Narrating Crises and Disasters in Contemporary Chinese Fiction

Yang Jincai

Abstract: Questions of crises occupy a central place in recent Chinese fiction. On one hand, novelists seek ways to develop a new sense of crises for those dispossessed by rural reform and nation-wide economic exploitation. Mo Yan's *Frog*, Yu Hua's *The Seventh Day*, Yan Lianke's *Enjoyment* and *Dream of Ding Village*, and Liu Qingbang's *Red Coal*, etc., exemplify this concern. On the other hand, numerous writers struggle to exhibit the deteriorating facet of local Chinese government that characterizes corruption and ill practice. Thus, while literary critics have celebrated the freedom to explore a broader range of subjects than corruption and bureaucracy, a dominant strain in the fiction of the past 16 years has urged the reader to look into the nuances of guilt and responsibility. Moral depravity, profit driven material pursuit, disenchantments and political interrogations have marked an era of paramount ethical issues that might embody global crises and disasters. Drawing on postsocialism, environmentalism, and social transformation, I will explore how contemporary Chinese novelists have complicated an ethics based on global human disasters.

Key words: Contemporary Chinese fiction; social transformation; human disasters; political interrogation; moral crisis

Author: Yang Jincai is Professor of English at the Institute of Foreign Literature, Nanjing University. His research interests cover the fields of British & American literature, contemporary Chinese literature and culture (Email: jcyang@nju.edu.cn).

标题：当代中国小说的危机与灾难言说

内容摘要：危机问题在中国新世纪小说中占据中心位席。一方面，小说家们试图反映当代中国一些人的危机感，他们因农村改革和全国性的经济运作而变得一无所有。莫言的《蛙》、余华的《第七天》、阎连科的《受活》和《丁庄梦》、刘庆邦的《红煤》等均对此予以关注；另一方面，众多的小说家们竭力呈现中国地方政府执政水平恶化的一面，其特征主要表现为腐败和不作为。对此，文学批评界反应及时，即刻觉得有了更多更广的可以言说的话题，甚至可以不受腐败和官僚体制两大话题制约。与此同时，过去 16 年创作的小

说呈现出一股显力促使读者细察过失和责任之间的细微差别。道德腐败、利益驱使下的物质追求、理想破灭和政治质询标志着社会进入一个伦理议题居首的新时代，也折射出全球性危机和灾难的影子。本文试图从伦理批评、环境保护论和社会转型论等视角，探寻当代中国小说家们如何使这一建立在全球性人类灾难基础之上的伦理主题更趋复杂化。

关键词：当代中国小说；社会转型；人类灾难；道德危机

作者简介：杨金才，南京大学外国文学研究所教授，主要研究英美学与文化、当代中国文学等。

China is nowadays featured by an explosive capitalist growth, multiple social contradictions, and various strategies of re-linking with global capitalism, exhibiting an apparent lack of coherence between theory and practice. Its advancement is accompanied by a vast transformation of the social body into emerging interest groups. What we have of China's increased globalization is in fact one of disturbing inadequacies that "has kept rural China ever on the edge in producing interpretations of what China's transformation means, ranging from coming collapse to inimical rise, with uncertainty and ambivalence in between."[1]

Chinese writers are becoming increasingly aware of the changing nature of risk in social transformation resulting from economic reform and the shifting landscape of the sociological study of disasters. They have begun to assess China's adoption of capitalism and predict its future, offering a far controversial picture of China in transition from communism to a market-oriented economy. As Minxin Pei has observed, China is experiencing an enormously daunting social transformation. On one hand, he argues, "rapid economic growth, massive social transformations, and relative political stability in the past two decades provide grounds for optimism." On the other, he continues, "the growing gap between the country's increasingly open and market-oriented economy and its closed political system, along with the increasing strains generated by an unprecedented pace of socioeconomic change, raise concerns about the sustainability of Chinese policy."[2] Many Chinese writers are voicing their doubts, concerns and bewilderment with their stark consciousness of uncertainty and catastrophe which may be related to China's fast economic and social developments. By exploring their thematic concerns, one may be amazed to find two things: first, that the period is one of healthy production of narrative

