

TAKING TIGER MOUNTAIN BY STRATEGY:
TEXT AND CONTEXT IN CAN XUE'S SHORT STORY
"THE SKYLIGHT"

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ABSTRACT

This essay presents a reading of Can Xue's short story "The Skylight" from the point of view of Chinese intellectual history. The second part of the thesis includes a translation of this story.

The essay begins with a look at some of the problems revealed by Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Notes From Underground. Dostoyevsky's writing provides a paradigmatic example of the predicament faced by intellectuals outside of Western Europe and North America. Consideration of these ideas in Dostoyevsky's writing leads to a discussion of cultural process in general, deriving insight especially from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on monologic and dialogic discourse.

From this groundwork, the essay proceeds to reconsider the meaning of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, following the idea argued by Liu Xiaobo that the Cultural Revolution was an example of repetition with change on a cultural level.

An examination of Can Xue's texts, exemplified in this essay by a close reading of "The Skylight," reveals the problems of subjectivity and political power in contemporary China. "The Skylight" enacts the breakdown of subjectivity in a crazed internality unbounded by any boundary of difference save for that between text and reader. The key to understanding this

difference may be found in the relation between Can Xue's texts and their context. "The Skylight" is a strategic caveat, an example of extreme monologism aimed at a forced implosion of political and social power in the broadest sense.

This thesis derives its name from one of the revolutionary operas of the Cultural Revolution era. In their tense relation to the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, Can Xue's stories both partake in and attempt to destroy the ideals of that era.

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Biographical Sketch

Jon Solomon was born on December 31, 1962 in Boston, Massachusetts. He attended high school at Beaver Country Day School in Newton, Mass., and recieved a B.A. degree in Chinese Language from Brown University in 1984. He studied in Taipei, Taiwan at the Mandarin Training Center of Taiwan Normal University during 1982-3; in the Department of Chinese Literature at National Taiwan University during 1985-86; and finally in the Department of Chinese Literature at Peking University during the 1986-7 academic year. In addition, Jon also studied French theater and literature in the Summer of 1981 at L'Institut d'Études Françaises d'Avignon.

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PART ONE: CRITICAL ESSAY

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Precisely why, for what purpose do I want to write? If it isn't for readers, surely I could just remember everything without putting it down on paper?

Exactly; but on paper it will somehow be more impressive. There is something awe-inspiring about it, one sits more severely in judgement on oneself, one's style is enhanced. Besides, perhaps I really shall get relief from writing it down. Now, for example, I am particularly oppressed by one ancient memory. It sprang clearly into my mind the other day, and since then has remained with me like a tiresome tune that keeps on nagging at one. And yet one must get rid of it. I have hundreds of memories like it; but from time to time one out of the hundreds becomes prominent and oppresses me. For some reason I believe that if I write it down I shall get rid of it. Why not try?¹

Whether Can Xue ever experienced a similar motivation to write as the one described above is a moot point. What interests us here is the idea of writing with an exorcistic function. Can Xue's short stories are filled with demons, but at times these ghoulish figures would seem to be called in as allies more than anything else. The true object of the exorcism may be another figure: "ancient memories" perhaps, the spectre of darkness prowling Chinese culture. In this essay, I shall attempt to examine the possibilities of Can Xue's writing, her short stories² and "The Skylight" in particular, as a textualized form

¹Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Jesse Coulson, tr., Notes from Underground, Penguin Books, London, 1987, p. 46

²The stories referred to here are primarily the short ones (excluding the

of cultural critique. At times, Can Xue's devotion to this project has all the rigour, zeal (and tact) of a frontal assault by a detachment of Red Guards. It's a question of strategy, after all, and "Tiger Mountain" clearly cannot be taken without it. In this respect, I think, Can Xue's short stories attempt to point beyond merely symptomatic and critical relations to their context.

The interpretative framework one assigns to Can Xue's context is crucial to situating the text. One plausible contextual framework is offered by a more strictly defined literary field of interpretation. This level of interpretation would focus primarily on the mimetic aspects of Can Xue's work in relation to an accepted canon of "modernist"³ writing imported from the West (notably Kafka and Marquez). Although I would not deny the importance of this comparative endeavour (which could presumably be the rewarding focus of another essay), it may initially tend to obscure part of the very problem to which Can Xue's texts are addressed within their own domain.⁴ Here,

longer pieces "Yellow Mud Street" and "The Hoary Old Floating Cloud") contained in the two published collections of Can Xue's work: Can Xue, Huang Ni Jie "Yellow Mud Street", (Taipei: Yuanshen Chubanshe, 1987); and Tiantang li de Duihua "Dialogues in Heaven", (Beijing: Zuoia Chubanshe, 1988).

³The term "modernist" is used here in the broad and extremely loose application which it is often given within Chinese debates on the subject. For a more detailed treatment of the subject, including the problem of definition in the Chinese context, see He, Wangxian, ed., Xifang Xiandai pai Wenxue Wenti Lunzhengji, (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1984).

⁴This problem is summed up by Liu Xiaobo: "Currently there are some who

we are primarily concerned with Can Xue's text in relation to its preponderantly monologic context. To this end, we shall not dispense entirely with the idea of comparison. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's short story Notes from Underground shares some important similarities with and differences from Can Xue's works; at the risk of chasing after red herrings, an investigation of Can Xue's short stories will be well served by a preliminary discussion of Notes.

As I have suggested in an earlier preface to Can Xue's work⁵, her writing is perhaps best situated in the context of a loosely-defined movement in post-Mao China which is commonly referred to as the *wenhua fansi yundong* ("cultural critique movement"). Reduced to the most simple schematic formula, the problematic addressed by this movement is very similar to the one faced by Dostoyevsky and his contemporaries in 19th century Russia, although the specific agendas were in fact

find a link between the Cultural Revolution and the May Fourth Movement, between importing foreign culture and confusion of thought. Objectively speaking, this cannot but cause our reflection on the Cultural Revolution to stop on the surface, to cause the Chinese nation, having just barely begun opening up to move once again toward isolation." (From Liu Xiaobo, "Wufa Huibi de Fansi: You jibu Zhishi fenzi ticai de Xiaoshuo Suo Xiangdao de" in Zhongguo, 1986.4 (April), p. 109. The translation is from an unpublished manuscript by Harold M. Tanner, p. 29.)

⁵Su, Zhean (Jon Solomon), "Cong Ji'an zhong Zhanfang Shengming de Lingguang" ("A Magical Life-light Bursting Forth from the Darkness"), preface to Can Xue, Huang Ni Jie "Yellow Mud Street", (Taipei: Yuanshen Chubanshe, 1987).

quite different. This essay, (committed primarily to a discussion of Can Xue's short stories), cannot possibly accommodate a full examination of the cultural critique movement in contemporary China, much less attempt an historical comparison with a similar problematic in Russia. Since we have begun with Dostoyevsky, however, and will return to him momentarily, perhaps it is worthwhile to summarize the Russian problematic with a quote from historian Alexandre Koyré:

"En effet, on peut dire que toute l'histoire intellectuelle de la Russie moderne est dominée et déterminée par un seul et même fait: le fait du contact et de l'opposition entre la Russie et l'Occident, celui de la pénétration de la civilisation européenne en Russie. [In effect, one can say that the entire intellectual history of modern Russia is determined and dominated by a single and constant fact: the fact of the contact and the opposition between Russia and the West, that of the penetration of European civilization in Russia.]"⁶

For a student of Chinese history, reading this passage must invoke a moment of recognition, recalling numerous instances throughout the last 150 years or so of vociferous debates and conflict.⁷

⁶Alexandre Koyré, La Philosophie et le Problème National en Russie au Début du XIXe Siècle (Paris: Champion, 1929), p. 9-10

⁷The reader may fault me here for relying on the supposedly outdated "tradition/modernity" paradigm recently critiqued by Paul Cohen and others (Paul A. Cohen, Discovering History in China (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), esp. chapter 2). In as much as this paradigm has been precariously conflated with particularly American contingencies, care is indeed required; however, the idea that this paradigm is now somehow passé in spite of its constant recurrence in Chinese political and intellectual debates seems to

Against the background of a century and more of critical conflict between proponents of "total Westernization" and nativist defenders, Can Xue's writing can be placed in the context of the most recent and particularly iconoclastic round of critique beginning with the end of the Cultural Revolution. Jin Guantao's Behind the Phenomenon of History⁸, Sun Lung-kee's 'The Deep Structure' of Chinese Culture⁹ and Bo Yang's The Ugly Chinese¹⁰, are notable examples of this disparate critical process in textual form. More specific to the field of literature per se is Liu Xiaobo's essay titled "An Inescapable Reflection: Thoughts Provoked by the Image of the Intellectual in Contemporary Chinese Literature"¹¹. Although each of these works displays significant differences in terms of focus and approach, they do share a common view. As textual practices of belie a lingering attachment in the midst of the critique itself to the interstices of positivism and cold-war power concerns which were ostensibly supposed to be isolated - I am tempted to say contained - from this misunderstood paradigm in the first place.

⁸Jin, Guantao, Zai Lishi de Biaoxiang Beihou "Behind the Phenomenon of History", (Sichuan: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 1984).

⁹Sun, Longji (Lung-Kee), Zhongguo Wenhua de 'Shenceng Jiegou' "The 'Deep Structure' of Chinese Culture", (Hong Kong: Ji Xian She, 1983).

¹⁰Bo Yang, Choulou de Zhongguoren "The Ugly Chinese", (Taipei: Linbai Chubanshe, 1987).

¹¹Liu Xiaobo, "Wufa Huibi de Fansi: You jibu Zhishi fenzi ticai de Xiaoshuo Suo Xiangdao de" in Zhongguo, 1986.4 (April), p. 109. The translation I have used is from an unpublished manuscript by Harold M. Tanner, titled "An Inescapable Reflection: Thoughts Provoked by the Image of the Intellectual in Contemporary Chinese Literature"

critique operating in a Chinese language-medium, they are all more or less aware and critical of a certain monologic discourse which, they would claim, exercises a deterministic and paralyzing effect on Chinese discourse in general. The area and limits of this narrow discursive terrain are ultimately established by the Chinese Communist Party Central, but in the actual production of discourse, the party's role cannot be seen in purely coercive terms. The amount of written materials constantly produced in the People's Republic today is enormous. As Wang Meng, the minister of culture, has said, there is no organized system of pre-publication censorship in China.¹² Of course, there are many examples of censorship after publication, but these are after all not very many and primarily serve a representational function. The mass of written material which is produced rarely, if at all, breaks through the static repetition of familiar themes to explore other discursive possibilities. In effect, writing in the P.R.C. today often functions as a kind of pink noise, a plethora of verbiage which fills up the limited discursive area represented by the party with a safely repetitive hum. The centre of this mass is occupied by the party; in other words, the Party is central because it occupies a representational centre. The locus of the centre, however, cannot be understood as a fixed spatial point. The flip-flops of numerous campaigns

¹²This remark was heard by the author in talk given by Wang Meng in 1988 at the Friendship Hotel in Beijing.

since Liberation make it clear that time is an important determinant element of the party's specific contingent position. The sheer volume of literary production in what I would call a "pink-noise" mode assures the continual turgidity and safety of the discursive terrain thereby staked out. This is, I think, a significant difference between the context that informed Dostoyevsky's Notes from Underground and that of Can Xue's work. Although the general problematic is essentially similar -- the insertion of European forms into a "pristine" native tradition with extended historical antecedents -- Can Xue operates in a context where discourse had already been solidified into the monologic sludge of post-Yenan Maoism. By contrast, at the time when Dostoyevsky was writing, the Russian context was still fraught with an intense dialogic struggle. The importance of this difference and its implications for cultural critique cannot be overemphasized.

In order to clarify what is meant here by the idea of "monologism," an idea which is central to our discussion, it may be necessary to digress for a moment and establish a common ground. I have taken my use of the terms "monologic" and "dialogic" from the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin. In Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics, Bakhtin provides a cogent analysis of Dostoyevsky's writing, which Bakhtin terms "dialogized discourse." At the same time, Bakhtin is also concerned with

elucidating the outlines of a general problematic combining history, language and culture, and he uses the term monologic in relation to this problematic. In my reading of Bakhtin, I attempt to make more thematic what is otherwise merely implicit. Bakhtin is too occupied with other ideas in Problems to develop his approach to culture in a fully articulated way.¹³ At the risk of entering ill-prepared into a field of study which Bakhtin himself was very cautious to enter, I shall nonetheless proceed to extract several ideas from Bakhtin and then extrapolate from there. In short, I would suggest that one plausible explanation for the highly dialogized nature of Dostoyevsky's writing -- at least in this specific instance -- lies in a much deeper struggle across Russian culture.

