cities where the majority of the population now make their living. The countryside is so crucial to this novella in part because it allows the depiction of human history to stretch back to thousand-year-old origins, acknowledging how limited our view of ourselves can be when we focus only on our immediate surroundings. Throughout Zhang Chengzhi's works, nature and the people whose lives are most deeply intertwined with nature provide a corrective to the arrogance of modernity. This corrective is not an escape from modernity, and it is not a solution to all of modernity's problems. However, it is a necessary part of a process of being able to move forward into a future that is something other than a disaster. This might be what the narrator is trying to accomplish in the preface to *Rivers of the North*, suggesting that some kind of comprehensive understanding of the past and the present of the human and natural worlds must be the foundation of a future. This cannot be achieved by passion or fetishization, but rather a slow, patient, listening.

Understanding in *Rivers of the North* integrates the concepts of intuitive comprehension, and logical understanding. The novella is not dismissive of the student's decision to study cultural geography, despite its critical stance towards the student's early blind enthusiasm for the subject. A comprehensive, academic knowledge of the human relationship to the environment can be a good thing, but only if it is pursued with hard work. At the same time, the novella does not seem to be suggesting that academic study is the only way to truly grasp the countryside. The student's passionate declaration that technical terms cannot encompass the majesty of the northern rivers is not presented ironically. His desire to write a poem to

encompass this feeling is earnest:

> Swimming in the Yellow River I already realized that this wasn't just river system topography, or just geography. This was a song, a symphony, a poem…Cultural geography is a branch of science, with its own means and methods. But I need something in addition to science. River system topography is not concerned with how poplar trees grow; works on geography, no matter how strong their descriptive powers, will never be able to express the mysterious caress of the waves of the Yellow River. (158-160)[35]

The importance of this moment is that the student does not think that poetry should overcome science, or that science does not need poetry. Learning topography and attempting to "express the mysterious caress of the waves of the Yellow River" both contribute to the "just and thorough" knowledge of the preface. The student's later difficulties in matching his poetic efforts to his poetic enthusiasm do not suggest that this desire is impossible to achieve, but rather that it might take a similar amount of effort and patience as a graduate degree in cultural geography. *Rivers of the North*, in its attempt to work towards a thorough understanding, moves between the peasant and the student, the countryside and the city. These categories cannot be defined exclusively through science—it is the novella form that allows us to see how they interact and to appreciate their non-tangible qualities.

For the student and his peers, other Beijing young people who are trying to find a place for themselves in society, life cannot be captured exclusively by science. Art is a necessary complement. This is demonstrated in the scene examined below in

---

35 在黄河里游着的时候我就想，这不仅仅是河流地貌，也不是地理学。这是一支歌，是一首诗。。。人文地理是科学，它有它的办法和路子。 可是我除了科学还需要些别的。河流地貌不会关心青杨树是怎样长大的，描述性再强的地理著作也不会写到黄河浪头那种神秘的抚摸。(161)

which the student declares the necessity of poetry to fully understand the river system that he wants to study through geography, and through the descriptions of the photographer's attempts to perfect and share her art. This faith in art was a common theme through the cultural explorations of the 1980s, as intellectuals turned to artistic production as a means to connect to the subjective self they felt was suppressed during the socialist period (J. Wang 142-143). This faith was challenged after the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 and the increasing commercialism of the 1990s, when writers and artists often created specifically anti-aesthetic works.

Unlike nineteenth century European realist novels or the socialist realist forms discussed in the previous chapter, Zhang does not attempt to depict an entire social world through detailed descriptions of settings, incisive explorations of characters' interior development and motives, or plot dynamics that allow the reader to experience the highs and lows of society from multiple angles. However, attention to the broader world of the novella outside of the student's individual consciousness shows how the student is transformed through his relationships with the land and with other people. Through his experiences, the novella attempts to bridge divides between the past and the present, the country and the city, the intellectual and the peasant, and science and art. In its own way, *Rivers of the North* does manage to capture a whole world, not only as it is or has been, but also with close attention to its potential. The novella ends before we find out whether the student passes the exam to enter graduate school as a student of cultural geography. This open-ended future suggests that the path to obtaining "a just and thorough knowledge" is not the attainment of external

markers of achievement like a passed exam or a degree, but rather, close attention to the range of human experience.

In its serious attention to Chinese culture and its long past, and it its attempts to reckon with the more immediate past of the Cultural Revolution, *Rivers of the North* lies squarely within the parameters of the roots-seeking movement. Yet in its stubborn insistence on the possibility of a better future, the novella diverges from its peers. This moment of sincerity in the middle of a decade of detached introspection has few peers and fewer descendants. Even Zhang Chengzhi's own work turned towards an exploration of religion and spirituality in the 1990s and 2000s that left the secular faith of this text behind. Yet I suggest this moment is worth revisiting and that its argument should not simply be a relic of a particular moment in the past, but rather inspiration for a continued commitment to understanding as we work towards a challenging future.

"The village has withered:" capitalist realism in Yan Lianke's *Dream of Ding Village*

Introduction

In a time when Chinese writers faced increasing commercialization and literary trends began to embrace the rapid urbanization of the nation, rural literature in the 1990s and early 2000s maintained a sense of urgency in narrating and defining the image of the peasant amid the accelerating changes in the countryside brought on by the ongoing reform and opening period. Through a close reading of Yan Lianke's *Dream of Ding Village,* the chapter explores how depictions of rural life continued and developed the 1980s tendency toward the fantastic, the sensational, and the mythic in the literary world, while at the same time returning to a more explicit political critique after the more lyrical, romantic, and primal depictions of rural life in the 1980s. In this era, rural fiction became a place to counteract hegemonic narratives that pushed rural development and urbanization at all costs. Through analysis of metaphors of extraction in *Dream of Ding Village* in the context of other contemporary novels addressing changes in rural and small town life such as Yu Hua's *Brothers,* whether tragic, comic, or both, I argue that while these often extreme portrayals of rural life depict critiques of modernity, at the same time they submit to its hegemony.

Rural literature in an urbanizing world

In the cultural and political sphere, scholars have described the 1990s and early 2000s as a period in which the environment for producing literature, literary styles, and literary content diverged from the cultural trends of the 1980s. These changes have been attributed in part to a post-1989 cultural reckoning, in which writers and intellectuals embarked on a period of soul-searching after the "culture fever" that erupted in the 1980s was dampened due to the marginalization of intellectuals in an increasingly market-driven socioeconomic system and the aftermath of the suppression of the 1989 political movements.[1] Other major changes included a significant decrease in state support of literary production that caused writers to focus more on the commercial market, which saw an explosion of genre fiction and superstar writers fueled by new methods of marketing literature. The late 1990s-early 2000s also saw the beginnings of internet literature which mostly followed and built on the popular genre fiction of the 1990s (Hong 437-442, Lovell 9-10, F. Ding 320). In concert with the rapid urbanization of China's population, urban literature such as the fiction of Wang Shuo moved to the forefront of literary trends. Despite these new trends, rural literature persisted, although it underwent significant transformations.

One effect these trends had on rural literature was the importance of

1 See Xiaoming Wang (2012, 142-150) for an essay outlining the major lines of thought in this period.

marketing to literary success. The styles of the texts, mostly idiosyncratic, personal perspectives on the long trajectory of changes of the twentieth century, were influential in determining what kinds of novels were written and made it to the marketplace. According to literary historian Ding Fan, "epic, grand narrative, and 'the people' has been replaced by immediacy, small narratives, and the new mainstream" (320).[2] Grand historical narratives became narrow, more personalized narratives; definable or distinguishable literary styles or schools dissipated into a diversity of styles. Ding further suggests that in the 1990s, urban values and lifestyles started to replace rural values and everyday practices even in the countryside (321). He argues that there was no clear or single way to encapsulate these changes in literature, which may have been an additional factor in literature's diversification. This analysis implicitly emerges in contrast with the socialist realist fiction discussed in Chapter One, which explicitly took "the people" as its subject and explored their role in enacting social and historical change. As we saw in the previous chapter, these literary trajectories were already diverging by the 1980s, although some novelists in that era still maintained a commitment to exploring the relationships between "the people" and history.

Many of the most successful rural novels of the 1990s and early 2000s were written by authors who had been active in the roots-seeking movement in the 1980s discussed in the previous chapter. Writers like Mo Yan and Yan Lianke, who grew up

2 "史诗"、"宏大叙事" 和"大家"已然被"当下"、"小叙事" 和"新流派" 取代。（320)

in the countryside, and writers such as Yu Hua and Han Shaogong, whose experiences as sent down youth formed the foundations of their literary pursuits, continued to draw on those wells of experience for inspiration, although many of these novelists also began to write urban novels. Jia Pingwa, one of the most prolific rural writers of the 1980s, wrote *Fei du* 废都 (*Ruined City* 1993), which takes place in a fictionalized Xi'an and explores themes of spiritual crises among intellectuals through graphic sexuality, while Liu Zhenyun shifted his literary lens from issues of rural power struggles to the challenges of urban office workers (Lovell 19).

Among the work of writers who continued to write rural fiction, novels re-narrating the past were more common than those addressing contemporary issues. This was not necessarily a new trend: in both the socialist and post-socialist eras, much "rural literature" looked backwards. In addition to the present-day "collectivization novels" discussed in Chapter One, the socialist period also included the genre of "revolutionary war literature," often set in rural environments in the 1940s,[3] while in the 1990s and early 2000s rural novels and films often focused either on the changes in rural life of the early twentieth century, followed the daily lives of common people against the backdrop of the changes of the entire twentieth century,[4] or existed in a kind of timeless rural space devoid of historical markers. Formally, these novels often continued to engage in experimental modes of narration that began in the 1980s, including magical realism, stream of consciousness writing, and

3 For more on these novels, see Cai *Revolutions* (190-249), Z. Huang.
4 For more on these novels, see Choy, Kinkley.

fragmented timelines. In addition, the definition of rural literature and its content underwent an expansion that reflected China's increasing urbanization. Fewer novels took place solely in rural settings. Many involved "peasants going to the city" or the increasing integration of rural and urban space (Ding and Li 9).

Amid the plethora of literary subjects and styles in rural Chinese fiction of the 1990s and 2000s, this chapter focuses on novels addressing the present or recent past. Throughout the dissertation, I have analyzed social fiction that attempts to represent recent history or the contemporary "real" and the ways it deals with the challenges of the present within its sociohistorical context. *Dream of Ding Village* is notable because it shows a village caught up directly in the historical forces of the 1990s. While the plot most directly shows the process of villagers selling their blood on the black market to get rich and the ensuing AIDS crisis that kills or drives away the whole village, the dynamic of the slow draining of the village of its lifeblood is reflective of the draining of the human life and material resources of the countryside by capitalist growth. Yu Hua's *Brothers* narrates the tale of two brothers who grew up in a rural small town during the Cultural Revolution and their diverging paths in the reform era: one brother becomes wealthy by transforming the small town into a manufacturing and business city, while the other struggles in poverty, unsuccessfully entering the stream of migrant laborers flooding the coastal metropolises. The novel's action spans rural and urban settings, yet it has still been discussed within the genre of "rural fiction" (Qu 84). While *Dream of Ding Village* and *Brothers* were published in the early 2000s, both address the recent past of the economic development of the

countryside in the 1980s-1990s with some hindsight. At a time when the nation was rushing toward growth in the cities, fostering the special economic zones, and joining the WTO, its literary stars focused their attention on the darker sides of this bright new society. These rural novels were being written at a time when the debates over the rural question and the role of the peasant in Chinese society discussed in the previous 1980s chapter continued to flourish and take on new dimensions. According to Day, throughout the 1990s, liberals continued to emphasize privatization and marketization of land and labor, but there also arose skepticism among left-leaning scholars about the total subsumption of rural life to the market. These debates, while not reflected directly in literature, provide a background for understanding the complex changes rural society faced and that literature depicting that society inevitably had to address.

Throughout the chapter, I look at the use of the changing landscape as a mirror and metaphor for the changes in human society it depicts. In the context of increasing urbanization of rural land and migration away from it, the role of landscape in 1990s-early 2000s rural literature also undergoes transformation. The native soil that gives the overarching genre one of its monikers is no longer central to rural life, either as the grounds for social transformation as depicted in the socialist realist novels of Chapter One or as the possible resource for social renewal as depicted in the roots-seeking novels of the 1980s discussed in the previous chapter. In socialist literature, we saw attitudes toward land and landscape that saw them as productive and transformable. By the 1980s, landscape took on symbolic weight, as it

often served as a background to portrayals of rural China as timeless, mysterious, and primitive. In *Dream of Ding Village*, land is still used in symbolic and lyrical ways, yet its productive power once again becomes central to the narrative, if only as example of how that productive power is diminishing.