1 Jincai Yang, "Political Interrogation in Contemporary Chinese Fiction," *Neohelicon* 41.1 (June 2014) 155.

2 Minxin Pei, "Contradictory Trends and Confusing Signals", *Journal of Democracy* 14.1 (2003) 73.

fiction seen by the vast number of novels produced in China during the past decade or so and fuelled by the rise of popular culture and commercial globalization. What is striking is the tone of narration in these works now "fully recovered from the sentimental retrospection and naïve, simplistic socialist realism in the decades following the end of the Cultural Revolution."[1] Su Tong's *The Boat to Redemption*, Ge Fei's *Invisible Clothes*, and Bi Feiyu's *The Moon Opera* are all cases in point. They have differed largely from the Post-Mao era in which fiction such as Gu Hua's *Hibiscus Town* was dominated by sentimental retrospection following the doctrine of reform as well as a memory of scars. Similar undertakings have featured "scar literature" writers, such as Liu Xinwu and Zhang Xianliang, who were primarily concerned about writing, reality and imagination. Instead of cultivating social and political protest, they exposed the evils and "scars" of the Cultural Revolution and used literature to propagate political change and highlight individual value.

The second main characteristic of Chinese fiction in the 21st century is its sheer diversity featured by issues of globalization, hi-tech, urbanization, marketing economy, internet and poverty and their impact upon the lowly common Chinese such as the disadvantaged rural farmers. A dominant strain in the fiction of the past 17 years has urged the reader to look into the nuances of guilt and responsibility. Su Tong, for example, cast a group of teenage protagonists in his *Walking for a Kilometer along the Railway* and *The Stained Glass* who attempt to save themselves by refusing to take part in the disordered activities. By depicting leaving home as a solution, such authors often draw on a well-established trope in which a symbolic journey of growth and change is used to address a crisis. Seductions in Yan Lianke's *Serve the People*, betrayals in Yu Hua's *The Seventh Day* and disenchantments in Yan Lianke's *Ballad, Hymn, Ode* and *The Four Books* and political interrogations in Mo Yan's *Frog* and Yan Lianke's *Enjoyment* also translated as *Lenin's Kisses* have marked an era of paramount ethical issues that might embody global crises and disasters. These Avant-garde and experimental writings have been associated with a wide range of political perspectives and agendas, including emancipatory struggles for social justice, ideological quest, criticism of repressive politics, and allegedly apolitical forms of creative expression. Writers in the new century have diverged from the conventional way to speak for the dominant ideology of the reform as many did during Deng Xiaoping's

1 Lei Da, "Ershishiji jinsanshinian changpianxiaoshuo shenmeijingyan fansi" (Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience of 30 year novels in the 20th Century), *Xiaoshuopinglun* (*Fiction Review*) 1 (2009) 11.

reign.[1] They have shifted their attention to the shaded side of contemporary China, writing about the marginalized and reflecting on crises that accompany the existing social order. Efforts have been made to explore various disasters, displaying a reengagement with a realist tradition. Their voice is harsh, interrogative, but heart-wrenching. Thus, I will examine how contemporary Chinese writers write up human disasters characteristic of political, moral and environmental crises.

