Authorship in Experimental Chinese Fiction

Yunzhong Shu
Queens College, CUNY

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The advent of experimental fiction in the 1980s' China is generally hailed as the arrival of postmodernism on the Chinese literary scene. As Chinese experimentalists—Ma Yuan, Hong Feng, Yu Hua, Su Tong, Ge Fei, Ye Zhaoyan, Sun Ganlu and others—jettison the legacy of realism and embrace a wide range of influences from the contemporary Western world, their fiction does take on some characteristics, such as antiform, play, anarchy, performance, combination, anti-narrative, indeterminacy, etc., that are listed as postmodernist by Ihab Hassan, one of the leading exponents of postmodernism. Such a paradigm shift apparently signals a marked transformation in the conception of fiction and, on the part of Chinese experimentalists, an effort to bring their works au courant with the contemporary literary and cultural trends of the West.

Have Chinese experimentalists really carried out a postmodernist program in their fiction? At first glance it seems there is no easy answer to the question because, as a multifaceted international phenomenon, postmodernism itself still awaits a conclusive definition. Having said that, we should not, however, be deterred from probing into the relationship between Chinese experimental fiction and what is taken as postmodernism in the West. According to Hans Bertens’ survey of postmodernism, in spite of the differences in their interpretations, Western critics agree on one central characteristic of postmodernism: a radical epistemological and ontological doubt. James Mellard, who prefers the term "late-phase modernism" over "postmodernism," explains the centrality of this ontological uncertainty in postmodernist writing with the following remarks:

...the situation of the late-phase modernist author
has come to this: not only can he not believe in the world "out there," physical or historical, a belief available to be given up by the early modernists; neither can he believe any longer in most of those modernist authorities posited for the world "in here," the interior worlds of man's intellect or imagination.  

If we turn to contemporary Chinese experimental fiction, we will find that although it is characterized by a strong doubt about the world "out there," a doubt that often ends with the suppression of the external world, it rarely raises any ontological question about the world "in here." Here I am not talking about the representation of the Self as a cultural hero, the lack of which leads some critics to conclude that the Self is absent in Chinese experimental fiction. Rather, I am referring to the experimentalists' strong self-confidence in their imagination. In Chinese experimental fiction the writer's imagination, if not his intellect, is celebrated as vital energy that refuses to be understood or controlled and its crucial generative function in the process of fiction writing is simply taken as a given. The obvious contrast between the celebratory mode in Chinese experimental fiction and silence and decreation, two features of Western postmodernism on Ihab Hassan's list, in my view, has to be understood in terms of the cultural context in China in the 1980s.

The germination of Chinese experimental fiction took place simultaneously with the promotion of subjectivity by leading intellectuals like Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu that aimed at a recovery of creative subjectivity and a recovery of literature itself. Situated in a cultural milieu concerned with the reconstruction of the individual, experimental fiction shared, not surprisingly, certain views on the function of subjectivity with other advocates of individualism. One might even argue that since it followed the theme of self-affirmation, self-liberation and self-realization in its own ways, its celebration of imagination was part of a general movement towards emancipation in post-Mao
China.

In what follows I will give an analysis of the concept of authorship in contemporary Chinese experimental fiction. Given the experimentalists' indifference to the external world on the one hand and their preoccupation with imagination on the other, the concept of authorship in experimental fiction has much more to do with writing fiction than with anything else. It is necessarily related to such issues as the creative process of fiction writing, the textuality and conventionality of fiction and the author's relationship with literary precedents and traditions. In order to understand these issues I will focus on a group of texts, selected from major Chinese literary journals and recent anthologies of experimental fiction, in which the experimentalists display either themselves or their alter egos, usually personalized writers or editors, as the creative sources of the texts. Since the writers of these works invariably foreground their creative function, if not always the fictionality of the resultant works, I will call these examples self-conscious fiction. My intention, however, is not so much to get to a definitive evaluation of the phenomenon of self-conscious fiction as to point out its certain imperceptions and paradoxes, because to me such an analysis will contribute more to our understanding of Chinese experimental fiction as a trend torn between its domestic agenda and its foreign influences.