Imagery of once fertile land becoming drained of its nutrients and drying out abounds as the land's human stewards turn their attention away, first toward selling their blood in the blood boom, then toward their own withering lives. In the earliest pages of the narrative, when the villagers hear rumors of a cure, we see them reinvesting in the land. When that promise is found to be empty, the land goes neglected once again. Neglected land also plays a role in Yu Hua's *Brothers*, which takes place in a small town. The narrative portrays the process of town collective property being rebuilt as private housing, but the town is also surrounded by rural fields. However, these fields are always at the periphery, always being forgotten. They are only observed in a small handful of lyrical and sentimental moments: Baldy Li's mother takes him out under the moonlight as a small child to see the river and the fields from the town's south gate. Later, when Baldy Li is an adult planning a trip into space, he remembers these images: "When he imagined the beauty and majesty of Earth, it was the same as the sight of the endless fields under the moonlight, the time his mother first took him down to the south gate" (31).[5] Yet the narrative doesn't linger on what grows in these fields or who works them. They have already become

5 他想象中地球的壮丽情景，就是母亲抱着他第一次站在南门外所见到的情景，天也在月光下无限地伸展。。。（34）

an image — something to be consumed from the outside but not engaged with. Land is always described in this text as moments of beauty, with sincerity, in complete contrast to the rest of the novel's exaggerated and satirical tones.

Yan Lianke's use of nature as a metaphor does not provide a respite from or alternative to the pains of the modern human world, as it is sometimes depicted in other rural novels from this period or the 1980s. While positing a symbiotic relationship between humans and land that in some ways echoes the faith in human ability to transform the land seen in socialist-era rural fiction, Yan depicts the failure of this symbiosis and the ensuing death and waste of the land alongside of the human tragedy. Here, the desecration of the landscape along with the emptying out of the village emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between the land and the people, not as a basis for a future-oriented care, but rather as a mirror of the broader neglect of rural livelihoods in the post-reform era. There is no imagery or possibility of renewal of the soil's depleted resources in the world as it is.

Yan Lianke and Dream of Ding Village

Yan Lianke, one of the most prominent writers of the 1990s, is known for his fiction set in his home region of the Funiu mountains in Western Henan. He did write fiction in the 1980s, but his writing style shifted in the 1990s and began to gain more widespread attention. In autobiographical writing, Yan has discussed the suffering of his childhood in a remote, poor region of China. He joined the army at 20 as an exit

route from his hometown and began writing shortly after (D. Wang "Geming" 25). While Yan's fiction is often set in the fictionalized rural "Balou" mountains, he also has novels inspired by his time in the military. His novels and novellas employ a range of temporal strategies. Like some of the *roots-seeking* fiction of the 1980s, there are works like the novella *Years, Months, Days* (年月日 2002) that occur in a kind of timeless rural space, with no direct historical markers. However, there are also novels set more explicitly in the socialist period and novels that address the reform and opening period.

Dream of Ding Village is Yan Lianke's seventh full-length novel. It takes place in his native Henan, the location of nearly all his fiction. Yan wrote the book after a series of visits to villages in Henan that participated in the blood selling boom in the 1990s, in which poor villagers were encouraged to make money by selling their blood for medical purposes. Due to unsanitary collection practices, this region was later wracked with the AIDS epidemic.[6] The main action of the novel takes place over the course of a year, from the autumn when villagers found out there was no cure for "the fever" to an autumn in which all the villagers have either died or left the village. Along the way, the novel also describes scenes from ten years prior, describing the blood selling boom which causes the AIDS crisis that is rampant at the beginning of the novel.

---

6 For a historical narrative of blood selling and the AIDS crisis in rural Henan framed within the larger context of AIDS in China, see Chaddah and Wu. Ironically, Chaddah and Wu attribute the proliferation of blood collection centers in poor rural China in the 1990s in part to China's decision to stop importing foreign blood to stave off the AIDS crisis.

The novel is narrated in first person by a ghost: a 12-year-old boy who died because his father, Ding Hui, got rich selling the villagers' blood on the private market. Grandpa, Ding Hui's father, is the central figure of the tale. The narration follows Grandpa as he attempts to make amends to the villagers for the harm caused by his son. Along the way, it examines Ding Hui's behaviors and how they affect different village members and their families, describes the villagers' attempts to cope with the devastation wrought on them by the virus, and elaborates on a tragic love story between Grandpa's second son and the narrator's uncle, Ding Liang, and Lingling. Both Ding Liang and Lingling have been abandoned by their spouses due to their infection with the virus, and their illicit affair complicates Grandpa's efforts to make amends.

At the time of the opening of the novel, the AIDS virus has already spread throughout the village. Its connection to the blood selling boom and Ding Hui's role in it ten years prior is clear to everyone. In an act of revenge, someone in the village has poisoned Ding Hui's livestock and then his son, and his son dies. The perspective of the ghost-narrator allows the narrator to be both engaged in the narrative and omniscient, with insight into the thoughts and feelings of other characters that are not directly reported to him. Like Yan Lianke's relationship to rural Henan, the ghost-narrator is invested in the community but no longer an integral part of it. He can only look on as the events take place—he cannot participate in them. This orientation may deepen the reader's affective experience of the events, creating an interpersonal connection that goes beyond the stance of a passive consumer of sociological

reportage. At the same time, the reader may feel as passive and unable to act as a ghost. Most importantly, the narrator's ghost status gives him the ability to narrate his grandpa's dreams, which are set off from the text in a different font and alternate with more directly realist description of contemporary events. These dreams, often prophetic, reflect Yan Lianke's self-described literary framework of mythorealism, which he argues allows the writer to better capture what he calls "inner truth" behind the extremes of social reality in contemporary China. In this text, as discussed further later in this paper, Grandpa's dreams are fantastic in their detail and more real than reality in their meaning: that is, the harshest truths and cruelest actions of the text, as well as the few moments of hope, are only articulated in the dream world. They remain unspoken in the everyday realism of the rest of the novel's narrative style.

"Realism amid mythorealism: historical particularity and the possibility of social critique" delves deeper into the socio-political context of the novel. While Yan Lianke's fiction has turned a critical lens on the socialist era, rural hardships, human vice, and the military, this novel explicitly addresses the rise of capitalism in the reform and opening era and its effects on village life. Through an analysis of the phenomena of an emptying countryside, a burgeoning consumerism, and the peasant-entrepreneur in the form of Ding Hui, the first section argues that the novel's power to critique rises from its attention to the concrete detail of these new phenomena.

"The limits of utopia: tradition, mutual aid, and love as alternatives to rural modernity and their failures" turns to brief moments of liveliness and pleasure in the novel, from the short-lived joy of a folk performer upon hearing (false) news of a

cure, to the scenes in which the villagers who have been infected with AIDS all move into the community school to care for one another and share resources, to the unconventional love story between two characters whose spouses rejected them for being infected with the virus. A discussion of the language and imagery associated with these moments of hope is contrasted with their short-lived nature due to the discovery of the truth that there is no cure, the rapid dissolution of the community into individualized self-interest, and the death of the lovers from the virus. This section argues that these moments of hope and pleasure are quickly smothered in the novel, increasing the sense of helplessness on the part of the reader and succumbing to the suffering brought on by capitalist encroachment into the countryside. At the same time, they provide clues for possible alternatives to the novel's crisis, affirming that there is something valuable about life that is worth protecting despite its horrors.

"Mythorealism and capitalist realism: does the rural have a future?" analyzes the function of dreams in the novel, paradoxically eliciting a discussion of the novel's employment of capitalist realism, or the overarching sense that there is no alternative to the present system. As the dreams help Grandpa and the reader digest and incorporate the full horrors of the rural development process, at the same time they do not provide an alternative or a way out of the desolate present. A final dream imagining the birth of a new world reaffirms the novel's commitment to the power of life, but it provides no bridge for movement between this world and the next.

Realism amid mythorealism: historical particularity and the possibility of social critique

Through a focus on the historical particularities of greed, extraction, and accumulation at work in the 1990s in rural China and how these processes are portrayed and critiqued in *Dream of Ding Village*, this section argues that in contrast to the more abstract or ahistorical depictions of rural China in many reform era novels, including Yan Lianke's prior work, *Ding Village's* concrete detail firmly situates it in its era and gives it power to critique those socioeconomic processes. I compare descriptions of an empty village with the historical processes that led to emptying villages in the reform era to show that even the more abstract and lyrical language in the novel is mirrored in contemporary events. I discuss the material presence of modern infrastructure and commodities in the novel to highlight the narrative's skepticism of the desirability of these objects. Finally, through a discussion of the novel's villain, a village resident who manipulates state development and aid programs to accrue wealth and power to himself, I argue that the novel critiques the growing relationship between state power and capitalist profit through close attention to the people who benefit from these relationships.

> The novel is framed on either end with images of an empty village:
>
> A thick silence fills the village, muffling all sound. Ding Village lives—a life like death. Because of the silence, because of deep autumn, because of nightfall, the village withers. The people also wither. The withered people, the withered days stack up like corpses buried in the ground. (7)[7]

"Silence," "death," "autumn," "wither." The heavy words are layered on top of one another. Beginning with death and emptiness upends the novel, a genre often noted for its cacophony, its excess of sensory detail, its many voices. While Yan's language is attuned to sensory detail, he focuses on its lack: muffled sound, withering bodies. Death has accumulated in this village:

> The days are like corpses.
> The grass on the plain withers.
> The trees on the plain have dried.
> The sandy plain, its crops, all withered after the blood came.
> The people of Ding Village are shrunken in their homes, never to emerge again. (7)[8]

---

7 Translations will be cited with page numbers from the English edition of Dream of Ding Village translated by Cindy Carter. Where the published translation diverges significantly from the source text, I will provide modified translations and note that in the footnote. This footnoted quotation is modified.
庄里的静，浓烈的静，绝了声息。丁庄活着，和死了一样。因为绝静，因为秋深，因为黄昏，村落萎了，人也萎了。萎缩着，日子也跟着枯干，像埋在地里的尸。(4)

8 My modified translation.
日子如尸。
平原上的草，它就枯了。
平原上的树，它就干了。
平原上的沙地和庄稼，血红之后，它就萎了。
丁庄的人，他就缩在家里，不再出门了。(4-5)

These opening scenes layer intense image on top of intense image, building up like the buried corpses in the text. However, the pace is not panicked or hurried. It is slow and measured. Yan creates a balance between his description of the human residents of the village and the plant life, moving back and forth between the two. The desiccation of the land is directly juxtaposed against the desiccation of human life in the village, but the parallel structure in the description does not seem to imply a heavier weight given to human life over that given to the environment. Without the land, the people cannot be sustained. Without the people, the land cannot be maintained. Throughout the novel, the land, crops, people, and animals are all mutually dependent, equally affected by the changing of the seasons and the changes brought on by the intrusion of the outside world.

At the end of the novel, which takes place a year after the opening scenes, we get a similar series of images describing an empty countryside:

> It was the worst drought seen on the plain in nearly a century. All the grasses and crops had died. The trees could not stand it—they died too…
> Ponds emptied.
> Rivers dried out.
> Wells dried up. (337) [9]

The images of drying out and withering return. The word to describe a dried out

9 My modified translation.
平原上见着了百年不遇的旱。因为旱，庄稼和草它就死掉了。
树，耐不住旱的树，他也死掉了。
。。。
塘涸了。
河干了。
井也枯掉了。（372）

well,“枯” is also one of the words used for “to wither” in the lines quoted from the beginning of the novel. This repetition reinforces the sense of hopelessness that pervades the novel. During the span of a year, the situation has only worsened. A little further on, the description shifts from landscape and flora to people and fauna: “All the people were gone. The streets were as silent as death, empty of man or beast. There were no chickens, pigs, ducks, cats, or dogs. Now and then, a sparrow cried, the sound falling to the ground like broken glass (338).”[10] In these scenes, as in the opening scenes, we see more imagery of death, emptiness, layers of bleak detail upon bleak detail. The imagery of the broken glass is a reminder of the people who were once in the village but are there no longer. The parallel between the disappearance of plant life and human life continues. The use of nature imagery to describe death, the emphasis on autumn turning into winter, that suffuses these passages suggests that the novel mourns the loss of these lives and the broader environment that sustained them.

The emptiness and withering of the people and the land, however, is not simply a metaphor. Passages throughout the text imply a direct causal relationship. Early in the novel, when the villagers believe a cure for AIDS has been discovered, they begin to work the land again and it responds in kind:

> From the fields outside the village came the faintest autumn chill, mingled with the delicate fragrance of freshly turned soil. When Grandpa raised his head to find the source of this scent, he saw Zhao Xiuqin’s husband Wang Baoshan in the distance, working his private plot of land. Originally, since his wife had the fever, he said, “what was the point in ploughing or planting? Might as well let it go fallow.” But now that he’d heard the news about the

10 可丁庄没人了，街道上安静得和街道死了样。没有人，没有畜。鸡、猪、狗、猫、鸭啥而都没有。偶尔向着的麻雀叫，落在地上和碎的玻璃样（374）。

> new medicine, he was back outside, working in his field, even though the season had passed.
> He said, "Turning the soil helps keep it moist."
> He said, "There's still time to plant some winter cabbage."
> He said, "Even if we don't plant this year, plowing still helps depleted soil become new again. (44)[11]

When the villagers believe in a future, they are willing to do the work to nurture the soil. And the descriptive, sensual narration responds: the soil has a "delicate fragrance." There is moistness where there will eventually be dryness and withering. However, Wang's industry and the soil's revival is based on a lie, and when that lie is revealed, the fields revert to their neglected state. The stylistic choice of parallel structure for Wang's last three statements, so common throughout the text, emphasizes Wang's tragic hope with each repetition.

