Writing Oneself as a Writer: Intellectual Identity and Moral Agency in Contemporary Chinese Novels

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Writing Oneself as a Writer:
Intellectual Identity and Moral Agency in Contemporary Chinese Novels
by
Fang-yu Li

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Dedicated to my parents, Gong-way Lee and Bi-sha Hong
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Intellectual Identity and Moral Agency in Contemporary Chinese Novels

by

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The discussion of “identity” in current scholarship on modern Chinese literature is mostly centered on the political dynamics between national, cultural, and gender identity. Contemporary Chinese language novels from late 1990s to the present, however, seem to show a sense of confusion and disorientation towards one’s existence in the rapidly changing society. Among the works that address individual’s existential crisis, self-reflexive novels are particularly intriguing as they reveal a strong sense of self-doubt on part of the author, and in particular, towards one’s role as a writer in contemporary society. This dissertation investigates this sense of self-doubt by examining closely four self-reflexive novels written by writers from PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong: Qiu Huadong’s Confession at Noon (2000), Yan Lianke’s Feng Ya Song (2008), Wu He’s Thinking of Abang Kadresengan (1997), and Dung Kai-cheung’s Exploitations of the Works of Nature, Xuxu and Ruzhen (2005). In these novels, each author incorporates different narrative strategies to conduct a moral inquiry into both the meaning of writing and one’s function as a writer-intellectual in contemporary society. Despite having differing historical experience, these
authors reveal a shared intellectual identity reminiscent of the traditional Chinese *wenren* or “literati,” who believe in the power of writing in guiding one towards a moral path. Such a shared intellectual identity indicates a common moral ground on which writers and intellectuals from the three Chinese-speaking regions can conduct a dialogue transcendent of political conflicts and cultural/historical barriers.
Chapter 1: Writing Oneself as a Writer: Writer-Intellectuals and Narrative Identity

"I think writers write for their consciences, they write for their own true audiences, for their souls."—Mo Yan

When the Swedish Academy in Stockholm announced Mo Yan as the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, it generated a debate among critics and scholars in Mainland China and overseas. While the Chinese government was quick to congratulate Mo Yan on his success and to appropriate his personal accomplishment as national glory, many voiced concerns on Mo Yan’s political stance and his affiliation to the CCP, especially regarding his role as Deputy President of the government sanctioned China Writer’s Association (Zhongguo zuojia xiehui), and his reluctance to speak against State censorship at the press conference prior to the Award Ceremony. Mo Yan’s Award also generated a pen war among Sinologists overseas. Perry Link condemns Mo Yan’s refusal to speak out against the imprisonment of Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Prize winner who advocated for democracy in China. Charles Laughlin, on the other hand, defended Mo Yan by highlighting the artistic value and humanistic concerns Mo Yan demonstrated in his literary work, which, he argues, should be the main focus since Mo Yan was awarded for his achievement in literature, not for his political views.

1 Quoted from an online news article in Reuters. Mo Yan said these lines in an interview with the Beijing English newspaper China Daily. See http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/11/us-nobel-moyan-idUSBRE89A0NC20121011.
2 When asked to comment about censorship in China, Mo Yan compares it to the security check points at airports, and implied that it can be considered as a necessary evil that every government in the world more or less incorporates for the purpose of national security.
4 See Charles Laughlin, “Why Critics of Chinese Nobel Prize-Winner Mo Yan Are Just Plain Wrong”
Months after the Award ceremony, Mo Yan commented on these critiques in an interview with Spiegel. In response to his affinity with the government, he stated that the Deputy President of China Writer’s Association is merely an honorary title he held for a long time, which was never a problem before he was awarded the Nobel Prize. He also questioned whether a writer has to take a “correct” political stance in order to be qualified a Nobel Prize in Literature, and if so, who can say they are taking the “right” side? Mo Yan’s reluctance to “take a side” is perhaps related to his disillusionment over the various political campaigns in which everyone was forced to embrace a certain “political correctness” and to stand on the “right” side without space for alternative opinions. Thus, when Mo Yan was being asked repeatedly to call for Liu Xiaobo’s release in public, he said it reminded him of the rituals of repetition in the Cultural Revolution.

Though Mo Yan refused to take sides in the battle between the CCP and the liberal activists, it does not mean he has no political stance. On several occasions, Mo Yan stated that he is always writing for the people, especially the lower class workers and peasants, whom he believes should be the ones to represent China. As his pen name suggests, Mo Yan (“don’t speak”) chooses not to address his political concerns in public speeches, rather, he prefers literature as the medium through which he can express his views on social issues in a larger textual space that allows multi-layered and detailed explorations. Therefore, when asked about his political stance, Mo Yan said that one only has to read his novels to see it.

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Asia Society, 12 December 2012.

5 Mo Yan in another interview explains that the title Deputy Chief of China Writer’s Association is not only an honorary title, it comes with no pay, no benefits, and no actual duties. There are more than 10 Deputy Chiefs and some of them are known writers such as Wang Anyi and Chen Zhongshi. Therefore, he does not see in what way such a title would suggest a close relationship with the government, given that he does not have real political power or influence with such a title. See http://news.qq.com/a/20121030/000499.htm.


7 ibid.
My purpose of addressing this controversy, however, is not to engage in the debate about whether or not Mo Yan deserves the Nobel Prize; rather, I’m interested in the ways in which Mo Yan is judged by critics, particularly the moral standards that were imposed on him. How do others judge Mo Yan’s moral character? Was Mo Yan judged as an individual, an author, a writer, an intellectual, or a representative of China?

Despite Perry Link’s and Charles Laughlin’s disagreement, they both see Mo Yan as a “writer-intellectual,” that is, a writer whose purpose in writing carries the moral weight of writing for the good of a greater community. In this sense, a writer’s moral character and the values embedded in his/her writings become crucial criteria that define his/her role as a writer-intellectual. While Link and Laughlin agree on the importance of Mo Yan’s moral character, whether judging from his action or from his work, the moral values they emphasized were different—Link focused on “freedom” and “human rights” that are under attack under current CCP rule and Laughlin focused on the humanistic concerns he detected in Mo Yan’s work that he believes can transcend political conflicts.

Another factor that instigated the Mo Yan controversy is the international prestige of the Nobel Prize. Such an honor elevated Mo Yan’s status to that of world-class writer, which subsequently turned him into a cultural icon and a symbol of national glory for domestic audiences. In this sense, Mo Yan is no longer a writer who writes novels, but a representative of China to the world. This involuntary “up-grade” of his status had opposing effects. On the one hand, it boosts his fame and book sales worldwide, and generated a “Mo Yan fever” domestically that has brought greater attention to the critical issues he seeks to address in this work. On the other hand, the Chinese government’s recognition of Mo Yan as the “first” Chinese writer to win a Nobel Prize (excluding the Chinese-French writer Gao Xingjian’s Literature
award in 2000 and Liu Xiaobo’s Peace Prize award in 2010) marked him a “government sanctioned” writer, whose works carefully stay in the “safe zone.” As a result, some question whether his work lacks critical energy to fight against State control on free speech and corruption. As a writer-intellectual and a representative of “China” to the world, Mo Yan no longer speaks or writes for himself, but has involuntarily become a national symbol whose actions and works are considered representative of a collective whole.

The great weight imposed on Mo Yan not only impels critics to judge Mo Yan’s moral character, but also brings up the problem of the means to judge. Do we examine his actions in real life, as Link did when he accused Mo Yan of collaborating with CCP, or do we examine his works, which Laughlin believes to be the main evidence of Mo Yan’s moral values? Can we construct an image of “Mo Yan” as a writer-intellectual when it always exists in multiplicity? Is it possible in the circumstances I have thus far described, to separate Mo Yan the “author” from Mo Yan the person in real life?

Through unpacking the various questions surrounding the controversy of Mo Yan’s Nobel Prize Award, we can detect not only the challenges of being a writer-intellectual, but also the complex process of constructing an image of a writer (zuojia), which always exists in multiplicity. Yet rather than conducting a survey on contemporary writers’ public images and the ways in which such images are constructed, I am more interested in exploring the image of the “writer” in fiction, and how the process of constructing such images illuminate the author’s

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8 Gao Xingjian had become a French citizen when he received the Nobel Prize, though he writes in both Chinese and French. There were both positive and negative receptions on Gao’s work in China and overseas. Liu Xiaobo is a human rights activist currently imprisoned. He was in prison when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010.

9 The “author” here refers to Foucault’s idea that an “author” is not the historical writer but an image of the writer constructed by interpreting the writer’s work. See Foucault’s “What is an Author.”
understanding of what it means to be a “writer-intellectual” (a personal and collective identity) in contemporary society.

1.1 Writers, Intellectuals, and the Writing of Intellectuals

What does the term “writer-intellectual” mean and why is it significant in the discussion of contemporary Chinese culture? In modern English, a “writer” can mean the author of a written text (for example, the writer of a letter), or a person who writes for a living, such as novelists, journalists, bloggers. Compared to the term “author,” which emphasizes individualistic style of writing, “writer” seems to encompass a broader meaning as it focuses on the act of writing (as a one time act or as an profession) than the person who carried out the act. In modern Chinese, “writer” and “author” is combined in the term “zuojia” (作家), a compound word that consists of the word “zuo” (作) which means “to compose,” and “jia” (家) which refers to someone who is the master or a specialist of a certain profession. To say someone is a zuojia, therefore, is to say that he or she has mastered the art of writing, usually with an established name. In this sense, a “zuojia” is not simply a person who writes, but a person who has demonstrated one’s talent in writing and established a significant social position.

“Zhishifenzi” (知识分子) is a modern term generally refers to the educated elites, which can be extended to include professionals who are educated in a certain area of knowledge. And “zhishifenzi” is usually used as an equivalent to the English term “intellectuals.” There are two basic approaches in defining the term “intellectual.” The realist-structuralist approach defines three types of intellectuals: those who are concerned with fundamental cultural values and create knowledge in different intellectual realms (scholars, writers, artists, and in some cases, journalists); those who distribute or transmit knowledge (journalists, teachers, clerics); those who
apply knowledge as part of their job (engineers, physicians, lawyers). While this approach encompasses different types of intellectuals regardless of their political orientation, other approaches focus more on the public role or political responsibility of the intellectual. The “phenomenological approach,” for example, emphasizes the need for reference to the moral purposes and epistemic contents of life of the mind. In other words, from this perspective intellectuals are not merely professionals, but professionals whose knowledge is used to fulfill a higher social responsibility. While most usages of the term “intellectual” adopt the realist-structuralist approach, intellectuals’ social function is not necessarily neglected as different adjectives such as “public,” “critical,” “academic” may be affixed to indicate different groups of intellectuals with specific social functions. One example is the term “public intellectuals,” which refers to experts in a certain field of knowledge who voice their opinions on critical social issues in public settings. In this sense, the term “public intellectual” designates not only “professionals,” but emphasizes how these professionals use their knowledge to engage in social debates, and therefore exercise their responsibility towards society.

To talk about “writer-intellectuals” (zuojia zhishifenzi 作家知识份子) as a group, then, is to consider those who “write” not merely as a profession, but who regard writing as an act that fulfills one’s social responsibility as an intellectual. One example of a writer-intellectual is Lu Xun (1881-1936), who considered writing as a means to conduct social change. In the Preface to his short story collection Call to Arms (Nahan), Lu Xun reflected on how he decided to give up medicine for literature after watching a film showing the indifference of Chinese people towards the sufferings of their own:

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11 ibid., p. 3.
Before the term was over I had left for Tokyo, because after this film I felt that medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made examples of, or to witness such futile spectacles; and it doesn’t really matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I determined to promote a literary movement.  

In this passage, we see how Lu Xun concluded that literature, rather than medicine, is the means to cure spiritual illness, which he believed was the key to save China. Therefore, he wrote stories that aimed to instigate general public’s concern over social inequalities and national crisis. Though the comparison of literature to medicine seem to render literary writing more a social function than an artistic expression, Lu Xun’s creativity in new ways of storytelling no doubt showed his contribution in the aesthetics of fiction writing. The passion to save the nation and the compassion for the suffering implicit in his work demonstrated Lu Xun’s moral conscience as a writer-intellectual, who not only mastered the art of writing, but used his skill to write for the greater community.

Though “zuojia” (writer/author) and “zhishifenzi” (intellectuals) are both used in modern times, “zuojia zhishifenzi” (writer-intellectuals) as a type of intellectual can be traced back to earlier social groups such as “shi” (士) in the Zhou period and “literati” (wenren 文人) in medieval China. In “An Investigation on Chinese Intellectuals,” Yu Yingshi maps out the historical development of Chinese intellectuals since antiquity. He traces the earliest

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intellectuals to the “shi” gentry in Zhou Dynasty, who belonged to the lowest rank of aristocrats and held professional duty to serve their feudal lords. During the Spring and Autumn Period, the social status of “shi” changed as the feudal system disintegrated and “shi” was liberated from fixed posts in the feudal system and became free thinkers. The emergence of schools of thought such as Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism nurtured groups of intellectuals pursuing utopian societies (datong shijie 大同世界) based on the realization of Dao (the Way, the Principle 道) a philosophical concept that bears various meanings in different schools but generally refers to the “Ultimate Truth” of the universe.14

“Dao” as the ultimate goal for intellectual pursuit can be detected in the major schools of thought and has a two-fold meaning, that is, to achieve social harmony and to conduct “self-cultivation” (xiushen 修身 or xiuji 修己).15 In this sense, the pursuit of Dao has always been a dual task for Chinese intellectuals. On the one hand, it is an inward reflection on one’s moral character (daode 道德); on the other hand, it is and an outward practice in social and political spheres for the realization of social harmony and cosmic order.

If “the pursuit of ‘Dao’” is the spiritual anchor and the ultimate goal for “shi,” according to Confucius’ teaching “shi zhiyu dao” (士志於道), the means to achieve such a goal is the

14 Confucians generally believed that Dao is based on human’s intrinsic moral capacity to do the right thing, while Legalists argued that the law is the ultimate guide to restrain human action and secure social order. Daoists on the other hand, contended that Dao exists in nature and human actions are the causes of disorder. For a comparative study of these schools, see Frederick W. Mote, Intellectual Foundations of China, or Benjamin I. Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China.

15 Different aspect of moral character is emphasized in the three schools, including being “venerable,” “righteous,” and “virtuous.” In the Confucian classic Analects, chapter 45 “Zilu asked what constituted the superior man. The Master said, ‘The cultivation of himself in reverential carefulness.’” In the Mohist classic Mozi, Book 12, Esteem for Righteousness, “Mozi said: The gentlemen of our time desire to achieve righteousness. Yet when we endeavour to help them in the cultivation of their personality they become resentful. This is like desiring the completion of a wall and becoming resentful when helped in the building. Isn't this perverse?” In the Daoist text Daodejing, Chapter 54, “Tao when nursed within one's self, His vigour will make true.”
practice of “wen” (文), the broader meaning of which includes language, literature, writing, and culture. In *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Wenxin diaolong, 文心雕龙), Liu Xie (刘勰 5th Century) theorized that literary creation is a manifestation of Dao. Liu stated that “wen” is powerful because it is a “natural organic expression of the divine” that is “observed and transformed into writing by the Sages,” and that Dao is handed down through that process.\(^{16}\) The concept “literature as the carrier of Dao” (wenyi zaidao 文以载道) coined by Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐 1017-1073 BCE) during the Song Dynasty further emphasizes the social function of literature, which is compared to the vehicle that carries and passed down “Dao.”\(^{17}\) As a Neo-Confucianist, Zhou’s idea of Dao is rooted in the Confucian tradition that “wen” (language, words, patterns) carried strong moral implications, and thus rendered the act of “writing” not only the means to conduct self-expression and self-cultivation, but also to pursue a utopian ideal founded on morality.

The significance of “wen” in constituting a Chinese intellectual identity is also manifested in the term “wenren,” which literally means “literary man” and is translated as literatus, scholar, or men of letters. “Wenren” refers to the educated elites in medieval and early modern periods. They received a broad education in the Confucian classics and were trained to conduct literary writing and/or other artistic practices such as music, painting, and calligraphy. These artistic practices not only provide literati a venue to express their personal emotions, social critiques, and political ideals, but also facilitate dialogue among the literati.

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\(^{16}\) “*Wen*” has many translations, including literature, essay, language, culture, writing…etc. According to the translator of *Wenxin diaolong*, “wen” signifies a wide variety of patterns that envelop all aspects of the universe. See *Wenxin diaolong*, chapter 1.

\(^{17}\) See Zhou Dunyi, *Tongshu* (Explanatory Text), chapter *Wenci* (Characters and Rhetoric). 周敦颐《通书·文辞》: “文所以载道也。轮辕饰而人弗庸，徒饰也，况虚车乎。”
Among various genres of art and literature, fiction served a particular function—a textual space for writers to reflect on “literati” as a collective identity. In Manling Luo’s *Literati Storytelling in Late Medieval China*, she demonstrates the ways in which literati took advantage of the emerging *chuanqi* storytelling to identify, imagine, and perpetuate themselves as a cultural elite.¹⁸ Martin Huang’s investigation of eighteenth century novels such as *Rulin Waishi* and *Honglou meng* also addresses how authors employed different narrative strategies in order to “come to terms with their increasingly problematic self-identity as literati.”¹⁹

The incorporation of the art of storytelling to reflect and negotiate one’s intellectual identity can also be detected in post-Mao fiction in the 1980s. In Rong Cai’s *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature*, she points out that the central task for writer-intellectuals of the 80s was to reconstruct a new subjectivity and to reassert humanist values.²⁰ Yet given that many protagonists in the stories appear to be “crippled subjects” trapped inside historical wounds that are not yet healed, it seems to suggest that writers’ attempts to reconstruct a coherent Chinese subjectivity has failed. Nevertheless, writers of that period showed unprecedented energy in experimenting with new narrative techniques, which can be interpreted as an exercise of intellectual agency that was seriously undermined during the Mao era. The construction of an intellectual identity, therefore, is manifested in the *act* of writing stories rather than the stories themselves.²¹

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²¹ Other scholars who had done research on the question of subjectivity and identity in Chinese literature include Jing Tsu and Lingchei Letty Chen. In *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature*, Jing Tsu examines literary texts during the May Fourth period and argues that modern China’s national, racial and cultural identity is based on the failure of the nation in combating foreign invasions. She made the provocative
From the discussion above, the role of “writer-intellectuals” among the broader definition of “intellectuals” is significant for its emphasis on “writing” as the means to fulfill social responsibility. Its association to the early “shì” and “literati” gentry further indicate the importance of morality as the base for the pursuit of Dao in the Confucian tradition. Though “writer-intellectual” is not a commonly used term to designate a particular group in contemporary society, the current literary productions suggest a presence of such a group. On the one hand, we can detect in many literary productions strong moral critiques of current social-political issues, which can be regarded as the exercise of writing to fulfill one’s responsibility as intellectuals. On the other hand, some literary works also show the writers’ anxiety towards both one’s role as an intellectual and the waning importance of literary practice in a market driven society, which necessitates a process of the formation of a collective identity of writer-intellectuals based on individual moral reflections.

1.2 Writer-intellectuals in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong after 1990s

The 1990s was a transitional period for PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong that redefined the relationships among the three regions. After the 1989 Tian’anmen Incident, China went full-bore into economic development, both as a means to recuperate national strength after the Mao era and as a strategy to redirect public energy from the “cultural fever” of the 1980s that had the potential to threaten CCP’s ruling authority. The launching of a new national project that aimed at economic success resulted in fast growth of GDP, as well as the establishment of closer argument that it is precisely due to the victimhood of China that Chinese nationalism gained its strength. Lingchei Letty Chen’s Writing Chinese: Reshaping Chinese Cultural Identity takes a global view on the question of “Chinese cultural identity” and argues that these “Chinese” writers employ imitation and appropriation as narrative strategies to engage in the dialogue with various manifestations of cultural authenticity and/or hybridity so as to arrive at a meaningful understanding of their “Chinese” cultural identity in local and global contexts.
economic ties among mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The economic ties also facilitated cultural and social interactions, and fostered political conversations during the past two decades.

While China’s economic growth brought Taiwan and Hong Kong closer, it did not ease the political tensions among them. The crackdown in 1989 sent the message that China’s “open-reform” policy does not extend to political reform, and that any attempt to re-evaluate the current political system will not be tolerated. Such messages cautioned Taiwan, which began the transformation process from one-party system into a democratic system since the revocation of martial-law in 1987. This political incident also marked a significant distinction in terms of intellectual development in the PRC and in Taiwan. While intellectual freedom is restricted under censorship in the PRC, there is more space for alternative voices in various social, cultural, and political sectors, including advocacy for democracy and gender equality, discussions on queer rights and problem of national identity, which becomes a central debate as Taiwan and China foster closer interactions.

Similarly, Hong Kong in the 1990s also faced a new challenge of integrating with the PRC politically, socially, and economically after the 1997 “handover.” Though Deng’s implementation of the “one nation, two systems” policy allowed Hong Kongers more freedom of expression, as media censorship seems relatively “loose” in Hong Kong, PRC control on the political front remains tight.22 The recent “Occupy Central” (zhanzhong 占中) protest exhibits

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22 Recent news report from The Guardian shows that PRC censorship is gradually affecting the freedom of publication in Hong Kong. See http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/19/censorship-in-hong-kong-how-china-controls-sale-of-sensitive-books
strong desire for political autonomy as students demonstrated against the deprivation of the people’s right to nominate candidates for the election of Chief Executive.23

The social and political change also influenced cultural productions. In mainland China, novels popular in the 90s focused more on exploring personal experiences in immediate realities. The “New Generation Novels” for example emphasized the depiction of individual’s spiritual agony as they confronted various challenges of living in the illusions of the material world.24 This new focus on private experiences and individual mental struggles raised the concern of contemporary critics on the loss of literature’s social function when writers retreated to their inner world and lost touch with immediate social-political realities. Similarly, Wang Shuo’s “Hooligan” novels (pizi wenxue 猖子文學), which used mockery and parody to assert one’s subversive and rebellious attitude toward the absurdities in life, was castigated for its lack of “spirituality” (jingshenxing 精神性), as the sarcasims in his stories were considered merely “subversion for subversion’s sake” without a higher purpose.

In fact, this “spiritual crisis” can be understood more as a reflection of the psychological struggle of a particular group of people than a depiction of shared sentiment for all. Many of these stories demonstrate the critical consciousness of being an intellectual, as they feature writers, artists, or academics as main characters. For example, in Jia Pingwa’s controversial novel Decayed Capital (1993), we see a talented writer who gradually turns into a morally depraved individual as he abandons the moral function of literary writing and utilizes his talent.

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23 The Occupy Central protest, also called Umbrella Movement, began in September 2014, where students occupy several major city intersections to protest against the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress’s decision on proposed reforms to the Hong Kong electoral system, which disallowed civil nominations and restricted the right to nominate within the 1200-member committee.

24 Generally referred to writers born in mid or late 60s and active in the 90s, whose writings showed strong difference from writers active in the 80s in various ways, including the lack of historical consciousness, emphasis on private experiences and depiction of private desires, and the depiction of urban living. Prominent writers of this generation include Zhu Wen, Han Dong, Lu Yang, Bi Feiyu, Qiu Huadong, He Dun…etc. (from Xinshiqi xiaoshuo fazhanlun).
as cultural capital to indulge in the game of money, sex and power. Similarly, in *The Flag of Desire* (1996), Ge Fei depicts the moral decline of academics and scholars’ submission to physical and material desire. In Qiu Huadong’s *The City Chariot* (1997), we see young artists confronted with the hardship of pursuing “artistic dreams” and the reality that the value of “art” is based on its price tag while inspiration and creativity have little value in the world of materialism.

Scholarly works also address the various fictional portrayals of intellectuals in novels written in the new era. Yi Hui’s *Who am I?* (2004) and Chen Shujie’s *The Anxiety of Value* (2009) discussed how intellectuals in fictional works suffer from identity crisis on both the personal level (as individuals) and the collective level (as intellectuals). Jiang Lasheng’s investigation of fiction written in the 90s also points out that many works demonstrated characteristics of postmodernism: decentralization, deconstructionism, fragmentation, and disintegrated subjectivity. He argues that characters described in novels of this period showed a characteristic of “roaming about” (*youdang*), a way of living that lacks passion and motivation while consumption becomes a means for identity formation.\(^\text{25}\) This type of existence implies that these characters lack a sustaining moral principle and value system, and thus the subject loses its point of reference and could only be driven by market flows.

The “roaming” individual type of character is not restricted to the elite class. In Zhu Wen’s “How Far Is It to the Factory,” the protagonist Xiaoding reflects on the uncertainty of life and the unpredictability of his future as a factory worker. This sense of “ephemerality of life” propels Xiaoding to carry a map in his backpack, which symbolizes the need to reassure his direction and position in life. Yet just like the factory, which is nothing more than “a small dot

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on the map that could be easily hidden or erased,” Xiaoding’s existence in the world, which is attached to the factory, is also as fragile.26

Similar to Xiaoding, intellectuals also confronted similar socio-economic changes. Timothy Cheek argues that the intellectual’s role as public official ended when the CPP withdrew its totalitarian goal to control all of society, as it did under Mao, to embrace “market socialism.” And the price of today’s relative autonomy for China’s intellectuals has been a loss of public influence and the birth of self-doubt and questioning.27 This self-doubt urges the opening of a new space of identity negotiation in the interstices between the new structure of material life and their praxis of critical inquiry. In Maurizio Marinelli’s research on the commitment of public intellectuals in contemporary society, he finds that the recent debate on Chinese “public intellectuals” reveals a high level of public involvement and investment, both in terms of the disposition of the intellectual himself and the practice of caring for the public. This derives from the combination of a constant “self-cultivation” drive (zixiu 自修) with the spirit of “self-awareness” (zijue 自覺): these two forces inform the Chinese intellectual’s attempt to formulate questions about his self-positioning in relation to “China” (and also to China in the world) on the one hand, and his interaction with the public, on the other, revealing his disposition to identify issues of public concern.28

As intellectuals try to position themselves on a moral stance, the various external political forces such as the state, the media, and the consumer market presented the task rather

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26 The recent suicide of a Foxconn worker Xu Lizhi testifies to this gruesome reality. Xu Lizhi was a worker and a poet who composed many works that explored the harsh condition and struggles of migrant worker in China. See https://libcom.org/blog/xulizhi-foxconn-suicide-poetry.


challenging. As Geremie Barmé illustrated in *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, the position of intellectuals, artists, professionals and dissidents under state-controlled capitalism is never a purely autonomous or moral choice, some have acted with a questionable moral stance—dissenters may be “professional rebels” whose comfortable livings depended on politics; artists may be charged to be playing with cultural-political sensitivities for better marketization.  

Surely Barmé is not arguing that there is no morality left in the heart of intellectuals/social critics/artists/dissidents; rather, he is pointing out the complexity and difficulty of “doing the right thing” in contemporary society. How do intellectuals find a firm moral/political ground in their artistic articulations and achieve a certain extent of public effect without being caught up in state politics and/or consumer market forces? And more importantly, how do literary writers deal with this dilemma? Do they take on the moral burden of the intellectuals or simply retreat into their private artistic space to deal with the existential crisis of postmodern subjectivity? Do they show intellectual autonomy in their writings or simply adapt themselves to become “professional writers” driven by ideological trends or market needs?  

While serious literature lamented the loss of moral values in the market-driven society, a new generation of writers born after 1980 ("balinghou") came to take the dominant role. Writers such as Han Han and Guo Jingming are two of the most well-known young writers whose novels have enjoyed great market success. Their success is not only the result of their writing skills and literary talent, but also because of their ability to capture the tastes of the young generation as they find effective ways of marketing themselves, in particular excessive media exposure through television and the internet. They appear as celebrities constantly under media spotlight,

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and expend much effort to maintain their public image and attention, which contributed to their writer’s identities.\(^3\)

On the other side of the Taiwan Strait, though writers in Taiwan enjoy more artistic and political freedom under a democratic state rule, they are not free from the various impacts of global cultural flow and global market forces. Similar types of “roaming characters” appears in stories such as Zhu Tianwen’s “Fin-de-siecle Splendor,” in which we see a young model indulging in a life driven by fashion trends. In Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Millennium Mambo*, we also see a young girl driven by the decadent nightlife of Taipei and clinging to a series of different men before she figures out what to do with her life. Yet compared to the character Xiaoding in Zhu Wen’s story, these female characters are less nihilistic; rather, they show a certain degree of individual autonomy in choosing their own lifestyle. This difference reflects on the more open cultural and political environment of Taiwan after the end of martial law, an environment that allows for rapid development of the intellectual field.

Chang Sung-sheng in *Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law* points out that the intellectual field took a new turn after the end of martial law, as new discourses such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, the new Left, and culture studies were incorporated by the intellectuals who have studied abroad and now occupy prestigious academic positions after their return. Cultural formation has benefited greatly from the proliferation of public forums in the 1990s, spurred by dramatically increased freedom of speech, intellectual pluralism, and new forms of competition within a more autonomous cultural field. Under this climate, writers voice

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\(^3\) These two writers’ popularity is based on how much public attention they can get, regardless of whether it is a negative or positive attention. Han Han has been suspected of fraud since some netizens believed that his father is the one who wrote the novels, not himself. Yet the scandal does not force Han Han out of the celebrity spotlight, on the contrary, it kept him in the literary circle as he remains to be a “hot topic.” Guo Jingming fashioned his image with the making of *Tiny Times*, a film adaption of his novel, in which he appears as a young celebrity “writer” who writes for a fashion magazine.
their opinions, thoughts, sentiments from different stand points—the development of subgenres such as “queer fiction,” “environmental writings,” “aboriginal literature,” “Military Compound literature”—all explore Taiwan and its various colors. Among these writings, there seem to be a tendency to “return to the (is)land,” focusing on the depiction of private and local experiences.

The focus on “local” experiences can be traced back to the spirit of bentu (native soil), which dominated the cultural scene of the 80s. It was a localist imperative that Taiwan be treated as the “center” in cultural mapping. Yet this tendency to form a Taiwan-centered discourse (as opposed to the Sinocentrism propagated by the Nationalist Party in the previous era) never reached a conclusion, for no consensus have been reached concerning the meaning of “Taiwanese” due to different historical experiences of each ethnic group. The diverse approaches to the term “Taiwanese” illuminate the ultimate paradox of Taiwanese cultural formation: the desire to form a coherent Taiwanese identity in a society where hybridity seems to be the only common factor. Thus, despite the attempt to form a coherent identity, many writers embraced the hybrid nature of Taiwan and redirected their attention to exploring the diversities of Taiwan by zooming in their focus onto the personal and the particular.

This tendency continues to develop in the twenty-first century, as we see in film productions during the 2000s and 2010s. For example, Chen Huai-en in Island Etude (Lianxi qu 2006) follows the journey of a hearing-impaired college student, who bikes around the island to

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31 Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law, 191.
32 One of the mainstream discourses is the “pro-Taiwan Independence,” which emphasized the ethnic hybridity of Taiwanese and the colonial history of Taiwan in order to establish a new national discourse detached from the history of the “Han Chinese.” Following the same anti-Sinocentric view, former president Li Deng-hui proposed the concept “New Taiwanese” (xin Taiwanren) to “localize” the mainlanders in Taiwan. Younger intellectuals such as Yang Zhao sought to establish a new identity by emphasizing Taiwanese talent in international trading so as to shake off the traumatic historical burden and embrace the thriving economy. Liao Xianhao, approaching the forming of “Taiwanese identity” from a mainlanders’ point of view, criticized the inherent discrimination in coining mainlanders “New Taiwanese” instead of simply “Taiwanese.” See Chang Sung-sheng, p. 191-193.
discover the natural beauty of Taiwan as well as his own heritage. Similarly, Wei De-sheng’s Cape No. 7 (Haijiao qihao 2008) and Seediq Bale (Saideke balai 2011) are set in specific local settings (the former at the southern tip of Taiwan and the latter in the mountains of central Taiwan) that highlights the private and specific historical experiences of local people in various parts of Taiwan. The making of documentaries that focus on social issues in Taiwan also become popular among general public in the past decade. For example, Let It Be (Wumile 2005) portrayed the life of farmers in Houbi County of Tainan and drew public attention on the importance of agriculture development. The recent documentary Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above (Kanjian Taiwan 2013) was also a great success as it revealed the environmental pollution cause by industrial development through a series of aerial photographs. From this observation, the problematic concept of “Taiwanese identity” is still at the center of cultural production, though it has turned from fixating on the historical entanglement with China to the exploration of what constitutes “Taiwan the island” (as opposed to “Taiwan” the nation), its present and the past, the city and the countryside, the land and its people, the everyday and the extraordinary.

This tendency to deconstruct the notion of “Taiwan” as a unified political entity while at the same time anxious in constructing an image of “Taiwan” through personal writings points to the dilemma of intellectuals in Taiwan. For the “obsession with Taiwan” is in fact originated from the failure to define “Taiwan” as a unique and unified community. If what “defines” Taiwan is its cultural and ethnic diversity, is Taiwan any different from other countries that are also culturally and ethnically diverse? Are intellectuals only allowed to position themselves within Taiwan (as speaking about/for certain groups) and not as a Taiwanese, for the very attempt to do so would render “Taiwan” a monolithic whole, which is “politically incorrect” under the postmodern deconstructionist discourse now dominant in Taiwan? If there is no
“common characteristics” shared by people in Taiwan, whom do intellectuals stand for? In this sense, even though the “Taiwanese identity crisis” seems to be an outdated issue as intellectuals imported new and trendy discourses to explain this crisis away, it remains to be a problem waiting to be resolved as manifested in the “obsession with Taiwan” in recent literary and film productions.

Writers in Hong Kong share a similar dilemma, as their local “Hong Kong” identity became a question after the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 that decided Hong Kong’s “return” to PRC in 1997. Hong Kongers’ anxiety towards the uncertain future both before and after 1997 can be detected among the general population and intellectuals alike. The decade before 1997 witnessed a large number of Hong Kong residents immigrating to other countries, mainly the United States, Canada, and Australia. Local Hong Kong artists were concerned about their local identity and Hong Kong’s future under PRC’s authoritarian rule, especially after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident where they witnessed the destructive means CCP authorities were willing to employ to crack down on democratic movements.

Deng Xiaoping’s “one country, two systems” model and the promise of “fifty years without change” sought to appease their anxiety by assuring the continuation of the existing social, economic, and legal system. Yet the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong in 2003 further harmed local peoples’ confidence in the SAR (Special Administrative Region) government, as the outbreak is partially due to the fact that mainland authorities refused to acknowledge the

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34 See Deng Xiaoping’s speech in 1984 June 22 and 23 to the Hong Kong representative visiting Beijing, including Sir Sze-yuen Chung.
extent and severity of SARS.\textsuperscript{35} The SARS crisis also reminded Hong Kongers of the importance of freedom of the press, which is crucial to ensure transparency and accountability in government. The massive demonstration on 1 July 2003 that targeted on the government’s incompetence in handling SARS also showed that Hong Kong people were playing a more active role in determining Hong Kong’s leaders and future development.

The need to obtain political autonomy echoed the need to construct a unique Hong Kong identity. Wing-sang Law points out that over the last decade, echoing the much politicized call for Hong Kong citizens to come out and protect their "ways of life," some local writers and critics have emerged from their secluded literary or art enclaves and demanded that people pay more attention to the culture production of Hong Kong. No longer confined to their role as guardians of high culture in small art and literary circles, which required them to shoulder the almost impossible task of promoting art and literary appreciation within an intensely commercialized society, many artists and writers joined in the battle cry for Hong Kong uniqueness. Reacting to the often-disparaging attitudes toward Hong Kong, which deny that the city is worthy of any mention of its cultural achievements, they have tried to rehabilitate its cultural status by affirming its own patterns of life. Redressing the past tendency to read Hong Kong as a mere deviation, exception, or even aberration from both the British and the Chinese experiences, these critics protest against the over-dominance of not only Western colonial cultures but also Sinocentrism. With the help of new cultural theories and postmodernist/postcolonial terminology, some writers have tried to rectify the past disdain toward Hong Kong, especially its local popular culture, complaining how the place had long been culturally marginalized. Vengeance against the old canons, the desire to update one's theoretical

\textsuperscript{35} Loh, Christine (2004). “Lessons Learned,” in Christine Loh and Civic Exchange (eds), \textit{At the Epicentre: Hong Kong and the SARS Outbreak} (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press), pp. 235-50.
equipment, and the display of intellectual duty in order to give one's work a political edge—all these have come together in this search for the local subjectivity.\(^{36}\)

The way in which Hong Kong writers reflect on their search for local subjectivity is similar to that of Taiwanese writers in that both focus on depicting cultural and ethnic diversity of Hong Kong by tracing common people’s everyday experiences. For example, Ye Si in *Postcolonial Food and Love* (2009) reflects the uniqueness of Hong Kong as a place full of fusion, conflicts, resistance, tolerance, and amalgamation through the depiction of the ways in which people fulfill their basic needs—food and sex. While the intellectuals are making efforts to establish a Hong Kong-centered discourse by “liberating” Hong Kong from western cultural colonialism and Sinocentrism, literary writers are pointing out the fact that there is no authentic “Hong Kong culture” to be liberated from, rather, the various images of Hong Kong are constitutions of the private experiences of everyone living in Hong Kong.

Yet regardless of the problematic formation of a Hong Kong identity, artists and writers continue to produce works that focus on depicting the city. Carolyn Cartier’s observation of contemporary performing arts shows that artists have been promoting the value of human qualities in economic spaces and conduct heritage conservation to counter the rampant commercial development of the city. They deliberately show their creations in public spaces or iconic sites such as Star Ferry Pier and Queen’s Pier to generate remembrance of personal memory and community experience.\(^{37}\) This act of connecting memory, experience, and public space as a way to assert a collective identity reflects a psychological need to assure one’s unique

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existence in “culture of disappearance,” an idea coined by Ackbar Abbas, who argues that Hong Kong, as represented in films, is constantly on the edge of disappearing.  

