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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Performing Perversion:  
Decadence in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature

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

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

by

Hongjian Wang

September 2012

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Perry Link, Chairperson

Dr. Paul Pickowicz

Dr. Susan Zieger

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The Dissertation of Hongjian Wang is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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*In Loving Memory of My Grandmother Mrs. Wang Ximei*

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Performing Perversion:  
Decadence in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature

by

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Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Comparative Literature  
University of California, Riverside, September 2012  
Dr. Perry Link, Chairperson

This project starts with dissatisfaction with the simplistic and moralistic interpretation of Decadence among writers and scholars in the Chinese context in the twentieth century. It first comes to an understanding of the original meaning of the European Decadence in the late nineteenth century and then uses it as a lens to examine Chinese literature in the twentieth century. With a combination of textual analysis and historical rendition, it discusses six writers' life and work in the 1920s, 1930s, 1980s and 1990s. The years between 1940s and 1970s are skipped because the leftist dominance and the Communist reign did not tolerate anything decadent.

Since the introduction of Decadence into China in the early 1920s, Chinese writers and scholars have understood Decadence with two interrelated connotations, namely, a pessimistic world view and indulgence in sensual pleasure. But the European Decadents



in fact celebrated individual free will by revolting against the norms they believed in. It is a rebellion for rebellion's sake and performance of perversion.

In this sense, Yu Dafu and Shao Xunmei who have been labeled as hardcore Decadent due to explicit exploration of erotica in their stories and poems in the 1920s and 1930s were not Decadent because they were busy, hesitantly or triumphantly, overthrowing traditional social norms and embracing the new ones. Yu Hua and Su Tong who were associated with Decadence because of the obsession with death, violence and evil in their fiction in the 1980s and 1990s were not Decadent, either, because they acknowledged the value of humanism and had no intention to revolt against it. In contrast, Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo in the 1980s and 1990s were closer to the European Decadents because their characters manage to assert their free will by rebelling against the norms they believe in.

The “real” Decadence emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in China because Chinese intellectuals regained their elitist status after the Cultural Revolution but also felt it threatened by the growing commercial culture. They engaged in Decadence to manifest their intellectual superiority. After all, Decadence is an elitist endeavor.

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## **Introduction**

### **Decadence vs. *Tuifei***

An outrageously controversial artistic movement that flourished mainly in the nineteenth-century France and Britain, Decadence has, like a shooting star with its brief yet fascinating brilliance, generated a lingering debate over how to understand and evaluate it. Although European Decadence came to an end in 1900 with the death of Oscar Wilde, it stimulated constant resonances in China ever since its introduction into the country in the early 1920s. Scholars in China and in the West have drawn parallel between many Chinese writers in the twentieth century and the European Decadent writers. But under close examination, one may notice that these Chinese writers are not quite like their European “counterparts.” Meanwhile, some Chinese writers are closer to the European Decadent writers but have not been recognized as so. This is the starting point of the present project, that is, to come to an understanding of the European Decadence first and use it as a lens to examine Chinese literature in the twentieth century.

### ***Against Nature: Towards a Definition of Decadence***

As briefly summarized by M. H. Abrams, Decadence is a movement derived from Aestheticism, which was “a European phenomenon during the latter nineteenth century that had its chief philosophical headquarters in France” (2). Aestheticism promoted the idea of “l’art pour l’art,” that is, to appreciate art for its own sake, releasing it from the

shackles of utilitarianism and the burden of morality, hence celebrating “the religion of beauty” (Abrams 3). Positioning Decadence within the frame of Aestheticism, one may trace the development of the idea of “l’art pour l’art” to a “cult of artificiality.”

Abrams continues with his introduction to Decadence, “[central] to this movement was the view that art is totally opposed to ‘nature,’ both in the sense of biological nature and of the standard, or ‘natural,’ norms of morality and sexual behavior” (3). (In fact, “Against Nature” is the title of the yardstick novel of Decadent literature, *A Rebours*, by J. K. Huysmans published in 1884 in France, in which the protagonist des Esseintes devotes his life to artificiality.) Here, one may discern a slight modification of Aestheticism. True, art per se is still the ultimate goal of art, but it is not any kind of art that deserves appreciation; rather, the scope of art is narrowed down to that “totally opposed to ‘nature’,” or, entirely artificial. This is also why Arthur Symons, in his 1893 essay “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” repudiates the classic art that possesses “those qualities of perfect simplicity, perfect sanity, perfect proportion” (858) in favor of Decadence, which is “really a new and beautiful and interesting disease” (859). It is precisely this exaltation of artificiality that paves the way to all kinds of excesses in Decadent literature, both in style and in subject matter, including “an interest in complexity of form and elaborate and arcane language; a fascination with the perverse,

the morbid, and the artificial; a desire for intense experience and a seeking after rare sensations in order to combat a feeling of *ennui* or world-weariness” (MacLeod 1).

Controversial as it is, this cult of artificiality asserts the will power of human being, for “the abnormal becomes a proof of man’s superiority to natural law, a demonstration of free will” (Carter 5). Just as Huysmans simply tells the readers, “[as] a matter of fact, artifice was considered by Des Esseintes to be the distinctive mark of human genius”(21). It is a voluntary revolt against and deliberate violation of anything that is given and fixed, or rather, any norms that are supposedly “natural.” Therefore, the sensation that results from the pursuit of the artificial is by no means spontaneous but self-consciously stimulated and calculated. As A. E. Carter concisely remarks, “[the Decadent] is intellectual rather than sentimental, a creature almost logical in his manias” (29). It is this self-consciousness that marks the intellectual aspect of Decadence, which is one of its essential characteristics.

One may quickly draw an analogy between Decadence and Romanticism based on its assertion of human being’s will power. In fact, some critics, such as Carter and Mario Praz, identify Decadence as the final stage of Romantic evolution. However, it is Carter that pins down Decadence’s transcendence over Romanticism:

[Decadence] borrowed Romanticism’s swollen emotions and spiritual exhaustion... But it was in revolt against Romantic theory on two essential points—the cult of Nature and the cult of ideal love. Its artificiality contradicts both; it begins (in De Sade and Baudelaire) as a renunciation of Rousseau’s naturism, and develops into the practice of whatever can be thought anti-natural and abnormal. (150)

That is to say, the cult of artificiality constitutes the fundamental distinction between Decadence and Romanticism, to which Nature is crucial.

Another distinction between Decadence and Romanticism lies in the sources of their rebellious spirit. The Romanticists fight against society because they are deprived of what they need and have faith in, things that are supposed to be granted by natural law, such as individual freedom. Or rather, they are rebellious because of frustration. Therefore, they tend to become sorrowful like young Werther if their rebellion fails or triumphant like Don Juan if they succeed. In contrast, however, the Decadents launch their revolt against the “natural” norms not from frustration but out of surfeit. As Carter insightfully points out, “[amongst Decadence’s] *dramatis personae* we find dukes, princes, countesses, baronesses, all belonging to the best society and all well provided with cash” (29). They are in fact social elites who have no necessity to fight for individual freedom but rather have the privilege to flaunt their freedom by indulging in what the natural norms prohibit. That is to say, their revolt is not a result of necessity but of willful choice. Nor do the Decadents have the sincere faith in what they pursue as the Romanticists do. As William Gaunt observes, “[the Decadents] refused to believe in to-morrow, [and they] were great practical jokers” (10). The artificiality they appreciate is merely an instrument that is used to arouse strange sensations as a protest against nature and needs to be constantly changed so as to keep the sensations fresh.

Thus, Decadence presents itself as an artistic movement going against nature. It inherits anti-utilitarianism from Aestheticism and will power from Romanticism but moves beyond both through the cult of artificiality.

***Against Oneself: Paradoxes of Decadence***

Among the critics of Decadence, Holbrook Jackson is probably the most positive. Praise and worship of Decadence overflow almost every page of his book *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*. For Jackson, the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “was a time when people went about frankly and cheerfully endeavoring to solve the question ‘How to Live’” and “[the] search for a new mode of life was anything but melancholy or diseased” (29-30). To do Decadence justice, “[all] the cynicisms and petulances and flippancies of the decadence, the febrile self-assertion, the voluptuousness, the perversity were, consciously or unconsciously, efforts towards the rehabilitation of spiritual power” (Jackson 70-71). Although Jackson confirms Decadence’s celebration of will power, he fails to explain the immediate disappearance of Decadence with the death of Oscar Wilde. In fact, as is noticed by other critics, Decadence is a movement fraught with internal and external paradoxes, which stem from its relationship with its own ideal, the natural norms and the market.

First, the Decadents’ pursuit of intense experience and seeking after rare sensations through the cult of artificiality are self-negating. Above all, the calculated and intellectual

aspect of Decadence fundamentally vitiates the intensity of the experience and sensations, for they are after all schemed rather than spontaneous. Furthermore, in order to keep the experience intense and the sensations rare, they are necessarily fleeting and unrepeatable; otherwise they would gradually form a new trap of the given, the fixed or the normal. As James Willsher rightly observes in *British Decadence*,

The brilliance of the sensation was that it never pretended to be anything other than fleeting; the hideous irony being that the habitual sensualist eventually craved it otherwise. The writers of the last decade of the nineteenth century suffered commitment to a cause that denied any commitment. (33)

The Decadents meant to entertain no faith and rebel for the rebellion's sake. When it is difficult to find something to rebel against, Decadence turns up biting at itself. In *A Rebours*, des Esseintes never picks up the same passion for a second time:

In time, however, his taste for these extravagant caprices, of which he had once been so proud, died a natural death; and nowadays he shrugged his shoulders in contempt whenever he recalled the puerile displays of eccentricity he had given, the extraordinary clothes he had worn and the bizarre furnishing schemes he had devised. (Huysmans 14-15)

Or rather, the only passion that survives is that to always present himself as provocatively unconventional. Similarly, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the Decadent protagonist's temporary "repentance" for his crime towards the end of the novel, is more of a revolt against his own habitual perversity than a real confession, hence soon gets aborted.

Second, Decadents' very consciousness of evil constantly suggests and potentially re-affirms the existence of the norms it endeavors to rebel against. After all, Decadence as a movement "against nature" is relational; or rather, Decadence is dependent on the



existence of nature, which provides an indispensable reference point for its revolt. For this reason, Jennifer Birkett argues that “[to] do Evil in full awareness’ (*L’Irremediable*) was the saving grace of the criminal, as of the dandy, [and the] ironic knowledge that adds an extra frisson to his crime also absolves him, because it acknowledges the authority of the taboos he infringes” (21). Similarly, Carter reveals the paradox in *Decadence*:

[The] decadents, even when they refused to live by Rousseau’s gospel [of naturism], never denied its truth. They were like unfrocked priests celebrating the Black Mass—perfectly aware that their cult was blasphemous. They accepted Nature as the norm, and primitive as synonymous with virtue. (4)

Therefore, a cannibal would not be called Decadent for eating human flesh because he simply follows what his cultural community considers natural. On the contrary, a person in a culture that views cannibalism as the ultimate sin would definitely be Decadent if he fed on human flesh simply for the purpose of perverse pleasure. As Huysmans unambiguously points out:

The truth of the matter is that if it did not involve sacrilege, sadism would have no *raison d’être*; on the other hand, since sacrilege depends on the existence of a religion, it cannot be deliberately and effectively committed except by a believer, for a man would derive no satisfaction whatever from profaning a faith that was unimportant or unknown to him. (148)

That is to say, the natural norms are inscribed in the Decadents’ genes. In fact, the deeper the norms are embedded within the Decadents, the greater the pleasure they derive from their perversion, and vice versa. Therefore, the Decadent revolt against nature is not intended to succeed because that would leave no room for its own existence.

It seems contradictory that on the one hand, the Decadents entertain no commitment; whereas on the other, they must be a believer of the norms in the first place. However, they may appear fairly consistent if the only thing they care about is recognized as what they rebel against, that is, the norms. They take on various fleeting and perverse gestures merely for the purpose of brandishing their individual will power, far from aiming for overthrowing the norms they have mercilessly ridiculed. As a result, the Decadent perversion is only a performance on the stage of the norms.

Third, when Decadent literature becomes popular in the market, it runs two risks, which are closely related to the above two paradoxes. First, to keep the experience and the sensations intense, they are also necessarily unique. Therefore, if the rebellious Decadent ideas get popularly accepted through commercialism, they would no longer be unique. Rather, they would become a new norm that Decadence would waste no time to flee from. Second, since Decadence is an elitist revolt against the norms, the consumption of Decadence can be a consumption of the elitist privilege. If the Decadents perform perversion as a revolt, the consumers of Decadence can perform the “performance of perversion.” Since Decadence has the norms embedded in its genes, a consumer can just take the consumption as a short cut to demonstrate their “elite-ness” while still upholding the norms.

For the Decadents, it is of primal significance to assert their will power, their individuality. Just as des Esseintes exclaims, “I just don’t enjoy the pleasures other people enjoy” (194). Charles Baudelaire also observes in “The Painter of Modern Life” that “[Decadent dandyism] is first and foremost the burning need to create for oneself a personal originality... [and] a kind of cult of the self” (27). To achieve this goal, they resort to perversion rebelling against anything that is supposed to be “natural” or “normal,” be it biological or social. However, one should not take this perverse rebellion too seriously because their pleasure derives directly from the solid existence of the norms. It seems that the Decadents are tied to the norms with a rubber band. In order to demonstrate their individuality, they try their best to move away from the norms. They might reach as far as an outsider of the norms would stand or even farther away; however, they are always tied to the norms. In fact, the farther they distance themselves from the norms, the stronger the tension on the band, and the more difficult for them to do so. The band may even cut into their flesh and make them bleed, but they rejoice in the pain because it proves their individuality. Thus, the Decadents are simply performing perversion. On the one hand, they situate themselves opposite to the norms. On the other hand, they distance themselves from their own perversion with an aloof attitude, as if they are watching some strangers’ show. This is also why Baudelaire registers in Decadent dandyism “the haughty exclusiveness, provocative in its very coldness” (28).

### ***“Decadence” in Chinese Literature***

When Decadence first came to China in the 1920s, one of the most popular translations of it is “*tuijiadang*,” based on the pronunciation of the French word “*décadent*.” Literally, it means *tui* plus *dang*. In Chinese, *tui* refers to the state of being dejected, dispirited, disappointed, downcast, etc.; while *dang* bears the connotation of being loose in morals, lascivious, licentious, dissolute, dissipated, and so on. Therefore, from the very beginning of its journey into China, Decadence has been understood with two interrelated facets. First, it indicates a pessimistic and negative view on world and life. Second, it features an indulgence in physical desires. Later on, though Decadence is more commonly translated as “*tuiwei*,” it carries these two facets with it, for *wei* is similar to *dang* in Chinese, meaning “to be abandoned.” In light of this translation, many Chinese writers in early 20<sup>th</sup> century have been viewed, mainly disapprovingly, as “Decadent” for pessimism or indulgence in physical desires or for the combination of both in their works. For example, Yu Dafu was labeled as Decadent for the extreme sentimentality and the explicit depiction of sexual repression in his short stories, Shao Xunmei for the erotic imagery in his poems, Ye Lingfeng for the celebration of sexual promiscuity in his short stories, and Eileen Chang for the “anti-romantic” desolation (*cangliang*) in her fiction, etc. In fact, precisely because of the second facet of the term in Chinese, Decadence has been dismissed as a synonym of immorality in Chinese literature

ever since. Apparently, this judgment is moralistic and simplistic. It contents itself with only looking at the appearance of these “Decadent” works while failing, or rather, refusing to look into the real relationship between them and the norms.

Recuperative efforts have been made by contemporary critics, such as Leo Lee, Xie Zhixi and Shu-mei Shih, to reexamine the concept of “Decadence.” Unfortunately, their reinterpretations are replete with problems. For example, Leo Lee, borrowing Matei Calinescu’s distinction between “bourgeois modernity” and “cultural modernity,” deems Decadence primarily as a revolt against bourgeois modernity, which is based on the faith in the teleological progress of history. Therefore, by understanding Decadent literature as a product of cultural modernity that questions and challenges bourgeois modernity, Lee finds *Dream of the Red Chamber* and fiction by Shi Zhecun and Eileen Chang successfully Decadent, whereas Shao Xunmei’s poems a failure.

However, under a second look, some of Lee’s arguments are difficult to hold water. For example, when Lee discusses *Dream of the Red Chamber*, he notices that both the author and the characters of the novel foresee the doom of history hence create a perfect yet illusional world called “*Fengyue baojian*.” He concludes dubiously that it is in this illusional world that Decadence lies (50). It is true that the novel complies with no teleology. However, to deviate from teleology does not necessarily make a literary work Decadent. In this case, the illusional world is an ideal realm, purer and loftier than the

real one. That is to say, instead of “falling down,” or moving away from the norms, as Decadent literature tends to do, the author and the characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber* choose to “go up,” or rather, moving towards the center of the norms.

Similarly, Lee highly regards Eileen Chang’s fiction, especially the sense of desolation (*cangliang*) permeating through her works. This judgment is close to Edward Gunn’s analysis of Eileen Chang’s works as anti-romantic in the sense that they register “disillusionment, the exposure of fraud, and compromise with reality” rather than “heroic characters, revolution, or love” (198). However, together with the teleological faith of bourgeois modernity, Eileen Chang discards the will to combat. That is to say, instead of “falling down” or “going up,” Eileen Chang chooses to “stay still” in compromise. The sense of desolation resembles *ennui* in that both involve a sense of boredom and distrust of change. However, Decadent literature distinguishes itself precisely by taking radically perverse actions, though in vain, to “combat a feeling of *ennui* or world-weariness” (MacLeod 1). That is to say, Eileen Chang is ready to be Decadent but not yet.

Last but not the least, Lee’s judgment of Shao Xunmei’s poems is not fair enough. According to Lee, the crucial defect of Shao’s poems is that it, instead of challenging the bourgeois modernity by shocking the bourgeois, they tend to cater to the taste of that class. However, Lee fails to take into consideration the external paradoxes of Decadent literature. That is to say, the Decadent writers rely on the bourgeois readers to sell their

works and what is shocking to the bourgeois tends to be amusing at the same time. Therefore, the popularity among the bourgeois is not a defining element that excludes a work from the realm of Decadence. Meanwhile, Lee also pays little attention to the difference between the western and the Chinese socio-historical background. In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century West, France and Britain in particular, the bourgeois represented the social norms, against which Decadent literature was written. However, in the 1920s in China, the bourgeois was not so developed to set the social norms, hence to side with the bourgeois against the traditional norms may also live up to the standard of Decadence as a revolt against the social norms. Thus, although Leo Lee touches upon several important aspects of Decadent literature, such as its sense of pessimism and its rebellious nature, his understanding of Decadence tends to be impressionistic and fragmented.

Xie Zhixi's *The Extremities of Beauty: A Study of Modern Chinese Literary Aesthetic Decadence* is a most comprehensive study of Decadence in the Republican era in Chinese. It provides a multitude of archival information about the establishment of literary clubs and magazines to introduce French and British Decadence into China and the publications of Decadent works by Chinese writers. Unfortunately, although he sets Abrams' summary of Aestheticism and Decadence as the entry point of his research, he ends up categorizing Chinese Aesthetic Decadence along the line of clichéd spiritual/sensual dichotomy while betraying his entrenched moralistic position. Xie

presents Zhou Zuoren as a model of the spiritually-inclined Beijing-school Aesthetic Decadents first because of his strenuous criticism of the conventional literary tradition, which demanded literature to convey the Confucian Dao (*wen yi zai dao*), and second because of his sense of pessimism.

However, if Xie examined Abrams' summary of Aestheticism and Decadence more closely, he would notice that Decadence is a narrow version of Aestheticism, meaning it not only opposes utilitarianism imposed on art, but also rejects any art that is not against nature. Zhou Zuoren may be an appropriate example of the Aesthetes but he can hardly be argued to be a Decadent for it is precisely the principle to comply with nature (*shun qi ziran*) that he was passionately promoting. Even when he advocated seeking pleasure in bitter life (*ku zhong zuole*), the very pursuit of pleasure is far from hedonism but rather confined within the appropriate boundaries. That is to say, one who is a Decadent is also an Aesthete, but one who is an Aesthete is not necessarily a Decadent. As for the erotically-charged Shanghai-school Decadent writers, such as Shao Xunmei, Teng Gu, Zhang Kebiao, etc., Xie merely dismisses them as being simple, vulgar and mercantile. It seems to Xie that anything fleshly and sensual is immoral, degenerate, corrupt and condemnable. However, this moralistic reasoning is exactly what the Decadent writers were attempting to break away with. Thus, Xie is not so different from the earlier hostile



critics of Decadence. His strategy to rescue Decadence from complete condemnation is by drawing under its umbrella figures who are not Decadent.

Unlike Leo Lee, Shu-mei Shih borrows a more concrete and tangible definition of Decadence from Tang Heyi, a literary critic in the 1920s, when she discusses Decadent writers such as Yu Dafu and Teng Gu:

[Decadent] literature was an expression of the hypersensitive moderns' pursuit of sensual stimulation, which was a form of escape from *but also* kind of protest against the world, toward which they harbored profound sadness and disappointment. In this specific historical moment, even escape could be construed as a form of protest, since alienation from society often indicated the individual's sense of nihilism toward desired social transformation. (113)

It is noteworthy that this "definition" is not a direct quotation from Tang. In fact, what Tang formulates in his introduction of western Decadence is different from Shih's summary. Tang understands Decadence the same as hedonism, which people resort to for comfort in front of the disappointing world. For Tang, hedonism is not completely negative:

One the one hand, the Decadents practice hedonism because they can no longer bear with the painful life. They are so dispirited to fight the bitter reality that they have to escape into the realm of sensual pleasures. (This is the case with the school of "l'art pour l'art.") On the other hand, hedonism is also an endeavor to search for a new life elsewhere so as to avoid sadness of death and despair. It should not be equated with cowardice. Rather, it is in fact a brave move to always seek satisfaction in material pleasures and go after all kinds of novel sensations and stimulations. (245)

Therefore, what Tang sees in Decadence as positive is its pursuit of pleasure beyond the miserable reality. In this sense, Decadent hedonists are not nihilists or pessimists; rather, they have strong faith in what they pursue. (To a sensitive mind, the two aspects Tang

unravels here are contradictory for one who has faith in some kind of “new life” cannot suffer from real despair in the first place.) This is different from what Shih regards as positive in Decadence, that is, to protest against reality through escape, without embracing anything beyond. Of course, Shih has her point in defining Decadence this way because she argues immediately afterwards that “the so-called decadent writers were most often socially engaged critics who protested against the conventional ‘morality’ of society” (113). However, this definition is problematic in that it has no root in the western Decadence or the Chinese common conception of the term or any particular Chinese writer’s understanding of it. The only reference Shih has is Tang’s words and yet she changed his original meaning. In fact, instead of “redefining” Decadence as she claims to do, Shih merely repeats what “*tuijiadang*” indicates, pessimism plus indulgence, while adding her “opinion” on it, that is, pessimism can also be a kind of protest.

Despite the discrepancy between Tang and Shih, both refer protest to that against reality. Reality is also what ordinary Chinese people point at when they talk about the pessimism in “Decadence.” However, the French and British Decadence is not as concerned with reality as with the norms; or rather, it is against the norms instead of the reality. That is to say, one can uphold the social norms perfectly high in his deepest dissatisfaction with reality, as Zhou Zuoren does. In fact, one is even more Decadent if he goes against the norms when reality has granted everything he needs, just as Des

Esseintes does. Therefore, in the French and British Decadence, the indulgence in perversity can by no means be construed as an escape; rather, it is a direct violation of the norms. Moreover, although the French and British Decadent works often involve sexual abnormality, the real pleasure lies not in the body but in the mind. Des Esseintes does not physically enjoy sleeping with a masculine woman, but the idea of blurring the gender boundary excites him. Therefore, the perverse pleasure in the French and British Decadence is intellectual rather than physical. A quick note should be added here. To compare Chinese “Decadence” with the French and British Decadence is not to pay homage to the West. Rather, the western Decadence provides a useful lens to reexamine the “Decadent” works in China, taking them out of the superficial, moralistic and simplistic criticism while revealing the complex relationships between texts, writers and social norms. Taken as a lens, the western Decadence provides only a perspective, rather than a paradigm, not to mention the ultimate criteria for judging literary values.

Thus, focusing on the relationships between texts, writers and social norms, the present research avails itself of both textual analysis and historical rendition. The twentieth-century China promises an interesting study of Decadence because of the multitude of radical social transformations, such as the May Fourth Movement, the rise of the Left Wing, the reign of the Communist Regime and the Reform and Opening-up, just to name a few. These social transformations have exerted tremendous impact on Chinese

people's mind, challenging them into thinking what the norms should be. However, the creation and the study of Decadent literature had been severely suppressed in China from late 1930s to late 1970s with the rise of the Left Wing and the dominance of the Communist ideology, or it was only mentioned as an evidence of the degeneration of the feudal or the bourgeois society. In contrast, Decadent literature enjoys more liberal, though not necessarily friendly, environment in the 1920s, early 1930s and the post-Mao era. This is why this project concentrates on writers in these periods.

The present research focuses on six Chinese writers in the twentieth century. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Yu Dafu and Shao Xunmei explicitly explored erotica in their short stories and poems and have been considered as hardcore Decadent writers. But they were in fact Romantic idealists, hesitant or confident, inspired by the May Fourth spirit, that is, to take enlightenment (*qimeng*) as their mission. They repudiated traditional norms while embracing the new, only that the new norms they advocated were not readily accepted even by other May Fourth writers. In the 1980s and 1990s, Yu Hua and Su Tong made their fame for the obsession with death, cruelty and violence in their fiction and hence have been associated with Decadence. But their stories are stimulated response to the Cultural Revolution. They accept what humanism considers right and wrong, appropriate and excessive. In fact, Yu Hua's exposure of darkness in society is an ardent appeal for the restoration of innocence and humanity, which had been seriously hurt in

the Cultural Revolution. Su Tong is just more pessimistic. He ascribes the tragedy in people's life to the evil human nature. Unlike the European Decadent writers, they do not intend to revolt against the norms they believe in or to assert their free will, so they are not Decadent. In contrast, the other two writers in the 1980s and 1990s, Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo better embody the spirit of European Decadence. Wang Shuo and his characters are cultural elite disguised as hooligan. In order to have fun, characters in Wang Xiaobo's stories rebel against the norms of which they are believers. Like the European Decadent writers, they have to stop being Decadent at certain point to avoid repeating themselves or being repeated. Their departure from Decadence in turn re-affirms their Decadence. After all, since Decadence is all about writers' and characters' relationship with social norms, it is in fact a prism that refracts the cultural dynamics in the twentieth-century China.

## Chapter I

### Yu Dafu: A Hesitant Pioneer of “Body-Writing”

When people talk about Chinese Decadence, Yu Dafu often comes in people’s mind first. This is largely because Yu, in his short story “Sinking” (*Chenlun*) in 1921, during the heyday of May-Fourth Movement, was the first who “dared to expose all his personal weaknesses in print and, in so doing, extended the psychological and moral frontiers of modern Chinese fiction” (Hsia 109). Few, Yu’s sympathizers and critics included, would fail to notice the exposure of the “personal weaknesses” in his story, namely the sexual repression and the extreme sentimentality. In fact, the casual equation among Yu Dafu, “Sinking,” sexual repression, sentimentality and Decadence has been so clichéd that it hinders people from questioning what “Decadence” is supposed to mean to Yu’s western “mentors,” such as Charles Baudelaire, to Yu himself and to the critics. However, the present research, in light of French and British Decadence, endeavors to demonstrate that Yu is not Decadent in the Western sense as he thought about himself. He misunderstood the Western Decadence in the first place, then was misunderstood by his countrymen.

It seems all begins with “Sinking.” According to the author, the story features two things, namely the sexual repression and the conflict between body and soul. It not only constitutes the main reason why readers are attracted or repelled by Yu Dafu, but also casts a melancholic spell over almost all Yu’s creative works.

### *Sexual Repression*

“Lately, he’s been feeling pathetically lonely” (Yu, “Collection” 8). With this simple start, the story “Sinking” delves deeper and deeper into the psychological landscape of the protagonist, a young Chinese student studying in Japan in late 1910s and early 1920s, like the author himself, whose sexual desire wakes up in a cold and unfriendly environment. He seems hopelessly tormented in a whirl of a national inferiority complex and a desperate yearning for spiritual understanding and physical intimacy. His efforts to relieve himself from the sexual anxiety—the frequent masturbation, the impulsive peek at the landlord’s daughter in shower and the eavesdropping of a couple’s love-making—merely aggravate his anxiety by adding a sense of guilt and shame to it. Like a delicate moth lured by the fire, he visits a brothel, where his loss of virginity brings to him such a severe despair in finding true love that he commits suicide.

Believe it or not, this is the stem of the story, the sad failure of a love-seeker in an alien land. However, the scholars’ attention has been mainly focused on the protagonist’s national inferiority complex. Though Yu’s sympathizers register the positive protest against the old society and system of China whereas the critics reproach Yu for his pessimism, both sides agree that, as C. T. Hsia observed in “Obsession with China,” “ultimately China gets blamed for all its problems” (543). Shu-mei Shih concisely points out, “[in Yu Dafu’s stories] the sexual or the libidinal never exists in separation from the

national” (115) and “[sexual] repression, or the inability to assert his manhood, is directly attributed to the Japanese ascendancy in China as an imperialist power” (117). That is to say, it is believed that the protagonist’s sexual repression is an embodiment or a metaphor for China’s national crisis.

Of course, Yu Dafu encouraged this kind of interpretation. In the short story, the protagonist frequently refers to the weakness of China. At one point, the protagonist walks home with three Japanese male students when they come across two Japanese girls. Despite his burning desire to talk to the girls, he flees the scene in shame. Assuming that the Japanese girls must have despised him for his nationality, he writes in his diary that “China O China, how come you are not rich and strong” (Yu, “Collection” 11). When he decides to solicit solace in a brothel, he is confronted with the question about his origin, which immediately sets him on alert:

Upon hearing the question, a tide of flush rose in his pale face. Murmuring an answer, he couldn’t say anything more. Now he felt he was positioned on a guillotine.

Japanese regard Chinese in the way we regard pigs and dogs. Japanese call Chinese as “*Zhinaren*,” three characters that sound in Japan even worse than “despicable thief” in our curse. Now in front of a pretty young girl, he had to admit that “I am *Zhinaren*.” (Yu, “Collection” 22)

Once again, he cries poignantly inside, “China O China, how come you are not rich and strong!” The most excruciating accusation comes in the end as he walks into the sea:

“Motherland O motherland, I blame you for my death!”

“Get rich and strong quickly!”

“You have many more children wallowing in dire sufferings!” (Yu, “Collection” 24)



With these straightforward appeals, it seems obvious that it is the declined China that is the source of the protagonist's sufferings.

After the publication of the short story, Yu received considerable criticism. Since the story is evidently autobiographical, Yu was prodded into defending his protagonist as well as himself. In the defense, Yu sounds like an innocent child being wronged for something he should not be responsible for:

After all, life is the crystallization of sorrow and bitterness. I don't believe there is happiness in the world. People accuse me of being decadent and hedonistic. However, they don't know why I have to indulge in alcohol and women. Alas, when I wake up from drunkenness in the morning next to a naked body that has been purchased by cash, my sorrow and sadness reach the depth that no self-acclaimed moralists would ever be able to imagine. Have I really abandoned moral principles? Am I really soulless? I just have seen through the destiny of life and have to pursue relief in this way. (Yu, "Niaoluo Ji" 152)

Yu's sympathizers have viewed this passage as a protest against the stifling environment of China. They assume the author-protagonist to have suffered primarily because China is weak and backward. However, on a second look, Yu did not spell out "why [he has] to indulge in alcohol and women." In fact, he never articulated how he has been suppressed by the old China. He just insinuated that he is frustrated, which the critics readily attribute to the national crisis. However, the critics' interpretation of the passage is self-contradictory in that it fails to explain how someone, who is inflicted with national inferiority complex, could draw relief from sleeping with women who despise him. One

might be able to achieve this relief if one is determined to revenge his enemy in that way, but this is not the case with Yu.

Thus the conflict within the widely accepted interpretation of Yu's story invites a revisit to the story per se. In the above-mentioned diary, right after the protagonist deplors China for being poor and weak, he questions the meaning of his studying in Japan. The logic behind this thinking is that obviously there are beautiful scenery and young women back in China. It seems that China, despite its backwardness and weakness, still possesses certain merits appealing to the protagonist. Then he laments over his wasted youth in the loveless country. As his emotion grows increasingly intense, he concludes:

What I'm asking for is just love.

If a beautiful woman can understand my bitterness, I would rather die for her.

If a woman, be she pretty or ugly, can love me with her whole heart, I would rather die for her, too.

All I'm asking for is love from the other sex.

Heaven O heaven, I don't need knowledge and I'd rather discard reputation and the useless money. If you could grant me an "Eve" in the Eden and make her belong to me body and soul, I would be completely satisfied. (Yu, "Collection" 12)

In disguise of a seemingly irrational impulse, Yu in fact sends out an unambiguous message, that is, the author-protagonist regards heterosexual love, spiritual as well as physical, higher than anything else, including knowledge, reputation and wealth. His concern for Chinese society, especially for national revival, is not even on the list. In fact, it is precisely his obsession with love that pushes him to suicide, because as he leaves the

brothel, he realizes that he probably will never get the love he craves and that a loveless life for him is as barren and dry as the dead ash (Yu, "Collection" 24). Thus it makes more sense to draw an analogy between the miserable destiny Yu claims in his self-defense to have seen through and the protagonist's pessimistic vision of his personal love life, instead of the national crisis. In fact, for the protagonist, China is only reproachable when it gets in the way of his pursuit of love. He visits the brothel looking for a substitute for love, gets relieved but only temporarily before that vision returns. Thus, one may find the protagonist's final appeal to the motherland nothing but abrupt and far-fetched. It also strikes one as surprising that the protagonist, who is so absorbed in his own emotional world, would suddenly get concerned with the wellbeing of his fellow countrymen. Therefore, the national discourse by no means grows out of the story naturally, but rather seems to have been forced into the picture hastily.

