China, one might remember, is inserted into Jameson’s inaugural account of postmodernism in a curious way, namely, as the title of a poem that begins: “We live on the third world from the Sun. Number Three. Nobody tells us what to do” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 29). Jameson, analyzing the poem, almost seems poised to give preliminary remarks on the theoretical project of Chinese postmodernism itself: “[The poem] does seem to capture … the signal event … of a collectivity which has become a new ‘subject of history,’ and which, after the long subjugation of feudalism and imperialism, again speaks in its own voice, for itself, as if for the first time” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 29). It is unfortunate, however, that this poem called “China” is written by a San-Francisco-based poet, whose inspiration has nothing to do with the really existing China, but rather comes from “strolling through Chinatown” and looking through “a book of photographs whose idiogrammatic captions remained a dead letter to him” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 30). China, here, is at least three times displaced: one sees it through the displacement of Chinatown, through a book of photographs in Chinatown, through a poem about the photographs, and perhaps also through Jameson’s interpretation of the poem. In Sheldon Lu’s terms, “China” in this account is the “absent object,” a signifier detached from its signified, and whose helpless detachment is the real objective of Jameson’s analysis in the first place. (Lu 114)

But for scholars of Chinese contemporary culture, whose interest is still piqued by however displaced a reference, an investigation of Chinese postmodernism surely does not stop there. Indeed, such a theoretical project should, “after the long subjugation of feudalism and imperialism, again [speak] in its own voice, for itself.” What does it mean, then, to theorize a Chinese postmodernism? What does it look like, and how might it differ from Jameson’s primarily Euro-American vision of postmodernity?

Something strange must have happened in the discussions of these questions, then, that makes an onlooker, after reading the staunchest defenders of Chinese postmodernism, wonder if there is a postmodernism in China after all. One after another, the arguments begin to read like bad cases of cognitive dissonance. Wang Ning, for example, argues in his essay, “The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity,” that “[postmodernism] can never become a cultural dominant in Asian or Third World countries … Postmodernism will remain secondary, no matter how influential it is at the moment” (N. Wang 36). What Wang calls “primary,” by contrast, is “mainstream culture and the dominant ideology,” which remains unidentified in his essay. (N. Wang 36) The logical next step for Wang would be to extend his argument by broaching what “mainstream culture” and “dominant ideology” is, demonstrate how the secondary position of postmodernism can be subsumed under the primary paradigm, and forego the postmodernism framework itself. Instead, Wang nonetheless concludes that “a mapping of postmodernity is both historically necessary and culturally significant” (N. Wang 22). His workaround for theorizing Chinese postmodernism’s historical necessity and cultural significance is to identify 8 forms of global postmodernism “within the scope of literature and culture alone,” and 6 versions of postmodernism in contemporary Chinese culture, with the confusing addendum, first, that “some of these versions of postmodernity have already been relegated to the past and will be of significance only to researchers of literary and cultural history,” and, second, that the 6 versions of Chinese postmodernism are “unlike the eight forms of postmodernism I have described in accordance with international criteria.” (N. Wang 28) It is unclear what the so-called “international criteria” is, especially since Jameson’s postmodernism is not exactly a universally accepted paradigm. And pedagogical functions aside, one cannot help getting a sense of the Sisyphean task of keeping a list of Chinese postmodernisms whose items are constantly being “relegated to the past,” not to mention the bewildering idea of playing combinatorics with the mismatched international and Chinese versions of postmodernism so that one might even begin to explore how or why they misalign. To be sure, the scholarly endeavor of tracking down and summarizing different positions of postmodernism is immense and certainly deserves applause, but postmodernism as a “cultural logic,” in this process of enumeration, becomes so fractured and unwieldy that it is no longer operable, and certainly not operable to Jameson’s theoretical goals.