Literary productions also reflected the need to construct a unique Hong Kong identity, often featuring “the city” as the main subject of writing. For example, Huang Biyun’s “Losing the City” portrayed an extreme sense of loss and rootlessness of Hong Kongers as the 1997 handover approaches. Dung Kai-cheung’s *Atlas: The Archeology of an Imaginary City* seeks to “create” an imaginary Hong Kong by deconstructing and reordering cultural and historical elements. Xi Xi’s *I City* (1989) follows a teenager’s view of common people’s everyday life around him in the 70s, depicting the coming into being of a “Hong Kong consciousness” through the playful eyes of a teenager. Shen Shuang argues that Xi Xi in his novel uses collage not merely as a self-conscious cultural strategy in defense of writing the local, but to indicate a spatial turn towards identity construction, that is, to construct a Hong Kong identity by placing the city at the center, as opposed to drawing a linear history of Hong Kong. Shen interprets Xi Xi’s novel as a demonstration of a new way to write Hong Kong history, that is, to incorporate literary space as a site for history writing, which poses a strong contrast towards the nationalistic tendency of writing the literary history of Hong Kong in connection with the literary history of China.

Film productions also reflected the obsession with “the city” that is on the edge of disappearing. In Wong Kar-wai’s *Chungking Express* (1994), one character’s obsession with a certain “expiration date” points to the anxiety of Hong Kongers as they count down to July 1st, 1997. Wong’s later film *Happy Together* (1997) further highlighted the “absence” of Hong Kong

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by portraying a Hong Kong gay couple’s intense yet abusive love relationship in Buenos Aires, with one upside down image of Hong Kong appearing for only a few seconds. Evans’ Chan’s low-budget, semi-documentary film *The Map of Sex and Love* (2001) explores the interconnection between self-identity, traumatic memory, and cultural heritage in post-‘97 Hong Kong, as we follow three Hong Kongers’ roaming in the city and their search for love and human connections.

The social, political, and cultural development in 1990s and 2000s have presented several new challenges for writer-intellectuals in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. For writers in mainland China, literature in the new era had lost its moral functions as censorship limited the space for social critique, and the new emphasis on market success marginalize writer-intellectuals’ social position and subjected literary production to serve as entertainment for public audiences. While the relatively liberal environment in Taiwan and Hong Kong allowed writer-intellectuals to conduct social critique and voice alternative views on politically sensitive issues, the lack of a coherent sense of the self in relation to the problematic concept of the “nation” casts a strong self-doubt on their personal identity as writer-intellectuals. This sense of doubt on the self as a writer-intellectual can be detected in self-reflexive writings, in which authors conduct moral critique on their role as writers and question the function of literature in contemporary society. This act of writing the self as a writer, I argue, is a manifestation of one’s moral agency and a demonstration of writer’s autonomy, as illustrated in the four novels I analyze in the following chapters—Qiu Huadong’s *Confession at Noon* (2000), Yan Lianke’s *Feng, Ya, Song* (2008), Wu He’s *Thinking of Abang Kadressengan* (1997), and Dung Kai-Cheung’s *Exploitations of the Works of Nature: Xuxu and Ruzhen* (2005). Before introducing each chapter, I will first discuss the how major contemporary theorists have discussed the
concept of identity in the age of consumption and globalization, and how Paul Ricoeur’s
heurmenytic approach to the concept of identity unpacks the complex process of identity
construction and illuminates the moral implication behind the act of constructing a self-identity.

1.3 Narrative Identity, Moral Agency, and the Writing of the self as a Writer

“Identity” as a theoretical and social inquiry has been a much-discussed topic in various
fields such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, and cultural studies. In social psychology,
“identity” is formed through the process of self-categorization or identification (the former used
in social identity theory and the latter in identity theory), in which a “reflexive” subject takes
itself as an object and categorizes, classifies, or names itself in particular ways in relation to
other social categories or classifications. In the process of self-categorization, one forms a
“social identity,” in which one acknowledges one’s belonging to a social category or group,
consequently resulting in the accentuation of perceived similarities between the self and group
members, as well as the differences between the self and people outside the group. In identity
theory, the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the
incorporation into the self the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its
performance. Though it seems that “social identity” (group based) and “identity” (role-based) are
different types of “identities,” Stets and Burke argue that the two are not mutually exclusive
categories and both are central features that work together to shape one’s sense of self.

Whether “identity” is understood as one’s role in society or one’s belonging to a social
group, a person’s identity is bound to be closely tied to the changing social-political conditions
under the forces of globalization. Sociologist Anthony Giddens provides a thorough analysis of

the concept of identity in a globalized world in his *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Giddens argues that we witness an emergence of new mechanisms of self-identity, which are shaped by, and also shape, the institutions of modernity. He points out that when forging their self-identities in the post-traditional order of modernity, and against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience (through printed and electronic media), self-identity becomes a reflexively organized endeavor, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives.\(^4^1\)

Jonathan Rutherford in *After Identity* attempts to find common shared meanings in response to an increasingly commercialized society. He argues that the influences of markets and neo-liberal ideology accelerated the historical transformation of the social category of the individual, and the languages and practices of identity today are no longer associated with the emancipatory struggle for political agency as they were in the 1960s and 1970s, but have given way to the commercial market value of individualized rational choice. Consumer culture, Rutherford argues, glamorizes and idealizes our desire, splitting it off from our emotional needs and our dependence on others. This “desire without a qualifying and balancing attachment to others” casts the individual into a pursuit of the unattainable. Success, then, is about the light of recognition illuminating a person’s unique singularity (as in celebrity culture), while failure means a loss of a unique identity.\(^4^2\)

While Rutherford stresses the rootlessness of one’s identity in a world governed by consumer culture, he recognizes the past as a crucial factor in shaping one’s identity. In one chapter, he examines the ways in which memory and the heritage industry construct historical time and shape our understanding of national identity and “race” difference. Heritage, he argues,

becomes the attempt to make sense of the past without disturbing the social and symbolic order of the present. And our subjective sense of self is constructed around a national identity that manufactures “ghosts”—the dead who cannot settle but who prowl ceaselessly looking for release. Here Rutherford stresses that one’s sense of a coherent self is inevitably connected to the nation, the idea of which is based on how the story of its past, hence the history of the nation, is told. Yet while the subject needs a coherent account of the past to sustain a coherent self in the present, the awareness of history’s “constructedness” that echoes with the sense of “doubt” Giddens mentioned seems to trap the modern subject forever in the present, as it fails to obtain a sense of continuity with the past and the future. Under such circumstances, the modern subject lacks a historically grounded sense of belongingness, which results in the hunger for psychic security that leads to a postmodern form of “narcissism.”

John Tomlinson in “Globalization and Cultural identity” pays special attention to cultural identity in the age of globalization. Before globalization, he states, there existed local, autonomous, distinct, well-defined and culturally sustaining connections between geographical place and cultural experience. These connections constitute one’s “cultural identity,” which people possess as an “inheritance” or a “benefit of traditional long dwelling” that signifies the continuity with the past. Globalization, however, destroys stable localities, displacing peoples, and brings a market-driven, “branded” homogenization of cultural experiences that seems to threaten the existence of traditional notion of cultural identity. Yet rather than lamenting the loss of a stabilized cultural identity, Tomlinson argues that globalization has been the most significant force in creating and proliferating cultural identity, and from which the dominance of national identity is challenged. One example is the “globalization wars” that involves identity politics in which movements mobilize around ethnic, racial or religious identity for the purpose of claiming

43 ibid., p.12-13.
state power. Another example would be projects of cultural “reterritorialization”—the claiming and reclaiming of localities, which does not involve claims of state power. The land rights movements of aboriginal groups in Australia, USA and Canada argue for the right to an ethnic “homeland” that is conceived as coexistent and compatible with national identity.  

The above discussion points to the major questions one encounters when understanding the concept of identity. First, it is a reflexive act in which one identifies or categorizes oneself as a member of a particular social group. Second, it involves a sense of continuity and coherence, despite the change of one’s conception of oneself and the social group with which one identifies. Third, the formation of identity is tied to history, both individual and collective. Thus, one’s identity is never fixed but requires constant reconfiguration, a process through which one seeks to reach a sense of permanence and continuity in history. While the above-mentioned theorists focus on self-identity as a dynamic between the self and the other, Paul Ricoeur seeks to explore another dimension of self-identity, that is, the self as “an other.”

In his *Oneself as Another* (1990), Ricoeur theorizes the concept of identity from a hermeneutic approach, and proposes that the construction of self-identity is a narrative process that ties together discordant elements into a temporal unity, and always entails an ethical aim. Identity, for Ricoeur, has two meanings: *idem*-identity, or sameness, and *ipse*-identity, or selfhood. Sameness consists some form of permanence in time, or uninterrupted continuity that allows us to identify and re-identify a person as the same over time. Selfhood consists a sense of self-constancy when one confronts the changing “other” external and internal to the self. It does not necessary assert an unchanging core of the personality, but is rather a dialectic between the

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45 The French original *Soi-même comme un autre*, is published in 1990. The English translation *Oneself as Another* by Kathleen Blamey is published in 1992. I use the English translation as my source.
self and the “other than self” subjected to change in time. A theory of narrative identity, first introduced in his earlier work *Time and Narrative*, reconciles the two aspects of selfhood:

Self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the noveliststic style of imaginary autobiographies.\(^{46}\) This interpretation of the self is manifested in what he calls “emplotment,” which allows us to integrate with permanence in time what seems to be diverse, variable, discontinuous, and unstable (*OA* 140). Emplotment, according to Ricoeur, is the competition between a demand for concordance and the admission of discordance, between the manifold of events and the temporal unity of the story recounted, and between disparate components of the action, including intentions, causes, and chance occurrences, and the sequence of the story. This “discordant concordance,” or the “synthesis of the heterogenous,” is characteristic of all narrative composition (*OA* 141).

The two process of emplotment are character and action. A character is “the one who performs the action in the narrative,” and the identity of the character “is comprehensible through the transfer to the character of the operation of emplotment, first applied to the action recounted” (*OA* 143). This correlation between action and character in a narrative results in a dialectic internal to the character which is the corollary of the dialectic of concordance and discordance developed by the emplotment:

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\(^{46}\) Ricoeur discussed this again in *Oneself as Another* p. 114, footnote 1.
Following the line of concordance, the character draws his or her singularity from the unity of a life considered a temporal totality which is itself singular and distinguished from all others. Following the line of discordance, this temporal totality is threatened by the disruptive effect of the unforeseeable events that punctuate it. Because of the concordant-discordant synthesis, the contingency of the event contributes to the necessity … of the history of a life, to which is equated the identity of the character. Thus chance is transmuted into fate …. The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. (OA 147-148)

Here Ricoeur points out that the identity of the character is produced at the same time as the story develops, as we see the character’s actions in the events told in the story, which also facilitates the progression of the plot. He stresses that the constitution of the identity of the character operates in the same dialectical mode as emplotment, that is, the synthesis between concordance and discordance. Different from a real life history, a narrative of the self has a beginning and an end, and constitutes a unity of the text, which transmutes the contingency of events to a teleological “fate” in the history of a life. That is to say, the identity of the character, with a narrative beginning and a narrative end, appears to be more deterministic than contingent. But how do we interpret the meaning of the identity of the character? And how is that related to the author who created the story of the character?

Borrowing from game theory, Ricoeur incorporates the notion of “constitutive rule.” By constitutive rule, he meant “those precepts whose sole function is to rule that, for instance, a given gesture of shifting the position of a pawn on the chessboard “counts as” a move in a game of chess …. The rule, all by itself, gives the gesture its meaning … (OA 154). The constitutive
rules in a self-narrative, then, are those that make an action “count” or “meaningful” in the interpretation of the identity of the character. Yet constitutive rules are not moral rules, Ricoeur further specified, since they simply rule over the meaning of particular gestures, such as waving hello, and voting, rather than imposing a moral judgment on those actions. Yet it is from the constitutive rules we are led toward the moral rules that govern conduct capable of conveying meaning (OA 155). That is to say, there is a moral drive behind the writing of the self that not only makes an action “count,” but also gives “meaning” to that action in terms of its relation to others. Such moral drive not only engenders the emplotment of the story, but also gives meaning to the identity of the character. In this sense, can we say that the author is the one who engenders the moral rules that leads to the constitutive rules in a self-narrative? Does the author have full control of the “character identity” as he/she creates the self-narrative?

Though the author does have authoritative role in creating the story of the self, he/she does not necessarily have full control over the meaning of the self appeared in the narrative. Along the lines of Barthes’ the “Death of the Author” theory, Ricoeur also recognized the separation of the author from his/her work once the work is completed. He further stresses the role played by “others” in the process of imposing meaning on the work:

For the author, the work as an index of individuality and not of universal vocation, is quite relegated to the ephemeral. The way the work has of taking its meaning, its very existence as work, only from the other underscores the extraordinary precariousness of the relation between the work and the author, the mediation of the other being so thoroughly constitutive of its meaning. (OA 156)

To think about a life narrative of the self in this sense, the author, despite his/her power to enact the constitutive rules, no longer controls the meaning of the story or the narrative identity of the
character after the work is completed; rather, the meaning is at the same time subjected to the interpretation of others as they give interpretation of the story/character according to their own set of moral rules. This is why Ricoeur states that in the autobiographical narrative, the author can be the narrator and/or the character in the story, but never the sole “author” but at best the “coauthor” of the work itself (OA 160).

This connection to “others” in the interpretation of the self points to the fact that the life history of a person is inevitably caught up in the histories of others, and thus one does not have the full authority to dictate the meaning of one’s existence, but can at best make oneself the coauthor of its meaning. The act of writing the self, then, should be understood as an act of giving “meaning” to one’s life that is always vulnerable as it could be subjected to an other’s evaluation, rather than a determination of the meaning of one’s existence in the world, which one has no authority over.

To give meaning to one’s life involves a moral evaluation of the self. For Ricoeur, the idea of gathering together one’s life in the form of a narrative, is not only to pursue a “narrative unity of life” that McIntyre proposed, but is destined to serve the aim of a “good life.” This is not to say that narrative of the self will necessarily result in the construction of a “morally good self,” but that self-narration has an ethical aim that not only drives the narrative progression but also creates an interpretive space for the evaluation of the character’s actions in life. Such an ethical aim is not predetermined by the author; rather, it resides in the dialectic between two poles. The first pole is symbolized by the phenomenon of character, by which the person can be identified and re-identified, corresponding to “sameness” of identity mentioned before. As for the second pole, it appeared to us to be represented by the essentially ethical notion of self-constancy (ipse-identity), which means “that manner of conducting himself or herself so that

others can count on that person,” the idea that “because someone is counting on me, I am accountable for my actions before another” (OA 165).

The importance of the notion of self-constancy is that it denotes a consistency of character such that others can count on that person, who, in turn, is accountable for others. The term “responsibility” unites both meanings: “counting on” and “being accountable for.” By responding “Here I am!” to the question “Where are you?,” one places oneself as the agent capable of being imputed, giving promise, and being accountable for one’s own actions. The question “Who am I?” thus becomes the question: “Who am I, so inconstant, that notwithstanding you count on me?” And by proudly declaring “Here is where I stand!” one reaches a sense of self-constancy based on one’s responsibility to others.

When Ricoeur speaks of the “other,” he meant not only the “others” external to the self, but also the “other” within the self. Towards the end of Oneself and Another, Ricoeur proposes the “triad of passivity,” or of “otherness”:

First, there is the passivity represented by the experience of one’s own body…as the mediator between the self and a world which is itself taken in accordance with its variable degrees of practicability and so of foreignness. Next, we find the passivity implied by the relation of the self to the foreign, in the precise sense of the other (than) self… Finally, we have the most deeply hidden passivity, that of the relation of the self to itself, which is conscience in the sense of Gewissen rather than of Bewusstsein. (OA 318)

While “others” in the first and second sense certainly plays important roles in the understanding of one’s sense of selfhood, Ricoeur is particularly interested in the last passivity mentioned, that is, the “otherness” within the self, hence the title “oneself as an/other.” Such a notion points to a
private space in which an individual comes to a sense of the self using one’s own judgment and evaluation, and thus, it is the realm of conscience in the sense of Gewissen, which denotes a sense of “certainty” of one’s conduct as right or wrong. And this sense of certainty leads Ricoeur to introduce the notion of attestation, which is “a kind of belief … but it is not a doxic belief … implied in the grammar of “I believe-that” … [but] belongs to the grammar of “I believe-in…inasmuch as it is in the speech of the one giving testimony that one believes” (OA 21).

Because of its base in “belief,” attestation has its vulnerability as it is subjected to the permanent threat of suspicion. Suspicion is “the path toward and the crossing within attestation. It haunts attestation, as false testimony haunts true testimony…it took on an even more insidious form in the guise of hesitations punctuating conviction in moral judgment in situation, confronted by the conflict of duties” (OA 302). Because of the inevitable challenge of suspicion, “trust” or “credence” becomes the foundation of a “reliable attestation” or “true testimony.” “Trust,” Ricoeur explains, is “a trust in the power to say, in the power to do, in the power to recognize oneself as a character in a narrative, in the power, finally, to respond to accusation in the form of the accusative: It’s me here’ (OA 22). In other words, to “trust” oneself and believe that one is making a “true testimony” requires a sense of agency, a sense that one is capable of recognizing oneself in action, and of giving promise and taking responsibility. Thus, Ricoeur defines attestation as “the assurance of being oneself acting and suffering,” and such assurance remains the ultimate recourse against all suspicion, and is always a “self-attestation,” since what is ultimately attested to is selfhood (ipse).49

48 Ricoeur explains that Gewissen (conscience) and Bewusstsein (consciousness) are both translated into conscience in French, but the German Gewissen recalls the semantic kinship with Gewissheit, “certainty.”
49 See Oneself as Another, p. 22 and p. 302.
To summarize, narrative identity, in Ricoeur’s theorization, is an interpretative self-identity constituted through the process of emplotment that attempts to reach a concordance among discordances. This narrative process can also be compared to the dialectic of “sameness” and “selfhood” that involves one’s action with “others,” including external “others” (the physically separated and the “foreign” others) and an internal” other” (the otherness of the self). The dialectic of self/other, he further argues, entails an ethical aim, that is, an attempt to constitute a “good life.” Yet as one’s life is always caught up in the history of other, the meaning of the “self” in a narrative cannot be determined by the author, but is subjected to a co-interpretation by others, including the other of the self. As one cannot determine who are the others or how others evaluate oneself, what we may detect is an internal evaluation of the self that reflects one’s “beliefs,” a process Ricoeur calls “attestation,” an attestation of the self and one’s conscience.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutical approach to the understanding of “self” and “narrative identity” helps illuminate the significance of reflexive self-narrative, that is, a narrative of the self in which the artificiality of self-construction is revealed. This type of novel demonstrates two layers of “self-narrative.” The first layer is the content of a self-narrative in which a self-image is constructed. The second layer is the narrative strategies the author incorporates in the writing of the self, through which s/he conducts an evaluation of the self, which can be understood as the process of attestation in Ricoeur’s theory.

In Qiu Huadong’s *Confession at Noon*, he writes a story about how a reporter seeks to piece together the life of a prominent film director, who has committed suicide after killing his wife, by collecting “material evidence” such as news reports, interviews from friends, colleagues, and family members, poetry and personal writings of the director and his wife, and
the testimony of the director and his wife after their death (they appear as ghosts and talk to the reporter). On the level of content, we see the image of the self in two characters—the “self” as a reporter and the self as a film-director. On the level of the narrative, the split of the self into two characters creates a space for self-evaluation, as we see how the reporter comments on, shows doubts towards, and agonize over the director’s actions and sufferings in life.

In Yan Lianke’s *Feng, Ya, Song*, we see a first-person narrator telling the story of his life. He is a literature professor in a prestigious university, who tried but failed to fight against corruption, and is eventually exiled from academia and goes on an internal pursuit for spiritual redemption and an eternal search for utopia. On the level of the content, we see an image of a morally degraded and spiritually damaged intellectual, which Yan states is a reflection of himself. On the level of the narrative, Yan uses various narrative devices—parentheses, hyperbole, and the frame of *Shijing* to conduct a confessional narrative through which he criticizes himself harshly as a failed intellectual.

In Wu He’s *Thinking of Abang Kadresengan*, he recounts his experience of living in a Rukai Village in southern Taiwan, and reflects critically upon the complexity and difficulty of culture representation as well as the dilemma of being a writer of Taiwan, which is itself a problematic term that defies any attempt of definition. On the level of content, we see the first-person narrator (indicating Wu He himself) recounting his observations of people and events that happen during his stay in the mountains. Through his conversations with others, he reflects on the role of the writer and the limit of artistic representation and scholarly research in capturing an “authentic culture.” On the level of narrative, Wu He uses parentheses extensively to facilitate

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50 *Shijing* is the oldest canonical text in Chinese Literature. It is considered the earliest collection of poetry, dating from 11th to 7th century B.C.E, and believed to have been compiled by Confucius during the late Eastern Zhou Dynasty (5th century to 3rd Century B.C.E.).
his “thinking process,” through which we can detect his doubts towards himself as a writer and his guilt of not being able to commit himself to the mission of writing Taiwan.

In Dung Kai-cheung’s *Exploitation of Works of Nature: Xuxu and Ruzhen*, Dung writes his family history and early adulthood by juxtaposing two storylines—the story of “I” and the story of Xuxu—the former is set in Hong Kong from the 1950s to 1990s, and the latter set in a fictional world of “characters” (*renwu*) created by the “I” in the first story. On the level of content, we see the construction of a self-image from two angles. One is a growing-up narrative closely tied to the development of the material history (*wujianshi*) of Hong Kong; the other is the creation of an “other” (the fictional character Xuxu), who functions as a compensation for the feeling of loss and guilt of the narrator “I,” who is the writer/creator of the fictional world in which Xuxu lives in. On the level of narrative, we see the juxtaposition of two storylines a device for the narrator to evaluate his role as a writer in current Hong Kong society, by both questioning his authority as a writer and claiming his autonomy as a writer of Hong Kong.

What is worth noting here is that these four authors all emphasize one aspect of one’s self-identity, that is, the self as a writer-intellectual, a profession and a social role that entails certain moral responsibilities to others as discussed before. In other words, these self-narratives reveal a special concern on the moral values one holds important for a “writer-intellectual,” and the evaluation process manifested on the narrative level hence involves attesting one’s “beliefs” of what a writer-intellectual should be, and it is against the beliefs they attest to themselves that each author conducts evaluations. This act of constructing and evaluating oneself as a writer-intellectual through writing, I argue, is a demonstration of the exercise of one’s moral agency. Here I borrow Christine Korsgaard’s theory of self-constitution to illustrate this point.
Korsgaard argues that the task of self-constitution is the task of living a human life. It places us in a relationship with ourselves, as we interact with ourselves, make laws for ourselves, and determine whether we constitute ourselves well or badly according to those laws.\textsuperscript{51} The task of self-constitution, she further points out, involves finding some roles and fulfilling them with integrity and dedication, and also integrating those roles into a single identity, into a coherent life (\textit{Self-Constiution} 25). Yet instead of theorizing on “identity” to indicate such unity, she proposes a conception of “practical identity,” which is constituted by our choice of actions. It is an identity under which we value ourselves and find our life worth living and our actions worth understating. It could include such things as roles and relationships, citizenship, memberships in ethnic or religious groups, causes, vocations, professions, and offices (\textit{Self-Constiution} 20). Therefore, one can have multiple identities according to one’s choice of actions and those identities are, for the most contingent. That is to say, practical identities are not necessarily identities that we are born into, such as being someone’s child or being the citizen of a certain country; they can be identities we acquire for certain reasons, like joining a profession that is worthwhile or devoting yourself to a cause in which you ardently believe, even when it is in the most arbitrary form of identification. On the other hand, one can walk out on a factually grounded identity, such as being someone’s child or a citizen of a particular country, by dismissing the reasons and obligations that it gives rise to because you don’t identify yourself with that role. In this case, that identity is no longer a practical identity anymore (\textit{Self-Constiution} 23).

\textsuperscript{51} Korsgaard, \textit{Self-Constiution}, p. xii.
Korsgaard argues that practical identity is our identity as rational or human beings, what distinguishes us from animals, and morality itself is grounded in an essential form of practical identity:

I must take some ways of identifying myself seriously, or I won’t have any reasons at all…in valuing ourselves as the bearers of contingent practical identities, knowing, as we do, that these identities are contingent, we are also valuing ourselves as rational beings. For by doing that we are endorsing a reason that arises from our rational nature—namely, our need to have reasons… We owe it to ourselves, to our own humanity, to find some roles that we can fill with integrity and dedication. (*Self-Constitution*, 24)

In this sense, the formation of practical identities is not merely a task that we choose to practice or not to practice, but a necessary condition for one to be recognized, and self-recognized, as a human being. Korsgaard further stresses the importance of action and agency: “you constitute yourself as the author of your action in the very act of choosing it” (*Self-Constitution*, 25).

That is to say, one’s actions presume an agent behind that action, and one’s self-identity is formed at the moment of action (including non-action, for not to act is also a choice, which is an act), when one recognizes those actions as one’s own (the author of those acts).

To think about the four self-reflexive novels in the light of Korsgaard’s theory, we see the constitution of practical identity on two levels—the actions of characters in the novel that constitutes the writer-intellectual identity of the character(s) in the fictional world, and the act of writing on part of the author that constitutes the writer-intellectual identity of the author in the real world, as the author conducts moral evaluations on the actions of the characters in the novel.

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52 Korsgaard argues that human beings differ from other animals because we are self-conscious, that is, we are conscious of the grounds on which we act, and therefore are in control of them. See *Self-Constitution*, p. 19.
In this sense, the act of writing oneself as a writer-intellectual can be interpreted as an exercise of one’s moral agency, which is the basis on which one acts and constitutes one’s practical identity.

So why do these authors show concern for their identity as “writer-intellectuals,” especially concerning the current socio-political contexts in which they live in, and what are the moral values illuminated from these self-reflexive novels, and does each author hold similar values against which they judge themselves as a “writer-intellectual”? Moreover, how do we understand each author’s act of exercise one’s moral agency as a writer? Is it a psychological need for affirmation, and if so, why do they have doubts? These questions will be further explored in the following chapters as we analyze each novel in detail.
Chapter 2: Failing as an Author: Qiu Huadong’s *Confession at Noon* and the 
Spiritual Crisis of Intellectuals

“I thought perhaps I can earn money and win love by writing, so I 
decided to write. For in a time of moral pluralism, whatever you do 
is nothing more than filling in the gaps in society, which is what 
writers do.”– Qiu Huadong¹

These lines quoted from Qiu Huadong’s “A Handful of Starlight” point to the dilemma of 
writers writing in a world of material pursuits and spiritual vacuum (*jingshen kongxu* 精神空虚). 
The same lines were also quoted to attack Qiu Huadong for endorsing such a view in his writing, 
and include Qiu in the category of writers he criticizes in his novels. Qiu’s reflection on the role 
of writers and the critics’ attack on Qiu both reveal an attempt to re-evaluate the social function 
of writers and the value of literary production, as economic success replaced political and 
cultural reform to be the dominant vehicle that drives the development of the nation. His 
evaluation of the writer’s role is coupled with a new trend of “New Generation Writings,”² which 
focused on the personal, the internal, and the private experience of the individual. This tendency 
toward internal reflection, usually accompanied with self-evaluation, also points to a sense of 
existential crisis as rapid economic development and the forces of globalization rapidly changed 
the social and cultural scenes of the new era.

This new turn in economic development that led to changes in social stratification 
compels writers to re-position themselves in the changing social order that depends heavily on

¹ See “A Handful of Starlight” (手上的星光) published in *Shanghai Literature*, 1995 volume 1.
² New Generation Writings (*Xinshidai wenxue* 新世代文學) is a label for literature produced roughly 
after 1990s, marked by Tiananmen crackdown in 1989 and Deng Xiaoping’s Trip to the South in 1992, 
both resulted in the turn from political reform to economic development. Some used “Writings of the 
New Era” (*Xinshiqi wenxue* 新時期文學) instead.
one’s financial success. Yet the writer’s sense of a moral self, which has its roots in the tradition of “the pursuit of Dao” in turn forces writers to dismiss one’s desire for personal material gain as it clouds one’s vision for a higher moral goal. In this chapter, I discuss Qiu Huadong’s novel *Confession at Noon*, and illustrate how the novel presents the anxiety of the author’s writer-intellectual identity and his desire to reconnect to the *Dao* tradition through asserting his moral agency as a writer in the rapidly commercialized society.

### 2.1 Qiu Huadong and the “New Generation Writings”

Qiu Huadong was born in 1969 in Xinjiang Province. He left his hometown for undergraduate training in the Chinese Literature Department of Wuhan University in 1988, and went on to Beijing in 1992 to work in a publishing company. He started to show talent in writing when he was in high school, and published his first short story collection when he was eighteen years old. Since then, he has continued to publish literary pieces in various genres, including short stories, novels, prose, poetry, essays, and criticisms. Among his works, the most discussed are his short stories and novels, including “PR Man” (*Gongguan ren*), “Environmental Theatre Man” (*Huanjing xiju ren*), *The City Chariot* (*Chengshi zhanche*), *Fly Eyes* (*Yingyan*), and *The Crying Game* (*Kuqi youxi*). In addition to being a prolific writer, his passion for literature is also obvious in his active engagement in literary societies during high school and college, and later when he became a reporter and editor for literary magazines after graduation.

Qiu’s stories are often regarded as “urban novels,” a genre that appeared during the 90s when China’s economic boom transformed the landscapes of major cities and introduced new urban life experiences. These novels usually focus on exploring the various impacts of rapid modernization and commercialization on human beings—the sense of spiritual void, the pursuit
of material wealth, the indulgence of corporeal desire, and the lack of genuine human contact—all of which cause the subject to suffer an existential crisis. For example, in a series of stories that designate different “types of people” such as “Fashion Man,” “Telephone Man,” “Drama Man,” the characters are depicted as performers of certain social roles that lack unique personalities and dispositions. This way of “making type characters out of people” “(jiaosehua 角色化) reflects a lack of a sense of essential self, due to the gradual bureaucratization of working conditions that render individuals simply “parts” of a bigger machine. The reflection on the deterioration of spirituality is best described in the contemplation of the protagonist in “PR Man:” “Human beings are spiritually deprived and the human body is disgusting, one’s soul is not attached to one face, only masks can reveal the spirit of contemporary human beings.”

Qiu’s concern for the de-humanization and materialization of contemporary Chinese subjects is also one of the characteristics of the so-called “New Generation Novels” (xinshengdai xiaoshuo). This term first appeared in Youth Literature magazine and generally used after 1994 to refer to young writers who started writing in the 90s, such as Zhu Wen, Han Dong, Lu Yang, Chi Zijian, Bi Feiyu, Qiu Huadong, He Dun, and others. Compared to the 1980s when various literary trends and cultural discussions bred a group of elites that constituted an elitist culture, the ‘90s were a time when materialism permeated every corner of society and postmodern deconstructionism promoted decentralization and highlighted individualism.

From this perspective, some criticize Qiu Huadong for being so concerned with the

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3 See Jiang Lasheng’s Jiegou yu jiangou.
4 See online text: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4a8c67b501008p56.html.
5 Some writers of the 90s exhibited strong concern for the individual and its immediate reality. They deconstruct the sublime and indulge in the secular, show resistance toward the political and the collective, and emphasized displaying private desires and existential crises of individuals. They seek to highlight the crude reality of the present society—the pursuit of fame, wealth and corporeal pleasure accompanied by the anxiety over one’s fragile spirituality. Among this bulk of literary creations, many show a tendency to use first-person narrator to depict the private experiences and psychological struggles of the individual. Some critics identified these writings as “Personalized Writings (gerenhua xiezuo).
pleasures and pains of his characters that he lost his critical distance as an author. Huang Fayou, for example, thinks that Qiu did not probe deeply enough into the source of failed spirituality and simply gave in to the forces of modernity, as exemplified in the constantly drifting subjects that appeared fragmented and disoriented. While Qiu considered his works as realistic novels seeking to expose people’s spiritual sufferings in modern society, Huang sees Qiu trapped inside the present reality, having lost the broad historical view a writer should have. For Huang, Qiu’s writings are “disconnected writings” (duanliede) that lack historical consciousness, severing the present from the past and that allow him to be caught in the current flow of global materialism. Thus, in Huang’s view, the value of Qiu’s works lies not in how he depicts the strength of an independent individual resisting the forces of modernization, but how he unintentionally reveals the difficulty of becoming an integrated subject in contemporary society.  

There are also opposing views. Wang Shicheng for example, argues that Qiu’s works are centered on one theme—the individual’s struggle to “break through” (tuwei 突圍). Wang sees this attempt to “break through” as the individual’s “journey to return to the origin” (fanyuan zhi lü 返源之旅), a realization of the gradual materialization and alienation in a commercialized world. Rather than passively going with the flow of life, most of the protagonists attempt to escape their destiny of becoming merely a “character” that fits into certain social roles, as they run away from their immediate environment (works, friends, family) and go on a “quest” (zhuixun 追尋) to retrieve their existence as a unique and independent subject. Different from

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6 On Huang Fayou’s critique of Qiu Huadong’s works, see his “Mimang de bentu: Qiu Huadong ji qi tongdairen de jingshen kunjing” (Disoriented Rush: The Spiritual Predicament of Qiu Huadong and His Generation).

7 This is a term Qiu Huadong used in his short story “Environmental Theater Man.”
Huang Fayou, Wang Shicheng recognizes the individual’s attempt to resist and rebel against the forces of modernity in Qiu’s novel, despite their failure to achieve their goal in the end.⁸

The contradictory views of Qiu presented above—a self-indulgent writer lost in his own writing and a critical writer trying to “break through” fixed social roles—point to the dilemma of writers in contemporary society. This dilemma, as exemplified in Qiu Huadong’s work, is further discussed by Shi Suzhen, who argues that Qiu’s works can be boiled down to one theme: the anxiety of being and the difficulty of choice making. She sees Qiu’s numerous “selves” all going through the same process in life: the search for the true self that ends in failure, the expectations for life that lead to frustration, and the faith one embraces that eventually turns into despair. Life, in this sense, constituted by doubt, anxiety and pain, becomes a constant appeal for survival, and death seems to be the only meaningful choice left (26). Shi further argues that the existential crises and spiritual deterioration of the characters also point to the dilemma of writers writing in the present day—the difficulty of finding a balance between writing for higher spiritual goals and writing to display the vicissitudes of material life in contemporary society.

In an interview with Liu Xinwu, Qiu reveals similar sentiments: “I expressed a common belief shared by our generation, that is, we should seize the opportunity to get wealthy when we still have the chance. Otherwise, when the period of interest redistribution ended and the new social strata are solidified, it would be difficult for the lower class to move upward.”⁹ Qiu’s frankness in revealing contemporary writers’ pragmatism has led critics to attack his moral integrity as a writer, but to what extent is he practicing such a “belief”? Is he embracing the fame and wealth of being a well-known writer, or is he critical towards himself as a writer? In fact, rather than positioning Qiu on either side of the scale—a material driven and morally degraded

⁹ The interview can be found in the interview collection Wentan gaofeng duihua (Literary Summit), edited by Qiu Huadong, 2009, p. 104.
writer-intellectual on the one side, and a *Dao*-pursuing and spiritually elevated writer-intellectual—I see Qiu struggling to find a balance in between, through a self-reflexive and critical portrayal of himself in his novel *Confession at Noon*. In this novel, we see a juxtaposition of Qiu’s self-evaluation of himself as a writer, and a critical reflection of the spiritual vacuum of contemporary writers and artists.

2.2 *Confession at Noon*: Scandal and Criticism

*Confession at Noon* was published in 2000 as the last of his *Sundial Trilogy*. It tells the story of a reporter gathering materials to write the biography of an internationally renowned film director Pan Yue, who commits suicide after killing his wife Xia Bailing. Thanks to the publishers who adjusted the title to reflect a more gossipy tone, the novel was an instant hit when it first came out, for many believed that it was insinuating Zhang Yimou and his love affairs with the actresses who played major roles in his films. Though the scandal boosted the sales of this novel significantly, Qiu did not regard this outcome a success. On the contrary, he was upset that the media and the public misinterpreted his work and that the rumors had clouded the novel’s literary value. In the afterword of the novel, he emphasized that the novel is not attacking anyone in real life: “the protagonist is a fictional creation, it is my own child and my split self living inside me. It has nothing to do with filmmakers or movie stars in the real world—though I do personally know some of them.” Qiu further points out that his intention was to depict the cultural change of China in the last two decades epitomized in the protagonist’s spiritual

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10 The *Sundial Trilogy* (Rigui sanbuqu) includes *Yewan de nuoyan* (Promise at Night), *Baizhou de xiaoxi* (News in the Morning—also published under the title *Chengshi zhanche*, City Chariot), and *Zhengwu de congci* (Confession at Noon).

transformation, though he ended up focusing on the protagonist’s spiritual growth instead, rendering the cultural transformation in the background.  

According to Qiu, the writing of Confession at Noon was inspired by the death of Gu Cheng, one of the “Misty Poets” (menglong shiren 靄朦詩人) active in the late 80s. On October 8th, 1993, Gu Cheng killed his wife Xie Ye at their house in New Zealand and committed suicide afterwards. The news shocked literary circles back in China, and rumors came out immediately surrounding Gu Cheng’s entangled love relationship with his wife and Li Ying, who was a Chinese literature student in Peking University who later became Gu’s mistress and who lived with Gu and his wife. Yet rather than focusing on the enticing details of this dramatic tragedy, Qiu was more curious about the psychological turmoil Gu Cheng had gone through. In Qiu’s view, a “spiritual man” (jingshenxin de ren 精神性的人) like Gu must have suffered from extreme emotional suppression coming from sexual, personal and social factors that he eventually became mentally ill. 

In fact, Gu is not the only poet who committed suicide at the turn of the 90s. Haizi committed suicide in March 1989 by laying on a railroad track. Ge Mai drowned himself in sewage near Qinghua University in 1990. Though there were various speculations on the reasons why these avant-garde poets who showed creative energy during the 80s would choose to end their lives at the turn of the new decade, including difficult financial situations, failed love relationships, and emotional depression, yet behind these seemingly personal reasons, one important factor of this extreme action, as Michelle Yeh argues, is their self-perceived imminent failures as poets (Yeh 1996).

