

On Narrative Mode of Historiography in Chinese Fiction in the 1980s

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Abstract

Mo Yan and Su Tong are Chinese writers whose literary works have become the milestones. The two novellas, Red Sorghum (as in contrast with the novel) by Mo Yan, and Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes by Su Tong provide compelling examples for that thematic and formalistic literary revolution. In Red Sorghum, the first person narrator is able to put a full stop to the end of the historical drama of the red sorghum clan. For his counterpart in Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes, however, the story of the Maple-Poplar Village and the Bamboo-ware Town refuses to make its closure. The first person narrator has to keep his house door open for shadows, souls and ghosts of his ancestors who are still wandering like black fish. Through the intense exercise of mind and the manipulation of narrative structures, they achieve moral, intellectual and spiritual transcendence which involves the narrators as well as the readers.

Keyword: Mo Yan; Su Tong; Chinese literature; native soil fiction; historiographical discourse; narrative structures; self-fulfilment

1. Introduction

The mid-1980s witnessed the arrival of a new literary era which has proven its lasting historical impact. From that time onward, the literary scene of China has never been the same due to the transformation in literary form, content and language. Mo Yan, Su Tong, along with dozens of others, belong to that generation of writers whose literary works have become the milestones of that era. The two novellas, *Red Sorghum* (Mo Yan, winner of 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature), and *Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes* (Su Tong), both written in the early phase of their writing prominence, provide compelling examples for that formalistic and thematic revolution.

Critics have argued that the adaptation of novella as the literary form by the writers of the mid-1980s may not be random nor is it incidental; rather, there is an inevitable connection between the choice of form and the social reality in which the authors find themselves caught up. Damian Grant made a study of this inevitable connection and pointed out that the conventional nineteenth-century novel in the Western literary tradition which normally “accommodates the processes of a dense, ordered society,” whereas the short story, remote from the community by its very nature, has been “romantic, individualistic and intransigent” (Grant 1977: 2). Drawing from Grant’s theory in the context of contemporary Chinese fiction, Leo Ou-fan Lee argues that the novella, as a generic form caught up between the two, may be seen as posing the artist’s dilemma whether to comply with or depart from that order:

... The preference for novella on the part of the Chinese writers in the nineteen eighties points to the fact that they are still negotiating uneasily within the formal constraints of the fictional narrative – undecided ... between conformity and intransigence... (Lee 1993: 381)

In the mid-1980s, what dominates Chinese fiction is the roots-searching/native soil motif. The “search” through the disrupted history, suppressed spirituality and the lost individual “identity”, all reflects the “uneasiness” and “undecidedness” of the narrative mode that is temporal and generational. The mid-1980s Mo Yan and Su Tong belong to that generation of Chinese writers who are caught up in that aesthetic dilemma and feel the urgent need to retrospect their cultural past, to re-define themselves and re-direct their future. Critics and scholars later categorize the group as the “roots-searching/native soil” school (Zhang, 1993, 11; Wang, 1993, 108).

Among this group of writers with distinction, Mo Yan and his novella *Red Sorghum*, later expanding into a novel *The Red Sorghum Saga Series*, deserves immediate critical attention.

For Mo Yan, unlike either his predecessors or his contemporaries, life in China's rural areas is his lived experience. He grew up and worked there until he was recruited into the Chinese People's Liberation Army in his early twenties. That lived experience in the northern China ceaselessly projects contrasting symbolisms and meanings in his imagination. The images of the Chinese countryside in his fiction are dichotomized spaces: the one that exists at the present is "a nightmarish world of ignorance, poverty, cruelty, bitterly hard work, suffering, sadness, misery and broken dreams, the bleakness of which is only infrequently and temporarily relieved by the very small doses of simple human kindness, friendship and love" (Duke 1993: 49); whereas the other found in the past is "a world of beauty" (48), and a world of dreams. This world from the past is only meant to exist in the author's imagination rather than in any other identifiable location. Since the present-day Chinese rural society has been first contaminated with poverty and misery and then corrupted by the life of commercialism and materialistic desire, a world, which is Utopian and necessarily exists at a higher level than reality, has to be created and preserved in imagination for people to hope for and dream about.

Mo Yan's novella *Red Sorghum* is set in Northeast Township, Gaomi County, Shandong Province from the 1920s extending through the War of Resistance against Japan to the present. Even though the time and the place are retrievable in real life at the first sight, they are made distanced and defamiliarized. Both the geographical location and historical time become signifiers generating deep meanings. The most memorable images are the red sorghum crops "[simmering] like a sea of blood" in the late autumn on his homeland (Mo 1995: 4), red sorghum wine, and associated with them, the men and women who eat red sorghum grains out of preference and drink red sorghum wine with no constraint.

Mo Yan develops a family saga "full of epic grandeur and pathos", and portrays a gallery of characters on the land of red sorghum as having "strong emotions and chivalric souls" (Wang, 113). The imaginary land of red sorghum in Mo Yan's fiction is a land of paradoxes where beauty blends with ugliness and chivalry meets cowardice. The first person narrator describes in the beginning of the novella:

I didn't realize until I'd grown up that Northeast Township at Gaomi County is easily the most beautiful and most repulsive, most unusual and most common, most sacred and most corrupt, most heroic and most bastardly, hardest-working and hardest-loving place in the world. (Mo, 4)

This very land of red sorghum with contrasting qualities has nurtured a race of men and women with distinguished, yet at the same time paradoxical characters. Consumed by primitive energy and vitality, they are powerful in every way, "in their love and hate, goodness and evil, honesty and deceit, greed and self-sacrifice" (Duke, 49).