Between these opening and closing images, the novel proceeds to narrate the events that led to this emptying out of the village. Of all the various development strategies used to modernize the countryside in the first twenty years of the Reform and Opening Period, Yan's choice to portray the blood selling boom and the ensuing AIDS crisis is important both for its specific tragedy and its evocative power. While blood selling and the AIDS crisis were concrete historical phenomena, the dynamics

---

11 My modified translation.
从庄外田野过来的淡淡的冷凉里，有一种新土的清香夹杂着。爷就抬起头…看见赵秀芹的男人王宝山，正在自家的田里犁着地。原来他说媳妇有了热病啦，地里种不出意思了，就把那地荒废了。可现在，一听说有新药能治热病了，过了季却又去犁地了。
说犁了的地能保墒。
说来得及就在地里栽些白菜苗。
说就是不栽也不种，犁了就不会让熟土变成了生地了。(43-44)

of boom and bust depicted in this novel mirror processes happening in villages across China throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Therefore, the novel serves both to mourn the unique tragedy of the effects of the blood selling boom and the AIDS crisis on rural life in China, and more broadly the ways that indiscriminate modern development policies often destroyed or fundamentally altered the very populations they purported to help.

The fact that the village described in the above passages is not just empty, but dead, emphasizes and magnifies the effects of the drive for modernity on local ways of life. As the villagers' bodies are drained of blood, the villages are drained of their lifeblood. Modernization policies in the 1980s and 1990s were largely focused on urban areas, which led to rapidly increasing inequality between rural and urban areas (Rosenberg, H. Liu). At the same time, rural modernization strategies were often applied unevenly, increasing inequality between local powerholders and the majority of residents (Sargeson 15). By focusing directly on the suffering caused by these modes of modernization and the dissolution of the village community, the novel questions both the cost of these policies and the supposed benefits they will bring to the people subjected to them.

After reform era policies including the redistribution of land to family households and to the rise in state-developed rural industry known as Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs), rural China experienced a period of relative growth and even in some cases prosperity in the 1980s (Oi 15). In a study of rural migration and changes in land use, sociologist Julia Chuang describes how some of this growth

began to decline in the 1990s: state lending focused on urban enterprise and privatization led many rural TVEs to go bankrupt, while rapid growth in urban Special Economic Zones led many rural residents to leave their homes to seek better opportunities in factories, construction, and the service industry (5-6). Chuang argues that the post socialist legacy of rural land distribution actually supported this rapid urban growth in that it allowed wages to remain low, because migrants could return home to other family members still engaged in subsistence farming during layoffs and economic downturns (5). However, at the same time as the TVEs went bankrupt, this drain of labor power from the countryside to the cities also created a burden on local governments who were losing their tax base (Chuang 6). One of the only methods to recover income was the expropriation of land from rural residents and resale of that land to developers, and/or the reclassification and development of rural land as urban (7). Therefore, while wages remained low, the safety net provided by the postsocialist legacy of universal land-use rights was also disappearing, leaving rural people scrambling for their livelihoods (20). These processes happened at uneven rates: villages further from urban centers with better land were more likely to continue with subsistence farming, villages further away with poorer land were more likely to empty out sooner, and villages closer to urban centers were reclassified as urban and developed accordingly (Chuang 28-29). Land sales began in the 1990s but became much more widespread in the early 2000s (19).

This process is documented in *Brothers,* when the urbanization of Liu Town fueled by tycoon Baldy Li's enterprises leads to the growth and redevelopment of the

town into a bustling city. The rural land that surrounded the town in the beginning of the novel fades completely out of the narrative. It only re-emerges during two scenes of impending death, that of Baldy Li's mother in the middle of the novel and his brother at the close of the novel:

> [Baldy Li's mother] watched the winding paths that framed each paddy, the various details of houses and trees at a distance, the ducks flying over the nearby pond and their reflection in the water, together with the sparrows flying by the road. This was the last trip that Li Lan would take along this dirt road; despite its bumpiness, she fully enjoyed the beautiful spring day (202).[12]

Unlike the withered land in *Dream of Ding Village*, there is still beauty and life here. Yet no one in the text notices it except those on the brink of death. In these scenes, the countryside is something to gaze at—no one is working the fields. Landscape does not contribute to the action of the plot nor figure into the development of the local economy. It only becomes a backdrop for scenes of people dying and leaving the new modern world behind.

The blood selling craze and the AIDS crisis it caused depicted in *Dream of Ding Village* is just one part of the broader strategies of rural development in the 1990s and early 2000s. The land of this village is not sold off to the highest bidder — rather it dries out and withers amid drought. Yet, as depicted in the passages above, the village and surrounding environment is described as drying out, just as the people are dying from AIDS due to the consequences of selling their blood. The process of

---

12 。。。她看到田埂弯弯曲曲，两旁的青草像是让田埂镶上了两条绿边；她看到了房屋和树木在远处点点滴滴；她看到近处池塘里的鸭子在浮游，甚至看到了鸭子在水中的倒影；她看到了麻雀在路旁飞翔。。。这是李兰最后一次走在这条泥路上了，在板车的颠簸里，李兰看到的春天是如此广阔和美丽。（237）

draining, of emptying, rural resources of land and labor to further urban development is implicitly present.

Rural consumer culture and hygiene

One reform-era argument for both urbanization and rural modernization is the need to wean people from subsistence living to develop a domestic consumer base. That is, rural modernization includes changing peoples' relationship to the land so that they can both become wage laborers and engage in modern consumption, thereby fueling the domestic economy (Chuang 173, Lora-Wainwright 8). This dynamic is reflected in one poignant scene in the novel in which the young woman who is part of the novel's tragic love story plot line, Lingling, explains that she sold her blood so that she could buy shampoo. The choice of consumer product here is significant. In the ongoing project of Chinese modernization, rural people are often stereotyped as dirty to show how backward they are compared to modern urban citizens. Lingling's desire for glossy hair is understandable in this changing world—she wants to be a part of modern society. However, in order to obtain cash to buy these goods, she must sell her blood. The vast gap between the value of the shampoo and the value of Lingling's life could be read as a critique of the desire for these commodities, or it could be read as an indictment of a system that provides no other way to obtain them. This imagery emphasizes the false promise of increased consumerism—although here the tradeoff is one's life, for most rural Chinese people it involves putting oneself at the mercy of

the wage labor market and leaving behind the security of the land.

While most of the novel takes place in Ding Village, from early on images of the urban and modern are brought into the text. Often these images arise in Grandpa's dreams:

> For the last three nights, he'd had the same dream: of *the cities he'd visited – Kaifeng and the Wei County seat. Their underground networks of pipes were like cobwebs, running thick with blood. And from the cracks and curvatures of pipes, blood spurts like water.* (7)[13]

The dream setting allows for the juxtaposition of imagery of horror—gushing blood—with imagery of modern technology: the pipes that might otherwise be bringing modern water infrastructure to urban areas. This ostensibly positive sign of development is tainted.

Modern plumbing makes its way to the village as well. With the money earned from selling blood, Ding Hui builds a western-style home in the village, complete with all the modern accoutrements:

> Instead of an outdoor squat toilet of the sort that Chinese people had been using successfully for thousands of years, we had an indoor toilet made of porcelain. But my parents, unable to adapt to shitting while sitting down, ended up building a squat latrine behind the house, anyway. We also had a washing machine and a laundry room, but my mother preferred to take her basin out into the courtyard to do the washing. The toilet became nothing more than decoration.
> The washing machine became decoration.
> There was a refrigerator: it became decoration.

---

13 Note: the text of the dreams is rendered in a different font in the original Chinese text and rendered in italics in the English translation. I maintain that formatting throughout this chapter. 三天来爷爷每天都做同一个梦，梦见他先前去过的汾县城里和东京城里边，地下的管道和蛛网一样，每根管道里都是流着血。那些没有接好的管道缝，还有管道的转弯处，血如水样喷出来。（5-6）

The dining room, the dining table: all decoration. (20) [14]

The toilet, the washing machine, and the refrigerator are all examples of a transitional aspirational consumerism in China that begins in the socialist period: "the Three Big-Ticket items" or 三大件 (Gerth 83). "The exact Three varied by time and place but [in the socialist period] most often included a wristwatch, a bicycle, and a sewing machine (ibid)." By the 1980s and 1990s, there were shifts in popular conceptions of the most desirable items, but washing machines and refrigerators often made the list (ibid). The novel's direct reference to these items that had become the foremost symbols of modern, financially successful life, and repetitive emphasis on their uselessness, further questions the value of this pursuit of modern ways of life. Again, the symbols of the modern being discussed here are domestic and concerned with imagery of cleanliness: washing clothes, sanitation. Despite the text's ridicule of these aspirations, we can understand why they might be appealing in a cultural environment in which dirtiness is one of the markers of peasants as second-class citizens. Still, there is a distance between the desirability of the commodity and its usefulness. There is also a contrast between the past and the present. If the narrator's mother cannot become accustomed to using these new objects, it does not necessarily

---

14 My modified translation.
把千百年来露天厕所用的蹲坑改成了屋里的坐器儿，可我爹，我娘坐着那器儿，坐死也拉不出来屎，只好又在楼后的露天地里挖了蹲坑儿。楼屋的洗漱间里有一台洗衣机，可我娘就爱端着洗衣盆儿到那院里用手洗。这样儿，那坐器儿就成摆设了。
洗衣机也成摆设了。
有冰箱，冰箱也成摆设了。
饭屋，饭桌都成摆设了。(18-19)

signify their uselessness, but rather emphasizes the incompatibility of old ways of life with the new world, dooming the old way to extinction.

Toilet humor also figures prominently in Yu Hua's *Brothers.* The novel opens with the narration of its protagonist, Baldy Li, "our Liu Town's premier tycoon"[15] sitting on his "famously gold-plated toilet seat"[16] and dreaming about his goal of going to space on a Russian Federation space shuttle. The association of modern toilets with a modern society is here exaggerated to extremes. Baldy Li does not simply have a modern toilet, but rather it is gold plated. He not only uses it (unlike Ding Hui, the peasant entrepreneur in Dream of Ding Village), he sits on it and dreams of the most modern, futuristic activity possible: human space travel. As in Ding Village, the modern toilet is soon contrasted with a traditional predecessor. The narration returns to the protagonist's youth, in which he is caught peeping at women's bottoms in a public pit toilet. The reader learns that the protagonist is following in the footsteps of his father, who drowned in a public toilet years earlier attempting the same feat. The imagery of a gilded waste disposal fixture hearkens back to the association of rural people with uncleanliness in a different way: despite his financial success, Baldy Li is still the coarse, unrefined peasant he was from birth. Plating a toilet in gold does not change its nature.

While both toilet scenes have a satirical and humorous effect, *Ding Village's* dry, minimalist, and straightforward description of both the modern and traditional

---

15 Translations from *Brothers* are quoted from the Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas translation. 我们刘镇的超级巨富李光 (1)
16 远近闻名的镀金马桶 (1)

toilet is more in line with the novel's overall themes of waste, loss, and mourning, while the toilet in *Brothers* suits the novel's indulgence in excess and extremes. Despite their different approaches, both texts suggest that the modern toilet has an element of the unnecessary about it. The villagers of Ding Village obtain toilets as unused decoration while Baldy Li's toilet is decorated with gold that has no real function other than perhaps to contribute to his "famousness." In both scenes, the rural remains the abject other to the modern through its inability to conform with normative waste management either through lack or excess.

The imagery of shampoo, blood-polluted water pipes, and indoor plumbing discussed above all call to mind discourses of hygiene, dirtiness, and cleanliness that have been associated with ideologies of the modern from the early twentieth century, which continue through the socialist period in modified forms and are transformed in yet again the reform era.[17] Through comedy in the examples of the toilets, tragedy in the example of the shampoo, and horror in the imagery of the blood-polluted water pipes, these novels undermine simplistic associations of modern hygiene with virtue and progress and the implicit association of the peasantry and rural life with dirtiness and backwardness.

17 Numerous historians and anthropologists have traced discourses and practices around modern hygiene in twentieth century China. For the early twentieth century, see Rogaski. For a contemporary ethnography, see Lai.

The peasant-entrepreneur and the discourse of rural development

As the novel flashes back to the origin of the blood selling boom, we see that it is first promoted by local government officials. During a visit to the village to encourage blood selling, the county Director of Education first relies on the mayor to host a meeting to encourage the villagers to sell. When the mayor refuses, he is fired. The Director then holds the meeting himself: "He talked at length about the past, the future, the development of a 'plasma economy' and the need for a 'prosperous people and a strong nation' (26)." [18] At first this proves to have little effect, so he keeps trying in a second meeting:

> "You can get rich or stay poor, it's up to you. You can travel the golden road to prosperity, or you can stay on the same dirt path and live like paupers. Ding Village is the poorest village in the province. You haven't got two coins to rub together. Rich or poor, it's your decision. Go home and think about that." (31)[19]

Mirroring the common talking points of the reform period, the concept of developing personal wealth is tied to the growth of the national economy and the strength of the nation. However, because the reader already knows that this "plasma economy" will lead to the AIDS epidemic, the Director's words come across as hollow. The director's use of exaggerated nationalist language to convince villagers to participate

---

18 他在庄民会上说了很多话。说了前，说了后，说了发展血浆经济，力图民富国强的话 (12).