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12 Ibid., 393.
13 Qiu Huadong, Wentan gaofeng duihua, p. 223.
Similarly, Qiu regarded Gu’s death highly relevant to the fact that he was a poet. Rather than focusing on Gu’s entangled love relationships and render his suicide a result of personal trauma, Qiu is more inclined to interpret Gu’s death as a symbolic case that revealed a sense of existential crisis in a rapidly materializing world. For Qiu, Gu’s psychological struggle is a phenomenon shared by a generation and his death symbolizes the end of an era.\(^{15}\) Thus, though he originally sought to use Gu Cheng as the model for his protagonist, he ended up using various literary writers and filmmakers to build the image of the film director. By doing so, he intended to map out a history of cultural transformation during the 80s and 90s by tracing the development of Chinese culture in the last two decades of twentieth century.\(^{16}\) For Qiu personally, this novel also represents a landmark of his writing career. Unlike his previous works, he thinks that this novel reflects a more mature writing style. While readers can easily detect in his earlier works certain writers’ shadows, it is hard to pinpoint any particular writer’s influence on him in this novel. Thus, Qiu thinks that this novel successfully proved him an independent writer, and shows his confidence in writing as he naturally imitates various genres—news reports, official documentations, diary, poetry, film scripts, commentaries, criticisms…etc.\(^{17}\) In this sense, *Confession at Noon* has dual significance for Qiu: on the one hand, it depicts the spiritual transformation of a generation through constructing the life of a deceased artist; on the other hand, it asserts his status as a mature writer through the display of his writing skills.

Among Qiu’s works, *Confession at Noon* is less commented on by literary critics and scholars, perhaps due to the alleged attack on Zhang Yimou, as many of the films appeared in the novel resemble Zhang Yimou’s major works produced in the late 80s and 90s, and therefore render the protagonist a surrogate of Zhang. Nevertheless, some critics still notice Qiu’s efforts

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\(^{15}\) See Qiu Huadong, *Wentan gaofeng duihua* (Literary Summit), p. 223.

\(^{16}\) ibid.

\(^{17}\) See the afterword of *Confession at Noon*. 
in experimenting with new narrative forms. Cao Zhongping for example analyzes how Qiu borrowed postmodern narrative techniques such as pastiche, polyphony, distorted temporality, intertextuality, and metanarrative to blur the boundaries between truth and fiction.\(^\text{18}\) Zhou Bingxin on the other hand criticizes Qiu’s play of narrative strategy as Qiu’s way of promoting himself as a “professional” writer. Zhou thinks that at best *Confession at Noon* is another example of commercial fiction that seeks to cater the tastes of a middle-class audience, providing readers the voyeuristic pleasures of peeping into the glamorous yet decadent life of movie stars.\(^\text{19}\) While Zhou is right in pointing out the author’s intention to present himself as a professional writer, his categorization of the novel as commercial fiction seems to reveal his own failure to detach himself from media effects and narrow his reading of the text inside the scandal. What he fails to address is the close relationship between the author and the two main characters, as well as the spiritual malaise of contemporary artists that Qiu seeks to convey.

My purpose, therefore, is to explore further the function of the reporter and how it complicates the reading of the novel by bringing out the complex relationship between the author (Qiu Huadong), the narrator (reporter), and the protagonist (film director). Can we interpret the reporter as Qiu’s surrogate self in the fictional world, given that Qiu is a reporter in real world and that the reporter addresses himself in first person? If so, why create a fictional self in the novel to tell the story of a fictive film director? Moreover, if Qiu’s intention is to trace the spiritual growth of the film director as a representative for a generation, why present the protagonist as a collage of narrative genres who appears to be an ambiguous and fragmented subject? In the following pages, I will explore the text from this angle by exploring the “author figure” in its various manifestations inside and outside the text.

\(^\text{18}\) See Cao Zhongping, “Zhengwu de gongci—fudiao linghun de guangchang kuanghuan.”
\(^\text{19}\) See Zhou Bingxin, “Jiushi niandai wenhua fengsutu de yici tianmi lusing.”
2.3 Failing as an Author: A Reading of *Confession at Noon*

The novel begins with a first-person narrator, a news reporter, who laments the loss of a great film director Pan Yue, and expressed his desire to probe into the reasons behind Pan Yue’s suicide. The following chapters present the materials gathered by the reporter that are related to Pan Yue, including crime scene reports, short stories written by Pan, summaries of Pan’s films, interviews with Pan’s family and friends, Pan’s ex-wife’s book about her marriage with Pan, Pan’s diary, Pan’s love letter to Xia Bailing, …, etc. Other than these materials, readers also encounter “facts” about Pan that defy scientific knowledge. For example, in the first chapter, we see the spirits of Pan Yue and his wife Xia Bailing playing a trick on the people moving into their house. In the last chapter, the reporter dreams about Pan’s conversation with internationally known film directors. At the end of the novel, we hear Pan and his wife giving their “testimony” to the reporter about what happened on the day they died. While the presentation of objective materials allows readers to construct an image of Pan Yue in different social roles—as a internationally known film director, a son, a brother, a husband, a colleague, a school mate; the reporter’s supernatural encounters allow the readers to enter Pan Yue’s psyche and explore his internal struggle. The reporter, in this sense, has lost his objective view as a journalist, but becomes an interpreter of Pan Yue’s life, who comments, evaluates, and sympathizes with Pan Yue as he further discovers Pan’s psyche. This makes us wonder the relationship between the reporter and Pan Yue. Is he writing the life of Pan Yue or is he exploring himself? Also, how do we understand the “Qiu Huadong” role? Is he the reporter in the story, given the first-person narrative and the fact that Qiu is a reporter in real life? Who is the “author figure” here, Pan Yue, the reporter, or Qiu Huadong?
Before examining the “author figures” in the text, it is imperative to first discuss the concept of “an author.” In Michael Foucault’s essay “What Is an Author?,” he theorizes that the author is not a person but a “function” or “figure” that emerged after the Renaissance. He argues that an author’s name is not simply an element in a discourse capable of being either a subject or object; rather, it serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, establishing among them a relationship of homogeneity, filiation, and authentication of some texts. In other words, an “author” is not an individual who writes but a construction of certain being of reason to whom critics seek to give a realistic status by discerning in the individual a “deep” motive, a “creative power,” or a “design,” the milieu in which writing originates. Thus, while a certain number of discourses are endowed with the “author function,” others are deprived of it, such as a private letter or an anonymous text posted on a wall, which has a signer but not an author. The author function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society.\(^{20}\)

Following Foucault’s theory of author function, Alexander Nehamas seeks to clarify further the relationship between the writer, the text, and the author. Nehamas points out that writers are actual individuals located in history and exist outside their texts. They may misunderstand their own work and could be as confused about it as we frequently are about the sense and significance of our actions. Therefore, writers have no interpretive authority over their texts. By contrast, authors are not individuals but characters manifested or exemplified in texts. They are postulated to account for a text's features and are produced through an interaction between critic and text.\(^{21}\) In between the historical “writer” and fictional “author” is the text, yet

\(^{20}\) See Foucault, “What is an Author?”
not just any written text but those being interpreted and thus considered as “works.” Thus, Nehamas proposes the sequence: writers produce texts; some texts are interpreted and are thus construed as works; works generate the figure of the author manifested in them.²²

Nehamas points out the importance of the critic in the construction the image of an “author.” This also renders the “author” image constantly subjected to textual interpretations. Yet the critic, as an interpreter, is at best a co-author of the text, for the text is also a production of the historical writer. Therefore, though “author” can be understood as a construct, it cannot be severed from the historical writer.

Another question we might ask is the meaning of constructing an author. Other than the classificatory function Foucault mentioned, what are the reasons that readers and critics took the effort to interpret the texts and formulate an image of an “author?” While Foucault pointed out the classificatory function of “the author,” Walter Benjamin answers this question by emphasizing the importance of a writer’s political position, which is reflected in his works and therefore related to the later construction of an “author” image to which the writer is attributed.

In “The Author as Producer” (1934) Benjamin begins by referring to Plato’s desire to banish poets from his ideal state. The question of the poet’s right to exist is in fact a question concerning the poet’s autonomy, his “freedom to write whatever he pleases” (220). An advanced writer, Benjamin argues, would acknowledge that this autonomy in fact indicates the author’s political position, that is, to be able to answer the question: “Whom to write for?” The particular historical period Benjamin lived in demanded that he take the side of the proletariat, a position he regarded to be “politically correct,” and which he argues is a required feature in all literature. For Benjamin, a correct political tendency necessarily includes a literary tendency, which

²² Ibid., 688.
constitutes the quality of a work. Though class distinction is still present in capitalist societies around the world, whether “writing for the proletarians” is “politically correct” or not seems to be a more complicated issue especially in post-Mao China. Nonetheless, Benjamin’s emphasis on the author’s political stance is still a valid point in interpreting works in contemporary China, except that it is more difficult a task to find a “politically correct” ground especially when writers lack the same autonomy as the poets Plato mentioned.

Benjamin’s essay not only points to the responsibility of writers to write for a certain political cause, but also illuminates the fact that writers naturally obtain the power to influence, or even lead political movement. Thus, he demands that a writer should “think, to reflect on his position in the process of production” (236). I see this reflection in Qiu Huadong’s Confession at Noon, in which Qiu reflects on his position as an author through the construction of the life of a fictional author—the film director Pan Yue. Moreover, he exemplified the complexity of constructing an “author” by featuring the works (Pan Yue’s films and literary productions), the writer (Pan Yue), and the critic (the reporter). In the following, I analyze how Qiu produces an image of the self as an “author figure” by being both the writer (producing “original works” of Pan Yue) and the reader/interpreter (reporter) during the textual construction of Pan Yue as an author.

In this novel, we can detect three levels of author construction process. First, the process by which the reporter (main narrator) constructs the filmmaker Pan Yue as an “auteur.” Second, the process by which Qiu constructs a collective intellectual identity through the writing of Pan Yue. 

23 “I want to show you that the political tendency of a work can only be politically correct if it is also literally correct. That means that the correct political tendency includes a literary tendency. For, just to clarify things right away, this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly contained in every correct political tendency—that, and nothing else constitutes the quality of a work. The correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency.” Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer” p. 221.
Yue’s work. Third, the process by which Qiu seeks to assert his identity as an “author” through the self-reflexive writing of the novel as a whole.

The most obvious “author construction” process is the reporter’s gathering information on Pan Yue, seeking to piece together an image of Pan Yue as a legendary figure of the 90s. The novel begins with the reporter lamenting the fact that the public has forgotten Pan Yue only a year after his death. Unlike the public’s indifference, the reporter feels an “inner pain and sympathy” over Pan’s death (CN 1), not only because of the dramatic ending, that is, killing his wife and then committing suicide, but also because of his status as an internationally known film director whose works carry the “imprint of history rolling from the 80s into the 90s (CN 6). As one of many who “grew up with Pan’s films,” the reporter has grown attached to Pan, whom he regards as a representative figure of his time. For the reporter, Pan’s death at the end of the century, following the deaths of avant-garde poets in the early 90s, should be regarded as a landmark of the 90s that reflects “the deep internal cause” and “the characteristics and symptoms of our time” (CN 8). The project to resurrect the dead “author” therefore implicated the reporter’s intention to reflect on the collective characteristics of a generation, as he pieces together the troubled life of a representative figure of their time.

The ways in which the reporter chooses to reconstruct the life of Pan Yue, however, are destined to render the project a failure. Rather than focusing on interpreting Pan’s works and constructing Pan as an “author,” the reporter is also interested in Pan Yue as an individual. He gathers materials from a wide range of sources. However, rather than getting closer to the truth about Pan’s suicide and the reasons behind his death, most of this “evidence” serves to prevent the emergence of a coherent identity for Pan. For example, the interview records of Pan’s family members show contradictory memories of Pan while revealing the different motivations behind
their recollections: Pan’s father remembers Pan as a talented child in order to emphasize his
genetic inheritance; the brother remembers Pan as a violent and cruel child for he is jealous of
Pan’s success. Pan’s sexual competence becomes questionable when his ex-wife Bai Bingmei
published a book in which she revealed private yet highly suspicious information about Pan after
an ugly break up. The more information he gathers, the more elusive Pan’s image turns out to be,
like “a man surrounded by smoke, non-perceivable and with no sense of reality” (CN 97).

However, despite the reporter’s failure in constructing a coherent image of Pan Yue, he is
rather successful in revealing the symptoms of their time, that is, the illusiveness of identity in
the age of information. Pan’s friend and co-worker Gu Qiankun reminds the reporter about the
impossibility of obtaining the truth about Pan Yue: “He is dead. And whatever you write about
him will always be a pursuit of illusory memory, which only takes you further away from him.
Just like in real life, people’s understanding of others is always skin deep” (CN 109). Gu’s words
predict the reporter’s failure to construct a coherent identity of Pan Yue, for it seems to be an
inevitable result of the information age they live in, where information is no longer considered as
objective and factual, but is mostly manipulated and manufactured and lacking in truth value.

The construction of Pan Yue as a person is paralleled with the construction of Pan Yue as
an “auteur,” a concept introduced in the 50s by a group of film enthusiasts writing Cahiers du
Cinema, who compared the making of film to writing a text, and film-director to an author. They
highlight the importance of individual style of the film director, focusing on the director’s
handling of mise-en-scène and cinematic language to convey his aesthetic views. Pan Yue’s
films, however, appears to be less coherent in establishing an individual style. On the contrary,
many of them easily remind readers of major films produced in China in the 80s and 90s, and
well-known films by directors in the world. For example, the title of Pan’s “Honor Guards of a
Great Nation” and “The Yellow Sun” echoes Chen Kaige’s “The Big Parade” (1985) and “Yellow Earth” (1984); the plot of “Hundred Years of Locust Tree” and “Regional Music” resemble Zhang Yimou’s “To Live” (1994) and “Red Sorghum” (1988). Pan’s semi-autobiographical film “Summer of that Year” is a close replication of Guiseppe Tornatore’s “Cinema Paradiso” (1988) as the reporter points out. And “Eternity,” Pan’s last film before his death, seems like a “Chinese” version of Vincent Ward’s “What Dreams May Come” (1998), as Pan instilled “Oriental elements” (dongfang yuansu) in the depictions of “heaven” and “hell.” Thus, instead of illuminating Pan’s personal vision and distinctive cinematic style, the process to construct Pan as an “auteur” through the interpretation of his films ends up with Pan becoming a collage of various internationally known “auteurs.”

Pan’s films also reflected the dominant cultural discourses of China in the 80s and 90s. Pan started making feature films right after his graduation from college in the early 80s. In his first work “Dawn at Noon,” Pan depicts the intense love relationship between two spies, one working for the Wang Jingwei Regime and the other for the KMT government during the Sino-Japanese war. Torn between executing their mission and following their feelings, the couple chooses to kill each other in the end. As the reporter notes, Pan uses different color choices to contrast grand history (black and white) with private feelings (colored), a technique that is considered new at that time (CN 62). He also thinks that the colored ending in which the leaders of KMT and CCP walk out together after reaching a political agreement seems to suggest a rather positive beginning of the history despite the tragic ending of the couple (CN 63). From this perspective, Pan’s highlight of individual sacrifice is less a critique of the past than a
representation of an “illusory new beginning,” a view shared by the Fifth Generation directors according to Rey Chow.24

Pan’s next two films are categorized as part of the “root-seeking” (xungen) trend popular during the 80s. “New Mr. Fool Moves the Mountain” depicts a persistent villager’s effort to dig a conduit through the mountain in order to channel the river water into their village. According to the reporter, this film is adapted from one of the root-seeking novels, which focus on the revival of the “local” and “regional” culture. He is touched by Pan’s choice of using simple techniques for the purpose of showing a realistic portrayal of rural life. Similarly, “The Yellow Sun,” set at the middle reaches of the Yellow River, depicts the life of a young man from a rural village who tries to survive various political instabilities from the later years of Sino-Japanese War to the present time. The reporter regards the two films as representative of the 80s, “a time of cultural fever, when people showed shared sentiments and close human relations. People were passionately thinking about how the nation could be revived and developed in the future, how history had run its course and what direction reality might take us to. It was such a inflamingly inspirational time!” (CN 73-74). Feeling nostalgic for the 80s, the reporter laments the loss of “humanistic spirit” (CN 74) and the concern for national culture: “We have entered a new era of information and knowledge economy in which the cultural debate is a marginal issue. Only the bored literati would continue to mourn the loss of humanistic spirit; more people are worrying about the “off-the-job workers” and those with low incomes” (CN 78).

While Pan’s films in the 80s seem to follow the “high culture fever” and “root-seeking” trends led by writers and intellectuals, his films in the 90s show more freedom in exploring individualistic views on history, the nation, and personal existence in the rapidly modernized new society. In “The Hundred Year Old Locust Tree,” Pan depicts the life of Han Shancun from

late 19th century to the present time (early 90s). Han was born in a wealthy merchant’s family and received traditional education. Yet half a century of war and decades of political campaigns forces him to suffer through various hardship of life. Pan chooses to use documentary style to convey a realistic tone, for he believes that “being a member of the largest ethnic group—the Han Chinese—in the world, [he] has the responsibility to tell the history of China to the world, a history of modern Chinese’s soul and their sufferings” (CN 228). Here Pan shows awareness of his national identity, since at this time he has won international fame. As China becomes a major player in global economy, Pan’s view has turned from inward to outward, that is, from domestic culture debates to representations of China in a global community. This is also manifested in “Folk Music,” which depicts a musician’s struggle to survive under Japanese invasion of their village. In this film, Pan displays various music instruments and satisfies viewers’ pleasure with the natural scenery of northern China. Rather than producing an anti-Japanese war film popular in the 80s, he focuses on the display of local culture with global audience in mind.

Other than films, Pan Yue also produced literary works, many of which resemble works written by contemporary writers such as Wang Meng, Wang Shuo, and Qiu Huadong himself. For example, Pan’s novel Folding Screen is clearly a reference to Qiu’s Chinese Folding Screen series. “In the Passing Season,” a subsection in Folding Screen, echoes Wang Meng’s “Season Tetralogy.” The child who “looks at the world through bottles” in “Summer of That Year” reminds us of the voyeuristic youth in Wang Shuo’s “Beastly Animals.” Other than referencing prominent writers and filmmakers, Pan’s works also reflected major literary trends of its time. For example, “New Mr. Fool Wants to Move the Mountain” reflects the roots-seeking theme of the 80s; “The Story of West Wing” follows the popular trend of adapting classical tales into

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25 Wang Shuo’s “Dongwu xiongmeng” is also adapted into the film “In the Heat of the Sun” (1994) directed by Jiang Wen.
films; “The Negative” demonstrates the turn of literary trends to depict the individual’s everyday life in urban settings. The use of abundant references of writers and filmmakers from contemporary China to construct an “author figure,” then, have resulted in a fragmented image of Pan Yue as an “author,” which I argue is a “failed construction” of an “author” for the work in total lack distinctive style and point of view that can be identified as uniquely Pan Yue. However, Pan Yue’s image, as a collage of various authors and their works, reflects Qiu’s effort of constructing a collective identity of a generation of Chinese intellectuals of the 80s and 90s. Given that Qiu’s original intention of writing the novel is to depict the cultural change of China in the last two decades by epitomizing protagonist’s spiritual transformation, how do we interpret this result? Certainly we can read Pan and his work as a representation of a collective “spirit” of Chinese intellectuals, but what is that “spirit” and how did it transform? In fact, while the text failed in constructing a coherent “author figure,” it successfully demonstrated the reasons why such a figure cannot be achieved if it is intended to represent a collective whole. In my view, what Qiu really wanted to do is to explore the “spiritual vacuum” of intellectuals of his time, through the portrayal of Pan Yue both as an author and as an individual, who struggles to overcome his spiritual crisis that cause his final act of committing suicide. This is why Qiu stated that the novel is also about himself.

To examine the novel on the level of self-examination, we can interpret the failed construction of Pan as an “author figure” as Qiu’s failure to form his identity as an author. Given that Qiu regarded the protagonist as “his child and his split-self,”26 the novel can also be read as a self-reflective narrative. Yet who exactly is Qiu’s “split self” and who is his “child”? Is the protagonist Pan Yue or the reporter? The fact that Qiu creates both “his child” and his “split-self” in the novel indicates Qiu’s dual role in the process of creating a self-identity, for he is constantly

26 See afterword of Confession at Noon, p. 394.
moving in between the role of the authoritative creator (hence the protagonist is his child), and role of the character that is being created (hence the “split-self”). For that purpose, Qiu used the reporter as a mediating character, who can be considered his surrogate self in the fictional world, given that Qiu himself is a reporter in real life and that the reporter in the text uses first-person narrative throughout the novel.\(^{27}\)

It is important to notice that the reporter is not merely an objective material collector, but also a reader/interpreter of Pan’s “texts,” which made him the main actor in the process of author construction. But who is the “real author”? While the novels and film synopsis we read in the text are designated to Pan Yue, the actual writer/creator of Pan’s texts, many of which we read first hand, is in fact Qiu Huadong himself. In this sense, the reporter’s effort to reconstruct Pan’s life as an author can therefore also be interpreted as Qiu’s construction of oneself as an “author.”

While Qiu is quite satisfied with the novel for it showed “his individuality and demonstrated his mature writing style,”\(^ {28}\) one may wonder how satisfying the outcome could be when the “author figure” in the novel appears to be a fragmented and distorted subject while the “work” of the author is more a collage of various authors’ works that lack distinctive features to determine the individualistic style of an “author.” In fact, this discrepancy in the evaluation of Qiu as an “author” lies in different understandings of what an “author” is. Qiu regards himself an independent author because readers can no longer find “traces of a certain author” in his work and that he had demonstrated his ability to produce all genres of writings.\(^ {29}\) Yet these qualities only prove that he is a highly skilled “writer,” whose work is accomplished through combining

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\(^ {27}\) The reporter also states in the novel that he is “an old writer who is young in age” (nianding de lao xieshou 年輕的老寫手), which is used to describe Qiu Huadong by many critics. This seems to suggest that the reporter is Qiu himself. See *Confession at Noon*, 139.

\(^ {28}\) See afterword of *Confession at Noon*, p. 394.

\(^ {29}\) Ibid.,
different styles from numerous authors and imitating various genres. Thus, the “evidence” Qiu used to prove himself an “author” has in fact proven the opposite.

While Qiu regards the success of the novel in proving himself a worthy writer, I argue that the success of the novel lies in the ways in which Qiu unpacks the spiritual crisis of being a “writer-intellectual” in contemporary society, manifested in Pan Yue’s existential crisis and his frustration over failing to be an “auteur.” We can detect these in several of Pan Yue’s films and short stories.

In “Summer of that Year,” an autobiographical film, he depicts a director looking back at his childhood during Cultural Revolution and his lamentation on the passing of time marked by the advancement of the movie industry. This attempt to trace one’s own history seems to reveal Pan’s doubts about his current existence, especially when the film ends with the protagonist’s nostalgia towards a romanticized past. This doubt about one’s existence is also present in “Swordfight on Hua Mountain,” Pan’s first and only martial arts film. It tells the story of an orphan being trained to be a swordsman, who later is revealed as the descendant of a late Ming Emperor. He fell in love with a girl whom he learned later is a princess of Qing dynasty. When they confronted each other’s true identity, they decide to abandon the national honor placed on them and jump off Hua Mountain together. During the making of the film, Pan asks the actors and actresses to act without the knowledge of what role they are playing, and the narrative is presented a-chronologically, emphasizing a sense of temporal disorder. This strategy conveys Pan’s doubts over the existence of a coherent identity as well as one’s purpose of being when one’s personal history lacks continuity. The ending of this film also foreshadows Pan’s own ending as he abandoned “national honor” (as a internationally famous director) for the pursuit of “eternal love” with his wife in the afterlife.
Obsession for “love” and longing for human connection is another theme Pan Yue incorporated in his films. In “The Negative,” Pan depicts a reporter and his journey to catch the bank robbers whom he accidentally took pictures of. During the process of his criminal investigation, he falls in love with a girl involuntarily involved in a drug deal. In the end, the reporter is killed by the robbers and the girl leaves the city after learning the news. This film resembles Qiu’s typical urban stories, which emphasizes the lack of genuine human connection and moral conscience in the material world. The reporter’s death indicates a dark prospect for those who seek to escape from the dehumanizing institutions and live “freely” in the urban jungle (CN 242). The only brightness in the story is the reporter’s love for the girl, despite their eventual separation after his death.

The nature of this spiritual crisis is embedded in Pan Yue’s self-reflexive novella Folding Screen, which is constituted by three inter-related sub-stories—“The River,” “In the Passing of Seasons,” and “The Poet’s Corridor.” Each sub-story is dissected into several parts, which appear alternately with a chronologically ordered plotline. “The River” tells the story of a teenage boy born into a broken family who eventually goes insane after murdering his neighbor because the neighbor believed the boy is the cause of his parents’ death and therefore had prevented her daughter from contact with the boy. “The Passing of Seasons” is a surreal, dream-like story that contains many symbols and images. It follows the protagonist “I” and his journey to search for a young girl, whose identity remains unclear. “The Poet’s Corridors” tells about a poet’s struggle to escape a closed quadrangle. Realizing his failure to escape and witnessing the loss of innocence of the young girl he loves, the poet commits suicide by lying on a railroad track. 30

The reporter categorizes this novella as one of the “avant-garde” writings of the mid and late-80s. He thinks Pan is experimenting in new narrative techniques with this novella by

30 This is clearly a reference to the poet Haizi’s death in March 1989.
designing it as a “three panel painted folding screen,” each with a particular theme—destruction ("The River"), searching ("The Passing of Seasons"), running away ("The Poet’s Corridor"). It is interesting that the themes of the three stories the reporter concluded are all actions without a clear subject and object. Is the protagonist in the three stories all one person? Is he the source of destruction or the one being destroyed? What is he searching for or running away from? In fact, as the reporter informs us, the text was written during the time when Pan was sick, and the reporter suspects that the text perhaps reveals Pan’s “inner secrets.” Following this hint, we can interpret the three stories respectively as Pan’s self-reflection on the formation of his subjectivity, his quest for the purpose of existence, and the evaluation of his social role in contemporary society.

“The River” can be regarded as a reflection of Pan’s failure to achieve a coherent subjectivity during his formative years. From the beginning, we learn that the protagonist is abandoned by his mother and is emotionally distanced with his father, who is the cause of his mother’s suicide. Lacking stable sources of parental love, he looks for compensation from the girl next door Liu Wei, who is his only friend. Yet when Liu Wei also distanced him because of her mother, who persuades others that the protagonist is an evil spirit, the protagonist is left alone and further alienated from society. Throughout the story, we see images of “river,” “rain,” and “tide,” emphasizing movement and a constant flowing of objects. These images of “movements” and “fluidity” form a paradoxical force of formation and destruction—while the frequent reference to the flow of the boy’s bodily fluids highlights the protagonist’s age of self-exploration and subjectivity formation, the rumors, which are like a “stream that passes over people’s mouths” (126), presents a threat to a coherent formation of the protagonist’s

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31 Confession at Noon, p. 139.
subjectivity, which eventually leads to the protagonist’s disappearance and leaves readers to question the protagonist’s existence.

In “The Passing of Seasons,” Pan probes into the protagonist’s inner desire to search for an object of love. The story portrays a surreal world that leads readers into the subconscious world of the protagonist. In this world, the protagonist states that his image is a “melancholy young man on a floating island searching for a language of [his] own” (117). The youth on a floating island clearly connects to the protagonist in the previous story, who is isolated by society and whose search for a “language of his own” indicates the destructive force of rumors that prevents the formation of his subjectivity. However, despite his claim that language is the object of his search, he is in fact searching for a girl whose identity is unclear. At one time, he sees “the blind girl holding a red bird, who is looking for orchid” (128); on another, he sees a 13 year old girl whose eyes are purple like grapes” (127). Whether these two are the same girl seems insignificant, for what he aims at finding is “an innocent girl who has never been contaminated by men’s polluted fluid” (136). The young virgin, as an object of pure love, however, appears illusive and ephemeral, for whenever the protagonist sees the girl, she is either leaving him or dying (lying in a coffin). Despite its difficulty, the protagonist completes his search in the end when he meets the eyes of the girl who is watching him while lying inside “the coffin that is slowly elevating” (137). In the end he unites with the girl he has been searching for, whom he found by the river in which the coffin floats, yet this seemingly happy ending implicates a tragic message for readers—that the protagonist can only find love in death.

If “The River” and “The Passing of Seasons” illustrate Pan’s fragmented subjectivity and his obsession with the irretrievable “love,” “The Poet’s Corridor” shows how such a subject fails to fulfill his role as a poet in the current society. The story begins with the poet waking up in a
quadrangle enclosed by four corridors, with each leading to one room. In the center of the quadrangle is a fountain, surrounded by a garden with numerous entangled roads that “allow the poet to go wherever he wants” (118). Yet rather than exploring possible paths, the poet seeks to run away by “using words to make gold,” for gold is what he needs to escape (119). The quadrangle represents the “world” the poet lives in, which appears to be orderly (with square boundaries and a center) yet complicated to navigate through (the entangled paths). Confronting such a world, the poet chooses to run away. Yet the next reality he encounters is the fact that “words,” the key element that defines the value of a poet’s life, are no longer considered valuable and have to be transformed into “gold” in order for the poet to function physically. This clearly refers to the dark truth poets of the late 80s and early 90s faced when materialism threatened to turn poetry into another form of consumption. Thus, the poet finds it difficult to navigate in the world for it is “full of materials, concrete, steel, and plastic” that he lacks the capacity to “go through” (122). When he actually tries to find his path, manifested in his search for a “wooden comb,” which is an object a young girl seeks to find inside an ancient castle, he eventually arrives at a dead end for he “keeps making the wrong choices” (130). Having no other way to find the exit, the poet and the girl light a match and seek to escape through “imagination” like the “The Little Match Girl” (130). Yet like the little match girl, the poet in real life dies, though not because of hunger but because of despair. At the very end of this story, the poet commits suicide by lying on the train track with one hand holding the girl’s picture, another holding a *Modern Chinese Dictionary*. His despair, as the narrator of the story states, resulted from the fact that the girl had “lost her innocence” after she goes to work in the big city (138), which ties to the “The Passing of Seasons” in which the protagonist only finds “the girl” after his death. Yet his holding

32 The reference to Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Little Match Girl” is pointed out in the text.
the dictionary further implies that the poet’s despair also comes from his failure in using
language, or literary expression, to save himself.

From the above analysis, we see that the novella is a reflection of Pan Yue’s sense of a
broken self. As an individual, Pan is a fragmented subject who lacks love, both parental and
romantic. As a poet with a broken subjectivity, Pan lacks the spiritual anchor to combat the
materialistic world in which artistic creations become consumptions that lack higher moral value.
The search for “the innocent girl,” who appears in all three stories although with an inconsistent
image, symbolizes the ultimate pursuit for an object of “pure love,” which is beyond the love for
a specific individual but a “sublime love” that can transcend life.

This pursuit of “pure love” is also addressed in “Eternity,” Pan Yue’s last film before his
suicide. The film depicts a husband going from heaven to hell in search for his wife, who dies in
a car accident but is sent to hell because of her sins involving the death of her father. This plot
reminds us not only of Vincent Ward’s What Dreams May Come, but also the Orpheus myth
where Orpheus is tries to retrieve his wife in the underworld. Stories in the Chinese traditions has
similar themes, such as “Mulian Rescues his Mother” as well as the canonical drama Peony
Pavilion, which also depicts how the power of “love” allows one to transcend life and death.
More interestingly, the protagonist realizes that the journey to heaven and hell is only a dream in
the very end, which leaves spectators wondering which is “real” and which is “illusionary.” This
also echoes Zhuangzi’s butterfly dream, in which he blurs the boundaries between reality and
illusion, and ask us to question our perceptions of life.

In fact, Pan explains his purpose of shooting “Eternity” in a private note, in which he
contemplates the relationship between life, love, and death:
“Someone asked me what is the purpose of living, I said I live because of love …

Love is the root to the meaning of things. One needs love, or one must face
nihilism. It will devour you, make you fear… . Heaven, hell, souls, ghosts, will
and the power of love, these are all inside our body and our head, and I made a
film about them. I want to build a sand castle from the ground, even though it
might be easily washed away. Artists are those who keep building sand castles… .

I made “Eternity” because I felt a sense of frustration. I want to probe the limit of
dream and question its periphery. But I am powerless when confronting the lack
of love. The only way to assure one’s self is to transcend life and death, walk
through heaven and hell. Yet I still doubt whether all these images, sounds,
characters, actions and languages will detach from me once I finished making the
film” (360-61).

From Pan’s reflection, we can see that “love” is the ultimate pursuit for Pan and it is key to the
constitution of Pan Yue’s subjectivity and the meaning of life. Pan’s idea of “love” is certainly
beyond romantic love; it should be understood as the “ultimate value” that is eternal and
powerful enough to transcend life and death. Thus, the making of “Eternity” is a manifestation of
his inner pursuit for the sublime “love,” which he expects to find inside his inner self but later
realized that he in fact lacks of it. As the object of his pursuit, “love” ironically becomes the
factor that crippled Pan and makes him powerless in pursuing this ultimate goal. His realization
of this vicious cycle reinforces Pan’s sense of disbelief, for the more he seeks to obtain “love,”
the more he is assured of his lack, which eventually leads to his death. For death seems to be the
only option for finding love when life fails to prove its existence. Thus, without experiences of
“love,” Pan suffers from eternal loneliness, as he confesses to the reporter in the form of a ghost in the very end of the novel:

As I gradually matured to be a creative artist, I felt a sense of loneliness, the kind that no one can share. I have to face eternity, and the lack of it—as Hemingway once said. Therefore, when Bailing wanted to leave me, I was afraid. I was afraid to confront the loneliness that only great artists could experience—the kind that appears when I face eternity and the lack of eternity. I love her, and that is why I killed her. So she will always be with me and I won’t have to confront such loneliness (390).

Like the other “girls” in “Folding Screen,” Xia Bailing is simply another “object of love” that Pan projected in order to fulfill his spiritual vacuum. Yet rather than focusing on his personal trauma as the reason for his murder and suicide attempt, Pan in the end brings out his self-identity as an “artist.” That is to say, Pan’s tragic ending is not only the result of his broken subjectivity and his crippled spirituality due to the lack of “love,” it is also a result of his becoming, or rather failure to become, an artist that he finds himself facing loneliness and the lack of faith in pursuing a higher meaning of life. In this sense, Pan’s death is as much connected to his crippled sense of self as it is related to his identity crisis as an intellectual, who bears the burden of certain moral responsibilities to the public and the world.

Pan’s identity crisis as an intellectual is further elaborated in the reporter’s dream about Pan Yue and his conversations with internationally known film directors that Pan meets in heaven after his death:

Jean Renoir: So, you are in fact a skeptic. On the one hand, you seek to express the high moral spirit of human beings and of the people in a nation: how
they sacrifice themselves, how they survive with great courage, and how they show love and virtue. On the other hand, you also see the dark side of Chinese history and soul—selfish, cowardly, and snobbish. Am I right?

Pan: Yes, but I haven’t finished all the work, neither did I complete the ones I started.

Michelangelo Antonioni: Are you a brave fighter for artistic creativity?

Pan: No. I am not qualified to be a devoted explorer of art.

Luis Bunuel: Did you use the sharpest knife to stab into the chest of your time?

Pan: No. There are too many restrictions externally and internally…

Charlie Chaplin: Did you defend human dignity and show sympathy and compassion for the weak in your films?

Pan (sweat on his forehead): No. I didn’t go all the way. I didn’t do enough.

Ingmar Bergman: Did you continue to question yourself, question God or the like such as “ultimate concern”?

Pan: No. I gave up half way…

…

Jean Renoir: Then, how deep did you probe into the reality of contemporary Chinese society?

Pan: Only surface deep.

Akira Kurosawa: Did you take a good look at your nation? Were you able to construct a national image through your film?

Pan: I did take a good look, but I haven’t been able to realize my dream in filmmaking.
Chaplin: Then why are you here among us? Shouldn’t you be making films and pursuing your dreams and ideals since you haven’t accomplished what we have…

Questioned by world famous auteurs, Pan is forced to evaluate his works and to admit that he does not qualify to be an “auteur” for failing to fulfill his duty, for any of the accomplishments achieved by these acknowledge film auteurs. Similar to the role of a writer-intellectual, to be an “auteur” requires one to have not only “individual style,” but also the sense of moral responsibility to the world. And this “moral duty” of an “auteur” or “author” also reflects the duty of traditional literati, whose life’s pursuit was to achieve social harmony and cosmic order through the cultivation of oneself and one’s understanding of the “Ultimate Principle” or Dao.

Considering the fact that Pan is portrayed as a representative of a generation of writers and artists active in the 80s and 90s, we may detect the reason behind Pan’s failure to be an “auteur” from his failure as a subject. As we see in Pan’s works Folding Screen and Eternity, Pan’s failure to become an integrated subject can be traced back to his childhood. Lacking parental love and guidance, Pan is disconnected from his heritage before his maturity and became a lonely soul wandering in the world. As a fragmented subject, Pan’s desire for “love” appears stronger for it is the spiritual anchor he must hold on to in order to define his meaning of life. To extend the interpretation of Pan as a individual to Pan as a representative of a collective, the text seems to suggests that contemporary Chinese intellectuals failed to form a coherent identity due to the various disruptive forces (the halt of political and cultural reforms and rapid economic change) that challenge the continuation of cultural heritage and tradition. The “love” that Pan personifies as the “innocent girl” thus points to intellectuals’ pursuit for the “Ultimate Truth,” or Dao, an utopian ideal pursued by Chinese intellectuals for centuries.
To conclude, the novel presents a failed attempt to construct a unified image of an “author” on three levels—Pan’s failure to be an “auteur,” the reporter’s failure to construct a coherent life story of Pan as an “auteur,” and Qiu’s failure to construct the self as a “writer-intellectual.” These failures are closely tied to a reflected spiritual crisis of contemporary intellectuals, heated discussed by literary scholars and critics in the early 1990s, which I discuss in the following.