Political Interrogation

At its political level, contemporary Chinese fiction attempts to question rather than affirm their ongoing political status quo. Many writers have to respond in various ways to the socio-historical contexts and ideological agenda underlying a persistent interest in material success and wealth pursuit. Different from their predecessors in the 1980s and early 1990s who simply look back and portray life in rural and urban China affected by the Cultural Revolution and its upheavals, Chinese writers in the 2000s are more socially critical, exploring mechanism of the present society. Yu Hua, for example, tries to tell the world what has happened to China. According to Yu, Chinese people today seem to walk in a world "entangled between a scene of feasting and revelry and one of broken walls and ruined curbs."[2] In his observation, contemporary Chinese life is no less than a stage of inflicted pain. Yu Hua is not alone when he once uttered that "various social issues and concerns have permeated all walks of life in China today but they are obviously blinded by a kind of optimism originating from the nation's high speed of economic development."[3] Chinese modernity carries a double face that juxtaposes modern urbanization to a backward, remote countryside hiding its ugly side. "At the heart of the problem of Chinese modernism lies modernity and at the base of a purportedly stylistic or formal procedure lies also a political dimension, a social meaning."[4] At first glance, contemporary Chinese fiction tends to distance itself from its previous undertakings which mainly followed the political agenda of their time and tried to single out their political correctness in reaching a right stance exactly required of the dominant

1 Many writers in the 1980s hailed the Chinese reform and offered their salient critical stances in rebuking the Cultural Revolution. Gu Hua, Li Guowen and Zhang Jie are such writers whose well-known novels are among many *Hibiscus Town* (by Gu Hua), *Spring in Winter* (by Li Guowen) and *Heavy Wings* (by Zhang Jie).

2 Yu Hua, qtd. in Liu Ke, "Yuhua zicheng yao wei zhengzhi xiezuo"("Yu Hua's Claim for Writing Politics"), Shidaizhoubao (*Times Weekly*), June 28, 2013.

3 Yu Hua, qtd. in Zhou Mingquan, "Ping Yu Hua xinzuo diqitian" (On Yu Hua's The Seventh Day), Dangdai zuojia pinglun (*Contemporary Writers Review*) 6 (2013) 122.

4 Jincai Yang, "Political Interrogation in Contemporary Chinese Fiction," 151.

ideology.[1]

The release of Yu's *The Seventh Day* enhanced the controversy over China's politics of modernization. The novel stands as a burlesque criticizing China's reality by way of its absurd narrative. Inventive, playful, dark and disturbing, it tells of vivid tragic scenes in contemporary China typified by a 41-year-old man named Yang Fei who, recently dead, receives a notice that instructs him to show up for his own funeral before 9:00 AM.[2] Known for his belligerent condemnations of the horrors of life in his writing, Yu Hua is capable of weaving fragmented narrative sequences in which twisted syntax, grotesque images and metaphors abound. Here again lies his theme "to live", implying an even more desperate tone.

Yu Hua's harsh criticism finds its resonance in Yan Lianke's *Enjoyment* which also critiques Chinese reality of peasant grievances and the devastation under local government manipulation. In reality, groups of Chinese such as the rural farmers are often abandoned and ignored during the process of China's modernization. It is insightful in the way in which contemporary China is subtly examined and judged. In his observation of reality Yan Lianke criticizes Chinese modernity, exposing social inadequacies. So does his peer writer Mo Yan who writes in response to political agenda in contemporary China. He deftly "questions the legitimacy of violence committed in the name of revolution by depicting such violence in disturbingly graphic detail."[3]

Typical cases include his *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and *Frog*. Mo Yan turned to his birthplace a world he knows so well that he can use "aches and pains" to express his love for the wide earth and its peasants. His *Frog* examines the government's policy of family planning in the countryside, drawing a public attention to the systematic campaign for contraception in the countryside. The novel cultivates a woman country doctor named "Gugu" (Aunt) whose activities demonstrate a far more complicated nature of her mind. On the one hand, she acts as a firm executor of family planning policy forcing mothers of children to have induced abortions or a ligation of the oviduct and launching a massive manhunt for runaway pregnant mothers; on the other hand, she saves life, for she on many

1 Many writers in post-Mao China hailed the Chinese reform headed by Deng Xiaoping with little reflection on its outcome however negative it may be. Typical writers are Gu Hua, Li Guowen and Zhang Jie who simply rebuke the Cultural Revolution in favor of the reform. The burgeoning heteroglossia of the literary scene of the 1990s marks the bankruptcy of revolutionary utopianism of the Cultural Revolution replaced by the new idealism of the reform era.

