

RE-NARRATING HISTORY AND QUESTION OF EXISTENCE IN YU HUA'S "TO LIVE"

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Abstract

The 20th century in Chinese history may be called as 'a century of bloodshed'. The writers of the Post Cultural Revolution China took upon the task of re-visiting history and depicting the historical events through literature. One of the most important, popular and controversial writer of Contemporary Chinese Literature, Yu Hua, has dealt with historical investigation through a story telling narrative in his seminal work "To Live". The novel published in 1993 depicts the life of a peasant in the much turbulent China from the 1940s to the late 70s and the struggle of a common man for existence in the face of extreme trauma and loss. This paper attempts to understand how the memories of trauma and loss as part of a historical legacy are seen from an individual's perspective. The aim is to try and understand how literature can serve as an alternative history and thus bring the marginalized into the main discourse. The paper will also attempt to probe into the question of existence and try to analyze the idea of life as depicted in the novel through the philosophies of Confucianism and Taoism.

Key Words: *Historical narrative, Cultural Revolution, Confucianism, Taoism, Existence*

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Introduction

The twentieth century in Chinese history may be termed as a 'Century of bloodshed'. The major events in the last century included the War with Japan, Civil War, Great Leap Forward, Anti-Rightist movement and the Cultural Revolution, all of which lead to catastrophic results. It is no surprise therefore that the writers and intellectuals today attempt to look back at this history of trauma and loss and re-visit it to make sense of what happened. Dr Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik has dealt with the history of this period and unearthed the reasons as to why the official historiography has preferred to remain silent about it. In her article in *The History of the PRC (1949-1976)* she talks about the need of a Master Narrative for this time period. She argues that where the party and the official historiography has been silent about the events leading to Cultural Revolution, the writers and the people have been and still are actively engaging in a discussion about it. Works both fiction and non-fiction dealing with Anti-Rightist movement, Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution have flooded the market and have been met with popular support. (216-237)

"Throughout the 1980s, the Cultural Revolution became "an omnipresent latent text" and "a signified associated with its continuously growing signifiers". At the same time, certain types of discussion on this history are constantly censored, making the Cultural Revolution an ideological minefield and a political taboo.' (Ma 12) In the 1990s the writers of avant garde fiction and new realist trend turned towards writing 'historical narratives'. These writers in their works do not focus on the recent history and events like Cultural Revolution and Anti-Rightist movement that were part of the narratives of Scar and Retrospective literature, but turn their gaze to a more elaborate understanding of 20th

century history. This is the trend that is called the New Historical Fiction. The history is thus not represented as understood through the official historical texts but from the perspective of an individual who is acting his part in the grand historical narrative as a non (willing) participant. Chen Xiaoming points out that ‘many fictional works labeled as “New Historicism” (*xin lishi zhuyi*) participate in the reorganization of historical memories to question dominant historical narratives that are legitimized in institutional history books.’ (Ma 136).

One of the most important, popular and controversial writer of Contemporary Chinese Literature, Yu Hua, has dealt with historical investigation through a story telling narrative in his seminal work “To Live”. Yu Hua began his literary career in 1983 and wrote short stories, novellas and prose in an experimental (*avant garde*) mode characteristic of the modernist movement of the 1980s. Later on he moved from the experimental mode of writing to a more realistic depiction of life. The representative work of this style is the novel “To Live” published in 1993 which immediately received wide acclaim and was soon made into a motion picture by the same title in 1994. The novel depicts the life of a peasant in the much turbulent China from the 1940s to the late 70s and the struggle of a common man for existence in the face of extreme trauma and loss.

The paper attempts to read the text from two angles, firstly to look at the value of history through literature, to postulate that literature can function as an alternative history in the absence of an official historiography. Secondly, to probe into the question of existence as depicted in the story and analyse the influence of Chinese traditional philosophies of Confucianism and Taoism on the text.