2.4 “Humanist Spirit” and the Value of Writing in the New Era

In the summer of 1993, several literary scholars in Shanghai launched the “Humanist Spirit Debate,” a discussion on the crisis of literature and the lack of “humanist spirit” (renwen jingshen 人文精神) in contemporary China. The discussion begins with Wang Xiaoming’s critique of the poor literary qualities and writers’ willingness to “jump into the sea” (xiahai 下海) for the pursuit of more profitable careers. Seeing literature as a major spiritual supplement for the general public, Wang is worried that the lack of enthusiasm in serious literature might be a symptom of a larger crisis, that is, a general lack of interest in higher moral pursuits due to the degeneration of people’s “spiritual qualities.” Popular writers and directors like Wang Shuo and Zhang Yimou were targeted as those who lack “humanist spirit.” Wang Shuo’s “playful” attitude was criticized as an expression of nihilism, for the mockery he implemented that seeks to “subvert” only had the effect of catering general public’s taste but lack a higher moral end. Similarly, Zhang Yimou was criticized for indulging too much in the play of cinematic expressions that feeds public’s visual desires but downplayed Zhang’s critical viewpoint, as manifested in Raise The Red Lantern and Ju Dou, where the female protagonist in both films fails to resist the oppression of patriarchy. Unlike Wittgenstein’s “language-game” theory which
considers the use of language as a form of life, the “playful” attitude detected in literature and film remained on the level of “play for play’s sake,” functioning as self-entertainment without further exploration on the profundity of life.  

Wang Shuo responded to these accusations by questioning the political agenda of these literary scholars and critics. For Wang Shuo, the outcry over the loss of “humanist spirit” is more about the scholars and literary critics’ anxiety of losing public attention. Once occupying the leading role in social development, these scholars are now being marginalized in the market-oriented society and lost their status as culture elites. In his defense, Wang Shuo emphasizes that a writer’s decision to “jump into the sea” is a personal choice that should be respected by others. Moreover, a writer’s financial independence in fact guarantees his freedom in writing while the haughty yet vague “humanist spirit” seems to be another universalizing ideology that constrains writers’ creativity. Another prominent writer Wang Meng also pointed to the potential danger of indoctrinating the “humanist spirit” as a universal value that may become another dominant ideology that threatens the existence of other values.

From Wang Shuo’s and Wang Meng’s response, we can discern two key problems emerging out of this debate. First, is “humanist spirit” a concept that existed in the past but was lost in present, or is it from the beginning an invention by scholars and critics today for the purpose of regaining their elite status? Second, is “humanist spirit” a universal value that everyone should pursue or is it simply another “ideological concept” among many others one may choose to believe or not to believe in?

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33 See Wang Xiaoming, Zhang Hong, Xu Lin, Zhang Ning, Cui Yiming, “Kuangye shang de feixu—wenxue he renwenjingshende weiji,” (Deserted house in a vast field—the crisis of literature and humanist spirit), 1993.
34 See Bai Ye, Wang Shuo, Wu Bin, Yang Zhengguang, “Xuanze de ziyou yu wenhua taishi” (The freedom to choose and the current cultural field), p. 73.
35 See Wang Meng, “Renwen jingshen ougan” (Random thoughts on Humanist Spirit); also see Nan Fan, “Renwen jingshen: Beijing he kuangjia” (Humanist Spirit: Background and Framework), p. 19.
In a later discussion, Wang Xiaoming tackled the second question and emphasizes the “individual practice” of a universal value, or what he calls “ultimate value.” He recognizes that throughout Chinese history, the search for “ultimate value” was led by the so-called “spiritual mentors” and “social representatives” who believed they hold absolute truths that everyone should follow. Thus, Wang Xiaoming wishes to emphasize the “personalization” of “ultimate value” in present day, meaning that each individual has the right to pursue one’s own understanding of “ultimate value” through one’s interpretation of personal experiences. By this statement, Wang Xiaoming rejects the accusation that the quest for the “humanist spirit” and “ultimate value” are merely for the purpose of regaining their social status as cultural elites; rather, they are generating an open space for public discussion and individual interpretations. Indeed, the debate successfully attracted sufficient public attention judging from the popularity of the use/misuse of the term “humanist spirit,” yet the various “individual interpretations” on an already vague concept led the debate into a dead end. What the debate actually achieved, however, is the gathering of a certain group of people who find the need to examine, define, reject, or question the existence and meaning of such a term—literary scholars, cultural critics, writers, artists, and filmmakers. In this sense, “humanist spirit” is rather a functional term than a prescriptive concept.

In this sense, Wang Gan’s view that the crisis of “humanist spirit” is the identity crisis of contemporary intellectuals seems valid. He interprets “humanist spirit” as an intellectual’s way of thinking and living, and thus should be understood as the “literati spirit” (wenren jingshen), which he regards as an essential part of Chinese intellectual’s identity that constitutes Chinese intellectual’s integrity and self-esteem. Yet “literati spirit,” as Wang Gan points out, also

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implied the intellectual’s “dependence” upon certain beliefs, which rendered intellectuals “representatives” of certain social class and/or institutions. The lack of such dependence, in Wang Gan’s view, is what constitutes contemporary intellectuals’ anxiety. He attributed such anxiety to the impact of Western modernity and socio-political instability since late Qing that turned intellectuals into cultural and political nomads constantly seeking for their place in society. Without a proper social position and a coherent cultural tradition for modern Chinese intellectual to identify with, intellectuals today become “independent” individuals who have to choose what to believe in and where to position themselves in society, which, on the bright side, presents a new opportunity for intellectuals to “find themselves,” that is, to negotiate a new collective intellectual identity in a new era of cultural pluralism.37

The sense of “dependence” upon certain beliefs that Wang Gan mentioned, points to the two traditions in which intellectuals were positioned in history—the Dao tradition (daotong 道統) and the political tradition (zhengtong 政統). Chen Sihe argues that the “humanist spirit” exists in the Dao tradition, which is placed higher than the political tradition in feudal society. Chen compares two types of “intellectuals” during the Warring States Period to illustrate his point. One is political strategists such as Su Qin and Zhang Yi, who offer practical knowledge to serve emperors and warlords for political ends. The other is political philosopher like Confucius and Mencius who do not care so much what the leaders need as what they should do to realize Dao. Intellectuals in the 20th century, according to Chen Sihe, has lost the spirit to pursue Dao for they care more about “how” to act instead of whether their action is “right.” And contemporary intellectuals, as Chen sees it, either became “political strategists” like Su Qin and Zhang Yi, or became “pure academics” hiding in the ivory tower. Either way, they lack meaningful contact

with social realities and thus lack the “literati spirit” in realizing *Dao* as we have seen in Chapter 1 above. Here Chen does not clarify how he understands *Dao*, a concept in Chinese philosophy that defies definition and always carries multiple definitions and connotations (usually translated as “the way” or “the path”). Yet from Chen’s discussion, the *Dao* tradition bears a strong moral and political implication for Chinese intellectuals, and to follow such tradition requires not only the ability to know what is “right,” but also the ability to “act” towards that end. Therefore, he believes that the lack of “humanist spirit” and “ultimate value” can be understood as intellectuals’ digression from the *Dao* tradition, which indicates a lack of moral guidance and the lack of ability to act accordingly.

While Chen Sihe’s reflection on intellectuals’ disconnection from the *Dao* tradition seems to indicate intellectuals’ lack of moral agency, the fact that there was a debate on the spiritual crisis of intellectuals, and that a bulk of novels were produced to criticize the moral degradation of intellectuals, is a demonstration of the moral agency of those who regard themselves as intellectuals and thus find it necessary to criticize and re-evaluate the social and moral function of such a role in contemporary society. The critical question here, then, is not the ability to conduct moral judgment, but the ability to judge oneself with the same moral values used to judge others. That is to say, while the “humanist spirit debate” criticizes “intellectuals” who allow themselves to become profit-oriented writers pursuing fame and wealth, do scholars who conduct these critiques exempt themselves from these tendencies and act according to these principles they believe to be essential characteristics for intellectuals? And more importantly, who is to judge whether they did or not? Similarly, while writers wrote about morally degraded intellectuals in novels, are they writing about a symptom they detect in “others” or are they

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reflecting a symptom they detect in themselves as they also belong to this category as “writer-intellectuals.”

This dilemma is also evident in the fact that many prominent writers such as Mo Yan and Yan Lianke have openly denied their role as zuojia (writers), whether it is because such a “title” has lost its esteem in recent years or because of their guilt of not fulfilling the standards they uphold for such a title. The contradictory sentiments towards their role as writers compel them not only to explore their views on the moral characteristics of intellectuals, but also to evaluate themselves according to those values they hold on others. Qiu Huadong’s Confession at Noon, in this sense, is a good demonstration of this dilemma, as he conducts not only a critique of intellectuals’ loss of faith and their disconnection from the Dao tradition, but also a self-critique of his failure as an “author” sharing the same symptoms he detects in others. The acknowledgment of such a “failure,” I argue, has demonstrated Qiu’s success as an “author,” for the writing of such a novel is itself a moral act that renders Qiu a writer-intellectual with moral agency and an act that contributes to a possible formation of “intellectual identity” based on individual moral self-reflection.
Chapter 3: The Road to Redemption: Confession of an Intellectual in Yan Lianke’s *Feng Ya Song*

“State censorship is not the greatest threat to a writer’s progress, the tyranny starts within.” – Yan Lianke

This poignant reflection on contemporary writers’ self-censorship is what distinguishes Yan Lianke from other writers, many of whom dare to write provocative novels yet none shows the courage to examine their own limits in writing as Yan Lianke does. As a novelist known for having the majority of his books banned by the Chinese government, Yan Lianke is never afraid of challenging the limits of State censorship. His controversial pieces such as *Wei renmin fuwu* (Serve the People) and *Dingzhuang meng* (Dream of Ding Village), though denied publication in China, have won him both domestic fame and international acclaim. Among his well-known novels, most of which engage in political satire or social critiques, I find *Feng Ya Song* (Airs, Odes, Hymns) particularly intriguing, for he dares to put himself at the center and conduct a moral critique of himself as a writer-intellectual.

*Feng Ya Song* is a story about Yang Ke, a literature professor at Qingyan University, and his journey of redemption after being banished from academia. The novel begins with Yang Ke returning to his apartment after finishing his masterpiece *Fengya zhi song: Guanyu Shijing jingshen de bengen tanjiu* (The Songs of Feng Ya—A Study of the Spiritual Roots of *Shijing*),

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1 See “Darkness Visible,” Roddy Flagg’s translation of Yan Lianke’s essay.
2 Both novels have English translations. *Wei renmin fuwu* is translated by Julia Lovell as *Serve the People!: A Novel* in 2008, and *Dingzhuang meng* is translated by Cindy Carter in 2012, entitled *Dream of Ding Village*.
3 The three characters “feng,” “ya,” and “song” designate three types of poems in *Shijing*: Airs of the States (feng), odes sung at the royal Court (ya), and hymns sung in the ancestral temples of the state of Zhou (song). *Shijing* is the oldest collection of Chinese poetry dating from the early Western Zhou Period (11th to 7th centuries B.C.), often translated as *Book of Songs* or *Classic of Poetry*. 

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only to find his wife Zhao Ruping and the Vice President of Qingyan University in bed. After several failed attempts to make peace with his wife and her lover, Yang Ke is forced to leave the University and be admitted to an asylum under the pressure of Vice President Li. As Yang Ke realizes that he has little chance of being released, he manages to escape from the city asylum and flees back to his hometown in the Palou Mountains. Once back home, Yang tries to maintain his image as a professor of a prestigious institution, while hoping to reunite with his ex-fiancée Lingzhen, a virtuous and faithful woman whom he abandoned 20 years before when he decided to marry Zhao Ruping, the daughter of his academic advisor. Despite his rekindled desire for Lingzhen, Yang Ke lacks the courage to accept Lingzhen’s love and seeks comfort in brothels. When Lingzhen learns that Yang lied to her about going back to the capital for New Year’s Eve (but went to a brothel instead), she commits suicide, which further pushes Yang Ke into an emotional crisis. Yang becomes delusional and begins to project his feelings for Lingzhen onto Lingzhen’s daughter Xiaomin, for whom Yang develops an inappropriate desire. Xiaomin’s marriage to Carpenter Li pushes Yang to the edge as he attempts to murder Carpenter Li, whom he confuses with Vice President Li. As a fugitive seeking a place to hide, Yang discovers an ancient Shijing site in the mountains where he becomes the leader of a community comprised of intellectual exiles and young prostitutes. The story ends with Yang leaving the commune and setting out on another journey to search for other hidden sites where the lost Shijing poems reside.

Many regard this novel as simply another example of Yan Lianke’s social critique, for it exerts a strong undertone in condemning corrupt intellectuals in academia. I argue that such a view fails to recognize a much deeper discontent directed not so much at China’s intellectuals in general but more towards the author himself, which reveals to me a reflection of Yan Lianke’s
own struggle in exposing his inner frustration of being a morally flawed writer-intellectual. In this chapter, I seek to examine the ways in which Yan Lianke creates the story of Yang Ke, and how the use of different narrative devices illuminates Yan Lianke’s inner struggle as a spiritually crippled intellectual, and reveals his desire to seek redemption through the process of writing fiction. This work in particular can also be seen as an example of Yan’s project of “Divine Realism,” which seeks to resolve the current conundrum of the realist writing in the new century.

In the first section, I will discuss critical views on realist writings in the new century, and how these views reflect not only the problems of “literary writers” but also the problems of “critics” themselves, as they reveal the same symptoms they detect in writers of their time. In the second section, I will discuss Yan Lianke and his proposed theoretical concept called “Divine Realism,” and show how he seeks to solve the conundrum of current realist writings by focusing on critical self-examination. In the last section, I will analyze Yan Lianke’s Feng, Ya, Song as an example of Yan’s attempt to create the “inner causality” that leads to his goal of reaching “Divine Realism.”

3.1 Realist Writings in the New Century and the Problem of the Writer

Literary trends in China in the twenty-first century are highly diversified and large, with wide-ranging genres including urban romance, martial arts novels, anti-corruption novels, rural writings, underclass literature (diceng wenxue 底層文學), body writings, internet novels, mini-novels, etc. Among the diverse genres and themes, there is a tendency of realist writings that focus on depicting and exploring social realities. Popular literature often attracts the public’s

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4 The close connection between the author and the protagonist is evident in the name. When Yan Lianke’s name is pronounced quickly, it sounds similar to Yang Ke. In an interview, Yan Lianke mentioned that he originally had the protagonist named after him, but later feels that it made him look too narcissistic, therefore he decided to alter the name to Yang Ke.
attention by portraying the challenges and predicaments the post-80 generation (balinghou 八零後) encountered in the new and modernized society. For example, in Han Han’s *Sanchongmen* (Triple Doors) we see a vivid portrayal of a high school boy’s life and his psychological struggle as he is caught up in between his parents, teachers and friends. Li Ke’s *Du lala shengzhiji* (Du Lala’s Journey to the Top) in which we follow an ordinary college graduate’s journey to become the top manager, revealing the life of the newly-emerged middle-class and their struggle to survive in the urban jungle.

In the field of high literature, there was a general orientation towards “realism” in the past two decades that nurtured the emergence of the so-called “New Leftist Literature,” which, as He Hongyan states, is not simply another literary trend in the new century, but a dominant one that occupies the center of contemporary literary scene. This “leftist spirit” is evident in works such as Gueizi’s “The Dampened River,” Chen Yingsong’s “Taiping Dog,” Liu Bangqing’s “Undercover,” Beicun’s “Anger,” and Chi Zijian’s “All Nights of the World.” Yet despite the popular trend toward social realism, literary critics saw a general lack of depth in such works compared to the highly valued realist novels during the May Fourth period. Yao Xiaolei points out that many good “rural novels,” such as Yan Lianke’s *Shouhuo* only reached the level of “identifying problems” but failed to find an appropriate “narrative morale.” Similarly, Duo Duo emphasizes that literature should go beyond simply revealing social problems, which is only the surface of social reality, but should “get deeper, to the core.”

Another critic goes so far to say that this “realism fad” has resulted in the decrease of

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5 See Yao Xiaolei and He Hongyan, “Xiangtu zhongguo de zaidu shuxie,” p.111.
6 ibid.
“spirituality” in literature. That is to say, the lack of in-depth reflection and exploration on the spiritual crisis as the fundamental problem behind various social issues seem to further facilitate the spiritual vacuum of contemporary society. The spiritual crisis, some believes, is rooted in the history of modern China. Since the fall of imperial dynasty early in the 20th century, China has gone through a series of “solutions” that fundamentally aim to modernize China. However, each of these “solutions” has led the people of this nation through a series of spiritual shocks—from passion and idealization to despair and disillusionment. More importantly, every “new solution” is a “reaction” or “disconnection” from the previous one, which made the “spiritual shock” even more severe. Therefore, China has never succeeded in building a solid “modern spiritual foundation” but has always been living in a crisis of “spiritual rootlessness.”

While some holds pessimistic view of the “realism fad,” some see a hope of the return of intellectual spirit in “New Leftist Literature.” As Li Zehou once stated, the intellectual spirit to combat social issues has been gradually dissipating since Scar literature and Reflexive Literature of the 80s. Thus, the emergence of “New Leftist Literature” can be regarded as a resurrection of intellectual spirit, implicating intellectuals’ return to the front of social critique. However, we can also detect problems in some new genres in New Leftist Literature that is worth noting. For example, the “underclass writings” (diceng xiezuo) exert strong socialist ideology that lack critical reflection on the traumatic past of Mao rule. This critical historical consciousness is the key challenge for writers in forming a new historical narrative that not only reflects current social reality but also connects this reality to the traumatic practice of leftism in modern Chinese history.

8 Wang Yao, “Fanshengshidai de jingshen shuaibian,” p. 110.
9 Ibid., p. 111.
11 Ibid.
While some writers focus on current social realities, some were keen on writing on realities of the traumatic past. In fact, many writers continued to reflect on the Mao period, which seems far way yet still had its influence on people’s everyday lives. Novels such as Mo Yan’s *Jiuguo* (Wine Republic), Yan Lianke’s *Shouhuo* (Lenin’s Kisses)\(^\text{12}\), Su Tong’s *He’an* (River Bank), Yu Hua’s *Xiongdi* (Brothers), and Jia Pingwa’s *Gulu* (Ancient Burner) are all personal reflection/recollections on the days of Maoist socialism and its various impacts ordinary people’s daily lives. These works that address the period of Mao rule can be seen as a continuation of the Scar Literature and Root-seeking Literature of the 80s, yet they differ from previous generations in that many abandon the approach of depicting collective trauma and deconstructing grand historical narratives, but rather emphasize the portrayal of personal/private experiences and the construction of local/regional histories. Thus, the historical narrative in literature of the New Century are no longer dependent upon the dominant ideology popular at that time; rather, writers’ various expressions of personal views allowed the coexisting of multiple histories in the new era.\(^\text{13}\)

Some critics, however, regards this interest in writing the past as writers’ lack of courage in criticizing present reality.\(^\text{14}\) Writers’ tendency to “look back” as a way to escape from the present and their inability to go beyond “revealing problems” in realist novels of the new century seem to call upon an investigation on writers as a subject of inquiry. He Hongyan contends that literature’s lack of moral value and power to generate social changes is in fact related to intellectuals’ lack of critical thinking ability and a solid moral position.\(^\text{15}\) Wu Yiqing further points out that the problem of literature surrendering to the market and lacking power in social

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\(^{12}\) *Lenin’s Kisses* is the title used by Carlos Rojas, who translated *Shouhuo* into English.

\(^{13}\) He Hongyan, “Jiannan de dangdaishi xushu-zhisan,” p. 109.

\(^{14}\) Wang Yao, “Falide jieru,” p. 108.

critiques has less to do with the forces of commercialization and popular culture, but is more related to Chinese writers’ subjectivity: “Chinese writers like to attribute the problems they detect in literature to external factors, political or cultural, yet they forgot to ask themselves whether they embody a powerful ‘literary self’.”

On a similar note, Yu Kexun sees the writers’ failure to determine a moral position and cultural identity in literature of the new century. He points out that the increase of “underground writing” in recent years has shown that what writers lacked was never humanistic concerns, but moral principles and historical perspectives. Moreover, he criticizes writers for embracing “empatheticism” (wenqing zhuyi 溫情主義) and abandoning the position of social critique, and thus betraying literature’s original function. Compared to the 90s, writers of the new century have grown backwards in process of determining their moral position. Confronting the various social issues that are in need of intellectual critique, including rapid materialization, the loss of moral value, the severity of corruption, the great division between wealthy and poor, and the lack of social justice that constitute a society full of contradiction, writers seem to have given up collective resistance and simply throw themselves into the flow of everyday life.

From the above criticisms, we can see that literary scholars and critics have attributed the problems of realist writings to writers themselves—spiritual crisis, the lack of historical consciousness, their escapist tendency, the loss of moral position and critical viewpoint on social problems. While these critiques seem valid, it is questionable whether critics should also place themselves under similar scrutiny, given that they are in the same social, historical, and political context as the writers they criticizes? In other words, are scholars and critics immune from these symptoms detected in writers of their times, and moreover, did they provide a “deeper reality”?

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17 Yu Kexun, “Xinshiji wenxue de kunjing yu tuibian,” p. 98.
underneath the symptoms, or are they simply “identifying problems” without giving a “narrative morale,” as Yao Xiaolei critiqued Yan Lianke’s Shouhuo? If, the problem of realist writings lies in the writers’ spiritual crisis and lack of moral position, should writers explore the reality of themselves, that is, the cause behind the symptoms, before they conduct social critiques? And shouldn’t critics do the same? Isn’t criticizing others also an “escape” from confronting the reality of the self?

In fact, we have seen writers reflect on their social role as a writer in prose narratives interviews. For example, in Chinese Writer Dream (Zhongguo zuojia meng), a collection of interviews with prominent writers in early 1990s, we see writers explain how they interact with social realities through creative writing, and how they perceive the function of literature as a means to interact with society.18 This tendency to conduct self-reflection and critical self-examination is so detected in Feng, Ya, Song, which exemplifies what Yan Lianke calls “Divine Realism” (shenshi zhuyi) a concept Yan proposed as an attempt to break the current conundrum of realist writings.

3.2 Yan Lianke and Divine Realism

Yan Lianke was born in Henan Province in 1958. He started writing after entering the army in 1978, and since then he has published numerous works, mostly fiction. In 1985, he graduated from Henan University with a degree in politics and education, and in 1991, he earned a degree in Literature from the People’s Liberation Army Art Institute. In 2007, Yan Lianke left his position in the army and obtained a transfer to the Beijing Writers’ Association. By then, he had already gained a reputation as a controversial and innovative writer. Despite his notoriety as

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18 Ma, Yuan. Zhongguo zuojia meng: Ma Yua yu 110 wei zuojia de duihua (China Writer Dream: Ma Yuan’s conversation with 110 writers), 1996.
a writer of banned books, his works had won critical attention from scholars and critics. In 2000, he won the Lu Xun Literary Award for the short story collection *Nian Yue Ri* (Years, months, days), and in 2005 he was awarded the Lao She Literary Award for *Shouhuo*, which was later translated into English as *Lenin’s Kisses*. Yan’s work has attracted the attention of international scholars in recent years and many of his works have been translated into English, French and German.

Many of Yan’s acclaimed novels were denied publication in mainland China and had to be published in Hong Kong or Taiwan. *Wei renmin fuwu* (Serve the people) was banned by the Central Propaganda Department after its first printing due to its depiction of a soldier servant’s illicit affair with a high-ranking military officer’s wife. A later work *Dingzhuang meng* (Dream of Ding village) was also banned because of its allusion to the AIDS villages in Henan. His more recent work *Sishu* (The Four Books) was rejected by major publishing houses in mainland China due to its satirical reflection on intellectuals’ sins and redemptions during the Great Leap Famine. One particular case is *Shouhuo*, a no less controversial novel that not only passed the State censorship, but also won the prestigious Lao She Literary Award, perhaps because Yan was able to dance around the borderline of State censorship using his particular narrative skills. The translator of *Shouhuo*, Carlos Rojas, points out that Yan in this novel demonstrates his ability to negotiate a delicate compromise between social critique and political permissibility, manifested in Yan’s use of only odd numbers for notes and chapters, which dramatizes the stark inequities of modern China. The “missing” even numbers, Rojas argues, can be interpreted as a “tacit reminder of everything the novel necessarily leaves unsaid,” and the numbering scheme reflects Yan’s delicate courtship with China’s censorship system.19 Here we see that Yan uses narrative forms creatively to probe the limit of State censorship, a tactic also seen in *Feng Ya Song*, in

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19 See Translator’s Note” in *Lenin’s Kisses*, translated by Carlos Rojas, p. viii-ix.
which he incorporates several narrative devices to probe the limit of his self-censorship.

In Yan Lianke’s view, writers have never enjoyed “freedom” but always write with constraints and regulations, both from publishing sectors and from the writers themselves. In a reflection on contemporary Chinese literature, he points out that many writers are detached from reality because they chose a path that stresses “art for art’s sake” and safety:

Whether you admit it or not, since the 80s and the emergence of new experimental novels, the trajectory of contemporary literature is a road of “art and safety” (yishu jia anquan 藝術加安全). Because it is art, therefore, it is safe; because of its safety, it gets even more “art-like.” Wang Anyi already pointed out ten years ago that Chinese literature does not lack good narrative structure or language skills, it lacks an “literary affection/emotion” (wenxue qinggan 文學情感). I understand what Wang Anyi means: one is the strong affection for the characters and plots writers convey through the text, another is the passion writers show as they confront reality. It is because writers had no passion when confronting reality that they are indifferent towards the characters and plots in their work. Yet it is also because writers are detached with reality that they found a safe writing direction to experiment writing skills.\(^20\) (192)

Here Yan points out that the major problem with contemporary literature is that it lacks “affection” and “passion” because writers do not “confront reality” directly, but rather escape into the realm of “art for art’s sake” and focus on experimental writings. This tendency to write “safe” is not simply the legacy of Mao’s restrictions on the production of art and literature that has been internalized by writers, but also the current censorship that continues to validate the

danger of crossing the “red lines” in one’s writing. Therefore, like other critics, Yan also targeted the writers as the major reasons why contemporary literature lack of strength and power in conducting social critiques.

In a recent blog post, he compares these processes of censorship and self-censorship to an act of castration, asking rhetorically: “Is not a literature that can only dance within a tightly constrained space also a castrated literature?” What gravely concerns Yan is that the “castration” of literature and the “self-castration” of writers have resulted in the “loss of the force and imagination of the spirit.” And this artistic self-restraint, Yan argues, will to a certain extent limit the way a writer thinks about China and result in writers tackling merely the surface of reality and emphasize only the craft and techniques of literary writing.

The “reality” Yan reveals in his novels, thus, often seems less “real” than readers would expect, given the absurd plots and overdramatic characters readers encounter. His play with narrative form, which shows a strong sense of the postmodernist characteristics—narrative disunity, a-chronology and fragmentation—further moves his writing away from traditional social realism to “magical realism,” a term that has been used to refer to several other Chinese writers for their tendencies to incorporate fantastic and supernatural elements in their novels. Yet despite his reputation as a writer keen on exploring new narrative forms, Yan emphasizes that he never prioritizes form over content but rather regards form as a significant counterpart that only exists to facilitate the establishment of the content. In this sense, creative form is never the purpose of writing, as some critics have accused, but a functional element that works to

\[\text{\scriptsize 21} \quad \text{Ibid. viii.}\]
\[\text{\scriptsize 22} \quad \text{See Roddy Flagg’s translation of Yan Lianke’s “Darkness Visible,” p. 41.}\]
\[\text{\scriptsize 23} \quad \text{ibid., p. 43.}\]
\[\text{\scriptsize 24} \quad \text{Mo Yan is also considered as one of the “magic-realist” writers.}\]
illuminate the content, which is aimed to reveal the inner truth and reality of life, or what Yan Lianke called “zhenshi.”

The pursuit of “zhenshi” (the real/the true 真實) has always been what motivates Yan to write. In his recently published Faxian Xiaoshuo (Discovering Fiction 發現小說), he contemplates on the relationship between fiction and reality, drawing examples from works of great writers in the 20th century, including Kafka, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, García Márquez, and Lu Xun. In the first section, he distinguishes four levels of “reality” in fictional writing: Reality of Social Construction (shehui konggong zhenshi 社會控構真實), Reality of Worldly Experiences (shixiang jingyan zhenshi 世相經驗真實), Reality of Life Experiences (shengming jingyan zhenshi 生命經驗真實), and Reality of the Inner Soul (linghun shendu zhenshi 靈魂深度真實). While the first two types of “reality” are the most commonly seen, especially in popular literature, for they remained on the level of everyday experiences that most people can easily relate to, the latter two types of “reality” are the ones writers strive to reach as they engage in a more profound inquiry on the meaning of life and the human soul. To be able to probe into such depths, Yan argues that writers need to achieve what he calls an “inner causality” in their fictional narratives:

Inner causality is the cause and effect detected in the development of the story, which is driven by the ‘inner reality’ embedded in it. It is not caused by factors coming from the external world, nor does it contain symbolic or allegorical meanings like we see in the non-causality stories…. It appears according to an “inner reality,” which may not necessarily exist in real life but definitely exists in
one’s spirit and one’s soul. This ‘inner reality’ is the core element that generates the telling and completion of the story.25

This “inner reality” is the “zhenshi” Yan is keen on exploring in his fiction. However, reflecting on fictional writings of contemporary Chinese authors, he seems concerned that writers failed to go beyond depicting “constructed social reality” and “worldly reality” and reveal a more in-depth reality of life and human soul. Rather than looking at external factors such as economic development and social changes, Yan thinks that the problem of the lack of spiritual depth in recent literary production lies in writers themselves, partially due to the political censorship that restrained writers’ freedom of expression, and writers’ self-censored “xin” (heart/mind), which is intuitively guarded and defensive. This invisible firewall enables writers’ satisfaction with “worldly reality” writing, which allows them to consider their work a legacy of the May Fourth social realism, but also promises their works a better chance of becoming classics in the future. Thus, writers nowadays, in Yan’s eyes, are not only incapable of venturing into the realm of deeper reality, but more importantly, they lack the will to do so.

Confronting contemporary writers’ reluctance to address philosophical and religious inquiries on the human soul and the profundity of life, Yan proposes a new theory called “Divine Realism” (Shenshi zhuyi 神實主義).

Divine realism can be explained in short as the exploration of a “non-existent reality,” which abandons the outer reasons and rationalization we see in everyday life. It is a reality that we cannot see, a reality hidden by reality. It is not the realism as we usually understand it. It is not directly related to everyday life but more dependent upon the artists’ contemplation of the human spirit and in the real

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25 Yan, Lianke, Faxian xiaoshuo (Discovering fiction), 150-151, my translation.
world…. Divine realism is not a rejection of Realism, it is rather an effort to transcend realism and create another level of reality.\textsuperscript{26} Yan’s idea of “divine realism” seek to transcend “worldly reality” and reach an “inner reality” and “inner causality” that can only be expressed through the “unseen” and the “unreal.” Yet Xiao Ying criticizes Yan’s idea of “transcendental reality” as a failed attempt to show reality but rather demonstrate “fantasies” resulted from self-indulgent writings. Xiao regards Yan as so indulgent in transcending reality (liberating from all restraints—internal and external) that he eventually creates a “reality of his own,” which failed to connect with the reality of others.\textsuperscript{27} Thus, Yan’s \textit{Shouhuo}, for Xiao, is merely a fantastical world created through exaggerating Yan’s personal experience on human’s suffering of illness, a “quasi-eulogy for a fictional world of illness and physical distortion.”\textsuperscript{28} Yet despite his criticism, Xiao thinks that the novel is able to address the author’s despair and helplessness towards the real world. In this sense, the “inner reality” that Yan seeks to address in his novels is in fact the “inner reality” of himself as the writer of the text, which can only be presented through the construction of the fictional self due to the self-censorship Yan believes writers have adapted to unconsciously. In \textit{Feng Ya Song}, Yan seeks to probe the “inner reality” of himself through a confessional narrative in which the protagonist reflects on his sins and sets out on the journey of soul cleansing and spiritual redemption.

\textbf{3.3 \textit{Feng Ya Song}: A Critique of Others or the Self?}

When \textit{Feng Ya Song} is first published in 2008, it generated a public discussion on the moral integrity of intellectuals in the academia. Many accused Yan for impugning the professors of

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{ibid.}, 172.
\textsuperscript{27} Xiao Ying, “Zhenshi de keneng yu kuangxiang de xujia—ping Yan Lianke \textit{Shouhuo},” p. 34.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{ibid.}, 54.
Peking University, for the morally degraded scholars in the novels are from “Qingyan University,” (清燕大學) which resembles “Yenching University,” (燕京大學) the precursor of Peking University.\footnote{Yenching University was originally a Christian University sponsored by four British and American churches in early 20th century. During the second Sino-Japanese War, the University was moved to Chengdu and after the People’s Republic of China is established in 1949, its arts and science faculties were merged into Peking University, while its engineering section was merged into Qinghua University.} In response, Yan stated that he originally thought about having the protagonist named after himself, but later decided to give the name a twist (the sound of “Yang Ke” is similar to “Yan Lianke” when pronounced quickly) so that he would not appear too narcissistic. He also said that he never wished to target any institutions; rather, his original intention was to write about himself: “I wrote about myself. I depicted my restless heart and that’s all; I often feel a sense of disgust coming from the bottom of my heart, knowing my incompetence and lack of strength to be a good person.”\footnote{See “Afterword” of Yan Lianke’s Feng Ya Song, p. 284.} To cure his restless heart, he feels that he needs to “return home” (huijia), which was the original title Yan chose for this novel.

One of the most commonly discussed topics is Yan’s use of Shijing in the novel. While many have argued that Yan use Shijing is mainly for the purpose of contrast, seeking to highlight the moral corruption of intellectuals by juxtaposing romantic love with illicit sex, court etiquettes with dirty academic politics, Hua Zhen argues that Shijing symbolizes Yan’s imagined utopia. Since Yan’s choice of incorporating Shijing into this novel is incidental rather than a deliberate choice, given that Yan got this idea during a casual talk with a friend, Hua thinks that Shijing plays a role that is more technical and functional. Other than using Shijing as the frame for the novel, Yan also uses Shijing to imagine a utopia where exiled intellectuals and the outcast prostitutes form a seemingly harmonious community. Hua argues that this portrayal of a fantastical world is in fact the utopia Yan constructed for himself, which incorporated the characteristics of Yan’s ideal society, a politically independent and autonomous small
community led by sages such as Yao and Shun, where people live without fear for fulfilling basic needs or restrained sexual desires.\(^{31}\) In fact, in the original version, Yang Ke does not leave the ancient *Shijing* site, rather, he seems content living in such a world, according to the description of the sunrise after the sex party: “the menstruation reddened and scented the entire world.” These last two lines of the original ending, as Hua points out, seems to suggest that the ancient *Shijing* site is not only the “utopia” Yang Ke has been searching for, but also the “home” Yang hopes to returned to.\(^{32}\)

Though Hua is right in pointing out the utopian vision Yan implants in the ending, it is important to consider the fact that Yan changed the destiny of Yang Ke in the final version, having Yang continue his journey in search for other lost *Shijing* sites rather than living happily ever after in a fantastical world. Though we do not know what made Yan change the destiny of the protagonist, it is certain that the edited ending reflect more faithfully the concept of utopia, which is essentially an ideal that is unreachable, a “Peach Blossom Land” the “fisherman” can never return to. If the utopia is the “home” Yan wishes to return to, than such an ending seems to indicate a pessimistic outlook for the protagonist. Yet what exactly does Yan mean by “home,” given that he originally titled the novel “Return Home”? Is he referring to his childhood hometown, an imagined utopian society, the spiritual home for intellectuals, or the cultural origin of the nation?

Liu Jianmei argues that the ending in which Yang Ke sets out on the journey of “returning home” should be read as an act of running away. For Liu, Yang Ke is a lonely individual, who chooses to run away from the absurd and chaotic reality with no intention to resist or struggle (Liu 17). Yet the place he eventually arrived, the symbolic ancient *Shijing* site,

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\(^{31}\) Hua Zhen, *“Feng Ya Song and Yan Lianke’s Utopia,”* p. 109.

\(^{32}\) ibid., p. 108.
does not provide comfort and peace for his soul and therefore he has to continue searching. Such an ending seems to suggest that “home does not exist, whether one understands it as childhood home, the home for emotional support, or the home of one’s soul” (Liu 17). Lacking a home to return to, Yan is forced to retreat into the “non-existing existence” that had already been erased by history.33 In Liu’s view, Yan’s writings have shown that Yan’s tendency to detach himself from reality, not only in Feng Ya Song but the later Resident #711, in which the narrator, presumably Yan himself, is a recluse living in a self-built “Walden-like” space located in the city and contemplating the relationship between nature and human being. The context in which Yan wrote Resident #711, as Liu sees it, is the over development of global materialism, a world of spiritual frustration. Thus, Liu read Yan’s effort in reflecting on Nature and its co-existence with human being in the text as a significant social critique. Yet in this particular text we also see the narrator’s dual personality, as he oscillates in between “saving oneself” and “saving the world,” in between being an individual seeking to return to one’s inner self and a writer expressing his concern for social issues. Despite showing his pursue for a Daoist ideal, the narrator realizes that he is essentially a part of the society from which he can never escape. For reality is that even the small “utopia” he built in the city will eventually be taken down for the purpose of “modern urban development.”34

While Liu Jianmei’s reading of Resident #711 hinted on the escapist tendency Liu attributed to the author, Yao Xiaolei see in Feng Ya Song Yan’s spiritual agony manifested in the inner struggle of Yang Ke, which is also a shared sentiment for contemporary Chinese intellectuals as they realize the problem of cultural rootlessness in current society. For Yao, Yang Ke is “the embodiment of both the base culture of the general public and the intellectual class,”

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33 Yan’s statement in Discovering Fiction, and other interviews.
therefore, the construction of Yang’s image is “no longer limited to a critique of intellectuals, but touches upon a ‘cultural gene’ found in Yan Lianke and also exists in the subconscious of a collective.” Here Yao’s idea of “cultural gene” refers to the idea that there is a shared cultural root to ties Chinese intellectuals together as a collective whole, and it is what determines their identity as an intellectual. Therefore, Yao thinks that Yan’s portrayal of Yang Ke is also an expression of a common identity crisis of contemporary intellectuals, who “find themselves unable to move forward and lacks cultural root to return to.”

