

Common Roots

Memory, Myth, and Legend in 20th-Century Chinese and Latin American Literature

by

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Dedicated to my family.

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Introduction

“If the roots are not deep, the leaves will not be luxurious.” – Han Shaogong

Xungen (寻根, or “seeking roots”) was a literary movement that began in China in the 1980s, almost immediately after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the 1976 death of Mao Zedong. The 1980s were a transitional decade for China as it moved away from the personality cult of Mao and the Cultural Revolution’s stringent restrictions on art and culture; artists and authors found themselves at a crossroads, struggling to find firm footing. The Cultural Revolution denounced traditional Chinese artistic and literary forms as corrupting and reactionary, and redefined Chinese cultural identity under the aegis of the Communist Party. The 1980s opened China to the West, both culturally and economically. Many authors who became a part of the Xungen movement, such as Han Shaogong, believed the time was ripe to delve back into China’s past to discover its roots. However, these authors did not, for the most part, look to the allusive classical literature of the Dynastic period that was often inaccessible to the average reader, nor did they look to imitate Western authors, as many of their peers did. Han Shaogong entreated his fellow writers to look to folklore culture, where he believed the true roots of Chinese literature lay. In his 1985 essay entitled “The Roots of Literature”, he discusses the “roots-seeking problem” that Chinese authors of the era faced immediately after the Cultural Revolution. He uses two case studies of different regions in China to describe the problem.

Han's first examines Guangdong Province, in the very south of China. On the coast of Guangdong lies Hong Kong, which was still a British territory in the 1980s (Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of China in 1997, per the end of the United Kingdom's 99-year lease of the territory). Han writes of Hong Kong, "People often say that not long ago, Hong Kong was a cultural desert. This fear has links to the modern business economy's disintegration of the bulk of national culture."¹ Han describes a trip to Shenzhen (a city in Guangdong that borders Hong Kong and which became a Special Economic Zone in the early 1980s, allowing it to experiment with a free-market economy before the rest of China), where he encountered a "flourishing, prosperous economy, splendid hotels, cozy playgrounds, and majestic mansions of commerce, but it was difficult to see the remains of traditional culture."² Han and his peers were dismayed by the disappearance of traditional culture between the repression of the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent leap into Westernization and modernization. Opening China to the world enriched the country economically and diversified it culturally to some extent, but at what cost? Was the sudden lurch towards modernity on the heels of a (failed) lurch towards a completely new society worth the loss of some of the essential elements of Chinese culture and identity?

Han's second example is the northwestern autonomous region of Xinjiang, which is the home of the Turkic Muslim Uyghur people. Although many poets hailed from Xinjiang, Han notes, in 1985 Xinjiang novelists were few and far between.

1 Han Shaogong, "The Roots of Literature (文学的根)," *Zuojia*, 4, 1985, 1. My translation.

2 Ibid.

Although, according to Han, the western (western in the sense of China's geographic west, not the West that academics and the media commonly use to refer to Western Europe and North America) literary traditions were certainly growing, they “could not lack the flesh and blood of traditional literature.”³ Furthermore, the prevalence of minority groups in Xinjiang, Han writes, contributes to the richness of Xinjiang culture. White Russians bring to Xinjiang European and Eastern Orthodox culture, Uyghur and Hui people their Islamic cultures, and Xinjiang's location along the Silk Road also brought Persian and Arab cultural influences.⁴ Here, we see Han's interest in China's cultural roots outside the centralized traditional and Communist cultures, as well as outside the hegemony of Han Chinese culture. In order to understand China's roots and the origins of Chinese literature, we must acknowledge that while there are well-established “Chinese” cultural and literary traditions, Chinese culture is and never has been monolithic. It has always been influenced by a multifaceted cross-cultural dialogue that spanned centuries and geographies.

This cross-cultural dialogue would prove to be key for the Xungen movement in a number of ways: firstly, as Han mentioned, the roots of traditional literature stem in part from the mixing of traditions and religions in multicultural regions in China which were historic or current trade zones, and secondly, the modern cross-cultural exchanges that were engendered by modern technology and post-Cultural Revolution reforms. As Han states in “The Roots of Literature”, “If you sever tradition, you lose the life-blood. A hard shift in a few themes and techniques that only come from

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

within Mainland Chinese literature is bound to be rootless, and then it would be difficult to have new vitality and energy.”⁵ Han's statement typifies the balance for which Xungen authors strove: the preservation of traditional Chinese literary forms, revitalized with new ideas from traditions outside of China (or at least outside the centers of Han Chinese culture), to create a distinctly Chinese voice in literature. The Xungen movement aspired to look simultaneously outwards and inwards to understand Chinese identity in the late 20th century.

Although Xungen focused chiefly on creating a truly Chinese voice for the 20th century and understanding what it meant to be Chinese in the modern age, foreign influence was still key. This is made evident by the influence of 1960s Latin American literature on Xungen in the early 1980s, particularly the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Marquez's seminal *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (published in 1967), inspired many Xungen authors, including Han Shaogong and 2012 Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan, to explore their own pasts and mix myth and legend with memory, just as Marquez did. It seems unlikely that a seminal influence on a movement to explore and develop a Chinese literary voice came from Colombia, but this phenomenon continues the long history of cross-cultural dialogue and exchange of influence in Chinese literature. Before Marquez's rise within China as the near-mythic figure of inspiration for young writers in China, Chinese writers like Lu Xun (1881-1936) translated Western works and adopted Western literary techniques in their own work. This exploration of foreign literary modes intensified in Han Shaogong's time. “Some years ago,” he writes, “many writers fixed their gaze

5 Ibid.

overseas; they hungrily, bravely broke through forbidden areas, and introduced a great deal [of literature] from the outside. They introduced a Sartre, they introduced a Hemingway...they all caused a sensation.”⁶

Conversely, writers and philosophers outside of China frequently admired, appropriated, or alluded to Chinese literary forms and Chinese culture. Consider Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges, who alluded to Chinese “category literature” in his essay *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*, and Enlightenment-era philosophers such as Voltaire, who spoke of their deep admiration for Confucianism (which jibed well with Enlightenment-era political philosophy). Colonialism and imperialism in Asia had a part in facilitating later cultural encounters between the West and China, which also shifted the power balance in the exchange into Europe's favor. At the same time, however, Borges' interest in Chinese literature indicates that modern cultural exchange between China and the Western Hemisphere cannot be reduced to a colonial or imperialistic narrative.

Chinese literature not only sustained itself and continuously revitalized itself through the negotiation between new literary ideas from outside the traditional mold and the traditional literary forms that gave Chinese literature a unique voice; it also influenced and enriched literary traditions from beyond its borders.

Despite the importance of foreign influence on the Xungen movement, we cannot ignore the literary traditions from within China that Xungen authors mined as part of their exploration of China's literary roots. Han Shaogong had a particular interest in Chu culture, native to modern-day Hunan Province, where he was sent to

⁶ Han, “The Roots of Literature”, 1 - 2

work alongside peasants as an adolescent during the Cultural Revolution. Chu, which reached its peak from the 6th-4th centuries BCE, rose to become one of the last peripheral kingdoms to resist the Qin, which unified China into one empire starting in 221 BCE.⁷ Chu culture was known for the way it embraced mysticism and shamanic rites, which both contemporary and future historians in China would regard as evidence of barbarism. This shamanic tradition greatly influenced Chu literature, most notably the poems of Qu Yuan, who is considered the first Chinese poet and whose life and death are still celebrated in China and among the Chinese diaspora during the annual Dragon Boat Festival. That Chinese people around the world still celebrate the life of a poet who died several thousand years ago is a testament to the enduring power and influence of Chu culture.

Han Shaogong believed that writers, especially those from Hunan, needed to look back to Chu culture to understand the roots of Chinese culture. In the beginning of “The Roots of Literature”, he mourns the loss of Chu culture. “I used to often think about this question: where has the magnificent Chu culture gone?”⁸ he asks. Han saw Chu culture as “more profound and conducive to artistic production than the northern, neo-Confucian culture.”⁹ Whereas the neo-Confucian culture of the dynastic capitals

7 The Qin Dynasty, which began as a state during the Zhou Dynasty, conquered and unified the various kingdoms that made up what is now modern China (save for parts of the south, north, and west of modern China). The Qin was relatively short-lived, only ruling a unified China from 221-206 BCE, but its influence is still palpable today. In particular, the first Emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi, was known as a cruel tyrant who imposed draconian laws and expected absolute loyalty from officials and citizens. His policies to unify China would devastate cultures like Chu. “As a result of the First Emperor's thoroughness, China lost much of its heritage, including local traditions of all sorts.” Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 61

8 Han, “The Roots of Literature”, 1

9 Mark Leenhouts, “Empty Talk: The Roots of Han Shaogong's Writing” in *World Literature Today* (web exclusive), Vol. 85, No. 4 (July/August 2011), accessed February 13th, 2013, http://www.ou.edu/worldlit/07_2011/essay-leenhout-shaogong.html

of Xi'an, Beijing, Nanjing, and Hangzhou focused on political philosophy, moral comportment and etiquette, Chu culture was focused on weaving the rational with the irrational, the fantastic with the real, the probable with the improbable. Chu literature, exemplified in Qu Yuan's world-leaping, time-jumping poetry filled with mythical creatures intermixed with court intrigue, sought to integrate the internal or the spirit world with the one we know. According to Han, this is a key part of understanding the roots of Chinese literary identity.

I argue that Chu culture was a major factor that led the Xungen authors to embrace Magical Realism. Like Chu literature, Magical Realism blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy, and uses influences from indigenous myth and religious traditions to create an unconventional, at times playful, at times highly expressive method of storytelling. In addition, both Chu literature and Magical Realism use political commentary, though often not as openly or nakedly as some of their literary cousins (this is not a hard-and-fast rule, as many Magical Realist works do not conceal their aim at conveying an essentially political message). The similarities between these two movements bridged the cultural gaps, and allowed Xungen authors to synthesize these two sources of influence into a new literary style that expressed their feelings about modern China and their memories of China's past.

I further argue that the Xungen movement, while highly influenced by China's indigenous folk and poetic traditions, was and is also a part of a larger cultural dialogue between China, the West, and Latin America. The Xungen movement is at once indigenous and international, and arguably represents the burgeoning cultural

climate in China during the 1980s, when the nation began to open up to the West (which the CCP had denounced merely a few years prior) culturally and economically, but also once again embraced its own past (within limits set by the CCP). Xungen was a microcosm of 1980s China, and while the movement only lasted a few years, its legacy forever changed the landscape of Chinese literature and popular culture.

Chinese Myth: Finding The Roots

Memory, legend, and myth have played an integral role in Chinese literature and the formation of Chinese literary culture since the earliest pieces of writing were produced in ancient China. From Qu Yuan's fantastic flight from the mundane world that would not accept him, to the Tang Dynasty's "Strange Tales" of distant lands and magical events, to the surreal and disturbing stories of the literary reformer Lu Xun, to the appropriation of folk tales by the Chinese Communist Party, and to the not-quite-real, not-quite-fantasy worlds of writers in the late 1980s, the imaginary and the fantastic have, over the centuries, become a conduit for the transmission of cultural values or commentary on very real present-day problems.

Qu Yuan's poetry is arguably one of the best-known pieces of early Chinese literature. Qu Yuan was a court official in the kingdom of Chu during the fourth century BCE.¹⁰ He was unpopular at court, and was ultimately exiled; in his sorrow and frustration, he threw himself into the Miluo River. His most famous poem, *Encountering Sorrow (Li Sao)*, lashes out at those he held responsible for his downfall at court.¹¹ *Encountering Sorrow*, in addition to adopting many aspects of fantasy, speaks of Qu Yuan's admiration of the rulers of Chu and other kingdoms, and compares upstanding officials and their qualities to sweet scents and plants. In one

10 Tony Barnstone and Chou Ping, "Verses of Chu" in *The Anchor Book of Chinese Poetry*, ed. Tony Barnstone and Chou Ping (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 18

11 Ibid.

stanza, Qu Yuan alludes to figures from the Xia Dynasty (ca. 21st-16th century BCE, though these dates are not verified), and how choosing desire over temperance and good judgment would lead to disaster for rulers. “But wild and disorderly ways seldom end right....August Heaven shows no favoritism; it sees men's virtue and apportions its aid accordingly.”¹² Allusions to legendary figures like those from the Xia Dynasty are instructive; Qu Yuan conveys a clear moral message, and he does so by recounting the fates of historical and legendary figures who were not virtuous or disregarded the Way.¹³ Qu Yuan seems to believe that history is repeating itself, and once again corruption, carelessness, and flattery are leading to disaster for the Chu. “Pepper is all flattery and insolence, and even prickly ash thinks he can fill a scent bag! They strive to advance, work to gain admittance, but what fragrance are they fit to offer? Yet such, to be sure, is the current of the times – who can fail to be affected?”¹⁴

Qu Yuan feels out of place in a time and place that cannot learn the lessons of the past or accept his beauty and virtue. Thus, he turns to fantasy as an escape route. In a sumptuously jeweled carriage pulled by flying dragons, he flies over the Kunlun Mountains and off to distant mountains and rivers and deserts, where he encounters dragons, phoenixes, and gods.

I had flying dragons to draw my vehicle,
a carriage inlaid with jasper and ivory.
How could I band with those of different mind?

12 Qu Yuan, “Encountering Sorrow”, trans. Tony Barnstone and Chou Ping in *The Anchor Book of Chinese Poetry*, ed. Tony Barnstone and Chou Ping (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 21-22

13 The Way is one of the central tenets of Daoism, or Dao (道, which literally means “Way” in Chinese); the Way itself is elusive and difficult to explain.

14 Qu Yuan, “Encountering Sorrow”, 24

I would go far away, remove myself from them.
 I turned my course toward the Kunlun Mountains,
 over distant roads rambling on and on,
 hoisting clouds and rainbows to shield me from the sun,
 sounding the tinkle of jeweled carriage bells.¹⁵

His journey enters further into the realm of fantasy. He soon amasses a massive cavalry to aid his treacherous crossing into Heaven. Phoenixes, dragons, pennants, and a thousand chariots accompany him.¹⁶ Qu Yuan's fantasy builds to an almost orgasmic crescendo as his "spirit soared upward into distant regions,"¹⁷ but suddenly, we and Qu Yuan are drawn back to earth by the final line of the poem: "But as I ascended the bright reaches of heaven, suddenly I looked down and saw my old home."¹⁸ Qu Yuan illustrates in this line how escape is not certain or permanent, that even if one can find solace and escape from an unappealing and frustrating world through fantasy, the ties to the "real world" that memories and attachments forge will never allow fantasy to completely overtake the mind. Qu Yuan, like the writers who would come after him in centuries to come, understood the power of memory and the gravitational pull one's native land.

In context, Qu Yuan's poem may allude to his eventual suicide. His journey from an earthly life to heaven could easily be read as a metaphor for death, including the moment at which he remembers his home and leaves the ending ambiguous: can he disconnect from his former life and ascend to heaven? Does he regret the choice he made? Is it even possible to live in both worlds? This theme of wanting to move forward while looking backwards towards one's home or native land would reappear

15 Qu Yuan, "Encountering Sorrow", 24

16 Qu Yuan, "Encountering Sorrow", 25

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

thousands of years later, as Chinese thinkers moved to reform and modernize Chinese society while retaining the essence of Chinese cultural values and traditions.

David Hawkes has a different take on the poem. Hawkes, who passed away in 2009, was an Oxford and Beijing University-educated British Sinologist who was known for his efforts to elevate classical Chinese poetry's reputation to the level of Latin and Greek in academia.¹⁹ In 1959, he published the authoritative translation of *Chu ci*, or the songs of Chu. In this book of poems, he translates and explores *Li Sao*. He particularly focuses on the Chu culture in which Qu Yuan lived. The kingdom of Chu flourished from the sixth century BCE to the fourth century BCE.²⁰ Chu emerged from a period of relative lawlessness at the end of the Zhou Dynasty (1050-256 BCE²¹) as a “dark horse” of sorts that could hold its own against the Northern kingdoms. “One of the greatest political changes which took place during these centuries was the rise to power of a seventh kingdom beyond the southern limits of the old Shang and Zhou empires and its gradual acceptance as an equal and sometimes as an ally by the other states.”²² While Chu's Southern neighbors (such as Yue and Wu) rose and fell, Chu endured into the fourth century, when it stood as the sole challenger to the powerful Qin, which would forcibly absorb Chu into an empire that would unify China for the first time.²³ Although it ceased to be a political entity, the kingdom of Chu endured as a source of literary and artistic culture for a unified

19 John Gittings, “Obituary: David Hawkes”, *The Guardian*, August 25th 2009, accessed March 10th, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/aug/25/obituary-david-hawkes>

20 David Hawkes, General Introduction, *The Songs of the South: An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets* (Penguin Classics, 1959), 17

21 Ebrey, *History of China*, 338

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

China. Hawkes expounds upon this: “Yet in a sense the ultimate victory was Chu's....it was Chu poets and craftsmen who provided the new Han era [after the overthrow of the tyrannical Qin] with its art and letters when Qin was no more than a hated memory...”²⁴

One aspect of Chu's literary and cultural legacy was the enthusiasm with which it embraced Shamanism. This shamanistic culture often appeared in later works as a mystical counterpoint to Confucianism, which eventually supplanted Shamanism. Chu's Shamanism (like Shamanism elsewhere in China) went through waves of state approval, appropriation, and suppression. Hawkes writes, “Shamanism was the Old Religion of China, dethroned when Confucianism became a state orthodoxy and driven into the countryside, where it fared as much as paganism in Christian Europe: sometimes tolerated and absorbed, sometimes ferociously suppressed.”²⁵ Even before the rise of Confucianism as a state orthodoxy (a development that began in the late Tang), attitudes towards Shamanism were not always positive. During the third and fourth centuries BCE, Shamanism lost much of its official legitimacy; marginalized by a more secular, skeptical ruling body, shamanism became bizarre to the mainstream.²⁶ First century historian Ban Gu's survey of the Chu kingdom (quoted in Hawkes) reveals this:

Because there is always enough to eat, they are a lazy and improvident folk, laying up no stores for the future, so confident are they that the supply of food and drink will always be replenished...there are no rich households among them. They believe in the power of shamans and spirits and are much addicted to lewd religious rites.²⁷

²⁴ Hawkes, General Introduction, 18

²⁵ Hawkes, General Introduction, 19

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ban Gu, qtd by Hawkes, General Introduction, *The Songs of the South: An Anthology of Ancient*

Ban Gu's views of shamanism endured centuries later into the Tang, when the Confucian government institutionalized suppression of shamans as a “civilizing” measure.²⁸ This further pushed traditional Chu culture out to the margins. Xungen writer Han Shaogong would later take up the banner of Chu culture as an example of Chinese culture that, because of its marginalization, was “purer”, or untouched by the centralizing forces of the Qin or Confucianism.

During the rise of the Xungen movement in the late 20th century, Chu culture was a source of inspiration for the imaginary geographies of Han Shaogong and others. Chu's egalitarian, simple society had great appeal to authors who wanted to return to China's traditional roots, but, for obvious reasons, were not willing to return to the old imperial society, which was highly stratified and often reluctant to adapt and change. On a more political level, Chu's rivalry with the Qin immortalized Chu as a peripheral kingdom that resisted assimilation into a centralized imperial force; thousands of years later, when Xungen writers sought to flout central control of culture, they would look to Chu as an inspiration.

While I have already examined Barnstone's translation of *Encountering Sorrow*, Hawkes' translation provides far more historical context for the poem, firmly entrenching it in the world of Chu. In his introduction to his anthology of poems from ancient Southern China, Hawkes details how Qu Yuan was the first true “poet” and the pioneer of Chu verse, or *Chu ci*. *Chu ci* differed significantly from the

Chinese Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets (Penguin Classics, 1959), 18
 28 Hawkes, General Introduction, 19

contemporary Northern tradition of poetry, which we mainly know through the *Shi Jing* (Book of Songs, or Classic of Odes): a collection of anonymous verse that is traditionally thought to have been compiled by Confucius himself.²⁹ The poems meticulously detail everyday life in northern China from approximately 840-620 BCE.³⁰ Some poems concern love affairs, others are about agrarian and court rituals.³¹ Mair writes, “Traditionally, the [*Shi Jing*] has been regarded as a canonical collection of important moral truths and lessons. Confucius saw in its content and language a guide for moderation in speech and action.”³² Most well-educated Chu poets would have almost certainly read and gleaned lessons from the *Shi Jing*, which was (and is) considered a cornerstone of Chinese literature.³³

How did *Chu ci* differ from *Shi Jing* poems? As Hawkes describes, *Chu ci* is a deeply personal form of poetry, drawn from the author's own thoughts and feelings, whereas in the whole of the *Shi Jing*'s 305 poems, only three mention the singer or author by name.³⁴ Personal identity and emotion are essential to Chu poetry; we certainly see this in Qu Yuan's poems, which intimate the reader to his psyche and unique feelings. His elevation of written poetry to new literary heights from simply recording anonymous, oral songs about the hardships of daily life to the bizarre, and profoundly emotional and personal earns him the title of China's First Poet.³⁵ Many of

29 Victor H. Mair, “Introduction to Classic of Odes,” in *The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, edited by Victor H. Mair (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000), 61

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Mair, “Introduction,” 62

33 Hawkes, General Introduction, 26

34 Hawkes, General Introduction, 27

35 Ibid.

the surviving poems anthologized by historians from later eras are imitations of Qu Yuan, which clearly indicates to us his vast influence on the *Chu ci* form.³⁶

With the historical context of the Kingdom of Chu as part of a long and mythic political lineage, we can much more easily understand why Qu Yuan would proclaim himself as descended from the gods and great ancestors themselves. In the first lines of the poem, Qu Yuan details his lineage, a “Scion of the high lord Gao Yang, Bo Yong was my father's name.”³⁷ In other parts of the poem, he refers to the great kings and mythical figures of Chu and their tragic downfalls.

