The Other Postmodernism,

or, the Cultural Logic of Uneven Development

by

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But there was a time we were lashed to the prow
Of a ship you may board, but not steer,
Before you and I ceased to mean now,
And began to mean only right here.

Joanna Newsom, *Waltz of the 101st Lightborne*

Contents

1 "We live on the Third World from the sun ..."

China enjoys a peculiar status in Fredric Jameson's theory of postmodernism. In order to appreciate this, it would be enough to consider his curious analysis of Lu Xun's novella, "Diary of a Madman," in his notorious essay, "Third-World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism." Its central thesis is easy to summarize: "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory."[1] It is worth lingering on some canonical critiques of the essay, if only to examine how they miss a broader and still more pressing paradox. Aijaz Ahmad's famous rebuttal in "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness," for example, proposes two distinct problems with Jameson's argument. The opening section, true to Ahmad's title, discusses how Jameson's rhetoric excludes, alienates or silences the voice of his "civilizational other," an argument often co-opted, by postcolonial theorists in particular, to demonstrate the Eurocentrism of a white, privileged U.S. professor. The rest of Ahmad's essay disputes the stability of Jameson's central terms: "first-world" and "third-world" not only commit one to a certain narrative of a post-war world order, but also strangely neglects the "second world," or, in Ahmad's preferred terms, "the socialist resistance."

But the rather awkward dialectical pairing of the first-world self versus the third-world other is overlaid by a larger concern. The title of Jameson's essay

1. Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, no. 15 (1986): 69.

is, after all, not "Third-World Literature as National Allegories," but "Third-World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism," which reminds one of a parallel formulation of his, the definition of postmodernism as "the cultural logic of late capitalism." "Late capitalism," one would remember, does not mean "capitalism in its final stage" or "the end of history," but rather means something like "advanced and thorough-going capitalism" or "capitalism *of late*," from which Jameson is willing to extrapolate "post-industrial society," "the era of globalization," "image society," and certainly "multinational capitalism." By focusing on "third-world literature," then, Jameson not only means to break up the fixity of the Euro-American literary canon, but also to supply an alternative to a postmodernism presumed Western. If Western postmodernism is, in Jameson's definition, the condition under which one's socio-historical situation is no longer legible in the schizophrenic flux of fragmentary images, then an alternative to this cultural logic might exhibit similar features as its Western counterpart, but should nevertheless break through the epistemological bind and make history visible once again. In the final footnote of the essay, Jameson makes clear that this breakthrough is none other than what he has elsewhere called "cognitive mapping":

> What is here called 'national allegory' is clearly a form of just such mapping of the totality, so that the present essay—which sketches a theory of the cognitive aesthetics of third-world literature—forms pendant to the essay on postmodernism, which describes the logic of cultural imperialism of the first world and above all of United States.[2]

These are the expectations the essay establishes before the reader gets to Jameson's literary examples, Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman" and Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*. An unsuspecting reader, unfamiliar with Chinese literary history, will indeed find plenty of characteristics that mirror Western postmodernism. The novella is an excerpt from the protagonist's journal, where he details his paranoia that everyone around him, including and especially his

2. Jameson, "Third-World Literature," 88.

family members, are cannibals. Paranoia, one would recognize, is one of the central features of, for example, Thomas Pynchon's postmodern classic, *Gravity's Rainbow*, where this pathological mechanism characterizes not only the psychic condition of the novel's characters, but also the confused interpretive process of seeking elusive connections between disconnected events and images. But Lu Xun's paranoia works in the quite opposite direction, where suspicions of cannibalism reconstructs, according to Jameson, "a grisly and terrifying objective real world beneath the appearances of our own world: an unveiling of deconcealment of the nightmarish reality of things, a stripping away of our conventional illusions or rationalizations about daily life and existence."[3] Rather than representing the unrepresentability of one's social reality, then, the schizophrenic text of the madman makes visible the real condition of oppression and exploitation of the Chinese society. Similar conditions, Jameson argues, also underwrites the texts of radical African writers such as Sembène, who "find themselves back in the dilemma of Lu Xun, bearing a passion for change and social regeneration which has not yet found its agents."[4] *Xala*, particularly, produces "the space of a past and future utopia—a social world of collective cooperation," against the political dilemma that confronts African nations after their "nominal national independence."[5]

Both texts, in this sense, can be considered as alternatives to Western postmodernism—until, that is, one looks at the publication dates: Sembène's *Xala* was published in 1973, whereas Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman" first appeared in 1918. A time gap of more than half a century is bizarre, to say the least, and especially disturbing when the readers remember that they are supposed to be parallels, not just with each other, but also with the likes of Nabokov and Pynchon. Lu Xun, indeed, is just a bit older than Virginia Woolf, which might partly explain Jameson's rather unexpected categorization, after explaining how the madman's paranoia unveils "the nightmarish reality of things," of the novella as modernist: "[the unveiling] is a process comparable, as a literary effect, only to some of the processes of Western modernism, and in particular

3. Ibid., 70.
4. Ibid., 81.
5. Ibid.

of existentialism."[6] The suggestion is not an implausible one: the concluding plea of the novella, "Save the children…", resembles, as Jameson points out, "the archetypal deathbed murmur of Kurtz, in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,' 'The horror! the horror!' "[7] Lu Xun's penchance for constructing Kafkaesque, absurdist allegories can also be seen in Jameson's use of Lu Xun's other texts, most prominently in the allegory of the "iron house without windows."[8] But to say that "Diary of a Madman" is modernism also implies, given the essay's overall project, that the alternative to Western postmodernism is modernism. This is already strange within the essay, since earlier he explicitly claims that third-world texts are "often unmodern."[9] For a cultural past to return to a present whose material conditions have fundamentally shifted also seems to be the kind of project that a Marxist would find least convincing. Jameson himself, indeed, rejects it in his famous essay on postmodernism: "We cannot, however, return to aesthetic practices elaborated on the basis of historical situations and dilemmas which are no longer ours."[10]

An additional complication, however, comes from Lu Xun's position within Chinese literary history. Jameson's method of literary periodization, and in particular his preferred periodizing scheme of realism—modernism—postmodernism, suggests that literature develops in such a way that a new form both invokes its predecessors and negates it at the same time. But "Diary of a Madman," again, was published in 1918, and one is confronted with the embarrassing fact that the novella, purportedly modernist, has no established realist tradition to negate. What is negated in the text is something else entirely, but unfortunately rendered invisible by the English translation: the frame narrative of the story—the entire first section—is written in classical Chinese [文言文], a historical form of written Chinese, whereas the rest of the journal entries are in vernacular Chinese [白话文]. The transition between the frame narrative and the madman's diary, then, represents the linguistic innovation introduced by

6. Jameson, "Third-World Literature," 70.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 75.
9. Ibid., 66.
10. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), 50.

the New Cultural Movement, a wholesale rejection of the classical, elite language form for a new one. Lu Xun's novella, further, is customarily regarded as the first successful work of literature written in vernacular Chinese. "Diary of a Madman" is therefore neither postmodernist nor modernist, but the seminal work of a Chinese realist tradition.

One now finds, within the "Third-World Literature" essay, three terms that might serve as alternatives to Western postmodernism: national allegory, cognitive mapping, and realism. It seems necessary to ask, if not whether these terms are equivalent, at least how they are related to each other. Yet realism is still the odd candidate of the three. If Jameson is willing to grant Chinese realism as a postmodern alternative, he also seems much more reluctant to do so in the African case: "One is led to conclude that under these circumstances traditional realism is less effective than the satiric fable: whence to my mind the greater power of certain of Ousmane's narratives … as over against Ngugi's impressive but problematical *Petals of Blood*."[11] That realism is less effective in postmodernity also has to do with the impossibility of retrieving a cultural past: even if one were to revive realism today, given the drastically different social context, such realism would have to take on a different form. Jameson, indeed, tells us what this different form is: "a model of a political culture appropriate to our own situation will necessarily have to raise spatial issues as its fundamental organizing concern. I will therefore provisionally define the aesthetic of this new (and hypothetical) cultural form as an aesthetic of *cognitive mapping*."[12] What Jameson wants to preserve from Lu Xun's novella, then, is not so much realism as the realist impulse, the attempt, in other words, to map out the socio-historical condition in which the readers are otherwise incapable of recognizing, which means, conversely, that neither realism can serve as an alternative to postmodernism, nor "Diary of a Madman" an example of such an alternative.

But equally puzzling is the "national" in "national allegory." Jameson himself, to be clear, does not have much attachment to the status of the nation. This focus comes from "recent conversations among third-world intellectu-

11. Jameson, "Third-World Literature," 82.
12. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 50-1.

als," where "there is now an obsessive return to the national situation itself … the collective attention to 'us' … in short, to the level of the 'people.' "[13] The two literary examples, indeed, are reacting against dire moments of the nation's survival: for Lu Xun, the presence of virtually every colonial power in early Republican China; for Ousmane, "the crippling effects of what Fanon prophetically warned them against—to receive independence is not the same as to take it."[14] But even these descriptions call attention to the factors that exist beyond a single nation, since colonialism implies at least two: the colonizer and the colonized. The so-called "national" allegories, then, are in fact transnational, and one is tempted to make the counter-claim, following Jameson's earlier suggestion that first-world readers already "read" third-world texts in certain fragmentary forms, that third-world texts also already contain mirror images of the first world. Jameson's attempt at proposing the "national allegory," then, is on the same sliding scale as the one he diagnoses "third-world texts" to be on, where "the telling of the individual story cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself."[15] "The experience of the collectivity" is, understood in the broadest sense as the grand narrative of the entire human race, the loftiest goal that the project of cognitive mapping can strive towards.

If, in the "Third-World Literature" essay, the central antagonism is between postmodernism and cognitive mapping, between, that is, a cultural logic that obscures one's socio-historical conditions and a cultural intervention that unveils them, then it still seems rather parochial to map these terms onto the geographical distinction between the first and the third world. At times, as Ahmad points out, the entirety of Western literature appears to be categorized as postmodern, in the same sweeping gesture as when Jameson hypothesized that all third-world literature tells the experience of the collectivity or performs cognitive mapping. It is not terribly hard to find counterexamples for both claims: in the "first world," cultural icons such as Superman or Captain America function as the U.S. version of national allegories, whereas in the "third world," even

13. Jameson, "Third-World Literature," 65.
14. Ibid., 81.
15. Ibid., 86.

among Chinese writers around Lu Xun's era, one can find individualizing and psychologizing narratives from writers such as Eileen Chang and Xu Zhimo. But the spatializing of the conceptual difference between postmodernism and cognitive mapping is itself a curious gesture. It is, as Jameson points out, an attempt to characterize the "radical difference" in cultural formations between advanced capitalist countries and the rest of the world. The ultimate failure of the "Third-World Literature" essay to propose a convincing framework suggests, then, that the "radical difference" still needs to be explored in a different way.

All this might come as a surprise: Jameson's version of postmodernism is often glossed as the cultural logic that uniformly applies to everyone and everywhere. Perry Anderson, a faithful scholar of Jameson's theory, writes in *The Origins of Postmodernity*: "postmodernism, [Jameson] concluded, was … the cultural ether of a global system that overruled all geographical divisions."[16] We now know, judging from the "Third-World Literature" essay, that Anderson gets it wrong: Jameson does not think that postmodernism is global; the "Third World," whatever that means, has an alternative to postmodernism, however that alternative might look. In his foreword to Kojin Karatani's book, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, Jameson writes, regarding the difference between Western and Japanese postmodernity, that "[w]e here fleetingly glimpse an alternate world alongside our own historical one: a world in which modernity in the current coinage did not occur, without our being able to discern clearly the outlines of what, equally supplanting precapitalist forms and relations, took its place."[17] An interpretation of Robert Stone's novel explains how Western postmodern literature can be revitalized by learning from non-Western countries: "I want to start with a proposition, namely, that the culture of late capitalism is not merely an empirically impoverished one, but one doomed structurally and tendentially to enfeeblement, whence its desperate need to revitalize itself with transfusions of the foreign and the exotic, the Other."[18] This "transfusion of

16. Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (Verso, 1998), 74.
17. Fredric Jameson, "In the Mirror of Alternative Modernities," in *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, by Kojin Karatani (Duke University Press, 1993), xvii.
18. Fredric Jameson, "Americans Abroad," in *Critical Theory, Cultural Politics, and Latin American Narrative*, ed. Steven M. Bell, Albert H. Le May, and Leonard Orr (University of Notre

the foreign and the exotic" is perhaps also what Jameson is looking for when he visited China for the first time in 1985, to give a lecture series on postmodernism in Peking University. Occasionally, he even attributes the formulation of his theory of postmodernism to that visit, as if to confirm the revitalizing power of a cultural alternative.[19]

But Anderson was also right. Jameson, in his other writings, makes the exact opposite claim that postmodernism is now properly global. One essay notes, for instance, how literary trends in non-Western countries tend to replace the foreign import of postmodernism with domestic productions of more or less the same thing—the import-substitution of postmodernism, which means that first- and third-world literature look increasingly alike: "[E]verywhere else (outside of Vermont), modern and postmodern technologies are taken for granted, producing an odd convergence effect between First World [*sic*] postmodernisms (in a narrower aesthetic and formal sense) and the rich new production of a whole range of Third World [*sic*] countries."[20] Writing for the first issue of the journal *Modern Chinese Literature*, he argues that "[a] new culture which articulates the logic of a new global and multinational late capitalism can no longer be considered a purely Western export but may be expected to characterize at least certain other local zones of reality around the capitalist world."[21] But what is even more surprising is his interpretation of Wang Wenhsing, which concludes with the claim, "it would now seem abundantly clear that his latest novel must, in content as well as in style be considered postmodernist."[22] This, then, is how China makes Jameson's theory of postmodernism sound almost incoherent: Jameson demonstrates that Chinese literature is postmodern, and argues, simultaneously, that Chinese literature transcends

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Dame Press, 1993), 35.

19. "My theories of postmodernism were first developed in China, when I taught for a semester at Peking University in 1985." Fredric Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," *New Left Review*, no. 92 (March 2015): 103.
20. Fredric Jameson, "On Literary and Cultural Import-Substitution in the Third World: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America," in *The Real Thing*, ed. Georg M. Gugelberger (Duke University Press, 1996), 177-8.
21. Fredric Jameson, "Literary Innovation and Modes of Production: A Commentary," *Modern Chinese Literature* 1, no. 1 (September 1984): 76.
22. Ibid., 75.

its Western counterparts, precisely because it is *not* postmodern.

Figure 1: Palace Hotel, Beijing

Figure 2: Jianguo Hotel, Beijing

2 "Nobody tells us what to do."

Is there a Chinese postmodernism? Really, all our previous speculations, Western and theoretical, seem rather circumspect. If the question is whether there was a postmodern culture in China, surely it would be enough to go back and look. In the 1980s, the famous Chang'an Avenue in Beijing, just in front of Tiananmen Square, which Jameson would have seen, had recently broken free from national, centralized planning and begun a wave of architectural experimentation.[1] The new cityscape was a dazzling mishmash of styles. Depending on the spectator's perspective, the Beijing Palace Hotel, whose foundations were laid in 1986, looks like it is either corroded from the top by its traditional glazed roof tiles, or swallowed up from the bottom by its steel-and-concrete body.[2] But the construction boom was happening everywhere in the country: where there had been a desolate fishing village, so the legend of the city of Shenzhen tells, there now emerged eight-lane highways, glistening skyscrapers, colossal cargo container ports, Starbucks and McDonald's, etc. Televisions replaced radios, and with them came late-century mass media—alongside TV commercials from Boeing, Kodak and IBM,[3] an animated TV series called *Black Cat Detective* (1984), featuring a police cat riding a motorcycle in the forest, stopping crime with his pistol. Parents lamented the show's pervasive violence, claiming that it lacked educational value, but such entertainment does educate the new generation in previously unimagined ways. Those coming of

1. See Shuishan Yu, "Modernization in a Postmodern World: The 1970s and 1980s," in *Chang'an Avenue and the Modernization of Chinese Architecture* (University of Washington Press, 2012), 144–77.
2. See Mingxian Wang, "Notes on Architecture and Postmodernism in China," *Boundary 2* 24, no. 3 (1997): 163–75.
3. See Orville Schell, "Prime Time in Peking," *The New Yorker*, April 1, 1985, 30–31.

age during the market reform were, to be sure, not exactly like rolling stones, but instead "eggs laid by the red flag,"[4] the title of China's rock-and-roll album in 1994. Revolutionary slogans, many of them directly from Mao, appear not on walls and banners, but on campy T-shirts, a new fashion trend among young students in the early 1990s, if, that is, they did not prefer the more minimal versions, spelling out to the world that "Life is a bore" or "I am pissed; leave me alone."[5] J. Hillis Miller, on one of his visits to China, notes that "Chinese young people are not reading the Chinese *Classics of Poetry*, or *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, or the works of Lu Xun, any more than American young people spend as much time reading Shakespeare, Jane Austen, or Toni Morrison."[6] Here are what they might be reading instead: a crime novel where the amnesiac protagonist investigates a murder mystery that involves a lost lover, alternative identities, faded photographs and shape shifting dream sequences;[7] a metafiction where a character exchanges letters with the author;[8] a novel where one routinely finds that portions of the narrative have been expunged and replaced by placeholder symbols;[9] a representation of the Cultural Revolution through the lenses of a nihilist intellectual's sexcapade;[10] and so on. Everywhere in China, one finds unmistakable features of postmodernism: the depthlessness of images, a weakening of historicity, pastiche, the overwhelming of the old arts by the mass media, the collapse of the high and low, etc. Those who summarily dismissed postmodernism as a Western import or imposition[11] quickly came

4. The translation is tricky: the album title means "eggs laid by the red flag" or simply "eggs under the red flag," but "eggs" also means, in vulgar speech, "balls." Symbolically, then, either the revolutionary energy is lost in the new generation—eggs are fragile embryos—or the new generation inherits the virility ("balls") of the old—eggs are also, incidentally, bodies without organs.
5. Geremie Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (Columbia University Press, 1999), 113.
6. J. Hillis Miller, "A Comparison of Literary Studies in the United States and China," in *Innocents Abroad: Lectures in China* (Northwestern University Press, 2015), 189-90.
7. Shuo Wang, 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]* (北京十月文艺出版社, 2012).
8. 莫言 [Mo Yan], 酒国 *[The Republic of Wine]* (1992).
9. 贾平凹 [Jia Pingwa], 废都 *[The Abandoned Capital]* (1993).
10. 王小波 [Wang Xiaobo], 黄金时代 *[The Golden Era]* (1994).
11. See, e.g., Jing Wang, *High Cultural Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (University of California Press, 1996), where she calls postmodernism a "pseudo-proposition" and a product of China's inferiority complex in relation to the cultural innovations of the West.

to sound rather out of touch: of course there was a postmodernism in China!