As a self-critical writer, Yan perhaps will agree to Yao’s reading of Feng Ya Song, however, Yao’s interpretation of Yan’s personal struggle as a representation of all Chinese intellectuals no doubt draws objection from other “intellectuals.” Meng Qingshu, for example, regards the novel a failed attempt to express a shared spiritual illness of intellectuals. One obvious flaw, as Meng sees it, is that the protagonist appears too “supernatural,” especially towards the end in which his actions are extremely absurd and beyond our comprehension. Without any rational explanation, the author seems to suggest that those actions can all be justified by the challenged mental condition of the protagonist. Therefore, even though Meng understands Yan’s use of “inner focus” to narrate the protagonist’s psychological world, which is more or less a projection of the author’s inner self, he sees the result a failure for the protagonist appears to be a vague and flat character, a “symbol” defined by the author rather than a “real person” in life. Because of his detachment from reality, Yang Ke certainly cannot represent “contemporary Chinese intellectuals” as a whole.

Not only does Meng criticize Yan’s depiction of Yang Ke, he also thinks that Yan’s

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35 Yao, Xiaolei, “Hechu shi guicheng—you Feng Ya Song kan dangxia zhishifenzi de jingshen zhishang (Where is the Road Home—Intellectual’s spiritual trauma in Feng Ya Song), p. 114-115.
characterization of the two female characters, Linzhen and Ruping, falls into the cliché of representing the dichotomy between intellectuals and peasants, who represent the urban and the rural respectively (Meng 25). Juxtaposing “moral bankrupted intellectuals” and “innocent and morally bond peasants,” Yan’s critique of the already disintegrated intellectual subjectivity in fact revealed an intellectual elitism behind. That is to say, even though Yan works hard to criticize and retaliate intellectual’s spiritual illness in the novel, he is assuming that intellectuals essentially carries more moral burden than people of other social class. Meng sees such view a reiteration of the myth of the 80s—that intellectuals are “the spine of the nation.” Thus, Meng argues that Yan’s genuine concern for the moral bankruptcy of intellectuals is a reflection of his true narcissism. Moreover, instead of generating a self-critique movement of contemporary intellectuals, Yan’s “moral reflection” on intellectuals rather broadens the gap between intellectuals and other classes. For Meng, his exaggeration of intellectual’s moral degradation, thus, is not different than the deification of intellectuals in the 80s (Meng 26).

Along the line of Meng Qingshu, Zhu Jianxin argues that Yan is in fact depicting an intellectual’s desire to seek for redemption, manifested by Yang Ke’s numerous “escapes,” including his escape from the academia, then from his hometown, and last from the ancient Shijing site. These numerous escapes also reveal Yang’s inability to resist, which dooms his redemption a failure. Like Yao Xiaolei, Zhu thinks that such a portrayal of Yang Ke, is also a critique of a collective illness of contemporary intellectuals. 37 Though I agree with Zhu that Yang Ke’s journey of “home-coming,” which Yan coins the core of the novel, is a journey to redemption, I wonder whether Yang Ke’s failure to find inner peace (spiritual home) concludes the novel.

37 Zhu, Jianxin. “Chenlun yu Jiushu—Jia Pingwa Feidu yu Yan Lianke Feng Ya Song helun” (Sinking and Redemption—a joint discussion of Jia Pingwa’s Feidu and Yan Lianke’s Feng Ya Song), p.130.
Though many criticism have pointed to important themes discussed in the novel, such as “returning home,” “Shijing as cultural utopia,” “collective agony of intellectuals,” “intellectual narcissism and elitism,” “spiritual redemption,” they fail to connect all but highlight one over the other. This is mainly the result of reading Yang Ke as a representative of either Yan Lianke himself or a representation of contemporary intellectuals as a whole. And this way of reading fails to recognize the narrative devices Yan Lianke incorporated that made Yang Ke less a “fictional representation” of reality (personal or collective) but more a “fictional creation” that functions as “the other self” that the author is conducting a dialogue with on the level of narrative form. In fact, I agree with Zhu Jianxin that the novel showed Yang Ke’s journey of “redemption,” which reflects Yan Lianke’s desire for spiritual salvation, yet I argue that the relation between Yang Ke and Yan Lianke is not simply “self-representation,” but is a “confession of/to the self.”

For Yan Lianke, “Returning home” has always been an important theme in his work. In fact, Yan sets many of his stories in Palou Mountains, an imaginary rural village modeled after his hometown. Known as one of the “rural writers,” Yan shows great compassion for the predicaments and sufferings of people living in the gradually declining rural regions, which he addresses in many of his works. For example, in Palou Tiange (The hymn of Palou Mountains), Yan depicts a woman’s perseverance as she struggles to raise four mentally diseased daughters after her husband’s suicide for the lack of strength to deal with harsh reality. The novella “Nian, Yue, Ri” (Years, months, days) is also set in Palou Mountains, in which we see an ironic depiction of a peasant’s faith in “life,” as he insists on taking care of “one burgeoning corn sprout” despite the harsh natural environment that threatens to take his life.
In *Feng Ya Song*, we see the protagonist “returning home” to Palou Mountains after being banished from academia, yet the meaning of “home” in this novel goes beyond its literal sense and can be understood metaphorically as the “spiritual refuge” and “cultural origin” of the suffering Chinese subjects. This is evident when we realize that Yang Ke holds the canonical poetry collection *Shijing (The Book of Songs)* to be the Holy Scripture that contains the answers to lead people back “home”:

The love poems in *Shijing* are road signs and clues to our spiritual home, in these poems we realize that only “love and affection” (*ai yu aiqing*) can bring comfort and solace, let us know what to fix and how to mend, and show us the home/origin of human beings (*FYS* 162-163).

For Yang Ke, going back to Palou Mountains does not grant him the spiritual salvation he needs, for the “home” he seeks to discover is the “spiritual home” where he can find love and solace. Yan’s altering “jiayuan” (home/land 家園) to “jiayuan” (home/origin 家源) at the end of this passage also reminds us that “home” is not only the place one seeks to arrive at, but also the place one originally came from. In this sense, “returning home” can also be interpreted as an inward journey of self-reflection and self-examination. Therefore, as we follow Yang Ke back to Palou Mountains, we are at the same time following Yang Ke’s reflections on his own life, including the sins he commits and the mental sufferings he experiences. On the level of narration, we also see the author Yan Lianke conducting a self-evaluation of his moral integrity as a writer-intellectual in the particular narrative choices used to create Yang Ke’s story. I see the self-reflection process of Yang Ke and Yan Lianke as “confessional narratives” that illuminate their sins, guilt, and desire for salvation, which are manifested in the interactions between the two
narrative acts—Yang Ke’s narration of one’s own life and Yan Lianke’s narration of the story of his fictional self.

### 3.4 Confessional Narratives and *Feng Ya Song*

Though “confession” in the Chinese cultural tradition is mostly referred to as a legal process rather than a religious practice or a literary genre, we can still find literary texts that are “confessional,” examples include Lu Xun’s Preface to *Nahan* (*Call to Arms*), Yu Dafu’s “Sinking,” and Ding Ling’s “Miss Sophie’s Diary” in the May Fourth period, and contemporary works such as Gao Xingjian’s *Soul Mountain* (*Lingshan*) and Ba Jin’s *Suixiang lu* (*Random thoughts*). Different from these earlier works, *Feng Ya Song* is “confessional” in the sense that it creates a dialogue between the self as a confessant, and the self as a confessor through the innovative use of narrative strategies. This narrative design, I argue allows Yan Lianke to detach himself from the “disciplinary function” of confession and break free from self-censorship.\(^{38}\)

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that confession (*l’aveu*) is one of the large exercises of power on the individual by those seeking to order and control individuals within the social structure: “For a long time, the individual … was authenticated by the discourse of truth he was able or obliged to pronounce concerning himself. The truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individuation by power.”\(^{39}\) The verbal act of confession, according to Foucault, takes place in a context of obligation, in a relation of power differential:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship,

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\(^{38}\) Philippe Lejeune theorizes that in an autobiographical text, there is a pact between the author and the reader that the author, the narrator, and the protagonist of an autobiography is one and the same. See Philippe Lejeune, “Autobiographical Pact,” in *On Autobiography*, p.3-30.

\(^{39}\) *The History of Sexuality* 58-59.
for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply an interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances that it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual, in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.⁴⁰

Here Foucault points to the power relationship between a confessor and a confessant, the former being the agency that not only requires the latter to confess, but also holds the power to intervene, judge, and pardon the confessant. In such a confessing situation, “truth” is authenticated before it can be formulated, and confession becomes a “ritual” that one is obligated to perform in order to be granted an authentic existence within a power structure, rather than a moral reflection on the truths about oneself. To avoid falling into the trap prescribed by the power structure, Yan Lianke in Feng Ya Song seeks to lift the “obstacle” (self-censorship) by separating himself from the confessing subject Yang Ke. In that way, Yan creates a confessional narrative in which the “truth” of confession lies not in the content of confession itself (which lacks truth-value due to self-censorship), but in the performative act of confessing, that is, in the ways in which Yan designs, creates, and manipulates Yang Ke’s confession.

So how does Yan manipulates Yang Ke’s confession and how does Yang Ke’s confession reflect on Yan’s guilt? This double role-play with the self is manifested in the two

⁴⁰ ibid., 61-62.
levels of speech act in confession. In *Troubling Confessions*, Peter Brooks points out that the speech act of confession is constituted by contrasting aspects:

As de Man suggests, the speech act of confession is double. In the terms of J. L. Austin’s famous distinction, there is a constative aspect (the sin or guilt to which one confesses) and a performative aspect, precisely the elusive and troubling action performed by the statement “I confess.” When one says “Bless me Father, for I have sinned,” the constative meaning is: I have committed sins, while the performative meaning is: absolve me of my sin. The confessional performance of guilt always has this double aspect, and since it does, it opens the possibility that the performative aspect will produce the constative, create the sin or guilt that the act of confessing requires. That is, the verbal act that begins “I confess” entails guilt, which is already there in the act of confessing, so that the referent—this particular guilt—may merely be a by-product of the verbal act.  

I see this double aspect of confession manifested in the two levels of confession in *Feng Ya Song*: Yang Ke’s confession of his spiritual weakness in the main narrative and Yan Lianke’s quest for spiritual salvation through the writing of Yang Ke’s story; the former constitutes the constative aspect and the latter the performative. In my view, Yang Ke’s confession can be read as a by-product of Yan’s performative act, which is motivated by Yan Lianke’s own guilt. Thus, rather than examining the sins Yang Ke committed, I propose to examine the performative act of Yan Lianke, and analyze the ways in which he manipulates the actions and characterizations of Yang Ke, and how his own guilt for being a morally flawed intellectual is manifested through that process.

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I detect four narrative devices in the novel that reflect Yan Lianke’s performative acts of confession. First, Yan uses parenthetical statements to disrupt the main narrative, which not only manifests the power struggle between confessor and the confessant, but also reflects his own guilt. Second, the appropriation of the female characters illuminates Yan Lianke’s desire to find comfort and obtain absolution through the “Other.” Third, by denying Yang Ke’s salvation in the fictional world, Yan Lianke reveals the punishment he thinks he deserves, which is also an act to seek for absolution in the real world. Last, Yan uses Shijing as the frame of the novel to highlight the power of literature in absolving one’s sins and assure one’s spiritual salvation.

Throughout the novel, there are many instances in which Yan Lianke uses parenthetical statements that complement, contrast or contradict the main narrative. I argue that the use of these parenthetical statements functions in two aspects. First, it creates a confessional situation in which Yang Ke is both the confessor and the confessant. This design renders Yang Ke both as a disempowered narrator and a self-doubting confessant whose story lacks truth-value. Second, it highlights the contradictions and ambiguities between the parenthetical statement and the main narrative, which work to reflect both Yang Ke and Yan Lianke’s guilt.

Brooks points out that the “truth” of a confession is often not straightforward but a truth of performance and dialogue, a truth created by the bond of confessant (the confessing subject) and confessor (the hearer of the confession), and the confessional situation. In Feng Ya Song, Yan Lianke makes Yang Ke both the confessant and the confessor by creating a “voice in parentheses” that constantly disrupts the main narrative. We encounter this voice from the very beginning of the text:

Come to think of it, I wasn’t walking that fast on my way home to Palou Mountains after I escaped from the city asylum. But time runs fast like the river

42 ibid., 63.
running down under my feet, splashing into the air. At that time I thought of a line in my new book The Songs of Feng Ya—A Study of the Spiritual Roots of Shijing (Can I call this book “The Songs of Feng Ya” in the following story?)—no matter where you are as you follow the new path life presents you, you will have to follow the same path back in the end. (FYS 2)

As a first-person narrator telling his own story, Yang Ke first appears to be an authoritative narrator dictating the story of his past. Yet the parenthetical statement that follows, in which the narrator requests permission regarding a choice of his own narration, has significantly undermined his own narrative authority. Moreover, it makes Yang Ke a troubled confessant who is incompetent to verify the truth of his own story. In another example, we see narrative inconsistencies created by the parenthetical statement that challenges the main narrative. When Yang Ke’s wife Zhao Ruping accuses Yang Ke of taking Vice President Li’s underwear as evidence after Yang witnesses Li and Ruping in bed together, Yang Ke first begs Ruping to believe that he has not taken it, but later doubts his own response in the parenthetical statement: “I said Ruping I didn’t see it and I didn’t take it, why don’t you trust me? Do you want me to kneel down again to prove it? … (… if it’s neither Ruping and nor me, who could it be? This makes me suspect it is you, Yang Ke, who hid that underwear.)” (FYS 40-43). Here we see a distinction between Yang Ke in the first-person narrator “I” and Yang Ke in the second-person narrator “you,” whom the “I” accuses of being dishonest. While this distinction seems to place the parenthetical voice in the position of the confessor who holds the power to question and judge, the fact that the parenthetical voice has already surrendered its authority, as we see in the previous example, seems to suggest that the power relationship between confessor and confessant has been disrupted. In contrast to most confessional situations in which the confessor
is the facilitator and authenticator of the confession, here we see a confessor who works to intrude, obfuscate, question, and invalidate the confessant’s story.

In this sense, the function of the parenthetical voice here is not only to reveal Yang Ke’s self-doubt typically seen in the confession process, but more importantly, it represents how power relations between the split-self—the authoritative confessor and a passive confessant—has been disrupted when the confessant seeks to be liberated from the censored self through the process of confession. Therefore, instead of seeing how the truth of Yang Ke’s confession is authenticated by an authoritative voice of himself, we see a disempowered confessor struggling to maintain his position as he seeks to take control of the narrative either by complementing, confirming, or intruding the main narrative. This design highlights how self-censorship can damage the confessant’s ability to reach the truth about the self, and consequently render the confession lack truth-value. Thus, instead of seeking the truth about Yang Ke in his confession, I argue that the “truth” of Yang Ke’s confession can be detected in between the power struggle of the confessor and the confessant, that is, in the contradictions and ambiguities between the parenthetical statements and the main narrative.

The “truth” of Yang Ke’s confession, I argue, is in fact the guilt he reveals when he contradicts himself. In the example above, whether Yang Ke hid Vice President Li’s underwear or not is not the “truth” we can discern; yet either way, we can detect a strong sense of guilt on part of Yang Ke: if he did hide the underwear, he is ashamed for being dishonest; if he didn’t, he is ashamed of being too weak to defend his honor when he begs Ruping to believe him. Similarly, when the villagers ask Yang Ke to put his clothes into Lingzhen’s coffin in accordance with Lingzhen’s last wish, the parenthetical voice immediately contradicts Yang’s words: “I did not

43 Coetzee in “Confession and Double Thoughts” points out that the project of confession raises intricate and intractable problems regarding truthfulness when the subject is at a heightened level of self-awareness and open to self-doubt. See Coetzee, p. 215.
hesitate at all (I hesitated for a while) and said yes, then I put my hat into Lingzhen’s coffin” (183). Again, the contradictory statement has illuminated the guilt Yang Ke suffers from as he confronts Lingzhen’s last request: if he consents, his guilt for betraying Lingzhen would be reinforced for he considers himself unworthy of being buried with Lingzhen, a woman who devoted her entire life to Yang Ke; if he declines, he not only betrays Lingzhen again, but also becomes an ungrateful man in the eyes of the villagers, who still respect Yang Ke as a venerable intellectual.

Here Yang Ke’s guilt is less the result of his intention to do wrong but from his inability to do right, in the sense of both his lack of courage to resist the wrongs he sees and his inability to uphold his moral principles. Such a critical reflection on Yang Ke’s spiritual weakness and moral flaws is also a manifestation of the guilt of the writer—Yan Lianke—over his lack of courage to act against the wrong he sees. This is most evident in an absurd scene in which Yan Lianke exaggerates Yang Ke’s weakness by having Yang Ke react apologetically when he sees Ruping and Vice President Li in bed:

I said to Vice President Li, I have finished writing The Song of Feng Ya—A Study of the Spiritual Roots of Shijing, and this book means everything to me therefore I need nothing else. If you feel you did wrong from the bottom of your heart, if you are sorry for what you did to me and want to make it right, I have three things I need you to do, first, I am not that open minded, so can you please not do it again? Second, I am old-fashioned, so please don’t do it again? While I was speaking, I felt a sadness in my heart that made me want to cry… then, as if driven by ghosts (coming out from my heart), I stood up from the sofa and knelt down like a crash of thunder on a sunny day (I knelt down with great force, like a fallen tree
wanting to conquer a mountain), I knelt down and looked at him ... and said repeatedly, I beg you in the name of an intellectual: first, can you please not do it again? Second, don’t do it again please? Third, I kneel down to beg you not to do it again, please? (FYS 5) 44

Rather than reprimanding Ruping and Li for their adultery, Yang Ke unexpectedly places himself in a position lower than Ruping and Li, as if he were the true sinner here. Moreover, the fact that he repeatedly begs Ruping and Li to redeem themselves seems to suggest that Yang is more frustrated by their lack of moral conscience as intellectuals than the fact that he has been cuckolded. Describing himself as “a fallen tree” that wishes to conquer “a mountain,” Yang is also suggesting that he, as one against many, lacks sufficient power to demand the sinners to do the right thing but can only beg and hope they will do so voluntarily. Such a metaphor is not only a critique of academic corruption in higher education institutions, but also a desperate cry for intellectuals to retrieve their moral consciences. Ironically, Yang Ke himself is the one responsible for depriving himself of his power of resistance, for to kneel down indicates a complete surrender to those whom he seeks to conquer, not to mention putting his self-esteem and stature as an intellectual completely in their hands as he begs them “in the name of an intellectual.” Yang Ke’s lack of courage to fight against corruption reminds us of the “self-castration” Yan mentions in his blog post, indicating the abdication of moral stature that makes Yang a moral cripple unable to do right by resisting wrong. Such an extreme portrayal of Yang Ke, I argue, is not only a critique of contemporary intellectuals’ weakness in reacting against social injustice, but also Yan’s critique of himself as a failed writer-intellectual through the symbolic “crippling” of his fictional self.

44 My translation. Note that the original is written without proper punctuation.
Regarding himself as a morally crippled intellectual, Yan Lianke appropriates female characters to serve his needs—both the need to be the savior and the need to be saved. Yan characterizes Lingzhen to be a saintly figure who embodies the virtues Yang Ke lacks—innocence, fidelity, courage, and filial responsibility. Not only does Lingzhen willingly fulfill the duty of a faithful wife even when Yang chooses to marry Ruping instead of her, including offering her virginity to Yang, she also purposefully marries someone who lives near Yang Ke’s old residence so that she can take care of Yang’s parents. As if her selfless devotion to Yang Ke is not enough, Yan Lianke also perfects Lingzhen’s image when we learn that she also fulfills her duty as a good wife to her husband and a good mother to her daughter. Such an “ideal” characterization of Lingzhen makes this character more “functional” than “real.” Portrayed as a saintly figure, Lingzhen turns into the ultimate object of desire Yang seeks to possess but can never obtain, the Lacanian “Other” that the subject demands but can never be satisfied.45

Similarly, Yang Ke visits the brothels to satisfy his needs to be a “savior” of the morally damned prostitutes by paying to buy their freedom, which is an act to compensate his guilt when he fails to save his colleagues and his students in Qingyan University. Yet the prostitutes, like the unrepentant Ruping and Vice President Li, find no fault in their “immoral behavior;” on the contrary, they perform their duty as prostitutes, that is, to fulfill the needs of their patron, mentally if not physically. Rather than leaving the brothels as Yang Ke pays them to do, the girls reenact a college classroom where Yang Ke is the professor giving a lecture on Shijing, and the girls, stripped naked, are college students in Yang’s class: “the colorful caps they put on makes them look like real college graduates” (FYS 166). He tries to save the damned souls of the young

45 Lacan compares the demand for the “Other” to the demand of the “mother” of a child, who is separated from the mother at the beginning of birth. Such a demand, then, is doomed to fail, which renders the “Other” a powerful entity that constantly poses as an object of desire that a subject demand but can never obtain. See Écrits: A Selection, p. 286.
prostitutes by introducing them to the love poems in *Shijing*, which are “a gift passed down by our ancestors, a road with 305 signs that can lead us back home, … in these poems we realize that only “love and affection” (*ai yu aiqing*) can bring comfort and solace, let us know what to fix and how to mend, and show us the home/origin of human beings” (*FYS* 162-163). The way Yang Ke describes *Shijing* makes him more like a preacher than a teacher, spreading the wisdom of *Shijing* where one can find solace and spiritual salvation. He even became the embodiment of *Shijing* when he inscribes the poems and signs his name on the prostitutes’ bodies. However, the fact that the lecture and the ritual are merely a performance to fulfill the request of Yang as a patron ironically renders Yang himself the only person in need of spiritual salvation. Instead of a preacher who holds the key to redemption, Yang is the lost soul constantly searching for “the road home.”

No surprisingly, Yang Ke’s attempt to find solace in women and his desire to seek salvation in *Shijing* both end in failure: the former ends with Lingzhen’s death and the latter ends with Yang Ke’s endless journey searching for a utopian *Shijing* site. I interpret this ending as a reflection of Yan Lianke’s repentance, as he symbolically punishes himself first by depriving Yang Ke’s self-esteem as an intellectual through Lingzhen’s death, and by casting Yang Ke into the Sisyphus Cycle to search for the lost *Shijing* site.

Lingzhen’s death can be interpreted as the death of Yang Ke’s moral integrity as an intellectual, as he lost the trust of the only person who has faith in him. When Lingzhen learns that Yang Ke lies to her about spending New Year’s Eve back in the capital, but in fact spent the night in the brothel, she commits suicide and dies before Yang Ke returns. The reason for Lingzhen’s death is rather peculiar, for it could not have been because of Yang’s visiting the brothel, given that Lingzhen has once paid a young prostitute to provide sexual service for Yang.
Moreover, if Yang’s betrayal of their engagement 20 years before has not resulted in her distress but rather makes her even more faithful to Yang, Lingzhen’s death should not be explained by way of her jealousy. The only factor left seems to be the fact that Yang lied to her about his whereabouts, which indicates that Lingzhen is more disappointed in Yang Ke being a dishonest person rather than he being an unfaithful lover.

The fact that Yang’s dishonesty is the definitive factor of Lingzhen’s death suggests that Lingzhen’s love and faith for Yang is dependent upon Yang fulfilling an image of a morally upright individual. Therefore, when Yang Ke’s fails to fulfill that image, Lingzhen’s love for Yang Ke also dies. Lingzhen’s death wish to have Yang Ke’s clothes buried with her body, however, seems to suggest the death of the “ideal Yang Ke,” a façade Yang Ke put on to maintain his moral stature. Yan Lianke further romanticized the symbolic union of Lingzhen and Yang Ke by alluding to the legend of “The Butterfly Lovers,” Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, when butterflies gather around Lingzhen’s grave. Yet as Yang witnesses the moral part of himself being carried away along with Lingzhen’s coffin: “Lingzhen and I are being carried away” (FYS 189), we also see Yang’s self-identity as a respectable intellectual gone with Lingzhen.

Lingzhen’s death is a significant turning point for Yang Ke, for the loss of his spiritual anchor has made Yang Ke even more vulnerable in maintaining his moral conscience, the lack of which also results in his committing moral and legal crimes. As a replacement for Lingzhen, Yang Ke develops an inappropriate desire for Lingzhen’s daughter, Xiaomin. Not only does he

46 The story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai is often regarded as the Chinese equivalent of Romeo and Juliet, for Liang and Zhu also died because their parents oppose their marriage. After they die, their spirits turn into butterflies and fly away from their shared grave. This is also a referent to Yan Lianke’s own experience in his hometown when he saw butterflies gathering around the grave of a relative. He uses that incident to illustrate the existence of unrealistic and unexplainable phenomenon. Another possible referent is the famous “Zhuang Zhou Dreams Being a Butterfly” episode in Zhuangzi, which highlights the blurred line between illusion and reality.
find Xiaomin physically attractive and plans to marry her, he also find no problem indulging in wild sex with a prostitute who looks like Xiaomin after he realizes that Xiaomin is engaged to marry carpenter Li: “As if I have lost something I shouldn’t have, something important, I went to Heaven Street and lived an indulgent, decadent, rotten life for two days so that I can get it back” (FYS 210). This “something” that is lost and that Yang seeks to get back, I argue, is Yang Ke’s ideal self that has gone with Lingzhen. And he seeks to retrieve it first by physically possessing Lingzhen’s substitute Xiaomin, and later a prostitute who look like Xiaomin after her engagement.

Yang Ke’s last struggle to retrieve his moral conscience as an intellectual is represented in the scene where he tries to murder carpenter Li on Xiaomin’s wedding night. In Yang’s eyes, carpenter Li and Xiaomin’s intercourse is another manifestation of Ruping’s affair with Vice President Li, manifested in his demand to carpenter Li: “Don’t ever think that intellectuals are easy to bully” (FYS 227). In his eyes, carpenter Li’s possession of Xiaomin is the destruction of Lingzhen, who represents the ideal image of Yang Ke as an intellectual. The destruction of Lingzhen, then, would mean another threat to Yang Ke’s intellectual identity, even if it is merely an illusion. The attack of carpenter Li is thus Yang’s final struggle to regain his lost moral value and his intellectual pride. Yet his belated “resistance” however turns him into a murderer of the innocent rather than a fighter of moral injustice.

As a fugitive, Yang seeks refuge in the ancient Shijing site, which he discovers by tracing the source of the carved stones given him by the villagers. The ancient Shijing site functions not only as a safe haven for Yang, but also as a religious site for spiritual cleansing and soul redemption, where intellectual exiles and outcast prostitutes gather to seek for a life with “freedom, equality, and respect.” (FYS 278). At first, the site seems to be a utopia where the
outcast forms a small community with primitive living style. However, it later turns into a
dystopia where each member draws lot to determine the sexual pairing and work distribution, for
a lottery seems to be the only way to ensure “equality” and “freedom” (*FYS* 280). The irony,
however, is that Yang’s manipulation of the results to have himself get the worst lot everyday,
which requires him to do all the chores and no sex, is itself a violation of the “equality” he
promises, despite that his intention is to sacrifice himself for the benefit of the others. Though the
lottery plan seems to work well as Yang describes it, the fact that Yang decides to leave for the
purpose of finding other lost *Shijing* poems seems to suggest that the current *Shijing* site is not
the “home” he has been searching for, and the ending in which Yang sets on another journey to
search for more lost poems seems to indicate dire prospects for Yang.

In fact, the ending of Yang’s story is already written in the conclusion of Yang Ke’s own
book *The Songs of Feng Ya*:

> The spiritual root of the Orient does not exist in the city or the country, nor in the
modern development we see happening everyday, rather, it exists in the
imperceptible memory of *Shijing* and the time that had disappeared in between the
lines. (*FYS* 258)

Here Yang Ke juxtaposes modern development with ancient mysteries, emphasizing that the
spiritual root of “Oriental” culture can only be found by returning to the ancient classics. This
comparison again reveals Yang’s resistance to the changes brought by modernization in recent
years, especially how it has negatively affected intellectuals’ spirituality and moral conscience.
However, the fact that the “spiritual roots” exist in the “imperceptible memory of *Shijing*” and
“the time that had disappeared inside the lines” also indicates the impossibility of finding those
roots. If Yang Ke’s journey is doomed to fail, which he should have known given the ending of
his book, then what is the meaning of searching?

I interpret Yang Ke’s moral downfall and his endless journey of searching for spiritual roots as the manifestation of Yan’s desire to redeem himself by symbolically punishing his fictional self. As Peter Brooks points out, “there is something inherently unstable and unreliable about the speech-act of confession, about its meaning and its motives. You may be confessing simultaneously to avoid punishment (to obtain absolution) and to assure punishment (to produce the scene of shame and guilt).”\(^47\) Thus, to read Yan Lianke’s confession on the level of narrative design, we can see how Yan produces the scene of shame and guilt by turning Yang Ke into a murderer, and later assures his own punishment by having Yang Ke suffer in the Sisyphus Cycle. However, by punishing his fictional self, Yan Lianke also seek to avoid punishment in the real world by uttering his repentance through the performative act of writing a confession.

Yan Lianke’s attempt to seek redemption is also revealed in his use of *Shijing* both in and outside the fictional world. While Yang Ke tries to absolve his sins through reading *Shijing* and searching for the ancient *Shijing* site, Yan Lianke uses *Shijing* to frame the novel, titling each chapter with a poem from *Shijing*, and begins each chapter with the designated poem. These poems work to contrast, complement, mock or reflect the content of that chapter, and thus render *Shijing* the “confessor,” who not only witnesses Yan’s confession (the novel) but also possesses the divine power to absolve his sins. In this sense, *Shijing* replaces Yan Lianke’s “self-censorship” to be the exerciser of the “disciplinary function” of confession, which indicates the power of literature in subverting political restraints. Unlike Yang Ke, who is denied absolution as he continues on an endless search for the lost *Shijing* site, Yan Lianke has completed his journey of redemption through the process of literary creation, where Yan Lianke is able to break free from self-censorship and reach the “inner reality” of the self.

\(^47\) Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, p. 23.
To conclude, *Feng Ya Song* is not simply another social realist novel that seeks to criticize academic corruption and intellectuals’ lack of moral conscience, but more importantly, it is an exploration of the “inner reality” of the writer himself, who exerts a glimpse of courage in reflecting on his sins, weaknesses, and desperation to seek for salvation, even when the prospect appears bleak. To uphold *Shijing* as the “Holy Scripture” for contemporary intellectuals in China moreover indicates Yan’s belief in the power of literature, which is the site where lost cultural values are preserved and where one can re-imagine a utopian future by resurrecting the ideal past. In a recent interview, Yan Lianke gave his views on Mo Yan, who had won the Nobel Prize in Literature the previous year: "I was very complimentary about Mo Yan's work, but as an author and intellectual I don't think he has done enough."

Though Yan Lianke did not specify what exactly Mo Yan should have done, in my view, the fact that Yan recognizes the incompleteness of Mo Yan’s work, as well as of the works of other contemporary writers including himself, has proved that Yan did one thing that many others have not, that is, to reflect honestly on his own moral flaws as a writer-intellectual in contemporary society. Yan Lianke’s *Feng Ya Song*, in which Yan exposed his own sins and weaknesses, is therefore an important witness of one author’s first step to reclaim his moral strength and regain his dignity as a writer-intellectual in contemporary society.

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Chapter 4: Rhizomatic Writing and Problematics of Taiwanese Identity in Wu He’s *Thinking of Abang Kadresengan*

“‘Interpreting life’ is not ‘life itself,’ compared to a constantly flowing life, static language would always be stranded.”–Wu He

As one of the most innovative writers in Taiwan, Wu He’s boldness in experimenting and challenging traditional forms of narrative has made his work especially difficult to read. One of the common experiences readers share when reading Wu He’s novels is a sense of rupture and incongruity. Not only does his use of language defy our regular usage of Chinese grammar, the unique form he implemented also problematizes our understanding of “fiction” as a genre. Wu He’s play with language and form, however, should not be regarded as merely a product of the postmodernist trend; rather, it reflects Wu He’s dissatisfaction with narrative conventions and the failure of language to represent fully the sophistication and subtlety of life as he observes it.

“Life” (*shengming* 生命) as a subject of inquiry, however, is never a philosophical quest for Wu He, but something that is always rooted in real life experience. As Wu He mentions in an interview, the “secular” (*sushi* 俗世) is what interests him the most, and the way he writes about the “secular” is to not only be an observant but always a participant. As a result, Wu He’s novels are mostly based on his personal experiences and therefore many regarded his work somewhat

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1 The title of the novel in Chinese original is *Sisuo Abang Kalusi* (思索阿邦・卡露斯), I translated it as *Thinking of Abang Kadresengan* and will use this title in this dissertation. *Kalusi* (卡露斯) is the name of a Rukai writer written in Chinese characters, *Auvini Kadresengan* is the name he uses when written in the Roman alphabet.

2 Because of the particular way Wu He plays with language, I will include the Chinese original for all quotations in footnotes. The original for this epigraph is: 「解讀生命」不是「生命本身」，相對河水一般流動的生命，靜態式的語言文字必然處處擱淺。 From Wu He, *Thinking of Abang Kadresengan*, p. 189-190.
autobiographical. Thinking of Abang Kadresengan, for example, is composed after Wu He left Haocha Village, a Rukai tribal village where he lived for three years. Wu He recorded his experience living with a photographer Abang and a Rukai writer Auvini Kadresengan, and observed the encounters between researchers, scholars, young Rukai activists, and local villagers. These observations lead to Wu He’s reflections on the social, political, and cultural conflicts among various ethnic groups in Taiwan, and further prompted Wu He to question the meaning of Taiwan, as well as the meaning of being a “writer” in Taiwan.

Though Wu He writes from personal experience, he chooses to write in the form of fiction despite the close resemblance of the fictional world to the real world. For example, Wu He regards Thinking as a novel despite the fact that he uses real names of the place and the people he met, and even inserts photographs of Abang and Kadresengan that made the novel looks like a reportage. Yet at the same time, we see characters such as “Miss Zhen,” whose identity is suspicious throughout the novel, which reminds us that the novel is in fact fictional. While many criticisms have focused on the content of the novel, as they try to determine Wu He’s political stance in the ethnic conflicts between Han Chinese and indigenous Taiwanese, few take into account the significance of the narrative form and its relation to the content, which, I argue, is an essential factor in interpreting this novel. In this chapter, I will discuss the significance of the narrative strategies Wu He incorporated to recount his experience in Haocha village, and argue that the ways in which Wu He frames the various aspects of cultural/ethnic/political conflicts between indigenous Taiwanese and Han Chinese can be

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3 For example, Wu He lived at Danshui for several years before writing the short story collection Wu He Danshui. Also, he spent sufficient time in the gay bars before writing Guier yu Ayao (Queer and Ayao). Thinking of Abang and Kadresengan is composed after he lived in Haocha village for three years.

4 Jin Hengbiao believes that Miss Zhen is another surrogate of Wu He in the novel, since her comments suggest that she knows the narrator’s thoughts (supposedly Wu He) very well. See Thinking, p. 3-5.
interpreted as a process of searching for the meaning of Taiwan and the meaning of being a writer in Taiwan.

4.1 The Lone Writer of Taiwan

Wu He, the pen name of Chen Guocheng, was born in 1951 in Chiayi County. His parents are both from Tainan and he received his education in Tainan Cheng-gong University. Therefore, he often regarded Tainan as his hometown. He started writing when he was in high school, and later published several short stories in school journals during college and graduate school, including “Peony Autumn” (Mudan qiu) and “A Thin Incense Stick” (Weixi de yixianxiang), both exhibit modernist approaches (existentialist quest, stream of consciousness) in expressing one’s psychological trauma and the trace of family history. As Wu He recounted in a recent interview, these early attempts in writing were still immature and it was not until early 1990s that he felt more confident in expressing the complexities of his ideas through writings.

Though Wu He’s early works during college have already won several awards, his eccentric writing style and provocative content were not particularly favorable to the taste of the relatively conventional critics at that time. His return to the literary stage 20 years later, however, had a great impact on Taiwanese literature as critics and scholars were amazed at the linguistic, narrative, ideological, and emotional intensity showed in his novels. Works produced during this period include; “Investigation: Narration,” which tackles the issue of traumatic narrative and historical representation; Yusheng (Remains of Life), a recount of the Wushe Incident mixing oral history, official history, first-hand documentation, and personal commentary to create a

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5 Wu He also had other pen names, Chen Jinghua 陳鏡花 and Chen Souyu 陳瘦渝 in his early stage of writing. He is best known as Wu He, which is used in his later, and more well-known writings published after the 90s.

6 “Mudan Autumn” is published in Chengda Youth (成大青年) in 1974 and “A Thin Incense Stick” in Qianwei Book Collection Volume 1 in 1978.
sense of “synchronicity”; *Thinking of Abang Kadresengan*, which recounted Wu’s short-term stay with the Rukai tribe where he contemplated the present life of the Rukai people and how it is entangled with their colonial past; *Queer and Ayao*, an investigation of queer culture and sexual desire.

Many have attempted to place Wu He in the literary field of the 80s and 90s. Zeng Yueqing in her study of Wu He’s fiction divides Wu He’s writing career into three stages: the practicing stage, during college in the 70s when he was still testing his writing skills; the experimental stage, during the 80s when he exiled himself in Danshui focusing on reading, social observation, and experiments with writing; his mature stage, during the 90s when he accumulated enough life experience and was able to release his artistic energy through creative narrative forms. Each stage not only reflected his different life experiences at the Danshui riverside (the Danshui period) or in the mountains (Haocha village), but is also very much in tune with the social changes in Taiwan, including the opposition movement in the 80s, the development of feminism and queer culture in late 80s early 90s, and the influence of postmodernist discourse in the late 90s.