Chu Shamanism also appears in *Li Sao*. The spirit journey Qu Yuan undertakes at the end of the poem (which may be an allusion, as we discussed earlier, to his later suicide) comes from Shamanism; although by the time of Qu Yuan shamans had lost much of their earlier status, the flying spirit journeys attributed to mythical kings and gods were the “stock-in-trade of the *wu* [Chinese word for shaman].”³⁸ Qu Yuan's poem clearly has a shamanistic heritage, and the ancient shamanism, which had already fallen from esteem by Qu Yuan's time, would be an undercurrent in many other traditions of Chinese literature.

In the introductory notes to his translation of *Li Sao*, Hawkes details how certain conventions of time and dramatic speech further reveal the shamanistic legacy in Qu Yuan's work. “...they must have used formulaic devices for conveying the passage of time. (It has always been held, and by other peoples besides the Chinese,

36 Hawkes, General Introduction, 27-28

37 Qu Yuan, “Li Sao (On Encountering Trouble)”, translated by David Hawkes in *The Songs of the South: An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets*, edited by David Hawkes (Penguin Classics, 1959), 68

38 Hawkes, General Introduction, 44

that time in the spirit world passes more quickly than our earthly time.)”³⁹ No longer is the poem merely the deeply personal, emotional outcry against the injustices visited upon Qu Yuan at court, but a shamanistic journey into the spirit world.

As Hawkes wrote in the introduction to *Li Sao*, the acceleration of time is a prominent trope in this poem. Interestingly, Qu Yuan states in the second stanza that he was “Afraid Time would race on and leave me behind.”⁴⁰ Throughout the rest of the poem, he frequently makes chronological leaps from day to night (“In the morning...in the evening...” is a constant motif throughout the poem), and spring to autumn. Qu Yuan makes geographical jumps as well, traveling from mountains to islands in the span of two lines. While one could interpret this as a narrative device (especially in the beginning stanzas of the poem, which detail Qu Yuan's early life), the case for Qu Yuan borrowing rhetorical and spiritual elements from Chu shamanistic tradition is compelling. His allusions to flying to “fairy precincts”⁴¹ and to time moving quicker than it would in the world we know only further support this point. We see this clearly in the 24th stanza, in which Qu Yuan begins his flying journey.

39 Hawkes, “Introduction to Li Sao [Encountering Sorrow]”, in *Songs of the South*, 67. The two examples Hawkes uses are “I started out in the morning on my way from Cang-wu;/By evening I had arrived at the Hanging Garden.” and “I set off at morning from the Ford of Heaven;/At evening I came to the world's western end.”

40 Qu Yuan, “Encountering Trouble”, 68

41 Qu Yuan, “Encountering Trouble”, 73.

I started out in the morning on my way from Cang-wu;
 By evening I had arrived at the Hanging Gardens.
 I wanted to stay a while in those fairy precincts,
 But the swift-moving sun was dipping to the west.
 I ordered Xi He⁴² to stay the sun-steeds' gallop,
 To stand over Yan-zi mountain and not go in;
 For the road was so far and so distant was my journey,
 And I wanted to go up and down, seeking my heart's desire.⁴³

In this stanza alone, we see the fantastic elements of *Li Sao* in full color. His spiritual journey brings him into direct communion with the gods, and allows him to travel to distant lands in the span of a day (as Hawkes observed, a hallmark of shamanic myth and rhetoric was the ability to travel at superhuman speed by supernatural means). Qu Yuan wishes to extend his spiritual journey for his own personal enjoyment; he hopes to roam around, to expand the compressed time he experiences. In some ways, Qu Yuan is a wayward shaman; he simultaneously embraces his spiritual journey, and tries to dally a while along the way, such as when he attempts to woo high-born ladies. Each time, he is unsuccessful, and his failures make him even more reluctant to continue his journey: “My mind was irresolute and havoring; I wanted to go, and yet I could not...where could I wander to look for amusement?”⁴⁴ Qu Yuan is later spurred on when a man named Ling Fen makes divination for him, and tells him that searching the earth for fair maidens to woo is counterproductive, since humans cannot see Qu Yuan's virtue and beauty. “Why need

42 Xi He is a Chinese sun goddess who drove a chariot to bring a sun-bird out to revolve around the earth. (source: “Xihe (deity)”, Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xihe_\(deity\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xihe_(deity)), Accessed February 21st, 2013)

43 Ibid.

44 Qu Yuan, “Encountering Trouble”, 75

you always cleave to your old home? The world today is blinded with its own folly:
you cannot make people see the virtue inside you.”⁴⁵

Qu Yuan is also, as we saw in his evocation of legendary Xia rulers, preoccupied with the moral example of ancient kings. He gleans his morality from the tales of ancient rulers, which were invariably an integral part of his education, and the oral stories he may have heard as a child.⁴⁶ He says in the fourth stanza, “The three kings of old were most pure and perfect: then indeed fragrant flowers had their proper place....And how great was the folly of Jie and Zhou, who hastened by crooked paths, and so came to grief.”⁴⁷ He states later that he even dresses in the fashion of the old kings, even if it looks strange and out of place.⁴⁸ His devotion to the past, while probably admirable in the eyes of some of his contemporaries and in the eyes of many writers and philosophers who came after him, makes Qu Yuan seem odd to his peers. As I said in my discussion of Barnstone's translation of the poem, he is displaced in time, and must seek out a spiritual escape. Thus, he invokes the rhetoric and ritual of shamanic tradition and takes a flying journey away from the world that rejected him.

Embedded in both of these aspects of *Li Sao* is dissatisfaction with the status quo, and a criticism of a corrupt and status-obsessed royal court. Qu Yuan longs for people to heed the lessons of the past and appreciate aesthetic beauty and the positive qualities of man, but he knows that, ultimately, he will not succeed in convincing man to take a more virtuous path. This covert political criticism and moral didacticism are

45 Ibid. The line “Why need you always cleave to your old home?” is alluded to in the final stanza of the poem as Qu Yuan ascends to the spirit world: “Why should I cleave to the city of my birth?” (Qu Yuan, “Encountering Trouble”, 78)

46 Hawkes elaborates further on this in his general introduction to the anthology that contains *Li Sao*.

47 Qu Yuan, “Encountering Trouble”, 69

48 Qu Yuan, “Encountering Trouble”, 70

common tropes in many other literary adaptations of folk tales to come.

The explosion of foreign trade in China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) facilitated travel outside the elite center of China in Xi'an. Those who traveled to the peripheries in China – the far west, the far south, and to different countries entirely – incorporated fantasy into their travelogues, creating the sense that the world outside of central China was a strange land full of miraculous events and wonders beyond one's normal understanding of the world. These travel narratives were called 传奇 (*chuanqi*), or “transmission of the strange”. In English, they are commonly called “Strange Tales”. I personally find the literal translation rather apt; the purpose of these stories was ostensibly to transmit to an audience the authors' perceptions of the unfamiliar worlds they had seen while abroad, embellished with imaginative and fantastic elements to emphasize the strangeness of the places they had visited.

One Tang-era Strange Tale, *An Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch* by Li Kung-tso (c. 778-848 CE), tells the story of Chun-yu, an ex-general who, after passing out drunk, is visited by strange envoys who take him to the Nation of Locust Tranquility, an imaginary kingdom. One interesting feature of the start of this tale is that, as Chun-yu enters the envoys' carriage, he tacitly acknowledges (and possibly accepts) the strangeness of his situation. “Chun-yu found this most strange, but he didn't dare to ask any questions.”⁴⁹ Li intentionally draws attention to the strange elements of the story; we would see this awareness of a break from reality or plausibility in later Chinese works as well, such as in *A Dictionary of Maqiao*. Chun-

⁴⁹ Li Kung-tso, “An Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch,” translated by William H. Nienhauser, Jr. in Mair, *Columbia Anthology*, 518

yu is then brought before the king of the Nation of Locust Tranquility, who summarily proclaims that Chun-yu will be, in accordance with an agreement brokered between Chun-yu's father and the king (unbeknownst to Chun-yu), be married to the king's daughter.⁵⁰ Later in the evening, the ceremony is all prepared: Chun-yu finds himself surrounded by marvelous delicacies, gifts, attendants, and beautiful women.

At the ceremony, the narrator mentions that a Central Asian general danced the “Brahman Dance” in the India Room of a Wisdom of Zen Temple, which Chun-yu visited with one of the young ladies of the court.⁵¹ This illustrates the cultural exchanges that were commonplace during the Tang; in fact, the introductory notes to the story note that “many early Chinese short stories were derived from Indian tales...it is revealing that tales of clearly Indian origin were often passed off as ostensibly Taoist pieces. This tells us much about the nature of the assimilation of foreign cultural elements in China.”⁵² Although we will further explore foreign influence on modern Chinese literature in the next section, we can certainly see that foreign influence and cultural exchange in Chinese literature did not start at the end of the Qing Dynasty; rather, it has been an integral part of even indigenous myths and literary traditions in China for centuries.

After his marriage to the princess of the Nation of Locust Tranquility, Chun-yu is offered a position as the governor of Southern Branch, which is not governed well. He accepts the rather low position, and becomes an exemplary governor. For his merit as a wise and effective ruler, the king awards Chun-yu with titles and lands,

50 Li Kung-tso, “An Account”, 519

51 Li Kung-tso, “An Account”, 520

52 Victor H. Mair, Introduction to 'An Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch', in Mair, *Columbia Anthology*, 517

eventually making him a Prime Minister.⁵³ His seven children all become successful; his sons become high-ranking officials, and his daughters are married off to princes. The narrator says, “His fame and glory were the highest of the era, beyond that of all his contemporaries.”⁵⁴

However, Chun-yu's fortunes are soon reversed. A war breaks out, and Chun-yu's most trusted official betrays him and makes misjudgments that result in defeat. Chun-yu's wife then dies. The once great official, resigns from his post in grief and returns to the capital. However, emboldened by his high status and massive fortune, Chun-yu begins to lead a lavish lifestyle. The king punishes him for his extravagance, and decides that Chun-yu must return home to the “world of men”.⁵⁵

At that moment, “Suddenly [Chun-yu] grew groggy with sleep and his sight was hazy for a while until he became aware of his former life again. Then he wept and asked to return there.”⁵⁶ When he returns, he realizes that little time has passed in the “world of men”, even though he felt as though he had lived an entire lifetime in the strange kingdom to which he was transported.⁵⁷ Upon waking, he sees that the dream-kingdom he visited is nothing more than an anthill under a locust tree. A Western reader might compare this tale to *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Wizard of Oz*, in which an ordinary mortal is transported to a magical world via a dream, lives out an entire lifetime there, and then must return to their world, where only a little time has passed. In a Chinese context, this Strange Tale is part of the centuries-long

53 Li Kung-tso, “An Account”, 524

54 Ibid.

55 Li Kung-tso, “An Account”, 525

56 Ibid.

57 Li Kung-tso, “An Account”, 526

celebration by many Chinese authors and poets of the literary potential that stems from altered states of consciousness: drunkenness, insanity, dreaming. In addition, we see the shamanistic heritage (most likely via Qu Yuan) in the acceleration of time that Chun-yu experiences in the dream-world.

The other most significant example of “strange tale” genre survives in the writings of Pu Songling, a native of Shandong Province (also the home of Confucius). Pu Songling was mostly active in the early days of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). His collected works, varyingly titled *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* or *Strange Tales from the Make-Do Studio*, were translated into English by one Herbert Giles in 1916, but were most likely originally written in 1679.⁵⁸ Giles' 1916 translation is also an early example of introducing Western readers to Chinese literature, which would prove important as part of the cross-cultural dialogue that I discuss later in this thesis. In his introduction to his translation, Giles emphasizes that while Western readers had likely never heard of Pu Songling, his works were “as familiar throughout the length and breadth of China as are the tales of the 'Arabian Nights' in all English-speaking communities.”⁵⁹ However, Pu Songling's works, according to Victor H. Mair, were not easily available or even comprehensible to the average Chinese reader. “Instead,” Mair writes in the introduction to his translation of Pu Songling, “the recondite tales were made known to the wider public through dramatic presentations, oral storytelling, vernacular paraphrases, and other types of

58 Herbert Giles, introduction to *Strange Stories from a Chinese Workshop* by Pu Songling, translated by Herbert Giles (Shanghai, China: Kelly & Walsh Limited, 1916), xii, Google Books eBook edition, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=-SkRAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&authuser=0&hl=en&pg=GBS.PR12>

59 Giles, introduction, xi

popularizations.”⁶⁰

Could we safely call Pu Songling the precursor to vernacular and folk literature, the legacy of which we see in Xungen? Mair referred to Pu Songling's writing style as an “allusive” classical style⁶¹ that was difficult for people without a classical education to understand. Pu's works had to be adapted to more popular (visual and musical) forms of storytelling in order to be understood and celebrated by common people, I would hesitate to put him in the same category as champions of the vernacular, such as Lu Xun or Han Shaogong. But on the other hand, the vernacularization of his stories is an indication of how classical works can be adapted for ordinary people, and how the “strange” can be transmitted in multiple media to make it more accessible to people who, due to lack of a classical education, may not have been able to understand the “allusive classical style” of Pu Songling's original writing.

Upon examining just the first paragraph of Pu's introduction to his own works, it is plain to see that Pu Songling certainly acknowledged the periphery of China differently from how Tang Dynasty *chuanqi* writers acknowledged and explored it. “Human beings, I would point out, are not beyond the pale of fixed laws, and yet there are more remarkable phenomena in their midst than in the country of those who crop their hair; antiquity is rolled before us, and many tales are to be found therein stranger than that of the Nation of Flying Heads.”^{62,63} Pu Songling promoted the idea

60 Victor H. Mair, “Introduction to Pu Songling, in Mair, *Columbia Anthology*”, 485

61 Ibid.

62 Pu Songling, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Workshop*, trans. Herbert Giles (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh Limited, 1916), xiii, Google Books eBook edition, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=-SkRAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&authuser=0&hl=en&pg=GBS.PR12>

63 According to Giles' translation notes, in Pu Songling's time, “the country of those who crop their

that strange tales are all around people in their everyday lives, not always far away in distant lands.

One story, *Examination for the Post of Guardian Angel*, is an allegorical tale of an official, Sung, who is called upon by a strange man to take an examination in a city populated by gods (among them the god of war, Guan Yu, who is based on a real-life legendary general from the Three Kingdoms period). Upon writing an essay that impresses his examiners, Sung is granted a post as a guardian angel in Hunan, but he refuses the post so he might care for his aging mother. The gods have the ability to calculate his mother's lifespan, and give him a nine-year furlough, recognizing his filial piety.⁶⁴ He departs from the city, and finds himself back at home, where “he had been dead for three days, when his mother, hearing a groan in the coffin, ran to it and helped him out.”⁶⁵ Sung thus escapes death once, but nine years later, dies on the same day he buries his mother. Immediately after death, he becomes a spirit who rides a chariot, pulled by richly decorated horses.⁶⁶ He is able to write his own story as a spirit, but the original text is lost; the narrator explains at the end of the story that what he has told us is merely the “outline” of the original tale.⁶⁷ This story clearly features elements of a traditional oral folk tale: the allegorical and instructional nature of the story (the praise of filial piety, the presence of supernatural beings who reward

hair” referred to the southern Chinese minority peoples (seen as savages by the Han) who tattooed their bodies and cut their hair short. (Ibid.) I find Pu Songling's attitude towards minority peoples of the south very interesting, especially in light of how later writers like Han Shaogong would see them as one of the important roots of Chinese identity.

64 Pu Songling, “Examination for the Post of Guardian Angel” in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Workshop*, trans. Herbert Giles (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh Limited, 1916), Google Books eBook edition, https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=-SkRAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&authuser=0&hl=en&pg=GBS.PR12_1-4_2

65 Pu, “Examination”, 3.

66 Pu, “Examination”, 4

67 Ibid.

noble, filial behavior), fantasy (most notably, the almost Qu Yuan-esque resurrection of Sung as a spirit), and the way in which the narrator breaks the fourth wall and makes the reader aware that he himself did not write the story; it is merely a retelling of something more ancient and profound than the narrator could have dreamed up, and a partial retelling at that.

Pu Songling's stories often feature moral instructions. The story that immediately follows, "The Talking Pupils", tells the tale of an insatiable rake who flirts with a married woman of great stature. She throws sand in his eyes for his trouble, and his eyes become covered with thick cataracts, which blind him. Only after a learned man teaches the rake a sutra to help him repent does his affliction begin to subside. Two men who live behind his eyes decide they want to see the man's garden, and find that the best route is to break through the thick cataracts. The man regains sight in one eye (the eye from which the two men escaped to see the world), and he thereafter leads a virtuous life.⁶⁸ Pu Songling's stories use fantasy and improbable events to relay a lesson to readers; this tradition in folklore is not confined to China, as we see in the stories of Aesop and other folklore traditions around the world.

Centuries later, towards the end of the Qing Dynasty, Chinese writers, seeing the extreme problems with Chinese society and culture, began to write about reforming every aspect of China in order to resist colonization by European powers. One of the most famous writers of this era was Lu Xun. Lu Xun was the pen name of

⁶⁸ Pu Songling, "The Talking Pupils", in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Workshop*, trans. Herbert Giles (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh Limited, 1916), 4-5

Zhou Shuren. Born in 1881 in Zhejiang Province, he was a reformist who advocated for the adoption of vernacular Chinese (*Baihua*) in writing, instead of the classical Chinese that only the educated understood. His short stories, such as *Diary of a Madman (kuangren riji)*, used surreal, disturbing imagery and situations to comment on China's social and political turmoil in the early 20th century.

Lu Xun was originally a medical student studying in Japan, which in the 19th and early 20th centuries had become an intellectual hub of Asia and a breeding ground for young, reform-minded scholars from China, Korea, and Southeast Asia. Upon seeing the plight and apathy of the Chinese people in the face of colonial encroachment (especially by Japan and Europe), Lu Xun decided that there was no use focusing on the health of Chinese bodies, when Chinese spiritual and social health were so in danger. Instead he began to write, first translating European and Russian works.⁶⁹ His goal was to awaken young Chinese people and spur them to understand and confront the issues they faced. He characterized his mission thusly: The people of China had fallen asleep in an iron box, to which they were confined, and Lu Xun stood outside of it. If he banged and banged on the box, even if the Chinese people could not escape, they would be roused and aware of their fate. If they could not escape, at least they would die thinking.⁷⁰ Lu Xun would soon become one of the leaders of the reform movement.

One of his most visceral commentaries on Chinese society was *Diary of a Madman (Kuangren Riji)*. *Diary of a Madman* was written in 1918, just seven years

69 Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2nd Edition, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 238

70 Spence, *Modern China*, 307

after the fall of the Qing and the end of thousands of years of dynastic rule in China. *Diary of a Madman* is written from the perspective of a mentally unstable man, who believes that the people who surround him are cannibals who will one day eat him. The titular “madman” surmises that their cannibalism is ingrained in history and moral values. As the narrator reads a history book, he sees the characters for “Virtue and Morality” written all over the pages, and they soon change into the words “Eat People”.⁷¹ As the story progresses, he becomes convinced that the doctor who comes to examine him is only fattening him up for slaughter, and that his older brother is “an eater of human flesh.”⁷² Eventually, he confronts his older brother and says,

...probably all primitive people ate a little human flesh to begin with. Later, because their outlook changed, some of them stopped, and because they tried to be good they changed into men, changed into real men...but some do not try to be good and remain reptiles still.⁷³

In the madman's admonition of his brother, we see Lu Xun's distinct view of traditional culture: a primitive practice that had its place, but ultimately must be abandoned if humanity is to evolve, or if one is to become humane. In a cruel twist, the madman realizes that he, too, has eaten human flesh, and thus is just as corrupted as those he tried to reform. “How can a man like myself, after four thousand years of man-eating history – even though I knew nothing about it at first – ever hope to face real men?”⁷⁴ He ends the story with the narrator desperately hoping that perhaps

71 Lu Xun, “A Madman's Diary,” translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang in *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun* (New York: Oriole Editions, 1972), 26-38, 29

72 Lu Xun, “A Madman's Diary,” 31

73 Lu Xun, “A Madman's Diary,” 34

74 Lu Xun, “A Madman's Diary,” 38

someone will save the children from the horrible fate of becoming cannibals;⁷⁵ taken allegorically, this is Lu Xun's hope that perhaps Chinese children raised in a new culture free from the corrupting and destructive designs of traditional culture will be “real men”, broken with their nation's and people's history of self-consumption and barbarism.

