THE VOICE OF FRENCH REALISM IN YU HUA'S AND SU TONG'S FICTION

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Original scientific paper
DOI: 10.31902/fl.36.2021.7

Abstract: Chinese postmodern literature, or post-Mao fiction, comes with disillusionment among the intellectuals and cynicism among the fictional characters. According to this line of thinking, narrative enters a theoretical discourse that leaves aside the former ideological imprint and moves within the frame of realism. As in the experience of the nineteenth century French realism, Su Tong's and Yu Hua's fiction describe a process of Bildungsroman that is never accomplished. A crude Darwinian weltanschauung seems to be the key to understanding.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Darwinism, French Revolution, Mao, Postmodernism, Realism

The object of the present study is not another jargon on the *raison d'être* of Chinese postmodernity, but to observe the narrative Bildungsroman produced by the neo-realistic fiction of Yu Hua (1960) and Su Tong (1963), highlighted by another novel of education, that of French realism in the nineteenth century. The events that occurred in France after the revolution, and their effects in terms of socio-economic changes, caused modern self-conscious realism to develop there first. After Napoleon's fall, the Restoration had forced the old aristocracy and the new bourgeois to live together: A party devoted to the defense of old privileges, but paralyzed by the fear of a second revolution, and a party filled with enthusiasm by the ideas and events brought in by the French Revolution and Napoleonic decades.¹ French society battles for

¹ The French Restoration, also known as Bourbon Restoration, is the historical period that saw the restoration of the monarchy (Ancient Regime) after Napoleon's defeat (1815). With the support of the aristocracy, but without that

democratic reforms and land reforms, simultaneously the class struggle between revolutionary and conservative forces, between the new bourgeoisie and the working class has become the novel's central issue. Fiction becomes about scooping full hands from the materialism of everyday life where ordinary people are intoxicated by the myth of Napoleon, by the book they read, either obsessed or horrified by the sight of a money-making society. Notwithstanding the temporal gap between these two expressions of realism, it seems to me that both of them, Chinese neo-realism and French realism are grounded on historical forces whose agent is a fatal Darwinian struggle for life. As Daniel R. Schwarz observes there is a Marxist element in the nineteenth century French narrative which bridges the temporal gap with China: "French novelists tend to be more aware than other European novelists of the way that economic contexts and social milieu shape characters" (72). Therefore, by considering the main texts of French realism and perhaps the two main authors going under the label of 'Chinese neo-realism,' I believe my area is sufficiently broad to make a case for few general conclusions about French and Chinese literature.

Postmodernity and its cultural application, postmodernism, in China gather uneven understandings. Starting as a historical periodization referring to the post-Mao period, in the aftermath, it became post-revolution, post-colonialism, post-grand-narrative, post-utopian, the blend of post that shapes the maze of Chinese contemporaneity.² My understanding is that Chinese postmodernism is the implosion of Maoist civilization, a space of clash between the residual of the socialist past (Chinese modernity) and the expectations of the present.³ At first, shaped by an economic trend at odds with the planned economy, it developed into an aesthetic moment of differentiation, division, disaggregation, the disintegration of ideological utopias, virtually the secularization of Chinese society. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang in the introduction of *Postmodernism & China* inspiringly

of the Catholic Church and the peasantry, the regime fell in the July Revolution of 1830 de facto ending the Bourbon Restoration.

² As Mao went down in history as the experience of Chinese modernity, post-1976 is commonly regarded as the beginning of Chinese literary postmodernism. Scholarships are virtually endless and very much controversial. For details see the essay collection edited by Kang Liu and Xiaobing Tang (1993); Ning Wang (1997); Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (2000); Xiaobin Yang, (2002); Yiwu Zhang and Michael Berry, (1997).

³ I have extensively written on the topic. See Alberto Castelli, *The Modernity of Chinese Postmodern Literature: A Step Beyond Ideology* (2020) and *A Letter to China* (2020).

