Transgression in Texts: Literary Quality of Qi from Tang Tales of Marvels to Wang Xiaobo’s Tang Tales

by

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Graduate Department of East Asian Studies
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ABSTRACT

The modern Chinese writer, Wang Xiaobo (1952-1997), retold three tales from the Tang dynasty (618-907) twice during the last two decades of the twentieth century. In this dissertation I examine the intertextual and intratextual relations between these tales and find that Wang Xiaobo’s efforts at literary adaptation belong to a long tradition of Chinese fiction writing in which the writer’s perceptions of the world are displayed through transformative experiments with language, genre, and reader’s expectations, experiments based on the pursuit of qi 奇 (“the marvelous”) in Chinese narrative literature.

The literary quality of qi was first associated with Tang chuanqi 傳奇, or Tang tales of marvels. The Tang literati made use of shared literary knowledge in writing the Tang tales, and by engaging a literary spirit of you 遊 (“freedom of roaming”) in transgressing generic restrictions imposed by their classical education, they were able to present new perspectives on their own world. I argue that it is the pursuit of the literary quality of qi in Tang tales that makes transgression possible for the Tang literati in textual, generic, and thematic terms.
Even though the literary quality of *qi* was domesticated and waned after the Tang dynasty, it persisted through the next twelve hundred years. I take an intertextual and intergeneric approach in analyzing selected texts by writers active in the centuries between the Tang literati and Wang Xiaobo, and find that writers who espouse the literary values of fiction help to preserve and enrich the literary quality of *qi* in their work. Wang Xiaobo continues the tradition of experimenting with shared literary and generic knowledge to achieve a sense of *qi* in his adaptations, adding to it a touch of postmodern irony. Wang Xiaobo revitalizes the literary power of *qi* as a means of two-fold transformation through which writing changes the writer, and reading changes the reader.
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# Table of Contents

Chapter I: Introduction 1

Chapter II: Tang Tales of Marvels: To Amaze the Everyday World with *Qi* 17

Chapter III: *Qi* Domesticated and Reduced 57

Chapter IV: Breaking the Bondage: *Qi* in Chinese Fiction of the 1980s and 1990s 92

Chapter V: The Tang People and Our Time: *Qi* in Wang Xiaobo’s Intertextual Travel 137

Chapter VI: Conclusion 210

Works Cited 216
List of Figures

Fig. 1. Front Cover of Zhang Ailing, *Chuanqi* (Shanghai: Shanhe tushu company, 1947)

Fig. 2. “Calamity will soon befall the Xie Empire” (變國的災難要降臨了)

Fig. 3. Comparison of “Kunlun Slave” and “No.1-A Lixin Street and Kunlun Slave”

Fig. 4. Chapter Beginnings in *Looking for Peerless*
Chapter I
Introduction

A literary interest in the past characterizes the field of Chinese narrative fiction in the 1980s and 1990s, and among the many fictional narratives produced during this period, many display the writers’ perception over the bare events in the everyday world they live in. When a writer’s perception of these events appears as distinct from or even opposite to his/her reader’s surface impression of them, the writer’s words create for the reader a sense of fantasy. In this dissertation, by impression I refer to the superficial appearance of bare events that is seen through human eyes, and in contrast, by perception I refer to the more profound comprehension of those events through human imagination. This phenomenon in the Chinese literary field is not a new thing. It is indeed a revival of the literary quality of qi 奇 (the fantastic, the marvelous) in Chinese narrative literature.

The Chinese character qi 奇 literally means the fantastic, and as a literary quality in narrative writing it was originally associated with Tang chuanqi 唐傳奇 in the Tang dynasty (618-907).

In this dissertation I use “tales of marvels” to refer to chuanqi after consulting other scholars’ translations. The English term for Tang chuanqi has been various. Most scholars writing in English language choose to use the Chinese term’s English transliteration with a note to describe it. For example, James Hightower explains chuanqi as “transmitted marvels,”¹ Karl S. Y. Yao describes it as “accounts of the extraordinary;”² William Nienhauser, Jr. describes it as

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“transmissions of the strange, or transmissions of strange stories,”³ and Steven Owen describes it as “transmitting accounts of remarkable things.”⁴ Grahams Sanders both translates the term into English as “fantastic tales” and describes it as “transmitting the fantastic.”⁵ Precise are these descriptions are, they intend to cover all the tales in the genre. I choose to use “tales of marvels” to refer to chuanqi narrative mainly because such a term could best describe its aspect of transgression in everyday life, a feature that appeals to and inspires contemporary Chinese fiction writers such as Wang Xiaobo.

While tales of marvels acquired formal maturity in the Tang dynasty, some well-known tales continued to be thought of as enduring and brilliant literary expressions of human fantasies. According to Lu Xun, “Fiction, like poetry, underwent radical changes in the Tang dynasty,” and these radical changes mainly were embodied in qi, a literary quality with which the Tang writers deliberately invented strange adventures in exquisite literary words.⁶ During the Tang dynasty, however, tales of marvels made their debut more as a frivolous variant of official historiography. The extant texts of Tang tales preserved in literary collections record the narratives of the tales themselves, often with frame stories describing the occasions that prompted the writer to transcribe the tale (usually told orally as part of casual conversation), and sometimes the responses from the tale’s primary and immediate audience at the time of its telling. All these elements embedded in the text of these fantastic tales have travelled over twelve hundred years

and reached Chinese writers of contemporary China, especially those who aspire to display not only their impressions, but also their perceptions of the everyday world. Among all the rich legacies Tang tales have left for Chinese fiction, the literary quality of qi as mediated through an author who hears then passes on a story especially inspires contemporary Chinese writers.

When displaying their perceptions in writing, Chinese fiction writers in the 1980s and 1990s looked back to various past moments from the vantage of the present. The past described in some fictional works may be as recent and short as the period of the People’s Republic of China until the Great Cultural Revolution (1949-1976), as far back as the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945), or even extending back as long as three millennia to the Warring States Period (476-221BC) right up to the 1990s.\(^7\) In terms of critical reception of these works, however, the past described in these narratives is often considered more historical than fictional in nature. One reason is that most Chinese fiction writers of this period, like their pre-modern precedents, are still under the spell of historiography, and they unconsciously take historiography as their ideal model of writing and ultimate goal of literary pursuit. Correspondingly, critics inside and outside of China are also inclined to interpret the past written by these writers according to its relevance to official history. For example, Lin Qingxin argues that by subjectivizing history and representing the misrepresented in fictional works, some contemporary Chinese fiction writers provide a number of alternative or supplementary histories to the official histories, or zhengshi 正史.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) *To Live* (1994) by Yu Hua tells of the vicissitudes of Fugui and his family from 1949 to 1990s. *Red Sorghum* (1987) by Mo Yan narrates a family’s history in the Anti-Japanese war from 1933 to 1945 as remembered and retold by the family’s members in 1980s. *A Dictionary of Maqiao* (1996) by Han Shaogong presents a local history in a lexicological form from the Warring States period to the 1990s with an implied first-person narrator from beginning to end.

\(^8\) Lin Qingxin’s *Brushing History Against the Grain*, published in 2005, provides a detailed survey of the “fiction of history.” He notes the traditional imitation among fiction writers of the historians, and gives credit to contemporary writers’ literary efforts to enhance literature by writing historiographic metafiction. Such an approach reinstates the promising literary quality of fiction shown in these works; however, it also paradoxically undermines the self-
Other than in this traditional reading of literary works as offering an historical alternative, however, the past in these fictional works and the way the past is displayed can be interpreted as a continuation of the pre-modern literary quality of qi in narrative writing. Yet for various reasons, this mode of reading from the perspective of qi is seldom given significant attention by contemporary critics, nor is it studied in depth when it is mentioned.

The Critical Flaw in the Study of Contemporary Chinese Fiction

As with most scholarship relevant to contemporary China, the critical attention paid to fictional works that are rich in aesthetic values and literary significance has so far mostly focused on their social and political facets. Recent scholarship on historical and political aspects of contemporary Chinese fiction is especially strong and solid. The attention to the aesthetic values and literary significance of these works, however, is far from adequate. Writers who show more literary than political inclinations in their works are sometimes unfortunately ignored in the more sweeping critical discussions. Sometimes if these writers do attract critical attention, the critics’ focus is still more on elements that are extraneous to the narrative text. For example, writers like Ah Cheng 阿城, Mo Yan 莫言, Yu Hua 餘華, and Su Tong 蘇童 are often labelled contrastingly by critics as either “roots-searching” or “avant-garde”, yet such a divisive grouping approach
reveals little about overlapping literary and aesthetic values in their fiction writing. Or, even worse, writers who reject critical cages are duly deprived of any serious critical attention and the possible legitimacy associated therewith.

Wang Xiaobo 王小波 (1952-1997) typifies these critically-ignored writers. His fictional works and literary essays find sympathetic readers among Chinese intellectuals, and yet influential Chinese critics pay him little heed at best. The response is reciprocated, as the writer himself refuses to be categorized in any “circle of literature.” His posthumous idolization by young Chinese high school and university students has not won him significant critical attention either. For this reason, even though his unique re-writing of a few well-known Tang tales of marvels enriches the literary quality of qi greatly, the literary values of fantasy in his writing remain to be discovered and discussed.

The preference for discussing social and political facets of contemporary Chinese fiction rather than the aesthetic and literary values of the fiction itself indicates a critical partiality in academic studies on Chinese fiction. An awareness of the dangers of such a critical partiality has recently alerted some scholars to potential flaws and inspired them to offer more discussions of alternative approaches to the Chinese fiction of today. In Fictional Authors, Imaginary Audiences published in 2003, Bonnie S. McDougall points out “a persistent methodological problem” when describing the state of Chinese fiction criticism in the English-speaking world in the twentieth century. She asks: “To what extent can literature, especially fiction, provide observers with reliable information about the political, economic and social realities of its time?” Her answer is: very little. The question implies that the motivation for English-speaking scholars to study modern and contemporary Chinese fiction lies in something more than, or other than, the literary. As a result, comparatively speaking, the literary quality of narrative texts has

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been the least discussed aspect of modern and contemporary Chinese fiction in English-language critical scholarship on the subject.

A critical preference for social and political facets over aesthetic and literary values in fictional texts is not only common, but even intrinsic to the historical study of Chinese fiction both inside and outside of China. For example, when speaking of periodization of Chinese literary history, it is almost universally agreed that the term “modern period” generally means the period from 1919 to 1949. Two events, more of a social and political nature than a literary one, took place in those two years: the May Fourth Movement in 1919 and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China on the mainland in 1949. The term “contemporary period” refers to the period from 1949 to the present. However, due to the lack of surviving literary production from mainland China during the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the contemporary period in the mainland Chinese literary field is de facto a period mainly represented by the three decades since 1978, the year when “Chinese Economic Reform” was started by Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997).

While historical events can arguably be clearly labelled and dated, literature is by nature not a clear-cut process and resists the imposition of fixed categories. Instead, its history is gradual and ambiguous, sometimes sporadic and contingent. For example, in the above-mentioned periodization of modern and contemporary Chinese fiction, the modern actually finds its beginning as early as the late imperial period at the end of the nineteenth century; and in the contemporary designation, some aspects of literary movements are repeatedly identified as a continuation, an echo, or a revival of some literary efforts of the 1930s.¹¹ A social and historical

¹¹ For the literary continuation from pre-modern to modern and contemporary, refer to Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, ed. The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China’s May Fourth Project (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001). Chen Pingyuan also touches upon the topic of the continuation of literary tradition in modern China in his numerous essays and books, the most insightful and inspirational parts of which are collected in Chen’s Ershì shì jiān zhōngguó xiǎoshuò shì diyì juǎn (1897-1916) 二十世紀中國小說史，第一卷 [A History of Twentieth-century
approach to literature therefore contributes more to our knowledge of the extraneous study of literature than to our critical study of meanings produced by the literary works themselves. The drawback of such an approach lies in the priority given to what is external to the narrative text, for the critical focus on such elements outside the narrative text often turns the discussion toward explaining how a certain literary work is determined by the writer, by the writer’s life, and by the writer’s time, and often toward fashioning a critical account of how a literary work can mimetically represent the actual world in the time when that literary work was produced. The writer’s own literary perceptions and aesthetic gestures expressed in the narrative text are then pushed into a corner and given little attention.

A critical focus on elements external to the narrative text may help answer questions about why a writer writes in a certain generic tradition, and why he/she selects a certain topic to write on; yet it explains little about how the writer makes the specific work appealing to readers of his/her own age, or even to those of future ages. Such an external focus sheds little light on why the text connects the writer and his/her readers in terms of shared literary competence. Indeed, for those authors who write more to expand the aesthetic aspects of a literary tradition than to produce its social and political extensions, it can hardly do justice to their works’ textual values if a reader only looks for the social and political meanings in them. The reader may fail to appreciate the generic continuation within which these texts were written, and may hardly see the beautiful formal tapestry of the text into which the writers skillfully weave their perceptions.

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12 I borrow part of the concept of literary competence from Jonathan Culler in his Structuralist Poetics (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975), mainly his usage of the term as referring to an awareness of the conventions, genres and rules which is required for an understanding of literature. Graham Sanders’ work on literary competence in poetry performance in pre-modern China explores the concept in the Chinese context. See Graham Sanders, Words Well Put: Visions of Poetic Competence in the Chinese Tradition (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006).
The artistry of textual tapestry, however, is precisely where a reader can see how the writer connects himself/herself to a tradition of genre, to his/her reader, and to his/her own perceptions of his/her world. For example, in Wang Xiaobo’s repeated efforts to rewrite Tang tales of marvels, one can see his special interest and undaunted efforts in showing his perception in a distinctively artistic way. Writers classified into groups also have made unique contributions to the reservoir of artistic forms of presenting perception in words. From the “root-searching” trend in the 1980s to “avant-garde” experimentation starting in the 1990s, and reaching even further into the twenty-first century, these critically grouped authors write in close yet different intertextual relations to the tradition of literary fantasy in classical Chinese fiction. For example, the narrative in *The King of Chess* (*棋王 Qiwang*) (1986) by Ah Cheng centers on the protagonist’s self-identity as rooted in a game of Chinese chess that is symbolic of the traditional Chinese philosophy of Daoism. “Classical Love” (*古典愛情 Gudian aiqing*) (1986) by Yu Hua narrates a lasting romance between a member of the pre-modern Chinese literati and a fair maiden in a typically disinterested tone characteristic only of modern times, a tone that both subverts and consolidates a sense of fantasy in the clichéd romance. Su Tong literally flaunts historiography with his historical fantasy in *My Life as an Emperor* (*我的帝王生涯 Wode diwangshengya*) (1992) and boldly connects the narrative in his fiction more with the art of music and the lyric than with any factual record of an emperor’s life. These “grouped” writers may not be as immune to the spell of historiography as Wang Xiaobo, but their unique literary ways of constructing fantasy in words are not fully captured by their labels and merit more significant critical attention.

**Methodology in this Dissertation: Textual Analysis and Intertextual Analogies**
My dissertation aims to devote more critical attention to the literary values of Chinese fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, with a focus on the writers’ artistry in composing fantasy in words. It dissects the artistic tapestry of the narrative text in light of generic developments and intertextual references. Chinese writers of the 1980s and 1990s write at virtually the end of a long tradition of Chinese fiction that originated more than a millennium ago. In the centre of my discussion is the literary quality of qi; this quality is embodied in the writers’ use of linguistic and generic knowledge to portray their unique perception of the world in their respective texts.

Indeed, the narrative text is where we find answers to the basic research questions in this dissertation. As human beings we like to hear stories, and we love to read these stories in written form, too, as if by doing so we could freeze the flux of meanings implanted in the narrative text by the writing hand. The text seems to be the straightforward medium of communication between the writer and the reader. However, it is also a fact that the meanings contained in the text continue to shift constantly through readerly interpretation. Different readers find different meanings in the text, and sometimes the same text produces different meanings for the same reader at different times and places. Human efforts to freeze the flux of meaning more often than not make the flux of meaning more active than before.

In the field of fiction, the meanings that a writer implants in his/her writing are from his/her impressions or perceptions of his/her world. If a writer puts his/her impressions of his/her world in the text, the meanings are at least true to the surface details of that world. As a result, it is possible and easy for the reader to find references to the actual world so as to fix the flux of meanings. If it is the writer’s perceptions of the world that he/she inserts into the writing, then it is more challenging for the reader to comprehend the writer’s message, for compared with impressions, the writer’s perceptions are farther from the surface of the writer’s world, and thus rely more on the writer’s literary talents in representing the imagined. How much and in what
way the meanings are picked up by the reader will then depend heavily upon how much the reader’s existent literary knowledge overlaps with that of the writer.

In fiction that aims to display the writer’s perceptions of the world, there is therefore a gap between the writer’s message and the reader’s reception of that message. The gap lies in the text, where the writer leaves his/her message for the reader to interpret. In this dissertation I explore this gap in some contemporary Chinese fictional works, analyzing how a writer encodes his/her message in literary words and in the context of literary traditions; and simultaneously I discuss how much and in what way a reader picks up a writer’s message and decodes that message into valid meanings in the reading process.

The reader’s act of reading can help validate meanings in the gaps texts create. On the one hand, in the act of reading, the writer and the reader share some of their knowledge regarding language styles, narrative perspectives, and generic features in the text, but not at the same time. The reader’s act of reading eliminates the limitations created by the temporal space between the moment of writing and the moment of reading. The reader and the writer thus find a common ground on which to construct meanings together across time. On the other hand, if the reader’s knowledge of language styles, narrative perspectives, and generic features are different from that of the writer’s, then the reader’s act of reading leads to a new space that might generate new meanings. These new meanings might not be consistent with the writer’s original perceptions, but they are still valid in the reader’s interpretation. Whichever the case, a common desire in both the writer and the reader to cross the lines that divide the reader and the writer in time, space, and meaning-production is implicit in the reader’s act of reading.