19 My modified translation.
是穷是富，都由你们自己定；是走金光大道奔小康，还是过独木桥重当穷光蛋——你们丁庄可是全县最穷的庄，穷得叮当响——是穷是富都回家想想吧。(29)

in a development scheme that the reader already knows will end in tragedy satirizes the lofty development rhetoric that rarely managed to deliver on the promises it made to the rural population.

The narrative proceeds to describe an initial rush of blood selling under the aegis of government services:

> Overnight, over a dozen blood-collection stations sprang up in this village of only a few hundred people: the county hospital, the village hospital, the village government, the police station, the Department of Party Organization, the Department of Propaganda, the veterinary hospital, the Department of Education, the Department of Commerce, the military garrison, the Chinese Red Cross, the livestock breeding center, one after another threw up a sign, stationed a couple of nurses and an accountant, and got to work.[20]

Here, the list form emphasizes the intensity of the efforts to a ridiculous degree, comparing the overwhelming number of blood stations to the relatively small population and emphasizing the involvement of government divisions with no medical background such as the Department of Commerce or the Department of Propaganda. This exaggeration furthers the satirical attitude toward the "plasma economy" that begins with the Director's rhetoric. Yet despite (or because of) this all-out mobilization, the interest and supply eventually die out. The narrator then explains succinctly: "At this crucial moment, my father emerged on the scene." (41).[21] It marks an abrupt turning point from public to private enterprise. Ding Hui, the

---

20 My translation.
一夜间，几百人口的丁庄村，突然冒出了十几个血站来。县医院血站，乡医院血站，乡政府血站，公安局县站，组织部血站，宣传部血站，兽医站血站，教育局县站，商业局血站，驻军血站，红十字会血站，配种站血站，八八九九，竖一块木板字，来两个护士贺会计，一个血站就建立起来了。(37)
21 这时候，丁庄就适时地出了我爹这个人物了。

narrator's father, opens his own private blood bank. Other villagers soon follow in his footsteps. Ding Hui offers a higher price for blood than the government blood banks, and sells the blood collected by less experienced private operations at a markup to collection trucks. We soon learn that the private collectors ignore guidelines for how much blood can be collected from a person in a day, or how often, and that Ding Hui reused equipment on multiple people without sanitizing it. While the excessive promotion of blood donation by state entities is clearly being critiqued by the narrative, the true horror (and most of the blame for the AIDS crisis) emerges from Ding Hui's private enterprises, in which the thirst for profit has clearly gotten out of hand.

Throughout the novel, Ding Hui's business ventures become more and more extreme. When the government creates a program to offer free coffins to villagers dying from AIDS as a compensation for their suffering, Ding Hui intervenes with the official in charge and convinces the official to let him oversee distribution. He then begins charging the villagers 200 yuan per coffin. Later, once this income source begins to dry up, he branches into a new market: arranging ghost marriages for a fee between families whose family members have died. This venture is apparently undertaken as a service on behalf of the government, while Ding Hui profits. The final straw for the ghost-narrator is when Ding Hui arranges for the marriage of his own deceased son (the narrator) to a much older deceased girl to solidify his relationship with the government official who is the girl's father. Although Ding Hui's initial blood selling scheme is described as a fully private enterprise, as his

schemes develop, he relies on relationships with government officials to further his profit-making goals. While more narrative space is spent on Ding Hui's behavior, the policies and officials who enable him are not spared from the satirical gaze. Therefore, what initially seems like a clear line between government policies that are relatively rational, and private enterprise that is unlimited in its willingness to cause harm for a profit, slowly becomes blurred.

Ding Hui's character and actions are in dialogue with an increasingly common image of the peasant in the 1990s: the peasant-entrepreneur. As the state moved away from state-owned enterprises in both rural and urban settings, individuals were encouraged to *xiahai* 下海, or "enter the sea" of private enterprise. Early 1980s representation of peasant life as static, unchanging, and in need of reform gave way to new images of the peasant as entrepreneur. In discussing the influential text *The Poverty of Plenty* by Wang Xiaoqiang and Bai Nanfeng, Alexander Day shows how the discourse of *suzhi* 素质 or "quality" came to dominate new conceptions of what the peasant is and could be. In a genealogy of the term, anthropologist Anne Anagnost writes that *suzhi* was used in state documents in the 1980s to discuss "population quality" in arguments that the reason for China's "failure to modernize" was the low "population quality" in rural areas (190). It spread into intellectual and middle-class discourse as well, becoming not only a term to discuss population-level "backwardness," but also individual success or failure in a growing middle-class social system. The hygiene discourse discussed above was also integrated into the concept of *suzhi*. While peasants by default were assumed to have low *suzhi*, which

could refer to physical uncleanliness, lack of education, backwards thought processes, and more, they could aspire to be people of higher *suzhi* in part through purchasing the right items such as shampoo or washing machines. With regard to peasant labor, it referred to the concept of "quality," defined as technical skill and entrepreneurial spirit, as opposed to "quantity," which referred to the labor-intensive agricultural practices of the socialist period. Day writes:

> Most important was a sense of 'entrepreneurial spirit,' reflected in an 'openness to new ideas,' a 'sense of efficiency,' 'initiative and drive,' and 'risk taking.'…If the early reform era saw a strong critique of the idea of the peasantry having revolutionary or historical agency, *suzhi* as entrepreneurial spirit indicated that particular peasants could have individual agency within the economy. (41)

On the surface, all of Ding Hui's actions should be lauded according to this new ideology of progress. He has the enterprising spirit to continually start new businesses, and he makes profits that enable his family to become wealthy and move from their poor village to the city. He portrays himself in this way, describing his actions as service to others. In a dream scene toward the end of the book, Grandpa goes to visit his son in his elaborate new home in the city. He asks if the money to build the home came from selling coffins, and Ding Hui (glancing sideways at Grandpa) replies, "Selling those coffins gave those people a once in a lifetime opportunity (305)."[22] Even when Ding Hui is ostensibly saying the right things,

---

22 My translation.
爹便瞟着爷，说卖棺材是给百姓做千载难逢的好事哩。
Many of the most direct examples of Ding Hui's corruption, including this quote, are shown in dreams rather than in the realist narrative of the text. I will address this phenomenon in the final section of this paper.

through additional description of Ding Hui's sideways glance and the juxtaposition of his actions with their devastating consequences, the narration makes it clear that he does not believe what he is saying. Throughout, the narrative focuses primarily on the harm these enterprises create and the dishonesty and corruption that underpin their success.

The figure of the small-town entrepreneur is also central to *Brothers*. Baldy Li, the tycoon we find sitting on his gold-plated toilet in the scene discussed above, develops business after business, from an early venture making a state-owned charity enterprise profitable, to a salvage and recycling business, and eventually branching out into almost every market imaginable:

> After returning from Japan, Baldy Li realized that his scrap business had reached its peak and would have nowhere to go but down. Therefore, he decided to develop some new enterprises. First, he opened a clothing factory…After the clothing factory started to enjoy some success, Baldy Li redoubled his efforts, opening two restaurants and a bathhouse and even dabbling in real estate. (423)[23]

Five years and a few pages later, his enterprises and wealth had increased exponentially:

> The ties everyone wore around their necks, the socks they wore on their feet, their undershirts and underwear, their leather jackets and leather shoes, sweaters, and coats, as well as their Western suits—they were all international name brands whose China-based factories were run by Baldy Li. Baldy Li designed the houses that everyone lived in and supplied the fruit and vegetables they ate...No one knew for certain how many businesses he owned

---

23 从日本回来以后，李光头知道自己的破烂事业已经达到顶峰，再做下去就要走下坡路了。李光头开始了新的事业，他首先开了一家服装厂。。。服装厂稍有起色后，李光头再接再厉，又开了两家饭店和一家洗浴中心，还弄起了房地产。(241-242)

or how much he earned. (430)[24]

In both *Dream of Ding Village* and *Brothers*, entrepreneurship is described through its excesses. However, in *Dream of Ding Village*, that excess is qualitative and explicitly harmful: each of Ding Hui's successive ventures exploits the people of Ding Village and the surrounding area in more and more clearly unethical ways, from drawing blood with carelessness toward health and hygiene, to selling coffins that were meant to be provided freely to the villagers from the government, to preying on people's spiritual beliefs by charging them for matchmaking ghost marriages. The excess in *Brothers* is described through language, overwhelming the reader with example after example of Baldy Li's ventures, hurtling through time in the span of only a handful of pages. Baldy Li's business ventures are not explicitly exploitative—in fact, after the story of his first two businesses, a charity factory and the salvage and resale business, we no longer see directly how he makes his money, who works in his factories, how the clothing and vegetables are produced. In this way, *Brothers* does not explicitly condemn the role of the entrepreneur the way that *Dream of Ding Village* does. Rather, for both the townspeople and the reader, Baldy Li elicits a sense of awe.

Playing the exemplary peasant-entrepreneur is not the only way that Ding Hui

---

24 我们刘镇群众胸前吊着的领带，脚上穿着的袜子，内衣内裤，皮衣皮鞋，毛衣大衣，西裤西服都是国际名牌，都是李光头的产品，李光头代理了二十多家国际名牌服装的加工业务。我们刘镇群众住的房子是李光头开发的，吃的蔬菜水果是李光头提供的。。。谁都不知道他做的生意究竟有多少?谁也不知道他一年究竟挣多少? (248)

justifies his behavior using hegemonic ideology. Literary scholar Haiyan Xie argues that despite his dishonesty and blatant exploitation of the poor villagers of his hometown, and consistent disobedience toward his father, Ding Hui can still in some respects be read as a filial son. He often says that all his actions are for the sake of his family, and he promises his father that he can move with his family to the city (Xie 56). Xie highlights this aspect of Ding Hui's character to argue that Yan Lianke is undermining the usefulness of "Confucian familial values" as an alternative to the darker side of modern development (55). In this dynamic, Xie reads a nostalgic longing in the text for a return to traditional Confucian familial values alongside a disbelief in the actual possibility of their return. There is no question that traditional familial bonds have no power to combat the horrors caused by modern development in the text; however, in both tone and action, the novel undermines them completely. Ding Hui says he is trying to get rich to support his family, yet his actions lead to the death of his son. He offers to care for his father in his old age, yet throughout the novel he ignores his father's pleas to make amends for the harm his blood-selling business has done to their village. There is no nostalgia, only cynical disappointment.

Conversely, Baldy Li, the tycoon in *Brothers*, consistently demonstrates his filiality toward his mother while she is still alive and his brother throughout the narrative. Although on the surface the relationship between the brothers is severed over a love triangle, in which Baldy Li's humble and handsome brother wins over the young woman Baldy has had his eye on since his youth, their relationship and commitment to each other's wellbeing is renewed throughout the novel despite their

differing fortunes. This familial relationship, cemented in a filial vow to look after one another they made to their mother on her deathbed, gives Baldy Li's life meaning when all his wealth cannot. The contrast between the two novels helps to highlight the difference between the worldview in *Brothers*, when familial love and forgiveness can trump all harm caused by Baldy Li's incessant profit-seeking, and that in *Dream of Ding Village*, in which profit-seeking destroys all familial bonds that may have once held the community together. The climax in which Grandpa finally murders Ding Hui is the only possible outcome of these broken bonds.

Ding Hui's near-total villainy and corruption in some ways mirrors the villains in the novels of the socialist era. However, his corrupt behavior only leads to his promotion in society—there are no repercussions for his behavior at the social level. Only interpersonal violence—being murdered by his own father as an act of restitution for the harm he has caused the village—is capable of stopping him. Baldy Li, on the other hand, is not stopped at all. Although he loses his brother and never finds true love, he does achieve his dream of going to space in the end. *Brothers* is ambivalent toward if not in full admiration of the figure of the entrepreneur. There is consistent description of Baldy Li's ingenuity and skill in making money, yet the loneliness his success brings him appears to be the price he pays. The effect on his community is downplayed rather than emphasized as it is in *Ding Village*. There is a brief scene in which Baldy Li and the County Governor tear down Liu Town and rebuild it, and the villagers grumble about having to give up their old government-provided houses to buy new houses from Baldy Li, complaining that "all of his profit

was extracted directly from his fellow townspeople" (429). But moments like this in the novel are few. In *Brothers*, there is an implication that traditional morality in the form of family relationships and loyalty to friends has the power to soften the hard edges of modern development. Baldy Li's familial bonds humanize him as he builds unimaginable wealth. Despite the ways that the narrative ridicules Baldy Li for his outsized ambitions and coarse manners, ultimately, he is its hero. Despite its satirical excess and humor, the novel succumbs to a narrative of inevitability of obscene wealth and indiscriminate development. In *Dream of Ding Village,* on the other hand, the destruction of Ding Hui's most important familial relationships — that with his son and that with his father — at the same time as he uses family as a justification for his actions, only highlights his hypocrisy and deepens the novel's critique of this image of the peasant-entrepreneur.