Any discussion of contemporary Chinese self-conscious fiction, it seems to me, should start with Ma Yuan because he first employs the device of autocommentary in his fiction and, in so doing, introduces an awareness of fiction as a discursive game. In his 1984 story "The Goddess of the Lhasa River" (Lasahe nushen), the first example of contemporary Chinese self-conscious fiction, the author/narrator inserts numerous hypotheses to show his story is a verbal construct that can potentially be structured in other ways. However, as he provides a verifiable environment for his story about an uneventful group picnic on the bank of the Lhasa River, including such details as Lhasa's longitude, latitude, altitude and the familiar scene of animal carcasses scattered on the river bank, and as he makes sure that his...
hypotheses about his characters and their actions fall within the bounds of possibility, we realize that his verbal construct becomes a virtual reality and, as such, bears a close relationship with the world outside the text. Here for the first time Chinese self-conscious fiction shows its uneasy dealings with the extratextual world. While emphasizing his story as a verbal construct, Ma Yuan is unable to cut the umbilical cord that links his fiction to the external world because he is aware that he himself is located in and limited by such a world, himself being an editor living and working in Tibet. What we see, in effect, is a tacit acknowledgment of the author's existential experience in real life.

In spite of all his awareness of the textual maneuvers in the composition of his story, Ma Yuan shows an imperception as to what constitutes the author in self-conscious fiction. Instead of probing into the conception of the author, he simply conflates it with his biographical self and takes it for granted. His 1986 story "Fabrication" (Xugou) begins with the following words:

I am the Han Chinese person named Ma Yuan. I write fiction. I like to roam around in my imagination like a heavenly horse. My stories are always more or less sensational. I tell stories in Chinese; Chinese characters are said to form a system furthest away from language itself. I am proud that I write in Chinese.⁶

Aside from the tongue-in-cheek bragging, it is apparent that Ma Yuan views himself and his activity as an author as irreducible facts of life that exist regardless of the fiction he produces. However, as he recounts his imaginary observatory trip to a Tibetan leper colony to gather materials for his fiction, we realize that his writing self, not his biographical self, only exists in his text. The writing self's contact with the extratextual world, which in the story includes encounters that inspire him, is at most haphazard and tangential and for the rest of the time he lives in a world conjured up by his imagination. As he conflates Ma Yuan

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the author, who exists in his text from moment to moment by dint of imagination, with Ma Yuan the man living in the extratextual world, Ma Yuan obviously collapses two different realms of experience.

Interestingly, in terms of self-conception, Ma Yuan differs significantly from Jorge Luis Borges, to whom he admits his fiction is indebted. For Borges, the self is an elusive concept constantly moving and losing itself between the image of the writer and his biographical self, as he describes in his well-known essay "Borges and I." Meanwhile, what the writer writes belongs to speech or literary tradition. In contrast, Ma Yuan reifies the self not only by linking it to its physical existence but also by displaying the traces of its effort to come to grips with formal devices in writing fiction. Instead of erasing his individual ego from his fiction, Ma Yuan strengthens it to a certain extent as an originating agency. The difference between Ma Yuan and Borges, in my view, again should be understood in connection with the cultural movement in China in the 1980s that called for the affirmation of the self. By emphasizing the self as the source of creativity, Ma Yuan expresses the yearnings of the movement in a formalist manner.

The consolidation of the self results in the merger of the "I" narrator with the implied author or even the real author to various degrees in Chinese self-conscious fiction. Ma Yuan and Hong Feng tend to name the narrators in their stories with the authors' real names. Ye Zhaoyan tends to incorporate experiences from his life into his stories. Even Sun Ganlu, the most visionary writer of the self-conscious group, merges his "I" narrator with the author by constantly reminding the reader that the latter's inspiration is the only source for fiction. In short, we are frequently reminded of the authors' existence outside their texts. Instead of taking the "I" narrator/author as an impromptu scriptive function, Chinese self-conscious writers tend to regard the author as a unitary and autonomous center of consciousness. In so doing they stop short of exploring its transience, inconsistencies, tensions and conflicts. As a phenomenological project that goes behind the
words to the center of consciousness, Ma Yuan's "Fabrication," by weaving snippets of hearsay and casual reading into a story through imagination, illustrates the generative power of such a center.

