

THE MOSAIC OF CHINESE MODERNISM IN FICTION AND FILM: THE AESTHETICS OF PRIMITIVISM, TAOISM, AND BUDDHISM

Rujie Wang

College of Wooster

14

When it comes to thinking structurally about the works of art produced in recent decades in China, to the extent they can be thought of as a whole, the word “reactionary” springs to mind. I am thinking mainly of the strong ambivalence or even skepticism about social progress and an equally strong sentimental approach to pre-modern cultures. Such sentiments are evident in Yu Hua’s novel *To Live*, later adapted into a movie by Zhang Yimou in 1993, Gao Xingjian’s *Soul Mountain*, which won Nobel Prize for literature in 2000, and popular film productions such as *Postmen in the Mountains* directed by Huo Jianqi in 1999, *Shower* directed by Zhang Yang in 1999, and *A World without Thieves* by Feng Xiaogang in 2004. The ways in which these literary and film texts lend expression to the changing views on Chinese experience with socialism and on social progress in general remind me of, among other things, a remark made by Hegel regarding what he called the Oriental world. Commenting on how Hinduism and Buddhism are modes of archaic consciousness fundamentally different from his Eurocentric and progressive philosophy of history, Hegel says,

But in India, it [despotism] is normal: for here there is no sense of personal independence with which a state of despotism could be compared, and which would raise revolt in the soul; nothing approaching even a resentful protest against it, is left, except the corporeal smart, and the pain of being deprived of absolute necessities and of pleasure. In the case of such a people, therefore, that which we call history is not to be looked for. ... This [Hinduism] makes them incapable of writing history; all that happens is dissipated in their minds into confused dreams. (Hegel 161-62)

Hegel’s frustration with Asian (religious) literature and his unwillingness to recognize the values of religious texts produced in India are, in my view, feelings not entirely irrelevant when we discuss Chinese literary development and the aesthet-

ics of modernism. In other words, the same objection can also be raised regarding modern Chinese literature or film. Are the fictional narratives capable of telling the true stories of human struggle the same way Hegel thought “real history” does? Or, are important facts of human existence being routinely ignored or dismissed as confused dreams in Chinese literature and film?

The criteria for Hegel’s evaluation of what is or is not history are also aesthetic criteria. History is after all just another name for his story. History and literature therefore can both be treated as cultural constructs that mutually illuminate and influence one another. During the May Fourth Movement, many progressive intellectuals and literary authors launched an assault on classical literature as the aesthetic of human suffering, opting for the Hegelian view of history as social and intellectual progress. They hoped that by rejecting such traditions as Taoism and Buddhism as primitive or archaic modes of consciousness, the Chinese would no longer live in despair or self-deception. The critical self-reflections on traditional values in the classics initiated the changes to come in the last century in Chinese literary development in which, as Marston Anderson states in his seminal work titled *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*, “May Fourth intellectuals did not have the luxury to slowly explore the philosophical and social ramifications of each system of thought or artistic genre they encountered. A sense of national crisis mandated their borrowing, and they approached their task with a keen sense of urgency, believing that China’s future rested on the models they chose” (Anderson 3). Dissatisfied with the way humanity was expressed in the classical literature, some of these intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s even accused the literary tradition of being non-human. A main figure in the May Fourth Movement, Zhou Zuoren wrote an essay titled “Humane Literature” to indict Chinese literary tradition as “non-human.”

15

For instance, the Frenchman Maupassant’s *Une vie* is human literature about the animal passions of man; China’s *Prayer Mat of Flesh*, however, is a piece of non-human literature. The Russian Kuprin’s novel *Jama* is literature describing the lives of prostitutes, but China’s *Nine-tailed Tortoise* is non-human literature. The difference lies merely in the different attitudes conveyed by the work, one is dignified and one is profligate; one has aspirations for human life and therefore feels grief and anger in the face of inhuman life, whereas the other is complacent about human life, and the author even seems to derive a feeling of satisfaction from it, and in many cases to deal with his material in an attitude of amusement and provocation. In one simple sentence: the difference between human and non-human literature lies in the attitude that informs the writing; whether it affirms human life or inhuman life. (Zhou 155-56)

Similarly, Chen Duxiu, one of the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party and one of the forerunners of the May Fourth New Culture Movement (五四新文化运动), also talked disparagingly of literary traditions in his essay “On Literary Revolution” because he believed the old modes of literary writing were incapable of telling human life as what it is:

Chinese literature today is lifeless and stale, unable to stand next to that of Europe. ... The problem of Confucianism has been attracting much attention in the nation: this is the first indication of the revolution in ethics and morality. ... The classical literature is pompous and pedantic and has lost the principles of expressiveness and realistic description. Eremite literature is highly obscure and abstruse and is self-satisfied writing that provides no benefit to the majority of its readers. In form, Chinese literature has followed old precedents; it has flesh without bones and body without soul. It is a decorative and not a practical product. In content, its vision does not go beyond kings, officials, spirits, ghosts, and the fortunes or misfortunes of individuals. As for the universe, or human life, or society—they are simply beyond its ken. Such are the common failings of these three kinds of literature. (Chen 144)

16 Given the serious charges leveled against the traditional Chinese literature (as “pompous,” “lifeless,” “stale,” and “inhuman,”) it is no wonder that a full-scale literary revolution (文化革命) of the May Fourth Movement was soon to become what is later known as the “revolutionary literature” (革命文化), privileging a different mode of fiction writing—realism—that dominated the literary production in China in the last century in which writing meant writing about history as social and intellectual progress. But what is happening with Chinese literary modernism today is, among other things, a gradual revival of those classical literary genres as well as obsolete modes of representation with which to replace the communist “red classics” (红色经典) that often narrowly interpret human events. Modernists like Gao Xingjian become sick and tired of the literary convention of socialist realism and begin to pursue and experiment with genres and modes of representation that are basically literary elaborations of old myths that Hegel saw as not really relevant to human history. These modern works give expression to the unconscious attitudes people have towards modernization, whether understood within the context of Maoism or that of Deng’s ideology of a liberal market economy. In recent fiction and film works, we find various uses of Buddhism, Taoism, and primitivism as literary aesthetics and as countervailing worldviews to social progress and modernizations. While no real alternatives, these popular works nonetheless offer utopian fantasies and serve as compensatory adjustments to China’s social and cultural transformation.

To the extent that the (re)uses of what was once rejected as archaic modes of consciousness, of the primitive and the supernatural in the fiction and cinema are deliberate, we need to study them as the phenomena attending Chinese literary modernism since the mid-1980s. That is to say that in their attempts to truly register their modern experience in the last century, many literary writers and film directors have chosen to experiment with narrative conventions they know to be incompatible with the official ideology of history as social progress; thus the relevance of Hegel’s remark. Gao Xingjian wanted literature to transcend politics and history, and stay away from the stale language of socialist realism as a literary convention. Novelist Han Shaogong wrote an article entitled “The Roots of Literature” (文学的根, wenzue

de gen) to express the need of seeking oneself in the deep spirit and essence of one's culture. The openness in the post-Mao era of reform allows people to search for the spirit of Chinese culture, to reflect upon or even resist the project of modernity.

The uses of the primitive that we discern in many literary and visual works of art are not just ways of developing the discourse of modernity but also a means of organizing the emotional life flowing out of China's experience of modernization. Gao Xiangjian's *Soul Mountain* represents an inward journey to the human psyche that modern man must undertake to be whole in his war against culture. Plagued by the absurdity of the modern life and haunted by the memory of social revolutions, the hero goes to the backwaters of China to collect ancient myths, legends, songs, and superstitious rituals that, though primitive, have far more life in them than the outworn political phrases of authorities. His contacts with Buddhist monks, Daoist priests, and uneducated peasants, enable him to see his spiritual poverty in a country committed to the ideology of progress and historical materialism. Modern China seems to be wearing the carved wooden mask the narrator accidentally finds, a mask of an animal head with a human face, which "accurately expresses the animal nature in human beings and the fear of this animal nature within themselves. ... Man cannot cast off this mask, it is a project of his own flesh and spirit. He can no longer remove from his own face this mask which has already grown like skin and flesh so he is always startled as if disbelieving himself, but this is in fact himself" (Gao 141). In the eyes of Gao Xingjian, human endeavors to conquer and control the world have resulted in the creation of a society alien and incomprehensible to humans. "I'm not a wolf but would like to be a wolf, to return to nature, to go on the prowl. However, I can't rid myself of this human mind. I am a monster with a human mind and can find no refuge" (Gao 229). Such identification with the primitive is key to the modern man's deepest sense of identity.

