

CAN XUE'S MARGINALIZED VISION: MIRRORS, MADNESS, AND MAGICAL REALISM

A Thesis by Laura McCandlish



Photo from my interview with Can Xue at her home in Changsha, P. R. China (June 8, 2001).

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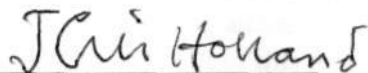
**Can Xue's Marginalized Vision:
Mirrors, Madness, and Magical Realism**

Submitted for Honors to the English Department at Davidson College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, with Honors.

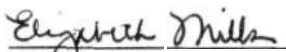
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I show my young readers a beautiful soul world that is much more important than the realistic world. There is another world parallel to this harsh reality, and this dream world is much bigger and deeper. From ancient times until today, Chinese culture has lacked the spirit of self-realization. China is a big country, so old ideas aren't thrown out easily. [. . .] My works are like a plant. My ideas grow up in the West, but I dig them up and replant them in China's deep ground, a rich five thousand year history.

--Can Xue in an interview with Laura McCandlish (June 8, 2001).



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I. Introduction: Stubbornly Illuminating the “Dirty Snow that Refuses to Melt”

Avant-garde Chinese author Can Xue (残雪), whose real name is Deng Xiaohua, soulfully illuminates the central paradoxes in post-Cultural Revolution Chinese society, while stubbornly clinging to the individual vision embodied by her non-feminine pseudonym—“the dirty snow that refuses to melt” (McCandlish, “Stubbornly” 4).¹ Despite many traditional and male-centered critics who dismiss Can Xue’s fiction as ranting madness, she remains confident of her unique place in contemporary Chinese literature and, with bubbling spunk and nervous laughter, dismisses the Chinese government’s selective criticism of her works. When I interviewed Can Xue at her home in Changsha, P. R. China, in June of 2001, she elaborated on her unique literary position:

The most important thing is that I write from the unconscious. In China, from ancient times until now, there’s never been a woman writer who has written in my style. Some male authors and critics have become angry. Most male and some women writers take offense to my irrational style. That’s my main difference from other Chinese writers. (McCandlish, “Stubbornly” 4)

Can Xue’s standing in contemporary Chinese literature is further marginalized by her role as the only woman writer in the experimental avant-garde school that emerged around 1985 in “timely response to the exhaustion of the utopian motif of the early 1980s” (J. Wang 3). The avant-gardists, including other successful authors such as Mo Yan, Yu Hua, and Su Tong, rejected previous pervasive movements of socialist realism, new realism, and “roots-seeking literature” in favor of “the means of articulating a withering of reality . . . The dramatic breaking down of this continuum, the annulment of the real and the referential [. . . and] the dawning of an epistemological revolution that bid farewell to humanism and the philosophy of representation in pursuit of the cultural logic of postmodernism” (J. Wang 9).

According to feminist critic Lu Tonglin, Can Xue's unique position as the only female of this avant-garde school "becomes doubly subversive—vis-à-vis the dominant official ideology and the institutionalized male-centered subversive position among Chinese intellectuals" (*Gender and Sexuality* 176). Can Xue views herself as a more androgynous writer, which she explained isn't a problem because "many people don't know that Can Xue (my name meaning "the dirty snow that refuses to melt") is a woman's name" (McCandlish, "Stubbornly" 4). The discourse of Chinese literary feminism² often differs from Western feminism, as Can Xue cited the popular view that all women writers are feminists, represented by the 1998 Conference on Women in Beijing, "where almost every woman writer was given an award, though most are very traditional" (3). In her efforts to replant Western concepts in China's rich soil, Can Xue does associate herself with at least some working conception of feminism, countering the avant-garde critics who patronizingly dismiss her hallucinatory fiction as ranting feminized madness.

After reading Can Xue's three English collections translated by Ronald R. Janssen and Jian Zhang—*Old Floating Cloud (Canglao de Fuyun)*, *Dialogues in Paradise (Tiantanglide Duihua)*, and *The Embroidered Shoes (Xiuhua Xie)*—I anticipated discussing Can Xue's use of postmodern magical realist techniques to subvert the Chinese political and literary spheres. I also imagined Can Xue's articulation of a marginalized Chinese feminism conflicting with the both patriarchal legacy of Confucianism and subsequent Maoist ideology that offered ambiguous liberation for women despite a monstrous history. In our interview together, Can Xue unabashedly answered all of my questions with her infectious grin, yet to my surprise she de-emphasized the political function of her works. She insisted, "There's no political cause in my work. In my younger days, I believed that if you wanted to change the world, you must change your soul first" (McCandlish, "Stubbornly 5). Though Can Xue's

nowhere. [. . .] The universalizing subject in Borges, and in much of magical realism, would seem to undercut the possibility of specific political and cultural critique” (Zamora 504).

In our interview, Can Xue praised Kafka for his “literature of the soul” (McCandlish, “Stubbornly” 2) that defies the tenets of realism. The grotesque and irrationally paranoid novellas of the *Old Floating Cloud* collection particularly correspond to Kafka’s vision, for Can Xue has similarly “created a nightmarish world” (Zha 238). Wu Liang further imagines her fantastical Kafkaesque vision through which “Can Xue narrates an indeterminable nightmare in a dank environment seemingly separate from the human world” (125). Kafka and Borges equally inspire Can Xue’s “literature of the soul” as all three authors draw on ancient Daoist and other Chinese wisdom.⁴ They further the international scope of magical realism in Amaryll Chanady’s opinion: “If magical realism is described as imaginative and innovative fiction [. . .] and can be found in Kafka as well as Borges, it cannot be ‘genuinely Latin American’ or the ‘authentic expression’ of the continent” (“Territorialization of the Imaginary” 130).

Zamora and Faris illuminate the contemporary global contexts and historical origins of magical realism in their vast anthology, speaking to a subversive “in-betweenness” (“Introduction” 6) that empowers those marginalized, particularly in postcolonial cultures, and increasingly women. They describe the central tensions of the magical realist texts, which correspond to Can Xue’s transcendence through a visceral irrationality, where the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality of literary realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing. (“Introduction” 3)

Magical realism provides a viable mode for transcending haunting terrorizing legacies, such as the Chinese Cultural Revolution, just as *New York Times* journalist Michiko Kakutani related the mode's recent relevance to the social chaos of our post-9.11.01 world: "Magical realism [serves . . .] as a narrative strategy for grappling with turbulent events that elude naturalistic description" (E1-2).

In an article on magical realism and global postmodern fiction, Wendy B. Faris illustrates five primary characteristics of this mode. First, these texts contain an "irreducible element" (Young and Hollaman qtd. in Faris 167) of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them" (167). Magical realist images also often reveal psychological, social, and political motivations, as descriptions employ extensive detail in their concrete creation of the phenomenal world, which Faris refers to as "the realism in magical realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory" (169). Faris also articulates the reader's hesitation between "contradictory understanding of events" (171) in marvelous versus uncanny dimensions of fiction. In the fluid boundaries between the conflicting realms of magical realism, Faris conjures the image of "an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions" (172). When magical realism is incorporated into broader postmodern discourse, the technique disrupts and distorts conventional ideas concerning narrative time, space, and identity. Other secondary dimensions of magical realism situated within postmodernism include metafictional tendencies, examples of linguistic magic through literalized metaphors, childlike and primitive narrative structure, repetition through both structural and symbolic mirrors, metamorphoses, anti-bureaucratic elements, ancient systems of belief and lore, and a carnivalesque spirit (Faris 175-185).

Given these expansive characteristics of magical realism, the movement and its variations do provide a viable lens towards Can Xue's "literature of the soul," a lens through which she, as a marginalized woman often psychoanalyzed within the avant-garde tradition, subverts the "iron-strong reality" of recent Chinese history and its rigid literary climate. Images of symbolic and literal mirroring and warped vision appear thematically throughout Can Xue's work as well a discourse on madness that de-centers notions of sanity by articulating an irrational voice to illuminate the oppression of recent Chinese History. The two novellas of *Old Floating Cloud*, "Skylight" and "Dialogues in Paradise" from the *Dialogues in Paradise* collection, as well as "Apple Tree in the Corridor" from *The Embroidered Shoes* all incorporate magical realist elements of mirrored vision and distorted depictions of madness. Translator Ronald Janssen captures and supports such a claim for magical realism in the "Afterward" of *Dialogues in Paradise*: "Can Xue's work renews our consciousness of the long tradition of the irrational in our own literature, where dream and reality are no longer separate realms but rather constitute one territory, its borders open" (172).