Regarding themselves as unified, autonomous entities, Chinese self-conscious writers tend to attribute their fiction directly to their imagination, purposely in defiance of the mediation of realist narrative codes and conventions, which appear suspect in that they falsify both fiction and the external world by making them intelligible. The revolt against realist codes and conventions results in a rupture of the social vision that had been consolidated for decades in China by realism. While alerting the reader to his subjugation by realist conventions, Chinese experimentalists often reveal an elitist attitude and, consequently, the communication between the author and the reader is often characterized by the dominance of the author rather than by the interaction and cooperation between the two, as is generally the case in Western postmodernist fiction. Putting this subversive practice into its cultural context in the 1980s, we may view experimental fiction as an attempt at both self-liberation for the author and discursive enlightenment for the reader.

As a consequence of the experimentalists' revolt against realist conventions, logical continuity and stable chronology that underlie the plot and characterization of realist fiction give way to incoherence and meaninglessness in experimental fiction. Narrative devices such as protagonist, antagonist, suspense, surprise and unity of action are all dispensed with, replaced by elements of uncertainty and indeterminacy. The impression of chaos and non-sense is further enhanced by the choice of trivia in private life as the subject matter for much of contemporary Chinese self-conscious fiction. In the meantime, the self-conscious writer tries to search for a language more fluid, transitory and more reflexive of the processes of fiction writing and life. Such a search for an immediate language, however, is ultimately doomed because the self-conscious writer himself is highly mediated by the discursive and cultural forces in his environment and,
however hard he tries to present the reader with the immediacy of his fiction and his world, his version can only be an already mediated version.

A case in point is Ye Zhaoyan's dealings with different generic codes. While most Chinese self-conscious writers set out to wreck literary codes by scrambling the constitutive codes of different genres, Ye Zhaoyan prefers to undermine the codes within certain generic boundaries. As a versatile writer with a master's degree in Chinese literature, he certainly is keenly aware of the constitutive codes in various literary genres. To expose the conventionality of the codes, broadly and unsuspiciously shared by readers, he often intentionally makes his stories fall short of readers' generic expectations. Such an example can be found in his 1989 story "The End" (Zuihou). As a story that turns out to be based on nothing but a writer's choice, from a court announcement, of a soon-to-be-executed murderer to be his main character, "The End" is a burlesque of crime fiction in general. The burlesque is present in the exposure of fabrication by the writer who, as a character in the story, spends much of his time reading and consulting with a psychologist to establish a motive for the murder. More importantly, it can be seen in how the writer presents the murder, the murderer on the run and the police's attempt to arrest him. While the murder at the beginning of the story is depicted as a crime without a motive, the physical abuse the murderer suffers, while on the run, from a goose peddler for falling in love with the peddler's lover is certainly an attempt to establish a motive for another murder. Yet being cowardly and physically weak, the murderer this time simply lets his abuser walk away. Thus we see a motive without a crime. Finally we are shown that the police's attempt to arrest the murderer fails. With all these deflections and disappointments, Ye Zhaoyan apparently intends to debunk the constitutive codes of crime fiction, perhaps the most cogent literary advocacy of intelligence and rationality.

In his 1988 story titled "Peach Blossom Spring" (Taohuayuan ji), a story that implicitly refers to the ancient poet Tao Qian's (376-427 A.D.) famous story with the same title as its contrast,
Ye Zhaoyan deflates the reader's expectations for the image of utopia. Unlike the utopia in Tao Qian's story, the locale of Ye's story, a tourist resort in a remote region, teems with shoddy hotels and fraudulent deals. It is a mirror image of an equally flawed outside world, a world familiar to the contemporary Chinese reader since it presents many problems the reader faces in his daily life. The reality effect is strengthened by the authenticating voice of the "I" narrator, the only voice in the story. As the "I" narrator, an editor sent by his publishing house to negotiate a deal for a potential best-seller, confesses his misdeeds and mocks himself, his voice comes across as reliable and credible. While discrediting the image of utopia, Ye Zhaoyan seems to suggest that the opposite, dystopia, is true, or at least truer, to reality. However, this implied truth claim reveals not only his entrapment by mimesis but also his unawareness of the operation of the generic codes of dystopia in his story. As he uglifies the tourist resort into an unpleasant opposite of utopia without any redeeming quality, he presents an imaginary world as polarized as Tao Qian's utopia.

