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Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Vol. 55, No. 1 (1992), 90-99.

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THE RISE OF METAFICTION IN CHINA

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Though it would be almost impossible to trace who first applied the term 'Avant-Garde fiction' (Xianfeng Xiaoshuo 先锋小说) to a recent trend in Chinese fiction since 1985, it is an appropriate name in many respects. All the previous schools of fiction in modern China—Wound fiction (Shangheng Xiaoshuo 伤痕小说), Reform fiction (Gaige Xiaoshuo 改革小说), Re-thinking fiction (Fansi Xiaowen 反思小说), or Roots-Seeking fiction (Xungen Xiaoshuo 寻根小说)—received their names after their respective subject matters. The naming of Avant-Garde fiction itself seems to indicate that Chinese fiction has grown out of its thematic age to enter a new phase of life beyond themes.

The earliest authors of Chinese Avant-Garde fiction—Can Xue 残雪, Ma Yuan 马原, Hong Feng 洪峰, Zhaxi Dawa 扎西达娃, Mo Yan 莫言 and others—are all based in remote areas far from the centres of modern Chinese civilization. This led some critics to the conclusion that literary modernity was at odds with modern urbanized culture.¹ Hardly had such an argument been put forward when, towards the end of 1987, there appeared a new group of Avant-Garde writers—Su Tong 苏童 with *The escape of 1934* (*Yijiu sansi nian de taowang* 一九三四年的逃亡),² Sun Ganlu 孙甘露 with *The letter from the postman* (*Xinshi zhi han* 信使之函),³ Ge Fei 格非 with *The lost boat* (*Mizhou* 迷舟)⁴ and Yu Hua 余华 with *One kind of reality* (*Xianshi yizhong* 现实一种)⁵—all of them based in the Yangtze Delta, the most prosperous area of modern China. This would suggest, at least, that Chinese avant-gardism is not entirely dependent on economic-geographical conditions.

Avant-gardism, in its literal sense, is a temporal phenomenon. People tend to think that it must sooner or later be replaced by something newer, and thus be reduced the conventional rear-garde. If, however, we look at European avant-garde works of the early twentieth century, we see that most of them still retain their avant-gardist flavour, hardly dulled by time. Avant-garde fiction would thus seem to be a cultural distinction, like popular literature. Most popular literatures of a century ago still reads as popular literature today, though it is hard to predict whether in four or five centuries' time they will have a change of fortune, like some of the Chinese vernacular novels of many centuries ago.

Recent Chinese Avant-Garde fiction is the first avant-garde school in the

¹ Wu Liang 吴亮, 'The modernistic tendencies of Chinese fiction in the countryside', (*Zhongguo xiangcun xiaoshuo li de ruogan xiandai zhuyi xianxiang* 中国乡村小说里的若干现代主义现象), *Wenyi Bao* 文艺报, 6 February, 1988, 2.

² *Shouhuo* 收获, no. 5, 1987. Su Tong's works are mostly collected in *Yijiu sansi nian de taowang* 一九三四年的逃亡 (Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press, 1988).

³ *Shouhuo*, no. 5, 1987.

⁴ *Shouhuo*, no. 6, 1987. Ge Fei's works are mostly collected in *Mizhou*, 迷舟 (Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe, 1989). The English translation of the short novel will appear as the title piece in the collection of Chinese New Wave fiction, *The lost boat*, edited by me and to be published by the Wellsweep Press, London.

⁵ *Beijing Wenxue* 北京文学, no. 10, 1987. Most of Yu Hua's works are collected in *Shiba sui chumen yuanxing*, 十八岁出门远行 (Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe, 1989). The English translation of the short novel *A kind of reality* will be published in *The lost boat* anthology (see preceding note).

history of modern Chinese literature. From May Fourth literature 五四文学 to the New Waves in literature 新潮文学, almost the whole of modern Chinese fiction has been, generally speaking, interpretative in nature,⁶ using all available means to persuade the reader to favour the 'correct' interpretation. A complicit sharing of codes is the desired goal common to all these schools, though the degree of exertion of interpretative guidance differs with various periods and groups. There is a conspicuous interpretative overkill in the post-Yan'an Literature of the 1940s and the so-called Sing-Praise Literature (*Songge Wenxue* 颂歌文学) of the 1950s and 1960s, which categorically deny the reader any right to allow his reading to deviate from the expected interpretation. Of course, a sufficiently critical reader/critic may still reach beyond the text to find the cultural control behind it, but such interrogatory critical readings are indeed deviant readings. Most readers/critics of these texts are not expected to challenge the interpretative guidance provided by the text. For over half a century, any work of fiction that slackened the interpretative control and thus allowed deviant readings was subjected to political criticism even if its ideological stand was explicitly 'correct'. Some of the best of May Fourth fiction of 1917-27 allows a relatively free interpretation, though the desired reading remains well-marked.