Bakhtin examines the word in a marginal space of activity through time: "The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another, from one social collective to another...In this process the word does not forget its own path".¹⁴ This approach, which Bakhtin calls "metalinguistics", situates the word in a marginal space of

¹³Refer to page 122 in Mikhail Bakhtin, Caryl Emerson, tr., Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984): "[This -in reference to the *Carnavalesque*] is one of the most complex and most interesting problems in the history of culture. We cannot, of course, do justice to it here." (Emphasis added). This statement alone is sufficient to reveal Bakhtin's sensitivity to the problematic of culture -- as well as his more immediate preoccupations.

¹⁴Problems in Dostoyevsky's Poetics, Mikhail Bakhtin, p. 202-203

interaction between different subjective points, and accounts for accretions over time. Bakhtin's idea of "dialogization" occurs in the field of relation between two (the speaker and the word itself) or more (people addressed) different subjects.¹⁵ In Bakhtin's typology, the word is invested with an anthropomorphic quality; the word itself is considered a veritable subject in its own right, with its own "voice" as it were. In spite of the fact that Bakhtin stops short of developing this idea to accommodate a cultural context (beyond the specific instance of the Carnavalesque), in which not only words but even whole language systems may vary and time becomes the problematic of history, this field of dialogization can easily be extended to include whole cultures as subjective entities. Bakhtin does not address the problem of dialogized relations across cultural boundaries. He does, however, state that the very appearance of dialogized discourse is dependent on a structural, albeit vague, difference between "social collectives". Moving back to his underlying, unarticulated conception of history and culture, Bakhtin relies on an implicit model of periodization and dominant discursive practices (thus relating history and

¹⁵"As we have already said, logical and semantically referential relationships, in order to become dialogic, must be embodied, that is they must enter into a sphere of existence: they must become *disocurse*, that is, an utterance, and receive an *author*, that is, a creator of the given utterance whose position it expresses." Problems in Dostoyevsky's Poetics, Mikhail Bakhtin, p. 184.

language to culture) to describe how the culture obsessed with a myth of "centering" may inhibit the emergence of dialogized discourse:

If there is at the disposal of a given epoch some authoritative and stabilized medium of refraction, then conventionalized discourse in one or another of its varieties will dominate, with a greater or lesser degree of conventionality. If there is no such medium, then vari-directional double-voiced discourse will dominate... In such epochs, and especially in epochs dominated by conventionalized discourse, the direct, unconditional, unrefracted word appears barbaric, raw, wild. Cultured discourse is discourse refracted through an authoritative and stabilized medium.¹⁶

In the passage quoted above, history is periodized by epochs and culture is seen primarily in a negatively-valued aspect of rigidity. Discourse which has been "cultured" is, for Bakhtin, a discourse which has become fixated in the Freudian sense, i.e., centered on a certain dominant discursive practice. Borrowing a biological metaphor which accords well with the etymology of the English word "culture", one could say the "cultural cell" is thus perceived in terms of its relative elastic permeability or rigid turgidity. Discourse is the field in which this quotient can be apprehended. A culture which is both literally and figuratively "full of itself", in a state of "turgor" as it were, is thus seen as much less likely to accommodate dialogized forms of discourse.

At this point, we will take the risk of jumping by a

¹⁶Problems in Dostoyevsky's Poetics, Mikhail Bakhtin, p. 202-203

syllogism: if Dostoyevsky's novels are highly "dialogized" as Bakhtin asserts, and dialogized discourse is symptomatic of the absence of a stabilized, impermeable medium, i.e. "cultured discourse", then perhaps we can conclude that Dostoyevsky's work may be symptomatic of a fluid situation in the Russian culture of his day. This statement is not intended to suggest, however, that these are the only conditions under which dialogized discourse might emerge; and it might even be prudent to question the whole symptomatic mode of reading upon which this interpretation is based. Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary includes under its definition of "syllogism" the idea of a "subtle, specious, or crafty argument."¹⁷ Ideally, this is the point where we should follow Koyré and enter into a concrete, historical discussion of the Slavophilism vs. Westernization debates among some members of the Russian intelligentsia in the nineteenth century. This kind of extended inquiry would ultimately support the syllogism described above, and perhaps save it from slipping out of the "subtle" into the "specious" form of argument. This caveat is, however, thoroughly beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say here that Dostoyevsky's context was itself dialogized. By contrast, although we would not deny the existence of competing and even mutually unintelligible modes of discourse in

¹⁷Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1986), p. 1195

contemporary China, the field of genuine dialogization is without doubt much more constrained and passive than in Dostoyevsky's day.

Let us now look for a moment more closely at Dostoyevsky. When the central narrative figure in Notes states that: "I couldn't make myself anything: neither good nor bad, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect",¹⁸ he raises the spectre of an existential identity crisis often associated with cultural dilemma. On the abstract level, this statement reveals the inability to choose freely between East and West, tradition and modernity. In itself, this predicament, bounded by antinomies, does not contain anything especially insightful. The interesting problem here is rather the lack of volitional ability: he could not "make" himself.

The idea of determinism is both a prevalent theme in Notes and one to which we shall return to with Can Xue. For so-called traditional cultures, by which we generally mean cultures with a long historical antecedent prior to the advent of "the modern West", the challenge of coming to terms with modern Euro-culture - often under the threat of military force or economic imperatives - has been associated with the question of determinism. The very process of accepting culture from "outside", i.e. from a Western model, necessitates an implicit

¹⁸Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Jessie Coulson, tr., Notes from Underground (New York: Viking Press, 1987), p. 16

critique of the indigenous way. The obvious question in any critique of tradition, then, is whether and to what extent is the critique itself conditioned by the structures of the very system it ostensibly seeks to replace. In political terms, Tocqueville saw the nature of this problem in relation to the French Revolution in his study *L'Ancien Régime*. The same essential problematic was repeated, it may be argued¹⁹, in both the Russian and Chinese revolutions in this century. In Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, the agony of this entire problematic is expressed with admirable succinctness:

"The more aware I was of beauty and of 'the highest and the best', the deeper I sank into my slime... But the chief feature of all this was that it was not accidental, but as if it had to be so. It was as if this was my normal condition, not a disease or festering sore."²⁰

This passage is especially terse and requires explanation. In a way similar to the statement of identity-crisis cited above, this passage also establishes a pair of opposites and sets the whole relation in a non-volitional context. The reader is left free to equate the idea of "beauty and 'the highest and the best'" with the allure of the promethean industrial culture emerging in the West, and the idea of "slime" with the mire of traditional 'feudalistic' culture. As the narrator explains, heightened awareness of the former does not by any means provide a "way

¹⁹I have attempted to express this problematic in an essay for Prof. Sherman Cochran titled "Conservative Revolution: The Literary Debate over the 'Third Category' and Emerging Trends in Chinese Intellectual Life, 1931-33".

²⁰*Notes*, p. 18

out" but rather only seems to land one deeper in the murky source - the "sources of tradition", as it were. "But the chief feature of all this was that it was not accidental, but as if it had to be so." The spectre of determinism returns, here, with an unexpected added twist. The following line is especially ambiguous. The most unselfconscious conclusion is to follow the apparent logic of the statement's conditional phrasing (It was as if...), as if it were clear for anybody to see that the condition described by the narrative "I" is indeed pathological. The irony of it all is that in a strange, uncanny way, this condition is actually a function of the normal. For after all, as Freud and others so readily admit, normality is nothing but a socially-defined construct. If human cultures on this planet existed in a vacuum, each one hermetically and discretely sealed off from the other, perhaps the monologic nature of "normality" would work in an ideal way. But thrown into less than ideal relation together, the pathology of relative normalities becomes painfully apparent. Relating this concept to the concrete situation of Russian culture at the time, perhaps we can better understand why heightened awareness of "the West" would potentially incite a return of the repressed tradition. Treated as an abstract idea inserted into the context of Russian discourse, "the West" as a concept naturally carries an implicit threat to previously established "Russian" norms. But by the same token, because this element of the other

is mediated primarily by the very same monologic mode of discourse which it purports to challenge, it cannot help but be conditioned by relation to that discourse. Thus there is no simple way to relate pathology and normality on the one hand and beauty and slime on the other in a direct one-to-one correspondence. The only effective way to address this question would be to talk about the pathology of normality, or rather, the pathology of any monologic form of discourse.

As I have asserted above, the dominant feature of Can Xue's context, in terms of discursive practice, is an overriding aspect of monologism. Although many people familiar with daily life in the People's Republic of China might intuitively agree with this statement, such a sweeping generalization should ideally be demonstrated in more concrete terms. Prof. Edward M. Gunn's work on the development of Chinese prose style since the end of the nineteenth century suggests the feasibility and importance of this project. Gunn's work clearly demonstrates the massive process of Europeanization which the Chinese written language underwent, especially since the start of the May Fourth Era in 1918. Gunn's work also demonstrates how this process of innovation has continued unabated throughout the twentieth century; equally clear from Gunn's study however, is the fact that after the mid-1930s, and especially after Mao's talks in Yenan, the process of innovation was constrained to specific practices such as regional speech, and that

by and large, the period after this time was marked by consolidation and even constriction of acceptable forms in prose style. Although it would be a patently fallacious form of argument to assume that this process of consolidation necessarily leads to the emergence of "cultured discourse" in the Bakhtinian sense of monologism, further investigation is likely to lead to such a conclusion in this specific instance. In lieu of such work, I would cite instead a part of Liu Xiaobo's argument which addresses the same problematic from a different perspective:

The sole rupture with traditional Chinese culture in the history of China came with the upsurge of the May Fourth Culture Movement, but heaven didn't come tumbling down; it only cracked, and due to complex subjective and objective reasons, it was soon patched up by the descendants of *Nuwa* (女娲)... the Cultural Revolution was not a mammoth break with traditional culture, but just the opposite; it was the highest development of traditional feudal ideology in contemporary China, a great counterattack on the modern Chinese by the awakened tiger of feudalism... Thus the Cultural revolution was absolutely not anarchic chaos, but rather a plotted, planned, and organised large scale restoration carried out on the rich soil of China's feudal culture.²¹

According to the highly schematic interpretative framework described by Liu, Chinese culture especially after the Cultural Revolution reached a state of "optimum turgidity". Indeed, the very term *Wenhua Geming* (文化革命) in its English rendition "Cultural Revolution" allows for an associative word-play which neatly conveys Liu's idea. Hardly a "revolution" in the

²¹Tanner, p. 27-28

sense of a renovation, the Cultural Revolution was more of a "Cultural Rev-up": the engines of Chinese culture were all revved-up while the entire vehicle of state remained firmly rooted in place; Chinese culture had finally "arrived" by not going anywhere.²²

In spite of the incisively poetic vision which Liu presents of contemporary Chinese culture, we should not be content to stop at such a general formulation of the problem. Here we might merely observe that the emergence of this overriding monologism, characterized by the Cultural Revolution Era, has had a dual effect of repression. Liu Xiaobo's phrasing of this problematic tends to reduce it to overly simplistic terms. In fact, the "restoration" he describes was not effected without massive modifications in the form of acceptable discursive practice. According to Gunn's analysis, (even) Mao's writing shows a marked move toward acceptance of innovative Europeanized constructions. Parallel to this change on a linguistic level was a

²²The idea of "arrival" here may be supplemented by Thomas Metzger's analysis in Escape from Predicament (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 214: "we can say that for many Chinese in the twentieth century, the belief that a society according with the morality of interdependence could in practice be realized grew much stronger than it had been for many centuries... An era of moral success rather than moral failure was about to begin, and the resulting enthusiasms were channeled into one political "movement" after another, partially dissolving old suspicions, creating new solidarities, and even recalling ancient Chou dreams..." Metzger's comment about "(Z)hou dreams" may also be read in conjunction with my discussion (below) of Chu culture.

concomitant reorientation in the realm of politics: the ascendancy of Marxism to a position of dominance and dogma. Thus, Liu's idea of the return to tradition has to be modified to accommodate the permutations of significant change occurring at the time. The strategic adoption of an ostensibly Western form conflated with more traditional content suggests the possibility of a double repression. The new stabilized medium of "cultured discourse" not only repressed the renovative element among the Chinese intelligentsia, but also effectively interdicted whole chunks of traditional culture itself.

At this point, there are a couple of preliminary observations about genre which could be tied into a general discussion of the repressed in Can Xue's writing. I am in no position to comment with any authority on the similarities between Can Xue's work and other modernist writers in the West. The similarity is definitely there, however. Preliminary investigation (based on an examination of "The Skylight" modeled by Gunn's analytic framework) reveals that Can Xue's writing does not exhibit any remarkable innovative grammatical constructions beyond those introduced since the May Fourth Era. The greatest area of experimentation in Can Xue's work occurs in a category described under the classification of "cohesion" in Gunn's analytic framework. No doubt it is primarily due to this aspect of Can Xue's writing that her work has been associated

with modernist forms in the West. Even more important than any direct correspondence between Can Xue's style and modernist writing in the West, however, is the fact that this association is bound to be made by the majority of her Chinese readers. This fact alone is probably sufficient to stimulate the sort of "heightened awareness of the West" as we saw in Notes which might intentionally incite a return of the internally repressed other.