III. The Shards of the “Yellow Mud Street” Dream

Can Xue’s extensive treatment of mirroring and warped vision in the stories of *Old Floating Cloud*, *Dialogues in Paradise*, and *The Embroidered Shoes* encompasses magical realism’s shifts between illusion and reality, through which she warps clear distinctions between the narrator selves and “the other” characters in her works. In her article “Can Xue: Tracing Madness,” Susanne Posburg even relates the experience of reading Can Xue’s “anarchistic mode of narration” (91) to such mirroring, as “reading her stories is entering the grotesque, haunted universe of a mirror cabinet, where images of reality and normality reflect their own fragmented travesties” (91). Wendy B. Faris’s compiled characteristics of the “magical realist rooms in the postmodern house of fiction” describe the feature of repetitious plot-mirroring and “in conjunction with mirrors or their analogues used symbolically or structurally, [. . .] a magic shift of references” (177). I also previously cited Faris’s apt metaphor for the magical realist vision “at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror” (172). Variations upon Jacques Lacan’s canonized “mirror stage”⁵ theory of the self and “other” relationship comfortably applies to a discussion of mirrored relationships in Can Xue’s fiction. This “mirror phase” traces the consciousness of self-reflection through the “symmetrical dual structure of the Imaginary [. . .], the illusory principle of symmetry between self and self as well as between self and other; a symmetry that subsumes all difference within a delusion of a unified and homogenous individual identity” (Felman 61). Clearly intertwined with magical realism, Lacan’s theory blurs rigid distinctions between the “Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real” (Wilden 160).

Can Xue describes the grotesque novella “Yellow Mud Street” from *Old Floating Cloud* as her earliest, most immature work, and mirrored characters and warped vision weave thematically throughout the piece. Although originally penned in 1983, to Can Xue’s

embarrassment the Beijing government banned the work last year because of its more overtly anti-Maoists statements that mock the Chinese need to model an authoritarian ideal, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. Through the paranoid dialogue and images of decay in “Yellow Mud Street,” a narrative unfolds where mood changes mirror weather shifts in the unfolding plot; a flood of rain parallels the dysfunctional experience of families dislocated in dilapidated houses. The clinging mud of “Yellow Mud Street” invokes the yellow-gray, essential color of China’s agrarian core, simultaneously idealized and discredited in this politicized story of self-deception, fear of foreign invasion and threat of disappearing persons. The “yellow earth” of Chinese history makes the “title[s . . .] physical setting referential” (Yinghong Li 158)—although most of Can Xue’s works lack explicit historical reference. Despite the book’s subversive status, Can Xue de-emphasizes the political statements in her work. While she admits that “Yellow Mud Street” exhibits hesitation and carelessly dips into the outside world, she also believes it captures internal “soul” worlds. Though the elusive Wang Zi-guang caricatures reflections of authority figures blindly obeyed by the Chinese, Can Xue insists that Wang Zi-guang’s name “means ‘first light,’ representing the eternal world. Through ‘Yellow Mud Street,’ I realized my real purpose to write literature of the individual” (McCandlish, “Stubbornly” 5). Chinese poet Wang Ping clarifies the wrenching search for individual voice in the Chinese literary avant-garde: “The Chinese community, with its big, communal voice is hard to break out of. So, in China, striving for individualism in the writer’s voice is a big deal” (qtd. in Sze 62).

This central character Wang Zi-guang weaves throughout the fragmented narrative, as a “thing” (*YMS* 13) of ambiguous human existence, though the character projects an aura of political authority. Dreaming of Wang Zi-guang’s mysterious origins, the district head Wang Si-ma speaks of him/it as caught between reality and illusion; “impossible to grasp

and ever-changing. Some people believed it was some kind of reflection, a rhapsody, an adhesive, a magic mirror [. . .] ‘The image of Wang Zi-guang is an ideal for us Yellow Mud Street people’” (14). The vague identity of this ideal mirror Wang Zi-guang is questioned throughout the novella in an anxious repetition by Director Wang, suggesting conspiracy: “Who can prove the identity of that nonexistent person? [. . .] He’s nothing! Nothing but a rumor, a fantasy. He’s only a kind of fantasy” (128).

In “Yellow Mud Street,” District head Wang Si-ma’s vision and reality is also questioned, as Can Xue epitomizes the fear of deception and distrust of government officialdom from the scars of post-Cultural Revolution chaos. Gratuitously repeated questions surround his vague existence: “The man Wang Si-ma, . . . Is he a real person?” (104). This district head equally reflects an ethereal and disappearing identity, but the people suggest, “*he was a real person, though not Wang Si-ma*” (153). Lacan’s “mirror stage” relationship between the self and other embodies the schizophrenic reality of this work, where Yang San confronts a devolved human figure at the end of the story: “You are Wang Si-ma, and Wang Si-ma is you. You’re mixed together, and there’s no way to distinguish the two” (156). Lacan’s theory invokes the Daoist classic Zhuangzi’s “butterfly dream,” where Zhuangzi dreamt that he was a fluttering as a butterfly, though when he awoke once again as himself, he no longer knew if he was Zhuangzi who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuangzi.⁶ Rey Chow interconnects these illusory visions, explaining, “What fascinates Lacan, I think, is that the dream, in which the ‘I/eye of Zhuang Zi becomes this Other; the butterfly, returns Zhuang Zi for a moment to a state of nondifferentiation in which the Other exists as pure gaze” (Chow, *Ethics* 93). Jianguo Chen also connects Can Xue’s writing to Zhuangzi’s butterfly metaphor; “she seems to share the Taoist perception of reality that life is a constant flux between material reality and dream

reality” (350). The district head may or may not be Wang Si-ma, who like Zhuangzi remains uncertain about his boundary-crossing identity, replying in fear and ambiguity: “No way to distinguish! These villains are misleading the public” (YMS 156).

Literal images of mirrors also appear in “Yellow Mud Street” to suggest the simultaneous physical and psychological decay of the street’s residents. Old lady Qi catches her husband sharpening a knife in front of a wardrobe mirror, “waving the knife and making gestures of chopping and cutting,” while discussing a chopped chicken and the dog’s ears her husband cut, implying degeneration (83). The mirror perpetuates the paranoid discourse surrounding manifest disease, as old lady Qi later touches something hard protruding from her hair and thinks of looking in a mirror. She fears the blood and swelling might be cancer, letting out a shrill cry as “hurriedly she looked into the mirror” (162). In this instance the mirror maintains power through reflection, through which abstract psychological disorder on Yellow Mud Street crystallizes in tangible corporal decay. The psychological also manifests itself in physical deformity when the district head peers before a peeling mirror, discovering an ear that has gone black with green spots on one side.

In “Yellow Mud Street,” Can Xue’s magical realism extends into variations of the grotesque, particularly through the images of decaying eyeballs through which she communicates characters’ warped visions of reality. According to magical realism theorist Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, such “grotesque realism” combines “Latin American baroque and Bakhtinian ‘carnavalesque.’ [. . . It is] used to convey the anarchic eccentricity of popular tellers who tend to amplify and distort reality to make it more credible” (256) with “confusion or interpenetration of the different realms like animate/inanimate or human/animal” (256). The grotesque classically defines “the fusion of realms which we know to be separated [. . .] the fragmentation of the historical order” (Kayser qtd. in Ban

Wang 251), embodied through the text's contradictory hesitations between reality and illusion through the deterioration of eyesight, which blurs objective truths—"Truth is often a tiny, dim star enveloped in thick layers of cloud and fog, quite beyond recognition by ordinary eyes" (*YMS* 14). A paranoid mantra echoes throughout the text: "Be careful about your eyeballs!" (140); they might fall out, bloodshot and diseased. Vision further meshes the bifurcation between the delusional realm of sleep and nightmarish realities, where the authoritarian Old Sun warns, "Don't close both eyes in sleep. Keep one eye open. *Warning*. Something strange is going to happen." (21). The eyes also function to question false reflections and articulate the subjectivity of truth. Director Wang criticizes a conceited man who popped his eyeballs out, presenting a binary vision between good and evil in the Yellow Mud Street collective: "We Yellow Mud Street people have tiny eyes. Yet we are good at smelling out what is right and what is wrong!" (128). Through the bulging small eyes, Can Xue mocks the collective need for objectivity and the Manichean search for order among the binaries of good and evil that pervaded Cultural Revolution society. The clinging dust of Yellow Mud Street warps reality—"When the wind blew, people's vision was blurred" (89).