For example, a member of the literati in the Tang dynasty who writes down a tale of marvels may share with all his readers, in the Tang dynasty as well as a thousand years later, a common understanding and acceptance of the generic requirements for factuality in writing a
“biography,” in which a person’s factual life is recorded in a formal and straightforwardly written Chinese literary language. Similarly, the Tang writer may also share with his readers across time a belief that a poem in the tradition of the “Chu lyrics 楚辭” needs to go beyond impressions of this world and roam freely into a realm of visionary images and perceptions. Or it might happen that the Tang writer breaks away from the restrictions of literary convention and starts to establish his/her own stance in the text. In this case, the writer could only use his/her unique literary talents distilled in the text to persuade his/her readers, both his contemporary ones and those of today, to accept his stance as it is. If the writer persuades the reader in the act of reading, as is the case of a number of Tang tales of marvels, then it is safe to say that the reader of the texts also joins in the procedure of breaking down those restrictions of shared past knowledge, of convention. Ultimately, all answers can be and should be found in textual analysis and intertextual analogies.

**Objectives of this Dissertation**

This dissertation singles out the literary quality of *qi* in fiction as a thread in the long tradition of Chinese fiction writing and traces its fluctuations from the Tang dynasty to the end of the last century, during which the literary quality of *qi* takes lively and productive forms in Wang Xiaobo’s tales adapted from texts from the Tang dynasty. As one of the essential aesthetic aspects of the tradition of classical Chinese fiction, the literary quality of *qi* is, however, often marginalized and repressed in that tradition. Writers engaging and producing the literary quality of *qi* in their fiction often provide readers with a new perspective on the factual surface of life. Instead of slavishly recording a writer’s impressions of the world, *qi* helps the writer express his/her perceptions of what he/she believes underlies and often subverts the world’s surface. Sometimes, with help of *qi*, a writer also vividly displays his/her imagination about the world
clearly in words. In other words, *qi* is the writer’s fantasy in words. Furthermore, *qi* also encourages a reader to distance himself/herself from a surface impression of the world, and subsequently opens a communication channel in the text that connects the writer of fantasy and the reader of fantasy.

When a writer integrates his/her interest in the literary past into his/her narrative text, this shows some part of the literary quality of *qi*; and when a reader is lured by such an interest into a reading journey to discover that literary quality, the following questions will be asked: Why does a certain writer choose a certain tradition to follow or respond to? In what relation does he or she hold his or her own world, temporally and spatially, with regards to the past world he or she observes? How do cultural and literary meanings in the source text travel through time and still provoke smiles of recognition from today’s readers, inspiring contemporary readers to relate the text to their own world? And ultimately, how does a contemporary writer adapt the pre-modern texts and reset them into a contemporary literary structure whose meanings break away from limits of historical time in the eye of beholding readers?

To be more specific, I answer the following research questions in the next five chapters. How does the literary quality of *qi* both help traditional Chinese fiction to develop its generic independence with the production of the tales of marvels in the Tang dynasty, as well as allow these tales to remain inspirational for Chinese fiction writers and readers of today? How does the literary quality of *qi* travel through the centuries across prose, poetry, and even drama, to reach the field of China prose fiction in the 1980s and 1990s? When Wang Xiaobo picks a few Tang tales to rewrite first in the 1980s and then again in the 1990s, what has he transformed in his two sets of texts based on the same pre-modern source texts? In spite of his own claim that he belongs to no “circle of literature,” is there any shared artistic pursuit in terms of literary fantasy between Wang Xiaobo and his contemporaries who somehow display similar interest in the
literary past of pre-modern China? In what specific ways have Wang Xiaobo and those contemporary Chinese fiction writers discussed in this dissertation continued and enriched the long literary tradition to portray perceptions in addition to mere impressions of the everyday world in fiction? Can these writers and their writing, like the Tang tales that gave them such inspiration, find resonance in the next generation and beyond?

This dissertation is neither a comprehensive historical study of the genre of fiction in the Chinese context, nor is it a comprehensive survey of all Wang Xiaobo’s life and works. Rather, it aims to answer more specific questions based on close textual reading and intertextual analogy in the reading process. The research questions answered here are not so general as to cover all the generic features of Chinese fiction; nor will these questions be exclusively related to every detail of Wang Xiaobo’s life and writings. Instead, I present an in-depth comparative study of Wang Xiaobo’s re-writing of some Tang tales, three of which were re-told twice in Wang’s own writings. My discussion of the literary quality of qi in Wang Xiaobo’s works is contextualized within the tradition of Chinese fiction. For this purpose a few writers between the Tang dynasty and Wang Xiaobo’s time are discussed briefly, and these writers’ works are revealed to provide other sources of inspiration to Wang Xiaobo and his contemporaries writing in this tradition. Wang Xiaobo’s texts bears intertextual relations not only to Tang texts, but also to his own previous texts. By moving across the boundaries that divide what I will designate as his hypotexts and his hypertexts, he prepares in words a journey of fantasy for his readers. His repeated efforts to expand and revise his own texts also create an intratextual relation between the two sets of hypertexts.13

13 Gérard Genette developed five types of “transtextuality” in his Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree, trans., Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1997). His concept of hypertext inspires most of this dissertation. According to Genette, hypertext refers to “any text derived from a previous text either through simple transformation …or through indirect transformation” (7). In case of the classical
The next chapter discusses the origins of classical Chinese fiction, identifying the guiding thread of qi as the key to understanding the Tang tales of marvels. To Tang writers, the literary quality of qi is both a means and an end of their tales. Qi is the literary expression of their fantasy in tales: a fantasy portrayed in classical Chinese language and thematically representing their perception of romantic relations that cross social boundaries. Such fantasy that embodies an imagined world can sometimes contradict the everyday world’s surface image. To present their literary fantasies, Tang writers engage their literary talents fully in such Tang tales as “The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest” (虬髯客傳 Qiranke zhuan), “Kunlun Slave” (昆侖奴 Kunlun nu), “Red Thread” (紅線 Hongxian), “Yingying’s Story” (鶯鶯傳 Yingying zhuan), “The Tale of Li Wa” (李娃傳 Liwa zhuan), and “An Explication of the Lament from Xiang River (湘中怨解 Xiangzhongyuan jie). The texts of these tales and the literary techniques Tang writers use in these tales are both sources of inspiration to contemporary Chinese fiction writers.

The third chapter discusses the decline of the literary quality of qi after the Tang dynasty. In pre-modern imperial China, from the tenth century to nineteenth century, the rebellious, challenging, and transformative elements in Tang tales of marvels gave way to the formal accomplishments and thematic conventionality of the classical prose narrative chuanqi and classical verse drama chuanqi, which are adapted from Tang tales. In the early Republican period in the first half of the twentieth century, immediate political demands and social unrest in China restricted in many ways the domain in which fiction writers could express their perception of a world that might show an image different from initial surface impressions. The literary legacy of qi since the Tang dynasty, however, finds sporadic and yet equally powerful expressions in works like Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio (聊齋志异 Liaozhai zhiyi) by Pu Songling 蒲

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Chinese concept of fiction that is represented by Chuanqi, it becomes a case of both a simple transformation and an indirect transformation.
松齡 (1640-1715), Border Town (邊城 Biancheng) by Shen Congwen 沈從文 (1902-1988), and Tales of Marvels (傳奇 Chuanqi) by Zhang Ailing 張愛玲 (aka Eileen Chang, 1920-1995). Each work contributes new ways of constructing fantasy in literary words, leaving new legacies for contemporary Chinese writers writing in the same tradition of qi.

The fourth chapter discusses literary efforts made by Chinese writers of the 1980s and 1990s to revive the literary quality of qi. According to major literary critics, two major nominally contrary “schools” of fiction—“roots-searching” and “avant-garde” schools—dominated the two culturally feverish decades of post-Mao China. However, my reading of works from these two “schools” reveals a kinship between them based on their shared interest in displaying processes of perception instead of surface impressions of the world. In works like The King of Chess by Ah Cheng, Red Sorghum (紅高粱 Hong gaoliang) by Mo Yan, “Classical Love” by Yu Hua, and My Life as Emperor by Su Tong, literary fantasy is often produced in the same way that it was in the Tang dynasty. In these works, the apparently formidable demands of writing in line with external political and social propriety collapse in the writer’s act of writing and the reader’s act of reading.

The fifth chapter studies Wang Xiaobo’s rewriting of a few renowned Tang tales of marvels. A thorough discussion of Wang Xiaobo’s self-defined literary position on fiction in favor of fantasy is offered before I narrow in on the intertextual comparison of three selected Tang tales of marvels: Wang Xiaobo’s initial rewriting of these tales in Tales of the Tang People (唐人故事 Tangren gushi), and his later re-writings based on the same Tang tales in The Bronze Age (青銅時代 Qingtong shidai). Wang Xiaobo’s re-writing in the 1980s foregrounds his literary position first as a reader with literary competency and then, akin to his Tang counterparts twelve hundred years ago, as a cultured writer with a strong awareness of the literary tradition. In
*Tales of the Tang People* he deliberately uses structural irony as a literary method to validate his fantasy in words, and his parody of classical literary language predicts his more confident literary maneuvers a decade later. In the 1990s, *The Bronze Age* surprised his readers by revisiting three fantasies based on Tang tales. In this book, published posthumously, his deftness in switching narrative perspectives skillfully and his confidence in using modern literary Chinese language throughout the text reveal that he inherits and transforms the long tradition of Chinese fiction to construct literary fantasies. Wang Xiaobo injects a touch of wit into the concept of *qi* in this tradition.

The last chapter concludes with a review of how the literary quality of *qi* relates to the tradition of Chinese fiction and confirms its vitality in transgressing the limits of, and indeed transforming, the tradition. *Qi* refers to the construction and realization of the fantastic effect in fiction through literary means. Even though it reached a height in the Tang tales of marvels, it continued to heavily inform the writing and reading of major contemporary Chinese fiction. As it did in the Tang dynasty, *qi* continues to enable writers to vividly present their perceptions about this world to all willing readers.
Chapter II

Tang Tales of Marvels: To Amaze the Everyday World with Qi

Having delineated my aims in this dissertation, as well as the significance of Tang tales of marvels in answering my research questions about contemporary Chinese fiction, I will now define the literary quality of qi in a more detailed and specific discussion of several Tang tales of marvels. I will first explicate the formation of the literary quality of qi in Tang tales by tracing the origins of classical Chinese fiction. Then, through analyzing some well-known Tang tales of marvels, I will outline how the literary quality of qi is constructed in Tang tales and how it is received by the reader.

The Origins of Classical Chinese Xiaoshuo and Its Traditional Mission

Xiaoshuo 小說 is the umbrella genre subsuming Tang chuanqi 傳奇, or Tang tales of marvels. It is the native Chinese term for fiction, but it has a multivalent meaning that has developed over time. Classical Chinese xiaoshuo is a literary genre that gradually developed from diverse origins. When scholars look for the formative elements of xiaoshuo in imperial China, they find wide-ranging possibilities. For example, Hu Shih 胡適 (1891-1962) believed that parables and fables recorded by thinkers of the pre-Qin era (before 221 BCE) to illustrate their philosophical teachings are the earliest form of xiaoshuo.¹ Some scholars later confirmed Hu Shih’s belief and label certain parables and fables from the pre-Qin era as “the earliest examples of short stories (duanpian xiaoshuo)”.² Lu Xun 魯迅 (aka Zhou Shuren 周樹人, 1881-

¹ See Hu Shih, “On Short Stories (Lun duanpian xiaoshuo)” in Hu Shhi gudian wenxue yanjiu lunji 胡適古典文學研究論集 (Hu Shih on Classical Literature) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988).
1936), however, offered solid evidential research in designating a group of anecdotes about famous historical figures recorded in the Jin dynasty (265-420) as the first group of *xiaoshuo*.³ Modern scholars like Hou Zhongyi 侯忠義 (b. 1936) and Wu Zhida 吳志達 (b. 1931) disagree with Lu Xun. They insist that *xiaoshuo* as a genre of prose fiction was born as early as the Han dynasty (206 BCE-206 CE).⁴ As different as these scholars’ views are from one another, there is one commonality to these designated origins: the first *xiaoshuo* writings are all insignificant and supplementary to other genres. Among the many genres that have overshadowed *xiaoshuo*, historiography is the most influential one.

* Xiaoshuo has traditionally been valued for its political and practical function from its very beginnings. Its own literary value was not of much importance: the two Chinese characters for *Xiaoshuo* 小説 literally mean “petty discourses.” The earliest record of the term *xiaoshuo* extant in any text is in *Zhuangzi* 莊子⁵ (350-300 BCE), in which the insignificance of *xiaoshuo* is shown in sharp contrast to the ultimate truth of *Dao*. The practical function of “petty discourses” to help illustrate *Dao* becomes the major reason for their existence.⁶ In the field of pre-modern historiography, *xiaoshuo* is similarly considered useful as a supplemental record of insignificant people and events. For example, Huan Tan 桓譚 (ca. 43 BCE-28 CE) in his *Xin lun* 新論 (New Treatise) defines *xiaoshuo jia*, or masters of *xiaoshuo*, as those who collect insignificant

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⁵ 仲小説以幹縣令，其于大達亦遠矣. Chapter 26, *Zhuangzi*. “Refine petty discourses to achieve fame, it is far from reaching great enlightenment.”

⁶ Dr. Liang Shi in his *Reconstructing the Historical Discourse of Traditional Chinese Fiction* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002) provides a most convincing analysis of such a concept of *xiaoshuo* as in the dichotomy of small talk and the Great *Dao*, or Truth (39-42).
fragments in short writings drawing analogies with matters in their immediate lives. A later historian, Ban Gu 班固 (32-92 CE), records in his *Han History* (*Hanshu*) that writers of *xiaoshuo* probably started writing in the capacity of *baiguan* 草官 (a petty official historian). According to Ban Gu, as a *baiguan*, the writer collects street talk, laneway gossip, and even hearsay. *Xiaoshuo* thus originated as a supplemental variant of historiography that aimed only to record superficial impressions. The writers of *xiaoshuo* wrote down their impressions as they collected details that were not important enough to be included in grand official histories.

*Xiaoshuo*’s status as a variant of historiography was unsettled in the Six Dynasties (220-589), when *zhiguai* 志怪 (records of the strange) became one of its major forms. Some scholars, such as Robert Company, argue that *zhiguai* is not merely a record, but a processed literary product. Other scholars, such as William Nienhauser Jr., insist that *zhiguai* is still written in the tradition of historiography. Both positions are valid in their own ways. For example, of the 454 records collected in *Sou shen ji* 搜神記 (A Record of the Immortals) by Gan Bao 干寳 (d. 336 CE), most are about figures and events outside most people’s common experiences of the world. Yet most of these records follow the tradition of pre-modern historiography and, as claimed by

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7 The extant text of Huan Tan’s *New Treatise* is incomplete; however, Huan’s definition of “masters of *xiaoshuo*” remains in most versions: “若其小說家, 合叢殘小語, 近取譬論, 以作短書。” (As for the masters of *xiaoshuo*, they assemble small words insignificant and fragmentary, making analogies to the immediate, and thereby compose short writings.) The definition is recorded in Li Shan 李善’s (ca. 689) *Wenxuan zhu* 文選注 (Annotations on Selected Literary Texts), vol 31 (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1977), in which he also makes annotations to poems by Jiang Wentong 江文通 (aka Jian Yan 江淹 444-505).

8 Ban Gu, “Yiwenzi”, *Hanshu* 漢書 (*Han History*), vol. 6, ch. 30, 1745 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962). 小說家者流, 詩出於稗官。街談巷語、道聽塗說之所造也。

9 Robert Company, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: SUNY P, 1996) 9-12. Company argues that *zhiguai* is more literary in its nature than historical because the collection of the *zhiguai* in the Six Dynasties displays a) a subjective selection process; b) a paradox of the “raw” materials and the “cooking” in editing; c) a structured principle; and d) an urban subjugation of periphery narratives.

Gan Bao, are written down merely to “prove the credibility of the existence of the immortals.”¹¹ The practical nature of the historical supplement lingers in zhiguai, but there is already the urge to portray in words a world other than the world seen by the empirical eye.

Diverse as the scholarly views are on the question of how xiaoshuo developed as a genre, most scholars believe it matured in the Tang dynasty. Tang chuanqi, or tales of marvels, became the major form of hobby-writing for members of the Tang literati.¹² The writing and reading of chuanqi differ from those of previous forms of xiaoshuo and are closely related to the philosophical concept of you 遊 (freedom of roaming) and the literary concept of wen 文 (writing with patterned rhymes). These two concepts, together with the rise of literati in the Tang dynasty, finally make xiaoshuo more than a supplemental genre that merely records human impressions of the world. Instead, human perceptions are presented in these tales of marvels in a variety of ways, the most prominent of which depends on a shared understanding by the writer and the reader of literary genres. The purpose of writing xiaoshuo correspondingly shifts toward more aesthetic and literary directions, and away from the traditional political and practical ones.

***You 遊 (Freedom of Roaming) and wen 文 (Writing with Rhythm)***

The philosophical concept of “freedom of roaming,” or you 遊, is a key concept in Zhuangzi 莊子. Zhuangzi used the character repeatedly, and it could mean “swimming.”