On another more associative level of interpretation, Can Xue's work may also be an attempt to reclaim some of the ancient Chinese literary aesthetic outside the conventions of Confucianist tradition. The Chu Ci anthology of lyrics is a notable point of comparison in this respect for several reasons. Can Xue's home province of Hunan is the area traditionally associated with this anthology²³; educated residents of the area allude to the Chu Ci anthology when they note with pride that Hunan is known for its preponderance of "demonic energy" ("guiqi hen sheng" 鬼氣很盛). The "energy" referred to here is

²³It should be noted, however, that the actual historical boundaries of the area covered by Chu (Ch'u) were apparently to the north of Dong Ting Hu and most of modern-day Hunan province, according to both the account in Hawkes' translation as well the chapter on the Chu Ci in Zhongguo Shi Ci Fazhan Shi, Lan Tian Chubanshe, Taipei, esp. p. 87-9. (This edition is a reprint of a work titled Zhongguo Shi Shi published in two volumes in the P.R.C.; the original author and publisher are not mentioned in the Taipei edition, for the obvious reasons). Nevertheless, Chinese today still associate the Chu Ci with the area in Hunan around the river Xiang.

the more "uncontrolled" shamanistic aspect of the text that was historically marginalized by Confucian commentators who were busy with the canonization of pre-Qin discourse. Although the Chu Ci anthology was subjected to the same kind of canonistic commentary that had been applied to the Shi Jing, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the Shi Jing was chosen as a principal canonical text, while the Chu Ci was not. This phenomenon coincides with an interesting cultural footnote: "To the people of the *Shih Ching* Ch'u had been the name not of a great state but of a group of hostile tribes beyond the southern limits of Chou civilization. Thus the China of the earlier *Ch'u Tz'u* poems was, both culturally and politically, a very different place from the China of the *Shih Ching* songs."²⁴ The Chu Ci anthology was not compiled in its present form until the second century C.E.,²⁵ and the very fact that it was not compiled until that time suggests that it was, intentionally or not, part of the hegemonistic Han effort to assimilate resistant cultural trends into the dominant Confucianist tradition. The differences, vis à vis the Zhou tradition (source of later Han culture), that marked Chu culture are nevertheless still apparent in the Chu Ci text

²⁴David Hawkes, tr., Ch'u Tz'u: The Songs of the South, (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 3

²⁵David Hawkes, tr., Ch'u Tz'u: The Songs of the South, (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 2. Also see p. 10, where Hawkes notes that the *Li Sao* was "composed at a time when an allegorical interpretation [which he previously relates to the Confucianist process of canonization] was already beginning to be put on the *Shih Ching* songs."

itself, as Hawkes notes in his own fashion. (And for that matter, the Shi Jing itself displays a number of thematic elements which ultimately challenge many of the canonical interpretations ascribed to them. As Hawkes also notes, the Shi Jing itself was also subjected to a similar process of domestication designed to accommodate pedantic Confucianist ethical values). In the contemporary context of iconoclastic critique of Confucianist tradition, the Chu Ci may still represent to some extent the marginalities of Chinese culture long repressed by the dominant discourse of tradition.^{26/27}

²⁶ As an adjunct to this idea, it might be interesting to look at the work accomplished under the auspices of Prince An of Huai during the Han Dynasty. Prince An was killed by Emperor Wen Di for a treasonous plot to overthrow the empire. At the same time, Prince An also supported a number of scholars to work on compilations of Taoist-oriented texts. In addition to the Huai Nan Zi, the Chuang Tzu text was apparently also one of the texts compiled during this time (see Huang, Jinhong, ed., Zhuangzi Du Ben, Taipei: Sanmin Shuju, 1981, p. 9). Given the ideas discussed above, it is perhaps not surprising to see the Chuang Tzu text and other related "marginalized" discourses cropping up in atmosphere of intense political intrigue. The pattern of Taoist-inspired rebellions continues throughout Chinese Imperial history, but it is interesting to note that these rebellions and their ideologies never really posed an effective threat to the whole "myth of centering" established earlier.

²⁷ In his book Art, Myth, and Ritual (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), the noted archaeologist K.C. Chang treats the period and texts which I have discussed here in a very different way. Chang does not consider the problematic nature of ancient Chinese texts, in spite of the presumably reconstituted form in which they have been handed down to us since the burning of books under the Qin Emperor. Central to Chang's thesis is the idea that Chu culture and the texts associated with that culture form part of a cultural lineage which can be directly traced from the Shang dynasty to the Han.

The idea of reconstructing a distinctly "Chu" form of discourse which was historically marginalized by Confucianist canonization suggests possibilities - all more or less ahistorical to a certain extent perhaps, but certainly not without associative power at least. Both the Lao Tzu and the Chuang Tzu texts have been related to the same Ch'u culture that apparently produced the Chu Ci. The Lao Tzu and the Chuang Tzu texts and the entire range of philosophical Taoist discourse spawned by them played an important counterpart to the development of Confucian tradition in Chinese intellectual history. Many people have portrayed the Taoist tradition as a *vita contemplativa* in contrast to the *vita activa* espoused by the Confucian school. While some have tried to point out the benefits of this system in terms of a yin-yang interchange, more recent commentators, such as Sun Lung-kee and Liu Xiaobo, have emphasized that Taoism functioned primarily under the hegemonistic influence of the dominant Confucianist discourse. According to this view, the more radical unrestrained tendencies of the Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu texts were effectively domesticated within the acceptably Confucianist framework of "self-cultivation". As Si-

Chang asks: "was shamanism a practice that extended beyond Ch'u...The answer is undoubtedly yes." (Art, Myth, and Ritual, p. 48). Although Chang would seem to have uncontrovertible evidence to support his claim he does not produce it for the reader to judge (perhaps he is waiting to 'unearth' it at the right moment!). Chang cites a reference in the Guo Yu, but the passage is about shamanism in the state of Chu, not Zhou.

Ma Qian records in the *Shi Ji*, the people of Chu did not consider themselves to be part of the "Central Kingdom": "King Xiong Qu (of Chu) said: 'We are barbarians [我蠻夷也 *wo man yi ye*], we do not adhere to the name of "the Central Kingdom"' [不與中國之號矣 *bu yu zhongguo zhi hao yi*].²⁸ Nonetheless, the discourse of Chu (as much as we know about it from such texts as are available which were by and large compiled during the Han) clearly became incorporated into that of the "Central Kingdom". The picture that emerges as a result of this schematic figure is one in which the discourse of two initially hostile cultures (Chu and Zhou) becomes synthesized - within a clearly defined hierarchy of dominance, of course - as part of the larger "centering" process effected by the victorious Qin and Han dynasties. This cultural process of "centering" acquires all the weight of a myth (which is perhaps why Zhou is central to charts of dynastic lineage while Chu is not), and in fact finally develops into a kind of cultural obsession.

The specific parallels that can be drawn between the *Chu Ci* style of poetry and Can Xue's writing are, I think, quite limited. It may be worthwhile to note, however, that all the poems in the *Li Sao* style are recorded in the first person, as are

²⁸Sima Qian, *Shi Ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), *Chu Shi Jia*, p. 1692.

Here I have glossed the word *yu* following Wang Li's *Gu Hanyu Changyong Ci Cidian* (Hong Kong: Zhongwai Chubanshe, 1978), p. 271 definition #2.

all of Can Xue's short stories. Other important characteristics of the *Sao*-style poems which David Hawkes notes in the introduction to his translation and which seem to be reminiscent of Can Xue's work are: "the fascination of the supernatural world into which the poet introduces us, the profusion of symbols, [and] the dream-like movement of the narrative... the *Sao* poet is no ordinary neurotic. He is, or aspires to be, a magician."²⁹

All of the above description could be applied equally to Can Xue's short stories. In much the same way as the *Chu Ci* lyrics, Can Xue's works are filled with a plethora of flora and fauna, completely unmediated by any conceptual narrative. And her narrative characters are certainly not the usual neurotic type; there is definitely something magical about the vivid descriptions and bizarre happenings. But the most striking comparative point between the *Sao*-style poems and Can Xue's writing occurs in terms of reversal. As Hawkes says of the *Sao*-style poems: "All proclaim the poet's purity and integrity in the face of an evil and corrupt world. In all of them - or nearly all - he seeks escape in distant travel, either to an imaginary fairyland peopled by mythical beings, or into a a mundane scenery of rivers and mountains."³⁰ In Can Xue's first-person narrative short stories, this motif is virtually reversed. The narrative I is

²⁹David Hawkes, tr., *Ch'u Tz'u: The Songs of the South*, p. 8.

³⁰David Hawkes, tr., *Ch'u Tz'u: The Songs of the South*, p. 8.

no longer distinctly separate from the evil of the surrounding world; he or she is equally implicated in the corruption - or, as Dostoyevsky's character in Notes puts it, "one sits more severely in judgement on oneself." Moreover, the "travel to distant lands" is attempted (eg. the journey with the old man in "The Skylight"; the taxi ride to a deserted island in "Dialogues in Heaven"; and the trip to the hut on the mountain in "The Hut on the Mountain"), but there is no real qualitative change between the travel-land and the land left behind; escape is out of the question, since there were no boundaries to begin with.

On a psycho-cultural level of analysis, the return-of-the-repressed in uncanny and uncontrolled ways can be interpreted as the result of a culture's fixation or obsession with the "myth of centering". This myth, which may exist as a normalizing feature in every culture, has been taken to an extreme in China; and it is precisely the main object of attack for the entire Cultural Critique Movement of the 1980s. Like Dostoyevsky's Notes, Can Xue's texts do address themselves to the problem of monologic pathology on a cultural level, but it must be observed that they operate in a field of choices significantly different from those for Dostoyevsky's Notes. Where the problems Dostoyevsky's generation was facing were still partially unanswered and even yet unformed at the time (and Dostoyevsky's own agenda as a Slavophil was quite different from Can Xue's), Can Xue is writing after the great rupture of the revolution cum restoration.

Thus while Bakhtin has found an extremely high level of dialogization in Dostoyevsky's work, we can only say that Can Xue's stories are not dialogic by any means; Can Xue's stories are perhaps part of a first attempt to work through monologism, but they have by no means broken through it.

The presence of the repressed is an important theme throughout Can Xue's short stories. The ox which emits a brilliant purple light through the wallboards of the house but is never seen (confronted) directly in "The Ox" is a perfect symbol of this repressed element; and as might be expected, this uncanny return-of-the-repressed is accompanied by unbridled pathology. Pathological images are far too ubiquitous throughout Can Xue's stories to require any citation here; they occur on both the physical and psychological levels in a myriad of equally revolting variations. The entire phantasmagorical world of Can Xue's short stories and the bizarre happenings uncontrolled by any recognizable logic which occur therein are all further evidence of a journey delving into the pathology of repression.

When we really begin to examine Can Xue's texts, the necessity of establishing a proper contextual framework becomes evident. As I have mentioned above, the most distinctive feature of Can Xue's style is the problem of cohesion. Although the narrative is definitely held together by devices such as

repetition-with-change (a nice motif for the entire revolution-cum-restoration problematic), the strident avoidance of standard narrative features such as plot line and character development serve to disorient completely even the most patient readers. This lack of cohesiveness creates a gap in meaning. This gap literally forces the reader to contextualize the text in order to ascribe some meaning (or even nonmeaning) to the stories.³¹ While this need to contextualize is more often than not the sign of a weak piece of writing, in Can Xue's case it is clear that this need is accounted for by the text itself with its particular style of first person narrative.

In all of Can Xue's stories under consideration here, the narrative is conducted in the first person voice. In his Notes from Underground, Dostoyevsky employs the same technique. Dominick LaCapra's explanation of the effect is especially revealing: "the Underground Man is himself the narrator, speaking in the first person. Yet he does not have a proper name that would clearly attach his 'I' to someone whose identity could be clearly underwritten with a signature. This fact adds to the indeterminate status of the narrator-protagonist and furthers his complicity with both the author and the reader."³² LaCapra

³¹I could give no notion by reference or footnote of what this work owes to discussions with Peter Button about various aspects of the problems discussed here; I am indebted to him here for his articulation of this aspect of the text in particular.

³²Dominick LaCapra, History, Politics and the Novel, Cornell University

develops his argument to account for the function of dialogized discourse and its transformative implications in Notes. As I have asserted earlier, however, the dialogic element never really comes into being in Can Xue's writing. All the characters and events are too intimately bound up with the central narrative voice; there is no effective boundary by which to distinguish the difference which is essential for any kind of dialogism to emerge. "The Skylight" is an especially good illustration of this point.