condense the issue: “Chinese communism was arguably the most forceful, and ultimately most successful, expression of an ideological commitment to modernity. Since 1978, a radical break with the revolutionary past has called into question the earlier framework of experiences, values, and ideologies” (8). As far as I am concerned there are many reasons for viewing the post-1989 age as a turning point in the history of Chinese culture, in short, a Post-New Era crystallizes itself as a departure from the critical tradition. De-politicized, more often ambivalent in its meaning, the 1990s met alienation and political apathy instead of Maoist revolutionary passion. In brief, the beginning of Chinese contemporaneity. With the Open-Door-Policy, the creation of private enterprise, and the access of China to the open world market, the Party-State slowly withdraws from the economic arena and to some extent from the private scene, while maintaining its presence in the public sphere.⁴ Asceticism and egalitarianism crack open and in that unfastened space flourished postmodernism, a component of post-socialism, dealing with the residual of socialism and an emerging subjectivity.⁵ Post-1989 narrative enters a new dimension; it borders, stylistically and ontologically, depending on the authors, the occurrence of European realism, and the fragmentation of modernism. As European modern realism benched romantic idealizations of nature and life to place back in the middle the rational, scientific, Voltairian roots, so did China; the excesses of the revolution are sidelined and subjectivity rebuilt. Chinese identity is defined by a past of injured and scars; this is up to now the most evident message lingering behind post-Maoist production. As in the French experience, the episodes of loneliness that all the protagonists suffer cannot be read as a personal affair or the vicissitudes of a family saga, but as a national allegory waiting to be interpreted.

Allegedly, we are dealing with two very similar methodological approaches. The novels, save a few occasions on the side of the French texts, are never launched *in medias res*. Realist authors have a clear beginning and ending, for them life begins and ends at some self-aware moment. This is how I explain pages of detailed descriptions going back

⁴ Begun in December 1978, the watershed in China’s recent history is Deng Xiaoping’s (1904–1997) policy of “Reform and Opening” (改革开放, pinyin: Gǎigé kāifàng), also known as Open Door Policy, the enlightened project of free market economy.

⁵ A definition of ‘post-socialism’ presupposes socialist culture and elements of modernism. For a throughout understanding see: Jason McGrath (2008); Paul Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin (2006); Xudong Zhang (2008).

generations of names. The plot is well encaged in a specific historical enclosure, the Restoration period on one side, and the epic of Mao's revolution on the other side, so that Europe and China are taken for a few decades between revolutionary forces. The author is everywhere; he is the witness narrating the whole, character's intimate thoughts, events in the past and the future, adding from time to time his judgment. Two are the defining elements: Bildungsroman and Darwinism. Bildungsroman is the combination of two German words: *Bildung*, literally education, and *Roman*, meaning novel. Seemingly, Bildungsroman is a novel of education that deals with the formative years of the main character, the changes he/she goes through before reaching adulthood, psychological development, moral education, and social entanglement. Following the hero's moral path in his progression, the plot moves throughout three main steps: The alienation of the subject from society and to some degree from himself, his journey (symbolic or physical) as a process of self-discovery, the accommodation with reality intended as a compromise and an accomplished maturity. In a broad sense, Bildungsroman is a path toward adulthood yet to be achieved. Darwinism seems to be the existential ghost framing the entire fiction. The basic idea of social-environmental conditions and hereditary traits, acting as inescapable forces shaping human nature, is entangled with the biography (*Bildung*) of ill-fated protagonists plunged into a sordid society described in its darkest aspects. Paris is a jungle where the struggle for survival is on every moment for those who sink. Or sin. Paris is a world dominated by self-interest and greed, an assemblage of victims and murders, a place ruled by money lenders and hidden plots, where corruption is great, and talent is scarce, where women choose their husbands according to the title and their lovers according to a whim. Not just a city of opportunity then, but the setting of poverty, alienation, vice, misery, and loneliness. Hence, the survival of the fittest governs biological and social evolution, species and societies evolve from homogeneous to heterogeneous leading to a state of increasing individualization and fragile equilibrium. Similarly, Chinese postmodern literature cuts its ties with the grand narration, the national allegory, and the rhetoric of writing serving the people, to stage a tale of sorrows and disenchantments. The texts come with an emphasis on external socio-economic conditions such as shabby working environment, human exploitation, and the lack of human touch, so to reduce the emerging human nature to animalistic instincts. Coming out of an age that taught China how to survive, life is lessened to basic needs. Family growth is interrupted by illness, hunger, and injuries; men are depicted as unscrupulous, brutal, cruel, and vulgar, while women as

deserted. Yu Hua's novels all follow this trend. Sun Guanlin's mother, after her husband's affair, is made public, cannot but sit by the kitchen stove wiping away her tears. Fugui's wife, Jiazhen, is a monument to resignation: She must accept a man who loves gambling, whoring, and beats her mercilessly just before ruining his family. Baldy Li and Song Gang's mother, Li Lan, is debased from the start: She spent half her life in shame and the last few years in sorrow.⁶ Women fated to surrender as when taken by force: Lin Hong by Baldy Li, Wang Qiyao by Director Li, Niuniu by teacher Ti, Grandma by Grandpa;⁷ or savagely raped, as for Grandmother Jiang by the landlord Chen in Su Tong's *Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes* (1996). Beaten, starved to death, with their back bent on the crops, their hands broken by the winter, improbable protagonists must be selfish to the extreme if they want to escape the process of human selection. Emotionally incapable, they are characters between human and monster, between heroes and idiots, the last expression of Darwinian selection with no trace of humanism left behind.