17

The frustration and disillusionment with the modern culture of "science" and "democracy" in the latter half of the twentieth century, and the subsequent realization of meaninglessness experienced by many modernists like Gao Xingjian, became the impetus behind Chinese literary modernism. What Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane list as the basic features of the modernist novel in European literature are readily found in Gao's work as well:

The modernist novel has shown, perhaps, four preoccupations: with the complexities of its own form, with the representation of inward states of consciousness, with a sense of the nihilistic disorder behind the ordered surface of life and reality, and with the freeing of narrative art from the determination of an onerous plot. (Bradbury and McFarlane 393)

Granted the historical circumstances under which modernism occurs differ from country to country (in the cases of China and Russia, there is a "modernism of underdevelopment" as Xudong Zhang argues in his *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* (1999) the basic features of it as a mode of writing and a literary move-

ment are certainly evident in China. First of all, his *Soul Mountain* is structured to unburden itself from any didactic purposes that many previous writers use to invest their works with meaning and significance. His is a fiction against the fiction form itself, somewhat like Fellini's film *8 ½* in which the problems and difficulties of the film medium become the very content and subject matter of the film. So unlike the realist works, the reader cannot be too serious about what he reads in *Soul Mountain* because the narrator-author appears not to take himself seriously as he constantly mocks and sabotages his own story. In the last chapter of his book, the narrative goes like this:

18 In the snow outside my window I see a small green frog, one eye blinking and the other wide open, unmoving, looking at me. I know this is God. He appears just like this before me and watches to see if I will understand. He is talking to me with his eyes by opening and closing them. When God talks to humans he does not want humans to hear his voice. And I don't think it at all strange, it is as if it should be like this. It is as if God is in fact a frog. The intelligent round eye doesn't so much as blink once. It is really kind that he should deign to gaze upon this wretched human being, me. His other eye opens and closes as it speaks a language incomprehensible to humans. Whether I understand or not is not God's concern. I could of course think maybe there is no meaning at all in this blinking eye, but its significance could lie precisely in its not having meaning. (Gao 505)

This sense of profound meaninglessness and of an equally profound incommunicability remain ubiquitous throughout *Soul Mountain*, which does not yield truth. It is a metaphor, the language of modernist fiction, of an inward journey wherein the narrator, by his effort to organize the outside world, becomes aware and finally takes possession of his own inner world. It is the peculiar features and conditions of human consciousness that are being investigated and presented to the reader.

The story, if it can be called that, is certainly unconventional in that it is not grounded in any communal reality and its "events" are not at all causally related. The coherence of the novel or of the character, if there is any to speak of, is solely a matter of narrative introversion—a mode of self-conscious psycho-narration—totally at odds with the traditional notions of wholeness of individual character. With no plots or subplots, the work is at least structurally independent of history and ideology. In contempt for the outworn terms of Chinese politics that permeated socialist realism and critical realism, Gao Xingjian tried to create what he and his friends refer to as "ideology-free" (非意识形态) theatre or "cold literature" (冷文学) that neutralizes contexts and morality. They wanted to do away with Maoist discourse through which socialist realities and even post-Mao reforms were mediated. They were truly embarrassed by the poverty of realism as a mode of writing, in the same way the modernists in the West became sick and tired of bourgeois art and literature as a form of commodity in the age of industrial civilization. *Soul Mountain* is an example of a marked change from a literary realism, which the Chinese government often endorses as a state discourse to maintain order, to a literary modernism with which to subvert the

political order and to create new narrative spaces for the individual.

In realism, the author appeals to public morality and to social science as points of reference; in Gao's fiction, the author or his personae renders problematic the very systems of truth and meaning. The characters now live in psychological time rather than real time.

I don't know if you have ever observed this strange thing, the self. Often the more you look the more it doesn't seem to be like it, and the more you look the more it isn't it. It's just like when one is lying on the grass and staring at a cloud – at first it's like a camel, then like a woman, and when you look again it becomes an old man with a long beard. But this doesn't last because clouds are transforming every instant. Suppose you use a lavatory in an old house and you happen to look at the water stains on the walls—everyday you go there are changes in the stains. First you see a face, when you look again it's a dog dragging a sausage, afterwards it turns into a tree, there is a woman under the tree and she's sitting on a skinny horse. After a couple of weeks, or perhaps after several months, one morning, you are constipated and you suddenly find that the stain is still a face. (Gao 150)

19

The protagonist's attitude toward the reality of self-identity, treating it as illusory and contingent upon the conditions of human perception and consciousness, may irritate the likes of Hegel who desire history be treated in an objective way; but to Gao Xingjian such instances of skepticism or nihilism that often reduce realities to dreams hold the key to individual truths. The patterns of the water stains on the walls are not emblems of outer reality that need to be addressed but the activities and conditions of the mind that make outer events intelligible. The narrator in *Soul Mountain* brings about self-reflections of man as a meaning-making animal driven to chase after his own projections. As Gao's fictional persona, he says:

Don't go searching for spirits, don't go searching for cause and retribution, don't go searching for meaning, all is embodied in the chaos. It is only when people refuse to accept that they shout out, even while not comprehending what they are shouting. Humans are simply such creatures, fettered by complexities and inflicting anxiety upon themselves. ... You create out of nothingness, playing with words like a child playing with blocks. But blocks can only construct fixed patterns, the possibilities of structures are inherent in the blocks and no matter how they are moved you will not be able to make anything new. (Gao 350-51)

Unlike the realist writers dedicated to becoming China's conscience and conscious of their works as vehicles for social transformation, Gao Xingjian, or his persona in *Soul Mountain*, stays away from that lofty writerly role and devotes his writing to exploring the hidden landscape of the human psyche. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he tries to defend the rights of modern Chinese writers to be themselves first and foremost:

Ten years ago, after concluding *Soul Mountain* which I had written over seven years, I wrote a short essay proposing this type of literature: Literature is not concerned with politics but is purely a matter of the individual. It is the gratification of the intellect together with an observation, a review of what has been experienced, reminiscences of

feelings or portrayal of a state of mind. The so-called writer is nothing more than someone speaking or writing and whether he is listened to or read is for others to choose. The writer is not a hero acting on orders from the people nor is he worthy of worship as an idol, and certainly he is not a criminal or enemy of the people. He is at times victimized along with his writings simply because of others' needs. When the authorities need to manufacture a few enemies to divert people's attention, writers become sacrifices and worse still writers who have been duped actually think it is a great honor to be sacrificed.

This is therefore a defining moment in which modern Chinese literature is about to be set free from the tradition of critical realism beginning from the late Qing and from the tradition of *wen yi zai tao* (literature as the vehicle of the way/truth/order). Gao takes a stand against these traditions that edify literature in which didactic values are always emphasized over aesthetic values, in which history is always preferred to fiction. It is this moment in Chinese literary history that gives birth and character to works like *Soul Mountain* and even recent films.