Xiaobing Tang comments on *Diary of a Madman* and its context within the larger New Culture Movement, which took hold in the years following the fall of the Qing Dynasty. During this time, a schism appeared between younger, modernity-minded writers (like Lu Xun and Hu Shi) and older writers from the Qing era who wanted to reform, but preserve old styles of writing, whereas New Culture writers agitated for the modernity that many of them had seen abroad in Japan or the West.⁷⁶ Writers like Lu Xun felt that China was sick, weighted down by the shackles of tradition and conservatism. Tang believes that *Diary of a Madman* reflects the New Culture movement's longing for modernity, and that we could view *Diary of a Madman* as a modernist text.⁷⁷ I agree with Tang's assessment; *Diary of a Madman* reflects a moment in Chinese history in which writers sought to abandon the norms and conventions of traditional literature (both in poetry and prose), much like how Western modernists of the 19th and early 20th century cast off literary conventions and, in the paraphrased words of Ezra Pound (who himself was quite taken with Chinese poetry and, despite little to no knowledge of Chinese, translated many famous

75 Ibid.

76 Xiaobing Tang, “Lu Xun's Diary of a Madman and Chinese Modernism”, *Modern Language Association*, Vol. 107, No. 5 (October 1992), 1222-1234, accessed March 10th, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462876>, 1222

77 Ibid.

poems), “made it new.”⁷⁸

Interestingly enough, Lu Xun was part of a group of writers who “rediscovered” the Tang-era *chuanqi* and novels, which in their time and until Lu Xun's days were considered pedestrian (*xiaoshuo*, small-talk, as opposed to the elite, rigid, high-culture poetry, which dominated literature). The “strange tale” and folk tale's status as the literary tradition of ordinary people (rather than the elite) fit in well with Lu Xun's reformist, vernacular sensibilities. But why would a revolutionary-minded writer like Lu Xun, who eschewed the traditions of the old Chinese society and called for modernization and the embracement of Western science and technology, so readily embrace something as premodern and traditional as folk literature from the Tang Dynasty, especially when his works (according to some) more reflect Western *modernism* than traditional Chinese literature?

Lu Xun did indeed have a certain sort of nostalgia for the old China. Shelley W. Chan directly compares Lu Xun's nostalgia to Mo Yan's⁷⁹ nostalgic sensibilities – both authors evoke in their short stories the idea that memories of one's old home are idealized and romanticized, not representative of reality. In Lu Xun's short stories, his characters returning home are essentially homeless: their nostalgia is for something that no longer exists, or never existed at all. Lu Xun especially invokes this idea in his short story, *My Old Home*. The narrator travels back to his rural home village, to

78 Ezra Pound's entreaty to writers to “make it new” stems from his 1934 collection of essays entitled *Make It New*. Ezra Pound, *Make It New*, (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1934).

79 Mo Yan is one of the most critically acclaimed authors in contemporary China, and is one of the most famous figures of the Xungen Movement. His novella *Red Sorghum* was adapted into a film in 1987 by director Zhang Yimou (who is best known internationally for directing the wuxia film *Hero* and for directing the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics), and he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012.

which he has not returned for twenty years. Immediately he sees that his home is not at all what he remembered it. “The old home I remembered was not in the least like this. My old home was much better. But if you asked me to recall its peculiar charm or describe its beauties, I had no clear impression, no words to describe it.”⁸⁰ Like Mo Yan's narrator in *Red Sorghum*, the narrator of *My Old Home* has no concrete point of reference for his memories; they were simply *there* and taken as axiomatic representations of the past. In *My Old Home*, we see the seeds of modern Chinese writers' love-hate relationship with the past. Lu Xun writes on the first page of the story, “...I am coming back to the country this time with no illusions.”⁸¹ Lu Xun willingly returns to and explores to the past, but refuses to look at it through rose-colored glasses.

Chan sees this same view of nostalgia (“paradoxical nostalgia”) in Mo Yan's works. In this way, Mo Yan is the heir to Lu Xun's critical view of the past: simultaneously full of longing and imagination, and constantly aware of the past's less savory aspects: violence, decay, stultifying conservatism.⁸² Lu Xun and Mo Yan also both created narrator characters who, upon returning to their natal homes, feel pity for their family members and former friends who, because of socioeconomic class, could not leave the village and find better opportunities. I suppose it is rather sad or even ironic that Mo Yan and Lu Xun, seventy years apart, would still see the same problems with urban-rural and class divisions, and express the same disconnection

80 Lu Xun, “My Old Home,” translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang in *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun* (New York: Oriole Editions, 1972), 79-90, 79

81 Ibid.

82 Shelley W. Chan, *A Subversive Voice in China: The Fictional World of Mo Yan* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011), 87

between the idyllic rural past and the harsh, unequal reality of life in the countryside.

It is in this paradoxical nostalgia that we begin to understand Lu Xun's feelings towards the past; even as he reviled the backwardness of traditional culture and social structures, he still felt proud of local culture and folk literature. Kirk A. Denton wrote in a cursory biography of Lu Xun, “Although in fictional representations of his hometown he often wrote disparagingly of its backwardness, in his scholarship and essays he shows a degree of pride in the local culture of Shaoxing and Eastern Zhejiang and its literary lineage.”⁸³ We must not mistake Lu Xun for the reformers of the end of the Qing who called for preserving the “essence” of Chinese culture (and who opposed Lu Xun's agitations for reform), but it is evident that he did not believe wholeheartedly in putting an end to all traditional culture.

I would like to take this opportunity to digress and “call forward” to a work I will be examining more in-depth in later chapters to discuss the two terms “*baihua*” and “*xiaoshuo*” and how they relate to the development of Chinese literature into the 1980s with the flourishing of Xungen. *Baihua* translates to “vernacular”, but can also mean “empty talk”. In Lu Xun's time, *baihua* signified the vernacular language that Lu advocated as the new language of literature, in place of the old classical language, which was difficult to understand without extensive education and familiarity with classical Chinese works. Diana Lary writes in *China's Republic*, “[Lu Xun] saw one of the root causes of China's problems in her traditional language, which trapped China in the past...the vernacular would express in writing the way people lived their

83 Kirk A. Denton, “Lu Xun Biography,” MCLC Resource Center, The Ohio State University, last modified 2002, <http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/bios/lxbio.htm>, accessed February 25th, 2013

spoken lives, and it would rapidly increase the number of literate people.”⁸⁴ To Lu Xun, *baihua* was an equalizer: it allowed more people to consume, understand, and talk about literature. In Han Shaogong's *A Dictionary of Maqiao* (which we will further discuss in the two later chapters), he devotes a chapter to the definition of *baihua* in the village of Maqiao, where it not only means “empty talk” and “vernacular”, but also “scary talk”, or ghost stories designed to stimulate listeners. In the novel, the narrator says of *baihua* in Maqiao,

[The association of *baihua* with ghost stories] led me to suspect that the beginnings of Chinese vernacular sprang from beneath gloomy thatched eaves such as were found here, that its roots lie in sources of vulgar diversion, in the records of the fantastic and bizarre...⁸⁵

I believe that here lies the common thread between Lu Xun's reformist literature of the early 20th century and Han Shaogong's *Xungen* of the 1980s: a preoccupation with the influence and possibility of folk tales and folk language – the very roots of Chinese language, of modern Chinese literature, are in the ghost stories people told on rainy days, or out on the road, not in the universities or gardens of the rich.

Similarly, the word for novel, *xiaoshuo* (小说), means “small talk”, which implies that the novel is pedestrian and common, a lesser form of literature to poetry. In an article for *World Literature Today* about the works of Han Shaogong, Mark Leenhouts writes,

84 Diana Lary, *China's Republic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 66

85 Han Shaogong, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, trans. Julia Lovell (New York: Dial Press, 2005), 379

Indeed, even today, fiction is still called *xiaoshuo* in Chinese...a term that has been used to designate everything from the earliest supernatural stories to the romances (*chuanqi*) of the Tang Dynasty and Pu Songling's famous *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio* that so enchanted Franz Kafka.⁸⁶

Lu Xun played a key role in elevating “small talk” and “empty talk” to a more official literary stage. By promoting vernacular folk stories and novels, Lu Xun ultimately helped set the stage for Xungen's revival of interest in folk culture in the 1980s.

One Xungen writer who would wholeheartedly embrace and then adapt folklore to make commentary on modern life was Wang Zengqi. Wang Zengqi was born in 1920 in Jiangsu Province (making him much older than many other Xungen writers – for comparison, Mo Yan was born in 1955, and Han Shaogong in 1953), and studied under the writer Shen Congwen during the 1940s. During the Cultural Revolution, he was employed writing librettos for state-approved operas, but after the 1970s, he reemerged as a fiction writer, focusing on life in rural China. Unlike Lu Xun or Mo Yan, Wang looked on pre-1949 China more fondly (though he certainly did not look at “old China” through rose-tinted lenses).⁸⁷ His literary point of view was also heavily influenced by his experience with Peking Opera. Just as Lu Xun cultivated his literary point of view through the “low” literature of *chuanqi*, Wang Zengqi found some of the roots of Chinese literary culture in the low, often

⁸⁶ Mark Leenhouts, “Empty Talk”

⁸⁷ Jeffrey Kinkley, “Wang Zengqi” in *Modern Chinese Writers: Self-Portrayals*, edited by Helmut Martin and Jeffrey Kinkley (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), 156

nonsensical lyrics of Peking Opera.⁸⁸ In an interview collected in *Modern Chinese Writers*, Wang goes on to discuss how his aim was to elevate the form of Peking Opera to stand up next to the fiction of Wang Meng or Deng Youmei.⁸⁹ Compare this to Lu Xun's desire to elevate *Baihua* as a legitimate literary form, or David Hawkes' desire for classical Chinese poetry to stand alongside the literary lions of Greek drama or Roman oratory in academia. Wang believed that even the “low” and “nonsensical” Peking Opera had plenty to offer the literary world, and that trying to write drama would help other authors be, as Wang said of himself, “ambidextrous.”⁹¹ Here, we see yet again the importance of media other than poetry books or novels for transmitting stories; as I discussed earlier, Pu Songling's works in their original form were rather byzantine and obscure to the average Chinese reader, but his stories became well-known through musical and theatrical adaptations. Wang Zengqi continued this legacy by considering music, theatre, and literature to be equally legitimate methods for storytelling.

Wang's sensibilities about diversifying literature shine through in his works. Some of his short stories are in many ways moralistic folk tales (like those of Pu Songling 300 years before) adapted to modern times. One such work, *A Tail*, sports an Aesop's fable-like structure but with an ultimately biting social commentary on the Communist regime. *A Tail* tells the story of a work unit meeting at a factory to discuss

88 Wang Zengqi, “We Must Not Forget Our Historical Roots: Popular Literature, Peking Opera, and Modern Prose”, translated by Jeffrey Kinkley, in Martin and Kinkley, *Modern Chinese Writers: Self-Portrayals*, 161

89 Wang Zengqi, “We Must Not Forget Our Historical Roots”, 162

90 Wang Meng and Deng Youmei are both well-known novelists who were both just a few years younger than Wang Zengqi.

91 Wang Zengqi, “We Must Not Forget Our Historical Roots”, 163

the promotion of an engineer. The work unit members find all sorts of political reasons why the engineer should not receive the promotion: his capitalist family, his cousin in Taiwan, his overly penetrating ideas.⁹² After listening for a long time, Old Huang, the elderly personnel consultant, tells the group a folk tale: in Old Huang's story, an old man comes upon a group of weeping animals. When the old man asks them why they are crying, they tell him that the Dragon King has decreed that all animals with tails would be killed. When the man sees a tailless frog among the crying animals, he asks why the frog is weeping, since he has no tail and is therefore safe from the Dragon King's decree. The frog replies, "I'm afraid he'll dig up my past as a tadpole!"⁹³

Wang Zengqi's fable within the story is reminiscent of other folk traditions worldwide, which used allegory to comment on morality and political issues. Wang Zengqi updates this use of folk tales to comment on the absurdity of the political climate in 20th century China. What sets it apart from the other folk tales we have examined (and will examine) is that Wang chose to use a modern situation with which many of his readers would be familiar as a framing device for the fable, rather than letting the fable stand alone. Wang deeply understood the power of folk tales as political commentary and moral instruction, and in the narrative structure he uses in *A Tail*, we see that that power has not diminished. This framing device depicting a modern-day situation contextualizes the story (and makes the moral of the story more clear) and allows Chinese people in 1983 to relate to a fable, and more easily

92 Wang Zengqi, "A Tail", translated by Howard Goldblatt in *Loud Sparrows: Contemporary Chinese Short-Shorts*, edited by Aili Mu, Julie Chiu, and Howard Goldblatt (New York: Columbia Press, 2006), 83-84

93 Wang Zengqi, "A Tail", 84

understand Wang's political commentary.

Although Socialist Realism held sway as the dominant literary genre during the early days of Communism, folk tales still held an important place in Chinese literary culture. Perhaps the most famous example is Mao Zedong's own interpretation of the old folk tale *The Stupid Man Who Moved a Mountain*. The tale, likely written in the 3rd or 4th century BCE and attributed to the Daoist Master Liezi, tells the story of a simpleminded old man (Mister Simple) who decides one day to level a mountain that makes his travels long and arduous. His wife is incredulous; how could a ninety-year-old man move a mountain? Nevertheless, Mister Simple enlists his son, grandson, and a neighbor's son to help him complete the task. Old Wiseacre asks Mister Simple, "How can you be so unwise? With the last strength of your declining years, you cannot even damage one blade of grass...what can you do to stones and earth?"⁹⁴ Mister Simple replies, "Certainly your mind is set too firm for me ever to penetrate it...my descendants will go on forever, but the mountains will get no bigger. Why should there be any difficulty about leveling them?"⁹⁵ The mountain spirits, seeing the old man's unwavering and most likely foolish tenacity, move the mountains and level the ground for him.⁹⁶ One could read the tale as a "just so" story, which explains why there are no mountains "from Chi-chou in the north to the south bank of the Han River."⁹⁷ Towards the end of the story, when the mountain spirits observe how man attempted to tamper with nature and choose to intercede to stop

94 Liezi, "The Stupid Old Man Who Moved a Mountain", trans. A.C. Graham, in Mair, *Columbia Anthology*, 38

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

him⁹⁸, it becomes similar to Greek myths about Prometheus or Arachne, in which mortals challenge the authority of nature or the gods, and subsequently become subject to divine intervention to prevent them from further meddling. In another interpretation, *The Stupid Man Who Moved a Mountain* illustrates the mercy of the gods, who recognize the hard work and tenacity of man, and reward him by lessening his burden.

Thousands of years later, CCP leader Mao Zedong would have a new, political take on the story. In a speech Mao gave to the Seventh National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party on June 11th, 1945, he directly referenced *The Stupid Man Who Moved a Mountain*. After summarizing it, he said,

Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?⁹⁹

In the pre-Mao interpretation of the story, the Stupid Man is just that: stupid to believe that he and his sons could move a mountain by sheer force of strength and will. In Mao's co-optation of the folk tale, the Stupid Man is diligent, unwavering in his aim to weather down the “mountains”--real or metaphorical--that obstruct his

98 “The mountain spirits, which carried snakes in their hands, heard about [Mister Simple attempting to move the mountain], and were afraid he would not give up.”

99 Mao Zedong, “Speech at the Seventh National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (The Stupid Man Who Removed the Mountains)”, translator unknown, Maoist Documentation Project, last modified 2004, accessed February 27th, 2013, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_26.htm,

path, and secure in the knowledge that he will eventually succeed, even if he or his direct descendants do not live to see that success. By directly comparing the overall mission of the Communist Party to the Stupid Man's quest and injecting into the story's element of divine intervention a deification of the masses, Mao makes the story a political parable and a powerful metaphor for the Communist Party's need to step up to the nigh impossible task of dismantling the “mountains” that block the path to the creation of a utopian Communist state. Mao's adaptation of a folk tale to perpetuate and support his political aims further illustrates how legend and folklore can be adapted to new ideologies, and illustrates how the past can be used to lend credence to and contextualize the present.

Mao Zedong was also a keen poet, and frequently alluded to mythology, folk tales, and even classical poetry in his poems. In “Yellow Crane Tower” (written in 1927), he alludes directly to “Green, Green Riverside Grass”¹⁰⁰ from the Nineteen Old Poems of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), and uses a classical poetic structure to describe the natural beauty of an abandoned tower.¹⁰¹ The first two lines of the poem directly mimic the opening lines of “Green, Green Riverside Grass”: Mao writes, “Wide, wide flow the nine streams through the land/Dark, dark threads the line from south to north.”¹⁰² Compare this to *Green, Green's* opening lines: “Green, green riverside grass/Lush, lush willow in the garden.”¹⁰³ It is curious to see Mao Zedong,

100 “From the Nineteen Old Poems: Green, Green Riverside Grass,” translated by Anne Birrell, in Mair, *Columbia Anthology*, 247.

101 Mao Zedong, “Yellow Crane Tower,” translator unknown, Maoist Documentation Project, last modified 2004, accessed March 19th, 2013
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/poems/poems02.htm>

102 Ibid.

103 “Green, Green”, 247

proponent of proletariat culture, write a poem that would not look entirely out of place in an anthology of classical poetry.

Many of Mao's poems (and his interpretation of *The Stupid Man Who Moved A Mountain*) focus on Mao's belief that man could conquer nature. His use of classical allusions, especially to poems that extolled China's natural beauty, lend an air of legitimacy and continuity to his vision for a utopian Chinese Communist state.

Another poem of Mao's, "Two Birds: A Dialogue", like Wang Zengqi's *A Tail* (which, for the sake of accurate historical context, I should mention was written in 1983, eighteen years after "Two Birds" was written), uses animals to comment on political situations. Two birds, a high-flying roc and a bush-dwelling sparrow, comment on the violence that plagues "Man's world."¹⁰⁴ The bush-dwelling sparrow longs to fly away to another world with plentiful food and grand palaces, away from the "mess" of our world. We could compare this wish to leave a messy, chaotic world to the language of the Six Dynasties era (220-580 CE) poet Tao Qian, who frequently spoke of his wish to leave the "dusty world" of court intrigue for a quiet life in the countryside.¹⁰⁵ The roc then rebukes the sparrow, saying, "Stop your windy nonsense! Look, the world is being turned upside down."¹⁰⁶

"Two Birds" was a quite naked commentary on the political climate in China

104 Mao Zedong, "Two Birds: A Dialogue", translator unknown, Maoist Documentation Project, last modified 2007, accessed February 26th, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/poems/poems36.htm>

105 Tony Barnstone and Chou Ping, "Tao Qian," in Barnstone and Ping, *The Anchor Book of Chinese Poetry*, 75. Tao Qian, a poet who worked as a court official during the politically tumultuous Six Dynasties Period, frequently wrote about his wish to escape the chaos of urban and political life; eventually, he did so, retiring to the countryside to be a farmer. In his poems, he refers to his former life at court as "empty", "dusty", and confining, like a cage or a net.

106 Ibid.

during the 1960s, at least among the upper echelons of society. The sparrow wishes to retreat to a fantasy land (Ross Terrill, in his biography of Mao, states that the “goulash” and the “triple pact” of which the sparrow speaks are direct allusions to Soviet policy¹⁰⁷), and avoid the messy violence of the world in which he lives. The roc calls such a thing “nonsense”, and considers the violence to be a turning point in the world which no one can (or should) escape or avoid. By framing the story as two birds discussing the state of the world, Mao is able to convey his rather vitriolic feelings about Soviet political philosophy and those who prioritize idealism over reality through a fable. This both softens the blow of his polemic and perhaps makes his idea more accessible. Such are the two main purposes of folklore and fable as I have examined them in this chapter.

Ningyi Li discusses in detail the impact and content of Mao's poetry in her book, *Mythic and Folk Elements in Modern Chinese Literature: A Study of Six Writers*. Much of Mao's interest in poetry stems from his early life: his middle-class upbringing afforded him an education that allowed him to read the classical novels of the Ming and Qing, like *The Water Margin* and *Journey to the West*, as well as classical poetry.¹⁰⁸ As we have seen from the two poems above, his education imbued his poetry with a wealth of allusions to classical literary form, folk tales, myth, and history. During the Cultural Revolution (which began one year after he wrote “Two Birds”), according to Li, “these classical and mythical elements in Mao's poems became the only resource for readers to learn Chinese history and China's classical

107 Ross Terrill, *Mao: A Biography* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 347

108 Ningyi Li, *Myth and Folk Elements in Modern Chinese Literature: A Study of Six Writers*, (Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 72

heritage, including some basic knowledge of traditional Chinese poetry.”¹⁰⁹

Furthermore, according to Mao biographer Ross Terrill, Mao himself found solace and inspiration in traditional Chinese history and literature during his tenure as Chairman of the CCP.

As he lost his faith in European Marxism, he turned back to Chinese tradition...he increasingly found a precedent for all good things in China's own experience. He began to see the past as a moral tale; not the mere fine print of Marx's historical laws, but an eternal, recurring war between good people and bad.¹¹⁰

Like the Xungen writers, Mao found that aping the West (in his case, aping European Marxism) was unsatisfying and did not adequately accommodate the realities of Chinese politics and culture. Like Xungen writers, Mao came to see history as essential to Chinese identity. And like the Xungen writers, he was able to use both classical and folk literary forms to express modern political sentiments and explore contemporary issues. However, we cannot deny that Mao's policies towards culture and the arts, namely the Cultural Revolution, did not reflect his private appreciation of traditional China.