2 Yu Hua, *The Seventh Day* (Xinxing chubanshe[New Star Press], 2013) 3.

3 Shelley W. Chan, *A Subversive Voice in China: the Fictional World of Mo Yan* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2011) 21.

occasions serves as a midwife, giving life to hundreds of babies. Here Mo Yan allows her to confess herself, but the evidence is largely hidden and paradoxical. He knows well how to handle political controversies in his days, for it is no easy job to address a sensitive subject such as family planning often termed as a basic national policy. Seen from this light, Mo Yan is adventurous in characterizing one who is both an executor of the family planning policy and a killer. Deftly, the novel brands itself a confession while featuring formal and thematic traits that are conspicuously fictional. As Foucault reminds us, "the confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement"[1] What we have of the fictionalized character Gugu is then one of reflection and despondence illustrated in the play that follows the novel. The fictional confession in the novel straddles intimate discourse with the prevalent common practices of family planning in rural China circulating within a public, making it a prime space within which to imagine a spiritual world of rural resentments against it. In the case of *Frog* discussed here, this kind of narrative Mo Yan employs playfully jettisons the intention of a huge amount of antagonism and spiteful attitudes from the empowered peasants towards the policy, allowing for a measure of criticism within a mass public that directly addresses the issue of human rights accompanied by the policy of family planning and the government's imposition of power on its subjects.

In all, *The Seventh Day, Enjoyment* and *Frog* stand as three fine examples in contemporary Chinese fiction extremely helpful to comprehend China today and its fiction writing. While they are interrogating governmental political maneuvering of local authorities that may have irrationally inflicted on lowly common Chinese various unexpected disasters, Yan Lianke and Mo Yan are both reminding their readers of a wide range of ethical issues of which moral degradation has invaded contemporary Chinese life. Such exploration has not been the subject of wide research due to many reasons, one of which is obviously how a critic should keep a right political stance, for one has to uphold the Party's leadership. If we look at it closely with respect to the multi-dimensional attitudes of its various authors, Chinese literature produced in the new century provides, apart from its political interrogation, a valuable and notable body of morally instructive fiction in which one might see another great surge in subversive voices.

Responding to a Moral Crisis

Mo Yan is not alone in his efforts to reveal his absorption of and deep

1 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, trans*. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage-Random, 1990) 61.

disappointment with reality. His contemporaries like Yu Hua and Yan Lianke are also highly conscious of an ill reality offering their sophisticated satires which showcase their condemnation of social, political and cultural maladies and human weaknesses. The former writes to expose and condemn the barbarities of local authorities. In his *The Seventh Day*, Yu Hua crafts a discerning critique of contemporary Chinese culture through an evocative allegory revealing fates much worse than death. He doesn't shy away from the harshness of modern China, but instead tries to highlight the humanity and kindness of ordinary people, their small everyday struggles, and their refusal to bow before the power of the government. Violence and conspiracies permeate Yu Hua's stories, for example, his "World like Mist" casts a few human characters who are reduced to abstract numbers 2, 4, 6, 7, and so on. The whole story revolves around a car accident and a suspected suicide, dominated by disconnected pieces of dreams, hallucinations, and memories concerning enigmatic characters such as the "driver," the "woman in gray," and 2, 6, 7, and others. By way of his grotesque images and metaphors of bloodshed, death, and weird and absurd dreams, Yu Hua captures an ill society in his unique narrative design which emphatically disrupts the logical and rational order of things.