Literature as Alternative History

Jan Assmann’s theory of collective memory has been used by Dr Susanne to understand the process of memory formation in the case of PRC. She says, ‘Jan Assmann, with his concept of “cultural memory”, can help us to see memory as a process in which individual remembrances become collective memories, which then develop to form something he

calls communicative memory.' (49) Dr Susanne uses this idea of collective memory in the process of formation of a historical narrative. In the 1981 resolution "On some questions regarding the history of Party since the founding of PRC" passed by the Central committee on the 60th anniversary of the founding of the CCP, the questions on the Party history were discussed but the official historical narrative did not discuss Cultural Revolution openly. This left a space open with no explanations, this 'vacuum' so to say which needed to be filled. This resulted in emergence of unofficial historiography comprising of documentary literature, memoirs, eyewitness accounts, historical documentaries and history books written by people from outside the field of academic historiography.

In the novel "To Live" Yu Hua narrates the story of Fugui, a rich landlord who gambles away all his family fortune. His father dies of heartbreak and he is conscripted and forced to participate in the civil war. He comes back after three years to find his mother dead and daughter deaf and mute. He struggles through his life of poverty as a peasant with wife Jiazhen, daughter Fengxia and son Youqing. His son dies while donating blood and Jiazhen dies of long illness. Fengxia is married to Erxi but she dies during childbirth leaving her husband alone with their son Kugen. Soon after, Erxi and Kugen also die leaving Fugui alone with his ox. The novel although narrates the life events of a common peasant but throughout the story, the major political and historical events in the twentieth century China form the background where the readers can watch the characters in the story experience these tumultuous events.

In the postmodern context the literary field developed a different attitude of looking at history. The history as we read in the textbooks or official historiography is no longer "the history". Julie Rivkin states:

'New Historians, in the wake of Foucault, see the historical as textual, and one effect is to create a new relationship between the historical and the literary text. Because both are representations, a term very important to the New Historians, neither one is closer to the "truth" of history. History is not some unmediated reality out there,

some stable background that the literary text reflects or refers to; it is not a context. Rather, it is like the literary text itself - of a different genre, granted, but no less a discourse.' (505-507)

It is not very dissimilar to Xiaobin Tang's understanding of history as a mirror which he says does not necessarily reflect a certain truth but it is a mirror in the sense that every person who looks at it sees his or her own image. (207)

Many writers during this period felt the urgent need to re-narrate the Chinese history. Their approach of dealing with the history is through the individual memories which are collected to form a communicative memory and which in future might become part of the cultural memory. As many scholars have pointed out that in the absence of a master narrative on the period after the establishment of PRC till the end of Cultural Revolution, intellectuals and many former Red Guard members, educated youths took upon the task of re-narrating history from their memories and their experiences as educated youths. What is interesting is that many of these works recorded the experiences of an individual who otherwise had always lived on the periphery of the mainstream discourse.

The official and unofficial histories often deal with the "participants", a common man is left on the margins without a voice. Through many of these narratives these people were brought into the main discourse. The peasants who were not the direct participants in these events were nonetheless victims of these catastrophic events. Literature in dealing with the history from an individuals' perspective, thus functions as an alternative history and brings the marginalised into the main discourse. The stories of individuals like Fugui who live in the margins are important and need to be told and heard.

Question of Existence

China being one of the oldest civilizations in the world has a rich philosophical tradition. Confucianism and Taoism being two indigenous philosophical traditions of China have guided the lives, belief systems and behaviour of Chinese people for thousands of

years. It is no wonder that even after many attempts at eradicating all traces of any traditional thought or religious practices, the influences of these traditional thoughts still permeate Chinese society.

“To live” recounts the story of the survival of a man in the face of all odds. Fugui manages to survive a war, famine, many political events and the death of all his family members. One wonders that in the face of such tragedy, violence and trauma, what is it that drove Fugui to keep on living and not give up hope.

The Chinese philosophy of Taoism talks about the idea of ‘Wu-wei’ 无为 which is translated as ‘inaction’ or ‘effortless action’ which does not mean ‘not acting’ but ‘acting by not acting’. When one seeks too much, one loses everything, therefore by living a life of moderation one can live a long and happy life. Fugui when rich, was a total wastrel but when he lost all his riches he found his “way”. It is not ironical then that during Anti Rightist Movement he is able to save his life because he had lost all his land and was a poor peasant. Xu Yiling says ‘Confucianism is the doctrine of the mean, everything must be in moderate degree, only then will one be able to enjoy it. Laozi said ‘知足者常乐’ ‘Those who know satisfaction will always be happy.’ (61)