In Can Xue's "Yellow Mud Street" world, cancer of the eyes devolves metaphorically to represent the cancer of the soul and psyche in illusions of recent Chinese history. Mirrors further suggest empty "utopian" ideals degraded through this period of history, which Can Xue suggests through a shattered dream. Throughout the text we are reminded of the penetrating reality of the dreams (nightmares really) that the Yellow Mud Street people cannot escape, visions of a contradictory world that is "both dear and tender" (174). At the end of the novella a first-person narrator suddenly emerges and further inverts the self/other relationships of the narrative that connect to Lacan and Zhuangzi's reflexive butterfly dream. The anonymous narrator communicates the author's final comment of the text by presenting

a disillusioned vision of utopia in post-Mao Chinese society—the shattered mirror of such a dream doesn't even exist. The narrator vaguely closes, “I once tried to look for Yellow Mud Street. [. . .] The shards of my dream have fallen at my feet. The dream has been dead for a long, long time” (174).

Can Xue's extensive discourse on madness in her marginalized fiction is often psychoanalyzed and dismissed by mainstream Chinese critics, but through the magical realism filter, her works effectively dismantle the “iron-strong” artistic silencing stemming from the Cultural Revolution. As previously cited, Zamora and Faris uphold magical realism's ability to overturn reductive binaries polarizing madness and sanity, where “magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing” (“Introduction” 3). Can Xue's fiction is marginalized by her position as the only female writer in the 1985 avant-garde school, given the schizophrenic reality of post-Maoist Chinese women in the culture where a patriarchal Confucian core intersects with the communist legacy that offered increased but masculinized autonomy to women through the “gender flattened”⁷ “Iron-Girl” model. Critic Lu Tonglin addresses Can Xue's “double subversion” (*Misogyny* 22) through a wild experimental form that disrupts communist ideology and the avant-garde writer's “masculine monopoly of language” (22), where many masculine critics “have for the most part attributed Can Xue's originality to her imagined madness” (22). In detecting hysteria in Can Xue's work, many critics wrongly psychoanalyze her life and, later, are shocked to see she appears “for all the world to be a perfectly normal individual whose perception of the world was anything but that of a mystic or a clairvoyant” (Duke 525), transforming “the realistic craziness around her into fanciful and perhaps symbolic craziness in her fiction” (525). Most of both Chinese and international criticism on Can Xue's works revolves around the centrality of madness in her work, “either disclaiming it or attempting to prove it” (Huot 30).

As Can Xue's most historically referential novella, "Yellow Mud Street" provides the vehicle for exposing psychological scars in recent Maoist Chinese history, through irrational images and discourse on madness. By commanding a delusional style in "Yellow Mud Street," Can Xue exorcises the anger and trauma resulting from this period of literary silencing through a mode that transcends masculinist realism. Claire Huot, who notices the therapeutic need for revenge in works like "Yellow Mud Street," considers Can Xue "the most radical and hence most potentially disturbing writer in China. She calls herself a barbarian and claims to write in order to take revenge. Her work is a resistance against culture and language" (29). Joseph S. M. Lau characterizes Can Xue as one "who ha[s] most relentlessly dramatized such acid disaffection in her writing" ("China Deconstructs" 35). "Yellow Mud Street" exudes a constant state of frenzy and mental degeneration with its carnivalesque suggestions of disappearing persons, paranoid officials, and questions surrounding the illusory and frenzied nature of both human and animal existence. A caged person motif often expresses madness in "Yellow Mud Street" and within Can Xue's other works, indicating psychological distress that particularly targets female characters and deranged mother figures.

A visceral madness infuses "Yellow Mud Street" in its totality, and the lives of its residents take on a nightmarish reality. From the beginning the paranoid Yellow Mud Street "people are described as "haunted by nightmares. Every day, they would complain to others about what dreams they had, how scary they were" (7); "Yellow Mud Street" simply couldn't escape its endless dream" (167). Through the depiction of universal mental degeneration in "Yellow Mud Street," the human and animal realms blur, where even "the animals on Yellow Mud Street were crazy. Whether a cat or dog, they went crazy while growing up. These animals would jump and run madly and bite everyone they met" (7). Here magical

realism again functions under characteristics of the grotesque, addressing “the vestigial primitive in us, the child in us, the potential psychotic in us. This magical, animistic quality prevails [. . .] separate from our sense of reality, but still powerfully experience[d] as real” (Mc Elroy 5-6). *Can Xue* incorporates this hallucinatory element into the narrative—the yellow dust and an ever-present stink—that infect all the street’s inhabitants, both human and beast.

Caged images of confinement portray the fractured state between madness and sanity in “Yellow Mud Street.” Director Wang locks himself in his room naked, with the fear that clothes with cause provoke cancer and deterioration: “He moved about the room without a stitch on, his gigantic bottom sticking out. He panted like a pig” (126). Acting like a deranged animal when his wife brings him clothing, the director yells in rage: “I’ve brought shame on you, eh?” (127). Through his mental degeneration Director Wang accuses people of conspired plots against his life, roaring that his family has stolen his clothes and intended to murder him—absurd claims of conspiracy reminiscent of the plots against innocent people during the anti-rightist campaigns of the Cultural Revolution. Everyone unanimously concludes Director Wang is “seriously sick” (127). Mental trauma manifests itself in tumors and other physical disease for Wang, and he “can’t stand [such] vicious reality” (127). Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg allegorically reads *Can Xue*’s frequent use of enclosures as ambiguous “representations of the mind/self [:. . .:] at once a place of refuge and a cage that can only be transgressed by force of imagination or magic” (“Ambiguous” 13-14).

The cage motif centrally reoccurs to represent madness in much of *Can Xue*’s fiction, where images of both caged animals and deranged people appear in “Yellow Mud Street.” The encaged space mimics the narrow space of the mind under traditional Chinese thinking and psychological confinement under authoritarian regimes. Jiang Shui-ying relates a story

about a mad wildcat that her husband would catch and throw into a cage. Shui-ying depicts her husband's neurotic behavior through his perplexing need to cage all creatures: "A bird, a snake, a small pig, a dog, anything he could lay his hands on. He shut them in the cage till they were starved to death. She couldn't figure out the cage" (155). The haunting cage stands like a "fiend" (155) in the backyard, while the husband views the cat as a monster.

When Shui-ying herself questions her husband about the cage, the misogynous man dismisses her along with the mad animals as a vehicle for his dominance: "Women are as stupid as pigs" (155). Shui-ying herself then appears in the cage, roaring, "her blue-veined hands clutching the bars of the cage" (166). Her husband here admits, "Whatever I catch, I shut up in this cage. [. . .] Yesterday she jumped into the cage and refused to come out. She said it was a good place to be, much safer than our room" (168). Secretary Zhu organizes a massive investigation about the status of the caged Shui-ying, though mysteriously someone alternatively asserts that "the person in the cage is none other than the dead Old Hu San" (172). The secretary suggests propaganda to solve this problem of spiritual pollution and "moral education" (172), through which Can Xue mocks the Cultural Revolution's reform mindset. "It's impossible to clarify the problem of Yellow Mud Street completely" (172) because Can Xue creates confusion and fear by blurring the subjective realms between truth and insanity.

IV. Mirrors and Madwomen Floating Through the Clouds

The “Old Floating Cloud” novella presents an even more probing account of the Chinese inner psyche symbolized by mirrors that convey the degeneration between marriage relationships. Mirrors embody the central tensions of the story, as Susanne Posborg summarizes, “Everybody becomes prey to everybody, being constantly on the move, hiding, sneaking, disappearing to escape the cyclopean eye of watching and spying through windows, holes, and mirrors” (93). In the unfolding affair between Geng Shan-Wu and his neighbor’s wife Xu Ru-hua, Can Xue creates a seemingly feminist critique of the woman’s loss of self, through Ru-hua’s mental and physical disintegration, represented by the metaphorical mirrors of magical realism. A *China Daily* article on Can Xue’s work even suggests that the eyes of the mirrors in “Old Floating Cloud” might symbolize “informers in the political campaigns or just political campaigns themselves which can alienate even husbands and wives” (“Surrealistic” 2)—when the lives of those spying and being spied on are equally disturbed.