In the other two stories published in the same collection as "Sinking," the national inferiority complex is either absent or looms only vaguely in the shadow of the protagonist's melancholy. "The Silver Death" (*Yinhui se de si*) is Yu Dafu's first endeavor at literary creation. It tells a story of, again, a Chinese student studying in Japan, who receives two fatal blows in a row. First, he learns about the death of his beloved wife back in China. Unable to handle the grief, he turns to his confidant, a Japanese waitress in a restaurant he frequents, for comfort, only to find that she is distancing him because of

her engagement to a Japanese man. Feeling his emotional attachments to the world suddenly and completely cut off, he abandons himself to drinking. In the end of the story, a dead body is discovered lying in the snow with the exactly the same physical features as the protagonist. This story not only sets the issue of a national inferiority complex aside, but also confirms the possibility of mutual understanding and respect between Chinese and Japanese people. At least, before the waitress' engagement, she and the protagonist can share secrets with each other and, more importantly, comfort each other. Even after her engagement, they can still communicate in silence and tears. This mutual attachment is precisely the kind of love the protagonist in "Sinking" is desperately in search of. The protagonist in "The Silver Death" is luckier than the former in that he has found it but unfortunately he loses it eventually. As a result, he chooses the same path as the former does, that is, suicide.

In the third story in the collection, "Moving South" (*Nan qian*), the issue of nation and nationality emerges once in a while but does not come up to the national inferiority complex. The story narrates how the protagonist Yiren, a Chinese student studying in Japan, falls in love with an innocent and sweet Japanese girl after a devastatingly disillusioning affair with a licentious Japanese woman. At the beginning of the story, Yiren has to move to the south for rehabilitation and the cause of his physical and spiritual weakness is that he is cheated by a Japanese woman. As the narration unfolds

itself, it turns out that the daughter of his former landlord first seduces him and then abandons him when her real lover comes back. Shu-mei Shih reads national inferiority complex into the protagonist's encounter with the Japanese man (119). However, it is fairly difficult to judge Yiren as feeling inferior in any sense in his description of the man. First, in Yiren's direct depiction, the man bears the look of a drunkard. Then, the man is dismissed by an ordinary Japanese hotel staff as gawky and rude and even pejoratively referred to as "the bull" (Yu, "Collection" 40). In fact, Yiren regards the Japanese man with profound contempt. Therefore, Yiren is sad not because the man is superior to him but because he loses the "love" of the woman. Near the end of the story, the issue of China is brought up by a Japanese student, B, who denounces socialism as only suitable for countries as poor and weak as China. However, this comment is not supposed to make much impact on the protagonist or the readers. First, it comes almost out of nowhere. Second, it does not seem to upset Yiren because B has been presented as crazy all the time and by that moment Yiren has already built up a spiritual bond with the Japanese girl.

Therefore, in all three stories, the protagonist is obsessed with the heterosexual love, rather than China. In his notion of love, spiritual understanding and physical intimacy are inseparable. Sexual repression is a symptom of the failure in search of love. However, Yu Dafu seems uncomfortable to tell this theme straight and feels obliged to drag the issue of

national crisis into the story. Some critics have also noticed this awkwardness, though not necessarily approvingly. For example, Su Xuelin, a contemporary of Yu who is famous for her aggressive commentaries, criticized “Sinking” for releasing only the stinky smell of “body” without a trace of the fragrance of “soul” (337), charging it ridiculous to relate the suicide with an ostensible patriotism (338). Despite her insight and straightforwardness, Su did not or refused to investigate why Yu had to do this and what was on his mind that pressed him to do so. In fact, the awkwardness in welding heterosexual love with national crisis deserves further examination.

### ***Conflict between Soul and Body***

Su Xuelin was not fair to dismiss the protagonist in “Sinking” as completely soulless, for she paid no attention to the extreme sentimentality prominent in the story, which derives from the protagonist’s spiritual agony. Throughout the story, the protagonist is haunted by an unfathomable sense of shame. Each time he ventures to fulfill his physical desire, he ends in severe self-condemnation. Unfortunately, he keeps succumbing to his physical desires, which only gives rise to further self-depreciation.

For example, he refers to masturbation as “the crime under the quilt” (Yu, “Collection” 15), which is not only unsanitary but also against “Confucius’ instruction” (*sheng xun*). According to *The Classic of Filial Piety (Xiao Jing)*, Confucius once told his students that one’s body is the gift from the parents, therefore one should not do harm to

it, which is the start of fulfilling one's filial piety. The protagonist learns from medical books that masturbation is the most harmful "crime" to one's health. He regrets his newly-established habit not because it is a shameful act of lust, but because it is detrimental to his health, which makes him guilty for violating his filial duty. After he peeks at his landlord's daughter in the shower, he feels his blood bubbling with extreme fright, shame and happiness (Yu, "Collection" 17). On the one hand, the protagonist tells the reader how he feels, whereas on the other, he frankly confesses that if people ask him about his feeling he would by no means admit that he is happy. That is to say, he is clearly conscious that he should feel ashamed for his behavior, which violates another instruction of Confucius, that is, one should not look at things one is not supposed to see according to the rites (*fei li wu shi*). Therefore, the Confucian doctrines are deeply entrenched in the protagonist's mind. They function as an alter-ego of the protagonist, constantly supervising, judging and criticizing him for his indulgence in physical pleasure, hence the conflict between soul and body.

The protagonist's preoccupation with Confucian morality is echoed in Yu Dafu's diaries and reminiscences. In his diary entry on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1917, Yu wrote, "I cannot love another person, nor could I desire women, not to mention seeking wealth or reputation. Instead, I have a greater love, that is, the love for my country" (Yu, "Memoir" 56). This confession might strike a modern reader as odd for positioning love and patriotism in

almost exclusive opposition. However, the logic behind this opposition looms large as one reads on. In the diary entry two days later, Yu reminded himself that “Lust is the primary evil” (*Wan e yin wei shou*) (Yu, “Memoir” 56), which is a rigid doctrine along the line of “repudiating human desires while preserving the Tao” (*Cun tianli, mie renyu*) in Neo-Confucianism predominant since the Song Dynasty. In the common practice of Neo-Confucianism, a person’s devotion to family and society is exalted to such a high level that personal desires, including those for physical pleasure, wealth and reputation, are considered immoral. In light of this, Yu’s mindset becomes much less strange. In fact, Yu’s sense of responsibility for family and society, as opposed to personal desires, had been so deeply inscribed within his mind that it constitutes the sources of most of his spiritual anguish.

The primary symptom of such spiritual anguish is his sense of emptiness when he can not make contribution to his family or the society. He simply felt himself as

“superfluous” (*lingyu*):

I’m indeed a superfluous man, totally useless to the society... I’m useless to the world, which does not benefit from my existence, nor would it suffer from my death... I’m useless to China, which, in its chaos, cannot expect of me to make a bomb to kill a single villain... How could I be of any use to my family? My wife would marry someone anyway if she did not marry me. My son would be born anyway if I did not give birth to him... I’m a completely useless man. (Yu, “Memoir” 117-119)

Thus, to Yu, the meaning of life lies in his service to other people, just as Confucianism preaches. In his mind, his responsibility for family and society occupies the center of his



system of values. Life would become unbearably hollow if he could not make himself useful.

The secondary symptom of such spiritual anguish is his sense of shame when he committed himself to physical desires. “Snowy Night” (*Xue ye*) is Yu’s recollection of his experience in Japan, which is almost the same as that of the protagonist in “Sinking” except the tragic ending. In that essay, Yu delineated the bursts of regret in his chest after he woke up by a Japanese prostitute’s side:

“This is way too unworthy! Way too unworthy! My ideal, my ambition, my enthusiasm for my country are all gone. What else do I still have now? What else?” Bursts of tears welled in my eyes as bursts of regret filled my heart. I put on a robe of the brothel, leaning my upper body against the wall. I sat there, listlessly and in deep remorse, sobbing for I don’t remember how long. (Yu, “Memoir” 53)

Once again and more clearly, physical pleasure and social obligation are put in diametrical opposition. According to Yu’s cultivated logic, if one indulges in physical pleasure, one becomes unworthy for the lofty goals of serving the family and the society. Since his responsibility for family and society occupies the center of his system of values in the first place, it is a natural conclusion for Yu that his life was wasted.

In light of this episode, one might argue that the protagonist in “Sinking” is still obsessed with the national crisis. However, to prioritize one’s social obligation over one’s personal desires in general is different from being concerned with the contemporary circumstances of China in particular. In the latter case, the protagonist would have been hindered from pursuing personal pleasure by the external condition, which is accidental,

temporary and open to change. On the contrary, in the former case, the protagonist is inhibited from indulging in personal desires, which stems from his internal moral conviction. That is to say, the latter case assumes that once China becomes rich and strong, the author-protagonist would be released from his spiritual agony and able to pursue personal desires with no moral burden. However, in the former case, even though China were rich and strong, with the Confucian moral codes at the root of the author-protagonist's mind, his tormented soul would still be unable to rest in peace. Therefore, although Yu Dafu and his protagonist suffer from painful conflict between soul and body, they are not so much concerned with the fate of China as with their moral solidity within the framework of Confucianism. His awkward emphasis on the issue of national crisis functions only as a disguise, directing people's attention away from his obsession with the heterosexual love, which he felt too ashamed to endorse.

All in all, Yu Dafu was a conventional intellectual in the sense that he had internalized the Confucian moral codes in his mind. No wonder people of personal contact with Yu felt obliged to testify to his moral rectitude. Guo Moruo, Yu's close friend and colleague since his stay in Japan, wrote in memory of Yu that "The common opinion that views Dafu as 'decadent' is nothing but superficial. Li Chuli once said that Dafu is a Decadent in appearance but an ascetic Protestant in essence. He had grasped the truth of Dafu best" (76). It is precisely because Yu was a pious follower of Confucianism

that after his visit to the brothel he would feel the “sorrow and sadness [that] reach the depth no self-acclaimed moralists would ever be able to imagine.” It is crucial to bear in mind his moral conviction for understanding Yu Dafu’s early stories.

### *A Voluntary Slave of Venus*

Had Confucian moral codes triumphed over Yu Dafu and his protagonists’ personal desire, there would have been no conflict between soul and body. One noticeable self-contradiction with Yu and his protagonists is their persistent pursuit of physical pleasure despite their intense regret and sorrow. For example, six days after Yu reminded himself of lust as the primary evil, he wrote in his diary that “I spent the whole day restlessly, feeling there is something blocked in my chest, which I cannot swallow down or spit out. I feel like an ant in fire or a tiger in cage. Alas, I’ve become a slave of Venus” (Yu, “Memoir” 57). Like his characters, despite his moral concern, Yu tended to surrender to the reign of Venus voluntarily, which drags him deeper into the mire of regret and sorrow.

In “Sinking,” the protagonist swears again and again that he would quit the habit of masturbation, only to give up easily in the end each time. “Whenever it came to the critical moment, he was totally oblivious to his own oath... Thus, he spent almost every day in self-condemnation and fear, which pushed him into hypochondria” (Yu, “Collection” 16). When he peeks at the landlord’s daughter in a shower, indeed he feels

afraid and ashamed, but he also cannot resist the ecstatic pleasure. Last but not the least, when he happens to hear the love-making of a Japanese couple, “although he scolded himself inside for the shameful act, his eager ears did not want to miss a single word of the couple” (Yu, “Collection” 20). In spite of the recognition of the dominance of moral judgment, the author-protagonist presents these incidents as inevitable and irresistible, or rather, instinctual. He does not approve of them directly, but neither does he disapprove of them. Rather, by carrying out those “shameful” acts and reiterating them, the author-protagonist is insinuating their *raison d’être*. In fact, Yu Dafu’s deliberate ambiguity is more obvious in his later stories written after he returned to China, such as “The Boundless Night” (*Mang mang Ye*, 1922) and “She is a Weak Woman” (*Ta shi yige ruo nüzi*, 1932).

As Shu-mei Shih noticed, “[in Yu Dafu’s] stories set in China, aberrant sexuality becomes if anything even more pronounced” (120), including homosexuality, bisexuality, masochism, foot fetishism, and frequent sexual encounters with prostitutes. Shih interprets these sexual predilections “as a means of debunking conventional morality *within* China,” deeming the “sick” protagonists as “embodiments of their sick nation” (120). Shih seems to agree with the common judgment of Yu and his protagonists as “sick.” Unlike those who simply considered Yu and his protagonists as vulgar and shameless, Shih ascribes their “disease” to the condition of Chinese society. Despite her

good intention to do Yu justice, Shih seems to have overlooked Yu's oblique effort to justify those sexual predilections for their own sake. Under close reading, the protagonists' indulgence in "abnormal" sexuality is not presented as sick but rather spontaneous and natural, sometimes even pure and innocent, always fulfilling the protagonists' psychological needs, hence does not deserve complete denunciation.

"The Boundless Night" narrates the experience of Yu Zhifu, a vicarious character of the author himself, after he returns from Japan to China. The story is set in a time when warlords vie for local powers through force and conspiracy. The college Zhifu teaches in is ridiculously disturbed by political struggles. However, Zhifu does not care much about the situation except feeling annoyed by the inconvenience it causes to his work and life. Like the protagonists in Yu's earlier stories, Zhifu is still obsessed with heterosexual love except that he ventures into new territories, such as homosexuality and masochism, for relief from the failure in finding it. The story starts with the scene of farewell between Zhifu and his boyfriend Chisheng. As is told later, Chisheng is a young man of femininity with pale face and slender figure. Zhifu meets him at a friend's office only twice when falling in love with him because Chisheng confides his tuberculosis to Zhifu. Like the protagonist in "Sinking," Zhifu spends years in Japan looking for love yet in vain. Therefore, Chisheng's unusual display of trust and intimacy naturally arouses in Zhifu a strong feeling of sympathy and gratitude. They are increasingly attracted to each other

due to further physical contacts and confidential conversations. It is the first time in his life that Zhifu realizes that the spiritual understanding and physical closeness he has craved desperately can be found in the same sex. Therefore, at the beginning of the story, the two hold hands together, exchanging loving words, just like a normal couple.

After Zhifu starts teaching in a small town away from Shanghai, his increasing feeling of loneliness brings back the hypochondria he has developed in Japan. Like the protagonist in “Sinking,” he mourns the failure of his search for heterosexual love, believing that the only relief lies in suicide. Overwhelmed by despair and on a sudden impulse, he enters into a little shop, where he buys from an amiable hostess an old sewing needle. He also wants to buy a handkerchief to exchange with her for an old one of hers, but the woman simply gives one to him. Cherishing these two things as treasure, he runs home in great excitement. He first pokes the needle into his face again and again in front of a mirror and then buries his face in the handkerchief, drawing unspeakable pleasure from the piercing feeling of pain, the sight of blood, and the smell of woman.

Zhifu is aware that his behavior is unusual and even abnormal in common opinions. However, he also makes it clear that he is driven into those behaviors by romantic frustration. Furthermore, there is a slight difference in the protagonist’s attitude towards his behavior from that in Yu’s earlier stories, that is, the protagonist appears less tormented by his own moral conviction. Or rather, there is a lack of sense of shame. This

is understandably the reason why Yu got criticized by his contemporary as well as the late-comers. However, Yu and his protagonist seem to “argue” silently that they should not be ashamed of those behaviors. The protagonist mentions words like “abnormal” (*biantai*) when talking about his experience but only in passing, whereas more emphasis is put on how he derives relief from the abnormal activities. When Zhifu leaves his boyfriend, thinking aloud, he even compares their relationship to the “pure love” between Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine, two French poets in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who were the protagonists of a controversial love affair. In the end of the story, when Zhifu exits from a brothel, he exclaims in damp spirit that “I’ve already turned into a Living Corpse” (Yu, “Collection” 69). It is just a puff of sigh over his loveless life, no longer bearing the moral burden as the protagonist in “Sinking” or Yu himself in “Snowy Night.”

In “The Boundless Night,” the author makes strenuous effort to show that aberrant sexuality is ascribed to romantic frustration. In contrast, in “She is a Weak Woman,” the protagonist is even more daring in seeking after sexual pleasure, i.e., she does it almost for its own sake, feeling that it needs no justification at all. Again, though the novella is set in the most tumultuous years of China, it leaves the historical context in the far background. It chronicles the promiscuous sexual experiences of the protagonist, Zheng Xiuyue, an innocent high school girl in the beginning and a victim of the Japanese invasion in the end. Initially, Zheng just easily gets emotionally attached to her first

girlfriend Feng Shifen. After she tastes the forbidden fruit offered by her second girlfriend Li Wenqing, her desire for sexual pleasure grows increasingly insatiable. For Zheng, physical intimacy is intertwined with emotional attachment. This is why she feels unbearably frustrated when her husband fails to keep the intensity and the frequency of physical contacts with her, which for her is a kind of betrayal. Partly as a revenge on her husband and partly as a pursuit of compensation, she sends out three love letters to her former lovers, female as well as male, at the same time. Just as Feng summarizes, Zheng is a woman full of passion, who cannot live for a single moment without the assured love from people around her (Yu, "Collection" 373). In fact, physical pleasure is much more substantial and concrete hence meaningful to Zheng than the so-called great causes of liberating all human beings and reforming the society, which only passes her mind during the brief intervals between romances. However, Zheng's passionate life is cut short by gang rape and brutal mutilation by the Japanese soldiers.

To ordinary readers and most scholars, the protagonist in "She is a Weak Woman" is nothing but a sexually-driven animal. However, the author's attitude towards her is highly ambiguous. The entire story is narrated in a neutral tone, hardly with any moral judgment. Things just seem to happen one after another following a natural logic. Zheng Xiuyue encounters two rapes in the novella, one by a low-cast military official of one of the warlords and the other by the Japanese soldiers. Du Heng read the two incidents as



humiliations deliberately arranged by the author as punishment of Zheng for her loose sexual morality (326). However, in fact, the encounter with the military official is plainly referred to as “she spent a night with the man” as if it is only a mediocre, if not unpleasant, affair. As for Zheng’s encounter with the Japanese soldiers, which costs her life, there is no direct description of it. Rather, the author offers a comment through Feng Shifen, Zheng’s first girlfriend, that “you have just lived your whole life as you wished” (Yu, “Collection” 378). It sounds as if Zheng is just determined to fulfill her sexual desire at any cost.

The only direct collision between Zheng and the general moral codes comes in the conflict between her and her lover Mr. Zhang. Upon receiving Zheng’s enthusiastic love letter, Mr. Zhang comes to Shanghai to meet her in a hotel room only to throw himself into fury after finding a letter from another lover of Zheng by accident. He calls in Zheng’s husband and makes an ugly scene of humiliation, continually calling her “the bitch.” For a moralistic author, this would be the perfect moment to launch moral admonition of the protagonist. However, Yu assigned this task to Mr. Zhang, who himself is far from being morally solid, which significantly undermines the power of criticism. Meanwhile, the only innocent person in the complex relationship, Zheng’s husband, takes all the blame on himself while continuing to beg Mr. Zhang for mercy on Zheng because “she is a weak woman” (Yu “Collection” 376). The same defense of Zheng by her

husband recurs when the Japanese soldiers take her away, which resonates with the title of the novella. On the superficial level, this appeal refers to the fact that Zheng is a woman weak in body, powerless in front of the physical maltreatment by Mr. Zhang and the Japanese soldiers. Meanwhile, a moralistic reader could interpret mild criticism into this defense for she is also weak in mind, powerless to resist temptations. However, on a deeper level, the defense itself is not true. It in fact makes people to reflect upon the protagonist, who has been presented as a woman stronger than most people, especially men, around her, for being sly and resourceful. She is never satisfied and always determined to get her way. Even when her husband cries for mercy in front of Mr. Zhang, Zheng refuses to beg for pardon. Therefore, in disguise of a precarious defense, the author not only refrained from direct denunciation of the protagonist, but also obliquely accentuated, if not straightforwardly approved of, her power, or rather, her vitality.

Thus, Yu Dafu had come a long way from “Sinking” to “She is a Weak Woman.” In “Sinking,” the protagonist is obsessed with heterosexual love, both physical and spiritual. However, he is tortured by his deeply entrenched moral conviction, which strictly prioritizes one’s service to the society and the family over the fulfillment of one’s personal desires. As a result, the protagonist leads his life in the dark shadow of shame. In contrast, the protagonist in “She is a Weak Woman” is never seriously concerned with her responsibility for the society or the family. She is much more confident and assertive in

her pursuit of personal happiness. For her, there is nothing to be ashamed of. She seems to have discarded the moral burden that weighs heavily on the protagonist in “Sinking.” Her mind works in a different value system, which legitimizes all her endeavors in pursuit of personal desires. Yu Dafu offered no direct endorsement or criticism of the protagonist in the novella. However, his seemingly disinterested “objective” presentation of the story was already provocative enough when it was published. It was simply unimaginable and unacceptable that the creator of such a promiscuous woman could refrain from unconditionally taking a strong position against her. However, Yu Dafu did have scruples. It is interesting to note that the male protagonists that bear clear resemblance to the author himself are never truly radical. Even Zhifu in “The Boundless Night” needs justification for his aberrant sexuality other than his own desire, i.e., he has to be “driven” into those abnormal activities by romantic frustration. It is only onto a “weak woman” that Yu could assign all the provocative attributes. Therefore, while pushing the moral boundary by building up a daring female figure, Yu also situated himself in a safe zone. Women as the weaker sex provide him with a necessary cover hence he could easily bail himself off by offering a dubious explanation that “she is a weak woman” while distancing himself from the protagonist. This could also be the reason he emphasized in the epilogue of the novella that it might be his worst work ever.

That is to say, he was not ready to be confidently supportive of the message leaked from the novella.

### ***Yu Dafu the “Decadent”***

If “Decadence” only refers to the pessimistic view of the world and indulgence in sensual pleasures, Yu Dafu could be called “Decadent.” However, this kind of moralistic and simplistic judgment is neither fruitful nor judicious in examining what drives behind these “Decadent” symptoms. In Yu Dafu’s self-defense written in 1923, he made no effort to deny himself being “Decadent” but stated that he was not a voluntary one for he had no other choice but to pursue relief from the gloomy view of life through physical pleasure. This statement reveals an understanding of Decadence that accords with his introduction to the western fin-de-siècle literary trend. In 1935, Yu contributed an essay on the western fin-de-siècle literary trend to an anthology *A Hundred Questions about Literature (Wenxue baiti)*, which was edited by Zheng Zhenduo and Fu Donghua with a clear educational purpose. In that essay, Yu held that Western fin-de-siècle hedonism was a result of the artists’ failure to rebel against stifling tradition:

In a word, with the success of the industrial revolution, in an era of the civilization’s over-development, material progress and individual emancipation, the assertion of individuality is naturally in conflict with the conventional tradition. There would have been no problem if the shackles of national ideology over humanity were broken down in one blow. However, it is by no means an easy task for the young and inexperienced folks to dispel the thousand-year-old ghost of the national ideology. Therefore, exhausted, these young warriors naturally turned to boredom and pessimism. If one wants to taste the nectar of life, one can only resort to sensual pleasures. Meanwhile, with the development of material civilization and the increase

of sensitivity, there was bound to be a multitude of abnormal inventions for stimulation. (“Fin-de-Siècle” 103-104)

That is to say, for Yu Dafu, the western Decadents longed for an ideal alternative world but were severely frustrated in their struggle against the tradition. It is after their acknowledged failure that they turned to sensual pleasure as if there was no other choice. That is also why their abnormal pursuits were always mingled with a sense of melancholy. Putting Yu’s self-defense and his introduction of western Decadence side by side, it is not farfetched to see that Yu entertained sympathy for the western Decadents because he felt he had undertaken the same path as they did. China, together with its long history and deep-rooted convention, is the thousand-year-old ghost for Yu. Unable to get rid of the ghost, he turned to alcohol and women. However, as said in the introduction of this thesis, for western Decadents, their indulgence in sensual pleasure, among other excesses, was one of their ways of revolt against the norms, as a way to assert their individuality, rather than a gesture of acknowledging their failure in the revolt. In fact, they entertained no faith in an alternative world in the first place, which is usually interpreted as pessimistic, hence invested no genuine passion in social reform. Rather, they drew pleasure from perversion, relishing in the abnormal behaviors and thoughts, for the sake of their individuality in the sense of being willfully distinct from other people. They were bored just because their growing appetite for new ways of rebellion outpaced their creation of

them. Therefore, despite the superficial similarity between Yu and the western Decadents, they differ from each other on the fundamental level.

Interestingly enough, Yu's understanding of Decadence, which supports his self-defense, does not correspond to his own writing, which in turn differs from the western Decadence. In his early stories, such as "Sinking," the Confucian moral codes that occupy the protagonist's mind could be seen as the depressing as well as overwhelming convention a Decadent has to face in Yu's understanding. It is also true that the protagonist longs for a new system of values that would endorse his ardent pursuit of heterosexual love. However, the protagonist is neither ready to repudiate the Confucian morality nor confident to brandish the new value system. Unlike the Decadents depicted in Yu's essay, who clearly held up the new value system against the tradition, Yu's protagonist hesitates to take sides. In fact, the protagonist's mind is constantly tormented between the two, hence the conflict between soul and body. Moreover, unlike the Decadents in Yu's understanding, who abandoned themselves to sensual pleasure as a gesture of surrender, Yu's protagonist in fact continues his struggle against the Confucian morality in his pursuit of sensual pleasure, despite all his painful sorrow and regret. To be a voluntary slave of Venus is also to refuse to remain a slave of Confucianism. Thus, the protagonist seems to bear more affinity with the western Decadents in his struggle against the tradition through his pursuit of sensual pleasure;

however, he is still distant from the latter in his painful sorrow and regret. Since the western Decadents were rooted in the old norms, they also viewed their abnormal pursuits as perverse. However, since they cared little about the new norms, they had no intention or wish that their abnormal pursuits could achieve any substantial results. Therefore, they could ridicule the old norms and play with abnormality by performing perversion with ease and fun. In contrast, Yu's protagonist cares about both the old and the new norms. It is his unwillingness and inability to cut himself away from the two that makes him swirl in misery. This is also why Yu's protagonist appears so serious, sincere and rigid. Naturally, one can never really ridicule or play with something while still caring too much about it.

In Yu's later stories, such as "She is a Weak Woman," the Confucian moral codes are no longer bothering the protagonist. One could argue that the story must be told after the author had already given up his struggle against the tradition and the promiscuous protagonist is precisely the epitome of the Decadent indulgence in sensual pleasure. However, it cannot be denied that in this story, gone is the deep sense of melancholy that hangs over the protagonists in Yu's earlier stories. There is no more conflict between soul and body. The protagonist, if not the author, is more confident in claiming the rights for personal happiness when holding up the new morality against the old one. Therefore, the protagonist's indulgence in sensual pleasure is not a gesture of passive surrender to but

rather of provocative challenge of the conventional morality. Since the protagonist revolts against the tradition through the pursuit of sensual pleasure without painful sorrow or regret, one might conclude that she finally qualifies as a Decadent in the western sense. However, quite the contrary, she moves even further away from the latter. Unlike the western Decadents, who were rooted in the old norms while caring little about the new ones, the protagonist in “She is a Weak Woman,” has already overthrown the old moral codes while embracing the new ones. That is to say, her pursuit of sensual pleasure is no longer “perverse” or playful to her own mind, but rather natural, healthy and hence deserving of serious respect.

For those who look into Chinese literature for a real Decadent in the western sense, Yu Dafu could be disappointing. He could be viewed as a pioneer of “body-writing” (*shenti xiezu*), a term which has been applied mainly to Chinese women writers since the 1990s, for his explicit exploration of the sensual, the sexual, the erotic, the personal and the intimate, as opposed to the grand discourse of nation. However, at the same time, Yu was not completely radical. Rather, in reading through his stories, one can feel the hesitant heavy steps he took to move away from the conventional tradition to a new morality. Having the traditional moral codes deeply inscribed in his mind, Yu was in fact engaged in a war against himself, which is even more violent and cruel than a war against something, be it social regime or ideology, of which one is an outsider. Unlike the



western Decadents, who revolted against the old norms with no intention of abandoning the norms, Yu still held faith in the change-over. Therefore, in the photo album of Chinese writers in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Yu stands out with his knitted brows and poignant expression. Being a pioneer of “body-writing,” Yu was also lonely in his struggle against the traditional moral norms. Among his May-Fourth contemporaries, only a few, such as Liang Shiqiu, could refrain from criticizing him from a moralistic point of view. Therefore, in addition to his inner conflicts, Yu also had to deal with tremendous social pressures on his own. In contrast, a younger generation of writers, such as Shao Xunmei, was less influenced by the tradition hence more confident in their celebration of erotica.

## Chapter II

### Shao Xunmei: A Nightingale of Sexual Love

A famous and active poet, writer, literary critic, translator, editor and publisher as he was during the 1920s and the 1930s in Shanghai, Shao Xunmei (aka. Sinmay Zau, 1906-1968) started to rise from obscurity in the 1980s almost like an archeological discovery. Despite Shao's family's and friends' strenuous effort to introduce his life and work, his name is still unfamiliar to many Chinese people. Those that have heard of him tend to refer to him as a Decadent poet, because of his aristocratic origin, his enthusiastic admiration of Sappho and the representative European Decadent poets, such as Algernon Swinburne, Paul Verlaine and Charles Baudelaire, and the erotic imagery in his poems. Moreover, no scholars have studied his poetry systematically and comprehensively. The few critics who did look into his poems are not in favor of them. In China, Xie Zhixi simply trashes the erotica in his poems as a proof of his "vulgar taste" (*diji quwei*) (230), especially inappropriate in a time of national crisis (237). In the West, Leo Lee considers him as a lame disciple of the European Decadents. However, Shao is not a Decadent despite his superficial similarity to the European Decadent poets. Under close examination, he is in fact a Romantic poet striving to praise intense emotions that are embodied in sexual love with the most sophisticated poems.

### *The Last Aristocrat*

Scholars of Decadence tend to get excited when they see words like this, “the last aristocrat,” especially when it is followed by descriptions like “pale,” “sensitive,” “bored,” etc. Shao Xunmei was a real aristocrat who was born near the end of China’s last empire. Shao’s grandfather Shao Youlian used to be a top-ranking official in the Qing government and governed Taiwan and Hunan successively. However, neither the death of his grandfather nor the fall of the Qing dynasty seemed to have affected the growth of Shao into a normal young master (*shaoye*) in a typical Chinese aristocratic family. He had acquired a solid education in Chinese classics through private teaching (*jiashu*) before he was sent to Saint John’s Middle School in Shanghai, a middle school affiliated with Saint John’s University established by the Episcopal Church of the United States. In 1924, he embarked on a ship to England, like many other Chinese young men from wealthy families who went to the West for further education.

Shao’s stay in the West was cut short in May 1926 because of a family emergency, but was going to prove extremely important in his life. Most important, on his journey to England, he stopped at Naples, where he got enchanted by a mural of Sappho. This unexpected encounter with the ancient Greek poetess triggered his eye-opening discovery of and life-long admiration for the poetry by Sappho, Swinburne, Verlaine, Baudelaire, etc. In 1925, he paid a visit to Paris, where he established close relationships with Xu

Zhimo, Xu Beihong and Zhang Daofan; with the latter two he even became “sworn brothers.” His friendship with Xu Zhimo foretold his later involvement with the Crescent School poetry. His brotherhood with Zhang Daofan, who became an important figure in the KMT government, turned out to be one of his “crimes” in the series of political campaigns in the 1950s and the 1960s in mainland China.

A last aristocrat as he was, Shao was not pale, sensitive or bored. Rather, he was among the most robust, confident and enterprising young intellectuals in China, full of hope and ambition in a modern era. Immediately after he returned to Shanghai, Shao met Teng Gu, the chief editor of a literary magazine, *Sphinx (Shi hou)*, which was deeply indebted to the Western Aesthetic movement. Shao not only started publishing poems in the magazine, but also, as the financial crisis threatened the continuation of the magazine, took over its ownership and editorship in 1928. In the same year, Shao set up his first publishing house Maison d’or Press (*Jinwu shudian*), which published a series of books by himself and his friends with an alleged Aesthetic inclination. In January 1929, *Sphinx* was replaced by *Maison d’or Monthly (Jinwu yuekan)*, which continued to promote Aesthetic literary works. Till the termination of this new magazine in September 1931, Shao had spent his most active and productive years in terms of poem writing. He published two collections of poems, *Heaven and May (Tiantang yu wuyue)* in 1927 and *The Flower-like Evil* in 1928. Chen Mengjia, a poet and theorist of the Crescent School,

incorporated five of Shao's poems into *Selections of the Crescent School Poetry (Xinyue shi xuan)* in 1931. In 1936, Shao published his last poem collection, *Twenty-five Poems (Shi ershiwu shou)*, but most of them were written between 1929 and 1931.

From 1932 on, Shao gradually shifted his focus to publishing and essay writing. He imported from Germany a set of intaglio printing machines, which was the most advanced in the world at that time. In 1933, he established his second publishing house Epoch Publishing Company (*Shidai Tushu Gongsi*) and started to publish a series of magazines, among which *Epoch Pictorial (Shidai huabao)* and *Analects (Lunyu)* were the most popular and influential.<sup>1</sup> Wang Jingfang, Chinese expert on Shao's publishing career, argued that this is a turn from literary publishing to cultural publishing for Shao, because these magazines were devoted to helping readers develop a reading habit, hence make them supporters of the cultural development of the country (175-176). In addition, Wang also pointed at Shao's later turn to political publishing (177), by which she refers to Shao's increasing concern with and candid critique of the political situation of China. Taking the financial failures Shao had experienced into consideration, one may find it fair

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<sup>1</sup> Shidai Tushu Gongsi published nine magazines altogether, including *Epoch Pictorial (Shidai huabao)*, *Analects (Lunyu)*, *Decameron (Shi ri tan)*, *Epoch Comic (Shidai manhua)*, *Comments Weekly (Renyan zhoukan)*, *Panorama (Wan xiang)*, *Epoch Film (Shidai dianying)*, *The Pictorial of Sound and Color (Shengse huabao)*, *The Epoch of Literature (Wenxue shidai)*.

for Wang to conclude that Shao is an ardent public intellectual, though a quixotic one (176-177).

