DON'T BELIEVE A WORD I SAY: METAFICTION IN

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE LITERATURE

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of East Asian
Languages and Literatures
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

June 2011

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: Don't Believe a Word I Say: Metafiction in Contemporary Chinese Literature

This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures by:

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Degree awarded June 2011

THESIS ABSTRACT

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Master of Arts

East Asian Languages and Literatures

June 2011

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    Literature

Approved: _____
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    This thesis focuses on the metafictional elements in selected works
of the contemporary Chinese authors Gao Xingjian, Huang Jinshu, and
Wang Xiaobo. I define metafiction as both a formal feature inherent *in* the
text and the result of an approach *towards* that text. I argue that
metafiction confronts us with the (postmodern) issues of 1) the ontological
status of the text, 2) the figure of the author and reader, and 3) the
(ambiguous) relationship between fiction and reality. Simultaneously, it
accepts and celebrates this self-conscious and ambiguous character,
encouraging readers to do the same. By combining elements from the
indigenous literary tradition and international literary movements,
contemporary Chinese metafiction is a valuable contribution to the study
of metafiction. Ultimately, it shows what it means to write and read in a
Chinese as well as in a global context.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is too much to read and too little time. Thus, to set myself a goal, I decided to read one work by each laureate of the Nobel Literature Prize. In light of that project, I read Jose Saramago's *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (1989) back in 2009. I was immediately intrigued by the way the story revealed its own constructed nature and commented upon the process of literary production. At the same time, I was reading stories by Gao Xingjian and Wang Xiaobo and all these texts made me rethink exactly *what* I was reading and *how* I was reading: my fascination with metafiction was born.

This MA thesis is the result of my explorations of metafiction in contemporary Chinese literature. And while the process of researching and writing is often a lonely adventure, I would not have been able to succeed without the support and understanding of the following people, to whom I am immensely grateful: My advisor Prof. Alison Groppe, for all her advice and support; My committee members Prof. Maram Epstein and Prof. Xiaoquan Raphael Zhang, for their time and expertise; My friends in Eugene and all over the world, for listening to me freak out and help me relax; Karin and Jaap, for their long-term and long-distance, but never-ending love and support; And Duncan, for always being brutally honest in the gentlest way. You make everything better.

For Ernie, without whom I would have been lost long ago

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true;
Real becomes not-real when the unreal's real
(Cao Xueqin, *Story of the Stone*, 55)

Despite the title of this project, "Don't believe a word I say", I hope that my arguments concerning metafiction in contemporary Chinese literature will convince the reader. In order to define the scope of my research, the phrase "metafiction in contemporary Chinese literature" needs clarification. Firstly, "metafiction"[1] is one possible term to describe a kind of writing that "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 2)[2]. I understand metafiction in a broad sense as "fiction about (creating) fiction," in which the latter "fiction" can refer to the specific text itself, to other literary texts or to the concept of fiction in general. In chapter II I will discuss this term in more detail.

Secondly, I use the term "contemporary fiction" to refer to literary works produced during and after the 1980s, delineating it from "modern literature," which generally refers to literature from the early republican

[1] The Chinese translation for metafiction is *yuan xiaoshuo* 元小说 (predominantly used in mainland sources) and *houshe xiaoshuo* 后设小说 (mainly used in Taiwan) (Zhao 95).

[2] Other possible terms for similar phenomenon are: "introverted novel, anti-novel, irrealism, surfiction, self-begetting novel, and fabulation" (Waugh 14).

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period, up to the May Fourth movement (1919) and into the mid-20th century. Thus, the texts I discuss in this project all come from the late 1980s to the late 1990s.

Finally, and perhaps most problematic is the modifier "Chinese." I have chosen works written by Gao Xingjian (高行健), Huang Jinshu (黄锦树), and Wang Xiaobo (王小波), authors that come from very distinct socio-geographical backgrounds. Gao Xingjian (b. 1940) was born in Mainland China, lived there until 1987 and is currently living in France. Huang Jinshu (b. 1967) comes from Malaysia, but has lived and worked in Taiwan for many decades. Finally, Wang Xiaobo (1952-1997) lived in Mainland China for most of his life, except for four years when he studied in the United States. The positions these authors occupy within the field of Chinese literature may appear marginal and I am aware of their relative distance to certain centers of literary production, whether that is a geographical location such as Mainland China, or a more abstract concept such as "mainstream literature." However, rather than making this a study of writers at the periphery of a literary field, I hope that bringing these authors together will reflect my understanding of Chinese literature as a broad concept not necessarily defined by, and confined to, national or geographical boundaries. Thus, the linguistic coherency of these texts and their shared thematic focus on China are strong enough reasons for me to think about them in terms of Chinese literature. Bringing these authors together under the umbrella of

metafiction is to my knowledge the first time that they have been discussed alongside each other. Hopefully, this combination will add a new dimension to existing scholarship about these individual authors.

In Western literary theory and criticism, the term "metafiction" is mainly associated with the rise of postmodern fiction and theories from the mid 20th century onwards. Despite several novels from earlier periods that employ metafictional elements[3], and due to a lack of non-Western sources in general works on metafiction, the term is at risk of being confined to a narrow Western temporal and geographical framework. Even if we broaden the scope to include China in the discussion of metafiction, critical and popular attention is focused on the so-called Avant-Garde writers of the 1980s, such as Ma Yuan, Ge Fei, and Su Tong. However, by the mid 1990s, the high tide of this experimental fiction was over and the growing trend of commercialization of literature placed less (easy) accessible kinds of writing, such as metafiction, in the background. Thus, by focusing on the works of the contemporary authors Gao Xingjian, Huang Jinshu and Wang Xiaobo, I aim to broaden the scope of metafiction in geographical as well as in temporal terms. I will show that as an aspect *of* the text as well as an approach *to* the text, metafiction is still a powerful tool for analyzing contemporary (Chinese) literature.

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[3] E.g. Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605/1615) and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760-1767).

Why Metafiction Matters

Both in China and in the West, metafiction has not always been positively received. As Jing Wang describes in her introduction to the anthology *Avant-Garde Writings in China*: "the school's eccentric experiment with language was often dismissed as babbling" (3) and "the annulment of the real and the referential, [...] called for the critical assessment, from some quarters, of the new fiction as a mere linguistic maze, a pure energy field, and an 'aesthetic game of narration'" (9). But despite these critiques of metafiction as mere formalistic play or insignificant "babbling," other scholars have acknowledged the positive traits of this kind of writing. For example, in his article on self-reflexivity in the Chinese literary tradition, Karl Kao summarizes the beneficial qualities of metafiction as follows:

> Whatever cultural implications metafiction may have, the capacity of metafictional questioning to help the development of heightened consciousness and a demystified understanding of human values *as constructions* has been affirmed by the majority of critics as one of its most valuable qualities. (Kao 82, my emphasis)

The emphasis on the word "construction" is essential here, because it is exactly this (post)modern notion, not only of human values, but also of history, reality, subjectivity, and fiction itself as constructs, that lies at the heart of metafiction. Patricia Waugh describes this as the "thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures" (7). This notion of both fiction and reality as

constructed entities is also present in the works of the contemporary

Chinese authors. My analysis of metafiction in the works of Gao

Xingjian, Huang Jinshu, and Wang Xiaobo focuses on three particular

aspects of that constructed reality: 1) the ontological status of the text, 2)

the figure of the author and reader, and 3) the (ambiguous) relationship

between the text and the world. Ultimately, these issues contribute to

our understanding of how literature (and art in general) can help readers

and writers alike with constructing and understanding the world they

live in, and their relation to it.

Analyzing these aspects of literary production and consumption in

literature itself, rather than using theoretical treaties, reader responses

or authorial comments, needs to be justified. In my opinion, that

justification lies in the fact that metafiction not only *raises* the question

of the relationship between literature and the world, but simultaneously

answers it. Metafiction "explore[s] a *theory* of fiction through the *practice*

of writing fiction" (Waugh 2, original emphasis), but rather than

providing an unambiguous solution, it accepts and celebrates its own the

ambiguity, encouraging (or forcing) readers to do the same.

Limited time and space made it necessary to decide upon a small

selection of sources. These choices were based first of all on their

importance to the study of metafiction in contemporary Chinese

literature, but also on the joy it brought me to read and analyze these

stories. I sincerely hope that my project will encourage others to read and enjoy them just as much as I did: Welcome to the funhouse!

In Chapter II, I discuss the notion of metafiction in more detail and position my understanding of it within the larger framework of theories of metafiction, both in the Western and the Chinese literary tradition. While most theories of metafiction focus on postmodern and Avant-Garde writers, my project looks at more contemporary authors. The question becomes if there are significant differences between the two? In one of the few articles specifically on Chinese metafiction, Henry Zhao introduces a typology of metafiction to categorize the work by Chinese Avant-Garde writers. Is this typology still applicable to the works of the contemporary writers, or are there other, more meaningful ways to categorize these texts?

The following chapters will then focus on selected works of each individual author. Despite the stylistic differences between them, Gao Xingjian, Huang Jinshu, and Wang Xiaobo share an interest in issues of literary production and consumption, and fundamental categories such as "fact" and "fiction." Not only do they express these ideas in fictional form, combining fiction and criticism, they also embody this duality in their professional careers as both creative writers and scholars, critics, and visual artists.

Gao Xingjian's novel *Soul Mountain* (*Lingshan* 灵山 1990) is the primary focus of Chapter III. In this novel, Gao puts into practice his own theories of language and new forms of fiction. Most notably, he represents the image of a fragmented Self through the use of different pronouns. Moreover, Gao exposes the process of creation by explicitly showing and problematizing the act of story telling and the responsibility of the figure of the author.

Chapter IV focuses on two short stories by the Chinese-Malaysian writer Huang Jinshu (Ng Kim Chew), "Death in the South" (*Si zai nanfang* 死在南方 1994) and "The Disappearance of M" (*M de shizong* M 的失踪 1994). By employing metafictional techniques such as frame breaking, narratorial intrusion, fake quotes and the insertion of historical characters, Huang problematizes the ontological status of the text. Moreover, he complicates prefixed notions such as "fact" and "fiction", and conflates the boundaries between the literary identities of author, narrator, character, and reader.

Finally, in Chapter V, I look at the novella "The Future World" (*Weilai shijie* 未来世界 1997) by Mainland author Wang Xiaobo. Set in the near future, this story represents Wang's rather pessimistic (or ironic) vision of the Chinese society and the impossibility of subjectivity, through his anti-emotional characters and twisted representation of historiography. Like Gao Xingjian and Huang Jinshu, Wang Xiaobo displays an interest in the production of fiction, as well as in the

complicated relationship between that fiction and what is believed to be

reality (or history).

CHAPTER II

METAFICTION: HERE, THERE AND EVERYWHERE

The term "metafiction" originates in William Gass's 1970 essay "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction," referring to literature "in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed" (25). By the 1980s metafiction was "firmly integrated into the canon of fashionable areas of research for aspiring critics and scholars" (Imhof, *The author's note*). One of those scholars was Patricia Waugh who published her seminal work *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* in 1984 and who defines metafiction as:

> A term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

Both metafiction's self-reflexive tendency and its ability and eagerness to enquire into the fundamental nature of the world outside the text, are included in this definition. Furthermore, Waugh points out two other characteristics of metafiction that are worth keeping in mind for the current project, namely: "although the *term* 'metafiction' might be new, the *practice* is as old (if not older) than the novel itself", and "metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels" (5, original emphasis). Here, Waugh points to the fact that the novel as a genre is characterized

by the incorporation of different discourses, "discourses that *always* to some extent question and relativize each other's authority" (6). Realism, the dominant mode of representation in the West until the rise of modernism in the early 20th century, covered up this tendency by means of "the dominant 'voice' of the omniscient, godlike author" (6). "Metafiction," on the contrary "*displays* and *rejoices in* the impossibility of such a resolution […]" (6). It is exactly this absence until recently of the "tyranny of realism" (Gu 331) in the Chinese literary tradition that urges us to rethink both the position of metafiction within that tradition, and the importance of this tradition for theories of metafiction.

Unfortunately, Waugh's discussion is limited to examples from the Western theoretical and literary tradition from the late 1960's and early 1970's, with works by scholars such as Robert Alter (1975) and Robert Scholes (1979), and creative writers including the aforementioned William Gass, and several others.[4] Waugh's own work roughly coincided with a second wave of studies on metafiction, including those by Inger Christensen (1981), Michael Boyd (1983), and Linda Hutcheon (1984). It goes beyond the scope of the current project to discuss all their definitions of metafiction in detail, but there are some general issues that

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[4] Two possible exceptions that Waugh mentions are Borges and Marquez, but one could argue that, although they come from South America, they have been appropriated by the Western literary Canon.

are beneficial to our discussion of metafiction in contemporary Chinese literature.[5]

These studies are all part of a larger scholarly trend that focuses on theories and practices of postmodern (and post-structuralist) fiction. The term "postmodernism" is a complex notion endowed with many political and social connotations. For this project, however, I adopt Douwe Fokkema's notion of postmodernism "as a current in literature: a literary sociolect used by writers, critics, and general readers" (141). While the applicability of the term "postmodern" in a Chinese context is debatable,[6] I find traces of similar concerns, such as the ontological status of literature and the provisional nature of reality and history, in the works of the contemporary Chinese authors under consideration. However, since one of the goals of this study is to break away from the rigid periodization that limits the study of metafiction to a select body of works by Avant-Garde writers in the 1980s, I am hesitant to place too much emphasis on the "postmodern" character of such issues. This attitude is also supported by the occurrence of similar techniques early on the Chinese tradition, as I will discuss shortly. Thus, with this project I aim to insert these contemporary works into a larger literary tradition (both Chinese and Western) and to simultaneously expand and enrich the notion of metafiction.

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[5] For an overview of all these scholars and their ideas, see Ommundsen 14-30.

[6] See e.g. Dirlik and Zhang (2000). High modernism and post-socialism are proposed alternatives to the term postmodern in relation to China.

The "fashionable" status of metafiction as an area of research may have faded since the mid 1980s, but in the 1990s two additional studies were published that offer an interesting addition to the earlier theories. In the edited volume simply called *Metafiction* (1995), Mark Currie suggests a new definition of metafiction "as a borderline discourse, as a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject" (2). That combination of fiction and criticism culminates in the figure of the "writer/critic," who "embod[ies] both the production and reception of fiction in the roles of author and reader in a way that is paradigmatic for metafiction" (3). Even though being a writer/critic is no guarantee for metafiction, the three authors in this study are all examples of how fiction and criticism, literature and theory, can coincide in both author and text. In addition, Currie's notion of metafiction counters the often-heard critique that it is "an isolated and introspective obsession within literature" (2). He points out that metafiction's critical self-consciousness "flowed outward into the more demotic realms of film, television, comic strips and advertising" (2). Even though this project focuses solely on literature, the coexistence of other meta-expressions is worth keeping in mind for future research.

