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## RECOVERING A LOST VOICE: SU TONG'S AND YU HUA'S CATHARTIC FICTION

**Abstract.** The Cultural Revolution left deep scars in the memory of the Chinese and strongly influenced Chinese literature, especially those works written by the generation who lived to experience its excesses. Yu Hua's novels *To Live* and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, as well as Su Tong's *Binu and the Great Wall of China*, address the problem of the pain and traumas associated with Chinese history. The writers draw upon the traditions of storytelling in an attempt to overcome those traumas by creating new, linear, coherent, and even optimistic, tales about the past experiences of ordinary people, who are given a chance to narrate them against the dominant historical discourse. Walter Ong's theory of orality and Michel Foucault's concept of counter-history open up new possibilities of analysis, and help understand these cathartic prose works. A careful reading of Su Tong's and Yu Hua's novels also raises the question of the authenticity of the trauma recovery presented, and exposes the risk of complicity with the hegemonic discourse of history in silencing and repressing the traumatic memories that they face.

**Key words:** Chinese literature; Su Tong; Yu Hua; orality; trauma recovery; counter-history.

Since the late 1970s, a great number of novels strongly influenced by traumatic memories of twentieth-century history, especially the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), have been published in China. Su Tong (b. 1963) and Yu Hua (b. 1960), two popular and critically acclaimed contemporary Chinese writers, also frequently address this problem in their prose works. Both authors used to belong to the ranks of the avant-garde (*xianfeng pai* 先锋派) in the 1980s; however, their writing changed dramatically in the following decade. Avant-garde prose with its irregular forms, unreliable narration, and shocking descriptions of violence can be claimed to reflect symptoms of psychological trauma (Hockx 44-47; Yang Xiaobin 44-47; Higonet 92). Yu Hua's *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (1995) and *To Live*

(1993) as well as Su Tong's *Binu and the Great Wall of China* (2006) treat trauma in a quite different way, seeking to overcome its influence.

According to the psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, fragmentation of consciousness caused by trauma may be overcome by constructing a narrative which accommodates the knowledge, feelings, and meanings related to the underlying traumatic event (Shay 188; DeMeester 650). Yu Hua's and Su Tong's novels feature linear, coherent plots, they no longer picture a world without justice, they are not testimonies of inextricable suffering. They strive to present methods of restoring a state of equilibrium and resisting violence as well as the effects of random catastrophes inscribed into the Chinese history so that happy endings appear as a possibility.

Karen DeMeester turns to the discoveries made by Victor Frankl's Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy to identify methods of recovering from trauma. According to the School's paradigms, man's fundamental motivating force lies in the search for meaning rather than in the following of instincts. That meaning is deciphered in the process of freeing oneself from suffering and trauma. Septimus, a character in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, discovers certain truths as a consequence of his war experiences. He writes those truths down, intending to present them to the Prime Minister. Septimus's only chance is communication as it has the power of conferring sense on traumatic experiences. However, the community he lives in takes that chance away from him, leaving him unable to recover (DeMeester 558-561).

In literature, communication can be made possible and the silence, which is caused by shock on the one hand and enforced by the repressive hegemonic discourse of history on the other, can be broken by returning to the oral tradition. This return has become an important trend in postcolonial and ethnic writing as well as in magic realism. Cristina Ana Băniceru claims that the muteness and demise of storytelling associated with the atrocities of World War I, mentioned by Walter Benjamin in his mid-1930s essay *The Storyteller*, are no longer there due to the rebirth of orality in postmodernist literature (Băniceru 167; Benjamin 361-378).

Băniceru employs Walter Ong's term "secondary orality" to emphasize that this new orality differs from primary orality and should be considered a simulation of the latter (167). Ong noticed that secondary orality, just like the primary one, helps people create a group sense; however, the group is incomparably bigger now – it should be associated with McLuhan's "global village." While in primary oral cultures group-mindedness and spontaneity were natural, they are reflected on and chosen today (Ong 133-134; Băniceru

167-168). Simulated orality puts an end to the solitude of written texts, which are characterized by a double absence of both writer and reader. Moreover, it makes the haunting voices of colonized peoples, women, prisoners, the mentally ill audible at last. All of them now speak up as first-person narrators of numerous novels (Băniceru 166, 174).