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¹² Lu Xun in fact implies such a view in his A Brief History of Chinese Fiction and indicates that it is in the Tang dynasty that literati writers transformed the basic concept of fictional narrative and assigns fabulation a priority over facts. He Manzi elaborates on the maturity of fictional narrative in the Tang dynasty in his Zhongguo aiqing xiaoshuo zhong de liangxing guanxi (Gender Relation in Chinese Romances) (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 1999) and calls the pre-Tang period the “pre-historical period for Chinese fiction” (12).
“floating,” “excursion,” and “freedom of roaming” in different contexts. In the field of art and literature, it refers to a state of mind that can swerve away from surface reality and roam freely beyond restraints. An example of such an understanding of freedom of roaming is the story of Paoding 匏丁 in Zhuangzi. Paoding performs his skill of butchering an ox so perfectly that he freely moves his knife along the bone seams without touching any of the bones. The bones symbolize restraints and Paoding’s perfect skills stand for the artistic freedom to avoid restraints.

Another level of you also implies contempt for physical limits. Zhuangzi uses youxin 遊心 (roaming mind) to illustrate it, and argues that with youxin one can reach a realm that is limitless.

The concept of freedom of roaming therefore encourages a person to go beyond surface-level impressions of the world. A person may let go of his/her mental limits and forget physical restrictions. When applied to the act of xiaoshuo writing, then, the concept of freedom of roaming enables a writer to travel freely among the limits of different genres, encouraging the writer to write down not only his/her impressions of the world, but also his/her perceptions, which are limited only by the human mind. The perception by one human mind of the outer world might produce an image that is different from the world’s impression made in another human eye. As for the expressions of human imagination produced by such roaming, it is only available in words.

The literary concept of wen 文 indeed is traditionally one of the two poles of a dichotomy in writing: wen 文 and bi 筆. Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 464 –ca. 521) succinctly defines the dichotomy in his Wenxin Diaolong 文心雕龍 (Literary Mind and Carving Dragons): “In common parlance

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14 Zhuangzi, ch. 25.
these days, a distinction is made between \textit{wen} and \textit{pi [bi]}, with \textit{pi} as writing without rhyme and \textit{wen} as writing with rhyme."\textsuperscript{15} "Rhyme" here does not only refer to the repetition of similar sounds as is characteristic of verse poetry; in classical Chinese it is also a metonymy of the literary and aesthetic pursuit in writing. That is why Liu Xie considers \textit{bi}, or unrhymed writing, as more suitable for classics to be transmitted through the generations.\textsuperscript{16} In contrast, \textit{wen} is preferred in writings that showcase a writer’s literary competence.

In the field of \textit{xiaoshuo} writing, both \textit{wen} and \textit{bi} are valued. However, as the traditional mission of \textit{xiaoshuo} prioritizes political and practical functions over literary and the aesthetic ones, and as \textit{xiaoshuo} historically originated as an insignificant variant of historiography, \textit{wen} was often put in a position secondary to \textit{bi} in \textit{xiaoshuo} writing. For example, the literary quality of the abovementioned \textit{Soushen ji} displays more \textit{bi} than \textit{wen}. When the traditional Chinese concept of \textit{xiaoshuo} prioritizes a historical, moral, or political agenda over literary pursuits or aesthetic pleasures, it therefore sets a limit of reception to the world to which a writer could reach when his/her writing reverses such a priority. The writers of the Tang \textit{chuanqi}, or Tang tales of marvels, however, were mostly members of the privileged literati, and their tales were mainly written for fellow members of the literati. Taking advantage of this limited but appreciative readership, Tang writers took the liberty to reverse the traditional priority of \textit{bi} over \textit{wen} in their \textit{xiaoshuo} writing.

\textbf{The Tang Literati and Tang \textit{Chuanqi}}

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Wen Xin Diao Long} \textit{文心雕龍} (Literary Mind and Carved Dragon) by Liu Xie \textit{劉勰} (ca. 464 -ca 521) is one of the most complex works, and the most comprehensive one, of literary criticism in pre-modern China. Most of its definitions of literary concepts remain valid even to this day and are still applied to the literary critique of Chinese literature. It provides a critical system quite different from its Western counterparts, a system that is more philosophical than purely literary. It is in this work that \textit{Wen} and \textit{Bi} are defined as follows: “今之常言，有文有筆，以為無韵者筆也，有韻者文也。See Stephen Owen (editor and translator), \textit{Readings in Chinese Literary Thought} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1992) 273.

\textsuperscript{16} Liu Xie 273.
The Tang writers of *chuanqi* were not common people. They were the literati, a very rare handful of scholars who received a sophisticated literary education and cherished great political ambitions. The social and political status of the Tang literati underwent a gradual change from the early Tang to the collapse of the dynasty. In the early period the Tang government consolidated the political system established by the Sui dynasty (580-618), and the Tang literati enjoyed a rapid increase in number and an enhancement of social status. Both Denis Twitchett and David McMullen note the “emergence of a more diversified elite”\(^\text{17}\) and the Tang emperors’ efforts to bring the literati “into the centre of the political arena.”\(^\text{18}\) The expansion of the bureaucracy, the sophistication of the civil service examination system, and the dissemination and promotion of Confucian canonical texts all gave members of the Tang literati a strong desire to enter public life and thereby to exert some political power within the state.

However, the aristocratic basis of early Tang government and the dominance of local military powers after the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763)\(^\text{19}\) scuttled their political ambitions. These elite scholars were consequently exposed to the gap between illusion and reality, between their impressions of the surface world and their perception of what it could have been, between what they saw in front of their eyes and what they imagined in their minds. On the one hand, they were well trained to believe in the Confucian political values of a public life; on the other hand, the actual hierarchical political system, which favoured the aristocratic clans, constrained their access to the real public world. In contrast with the constricting political arena, the mainstream of the intellectual milieu in the Tang dynasty, especially in the post-Rebellion


\(^{19}\) An Lushan (703-757) was a military governor who rebelled in 755 and challenged the centralized political power with his local military force. The rebellion was finally ended by the central government in 763. It was a turning point for the Tang dynasty, and had quite a number of lasting effects on the dynasty, among which was the decline of the empire, and thus the futile efforts of the literati to restore past power made the yearning for a private space increasingly urgent.
period, was open, diversified, and liberal for these small, exclusive literary groups. The literati were disappointed and restrained by the increasingly intense social and political conflicts, but they found consolation in the Daoist spirit of you, or freedom of roaming, in expressing what they perceived and envisioned in various forms of literary experiments. The best of these forms is the Tang *chuanqi*.

In writing Tang *chuanqi*, the Tang literati, who were educated to be politically ambitious and yet discouraged by the false promise of a Confucian public life, began to entertain themselves semi-privately in their small groups by trifling with the official classical Chinese language, which was used to govern a public world. Instead of writing the official history commissioned by the emperor, they recorded insignificant gossip among friends; and in place of tedious descriptions of political procedures, they constructed with their gossip and imagination a separate world of love, literary talents, and fantastic achievements.

As described in *Tang zhiyan* (Gleanings from the Tang), a record of notes on the Tang literati’s life written by Wang Dingbao 王定保 (870–c.954), it seems that the above-mentioned access to a shared world of literary exploration through the tales of marvels helped the Tang literati keep a spiritual balance in the everyday factual world. Once the candidates for the examination were awarded the *jinshi* 進士 title, or the presented scholar title, they were to visit their examiners and thereby become allies, both political and literary, with their fellow examinees who acquired the title of *jinshi*. This was one of the many ways for the literati in the Tang dynasty to form a literary group. Some literary groups might be formed by kinship, and some by a common interest in a certain literary style. Nevertheless the function of literary groups was less political than artistic, for even though from time to time they might get involved

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21 *Jinshi* as a title was only granted after the highest level of the civil examination, administered at the capital.
in the political battles in the imperial court, the major purpose of the literati in forming groups was to share some uncommon literary interests and thereby, through literature, to find and found a world other than that of everyday public life.

In order to entertain themselves with a somewhat fanciful world built from real life prototypes, the writers of Tang tales fully engaged the writing techniques of the different genres that they were educated to use in public and political life. Just as is described by the literary critic Zhao Yanwei 趙彥衛 (fl. 1195) of the Song dynasty, and as elaborated by the modern Chinese scholar Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1890-1969), the writers of Tang tales displayed skill in high literary techniques of almost all the genres that predate them, especially parading their ability to write official history, classical poetry, and expository prose combined in the single act of writing tales of marvels.22 The freedom to cross generic limitations is a message in and of itself about the Tang tales to readers during the Tang dynasty as well as to readers in future epochs. As the lyrical force of poetry can penetrate the prosaic plot of prose narrative, and as, within the frame of the factual style of history and biography writing, expository phrases can bear a force that supersedes what is visible in terms of worldly surface, thus human perceptions of the world can be appreciated by readers who are of like mind with the writers.

The label “Tang tales of marvels,” known as Tang chuanqi 唐傳奇 in Chinese, refers to tales written in the classical Chinese language by members of the Tang literati exclusively for their fellow members. The name chuanqi is believed to be originally a title either for a tale written by Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831), or for a group of tales written by Pei Xing 裴鉶 (fl. 860-

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22 See Zhao Yanwei 趙彥衛 of the Song dynasty Yunlu manchao 雲麓漫鈔 (Random Notes at Yunlu) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958) and Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, Yuan Bai shi jianzheng gao 元白詩箋證稿 (A Draft Annotation of the Poems by Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi)” (Beijing: Joint Publishing Co, 2001).
In other words, *chuanqi* was once used specifically to name certain narrative texts or a certain group of narrative texts composed in the Tang dynasty. Later it was extended in its usage to refer to the type of tales that were formed in the same period bearing significantly similar generic features, i.e., a group of short fictional prose narratives that were written in classical Chinese and mostly produced in the Tang dynasty.

Literary critics started to accept and use *chuanqi* as a generic term around the time of the Yuan (1279-1368) and Ming dynasties (1368-1644). During these two dynasties *chuanqi* was also used to refer to a type of verse drama that shares a topical interest with the tales of marvels *chuanqi*. Many Ming *chuanqi* dramas were in fact inspired by some *chuanqi* Tang tales. Meanwhile *chuanqi* as a form of prose fiction continued to develop in imperial China after the Tang dynasty, though with much less momentum. In this dissertation, when used without additional annotation, *chuanqi* refers exclusively to classical prose fiction written in the Tang dynasty or later in imitation of or as a response to Tang *chuanqi*.

According to Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551-1602) of the Ming dynasty, and to Lu Xun in the 1930s, Tang *chuanqi*, or Tang tales of marvels, were the first narratives consciously composed as fiction and thus served as exemplary sources for many later literary works. Contemporary critics--such as Wang Pijiang 汪辟疆, Wang Mengou 王夢歐, Hou Zhongyi 侯忠義, Cheng Yizhong 程毅中, and Cheng Guofu 程國賦--mainly hold the same opinion, and they also identify many generic precursors to Tang *chuanqi*, such as *zhiguai*, *zhuan* 傳 (biography), *fu* 賦

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(parallel prose/rhapsody), and lun 論 (expository prose). Based on what previous scholars have observed, a tentative and simplified description of Tang chuanqi might go as follows: most of the so-called Tang tales of marvels anthologized together show that first, in terms of form, they were prose narratives written in the classical Chinese language, mainly following the tradition of historiography (official biography in particular), with occasional poems scattered in the text; in terms of content, such tales were mainly about the adventures of the Tang literati, especially their unconventional romances with ladies, both human and from other worlds; stylistically, these tales incorporated detailed dialogue as a literary technique in order to augment the plot, characters, and settings; in terms of the writers’ ambitions, most of the tales also seem to be motivated by a desire to recount narratives distinct from the conventional knowledge of their immediate audience; meanwhile, audiences seemed to welcome the amazing authorial perceptions conveyed in the texts of these tales.

The Tang tales of marvels therefore are a form of generic hybridity in literary history. During the Tang dynasty chuanqi developed quickly and, later in the dynasty, established itself firmly as a sub-genre under the genre of xiaoshuo, covering a range of fantastic subjects like the supernatural world, romantic affairs, and knight-errant adventures. The Tang tales also allowed Tang writers to experiment with a number of literary techniques: for example, expanding the range of the classical Chinese language, enriching received historical narrative patterns, and developing expository speech as a narrative voice that frames many of the tales. As the Tang literati wrote these tales for their fellow members to show off their literary talents, they worked

out a sophisticated avenue for the development of classical Chinese fiction. On one hand, each of the contributing source genres for Tang *chuanqi* is complicated in its own form and highly sophisticated in its own composition, and therefore creates inevitable expectations in the writing and reading of the Tang *chuanqi*. On the other hand, the new genre of *chuanqi* was written and read exclusively in small circles and therefore the members of these circles were less concerned with the traditional missions of *xiaoshuo*, which is the umbrella genre covering *chuanqi*. For the first time in the mind of a writer of *xiaoshuo*, the genre’s traditional hierarchy of practical over aesthetic, of political over literary, and of *bi* over *wen*, was unsettled, if not completely inverted.

The literary quest for more *wen*, or aesthetically-oriented, works went hand-in-hand with the Tang literati’s search for *you*, the freedom of roaming. The concept of freedom of roaming was a precondition for the Tang literati to go beyond the limitations of their generic sources. By helping Tang writers break away from historiography and other generic strictures, *wen* and *you* work together and validate the Tang literati’s pursuit of aesthetic pleasure which had until then been suppressed by the priority given to political and pragmatic goals in writing all forms of *xiaoshuo*.

However, even with the help of the concept of freedom of roaming, the Tang literati did not accomplish generic transgressions in *chuanqi* without difficulty. They often had to defend themselves in the face of accusations of transgressions. For example, in his own words Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) boldly claims that in writing tales he does not look for social and public fame but pursues a literary goal and a true spirit of entertainment.²⁶ He freely admits to accusations that he was taking writing too lightly and spending too much time writing miscellaneous statements

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²⁶ See the letters of Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) in defense of his writing of tales instead of grand historical narratives. “Da Zhangji shu” (Letter In Reply to Mr. Zhang Ji), *Quantangwen* 全唐文 (An Anthology of Tang Proses) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), vol. 12, 7079. As we shall see, when Han Yu wrote a popular tale of marvel entitled *Maoying zhuang* 毛穎傳 (A Biograhpy of Mao Ying), Zhang Ji 張籍 (767-830), a fellow member of literati of Han Yu, tried to persuade Han to give up writing such tales because, in Zhang’s view they portrayed things not true to reality, and in styles not consistent with any one genre.
with no reference to grand topics and real life. His admission thus confirms that in his tales he is not recording what impressions the world leaves in his eye, but something more. He also openly casts off any political mission attributed to his writing by explicitly admitting that he has indeed committed the literary crime of neglecting this mission. However, to defend his position, he wittily compares the purpose of his writing to that of having wine and women, which he claims is essential to a gentleman’s life. That is a shrewd argument, since in the Confucian classic *Analects*, Confucius defines man’s pursuit of pleasure in food and sex as basic elements in human nature. Having made this claim, Han Yu painstakingly privileges pleasure in listing his motives in writing tales of marvels, elevating it above the motives of recording empirical reality, conveying a moral message, or promoting a political agenda. In such a joking way, Han Yu makes the function of *chuanqi* writing to entertain not only morally justified, but even aesthetically preferred.

Han Yu claims to prioritize aesthetic entertainment over moral education as his purpose of writing tales of marvels, yet in his *Maoying zhuan* (A Biography of Mao Ying) he borrows many important techniques from the genre of historical biography, putting them to new, playful purposes. The need to state his defence confirms his transgression of the genre of historical biography. His contemporary Zhang Ji (767-830) wrote to criticize him for not following the norms of historical biographies, showing clearly that Han Yu’s literati contemporaries were sensitive to the transgressive literary moves in his tales, and that some fellow literati found it hard to accommodate them in their reception of such texts. In some other cases, however, the texts of Tang tales describe the responses from their immediate audience in the Tang dynasty; these parts of the texts also reveal the literary efforts of the Tang literati to cross generic boundaries through the form of *chuanqi*. In tales like *Yingying’s Story* and
The Tale of Li Wa 李娃傳 there are passages either in the opening or the concluding sections that describe the occasions for narrating the tales and the responses of contemporary listeners/readers. These parts are sometimes written on the model of historical judgments in official historiography, or as a kind of literary appreciation often expressed about poetry. These echoes of other genres reveal the Tang literati’s struggle to represent something other than the normal while using familiar modes of discourse. Sometimes the transgression of genre is so drastic that it literally changes the direction of the plot’s development, as we can see in Xiangzhongyuan jie 湘中怨解 (An Explication of the Lament from Xiang River).