The limits of utopia: tradition, mutual aid, and love as alternatives to rural modernity and their failures

Alongside *Dream of Ding Village*'s imagery of death and its satirical critiques of modern capitalist development, there are brief scenes that provide respite from this bleak outlook. They arise as sprouts of life based on glimpses of hope, and they are often juxtaposed with the nature imagery of spring and its new beginnings. At first, these moments seem to provide alternatives to the endless draining of life happening in the village. Yet in many of these examples, those moments of life are shown to be

based on false foundations and doomed to extinction with the village, its people, and its land. At the same time, these moments of life are not described with ridicule—they are rendered in beautiful, descriptive prose that respects its object despite its fleeting nature. Looking at any of these images closely, we can gain a better sense of the kinds and ways of life that are valued in the world of the novel. However, the absolute closure and erasure of each of these moments only emphasizes the bleak perspective of the text. No force of life, however beautiful or meaningful in the moment, has the power to resist its ultimate destruction. Despite this bleak perspective, the care the text puts into narrating these moments suggests that they have some value. Even if there is no future for rural life within the text, readers may come away from reading these scenes with the sense that this life is something worth preserving.

One early example of a moment of hope that is quickly extinguished occurs early in the text: Grandpa returns from a meeting with officials in the city about the AIDS epidemic and the lack of a cure but cannot bring himself to share this with the villagers. Instead, he lets them believe the meeting was about the announcement of a cure. An old musician on the brink of death decided to give a performance for all the villagers in his gratitude for the "good news." The description of this performance is full of life:

> Eyes half-closed, he bobbed his head, playing only for himself, as if the audience didn't even exist. The fingers of his left hand moved up and down the neck of his instrument; now slowly, now quickly. With his right hand, he drew his bow back and forth across the strings, now quickly, now slowly. The sound that emerged was like water flowing across parched desert sands. Clear and cool, but with an undercurrent of stifling heat; under the stifling heat,

something flowing fresh and clean (47).[25]

With the hope of a potential cure, Ma Xianglin, described as cold, pale, and scabby before he begins to play, starts to revive. As throughout the text, nature imagery is used to mirror human experience. His music is described as dry land coming back to life at the end of a drought, a complete contrast to the imagery of withering that suffuses the novel. Yet again, the reader knows that there is no cure, that by the end of the novel this world will be withered and gone. But the narrator's continued vibrant description of the performance, including the musical style, ballad lyrics, and the range of content from old folklore to historical events allows the reader to experience the same respite from pain that the villagers receive. The reader can enjoy the lively and descriptive prose as the audience enjoys the lively and rich performance. At the end of the scene, when Ding Hui tells the villagers there is no cure, the scene ends with the audience exploding in anger, and Ma Xianglin dramatically topples off his stool and dies: "his neck twisted at an unnatural angle, his face as white as a funeral scroll"[26] (56-57). All the vibrancy of his performance has drained away. However, for a few hours within the narrative, a few pages for the reader, the richness of tradition and historical storytelling provides, if little else, a distraction from the pain. The contrast between the aesthetic pleasure of the

---

25 My modified translation.
他就摇着他的头，半闭了眼，谁也不去看，就像台下没有一个人。左手在弦杆和弦线上走动着，慢慢快快的；右手推拉着弦弓进进出出的，快快慢慢的。弦子的声音更如从干沙地上流过去的水，清凉里含了干热的哑。沙哑里又有很清明的流。(47)

26 脖子弯曲着，脸色像是白门联上的纸. (57)

performance and its grotesque ending imbues the subjects of this tragedy with pathos. In this village, wasting away and neglected by the outside world, is valuable life, even if the only value given to it is the attention of the page.

This scene calls to mind a fraught subject in reform era discourse about the future of rural life: folk culture, or in the terminology used by UNESCO and adopted by Chinese government-managed and private tourist development, "Intangible Cultural Heritage." Tourism is often brought up as an economic development strategy for rural areas, yet much research has shown how it commodifies culture and often creates business models that displace the residents of the area being visited.[27] Folk culture has appeared in other contemporary novels as a symbol of China's rural life that is quickly disappearing: Jia Pingwa's novel *Qinqiang* 秦腔 (Shaanxi Opera 2005) uses a rural community's declining interest in the folk art of Shaanxi-style opera and its stubborn proponents as a symbol to portray the challenges of sustaining rural community in the reform era (Peng 126-127). Ma Xianglin's lively performance is inspired by a lie, and the cruel impossibility of folk culture as a saving force is emphasized through his ignoble death.

Once everyone knows that there is no cure, Grandpa proposes that all the sick people co-quarantine at the village school, pooling resources and government aid to avoid infecting their family members. At first, the schoolhouse feels almost utopian: "There was nothing to worry about…No one would bother you or boss you around.

---

27 For a description of the broader role of tourism in rural development in the reform era, see Chio. A few case study examples include Feng, Su and Teo, and You.

You were as free as a dandelion in a field." However, as in the folk performance scene, any moment of potential happiness is quickly cut off: "For a few weeks, life in the school seemed better than paradise. But this paradise couldn't last for long." (70)[28] Here, *bu neng* 不能 (could not) suggests that it was impossible for these good things to continue. Yan Lianke's choice of the schoolhouse as the location for this communal space is significant. It has a history: it was a village temple to the God of Wealth, then became a school in the socialist period. As a space for public education, it is imbued with the spirit of collective resources. However, when the mutual aid community falls apart, this space and its resources are destroyed alongside it.

From the beginning, Grandpa organizes the community and sets the rules, although these rules are consented to by the other residents. When conflict arises after two residents are caught stealing, Grandpa is the arbiter of justice. However, when his married second son Ding Liang is caught having an affair with a young married woman, Lingling, two younger men use this to remove Grandpa from his de facto position as leader. They argue that based on his son's immorality, Grandpa has "lost the mandate." With new, more corrupt leaders in power, the community quickly dissolves. The community's strength is not based on the cooperative participation and initiative of each member, as in the collectivization novels discussed in Chapter Two, but rather it depends on the relative morality of its leader at any given point. As

28 My modified translation.
啥儿也不想。。。没有人管你和问你，人自由得像是草地上的蒲公英。。。热病病人的日子过的胜着天堂要好。可好了半月就不能再好了。(69-70)

villagers give up on the mutual aid project and revert to managing their own private interests, the material resources of the school, once shared by all, are all distributed to individuals who attempt to use them to construct their own coffins. Only one person in the end returns what he has taken, a blackboard, to the school. In this gesture there is a moment of hope, of faith that in the future there will be children who can use the blackboard. Yet even this hope is snuffed out when the village is emptied. If there are no people, no collective resources are needed.

The chapter that begins right after we find out that Grandpa's mandate has been lost opens with a deep description of spring in the village:

> The plain was a thick carpet of green. In the fields, the new crop of wheat stems began to harden, using a whole winter of stored nutrients to grow long. Rich field soil or poor sandy soil alike was fertile enough at this time of year to nourish the young wheat and allow it to thrive. It would be at least another fortnight, or perhaps another month, before the relative wealth or paucity of the soil began to show. By mid-spring, when the nutrients in the sandy topsoil had been exhausted, some of the plants would become emaciated, thin and yellowing. But now, in the first few weeks of spring, everything was lush and green (169).[29]

Here, as in the description of the folk musician's performance or the mutual aid collective in the school, the description is vibrant at first. Yet as in the two previously discussed examples, what seems beautiful is quickly shown to be based on a false foundation, whether that is the lie about the cure, the lack of commitment or moral

---

29 My modified translation.
平原上已经布满了绿。田野上的小麦脖子都硬将起来着，蓄了一冬的地力这时都用在了生长上，好的田地和坏的沙土地，在初春里都把小麦养得肥肥的旺。只是旺到半月后，一月后，仲春来到后，沙土薄地的地力用尽后，那时才能看出地的厚薄来，看出一些庄稼的瘦黄来。这当儿，初春里，一片的绿。(181)

integrity of the villagers, or in this case, poor soil. The focus on soil calls the "native soil" fiction of the early twentieth century, a moniker that has sometimes been attributed to twentieth century rural fiction as a whole. Yet unlike the roots-seeking literature of the 1980s which sought renewal of Chinese society through a re-examination and reclamation of the soils of what they saw as traditional rural culture, here, the novel seems to be declaring that there is not enough substance there to sustain life.

Even though Ding Liang and Lingling's affair was the catalyst for the ultimate demise of the mutual aid collective, in other ways their relationship can be read as a celebration of life amid the text's many examples of destruction. As in the two cases above, this life force could be said to have emerged from poor soil—an illicit affair. Ding Liang and Lingling are both infected with the virus, and both have been rejected by their respective spouses. They begin to develop an attraction when living together in the schoolhouse with the rest of the infected villagers. However, despite the early censure of their behavior that causes Grandpa to lose control of the schoolhouse community, Ding Liang and Lingling are later able to obtain divorces and marry, and their union is generally accepted by the villagers. Like Ma Xianglin, the schoolhouse community, and the spring wheat, their romance is short-lived. However, their love affair is similarly narrated with moving detail. The scene in which their affection is first consummated recalls the liveliness imbued in Ma Xianglin's performance discussed above: "The room was warm, and they in turn became warm. Once warm,

they recaptured what it meant to be alive" (79).[30] Like Ma Xianglin, who transformed from a cold and scabby invalid to a flourishing performer, these ailing patients are brought to warmth and life through their lovemaking.

Death and life are persistent themes in Yan Lianke's work. In his earlier novel *Riguang liunian* 日光流年 (*Streams of Light and Time* 1998), a village is infected with a cancer that shortens the villagers' lifespan to the age of 40. Scholars have noted that the novel's structure, which begins with the main characters' deaths and moves backwards toward their births, creates a kind of hopelessness and resignation toward the inevitability of life's end (D. Wang "Geming" 32, S. Chan 183). In some ways, Ding Village is no different. Yet while the characters in *Streams of Light and Time* experience failure after failure in their attempts to lengthen their lifespans, *Ding Village* allows Ding Liang and Lingling to experience small successes, not in extending their lifetimes but in finding ways to enjoy the time allotted to them. After a scene in which they consider committing suicide together to prove the sincerity of their love, Ding Liang decides he'd rather live as long as he can and proceeds to persuade Lingling:

> Living another day is gaining another day. And life is good! We have food to eat, a place to live. If we're hungry, we can go in the kitchen and fry some bread. If we're thirsty, we can drink some sugar water. If we're lonely, we can go out on the street and chat with people. I want you. I want to stroke your face and kiss your lips...the only thing I worry about is being able to make love to you. (240)[31]

---

30 My modified translation.
那屋里暖。到了那里他们就暖了。
人暖着，抓住活着的意味了。(80)
31 多活一天是一天。。。活着多好呀，有饭吃，有房住，饿了可以去灶房烙油

There is no embellishment here. Ding Liang is focused on the most basic needs of life: food, drink, companionship, sex. But for Lingling and Ding Liang, that is enough. The stubborn persistence of life is a thread that runs through Yan Lianke's novels alongside his insistent focus on death. David Der-Wei Wang writes that in Yan Lianke's rural novels of the 1990s, death is a prerequisite for life: the old man in *Nian yue ri* 年月日 (*The Years, Months, Days* 1997) who gives up his body to feed the last stalk of corn in a famine-ravished village, the old woman in *Balou tian ge* 耙耧天歌 (tr. as *Marrow* 2001) who gives up her bones for a medicinal cure for her children (33). We can read these stories and argue that in a just world this should not be. But by focusing on a different side of these narratives, we can see Yan's persistence in affirming the value of life, despite the almost unimaginable suffering his characters endure. In every example discussed in this section, life flares up briefly yet is quickly extinguished. The short-lived nature of these glimpses serves to reinforce a sense of tragedy and sorrow over their loss. *Dream of Ding Village* critiques both capital and the state for the ways they exploit and neglect rural people. These glimpses of life show that the people have insufficient resources to make any real effort to preserve themselves in the face of this exploitation. There are things in the village worth preserving, yet no way to do so.

馍，渴了可以喝一碗白糖水。寂了可以到庄街上和人说说话。想你了，我能摸你的脸，亲你的嘴，着急了还能和你做那男女的事。(262)

Mythorealism and capitalist realism: does the rural have a future?

The above discussion focuses on the realist scenes and events from the narrative, yet despite Yan Lianke's extensive field research for this novel, it is not a text of sociological reporting. Grandpa's dreams are suffused throughout, opening up the stifling narrative. While these dreams are often nightmares, they also provide space for reflection on the horrific events of the novel. They offer a deeper understanding of the affective experience of these events than sociological reportage could provide. Through their irrational logic and form, they demonstrate Yan Lianke's concept of mythorealism, a literary method that he uses to critique modern realist ideas that human existence can be explained or modified solely through logical means and the development policies that arise from those ideas. While creating space to deepen Yan's critique, the dreams also depict a passive relationship between Grandpa and the events he comes to understand. He never acts within these dreams, he only watches. This helpless relationship to the present is further emphasized by the ghost narrator. Neither the narrator nor the protagonist has the power to do anything to change what is happening. Despite the novel's thorough critique of the present, in its passive relationship to that present it has no power against it. Ultimately, it leaves the reader in the same position as the narrator and the protagonist: a tragic, if empathetic, observer. This section examines the form and function of the dreams in the text, clarifying how they provide critique of societal problems, yet offer no path forward out of those problems. The dreams are read within the historical context of

dreams in Chinese literature, from their role in earlier twentieth century realism to the more recent flourishing of magical realist trends in the 1980s and 1990s. I discuss how the powerlessness of the dreams echoes similar trends in global literatures of dystopia, reflecting the challenges of imagining and creating a better future that provides an alternative to the desolation of the present.