What the recent Chinese Avant-Garde writers have been producing is a fiction which, by refraining from interpretative prompting, deliberately obliterates its intentional context and shuns interpretative guidance. Any reading is then both a desired reading and a deviant reading. Whereas for other texts a deviant interpretation is obtainable only after much critical manoeuvring, for Avant-Garde fiction, deviant readings seem to be the only possible readings. Robert Scholes once described this hesitation of contemporary fiction to provide interpretative guidance as a 'masturbatory revelling in self-scrutiny', and warns:

Readers need imaginative help from writers. If all they get are muffled cries of 'Go'way, I got my own problems', they will indeed go away.⁷

It may be true that most readers want the narrator to provide interpretative directions, but readers of metafiction should not. If most of them really turn their backs on avant-garde fiction (as readers in most countries have done), this is the price avant-gardists are ready to pay.

In its refusal to guide the reader to an interpretation, Chinese Avant-Garde fiction reveals strong metafictional tendencies. Without going unnecessarily deeply into the frustratingly difficult problem of defining the prefix 'meta-' in its modern usage, metafiction can be simply described as 'fiction about fiction'⁸ or, to use Scholes's derogatory term for it, as the obsession with 'self-scrutiny'.

In any fictional text there are bound to be some traces which reveal its narratorial control and thus betray its fictional nature. Metafiction in its general sense, therefore, is omnipresent in any kind of fiction. A narrative instance is bound to be an action across levels, a from-above creation of the narrated

⁶ See Roman Jakobson's definition of 'the metalingual function' of speech; 'Whenever the addresser and/or the addressee need to check up whether they use the same code, speech is focused on the code: it performs a metalingual (i.e. glossing) function' ('Closing statement: linguistics and poetics', in Thomas Sebeok (ed.), *Style in linguistics* New York: MIT Press, 1960, 356).

⁷ Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and metafiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 218.

⁸ The term metafiction was more or less established by around 1980. Imhof Rudiger says in 'The author's note' to his *Contemporary metafiction: a poetological study of metafiction in English since 1939* (Heidelberg, 1986), in the early 1980s, the discussion 'only attracted a small group of readers of awkwardly difficult narrative texts', while by the end of the 1980s, 'Metafiction has now been firmly integrated into the canon of fashionable areas of research for aspiring critics and scholars'.

world, and traces of this creation are bound to show up here and there in the course of the narrative, exposing the narrated world as the product of narratorial mediation. For instance, the narrator's directives demonstrate his self-consciousness in the narrative creation; the narratorial commentaries are obvious efforts to expose the intentional context for the desired interpretation; the variations of reported speech may betray the narrator's manoeuvring of the characters; the shift of temporal scheme may show the artificiality of causal arrangement; the narrative stratification turns the narrator into a character, thus exposing his 'authority' as fallible. If the reader attends seriously to these metafictional traces—i.e. the formal features that point to the fictional nature of the narrative—the verisimilitude necessary to lead him into a suspension of disbelief and a whole-hearted acceptance of the desired interpretation may then be destroyed.

In traditional fiction, these metafictional features are conventionalized and thus naturalized to the extent that they can do no harm to the verisimilitude and interpretative guidance but, on the contrary, reinforce them.⁹ These exposed metafictional operations, indeed, come within the reader's expectations, as convention has already de-semanticized their metafictional traces. This explains why the great amount of traces of narrative activity in traditional Chinese fiction, including some very unnatural narratorial intrusions such as the use of poems as commentaries, does not necessarily dampen the verisimilitude. Similarly, many of the nineteenth-century European novels which abound in narratorial intrusions (e.g. the novels of Balzac) could still be hailed by literary historians as among the highest achievements of realism.