The apparent incoherence between a postmodernism that looks so different in China that one might as well abandon the project, and the almost heroic insistence that there is nevertheless a postmodernism in China, does not come from Wang’s own argumentative deficiency, but reflects instead a field of study where virtually everyone is plagued by the same conundrum. Ping-hui Liao, investigating postmodernism in Taiwan, notes that “if the postmodernism craze in Taiwan sprang up like ‘bamboo shoots after the rain,’ it soon declined and virtually disappeared … It was as if the age of post-postmodernism had arrived overnight—even before postmodernism took root in Taiwan,” but then concludes, somehow, that “the postmodern condition in Taiwan is far from over.” (Liao 70, 85) The certainty in his conclusion, at least, should give one pause—what happened to the apparent evidence to the contrary, for instance, the delightful beer house in Taipei called “Postmodernism Graveyard”? (Liao 70) Sheldon Lu, similarly, argues that “the avant-garde is a distinct feature of Chinese postmodernism,” despite his knowledge that “postmodernism as we know it in the West implies the ‘silence of the avant-garde’” (Lu 115). Jameson, I should note, does not quite argue that the avant-garde no longer exists in postmodernism, but believes that the institutional status of deconstruction and New Historicism preserves them “where they are no longer supposed to exist” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* xvi). But then Lu’s gesture of promoting the avant-garde to an emblem of Chinese postmodernism amounts to almost a similar institutionalizing gesture, a problem which merits more comments below. Wang Fengzhen, writing “Third-World Writers in the Era of Postmodernism,” paradoxically picks “a recent prize-winning movie” *The Accused Stubborn Old Uncle* as an example of postmodern culture, which, it turns out, represents an almost feudal configuration of the Chinese rural social structure. (F. Wang 54) This makes Jonathan Arac wonder “if this point of Wang’s is a quiet disagreement with Fredric Jameson,” who argues that postmodernism can only occur after modernization is complete, and certainly after feudal modes of production are cleared away. (Arac 139)

Arac’s response to the 1995 Dalian conference, then, can be understood as a genuine frustration towards this kind of cognitive dissonance: “Has global capital fully penetrated an economy in which in 1994 I could not buy an international airline ticket with an American Express card but only in cash in Chinese currency? … Assessing the situation as presented by the essays, and I have no competence to underwrite any claim to see beyond them, *postmodernity is not the condition of China*” (Arac 144; emphasis added). That was, of course, 1994, but an *American* Express card, if I may report on my anecdotal experience in 2019, is still only accepted in tourist-filled hotels and restaurants, which in turn makes this anecdote of Arac’s sound too much like the new marketing pitch for U.S. based, transnational corporations such as Visa or Mastercard. For a more recent report from a visiting U.S. academic, though, J. Hillis Miller notes in 2014 that “Chinese young people are not reading the Chinese *Classic of Poetry*, or *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, or the works of Lu Xun, any more than American young people [are] reading Shakespeare, Jane Austen, or Toni Morrison” (Miller 190). This account would seem to draw a parallel between Chinese youth and their American, postmodern counterpart, except that Lu Xun writes in the tradition of critical realism under the intellectual milieu of the May Fourth Movement of 1919, and according to the orthodox periodizing scheme, before one get to postmodernism from realism, there is still the unaccounted-for intermediary of modernism in between. Scholars trying to theorize Chinese postmodernism from Jameson’s interpretation of Lu Xun in “Third-World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism,” then, is not only theorizing the wrong period, but also skips over another period entirely.

At this point, the “absent object” of China in Jameson’s postmodernism essay reads like an allegory for subsequent attempts to theorize Chinese postmodernism. The risk that “Chinese postmodernism” becomes an empty signifier detached from reality looms ever larger over this debate. It would even be fine to say “postmodernity is not the condition of China,” and leave the matter at that, had Arac not added a much more polemic claim after his pessimistic pronouncement: “if not China, then not the world” (Arac 144). The mismatch of China and postmodernism, indeed, has implications on Jameson’s theoretical project as a whole: what does it mean to theorize postmodernism as the “cultural dominant” of our current historical era, if it does not exist in China?

Perhaps it is fortunate that Arac is overstating the case. The theoretical problem of Chinese culture since the 1980s, after all, does not fall into the simple binary of a full-blown adoption of global postmodernism on the one hand, and the non-existence of postmodernism on the other. The ingenuities of the cultural theorists of this period, indeed, lie in the different intermediary positions between these poles. Virtually nobody is interested in theorizing a global postmodernism in China wholesale; instead, by arranging their theories of culture at different scales, each of them offers a distinct picture of Chinese culture on every geographical level while coexisting with rival or even contradictory theories with surprising coherence. A tiered conception of Chinese culture—both the fact that the theorists offer frameworks on different geographic scales, and the phenomenon that Chinese culture does exhibit different characteristics depending on where the observer looks—does not arise out of its own accord, but reflects a common material condition, namely, the condition of uneven development. The term, as it comes down to the present form from Marx and Trotsky, gains its precise socioeconomic definition today from David Harvey, who promotes it to one of the inherent mechanisms with which capitalism overcomes its boom-and-bust cycles. Harvey argues that capitalism, because of its periodic fluctuations between supply and demand, creates immense amounts of surplus value in more developed geographic regions, which then needs 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, “the means to achieve that end entail the production of new geographic differentiations which form new spatial barriers to be overcome” (Harvey 417). Thus capitalism depends on the unevenness in development between geographic regions to maintain its stability and expand its production.