In 1993, Wenche Ommundsen added another important aspect to the definition of metafiction. She claims that: "Metafiction is the *product of a certain practice of reading*, a particular kind of attention brought to

bear on the fictional text" (29, my emphasis). Currie makes a similar point by saying that in some cases "metafiction is less a property of the primary text than a function of reading" (5). Thus, whereas most scholars in the 1980s saw metafiction either as a generic category, a subgenre of postmodern fiction, or a tendency inherent in all fiction, Ommundsen and Currie add the notion of metafiction as a result of a particular "mode of reading". In my opinion, these different models are compatible, and thus my understanding of metafiction is two fold. On the one hand, metafiction is a textual construct, present in the text as literary (or narrative) techniques, including frame breaking, narratorial intrusion, *mise-en-abyme*, self-conscious characters and so forth. These techniques and aspects are inherent in the text and can be identified, analyzed and interpreted. In a way, this is the formal side of metafiction. On the other hand, I understand metafiction not just as an aspect *of* the text, but also the result of an approach *towards* that text.

Assigning this second meaning to the notion of metafiction has two important benefits. First, it provides us with a useful approach to texts that do not explicitly use metafictional elements or display a direct self-consciousness towards its own fictional status. By bringing a metafictional awareness to such texts, we can extract valuable information about the production and consumption of literature that may otherwise go unnoticed. Secondly, it shifts the focus from the author and the text to the reader, a movement that is fundamental to the

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understanding and success of metafiction. Without the willingness of the reader to consider and accept certain ambiguities proposed within the text, metafiction indeed runs the risk of becoming merely formalistic play, without any reference or relevance to the world outside the text.

Like Waugh and most other general studies on metafiction, Ommundsen's discussion does not take any non-Western authors into consideration. However, towards the end she addresses the Euro-centric perspective that haunts not only literary studies, but also the Humanities at large:

> [I]f we are to believe most books on postmodern fiction (or metafiction), the genre has until very recently remained the preserve of male writers, and, with the exception of a few daredevils in South America, it has been confined to European and North American centers of culture. (96)

By its very regional and linguistic focus, this project is an attempt to adjust that narrowly confined notion of metafiction. Whatever the reason for its exclusion, in the next paragraph I will show how the Chinese literary tradition can provide a much-needed non-Western addition to the study of metafiction.

The Rise, the Roots, and the Result: Metafiction in China

One of the few sources that focus exclusively on Chinese metafiction is Henry Zhao's 1992 article "The Rise of Metafiction in China". He attributes the reason for that "rise" during the mid 1980s to

the re-assessment of recent history and a subsequent "crisis of codes" (97):

> If, as some Western scholars hold, meta-sensibility in the West is the result of the pressure of the information explosion, meta-sensibility has arisen in China today in answer to the pressing need to understand the problems of Chinese culture and history, the enormity and complexity of which have been baffling Chinese intellectuals hitherto. (96)

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) there had been several literary movements in China that attempted to deal with the traumatic events in recent Chinese history, including so-called scar literature (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学) and roots-seeking fiction (*xungen wenxue* 寻根文学). But whereas these stories and their authors tried to express a lived experience and find a suitable means of representation for it, writers of metafiction introduce

> A fundamental doubt about the possibility of creating a fictional world to 'reflect' the real world (which is, after all, the result of a sharing of the same codes by the reader and the author), and an affirmation of the artificiality of the narrated world coupled with a total rejection of the search for its truth-value. (97)

This rejection of realism and search for a new mode of representation resulted in the metafiction of Avant-Garde writers like Ma Yuan, Ge Fei and Yu Hua. Their experimental fiction included metafictional techniques, formal experimentation, and strongly depoliticized content.

Zhao proposes a typology of metafiction, which divides the writings of the previous mentioned authors into three categories: self-reflexity metafiction, pre-textual metafiction and para-fictional metafiction. This

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typology is based on the understanding of metafiction as "fiction about fiction", and as in my own usage of the term, the latter "fiction" can refer to a variety of texts and systems of meaning.

Zhao describes self-reflexity metafiction as fiction in which "the narrational mediation is foregrounded as an almost masochistic self-exposure, and the fabrication is shown to possess more power to induce the sense of reality than the verisimilitude of conventional fiction" (93). As an example, Zhao mentions the intrusive narrator in most of Ma Yuan's stories, who constantly reminds the reader of their constructed nature. At the same time, however, by virtue of naming the narrator Ma Yuan as well, the author manages to insert himself in the text, complicating its fictionality with this real life reference.

Pre-textual metafiction is defined as "a fictional work about or alluding to other, or other groups of, fictional works" (93). It relies on readers existing understanding of other texts and genres and "uses it or parodies it to achieve a meaning that otherwise cannot be deciphered" (93). Yu Hua's novels that parody the genre of historical writing are a case in point.

Zhao notes that "if we push the notion 'fiction about fiction' further, we arrive at a third kind of metafiction," namely para-fictional metafiction, in which "all meaning systems that connect man with the world- consciousness, imagination, experience, knowledge, human relationship, history, culture, ideology, etc.," (93) are considered as

constructed and thus as fiction. While this typology provides a meaningful framework for the Avant-Garde writers, the question arises if it is still valid for the more contemporary authors. If and how these contemporary metafictions function differently is a question I will explore in the following chapters.

Zhao does not only explore the rise of Chinese metafiction, but also comments upon its roots. Some critics argue that the Avant-Garde writers were simply imitating literary techniques imported from the West. However, Zhao renders that argument invalid by claiming that at the time, most Western metafiction was not yet translated and the Chinese writers had no access to the original versions. In addition, he claims that

> The meta-sensibility in recent Mainland China fiction seems to be something of which even the Chinese metafictional writers themselves are not aware. For this simple reason it can be concluded that metafiction in China cannot be a 'bogus metafiction' or an imported fashion. The emergence of meta-sensibility has been brought about by the development of Chinese culture itself. (95)

While I tend to disagree with Zhao's notion that the writers are not aware of their own self-conscious tendencies, there are indeed many indications that this "meta-sensibility," so characteristic for postmodern and Avant-Garde writing, has its roots within the Chinese literary tradition itself. Several scholars have pointed towards indigenous (philosophical) traditions that can at least to some extent account for the occurrence of metafiction in modern times:

> In China, however, there is a vital Daoist and Buddhist tradition that […] contains notions of metalinguistic and

epistemological skepticism of which contemporary writers are fully aware and to which they may refer, leaving the question of the primary source of their inspiration in the dark. (Fokkema 148)

Fokkema is not as radical in his rejection of foreign influences as Zhao, but he recognizes the importance of the indigenous tradition upon modern writers. Similarly, in his article "Self-reflexivity, Epistemology, and Rhetorical Figures," Karl Kao uses examples from Ming-Qing narratives, e.g. the famous *Story of the Stone* (*Shitou ji* 石头记) by Cao Xueqin and the parodic stories by Li Yu, to show how Chinese self-reflexivity evolved from a tradition that was more focused on ontology than epistemology and in which literature was predominantly an "expression of one's self and one's values, not a representation of an external truth" (65). This lack of the "tyranny of realism" (Gu 331) accounts for the fact that traditional Chinese fiction already displays many formal features, which are identified centuries later as metafiction, postmodern, or Avant-Garde:

> Fiction commentaries are printed alongside fictional works. A narrator may intrude into his fictional work as he pleases. Author, narrator, commentator, and reader may all appear in the same fictional work. The narrator may declare a patently untrue account as true events that have happened in life or history. (313)

Most of these aspects will indeed reoccur in my discussion of contemporary Chinese metafiction, establishing a firm link between the Chinese literary tradition and modern literature.

However, the question of foreign "inspiration" (rather than influence) is by no means off the proverbial table because of these indigenous tendencies. Especially when we take into consideration that contemporary authors have more and easier access to international sources of literature and theory. In their respective articles, Cai Rong and Zhang Xuejun both focus on the influence of the Argentian writer Jorge Luis Borges on the Chinese Avant-Garde. While Cai Rong mainly focuses on the similarities between the philosophical concerns in the writings of Borges and Ma Yuan, Zhang Xuejun claims there is an important difference:

> The repetition, cyclicality, labyrinth and metafiction for Borges are only employed as means to discuss his ontology and epistemology while for the Chinese avant-garde writings they are used for the experimentation of methodology and an experiment in story forms, giving priorities to wordplay and writing techniques. (286)

As with Zhao's typology, this statement may hold true for the Avant-Garde writers under consideration in Zhang's article, but as I will suggest in the following chapters, contemporary metafiction is in fact used to help these authors express their own ideas about ontology and epistemology.

As I have mentioned before, by far the largest amount of scholarship on metafiction focuses on the heyday of postmodernism and Avant-Gardism, ranging from the late 1960s in the West, to the late 1980s in China. In the case of China, (and arguably in the West, although that discussion lies beyond the scope of this project) this lack of

attention to contemporary sources may be explained by a shift in the literary paradigm from (formal) experimentation in the 1980s to commercialization in the 1990s. As I hope to show in the following chapters, despite this periodization, authors from a wide variety of positions within the Chinese literary field still turn to metafiction to express their own systems of thought. Huang Jinshu, Gao Xingjian and Wang Xiaobo have all been exposed to literary theories and practices from both China and the West, which has informed their own creative, critical and theoretical writing. By combining elements from the indigenous Chinese literary tradition and international literary movements, these texts give us a better understanding of what it means to write and read in both a Chinese and a global context.

CHAPTER III

GAO XINGJIAN: TELLING STORIES TO YOU, ME AND EVERYONE

WE KNOW

> Reading this chapter is optional but as you've read it you've read it.
>
> (Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain* 455)

> A writer is a normal person – though perhaps a person who is more sensitive than normal, and people who are highly sensitive are often more frail. A writer does not speak as the spokesperson of the people or as the embodiment of righteousness. His voice is inevitably weak, but it is this weak voice that is the most authentic.
>
> (Gao Xingjian, "The Case for Literature" 32)

> The story must be told and its telling is a record of the choices, inadvertent or deliberate, the author has made from all the possibilities of language.
>
> (William Gass, "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction" 7)

Gao Xingjian (b. 1940) wrote his first full-length novel *Soul Mountain* over a period of seven years, between 1982 and 1989. It was eventually published in 1990 in Taiwan and is thus the oldest work included in this thesis. Even though it was written at the time of the Avant-Garde, Gao's work has a strong individual and unique style. Since the early 1980s, Gao has written and published not only several short stories and plays, but also critical and theoretical essays about language and literature. *Soul Mountain* is in many ways the practical realization of

Gao's own theoretical ideas about literature and, as metafiction does, it combines literary creation with theoretical reflections upon that creation. These ideas include his innovative use of pronouns, fragmented narrative structure, and the incorporation of various literary discourses. I choose *Soul Mountain* rather than his earlier short stories or his later novel *One Man's Bible* (*Yige Ren de Shenjing* 一个人的圣经 1998), because I see this novel as exemplary of Gao's use of metafiction.[7] It can be seen as a transition from the formal experimentation of the Avant-Garde, to the contemporary metafiction that aims to express a developed system of meaning through the creation of literature.

I focus on how *Soul Mountain* represents Gao's notion of the Self as a (postmodern) fragmented individual who, as a writer "does not speak as the spokesperson of the people or as the embodiment of righteousness" (Lee *The Case* 32). In addition, metafiction allows Gao to comment upon the meaning and process of writing and reading by making storytelling a recurring object of scrutiny in *Soul Mountain.* In accordance with my definition of metafiction, my discussion has two main parts; one that

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[7] There are also numerous examples of Gao's plays that contain similar metafictional themes and techniques. In *Monologue* (1985) the actors reflect upon their different roles as performers and characters, talk directly to the audience and physically break down the fourth wall by leaving the stage and entering the audience. His 1994 play *Story of The Classic of Mountain and Seas* (re)uses the historical narrative *Classic of Mountain and Seas.* The play opens with the self-conscious statement by the narrator: "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our show. My goodness, a full house. Anyone know what's on tonight? It's called *Of Mountains and Seas,* uncut and unabridged." Since my project focuses on literature, I will only refer to the plays when they can help us better understand the nature of metafiction in Gao's novel. For a more detailed discussion on Gao's plays, see e.g Lai (2001).

explores metafiction as a textual aspect in *Soul Mountain,* and one that approaches this novel with the intention to read it as metafiction. Both aspects together are hopefully beneficial to answering some of the questions raised here.

First, however, I will introduce Gao Xingjian as an author, and his position vis-à-vis the Chinese literary field. Moreover, I will outline how Gao's writing combines traditional Chinese aspects with typical postmodern concerns.

Between East and West

Even though Gao's early publications in the 1980s were positively received and made his name familiar among the literary elite of the time, today most studies on the Chinese Avant-Garde or experimental fiction do not include his works. This fact may be explained by his "disappearance" from the literary scene of Mainland China. To better understand this absence and Gao's development as an author, a brief overview of his career is necessary. Born in Ganzhou, Jiangxi province, Gao studied French at the Beijing Foreign Language Institute, where he graduated in 1962. During the Cultural Revolution, he spent some time in a remote rural area of South China, where he was forced to burn all his writings up to that point to avoid prosecution. In 1975 he resumed working for the Foreign Language Press and he visited Europe on several

occasions in 1979 and 1980. His 1981 treatise "A Preliminary Exploration of the Techniques of Modern Fiction" (*Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan* 现代小说技巧初探) laid the (theoretical) foundation for most of his future writings, including *Soul Mountain.* It contained his thoughts on possible new forms of fiction, the role and figure of the author, and the influence of changed circumstances of cultural production and consumption, especially the popularity of cinema, on writing fiction (Tam 295).

Despite the initial positive reactions towards his work, Gao was heavily criticized during the 1983 "Oppose Spiritual Pollution" (*Qingchu jingshen wuran* 清除精神污染) campaign and his "Preliminary Explorations" and experimental play *Bus Stop* (*Che Zhan* 车站 1983) were banned. Alarmed by the rumors of his pending arrest and following a serious misdiagnosis (for several weeks, Gao believed he had lung cancer), Gao left Beijing and traveled along the Yangzi River, a journey that is largely reflected in his novel *Soul Mountain.* Finally, in 1987 he went to France and applied for French citizenship after the 1989 Tian'an men incident. He has not returned to China ever since, lives and works in Paris and currently writes in both Chinese and French. It is exactly this diasporic (or dissident, depending on the political perspective) position that complicates Gao's relationship vis-à-vis the field of contemporary Chinese literature. The Chinese official critique on Gao's

work, and his own negative attitude towards the Chinese state, in addition to the geographical distance, have placed Gao in a marginalized position.