But the problem is not as easy as it looks. Scholars who examine the same set of social phenomena and who arrive at this conclusion—that China has had a postmodern culture—too often begin, strangely, by itemizing stylistic features not of postmodernism, but of modernism instead. The Beijing cityscape thus looks rather modern: blatant imitations of the Manhattan or London skyline, triumphantly announced on advertisement sheets, celebrate, first and foremost, not a mashup of symbols, but the rapid-fire modernizations of the newest construction technologies. Some, like the understated entrance to the Jianguo Hotel, strive for an austere minimalism; most, like offices and government buildings along the Chang'an Avenue, are either functionalist or in the international style; all the while, media outlets are announcing that China can now build skyscrapers taller than any other building in the world.[12] Possibly the most popular Chinese TV show, first broadcast in 1990, explores how the everyday life of Chinese individuals is disrupted by the Cultural Revolution.[13] Its title is most often translated as *Yearning* [渴望], but slight modifications of that rendering are enough to flush out its modernist themes: the term, in Chinese, lies somewhere between "aspiration" (that is, for the project of market reform and modernization), "desire," (or the liberation of sexual taboo and individual romance from the purview of the state), [14] and "nostalgia" (a yearning

12. See, e.g., Anthony D. King and Abidin Kusno, "On Be(ij)ing in the World: "Postmodernism," "Globalization," and the Making of Transnational Space in China," in *Postmodernism & China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Duke University Press, 2000), 41–67. Many scholars, King and Kusno included, argue that China's construction boom in the 1980s produces a mixture of modernist and postmodernist architecture, or, as they often style it in their essays, "(post)modernist" architecture. For an account of how the term postmodernism is introduced and misinterpreted among Chinese architects, see Guanghui Ding, ""Experimental Architecture" in China," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 73, no. 1 (March 2014): 28–37. See also Yaohua Shi, "Reconstructing Modernism: The Shifting Narratives of Chinese Modernist Architecture," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 30–84, where he outlines how architectural modernism fits into broader trends of Chinese cultural modernism, and how it looks like beyond Beijing.
13. A brief account of the show's reception, and the history of Chinese TV dramas more generally, can be found in Hongwei Lu, "TV Romance and Popular Cultural Mood: The Chi Li Phenomenon," *China Review* 6, no. 1 (2006): 125–52, and particularly 128-9.
14. The analysis of desire is particularly widespread in feminist literary criticisms of Chinese literature in the 1980s. See, e.g., Wendy Larson, "Woman and the Discourse of Desire in Postrevolutionary China: The Awkward Postmodernism of Chen Ran," in *Postmodernism*

for life before the revolution). There were, among literary circles of the time, a "Chinese Kafka" and a "Chinese Joyce."[15] Cultural critics moved effortlessly from citing Jameson to supplying, as evidence, the modernist crisis of subjectivity,[16] the role of the intellectual[17] and Freudian melancholy at the onset of mass modernization;[18] they identified irony instead of pastiche,[19] neurosis instead of psychosis,[20] and experimental art and literature despite the death of the avant-garde.[21] Their justification for this was that Chinese postmodernism looked different from Western postmodernism;[22] what they ended up arguing is that Chinese postmodernism was just like Western modernism. Chinese modernism, the remaining term of the combinatorics, thus loses much of its distinctiveness from Chinese postmodernism, which allows Zhang Xudong, for example, to complete his project on Chinese modernism and subsequently coedit a collection of essays on Chinese postmodernism, both discussing es-

& China, pp. 337-57; Alberto Castelli, "Female Writing in Chinese Postmodern Literature: From Neorealism to Avant-garde," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 21, no. 4 (2019): 448–75.

15. 残雪 [Can Xue] and 王小波 [Wang Xiaobo].
16. See Kang Liu, "Subjectivity, Marxism, and Cultural Theory in China: Theoretical Interventions and Cultural Critique," in *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China*, ed. Liu Kang and Tang Xiaobing (Duke University Press, 1993), 23–55.
17. See Fengzhen Wang, "Third-World Writers in the Era of Postmodernism," *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 45–55.
18. See Xiaobing Tang, "Melancholy against the Grain: Approaching Postmodernity in Wang Anyi's *Tales of Sorrow*," in *Postmodernism & China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Duke University Press, 2000), 358–78.
19. See Xiaobin Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-garde Fiction* (University of Michigan Press, 2002). The title of the book captures the most common modernist themes assigned to Chinese postmodernism.
20. See Ning Wang, "Confronting Western Influence: Rethinking Chinese Literature of the New Period," *New Literary History* 24, no. 4 (1993): 905–26, particularly his comments on Can Xue and Xu Xiaobin on 910.
21. See, other than Xiaobin Yang's *The Chinese Postmodern*, Ning Wang, "A Reflection on Postmodernist Fiction in China: Avant-Garde Narrative Experimentation," *Narrative* 21, no. 3 (2013): 296–308. For examples of Chinese avant-garde literature and an argument against associating the avant-garde with postmodernism, see Jing Wang, ed., *China's Avant-Garde Fiction: An Anthology* (Duke University Press, 1998).
22. "Third-World, non-Western nation-states toward the end of the century. In the Chinese case, it seems to me that the avant-garde is a distinct feature of Chinese postmodernism. Due to specific social and cultural conditions, twentieth-century Chinese art does not exactly follow the pattern of the succession of periods and styles in Western art such as modernism, avant-garde, and postmodernism." Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, "Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post-New China," *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 111–133.

sentially the same era.[23]

One could try to explain away the problem by arguing that, in Chinese postmodernism, there was a powerful residual modernism that sometimes overshadowed—and other times illuminated—the dominant cultural field.[24] Modernism, according to this argument, is the marginal practice against the cultural center of postmodernism—except postmodernism, with its emphasis on difference and discontinuity, is equally described as a marginal practice against another cultural center, now defined as the official Party guidelines on cultural production,[25] and it is hard to see how modernism can marginalize itself within a postmodernism that is purportedly already marginalized. To argue that Chinese modernism was a residual form in the 1980s and '90s, further, is to say very little about the nebulous status of Chinese modernism itself: perhaps the development of modernism was stunted and repressed by the Cultural Revolution, so that it existed only in fleeting and fragmentary forms before and after;[26] but perhaps it did exist during the Cultural Revolution after all, if one looks beneath the official discourse and traces the lineage of underground poetry groups and political dissidents from the 1930s till the Tiananmen massacre in 1989;[27] if modernism remained underground, though, it would have

23. "What has been declared to be 'postmodern' is indeed meant to be a more completed, secured, and self-sufficient modernism than was achieved by those self-proclaimed, half-baked modernist ephemera of the early and mid-1980s." Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (Duke University Press, 1997), 152. In Dirlik and Zhang's *Postmodernism & China*, Zhang revised his periodization to align modernism with the New Era (1979-89) and postmodernism with the Post-New Era (1989-). A separate discussion on alternative periodizations of the reform era will follow.
24. See Xiaobing Tang, "Residual Modernism: Narratives of the Self in Contemporary Chinese Fiction," *Modern Chinese Literature* 7, no. 1 (1993): 7–31.
25. See Xiaobing Tang, "The Function of New Theory: What Does It Mean to Talk about Postmodernism in China? Theoretical Interventions and Cultural Critique," in *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China*, ed. Liu Kang and Tang Xiaobing (Duke University Press, 1993), 278–299.
26. For a pre-revolutionary modernism, see Patricia Laurence, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China* (University of South Carolina Press, 2003); for a post-revolutionary modernism, see Kang Liu, "The Short-Lived Avant-Garde Literary Movement and Its Transformation: The Case of Yu Hua," in *Globalization and Cultural Trends in China* (University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 102–126.
27. See Xiaomei Chen, ""Misunderstanding" Western Modernism: The *Menglong* Movement in Post-Mao China," *Representations*, no. 35 (1991): 143–163.

never entered into the public limelight, which makes aligning modernism with any major cultural trend questionable; still, there was the bizarre moment of "high culture" in the early 1980s, ushered in by intellectual elites who all but surveyed every cultural innovation from the West and made them available in China, among which was the "innovation" of postmodernism itself.[28] In order to appreciate the belatedness of Chinese modernism, then, one first has to posit a postmodernism—which is to say, to render modernism obsolete. But it was not just modernism that appeared belatedly in the 1980s, since the early years of Deng's market reform seemed to run through every major Western intellectual movement at a blinding pace:[29] in temporal order, the revival of interest in Chinese classics and the renewed focus on the individual subject is described as a cultural Renaissance;[30] discussions of modernization, economic liberalization, democracy and human rights are sometimes grouped under the heading "Chinese Enlightenment";[31] the literary trend called "root-seeking literature" [寻根文学] and its nostalgia for an untainted nature imitates, sometimes self-consciously, European romanticism,[32] even as the decade's radically disillusioned or experimental contemporaries get assigned to modernism. Perhaps this very embarrassment of periods can be called postmodernism: the burst of creative energy after a decade of suppression and at the beginning of Deng's reform was a hothouse for cultural experiments, not for genuine innovations, exactly, at least not when judged against the international literary scene, but for

28. For an account of how the discourse of postmodernism first entered China, see Ning Wang, "The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity," in *Postmodernism & China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Duke University Press, 2000), 21–40.
29. This sequence is taken, in chapter order, from Jing Wang's *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, which does not explicitly make this argument.
30. See Jing Wang, "High Culture Fever: The Cultural Discussion in the Mid-1980s and the Politics of Methodologies," in *High Culture Fever*, 37-117. See also Henry Zhao, "Post-Isms and Chinese New Conservatism," *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 31–44, and particularly when he quotes Gao Ruiquan on 39: "After Mao, a large number of students with higher grades poured into departments of literature, history and philosophy; many classics were reprinted and foreign classics translated. People were once again convinced of the value of knowledge, the significance of thinking, and that human beings should not be insulted. All these made China look like Europe in the time of the Renaissance."
31. See Jing Wang, "*Heshang* and the Paradoxes of the Chinese Enlightenment," in *High Culture Fever*, 118-136.
32. See Jing Wang, "Romancing the Subject: Utopian Moments in the Chinese Aesthetics of the 1980s," in *High Culture Fever*, 195-232.

a whole spectrum of previously established aesthetic styles, whose adaptation and recombination in the Chinese context make for their own kind of pastiche, here in the mood of playing catch-up.

Literary style, nevertheless, only tells us so much, especially if we are taking our cues from Jameson. It would be helpful, for current purposes, to distinguish between "postmodernism" and "postmodernity," which an older Jameson has regretted not doing:[33] "postmodernism," like "modernism," is a period style or an aesthetic project, and "postmodernity," like "modernity," is a historical period and a unique stage of capitalist development—that of globalization, multinational corporations, information society, etc. Nor are Chinese scholars solely to blame for confusing the two—the confusion has its Western counterparts.[34] There are reasons for using the term "postmodernism" to designate both the style and the period, since the two are inextricably linked: one can only understand a historical period through the formal features of representation available to them within the period, and aesthetic forms can only be appreciated fully within their historical context, through the particular social circumstances from which they originate. A far more difficult task, though, is to explain the specific ways that aesthetic forms relate to socio-economic conditions, ergo not to use "postmodernity" and "postmodernism" interchangeably, simply because they exist in close conjunction and exhibit similar features. We have discussed how cultural critics tend to analyze Chinese postmodernism in terms of stylistic parallels with Western postmodernism, and sometimes with Western modernism. When the focus is on the socio-economic period, though, one might reasonably doubt whether China, as of 1983, had the necessary economic conditions to sponsor a postmodernity: modernization was just getting underway; the country was notably un-globalized; a liberalized market was taking shape, but only in select "growth-pole" cities on the east coast;[35] large

33. "Yet I soon became aware that the word I should have used was not postmodernism but rather postmodernity: for I had in mind not a style but a historical period, one in which all kinds of things, from economics to politics, from the arts to technology, from daily life to international relations, had changed for good." Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," 104.
34. See, e.g., Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (Routledge, 1989).
35. See, e.g., Kyle A. Jaros, *China's Urban Champions: The Politics of Spatial Development* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

portions of the country were yet to be transformed by Deng's economic policies and remained predominantly agrarian, exhibiting residually socialist, and in some regions even feudal, modes of production.[36] China scholars sometimes refer to "postsocialism," dispensing with "postmodernity" and emphasizing China's unique experience with socialism,[37] but it usually reverts back to synonymy with postmodernism and so ends up suffering from the same ambiguity.[38] Some scholars, dispensing with "postmodernity," believe that a more granular periodization is necessary: we are, after all, talking about a country where foreign investment was forbidden before 1979, where private enterprises only began to develop in 1984, but which joined the WTO in 2001, hosted the Olympics in 2008, and overtook Japan as the world's second biggest economy in 2010. The 1980s and the 1990s, two different stages in Deng's reform, look so different that 1979-89 is sometimes called the New Era, and what comes after 1989 gets termed the Post-New Era.[39] These terms, unfortunately, carry with them the same conflation between cultural and economic periodizations.[40] But the economy was like the culture. If writers' dizzying experiments with preexisting aesthetic forms dragged postmodernism into China, then perhaps the drastic economic differences between regions, and the recombination of anachronistic modes of production, might also have allowed postmodernity to enter the mix.[41] If one begins from the idea that the world had already en-

36. For an account of Deng's China, see Erza F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Harvard University Press, 2011).
37. See, e.g., Arif Dirlik, "Postsocialism? Reflections on "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics"," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 21, no. 1 (March 1989): 33–44.
38. "[O]ne may say that the cultural dominant in the post-New Era is then a postmodernity with 'Chinese characteristics,' a 'post-socialist postmodernity.' " Lu, "Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post-New China," 125; "Where postsocialism designates the ambiguous place of Chinese society in the grand narrative of the modern that has never left us, postmodernism signifies an emerging vision of a form of life corresponding and bringing cultural affirmation to such economic reality."Xudong Zhang, "Postmodernism and Postsocialist Society—Historicizing the Present," in *Postmodernism & China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Duke University Press, 2000), 422.
39. See, e.g., ibid.
40. "Because the culture of the nineties is already completely different from the culture of the New Era (*xin shiqi*), we have begun to use the term post–New Era (*hou xin shiqi*) to deepen our analysis of the culture of the nineties," Yiwu Zhang, "Postmodernism and Chinese Novels of the Nineties," in *Postmodernism & China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, trans. Michael Berry (Duke University Press, 2000), 325.
41. "We would like to suggest, to the contrary, that it is precisely such a situation of spatial

tered the era of postmodernity, then it is enough to observe that China was part of the world, hence that it, too, needed to confront postmodernity in its own terms.[42] But then Chinese economy was not uniformly postmodern (late capitalist, or globalized) which means either that China, with its socialist heritage, has offered a unique and radical alternative to global postmodernity,[43] or that, reiterating doctrines from the May Fourth Movement of 1919, it needed to play catch up with the more developed capitalist countries and bring about a wholesale postmodernity.[44] This last possibility sounds like a bad case of internalized developmentalism or Eurocentrism and is often and appropriately critiqued for that reason.[45] Seldom, though, does one question the initial assumption, though questions are certainly possible. In 1990, what could it have meant to say that postmodernity was global, if China, for one, had not yet entered postmodernity?[46]

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fracturing and temporal desynchronization that justifies the use of the postmodern against the spatial (as in the nation-form) and temporal (as in the development of a national market and culture) teleologies of modernity." Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, "Introduction: Postmodernism and China," in *Postmodernism & China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Duke University Press, 2000), 3; "The fact is that China is still a Third World [*sic*] country in which various elements are blended: premodern, modern, postmodern, and even primitive. In a society such as this, which is subject to contingencies and uneven development, anything can happen, at any time; so why not postmodernism?" Wang, "The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity," 35.

42. "Globalization in the 1990s is at one and the same time the *postmodernization* of the globe. There is no society in the world today that is completely untouched by transnational capital and postmodern culture." Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, "Global POSTmodernIZATION: The Intellectual, the Artist, and China's Condition," in *Postmodernism & China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Duke University Press, 2000), 145.
43. "A consideration of recent non-Western experiences thus allows us to make a modification of the unilinear Euro-American paradigm and envision alternative postmodernities." ibid., 146. For a cultural version of alternative postmodernism, see Ping-hui Liao, "Postmodern Literary Discourse and Contemporary Public Culture in Taiwan," in *Postmodernism & China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Duke University Press, 2000), 68–88.
44. See, e.g., Haomin Gong, *Uneven Modernity: Literature, Film, and Intellectual Discourse in Postsocialist China* (University of Hawaii Press, 2012). Its title notwithstanding, the book extensively discusses China's economic background.
45. See, e.g., Jing Wang, "The Pseudoproposition of 'Chinese Postmodernism': Ge Fei and the Experimentalist Showcase," in *High Culture Fever*, 233-260, where she argues that Chinese postmodernism is a symptom of the "Great Leap Forward" myth.
46. Jonathan Arac, reporting from a conference on Chinese postmodernism, was among the few who did: "Assessing the situation as presented by these essays, and I have no competence to underwrite any claim to see beyond them, postmodernity is not the condition of China. It seems necessary to add: if not China, then not the world." Jonathan Arac, "Post-

This is the point where investigations of Chinese postmodernism come full circle and rejoin their Western and meta-theoretical counterparts: the term "postmodernism" is often rejected not because it does not apply to China, but simply because it is a Western theoretical construct purportedly designed to annihilate alternative, Third-World conceptual models.[47] We have seen two ways that "postmodernism," the style or the period, might be called a Western import in China: either Chinese culture, in a feverish campaign, adopted the aesthetic features of Western postmodernism, or the Chinese economy, because of Deng's reforms, was integrated into the economic postmodernity organized by the developed, Western countries. But postmodernism is also a Western theory and a critical perspective, which overzealous Chinese theorists might have imposed onto an unsuspecting China, where neither postmodern culture nor postmodern socioeconomic forms exist (or existed).[48] Postmodernism, in this sense, was an exercise in cultural imperialism.[49] But it has also been argued

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modernism and Postmodernity in China: An Agenda for Inquiry," *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 144.