Although in later chapters I discuss the foreign influence of Magical Realism and William Faulkner on Xungen writers, it would be foolish to ignore the indigenous ingredients present in Xungen writers' embracement of the fantastic and the folkloric. Just as Qu Yuan wrote of dissatisfaction with the world in which he lived but still longed for his native land, Xungen writers would use fantasy and collisions between

¹⁰⁹ Li, *Myth and Folk Elements*, 73

¹¹⁰ Terrill, *Mao*, 328

real and unreal to express their “paradoxical” nostalgic feelings about China. Similar to the Strange Tales written a thousand years before, Xungen concerned itself with the periphery, and incorporated imaginary elements into its descriptions of minority and rural communities, which, despite being within China's geographical borders, were often as foreign to the writers as they are to readers. Like Lu Xun, Xungen writers for the most part embraced Western or at least non-traditional literary conventions, but sought to preserve the vernacular, marginal literary traditions of China.

Although many Xungen writers actively disavowed the Socialist-Realist writing style or even actively subverted it (it can be argued that many parts of *Red Sorghum* are direct commentary on Socialist-Realist narratives of the Second Sino-Japanese War), they continued the tradition of using folklore and transforming it to comment on social problems or further a point of view. Just as Mao was able to use an ancient folk tale to reinforce his ideology and explain his views about the power of the common man to change the course of nature and history (with the help of the CCP, of course), Xungen writers explored folklore and experimented with the methods of transmitting it to comment on life and social issues in rural China.

We can clearly see how the legacy of fantasy and legend as instruction and commentary is nothing new to Chinese literature; while Xungen certainly took influence from literary traditions in the Americas that used fantasy, myth and memory as tools for commentary, it would be folly to view such borrowing as Chinese writers simply aping Marquez or Faulkner. Xungen, while part of a wider international literary trend, continues the long legacy of Chinese writers and poets using fantasy

and myth to contextualize and imagine China and the experience of being Chinese. Integral to all of these works is an integration of fantasy or myth into reality; there is little separation between the two. Whether to teach moral lessons, evoke a sense of the sublime, illustrate the foreign-ness of the periphery, or to highlight the way in which memory distorts reality, Chinese literature has a several thousand-year history of using fantasy, myth, fable, and legend as a literary and dialectic tool, not just as a genre.

Foreign Influence: From Bogotá to Beijing

Until the mid-to-late 20th century, Chinese literature was mostly self-sufficient and self-sustaining. Imbued with a rich literary tradition that spanned millennia (as we saw in Section 1's exploration of literature from the Zhou Dynasty all the way to the end of the Qing Dynasty in the early 20th century), China's literary traditions developed, for the most part, independently of foreign influence, though religious and cultural exchange with India greatly influenced works like *Journey to the West*.¹¹¹ Some of this literary isolation was politically imposed; emperors often closed China's doors to foreign trade or political dealings outside the tributary system. For instance, during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the Emperor Taizu (1368-1398) cut off all foreign trade that did not take place within the existing tributary trade system. Later, during the early 1400s, some Ming-era explorers like the eunuch Zheng He took voyages as far as East Africa, but officials convinced the emperor that such voyages were not cost-effective.¹¹² Thereafter, China restricted its foreign trade to specially designated ports and favored tributary states, such as Vietnam and Korea.¹¹³

After the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, Shelley W. Chan writes in the

111 The monk who serves as the main character in *Journey to the West* is named Tripitaka, a Sanskrit name, and scholars argue that his travel companion, a monkey deity named Sun Wukong, bears similarity to the Hindu deity Hanuman. Mair writes, "Readers of *Journey to the West* who are familiar with the *Ramayana* will note many striking correspondences between Sun Wu-k'ung and [Hanuman], the famous monkey-chief of that great Indian epic." (Mair, *Chinese Literature*, 567) In addition, Buddhism itself was an import to China from India, though it eventually had much more lasting power as a religion in China and the rest of East/Southeast Asia than it did on the Indian subcontinent.

112 Ebrey, *History of China*, 209-211

113 Ebrey, *History of China*, 210-211

introduction to her book, *A Subversive Voice in China: The Fictional World of Mo Yan*, a movement of writers who looked outside the borders of the Middle Kingdom briefly flourished. Reform-minded and radical writers such as Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, and Mao Dun embraced foreign literature, which had recently become available to Chinese readers.¹¹⁴ In the thirty-odd years between the fall of the Qing and the rise of the CCP as the new rulers of China, Chinese writers translated European works with which they had come into contact while studying abroad (often in Japan), and Chinese readers and audiences delighted in European novels and plays, such as Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. But, with the ascension of the Chinese Communist Party, the door to the literary outside world was slammed shut once again. Only a few Soviet writers held sway. Chan writes:

The literary monoglossia and the personality cult surrounding Mao Zedong reached an extreme during the...Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when formulaic and propagandist literature became dominant...almost all literary works – except those by government-paid writers – were labeled as 'poisonous weeds' and were either suppressed or repudiated.¹¹⁵

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the literary floodgates opened. Authors began to read literature from all over the world. Meanwhile, many writers turned their gazes back within China's borders, but in a whole new way. As China tried to find its footing after the Cultural Revolution, many writers began to question “Chineseness”, as the Revolution had violently redefined Chinese history and culture.

114 Chan, *A Subversive Voice*, 1-2

115 Chan, *A Subversive Voice*, 2

A group of writers who engaged in this sort of introspection called their works “roots-seeking”, or Xungen (寻根). Xungen looked to the past and towards the periphery of China, to the rural areas where many of the movement's writers lived as “sent-down youth”: educated young people from urban areas who, by Mao's decree, were sent to remote rural regions to work and be reeducated by the peasants. Writers like Han Shaogong frequently alluded to their experiences in the peripheries of China, and would extoll these rural regions as the fonts of “pure” Chinese culture, uncorrupted by modern cultural shifts.

Ironically, although the Xungen Movement was very much an inward-looking, indigenous literary movement in China, foreign influence was extremely apparent, especially from post-colonial literary schools like Magical Realism. Magical Realism, made famous in the West by authors like Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, blurs the boundary between reality and fantasy, and uses indigenous mythology and descriptions of sensory perceptions of historical events in order to reconstruct personal and collective memory. Magical Realism also uses this porous boundary between reality and fantasy as part of a larger critique of Western culture and colonialism. Magical Realism is inextricably tied to living on the margins of society, and to living in a threatened culture. Embedded in Magical Realism is “a concept of resistance to the imperial centre and its totalizing systems.”¹¹⁶ We can easily connect this undercurrent in Magical Realism to one we see in Xungen: the focus on the periphery, the minority, the rural, the aspects of Chinese culture and

116 Stephen Slemon, “Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse”, University of British Columbia, accessed November 26th, 2012, [http://cinema2.arts.ubc.ca/units/canlit/pdfs/articles/canlit116-Magic\(Slemon\).pdf](http://cinema2.arts.ubc.ca/units/canlit/pdfs/articles/canlit116-Magic(Slemon).pdf), 10

identity untouched by cosmopolitan culture.

Magical Realism began to attract international attention and grew as a genre during the 1960s. The 1960s saw major political and social upheaval in Latin America. In particular, the Cuban Revolution from 1953-1959 had a major impact on Latin American literature and the worldwide perceptions of Latin America.¹¹⁷ The Cuban Revolution, like the 1949 triumph of the Chinese Communist Party, was a part of the post-World War II/Cold War-era rise of the Third World, which also encompassed the end of British rule in the majority of Africa and the initial rumblings of the myriad conflicts in Southeast Asia during the 1960s and 70s (most notable of these was the Vietnam War). In addition, a burgeoning middle class in Latin America and the 1967 Nobel Prize win by Guatemalan author Miguel Angel Asturias (the first Latin American author to win a Nobel Prize)¹¹⁸ further raised Latin America's international profile, and raised more and more authors to prominence.¹¹⁹ This flourishing of Latin American novels became known as the Latin American Boom. Gerald Martin writes that the upsurge in modern communication technology such as the television, the international attention on Latin America caused by political upheaval, the recognition of Latin American authors, and the Latin American middle class's desire to read novels about their own experiences, by authors who shared their national and cultural backgrounds, all contributed to a climate in which authors like

117 Gerald Martin, "Boom, Yes; 'New' Novel, No: Further Reflections on the Optical Illusions of the 1960s in Latin America," in *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1984), pp. 53-63, accessed March 21st, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3338252>, 53

118 "Miguel Angel Asturias", The Nobel Prize, accessed March 21st, 2013, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1967/asturias.html

119 Martin, "Boom, Yes", 54

Marquez became celebrities as celebrated as film stars and athletes.¹²⁰

Much of Latin American literature in the mid-20th century, including *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, reflected Latin America's search for a concrete identity and history as the nations of Central and South America came into their own politically. Novels such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Kingdom of This World* (published in 1949) addressed the painful history of Latin America and the cataclysmic effects of colonialism, imperialism, revolution, and despotic governments on the psyche of the peoples of Colombia and Haiti, respectively. Asturias delved into indigenous myth and the political realities of his own country of Guatemala.¹²¹ All of these authors sought to understand their native lands and identities, and critique the political and social forces (i.e. imperialism) that erased indigenous culture and identity.

Many Chinese writers, including Han Shaogong, looked towards Latin America and North America for influence and inspiration. In particular, the Nobel Prize-winning Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the American author William Faulkner each greatly influenced Xungen works. Mo Yan has acknowledged Faulkner's influence on his works, as have many other critics, as mentioned on National Public Radio in an October 2012 feature on Mo Yan.¹²²

Han has also acknowledged his literary debt to Marquez and Magical Realism. What links a Colombian author most active in the 1960s and 70s to a Chinese writer

120 Ibid.

121 "Miguel Angel Asturias"

122 "Nobel Prize-Winning Author Inspired by Faulkner," narrated by Neda Ulaby, All Things Considered, NPR, October 11th, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/11/162743649/nobel-winning-chinese-writer-inspired-by-faulkner>

who came of age during the Cultural Revolution? Surely their backgrounds are too disparate, their nations' histories and their novels' subject matter impossible to compare.

Not quite so.

Upon reading the novels and short stories of Marquez, it was clear to me how a Colombian author who come of age in a nation beginning to delve into its own culture in the wake of colonialism and semi-imperialistic adventures by American fruit companies would resonate with Chinese authors attempting to rediscover their own culture after the ravages of the Cultural Revolution. Gabriel Garcia Marquez was born in 1928 in rural northern Colombia; raised by his grandparents, he abandoned his pursuit of a law degree in order to become a journalist. Since 1954, he has almost exclusively lived outside of Colombia, although many of his short stories and novels take place there.¹²³ A prolific journalist, fiction writer, and screenwriter, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982. He is considered a leader in the genre of Magical Realism; his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, first published in 1967, is considered a seminal work within the genre, and its themes of memory, family, and how a community interacts with the larger world have clearly resonated with authors from all corners of the globe.

Magical Realism, especially Marquez's particular brand of Magical Realism, has changed the way scholars discuss both non-Western literature and non-Western historiography. This literary movement actively challenges accepted norms of

¹²³ "Gabriel Garcia Marquez," The Nobel Prize, accessed January 20th, 2013, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1982/marquez-bio.html

plausibility and truth, and aims to retell history through emotion and experience, not necessarily through fact.

Perhaps the best example of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's clout as a Magical Realist author lies in his depiction of the fruit company strike in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The incident is based on real events which transpired in 1928 (the year of Marquez's birth) in Colombia; in the historical record, El Masacre de las Bananeras (the Banana Massacre) was an effort by banana plantation workers to demand better working conditions and compensation. During the protest, an army detachment from the capital Bogotá fired into the crowd, killing an unknown number of people (estimates range wildly from nine to two thousand).¹²⁴ In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the strike is a cataclysmic event that leaves three thousand dead; Marquez himself has stated that the Banana Massacre was one of his earliest memories (though it is unlikely that he would remember the event firsthand, seeing as he was not even a year old at the time the event occurred), and became seared into his psyche as something catastrophic, even apocalyptic, despite his knowledge that the death toll was most likely far lower than three thousand. When writing *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, "I couldn't stick to historical reality," Marquez said in a 1990 television interview.¹²⁵ "...I decided on 3,000 dead because that filled the dimension of the book I was writing. The legend has now been adopted as history..."¹²⁶

124 "Banana Massacre", Wikipedia, accessed January 21st, 2013,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banana_massacre

125 Gabriel Garcia Marquez, qtd by Eduardo Posada-Carbó, "Fiction as History: The *bananeras* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (May 1998): pp. 395-414, accessed January 21st, 2013,
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu/stable/158531?seq=1>, 396

126 Ibid.

Indeed, as Posada-Carbó notes, Marquez's in-story figure of 3,000 has been accepted into the Colombian history books, even if in all likelihood the body count was far lower (Marquez would later admit as much in an interview).¹²⁷ The plot thickens when in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the reverse of this situation occurs: the “official story” that the future children of Macondo (and all of Colombia) will read in the history books states that there were no deaths at all. After the massacre, a heavy rain cleansed the village of all traces of the killings, including people's memories of it. Indeed, when José Arcadio Segundo insists that three thousand people surely must have died in the massacre, he is met with puzzled looks; the people of Macondo tell him that no such deaths happened in the village.¹²⁸ The official history erases the massacre and the people's memories of it, turning truth into fiction, or as Posada-Carbó puts it, “history became legend.”¹²⁹

This theme is constant throughout colonial and post-colonial histories. The French scholar Pierre Nora observes in “Les Lieux de Memoire: Sites of Memory” that history and memory, while intertwined, are still separate entities that often come into conflict when one does not jibe with the other. Memories become “monuments” when there are no physical, tangible ways to commemorate the experience of a historical event or period; they become relics or preservers of a history that official narratives ignore or change; they can morph and reshape to accommodate differing

127 Posada-Carbó, “Fiction as History”, 395

128 Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 308

129 Eduardo Posada-Carbó, “Fiction as History: The *bananeras* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (May 1998): pp. 395-414, accessed January 21st, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu/stable/158531?seq=1>, 396

points of view or emotional response.¹³⁰ Nora summed it up thusly: “Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic...”¹³¹ Marquez's memories of the Banana Massacre nourished his emotional perception of the event, and preserved not the body count, but the symbolic importance of the massacre to the Colombian people and the intangible emotional trauma it caused them.

In both the fictional and actual stories of the Banana Massacre, we see how Magical Realism, and in particular Marquez's Magical Realist works, elucidate the gap between memory and emotion and historical “truth”, whatever that may be. Memory, as the reconstruction of events rather than the perfect recording or recollection, can have an imaginative element; events that felt cataclysmic to the rememberer are rendered as shocking and earth-shattering, even if numbers or statistics suggest (or prove) otherwise; people of no consequence in history books become the subjects of songs and stories if the storyteller so chooses. Memory and legend are where history intersects with art.

This interchange of legend, art and history that we see in the depiction of the Banana Massacre in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* also plays a prominent role in Xungen works, such as *A Dictionary of Maqiao* and *Red Sorghum*, where the characters are actively aware that the stories they hear or tell are partially or

130 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire”, University of California, Santa Barbara, accessed October 3rd, 2012, <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/201/articles/89NoraLieuxIntroRepresentations.pdf>, 9

131 Nora, “Lieux de Memoire”, 8

completely fiction, or transmuted over time from fact into improbable legend. It is easy to see that Marquez's view of history as malleable in the hands of whoever remembers or records it found its way into the thematic content of Xungen works. Like Marquez, Xungen authors like Mo Yan and Han Shaogong put history in the service of art (i.e. make history art by exploring memory and myth rather than the facts in history books), and explore how emotion, erasure, and oral tradition dictate what stories are told and who tells them.

Scholars have acknowledged Xungen's status as a Chinese offshoot of Magical Realism, specifically citing Marquez's immense influence on the movement. Wang Jing suggests in her book *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* that Xungen writers believed themselves to be a Chinese counterpart of Magical Realism.¹³² “The example of magic realism unloads many other half-truths for the Chinese writer desperately seeking for a global laureate, among which...is the prescriptive turning away from the center toward the margin...”¹³³ Wang also mentions the influence of Marquez on Xungen authors – it was Marquez's tendency to mythologize the everyday and the Xungen authors' desire to find enlightenment in the international and the modern that in part fueled the fire of a “culture fever” in China during the 1980s.¹³⁴

Chan writes that Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Nobel Prize win in 1982, at the very start of the Xungen movement, inspired Xungen writers by breaking the “old

132 Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), accessed January 24th, 2013, <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft0489n683/>, 222

133 Ibid.

134 Wang, *High Culture Fever*, 38

Western white men” mold of acclaimed writers and expressing the culture and feelings of a specific ethnic group. “...none of the previous Nobel Prize winners in literature had stimulated such widespread and long-lasting interest among Chinese writers, who were greatly inspired by Marquez's success to mine the riches of their own culture.”¹³⁵

Despite Marquez's influence on Chinese writers even in the 1980s, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was not officially translated into Mandarin Chinese until 2011, though bootleg translations had been in circulation at least thirty years prior.¹³⁶ The translator, Professor Fan Ye of Beijing University (whom I had the distinct honor and pleasure to correspond with via email), said in an interview with the Colombian magazine *El Espectador* that in many ways, traditional Chinese literature helped him to understand the complexities of Marquez's Macondo and the Buendía family, who are famous for their tangled family tree. On interpreting the complicated genealogy of the Buendías for a Chinese audience, he said, “...we are a people who possess novels on the magnitude of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, in which appear more than four hundred characters with their own names (but [their names] don't repeat themselves quite as much as the Buendías, thank God).”¹³⁷ On the influence of Marquez on Chinese writers, he said, “In China, [Gabriel Garcia Marquez] and his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are all a myth, and have been for some time, for almost an entire

135 Chan, *A Subversive Voice*, 74

136 Igor I. Solar, “First Legal Translation of One Hundred Years of Solitude”, *Digital Journal*, May 1st 2011, Accessed February 23rd, 2013, <http://digitaljournal.com/article/306210>

137 Fan Ye, qtd by Nelson Fredy Padilla, “En China Gabo Es Todo Un Mito [In China, Gabriel Garcia Marquez Is All A Myth]”, *El Espectador*, June 11th, 2011, Accessed February 22nd, 2013, <http://www.elespectador.com/impreso/cultura/articulo-276723-china-gabo-todo-un-mito>. My Translation.

generation of Chinese writers, a source of “anxiety of influence.”¹³⁸

What exactly was this “anxiety of influence” for Chinese writers? Fan's turn of phrase originated from literary critic Harold Bloom's book *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Bloom defined “anxiety of influence” as poets being creatively stymied by the older poets inspired them to write and from whom they subsequently derive technique and style.¹³⁹ Fan's use of the phrase highlights how Marquez's almost godlike status as the standard-bearer for modern world literature has made it difficult for some Xungen writers to come out from under his shadow.

Marquez's influence on Xungen writers is prominent enough that Mo Yan, the first Chinese citizen to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (joining Marquez, who won the prize 30 years prior in 1982),¹⁴⁰ felt compelled to say that he had not read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* before he started writing. “When I first started writing it was the year of 1981, so I didn't read any books by Garcia Marquez or Faulkner. It was 1984 when I first read their works and undoubtedly those two writers have great influence on my creations.”¹⁴¹ After 1984, we could certainly see Marquez's hand in Mo Yan's writing. Mo Yan would also go so far as to remark wryly, “Garcia Marquez wrote my novel.”¹⁴² Facetiousness aside, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's blurring of the boundaries between history and legend and his emphasis on emotional memories

138 Fan Ye, qtd by Nelson Fredy Padilla, “En China Gabo Es Todo Un Mito”. My Translation.

139 “The Anxiety of Influence,” Wikipedia, accessed March 8th, 2013,

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Anxiety_of_Influence

140 “Mo Yan,” The Nobel Prize, accessed January 27th, 2013,

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/

141 Mo Yan, Interview with John Freeman, *Granta Magazine*, October 11th, 2012, Accessed April 9th,

2012, <http://www.granta.com/New-Writing/Granta-Audio-Mo-Yan>.

142 Lev Grossman, “Chinese Novelist Mo Yan Receives Nobel Prize. But Is He Politically Correct?” *Time*, October 11th, 2012, Accessed January 24th, 2013,

<http://entertainment.time.com/2012/10/11/chinese-novelist-mo-yan-receives-nobel-prize-but-is-he-politically-correct/>

rather than empirical historical fact are themes and tropes present in Mo Yan's work, and in the works of other Xungen writers, such as Han Shaogong. Han's works in particular show the mark that Marquez's epic story of the village of Macondo has left on Chinese literature.¹⁴³

However, it would be foolish to base a discussion of an author's influence on a literary movement on a single chapter in a single novel of his. Marquez's short stories, such as *Leaf Storm*, reveal more pages that Xungen writers took out of Marquez's book, so to speak. For instance, *Leaf Storm*, a short story that tells, in shifting perspectives, the story of a funeral in Macondo. The two narrators, a small boy and his mother, experience the funeral, the corpse, and the stifling heat; the narrative shifts seamlessly between their two perspectives, leaving no gap, chapter heading, or even much of a change in writing style to indicate the shifts. This narrative structure evokes how collective and individual memory are intertwined. Furthermore, the story itself is a perspective shift, portraying the lives of denizens of Macondo who are not part of the Buendía family. The story does, however, mention the names of characters who would later appear in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, notably Meme, who is a friend of the mother in the story.¹⁴⁴ Marquez treats Macondo as a Middle-Earth of sorts: an entire fictional realm not contained to any one novel or narrative; it is a universe that needs to be understood from all sides. This repeated use of one fictional setting in multiple seemingly unrelated works is also a motif in the works of Mo Yan, who sets many of his stories in a fictionalized version of the real village of Northeast

143 Jeffrey Kinkley and Helmut Martin, "Han Shaogong," in *Modern Chinese Writers: Self-Portrayals*, ed. Jeffrey Kinkley and Helmut Martin (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), 147

144 Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "Leaf Storm", trans. Gregory Rabassa, in *Leaf Storm and Other Stories* (New York, NY: Perennial Classics, 2005), 9

Gaomi Township, the setting of *Red Sorghum*. A village becomes a universe that can only be understood from multiple perspectives and narratives.