Thus, when Gao was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000, there was a wide range of responses:

> [...] many Chinese scholars and writers who live outside China rejoiced at the news. The same news, however, was received quite differently by the Chinese government and the official literary organizations on the mainland,[...]. They dismissed Gao as an unknown writer in China and denounced the Swedish Academy for awarding the Prize to Gao with a political intent. (Tam 3)

Without dismissing the value or validity of the Nobel Prize, Gao was at the time indeed a relatively unfamiliar writer, both in China and abroad. Since his relocation to France, his Chinese works are only published in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and are not available in Mainland China. In the West, some of his works have been translated into French, Swedish and English, but outside the academic circles "Gao was an unknown quantity" (Lovell 2). Awarding the Nobel Literature Prize to a relatively unfamiliar, yet controversial figure such as Gao, led to two related discussions. On the one hand, as mentioned above, the possible political motivation for awarding the prize was actively discussed in China and the West. While this is an aspect of the Nobel Prize that arises more often, the debate is generally more animated when it involves a non-

Western laureate.[8] On the other hand, awarding Gao the Nobel Prize largely on basis of his works about China and, as the Committee expressed, "for his importance to the future of the Chinese novel," rekindles the question of what constitutes "Chinese literature."

While this is a discussion worthy of its own research project, here I will only make a case for the inclusion of Gao in the current discussion. Despite Gao's geographical relocation to France, his familiarity with Western theories and literature, and his attempts to "disassociate[d] himself from China the nation-state," (Lovell 1) his works still contain many influences from Chinese history, culture, and language. As Wai Yee Yeung points out:

> He aspires a universal literature that can be shared by readers of all nations. But in his works he constantly makes reference to his Chinese nativity. The frequent allusions he makes to Buddhism, Taoist philosophy and classical Chinese literature contradict this declaration. (178)

In *Soul Mountain* this dualistic nature is represented in the metafictional tendency of the novel to theorize its own form as well as fiction in general, while the setting, geographical and historical references, and overall themes are still predominantly Chinese, as we will see in the following paragraphs. On a very fundamental level, the inclusion of Gao's novel as Chinese literature is motivated by the fact that it is written in Chinese while Gao was still living in China and it is obviously rooted in

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[8] For a more detailed discussion about the Nobel Prize, its relation to the world literary economy and China's "Nobel complex", see Lovell 2006.

Gao's personal experiences with Chinese culture and history. While Gao's status as a Chinese author needs to be justified in light of the described circumstances, his writing possesses an equally hybrid quality, bringing together the past and the future.

Between Tradition and the (Post)Modern

Wai Yee Yeung argues that *Soul Mountain* "is a novel about the writing of a postmodern novel without itself being one" (117). While one can argue about the categorization of Gao's work as modernist, postmodernist or Avant-Garde, the metafictional nature of a novel "about writing a novel" is obvious. This self-reflexivity as a literary technique is both inherent to the Chinese tradition, as well as typically postmodern. *Soul Mountain* thus incorporates aspects of both traditions, reflected in both its form and content:

> To refer to Soul Mountain as a 'novel' is to use this term for want of a better one. It contains dialogues and stream of consciousness monologues, as we may expect from a novel, but also pieces, which look like journalistic reportage, anthropological reports, philosophical essays and historical treatises. This combination of themes is in some way reminiscent of classical Chinese writings, but the technique and intellectual content is also informed by Gao's deep insights into Western culture. (Loden 266)

In this quote the hybrid quality of Gao's work once again becomes apparent. The "combination of themes" in traditional fiction can be attributed "the Chinese lack of dogmatic attitudes towards mimesis,

realism, objectivism, and authorial presence, etc" (Gu 331). Gu Mindong calls this style of writing "kaleidoscopic narration," (330) which "may cover ways of mimesis, themes and motifs, narrative techniques, generic forms, language registers, points of view, and tones and styles" (332). I find the term kaleidoscopic very appropriate to describe *Soul Mountain,* not only because it incorporates many different discourses, but also because of its fragmented narrative. The breakdown of generic boundaries is characteristic of postmodern fiction, which aims to destabilize fixed notions of literary representation in accordance with its denial of the existence of one objective reality. Thus, Gao's blending of forms and styles can be seen as both traditional and postmodern. It is also a concern and technique that is specifically metafictional, because as Patricia Waugh argued, these different discourses provide comments upon each other and themselves.

If one aspect of Gao's work has been thoroughly discussed, it is his innovative use of pronouns and shifting narrative perspective. Once again, this perception of a subjective reality and a fragmented Self is both inherently postmodern as well as a familiar aspect of kaleidoscopic narrative (Gu 333). Gao's understanding of the subjective Self and his expression of this notion in art is not restricted to his fiction. For example in his play *Monologue* (*Dubai* 独白), the actor addresses himself interchangeably as "I" and "you," and is alternating a character and an

actor. Here we can see Gao's notion that the Self "must inevitably be subject to a vigorous questioning in the postmodern era" (Lai 144). In *Soul Mountain*, that questioning takes place through the replacement of traditional characters with a set of pronouns that (may) amount to one single Self.

Soul Mountain has a complex structure of "I" (我), "you" (你), and "he" (他) who serve as the main character and narrator, alternating every chapter. The novel begins with a combination of "I" and "you" chapters, with the sporadic occurrence of a "he" in a limited number of the latter chapters. Moreover, a female character "she" (她) accompanies "you." It becomes apparent that all the pronouns are part of one and the same person; an unnamed male author who travels through China and whose life bears resemblances to Gao's own. In metafictional terms, the "I" and "you" are providing self-reflexive comments aimed at complicating the notion of the Self, as well as constituting a new kind of character/narrator that represents the fragmented view of reality as portrayed in the novel.

In the following paragraphs, I will look at three chapters in *Soul Mountain,* each of which stands out because of its distance from the narrative in terms of form, style and tone. In these specific chapters, Gao uses metafictional techniques to offer meta-comments on the nature of art, the use of language and the characteristics of fiction itself.

<u>The Odd Ones Out</u>

Soul Mountain can be divided into two main narrative strands that turn out to be inextricably bound to each other. The physical journey of a writer through the hinterland of China, populated by ethnic minorities and scattered with primordial forests and mountain ranges, is told from the first person perspective "I." The chapters written in the second person "you" relate the story of the mental journey of this "I," which is represented by the search for a mythical place called "Soul Mountain." Both "I" and "you" come across a variety of people, places and events on their journey, including Daoist priests and ceremonies, Buddhist monasteries, panda reserves, folk singers, virgin forests, old friends, and new acquaintances. While "I" spends most of his time interacting with his surroundings, "you" engages mainly in conversations and debates with a female character "she." A clear main plotline is absent, and instead the novel consists of a collection of smaller stories, descriptions and characters, which usually play out in the space of a single chapter. The one constant factor is the shifting presence of "I," "you," "he" and "she."

Gao's fragmented descriptions make use of very visual and spatial terms. Taking into account that Gao is also a painter and a dramatist, reading *Soul Mountain* can be compared to leafing through a photo album. Pictures you took yourself are from the "I"-perspective. In others you may be looking straight at the camera, a "you" in dialogue with

yourself, searching for contact with the "I." And in yet others you might not even be aware that a picture is taken, you are "he," the distant counterpart of "I" and "you." Moreover, thinking of the novel as a whole in this way also explains the fragmented nature of the chapters, which are only loosely connected. The chapters, like the photos in an album, convey only piecemeal information. A complete chronological narrative is absent and the gaps need to be filled in by the onlooker. Mabel Lee comments upon this kind of structure by arguing that:

> the larger part of life consist of non-plot elements and Gao is searching for a structure or technique to represent this (modern) notion of life, which is not linear, hence, even while taking plots from life, modern fiction does not necessarily have a conclusion. (Lee, *Pronouns* 245)

Even though the protagonist travels extensively, there is no identifiable goal to his journey, and at the end of the novel he returns to Beijing. His spiritual search for Soul Mountain also remains unresolved, as he is told that Soul Mountain is always on the other side of the river (479).

As I pointed out earlier, "I," "you," and "she" appear to be separate entities, but in fact they are all reflections of the same character. The alternation between these different perspectives gives the reader a sense of a dialogue between an inner voice and an outer "persona."

The already fragile narrative flow is interrupted by several chapters that have no apparent connection to either of the journeys, and that instead provide meta-commentary on the novel itself.

In Chapter 52 the use and meaning of the different pronouns in the novel

is explained:

> You know that I am just talking to myself to alleviate my
> loneliness...In this lengthy soliloquy *you are the object of what I
> relate*, a myself who listens intently to me – you are simply my
> shadow. (312, my emphasis)
>
> As I listen to myself and you, I let you create a she, because you are
> like me and also cannot bear the loneliness and have to find a
> partner for your conversation. *She was born of you, yet is an
> affirmation of myself.* (312, my emphasis)
>
> Like me, you wander wherever you like. As the distance increases
> there is a converging of the two until unavoidably you and I merge
> and are inseparable. At this point there is a need to step back and
> to create space. *That space is he. He is the back of you* after you
> have turned around and left me. (313, my emphasis)

This is the first time that "I" and "you" actually come together and are

not separated by the boundaries of a chapter. As "I" addresses "you" it

becomes clear that "I" is thus the narrator of the entire novel, and that

"you" is but a figure of his imagination, subsequently described as "my

shadow," "my reflection," and "my creation." In addition, the perspective

of "he", which occurs only several times towards the end of the novel, is

the result of simultaneous converging and distancing of the "I" and the

"you." In other words, it offers yet another layer of reflection upon the

already fragmented Self.

     As the "object of what I relate" (312), "you" as well as his journey,

companions, and stories are thus revealed as fabrications. But "I"

himself and his narrative are not free of ontological doubt either. As the

chapter moves on, "I" admits that he is no longer sure what comes from his experience, and what stems from his imagination:

> Even I can't distinguish how much is experience and how much is dream within my memories and impressions, so how can you distinguish between what I have experienced and what are figments of my imagination? And in the end, is it necessary to make such distinctions? (312)

Here Gao touches upon one of the core concerns of metafiction: the presumed dichotomy between "fiction" and "reality." Since "I" cannot distinguish between lived experience and imagination, the story "I" narrates is subjected to an ontological doubt that questions its representation of any "reality." But the fundamental question is if this distinction is relevant at all, because while "I" insists on imagining "you," both characters are linguistic constructs, words on a page, imagined by yet another participant in the process of creation: the author. This awareness is brought to attention exactly by showing the way that "I" constructs "you" within the novel. It is the metafictional attitude brought to the text that allows the reader to recognize this regressing structure, from "you" creating "she" to "I" creating "you," and finally Gao creating all.

Chapter 58 consists of a collection of seemingly unrelated, short paragraphs. The first paragraph refers to the Chinese creation myth of Nüwa, and through comments on "spirits and ghosts", "the self within

you" as "a mirror image," and "knowledge as a costly expense" (350), the

topic morphs into a discussion of the use and limitations of language:

> You have only the desire to narrate, to use a language transcending cause and effect, or logic. People have spoken so much nonsense, so why shouldn't you say more. (350)

> You create out of nothingness, playing with words like a child playing with blocks. But blocks can only construct fixed patterns, the possibilities of structures are inherent in the blocks and no matter how they are moved you will not be able to make anything new. (351)

From the first quote, we can see both the necessity and the uselessness

of narrating. "You" has the desire to narrate, but this narration is also

labeled as nonsense. In the second quote, "you" is faced with the

inadequacy of language to represent anything new, simply because by

using language, "you" is confined to a set amount of expressions and

"fixed patterns" (351). Whatever "you" "creates out of nothingness" (351),

is predetermined by the language he uses. Throughout the novel the

stories and language contains traces of the old, of what is already said

and of previous texts and genres. For example, in Chapter 36, every

paragraph begins with "It is said," (*shuo* 说) a conventional way in

traditional Chinese literature to begin a story and refer to an unspecified

source. It simultaneously exposes the constructed nature of the fiction

and aims to heighten the truth-value of what follows. However, the

notion of language's inability to create something completely new extends

from the stories within the novel to the novel itself. Despite Gao's attempt

to create a new form of fiction, different from the traditional

understanding of the genre, he too will become stuck in the rules of

language itself. The question remains if one can indeed ever find a

language that can "transcend[...] cause and effect, or logic" (350).

Chapter 72 is arguably the most metafictional of all the "odd"

chapters, beginning with the accusing exclamation "This is not a novel!"

It is also one of the few chapters told with a third-person perspective.

"He" is in dialogue with an unknown character, presumably a (literary)

critic, who argues with him about the nature and definition of fiction:

> 'This isn't a novel!'
> 'Then what is it?' he asks.
> 'A novel must have a complete story.'
> He says he has told many stories, some with endings and others without.
> 'They are all fragments without any sequence, the author doesn't know how to organize connected episodes.'
> 'Then may I ask how a novel is supposed to be organized?'
> 'You must first foreshadow, build to a climax, then have a conclusion. That's basic common knowledge for writing fiction.' [...] No matter how you tell a story, there must be a protagonist. In a long work of fiction there must be several important characters, but this work of yours...?'
> 'But surely the I, you, she and he in the book are characters?' He asks.
> 'These are just different pronouns to change the point of view of the narrative. This can't replace the portrayal of characters. These pronouns of yours, even if they are characters, don't have clear images they're hardly described at all.'
> He says he isn't painting portraits.
> 'Right, fiction isn't painting, it is art in language. Do you really think the petulant exchanges between these pronouns can replace the creation of the personalities of the characters?'

He says he doesn't want to create the personalities of
the characters, and what's more he doesn't know if he
himself has a personality.
'Why are you writing fiction if you don't even
understand what fiction is?'
He then asks politely for a definition of fiction.

(452-453)

Introducing a (literary) critic in the text is common in traditional Chinese

fiction, as well as a popular technique in metafiction, as we will also see

in the discussion of Huang Jinshu and Wang Xiaobo. It allows the author

to juxtapose his own views of literature with conventional interpretations,

and comment upon specific (and perhaps remarkable) aspects of the text

itself. "This isn't a novel," exclaims the critic in this quote,

simultaneously confronting the reader with the essential question: if this

is not a novel, than what is it? The critic goes on accusing "him" of not

having a complete, finished story, and not having fully developed

characters. These comments highlight exactly those aspects of Gao's

writing that he has explored extensively in both his fiction and non-

fiction writing. The critic's understanding of what fiction is, or is

supposed to be, is clearly at odds with how this novel is constructed.

Through the answers "he" gives, Gao shows his awareness of this

conventional understanding but also his doubt and disagreements about

it. "He" does not feel obliged to follow this model, arguing that he did tell

stories, with and without end and that he does have characters in the

form of the pronouns. On a more fundamental level, "he" questions the

fixed notion of fiction in general, asking "politely for a definition of fiction" (453), which is never given. Gao anticipates the possible critiques that his fragmented structure and use of pronouns will generate. This chapter is not only a reflection upon fundamental aspects of the novel itself, but also on the way it can be (mis)read. Here we see how Gao's metafiction walks the line between fiction and criticism, self-conscious not only of its production, but also its consumption.

The chapter ends with the line: "Reading this chapter is optional but as you've read it you've read it" (455). With this metafictional comment, Gao breaks down the wall between reader and text, by directly addressing them from within the diegetic world. The reader is no longer the objective observer of the world represented in the novel, but an active participant in the experience of that novel. Having followed the narrative from the beginning up to this point, there is no way for the reader to unread the chapter he or she just read. An optional chapter that is only declared optional after the fact begs the question of how optional it actually is. It confronts the reader with a choice (reading or not reading) that has effectively already been taken away from them. This alerts them of their own reading practices, namely the assumption that each chapter in a novel must be read simply because it is there. The reader is no longer free of any responsibility in the reading process, but has to assume a degree of active participation that metafiction so desires.