The critical function of the dreams is emphasized from the start: the epigraph to the novel quotes the dreams of the Cupbearer, the Baker, and the Pharaoh in the Bible's Book of Genesis. In the biblical narrative, the dreams of the Cupbearer and the Baker serve primarily to prove to the Egyptian Pharoah that Joseph can accurately interpret prophetic dreams. For the sake of *Dream of Ding Village*, the Pharaoh's dream is most relevant. The Pharaoh dreams that seven healthy cows emerge from a river, then seven starved cows emerge from the river and eat the healthy cows. He then dreams that seven full ears of corn emerge from a stalk, then seven thin ears spring up and eat the full ears. Joseph's interpretation of the dream says that it is a warning of a coming famine, and the Pharaoh should prepare his stores in advance to aid the people. The Pharaoh does so, the famine comes to pass, the people do not starve, and Joseph is rewarded. In a way, despite the gruesome imagery of the Pharaoh's dream, the story has a happy ending. The Pharaoh heeds the warning of the prophecy. An apocalyptic foretelling leads to preventive measures and the crisis is averted. Even though the reader knows that the AIDS crisis did happen in Henan and many villages suffered deeply, the use of the biblical dreams at the beginning of the novel suggests that the novel itself is a prophetic message to leadership: if the

suffering of the people is not addressed, disaster will follow. Although the Pharaoh is a passive observer of his dream, the act of Joseph's interpretation of the dream makes it possible for the Pharaoh to take action to prevent calamity.

Within the main text of *Dream of Ding Village*, there is no Joseph present to interpret Grandpa's dreams. Even the ghost-narrator, the grandson, presents them with little to no commentary. However, through the perspective they provide on the events of the narrative, they carry a similar power of critique as the imagery of the starving cows eating their healthy brethren. Yan Lianke describes his concept of mythorealism as a literary effort to diverge from what he calls the total equivalence of cause and effect (*quan yinguo* 全因果) at work in classical realist novels. For Yan, mythorealism is not simply a literary stylistic choice — rather, "China's reality has forced into existence a new kind of writing" (73).[32] He gives examples of these extremes from current events, such as the 2013 event in which 10,000 dead pigs were found floating down Shanghai's Huangpu River (72). Yan emphasizes that the contemporary world has lost its grip on the logical connection of cause to effect when facing these kinds of events, and correspondingly, traditional realism cannot rise to the challenge. In making this argument, he refers back to the absurdism of Franz Kafka and the magical realism of Latin American writers including Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Mythorealism, therefore, does not seek to enforce a strict equivalence of cause and effect on a reality that eludes that kind of understanding. Instead, it seeks

32 中国的现实，在逼迫着一种新的写作。

out “inner truth” (*nei zhenshi* 内真实) and the “inner causality” (*nei yinguo* 内因果) of those inner truths (74). Yan compares the process of seeking inner truth and its causality to “a painter trying to paint the ridges of a riverbed that lie beneath the flowing water” (72).[33] In *Dream of Ding Village,* inner truth and inner causality emerge from Grandpa’s dreams. There is no actual blood flowing through the pipes of the city, yet the imagery helps show the reader the human cost behind the profit-seeking that fuels urban development.

Throughout the text, inner truth emerges when the dreams depict a depth of imagery in their description of the most horrific events of the novel. These events are remarked upon in the conventional narrative in passing conversations, but the conventional narrative cannot contain them. For example, Ding Hui’s most egregious behaviors from selling the government-provided coffins to arranging ghost marriages for exorbitant fees are only narrated fully in dreams. These dreams combine elements of the real and the surreal. After a brief dream in which Grandpa sees Ding Hui meeting with a government official to discuss the free coffins the government will provide for Ding Village, Grandpa dreams of a coffin factory, a scene of production that is usually hidden from the consumer in modern life. He *“stood gazing at a sea of finished coffins, their polished black surfaces gleaming, like a dark oily lake had emerged from the plain.”* (116-117).[34] The coffins appear like a poison emerging

33 如画家要画出了一条河流深处看不见的河床的错落与嶙峋.
34 我爷也就进来了，就望见这几百上千口的棺材了，黑亮亮地摆着、铺着，像那地上生出的一片黑油油的湖。(121-122)

from the land. Later in the dream he sees that his son, Ding Hui, is overseeing the factory, but when he calls out to get his attention, Ding Hui doesn't hear him. Later, in the conventional narrative, a villager says, "everyone knows Ding Hui has been selling off the coffins he got free from the government" (150). The rumor in the conventional narrative confirms the truth at the heart of Grandpa's dream. Even if Ding Hui is not literally overseeing a factory producing thousands upon thousands of coffins, his power and his greed are elucidated more vividly through the dream sequence than they can be through the village's mundane hearsay.

Another scene describes a dream in which Grandpa sees the villagers chopping down every tree in the village, from the oldest trees to the newest saplings, to make their coffins. They explain they have to do this because Ding Hui has sold the government coffins intended for them to the highest bidders in neighboring areas. In the conventional narrative, a villager tells Grandpa that the new village leaders told the villagers they could chop down the trees. The narration immediately cuts to a dream. Grandpa walks through the village, watching villagers take down one tree after another:

> *In every lane and alleyway, in every corner of the village, wherever there was a thick enough tree, people hung lanterns, kerosene lamps, or candles…Nearly every other house was brightly lit, turning Ding Village into a blaze of light, as dazzling as the daytime sun. On each tree, under the light of the lanterns, was a notice stamped with the village committee seal, as if each great tree had been served with an execution order.* (195)[35]

35 无论是在庄前或庄后，前胡同或者后胡同，凡是有着桶粗的树，那树下都挂着马灯，点了蜡烛或者煤油灯。。。差不多不隔几家的门外都有亮灯光，把丁庄照得通火通明、亮如白昼了。在那每一处的灯光下，在那灯光照着的树身上，都贴有盖了丁庄村委会公章的砍树通知书，如每棵大树身上都贴了死刑公告

The blaze of electric light at night and the activity it enables connotes a sense that these behaviors are unnatural. The intensity of this unnatural light is no less jarring to the senses than the intensity of the oily dark lake in the dream discussed above. The description goes beyond the visual, describing "the clamor of chopping and sawing…the pungent scent of fresh-cut wood mingled with tree sap" (ibid).[36] The event's overstimulating sights, sounds, and smells do not fit within a rational world of direct cause and effect. They can only be observed through the distance provided by the dream. The following scene returns to the conventional narrative. The villagers wake up the next morning and gaze at the scene in shock (198).[37] It is impossible for the narrative to directly face this scene of the life, history, and resources of the village being torn away. The villagers themselves cannot fully understand the consequences of their own behavior. And once again, Grandpa is simply observing these events. He chats with a few villagers in his dream, but he cannot persuade any of them to stop what they are doing.

The dreams portray the "inner causality" of the tragedies experienced in the realist narrative when the reality is too painful to look at directly. The complex interactions of state power and capitalist accumulation, traditional morality and modern exploitation, and life and death in the novel can most thoroughly be portrayed in the dream scenes. The dreams in this text are not dreams of what is possible, of

---

样。（209）

36 砍树声砰砰不断，锯树声吱吱不息。新鲜刺鼻的木味儿，在夜里带着胶汁的味儿四处地飘。（210）

37 来日里，人们起了床，站在自家门口上，脸上全都惊下了白。(213)

individual, collective, or national success or prosperity. Instead, they are an attempt to incorporate and understand what is unthinkable: Ding Hui's cruelest moments of exploitation of his fellow villagers and the ecological and social disaster when the fragmented community cuts down every village tree to make coffins, each villager only looking out for the needs of themselves and their families.

Yan Lianke's use of dreams is not unique in twentieth century Chinese literature. Literary scholar Roy Bing Chan has traced the function of dreams in critical and socialist realist Chinese fiction from the May 4th period to the early 1980s. He argues that the depiction of dreams in twentieth century Chinese fiction is not a departure from realism, but rather a form that allows realism to incorporate aspects of human existence or experience that do not fit within the traditional conventions of the genre — verisimilitudinal reportage of "reality." He describes how in the May 4th movement, intellectuals wanted to redefine dreams not as a premodern superstitious form of prophecy, but a modern, scientific insight into the psyche, something that could be analyzed and studied. He explores multiple functions of dreams in twentieth century Chinese realist literature, but the one that is most relevant here is his reading of dreams as an index to a "troubled and conflicted reality" (16). He writes:

> While Chinese thinkers and writers of the twentieth century sought to disavow metaphysical notions of dreaming that cast phenomenal existence into doubt, their lingering interest in dreams, however modernized and made legitimate through the frame- work of science, nevertheless betrayed the complexity and difficulty of accessing reality through literary form. (35)

By the mid 1980s through the 1990s, dreams and other magical, surreal, and grotesque narrative devices became the driving force in contemporary Chinese

literary form. In recentering these devices, dreams became more than an index to a "troubled and conflicted reality." They once again took on something like their significance in premodern Chinese literature, as "metaphysical notions of dreaming that cast phenomenal existence into doubt." Franz Kafka, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and other international writers were a major influence on 1980s and 1990s fiction, including the work of Mo Yan, Can Xue, Han Shaogong, and others. At the same time, these writers were revisiting Chinese literary traditions of the grotesque and the strange. As discussed in the previous chapter, writers of the 1980s revisited traditional cultural forms and practices as a way of moving away from the categories of "politics, economics, morality, and law, and gradually entering the categories of nature, history, culture, and humankind" (Q. Li 111). Bonnie McDougall has suggested that the fantastic, mythic, and grotesque literature of the 1990s could be understood through the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, stressing "change, mediation, and the ability to surprise" as a reaction both against the more staid forms of socialist realism and the increased marginalization of writers in the commercial market (729). Jeffrey Kinkley has read many of these narrative devices in the "new historical fiction" of Mo Yan, Han Shaogong, and Wang Anyi as strategies to undermine official state narratives and interrogate history, while Can Xue has described her own writing as "not concerned with [the] external world" with a "focus on my soul" (Can Q &A). Yan Lianke has written similar narratives that exist in worlds without historical markers or undermine traditional historical narratives, yet *Dream of Ding Village* adapts these strategies more directly to the extremities of the present. This

allows him to deconstruct both state and capitalist ideologies and their effects and highlight the reader's attachment to the people and places in the text that are being destroyed by them.

Yan Lianke's description of the concept of mythorealism confirms the ongoing struggle in achieving literary representation of reality Roy Bing Chan characterizes as a major challenge for and goal of twentieth century Chinese fiction. Although this goal becomes less central to the 1980s and 1990s literary worlds, Yan's choice to set this novel in a historicized time and place and base it on observations of a real crisis shows a desire to be in conversation with that realist literary history and its aims. However, the difficulties in using realism to capture historical change are reflected and magnified through Yan's descriptions of mythorealism. In *Dream of Ding Village*, Grandpa's dreams are at once "prophetic" and "modern." No attempt is made to scientifically analyze them in the text—they are simply printed in a separate font and juxtaposed with the novel's more direct depiction of "reality." However, the dreams incorporate the concrete details of modern life alongside more subconscious, warped, dreamlike imagery. Grandpa's dreams reappropriate some of their premodern mythical powers of prophecy—the scenes depicted in them often come true. The dreams in the text are full of horrors, but so is the reality. If modernity is a narrative of awakening, as Chan writes in his analysis of the metaphors of dreams in the May 4th period, while dreams are a way of incorporating that which modernity on its surface cannot handle, Grandpa's dreams function in the opposite direction: modernity is the "other" which cannot be easily incorporated into the narration of

everyday rural life.

Dreams help the reader to understand the horrors of capitalist modernity, but throughout most of the novel they do not offer a path to an alternative. There are no dreamworlds of progress here in the sense that Susan Buck-Morss, employing the concept of Walter Benjamin, argues describe the major ideological patterns of both the capitalist and socialist worlds for the majority of the twentieth century: "The construction of mass utopia was the dream of the twentieth century. It was the driving ideological force of industrial modernization in both its capitalist and socialist forms" (ix). In *Dream of Ding Village,* there is no linear, causal, or logical pattern that draws the countryside into the future. Grandpa gains insight to the present in his dreams, but he is powerless to stop it. The dreams are full of the language of watching, of observing. Grandpa sees, he walks past; scenes open up to him with sights, sounds, and smells, but he is always on the edge of the action. As Grandpa becomes a passive observer in these dreams, the reader also takes on this role. We can see what is happening, we can even understand it, but there is nothing to be done about it.