One of the short stories that best captures the essence of Marquez's Magical Realism and the use of myth or fairy tale as a narrative structure within the genre is *The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World*, subtitled "A Tale for Children". In the story, a group of children from a seaside village encounter the body of a man washed up from the sea, and the villagers soon discover that this is no ordinary man: he is far too heavy, he is far too tall to fit into a house, and he looks as much like a sea creature as he does a human being.¹⁴⁵ The villagers, after attempting to rationalize the man's odd size and appearance, decide to hold a funeral for him. The village women begin to fantasize what the man would have been like had he lived in the village, imagining him to have a huge house and a happy wife, with enough authority to catch fish simply by calling to them; they decide to call him Esteban.¹⁴⁶

Although *The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World* is not based on historical events, its fable-like quality (first hinted by how the story is intended for children) fits right into Magical Realism's use of legend and myth to supplement memory, and to reconstruct a culture or a people that no longer exist as they once did or could. The story itself illustrates this through the village women reconstructing, through their fantasies, the name, personality, and personal life of a mysterious corpse. They have little to go on but the superficial remnants of a man (his body), but quickly form an entire fantastic narrative of his life; this very action is the essence of

145 Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World", trans. Gregory Rabassa, in *Leaf Storm and Other Stories* (New York, NY: Perennial Classics, 2005), 98

146 Marquez, "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World", 100

both Xungen and Magical Realism: reconstructing the remnants of a world (a past, a culture, a people) that no longer exists, adding elements of fantasy and myth and legend to aid the imagination.

Chan discusses this phenomenon in *A Subversive Voice In China* by analyzing it in the works of Mo Yan, who represents the past as “a fantasized mirage, to which he never belonged and will never be able to return.”¹⁴⁷ His nostalgia is imaginary, since he has no idea what the past was really like, just as the women of the village in *The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World* create a fantastic past for the corpse of a man they never knew.

Magical Realism was not the only influence on the Xungen movement. Another author from the Americas would have a profound impact on the writing style and content of Xungen novels and short stories: William Faulkner. Born in 1897 in Mississippi, Faulkner became famous for his many novels which depicted life in the Southern United States. His works employed a stream-of-consciousness style and use Southern American vernacular and syntax. His stories, especially *The Sound and the Fury*, sound like an oral narrative rather than a written one – rambling, making frequent chronological leaps, and focusing on specific aesthetic details. Many of his novels take place in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County (which was based on Lafayette County, Mississippi, Faulkner's home county): compare to Marquez's Macondo, Mo's Northeast Gaomi Township, and Han's Maqiao.

This use of fictional geography is a major facet in these three literary traditions that discuss alternative historical narratives. Macondo, Maqiao, and

¹⁴⁷ Chan, *A Subversive Voice*, 107

Yoknapatawpha County allow the authors to have a “safe space” of sorts to depict historical events and comment on them. Because these locales, though they are based on actual places or regions, are not “real” in the traditional sense, it is less controversial to use a fictional locale to comment on a town, region, or country's past or present political situation. Fictional geography also creates a sense of universality; the story of Macondo could be the story of any village in Colombia, the story of Yoknapatawpha County could be the story of any county in Mississippi, and the story of Maqiao or Northeast Gaomi Township could be the story of any village in rural China. In his article on Faulkner's fictional geography, Charles S. Aiken writes about how Yoknapatawpha County functioned as a way to express the romanticization of the Southern past. Faulkner grew up in the early 20th century, just forty years after the American Civil War and the Reconstruction Era. After the extreme social and economic upheaval of the late 19th century, Southerners began to romanticize the Antebellum period and the Civil War. “The poverty of the postwar period contributed to the development of a backward-looking people who, by the turn of the century, had begun to romanticize the antebellum era and the war itself.”¹⁴⁸

Mythologizing the past is a coping mechanism.

We would encounter this romanticization and mythologization of the past in modern Chinese literature, including Xungen, albeit in a very different mode. After the tumult of the early-to-mid 20th century, the traditional and peripheral pasts became a source of empowerment and comfort. Authors could experience nostalgia for a past

148 Charles S. Aiken, “Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County: Geographical Fact Into Fiction” in *Geographical Review*, Vol. 67 No. 1 (January, 1997), pp. 1-21, accessed February 6th, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/213600>.

they'd never experienced and no longer exists, much like how Faulkner could imagine a South that no longer exists (and perhaps never even existed in the first place).

However, Faulkner's imagination did not spring from thin air; as Aiken details in his article, Yoknapatawpha County is quite obviously based on Lafayette County, Mississippi, where Faulkner grew up. Aiken compares the fictional geography of Yoknapatawpha to Lafayette's factual geography, saying that the dissimilarities between Yoknapatawpha and Lafayette's geographies are a result of Faulkner's "quickly sketched mental maps" of Lafayette.¹⁴⁹

Faulkner, by setting his stories in a fictional county of Mississippi, had far more freedom to make criticisms about life in the South. In addition, by placing his stories in a world that could feasibly exist in our own (unlike, say, Macondo, which is routinely the site of improbable and fantastic events, such as plagues of insomnia or people living unusually long lives – we will discuss Macondo's fantastic nature in the next section), but does not actually exist, he sets his novels in "everywhere and nowhere". The characters in *The Sound and the Fury* who live in Yoknapatawpha County, for instance, are characters who very well could have lived in Lafayette County, or Calhoun County, or Prentiss County. But because they exist purely in a world constructed by Faulkner and his own interpretation of his native land, Faulkner can make them into something more than average Mississippians, and their stories into something more than private family dysfunction.

This yet again lines up with the idea we see in both Magical Realism and Xungen (and in Nora's "Les Lieux de Memoire"): that memory is a reconstruction of

¹⁴⁹ Aiken, "Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County", 7

the past, subject to emotional transformations and different perceptions by different people.

Mo Yan would take a similar approach in his works; many of his novels, including *Red Sorghum*, take place in a fictionalized version of his childhood village, Northeast Gaomi Township in Shandong Province. Mo would directly address Faulkner's influence on his work in his short story "How Are You, Mr. Faulkner?" and in a 1993 essay entitled "Talk about the Old Fellow Faulkner"; he admitted that the fictionalized Northeast Gaomi Township in many of his works was a take-off of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, and that Faulkner was the one who taught him that he could imagine not just characters, but geographies as well.¹⁵⁰ Just like Faulkner, Mo places his stories in "everywhere and nowhere": Northeast Gaomi Township is simultaneously real and unreal. It is, in fact, the name of Mo Yan's hometown. It is very much within our (by "our" I include both Chinese and Western readers) understanding of the experience of living in a Chinese village, but because Mo Yan places the events and characters into a fictional location, he has more freedom with characterization and what criticisms he can make about Chinese society.

However, unlike Faulkner, Mo's use of imaginary geography has some political underpinnings (despite Mo's insistence that he is apolitical: a point of contention among his critics, especially after his Nobel Prize win). By placing his stories in a not-quite-real-not-quite-fantasy locale, Mo Yan can touch on subjects that perhaps would be off-limits to him had he written them as nonfiction. He said in an interview quoted in a National Public Radio feature on his Nobel Prize win,

¹⁵⁰ Chan, *A Subversive Voice*, 15

Many approaches of literature have political bearings. For example, in real life, there might be some sensitive issues you don't want to touch on. I think writers can inject their own imagination to isolate them from the real world. So actually I believe censorship is great for creating literature.¹⁵¹

While many of Mo Yan's critics would decry such a quote as evidence of his refusal to use his writing to take a stand against the Chinese government's censorship policies, Mo Yan's imaginary geography is a method to explore a past that for years was monopolized by the CCP and the Socialist-Realist style, and gives him a method to circumvent censorship and conventions on how to explore topics like the Japanese occupation or, as seen in his latest novel entitled *Frogs*, the One Child Policy. Imaginary geography is an important feature in Xungen works because it allows for a form of expression and exploration that relying on pure realism does not, or cannot allow. Just as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County explored the early 20th century romanticization of the past in the Southern United States, the use of imaginary geography also allowed Xungen authors to comment on the romanticization of their own past, by implicitly saying that such a past, even if it was grounded in truth, did not exist as it was remembered.

Chan posits that Mo Yan's imaginary past in Northeast Gaomi Township is a part of Mo's “paradoxical nostalgia”; he wants to return to a past that probably never

151 “Chinese Writer”, quote originally from a 2012 Granta podcast

existed, and yet he criticizes the older generations for their numerous shortcomings.¹⁵² Mo Yan's imagined past takes away the trappings of an idyllic pastoral world depicted in the fiction of the generation before the Cultural Revolution, and makes his Yoknapatawpha County (Northeast Gaomi Township) a harsh, morally ambiguous world filled with violence and sexual transgression (“sexual comedies”, as he calls them in *Red Sorghum*¹⁵³). In this way, he comments on romanticizing the past and the ambiguities people feel towards histories that are often harsher and less sympathetic or clear-cut when one removes the rose-colored lenses, just as Faulkner did in *The Sound and the Fury* and other works. Because Mo Yan is, in the words of Chan, “estranged from both the past and the present,”¹⁵⁴ he must resort to imagination to revisit the past, and creates the fictionalized Northeast Gaomi Township as his mental “monument” (to borrow a concept from Pierre Nora's *Sites of Memory*) to the countryside he remembers, but from which he is estranged both psychologically and geographically. Chan directly compares Mo Yan's Northeast Gaomi Township to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County: both are “literary kingdoms”¹⁵⁵ where the author can recreate and comment upon the past and the present alike.

Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* deals in part with the trauma of Reconstruction and the disconnect between the romantic image of the aristocratic rural South and the reality of the South's decline. Compare this theme to those we see in Lu Xun's *My Old Home* and in Mo Yan's imaginary nostalgia in *Red Sorghum*. The Compson family in *The Sound and the Fury* cling to an unsustainable past that has no

152 Chan, *A Subversive Voice*, 75

153 Mo Yan, *Red Sorghum*, translated by Howard Goldblatt (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 6

154 Chan, *A Subversive Voice*, 79

155 Ibid.

connection with the reality in which they live, and may have never been connected with reality. Faulkner uses the Compson family to comment on imagined nostalgia in the Southern United States. The Compsons have trouble adapting to a post-Reconstruction South, where the plantation mansions have become ghostly shells of what they once were, and the family is reduced to selling some of their land to a golf course developer to pay for their son Quentin's Harvard education.

In addition, Faulkner made ample use of local folklore in his works. In Charles D. Peavy's article on Faulkner and folk traditions for the *Journal of American Folklore*, he discusses how Faulkner incorporated African-American folk beliefs into *The Sound and the Fury*, especially superstitions about animals. African-American characters in the story (notably, the servants of the Compson family) regard screech owls and dogs as harbingers of death, either heralding it through hooting or howling, or by sensing it through smell.¹⁵⁶ These characters, like the elderly denizens of Northeast Gaomi Township in Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* and the African slave Macandal in Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World*, preserve and transmit folk tales and beliefs.

Taking all of these similarities between Faulkner's unique brand of fiction and Mo Yan's interpretation of Xungen into account, it is not surprising that Mo Yan would have a literary affinity towards Faulkner. Both authors struggle to reconcile the romance and magic of the pasts they remember (whether or not such pasts really happened) with their critical view of both the past and present, and both use folklore

¹⁵⁶ Charles D. Peavy, "Faulkner's Use of Folklore in *The Sound and the Fury*," *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 79, No. 313 (July-September 1966), accessed March 31st, 2013, pp. 437-447, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/537508>, 441

and imaginative, emotional elements to express their simultaneous longing and revulsion for their nations' histories.

In this chapter I have focused chiefly on how writers from the Americas influenced modern Chinese writers; I feel that ignoring the influence of both ancient and modern Chinese writers on Western literature would be to ignore an entire side of a rich and lively cultural dialogue. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a particularly interesting moment for this cultural exchange. For example, Franz Kafka, the Czech writer best known for his surreal and often disturbing stories, was said to have been interested in the strange stories of Pu Songling. In a letter to his fiancée Felice Bauer, dated January 16th, 1913, he described Martin Buber's *Chinesische Geister Und Liebes Geschichten* (*Chinese Ghost and Love Stories*), which included German translations of *Strange Tales* by Pu Songling, as “wonderful, at least the ones I know.”¹⁵⁷ Although Kafka did not mention Pu Songling directly, his interest in Chinese literature reveals that the literary exchange between China and the West was not one-way.

Martin Buber's *Chinesische Geister Und Liebes Geschichten* is yet another example of how European authors took inspiration from Chinese literature, and how Chinese literature obviously enjoyed some modicum of popularity in (at the very least) the literary circles of the West in the early 20th century. As we discussed previously, Western literature (including Kafka) was gaining popularity in China by way of Japan during that time. What prompted Western authors like Buber and Kafka

¹⁵⁷ Franz Kafka, “January 16th, 1913, Thursday Afternoon”, translated by James Stern and Elizabeth Duckworth, in *Letters to Felice*, edited by Erich Heller and Jürgen Born (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1973), 158

to look east? Was it the Orientalism that was evident in the art and fashion (*chinoiserie*) of the time?¹⁵⁸ Was it from Chinese scholars who had traveled to Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to study?¹⁵⁹

This cross-cultural dialogue between China and the West is multi-faceted, and its rise in prominence during the 19th and 20th centuries is due to the rise of faster transportation, new trade routes, colonialism (notably in Chinese port cities like Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Qingdao) and political developments that allowed for more cultural contact. At the same time, we know from history that Chinese literature and culture have continually been at least a peripheral element in Western literary and artistic culture; for instance, 18th century philosopher and satirist Voltaire first learned of Confucian philosophy through Jesuit missionaries' translations, and wrote extensively about his admiration of Confucius and the Chinese political system of the time.¹⁶⁰ Even before the age of colonialism and global trade, there was a lively East-

158 Orientalist themes had been present in Western art and fashion for quite some time by the 1910s (the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art features an online overview of Orientalism in historical fashion here: "Harold Koda and Richard Richard Martin, "Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000--, Last Modified October 2004, accessed March 4th, 2013, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/orie/hd_orie.htm). However, in the 1910s, Orientalist themes in art and fashion became much more commercialized and apparent with the advent of high-profile designers like Paul Poiret and the increasing accessibility of fashion through department stores, et cetera.

159 Spence, *Modern China*, 218-219, 237. Starting in the late 1800s, Qing officials began to organize student missions to the United States (such as to Hartford, Connecticut), the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, where Chinese students could study English, Western science and engineering, and Western political theory.

160 Martin H. Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile" in *PMLA*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (December, 1932), 1050-1065, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/457929>. Rowbotham argues that Voltaire's interest in Chinese philosophy and religion was part of a larger Enlightenment-era interest in China. Confucianism especially fascinated European Enlightenment thinkers, who wished to establish a more equitable society, but were reluctant to abolish the monarchy. In this particular instance of East-West contact, China and Europe seemed to be on somewhat equal footing, with China a subject of admiration and interest rather than an object of cultural fetishism, which it would become in the century

West cultural exchange; Martin Buber and Franz Kafka were neither the first nor the last Europeans to take an interest in Chinese literary culture.

However, we absolutely cannot ignore the fetishistic and colonial underpinnings of Western adoption and adaptation of Chinese literature and art when we discuss the cross-cultural dialogue between China and the West. Buber may very well have been introduced to Chinese works in part because of Germany's 1898 occupation of Shandong Province, including the port city of Qingdao.¹⁶¹ In her article entitled "Martin Buber and Taoism," Irene Eber writes,

Buber's initial concern with matters Chinese occurred against the background of a wider German interest in China which began in 1897 with Germany's occupation of Chiao-chou Bay and the port of Tsingtao. But German interest in Chinese culture went well beyond the purely practical matters of the military or trade...but even if German scholars considered themselves initially to lag behind the British, modern Chinese studies, including Sino-German scholarly contacts, developed rapidly.¹⁶²

Martin Buber, it should be mentioned, could not speak or read Chinese. His collection of Pu Songling's tales in German came from Herbert Giles' English translations (which we explored earlier in Chapter 1), and from German translations by a Germany-based Chinese scholar named Wang Ching-T'ao, whom Buber met at the Seminar for Oriental Languages.¹⁶³

Later in the 20th century, European and American writers would continue to see China as exotic and a source for literary and scholarly inspiration. The writer Ezra

immediately following.

161 Spence, *Modern China*, 229.

162 Irene Eber, "Martin Buber and Taoism" in *Monumenta Serica*, Vol. 42 (1994), 445-464, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40727025>, Accessed March 12th, 2013, 446

163 Eber, "Martin Buber," 447

Pound, for instance, tried his hand at translating classical Chinese poetry, despite (like Buber) not knowing how to speak, write, or read Chinese (though he would later learn the language and become quite adept at it by the mid-20th century).¹⁶⁴ Western Beat generation and counterculture poets in the 1950s and 60s, such as Gary Snyder, were also inspired by the simplicity and economy of classical Chinese poetry, and by Chinese religions.¹⁶⁵ Just as Xungen authors looked to Latin American authors for something to break the mold of traditional Chinese literary forms, the American poets of the counterculture looked east to break away from European and established American literary modes.

Latin American authors also looked to China for inspiration. One of the most famous authors to look east was Jorge Luis Borges. Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1899 and educated in Switzerland, Borges was one of the largest influences on the Magical Realism genre and a highly prolific short story writer, essayist, poet, and novelist. Many of his short stories feature Chinese characters (such as *The Garden of Forking Paths*), or took direct inspiration from Chinese literary forms, such as his essay *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*, which references a fictional Chinese encyclopedia called “The Celestial Empire of Benevolent Knowledge”, which classifies animals into odd categories, such as: animals that belong to the emperor, animals that are embalmed, tame animals, suckling pigs, sirens, fabulous animals, stray dogs, and animals painted with a fine camel brush.¹⁶⁶ While Borges's categories

164 Nick Selby, “Ezra Pound's Chinese Friends: Stories in Letters,” review of *Ezra Pound's Chinese Friends: Stories in Letters*, by Zhaoming Qian, *Times Higher Education*, June 5th, 2008, Book Reviews, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/402230.article>

165 “Biography: Gary Snyder,” The Poetry Foundation, last modified 2009, accessed April 11th, 2013, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/gary-snyder>

166 Jorge Luis Borges, “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins”, translated by Lilia Graciela

are absurd ones of his own creation, the form of this fictional encyclopedia takes direct inspiration from Chinese reference books – a legacy we also see in Han Shaogong's *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, which, as the title suggests, is a novel structured as a dictionary of Maqiao-dialect phrases and words.

In Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), the main character is a Chinese professor of English named Yu Tsun, who originally taught at the Hochschule in Qingdao (which Germany briefly controlled in the late 19th to early 20th century), but now works as a spy for the Germans in World War I England. Over the course of the story, Borges uses Yu Tsun to comment on racist attitudes towards East Asians, which were commonplace in Europe at the time. Yu Tsun does not hold any real loyalty to Germany, but spies for them in order to prove that he, a Chinese man, is equal to white Germans.

I didn't do it for Germany, no. I don't care anything for a barbaric country...I did it because I felt that the Chief feared people of my race – the innumerable past ones who conflated into me. I wanted to prove to him that a yellow man could save his army.¹⁶⁷

Borges makes a rather biting commentary on the Chinese experience in the West, which, due to his education in Europe, he may well have seen firsthand. Yu Tsun is split between his two identities as a Chinese man and as a European, who must prove himself to be different from the stereotypes of Chinese people. On one

Vasquez, edited by Jan Frederik Solem, with assistance from Bjorn Are Davidsen and Rolf Andersen, <http://www.alamut.com/subj/artiface/language/johnWilkins.html>, last modified July 15th, 1999, accessed March 3rd, 2013

167 Jorge Luis Borges, “El Jardín de Senderos que se Bifurcan [The Garden of Forking Paths]” in *Obras Completas: Ficciones V-V* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Emecé Editores, 1956), 98-111, 100. My translation.

hand, he wishes to assimilate and be accepted by the West, and on the other, he wants to empower himself as a Chinese person—as an other. This “forking path” would show up again in Xungen literature, in which authors sought to balance Western techniques and ideas with a distinctly Chinese voice.

Later in the story, Borges peppers Yu Tsun's narrative with allusions to China. While hiding from Richard Madden, the British military officer pursuing him, Yu Tsun remembers his eccentric great-grandfather, Tsui Pen. Tsui Pen was the governor of Yunnan Province (in southwestern China), but renounced his post in order to write a great novel “which would have been more popular than *Hong Lu Meng* [*Dream of the Red Chamber*, one of the most famous Chinese novels of all time]”¹⁶⁸ and build a marvelous labyrinth. But, Yu Tsun says, “the hand of a stranger murdered him, and his novel was insensate and no one found the labyrinth.”¹⁶⁹ Like in many of the other works we have analyzed, Yu Tsun has a complicated relationship with his past; he is a Chinese man in England, purportedly pledging allegiance to the German Empire, and in his hour of need, he meditates on the odd story of his great-grandfather back in faraway Yunnan Province.