All these examples show how metafiction as a formal aspect of the text allows Gao to theorize his novel *within* the novel, and self-consciously reflect upon its characteristic aspects.

Telling Stories Just Because You Can

One of the main themes in *Soul Mountain* is telling stories. As we have seen in the previous paragraph, the entire novel is constituted of the telling of the story of "I," in which he creates "you," "she" and "he." Within that narrative frame, it is especially "you" who loves to tell stories and share them with his companion, "she". Stories are often triggered by elements in the direct environment of "him" and "her," but as they develop, the boundaries between the diegetic reality and the constructed narrative become unclear. Elements from one layer are ambiguously represented in the other, distorting a clear sense of what belongs to the diegetic world and what belongs to the story within the story. This exhibition of how stories are constructed and how reality and fiction are inflated, urges us to take a step back and rethink the production of *Soul Mountain* itself. Moreover, the *mise-en-abyme* structure in which stories and reality are constantly intertwined can be read as a comment upon the subjective and provisional nature of reality, as is explicitly stated earlier in the novel:

> Reality exists only through experience, and it must be personal experience. However, once related, even personal experience becomes a narrative. Reality can't be verified and

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> doesn't need to be, that can be left for the 'reality-of-life'
> experts to debate. What is important is life. Reality is […]
> myself, reality is only the perception of this instant and can't
> be related to another person. (15)

For Gao reality is an inherently individual and subjective experience that cannot be transmitted. Once it is recorded and passed on to someone else, it is no longer that reality. This understanding also dismisses the possibility of realism; trying to represent an objective reality in fiction is an absurd and impossible endeavor, according to *Soul Mountain.*

It may be impossible to represent reality in fiction, but the stories "he" and "she" make up still reference aspects of traditional Chinese literature and folk tales, including fox spirits, female shamans, histories of local bandits, and other historical data. The occurrence of such intertextual references call to mind Zhao's category of pre-textual metafiction, which relies on readers' prior knowledge of certain genres and "use it or parodies it," to convey a new meaning. In the case of *Soul Mountain,* the inclusion of these references is focused more on their form and how they tell stories, than on the content of the stories themselves.

In Chapter 25, another often-used metafictional technique occurs, that of the "multiple choice stories." "You" and "her" are travelling in the mountains, when they arrive at an open field: "here stand two stone pillars which in former years must have been a gateway and nearby there are the remains of stone lions and stone drums. You say this had once been an imposing family" (143). For a few pages, the protagonist tells the

story of the rich family and its decay, until we read: "or the story could go like this" (144), and not much later "there could also be another version of the story. It varies significantly from the historical records, and is closer to *biji* fiction" (145).

Showing the different (even infinite) possibilities of a story represents the arbitrary nature of storytelling. The endless possibilities that the creator of the text has and the choice he or she has to make lay bare the creation process to the reader. In this case, Gao not only proposes different possible options for the development of the story, he also suggests that there is a "historical record" that deals with the same events and "he" compares his versions with that record, implying once again the provisional nature not only of fiction, but also of history.

At the beginning of chapter 32, the narrator claims to be done telling stories: "You say you've finished telling stories, and that they are all common and vulgar [...]" (180). But the story telling, the mutual believing and disbelieving continues for another three hundred pages, until finally, in the very last chapter, on the very last line, the author sighs: "The fact of the matter is I comprehend nothing, I understand nothing. This is how it is" (506). Thus, even though telling stories allows "I" to create "you", "you" to imagine "her", and all of them to communicate with each other and express themselves, at the end nothing is learned, and no meaning discovered.

Conclusion: Never (Dis)trust the Author

The formal metafictional aspects of *Soul Mountain,* such as the multiple pronouns, the thoughts on language and the discussion with the invisible critic about the definition of fiction, all represent Gao's notion of literature as he has expressed in his fiction, plays and critical essays since the early 1980s. The author is a central figure in this creative process. For Gao, the individual author never represents a larger social body: "fiction is the creation of the individual fiction writer, and its significance does not lie in commonality or identification – for example, race or national identity, cultural or even political identity" (Sze 133). There is a curious tension between Gao's attempt to produce "universal" literature, and how *Soul Mountain* conceptualizes reality as a subjective experience that is both impossible to transmit and strongly connected to China. However, this claimed individual notion of fiction and reality should not be understood as an invitation to an autobiographical reading of Gao's work:

> Although many details in the novel appear to be based on what he saw during this real trip, and the metafictional element in it coincides with his attitude towards fiction writing as expressed in his theoretical writings, there is no reason to read it as a 'reliable' autobiography or to assume the 'I' is representing the author himself. (Yeung 88)

As Gao Xingjian himself states: "Fiction is not autobiography, although autobiographical fiction today is fairly popular" (Sze 121). However, Mabel Lee's interpretation of Gao's usage of multiple pronouns does

attempt to establish a link between the characters in the novel and the author himself: "[The use of multiple pronouns] compels reader involvement at many levels. Most importantly, the reader is given the sense of knowing the author at a personal level, liking him, and trusting what he has to tell" (238). I agree with her remark that the shifting narrative perspective from "I" and "you" to "she" and "he," requires a high level of reader participation, as do the other metafictional aspects in the text. However, I strongly disagree with her following interpretation that the reader is presented a reliable image of the author himself through reading *Soul Mountain*. The novel represents those who tell stories, who turn historical records into constructed narrative, who conflate reality with fiction, as everything but reliable. All too often the "she" and "he" accuse each other of presenting reality as fiction and visa versa. "I" himself has admitted to not being sure what comes from experiences and what from imagination. Stories are presented as part of the main narrative, implying diegetic reality, but sooner or later the teller of the story within the story is revealed, turning that story itself into an exploration of what it means to tell a story. Thus, the narrator and other characters, all considered as authors in the broadest sense of the word, are represented as unreliable. I believe this is in accord with the other main message of this novel, namely that fact and fiction are easily conflated, and that that difference might not be important, since "reality"

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is a subjective experience that can never be recounted to someone else. Moreover, the representation of the Self as a fragmented identity also hints towards the idea that there is no coherent, real "author" to know.

As I have tried to lay out in this chapter, Gao's *Soul Mountain*, holding the middle between modernist and postmodernist, between tradition and Avant-Garde, is an important example of how metafiction can function as a means of conveying a system of ontology and epistemology. Together with his non-fiction writing, Gao has actively aimed to constitute a theory of language and fiction *within* his fiction, since the early 1980's. For Gao, the author as an individual, with his or her own personal experience of reality, is also reflected in his representation of characters through multiple pronouns, a collection of "I", "you," "he" and "she." This fragmented subjectivity highlights the notion of the impossibility of an objective reality, something that metafiction also aims to undermine. The "odd" chapters in *Soul Mountain* that reflect upon the structure and nature of the book in particular and fiction in general, give the reader open to a metafictional approach ample food for thought. Never quite allowing his readers to sink into the narrative, Gao succeeds in "provid[ing] perceptions that mock or contemplate those in the predicament while presenting an aesthetic judgment. In doing so, he [the writer] gains pleasure and spiritual release and gives readers something interesting to read" (Sze 133). In the following chapter, I will explore how

Huang Jinshu also uses metafiction to "mock," "gain pleasure" and give readers "something interesting to read."

CHAPTER IV

HUANG JINSHU: MOTIFS OF MISSING

> This is a work of 'metafiction' (?), here in Malaysia this will definitely have a sense of freshness.
>
> (Huang Jinshu, "The Disappearance of M" *40)⁹*

> To focus the issue of self-consciousness on the boundary between fiction and criticism is to acknowledge the strong reciprocal influence between discourses which seem increasingly inseparable. A simple explanation of this inseparability would be that the roles of writer and critic are often fulfilled by the same person.
>
> (Mark Currie, *Metafiction* 2-3)

> In a variety of literary contexts, the presence of the historical figure signals our questioning of the artificial boundaries between truth and lie, history and fiction, reality and imagination. This presence invites the readers of today's fictions to recognize and accept the daunting and exhilarating knowledge that we can reshape the malleable realities of our dreams, our selves, and our world.
>
> (Naomi Jacobs, *The Character of Truth* xxi)

Metafiction, as described in Chapter II, can be seen as a combination of a literary text and a critical assessment of or comment upon that text. As a literary scholar and a creative writer, Huang Jinshu (Ng Kim Chew) is another good example of the "writer/critic, [...] a dialectical figure, embodying both the production and reception of fiction in the roles of author and reader [...]" (Currie 3). He also combines these different roles and concerns *within* the narrative frame. As metafictional

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⁹ All translations in this chapter are my own, unless otherwise noted.

writing theorizes itself and paradoxically breaks away from the textual construct to reflect upon the world outside the text, it problematizes fixed notions of identity, history, and truth. In many of his short stories, Huang uses metafictional techniques to comment upon the ontological status of the text itself and the literary production and consumption both in his specific national context and in the international arena. How exactly metafiction allows him to do this will be the focus of this chapter. As in my discussion of Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain,* I will distinguish between formal aspects of the texts and a metafictional approach towards the text. Before turning to my analysis of the two stories, I will briefly introduce Huang Jinshu, and position my own research question in relation to those of other scholars.

Similar to Gao Xingjian, Huang's position within the field of contemporary Chinese literature is somewhat marginal and this arguably has an impact on his writing. Huang was born in Johor, Malaysia, and currently lives and works in Taiwan. As an active participant in the discussion concerning Malaysian-Chinese literature (*Mahua wenxue* 马华文学*)* and culture, his polemical opinions about the literary politics in Malaysia and Taiwan make him a controversial figure. Due to his position in these literary and academic circles, existing scholarship on Huang's fictional work has often focused on two aspects. First of all, there has been attention to "Ng's [Huang] preoccupation with the nuances of his identity as a Sinophone writer from Malaysia and all that

identity entails" (Groppe 161). While the notion of the Sinophone, a term Groppe borrows from Shih Shu-mei, is an important aspect of Huang's work, what is more important for the current discussion is Groppe's argument that "Ng Kim Chew deploys a tactic of postmodernist parody to deconstruct the politics of literary production [...]" (163). As I hope to show in the following analysis, metafiction (perhaps as a kind of postmodern parody) achieves a similar goal in its commenting on the process of literary production.

Jing Tsu discusses another important aspect of Huang's work in her book *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* (2010). She emphasizes how Huang "restage[s] the unequal relations between national and diasporic writing" by "using the May Fourth writer Yu Dafu 郁达夫 (1896-1945) as the ironic and iconic figure of modern Chinese national literature" (180). Tsu's discussion focuses on the particular importance of writing in and for the diaspora and the role of language in that process. Like Groppe, she interprets the presence of Yu Dafu in some of Huang's stories as an attempt to reposition Malaysian-Chinese literature with regards to the grand narrative of the Chinese tradition. While both aspects play an important role in Huang's work, the goal of my analysis, however, is not so much to find out how Huang's stories construct or problematize a certain national (or ethnic) identity or rethink the role of Sinophone literature vis-à-vis the Chinese literary tradition, but rather how, through the use of metafictional elements, these stories deconstruct

fixed notions of fact and fiction and explore the ontological status of the text.

The stories I look at are "The Disappearance of M" and "Death in the South", both from the collection *Dreams and Pigs and Aurora (Meng yu zhu yu liming* 梦与猪与黎明*)*, published in 1994 in Taiwan. These two stories have in common an obsession with what I call "motifs of missing." The disappearance of a character and the unresolved quest for that figure finally lead to a breakdown of the realistic narrative mode. "The Disappearance of M" and "Death in the South" are brimming with metafictional aspects such as frame breaking, narratorial intrusion, intertextual references and the insertion of historical characters. In many ways, these stories are what Zhao calls "typical self-reflexity [sic] metafiction" (93). Zhao uses Ma Yuan as his example but Huang's works share a lot of elements with his texts "that are narrated in such a realistic way that they could well be read as fascinating 'true stories' but for the narrator's self-debunking intrusions" (93). This tension between reality and fiction (or truth and lie) is my point of interest, exactly because it lies at the heart of what metafiction is concerned with.

"The Disappearance of M" is set in Malaysia and revolves around the disappearance of the mysterious author called M, who allegedly wrote the novel *Kristmas* that received foreign attention. When *The New York Times* sends somebody to Malaysia to find out more about this writer, it becomes obvious that nobody really knows anything about him (or her?).

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The story sets up two narrative strands. On the one hand it describes the meetings of two literary organizations: the National Malaysian Writers Organization and the Malaysian-Chinese Writers Organization. Both meetings focus on the issue of the (national) identity of the writer and the importance of the popularity of his work for the question of national literature, but they also discuss the undefined nature of the work itself:

> Coming up to the microphone was the realist writer Meng Sha, who said that this work, no matter how good it was, couldn't be counted as 'Malaysian-Chinese literature', because it wasn't written in Chinese. 'I went over it once, and there isn't only English in this book, but also Malaysian, and not only does it have modern Malaysian, it also has a lot of classical Malaysian, Sanskrit, Arabic, Balinese, German, French... and oracle-bone script! What kind of thing is this!' (18)

Interestingly, while predominantly written in Chinese, "The Disappearance of M" also contains different scripts, such as oracle bone script, trigrams, and what appears to be some kind of strange mathematical formula. The reader who approaches this text with a metafictional attitude is thus faced with the same question: What kind of a thing is this? One possible answer is given towards the end of the story, when another writer commenting on the novel exclaims: "This is a work of 'metafiction' (?), here in Malaysia this will definitely have a sense of freshness" (40).