47. "This essay is not intended to argue for such an alternative [for globalization]. Rather, I try to offer an account of the current Chinese debate over an alternative modernity in order to problematize the very assumptions that animate the critical discourses on globalization." Kang Liu, "Is There an Alternative to (Capitalist) Globalization? The Debate about Modernity in China," *Boundary 2* 23, no. 3 (1996): 193–218.
48. "[I]ntellectuals are being pressured by the cultural status quo and the borrowed ideas of Western post-isms to turn their back on the modernist project, which has hardly won a foothold in the culture of their nations let alone been oppressively institutionalized." Zhao, "Post-Isms and Chinese New Conservatism," 43.
49. The problem is occasionally phrased in terms of orientalism versus occidentalism. What is not agreed upon is which aspect of orientalism the term occidentalism opposes—or whether they are opposed after all. See, e.g., Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Ning Wang, "Orientalism versus Occidentalism?," *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 57–67. Jameson also writes, regarding Orientalism, that "[i]t does not matter much that the radical otherness of the culture in question is praised or valorized positively, as the preceding pages: the essential operation is that of differentiation, and once that has been accomplished, the mechanism Said denounces has been set in place … I don't see how a first-world intellectual can avoid this operation without falling back into some general liberal and humanistic universalism." Jameson, "Third-World Literature," 77.

that postmodernism was China's new nationalism,[50] nativism[51] and conservatism.[52] This line of critique—that the problem with postmodernism lay not in its Western origins, but in its being in some sense too Chinese—was in part a reaction against the theorists who insisted that a Chinese postmodernism would look different from the West's version, and that it would serve as an economic or cultural alternative.[53] Then again, much like in Western scholarship, the term "postmodernism" gets conflated with "poststructuralism," which implies a radical transformation of Western intellectual thought—the Enlightenment, liberalism, science and technology, etc.—since the dawn of modernity. Because non-Western cultures, like China, have never adopted the paradigms of Western-style modernity, either they cannot be "postmodern" in the Western sense and therefore does not need postmodernism, or perhaps they have been "postmodern" all along, since modernity is uniquely Western, which makes "postmodernity" sound like "non-Western." But the critique of Chinese postmodernism as nationalist conservatism also originates from an under-argued equation of postmodernism to postcolonialism, and perhaps more specifically from a widespread misinterpretation of Kwame Anthony Appiah's essay, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?".[54] Even though, as

50. For a critique of "nationalist postmodernism," see Xu Ben, "Chinese Populist Nationalism: Its Intellectual Politics and Moral Dilemma," *Representations* 76, no. 1 (2001): 120–140. For an example of what he is critiquing, see Xudong Zhang, "Nationalism, Mass Culture, and Intellectual Strategies in Post-Tiananmen China," *Social Text*, no. 55 (1998): 109–140.
51. For a proponent of "nativist postmodernism," see Longxi Zhang, "Postmodernism and the Return of the Native," in *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 184–212.
52. See, e.g., Zhao, "Post-Isms and Chinese New Conservatism."
53. For an overview of different arguments in the post-ism debates, see Giorgio Strafella, "Postmodernism as a Nationalist Conservatism? The Case of Zhang Yiwu," *Asiatische Studien - Études Asiatiques* 70, no. 3, 921–941.
54. See, e.g., "Anthony Appiah asks whether the 'post' in postcolonialism is the same as the 'post' in postmodernism. The answer is clearly 'yes.' " Xiaoying Wang, "Hong Kong, China, and the Question of Postcoloniality," in *Postmodernism & China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Duke University Press, 2000), 114; "The fact that the three major schools of contemporary cultural studies [postmodernism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism] are all prefixed in the same way can hardly be a coincidence. Some scholars have pondered whether this post- is the same as that post-. The answer in all cases seems to be 'yes.' " Zhao, "Post-Isms and Chinese New Conservatism," 32 For a more carefully argued case, see Liao, "Postmodern Literary Discourse and Contemporary Public Culture in Taiwan"

Appiah points out, "the *post-* in postcolonial, like the *post-* in postmodern, is the *post-* of the space-clearing gesture,"[55] the post- in postmodernism was a space-clearing of prior aesthetic forms and a construction of a new cultural dominant, whereas the post- in postcolonialism was a radical self-refashioning of the marginalized colonial subjects and their liberation from imperial powers. When critics say that they reject postmodernism, then, what they sometimes mean is that they reject postcolonialism: postcolonialism is sometimes a "Western" theoretical imposition, and other times a nativist and nationalist attempt to essentialize "the Chinese experience."[56]

All these proposals of alternative terms and alternative definitions, misunderstandings and overhasty disagreements, only serve to reproduce the bewildering complexity of post-market-reform China itself, so that the scholarly debates around Chinese postmodernism also look rather postmodern, in their self-differentiating and self-contradicting ways. A mapping of Chinese culture seems even more elusive, and further away from Jameson's initial goal when proposing the term "postmodernism"—that we understand the system qua system, and its appearance to us in the form of a cultural dominant, through which we might understand our place in history.

55. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 348.
56. For an intervention that engages with both these points, see Chow Rey, "Can One Say No to China?," *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 147–151.

3 "The people who taught us …"

The previous pages document what happens when Jameson's theory of postmodernism encounters a cultural context alien to its birthplace, how a theoretical center, so to speak, encounters its margins and looks dangerously close to breaking down. But one cannot shake the feeling that, despite all this, one is moving further away from the source of the conceptual confusion, that the most serious problems sit at the center and not on the margin, problems that produce as their symptom this frantic search for a coherent model of postmodernism. In other words, Jameson's account of postmodernism should be considered secondary to his overarching hermeneutics, which he outlined in *The Political Unconscious* a few years before the postmodernism essay. A reformulated theory of postmodernism could do worse than revisit the central categories of Jameson's interpretive method, if only to retrace the internal tensions that evolve later into full-blown antinomies.

It is easy to forget, further, that *The Political Unconscious* already contains a miniature argument about postmodernism. One need not look beyond the first page of the first chapter to find Jameson's critique of "the tendency of much contemporary theory to rewrite selected texts from the past in terms of its own aesthetic and, in particular, in terms of a modernism (or more properly postmodernist) conception of language."[1] This tendency, whereby the historical past is continuously transposed into the present, is contrasted with an antiquarianism similarly disavowed by Jameson, "the modest claim … that certain texts have social and historical—sometimes even political—resonance."[2] An-

1. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University Press, 1981), 17.
2. Ibid.

tiquarianism and the postmodern illusion of the eternal present, according to Jameson, constitute the double bind of historicism, a dilemma that is made no less visible by the famous but typically misunderstood opening line of *The Political Unconscious*, "Always historicize!," an oxymoron that means something like, "Ahistorically historicize!" Jameson, indeed, is fully aware of this problem: insofar as historic*ism* comes to us as a system of thought or method that can be applied to all texts from all historical periods, it necessarily has to be lifted out of history—hence it is, as Jameson calls it, the " 'transhistorical' imperative of all dialectical thought."[3] The version of historicism that Jameson calls for, then, should not be understood as the simple opposite of a pure ahistoricism, but rather as its dialectical resolution. In *The Political Unconscious*, history is not an objective reality but an always already subjectivized master narrative of history: "[Historical struggles] can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story … only if they are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot."[4] This, then, marks Jameson's departure from earlier versions of Marxist criticism, where historical materialism is presented as a "science" that enjoys unmediated access to "how things really are."[5]

But it would also be mistaken to think, since history is bracketed in *The Political Unconscious*, that it is no longer present in Jameson's framework. This is where his focus on the reading subject rather than the object—"that we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself"[6]—recruits the support of psychoanalysis, through which texts that so often limit

3. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 9.
4. Ibid., 19-20.
5. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Marxist Internet Archive*, accessed April 15, 2020, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm, in particular his distinction between various ideologies and the "science" of historical materialism. Also see Jacques Lacan, "On the Subject Who Is Finally in Question," in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 194-5: "[O]ne can say that a part of the reversal of Hegel that [Marx] carries out is constituted by the return (which is a materialist return, precisely insofar as it gives it figure and body) of the question of truth … Symptoms remained somewhat vague when they were understood as representing some irruption of truth. In fact they *are* truth, being made of the same wood from which truth is made, if we posit materialistically that truth is what is instated on the basis of the signifying chain."
6. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 9.

their representation to the story of an individual or of a family can acquire wider valence and be interpreted to represent the socio-political condition that confronts all individuals and families alike. The combination of a Lacanian psychoanalysis with Marxism makes available the double meaning of history in Jameson's account: individual history is also always collective History. The trauma that defines an individual's psychic development constitutes, for Lacan, the psychological register of the Real, and so does, for Jameson, the History of class struggles[7]: "history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but … as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious."[8] The twin categories of historicism and History—of the textualization or narrativization of history and history as the absent cause—can thus be understood through the Lacanian registers of the Symbolic and the Real, respectively. The political unconscious presumably gets its name from Lacan's dicta that the unconscious is structured like a language, and that the unconscious is the discourse of the Symbolic Order. The function of the text, in these terms, is the half-broken arrow in Lacan's Schema L pointing from the Symbolic to the Real, a narrative of history that asymptotically approaches History itself, but that, by definition, cannot reach it directly: "History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis … This is indeed the ultimate sense in which History as ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular theoretical justification."[9]

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7. "Nonetheless, it is not terribly difficult to say what is meant by the Real in Lacan. It is simply History itself: and if for psychoanalysis the history in question here is obviously enough the history of the subject, the resonance of the word suggests that a confrontation between this particular materialism and the historical materialism of Marx can no longer be postponed." Fredric Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject," *Yale French Studies*, nos. 55/56 (1977): 384.
8. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 35.
9. ibid., 102. Whether Jameson has a system of ontology in mind—whether History as the ground can be called "materialist"—is an investigation for another day. This interpretation of Jameson, at any rate, differs slightly from Alexander Galloway, "History Is What Hurts: On Old Materialism," *Social Text* 34, no. 2 (2016): 125–141. For Galloway, the claim "there *is* an absolute horizon" demonstrates that Jameson subscribes to an ontology of material conditions. But History *really* exists for Jameson in the sense that History is

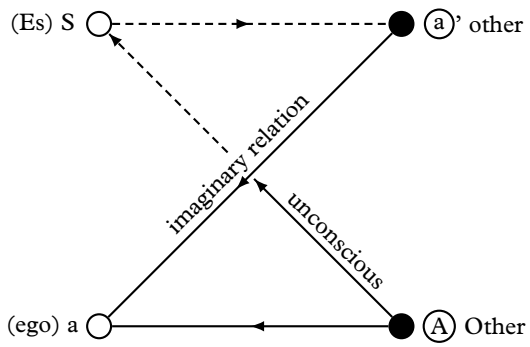

Figure 3: Schema L

Schema L, furthermore, also discloses an additional axis or register, namely, that of the Imaginary. The Imaginary is, for Lacan, the domain in which daily interactions with others occur:[10] how one "imagines" one's identity, how one "imagines" the other person's identity, how one "imagines" relations of kinship or rivalry, where moral or ideological categories of good an evil becomes operative.[11] The Imaginary axis also maps out the positions of the ego (*a'*) and the other (*a*), the latter of which, in the classical Oedipal paradigm, aligns with the mother or the object cause of desire. A text can also function along the Imaginary axis, performing, that is, what Freud calls daydreaming or wish-fulfillment, whereby a reader projects their own desire onto the representation of the text, and the narrative resolution affords a sense—however fleeting or superficial—of closure. But there is the alternative possibility that a text never

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the Real, a psychological register that is at once subjective and outside of the purview of the subject. One might preliminarily say, reading Jameson with Lacan, that Jameson's relationship to an ontological system is dialectical—which, regarding two faithful Hegelian scholars, says nothing very surprising at all.

10. "Indeed, for imagos—whose veiled faces we analysts see emerge in our daily experience and in the penumbra of symbolic effectiveness—the specular image seems to be the threshold of the visible world." Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 77.
11. "[I]t will be appropriate to designate this primordial rivalry of the mirror stage as a relationship of otherness: nowhere better can we observe the violent situational content of those judgements of good and evil which will later on cool off and sediment into the various systems of ethics." Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan," 357.

fulfills the desire, and that a desire involves a fundamental shift in both the constitution of the psyche and the structure of one's society. Indeed, desire, in proper psychoanalytic understanding, can never be fulfilled—it is, as Lacan tells us, always the desire of the Symbolic Order, and the persistence of the regulatory function of the Symbolic maintains the libidinal economy of ongoing desire, which lands one back along the axis of the Real and the Symbolic. It is in accordance with these two axes, then, that Jameson differentiates between the Imaginary and the Symbolic text: "Unlike the more degraded, and easily commodifiable, texts of the Imaginary level, these new, second-level narratives—we will call them … 'Symbolic texts' … seeks to endow [themselves] with the utmost representable density and to posit the most elaborate and systematic difficulties and obstacles."[12] What this unfulfillable desire of the Symbolic text encounters is none other than the Real itself, that "bedrock against which the desiring subject knows the breakup of hope and can finally measure everything that refuses its fulfillment."[13]

A direct connection between the narrative mapping of Lacanian registers and Jameson's account of postmodernism is the universal condition of schizophrenia: "a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning."[14] In psychoanalytic terms, this psychotic breakdown happens when the person, in their childhood, does not successfully undergo a mirror stage and is therefore stuck between the infinite fluctuation between the ego and the other, between identification and differentiation. The incomplete formation of the psychotic subject, according to Schema L, also has to do with a missing father figure, otherwise transformed into the Name-of-the-Father or the Symbolic Order through the process of signifying substitution. When an absent father cannot sufficiently mediate between the child and the mother—when an underdeveloped Symbolic, in other words, cannot regulate the relationship between the ego and the *objet petit a*—is also when the individual collapses back onto the Imaginary axis, bound by the shifting categories of self and other, good and evil,

12. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 183.
13. Ibid., 184.
14. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 26.

etc. The psychotic collapse onto the Imaginary, further, illuminates another way of understanding the cognitive bind of postmodernism, since "late capitalism" in Jameson's formulation is alternatively called "image society." The "image" here connotates the oversaturation of images through the omnipresence of the media, but it also evokes the Imaginary, as in the term "Imaginary text." The implication, then, is not only that most of the cultural products in postmodernity serve as means of wish-fulfillment, but also, since they are mass-reproduced as easily accessible commodities, that they provide the immediate—albeit "imaginary"—gratification of individual desires. It is a truism to say that what Baudrillard calls the hyperreal blocks access to the Lacanian Real, since the Real is by definition inaccessible. More importantly, for Jameson, the hyperreal also blocks the regulatory function of the Symbolic, thus rendering invisible its asymptotic approach to the Real[15] through the political unconscious. In postmodernity, in short, all texts are Imaginary texts.

The result, then, is the experience of a subject irrevocably lost in the Bonaventure Hotel, much like a child experiencing the world prior to the mirror stage: "the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling."[16] This last explication of the crisis of the subject in postmodernity, finally, marks the implicit disagreement between the methodologies of Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* and of Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*. For Deleuze and Guattari, the path to the Real can only be achieved through a mending of the split subject, a return, in other words, to the Imaginary condition prior to the intervention of the Name-of-the-Father. For Jameson, however, this politics of schizophrenia also threatens to destroy the Imaginary axis, since, by the time one reaches the mirror stage, the subject is already split, and

15. "By taking one's bearings from the joint between the consequences of language and the desire for knowledge—a joint that the subject is—perhaps the paths will become more passable regarding what has always been known about the distance that separates the subject from his existence as a sexed being, not to mention as a living being … Similarly, a certain order of construction can be required regarding what must be attained by way of what fundamentally screens the real in the unconscious fantasy." Lacan, "On the Subject Who Is Finally in Question," 195.
16. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 15.

to become a pre-mirror-stage child is precisely to succumb to the condition of postmodernism: "there is no longer a self present to do the feeling." Jameson's preference for the Symbolic over the Imaginary text, then, aligns with his attempt to reintroduce master narratives into a postmodernism that forgets how to construct them, in the hopes that the Real of History can be reintegrated into the postmodern psyche, not through a psychotic break but through a revitalized mediatory force of the Symbolic[17], as the "return of the repressed": "the restoration of the meaning of the greatest cultural monuments cannot be separated from a passionate and partisan assessment of everything that is oppressive in them and that knows complicity with privilege and class domination, stained with the guilt not merely of culture in particular but of History itself as a long nightmare."[18]

But *The Political Unconscious* does more than reinstate the Symbolic against the infinite regress of the Imaginary. Its central thesis, indeed, is a far more wide-ranging claim, namely, that all texts possess a political unconscious, and that "the political perspective … [is] the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation."[19] His four allegorical levels, each transcending its predecessor, demonstrate Jameson's belief that the orientation towards the Symbolic—and, through the Symbolic, towards the Real—is everywhere applicable: all texts can be read, first, on a literal level, whereby one discovers "the historical or textual referent"; second, on an allegorical level, where a comparison with a different text (the Old Testament, for example, against the New) reveals the "allegorical key or interpretive code" of the original one; third, on a moral level, where one might trace the journey of an individual subject, and where the more traditional version of psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the psychological development of the individual, primarily operates;[20] fourth, on an anagogical

17. "Only by grasping images—and also the surviving fragments of authentic myth and delusion—in this way, as that trace of the Imaginary, of sheer private or physiological experience, which has undergone the sea-change of the Symbolic, can criticism of this kind recover a vital and hermeneutic relationship to the literary text." Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan," 376.
18. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 299.
19. Ibid., 17.
20. One might be concerned as to why, in my argument, Lacanian psychoanalysis is elevated above any specific level within Jameson's four allegorical levels. This is because the incor-

level, where a properly political reading discloses the "collective 'meaning' of history."[21] The transcendence of the levels comes from the medieval Christian interpretation of the Bible, itself a grand narrative of history that provides meaning for humanity's existence on earth. But insofar as a movement through levels is not only possible but also seems to always go from the textual to the anagogical, from the particular to the universal, it would also seem that the distinction between the Imaginary text and the Symbolic text is no longer stable, since what is Imaginary about the text is merely the intermediary levels in a ladder of interpretive transcendence, and seems to map onto the third, moral level particularly well. An Imaginary text, according to the methodology of *The Political Unconscious*, marks the deficiency in interpretation—it is not so much that the text is Imaginary, as it is one's interpretation of it. This also implies that the slogan, "Always historicize!," can be rewritten in terms that directly oppose Jameson's own argument that in postmodernity, all texts are Imaginary texts: according to the argument in *The Political Unconscious*, all texts are Symbolic texts.