In sum, unlike the usually self-indulgent aristocratic figures in the Western Decadent movement, Shao was socially-concerned. Unlike Des Esseintes in J. K. Huysmans' *A Rebours*, who isolates himself from the outside world to indulge in various eccentricities against nature, Shao was very active in the public sphere. The collapse of Chinese aristocratic system together with the fall of the Qing dynasty did not prevent him from turning into a cutting-edge public intellectual in the new era. In fact, it is precisely because of his family wealth that he could initiate so many publishing projects that most of his contemporaries could not afford.

### ***A Spiritual Brother of Sappho and Swinburne***

An important reason that scholars associate Shao with Decadence is his sincere admiration of Sappho and the representative Western Decadent poets, such as Algernon Swinburne and Paul Verlaine. Shao not only wrote essays to introduce them but also composed poems to praise them. These poets are known to Chinese for their poetical treatment of sexual abnormality, which also characterizes their personal life. So when Chinese scholars read erotica in Shao's poems, they immediately draw a parallel between Shao and his Western masters in terms of their sexual morality. Meanwhile, since Chinese readers and scholars consider indulgence in sexual pleasure as Decadent, it is just natural

for them to label Shao as Decadent. However, from Shao's essays and poems on these Western poets, one may notice that Shao admires them not for the sexual abnormality in their life and their poems, but for intense emotions, which are embodied in sexual love, and their poetic techniques.

Shao claims to be the younger brother of Sappho and Swinburne and writes many poems dedicated to them. At the beginning of "To Swinburne," he wrote,

You are Sappho's elder brother and I her younger one,  
Our parent is the God that created Venus—  
Rosy clouds, colorful rainbows, tail of peacock, and feathers of phoenix,  
The birth of all beauty is attributed to their technique. (Shao, "Poetry" 21)

It is fairly clear that two things in the two poets attract him dearly, namely, the theme about sexual love and their poetical techniques. In fact, this little stanza offers a key to examining Shao's understanding of all his Western masters.

Shao wrote a series of essays introducing his favorite poets like Sappho, Swinburne and Verlaine, which were collected in *Fire and Flesh* (*Huo yu rou*, 1928). In the essay entitled "Sappho," Shao tells the story of Sappho through a dialogue with an imaginary friend Pengshi, who is obviously named after Swinburne because Swinburne's name is translated into Chinese as "Shi Wenpeng." For Shao, Sappho is not just a female saint of poetry in ancient Greece, but the only female saint of poetry in the entire human history ("Fire" 6). Shao ascribes the immortality of her fragmented poems to "the beauty of rhythm and words, [which is a foil to] the simple, pure but profound emotions" ("Fire"

10). In his appreciation of Sappho's poems, though he himself never articulated explicitly, the intensity of emotions and the beauty of words are never separated. He translates Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite," which is his favorite, into Chinese free verse, but cannot help but lament over the loss of the Sapphic meter in the original.

Interestingly enough, although Sappho is famous for her homosexual affairs with her girl students, Shao simply considers them as a rumor. In "Sappho," Shao spares at least one third of the space in the essay to defend Sappho on this issue. He not only refuses to believe in the love stories between Sappho and her girl students, but also quotes her poems to prove that she was straight. The only thing Shao agrees with is that the emotions expressed in Sappho's poetry for her female friends are intense and passionate. It is noteworthy that Shao not only discredits the "fabrication" of Sappho's sexual aberration, but also denounces homosexuality in general, because "[the story of Sappho's homosexuality] is unbearable to read" (*bu kan zu du*) ("Fire" 7). For Shao, Sappho is the quintessential symbol of intense love, sexual love in particular, and, of equal importance, she is also the goddess who can express that intense love in the most beautiful words. Therefore, in Shao's opinion, nothing in Sappho is even vaguely related to anything that is supposed to decay.

Through Sappho, Shao enters the world of Algernon Swinburne, who, like him, was an enthusiastic, or rather, the most enthusiastic, lover of Sappho's poetry in England.



Shao regards Swinburne and his poetic art highly: “[Swinburne] had reached the apex of everything, the boiling point, the destination! There is no way to surpass him, no way” (“Fire” 39). For Shao, Swinburne is a revolutionary, who liberates literature “from all religion, morality and customs,” as well as a creator, who protects “all poems that are true, beautiful, emotional, melodic and sweet” (“Fire” 19-20). In Swinburne’s poems, Shao hears the most mystique music and registers the unparalleled use of meters. He worships Swinburne as the master of “repetitions,” by which he means “the repetition of vowels, consonants, words, sentences and meanings” (“Fire” 27). One can see no limit in Shao’s admiration for Swinburne’s poetical art.

Meanwhile, Shao cries out to draw people’s attention to the iconoclastic appeals in Swinburne’s poems, namely, the denunciation of God and the embrace of sexual love. Both themes are best exemplified by “*Laus Veneris*,” in which the medieval knight Tannhauser is first seduced by Venus and then, as his petition for pardon is turned down by the Pope, returns to Venus with fear of the punishment after death and pleasure in reuniting with her. In Shao’s interpretation, God for Swinburne is the symbol of authoritarian politics and hypocritical morality and Venus the embodiment of the scorching passion. Shao believes that, through Venus, “Swinburne expressed the ideas that people had desired to express but had not yet or had not dared to” (“Fire” 21). For

Shao, these two themes are intertwined and Swinburne's embrace of sexual love is heroic because he rebels against the reign of God.

As in the case of Sappho, although Swinburne was notorious for his sexual abnormality, Shao stands up for Swinburne against moralistic criticism.<sup>2</sup> He admits that "some lines" in Swinburne's poems are immoral ("Fire" 26), but he immediately warns people against taking the poems as the poet himself because "those who write immoral poems are not necessarily immoral and in turn those who write moral poems are not necessarily moral. It is ridiculous to judge people's character from their poems" ("Fire" 26). In fact, this is an argument more applicable to Shao himself than to Swinburne. Without endorsing Swinburne's moral rectitude directly, Shao accuses the moralistic critics of confusing pleasurable feelings with lascivious action and taking resistance to oppressive regimes as celebration of barbarian behavior ("Fire" 26). That is to say, in Swinburne's poems, Shao sees pleasurable feelings and resistance to oppression where others see sexual indulgence and barbarianism. In other words, Shao chooses to believe that Swinburne is an innocent seeker of physical pleasure and individual freedom.

Moreover, when reading *Songs before Sunrise*, Shao's worship for Swinburne reaches a higher level. *Songs before Sunrise* is a collection of Swinburne's later poems, which were inspired by his meeting with the Italian democratic activist Giuseppe Mazzini.

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<sup>2</sup> See "Life for Art's Sake" in John A. Cassidy, *Algernon C. Swinburne* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), 63-79.

Shao finds this collection even better than Swinburne's earlier collection of poems, *Poems and Ballads*, which is mainly devoted to sexual love. In this new collection of poems, Shao sees a revolutionary hero, who "fights for not only the freedom of his own country but that of the world" and "pursues not only the freedom of the body but also that of the soul" ("Fire" 41). That is to say, for Shao, sexual love is not a matter of fulfilling one's sexual desire, but a matter of both physical and spiritual emancipation. What Shao admires in Swinburne is not his sexual indulgence, not to mention abnormal sexuality, but his passionate pursuit of love and freedom in opposition to all kinds of authority.

One may argue that Shao admires Sappho and Swinburne only because he is misinformed. Had he known that all the accounts of their sexual aberrations were true, he would have changed his mind. However, this hypothesis is rendered highly unlikely by Shao's introduction of the French poet Paul Verlaine. Shao is unmistakably aware of Verlaine's indulgence in alcohol and sex, his controversial affair with Arthur Rimbaud, his capricious temper and degenerate lifestyle. However, Shao offers an even stronger defense for Verlaine than for Sappho and Swinburne:

These [debaucheries] only made him cherish life more and understand life better. As long as his life was meaningful, active and boiling, he could discard all ethics, interests, morality and reputation. For him, a boring life is a dead life. It is more tragic to live in boredom than to die. As long as one lives, one should taste "the real flavor of a living life"... He despised everything that is hypocritical in the society. He only respected himself, or rather, he only respected his own soul. ("Fire" 54-55)

For Shao, Verlaine was a real hedonist ("Fire" 54), an extreme individualist ("Fire" 59).

Shao ardently embraces the life philosophy he sees in Verlaine, that is, to seek as much pleasure as possible in this brief sojourn on earth regardless of any restrictions (“Fire” 59). He also refuses to believe in the sincerity of Verlaine’s seeming conversion to religion in *Sagesse*, the collection of religious poems composed after he was imprisoned for shooting at Rimbaud. This time, Shao is right because Verlaine’s effort to live a faithful and chaste life did not last long.<sup>3</sup> Shao considers Verlaine’s “faith” in religion only as an expression of his unbounded passion (“Fire” 60). Contrary to those who view Verlaine as pessimistic and passive, Shao finds him very positive, or rather, “excessively positive” (“Fire” 60).

As in the case of Sappho and Swinburne, Shao registers in Verlaine’s poems not only the flame of passion, but also the charm of language. For Shao, Verlaine’s poetic language even surpassed Victor Hugo and Charles Baudelaire. He considers the French poetry before Verlaine only as “a kind of meter, a study of rhetoric” (“Fire” 56). Although Hugo and Baudelaire had reformed the French poems into something musical and recitable, Shao finds them still constrained within the boundary of rhetoric. It is in Verlaine’s poems that Shao hears the inimitable melody beyond the limits of rhetoric (“Fire” 57). As a poet himself, Shao is quite sensitive and correct in pinning down Swinburne and Verlaine’s contribution to British and French poetry. As John A. Cassidy

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<sup>3</sup> See “The Struggle for Faith: *Sagesse* (1873-1883) in A. E. Carter, *Paul Verlaine* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971), 70-89.

points out, Swinburne made two chief services to English literature, namely, his courage and effort in “[turning] into beautiful song the longings and frustrations of the sexually abnormal” despite “the smug prudery of his times” and “his incomparable mastery of prosody” (162). A. E. Carter also gives credit to Verlaine for the changes he brought into French poetry, which had suffered “so rigid a structure” (121).

However, for scholars who see Decadence primarily as a celebration of intellectual power and free will, Swinburne and Verlaine are only second-rate compared with Baudelaire. According to Richard Gilman and Carter, Swinburne and Verlaine share adjectives like “capricious,” “unstable,” “uncontrollable,” “emotional,” etc.<sup>4</sup> Although Swinburne was the first to introduce Baudelaire to England, Harold Nicolson characterizes Swinburne as “an event only in the emotions [but] scarcely ever an event in the mind” (19), while contrasting his poems against Baudelaire’s as “the volatile and superficial fantasy” versus “the powerful brooding intelligence” (21). For Carter, Verlaine was “instinctive, sensitive, emotional [but] had none of Baudelaire’s remorseless lucidity” (25), lacking “the analytical concision we meet everywhere in *Les Fleurs du Mal*” (26), because “his inspiration obeyed nervous impressions, not the summons of conscious will” (122). However, Shao is fascinated precisely with these capricious,

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<sup>4</sup> See Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 117. Also see A. E. Carter, *Paul Verlaine* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971), 122.

unstable, uncontrollable and emotional qualities, or rather, passion that he believes to be crucial in poetry.

Although Western scholars see huge difference between Swinburne and Baudelaire, Shao thinks that they are at the same level in poetical creation, “Swinburne together with Baudelaire occupied the top position in the history of culture” because “both of them are revolutionaries, liberating literature from all religions, morality and customs, and creators and protectors of all poems that are true, beautiful, musical and sweet” (“Fire” 19-20). That is to say, in Baudelaire, Shao registers not his ability of impersonal thinking, but his iconoclastic role in revolting against all kinds of authority and his poetical techniques. This is probably because he came to know of Baudelaire through Swinburne. According to his self-preface to *Twenty-five Poems*, Shao discovered Swinburne through Sappho and through Swinburne he found the Pre-Raphaelites and finally Baudelaire and Verlaine (“Poetry” 5). That is to say, before he actually read Baudelaire, Shao had already been deeply influenced by Swinburne and he understood Baudelaire through the lens offered by Swinburne; therefore it is not surprising that he missed the spiritual quality in Baudelaire. The strong influence of Swinburne in his understanding of Baudelaire also foreshadows the discrepancy between his poem collection *The Flower-Like Evil* and Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, because what Shao had in mind was in fact the

Baudelaire understood by Swinburne, or rather, he was thinking of Swinburne in the mask of Baudelaire.

It is noteworthy that among so many Western poets, Shao admires Sappho, Swinburne and Verlaine in particular. In their poems, Shao appreciates intense emotions and refined poetic craft in particular. That is to say, Shao is very selective in his contact with Western poetry. This is probably because Shao's stay in Europe was very brief. He did not study British or French literature systematically and his study of the above-mentioned poets is the result of a series of coincidence. Although he set up *Maison d'or Press* and *Maison d'or Monthly* modeling on the British Decadent magazine *the Yellow Book*, Shao does not seem to know Decadence very well. Xie Zhixi criticizes Shao for promoting Oscar Wilde for hedonism but ignoring Walter Pater who cares more about "spiritual pleasure" (*jingshen qingqu*) (229). But on the contrary, Shao did not understand or approve of Wilde's aesthetic ideas and he was closer to Pater precisely because both of them endorsed hedonism.

Shao betrays his misunderstanding and disapproval of Wilde in an essay about the epidemic phenomenon of lying on the Chinese literary scene. In that essay, Shao enumerates several kinds of lying at his time, such as plagiarism, false translation and libel, and criticizes the writers as the "disciples of Wilde" ("Essay" 99). Here Shao clearly refers to Wilde's essay "The Decay of Lying." However, Wilde's essay is by no

means about actual lying, but only a metaphor. In the essay, Wilde articulates his Aesthetic ideas through three doctrines, namely, “[art] never expresses anything but itself,” “[all] bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals” and “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (1091). Based on these three doctrines, Wilde concludes that “Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art” (1091). This is an important article in the British Decadent movement because it clearly states the movement’s dedication to the cult of artificiality that is against nature. However, Shao’s misunderstanding of “lying” in the article proves his distance from the most significant artistic movement in the late nineteenth century in Europe.

Walter Pater is one of the most important predecessors of the British Aesthetic Movement. Shao never mentioned him in his writing, but he was not as distant from Pater as Xie claims. Above all, Shao’s enthusiastic introduction of Verlaine’s life philosophy sings almost the same theme as Pater does in his famous “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, which expresses his main Aesthetic ideas. Pater shares the same premise as Shao, that is, “we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve...we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more” (248). The corollary Pater draws from this premise is also similar to what Shao admires Verlaine for, that is, to live this short life in “[great] passions [that] give us this quickened



sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity” (248). Xie believes that Pater was concerned with “spiritual pleasure” as opposed to the sensual, but Pater’s “Conclusion” is fairly ambivalent in this aspect, or at least one cannot rule out the reference to sensual pleasures from Pater’s writing. In fact, Pater deleted this conclusion from the book in its second edition for worrying about its misleading effect among young men, but decided to put it back later with slight changes. That is to say, Pater was aware of the potential hedonistic reading of his essay, but as he finally decided to put it back without a clear statement against a sensual interpretation to go with it, Pater seemed to have endorsed that kind of reading in the end. Therefore, had Shao read this article, he would have sided with Pater.

Shao’s closeness to Pater and distance from Wilde further confirms his preference in studying Decadence, that is, he is more interested in the poetic expression of intense emotions than in intellectual pleasures. He picked and chose what matches his own taste in Western Decadence without understanding it as a comprehensive whole. He did not mean to promote the original Western Decadent poetry in China, so one cannot accuse him of being a lame disciple of his Western masters. Moreover, Shao considers the expression of intense emotions that are embodied in sexual love as a revolt against all kinds of authority, rather than mere fulfillment of one’s sexual desire, so one can neither charge him for indulging in “vulgar taste.” When one reads Shao’s own poems, one

should avoid directly connecting them with Western Decadence as it is, but should keep in mind what Shao has taken out of it. After all, he is merely a spiritual brother of Sappho and Swinburne, both of whom are masters of poetic expression of intense emotions for him.

### ***Heaven and May***

Shao Xunmei published poems in various magazines and incorporated most of them into three collections, namely, *Heaven and May* (1927), *The Flower-like Evil* (1928) and *Twenty-five Poems* (1936). Interestingly enough, although *The Flower-like Evil* is not Shao's first poem collection and the poems in it are not as refined as those in *Twenty-five Poems*, it is now the most well-known among Shao's works. This is probably because its title resembles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. It is probably also because of such resemblance that the editors have positioned this collection in the center of Shao's works when introducing them since the 1980s, with an apparent intention to emphasize Shao's "Decadence." *The Flower-like Evil* was the first among the three that was reprinted. Even in the latest five-volume collection of Shao's writings in 2008, the volume on Shao's poetry is entitled "The Flower-like Evil" and the three original collections are compiled in an achronological order, with *The Flower-like Evil* in the very beginning. *Twenty-five Poems* was reprinted in 1988, but *Heaven and May* was only reprinted in 2008.

However, editors and scholars have seriously underestimated the importance of *Heaven and May*. It is Shao's first poem collection, which contains his freshest passion for poetry and the central themes that he found most urgent to explore. People neglect this collection probably because its title sounds plain, at least not as exciting as "The Flower-like Evil." The two words "heaven" and "May" tend to denote a sense of halcyon tranquility, which reminds one of the poems by Rabindranath Tagore, whose *Stray Birds* was popular in China at that time and attracted many of Shao's contemporaries, such as Xu Zhimo, Lin Huiyin and Xie Wanying, etc. But under close reading, in Shao's poems, heaven represents the eternal life of unbearable banality whereas May the temporal life of love, desire and pleasure. By violently condemning a life in heaven while embracing that in May, Shao in fact is closely following the steps of Swinburne.

To understand the title of the poem collection, one can take a look at the two poems "Heaven" and "May." In "Heaven," Shao retells the story of the loss of innocence in the Garden of Eden. For the poet, the heaven is so boring that it is no different from a beautiful tomb. In contrast, despite all the miseries, there are always comforts in an earthly life. He questions God why he creates Adam and Eve if he forbids them to know happiness, pain, shame and everything else. In the end, he celebrates triumphantly the loss of innocence because "before they knew happiness, pain, shame and everything else, they knew of love above all" ("Poetry" 60). The poet exerts much emphasis on human

beings' awareness of their choice. That is to say, hedonism does not mean blind indulgence in sensual pleasures, but a conscious pursuit of them. The poet finds this important for human beings because he values the deliberate revolt against the God.

“May” is one of the many “fleshly” poems by Shao, in which there are plenty of erotic images, such as “the burning desire in May,” “the evil rising from a virgin’s kiss,” “pressing my trembling lips on her breast” (“Poetry” 7), etc. The poet takes so much pleasure in May that he refuses the invitation by God: “O God I will never enter heaven for I have found comfort in hell” (“Poetry” 8). Here, Shao is exaggerating at the expense of accuracy because he is talking about earthly pleasures rather than those in the hell, but his point is very clear, that is, he would rather risk going to hell after death than sacrifice his earthly pleasures. Thus, although the two poems describe two different scenarios of life, one in heaven and the other on earth, they sing the same anthem of the philosophy of enjoying life against God’s confinement. This in fact echoes his love of Swinburne because for Shao Swinburne is at once a passionate singer of sexual love and an iconoclastic hero. In Shao’s opinion, explicit exploration of sexual love demonstrates a poet’s revolt against all religions, morality and customs. That is to say, for Shao, the denunciation of heaven and the embrace of May are two sides of the same coin. One cannot be understood without taking the other into consideration. The editors of Shao’s poems since the 1980s have highlighted his obsession with erotic but have actually

missed the other organic half in Shao's poems, that is, to revolt against all kinds of authority through the depiction of sexual love.

This double-sided theme runs through Shao's entire poetic creation. For example, in *Heaven and May*, there is another poem entitled "Poet and Jesus" (*Shiren yu Yesu*), in which the poet addresses God directly and makes bold comparisons between the two. Unlike Jesus who is virgin-born, the poet has both parents. Unlike Jesus who guides his believers into heaven and drives the rest into hell, the poet makes people create their own heaven and destroy hell. Unlike Jesus whose doctrines can convince an unenlightened audience of thousands, the poet's words can find a believer only in himself. Unlike Jesus who rises to heaven on the cross, the poet has to drink his own tears. To conclude this comparison in which the poet looks inferior, he proudly exclaims "Your soul suffers no death, but the poet is laughing at your immortality" ("Poetry" 98).

In *The Flower-like Evil*, the title poem features a fallen fairy's confession to God. She has committed "the flower-like evil by trading [her] beauty for men's love" ("Poetry" 42). She tells God how men are fascinated by her beauty and by lust, how she is cursed by those who regret loving her, and how she is defended by those who never quit loving her. She is supposed to be praying for God's forgiveness, but she quotes men's arguments to defend herself, that is, she has brought sexual ecstasy to them. She does not seem to show any repentance, but God agrees to forgive her. More ironically, just as God offers

his forgiveness and welcomes her back to heaven, the fallen fairy shakes off God's hold and determines to "return to be a slave of the earthly life" ("Poetry"45).

In *Twenty-five Poems*, Shao describes his journey to heaven in "Xunmei's Dream" (*Xunmei de meng*). In the poem, the poet follows his personified dream and enters heaven. But at the border of heaven he sees on the other side his old acquaintances on the earth, tree boughs, grass in the shade of flowers, spring water and mountain valleys. These creatures beg the poet to visit them again and sing songs about them so as to bring them pleasure. Then he suddenly recognizes his unique destiny is to fulfill his mission as a poet on the earth, whereas "the heavenly palace of the deities is not [his] home" ("Poetry" 132).

Shao's philosophy of *cape diem* is based on the dichotomy between the banal heaven and the pleasurable earth. This is also the basis of the majority of Shao's poems, which deal with the often intertwined love and lust. For example, in "Give My Poems Back" (*Huan wo wode shi*), Shao writes:

Give my poems back, lustful girl.  
I got your kisses, but lost my soul.  
Day by day, like the love-struck sun,  
I circle in the sky, chasing the stars.

O my star, lustful girl.  
Because of you, I cannot write a single word.  
If you love me no more,  
How can I express my sorrows? ("Poetry" 4)

In this poem, the poet loves a lustful girl, or rather, love and lust are mingled together. It

is noteworthy that although “*yin*” (lustful) in Chinese often carries negative meanings, Shao never used it negatively. In a feminist impulse, Su Xuelin accuses Shao of degrading women as sex objects and cursing women when his indulgence in sexual pleasures affects his social status, reputation, health and wealth (155). Her accusation is groundless. Shao never mentioned anything about men’s social status, reputation, health or wealth in his poems, not to mention women’s negative effect upon them. Moreover, it is true that Shao writes lines like “you are a poisonous serpent, a vicious monster” in “Madonna Mia” (“Poetry” 6) and “you, such a lovely woman similar to a wolf or a fox, don’t need to kiss men with your lips, since the fragrance of your teeth has already contaminated them all” in “Our Queen” (*Women de huanghou*) (“Poetry” 11). But Shao is not degrading women in these lines. He writes more like an ordinary man who is so madly in love with a woman that he teases her with exaggerated words jokingly to express his excessive love. The seeming derogatory words do not even bear the connotations of *femme fatale* as in the West. Su finds it absurd that the male poet would still approach a woman even though he knew of the deadly results (155). However, it is no less absurd to interpret literary works, especially poems, in the literal way that Su does. In fact, it is his love and desire for women despite the risk of going to hell that manifests his defiance against God and his determination to enjoy the earthly life.

In the often-quoted poem “To Sappho,” which is collected in both *Heaven and May* and *The Flower-like Evil*, Shao writes:

Your fragrance awaking from the flower-bed,  
Also resembles the moon-like body of a virgin.  
I cannot see your skin that wraps fire and blood,  
But, like a rose, you blossom in my heart. (“Poetry” 20)

This poem has been quoted often for its erotic images, such as “the moon-like body of a virgin” and “your skin that wraps fire and blood.” But according to Shao’s essay on Sappho, although this is a poem dedicated to a poetess in ancient Greece, it is primarily a love song. In his conversation with his imaginary friend Pengshi, Shao rebukes Pengshi for doubting in his love for Sappho, arguing that he can love her as much as Mencius could make friends with ancient people (“Fire and Flesh” 5). Thus, even in an imaginary love affair, sensual pleasure is indispensable.

Another often-quoted poem by Shao is “The Decadent Love” (*Tuijiadang de ai*), which is also usually considered evidence of his being a Decadent poet. In the poem, Shao describes love affairs in the image of clouds:

The white cloud sleeps in the sky-bed,  
But by his side it is not his lover.  
Probably out of the incitement of pleasure,  
Tightly, they embrace and kiss each other.

Ah after mating with one of the clouds,  
He goes to flirt with another.  
In the melody of colors,  
His soul disperses into vapors. (“Poetry” 12)

“*Tuijiadang*” is the Chinese transliteration of the French word “*décadent*.” Shao never



defined “Decadent” or *tuijiadang* or *tuipei* in any of his writings. In this poem, Shao seems to refer “*tuijiadang*” to the white cloud’s infidelity and promiscuity, but his description of the white cloud’s “*tuijiadang*” behaviors is very positive. He used “*tuijiadang*” in the sense similar to “hedonistic,” which is the keyword in his introduction of Paul Verlaine, referring to the conscious pursuit of pleasure against God’s will. In fact, the last two lines of the poem, “In the melody of colors, his soul disperses into vapors” echoes his double-sided life philosophy, that is, to denounce God for the sake of the earthly pleasures.

Unfortunately, scholars tend to focus on the representation of lust in Shao’s poems without paying due attention to that of love or his underlying philosophy. In his half chapter on Shao Xunmei, Leo Lee quotes only the “lustful” poems, such as “Peony” (*Mudan*), “To Sappho,” “The Decadent Love”, and “Snake” (*She*), and only the “lustful” stanzas in the not-so-lustful poems, such as “Xunmei’s Dream” and “The Flower-like Evil”. With dubious analysis, Lee criticizes Shao, together with Ye Lingfeng, for being “too happily basking in the urban ‘light and glory’ of their city to contemplate the artistic significance of ‘ugliness, viciousness, rottenness, and darkness’” (265-266), so he is a lame disciple of European Decadent poets such as Baudelaire. But Shao does not deserve this criticism because he neither thinks indulgence in sensual pleasures ugly, vicious, rotten or dark nor has particular favor of the urban setting in his poems.

Readers of poems should always keep aware that poets tend to use exaggerated and even twisted expressions in their work. It is true that Shao loves to write lines like, as in “To Swinburne,” “We came from the filthy mud and will go back there, and how we wish to remain in it forever” (“Poetry”22). But we should not take the “filthy mud” at face value, because by calling his earthly life “filthy mud,” the poet is simply mocking the tone of God and the moralists. In fact, right before these two lines, Shao writes:

You like her, I like her too and she also likes you;  
We all like love and the mystery of love.  
We like the pure liaison of flesh and blood;  
We like the poisonous wine and the bitter sweet.  
Ah we are like three wild flowers on the deserted mountain;  
Never will we allow people to plant us in a vase. (“Poetry” 21)

In these lines, the so-called “filthy mud” is actually a life of love, in which the liaison of flesh and blood is nothing but pure. In contrast, a life in a vase is a metaphor of the banal life in heaven, which the poet strives hard to abandon. Therefore, when the poet uses “filthy mud” to refer to the earthly life, he is in fact challenging God and his followers: call my earthly life whatever you want, but I am *enjoying* it!

Unlike Baudelaire who derives aesthetic pleasures from foul things, Shao in fact detests rottenness and darkness, which are embodied in death. In “What Comfort Can You Find in Death?” (*Si le you shen anyi*), Shao writes:

What comfort can you find in death!  
Lying underground, you can neither smell the fragrance nor see the colors;  
Not to mention to hear the melody on a zither or the humming of a lover,  
Ah but will only be tramped by the beasts and gnarled by the worms.

In the gloomy heart the knots of sorrows will forever be tied.  
In whom can you confide despite tons of bitterness inside?  
Surrounded you will be only by the nasty earthworms and the filthy mud,  
Spending in darkness the endless lonely time.

How can Xishi's cold lips be as good as just anyone's warm touching?  
The thirst of a living person can only be drenched by a soul breathing.  
Ah I'd rather stick my tongue into the mouth of an ugly woman  
Than press my lips on those of the dead Helen. ("Poetry" 29)

Unlike the poems mentioned above, in which Shao contrasts the pleasurable earthly life with the banal one in heaven, in this poem, he contrasts it with death. The image of an ugly woman reminds one of the aged prostitute in Baudelaire's "To the Reader" in the beginning of *Les Fleurs du Mal*: "Just as a lustful pauper who kisses and bites/ The martyred breast of an aged whore,/ We steal, as we move along, a clandestine pleasure/ Which we squeeze hard like an old orange" (19). But the choice in Baudelaire's poem is not one between life and death, but one between the least physically desirable woman and the rest. The aged whore is preferred not for sensual pleasures, but to manifest the poet's intellectual freedom in front of social and aesthetic norms. On the contrary, for Shao, even an ugly woman can bring men real sensual pleasures that are denied by death. In Shao's poem, the rottenness and darkness embodied in death is to be avoided, not to be contemplated, not to mention to draw aesthetic pleasure from. The result of the contemplation on the rottenness and the darkness embodied in death simply encourages the poet to cherish more the pleasures in the earthly life.

Moreover, although many Shanghai-based writers, poets and artists in the Republican era closely engaged with the modern urban setting, Shao does not seem to find it of particular significance in his poems. “Under the Risheng Building” (*Risheng lou xia*) and “The Soul of Shanghai” (*Shanghai de linghun*) are explicitly set in the city, but most of his poems are set in natural environment or replete with images from nature. For example, in *Heaven and May*, Shao writes a poem entitled “Love” (*Ai*):

Thousands of fish-like light reflections flipping on the sea  
Are mingled with the waves.  
This is love;  
This is the truth of love.

A mountain is sleeping in the fog,  
While the fog embracing the mountain in its arms.  
This is love;  
This is the principle of love.

Beads of rain kiss the sea,  
While the sea swallowing them into its heart.  
This is love;  
This is the mystery of love.

The sea whispers to the moon but the moon keeps silent,  
Letting the waves turn into drops of tears.  
This is love;  
This is the taste of love. (“Poetry” 95)

Also, in *Twenty-five Poems*, there is a poem entitled “Seasons” (*Jihou*):

When I saw you for the first time, you gave me your heart,  
Which embraced a spring morning.

When I saw you for the second time, you gave me your words,  
Which could not express the heat of a fiery summer.

When I saw you for the third time, you gave me your hands,  
Which held hidden a late autumn with fallen leaves.

When I saw you for the last time, you were in my brief dream,  
Which harbored you and bursts of winter wind. (“Poetry” 135)

In both poems, Shao associates love with nature and sings praise of both. In opposition to the spirit of European Decadence that embraces anything against nature, Shao bears more affinity to Rousseau’s naturism. In fact, except the exploration of the erotic images, Shao’s eulogy of love and nature is very similar to the poetry by the Crescent School, a prominent school of poetry in the late 1920s and early 1930s in China. The Crescent School poets were notably influenced by European Romanticism and worshiped emotions and nature in particular (Piao 148). Shao was not an official member of the Crescent School, but had very close friendship with one of its leaders Xu Zhimo. When editing *Selections of the Crescent School Poetry*, Chen Mengjia, the poet and theorist of the school, also incorporated five poems by Shao, not only because of Shao’s sophisticated craft in poetic creation, but also because he shared their passion for love and nature.

Nature, the ultimate target in European Decadence, ranks very high in Shao’s poetical world. In an essay entitled “Permanent Architecture” (*Yongjiu de jianzhu*), Shao compares poetry to permanent architecture, which houses permanent life, i.e. the emotions (“Essay” 55-56). To make the architecture permanent, one has to use the best material, which is everything in nature, because:

All things made by men will perish in the end. Clothes, decoration, utensils and daily odds and ends transform with time. Thoughts, speech, customs and habits also differ

from generation to generation. Only things in nature survive forever. The withered flowers will blossom again. The set moon will rise again. The dispersed cloud will re-gather. The faded wind will regain strength... If we want to build permanent architecture, we have to use materials like these. ("Essay" 55-56)

That is to say, Shao's poetic belief is diametrically opposite to the Cult of Artificiality in Western Decadence. It falls squarely within the boundary of Rousseau's Romantic naturism. As Carter points out, Decadence "borrowed Romanticism's swollen emotions and spiritual exhaustion... But it was in revolt against Romantic theory on two essential points—the cult of Nature and the cult of ideal love" (150). Interestingly enough, Shao borrowed Romanticism's swollen emotions and spiritual exhaustion from Decadence but neglecting the Decadent revolt against both nature and love. Therefore, although Shao took Swinburne and Verlaine, two Decadent writers, as his model, he was in fact a Romanticist.

Thus, Shao Xunmei is not a Decadent poet. Although he came from an aristocratic family, which was declining rapidly in the Republican era because of the fall of the Qing dynasty, he did not suffer any sense of despair or pessimism. On the contrary, he joined the most aspiring intellectuals at that time and participated in the cause of enlightenment (*qimeng*). Meanwhile, although he allegedly admired several important Western Decadent poets, he was more interested in intense emotions embodied in sexual love and refinement of poetic language than in rebellion against both nature and naturism. For him, intense emotions embodied in sexual love are nothing shameful but rather natural.