By creating this land of red sorghum and its residents filled with "blood energy" at a location which does not exist anymore and in a past which is not retrievable, the first person narrator makes a distinction between "them", his grandparents' and his parents' generations as versus "us", "the unfilial descendants who now occupy the land" (Mo, 4). In sharp contrast to the chivalry and heroism of their ancestors, the present generation looks pale, vain and meagre, everything that is opposite to their precursors. Feeling guilty with "a nagging sense of [their] species' regression" (4), the narrator reaches back to connect with the ancestral generations by reconstructing his family chronicle so as to rehabilitate the vain soul and shameful deeds of his own generation. In this particular case, he strives to bring together the three generations: the grandparents' generation with the parents' and the parents' generation with his own. The narrator succeeds in linking them together through the rearrangement as well as disarrangement of the time schemes, allowing direct contacts and dialogues between the members from the three generations. With each generation occupying a different time zone, the narrative discourse has to break through the temporal boundaries and reach out to associate one with another. The anachronic cross-generational interaction is made possible through the act of story-telling within the capacity of narrative discourse, where "[his] fantasies [are] chasing [his father's] while [his father's are] chasing [his grandfather's]" (181).

The first person narrator considers himself as an unfilial descendant of the red sorghum clan with a past full of glory and grandeur. The novella frequently puts the three generation in a convenient textual range with one another so as to enable a contrast through the dramatic disarrangement of time.

The novella *Red Sorghum* begins in the early morning on the ninth day of the eighth month in 1939 when the Grandmother bade farewell at the entrance of the village to the Father and the Grandfather Yu Zhan'ao, the commander-in-chief of the local anti-Japanese guerrilla forces. The heavy moist fog and ripe red sorghum crops with "slightly sweet yet pungent odour" (3) created a mysteriously solemn atmosphere. The Grandfather and the Father were to participate in the famous battle which constitutes a significant part in the reconstruction of the family chronicle. This first narrative sequence not only makes a solemn start for a battle yet to be launched by a group of patriotic and chivalric people; it also marks a perfect temporal starting-point (Genette, 97) for the narrative discourse of the novella.

Three paragraphs later from the beginning, the narrative discourse makes a sudden proleptic (90) move forward in time to a "present" when the narrator as "a bare-assed little bastard... [pisses] furiously on the grave [of his father] and [sings] out: 'The sorghum is red—the Japanese are coming—compatriots, get ready—fire your riffles and cannons—'" (Mo, 4). The anachronic shift immediately brings the narrator (at present) side by side with the Grandfather (a more remote past) and the Father (a more recent past). In the sharp contrast to the solemn mood on that morning in the past, the parodic song of praise he is singing renders a striking anticlimax for the descending line of the red sorghum clan. The Grandfather at this point stands out high as an epical hero who is to orchestrate the great battle and becomes a history maker for the land of red sorghum. The Father, as only a companion to the Grandfather, is very much overshadowed by the Grandfather's immense image. However, even though he is not capable of doing anything great to create for himself a name—the uninscribed tombstone erected before his grave is the proof, yet he has the privilege to witness the Grandmother's divine death and the Grandfather's incomparable heroism. As for the first person narrator who lives in a time when the Grandfather's grandeur and the villagers' bravery are no longer cherished, what is left for him from that past is nothing but a weed-covered grave with an uninscribed tombstone. Through the immediate contrast, there is a visible regression from the Grandfather's generation to the Father's, and further from the Father's to the present generation impersonated by the first person narrator.

With the sense of genealogical "regression" and the guilt of being an "unfilial descendant" (4), the first person narrator returns to Northeast Township in Gaomi County to compile his family chronicle in order to search for a voice from the past and to revive that uncherished glory. His primary concern at this early stage is how the story can be recovered so that it will be retold. In the second chapter of the novella, he abruptly cuts off the continuity of the narration of the Grandfather's story and makes another proleptic switch from the past to the present to explore the way(s) of story-telling. He finds a survived voice of the past from a wizened old woman of ninety-two years old whose head is "as bald as a clay pot" and whose "protruding tendons on her chapped hands are "like strips of melon rind". Her narration of the events and the characters are "choppy and confused, like a shower of leaves at the mercy of wind" (13). In her folkloric account of the Grandfather, the Grandmother and their anecdotes, history is mixed with fabrication whereas the facts are compounded by the legends. This mixture of historical and fictional discourses provides the first person narrator with a model in the re-construction of his family chronicle.

From the old woman's incoherent and intermittent oral narration of his Grandparents' stories, the first person narrator experiences vigor, potential and power which are generated by the act of story-telling. In order to have the story told, he first of all credits the Father as the first-hand witness of that past grandeur and gives him a voice to tell about the glory of the Grandfather, the romance between the Grandfather and the Grandmother and the chivalry of the Gaomi people. A considerable portion of the Grandparents' story is narrated in the indirect speech style. The indicated speaker of those narrative sequences is none other than the Father. The indicative markers such as "The Father said ...", "My Father told me that ..." have authorized the Father as the story-teller. This strategy of making the Grandfather's stories into the narrative sequences in the indirect speech style has changed the temporal scheme of those sequences. They are not just the stories about the Grandfather; but the Grandfather's stories as told by the Father. The narrative discourse has shifted from the more remote past of the Grandfather's time to the more recent past of the Father's time. The first person narrator thus has restored for the Father his lost voice in the narrative structure of the story-telling.