On the other hand, the narrative describes the search for the mysterious writer by a journalist, suggestively named Huang (黃, the same character as the author's last name). His quest leads him first to

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Taiwan where he meets several prominent writers and eventually to a remote place in the Malaysian jungle where M supposedly lived and where he experiences a series of strange hallucinations. Not much later he is shown a newspaper and makes a shocking discovery. In the literary supplement of the paper, his eye falls on a story called "The Disappearance of M," written by an author named M, and when he continues reading he discovers that this is in fact the very story he himself is writing. As he reads the final paragraph of that story, the narrative shifts back to the literary meetings, exposing those as part of the larger story. As the story crawls up into itself, the comments of the writers in the text upon that same text are inserted, and in an act of double self-referential awareness, the narrative points towards the story within the story, and the final impossibility of a definite distinction between real and fiction:

> So a special situation arose: in the piece a group of Taiwanese writers and critics are commenting on a piece with the same name in which they are mentioned, and those 'they' once again discuss a work by the same name. (40)

The unnamed narrator of the second story, "Death in the South", is obsessed with the figure and disappearance of Yu Dafu, the famous Chinese May Fourth author. Yu had fled to Indonesia during the Japanese occupation of South-East Asia, and lived there under the pseudonym Zhao Lian until he was executed in 1945. However, there were rumors that Yu's disappearance did not meant he had died, but that he lived on. In the story, when the narrator is still a child living in

Pajakumbuh, Indonesia, he finds a shelter in the forest near his house that shows signs of habitation. Many years later, inspired by scholarship on Yu Dafu's disappearance, he goes back and finds remnants of writings, which he attributes to Yu Dafu. These quotes are inserted throughout the story and form the basis for the narrator's retelling or reconstructing of Yu Dafu's life in Indonesia. Because the historical references and the insertion of quotes, as I will discuss later, are not all authentic, the boundaries between fiction and history, original and imitation are conflated throughout the story. Huang not only adopts Yu's writing style and rewrites his history by inserting him in a fictional world, he is also heavily inspired by, and cites secondary sources on Yu Dafu. For example, Huang mentions the accounts by Hu Yuzhi, a fellow intellectual who lived with Yu Dafu in Indonesia on several occasions. But the origin of the material is not always clearly identified. In Yoon Wah Wong's article "Yu Dafu in Exile: His last Days in Sumatra", he paraphrases Hu Yuzhi's account of the following event taking place:

> A Japanese army truck stopped the bus on which Yu was riding to ask the way to pakanbaru. Ignorant of the troops' intentions, most of the passengers rushed out of the bus and sought cover under the roadside bushes, while Yu stayed on board and remained calm. When they asked for directions to pakanbaru, Yu answered them in fluent Japanese. (Wong 17)

Compare this with the following paragraph from Huang's story "Death in the South" about how Yu Dafu became a translator for the Japanese:

> While fleeing, an unexpected interlude – Japanese soldiers asking for the way in Japanese – already decided Yu Dafu's final livelihood while in exile, as is recorded. Because no one understood the invaders' language, the previous collective criminal record of the Japanese made the listeners interpret their talk as cries before a massacre, and they all scattered off, leaving only Yu, who had studied abroad in Japan for many years, spending long years sinking[10] into a great harmony of sadness and aesthetics, and who had the ability to write the curved and refined characters of the Japanese language. Only he understood that the Japanese were asking for directions. (192)

This paragraph is not marked as coming from a secondary source, as certain other parts of the story are, but it is obviously heavily influenced by the actual, historical accounts of Yu Dafu's life. In "Death in the South" there is a constant interplay between quotations ascribed to Yu Dafu, secondary sources about him, and the narrator's own quest for the remnants of the writer. In the meantime, the narrator also uses metafiction to comment upon the construction of the story itself, his reasons for writing it, and his use of the quotations.

In the following paragraphs I will discuss several metafictional aspects that occur in these two stories and focus on how they allow Huang to deconstruct fixed notions of reality, fiction, history, identity and finally the ontological status of the text.

Handle With Care: Fragile Frames and Frame Breaking

Framing is one of the most fundamental narrative techniques. Frame breaking then, is one of the most essential metafictional methods

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[10] "Sinking" or *"Chenlun"* 沉沦 is the title of one of Yu Dafu's most famous stories.

that is employed to deconstruct the categories of "fiction" and "reality."
Patricia Waugh points out that "contemporary metafiction draws
attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through
frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends
and another begins" (29). Frame breaking within a novel, therefore, can
be used as a means to "unsettle our convictions about the relative status
of "truth" and "fiction"" (34), and the ontological status of the text.

There are many different ways to create and break fictional frames,
such as "stories within stories, characters reading about their own
fictional lives and self-consuming worlds or mutually contradictory
situations" (Waugh 30). In "The Disappearance of M" there are two
different frames that both contradict and reinforce each other. The
literary meetings are set in an urban, recognizable and civilized
environment, while journalist Huang's search for M takes place against a
backdrop that is much more imaginary, mystical and dark. This
juxtaposition reinforces the opposition between perceived reality and
fiction:

> If certain events of a book's universe explicitly account for
> themselves as imaginary, they thereby contest the imaginary
> nature of the rest of the book. If a certain apparition is only
> the fault of an overexcited imagination, then everything
> around it is real. (Waugh 112)

Emphasizing the "imaginary" nature of journalist Huang's search
for M are not only the dreams and hallucinations he has while staying at
the abandoned house in the jungle, but also the description of his

journey and the geographical location. Before he reaches the house where M supposedly lived, journalist Huang has to cross a bridge. While crossing, the narrator compares the bridge to the skeleton of a pre-historic dinosaur, invoking the idea that by crossing this bridge one is entering a world set apart from our modern existence (10). Descriptions of the dark forest, sounds of birds and animals, and the family that lives nearby, all add to the feeling of entering a different realm. As a result, the literary meetings become the naturally assumed diegetic "reality," strengthened by the naming of characters after real life authors and the invocation of their literary styles and personal character.

Because of this initial framing, the final frame break is especially unsettling because it does not take place in the already more "imaginary" narrative strand of Huang's search for M. While the reader may expect that the "confusion of ontological levels [takes place] through the incorporation of visions, dreams, hallucinatory states […] which are finally indistinct form the apparently 'real'" (Waugh 31), in "The Disappearance of M" these events remain clearly demarcated as unreal. Instead, it is the world of the literary meetings, and of literary production in general, that finally gets turned from real into fiction. When Huang reads his own story in the newspaper, we realize that everything we have read so far has been constructed, rather than being a representation of things that actually happened. Moreover, confronted with their own appearance within the story they are reading, the writers at the literary

meeting are coming to a profound realization: "And thus Zhang Dachun couldn't help but say: 'Don't you know, reality is actually really constructed'" (40). This understanding of reality as provisional is a typical characteristic of postmodern and metafictional writing, and the tension between frame and frame break as discussed above, encourages the reader to realize that, as Waugh pointed out at the beginning of this paragraph, it is not just fiction that is constructed through frames, reality itself is made "visible" and comprehensible through such (linguistic) frames.

He's Not (T)here: Disappearance and Discovery

Searching is a prevalent theme in many of Huang's stories. In "The Disappearance of M," the main question that drives the narrative from the beginning is: Who is M? However, while there is a large amount of time and effort dedicated to this question, it remains unsolved. If anything, the notion of identity becomes increasingly harder to define. In this case, the term identity does not necessarily refer to national identity, but can also be understood as a literary identity; referring to positions involved in the production and consumption of literature, namely authors, narrators, characters and readers.

Approaching these "motifs of missing" from the perspective of the popular genre of the detective novel can show how Huang uses the theme of searching to comment upon the nature of the text and the world. As

far as we can understand the self-reflexiveness of metafiction as referring

back to different genres of fiction itself, the detective genre offers fertile

ground for appropriation by metafiction. Even though Huang's stories are

not necessarily characterized as detective novels, their quest-like

narratives offer sufficient similarities to justify this comparison. Patricia

Waugh describes traditional detective fiction as

> [...] a form in which tension is wholly generated by the presentation of a mystery and heightened by retardation of the correct solution. [...] Like metafiction, it foregrounds questions of identity. The reader is kept in suspense about the identity of the criminal until the end, when the *rational operations* of the detective *triumph completely over disorder*. (82, my emphasis)

In traditional detective stories the mystery is resolved within the limits of

the narrative frame. While the suspense is upheld throughout the book,

the final answer releases the reader from any real life responsibility

because no questions remain unanswered. When metafiction

appropriates the detective genre, however, it does not follow this

traditional structure of problem-search-solution. Instead, by not

providing a satisfying solution within the narrative frame and instead

pointing the questions towards the world outside the text, "the detective

plot is being used to express not order but the irrationality of both the

surface of the world and of its deep structures" (Waugh 83). In "The

Disappearance of M", the search for M can thus be read as a quest for

his national identity, which may or may not be important for the

categorization of his novel. But it can also be understood as a comment

upon the irrationality of the world by posing questions that never will (or can) be answered. The irrationality is also represented by the pitiful journalist Huang who finds his own story already published in the newspaper, transforming him from an active agent set out to complete a quest, to a powerless, constructed character in someone else's story. A metafictional approach to this text encourages the reader to read the unresolved search for M and the denigration of journalist Huang as "an examination of the conventions governing the presentation of enigma in fiction," (Waugh 159), but it also hints at the possibility that "we are all, *metaphorically*, fictions" (59, original emphasis).

In addition to the inherent aspects of the metafictional appropriation of the detective genre, the reader brings to the text both a prefixed knowledge of what to expect from that literary genre as well as general human expectations. When the narrative sets up a quest, the reader tends to long for a resolution. When this is not provided, the reader is forced to think about the ways in which this text denied them the expected elements and thus confronts them with their own reading habits. As a textual construct and an approach, metafiction holds a mirror up to the reader and her ways of reading. Moreover, we can understand the search for a missing character, especially the "author" figure in "The Disappearance of M" and Yu Dafu in "Death in the South," as I will discuss in more detail below, as a loss of and search for meaning. This metaphorical interpretation becomes more meaningful

when we take into consideration the fact that in both stories the search is never resolved, the "searched for" is never found. The (postmodern) attitude displayed in many metafictions, including Huang's short stories seems to be that there is indeed no ultimate (or intrinsic) meaning to be found. The symbolic loss, search and non-solution within the text, can thus also refer to the epistemological system of the text itself.

In "Death in the South," the search is not so much for a person as it is for the history of that person and its importance for the local (Malaysian) literary history. The narrator looks for signs that Yu Dafu did not actually die in 1945 but lived on, both in local legends, rumors and in pieces of writing he finds in the abandoned shelter. Groppe interprets this recurring search for Yu Dafu and his simultaneous absence as an actual character in Huang's stories as an implication "that there is something elusive, ineffable, and unstable at the core of the Sinophone Malaysian experience" (187). In addition we can focus on what these texts as metafiction say about fiction in general. The rewriting of Yu Dafu's history based on fictional evidence, since the quotes used in this story are largely made up by Huang and written in Yu Dafu's style, foregrounds the constructed nature of both the story and history. Through these motifs of missing and unresolved quests, metafiction emphasizes the constant tension between the constructed nature of fiction and the falsely perceived natural character of the world around us.

<u>Knock, Knock, Who's There…</u>

As I mentioned earlier, the four main "identities" involved in a literary text are the character, the narrator, the author and the reader. Strictly speaking, each literary identity belongs to his or her own diegetic level and as long as these levels do not interrupt each other, the reader is barely aware of the (possible) relationship between them. But what happens when the different ontological layers collapse and literary identities become conflated?

"The Disappearance of M" is predominantly told by an omniscient third-person narrator. However, there are two moments in the story where the illusion of an objective third-person narrative is broken by what appears to be a "slip of the tongue" of the narrator. When discussing his visit to Taiwan, and the meeting with two well known Sinophone writers, the narrator says: "[…] I (oh no, not me) [我 (噢，不是我)] he, boldly told Li [Yongping] that when it came to literary abilities, there was no Sinophone writer that could have produced *Kristmas*" (20). The second instant appears a little later in the story, and is worth a closer examination. At this moment, journalist Huang finds out that the article published in the newspaper is almost identical to the piece about the disappearance of M that he himself is currently writing:

> *I (oh, not me)* [我，嘿，不是我]…when he talked about that piece he strongly felt like he had written it and at the same time that it was the biggest mockery of himself. How could this writer penetrate into his deepest feelings and finish writing his future, and *slowly push him off his position of*

'author'. This almost impossible manner constituted a war directly against his existence, suggesting that 'I' could be totally replaced...But, who could that be? Who was it in the end that used the code name M to replace his story of the disappearance of M? (36, my emphasis)

This narratorial intrusion first of all betrays the objective, third person narrative and exposes a hidden subjective narrator. Obviously, the question is: who is this intruding "I"? Since both cases of intrusion happen when the story is focalized from journalist Huang's perspective, one could argue that he actually is the narrator who set out to write his own story in the third person but at some point made a mistake. But there might be more to it than that, especially since this is also the moment we find out that journalist Huang is but a character in his own (already published) story. The full magnitude of this narratorial confusion might become clear when we look at Waugh's comment on narratorial intrusion:

> Third-person narrative with overt first-person intrusion allows for metafictional dislocation much more obviously than first-person narratives (whether the intruding 'I' is the 'real' author or not) [...] In third-person/first-person intrusion narratives, an apparently autonomous world is suddenly broken into by a narrator, often 'The Author', who comes explicitly from an ontologically differentiated world. (133)

Here, Waugh points toward the connection between the first person intruder and the author. If we assume that the story we are reading is the same (or at least partly similar) to the story that Huang is reading in the newspaper, which is implied by the fact that they have the same title, and we accept that that story is written by the mysterious M, than the

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intruding "I" could very well be M himself. Groppe finds evidence in the story that suggests that the stranger was, in fact, the author M, "but that M could have been Yu Dafu himself" (182). In that case, the author would have chosen to use the historical figure of Yu Dafu as a narrator but disguise him as an anonymous writer. However, we can take the narratorial intrusion one step further and interpret it as actual authorial intrusion. As we can see in Waugh's quote above, the intruding "I" can be the author him/herself. In this case, the possibility is strengthened by the fact that the journalist and the author share the same name. Thus, when the author is supposed to describe the situation of the character through the voice of the narrator, the ontological boundaries collapse and the writer himself enters the text. Initially, it appears that this intrusion breaks the fictional frame and thereby either adds truth-value to the story (by reading it as autobiographical) or once again shows the constructed nature of the text. However, quite the opposite appears to be the case, as Waugh argues: "The author attempts desperately to hang on to his or her real identity as creator of the text we are reading. What happens, however, when he or she enters it is that his or her own reality is also called into question" (133). Instead of adding truth-value to the story, the first-person intrusion devalues the actual reality of the author himself. And whether we argue that Yu Dafu is the author or we focus on Huang Jinshu himself, the question of who creates and who is being created by/in the text has made its way from the inner narrative frame

(journalist Huang reading his own story), to the outermost layer of literary production. Either way, the story uproots and conflates the literary identities of character, narrator and author, asking the reader to rethink their prefixed notions of these categories.

Do I Know You From Somewhere?

As has become clear by now, Yu Dafu plays an important role in Huang's work. But he is not the only historical, or real life figure that appears in these stories. What are the implications of inserting this kind of historical characters into a fictional text? Generally speaking, a fictional character is "a non-entity who is a somebody" (Waugh, 91). We can talk about the appearance, actions and thoughts of a character, but that character only exists *within* and by the *grace of*, the fictional text. Historical characters pose a challenge to this notion, because these characters actually do have a real counterpart and they do (or rather can) refer to someone outside of the text. However, when appropriated by metafiction, the historical character is often given additional characteristics or is placed in different geographical or temporal locations and circumstances. These often complicate the historical "reality" of that character, as is the case with Huang's character Yu Dafu. Huang has based his character on the historical figure Yu Dafu, consulted historical and secondary sources, developed existing myths about his disappearance and finally invented an "after-life" in which Yu Dafu lives

on as an anonymous writer and recluse, nothing less than a literary

ghost that haunts the fictional world (Groppe 171). The line between

history and fiction is no longer clearly drawn in the way Huang

represents Yu Dafu. Naomi Jacobs reads the insertion of historical

characters as an important contribution to the larger goal of metafiction:

> In a variety of literary contexts, the presence of the historical
> figure signals our questioning of the artificial boundaries
> between truth and lie, history and fiction, reality and
> imagination. This presence invites the readers of today's
> fictions to recognize and accept the daunting and exhilarating
> knowledge that we can reshape the malleable realities of our
> dreams, our selves, and our world. (xxi)

Invoking Yu Dafu thus leads to both a reconstruction of the position of

Sinophone literature in relation to the Chinese literary tradition, as

Groppe and Tsu have pointed out, but at the same time it proposes that

history "itself is a multiplicity of 'alternative worlds', as fictional as, but

other than, the worlds of novels" (Waugh 104). In this case, literary

history, like any kind of history, is *written* and can thus be *re-written*.