Grandpa's role as an observer is most significant in the final dream that takes up the last few pages of the novel. The dream refers to one of the Chinese origin myths, the story of Nüwa making people out of clay:

> *Grandpa saw a woman digging in swathes of mud on a vast plain. Holding a willow branch, she dug into the mud, sweeping the branch back and forth. With each stroke of the willow emerged countless mud people. More digging, more sweeping, and the land teemed with hundreds upon thousands of mud people. Ceaselessly digging, ceaselessly sweeping, the mud people sprang and leapt forth, as many as the bubbles on the rain-soaked earth. Grandpa saw a new plain springing forth.*

A new world was springing forth.[38]

There are many versions of the origin myth, but in a version from the Han dynasty, Nüwa sweeps a cord through the mud to make the common people (Yang and An 172). This reference to the common people calls to mind the common people at the heart of this narrative, yet the people of Ding Village are nowhere to be found in this dream. In the rational, linear world of the conventional narrative, there is no clear way forward for the residents of Ding Village. There is only death or migration. There is no causal relationship of the present to an imagined future. In the world of Grandpa's dreams, the first vision of the future emerges. However, even in this dream, Grandpa watches from the side as the goddess creates new life. The new world has no connection with the present one, with no room for the people of the present to participate in it. Is there an inner cause and effect emerging from this dream that cannot be expressed in the novel's bleak realist narrative? If nothing else, it is an expression of the persistence of life in an environment determined to destroy it.

Cultural critic Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* includes a reading of the British film *Children of Men* (2006) that may help contextualize the apocalyptic tone of *Dream of Ding Village*. He argues that the characters in the apocalyptic film

---

38 My translation.
爷爷看见平原上一马平川的泥地里，有个女人手持柳枝去泥里沾一沾，举起柳枝甩一甩。她一甩地上就有了好多泥人儿。又一沾，再一甩，地上又有成百上千的泥人儿。不停地沾，不停地甩，一片一片的泥人儿蹦蹦和跳跳，多得和雨地里的水泡一模样，爷就看见一个新的蹦蹦跳跳的平原了。
新的蹦蹦跳跳的世界了。(377)

Children of Men have a simple response to the collapsing world around them: nihilistic hedonism, encapsulated in the following exchange: "'How can all this matter if there will be no-one to see it?' 'I try not to think about it'" (1). The catastrophe in Children of Men is the inexplicable sterility of the entire human race. In *Dream of Ding Village*, the AIDS virus does not wipe out the entire human race, but it does wipe out an entire village. The apocalyptic and dystopian imagery that permeates the text, from the dreams of blood-filled water pipes to the realities of an abandoned village, brings it into conversation with that genre. Ding Liang's suggestion to Lingling that they cling to life and make love in the face of death could be read as nihilistic hedonism in this vein. The ways that capitalist modernity destroy rural ways of life are not unique to this moment in the 1990s, but the AIDS crisis in *Dream of Ding Village* enacts these changes at an accelerated pace. Fisher writes:

> Watching *Children of Men,* we are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it (2).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, it appeared to many writers, researchers, and rural residents that these transformations of the countryside, the sucking out of its lifeblood, were inescapable. In *Brothers,* the responsive affect becomes one of manic acquiescence: Liu Town transforms from a sleepy small town to a neon-covered consumer paradise almost overnight and its residents quickly shed their old identities as state factory workers, blacksmiths, and dentists for new roles as brothel madams, retail magnates, and world travelers. *Dream of Ding Village* more clearly depicts a

resigned depression. The concept of a lack of "coherent alternative" is key to understanding where *Dream of Ding Village* leaves the reader—alone in an empty village.

While mythorealism is not science fiction, Fredric Jameson's discussions of the relationship between utopia and science fiction can shed some light on the impossibility of futurity that comes with reading *Dream of Ding Village* as an apocalyptic text:

> [Science fiction's] deepest vocation is to bring home, in local and determinate ways and with a fullness of concrete detail, our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself: and this, not owing to any individual failure of imagination but as the result of the systemic, cultural and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners (289).

Therefore, *Dream of Ding Village* cannot be uniquely criticized for its inability to imagine a future for the community or the flora and fauna that inhabit it. Rather, the sense of foreboding inevitability that follows the reader throughout the text is symptomatic of a larger, globalized cultural response to capitalist development.

In an interview with Liang Hong titled "Contemporary China under Developmentalism,"[39] Yan Lianke argues that that the reform era mandate to get rich has taken precedent in the peoples' minds above all else, leading people to give up their own autonomy and values in the process. He states that he is "working hard to arouse people's consciousness of crisis" (86).[40] Yet toward the end of the interview, his bleak perspective remains. Discussing a character who tries and fails to resist this

39 "发展主义"思维下的当代中国
40 我在努力唤起人们的危机意识。

status quo in his novel *Shouhuo* 受活 (tr. as Lenin's Kisses 2004), he says "Of course in a village environment like the one in the novel, there will be people who are critical of modernity. Even if there are, they have no way to survive" (87).[41] In a discussion of one of Yan's historical novels, *The Four Books*, Sebastian Veg has shown that the ambiguity of Yan's work helps to create space for public discourse around complex subjects such as the complicity of intellectuals with the state's abuses of power. In *Dream of Ding Village*, ambiguity emerges from the tension between the conventional narrative, the Pharaoh's dream, and the dream of Nüwa. The conventional narrative depicts a crisis, and its greatest horrors emerge in dreams. The story of the Pharaoh's dream suggests that the way out of the crisis is not depicted in the dream or narrative itself, but rather through its interpretation. Drawing attention to the crisis is the first step in finding a way out of it, but the next step toward any kind of future must be taken by the people who receive the message.

A resigned approach to the present also emerged in the discourse of the rural of the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Leftist rural scholars engaged in critique of the system of rural development that was becoming popular and widespread, yet they struggled to develop possible alternatives. In the new rural reconstruction movement of the early 2000s, there was a return to the ideals of community building and community-based production and consumption, also known as food sovereignty. Yet these projects were limited in scope and not supported by government resources.

41 在受活庄这样的环境中，产生不了一种对现代性能持批判态度的人，即使有了，也不可能存活。

Many were short-lived, recalling the ephemeral nature of the school mutual aid commune and the folk artist's performance in *Dream of Ding Village.* The possible future may contain kernels of the past, but the path to arrive there remains unclear.

Bibliography

A Cheng. *Qi Wang*. Zhong-Ying duizhao ban. Zhongwen daxue chubanshe, 2005.

Anagnost, Ann. "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi)." *Public Culture*, vol. 16, no. 2, June 2004, pp. 189–208.

Apter, David E., and Tony Saich. *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*. Harvard University Press, 1994.

Ash, Robert. "Squeezing the Peasants: Grain Extraction, Food Consumption and Rural Living Standards in Mao's China." *The China Quarterly*, vol. 188, Dec. 2006, pp. 959–98.

Ash, Robert F., and Richard Louis Edmonds. "China's Land Resources, Environment and Agricultural Production." *The China Quarterly*, no. 156, 1998, pp. 836–79.

Bernstein, Thomas P. *Up to the Mountains and down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China*. Yale University Press, 1977.

Berry, Michael. *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*. Columbia University Press, 2008.

Bonnin, Michel. *The Lost Generation: The Rustication of China's Educated Youth (1968-1980)*. The Chinese University Press, 2013.

Braester, Yomi. *Witness against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China*. Stanford University Press, 2003.

Brown, Jeremy. City versus Countryside in Mao's China: Negotiating the Divide. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Brown, Jeremy, and Matthew D. Johnson, editors. *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*. Harvard University Press, 2015.

Buck-Morss, Susan. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. MIT Press, 2000.

Button, Peter. *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity*. Brill, 2009.

Cai, Xiang. *Revolution and Its Narratives: China's Socialist Literary and Cultural Imaginaries (1949-1966)*. Translated by Rebecca E. Karl and Xueping Zhong, Duke University Press, 2016.

---. “Yi ge lixiang zhuyizhe de jingshen manyou: du Zhang Chengzhi Beifang de He.” *Dushu*, vol. 9, 1984, pp. 52–58.

Can, Xue. “Q & A for Can Xue.” *Contemporary Chinese Writers*, web.mit.edu/ccw/can-xue/questions-answers.shtml. Accessed 11 Mar. 2022.

Cao, Jinqing. *China along the Yellow River: Reflections on Rural Society*. RoutledgeCurzon, 2005.

Cao, Zuoya. *Out of the Crucible: Literary Works about the Rusticated Youth*. Lexington Books, 2003.

Chaddah, Anuradha, and Zunyou Wu. “Selling Blood Spreads HIV.” *HIV/AIDS in China: Beyond the Numbers*, Springer Singapore, 2107.

Chan, Jenny, and Mark Selden. “China’s Rural Migrant Workers, the State, and Labor Politics.” *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4, Oct. 2014, pp. 599–620.

Chan, Roy Bing. *The Edge of Knowing: Dreams, History, and Realism in Modern Chinese Literature*. University of Washington Press, 2017.

Chan, Shelley W. “Narrating Cancer, Disabilities, and Aids: Yan Lianke’s Trilogy of Disease.” *Discourses of Disease*, Jan. 2016, pp. 177–99.

Chen, Hansheng. *Landlord and Peasant in China; a Study of the Agrarian Crisis in South China*. Hyperion Press, 1973.

Chi, Pang-Yuan, and David Der-wei Wang. *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century: A Critical Survey*. Indiana University Press, 2000.

Chio, Jenny. *A Landscape of Travel: The Work of Tourism in Rural Ethnic China.* University of Washington Press, 2014.

Chow, Rey. *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. Columbia University Press, 1995.

Choy, Howard Y. F. *Remapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng’s China,1979 - 1997*. Brill, 2008.

Chuang, Julia. “Beneath the China Boom: Labor, Citizenship, and the Making of a Rural Land Market.” *Beneath the China Boom*, University of California Press, 2020.

Chung, Hilary, and Michael Falchikov, editors. *In the Party Spirit: Socialist Realism and Literary Practice in the Soviet Union, East Germany and China*. Rodopi, 1996.

Clark, Katerina. *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. Indiana University Press, 2000.

Clark, Paul. *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Coase, R. H., and Ning Wang. *How China Became Capitalist*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Cohen, Myron L. "Cultural and Political Inventions in Modern China: The Case of the Chinese 'Peasant.'" *Daedalus*, vol. 122, no. 2, 1993, pp. 151–70.

Day, Alexander F. *The Peasant in Postsocialist China: History, Politics, and Capitalism*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

DeMare, Brian. "The Romance and Tragedy of Rural Revolution: Narratives and Novels of Land Reform in Mao's China." *CLIO*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2014, pp. 341–65.

Diamant, Neil Jeffrey. *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949-1968*. University of California Press, 2000.

Ding, Fan. *Zhongguo xiangtu xiaoshuo shi*. Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007.

Ding, Fan and Li Xingyang. "Zhongguo xiangtu xiaoshuo yanjiu de bainian liubian" *Dangdai Zuojia Pinglun*, no. 01, 2018, pp. 4–11.

Ding, Ling. *Taiyang zhao zai sanggan heshang*. Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1956.

Ding, Yizhuang. *Zhongguo zhiqing shi*. Dangdai zhongguo chubanshe, 2009.

Duara, Prasenjit. *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Duke, Michael S. "Past, Present, and Future in Mo Yan's Fiction of the 1980s." *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth Century China*, Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 43–70.

Egan, Michael. "A Notable Sermon: The Subtext of Hao Ran's Fiction." *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, edited by Bonnie S. McDougall, University of California Press, 1984.

Elvin, Mark. *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China*. Yale University Press, 2004.

Fei, Xiaotong. *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*. University of

California Press, 1992.

Feng, Xianghong. “Who Benefits?: Tourism Development in Fenghuang County, China.” *Human Organization*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2008, pp. 207–20.

Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei. *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant “Other” in Modern Chinese Literature*. Stanford University Press, 1998.

Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* O Books, 2009.

Friedman, Edward, et al. *Chinese Village, Socialist State*. Yale University Press, 1991.

Gao, Xiaosheng. *Gao Xiaosheng xiaoshuo xuan*. Zhongguo wenxue chubanshe, 1999.

Gerth, Karl. “Consumerism in Contemporary China.” *Faith, Finance, and Economy: Beliefs and Economic Well-Being*, edited by Tanweer Akram and Salim Rashid, Springer International Publishing, 2020, pp. 75–105.

Han, Shaogong. *Ba ba ba*. Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2015.

---. “Guiqulai.” *Ba Ba Ba*, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2015, pp. 69–90.

---. “Homecoming?” *Homecoming? And Other Stories*, translated by Cheung, Martha, Research Centre for Translations, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1992, pp. 1–20.

---. *Wenxue de gen*. Shandong wenyi chubanshe, 2001.

Han, Xiaorong. *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant, 1900-1949*. State University of New York Press, 2005.

Hao, Ran. *Jinguang Dadao*. Renmin chubanshe, 1975.

---. *Yanyang tian*. Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1975.

He Guimei, editor. *“50-70 niandai wenxue” yanjiu duben.* Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2018.