Through the recovery of the Father's voice, the first person narrator has restored the missing link back to the story-telling act. His next step is to re-establish the "chain reaction" in the story-telling process. In an anachronic comment on the mysterious disappearance of Arhat Liu's body, he describes the mechanism of the magic "chain reaction" in story-telling:

That night a heavy rain fell, washing the tethering square clean of every drop of blood, and of Uncle Arhat's corpse and the skin that had covered it. Word that his corpse had disappeared spread through the village, from one person to ten, to a hundred, from this generation to the next, until it became a beautiful legend. (37)

A legend (a story) cannot be created by one single voice; it has to be nurtured and enriched by hundreds of people, through hundreds of voices and across numerous generations. To restore the "chain reaction" of story-telling, the first person narrator, as the sole survivor of the red sorghum clan, ultimately has to bring himself back into the story-telling process.

In a way, "I" in the novella *Red Sorghum* already has a voice when he authorizes the Father as the teller of the Grandfather's stories. The indicators like "My Father told me that ...", which repeatedly cap the narration of the Grandfather's stories, implicitly point to the function of the first person narrator "I" in the "chain" process of story-telling. The establishment of the indicative markers and the use of the indirect speeches have been created two layers of anachronic narrative: one layer consists of the more recent past with the Father as the story-teller and "I" as the listener; whereas the other layer is set in the present with the first person narrator as the story-teller and the readers as the listeners. With the creation of the Chinese-box like structure of the story-telling act (Hutcheon 1980: 57), the first person narrator makes himself a legitimate carrier of the red sorghum clan bloodline.

Framed within the Chinese-box like narrative structure, the first person narrator constantly makes an attempt to surpass the Father, letting his own voice be heard from the orchestral, symphonic and polyphonic act of story-telling. From time to time he escapes from the confinement of the narrative layer of the Father's (as in "My father told me that ...") and directly makes his comments and expresses his opinions in the inserted anachronic narrative sequences (as in "I think that ..."). At the point where the Grandfather held the Grandmother's tiny bound foot gently in his hand "as though it were a fledgling whose feathers weren't yet dry" when they met for the first time (Mo, 46), the first person narrator abruptly cuts short the narration of the story and surfaces speaking directly to his listeners (i.e., the readers):

I've already believed that marriages are made in heaven and that people fated to be together are connected by an invisible thread. The act of grasping Grandma's foot triggered a powerful drive in [Grandpa] to forge a new life for himself, and constituted the turning point in his life – and the turning point in hers as well. (46)

The anachronic insertion like this one made by the first person narrator places the Grandfather's story into yet another new perspective. The story (the legend) about the Grandparents is no longer the one from the remote past, nor is it the story as told by the Father in a more recent past; but the story being told in the narrative control of "I", the Grandson/the Son. The direct appearance of the last descendent of the red sorghum clan assures himself of the role as a story-teller rather than a passive listener overshadowed by both the Grandfather and the Father.

As a matter of fact, the first person narrator believes that, within the artifact of story-telling, he can easily outsmart his predecessors. He is keenly aware of his position as the last survivor of the red sorghum clan, who always has the advantage of knowing more and the privilege of having the last say. In a proleptical sequence in Chapter One of the novella, he describes the dirt path, the only direct link between the Black Water River and the village, whose ebony-coloured earth had been "covered by the passage of countless animals: cloven hoof-prints of oxen and goats, semicircular hoof-prints of mules, horses and donkeys" (Mo, 6). The dusty road is so closely related to the villagers, the events and the stories of the red sorghum clan that it becomes a personified witness of its glory, its legend and its history. Although the Father had walked on it on that very autumn morning, had taken this path frequently afterwards, and had thought about it when he suffered in the cinder pit in the Japanese POW camps, he still had limited knowledge about the road, the characters and the events associated with it. In contrast, it is the first person narrator who knows a lot more. He proudly claims his advantage over the Father who has so far been made the pseudo-narrator of the Grandfather's stories:

[Father] never knew how many love-making dramas my Grandma had performed on this dirt path, but I knew. And he never knew that her naked body, pure as glossy white jade, had lain on the black soil beneath the shadows of sorghum stalk, but I knew. (6) This anachronic interruption by the first person narrator elaborating his excessive knowledge about the Grandparents' anecdotes is significant in the narrative structure of the novella. The proleptical insertion is placed between the sequences of narration given by an invisible omniscient narrator about that misty morning in 1939 when the troop of villagers marched along the narrow dirt path to carry out the ambush of the Japanese convey.

The direct appearance of the first person narrator and his claim for the superior knowledge about the Grandmother clearly indicate that he is the invisible omniscient narrator behind those narrative sequences. Through the manipulation of the temporal ordering and the anachronic insertions of narrative discourse, the first person narrator “I” has fulfilled his wish to become an almighty creator of the chronicle of the red sorghum clan with the Grandfather and the Grandmother as the crowned hero and heroine.