Many of the characters in "The Disappearance of M" who are

participating in the literary meetings carry the names of real (historical)

figures from the Malaysian-Chinese and Taiwanese literary

establishment. Not only do they share their name, but the characters

also have the same literary attributes as their real life counterparts, are

characterized by their literary style (realism, modernism etc), and there

are references to actual written works. For example, journalist Huang

finds works by two Sinophone writers both living and working in Taiwan,

Li Yongping 李永平(*The Chronicles of Jiling* 吉陵春秋) and Zhang Guixing 张贵兴 (*The Children of Keshan* 柯珊的儿女) in the house where M supposedly lived. Invoking these figures, and describing them in the sarcastic way that Huang does, is a way for him to comment upon the literary politics in Malaysia and Taiwan. But it can also have another effect on the reader:

> Reduced to pure personae, the historical figures are important counters in a metafictional game confusing the boundaries between all epistemological categories and forcing readers to recognize their own complicity in the reading process and in the preservation of the myths of power that accumulate around public people. (Jacobs xx)

Metafiction requires the reader to take up an active role in reading and interpreting the text, in order to make sense of the appearance of historical figures in a fictional world. Moreover, it confronts the reader with the question of its own role in the production and consumption of literature and its immediate context. In other words, the appearance of Yu Dafu and other important literary figures not only complicates the ontological nature of the story, it also forces the reader to rethink the historical and real life figures themselves, and especially their own relationship towards them.

Conclusion: Fake Quotes and Empty References

      Like the historical characters, the use of quotes and the allusion of other texts are obvious intertextual references. "Death in the South"

leans heavily on the inserted quotations, attributed to Yu Dafu. However, these quotations are largely made up by Huang himself. The narrator of the story finds these writings in the remote shelter and admits they have not been published anywhere before. He refers to them as coming from an "unfinished manuscript" (*cangao* 残稿). The fact that some of these quotations are "real" (coming from actual works by Yu Dafu), while others are "fake" (made up by Huang Jinshu and attributed to Yu Dafu), destabilizes our notion of the ontological status of the text as a purely fictional account. Moreover, the fake quotations reverse the nature of the reference. They are no longer references, in the sense that they refer to something outside the text, but rather empty references that have no actual relation to the world beyond the text. The implied authenticity of the references is emphasized by the form of the story, which besides quotes has footnotes and citations, giving the story an academic appearance and an air of "truthfulness." Moreover, as Ommundsen explains, this use of quotations and notes occurs in metafiction to "transgress generic boundaries":

> The presence of footnotes generally points to genres such as criticism, historiography or other kinds of scholarly writing; when they occur in a work of fiction, they upset our generic expectations, forcing a reconsideration of how texts are sorted into categories, and how the category itself determines our mode of reception. (9)

Thus, knowing that the quotes and citations are (or might be) fictional, the reader is alerted to the ontological status of the rest of the text as

well. Both the insertion of historical characters, with an actual real life reference, and the fake quotations, with nothing except itself to refer to, are metafictional aspects that problematize the strict distinction between fiction and reality, and that instead argue for more fluid categories of truth and fiction, history and reality, writer and reader.

My discussion of Huang Jinshu's stories has focused on the way that metafiction forces readers to rethink the relationship between the text and the world, and between fiction and reality. Metafictional writings such as these

> are unified by their common loss of faith that fiction and reality are separate realms. This sense that history and identity are verbal constructs, necessarily removed from the 'real thing' has freed many writers to do new things within familiar modes. (Jacobs 204)

For Huang Jinshu, as a writer and a scholar, the familiar mode of academic writing serves as the perfect framework to destabilize fixed generic boundaries and by extension the ontological status of the text. His position as a Sinophone writer, exploring the marginal spaces of Malaysia and (to a lesser extend) Taiwan, has been successfully explored in the scholarship of Tsu and Groppe, and has thus played a smaller role in my own interpretation. However, his overt references to figures from the Malaysian-Chinese and Taiwanese literary establishment do place him in a clear relationship with that locality. The final line of "The Disappearance of M," which is also part of the story read by the writers within the text, reads: "Thanks to all the writers and scholars who have

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participated in the performance" (42). While the word "performance" signals a certain level of mocking towards those writers and scholars, it also says something more general about the act of writing and the role of the characters. Both are engaged in an active process of creation that is finally channeled through the author, and that is walking the line between fact and fiction, art and academics.

In the following chapter I will (re)turn to mainland China and explore how the malleability of history and identity are represented in the novella "The Future World" by Wang Xiaobo.

CHAPTER V

WANG XIAOBO: THE CHOICES THAT MAKE HISTORY

> My uncle lived at the end of the last (20th) century. There is one thing we all know; in China, history is limited to 30 years, it is impossible for us to know anything about more than 30 years ago.
>
> (Wang Xiaobo, "The Future World" 57) [11]

> [...] While critiquing the absurdity of an inverted world by depicting the interaction between fiction and history or reality, Wang Xiaobo, the author, self-consciously violates, transgresses, and subverts the line between these two on a fantastic level.
>
> (Huang Yibing, *Contemporary Chinese Literature* 176)

The amount of sources available to the scholar of Chinese literature, whether traditional or modern, is overwhelmingly large. The process of selecting appropriate sources includes decisions that reflect more than the aesthetic qualities of the literary text itself. Sometimes, patterns occur only after choices have been made. In my case, I realize that by choosing works by Gao Xingjian, Huang Jinshu and Wang Xiaobo, I include writings produced in a wide variety of geographical locations and by authors with diverse national identities, expressing my broad understanding of Chinese literature. At the same time, I realize that all authors in one way or another occupy marginal positions in relation to "mainstream" or "Mainland" literature. In spatial terms, my

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[11] All translations in this chapter are my own, unless otherwise noted.

project started in Mainland China, with the familiarity of metafictional techniques to traditional literature, and the much later 1980s Avant-Garde writers. Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* constitutes a transition between those writers and contemporary metafiction, but it also takes us away from Mainland China through Gao's move to France. While Gao tried to disconnect himself from the Chinese state in several ways, Huang Jinshu made a somewhat contrary movement, moving from a double marginal position in Malaysia (marginal in relation to Chinese as well as Malaysian culture and literature), to a somewhat less marginal position in Taiwan. In this final chapter, I return to the mainland, focusing on the novella "The Future World" by Wang Xiaobo. However, even though Wang is physically closer to the center of Chinese literary production, as we will see in this chapter, vis-à-vis the "mainstream" literature his position is marginal nonetheless.

"The Future World" was published in 1997 as part of a collection known as the *The Silver Age (Baijin shidai* 白金时代*)*. *The Silver Age* in turn is part of a larger trilogy, sometimes referred to as the *Trilogy of Our Time* (*Shidai sanbuqu* 时代三部曲*)*. Besides *The Silver Age* it consists of *The Golden Age (Huangjin shidai* 黄金时代*)*, Wang's representation of the Cultural Revolution, and *The Bronze Age (Qingtong shidai* 青铜时代*)* which parallels tales from the Tang dynasty with modern China. A posthumously published collection of unfinished stories is called *The Iron Age (Heitie shidai* 黑铁时代*)*, set in the future in a virtual world. *The Silver*

Age consists of three novella's; *"*The Silver Age*"*, *"*The Future World*"*, and "2015" *(Er ling yi wu 二〇一五)*, and *"*presents an Orwellian future world of total surveillance and no exit" (Huang 139). Considering the fact that Wang Xiaobo did not become a fulltime writer until the early 1990s and that he died unexpectedly in 1997, the amount of works he produced is remarkable. Besides fiction, Wang is also a prolific essayist, and he co-authored a sociological study on homosexuality with his wife Li Yinhe 李银河.

Wang Xiaobo's writings are particularly popular among the intellectual elite, characterized by a style that is "[…] a hybrid of dark skepticism and melancholic existentialism, simultaneously ironic and lyrical, bleak and fanciful" (Huang 139). With his dark sense of humor and what Wendy Larson calls "ironical philosophical detachment" (119), Wang manages to extract and expose the absurdness of the past, present and future. This kind of "intellectual amusement" (Wu 167) is obviously appreciated by a select group of readers, but his works are also considered "anti-popular literature" (Wu 141):

> His anti-emotional narrative requires a creative reading mode of active participation, by which readers can enjoy the pleasure of imaginative reading. Because the author does not show an obvious desire to satisfy readers' expectations nor lead them clearly along a certain path of interpretation or appreciation, readers must set up a value system to fill the void. (Wu 137)

This absence of a sufficient interpretative guidance and the required active reader participation are also characteristics of metafiction.

Interpretative guidance is avoided mainly because, as Wang's story shows, there is no ultimate "truth" or "reality" to be represented or discovered. One could argue that all authors discussed in the current study share both this "elite" character and a lack of interpretative guidance that results in a high demand of reader participation. This is exactly what metafiction thrives on, but it is also the reason why metafiction is often perceived as inaccessible or elite writing that appeals more to the (literary) critic and scholar than to the general public. Despite his popularity among certain groups of readers, Wang's works are rarely found in anthologies of contemporary Chinese literature, and up to date, only *The Golden Age* has been translated into English.

Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, his marginal position can be ascribed to the fact that "Wang had remained an utter outsider to the 1980s literature altogether, as represented by scar literature, […] or experimental fiction" (Huang 138). Thus, his writing style and content differs from that of the 1980s Avant-Garde writers, but also from many of his contemporaries. In China of the 1990s, popular literature became more and more intertwined with commercialization, and content and style were influenced by market forces and a demand for profit. In English-language studies by Huang Yibing and Jin Wu, Wang Xiaobo is discussed alongside contemporary authors such as Wang Shuo 王朔 and Zhang Chengzhi 张承志. While they can all be identified as "ideological rebels" (Wu v), what sets Wang Xiaobo apart is his deliberately anti-

moral narratives and anti-emotional characters and descriptions of sex and violence.

Similar to the previous chapters, I will focus on the ambiguous relationship between truth and fiction in "The Future World". Set in the future but relating a recent past, this story uses a distorted notion of historiography to comment upon the (re)construction of fact and fiction and it constitutes "an Orwellian warning against any blind belief in a theological and linear history" (Huang 140). In the works of Gao and Huang we have also seen a prevalent role for history in the form of appropriation of traditional genres and historical characters. In the conclusion I will discuss in more detail how these authors use history for different purposes. In the current chapter I will explore how Wang creates a world that is simultaneously possible and absurd through the use of metafictional aspects such as "multiple choice narratives" and meta-commentaries on the creation of the story within the story.

When the Future Is Now

"The Future World" is divided into two parts; the first half, called "My Uncle" (*Wode shushu* 我的叔叔), focuses on the narrator's uncle, who was a writer but never published any work during his life, and who finally died in a tragic elevator accident. At a time set in the near future, the narrator is writing his uncle's biography. However, the world in which the narrator lives is different from the world we know today. As

Huang Yibing pointed out, the society in "The Future World" is reminiscent of Orwell's *1984*, in which people are under constant surveillance and thought control. As a bibliographer and a historian, the narrator is supposed to write his uncle's biography according to certain rules, as we will see below. However, in the process of writing, he has made several "'mistakes" (*cuowu* 错误*)*, most notably that of "explicitly describing" (*zhilu* 直露).[12] The second half of the novella, simple called "Myself" (*Wo ziji* 我自己), tells the story of what happens to the narrator after he is arrested. He first goes through a series of thought reform classes and subsequently he is "relocated" (*chongxin anzhi* 重新安置): all his possessions are taken away from him and he is given a completely new identity, a new house, a new job and even a new "wife." In the end, the narrator becomes a "writing hand" (*xieshou* 写手) at a company, meaning he is writing essays and fiction on demand, as if it were a mechanical production process. He and his colleagues receive regular "re-education" in the form of physical punishment. At the end, the narrator seems to have accepted his situation, or in a more pessimistic reading, has his resistance broken by the company: "I have no more energy, and don't want to make another thought mistake again" (Wang 154).

In the first part of the story, it becomes clear that historiography and literature are defined rather differently in this future world. Nobody

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[12] Lin Qingxin translates *zhilu* as "overt descriptions", 185.

can, or is supposed to, remember anything that happened more than 30 years ago, rendering anything before that period insignificant. Moreover, not only does one need a license to practice historiography, it also needs to serve the greater good and should thus be rewritten in order for it to be "right":

> I am a historian, and history is a liberal art; therefore, I am familiar with the guiding principle of the humanities. That is to say, everything that is written, must all lead to a result that is beneficial to us. (58)

At the same time, the narrator emphasizes the absurd character of this guiding principle:

> With regard to the guiding principles of history I should add a few sentences. It stems from two self-contradicting demands. First: all historical research and discussion must lead to the conclusion that the present is better than the past; second: all the above described discussion must lead to the conclusion that the present is worse than the past. The first principle is suitable for culture, institution and material objects. The second goes well for people. But this isn't very clear. Numerous fellow historians have fallen because they didn't understand it. I have a very clear and concise way to explain it: if we talk about life, today is better than yesterday, but if we talk about the people, today is worse than yesterday. That way, the guiding result is always in our favor: however, I don't know whom this 'we' is. (59)

In this quote we can see a critique of historiography, its hidden arbitrariness is pulled into the extreme to expose the constructed nature of history and the tendency to write the story of the victor. In the case of China, history has always been an important ideological tool and the grand historical narrative served specific goals. In the 20th century, socialist history was aimed not only at providing a favorable narrative of

the past, but more significantly, a justification for the present and a guideline for the future. Wang Xiaobo is reacting against this political appropriation of history and the way it has also governed literarily production for many decades.

At the same time, it calls attention to the absurdness of this historiography, which both needs to show how the world is better now, but people are worse. As we have also seen in the works of Gao and Huang, the idea of an objective history is called into question. History, like fiction, is malleable and cannot be a direct representation of any "reality," especially not in Wang's dystopian world:

> Talking about centuries will evoke the idea of history, which is exactly my field of expertise. In history there is one small part that I have experienced, and that is only 30 years or so, less than one percent of all written history. I know that this one percent of written history is all fabricated, and if there still is a little bit of truth left, it is only because there is no alternative. As for the remaining ninety-nine percent, I cannot judge its authenticity, and as far as I know, nobody who is still alive today can judge it. That is to say, it's not looking too good. Now I'm writing my uncle's biography and I am a licensed historiographer. What result that should have, I'll leave that up to you. (65)

Wang's ironic portrayal of the historiographer, who has to "rewrite" history in order for it to be accepted, is filled with metafictional techniques. First of all, the narrator explains how he is constructing the story of his uncle by constantly inserting different possible options for the same story; one that represents what "really" happened, and the other how the story should look like according to the rules of historiography. As the narrator moves along with his story, he often

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explains how an event happened "according to this first version" (63), but that "the facts described above can also be restated as follows" (61). One of the elements that is represented in two different ways is the leading female character. In the story, the narrator's biology teacher, named Aunt Yao, falls in love with his uncle and ends up marrying him. But in his "historical" biography, the narrator invents a character "F" (for female) that is initially a replacement for Aunt Yao, but that soon becomes a distinct character.