- 20 So it would seem that realism may have lost its strong appeal both as a form of creative writing and as an attitude toward real life. *Soul Mountain* does not have much of a plot, or a theme, or a message; it does not have a linear story line, but a fragmented travelogue recording incoherent thoughts and dreams of an individual unsure of his purpose in life. A modernist and symbolist novel, *Soul Mountain* is divided into 81 chapters which are really more unrelated short essays than stories with a coherent theme. Even the narrator is divided up into such personae or alter egos as "I," "he," and "you," just like Western modernist abstract paintings in which the background and foreground collapse together. Alternating between the "I" and "you," the narrator is able to appear both as the observing subject and the observed object. Often he removes quotation marks, blurring the lines between differing presentations of consciousness. Gao fragments his narrative and chops up his story into small blocks of time, into which he pours his own experience and aesthetic perceptions, sort of like Proust interested less in the story than in his unedited transcription of consciousness. He experiments with psychological time and narrative points of view, and deliberately disintegrates the narrative form of the novel. The inward turn of his narrative ignores and collapses the lines between, say, (1) psycho-narration: the narrator's discourse about a character's consciousness; (2) quoted monologue: a character's mental discourse; and (3) narrated monologue: a character's mental discourse in the guise of the narrator's discourse that Dorrit Cohn painstakingly differentiates in her *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. All these changes in narrative technique and in the artistic syntax are significant in Chinese and world literary history as an aspect of the history of consciousness. The title of Gao's work seems indicative of the phenomenon many have correctly associated with the developments of fiction narrative in which, as Joseph Frank points out, "... the gradual loss of contact with the natural world of the common sense experience [is] observable in all of the greatest products of the modern artistic sensibility"

(Kahler x). Thus, *Soul Mountain* has little to do with travel in a tempo-spatial sense; it is a journey into the unconscious, to explore and expose the deep anxiety modern man feels about the changes made in the name of progress and modernization.

If the word “theme” is remotely applicable here, then I would say one of the themes is primitivism. *Soul Mountain* symbolizes an inward journey to the primitive psyche that modern man must undertake. The dreams and fantasies we find in the novel compensate, in Jungian terms, for a set of one-sided conscious values developed at the expense of the wholeness of the human psyche. In other words, the “I” and “you” of Gao Xingjian represent modern man who arrives at his new state in “social progress” only as fragments of himself. Plagued by meaninglessness in the city life, the hero goes to the backwaters of China to collect ancient myths, legends, folklore, vulgar love songs, death ballads and superstitious rituals as fragments or shadows of his childhood, his former self. He is trying to be reconnected with those psychic elements that could play their part in life but are denied the right to exist because they are incompatible with the project of modernity. He is rejuvenated when he is surrounded by the villagers who live at the margins of modern China, singing bawdy songs that, though primitive, have far more life in them than the outworn language of authorities in China.

21

Soul Mountain is but one of many instances of modern Chinese responses to social progress as defined by the social practices in the latter half of the last century in China. In their penetrating analyses of the post-Enlightenment Europe, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno try to redefine social progress driven by enlightenment ideas as a form of totalitarianism from which modern man needs to free himself, which is the key to understanding some of the modern Chinese works that portray socialist modernity as repressive to the individual. Chinese literary modernism needs to be understood as a response or reaction to social developments in the last century for which Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis rings true:

In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant. The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy. ... Knowledge, which is power, knows no obstacles: neither in the enslavement of men nor in compliance with the world rulers. ... For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect. ... In advance, the Enlightenment recognizes as being and occurrence only what can be apprehended in unity: its ideal is the system from which all and everything follows. ... Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. (Horkheimer and Adorno 3-9)

The “progress” from the May Fourth intellectual enlightenment to the subsequent social reforms and projects of modernization parallels the process of literary changes in China from realism to modernism. As the heirs of the May Fourth movement, some of the realist writers had unknowingly developed their art into a form of mass

deception resulting in their own ineptitude as intellectuals to resist intolerance of rational progress. Many acquiesced and complied with this mass-mindedness because the language of enlightenment that has translated China into a socialist state still dominated the critical reflections of the Cultural Revolution after the death of Mao. Thus the great appeal of the aesthetics of primitivism as a compensatory adjustment to a set of one-sided conscious attitudes, and thus the journey to China's backwaters to seek one's roots and lost identities. Through his contacts with Buddhist monks, Daoist hermits and priests, social misfits and outcasts, recluses, the narrator (and his many alter egos) in *Soul Mountain* is able to see his own poverty, the poverty of Chinese socialism as one of the projects of May Fourth intellectual enlightenment. "Where else can reverence of the soul be found? Where else can we find these songs which one should listen to while seated in quiet reverence or even while prostrated be found? What should be revered isn't revered and instead only all sorts of things are worshipped! A race with empty, desolate souls! A race of people who have lost their souls!" (Gao 361).

22

Many of the reflections and impressions that go to make up the narrative of *Soul Mountain* are thematically connected to the quest to achieve psychic equilibrium in modern China in which people are hard pressed by the speed of social change. Such reflections are usually done through humor, symbolism and subtlety. One day the traveler sees a performance of an acrobatic troupe, which he describes in detail. His thoughts from his innermost psyche flow out as he watches the head of a contortionist slowly emerging from between her legs, looking like a grotesque humanoid spider. "The girl in red, her teeth clenched, and her abdomen gently heaving and her face shining with a rich glow, is contorted beyond human semblance. Only her thin lips and black eyes reveal her pain and it is this pain which inflames the human lust for cruelty" (Gao 369-70). Here, the author calls into question the nature of social or cultural accomplishments, implicating and subjecting to critical scrutiny the state of affairs people normally associate with culture and progress.

Driven by a strong desire to search for authentic meaning in a degraded world, the narrator appears to be a Chinese Sisyphus condemned to labor in utter futility: "After some time you get used to this loneliness and climbing peaks becomes an obsession. Knowing full well you will find nothing, you are still driven by this blind thought and keep on climbing. In the course of doing this, you of course need to find solace and fabricate stories for your self, creating a myth for yourself" (Gao 435). Instead of rolling rocks uphill only to let it roll downhill to start over again, this Chinese Sisyphus is condemned to writing stories only to undo their meaning so as to start the process again to keep himself busy. This is also the key to Gao's other full length novel entitled *A Man's Bible*, the story of an individual who has become religiously and spiritually involved with his own meaningless and absurd existence during the Cultural Revolution.

Chapter 40 exemplifies what distinguishes Gao's writings from the realistic works. Here, the narrator is engaged in a conversation with his one-time girl friend who

tries to negotiate their relation by telling him a story she heard from one of her girl friends. It constitutes a moment in Chinese fiction in which fictionality becomes a self-conscious factor. In this chapter, the characters are just like those in Thomas Mann's novel, who are, according to J. P. Stern, "connoisseurs of fiction too. The complicity, the close relation that we sense between the author and his characters, extends through all the working of the action, to the point where it sometimes seems that the characters have read the novel in which they exist; certainly there is a sense in which we feel that, in the process of its making, they have amended it" (qtd. in Bradbury and McFarlane 397). Gao is really disrobing modern man by stripping away the cultural trappings he uses to hide his primitive self, and this moment would not have been possible if it were not because of modernism as a mode of writing in fiction.

Primitivism is many things and shows up in different forms. If realism can be seen as an effort to represent and reflect on history or reality, modernism is an intellectual endeavor to dispose and deconstruct it as a lie or myth. As a rational attitude, it is a view of global capitalism as an exploitative or pernicious force and a source of alienation. As aesthetics, primitivism is a lot harder to define and we can only see its manifestations in works of art that often adopt a sentimental approach to archaic and pre-industrial traditions that Hegel found hard to bring into the progressive narrative of the West. As is evident in my analysis of *Soul Mountain*, the aesthetic of primitivism is also an impulse to return to nature which, although totally irrational, has to be recognized when we interpret recent Chinese fiction and film. "Works of art or literature," says Marie Bonaparte, "profoundly reveal their creator's psychology and, as Freud has shown, their construction resembles that of our dreams. The same mechanisms which, in dreams and nightmares, govern the manner in which our strongest, though most carefully concealed, desires are elaborated, desires which often are the most repugnant to consciousness, also govern the elaborations of a work of art" (qtd. in Wright 40). As we will soon see, many film dramas are in fact elaborated primitive fantasies often hidden from modern man who needs film therapies to cope with his own neurosis, mental disturbances, and suppressed emotions. The aesthetic principles of primitivism, which allow the viewer as well as the director to express the irrational contents of the collective unconscious, operate the same way as projection:

23

Projections change the world into the replica of one's own unknown face. In the last analysis, therefore, they lead to an autoerotic or autistic condition in which one dreams a world whose reality remains forever unattainable. The resultant sentiment d'incomplétude and the still worse feeling of sterility are in their turn explained by projection as the malevolence of the environment, and by means of this vicious circle the isolation is intensified. The more projections are thrust in between the subject and the environment, the harder it is for the ego to see through its illusions. (Jung, *The Essential Jung* 92)

Acting under all disguises, the figure of the primitive seems to be intimately associated with unconscious resistances to social progress narrowly defined by the

national quest for wealth and power through modernization. S/he can be a persona fragmented into several figures like in *Soul Mountain*. Although the return to one's primitive origin takes on many forms, the end result is the same when the viewer achieves a sense of wholeness, a collective identity from which we have become split or fragmented into various selves in the course of cultural development.