What contemporary metafiction does is to de-naturalize and re-semanticize the conventional metafictional features, thus foregrounding them so that they can no longer be ignored by readers. The verisimilitude of fiction is then ridiculed and irrevocably destroyed. This kind of metafiction can be called a metafiction of 'self-reflexivity', or rather, self-parody. This kind of narratorial foregrounding has been present in the European writing since the works of such writers as Diderot, Sterne and others, in the so-called 'self-conscious novel'. But before the twentieth century the self-conscious novel was never part of the mainstream of Western fiction.¹⁰

In contemporary Chinese literature, before the emergence of Avant-Garde fiction, elements of self-reflexivity were already visible in such works as *Love in the Brocade Valley* (*Jinxiugu zhi lian* 锦绣谷之恋 by the woman writer Wang Anyi 王安忆).¹¹ In this short novel, the implicit, non-participant narrator, with constant self-revealing intrusions, seems more nervous than the protagonist in her adulterous adventure.¹² An interesting irony is then created at the expense of

⁹ Roland Barthes insists that 'discovering lost diaries, receiving letters, or finding manuscripts are efforts made by the bourgeois to naturalize narrative' (Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to structural analysis of narrative', in *Image-music-text*, New York: 1977, 187).

¹⁰ Robert Alter in *Partial magic*, one of the earliest and most important works on the discussion of metafiction, holds that 'the self-conscious novel' is 'the other' tradition in relation to what F. R. Leavis called 'the Great Tradition', and the study of it 'a balance' to the scholarship of the 'serious novel'. (*Partial magic*, Berkeley, 1975, 3.)

¹¹ Wang Anyi's highly controversial short novel series *Three loves* (*San lian* 三恋) have been collected in *Huangshan zhi lian*, 荒山之恋 (Hong Kong: Nanyue Chubanshe, 1988), which includes *Love in the Brocade Valley*.

¹² At the beginning the narrator steps forward to flaunt his (or perhaps we should say 'her', but we never know, as the narrator personality is never revealed throughout the novel) control of the narrative, 'I want to tell a story, about a woman'. In the middle of the work, when the critical moment in the adulterous courtship is about to arrive, the narrator says, 'Yes, I know something is going to happen. Among all these people on the tour, perhaps only I know it.' But nothing real does happen in the adventurous relationship. And at the end, 'beside all these, I can't think of anything else. I can't help but let her go, walking away from us, alone, without a story.'

verisimilitude, though without destroying it totally. Some critics have called this kind of fiction 'mid-fiction'.¹³ The experimental wing of contemporary Chinese fiction since 1985 seems to have been undergoing a continuous process of evolution from conventional 'realistic' fiction through mid-fiction to fully-fledged metafiction.

The works of Ma Yuan, the Chinese writer who was based in Tibet for long years, can be regarded as typical self-reflexivity metafiction. The narrator in Ma Yuan's stories and novels is eager to seize every change to remind the readers that he is only fabricating, not reporting something that has supposedly happened in reality. In *Old Death* (*Jiu Si* 旧死)¹⁴ a parallel plot line is installed to tell how the narrator 'I' engineers the whole story of a mother killing her murderous son. In *Fabrication* (*Xugou* 虚构) the narrator never wearies of pointing out that the narrated world of his strange amorous adventure in a Tibetan leprosy settlement is nothing but a creation of his fantasy. These novels are narrated in such a realistic way that they could well be read as fascinating 'true stories' but for the narrator's self-debunking intrusions. In the series of novels starting from *The seaside is also a world* (*Haibian yeshi yige shijie* 海边也是一个世界) and *Tempted by the Gangdisi* (*Gangdisi de youhuo* 冈底斯的诱惑), two characters, Lu Gao and Yao Liang, who form a so-called 'pseudo-couple' as a double surrogate of the implied author, constantly challenge the narrator not only by taking over the narrative voice but also by dragging in another character bearing the name of the author, Ma Yuan, to join in their own narrative activity. In *The poetics of death* (*Siwang de shiyi* 死亡的诗意), some 'absolutely genuine' fragments, e.g. look-alike police reports, are collaged on to the context of apparent fictionality. Thus the narrational mediation is foregrounded as an almost masochistic self-exposure, and the fabrication is shown to possess more power to induce the sense of reality than the verisimilitude of conventional fiction.

The concept of fiction about fiction, however, can be extended to mean something else—a fictional work about or alluding to other, or other groups of, fictional works. It is, then, a fiction dependent on its pre-text. Of course the pre-text reference is omnipresent in any text, and forms part of the contextual pressure that an interpreter of the text can never ignore. But if the text intentionally exploits the reader's memory of some previous text or texts, and uses it or parodies it to achieve a meaning that otherwise cannot be deciphered at all, it is then a piece of what I suggest might be called 'pre-textual metafiction'.