Yingying’s Story 鶯鶯傳 and The Tale of Li Wa 李娃傳

The efforts of the literati to transgress the traditional restrictions on what to write and how to write can be seen in two well-known Tang tales of marvels: Yingying’s Story by Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831) and The Tale of Li Wa by Bai Xingjian 白行簡 (776-826). Both these tales of marvels were originally transmitted through a small group of fellow members of literati who shared the same knowledge of literature and literary values and who were able to respond to the tales with literary comments. Yuan Zhen and Bai Xingjian belonged to the same literary group, one with Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-841), the famous Tang poet, as its central figure. Bai Juyi and Bai Xingjian were brothers, and Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen were lifelong friends. The texts of the two

27 Yingying’s story presents a most puzzling plot to readers: Scholar Zhang rescues the aristocratic young maiden Yingying in a besieged Buddhist temple, and succeeds to lure her into an exchange of erotic poems. After rebutting his physical advances with moralistic preaching, Yingying finally succumbs to him, under the influence of her maid Hongniang and becomes his fiancée. After that Zhang goes off to the capital to attend the civil service examinations and abandons Yingying, who writes letters to Zhang, receiving no encouraging reply. Zhang shows Yingying’s letter to his literati friends, and later in his life, visits Yingying as her cousin after her marriage. Yingying refuses to receive him and only leaves a poem in the ancient style. The discrepancy between Yingying’s poetic response to Zhang and her prosaic attitude toward him makes rational explanations hard to find. The Tale of Li Wa tells the adventures of Scholar Zheng from Xingyanga in the Capital City of Chang’an, and describes how this young aristocratic scholar encounters Li Wa, a courtesan, and is redeemed by her love and care after he had degraded himself from his high rank and been deserted by his aristocratic father.
tales thus record similar occasions for spreading the tales. For example, after Yingying’s story was told, Yuan Zhen concluded his text by meticulously documenting the story’s reception among his literary group as follows:

In the ninth month of a year in Zhenyuan reign era (785-806), Officer Li Gongchui stayed overnight in my residence at the Jinganli quarter, and our conversation touched upon this matter. Gongchui exclaimed that it was most extraordinary, and then composed “Song of Yingying” to help transmit the story. Miss Cui’s childhood name was Yingying, and Gongchui used it for the title.28

This reads like a paratextual note about how the tale was written, read, and received. A story that goes beyond surface impressions of life is told among literary friends, inviting or expecting their comprehension, interpretation and appreciation. Such a story holds the attention of the literati audience with its convincing portrayal of characters from a world that they inhabit: for example, the male protagonist boasts literary talents and a firm belief in Confucian virtues. Yet the familiar is transposed into literary language and this alerts the audience to the not-so-common emotional elements in the story; therefore, the audience designates the tale as “extraordinary.”

Even with a generically familiar figure such as Scholar Zhang going through the experience and retelling it to his fellow members of the literati, the events in the tale still present something other than what the literati normally see in their daily lives, as is evidenced by their reaction to it both within and outside of the narrative of the story. Throughout the romance, Scholar Zhang repeatedly feels “confused” at Yingying’s words and behavior. There is no supernatural quality to the events in the tale. The breach of their comfort within the boundaries of normal life is the emotional content, which evokes a literary response. The small group of readers/listeners, who

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28 貞元歲九月，執事李公垂，宿于予靖安裏第，語及于是。公垂卓然稱异，遂為《鶯鶯歌》以傳之。崔氏小名鶯鶯，公垂以命篇。Yingying’s Story, TPGJ 4017.
have a glimpse of what transpires in the tale, do not brush it away as whimsy. Instead, they provide their responses in literary form: by writing poetry inspired by the perceptions presented in the tale, they try to comprehend it, and take a different perspective on the world as described in the tale. A long poem in the form of a ballad was composed as an event in the narrative and named after the female protagonist in the tale: Yingying puzzles not only the male protagonist, Scholar Zhang, but also the literati audience that hears the tale in the narrative, which is a proxy for the literati audience extrinsic to the tale. In this way, through their shared admiration and astonishment, the literati audience members identify themselves with the male literati character and adopt a certain attitude toward the text of the tale as transcribed when they produce their lyrical response to it. Han Yu’s claim of pure literary pleasure in writing tales of marvels seems to be a given here: no one in the text even mentions that the tale falls short of reaching any political and practical goal.

The poetic lines recorded in Yuan Zhen’s text also work with the prose narrative written in the tradition of historical biography, and affect the tale’s reception among its literati readers. In addition to the ballad-style poems by Yang Juyuan 楊巨源, Gongchui 李紳 (772-846), and the writer Yuan Zhen himself, who appears as a tangential character within his own story--there are other poems inserted in the story in the voice of the protagonists. Recent research shows that those pieces in the voice of the male protagonist, Scholar Zhang, are indeed poems that Yuan Zhen himself

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29 Li Gongchui, aka Li Shen 李紳 (772-846), writes Song of Yingying 鶯鶯歌, in which he uses qilü 七律, a complicated eight-line poetic pattern with seven Chinese characters in each line, to describe how a seventeen-year-old Yingying lives demurely in seclusion in a deserted Buddhist temple after her father passes away. Yingying’s image is sharply different from Zhang’s label of her as youwu 尤物, a special Chinese term referring to physically charming ladies with powers potentially destructive to the mental and spiritual ability of a man. “Femme fatale” might be a tentative English equivalent, only the Chinese youwu are more passive than active in precipitating the disastrous events. The complete Song may contain more than four stanzas; only the first was anthologized into The Complete Tang Poems 全唐詩. The next three stanzas were quoted in a Yuan drama based on Yingying’s story. See Zhou Shaoliang, Tang Chuanqi jianzheng 407-408.
wrote on other occasions. These poems are all well documented in collections of Tang poems.\textsuperscript{30} The blurring between the writer’s actual life and his literary tale of marvels caused critical controversy over the autobiographical elements in the story, but it nevertheless helped both the writer and the reader who were members of the Tang literati to break down the generic boundaries of historiography and poetry, and thereby to mix the aesthetic and literary functions of both in one text. It also provides an opportunity for later readers to appreciate the complexity of a tale purely constructed in literary words and techniques.

Thus in Yuan Zhen’s prose narrative, the tale is complicated and enriched by his use of poetry. Readers of Yingying’s Story are, on one hand, marvel at the verbal power of a scholar’s poetry that could so seduce a morally upright maiden, yet on the other hand, they still hesitate to accept it as a natural story reflecting their normal knowledge of life. For the Tang literati, if they take Scholar Zhang’s behaviour as morally unproblematic, which they might be willing to, then they cannot explain his weak justification for his repudiation of Yingying in the name of Confucian virtues, which he himself did not follow. If they admit that they are deeply touched by Yingying’s farewell poems and letter to Zhang, then they can hardly justify his callous behaviour. Such hesitation is a symptom of their indecision in receiving the tale as purely fictional. When the reader, as a member of the literati class portrayed in the tale, accepts the tale’s existence and starts to write his responses to it through poetry, then he is admitting that the tale is not merely about the impressions of a puzzling romance, but rather about how to perceive what is underneath the ostensible failure of a romantic affair--the tale suggests an emotional truth that was beyond the scope of prose narratives up to that point.

\textsuperscript{30} Yang’s poem and Yuan Zhen’s are all included in the text of the tale, while the two \textit{chunci} “spring verses” by Scholar Zhang are not recorded except for their titles. However, critics find in The Complete Tang Poems two such verses by Yuan Zhen, in which the Chinese character Ying as in Yingying’s name is symbolically used.
Even today, the Tang writer’s freedom of generic transgression—and consequent transgression of social and cultural values embedded in different genres—still gives pleasure and curiosity to readers and critics alike. For example, Stephen Owen in his *The End of the Chinese Middle Ages* presents controversial interpretations of *Yingying’s Story* and displays therein the gap between cultural roles and genuine feelings throughout the text.\(^\text{31}\) He points out that “the rise of romance with the representation of individually chosen and socially unauthorized relationships between men and women” is closely related to “the development of individual acts of interpretation or valuation and the demarcation of private space,”\(^\text{32}\) and he illustrates the tension between the culture of romance and Confucian values as represented in the loss of authority of discourses to more subversive interpretations and judgments. Yuan Zhen’s perceptions and implied judgments of his Tang world, embedded in his tale, are thus uncovered and decoded in Stephen Owen’s reading more than a thousand years later, using an explicit vocabulary that may well have been unutterable during the Tang. Thus Tang tales—in their emphasis on the literary over the historical—can say more.

Similarly, the priority given to literary experimentation in *The Tale of Li Wa*\(^\text{33}\) enables the tale’s focus on the male protagonist’s transgression of social rank.\(^\text{34}\) The male protagonist in the tale makes full use of his literary knowledge and, with a true spirit of freedom of roaming, he transgresses many social restrictions. At the climax of the tale, the protagonist’s adventures reveal less about his social experience than they do about the aesthetic and literary beliefs that


\(^{32}\) Owen 130.

\(^{33}\) TPGJ 3985—3991.

\(^{34}\) In *The Tale of Li Wa*, Young aristocratic scholar Zheng sets out on his journey from his upper class household, where he is treasured as the legal heir to the family. Once in Chang’an, the capital city, and physically away from his family and the values the family represents, he lives with Li Wa, a courtesan who has seduced him to cross class lines and inhabit a quarter of the capital that is not familiar to elite members of the Tang literati. Zheng eventually squanders all his money and cast away by his own family. He is then driven to the lowest quarters of Chang’an. There he makes a living in a mortuary by singing elegies for people’s funerals. After many ups and downs, he is redeemed by Li Wa and restored to his original social rank.
obviously gain the approval of his literary group. Unlike *Yingying’s Story*, in which the reader could still discern many elements of the critical controversy over its autobiographical nature, *The Tale of Li Wa* is told in a consistent third-person voice and the events in the narrative are deliberately presented as offering a partial picture. In the beginning of the narrative, Bai Xingjian seems to distance himself from the tale and uses young scholar Zheng, the male protagonist, as an agent to move through different layers of society in the plot. The tale functions as a reflection on Tang society and therefore provides an incomplete yet consistent impression of Tang society through one person’s eyes. The love story in the tale is thus like an image projected onto the backdrop of the hierarchy of the society: all walks of life in the mid-Tang period are represented in their interaction with the male protagonist.

However, given the possibility of writing the tale as a factual documentation of a young scholar’s impression of goings-on around him, Bai Xingjian manages to surprise his literati readers pleasantly with unexpected turns in his narrative. The most striking part of this tale comes when Scholar Zheng is reduced to being a beggar barely making a living by singing elegies in a mortuary, and yet he finds that his literary talents help in overcoming social boundaries and building up a new sense of self.

Zheng sings elegies so touchingly that his mortuary asks him to represent the mortuary to compete with their rival mortuaries in an elegy contest. To make this elegy contest (an experience alien to Bai’s contemporary Tang literati audience) comprehensible on the common ground of literary competences, Bai Xingjian makes full use of their shared literary knowledge and values in his writing. The description of Zheng’s performance in the elegy contest between the rival mortuaries deploys allusions to other narratives, and it shows how Bai Xingjian, himself a member of literati, undermines social impossibilities via the literary imagination. When the
stage is set and the audience settles down, Zheng and his rival start to perform their artful elegies:

… A man with a long beard came in, holding a handbell, attended by several guards. He then shook his beard, raised his brows, grasped his own wrist, and kowtowed before he went up to the platform. There he sang “White Horse (Bai ma)”. Confident that he would be the winner, he glanced here and there as if no other singers could be as good as he was. The audience all applauded with praises, which made him think that he was now without rival that day. After a while, the mortuary from the east quarter assembled a connected platform in the north corner. A youth in a black turban, holding a feather fan, flanked by five or six people, came forward. He was none other than the young scholar of our tale. He straightened his clothing, bowed and stood straight with much deliberation. Then, clearing his throat, he started to sing. It was “Dew on the Leaves (Xie lu)”. His clear and transcending voice flew high and made even the forest trees tremble. The audience sighed and wept even before the song was finished.\(^{35}\)

In this scene, the narrator in fact describes the competing performances in front of the audience with great insight into the artistic and literary effects of such performances. Scholar Zheng may be educated and have a beautiful voice, but he is not a professional performer, and his rival is an experienced professional who knows all the tricks of the trade. Once the contest starts, it is evident in the text that Bai Xingjian, the writer, has more to say about the significance of such a contest than his mere surface impressions. His implicit code of literary values would be shared

\(^{35}\)有長髯者，擁鐸而進，翊衛數人，于是奮髯揚眉，扼腕頓顙而登，乃歌《白馬》之詞。恃其夙勝，顧眄左右，旁若無人。齊聲贊揚之，自以爲獨步一時，不可得而屈也。有頃，東肆長于北隅上設連榻，有烏巾少年，左右五六人，秉翣而至，即生也。整衣服，俯仰甚徐，申喉發調，容若不勝。乃歌《薤露》之章，舉聲清越，響振林木。曲度未終，聞者欷歔掩泣。TPGJ 3986.
by his contemporaries among the Tang literati, and therefore his vision can be perceived and shared by his immediate readers. The description of the professional singer from the west quarter recalls the butcher, Paoding, who dissects an ox in Zhuangzi: both treat their profession more like performances, and both present a self-contented attitude during and after the performance. What makes Paoding different from the singer is that for the former his performance is closer to Dao (in other words, it is a way for him to approach the truth), while for the latter it is nothing but a presentation. Paoding achieves freedom of roaming in his performance, while the singer achieves only the smooth appearance of performance. The singer makes a great show of himself before his performance. He is performing a ritual. What he receives is enthusiastic applause, justified for such a great performance. His audience is engaged by but not involved in his performance. In contrast, the youth from east quarter, i.e., the “degraded” young scholar Zheng, arrives with a humble and modest appearance. His deliberate movements show that for him, it is more an expression of mood than a presentation of ritual. In other words, if the other singer aims at overwhelming his audience with his superior skills, Zheng touches his audience by sharing his true sorrow through emotional openness. His spirit is not restricted by the superficial presentation of the performance; instead, it goes across the division of performer and audience and evokes sympathy from his audience rather than mere appreciation. The two elegies that are respectively selected by the two singers also reveal the literary beliefs of Bai Xingjian and his literary group. Scholar Zheng’s “Dew on the Leaves” is a short elegy lamenting the shortness of a human life; and is in contrast to his rival singer’s choice of “White Horse”, a long poem praising royal soldiers’ deaths on the battlefield. In the Tang dynasty, it may have been politically incorrect to portray Zheng’s more poetic choice as triumphant over his rival singer’s patriotic choice, and yet Bai Xingjian and his audience share a possibility through this tale to better appreciate “Dew on the Leaves” in a new context.
“An Explication of the Lament from Xiang River” 湘中怨解

Sometimes in Tang tales of marvels, even without evident support from fellow members of the audience, the generic transgressions in the writing of chuanqi could transform the narratives of the tales. As can be seen in Yingying’s Story and The Tale of Li Wa, the Tang writers’ and readers’ shared literary knowledge, common literary values, and joint yearning for freedom of roaming make it possible for their tales of marvels to transgress the strictures of genre. The transgressions sometimes more clearly engage with source genres in the final forms of tales of marvels. The best example to illustrate this point is Xiangzhongyuan jie 湘中怨解 (An Explication of the Lament from Xiang River) by Shen Yazhi 沈亞之 (781-832),36 in which the tug of war between the genres, i.e., classical Chu lyrics 楚辭 (chuci) and biographical prose narrative, drastically changes the style of prose narrative in this tale.

The tale “An Explication of the Lament from Xiang River” portrays a romance between a young Imperial Scholar Zheng and a river Goddess Siren.37 Zheng encounters Siren who is disguised as a forlorn young woman. Touched by her helplessness, Zheng generously takes care of her. In their life together, she shows her resourcefulness in practical life as well as her literary

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36 Shen Yazhi 沈亞之 (781-832) wrote Xiangzhongyuan jie in the thirteenth year of Yuanhe 元和 reign (818). Shen Yazhi, also named Xiaxian 下賢, is the author of several other Tang tales of marvels. These can be found in Shen Xiaxian wenji 沈下賢文集, a collection of writings by Shen Yazhi. Later a shorter version was edited into Taiping guangji 太平廣記 under a different title Taixue zhengsheng 太學鄭生 (Imperial Scholar Zheng), annotated as coming from an earlier collection entitled Yiwen lu 異聞錄 (Record of Strange Stories Heard). Two English translations of the story are available in the following titles: Chinese Prose Literature of the T’ang Period by E.D. Edwards, Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic: Selections from the Third to the Tenth Century, translated by Michael Broschat and edited by Karl S. Y. Kao. In 1998, William H. Nienhauser Jr. working with a fuller source text that appeared in Wang Pi-jiang, Tangren Xiaoshuo 唐人小說, provided his own translation in his essay “Creativity and Storytelling in the Ch’uan-ch’i: Shen Ya-chih’s T’ang Tales.” All these previous translations are valuable secondary resources, but I will present my own translation of quoted texts. Also, the source text of my translation is taken from Shen Xiaxian Ji 沈下賢集.

37 There are two characters in Siren 汎人. Si 汎 is the name of the river; and ren 人 is a term for human beings in general. “Siren” is the pinyin spelling of the name. It does not necessarily have the same association as Siren in English, which means a Sea Nymph who lures sailors to destruction on the rocks where she lives.
talents as a poet. She sings many classical pieces of *Chu* lyrics with ease and creates her own piece in the style of *Chu* lyrics entitled *Fengguang ci* 風光詞 (*Lyric of Light and Breeze*). She then reveals her true identity as a river Goddess when she takes leave of Zheng. More than ten years later, Zheng comes across Siren again on the Xiang River, with her true identity of a river Goddess now revealed. Zheng laments the loss of her in a couple of poetic lines in the style of *Chu* lyrics, and Siren responds with her own poetic lines. After the song is chanted, she disappears and leaves Zheng in deep misery. In this tale of fantasy written in classical prose, poetry acts as a shaping power of the roaming imagination as it assumes the form of a lady demonstrating literary powers in *Chu* lyrics; the poetry is in tension with the more utilitarian biographical prose, which opposes these poetic flights with a demystifying tendency, shown clearly in the tale’s plot of domestication. In particular, Siren strongly revives the spirit of literary beauty and the free roaming spirit of art in her revival of *Chu* lyrics, in spite of the fact that the prose narrative tries to domesticate and transform her Goddess image into a homely lady.