The illusion versus reality of vision is first distorted in “Old Floating Cloud” when Geng Shan-wu hallucinates his wife’s eyes watching him, expressing guilt over the affair: “In his mind Geng Shan-wu saw a pair of woman’s eyes, deep and gloomy [. . .]. He couldn’t stand the idea that these eyes were fixed on his long thin back” (183). Xu Ru-hua questions the tangible reality of her own reflected existence: “Looking toward the mirror, she saw her image floating in the air” (187). Eavesdropping on the neck-straining neighbor next door, Ru-hua overhears the neighbor’s conversational exchange with an unfamiliar voice that answers, “You can never tell about your life. . . . Please move the mirror outside. It’s convenient to hang it on the tree. We must keep on spying, and be on guard against a last-struggle” (202). The mirror centralizes the ambiguous fears of the story, by mingling the

loveless reality and illusions that sustain the institution of Chinese marriage, which are in turn undermined by the mirror spying. Critic Rong Cai further links the scopophilia of “Old Floating Cloud” to the oppression of the communist party under the Cultural Revolution, portraying “the consequences of the training the Chinese people were given over the years of spying on one another under the Party’s slogan of carrying out criticism and self-criticism” (55). Mirrors used as a spying tool become a literal and symbolic extension of the eyes in the story.

Themes of darkness and blindness create grotesque hallucinations that straddle realms of reality and nightmare, continuing to obscure the eyeballs and vision of “Old Floating Cloud.” Geng Shan-wu and Ru-hua are the objects of the gaze in the novella, for in the opening Shan-wu dreams of red-faced women gawking through his window, first feeling “a pair of eyes [that] seemed to gaze on his narrow back” (179). As Ru-hua degenerates into madness by the end of the novella, she sets herself aflame, triggering her eyes to burn with wide open terror, while her now ex-husband (Old Kuang) melts like wax with “his eyeballs [shrinking] into two tiny white spots” (261). Ru-hua then focuses on Old Kuang with her now “swollen, narrowed eyelids” (262), seeing only darkness which will fade into blindness. Ru-hua laments the overuse of her eyes as she retreats into the dark confines of the self. The characters of “Old Floating Cloud” obsessively rely on mirrors and eyesight in their compulsive scrutiny, though ultimately they confront the indeterminacy of reflected vision. By the end of the novella Ru-hua conceals the closet mirror, blinding herself from the taunting reflection, as it “had been covered with a piece of black cloth because she hated to look into it” (266).

Dreams and reality further intertwine through the mirrors of “Old Floating Cloud.” Though Old Kuang pretends he doesn’t have dreams, he ashamedly imagines the reflection

realistic nightmares in her husband (Ru-hua's father): "He saw his wife sucking at his leg like a cat eating meat. Her tongue was covered in thorns" (234). Ru-hua herself lives in confinement like a rat—"She lived like a rodent in the dark, moldy room. [. . .] Old Kuang [. . .] His guilt resembled that of someone who feeds a rat" (224). Old Kuang could never comprehend his wife's interiority, but he does articulate Ru-hua's devolution from metaphorical rodent to the literal one: "She used to imitate rats and bit everything in the house. Now she's actually turned into a rat" (229). Ru-hua's literal or symbolic association with the rat and madness is again obscured by the close of the novella, where she feeds a supposed female rat under her bed and "the scratching sound of the rat relieved her severe nervous pain" (265). Susanne Posburg convincingly suggests Ru-hua's disintegration towards death and exclusion from the external world "bear[s] the mask of madness, [but] it presents itself as an obsessive drive for wholeness, for presence, for meaning" (95).

"The Madwoman in the attic" archetype taken from Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, has crystallized discussion of female literary madness which directly relates to grotesque images of madness that fuse the worlds of insanity and irrationality. Although this study examines nineteenth century women's literature, its anxieties and preoccupations overlap with many of Can Xue's themes: "Enclosure and escape, fantasies [of . . .] maddened doubles, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors" (Gilbert and Gubar xi). Though frosty white and breathing out icy cold vapors, Ru-hua lights herself aflame towards the end of "Old Floating Cloud," where "The flame leapt higher and higher [. . .] Her eyes burned with fire, wide open in terror" (261). Claire Huot views Can Xue's fiction as beyond the confined tropes of "madwomen in the attic or Luxunesque" lucid madmen [. . .]; it is a ship of fools, with Can Xue sometimes at the helm" (30). Yinghong Li also incorporates the "madwoman in the

attic” into her discussion of Ru-hua, whose “nonchalant outer appearance [. . .] perfectly conceals her true state of mind, a state of absolute insanity” (207) through a mental visualization which seeks revenge against the absurdities around her. Works like “Old Floating Cloud” do portray a universalized paranoia that plagues all the characters of the text, but images of madwomen are a central feature of this world—“techniques that serve to counter logic [. . .] any logic, that of a dreamer, of a hallucinating subject, of a madperson” (30). Posburg accurately clarifies Can Xue’s position on Lu Xun’s madman that reverses the binaries of reason and madness: “Can Xue’s point rather is to challenge the very opposition of this binary opposition, blurring or even effacing the line of differentiation” (94).

Can Xue’s articulation of madness in “Old Floating Cloud” roots itself in hereditary madness and dysfunctional marriage relationships, which metonymically comment on the internalized madness of larger Chinese society. Mothers remain dominant conduits for madness in this novella, like Old Kuang’s mother who parrots Maoist rhetoric concerning spiritual pollution: “The distracting thoughts in one’s soul are the blasting fuse leading to detonation” (223). While Old Kuang is on the verge of mental breakdown, the mother persists in “undergoing a thorough cleansing of the soul” (223) and irrationally speaks of propagandistic newspaper’s reporting “spiritual doings” (228). Old Kuang again emphasizes the mother’s connection to a daughter’s patterned insanity, particularly where the realm of marriage is considered—“You’ve been crazy for a long time. [. . .] Your mother’s mad, too. It’s hereditary” (230). Mu-lan’s compulsive scrutiny of her scandalous neighbor Ru-hua also deliriously mimics the paranoia that pitted neighbor against neighbor during the anti-rightist campaigns of recent Chinese history. Mu-lan thus complains, “I get so entangled in all these thoughts that I’m worn out with neurosis” (257).

V. Encaged Eyes in “Skylight”

In Can Xue’s first English translated collection, *Dialogues in Paradise*, mirrored reflections and discourse on eyesight feature centrally in the magically lyrical stories that distinguish themselves with strong first-person subject narrators. The sexualized and fluid “Skylight” story debunks the binary divide between fantasy and reality through the non-gender specific narrator’s description of a dream world entered through the mysterious cupboard mirror. Early in the narrative, realism is disrupted when the narrator, unclassified as either male or female, crosses over into the hazy realm of the dead and the imagination in a non-object world: “At midnight the old cremator appeared in the mirror of the cupboard. He was a skein of vague stuff like a puff of air. He stretched his hand toward me from inside the mirror” (104). Ban Wang’s examination of desublimation in Can Xue’s work raises questions of character existence surrounding this ambiguous and phantasmagoric scene: “Is the old cremator a mirror image of the narrator, a double?” (“Angels” 247). According to postcolonial/post-feminist ethnographer Trinh T. Minh-ha, mirrors present a holistic yet fissured dual view of things: “It reveals to me my double, my ghost, my perfections as well as my flaws. [. . .] It also bears a magical character that has always transcended its functional nature” (22).

“Skylight” also weaves grotesque eyeballs and blurred vision thematically throughout the narrative, as the dimension of otherness between the cremator and the unidentified narrator is distorted. Illusion and reality again coalesce through “acts of seeing and being seen [that] are both imbued with symbolic meaning” (Solomon 244). Jon Solomon further elaborates on the images of eyesight that are associated with pain, the pain that results from a vision that confronts social reality and recognizes past blindness to historical horror— “[The eyes’s] function in the story may be taken to represent the act of sight in the abstract.