Given that, the path towards a fulfilling adulthood is somewhat troublesome. Single characters' lives are cocooned within the fate of France; the collapse of personal integrity is linked to the alternate vicissitudes of the political regime. The social evolution in France has provided the political and economic growth of the bourgeoisie, but with Napoleon's fall and the return of the Bourbons, the heroic period of the French revolution came to an end. The literary critics Georg Lukacs and Franco Moretti do not hesitate to define the new novel as 'novel of disillusionment' which in Lukacs' words "shows how the conception of life (...) is shattered by the brute forces of capitalism" (47). Both Balzac and Stendhal regret much of all that was lost after the French Revolution; they miss the world Napoleon represented, where ambition, passion, and bravery had a place. Instead, their contemporaneity treats ideals as superfluous ornaments on the path towards capitalism, while previous heroes have to make way for exploiters, speculators, a new generation of post-Napoleonic young men who either perish during the Restoration (Julien Sorel) or adapt themselves to the filth of the age (Lucien, Rastignac). Unlike in the classical Bildungsroman, the bourgeois dilemma of modern societies, that between individual autonomy and social integration, the clash between individual freedom and the logic of socialization, no longer reaches a cultural synthesis but remains an incompatible choice. Moretti acknowledges the panel discussion in

⁶ Respectively: *Cries in The Drizzle*, *To Live*, *Brothers*.

⁷ In order: *Brothers* (Yu Hua), *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (Wang Anyi), *A Private Life* (Chen Ran), *Red Sorghum* (Mo Yan).

these terms: "Here youth does not find its meaning in creating countless connections with the existing order, but in breaking them. It is not appeased by the happiness of synthesis, but lives and dies, in the harshness of conflict" (75). Correct. Fictional characters never become mature in the ways indicated by the classical Bildungsroman. Men are described as dreamers, narcissistic, self-complacent figures whose dreams are as sterile as the outcome they produce. On the other hand, women, do not seem to have much esteem under realism considering that they play out either as adulterous or courtesans. Intoxicated by the second-rate books they read, they trade literature for cheap romanticism for housewives. Emma Bovary is kept awake by stories of orgies and violence; on her part, Madame Roland in Maupassant's *Pierre and Jean* (1887) is awakened by the melancholic pleasure of her reading. Turned on by her imagination, she saw in her lover the embodiment of travel, kisses, and evening shadows. Nana, in Zola's homonymous novel, out of sheer ennui, reads romantic ballads and erotic novels matching her personality; her counterpoint is Madame Arnoux who does not read much, but when she does she is ready to give herself up to Frederic.⁸ Even more inadequate is Zola's Thérèse Raquin who reads so to be able to compare her reality. Soon those romances will arouse passions and a nervous crisis and in the end, incapable of distinguishing between different layers of reality, she will confuse the tales she read with her life. Potentially, it is the whole of the bourgeois scaffold to come down.

Possibly, Balzac is the first painter of reality representing the whole category of mankind, not just the ranks of the aristocracy as it was a convention in earlier literature. The *Human Comedy* (1829-48) comes with a carriage of people feverish with vanity, self-absorbed, selfish, frivolous, and shallow. Lucien (*Lost Illusions*, 1837-43), Rastignac (*Father Goriot*, 1835), Eugenie's father, cousin, and husband (*Eugénie Grandet*, 1833) are intoxicated with ambition, fascinated by the splendor of aristocratic symbols, willing to sacrifice it all to secure a social rank, a convenience, a fabulous income. The society of *Lost Illusions* is an intellectual brothel where virtually everything is for sale; bodies, identities are installed in a circuit of exchange where money is the universal measure of value, and because the exchange of sex for money is the foundation of a contractual relationship, prostitution stands as a metaphorical matrix. Lucien, the main protagonist, is the dandy moving between social classes in the attempt to negotiate his legibility in the landscape of the modern city. He is moved by ambition for glory and money, yet as he switches from the idealistic provincial Angoulême to

⁸ Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education* (1869).