Orality proves to be a useful tool for the Chinese new historical fiction (*xin lishi xiaoshuo* 新历史小说), which challenges the official historical discourse and attempts to give a voice to the ones it marginalizes.<sup>1</sup> Listening to silent voices and searching for omissions, discontinuities in the dominant historical narratives is recommended by Michel Foucault as well. The French philosopher points out the possibility of insurrecting subjugated knowledge(s)—the hidden, silenced forms of knowledge often pictured as illegitimate, unscientific and therefore unqualified—and constructing counter-histories to resist power, which can never be separated from knowledge (as in the Foucaultian “power/knowledge”) (Medina 12-18; Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* 7-10, 178-179, 66, 69-71; Foucault, “What is an Author?” 134-135). Michael Berry also turns to Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of “centrifugal” and “centripetal” forces to explain how trauma narratives are created. The trauma narratives discussed in this paper seem to rely on the centrifugal force; they attempt to destabilize the central discourse, creating a heteroglossia together with other unofficial narratives (Berry 7-8; Bakhtin 490).

Each of the three analysed novels uses a marginal perspective. Xu Fugui, one of the two narrators of *To Live*, is a landowner who then turns into a poor peasant (the other narrator is a man who, collecting folk songs, meets Fugui in the fields and listens to the story he tells about his and his family’s life<sup>2</sup>). Xu Sanguan, the protagonist of *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, works at a silk factory in a small town in the south of China, and Binu lives not just in the peripheries of the kingdom but even on the margins of the local community.

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<sup>1</sup> The new historical fiction (*xin lishi xiaoshuo* 新历史小说) started to develop after 1985 parallel to or as part of the avant-garde. It resisted the official discourse of revolutionary history and negated the Chinese modernity: an ongoing project, in which time, perceived as linear, is put before space and history is thought to be progressive and teleological. The project of modernity has been pursued in China throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was present, among others, in Maoism as well as in the ideas behind Deng Xiaoping’s reforms and opening up (*gaige-kaiifang* 改革开放) policies. Lin Qingxin 12-17, 33.

<sup>2</sup> This narrator may be reminiscent of the third-person narrator, a storyteller who does not participate in the events he relates, appearing in traditional literary works modelled on the form of oral performance (Børdahl 5).

1. TRACES OF ORALITY IN THE THREE NOVELS  
IN THE LIGHT OF WALTER ONG'S DEFINITION

1.1. ADDITIVE

In his article entitled "Walter Ong's Paradigm and Chinese Literacy," David Ze undertakes the difficult task of discussing some of the "characteristics of orally based thought and expression" (Ong 36) described by Walter Ong in relation to the Chinese culture (Ze, "Walter Ong's Paradigm"). Most of these characteristics are in some form present in the analysed novels, and some of them are especially worthy of discussion in the context of the texts' attempt to overcome historical trauma.

The first characteristic enumerated by Ong is additive structure. He discusses this quality analysing two translated versions of the description of creation from the Book of Genesis. In the seventeenth-century Douay version, which was created in a culture retaining a large oral residue, the description is composed of compound sentences with the dominating conjunction "and". In the twentieth-century *New American Bible*, "and" is replaced by words such as "thus," "when," "then," and, in this way, a relation of subordination is introduced (Ong 36-38).

Ze claims that the classical Chinese language was characterized by a certain simplicity as there was a tendency to construct compound rather than complex sentences. Only the intellectual elite was capable of understanding relations of subordination inherent in the context of those sentences, but not explicitly articulated. Subordinate clauses were rare in popular literature too; however, in this case the implicit relations of subordination were absent, those who did not receive education seldom put events in order according to their relative importance (Ze, "Walter Ong's Paradigm").