Most of Yu Hua's works can be read as pre-textual metafiction. The objects of Yu Hua's parody are genres that have enjoyed the greatest meaning-power in Chinese culture, most particularly history, the genre at the top of the Chinese cultural hierarchy. The suffocating smell of blood in *1986* (*Yiji Baliu*, 1987) and in 'The past and the punishment' ('*Wangshi yu xingfa*' 往事与刑罚, 1987) deprives history of its meaning-power, making these works into anti-histories; 'The noon when the north-west wind howls' ('*Xibei feng huxiao de zhengwu*' 西北风呼啸的正午, 1986) and 'The ephemeral world' ('*Shishi ru yan*' 世事如烟, 1988) are an anti-Filial Scripture genre (*Xiao Jing* 孝经) as they turn upside down the filial-piety-centred Chinese ethics; *One kind of reality* subverts

¹³ This is a term invented by Alan Wild (see Larry McCafferey, *The metafictional muse*, Pittsburg, 1982, 263) to denote to fiction 'that operates on a middle ground between realism and reflexivity'. Such fiction is experimental to different degrees but does not primarily depend on the 'reflexivity method'.

¹⁴ *Shouhuo*, no. 6 1987. Ma Yuan's works before 1987 are collected in *Gangdisi de youhuo* 冈底斯的诱惑 (Beijing: Zhongguo Zuoji Chubanshe). The English translation of the short novel *Fabrication* will be included in *The lost boat* (see n. 4 above).

patriarchal family morality in the manner of an anti-Family Admonition genre (*Jia xun* 家训). In some of his other works, Yu Hua aims at the popular genres that have for centuries enjoyed the greatest moralistic influence over the masses: 'The mistake on the river bank' ('*He bian de cuowu*' 河边的错误, 1987) can be read as anti-Court-Case (*Gong'an* 公案) fiction; 'A classical romance' ('*Gudian aiqing*' 古典爱情, 1988) as anti-Talent and Beauty (*Caizi jiaren* 才子佳人) fiction, and 'The bloody plum flower' ('*Xianxue meihua*' 鲜雪梅花 1989) as anti-Martial Arts (*Wuxia* 武侠) fiction. In these works, the traditional narrative conventions of the respective sub-genres are followed so strictly that the generic conventions become targets of merciless parody.

If we push the notion 'fiction about fiction' further, we arrive at a third kind of metafiction. All meaning systems that connect man with the world—consciousness, imagination, experience, knowledge, human relationship, history, culture, ideology, etc., can all be regarded as texts in the broadest sense, since they all structure or impart meanings. Thus the fictional texts about these 'fictional texts' can be regarded as fiction about fiction. In this sense too, all works of fiction are more or less metafictional, as they all engage these meaning systems as their subject matters. But traditional fiction holds that they are real, describable objects that fiction can and should reflect. In metafiction, however, these are regarded as man-made fictional systems composed more or less in the same way as the narrative text, and human beings are basically 'fiction-makers' in their relations to the world. This is metafiction in its most expanded sense, and I suggest calling it 'para-fictional metafiction'.

Among the most significant works of recent Chinese Avant-Garde fiction, Ge Fei's works can be read as examples of para-fictional metafiction. Ge Fei's short novels and stories can be divided into two groups. In the first group, which includes his earliest published story 'Man can't see grass grow' ('*Ren kan bujian cao shengzhang*' 人看不见草生长, 1987), and 'The brown birds' ('*Hese niaoqun*' 褐色鸟群, 1988), 'Blue-yellow' ('*Qing huang*' 青黄, 1988), and 'A trip to Yelang' ('*Yelang zhi xing*' 夜郎之行, 1989), Ge Fei tries to build an unreal or even anti-real reality where the imaginative overwhelms the apparently real, evoking in these works a powerful dream-like atmosphere. The second group, short novels which include his best works—*The lost boat*, *New Year's Eve* (*Danian* 大年, 1988) and *Harmonium* (*Fengqin* 风琴, 1988)—is explicitly anchored against the background of tumultuous periods in modern Chinese history, yet none of these is a historical novel. The mesh of misunderstandings and double entendres shrouding these short novels, and their labyrinths of conspiracies and counter-conspiracies, are presented as conflicts between various value systems. In this constant conflict, history is so helplessly subjected to re-shaping or mutilation that not even a possibility of truth remains. *The lost boat*, a short novel that attracted the attention of film-makers with its interesting plot, plays on the time-honoured theme of love and death. But the theme is replayed as a double parody on the conflict between the cruel code systems of history and those of personal infatuation. Truth is shown to be no more than the slave of capricious norms, and history only a succession of suppressions of truth and assassination of meanings.

