

The Chinese Postmodern

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Trauma and Irony in
Chinese Avant-Garde Fiction

Xiaobin Yang

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Preface

The conceptualization of this work harks back to the early days when I was working at the Institute of Literature, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. Modern Chinese literature had not been my major interest before my graduation from college. The advent of Ma Yuan, Can Xue, Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Xu Xiaohu around the mid-1980s changed my view of contemporary Chinese literature. I wrote something on Ma Yuan (the first to apply postmodern theory to Chinese literary criticism, according to a fairly comprehensive bibliography of Chinese postmodernism [see Zhang Guoyi 323]) and then the rest of the cohort, in the last few years of the 1980s, with the help of some postmodern theories (Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and Ihab Hassan, among others) I was exploring at the time. I subsequently took up a book project on Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse, whose theories have had tremendous influence on this work. My essay on Ma Yuan and postmodernism was commended by Howard Goldblatt, who encouraged me to study with him in 1989 at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where naturally I was fascinated by Mo Yan, as well as everything that stylizes Goldblatt's cultural world: Jessye Norman's Richard Strauss, Philip Kaufman's Milan Kundera, and, of course, his own Xiao Hong.

The theoretical framework of this book was developed from the two graduate seminars I attended at Yale. The decisive event was Jean-François Lyotard's seminar on Freud and Kant in spring 1992. I remember visiting his office one day near the end of the semester for a discussion of the final project, which for some reason I mistakenly thought would not necessarily be a research paper. While waiting outside of his office at Whitney Humanities Center, I was told by a fellow student sitting next to me that Lyotard did in fact expect a paper, which was to be discussed in a moment but about which I had no clue at all. My paper topic—the Chinese avant-garde, historical trauma, and Maoist dis-

course—was then (forced to be) conceived within the next fifteen or twenty minutes after that student went in, and I was already quite confident when it was my turn. Lyotard supported this topic at the time, and, a month later, I received an A+ for the paper from him. I should also mention Kevin Newmark, whose seminar on the concept of irony was illuminating in terms of theoretical scope and depth. He looked surprised when I, hardly an eloquent participant in class discussion, finally turned in a substantial, though sometimes theoretically “far-fetched” (as he puts it), paper addressing contemporary Chinese literature and the vision of irony by incorporating Adorno’s philosophy of “negative dialectics.”

As a result of the unfortunate death of Marston Anderson, my advisor at Yale, I, officially still a Yalie, traveled in the early years of the 1990s on weekly basis from New Haven to Columbia University, New York, to work with David Der-Wei Wang, whose incomparably extensive and profound understanding of Chinese literature always attracted my admiration. This book would not be as well rounded without the insightful, and often challenging, advice from David Wang. The chapter on Mo Yan is revised from my paper for Professor Wang’s seminar on Chinese decadence.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Kang-i Sun Chang, who guided my academic career in every caring way possible during my years at Yale; to Geoffrey Hartman, whose teachings and conversations (about the Holocaust, in particular) and whose remarks on my earliest manuscript greatly inspired my intellectual imagination; to Yomi Braester, who kindly read an early version of the whole manuscript and made many helpful suggestions; and to Ted Hutters, Arif Dirlik, and Xudong Zhang for their comments on one or more portions of this manuscript that were published individually. Two anonymous readers provided valuable comments for the revision of the manuscript. Ingrid Erickson at the University of Michigan Press always offered great help in the whole process.

My thanks also go to the writers, who are not just the subject of this book. The mutual visitations and correspondences with Can Xue, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua over the past few years were often fruitful. My dialogue with Ge Fei, aired by Shanghai Education TV Station in summer 1995, was indeed an educational experience for me. And above all, my perennial friendship with Xu Xiaohu is conducive to closer under-

standings of his intellectual vision, despite the fact that Zhao Wumian, his nom de plume as a historicocultural critic, is now perhaps more popular than Xu Xiaohu the fiction writer.

I also wish to acknowledge the generous support for this project in different stages from Whiting Fellowship, Pacific Cultural Foundation, John F. Enders Fellowship, Henry Hart Rice Fellowship, and Cheng-Lee Fellowship.

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