This lengthy exposition arrives at a conclusion that many Lacanians would consider self-evident: surely, all texts are Symbolic—the ultimate Symbolic Order, for Lacan, is none other than language itself, of which texts are instances. The incompatibility between *The Political Unconscious* and *Postmodernism*, between the Symbolic and the Imaginary axes in Schema L, only serves in turn to illuminate the peculiar status of narratives in postmodernity: if postmodernism is missing the Symbolic register, and if all texts are Symbolic, it should be surprising that there are texts at all in postmodernity. One would notice, for example, that Jameson does not include a chapter on narratives in his *Postmodernism* book: the paradigmatic postmodern cultural forms are "video," "architecture," "film," etc., and the chapter on Claude Simon whose title should have

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poration of a structuralist Symbolic in the Lacanian framework allows Jameson to detach it from the otherwise individualizing and psychologizing tendencies of psychoanalysis and provide it with a universal significance: "I must omit the familial or more orthodox psychoanalytic background to this situation, which Lacan transcodes into language by describing the Oedipal rivalry in terms not so much of the biological individual who is your rival for the mother's attention but rather of what he calls the Name-of-the-Father, paternal authority now considered as a linguistic function." Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 26.

21. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 31.

been "Novel" bears instead the heading, "Sentences." The argument, then, is that on the level of sentences, postmodern literature generates the same effects of schizophrenia as do other media: "In effect, the reader seems unable to conclude that language has broken down (something which would leave her or him without any subject position whatsoever), and therefore—as in a reverse shot in film—constructs some new imaginary object to justify the persistence of the subject position already achieved."[22] But even in this chapter, where the point is to demonstrate the breakdown of the signifying chain, Jameson seems unable to withhold himself from enforcing a political interpretation and thereby providing a symptomatic reading of the text: "it is also significant, if not symptomatic, that the airplane does land, but at an intermediary stop somewhere … *Les Corps conducteurs* is, in that respect, one immense shaggy dog story which leads us firmly toward the completion of an incomplete thing."[23] The stop that is always intermediary, according to this interpretation, is the text's attempt to map out the experience of postmodernity, perpetually caught between destinations. It would come even more as a surprise that Jameson seems, at one point, to have identified the Real in the novel: "Yet as Deleuze has taught us, even under postmodernism we must distinguish between the body with organs and the body without … The body that has organs … accompanies Simon's sentences as their ghostly referent and as a stand-in for the Real itself."[24]

Jameson's interpretation of Simon's novel, then, illuminates all the anachronistic elements within *Conducting Bodies* that should not exist against the backdrop of postmodernity. This is the problem with his interpretation of Lu Xun all over again: there is, despite the universal condition of schizophrenia, still a distinction between the body with organs and the body without organs; the novel's valorization of closure, according to Jameson, "marks Simon as relatively *traditional*;"[Jameson[25] 153; emphasis added] an earlier argument points out, first, that "Simon's relationship to such raw materials can in any case be said to be more *realistic*," and second, that Simon has a "*modernist* and painterly

22. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 136-7.
23. Ibid., 153.
24. Ibid., 252.
25. Ibid.

relationship to the visual."[Jameson[26] 153; emphasis added] The reappearance of the Real is also described with a temporal metaphor, as the "ghostly referent" of the postmodern sentences, a thing of the past that has come back to haunt the present. But the most glaring anachronism is none other than the narrative itself, which, once transformed by Jameson's own hermeneutics into a Symbolic text, becomes the force field in which all forgotten possibilities of the past begin to dismantle the immaculate surface of the postmodern and emerge revitalized.

At this point, Jameson's interpretation of Simon reads like a chapter of *The Political Unconscious* that has wandered astray into *Postmodernism*. The fact that Simon's novel no longer looks like a synchronic construct but rather a combination of diachronic elements, in turn, illuminates a perhaps surprising feature of Jameson's hermeneutics: for all his suggestion of reintroducing the Symbolic register, he is not in fact interested in reducing all texts into one single, homogeneous master code. Insofar as the Symbolic Order is a system in Lacanian terms, it makes visible all the heterogeneous components that resist the imposition of the system in the first place. By regulating one's Imaginary experience, it discloses a whole host of conflicts and antinomies that persist unresolved. Jameson's reading of Simon does something similar: by naming the synchronic system through which all disparate cultural influences must make way—that is, by periodizing *Conducting Bodies* as a postmodern novel—the non-synchronous, pre-postmodern features of the novel emerges with striking clarity: "traditional … realistic … modernist." The "Sentence" chapter in *Postmodernism* is therefore not a mistake on Jameson's part, but rather wholly in line with his interpretive methodology outlined in *The Political Unconscious*: an interpretation becomes "productive at the moment when the narrative text in one way or another *deviates* from its basic schema; far less so, in those instances where, the narrative proving to be its simple replication, the analyst is reduced to noting the conformity of the manifest text to the underlying theoretical schema."[27] The notion of a text always "deviating" from its schema aligns with a similarly underappreciated aspect of Jameson's method of peri-

26. Jameson, *Postmodernism*.
27. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 126.

odization, namely, that a historical period is never as clean and settled as its reductive conception makes it out to be, since within any given period, one can still observe the residual features of the previous period and the emergent ones of the next, a phenomenon that Ernst Bloch calls the "synchronicity of the non-synchronous." Jameson's innovation over Bloch's term is to establish a parallel between what, in Marxist tradition, one might call the socio-economic condition of uneven development and what one can now call the condition of uneven development within the realm of culture. Cultural uneven development, then, has three primary functions: 1) each historical condition has its particular way of being represented; 2) these representational features, as historical conditions disappear or reemerge, are recombined in what looks like a coherent representation appropriate for the latest period; 3) by tracing how these uneven formal features index historical conditions and struggle to resolve historical conflicts within a new cultural form, one might break apart the latter's reified surface and, identifying the emergent social trends, project a utopian vision for the future. The most apparent way of encoding these formal features is through the category of genres, and Jameson argues that the ultimate horizon of genre analysis is the exploration of their unevenness: "genre theory must always in one way or another project a model of the coexistence of tension between several generic modes or strands."[28] Cultural uneven development, as outlined in *The Political Unconscious*, also shows one the way out of postmodernism: the lost sense of history might be redeemed, first, by naming postmodernity as a synchronic system, and then by identifying the diachronic elements within its cultural products, which demonstrates that the postmodern "eternal present" is a mere illusion, and that history or its possibilities are, after all, not entirely lost.

Jameson's adaptation of uneven development for cultural criticism is, further, parallel with the evolution of the concept within Marxist theory more generally. The term, as it was first coined by Trotsky, is a precondition to his political project of permanent revolution, which does not mean "a revolution that never ends," but "a socialist revolution that can happen at any time": different modes of production—from feudalism to capitalism to socialism—need

28. Ibid., 141.

not transpire in absolutely uniform stages everywhere in the world. A country whose overall social structure is by certain standards "backwards" might borrow selectively from the most advanced economies; in some places, at least, it will play host to the world's most advanced technologies and organizational forms, which exist in close conjunctions with seemingly archaic practices. In the colonies, and on other peripheries, the economy is hybrid—"combined and uneven." It follows that in underdeveloped countries such as Russia, a socialist revolution is not only possible, but more likely to succeed in overturning both the feudal residues and the capitalist emergent—hence Lenin's famous adage that any chain is only as strong as its weakest link. For Trotsky, then, uneven development is the privileged revolutionary condition of the marginal countries in the global capitalist system. Later usages of the term, however, no longer restrict it in the periphery and make it applicable for social formations everywhere and at all scales.[29] Not only the disadvantaged countries suffering from imperial domination or capitalist exploitation can be described as unevenly developed. Instead, uneven development is among the internal logics of capital itself: capitalism, because of its periodic fluctuations in supply and demand, creates immense amounts of surplus value in more developed geographic regions, which then need to be reinvested in less developed regions to avert crisis. The less developed regions, gaining the influx of capital and therefore more advanced infrastructure, higher-educated labor and more technologically advanced products, can seem to be accelerating its development to draw "even" with the more developed regions. However, to draw even and become developed also creates similar geographic differentiations, reproducing unevenness elsewhere or with increasing intensity.[30] The theory of economic uneven development, then, has three primary functions: 1) it illuminates the geographical specificities of socio-economic formations, not only at the level of

29. For possible influences on Jameson's usage of uneven development, see "Contradiction and Overdetermination" and "On the Materialist Dialectic," in Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (Verso, 2005). Regarding uneven development in postmodernity, see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), or Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1978), in particular his chapter on "The Structure of the Capitalist World Market."
30. For a discussion of uneven development as an internal mechanism to avert crisis in capitalism, see David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (Verso, 1982).

nation states—as in Trotsky's original conception—but also internally among regions and provinces, within cities and countrysides, etc.; [31] 2) it provides an explanatory mechanism, through the intrinsic logic of capital, for how these disparities coexist and recombine; 3) because unevenness is arguably everywhere, capitalism as a dominant system can also be dismantled everywhere—the chain, in other words, is made entirely of weak links. When one compares this economic conception of uneven development to Jameson's cultural version, one would notice, other than their manifest parallel, that the temporal unevenness of historical periods is spatialized—or mapped onto—geographical unevenness. This, on the one hand, coheres with Jameson's project of cognitive mapping: no one enjoys unmediated access to history itself; history becomes visible, instead, through the inconsistencies and interplays of generic forms within a particular text, as if the text were a house consisting of closed and ossified rooms, miraculously preserved through the ages, and an interpretation is a tour, not only of the individual rooms themselves, but also of how they function together in ostensible coherence, tracing, that is, the seams in the carpet and the cracks on the walls. On the other hand, uneven development is a spatial category, which would make it seem particularly amenable in an era where temporal thinking has all but disappeared: in postmodernity, "our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time."[32]

Jameson, in sum, asks one to read for unevenness—it is central to his method. It must come as a surprise, then, that Jameson, in the final section of *Postmodernism*, seems to foreclose the possibility of any unevenness in postmodernity. After attributing Bloch's "synchronicity of the non-synchronous" to modernism, Jameson writes:

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31. "Today, however, any theory of uneven development has no such luxury and has to cover not only national scale political economies but processes of economic restructuring, political movements and cultural revolts at sub-national scales—the urban, the regional, and (as feminism has surely taught us by now) the scale of the household—and simultaneously the international scale." Neil Smith, "The Geography of Uneven Development," in *100 Years of Permanent Revolution: Results and Prospects*, ed. Bill Dunn and Hugo Radice (Pluto Press, 2006), 187-8.
32. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 16.

> [T]he postmodern must be characterized as a situation in which the survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace. In the postmodern, then, the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known "sense of the past" or historicity and collective memory) … Ours is a more homogeneously modernized condition; we no longer are encumbered with the embarrassment of non-simultaneities and nonsynchronicities. Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development or rationalization (at least from the perspective of the "West"). This is the sense in which we can affirm, either that modernism is characterized by a situation of incomplete modernization, or that Postmodernism is more modern than modernism itself.[33]

But one already knows that, by Jameson's own admission, these claims cannot be true. Intuitively, if uneven development characterizes the radically different levels of modernization during modernity, it would be rather odd if it did not characterize the radically different levels of globalization during postmodernity. The revival of older narrative forms in postmodernism means that "the holdover" has precisely not been "swept away without a trace," and the example of Claude Simon demonstrates "the embarrassment of non-simultaneities and nonsynchronicities" within postmodern culture. Not everything has reached "the same hour on the great clock on development," since any Jamesonian literary period has always been the site where heterogeneous attributes from different historical periods are unevenly combined. Perhaps more importantly, if there is no unevenness in postmodernity, there is also no way out of postmodernity, and the lack of struggles or contradictions would mean that any transcendence would be impossible. If this one paragraph of Jameson's were correct, it would mean that the dialectic had stalled. If one is looking for the possibility of revolution, then, the parentheses around "at least from the perspective of the 'West' " would be curious, and recall Jameson's inconsistent attempts at finding alternatives to postmodernity outside the "West" in "third-world countries." But if unevenness is nonexistent in developed countries of the global

33. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 309-10.

capitalist center, and preserved in the developing countries of the margins, then Jameson seems to be bracketing contemporary innovations on the theory of uneven development and reverting to Trotsky's initial, much more limited formulation, namely, that only the underdeveloped countries enjoy their development uneven and combined. All these are at odds with what Jameson does throughout his career anyway: interpreting cultural texts, as he does in *The Political Unconscious*, in terms of uneven development, and this at a stage in history when uneven development is ostensibly impossible.

It is now worth returning to the Lacanian schema one last time and observe that uneven development has its parallel in the human psyche as well: the definition of the postmodern condition as psychosis means that postmodernity has an underdeveloped register of the Symbolic. But History as the Real, according to Jameson, is made visible through uneven development as a reading method, which means that the theory of uneven development—as a unified system that explains and generates difference—can itself be considered the Symbolic Order. It is in this sense that Jameson's rejection of uneven development in postmodernity can be called an act of foreclosure: it refuses the intervention of the Symbolic Order, thus making uneven development reappear in the Real and resurface, in the political unconscious of cultural texts, as the "return of the repressed." Jameson's ultimate mistake in "Third-World Literature" and elsewhere is to look for an alternative to Western postmodernism in his civilizational other—whereas his own method, all along, has been instructing him to look for the Other instead.

Here, then, is why one should study the culture of post-market-reform China: Jameson, in addition to instructing all cultural critics to read for unevenness, also claims that postmodernism is the culture of societies *without* unevenness; meanwhile, something that looks very much like postmodernism has manifested existed in China, and under conditions of well-nigh classical unevenness. So what is this thing that Jameson argues cannot exist, this uneven postmodernism, in a nation for which capitalism is at once belated and inconceivably new?

4 "You either have your umbrella or you don't."

In the following sections, I will consider four possible ways that postmodernism might exist in China:

1. Perhaps it is the same postmodernism as that of the West, but geographically restricted to economically advanced metropolitan regions;

2. Or perhaps postmodernism is the same set of formal or generic operations, but operating on Chinese-specific cultural content;

3. Or perhaps taking indigenous culture as content is what Western postmodernism does anyways, and what is distinctive about Chinese postmodernism is instead its specific socio-historical context;

4. But once the context shifts, perhaps the cultural form has to change as well, which calls for a postmodernism of uneven development.

In each section, I will examine cultural products that might serve as illustrations or refutations for their respective hypotheses. The goal, then, is not to prove or disprove the ways in which postmodernism might exist in China, but rather to show how each conceptual model illuminates different aspects of the Chinese culture since the 1980s, and how the object of our investigation shifts as we shift our narrative about it. Nor does China serve as exemplar of either global postmodernism or its emancipatory alternative—the two fluctuating polarities that Jameson has inadvertently fallen into. What I mean to demonstrate,

instead, is a hermeneutic model with which we may understand cultures under the condition of uneven development. Since uneven development is arguably the condition intrinsic to global capitalism, this same hermeneutic model is meant also for the world.

It is not hard to imagine how a metropolitan postmodernism might exist in China. Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong give an apt description of it: "[C]ities such as Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen, now with cityscapes punctuated by the golden arches of McDonald's and giant Panasonic advertisements, are nothing more than enclaves of a global consumer society."[1] That these cities are "enclaves," bearing little to no relationship with the rural interior, also means that arts and media in the coastal cities have tended to develop asynchronously from the rest of China, resembling mainstream forms of global literature and art while resonating only weakly with the rural population. This metropolitan and basically Westernized postmodernism, then, might help us account for the famous Beijing-based writer 王朔 [Wang Shuo], who, in addition to occupying the top of the bestseller list with his novels for years on end, is also a prolific screenwriter, often adapting his own novels into films and TV shows of global acclaim. It has become routine, especially in Western academia, to associate Wang Shuo's name with "hooligan literature"—a masculine literature of fast-talking tough guys and idlers.[2] The same group of hooligan characters attend kindergarten together in 看上去很美 *[Little Red Flowers]*, high school in "动物凶猛 [Animal ferocious]," and find their middle-aged selves scattered across China in 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*. What is not immediately obvious from the term, however, is that Wang Shuo's "hooliganism" denotes a coming together of two contrasting social circumstances. On the one hand, the characters of Wang Shuo represent a new generation of Chinese city dwellers, usually in their twenties and predominantly men, who can no longer look forward to the stable careers that the Party offered their predecessors in earlier decades, and who therefore roam the streets wantonly,

1. Dirlik and Zhang, "Introduction: Postmodernism and China," 6.
2. See, e.g. Geremie Barmé, "Wang Shuo and Liumang ("Hooligan") Culture," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 28 (1992): 23–64. For an exploration of the class background of "hooligans," see Yusheng Yao, "The Elite Class Background of Wang Shuo and His Hooligan Characters," *Modern China* 30, no. 4 (2004): 431–69.

coalesce into gangs, or engage in questionably one-off business ventures. On the other hand, these same men can typically afford to be jobless because they are the offspring of high-ranking Party cadres and have therefore inherited considerable wealth and social status from the revolutionary generation. Wang Shuo's own identity is important here: his parents were officials in the Chinese military. The unique political identity of Beijing is also important, since proximity to the central government means that second-generation revolutionaries abound in the city. The hooligans, then, represent a peculiar cross-section of Beijing, a counter-bourgeoisie of sorts, who construct their identity against what Maurice Meisner calls the "bureaucratic bourgeoisie"[3] and the high cultural elites among them, but who are nevertheless unwilling to be integrated into a much lower social stratum that occupies the same space: beggars, prostitutes, blue-collar workers, etc.