"The Skylight" is a narrative told in the first person. Very little can be said about this person with any degree of certainty. The character is never referred to by name, and even his or her gender is a mystery. Considering various sexual innuendos surrounding the old man's "grapes," it may be possible to infer that the narrative "I" is female, but the possibility of a homosexual relation is certainly not beyond reason. We do know, however, that the character is a productive member of society, if only for the simple reference to a certain co-worker at the beginning of the story, which suggests that the "I" does at least have a regular job. The character's age can be determined at 43, based on the following passage: "My brother is forty years old this year. I'm three years older."³³ Although the date may be insignificant, such an age would place the speaker within the

Press, Ithaca, 1987, p. 40.

³³p. 78. References are to my own translation of "The Skylight" contained in Part Two.

range of China's "lost generation," i.e. the group of young people most directly affected by the turmoil of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." However tantalizing this fact may be, it is nonetheless virtually superfluous to the rest of the story. Among all the facts that can be ascertained about this character, the most important concerns her family life. In spite of the character's age, he or she is unmarried and still lives at home. The "T"'s family consists only of her mother, father and two brothers. Except for the suggestion of a job, the character is never shown in relation to other members of society beyond her immediate family and the old man. She is an outsider to society: "In fact," she says at one point, "everybody knows about my leaving. It's an open secret. They just 'hmp' once through the nose; such unorthodox behaviour is complete anathema to them."³⁴

If the identity of the main "T" of the story is not clear, that of the old man is even less so. Like the narrative "T", he too is an outsider to society. According to information given by the narrator, the old man has been living alone for at least ten years before the time of this story. His profession as a corpse-burner certainly suits the role of an outsider. Depicted not only as an outsider to society, the old man is virtually an outsider to life as well. Living alone in the graveyard and working as a corpse-burner, he stands at the gateway between life and death. Time

³⁴ibid., p. 71

seems to stand still for this man. He is always referred to as "the old man," and unlike the "I" of the story, he is never given to reminiscing about his earlier days as a youth. At one point, the old man gives his age: "Ever since those shadows got stuck and wouldn't budge, I have counted my age to myself at 103."³⁵ The phrasing of this statement suggests that the figure given is hardly an accurate one. Moreover, the use of the words "ever since," combined with the image of "stuck shadows," suggests that the old man exists in a superfluous realm where time stands still, the place where particularly oppressive "ancient memories" (recalling Dostoyevsky's phrase) reappear, synchronically, as it were.

The identity of the old man is one of the crucial riddles presented in the story. At two different points in the narrative, the "I" asks the old man, "Who are you?" Each time, the old man responds with surprisingly nonchalant answers that carry a note of the absurd: "Me? Just a corpse-burner."³⁶ "An old fogey who digs tunnels in the graveyard."³⁷ The humorous effect created by the old man's simple tone of understatement belies a more complex answer. The first time the "I" asks the old man "who are you," she tells us that, "I can not help the cold shivers running down my spine." Whoever, or whatever, this old man

³⁵ibid., p.77

³⁶ibid., p. 72

³⁷ibid., p. 78

is, the problem of his identity instills fear in the narrative "I."

The point of relation between the old man and the narrative "I" is precisely the point where one facet of the old man's true identity first becomes revealed. The old man's appearance at the very outset of the story is the primary clue: "At twelve o'clock midnight, the old corpse burner appears in the wardrobe mirror. He is a blurry sphere of a thing, like a vapour. He stretches out a hand to me from the mirror, a hand that is covered with the greasy, smoked smell of burnt flesh."³⁸ Appearing from out of a mirror, the old man is nothing more than a reflection. The object which is being reflected is none other than the narrative "I" itself. Seen on this level, the entire story takes on the quality of an interior monologue carried on within the psyche of the narrative "I."

This interpretation can be supported by additional examples. The second most direct instance which supports the interior monologue interpretation comes at the very conclusion of the story, where the narrator says: "I have finally become enraptured by my own voice. It's a kind of beautiful, soothing low tone which confides to me, perpetually without a break."³⁹ The effect of this remark is to confirm suspicions that were laid down at the outset of the story.

The conflation between different characters in the story

³⁸ibid., p. 65

³⁹ibid., p. 85

does not stop there. Beyond an identity between the old man and the narrative "I," the narrative also suggests that this "I" can be identified with the old man's "little daughter" as well. The old man recounts: "Twelve years ago, my little daughter stood in the doorway and said: 'Hmph!' I saw a large tumour was growing in her chest, tightly extruding her tiny heart."⁴⁰ The mention of a tumour growing in the daughter's chest bears a striking resemblance to the narrative "I"'s description of "bamboo shoots" growing in her own chest: "The fully-grown young sprouts make my chest feel unbearably congested."⁴¹ An interpretation which considers the old man as father and the narrative "I" as daughter can be supported by a Freudian reading of the text. In his lecture titled "Femininity" (No. 33 in The New Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis, 1933), Freud charts the course of the female Oedipus Complex. Reduced to its most basic form, Freud's view is that baby girls begin with a love for the mother, which turns into a strong hatred during the "phallic" phase of early development. This period is accompanied by great frustration over the lack of a "penis."⁴² After this point, a young woman develops greater affection for her father. Hatred of the mother never fully recedes, according to Freud, but is rather

⁴⁰ibid., p. 67

⁴¹ibid., p. 79-80

⁴²Freud's essay has recieved much criticism from feminist readers. In my reading of the text, I follow those who would understand Freud's use of the "penis" in a sense as much symbolic as literal.

subsumed and repressed during later development.

This type of feminine Oedipus Complex is precisely the sort of relation which is depicted in "The Skylight." The story is filled with instances of sexual innuendo, and all are touched with a hint of incest. When the narrator describes her home to the old man, she mentions that, "My family and I sleep inside."⁴³ The use of the word "sleep" rather than "live," which would be more common in this instance, is significant. In China, just as in the West, the word "sleep" is often used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The most blatant example of sexual innuendo in "The Skylight" concerns the old man's "grapes." The description of these "grapes" leaves no question as to their nature:

"Grapes are very good.' The old man stoops down. Smacking his lips with great relish, he grabs my hand and sticks it into a dark place. I can feel a soft moist pile, like the innards of some animal. There is even a noxious fishy smell."⁴⁴

"Those things he calls 'grapes,'" as the narrative "I" puts it, have the unmistakable quality of genitals. The hermaphroditic association between "grapes" (testicles) and "innards with a fishy smell" (vagina) reinforces the idea of a repressed (dual) sexuality such as Freud described.

Following Freud's thesis, the female Oedipus Complex should include not only an attraction to the father, but also an

⁴³"The Skylight," p. 70

⁴⁴ibid., p. 75

intense hatred of the mother. The text of "The Skylight" conforms to this pattern, although the interpretation at this point is rather inferential. On page four, when the narrative "I" describes her early childhood and her family, she stops at the point where her description turns to her mother. At the bottom of the same page, she thinks of screaming out something, but the words do not come. The old man tells her: "Mommy, that's what you want to say. Mom-my." While the father is someone who can be talked about, there is something about mother which makes it almost impossible for the narrative "I" even to mention her name.

According to Freud, "girls hold their mother responsible for their lack of a penis,"⁴⁵ and, "the mother becomes the girl's rival, who receives from her father everything that she desires from him."⁴⁶ The old man mentions at one point that his mother is consumed by a "frightening passion" which makes her "want to jump all night." On the level where the old man is identified with the narrator herself, it is possible to say that the old man's mother is also the narrator's mother. The old man says, "I've always wanted to imitate mother, but have striven only in vain all my life."⁴⁷ The old man's yearning to identify himself with the mother, translated into terms

⁴⁵Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures, p. 124

⁴⁶*ibid.*, p. 129

⁴⁷"The Skylight," p. 77

of the narrator's own yearning, reflects the idea of envy of which Freud spoke. Furthermore, a passage such as, "My mother was sitting in the bathtub, and all the flesh on her scalp had peeled off,"⁴⁸ could be read as a cryptic phallic image. The mother's head, stripped of hair and covered in blood, can be construed as a sign for the "castrated penis" which occupies a central part of Freud's thesis.

At this juncture, it is useful to recall the fact that in spite of the narrative "I"'s mature age at 43, she is introduced as a spouse-less character. Aside from the secondary support this fact lends to the idea of the character as an outsider to society, its primary function can be seen in terms of support for Freud's concept of the feminine Oedipus Complex. According to Freud, "it may easily happen that the second half of a woman's life may be filled by the struggle against her husband, just as the shorter first half was filled by her rebellion against her mother."⁴⁹ The absence in this case of a husband serves to intensify the primary Oedipal struggle against the mother. There is no chance for the conflict to be worked through in a displaced relationship between husband and wife.

One problem in the interpretation given above is the dual reading of the old man. He can be identified with either the narrator herself, or with the narrator's father. This confluence

⁴⁸ibid., p. 78

⁴⁹Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures, p. 133

makes it difficult for the reader to know when to make the appropriate substitution. In terms of the Freudian psychological model we have been discussing, Freud does talk about the young girl's identification with her father; however, this idea, according to Freud, should eventually lead the girl to long for her father's baby. There is no direct reference to this sort of idea in the text, but it may be inferred: "As soon as it gets dark, the old man burrows a hole in the dense pile of thin-leaved mosla. We wriggle into the hole and close up the entrance."⁵⁰ The dark, enclosed, cave-like hole can be read as a symbol for the womb, and the characters (two selves collapsed into a single "we") may be understood as the baby. The next line in the above passage hints at sex: "Uttering a note of satisfaction, we quickly fall into a dream." Through ellipsis and associative imagery, it is possible to fill out the Freudian idea, albeit in a rather forced fashion. Even without this final caveat, the parallel with a Freudian idea is quite striking.

Surely the whole complex of parent-child relations has an extremely important formative effect upon the individual, an effect which is no doubt significant for an understanding of society and culture as a whole. The enduring value of Sun Lung-kee's work in 'The Deep Structure' is to open up a discussion of this entire problematic within the specific context of Chinese

⁵⁰"The Skylight," p. 74. The idea of seeing a womb and a baby symbolized by this passage of the text was first pointed out to me by Jobi Petty.

culture. Among the points which Sun raises, the one which is probably most apposite here concerns the notion of ego development. Sun follows a reductive Freudian schemata, tracing the development of an individual through various stages (oral to anal to genital) on the road towards an ultimately independent and balanced ego. Sun argues that Chinese development processes tend to result in a fixation on the oral and anal stages. Thus a truly "independent" individual does not emerge. Sun's attempt to relate processes of individual development to cultural development is not without severe limitations; in short, in as much as his argument follows Freud, Sun also stumbles into the same essential problems which remain unresolved in Civilization and Its Discontents. Without digressing further, I would simply comment that it would be a great mistake to assume a direct one-to-one correspondence between individual psychology and cultural psychology. Moreover, any interpretation based on an idea of the universal human psyche inevitably creates serious problems for the attempt (shared by Sun and this essay alike) to establish the "social construction of reality"⁵¹ specific to China. Nonetheless, Sun achieves a surprisingly synthetic and coherent view of this crucial problem in modern Chinese culture. The problem of family relationships and their formative influence upon the

⁵¹See Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality, (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

individual is a recurrent motif in Can Xue's writing. Based on a preliminary reading of "Yellow Mud Street" (a story which I have not discussed here), Sun concludes that Can Xue "delves more into the anal", which he relates to "the putrid, the filthy and the stenchy."⁵² I will not attempt to recapitulate Sun's discussion and the implications that a fixation on this stage of development has for Chinese culture as a whole. In terms of Can Xue's work, the interesting point is that "The Skylight" combines this aspect of a pathologically repressed element in the individual psychology with monologism and narrative voice.

In effect, Can Xue's story "The Skylight" enacts what Dostoyevsky's Notes from Underground can only talk about. While the "Underground Man" only talks about how "one sits more severely in judgement on oneself," Can Xue's character is shown directly in the throes of this self-reflective nightmare. This theme can be accessed through descriptions of sight. The acts of seeing and being seen are both imbued with symbolic meaning in "The Skylight." As with many of the images in Can Xue's writing, these actions are associated with great pain. The narrative "I" says that her, "eyeballs are always distended in pain."⁵³ The pain of seeing is reflected in more general terms in the following passage: "Underneath each tea-bush, there is a grey eye which continuously blinks out clear tears like dewdrops."⁵⁴

⁵²From personal correspondence with the author, 1988.2.1.

⁵³"The Skylight," p. 70.

The impersonal nature of these eyes lends to them a universal quality. Their function in the story may be taken to represent the act of sight in the abstract. We are not told why these eyes shed tears, but the simplest answer would be to conclude that they are crying. In the next moment, when the eye is discovered by the narrator, "it immediately turns to fine dust in the palm of my hand, emitting a puff of smoke." This self-destructive disappearing act, literally made behind a smoke-screen, suggests the nature of a defensive response. It is as though the eye were trying to avoid being seen by others.