When one adapts Harvey’s conception of uneven development to the Chinese case, one finds that uneven development is enshrined on the level of national economic policy, so much so that Kyle A. Jaros calls it “uneven developmentalism” instead. The Chinese market reform, indeed, is accompanied by Deng Xiaoping’s famous dictum: “Let some of us get rich first, so that those who get rich first can help others get rich later.” Those who “got rich first,” further, reside predominantly in the 14 special economic zones, most of which are located along the coast or close to Hong Kong, to take advantage of their proximity to international trade routes and attract foreign capital. Jaros further argues that “[s]ince the 1950s, policymakers have worked to foster economic ‘growth poles’”—regions that are significantly more developed than its neighboring areas—while making “the distributing of cities and industry across the country more ‘rational,’” mirroring the process that Harvey identifies, where less developed regions struggle to draw even with the “growth poles” (Jaros 27). Deng’s “spatial policy,” then, is a particularly well-executed employment of uneven development in the Chinese context, harnessing the dynamics it creates to propel market reform forward. The result, other than a massive growth in Chinese GDP, is “yawning socioeconomic gaps” between cities and countrysides, and between coastal regions and the inlands. (Jaros 52) These extreme cases of unevenness in material distribution makes it possible for a host of mutually contradicting modes of production to coexist in China since the 1980s, where special economic zones such as Shanghai and Guangzhou would have skyscrapers and supermarkets, and where rural countrysides would remain relatively undisturbed in their residual socialist, or sometimes even feudal, economic structures.

Convincingly, then, Chinese theorists have argued that the material condition of post-market-reform China is, instead of uniformly postmodern, the condition of uneven development. If one believes that the material structure determines or, at least, exerts profound influence on cultural formations, then it seems important to ask what the cultural logic of uneven development is. Haomin Gong, in his book *Uneven Modernity*, identifies acutely three critical paradigms, all of which take uneven development as their premise: “‘alternative modernities,’ ‘Chinese postmodernity,’ and ‘Postsocialism’” (4). Reordered on a scale from local to global cultural formations, it appears that “Chinese postmodernity,” which I will in subsequent arguments call “local postmodernism,” seeks to describe the presence of global postmodern trends in limited locales such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, but does not explain—and, at times, highlights its own incapacity to explain—the culture of regions outside these overdeveloped metropolises. “Postsocialism,” a term coined by Arif Dirlik to characterize a *national* culture precariously defining itself against its socialist heritage and a full-scale adoption of liberal capitalism. “Alternative modernities” seems to be the closest formulation to explore the global valence of Chinese culture, accepting, on the one hand, China’s increasing integration into global capitalism, and proposing that Chinese modernities, with its specific conditions, can offer alternatives for Western notions of modernity. Insofar as I am nevertheless interested in theorizing global postmodernism as the defining feature of post-market-reform China, it is necessary, for now, to discuss each of these three paradigms in turn, and catalog the cultural trends they illuminate or do not illuminate.

It is not hard to imagine how a local postmodernism might exist in China. Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong gives 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” (6). The implication that these cities are “enclaves,” bearing little to no relationship with the rural inlands, also means that the cultural production of metropolitan cities tend to develop asynchronously from the rest of China, resembling mainstream forms of global literature and art while inspiring little resonance in the rural population. This formulation of local postmodernism, then, fits perfectly the famous Beijing-based writer Wang Shuo 王朔, who, in addition to occupying the top of the bestseller list with his novels for years on end, is also a prolific screenwriter, adapts multiple novels of his own into films and TV shows of global acclaim, and even establishes the legal precedent in 1992 for collecting royalty interest from his publishing house rather than selling his works upfront. It has become routine, especially in Western academia, to associate Wang Shuo’s name with “hooligan literature.” 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 represents a new generation of Chinese city dwellers, usually in their twenties and predominantly men, who no longer have the stability of career that the Party offered them in the previous generation, and therefore roam the streets wantonly, participate in gang activities, or engage in one-off, questionable business ventures. On the other hand, these young men are able to roam the streets without a job while not falling into abject poverty, because they are, more often than not, the offspring of high-ranking Party cadres, and therefore inherits considerable wealth and the social status of the revolutionary generation. Wang Shuo’s own identity becomes important here: his parents were military officials of the PLA, and he grew up—like many of his characters did—in military compounds. The unique political identity of Beijing, the capital of the People’s Republic, is also important, since proximity to the central government means that there are clusters of second-generation revolutionaries, whose economic and cultural activities carve out their own space in the cityscape. “Hooligan literature,” then, represents a peculiar cross-section of Beijing, a petite bourgeoisie of sorts, which constructs its identity against what Maurice Meisner calls the “bereaucratic bourgeoisie” 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.