Moreover, he sees the pursuit of sexual love a daring revolt against all kinds of authority. In the Chinese context, it is Confucian moral codes that hinder people from pursuing sexual love. In this sense, Shao is not very different from other May Fourth intellectuals for his celebration of sexual liberty and individual freedom. He is just more confident and more assertive than Yu Dafu. Unfortunately, his poetry has been associated with “*tuipei*,” the Chinese understanding of Decadence ever since, which also contributed to the political persecutions he suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, to do him justice, one should not try to reconnect him with the well-accepted Western Decadents, such as Baudelaire, but should restore his status as a Romantic poet. After all, he was just a nightingale of sexual love.

### Chapte III

#### Yu Hua: A Humanist Obsessed with Evil

Starting from the publication of the short story “Leaving Home at the Age of Eighteen” (*Shibasui chumen yuanxing*) in 1987, Yu Hua established his literary fame as one of the leading figures of the Avant-Garde literature in China in the late 1980s. His short stories and novellas that were mainly published in the late 1980s are famous for the nonchalant representation of spectacular violence, cruelty, insanity and death, leaving his readers shocked as well as fascinated at the same time. In addition to their unanimous admiration for Yu’s ingenious innovation of the narrative techniques, Chinese critics have labeled and praised his early works as postmodern, in the sense that they, through the indifferent representation of the evil, suspend moral judgment, dissolve rationality, deconstruct conventional values, evaporate enlightenment ideals, exalt nihilism, etc., which coincided with the introduction of postmodernism into China by Fredric Jameson at the same time.<sup>1</sup> Scholars like Chen Xiaoming took the strong sense of fatalism and the loss of ideals and passion in Yu’s works as Decadence, which according to Chen bears no negative connotation.

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson gave lectures on postmodernism in Beijing University and Shenzhen University in 1985 and published the Chinese translation of his seminal book *Postmodernism and Cultural Theories* in 1987, triggering tremendous interest in and enthusiastic admiration for the postmodern theories among Chinese intellectuals.



However, with the publication of the two internationally acclaimed novels, *To Live* (*Huozhe*, 1993) and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (*Xu Sanguan mai xie ji*, 1995), Yu seemed to have turned away from the Avant-Garde literary trend and the postmodern writing to plain realism, which frustrated or even disappointed many Chinese postmodern critics. Indeed, Yu attempted considerably less experiments on narration since the 1990s, but the departure from postmodern writing to return to plain realism is not as self-evident as it seems to the postmodern critics. In fact, Yu's most recent two-volume novel *The Brothers* (*Xiongdi*, 2005 and 2006), which touches upon not only the historical issue of the Cultural Revolution but also the social problems in contemporary China, affirms to readers that Yu has always been a socially-concerned and critical writer. The postmodern interpretation of Yu's early works is only possible when one takes the nonchalance in Yu's stories at face value. Even at the apex of his Avant-Garde period, his narrative innovation was never separated from his critical reflection upon the catastrophe caused by the Cultural Revolution. Yu's obsession with evil in fact calls for the restoration of reason and humanity, which is precisely what the postmodern theorists endeavored to deconstruct. Yu is not postmodern or Decadent, but a humanist in disguise.

### **“Fin-de-Siècle”**

Chen Xiaoming is a representative of the Chinese critics on postmodernism who eulogized the Decadence in Yu Hua's works. In his widely anthologized and quoted essay

“Yu Hua’s Fiction and the Awareness of the Fin-de-Siècle,” Chen ascribes Yu’s obsession with evil to his awareness of the fin-de-siècle, by which Chen refers to the end of the human world:

There is absolutely no admiration in Yu Hua’s depiction of torture and cruelty. He simply narrates them in a calm and leisurely manner (*congrong*), with no exaggeration or embellishment, not to mention provocation... Yu seems to have seen through the evil nature of human beings. As a result, he has no choice but to describe it as if he is delivering a prophesy: the end of the human world is coming... In contrast to the despair and fanaticism in the Western fin-de-siècle, Yu’s awareness of the fin-de-siècle is replete with the wisdom of peaceful self-reflection of the East. (283-285)

In his analysis of Yu’s stories, Chen locates Yu’s awareness of the fin-de-siècle in his exhibition of “the bestial instinct of human beings” and “the fear of fate” (284). To contextualize Yu’s awareness of the fin-de-siècle, Chen contrasts him with May Fourth intellectuals, who, in front of the collapse of the traditional values, “encouraged by passion and ideals, held faith in the future, engaged in the construction of it, and reformed the society according to the standard of ‘how we should live’ in the future” (286). Meanwhile, Chen associates Yu with Yu Dafu, Shao Xunmei, Yu Gengyu and Zhou Zuoren, who, according to Chen, “understood the unreality of the ideals and passion... and tried to grasp the meaning of the present, namely, the assertion of individuality, the enjoyment of sensual pleasures and the pursuit of all kinds of material desires, etc.” (286). Chen thinks that both groups of writers abandoned tradition and criticized social reality but were different from each other in their attitude towards the future, because “the

fin-de-siècle Decadent writers pierced one by one the colorful bubbles that the May Fourth intellectuals blew... [which] in a way makes people see the reality clearer” (286). It will be another project to discuss whether the other four writers embody the spirit of the fin-de-siècle as Chen claims. Suffice it to say that for Chen, the fin-de-siècle or Decadence is essentially a denial of the ideals of and passion for human development and social progress, which are at the core of the discourse of enlightenment and modernity. Chen believes that it is the awareness of the fin-de-siècle that drives Yu’s nonchalant representation of evil.

In another essay on the Decadence in Wang Shuo’s works, Chen further explains his idea of Decadence, distinguishing two kinds of Decadents, the sophisticated and the vulgar:

Decadent behavior bears no so-called purpose. To live itself is not the purpose, either. The only thing that matters is to live a comfortable life. The sophisticated Decadents abide by the principle of “playing while abandoning the ideals” (*wanwu sangzhi*), because “ideals” are empty and unreal whereas “playing” is substantial and real. The vulgar Decadents follow the principle of the “walking corpse” (*xingshi zourou*), their action simply dictated by instinct as their ancient ancestors did. In fact, they know nothing worth cherishing other than preserving their life in the most primitive ways. (“Dark Decadence” 51)

Chen recognizes both kinds of Decadents in Wang’s stories but prefers the sophisticated to the vulgar. Consistent with his celebration of Yu’s fin-de-siècle awareness, the sophisticated Decadence is worth embracing to Chen because of the conscious abandonment of the “ideals.”

Despite minor differences in the term they use, other critics also make arguments similar to Chen's. For example, Geng Chuanming proposes the term "post-humanism" (*hou rendaozhuyi*) to describe the world in Yu's stories, whose essence lies in "the limits of human reason and the world's absurd irrationality" (152). Geng thinks such a kind of "post-humanism" deconstructs the discourse of enlightenment represented by May Fourth intellectuals such as Lu Xun:

Lu Xun deconstructed the traditional moral codes based on a new notion of human. He deconstructed the inhuman moral values with humanist ones. He never deconstructed morality per se. In contrast, Yu Hua deconstructed the moral structure that stems in the dichotomy between good and evil. This is the deconstruction of morality itself. He changed the either-or moral logic into moral relativism, which makes the ground of morality uncertain. (152)

For Geng, the position Yu holds is neither moral nor immoral, but "amoral" (152). He welcomes Yu's post-humanism because it "reveals the reality that has been concealed by morality" (152).

In a similar vein, Li Yinghong and Yang Xiaobin see the representation of decay, irrationality and disintegration in Yu's stories as a breakaway from the May Fourth tradition. Li registers nihilism in Yu's works because unlike the May Fourth writers who attacked the Confucian tradition to serve an "essentially revolutionary and propaganda purpose" (51), Yu refuses to "take a moral or political stance [hence] points toward a morally nihilist view" (53). For Yang, the split and displaced subjectivity in Yu's stories challenges the "totalizing, self-sufficient subjectivity" (44) that is the backbone of the

May Fourth discourse of modernity, “whose homogeneous cultural power has upheld the political totalitarianism in communist China” (44). Yang considers this split and displaced subjectivity postmodern because it is “self-questioning and deconstructive... which breaches the absolute, rational, and totalistic oppression of both the politico-historical Mao-Deng and the culturo-literary modern” (246).

All these critics seem fed up with the highly moralized revolutionary discourse of modernity, which gradually ascended to dominance in China after the May Fourth movement. Their indignation is easy to understand after the Cultural Revolution, which brought catastrophe to China precisely in the name of revolution, modernity and progress. Therefore, postmodernism won the heart of many Chinese intellectuals in the late 1980s easily like a sparkle of fire on dried grass, simply because they considered it a powerful theoretical weapon that undermines the discourse of modernity most profoundly. For the same reason, they were thrilled to find that Yu Hua, unlike his predecessors writing after the Cultural Revolution who criticized it in a moralized and sentimental way that is similar to the discourse of modernity, approached the historical trauma with a refreshingly cold and indifferent manner. They made a quick connection between postmodernism and Yu with excitement as well as confidence. However, with the cooling of the fervor over postmodernism and Yu’s continued literary creation, one has to admit that the “marriage” between postmodernism and Yu was an arranged one, rather than

based on free love. One should never forget that as one of the leading figures of Chinese Avant-Garde literature, Yu is first and foremost famous for his innovation of narrative techniques, especially his manipulation of the narrator's role. It is the least wise choice to take the narrator's attitude towards violence at face value and even take the narrator as the writer himself. Had the critics read Yu's stories beyond the nonchalance of the narrators, they could have seen that the writer is not as postmodern as they thought.

### **Violence and Morality**

In an interview with Hong Zhigang, Yu compares himself with Su Tong who favors peaceful stories and admits that he himself has particular interest in things and personality of "intensity" (*qianglie*) ("Secret" 12). In the essay "The Fictional Works" (*Xuwei de zuopin*), Yu agrees with Zhang Yiwu that he had been obsessed with violence in the early years of writing, because "the form of violence is full of passion, speaking of people's innermost desire..., in front of which civilization has become an empty slogan and order simply a decoration" (50). It is hard to imagine such a fan of intense violence would demonstrate in his stories "peaceful self-reflection" as Chen claims. One could say Yu's signature coldness in his representation of violence is calm, but to say it is leisurely (*congrong*) can be misleading. Critics tend to notice the distance between the narrator and the violence being narrated, hence the detachment and nonchalance, but fail to recognize

the distance between the narrator and the writer, hence the double critique of both the violence and the nonchalance towards it.

“Leaving Home at the Age of Eighteen” is not Yu’s first published story, but it is his first step in forming his unique literary style. His adroit use of language and narrative techniques surprised and delighted the readers and the critics. Zhao Yiheng’s comment on Yu has been widely agreed with, that is, “Yu Hua seems to have had no apprentice period: when he emerged around the end of 1987, he already had all the marks of a writer of excellent caliber” (415). The short story tells the experience of a boy who has just turned eighteen. His father sends him on the way to see the world on his own. A brief phase of carefree excitement is quickly over as he starts to worry about where to stay at night because the road seems to extend endlessly into nowhere. After a series of failure in stopping a passing vehicle for a ride, he gets a lift in a truck loaded with apples by offering a cigarette to the driver, who is repairing the truck engine beside the road. However, his sense of relief is cut short when the truck engine breaks down again. This time, instead of attracting hitchhikers like the boy, the truck gets looted by a group of peasants who live nearby. The boy fights against the peasants to protect the apples and the truck out of the newly-established friendship with the driver, but he is amazed to find that the driver himself not only does nothing to stop the robbery but also gloats over his

suffering. In the end, the driver leaves with the peasants triumphantly, carrying the boy's bag in his hand.

In comparison with Yu's later stories such as "A Kind of Reality" (*Xianshi yizhong*, 1988) and "The Narration of Death" (*Siwang xushu*, 1988), "Leaving Home at the Age of Eighteen" is relatively mild in its representation of violence, but it launched Yu's secret weapon of writing, that is, to describe violence from an external and objective point of view. The story is told by the boy, the victim of violence. Throughout the story, the readers can get first-hand report of the boy's thoughts and feelings except when it comes to the scene of fight:

At this time, I rushed to the peasants regardless of my own safety, shouting "You robbers!" only to be greeted by countless fists and kicks, which showered all over my body at the same time. As I struggled to rise to my feet, several kids threw apples to me. On hitting my head the apples smashed, but my head was not cracked. When I was about to fight back, a heavy kick landed in my waist. I wanted to cry out, but my mouth just opened without making any sound. I fell to the ground and couldn't rise again. I could only watch the peasants grabbing apples in a chaos. ("Collection" 1:8)

This is a brutal scene and the narrator must have been inflicted with unbearable pain.

However, instead of telling the readers how painful he feels, the narrator describes the scene as if he is just a witness who happens to pass by. He "sees" how a group of people circle around and hit a young man, how some children throw apples to him so hard that the apples smash, how someone knocks the wind out of him. In this way, the insider of violence becomes an outsider. Violence is objectified into a spectacle, something to be observed rather than to be felt or related to. This is in fact the scene in the eyes of the



cold-blooded driver. It is true that by objectifying violence the narration sounds calm and nonchalant, but in fact by swerving from direct depiction of the victim's pain the narration reveals and critiques the cruelty of the victimizers and especially the onlookers: how cruel can someone be to remain calm in front of such severe violence?

Moreover, apart from the objective depiction of violence, in the rest of the story the narrator is, though not to the extent of sentimental, not indifferent at all. When he sits on the ground watching the peasants stealing the apples, he is filled with fury and he is most angry with the driver. After the peasants leave, his heart is laden with grief. As the night sets in and the wind starts to howl, he is tortured by fright and helplessness. Finally, he finds comfort in the truck, which is as injured as he is, feeling the truck's cab as healthy and warm as his own heart. That is to say, the narrator has a good sense of right and wrong. He hates injustice, especially the indifference to injustice, and longs for understanding, love, trust and support. Even after the sad incident, he is not disillusioned with the world as the postmodern critics would expect and welcome. In the end, he is profoundly relieved to realize that after all his own heart is still healthy and warm. As he lies down in the truck's cab, he tells himself that the lodging he has been looking for so hard is right here. "Here" is a little ambiguous in its reference. It can mean the truck's cab and it can also mean his own heart. It seems that the protagonist finally comes to the realization that the understanding, love, trust and support he has been expecting is in his

own heart and he has to have faith in it. Therefore, although the protagonist's first encounter with the outside world is painful, his moral conviction remains intact.

“A Kind of Reality” (1988) is probably Yu's most unforgettable novella, because the kind of reality presented in the story is breathtakingly bleak and cruel. It starts with a four-year-old boy Pipi's unintentional murder of his baby cousin, which serves as the first domino of a series of revenge. First, the baby's father, Shanfeng, kills Pipi with one kick in the stomach. In turn, Pipi's father, Shan'gang, tortures his younger brother to death. He first ties Shanfeng to a tree and takes off his socks. Then he applies over-stewed pork to the soles of Shanfeng's feet and let a hungry dog lick them. Shanfeng laughs so hard that he suffocates to death. To avenge his husband's death, Shanfeng's wife not only reports Shan'gang to the police but also secretly donates, in the name of Shan'gang's wife, his body for medical use after his death execution. The novella ends with detailed yet detached description of the process the doctors dismember Shan'gang's body.

The nonchalance towards violence is manifested in Pipi's murder of his baby cousin and the doctors' dismembering of Shan'gang's body but neither of them can justify a postmodern conclusion. For Pipi, violence is nothing but a fun game. In order to hear his cousin's sonorous cry, he pinches the baby's cheeks, slaps him in the face, tightens and releases his hold on the baby's throat alternatively till it can hardly breathe. He does not mean to kill his cousin but drops him to the ground only because he is distracted by the

jumping and chirpy sparrows in the trees. When his uncle threatens to claim his life, he finds his uncle's red eyes very funny and even refuses to leave because he does not want to miss an exciting fight between his father and his uncle. Right before the fatal kick, as his uncle forces him to lick his cousin's blood on the ground, he even takes the blood as tasty fruit juice. However, Pipi is not evidence of the bestial nature of human beings. He is too young to understand good and evil or the meaning of life and death, not to mention to abandon morality consciously. It is noteworthy that when he slaps his cousin, he has in his mind his father who usually hits his mother in that way. In fact, although the family members live under the same roof, they are like strangers and even often maltreat each other. That is to say, Pipi is not born an evil child but is simply imitating the adults. Therefore, unlike the allegorical figure Bingzai in Han Shaogong's "Dad Dad Dad" (Ba Ba Ba), who is supposed to represent the root of Chinese culture, Pipi is only a mirror of the vicious example the adults have made. Thus, through Pipi's naïveté, the writer in fact critiques the diseased relationship among the adults.

Unlike Pipi's naïveté, the doctors' nonchalance towards violence is mediated through professionalism. When they dismember Shan'gang's body, they take it just as a job, like a butcher dissecting a pig or a carpenter sawing wood, nothing special. Time and time again, through the eyes of the doctors, the narrator refers to Shan'gang's body parts as inanimate things. For example, the first doctor peels Shan'gang's skin with such enviable

precision and skill that “in no time the skin of Shan’gang’s chest and stomach was already separated from his body, covering it like a piece of cloth” (“Collection” 2:43). After she takes off all of Shan’gang’s skin, “she picked them up piece by piece as if she was collecting trash..., spread them over a ping pong table and started to scratch off the fat as if she was brushing clothes” (“Collection” 2:43). Finally, she leaves with Shan’gang’s skin “folded like laundry” (“Collection” 2:44). Since the skin is gone, the fat on Shan’gang’s body starts to fall apart, which “first rose up slightly like cotton and then started to flow in all directions like mud, so the doctors felt they saw a field of rape” (“Collection” 2:43). The doctors seem to be dismantling a waste machine, rather than dealing with a human being who has a life and a soul just a while ago. There is in fact no difference between the doctors and the crowd of curious spectators at Shan’gang’s death execution because violence and death to them is just a show, which they do not have to take seriously.

Indeed, Yu does not exaggerate or embellish violence, but it is precisely the lack of feeling in narration that is even more disturbing and provocative because people’s nonchalance towards violence and death in fact reveals their apathy to life. For Yu, to represent violence from such an external and objective point of view is by no means to endorse any moral indifference or relativism, but to dramatize and hence call for the readers’ awareness of a grave problem in people’s unconsciousness. In this sense, Yu is

echoing Lu Xun who used to poignantly criticize Chinese national character, only that Yu's critique is even more poignant because there does not seem to have much change over the past sixty years.

In contrast, the two intentional murders in the story are not told with indifference. It is true that both Shanfeng and Shan'gang carry out the murders in a most cruel way, but they are not soulless or bloodthirsty beasts. Above all, they commit their felonies purely out of grief and fury because each of them loses a beloved son. Similarly, Shanfeng's wife secretly donates Shan'gang's body because he kills her beloved husband. One has to really care about something to have the urge to revenge when the thing is hurt. Moreover, both murderers know clearly what they have done is intolerably wrong and suffer from profound fear. The next day after killing Pipi, Shanfeng falls seriously ill. He feels he is going to die and has no strength to resist Shan'gang's torture. He confesses to his brother that after killing Pipi he is extremely frightened. It is an uncontrollable sense of guilt and fear that takes the place of the initial grief and fury and sucks all vitality out of Shanfeng.

In the case of Shan'gang, he first acknowledges his son's fault in killing the baby and proposes to compensate his brother with all his savings, yet in vain. After Shanfeng is dead, he should escape as his wife instructs, but instead just wanders aimlessly in the city like a ghost. He stands in a toilet next to other people for a long time before he realizes that he has no need to urinate. Coming out of the toilet, he forgets to zip his pants and

continues walking with himself exposed. Out of exhaustion he falls asleep in a building under construction before the policemen catch him three hours later. Although Shan'gang's reaction to Shanfeng's death reads like the light-hearted killer Meursault in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, he has in fact lost his mind, just like his brother losing his physical strength, as a result of fear. If someone still has something to care about and to fear, (s)he is far from being ready to become a nihilist or to deconstruct morality.

In 1989, Yu published "The Past and the Penalties" (*Wangshi yu xingfa*), which pushed his nonchalant representation of violence to the extreme through aestheticization. It tells a story of a stranger who upon receiving a mysterious telegram embarks on a journey back to his personified past. His encounter with an expert on penalties revives his memory of four significant dates in the past, each being executed by the expert in an abnormal way. In the end, the expert hangs himself, which brings back the memory of a date in the past the stranger has been trying very hard to retrieve.

The expert has a real obsession with penalties. When he recalls how he executes the four dates of the stranger's past, he sounds as if he is talking about his artworks:

He tore January 9, 1958 apart with five chariots running in different directions. The fragments of January 9, 1958 went flying in the air like snowflakes in winter. He castrated December 1, 1967, cutting off his two heavy testicles. There was not a single drop of sunshine on that day, but the moonlight that night was as wild as grass. August 7, 1960 couldn't avoid his fate, either. The expert cut through his waist with a rusty saw. The most unforgettable is September 20, 1971, because the expert dug a big hole in the earth and buried him in it, only leaving his head above the earth. In this way, the pressure from the earth pushed his blood to the top. Then the expert knocked open his head, which immediately shot into the air a column of blood. The

brilliant grandeur of the scarlet fountain was beyond imagination. (“Collection” 1:37) When he invites the stranger to participate in a new penalty he designs, that is, to chop the stranger’s waist with one strike and immediately erect his upper body on a glass table till his blood drains out, the expert describes a poetic scenario. He promises the stranger that as his blood flows slower and slower he will experience the ultimate silence, in which he will see the first drop of dew at the dawn on January 9, 1958, a great expanse of brilliant cloud at the noon of December 1, 1967, a little dirt path in the woods in the warm twilight of August 7, 1960 and two dancing glowworms in the depth of the night on September 20, 1971. However, the expert reserves for himself the perfect penalty that he is proudest of, that is, he will experience various torrential emotions, including fear, hope, resolution, hesitation, etc., during the ten hours before a bullet ends his life. The expert considers all these penalties scientific experiments and himself a genuine scholar unparalleled in the twentieth century. He is not interested in exerting pain on people but fascinated with the extreme sensations the penalties can generate, so he entertains no fear or guilt at all when he carries them out on his relatives.

If both penalties the expert prepares for the stranger and himself work out as planned, this story might become a postmodern fable which does not concern morality at all. However, both penalties are aborted at the last minute. In the case of the stranger, the expert has to give up his original plan because he finds out that he cannot chop the stranger’s body into halves with a single strike, which will lead to unacceptable nasty

results. As for himself, the expert tries twice but fails to die because at the very last moment he is defeated by the fear of death. The expert's reactions to the two failures are very different. When he realizes that he has to give up the penalty prepared for the stranger, he is not very upset but just laments his loss of physical strength. The first failure is only a technical one. In contrast, his surrender to fear in his own case completely overthrows his faith in his career, because it is no longer a lofty science or a respectable art that people can and should unconditionally devote themselves to. In fact, the penalties remain aesthetically enjoyable only when they are executed on other people. Once the executioner himself is involved, he can no longer stay calm or aloof. As a result, the expert decides to hang himself to terminate his own shame.

It seems that in this story Yu first gradually builds up brick by brick a giant tower of aestheticized violence and then suddenly takes away its base, a double standard, hence the tower collapses in a second. If one only focuses on the body of the tower, one might come to the conclusion that the writer avoids moral judgment on violence. But if one takes the end of the story seriously into consideration, one will find that the writer in fact critiques the base of the tower, that is, the double standard under all discourses that try to justify or objectify violence, be they in the name of profession, science, art or something else. Following the same reasoning, although the writer does not spell it out explicitly, the driver in "Leaving Home at the Age of Eighteen" and the doctors in "A Kind of Reality"



are nonchalant towards violence only because it happens to other people. Should the driver be brutalized unjustly or the doctors be put under the surgery knives, they would not maintain their indifference. Therefore, by representing violence with nonchalance, Yu in fact exposes the problematic mentality underneath it. In this way, Yu highlights and reinforces what is morally correct, rather than deconstructing morality.

### **Madness, Fatalism and History**

In addition to their interest in Yu's nonchalant representation of violence, the postmodern critics are fascinated with madness and fatalism that are also prominent in Yu's stories. For example, Geng Chuanming particularly contrasts Yu's "April 3<sup>rd</sup> Incident" (*Siyue sanri shijian*, 1987) against Lu Xun's "The Madman's Diary" (*Kuangren riji*, 1918), arguing that the world in the eyes of Yu's protagonist is an irrational one, which defies "unified, definite and stable cognition" (154) hence rules out the possibility of reforming it with reason. Geng names this situation a post-humanist one. At the same time, Chen Xiaoming interprets the recurring theme of fatalism in Yu's stories as despair in a better future hence the awareness of the fin-de-siècle. However, had the critics not been preoccupied with postmodernism, they would find Yu not so different from May Fourth intellectuals like Lu Xun in terms of their social criticism and enlightenment ideals.

“April 3<sup>rd</sup> Incident” tells a story of a boy, who, on turning eighteen, finds himself living under hostile supervision by everyone around him, including his parents, neighbors, former classmates, the girl he secretly fancies and strangers in the streets. He believes that all of them are conspiring to kill him on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, especially as their “preparatory” actions confirm what he predicts or imagines. In the end, he escapes the small town by jumping onto a passing train right before April 3<sup>rd</sup>. Putting aside Yu’s narrative innovations, such as the constant mingling of reality and fantasy, Yu’s story reads similarly to Lu Xun’s “The Madman’s Diary,” in which the protagonist is haunted by the realization that Confucian society is cannibalistic, only that Yu does not nail down the problem at the core of the society specifically to Confucianism.

It may be this difference between the two stories that prompts Geng to think that the world in the eyes of Yu’s protagonist is an irrational one, which people cannot comprehend with reason and therefore cannot reform accordingly. However, it is fairly difficult to argue that a cannibalistic society in the eyes of Lu Xun’s madman is a rational one. Moreover, after all, both protagonists are considered insane in their respective social environment and one should not forget that Lu Xun’s madman even admits his own insanity after he “recovers.” So it is even more difficult to argue that Lu Xun’s madman can, in the middle of his madness, form a “unified, definite and stable cognition” of the surrounding world while Yu’s protagonist cannot. Geng also believes that Lu Xun’s

madman will reform the world with reason whereas Yu's protagonist cannot. However, Lu Xun's madman abandons his former understanding of the world after his "recovery," so for him there seems to be no need to reform any more. In contrast, Yu's protagonist, by escaping the conspiracy, refuses to change his mind, which is in fact a necessary condition for any potential social reform. Geng invites these contradictions in his argument because he confuses the protagonist, or the narrator, with the writer himself. It is the writer Lu Xun, rather than the madman, who forms a "unified, definite and stable cognition" of the "cannibalistic" nature of Confucianism, in the sense that the rigid moral codes and hierarchical social order strangle individual freedom and humanity. It is also the writer Lu Xun, rather than the madman, who calls for an overall moral revolution. Lu Xun could make these arguments directly with the help of a perfectly sober narrator, but his success lies precisely in his ironic use of a seemingly unreliable narrator, the madman. For the same reason, even though Yu's protagonist seems to have been driven crazy by imaginary threats of murder, it does not mean that the writer Yu Hua cannot form a "unified, definite and stable cognition" of the society nor does it rule out the writer's appeal for social reform.

In fact, through the irrational world in the eyes' of the boy, Yu reveals a general social condition that is not farfetched for the readers to relate to after the Cultural Revolution. The general social condition Yu describes is actually one deprived of basic

mutual trust among ordinary people, which is one of the worst legacies of the Cultural Revolution for the Chinese society. During the Cultural Revolution, ordinary Chinese people, not just the politicians, were incited to participate in the campaign by informing against or even framing each other publicly as well as secretly. For the sake of self-protection, many friends and relatives became enemies, which was one of the most poignant themes of the “Scar Literature” (*Shanghen wenxue*) in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. If one reads Yu’s story against the background of the Cultural Revolution, the paranoia of the protagonist is much easier to understand. Moreover, once the mutual trust among people is destroyed, it is not that easy to reestablish it. That is why in the story, which is set in the post-Cultural-Revolution era, the boy is still suffering from the fear of unreasonable hatred and hurt.

Therefore, one can see in the story Yu’s criticism of the Cultural Revolution and its lingering destructive effect on Chinese society. Although Yu’s protagonist does not cry out explicitly “Save the children!” as Lu Xun’s madman does, one can notice Yu’s sense of urgency for a fundamental change in the situation as Lu Xun did. The difference between the two stories, if any, lies in the fact that in “The Madman’s Diary,” the cannibalism is just a metaphor for the moral suppression Confucianism exerted on people, whereas in “April 3<sup>rd</sup> Incident,” the constant menace of conspired persecution stems in historical reality.

The connection between madness and the historical trauma is most clearly demonstrated in the novella “1986” (*Yi jiu ba liu nian*, 1987). In the story, a former middle-school history teacher, who is reported missing after being arrested by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, returns to his hometown as a madman ten years after the Cultural Revolution is over. He has lost everything, including the memory of his beloved wife and daughter, except his obsession with ancient Chinese penalties. As the narrator unravels in flashbacks, his obsession with the ancient penalties is rooted in the shocks he experiences during the Cultural Revolution:

He saw a man lying next to a postbox, dead. The blood flowing out of his body was still fresh. It had not dried yet. A propaganda leaflet floated down and covered half of his face. People wearing all kinds of tall hats and placards passed by. They cast a glance at the man on the ground but showed no surprise. The look in their eyes was as calm as still water, as if they saw themselves in a mirror after getting up in the morning. He recognized several colleagues among them. He thought to himself that his own turn was to come. (“Collection” 1:144)

The occurrence of violent death due to political persecution during the Cultural Revolution has been so frequent that people even get used to it. Meanwhile, the prolonged wait intensifies their fear of the impending doom. As a result, the vision of violence, blood and death is planted in the madman’s mind so deeply that he keeps replaying them in his imagination and action. For example, upon his return to the small town, he takes the sun as a head showering blood, a cement path as a bear bone, two pale street lamps as heads drained of blood, a river as oozing pus and some boats as floating corpses. As he wanders around, his mind is full of illusions of his tattooing people’s arms,

cutting off their noses, legs and men's "tails" and dismembering their body parts. In the end, he makes bloody scenes in the streets by executing all these penalties on his own body. Before his death, the above-mentioned scene recurs to the madman's mind when he finally regains his sanity briefly.

Indeed, the madman is insane. He cannot understand the fanatic revolution that devours so many innocent lives, so he loses his mind. However, the writer has little difficulty in understanding and explaining to the readers that it is the Cultural Revolution that is to blame. Irrational as the Cultural Revolution was, it does not prevent the writer as well as the readers from forming a "unified, definite and stable cognition" of it. Moreover, according to his interview with Hong Zhigang, Yu was inspired to writing this novella because he saw many people like the madman when he traveled around in China's tourist cities between 1984 and 1986. Yu decided to write about the Cultural Revolution through these people because "the Cultural Revolution will never be over for them, or rather, it will never be over for our generation even though we might forget it" ("Secret" 18). This is an interesting comment because it refers to not only the damage that has been made, but also people's attitude towards it. Just like the madman's wife and daughter, people are busy forgetting the traumatic history voluntarily and involuntarily. By writing about the Cultural Revolution ten years after it, Yu in fact not only reiterates the historical lesson one should learn from it but also draws people's attention to their

own forgetfulness. By writing a story about a madman, Yu in fact urges people to see the history and the present more clearly with reason, so that they can prevent the tragedy from repeating. In sum, Yu's stories are not as "post-humanist" as Geng claims, nor is Yu very different from the May Fourth intellectuals such as Lu Xun.

It is, therefore, surprising that Chen Xiaoming considers the Cultural Revolution as an unnecessary fictional setting for the story. He says so because he wants to argue that the story is mainly about the bestial nature of human beings, due to which the end of the human world is fatalistically imminent. However, to say the madman is a beast in nature simply based on his imaginary torture of other people and self-injury is not faithful to the story. In fact, the madman is a caring husband and a loving father. Three months before his arrest, he starts forbidding his wife to leave home so as to avoid public humiliations many women have experienced. Even after he loses all his memory, he still delights in red butterfly knots on strange girls' pigtailed in the streets because, as the narrator explains, that is how his wife decorates her hair. As he finally regains sanity shortly before his death, the first thing he desires to do is to go home, to return to his tender wife and sleeping daughter. It is not because of the manifestation of his monstrous genes that he goes mad, but because of the severe political persecution. It is somewhat merciless to insist that such a pitiable victim of the Cultural Revolution is a beast in nature.

Fatalism does appear frequently in Yu's stories, but it does not indicate the end of the human world as Chen interprets it, not to mention the fin-de-siècle awareness. For Yu, fatalism is more about the unpredictability of life. For example, in "The Narration of Death," the protagonist runs over a boy and a girl successively in two truck accidents. In neither case does the protagonist have any premonition. In retrospect, both accidents seem like a dream. He can find no convincing explanation for the cause of the accidents except that they are predestined. To ascribe the accidents to fate does not mean the protagonist is an irresponsible person with a bestial nature. Rather, after escaping from the first accident out of shock, he lives in guilt and regret all the time. When he hits the girl several years later, he is determined to save her even though nobody sees the accident and she can barely breathe only to be brutalized to death by the girl's enraged relatives. To live free of charge after escaping from the first accident and to be killed when he is ready to take his responsibility, there seems to be no way to predict life and the protagonist seems to have no choice but to succumb to fate.