Yan Lianke offers a far better existential parable that embraces absurdity and nihilism in contemporary post socialist China, arousing in the reader's mind various moral issues. Through his depiction of an ill society filled with insanity and official corruption in his *Dream of Ding Village*, Yan Lianke is in fact approaching Chinese peasants' complex relationship with wealth, power, desire and death. Death caused by blood-selling provides a useful example of how an actual tragic story is interpretative and narrated. It is one of the major thematic concerns in Yan Lianke's fiction displaying his personal sentiment of death: atrocious fear hanging around. Yan successfully transforms it into a deep concern for human survivals and fine points of ideological significance. In the proliferating narratives that seek to establish a more complete definition of human nature, his novels are filled with people who tend toward the ecstatic: they tumble into oblivion, edge toward absence, thin into evanescence.[1] In fact, at the start of a new millennium, Chinese people are becoming more and more confident in their efforts for a national rejuvenation. Notably, this confidence transforms into a drive for the Chinese Dream, immediately catching on within contemporary Chinese literature, where

1 In addition to Ma Xianglin (*Dream of Ding Village*), Sima Nan [*Riguangliunian* (*Life As It Is*, 1998)] is also a salient illustration of this phenomenon, in which forms of delirium or unconsciousness substitute for intersubjective imagination.

writers in different ways engage with a moral degradation. How to get rich quickly and earn a decent life is part of the Chinese Dream and has become the major goal of the Chinese. But in reality, it is still wishful thinking, especially for the poverty stricken rural farmers who are so loosely fastened to themselves that they frequently wander away and get lost, particularly when they attempt to find a better life by selling their own blood but instead become infected with HIV. Villagers in Dream of Ding Village act recklessly with HIV infection, giving rise to various destructive behaviors in which the blackness and ugliness of humanity surface. There are many scenes in the novel that embody these various behaviors such as power struggle, cheating in marriage and reckless love-making all illustrating a brutal morality tale that marks the stark transition China is undergoing.

As the first Chinese novel that deals with AIDS, *Dream of Ding Village* revisits the Chinese literary tradition in the 1980s derived from not only a human concern for life, but something related to a disease that has become a metaphor in which human disease is often embodied signifying in general, perhaps something like moral decay or social and political corruption or human evil.[1] Obsessed with their dreamful life Ding villagers are now driven mad and have lost their sense of reason and become devilish leaving their whole village forsaken. A village of life has now turned into a hell on earth:

> It was still the same place, but all the people were gone. The streets were as silent as death, empty of man or beast. There were no chickens, pigs, ducks, cats or dogs. Now and then, the call of a sparrow shattered the quiet, like a stone hurled through a pane of glass. Grandpa met only one living thing, a

1 A host of writers who came upon the Chinese literary scene after the mid-1980s reacted strongly against the vestiges of the aesthetic of the sublime dominated in Mao's time, expressing their disenchantment with Communist ideology, the party and the official narrative. With souls tormented with anxiety and driven by desire, with phantasmagoric dreams and the shady unconscious, they blasted the semi-religious doctrine of literature and art irrigated by vague Communist ideology and began to depict sex and sickness in the most disgusting, nauseating corporeality, smearing the public space of literature with images of the body intended to negate its sublime aspects: the body wallowing in filth and dirt, the body that farts and shits, the body dripping with urine and feces, and above all the body as rotting corpse, see Wang Ban, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) 231. Dubbed New Wave Fiction (Xinchao xiaoshuo), their works initiated a writing tradition of the fantastic, the schizophrenic, and the grotesque in post Mao China. Yan Lianke belongs to this tradition of which Li Tuo, Su Tong, and Yu Hua are also representative.

stray dog so skinny you could see its ribs….[1]

In a scene of unexpected catastrophe that has become characteristic of Yan Lianke's work with a portrayal of the death ridden Ding Village, we are encountering the cruel reality of the Chinese peasants who have been perpetually suffering from their own fate of a hopeless, unknowable, unintelligible and mysterious reality. Notably, this gesture of the narrative potentially implies its author's private spiritual life enhanced by an attempt to seek self-preservation in the text. Yan identifies this trope in the novel, in response to pressure from poverty and the coercive role of local government manipulation in rural China.