Simple sentences imitating the uneducated characters' manner of speaking can be found especially often in *To Live* and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. Fugui's narration features many short sentences separated by commas or periods: "The sickle was ready, Kugen wanted to hold it even while he was sleeping, I didn't let him, then he said let's put it under the bed."<sup>3</sup>

Of course, compound sentences are not as prevalent as in the Douay Bible, but additive structure is clearly recognizable. Nevertheless, it should be noted

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<sup>3</sup> The author's own translation retaining the original placement of commas. Yu Hua, *Huozhe* chap. 10. Michael Berry's translation modifies the original text so that it loses its additive structure: "After the sickle was finished, Kugen insisted on sleeping with it. I wouldn't let him, so he had to settle for keeping it under his bed." Yu Hua, *To Live*.

that the narration of *To Live* focuses mainly on important events arranged in a logical, chronological order. It departs from the absolute closeness to lived experience found in some of Yu Hua's and Su Tong's avant-garde works (e.g. Yu Hua's *1986* or Su Tong's *1934 Escape*), in which they used experimental narrative techniques to bring together unaltered, chaotic memories added to one another in the seemingly random order in which they appear in the mind of the traumatised person. It is evident that even though the narration of *To Live* approaches spoken style, an order in the form of a linear narrative has been superimposed on the characters' memories of their own history.

## 1.2. AGGREGATIVE

Ong claims that oral expression tends to be "aggregative rather than analytic" (38). It is most apparent in creating formulas such as "brave soldier" or "beautiful princess", which facilitates memorisation and imparts attributions assembled by many generations. Phrases like "enemy of the people" or "Glorious Revolution of October 26" also fall into this category (Ong 38). David Ze emphasises propagandistic potential of such formulas. He classifies some Chinese idioms among them and points out their ideological content, stresses the fact that they often propagate certain values or define power relations within the family ("Walter Ong's Paradigm").

The analysed novels employ formulas in two ways. In the first place, formulas are used to describe the characters. Characters of all three novels are simple people living in small communities, who tend to add a person's defining characteristics to his or her name. At times, such a characteristic or the name of a person's position replaces the original name altogether, which helps bring order into their lives and social relations and describes some real situations. Fugui's son-in-law, Wan Erxi, is frequently referred to as "crooked-headed" (Yu Hua, *To Live*). One purpose of calling him so is to define his value as a candidate for a husband. The words "Blood Chief" (Yu Hua, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* chap. 1) are inseparably connected with the surname of a man called Li as he decides who is allowed to sell blood to the local hospital in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. Some of the characters' original names also bear special meaning. One example is Kugen („bitter root" or „reason for hardship")—suggested as Fugui's grandson's name by the child's grandmother. The full name Xu Kugen ("the reason for the Xus' hardship") describes the bitter fate of the family and the little boy, whose mother died in childbirth.

Sometimes senselessness and mendacity of accepted formulas are exposed in the novels too. Fugui continues to call the county magistrate, his former fellow soldier Chunsheng, by his original name, even though everyone else calls him “Magistrate Liu” in keeping with his new name: “Liberation Liu”. Some of the formulas used frequently during the Cultural Revolution are questioned as well. When the Red Guards come to Fugui’s village in search of enemies of the revolution, but are unable to identify any, they turn against the team leader, and one of them accuses him:

‘Who are you?’ ... ‘I’m the team leader, the team leader.’ Who could have known she would scream, ‘You’re the capitalist roader! Abusing your power to walk the road to capitalism!’ ... ‘He’s been making you live through a white terror, oppressing and belittling you!’ (Yu Hua, *To Live*)

The directives followed by the Red Guards are based on the assumption that among those who hold power, there are capitalist roaders implementing a reign of white terror. This assumption proves absurd in the case of Fugui’s village, and the only way to fulfil the ideological obligation is to arrest and torture an innocent man.

Similarly, in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, numerous formulaic slogans appear in Xu Sanguan’s town with the coming of the Cultural Revolution:

Among many other posters, there was indeed one that singled out his wife, Xu Yulan, saying that she was a ‘broken shoe,’ a shameless tramp, saying that she had become a prostitute at the age of fifteen, saying that you could sleep with her for just two yuan a night, saying that the men she had slept with would fill up ten whole trucks. (Chap. 25)

Due to the lack of actual prostitutes in town, Xu Yulan is accused of being one, and the rape by her former fiancé, He Xiaoyong, is used as pretext. Xu Yulan can hardly be described as a prostitute, and some of the expressions used in the poster, such as “broken shoe”, are purely conventional, inherent in formulaic descriptions of “loose” women frequent in the dominant discourse of the Cultural Revolution. Xu Sanguan attempts to demonstrate the absurdity of these accusations to his sons:

‘They say that Xu Yulan is a prostitute. They say she sees clients every night, that she charges two *yuan* a night. But I want you all to think about that. Who exactly is it that sleeps in the same bed with Xu Yulan every night?’ ... His three sons gazed silently back toward him. Finally, Sanle broke the silence. ‘It’s you! You sleep in the same bed as Mom every night.’ ‘That’s exactly

right,' Xu Sanguan said. 'It's me. Every one of Xu Yulan's johns is me. But can you really call me a john?'. (Chap. 25)

### 1.3. AGONISTICALLY TONED

Ong describes oral cultures as agonistic: riddles and proverbs force people to interact with one another; moreover, there is a profusion of elaborate patterns of name-calling, but exceptionally complex expressions of praise are common too (43-45). In *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, He Xiaoyong's wife is well aware that when she comes to ask her enemy Xu Yulan a favour, she must humble herself. This allows Xu Yulan to praise herself and insult He Xiaoyong's wife:

You have bad karma, and you're getting exactly what you deserve. Our family has good karma. If you do right, good things will come to you. Look at us. We're doing better and better. Take a look at my blouse. This is raw silk. I sewed it for myself just last week. (Chap. 23)

A while earlier Xu Yulan says:

My fate is sweet. Everyone says Xu Sanguan will live for a very long time. They say you can see from his face that he'll be blessed with longevity. If you look at his hands, you'll see that my Xu Sanguan's life line runs long and deep. What does that mean? It means that even when he's over eighty, the King of Hell won't be able to pull him down to the netherworld, no matter how hard he tries. (Chap. 23)

Ong claims that oral cultures are characterised by high tension of interpersonal relationships. In oral narratives and in literary works retaining a high oral residue, graphic descriptions of violence are commonplace as opposed to novels produced under the conditions of high literacy, where characters' internal struggles come to the fore (Ong 43-44). Ze also emphasises frequent descriptions of violence in the tradition of Chinese literature ("Walter Ong's Paradigm").

In the analysed novels, the reader encounters descriptions of atrocities of the Cultural Revolution (e.g. the scene of the Red Guards beating Chunsheng, witnessed by Fugui) or, more generally, of crimes committed by cruel regimes (decapitated heads on the city gate in *Binu and the Great Wall of China*), of dead and injured bodies (observed by Fugui when he serves as a soldier), and fighting (Xu Sanguan's son beating the blacksmith's son).

However, it should be noted that, while numerous characters die an unnatural death, the descriptions are usually not very graphic, a far cry from the shocking goriness of avant-garde short stories such as Yu Hua's *1986* or *Classical Love*. Moreover, many of those deaths are caused by uncontrollable, random circumstances and not by other characters: He Xiaoyong and Wan Erxi die in accidents, Fugui's wife Jiazhen dies because of a disease, Fugui's daughter Fengxia dies in childbirth, death on the battlefield and death connected with conscripted labour can also be found in the novels. Misfortunes and suffering seem to be accidental. Politics and history, which should be counted among their causes, are depicted as incomprehensible forces similar to natural disasters (Wang 159). Even when Fugui's son Youqing dies after too much of his blood is drawn for the magistrate's wife, it is not the act of a ruthless, cruel politician. The magistrate—Chunsheng—begs for Fugui's family's forgiveness, and eventually, even the boy's mother Jiazhen admits that he was not guilty.

Due to their random character, few of the misfortunes can be viewed as the characters' fault, so these people are usually able to unite and face the cruel history together. Xu Sanguan makes great sacrifices for his family selling his blood, and when he is weak and ill, many other characters offer to help him. In *To Live*, the team leader attempts to protect the village from famine and excesses of the Cultural Revolution, and Fugui's family helps him, giving him rice. On her way to the Great Wall, Binu experiences enmity caused by other people's jealousy or greed, but in the end, everyone and everything, including the general who oversees the construction of the Wall and the nature, is united against the atrocious project.