24 In the wake of the collapse of communism as a political ideology, alternative world-views or myths have been allowed in Chinese fiction and projected in cinema. Yimou Zhang's *To Live* (活着, 1992) is a cultural elaboration of Taoism and Buddhism in which the Civil War, the communist land reform, and the Cultural Revolution are understood anew, in terms of karmic retributions and meaningful coincidences. Unlike Gao Xingjian's educated persona in *Soul Mountain* who is nihilistic and narcissistic, Fugui is an uneducated peasant trying to survive the half-century of political upheavals about which he knows nothing. Yet, ignorant and unenlightened, he exemplifies life's intrinsic meanings routinely ignored by Mao with his revolutionary excesses. The ups and downs in his life are not presented as the results of his rational choices but as the convulsions of mass hysteria from which he and his family try to run away unscathed. Caught in the changes and forces over which he has no control, Fugui refrains himself from trying to make sense of the world as a modern man who has grown accustomed to the idea of life that must have meaning and purpose for it to be worth living; his resignation thus represents the wisdom of Taoism and Buddhism to resist and dismiss rational and intellectual history as illusory. Fugui validates the traditional worldviews held in contempt by modern man, and his "failure" to comprehend the changes taking place in the name of communist revolution makes the viewer aware of the indignities and atrocities the Chinese have committed and endured. A Taoist sage in disguise, Fugui has grown wary of moral and philosophical postulates through which life is made comprehensible, because, as a Taoist, he understands that the world is by nature chaotic and undifferentiated. It is not ironic that Fu-gui's real fortune and wealth (as signified by his name) are his many losses that result in his disillusionment, a necessary condition for real enlightenment in Buddhism. He preserves his life, not by whole-heartedly jumping on the bandwagon of socialism, but by being true to his primitive instinct of survival and by resisting the blandishments of the world. Dispossessed and disenfranchised, Fugui is in a unique position to understand Mao's revolutionary excesses that put emphasis on the efficacy of human endeavors. The viewer sees human propensity to moralize the world and build the tower of Babel. He also sees man (Fugui) as the product of natural environment and believes that "[t]he fortuitous play of circumstances, or chance, guides him more than he guides himself." Through Fugui, modern man re-establishes his relation to nature as represented in the *I-Ching* (*The Book of Changes*), one of the very first Chinese attempts to make sense of the world. Within the context of this "I"-philosophy, man is neither the creator nor the diviner of the universe, but

a product of chance. What befalls Fugui brings to life the legend of *sai wong shi ma* that accustoms people to the idea of man as an insignificant creature in the natural universe who needs to wait patiently for nature to bring balance and order back to the chaotic human world through Chance.

Perhaps what is at the core of Chinese literary modernism is a strong impulse to reject or resist the rational notion of history as has been understood in China, which gives it the characteristics of antiquarianism or primitivism. To this extent, it can be considered a form of dissent to Hegelian Marxism and Maoist communism in the names of which many social changes have been made. As such, some fictional stories such as *To Live* that seem indifferent to human suffering actually put the reader/viewer in touch again with worldviews that satisfy modern man's archaic passion for myths that help preserve natural wonders, human wholeness and spirit. What Hegel saw as nothing more than an archaic mode of consciousness in which no concept of freedom and rights exists for the individual is understood quite differently by Andrew Plaks, who sees how human spirit is reflected in the very structure of Chinese narrative:

25

The ubiquitous potential presence of a balanced, totalized, dimension of meaning may partially explain why a fully realized sense of the tragic does not materialize in Chinese narrative. But in each case the implicit understanding of the logical interrelation between these fictional characters' particular situation and the overall structure of existential intelligibility serves to blunt the pity and fear the reader experiences as he witnesses their individual destinies. In other words, Chinese narrative is replete with individuals in tragic situations, but the secure inviolability of the underlying affirmation of existence in its totality precludes the possibility of the individual's tragic fate taking on the proportions of a cosmic tragedy. Instead, the bitterness of the particular case of mortality ultimately settles back into ceaseless alternation of patterns of joy and sorrow, exhilaration and despair, which go to make up an essentially affirmative view of the universe of experience. (Plaks 351-52)

Such scholarship and research in Chinese narrative tradition provides a critical context for understanding the revival of Taoism and Buddhism that have been put back into circulation through literary modernism, a mode of creative imagination heavily influenced by the narrative motifs of Chinese literature and history. The objection to ancient mysticism or religious superstition in Asian art and literature, such as Hegel has for Oriental philosophy of history or as the May Fourth writers had for the religious traditions of Taoism and Buddhism, needs to be raised along with a critical view on the ideas of social and intellectual progress; or we are damned to repeat history in which Christian missionaries experienced much frustration when trying to modernize Chinese religion. In the chapter titled "The Problem of Evil, and Consequences of A World without Sin," Frederic W. Mote says:

The late Dr. Hu Shih, eminent historian of Chinese thought and culture, used to say with sly delight that centuries of Christian missionaries had been frustrated and chagrined by the apparent inability of Chinese to take sin seriously. Were we to work out fully all the consequences for Chinese society of the model offered by an organismic

cosmos functioning through the dynamism of harmony, we might well be able to relate the absence of a sense of sin to it. For in such a cosmos there can be no parts wrongfully present; everything that exists belongs, even if no more appropriately than as the consequence of a temporary imbalance, a disharmony. Evil as a positive or active force cannot exist; much less can it be frighteningly personified. (Mote 21)

When enlightened May Fourth intellectuals rebelled against Chinese classics and rejected Taoist cosmology as myth and superstition, and when realist authors chose to write about social progress as truth and reality, they did not understand that “a natural function which has existed from the beginning, like the religious function, cannot be disposed of with rationalistic and so called enlightened criticism. You can, of course, represent the doctrinal contents of the creeds as impossible and subject them to ridicule, but such methods miss the point and do not affect the religious function that forms the basis of the creeds. Religion, in the sense of conscientious regard for the irrational factors of the psyche and individual fate, reappears, evilly distorted, in the deification of the state and the dictator” (Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* 17). The failure of May Fourth movement to truly enlighten the Chinese populace became clear in the ensuing decades that witnessed the cult of Mao and the catastrophic Cultural Revolution in which new religion and myth merely replaced the old ones.

Thus the ending of *To Live* deserves our attention when Fugui is the lone survivor having nothing to say, or left undone for that matter, about the meaning of his suffering. There is no evil identified at the end of the story that represents, among other things, the situations of moral ambiguity that many China’s political leaders failed to understand. What is frustrating is a deliberate rejection of the naïve view of history as social progress, in the name of which so many lives been destroyed: 632,000 were killed during warlord era; 4,968,000 were killed during The Civil War; 7,474,000 perished during the collectivization period, “The Great Leap Forward”; 10,729,000 were starved to death during the Great Famine, and 7,731,000 met their deaths during the Cultural Revolution. As the film progresses to the end, no efforts are made to moralize or rationalize modern Chinese history represented in the work. To Fugui, evil is self-ignorance, which has resulted in endless cycles of joy and suffering. The anti-climactic end is a space created for reflection on the intrinsic meaning of life and for, as Plaks calls it, an essentially affirmative view of the universe of experience.