Ye Zhaoyan's novella "A Death for Love" (Xunqingji) deals with the issue of generic codes—this time the generic codes in love stories—from yet another perspective. Like many of his other self-conscious works, including "The End," we have discussed, this novella is composed of two narrative lines—a young man's suicide after his girlfriend's death and an investigation into the incident by the "I" narrator, a newspaper reporter. The love story enclosed in the novella, presumably written by the "I" narrator, is definitely derived from imagination since the real story had happened in the privacy of two lovers now both dead. The course of the investigation highlights the inaccessibility of the lovers' private experience even to their closest friend. So in composing his story the "I" narrator has to depend on cliches like "love at first sight." The numerous discussions the "I" narrator has had with the lovers' closest friend on such technical issues as the point of view and the beginning sentences for their collaborative story about the lovers further indicate the narrative manip-
ulation involved in the production of the story. With the introduction of the frame story about the "I" narrator's investigation and writing, the resultant love story is shown to be imagined, manipulated and streamlined. However, while lifting the suspension of disbelief from the enclosed love story by exposing its frame, Ye Zhaoyan suppresses a larger frame that encloses his story about the "I" narrator. Instead of exposing himself as a fabricator like the "I" narrator, he conceals the traces of his own fabrication and appears to be a recorder of a concretized, credible character. Consequently the frame story is naturalized in a realist manner as he problematizes the enclosed love story. After all Ye Zhaoyan does not seem to realize that, no matter how he exposes a narrative frame, he is always entrapped in a bigger one.

Ye Zhaoyan's subversion of different sets of generic codes eventually leads to what we might call non-genre fiction. An example can be seen in his more recent novella "Concerning Toilets" (Guanyu cesuo, 1991). Inspired by a female co-worker's frustrated search for a public toilet in Shanghai seventeen years ago, its significant consequences on the life of the woman, and the persecution the author's family had suffered during the Cultural Revolution, the novella incarnates the credo that fiction should arise from the author's deepest feelings, a lesson Ye Zhaoyan first learned from a senior writer Gao Xiaosheng, as he tells us in the novella. Thus conceived, the novella is characterized by an experiential and emotional immediacy derived directly from the author's real life. In order to maintain his story's close ties with his life and personal opinions at every step, Ye Zhaoyan ignores structural considerations for his novella, freely using personal anecdotes and citations from ancient classics and newspaper clippings to support his idea about the importance of the toilet. However, it is precisely through the large number of citations that he reveals that his personal feelings about perhaps the most private human activity are culturally mediated and textualized. Consequently, his work becomes quite literally what Roland Barthes means by a "text": "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture." Ye Zhaoyan might have suc-
ceeded in breaking through generic codes by introducing non-narrative quotations into his fiction, but he certainly cannot rid himself of the ultimate function of generic codes--defining and ordering the world according to certain cultural criteria.

As can be seen in Ye Zhaoyan's case, the Chinese self-conscious writer emphasizes his autonomy by distancing himself from conventional narrative codes and, at the same time, cannot help being ensnared in what he sets out to thwart. The dilemma he faces, it seems to me, stems from his failure to realize that ultimately his cherished autonomy is just an illusion. As a writer, he is not engaged in free invention but in bricolage, reassembling elements of traditional narratives. On a broader scale, he is caught, as a social, political and cultural subject, within external conventions of human mentality of the times that contest each other for dominance. Instead of being a unitary agency solely responsible for the production of his fiction, he turns out to be a reflector of historical changes and crises, a meeting ground for the exchange of different discourses.