The unpredictability of life is best exemplified in *To Live*. The novel narrates the ups and downs in the life of the protagonist Fugui from the Republican era all the way to the 1980s. Fugui is born a rich landlord, but early in the story he loses everything to Long Er through gambling, upon which his father dies of fury. However, as the land reform begins and the landlords are forced to cede their property, Long Er is sentenced to death and



executed in public due to resistance. Right before the execution, Long Er stares at Fugui in the crowd and tells him that he is to die in Fugui's stead. Fugui's son Youqing has to run a long way back and forth between home and school every day to feed his lamb, but this makes him an excellent runner and the first prize winner of a marathon race, which gives him and the family a strong sense of honor. However, it is also because of this sense of honor that the boy rushes to donate blood for the county leader's wife only to be killed by overdraft. Coincidentally, the county leader Chunsheng turns out to be Fugui's good friend when he is forcibly recruited to the Kuomintang army. Barely surviving the Civil War, Chunsheng joins the army of the Communist party after KMT's defeat and gradually ascends to leadership. Shortly after he assumes the position of the county leader, his wife nearly dies of hemorrhaging when delivering a baby, but is saved by the blood of a primary school boy, which happens to be Youqing. Despite the glory and authority he enjoys as a Communist cadre, during the Cultural Revolution, Chunsheng is labeled as a "Capitalist-Roader" and commits suicide because of unbearable physical and spiritual tortures. The entire story is a mixture of hopes and despairs, laughter and tears. Life is so unpredictable that one cannot tell a curse from a blessing. The characters in the story are like autumn leaves blown off the tree flipping around in the storm of fate.

The unpredictability of life continues to manifest itself in Yu's most recent two-volume novel *Brothers*. The novel tells the story of two step-brothers, Li Guangtou

and Song Gang, from the 1960s to the first decade of the twenty-first century. The first volume reads similar to *To Live* and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* in their representation of the life during the Cultural Revolution. The second volume starts with the two brothers' coming of age after the Cultural Revolution. With the nationwide economic reform, the former hooligan Li Guangtou turns from a humble waste collector into a billionaire who sells products to all corners of the world. Following his success, his most infamous anecdote, that is, to peek at women's bottoms in a public toilet when he is only fourteen years old, is retold as a complete mistake because, as the new version goes, when he is caught by Poet Zhao he is in fact only looking for his key that has dropped into the pit. His organization of the so-called "Virgin Beauty Contest" is relentlessly criticized for fraud and sexual scandals, but in a strange way it draws tremendous attention to him and largely boosts his company's profit.

In the early 1980s, Song Gang looks better than Li Guangtou in every aspect. He is more handsome and more cultured and has a stable job in a state-run factory, which wins him the heart of the first beauty in the town Lin Hong. However, with the deepening of the economic reform, he first loses his job and then loses his health. When he shows to the public his fake breast to promote breast-augmenting products, he loses his dignity. In the end, as his wife throws herself to his brother's arms, he loses his faith in life. Lin Hong, the major victim of Li's toilet peeking incident, used to be a loyal wife and

despised Li to the bones. But she eventually yields to Li's temptation and, after Song Gang commits suicide, starts a hair salon which hosts a bunch of prostitutes. Standing at the threshold of the Reform and Opening-up era, nobody would have foreseen all these changes. In a sense, life is even more unpredictable than during the Cultural Revolution period.

People tend to clothe life with fatalism when they cannot understand it or have no control over it. But it is noteworthy that in Yu's stories, fatalism, or the unpredictable nature of life, is not an abstract judgment of the human world in general; rather, it is closely related to the empirical history. In *To Live*, the characters are completely at the mercy of fate because of the turbulent history of twentieth-century China, which is filled with wars and political campaigns. In *Brothers*, the sense of fatalism extends beyond the Cultural Revolution through the contemporary era also because the Chinese society has witnessed drastic changes in the political, economic, social and cultural arenas in the past three decades that challenge people's ability to comprehend. Yu admits that his profound sense of fatalism stems from his childhood memory of the Cultural Revolution and keeps being reinforced by his experience after he grew up.<sup>2</sup> Many critics share the opinion of

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<sup>2</sup> In an interview with the writer of this article on November 10, 2011 at University of California, Riverside, Yu talked about how he drew the sense of fatalism from seeing people making similar politically blasphemous remarks courted drastically different treatment only because of random reasons, such as the venue of the remarks and the personality of the audience. Even after the Cultural Revolution was over, China's political climate was still dramatically changeable. There were several times when the editors of literary journals had to cancel the publication of his stories due to unexpected

Zhao Yiheng that writers who were born in the 1960s like Yu are “too young to remember anything about the Cultural Revolution” and “it would be unnatural for them to have an obsession with [it]” (415). However, according to Yu, his childhood experience of the Cultural Revolution plays a crucial role in his writing (“Secret” 6); or rather, the Cultural Revolution constitutes the fundamental background of all his literary thinking and creation.<sup>3</sup> This is why, even though the writer does not specifically refer to the Cultural Revolution in stories like “The Past and the Penalties” and “April 3<sup>rd</sup> Incident,” it looms large in the background.

Chen understands fatalism as despair in a better future because he takes fatalism as an abstract, ontological, or rather a de-historicized, idea—now that people are all evil in nature, they deserve nothing but doom. However, in the case of Yu, fatalism is a historicized concept, which refers to concrete historical experiences. Yu’s final comment in his blog on Ha Jin’s *Nanjing Requiem* is “fate is not an arrangement by God but a result of what people have done.”<sup>4</sup> Chen’s understanding of fatalism denies the possibility of change or progress, but Yu’s stories aim at revealing the problems in history that shaped people’s fate so that one can draw lessons from them. Also, Yu’s notion of fatalism is not based on a conviction of human beings’ evil nature. On the contrary, in the government policies.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from the interview on Nov. 10, 2011 at University of California, Riverside.

<sup>4</sup> See Yu Hua’s blog “Our Requiem” (*Women de anhunqu*) on November 11, 2011 at [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_467a32270100vvgw.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_467a32270100vvgw.html)

above-mentioned stories, none of the characters that have been mocked by fate is completely evil, which is actually where the hope of salvation lies.

In fact, Yu's three novels written in the 1990s are his efforts to seek a way to come to terms with fate. *Cries in the Drizzle* (*Zai xiyu zhong huhan*, 1991) is Yu's first novel, which marks his transition in writing both in form and content. The structure of the novel is relatively loose, so it reads like a combination of several novellas. In terms of the content, it inherits many features of his early stories, such as coldness among family members and people's nonchalance towards others' sufferings. Meanwhile, it also sows the seeds of humanism, which is going to thrive in Yu's following works. For example, although the protagonist has been treated as an unwelcome stranger in his own family, he savors the sweetness of care and trust from his foster parents and experiences sincere friendship from other lonely boys. When he finally leaves home for college, he even reconciles with his brother who secretly pays his debt. In *To Live*, Fugui's family cuddles tighter and tighter together in times of endless adversity. In the end, although fate has taken away all of Fugui's relatives, he is determined to live on because his very survival proves the deep love and care among his family members. In *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, the protagonist has to sell blood to overcome one difficulty after another in his life. But he is the most fortunate character in all of Yu's stories because his entire family survives due to the mutual support not just within his family but also among strangers.

All these three stories end with hope, that is, although people have been tossed around by fate, they are going to survive because deep in their heart, they love, trust and care about each other. Should the boy who leaves home at the age of eighteen continue with his journey, he will find comfort “here.” A reader who has been used to the cold-blooded narrator in Yu’s early stories might be surprised to see the changes, which Yu explained in an interview with the magazine *Girlfriend*:

I always write for the inner needs of my mind. For many years my writings emanated from the tension between inner mind and reality. I always looked at the world with hostility. As time passed, the inner anger subsided, and I began to realize that the mission of the writer is not simply to condemn and to expose but to look at the world with sympathy after understanding everything. . . . I wrote the novel *To Live* in order to describe the forbearance of human beings in the face of suffering, their optimistic attitude toward the world. (qtd. in Liu 93-94)

It is noteworthy that the change of Yu’s writing style is only a superficial one. In fact, he has been fairly consistent in his pursuit of the humanistic ideals, which is not so different from the May Fourth intellectuals. It is the damage of humanism that ignited his anger so he had to accuse and expose. It is the restoration of humanism that softened his heart and pen. He wrote about nonchalance towards violence, madness and fatalism only for the sake of criticizing their historical conditions. He never deconstructed morality, nor did he ever attempt to be nihilistic. His works have never been postmodern, nor has he ever embraced the *fin-de-siècle* awareness as Chen argues.

## Yu Hua the “Decadent”

In fact, even if Yu’s works were postmodern and he embraced the *fin-de-siècle* awareness as Chen argues, he would not be Decadent in the Western sense. Chen’s understanding of the *fin-de-siècle* awareness is rooted in the denial of not just the old social norms, but norms in general. For Chen, the *fin-de-siècle* awareness overthrows the May Fourth tradition, which endeavors to reform Chinese society with faith in the humanist ideals. The *fin-de-siècle* awareness, on the one hand, cuts itself from the humanist ideals while, on the other hand, also claims to refuse any new values to replace them, although this is technically impossible because it takes conviction to keep oneself from falling into any values and the conviction itself is in fact of indispensable value. This is why Chen’s description of Decadence is self-contradictory: “The Decadent behaviors bear no so-called purpose. To live itself is not the purpose, either. The only thing that matters is to live a comfortable life” (“Dark Decadence” 51). How can someone who believes that life has no purpose possibly find anything that matters? To live a comfortable life per se is precisely a purpose. Regardless of the loopholes in Chen’s argument, even if one can really live in a value-proof state, one is not a Decadent. A Decadent in British and France is someone who rebels against the norms that (s)he sincerely believes in and relishes in the rebellion because it asserts his/her individual will power. If someone does not believe in any value, (s)he would not need any effort, not to

mention will power, to behave abnormally; or rather, there is no such thing as abnormal any more. Therefore, people embracing the so-called fin-de-siècle awareness as Chen defines are Decadent.

As noted above, Yu is too socially-concerned to be postmodern or to endorse the fin-de-siècle awareness. For the same reason, Yu is not Decadent in the British and French sense, either. Indeed, in his early stories, he seems to be obsessed with violence, cruelty, insanity, death, etc. He even appears provocative by narrating the evil with nonchalance. However, he does so not for the sake of rebelling against humanism, but for the sake of exposing and criticizing precisely the decline of it in a concrete historical context and calling for its restoration. The expert in “The Past and the Penalties” might be the closest to the Decadent heroes in the West because he takes genuine pleasures from designing and executing all kinds of cruel penalties, at least before his final failure in executing one on himself. He aestheticizes the entire process of death execution, taking it as artwork and believing that perfectly executed penalties generate poetically extreme sensations in the dying people. He defends himself against imaginary moral accusations by defining the penalties as academic research, which does not concern morality. He seems to aim at challenging the social norms with his unusual taste and practice of art, which almost makes him a hero of art for art’s sake. However, his admiration for the cruel penalties is completely blown off by his failure in executing one on himself. The story



makes a sharp twist in the end showing that no matter how people try to justify violence in whatever names, it is unjustifiable anyway. After all, the penalties are not art and the executioner's pleasures are not maintainable once the executioner himself is involved.

Like the Western Decadents, Yu holds faith in the norms, humanism in particular in his case. But for the Western Decadents, the norms that they rebel against dominate their society hence threaten to drown individuality; whereas in Yu's case, humanism suffers in the turbulent history. Although the Western Decadents do not mean to overthrow the norms, they do ridicule or even attack them. In contrast, Yu has never ridiculed or attacked humanism. Although Yu deviates from the sentimental approaches to the traumatic history in literature through the nonchalant representation of the evil, he actually shares with the sentimental writers the faith in humanism and the determination to restore it. He is only a humanist who seems to be obsessed with the evil.

## Chapter IV

### Su Tong: An “Existentialist” in a World of No Exit

People who start reading a story by Su Tong need to take a deep breath first, because they are about to enter an enclosed world, which brews nothing but adultery, betrayal, chaos, crime, death, decay, despair, hatred, and endless injuries and sufferings. Because of this reason, critics tend to consider Su Tong’s works as examples of Decadence. It is all too easy for them to locate signs of the world’s inevitable decline in Su Tong’s stories, but they are in fact more about a pessimistic view over the bleak world and evil human nature than about Decadence. In Su Tong’s stories, the characters are either entitled to little choice or, when they do have a choice, most of them choose to behave in the most selfish way, usually establishing their happiness upon others’ sufferings. None of them holds up a value that they deliberately revolt against and none of them bother to assert their individual free will. By lavishing ink on stories of this kind, Su Tong stands out from other writers in the post-Cultural-Revolution era because he attributes historical trauma not to a specific political regime and ideology but to a more fundamental root, that is, evil human nature. He depicts a world that cannot be redeemed by reforming the regime, but rather a world with no exit.

### *Deprived and Humiliated*

Sabina Knight was among the first, and hence widely-cited, Western scholars to deal specifically with the issue of decadence in Su Tong's works. She calls people's attention to the characters' "self-determination and individual initiative" (91), which she appreciates for their subversive potential against the dominant revolutionary ideology. But despite her good intentions, Knight's reading of Su Tong's stories misses a crucial and common condition for the characters' existence, that is, the majority of the characters are deprived of or under the threat of losing something central to their life, such as means of survival, dignity, love, etc. Contrary to self-determination and individual initiative, most of them are at the mercy of fate.

One of the recurring themes in Su Tong's stories is the characters' obsession with food, which is a direct result of their ongoing impoverishment or the fear of it. Su Tong sets many of his stories in the time of famine or in its aftermath. For example, his first novella, "Escape in 1934" (*Yijiusansi nian de taowang*, 1987), reconstructs the narrator's family history in the year of 1934, when famine and pestilence hit the narrator's hometown in the countryside in a row, which trigger the peasants' massive exodus. Under acute pressure to survive, the narrator's grandmother Jiang, who raises six children on her own, fights like a fierce beast against her neighbors for ever-scarcer wild herbs. Meanwhile, although the narrator's grandfather Chen Baonian does not have to worry

about the shortage of food at all because of his successful business in the city, he launches the well-known robbery of three cargos of grain with his partner Little Blind. Little Blind used to be an abandoned baby from a brothel who survives like a miracle. His left eye receives a fatal attack when he grabs a piece of cured meat from a starved dog when he is only five years old. Judging from the life experience of both Chen Baonian and Little Blind, the narrator believes that they rob the cargos “out of their dream for food stemming from their starved childhood” (“Opium” 147). That is to say, hunger, be it an ongoing experience or a residue of memory, haunts the characters in the story like a ghost, which turns people into ferocious animals.

In Su Tong’s second novella “Opium Family” (*Yingsu zhijia*, 1988), the shadow of hunger hangs over the pre-1949 Maple-Poplar Village, where preserving food and obtaining land are the cardinal principles. The landlord Liu Laoxia owns the entire village and stores grains like hills, but he is most frugal and even miserly in the consumption of food. He marries his only daughter to an old hunchback in exchange for twenty hectares of land, of which he feels very proud. His elder son Yanyi is permanently tortured by a fathomless hunger, which is so alarming to the family that they often imprison him to prevent him from stealing food. According to the narrator, Yanyi inherits an enormous appetite from his ancestors, who can each eat a whole pig at once due to constant

starvation. In fact, both Liu Laoxia's excessive frugality and greediness and Yanyi's insatiable appetite are rooted in the deprivation that the family used to suffer.

Meanwhile, the peasants in the village share the same mindset with the landlord. When Chen Mao, the rebellious long-term laborer, tells the peasants that the Communist Party will come to liberate them, they compete with each other to punish him simply because the landlord offers to reward them each with a bag of rice. When the Communist cadres save the naked Chen Mao, he refuses to put on his trousers first but immediately snatches a bun from one of them. Most ironically, the peasants fling into sheer chaos to catch the land titles blown into the air in a land-reform meeting that announces precisely the annulment of them. That is to say, in Maple-Poplar Village, food and land reign, in front of which nothing else counts, be it parental love, liberty or dignity. Like those in "Escape in 1934," the characters in "The Opium Family" simply follow their natural instinct of survival with little reflection upon their life, not to mention to pursue self-determination.

The characters' obsession with food is pushed to the extreme in Su Tong's first novel *Rice (Mi)*, 1991), in which rice has become a fetish for the protagonist Wulong. Wulong is a refugee of famine. Upon his arrival in a city with an empty stomach, he spends the first night in the street next to an immobile man, who turns out to be dead due to starvation. This is the primal trauma for Wulong, which foreshadows his entire life. In the alien and

hostile city, only raw rice can bring him a genuine sense of comfort and excitement. It is a natural choice for a refugee of famine to work for a rice shop, but no one would predict his abnormal obsession with the grain. At the rice shop, he does not want to leave the storage room because to him the pile of rice feels like a huge cradle, by which he can relax and easily fall asleep. Whenever he sees a woman next to rice, he experiences an irresistible surge of sexual desire. Later on, he develops a notoriously eccentric habit, that is, to stick raw rice into women's vaginas after their sexual intercourse. As he takes over the ownership of the rice shop by marrying the two daughters of its original owner successively and gradually gets rich, the first thing he does is to purchase a huge amount of land in his hometown in the countryside. His obsession reaches its crescendo near the end of his life when he insists on returning to his hometown with a whole train carriage of newly-harvested rice.

Perverse as Wulong seems to be, his obsession with rice is not a willful choice, but stems from a primitive impulse of self-protection and survival instinct. Originally, rice is only a necessity for sustaining life. But his attachment to rice strengthens as it continues to signify life, security, hope and, more importantly, his triumph in the struggle for survival. The intensification of his obsession simply confirms his initial desperation and continuing fear of deprivation. Therefore, Wulong's obsession with rice is not so much a

result of self-determination or individual initiative as of an exaggerated response to a devastating famine.

Intricately intertwined with the fear of hunger, hatred fosters the other half of Wulong's bitter character. When he first arrives in the city, he falls under the hands of a group of gangsters on a dock, who force him to call everyone dad so that he can take away the piece of meat that they drop on the ground. Throughout his life, Wulong never gets rid of the sense of shame while hatred grows inside him like ever-expanding moss. Many years later, after he becomes the head of the gangster group, he maltreats a poor boy like his former self at the dock simply because the boy agrees to call him dad in trade of two dollars. He scolds the boy severely for his shamelessness but praises the sparks of hatred in his eyes, declaring that it is hatred that leads him to success. This is not an exaggeration, because each of his successes can be seen as a victory of revenge. In short, Wulong is a revenging machine fueled with profound hatred.

It is noteworthy that deprivation does not affect the efficacy of Wulong's revenge. On the contrary, it is precisely the lack of power and resources that makes Wulong's revenge more secretive, more ingenious and crueler. For example, when he is still cheap labor in the rice shop, he causes the death of Ah Bao, who humiliates him on the dock. He does so by sending an anonymous letter to report the secret relationship between Ah Bao and Zhiyun to Lord Six, who is Zhiyun's exclusive patron and Ah Bao's boss. To revenge

himself on Lord Six for taking away his wife and tramping on his pride as a man, Wulong detonates Lord Six's private arsenal by pretending to be the haunting spirit of Ah Bao. As his physical condition deteriorates, he notices the betrayal of his own men. To punish them, he secretly makes a deal with another gangster group about a long-disputed territory without telling his own men, hence ignites a bloody fight between the two groups, which kills all his own men.

Although deprivation often courts humiliation of Wulong, it also teaches him how to murder without staining his own hands. It seems that Wulong is the one in control of these situations and hence has the power of self-determination, but this power is rather limited. Aggressive as Wulong seems to be, he is constantly in the position of a self-defending underdog. He is always prompted into action, rather than taking the initiatives, only that accumulated humiliations have trained him to be extremely sensitive, vicious and always ready to bite back.

Of course, the underdogs' involuntariness in revenge does not justify their cruelty. In fact, Su Tong seems particularly interested in the dark psychology of the underdog. For example, in "Escape in 1934," the narrator's grandmother Jiang should have been the one that deserves the greatest sympathy. Her husband leaves her several days after their wedding because he considers her as the source of catastrophe. He makes her give birth to seven children but refuses to give her any financial support despite his business



success in the city. He even sends his pregnant mistress Huanzi to live with her. Although Jiang suffers deep indignation, she does not make any violent revolt. Rather, she secretly poisons Huanzi, causing her to miscarry.

Similarly, the three jealous concubines of a landlord in “Raise the Red Lantern” (*Qi qie chengqun*, 1989) engage in a silent war against each other. They share the same pathetic fate, that is, their life is solely dependant on the husband’s favor, but they are predestined to be rivals. Temporary alliance is possible when they find a common enemy, but real friendship is nothing but a joke. To compete for the husband’s favor, Zhuoyun accepts the husband’s humiliating requests in sex that other concubines refuse. Meanwhile, she poisons Meishan so as to abort her fetus, instructs Songlian’s servant to curse her by piercing needles into a cloth doll that wears Songlian’s name, and spies on Meishan’s adultery. Meishan and Songlian make their own moves, too. For example, Meishan pays a boy to beat Zhuoyun’s daughter at school. Songlian clips Zhuoyun’s ear when giving her a haircut. Obviously, Meishan and Songlian are much less experienced and resourceful than their common enemy, so Meishan is killed due to discovered adultery and Songlian driven into madness upon witnessing Meishan’s death. Ironically, barely after getting rid of Meishan and Songlian, Zhuoyun is introduced to her new rival, the husband’s fourth concubine, so she cannot even take a break before continuing her unending battle. Therefore, although Zhuoyun is the cruelest underdog that survives, she

can never live a secured and peaceful life. She can never dismiss herself from the bloody war among the underdogs or escape the fate of being an underdog.

Chinese scholar Jiao Yuhong draws a parallel between these female characters in Su Tong's stories and Salome in Oscar Wilde's play. For Jiao, Salome "embodies desire, seduction and death" (418) while Su Tong's female characters resemble Salome for their "struggle in despair and sinking in desire" (418). Jiao takes this as important evidence for Su Tong's works being Decadent. Jiao is right in registering the despair of Su Tong's female characters, but mistaken in the interpretation of Salome. Indeed one can argue that Salome "embodies desire, seduction and death," but this is an extremely vague argument, especially when it does not specify the power dynamics between Salome and her male beholders. It is true that Salome seduces men and eventually dies, but she is the one manipulating male desires. As a quintessential example of *femme fatale*, she is assertive, seductive, mysterious and destructive at the same time. She never struggles in despair nor sinks in desire. On the contrary, Su Tong's female characters are prey to male desires, rather than manipulators. Therefore, there is no similarity between the two at all. In fact, it is precisely because of their deprived and humiliated situation that Su Tong's female characters do not have much choice except to struggle for survival and their desperate struggle can hardly live up to self-determination.

In Su Tong's works, deprivation and humiliation are not restricted to the Republican period, but also flourish in stories set in the Communist era. For example, in "The Shu Brothers" (*Shu jia xiongdi*, 1989), Shu Nong is already fourteen years old but still wets the bed at night. He suffers tremendous shame for this unspeakable flaw in his life, but neither sympathy nor protection is easy to obtain. When the neighborhood girl Han Zhen publicizes his secret upon failing to blackmail him, he decides to seek revenge in his own way. He first hides five dead mice and a handful of thumbtacks in Han Zhen's bed and then urinates in her rice-cooker. His elder brother Shu Gong bullies him, but he is perfectly aware that he cannot beat him in physical confrontation, so he spies on his brother's secret dates. Unable to stand his father's threat of beating and his brother's framing for bed-wetting, Shu Nong locks them inside the house and sets it on fire. True, Shu Nong is as cruel as a criminal, but he is also helpless and desperate.

The protagonist in "The Time of Tattoo" (*Ciqing shidai*, 1993), Little Cripple, would have understood Shu Nong's pain best should they have met. Little Cripple loses his mother at birth, then a leg in a train accident when he is very young and later the protection of his elder brother, who dies in an adolescent gang fight. As a result, he becomes the target of bullying by everyone at school. Like Shu Nong, he hides a dead cat and spreads excrement in the house of the boy whom he believes has pushed him in front of the train. But he is much more ambitious than Shu Nong. Ever since he finds a flag of

his brother's rival gang, he decides to revive his brother's gang. He learns martial arts from an eccentric figure in the town, who promises to help him to bully everyone that has bullied him. He gradually rallies a group of younger boys, who obey him with awe. He is particularly obsessed with a pig-head-shaped tattoo, which he sees on his brother's arm and believes to signify power. Unfortunately, he is dethroned under the collaboration of traitors in his own gang and his enemies, who just cannot tolerate the reign of a cripple. The long-yearned tattoo turns out not to be a pig head in the arm, but reads "coward" on his forehead.

Thus, none of these characters in Su Tong's stories are innocent, but they engage with cruelty and evil because they all have to safeguard something of paramount importance to them, such as survival and dignity. Unlike the Western Decadents who are all extremely well-off and worry about nothing but how to fight their boredom, these characters in Su Tong's stories are struggling on the margin of society. Their hostile environment denies them access to power and resources, leaving them easy targets for humiliation. Therefore, it is almost a necessity for them to become crueler than their enemies. Even if they have done so, it is never guaranteed that they can be immune to deprivation and humiliation forever. That is to say, they do not get to choose their own life but are forced to behave in certain ways. Their behavior may bear some resemblance

to the Western Decadents' eccentricity, but they will never experience the intellectual pleasure of asserting their individual free will as the Western Decadents do.

### ***Hell Is Other People***

Should the characters be provided with all the necessities for life, one may ask, will they become better persons? Su Tong's answer is probably no. It is breathtaking to see in Su Tong's stories how little tender feeling is left between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, and between lovers, not to mention between strangers. People seem to be stone-hearted and cold-blooded, taking advantage of others whenever they can. Personal interests seem to be the only value that everyone cares about and strives for.

The families in Su Tong's stories are highly dysfunctional. Couples who are supposed to be the closest view each other as enemies. For example, in "Escape in 1934," the narrator's grandfather Chen Baonian believes that his wife Jiang is a curse to the family hence treats her merely as a slave of reproduction. In "The Shu Brothers," both Shu Nong's and Han Zhen's parents keep an empty marriage and the affair between Mr. Shu and Mrs. Han is a public secret. Mrs. Shu is too timid to protest whereas Mr. Han does not bother to interfere. In "The Degeneration of the South" (*Nanfang de duoluo*, 1989), the proprietress of the Mei's teahouse Yao Bizhen cares nothing about her aging husband except his gold bullion. She flirts with all male customers and even keeps her

young lover at home, leaving her husband die in loneliness and misery. In “Women’s Life” (*Funü shenghuo*, 1990), none of the three female protagonists enjoys a normal marriage. Xian is abandoned by her boss because she refuses abortion. Zhi turns neurotic due to her suspicion of her husband’s infidelity. Xiao’s practical attitude towards marriage cannot prevent it from divorce. In *Rice*, Wulong abuses his wives both physically and emotionally. In Su Tong’s stories, marriage has nothing to do with romance and mutual care. Husbands and wives are like prisoners trapped in one cell, who are at the best aloof to each other when they do not fight.

The relationship between fathers and sons in Su Tong’s stories is almost scandalous. Nearly all the father figures are tyrants. In “Escape in 1934,” each time Chen Baonian’s eldest son Gouzai steals the bamboo knife, which is a family heirloom, Chen Baonian turns into a furious monster and beats the boy so hard that one can even hear the cracking sounds in his little body. Similarly, the fathers in “The Shu Brothers,” *Rice*, “The Nineteen Houses” (*Shijiu jian fang*, 1992) and “The Time of Tattoo” all have the tendency of brutal violence in response to their sons’ wrong-doings. In return, the sons revenge in their own way. In “The Shu Brothers,” Shu Nong attempts to burn their house after locking his father and brother in. In *Rice*, Wulong’s son waits till the end of his life and extracts all his golden teeth. In “Gardening” (*Yuanyi*, 1992), instead of looking for his lost father with the money that his mother gives him, Lingfeng invests it in an amateur

theater troupe and travels with it. The most audacious son is Little Cripple's elder brother in "The Time of Tattoo," who beats his father in the street with the help of his adolescent friends.

The relationship between mothers and daughters is no better than that between men. In "The Shu Brothers," Han Li entertains deep contempt towards her mother for her affair with Mr. Shu. She not only rudely refuses Mr. Shu's birthday gift in front of her mother but also seduces Mr. Shu's elder son Shu Gong as revenge. Her logic is quite strange, that is, she wants to disgrace herself so as to disgrace her mother. In "Women's Life," none of the three protagonists harbors any emotional attachment to their mother or daughter and their relationship is further complicated by men. Xian despises yet does not really care about her mother's relationship with Barber Wang. But once she realizes that her mother might give her wealth to the man, she voluntarily succumbs to Barber Wang's seduction, which devastates her mother's last illusion about romance. Xian disagrees with Zhi's choice of husband because of the difference in family background, but once she sees the handsome and robust son-in-law, she cannot help but to dress up, which sets Zhi on alert, and even peaks at their love-making. Zhi is sent to a mental hospital by her adopted daughter Xiao because Xiao needs space in the house for marriage. Xian finally dies in a hot summer because Xiao is too parsimonious to purchase ice for her to keep cool.

Among siblings, there is not so much of ordinary rivalry as of general indifference and occasional hostility and violence. In “Escape in 1934,” Gouzai hits on his mother’s belly because his fetus brother takes away the family resources hence prevents him from getting a pair of shoes. In “The Shu Brothers,” neither the Shu brothers nor the Han sisters are on friendly terms with their siblings. Shu Gong urinates on Shu Nong’s bed to frame him for bed-wetting so that their father will punish him severely, which makes Shu Nong determined to burn the house. In *Rice*, the rice shop owner’s two daughters are constantly in a fight. Wulong’s eldest son even buries his little sister alive in a pile of raw rice because she tells their parents that he has traded a box of gold for candy. In “Another Kind of Women’s Life” (*Ling yizhong funü shenghuo*, 1991), the Jian sisters live a reclusive life together. They seem to be mutually dependant and caring, but it turns out that the elder sister is a misanthrope and simply keeps her sister as her company by brainwashing her to consider it shameful to contact the outside world. Docile and submissive as the younger sister appears to be, she resents her elder sister to the bones and finally leaves her to die on her own.

Peopel may risk getting bored should they continue listing the regrettable domestic relationships in Su Tong’s stories, but this seems to be his favorite theme. Looking retrospectively on his own writing of *Rice*, Su Tong confesses that he created the story with a strong desire for destruction:

Inside me there was an irresistible desire for destruction and subversion. In an



extremely reckless and cruel way, I depicted a family almost like a hell. There were so many things that I wanted to destroy and overthrow, including the established notion of humanity, morality and ethical system. I wanted to break down everything. Looking back at that time, I see myself as an enchanted wizard... The whole story reveals a space of human nature, but it is exactly this space of human nature that I am not satisfied with because it is too sharp hence loses elasticity. There should have been richer layers in human nature, but my depiction is a little narrow and monotonous. ("Thoughts" 48)

Su Tong's confession about his writing of *Rice* can apply to his other stories, too. Read separately, each story is interestingly shocking. When put together, one cannot help but to realize that Su Tong has the lowest opinion about family relationships. In his observation and/or imagination, people are unable to love, forgive or care about each other. Each of them is like a self-centered tank roaming around on the battlefield of life aimlessly, crushing everything that gets in the way. A quick note needs to be added here. By "breaking down everything," Su Tong does not mean to question the value of the established notion of humanity, morality and ethic system. Neither does he celebrate the dominance of hell. His point is that, no matter how lofty ideals are, reality is just the opposite.

As Su Tong testifies, his stories about family also reflect his thinking about humanity in general. In fact, Su Tong's characters are not just hostile towards their family members, but also show no respect for life and are horrifyingly nonchalant towards others' misery and death. In "Gardening," three adolescents kill Mr. Kong simply for the sake of getting his golden match. In *Rice*, after robbing a man of his boat of rice, Ah Bao and his gang

kick the man into the river like kicking a sack of sand. In front of something that is of certain financial interest, no matter how little that interest is, one can destroy another human being without any scruple.

People's nonchalance towards life reaches such an extent that even romance cannot redeem it. In *Rice*, Wulong succeeds in killing Ah Bao with the hand of Lord Six, but he is amazed to find that Zhiyun feels nothing about her lover's death:

Wulong heard the conversation between Zhiyun and Qiyun, who were talking about the death of Ah Bao. While talking, Zhiyun was brushing her teeth. When Wulong saw the foam around her mouth mixed with the indifference on her face, he was struck by a penetrating fear about women. Just think about it! A man was killed because of her, but she seems to be totally unaffected by it. Is it true that the intimate relationship based on the body will wither like a flower any time? ("Rice" 47-48)

Zhiyun only starts to feel uneasy and even a little afraid when Ah Bao's "spirit" haunts the house of Lord Six. That is to say, as long as there is no risk of direct punishment, Zhiyun sees no necessity to take her lover's death seriously.

One may argue that here Zhiyun is a Salome, who plays with the male desires with a cool and cruel mind. But Zhiyun is not as mysterious and resourceful as Salome. Her intention is crystal clear: to make men her playthings, rather than the other way around, which can be confirmed in her relationship with Wulong. Unfortunately, her seemingly feminist endeavor is based on her privileged status. Once Wulong rises to power, she can no longer manipulate him. More pathetically, she never escapes the fate of being the

plaything of Lord Six and eventually dies a miserable servant in his house deprived of even her own son's respect and pity.

In "The Shu Brothers," Han Li and Shu Gong do enjoy a brief "honeymoon," but once Han Li finds out that she is pregnant, the two lovebirds immediately turn into enemies. Han Li is both ashamed and frightened by her pregnancy, but Shu Gong is rather indifferent and even annoyed by the trouble Han Li makes. Not knowing what to do, Han Li proposes to commit suicide together with Shu Gong. Upon his refusal, she threatens to sue him for rape. At this moment, Han Li "looked so calm, just like a sophisticated and experienced woman, who is skillful at all kinds of tricks" ("Tattoo" 56). Despite his hatred for Han Li, Shu Gong accepts her arrangement without much difficulty, "Whatever. If you really want me to die, I'll just die" ("Tattoo" 57). Giving up his own life sounds as easy as spitting out chewing gum. He hates the idea of suicide not because he cherishes his life, but because he does not feel like being forced to kill himself. As Han Li dies of drowning but he himself saved, Shu Gong betrays no regret or pain over his girlfriend's death at all. He simply resumes his daily routine as if nothing has happened. To Shu Gong, life, be it his own or others', means nothing.