Ding villagers are tragic and hopeless and the place they live is now enveloped in death, appearing to be ominous and suppressing just as the narrative explains,

> The silence is intense. Yet even in the absence of voices or sound, Ding Village lives on. Choked by death, it will not die. In the silent shades of autumn, the village has withered, along with its people. They shrink and wither in tandem with the days, like corpses buried underground.[2]

In such atmosphere of universal death, one finds it easier to see deaths than slippery pebbles around the lane. Yan uses the first person narrator "I", a 12-year-old boy who has been poisoned to death to unveil his father's true nature. It is through "I" that we learn his father is called Ding Hui who is the biggest blood merchant known as the Bloodhead, characteristic of a capitalist in post socialist China. Grandpa asked his son Ding Hui to apologize for what he did, but was rudely refused. Sadly in vain Grandpa hid in dreams as fever did in blood. Yan writes,

> Grandpa has a same dream every day, Grandpa dreamed almost every night. For the last three nights, he'd had the same dream: the cities he'd visited — Kaifeng and Wei county, with their underground networks of pipes like cobwebs — running thick with blood. And from the cracks and curvatures of pipes, from the l-bends and the u-bends, blood spurs like water. A fountain of brackish rain sprays the air; a bright-red assault on the senses.[3]

Also,

1 Yan Lianke, *Dream of Ding Village*, trans. Cindy Carter (New York: Grove Press, 2005) 338.

2 Yan Lianke, *Dream of Ding Village*, 7.

3 Ibid., 8.

> Death settled over Ding Village like deep, black night, blanketing the neighboring hamlets and villages. The news that passed back and forth along the streets each day was just as dark. If it wasn't that another person had come down with the fever, it was that someone had lost a family member in the middle of the night. News even spread that a woman whose husband had died from the fever was planning to remarry into a distant mountain village, as far away as possible from this fever-ridden. God-forsaken plain.[1]

Life is really hard for Ding villagers, for they not only lack in money, but also do not have sufficient rules and regulations that enable them to get rich. Poor as they are, Ding villagers have to risk their life and try their luck. Gripping, swift, heartfelt, occasionally exhilarating and often surprising, the narrative exhibits an existential parable in which power obsession leads to moral crisis. Its ruthless depiction of violence, madness and despair also encode such themes as sacrifice and misery. In the novel, the narrator locates the critical and moral function in the power of the author to introduce the reader, by indwelling and identification, to dimensions of reality of which the reader would otherwise remain ignorant. Just as Liang Hong has observed, "death, violence and self-destruction abound in Yan's fiction."[2] Judged by the standard criteria of literary excellence, *Dream of Ding Village* merits our attention, for it diversifies our understanding of the modes and manners of moral discourse in the new century. It exposes how Chinese people in age of transition struggle to survive at the cost of their life, reminiscent of decades of destruction, frivolity and moral degradation in twentieth century China despite its boastful claim of tremendous material achievements.

Yan is keen and observant, probing to the depth of humanity and the desire to combat death in the face of death. For him, it is just the desire that incurs death. In his *Dream of Ding Village*, Yan censures human desire, for it is not only the instinct of death but one of life as well. The novel's hallucinatory depictions of death and desire-driven morally corrupted actions allow us to consider further how Chinese peasants have suffered from capitalistic impulses and distorted human nature in post socialist China. Despite its obvious harsh criticism and representation of moral crisis, *Dream of Ding Village* also foregrounds the writer's

1 Ibid., 13-14.

2 Liang Hong, shenhua, qingdian, baoli ji qita — Yan Lianke xiaoshuo meixue tezhen lun (Myth, Ceremony, violence and others: a study of the aesthetics and others: a study of the aesthetics in Yan Lianke's fiction) , *Nanfang wentan* [*Southern Cultural Foru*m 4] (2015, 64).

"mythorealist consciousness, innovative imagination, and creative literary praxis," to borrow Weijie Song's words.[1] It is all known that economic development — industrialization in particular, and more recently globalization — often brings undesirable side effects, like damage to the environment or the homogenization of what used to be distinctive cultures, and we would naturally regard these matters, too, in moral terms. On both counts, economic growth is often observed in terms of material considerations *versus* moral ones.