#### 1.4. HOMEOSTATIC

Oral thought is characterised by homeostasis—it always stays in the present and discards superfluous elements of the past. Walter Ong explains this using the example of a myth about a former ruler of the state of Gonja. In the version of the legend recorded at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the king Ndewura Jakpa had seven sons. Sixty years later, when the Gonja state consisted of five and not seven territorial divisions any more, the new version of the legend stated that the king only had five sons (Ong 46-48). According to David Ze, in China, it was the ruling elite who decided on the version of history available to the masses, thereby influencing the people's way of thinking and legitimizing their own rule (“Walter Ong's Paradigm”).



The way, in which Su Tong employs the legend about Meng Jiangnü in his novel *Binu and the Great Wall of China*, is worth careful consideration in the context of the problem of homeostasis. The earliest versions of the tale about Meng Jiangnü, whose tears make the Great Wall collapse, originated between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E. In *Biographies of Exemplary Women* by Liu Xiang and in *The Zuo Tradition*, the protagonist is the wife of a fallen soldier, and she demands appropriate condolences from the state's duke. The motifs of bringing a wall down with the woman's tears and her suicide after her husband's decent burial is ensured were added by Liu Xiang (Idema, *Meng Jiangnü* 5). A version featuring a protagonist married to a conscript labourer emerged in the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The Great Wall of China was incorporated into the story and its setting moved to the Qin era (221-208 B.C.E.) as late as the Tang period (618-907 C.E.) (Idema, *Meng Jiangnü* 7).

Wilt Idema has investigated deeply into the various versions of the legend accumulated over centuries (Idema, *Meng Jiangnü* 5-20). In many of them, the woman's future husband hides in her garden after escaping the corvée labour and sees her bathing there, which makes her decide to marry him. Subsequently, the man is forced to go back to the Wall, where he dies killed by the supervisor. Then, his wife arrives at the spot and sprinkles the bones of the many dead labourers with her blood to identify the remains of her husband.

The name "Meng Jiang" and the motif of carrying winter clothes for the husband first appeared in a ninth- or tenth-century version of the legend discovered in Dunhuang. Sometimes, Meng Jiangnü dies on the way back home, but more often she becomes the object of the First Emperor's desire. Their confrontation takes place in Shanhaiguan (the place where the Great Wall reaches the sea). She agrees to marry him, but after he satisfies her conditions, she chooses suicide instead.

Idema also mentions that in southern plays (*nanxi* 南戏) inspired by the story of Meng Jiangnü, the characters are often resurrected to enable a conventional grand reunion, and the husband is a student rather than just a simple man. In Jiangnan (where Su Tong comes from) versions, the husband's name "Wan Xiliang" bears special meaning as the emperor wishes to bury the man in the Wall as a sacrifice equivalent to ten thousand people (*wan* 万 means "ten thousand" in the Chinese language). In a late version of the legend with apparent southern and Buddhist influences, Wan Xiliang decides to descend from heaven to offer himself for ten thousand victims of the First Emperor's Long Wall construction project. Meng Jiangnü comes to earth as well, born from a gourd, and returns to heaven after Xiliang is given a great funeral.

The characters in Su Tong's novel belong to a peripheral culture, which is made clear, among others, by their magical beliefs. The villagers are born from selected elements of the local nature, e.g. the protagonist, whose name is changed from Meng Jiangnü to Binu by the novel's author, was born from a gourd, and she believes she will turn back into a gourd when she dies. Both she and her husband hail from lower social classes, they are both orphans, so Binu does not have a garden she could bathe in, and Wan Qiliang does not study.

It is important to mention that no confrontation between Binu and the First Emperor can be found in *Binu and the Great Wall of China*. The First Emperor appears as the King, who is supposed to come to Five-Grain City. Nevertheless, when everyone in the city is expecting the King's visit, it eventually turns out that only the King's corpse is waiting before the city gate, and the attendants are trying to conceal the stench with rotten fish. The King is dead and the kingdom is degenerate: a local ruler, Lord Hengming, uses people as horses and deer, and the lives of ordinary people are extremely hard due to cruel law, poverty, and disease. Even though Binu is a victim of the system, she is also powerful and her power, which will become fully apparent at the Great Wall, is also manifested while she is staying in Five-Grain City. When the inhabitants learn that the King is dead, everyone falls to their knees, only Binu, tied up and locked in a cage, cannot bend her knees. It looks as if all the people were kneeling before Binu:

The hearse carrying the dead King had not moved, so the people continued to kneel facing the road. Since the cage stood between them and the road, it looked as if the citizens of Five-Grain City were prostrating themselves before a cage. A crow flew off from Five-Grain Tower. ... She did not understand the bird's call, but she sensed its emotion, believing that the caws voiced feelings for the kneeling crowd. 'Binu, Binu, those people kneeling at your feet are asking your forgiveness.' (Su Tong 240)

In Su Tong's novel, the victory of simple, innocent people over a heartless regime is even more marked than in the case of earlier versions of the legend discussed by Idema. By the end of the novel, Binu is ready to die, but she does not commit suicide, nor does she die on her way back home, despite the sorceresses' prophecy. The events take a surprising turn as the supervisor of the construction of the Wall, the homesick general Jianyang, mounts his horse and heads to his native steppe, the labourers also stop working, and one of them says: "Listen! It is the sound of the mountain

crumbling. The wall at Broken-Heart Cliff has collapsed. Wan Qiliang and the others are rising up from the ground!" (Su Tong 291).

The liberation is not complete because, as an elderly man encountered by Binu on the road claims, every ruler wants to build walls, and even if the old king is dead, a new king will continue his project. Still, the power of the people's suffering, which is then transformed into power of resistance, is overwhelming. Binu believes in retribution, so she thinks that her failure to deliver the winter robe for her husband is caused by the fact that she stole it. If such a minor transgression has its consequences, deaths of thousands of labourers and of Wan Qiliang (who still symbolises those thousands like in the Jiangnan version of the legend) cannot be simply forgotten. Even though in Su Tong's novel justice is manifested in the material realm: the King dies and the Great Wall collapses, the conclusion of his story is far more subtle than grand reunions in southern plays.

The writer does not allow his characters a return to their peaceful, happy lives, but he does let them recover their voices. Su Tong addresses this problem as follows:

There is no doubt that tears are an important way of expressing emotions in my novel. In the tale about Meng Jiangnü crying at the Great Wall, 'crying' is the essence. I focused on the problem of tears, this novel can be described as a history of tears. ("Su Tong 'Binu'")

At the beginning of the novel, the King prohibits shedding tears on pain of death, and people have to learn to cry in various ways: through their ears, mouth, or hair, which can be understood as a means of resistance. Later, Binu and some other characters sell their tears as they prove to be a miraculous cure. Her tears also have the power of identifying good and bad people—when they are poured out on the crowd, they make bad people fall to the ground. When the protagonist finally reaches the Great Wall, tears are everywhere despite the prohibition on crying: rocks, trees, birds, and butterflies cry, tears are carried by the wind. Binu cries as well, but this time in a regular way, she does not need to shed tears through her hair any more. The Great Wall is brought down when oppressive silence is broken.

For centuries, the Great Wall was associated with the suffering of its builders, so Ming dynasty rulers did not refer to the fragments they built as "the Great Wall." It was the seventeenth-century Jesuits who described those fragments and the construction from the Qin period as one project. The Great Wall only became a glorious national symbol around the time of the Anti-

Japanese War (1937-45) (Idema, *Meng Jiangnü* 4). In Maoist China, the legend about Meng Jiangnü was fiercely criticised because of Mao's admiration for the First Emperor and his Wall (Idema, "Old Tales for New Times" 42; Idema, *Meng Jiangnü* 21). Su Tong, as a storyteller trying to achieve homeostasis and create a version of the legend that suits his times, draws on the earliest association connected with the Wall: the suffering of ordinary people who have to die to realise their ruler's plan. His retelling of the story about a woman who sacrifices everything for the "reactionary" love of only one person and brings down the wall of silence erected by the hegemonic authority resists the revolutionary discourse on history, which extols collective sacrifices for greater causes (e.g. big economic plans and, ultimately, building communism). The old legend becomes the basis of a tale that might be described as a counter-history, using Michel Foucault's term.