Sometimes, Su Tong's stories give the readers a sense of déjà vu, because like the numb onlookers in Lu Xun's works, Su Tong's characters also take others' sufferings as an entertaining spectacle and derive plenty of pleasure in watching them. For example, in

“The Degeneration of the South,” in addition to the lascivious and greedy proprietress of the teahouse Yao Bizhen and her cowardly and shameless lover Li Chang, Su Tong also depicts a group of nameless customers: “If you strip the customers at the Mei’s teahouse, you will see their repulsive real face. They are a bunch of thugs, libertines and idlers, who are evil-natured, ill-intentioned, always thirsty for chaos, and searching for free benefits in the name of drinking tea” (“Tattoo” 93). The arrival of a country girl Hongling merely adds an appetizer to their meals and gossip. Hongling escapes from her father’s sexual abuse by going to the city, where she immediately falls to exploitation by both Yao and Li and eventually gets drowned by Li, who refuses to take responsibility for her pregnancy. The customers inquire into Hongling’s secret past with tremendous curiosity, watch the farcical fight among her, Yao and Li with unlimited amusement and rush to see her dead body as if they fear that they might miss an important show. None of them shows any sympathy. None of them realizes that Hongling is a living person with blood, flesh and also feelings. She has come and gone, leaving not a single trace in the customers’ life.

Similarly, in “The Time of Tattoo,” when there is a gang fight among the adolescents and many are brutalized to death, the residents of the Mahogany Street cannot hold up their excitement but rush out to watch. Seeing both his sisters are ready to go, Little Cripple grabs a sister’s pigtail and blurts out, “Take me, too! I want to see dead people” (“Tattoo” 9). Since he cannot find his walking sticks at once, he demands a sister to carry

him on the back. Even though Little Cripple has been the target of humiliation and bullying, he is no less blood-thirsty. When Little Cripple himself makes a scene in the street by ambushing the traitor Zhu Ming, he also attracts due attention from the passers-by:

More people in the Mahogany Street just retreated to the stairs in front of the candy shop as if they had been well-trained. Some climbed onto a tricycle nearby to gain a bird's-eye view of the fight. Seeing Little Cripple beating Zhu Ming with walking sticks and whips, the spectators were not very surprised except making a few admiring comments on Little Cripple's heroic image. Zhu Ming swirled in the street with blood all over his face, but did not stir much response in the spectators. After all, this is a rather small fight among the adolescents. For the residents in the Mahogany Street, this is nothing new. ("Tattoo" 27)

Like the costumers of Mei's teahouse in "The Degeneration of the South," the residents in the Mahogany Street are emotionless. They see the actual pain, blood and death nothing but a spectacle free of ticket, which brings something fun to their monotonous life. Decades ago, Lu Xun poignantly criticized the numbness among Chinese people with the hope that his outcry may wake up their awareness of the meaning of life and freedom. In Su Tong's stories, nothing seems to have changed.

Knight is correct in pointing out the denial of "any belief in meaningful human evolution" (109) in Su Tong's stories:

The moral depravity of this panorama seems all the more absolute because it is unreflective and because the characters enjoy no redeeming qualities, no expanded awareness, and no moral development. It is not only that the malefactors are impelled toward evil, but that they utterly lack any moral inhibitions or compunction. (109)

There is no question that Su Tong is deeply pessimistic over human nature. Like many

other scholars, Knight ascribes the moral depravity in Su Tong's stories to the immanent decadence in human nature and history. Knight's conclusion is based on her equation of decadence and degeneracy. However, it is precisely their lack of moral inhibitions and compunction that disqualifies them from being Decadent in the original sense. The British and French Decadents revolt against the norms that they believe in hence draw perverse pleasures from their revolts. On the contrary, Su Tong's characters simply follow their natural evil instinct and enjoy easy delight from the fulfillment of their immediate desires. As Knight observes, Su Tong's characters are unreflective. There is hardly any sense of morality or social norms in their minds. They care only about their personal interest and go for it, without thinking about the external expectations and prohibitions. They do not care about morality and social norms, nor do they think of their individual free will, not to mention to assert their individual free will against the established moral codes and social norms. Therefore, they are just degenerate, not Decadent.

### ***No Exit***

Another theme in Su Tong's stories is escape. It is in the title of his first novella "Escape in 1934." Another short story is simply called "Escape" (Tao, 1989). In addition to that, escape is almost everywhere in Su Tong's writings. This may be the most and the least successful theme for Su Tong. It is successful because he depicts the bleak world and evil human nature in such a lively way that it makes escape both necessary and

urgent. It is unsuccessful because none of the characters ever manages to escape.

Characters like Wulong and Hongling in fact both escape into the city but soon realize that a larger yet no less deadly trap is awaiting them there. The fictional world created by Su Tong has no exit. One can even argue that it has no entrance, either, because it is so tightly enclosed that neither can people get out nor can external influence bleed in to make a difference.

All of Su Tong's stories are set in an enclosed space, be it a compound, a flat, a street, a village, or a city, etc. It is noteworthy that these settings are not very different from each other, at least in terms of their effect upon the characters. Many scholars pay special attention to the urban settings in Su Tong's stories and tend to view them as a major cause of the characters' degeneration, especially when he writes explicitly at the end of *Rice*:

The city is a gigantic decorated tomb...So many people die in the city of murder, disease, fury, sadness or the bayonets and bullets of the Japanese soldiers. To them, the city is an enormous coffin. The coffin lifts its lid, emitting black smoke from factories and fragrance from women's rouge and body. When it glows with wealth and luxury, it also holds out an invisible yet powerful hand, dragging the wanderers in the streets into its icy and fathomless embrace. ("Rice" 201)

This last paragraph echoes Wulong's first impression of the city and seems to frame Wulong's degeneration in an urban setting that is full of vice. Knight also associates the city with decadence because "part of the message of decadence is to point out how the impersonal power of modern cities can crush individuals" (108).

It is true that British and French Decadence is always associated with nineteenth-century European cities, but it is not because of the cities' impersonal power. Rather, modern cities provide the Decadents with several conditions necessary for their existence, such as an open and fluid space that enables the flâneurs to roam around and engage in ephemeral encounters, multitudes of industrial products that can satisfy Decadents' obsession with artificiality, and the rapid change in landscape and technology that helps sustain the Decadents' fast-changing taste, so on and so forth. In contrast, the city Wulong dwells in is not modern enough or at least his living circle is too small to overlap with its modern side. Although upon his arrival in the city, Wulong sees its symbol, giant chimneys in factories with black smoke, this is all his contact with modernity, that is, to look at it from a distance. From then on, the city, together with its symbol, completely disappears from Wulong's life. His activities are mainly restricted in the rice shop. Even after he joins the gangster group, he does nothing more than committing money-oriented crimes and frequenting brothels. When he gets rich, he returns to his hometown in the countryside to purchase land for agriculture. That is to say, although Wulong lives in an urban space, he leads a much more primitive way of life and keeps the mindset of a peasant. His degeneration does not have much to do with modernity.



In the other stories that are set in cities, the city also looms only in the far background, too vague to be significant. In “Escape in 1934,” Gouzai is amazed at the urban space when he arrives in the city for the first time, but he is soon “arrested” by his father’s bamboo-ware shop and then his infatuation with Huanzi. In “The Shu Brothers,” “The Degeneration of the South,” “Women’s Life,” “Gardening” and “The Time of Tattoo,” most characters hold supposedly modern jobs or attend supposedly modern schools, but modernity does not find reflection in their life at all. In “Another Kind of Women’s Life,” the Jian sisters refuse, voluntarily or involuntarily, to contact with the outside world. In “Rouge” (*Hongfen*, 1991), Xiao’e deliberately retreats from a modern factory into her enclosed domestic space. In contrast to the French Decadent hero Des Esseintes, who retires to his little villa in the suburb as he is bored with the perversities enabled by the modern city but still maintains his access to all modern products and conveniences, Su Tong’s characters isolate themselves in various enclosed spaces, unclear what modernity is and uninterested in exploring it.

In fact, even when external influence is imposed on people in the enclosed spaces, they can still find a way to resist it. At first glance, Su Tong’s stories seem to affirm the revolutionary narrative in its depiction of the decline of landlords, prostitutes, concubines, gangster groups, etc. in the pre-Communist era, or rather, all the residues of the old society. Chinese critic Ke Ze even takes them as perfect examples for Karl Marx’s and

Friedrich Von Engels' theories about "the inevitable tragedy of the old classes" (232) in a time of drastic social transformation. But on a second look, one may notice that it is not just the residues of the old society that are declining; the supposedly progressive classes—such as peasants and workers—are not rising, either. In Su Tong's works, class, the fundamental category in the revolutionary narrative, does not seem to be relevant. Revolution, the enforced re-ordering of society, does not seem to be able to crack open the enclosed world in Su Tong's stories.

For example, in "The Opium Family," the Maple-Poplar Village is "distant from all thoughts and isms" ("Opium" 12). The peasants hate the landlords but have no intention to revolt, considering "themselves as farm tools that belong to the landlord Liu Laoxia" ("Opium" 37). They never imagine a world with fairer distribution of land. This is why they cannot believe the young landlord Chencao when he loans the land to them with significantly lower interests and simply go crazy to catch the annulled land titles on the land-reform meeting. To the Communist cadre Lu Fang, the Maple-Poplar Village is like a sunken ship stuck at the bottom of the sea which resists any attempt of salvage, because "the villagers are like fish, seaweed and hidden reef, holding you back and making it almost impossible to reach the wreck" ("Opium" 33). Even the most rebellious and daring peasant Chen Mao can think of nothing better than zero labor and freer sex after revolution, which in fact used to be the privileges of the landlords. After executing Chen

Mao for his rape of Liu Suzi, Lu Fang sighs to himself that “you can change a person’s fate, but not his blood” (“Opium” 47). By fate, Lu refers to Chen Mao’s political status. That is to say, revolution can re-shuffle people’s political status by force, but cannot change their human nature.

“Raise the Red Lantern” tells a story quite different from those about women emancipation in the Republican era. Unlike those young ladies in conventional families who crave revolution because of modern education, Songlian, a college student, drops out of school to become a concubine in an extremely patriarchal family. After her father’s death and due to the lack of financial support at home, she chooses to be a concubine in a rich family instead of marrying an ordinary man. Out of practical reasons, she makes a decision to imprison herself in a big conventional family, where she participates in the cruel war among jealous wives. It is noteworthy that the husband has a daughter and a son studying in modern schools, too, but neither of them constitutes any threat to the stable and powerful patriarchal system. The conventional family is not only distant from any new ideas but can also drown anything new that comes close to it.

In “Rouge,” both Qiuyi and Xiao’e, two former prostitutes, refuse the political reform under the new Communist regime. Qiuyi does so by jumping off the Liberation Army’s truck on its way to a reform camp. She first hides at her former client and lover Lao Pu’s place, then in a Buddhist temple as a nun and finally marries an old hunchback.

Xiao'e does not escape from the reform camp, but she is never truly reformed. At the reform camp, the Communist cadres encourage her to accuse the old society of forcing her into the profession, but she not only admits that she voluntarily chose the job because she was afraid of other physically-demanding labor but also implies that prostitution is just a normal job that pays people for their efforts. Shortly after her term in the reform camp is full, she marries Lao Pu and resigns from her "normal" job as a factory worker. After Lao Pu dies, she elopes with a northerner to avoid labor back in the factory. Despite the forced labor and political education in the reform camp, Xiao'e insists on her way of life. Although Qiuyi and Xiao'e are very different in personality, one tough and the other weak, both of them are quite stubborn to keep revolution out of their way.

In "The Time of Tattoo," which is set in the 1970s, revolutionary propaganda is ironically incorporated into Little Cripple's gangster group. To discipline the boys in his gang, he slightly revises the Liberation Army's regulations, with no parody intended. He also copies as his commandment the most popular political slogan that the Communist government designed to deter Taiwan from military attempts, "We will not attack unless we are attacked; if we are attacked, we will certainly counterattack" ("Tattoo" 19). To mobilize the boys to fight, Little Cripple again borrows a line from a revolutionary song that declares the ultimate faith in overthrowing the American imperialism, "The east wind blows and we beat the battle drums. In the present world, who on earth is afraid of

whom” (“Tattoo” 29). Last but not the least, he makes the flag of his gang out of a silk banner that the government originally uses to honor a residents’ committee for its excellent work in maintaining hygiene. That is to say, despite decades of revolutionary dominance, especially when revolutionary ideology is supposed to have penetrated every corner of the country, Little Cripple easily peels propaganda off the revolutionary ideology and makes it serve his gangster group. Without inquiring into the potential similarity between the revolutionary ideology and the spirit of a gangster group, one can at least get a glimpse of the revolution’s futile effort in reforming people’s mind.

In these enclosed spaces, which deny external influence, be it modernity or revolution, there are a few, though very few, enlightened figures that deserve critical attention. In “Raise the Red Lantern,” the landlord’s eldest son Feipu is too familiar with the endless and meaningless war among people, so despite his deep loneliness and strong fancy in Songlian, he turns down her advance and chooses to remain an outsider in the big family. In “The Opium Family,” Chencao sees through the deep-rooted hatred and avarice in human nature, so he predicts the failure of Lu Fang’s revolutionary endeavors. In “The Degeneration of the South,” the Mei’s teahouse’s disempowered boss Jin Wenkai lives like a hermit. In front of his wife’s maltreatment and the political persecutions, he refrains from any confrontation or communication and only secretly instructs the young narrator to run away.

Scholars preoccupied with the issue of decadence tend to make false analogies. For example, Jiao Yuhong considers Su Tong's narcissistic and effete characters, such as Feipu and Chencao, as Chinese counterparts of British and French dandies who attracted people's attention with their unconventional and resplendent clothing (419). But Jiao's understanding of British and French dandies is superficial and his interpretation of Su Tong's characters inaccurate. As representative of Decadence, British and French dandies indeed impressed people with their unique clothing, but that was only one of their ways to create for themselves a "personal originality," which is their "first and foremost... burning need" (Baudelaire, 27). If British and French dandies cared only about their distinguishable appearance, this is not the case with Su Tong's characters. None of Su Tong's characters pay much attention to their appearance, not to mention to be unconventional and resplendent in clothing. These enlightened characters may look effete, but they are hardly narcissistic. They do not appreciate their personal talents or appearance above anything else, nor do they make any effort to boost their personal interests. They are just extremely passive, entertaining no faith in any change in dire situations.

David Wang notices this kind of passivity and thus considers Chencao a hero of Decadence because he "lacks the will for life" (14), but this only betrays an even greater misunderstanding of Decadence. The will for life is at the center of Decadence. The

Decadents' rebellion and performance of perversion aim precisely at asserting their free will. It is true that they are constantly bored, but that is because their ever-changing perverse eccentricity cannot quench their exploding thirst for originality. Like Feipu and Jin Wenkai, Chencao never wants to assert his free will. They are not bored, either. They just think it useless to fight against the status quo.

In addition, Wang confuses Decadence with sexual impotence, which he finds in Chencao, the landlord Chen Zuoqian in "Raise the Red Lantern" and the landlord Chen Wenzhi in "Escape in 1934" (16). He is mistaken in at least two ways. First, none of the three characters is impotent. Although Chencao is in poor physical condition and Chen Wenzhi lives an isolated life, nowhere in the stories do we learn that they suffer impotence. Chen Zuoqian is in fact exceptionally active in sex. It is true that he begins to sense the decline of his body after his fiftieth birthday, which is natural if we take Chinese people's average lifespan in the Republican era into consideration, but he keeps taking in concubines after the death of Meishan and the madness of Songlian. Second, even if they were indeed impotent, they are not Decadent. British and French Decadents never seem to concern themselves with sexual prowess. They are more interested in all kinds of sensual pleasures and they do not seem to have a problem when they indulge in sex. When they do turn sexually inactive like the protagonist Des Esseintes in *A Rebours*, it is not because they lack the ability but because they think women cannot satisfy their

desire for novelty. That is to say, Decadence is more concerned about mind than about body. The decline of one's physical power does not make one Decadent.

Though not Decadent, Feipu, Chencao and Jin Wenkai are the few characters in Su Tong's stories that reflect upon the irredeemable world. They know they can neither escape from it nor change it, so they try their best to remain detached observers of the farces going on. In fact, they are more like the writer Su Tong who writes these stories from a rather detached distance. In Su Tong's works, one can find similar representation of emotionless and unreflective spectators of others' sufferings as in Lu Xun's stories, but one cannot sense the same conviction in Su Tong as in Lu Xun. Indeed, Lu Xun ruthlessly exposes the darkness in Chinese society, but he never admits the impossibility of transformation. In fact, his strenuous exposure speaks of his urgent appeal for an immediate action against the darkness. In contrast, when Su Tong depicts the evil human nature, he always denies the possibility of change. Just like in "The Degeneration of the South," the narrator says "the south is a decayed yet enchanting existence" ("Tattoo" 72). To say the south is enchanting is not to praise its beauty or its charm, but to emphasize its numbing power that prevents people from reflection and reaction.

Su Tong is not a Decadent writer. His characters engage in cruelty and evil out of revenge or selfish purposes, not because they want to demonstrate their individual free will by revolting against the norms they believe in. His fictional world reads like an



extended version of Jean-Paul Sartre's existential play *Huis Clos*, which is translated into English as *No Exit*. Although no evidence shows Su Tong's interest in or comprehensive knowledge of existentialism, his stories do reiterate one theme, that is, hell is other people. Like the characters in *No Exit*, Su Tong's characters are doomed for eternity, which is a result of their evil human nature, or rather, their blood. Unlike other writers in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, who constantly refer to the historical trauma in their writing, Su Tong is not particularly concerned about it. People's tragedy is more attributable to their internal and immanent nature than to the external and coincidental history. Or rather, it seems that, to Su Tong, even if the Cultural Revolution had not happened, people would have suffered in other ways.

## Chapter V

### Wang Shuo: A Cultural Elite in Disguise of a Hooligan

Hardly any Chinese writer in the twentieth century has generated so divided critical opinions as Wang Shuo has. Since the late 1980s, the name Wang Shuo has been associated with “Hooligan Literature” (*pizi wenxue*). The popularity of Wang’s stories and his public denunciation of Chinese intellectuals provoked such a huge controversy that people have designated a term, “Wang Shuo phenomenon,” to the series of cultural events in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For those in the “Hate Wang Shuo” camp, Wang as well as his characters are morally degenerate, blasphemous, pleasure-seeking, mercenary, and anti-intellectual only because they themselves are marginalized due to the lack of proper education, etc. For those in the “Love Wang Shuo” camp, Wang as well as his characters are genuinely rebellious; they ruthlessly ridicule the hypocrisy in Chinese society that is best represented by the intellectuals, or celebrate the emergence of literature of the commoners as opposed to that of the elites, or overthrow the ideological lies about revolution and social progress while embracing the postmodern vision of the absurdity of life, etc. People hate Wang for similar reasons but love him for a wide variety of reasons. There are also scholars who recognize the more complicated relationship between Wang and the social norms upheld by the intellectuals and register his switch between a nonconformist and a conformist of the social norms. Interestingly

enough, the word “*tuipei*” (decadent) has been used by critics from all camps to refer to Wang and his characters. However, few have realized that Wang and his characters are conformists and nonconformists at the same time. Seen from the lens of the Western idea of Decadence, Wang and his characters pose as hooligans in order to assert their individual free will, which is actually a privilege of the cultural elites.

### ***Wang Shuo the Innocent***

According to Wang’s own periodization, his stories can be classified into three phases.<sup>1</sup> “The Airhostess” (*Kongzhong xiaojie*, 1984), *Emerging from the Sea* (*Fuchu haimian*, 1985) and *Half Flame, Half Sea* (*Yiban shi huoyan, yiban shi haishui*, 1986) all tell stories of innocent love (*yanqing*) hence belong to the phase of innocence (*chunqing*). Although here innocence refers to the pure emotions in love, it also indicates compliance with established social norms in a more general sense. In *The Rubber Man* (*Xiangpi ren*, 1986), the innocent elements are significantly reduced. From “The Master of Mischief” (*Wanzhu*, 1987) on, Wang started to tease and taunt (*tiaokan*).<sup>2</sup> He pushed his signature style of teases and taunts to the extreme through *Not Serious at All* (*Yidian zhengjing meiyou*) and *Never Take Me as a Human* (*Qianwan bie ba wo dang ren*) in 1989, when he began to reflect on his own writing that “I suspected that these heartless teases and taunts

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<sup>1</sup> Wang, Shuo. “On Literary Creation” [*Chuangzuo tan*]. *Research Materials on Wang Shuo* [*Wang Shuo yanjiu ziliao*]. Ge Hongbing and Zhu Lidong ed. Tianjin: Tianjin People’s Press, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Translation borrowed from Li Donghui *A Phenomenon of Wang Shuo: A Historico-Literary Consideration*. Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1998, p. 33.

are boring and meaningless and cannot be counted as literature” (“Creation” 22). Then he went “deep” (*shenchen*) and returned to the values he had ridiculed, appearing nostalgic and sentimental in stories like “Losing My Love Forever” (*Yong shi wo ai*, 1989), *I Am Your Dad* (*Wo shi ni baba*, 1991) and “Ferocious Animals” (*Dongwu xiongmeng*, 1991).

Wang’s own periodization of his writing is roughly accurate, though his playful teases and taunts actually take root in his earlier stories. It seems that he took a journey away from his initial innocence and finally back to it with pensive depth like a wandering son returning to his spiritual home. What invited the heated controversy over Wang was his departure from innocence, i.e., the middle period of teases and taunts. Critics in the “Hate Wang Shuo” camp may even find it shocking that Wang categorized *Half Flame*, *Half Sea* in the phase of innocence, because in that story, they find astounding moral and economic crimes depicted in an unbearably lighthearted tone. However, it is precisely this “misplacement” by the writer himself that reminds the readers that innocence has never left Wang’s writing but permeated through it, only sometimes as the undertone.

Wang started to publish short stories as early as 1978. His earliest works, including “Waiting” (*Dengdai*, 1978), “The Story of a Seagull” (*Haiou de gushi*, 1982) and “The Long Long Fishing Line” (*Changchang de yuxian*, 1984), can hardly distinguish him from other mainstream writers. Published in 1978, the same year Lu Xinhua published “Scar” (*Shanghen*) which became the name of the first significant literary trend after the

Cultural Revolution, “Waiting” can be seen as a typical example of Scar Literature. The story is set in the middle of the Cultural Revolution and tells of disputes between a high school girl and her mother over whether she should read *Anna Karenina*, a forbidden book during the Cultural Revolution, and whether it is appropriate for her to keep a friendship with a boy. The father figure plays the decisive role of reconciliation and enlightenment, attributing the unhappiness of young people to a diseased society and reiterating the revolutionary objective, which is to relieve the younger generation from tribulation. The story ends with profound sentiment and assured hope. “The Story of a Seagull” tells a story of two young navy soldiers who learn to cherish life and nature through an old man who saves the seagull they have hurt for fun. “The Long Long Fishing Line” relates the friendship between a young navy soldier and a little boy. All three stories glow with the positive values endorsed by the mainstream, including faith in revolution, love, respect, friendship, etc.

In retrospect, Wang has dismissed his earliest work as childlike, affected and insincere. He blames the literary principles he had been indoctrinated with, which prescribed that literature not only “use elegant and formal language, [but also] has to exert positive influence on the readers... otherwise it is just trash” (“Preface” 1). It is noteworthy that although Wang as a mature writer loathed his early works for gawkily

taking up the role of a preacher delivering inspiring sermons to the public, he never doubted or contradicted the positive values he eulogized in those stories.

Starting from “The Airhostess,” Wang began to express his inner self (“Collection” 1; vol. 1). He wrote a series of stories based on his own experiences and those of his close friends, who were born in the late 1950s and early 1960s, joined the navy around the end of the Cultural Revolution and left it at the beginning of the era of Reform and Opening-up. Like the writer himself, the main characters in these stories do not follow the government’s arrangement of taking ordinary jobs in ordinary working units, but become self-employed “*getihu*,” a way of life that is not only unstable and risky but also unorthodox, idling and even shady in common opinions. In “The Airhostess,” the protagonist refuses to take the job as a salesman in a medicine company and most of the time idles around, living parasitically with his parents. In *Emerging from the Sea*, the protagonist Shi Ba is a self-employed tradesman, sometimes making quick money and enjoying an easy life whereas sometimes having to starve and take temporary jobs of manual labor. In *Half Flame, Half Sea*, the protagonist Zhang Ming becomes a criminal, conspiring with prostitutes and hotel managers to blackmail clients while wearing policemen’s uniforms. In *The Rubber Man*, the protagonist also engages in illegal businesses, smuggling goods from Hong Kong into the mainland. In “The Master of

Mischief,” a group of young men play with the established social values by setting up a “Three T Company” (troubleshooting, tedium relief, and taking the blame).<sup>3</sup>

In 1988, four of these stories, namely “The Master of Mischief,” *Half Flame*, *Half Sea*, *Emerging from the Sea* and *The Rubber Man*, which are viewed as a series of “masters of mischief” stories, were adapted into films that proved tremendously successful. As a result, people named the year of 1988 as the “Year of Wang Shuo’s Films.” However, in contrast to the huge success of the films, many critics appeared upset or outraged. Huang Shixian, a famous film critic in China, poignantly criticized the writer and his characters as diseased (*bingtai*) nihilists, who “blaspheme the sacred, destroy order, and shatter all values and norms” (176). Critics like Chang Qinghua sympathized with Wang and his characters’ sincere pursuit of individual freedom, but considered that their rebellion against social norms exceeded appropriate limits, “They have no sense of responsibility or mission but indulge in the immediate enjoyments” (206). Wang Meng, a prestigious writer and the former Minister of Culture, participated in the debate over Wang Shuo by writing an article entitled “Avoiding Loftiness” (*Duobi chonggao*, 1993), in which he praised the young writer for his daring liberation of literature from the obligation of achieving loftiness, only to find himself targeted by disappointed and enraged critics. Tao Dongfeng argued that Wang Shuo “blasphemes not only a fake

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<sup>3</sup> Translation borrowed from Jing Wang *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. p. 274.

loftiness soaked with politics and ideology, but also the real loftiness, the sacred, the ideals, etc...[hence] his social criticism is seriously plagued with nihilism” (367-368). Chen Xiaoming and Chen Sihe sided with Wang Shuo, endorsing his revelation of the empty nature of life, but they in fact agreed with the other critics in saying that the writer and his characters embrace no values.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, critics in both camps tagged the labels of “*tuifei*” (decadence) and “*shijimo*” (fin-de-siècle) to Wang Shuo.

Despite Wang Shuo’s characters’ unconventional careers and denunciations of social norms, to label them as nihilist is a mistake. When Wang categorized “The Airhostess,” *Emerging from the Sea* and *Half Flame, Half Sea* as stories depicting innocent love, he in fact provided an important hint to understand his writings. Indeed, many critics have noticed that in Wang’s stories, the masters of mischief have a particular interest in girls who are from the south, young, pretty, innocent and idealistic. But they tend to discuss those female figures as if they are only a fetish while neglecting their significant function as the connecting point between the masters of mischief and social norms.

For example, the love between the protagonists in “The Airhostess” is essentially based on the two lovers’ shared ideal of making contribution to society, a value that is at the core of the Communist morality. This may sound strange since the male protagonist

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<sup>4</sup> Chen, Sihe. “Dark Decadence: Dark Decadence: Reading Notes on Wang Shuo’s Fiction” [*Heise de tuifei: du Wang Shuo zuopin zhaji*]. And Chen Xiaoming. “The Metropolitan Duet in Wang Shuo’s Films” [*Wang Shuo dianying de dushi erchongzou*]. *Research Materials on Wang Shuo* [*Wang Shuo yanjiu ziliao*]. Ge Hongbing and Zhu Lidong ed. Tianjin: Tianjin People’s Press, 2005. pp.180-202.



seems to be an idler with no sense of responsibility. However, when the two lovers first meet, the girl is immediately attracted to the male protagonist, a young, handsome and aspiring navy soldier, because he embodies the military heroism extravagantly promoted by the state. Before he leaves the navy, he has already become her model for emulation. She becomes an airhostess because she gets inspiration from his bravery in front of the dangerous military tasks and his strong sense of mission. After he leaves the army, he seems to become playful and cynical, but under the mask of an idler and rebel, he never completely abandons his dream of becoming a hero, a paragon recognized and respected by the society. In fact, he loves the airhostess precisely because she has realized his dream. When she gets an award for her hard work and expresses her wish to win the national prize for excellent female workers and even to join the Communist party, the male protagonist cannot help but to exclaim in his mind that “O I really love her” (“Collection” 60; vol. 1). One should not doubt the spontaneous sincerity of this exclamation. It is the airhostess’ lofty ideals that in turn attract the male protagonist. When he breaks up with her, it is also because that he feels he cannot live up to her expectation, that is, to become someone glorified for making outstanding contributions to society, an ideal he himself also cherishes dearly.

In *Emerging from the Sea*, the writer seems more conscious about people’s prejudice against the self-employed *getihu*, so he has the protagonist Shi Ba confront those

prejudices directly. When he meets his future wife for the first time, the female protagonist Yu Jing says half-jokingly that she knows that he is a hooligan. He immediately takes offence and identifies himself as a “young reformer” (*qingnian gaigejia*) (“Collection” 93; vol. 1), referring to his resignation from the job assigned to him by the government to start his own business. Yu Jing’s friend Little Yang also teases him by calling him a “jobless idler” (*wuye youmin*), which he corrects into “the worthy of the society” (*shehui xianda*) (“Collection” 96; vol. 1), referring to his abandonment of the stable life guaranteed by the government. In his own words, he is not selfish; rather, he fulfills all his obligations, such as “joining the army, donating blood, paying tax, planting trees and purchasing a treasury bond” (“Collection” 106; vol. 1). Yu works hard and aims high with her thoughts and behaviors well confined within what social norms permit.

Despite his playfulness and cynicism, Shi falls in love with her, which, on a second look, is because of the similarity between the two. Although he tells Yu that he cannot appreciate sophisticated high-brow art, he actually trashes his friends’ popular dance as vulgar and prefers to listen to the sentimental music played by the French pianist Richard Clayderman. Although he claims to be interested in nothing but money, when Yu teases him that she loves him because she loves money, too, he begs her not to be so blatantly mercenary, because it kills the romance of love (“Collection” 128; vol. 1). Although he says he is open to pre-marital sex, he never carries it out. According to Shi, he has not

had pre-marital sex not because he has moral concerns but because he has not met the girl he loves. Therefore, he is not sexually promiscuous but considers sex as healthy, natural and serious. Although he seems to care about nothing, when left on his own, he sheds tears for the loss of his parents. That is to say, although he seems to despise and spares no effort to mock at conventional morality and social norms, he is in fact deeply indebted to them.

In *Half Flame, Half Sea*, the protagonist Zhang Ming is a criminal who lives on blackmailing. The story has two parts. In the first half, it tells of an affair between Zhang and Wu Di. Wu is an innocent college girl who believes in true love and would sacrifice anything for it. Zhang meets her in a park, seduces her and then breaks up with her. In despair of getting Zhang's love and also for revenge, Wu decides to become a prostitute and eventually commits suicide. Many critics consider Zhang as a devil because of his cruel attitude towards Wu and loose morality, but from time to time, the writer depicts Zhang as someone with a gentle heart. For example, although he conspires with other criminals to do shady business at night, he is a decent gentleman during the daytime. Wang must have made this contrast on purpose, because right after the scene of the crime, he narrates how Zhang offers his seat to a woman holding a little child on a bus and refuses the child's thank-you gift. This is a classical plot in the stories of Lei Feng, the saint-like national model who is always ready to help. When he finds out that Wu

becomes a prostitute, he flies into a fury, roaring, “who gets her into this bloody business” (“Collection” 222; vol. 1). From then on, as Wu becomes their partner, in addition to blackmailing Wu’s clients, he often beats them like crazy. That is to say, he has a clear sense of right and wrong and he also has deep feeling for Wu, but just refuses to admit it. Learning that Wu commits suicide because of him, Zhang can no longer bear living in the room where she dies. He embarks on a journey, which initiates the second half of the story. On the journey, he meets another girl who resembles Wu in many ways, falls in love with her but gets turned down in the end. In fact, the second half is nothing but a reconfirmation of Zhang’s love for Wu, which is probably the reason that Wang categorized this story as innocent.

Although, as Wang said, *The Rubber Man* marks the beginning of his departure from innocence, one can still sense the protagonist’s strong attachment to orthodox norms, which is embodied in the young female soldier Zhang Lu. The protagonist is a smuggler who takes advantage of his connections with the army to smuggle cars and televisions from Hong Kong, goods that were extremely popular in the mainland at the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up era. He lives in a world of lies and dangers, in which he can trust nobody, including his childhood friends. He is always in a bad mood, on the verge of cursing every minute. However, when he meets the young female soldier, who is also a Communist party member, he becomes a quiet and mellow person. He enjoys the intimate

conversation with her and secretly loves her, “I envy Zhang Lu like a wild animal that envies a domesticated one, and I love her as if loving a photo of myself from the early years” (“Collection” 70; vol. 2). That is to say, the protagonist used to be like Zhang Lu, young and innocent. On a deeper level, he identifies himself with Zhang Lu. Despite his engagement with the illegal businesses, he cannot resist the attraction of people who well embody the norms and derives from his relationship with them a strong sense of comfort and security.