Moral crisis is also accompanied by a theme of extramarital love that many Chinese writers are enthusiastic about in the new century. In their writing, sexuality offers meaningful social criticism regarding the individual's plight in contemporary Chinese society, a criticism present in the work of Bi Feiyu. Different from the conventional Chinese concept of family which sees sexuality as the result of marriage and love between husband and wife, sexuality depicted in the new century Chinese literature starts to serve as a kind of individual communication in which sex is no longer connected with marriage. Here sexual morality like loyalty and chastity, for example, is effaced, but what we see instead in these family narratives are their different discourses of love bringing to the fore extramarital sex. A case in point is Bi Feiyu's short story "Days in Love" featuring a man and woman who only get to know at a dinner party come together afterwards and make love. Obviously they don't intend to get married, for they simply want to live together to comfort each other by making love. For both, sex serves as a means of connection. Living on odd jobs in a glamorous city, they don't know what will happen to them but they have to live on. Again, the story unveils the dark side of materialized contemporary China which reminds its reader of unemployed city dwellers nowadays reduced to be hapless, desperate and lonely seeking reckless sex at the cost of Chinese marital morality.

Towards an Environmental Crisis

Many writers in the new century are also striving for an ecocritical approach in their writing which renders various perspectives into Chinese government-led economic development and human depravity. Environmental degradation, for them, is a profound moral failing that ignores the well-being of the whole of the social network.

Liu Qingbang, for instance, is very much concerned about environmental degradation. His *Red Coal* (2006) offers a typical example that addresses

1 Weijie Song, "Yan Lianke's Mythorealist Representation of the Country and the City," *Modern Fiction Studies* 62, no.4 (Winter 2016) 645.

rural environmental failing caused by local government's policy of economic development. The novel narrates a farmer and his life in a coal factory. It reveals how he chased fortune in any means, revealing the twisted soul of humans. The story started in the1980s, a farmer named Song got a temporary job in a coal factory. In order to become the staff there, he tried to chase the daughter of the boss of the coal factory. However, he failed and was driven out of the coal mine. He then found his chance in another village which is not far away from the mine, and finally married the daughter of the village headmaster. He made plenty of money and finally became the boss. With wealth came, his darkness of the soul surfaced. He became obsessed with profit making with no attention to the environment coal mining was ruining. Casualty occurs daily and the villagers are now living in pollution. Springs abound in the area but no one now flows water. The river around is now dry as the narrative goes, "They cannot grow lotus or rice any more. Birds have flown away. You are responsible for all this, demanded a villager."[1] Even waterfowls have flown away, for there is no fish for them. No waterfowls. "Not a single one. The tall trees where birds used to nest have been felled. The whole Red Coal Village cannot grow rice any more. All the fields have become wheat land. Deprived of its moisture, the wheat land turns barren. Even garlic grows smaller and there used to be lots of lotus ponds, mourned the villagers."[2] The situation is even worse, for Red Coal villagers are utterly "threatened by a lack of drinking water."[3]

Having recognized the dual facets of science and technology, Li Cunbao also begins to critique the government's crazy obsession with science and technology and mourns over their penetrating impact on human life, offering his critical thoughts that science has not ensured humanity safety but fears of atom and chemical wars. In his opinion, science and technology do help us know the world better but have never avoided deterioration they are to bring about and left us on a worse situation.[4] Such perception of science is rooted in his ecological vision critical of contemporary China's high-tech controlled modernization drive. Unexceptionally, Zhang Wei also gets saddened over the deforested wasteland in his hometown, claiming that loss of land often gives rise to human empty-

1 Liu Qingbang, *Hong mei* [Red Coal] (Beijing: The Beijing October Arts and Literature Publishing House, 2006) 289.

2 Ibid., 350.

3 Ibid., 351.

4 Li Cunbao, Jingshang [The death of a whale] in *Dahe yimeng* [Remaining dreams of a big river] (Beijing: PLA Literature and Art Press, 2002) 27.

mindedness. Very few people may agree with me, Zhang maintains, but it is absolutely a truth.[1] Thus, contemporary Chinese writers offer what might be considered a morally infected criticism of the refinements of life made possible by economic development and negligence of the importance of nature in human life.