This paranoid reaction associated with the act of being seen is reflected in other parts of the text. The most striking feature of the "man-eating nocturnal bird" which hounds the characters off and on are its eyes: "The man-eating nocturnal bird has come back again: two green eyes in the air, like a tiger eyeing its prey."⁵⁵ The fear associated with being seen drives the story's characters to hide themselves: "Nobody stints, and everyone winds up totally worn out. As soon as night comes, we scurry back and forth like rats in the old house, looking for the darkest, most sequestered corner."⁵⁶ At the opening of the story, the narrator tries to hide her secret of the letter from the rest of her family. Her comment, "They have already seen through my

⁵⁴ibid., p. 70

⁵⁵ibid., p. 76

⁵⁶ibid., p. 70

mind,"⁵⁷ reveals the true nature of the paranoia associated with being seen. The narrative "I" is afraid of being seen for what she really is.

The themes of paranoia and repression come together. What is being seen in this story, that is to say, the source of the pain associated with the act of sight, is an entity which is none other than the self. In effect, the first person, the narrative "I," of the story, is itself a kind of eye. This narrative "eye" begins its story by looking in the mirror. The phantasmagorical world that is reflected therein is the world of the inner psyche. All the externals have been stripped away, just as the house stands alone in a barren pile of ruins. The view from this vantage point, revealing deep fears and repressions within a tortured inner psyche, is an understandably harrowing -- and we may say courageous -- one, to say the least. Regardless of whether one is looking inside oneself or inside one's own culture, this process is a difficult but perhaps necessary step.

Sun Lung-kee's analysis of the "underdeveloped nature of the ego" and the general "infantilization" of Chinese culture is undoubtedly addressed to similar questions within the same problematic. We may reflect for a moment that within the monologic culture of 'feudal' Confucianist China, this aspect of the individual psychology may have operated in a more or less ideal way; perhaps it would even be anachronistic to say that the

⁵⁷ibid., p. 65

individual ego was "underdeveloped" in traditional China -- apparently it was a desired plan. In any case, as China was pushed into the rush of modernity, this "underdeveloped" state has become a source of extreme tension. In his synthetic work Self and Society, aimed largely at addressing the gap between individual and society which Freud left unanswered, Drew Westen has pointed out as a "central thesis of (t)his book that greater emphasis of self is an inherent aspect of modernization, not primarily a by-product of capitalism, colonialism, or social change in general; and that the greater self-emphasis that arises with the process of modernization constitutes a moral revolution."⁵⁸

Although I have settled for the term "underdeveloped ego" utilised by Sun, the term itself and the assumptions behind it are wholly inadequate. "Underdeveloped" assumes an idea of the "developed," and this in turn suggests the assertion of a certain ethical universal, an idea of how subjects *should* be constructed. I believe that what we are talking about is in fact a completely different notion of the socially-constructed subject than that which has historically obtained in the modern west. Angela Zito's work on imperial grand sacrifice in the 18th century lays the groundwork for a concept of the subject specific

⁵⁸Westen, Drew, Self and Society: Narcissism, Collectivism, and the Development of Morals, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1985, p. xiv.

to the Chinese context.⁵⁹ The question of subjectivity is central. As Zito writes, "'Subjectivity' [as an analytic category] enables us to grant that human 'selves' are not substantialized unities that everywhere and in every epoch interact according to the same set of universal laws."⁶⁰

In Zito's concept of 18th century Chinese personhood, the self is a, "planar, surface signification that assumes no fixed boundaries between the internal self and the external world...Like membranes or tympanum, people mediated, through total participation, an immediate boundary."⁶¹ This idea of personhood departs radically from the sort of Cartesian subjects assumed by Freud, Westen and Sun alike. In her work Subjectivity and Representation in Descartes, Dalia Judovitz finds the origins of modernity and the typical western concept of the subject within Descartes. Judovitz states that the Cartesian worldview, "is best encapsulated in terms of the ... dependence on a foundational principle [the logic of geometry] which reifies the experiential relations of the self and the world."⁶² In other words, the Cartesian view establishes a notion of the self as an

⁵⁹See an unpublished dissertation for the University of Chicago by Angela Zito, Grand Sacrifice as Text/Performance: Writing and Ritual in 18th Century China.

⁶⁰From the introduction to an unpublished volume of essays on body, subjectivity, and power in China, edited by Tani Barlow and Angela Zito.

⁶¹ibid.

⁶²Judovitz, Dalia (1988), Subjectivity and Representation in Descartes: The Origins of Modernity, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 13.

"individualized essence" that opposes its subjectivity to a world of objectified things. In Zito's thesis, the 18th century Chinese subject is not defined in terms of such a fixed position, but seen rather in terms of spatio-temporal fluctuation, a process which Zito calls "centering" (from the Chinese word *zhong* 中).

It is beyond the bounds of this essay to consider in detail the problem of subjectivity in recent Chinese history. The attempt to reduce western notions of subjectivity to a unified Cartesian schemata, and the similar effort to define a different concept operative in China, run the risk of cultural essentialism. There can be no question, however, that Can Xue's stories, exemplified by "The Skylight," are an exploration of subjectivity in contemporary Chinese culture.

In a nutshell, "The Skylight" presents a sort of crazed internality unbounded by any discernible relation to an externality. This image is symbolic of the breakdown of the sort of traditional personhood described by Zito for the 18th century, without its having been replaced by any other coherent concept. The western-derived Cartesian concept is nonetheless visible, notably in terms of the Freudian parallels. I have no doubts that the appearance of a Freudian motif in "The Skylight" is purely unintentional on the part of the author. Given the notorious unavailability of Chinese-language translations of Freud in China (translations of basic texts such as The Interpretation of Dreams were only completed after 1985), it is highly improbable

that the author could have been exposed to the ideas in Freud's article on "femininity;" moreover, the author has said as much to me in personal conversation. If we are to explain this uncanny parallel, I believe the answer will be found in terms of an historical genealogy that examines the category of the person in 20th century China.

Although the impact of western imperialism upon China is a well-explored area, (noting also that discourses on "post-coloniality" and "cultural imperialism" are current), there has been little consideration of the ways in which "imperialist" discourses, especially those about "national character" and "social darwinism," were themselves accepted by certain Chinese intellectuals as the framing terms for a critique designed to be at once anti-traditional *and* anti-imperialist. The tension inherent in this position is part of a predicament from which Chinese today still have not been able to extricate themselves. On the most reductive level of analysis, the paramount problem in this situation has been the breakdown and attempted rearticulation of subjectivity. In other words: the terms of a critique ostensibly designed to save and protect sovereign China (from the west), were, ironically, decided for Chinese intellectuals by the west in the Chinese acceptance of a putative cultural unity in "the west." This unity was first expressed in China through the ideals of "democracy" and "science" on the one hand, and attendant

notions of "national characteristics" and "social darwinism" on the other. After dictatorship of the proletariat was established by Mao, et al., in 1949, the west was primarily defined in terms of "bourgeois imperialists." The supposed putative unity (of the west) was still not being questioned, in spite of significant changes in the ruling structure of the Chinese state. Seen from within the problematic of traditional subjectivity, the acceptance of the west's unity must have functioned as the source for a smooth boundary of difference, designed to allow for inclusion and control. And yet, the pressure to modernize in order to defend led to the insertion of western concepts of subjectivity from which Chinese (not just intellectuals) could not escape.

Author Lu Xun (1881-1936) engages this problematic in paradigmatic fashion in his short story (1921), "The True Story of Ah Q," probably the most widely read piece of Chinese fiction in the 20th century.

The central figure in this narrative is known as "Ah Q," which the author settles upon after a lengthy discussion for want of a better name. The use of the Roman letter "Q" more than *signifies* -- it is in itself part of the irrepressible intrusion of western forms. Although the west actively enters the author's narrative, the "Q" in Ah Q's name is a constant irritant (modern editions always contain a footnote telling Chinese readers how to pronounce this letter), reminding the reader that the action

within is conditioned by another presence. Since the story first appeared in 1921, it has engendered much discussion, particularly about the Chinese national character. According to this argument, Ah Q is understood as a composite figure, supposedly bringing together all the negative traits specific to Chinese culture.⁶³ Indeed, in modern usage, the so-called "Ah-Q character" (A-Q-Xing 阿Q性) is virtually synonymous with the term "national character." Much has been written about "The True Story of Ah Q" that need not be repeated here, and, for the sake of economy, I shall assume that the reader is familiar with the story. It must be remembered, however, that the exact content of the "Ah Q character" has been contested since the late 1920s.⁶⁴ The focus of our attention here is solely upon the switch in perspective which occurs in the final pages of the story, the public execution of Ah Q.

The scene is this: Ah Q is to be executed for his participation in the "revolution" (historically referring the reader to the Republican revolution of 1911), but it is an execution ill-warranted by the bumbling, ineffectual Ah Q. Ah Q is so passive in his approach to activity, he does not even realize that he is about to die until the 11th hour: "Then he realized that

⁶³ For a recent discussion of the place of "national character" in Lu Xun's writings, see Bao, Jing, ed., *Lu Xun Guominxing Sixiang Taolunji*, Tianjin: Tianjin Renmin Chubanshe, 1982.

⁶⁴ See A Ying (Qian Xingcun, a 'progressive-leftist'), and Su Xuelin ('on the right') for criticisms of Lu Xun's Ah Q from different perspectives.

...y were making a *detour* to the execution ground, so he must be going to have his head cut off after all."⁶⁵ The reader has been aware of Ah Q's fate since the beginning of this chapter (if not much earlier), so the narrator's use of the word "detour" is an extremely sarcastic choice. "Ah Q had originally thought they were going somewhere else?! -- what a fool," we think. This kind of thick-headed behaviour is perfectly typical of Ah Q; the narrative prior to this point is filled with many similar examples of Ah Q's half-wit behaviour and dubious rationalizations for it which make this final blunder completely plausible for the reader. What is important for our purposes, however, is to note that until and through this point in time (when Ah Q rides on the army truck and realizes he's going to be executed), the narrative has with merciless irony concentrated all the "bad" characteristics revealed upon the single figure of Ah Q. The narrator apparently intends the reader to agree in his bitter cynicism and rejection of Ah Q. In the final passages of the narrative, however, the narrator leaves Ah Q and turns to the gaze of the surrounding throng. In that moment, the subjectivity constructed upon Ah Q is, along with the critique inherent within, generalized and rendered problematic. For the benefit of the reader, I will reproduce this passage in full:

At that instant his [Ah Q] thoughts revolved again like a

⁶⁵Lu Xun, The True Story of Ah Q, Singapore: Xingzhou Shijie Shuju, undated, p. 150. The translation is, I believe, lifted from the Yang, Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang translation issued by Foreign Languages Press, Beijing. Emphasis added.

whirlwind. Four years before, at the foot of a mountain, he had met a hungry wolf which had followed him at a set distance, wanting to eat him. He had nearly died of fright, but luckily he happened to have a wood-chopper in his hand, which gave him the courage to get back to Weichuang [village]. But he had never forgotten that wolf's eyes, fierce yet cowardly, gleaming like two will-o'-the-wisps, as if boring into him from a distance. But now he saw eyes more terrible even than the wolf's: dull yet penetrating eyes that seemed to have devoured his words and to be still eager to devour something beyond his flesh and blood. And those eyes kept following him at a set distance.

Those eyes seemed to have joined in one, already biting into his soul.

"Help, help!"

But Ah Q never uttered these words...

...As for any discussion of the event, no question was raised in Weichuang. Naturally all agreed that Ah Q had been a bad man, the proof being that he had been shot; for if he had not been bad, how could he have been shot? But the opinion in the town was unfavourable. Most people were dissatisfied, thinking a shooting was not such a fine spectacle as a decapitation; and what a ridiculous culprit that had been too, to have passed through so many streets without singing a single line from an opera. They had followed him for nothing.⁶⁶

A long passage, to be sure, but worth quoting at length in the context of our discussion about the historical predicament of Chinese subjectivity in the 20th century. Ah Q fulfills his passive characterization to the fullest. Not even a single call for help ever issues from Ah Q's mouth. The last thing we are made aware of before his death is the gaze of the onlooking crowd.

⁶⁶ibid., p. 152.

Skipping straight to the last paragraph, we find the narrative sarcasm previously reserved for Ah Q is now shifted onto the whole town, depicted as spectators to Ah Q's execution. This displacement should shift the focus of our subjective involvement onto the crowd, but the final line is highly ironic. Who was "following" whom? They, the townspeople, had followed him, Ah Q, for nothing, but hadn't he also been following them, forced at gunpoint to follow some form of public opinion? In any case, the crowd's only concern seems to have been disappointment with a poor show. The almost incredible lack of humanity (people described as wolves) generalizes the extent of the "Ah Q character." In this sense, the "Ah Q character" applies to the entire social collective, and it is impossible to find an effective boundary by which to distinguish Ah Q from the spectators. In this situation, where everybody seems to be following someone else, the subject is noticeable by its absence. Absent, of course, because it is about to be executed. To the extent that the crowd shares in the "Ah Q character," we can say that what they are watching is really their own execution. In symbolic terms, this execution is emblematic of the breakdown of subjectivity. Watching Ah Q, for the sake of spectacle, the crowd identifies itself with the subject of execution, and as a result, is witness (is subjected) to its own objectivation. From this point of view, we can say that what is being

executed" is none other than the position of the subject itself. As Ah Q is executed, he feels, "as if his whole body were shattering like so much dust."⁶⁷ Death for Ah Q is related in terms of a complete dissolution. Thus the Chinese people are depicted as participating in the loss of their own subjective power. What remains is only for them to be made an object, the objects of western imperialism, to be sure, but also the objects of a state which denies the possibility of subjectivity to any of its subjects.' This is, I would assert here without further explanation, a plausible reason which could explain why successive Chinese governments in the 20th century have never been prepared to challenge the putative unity of the west.