In comparison with those in *Half Flame*, *Half Sea* and *The Rubber Man*, the characters in “The Master of Mischief,” *Not Serious At All* and *Never Take Me as a Human* are better citizens in the sense that they do not violate the laws. Instead, they tease and taunt. In “The Master of Mischief,” the protagonist Yu Guan and his friends set up a “Three T Company,” which, under the banner of “serving the people,” caters to the usually ridiculous demands of their clients. For example, they fabricate a “Three T Award” ceremony for a rich, mediocre and fame-driven writer. They also go on a date with a young woman upon the request and in the place of her boyfriend and play the role of a husband to receive the wife’s complaints. *Not Serious At All* and *Never Take Me as a Human* can be seen as extensions of “The Master of Mischief,” except that the teases and taunts in these two novels are stretched to such an extent that the writer got himself nauseous (“Creation” 20). Despite their playfulness, the masters of mischief are in fact

kind, trustworthy and honest to friends and clients, polite and respectful to elder people. For example, Yu, after failing to return it to the seller as he promises, ends up buying a jacket smaller than his size from his client. When visiting a friend named Ding Xiaolu who lives with her mother, the masters of mischief are polite and well-behaved out of natural disposition. In responding to his father's criticism of his life style, Yu asks, "Why do you have to pick up on me? Whom do I bother when I neither commit felonies nor go on demonstrations? Does a good kid have to always behave like a model citizen or a revolutionary hero? I just want to have a simple life without getting into the lofty ideals" ("Collection" 159; vol. 2).

Not everyone is ready to accept Yu's self-justification. In a society that has been trained to embrace revolutionary idealism, to neglect lofty ideals is blasphemous enough, not to mention to even making fun of them through teases and taunts. As Ding testifies, although the masters of mischief are actually harmless, ordinary people who do not know of them tend to view them as dangerous ("Collection" 166; vol. 2). They are dangerous because their playfulness seems to suggest further subversion of the orthodox values. However, if one examines closely, one may notice that despite their seemingly disrespectful attitude towards those values, they never repudiate them. On the contrary, when they help the clients with their ridiculous demands, the masters of mischief are like a magnifying glass that reveals the absurdity of life, which the orthodox values may not

approve, either. For example, the “Three T Award” ceremony is a nothing but a parody of the conceited writers’ self-enclosed community that is based on the mutual support among the members. To go on a date as a surrogate ridicules the businesslike nature of many romantic relationships. To receive the complaints of a wife reveals problems in communication between the most intimate couples. In fact, it is not the orthodox values but the improper activities being carried out in their name that are being teased and taunted. In this sense, the masters of mischief are still innocent.

When reading the series of “master of mischief” stories, one should not forget that Wang also published a series of detective stories at the same time, centering on a character named Shan Liren, who is a brave, wise, mature Communist official in the police department. Although Wang claimed that he wrote these stories for the sake of making money and the critics tend to dismiss them as pop literature, there is a simple fact that no one can deny, that is, these detective stories all represent the most appropriate, correct, positive and well-endorsed social values, such as justice, honesty, sympathy for the underprivileged, mutual support and respect, etc. That is to say, even during Wang’s most provocative years of creation, there was still a string on his writing zither vibrating steadily and echoing the social norms. Taking these stories into consideration, Wang’s later “return” to innocence in “Losing My Love Forever,” *I Am Your Dad* and “Ferocious

Animals,” in which the values of love, mutual care and respect, friendship are revisited and celebrated, is nothing surprising.

### ***Wang Shuo the Non-Commoner***

Another common misunderstanding about the masters of mischief in Wang’s stories is that they are commoners. The “Love Wang Shuo” camp takes them as ordinary people in opposition to the elites and the “Hate Wang Shuo” camp consider them as hooligans marginalized in the new era.

In the “Love Wang Shuo” camp, Ge Hongbing considers it unfair to denounce Wang’s stories as “Hooligan Literature” because he felt that the characters in Wang’s stories are just humble, obscure, ordinary people, who “live at the bottom of the society, suppressed by their environment, some feeling lost, some nihilistic, some bored, not knowing what to do, but are sincere, warm-hearted and kind” (464). Wang Yichuan regards Wang’s stories highly because he finds Wang’s language of teases and taunts deconstructive of the elitist discourse, which is “homogenizing, absolute and rigid” (322). He argues that the commoners in Wang’s stories represent the emergence of the civil society in China and their language of teases and taunts re-configures the value system based on it.

In contrast, in the “Hate Wang Shuo” camp, Huang Shixian directly ascribes the playfulness of the masters of mischief in Wang’s stories to their marginalized social status:



“Since they belong to the lower rank in the society hence have no right to participate in the social affairs, they tend to hide their inner jealousy of the upper ranks, their sense of loss and their decadence in the playful teases and taunts and the indulgence in easy pleasures” (174). Critics like He Zhongming and Yao Yusheng trace the change of the social status of the masters of mischief, including the writer himself. They find that the masters of mischief were in fact political elites during the Cultural Revolution, who were born in families of military officers and used to enjoy political privileges but could no longer maintain their elitist status in the new era. In He’s opinion, Wang and his characters are a group of “culturally marginalized people” (*wenhua bianyuan ren*), who are “dissatisfied with the reality but have no way to change it” (256) and whose rebellion against traditional values “is not rational criticism but speaks of hatred out of despair” (255). For Yao, the masters of mischief are the former political aristocrats who failed to adapt to the new environment of commercialism and materialism, and “became marginalized and even impoverished... [hence] felt the need to develop to perfection a style of fast talk and an irrelevant, knowing, and playful attitude, which helped them to maintain a sense of superiority” (434).

It is true that Wang wrote some stories of commoners, especially in his innocent stories, such as the protagonists in “Losing My Love Forever” and *I Am Your Dad*, but as for the masters of mischief, He and Yao are insightful to point out their elitist origin. One

can roughly take them as a group of political aristocrats. However, these masters of mischief are never marginalized; or rather, they “marginalize” themselves from their willful choice, rather than the external circumstances. People may argue that it is the masters of mischief themselves who admit their involuntary marginalization, because in “The Airhostess” the male protagonist details the frustration he encounters in adapting to the society after leaving the army:

After returning to my home in Beijing, I took off the tight military uniform and put on the loose outfit of the ordinary people. Suddenly, I felt I could hardly do anything. Walking in the streets, seeing the drastically changing city landscape and the increasingly noisy crowds and traffic, I felt that life was forging ahead at a speed that made me dizzy. I went to visit some former classmates. Some of them were in college and some had already become core members in their working units. Even my ex-girlfriend had married someone else. In other words, they were all on the right track, working hard with steadfast conviction and unflinching optimism. Years ago, we were recruited into the army as the best members in our generation. Now, we returned the late-comers in life. At the age of twenty-five, we had to enter the society with heavy steps like a high-school kid of seventeen or eighteen years old. (“Collection” 39; vol. 1)

Indeed, Chinese society witnesses dramatic changes with the advent of the era of Reform and Opening-up and the former political aristocrats like the masters of mischief are denied access to the mainstream due to their lack of higher education.

Nonetheless, they are not commoners. They resign from the job positions assigned to them by the government, rather than being laid off. Even without a stable job, which seems to be necessary for survival in ordinary opinion, they can make a living and some of them even enjoy enviable wealth. This is not something that can be easily achieved by

ordinary people in China, where the distribution of resources is closely related to the government. Although new accesses to the mainstream are available to ordinary people, such as taking the national exam for college entrance and pursuing higher education, the former political elites, including the masters of mischief, never lose their privileges because they never lose their connections with the government. The only difference is that now their privileges are materialized mainly in the economic sector.

In “The Airhostess,” after the male protagonist turns down the job assignment, he not only lives at the expense of his father, a military officer, but also travels around to chase his girlfriend. One has to be reminded that, to travel around the country in the early 1980s, Chinese people still had to exchange local food coupons for national food coupons, without which they cannot even purchase a bowl of noodles. To be able to do that, one had to either have an official document from the working unit to justify the travel or have enough money to purchase the stamps under the table. However, the protagonists in Wang’s stories never seem to have a problem with that. Also, when the male protagonist in “The Airhostess” finally feels the need to work, he reclaims the position assigned to him without any difficulty as if he just grants himself a long break. That is to say, in a time when the real commoners have to take the assigned jobs very seriously, Wang’s protagonist does not have to worry as much. Therefore, he is never marginalized or impoverished but lives a fairly carefree and comfortable life that not everyone is entitled

to. It is also noteworthy that the above-quoted frustration appears only once in Wang's stories, which was also the first story after he started to deviate from the orthodox literary principles and express himself. One can justifiably suspect that, at the beginning of his new-style writing, Wang felt the necessity to make his protagonist look a little miserable to offset the readers' potential outrage at him, because from then on, the protagonists in Wang's stories are more and more rebellious and provocative with less and less apology.

In *Emerging from the Sea*, although the protagonist Shi Ba has to take jobs of manual labor once in a while, he is resourceful most of the time. This can be seen at the very beginning of the story:

After a whole week's tough negotiation, the government of Beihe Town insisted that the annual salary for each worker be no lower than one thousand three hundred RMB. As a result, I had to give up the plan of taking over the commune-run clothes factory that was near bankruptcy. A friend told me that a restaurant in a good location was adjusting its accounts and asked me whether I was interested of taking it over. I used to frequent the restaurant. I knew that it had a very complicated background and I would not dare to offend any of its partners. So I refused. ("Collection" 89; vol. 1)

Like the male protagonist in "The Airhostess," Shi resigns from the job position assigned to him by the government. But unlike the former, who feels dizzy in front of the fast-changing society, Shi already becomes a propellant agent behind the social changes; he becomes a self-employed tradesman. Contrary to what Yao Yusheng argues, that the masters of mischief "failed to adapt to the new environment of commercialism and materialism" (434), they are quite successful. As he tells Yu Jing and Little Yang, Shi considers himself a "young reformer" and "the worthy of the society." This is not

necessarily a joke to disguise his embarrassment in front of the two girls' teases; rather, he sounds fairly confident and proud of his enterprising endeavors, which the government in fact started to promote in the early 1980s as part of the Reform and Opening-up policies. Although Shi's connection with the authorities is not explicitly spelled out, one can get a glimpse of it from his conversation with Little Yang. As she is going to return to Yunnan province to work, he mentions that maybe he will cooperate with her in setting up a clothes business in the border areas, which he can help with by asking the army to deliver the goods. Even though, by the end of the story, this project has not been carried out yet, it is clear that Shi has access to resources that a commoner is not supposed to have.

The privileged status of the masters of mischief is best exemplified in *The Rubber Man*. This is an insiders' story of the smugglers at the beginning of the era of Reform and Opening-up. Although the protagonist and his business partners seem to have to take risks all the time and sometimes even have their personal security in danger, they all have connections with the authorities. For example, when they have to fly to the border town immediately for urgent business, they can get the last-minute air-tickets that are reserved for the government officials. After the protagonist is released from the detainment, his friends get him into a military hospital to shield him from further revenge by a group of gangsters. One of the protagonist's business partners/rivals can successfully package their

smuggling in the name of government procurement, i.e., having all the official documents and commercial invoices to prove that their business is legal and nonprofit. One may argue that the protagonist is just lucky enough to be friends with people who have connections and he himself does not necessarily have direct connections with the authorities. However, he is a “friend” to those people precisely because he has connections that they can take advantage of. For example, it is the protagonist that brings in the business with a local government, though it is taken over by his “friends.” In the early 1980s and even today, to have connections with the government is one of the most valuable capitals a businessman in China can think of. The masters of mischief in Wang’s stories are among this selected tier. That is to say, even when they have to deal with difficulties and frustrations, their specific difficulties and frustrations are not something that a commoner has the chance to experience.

Wang Shuo is an eloquent speaker and loves to argue, not only in his essays and interviews but also in his stories. When the critics in both camps tried to ascribe the playfulness in his writing to the characters’ involuntary marginalization in the society, he had one of the characters confront these interpretations, be they sympathetic or critical. In “The Master of Mischief,” a middle-aged intellectual, Zhao Yaoshun, who enjoys an obvious sense of superiority, flaunts his noble heart of compassion and justice in front of the young people of the Three T Company by criticizing the society for offering no

opportunities for them. When Yu Guan refuses to admit any pain among his friends, Zhao gets surprised and even offended, hence starts to criticize the young people for their lack of sensitivity:

“Young people like you didn’t get much education so won’t have much room for development. You have suffered from severe discrimination and pain. But since you have no other choice, you can only pretend to have fun... This is not fair! The society should offer you better opportunities. I want to appeal to the entire society to care about you. Although I’m no longer young, I still have bubbling blood in my vein and I easily get concerned. Whenever I think of the lovely young people like Ma Qing, Yang Zhong and you, I cannot control myself and cannot fall asleep.”

“You mean we suffer from a lot of pain?”

“That’s obvious! I can feel it even though you don’t say it.”

“What if we don’t feel any pain?”

“That’s impossible—it doesn’t make sense. You should feel the pain. Why don’t you feel it? You can only redeem yourselves when you feel the pain.”

“Then I tell you, we don’t feel it.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Then I can only feel sorry for you. It proves nothing but your numbness. You are on your way to degeneration, not to revival. You should cry for yourselves.”

“But we don’t cry. We are having fun... Listen, we can bear with all kinds of discomfort, because we know there is no perfect thing or perfect place in the world. We ask for nothing from other people. Even if we encounter difficulties in life, we don’t want to blame others. In fact, the difficulties in our life have nothing to do with other people, not to mention that we don’t think we’ve been unjustly treated. So there is no reason for cynicism.” (“Collection” 162-163; vol. 2)

In comparison with the melancholic protagonist in “The Airhostess,” these masters of mischief are much more confident and assertive about their way of life. Like the conceited intellectual depicted in Wang’s story, the critics in both camps find it difficult to come to terms with the masters of mischief’s playfulness that is not a result of the involuntary marginalization. As Wang observes in an essay entitled “Wang Shuo’s

Confession” (*Wang Shuo zibai*), most of the critics’ minds are “one-dimensional... often susceptible to simplification, putting [his] writing on a Procrustean bed of an abstract but irrelevant concept, [such as postmodernism,] totally ignorant of the life style in [his] stories” (18). The life Wang refers to here is the life of the non-commoners, who can choose to be away from the mainstream of the society while maintaining the right to ridicule the mainstream represented by the intellectuals. It is their sense of superiority that grants them the right of playfulness, rather than the other way around. Their rebellion is not rational, but it is not out of hatred or despair, either. Their language of teases and taunts are in a certain sense subversive to the elitist discourse, but it is subversion coming not from commoners, but from the elite itself.

### ***Wang Shuo the Decadent***

If Wang and his characters are innocent non-commoners, however, we need to explain why they appear as hooligans, who, like the title of one of Wang’s stories, are “not serious at all,” spare no effort to ridicule orthodox values, and sometimes even violate the laws. As noted above, “The Airhostess” is the first story published after Wang started to express himself in opposition to orthodox literary principles. Therefore the reason he provides in that story for the protagonist’s idling, i.e., that he has lagged behind in society, is not trustworthy. In fact Wang as well as the characters in his later stories soon picked up the courage to brandish their rebellion.



In *Emerging from the Sea*, which was published right after “The Airhostess,” the protagonist Shi Ba, when talking to a high-school friend, explains the painful reason behind his resignation from the assigned job position as “to explore the meaning of life” (“Collection” 135; vol. 1). This serious remark by a master of mischief may sound shocking to the critics, but he is doubtlessly sincere. For Shi, the meaning of life can be put simply as doing what he wants. “When I resigned, I didn’t know what I was going to do in the future. I still don’t know it even now, but I always feel that I should do something” (“Collection” 135; vol. 1). Although he does not know exactly what to do yet, he is clear what he does not want to do, that is, to be the same as other people:

My mom was the kind of person, how to put it, a mom with authentic Chinese characteristics. She always wished me to be the same as other people. She always felt the obligation to guide me to live a “meaningful” life. When other people joined the army, she asked me to join the army. When other people entered the college, she asked me to enter the college. She also wished me to join the Communist Party and eventually marry a female Party member. She had thought of everything for me, but just didn’t ask what I really want. (“Collection” 106; vol. 1)

Shi knows that his mother’s wishes are for his own good and feels sorry for her death out of disappointment in him, but he just cannot live a life the same as other people as his mother wishes.

In the story, the sea is used mainly as a metaphor. It appears several times in Shi’s nightmares in which it threatens to devour everything, symbolizing the unknown, the uncontrollable and the unpredictable, just like the life he actually lives after resigning from the assigned job. In the real life, the sea literally gets Shi in danger for once. He

swims too far away from the sea shore and passes the shark net. He feels exhausted and scared, secretly praying to be discovered and saved by the coast guard. However, when the coast guard does come, he refuses their offer of help rudely, telling them to mind their own business because this dangerous situation is just what he wants. That is to say, in Shi's opinion, to do what he wants is even more important than life. This is in fact the same reason that he gives up the stable life guaranteed by the government. The freedom to do what he wants is of such importance to him that even when he is crazily in love with Yu Jing, he keeps a cool mind in this respect, telling her that he wants neither to abandon his independent personality for anyone nor to have anyone abandon theirs for him ("Collection" 129; vol. 1). Thus said, his playful attitude towards life is in fact a significant gesture he takes to distinguish himself from other people and to safeguard his individual free will. In other words, he is very serious about being playful.

In *Half Flame, Half Sea*, the protagonist Zhang Ming resigns from the assigned job position because it is too predictable and boring:

I don't like to do things of which the result is too obvious. It's boring to do things step by step with a series of fixed goals. The more I know in advance, the less the excitement. If I knew what is going to happen next, what I will encounter in every step and what the results will be, I would rather hang myself immediately.  
("Collection" 196; vol. 1)

It is true that the masters of mischief like Zhang Ming pursue novel sensations. To do so, they even risk violating the laws. However, they are not just interested in immediate pleasure stemming from sex and money, as many critics say. Their deviation from the

norms first and foremost fulfills their psychological needs, that is, to emancipate themselves from the inertia of habits, customs, norms and the predictable destiny that most ordinary people are subject to.

In *The Rubber Man*, the protagonist firmly believes that he is different from other people. During the police officer's interrogation of him, he admits that he cannot bear living like other ordinary people but has to mess up his life. Although he loves the innocent female soldier Zhang Lu, as one of his friends Li Bailing testifies, he and Zhang are not the same type of people, because "what we abandon without scruples is precisely what she cherishes, whereas what we cherish is also precisely what she disdains" ("Collection" 98). Although the protagonist derives profound sense of comfort and security from his interaction with Zhang because she well embodies the norms, he cannot help but to abandon the norms so as to live a life different from that of others. When Li expresses her understanding of him and even uses "we" to refer to them both, she arouses in him deep indignation because he feels that he has been ripped naked and his secret exposed and even sympathized ("Collection" 42; vol. 2), which undermines his conviction that he is unique among human beings. That is to say, his obsession with his being unique has reached such an extent that it even repels other people's understanding and sympathy. Although he always feels painfully lonely, this painful loneliness is precisely what he desires because it proves his uniqueness and his free will.

The masters of mischief's pursuit of free will is pushed to the extreme in *Play for Thrills*. This novel has been considered one of Wang's best works, which at once demonstrates his mature mastery of literary techniques and fleshes out his signature characters. The protagonist of the story Fang Yan tries to retrieve his memory because he is told to be involved in a murder ten years ago. Here, Wang plays with the idea of memory, how untrustworthy it is, and creates a huge and layered net of suspense, making it extremely difficult to see through to the truth. Meanwhile, his narration shuttles between the past and the present. At the end of the story, he particularly adopts a backward narration by telling what happens during the most significant thirteen days around the "murder" day by day. It is like pushing open a series of heavy and dusty gates one by one in the ancient palace of memory as one approaches the ultimate truth. In the end, Fang finds out that ten years ago his friends arranged a role of scapegoat for him in a game of murder.

Like the characters in Wang's earlier stories, Fang and his friends in *Play for Thrills* are all former navy soldiers who leave the navy at the beginning of the era of Reform and Opening-up. With limited cash in their pockets, they travel to the coastal cities in the south, where international trades were first allowed in China. They engage in shady businesses and make quick money, but most of the time they busy themselves consuming all kinds of sensual pleasures. They pursue excitements like a drowning person desiring

oxygen, which in turn always leaves them exhausted and bored. As a middle-aged man recalls, upon leaving the army, Fang gives people the impression of a dangerous figure, “not dangerous to others but dangerous to himself” (“Collection” 349; vol. 2), which means that he seems to be driven by violent passions that threaten to consume himself. But Fang’s girlfriend gives a shrug to the middle-aged man’s concern, asking a question to which she gives a ready answer: “What is the thing that we fear most? It’s just to live a life for nothing” (“Collection” 349; vol. 2). That is to say, like the protagonist in *Emerging from the Sea*, Fang and his friends, despite their playfulness and idleness, are seriously concerned with the meaning of life. Their playfulness and idleness is in fact part of their earnest effort to escape the plain and mundane life of ordinary people. In the end, they decide to fabricate a case of murder, having one person kill a voluntary victim in the name of Fang behind his back, and find this extremely interesting because their motivation, which is to play for thrills, is completely beyond the imagination of the commoners (“Collection” 377; vol. 2). They enjoy a tremendous sense of superiority by doing things that ordinary people not just dare not to do, but also dare not to imagine.

Thus, Wang and the masters of mischief in his stories are indeed Decadent, but in the sense quite different from what the critics have understood. For critics in the “Love Wang Shuo” camp, such as Chen Sihe and Chen Xiaoming, they are decadent in the sense of seeing through the absurd and empty nature of life and being postmodern prophets of

nihilism. But, as discussed above, Wang and the masters of mischief are not nihilists but innocent believers of the orthodox values. Wang has personally denied any debt to postmodernism.<sup>5</sup> For critics in the “Hate Wang Shuo” camp, such as Huang Shixian, Wang and his characters are decadent in the sense of being degenerate, abnormal, diseased, cynical, negatively nihilistic, etc., because of their involuntary marginalization. But, as we have seen, they are neither nihilists nor marginalized commoners. Rather, Wang and the masters of mischief in his stories are Decadent in the European sense, that is, they ridicule the norms that they believe in. Wang Jing sensed their paradox in pointing out that “the adult hooligans were not real rebels... [and it] was just a lifestyle” (271). They are not real rebels because they do not seek to overthrow the norms they ridicule. Wang Jing is mistaken, however, when she says that “there was no purpose for their rebellion... [and] behind the high-profile existence of these seemingly self-possessed playboys are empty husks” (271-272). Their purpose is to assert their free will, to shake off the influence of the norms, which is, according to the masters of mischief, “the meaning of their life.”

It is an interesting oddity that, “the meaning of life” is a clichéd jargon in the ideological propaganda of the Communist party. It is usually related to exalted political virtues such as serving the people, making contributions to society, taking pride in a

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<sup>5</sup> Wang, Shuo. “Wang Shuo’s Confession” [*Wang Shuo zibai*]. *Research Materials on Wang Shuo* [*Wang Shuo yanjiu ziliao*]. Ge Hongbing and Zhu Lidong ed. Tianjin: Tianjin People’s Press, 2005. p. 18.

simple life of hard work, fighting for the realization of Communism, etc. Hence it seems perhaps ironic that the Decadent masters of mischief take “the meaning of life” to be their core belief. However, people tend to neglect that the jargon also implies individual heroism. Behind all the above-mentioned virtues actually looms large the state’s potential reward of the individuals through glorification. This is why the male protagonist in “The Airhostess” cannot resist his admiration and love for the airhostess when she gets an award for her hard work and expresses her wish to get the national prize for outstanding female workers and to join the Communist party. In the army, the male protagonist is shrouded in an aura of heroism, so when he returns to mundane civil life, he feels lost. To make quiet and unknown contributions to society is not enough; he has to stand out, to be the hero, to win people’s admiration and awe. His melancholy is rooted not just in his difficulty in adapting to the new life outside the army, but also because, compared with his former classmates, he is no longer the “best” member of his generation. In fact, deep in the mind of the masters of mischief, they all have a dream of becoming a hero, which explains why they cannot bear living an ordinary life by taking the ordinary jobs assigned by the government.

The curious mixture of hooliganism and revolutionary heroism is most clearly represented in “The Ferocious Animals,” a novella that is almost autobiographical. In this story, the protagonist tells the readers that his greatest childhood dream is to liberate the

entire world: “I ardently looked forward to getting involved in a world war, in which I believed with no doubt that the People’s Liberation Army will smash the war machines of the Soviet Union and the United States while I will become a world-renowned hero” (“Collection” 251; vol. 4). The writer later confirms this wild idea in an interview, ascribing it to the political inculcation since his childhood.<sup>6</sup> The world war is not to happen but the obsession with the heroic dream is not easy to get rid of. As a result, the protagonist as well as his friends unanimously adopts the lifestyle of a hooligan: “When people are trapped in a mediocre life that is contradictory to their ideals, they have to assume some evil habits, as a gesture or as a symbol, to fight against the very mediocrity because that is even worse than the evil habits” (“Collection” 252; vol. 4).

That is to say, the masters of mischief are not real hooligans. They are deeply indebted to revolutionary idealism, which ironically promotes the values of ordinary proletarian life and individual heroism at the same time. The masters of mischief are perfectly aware that their evil habits, though blasphemous, are nothing but a gesture, a symbol or a performance. By assuming those evil habits, they do not mean to overthrow the orthodox values, which they actually believe in, but to challenge them in order to demonstrate their free will. This makes them very close to Decadent in the sense of

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<sup>6</sup> Wang, Shuo. “On Literary Creation” [*Chuangzuo tan*]. *Research Materials on Wang Shuo* [*Wang Shuo yanjiu ziliao*]. Ge Hongbing and Zhu Lidong ed. Tianjin: Tianjin People’s Press, 2005. p. 27.



Charles Baudelaire, J. K. Huysmans, etc. Now that they can no longer become revolutionary heroes, at least they can lead a life that is unique and cool, which in an oblique way help them to achieve a sense of heroism, only that now it is not revolutionary heroism but heroism of individuality. That is to say, the Decadent hooligans share the same mindset as the elitist revolutionary idealists.

Thus, Wang and his Decadent hooligans are like a prism that refracts the cultural landscape of China in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By this time, the Cultural Revolution was still fresh in people's memory and the rigid revolutionary ideology, though challenged, still maintained considerable influence over the country. Meanwhile, the Reform and Opening-up policies not only brought to people foreign products, but also opened their eyes to the outside world and kept pressing them to rethink over their society and culture. The Chinese society witnessed a division that almost matched that in the early twentieth century when May Fourth intellectuals launched a comprehensive war against the Chinese tradition. Wang and his characters were providing a battlefield for the various cultural camps to contest against each other. The "Hate Wang Shuo" camp mainly consisted of the orthodox intellectuals who were struggling to safeguard the values inherited from the revolutionary era, whereas the "Love Wang Shuo" camp was a loose alliance of younger intellectuals who aimed at overthrowing the older generation's dominance by introducing new ideas and values, such as the notions of postmodernism

and civil society. But the Wang was neither an enemy of the “Hate Wang Shuo” camp nor a friend of the “Love Wang Shuo” camp. He and his Decadent characters in fact belong to the cultural elite, deeply indebted to the revolutionary idealism, posing as hooligans for the sake of asserting their individual free will and enjoying a sense of heroic superiority like the one that, a few years earlier, had accompanied revolutionary idealism.

But while Decadence helps Wang and his hooligan characters to achieve a sense of heroic superiority, it cannot escape the intrinsic paradoxes that we pointed out in the introduction. First, despite his ruthless ridicule of orthodox values, Wang remains a believer in them. Innocence has always been embedded in his writings. After publishing *Not Serious at All* and *Never Take Me as A Human*, which satirize traditional Chinese culture and the value of education, Wang recognized that “there is something that we cannot do away with” (“Creation” 24) and then returned to innocence. Second, the assertion of the individual free will also repels repetition, both self-repetition and repetition by others, because once the Decadent eccentricities get repeated, they will no longer be unique hence cannot prove one’s individuality. Wang dismissed *Never Take Me as A Human* as “outrageously ridiculous, pushing the style of tease and taunt to the extreme” (“Creation” 20), “boring and meaningless” (“Creation” 22). The style of tease and taunt turns out to be boring and meaningless because when people start to tease for the sake of teasing, their individual free will is dimmed. This is why Wang had to drop

his masters of mischief stories and return to the mainstream. The Decadent writer finally resumed his real identity as cultural elite without further pretense.

## Chapter VI

### Wang Xiaobo: A Fun-Lover's Encounter with Decadence

Wang Xiaobo is a legendary figure in the Chinese cultural scene in the 1990s. Born in 1952, he spent his adolescent years in a politically turbulent period in China. During the Cultural Revolution, he went through forced labor in the countryside as well as in factories. He entered college in 1978 together with over 400,000 knowledge-thirsty young Chinese after the restoration of the national entrance exam for college. When going abroad for further education was still very rare among Chinese, he received his masters' degree in East Asian Studies in Pittsburg University in 1988. After a few years' teaching in People's University in Beijing, he resigned from the enviable teaching position and became one of the first freelance writers in China in 1992. All these experiences were going to find their reflection in Wang's stories.

Wang was a very talented and diligent writer. He did not start publishing stories until 1989, but his literary talent was soon recognized outside mainland China. In 1991, his novella "The Golden Times" (*Huangjin shidai*) was awarded the first prize by the United Daily News in Taiwan. In 1996, the script he wrote for Zhang Yuan's film *East Palace, West Palace* won the best script at the Mar del Plata Film Festival in Argentina. Despite these oversea recognitions, his unconventional way of writing made it extremely difficult to find a publisher in mainland China, where he had been known mainly as a columnist of

essay before his unfortunate death in 1997. It is after his death that his stories suddenly became popular and he almost became the godfather of liberalism in China.

No evidence shows that Wang had known of the Decadence movement in Britain and France in the late nineteenth century. Nobody has made any connection between him and Decadence, either. To readers and scholars, he is mainly a singer of intellectual freedom. “The Fun of Thinking” (*Siwei de lequ*) is not just the title of the essay anthology that he published in 1996, but is also the keyword for all his writings. Like his characters, Wang is a lover of “fun” (*lequ*), or rather, a lover of wisdom and intellectual pleasures. It is just a pleasant coincidence that in their search for wisdom and intellectual pleasures, many of Wang’s characters rebel against the norms that they believe in and make themselves Decadents.

### ***Determined to Have Fun***

Fun is the core concept in Wang’s writings, not only in his essays but also in his stories. In the essay “The Fun of Thinking,” he defines having fun as “being reasonable” (*you daoli*) and “seeking novelty” (*xinqi*) (“Thinking” 4). He first distinguishes this kind of fun from the simple pleasures coming out of “monotonous and mechanic activities, such as eating, defecating and having sex” (“Thinking” 4) because the fun he refers to comes out of intellectual activities. It is a kind of intellectual pleasure stemming from the pursuit of novelty, or rather, diversity. Wang sincerely admires the British philosopher

Bertrand Russell and especially agrees with him on that “diversity is essential to happiness” (Russell 522). But this pursuit of novelty should be conducted under reason and logic, because “having fun is different from thinking randomly (*hu si luan xiang*)” (“Thinking” 4). In sum, the fun Wang promotes is essentially an exercise of individual human intelligence in pursuit of alternatives with the help of reason and logic.

In fact, Wang’s literary career can be summarized as a combat against everything that suppresses this kind of intellectual pleasure. Its first enemy is morality. Wang has no intention to overthrow the current moral codes. He has his own opinion over morality, especially sexual morality, but that is not his focus. What he condemns is the suppression of reason and diversity in the name of morality. After Wang published his first novella “The Golden Times,” many scholars in the mainland criticized the story for possessing low “moral quality” (*gediao*) because it candidly depicts sex. As a response, Wang wrote an essay entitled “On Moral Quality” (*Lun gediao*). In that essay, he briefly criticizes the abnormal sexual psychology in Chinese society, that is, some deny the existence of sex while some can think of nothing except it, but few takes sex as just one of the many natural and important things in life (“Homeland” 160). But Wang’s main argument in the essay is that he disagrees with people who evaluate everything merely according to moral quality, making life a game of getting moral points, because “no matter how interesting the game is, it cannot incorporate all aspects of life, including art, not to mention the

game of moral quality is not fun at all” (“Homeland” 159). Wang sees his story an alternative to the politically endorsed literary style that promotes revolutionary heroes who are “*gao, da, quan*” (lofty, great, perfect). For Wang, when moral quality becomes the only evaluating criterion, art is inevitably simplistic and boring.

The second enemy of this kind of intellectual pleasure is people’s voluntary and involuntary inertia to stay the same. For example, at the peak of the “Zhang Ailing Fervor,” Wang expressed his dislike of Zhang’s stories. He names Zhang’s stories as “enclosed-style fiction” (*youbi xing xiaoshuo*), which “takes confinement and nightmare as everything” (“Homeland” 162-163). In Zhang’s stories, he sees only sadness and despair but no anger or hatred, “as if they are written by a dying person” (“Homeland” 163). For Wang, the enclosed-style fiction denies or even refuses the possibility of change, so it kills the pleasure of pursuing diversity. Wang also disliked the plague of melodramatic films in the 1980s and 1990s in China, considering it fine if a few individual filmmakers make films like that but seriously problematic if many filmmakers as a group do the same thing (“Homeland” 187). For Wang, the inertia to stay the same is intolerable because it means people are not exercising their individual intelligence.

The protection and promotion of this kind of intellectual pleasure becomes even more necessary and urgent in front of its archenemy, political ideology, which suppresses reason and diversity at the same time. As a victim of the Cultural Revolution, Wang sees

the ultimate crime of political ideology is to standardize and unify every aspect of people's life in the name of lofty revolutionary ideals, which is in fact a kind of spiritual control. He has never directly criticized Communist ideology's spiritual control, but one can find his critique of it everywhere in his essays and stories. In his most famous essay "A Nonconformist Pig" (*Yizhi teliduxing de zhu*), he tells a story of a pig he encountered when he was sent down to a farm in Yunnan province for re-education. On the farm, every pig is assigned a task, growing fat or making female pigs pregnant. But the nonconformist pig refuses his assignment and battles against human beings for his own way of life, showing extraordinary strength and intelligence. He roams around freely and has relationships with female pigs of his kind. Wang contrasts the free life and free spirit of the nonconformist pig with the human beings who "want to control others' life or take a life under control for granted" ("Homeland" 108) presumably within the Communist regime. His critique of Communist ideology and people who voluntarily succumb to it is obvious.