More and more Chinese today are afraid of being displaced in the process of rapid urbanization and have brought forth an anxiety of spiritual loss and displacement. Instead of immersing in their happiness of material gain and refined life, they are now aware of many considerable environmental sins and a steady distancing from nature and become more anxious about their own life featured by a perplexity of alienation, haplessness, fear, helplessness and mental predicaments. Most of them inwardly know that nature will soon take a terrible revenge if human beings continue their rampant exploitation of it. For them, the feast offered by material gains doesn't taste well. This reflection warns that humanity should revere nature. Writers at the time feel impelled to streamline such sporadic environmental thoughts and turn them into a more interrogative voice embodied in their respectful portrayals of awesome Mother Earth. Obviously, Chinese life writing starts with a kind of profound self-questioning that is necessary to moral judgment, bringing out some aspects of the relevance of literature to the global environmental crisis, for "stories matter because they shape our values, inform our sense of our humanness, and by indirection shape our environmental behavior."[2] It is hoped that man can regain his benign humanity and befriend nature. This thematic concern is evident in many contemporary works such as Yang Zhijun's *Huanhu bengkui* (*Lake-bank Collapse*) and Wu Zhongxin's *Dixia youyu* (*Underground Fish*) both are novellas offering intricate analyses of the causes of environmental degradation, focusing on frenzied human activities dedicated to profit driven cultivation against the laws of nature. What is apparent in *Lake-bank Collapse* is the novella's argument that human beings will inevitably ruin their homelands and become homeless if they keep acting irrespective of natural governance. In a similar way, Wu Zhongxin recuperates the motif of crime and punishment in his *Underground Fish* which is told via the first person point of view, demonstrating that coping with power requires adaptability, strength and the willingness to surrender oneself. Ironically, the story narrates how government approved mining industry destroys a green village, exhibiting various responses to power ranging from direct confrontations

1 Zhang Wei, *Yuanxing zhi zhu*[Warning of a long journey](Wuhan: Changjiang Literature and Art Press. 1996) 202.

2 G. B. Handley, The metaphysics of ecology in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, *Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no.3 (2009) 500.

with damaging dominant discourses of coal mining to the constructions of alternative communities after environmental destruction. As the story develops, the narrator "I" is morally encoded in line with other protagonists named respectively Shi Shenxian and Lin Daren who represent two different attitudes towards Nature. Shi Shenxian, though boney and often talking nonsense, is actually a village prophet who can foretell a future mining disaster; whereas Lin Daren is rather negatively portrayed as one who has made fortunes and climbed up the social ladder at the cost of his village's environment and many villagers' life and health.

Conclusion

Reading contemporary Chinese fiction, one is also getting to know China today in its rapid social transformation in the past couple of decades. Chinese writers in the new century have been keenly observant of various issues derived from social transitions turning out a cluster of stories and novels which correspond with the nation's explosive capitalist growth, multiple social contradictions, tumultuous strategies of re-linking with global capitalism. What they write about embodies an apparent lack of coherence between theory and practice, and a vast transformation of the social body into emerging interest groups. Instead of enjoying equal benefits of social development increased globalization has brought about, the nation's vast rural China has been all the way kept on the edge. Thus have occurred various interpretations of what China's transformation means, ranging from coming collapse to inimical rise, with uncertainty and ambivalence in between despite various governmental efforts taken to improve the situation. As China is undergoing such colossal transformation, Chinese writers nowadays are more than ever reflective in their criticism while they are writing crises and disasters. What we read in their writing is often a grotesque, comic, spectacular, miserable, absurd, and deformed literary world.

责任编辑：杨革新