the cynical Paris, he suffers a metamorphosis that makes the point of a loss. Idealist and innocent at first, he becomes a man weak of will and a gambler in Paris where he does not hesitate to write against his conscience. Same as Dostoevsky's St. Petersburg, Joyce's Dublin, Dicken's London, Paris persecutes its protagonists. Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) tortures Bel Ami turning his hero from a shy Don Juan into a greedy, unscrupulous capitalist until he has nothing left to betray.⁹ He plans to marry Madeleine on the deathbed of his friend Charles Forestier, and he gets rid of her once he has found a more suitable match. Envious and maneuvering, he extorts money and pleasure from everyone; Maupassant does not refrain from addressing him as an intriguer, a scoundrel, a villain, and a rascal. In his second novel, *Sentimental Education*, Flaubert as well deals not much with the rebuilt Paris, but with modern life itself. The novel is dull, life is turned into an apology of vanity, the characters are not permitted to rise to any great high, but they sink into themselves. Frederic is an idler who observes the history of France unfolding from a balcony with a prostitute by his side. He does not look for reasons; he is at ease with the surface. All in all, a mediocre character drifting aimlessly through life. When asked by his mother what he is going to do in Paris with the inheritance just received, he plainly answers: 'nothing.' His fate was then drawn; he will end up squandering almost all his fortune and having an illegitimate son who will soon die. A faceless man in the crowd, far from resembling Lucien or Rastignac, he does not have the same passion, neither the same social ambition. He is not even on par with Julien Sorel, Frederic does not feel contempt for the void of the salons he attends every night, he is not bored to indulge in gossip, he rather feels at ease among commonplace topics and aimless voices. Endlessly roaming the capital, he hesitates between professions and artistic projects, making nothing out of himself; consequently, entropy is the setting of his whole biography. And yet, in his insignificance lies his significance. His uneventful existence within an unmemorable plot reflects Flaubert's commitment to truth, Frederic is just an average man of his age. Neither Lucien nor Frederic evolve psychologically but are consistent in their attempt to be and the following decline, from here their Bildungsroman left halfway. Lucien failed because unable to withstand the pressure of a commercialized world where literature has become a commodity and the writer someone to be exploited. Frederic is defeated by the unfolding of an inner logic: Within himself are the seeds of his own destruction. At last,

⁹ Bel Ami is the protagonist of Maupassant's homonymous novel *Bel Ami* (1885).

he goes traveling, but he is not a changed man once back to Paris; just some fifteen years older. The vehemence of desire had vanished, yet instead of a pattern of maturity he is bolted in a state of mental and emotional inertia: 'he endured the idleness of his mind and the inertia of his heart' (358).

Post-Napoleonic characters, they all wanted to be Napoleon, the soldier who became emperor; they all believed in the project of Enlightenment. And they all failed. Victims of a myth, while engaging themselves in copying someone else destiny, they failed to invent their own. None of them obtained the object of desire. Instead, they retreat into a winding path of hypocrisy and intrigue. Vanity seems to be at the end of all their choices. Lucien is indolent, a poetic temper, certainly not a poet; a womanish creature that loves to display his wit, eaten up by his own complacency. Once in Paris, he finds through journalism a way to enrich himself, but what he needs the most is the mark of nobility before his surname. Back to the provincial Angouleme, while his family deals with bankruptcy, he can still find space for personal, foolish, admiration behind a suspicious invitation:

All his melancholy had left him, his face was radiant with good humor. "If you knew mankind, Papa Sechard, you would see that no moment in a one's life comes twice. Such a triumph as this can only be due to genuine enthusiasm...My dear mother, my good sister, this wipes out many mortifications (347)

Somewhere along the line should be placed Bel Ami, no more than a peasant modified into a bourgeois and then, out of a whim, into a violent aristocratic by changing his surname from Duroy to Du Roy. In *Sentimental Education* (1869), Frederic has been surprised, by an attentive reader, of dreaming of a future life with cashmere divans, Negro pages and Madame Arnoux by his side. All of them move within the borders of their trivial passions, incapable of conquering the fate of those who understand it was theirs, only when they lose it. Prisoners in the dungeon of their imagination, unlike their romantic fathers, they cannot become larger than life characters; none of them can be either Napoleon or Don Quixote. Vanity and ambition. Without that ambition, we would not have realism. *The Red and Black* (1830) is back to the perspective of the proletariat. The hero is the passionate and ambitious Julien Sorel, allegedly the son of an uneducated peasant, though the author casts more than a shadow over his origins. Drawn into life by innate talent and fortuitous circumstances we see him changing into multiple roles: From poor peasant dreaming of Napoleon to unscrupulous lover in an adulterous relationship. Once discovered Julien is placed again on the path of redemption and we see him as a student