## 2. OBSTACLES ON THE ROAD TO CATHARSIS

In his book on trauma, history, and memory, Ban Wang discusses melodramatic features of selected films concerning the Cultural Revolution. One of those characteristics is a focus on the family presented as a microcosm where historical crises take place (Wang 144). This feature can be found in all three novels. Wang claims that describing the past through the lens of human emotions, their happiness, suffering, and love creates an aesthetic distance between the traumatic memory and history. He mentions the example of Xie Jin's film *The Herdsman*, which tells the story of a man sent to the countryside in northwest China in the 1950s. Despite initial difficulties, the protagonist makes the place his home thanks to the friendliness of the local people, close contact with nature, and marriage (Wang 150-151).

Even though there are many differences between the films discussed by Wang and the novels analysed in this paper, much of his discussion is relevant here. In both *To Live* and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, family and local community are depicted as shelters from the maelstrom of history. The fervour of the Cultural Revolution never reaches Fugui's village, and no one is willing to write big character posters. In fact, all the atrocities only happen in town. As Fugui's health worsens, other villagers help him cover up his weakness and never blame him for working too little in the fields. Deaths of Fugui's family members do not destroy solidarity among those who are still alive, e.g. when Fengxia dies, Fugui and Wan Erxi support each

other. Eventually, all Fugui's relatives are dead, but the old man continues to work in the field, able to talk about the past with composure and comforted by the thought that when he passes away, his fellow villagers will bury him.

One can admire the way Fugui accepts his fate; nevertheless, it can hardly be said that the novel ends happily. A happy ending proves possible in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. The Xu family makes it through both internal problems (marital infidelity and the Xus' son Yile having a strange biological father) and the challenges coming from the outside world (famine or persecution of Xu Yulan during the Cultural Revolution). In the end, they no longer suffer poverty, and their sons find jobs and get married, so there is no need for Xu Sanguan to sell blood any more. The road to this ending is not easy for the father of the family, whose love and readiness to sacrifice himself overcome all obstacles. He is in constant danger of losing his face because everyone in the village knows that He Xiaoyong is Yile's biological father, but he still decides to accept the boy as his own son. When Yile falls seriously ill, Xu Sanguan accomplishes a heroic deed and risks his life selling his blood in every hospital he encounters on his way to Shanghai, where Yile waits for him to bring the money for his hospital treatment.

Ban Wang claims that it is a treacherous artistic practice to focus on values such as beauty, love, compassion or emphasise the importance of peaceful everyday life and bonds within families or local communities. It is a way of ignoring the most difficult problem connected with every historical trauma, i.e. everyone's involvement in violence, the fact that in every community, victims and tormentors live alongside each other or that, to some extent, every member of the community plays both those roles simultaneously (Wang 152).

Among other characteristics of melodrama enumerated by Wang, there is also the tendency to depict victims of injustice as beautiful, suffering women and to create highly dramatic scenes (Wang 144). Beautiful, suffering women in the analysed novels include Binu and Fugui's wife Jiazhen. Even though Fugui loses his fortune, Jiazhen comes back to him, stays by his side, and endures the hardships of the simple life in the countryside. She suffers from a serious disease, which eventually forces her to stay in bed permanently. The woman is so selfless that she feels happy when she finds out her disease is incurable, and her poor family does not need to buy drugs or pay for treatment. Her condition worsens by the day, but she wants to work all the time: when she is no longer able to go out and work in the field, she cleans the house and sews. Another ordeal she has to go through is the death of her

children. After her daughter Fengxia passes away, Jiazhen's death follows less than three months later. Fengxia's fate is equally bitter. She is mute since childhood, and her parents, convinced that her life is going to be very hard anyway, decide to sell her and use the money to send her brother to school. Eventually, they abandon this plan and later manage to find a husband for Fengxia. For a while, she lives a happy life, which is then suddenly interrupted by her death in childbirth.