---. “Cunzhuangli de Zhongguo: Zhao Shuli yu Sanliwan." *Wenxue pinglun*, no. 01, 2016, pp. 36–48.

Hershatter, Gail. *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China’s Collective Past*. University of California Press, 2011.

Ho, Christine I. *Drawing from Life: Sketching and Socialist Realism in the People’s Republic of China*. University of California Press, 2020.

Hong, Zicheng. *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*. Brill, 2007.

Honig, Emily, and Xiaojian Zhao. *Across the Great Divide: The Sent-down Youth Movement in Mao's China, 1968-1980*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Hou, Xiaojia. *Negotiating Socialism in Rural China: Mao, Peasants, and Local Cadres, in Shanxi, 1949-1953*. East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2016.

Huang, Joe C. *Heroes and Villains in Communist China: The Contemporary Chinese Novel as a Reflection of Life*. Pica Press, 1973.

Huang, Yibing. *Contemporary Chinese Literature: From the Cultural Revolution to the Future*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Huang Ziping. *Geming, lishi, xiaoshuo,* Oxford University Press, 2001.

Hung, Chang-tai. *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic*. Cornell University Press, 2011.

Jacka, Tamara, et al. "Regional, Rural–Urban and Within-Community Inequalities." *Contemporary China: Society and Social Change*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 167–202.

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso, 2007.

---. *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton University Press, 1974.

Jia Pingwa. *Jia Pingwa xiaoshuo xuan*. Zhongguo wenxue chubanshe, 1999.

---. *Qinqiang*, Zuojia chubanshe, 2005.

Johnson, Kay Ann. *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China*. University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Johnson, Matthew D. "Cinema and Propaganda During the Great Leap Forward." *Visualizing Modern China: Image, History, and Memory 1750-Present*, edited by James A. Cook et al., Lexington Books, 2014.

Karatani, Kōjin. *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*. Duke University Press, 1993.

Kelliher, Daniel. "Chinese Communist Political Theory and the Rediscovery of the Peasantry." *Modern China*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1994, pp. 387–415.

King, Richard, et al. *Heroes of China's Great Leap Forward: Two Stories*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2010.

---. *Milestones on a Golden Road: Writing for Chinese Socialism, 1945-80*. UBC Press, 2013.

Kinkley, Jeffrey. *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels*. Columbia University Press, 2014.

Lai, Lili. *Hygiene, Sociality, and Culture in Contemporary Rural China: The Uncanny New Village*. Amsterdam University Press, 2016.

Larson, Wendy. *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

Lau, Joseph M. "Visitation of the Past in Han Shaogong's Post-1985 Fiction." *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in 20th Century China*, edited by David Der-Wai Wang and Ellen Widmer, Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 19–42.

Li, Huaiyin. *Village China under Socialism and Reform: A Micro History, 1948-2008*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

Li, Qingxi. "Searching for Roots: Anticultural Return in Mainland Chinese Literature of the 1980s." *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century*, edited by David Der-Wai Wang and Pang-Yuan Chi, Indiana University Press, 2000, pp. 110–23.

Li, Shulei. "Beifang de He: jingshen fenxi." *Wenxue ziyou tan*, no. 4, 1998, pp. 82–88.

Li, Zhun. "A Brief Biography of Li Shuangshuang." *Heroes of China's Great Leap Forward: Two Stories*, translated by Richard King, University of Hawai'i Press, 2010, pp. 15–62.

---. *Li Shuangshuang xiaozhuan*. Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1977.

Liu, Hui. "Changing Regional Rural Inequality in China 1980-2002." *Area*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2006, pp. 377–89.

Liu, Qing. *The Builders*. Foreign Languages Press, 1964.

---. *Chuangye shi*. Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1996.

Liu, Xiaomeng. *Zhongguo zhiqing shi: dachao 1966-1980*. Dangdai zhongguo chubanshe, 2009.

Liu Zhenyun. *Liu Zhenyun jingxuanji*. Beijing yanshan chubanshe, 2006.

Lora-Wainwright, Anna. "Rural China in Ruins: The Rush to Urbanize China's Countryside Is Opening a Moral Battleground." *Anthropology Today*, vol. 28, no. 4, Aug. 2012, pp. 8–13.

Lovell, Julia. "Finding a Place: Mainland Chinese Fiction in the 2000s." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2012, pp. 7–32.

Lu, Xun. *Selected Stories of Lu Xun*. Translated by Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang, China Books & Periodicals, 1994.

Lukács, György. *Writer and Critic: And Other Essays*. Merlin Press, 1970.

MacFarquhar, Roderick, et al. *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 14, The People's Republic, Part 1, The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1949-1965*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Mao, Zedong. *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*. Translated by Bonnie S. McDougall, Center for Chinese Studies; University of Michigan, 1980.

---. *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tsetung.* Foreign Languages Press, 1971.

Martin, Michael F. "Bias and Inequity in Rural Incomes in Post-reform China." *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, Jan. 1990, pp. 273–87.

McDougall, Bonnie S. "Literary Decorum or Carnivalistic Grotesque: Literature in the People's Republic of China after 50 Years." *The China Quarterly*, no. 159, 1999, pp. 723–32.

McKinley, Terry, and Keith Griffin. "The Distribution of Land in Rural China." *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, Oct. 1993, pp. 71–84.

Mi, Hedu. *Hongweibing zhe yidai*. Sanlian shudian youxian gongsi, 1993.

Mittler, Barbara. *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*. Harvard University Asia Center, 2012.

Mo, Yan. *Hong gaoliang*. Zuojia chubanshe, 1995.

--- *Red Sorghum: A Family Saga*. Viking, 1993.

Oi, Jean C. *Rural China Takes off: Institutional Foundations of Economic Reform*. University of California Press, 1999.

Pan, Yihong. *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace: China's Youth in the Rustication Movement*. Lexington Books, 2002.

Pang, Laikwan. *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production during China's Cultural Revolution*. Verso, 2017.

Peng, Qinglong. "The National and Cosmopolitan Significance of Jia Pingwa's Fiction." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2021, pp. 120–33.

Qi, Bangyuan, and David Der-wei Wang. *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century: A Critical Survey*. Indiana University Press, 2000.

Qu Huabing. "Chengshihua yujing yu xiangcun ticai xiaoshuo wenti tezheng de xingcheng." *Tongling Xueyuan Xuebao*, vol. 11, no. 01, 2012, pp. 84–87.

Quan Tang shi. Cui wen tang; Tai-nan: Ping bing chubanshe faxing, 1974.

Redfield, Marc. *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the "Bildungsroman."* Cornell University Press, 1996.

Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*. University of California Press, 2004.

Rosenberg, Lior. "Urbanising the Rural: Local Strategies for Creating 'New Style' Rural Communities in China." *China Perspectives*, no. 3 (95), 2013, pp. 63–71.

Sa Zhishan. "Shilun wushi zhi qishi niandai 'nongcun ticai' changpian xiaoshuo." *"50-70 niandai wenxue" yanjiu duben,* edited by He Guimei, Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2018.

Sargeson, Sally. "The Demise of China's Peasantry as a Class." *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, vol. 14, no. 13:1, July 2016.

Schmalzer, Sigrid. *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Selden, Mark. *China in Revolution: The Yenan Way Revisited*. M.E. Sharpe, 1995.

Shen, Congwen. *Selected stories of Shen Congwen*. Chinese University Press, 2004.

Strauss, Julia. "Morality, Coercion and State Building by Campaign in the Early PRC: Regime Consolidation and after, 1949-1956." *The China Quarterly*, no. 188, 2006, pp. 891–912.

Su, Xiaobo, and Peggy Teo. *The Politics of Heritage Tourism in China: A View from*

Lijiang. Taylor & Francis Group, 2009.

Tang, Xiaobing. *Visual Culture in Contemporary China: Paradigms and Shifts*. University Press, 2015.

Taubes, Hannibal. "'Gaze Upon Its Depth': On the Uses of Perspectival Painting in the Early-Modern Chinese Village." *East Asian History*, vol. 43, Nov. 2019, pp. 39–74.

Tay, C. N. "Two Poems of Mao Tse-Tung in the Light of Chinese Literary Tradition." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1970, pp. 633–55

Thaxton, Ralph. *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Unger, Jonathan. *The Transformation of Rural China*. M.E. Sharpe, 2002.

Van Fleit Hang, Krista. *Literature the People Love: Reading Chinese Texts from the Early Maoist Period (1949-1966)*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Veg, Sebastian. "Creating a Literary Space to Debate the Mao Era:" *China Perspectives*, vol. 2014, no. 4, 4, Nov. 2014, pp. 7–15.

Volland, Nicolai. *Socialist Cosmopolitanism: The Chinese Literary Universe, 1945-1965*. Columbia University Press, 2017.

Wang, Anyi. *Xiaobao zhuang*. Wenyi chubanshe, 1986.

Wang, Ban. *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*. Stanford University Press, 2004.

---. "Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism." *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, edited by Kirk A. Denton, Columbia University Press, 2016.

---, editor. *Words and Their Stories: Essays on the Language of the Chinese Revolution*. Brill, 2011.

Wang, David Der-wei. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, 1992.

---. Wang Dewei. "Geming shidai de ai yu si--lun Yan Lianke de xiaoshuo." Dangdai zuojia pinglun, no. 05, 2007, pp. 25–37.

---. "Imaginary Nostalgia: Shen Congwen, Song Zelai, Mo Yan, and Li Yongping."

From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China, Harvard University Press, 1993.

Wang, Jing. *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*. University of California Press, 1996.

Wang Xiaoming. *Jinshi yu yuanwang*, Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2012.

Wang, Xiaoqiang and Bai Nanfeng. *Furao de pinkun: Zhongguo luohou diqu de jingji kaocha*, Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1986.

Watts, Jonathan. "Censor Sees through Yan Lianke's Guile." *The Guardian*, 9 Oct. 2006, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/oct/09/books.china.

Wemheuer, Felix, and Kimberley Ens Manning, editors. *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine*. UBC Press, 2011.

Wen, Tiejun. "Centenary Reflections on the 'three Dimensional Problem' of Rural China." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, Jan. 2001, pp. 287–95.

Widmer, Ellen, and David Der-wei Wang, editors. *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*. Harvard University Press, 1993.

Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. Oxford University Press, 1973.

Woloch, Alex. *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton University Press, 2004.

Wu, Zunyou, editor. *HIV/AIDS in China: Beyond the Numbers*. Springer Singapore, 2017.

Xie, Haiyan. "Nostalgia as Method: Contamination of Blood and Familial Ethics in Yan Lianke's *Dream of Ding Village*." *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, vol. 67, no. 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 45–60.

Yan, Hairong. "Spectralization of the Rural: Reinterpreting the Labor Mobility of Rural Young Women in Post-Mao China." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2003, pp. 578–96.

Yan, Lianke. *Ding zhuang meng*. Chengshi daxue chubanshe, 2020.

---. *Dream of Ding Village*. Translated by Cindy Carter, Grove Atlantic, 2011.

---. "Shenshi zhuyi de Zhongguo yu wenxue. " *Mudan*, no. 01, 2015, pp. 72–74.

Yan, Lianke, and Liang Hong. "'Fazhanzhuyi' siweixia de dangdai Zhongguo—Yan Lianke fangtanlu." Wenhua zongheng, no. 01, 2010, pp. 83–87.

Yan, Yunxiang. *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999*. Stanford University Press, 2003.

Yang, Lan. *Chinese Fiction of the Cultural Revolution*. Hong Kong University Press, 1998.

Yang, Lihui, and Deming An. *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*. ABC-CLIO, 2005.

You, Ziying. "Shifting Actors and Power Relations: Contentious Local Responses to the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Contemporary China." *Journal of Folklore Research*, vol. 52, no. 2–3, 2015, pp. 253–68.

Yu, Hua. *Brothers*. Translated by Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas, Pantheon Books, 2009.

---. *Xiongdi*. Wenyi chubanshe, 2005.

Zhang, Chengzhi. *Zhang Chengzhi xiaoshuo xuan*. Zhongguo wenxue chubanshe: waiyu jiaoxue yu yanjiu chubanshe, 1999.

Zhang, Yingjin. "Toward a Typology of Literary Modernity in China: A Survey of English Scholarship on Modern Chinese Literature." *A Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, 2015, p. 483.

Zhao, Shuli. *Sanliwan Village*. Translated by Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, 1957.

---. *Sanliwan*. Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005.

Zhou, Libo. *Baofeng zhouyu*. Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1977.

Zhou Yang. "Jianshe shehuizhuyi wenxue de renwu-zai zhongguo zuojia xiehui di er ci lishihui huiyi (kuoda) shang de baogao." *Renmin ribao*, 24 Mar. 1956.

---. "Wo guo shehuizhuyi wenxue yishu de daolu." Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1960, pp. 6–25.

---. "Guanyu 'shehuizhuyi de xianshizhuyi yu geming de langmanzhuyi.'" *Zhou Yang ji*. Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2000.

Zhu Yu. *Shehui zhuyi yu "ziran:" 1950-1960 niandai Zhongguo meixue lunzheng yu wenyi shijian yanjiu.* Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2018.