The *Chu* lyrics are a unique poetic genre in classical Chinese literature. Unlike the central Chinese poetic tradition emanating from *Book of Poetry*, it shows great poetic power in creating an internal, private, and personal space where the poet can capture a moment of epiphany. In the Tang dynasty, most prose narratives written in the classical Chinese language are meant to convince the audience that they at least sound true to impressions of daily life. Thus two literary drives co-exist in the tale form: one upward and outward that celebrates the literary

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38 Christopher Leigh Connery, in “Sao, Fu, Parallel Prose, and Related Genres,” argues that the *Chu* lyrics differ from the central Chinese genres commonly identified with poetry. He notes that the *Chu* lyrics often have exotic descriptive passages with images drawn from the flora, fauna, and rituals of the *Chu* region, and that thematically speaking, the *Chu* lyrics, talk abundantly about encounters with the otherworldly. Also, he notices a contrast between the almost unrealistic nature of such encounters and the solid concreteness of specific images used in its description. See Christopher Leigh Connery, “Sao, Fu, Parallel Prose, and Related Genres,” Victor H. Mair ed., *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (New York, Columbia UP, 2001) 225-227.

act of capturing the moment in language; the other downward and inward that laments losing the
moment and dealing only with the aftermath of the inexpressible.

Shen Yazhi himself enjoyed great fame as a poet in the Tang dynasty. The otherworldly
style of his poems shows how much he follows in the tradition of Chu lyrics. It is therefore not
surprising that the motif of ascending, the image of a flowery and fragrant goddess, and the
celebration of short but ecstatic moments which are so commonly seen in Chu lyrics all find
expression in his narrative writing. “An Explication of the Lament from Xiang River”, however,
is basically a prose narrative that is meant to follow the generic structure and content expected
from its Tang readers conditioned by the biographical form from historiography. Shen Yazhi
conscientiously makes this clear in the title, the plot, and the theme. The frame structure of the
tale constrains the lyrical poetic lines within a narrative sequence. The title “An Explication of
the Lament from Xiang River” promises a key to understand the text that follows. The framing
introduction and conclusion, written in flat classical prose, also help curb the outward drive of
the poetic sections. The plot itself clearly strives to contain, subdue, and incorporate the literary
transgression ultimately sung out in Siren’s song.

The keyword, “Explication”, in the title of the tale reveals the purpose of the prose
narrative containment. The prose narrative was meant to dissolve the power of poetry. By
explication, or jie 解, Shen Yazhi declares that he means to analyze, to explain, and to dissolve
the mystery and fantasy linked with the lyric “Lament from the Xiang River.” (The word jie is
the very one used to describe butchering an animal into its component parts, as Butcher Paoding
does in the Zhuangzi.) It is a rhetorical gesture that aims to bring the private space created by the

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40 Shen Yazhi’s reputation as a poet can be seen in his being cited in the preface to the literati chapter in Xintangshu 新唐書 (New History of the Tang, 201:5726) and in his being acknowledged and lauded by other famous poets such as Li He 李賀 (790-816), Du Mu 杜牧 (803-852), and Li Shangyin 李商隱 (812-858). Du Mu lines on Shen--“To crystal lyrics by this man who can sing in echo? / Weeds covering the path, moss spreading everywhere, he is not to be found.” 斯人清唱何人和，草徑苔蕪不可尋 (Quan Tang shi 全唐詩 521:5958)--are precise in summarizing Shen’s style and fame in poetry writing.
lyrical force of poetry into the public field to analyze and reveal every bit of its mystery to the audience, thus materializing the poetic fantasy with everyday details of factual descriptions in prose. The accomplishment of jie 解 therefore means both completion of narration and the deconstruction of the mysterious beauty of fantasy created by the genre of Chu lyrics when these lyrics are incorporated into prose tales of marvels. However, even as the text of the tale evolves, the lyrical power of Chu lyrics shifts the tale’s destination.

Siren, the female protagonist, is metaphorically the personified spirit of Chu lyrics living in a mundane world: she has a double identity in the narrative. In the prose narrative she is a plausible woman living in the Tang dynasty. She emblematizes the situation of most women in the Tang dynasty in that she relies on the mercy of men to have a decent life. She is an orphan, so she first depends on her elder brother; and then, finding her sister-in-law unaccommodating, she wishes to drown herself in the river. When Zheng, the male protagonist, proposes to take care of her, she acknowledges her status in his life as an inferior and a dependant. In the prose part of the tale, she is first a discarded woman and then a wife figure, until the end of the tale. The genre of Chu lyrics enters the tale of marvels with a similar self-effacement: ready to give up some part of lyrical force so as to be accepted by the reader.

Siren’s prosaic identity in everyday reality is as a wife to Zheng. She is, on the other hand, endowed with immortality and fantasy by the poetic lines that are scattered throughout the tale. She is said to have created lyrics that “are so beautifully done that they do not belong to this world 其詞麗絕，世莫有屬者.” Indeed, Siren’s poem is the only complete poetic piece allowed into the prose narrative, and it is aptly titled “Lyric of Light and Breeze”.

Siren’s true identity of a River Goddess is only fully revealed at the end of the tale. The dramatic irony is thereby embedded in the prose narrative, which mainly describes how Siren fits into the prosaic actual life that is constructed by all boundaries set up for a woman. On one hand, “Lyric of Light and Breeze” is said to be a lyric by Siren; on the
隆佳秀兮昭盛時，**Luxuriant are the beautiful woods, prime the flourishing season,**
播薰綠兮淑華歸。**I sow the seeds of rich green, and in return, the sweet blossoms arrive.**
故室荑與處萼兮，**In the chamber I place fresh lily buds and new calyxes,**
潛重房以飾姿，**Within the layers of the room I adorn myself.**
見耀態之韶華兮，**Radiance shows from my appearance in the flower of youth,**
蒙長霧以爲幃，**Concealed in the long veils of thin mist.**
醉融光兮眇眇瀰瀰。**Intoxicated with the flowing light, distant and diffused,**
遠千里兮涵烟眉。**I look afar to a thousand li, and my brows harbor the foggy shores.**
晨陶陶兮暮熙熙，**Happy I am in the mornings, and joyful at dusks,**
舞婀娜之穠條兮，**Supple is my dancing figure, like willow branches,**
娉盈盈以披遲。**And with grace I move, slowly and steadily.**

other hand, with the knowledge of Siren’s immortal identity, the reader will understand that it is actually a lyric of Siren. In this case, in my translation, I interpret it as a self-confessional poem and use the first-person voice.

42 隆佳秀兮昭盛時：Jiaxiu 佳秀 (beautiful woods) literally refers to the trees higher and more beautiful than the rest in the woods. Plants are often used as an image for gods and Goddesses in the Chu lyrics.
43 播薰綠兮淑華歸：xunlü 薰綠 refers to a fragrant green plant. Shuhua 淑華 are flowers with a sweet smell. First “I” sow the seeds, then the green plants grow up, and at harvest time, the sweet flowers will reward all the efforts.
44 故室荑與處萼兮：yi 芊 is the blossoms of wild lilies. Chu’e 處萼 is the newly blossomed calyxes.
45 潛重房以飾姿：Chongfang 重房, in comparison with shi 室 in the previous line, refers to the inner chamber of the Goddess. The Goddess finishes with the outward decoration and is ready to give the final touch of elegance to herself.
46 見耀態之韶華兮：This line describes the appearance of the Goddess coming out from her inner chamber. Her beauty is shining like the brightest flower. Shaohua 韶華 literally means blossoming and is often poignantly associated with the quickly disappearing youth.
47 蒙長霧以爲幃：Wei 韩 is the veil attached to a hat, a common garment in the Tang dynasty.
48 醉融光兮眇眇瀰瀰：miaomiaomimi 昧昧瀰瀰 describes the way one looks afar but without seeing much. This line and the following line together describe the eyes and eyebrows of the Goddess, outlining the foggy expression on her face.
49 Taotao 陶陶 and xixi 熙熙 both describe a happy, contented state of mind.
50 Nongtiao 穎條 means willow branches.
Flush on my face spreads, like vines flowering,

Waves issue forth lights dainty and delightful as the moss grows from the rock, full of charm.

In a short prose narrative comprising 672 Chinese characters, the 104 characters in “Lyric of Light and Breeze” conveniently help Siren, the domestic lady, pierce through the confining role of her social world, as well as the prose narrative that constructs it. It elevates her out of subservience. The poetic lines take the reader’s attention away from the events and the plot to focus on the moment itself. The poem also culminates in the vision of Siren the Goddess breaking through the restrictions of the human world. When it comes to the description of the Goddess herself, the lines follow the order from far to near, and from body to face. The poetic lines aim to alter the mood and introduce fantasy into the reading moment. Siren’s final appearance from the layered chamber is celebrated in elegant, intoxicating language.

“Lyric of Light and Breeze” seems to have little relevance to the narrative plot of domesticating Siren in the tale. However, it drastically affects this plot thereafter. Indeed, it contradicts the escalating domestication of the immortal lady by the prose narrative. The latter half of the tale further makes the tug of war evident before ending in a sate of compromise. The lyric first reveals its force of generic transgression by interrupting a chronological narrative flow.

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51 娉盈盈以披遲: In contrast with the previous line, this line describes the elegance of the slow movement of the Goddess. Ping 娉 means slow but exquisite feminine gesture.
52 颳游顔兮倡蔓卉: tuo 颳 means a state of intoxication by drinking too much. You 遊 means to wander. Yan 頰 refers to the complexion of the face. Changmanhui 倡蔓卉 means the vines and flowers grow and spread. This line describes how the Goddess flushes gradually, and yet she is closely associated with plants and flowers.
53 結流茜霓兮石發髓旎: Hu 結 refers to the curving wave. Liu 流 and fa 發 are two verbs, meaning to issue, to give out, to flow, and to grow out. Qianni 茜霓 is the beauty and daintiness of colors as reflected on the water. Suini 髈旎 means elegant beauty. Literarily, it means the river flows while its water body gives out colorful reflections, and that even the stone gives out its bone-deep beauty by growing hair-like mosses.
54 TPGJ 2372-73.
prose; then the changes taking place in the narrative frame responsively incorporate such a transgressive force into the tale’s final structure.

For example, immediately after Siren sings “Lyric of Light and Breeze,” the prose narrative takes a dramatic turn. Siren orally confesses her true otherworldly identity to Zheng and decides to leave him and the human world behind. She thus emancipates herself from human bondages with the lyrical force of “Lyric of Light and Breeze” and leaves the prosaic worldly life. The prose narrative turns to Zheng, the mortal human being, as the centre of events. However, the narrative’s attempts to stick strictly to impressions of the human world collapse as Siren and her lyrical force powerfully reshape the prose narrative. Zheng is now hardly the confident secular scholar he appears to be in the beginning of the narrative. Instead, he now resembles a shaman after accomplishing a sacrificial service: obsessed, deserted, and indulging in his own sense of loss. A reader with knowledge of the Chu lyrics will remember that many Chu lyrics indeed were written in the voice of a shaman. Such a reader would find such a narrative revision acceptable if the tradition of Chu lyrics is followed, even in the prose narrative. Zheng himself utters the first two lines for the second section of poetry in the tale:

情無垠兮霧霧洋洋，55 My affections go like an ocean without shores, far and wide,懐佳期兮屬三湘。56 I cherish delightful times at the Three Xiang.

55 情無垠兮霧霧洋洋: The metaphor lies in the comparison of Zheng’s profound feelings for Siren to the deep and wide river. It also recalls the beginning lines of Xiang Jun and Xiang Furen. It sings of a desire and anguish for the object of affection.
56 懷佳期兮屬三湘: huai 怀 means to think of, to linger upon. Jiaqi 佳期 literally means a good time, especially the time when two people in love meet. Sanxiang 湘江 is another name of Xiang River, mainly coming from the fact that there are three levels of the Xiang River: Lixiang 漓湘, the upper level where it joins the Li River 漓水; Xiaoxiang 潇湘, the middle level where it joins with the Xiao River 潇水; and the lower level where it joins the Zheng River 蒸水. As Siren already reveals her true identity as 湘中蛟宫之娣, one of the concubines in the Dragon’s Palace in the Xiang River, Zheng expresses his love for her in this line. Also, 妹娣 reveals Siren’s real status in the Dragon Palace to be a lower-rank concubine instead of a dependent younger sister, and justifies later narrative descriptions of her dancing in a group of ladies.
These two lines may be interpreted as Zheng’s anguish for a lost love in this world, but they may also be understood as a shaman’s song for the desirable otherworldly Goddess, a mode commonly found in Chu lyrics. The war between prose narrative and poetry reaches an armistice via a double compromise. Inserting the poems within the prose narrative, the tale mediates between the two forces by intertwining both parties into the text.

Both genres, Chu lyric and biographical prose narrative, cross their generic boundaries in the text and come to build a new common ground for the tale of marvels. Within the tale, Siren’s “Lyric of Light and Breeze,” the only lyric whose text is allowed to appear in full form in the tale, is hardly subordinate to the prose narrative in that it remains an independent piece of text outside the plot of the tale. Rather than bending its will to the narrative’s demands, it fully displays its poetic force in rebelling against the domestication of a Goddess. After the lyric appears, the narrative focus is essentially poeticized. Action is far less important in the latter half of the prose narrative than in the first half. It is as if the narrative frame were thus broken by the poetic attention to moment and mood. Parallel to the change made to prose narrative by the genre of Chu lyrics, the poetic genre is reduced in accordance with narrative necessity and offers more consideration to characterization in the plot. For example, unlike Siren’s full poem at the turning point, the two poetic fragments in the latter half of the text of the tale are characterized by a communicative nature that is specific to the two lovers, rather than with a descriptive richness typically seen in “Lyric of Light and Breeze.” In the last lyric fragments, the reader reads the shaman’s yearning for his Goddess as expressed in a more individual and human way; and the Goddess reveals herself to her shaman, but at the same time, it is also a separated wife bidding goodbye to her deserted husband with a touch of human anguish.

Shen Yazhi thus applies freedom of roaming, as represented in Siren’s Chu lyrics, to his prose narrative and transforms the latter. The narrative plot thus transformed in turn works to
expand its horizon in a new direction. A generic compromise of two genres occurs in one unified new form of *chuanqi*, and fragments of lyric lines become part of a less eventful prose narrative. The immortal, free, and otherworldly literary beauty of *Chu* lyrics attracts the mortal, conventional, and worldly scholar to the immortal Goddess; and the factual and prosaic details of a worldly life with the scholar domesticate at least part of the spirit of the Goddess. Siren goes back to her immortal world and leaves the factual and prosaic world for good, but she bestows her legacy on the worldly life, on the text, and on readers’ reading experience, be they pre-modern or those of today.

“The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest” 虬髯客傳, “Kunlun Slave” 昆侖奴, and “Red Thread” 紅線

Three Tang tales of marvels—“The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest” (*Qiuranke zhuan*) by Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850-933),57 “Kunlun Slave” (*Kunlun nu*) by Pei Xing, and “Red Thread” (*Hongxian*) by Yuan Jiao 袁郊 (fl. 860-870)—despite first appearing in different times and bearing no textual relationship to one another, have often been categorized jointly by many post-Tang literary critics as “The Tales of Three Reds” （唐傳奇之“三紅”）, as if they together could reveal some common feature of *chuanqi*. All three tales of marvels can be categorized by a common subject, i.e., they are all tales about knights-errant who traditionally have operated on the margins of the social system. The names of female

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57 *The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest* tells a story about three main characters: Hongfu (last name as Zhang, nicknamed as Hongfu or Red Whisk because she holds a red whisk in her first appearance), Li Jing (a historical figure whose biography is found in the *New Tang History* and *Old Tang History* 新唐書、舊唐書, a successful general and Duke of Wei in the Tang dynasty), and the titular Curly-Bearded Guest with the same last name as Red Whisk. The story centres around Red Whisk and her choice of Li as her betrothed husband and the Curly-Bearded Guest as her sworn brother. It also tells of the Curly-Bearded Guest’s choice to give up his fortune in acknowledgement of the talents and power of Li Shimin 李世民, the future Tang emperor.
protagonists in these three tales are all composed of two Chinese characters, the first one of which is “Red” (hong 紅, literally meaning the color red in Chinese) and the second, a Chinese character standing for a household material or tool, i.e., Silk (xiao 繡) in “Kunlun Slave”, Whisk (fu 拂) in “The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest”, and Thread (xian 纓) in “Red Thread”. In addition to the name similarities, the three female characters in the these Tang tales all conjure a sense of fantasy in that they all display personalities and characters atypical of ladies in the Tang dynasty but in accord with what the Tang literati imagined for their fellow members.

The inverted images of Tang society as represented in these tales of marvels are indeed the Tang writers’ perceptions of it. Their use of received genres that aim to faithfully record impressions instead of perceptions sometimes produces a textual irony in the reader’s reading experience, especially if the reader shares the writer’s literary knowledge and values. A subversive reading is often the result: there arises a disharmony between the textual display of the writer’s perceptions and the generic expectations known by the text’s writer and the knowledgeable reader. In the knowing beholder’s eye, this disharmony becomes irony.\(^{58}\) Take “The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest,” for example. It is basically a tale of choices: how Red Whisk chooses her love, how Li Jing chooses a monarch to follow, and how the Curly-Bearded Guest chooses to withdraw from the battlefield. The story is set in the pre-Tang period, when the Tang royal family was gaining greatly in confidence and came to rule the whole country, but the text itself was written in the late Tang period when social turmoil caused much doubt about royal authority in most of the literati’s minds. The problem of (or potential for) differences among times of narrative setting, textual production, and of the time of the reception of the textual

\(^{58}\) Linda Hutcheon’s *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London and NY: Routledge, 1994) reveals much about how irony works in Western cultural fields. Interestingly enough, most of her theories, especially the part about how the intentions and interpretations of irony have to work together to make it happen (in section 5) applies most conveniently in reading many of the Tang tales, if we take Han Yu’s declaration in his defense letter seriously.
message creates a space for the writer to play with generic expectations. In the narrative, Du Guangting allows the leading characters to verbally justify their own choices in conversations. Their arguments, however, read more like political speeches than emotional outbursts, and the way these arguments are thus presented in such a romance is contrary to what Tang literati readers in Du Guangting’s time would expect from a romantic story like that between Red Whisk and Li Jing. In addition, at the end of the tale Du Guangting the writer speaks up and explains in a passage his intended purpose in writing. According to him, his writing of the tale aims only to confirm that Li Shimin, the second Emperor of the Tang dynasty, is the “true man” deserving of the throne. So bold an experiment with the accepted genre of biography is not to be explained away by Du Guangting’s half-hearted self-defence. Indeed, it only makes his fellow members of the literati more aware of the vulnerability of generic strictures as well as of the transformative power of romance.