The fulfilment of the first person narrator as the omniscient chronicler has thus reversed the descending line of the red sorghum clan from the glorious Grandfather to the fameless Father and down to the unworthy Grandson/Son. Through the rehabilitation of the story-telling act, the genealogical line of the red sorghum clan is ascending from the wordless Grandfather, to the Father with limited words, and further upwards to the Grandson/the Son who, with an unlimited power for words, has restored the honour of the Grandparents, revived their fellow homeland dwellers and hence reconstructed the history of the red sorghum clan. In fact, he is a “super-omniscient” narrator (Wang, 125), who, in his effort to re-establish a family genealogy, “not only takes the liberty of entering his Grandparents’ and Parents’ consciousness, speaking and thinking on their behalf, but also tries to speculate on what they could have done and what they must have done. Where facts and memories are incomplete, fantasy fills in. When history fails to provide the account, fabrication takes its place.

In Chapter Eight, when the Grandmother was shot by the bullet fired by the Japanese soldiers, she was so gravely wounded that the only thing she could say intermittently to her son (the Father) was “Let’s go home, go home ...” (Mo, 66). The Father, then thirteen, was desperate as he looked at the wounds and tried in vain to staunch the flow of blood. The first person narrator assumes the role as the “superomniscient” story-teller front-stage in place of the Father as if he had entered the Grandmother’s mind thinking and imagining on her behalf:

Grandma looks contentedly as Father’s exquisite face. She and Commander Yu [the Grandfather] had joined to create him in the shadows of the sorghum field, lively images of the irretrievable past streak before her eyes like racehorses. (Mo, 67)

The first person narrator keeps her mind so actively engaged that it travels back in time to recall those days when her parents had married her to a man with leprosy and how she had made love with the Grandfather in the red sorghum fields that changed the lives of both hers and his. Her thoughts surge on foreseeing the massacre of the villagers on the land of red sorghum and envisioning that, “caught in a hail of gunfire, their clothes in rags, [the villagers] lie in the sorghum fields, arms and legs writhing in a macabre dance” (74). The first person narrator and the Grandmother are converged in one at the level of artistic imagination, subconscious narrative and pathetic climax. The sequence depicting the Grandmother’s last moment of her life is free of any narrative constraints as her soul, divine and pure, traveling up to Heaven. She sees a fleet of doves soaring through the vast blue sky and feels that she is floating up to join them “spreading her newly sprouted wings to glide weightlessly in the air above the black soil and sorghum stalk” (73). The anachronic activities of the Grandmother’s mind and consciousness can only be traced by the super omniscient narrator. By permitting the Grandmother’s mind with a free passage in time, the first person narrator succeeds in making her death as emancipation from human sufferings and as an achievement for peace and freedom. It is, in the meantime, an emancipation for him except from shame and guilt for being an unworthy descendent. The act of story-telling and the art of literary creativity serve as the most powerful means of his moral and spiritual redemption.

As a sole legitimate heir of the red sorghum clan, the first person narrator “I” delivers a solemn oath at the very end of the novella to the souls and ghosts of his ancestors forever present on the land of red sorghum:

With this story I respectfully invoke the heroic, aggrieved souls wandering in the boundless bright-red sorghum fields of my homeland. As your unfilial son, I am prepared to carve out my heart, marinate it in soy sauce, and have it minced and placed in three bowls and laid it out as an offering in the field of sorghum. Partake it in good health! (Mo, 78)

Entirely different from Mo Yan’s Northeast Township, Gaomi County located in Shandong, a piece of ancient land which had nurtured the very essence of Chinese culture (with Confucius’ native place Qufu located in the Province), the Maple-Poplar Village in Su tong’s *Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes* is situated in China’s east, in Jiangsu presumably, one of those locations in China which became industrialized and urbanized in the first few decades of the twentieth century. In sharp contrast to Mo Yan’s Northeast Township visually dominated by red sorghum crops “simmering like a sea of blood” in the late autumn, Su Tong’s Maple-Poplar Village is surrounded with green rice paddy fields “extending for miles and miles” under the white sunlight of the early spring (Su, 4).

Like *Red Sorghum*, Su Tong's novella is a story running across the three generations, an epical narration endowed with equal grandeur of imagination and power of creativity.

Unlike Northeast Township which nurtured a category of men and women eating red sorghum grains out of preference and drinking red sorghum wine without constraint, the geographical environment of the Maple-Poplar Village produces highly skilful bamboo craftsmen who "went to those prosperous cities and towns by crossing the Yangtze River with the current and pioneered the bamboo crafts business establishing a brand-new handicraft industry" (21). Su Tong's heroes and heroines bear very different profiles from those in Mo Yan's red sorghum clan gallery. Su Tong's core characters are portrayed as if in a series of photographic snaps: the Grandmother Jiangshi whose "narrow, long feet are fastened motionless in a cold, muddy rice field" with her hands on her protrusive belly listening to the sound of her babies (4); the Grandfather Chen Baonian, a vulgar craftsman who becomes a sophisticated businessman and never returns to his home at the Maple-Poplar Village; the landowner Chen Wenzhi who peers at his hired farmers through a pair of Japanese binocular from the top of his black bricked manor; Little Blind who has a shiny shape of a plum blossom in his eye; Huanzi, a city woman in her blue Chinese-style *qibao* dress who kidnaps the Father and brings him to the city; and Fengzi who is sold to the landowner by her brother in exchange of ten acres of paddy fields and who dies of grief and agony in Chen Wenzhi's bamboo garden.