Wang also criticizes Communist ideology's spiritual control in his stories. In "The Future World" (*Weilai shijie*), Wang depicts a dystopian world in which one has to acquire a license to be a writer, a researcher or a philosopher. To work in the humanities, one has to comply with the so-called "principle of direction" (*daoxiang yuanze*), which means that "scholars should direct their writing towards a conclusion that is beneficial to



us” (“Silver Times” 58). For historical research specifically, the historians have to come to the same conclusion, that is, all contemporary culture, system and material life are better than the past but all contemporary people are more evil than the older generations (“Silver Times” 59). To do historical research, it is also crucial for one to entertain the correct attitudes, namely, the scientific attitude—saying things as they are, and the partisan (*dangxing*) attitude—saying things as they are not (“Silver Times” 86). Although the narrator does not specify who the beneficiaries of the principle and the party are, it is not difficult to tell that the so-called principle of direction justifies the control of the ruling regime, presumably the rule of the Communist Party in China.

To make things even more ridiculous, in the second half of the story, the narrator Wang Er is severely punished for trying to be creative and different. He loses everything that used to be assigned to him. Instead, a mysterious and omnipotent company re-assigns a life for him, including a new identity, a new job, a new place to live, a new wife and new social relationships. In the end of the story, in order to get rid of the impoverished life of manual labor, Wang Er compromises with the company and agrees to write the same chunks of story parts as required like a worker on an assembly line. The future world is a dystopian one because everything is under the control of a dominating institution, which executes its power through a set of rigid principles. It maintains its

control by publishing any individual thinking and rewarding docility. It is a world extremely ordered but at the same time dreadfully lifeless.

Wang displays his most playful ridicule of political ideology in a novel set in the Tang dynasty, namely *The Elopement of Hongfu* (*Hongfu ye ben*). In this story, the male protagonist Li Jing is one of the leading generals who assist the Tang emperor to found the new empire. During the reign of the previous dynasty, Li has been persecuted for being intelligent and imaginative, which threatens the rigid imperial regime. When he is young, he dreams of becoming a doctor of mathematics, but never succeeds, not because he is not good at mathematics, but because “to become a doctor of mathematics, one has to not only take mathematics exam, but also pass the exam on *The Book of Change*, which has nothing to do with mathematics at all, or rather, belongs to superstition” (“Brazen Times” 273). This anecdote can give all contemporary Chinese students a hearty smile, because to enter college, masters’ programs and doctoral programs in China, all have to take the exam on “politics,” which is not about political science in general but about Communist classics and China’s Communist Party’s interpretations of them. In most cases, it has nothing to do with the students’ major, but it is compulsory in all entrance exams and does rule out many students who are only good at their majors. To say that *The Book of Change* belongs to superstition also hints at the absurdity of the exam on “politics.”

Ironically, after Li Jing becomes the designer of the ruling system of the Tang Dynasty, he exhausts his intelligence and imagination to prevent people from becoming intelligent and imaginative as he is, so that they will not threaten the new regime. He starts with the construction of the capital city Chang'an. In his design, the city is square, composed of square grids divided by straight streets. In this way, the residents in the city will become and thereafter remain square-minded. Li also pays particular attention to education and compiles textbooks for elementary schools. The content of the texts is a series of "Long live X," ranging from the emperor and the empress to all the aristocrats down the line. Li dies before he finishes the project but he is very confident that with textbooks like this, people will never think of or want to think of anything different.

The effect of Li's design is vividly demonstrated in his wife Hongfu's attempt of suicide after his death. As Hongfu decides to commit suicide, she is told that she needs to apply for a permit from the government because, due to the design of Li, the laws in the Tang Dynasty are strict and impartial and everything has to follow the rules as planned. Therefore, she needs to go through a complex procedure by visiting various government bureaus. Although she wants to die as soon as possible, she has to wait because of the lack of quota. Once her permit is granted and the suicide process initiated, she has nothing left but the "glory (of dying by the emperor's order)" ("Brazen Times" 476), which means she is completely subjected to the suicide supervisor, who is in charge of

not only the way of her death but also every detail of her life before she dies, including eating and sleeping. Throughout the entire process, Hongfu tries to ask for minor adjustments to the execution of her death, yet in vain. No variation is allowed. It is only when she finally arrives at the moment of dying, after an excessively lengthy and complicated operation of hanging, that she finds true relief. That is to say, in the Tang dynasty under Li Jing's design, one has neither the liberty concerning how to live nor the liberty concerning how to die. Everything is so strictly planned and executed that there is no room for individual thinking, not to mention diversity.

Both stories envision a world of sameness, which refuses diversity and destroys individual thinking. To make things worse, the sameness is institutionally enforced. It is reminiscent of the Utopia imagined by Thomas More, especially the design of the city of Chang'an. Wang Xiaobo was an avid reader of Bertrand Russell and a passionate lover of his *A History of Western Philosophy*. He must be very familiar with Russell's description of More's Utopia, in which everyone lives according to the same pre-determined plan and following the same time schedule. He must agree with Russell that "life in More's Utopia... would be intolerably dull" (522). Although he sets the stories in the distant past and future, it is clear that he refers to the contemporary world he lives in, in which Communist ideology prevails through state apparatus.

Meanwhile, Wang creates a series of characters that are determined to have fun. For example, Li Jing in *The Elopement of Hongfu*, Xue Song in *The Wanshou Temple* (*Wanshou si*) and the ubiquitous character Wang Er in “Time Flows by like Water” (*Si shui liunian*) are ingenious inventors of all kinds of devices. All of them design and produce things that are literally novel. The ruling regimes perceive them as dangerous because they all make something new, which means something unpredictable and uncontrollable. So Li Jing is severely persecuted and Wang Er is labeled as a “problem youth.” Xue Song seems to be lucky for suffering no punishment, but that is only because he lives in quasi-exile. It is noteworthy that their inventions in fact do not concern morality or ideology or any social norms. So even though these characters are rebellious in the sense that they venture into the realm that the ruling regimes do not endorse, they are quite different from the Decadents who rebel against the norms that they believe in.

The Wang Er figure in “My Yin-Yang Worlds” (*Wode yinyang liang jie*) can best explain the difference between Wang Xiaobo’s novelty-seeking characters and the Western Decadents. In this novella, the male protagonist Wang Er works in a hospital as an engineer of medical equipments in the early 1990s. Most of the time, he works where he lives, one of the storage rooms in the hospital basement, where he cultivates a special connoisseurship in the body parts steeped in formalin:

The storage room on my left was full of junk and the storage room on my right was also full of junk. But aside from all kinds of junk, there was something else. In the corridor, there was a niche in the wall every a few feet, in which there were specimen

containers. In the containers steeped some fragments of dead people. One of them was right across my door. He was of my sex, but had no head or limbs. I used to visit him in my spare time. In my opinion, he was probably younger than I was when he died. His back was straight as if he was striding forward. Unfortunately, he lost his head and could no longer stride. Someone opened a door on his belly and tied many threads to his viscera. At the other end of each thread there tagged a label, on which one can read names like “large intestine,” “small intestine,” etc. If he came back to life, he could see the name of his organs simply by lowering down his head. Moreover, he would also notice that his penis had been cut off, but his scrotum and testicles were left. They were steeped in the container like half garlic. I wasn’t sure whether he would think them good-looking. In some of the niches, there were human bones in glass cabinets. Since the bones could not stand on themselves, people erected wooden frames in the cabinets first and attached the bones to the frames with iron clips. To turn dead people into specimens like these is indeed an art. An ordinary person, even though provided with the best corpse, would not make specimens as good as these. Because of this reason, I felt I was living in an art gallery. I was very satisfied with my lodging. (“Golden Times” 322)

This paragraph sounds like an excerpt from a French Decadent novel. The protagonist lives in an isolated space. He takes fancy in products of human ingenuity and craftsmanship. He finds death-related objects not repulsive but enjoyable. But one has to admit that Wang Er’s pleasure is perverse. Unlike Des Esseintes in *A Rebours* who deliberately exalts artificiality against nature so as to assert his free will, Wang Er is not concerned about rebelling against nature. He simply finds human beings’ refined craftsmanship admirable and fun. He also translates the scandalous French novel *The Story of O*, written by Pauline Réage modeling on Marquis de Sade, not because he is fascinated with the rebellious spirit embodied in sadomasochism, but because he considers it as a unique story that is artfully written. Like the characters just mentioned above, Wang Er is interested in things that are different but does not care whether it is

morally or politically good or bad. They do not deliberately set their pursuit of novelty in opposition to social or aesthetic norms, which make them fundamentally different from the Western Decadents.

Although Wang Xiaobo is well-known for his candid depiction of sex, he is not a Decadent writer. Above all, as mentioned above, he takes sex as one of the most natural and important things in life. In Wang's stories, sex is just a natural expression of one's natural desire in most cases. There is no excessive indulgence in physical pleasure, so the characters are not Decadent as Chinese commonly understand the term. Nor do the characters pursue any abnormal sexual activities to rebel against social and moral norms that they believe in, so they are not Decadent in the Western sense, either. When sex does take on significance other than the fulfillment of one's natural desire, it concerns one's intellectual pleasure that Wang promotes.

In Wang Xiaobo's best-known novella "The Golden Times" (*Huangjin shidai*), the sent-down youth Wang Er engages in an affair with the countryside doctor Chen Qingyang. The affair starts with Chen's request for Wang Er's help to prove she is not a loose woman but ends up with a sexual relationship between the two. Although they violate the sexual codes that are rigidly upheld by the Communist regime, they are not Decadent because they do not believe in the rigid sexual morality in the first place. For Chen Qingyang, the so-called "loose women" (*poxie*) are not despicable. She is upset for

being called a loose woman because that is not the truth. Since she does not side with the rigid sexual morality, her affair with Wang Er is not a rebellion against the norms she believes in, so she is not Decadent in the Western sense.

In fact, their relationship is a game of logic with the ruling regime. Her strategy to fight against the rumor is to turn the rumor into truth, that is, she starts an extra-marital relationship with Wang Er. Ironically, as soon as her relationship with Wang Er gets publicized, nobody mentions her being a loose woman any more. The local authorities press Chen and Wang Er to write confession materials about their illicit and immoral relationship, but once Chen admits her love for Wang Er, which is even worse than having pure sex according to the current sexual codes, the authorities release them immediately. This is because the ruling regime is largely based on hypocrisy, which fears the respect for truth the most. Therefore, Chen's affair with Wang Er and confession of her love threatens to make it a rule that one gets punished for what one has actually done. Even though the ruling regime insists on its rigid moral codes, it cannot tolerate the respect for truth, because that may threaten its rule which is based on hypocrisy. For Chen and Wang Er, this is a fun game because it celebrates the power of logic and reason, which is a crucial element in Wang Xiaobo's idea of intellectual pleasure.

In sum, Wang Xiaobo is a lover of fun. Reason and novelty are of central importance in his understanding of intellectual pleasure. His characters, who are also lovers of fun,



demonstrate their individuality in their pursuit of novelty with the help of reason. But to demonstrate one's individuality does not necessarily make one Decadent in the Western sense. The Western Decadents are rebels with paradoxes, that is, they rebel against the norms that they believe in. Interestingly enough, Wang Xiaobo writes many stories set in the distant past and future, but his Decadent characters enter onto the stage in the stories set in the contemporary era.

### ***Perversion in the Golden Times***

Together with “The Golden Times,” four other novellas that are set in the contemporary era are anthologized in *The Gold Times*, in which we will find Decadence in the Western sense.

In the novella “Love in The Time of Revolution” (*Geming shiqi de aiqing*), the narrator Wang Er tells the story of his two love affairs during the Cultural Revolution. In the early stage of the Cultural Revolution, when he is still a high school student, he has an affair with a college girl, whose name he completely forgets afterwards. After he becomes a worker in a bean curd factory, he gets involved in another affair with X Haiying, who is the secretary of the Communist Youth League branch in the factory. The narration focuses the love affair between Wang Er and X Haiying and only relates his affair with the college girl in flashbacks.

In his affair with X Haiying, Wang Er is in a relatively passive position. It is X Haiying who approaches him, seduces him, commands the sadomasochistic games and finally terminates their relationship. Chinese critics tend to dismiss their relationship as abnormal, absurd, distorted, which is possible only in an equally abnormal, absurd and distorted historical period. Ai Xiaoming, who is the main editor of Wang Xiaobo's posthumous publication and a well-received critic of Wang's works, argues that "the sexual relationship between the two can only be loveless, with the spirit separated from the body. Although the relationship succeeds physically, it fails spiritually" (181). On the contrary, however, the love between Wang Er and X Haiying is more of a spiritual one than a physical one and the key to understanding their relationship lies in the fun that both characters are seeking in the time of revolution.

X Haiying gets fascinated with Wang Er because of his jarring relationship with his environment. He has a fierce appearance. Since he has been discriminated and bullied since his childhood because his father is a "reactionary scholar" (*fandong xueshu quanwei*), he deliberately avoids socializing with other workers in the factory. Right before X Haiying enters the factory, he becomes the primary suspect of drawing vulgar sketches of a naked woman on the walls of several men's rooms. In the eyes of his colleagues, Wang Er is an eccentric, and in the eyes of the factory leaders, he is nothing but a trouble. During the Cultural Revolution, when people are labeled and separated due

to their political lineage (*xuetong*), it is detrimental to X Haiying's interest to get involved with Wang Er. However, in the eyes of X Haiying, Wang Er is indeed interesting. As Wang Er contemplates afterwards, according to all advanced wisdoms, X Haiying should not have fooled around with him at all, but "she just cannot help but to have a try" ("Golden Times" 313)

Taking the advantage of her position as the secretary of the Communist Youth League branch, she gets Wang Er to report his stories to her as political confession every week. Then she turns this political education into romantic dates, during which she commands Wang Er to act like a sadistic Japanese soldier or a brutal rapist. This is in fact a continuation of her childhood game. X Haiying comes from a politically pure family and enjoys many political privileges. Unlike Wang Er, she has never suffered any physical punishment, hunger or humiliation. But ever since her childhood, she entertains a strong interest in and desire for all these things. When she is still a little girl, after watching a film in which a revolutionary is tied to a tree and tortured, she asks a boy in the neighborhood to tie her to a tree. It would be the last message in a revolutionary film to promote masochism, but X Haiying considers it as extremely refreshing and exciting and derives tremendous pleasure from it.

It is noteworthy that X Haiying does not approach Wang Er because she sympathizes with his political situation but because, first, he is the person with the worst physical and

political qualities she can find to fool around with, and second, he seems to share her passion for novelty. She does not play the sadomasochistic games to mock the political ideology, either. In fact, she is a product as well as a supporter of the orthodox political regime. Above all, she has been a model student and assigned to important posts in the Communist Youth League. Also, when Wang Er tells her in his political confession that he used to serve both sides in an armed fight between two factions of the Red Guards in the early stage of the Cultural Revolution, X Haiying seriously criticizes him for sitting on the fence, which is one of the worst mistakes according to the Communist political morality. After their secret date is discovered and reported, she readily admits her political mistake. She is perfectly aware that her relationship with Wang Er will contaminate her political purity, but as Wang Er testifies, the contamination is precisely what she desires. She invites her own contamination to revolt against the regime, which she supports, and derives plenty of fun from it. Therefore, the fun she enjoys in her relationship with Wang Er is in fact calculated, intellectual and spiritual. It is actually the perverse pleasure of a Decadent. Wang Er does not think this through until they break up. But his reciprocation of X Haiying's love comes too late because she has terminated their relationship as if quitting a game before she gets bored.

Wang Er's relationship with the college girl makes a meaningful contrast. Wang Er meets the college girl when he helps one of the Red Guard factions to fight against

another. They are drawn to each other purely out of the physical attraction. At night, they cuddle together, embrace and kiss, but in the day time, Wang Er often finds her slightly annoying, especially when she performs the wifely routine of cooking. Many years later, even though Wang Er can no longer recall her name, he clearly remembers the taffy-like smell on her body. Therefore, although Wang Er and the college girl do not make love, it is a physical love between them. On the contrary, X Haiying is attracted to Wang Er because of her passion for novelty and obsession with the rebellion against the norms. When Wang Er loves her back, it is also because he finally gets rid of the fear in his political situation and understands the reasoning behind X Haiying's feeling for him. Therefore, although they do make love, the love between X Haiying and Wang Er is essentially a spiritual one, or rather, a Decadent one.

In the novella "Time Flows by like Water" (*Si shui liunian*), Wang Xiaobo tells another love story in the time of Revolution. In this story, the narrator is also called Wang Er, but the love story is between Wang Er's high school sweetheart, Xiantiao, and her future husband, Mr. Li. Mr. Li is a Hong Kong native who receives his Ph.D. degree in the US. When the Cultural Revolution starts, he returns to the mainland to participate in the glorious cause. However, he soon becomes the target of persecution due to his contacts with several Trotskyists he meets in Hong Kong on his way back to China. Everything that happens to Mr. Li seems so unreal that he ascribes them to the evil magic

of his former Indian roommate in the US. Xiantiao is only a high school student when Mr. Li returns to China. She is young, pretty and daring. Although her parents are sent down to cadre's school for re-education, she does not have to go to the countryside as her friends do. In contrast, Mr. Li is in a miserable situation. He is weak both in body and in mind, with no family or friend. More importantly, he is a class enemy with no political future. However, Xiantiao falls in love with him when she sees him being brutalized in public.

Some scholars are particularly interested in the “sadomasochistic” implications in Xiantiao's love for Mr. Li. Dai Jinhua thinks it is a good example of the sophisticated game of role switching and identity politics: “Mr. Li's constant protest more or less shows his willingness to choose a masochistic role. It is exactly his masochistic situation that arouses endless passion in Xiantiao. She becomes at once an active pursuer, which is another form of sadism, and a masochistic sacrifice” (150). Dai is a sensitive reader of Wang's works and her article proposes many theoretical perspectives to examine them. But it is a pity that here Dai does not explain what she means by “role switching” and “identity politics” and, more importantly, their significance related to the story. She also misreads the meaning of Mr. Li's constant protest, by which she refers to his big-character posters. When Mr. Li keeps posting posters to criticize the physical abuse he suffers, he is not yet disillusioned and still believes that he can regain justice.

Therefore he is not masochistic at all by then. In fact, he is never masochistic in the story. To be masochistic, one has to enjoy being hurt. But Mr. Li never enjoys it; rather, he finds his sufferings so unreasonable and unreal that he ascribes them to his former Indian roommate's revenge. He accepts the tortures with a seemingly peaceful mind only because he has no other choice.

Indeed, Xiantiao is active in the relationship, but being active is different from being sadistic. She does not relish watching Mr. Li being brutalized. On the contrary, the moment she falls in love with him, she has a strong urge to rush onto the stage, hold him in her arms and rub away the lumps on his bald head with her little tender hands. Xiaotian does not love Mr. Li because of sadistic desire, but because she finds his reaction to the brutalization extremely fun. Since Mr. Li believes that the torture he is facing is attributed to the magic of his former Indian roommate, he wears a weird look on his face as if the torture is none of his business. This is something entirely novel and unique for Xiantian, and generates endless excitement and passion in her. After that, Xiantiao follows Mr. Li everywhere till she finally marries him.

In ordinary opinions, Xiantiao's choice is crazy, because like X Haiying in "Love in the Time of Revolution," she risks her future by falling in man that is both physically and politically inferior. In fact, she knows very well that what she does is crazy, but still desires to be crazy because "she believed that craziness can bring her the piercing

feelings of satisfaction” (“Golden Times” 132). Over twenty years later, Xiantiao admits to the narrator that in fact there is nothing lovable in Mr. Li. However, she chooses to love him to her own disadvantage. Just because she falls in love with Mr. Li, she considers herself heroic.

Thus, in both stories, the female protagonists fall in love with men who are incompatible with their environment, even though incompatibility is a dangerous attribute in the time of revolution. Both female protagonists deliberately make decisions that are unfavorable to themselves. Meanwhile, they do not mean to hold up any lofty ideals, such as to pursue true love against the suppressing political environment or to challenge the conventional moral codes. They make these decisions simply because they consider it fun to go against what the norms expect them to do. They are satisfied to see the negative effects of their choice because those are the fruit of their free will, which is the essence of Decadence.

In “Established at Thirty” (*Sanshi er li*), Wang Xiaobo pushes the idea of Decadence to the extreme. This story is set in the early 1980s and the protagonist is also called Wang Er, who is an assistant professor but behaves like a hooligan. In nature, Wang Er is a good person with good sense of right and wrong. He loves his mother and respects his wife. As a friend, he is loyal and generous. As a teacher, he understands the importance of responsibility. He is also a person of gratitude. He appreciates the chancellor’s



recognition of his talent and effort in covering his mischievous behaviors, so he often makes decisions to repay his kindness by behaving better.

But he cannot get rid of his “inferior nature” (*liegenxing*) (“Golden Times” 59). Whenever he sees a teacher or a person superior to him, he feels a strong urge to behave like a hooligan. His father always wants him to take the right route and strive for the first place in society as he himself used to. But in front of his father, Wang Er spares no effort to prove that he is a nobody. The chancellor wants him to be a respectable teacher and a loyal follower of himself. But despite his frequent decision to behave better, Wang Er always comes to the same conclusion: “Fuck it! I’m a follower of nobody but myself” (“Golden Times” 72). That is to say, Wang Er is not a bad person, but he does not like to do what people of authority expect him to do. Both his father and the chancellor represent the social norms, orthodox and boring. If he yields to their expectation, he feels he is playing a role for other people rather than keeping his real self. If he is expected to be a good person, he would rather behave like a hooligan. In fact, when he presents himself as a hooligan he is also playing a role, but it is a choice of his own, and in this sense, a manifestation of his real self and assertion of his free will.

A good person deliberately behaving like a hooligan is already a Decadent. But what makes this Wang Er figure more interesting than other Decadent characters in Wang’s writing is his relationship with his mother. The woman is a fairly liberal and

unconventional mother. Unlike her husband who always wants Wang Er to take the right route and strive for the first place, which she considers rather boring, she encourages her son to have fun in life, approving of every of his provocative attempts as long as he remains an upright person. Wang Er loves his mother for her understanding, but her support is something he cannot stand. When his mother expresses her admiration of his choice of girlfriend, he breaks up with the girl he loves and marries someone else. When she congratulates herself for having a son like Wang Er who despises the common way of life endorsed by the norms, he decides to do the opposite, that is, to take the right route and strive for the first place as his father instructs. Wang Er loves his mother beyond anything but he just has to prove that he is different from her expectation.

This is the true spirit of Decadence. After all, the ultimate goal of being Decadent is to celebrate one's individual free will. In the opinion of the Decadents, the archenemy of their individual free will is the norms, which expect people to behave in certain ways. Therefore, the Decadents have to revolt against the norms even though they believe in them. This is why Wang Er, though a good person in nature, has to behave like a hooligan. However, the Decadents have equal doubts in any alternatives to the norms, simply because the alternatives will turn into another shackle for the individual free will. In the case of Wang Er, his mother seems to be as Decadent as he is, so she can understand and support his perverse endeavors. But since she notices the pattern in Wang Er's behaviors

and starts to expect him to behave in certain ways, a new norm is emerging, which threatens Wang Er's individual free will. Therefore, although he is determined to disappoint and enrage his father, he decides to strive for the first place in society as a revolt against his mother's expectation.

Decadence is a relational and fluid concept. It is relational because it is defined in opposition to the norms. Wang Er is Decadent not because he chooses to be a hooligan or strive for the first place in society or anything else, but because he chooses to behave against the expectations of his father, the chancellor *and* his mother. Since the norms as the reference point are changing, the content of Decadence is also changing, which can be seen from Wang Er's switch between a hooligan and a good person. He is Decadent when rebelling against his father's and the chancellor's expectation because he thinks one should strive to be a good and successful person in society but he deliberately behaves against that norm. He is Decadent when rebelling against his mother's expectation because he believes it is important to behave against the social norm so as to assert his free will but he deliberately behaves against this belief. That is to say, no matter what Wang Er chooses to be, as long as he goes against the norms, which are endorsed by himself and embodied in other people's expectations, he is a Decadent.

### *A Fun-Lover's Encounter with Decadence*

Wang Xiaobo is a lover of fun, not a writer dedicated to Decadence in the Western sense. But his creation of a series of Decadent characters is not surprising. The fun Wang promotes is a kind of intellectual pleasure that stems from one's pursuit of novelty with the help of reason. Likewise, Decadence also desires novelty; novelty is crucial for the Decadent revolt against the norms. Decadence also relies on reason, because the perverse pleasure the Decadents derive from their revolt is a result of logical reasoning, i.e., the Decadents are perverse because they rebel against the norms that they believe in. Most importantly, Decadence also seeks intellectual pleasures, instead of physical ones. The only difference between Wang's fun and Decadence is that it is not necessary for Wang and his characters to revolt against the norms they believe in to experience intellectual pleasure. As long as they can achieve novelty by exercising their intelligence, they are having fun. It is only when they set themselves against norms they believe in that they become Decadent. But this overlap cannot last long, because both Wang's fun and Decadence yearn for novelty, so they have avoid repeating themselves to avoid banality. As a result, Wang and his characters have to stop being Decadent at one point to continue their pursuit of novelty. But this is the destiny of all Decadents and they manifest the spirit of Decadence precisely by stopping being Decadent.

## Conclusion

### Decadence as an Elitist Endeavor

Ever since its journey into China in the early 1920s, Decadence has been seriously misunderstood. Because of its Chinese translation *tuijiadang* and *tuipei*, Decadence has been associated with a pessimistic world view and indulgence in sensual pleasures. As a result, Decadence encountered wide hostility in the twentieth century in China. Between the late 1930s and the 1970s, it was even completely banned because of leftist dominance and Communist reign. Even in those more liberal years, it was also extremely controversial. Some people simply take Decadent literature as pornography. However, such a kind of understanding is not only untrue to the original meaning of the European Decadence movement, but also too simplistic and moralistic to be useful as an analytical concept in literary criticism. The present research aims at doing justice to Decadence, restoring its original meaning and re-examining Chinese literature in the twentieth century through it.

Since Decadence is by nature closely related to moral, social and aesthetic norms, to use it as a lens to examine Chinese literature leads one to a more concrete and nuanced understanding of the complicated cultural dynamics among texts, writers and their socio-historical environment. For example, Yu Dafu turns out not to be a Decadent writer because he was on the threshold between Confucianism and a new morality that endorses

individual freedom, including sexual liberty. Unlike the European Decadents who have clear faith in certain norms but deliberately revolt against them to assert their individual free will, Yu Dafu found it difficult to take sides between the old and the new. He represented a group of Chinese intellectuals during the heyday of May Fourth movement, who were neither confidently conservative nor assertively iconoclastic, but were stuck in between and suffered tremendous spiritual agony. Shao Xunmei was not Decadent because he was striving to overthrow the old sexual codes and establish new ones. He was wealthier, younger and more confident than Yu Dafu. He represented the more daring and progressive intellectuals in the later stage of May Fourth movement before the leftists took over the cultural arena due to the intensification of national crisis.

Both Yu Hua and Su Tong wrote in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. They expose the darkness in society but neither of them is Decadent because they believe in the value of humanism but do not revolt against it. Yu Hua's breathtaking exposure of the darkness in society is in fact a poignant critique of it. He believes that people's tragedy is a historicized one and as long as they correct their mistakes, they can live a better life. He never gives up hope in human beings and his real goal is the return of innocence and humanity. On the contrary, Su Tong's mind is clouded with pessimism. For Su Tong, the historical trauma is rooted in the evil human nature so there is no way to get away from it. Yu Hua and Su Tong are of similar age, both coming from the lower Yangtze area, and

both being core members of Avant-Garde Literature. But they are very different in their reflection over the historical trauma and also representing the varied opinions over the Cultural Revolution among young Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s and early 1990s.

It seems that both pairs of writers were confronted with serious and urgent national crisis. Like other May Fourth intellectuals, Yu Dafu and Shao Xunmei were concerned about the modernization of the country. They had to dismantle the old norms, that is, shackles from the past, so that they could build up a stronger country. Yu Hua and Su Tong came directly out of the Cultural Revolution. They saw just too clearly how norms that are rooted in humanism were destroyed. Yu Hua called for people's awareness and effort to restore those norms. Su Tong acknowledged the value of the norms but was just too pessimistic to take any action. The norms they believed in were all in an unstable and insecure state. As a result, their sense of crisis and emergency make them too serious to play with the norms they believed in. Therefore, they could not be Decadent. At least, they were not in the mood to be Decadent.

In contrast, although Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo lived in almost the same time as Yu Hua and Su Tong, they were able to keep an emotional distance from the tragedy in the Cultural Revolution. This is probably because Wang Shuo comes from a military official's family and is luckier than Yu Hua and Su Tong for enjoying more political privileges. Therefore, the Cultural Revolution is not an experience as painful and

shocking as it is for Yu Hua and Su Tong. In the case of Wang Xiaobo, it is probably because he is older and more mature. He experienced the Cultural Revolution in his late teens and early twenties, almost ten years older than Yu Hua and Su Tong. So even during the Cultural Revolution, he was able to reflect upon the historical trauma from a historical and philosophical perspective. He started publishing much later than Yu Hua and Su Tong, so that also grants him a critical distance from the immediate historical event. Moreover, the two Wangs seem to be more optimistic and positive in front of the problems in China. After all, despite the shadow of the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Incident, the 1980s and 1990s also saw fast changes in China and people kept accumulating hope and confidence in social development.

Not everyone can afford being Decadent. They must enjoy abundant resources so that they do not have to worry about survival. They also have to have faith in the norms they ridicule. So when they rebel against the norms they believe in, they can enjoy intellectual pleasures of asserting their individual free will. In the 1980s and 1990s, the revolutionary ideology was gradually replaced by humanized social norms, which were relatively unified, stable and powerful. Therefore, Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo did not have to strive for something particular, so they can be at ease when playing with the norms. By posing as a hooligan, Wang Shuo and his characters achieve a kind of heroism of individuality when revolutionary heroism is no longer accessible. By opposing others'



expectations even though it might hurt their own interests, some of Wang Xiaobo's characters savor the triumph of flaunting their individuality. By doing so, both Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo come closer to the spirit of Decadence in the European sense.

The cultural environment in the 1980s and 1990s is another important condition for the emergence of Decadence in China. In the first half of the twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals were social elite. Despite huge divisions among intellectuals, they were the leader of society, providing solutions to social problems, shouldering the responsibility of enlightenment and enjoying tremendous respect and authority. Even though traditional norms were under unprecedented attack, Chinese intellectuals' elitist status was never challenged. Therefore, in the first half of the twentieth century, it was unnecessary for Chinese intellectuals to strive to prove their intellectual superiority. But Chinese intellectuals' status plummeted in the Communist regime, getting worse and worse after the 1949 takeover and reaching its nadir during the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, during the first three decades after 1949, it was impossible for Chinese intellectuals to assert their intellectual freedom, not to mention their intellectual superiority.

To Chinese intellectuals, the 1980s and 1990s was the gold times they had yearned for a long time, because it witnessed the revival of their elitist status. Chinese people who were eager to find an answer to the social disaster they had experience so they re-crowned the intellectuals as the lighthouse of the society. Despite the unpredictable

political control from the government, the cultural scene in China was flourishing with mushrooming cultural fervors and debates one after another. Therefore, it was possible for the intellectuals to pursue intellectual freedom and demonstrate their intellectual superiority. They could finally have a taste of glory that May Fourth intellectuals used to enjoy. Meanwhile, however, the market economy was also gaining momentum and suggesting a new set of value system that may threaten the intellectuals' newly-retrieved status. This is why they also experienced a sense of anxiety towards the end of the twentieth century, which Chen Xiaoming names as “a sense of cultural desolation” (*wenhua shang de tuibai gan*) (29).

The situation that Chinese intellectuals were facing in the 1980s and 1990s is similar to what European Decadents were experiencing in the late nineteenth century. In “The Painter of Modern Life,” Charles Baudelaire explains the social condition for dandyism, which is also true to the Decadence movement in general:

Dandyism appears above all in periods of transition, when democracy is not yet all-powerful, and aristocracy is only just beginning to totter and fall. In the disorder of these times, certain men who are socially, politically and financially ill at ease, but are all rich in native energy, may conceive the idea of establishing a new kind of aristocracy, all the more difficult to shatter as it will be based on the most precious, the most enduring faculties, and on the divine gifts which world and money are unable to bestow. (28)

The 1980s and 1990s was a transitional period in China's contemporary history. The revolutionary ideals were fading while the market economy was to exert tremendous impact on Chinese society. In the twenty-first century, when wealth swiftly became the

most important indicator of one's success, Chinese intellectuals' elitist status had to suffer an inevitable decline, because everyone is equal in front of money. Culturally speaking, the two decades at the end of the twentieth century is a bridge between a fanatic revolutionary culture and an equally crazy commercial culture. Therefore, this period of transition in Chinese society also made it necessary for some Chinese intellectuals to flaunt their intellectual superiority, establishing a new kind of spiritual aristocracy, just like what Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo did.

Therefore, although Decadence is progressive in the sense that it celebrates human beings' individual free will, it also has its limitations, because it is mainly reserved for the elite. It is the elite that support the mainstream norms. It is also the elite that possess the resources to flaunt their rebellious spirit against those norms. Moreover, by being a Decadent, the elite manifest and reinforce their intellectual superiority, which is in fact part of their elitist status.

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