Indeed the tension in the writing of Du Guangting, the late Tang elite writer, between the values of his own time and those of the time of his tale, is relieved by the transgressions depicted in his tale of marvels. He goes beyond the limits of his education and accesses in his text that which is blocked to him. As an educated Tang elite scholar, Du Guangting follows Confucian teachings of loyalty so as to show his confidence in the legitimacy of the Li royal family’s rule over the country; yet despite all the details justifying his characters’ choices, he offers a much less convincing conclusion to his fellow members of the literati. The narrative also works against his concluding remarks. Throughout the tale, Li Shimin, the chosen royal representative, does nothing but sit over a chess board. Indeed, to the sympathetic ears of Du Guangting’s fellow

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59 “乃知真人之興也，非英雄所冀。况非英雄者乎？人臣之謬思亂者，乃螳臂之拒走輪耳。我皇家垂福萬葉，豈虛然哉。或曰：“衛公之兵法，半乃虬髯所傳耳。” (Then did we know that the rising of a true man is not what a hero could expect. Not to mention to be expected by those who are not heroes! Those subjects of the emperor who think of rebels in vain are virtually mantis trying to block the moving wheels of a cart. “The Duke of Wei knows the military strategies well, and half of his knowledge comes from the teachings by the Curly-Bearded Guest,” so say some people.)
members of the late Tang literati, all of whom lived in social and political chaos partly because of the Li royal family’s incompetence, the last sentence of the tale ironically destabilizes the royal family’s authority. It reveals that the “truly” knowledgeable and capable person in the tale is not Li Shimin, but the Curly-Bearded Guest who withdraws from the battlefield. The embedded irony is logically meant for Du Guangting’s fellow literati, who might find the discrepancy between what they have been taught to believe and what they, with their knowledge and intelligence, would rather question. Such an irony is forbidden in historiography or in any grand narrative, but is miraculously accommodated and even appreciated in Tang tales of marvels.

As with many Tang tales of marvels, “Kunlun Slave,” written by Pei Xing, relates a fantasy of socially impossible love between two young people aided by a slave with extraordinary skills. The romance starts with a young scholar Cui visiting a high military official’s home, where Red Silk the maid entertains, embarrasses, and seduces him with a few mysterious gestures. Once home, tormented by his yearning for Red Silk and confused by her gestural puzzle, Cui composes a poem, in which his Kunlun slave discerns his true intention. The Kunlun slave solves Red Silk’s puzzle and helps the young couple through his magical martial arts. He jumps into Red Silk’s courtyard and after overhearing her chanting a love poem, evidently intended for his young scholar master, confirms his judgment of the girl’s wishes. He carries her out of the high official’s residence and then she lives with Cui, happily. Two years later, Red Silk is spotted by a servant from her old master, and Cui out of fear confesses his actions to the high official, who tries to arrest and kill the Kunlun slave, but in vain. A dozen years later, the Kunlun slave is seen in the market, peacefully selling mysterious medical herbs for a living.

60 TPGJ 1452-54.
For the Tang literati audience, the incongruous part in the story derives from the fact that the success of the romance is not secured by the couple themselves, but by Red Silk and the Kunlun slave. It is not Cui, Red Silk’s intended lover, who breaks her mysterious gestural code. In fact, scholar Cui is clueless about her subtle expressions of desire, but the Kunlun slave thoroughly comprehends them. Later it also turns out that the Kunlun slave is the one who assists her in her escaping from the high official’s residence. In the whole course of the romance, Cui only responds with passive shock, confusion, or frustration, and never with determination or action. Cui plays a weak role in the relationship and his purpose in the narrative is mostly to shift the reader’s attention more to the leading lady in the tale. Compared to a maid who chants poems and designs a set of gestural codes, and a slave who sees the intention of the poems, understands the meaning of the codes, and takes action based on them, the nominal member of the literati, Cui, is nothing but a puppet. In addition to his inadequacy as a hero of romance, Cui betrays the Kunlun slave once his love affair with Red Silk is exposed. By doing that, he joins the conventional social order that works against his own romance in the Tang dynasty, in spite of the fact that it is a romance in which he is supposed to play an active role.

Such a tale is not conventional if judged in terms of Tang social values. The true “hero” is not a member of the literati but a slave from a foreign land; the male protagonist of the love affair, who in a clichéd romance between a scholar and a beauty would possess literary competence to conquer his lady’s heart, turns out to be a cowardly young man with little literary talents who would rather stay safely within social confines. The lady finally has to live with the young man, not out of love, but out of necessity and convenience. Yet, reading to the end of the narrative, the reader is surprised by a vision of the Kunlun slave free and selling his medical herbs in market, and is thus consoled with the possibility of escaping from the depressing status quo.
“Red Thread”, written by Yuan Jiao, is unique in the corpus of Tang tales of marvels in that it is hardly a romance. Indeed, in order to achieve an other-worldly effect, Yuan Jiao makes the female protagonist defy any romantic expectations in the text. A maid to General Xue Song, Red Thread first earns General Xue’s respect with her literary accomplishments, which is not a traditional female talent in premodern China. Similar to a male member of the literati, she is erudite, quick-witted, with a fully developed knowledge of music. She is even given a mock official title of “Secretary of Home Affairs” by the General. Moreover, she helps General Xue with her extraordinary martial arts, skillfully stealing a casket from Xue’s military rival and frightening the rival into submission. The ending of Red Thread’s tale is as unexpected as her characterization: she reveals her former identity in a past life as a male physician, and persuades General Xue to set her free from bondage.

Such a tale offers marvels for its Tang literati readers in several ways. First, the female protagonist challenges the social expectations of a lady in the Tang dynasty through her “male” skills: literary talents, martial arts, bravery, and a strong will to earn individual freedom. Second, the social role for male literati captured in an official title is willingly assigned to Red Thread by the male protagonist. While the audience contemporary with the Tang writer is fully aware that “secretary” is a position in the Tang dynasty that could only be acquired by an educated male, Red Thread is addressed by General Xue as my “Secretary of Home Affairs.” She is differentiated from normal males by the addition of a modifier, nei 内 or “inner/domestic ,” to the title, meaning she does not fit completely into either the male or the female sphere in the Tang dynasty. Third, and as a result of the first two points, her relationship with General Xue

61 TPGJ 1460-62.
62 Many readers, including Wang Xiaobo, however, mistake the author of his Tang hypotext as Yang Juyuan 杨巨源 in his preface to his later extended hypotext. For the academic controversy over the authorship of the Tang hypotext, see Zhou Shaoliang 周绍良, Tang Chuangqi Jianzheng 唐传奇箋证 (Annotation on the Tang Tales of Marvels [Beijing, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2000]), and Liu Kairong 劉開榮, Tangdai xiaoshuo yanjiu 唐代小說研究 (A Study of Tang Tales of Marvels [Taiwan: Taiwan Commercial Press, 1964]).
Song bears few of the qualities of romance. Instead, the relationship resembles more one between two male members of the literati who have like minds: she is more his consultant than his erudite maid, and her service to Xue is not bound by her female gender. Such a female character transgresses almost all social boundaries in the Tang dynasty. Indeed, the discrepancy between what she is supposed to be and what she is created to be is so huge that Yuan Jiao finally uses the device of a past life to mediate the gap for his readers. He conveniently uses a Buddhist concept of karma to explain Red Thread’s identity as a female with male talents, claiming in her own voice that she used to be a male physician in her past life when s/he accidentally killed a pregnant woman in delivery, so that in this life she lives with a female identity, which is both a punishment and an atonement.

In the modern reader’s eyes, Yuan Jiao’s explanation may ironically replace one doubt with another. However, the claim that Red Thread is a male doctor re-incarnated into a female maid nevertheless indicates to an audience in the Tang dynasty that her current female identity is nothing but a transitory disguise for her. The denial of true female identity to Red Thread may excuse her failure to generate any romantic relationship with General Xue in the text. In short, the absence of femininity in the female protagonist forces the Tang literati audience to deal with the loss of the generic expectations of romance in the text of “Red Thread”.

To summarize, Red Silk has the literary talent to design a set of coded puzzles through hand gestures; Red Whisk has the political insight to distinguish a hero from a declining politician; and Red Thread is not only as talented as the other two “Reds” in her literary skills and political strategies, but is also physically endowed with great martial arts abilities so that she can sneak away and surprise her enemy with unbelievable skills. Similarly, the three female protagonists thus created in the Tang tales break down social conventions and embody transformative forces in their narratives. Red Silk is a maid to a general of influential power, but
she falls in love with a member of the Tang literati and then gains help from a Kunlun slave. She also starts a family life in the face of powerful interference from her influential previous owner. Red Whisk is also a maid high in her master’s favour, but identifying a great mind in Li Jing, she single-handedly helps him subjugate the ambitious and wealthy Curly-Bearded Guest and thus secures political success for Li Jing. And Red Thread might be the most unconventional maid among the three: she assists her master not only through her literary talents, but also through her almost otherworldly martial arts skills, yet at the end of the story, she chooses her own freedom over the confined life of a lady in a man’s world.

Conclusion: Qi as a Literary Quality in the Tales ofMarvels

Many scholars--Chinese and Western, pre-modern and contemporary--agree that qi is a defining characteristic of Tang tales of marvels.⁶³ As to the question what qi is in Tang writing, most scholars turn to its effects on the reader as well as to the writer’s aims in constructing it.⁶⁴ Chen Wenxin answers the question “what is qi in Tang tales” by what he calls “specific connotations” (juti neihan 具體內涵) in the Tang tales and argues that the core value of qi in these tales is a romantic attitude toward life that does not affect the overarching discourse.⁶⁵ Later in his research he adds two more characteristics to this definition: the writer’s intent to

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⁶³ In addition to pre-modern critics like Hu Yingling and modern critics like Lu Xun, contemporary critics also show much critical interest in the development of the genre of chuanqi. Xue Hongji 薛洪勣’s Chuangqi Xiaoshuoshi 傳奇小說史 (A History of chuanqi Fiction) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1998) provides a panoramic view of the chuanqi genre from before the Tang dynasty to the Qing dynasty; and yet, due to the very wide span of time his critical work covers and the many pieces of work his textual analysis tries to discuss in under 400 pages, the book becomes more a descriptive survey than a profound analysis of the genre. Xue’s discussion of the qi quality in the Tang tales concludes that the quality leads to certain themes and literary techniques that appear to be “new” in the Tang dynasty narrative writing.

⁶⁴ A reading of anthologies of pre-modern Chinese fiction writers’ prefaces to either their own writing or to their fellow writers’ writing would show how much importance the pre-modern writers attach to the aim of amazing their readers. See Huang Qingquan 黃清泉, Zhongguo lidai xiaoshuo xuba jilu 中國歷代小說序跋輯錄 (A Compilation of Prefaces and Colophons of Chinese Xiaoshuo Through the Ages [Wuhan: Huazhong shifan daxue, 1989]).

⁶⁵ Chen Wenxin, Zhongguo chuanqi xiaoshuo shihua 中國傳奇小說史話 (A Historical Account of Chinese Chuanqi Fiction [Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1995]).
fabricate, and the poetic devices used in these prose tales. Yet, again, Chen’s research stops at
the crucial stage where specific textual analysis is needed to explain how the literary quality of qi
is created by “the writer’s intent to fabricate” and “the poetic devices.”

In his discussion of Chinese narrative theory, Andrew Plaks also notes that much of the
classical fiction tradition is “devoted to the investigation of the unusual, the special, [and] the
unique.” He then mentions chuanqi as one example of such an unusual narrative and explains
briefly the semantic range of the Chinese term qi in the context of Chinese narrative, translating
it as patently marvelous. However, his explanation is too brief. Liang Shi makes a chronological
account of the term qi in pre-modern Chinese fiction. In his interpretation of qi in the Tang
dynasty, he concludes that qi in Tang tales of marvels is defined by the supernatural. His
conclusion, however, hardly explains the fact that a good number of the chuanqi tales narrate the
worldly romances between members of literati and beauties, and anecdotes of knights-errant, and
are still considered qi. And Liang Shi mentions little about the literary aspect of qi in Tang
chuanqi.

My discussion of Tang tales is meant to fill in the gaps in textual analysis left by the
above-mentioned studies. The literary quality of qi is constructed in Tang tales of marvels and
helps these tales win their readers’ attention and appreciation among the literati. The literary
quality of qi is therefore essential to the birth and growth of a genre of tales that represents
unusual subjects through transformative deployments of generic and literary knowledge. These
tales were accepted and appreciated by their immediate readers who shared the concept of you or
freedom of roaming with the writers. In the texts of the Tang tales discussed here, the literary
quality of qi is skillfully translated into the Tang literati’s concept of you in their writing and

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reading. With such freedom, the Tang literati roam across the restrictions of genres like historiographical biography and lyrical poetry. This transformative poetic power started to spread to tales like “An Explication of the Lament from Xiang River.” These tales conveyed perceptions inscribed by and for members of the literati in a form more inspirational than the social and political functions more restrictively associated with the source genres borrowed to construct such tales. The literati in the Tang chose to permit and came to relish the transgressive nature of these tales, and to appreciate the transformative and even subversive effect these tales produce through their readings. They even recorded their responses to tales in codas that appear in other tales such as Yingying’s Story and The Tale of Li Wa. The significant shift of focus from the political and practical purposes of writing to the literary ones generated, justified, and historically validated thematic changes. Themes of transgressions in such tales of marvels as “The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest,” “Kunlun Slave,” and “Red Thread” indeed totally break down the strictures of generic biography writing. Instead, they introduce a new form of literature to the reader: a literature that does not present for a person’s eye what has already occurred, but constructs what might be possible, or what might only ever exist in the writer’s mind. These newly expanded qualities of narrative in Tang tales of marvels are enabled by the literary quality of qi.

The literary quality of qi in Tang chuanqi allows the possibility for a writer to write what is perceived and envisioned in the images the world leaves in one’s mind. For a writer with the emancipated spirit of you, or freedom of roaming, the literary quality of qi is thus translated into a highly skilful application of the sophisticated knowledge of various literary genres and values in constructing such images. It is human fantasy conveyed in literary words.

The Tang literati achieved transgressive crossing between prosaic narrative and poetic transformation, inaugurating a literature that represented a new perspective on reality through
words. They sowed the seeds of qi in the fertile fields of classical Chinese fiction, even as they opened up those fields. What came next in Chinese literary history, however, drained much of that open-minded literary force and stunted the growth of qi for a long time. In the next chapter, I will briefly summarize a period of time--spanning the imperial period after the Tang dynasty to the early Republican period--in order to show how the literary sophistication which gave so much life and power to Tang chuanqi tales lost its force of transgression. Furthermore, this literary sophistication drained of its force made writing so restrictive that in the literary field of classical Chinese fiction, and even in related genres such as classical Chinese drama, it compromised the literary quality of qi and left only the shell of the genre of chuanqi. Meanwhile, heavily fettered by the new political and social demands of modern time, the umbrella genre xiaoshuo returned so as to give more priority to political and practical considerations. And so literary qi became at first overly mannered, then virtually disappeared altogether. Pursuit of genuine qi is seen only sporadically in a few writers’ efforts over this time. Few as they might be, they did manage to keep the literary quality of qi alive in their sparse but powerful words.
Chapter III

Qi Domesticated and Reduced

In the last chapter I discussed how the Tang literati made fantasy possible in words by exploring the literary quality of qi in the writing and reading of tales of marvels. I argued that Tang literati writers made full use of the philosophical concept of you (freedom of roaming) and applied it to generic transgression and then thematic transgression carried out with mature literary sophistication. The vision of Tang society displayed in the Tang tales was accepted and appreciated by fellow members of the Tang literati. Moreover, the expression of this vision through new forms of narrative justified the Tang literati’s intensified focus upon the literary and aesthetic purposes of writing rather than the traditional practical and political ones.

The ripe seeds of literary fantasy thus planted by the Tang literati in classical Chinese literature, however, failed to produce immediate fruits after the Tang dynasty. Instead, while the chuanqi genre expanded through enhanced formal variety, it lost the transformative vitality of qi as it increasingly adopted the more restrictive formal features of classical literature. In modern times, the quality of qi was again relegated to near irrelevance in the field of fiction. In the first half of twentieth century, in fact, social turmoil, national crises, and political controversies consumed so much of modern fiction writers’ attention that the literary quality of qi was the least significant and often absent element in their writings. Nevertheless, a few writers managed to contribute essentially to the survival of qi in fiction writing. In this chapter I outline briefly the domestication of qi in classical Chinese literature and the reduction of that quality in modern Chinese fiction in the early Republican period. Then I analyze how the literary legacy of qi from the Tang tales of marvels manages to survive in works like Strange Stories from A Chinese Studio (聊齋志異 Liaozhai zhiyi) by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715), Border Town (邊城
Post-Tang Literati in Imperial China

Many Tang literati consolidated and developed tales of marvels in their literary groups, but they did face criticism from scholar/officials who were more loyal to the traditional historiographical doctrines. Occasionally, these Tang writers of tales of marvels were scorned by fellow members of the literati who followed more traditional routes to political success. Nevertheless, most members of the Tang literati who wrote tales of marvels pursued the literary quality of qi with ease, and even with joy. What enabled such easy and even joyful pursuits were the suitable cultural and historical conditions for the Tang literati: unprecedented cultural diversity sparked by social turbulence; a chance to seek public and political success while receiving private acclaim from literary minds; and familiarity with previous literary genres—a credit to traditional Chinese education, just to mention a few conditions.