Wang Shuo's 1987 novells, "顽主 [*Wanzhu*]," has this cast of hooligan protagonists. The story is about a newly founded company called "3T," whose employees get paid to act out roles in their customers' lives: one plays the husband for a saleswoman on the brink of divorce; another takes a beating from a depressed, suicidal man; in the novella's set piece, the hustler-hooligans host a fake award ceremony for an amateur writer. "T," in the name of the company, is homophonous with the Chinese character "替 [*ti*]," or substitution. "Substitution," then, happens not only within the plot of the story, when characters substitute for someone else, but also happens on the level of the text itself, when pairs of homophones substitute for each other: "T" substituting for "substitution." The title of the novella, "*Wanzhu*," means in Beijing slang something like "master of the hooligans," the character "wan" connoting "wanton" or "frivolous." But this "顽 [*wan*]" is also homophonous with another "玩 [*wan*]," which means "play," and thus the title reads "the master of play." To illustrate that the story does seem to have the poststructuralist concept of "play" [*jeu*] or "freeplay" in mind,[4] it is worth examining a section of the novella, where the

3. See Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (The Free Press, 1999), in particular his section on "Bureaucratic Capitalism" on 473.
4. See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H.Richter St Martin's (2007), 915–26.

language begins to imitate a Joycean modernism. Yang Zhong, an operator for 3T, is struggling to maintain a conversation with a customer whom he calls a "modernist woman." After going through virtually every Western philosopher available to him (neglecting Nietzsche, with whom he is unfamiliar), Yang turns the topic to Freud:

> "You must really want to marry your mother."
>
> "No no. My father married my mother. I can't marry my mother first without having my father marry my mother. Doesn't work."
>
> "I'm not saying you're marrying your mom. Violates social norms. Nobody should marry their own mom. Incestuous. I'm saying that you want to marry your mom but can't because of your dad unless castrated useless because of moral ethics so you're in pain you're attracted to no one only want to marry your mom but can't because of your dad how am I repeating myself I can't explain it either it's just like this anyhow those foreign quote books says looking for a partner is really looking for your mom."
>
> "But my mom is blind in one eye."
>
> "If his [*sic*] mom is not blind in one eye he won't marry his mom to give birth to a younger brother or sister because before he can castrate his dad his dad will castrate him because his dad has eight buns for one meal and one whole kilogram of pork and works for the breeding station castrated tens of thousands of pigs slick with it no need for knife squeeze with his hands and the pair of balls comes out the Japanese all call him respectfully Talo Testicles."[5]

It is significant to note that this exchange happens "by an ice cream stand in a cinema with colored advertisements," and that Yang Zhong learns about Freud through a "foreign quote book"—reminiscent of the "Little Red Book" during the Cultural Revolution, whose proper name is *Chairman Mao's Quote*

5. Most citations of Wang Shuo are from 王朔文集 *[The collected writings of Wang Shuo]* (北京十月文艺出版社, 2016), epub version, except his novel *Playing for Thrills*. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

Book. The same format, in the new era, bears Freudian doctrines and is sold in mass-market editions as a fashionable commodity. The most important object of commodification, however, is Yang's language itself. Humor becomes commodity in the double sense that Yang is using his wit, albeit increasingly incoherent and running out of steam, to placate his customer, and that the reader of Wang Shuo's story, consuming the language, buys into and is captivated by this parody of modernism. But the unpunctuated torrent of language, in Wang Shuo, does not function as a stream of consciousness or an interior monologue, but is instead spoken as dialogue explicitly and performatively, yielding no insight, contrary to modernism, to the inner psyche of the characters. Indeed, a lack of insight into what the characters are thinking and feeling, coupled with such oversaturated rhetorical flourishes, characterizes most of Wang Shuo's hooligan novellas. What results from this is a distinct image of this "counter-bourgeoisie" in Beijing under market reform, psychologically hollow, repressed or impoverished, all the while bombarded with the latest commodities—ice creams, films, Freud, language—that a free market has to offer.

It is not an unreasonable hypothesis, finally, that Wang Shuo's commercial success depends on a growing readership intimate with the experience of living in a metropolis, a population that China's economic growth supplies. His faithfulness to the everyday idiom of Beijing is also admirably outside of history. The dialogue-driven stories read like the city's background chatter, such that a present-day reader of Wang Shuo, visiting Beijing for the first time, can hear the signature rhythm and cadence of Wang's characters the moment they step out of the train and climb into the backseat of a taxi. The all-encompassing commodification within these cities, further, destroys what is left of an ideological center—the socialism of a failed experiment—in the linguistic structure, thus making the freeplay of all signifiers possible.

The culmination of Wang Shuo's hooligan literature is 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*, a full-length novel he published in 1987. The book is an even more recognizable version of postmodernism. Wang Shuo himself notes that the novel is inspired by *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* , a novel by the French post-

modernist Patrick Modiano.[6] "Play," again, is in the title. The "thrills," meanwhile, come from the fact that the novel, like Modiano's original, is a work of crime fiction: the first-person narrator of "*Wanzhu*," Fang Yan, finds himself the main suspect for a murder mystery that happened a decade ago, and wanders around Beijing talking to his old friends or chasing faded photographs, so that he may conduct his own investigation and prove his innocence. The hooligan clan now confronts real stakes: the police have found a headless corpse, and whoever committed the murder is going to jail for the rest of their life; the protagonist, however, is amnesiac, and cannot remember what he was doing when the murder happened; the enigmatic days when his memory fails him, then, become a rupture in the narrative of his personal history, a hole in his otherwise stable identity. Finding out what really happened, both for resolving the murder case and for mending Fang Yan's identity construction, becomes rather urgent.

But "what really happened" is itself nebulous within the freeplay of signifiers. In the first chapter, Fang Yan mistakenly thinks that his gambling friends are still in his apartment, and decides to pull a prank on them by announcing the arrival of the police:

> I clomped upstairs and flung open the door. "Cops!" I shouted. "The cops are here. Drop everything and don't move!"
>
> "We're not moving. Come on in."
>
> Three men in civilian blue overcoats sat around the table. They looked friendly enough. "You're Fang Yan, right?" one of them asked. "We thought you'd never show up." He introduced himself and his companions as policemen.
>
> "How come you're shaking? No need for that."

6. "*Playing for Thrills* originates from the French author Modiano's *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, but [Wang Shuo] learned the superficial stuff—only how to stir up water but not how to let it settle—and therefore failed to round out the story later on." Shuo Wang, "我看王朔 [I read Wang Shuo]," in 王朔文集 *[The collected writings of Wang Shuo]* (北京十月文艺出版社, 2016).

I said I wasn't, and if I was, it was because I was wired, not scared.[7]

Fang Yan's joke about the cops, then, is somehow actualized into truth: the police are in Fang Yan's apartment to investigate his connection with the murder case. But the readers need to be convinced that the scene is actually happening: we certainly do not believe Fang Yan's exclamation, "The cops are here!"; the reply he receives, "We're not moving," could still be the response of his fellow gamblers; the visitors, in any case, are only wearing "civilian blue overcoats," not police uniforms; the narrator, cigarette-addled and absentminded as he is, does not say that the visitors are policemen, but rather that "[h]e introduced himself and his companions as policemen"—they could, in a novel filled with identity shifts and cover stories, still be playing games. What assures the readers that this encounter is not a game—that we are experiencing the effects of the real—is an unconscious symptom, introduced by an unattributed line of dialogue: "How come you're shaking?" Fang Yan, in other words, does not notice the symptom himself. When the lead policeman points it out, his response is an immediate repression: "I said I wasn't." We then immediately return to the realm of indeterminate freeplay, as Fang Yan regains his wits and resumes his roguish ways: "It was because I was wired, not scared." The readers are never told what Fang Yan is so scared of. The private gambling party is no substantial crime, and we later learn that the rest of the gambling circle are simply shooed out of the apartment, not arrested. Perhaps Fang Yan is guilty of something in his past, but even he does not know what he should be guilty of at this point in the story, since he still does not remember anything surrounding the murder. The symptomatic return of the real, then, only happens for a brief moment; the rhapsodic display of hooligan ingenuity forms the unbroken surface of this postmodern text.

A discussion of *Playing for Thrills* as Western-style postmodernism cannot be complete without considering Wang Shuo's memorable descriptions of architecture. Here, however, the readers are reminded that perhaps the novel

7. Wang, 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*, 6. The translation is by Howard Goldblatt, *Playing for Thrills: A Mystery* (William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997), 8. Subsequent references to page numbers will be shortened to, e.g., 6/8, referring to the Chinese original and the English translation, respectively.

cannot be considered as a self-same image of Western postmodernism. A scene set in a restaurant near the southern coast is particularly central to the novel, since it is the last place Fang Yan remembers seeing the victim of the murder:

> From the outside it looked like a great big garage, with a heavy wooden signboard—black letters on a gold background—over the entrance. By standing next to the concrete utility pole near the entrance we could see down several lanes laid out like spokes; at the end of a couple of them were streets wide enough for pedestrian and vehicular traffic. As many as a hundred metal tables with spotty green paint were arranged throughout the courtyard, which was surrounded by massive two-story colonial-type buildings, replete with etched concrete pillars, intricately carved banisters, and arched window. The stone facing had turned black under the assault of wind, rain, smoke, and grease. The restaurant itself was in an old-fashioned Chinese building, with carved beams and painted rafters and flying eaves and shuttered windows that boasted the handiwork of master woodcarvers: Flowers, birds, insects, and all manner of flora made the building look like a multitiered stage. I might be wrong, but I think it was deserted: no diners *and* no waiters.[8]

A restaurant with "no diners *and* no waiters" is certainly not a restaurant, but a space of postmodernism. Later in the novel, as Fang Yan tries to reconstruct the participants of this last meal, the space would indeed transform into "a multitiered stage," where characters take up shifting chairs around the table and exchange meaningful but indecipherable conversations, inferred or imagined by the protagonist. In the various dreamscapes of Fan Yan, the restaurant becomes increasingly labyrinthian, which reminds one of Jameson's directionless adventures in the Bonaventure Hotel. But if Wang Shuo's nameless restaurant is Jameson's Bonaventure Hotel, we should also note that one is in China, and the other the United States: "The restaurant itself was in an old-fashioned

8. Wang, 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*, 9/11.

Chinese building," adorned with Chinese traditional decorations. It is significant, indeed, that Wang Shuo's description seems to ask its readers to peel back the layers of architectural camouflage and discover a Chinese kernel within a Western shell: a few blocks away are "streets wide enough for pedestrian and vehicular traffic"—a fully modernized roadway; the outside looks like "a great big garage"; the courtyard, furthermore, is "surrounded by massive two-story colonial-type buildings." *Playing for Thrills*, in this sense, asks its readers not to consider it as an example of Western-style, metropolitan postmodernism, but instead to look for Chinese-specific contents enclosed within. How, then, might we understand this postmodernism, which takes Chinese cultural forms as its content?

5 "Run in front of your shadow."

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,[1] for its Western audience, is a recognizably postmodern film. The genre of martial arts, once evoking the slapstick humor of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton, is now beautifully refashioned in the style of arthouse cinema, collapsing high and low cultures. The plot is no longer haphazardly thrown together, only to give halfhearted transitions between spectacles of physical violence; rather, fight scenes seem deliberately delayed, spaced apart, and ease in and out of a slow and smooth-flowing narrative, developing characters and reinforcing themes: Jen, the rebellious daughter of Qing-dynasty aristocrats, defies gravity and takes off flying above the cloisters of imperial Beijing, whereas the dutiful and more traditionally-minded Yu Shu Lien, in pursuit of Jen, persistently drags her to the ground. The laws of physics are overruled by elegantly choreographed acrobatics and special effects: *The Matrix*[2] has Neo dodging bullets; *Crouching Tiger* has Yu Shu Lien catching arrows. Jen's love interest, Dark Cloud Lo, is the leader of a gangster group from Xinjiang, but the English subtitles sometimes gloss his hometown as "the West," as in "the frontier." The romantic backstory between Jen and Lo thus feels like an inserted sequence from a Hollywood Western: the prized daughter of city-dwellers, wandering in an uncharted desert, falls in love with a rogue cowboy on horseback. The Taklamakan Desert, where the sequence is shot, looks rather like Tatooine from *Star Wars*.[3] The fluctuating camaraderie and betrayal between Jen and her evil mentor, Jade Fox, reminds one of the relationship between a Sith Lord and his apprentice, and the scene where the

1. Ang Lee, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Sony Pictures, 2000).
2. Lana Wachowski and Lili Wachowski, *The Matrix* (Warner Bros, 1999).
3. George Lucas, *Star Wars: A New Hope* (20th Century Fox, 1977).

kung fu master Li Mu Bai blocks the poisonous needles with his sword resembles a Jedi knight deflecting blaster bolts with a lightsaber.[4] Jen's yearning for freedom, finally, makes her disillusioned with Li Mu Bai, her would-be mentor, or Yu Shu Lien, her sworn older sister, or Dark Cloud Lo. Her final leap off the cliff of Wudang, drifting ambiguously upwards through the clouds, perhaps symbolizes her mystical abandon, but also recalls the ending of Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*,[5] whose heroines drive off the cliff but remain suspended in midair in a final freeze frame. *Crouching Tiger*, then, is a postmodern mashup in the most recognizable ways.

But *Crouching Tiger* is also a national allegory, just by virtue of being a Chinese-language kung fu movie. We only have to retrace the cultural lineage of martial arts to understand this point: if a character's journey—first studying kung fu as an initiate, then overcoming all obstacles before finally becoming a self-sufficient master—is the construction of an individual identity, the journey of the genre itself, migrating from Hong Kong to Hollywood with the Chinese diaspora, has helped construct a national identity. The link between martial arts and Chinese nationalism was established around 1900, when an anti-imperialist, anti-foreign and anti-Christian movement called the Boxer Rebellion sought to drive out the Western colonizers with "Chinese boxing," or kung fu. The symbol has been gendered from the start: stereotypically feminine and enfeebled Asian men are revitalized by ancient Chinese practices and defeat the phallic power of Western rifles and cannons and so emerge remasculinized. To make a martial arts film, then, is to tell a story about China and Chinese manhood: We see hypermasculine Bruce Lee defeating one white man after another, or Jackie Chan's underdogs fighting repeatedly from their marginalized positions to the top. In *Crouching Tiger*, we see characters from all over the country coming together in the capital city of Beijing: Lo is from Xinjiang, China's westernmost province; Jen declares herself Manchurian, the ruling ethnicity of the Qing Dynasty, who came from the northern borderlands; Yu Shu Lien has a recognizably southern last name. The cast, moreover, covers an even greater geographical range: Chang Chen is from Taiwan; Chow Yun-

4. *Star Wars*, of course, is itself borrowing from Japanese samurai films.
5. Ridley Scott, *Thelma & Louise* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1991).

fat and Cheng Pei-pei are from Hong Kong; Michelle Yeoh is from Malaysia; Zhang Ziyi is from Chinese mainland. The "China" in Ang Lee's national allegory, in short, is the Chinese diaspora, called back home by Columbia Pictures and the PRC.

The film, in this sense, is doing something distinctive: it calls postmodernism to mind, but performs its postmodern operations on cultural contents that are distinctly Chinese—in this case, the genre of martial arts, which carries with it the ideology of a well-established national allegory. What, then, is the fate of national allegory in postmodernism? For one thing, China feels rather uncanny in *Crouching Tiger*: not many of its diverse cast are native Mandarin speakers, and however much their accents construct, for the present, a polyphonic image of the diaspora-in-unity, they also displace this period drama from the Qing Dynasty into some unfamiliar moment in a parallel history, eerily similar to our globalized present. This is perhaps part of the reason that the film's mainland audience have found it alienating and "inauthentic." But it is also not entirely clear what role martial arts is playing in this imaginary, pseudo-historical China, especially since everyone in the film seems eager to abandon it. The movie takes as its heroes a swordsman and a she-warrior, but their martial exploits are staged as digressions to a romance plot that the movie wants to make central: He cannot complete the final stage of his meditation because of his lingering romantic feelings towards her; his marriage proposal is further foiled when he encounters the murderer of his mentor, a blood feud that results, finally, in his death and an unconsummated love affair. Martial arts, further, is a structure of social morality that obstructs individual freedom. At one point, Jen, lamenting her arranged marriage, imagines an escape in the martial arts realm: "I wish I were like the heroes in the books I read. Like you [Yu Shu Lien] and Li Mu Bai. I guess I am happy to be marrying. But to be free to live my own life, to choose whom I love … That is true happiness." But Yu, repressing at this point her love for Li, dispenses with the illusion the martial arts books offer: "Fighters have rules too: friendship, trust, integrity … Without rules, we wouldn't survive long." The source text of these martial arts books, indeed, is the Chinese classical novel *Water Margins*, which tells the story of a gang of outlaws, living in the martial arts realm beyond the purview of

the imperial government, but who, in the end, eventually accept amnesty from the emperor and offer military service. *Crouching Tiger*, then, begins where a classical martial arts story ends: Li Mu Bai gives up his sword to a government official, symbolically terminating his wanderings at the margins of the society. It is in this sense that the film is also post-martial-arts: what happens when the knight errant becomes the master, when kung fu is a stricture rather than an emancipation, when there are no more rogue adventures to tell?