One of Wang Shuo’s earlier novellas published in 1987, “Wan Zhu 顽主,” has this same cast of hooligan protagonists. The title poses a problem of translation, which merits a detour. The story is about a newly founded company called “3T,” whose motto is “help others’ difficulties, relieve others’ boredom, and take the blame for others’ mistakes.”[[1]](#footnote-2) “T,” here, is homophonous with the Chinese character “ti 替,” or “substitute,” and what the protagonists actually do in the company is to get paid for substituting for other roles in their customers’ lives: acting out the husband for a saleswoman on the brink of divorce, taking a beating from a depressed, suicidal man, and, rendered most extravagantly, hosting a fake award ceremony for an amateur writer. “Substitution,” it is already clear, happens not only within the plot of the story, when characters pretend to be someone else, but also happens on the level of the text itself, between pairs of homophones: “T” substituting for “substitution.” The English rendition of the title usually follows the story’s 1988 film adaptation and reads “The Operators,” which is woefully inadequate. “Wan Zhu,” in common Beijing slang, means something like “master of the hooligans,” the character “wan” denoting meanings such as “wanton” or “frivolous.” But this “wan 顽” is also homophonous with another “wan 玩,” 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, it is worth examining a section of the novella, where the 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 has a blind eye.”

“If his [*sic*] mom does not have a blind 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.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Much can be gleaned from this hilarious rhetorical flourish, but for the present purpose 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 Book*. The same format, in the new era, bears Freudian doctrines and is sold in mass market copies as fashionable commodities. The most important object of commodification, however, is Yang’s language itself, which is used to appease a customer who previously consumed much of the modernist discourse, and now seeks similar validation from Yang. Humor becomes commodity in the double sense that Yang is using his witticism, albeit increasingly incoherent and running out of steam, to woo his customer, and that the reader of Wang Shuo’s story, consuming the language, buys into and is captivated by this parody of modernism—until, that is, Yang produces a quite violent imagery of castration, whereby the parody begins to read like pastiche. But the most significant break with modernism is that 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 Joyce, of the inner psyche of the characters. Indeed, a lack of insight into what the characters are thinking and feeling, coupled with an oversaturation of rhetorical display, characterizes the majority of Wang Shuo’s novellas written about this same host of hooligans. What results from this is a distinct image of the petite bourgeoisie in Beijing under market reform, psychologically hollow, repressed or impoverished, all the while being bombarded with the latest commodities—ice creams, films, Freud, language—that a free market has to offer.

“Wan Zhu,” like many other stories of Wang Shuo, is driven almost exclusively by dialogues. Especially when the narrator drops out all denotations for who is saying what, much like some of the dizzying dialogues in Henry James’ novels, the story reads like running theater productions (“play”)[[3]](#footnote-4) detached from time and located merely in space, as if the readers are listening in, voyeuristically, to the background chatter of the city. The theatrical quality of Wang Shuo’s fiction lends itself, naturally, to numerous box office miracles in the nascent Chinese film industry. His faithfulness to the everyday speak of Beijing is also admirably timeless, such that a present-day reader of Wang Shuo, visiting Beijing for the first time, can hear the signature rhythm and cadence of of Wang’s characters the moment they step out of the train and climb into the backseat of a taxi. 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. 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.

It would seem, then, that the metropolitan postmodernism that Wang Shuo represents is limited to cities. Like “enclaves of a global consumer society,” local postmodernism of Wang Shuo’s variety does not exert much influence in the Chinese countryside. Indeed, the Nobel laureate Mo Yan 莫言, publishing his first works around the same time as Wang Shuo, persistently represents a rural village in the Chinese northeaast that could not look more different from Beijing. But before examining his most famous work, *The Red Sorghum Family* 红高粱家族, it is worth giving a few preliminary remarks. First, it is easy to fall into an anachronism when discussing Mo Yan’s rural landscape, since, in *The Red Sorghum Family*, he does not describe the unevenly developed countryside during the market reform, but rather his own hometown, experienced by his father’s generation, before the founding of the People’s Republic and during the Second World War. Because of this, second, *The Red Sorghum Family* is sometimes characterized by critics as an example of the 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. 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 existence has a vitality and resilience well beyond the influence of 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 *Frog*, while maintaining a recognizably self-same image of his favorite town.