After the Tang dynasty, with the rise and fall of ensuing dynasties in imperial China, a series of landmark events occurred in the country’s intellectual sphere. The Song dynasty (960-1279) saw the popularization of the literary motto “wen yi zai Dao 文以載道” (writing as a

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1 See Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661-721)’s disapproval of the chuanqi writings or tales of marvels in his Shitong 史通 (Generalities in History). Liu in his discussion of history writing represents this highbrow trend of the critique of the pursuit of the fantastic at the cost of factuality. And yet in his attempt to analyze the causes of the unfortunate occurrence of chuanqi writing, he simultaneously uncovers its intention and purpose: “the literati who are interested in the fantastic supplement what is missing in official history 好奇之士，補其所亡.” The intention is to pursue the fantastic, and the purpose, is declared to be supplemental to the official history. In other words, what contributes to the fantastic is not necessarily the factual.

2 Han Yu’s communication with Liu Zongyuan might illustrate this paradoxical attitude toward chuanqi writing or tales of marvels in the Tang dynasty.

3 The Tang dynasty inherited the unified territory from the previous Sui dynasty (581-618) as well as its comparative openness to cultures other than the centralized Han culture.
vehicle for the Dao, or the Way of Confucian moral doctrines), and the literary quality of qi was thereby downgraded and reduced to a means to achieve more effective diffusion of Confucian principles. Such a literary belief restored priority to the political and practical function of xiaoshuo writing as a whole, which prevailed until the end of the imperial period, when some Qing dynasty (1644-1911) literati chose to switch back to the earlier genre of zhiguai or “records of the strange” in order to write of other-worldly matters. The concept of freedom of roaming (you) slowly succumbed to the restrictions of social, cultural, and generic norms.

Alongside the decline of the true spirit of freedom of roaming, the dominance of Confucian principles, or li 理, in Chinese culture also reduced the prominence of qi. For example, the Song dynasty successfully consolidated the educational foundation of a bureaucratic political system sustained by civil service examinations based on the Confucian classics; and Neo-Confucianism arose to encompass the literati’s political ambitions, and almost became the group’s form of a personal religion in their everyday lives. The vastly expanded public obligations living a Confucian life entailed, however, constrained the literati’s imagination as a means of breaking through conventions. They became more conservative and more willing to follow political and practical callings as they were increasingly part of a political system that threatened to subsume their private lives. According to Stephen Owen, the Song literati responded to “the demands of state service” and “the unremitting moral seriousness of Neo-Confucian self-examination and self-cultivation” with literati culture, “a space of freedom and sanctioned pleasure.” And yet Stephen Owen also notes that such “a realm of private life and leisure” was only kept separate from all those demands “to some degree,” that it was not outside, but “within” the intrusive public world, and that consequently the forms of the literati culture

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4 The term comes from the Song scholar Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017-1073)’s Tongshu 通書·文辭 (Generalities: Literariness).
were supposed to be “approved” by that world. In other words, while the Song literati enjoyed the expansion of their role into the public world that the Tang literati craved in vain, public demands for them to follow Confucian ways shaped almost every part of their literary world. Tasked with conveying only Confucianism in their literature, any expression of otherness had to be contained at the level of form only. In this case, the Song literati achieved formal sophistication in writing their tales, but different from their Tang counterparts who transgressed thematically in their textual and formal experiments, the Song literati lost the transformative force of roaming spirit. Instead, they cultivated an increasingly private realm within the public world and gave in to moral restrictures from increasingly conventional public life.

In the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) the path to officialdom was blocked to the literati. The removal of pressure to serve publicly from many of the literati had a profound effect on the course of literature. There was a well-documented explosion of interest in vernacular literature (prose, poetry, and drama), but the variety play (zaju) also came to have a greater literary quality as it received more attention from literati authors. The verse play continued into the Ming dynasty, giving rise to a long form of drama known as chuanqi, just at the time that the literati began their significant attempts at producing long vernacular fiction elevated to share many generic similarities with classical fiction, such as subject matter, plot and characterization. The late imperial literati held up the concept of qing 情, or emotion/sentiment, to form a dichotomy with li (principle). Due to the overwhelming power and influence of Neo-Confucianism, however, most transgressions in the name of qing in Ming and Qing fiction were domesticated by li in the closure of such narratives.

6 The Song dynasty Confucian scholar Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200)’s compact selection of the Confucian classics was finally assigned as the imperially sanctioned core of the curriculum for the civil service examination in the Ming dynasty, and an advocacy of imitation of the classical prose styles thus heralded in the most boring period of classical literature. Meanwhile, the vernacular literature, aiming at the larger but less elite readership in the lower ranks of society, started to use the classical Tang tales.
The Tang literati expressed their disagreement with their contemporary world in the complexity of their perspectives on the world, their original engagement with the lyrical force of classical Chinese language, and their generic transgressions through new forms of hybridized narrative such as chuanqi. The Song literati started to repress their desire for a different understanding of the world by formally elevating their fiction in order to make themselves more acceptable to a broader public. The Yuan literati redirected their ambitions through new literary inventions in vernacular literature. The Ming literati continued the fascination with vernacular literature but inserted numerous lines of classical poetry and discursive arguments in their vernacular narratives, as if by doing so they could realign themselves with the great teachings of Confucian masters even when writing the lowly form of xiaoshuo. The Qing literati might be the most subversive in their fiction writing: on the one hand, they write about the supernatural with full knowledge that it is a subject of which Confucius disapproved; on the other hand, as if to connect themselves to the traditional practical purpose of writing xiaoshuo, they return to zhiguai and its historiographical mode to record the supernatural as though it were simply a faithful record of surface impressions of the world. In general, however, freedom of roaming (you) was increasingly reduced to a collective yearning for normality among the Chinese literati following the Tang dynasty.

Tang chuanqi as a genre had its literary descendants both in its immediate formal follower, Song chuanqi, the Song classical tales of marvels, and in its transformation into plots and themes for the chuanqi drama form, the classical verse plays of romance and marvels that started in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) and fully matured and blossomed in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The energizing, transgressive quality of qi, however, dissipates over time as it is conventionalized and domesticated into more and more clichéd, hollow literary forms. As well, the transformative
lyrical force from poetic genres that were incorporated into Tang tales of marvels declines into mere superficial formal novelties in later writing.

**The Decline of Qi in Post-Tang Classical Chinese Fiction**

As argued in the previous section, the abolishment of the civil service examination system in the Yuan dynasty and its subsequent restoration and elaboration in the Ming and Qing dynasties made the literati more conservative and willing to follow Confucian teachings in their intellectual life. It also affected how they wrote classical fiction. Post-Tang writers and literary critics were aware of the transgressive force of qi in the Tang tales of marvels. As early as the Song dynasty, Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123-1202) states in his *Tangren shuohui: Fanli* 唐人説薈·範例 (Collections of Tang Tales: Examples) that for a member of the literati it is a requirement to be familiar with Tang tales, for in them one finds that the quality of qi can be discovered even in the smallest details of emotional life.\(^7\) Hu Yinglin of the Ming Dynasty credits the incredible force of the Tang tales to their powers of fantasy in his discussion of the dichotomy and interaction of *xu* 虛, the non-existent and the fabricated, and *shi* 實, the existent and the factual, and determines that Tang tales provide readers with an engaging reading experience in crossing the lines between these two worlds.\(^8\)

This awareness of the subversive powers of qi led the post-Tang imperial writers in a direction unlike that of their Tang predecessors. The post-Tang imperial writers tried to encage qi
within Confucian doctrines, within “stock situation and predictable plot developments” after the Tang dynasty, and even through a return to the pre-Tang obsession with historical records.\(^9\) For example, the *Trimmed Lamps* collections\(^\text{10}\) written by Qu You 瞿佑 (1347-1433), which are considered to be the best Ming classical tales of marvels and were held up as a model of fiction with their delicate descriptions and literary allusions,\(^\text{11}\) slavishly imitate the surface narrative framework of Tang tales but replace the urge to cross the borders that constrain the text with nothing but flowery poems that ornament the narratives but do little to change their course.\(^\text{12}\)

Qu You himself declares clearly in his preface to *Trimmed Lamps* that his purpose in writing these tales is “to convince the good and condemn the evil, to deplore the impoverished and lament the wronged.”\(^\text{13}\) In other words, he writes in order to abide by conventional normality, not to cross boundaries and present a different perspective on the world. As one might expect, his tales bear surface resemblances to Tang tales but differ in their outcomes. For example, in the twenty-two tales collected in his *Jiandeng xinhua* 剪燈新話 (New Stories from Trimming the Lamp Wick), half of them are about romances that either arouse social disapproval or involve other-worldly elements. They seem to continue the Tang tales’ opposition to social boundaries and they also contain beautifully-composed poems in classical language. However, the unconventional relationships never reach fruition and while the texts of the Tang tales often show how poetic lyricism can reshape and redirect the prose narrative, Qu You’s texts deprive the poems of such a transformative force. Take “The Story of Cuicui” (*Cuicui zhuan* 翠翠傳) as an

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\(^\text{10}\) The *Trimmed Lamp* collections refer to *Jiandeng xinhua* 剪燈新話 (New Stories from Trimming the Lampwick), a collection of short tales written in classical Chinese by Qu You, and which triggered a number of sequels by later literati writers, using *Jiandeng* to indicate the linkage, for example, *Jiandeng yuhua* 剪燈餘話 (Supplementary Tales by the Trimmed Lamp) by Li Zhen 李紱 (1376-1452).

\(^\text{11}\) Barr 680-681.

\(^\text{12}\) See Gao Ru 高儒, 1540, *Baichuan shuzhi* 百川書志 (A Hundred River Book Catalogues [Beijing, Gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1987]) 181. According to Gao, most of the Ming tales of marvels are “composed in imitation of Yingying’s Story” (皆本《鶯鶯傳》而作).

\(^\text{13}\) Qu You, *Jiandeng Xinhua* (New Stories from Trimming the Lampwick), author’s preface.
example: the young scholar Jin Ding and his childhood love Cuicui start as a perfect couple, exchanging poems and enjoying a happy life, but soon they are separated by social disorder.

Cuicui is taken by a warlord and becomes his concubine, and Jin Ding, after communicating with her by poetry, meets her disguised as her brother. The newly imposed boundary of their relationship, i.e., brother and sister, blocks their genuine love. In the end, both die heart-broken and remain in the bondage of the brother-and-sister relation. All the poignant poems they have written to and for each other fail to erode the boundaries. Cuicui finally gets buried beside Jin Ding, but only in her false identity as his sister. Compared with such Tang tales as “Kunlun Slave” or “The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest,” where no warlord is powerful enough to impose an impassable boundary between two truly engaged lovers, or compared with “An Explication of the Lament from Xiang River,” where the lyrical force of literary language is able to break the spell of social boundaries, Qu You’s tale presents a total failure of qi. There are six complete poems exchanged between the two protagonists, and one long letter written in the style of rhymed prose: all are beautiful and touching, but the spirit of freedom of roaming within them is completely surrendered to the impositions of prose narrative; the writer can do nothing with the text but accept what is given by social norms and impotently “lament the wronged.”

A growing Neo-Confucian obsession with xiaoshuo’s historical mission also helped weaken the power of qi in classical fiction after the Tang dynasty. The post-Tang imperial writers returned to the tradition of zhiguai, or records of the strange, to corral anything they perceived in the world that was at odds with Confucian doctrines. Hong Mai’s 洪邁 (1123-1202) Yi Jian zhi 夷堅志 (Records of the Listener) was the greatest Song dynasty example of this genre. But it was in the Qing dynasty that literary qi in classical fiction almost completely cedes ground to a brief and straightforward plain style of writing that engages the supernatural. For example, Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1797) writes Zi bu yu 子不語 (What the Master Did Not Talk About), a collection of
supernatural stories and anecdotes narrated in a very terse style, and Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724-1804), the general editor of *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (The Complete Library of Four Treasures), argues against elevating qi over the moral preaching of Confucian virtues in his *Yuewei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記 (Sketches from the Cottage for the Contemplation of Subtleties). The quality of qi is effaced in the two writers’ literary efforts to avoid a literary celebration of otherworldly or supernatural events in the face of Confucian virtues.

**Domestication of the Literary Quality of Qi in Chuanqi Plays**

As I discussed previously, the loss of access for the literati to official positions in the Yuan dynasty had a profound effect on the course of literature, and the rise of the verse play in the Yuan dynasty continued into the Ming and Qing dynasty. Post-Tang literati writers started to channel significant efforts into producing great dramatic works with lyrical force. Some of these plays pay homage to the Tang tales of marvels and take inspiration and models directly from the Tang tales of marvels. Even the genre name for one corpus of verse dramas is drawn from the label Tang chuanqi. These plays from the southern part of China developed in the Ming and Qing dynasties, may be called chuanqi drama, literally “dramas of marvels”, but qi failed to be fully translated into the new form. On the contrary, the texts of these plays uniformly constrain the literary quality of qi and domesticate most of the characters and themes from the Tang tales.

Many critics have noticed the generic and intertextual relations between the Tang chuanqi tales and the chuanqi plays of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Both Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898-1958) and Lu Xun note that the Tang tales inspired dramas after the Yuan dynasty.14 Wang Pijiang also mentions in his preface to his anthology of the Tang tales that the subject matters

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14 Please see Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, *Zheng Zhenduo shuo wenxue* 鄭振鐸說俗文學 (Zheng Zhenduo on Popular Literature) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000). And also, Lu Xun 44.
therein often provided raw materials for the *chuanqi* plays of the Ming dynasty. It is not until the turn of twentieth century, however, that a more detailed and solid discussion of the Tang legacy in traditional Chinese dramas (and other literary genres) appears in the criticism. Cheng Guofu 程國賦 has completed useful research on how major Tang tales evolved between the Song dynasty and the Qing dynasty, appearing in various genres of writing.\(^{15}\) He discusses the issue of textual evolution in terms of narrative perspectives, principles of plots, the dichotomy of the elusive and the factual, and the art of characterization, and he concludes that the “scholar-beauty” (*caizi jiaren* 才子佳人) pattern of plot, which is prevalent in traditional drama and vernacular *xiaoshuo*, is in fact a descendant of the classical Tang tales.

By examining the textual changes from the Tang *chuanqi* “The Tale of the Curly Bearded Guest” to its adaptation in the mid-Ming *chuanqi* drama *Hongfu ji* 紅拂記 (*The Tale of Red Whisk*) by Zhang Fengyi 張鳳翼 (1527-1613), we can see how *qi* is lost in making its trans-generic journey.\(^{16}\)

The major differences between the two texts are immediately apparent. The Tang text is a short piece of classical prose narrative of less than 3,000 Chinese characters, while the Ming text is a long verse drama of almost 30,000 Chinese characters. The short Tang text coherently provides vivid details to justify the three major characters’ personal choices, mainly in quoted dialogues among the three. Also the Tang writer appends a note of 68 Chinese characters at the end of his text which, opens the tale to a discussion among his immediate Tang readers. In

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\(^{15}\) Cheng Guofu 程國賦, *Tangdai xiaoshuo shanbian yanjiu* 唐代小說嬗變研究 (A Study of the Evolution of *xiaoshuo* in the Tang Dynasty [Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1997]). Cheng first categorizes the Tang tales into five groups according to the subject matter, i.e., supernatural events, love and marriage, literati anecdotes, Buddhism and Taoism, and knights-errant, and then takes a literary historical approach in following the evolution of these subjects in the subsequent dynasties; then he devotes the next four chapters to discussing the generic similarities and differences between the Tang tales and other genres like late imperial classical fiction, vernacular fiction, the variety play of the Yuan dynasty, and the dramas in the Ming and Qing dynasties. He obviously shows more interest in the inter-generic relation between the Tang tales and the traditional drama.

\(^{16}\) The text of the drama can be found in *Hongfuji pingzhu* 紅拂記評注 (Annotation and Comments on *The Tale of Red Whisk*), ed. by Wang Qiang and Huang Zhusan (Jilin: Jinlin renmin chubanshe, 2001).
contrast, the Ming text is a script for performance, and in order to make the story more dramatic to retain the audience’s interest, it adopts characters from another Tang tale and inserts them into the plot.\textsuperscript{17} Given the sprawling 34 acts in the drama, the whole structure of the play is very loose. Each act itself, however, is neatly framed and complete in structure, having a short opening poem and a short concluding poem that work as the playwright’s comments and a poetic precis of the plot developments in the act.\textsuperscript{18}

At first glance the Ming text is less elliptical in its usage of classical language, which would seemingly afford the playwright more space to present an accessible perspective on the world that connects to the reader/audience’s own everyday reality. However, my reading shows that this is not the case. First, such a neat poetic frame for the plot in each act prevents any interaction with the audience and contains a prepackaged interpretation through which the playwright defines the neat structure. Second, the playwright’s comments function more like a consistent and persistent recapitulation of the plot rather than as a paratextual note inviting the audience to reflect on the status of text. For example, in Act 1, the final poem merely summarizes the whole plot briefly in the following verses:

打得上情郎紅拂女。Lady Red Whisk pushes her lover upward,

撇得下愛寵楊司空。Minister Yang casts his adored away with ease,

讓別人江山虬髯客。The Curly-Bearded Guest surrenders all his territory,

成自己事業李衛公。And Li, Duke of Wei, accomplishes his own great deeds.