It would be insufficient, however, to say that kung fu in Ang Lee's film becomes mere background for a psychological drama and thereby loses its political valence. English-speaking commentators are in the habit of shortening the title to its first two words. Salman Rushdie, at one point, wrote a celebratory op-ed on *New York Times*, "Can Hollywood See the Tiger?" But the tiger is only crouching; the dragon is hidden.[6] Dragon, indeed, comes to the West part and parcel with martial arts as the cultural symbol of China, partially hidden under anglicized names: Bruce Lee's Chinese name means, literally, "little dragon,"[7] and Jackie Chan's means "becoming dragon." This is also how *Crouching Tiger* hides its dragon: the female protagonist is assigned the name "Jen" only in the English subtitles. Her Chinese name is "Yu Jiaolong," which, had the Mandarin-speaking audience not seen the ideograms, has two possible meanings with the same pronunciation: 蛟龙, literally, "scaly dragon," or 娇龙, "delicate dragon." Jen, and therefore China, is both masculine and feminine. One would remember that her adventure begins when she steals the male hero's sword, a phallus that seems particularly good at slicing every weapon it encounters in half. The legendary sword, in other words, is the ultimate phallus in its ability to castrate all other phalluses. Hence the dynamic among Jen, Li and Yu becomes the female version of an Oedipal complex: Li, the Symbolic Father and the original wielder of the phallus, insists on teaching Jen the doctrines of martial arts; Yu and Jen's antagonism over the sword is thus a rivalry

6. English does have the curious tendency of swapping out "tiger" for "dragon": in the 1990s, the four high-growth economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea are called "Four Asian Tigers" in English, but "Four Asian Little Dragons" in Chinese—"little dragon," or *xiaolong*, is Bruce Lee's first name.
7. He is also born, as commentators are eager to point out, in the year of the Dragon. The color patterns of his costume are yellow and red, the traditional Chinese colors for a dragon.

over the possession of the phallus, as Yu, watching Jen caressing the sword in the midst of their duel, cries out, "Don't touch it! That's Li Mu Bai's sword … Without the Green Destiny, you are nothing." The arrangement of this family also makes Jen the progeny of two older-generation warriors, the new China that is to inherit the cultural legacy of martial arts. What we learn, then, is that the transmission of this lineage has gone awry: Li and Yu cannot consummate their marriage, and do not have their own child; Jen refuses to become Li's student, and even when she ends up in Wudang Mountain, the sacred site of martial arts, she does not enter training and commits suicide instead. In a post-martial-arts story, there will be no more martial arts.

The image of China, then, becomes indeterminate. We have overlooked the fact that, despite the Oedipal tensions among the film's three protagonists, Yu agrees to be Jen's older sister, not Jen's mother. What would otherwise be the rebellion of a child against her parent, in the postmodern iteration, is transposed onto a sibling rivalry along the Imaginary axis. The rapturous tangle of the bamboo forest where Jen and Li fought resembles, in Deleuzian terms, a rhizome, and only Li can balance atop its crisscrossing lines, as the Symbolic Order that commands and regulates its schizophrenic fluctuations. But the Symbolic tends towards its self-destruction. Jade Fox, both the character and the actress, belongs to the same, earlier generation of martial arts warriors as Li Mu Bai. Their phallic powers cause their mutual demise: Li penetrates Jade Fox with his legendary sword, but Jade Fox also poisons him with her needle—not only a penetration, but also an insemination. Jen, or the China of our contemporary, can only tumble through the bamboo rhizome. At most, she can become a line of flight, fleeing into the river or falling through the Wudang clouds, suspended between life and death, liberation and annihilation. Her double gender, though, affords her one more comment on the state of the national allegory in postmodernism. Poisoned by her mentor, drenched and holding the stolen sword aloft, Jen asks the approaching Li Mu Bai, "Do you want the sword or me?" The question, further, is addressed to the global audience: is it the phallic, hypermasculine version of China that they want, or is it the feminine, Oriental and hypereroticized version? The film, then, anticipates both the triumphant celebration that the dragon of China returns

to Hollywood with martial arts, and the equally scathing allegations of self-Orientalism, reproducing an alluring image of China just as Westerners had imagined it. Neither response escapes the imbalanced power dynamic: however China is represented, it is for the global metropolis to consume, and the gender reversals no longer hold emancipatory potentials once they are ossified into a postmodern commodity.

To consider *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as an instance of Chinese postmodernism, then, is to consider Chinese postmodernism, not as the self-same Western cultural dominant, but as the same set of formal operations that can take as its content Chinese-specific genres. What we get, other than an expanded list of Chinese cultural products that can be considered postmodern, is an understanding of how these local genres manifest themselves within the postmodern force field, how the ideologies that the genres carry restructure themselves or wobble and break down. But in doing so, we have only confirmed, rather anticlimactically, what Jameson outlines in his essay on the import-substitution of third-world culture: previously indigenous genres specific to the third world, he argues, tend to converge with global trends of postmodernism. This is perhaps a frustrating conclusion, no less because it is drawn from a film that was, among Chinese viewers, well-received only in the economically advanced regions where Hollywood has tended to dominate anyway—Taiwan and Singapore. In a sense, taking indigenous genres as its content and transforming them—abstracting and ironizing them—is precisely what Western postmodernism does. Does this mean, therefore, that postmodernism with Chinese-specific content is the same postmodernism after all?

The author of *Playing for Thrills*, however, hates the genre of martial arts with a passion. First published in 中国青年报 *[China Youth Daily]* in 1999, one of Wang Shuo's best known essays criticizes the bestselling martial arts author 金庸 [Jin Yong].[8] At one point, he tries reluctantly to read one of Jin Yong's volumes, after repeated urgings from enthusiastic friends, but claims it was "an awful experience": "The plot was repetitive, the style longwinded; characters

8. For an English-language overview of the controversy, see John Christopher Hamm, "Jin Yong at the Century's End: Jin Yong and the Modern Chinese Martial Arts Novel," in *Paper Swordsmen* (University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 250–60.

start fighting anytime they see each other, and can't seem to talk through problems that can be explained away with a word or two." [9] The convergence with global postmodernism, Wang Shuo claims, only characterizes the decadent culture produced outside the Chinese mainland: "Friends who sell paintings have a concept: the Southeast Asian Circle of Cultural Vulgarity. The term refers to a Chinese bourgeois aesthetics that centers around Hong Kong and Taiwan and influences the Xinmatai region. In recent years, this kind of aesthetics has been encroaching on the mainland and gradually succeeding."[10] As a wholesale rejection of a regional culture, Wang Shuo's claims sound more like provocation than criticism. Regional stereotyping aside, it is odd to target Jin Yong for postmodern encroachment: his most active years of literary production were the 1960s, a generation earlier than Wang Shuo's; he enters Wang Shuo's "recent years" mostly via the globally successful film and television adaptations of his work. Then there is his strange allegation that all culture from Hong Kong and Taiwan is vulgar: Wang Shuo, as we know, is a popular writer; critics more commonly accuse *him* of vulgarity. Wang Shuo sounds rather like the target of his critique—and not just in his fiction, but in the pages of that critique itself: the "repetitive … long-winded" complaint against the genre reiterates the same points over several pages, and the belligerent author seems to enjoy starting fights without any discernable cause. Indeed, it is possible to consider Wang Shuo as a mirror image of Jin Yong, only from a different region: in the 1990s, the proliferation of martial arts productions in Hong Kong and Taiwan was paralleled only by the meteoric rise of Wang Shuo as a literary rock star in mainland China.

One possible reading of Wang Shuo's hooligan literature, then, is to understand it as the mainland's postmodern variation on the genre of martial arts. Geremie Barmé, for instance, notes the similarities between their protagonists:

9. Shuo Wang, "我看金庸 [I read Jin Yong]," in 王朔文集 *[The collected writings of Wang Shuo]* (北京十月文艺出版社, 2016). The title marks the article as among a series of Wang Shuo's denigrations of literary idols, past iterations of which include "我看鲁迅 [I read Lu Xun]" and "我看老舍 [I read Lao She]," but also "我看王朔 [I read Wang Shuo]," where he reserves the most scathing criticism for himself. It is entirely possible that his article on martial arts is tongue-in-cheek, and the overgeneralizations entirely self-conscious.
10. Ibid.

"One of the central values of the *liumang* [hooligans], as of the knight-errant, was that of mate-ship, the bonding of friends and associates that behooved a person to stick up for his allies."[11] The hooligans and the knight-errant both occupy a peculiar status in the Chinese social structure: the hooligans sandwiched between the political elites and the lower class, and the knight-errant forming a hierarchical and self-regulated martial arts realm distinct from both the imperial government and its commoner subjects. Barmé also points out that the fiercely combative dialogues between Wang Shuo's characters resembles a physical fight between masters of martial arts: "The knight-errant might delight in killing for personal satisfaction or honor, but the *liumang* gets his thrills by cutting someone to the quick."[12] Wang Shuo identifies the trope in martial arts novels where two characters always fight it out instead of talk it through; his own trope, then, is that the characters always fight it out *by* talking it through. This parallel is made explicit in *Playing for Thrills*: in an early chapter, Fang Yan interrogates his hooligan friend Xu Xun about the murder mystery, while a martial arts film is playing in the background. The fighting on screen ends just as Fang Yan realizes that he cannot secure his alibi for the murder: " 'The way you say it makes me the culprit.' The bitter fight between the monks and the long-hairs on the TV screen ended and peace returned. Shouts of battle were replaced by a Cantonese song, gloomy music to accompany the scrolling of film credits."[13]

But the parallel with martial arts novels only explains Wang Shuo's cast of characters and their interactions. *Playing for Thrills*, most importantly, is a work of crime fiction. We have previously taken Wang Shuo at his word by treating crime fiction as a Western import, but in doing so, we downplay the Chinese-specific itinerary of the genre. As early as the Song dynasty, folklores and oral traditions tell of murder mysteries and mythical occurrences that are later recorded and codified under the term "公案 [*gong'an*]," or court-case, fiction. Specimens from the time do not survive, but Ming-dynasty compilations of the genre show that the stories are highly iterative, with most follow-

11. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, 86.
12. Ibid., 85.
13. Wang, 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*, 44/55.

ing a three-part structure: some succinct background information about the characters involved, followed by the criminal act itself, which is examined and adjudicated in front of a benign and sometimes clairvoyant local magistrate.[14] Some of them, like Judge Bao, become household names and are repeatedly revived in later adaptations. Elements of martial arts were mixed into the genre in the Qing dynasty, and the savior judge often find knight-errant figures to protect them from retributions. In the twentieth century, however, the *gong'an* tradition faded into relative obscurity, as Western detective novels—the likes of Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie—began to be widely translated and read. Chinese mainland authors in the 1980s, emerging from the state's long prohibition on genre fiction, confront two historical precedents when they attempt their own crime fiction: the Chinese court-case tradition and Western whodunits.[15] These are the two options, then, that confront Wang Shuo when he writes *Playing for Thrills*.

It is easy to see how *Playing for Thrills* evokes American and British detective fiction: the protagonist Fang Yan wanders through the metropolis, conducts field investigations and questions potential witnesses. His cigarette-fueled living-room resembles that of a bored Sherlock Holmes conducting chemical experiments or meddling with drugs. All that the detective sees and hears are presented to the readers, so that we may accompany Fang Yan in piecing together, like an elaborate jigsaw puzzle, the murder mystery that happened years ago. But *Playing for Thrills* also takes as its content the genre of Chinese court-case fictions. Barmé's observation that Wang Shuo's fiction resembles martial arts novels is insightful, precisely because of the intermixing of martial arts with the *gong'an* tradition. The novel has a frame narrative that marks its genre. The end of the book has Fang Yan reading the book that the readers have just finished: "The protagonist of my book is a compulsive gambler who never does

14. The best examples for this structure are from the late-Ming *gong'an* collection "包公案," 中国古典文学, accessed April 27, 2020, http://www.zggdwx.com/baogong.html.
15. Jeffrey Kinkley, whose historical account of Chinese crime fiction we primarily follow here, gives the two subgenres different names: "There were two major genres or subgenres, here termed the 'whodunit with Chinese characteristics' and the 'penal law melodrama.'" Jeffrey Kinkley, *Chinese Justice, the Fiction: Law and Literature in Modern China* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 21.

an honest day's work. One day he finds himself suspected of murder. Forced to delve into his memories by calling on old friends, he produces a book of life that is missing seven of its pages."[16] The missing seven pages are the days of the murder missing in Fang Yan's memory. "The book of life" Fang Yan produces of his own accord, ignoring the policemen's advice when they first visited his apartment: " 'No fanciful sagas, now,' they warned. 'We're not here for a good time or to nurture new literary talent. Make up a story, and you'll wish you hadn't.' "[17] *Playing for Thrills*, in other words, is a "fanciful saga," and as Wang Shuo accuses of Jin Yong, "filled with fabrications." The word "演义 [fanciful saga]," indeed, evokes not only the Chinese classical novel 三国演义 *[Romance of the Three Kingdoms]*, considered to be another inspiration for later martial arts novels, but the Qing-dynasty *gong'an* novel 七侠五义 *[The Seven Heroes and Five Gallants]*, where the benevolent Judge Bao recruits knight-errant figures for help. The first half of the novel, where Fang Yan visits his childhood friends one by one, also has an iterative chapter structure: a sketch of the meeting place or some idle chitchat with the character under investigation, followed by an interrogation regarding their relationship to Gao Yang, the alleged victim of the murder, which finally gets incorporated into Fang Yan's dreamscape at the end of every chapter, where his mind is busy reconstructing the forgotten crime scene. This pattern falls under Wang Shuo's criticism of Jin Yong: "the plot is repetitive, the style longwinded"; but the repetitiveness comes from the tripartite structure of traditional *gong'an* stories: background—criminal act—verdict.

Playing for Thrills, then, is a synthesis of both the Western detective fictions and the Chinese *gong'an* tradition. But as a postmodern novel, it also negates both of its precursor genres at the level of content: amnesia persistently overtakes the narrative; Gao Yang turns out to be alive anyway; Feng Xiaogang, whose headless corpse the police discovered, committed suicide; the murder mystery is in fact an elaborate game among the hooligans that frames Fang Yan as the murderer; the recounting of the investigation stops abruptly, midway during Fang Yan's train journey, suspended, as in Simon's

16. Wang, 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*, 250/324.
17. Ibid., 17/20.

Conducting Bodies, between destinations. Traditional *gong'an* fictions, meanwhile, do not look for rational explanations for the how and why of the crime, as do their Western counterparts, but rather seek a restoration of justice—the good and lawful rewarded, often with cash prizes, and the morally decadent jailed or executed. No justice is restored, of course, in the inconclusive ending of *Playing for Thrills*. The hooligans return to their respective positions in life, seemingly undisturbed. Where the iterative *gong'an* structure calls for the benevolent magistrate's verdict, furthermore, Wang Shuo fills it in with Fang Yan's phantasmagoric dreams, persistently denying a coherent recapitulation of the court-case. In *Playing for Thrills*, it is not only that the judge is incompetent; we no longer find any stability or reassurance in the postmodern courthouse, adjudicating nothing. This, then, is Wang Shuo's own convergence, despite Chinese-specific content, with global postmodernism.

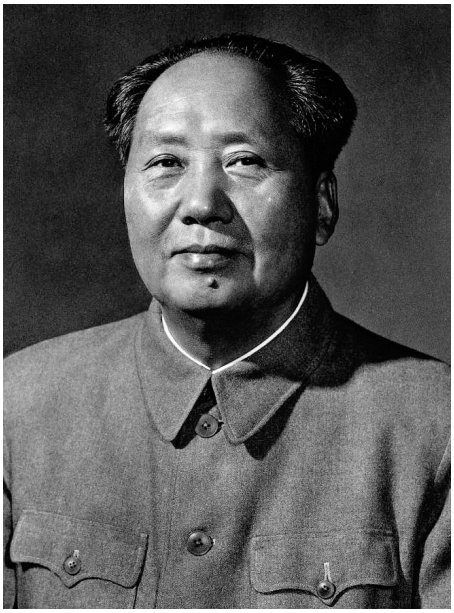

Figure 4: Mao Zedong

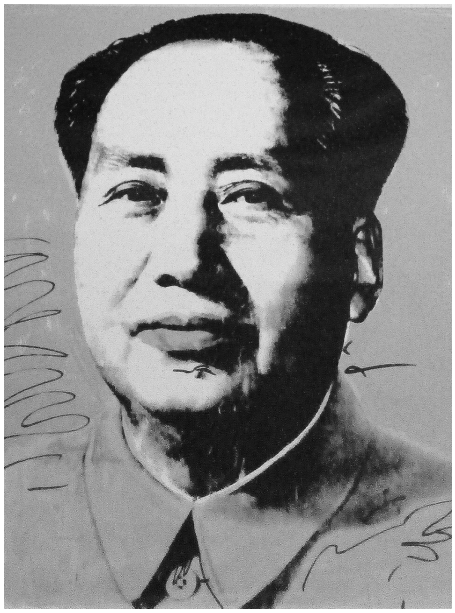

Figure 6: Andy Warhol, *Mao*

Figure 5: Luo Zhongli, *Father*

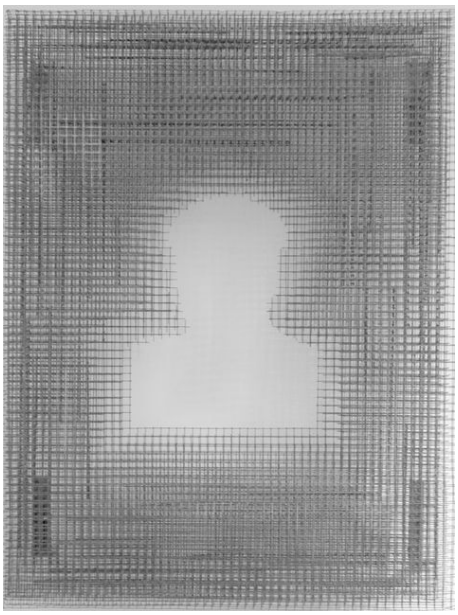

Figure 7: Zhang Hongtu, *Material Mao*

6 "The landscape is motorized."