Another example is the death of the narrator's uncle. He had a heart condition, but in the end he died in an accident with an elevator that crushed him. However, since that version does not "give enough guidance" (59), the narrator needs to come up with another explanation. That explanation, based on the belief that in the previous century people who were not to be trusted (such as his uncle) had to ride bicycles without saddles, is both an example of Wang's anti-emotional characters and his vision of the world as a thoroughly absurd place:

> [...] I'm writing a biography. And I should write how he had a bike without a seat, proof that he was not to be trusted and that he died of rectal cancer because of the bike. But while my sources all say he had several illnesses, including heart disease and arthritis, they do not mention anything near his anus. He actually died in an elevator accident where he was crushed. That is a way to die that I envy, it is obviously better than dying from rectal cancer. (58)

> My uncle is already dead, so if letting him die from cancer is beneficial for us, so be it. (58)

> But that [death by elevator] isn't giving enough 'guidance'. It blames his death on someone's greediness, not on the evils

of the system. We must give him another death. That is no problem for me, since I took many creative writing classes in the Chinese literature department, dealing with all the 'smelly' problems. (59)

The narrator does not only display a very nonchalant attitude towards the death of his uncle, he appears to have no problem with rewriting it, being able to fall back on skills he learned in creative writing classes back in school. "We must give him another death," sounds utterly absurd, but in this world, where history is malleable, it is actually quite unproblematic. What finally gets the narrator into trouble is actually not moving far away enough from reality, and being too specific (*zhilu* 直露) about his uncle's life:

> The attitude of the 'Biography newspaper' towards this part of my uncle's biography was as follows: You (indicating me) are too talented. A small newspaper like ours cannot afford to enjoy such fortune. Moreover, we can't afford to commit intentional mistakes. These were the problems that had to do with the publisher's office. There were also problems arose that arose with regards to myself: You are a famous biographer, and a historian, it's not necessary for you to specifically describe these kind of sexual issues --- that is what novelists do, and they have a very low rank. But it was my uncle who did these explicit things, so what choice do I have? (99)

In other words, describing his uncle as he "really" was, is too explicit, and that does not have a place in the future world, because it is not adhering to the guiding principles of historiography. Writers of literature may describe these matters in a straitforward manner, creating a situation, as can be found in other stories by Wang, where "fiction can be

more real than history or reality, [while] history or reality can also be as unreal as fiction" (Huang 175).

Moreover, the low status of the novelist in comparison with that of an historian is clearly described in this quote. After the narrator loses his license to practice historiography, he chooses first to become a philosopher in order finish his uncle's biography, as he mentions in the last lines of the first part: "I still took my philosopher's license with the two holes in it to fool around a bit – I could use it to finish writing my uncle's biography, what to do after that, I'll think about that later" (108). Later on the novel, after the narrator is relocated, he becomes a writer in a company, producing essays as if it is a mechanical process, reduced to the lowest of the lowest. Keeping Wang's satirical writing style in mind, this hierarchy can also be read as a comment on the way in which in traditional China historical writing was often valued over fiction. Yet writing history is in no way a guarantee for a safe existence. After all his hardships, the narrator explains at the end of the novella: "As the above showed, when I wrote 'My Uncle,' I was a historian. At that time I thought that being a historian was a talisman. Now I know, that there is nothing in this world that can protect me" (154).

At the same time, this satirical representation of the novelist as an inferior figure, doomed to only express things that are obviously "fiction," looked down upon by those involved in more meaningful endeavors such as writing history, can be read as a sharp, self-conscious commentary on

the writer in contemporary society. Marginalized by commercialization, the modern writer in China can indeed be subjected to harsh criticism by intellectuals if their writings are not conforming to the standards of high literature, still closely linked to the idea of representing China and Chinese society.

The Critic in the Text

Another metafictional aspect that we also encountered in the works of Gao Xingjian and Huang Jinshu is the figure or the voice of the critic, who comments upon the text itself or the text within the text. While Gao's character is having a debate with an invisible critic about the definition of fiction and the genre of the novel, Huang describes real-life authors debating the novel *Kristmas* and its importance for Malaysian-Chinese literature. In "The Future World," the reaction of the critics on his biography "My Uncle" is channeled through the narrator himself. His response to the critics comments included in the narrative, implies that the story at hand, or at least the "historical" part, is already published. The critiques focus first on his writing style and later also on the content and the "mistakes" the narrator made:

> The previous part comes from the biography I wrote for my uncle, taken from the first section of the first chapter. To be honest, it is quite a mediocre piece, and it's not clear that I'm making a mistake with it, although there have been a few critics who said that from the beginning it carries the tone and tendency of a mistake. In all fairness, I actually wanted to write a mediocre piece, so the words of the critics don't really get to me. As everybody knows, critics have to find out

the rotten eggs, because otherwise, if a bad work comes out, they are getting fined. The critics also said, that in my work I use 'as everybody knows' too much. [...] But 'as everybody knows' is my stock phrase, I can't drop that. Besides, these three words make me two cents in manuscript fees, so I don't want to change them. (61-62)

While the narrator references how he has to make choices between what really happened and the appropriate historical version, this quote also exposes the material aspect of literary production, namely that of receiving money for the amount of words, or characters, one produces. Soon the criticism becomes more severe as it turns to his violation of the guiding principles of history: "At the moment the criticism in the media on 'My Uncle' is already very intense. Some people even say I am using the past to disparage the present, which is the most frightening accusation for a historian" (67).

Wang also uses the voice of the critic to satirize the urge of readers and critics to search for deeper meanings in the text. Some scholars have argued that Wang's works are not meant to provide a clear and deeper meaning (e.g. Wu 149), which is in line with Wang's attempt to reflect the absurd nature of the world. A good example of this is the discussion of why the character F in the biography of the narrator's uncle is always wearing black clothing. While the critics theorize about the narrator's transsexual inclinations, he explains how he was simply inspired by a visit to Mozart's opera "The Magic Flute," "but I also have to admit, this is actually not so easy to think of" (78-79).

The Invisible and the Copy

As far as intertextuality is an important aspect of metafiction, Wang's use of characters presents an interesting example. Firstly, there is the uncle in "The Future World." Even though he is never called by name, Huang Yibing identifies this character as Wang Er 王二, Wang Xiaobo's stock character that appears in many of his stories (169). Throughout all these stories, Wang Er grows older and younger, moves from the past to the future and is sometimes, as in the case of "The Future World," anonymous. This intertextual border crossing releases the character from any particular historical or geographical narrative reality and allows it to roam freely, emphasizing the flexible nature and "non-entity-ness" of the character.

Moreover, the other two stories in *The Silver Age* show interesting parallels with "The Future World". Compare for example this story with the narrative of "The Silver Age," in which:

> The first-person protagonist has now become a professional writer, working ever day in the department of fiction at a writing company. He keeps writing and rewriting a supposedly autobiographical novel […] because he is caught in a dilemma and oscillates between two versions of his story. The first version is the one he writes for the company. The other is what he really wants to write but cannot, because apparently it would never meet the criteria set by the company. (Huang 167)

The repetitive structure, both of the reoccurring character Wang Er as well as the similar narratives, seem to support Wang's ideas of history as well as reality as absurd, and of a future that is not

much better than the past. Huang Yibing identifies this characterstic of Wang's writing as an obsessive "rewriting" (173), expressed through these metafictional techniques of intertextual references and characters.

Within "The Future World" there is a similar repeating of themes and motifs between the first part (My Uncle) and the second part (Myself). For example, the female character F, that the narrator invented and which he used to "replace" his Aunt Yao, is again invoked in the story of his own life. Due to him losing his historian's license, he needs to work for a company that assigns him an entirely new life, including a new "wife," whom he calls F. Consequently, he sometimes refers to himself as M (male).

The way Wang describes his characters, and lets the characters in the novel deal with other characters is also typical of metafiction. The narrator's Aunt Yao reads his uncle's biography and becomes obsessed with the character F. After explaining to her that she is not F, Aunt Yao asks him how F looks. The narrator asks her to guess and after she has described how she thinks F looks, he says: "If it wasn't for you telling me, I still wouldn't really know what she looks like" (82). Consequently, the narrator finds a picture of a Thai stewardess in a paper which looks like Aunt Yao's description, but then Aunt Yao wants to meet F. Recounting all the narrative tricks he would have to come up with to make the girl in the picture actually be F, he goes on to ponder: "The way I'm governing

history, you could call it rigorous, but at the same time it gives the story an air of mystique. But writing it this way will bring trouble, so I'll just get rid of all these details" (82). As a result, F's role in the narrative is limited to her relationship with the narrator's uncle. The reader is not given any further information about her background or future beyond that relationship. The way Aunt Yao imagines F, which eventually "creates" her both for herself and the narrator, reflects upon the process of creation of characters and fiction.

There is also a passage referencing Italo Calvino's novel *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959),[13] in which the knight is actually only an outer shell of armor. Nobody can ever see what is behind the mask, because if they would look, they would find there is nothing there. Yet the character can eat, drink, sleep and even make love. Once again, this description is reminiscent of Patricia Waugh's understanding of fictional characters as non-entities. They are there, they exist as words on a page, but beyond that, they don't have any real life references. We only know about the characters what the author tells us about them. Yet, as the example of the narrator and his Aunt Yao shows, sometimes the readers themselves know more about the character than the author. In a way, the relationship between character, reader and author, is mutually dependent.

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[13] Italo Calvino (1923-1985) is an Italian author who's works are well known for their metafictional character. His 1979 novel *If on a Winters Night a Traveler* begins with the self-conscious sentence: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a Winters Night a traveler*" (3).

Thus, the characters in Wang's work come in two kinds, they are either copies or echoes of earlier and other characters, or they are empty entities that are only existing because they are invented and written in the story within the story.

Conclusion: Historiography versus Futurology

"The Future World" is an ambiguous title for this novella. Even though the narrator writes from the near future, his focus is mainly on history, and the act of historiography in general. As Wang juxtaposes this historical writing with fiction, philosophy, logic and even futurology, it becomes clear that his discussion of the future is just as much a comment on the past. The fact that in this story there is no history older than 30 years in China seems a blatant criticism of recent historiography and, with regard to Wang's earlier trilogy on the Cultural Revolution, a comment on the experience of that era. As I mentioned before, the fact that plot lines and characters reappear throughout Wang's oeuvre, set in different times and places, creates the image that history is repeating itself, or, as Huang Yibing points out, that in Wang's writings "the future is a rewriting of the Cultural Revolution" (166).

But besides writing about the past through the future, Wang is also writing about fiction through historiography and visa versa. The reversed, or polarized notions of literature and reality in this novella are expressed through the narrator's philosophical interruptions, explaining

a series of absurd rules and regulations regarding these two topics. Together with the constant switching between different possibilities, how it "actually" was and how it should be according to the guiding principles of historiography, these notions thoroughly destabilize the reader's notion of what is real and what is fake. Or, as Huang describes: "[...] while critiquing the absurdity of an inverted world by depicting the interaction between fiction and history or reality, Wang Xiaobo, the author, self-consciously violates, transgresses, and subverts the line between these two on a fantastic level" (Huang 176).

Not only the categories of history and literature are called into question by Wang's novella, but the way that Wang destabilizes his characters also confronts the reader with such unconventional notions of representation. The character Wang Er appears frequently in Wang's stories, and within "The Future World" there are many characters that function as each other's mirror or echo. Yet, at the same time, they escape our grasp completely, because they are simply linguistic constructs, and Wang transposes them through time and place with the greatest of ease: "Wang Xiaobo continues to allow his narrators to carry double identities as would-be writers or historians, granting them a posthistorical or transhistorical viewpoint[...] the individual subjectivity itself, in turn, becomes entirely unreal and a fiction" (Huang 166). When we compare the representation of the Self and the subjectivity of that self in Wang's story with that in Gao's novel, we see an interesting

relationship. While Gao's subject is an internally fragmented Self, Wang's individual subjectivity seems to be fragmented in an outward manner, represented in the reappearance of the same or similar characters. Both authors seem to express the same idea that the existence of one coherent subjective identity is an impossibility, both in fictional representation and so-called "reality."

The metafictional techniques such as *mise-en-abyme* and self-conscious narratorial comments all contribute to the construction of a future world that is simultaneously past, present and future, as well as real and unreal. That notion of the unreal is further explored in Wang's last works that were found, unfinished, on his computer after his death in 1997. In these stories, the background is no longer an absurd dystopia, but a virtual reality. Obviously, this change in setting brings an entirely new set of questions and possibilities, both for the writer and the reader. The material particularity of virtual reality has, in my opinion, wide ranging implications for the production and consumption of literature. In the conclusion I will comment more upon how theories of metafiction may play a role in understanding these new circumstances.

In an ironical twist of faith, Wang left behind not just one unfinished manuscript, but many versions of what appear to be similar stories. In "The Future World" and several of his other stories, the idea of "multiple choice stories" play an important role for signaling the constructed nature of the text. Thus we are left with multiple choices for

these stories, but there will never be an author who will make the final

editorial decisions. The responsibility for "choosing" and acknowledging

the choice now lies completely with the reader.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: DON'T BELIEVE A WORD I SAY

"Are novelists liars?"
(Waugh, *Metafiction* 87)

At the end of this thesis, I return to the very beginning, to the title: "Don't Believe a Word I Say." This title is inspired by a set of questions that center on the way metafiction complicates our understanding of the ontological status of the text and the ambiguous relationship between that text and the world, writer and reader, fact and fiction. Thus is, as Patricia Waugh asks, "telling stories telling lies?" (87) Should we believe what Gao Xingjian, Huang Jinshu and Wang Xiaobo are telling us? Or perhaps should we be asking ourselves a completely different question, since what these authors try to do continuously throughout their texts is to shatter our momentary belief in the "realness" of their constructed worlds of words. They force their readers to come to terms with that constructedness, and encourage them to extend this idea of a construction from text into world. By doing so, contemporary metafiction continues the postmodern (literary) tradition that views reality and history as provisional, malleable, constructed through language, and thus essentially fictional. In other words, I think we should *not believe* what these authors are saying, but instead we should consider the consequences of what they are saying. In my opinion, the power and

appeal of metafiction lies exactly in its ability to *not* provide definite answers, but to rejoice in its own ambiguity. Metafiction confronts its readers with fundamental questions about the nature of what we believe to be true or false, fact or fiction, and it is exactly at that moment that literature really starts to matter.