A number of dramatic scenes, designed to touch the reader's emotions, can be found in the novels. The characters' feelings are often expressed through theatrical gestures and tears. The scene of Fugui's return home from war is a good example:

[A] woman started running toward us, crying out my name. I recognized that it was Jiazhen, stumbling as she ran. When she got to me she called out, 'Fugui!' She then fell to the ground and began to bawl. I said to Jiazhen, 'Why are you crying? What's there to cry about?' Yet, before I could finish my sentence, I had also started to weep. (Yu Hua, *To Live*)

Moving scenes are frequent in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* as well. When the town is suffering from famine, Xu Sanguan sells his blood to take his family to a local restaurant, but he excludes Yile from the trip because he believes money gained from selling blood should not be spent on someone who does not belong to the real, i.e. biological family. Yile runs away from home, and when Xu Sanguan finds him, he feels he must change his mind:

Yile cried even harder. 'I'm hungry, I'm sleepy, I want something to eat, I want to go to sleep. And even if you won't have me as your real son, I thought you loved me more than He Xiaoyong . . . so I came back.' . . . Shoulders bent and head to the ground, he began to cry so violently that his body shook with his sobs. Xu Sanguan knelt down by his side. 'Climb onto my back.' (Yu Hua, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, chap. 22)

Ban Wang views melodrama as a shortcut to catharsis, a method of satisfying the audience's emotional needs rather than deepening their historical consciousness. Wang compares watching it to riding a roller-coaster; he claims that trauma loses its importance in favour of different strong emotions in the process. Constant emphasising of the characters' good-heartedness and foregrounding humanistic values conceal trauma, help the characters and the readers avoid confronting it. Melodrama is also used to establish an illusion of order (Wang 143-151). Fugui associates the deaths of his

children with new life as his son gave his blood to a woman in labour, and Fengxia died in childbirth. He also describes the death of his wife as a peaceful event, stresses the fact that she had no regrets and did not leave any unresolved issues behind. The safe perspective of the present that dominates in this kind of artistic production makes trauma seem to be a thing of the past.

Yu Hua's and Su Tong's counter-histories attempt to recover silenced voices of trauma victims by turning to the oral tradition. They give a voice to their marginalised characters and enable them to tell stories about the past based on humanistic values, which brings a new sense into the described Chinese history. Sometimes the potential afforded by references to oral tradition is exploited to its full: this is achieved by Su Tong through his approach to orally based homeostasis as presented in the novel *Binu*. It even happens that the writers eliminate the rare harmful effects of orality-related thought processes and literary techniques, exposing of senselessness of some accepted formulas. However, sometimes the positive potential of orality is only partially tapped into: e.g. the language of *To Live* and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* imitates additive structure of the oral thought, but the overall structuring of the plots reveals a superimposed chronological order of events. The novels also mitigate the harshly agonistic tone of orally based expression to suggest that no blame can be ascribed to any particular individuals or even groups, as if violence of history and politics resembled a natural disaster. Moreover, the cathartic potential of the texts is further compromised by their melodramatic features. All this suggests that the novels might actually be repressing haunting memories of the violent history, which are still floating just beneath the surface of the present ready to reappear any time.

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## ODZYSKIWANIE UTRACONEGO GŁOSU: KATARTYCZNA PROZA SU TONGA I YU HUA

### Streszczenie

Rewolucja kulturalna pozostawiła w pamięci Chińczyków wyraźne blizny i wywarła głęboki wpływ na chińską literaturę, szczególnie na utwory napisane przez przedstawicieli pokolenia, które osobiście doświadczyło jej ekscesów. Yu Hua w powieści *Żyć!* oraz *Kroniki sprzedawcy krwi* i Su Tong w powieści *Binu* zmagają się z cierpieniem i traumami związanymi z chińską historią. Próbując przezwyciężyć traumę, czerpią oni z tradycji literatury oralnej w poszukiwaniu nowych, linearnych, spójnych, a czasem nawet optymistycznych narracji o przeszłych doświadczeniach zwykłych ludzi, którzy otrzymują szansę stworzenia własnych opowieści, przeciwstawiających się dominującemu dyskursowi historiograficznemu. Teoria oralności Waltera Onga oraz pojęcie kontrhistorii ukute przez Michela Foucaulta otwierają nowe możliwości dla badacza usiłującego przeanalizować i zrozumieć te utwory i ich katartyczne działanie. Uważna lektura powieści Su Tonga i Yu Hua każe również postawić pytanie o autentyczność prezentowanego w nich uleczenia z traumy i rozważyć ryzyko ich współdziałania w tłumieniu traumatycznych wspomnień.

**Słowa kluczowe:** literatura chińska; Su Tong; Yu Hua; oralność; przezwyciężanie traumy; kontrhistoria.