Obviously, Latin American countries did not participate in the imperialistic adventures taking place in China during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus, it would be illogical and inaccurate to chalk Latin American authors' interest in Chinese literature to colonial hegemony by their home countries. Even still, authors like Borges most likely keenly understood the cruel legacy of imperialism in their nations,

168 Borges, “El Jardín”, 102

169 Ibid.

and may have sympathized with Chinese people's plight in the late 19th century. In addition, Borges in particular was very much in tune with the wider literary and academic trends in major cosmopolitan areas, owing to his European, bilingual education, which allowed him to straddle the “old” and “new” world. Like Borges, Yu Tsun must straddle two worlds: as a Chinese man still deeply connected to his heritage, but hoping to gain the acceptance of Europeans.

Latin American authors such as Borges and Carpentier also took inspiration from the European modernists. Gerald Martin goes so far as to say that the “new” literature of 1960s Latin America and the literary waves that preceded it were nothing new – they were heavily rooted in European modernism.¹⁷⁰ Martin particularly focuses on James Joyce's *Ulysses* as one of the most important influences on Latin American authors. He refers to the novels of Marquez and other authors as “Ulyssean”; Martin states that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in particular is a “Ulyssean novel” because of its “quest for totality.”¹⁷¹ Indeed, like *Ulysses*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* creates a self-contained mythos (though not entirely self-contained, as the legends and characters of Macondo make repeat appearances in Marquez's short stories) and seeks to explore the whole of human existence in all its beauty and absurdity.

In the modern day, economic globalization and technological advancements have greatly facilitated cross-cultural dialogue between China, Latin America, and the West (if the West is defined as North America and Western Europe). After the Chinese

170 Martin, “Boom, Yes”, 55

171 Martin, “Boom, Yes”, 59

government began to allow foreign literary works into the country again after the Cultural Revolution and began their experiment (and eventual love affair, some would say) with capitalism, Chinese and Western authors could communicate ideas to one another, actively or passively, faster than ever before.

The common roots of Xungen, Magical Realism, and modern European and American literature (read: from the late 19th century onwards) lie in their desire to preserve what is lost and interpret the world through a less linear, logical, realistic lens. All of these works interpret and construct reality through the senses and through storytelling or myth, and through the specific mechanics of storytelling.

All of these movements employ fictionalized geographies and events, and non-linear storytelling as methods to make commentary on the past and present, and make more radical statements than a more “straight” or “true” retelling might allow. A fictional lens adds a buffer zone of sorts between the authors' social commentary and the actual event, place, et cetera. A fictional lens and non-linear story structures also allowed these authors to offer alternative perspectives on the past. Indeed, there is evidence that readers sometimes find the fictional, multi-perspective retelling of history more compelling than the “official” version, as we saw in Colombian history, where Marquez's admittedly exaggerated account of the 1928 Banana Massacre leapt from the pages of his novel into Colombian history textbooks.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) the fact that Xungen, Magical Realism, and Faulknerian fiction all employ fiction, legend, hearsay, and oral tradition to recount historical events, some literary critics have alleged that Marquez's Magical Realism –

in particular *One Hundred Years of Solitude* – has been instrumental in the preservation of history, some going so far as to say that fiction saved Latin American history.¹⁷² Similarly, Xungen fiction has preserved or restored elements of Chinese history, memory, and culture that were repressed, erased, or undercut by the politicized “official” histories of the 20th century. Xungen created a sense of continuity in indigenous Chinese tradition, which had been disrupted by civil war, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution.¹⁷³ Magical Realism also endeavors to pick up the threads of indigenous culture after centuries of colonialism and imperialism in Latin America. Fiction and fantasy are often the only way that sense of continuity in history can be created, as we saw symbolically in short stories like *The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World*, or concretely in *Red Sorghum*. Xungen writers saw their struggle to find an indigenous identity that no longer exists mirrored in the works of Magical Realist writers, and in turn, penned novels, essays, and short stories that sought a return to and an examination of China's traditional, indigenous cultures in the wake of forces and movements that threatened to supplant them.

I would further argue that Magical Realism, Faulkner's style of writing, and Xungen are more official, codified versions of what Han Shaogong called “oral monuments” in his novel *A Dictionary of Maqiao*:¹⁷⁴ the stories and memories that

172 Eduardo Posada-Carbó, “Fiction as History”, 398

173 Chan, *A Subversive Voice*, 74. “To a certain extent, the “root-seeking” movement, which occurred in the post-Cultural Revolution chaos, is a kind of collective nostalgia...almost all traditional values had been repudiated over the course of the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the nostalgic sentiment of the post-Mao writers is “a longing for continuity in a fragmented world”.”

174 Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 189 “I'd never imagined that even all those years later Mingqi would still live on in Maqiao, in the folksongs of Maqiao's next generation, that such an immortal oral monument would have been erected...” I will discuss this particular scene further in Section 3, in which I directly compare *A Dictionary of Maqiao* to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Buendía children literally inherit in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the clapper-songs that extoll the narrator's grandmother in *Red Sorghum*, the stories of great African cities with which Macandal the slave regales his compatriots in Alejo Carpentier's novel *The Kingdom of this World*, and the vernacular, stream-of-consciousness, conversational style of *The Sound and the Fury*. Of course, this idea of the “oral monument” harkens back to Nora's monuments of memory. Marquez's Magical Realism and Xungen both stemmed in part from the oral traditions and stories of indigenous or marginalized people, which had already begun the work of preserving historical narratives. Magical Realism and Xungen are both movements that, through blending memory, myth, history and fiction, create a “people's history” of sorts, focused on emotion and the sensory experience of events rather than on the events themselves. Even if the writers of these myriad movements never formally met or collaborated, and even though their cultures and national histories take wildly different paths, they share a sensibility: the idea that true history comes from memory, and from the stories of those who lived it, not from political leaders or central cultural authorities.

These myriad literary traditions were not only codified versions of indigenous legend and myth, but also the expressions of a transnational dialogue. Just as Chinese writers took inspiration from writers from Europe and the Americas, Western writers found new ideas and influences from classical Chinese literary forms, or simply appreciated Chinese literature. This give-and-take and “loop of influence” (in which one literary movement at least in part fed the other and vice versa), while not constant

and always featuring some generational gaps (for instance, much of the Magical Realist works that were influenced by Chinese literature took their inspiration from premodern Chinese works, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was already more than a decade old by the time Xungen writers began to flourish), was key to the growth and development of world literature as a whole.

Common Roots: A Comparison of Xungen and Magical Realist Works

Although China's history is obviously different from Latin America's, their modern literary traditions share common features. Both post-Cultural Revolution Chinese literature and post-colonial Latin American literature, which started in the late 1970s and the late 1950s, respectively, seek to rediscover or recreate a unique indigenous identity in the wake of forces that sought to assimilate or erase said cultural identities. In particular, the Xungen and Latin American Magical Realism literary movements typify the search in literature for a reconciliation between the past and present, for a balance between modernity the preservation of memory and identity. One could plausibly call Xungen post-colonial literature with Chinese characteristics. Post-colonial literature and Magical Realism and their associated tropes are universal and are not just confined to specific colonized areas of the world.

The Xungen Movement was a response to the rapid changes to Chinese society that came after the end of the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976), and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. At the start of the 1980s, a contingent of mostly middle-aged Chinese writers,¹⁷⁵ in reaction to the sudden lurch towards capitalism and

¹⁷⁵ Wang Jing discusses the age of the Xungen writers as opposed to the younger modernists in the 1980s in the context of the growing generation gap in China; the young modernists, many of whom were children or young teenagers during the Cultural Revolution, wrote about ennui and took inspiration from the quintessential American champion of disaffected, disillusioned youth, J.D. Salinger. They focused on urban life, on crime, on play. The Xungen authors, on the other hand, who came of age or were adults at the time of the Cultural Revolution, sought to restore emotional connections to the past, and, in some cases, confess their own "sins" during their tenure as Red Guards or Zhiqing. Wang, *High Culture Fever*, 44-45

openness to the West, looked to their own pasts, and the pasts of the rural and minority communities to which they were sent as part of the Down to the Countryside (Sent-Down Youth) policy, to find a pure, essential Chinese identity absent of corrupting forces like Westernization, Communism, and Confucianism. Xungen writers took inspiration from China's primitive, distant past.

Why look to the primitive past? In a political and historical context, the Cultural Revolution was a traumatic, violent rejection of China's past, and in the immediate aftermath, China's past was shunted off to the wayside in favor of rapid economic development and openness to the outside world. To use the language of social justice, for years, China's less-explored histories were never “unpacked”, especially the more traumatic elements of Chinese history. To many writers, to gaze back into the distant, anarchic, marginalized past is a method of “decolonizing” China's past, much like how Pierre Nora describes historiographies in post-colonial nations that reclaim their history after gaining independence.¹⁷⁶ To others, searching for a pure identity among ethnic minority and rural communities allows for a long-neglected past to finally come to light. Though most Xungen works do not take place in ancient China – indeed, some of the most famous works of Xungen literature are set in the early 20th century, or even the contemporary age – consciousness of traditional narrative forms and the use of allusions to China's ancient history nevertheless permeate these works.

Xungen not only looked backward, but also to the far south, north, and west of

¹⁷⁶ Nora, “Lieux de Memoire,” 7

China, and into minority cultures like the Evenki, Bai, Miao, or Uyghur.¹⁷⁷ This aspect of Xungen was very heavily influenced by the Cultural Revolution-era policy of “sending down” educated, urban youth to the countryside (the aforementioned Down to the Countryside policy), where they would work and learn the ideals of Communism alongside peasants. Han Shaogong believed in the importance of local flavor in Chinese literature, and considered the new focus on rural and minority cultures and on China's past among young writers in the 1980s an awakening of indigenous literature and self-expression that had been suppressed or ignored in the previous decades. As he wrote in “The Roots of Literature (文学的跟)”, “...now, happily, writers are beginning to cast their gaze and reexamine the nation, and take into account the history of minorities. They have gained a new literary consciousness.”¹⁷⁸ This literary consciousness spurred Xungen writers to imagine and record an indigenous history of China that attempts to capture the essence of the Chinese nation and Chinese culture, which had been called into question during the Cultural Revolution and again during the rapid lurch towards modernization in the 1980s. Han and other writers saw the minority and rural cultures in which they were immersed during their time as Sent-Down Youth as “uncorrupted” by modernization, revolution, and the New Culture movement (which we discussed in Section 1).

177 In China, there are 56 recognized ethnic groups, 55 of which are classified as minorities (Han Chinese is the dominant ethnic group, composing over 90% of China's population). The Evenki, Miao, Bai, and Uyghur peoples are just a few of the 55 minority groups who live all across China.
178 Han, “The Roots of Literature”, 2. My Translation.

To [Han], the rupture in tradition caused by the political isolation introduced by Maoism, and previously by the New Culture Movement of the early 20th century had created a vacuum in Chinese culture, leaving it overrun by superficial modern influences. Writers felt 'uprooted' and therefore lacked self-confidence.¹⁷⁹

Xungen, especially as Han Shaogong saw it, was an effort to return to the essence of Chinese culture, to find a grounding point again in the turmoil of the 20th century. And, as the above quote suggests, Han hoped that a return to the roots of Chinese culture would help Chinese writers find their own unique voice instead of aping Western authors or writing only about politics or the superficial problems of modern life.¹⁸⁰ To Han Shaogong, the answer was in Southern Chinese culture, in rural Hunan where he was sent down. Hunan is, as we discussed previously, the ancient seat of Chu culture, which had a profound influence on Chinese literature, especially the works of celebrated Chu poet Qu Yuan.

It can also be argued that Xungen's roots lay in the anxieties of the post-Mao era. Wang Jing writes that Xungen was very much a product of the 1980s in China: as the promises of modernization and utopia failed to materialize and as counter-cultural heroes like Cui Jian rose to prominence, the irrational and ancient became more and more appealing. The 1980s were a chaotic time artistically and ideologically in China; Wang quotes an intellectual of the time as saying, “this was not a period in which heroes were given birth. This was, on the contrary, an era in which miracles and

179 Mark Leenhouts, “Empty Talk: The Roots of Han Shaogong's Writing” in *World Literature Today* (web exclusive), Vol. 85, No. 4 (July/August 2011), accessed February 13th, 2013, http://www.ou.edu/worldlit/07_2011/essay-leenhout-shaogong.html

180 Ibid.

superstition triumphed over rational forces...”¹⁸¹ People looked to ancient symbols and ideas for artistic inspiration as part of a larger discussion of what modernity in China meant or ought to mean. The Xungen writers played an important role in this discussion; they, Wang writes, acted as cultural philosophers who examined the relationship between modernity and tradition.¹⁸² Xungen writers wanted to reconcile the march towards scientific, Western modernity with traditional Chinese culture that had been erased or overlooked in favor of foreign ideologies, or actively destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

After the devastation of the Cultural Revolution, how would China salvage its past and its memories? As leaders began to make overtures towards modernizing the economy and opening to the once-hated West, how would China preserve its past and its memories? The answer, in the minds of Xungen writers like Han Shaogong and Mo Yan, was to move away from the imperial and official center of Chinese culture, and out to the periphery and into the lives and memories of people who otherwise had no “historical capital” (to use a turn of phrase from Nora).

In order to find this unique voice away from the center of Chinese culture, which had been (in his view) adulterated by modern influences, Han Shaogong turned to Chu culture, which was familiar to him from his time as a Sent-Down Youth on the banks of the Miluo River in Hunan Province, where the poet Qu Yuan drowned himself after he fell out of favor at court. Chu culture is deeply intertwined with local Hunan culture, and, according to Han Shaogong, the mixing of the rational and

181 Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever*, 38

182 Ibid.

irrational, people and gods, mystical and real, in Chu culture is an essential part of Eastern culture.¹⁸³

In “After Literature of the Wounded”, Han Shaogong said this of Chu culture: “[Chu culture] is an unorthodox, nonstandard culture that even today has not been codified or intellectualized...the rational and instinctive are mixed together as one.”¹⁸⁴ Han saw the roots of this primitive and magical-realist culture in the poetry of Qu Yuan, and that ultimately, literature—true literature—came from the “irrationality” of dreams, altered states, and instinctive thought, which, Han states, is omnipresent in primitive cultures like Chu.¹⁸⁵ Thus, to find the roots of Chinese literature and understand where literature has been and where it might go, we must look into these primitive cultures within China. Han, like Lu Xun and other reform-minded authors, was willing to explore China's literary past, but not in the literature of the elite center --- Han, like Lu Xun, saw modern China's roots in the “lowly” folklore traditions of the common people and the people of the periphery.

As Han wrote in “The Roots of Literature”, “Literature's roots are deeply rooted in the soil of folklore culture, if the roots are not deep, it will be hard for the leaves to be luxuriant. Thus, Hunan writers have a 'roots-seeking' (寻根) problem.”¹⁸⁶ As we saw in the section on Chinese folklore and mythology and their influence on Xungen, Han's view is not revolutionary, at least to us. And as we will see later in this chapter, Han's works reflect his reverence for folklore and oral tradition in the

183 Han Shaogong, “After Literature of the Wounded: Local Cultures, Roots, Maturity, and Fatigue”, trans. David Wakefield in *Modern Chinese Writers: Self-Portrayals*, edited by Helmut Martin and Jeffrey Kinkley (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), 147-155, 152

184 Ibid.

185 Han, “Literature of the Wounded”, 153

186 Han, “The Roots of Literature”, 1. My translation.

peripheries of China.

Although Han and his peers within the movement dug deep into Chinese history to find the roots of their cultural identity in the 20th century, they also found a certain kinship with Latin American works, especially Magical Realism. When we examine and analyze works from both the Xungen movement and Magical Realism, the commonalities between the two are plain to see.

With no current native land or native culture to which they could return, both Xungen and Latin American Post-colonial writers look back into the past, their own memories (and the collective memories of their respective cultures), and into myth and legend to reconstruct their home countries, regions, or towns. Myth and legend are especially key in Magical Realism (though they are equally important in Xungen), which exploits the tension between real and unreal to create two “worlds” that coexist parallel to and within one another, and the reader must negotiate the two without any indication that one or the other is more “valid.” Slemon writes, “Since the ground rules of these two worlds [the magical world and the realistic world] are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remain suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the 'other'.”¹⁸⁷ On an allegorical level, this clash of fantasy and reality reflects the incompatibility of the reality in which Xungen and Magical Realist writers lived and the sometimes mythical, sometimes merely hazy and inaccurate pasts to which they long to return and understand.

In addition, Magical Realist stories themselves are active participants in the creation of myth and the transmission of collective and individual memory. Marquez's

¹⁸⁷ Slemon, “Magic Realism”, 11

groundbreaking work *One Hundred Years of Solitude* tells the story of not only the ill-fated Buendía family, but also the story of Colombia's history (and perhaps the history of the whole world). The village of Macondo, founded by patriarch José Arcadio Buendía, is isolated, but is constantly visited with strange events, like a plague of insomnia that quickly spreads and causes the villagers to stop sleeping, and soon forget the names of places and things. This event, improbable or at least odd in the world we as readers understand as the “real world”, could be seen more as allegory or myth than as something the reader should interpret as fact or a simple occurrence in a fantasy world (the tension of how the reader should interpret odd and fantastic occurrences in Magical Realism is, as Slemon described, an important component of the genre).

Other Magical Realist writers actively explored the relationship between fantasy and history, and saw the two as integrated and in many ways, inseparable. In the final line of the prologue to his novel *The Kingdom of this World* (which I will examine later in this chapter), Alejo Carpentier asks, “But what is the total history of America but the chronicle of the marvelous real?”¹⁸⁸ To Carpentier, the story he tells in *The Kingdom of this World* is at once historically real and meticulously researched down to the names of minor characters, and a fantastical story that could never be set in Europe.¹⁸⁹ In this way, he sets up the “marvelous real” or “*lo real maravilloso*” as something unique to the Americas – something that grew from the unique history of a land whose every corner was shaped by colonialism. Unlike European surrealism,

188 Alejo Carpentier, *El Reino de Este Mundo (The Kingdom of this World)* (Montevideo, Uruguay: Editorial Arca, 1966), 13. My translation.

189 Ibid.

which is starkly at odds with reality, the history of Haiti (and the Americas in general) is strange and marvelous and challenges accepted paradigms of logical or normal without artistically intending to. Michael Bell writes on Carpentier in *The Cambridge Companion to Gabriel Garcia Marquez*:

Here [in Haiti] the anti-rational devices of the surrealists were starkly revealed to him as formal games still essentially in the world of Western rationality. In being merely oppositional they were still defined by it. By contrast, the history of the slave uprisings inspired partly by African tribal chiefs or the story of Henri Christophe with his fantastic redoubt of Sans Souci, were marvels of reality.¹⁹⁰

Bell argues that Magical Realism is distinct from Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso*, saying that Magical Realism is a literary mode, while *lo real maravilloso* is reality, a state of being.¹⁹¹ I agree with Bell's argument, though I believe that without a marvelous reality, there would be no Magical Realism to record it and interpret it into a literary mode. Magical Realism is the written codification of *lo real maravilloso*.

Similarly, as Vivian Lee writes in “Cultural Lexicology”, Han Shaogong and other modern Chinese writers sought to express the strangeness and marvelousness of everyday life; there is little to no separation between fantasy and reality, and fantasy is not an “alternative” to reality.¹⁹² Han Shaogong summed up this view quite

190 Michael Bell, “Garcia Marquez, Magical Realism, and World Literature”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gabriel Garcia Marquez*, ed. Philip Swanson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 179-195, accessed March 20th, 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521867498>

191 Ibid.

192 Vivian Lee, “Cultural Lexicology: Maqiao Dictionary by Han Shaogong” in *Modern Chinese*

concisely: “In my writing, sometimes I make strange parts of life familiar, and familiar parts of life strange.”¹⁹³ In both Xungen and Magical Realist works, “strange” and “normal” coexist and compliment each other, rather than lock horns.

Slemon describes in his article two conventional openings of Magical Realist novels: one which establishes the conventions and feel of a “real world” (one with which the reader is familiar or to which the reader can relate), and one which “opens in pure fantasy and myth”¹⁹⁴, immediately establishing the fantastic elements of the story. Slemon writes of the novel with the former opening, “Yet a complete transference from one mode to the other [fantasy to reality] never takes place, and the novel remains suspended between the two.”¹⁹⁵

The opening of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* falls somewhere in the middle of Slemon's continuum, though the very beginning establishes the conventions of a “real world”:

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice. At that time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs. The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point.¹⁹⁶

In beginning the story with a perfectly probable event (a military leader being

Literature and Culture, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 2002), 145-177, 146

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41490869>

193 Han Shaogong, “Literature of the Wounded,” 154

194 Ibid.

195 Ibid.

196 Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1

executed by firing squad), Marquez establishes the “real world” to which the reader can relate (to some extent) and understand, but Marquez soon creates a tension between fantasy and reality, or at least probable and improbable, when he places Aureliano Buendía's childhood in a time before language had fully developed, which was, in the timeline we the readers know well, long before the invention of the rifles that point at him. This tension of probable and improbable only grows throughout the story; moments and details of reality clash with epidemics of insomnia that cause the residents of Macondo to begin to lose their memories, or women suddenly ascending into the sky.