The importance of this primitive figure is therefore the negative of modern man. He is constantly morphing between ignorant peasant women, village urchins, mentally and physically challenged. What all these characters have in common is their inability, intrinsic or external, to fully partake in the normative cultural activities; their limitations, physical, psychological, cultural or historical, complicate a naïve view of rational progress. Take, for example, Yimou Zhang’s *Not One Less* (一个不能少 1999), a tear-jerking story about a 13-year old substitute teacher, Wei Minzhi, determined to keep all of her students in class in spite of the problems of rural China that bar millions of poverty-stricken children from getting a basic education in lit-

eracy. But, as the viewer soon realizes, the film is a national allegory in which the thirteen-year old is in fact bigger than life. She is the primitive in us all. To be sure, she is uncouth, silly, immature, and simple-minded; everywhere she goes in the city she becomes the convenient dumping ground for the negative human emotions of the “educated” that lecture her on rules and etiquette as if she were an abomination. Yet, in her firm resolve to let no one go missing from her class, Wei Minzhi represents the collective will and spirit of the Chinese people on a quest for equitable growth and a more egalitarian society. The urbanites that she encounters in the big metropolis are portrayed as selfish, profit-driven and without compassion. The ticket conductor throws her off the bus after catching her without a ticket; the policeman guarding the iron gate of the television station treats her as an undocumented vagrant. They all treat her as a nuisance and tell her to stay clear from the main entrance; the woman receptionist at the station where Wei Minzhi seeks to make a missing person announcement scolds her as if she is a retard for not having a teacher’s I.D. in spite of a pile of posters handwritten by Wei in the hope to find her student. Understood allegorically, the film is no longer just about one rural teacher not letting go missing one of her students; it is really about China, driven by the blinding light of modernity and no longer recognizing its own children and primitive past. Representative of an agrarian community, Wei Minzhi, with all her backwardness and naivety, embodies the humanity that is being rejected by modern man in pursuit of an industrial civilization driven by capital and technology.

27

The figure of the primitive offers a point of identification at which the viewer becomes conscious of his or her own forgotten self or primitive shadows. In another Zhang Yimou’s work, *Happy Times* (幸福时光, 2002), the role of the primitive is split up between two characters living at the margins of a society transforming from a state economy to a free liberal market economy. Mr. Zhao, a retired factory worker, is an old bachelor who apparently lives in a contradiction: he is broke but he talks as one of the nouveau riche. Wu Ying is a blind girl with a growing brain tumor, abandoned by her father and mistreated by her step-mother. They cross paths when Zhao tries to date Wu’s stepmother hoping to use him to get rid of Wu Ying as a financial liability. The message of this hilarious comedy is in fact quite poignant or even bitter as it reminds the viewer of what has been swept under the rug when people regroup and reconnect with one another economically and politically. The friendship between these two needy people who could not survive on their own bespeaks of the needs of the collective unconscious to return to the past fondly remembered as one in which the power of money is not as ubiquitous as it is now. The primitivist fantasy plays itself out literally when Zhao, with the help of his fellow co-workers and retirees, constructs a fake massage parlor in the middle of a decommissioned state-owned factory and has his friends pay Wu fake money so as for the blind girl to believe she is needed and able to support herself by working as a masseuse. By (re)creating a socialist oasis in the midst of a dynamic capitalist economy driven by money and power, Zhao not only makes a dream come true for the blind girl, an emblem of innocence,

but also expresses the nostalgia for and the secret wish to return to a simpler life on the part of many former state employees now out of work like Mr. Zhao. Wu Ying's blindness signifies innocence preserved by ignorance about the brutal realities of capitalist competition and the loss of security, thus ignorance is bliss. At the very end of the film after Zhao dies from a traffic accident, the viewer finds Wu Ying walking, without the help of anybody, on the street of a crowded modern city, with the sound of her voice playing in the background from a cassette player that she left behind, stating that, in fact, she knew all along that both the massage parlor and money are fake but she nonetheless appreciates the time she has spent with Zhao. Her remark, which makes it clear that she is not as innocent or naïve as people take her to be, calls into question the humanity of the current society. She prefers the falsehood and lies in which she has been kept by Mr. Zhao to the cut-throat realities of the present that she is fortunate enough not to be able to see. Those are the happy times, she recalls at the end, referring not only the days in which she is cared for by Mr. Zhao but also

28 a mythic past in which people are believed to have been willing and able to care for one another.

It seems that modern man's preoccupation with his primitive shadows underscores many Yimou Zhang's award-winning films on the subject of social change. For the grand master of cinematic art that Zhang truly is, social transformation cannot be presented without the primitive figure through whom the viewer finds the real meaning of progress. In *The Story of Qiu Ju*, (秋菊打官司) the title figure is an illiterate peasant woman whose lack of formal education and simple-minded pursuit of justice for her husband help the viewer to critically scrutinize China's legal system and bureaucratic apparatuses of the state. Her grievances against the village chief bring to sharp focus two systems of value; viewers who follow the lawsuit tend to see the story as about the tension between Qiu Ju, the litigant, and Wang Shantang, the accused. However, the film's real subject matter is modern society about which neither understands because they both believe that their lawsuit is about justice and not about money. Qiu Ju, as well as the chief, values personal reputation (face, pride and dignity) more than money because, as members of an agrarian community, they are not yet aware of the ways in which money can function just as powerfully and effectively as personal reputation, which is the political capital in primitive societies the way money is the political currency of a capitalist society. That with which Qiu Ju, her husband Wan Qinglai, and the chief Wang are preoccupied include: who has sons (rather than girls), who is kicked in the groin (phallus as the symbol of male power and authority), and who apologizes to whom, which contrast strikingly with the way city folk value money over anything else, like the tricycle cab driver, lawyer Wu, the hotel manager, and the person writing complaint letters for others, all of whom play a hand in the outcome of final justice after they make money off of Qiu Ju's obsession with face and pride.

The scene in which Qiu Ju sells her chili is quite memorable. The buyer carefully weighs Qiu Ju's goods on a hand-held scale, a symbolic gesture of primitive justice

or fairness. A product of this rural economy (low tech and low profit) and medieval barter system, Qiu Ju has an idea of justice that is characteristic of the mode of economic production in which we see both the chief and Qiu Ju throw money on the ground as if it was beneath their personal dignity. City folk, on the other hand, appreciate everything for their exchange value, even when it comes to justice, fairness and kindness. Services such as writing complaint letters, peddling a tricycle to transport people from bus stations to hotels, or legal representations in court, are readily translated into and greatly facilitated by cash. In a way, the city folk have redefined the meaning of justice by the way they practice it; lawyer Wu says to Qiu Ju, "I've taken your money; of course I'll represent you." And represent her he did, but only in a way that calls into question not only the notion of social justice but also the very idea of social progress.

Once the urban viewer is identified with Qiu Ju on the emotional level, he is put in a position to rethink the project of modernity. What puzzles Qiu Ju, demanding no less than and no substitution for a sincere apology from the village chief who kicked her husband in the groin, is the total lack of direct human input in the way justice is carried out, with the chief being taken to jail after he has more than expiated his wrong-doing by saving her life and pregnancy under life-threatening circumstances. The punishment of the chief by jail time is the result of an X-ray exam showing that one of the husband's ribs is broken, of which no one is even aware, let alone demanding reparation. The modern-day legal system, if and when it works, is only a part of the machine that is the state that punishes or pardons mainly to maintain order and control rather than intervene on behalf of the parties involved. The implication of the story is not how much or how little justice has worked for Qiu Ju but how it operates in spite of the individual. When the chief is taken to jail, he is taken on his way to Qiu Ju's house as a guest of honor invited to celebrate the birth of her son whom he helped save; the state's interest in carrying out justice in this particular case is none other than showing the effectiveness of its penal process, which "is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity; it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime". That is why Qiu Ju's repeated quests for justice, first in the district court and then in the municipal and provincial courts, only result in a miscarriage of justice by the functionaries of modern social system. The twists and turns help register two distinct stages of civilization with differing attitudes towards life, brought to light in the course of Qiu Ju's search for justice, which represents modern man's frustration and deep anxiety with a (legal) system that, in this film, seems to represent his true humanity less and less.