While dealing with the question of what drives a human being to survive in the face of extreme adversity Yu Hua says, ‘the Chinese people can overcome any difficulty presented to them ... the Chinese character remains strong even after all the changes. I believe that whatever life you offer the Chinese; they will be able to deal with it.’ (Standert) Yu Hua is talking here about the Chinese spirit of endurance “忍受 (renshou)” “吃苦 (chiku)” that Chinese people have a capacity to survive any catastrophe and persevere against all odds. He describes the title of his novel and its meaning in the Chinese context. He says:

“The word ‘to live’ in Chinese language is full of strength, its strength does not come from crying or from attack but which stems from endurance, enduring the

responsibility that life gives us, enduring the happiness and misery, insipidity and mediocrity that reality offers us.’ (Yu 5)

Zhangsui Yu while detecting an influence of Zhuangzi (Taoist Philosopher) on Yu Hua and his writings, traces the idea of placing more value on life in comparison to death in Chinese philosophy to understand the desire to exist and find meaning in mere existence. He says,

‘Zhuangzi upholds an existential view of life and death. By describing death as “peaceful sleep” and as a state of full freedom and “perfect happiness” Zhuangzi aims to strip the horrible and deplorable aura surrounding death and tries to aestheticize it.’ (244)

According to Taoist thought, what is called death is nothing more than a change of one form of existence to another. Hence if we look upon our present form of existence as something to find happiness in, there is no reason why we should not find happiness in the new form of existence which we assume after death. (Fung 236) It is for this reason perhaps that even after losing all his family members, Fugui still finds a kind of dignity and grace in living. This story has influenced many a Chinese minds after its publication and inspired them to find strength in the face of difficulties and meaning in existence.

I see Yu Hua’s notion of existence as an existential philosophy of living life for itself and not for any other meaning. Yu Hua in the preface to his novel states, “A man lives for life itself and not for anything other than life.” (4) An old popular saying in Chinese “好死不如懒活着” (A living dog is better than a dead lion) describes best what Yu Hua means when he talks about the meaning of existence in the context of Chinese people. While talking about Chinese people’s view of life, Wang Guowei says that ‘common Chinese people believe that no matter how difficult and miserable life is, one has to endure and live, even when life is good and even when it is bad. Second is the belief that an individual’s life is not his/her own but also belongs to the family, community and the country.’ (Xu 61) This

belief that one's life is not only one's own is the Confucian view of life and suggests a strong negation of the act of ending one's life.

'Taoism believes that if any one thing moves to an extreme in one direction, a change must bring about an opposite result. This is called reversion (反) or return (复). Therefore, "it is upon calamity that happiness leans; it is upon happiness that calamity rests".' (Fung 182) This hints at the idea of constant change in life, nothing stays forever, not the tragedies and not the happy moments. The idea of existence as understood by Yu Hua and as depicted in the novel shows the influence of these traditional Chinese philosophies.

Conclusion

Like most of his contemporaries, Yu Hua dedicates his works to realistically depict the life of an individual during the tumultuous events of the 20th century and in so doing presents an alternative history by telling the story of the marginalized. His efforts are important because as Dr Susanne says, 'If people do not have an idea of the past that they can share they are unable to develop ideas for the future.' (The History of PRC 217) The literature thus serves as an alternative history, not "the history" but "a history". The life of Fugui is not a life without meaning. The image that the reader is left with at the end is of Fugui an old man with an old Ox working in the open field, an image that explains existence best. It also shows human in perfect harmony with nature, a Taoist naturalistic vision of "天人合一" (oneness of heaven/nature and humanity). While explaining his relation to reality and his profession, Yu Hua in an interview with Michael Standert said,

"With the passage of time, my inner anger gradually subsided.....the task of the writer is not to vent, it's not to accuse, or expose, he should reveal the noble to people. The noble I speak of is not that type of simple beauty, but the detachment after all things are understood, seeing goodness and evil as equals, seeing the world through sympathetic eyes."

In the character of Fugui, the reader sees the Chinese spirit of perseverance, informed by the Chinese traditional philosophy. He is seen happy and at peace with himself and the world around him. His story is the history of twentieth century China and while re-narrating it Yu Hua manages to add to the existing corpus of alternative (unofficial) histories.

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