To prove the argument, let us turn to "Let the Women Solve the Puzzle" (Qing luren caimi, 1988), a self-conscious story written by Sun Ganlu, arguably the most imaginative phantasmagorist in contemporary China. Unconcerned with the external world, Sun Ganlu's stories purport to show the fecundity of imagination by tracing its surprising flights into the labyrinths of dreams and fantasies. However, no matter how outlandish the dreams and fantasies seem to be, they are always shown to have gushed out of the selfsame fountainhead, an authorial "I" that endeavors to stake out an "internal space." In "Let the Women Solve the Puzzle," a reflexive story about narration, the "I" narrator achieves a prominence by being the author of a story who frequently steps in and out of the fictional world he creates. Instead of fictionalizing him, however, Sun Ganlu gives him a spatio-temporal dimension and turns him into a personalized figure by providing accounts of his environment, his daily routine and sporadic readings. The effort to individualize and identify the narrator/author naturalizes not only him but also his writing,
which is by and large his modus vivendi in the story. Since the narrator/author is assumed to be an entity that accounts for his performance, no further question is asked about the external cultural and discursive forces that impinge on him and contribute to his writing.

There are plenty of such external forces at work in the story. As a writer who reads, among other writers, Jane Austen, Angus Wilson, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Jorge Luis Borges, the "I" narrator/author learns how to channel his impressions from the Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni and takes one of the main characters of his story out of George Orwell's fiction. Crisscrossed by all these "foreign" influences, the identity of the narrator/author begins to disintegrate. Instead of remaining an originating subject, he becomes an intertextual nexus through which diverse cultural forces, conventions and discourses come into contact and give rise to new combinations. In other words, just as he celebrates the creative power of his imagination, Sun Ganlu shows, wittingly or unwittingly, that this power is premised on a cultural repertoire of patterns and devices. Caught in such a cultural network, the author is deprived of his genius and originality and becomes, in Michel Foucault's words, a certain functional principle by which "one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction."14

The cultural network that envelops the author is in turn situated in history. In the case of contemporary Chinese literature, it means that we should view the literary repertoire of the experimentalists in connection with, among other things, the government policy changes, economic reforms and cultural osmosis in the 1980s that made the repertoire possible. Unfortunately, by regarding his imagination as the autonomous, originary source for his fiction, the Chinese experimentalist shows a resistance to situating himself at a historical moment. His ideology of individualism is ultimately idealistic in that it isolates imagination from its historical context. Interestingly, in Chinese experimental fic-
tion the weakening of historicity takes place not so much through its schizophrenic structure, as Fredric Jameson has noted in Western postmodernism,\textsuperscript{15} as through its apotheosis of imagination as a transhistorical power. So in the "historical" fiction by Ge Fei and Su Tong history is finally ousted by the ubiquitous imagination.

A historical approach to the issue of imagination in Chinese experimental fiction should start with an analysis of the constitution of specific individuals as "authors" at specific times. Special attention should be paid to the discursive environment in which the "authors" are conditioned as variable and complex functions of discourse that interact with each other and expand some discursive possibilities while suppressing others. In the case of the foreign influences on Chinese experimentalists, a historical approach means that, instead of regarding the influences as unaltered importations, we should study their mutations under Chinese domestic circumstances. As such a foreign influence, postmodernism does go through important changes in China, most significantly through the conception of the author as a unified and reified source for fiction, as I have tried to show. The question is: with Chinese experimentalists' ontological certainty about their authorship and their imagination, does their fiction still belong to postmodernism?

Queens College, CUNY

NOTES:


3. James M. Mellard, \textit{The Exploded Form: The Modernist Novel} in

4. See, for example, Chen Maiping's "On the Absence of the Self: From Modernism to Postmodernism?" Inside Out: Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture (Aarhus, C., Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1993), pp. 82-86.


6. Ma Yuan, "Xugou" (Fabrication), Shouhuo (Harvest), (1986) 5:49.


13. Sun Ganlu, "Qing luren caimi" (Let the women solve the puzzle), Shouhuo (Harvest), (1986) 6:160-174.


15. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism; or, the cultural logic of late capitalism," New Left Review, 146 (1984), 58.