Metafiction's first and foremost objective is shattering the illusion of realism: that a literary work simply reflects the world as it is, or that the world as such can ever be represented. It does so by constantly reminding the reader of the constructed nature of the text before them by means of frame breaking, narratorial intrusion, *mise-en-abyme,* and multiple-choice narratives. In fact, metafiction points towards the impossibility of a definite, singular, and objective reality. Instead, reality, as well as history, is a constructed notion that relies heavily on the subjective experience of each individual. But as I have shown in the previous chapters, the contemporary authors that use metafiction are not solely concerned with the deconstruction of "reality," nor are they fully retreating into their linguistic labyrinths, playing pure language games and denying any reference to the world outside the text. Instead, as my analysis of the works of Gao Xingjian, Huang Jinshu, and Wang Xiaobo shows, these authors are very much engaged in constructing and representing new systems of meaning. Moreover, they use their writings as a way to expose (and often criticize) the process of literary production as well as larger social, political and historical issues. Thus metafiction,

both as a textual construct and as the result of a particular mode of reading that is sensitive to metafictional implications of the text, can still provide a meaningful framework for the analysis of literary works from the 1990s and beyond.

In China, even during the heyday of experimental fiction in the late 1980s, metafiction was often perceived as formalistic play. During the 1990s, economic and social reforms had a large impact on the organization of the literary realm in Mainland China, which resulted in the commercialization of literature due to the exposure to market forces. This change may account for the lack of critical attention to formalistic and experimental literature such as metafiction. At the same time, the marginal position of the three authors under consideration here may have worked in their (or metaficiton's) favor, since they were less controlled by the general tendencies of that literary field. They have been able to incorporate within their writing a range of techniques and styles, combining Chinese elements with foreign influences. But most importantly they employ metafiction to engage in a dialogue with the world outside the text: readers, other writers, other texts, literary creation itself, and history. I think that this connection with the outside world and the concern with the construction of new systems of meaning, rather than deconstruction or literary isolation, sets these contemporary writers apart from their Avant-Garde counterparts.

Henry Zhao's typology of metafiction aimed to categorize the works of Ma Yuan, Ge Fei, Yu Hua and other Avant-Garde writers into self-reflexive metafiction, pre-textual metafiction and para-textual metafiction. While this categorization is beneficial for a broadening of the concept "metafiction" by including less overtly metafictional text, I think the strict distinction is ultimately unattainable. I find that the works of all three authors I discussed could fit into all three categories, or rather, that they all employ metafiction on different levels of their works. Thus, I suggest we can use Zhao's categorization to organize our analysis of metafiction within a particular text, but not to categorize that text as opposed to others.

Three Times Different, Three Times the Same

The fact that Gao Xingjian, Huang Jinshu and Wang Xiaobo are rarely mentioned in the same critical breath, can be ascribed to their obvious temporal, geographical and stylistic differences. The theoretical framework of this project brought them together as examples of metafiction in contemporary Chinese literature. Keeping this overarching theme in mind, the question becomes if there are any significant similarities or differences between the ways these authors employ metafiction and if these come from, or result in, distinct literary and intellectual projects or goals? Besides the fact that all authors use metafictional techniques such as narratorial intrusion and confusion,

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frame breaking, and *mise-en-abyme* structures, there are three elements that connect as well as differentiate the texts under consideration: the presence of an author figure or writing character, the insertion of a critic or critical voice, and finally the way these texts deal with and comment upon history and historiography.

In a self-reflexive kind of writing such as metafiction, the occurrence of an author figure, or at least a "writing" character is to be expected. Gao's unnamed protagonist, Huang's journalist and Wang's historian and his uncle, all fulfill this function. Through these characters, the authors are able to display the process of writing, the choices that are made in that process and the problems he/she can encounter. But while all three characters write, there are some significant differences between them. Gao's protagonist "I" is a professional writer, while we could characterize his constructed alter-ego "he" as a professional story teller. Since they are ultimately the same person, it is hard to make a clear cut distinction, but the structure of an "I" who imagines a "he," who in return imagines a "she," who together make up a wide range of tales, points towards the power of imagination and the possible infinite regression of fictional construction. At the same time, the protagonist shares certain characteristics with Gao Xingjian himself, but the intricate structure of pronouns-as-characters and Gao's denial of the possibility to transmit "reality," complicates an autobiographical reading of *Soul Mountain.*

In a similar way, Huang Jinshu conflates the different diegetic levels through narratorial intrusion that leads to what I have called narratorial confusion. By inserting a first person into the predominant third person narrative, the literary identities of the writer, narrator and characters are conflated. Moreover, by giving the protagonist, who is a journalist, the same surname as himself, he too manages to insert himself into the text without resorting to autobiographical writing. Huang also invokes a range of real-life figures that are influential writers in the Taiwan and Malaysian literary scene, which allows him to comment upon the local literary establishment.

Wang Xiaobo, the author, is arguably most removed from his own narrative in "The Future World," but his protagonist is still a writing character. The narrator is a historian (and later philosopher and writer) who writes the biography of his uncle, who was also a writer. Moreover, that uncle, as Huang Yibing points out, can be understood as Wang Xiaobo's stock character Wang Er, who in other stories does share biographical details with Wang's own life. In other words, all authors manage to insert themselves into their texts, which leads to a complication of the diegetic levels and literary identities, rather than supporting an autobiographical reading of the stories.

As authors, Gao Xingjian, Huang Jinshu, and Wang Xiaobo all embody the dual nature of metafiction understood as a combination of fiction, criticism, and theory. As "writer/critics" they all engage not only

with the production of literature, but also in the discussion and study of it. Gao Xingjian produced many theoretical essays in the 1980s on new forms of fiction, Huang Jinshu is both a writer and a literary scholar, and Wang Xiaobo was a teacher and studied economics and trade before he turned to creative writing. Their profession outside of creative writing seems to leave a particular mark on those writings. Gao's fictional writing reflects his position as a painter and playwright, through its visual and spatial style. On the other hand, Huang Jinshu is a literary scholar, and the form of his short stories is often reminiscent of scholarly articles, including footnotes and citations.

But also within their texts, the figure or function of the critic appears regularly. In chapter 72, Gao's narrator has a discussion with an invisible critic about the nature of fiction, anticipating the critique upon *Soul Mountain* and its experimental form and characters. In Wang Xiaobo's novella, there is a similar appearance of critics, criticizing the narrator's work "My Uncle," and debating the historiographical and fictional faults of the work. In Huang Jinshu's short story "The Disappearance of M," the role of the critic is filled by the fellow writers that criticize and discuss the novel *Kristmas* and its mysterious author. In addition, while the authors themselves can be seen as belonging to a literary elite, they simultaneously criticize these circles and their activities through the satirical representation of them.

Finally, history plays an important role in these texts under consideration, yet in distinct ways. Even though his novella is set in the future, in Wang Xiaobo's story historiography becomes the battleground for the fight between fiction, reality, and history. With a notion of historiography that is more fictional than fiction itself, Wang exposes the absurdity of the world and the impossibility and danger of an objective understanding of history and reality. For Gao Xingjian, history provides a source of endless inspiration and historical data seamlessly flows over into fictional accounts through the act of story telling. Moreover, he appropriates traditional themes and motives from Chinese literature. Finally, in Huang's stories, the focus is on the particular literary history of Malaysia in relation to the grand narrative of Chinese literature. His use of historical characters, most notably the writer Yu Dafu, allows him to not only attempt to rewrite this literary history, but also to comment upon the provisional nature of it.

The role that history and historiography play in the works of these authors can also be related to specific historical developments in 20th century China. Constantly changing literary policies were the result of a century of dramatic political and social change, civil war and revolution. These events, and especially the influence of the socialist ideology that took hold of Mainland China after 1949, have left a considerable mark on the country's writers and intellectuals. We can see this for example in the struggle of Wang Xiaobo's character with the stifling rules of

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historiography and Gao Xingjian's appropriation and referencing of traditional literary forms and genres. In other words, these two authors also use their metafictional writings to react against and provide alternatives to the dominant historical narrative, and the role of literature and the writer in that tradition. From his marginal position, Huang Jinshu reacts very different to the Chinese historical narrative, as I will explain shortly.

The focus of my analysis has been on the way that metafictional elements in these stories help us gain a better understanding of the ontological status of the text, the figure of the author and reader and the relationship between text and world. To understand how these aspects add to the individual intellectual projects of these authors, we need to take into consideration the larger context of their oeuvre. While a detailed analysis of more texts would be necessary to draw more precise conclusions, some distinct tendency did come forth from my analysis. First of all, as I just pointed out, while Gao Xingjian and Wang Xiaobo try to distance themselves through their writing from the Chinese literary canon and the dominant historical narrative, Huang Jinshu actively tries to insert Malaysian-Chinese literature in that larger literary tradition through his evocations of the figure of Yu Dafu. At the same time, he anchors his writings firmly in a specific locality, namely South East Asia (Malaysia and Indonesia) and Taiwan.

For Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain* reflects the ultimate experiment with new forms of fiction and usages of language, geared towards representing a fragmented and subjective Self and exposing "reality" as ultimately non-transmittable. While *Soul Mountain* is still closely related to China through its content and literary references, Gao's work in general aims to be universal, representing the human condition separated from national, ethnic or political identity. The self-conscious comments upon the creation of fiction and the novel as a genre aim to overcome these constructed national boundaries.

From Wang Xiaobo's representation of China's society in "The Future World", we can see both a pessimistic view of the future and an understanding of past and present as utterly absurd. The individual subject always loses out to larger forces, whether that is history or an authoritarian state or company. Moreover, historiography in Wang's fiction is revealed as the result of a process that is not much different from writing fiction; choices are made that will result in a required, favorable representation.

While the intellectual projects of all three writers have their specific characteristics, I maintain that they share a comon interest in and concern with the mechanics of production and consumption of literature.

Extending the Range of Metafiction

The differences and similarities between the metafictional writings of Gao Xingjian, Huang Jinshu and Wang Xiaobo that have been outlined above show that there is a wide range of possibilities even within a linguistically homogenous group of texts. In other words, from this group of varied texts, it is hard to distill any general characteristics of a "Chinese metafiction," as opposed to its Western counterparts. This study was not intended to provide a comparative study between different literary traditions, but rather to expand the discussion of metafiction in both temporal and geographical terms. The lack of non-Western sources in the general theories of metafiction is symptomatic of the still marginalized position of non-Western cultures in the study of literature and the humanities at large. By paying attention to the incorporation of both traditional Chinese and foreign themes, motives and techniques, I aim to show that metafiction in Chinese literature should be understood neither as an inferior copy nor an isolated phenomenon. Instead, especially because of the dominant presence of literary techniques I have called metafiction in Chinese literary history, Chinese metafiction can be a valuable addition to the general discussion of metafiction. More extensive comparative research would be necessary to find out exactly how Chinese metafiction differs from that produced in other literary traditions. A first step in that process would be to look at other Asian traditions, such as Japanese and Korean literature, and determine how

metafiction has developed in those environments. Subsequently we could expand this gesture to include an ever wider geographical and cultural range.

A second possible extension of the current research project is a more in depth exploration of how metafiction has developed within the Chinese literary tradition itself. Scholars such as Gu Mindong and Karl Kao have pointed to the self-reflexive nature of traditional Chinese fiction, but a comparative study that looks specifically at metafictional texts from different historical periods, for example pre-modern, the Avant-Garde and the contemporary period, could help us better understand the nature and specifics of a "Chinese metafiction."

As this research project took me further and further into the theoretical depths of metafiction and the highs of Chinese literary texts, I had to pass by several fascinating sidetracks. In recent years, there seems to be a resurrection of the meta-genre, especially in the visual arts. One example of this is Stanly Kwan's 关锦鹏 1992 movie *Centre Stage (Ruan Lingyu* 阮玲玉*)*. Besides portraying the tragic life story of Shanghai movie star Ruan Lingyu, the film combines different types of footage showing archival images of original movies she starred in, reenactments of those particular scenes and interviews with the modern-day cast members, which may or may not have been staged. The combination of these different materials, together with other metacinematic techniques such as *mise-en-abyme,* results in a

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postmodern collage that exposes the constructed nature of the film itself and the complex process of its production. In the end, it is up to the viewer to put all the pieces of the puzzle together and come to terms with the representation of representation, and with the possible "fakeness" of what we assume to be real.

Another recent movie that problematizes the separation between fiction and reality, and that reflects upon the question of representation is Zhang Yang's 张扬 2001 movie *Quitting* (*Zuotian* 昨天). Based on the true story of the life of Beijing film actor Jia Hongsheng 贾宏声, the movie's cast consists of Jia, his mother and father, all playing themselves in the movie. As in *Centre Stage, Quitting* uses the *mise-en-abyme* structure to expose the constructed nature of the film. The camera zooms out to reveal the characters moving around in a stage-like movie set with only three walls. The fourth wall is literally broken down, leaving the rooms open and exposed to offer the viewer a look into this staged (or constructed) reality. Finally, there are several popular movies that reflect on the history of cinema and the impact this form of popular culture can have on its viewers. For example Ann Hu's 2000 *Shadow Magic,* the 2004 production *Electric Shadows* (*Meng Ying Tong Nian* 梦影童年, dir. Xiao Jiang 小江), and many of Feng Xiaogang's 冯小刚 films (e.g. *Big Shot's Funeral, Da Wan* 大腕儿 2001). Movies such as these could benefit from

an approach that pays attention to its metafictional aspects, in order to analyze the self-reflexive movements in them.

The omnipresence of these kinds of narratives in cinema raises the question if there is something specific about the visual medium that makes it especially suitable for meta-commentary.[14] Perhaps the visual is better equipped to do so than the written word, but if so the question remains why? While metafiction is often considered elite writing that receives little popular attention, the use of meta-commentary in popular television series such as *30 Rock, Family Guy, The Simpsons,* and *South Park* indicate that meta-discourse is not necessarily limited to high-brow cultural expressions.

Finally, with the development of new media and the importance of the Internet for literary production, in China perhaps even more than in the West, the terms of analyzing literary production and consumption are at a critical stage. For example, electronic literature calls for an entire new theoretical framework for literary analysis as readers become writers, and the real world becomes virtual reality. Theories and practices of metafiction, which already try to find a way to deal with these conflating categories, might provide a useful guide to interpretation in this new age of reading and writing.

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[14] In the West, in the early 2000s, a large number of films that used metacinematic techniques were produced. E.g. *Adaptation (*Spike Jonze 2002*), Tristram Shandu a Cock and Bull Story* (Michael Winterbottom 2005), *Stranger than Fiction (*Marc Forster 2006), and *New York Synecdoche (*Charlie Kaufmann 2008).

My thesis touches upon a small part of a much larger field of research. The selected works of Gao Xingjian, Huang Jinshu and Wang Xiaobo serve as examples of how metafiction can function in contemporary Chinese literature. Undoubtedly there are many more authors and texts that could be used for this purpose, which makes me anxious and excited to pursue the line of inquiry I have initiated in this project. For now, the ultimate metafictional ending to my thesis would directly address you, the reader, ponder on the difficulty of a final sentence, and admit that reading this thesis was optional, but as you have read it, you have read it.

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