of theology, though, as Fabrizio in *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), with not much of vocation, but moved by the attraction of a brilliant career. Because of a stroke of luck, he is catapulted to Paris, where he becomes the secretary of a gentleman of rank whose daughter, Mathilde, will represent for him what Mme de Bargeton and Delphine represent for Lucien and Rastignac, a means for an aim. Julien shares the same poor origins as Lucien. Outsiders, keen observers, both have an indefinable something that enables them to stand over the desert of mediocrity around them. Handsome and young, gifted with superior intelligence and different sensibility, passionate and innocent, both loved by older women regardless of their social class, fated to make their own fortune or to be persecuted. They both dream of Napoleon and Parisians salons, carriages, and fancy ladies, but while Lucien is naïve and radiant, Julien is manipulative and gloomy. Lucien is true to his character; his ambition leaves some space for sentimental feelings and shades of morality. We see him shaking violently before the political intrigues of Paris, thus, he tapped at the door of his friend d'Arthez, whose book he is asked to attack on the press. Sometime later, he does not hesitate to choose the poor Coralie over the title of 'Count' which Mme. de Bargeton could have offered him through a convenient marriage. On the other hand, Julien is nothing but ambition and pride, a child of the Restoration who turns his life into a castle of hypocrisy because he does not have a thousand francs income. Offended by a glance, a word, a laugh, he is a player humiliated by his position in life and devoured by careerism, perhaps envy. Life becomes a battlefield. He studies his opponent, the tremble of the hands, a sudden blush, he tricks his listeners as he tricks love, ergo his relationships have nothing of innocent but cunningly built for the purpose of another goal. Not surprisingly, the outcome is never joy but a fragile gratification. When already jailed, his detached behavior with the beautiful and already compromised Mathilde reminds very much that of the first Federico in *The Charterhouse of Parma* before his encounter with Clelia: Yearning a perfect intimacy and turning cold once obtained it. In short, about the nature of relationships, Lucien loves for real the world he so eagerly attempts to belong to, Julien, on the other hand, feels just hatred and horror for the high society he was easily admitted to. He is what becomes of Rastignac after having defied Paris: "I have been ambitious, but I have no intention of blaming myself for that; I was acting in those days according to the code of the times (406).

Julien's last confession is the manifesto of a generation seized by the shadow of Napoleon, the pursuit of social success, exploited by a passion depicted as a malady. And because of the impossibility of living

purposeful lives in agreement with their inner-self, they cast themselves into extreme actions, breaking with the typical practices of those average men they are surrounded by. Emma Bovary is rotten by the books she reads and the carnival of her misjudging, Julien and Lucien devoured by ambition, Federico and Frederic consumed by love. French realism, more obsessed with the sordid sides of life than its prodigious achievements, ends with a bitter taste. Their personal failure is to be ascribed to their incapacity to pull themselves out from the ditch of materialism of their fantasies. Above all, it is the failure of a society to live up to its expectations.

Chinese post-1989 production moves on the same trajectory; the conflict of generations and obscure childhood are still the hegemonic traits of the narrative, the characters we meet are still outsiders challenging a decadent society while being created by it. However, if the French Bildungsroman is not completed yet, Chinese Bildungsroman has been suppressed by the avalanche of history. French realism comes with a multiform social milieu of aristocrats (Federico), provincial bourgeois educated with fortune (Rastignac) or without (Lucien), and upstart peasants (Julien, Bel Ami). Chinese neo-realism cannot afford any of these but recalls the days of starving peasants under the shade of Mao's revolution. Less daring and less methodologically orientated than the European one, it shares with the French experiment the same idea of decadence. There is a deep feeling of desolation for a plot that, save a few occasions, offers details of a life of humiliations and hardships, describes inevitable losses, condemns its heroes to a bitter and solitary ending. My guess is that the anti-Confucianism and anti-intellectualism of the past decades have emptied Chinese literature of any residual of humanism. The roots-seeking experience of the 1980s acknowledges that the roots are dry, reality is chaotic but turning back is no help for its chaos again.¹⁰ Tradition is eroded, role models come loose, fathers are cruel, and mothers are missing, life remains unfulfilled jammed between man's aspiration and the existential need to survive. Finally, those characters discover themselves alienated from their families, their village, the whole community and the sense of history, frozen between life and death. They lose in silence facing the wasteland of their life, and a Bildungsroman interrupted in its draft moment; they learn and make

¹⁰ At the end of the 1970s, Scar and Roots-seeking Literature and Art represent the first artistic attempt engaging with humanist themes rather than political rhetoric. Not valuable texts by strict aesthetic-literary standard, but fundamental historical documents to trace the 'before and after Mao' artistic production.

the reader feel, the inconsolability for a time that not even the parody of the Maoist revolution can overcome.