In both novellas the grandmothers have a dominant presence: Dai Fenglian in *Red Sorghum* and Jiangshi in *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes*. Mo Yan portrays the Grandmother as a divine goddess of life and vitality who has an inseparable kinship with the land of red sorghum. She and the Grandfather first made love in the sorghum fields and produced the first seed of the red sorghum clan. Before she died, her blood flowed out of her body and soaked the fields while her soul flew high to Heaven like a dove. Her body thus becomes the symbol of the land of red sorghum which nurtures the successive generations. Su Tong's depiction of Jiangshi, however, is in a manner far from being romantic. As a woman with an extraordinary capacity for productivity, she is a source for life; yet this life spring is rapidly withering, being exhausted and finally drained up. When he tries to visualize how she might be standing in a paddy field, the first person narrator in *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes* imagines Jiangshi as a "barren mountain which, after being stripped of trees by men, is reforested with sons and daughters" (4). There is a triangular relationship of life-and-death forces connecting the Grandmother Jiangshi with the Grandfather Chen Baonian and the landowner Chen Wenzhi.

Robin Visser's observation on the thematic symbolism and structural mechanism of the rural-urban tension and confrontation in Su Tong' fiction finds a convincing illustration of these triangular inter-relations in the novella *Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes*. In many ways, Chen Baonian the Grandfather represents an inevitable trend of life: the abandonment of their home village and migration to cities. The heirless landowner Chen Wenzhi, whose babies were born deformed and dead, is the impersonation of the decayed way of life which leads to degeneration and impoverishment. Jiangshi the Grandmother eventually gives herself up to Chen Wenzhi to be his concubine after her only baby has been stolen away from her. The integration becomes a sorrowful signifier that the Maple-Poplar Village is the land of famine, the land of catastrophe and the land of death.

The images of the two Grandmothers in striking contrast have exercised immense impacts on the shaping of the two familial historiographies. Both stories are narrated by the first person narrators, who strive to reconstruct a family history including three generations, the Grandfather's, the Father's and the Grandson's. However, because of the way the two stories are being represented, the two novellas turn out to be incomparable in theme, style and meanings. *Red Sorghum* is set exclusively in the countryside about the land, imaginative or otherwise, where the first person narrator as the third generation descendent of the red sorghum clan has retrieved his roots. *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes*, on the other hand, is about the diasporas of the three generations from the rural region to the town "with all traces of small town flavour" (Su, 8), and then from the small town further to the big city. If *Red Sorghum* is a piece about re-rooting, *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes* can then be regarded as a story of uprooting, an allegorical representation of the unique process of urbanization in China's southeast of the 1930s. Despite of the differences between the two novellas, the two first person narrators as the third generation in the genealogical lines are painstakingly seeking for their ancestral origins.

While the first person narrator in *Red Sorghum* is an eloquent story-teller, the first person narrator in *Escapes* poses as a solitary poet. Like his counterpart in *Red Sorghum*, the first person narrator "I" in *Escapes* also has a wordless Father who "seems to be born mute" because of his heavy reticence (Su, 1).

He is facing a more difficult situation than his counterpart in the sense that the *Red Sorghum* narrator is a ready story-teller and he, on the contrary, is a quiet type like the Father as if a born mute. As the Father's reticence "has shrouded [his] family in a layer of mist for an entire half century" (1), the first person narrator is denied any access to that history shielded behind the Father's silence. Since there is nothing substantial readily available for him to work on, "the glorious past years of [his] family" can only be imaginative. The fantasized family history is "inarticulate and nonsensical" as his imagination has failed him pitifully. As a result, he has to ruin his script "[covering] the paper with red ink until there [is] no way to distinguish the words of the poem" (2). Not as fortunate as his *Red Sorghum* counterpart whose homeland seems much more retrievable in imagination as well as in narrative, the ancestral home in the Maple-Poplar Village has sunk so deeply in history that he is forever at loss which way to return home.

To a great extent, the first person narrators in the two novellas reconstruct their family histories for their own sake. In *Red Sorghum*, it is a process of moral and spiritual redemption. In *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes*, on the other hand, it is the journey in search of self and identity (Tang, 216). The first person narrator in *Escapes*, who moves to a metropolis at the age of nineteen, compares himself as a shapeless shadow. The second and the third paragraphs in the novella *Escapes* are anachronic sequences in close relation to each other. The second paragraph describes the first person narrator's unusual obsession for his shadow under the city street lights "[extending] arbitrarily over the cement sidewalk in an odd manner, like a reed caught in the wind" (Su, 1). In his shadow, he as the Grandson sees the image of a fugitive and his resemblance to the Father. The third paragraph which mirrors and parallels the second is an analeptical sequence about the Father's indulgence with his own shadow. There is an obvious indication that the Father too sees his own father, the Grandfather, and himself in the shadow as he "stared at the changing shadow on the ground" (2). The two anachronic sequences bring together the three generations in one identical portrayal of the tripartite. As they remove further and further from their native roots, the Grandfather, the Father and the Son/the Grandson all become shadows which resemble the portraits of fugitives forever on the run. The silent, ever-changing shadows are chasing and haunting one another with the Grandfather's hanging around the Father stubbornly and with the Father's chasing the Son/the Grandson down the street screaming. In order to trace his ancestral origin and reconstruct his family genealogy, the first person narrator has to restore the shapes and images, the voices and words, the events and stories of his family members who have been long forgotten and erased from memory and history. It is again the anachronies in the structure of discourse narrative that exercise the power of resurrecting and reconstructing.