Wu He’s close connection to the social and cultural development of Taiwan also prompt some critics to categorize him a “Taiwan” writer, as he continually showed earnest concern and poignant observation of the people and events happening on the Taiwan island. Ye Shitao sees Wu He as a “Taiwan writer born natural” for his writings showed familiarity with the historical changes of Taiwan and its local culture and customs. Yang Zhao thinks that Wu He best represented Taiwan for he was able to blend the two veins of Taiwan modern literature together—modernist and nativist discourses—with a flavor of fin-de-siècle desolation. Ye Haojin emphasized Wu He’s “heterogeneous narrative” composed by eccentric use of languages.
and unstable tone, which manifested the deformation, desolation, and decadence of Taiwan as a spiritually devoid society.\(^7\)

Wu He’s ability to reflect the diverse reality of Taiwan from various angles and different cultural/historical approaches is in fact the result of his constant switch between being a participant and an observer of the various social/cultural events in Taiwan. Therefore, rather than demonstrating the “influences” of these cultural trends, his writings carry a strong satirical tone that questions the limits of each cultural trend and political discourse. Being both an observer and a participant, who conducted “field work” (living in Danshui, Haocha village, queer bars and following democratic movements in the 70s and 80s) in an attempt to investigate the various cultural/historical aspects of Taiwan, Wu He was able to reach a significant depth in analyzing the various cultural phenomena in Taiwan, as we can see in his novels where readers can detect a strong authorial tone in the critical/satirical commentaries he inserted in the texts.

Wu He is often regarded as an “isolated” (gujuede 孤絕的) writer, who detaches himself from the literary circle as well as the culture center to conduct a self-exiled life in search for the meaning of life, which he later found in the act of writing. Therefore, Wu He’s works are mostly self-reflexive and autobiographical, as most of the protagonists in his stories share characteristics and life experiences with him. Zeng Yueqing identified four common traits shared by Wu and the narrator “I” in his works: both has a middle class background, both appear to be a loner detached of social relationship, both showed desire for sexual liberation and freedom of life, and exhibit nihilistic views.\(^8\)

Other than sharing the same background and the similar “loner” image, Wu’s portrayal of the protagonist’s psychological struggles further strengthens the tie between the author and his

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\(^7\) See Wang Der-wei’s forward to Wu He’s Yusheng entitled “Wu He the Bone Collector,” p. 8.

\(^8\) Zeng Yueqing, The Aesthetic of Wu He’s Fiction, p. 36.
protagonist. Zeng Yueqing points out that though the protagonist appears to be a renegade with a nihilistic view of life, he in fact “embodies high moral values and ideals inside.” She interprets the psychological crisis of Wu’s protagonist as the conflict between the “id” and the “super ego” in the Freudian sense. While the “super ego” seeks to conform to the social order and moral principles represented by the “father,” the “id” seeks to disrupt the symbolic order and return to the primitive self following its basic desires and libidinal force. Though Zeng’s psychoanalytical approach provides a plausible explanation for the psychological struggles of the protagonist, it seems to equate the protagonist’s inner “moral values” and “ideals” with social order and moral conventions by applying Freud’s model. This approach, in my view, is a misreading of Wu since rather than struggling to conform/behave according to the traditional “moral values,” the protagonist is in fact questioning the existing social order and moral principles while yearning for a new and “higher” moral value. In this sense, Wu He’s works should not be read as “nihilistic,” for he is not simply dismissing any attempt to pursuit value as meaningless, rather, he is constantly probing the limits of current discourses and traditional moral values in order to search for a new and higher moral values.

This act of “searching,” I argue, is what constitutes Thinking of Abang Kadresengan, a text in which Wu He recounts his experiences living in the Rukai tribal village. The genre of the text is difficult to categorize. On the one hand, it reads like a nonfictional prose or a reportage, in which Wu He talks about real people and real events in real settings. The pictures inserted in the text also connected the people in the text to the real world, which made it more “real” than fictional. On the other hand, we detect many fictional elements in the text, such as the discussion of “Wu He” the writer and the mysterious character Miss Zhen. Moreover, Wu He personally

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9 ibid., 47.  
10 ibid., 47-58.
designated this piece fiction (*xiaoshuo*), as fiction allows more space for him to write creatively. In an interview, Wu He mentioned that the writing of *Thinking* came about some time after he left Haocha village, when he “felt something inside him that he had to let out.” His first attempt to “write it out” was a failure, for he was not able to find an appropriate narrative and linguistic form. Later, he incorporates the use of parenthesis, which successfully assisted his thought flow as it went completely deviant, with infinite parentheses inside parentheses. As a result, the text appears to be an assemblage of random thoughts cluttered inside several chapters; each of the chapters carries a theme but has no direct/logical relation to the next.

It is not surprising that *Thinking* appears to be a challenging text even for sophisticated readers, for it defies every literary convention one can think of. First, it is generically questionable given its hybrid nature—part-fictional, part-autobiographical, part-reportage. Second, it is linguistically challenging when Wu He alters the order of words or twists the meaning of certain phrases to create double/paradoxical meanings in one sentence. Third, the infinite repetition of parentheses within parentheses that constantly lead the reader’s thought away from previous discussions and defies readers’ ability to follow plotlines.

Despite these reading challenges, readers seem to agree on a common theme of the novel, that is, the conflict of Han Chinese and Taiwan aborigines, the former represented by the “I” narrator (presumably Wu He) and “Miss Zhen” (a character in the story), and the latter represented by Abang the photographer and Kadresengan, a Rukai writer. And many critical readings have focused on positioning the political stance of Wu He and determining his perspective in writing.

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11 From a talk Wu He gave in Cheng-gong University. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Z2ZVzKIBJg
Yang Zhao for example suggests that *Thinking* reflected the “local modernism” trend of 90s—on the one hand, Wu He criticizes the “nativist” trend in Taiwan for its Han-centric view; on the other hand, he fails to embrace aborigine culture completely given his often satirical/skeptical tone towards the cultural preservation movements in the aborigine tribes. Lin Liru also applauded Wu He for criticizing the Han-centrism in localist discourses, and even goes so far to argue that Wu is standing “on the side of the aborigines.”

Contrary to Lin, Yan Junxiong argues that Wu He approaches the aborigine culture with a sense of “Han original sin,” and he seeks to find redemption through the writing of an ethnic documentary about the Rukai. Similar to Yan, Peng Ruijin thinks that Wu He’s ability to transcend Han-culture centrum during his encounter with the aborigines is a manifestation of the “localist view” (*bentu guan*) of Taiwan, which emphasizes the bond between the local residents and the land, and hence renders early Chinese immigrants and mountain aborigines more “locally bond” than later immigrants such as mainlanders and foreign workers from Southeast Asia. Ke Pinwen, on the other hand, thinks that Wu He is not writing from either the aborigine’s nor the Han Taiwanese perspective; but rather writes from a more “objective” and “convincing” angle. Ke argues that Wu He plays the role of the “liaison” between Han Taiwanese and aborigines, using a “purely neutral perspective” to depict the everyday life of Rukai people.

The above readings of *Thinking*, despite their different views, all attempt to pin down Wu He’s political stance in between Han Taiwanese or aborigine by analyzing the relationship between Wu He, Abang, and Kadresengan. Yet this approach, I argue, falls right into the trap Wu He seeks to avoid, that is, to speak from a single position, whether it is from the Han

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13 Yan Yunxiong, “Guiquba! Wode xiangchou—Wu He Sisuo Abang Karusi de wenben jiedu.”
14 Ke Pinwen, “Han minzu zuo jia yi xiaoshuo shuxie yuanzhumin zuchun celue de chutan—yi Wu He de Sisuo Abang Kalusi danpian xiaoshuo weli.”
Taiwanese or the aborigines. In my view, to try to determine Wu He’s “identity” or “narrative point of view” is an approach that is doomed to fail; rather, I argue that Wu He has presented in this text an assemblage of critical views from multiple perspectives that defies any attempt to be pinned down as one. While Zheng Liqing interprets the juxtaposition of multiple voices as what Bakhtin calls “carnivalesque” writing, I argue that such an interpretation fails to capture the mobility of the main narrative, which goes in multiple and random directions simultaneously as manifested in Wu He’s use of parentheses and his creative twists of the language. The movement of the main narrative is a representation of Wu He’s thinking process, which is the main drive that constitutes the formation of the text. Thus, rather than joining the debate about where Wu He stands in his view of Abang, Kadresengan or the aborigines as a whole, I wish to approach the text by looking at the “thinking” process, the movement of which I argue resembles a “rhizome” theorized by Deleuze and Guattari.

4.2 Thinking of Oneself as a Writer and Searching for “Taiwan”

In “Hardcore Writing and the Heterotopia of National Language,” Yang Kailin gives readers a thorough reading of Wu He’s works using theoretical concepts borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari. Yang argues that the language play manifested in *Thinking* does not lie in the alteration or distortion of words, but lies in the “stream of words” that equals the “thinking” process. He recognizes how the flow of narrative is constantly being disrupted, distracted, and redirected by various insertions, especially the abundant use of parentheses that grow on each other and eventually become a strong destructive force constantly violating the flow of the main narrative. Consider the following example:

(The famous saying of Miss Zhen: Though Abang has the quality of a lamb, that

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15 Yang Kai-lin, “Yingrui shuxie yu guoyu yituobang—Taiwan xiao wenxue de Wu He nanti.”
is why everyone wants to guide him, it is hard to say who takes the lead after walking with him for a while. (The famous saying of Kadresengan: Abang is “A person who doesn’t speak,” but actually speaks a lot. (The famous saying of Abang: I don’t know what is, but, what it is I do know.) Kadresengan won “Abang’s trust for Mr. Kadresengan” when he led Abang through the trip to Baruguan the second time. As an experienced guide for mountaineering, Abang followed with his legs trembling while Kadresengan clears the path when there aren’t any, (later Abang mentioned his “trembling legs” several times, while Kadresengan responded with a smile, Abang said he couldn’t believe it too, neither do Miss Zhen believe that Abang who walks around all the time would actually have trembling legs, I don’t have any comments on that since I have seen other kinds of “trembling legs.”) (26-27)

The “sayings” (名言) contained inside the parentheses, Yang points out, are inserted into the main narrative not for the purpose of facilitating the main narrative, but appear much stronger, like Nietzschean aphorisms that dissect the flow of main narrative and redirect it towards other ends. The use of parentheses here not only changed the nature of the narrative flow, which is no longer the “stream of words” but a “labyrinth” of sentences connected by nodes of disruptive parentheses. These random and rampant disruptions add more layers to the narrative, turning the

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16 The original quote: (貞小姐名言：阿邦具有天生羔羊的品質，難怪人人都想帶領他，其實同走一段路後就不曉得誰帶領誰。（卡露斯名言：阿邦是「不說話的人」，可能說得最多。（阿邦名言：我不知道什麼，但，是什麼我知道。）卡露斯帶阿邦第二度巴魯冠之行，贏得「阿邦對卡露斯先生的信任」。曾有高山嚮導資歷的阿邦，見卡露斯在前沒路開路，而他跟後走到兩腿發抖，（後來阿邦多次提到這「兩腿發抖」，卡露斯只是微笑，阿邦說他自己當時都不相信，貞小姐也不相信阿邦那樣一天到晚馬不停蹄的腿會走到發抖，我沒有意見但我看過另一種「兩腿發抖」。） See Thinking, p. 26-27. The English quoted above is my translation, and the following quotation in English are also my translation.
two dimensional narrative into three dimensional narrative, or what Deleuze calls “a thousand plateaus.” These “plateaus” are dialogic spaces juxtaposed simultaneously inside the pages, and it is within these spaces, argues Yang, that the “thinking” emerges. This “thinking” process, as Yang sees it, is not a philosophical or anthropological quest, nor is it a logical, truth-determining process. Rather, it is a contemplation that remains on the level of language, as we see multiple layers of words rushing and swarming onto the paper constantly. Meaning, then, is not contained in the words but in the intersection of multiple flows of sentences, a cartographical representation of the thinking process (Yang 10-11).

Though Yang’s Deleuzian reading of Wu He’s “narrative flow” in Thinking is well-analyzed and fairly convincing, I find his conclusion somewhat nihilistic, for he seems to overemphasize the aspect of narrative innovation and the linguistic play, and thus renders the meaning of the text purely aesthetic. While I agree with Yang that the “thinking” process Wu He presents is not a logical or “truth-determining” process, I wonder if Wu is simply writing for the sake of writing (or thinking for the sake of thinking) without a higher purpose such as an ontological or philosophical quest, especially considering Wu He’s use of “sisuo” (思索), which indicates both “thinking” and “searching.” Thus, in my view, the “meaning” of the text is not contained in the intersection of multiple flows of sentences as Yang suggests, but lies in the inner drive that causes the flow of thoughts and formation of sentences and words, as Wu He states in Yusheng:

“Thinking” has its inner power. While intuition is a natural instinct that later accumulates and strengthens, thinking is an instinct that comes later, with the same accumulation and strength. It could change because of external factors, but it will never end, even when the object of thinking has no meaning or value, not
until its inner power abated that ‘thinking’ reaches an end…”\(^{17}\)

In this passage Wu He points to the “inner power” of thinking, which is what motivates him to write. And this inner drive, born out of nature, has neither purpose nor an end, and comes and goes without subjecting to one’s control. This illustration of “thinking” corresponds to Wu He’s process of writing Thinking, for it is when he “felt something inside that he had to let out” that he started to write about his experience in Haocha village.\(^{18}\) If “thinking” has an inner drive, what is the drive behind Wu He’s writing of Thinking of Abang Kadresengan?

One way of approaching the “inner drive” is to examine the nodes of connections that constitute the rhizomatic map of thinking. Considering the opening paragraph:

“In a late evening like this, I met Abang and Kadresengan for the first time in the mountain village Dawu, approximately two hours away from Wutai highway. Following the guide who also came to conduct studies on indigenous culture, I introduce Abang as: a maverick “photographer,” who recently fell in love with Rukai. (Since the Marxist-Leninist collaboration during the second half of 19\(^{th}\) century that made “proletariat” the voters of society, intellectuals with a moral conscience and writers all felt guilty to the extent: “I never stopped writing, now I write with hoe” “writing is a type of labor” “I’m a literati farmer lying in a pool of blood” etc. etc. (Similarly I would never dare to identify myself as a “writer” who sits at home all day; if necessary, I’ll introduce myself as a “language

\(^{17}\) The original quote: 「思索」有它內在的力量，直覺是與生俱來的本能之後是一種積累、一種強度，思索是稍稍遲來的本能之後同樣是一種積累、一種強韌，它可能因外在的因素而修正，但不會止歇，甚至思索對象的一無意義和了無價值也無礙於思索，只有它內在的動力熄火之時「思索」才到了終結[…]. See Yusheng, p.212.

\(^{18}\) See footnote 8.
The novel begins with conventional narrative as readers are introduced the time (late evening), the place (Dawu mountain), and the main characters (I, Abang, Kadresengan). Yet starting from the third sentence, there is a shift to a long reflection on the change of writer’s social status and it’s impact on the meaning of “writer,” which also prompts the narrator’s self-identification as a “language worker,” as opposed to a “writer.” Here we can see that parenthesis has a dual function—it is at the same time interrupting the previous narrative line (in meaning) yet at the same time connecting the two (in form). Also, if we look closely for the “nodes of connections” that prompt the narrator to another line of thought, we may get closer to the inner drive that is directing the movement of the narrative.

The first node of connection in this passage is Abang, which connects the first and second sentence. Between the second and third, it is the term “photographer” (sheyingjia 撮影家). The word “jia” (家) in the original prompts the narrator’s reflection on “writer” (zuojia 作家) for the two shares the same word. “Jia” is used to refer to a person who is a master of a certain profession. Therefore, “zuojia,” though commonly used to refer to a writer or an author, still connotes the elite status of the writer. This connotation generates another parenthetical statement in which the narrator reflects on himself as a writer and seeks to brush off the “elitist” sense of the word by declaring that he is never a “writer” but has always been a “language worker.” These nodes of connections (Abang—photographer—writer—Wu He), right from the beginning of the

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19 The original reads: 我在同一個深夜，在離霧台公路兩小時車程的深山部落大武，初見阿邦和卡露斯先生。我跟著同來研究山地文化的領隊介紹阿邦是：單打獨鬥的「攝影家」，最近不知為什麼迷上魯凱。（自從十九世紀後半葉馬列合作成功「工農」兩個階級成為社會的選民後，有良心的知識份子乃至搖筆桿的人都愧疚到：「我一直沒有停筆，現在我用鉛頭寫詩」「寫作也是一種勞動」「倒在血泊的筆耕者」等等，等等。（比如我絕不敢自稱是當時坐在家裏的「作家」，必要時我自介是個「文字工作者」。）。 Thinking, p. 11.
novel, have already provided us clues that lead us to the main subjects of inquiry that are driving the thoughts of the narrator throughout the novel—the meaning of being a writer/photographer, the limit of artistic representation (visual/textual), and the problematic conceptualization of “culture” and “identity.” And this opening passage, in which we see the narrative jumping from one narrative context to another, demonstrated a map of Wu He’s thinking process, in which Wu He contemplates the meaning of writing and his role as a writer.

The narrative movement of this is novel can also be understood as a process of constructing the self. This is evident if we trace the meaning of the first-person pronoun “I.” Let’s take the same paragraph as an example:

“In a late evening like this, I met Abang and Kadresengan for the first time in the mountain village Dawu, approximately two hours away from Wutai highway. Following the guide who also came to conduct studies on indigenous culture, I introduce Abang as: a maverick “photographer,” who recently fell in love with Rukai. (Since the Marxist-Leninist collaboration during the second half of 19th century that made “proletariat” the voters of society, intellectuals with a moral conscience and writers all felt guilty to the extent: “I never stopped writing, now I write with hoe” “writing is a type of labor” “I’m a literati farmer lying in a pool of blood” etc. etc. (Similarly I would never dare to identify myself as a “writer” who sits at home all day; if necessary, I’ll introduce myself as a “language worker.”)).”

Here we can see each of the four “I” (underlined) indicates a different subject in time. In the first sentence, the “I” refers to Wu He in the past meeting Abang and Kadresengan for the first time.

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20 Thinking, p. 11. I marked the underline for the purpose of illustration. The original can be found in earlier footnotes if needed for reference.
In the second sentence, however, Wu He uses an ambiguous sentence structure to indicate that the “I” is both the written object in the past, and the writing subject in the present time, as the “I” indicates both the “I” in the past following the guide to the mountain, being introduced to Abang, and the “I” in the present time introducing Abang to readers the way the guide had introduced Abang to him. When we get to the last sentence, the “I” expressed his self-identification as a “language worker” and not a “writer.” This sentence is also ambiguous in that one interpret its meaning in two ways: that the narrator sees himself as a writer but dare not to identify himself as one due to its political implications; or that the narrator find “language worker” a more suitable term to describe himself (however reluctantly) than “writer” as the term “writer” carries too much political burdens. Either way, the “I” in this sentence is neither referring to a person acting in the present nor a person acting in the past, but an “I” who is acting out of one’s will (to identify or not identify with a group), which makes this “I” capable of enduring the change of time.

This movement of the first-person pronoun in time, in my view, is similar to the process of constructing a narrative identity as theorized. In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur theorizes that identity construction process as a dialogue between the self as the writing subject and the self as a written object. It is a mixture of historical and fictional elements, which are weaved together to constitute a unity of the story, or what he calls a “discordant concordance.” More importantly, the process involves what he calls “self-attestation,” that is, a conviction or a confidence that the self, no matter how it changes in time (or how it appears differently in different narrative identity constructions), can always be attributed to the “same” or “permanent” characteristics that the self believes it embodies.\(^{21}\)

\(^{21}\) Ricoeur talks about “discordant concordance” in *Time and Narrative*, and “self-attestation” is introduced in *Oneself as Another*. 
From the movement of first-person pronoun in the opening passage of *Thinking*, we can see that Wu He creates a dialogue between the “I” as a written object and “I” as a writing subject from the first and second sentence. Moreover, he ties together discordant elements—the self in different time frame and shifting contexts—to form a unity of the story of the self. The involvement of self-attestation is also demonstrated through the first-person narrator’s ability to revaluate one’s role and position oneself in society despite the change of time and the change of meaning (“writer”).

Taking into consideration the representation of the “thinking” process, which surrounds the questions of “limitations of artistic representation,” “the meaning of being a writer” and “the problematic conceptualization of culture and identity,” the novel as a whole seems to be less an objective observation of Abang and Kadresengan as Ruaki photographer and writer, but more about Wu He’s self-identity as a writer in Taiwan. Yet rather than forming a coherent image of oneself as a writer, Wu He instead puts these subjects of inquiry, that is, the “self,” the “writer,” and “Taiwan,” constantly under questioning. Therefore, what we see in the text is not a unified image of Wu He as a writer, but a “rhizomatic cartography” on which we see lines of thoughts that has no beginning nor end, but is in one way or the other related to Wu He’s inquiry on one’s self-identity as a writer in Taiwan. That is to say, what Wu He presents in the novel is an identity construction that is on-going and remains incomplete. But what forbids Wu He to complete a formation of a self-identity and come to a unified sense of self? We might have some clues if we examine Wu He’s relationship with two other major characters in the novel—Abang and Kadresengan.

Wu He’s critical reflection on his role as a writer is closely tied to the two main characters in the novel—Abang and Kadresengan, especially in terms of how they carry out their
mission to “preserve Rukai culture.” In one chapter, for example, Wu He makes a critical inquiry into the act of photographing. He first point out how Abang’s act of taking pictures can be considered an “invasive act” when one of the Rukai hunters said to when he sees Abang’s camera: “What are you hunting?” From this incident, he further reflects on the various types of “photographers” and their particular “philosophies” of capturing images:

… The field culture researcher Mr. Wang from Kaohsiung said: “The camera lens we see outside is merely an extension of a hidden interiority”…This person gave nature the power to decide whether his camera lens should “extend” or not, including the “decisive moment” to press the shutter, he also rely on the almighty nature, so humble to an extent that he has no “self-extension” at all.22

… The photographer-journalist from academia…he has to deliberate extensively before he presses the shutter … to conduct an investigation of his thoughts, a “self-tracking—a dialogue with himself,” then he will track physically the objectives he wishes to shoot, and this “tracking” process, after he presses the shutter, has to continue until it could reach an interpretation of the image as a whole.23

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22 The original quote: 「高雄的田野文化工作者王君：『外在可見的鏡頭只是內在那不見的延伸』…這人是自然替他決定鏡頭的可不可伸出去，包括按快門的「決定性瞬間」都包給無所不能的大自然，如此謙讓到毫無『自我伸縮性』。」 See Thinking, p. 44-45

23 The original quote: 「學院氣派的田野攝影報導工作者…按快門前他必要思前想後…作一番思想的『自我跟蹤一自問自答』，然後針對拍攝的對象作實質的跟蹤，按下快門之後這『跟蹤』的動作必須持續到可以詮釋一張影像的完整性。」 See Thinking, p. 45-46.
... The master-professor with a prestigious degree in photography from the United States ... now that he stepped on the land of the tribe, he knew immediately that the most difficult task for others is how to “position oneself,” and he easily found his position of this task: he positioned himself as a “mediator” and therefore his shots are neutral, the act of photographing is itself a “mediation,” he has no guilt of “intruding others with his camera,” and felt no harm when someone intrude his shooting process, as he would move his camera smoothly to avoid the interruption.²⁴

Here Wu He recognizes the important role of the photographer in the process of representation. For Mr. Wang, who let “nature” take control of the shooting moment indicates a complete denial of the photographer’s authorial control, which Wu He regards “too humble” that one lacks the capability of “self-extension.” The satiric tone indicates Wu He’s critique against the reluctance of photographer to take responsibility of his act by reducing of photographer’s authorial role into a medium of nature. The “photographer-journalist from academia,” on the contrary, recognize photographers’ responsibility to conduct sufficient “self-questioning” and “object stalking/observation,” since his goal is to capture a “complete” representation of the object rather than parts of a whole. Such a philosophy is closer to Abang’s, who also stalks his subjects to take pictures. Yet Wu He’s comment—“the thought of ‘having completeness achieve its own completeness’ is in itself a completeness rarely seen” (47)—seems to mock the idea of achieving “completeness” while taking a picture, for in Wu He’s view, each photograph is already

²⁴ The original quote: 留美專攻攝影爵士學位的教授名家…目今他腳踏部落土地，很快他知道對別人來說最難纏的是「定位自己」的問題，而這個問題他輕易就找到了位置：他定位自己是「溝通者」的角色，因此他的鏡頭是純中立的，攝影這個動作本身是「中介性」的，他既沒有「鏡頭侵犯」的罪惡感，即使友人侵犯到他的鏡頭他巧妙避開內心也不覺得受傷，—因為他已定好位。See Thinking, p. 47-48.
“complete” at the moment it is taken. What make the photograph “incomplete” is the various interpretations it carries through time.\textsuperscript{25} Compared to the previous two types, Wu’s discussion of the “master-professor with a prestigious degree in photography from the United States,” is even more sarcastic. The professor, who “stands on the highest level,” claims that “all these problems are no longer a problem,” for he has figured out that the key struggle for a photographer is to know one’s “position,” which he easily found for himself—a “communicator” or a “mediator” whose perspective is always “neutral.” Other than critiquing the elitist attitude of the professor, who belongs to those “local artists who went abroad to register into ‘master’s workshop’ [prestigious universities abroad] in the 80s,”\textsuperscript{26} Wu He also criticizes that the professor’s actual “position” is an “academic-aristocrat” (\textit{xueyuan guizu qipai} 學院貴族氣派) who already placed himself on a high status and therefore would not feel guilty of intruding others with his camera.\textsuperscript{27}

Wu He’s critiques on the role of photographer and his thoughts on photographic representation of “truth” is rather a part of the larger contemplation on the role of the “author” and their “life mission” of conducting artistic representations, especially when it involves political movement such as “aborigines cultural reconstructions” that Abang and Kadresengan involved in. In another chapter, Wu He reflects on the life mission of Abang and Kadresengan to conduct visual and textual documentation of Rukai tribe, and questions to what extent the root-seeking movement is part of the postcolonial discourse popular in the 90s, which will also fade

\textsuperscript{25} The original quote: 「影像具有一種確定性，相當於實像的存證，「你無法否定它存在過，——要怎麼解釋，就看你們大家。」它的意義再於它可以包容時代的歧義性，歷時光而永久保鮮。\textit{See Thinking}, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{26} The original quote: 「八○年代以來，土生土長的藝術家紛紛遠渡海去「名家工作坊」註冊冊，二、三個月後拿到一張修業證書回家，就可以在資歷欄上加一條這個那個——台灣人就吃這套，不過也不能全怪台灣人，真的你說奇怪不奇怪過海镀金回來後每次拉屎都帶有一股金銅氣味，如是闊久之後自然她就想吃「鈀金大餐」了。」\textit{See Thinking}, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{27} The original quote: 「他天生的職責就是維持他的貴族氣派...因是無論「良心上」或「實質上」的問題對他而言都不是問題。」\textit{See Thinking}, p. 47.
in time like all other “movements.” He first analyzes Abang’s sense of “life mission” to document Rukai tribe, which develops in two directions:

Abang’s “mission” is developed into two directions; one is “following,” another is “root-seeking”: to follow is of course to keep up with the latest of the time, he studied diligently information related to Rukai indigenous, especially those in Haocha Village … his notes accumulated like his films … he will attend as many as possible the root-seeking events, and he went to the remnants at Gucha Buan several times with the Haocha villagers, as a way to “return, reaffirm, and revival,” when he saw a thirty-year-old young Rukai frustration as he failed to find his old house, Abang cried with him.28

Here Abang, who is a Han Chinese, acts as if he is a Rukai ethnic when he joined the young Rukai’s root-seeking journey and shares the “sorrow” of the lost “home.” Though Kadresengan is touched by Abang’s sincerity in devoting himself to the “return, reaffirm, and revival of Rukai culture” movement and hence called him a “half-blooded Rukai,”29 Wu He points out that Abang’s devotion is partly the result of the larger postcolonial discourses, and the “cultural revival” movement at large is in fact a result of the dialects between “root-seeking” and “trend following.”30

28 The original quote: 「阿邦的「使命化」動作朝兩線發展，一是「跟進」，二是「尋根」：跟進當然是為了跟上時代的鮮度，他勤讀有關原住民族在魯凱尤其好茶的資訊…筆記文字如膠卷底片愈積愈多…尋根活動他已是可能與會的，他幾度與好茶人一起「再回歸、再肯定、再出發」中同上古茶布安，當他看到一位三十左右的青年魯凱惶惶在馬櫻丹中找不到昔日的家屋而哭時，阿邦也跟著哭找不到。」See Thinking, p. 84.
29 The original quote: 「卡露斯先生感動阿邦這種情不自禁、情動於中的哭，肯定他的血液至少已同化成為半個魯凱人。」 See Thinking, p. 84.
30 The original quote: 「我小聲告訴阿邦：「尋根」與「跟進」其實是一體兩面，同屬運動中的辯證發展。」 See Thinking, p. 86.
The inevitable attachment of the cultural revival movement to the larger cultural trend is what troubles Wu He, for political movements as such are always temporal and strategic, compared to “written works” that can survive the passing of time (Thinking 89). Thus, he points out the conflict between participating in “campaign” and “writing,” which Kadresengan finds himself trapped in:

Kadresengan’s biggest dilemma is: The “movement” led by Chief Sha Le trapped him in Gucha Buan. In order to avoid visitors who came up the mountains from the plain … Kadresengan left his home at Haocha and became a hermit in a stone house among the remnants of Gucha Buan … Like what happened recently, before he barely started on his project of writing the biography of “The best Sculptor in Haocha—Li Da Gu,” he was called back to Haocha village to contribute to the “movement” led by people from the plain. “If I don’t go back, I’ll feel bad” … he is not “a personal who write occasionally at leisure,” every time he closes his eyes he will see Rukai ancestors looking at him with expectations.”

Compared to Abang, Kadresengan’s mission to write about Rukai is not simply a personal interest nor a part of the root-seeking trend, but a responsibility to preserve the culture and history of Rukai through his writing, a duty he owes to his ancestors as he inherited his uncle’s job as a “shiguan” (史官, historiographer) of Rukai. Yet he finds his mission to write conflicted with the larger “cultural movement” led by Chief Sha Le, not only because these political

31The original quote: 「對卡露斯先生最大的困擾是：沙勒君所領導的「運動」令他無所逃於古茶布安。為了逃避不時來訪清談的平地朋友…卡露斯捨棄了好茶居厝，退隱到古茶布安廢墟中的小石板屋…像最近他預計寫「好茶第一雕刻師力大古」的生平評傳，梧桐樹下的座椅還沒坐熱，就被山下的「運動」召喚了回去。「不回去參加，心理不安」…他不是一個「偶爾寫點東西的閒人」，他閉起眼睛來都會面對整個魯凱祖靈殷殷期盼的眼神。」See Thinking, p. 87.
campaigns become a distraction, but also because of the fact that Chief Sha Le has a different idea of the “home-returning” movement than he does: while Kadresengan thinks that “home-return” means to return to the traditional way of living, Chief Sha Le thinks that it is more about finding in tradition “meaningful, effective, and recyclable resources to make a mixed bomb of ‘modern plus tradition’ as a way to resist the exploitative and unjust system.” Thus, despite his disinterest in the “political” aspect of the “home-returning” movement, Kadresengan feels compelled to join the meetings to voice the expectations of the Rukai ancestors.

Wu He’s thoughts on Abang and Kadresengan’s “life mission” to preserve and document Rukai’s cultural tradition also lead to his self-reflection as a writer:

( … Miss Zhen sees it through immediately: Abang’s mission to photograph “professional Rukai” comes from Kadresengan’s “devotion to the entire Rukai culture.” Yet I am merely a person who writes occasionally at leisure, though I regard myself writing on the basis of real life, but Miss Zhen exposed me with her poignant comment, that most of my writings are “imagined garbage.”) Compared to Abang and Kadresengan, who photograph and write to fulfill a life purpose, Wu considers himself “a person who sometimes write but mostly does nothing,” and whose writings are mostly “imagined garbage.” Such a critique of himself being a “writer without a mission” reflects Wu He’s confusion about being a writer—on the one hand, he rejects writing for a specific “mission” or “higher purpose,” which requires one to determine one’s political stance,

32 The original quote: 「社長沙勒君訓誡來者回歸不是要真正回到傳統去，而是要在傳統中找到有意義的、有效益的、可資源再利用的資源，作為向壓榨的、不公平的體制發動反擊的「現代＋傳統」混合彈藥。⋯卡露斯淡淡說：「回歸」是要真正回到傳統、活出傳統。」 See Thinking, p. 85-86.
33 The original quote: （⋯貞小姐很快的看出：阿邦「專業魯凱」的影像使命感來自卡露斯「對整個族群文化的使命感」。而我則是偶爾寫點東西的閒人，雖然自己說是從現實出發，但貞小姐一語道破，大部分是「想像的垃圾」。） See Thinking, p. 86-88.
which will limit one’s perspective; on the other hand, he feels guilty to write without a higher purpose, which reduces the value of his literary works into nothing more than “imagined garbage.”

Wu’s resistance to take on a “mission” of writing derives from his frustration with the opposition movement of the 80s, where ideals were sacrificed in the struggle to obtain political power:

My scholar-PhD Candidate friends said that “writing” is an “act of escaping” the “movement” currently going on, which will decide the fate of the indigenous people. … I told Kadresengan earnestly that “movement” is always “temporary” … the importance of “written work” can not be easily replaced by any “movement.” Miss Zhen criticized my words as being too peremptory, some sentence structures and diction are similar to the scream we hear in the motivational speeches in political campaigns, … I emulate Miss Zhen’s habit of three-minute self-reflection, so I held a “self-criticism” session and said: maybe it’s because I have been through the ten years of “nonparty” movements, and have witnessed all kinds of political struggle and anti-struggle, when one tree is about to fall because of the storm it begs you to kick it so to get it done but at the same time you sympathize with it and bend another tree to hold it up the same with people when one is reactionary to the point of believing oneself as the absolutely right you wish you could kill his entire family but you wouldn’t dare to kill a dog not to mention a family you might as well kill yourself so you won’t kill him but how could you kill yourself if you are not alone but have family so in the end you still killed his entire family but this is not possible since not even a dog not to
mention the family or you could get a dog first and see if you can kill it ….

*(Thinking 89)*

Here Wu He clearly opposes the scholar’s critique that writers write to avoid political engagement; on the contrary, he regards political movements as merely “temporary” solutions to one aspect of oppression that often end up with another form of oppression. His reflection upon the “dangwai” (non-Party) movement, as we see in the second half of this passage, seems to be a intensive and emotional process, manifested in the lack of punctuation and the violent language he uses to describe his attitude (killing others and killing the self). As Wu He followed closely the development of the “dangwai” social movements, which began with a high moral purpose of resisting totalitarian rule and advocating for “democracy, freedom, and equality” as the central values, Wu also witnessed the class and gender conflict within the opposition Democratic Progressive Party that revealed the hypocrisy of certain party members. In “The Death of a Politician-Artist” for example, he illuminates the negative aspects of the seemingly glorious opposition movement through the investigation of the death of a “politician/artist”—the “self-sanctification” of the opposition party, the dramatization of the political campaign and the moral impact on people as DPP leaders obtain political power. Therefore, as a writer, Wu finds it necessary to resist the “political resistance” in order to maintain a clear mind. Yet such a

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34 The original quote: 學者準博士一類的朋友說「寫作」對現今攸關原住民命運的「運動」是一種「逃違的動作」…我前心告訴卡露斯先生：「運動」永遠具有「暫時性」…這「文字工作」的重要性不是任何現時的「運動」可以取代的。貞小姐批判我這段「說法」過於霸道，其中的用辭與語句結構跟「運動諭台」上的嘶吼差不多，…我學貞小姐凡事閉目自省三分鐘，然後「自我檢討」說：也許我是從「黨外」十年運動中走過來的，耳濡目染了鬥爭和反鬥爭的各種花樣，一棵大樹快要被暴風吹倒—時恨不得你踢它一腳倒了它也罷同時你不忍心快快拔倒旁邊一棵大樹支撐它同樣的一個人造反對自認為非常有理的地步你恨不得殺死他全家但你不忍心殺死一條狗何况他全家你恨不得殺死你自己為了避免殺死他但你怎麼能殺死你自己你不單單你自己你還有你全家最後你還是殺了他全家但這是不可能的一條狗都不能況全家不然你養一條狗你殺牠看看… See *Thinking*, p. 89.
“distance” also troubles Wu He, as revealed in his anger for not being able to “kill” the “rebel who falsely justifies violence.” Here we see Wu He sharing the same passion to resist oppression and violence like the rebel, yet he hesitates to join the rebel’s political resistance so that the quest for justice would not turn into a part of the “struggle” and “anti-struggle” cycle.

This “objective” tone that renders Wu He more a critical “observant” than an active participant, also generated a sense of guilt, as he contrasts his “observing eyes” with Kadresengan’s passion to write for a the purpose of preserving Rukai cultural traditions: “But I have regrets, I regret that I always maintain the “clear observing eyes” of the “bystander.”

Though Wu He considers himself writing without a “mission,” I argue that he in fact does have a purpose in writing. Unlike Abang and Kadresengan, whose “mission” is to record or preserve Rukai culture through visual or textual representations, Wu He’s works have shown that his mission is to discover Taiwan. And the way he presented the image of Taiwan, that is an “assemblage of multiplicities” that lacks unity and coherency, is in fact an accurate depiction of Taiwan as a nation that is always in “becoming,” in the Deleuzian sense.

Deleuze and Guattari explain the concept of “becoming-” as a process of change that involves deterritorialization and reterritorialization, manifested in the relationship between orchid and wasp:

The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid’s reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements,

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35 The original quote: (但我有懺恨，我恨我永遠保持「作為一個局外人」的「觀照」的清澈的眼睛。See Thinking, p. 231.)
form a rhizome. It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing its image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, lure, etc.)…At the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp. Each of these becomings brings about the deterritorialization of one term and the reterritorialization of the other; the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 10-11)

Rather than seeing the orchid’s change of form as an “imitation” of the wasp, which presumes that the orchid belongs to a unified system that ensures the heterogeneity between the orchid and the wasp, Deleuze and Guattari propose to look at the orchid as an “assemblage,” which changes as the orchid changes its form to attract the wasp. Such change is the deterritorialization of the orchid, which the wasp reterritorializes by transporting its pollen. Similarly, the wasp is an “assemblage” which is changed when it reterritorializes the orchid. Such a change also deterritorializes the wasp for it becomes a part of the orchid’s reproduction system. This change, the “becoming-wasp” of orchid and the “becoming-orchid” of wasp thus designate not merely a change of the outer form, but a change of the formation and function of the orchid (or wasp), which is never a unified system but an assemblage of multiplicities. In this sense, the process of “becoming-” removes a subject from the realm of stability and renders it into a nomadic mode of existence in which one is always an anomaly and inaccessible to any form of definition, or an achievement of non-identity.  