The Mao Era (1949-1976) had compelled people to the cause of collectivism, until the end it kept alive its conjectures, political suppression, the fear of revisionism, the need for mass mobilization, and while so doing it slowly washed away the family unit. It seems evident that, under the pressure of a totalitarian system individual issues, forbidden dimensions such as love, sexuality, and art do not belong to the revolutionary discourse, all equally unhealthy to the common cause of communism. Ergo, when man's solicitude is diverted from production and Marxist-Leninist thought man then is found at fault. It is only in post-1989 China that the literary production began an inverse process of discovery by proceeding from the individual to the history; the protagonists are taken out from the shadow of darkness, flung into a zone of resistance that is together memory and expectations. Consequently, loss of humanity -from the side of the actors- is the unequivocal landmark of neo-realist characters. They are rejected from the bigger society, alienated from themselves when pushed to the limits of life, they reveal man's lower nature. In this sense, Su Tong's and Yu Hua's narrative rightly act as a model, with the critic Xiaobing Tang writing "[Su Tong] opens new possibilities of looking into the mirror of history" (244), and the scholar Hua Li observing that "Su Tong and Yu Hua have chosen a specific literary genre -the Bildungsroman- to visualize the tragic coming-of-age experiences of Chinese adolescents in a time of tremendous social upheaval" (11). A degenerating parental milieu is the starting and ending point of both writers' fiction. Sun Kwangtsai, the father of Sun Guanlin in Yu Hua's *Cries in the Drizzle* (2007) is a picture of immorality and brutality. Emotionless to everything but alcohol and beating, he fails to deliver duties of filial piety repeatedly humiliating his own father:

Sun Kwangtsai's real goal in punishing my little brother so harshly was to cow his father into submission, as Granddad perfectly well knew. He sat meekly in his little chair, and for Sun Kwangtsai it was most gratifying to witness the old man's discomfort as he raised his chopstick high in the air and struggle to pick up morsels from this awkward angle (150)

Altogether indifferent to his son Ganglian with whom he shared a few words along two decades; devious towards his oldest son, Sun Guangping, disloyal to his wife, adulterous, drunkard, he finally dies unheard, face down, in the muck of a cesspit at the entrance to the village. So is Five Dragons in Su Tong's *Rice* (2004). Incapable of redeeming himself, subject to a series of physical abuse, he rapidly

changes from impoverished peasant to unscrupulous criminal who does not hesitate to cripple his son and rape his own wife. The disgraced secretary Ku in Su Tong's *The Boat to Redemption* (2010), focused on dealing with his own devils, is not concerned at all about the devouring solitude of his son; he missed the process of self-alienation, self-destructiveness Danglian has undergone, more worried to clear his past to establish a name for himself instead of a legacy for the future. His vain pride allows him to ignore the social implication the nickname *Kongpi* imposes on Danglian and the part he plays within the father-son dynamic. Blinded by an out-of-date sense of honor he does not see how his clumsy, and at times fanatic behavior, contributes enormously to making an outcast of Danglian. Simultaneously, Qiao Limin, Danglian's mother, is not any better; she never shows any signs of affection, neither a caress nor a little comfort. Unable to compromise after divorcing, worried about educating her son rather than loving him, she is incapable of delivering any of them:

You wicked boy, she scolded. You are isolated from the masses, animals hate you, and a mangy dog chases you! Even a shit-eating dog has no forgiveness in its heart for you! (...) Mother supplied me with three meals a day, but every grain of rice was saturated with her sadness, and every vegetable leaf was infused with her disappointment (77)

Victim of the political atmosphere and the residue of her broken marriage, she built for them a space where the words mother and son meant nothing; at last, from the outside of a man toilet, rejected by her son's anger, she leaves for good, sent off to work in the coal mines, amending her lack of maternal attention with a few letters and a tin of biscuits. Xu Sanguan in Yu Hua's *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (1995, 2004), before his final redemption, the moment he accepts Yile as his son, does not falter to mark the difference between his biological sons and the illegitimate Yile:

Dad, do you think you could pretend for a little while that I'm your own son so I can eat some noodles too?