In the study of modern or contemporary Chinese literature, there is always an 'influence trap'. Anything new can be denigrated as a pale imitation of an outdated Western fashion, which rules out any serious critical appraisal. In the early 1980s, modernism was regarded a derogatory term. A large number of critics declared that modernism in contemporary Chinese literature was genuine, and therefore, dangerous. In the second half of the decade, there arose the accusation of 'bogus modernism' (*wei xiandai pai* 伪现代派). Those same

critics now accused Chinese modernism of being a 'modernism without modern sensibility', because 'there is no soil for modernism in under-developed China'. Avant-Garde fiction, with the strongest flavour of 'modernity' in contemporary Chinese literature, could hardly escape the accusation of being an avant-gardism without a genuine avant-garde sensibility.¹⁵ Indeed, Avant-Garde fiction has been repeatedly attacked as being an imitation, or even plagiarism, of Western avant-garde literature.

Fortunately, it is easier to sort out this kind of argument in contemporary Chinese literature than it was with the May Fourth literature of the 1920s, when most fiction writers were themselves translators and critics of Western literature. The majority of fiction writers today, however, do not read Western fictional works in the original, thanks to the more minute division of labour in Chinese literacy circles. If we check the publication list of Western literature in Chinese over recent years, we can see that none of the recognized masters of metafiction—Donald Barthelme, John Fowles, John Barth, Robert Coover, Italo Calvino, Samuel Beckett and others—has had an adequate translation or critical review. The most widely known of recent metafictional novels, John Fowles's *The French lieutenant's woman*, was translated and published in 1985, but the most characteristically metafictional chapter, chapter 13, was omitted, perhaps for fear that readers might not be able to understand it, or, more possibly, because the translator himself was baffled by it. Perhaps Jorge Borges is an exception to this general neglect, and his influence is noticeable in the works of Ge Fei and certain other Avant-Garde authors. Nevertheless, Borges, with his unique yet narrow style, cannot be responsible for the wide spectrum of Chinese Avant-Garde fiction.

The concept of 'meta-' itself seems to have remained totally unknown to Chinese authors and critics. The criticism of Avant-Garde fiction in the last few years has concentrated on such thematic issues as 'anti-civilization' or 'escapism'.¹⁶ A number of Taiwanese authors have been deliberately experimenting with self-reflexive metafiction (*houshe xiaoshuo*, 后设小说 post-fiction, as it is called in Taiwan,—a very misleading translation of 'meta-' which is now translated by the mainland linguists as *yuan* 元) but their efforts have attracted hardly any attention in mainland literary circles, as self-reflexivity metafiction can so easily lapse into a mere play with formal techniques.

The meta-sensibility in recent Mainland China fiction seems to be something of which even the Chinese metafictional writers themselves are not aware. For this simple reason it can be concluded that metafiction in China cannot be a 'bogus metafiction' or an imported fashion. The emergence of meta-sensibility has been brought about by the development of Chinese culture itself.

Looking back to the Chinese philosophical tradition, one can see that meta-sensibility has been perceived and discussed since ancient times, especially in Taoism and Buddhism. The first Taoist philosophical work the *Daode jing* was

¹⁵ Wang Gan 王干 'The failure of counter-culture: a critique of the recent fiction of Mo Yan' (*Fan wenhua de shibai: Mo Yan jinqi xiaoshuo pipan* 反文化的失败: 莫言近期小说批判), *Dushu* 读书 no. 10, 1988.

¹⁶ Wang Meng 王蒙 and Wang Gan, 'The retrogression of literature: Counter-Culture, Anti-Civilization, Anti-Sublimity' (*Wenxue de ni xiang xing: Fan Wenhue, Fan Wenming, Fan Chonggao* 文学的逆向性: 反文化, 反文明, 反崇高, *Shanghai Wenxue*, no. 5, 1989. This essay seems to represent the highest understanding the Mainland critics have reached on avant-gardism in contemporary Chinese literature. In the same issue of *Shanghai Wenxue* there is a discussion 'Defend Avant-Garde fiction' (*Baowei Xianfeng Wenxue* 保卫先锋文学) chaired by the aesthetician Zhu Dake 朱大可, in which many extremist statements are made such as 'retreating from the space of civilization ahead of others'. There is an obvious want of theoretical support for these statements.