36 See also Gerald Bruns, “Becoming-Animal.”
engages in the “becoming-Rukai” process as he develops a great passion for Rukai culture to the extent that he devotes his life to photographing the Rukai. As Abang becomes what Kadresengan calls a “half-blood Rukai,” the “cultural purity” of “Rukai” is also destabilized, as a new member with heterogeneous cultural elements becomes part of Rukai culture.37 Wu He’s encounter with Kadresengan also shows a “becoming-” in working on both sides, manifested in Kadresengan’s reflection on how he becomes a writer after he met Wu He:

I met Wu He because of the ancestor’s guidance. After I left the church and returned back home, my only thought is to get away from the nomadic life in the polluted and messy city and return to the arms of our ancestors to rebuild our deserted home and live peacefully…As I was ready to embrace my carefree middle life like a eagle flying into the open sky, he [Wu He] appeared and led me to another path—writing. It is after I began writing in the old Haocha village that I first discovered the beauty of art and the happiness of “living inside one’s heart and soul,” which made me “solitary” at times, but never “lonely at heart.”38

Here we can see that Kadresengan’s “mission” to write about the Rukai is in fact a result of Wu He, whose passion in literature and impulse to write changes the course of Kadresengan’s life. In this sense, Kadresengan’s “becoming a writer” is a part of the process of “becoming-Wu He,” as Wu He deterritorializes Kadresengan by affecting his sense of self and his understanding of life. Similarly, Kadresengan’s “writing mission” also has an impact on Wu He as he re-evaluates his role as a writer after realizing the moral flaw of writing as a “bystander” with “clear and objective eyes.” Such an impact comes not only from Kadresengan, but also from Abang: both

37 The original quote: 卡露斯先生感動阿邦這種情不自禁、情動於中的哭，肯定他的血液至少已同化成為半個魯凱人。See Thinking, p. 84.
38 In “The Wu He I Know,” see Thinking of Abang Kadresengan, p. 240-241, the quoted words are probably Wu He’s words.
possess a clear “life mission” or purpose when they engage in artistic representation. This leads to Wu He’s seeing Kadresengan and Abang become one individual: “I gazed at the fire and sensed that something was lost in between us. After all, it has already been three years—yet as my eyes move away from the fire, I saw a vaguely emerging individual: ‘Abang Kadresengan,’ concentrating on slicing the barbequed meat” (233-234). Wu He’s experience in Haocha village, has thus engaged him in the “becoming-Abang Kadresengan” process, which makes his self-perceived” position as an “observing bystander” questionable. Rather than writing “objectively” with “clear observing eyes,” Wu He’s real-life interactions with people in Taiwan, and his the contemplation, speculation, and critique on the limitations of “representation” and “artistic devotion” have rendered him a critical part of the process of “Taiwan in becoming.”

Wu He’s anxiety about his lack of “mission,” therefore, is derived from his realization of the impossibility of defining “Taiwan” rather than his indifference to construct Taiwan as a unity. This anxiety is also reflected in the cultural productions of post-martial law Taiwan, many of which seek to obtain a “Taiwan identity” through the affirmation of “multiplicity” and “hybridity.”

Liu Naici, for example, concluded that the post-martial law literary production in Taiwan exhibited the so-called “luxury aesthetic,” a result of the particular cultural-historical context of the 90s. She describes the cultural scene of post-martial law Taiwan, following Wang’s proposition, as “carnivalesque”—on the one hand, people celebrated material culture as Taiwan’s economic development gradually matured; on the other hand, the lifting of martial law rendered people in a state of excitement and confusion—excited to regain cultural and political autonomy yet uncertain about what to do with it. 39 This combination of materialism and immature cultural-political environment provided a particularly free and open ground for new

imaginations and creations, manifested in the rapid development of cultural productions in various fields, including postmodern metafictions, avant-guard films (Taiwan New Wave), theater and dance troupes such as Pingfong Acting Troupe and Cloud Gate Dance Theater. These artists tackle different aspects of Taiwanese culture from various points of view (post-colonial, social-realism, existentialist crisis of modern living, material culture...etc.) and more importantly they exhibit independence and autonomy through the experimentation and exploration of new artistic forms.

The change of means for cultural production also had its effect on literary and artistic creation. As the government steadily withdrew from direct interference in cultural activities, agencies adopted a more modern managerial approach, paying more attention to cost efficiency than ideology. Newspaper subsections (fukan) and their annual literary contests that were the dominant venue for literary production have given way to more specialized publishing houses such as The Unitas and Ryefield. Compelled to conform to new standards and to professionalize their approach to the craft, many writers gave more consideration to the popular reception rather than high moral ambitions and elitist assumptions. Some pragmatic writers are keen on imitating proven successes, leading to eclectic use of techniques and aesthetic modes associated with different artistic positions in the field. Writers also show greater professionalism by investing more energy in archival research, manifested in the publication of historical and biographical novels such as Ping Lu’s *Xinglu tianya*, a fictional account of the love story between Sun Yat-sen and Song Qingling; Li Ang’s *Autobiographical Novel*, a semi-fictional story of Xie Xuehong, a female communist during Japanese colonized Taiwan; Wu He’s *Yusheng*, which
dealt with the Wushe Incident, a bloody massacre of an aboriginal tribe during the colonial period.  

As writers became more self-conscious about their commitment to the vocation, their works became increasingly self-reflexive, filled with metacommentaries pointing to their own creative acts and the questioning of conventional literary genres. While modernist fiction writers still active in the post-martial law period continue their humanistic approaches with a “master narrative” underneath (tackling topics such as human existence, the meaning of life, the nature of human suffering and interpersonal ethical responsibilities in Taiwan’s specific historical context), writers active after the 90s showed more “postmodern” characteristics keen on “deconstructing” totalizing systems and implementing self-reflexive narratives that destabilize the validity of the text itself.

The imported postmodernist discourse not only has its influence in the form of writing, but also in the ways in which writers approach social issues such as history, memory, identity, ethnicity, and cultural heritage, etc. Equally influential is the dominance of postcolonial discourse. Yet rather than developing two lines of cultural development, it is the juxtaposition, contestation, and hybridization of these two discourses that best describe the leading cultural atmosphere and the major themes of novels in the post-martial law period, according to Liou Liang-ya, who suggests that the dialectics between the two can even be regarded as a newly emerged literary aesthetic in post-martial law Taiwan. In her investigation of the development of post-martial law novels, Liou points out that while postmodernism and postcolonialism both emphasize decentralization, their developments move in different directions. While the former

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41 ibid., p. 205-206.
focuses on the liberation of senses, deconstruction of history, disintegration of subjectivity, and the view that identity is essentially fluid, multiple, heterogeneous, and culturally hybrid, the latter focuses on anti-colonialism, colonial mimicry, localization, reconstruction of national/cultural identity, rewriting history, revisiting traumatic memories, etc. (Liou 66). In this sense, however, while the emphasis on decentering and deconstruction in postmodernist discourses provides the theoretical basis for postcolonial writers to challenge the center (imperial hegemony/ dominant cultural and grand histories), the goal to form a new subjectivity/cultural identity/historical narrative afterwards is doomed to fail: to form another “center” would simultaneously lead to the creation of another “margin.” For example, in Li Ang’s (in)famous short story “Beigang Incense Burner,” she questions feminist’s belief in inequality by pointing out the inherent gender bias of feminists toward sexually-active females. Also in “Bloody Makeup,” another story in the same collection, Li highlighted the hypocrisy of the opposition party movement by looking at how the homosexual “son of the martyr” is sacrificed for the “grand purpose” of Taiwan Independence. Hence the so-called “Taiwanese subjectivity,” though it experienced a high time of development, has never come into being in reality due to the deconstructive force that accompanies every attempt at identity construction. Such conflict is also presented in Thinking of Abang Kadresengan, in which Wu He not only illuminates the various political agendas of “cultural workers” (wenhua gongzuozhe) who came to the mountains to conduct “cultural research,” but also presents the diverse views on the goal of “cultural revival movement” within the Rukai tribe.

The significance of Wu He’s Thinking of Abang Kadresengan, however, is not only a response to this dilemma, it also provides a new direction of thinking about “Taiwan” as a possible signifier that designates a collective, that is, to define a mobile “Taiwan” identity
through the act of writing Taiwan, and through that process, one contributes to the making of, and the taking of responsibility for, the construction of Taiwan. The dual motion of thinking and searching (si 思, and suo 索), that is, to think about one’s role as a writer (one’s mission, purpose of writing, and artistic means), and to search for the meaning of “Taiwan,” can thus be regarded as the mobile “act” of writing Taiwan, rather than a static “representation” of Taiwan. Through the extensive implement of parentheses, we see Taiwan as a rhizomatic cartography in which we see Wu He’s struggles to construct a meaning of self-identity as a writer of Taiwan (despite its failure to reach a unity), accompanied by the complicated cultural, political, and historical entanglement of various ethnic groups in Taiwan. Such an open-ended “map” of Taiwan, which can be “traveled” in various combinations of routes, in my view, accurately portrays “Taiwan” as an “assemblage of multiplicities” that is always in the process of “becoming” in the Deleuzian sense. Wu He’s passion to write Taiwan, and his sense of devotion and responsibility to Taiwan (its people and the land), is beautifully captured in the concluding lines of the novel: “The mountains and rivers of Taiwan, the vicissitudes of the aborigine tribe, me and my contemporaneity: every time these three come together, I sense the serene beauty of life.”

43 The original quote: 台灣的山水，原住民部落的滄桑，我渾身洋溢著的我的當代；這三者每一貼觸，讓我感受到一種生命沈靜的美。See Thinking, p. 236.
Chapter 5: Possible Worlds and Writer’s Autonomy in Dung Kai-cheung’s

*The Exploitation of the Works of Nature: Xuxu and Ruzhen*¹

“The original sin of the self can never be cleansed. Fiction writing is always a process of redemption.”—Dung Kai-cheung²

*The Exploitation of the Works of Nature: Xuxu and Ruzhen* (Tiangong kaiwu xuxu ruzhen) is the first part of Dung Kai-cheung’s “Natural History Trilogy” (*Ziranshi sanbuqu*).³ In this semi-autobiographical novel, Dung writes about his family history and his earlier adult years, from his grandparents’ migration to Hong Kong during the Sino-Japanese war to his experience of growing up in Hong Kong during the 1970s and 1980s. Yet instead of giving a chronological account of the events and people involved in the narrator’s life, as most autobiography is structured, Dung structured the memories of past events and emotions around material objects (*wujian* 物件), as each chapter is devoted to one object that ties different generations together. Such a way of narrating his personal history not only stresses the close connection between the lives of Hong Kong people and the development of material culture in Hong Kong: each material object becomes the marker of a specific time in the history of modernization in Hong Kong. This narrative format also illuminates the change of relations between human beings and objects, as people gradually become dependent upon these objects,

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¹ “The Exploitation of the Works of Nature: Xuxu and Ruzhen” is my translation of the original title “Tiangong kaiwu xuxu ruzhen” (天工開物. 栩栩如真).
which may turn into obstacles for human communication and emotional bondage despite their original function as facilitators of human communication.

As an established Hong Kong writer, Dong’s *Exploitation* immediately attracted critics’ attention when it was first published. Most centered on illuminating the various themes Dung Kai-cheung tackles in the novel, including the questioning of personal identity and Hong Kong subjectivity, the relation between modern subjects and material culture, and the problematics of fictional representation and historical narrative. Most discussions focus on the content of the novel, that is, to point out Dung’s critical reflection on the ambiguous social, historical, political and cultural status of Hong Kong and its impact on individuals living in Hong Kong. However, none focused on the narrative form as a crucial part in understanding the novel.

The most conspicuous narrative feature of this novel is the juxtaposition of two storylines: the family history of the first person narrator “I” (presumably Dung Kai-cheung) and the story of a fictional character named Xuxu, a teenage girl who lives in a fantastic “world of characters” (*renwu shijie* 人物世界). On the surface, the two stories seem to have little in common, yet later it becomes clear that the story of Xuxu is in fact a fictional text written by the narrator “I,” who wishes to find comfort, project desire, and seek redemption as he reflects on his experience interacting with various young female figures during his childhood and early adulthood. Though Xuxu appears to be a product of the narrator at the beginning, the story’s later development reveals the narrator’s loss of control as Xuxu enters the “real world” and meets the narrator. The break of the boundary between the fictional world and real world, creator and

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4 See Hu Jinlun’s “Guangyu Dong Qizhang: Ducaizhe zuozai wenxi gongchangli qi quanzhuang muma” on the discussion of Hong Kong subjectivity. See Luo Yijun’s Luo, “Pangda de luoxuan jianzhu Tiangong kaiwu” for the discussion of the dual vocal line of fiction and history. See Liao, Weitang’s “Cong Baiwuzhe de wutuobang zouxiang keneng shijie” for the discussion of materialization and anti-materialization.
created, renders Xuxu’s story more than a device for the narrator/author’s personal redemption; rather, it showed his concern for the ambiguous role of the writer/creator, who simultaneously occupies a subversive and authoritative role in society.

In this chapter, I examine how the narrative strategies of Exploitation reflect Dung’s anxiety towards being a fiction writer in Hong Kong, whose creativity both challenges and undertakes the authoritative position. I argue that the “possible worlds” and multiple “selves” Dung creates in the text can be interpreted not only as a rejection of the pursuit of unity (one history, one reality), which has been a popular theme in recent literary creations in Hong Kong, but more importantly, as a demonstration of one’s autonomy in creating one’s self-identity and Hong Kong’s reality. In other words, rather than reading this text as another attempt to write personal account of Hong Kong history, I see in Exploitation an emphasis on the act of “creating” a Hong Kong reality that is based on the co-existence of plural histories, multiple identities, and possible worlds. The emphasis on the co-existence of multiple realities that are actively “created” rather than being “discovered,” I argue, is Dung Kai-cheung’s call for a collective act to claim Hong Kong’s autonomy through the act of writing.

5.1 A Book of the Self: Dung Kai-cheung and Self-Reflexive Writings

Dung Kai-cheung was born in 1967 in Hong Kong, and grew up in one of the most densely populated area in Kowloon. He graduated from the Foreign Language Department at The University of Hong Kong in 1989, and obtained a Masters degree in Comparative Literature in 1994 with a thesis on Marcel Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past.5 During his graduate years, he published his first short story and co-established the journal Wenhua pinglun (Culture

5 Dung, Kai-cheung, “The concept of the body in Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past.”
Criticism). In 1994, he won the Unitas Fiction Writing Award for New Writers with his novella *Androgyny* (Androzhenni), and since then, his works have regularly attracted critics’ attention, and many of them won literary awards both in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In 1995, his *Dual Bodies* won the Unitas Daily News Literary Award for the Novel. In 1997, he won Hong Kong Arts Development Council Literary Award for New Writers. His *Xiaodong’s Campus* won The Fourth Hong Kong Chinese Literature Bi-annual Award for Children’s Literature. *Exploitations of Works of Nature: Xuxu and Ruzhen* also won several awards, including The Dream of Red Chamber Award and Shi Naian Literary Award, and was ranked among the best ten in the Annual Book Awards by China Daily News and Yazhou Zhoukan (Asia Weekly Magazine).

He now teaches part-time at several universities in Hong Kong, but spends most of his time writing short stories, novels, criticism and literary reviews.

Hong Kong has always been a key subject and the main setting in Dung’s stories. In *Atlas: Archeology of an Imaginary City* and *A Chronicle of the Splendor of the V City* for example, he presents the complex process of reconstructing an image of Hong Kong by future archeologists and archivists, which involves gathering of historical records, local legends, myths, memories, and the insertion of imagination and speculations of current collectors/editors. In this work, Dung emphasizes fictionality as the essential way to approach Hong Kong’s reality. In *The Catalogue* and *Bowu Zhi* (A Record of the Myriads of Things), Dung Kai-cheung seeks to construct a material history of Hong Kong by listing the various objects that existed in Hong Kong, including commercial products and living things, and presenting stories surrounding these objects. Dung’s contemplation on the problematics of historical representations and his obsession with the impact of material culture are both developed further in *Exploitation*. Yet rather than focusing on constructing an image of Hong Kong as he did in previous works, Dung seeks to weave the history of Hong Kong, his family history, and his reflections on the formation of the

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6 In 1995, his *Dual Bodies* won the Unitas Daily News Literary Award for the Novel. In 1997, he won Hong Kong Arts Development Council Literary Award for New Writers. His *Xiaodong’s Campus* won The Fourth Hong Kong Chinese Literature Bi-annual Award for Children’s Literature. *Exploitations of Works of Nature: Xuxu and Ruzhen* also won several awards, including The Dream of Red Chamber Award and Shi Naian Literary Award, and was ranked among the best ten in the Annual Book Awards by China Daily News and Yazhou Zhoukan (Asia Weekly Magazine).

7 Linking Publishing (Lianjing chubanshe) republished four of Dung’s works that focus on the depiction of V City: *Ditu ji* (Atlas: The Archeology of an Imaginary City), *Menghua lu* (formerly named *The Catalogue*), *Fansheng lu* (A Chronicle of the Splendor of V City), *Bowu zhi* (A Record of the Myriads of Things). The four books were originally written from 1997 to 2000, and now form a collection entitled *The V City Series* or *The V City Series Quadrilogy*. 

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self in this novel together in one novel, which he refers to as the “Book of the Self” (ziwo de shu).

Compared to other Hong Kong writers’ works, Dung Kai-cheung’s novels have always been self-reflective and self-reflexive, that is, he not only inserts personal experiences into his stories, he is also very self-conscious of the artificiality of self-representation. This obsession for the “self,” both as the object and subject of writing, is also manifested in the Preface of Exploitation. In the Preface, Dung reflects on his intention and the process of writing this novel, disguising himself as the “Dictator” expressing his evaluation of the novel to the author. The Dictator states that the author’s original intention of writing this novel is to construct an image of the self through the delineation of family heritage and personal history. Yet rather than constructing a coherent and unified image of the self, the author ends up creating multiple “selves” in multiple “possible worlds.” The cause of this “inflation of the self” (ziwo pengzhang), the Dictator argues, is the author’s self-indulgence, which inevitably leads to conflicted and split “selves” despite his original intention to achieve integrity and unity. Thus, the Dictator accuses this novel of lacking reality external to the “self,” as all the “others” that appear in the novel, including Dung’s family members and friends, are merely fictional characters who exist only in the author’s consciousness. As a result, the dictator believes that the author’s fictional self-writing is meaningless and useless for it is completely detached from reality and therefore lacks social function or moral values.

The Dictator’s critique of the author is in fact another manifestation of Dung Kai-cheung’s “self-indulgence,” and thus makes the Preface appear as part of the main text and thus blur the boundaries between fictional world (the main text) and the real world (the setting the

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8 “The Dictator” (ducaizhe) is one of Dung Kai-cheung’s personae he uses in literary and cultural criticisms.
9 Exploitation, p.4.
In other words, this is Dung’s self-writing project, and I see this dialogue between Dung’s “split-self” a valuable piece in understanding the novel as a whole. In fact, Dung Kai-cheung has addressed himself as “Dictator” in other writings. In an essay in which Dung addresses to “writers of the same generation” (tongdairen), likely himself included, he urges his contemporaries to admit to the fact that all writers are dictators. By naming himself the “dictator,” Dung aims to highlight the dual effect of creative writing and the ambiguous position of writers in society: on the one hand, writers use creativity to subvert authorities, yet at the same time the inner creative power they possess also reveals the potential to become the very authoritative figure they seek to overthrow. This dilemma of being a writer-intellectual is reiterated again in the Preface, as the Dictator states: “Every dictator was once a rebel, an anti-authoritarian. His subversive power was founded upon a stronger self that seeks to overthrow a weaker self.” Therefore, one of the tasks Dung seeks to accomplish in this self-reflexive novel is to find a balance between the two extremes.

Dung Kai-cheung’s use of the “self-narrative” form also reveals his doubts about the social function of both fiction writing and self-writing. For Dung, the two extreme roles of a writer, as a rebel and dictator, often result in their creative work being either “realist” or “didactic,” the former carries the subversive power for social-political critique and the latter carries the strong moral message that has the potential to form an authoritative discourse. To reconcile the author’s contradictory position with the ambiguous social function of literature, Dung seeks to pursue a sense of “coherency” (yizhixing) and “integrity” (wanzhengxing) between art and real life, borrowing Bakhtin’s idea of the “unity of answerability:”

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10 ibid., p.4.
11 Dung uses “shiran” (in practice/in factuality 實然), “yingran” (should be, necessity 應然), and “huoran” (possibility, probability 或然) to refer to different takes on literary representations. See Exploitation p. 6.
When a human being is in art, he is not in life, and conversely. There is no unity between them and no inner interpenetration within the unity of an individual person. But what guarantees the inner connection of the constituent elements of a person? Only the unity of answerability. I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life. … Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself—in the unity of my answerability.¹²

Here Bakhtin argues that art and life can only be united within an individual as s/he strives to respond to art with life and life with art. In this sense, the “integrity” Dung seeks to achieve then, is not so much the coherent “self-image” he sets out to create but the “unity of answerability” that lies within the artist, or in Dung’s case, the “writer” whose creative work demonstrates a complex dialogic web between art and life. In this sense, Exploitation can be regarded as a manifestation of this “unity,” for it provides a dialogic space between art and life by juxtaposing “fictional world” (Xuxu’s story) and “real world” (the story of “I”), and through the mutual response between the two narrative lines, Dung seeks to answer to his experiences in the real world with this novel by claiming writer’s autonomy through the disintegration of binary oppositions and the reaffirmation of the right to create multiple histories and plural realities.

¹² Dung quotes part of Bakhtin’s short essay “Art and Answerability” to respond to his dilemma on the meaning of fiction writing. Dung translated the text into Chinese, and the quotation here is an English translation by Michael Holquist. See Bakhtin, Art and Answerability, p.1-2.
5.2 Two-Part Invention and the Dissolution of Binary Oppositions

Dung Kai-cheung borrows Bach’s “Two-Part Invention”\(^{13}\) to describe the narrative form of the novel, that is, the alternating between the story of Xuxu, who lives in a fantastic “world of fictional characters,” and the story of “I,” who lives in the “real world” that very much resembles the world we live in.\(^{14}\) Both stories are divided into twelve chapters and are presented in turn (the first chapter of Xuxu’s story followed by the first chapter of the story of “I”). Such a way of structuring the novel, I argue, is Dung’s way to highlight the binary oppositions between fiction and reality, fantasy and history, human (ren) and objects (wu), creator (writer) and creations (written text).

In the story of Xuxu, Dung Kai-cheung emphasizes the fictionality of the world Xuxu lives in by creating a fantastic world where everyone has a unique bodily feature that designates one’s “character identity” (renwu shenfen). For example, one of Xuxu’s classmates has feet made of roller skates and her math teacher has hands made of rulers and a huge compass. On the one hand, these physical characteristics marks each character’s social function in the fictional world; on the other hand, they seem to lose their autonomy as they are physically confined to their predetermined roles. Dung plays with the term “renwu” (人物), which contains the words “human” (ren 人) and “things/material” (wu 物) yet refers to “fictional characters” or “personae,” to emphasize the fictionality and artificiality of the characters, whose lack of

\(^{13}\) Dung calls this novel a “Two-Part Invention” novel (ershengbu xiaoshuo), borrowing from Bach’s Inventions and Sinfonias, to highlight the interaction between the two storylines as they are presented to readers in turn. In Part II and Part III of the Natural History Trilogy, Dung adopts “Three-Part Invention” and “Four-Part Invention” respectively as the main narrative frame.

\(^{14}\) Here the “real world” refers to the world where the first-person narrator “I” lives rather than the actual real world where we live. Though the story of “I” resembles Dung’s personal life in many ways, the “real world” in the novel is still a fictional creation, only it appears more “real,” than the “fictional world” Xuxu lives in.
independence is partially due to their confinement to material objects, and partially due to their subjection to the ultimate power of the fiction writer.

Contrary to Xuxu’s story, the story of “I” aims to create a “real world” in which we see people and events that resembles the world Dung lives in. Dung Kai-cheung uses a first-person narrator to tell his family history and his memories of growing up in Hong Kong. He also uses the real names of his family members and friends to make a close connection between the story of “I” and his life. Yet rather than following the autobiography convention and tell the story in chronological order, Dung centers the people and events around specific objects that marks a specific period of technological and economic development in the history of modern Hong Kong, such as the telegraph, a sewing machine, a camera, or a cassette recorder. That is to say, personal history and private memories are dissected and reorganized to fit into the chronology of Hong Kong’s material culture, and the writing of the self is subjected to the writing of the grand history of Hong Kong. While the role of the writer in Xuxu’s story appears to be a dominant figure given his authority in defining the character’s “character identity,” the image of the “writer” or more accurately, the “I” as a writing subject exerts a strong sense of self-doubt in the story of the self. Not only does the “I” question his ability to represent reality, he also creates contradictory self-images to diminish the truth-value of his own writing. This ironically renders the “writer” in the story of “I” lacking autonomy to create his own reality, as opposed to the subjected “characters” in Xuxu’s story.

At the beginning, the juxtaposition of two storylines works to highlight the binary oppositions between fantasy and reality, fiction and history, material objects and human beings,

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The names of the narrator’s grandparents, father, and mother are identical or almost identity to Dung’s family members, whose name appear on the dedication page. Another hint is the given name of the narrator’s friend “Xian-wen” (illuminate, language/literature), which the narrator says is a couplet to his own name “Kai-cheung,” which means “enlighten” and “essay/article” respectively.”
writer/creator and character/creation. Yet as the stories develop, the dichotomy gradually collapses as the boundaries between these opposing elements begin to blur. This is evident if we look closely at the functions of objects (wu) and the functions of the character Xuxu as a human-object (renwu), especially in terms of how the relationship between human and objects changes, and how these changes disrupt the dichotomies set up by the two storylines.

Material objects have three major functions in the story of “I.” First, they are the markers of history and the pivot points that tie together Dung’s personal story. Second, they are the medium through which human beings can establish emotional connections. Third, they are the place where memories are preserved and appropriated for the narrator’s emotional needs. In the first chapter for example, Dung tells about the story of his grandparents and himself surrounding the object “radio,” which has different meanings and functions in different time periods. During his grandparents’ generation, the radio represented new technology that is rarely owned by common people. Therefore, as a keen student of electric technology, Dung’s grandfather Dung Fu finds the radio a suitable engagement gift for Long Jinyu’s family. Dung Fu and Long Jinyu’s first encounter is also related to radio. He sees Long Jinyu for the first time while testing his self-made radio. As he tries to send radio waves out to his partner, who is waiting to receive them from a long distance, he sees a young girl drawing marks on the ground not far away. When Dung Fu asks the girl, or Long Jinyu, what she is doing, she answers that she is “writing words” (xiezi) about the “song” she hears, which corresponds to the frequency Dung Fu sends out. Here Long Jinyu regards the frequency Dung Fu sends out as “songs” and “words” that she can capture and record, which indicate that she is able to connect with Dung Fu who expresses himself better through electronics than words. In this scene, the radio also becomes a crucial medium through which Dung Fu and Long Jinyu can communicate and bond. The bonding effect
of the radio is also carried down to the next generation when Dung remembers that his parents and siblings cannot sleep without having the radio on.

For Dung Kai-cheung, the radio functions as the place where memories are preserved. Dung remembers that the first time he is “struck” by radio waves is when he hears Italian opera in a radio program, which sounds like “a blind monster fish vomiting pebbles” (38) due to his inability to capture the precise frequency. This memory is significant for Dung since it is Ruzhen, his first love during high school, who asks him to listen to the music. Following this memory of Ruzhen is his memory of Lianxian, another girl Dung meets years later, whom Dung marries and with whom he also co-hosts a radio show. Dung remembers how he revisits the same Italian opera in Lianxian’s show, and how he was able to connect to the right frequency this time, which indicates that his relationship with Lianxian is much more stable than with Ruzhen, despite his strong emotional attachment to Ruzhen. Here we see the radio becoming a site where memories are preserved and withdrawn for reinterpretation when Dung reflects on his romantic relationship with the women in his life. [camera, memory of father son affection]

Other than being the medium for human communication and the site for memory preservation, the radio also functions as the pathway to other possible worlds. In fact, Dung Kai-cheung reconstructs the story of Dung Fu and Long Jinyu through a faint frequency he finds while tuning:

I believe that in between the registered radio channels, there is a frequency barely detectable, where I can find the sound I’m looking for…I tried to tune my senses to the source of the wave and catch it, and adjust it to the frequency of memory and imagination, so they can resonate each other and expand, amplify, recover, and turn into a vivid and faithful reconstruction of the past….Did you hear it,
Xuxu? Did you see it? ... That happened many years ago. Faraway, we can see a man and a woman walking out of a village … (21-22)

Here Dung Kai-cheung tells the story of his grandparents to Xuxu by connecting his senses to a specific frequency, which can only be detected when he “tunes [his] senses to the source of the wave.” Here Dung uses the radio as a conduit through which he can enter an imaginary world of the past, which is reconstructed by combining memory (passed down by his father) and imagination. In this sense, the radio becomes not only the site where the memories of the past are preserved, but also a portal through which one can enter a fictional world where the passive listener turns into an active creator of past memories.

In addition to the radio, objects such as watches and televisions also function as a portal to alternative worlds. In the chapter dedicated to television, Dung Kai-cheung recounts a traumatic memory during childhood in which he fails to help a sister-like neighbor Xiaolin when her adopted brother rapes her. In this scene, Dung splits himself into two—“This I” (zhegewo) and “That I” (neige wo). “This I” refers to Dung as a young boy who witnessed the rape, while “that I” refers the split self who walks into the television and becomes a spectator watching the attack. Here we see how Dung’s guilt forces him to tell the story by detaching himself from the crime scene and entering an alternative world where he can criticize himself, as he describes “this I” being the “rape facilitator” whose “body becomes united with the rapist” (171). Dung also seeks to punish himself by having “that I” kick “this I” in the face when “this I” fails to stop the crime. For Dung, radio and television are not merely objects that links together events and people in the present and the past, but also conduits through which he can create alternative worlds for his emotional needs. While the radio allows him to imagine the love story between his grandparents, whom he had little contact with (Long Jinyu died very young and Dung Fu is a
reticent man), television allows him to enter another world where he could seek comfort and redemption.

Though objects may have various functions in facilitating Dung’s storytelling process, there are also incidents in which these objects fail to achieve the purpose they are created for. In the chapter about the camera, for example, Dung Kai-cheung recounts how a camera fails to capture the image of “Volvo girl,” whom he describes as “the embodiment of an imagined Saint Mary” (391). “Volvo girl” is a young girl Dung sees every Sunday at Church, who always comes and goes in a Volvo car. As a teenager, Dung secretly falls in love with the girl and fantasizes about her all the time. Therefore, his friend “Monster” suggests that Dung takes a picture of the girl so that he can capture her smile on paper. Yet Dung later realizes that the beauty of the girl exists only in his fantasy, for the picture of the girl he captures fails to reflect the smile he “remembers,” rather, it contradicts his “memory” of the girl’s smile, which is in fact a creation of his own imagination.

Similarly, in the chapter devoted to a portable audio cassette player, or “walkman,” Dung tells how the Walkman fails to facilitate the emotional connection with his friend Xianwen and instead becomes the “invisible and silent wall” between them. Xianwen and Dung are friends in high school who come from different social backgrounds but share the same love for Lin Zixiang’s songs. This shared love for Lin Zixiang’s songs becomes the “common code” (438) that bonds the two teenage boys together. Yet upon graduation, Xianwen records a tape for Dung, in which he tells Dung that their lives will grow apart from now on, knowing that Dung will go to college and become successful while he, coming from a humble background without any talent or outlook for a prosperous future, will continue to live a mediocre life. As Dung listens to Xianwen’s recording, he is stunned for he had never realized that Xianwen and he are

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16 Lin Zixiang is a Hong Kong singer whose songs were popular during the 80s and 90s.
so different, nor how Xianwen regards Dung as the person who can realize the dream he will never be able to fulfill. Rather than strengthening the bond between them, Xianwen’s recording instead creates an invisible wall that separates Dung’s life from Xianwen’s life. As a result, Dung fails to reply to Xianwen’s confession after several attempts, both in the form of tape recording and writing.

The “Walkman” also fails to function as the medium for communication and bondage in Dung’s relationship with Ruzhen during his last year of high school. Contrary to Xianwen, Ruzhen cannot appreciate Lin Zixiang’s songs; rather, she loves Italian opera and classical music, and is preparing to go abroad for further studies in music after high school graduation. Similar to Xianwen’s view of Dung as the “better half,” Dung sees Ruzhen as the ideal “other,” who is the embodiment of “high culture” and a future member of the elite world. One example is when Dung remembers the time when he spent a great deal of his savings to take Ruzhen to see the opera, but fails to dress appropriately, as if he is a “barbarian who accidentally walked into another time-space” (449). The mismatch of outfit symbolizes that Dung and Ruzhen would eventually follow different paths, despite their shared passion for art, music, and poetry. When Ruzhen distances Dung as she prepares to go abroad, Dung tries to “bridge the broken connection with Ruzhen” (454) through the making of a recording of the sound of the places they have been to (Ruzhen has acute memories of sounds according to Dung), so that she will remember him and the days they spent together. Yet his inability to capture these sounds forces him to realize that recording is not a way to reconnect with people, but is inevitably an “echo of the self” that will “eventually bounce back from the invisible wall” (454). Later Dung records a speech on a tape as a farewell to Ruzhen, yet the only response he gets from Ruzhen is the returned tape, on which Ruzhen also records her words for Dung, which Dung never knew
existed until many years later. By that time, most of the content has been erased and the part that
still exists is too damaged to identify. Like Dung’s failure to find the right frequency when
Ruzhen asks him to listen to the opera, the tape recorder fails to function as the medium for
Dung to reconnect with Ruzhen and to preserve his memories of her.

The dysfunction of material objects seems to indicate that while materials objects are
invented by human beings to facilitate social/emotional communication, they may also become
the obstacles that forbid human beings to connect and bond. In this sense, material objects are no
longer simply creations of human beings that exist only to fulfill the needs of men, but may in
turn become factors that have the potential to change the course of human lives. In the story of
Xuxu, we also see the limitations objects may bring to human lives. In contrast to the “real
world” setting of the story of “I,” Xuxu lives in a “fictional world” in which we see “characters”
(renwu), each with a body part that is made of a particular object that defines their “character
identity.” Dung’s creation of this “fictional world” and fictional “characters” constantly reminds
readers the presence of the “writer-dictator,” for each character’s existence and trajectory of life
is already set when the writer assigned them a “character identity” that is bond to a certain
material object which physically limits their freedom for self-development.

Yet Dung Kai-cheung’s purpose of creating this fictional world is not to reassure his
absolute power as a writer; rather, his purpose is to illuminate human beings’ capacity and
creativity to claim autonomy and independence despite the fact that they are subjected to the
control of the almighty writer. In the story, we see two characters, Not Apple and Zunni, who
seek to pursue freedom and independence from the external constraints of the writer. Not Apple
is Xuxu’s high school classmate, who is born with “roller skate feet” but wishes to become a
singer and a guitar player. When Xuxu finds out that Not Apple frequently performs in a pub
located in the red-light district called “Red Mushroom Street,” she meets people who have
developed multiple talents beyond the one originally assigned to them. For example, the
drummer of Not Apple’s band has a harmonica-mouth, who has dual role of a harmonica player
and a drummer in the band. The cellist is originally a talented ice skater, but becomes a cellist
after she loses her leg in an accident.

Another rebellious figure is Zunni, a biology teacher in Xuxu’s high school. In Zunni’s
lecture, he asks students to question the nature of being a “character” and to what extent
characters are human beings:

Human beings are in fact no different from characters. … What is human nature?
… How is human nature being controlled by their biological impulses? Some
people say that selfishness is part of human nature, because we are born with that
biological feature in order to survive …. But humans also have consciousness,
and the capacity to make decisions and judge with free will. Most importantly,
human have imagination … and collective imagination produces culture…. If we
have no essential difference with humans, why can’t we create our own lives
using our imaginations like human beings do? Why should we follow a certain
trajectory and conform to the roles pre-assigned by others? (229-230)

Here we see Zunni seeks to remind students that despite their biologically assigned “character
identities,” they should not limit their options in life because they also possess the most valuable
human traits such as free will, consciousness, imagination, and creativity. In Xuxu’s view, Zunni
is not a teacher but a preacher, whose “theory is so convincing” and “full of passion.” Here Dung
Kai-cheung creates Zunni to highlight the power of imagination and creation, which he regards
as essential elements of human nature that allow individuals to break free from external limitations and assure ones’ autonomy and independence.

While Zunni and Not Apple’s role in the fictional world is to challenge the authority of the writer-creator, Xuxu plays a much bigger role in challenging the binary structure of the novel, as she moves in between reality and fantasy, history and fiction. Unlike the other “characters” in the fictional world, Xuxu’s “character identity” appears to be ambiguous. Not only does she lack any apparent physical feature to indicate that she is a “human-object,” which would render her “abnormal” in the fictional world, she also shares many characteristics with women in Dung’s life “real world” including his first-love Ruzhen and his grandmother Long Jinyu. In Dung Kai-cheung’s story of “I,” Dung writes that his grandmother dies at the age of twenty-four due to insufficient medical resources during wartime. Therefore, Dung lacks memories of Long Jinyu and can only create an image of her: “If I can meet Long Jinyu at the age of seventeen, she must look exactly like you [Xuxu]”(64). Here Xuxu seems to be a passive “object,” whom Dung creates, manipulates, and appropriates to fulfill his emotional needs.