The primitive is a problematic hero that makes the viewer and reader aware of those old values and modes of thought that modern man is called upon to reject as archaic. By the same token, this problematic figure also holds the key to modern man's becoming spiritually whole again when he becomes conscious of his own shadows and forgotten selves. He is modern man's the "Other" or alter ego whose relevance or

kinship to us is made stronger by our renewed efforts to deny or forget it/him. Such is exactly what happens in Yang Zhang's film *Shower* (洗澡, 2000), in which two brothers become spiritually reunited in a public bathhouse in Beijing, a symbol of purity as well as communal (collective) spirit. The owner of the bathhouse, Mr. Liu, is an aging father in poor health with two sons: Daming, a successful businessman working and living in Shanzhen in southern China, and Erming, a retard with a kind-heart. The psychological fragmentation takes places clearly when the traditional bathhouse, which satisfies so many personal needs (haircut, pedicure, manicure, chess game, cricket-match, full-body massage and hot-cup suction treatments, etc.) is scheduled to be torn down to make room in Beijing for apartment high rises with private shower room, the fast paced modern life style that Daming represents working in Shenzhen. The drama begins after Daming returns to Beijing for a home visit because the postcard he has received from Erming, only a picture sketch of a man lying in bed, gives him the impression that father is dying. Realizing that his father is well and that the postcard has meant nothing more than Erming's hope a see him, Daming plans to go back to his place of work. In the days leading up to his father's death, prophetically announced by the retard, clash of ideas breaks out between Mr. Liu and Daming who disagree on such matters as money, kinship, meaning of work, and how to bathe. Like a primitive tribal shaman, the father values his bathhouse as a healing place for people who are traumatized or wounded by culture. He distains technological advances, wealth, and social success that Daming embodies, which only too often results in displacement and the loss of small-scale human communities. He finds nothing wrong with Erming who accompanies him in ways Daming is unable; it never occurs to him, as it does Daming, to commit Erming to an asylum because caring of man's souls is his business and because people are not means to an end but ends in them-selves. The movie begins with a shot of the coin-operated automated shower cubicle in which a person is processed no differently from a car wash. The camera immediately pans back to the old communal bathhouse in which people are undertaking such leisurely activities as chess game, cricket-fights, body-massage, pedicure and manicure, and hair-cut. The film reaches its climax when, after father's death, Erming recalls what his father has told him about the meaning of water in primitive societies in a flashback, in which an old Tibetan woman takes her granddaughter on a long-distance pilgrimage to a lake in the Himalayas in order to take a bath in the sacred water that "purifies one's soul." The primitive life is idealized as a wellspring of meaning, a stark contrast with the life in Beijing plagued by a meaningless "busy-ness" in which people have already forgotten how to take care of their own souls. Human wholeness results when Daming decides to take care for his retarded brother, his primitive shadow and Self.

In these film therapies, the viewer usually becomes familiar with the psychodynamics and the tension between modern man and his primitive shadows, elaborated through symbols of transformation. The primitive often lives (or dies) to offset the growth and decline of its countervailing Other, the modern, in a process in which the

modern and primitive compensate one another towards human wholeness. In *Pretty Big Feet* (美丽的大脚) directed by Yang Yazhou in 2002, the viewer sees the interplay of the modern and primitive in the friendship of two women, one living the countryside where water is in critical shortage, and the other with easy access to urban amenities taken for granted by the moviegoer. On the one end of this psychological spectrum is Xia Yu (“rain”), a young urbanite in Beijing who is a typical problematic hero that Lucien Goldmann believes represents “the values of the bourgeoisie: individualism, the thirst for power, money, and eroticism, which triumph over the ancient feudal values of altruism, charity, and love” (Goldmann 14). On the other end is Zhang Meili, the peasant woman living under the primitive conditions in a rural village kept in stark poverty by draught. The story begins with Xia Yu volunteering to teach the children in Zhang’s village, children whom Zhang teaches and hopes will one day live in modern cities like Xia Yu; so from the start a dialectic is put in place to synthesize or harmonize the polarities of the rural and urban, the primitive and modern, which are interactive and interdependent. The widow of an ex-con executed for stealing, Zhang Meili finds her life as a woman and peasant unfulfilling in comparison to the life of Xia Yu who has a college education, a boyfriend, and residence in China’s capital. Yet to Xia Yu, everything about Zhang is rich in meaning rarely found in the urban bourgeois life. The hardships and primitive conditions that Zhang Meili hopes her students would one day leave behind terrify but also attract her. To Zhang, Xia Yu represents the mosaic of modernity: her polished speech in impeccable mandarin, her English with an American accent, her cell phone, healthy diet with vitamin supplements, civilized demeanor and dental hygiene (brushing teeth daily), her fashion-awareness (wearing perfume and dry-wash-only imported western clothing), and her pet dog that requires the attention of a vet for its depression. Xia Yu is savvy with computer technology; and her abortion is clearly an exercise of her free will as a liberated woman intellectually independent from her high-salaried boyfriend. Yet, Xia Yu still finds her rural counterpart beautiful (hence the title), enchanted by the primitive and barren landscape in which Zhang and her students are permanent fixtures: the dry river-bed with no water to wash the mud and dust off one’s self, severe draught that is the alchemy of poverty and suffering, a steady diet of sweat potatoes day after day, ignorance and bad manner (putting fingers in one’s mouth to flip book pages and using corn skins as toilet paper), urchins that pick their noses and amuse themselves by howling like braying asses. Yet, the advantages of the “city people” (*cheng li ren*) do not diminish or eclipse the dignity of the primitive peasants (*xiang xia ren*) living in poverty. As their team-teaching goes on, the two women gradually come to tolerate, understand, and even appreciate their differences in attitude and value. There is a kind of (primitive) beauty that cannot be enjoyed or appreciated up close by the modern spectator, just like the glittering city life of Beijing, charming and fascinating as it is, is too much for Zhang Meili who declines Xia Yu’s invitation to stay in the capital and returns to her village where she is killed in the end in an accident. There is a moment of identity change when Xia Yu makes

Zhang Meili wear her clothes that the latter has accidentally “ruined” by hand-washing them for the former. The last scene reinforces this identity swap (and therefore the union of two fragmented lives) when Xia Yu slides down the dirt slop on which she has seen the village urchins slide so many times for fun, a symbolic act of getting in touch with the primitive side of her personality, rejected and forgotten in her pursuit of a modern identity.

32 What has dominated Chinese cinema in the last two decades, it seems, is a kind of built-in therapy for the modern viewer for whom uninterrupted revolutions or/and sustained social progress have proven to be traumatic. The viewer of such film productions is whom Schiller refers to as the aesthetic man that needs the aesthetic freedom to heal his wounds by culture, freedom that these films readily provide in which to express their doubts, regrets, lamentation, nostalgia, or “belated fascination with its [Chinese culture] own datedness, its own alterity,” as Rey Chow has aptly pointed out. (Chow,145) *Nuan*, (暖) directed by Huo Jianqi in 2004, is a love story with great appeal to those fascinated with China’s belatedness, represented by the title character. The lead male protagonist, Lin Jinghe, smitten with guilt and nostalgia, returns to his village from which he has been away for ten years while attending college and working in the city. The real reason for his return is of course to visit Nuan, his first love whom he abandoned after she was crippled, and who is by now, ten years afterward, married to a local deaf-mute. In other words, it is really a love story that is over for all practical purposes, as is Chinese love affair with an agricultural society. The many flashbacks to their childhood days do not indicate any alternatives as to how their relationship (here reads: “wholeness”) could have been otherwise in a time when more and more opportunities became available for rural youths to migrate into the city. What is most distinct about their childhood memories is their shared dream of leaving the countryside one day. Keenly aware of Jinhe’s affection for her, Nuan nonetheless falls in love with a young performer in an opera troupe who may be, in her view, able to bring her out of the countryside. Jinhe is not able to declare his love for Nuan because he could not offer her any such opportunity, a poor peasant himself. Although years later Jinhe is the one to come back from the city and Nuan is the one stuck forever in the primitive village where she grew up, Jinhe’s affection for her never diminishes despite of cruel joke Fate has played on Nuan who, instead of marrying the handsome opera troupe actor and moving into the city, finally settles for much less, a docile wife and mother that never gets to see Tiananmen thousands of miles away, which she said she saw when she and Jinhe were having fun on the village swing as kids. Yet, to Jinhe who now works in Beijing, Nuan is more attractive and meaningful than anything one can find in the city because she is his childhood and primitive self. She is his roots and warmth (*nuan*). With both of them now married and with children, they only have their childhood memory to cherish, which is more meaningful than who they are, what they do, or to whom they are married as adults. This fantastic love story is deeply satisfying as well as compensatory to the modern viewer, anxious about the need to reinvent himself as society progresses.