already expounding on the distinction between the 'wayable' (*ke-dao* 可道) or 'nameable' (*ke-ming* 可名) world and the constant 'way' or 'name' that reigns over it. Zen Buddhists held that 'the supreme buddha' is 'no buddha', and that the world of obsession (*mi* 迷) is totally different from the world of awakening (*wu* 悟) in that 'Obsession is knowledge while awakening is wisdom; obsession follows matters while awakening seeks for causes'. The esoteric sixteenth-century novel *Supplementary chapters to the Journey to the West* (*Xiyou bu* 西游补) can be said to be the first Chinese metafictional novel. Apart from its parody of *The Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西游记), there are many passages that dramatize the idea of across-level control of meaning.¹⁷ The Chinese have every right to boast that their ancestors had a much sharper perception of meta-sensibility than their Western contemporaries. This sensitive understanding, however, could not have led directly to modern meta-sensibility, as its closeness to the modern idea of multi-level control is only seen in retrospect. Meta-sensibility in modern Chinese fiction had to wait until the mid-1980s when the intellectual and literary climate was ripe enough for such a development.

The 'Methodology Fever' (*Fangfa Lun Re* 方法论热) that swept Chinese intellectual circles in the early 1980s provided the soil for the rise of metafiction. The heated debate on the weakness and strength of Chinese culture that started in 1985 finally brought the long cultural awakening to its fruition. If, as some Western scholars hold, meta-sensibility in the West is the result of the pressure of the information explosion, meta-sensibility has arisen in China today in answer to the pressing need to understand the problems of Chinese culture and history, the enormity and complexity of which have been baffling Chinese intellectuals hitherto.

The anxiety caused by this vast task of re-evaluating Chinese culture is noticeable in the fiction of Avant-Garde writers. If in the early half of the 1980s the so called Wound fiction and Reform fiction still managed to flourish by answering the social need for interpretation guidance, fiction in the mid-1980s was no longer able to do that, because a deep distrust of the existing interpretative systems had already led to a crisis of codes. The so-called New Wave in almost all the genres of Chinese art and literature was, indeed, based on a denial of common codes.

This crisis of codes was first demonstrated by the 'Stray Youth' fiction,¹⁸ in the works of Liu Suola 刘素拉 ('You have no choice' [*Ni bie wu xuanze* '你别无选择', 1985],¹⁹ Xu Xing 徐星 ('Variations on no theme', [*Wu zhuti bianzou* 无主题变奏], 1985),²⁰ Hong Feng ('Going to the funeral', [*Bensang* '奔丧', 1986],²¹ Wu Bin 吴滨 ('City monologues', [*Chengshi dubai* '城市独白', 1987-8],²² which gave a vivid expression to the loss of values among Chinese

¹⁷ For instance in ch. iv of the novel, when Wukong enters the Million-Mirror Chamber of the King Xiaoyue, he sees his old friend Liu Boqin in the mirror. Wukong bows and asks, 'How come we are here together?' Boqin says 'How can you say we are together? You are in the world of others. I am in your world. We aren't together. We aren't together.'

¹⁸ Chinese critical circles have not been in agreement on the name for this trend. Some name it the Chinese 'Beat Generation' (*Kuadiao Pai* 垮掉派). Others call it Chinese 'Fiction of Hippies' (*Xipi Shi* 嘻皮士).

¹⁹ Most of Liu Suola's works are collected in *Ni bie wu xuanze* 你别无选择 (Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe, 1986).

²⁰ Most of Xu Xing's works are collected in *Wu zhuti bianzou* 无主题变奏 (Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe, 1989).

²¹ Most of Hong Feng's works are collected in *Han hai* 瀚海 (Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe, 1989).

²² Most of Wu Bin's works are collected in *Chengshi dubai* 城市独白 (Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe, 1989).

urban youth. The individualism and existentialism that could be strongly felt in the fictional works a few years earlier on the Red Guards who were sent-down to the countryside was now discarded as an over-zealous clinging to values that had already been lost.

Nevertheless, self-abandonment and self-disillusionment are still a kind of longing after values, though in a negative way. A frustration at the want of codes is perceptible. The young protagonists do not actually enjoy freedom from any ideological guidance; they despise it, yet cannot help feeling pain at its loss. In the last few years authors like Wang Shuo 王朔 have shown that young people's narcissistic obsession with nihilism can be enjoyably playful, and that the scorn for values can be turned into financially viable popular entertainment.²³