Xu Sanguan shook his head: "Yile, I almost never treat you any worse than them. If Erle and Sanle get something good to eat, you get some too. But the money I made today came from selling blood. This money is special. This money's harder to come by than other kind of money. I put my life at risk to get this money. So if I let you eat noodles too, I'd be doing that bastard He Xiaoyong a favour (130)

Given all that, considering that they do not recall history, but are in the middle of it, none of them, save a few exceptions, is capable of developing a humanitarian spirit. The tragedy of their lives, the history they share, sometimes has a relief, a moment of beauty. While the

Cultural Revolution is still at full speed, as dusk is approaching, the crooked-head Erxi, would let the mosquitoes feed on him to protect the mindless pregnant Fenxia from being beaten. Even though raving for being a cuckold, Xu Sanguan finally carries Yile on his back to the Victory restaurant to have some noodles; after years of abuses and humiliations, on the very last page, Huixian offers to Denglian the tin red lantern symbol of lust, love, and friendship.¹¹ But this is only fiction coloring reality, not enough to change the spirit of desolation we receive from the whole narration. History has failed to redeem its people, turning them into soulless disciples dwelling on a bowl of rice; families have failed their children, turning them into soldiers with no grade, and so did the educational system collapsing behind political rhetoric and fanaticism. In *Cries in the Drizzle*, the primary school teacher forces Guanglin to write a confession for a crime he did not commit -hinting at the collusive practice of the Party indoctrination system-. In Chen Ran's *A Private Life* (1996) Teacher Ti abuses his power on the teenager Niuniu, harassing her verbally and physically. On the whole, the total absence of role models forces everyone to retreat into themselves, renouncing to decode history as they submit to it. Abandoned by everyone, the protagonists we encounter are left alone in their journey towards maturity; we observe them walking by a pond, staring at the moonlight, wrapped in rattled clothes, begging, crying out their fear, taking it all out on some other victims. Physically or metaphorically orphans, adults, and children have no place to return to. In *The Boat to Redemption*, Dongliang, facing his mother's refusal to compromise regarding his permanent residence, has to choose between the river and the dry land. At first, he chooses the river for an invisible bond with his father's fate he cannot avoid. However, events do not bring improvements, each time he has a clash with his father, he runs ashore, walking everywhere and nowhere, enduring random insults and mockery, at least until when he finds a purpose to his excursions at the barbershop. Not long after, his alienated personality and the reticence of the residents will not push him away without additional beatings and humiliations. Rejected by the dry land he can only go back to the barge, aware that no place is willing to shelter him:

My days on the river were unrelievedly lonely, and that loneliness comprised the last thread of self-respect. There were lots of boys in the fleet, but they were either too old and stupid or too young and disgusting, so I had no friends (60)

¹¹ In order: Yu Hua (*To Live*), Yu Hua (*Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*), Su Tong (*The Boat to Redemption*).

Su Tong's short stories and novels are based on the experience of adolescents and adults whose Bildungsroman is stained by violence and death as a decoration of the 'revolutionary carnival,' sex experienced as a sin, family heritage as decadence. Only after they outlive their solitude and live in a society redeemed by the future, only then they feel all the tragedy of the past. Too late to make amends. Yu Hua's desolation is entrapped within the sad fate of the children and the adults' selfishness. *Cries in the Drizzle* is not so much one person's war as it is a complex entanglement of feelings of injustice, loneliness, and disenchantment people are caught in. Guanglin's younger brother drowns in the river guilty to have miscalculated the burden of his task; the older one, Sun Guangping, after graduating from high school, is called back to his village by the demands of the Cultural Revolution. Wondering about the latter stages of his life, he stoically comes to terms with his reality, hence sulkily he sets for a life in the countryside. Guanglin himself is set aside twice, by his biological family who sent him away, and by his foster family faded along the way. His existentiality is enclosed in his grief; his silence sounds like an admission of guilt. Despised by his father without compensation, estranged from the village, he understands solitude as a condition of his life:

My alienation had kept me away from the scenes surrounding his death and burial and I was anticipating that I would now be the object of even more forceful censure at home and in the village. But many days passed and nobody said or did anything different from before, which took me rather aback until I realized with relief that I had been utterly forgotten. I had been assigned to a position where I was recognised at the same time repudiated by everyone in the village (24)