[. . .] It is as though the eye were trying to avoid being seen by others” (244). The narrator maintains a heightened awareness towards his/her obscured eyesight, which conflates the envisioned relationship between narrator viewer and cremator object. The narrator complains of eyeballs that protrude and hopes they might have a rest, complaining, “My eyeballs are always swollen and pained” (S 108). An uncanny mist directly clouds the scene as the narrator continues, “My vision was obscured by a vast haziness” (109). Eyeball imagery reoccurs in mirrored repetition, marrying the real and ethereal: “Under every bush there was a gray eyeball, [. . .]. I picked up one of them, but immediately it turned into powder” (115). Sties infect the narrator’s own eyes, which appear swollen and bloodshot, and through his observation, the cremator describes these eyes as “two iceballs” (116).

The symbolism of Zhuangzi’s “butterfly dream” also finally relates to the eyes and reoccurring dreams of “Skylight.” The narrator speaks of the old cremator’s inexplicable dream where a butterfly was flying through the forest while the cremator’s “eyes dripped with blood” (117), paralleled by the narrator’s later intention to take “butterfly samples, that red butterfly” (119). Lacan’s mirror stage and Zhuangzi’s “butterfly dream” are again invoked by Can Xue’s work, as Jon Solomon explains the prominent first-person self of the *Dialogues in Paradise* stories as “the narrative ‘I’ [. . . which] is itself a kind of eye. This narrative ‘eye’ begins its story by looking in the mirror”(Solomon 245) to view both the ghostly inner psyche and the larger authoritative psyche of recent Chinese history. Through an implicit connection to this butterfly dream of subjectivity, Can Xue inverts reflections of the self and the other into a “state of non-differentiation in which the Other exists as pure gaze” (Chow, *Ethics* 93); “one is not conscious of oneself as consciousness” (93). A similar state of non-differentiation occurs between the narrator and cremator once the narrator enters the magical reality of the cupboard mirror. Critic Patricia Waugh criticizes Lacan’s

mirror stage through a feminist lens, as “his concept of the mirror phase [is] central to the construction of an alienated subjectivity [. . . where] feminine subjectivity is simply the mirror of another’s (masculine) desire” (*Feminine Fictions* 55), as Can Xue flees from masculine socialist rationality and traditional Chinese literary criticism.

The dream-like *Dialogues in Paradise* visions coax the reader into the first-person narrator’s internal sphere, where questions of sanity become relatively subjective as everything “comes to the reader through the filter of the narrator’s ‘disrupted’ mind” (Wedell-Wedellsborg, “Ambiguous” 9). Discussion of sexual degeneration woven through hereditary lines in “Skylight” further corresponds to more general images of mental degeneration. The narrator’s mother is initially described in an image of hunched over torment as she moves her bowels “mad with pain” (103). The narrator comments on the suffering neglect of her childhood that manifests itself in the psychological sphere: “I was thrown into the chamber pot as soon as I was born. [. . .] steeped in urine [. . .] my head was swollen like a ball when I grew up. I have breathed in poisonous air for half my life” (107). Her father is a syphilis patient in the advanced stages, linking mental dissolution with sexual degeneration. The narrator’s entire family appears deranged and diseased, as their “transparent empty bellies[’s] huge stomachs were convulsing, greenish fluid oozing out. They were all staring at the smoky gray sky with their blank whitish eyes” (109). Madness and mortality link together in Can Xue’s debunking of objective reality, where the territories of the living and dead further intertwine. The narrator then finds herself in an ambiguous state of sexualized confinement with the cremator, saying in darkness, “The old man dug a hole [. . .]. We squeezed into the hole, then sealed up the entrance. [. . .] Everytime I was about to wake up, the rings swung me into deeper dreams” (111).

“Skylight” continues the hazy boundaries between hallucination and reality again with this confining motif of caged madness. After reading Can Xue’s autobiographical “A Summer Day in the Beautiful South,” it is not surprising the caged motif of madness reoccurs, given the fact that Can Xue’s entire family was forced to share a tiny mountain hut after the Communist Party condemned her parents as ultrarightists in 1959. After the narrator has entered the cremator’s ambiguous mirror world, she explains, “Again we squeezed into the straw cage. We were swung into deep, deep, dreams far from each other” (114-15). Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg describes the cage motif in the *Dialogues in Paradise* stories as “at once a place of refuge and a cage that can only be transgressed by force of imagination or magic” (“Ambiguous” 13-14). After a tempestuous and dark journey through the dreamscape of “Skylight,” Can Xue’s narrator does ultimately realize a subjective peace through metafictional confidence in the transformative imagination: “At long last I was fascinated by my own voice. It was a kind of low voice, both soft and beautiful. It poured out eternally to my ears” (120). Through this statement Can Xue provides strategy towards coping with an oppressive external reality, where one must cultivate the imaginative vision so that the reductive binaries between madness and sanity cease to divide.

VI. Dialogues in the Darkness of Paradise

As the extended title-story of the collection and Can Xue's most mystical piece, "Dialogues in Paradise" integrates fluid myths and lyrical illusions where eyes of lovers reveal androgynous mirrored reflections. By overturning woman's role as passive female "other," Can Xue challenges the patriarchal Confucian binary opposition between man and woman⁹, knit into the broader fabric of Chinese postmodernism which showcases the "binary oppositions such as good/evil, man/woman, life/death [. . .] dream/reality, self/other, individual/collective, which are then deconstructed" (N. Wang 506). The ancient Daoist ideals of yin-yang balance complement Can Xue's dismantling of gendered oppositions, allowing her to create "a conception of the self which transcends the traditional Western tendency to polarize the sexes into mutually exclusive categories" (Clarke 113). Like the stream of consciousness in Can Xue's flowing prose, this element of Daoist thought views gender as more fluid and "polyandrogynous" (113). Such equalized vision is best mirrored in the scene when the female narrator unites with her male teacher/seducer:

The spark belongs to me in reality, yet I recognized it in your eyes. Maybe we have the same type of eyes. Maybe the spark from one's eyes can light those of the other, though our own soul is always in chaos. We can only recognize ourselves in each other's eyes (*DP* 150).

Chinese avant-garde fiction scholar Yinghong Li aptly notes a lack of sex specific physical attributes assigned to the "Dialogues in Paradise" couple, though "'You' and 'I' can [still] recognize each other and communicate with each other above and beyond any temporal [, sexual,] and spatial barriers" (251).

The narrator in "Dialogues in Paradise" admits that the eyes are best sustained by the flame of the imagination, where she merges charged oppositions of blindness and vision—

“My soul is forever in darkness. I have to search, search the eyes that will light the darkness” (150). Vision warps as the female “I” narrator goes blind, lamenting the multiplicity and repetition of reflections—“Oh, yes, I’m going blind. So many double images” (154)—in a subjective world where “repetition transmutes illusion into reality” (Can Xue qtd. in Chen 350). A shadowy masculine figure frequently appears as an elusive threat to the narrator when “eyesight [becomes] all the more blurred” (*DP* 143) so that she cannot see the figure’s eyes. The eyes impose order upon Can Xue’s dark and dreamlike territory, which she metafactively controls through her deliberate use of fantasy, represented by the narrator’s open eyes in darkness: “I have to control by fantasy and let matters slide. I keep my eyes open in darkness” (156); “My eyes have long since gotten used to observing things in darkness” (139). Questioning the metafictional reflection of Can Xue’s own narrative desire, Yinghong Li wonders if “the explicit ‘you’ [is] not just the other side of the mirror showing her [Can Xue’s] own image” (259). The narrator’s lover (the “you”) with the contrasting eyes that “reflect two golden suns” (142) tells the narrator, “We go straight ahead holding hands with our eyes shut”(142). The lover offers the narrator the potential imagination of love as an escape vision from reality and from the ambiguous threat of the other male lurking in the shadows.