Another direction taken by the New Waves was the Roots-Seeking fiction which attracted great attention in 1986–8. But wherever it tried to find its roots—among the national minorities (Hong Feng's 'Shepherds' song on the prairie' [*Bo'er jinzhi muge* '勃尔金支牧歌', 1985], in the mountainous regions (Li Rui 李锐's series of stories, *Thick earth*, [*Houtu* 厚土], 1986),²⁴ among the simple country people (Li Hangyu 李杭育's series of stories, *The Gechuan river* [*Gechuan jiang xilie* 葛川江系列], 1986–8), among the grandparents who 'lived by intuition' (Mo Yan's *Red sorghum* [*Hong gaoliang* 红高粱], 1986)²⁵ or in the non-mainstream mode of life in Chinese culture (A Cheng 阿城's *The Chess Master* [*Qi wang* 棋王], 1985)²⁶—all its works represent a frantic search for a cure for the crisis of the cultural metalanguage,²⁷ even if that search leads to an unhappy, disillusioned negation of Chinese civilization (Han Shaogong 韩少功's *Daddy Daddy Daddy* [*Ba Ba Ba* 爸爸], 1986).²⁸

In flinging itself out to the margins of culture, the Roots-Seeking fiction may certainly be seen as part of the general centrifugal movement that seems to be the tendency of modern art in this century. But romanticization of the 'untainted' way of life as a panacea for the senescent Chinese culture was soon discovered to be a wishful rather than real solution to the crisis of codes.

Meta-sensibility is, then, a fundamental doubt about the possibility of creating a fictional world to 'reflect' the real world (which is, after all, the result of a sharing of the same codes by the reader and the author), and an affirmation of the artificiality of the narrated world coupled with a total rejection of the search for its truth value. In this way the hidden controlling mechanism of the narrative—the narrative conventions, pre-text, intertextuality, value systems

²³ Wang Shuo has been extremely productive, and most of his works have been selling well. Three films after his novels were produced in 1988. *Wan de jiushi xintiao* 玩的就是心跳 is, hitherto, his best work, and one of the most commercially successful Chinese novels in recent years.

²⁴ Most of Li Rui's works are collected in *Hong fangzi* 红房子 (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1988).

²⁵ Mo Yan has been extremely productive. His shorter works are collected in *Touming de hong luobo* 透明的红萝卜 (Beijing: Zuoja Chubanshe, 1986); *Hong gaoliang xilie* 红高粱系列 (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1987), and *Huanle shisan zhang* 欢乐十三章 (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe). Some of his works will appear in English in a collection being prepared by *Renditions* in Hong Kong.

²⁶ A Cheng's short novel series *San wang* 三王 can be found in *Qi wang* 棋王 (Beijing, Zuoja Chubanshe, 1986). Its English translation *Three Kings* (tr. Bonnie McDougall) was published by Collins, London, 1990.

²⁷ Zheng Wanlong 郑万隆, one of the most ardent Roots-Seeking writers, claimed that his purpose was 'to use myth, legend and fantasy to build up a frame for fiction, in order to establish finally our own conceptions of ideals, of values, of morals, and of culture' ('*Wo de gen*' 我的根, *Shanghai Wenxue*, no. 1, 1987, 45).

²⁸ This short novel was published in *Renmin Wenxue*, no. 6, 1985. Some of Han Shaogong's works will be published in English in a collection being prepared by *Renditions* in Hong Kong.

interpretative guidance, etc.—are pulled out on to the textual surface, exposed, and subjected to parody. What is being presented in the text is then the manoeuvring of the puppets instead of the manoeuvred puppets, since the subject of metafiction is no longer the world existing independently outside fiction.

This fiction no longer depicts experience. The narrative text itself is the experience. What the reader faces is no longer the expected interpretation of experience. He has to form for himself an interpretation which the text neither denies nor encourages, once all meta-lingual systems—historical, ethical, rational, ideological, etc.—are falsified. In other words, every reader has to be a critic able to reach beyond the text.

Since the depth is pulled to the surface, metafiction persists on the surface of presentation. This is what makes Avant-Garde fiction the first genuinely formalist school of fiction in the history of modern Chinese literature. In these works, content is dissolved in form and seems to be only an element of form. To deal with such fiction, the critical language of traditional literary scholarship is no longer adequate. Instead of a profound treatment of theme we see only a rejection of themes; instead of an organic structure, we see disintegration and fragmentation; instead of an effort to produce 'round characters', we find most characters in metafiction flat and one-dimensional. This last development seems like a regression. But 'round characters' are essential only in those works that strive to press home a complex theme in order, as their authors see it, to depict the complexity of the world. Since works of metafiction no longer concern themselves with the outside world but with their own world or the world of intertextuality, the network of psychological motivation activating the characters no longer deserves their attention.