As he grows older, he comes to realize that the desolate feeling of abandonment is not individual but universal, alike Balzac's protagonists. His authentic affinities are with those whom society has cast aside; in fact, he is befriended by those who share with him the same irrevocability. His friends' fate, if possible, is even bitter: Guoqing's mother dies, his heartless father abandons him with ten Yuan:

One morning when he was nine, Guoqing woke up to find out that he held his destiny in his own hands. Though far from being an adult, (...) all of a sudden, he was independent. Premature freedom made him carry his fate on his shoulder the way he might carry a heavy suitcase (227)

Fatherless Lulu, invents a big brother to handle his isolation and the bloody street-fight, yet life plays on him one more evil trick when he is stripped off of his mother, arrested for prostitution:

In the days that followed Lulu began living an outdoor life. He laid his bedroll out underneath a camphor tree, used the duffel bag as a pillow, and lay there reading his textbook (...) Always on alert, as soon as he heard the thud of well-regulated footsteps he would drop his book and sit up, opening his dark eyes wide. When a line of black garbed prisoners trotted past, hoes on their shoulders, a head would turn to look at him and Lulu's rapturous gaze would meet his mother's eyes (180)

Fugui in Yu Hua's *To Live* does not die as secretary Ku does in *The Boat to Redemption*, but his fate is bitter to the extreme. He will have to outlive all those he loved the most, left alone with an ox bearing his name, unfolding his story of mistakes and amnesty, to no one but a stranger. Swaying between life and death, forsaken by both, this trend of Chinese neo-realism seems to come to terms with death rather than life. The excess of the Mao Era and the contradictions of the market economy have shaped a generation of writers whose future expectations do not match with their recollections of the past. And the past becomes a ghost. Chinese traditional sense of belonging fades away; family ties are dismissed, children are abandoned, people learn to stand on their own not to succumb. The protagonists are dissatisfied, deceived, alienated from family members, yearning for love, anti-hero of the revolution, never fully engaged in the present nor fully aware of their past. Forever drifting towards a would-be identity. Death, at last, becomes a liberation more than a loss of self, an alternative remedy for many of them to seal the awareness of human fragility and cruelty. Sun Guangming drowns, Su Yu dies of a cerebral hemorrhage. Unnoticed by his family, Fugui's son is killed by unscrupulous doctors, his daughter by Red Guards disguised as doctors; secretary Ku and Song Gang, suffocated by the heaviness of a shame they did not provoke, commit suicide. Son Fanping and Sun Wei's father were tortured to death without knowing why.¹² As they all die alone without ever decoding what they lived for, death here is not just the end of earthly life, but a cunning allegory describing the crucial notion of man's existence: The selfishness of human nature and the hopelessness of the human condition.

Given that, it is the dramatic awareness of man's loneliness to accompany the protagonists' journey through life and once more shorten the distance between Chinese and Western literature. Political hypocrisy, emotional vacuities, social and personal decadence, stretch out a common lineage between different experiments of realism. All

¹² Sun Gungming and Su Yu (*Cries in the Drizzle*), Fugui (*To Live*), Secretary Ku (*The Boat To Redemption*), Song Gang, Son Fanping, Sun Wei (*Brothers*)

examples of social Darwinism, youngsters brought up in an era of harsh material circumstances, history has shaped characters morally ambiguous, irresponsible, and vulnerable. Sometimes the texts offer an ambivalent response as the characters' journey enters the milieu of modernity and becomes a matter of compromise. Greatness turns up being an endless project within the anatomy of a social decline; foolish mistakes, and painful disappointments feature the experience of a failed modernity. Back to the original comparison, the journey of Bildung, within the shreds of evidence I have analyzed, has been interrupted, life has been denied. Hence, it is that beyond these two paralleling experiences of realism, fiction becomes a sociological enterprise rather far from being an aesthetic activity.

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LA VOZ DEL REALISMO FRANCÉS EN LA FICCIÓN DE YU HUA Y SU TONG

La literatura posmoderna china, o ficción post-Mao, viene con desilusión entre los intelectuales y cinismo entre los personajes ficticios. De acuerdo con esta línea de pensamiento, la narrativa entra en un discurso teórico que deja de lado la huella ideológica anterior y se mueve dentro del marco del realismo. Al igual que en la experiencia del realismo francés del siglo XIX, la ficción de Su Tong y

Yu Hua describe un proceso de Bildungsroman que nunca se logra. Un weltanschauung darwiniano crudo parece ser la clave para la comprensión.

Parole chiave: Bildungsroman, Darwinismo, Revolución Francesa, Mao, Postmodernismo, Realismo