If vision in “Dialogues in Paradise” appears most lucid when eyes are shut in darkness, preoccupations surface about the reality of the characters’s daylight existences and experiences. Just as the ethereal existence of the “magic mirror” Wang Zi-guang is questioned in “Yellow Mud Street,” the narrator of “Dialogues in Paradise” confronts her “you” lover about his indefinite existence, for in a photograph he appears as her uncle morphing into her cousin, finally changing “back into your hazy self” (144). The narrator continues, “Even now your existence remains a question. [. . .] You might disappear one

and visceral associations with the “antihumanistic ravage of the Cultural Revolution”—though Wang rejects reading the texts with a strict degree of historical reference (6). The caged motif also connects to magical realism’s tendency to melt into “psychic’ realism, that is, a physical manifestation of what has taken place inside the psyche” (Delbaere-Garant 255). The narrator also runs like crazy from the shadowy male threat and describes a madwoman stalker which quite possibly only exists in the fictional realm of the attic as a double: “A woman follows me everywhere, a disheveled-haired, boisterous savage, laughing like a madwoman” (*DP* 153). While Wang also reads Can Xue’s voice as more androgynous, she does admit such images, and “her hysterical mode of narration was indeed often seen as political in various ways, are gender specific and a camouflage of the feminist resistance to the ‘institutionalized patriarchal rule’” (6). Further fusing the human and animal realms, the narrator comments on her boundary-crossing neurosis therapeutically channeled through a narrative stream: “I am decreed by fate to talk endlessly, maybe because I was raised by rabbits when I was young” (159).

VII. "Everything Seems True": "The Apple Tree in the Corridor"

Can Xue's most widely received and recent English-translated collection *The Embroidered Shoes* contains the final novella-length "Apple Tree in the Corridor," which circulates the central themes of magical mirrors and warped vision. Stylistically patterned in the mode of *Dialogues in Paradise*, this also lyrical and nonreferential narrative employs a first-person subjectivity, though different speakers command the "I" voice throughout the different subsections. Little criticism in English exists on *The Embroidered Shoes* collection, though "Apple Tree in the Corridor" was first published in China in 1987, and the mysterious mirrors of "Apple Tree in the Corridor" are discussed in a recent *China Daily* article which mentions the mirror-looking hobby shared by the first-person narrator, her third sister, and her mother.

The principle narrator's mother stores a small mirror in her pocket, as well as a polished mirror inherited from the narrator's maternal grandmother. A letter "E" magically appears on the little round mirror in the sunshine, disappearing once indoors: "I looked at it and saw a big letter E, a black E. I turned it round and round, and the letter was still E. How could the mirror show an E?" (196). The narrator speaks of a vague and fractured reality of a self-reflection cast in a repulsive mirror: "I dug out a broken mirror and looked into it. I saw a vague lump of a face. [. . .] I tossed the mirror aside. It crashed" (149). Trinh T. Minh-ha addresses the motif of the broken mirror: "A shattered mirror still functions as a mirror; it may destroy the dual relation of I to I but leaves the infiniteness of life's reflections intact" (23). The *China Daily* article also does draw a relevant conclusion surrounding the paradox of these mirrors, though material published in China must be read subjectively, given lingering government control over the Chinese media: "The paradox is apparent in Can Xue's novel in that the reflection in the mirror is not reliable, but one can

never see oneself without a mirror. The same is true of the relationship between a person and the objective world around him or her" (2). Correspondingly Can Xue portrays her fiction as a metaphorical plants that "grow[s] up in the West, but [she] dig[s] them up and replant[s] them in China's deep ground, a rich five thousand year history" (McCandlish, "Stubbornly" 6). The conventions and expectations of Chinese collective society function as the mirror from which Can Xue's fiction and her characters, no matter how non-referential they may become, can never completely escape.

Mirrors offer an escape from objective reality in "Apple Tree in the Corridor" while perpetuating flaws and illusions in subjective reality. The third sister desires to look in mirrors when she is depressed, though she laments this imperfect escape, where "some spots on [the mirror] can never be cleaned" (158)—just as the fierce wounds in recent Chinese history cannot completely heal. As the third sister recounts her story, her mirror mimics phantasmagoric reflections in nature: "The moon was shining, the stars were shining. The little round mirror in my hand was also shining" (179), corresponding to popular Buddhist and Daoist images of the moon on the surface of water. Motionless water is described as a mirror, where the reflected moonlight "frequently point[s] to the illusory attachment of the unenlightened consciousness to external signs" (Plaks, "Asian Art" 4), just like Can Xue's fight against the delusional rationality of "iron-strong" reality. The mother also rants about her heirloom mirror with the sight of a supposed fire dragon at its center. The mirror represents escape for the psychologically tormented mother, who "decided to go far away with the mirror" (ATC 200). The mother eventually shatters the mirror for its reflection of disturbing illusions of flames and a camel, though her son accuses her of rudely destroying a family heirloom. The shattered mirrored exhibits a disillusioned view of the traditional yet dysfunctional family in Chinese society.

Butterflies once again reveal themselves as a vague motif in “Apple Tree in the Corridor,” re-invoking the Zhuangzi dream’s pattern of questioning the appearance of existence. The third sister has visions of an endless butterfly stream encircling her around a mountain, which no one comprehends. The detective figure then accuses the sister of not believing that he is a real being after his marriage proposal—“You have a skeptical, indifferent attitude toward my existence,” he said [. . .] You told your brother [. . .] that I was nothing but a product of the collective imagination” (162)—and an old fool is criticized as stupid because “he believes he is unique” (191). These jabs at the collective imagination serve as Can Xue’s assertion of individual vision over the rigid history of Chinese collectivism, as she admits to write against the authoritarianism of Chinese culture, which extends from ancient times to present.

Where would a discussion of vision in the “Apple Tree in the Corridor” stand without connecting to the grotesque eyeball themes? A paranoid phobia strikes the family surrounding glaucoma and diseases where symptoms include hallucinations and “dizziness [. . .] solely caused by the eyes,” while narrator complains, “My eyeballs expanded so fast that I felt they might drop out of their sockets” (149). Again, shutting the eyes to the world provides an escape through the multifaceted sensory imagination in Can Xue’s work. The third sister describes such lucid vision revealed by relative blindness: “Closing my eyes, I could see big raindrops” (168), and “Whenever I closed my eyes, a pattering sound woke me up” (169). In the subsequent detective/doctor’s story, the detective speaks of happiness and self-satisfaction that stems from shutting the eyes to an infective and brainwashing reality, easily internalized by the citizens of an authoritarian state: “I swim here and there, never opening my eyes. That’s why I never have eye disease” (190).

In an interview Can Xue commented on the mysterious mirror that incessantly draws her characters to their own images. She illustrates the metafictional impossibility for writers to consciously observe such self-reflection—"for a writer, it is impossible to observe oneself. At least not at the height of one's creative activity. I believe one sees oneself only after a work has been created" (qtd. in Chen 365). Can Xue's belief corresponds to Michel Foucault's utopian description of the mirror as a paradoxical placeless place in "Of Other Spaces," stating, "In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not [. . .]. It makes this place that I occupy at once absolutely real . . . and absolutely unreal" (qtd. in Chen 364). In my interview with Can Xue, she depicted this doubled reflection as an abstract character in her head: "When I write, I always imagine a person behind me, editing my words" (McCandlish, "Stubbornly" 6). Images of physical and metaphorical mirrors also endow Can Xue's writing with the fantastical possibility of a utopian landscape amidst the dystopic control of recent Chinese history.

The "Apple Tree in the Corridor" circularly questions the lines between illusion and reality in the narrator's patterned introduction and conclusion. The narrator opens with a subjective view of reality through which "everything gives the appearance of being real (ATC 127). By the conclusion she echoes this extended state of illusory reality that plagues her entire family:

Everything seems true: The apple tree planted in the cement floor in the corridor is bearing harvestable fruit, a mysterious silhouette of a camel appears in front of the window, the blue-skinned old woman is flying with a pair of wings like a wasp, my third sister's fiancé has turned into a mask on the wall, and I am thirty-five years old" (220-21).

The narrator's distortion of the fibers of both irrationality and sanity in the fabric of "Apple Tree in the Corridor" corresponds to Jing Wang's description of Can Xue's circular textuality: "Hers [Can Xue's text] is a vicious narrative circle that always brings us back, after a journey through the savage imagery of schizophrenia and cannibalism, to the same closure—the cemetery of the mind" ("Introduction" 5-6). The Chinese critic Ji Hongzhen interprets such circles allegorically as a viscous and unceasing circle of Chinese existence, popularized by Lu Xun's view, where "textuality [. . .] is also a temporal circle in which the individual memory is never allowed to unfold undisturbed, and in which the future is conspicuously absent as a point beyond the circle" (qtd. in Wedell-Wedellsborg, *Introduction to "Confronting"* 181). The detective's long, dull story brands this circular metafictiveness for Can Xue. He laments, "I haven't told the story as I intended. I am forever circling around, never able to approach reality" (*ATC* 192).