This insomnia plague, which occurs fairly early into the novel, causes people to stay awake for days on end. At first, without sleep, people are more productive and find new ways to fill the six or so extra hours they gain by forgoing sleep. But soon, they begin to lose their memories; they forget what objects are called or what they do. Soon, they begin to forget who they are. José Arcadio's method of preserving memory during the sickness – to label every object with its name and purpose – recalls the Biblical story of Adam naming the animals, and calls back to the genesis of Macondo, where things lacked names. The event could be read as a commentary on the loss of memory in colonized communities, where people forget the names and purposes of customs, important figures, traditions, et cetera, as they assimilate into colonial culture. Marquez writes,

...when the sick person became used to his state of vigil, the recollection of his childhood began to be erased from his memory, then the name and notion of things, and finally the identity of people and even the awareness of his own being, until he sank into a kind of idiocy that had no past.¹⁹⁷

Within the structure of a myth or, as mentioned previously, a story from the Bible, Marquez conveys the importance of dreams and the departure from the “waking world” in forming an individual or collective identity. Memory plainly cannot exist without the fantasy of dreams.

One Hundred Years of Solitude constantly returns to this idea of rootlessness and the absence of memories. The Buendías create Macondo out of an isolated primordial swamp, like God creating the world from nothing. Through telling a non-linear, magical, improbable story of a small village in rural Colombia that sprung up through the willpower of a single man, Marquez can imagine the roots of a village, of a nation. Macondo and the Buendías constantly struggle to remember their past and their identity, all the while trying (and more often than not, failing) to connect with the wider world. Every instance in which Macondo comes into contact with the larger world leads to disaster, or simply does little to put Macondo on the map. The single biggest “opening” of Macondo – in the form of banana plantations – is a direct allusion to the rapaciousness of 20th-century fruit companies as they made inroads in Latin America; ultimately, the greed of the banana company leads to the Banana Massacre of 1928 (which we explored in-depth in Chapter 2), which soon drives most

¹⁹⁷ Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 45

of the outsiders out of Macondo and reduces the town to ruins slowly being reclaimed by nature.

Marquez also makes the transmission of memory through generations a major theme in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Family members teach their descendents their own versions of history, placing memory and interpretation over historical “fact”. The Buendías are the people of whom Nora speaks when he discusses the rise of memory as historical narrative. In the case of the Banana Massacre, José Arcadio Segundo, the upstart instigator of rebellion against the banana company's maltreatment of workers, teaches his nephew Aureliano about the banana company's presence in Macondo from his own memories, a narrative that did not jibe with the one in the history books, nor with the the memories of other residents of Macondo, who insisted that no such massacre occurred. “...one would have thought that he was telling a hallucinated version, because it was so radically opposed to the false one that historians had created and consecrated in the schoolbooks.”¹⁹⁸ Here, we see Nora’s ideas in action: transmitted memories are the truth, even without the “consecration” of political approval or academic evidence.

In simple motifs like repeated names within the Buendía family (José Arcadio, Arcadio, Aureliano, and Remedios are all repeated at least once throughout the Buendía family line), Marquez creates the sense of history repeating itself, that memories and names passed down from generation to generation often quite literally become one's fate. Those in the Buendía family christened José Arcadio tend to be

198 Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 355

“impulsive and enterprising, but...marked with a tragic sign”¹⁹⁹, while those christened Aureliano tend to be “withdrawn, but with lucid minds.”²⁰⁰ When José Arcadio Segundo (the great-grandson of José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula Iguarán) begins to follow in the footsteps of his great-grandfather and try to use technology to open Macondo to the outside world, Úrsula laments, “I know all of this by heart...it's as if time had turned around and we were back at the beginning.”²⁰¹ The Buendía family is doomed to remain in a cycle where time and history constantly repeat themselves.

Reinforcing the endless cycle of time in the Buendía family is that characters seem to inherit not only personality traits, but also memories. Aureliano Segundo, born at least a generation after the death of the gypsy Melquiades (Macondo's first link with the outside world), could remember and recognize Melquiades on sight, despite never knowing him. “Aureliano Segundo recognized [Melquiades] at once, because that hereditary memory had been transmitted from generation to generation and had come to him through the memory of his grandfather.”²⁰² In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, memory is genetic, as hereditary as blue eyes or a tall stature; it is an essential building block of the human mind and identity. Without memory or a history of which to be a continuation, Aureliano Segundo would be lost. In many other Magical Realist and Xungen works, this theme of memory as inescapable would not be quite as extreme, but many espouse that memory is an essential element of existence.

199 Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 186

200 Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 186-7

201 Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 199

202 Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 189

As suggested by the title, *A Dictionary of Maqiao* is structured as a dictionary, wherein terms are defined in relation to their history of use in Maqiao. Maqiao stands linguistically apart from the rest of China (or at least Beijing), speaking a dialect that assigns unconventional meanings to standard Mandarin words (for example, “scientific” means “lazy”), or uses unusual terminology for everyday subjects, such as “placing the pot” as a synonym for marriage.²⁰³ This structure, which gives Maqiao-specific names to concepts and objects like marriage and sweet-tasting food, recalls the need for the denizens of Macondo to name the objects and ideas in their world, and later, after the town begins to lose its memory, to catalogue and preserve those names.

A Dictionary of Maqiao also reads like an anthropological work (specifically, an ethnography); it is written by an outsider – an educated youth sent down to work alongside the peasants in Maqiao, possibly based on Han Shaogong himself. Unlike in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where the story is told from the perspective of characters who lived in Macondo for most or all of their lives and do not find Macondo as strange as an outsider might, *A Dictionary of Maqiao* is written so that the village is as strange to the narrator as it is to the reader. The narrator documents Maqiao's dialect and customs for an audience of outsiders to understand or marvel at the strange town, rather than for the denizens of Maqiao to remember and preserve their linguistic and cultural peculiarities.

203 Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 29. “Placing the Pot” stems, according to Han, from a Maqiao wedding ritual in which a bride places a new pot on her husband's stove, and cooks a pot of rice, which signifies that she is now a member of the husband's family. Using “placing the pot” as a synonym for marriage is comparable to the American English “tying the knot” or, in African-American culture, “jumping the broom”.

Maqiao's linguistic peculiarities are many. For example, the word “awakened” (醒, or *xing*) means stupid. “Maqiao people have long used this word, spat out with a disdainful wrinkling of the nose and thinning of the lips, to refer to all kinds of idiotic behavior...could it be this custom dates from when their ancestors encountered Qu Yuan?”²⁰⁴ The narrator is referring, of course, to Qu Yuan, who was called “the awakened” and committed suicide after his exile from the Chu court. The narrator meditates on Qu Yuan's suicide, seeing in the act the dual meaning of “awakened”: the traditional meaning (to be aware of the world, not in a state of dreaming) and the Maqiao meaning (to be stupid or to commit an idiotic act). We could certainly compare Maqiao's glorification of sleep to the plague of insomnia in Macondo, where constant wakefulness, though at first it brings about productivity, causes the people of Macondo to lose their memories and live in a constant haze. In turn, “asleep” (觉, or *qo*, in Maqiao-dialect's pronunciation) means to be clever. In both Macondo and Maqiao, sleep and in particular, dreams are the preservers of the mind.

What makes many of the words in Maqiao dialect particularly fascinating is their deep ties to historical events or particular people. The language of the town is in itself a vessel for myth or local legend, and indicator of cultural changes and moods, though it is easy to say the same of any language or dialect. Still, Han and the narrator's focus on the mythical and anecdotal etymology of words from Maqiao reveals Han Shaogong's fascination with the search for roots. When the narrator of *A Dictionary of Maqiao* searches for the roots of words in the poems of Qu Yuan, in the

204 Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 46

townspeople's stories of mad old men, and in the conjectures he makes on historical events and legends, we see Xungen in action on a smaller scale. The Maqiao dialect's roots are not in the Kangxi Dictionary, but in their stories and perceptions of the world. Han's novel is very much rooted in Western postmodernism, which accepts the idea of multiple perceptions of reality. Lee states that, while to a Western reader the style and substance of *A Dictionary of Maqiao* are familiar, “in the Chinese context, it is at once a radical aesthetic and political gesture, a literary subversion of the monologism of the so-called 'workers-peasants-soldiers literature'...”²⁰⁵

The dictionary format also illustrates the ways in which words, like reality, need not be limited to one single definition or interpretation. By pointing out how words can be used and perceived in different ways depending on context, culture, and history, Han makes a multilayered commentary on modern Chinese thought.

A feature of *A Dictionary of Maqiao* that sets it apart from the other works discussed in this chapter is the narrator's keen awareness and disbelief of the strangeness he hears of or experiences. The narrator repeatedly doubts the veracity of the stories he hears from the “old-timers” of Maqiao, even though they insist their stories are true. This theme of the elder residents of Maqiao passing down their stories to their children, grandchildren, and Educated Youth in an effort to instruct or entertain comes to a head in the entry “1948 (一九四八年)”. In Maqiao, the Gregorian year 1948 has no meaning, as the label is unimportant to them. They define 1948 by what they associated with the year, not by what the rest of the world experienced in 1948. Their memories determine the way they perceive 1948. The

²⁰⁵ Lee, “Cultural Lexicology,” 149

narrator specifically notes that many of the events associated with 1948 in Maqiao did not, in fact, happen in 1948; the denizens of Maqiao refer to 1948 as the year of the Great Battle of Changsha, although the Great Battle of Changsha happened six years prior. “*Their* Battle of Changsha was a piece of news that came nearly six years late, and was mistaken by them for an event that took place in 1948. If someone from outside Maqiao...relied solely on what Maqiao people said to gain a sense of history, they'd end up with a very muddled chronology.”²⁰⁶

This perception of memories and time is illustrated in “1948” when an elderly Maqiao resident, Guangfu, scolds his son by recounting the hardships he experienced in order to give a better life to his son. The son does not respond. The narrator writes, “...Guangfu thought that most people would sympathize with his ordeals, that everything set in stone by Time should be forever preserved in its original form, universally recognized and admired like a precious cultural relic in a museum.”²⁰⁷ But, the narrator says, memories are based in perception and feeling, and that the sacred meaning and emotion Guangfu ascribes to 1948 has no such meaning or emotion to his son. To the narrator (and possibly to Han Shaogong), memory is only sacred to those who perceive it to be so, or to those who experienced those events. The significance of events or years or eras depends on who does the remembering.

Does this jibe with Nora's “sites of memory”?²⁰⁸

Nora writes in “Sites of Memory”, “...there are as many memories as there are

206 Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 111

207 Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 132

208 In “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire”, Pierre Nora discusses the idea of “sites of memory”, or places in which we become conscious of the vast difference between our memories and history.

groups...memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, yet individual.”²⁰⁹ In Nora's view, memory has a thousand faces and aspects, and events' significance, chronological or geographical situation can shift between people or groups. In the scene between Guangfu and his son in *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, Nora's idea clearly takes shape. 1948 and the hardships associated with it is burned into the memories of the older villagers, but that memory of 1948 is specific only to them. “The vast and momentous 1948 of his mind had to take on the same supremacy in his son's mind, it couldn't shrink, couldn't scatter, least of all disappear into nothingness. What he hadn't realized was that his son lived entirely outside his father's time...”²¹⁰ Guangfu desperately wants his son to commemorate the “site” of 1948 as he constructed it in his mind, but that “site” cannot take root in his son's mind. There is no singular memory or singular mode of commemoration; Guangfu's son rejects his father's past and memories designed to instruct and enrich him, since he feels that this particular past (what Han deems “the present past”²¹¹) has no connection to his own life except to cause animosity with his father.

We also see this rejection of the past and inherited memories in one of the final chapters of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which Amaranta Ursula, the great-great-granddaughter of José Arcadio Buendía, marries a Belgian man named Gaston and decides to reject her family's century-long way life, seeing the past as a hindrance. For instance, she resolves to name her future children not José Arcadio or Aureliano or Remedios, but Rodrigo and Gonzalo.²¹² In this simple act, she chooses to

209 Pierre Nora, “Lieux de Memoire”, 9

210 Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 133

211 Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 132

212 Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 380

reject the inherited memories and traits of the Buendía family, and start a new life free of the burdens and responsibilities of the past she inherited by virtue of being born a Buendía. Nora said that memory binds people to the past; Guangfu's son and Amaranta Ursula feel that those bonds are too tight.

This complicated relationship with the past is a key part of both Magical Realism and Xungen. Vivian Lee describes it in the context of Han's *A Dictionary of Maqiao* as a “double bind”, in which Han wishes to revisit his past, but is repulsed by aspects of it.²¹³ When he returns to the past, he must reexamine it, warts and all – not always an easy task. It isn't hard to see why in *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, characters like Guangfu's son have such a love-hate relationship with the past; it mirrors the relationship Han and his contemporaries have with Chinese history.

Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* also expressly addresses the theme of the power of myth and memory among groups on the periphery. The novel (which was published in 1957), which tells the story of a slave in Haiti at the time of the Haitian Revolution, alludes to the reclamation of myth and history among Haitian slaves, who are disempowered by their disconnection from their native culture, and yet are empowered by their memories and stories of their homeland. In the first chapter, the main character, Ti Noel, recalls how a fellow slave, Macandal, would regale him with tales of the great kings in Africa. “They were kings, true kings, and not those sovereigns wigged in false hair who played at cup and ball and were gods only when they strutted the stage of their court theaters...”²¹⁴ Despite being

213 Lee, “Cultural Lexicology,” 148

214 Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World*, trans. Harriet De Onis (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 6

marginalized through colonialism and enslavement, the slaves in *The Kingdom of This World* gain strength and pride in their identities and heritage through their cultural history. In addition, the proud narratives of the great kings across the Atlantic also allowed the slaves within the story to critique their French overlords, and this plot element allows Carpentier to criticize the oppressive nature of colonialism in general, and to express his disillusionment with post-colonial regimes adopting the same oppressive ideas and governing styles as their predecessors.

Macandal also has the ability to transform himself into animals. He uses this ability to escape slavery and to watch over the slaves whom he “enlightened” with the stories of their lost homeland. This use of magic is very much rooted in African mythology,²¹⁵ and underscores yet again Carpentier's “*lo real maravilloso*” and his perception that the history of Haiti (and Latin America in general) is intrinsically surreal and magical, as opposed to European surrealism, which Carpentier saw as affected, constructed, and separate from everyday life,²¹⁶ whereas in the marvelous reality he depicts in *The Kingdom of this World*, shapeshifting is taken as just another part of reality.

In the final pages of *The Kingdom of this World*, the former slave Ti Noel, who lived through all manner of turmoil in both Haiti and Cuba, finally returns to his former master's plantation, where he too gains the ability to transform into other animals, like the geese who roam the plantation. Through turning into an animal, Ti

215 Carpentier, who was born and raised in Cuba, was deeply involved with the revival of Afro-Cuban culture in the mid-20th century; he saw Afro-Cuban culture as a route by which Cubans could find the roots of their identities independent of European influence. Donald L. Shaw, *Alejo Carpentier*, (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Company, 1985), 17

216 Carpentier, *El Reino de Este Mundo*, 1-13

Noel hopes to finally escape the toil and pain of being human, but through all his transformations, he learns that animals are no better than humans, and that ultimately, escaping from the human world will bring him no comfort. In his wanderings, he remembers Macandal.

Macandal had disguised himself as an animal for years to serve men, not to abjure the world of men....[Man] suffers and hopes and toils for people he will never know, and who, in turn, will suffer and hope and toil for others who will not be happy either, for man always seeks a happiness far beyond that which is meted out to him.²¹⁷

In *The Kingdom of this World*, magic is a powerful force that, Carpentier believes, should be used to bring about a better world. Throughout the novel, Carpentier illustrates how Ti Noel and his fellow slaves repeatedly try to throw off their shackles of slavery, marginalization and oppression, only to find themselves under the rule of a new overlord. Ti Noel returns to Haiti after the death of his master to find that a former slave who became king of Haiti uses black slaves to build fine monuments and mansions for him: a fate Ti Noel considers worse than slavery under Europeans. “[The splendors of King Henri Christophe's palace] were all the product of a slavery as abominable as that he had known on the plantation of M. Leonormand de Mezy.”²¹⁸ When Ti Noel transforms into a goose, he is rejected from their hierarchical social order, showing him that even the animal kingdom cannot provide a better world for him. Instead, Carpentier states through Ti Noel in the very final pages of the novel, they must better the “kingdom of this world” and use magic and myth

²¹⁷ Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World*, 148-149

²¹⁸ Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World*, 96

(as Macandal did) to bring enlightenment or even simply hope to others.

In many ways, *The Kingdom of This World* is a story of the power of the transmission of myth, legend and memory. Macandal, as the storyteller, empowers Ti Noel and others slaves by helping them to remember their roots in Africa, where they ruled great kingdoms and empires that rivaled their colonial overlords'. By becoming a legend himself by shapeshifting and escaping death, Macandal becomes something more than a man and can thus inspire and empower even more people. Without a history to write down, or treatises to write, ordinary slaves use oral tradition and the transmission of legend to preserve and assert their identities, imagining their nation and original culture, to which they no longer have access due to slavery and colonial rule.

Although Mo Yan's novella *Red Sorghum* deals with an entirely different time period, culture, and place, the similarities to *The Kingdom of This World* are highly apparent. *Red Sorghum* is a particularly good example of the "post-colonial" element of Xungen. The novella takes place chiefly during the Japanese occupation of China during the 1930s and 40s: a period that was arguably colonial, at least for the areas of China under Japanese control. The narrator is situated in the 1980s, long after the end of Japan's incursion into northeastern China, and not long after the Cultural Revolution. This 4-decade separation from the Japanese occupation of China allows the narrator to view the Japanese occupation not as a firsthand painful experience, but as a part of his family history, peppered with legend and conflicting or incomplete memories that the narrator must fill in. The story becomes a bridge between the past

and the present as the narrator repeatedly breaks the fourth wall or flashes forward to the present day (the 1980s) to clarify that his grandfather would almost certainly have not described or remembered an event in the way the narrator did,²¹⁹ or that an event or person would go on to become a piece of local folklore. For instance, when the narrator first arrives in Northeast Gaomi Township, the rural village where he was born and where the bulk of the events of the story take place, he comes across an elderly woman singing about the exploits of his grandmother.

The Dai Fenglian in her clapper-song was my grandma. I listened with barely concealed excitement, for her tale proved that the strategy of stopping the Jap convoy with rakes had sprung from the mind of my own kin, a member of the weaker sex. No wonder my grandma is feted as a trailblazer of the anti- Japanese resistance and a national hero.²²⁰

Just as Ti Noel and the other slaves gained both joy and a sense of pride from hearing Macandal's stories of the great kingdoms of Africa (which few of them remembered, or had even experienced), the narrator feels empowered, proud, and excited by the stories of the grandmother he never knew. When the narrator hears the song about his grandmother, he has no reference point of his own to remember his grandmother's exploits or who she was as a person, since she died long before the narrator was born. He must reconstruct the image of his grandmother (and ultimately, his own roots) from the memories of others and the legends into which those memories transformed. Similarly, Ti Noel and the other slaves must conjure their

219 On page 24, "Father was too young [in 1937] to describe the sight [of the sorghum] in such flowery terms – that's my doing." Mo Yan, *Red Sorghum*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 24

220 Mo Yan, *Red Sorghum*, 13

kings and cities and warriors from the memories and stories of another person. Their memories and their understanding of the past are secondhand and mixed with embellishments and local legends.

Roots-seeking is an exercise of simultaneously separating and weaving together fact and fiction, individual memory and collective memory. In *Red Sorghum*, Mo Yan takes pains to point out the narrator's embellishments on the story or the later transformation of events into local legend, as seen in the chapter in which the town butcher skins the narrator's great-uncle Arhat alive, under duress from Japanese soldiers. Mo Yan writes at the end of the gruesome scene,

That night a heavy rain fell, washing the tethering square clean of every drop of blood, and of Uncle Arhat's corpse and the skin that had covered it. Word that his corpse had disappeared spread through the village from one person to ten, to a hundred, from this generation to the next, until it became a beautiful legend.²²¹

The heavy rain after Uncle Arhat's public execution closely recalls the torrential downpour after the Banana Massacre in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In both stories, the rainstorms wash away all traces of a very public, very traumatic act of violence, and dramatically alter people's memories of the events.

The legend of Uncle Arhat and the injection of the miraculous into the traumatic and violent (or simply mundane) illustrates one aspect of memory with which Xungen concerns itself: the use of memory and myth as a method to reconstruct the past as moral instruction or personal history, not as objective historical

²²¹ Mo Yan, *Red Sorghum*, 37

fact. Mo Yan acknowledges that memory is a fickle thing, prone to transformation and fantastic embellishment as it transitions from the individual to the collective. Uncle Arhat's corpse probably did not, in reality, disappear completely within hours of his death, but the mythic and trans-generational quality of the story transforms the memory of Uncle Arhat's execution into a piece of the town's personal narrative as told by the people who live there. Uncle Arhat's violent death becomes more than a casualty of war; like the heroic death of Dai Fenglian, Uncle Arhat's death becomes something more: a symbol of suffering, a martyrdom, a miracle.