Certainly this denial of subjectivity is the central thesis of Sun Lung-kee's work. The denial of subjectivity by the state for its 'subjects' corresponds with Sun's idea of the 'underdeveloped ego.' Of course, the unarticulated part of Sun's argument is an idea of the "developed ego," an entity which turns out to be a particular model of subjectivity established in the west. By contrast, Lu Xun saw clearly that China's predicament could not be de-historicized; for Lu Xun, the entire problematic is inevitably conditioned by China's relation to the west.

No doubt I have raised many more problems than can be effectively dealt with here. My purpose is to show a notable

⁶⁷ibid., p. 152.

example of how the breakdown of Chinese subjectivity had been explored by an author whom many would consider to be the greatest Chinese writer of the 20th century. Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q" simply ends with the presentation of this problematic; his storyteller's role is to shed light, not to master. Writing some sixty years after Lu Xun, Can Xue still operates within the same problematic; compared to "The True Story of Ah Q," however, "The Skylight" is more insistent, more desperate in its predicament. While "Ah Q" seems designed to enlighten the reader, "The Skylight" aims to destroy.

The obvious question here is to what extent is Can Xue successful in her Samson-esque gesture ("If I had my way, I would tear this old building down") of resistance and destruction. In effect, "The Skylight" enacts the consciousness of a radically overbounded ego divided against itself in a kind of schizophrenic monologue. This is the point of true pathology in Can Xue's stories, against which any possibly Oedipal motifs have only secondary importance. Perhaps we may say that these two motives together symbolize the predicament of Chinese subjectivity in the 20th century. The sufferings of the individual are clearly related by the text to a much more imposing deterministic structure. Although the highly psychological nature of Can Xue's works and the close relationship between characters in the text would suggest the possibility of dialogized

discourse, the overriding presence of a single consciousness invades all aspects of the narrative and prevents the emergence of dialogism. In effect, Can Xue relies on monologism, the very mode of discourse utilized so effectively by the dominant practice of cultural centering in China, in order to blow it apart. In this respect we may say that Can Xue's works have a symptomatically critical relation to their context: they both attest to and suffer from the pathological element in contemporary Chinese culture, as well as attempt to negate it at the same time.

This predicament is represented by the interaction between text and reader. Following the themes of identity and interior dialogue discussed above another step further, I would suggest it is even possible to provide a reading of the text which projects these themes on to the reader. Just before the penultimate paragraph, the "I" is asked if she was trying "to camouflage" herself. The idea of camouflage itself immediately recalls the question of appearance and identity - in the world of "The Skylight," things are not always what they seem to be. The dialogue which begins the second to last paragraph starts as the narrative "I"'s response to her interlocutor. Midway through the paragraph, however, a transition occurs. The speaker's voice moves from an interactive mode of response to assume the quality of a monologue. The action described at the end of this paragraph, such as the lighting of a match and the character's

subjective response to gnawing on other people's cheeks, is similar to other parts of the narrative which are not described through speech in quotation-marks. The action of gnawing on other people's cheeks is also highly significant when read as a symbolic erosion of the smooth boundary provided by "face" in Chinese culture. In effect, the "I"'s dialogue becomes a monologue which assumes the function previously assigned to the narrative voice (outside of quotes). This situation repeats in reverse an earlier passage in which the "I"'s speech is unbounded by end quotes.⁶⁸ By enclosing narrative description within quotation-marks, the story creates a situation whereby the reader is marginalized. The "I" is no longer speaking to a third party, i.e. the reader, but has instead shifted to address only itself. However, since the reader continues to "hear" what is being "said," perhaps we may say that even the identity of the reader is being thrown into question. In much the same way as the story had previously subsumed the identity of the old man within that of the narrative "I," this transition from dialogue to narrative monologue in quotes carries a similar potential. Sharing the same "ear" with the narrator, the reader herself becomes effectively implicated within the narrative. As a result, this implication may constitute an extension of the individual psychological problem onto the whole society, as it were. Although the narrative does not delve into abstract theorizing,

⁶⁸See for example the dialogue beginning with the first full paragraph at the top of page 70. There are no quote marks to end this passage.

the reader's unavoidable involvement with the text effectively opens up the whole sticky problematic of the relation between self and other.

Within the text itself, the larger context or setting of the stories is never fully described but appears only as a kind of haunting memory of the past. As a "story" of sorts, "The Skylight" nevertheless absolutely refuses to enact any sort of diachronic concept of time. There are certain events in the text which the reader is free to associate with actual events in recent Chinese history; the passage about going out to look for scrap metal in "The Skylight" suggests comparison with similar scenes during the Great Leap Forward movement. Events such as these are merely suggestive, however, and their meaning is ultimately marked by complete underdetermination. Time is not absent from the narrative; in fact it is a central theme. Even the old man talks about "the fleeting passage of time". Nevertheless, it is impossible to ascribe any sense of chronology to the narrative. Time passes so quickly, as it were, that everything is caught in still-life freeze, like the frozen carcasses gobbled down by the nocturnal bird. The whole flow of the narrative is like the alarm clock which appears periodically throughout the story, ringing continuously the whole time. Events from the past seem to occur simultaneously with events in the present and even those in the future. This synchronic vision of time recalls the

Underground Man's talk about "ancient memories" which continuously return to haunt him in the present. More to the point, however, is the idea that underlying the text's presentation of time is an implicit concept of history.

History in China has essentially been limited to narrative accounts designed to define and strengthen the primary task of "centering." In this sense, the traditional expectation of narrative history in China has been to find a central meaning which could effectively master all that chaos. This kind of search for meaning requires as its prerequisite a diachronic time scale along which events can be ordered into a coherent pattern of sense. Can Xue's stories are like a piece of dynamite placed at the foundation of this elaborate edifice, this temple to the god of a cultural "myth of centering." The adamant refusal to admit a diachronic time-scale combines with the lack of concordant narrative closure to inhibit the search for satisfying "meaning" on the level of the imagination; the reader is thus forced to come to terms with the unresolved problems which the story reveals in an intentionally uncomfortable way.⁶⁹

This idea raises a question about the function of

⁶⁹ "One way a novel makes challenging contact with "reality" and "history" is precisely by resisting fully concordant narrative closure (prominently including that provided by the conventional well-made plot), for this mode of resistance inhibits compensatory catharsis and satisfying "meaning" on the level of the imagination and throws the reader back upon the need to come to terms with the unresolved problems the novel helps to disclose." Dominick LaCapra, *History, Politics and The Novel*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 14.

monologism in Can Xue's writing. To a certain extent, the schizophrenic language employed by Can Xue allows her to establish a world completely autonomous of reality and reason. The world of these stories is encased by a "wall," as it were, which attempts hermetically to seal its characters and even the reader within itself. This "wall" is one of the elements that make Can Xue's stories so daunting for the reader. Although -- and perhaps because -- the reader is implicated within the text, the result produces an almost condescending effect upon the reader. Among the stories included in the two current editions of Can Xue's work, there is not a single character-protagonist with whom the reader can fully sympathize. Through a series of disgusting images and irrational events, the narrative establishes a "pristine" world which stands in sharp contrast to the "reality" of most readers. The boundary dividing this world from that of the reader's can only be seen as an intentional device, a kind of trap laid out in advance. In order to defend the autonomy of this world, the narrative denies the reader any foothold in terms of conventional plot devices and claims every advantage for itself. This kind of uncompromising attitude has all the zeal and dogmatic qualities of a troop of Quotations-waving Red Guards. Given the breakdown of effective surface boundaries within the story, this "wall" must be seen as highly significant. In her examination of 18th century ritual, Zito notes, "The bounding of

difference brings difference into being and ...most importantly, allows for its control."⁷⁰

At this point the reader is virtually forced to find a way of coming to terms with the absolute extremity of the text. Perhaps at this point even more patient readers would be persuaded just to put the text down and read something else. Fair enough. But if we sit for a moment with the dis-ease, a whole problematic involving the most sticky kinds of antinomies is allowed to arise. Without doubt, the effect of the text's extremity raises the question of binary opposites. The unselfconscious reader may simply rely on standard polarities such as reality and dream or reason and irrationality to conventionalize this more radical element of the text. The operative procedure in this kind of reading establishes these antinomies in rigidly defined hierarchy: reason dominant over irrationality and reality privileged over dream. It may be that a certain observance of hierarchy is required for a stable social medium to obtain; nevertheless, when one of these opposites is weighted too heavily, to the extent that communication and creative interaction with its other half is precluded, the situation tends toward a kind of pathological unbalance.

In terms of traditional Chinese cosmology, these sorts of unbalanced situations are depicted in the I Ching as a time fraught with danger. We may meditate on the idea (with a sigh

⁷⁰From the introduction to an unpublished volume of essays on body, subjectivity, and power in China, edited by Tani Barlow and Angela Zito.

perhaps) that if only reason *could* stamp out irrationality, then all would finally be "light" -- *guangming* 光明, as it is often termed in Maoist discourse. Practically speaking, however, this effort is compromised from the start; it is, in fact, the pinnacle of irrationality. Can Xue's text functions as a way of challenging the standard assumptions behind opposites paired into such hierarchies. Although this may seem unnecessary, within the Chinese context of extreme monologism (but I would certainly not want to imply that this condition exists only in China), it is highly pertinent. By reintroducing the play between antinomies through the grotesque and the absurd, this reversal may also perform a regenerative function similar to that described by Bakhtin's discussion of the Carnavalesque.⁷¹ Thus to say that the world of Can Xue's stories is like an "irrational dream-state" (*fei lixing de mengjing* 非理性的梦境)⁷² is not as accurate as it would be to say that her stories are a form of uncompromising resistance to the hegemonistic position accorded to a certain monologically defined "rationale" in contemporary China. In Can Xue's stories, "irrationality" and the "dream-state" are used as tools to construct a wall -- the first line of defense, as it were.

It is a common axiom of war that "the best defense is a

⁷¹ See Bakhtin, Mikhail, Caryl Emerson, tr., *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp. 122-137.

⁷² Critics such as Wu Liang and Cheng Depei in China, as well as myself, have at one time or another used this kind of terminology to describe them. While it would not be untrue to make such a statement, I have come to the conclusion that it is potentially misleading.

good offense." Can Xue's defensive effort ultimately has this offensive quality to it - offensive both in the sense of an attack upon Confucianist tradition and in the sense of a disturbing intrusion upon "good taste." Can Xue's work raises, I think, an interesting problem of strategy. As Dostoyevsky's work shows, the whole process of a cultural critique must at some point address itself to the question of determinism in order to be effective. Although Can Xue's work would ostensibly seem to be designed to explode the strait-jacket of pathological monologism, it does not offer any alternative by itself to this mode of discourse. In this respect, the transformative possibilities of Can Xue's efforts are seriously compromised by this symptomatically critical approach. What Can Xue would offer is an antidote: a culture made from the disease itself. The idiom *yi du gong du* ('using poison to fight poison' 以毒攻毒) conveys all the risks inherent to this kind of remedy. This may just be a problem of strategy, however. During the Second World War in Europe, the German high command emphasized a policy of "*klotzern nicht kleckern*" ("Don't divide your men into penny-packets") as the key to effective Blitzkrieg. This strategy relies on local superiority in the face of a numerically superior opponent to achieve a total breakout. By defiantly proclaiming another discursive practice opposed to all the standard hierarchies of dominance in language, Can Xue may be taking the necessary

first step. Given the extremely unbalanced state of recent Chinese discursive practices, in which the voice of the internalized other has been consistently repressed to the point of asphyxiation, it is probably necessary to enact a moment of cathartic reversal. The danger is that this reversal may become yet another point of fixation and obsession. Here we should first pay tribute to the supreme power of the Chinese "myth of centering." Although I have in this essay described this "myth" in terms of its most negatively-valued aspect, this has not been its only function in an historical sense. It may be that for 'traditional' China, this "myth" performed an optimal function. With the advent of 'modern' culture emanating from the West, however, this configuration was simply untenable. In spite of the liability now presented by this "myth," it still persists; the revolution-cum-restoration idea attests both to its enduring influence and its almost admirable efficiency. As the Underground Man notes, "sometimes a man is intensely, even passionately, attached to suffering".⁷³ The sense of paranoia which pervades "The Skylight" may be symptomatic of a similar sentiment in its national context. As Jin Yaoji⁷⁴ and many others have noted, China's modernization began primarily as a defensive reaction against intrusion by the West. Although Can

⁷³Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Jesse Coulson, tr., Notes from Underground, Penguin Books, England, 1987, p. 41

⁷⁴Jin, Yaoji, Cong Chuantong Dao Xiandai, Shibao Chubanshe, Taipei, 1986.