This 'flat' characterization results in a number of changes in the narratological characteristics of Chinese fiction. To mention one of the most conspicuous, in metafictional works direct reported speech, in quoted form or in free form, is greatly reduced. In this way, the personalized tones of the characters' words are diluted by the narrative context, whereas in traditional Chinese vernacular novels, and in the works of those modern writers who seek to revive the tradition (for instance in the post-Yan'an period when fiction was encouraged to return to traditional forms so as to serve the masses and the revolution), one of the important conventions is the dominance of the direct-quote form of reported speech.

When the critic Li Jie 李劫 suggested in 1988 that the young Avant-Garde writer Yu Hua was the most representative successor of the spirit of Lu Xun 鲁迅, the great founding father of modern Chinese fiction,²⁹ his words sounded like over-praise. Now we can see that with Avant-Garde fiction, contemporary Chinese fiction has not only made a great return to the glories of the May Fourth Movement but is, in many aspects, beginning to surpass it.

Avant-Garde fiction represents not a direct critique of Chinese culture but rather a more successful invigoration of the Chinese cultural heritage, because, so far as fiction is concerned, a fundamental questioning of the operation of the cultural meta-language is more helpful to the re-orientation of Chinese culture in the modern world than proposing or defending any given set of cultural codes. The May Fourth fiction attacked the old meta-lingual systems with what the writers conceived of as a new, 'progressive' metalanguage. With the May Fourth authors, and Lu Xun is no exception, 'the new in place of the old' seemed to be a sure cure for all the ills of Chinese culture. This tendency, though

²⁹ Li Jie 'On the New Wave Fiction of Contemporary China' (*Lun dangdai zhongguo xianfeng xiaoshuo* '论中国当代新潮小说'), *Zhongshan*, 钟山, no. 5, 1988, 124.

the exact reverse of Roots-Seeking fiction seventy years later, was actually very similar to it because neither of these schools had shaken off their obsession with creating a new set of codes. Avant-Garde fiction today, with its powerful meta-sensibility, tries to expose all manoeuvring of meaning by any meta-language, thus negating the rationality of codes. This apparent nihilism actually springs from an ontological awareness of the need for thoroughgoing cultural criticism.

Avant-Garde fiction does in one sense suggest an anarchy of signs, a void of meaning. But the building of a new cultural meta-language is hardly the task of fiction. The re-orientation and rejuvenation of a culture in crisis is a vast and complicated process. Serious literature can only stimulate the regenerative power latent within the culture itself. The reason why the Literature Revolution starting in 1918 soon lapsed into the Literature of the Revolution of mid-1920s, putting a premature end to the movement of cultural criticism, was nothing other than its over-hasty search for a cure for the ailing culture.

Avant-Garde writers in China today seem to be aware of this danger. The meta-sensibility demonstrated in their works indicates that they do not intend to give up the stand of pure criticism as their May Fourth predecessors did. There is, therefore, every reason to expect that, if its meta-sensibility does not wane in the long and hard struggle ahead, this first avant-garde school of Chinese fiction will achieve more than any fictional school in modern Chinese history has done before, and so help to provide Chinese culture with another precious opportunity for re-orientation.

There has been real pressure to make Avant-Garde fiction give up its metafictional stand. Before the Tiananmen incident of 1989, the immediate need for a political reformist movement brought on the accusation of Avant-Garde writers as 'art for-art's sakers'. The well-known pro-democratic journalist Liu Binyan 刘宾雁, for instance, has been criticizing these young writers as 'not caring enough about the society and the people'. It was indeed very strange to see the left and the right political wings frown on the same literary trend. The situation remains, though criticism from the reformists is no longer heard as they themselves have been silenced. Nor has the voice of the conservatives been loud since they feel obliged to concentrate their criticism on politically dissident literary expressions. However, publication and critical appraisal of the Avant-Garde writers has definitely been discouraged. Before June 1989, Ma Yuan, Yu Hua and Ge Fei, the three most outstanding Avant-Garde writers discussed in the present essay, had had a surprisingly large number of critical reviews. Because they were prepared before the incident, the collections of the works of the latter two, in simple pocket editions, were on the market around the end of 1989, but only in small print numbers. They were immediately sold out. They continue to publish, though much less actively.

Generally speaking, the discouragement is tacit. Since none of the pre-eminent Avant-Garde writers and critics has publicly changed course, one may hope that the discouragement will not silence them, and that Avant-Garde fiction as a movement will survive. No matter what happens next, it has already written a glorious page in the history of modern Chinese literature worthy of rigorous critical study.