In yet another instance of secondhand, legendary memory, the narrator, though he was born years after the death of his grandmother, is able to describe in painfully intimate detail her death from a stray bullet during a battle, and her thoughts as she dies in the sorghum field. The narrator enters his grandmother's mind and imagines her dying memories. Although he is a generation removed from her and has no logical, realistic way of knowing her dying thoughts, he is able to reconstruct her last moments. The narrator imagines that “lively images of the irretrievable past streak[ed] past her eyes like racehorses.”²²² The story then shifts to his grandmother's memories of her unhappy wedding day, when she had to travel to the home of her new husband, an old man with leprosy whom she did not wish to marry. The narrator takes the idea of “life flashing before one's eyes” literally, and in doing so allows us to understand Grandma intimately, not just as the subject of songs and legends.

222 Mo Yan, *Red Sorghum*, 67. In this quote and in the section of the novella of which it is a part, Mo shifts to the present tense, whereas the rest of the story is in the past tense. Why does Mo shift to the present tense? Perhaps because although the narrator can corroborate most of the story with clapper-songs, local legend, or historical fact, this particular moment—in which the legendary grandmother he never met is dying in a field of sorghum—is purely conjured from his imagination; the change of tense could reflect this.

Legend, imagination, and the unreal are inalienable parts of personal and unofficial histories; in addition, the use of the fantastic, irrational, or unreal in historical narratives is arguably a direct challenge to more “legitimate” narratives, though more “official” histories may also include fantastic or improbable elements. Chan calls Mo Yan's use of an omniscient first-person narrator who is simultaneously disconnected from and deeply connected to the details of his family history a “minimization of history that has played a key role in the party's political education in Communist China.”²²³ By making a narrator who blurs the lines between past and present, possibly (or definitely) makes up parts of his narrative from his conjecture and imagination, and relies on emotion and memory rather than ideology to push his story along, Mo Yan challenges the didactic, black-and-white revolutionary history that held sway in China.²²⁴

The power of the story and the recounting of the past in *Red Sorghum* is yet another variation on the theme we have seen in both *The Kingdom of This World* and *A Dictionary of Maqiao*. The stories the narrator collects and embellishes and assigns emotions to help the narrator to reconstruct his identity through connecting himself to the past, unlike Guangfu's son in *Maqiao*, who cannot find a connection to his father's past, and hates how his father's specific interpretation and experience of the past has

²²³ Chan, *A Subversive Voice*, 31

²²⁴ Ibid. Chan also discusses how *Red Sorghum* also challenges Socialist-Realist fiction's character archetypes; the character Yu Zhan'ao embodies both traits of traditional villains (a bandit who murders people and has a dalliance of dubious consent with a married woman) and traditional Communist heroes (a brave military commander who defends his village from the invading Japanese). Grandma as well defies the rigid roles of Socialist-Realist fiction; she is a mother and a national hero whose ingenuity and bravery helps repel the Japanese forces, but she is also an unwed mother, an adulteress, and a businesswoman in a time when such a thing was not a traditional activity for a woman. By rejecting a flat character type and the good-evil binary so common in Communist narratives, Mo Yan creates a historical story that focuses on people with emotions and desires, instead of on archetypes that serve to propagate an ideological stance.

adversely affected his specific experience of the present. Memory can be empowering and sacred, but only if those in the present day so use it.

In all four of the works I have examined, there is a common conflict between rejecting the memories of others in order to live in the present and form a new identity apart from one's family or community, and making the memories, legends, myths, and stories one's own and a part of one's ethnic, national, or social identity. Characters like the narrators of *A Dictionary of Maqiao* and *Red Sorghum* view the past through the lens of an outsider; they have no direct experience with or emotional connection to the lexicon and stories they hear, and act as observers and chroniclers rather than rememberers. By the same token, neither the narrator of *Red Sorghum* nor Ti Noel ever experienced the pasts they hear about in stories told by older slaves or elderly villagers, yet they both adopt the memories and stories as their own, and create new collective memories and legends that exist to connect themselves and others to a now unreachable past. Both of these characters experience what Chan dubbed “imaginary nostalgia”.²²⁵

In all these works, we see common thematic and structural elements. These four authors all use some form of non-linear timeline, which emphasizes the integration of the past and present, and how with the power of memory, the two are inextricably linked. Jumping between the past, present and future, Marquez, Mo Yan, Carpentier and Han demonstrate how time can be compressed or expanded based on who's viewing it, and how the past is integral to understanding the present and future. In particular, Mo Yan and Marquez's allusions to an inevitable future event (namely,

²²⁵ Chan, *A Subversive Voice*, 107

the execution of Aureliano Buendía and the narrator's father's retelling of the events in the story proper) illustrate that the power of the past and memory transcends time, and how the past and memories are critical factors in our own fates.

The authors mythologize the family and native land in order to preserve the memories of their cultural identities, and to critique the forces that cause cultural memory loss or suppression. Marquez structures *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a Biblical story (complete with an extensive genealogy and fantastic events); like the Bible, the story of Macondo and the Buendía family becomes a method for conceptualizing Colombia's past and national identity. In *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, the story itself takes place in Hunan Province, the site of the ancient kingdom of Chu, which Han Shaogong referred to in his essay “The Roots of Literature” as one of the cradles of Chinese culture. In *The Kingdom of this World*, Carpentier includes storyteller characters like Macandal, who preserve and reconstruct the main characters' African homeland through legends about great kings and stories of grand cities that far surpassed anything in Haiti. If we were to speak in terms of religious figures, we could consider Macandal an angel, a prophet, or a bodhisattva by virtue of being a storyteller who returns to lead other slaves to enlightenment or give them hope for a better world. In *Red Sorghum*, Mo Yan's narrator weaves together the folk legends about his family and his own embellishments and imaginations on the story of his grandparents during World War II to come to terms with his past and reconstruct memories he never had firsthand. The past and the reclamation of it through myth, legend, or embellishment is empowering.

By using fantasy and myth to fill in the gaps of history and memory, Xungen and Post-colonial/Magical Realist writers can imagine the roots, origins, and inner workings of their native lands, communities and identities, from which they and other people are separated by time, geographical distance, or political repression. It is through fantasy and myth, especially fantasy and myth unique to traditional, indigenous culture, that Xungen and Post-colonial/Magical Realist writers can imagine and reconstruct their identities independent of any centralized political influence, indigenous (in the case of China) or colonial (in the case of Latin America).

The fantastic and improbable elements of both Xungen and Post-colonial/Magical Realist literature also serve to emphasize the fantastic and improbable nature of the real events in which the works are rooted. For societies to transform so quickly and on such a large scale as they did during the Haitian Revolution, the 20th century in Colombia, or in 20th-century China, is in itself surreal. New construction projects and plantations sprout up like shoots from the ground. The master-slave social order is violently, suddenly upended. Suddenly, urban students must become peasants and learn a language that turns the one they know utterly upside-down, or the sorghum fields that sustain a village become a bloody battlefield. Are these events themselves not strange and improbable to those experiencing them? Xungen and Post-colonial/Magical Realist literature both explore and comment on the surreality inherent in massive social changes that irreversibly alter the physical, psychological, and cultural landscape of a nation, cutting it off from traditional ways of life. Xungen and Post-colonial/Magical Realist literature can be viewed as a coping

mechanism of sorts for a world facing the inevitable loss of the past.

In her article “Cultural Lexicology: Maqiao Dictionary by Han Shaogong”, Vivian Lee writes about how Magical Realism and Xungen both have a sense of “felt history”, or that the use of the fantastic and unreal are methods to explain a reality that is strange when viewed from any sort of distance, be it cultural, spatial, temporal, or aesthetic.²²⁶ An emotional experience of history might transmute everyday occurrences and wrenching upheavals alike into miracles and apocalypses; an outsider looking backwards into the past or to the edges of his known world would transform what he sees as abnormal or unfamiliar into something completely improbable and unreal. Surreality is also a method for an individual or group to understand and process the trauma of the past; Vivian Lee discusses this in Han Shaogong's work and other Xungen works. “Very often, surreal events reveal the psychological repercussions of a traumatic past the reality of which remains obscure so that the narrative is open to multiple interpretations.”²²⁷ Vivian Lee's assertion also very much applies to Magical Realist works; take, for instance, the Banana Massacre in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Marquez's cataclysmic massacre that nearly destroys Macondo is, quite obviously, fiction. But in his fictionalization of a historical event that has so many interpretations and contradictory accounts, we see how Marquez (who was an infant when the massacre occurred) is using fiction to express how he personally understood the trauma of the Banana Massacre, regardless of what “actually” happened.

226 Lee, “Cultural Lexicology,” 146

227 Lee, “Cultural Lexicology,” 149

Fantasy is a psychological monument to history.

Ultimately, these works demonstrate how fantasy and reality together are important tools in the construction, reconstruction, and transmission of memory within a group of people and to others, and herein lies the common thread between Post-colonial/Magical Realist and Xungen literature: the theme of addressing rootlessness and the lack of connection to the past in people affected by the cultural erasure of colonial or totalitarian rule. Fantasy fills the gaps in memory, and helps process the strange and unfamiliar society in which the writers and their subjects live. By writing about real events and mixing them with fantastic elements, writers can provide a more personal, “bottom-up” narrative of historical events. These four works represent not a direct counterpoint to an imperial center's historical narrative, but rather an alternative exploration of history and memory, with more regard to personal experience and feeling than to accuracy or concrete “truth”. Ultimately, these are stories of personal connections to the past, and how memory, fantasy, legend, myth, and the written or oral transmission of these four works allow people to maintain that personal connection to their individual and collective pasts.

Although China's and Latin America's histories and cultures differ greatly, I argue that we could think of Xungen as “Post-colonial literature with Chinese characteristics”: a literary movement that imagines an indigenous past and seeks not only to critique modernization, but also reconcile it with the “roots” of a culture through the celebration of memory and the distant past. Like how post-colonial literature in Africa and Latin America is informed by the trauma of the rapaciousness

of colonial rule, Xungen was colored by the traumatic Chinese cultural experience of the 20th century. The cannibalism of the cultural erasure that characterized the Cultural Revolution distinguishes China from Latin America, where indigenous culture fell victim to an entirely alien culture. The sudden modernization and rush into prosperity, as opposed to the fits and starts of development in Latin America, made the anxieties about globalization and yet another colonizing force in the form of Western culture more acute in China. Just as Mao and other Chinese thinkers worked to adapt the European ideologies of Marxism and Socialism to Chinese sensibilities and history, Xungen writers tailored the tropes of Magical Realism and post-colonial literature to the needs and peculiarities of late 20th century China. Thus, Xungen can be considered a local flavor of an international literary movement. Through its adaptation to China's particular political, social, cultural, and spiritual situation in the 20th century, Xungen underscores the universality of post-colonial themes and tropes in 20th century literature.

Conclusion

In southern Utah, there is a forest of quaking aspen trees known as Pando. The forest, which covers 106 acres of land, is one single organism: thousands of trees that share a single root system. It is one of the oldest living organisms in the world, possibly predating humans by 800,000 years.²²⁸ Were we to imagine world literature as Pando, Xungen would be but one tree (or stem) in this gigantic organism. However, this is not to say that Xungen is insignificant.

As a post-Cultural Revolution movement that encouraged Chinese writers to find the roots of their writing in the primitive past and explore their own traumatic memories and stories, Xungen signaled a shift in 20th-century Chinese literature and provided an outlet for writers to comment on the modern Chinese experience in a unique way. As a movement that also adapted the roots-seeking tendencies of Magical Realism and William Faulkner's fiction, it was a continuation of Chinese literature's constant and ever-changing dialogue with other literary movements around the world. Xungen both reflected the social, political, and cultural changes that rocked China in the 1980s, and the dynamic developments in Chinese literature that had been brewing and forming since the early 20th century.

Xungen nourished the roots of Chinese literature by revitalizing pre-20th century Chinese literary forms, folk tales, and poetry. Like Lu Xun and other

²²⁸ Tia Ghose, "The Oldest Trees on the Planet," *Wired*, March 17th, 2010, accessed April 8th, 2013, <http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2010/03/old-tree-gallery/>

reformers in the 1910s and 1920s, Xungen authors took interest not in neo-Confucian tradition (though it undeniably holds an esteemed place in China's literary, cultural, and philosophical heritage), but in the *chuanqi* and *baihua* traditions that were more accessible to ordinary people. It was only natural that a literary movement that sought an alternative to hegemonic literature (both from elite of China and from the West) would look to indigenous folk tales and novels for inspiration when they began to write. I believe that Xungen was both a culmination of and a new beginning for 20th century Chinese literature.

Furthermore, revitalizing and reinterpreting these literary traditions was key to bringing forth the other essential elements of the Xungen movement. Chu poetry, *chuanqi*, and *baihua* blurred the boundaries between fantasy and reality, imagined new geographies (whether based in reality or not), journeyed into and out of the spirit world, and explored political and social issues through allegory and allusion. I argue that these elements of vernacular and peripheral literature, which were already familiar to Xungen writers, were one of the reasons that Magical Realism could gain a foothold in Chinese literary circles in the late 20th century. Magical Realism, like Chinese folk and vernacular literature, used surreality and exploited the tension between reality and fantasy to comment on everyday life or political and social issues. Magical Realism also incorporated folk religious beliefs, legends, fables and myths into its narrative, such as in Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World*. We can see the same practice in both vernacular literature, such as in the tales of Pu Songling, and in Xungen works (and Chinese works that inspired or ran parallel to Xungen),

such as in *A Dictionary of Maqiao* or Wang Zengqi's short story *A Tail*. There is an obvious kinship between modern Chinese literature and Magical Realism.

At the same time, however, the phenomenon of a link between Bogotá and Beijing (or Macondo and Maqiao) was (and is) not a new phenomenon in modern Chinese literary history. The complex network of literary roots of which Xungen is a part did not spring from nothing in the 1980s. From Voltaire's voracious reading of translated works of Chinese philosophy, to Lu Xun translating the works of Western writers he came upon during his education in Japan, to Borges' adaptation and exaggeration of “category literature”, Chinese literature and Western/Latin American literature have constantly borrowed from and communicated with each other. This cultural exchange has enriched Chinese, Western and Latin American literature alike, and has colored the literary traditions of all these regions in unique ways. Xungen not only nourished the roots of Chinese literature, but also strengthened and gave new life to the whole organism of world literature.

This, of course, brings us to an entirely new crossroads: we have seen how Xungen played into the state of world literature in the 1980s (and built upon the trends in world literature that began in the 1960s and even beforehand), but where does Xungen stand in world literature today, thirty years after its own heyday?

Although Xungen was very much a product of Chinese thought in the early 1980s, its influence continues into the present day, and far beyond the literary world. For instance, famed director Zhang Yimou (best known internationally for the wuxia film *Hero* and for the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics) adapted *Red*

Sorghum into a critically acclaimed film in 1987 (although it deviated significantly from the novella's plot), and Mo Yan's 2012 Nobel Prize win demonstrates that Xungen and the luminaries of the movement have a formidable influence that extends far beyond China's borders. Although Xungen was by and for Chinese people, its themes of seeking the roots of cultural identity and celebrating memory transcend nations and cultures. The Xungen movement is not and never has been an isolated spark of life in the literary world; it is part of an ever-growing, ever-evolving Pando that spans the entire world and has endured for centuries.

That being said, how does Xungen fit into the wider landscape of world literature? Beyond high-profile accolades, Xungen holds an important place in world literature because it embodied many of the issues both 20th and 21st century world literature movements face: most notably, the problem of translation. Xungen authors, who, due to censorship or lack of easy access, often read bootleg, unofficial translations of the foreign works that influenced them. As I mentioned earlier, it was not until 2011 that Professor Fan Ye of Beijing University completed the first official Mandarin Chinese translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

It is fascinating that Xungen authors took influence from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* thirty years before the release of an official translation. While even a meticulous translation of the novel by a university professor will inevitably omit or change many of the nuances, plays on words, and allusions of the Spanish original, unofficial translations almost certainly made significant changes to Marquez's text. In an interview with *El Espectador*, Fan Ye said,

They [the illegal translations] have their own version of Macondo, and as a consequence, their own strategy for translating it into another language. As a translator, I don't pay attention to what were the styles that already existed, except for that of Garcia Marquez: to find it, transmit it or reincarnate it, again, in my own way.²²⁹

Here we see the problem of translation, which plagues all corners of world literature, up close and personal in Chinese literature: on one hand, we look at the 1980s, when illegal translations presented wildly varying incarnations of Macondo and the Buendías and likely gave authors like Mo Yan and Han Shaogong a very different picture from the one Marquez originally painted. On the other, we see the recent advent of a new translation by a scholar of Marquez, which gives an “official” interpretation of the story that ignores the strategies and conceptions of the illegal translators of thirty years ago. We can write off such change as inevitable, but let us examine it: will a Chinese writer who looks for inspiration in Fan's 2011 translation have a completely different conception of Marquez and Macondo from Mo Yan and Han Shaogong? How might they interpret the text or take inspiration from it? Is one conception or interpretation more “right” than the other? Furthermore, are the illegal translations, which inspired such seminal works within the Xungen Movement as *Red Sorghum*, worth preserving alongside Fan Ye's?

In his text *How to Read World Literature*, David Damrosch attacks this problem, albeit in different works of world literature. He focuses on various English

229 Fan Ye, qtd by Nelson Fredy Padilla, “En China Gabo Es Todo Un Mito [In China, Gabriel Garcia Marquez Is All A Myth]”. My Translation.

translations of Voltaire's *Candide*; the translations vary greatly between the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, shifting due to cultural mores about acceptable language (for instance, a Victorian-era English translation censors the word “bitch”, which was translated from the French *chienne*) or changing cadences in more contemporary English.²³⁰ Although these translations may not be as “pure”, the styles tell us something about the historical and cultural contexts that they inhabited.

Applying the phenomenon of multiple translations that Damrosch observed with *Candide*, having a new Mandarin translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* could indicate to readers how China has changed since the 1980s. The rapid changes in Chinese society and politics since the 1980s have almost assuredly shifted the linguistic and literary sensibilities of Chinese writers and scholars, changed what language is or is not acceptable, and opened up more resources for understanding Colombian culture. Fan's translation, although it closely follows Marquez's cadences and style, will still be colored by China's current situation. This does not make his translation “adulterated”. Rather, Fan's translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a new synthesis in the wonderful organism of world literature.

In what other ways might Xungen continue to make its mark on world literature? As other writers from around the world explore their identities and histories, and use their writing to make political commentary, they might look to Xungen. Numerous authors and literary movements in Africa, Asia, and the Americas write stories about the crises of cultural identity that their nations have undergone in

230 David Damrosch, *How To Read World Literature* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 70-71. Ebook.

the age of post-colonialism and globalization. Many of these authors, like Xungen writers, must negotiate between finding their own voice and using the foreign influences that they have absorbed. For example, the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe (who passed away earlier this year) explored Igbo myth and legend indigenous to Nigeria, but wrote his novels in English, which Achebe himself denounced as a language forced on Nigerians. At the same time, however, Achebe adapted his oppressors' language to African sensibilities and cadences (which we saw in Damrosch's examples of translations).²³¹ We can compare this to the way in which Xungen writers, though they sought a distinctly indigenous voice, used foreign techniques and elements to express their uniquely Chinese literary identity.

With these examples in mind, would be rather academically parochial and inaccurate of me to say that Xungen is the first or best example of these problems in world literature, but when we examine the issue of balancing foreign influences with indigenous essence in contemporary literature, Xungen is an excellent case study.

Furthermore, Xungen could provide a lens through which we can observe and examine the intersection of politics and literature, and how writers within world literature must position themselves politically (or apolitically). Mo Yan, for instance, asserted his political neutrality in response to backlash by activists after his Nobel Prize win. Other writers, such as Han Shaogong's mentor Wang Zengqi, were much more overtly political in their works. The movement that immediately followed Xungen, Avant-Garde fiction, had many writers who wished to focus on their own

231 Ruth Franklin, "After Empire: Chinua Achebe and the Great African Novel," *The New Yorker*, May 26th, 2008, accessed April 9th, 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/05/26/080526crbo_books_franklin?currentPage=all

inner worlds, not on the political and social landscape of China. One author in particular, Yu Hua, transformed the extremely politicized events of the Cultural Revolution into inevitable aspects of human nature, in order to explore the trauma of the violence of that age.²³²

Other writers around the world whose works deal with the after-effects of colonialism, or the changes brought on by globalization, must similarly negotiate where they stand politically. Should they choose to identify as apolitical, as Mo Yan and Avant-Garde writers did (even if their works include politically sensitive themes), or should they accept the potential risks of taking a distinct political stance? Although the Xungen writers' situation was fairly unique to Chinese politics, Xungen can show us how politics and art intersect and interact in world literature.

These are just a few of the ways in which students of world literature can apply the lessons and experiences of Xungen to the analysis of contemporary world literature movements. Even if Xungen was a relatively short-lived movement, it signaled a turning point in Chinese literature, and illustrates how the myriad movements within world literature, although they are inextricably tied to specific national and cultural experiences, or to specific moments in history, are also fundamentally based on a constant, dynamic cross-cultural dialogue. When we view new literary movements both in China and around the world, we can look back at Xungen to find ways to analyze and understand them.

²³² Xiaobin Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-Garde Fiction* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 68

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