Xue's work is implicitly critical of this idea, it shares the same fears of its context to a certain extent -- a "fear of flying" one might say. Given the immense power of cultural conservatism in contemporary China, this is a problem to which any "complete negation" of tradition, such as Liu Xiaobo now calls for, must address itself, (not to mention the fact that "complete negations" don't stand a dialectic chance). Can Xue's work unfortunately gives us no indications in this respect, but the author's sensitivity to the need for addressing these issues gives us hope: having effectively enacted the moment of reversal, Can Xue (or another author for that matter) may now be able to take one step further and enact a working through of these problems, fostering the genesis of truly discursive dialogic exchange within Chinese culture. In any case, at the current stage of Can Xue's development as a writer, we may end with a refrain from the Underground Man:

"Now, for example, I am particularly oppressed by one ancient memory. I have hundreds of memories like it. For some reason I believe that if I write it down I shall get rid of it. Why not try?"

PART TWO: TRANSLATION OF "THE SKYLIGHT"

The Skylight

by Can Xue (Deng Xiaohua)

The father of a guy I work with is the corpse-burner at the crematorium. He has spent the better half of his life burning dead bodies; his whole person is covered with the smell. One day his family secretly settled the matter and collectively disowned him. He lives all alone now in a small shack by the edge of the crematorium burial ground. As far as I know, he has been living there for ten years already. I got a bizarre letter from him out-of-the-blue this morning. Although the envelope had no postmark and was addressed with only a large pencil-drawn skull, it still made it to my mailbox without a problem. The letter itself was rather odd; even the phrasing was quite unique:

It's very good here. The weather is fresh and cool. The air is teeming with thin-leaved mosla plants.⁷⁵ Grapes, *in one great cluster after another*, float through the mist. Every night, there is a kind of *dance*.

- Co-worker A's father

I readily understood what he was getting at; I was thinking about those grapes, those plants nourished by the ashes of dead people's bones...

Opening the window, I saw mother's weighty frame squatting in a pile of rubble. Gasping for air, she was in the

⁷⁵Mosla is a common herb used in traditional Chinese medicine.

middle of taking a crap. Grassy wormwood was growing in clumps on the rubble pile. Driven crazy by the pain, mother kept on ripping out the wormwood and throwing it away.

The whole day I had been feeling uneasy about the letter in my pocket. One of my little brothers had been stealthily checking me over a number of times through the corner of one eye. While we were having soup, he surreptitiously dropped a rat turd into my bowl in order to test me out.

"Although this house is an old one," father droned with dignity out of the festering abscess which had become two holes in his nasal cavity, "it's the only building in this area. How the years have gone by. I can really appreciate those clumps of grassy wormwood."

"Totally amazing!" As my little brother began to cheer, he splattered his bowl of soup all over the table.

I could not understand why on earth he used the word "appreciate." All his life he has been saying such sensationalist nonsense.

They have already seen through my mind.

At twelve o'clock midnight, the old corpse burner appears in the wardrobe mirror. He is a blurry sphere of a thing, like a vapour. He stretches out a hand to me from the mirror, a hand that is covered with the greasy, smoked smell of burnt flesh.

"Were you waiting all this time?" he says facing me. His voice is barely intelligible, like a transistor radio that has been

dropped on the floor. "We leave immediately."

Suddenly I remember that I have already arranged something with him.

It is so dark outside, you can not even see your hands. Maintaining a distance about five or six paces ahead of me, he walks urgently, looking like a gorilla flashing blurry, luminous spots. Every ten steps or so, he warns me, "There's a floating bridge under our feet."

No sooner does he warn me than of course the ground below my feet has a floating feeling to it, and I faintly hear the gurgling sound of running water.

"The old fisherman fell into the cave before twelve o'clock," he enigmatically intones.

I have slipped for a moment. There are clearly two rows of teeth clenching my toes, but in the next instant they let go again. From down under comes malignant cursing, hysterical roars and a loud "heh-heh" of obnoxious laughter. In the midst of all this racket, an alarm clock is ringing the whole time.

The old man moves like his feet are on wings. I have to run myself out of breath just to keep up with him. In the distance there are two green halos. Moving at an incredible speed, we rush ahead towards the halos. The closer we get, the giddier I become, my legs losing all sensation. A door creaks, and

then everything disappears.

"Come on up." The old man floats in mid-air. His voice still has that same grainy sound, and his throat reverberates with the "whirr" of a shrill cry.

I step up gently, and then just like him, I too am floating in a black emptiness.

"Crunch, crunch, crunch..."

"Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch."

"Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch."

The sound of gnashing teeth reports to us from every direction.

After my eyes have become accustomed to the darkness, I notice a faint light swaying over the roof. Through the feeble glow, I can make out what is a grass shack, more or less ten metres square. The walls are covered with hanging skulls, contorted in pain...

"That moving light, it's the fleeting passage of time." The old man grinds his teeth, chewing out an unpleasant, grating sound. "This place makes you lonely to the marrow. There's a spider's web on the corner of the wall, it's been there for twelve years already. Twelve years ago, my little daughter stood in the doorway and said: "Hmph!" I saw a large tumour was growing in her chest, tightly extruding her tiny heart."

"Crunch, crunch, crunch... .."

The green halos appear again. First two dots. Then, getting larger and larger, they appear more dazzling and even more terrifying than moments ago.

"Hey, you, go away!"

The halos bunch up again into two dots, and a dark shadow brushes past. It was nothing more than a clumsy nocturnal bird. It shrieks angrily once. Flapping over to the skylight, it beats the roof-top violently with its mammoth wings, producing a thunderous rumble.

"A man-eating bird." As the old man is saying this, I can guess that he must be grinning. "It miscalculated. As soon as it's light, I want to take you up to the skylight to see something truly amazing." He makes a slight snoring noise. I struggle, however, not daring to sleep. I am afraid of dropping out of this emptiness in which I am now lying and falling into a bottomless abyss. The old man tosses and turns, back and forth; his creaky bones ring, as though this emptiness were slamming against his back. After tossing about for the better part of the night, I see the dew coyly dripping off the lilac petals. In the brilliant azure sky, there is a giant red moon, like the furry head of some strange beast. On a barren slope, apes and monkeys by the tens of thousands plaintively wail at the strange thing in the sky. An odd, powerful fragrance suffuses the air.

"That's the scent of the thin-leaved mosla plants." The

old man has already got up, but I am still lying on clump of straw in mid-air. Bending over, he rolls back and forth in the dry straw which fills the shack until his beard is covered with stems. "All summer long I've been busy gathering this kind of grass. It's piled as high as a mountain behind the house. Don't you want to see my grapes?"

Before I have even had the chance to answer, he has already climbed up to the very top of the straw pile and nimbly leapt up. Having clambered onto the skylight, he says, "Please come on up." He motions toward me, stealing a furtive grin.

The two of us stretch out on our stomachs on the fir-bark roof. He pokes me, and points back and forth with his fingers in the misty air. "Please have a look at these treasures of mine. Can you see them? On the left, that glittering pearl? And there on the right, that's all seedless, green grapes." Good God! Where are there any grapes?! I tell him that I do not see anything except the fog, but he just ignores me. "All year long, a desolate wind is blowing across this graveyard; sometimes it carries yellow sand and beats down on the roof-top like a torrential rain. Heard from under the old cypress tree, the sound of the wind is especially loud, like it's carrying a hidden threat. I have already gotten used to standing alone in the wind: at that time this world was utterly deserted. There was only occasionally an old crow, which brushed in front of you in a crooked way. Just a moment ago, while you were still asleep, I already heard that last cicada on the

camphor tree branch doing its magnum opus -- that's something really unusual. After it had finished singing, it turned into a transparent carcass instantly - that happened on the last syllable. Wait a second, you go ahead and talk about something."

"Me? I was thrown into a piss-pot after I was born. Because I got soaked in urine, now that I've grown up, my neck is soft like putty, and my head is swollen like a ball. I have been breathing in poisonous air for half my life. My rib cage was picked clean long ago by tuberculosis germs. My father suffers from syphilis. His nose has abscessed into two small, terrible holes. Then there's my mother... ...Our house is on a pile of ruins: There's a spacious old house there, and it's the only building in that whole area. My family and I sleep inside. During the day, we all go out to look for scrap metal. Nobody stints, and everyone winds up totally worn out. As soon as night comes, we scurry around in the old house like rats, looking for the darkest, most sequestered corner. I always want to take a rest. Sometimes in the sunlight, when everything is still, I space out for a long time on a clump of small, light-red flowers in the middle of the rubble, thinking to give my eyes a moment's rest -- my eyeballs are always distended in pain. Why are those flowers all pallid faces?

I remember that muddy, rainy morning. Father came in from the outside, treading heavily in his rubbers. The whole

house got soaked with rainwater. Then he huddled up to me and said, in a manner beating around the bush: the test results show there are three leeches growing in my lungs. While he was talking, he chuckled about that and his whole body twitched. He felt as though he had at last completed an extraordinary mission. When I left, I could not get my legs to stand up straight. All along the way I kept slipping. My whole body was covered with mud. In fact everybody knows about my leaving. It's an open secret. They just 'hmp-h-ed' once through the nose; such unorthodox behaviour is complete anathema to them.

"Little flowers? Pallid ones?" the old man, lowering his head, murmurs in a daze. "I understand this very well." Suddenly his eyes become bright, and he says with vigour, "Perched on top of a blackened gravestone, the old crow cawed once. Twelve years passed, and sweet-smelling roses grew, covering the grave. Two muddy feet had trampled down the thin-leaved mosla plants. Even though it's daytime, there are still spectres wandering about."

The fog begins to recede. A scarlet sunset is blazing over the black ruins in the distance. The silhouette of the dark, old house has softened, and green-tinted water drips off the eaves. Father, a case suffering from advanced syphilis, is sitting on the roof-top like an oozing pustule; there is also mother, obese and tormented to her last gasp by diabetes. Leaning on each other, the

two of them kick in a bunch of rooftiles. My brothers scramble around on top like monkeys. Inside that empty transparent abdomen of theirs, a huge stomach spasmodically exudes a green liquid. They all stare at the smoke-coloured sky with hollow, paling eyes, and make clumsy hand gestures of anticipation. I start to move my lips, thinking to shout something, when everything before my eyes suddenly turns again into a vast blanket of haze.

"Mommy, that's what you want to say. Mom-my." The old man pauses between each syllable, looking totally exhausted. "My time is almost up. Recently these days, I keep seeing rainbows. It happens when I go to take walks in the graveyard. Sometimes when I'm sleeping it's also like that, a kind of familiar something that takes you by surprise."

"Who are you?" I can not help the cold shivers running down my spine.

"Me? Just a corpse-burner." He thrusts his hand onto my shoulder. "If you don't mind, I feel like laying down to sleep for a moment. It's really tranquil here. I've already picked the spot in which I'm going to lie, it's just below that grape grove, right next to the small pond. Nobody's ever drunk from that pond water, except for an old black crow. A few other people may come and lie with me, so I've dug many ditches. One day they come, a young girl will be walking in front. They'll kneel down, and after drinking some pond water, they'll tumble over into

those ditches. The bottoms of the ditches are lined with thin-leaved mosla plants. You've been through those cold winter nights, haven't you?"

"I am always rubbing my frost-bitten toes. If I were to stop, somebody would turn into an icicle."

"There is a dance which the red squirrels do in that ice-covered graveyard. Their fiery red tails are like big candles burning on the snowy ground. Tap, tap, tap, tap, donk! Tap, tap, tap, tap, donk!" Using his fingers to tap on the fir-bark roof, he falls asleep. A rapturous smile hangs the whole time on the corners of his mouth.

I have been lying on the skylight for the whole day, intently focused on anything stirring in the distant ruins. At first, you cannot see anything but the fog. By noon the fog has gradually lifted and the scorching sun is directly overhead, but the atmosphere around the old house is already as gloomy as night. A thick column of smoke billowing out from the chimney slowly congeals in mid-air, forming a static mushroom cloud. The cellar door suddenly opens. Old Auntie comes bursting out, riding on the back of a large, rabid bitch. She circles once around the slag pile, and then madly rushes back into the cellar. The door slams with a thud, shutting in a grief-stricken sob. At the chime of a clock somewhere, myriad shadows cast by unknown heads rise up out of the rubble, while a green snake slithers

between them. The door opens again. It is mother, being carted out packed in a bathtub. Her whole face is covered in blood. One hand is raised high, holding a lock of white hair, white hair which is caked with bits of scalp flesh. She is unable to scream out, her voice stifled by a bone in her throat. The bathtub is very deep. As she tries to climb out, her efforts one after another end in defeat. The old man twitches slightly; two drops of blood roll out from under his eyelids, and the corners of his mouth are caked with the white crud spit out in convulsions. "I'm better now." Speaking with his back to me, he is rather apologetic, spitting out gnashed teeth.