In the restoration of the family genealogy, the Father, on the one hand, is a crucial link connecting the older generation with the younger generations; on the other hand, he acts as a link re-establishing the continuity from the past to the present. With the realization that they are "all links in the great chain of reproduction and multiplication" (1), the first person narrator initiates his move to connect with the Father. About a half way through the novella, an anachronic sequence suddenly interrupts the continuity of the story about the Maple-Poplar Village and describes the last time the Son visited the Father who was gravely ill in the hospital. The first person narrator recited a poem by an unknown artist about the story of a father and a son:

We walked in the rain and the
 Intervals between the rains;
 Our shoulders are distinctly touching,
 But we need not utter a word;
 We just came out of the house,
 So there is nothing we want to say;
 This is what comes
 Of living together for too long ...
 Father and I walked calmly along
 With affection we can't express ...

The Father was obviously touched by the poem. On that day, "Father cast aside his dumbness and spoke to [him] in a loud voice" (27). Unfolded before him were the stories about the eight members of his family, about the famine and deaths in the Maple-Poplar Village, and about the glory and the downfall of the town once flourished with bamboo-ware businesses.

The positioning of this anachronic sequence is structurally and thematically significant. Inserted between the episodes about Uncle Gouzai's desperate flight to the city and the Father's spectacular birth, it suggests that the Father is a midpoint on the chain of the Chen family genealogy. He is the key for unlocking the mystery of the Chen family history even though he may be an unfilial source for disclosing the buried history of the Chen family. Unlike the Father in *Red Sorghum* who was not only born in Northeast Gaomi Township; but also was brought up there, the Father in *Escapes*, however, was kidnapped from Jiangshi the Grandmother by the little woman Huanzi after her miscarriage and was brought to the city when he was still a baby. While the Father in *Red Sorghum* witnessed the mutilation of Uncle Arhat, the Grandfather's heroic battle, and the Grandmother's divine death, which are the essential components of the red sorghum saga, the Father in *Escapes* has no way to verify himself as an informant either for the history of the Maple-Poplar Village or for the rise and fall of the town of the bamboo craftsmanship and business.

Because of the unreliability of the Father as a mediator, the first person narrator makes himself a family chronicler of a very different kind. The narrator in *Red Sorghum* as an eloquent story-teller takes it for granted that imagination, fabrication and exaggeration are necessary ingredients in the reconstruction of a family history. He feels no guilt whatsoever for claiming to be and playing as the omniscient creator of the red sorghum epic. The narrator in *Escapes*, however, is an introvert and reticent poet obsessed with a strong sense of insecurity and insufficiency. Unable to justify his reluctant choice of constructing the family history out of void, he constantly reminds the readers of the painful fact instead of making believe as "I" does in *Red Sorghum*. He has to step in and out of the story—he steps in to reconstruct his family genealogy and steps out to make a counter-statement against his inventions. As his narration shifts back and forth in space, the narrative temporality travels accordingly back and forth between the past and the present. Anachronism occurs to provide him with the structural convenience to release his aesthetic and poetic anxiety.

The first person narrator casts a skeptical light on the historicity of his family genealogy from the very start. Besides the revelation about his family which he gave out at the hospital ward, the Father spins out tales from time to time when he gets drunk at home. There are two instances of getting drunk in the anachronic sequences in the beginning part of the novella. The Son got drunk speaking to an invisible partner: "Last winter when we got drunk, you and I overturned a bottle of red ink and drew the portraits of the eight members of my family on the wall" (2). After the Father got drunk, he "would draw close to [the Son's] ear and, with alcohol-laden breath, slowly spit out the names of our kinsfolk: Jiangshi the Grandmother, Chen Baonian the Grandfather, the eldest son Gouzai and the little woman Huanzi" (3-4).

The analeptical sequence about the Father immediately after the episode about the Son's drinking party brings the two generations side by side mirroring each other. The Son resembles the Father. The family history is not at all more tangible to the Father than it is to the Son. It only takes shape and thus comes to existence when their imagination reaches its height due to the effect of alcohol.

In their spinning of wild tales, the two physical objects that would materialize the fantasy of the Father and the Son are the landowner Chen Wenzhi's black brick manor in the Maple-Poplar Village and the Grandfather Chen Baonian's wooden house in the bamboo-ware city. The landowner and the Grandfather are the two major axes in the historiographical composition of the Chen clan. The story line in the family chronicle alternates between the two loci with one representing the countryside and the other the city. The first person narrator has two anachronic appearances interrupting the fluidity of narration to comment on the two houses. One is his proleptical surfacing which follows the narration about the Grandfather's escape to the city from the Maple-Poplar Village seven days after the wedding. He turns away from the Grandfather's story (the past) to talk about his visit (the present) to the site of the old town known for its bamboo handicrafts in the lower valley of the Yangtze River. One dark evening, he found himself in a shabby lane of great age where the Grandfather's bamboo shop had used to stand. The multi-storied wooden house had been long gone. But it does not matter to him whether certain landmarks or physical remainders still exist and whether they had ever existed at all. Its presumed existence is sufficient to serve as proof of authenticity for any historical facts. It functions as a catalyst activating the imagination and creativity that are essential in the making of his family chronicle. In his second proleptical presence after the introduction of the Grandmother's story, the first person narrator expresses his opinion regarding the relations between historiography and imagination, between historicity and fabrication:

Whenever I imagine life in the Maple-Poplar Village in those far off years, that black brick manor existed or not is not important; what is meaningful is that it has become a silent symbol which accompanies the emergence of Jiangshi the Grandmother. Or perhaps the black brick manor is a stage prop given to me by the Grandmother in order to call forth my amazing powers of imagination. (5)

The first person narrator's excessive concern about process of making catches on critical attention. Or it is rather the author, Su Tong's concern even though he cautions – speaking directly to the readers in the novella – not to identify him, the writer, with the first person narrator. Critics waste no time to point out the technique as one of the many traces of postmodernist fiction writing in Su's novellas (Tang, 206). They may be well justified in their observation and claim. Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodernist fictions – those novels that, by definition, are self-referential or auto-representational – suggest that the mimetic connection between art and life has changed. It no longer operates entirely at the level of product alone, but instead functions on the level of process, too. The focus here is not on the reader and the author as individual, real historical agents, or the focus on the text as the product of action; but on the processes involved in the discursive context of the writing and reading of the text (Hutcheon, 61). To a great extent, *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes* (*Red Sorghum* as well), is fiction that includes in itself commentaries on its own narrative identity, laying bare the process involved in the making of the family history.

Both *Escapes* and *Red Sorghum* are punctuated by the frequent anachronic appearances of the first person narrators, who interrupt the otherwise linear narration of their family histories and, with either proleptical or analeptical episodes, surface to make comments about their own narrating. In *Red Sorghum*, the first person narrator, in his anachronic interferences, discloses purposefully the secrets of how he changes his role from a passive listener to an omniscient observer and finally to a super omniscient narrator. With his structural manipulation within narrative discourse, “telling” and “showing” seem to become reconciled and merged towards the end of the novella. He has succeeded in creating an illusion that whatever he tells in his stories is accountable and believable. In *Escapes*, however, there is a great tension between the act of telling and the act of showing which refuse to make any compromise with each other. In his anachronic appearances, the first person narrator feels it necessary to cut short his narration from time to time and remind the readers how he has created the precious events and characters. The process of fantasizing and fabricating in his case makes him much more preoccupied with the products of imagination. He feels obligated to confess to the readers about the processes of making and fictionalizing within the mechanism of narrative discourse.

The strategy of laying bare the processes of making rather than creating out of void has released the first person narrator from the narrative tension and the textual anxiety. In the making of his family history, he is no longer dead-locked in the inaccurate information, the unreliable information, lack of information or no information at all. History thus becomes accessible to him; for historiography is a poetic construct. And history is tangible to him; for it is made by its writer (White, ix). In two anachronic sequences, the first person narrator in fact physically connects with the history and with people belonging to that time as one of the links on the chain of his family genealogy. As a genealogical continuation of that history, he is standing at the other end of the passage of time watching and observing. Immediately after the episode in which the landowner Chen Wenzhi voyeuristically peeped on his black brick manor at Jiangshi and saw the Grandmother who was then pregnant with another baby, the first person narrator makes an anachronic surfacing to state his comment: “In 1934 Grandmother Jiangshi was pregnant again. My father was eager to be born while I concealed myself and watched them from yet another historical niche. This is how the chains of humanity hang on me” (Su, 5). In an earlier anachronic interference, he imagines himself sitting on one annual ring of an ancient tree which signifies such a long ago year that will never reappear. He sits upright on it reviewing the sad human events of nineteen thirty-four (4).

Since the first person narrator connects with the past in time and space, history becomes a stage for him with himself as a director orchestrating his family dramas. The temporal and special discrepancy between the past and the present is no longer an obstacle blocking his imagination. He is set free to step in and out of the different temporal zones in the process of making and constructing. Sometimes he imagines himself as a participant of history seeing and hearing his family members in person (Tang, 210). When he stages the first encounter between the Grandmother and the little woman Huanzi (by then as the Grandfather's mistress who was pregnant with his baby), the first person narrator fantasizes not only hearing the conversation between the two women but also the footsteps of Chen Baonian the Grandfather.

He eavesdrops the same conversation together with the Grandfather despite the fifty years' lapse in time. The anachronism not only erases the temporal discrepancy between the past and the present but also the distance between the two generations. At another time, history emerges from the past making its illusive appearance in the present. When talking about the attic over the Grandfather's bamboo crafts shop, the first person narrator imagines seeing human figures who "peep at us from the attic which is forever gone. They are suspended in the void of nineteen thirty-four" (Su, 4).

It is the eight remaining members and their anecdotes that consist of the most important portions of "the sad human events of nineteen thirty-four" (38). And each of them who appears in the story has a distinct image. Bits and pieces of the information surrounding them are presented for the first time as the static snapshots before they are set in motion with actions and speeches. Each character enters the stage with a tableau and is made to exit the drama of the Chen family history when his/her story is told. The first character emerges is Jiangshi the Grandmother:

Grandmother Jiang's long, skinny feet pressed firmly and motionlessly into the cold, muddy, wet rice paddy. She was a perfect picture of a rural woman in early spring. Her face was completely splattered with mud; her cheekbones stuck out permanently; and she hung her head to listen to the sounds of the baby in her womb. (4) Only after the creation of this unforgettable snapshot like image, is she allowed to move: planting rice seedlings, wading out of the paddy fields and walking along in the midst of the other farm workers. In his anachronic interference, the first person narrator sometimes points to the lack of evidence: "I have never seen Grandfather's bamboo knife" (15); "It is impossible that I have ever seen Chen Wenzhi's white porcelain jar" (24). Sometimes he countervails his own description of characters and events which are fabricated out of imagination: "The old folk surnamed Chen who had seen Jiangshi the Grandmother all told me that she was an ugly woman. She had neither garments of red cloth nor the breasts which bulged beneath red cloth garments like those of other female farm workers" (7). Other times, he worries that his imagination may go too far: "I should avoid describing these scenes in which Huanzi and Jiangshi were fighting. It bothers me to smear the image of Grandmother Jiang like this" (75).