But it is Andy Warhol, not Wang Shuo, who demonstrates most clearly that Chinese postmodernism cannot simply be postmodernism with Chinese content. Between 1972 and 1973, after Nixon's visit to China, Warhol created 199 silkscreen paintings of the country's leader, Mao Zedong. The portrait on the cover of *Quotations from Chairman Mao* is reproduced in brilliant splashes of color, the same techniques Warhol employed on the publicity stills of Marilyn Monroe, only transposed onto the iconic Chinese political leader. In 1972, China was still at the height of the Cultural Revolution. The sheer number of paintings in Warhol's Mao series is itself a commentary on the oversaturation of cultural icons in advanced capitalism, but no market-driven mass production can compare with the ubiquity of Mao's image in China. Commentators, whenever they touch on the topic, are eager to point out that "Mao's portrait is the single most reproduced portrait in human history," with an estimate of 2.2 billion copies produced by 1979.[1] Those unfamiliar with the social context might even conclude that China's Mao images were already postmodern—even before Warhol—as one might argue that Campbell's soup cans were already postmodern, even before Warhol blew them up to gallery proportions. The suggestion would not be entirely unconvincing: if every citizen on average owns three portraits of Mao, we are well beyond the loss of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction. What is left, if we are to imagine the Cultural Revolution from our own present, is a sense of depthlessness: "politics," the signifier that has lost its signified in the political turmoil, is henceforth noth-

1. Barbara Mittler, "Mao Wherever You Go: The Art of Repetition in Revolutionary China," in *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Harvard University Asian Center, 2012), 303.

ing but the gloaming on the surface of romanticized, hypermasculine worker images or the grandiose but empty slogans of Party propaganda.

This, however, would be a decontextualized reading of Chinese culture during the Cultural Revolution. Mao images became postmodern much later than when they were first popularized, and not only because of censorship: Chinese people at the time did believe that Mao was going to lead China into a more prosperous socialism, and often subscribed to the myth of the nation. However tumultuous the decade of the Cultural Revolution, China still had a stable Symbolic Order that positioned Mao as the all-knowing and ever-benevolent father figure—perhaps only temporarily deceived by the Gang of Four. Chinese culture in the 1980s, furthermore, did not immediately abandon all grand narratives about the nation's future, but rather seemed to witness an explosion of them. To understand a postmodernism that is specifically Chinese—that is, emerging from China's unique socio-historical context after the Cultural Revolution—one must confront this transition period that links the country's socialist heritage on the one end, and on the other end the more full-blown versions of postmodernism in the 1990s, where the legacy of socialism is rendered increasingly illegible.

We begin, then, with what looks like a revival of realism immediately after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Luo Zhongli's famous 1980 painting *Father*. Despite the title, the figure in the painting is not Luo Zhongli's own father. His prototype is a destitute cleaning worker that the artist encountered one rainy night outside a public restroom, and his facial features are composited from portrait photographs of many other peasants from across China. Just behind him we see the handles of a traditional Chinese rake. The "father," then, is symbolic: it is an abstraction of China's peasant class, who carried the weight of feeding and raising an entire nation on its shoulders, and in the process has become battered and old. The background looks like an infinite field of golden crops ripe for harvest. The old peasant crouches before what is presumably the products of his labor and, in respite, holds a bowl of tea in his hands. He has disproportionally large hands, wrinkled and veiny much like his face, and his index finger has been bandaged. There is something passionate in the brush strokes of the golden field, an eagerness in the peasant's half-opened

mouth, in his dark and sunken eyes that grapple the onlooker, that the painting does not exhibit the somber indifference of, for instance, Walker Evans's American realism, but recalls instead Van Gogh's famous peasant boots: "In them, there vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of ripening corn and its enigmatic self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field."[2] Part of the energy, perhaps, comes from an Oedipal tension. The portrait, indeed, is a counter-image of Mao: to focus on an anonymous peasant figure and claiming him as China's true father is to dislodge Mao from his mythical position as the revolutionary father. The sun is routinely used as a symbol for Mao, but here, in the relentless heat of the sun, the peasant, sweating profusely, can barely open his eyes. The deep wrinkles seem not only to carve into his face, but also insistently into the immaculate, almost deity-like surface of Mao's countless portraits, dismantling their monopoly on the nation's consciousness.

What, then, happens to the Symbolic Order after Mao? For one thing, the painting seems to give more than one answer. Luo Zhongli's *Father* is sometimes considered an instance of what is later called China's "root-seeking movement [寻根运动]," where writers and artists try to find China's missing cultural origin, disrupted by the political violence of the Cultural Revolution. The depiction of a peasant and his rake, then, is quite literally a return to the roots, that is, to agriculture, and to the oppressed and impoverished peasant class that once led to the success of the Chinese revolution. But Luo's focus is not on the peasant collective, directing our view, instead, to an individual, which coincides with early 1980s influxes of liberal humanism in China. The tea bowl, meanwhile, adorned with symbols from folk traditions, seems to call for a return to a kind of traditionalism—perhaps even to a feudal way of life, to indigenous myths and narratives that existed before socialism or liberalism.

One more alternative, however, comes from the genre of the painting. We have treated *Father* as a work of realism. Luo Zhongli, however, claims that he is inspired by the American *photo*realist artist and photographer Chuck Close and his massive human portraits. At first glance, the resemblance is largely superficial: perhaps Luo reuses the composition, the abstracted background,

2. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14.

and the portrait's glare at its onlookers, but certainly not the glossy, reflective finish characteristic of American photorealism, and particularly prominent on the glasses of Close's characters. But postmodernism's gleaming surface is carefully tucked away in Luo's painting as well: the tip of a blue ballpoint pen, in sharp contrast with the earthy colors of the painting, just above the old peasant's left ear. In *Father*, then, Van Gogh's peasant boots have the heels of Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes.* The implication, supposedly, is that the peasant is literate, a testament to the success of the Party's literacy campaigns. The presence of the ballpoint pen, though, functions like Roland Barthes's punctum, so that the viewers, once they notice it, are displaced from their quiet nostalgia towards an agrarian ideal. It is, in that sense, also a marker for a period shift: China, newly under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and undergoing market reform, is no longer the old agricultural country it once was. Commentary on the painting usually claims that the pen is behind the peasant's ear, which would probably be the more realistic placement. But its placement is more bizarre than that, since half of the pen is tucked under the turban, so that it looks rather uncomfortably thrust into the peasant's brain. It is perhaps significant that the artist never intended to include the pen, but was forced to do so by the judges of a painting competition he participated in, on the grounds that, without the pen, the peasant would not belong to Deng's New Era. Whether one wants it or not, postmodernism presents itself as a new and shiny ideology with the dawn of the market reforms.

The figure of Mao, displaced by the plethora of alternative ideologies at the turn of the decade, can now be invoked again to disassociate it further from its revolutionary myth. Luo Zhongli's *Father*, in this sense, is a precursor to a fatherless postmodernism. Zhang Hongtu, in his series *Material Mao*, cuts out silhouettes of the Chairman on a variety of materials. The obsessive return to Mao, then, can only reproduce his outline; the figure itself is consistently missing. Zhu Wei has Mao blindfolded by a piece of red cloth, evoking Cui Jian's censored but highly popular rock classic, "A Piece of Red Cloth"—Mao, then, becomes a rock star. Liu Anping's video, *Counterrevolutionary Slogan*, restages the defacement of Mao's portrait over the Tiananmen Square in 1989. The distorted image and the reenactment of Mao by the artist, though, occasion-

ally makes the Chairman look like his civil war rival, Chiang Kai-shek, thus causing an indeterminate fluctuation between their rival identities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Deng era also brings Warhol, finally, to the Chinese version of political pop: Yu Youhan combines Warhol's Monroe with Mao, whereas Zhang Hongtu puts the Chairman's face on a can of "Old-Fashioned Quaker Oats."[3] But Warhol's Mao never exerted the same commanding influence as China's Mao did in people's collective psyche. The historical context of the Cultural Revolution reveals that there was indeed a time when Mao's image was passionately produced as a symbol for the revolution, so that even a Chinese postmodernism that most resembles its Western counterpart has a strange unevenness: a sense that, despite the thoroughgoing pastiche, a desire for the revolution still returns, hauntingly, as the repressed thing.

Before we return to *Playing for Thrills*, we should clarify the relationship between the mythical-revolutionary figure of Mao and the hooligans of Wang Shuo: hooligan literature, indeed, is intimately bound to the historical context of Chinese socialism. The word "hooligan" appears in Mao's 1927 political treatise, titled "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan": "The right-wing of the Kuomintang says, 'The peasant movement is a movement of the [hooligans], of the lazy peasants.' "[4] Mao's key insight in the article, meanwhile, is that the peasant class is a vital force of the Chinese revolution: "the peasants have accomplished a revolutionary task which had been left unaccomplished for many years and have done an important job for the national revolution."[5] This unexpected genealogy of the term, then, means that hooligans, within the Chinese historical context, are at one point revolutionaries.[6] One might even say that Mao, born into a peasant family in Hunan where

3. Examples from this paragraph are mostly taken from Francesca Dal Lago, "Personal Mao: Reshaping an Icon in Contemporary Chinese Art," *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (1999): 46–59.
4. Zedong Mao, "湖南农民运动考察报告 [Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan]," in *Marxist Internet Archive*, accessed May 1, 2020, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_2.htm. The original translation renders "痞子 [*pizi*]" as "riffraff," but it is the same word in Wang Shuo's "痞子文学 [*pizi wenxue*]," which is most often translated as "hooligan literature."
5. Ibid.
6. This connection between hooligans and Maoist revolutionaries is made in Yibing Huang, "Wang Shuo: Playing for Thrills in the Era of Reforms, or, a Genealogy of the Present: From the Cultural Revolution to the Future," in *Contemporary Chinese Literature* (Palgrave

he conducted his investigation, is a hooligan himself: a young and passionate radical, occupying a marginal position in turbulent times, who nevertheless receives first-rate education[7] and aspires to transform the social order around him. Wang Shuo's hooligans are therefore post-Mao in this ambiguous sense: as second-generation revolutionaries, their unique identity offers them not only the privilege attached to the ruling class, but also a sense that they are the direct inheritors of the socialist ideal, and that they will be called upon by the nation to perform the duties of their previous generation. Here, then, is the question for Wang Shuo: What is the fate of the hooligans where there is no longer a revolution?

One answer we already know: the hooligans, much like the figure of Mao, found themselves thrown into the sea of capitalist innovations, unprecedented in a previously socialist state. In *Playing for Thrills*, when the gambling group is bragging in front of Fang Yan's house guests, one of them, Fat Man Wu, declares: "Our pal here's a writer … You must have read [Fang Yan's] stuff. The only book with a larger print run is *Selected Works of Chairman Mao*."[8] The scene is a classic enactment of hooligan-style seduction, which has the Freudian structure of a joke: Fat Man Wu, the joke-teller; Fang Yan, the listener; Li Jiangyun, the female spectator and the recipient of the hooligans' sexual aggressions. For the joke to work, Fang Yan must imagine himself participating in the scenario that the joke-teller describes, which is easy enough: as the frame narrative of the novel demonstrates, Fang Yan is indeed a writer, authoring *Playing for Thrills* itself. It is tempting to associate this imaginary Fang Yan as a bestselling author with Wang Shuo himself, all the more because, as the bragging continues, we are told that "he's made movies."[9] But the punchline of the joke connects Fang Yan with another popular author, since Fat Man Wu assigns him the pen name Qiong Yao—a bestselling martial arts author from Taiwan, whose works gained an enormous following in the mainland during the 1980s. The parallel between these popular authors and Mao trivializes the lat-

Macmillan, 2007), 63–104.

7. Mao attended the First Normal School of Changsha, then considered the best post-secondary institution in Hunan province.
8. Wang, 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*, 36/44-5.
9. Ibid., 37/45.

ter: his *Selected Works*, after the market reform, is just another commodity to be consumed, comparable to other popular culture items such as martial arts novels or *Playing for Thrills*. Fat Man Wu's joke also implies that reproducibility is the surefire way to fame, a claim which Warhol, for one, would wholeheartedly endorse: "The only book with a larger print run is *Selected Works of Chairman Mao*." The hooligans, then, no longer resemble Mao, their revolutionary forefather. In the Deng era, the figure of Mao, popularized and commodified, is dragged into the midst of a different type of hooligans, that of a group of playfully cynical consumerists. Wang Shuo, in an earlier novella, has one of his characters say, again in front of a female spectator, "No, [I have] nothing to do with hooligan; they said that I am a 'young reformer.' "[10] "Hooligan," then, has evolved its meaning from a revolutionary peasant to a participant of the market reforms, eager to earn sexual favors as much as financial profits.

But the hooligans in *Playing for Thrills* also try to retrieve their revolutionary fantasy, which can be seen in their collective reminiscence of Zhuo Yue. His figure persistently reappears in Fang Yan's reconstruction of the restaurant scene, even though Zhuo Yue could not have been at the restaurant: "He wasn't even alive then. A year before our discharge he was lost to us in a shipboard accident."[11] What we learn, then, is that Zhuo Yue was in the navy, a rarity at the time: the PLA led by Mao failed to take over the KMT-controlled Taiwan in 1949, because the newly founded People's Republic lacked a navy. Becoming a military hero was commonly heralded as the ultimate life accomplishment for those born before the market reforms, and for the second-generation revolutionaries the perfect way to imitate their fathers and defend the socialist legacy.[12] Even though most of the hooligans were enlisted at one point, Zhuo Yue's identity as a sailor patrolling the borders of the country marks him as

10. Shuo Wang, "浮出海面 [Emerging from the sea]," in 王朔文集 *[The collected writings of Wang Shuo]* (北京十月文艺出版社, 2016).
11. Wang, 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*, 10/12.
12. "The only thing worth fantasizing is a war between China and the Soviet Union. I enthusiastically hope to be swept into a world war, and do not doubt for a second that the iron fist of the People's Liberation Army will smash the war machines of the Soviet Union and the United States. I will then become a world-renowned war hero. For the liberation of all peoples of the world, I carry inescapable responsibilities." Shuo Wang, "动物凶猛 [Animal ferocious]," in 王朔文集 *[The collected writings of Wang Shuo]* (北京十月文艺出版社, 2016).

distinctive,[13] since, in Fang Yan's recollection, he is notably the only one at the table "[d]ressed in white navy trousers."[14]

No one, however, remembers what exactly happened to Zhuo Yue. He was killed during his time in the navy and therefore unrelated to the murder mystery, but a long stretch of unattributed dialogue among the hooligans blurs the circumstances of his death:

> "I really miss Zhuo Yue … Our pal was part of the mission, and got crushed by Sea Eagle Number 1."
>
> "What's that? I thought you said Zhuo Yue died by banging his head on a ship's ladder as he was running into the gallery to get some stuffed buns hot out of the oven."
>
> "That's bullshit. We fired a missile at a Taiwanese ship, and the damned thing did a one-eighty and came right back at us. Everybody ran, everybody but Zhuo Yue, who stood on deck and tried to catch the incoming missile. The dumb fuck, how can you catch a flying missile? It blew him to bits."
>
> "No no that's not what happened, that's the official explanation. What really happened is that they scheduled target practice for hundred-thirty-millimeter guns, and Zhuo Yue, who was on the tow ship, was afraid the gunners might be off target, so he ordered a ten-thousand-meter cable from the factory. Well, they aimed at the target tow, but the shell headed straight for the tow ship, off target by ten thousand meters, and blew our pal to bits. You should know, you fired the shot, and when you saw where it went you stood on the platform like an idiot."
>
> "Those were the Gang of Four days, after all, so you could say just about anything you wanted, right?"[15]

13. His name, "卓越 [Zhuo Yue]," means "distinction" in Chinese. It is unclear whether anyone else in Fang Yan's gang was in the navy, but this ambiguity is part of Wang Shuo's narrative strategy, as is discussed below.
14. Wang, 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*, 10/12.
15. Ibid., 199-200/253-4.

Zhuo Yue died three different ways: banging his head against the ladder in a moment of unbridled gluttony, blown into bits by a malfunctioning missile ("Sea Eagle Number 1"), and killed in a mishap during target exercise. The discussion sound less like a group of informants recounting the last moments of a lost friend, but instead like a competition for the most extravagant story. The ladder scenario is simply absurd, but it can also happen to anyone hungry for some fresh-from-the-oven buns, and not just a distinguished soldier in the navy. The navy, in any case, is also absurd, since it apparently fires boomerang missiles, and Zhuo Yue's mock-heroic attempt to catch one with his bare hands satirizes propagandist fantasies of the inhuman strength of PLA soldiers. The story about the target exercise goes into unnecessary details, specifying the caliber of the guns and the length of the tow cable, but these numbers merely call attention to the exaggerated nature of the narrative. What makes this scenario almost believable is how it discredits the missile story: "that's the official explanation." Zhuo Yue's death, then, is shrouded beneath a conspiracy theory, which involves government cover-ups for the incompetence of its military. We still do not know for certain if any of these scenarios is how Zhuo Yue died, an uncertainty generated by the freeplay of signifiers, by the emptying-out of the genre of traditional court-case fictions, and by the no longer viable revolutionary legacy. Hooligans, within their historical context, are amnesiac of the revolutionary ideal that they once inherited and that now only exist as a relentlessly ridiculed fantasy. The phantom existence of Zhuo Yue also feels like a diversion in *Playing for Thrills*, a side-plot that distracts its readers from pursuing the real murder mystery, the cause of which remains out of view. But this, too, is the effect of Wang Shuo's postmodernism: the dismantling of socialist revolution as the grand narrative of China makes the pursuit of the Real of history, by definition inaccessible, even more futile.

It is strange, then, that according to one participant of the dialogue, the collapse of all grand narratives is restricted to the Cultural Revolution: "Those *were* the Gang of Four days," which implies that in the present tense of the hooligans, people cannot "say just about anything" they want. But the opposite is true: people in the Cultural Revolution, afraid of political repercussions, were extremely afraid of saying anything out of line with the Party ideology.

It is not until after the Cultural Revolution that Fang Yan's gang of friends can fabricate identities and memories and manage to get away with them unscathed. These stories, then, are motivated by a different historical context, that of the market reform. In the ladder scenario, Zhuo Yue is overcome by a desire for material goods, "stuffed buns fresh off the stove." The missile is fired, further, when Zhuo Yue is on a failed mission to retrieve gold ingots from the sea: "The *Awa Maru* was refloated, but there were none of those gold ingots we need for our four modernizations, nothing but eight thousand Japanese cremation urns."[16] The fantastical scene is symbolic: "sea," during the Deng reforms, is a common metaphor for the newly opened capitalist market; the popular phrase "going to sea," for example, means "starting a private business." Zhuo Yue, in other words, died in the Chinese equivalent of a gold rush, sacrificing himself rather pointlessly for Deng's Four Modernizations. It seems, then, that we have found the murderer of Zhuo Yue: capitalism killed him. The murder, further, results not so much in the death of Zhuo Yue, but more in the hooligans' failure at retrieving their revolutionary legacy or reconstructing a narrative of their past. We are, in that sense, approaching the origin of their collective schizophrenia, the trauma of history. But what kind of postmodernism allows one to glimpse, however fleetingly, the moment of historical trauma?