Madness also infects the family line in "Apple Tree in the Corridor," integrated into a metafictional discourse on the situation of madness within magical realism. The narrator's mad mother rants that her family, "these people[,] determined to live a kind of nondescript, weird life that runs counter to both reality and law" (205). The narrator associates the madness and decay of her family with a bad dream that personalizes the collective psyche, while suggesting the individual neurosis can never be divorced from the trappings of external society. The narrator creates a nightmare through which she recognizes her father's fear of "black men in your childhood dreams" (209). By observing her mother's phobias and father's fear, the narrator comforts herself: "So that dream was not my unique creation; it was my family legacy" (209).

Although Melissa Ann Qualls's thesis offers a superficial and simplistic sojourn through the territory of madness in *The Embroidered Shoes* and lacks understanding of the

Chinese context, her thesis is one of the only critical examinations of this collection that has been published in English, and at least to Qualls's credit, she does effectively connect Can Xue's discourse on madness with Michel Foucault's foundational theory in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Foucault particularly relates to the metaphors of confined madness in Can Xue's fiction, again resurfacing in "Apple Tree in the Corridor" with the narrator's third dream section. In this dream, she lives in a cave, which "has aroused so much disturbance" (213). Foucault intellectualizes

Confinement merely manifested what madness, in its essence, was: a manifestation of non-being [. . .]. Confinement is the practice which corresponds most exactly to madness experienced as unreason, that is, as the empty negativity of reason; by confinement, madness is acknowledged to be *nothing*. That is, on one hand madness is immediately perceived as difference. (115-116)

Caged narrators conveying the cage of history frequent the contemporary Chinese avant-garde, as Can Xue's tropes easily connect to those of author Mo Yan, whose "caged narrator must rely heavily on the constraint of the iron cage [. . .]. The cage has become the home of identity and permanence; it house the repository of images, fragmentary and whole" (Chan, "Split" 88). Confinement in Can Xue's fiction serves as a reoccurring physical manifestation of the less tangible psychological caging and control that continues to censor and restrict Chinese popular culture.

Finally, a fusion of the human and animalistic worlds appears in the magical realism of "The Apple Tree in the Corridor," connecting to the carnivalesque attributes of Foucault's framework of madness. In the story's ninth section of the narrator's "last dream," humans devolve into bodies with beastly, insect-like features. An old woman resembles "a funny little animal" (ATC 217), the narrator's father's thin hair props up like a chicken's tail,

funny little animal" (ATC 217), the narrator's father's thin hair props up like a chicken's tail, a dead centipede is heard groaning, as many frenzied "people were running madly on the street, every one trailing a long tail behind. [. . .] Everybody is running [. . .] just like maggots in the toilet" (219-220). In his discussion of "The Insane," Foucault links insanity with such animality:

Madness borrowed its face from the mask of the beast. Those chained to the cell walls were no longer men whose minds had wandered, but beasts preyed upon by a natural frenzy: as if madness, at its extreme point, freed from that moral unreason in which its most attenuated forms are enclosed, managed to rejoin, by a paroxysm of strength, the immediate violence of animality [. . .]. For classicism, madness in its ultimate form is man in relation to his animality, without other reference, without any recourse (72-74).

In his examination of insanity in grotesque fiction (i.e. the carnivalesque in magical realism), Bernard Mc Elroy cites the above passage from Foucault's depiction of madness and animalism in the seventeenth-century view. Mc Elroy suggests such madness contains a power as "a form of knowledge, of alien knowledge [. . .]. It is the very *otherness* of the madman's view that can often make his observations unsettling" (95), seeing things that rationalized humans choose to ignore through complacent blindness. The "Apple Tree in the Corridor" penetrates through such blindness towards knowledge through the narrator's mad dreams that expose the psyche of social reality.

VIII. Conclusion: Writing the Magical “Zigzag Way”

After exploring Can Xue’s instances of mirroring and discourse on madness through the magical realism of the novellas of *Old Floating Cloud*, “Skylight” and “Dialogues in Paradise” from *Dialogues in Paradise*, and in *The Embroidered Shoes*’s “Apple Tree in the Corridor,” I find myself returning to the initial questions from my interview with Can Xue this past summer. While respecting the friendship and honest exchange we enjoyed during the interview, I will still challenge some of Can Xue’s statements that deny her political functioning, while I can imagine her need to also protect herself from indicating any subversive elements in her works to the outside world. Magical realism provides an effective lens for conceptualizing Can Xue’s negotiations between internal and external worlds, dreams and reality, and the self versus the collective, as an individual women writing amidst rationalizing male-centered criticism. Similar to the “small zigzag path” (142) that ephemerally leads into a hazy purple desert in “Dialogues in Paradise,” the political function of Can Xue’s “literature of the soul” comfortably correlates with poet Wang Ping’s notion of the “Zigzag Way”¹⁰ for contemporary Chinese writers: “If the work is too political, then it can’t get back into China at all. But I guess Chinese poets have had a history of writing in a zigzag way, you know, alluding to the politics and what is going on; we’re quite good at that” (61). Magical realist texts do often “use their magic against the established social order. [. . .] In several instances, magical realist texts are written in reaction to totalitarian regimes” (Faris 179). Magical realist fiction demands narrative and parallel social freedoms, like Can Xue’s pursuit of individual escape from Chinese literature’s constrictive reality. As an apposite metaphor for magical realism’s negotiation between the political and artistic spheres threatened by Chinese censorship, Frank Stewart summarizes this double-bind: “Chinese

writers today, like their predecessors, have learned to avoid censorship while striving to tell the truth: writing, as [Wang Ping] says, in a ‘zigzag way’” (ix).

Can Xue and the Chinese avant-garde invoke diffused historical experience without being trampled on by tangible reality, which helps to limit their censorship. Although most of Can Xue’s works are still in publication because they are inaccessible and imaginatively nonreferential, the fact that two of her pieces were banned in Beijing confirms her subversive position; she admittedly “write[s] against the authoritarianism of traditional Chinese culture, and the government happens to be from that culture” (McCandlish, “Stubbornly 5), a culture that she hopes to change through her young readers. Wu Liang extensively examines the avant-garde’s treatment of the burdensome Cultural Revolution memories, declaring writers like Can Xue to be “literary separatists” (124) often more detached from history and politics than 1980s literary mainstream, “although politics and society always unexpectedly cast shadows over their environment and experiences” (125)—forcing them once again to walk the “zigzag path.” Liu Kang and Xiaobing Tang distinguish such shadows of thought as “cultural reflection” (“Introduction” 16) in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, where historical detail becomes a present absence. Additionally inscribed into Can Xue’s “zigzag path” is a frantic, individual voice radicalizing subjectivity within a social collective. Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg captures Can Xue’s state of cultural schizophrenia, fractured between the “often evoked dichotomy of a *xiao wo* (small self) and a *da wo* (larger self), the former morally inferior and subservient to the latter” greater society (“Ambiguous” 18). Even Can Xue problematizes the Chinese context of such individuality while “attempt[ing] to confront the internalized conflicts and dilemmas of the self of a female Chinese individual” (19).

Careful balance must be applied while reading Can Xue through the lens of magical realism, for as a Western reader with barely intermediate Chinese language skills, I have been hyperconscious not to over-historicize, allegorize, or Orientalize her writings through a removed gaze. Pointing to the limits of cultural and linguistic translation of Chinese literature and the “slim storylines but heavy textuality” (7) in fiction like that of Can Xue’s, Claire Huot cautions the non-Chinese reader against “some form of out-of-language interpretation, something akin to what [Fredric] Jameson called ‘national allegory’ reading” (7). Jameson raises the positional question of the writer in the third-world context (including a significant portion of world magical realist literature, i.e. China), and “to what must be called the function of the intellectual, it being understood that in the third-world situation the intellectual is always in one way or another a political intellectual” (Jameson 325). While the Western reader tends to emphatically read third-world narratives as pure national allegories, Jameson concludes that the luxury of “placeless individuality” (336) is a luxury we deny to third-world culture, and through Western vision, “the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” (336). Can Xue thus acts politically by clinging to her individual imaginative vision in a culture with harsh collective realities; an oppressive external culture is impressed upon Can Xue both within China and from the Western gaze that would read her voice as representative of the Chinese condition.