That such a pure love still exists for the two after a decade is a fantasy very therapeutic to the viewer who, for most of the time, has to live in a world structured by conscious attitudes and values only. In other words, this heart-warming fantasy runs counter to the existential meanings of a college education and urbanization that take Jinhe away from Nuan. When Jinhe returns to the hometown as if it were a pre-historical Garden of Eden comes into being, he is but another modern man in search of certain non-existent “soul mountain” as a refuge from industrial civilization. The attraction of our primitive past, represented by the intensity of a prolonged romance, correlates with the viewer’s inability to find meaning in the present post-Deng world of the 1990s when remaining in the countryside is no longer a real option for anyone with moderate ambition. The film thus completes a spiritual and psychological journey that ends where it begins: in one’s innocence no matter how many times it has been betrayed or outgrown. The existential meaning of our life consists of many conscious choices that we make, and has to be understood in conjunction with the meaning of our unconscious attitudes that Jinhe and Nuan represent going in the opposite direction.

33

Modern man’s secret, or not so secret, identification with the primitive will not diminish or subside so long as his success is defined and measured by his self-alienation that is often conveniently referred to as social or intellectual progress. Little surprise modern man often fantasizes and dreams of returning to the familiar environment where he once was as a child or primitive. This return is made possible in Huo’s earlier film, *Postmen in the Mountains* (那人、那山、那狗 1998), which is such a compensatory adjustment for what Jung calls modern man’s progressive alienation from his own self. Set in the mountains that impede social progress and preserve the primitive life-style for ethnic minorities, the narrative film tells a sentimental story of a young man’s successful initiation into his father’s world as a postman regularly traveling hundreds of miles on foot in China’s backwaters, depicted as a pristine primitive paradise still untouched by the advance of modern civilization. The film moves the viewer in a powerful way, with painterly images of nature that totally enchants the son as well as the father who believes that people who live in the mountains are “the descendents of the gods;” (etymologically, the word for fairies and gods in Chinese is *xian*, 仙, a compound word of two written characters: “people” and “mountains”). The title, *na shan na ren na gou*, (the mountain, the man, and the dog) runs like a line from a haiku poem that conjures up a nature painting of incredible beauty, an iconographical idea of man living and working in perfect harmony in nature. The trip, last one for the father, the first one for the son, and just another one for the family dog, allows the father to introduce his son to a community of people held together by their common circumstances of living in the primitive villages scattered in the mountains who believe in simplicity, filial piety, trust, kindness, and good will. Huo uses generational gap or friction between the father and son to represent the conflict of values, which disappears into the thin air when the son, who is tempted by the modern world of money, fame, and technology, makes the strong emotional connection with and

personal commitment to the people his father has served faithfully all his life. Thus the film offers a healthy dose of myth to the urban viewer who secretly dreams of being a hermit or cave man living in total harmony in nature just like the father. Such is the condition in which modern man lives as Rollo May has understood him: “As a practicing psychoanalyst I find that contemporary therapy is almost entirely concerned, when all is surveyed, with the problems of the individual’s search for myths. The fact that Western society has all but lost its myths was the main reason for the birth and development of psychoanalysis in the first place. ... I speak of the cry for myths because I believe there is an urgency in the need for myth in our day. ... Many of the problems of our society, including cults and drug addiction, can be traced to the lack of myths which will give us as individuals the inner security we need in order to live adequately in our day” (May 9). By presenting the security and paradise of a simple primitive life, *Postmen in the Mountains* richly compensates the viewer, robbed of his peace and security, captive of a deep anxiety, longing for the myth of returning to nature and being free of the pressure of social conformity.

34

As surreal and unbelievable as *A World without Thieves* (天下无贼 *tian xia wu zei*, 2004) is, with two highly skilled pickpockets risking their lives to protect the innocence as well as the hard-earned money of an idiot who does not believe there are thieves in the world, the movie nonetheless resonates with the urban audience. For one thing, Feng Xiaogang’s work tells us what contemporary Chinese fantasize about, forever caught in what Xiaobing Tang refers to as “the dialectical movement of the heroic and the quotidian [that] constitutes an inescapable condition of secular modernity” (Tang 1). Although the “lyrical age” of Mao’s utopian communism is long gone ever since the Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1977, our archaic passion for myth remains, which means that, for better or worse, the mundane life in post-Mao and post-Deng China has to be re-imagined mythically for it to have meaning and purpose. Little wonder then that Feng Xiaogang chose Tibetan Buddhism as the backdrop for his story, a belief in karmic retribution almost as popular now as Maoism was during the Cultural Revolution when people embraced the myth of communism. The story begins with Wang Bo and Wang Li, the two pickpockets, going to Tibet to get rid of their stolen goods. It is there that Wang Li, the female outlaw, pregnant by her partner in crime and accomplice, suddenly feels the need to quit her life of crime and to repent in the name of her unborn child, (“我想为孩子积点儿德 *wo xiang wei haizi ji dian de*). On their train ride back she runs into and befriends Dumbo (sha gen, literally “born stupid”), a divine child trapped in a 21-year old body of a day laborer taking 60,000 yuan of his hard-earned money home. Born and raised in a rural village where people would not touch cow-droppings if one drew a circle around them, Dumbo is a product of this pre-modern communalism or primitive paradise, innocent of greed and avarice. Between the ages of 16-21, he works as a construction-worker and befriends a pack of wolves that hang out near his worksite he is left alone to guard.

An ethical battle between good and evil soon begins in which, instead of stealing

Dumbo's money, Wang Bo and Wang Li try to protect his money from being stolen by other thieves on the train. Innocent and therefore fearless of the risks of being with wolves in the wild, this Buddha-like young man is entirely unaware of the dangers of falling prey to a pack of thieves riding on the same train who are as determined to steal his money as Wang Bo and Wang Li are to guard it as if Dumbo's innocence is as important as the life of their unborn child. Turning himself into a shepherd dog, Wang Bo robs the people who have robbed Dumbo and returns the money to its rightful owner before he dies, performing a Buddhist miracle in the midst of what appears to be Darwinian jungle in which only the strong survive. The action-packed train ride, representing a moral battle waged in a capitalist China, brings the relevance of Buddhism to a market economy when the strong engineer their own spiritual salvation by observing the laws of karmic retribution and by protecting the weak that they are free to prey on. The story ends with Wang Li returning to the Buddhist temple where she has met Dumbo before, leaving behind her infant to be picked up by two Tibetan women, signifying the beginning of a new life on this holy religious site, free of sins and thieves. The aesthetics of Feng Xiaogang's film proves, among other things, that, "art is about spirit and, in an aesthetical sense, is the name given to the animating principle of the mind," and "this principle is no other than the faculty of presenting *aesthetical ideas*." The fantasies of wolves protecting sheep or of innocence triumphant over corruption are such aesthetical ideas that delight the human spirit. They contribute to what Fredrick Schiller called "the necessary condition by which alone we can attain to a judgment" on modern civilization (Schiller 108). The dramatic return to the ancient religion of Buddhism expresses something hidden and totally incompatible with the rational choices people make and their existential meanings regarding money, profit, and material wealth; it releases the contents of the collective unconscious, unspoken desires represented by heroes and monsters waging wars in the darkest corners of the human psyche.