16. Wang, 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*, 199/254.

7 "But better get used to dreams."

We have been rather focused on a metropolitan Chinese postmodernism: Wang Shuo, for example, is from Beijing, and Ang Lee, like many Chinese diasporic artists, lives in New York. Perhaps, then, in a country so unevenly developed as China, postmodernism might still be limited to the cities. Indeed, the Nobel laureate 莫言 [Mo Yan], publishing his first works around the same time as Wang Shuo, persistently represents a rural village in the Chinese northeast that could not look more different from Beijing. How, then, might Mo Yan's rural literature interact with Chinese postmodernism?

Mo Yan's most famous work, 红高粱家族 *[The Red Sorghum Family]*, describes the author's hometown, before the founding of the People's Republic and during the Second World War. Because of this, critics sometimes characterize it as a Lukáscian historical novel, where a middle-of-the-way protagonist, standing at the intersection of residual and emergent historical forces, witnesses the structural changes of a society.[1] If *The Red Sorghum Family* is a historical novel, however, it must be a strange historical novel indeed, since the town remains in virtual stasis despite undergoing the fall of the late Qing Dynasty, the Japanese invasion, the rule of the puppet government and the influx of Communist militia. One might even go so far as to claim that to show the town's socioeconomic stasis is precisely the point of Mo Yan's literary endeavor, to demonstrate, in other words, how the traditional mode of Chinese rural exis-

1. See, e.g., Jeffrey Kinkley, "Discomforts of Temporal Anomie," in *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 32–72.

tence has a vitality and resilience untouched by political change. This dynamic between a town embedded in history and a town outside history—in short, the contradiction between literary historicism and ahistoricism—is one of the most prominent features of Mo Yan's fiction, and allows him to jump from the revolutionary period in *The Red Sorghum Family* to the post-revolutionary period in his later 蛙 *[Frog]*, while maintaining a recognizably consistent image of his favorite town.

The question, nevertheless, is what the experience of the new and entrepreneurial China does to the memory of revolutionary China. The narrator gives an answer in the opening section of the book:

> I used to love the Northeast Gaomi Township with all my heart; I used to hate the Northeast Gaomi Township with all my heart. After I had grown up and endeavored to learn Marxism, I finally realized: the Northeast Gaomi Township is no doubt the most beautiful and the most hideous, the most transcendent and the most worldly, the most virgin and the most filthy, the most heroic and the most bastardly, the hardest-drinking and hardest-loving place on this planet.[2]

One wonders if the historical materialism of Marxism, which the narrator claims he "endeavored to learn," has had any impact on his impression of the Gaomi Township whatsoever.[3] The shift from before to after a Marxist education runs parallel to the shift from subjective judgment ("love … with all my heart … hate … with all my heart") to what sounds like an objective observation ("the Northeast Gaomi Township is no doubt …"). But the observation does not turn out, as Marxist materialism demands, to be the ontological status of material structures, but instead returns to an aesthetic judgment ("the most beautiful and the most hideous"). What is preserved from Marxism, then, is a vertiginous fluctuation between dialectical extremes, from one superlative to

2. Yan Mo, 红高粱家族 *[The Red Sorghum Family]* (当代世界出版社, 2003), 1-2. Translations adapted from Howard Goldblatt, *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China* (Penguin Books, 1993), 4. Subsequent references shortened to, e.g., 1-2/4.
3. It is perhaps indicative that Howard Goldblatt, in his English translation, neglects the narrator's comment on Marxism altogether.

another, so much so that the content of the superlatives rapidly cancels each other, leaving behind only the formal structure of the superlative itself: the Northeast Gaomi Township is the site of superlatives.[4] Once detached from material referents and operating on the level of form, the superlatives illuminate in turn that "Marxism," here, is in fact a stand-in for the "rupture" or "event" of the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution,[5] during which the narrator would have received his education. The intensity of the superlatives is then a blank parody of the high-flown grand narratives of Mao's China, either of the extravagant political propaganda for increased agricultural production, or in the revolutionary romanticism, the Party's ordained literary genre, extolling heroic figures larger than life.

The realist heritage of Chinese literature, now pushed to the extreme by Mo Yan, depicts revolutionary heroes in a different light. His characters not only escape the easy categorization of good versus evil ("the most heroic and the most bastardly"), but also uniformly suffer from, and demonstrate an almost pathological interest in, the most extreme forms of violence, bodily mutilation, torture and gore. The narrator often spends considerable effort describing the exact way that a bullet enters its victim's eye socket and leaves their skull, fracturing the entire face. The central motif of the story, the red sorghum, grows most ferociously in the Township into a "blood ocean," and is persistently associated with blood and violence, life and death. The first time one reads the description of the narrator's father walking through the sorghum field, one gets the imagery of "three hundred fellow villagers, their heads pillowed on their arms, their bodies strewn across the ground, their fresh blood oozing to irrigate the vast field of sorghum, mudding the soil into black earth that slows one's walk. The scent of sweetness is suffocating." The most heroic character, Uncle Arhat, was captured by the Japanese invaders and managed to escape briefly, crippling two of their mules. He then receives the goriest description of his

4. This fluctuation between superlatives is also evocative of Charles Dickens's famous opening lines for *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times …" Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), 1.
5. "Perhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that could be called an 'event' … [t]his event will have the exterior form of a rupture and a redoubling." Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," 915.

death, tied to the rack before the whole village, castrated and skinned alive—the narrator spares no graphic details. These extremely faithful descriptions of violence, then, form a realism in the superlative, a realism in excess.[6] The aesthetic experience of reading the novel—watching, for example, the body of a beloved character being ruthlessly torn apart—is something like the experience of a Kantian sublime, where the pleasure is motivated by the pain of comprehending and imagining that which lies beyond one's cognitive capacity. Mo Yan's fluctuation between superlatives does make one feel, reeling from the sea of red sorghum after closing the book, as if one had caught a glimpse of the incomprehensible: the atrocity of the Japanese invasion, the infinite vitality of the Gaomi Township, the essence of life and love itself.

It is possible that one recoils from this experience of the sublime, which breaks with the function of the historical novel altogether. Contemporary readers, alarmed by the sheer barbarity of bodily violence, might imagine the Gaomi Township as a place lost in the past, which has nothing to do with the "socialist new countryside" of the present: history is no longer relevant, since the material progress of the market reform has produced a more peaceful, more civilized society. But Mo Yan, in his typical dialectical fashion, has his narrator pronounce a Benjaminian sentiment: "With progress, I feel intimately the regression of our genes." That the present China, despite material progress, is nevertheless a genetic regression, might be explained by the fact that post-revolutionary China no longer has the vitality of life, the same passion for love, as the Gaomi Township in the height of an anti-imperial war had. But the past is not irrevocable, nor is the present severed from it, since under the condition of uneven development, residual forms of Mo Yan's town, in social structures or in desires and imaginations, still exert influence today. It is by bringing the vital image of the past back to the present, then, that Mo Yan commits the most extreme case of violence in his story, which, perhaps not surprisingly, is a violence against the story itself. The novel begins with a disturbing dedication:

6. *The Red Sorghum Family* was written before Mo Yan read Gabriel García Márquez, and so the literary genre of "magical realism" was not available to him then. Still, supernatural occurrences in other parts of the story suggest that Mo Yan, unknowingly, might already be enacting the genre.

> With this book I respectfully invoke the heroic, aggrieved souls wandering in the boundless bright-red sorghum fields of my hometown. As your unfilial son, I am prepared to carve out my heart, marinate it in soy sauce, have it minced and placed in three bowls, and lay it out as an offering in a field of sorghum. Partake of it in good health![7]

The cannibalistic image doubles its power once the reader realizes that they are themselves consuming the story, and thereby devouring the narrator's "heart"—his overflowing emotions, his faithfulness to depicting the real.[8] The consumption of literature by contemporary readers, then, is just as violent an act as the ostensibly bygone era of barbarism. The violence towards language, a kind of postmodernism itself, thus generates a dialectical critique of both the consumer culture of the post-market-reform China, and the superlatives of revolutionary China. Mo Yan creates a sublime from which one recoils, but the complacent gesture of recoiling, or retreating into a "progressive," "civilized" present, becomes just as questionable.

That Mo Yan's works can constitute a postmodernism of the countryside is surprising, since it lies outside the purview of metropolitan postmodernism—that this cultural formation should primarily exist in the economically advanced coastal cities, where it "lands on the Chinese shores and establishes beachhead positions."[9] Even apart from its realism-to-excess, The *Red Sorghum Family* is an orthodox postmodern text , since its narration dispenses with linear chronological order and intercuts multiple moments in the history of the village, a technique that even its film adaptation—the otherwise privileged artform of an image society—does not attempt to employ, and which produces a disorienting effect much like reading Western texts of postmodernism: "[W]e are given unnamed components of an unidentified segment of an action or a gesture, which must, like magnified fragments of a lost photograph, be put back together in

7. Mo, 红高粱家族 *[The Red Sorghum Family]*, 1/1. This dedication was originally the last paragraph when the first part of the novel was published as a standalone novella.
8. Tearing one's heart out, in traditional Chinese symbolism, means telling the truth.
9. Zhang, "Postmodernism and Postsocialist Society—Historicizing the Present," 407.

some recognizable form."[10] Mo Yan's fiction, then, does not show that under conditions of economic uneven development, postmodernism can only exist in cities and not in the countryside; rather, it serves as a case where a cultural hermeneutics of uneven development is necessary.

We have previously discussed how the ballpoint pen in Luo Zhongli's *Father* might be understood as an early glimmer of postmodernism, and how, probing the hooligans' rhetoric, we are able to piece together the historical trauma around Zhuo Yue's death. With the notion of an unevenly developed postmodernism, we might finally be able to solve the murder mystery behind the headless corpse in *Playing for Thrills*. It certainly helps, then, that in the last part of the novel, the supposed victim of the murder, Gao Yang, reemerges in a dream-like scene and engages in a conversation with Fang Yan. From this point on, the narration breaks into a reverse-chronological retelling of the hooligans' younger days in Guangzhou before the murder, and the section titles count down to the original moment of historical trauma—"Day Thirteen," "Day Twelve," and so on until "Day One." Even the frame narrator makes fun of it at the end of the book: "The author appears reluctant to lay down his pen, wanting to keep at his copious excesses and take this fellow all the way back to his mother's womb."[11]

For this reason, and despite all the suspense the novel generates around the unidentified corpse, the murder itself is surprisingly easy to solve. We only need to piece together the relevant plot points: the victim is not Gao Yang, but rather Feng Xiaogang, who comes to Guangzhou with borrowed money hoping to make a fortune. The money, however, is soon lavished by the rest of the hooligans on taxi rides, cigarettes and alcohol. The get-rich-quick scheme of his, with which he intends to impress his then romantic partner, Liu Yan, amounts to his own bankruptcy in the end. As their tour of southern China is running out of steam, the two Gao brothers and Feng Xiaogang decide to play one last elaborate prank on the rest of the hooligans, by constructing a murder mystery that will keep everyone guessing for the years to come. The murder plot, then, begins as Feng Xiaogang's planned suicide: he volunteered

10. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 142.
11. Wang, 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*, 250/324-5.

to serve as the dead body. Fang Yan's identity is stolen by Feng Xiaogang and Gao Yang, because they choose him to play the murderer, which prompts the police to come look for him when they discover the body ten years later. The prank, however, has gone awry after prolonged arguments among the participants, and Gao Yang kills Feng Xiaogang by the cliff of a mountain one foggy night. The altercation between them is never shown; even about the death of Feng Xiaogang the readers cannot be certain. Instead, we read that "clouds billowed then spouted and formed a massive human head looking majestically into the sky, showing the whites of its eyes."[12] This phantom figure, then, is the decapitated head of Feng Xiaogang returning "majestically" to haunt the world. His death scene is well-neigh cataclysmic, "as if the Creator were giving the mortals below a microcosmic view of the world. The snowcapped mountain crumbled, the alabaster pillars toppled, tigers and elephants and lions and leopards were swallowed up by smoke and dust."[13] It is, indeed, the moment of rupture when the wantonness of the hooligans transgresses into the realm of the Real: Fang Yan's friend group, after this point, never recovers its youthful enthusiasm; we find, at the beginning of the novel, a worn-out and cynical Fang Yan who refuses to believe in anything other than financial gain or casual sex.

But if the murder of Feng Xiaogang is originally a plan for his suicide, we have yet to explain how Gao Yang persuades him to be part of this elaborate murder mystery, how, in other words, his death drive is generated. Here, then, is Gao Yang's rational for Feng Xiaogang's suicide:

> You have our word that if the day comes when we never see you again, we will tell your story to everybody, whether they knew you or not, placing the blame for every unacknowledged misdeed on your head, telling how you robbed and plundered, what a playboy you were, and how you're now enjoying yourself in a better world. That way you'll become a folk hero, a legend embodying all of mankind's longings and fantasies … You have our word that for

12. Ibid., 189/240.
13. Ibid.

> the next ten years you'll live in the people's hearts. After that, it's out of our hands. You know how hard it is for our great revolutionary pioneers to live for more than ten years in the people's hearts, so you have nothing to complain about. Ten years is damned close to immortality, so you can reside down in the Nine Springs with a smile on your face.[14]

We know that, when Fang Yan gets the visit from the police, it has been roughly ten years since Feng Xiaogang's death, which means that Feng Xiaogang is indeed immortalized. But when Wang Shuo first published the novel in 1987, it has also been nearly ten years since the beginning of the market reform. The way Feng Xiaogang is immortalized, further, is through narratives. Gao Yang's soliloquy, in this sense, is a catalogue of the narrative forms available in the Chinese culture during the first decade of the market reform. Feng Xiaogang is to "become a folk hero," residing "down in the Nine Springs" and "enjoying [himself] in a better world." If he is to be the protagonist of a folk legend "embodying all of mankind's longings and fantasies," though, the myth of his death will become the missing cultural origin that the root-seeking movement in the early 1980s desperately look for. Different from the stoic traditionalism of the root-seeking movement, however, the hooligans are going to describe Feng Xiaogang as the rogue anti-hero, "telling how [he] robbed and plundered," ambiguous as to whether he is a benevolent knight-errant figure from the martial arts genre or the evil mastermind in a crime fiction. But when it comes to living "in people's hearts" for the next decade, and out-performing the lifespan of "our great revolutionary pioneers," Gao Yang is speaking in yet another register—the recognizable rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution. One would also note that performing one's death as revolutionary martyrdom is the favorite game of the hooligans in their childhood: "Some of us were killers, the others were the police … Torture lay in store for the killers when they were caught, and still we all fought to be the killers, because … after they were caught, they could put on a real show. They were the stars, the ones who

14. Wang, 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*, 179-180/227.

made the game."[15] Feng Xiaogang's death drive is therefore also a desire to restage a sacrifice for the revolution in an age when the revolution no longer exists. This, then, is the meaning of the novel's title, *Playing for Thrills*, which Feng Xiaogang uses, earlier in this scene, to justify his wish for suicide:[16] the thrills that come with the hooligan's play, at this point of their trajectory, is the vital and subversive energy of their revolutionary heritage.

But Feng Xiaogang dies a nameless death, and never gets to reenact any martyrdom of his fantasies. It seems, further, that Gao Yang no longer believes in the narratives that he invokes himself. The image of "our great revolutionary pioneers" only serves to excite Feng Xiaogang, but Gao Yang speaks in thoroughgoing irony. For Gao Yang the murderer, then, the revolution has already transpired, and the historical trauma is in an even earlier moment, for which the cataclysmic death of Feng Xiaogang is only the reverberation. This original moment of trauma, appropriately, occurs on Day One, the last to be recounted in the reverse-chronological sequence:

> "Ignore them," Gao Yang said to Gao Jin. "They've got their heads in the clouds. Give them a couple of days here, and just watch them change. What good is money? Lots of good. There are two kinds of people who don't know the value of money: Those who are born with it and those who have never tasted its joys. Pretending you're high-principled nobility is stupid. Where will you find China's nobility? They're in power now, but thirty years ago they were a bunch of cowherds. Close down the national treasury, and they'll all be out on the streets begging."[17]

Here, not only Feng Xiaogang's head is in the clouds; all the rest of the hooligans, apart from the Gao brothers, are, which implies that Feng Xiaogang's death is due to his anachronistic revolutionary idealism. Anyone who has high principles is stupid; the new era calls for political realism. "China's nobility," "a bunch of cowherds" "thirty years ago" but now the ruling class, refers

15. Ibid., 136/174.
16. "Well, I think [jumping into the lake] is a good idea. What rule? We are playing for thrills." ibid., 178/224.
17. Ibid., 248/322.

to the first-generation revolutionaries, the parents of the hooligans, who, Gao Yang suggests, are merely feeding off of "the national treasury." The privatization of national industries during the first decade of the market reform, indeed, destroys the stable career of many members of the Party bureaucracy. The hooligans, in effect, have been thrown onto the streets by the market reform—Fang Yan's gang arrives in Guangzhou with borrowed money, swindling and stealing their way into hotels and restaurants. The trauma of the hooligans in postmodernism, then, is brought about by capitalism: "What good is money? Lots of good." It is only appropriate that Gao Yang's capitalist manifesto is followed by the image of an apocalypse, flames blazing against the immaculate surface of a postmodern skyscraper, a reenactment or prefiguration of a revolution:

> The high-rise was now a towering inferno, an enormous pine-bright torch. In the radiant sunlight the flames were the reddest of reds. A crowd has formed in front of the building; fire crews threw up ladders; silvery jets of water arched toward the rooftop; firemen's helmets glinted in the sun. Water sprayed everywhere, glittery and crystalline, frames leaped into the red and the black sky, burning fiercely, a wanton display of might high up; rooftops, some flat, others tapered, were bathed in serenely stupefying sunbeams.[18]

18. Wang, 玩的就是心跳 *[Playing for Thrills]*, 249/323.

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