Xuxu being the ideal “other” to compensate Dung’s sense of loss, guilt, and regret is also evident if we consider the relationship between Xuxu and Ruzhen. The first obvious connection between these two characters is their names. “Xuxu” means “vivid” and “ruzhen” means “like real,” and the two combined resonate with the phrase “xuxu rusheng” (vivid and life like), a term commonly used to describe an object that resembles reality so much that it appears to be alive.\footnote{The term “xuxu” first appears in Chapter 2 of Zhuangzi, in which Zhuangzi confuses reality and illusion after he had a vivid dream of being a butterfly.} Dung’s choice of these two names indicates that Ruzhen and Xuxu both occupy a liminal space in which they appear simultaneously real and imaginary. Though Ruzhen is a real person in Dung’s life, we learned from Dung’s narrative that the ideal image of Ruzhen, which Dung
projects on Xuxu, is in part the product of Dung’s imagination: rather than being the girl who possesses the talent for music and artistic expression, Ruzhen in fact values material success more as Dung recounts her decision to transfer from the study of music to economics. Dung’s paradoxical feeling towards Ruzhen—admiring her talent in music, art and poetry yet disillusioned when she betrays their shared love for art—is reflected in his portrayal of Xuxu, who looks exactly like the Ruzhen Dung remembers. Dung’s creation of Xuxu as an innocent girl with a “music box in her heart” can be interpreted as his attempt to preserve the perfect memory of Ruzhen as a high school girl who has not yet compromised her artistic talent to fit into the demands of life in the rapidly materializing world. At the end of the novel Dung confesses: “Xuxu, you must have realized that you were created as a compensation for all the good things I experienced, desired, and yet lost from Ruzhen” (457).

In addition to compensating Dung’s sense of losing the significant women in his life, Xuxu also functions as the confessor through whom Dung seeks to find redemption. Xuxu’s role as the confessor is manifested in how Dung frames his life story in the form of letters, which are addressed to Xuxu. In the chapter in which Dung writes about his memory of the sewing machine, Dung Kai-cheung recounts how he, as a young boy, explores his sexual impulse to explore and dominate the female body through the sexual violation of a doll, which he undresses, ties-up, and cut through its bottom. Due to his shame for his action, Dung seeks to find redemption through confessing this sin to Xuxu: “Xuxu, now you know what kind of guilt I had when I created you, and how I so genuinely hope to find redemption from you.” (131). In this sense, Xuxu is not only an object created to substitute for Dung’s loss, but also operates as the “ideal other” from whom Dung seeks to find forgiveness and absolution of his sins. While Xuxu being the “confessor” seems to indicate that she possesses the divine power to absolve Dung’s
sins, such a role leads to a paradox: given that Xuxu is in fact a creation of Dung, who is the ultimate source of power that created Xuxu and the “fictional world” Xuxu lives in.

Xuxu’s paradoxical role of being both a “human-object” whom Dung creates and manipulates to provide emotional comfort and the “confessor” who possesses the power to absolve Dung’s sin can be interpreted as a disruption of the power relations between human and object, writer and character, creator and creation. Rather than maintaining Xuxu’s role as a “character” or “human-object” who is completely subjected to the dictatorship of the writer-creator, Dung gradually releases his control of Xuxu as her self-consciousness begins to develop throughout the novel. Following the storyline of Xuxu, we can see that it is in fact a journey of self-discovery. In the first part, we see Xuxu gradually realize her ambiguous “character identity” as she discovers the “fictionality” of the “world of characters” she lives in. As an attempt to search for Xiaodong, whom Xuxu believes holds the key to her existence, she sets enters the “real world,” which is the fictional world of the “I” narrator. Yet instead of finding Xiaodong, she meets the “I” narrator who created both Xiaodong and Xuxu. By stepping into the world of her own “creator,” Xuxu is no longer subjected to the control of her creator, but rather forces the “writer-creator” to re-examine his “power” of creation. This journey of Xuxu’s self-discovery, thus, is at the same time a process of asserting her autonomy and independence. On the other hand, Dung as the writer-creator of “world of characters” gradually loses his dominance when Xuxu break the fiction/reality boundary he sets up, and becomes the “confessor” from whom Dung seeks redemption and forgiveness.

The destruction of binary oppositions culminates towards the end of the novel when Xuxu walks into the “real world” from the “fictional world.” In the chapter entitled “Real World,” Xuxu crosses the border of “world of characters” and enters the “real world” to search
for Xiaodong. Yet instead of meeting Xiaodong, who is also a “character” that cannot exist in the “real world,” she meets the narrator “I,” who accommodates her and shows her around the community he lives in. The co-existence of Dung the writer and Xuxu the character in the same world not only blurred the boundaries between “real world” and “fictional world,” history and fantasy, human and object, writer and character, creator and creations, but also deconstructs the binary narrative structure of the novel. Xuxu’s power to disintegrate the narrative dichotomy set up by the writer-dictator, I argue, can in fact be interpreted as Dung Kai-cheung’s way of showing how artistic creations have the power to challenge authority. But what happens after the dichotomy is disintegrated and authority challenged? Does the rebellious character become the dictator of the “world of characters” and Xuxu become the writer of her own story? In fact, rather than reversing the power relations between creator and creation, writer and character, and consequently sustain the binary structure that he sets out to challenge, Dung seeks to highlight the function of creativity in combating binary oppositions and dichotomous thinking, given its power to assert possible existence of multiple realities.

5.3 Possible Worlds and Multiple Selves: The Crisis of Being a Writer and the Power of Creation

The problem of fictional representation of reality has always been a central theme in Dung Kai-cheung’s work, especially concerning the ways in which fiction can address social-historical issues in real life. In Exploitation, Dung seeks to address the question of how to represent oneself faithfully in a fictional world: instead of creating a coherent image of oneself in one fictional world, he ends up creating multiple selves and multiple worlds in the text.
In the novel, we see Dung appear in different forms and exist in different worlds. As the author of the novel, Dung is the creator of the fictional universe, which contains different fictional worlds. In the fictional universe, Dung creates two worlds, the “Real World” and the “World of Characters,” the former closely resembles the world we live in, and the latter a fantastical world imagined by the protagonist in the “Real World.” In the two worlds, we see Dung occupying both the role of the writer and the role of the character. In the “Real World” in which Dung tells the story of himself, he is both the narrator and the protagonist, while in the “World of Characters,” Dung Kai-cheung appears as the character Xiaodong, whose “pen fingers” and his ability to alter the plot of Xuxu’s story suggests that he is also the writer-creator of that world. The connection between Dung and “Xiaodong” can be traced back to Dung’s earlier work Xiaodong’s Campus, in which Dung reflects on his high school life and his experience growing up in Hong Kong. The use of Xiaodong as his surrogate in the “World of Characters” indicates that Xiaodong, despite being the “writer” of Xuxu’s world, is ultimately a “character” who can only exist in fictional texts.

On the contrary, the first-person narrator “I” in the “Real World” seems to be Dung Kai-cheung the author, not only according to the autobiographical pact, but also because the name and events that appear in the story in many ways reflect Dung’s personal life. Yet despite this close resemblance, we see fantastical elements in the story that render the validity of Dung’s story questionable. One example is how Dung creates a first-person narrator whose identity is ambiguous. In the first chapter of Dung’s story of the self, he tells Xuxu that the story is in fact told by an imaginary narrator:

Xuxu, maybe you didn’t notice: the room I was talking about is where we used to live, which is to say, I don’t live there now. In fact, I am now in the imaginary
word factory, producing words that I wish to communicate with you. In this mode of imaginary word factory, I put myself back to the old room and pretend to be myself at 30 years old telling you a story about a radio, on a damp and cold night.

Here Dung puts the autobiographical narrative in a fictional world created by an imaginary narrator, who is in fact himself at 30 years old. This narrative device not only allows Dung Kai-cheung to add in fictional elements in the supposedly “real” story, in which he creates various possible selves that exist in alternative worlds, but also makes the narrator’s identity ambiguous: while the narrator claims that the story is told through the consciousness of an “imaginary self at 30-years-old,” in a room where he “used to live,” the sentence “I don’t live there now” reveals the fact that the narrator is speaking from a later time and place. Since the narrator always speaks in the first-person narrative without distinguishing whether it is the real “I” (in the present moment of writing) or the imaginary “I” (a 30-year-old person writing in a room of his memory), it is questionable what part of the story is told from the “I” of the present and what part is told by an imagined “I” of the past, for the switch only happens inside the narrator’s consciousness and not in the narrative we read. Given the close resemblance of the story and Dung’s life, we may even question whether the narrator’s consciousness is different from the author’s consciousness.

The fictionalization of a seemingly historical account of Dung’s life is further played out when Dung Kai-cheung creates multiple selves in possible worlds. For example, when Dung tells about “a personal history of a watch,” he lists several different “selves” that exist in alternative time-spaces. For Dung, every watch represents a unique time-space for no watch shares the exact same time with another. Therefore, despite his effort to list a chronology of the “watches” he remembers in his life, beginning from the time of his grandparents when a watch has not been
part of their lives, to his father’s Omega hand-wound watch, to the gold pocket watch he bought with Xianwen, he tells how the pocket watch has created two possible worlds:

In the possible world in which I threw the pocket watch in the ocean, I was at Sha Tau Kok, having just graduated from college, and spent the summer with Lianxian, a girl I met for the third time, who cannot wear a watch. Then, This I got married with Lianxian when we met for the fourth time, and had a baby called Beibei. In another world, I didn’t throw the watch nor go to the beach, but went to teach in a high school where I met a student named Yaci, who wears a Baby-G watch. Several years later, Guo, the child of Yaci and this Other I, becomes a buyer of antique watches, and while he is searching for a Breguet hand-wound mechanical watch, he meets Beibei who comes from a “parallel possible world.”

Here Dung creates two selves—This I and Other I—living in two possible worlds—this possible world and another world. Throughout the novel, “this possible world” is used to indicate the world in which the main story of the self is set, while “another possible world” is used to indicate alternative worlds where the “I” makes another choice in life. While the two “parallel” worlds seem to be mutually exclusive, Beibei and Guo, the child of “I” in different worlds, are able to cross the boundaries of different worlds and meet each other. We have encountered this cross-world contact earlier when Xuxu walks into the “real world” and interacts with “I.” While Xuxu’s act works to break the dichotomy of fiction and reality, Beibei and Guo’s meeting each other also suggests that creations (children of “I”) are independent of creators (“I”), for they are not bound by the limitations set up by “I,” who is at the center of the creation of possible worlds.

The creation of multiple selves and possible worlds, from the above examples, has two effects. On the one hand, it destabilizes the truth-value of Dung Kai-cheung’s story of the self,
making his personal history a “possibility” rather than a reality. On the other hand, it challenges
the power of the writer-creator, both by creating an ambiguous narrative voice and by creating
characters that can move in between boundaries (parallel worlds) set up by the narrator, whose
authority is consequently challenged. The ambiguous identity of the narrator and the paradoxical
act of both asserting and diminishing the authoritative role of the writer-creator, I argue, can be
interpreted as a manifestation of Dung’s uncertainty of his role as a fiction writer in current
society of Hong Kong.

In his essay collection *Writing in the World, Writing for the World*, Dung reflects on the
meaning of fiction writing and the role of the writer in contemporary Hong Kong society,
particularly focusing on questions such as the purpose of literary creation in society, the limit of
artistic representation, and the moral responsibility of a fiction writer. In “Literature is not One’s
Business, but Everyone’s Business,” for example, Dung points out that literature is never
personal but involves everyone in the world:

> Literature is everyone’s business. With “everyone” I mean all people, including
those who don’t read literature or even those who don’t read at all. … I am not
saying that everyone should write or read literature, since it is not possible nor is
it necessary. Though “Everyone” doesn’t need to care for literature, but literature
has to care for “everyone.” This way of putting oneself in “response” to others, is
to be “responsible.” (*WW* 296)

Here Dung stresses writers’ duty to respond to social issues. His concern is mainly derived from
his observation of contemporary many Hong Kong writers (perhaps himself included), many
have been focusing on expressing the private and the personal instead of addressing social issues.
This is also reflected in the Preface of *Exploitation* in which Dung quoted Bakhtin’s passage on
art and answerability/responsibility, as discussed above. In another essay, Dung points to the “inward-looking” (neixiang) tradition in Hong Kong literature, and how it becomes an obstacle in realizing the social function of literature:

Hong Kong literature has a tendency of being too “introvert,” a tradition that emphasizes on the private and the personal. Writing becomes a practice of self-realization. Therefore, Hong Kong writers can show “personal styles” by positioning themselves outside ideology, outside the mainstream consumer culture. But at the same time, it also nurtured a sense of “anti-socialism,” a sense of doubt and rejection towards the social function of literature. (*WW* 542)

This tendency is also manifested in the writings of the younger generations, even though some are actively engaged in social issues. He uses Li Weiyi’s *Hard Journey* (Xingluanan) and Li Zhiliang’s *Room* (Fangjian) as examples to show that the young generations, despite their willingness to participate in social movements, they always regard literature as a private space in which they express personal emotions, and a way of re-organizing oneself and heal oneself after the frustration she encounters while being an activist (*WW* 542). Therefore, the creation of *Expotation* is Dung’s project to realize literature’ social function and create a “unity” of art and responsibility by connecting the private/personal/inward world to the public/collective/external world.

Dung recognizes the same tendency in the development of Chinese literature throughout the twentieth century. He sees modern Chinese literature as constantly oscillating between two poles: collectivism and individualism. While literature in the first half of the twentieth century demonstrates its function in shaping collective discourses, we see in recent decades a reaction against collectivism, which resulted in a prioritization of individualism and private experience:
The individual’s autonomy to create, that is, the literature “for the self,” is not necessarily one that excludes care for the other, which is the literature “for the others.” On the other hand, to write “for the others” does not interfere with writing “for the self” … The problem of Chinese literature cannot be resolved by escaping collectivism and embracing individualism, the fundamental cure is to reject the binary opposition of these two categories. (275)

Here Dung stresses that individualism and collectivism is not mutually exclusive; rather, the two “has to” function simultaneously in order to resolve the conundrum of literary production. Yet Dung is not unaware of the danger of turning literature into political tools, as we see literature produced during Mao period. Therefore, though Dung wishes to motivate writers to recognize one’s duty to “write for others,” he is also careful in distinguishing literary writers from social and political activists:

To be responsible to the world is not to say that writers have to fulfill social responsibilities, or try to mold the society into the shape s/he wants. … Literature cannot and should not try to reform society, so it wouldn’t become a tool for political movement or moral teaching. But literature should not retreat into the inner safe haven of the self … it is ultimately the bridge or conduit through which one crosses in between public and private spaces … it not only affirms the self, but also recognize the other. Literature hence becomes the world. (297)

To see literature as “a bridge” or “conduit” reminds us of the “wenyizaidao” tradition (literature as a vehicle that carries Dao). Witnessing the disaster of turning literature into political tools, Dung wishes to highlight that writer’s responsibility is not to preach certain set of moral values through literary creations, but to find a moral position of oneself among others through the act of
creation. In this sense, literature can bridge the interior and the exterior, and hence “becomes” the world. But what does Dung mean by “the world”? He further explains in another essay:

Literature, as an artificial creation, is one method for human beings to construct the world. But what is “the world”? First, it is not a combination of the countries on earth … it is not a geographical concept. Therefore, “cosmopolitanism” is not simply an opposition to “localism” or an interest in different cultures and places, but has to be an ability to think with a wider perspective and a critical view of oneself. (297)

In Chinese, the term “cosmopolitanism” (shijie zhuyi) contains the term “world” (shijie), therefore, when Dung addresses Hong Kong, which is regarded as a cosmopolitan city, he sees it as an epitome of the world rather than a region in East Asia. To see Hong Kong as a “cosmopolitan” city instead of an “international” city, then, is also to highlight the importance of looking at people in Hong Kong as “global citizens” rather than “foreign citizens,” the former allows (and forces) one to form a personal identity that is independent of nation or race, while the latter requires one to belong to certain country, certain race, or other social groups. Therefore, to be able to form a “wide perspective” by seeing oneself as the citizen of the world, one is simultaneously required to form a critical view of oneself after one is “freed” from social categorizations.

Therefore, for Dung Kai-cheung, Hong Kong is the world, and to write about Hong Kong is to write about the world. In fact, though Dung has read widely from literary works to theoretical works in both Chinese and English, given his comparative literature training, Dung’s fiction is almost exclusively about Hong Kong.
Dung’s obsession with Hong Kong is not only manifested in his stories, almost all of which are set in Hong Kong, it is also revealed in his essays, many of which address the problem of representing Hong Kong. In “Made in Hong Kong,” Dung reflects critically on the problematic concept of “local Hong Konger,” a term that is often used to distinguish them from “outsiders,” and argues that such a differentiation presumes a singular, homogenized identity called “Hong Kong,” which is in fact a problematic concept:

Ye Si in Hong Kong Culture brought up the question of “who tells the story of Hong Kong,” which I believe is a question many Hong Kongers care about as they gradually become aware of their cultural identity. Especially at this time close to the 1997 return … all kinds of cultural productions about Hong Kong appears on the market, such as news report, book publications, films, and novels, seeking to present and represent the “true Hong Kong.” … We who regard ourselves as “locals” usually put on a self-defense attitude and lean towards a “local identity” that seems unproblematic. “We” placed “them” as outsiders … and by denying others we affirm our existence. When I repetitively use the pronoun “we,” I already made a presumption that “Hong Konger” is a collective whole that homogeneous and has no differing and conflicting elements within.

But the question is, does this homogenous collective identity really exist?

Here Dung is challenging the possibility of arriving an authentic “Hong Kong” identity, a similar sentiment Wu He expressed when he questioned the existence of “Taiwan” identity. Similar with Wu He, who used the “act of writing” to approach an identity that is always “becoming,” Dung Kai-cheung stresses the writer’s agency in constructing Hong Kong identity, which is not
necessarily a fixed unity, but a “creation” of the writer, who claims both the authorship and responsibility to the meaning of “Hong Kong”:

We are not innately Hong Kong writers because we are born in Hong Kong, we “become” Hong Kong writers in the process of constructing ourselves and others. People with different background and orientations does not collectively “become” homogenous Hong Kong writers, the so-called “Hong Kong writer” should be “a non-referential, multiply defined, multi-functional, and self-contradictory sign.” Therefore, rather than discussing “Who is Hong Kong writer?” we should rather ask: “How a writer ‘becomes’ a ‘Hong Kong writer’?” and what kind of “Hong Kong writer does that person become?

Here we can see that Dung is cautious about using the label “Hong Kong writer” (Xianggang zuojia), especially when it is used to claim one’s right to be the spokesperson for Hong Kong. For Dung Kai-cheung, the question one should ask is not who deserves the title of “Hong Kong writer,” which would entail a definition of Hong Kong, but how one becomes a Hong Kong writer, and what kind of Hong Kong writer one seeks to become. In other words, instead of passively defend one’s “Hong Kongness” and fall into the trap of homogenizing a heterogeneous group, Dung is advocating for active participation in the making of the meanings of “Hong Kong” and “Hong Kong writer” (WW 59).

Following this line of thought, Dung also criticizes the idea of “root-seeking,” which falsely assumes a shared “root” that defines the authenticity of “Hong Kong culture,” rather, he urges writers to transform their role as the “product” of “root-seeking” into the “producer” of identity. Writers of Hong Kong, in this sense, would occupy a double role in the process of Hong Kong identity-construction, that is, they are both the objects being made and modified, and the
subjects that are involved in the making of Hong Kong subjectivity. The meaning of writing in
Hong Kong, then, is not simply an expression of sentimentalities but an assurance of one’s
subjectivity through the medium of language, as one discards the self-assigned “Made in Hong
Kong” label and begins the process of “making Hong Kong” (WW 61). “Hong Kong culture,” in
this sense, is not a discursive construct through observation of the past or representation of the
present, but something produced at the present and for the future.

Dung Kai-cheung’s attempt to position himself (and other writers of Hong Kong) as the
“makers” rather than the “defenders” of Hong Kong identity can be interpreted as an act to claim
Hong Kongers’ autonomy in self-definition. This act of writing Hong Kong is also a response to
current cultural discourses in Hong Kong, in which Hong Kong’s “uniqueness” is always
positioned in between binaries such as British imperialism and Chinese nationalism, democratic
society and state-controlled society, global culture and local culture. For example, Anthony Fung
argues that though Hong Kong has experienced both a strong national Chinese culture and a
Western culture, it is not just a hybridized culture as most postmodern thinkers would suggest;
rather, global culture performs a real social function for Hong Kong (200). He emphasizes that
one of the key components of local Hong Kong identity is Hong Kong people’s conception of a
strong global capitalist culture, which is broadly perceived as external Western values that are
higher in the cultural hierarchy in the eyes of local people (Fung, 193-194). Though seemingly
ironic in highlighting “global culture” as a part of the local identity of Hong Kong people, it is a
crucial strategy to combat against British colonization and Chinese nationalism, for being
“global” indicates a cultural space that is constantly changing and an identity that is fluid and
unstable, and therefore, cannot be easily conformed to discourses of post-colonialism or
nationalism.

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18 Anthony Fung, in Doreen Wu ed. Discourses of Cultural China in the Globalizing Age.
Though “global culture” as a political strategy works to create an open space in which Hong Kong can claim its “uniqueness” and avoid being subsumed into the political battle between Western imperialism and Chinese nationalism, to base one’s identity on a “global culture” does not necessarily grant Hong Kong the autonomy for self-definition; rather, it renders Hong Kong dependent on external cultural forces that constantly define and redefine Hong Kong. Contrary to Fung, Ackbar Abbas theorizes that Hong Kong’s unique cultural space can be regarded as “a space of culture disappearance.”19 He argues that Hong Kong subjectivity is coaxed into being by the disappearance of old cultural bearings and orientations, and therefore it is a subjectivity constructed in the very process of negotiating the mutations and permutations of colonialism, nationalism, capitalism (11). What Abbas means by “disappearance” is not a lack of presence, but a question of misrecognition, of recognizing a thing that is something else, a “reverse hallucination,” that is, not seeing what is there. Therefore, Hong Kong subjectivity, in Abbas’s view, is not only fluid and ephemeral, but can never be captured or rightly represented.

Abbas detects this “culture of disappearance” in many artistic representations of Hong Kong, including cinema, architecture, and writing. In these works, disappearance is not a matter of effacement but of replacement and substitution. That is to say, artists develop techniques of disappearance as critical strategies of resistance in response to a space of disappearance (6-8). These artistic strategies, Abbas argues, are essential for Hong Kongers to survive a culture of disappearance without being absorbed or assimilated into another stable appearance or fixed identity (15). Yet similar to the use of “global culture” to assure Hong Kong’s independence of the dominant political discourses, the use of “disappearance” as a strategy to resist any attempt at definition also fails to assure Hong Kong the autonomy for self-definition, for any effort to construct a Hong Kong identity is nothing but a reification of its lack of identity.

Contrary to Abbas’s theorization that Hong Kong identity is inevitably lost in the ungraspable past, Dung Kai-cheung believes that Hong Kong identity can never be found by looking backward into history in the first place, rather, it is always a creation from the present time. That is to say, rather than positioning himself as a “constructor” of Hong Kong culture and Hong Kong identity that he believes never existed, Dung regards himself, as well as other writers of Hong Kong, the “creators” of Hong Kong, the meaning of which never existed (hence would not “disappear”) but is always waiting to come into existence through one’s creations. Therefore, Dung’s strategy to assure that Hong Kong remains an open concept is to create “possible” worlds through fiction writing, as he mentioned in an interview with Zou Wenlu:

What is the purpose of creating other worlds? ... To find an alternative world in opposition to the current one so that the world we understand now will not be easily fixed onto a certain condition, and to let people know that the world does not necessary have to appear the way it does…. This is not to say that we are creating a new world to replace the current one, nor saying the new one is better than the current one…though we cannot guarantee that the world created in fiction is necessarily a better one, but I hope that the fictional world can create a tension to the real world we currently live in.\textsuperscript{20}

Here Dung Kai-cheung regards fiction writing as an act of destabilizing fixed notions of reality. We can see this in Exploitation, in which he presents a contrasting view to the “aesthetics of disappearance” Abbas coined by positioning fiction writers as “creators.” That is to say, rather than showing a passive resistance to cultural assimilation, Dung conducts an active assertion of Hong Kong reality by conflating binaries and creating possible worlds and multiple selves.

Such a way of writing the self and writing Hong Kong, I argue is also an act to create one’s identity as “Hong Kong writer” and the meaning of “Hong Kong,” for both, in Dung’s view, should be “manufactured” (zhizao) not be “defended.” Moreover, Dung’s emphasis on the co-existence of multiple histories and plural realities in possible worlds and/or alternative universes also indicates a call for collective effort to “create” Hong Kong realities, which I see as a response to Hong Kong’s literary production that focused on the private and the personal and failed to address social issues. Dung’s act of writing Exploitation, then, not only demonstrates his autonomy to define himself (as a Hong Kong writer), but is also an exercise of his agency as a writer-intellectual, as he assumes the responsibility for creating Hong Kong reality through fiction writing. At the same time, he is also proposing a collective effort to the project of “making Hong Kong” (zhizao Xianggang), an act that not only makes Hong Kong into existence but also confirms one’s identity as a Hong Konger. This understanding of “identity” echoes Korsgaard’s theory that one’s identity is not a given but is constructed by one’s choices of actions. And this attempt to construct the meaning Hong Kong and one’s Hong Kong identity grew stronger in recent years as we see in the recent Occupy Central movement, in which students demonstrated their agency to “choose” their identity as Hong Kongers, and through that choice, they defined the meaning of Hong Kong.
Conclusion: The Dilemma of Writer-intellectuals and the Function of Literature

On November 21st 2013, Hong Kong critic Liang Wendao and Taiwan writer/critic Tang Nuo gave a joint lecture at Shanghai International Studies University entitled: “Writers as a type of intellectual” (zuojia zuowei yizhong zhishifenzi). Both speakers addressed the question of whether writers are obligated to respond to “reality” (xianshi) and whether such obligation would restrain a writer’s creativity. Liang Wendao pointed out that earlier critiques of intellectuals’ elitism have tainted the meaning of “intellectual,” and therefore the term was sometimes used negatively to criticize those in the ivory tower. On the other hand, Liang mentioned that some intellectuals were criticized for their elitism because they pointed out “realities” that were against the mainstream of political movements of their times. Liang used Mo Yan as an example and asked why he was pressured to identify his “political stance” when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2012, while no one asked Alice Munro to do the same when she won the Nobel Prize in 2013. And by posing this question, Liang implied that writers should have the freedom to not respond to the call of political groups.

Tang Nuo also worried that this “intellectual’s obligation” will “trap” writers in “social realities” and thus forbid them to pursue a deeper understanding of life. Tang used “commercial writers” in Taiwan (Jiubadao, Zhu Xueheng) as examples. These writers are keen on addressing their immediate realities, as both were active in voicing their opinions on current social-political issues on the Internet. Jiubadao’s novels were originally published on the BBS (Bulletin Board System) of National Taiwan University (PTT), and later became a celebrity who goes on television shows and publically comments on various social issues on Facebook. Zhu Xueheng
began as a board manager (banzhu 板主) on the BBS, and later gained the title of “God of the homebody” (zhaishen 宅神) given his ability to speak out the thoughts of mostly taciturn “homebodies” (zhainan). The fact that these two are the top two on the list of most popular writers worries Tang Nuo, as he failed to see a deeper reflection on the issues in these writer’s works. Therefore, Tang Nuo projected a bleak view for the future of literature development as these dominant voices that cater to the tastes of the crowd eventually silence those who hold objective views, and in turn make the literary scene more homogenous than heterogeneous.

I begin my conclusion with Liang Wendao’s and Tang Nuo’s lecture since it touched on the core issues I discuss in my dissertation: what does it mean to be a writer in our times and should we expect writers to be intellectuals? If so, what does being an “intellectual” mean and what are the difficulties writers encounter when they perceive their roles as a writer-intellectual? The social role of the “writer” and the function of literature have always been a concern for writers, and many have reflected on these questions in various genres—prose narrative, poetry, fiction. As new media such as film, television, and the Internet become the major media to transmit knowledge, disseminate information, and form new ideas and cultural discourses, literature’s social function is in dire need for re-examination. Rapid economic growth also pushed serious literature to the margin, while popular literature that caters to the young audience’s needs are occupying central position as writer-celebrities put more effort into book promotion and image-packaging rather than in critical thinking and artistic expression. Han Han and Guo Jingming exemplified this type of celebrity writers, who not only addressed social reality in their works and engage in social activities in real life, but who also become trend setters who lack any critical awareness of their role as “representatives” (of the younger generation in particular). In this sense, it is not that Han Han and Guo Jingming lack talent in
pinpointing and expressing the realities of the younger generation (a reality that worries the older generations), but it is the fact that they act as spokespersons to define and even lead the direction of their generation that concerns critics such as Tang Nuo.

On the other hand, we also see writers who are aware of the complexity of social problems and political conundrums that are rooted in history as well as the urgency to address these issues in their writings. Writers such as Yan Lianke and Mo Yan wrote about tabooed topics such as the AIDS village and illegal abortions done under the one-child policy. Hong Kong writers such as Xi Xi and Dung Kai-cheung have addressed Hong Kongers’ need to construct a Hong Kong identity closely tied to the history of the city. In Taiwan, Wu He and Wu Mingyi’s writings address the need to re-configure Taiwan with its social, historical, and ethnic complexity, and the urgency of dealing with environmental issues that were long ignored. However, unlike Han Han and Guo Jingming who pride themselves for being the representatives of a certain group, many of these writers are critically aware of the role of the writer and the danger of treating literature as a tool to achieve certain social and political ends. Therefore, whether writers should write for certain ends (such as to raise awareness on social, political, gender, environmental issues), whether they should reveal their stance in public debates, and in what way should they present their position on certain issues (In fiction? In public lectures? In interviews? In blogs?), are the major challenges writers need to deal with.

Mo Yan was forced to take this challenge when people questioned his political stance after being awarded the Nobel Prize. Yet it is not surprising that he was expected to have answers for political issues, since many of his works addressed politically sensitive topics such as the Great Leap Forward, the Famine, and the one-child policy. Therefore, we can expect political activists to push him to give a “clearer” message on these issues as a strategy to pressure
the government. From Mo Yan’s point of view, he refused to respond to this political call since doing so would easily trap him into either the anti-government or the pro-government camp. Certainly Mo Yan is not unaware of the dire need to conduct political reform and social change, as we see from the critical tone in his works. Yet he is also cautious with the “political acts” that appear “morally correct,” but which may easily turn into another political campaign to silence all voices that appear “incorrect” without careful debate. This is why Mo Yan chose not to respond to the question of Liu Xiaobo’s release multiple times (he responded directly only once), for he recognizes the nature of such questions as a trap that could turn him into a mouthpiece for certain political groups, and hence would cost him the individual voice that he expressed in his novels.

However, Mo Yan’s non-response was still considered a response that determined his stance, which is variously interpreted by others. While activists and critics interpreted Mo Yan’s silence as his lack of courage to stand against the government, I see it as Mo Yan’s effort to preserve his “freedom” and his “right” to avoid engaging in politics. That is to say, Mo Yan never intended to be a writer-intellectual; rather, he just want to enjoy the freedom of writing in the fictional world so as to avoid being caught up in the political mess he lives in. Yet what Mo Yan did not wish to confront is the fact that there is no clear line between the fictional world and real world, and the strong ties to social realities we see in his novels and his use of fantastical elements to highlight the absurdity of reality have showed us Mo Yan’s critical view of the world and his exercising the role writer-intellectual, regardless of his denial of such a role. In other words, it is not that Mo Yan has no interest in addressing political and social issues, but that he chose fiction writing as his means to voice his views, since fiction writing, as opposed to public speaking, allows him the space to reconstruct reality and to re-position himself in society. Through this reflective process, Mo Yan can re/locate his individual voice and viewpoint without
being caught up in the demands from various political groups. Fiction writing thus functions as both the means to conduct critical evaluation of social realities and the means to conduct self-reflection and self-examination (zixing and zixiu), which was also an essential practice for the constitution of moral integrity of intellectuals in the Confucian tradition.

We can see this dual function of fiction writing exemplified in Qiu Huadong’s *Confession at Noon* and Yan Lianke’s *Feng Ya Song*, as both incorporated certain narrative devices to conduct critical evaluations of the self as a writer-intellectual in contemporary society. In Qiu Huadong’s *Confession at Noon*, Qiu dealt with the spiritual crisis of being a writer-intellectual in a time of rapid commercialization. By presenting a three-layered construction of an “author figure,” he not only presented his critical view of intellectuals’ loss of moral anchor and their disconnection from the Dao tradition, but also presented a self-critique of his failure to be an “author” as he realized that he shared the same symptoms he detects in others. This acknowledgment of his “failure” as an “author” in the novel in turn showed Qiu’s moral agency as a writer-intellectual who probed into the spiritual crisis of contemporary intellectuals and exercised a critical self-examination through the act of fiction writing. Similarly, Yan Lianke in *Feng Ya Song* uses literary devices such as parentheses and the Shijing frame to conduct a critique of intellectuals’ lack of moral conscience, as well as to examine his own “inner reality” as a morally degraded writer-intellectual seeking spiritual redemption through literature. By acting both as the confessor and the confessant in the novel, Yan Lianke demonstrated his moral agency as a writer-intellectual, even as he reflected on both the moral bankruptcy of contemporary intellectuals and his own guilt in failing to fight against it.

Writers in Taiwan and Hong Kong also have ambiguous attitudes towards the role of the writer. On the one hand, we see writers addressing social, political, and cultural issues in their
works, often with critical views. Recent publication of anti-nuclear novels by Yi Geyan and Leng Yan, for example, portrayed the apocalypse of post-nuclear Taiwan as a way to halt the construction of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant. Another example is Zhang Wankang’s novel *Daoji chunsheng lu* (道濟群生錄), which adopts the traditional *zhanghui* (章回) format and the use of classical Chinese to tackle the flaws of current medical system in Taiwan. In Hong Kong, we see young writers such as Li Weiyi, who reflected on her experience participating in several social protests in her novels. Chen Guanzhong’s *The Fat Years (Shengshi)* depicted a dark view of the “Rise of China” by targeting China’s media control in particular. On the other hand, writers are also careful to maintain critical distances from certain political groups, by adopting “personal” voices and playful tones, or highlighting “private” experiences and the “fictionality” of the stories, so to avoid being caught in fixed political categories. Hence, these novels showed a rather more reflective than critical tone towards the social issues they addressed in their novels.

This dilemma of writers in Taiwan and Hong Kong is partly derived from their disillusionment over political debates that easily grouped people into binary oppositions (pro-independent/ pro-China, pan-green/pan-blue), and partly the result of the postcolonial and postmodern critique against “central power” and “authorities” that pushes writers to reflect critically on their role as writer-intellectuals, who hold the “power” to influence people with their writings. Moreover, the ambiguous Taiwanese identity and Hong Kong identity (national? cultural? local?) further posed the question of whom to write for, especially in a time when various social interactions among China, Hong Kong and Taiwan accelerated as economic ties strengthened in recent years. That is to say, if one is writing for the good of the greater community, what is the “community” writers have in mind when they write? Do writers in Taiwan write for Taiwan and Hong Kong writers write for Hong Kong only? If so, how do they
decide what or who counts or does not count as part of Taiwan or Hong Kong? In this sense, the question of writers’ role in Taiwan and Hong Kong is inevitably entangled with the problem of Taiwan and/or Hong Kong identity.

Wu He and Dung Kai-cheung both dealt with this problem as they unpack the complexity of their role as writers in *Thinking of Abang Kadresengan* and *Exploitation of the Works of Nature: Xuxu and Ruzhen* respectively. Rather than showing a tendency to define Taiwan or Hong Kong with “unique” local characteristics, we see Dung Kai-cheung and Wu He re-imagining a “community” that is more inclusive than exclusive. In Dung Kai-cheung’s *Exploitation*, Dung conducts a re-examination of one’s identity as a writer alongside the reconfiguration of Hong Kong history. By breaking down binary oppositions and proposing the coexistence of various possible worlds and multiple realities, Dung not only retrieved the autonomy in self-definition, but also exercised his agency as a writer-intellectual, as he calls for a collective effort of “manufacturing Hong Kong” (*zhizao Xianggang*). Similarly, Wu He in *Thinking of Abang Kadresengan* presented a process of thinking and searching the meaning of being a writer and the meaning of Taiwan. Such a process not only reconfigured “Taiwan” as an assemblage of multiplicities that is always in the process of “becoming” in the Deleuzian sense, but also demonstrated Wu He’s agency as a writer-intellectual, as he seeks to address the dilemma of writers and the problem of Taiwan identity in his novel.

While these four self-reflexive novels appear to be each writer’s private dialogue with the self, I also see a conversation among these writers after reading these four novels together, a discussion that centers on the question—Who am I as a writer? By conducting a critical examination of the self as a writer-intellectual, each author showed an attempt to redefine the meaning of a writer and his obligation to society. While Qiu Huadong and Yan Lianke focused
on writers’ conscience and moral integrity under the forces of market economy and political
censorship, Wu He and Dung Kai-cheung stressed writers’ obligation to the “greater
community,” even when such communities are in the process of reconfiguration and re-
formation. And I see Dung Kai-cheung’s proposition of possible worlds and possible selves a
starting point for writers and intellectuals from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan to re-
imagine a community based on the co-existence of multiple histories and plural realities.

In this study I have deliberately avoided certain areas that merit further research. First,
my study focused on the narrative identity of writers, but did not look into how writers’ perform
their role in public. That is, are writers’ self-identities as revealed in self-reflexive novels
consistent with how they appear in public? How does a writer’s public persona complicate our
understanding of writer-intellectual’s identity? And can we draw an image of the writer’s public
persona without multi-layered interpretation (interpreting others’ interpretations of the writer)?
Second, my study only discussed male writers from the three regions, and excluded female
writers and writers overseas. One question for future research is how female writers deal with
their writer-intellectual identity. Do they regard themselves as “intellectuals” in the sense that
male writers do? How role does “gender” play in defining the social role of a writer? Another
area of research I might pursue is how overseas Chinese writers view their role as writers. Do
they imagine a different “community” when they write? How is their perspective different from
writers writing in the mainland? Third, the theoretical framework of my study is currently based
on Paul Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity and Christine Korsgaard’s theory on practical
identity and agency. In the future, I would like to do more research on Confucian role ethics and
the concept of “self-reflection” (zixing, zixiu) in the Confucian philosophical tradition, and
explore how these concepts shape writer’s self-identity and their role as writer-intellectuals.
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