35

It seems that quite a few films made in the past decade express modern man's ambivalence to progress as well as nostalgia for the past that can only be signified and represented mythically. It almost seems as if the discomfort, deep anxiety, and rational fear that people experience because of the change in the present are offset when the viewer is able to, through the help of modern art, reminisce, sentimentalize, revisit or even reconstruct the past according to how well s/he is faring in China's rapid economic progress. His irrational need of "returning to a simple and authentic life" is given full and colorful expression in *Together* (和你在一起 *he ni zai yiqi*) directed by Chen Kaige, a tear-jerking story of a thirteen-year old child music prodigy, Liu Xiaochun, a gifted violinist with a bright and promising future who decides to terminate his professional music career in Beijing and return to his humble abode in a rural town in southern China with his father. The choice in this case is, as has been in many other recent narrative films, between material success measured by personal fame and modern amenities, and renunciation of bourgeois values in favor of friendship and family ties. Unfailingly, Liu Xiaochun chooses the latter and sacrifices his

music career to be with his adoptive father, Liu Cheng, an ordinary farmer who takes him to Beijing for a good music education only to realize that his humble origin is in the way of his son's success. In fact, Xiaochun is not aware of the choices until he runs into a situation in which he feels pulled toward different directions by his three mentor figures: his adoptive father, a country bumpkin and widower with unconditional love for his son, his first teacher (Jiang), a true music virtuoso and humanist in contempt for a mass society and for its criteria of success, and his second teacher (Yu Shifeng, played by Chen Kaige himself), an academic guru at Beijing Conservatory whose name is well recognized nationwide in the world of music. Xiaochun's final decision to end Yu's tutorage in favor of plain existence in the countryside with his father deeply gratifies the viewer's unspoken and unconscious desire to rise above the temptations of the big metropolis: fame, wealth, career, women, and success.

36 When dealing with the aesthetics of primitivism, it is worth keeping in mind also what is being excluded from a work of art such as *Together*, which portrays human spiritual life at the expense of economic reality in which people participate by making rational choices. It is interesting, for instance, how female beauty revolves around "social zeros" when Lily, a good looking young woman pursued by many successful businessmen willing to throw money at her, becomes attracted to the 13-year old who is unable and unlikely to make this material girl happy. That towards the end of the film Lily, touched by Xiaochun's misplaced affection for her, is more interested in his wellbeing than those rich men seems surreal, especially when she structures her life around the trade of female beauty for social security. In the final shot, she and teacher Jiang stand side by side in Beijing train station to say goodbye to Xiaochun and Liu Cheng, which seems to indicate a drastic change of attitude on her part and a new appreciation for authentic human interactions rather than those mediated by money and wealth. Compensation of a major proportion is achieved when Liu Cheng the father appears so devoted to his son, living in an age in which the traditional family is severely weakened by rapid economic development that moves the patriarchs (capable male labor in agricultural communities) from rural areas to the cities, creating a whole class of absentee fathers. Contrary to what normally happens with displacement by modernity, his is a case in which Liu Cheng loves Xiaochun so much that he sacrifices his own happiness (of getting married) to be his son's business agent and guardian. Equally compelling and incredible is Xiaochun's final decision to be filial rather than successful, a decision that puts everything in reverse. By denouncing his assured success under the tutorage of Professor Yu in favor of a lifetime together with his father in the countryside, Xiaochun does what few has ever done or will do in China's economic transformation in which peasants flock into the urban centers in the millions. The film ends as it cross-cuts between the scenes in the train station 13 years ago in black and white, in which Liu Cheng picks up Xiaochun as an abandoned infant, and the scenes in the train station in the present, in which Xiaochun joins his father on their way back to their rural hometown, a powerful articulation

of the unspoken need for a return or homecoming in order to be “together” with the people important to us, in the case of Xiaochun, his father who is a source of inspiration and meaning for his music.

It seems that operating in modern Chinese fiction and cinema are such aesthetics as Taoism, Buddhism, and primitivism that go to make the mosaic of modernism as a conscious or unconscious resistance and response to the Western discourse of history as social progress. This is so because, as Naoki Sakai has pointed out, “[m]odernity for the Orient ... is primarily its subjugation to the West’s political, military, and economic control. The modern Orient was born only when it was invaded, defeated, and exploited by the West. This is to say that only when the Orient became an object for the West did it enter modern times. The truth of modernity for the non-West, therefore, is its reaction to the West” (Naoki 496). An important part of that reaction is the reappearance of the traditional or archaic concept of man who is the product of chance rather than an agent of change, which the enlightened modern man wanted to reject, along with the cultural traditions that Hegel found wrong with the Oriental world. Perhaps modernism is a misnomer by which to call works produced in recent decades, considering so many of them are in fact expressions of a yearning to be returning to and be identified with a primitive and pre-modern past in which we think we have deep roots. It is not without a sense of irony that we review a century of fiction writing (and film production), beginning with a literary revolution on traditions as something in the way of social progress, and ending with the works by modernist and discontents of industrial civilization who see social progress as a blind force uprooting modern man from his traditions. What was blamed for China’s stagnation at the turn of the last century—narrative patterns, literary conventions, and frameworks of intelligibility such as Taoism and Buddhism—has been resurrected and revived as powerful ways of re-imagining and reinterpreting contemporary China. A silence has been finally broken, so to speak; “this silence is striking in that modern Chinese literature has traditionally dated itself as beginning in a movement to discard the native literary language in favor of a literary language explicitly based on Western models”. The survival of some of the native literary tradition in modern times is made possible partially by the way people defined social progress too narrowly in the last century. About classical Chinese novels, critic and scholar Andrew Plaks says the following, explaining how aesthetic and moral attitudes such as fatalism and pessimism are embedded in the very structure of literary language and narrative patterns.

37

This is the fact that, despite our easy acceptance of the commonsense premise that narrative is that branch of literature which relates a sequence of human events, it is precisely in the area of defining the “event” as an existential unit that we find a wide divergence of conceptual models from culture to culture. (Plaks 314)

Modern civilization is also a historical event about which there exists a wide

divergence of conceptual models; the works discussed in this paper show how that event can be interpreted in multiple ways to satisfy different desires when modern writers and film directors adopt different aesthetics to resist the totalizing discourse of social progress. This is also why the antiquated ways of conceptualizing the world are now being rediscovered by modern artists all over again.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Marston. *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990.
- Bradbury, Malcolm, and James McFarlane. *Modernism: 1890-1930*. New York: Viking, 1991.
- 38** Chen, Duxiu. "On Literary Revolution." *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*. Ed. Kirk Denton. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1996.
- Chow, Rey. *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia UP, 1995.
- Cohn, Dorrit. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Models for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1978.
- Denton, Kirk. *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1996.
- Gao, Xingjian. *Soul Mountain*. Trans. Mabel Lee. Australia: HarperCollins, 2000.
- Goldmann, Lucien. *Towards A Sociology of the Novel*. London: Tavistock, 1975.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Dover, 1956.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodore Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum, 1993.
- Huters, Theodore. "Ideologies of Realism in Modern China: The Hard Imperatives of Imported Theory." *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourses in Modern China*. Eds. Liu Kang and Tang Xiaobing. Durham: Duke UP, 1993. 147-73.
- Jung, Carl. *The Essential Jung*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1983.
- . *The Undiscovered Self*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1990.
- Kahler, Erich. *The Inward Turn of Narrative*. Forward by Joseph Frank. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 1987.
- May, Rollo. *The Cry for Myth*. New York: Norton, 1991.
- Mote, Frederick W. *Intellectual Foundations of China*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1989.

- Naoki, Sakai. "Modernity and Its Critique: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 87:3 (1988): 496.
- Plaks, Andrew, ed. *Chinese Narrative*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1977.
- Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale UP, 1954.
- Tang, Xiaobing. *Chinese Modern: the Heroic and the Quotidian*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- Wright, Elizabeth. *Psychoanalytic Criticism*. London: Methuen, 1984.
- Zhou, Zuoren. "Humane Literature." *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*. Ed. Kirk Denton. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1996.