As soon as it gets dark, the old man burrows a hole in the dense pile of thin-leaved mosla. We wriggle into the hole and close up the entrance. Uttering a note of satisfaction, we quickly fall into a dream. All around me, red dragonflies are dancing in the air, spinning innumerable halos. Every time I start to wake up out of the haze, the halos spin into a deeper dream state. Just as I bend down, thinking to pick up a narcissus, somebody gives me a violent shove from behind.

"Aren't you going to see my grapes?" The old man's sore throat rings.

We crawl out of the hole, like two alley cats at night.

The ground under me has that same floating feeling again. Amid the racket of noise underground, an alarm clock is

ringing the whole time.

A gust of wind blows by. It is a thoroughly alien, bone-chilling wind. I bend over tightly to muffle the groaning sounds issuing out of my stomach.

"Grapes are very good." The old man stoops down. Smacking his lips with great relish, he grabs my hand and sticks it into a dark place. I can feel a soft moist pile, like the innards of some animal. There is even a noxious fishy smell. I jerk with a start, and scream.

"At the beginning," in the darkness, the old man fondles those things he calls "grapes" with his hands, continuously popping them into his mouth to chew on, "they moved very slowly, and then gradually began to pick up speed. There was one winter's night when I saw those shadows stuck on the roof. The first time I ever saw a rainbow was just then at that moment, in a drowsy state. It all happened so suddenly, I didn't really wake up completely. Later, it happened again so many times, by now I'm already used to it. My ditch is right under here, you can touch it with your feet."

I test it out with my toes, and feel those same soft moist innards. There are also, it would seem, tiny suction cups growing on top. They tightly suck the blood vessels on my feet, not letting go. I shrink back at once, and use my hands to whack the insteps of my feet.

"This kind of thing always happens to me: I'll be strolling back and forth between the tombstones, and looking up, I'll see a scarlet glass cup suspended in mid-air. Frothing a rich head, turbid rice wine overflows off the edge of the cup. Listening... what I hear is complete stillness all around, no sound -- only the evil froth dribbles out in mid-air with a sloshing sound. Won't you try a taste of these grapes?"

He uses a cold sticky finger to feel my hand.

I retract into a ball, dodging back and forth.

The man-eating nocturnal bird has come back again: two green eyes in the air, like a tiger eyeing its prey; wings rushing at me, beating against the tree branches with a loud "whoosh!" sound. I dodge out of the way, and my forehead presently slams with a thud into something hard. Two pairs of pliers tightly sandwich me around the waist.

"Say 'pretty please.'" In the murkiness, I hear the old man's sarcastic voice.

"Please," I blurt out in a muddleheaded way.

The ground is covered with thick black twigs. In the dim light coming from who-knows-where, the old man's spindly, weak legs are faintly visible. Turning from dark blue to black, they look very much like an intestinal sort of thing.

From mid-air, I vomit out in a stream on the ground the undigested food in my stomach.

"This kind of dance is really crazy," the old man broods.

"This is my mother. She's the type who doesn't like to be lonely, crawling out from under there every night to hunt, her brain eaten away long ago by ants. Just listen: thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump! It's really frightening, the passion that makes her want to jump like this all night. She's pretty crude, don't you think? She's always been like this. I used to be afraid of it, but now it's alright. I'm so weak-willed it disgusts other people. I've always wanted to imitate mother, but have striven only in vain all my life."

As I think back on those pliers with a lingering fear, my whole body trembles with pain. The nocturnal bird's eyeballs are still floating in mid-air, now expanding, now contracting, as though they were sending some sort of signal. Here, there is the scent of spurious danger. The smell of it makes me so dejected, I cannot even lift my head.

"That guy has his eyes so intensely fixed on me, does my body really smell of rotting flesh? At our place here, everything has to live until the last moment. Ever since those shadows got stuck and wouldn't budge, I have counted my age to myself at 103. I have dug so many ditches and holes. Because of the in-born deficiencies in my character, I'm always hesitating, treading deep furrows on the edges of those ditches and holes, listening to the water accumulated inside splash out. The afternoon sun shines on the rhododendrons, their shadows short and small.

Suddenly I see a pomegranate tree. An alarm clock underground moves its hands with a tick-tock tick-tock sound, and then stops. Everything between heaven and earth enters a state of death again. In the bat of an eye, I have once more changed my mind."

"Who are you?"

"An old fogey who digs tunnels in the graveyard. Each thing here wants to go on living all the way until it turns into a transparent carcass, so that when it's hit, it echoes with a boom. Just a moment ago, as you were about to pick a narcissus flower -- with the white clouds overhead, the pomegranates all around, the wind blowing eternally, and the alarm clock ringing away -- you would have noticed that the pomegranate tree grew in red dirt, and the imaginary blossoms covering the tree were all in full bloom."

"My mother was sitting in the bathtub, and all the flesh on her scalp had peeled off." I am narrating a recent event. It is like a young sprout growing out of my lungs, making my chest swell up like this.

"Ay, mom-my." His voice is loaded with sarcasm.

"Smoke from the kitchen fire is curling up the chimney, and a fireplace lights inside the ash-covered window. My brother is forty years old this year. I'm three years older." My voice gradually grows clearer.

We crawl again into that straw cave.

We get sent swirling into a deep dream-state. A long distance separates the two of us.

At one end of the forest there is the faint sound of thunder. It is him, snoring at the other end. There are no narcissus flowers among the grass. Underneath each tea-bush, there is a grey eye which continuously blinks out clear tears like dewdrops. I pick up an eye, and it turns immediately to fine dust in the palm of my hand, emitting a puff of smoke.

I remember that I have come here in the height of summer, wearing a straw hat and a white shirt as dazzling as if it were ablaze.

I came here to find mushrooms. My hand is still holding the bamboo basket.

I look around back and forth. A sty grows on my eye. The alarm clock ticks away insensitively, and half my life is gone.

I struggle to open my puffy red eyes. The ground is covered with carcasses of red dragonflies. Wild cats in despair cry in the thicket.

The thunder gradually closes in. The old man is lying under a ginko tree, his feet appearing slightly translucent. Having contracted the halos in its eyes, the man-eating nocturnal bird perches on a branch. He is wallowing in the middle of an even deeper dream-state. Because a purple light is flickering off the top of his head, his dream must definitely be a purple one. There is no way I can approach his dream-state, the

fully-grown young sprouts make my chest feel unbearably congested.

The skylight looms in-between the branches of the ginko tree; it is a black hole on the roof of the grass shack. Gnats pour out of the hole like thick smoke. Two people in grey coats come to the side of the shack. Using plaster-of-paris, they write two large thick letters on the wall: T X. Leaving hurriedly, they trample over many thin-leaved mosla plants.

We wake up at dawn. At that moment, the sound of a bell comes in from afar: dong--dong--dong, striking three times in all, very measured. There is, indeed, a clock in the old house. My father is the bell-ringer. It is a funny thing; before I had ever come here, the clock was in the cellar. Thick green moss was growing on top. One clear day I wanted to bring it up to air out under the sun, but it crushed my toes instead.

They definitely did hit the bell, three times all together. The man striking the bell was my father, I could tell by the sound.

"They've rung the bell," I say.

"I just heard a cicada singing an absolute tour de force." Studying me with a careful look, the old man has had some kind of premonition. With a trembling hand, he picks a grass stem from the hair on his temples.

Over by the graveyard: rainwater has already filled up the

ditches; rotting grass floats on the water; and a bunch of toads are standing motionlessly erect by the edge of a ditch.

"I can't cough, something just grew in here. Maybe it's a bamboo shoot. I'm not used to it yet... .." I embrace my chest with both hands overlapping, as though I had indeed smelled burning pine.

"You've seen rainbows, too. I was under the electric pole at the time watching you. Your eyes had turned into two hockey pucks. That kind of feeling is absolutely real. When the cold wind came blowing over, we were two dark shadows walking on a barren slope. The two of us had nothing to do with each other, each one walking alone."

"Red light is flickering off the ceiling, a story remains in the ashes. I know how tiresome this is, not to mention that eternal desolation." My throat is jumping with the pain.

"They're just about to say: Happy New Year?!" The old man stifles a chuckle in his throat, repressing the distress written on his face.

"That's not important. You know all about this: A butterfly was fluttering in the woods, its wings shining under the sun like soft blood-red silk. She'd flown for so long, in the middle of the night I could hear the sound as she dropped to the ground-- clear and pleasant to the ear. Under the starlight, whimpering sobs rippled through the forest. Blood dripped out

of your eyes while you were dreaming."

"Happy New Year! Happy New Year!" Mumbling it over and over again, the old man crawls out of the straw pile, making deep footprints in the quagmire on the road.

Looking through the skylight, one can see very far. The old man stoops down in the dawn breeze, his face stuck to a gravestone. All around him every few steps is one of the ditches he has dug. As soon as the sun shines, the water collecting in the ditches reflects a brilliant white light, a light which makes it look as though he has placed himself in a world of glass, with cracks running all over the fragile floor. In the thicket at the far end of the graveyard, there is someone crawling over. Each time after crawling a certain interval, he raises a slender weak hand high up at the heavens, and cries out a few indistinct phrases. It is my little brother. Overnight he has grown a mole's tail, fur, and skin. In his devolutionized memory, my shadow is a vague blur. Drooling yellow saliva, he forcefully siezes a certain kind of light-yellow mind-state. Spurred on by some unfathomable thought, he crawls over from the cellar to here. Mother sits on a wooden barrel in the cellar, chanting under her breath a strange, unfamiliar name. She is melting away. A thin black stream scurries out from under her feet, rushing towards the cellar door. Father starts to strike the bell again, his butt sticking up in a ridiculously awkward way. Dong--dong--dong, three times all together, a rather timid three times. He throws down the metal

hammer, and one eye instantly goes blind. My chest is swollen in pain by the bamboo shoots.

The people in the grey coats have left long ago. Any trace of the letters on the wall has been washed away by the rain. So, it did rain last night. I was roaming around at that time under the burning sun of mid-summer.

It is so quiet and still here; there is also that kind of wind.

The sky is filled with fake stars, wavering with no fixed position.

The fireplace is already burning brightly. Another story congeals in the grey mushroom cloud.

Many people come walking down off the rubble pile, treading along the coal-slag road heading towards the old house. Seen from behind, their figures are slender, tall and nimble. Their footsteps are flighty and unsure. It was many years ago that I forgot there used to be other houses and other people on these ruins. The reddening street light blinks on and off, while the lantern cover whispers softly in the cold mist. A layer of silvery frost covers the ground. A thin person starts to whistle. Reddish-yellow flames leap up from the window glass, and a puff of steam blurs that shadowy figure once again. Many shadows are flashing on the moss-covered wall. The house rocks with a creaky sound, and all at once, the icicles under the eaves come crashing down together.

The old man instantly freezes into a transparent block of ice. The nocturnal bird has fallen asleep.

A long time ago, he and I looked for mushrooms in this forest. That was still before he had started digging ditches.

He could not understand why I had turned traitor, so he just went over there alone.

The nocturnal bird is going to wake up with a start in the rain, and beating its huge wings, it will gobble down his frozen carcass. Those ditches are completely filled with water; black rotten grass floats on top.

I pierce through the white light of the glass world, hurriedly moving on ahead.

"You, trying to camouflage yourself, eh?" The man in a grey coat accosts me at the edge of the forest. He has no head, his voice just buzzes in his chest.

Coming from behind me, I hear a "ding-dong" sound. That world is right in the middle of breaking to pieces.

"No, no, I only wanted to change my underwear and shoes, then just neatly comb my hair. Very simple things. If possible, I would also like to make a butterfly specimen album--those kind of red butterflies. In the winter nights, I'll be listening attentively for those footsteps, and think over the story of the *wutong* trees 'til I get it straight. It's dark outside, and dark inside the house too. Using an icy finger, I grope for a match.

After striking four or five times, I finally light a quivering flame. So many people float past the window and drift away, so many people. Just by stretching out my arms, I can touch their bodies. Gnawing on their cheeks, I get a private sense of satisfaction. I'm going to sit here in the dark night until the last minute, smiling coldly, smiling affectionately, smiling bitterly. By that time, the oil lamp will be extinguished, and the bell will be ringing on."

I have finally become enraptured by my own voice. It's a kind of beautiful, soothing low tone which confides in me, perpetually without a break.

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