The question, nevertheless, is what the experience of a post-market-reform China does to the memory of a 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 have grown up and endeavored to learn Marxism, I finally realized: the Northeast Gaomi Township is no doubt the most beautiful and the most ugly, 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.

One wonders if the historical materialism of Marxism, which the narrator claims he “endeavored to learn,” has any impact on his impression of the Gaomi Township whatsoever. 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 ugly”).[[4]](#footnote-5) What is preserved from Marxism, then, is a vertiginous fluctuation between dialectical extremes, from one superlative to 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. Once detached from material referents and operating on the level of aesthetics or even linguistics, the superlatives illuminates in turn that “Marxism,” here, is in fact a stand-in for the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution, during which the narrator would have received his education. The intensity of the superlatives is then a blank parody of the highfalutin 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. It is quite impossible to be a casual reader of Mo Yan for this reason: his characters not only escapes 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 most gory description of his 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, is a realism in the superlative, a realism in excess.[[5]](#footnote-6) The aesthetic experience of reading the novel—watching, for example, the body of one’s 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 leave one feel, reeling from the sea of red sorghums after closing the book, as if they have 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: “Thank god we have none of the problems of the past!”, meaning that the material progress of the market reform has produced a more peaceful, more civilized society. Mo Yan, meanwhile, 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 hight of an anti-imperial war had. But either of these historical ruptures of an irrevocable past severed from the present can be mended through the concept of uneven development, if one realizes that residual forms of Mo Yan’s town, in social structures or in desires and imaginations, still exerts influence today and might be reawakened in the future. It is by bringing the vital image of the past back to the present, in any case, 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 first section of the novel ends with a disturbing dedication:

With this text I summon all the wandering spirits above the endless red sorghum field of my hometown. I am your unfaithful son. I am willing to tear out my heart marinated in soy sauce, dice it into three bowls, and place it in the sorghum field as an offering. Please partake of it! Partake of it!

The cannibalistic image doubles its power once the reader realizes that they are themselves consuming the story, and thereby the narrator’s “heart”—his overflowing emotions, his faithfulness to depicting the real.[[6]](#footnote-7) 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,[[7]](#footnote-8) thus generates a dialectical critique of the consumer culture of the post-market-reform China and the superlatives of the 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.

In both Wang Shuo and Mo Yan’s fictions, uneven development functions as a constitutive force within the texts themselves. In Wang Shuo, the distinctive social position of the holligans, in between the unevenly developed upper and lower classes, depends on a commercial culture while critiquing it at the same time. In Mo Yan, the unevenly developed rural township constructs a history so vibrant that one wants to both reawaken it in the present and abandon it in the past. Between the texts, however, the condition of uneven development also exists, and prevents “local postmodernism” from capturing the complex interactions between China’s socialist tradition and its capitalist influx. This, then, makes Arif Dirlik’s term “postsocialism” immediately attractive. In the 1980s, further, a literary movement called “xungen literature 寻根文学,” most commonly translated as “root-seeking literature,” considers this very problem of reconciling a socialist heritage within the market reform. I hope to argue, nevertheless, that the “root” of the “root-seeking literature” is more complicated than one might otherwise suspect, as is already evident in the source text of the term, Ah Cheng’s 1984 novella “Chess King.”

One of the early commentators of the novella observes that, despite the story being set during the cultural revolution, “one of the most surprising things about it is the almost complete absence of plot elements dealing with the abuses so widely suffered during [the Cultural Revolution]” (Huters 391). This is terribly mistaken, but in an indicative way: plot points about the Cultural Revolution are everywhere, but everywhere repressed.

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1. “替人解难替人解闷替人受过。” The motto alliterates on the character “ti 替,” hence the company name “3T.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Translations in this chapter, unless otherwise noted, are mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. This meaning of “play” as a theater production is not available in the Chinese “顽” or “玩”, although Wang Shuo does know English. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. It is perhaps indicative that Howard Goldblatt, translating the book to English, neglects the narrator’s comment on Marxism altogether. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *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. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Tearing one’s heart out, in traditional Chinese symbolism, means telling the truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. This overhasty suggestion might not be so outrageous if one considers “magical realism” to be a literary genre that emerges within postmodernism, employing postmodernist devices while resuscitating a sense of history. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)