In the process of making, the members of the Chen clan have been revived and the events related to them retrieved. A family history thus has been created. In the beginning of the novella, the first person narrator describes how the Father always leaves open the door of their house expecting the homecoming of the family members. As they enter and exit the stage of the Chen family history, they have fulfilled their homecoming visits and are destined to leave home again "wandering like black fish" (2). As his counterpart in *Red Sorghum* who, with the completion of the red sorghum saga, "respectfully invoke the heroic, aggrieved souls wandering in the boundless bright red sorghum fields of [his] hometown" (Mo, 1), the first person narrator of *Escapes*, with the reconstruction of the epic of the Maple-Poplar Village and the Bamboo-ware town, "dedicate a gigantic basket of flowers to the history of his family" (Su, 80). He still remains to be "a waving shadow" casting over the city where he lives. Yet it is a conspicuously different kind of "shadow" which has been given life and soul by the Father and the Grandfather, by the one hundred and thirty-nine bamboo craftsmen from the Maple-Poplar Village and their countless descendants. With the compilation of the Chen family chronicle, the wandering poet, the first person narrator of *Escapes*, has finally achieved his spiritual transcendence and moral cleansing.

In *Red Sorghum*, the first person narrator is able to put a full stop to the end of the historical drama of the red sorghum clan. For his counterpart in *Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes*, however, the story of the Maple-Poplar Village and the Bamboo-ware Town refuses to make its closure because the first person narrator has to keep the door of his home open for shadows, souls and ghosts of his ancestors who are still wandering like black fish. Through the intensive exercise of mind, both novellas achieve moral, intellectual and spiritual transcendence which involve the narrators, the writers as well as the readers.

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Notes

[1] Mo, Yan. 1986. "Red Sorghum". Mo Yan is the winner of 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature. In Howard Goldblatt. Tr. *Red Sorghum: A Chinese Novel*. N.Y.: Viking, 1993). The page numbers included as reference in my article follow Goldblatt's 1993 translation. The Chinese version of the novella "Red Sorghum" first appeared in *The People's Literature* 人民文学 3: 86-108. Apart from the prize-winning filmic adaptation by Zhang Yimou, Mo Yan's novella "Red Sorghum" may have been forgotten by Chinese domestic readers and may be virtually unknown to international readers. In the interview by Laifong Leung, Mo Yan informed her how the novella evolved into *Red Sorghum Saga Series* in the following words: "Because 'Red Sorghum' [the novellas] was so well received that the editor asked me to continue to write more. So I wrote five together, to form a series. Looking back, it would have been better if I had written a long novel instead. When I wrote the first work, I had not planned to extend it into a series. Because I had not thought through the fates of the characters, I ran into some minor technical problems."

[2] (Laifong Leung. 1994. *Morning Sun: Interviews with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 150). The Chinese version of "Red Sorghum", the novella, was first published by *The People's Literature* in 1986. I can argue that each component in *Red Sorghum: A Chinese Novel* could have been independent novellas: "Red Sorghum", "Sorghum Wine", "Dog Ways", "Sorghum Funeral" and "Strange Death". Other representative works in form of novella include "Crystal Carrots" and "Red Locusts". From the mid-1990s onward, Mo Yan has written seven powerful novels. That is proof of Mo Yan's creative talent as one of the greatest Chinese novelists since the 1980s.

[3] Su, Tong. 1987. "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes". In Kang Rongli. Ed. *Su Tong's Best Stories*. Sichuan, China: Southwest Normal University Press, 25-51. The page numbers included as reference in my article follow Michael Duke's English translation (*Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas*. Tr. Michael Duke. N.Y.: W. Morrow & Co., 1993). The Chinese version of Su Tong's novella "Nineteen Thirty-four Escapes" first appeared in 1987 in the literary journal *October* 十月. Quite a number of Su Tong's best known works are novellas. For instance, what Michael Duke categories as Su Tong's Maple-Poplar Series: "Wives and Concubines" (usually known as *Raise the Red Lantern* because of the film adaptation by the internationally acclaimed director Zhang Yimou), "Opium Family", "1934 Escapes". Other representative works include "Rouge" (usually known as "Blush"), "The Moral Corruption of the South" and many other.

[4] In the study of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, critics and scholars use various English terms for "寻根文学". Henry Y.H. Zhao refers to it as "roots-searching fiction" (Henry Y.H. Zhao. 1993. *Lost Boat: Avant-garde Fiction from China*. London, Wellsweep, 11). David De-wei Wang, on the other hand, traces the modern Chinese literary genre back to its pioneers Lu Xun and Shen Congwen and names it as "native soil literature/fiction" (Ellen Widmar and De-wei Wang. 1993. Eds. *From May Four to June Four: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 108).