While Can Xue may not proclaim herself a political activist or feminist, as a writer exploring the marginalized tensions of a woman writing the internal “literature of the soul” in a culture that psychoanalyzes and dismisses her works, even further marginalized as Chinese literature within the contemporary world canon, Can Xue maintains an active political resistance through her fiction. Jon Solomon portrays her paradoxical role as a

“twice-repressed margin” (265); “Inside China, however, Can Xue’s works don’t represent just the margin but rather seem to speak of a move toward the center and resistance to that move” (265). The magical realism that imbues stories such as “Yellow Mud Street” and “Old Floating Cloud” appears more historically referential and grounded in relationships and physical detail, while the fluid abstractions of “Dialogues in Paradise’s” world still challenge gendered binary oppositions. The reader of Can Xue’s fiction must balance her fiction’s struggle to exorcise the “soul engineering” of communist political oppression while still painting a utopian or nightmarish dream-world that neglects tangible reality. When we examine the historical details of Can Xue’s life, the irrational yet historicized dimension of her fiction crystallizes: Can Xue’s parents were condemned as ultrarightists and sent to reform labor camps in the late 1950s, her grandmother subsequently raised Can Xue and her family on the brink of starvation, and Can Xue’s education was discontinued with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 after just completing primary school. But rather than exorcise the memories of such historical oppression through the realism of bitter revenge, Can Xue transforms such trauma through the fiction of magical sub-conscious experience, as her writing forever marries the “zigzag” line. Can Xue remains defiant, engaged, and optimistic in her struggle for androgynous fictional subjectivity, while acknowledging the bitter futility of truly attaining such freedom of vision as a current woman writing in a China still clouded by traditional impulses and imposed control upon artistic expression.

Notes

Abbreviations of Can Xue's works used within my text:

- YMS "Yellow Mud Street." *Old Floating Cloud*. Northwestern UP, 1991.
- OFC "Old Floating Cloud." *Old Floating Cloud*. Northwestern UP, 1991.
- S "Skylight." *Dialogues in Paradise*. Northwestern UP, 1989.
- DP "Dialogues in Paradise." *Dialogues in Paradise*. Northwestern UP, 1989.
- ATC "Apple Tree in the Corridor." *The Embroidered Shoes*. Holt, 1997.

1. This is the translation Can Xue (残雪) suggested for her pseudonym in our interview—"the dirty snow that refuses to melt." Dr. Vivian Shen, Professor of Chinese at Davidson College suggests the name Can Xue more accurately translates as "remaining, resilient, or clinging snow."

2. Li Ziyun articulates a similar conception of Chinese literary feminism, reflecting what strikes me as inaccurate and somewhat naïve assumptions about Western feminism:

This feminism is different from Western ideas of women's rights, however, whose more militant ideas have already attracted the interest of scholars in China but haven't reached women authors. When we in China speak of a 'feminist' viewpoint, we simply mean the author writes and examines matters as a woman, considering the real life situations women face [. . .]. It also means that the language has a feminine flavour (11-12).

See Li Ziyun, "Foreword," Trans. Joe Adams, *Contemporary Chinese Women Writers II*, (Beijing: Panda, 1991): 5-17. While Can Xue herself may not overtly associate with Western feminism, she is much more informed on the topic than Li Ziyun, and Can Xue hopes to be known as an "androgynous writer" rather than one of "feminine flavour."

3. To research the mode of magical realism I consulted numerous other background sources that do not appear cited within the body of my paper. See María-Elena Angulo, *Magic Realism: Social Context and Discourse*, (New York: Garland, 1995); Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved* (Antimony, New York: Garland, 1985); Patricia Hart, *Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende*, (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1989); Elsa Linguanti, Francesco Casotti, and Carmen Concilio, eds., *Coterminus Worlds: Magical Realism and Contemporary Post-colonial Literature in English*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999); Emir Rodriguez Monegal, "Surrealism, Magical Realism, Magical Fiction: A Study in Confusion," *Surrealismo/Surrealismos. Latinoamérica Y Español* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1975).

4. For information on the influence of Daoism and other Chinese wisdom and history on Kafka and Borges's fiction, see Jonathan Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: Norton, 1998). As Kafka wrote "The Great Wall of China," he "kept at least one copy of the translated Taoist classical texts in his office drawer, and had marked up the margins of passages that appealed to him" (Spence 227). In "The Garden of Forking Paths," Borges employs a Chinese narrator, presenting "the intensest possible subtlety of the Chinese blends" (Spence 236); "The Chinese side of Borges's condensed yet intricate plot thus fitted into certain preconceptions of earlier Chinoiserie, but the two other main aspects [. . .] were drawn from the imaginative use of quite different sources of history" (235).

5. Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg refers to the theories of both Lacan and Julia Kristeva in her application of the "mirror stage" towards Can Xue's texts. While Kristeva disagrees with elements of Lacan's theory through her focus on semiotics rather than the imaginary, like Wedell-Wedellsborg, I wanted to avoid a semantics argument here, more importantly

hoping to convey the symbolic relevance of the “mirror stage,” which was first coined by Lacan. See Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg, “Ambiguous Subjectivity: Reading Can Xue,” *Modern Chinese Literature*, 8 (1994): 7-20.

6. For more on the tale of Zhuangzi’s “butterfly dream,” see A. C. Graham, trans., *Chuang-tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981) 59-61. In the second inner chapter entitled “The Sorting Which Evens Things Out,” Chuang Chou “does not know whether he is Chou who dreams he is a butterfly or a butterfly who dreams he is Chou. Between Chou and the butterfly there was necessarily a dividing; just this is what is meant by the transformation of things” (61). Zhuangzi is the pinyin spelling of Chuang-tzu or Chuang Chou, which is the spelling Graham employs in this text.

7. In “The Consumption of Color and the Politics of White Skin in Post-Mao China,” Louise Schein associates the concept of “gender flattening” with women during Cultural Revolution compared to the current situation in China, where

“She” [the Western feminine ideal] signifies modernity in a neat voluptuous embodiment, often bedecked in a finery [. . .]. “She” is femininity, an essentialized and potent difference much cherished after the gender flattenings of the Cultural Revolution. (475)

Schein examines the current polemics among both Chinese and Western scholars concerning women’s status as subaltern under post-Maoist reforms: “While the Maoist period (1949-1979) fell far short of utopia, many point to negative, retrogressive trends in the current years such as intensification of the gendered division of labor, discrimination in the workplace [. . .]. But many also stress that the current period is conditioned by several decades of at least partially successful attempts to overhaul Chinese gender norms” (484).

For an outdated and simplistic yet famous study on the place of women within Communist Revolutionary China, see Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, Trans. Anita Barrows (New York: Boyars, 1974). Kristeva visited China near the end of the Cultural Revolution and yet surprisingly presents a somewhat romanticized view of the communist revolution's anti-patriarchal nature as a more fundamental women's revolution. See chapters on "Socialism and Feminism" and "Women in the Party."

8. The May Fourth writer Lu Xun (1881-1936) is popularly known as the father of modern Chinese literature. His "Diary of a Madman" story inverts the opposition between madness and rationality. See Lu Xun, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, Trans. William Lyell (Honolulu: U Hawaii P, 1990).

9. For Western feminist criticism that parallels Can Xue's implicit critique of the binary opposition between man and woman, see Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, Trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1975)—
 "Man/Woman: always the same metaphor [. . .] wherever the discourse is organized. [. . .] Thought has always worked through opposition [. . .] to a binary system, related to 'the couple, man/woman?" (64). As an expansive resource on the deconstruction of gendered binary oppositions that catalogues the theories of Cixous, Kristeva, Lacan, Foucault, Luce Irigaray, among other (post)structuralists, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990).

10. Thanks to Dr. Holland for calling my attention to the *Manoa* volume on "The Zigzag Way," which provided such the fitting metaphor of the "zigzag path" for Can Xue's writing. See Frank Stewart and Arthur Sze, eds. Sze, Arthur, *The Zigzag Way: Avant-Garde Poetry from China*, *Manoa*, 10:1 (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1999) 59-65.

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