Beneath such a summary lies the Confucian definition of fixed social roles and restricted social values of the major characters in the play. According to Confucian doctrines, ladies are meant to

\textsuperscript{17} Meng Qi 孟啓 (fl. 841–886), Benshishi本事詩 (Storied Poems). The story tells how Princess Lechang 樂昌公主 reunites with her husband after the social turmoil. A precise English translation of the story can be found in Graham Sanders’ book \textit{Words Well Put}, 263.

\textsuperscript{18} As for the structural features of the Ming and Qing chuanqi plays, see Guo Yingde 郭英德, \textit{Ming Qing chuanqi xiqu wenti yanjiu} 明清傳奇戏曲文體研究 (A Stylistic Study of the Ming and Qing Drama [Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2004]).
be meek and submissive at home, supporting and encouraging their husbands to climb up the social ladder, and men should take up their own proper places and make a name outside the home. Hence Red Whisk in this Ming chuanqi drama behaves differently from the character in the Tang tale. She shows her obedience to Li Jing after eloping and she accepts her domestic role once she becomes his wife (Act 22). She even encourages her husband to pursue his political ambitions and to leave her behind in this pursuit. Minister Yang prioritizes the state administration above indulgence in sensual pleasures, and he turns away from a femme fatale (Act 20); the Curly-Bearded Guest follows the message from Providence and subjugates himself to the new Tang emperor (Acts 18 and 34), and Li Jing, as a member of the literati, sells his talents to the right emperor for both personal glory and public duty (Acts 27, 28, 33, and 34). Such a poem, written in neatly parallel lines, shows no disagreement with the values dominant in the everyday world; nor does it challenge any of the social opinions popular among the audiences of the mid-Ming dynasty. It offers surface impressions of everyday life that legitimate status quo. Literary language and poetic verses generate no transgression here; instead, they provide a reiteration of the rules, the conventionality, and normality that govern traditional social role-assignments.

The changes in the characterization of Red Whisk in particular display the thematic domestication of qi in Ming chuanqi drama most clearly. Cheng Guofu argues that the Ming text does not change the arrangement of events in its adaptation of the Tang tale, and that the differences are only superficial, but many other critics notice the essential discrepancy between the two images of Red Whisk in the Tang text and the Ming text. Xu Dingbao, for example, clearly points out that Red Whisk of the Tang text is a brave and independent female version of the knight-errant while that of the Ming text is a typically domesticated Ming lady.

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19 Cheng Guofu 138.
Indeed, the marital (rather than martial) life of Red Whisk sustains the major frame narrative of the Ming verse drama. The image of Red Whisk in the Ming text epitomizes female virtues as defined by Neo-Confucianism, among which chastity and conjugal fidelity were most highly valued in Ming and Qing society.\(^\text{21}\) Acutely aware of the significance of chastity for a lady, the Red Whisk of the Ming play hesitates out of fear of losing it on the night of her elopement. Once married to Li Jing, she applies most of her eloquence to reassuring him that he can trust her conjugal fidelity. Furthermore, in order to keep her chastity in his absence, she conceals her physical beauty and feminine identity, and abides by the social etiquette for a married woman more typical of the Ming dynasty (the time for the verse drama’s composition) than of the Tang dynasty (the time in which the story is set). Red Whisk of the Ming text presents little of the literary quality of qi to her Ming audience. On the contrary, she consolidates social boundaries at the time of crisis among her closest friends. The audience, now kept at a distance by the playwright’s closed literary structure of the play, witnesses transgressions prevented on stage in line with Confucian female virtues.

Compared with the Red Whisk of the Tang text, whom the Curly-Bearded Guest praises as an equal to Li Jing, the one in the Ming text is subordinated to being a beautiful but vulnerable dependent of the male protagonist. The one in the Tang text quotes as a male scholar would from the classic *Shijing* 詩經, *The Book of Poetry*, to express herself and demonstrates that she is a marvellous woman in a man’s world; by contrast, Red Whisk in the Ming text panders to the audience with hundreds of flowery poetic lines describing her physical beauty, her spiritual obedience, and her essential confirmation of the everyday world’s expectations of her. In other words, the former Red Whisk brings forth a powerful force of literary qi through sparse use of literary language and the generic force of poetry in prose narrative; while the latter indulges in

\(^{21}\) For the female virtues advocated by Confucianism, see Li Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Albany: SUNY P, 2006).
verbose and flowery literary expressions only to give the audience an unsurprising imitation of everyday life. The simple yet powerful lyrical force of the Tang text fades into a humble homage paid to the everyday world in hollow verses.

Liaozhai zhiyi 聊齋志異

Weak as it is, qi dims but does not die in the field of classical Chinese fiction after the Tang dynasty. In fact, before Yuan Mei and Ji Yun returned to the traditionally political and practical purposes of writing xiaoshuo in the zhiguai form, Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) already released some of the literary power of qi in his unique Liaozhai zhiyi 聊齋志異 (Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio, called Liaozhai from now on), a collection of mostly short zhiguai accounts written with a literary flaire more in the style of chuanqi.

With its 491 tales of various lengths collected in one book, Liaozhai makes for exciting reading; however, it is hard to designate its genres. First circulated in manuscript form during Pu Songling’s life and then published posthumously, the tales are grouped into twelve volumes and follow a historiographical format, often with a postscript note from the writer who styles himself as “Historian of the Strange”, a practice evidently used in homage to the great Han historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (139 BC-86 BC), who calls himself “The Grand Historian” when providing postscripts to accounts in his masterpiece, Historical Records (Shiji 史記). Pu Songling superficially engages qi by going back to the tradition of zhiguai, writing down tales about ghosts, fairies, and spirits that are traditionally set apart from factual records of the human world. But his real return to qi occurs in the text’s form. Through writing Liaozhai he acquires a freedom of roaming in poetic language, successfully weaving his literary explorations into the structure of his records of the strange. Even in the plots of his narratives, the otherworldly figures are often given more complicated endings than merely being destroyed or domesticated by Confucian
social codes. In this sense Pu Songling revives the literary quality of *qi* by tapping into its transformative and transgressive force in the text.

Among all the tales in *Liaozhai*, those most resembling Tang tales of marvels are romances between female fox-spirits or ghosts and male human scholars. In a time when women were expected to take part in social relations, including emotional affairs, with coyness and passivity, Pu Songling endows his female characters with will, power, and wishes that are alien to the everyday world of female experience.\(^{22}\) The other-worldly identities of these female characters conveniently give them a right to the freedom of roaming in Pu Songling’s texts, and they often take the initiative to cross the boundaries between the human and non-human, between everyday normality and alternative perspectives on life. For example, a fox spirit, Yingning, ignores etiquette by openly smiling at young master Wang at their first meeting in the tale named after her. In another story, “Hsiang-Ju’s Misfortunes,”\(^ {23}\) a fox spirit Hong Yu (Red Jade) transgresses the normal social barriers between a young maid (which is her impersonated identity) and a young widower by crossing the bridging ladder between their neighboring courtyards and sharing her life with him. All these transgressions in social behaviour are made acceptable to Qing readers because Pu Songling uses the freedom of literary description to render these non-human figures free of social bondage and rich in human feelings other than those allowed by Confucian doctrines. As a result, in the pages of *Liaozhai* at least, a few other-worldly ladies--and the transformative force represented in their literary representations--avoid being domesticated into human society as a form of closure. Their successful escape from Confucian doctrines reveals the possibility of holding an alternative perspective on the world. The literary quality of *qi* thus finds a continuation in such escapes by making them possible.

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\(^{23}\) Herbert A. Giles, trans., *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (Shanghai, Hongkong, Singapore: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., 1926) 139-146.
The literary quality of qi in Liaozhai has long appealed to critics. Ever since Lu Xun described it as a historical record of the supernatural written in the vein of literary fantasy, both Western and Chinese critics have accepted this description almost unanimously. Critics have explored its multiple intertextual and intergeneric relations with both zhiguai and chuanqi. Some writers see Pu Songling as more aligned with Ming literary trends. For example, Jaroslav Průšek notices the moral focus in Liaozhai and thereby identifies Pu Songling as the one who brings Chinese literature in classical language to its peak.24 Such an argument pays less attention to the literary quality of Liaozhai than to its political and social functions. Judith Zeitlin, however, believes otherwise. In her view, unlike the Ming literati’s concessions to increasingly conservative social values, the stories in Liaozhai, long or short, reflect a “boundary-crossing” quality: supernatural agents, mostly in the form of female foxes and ghosts, invade the human world, and in the end some of them are domesticated by the human world or finally betrayed and destroyed by the human beings with whom they choose to share their other-worldly values; but others, untamed, choose to flee the human world after they see that the human world goes against their free will.25 Both critics reveal interesting aspects of Liaozhai, and Zeitlin’s interpretations of the difference of these female aliens confirm Pu Songling’s perception of a world other than that prescribed by Confucian doctrine.

In summary, while Pu Songling follows all the other members of the literati in the early Qing period and ostensibly returns to the traditional practical and political mission of writing classical fiction, his individual literary voice of Liaozhai clearly differentiates him from other Qing writers such as Yuan Mei and Ji Yun. He is closer to his Tang predecessors, especially in the longer and more literary romances in Liaozhai. Pu Songling often displays an explicit tone of

social criticism in his shorter anecdotal stories and tries to restrain the literary quality of *qi* in them even when they deal with strange topics. However, when he turns to longer romances, mainly about the interactions of female otherworldly beings with human scholars, he is more inclined to construct a supernatural world that is fascinating to his contemporary readers. His language in such stories is not as terse as in the short anecdotal ones; instead, it gains a lyrical force that often breaks through the narrative framework, as occurred in the Tang tales of marvels.

**The Political Mission of Chinese Xiaoshuo in the Early Twentieth Century**

The last days of imperial China saw the rapid collapse of centralized government and the rapid ascent of local military powers. At the same time, the influx of Western powers started to threaten China’s national identity around the turn of the twentieth century. In many intellectuals’ views, boundaries were much needed, geographically, culturally, and politically, if only to provide an illusion of security for a Chinese populace tormented by contemporary political turmoil. Under the attack of the so-called “New Culture Movement” 新文化運動 (1910s to 1920s), the tenets of traditional pre-modern literature seemed to collapse; however, such an attack also established new political and social missions for writers in modern China, and these missions were as restrictive and demanding in their owns as the traditional strictures.

When the imperial political system gave way to the republican system in China in 1911, the literary field was exposed to many new possibilities, especially in the realm of fiction. Echoing the political revolution, influential critics such as Liang Qichao 梁啓超 (1873-1929) and Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942) unanimously advocated revolution in literary concepts and at the same time welcomed an influx of foreign literature in the name of pursuing a youthful and
modern China.\textsuperscript{26} Political crisis in the early Republican years and later in the Anti-Japanese War period made “obsession with China 感時憂國” a commanding call for all writers, so commanding that any other voices would be deemed improper at that time.\textsuperscript{27} For a moment, it seemed that traditional literature would be cast away permanently because it appealed to elite tastes and used archaic language. With the modern promotion of the political and social mission of xiaoshuo, a writerly pursuit of literary quality was depreciated and encaged within a political agenda once more, leading again to the de-prioritization of qi as a literary quality.

Literary historians have debated the effect of the New Cultural Movement on the legacy of traditional Chinese literature. Wu Mi 吳宓 (1894-1978) cast the Movement as an absolute break from traditional culture.\textsuperscript{28} Hu Shih considered the May Fourth period an enlightenment moment, a chance for Chinese intellectuals to challenge traditional Chinese cultural values, and credits the Movement with connecting traditional Chinese literature with the modern period.\textsuperscript{29} Yu Ying Shih 余英時, however, took a more impassive approach to the period and while he grudgingly agreed with Hu Shih that it was a historical moment of intellectual enlightenment for modern China, he also argued that a significant part of the so-called New Culture Movement was indeed composed of traditional cultural values.\textsuperscript{30} Yusheng Lin’s arguments push such a view

\textsuperscript{28} Wu Mi’s diary during the period illustrates his disgust with the New Culture Movement and the New Literature. See Wu Mi, \textit{Wu Mi Riji 吳宓日記} (The Diary by Wu Mi [Shanghai: Joint Publishing Press, 1998]), vols. 1-3.
\textsuperscript{29} Hu Shih’s position can be seen in his speech in Shanghai in 1928 entitled “A Tribute to the May Fourth Movement,” as collected in \textit{Hu Shih Zuopin ji} (Collected Writings of Hu Shih [Taiwan: Yuanliu Publishing Company, 1986]), vol. 4.
\textsuperscript{30} Yu Ying Shih pays consistent attention to the vicissitudes of the traditional values as epitomized in Confucianism in the early twentieth century, and it is owing to his study that the special Chinese intellectual paradox of tradition and modernity is fully disclosed. For detailed analysis, see his essay entitled “Wusi yundong yu zhongguo chuanton” 五四運動與中國傳統 (The May Fourth Movement and the Chinese Tradition), collected in \textit{Yu Ying Shih wenji 《余英時文集》} (Guilin: Guangxi Normal UP, 2004-2006), vol. 2, 82-90. For his more recent views, see his essay “Neither Renaissance nor Enlightenment: A Historian’s Reflections on the May Fourth Movement,”
even further. Lin argued that the “totalistic antitraditionalism” displayed by May Fourth intellectuals is exactly a modern reincarnation of the “intellectualistic cultural approach” that is deeply embedded in Chinese traditional culture. Lin’s views illustrate why Chinese fiction writers of the first half of twentieth century are so politically involved in their fiction. For them, all literature of any era is political.

With the traditional political mission of xiaoshuo thus revived in the New Cultural Movement, Western imperialism’s threat to Chinese identity accentuated the political aspect of Chinese literature more than ever. Historically speaking, Western imperialist powers of the early twentieth century never completely colonized China, but they did pose an existential threat to declining traditional native Chinese values. In the 1930s, Chinese national survival was considered to be at stake in the war with Japan, and Chinese writers started writing in a unified voice, and sometimes in unified literary groups, with a clearly-stated political mission. A number of literature associations for writers were highly active in manipulating the contending trends of fiction writing.

Despite their surface diversity, most writers of these literary groups did share a sense of the social tempo of modern China, and they wrote their fictional works in order to answer the political demands created by a national crisis. Even in individual expressions of the notion of “self,” for example, most modern Chinese writers harboured little space for perspectives other than those that could satisfy national and political demands. No matter if it were the “expression of the self” claimed by the Chinese Romantics, or the declared purpose of “educating the people”

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32 For example, the Creation Society 創造社, the Literary Research Association 文學批評會, the Crescent Moon Society 新月社, to name just a few. For a detailed reading on the activities of the modern Chinese literary groups in that period, please read Kirk Denton and Michel Hockx eds, Literary Societies of Republican China (Lanham: Lexiongton Books, 2008).
of the Chinese Realists, in the final analysis, “the self” in their fictional works was rendered with the same purpose as in traditional grand narratives conditioned by a Confucian outlook, i.e., exclusively to abide by the contemporary political agenda. The notion of self in modern Chinese Romantic fiction is very different from the notion of the individual in Western Romanticism. It is, according to Hu Shih, a harmonious combination of *dawo* 大我, the great self or the society composed of people, and *xiaowo* 小我, the small self or the individual person. In other words, its focus is on the individual as a social element, not as an independent entity. In the fictional works of Chinese Realism, however, writers claimed to represent the so-called “real” society, and thus writers of this group aimed to cultivate their interest in the external world almost exclusively, gradually cutting off access to the internal world of the human mind. Under the auspices of either Chinese Romanticism or Chinese Realism, little space is left for fiction writers to portray perspectives on the world other than those that help relieve national, political, and social problems.

Under such historical circumstances, the literary quality of *qi* was reduced as much as possible in fiction writing. However, it did not die out completely. Instead, it disguised itself in a few writers’ challenges to the dominant political perspectives on everyday life, to the politically necessary belief in the centralizing concepts of Chinese culture, and ultimately, to the exclusiveness of a popular “obsession with China.” Shen Congwen and Zhang Ailing are two such writers. Neither of them was a protégé of anyone in any significant literary group in the first half of the twentieth century, and yet they found a loyal, general readership. Contemporary critics’ responses to their fictional works were mixed. When the superficially different literary schools argued over issues like art for nationalism, or art for art’s sake, or even expression of the modern self or representation of a revolutionary social reality, neither of these two writers was mentioned. Both received little attention from literary critics in their own time and even less from
communist literary critics after 1949. In fact, both writers only rarely produced any significant writings after 1949. In a narrow sense, we might say, both writers were exclusively writing in and for the socially turbulent China of the 1930s and 1940s in a style that was so individual, and even against the “obsession with China” of their time, that the existence of their writings already contrasted with the dominant mindset of that time.

The rediscovery of Shen Congwen and Zhang Ailing, and their significance in modern Chinese literature, started with an influential and controversial book of literary criticism, A History of Modern Chinese Fiction by C.T. Hsia, in which he applauds Shen Congwen’s fiction writing for encompassing a “rich structure of symbol and feeling,” and Zhang Ailing’s for capturing “the sense of desolation inherent in all human hunger and frustration.” Two decades later, Jeffrey C. Kinkley’s critical biography of Shen Congwen provided a more comprehensive and more distanced perspective on Shen Congwen’s contribution to the long tradition of Chinese literature, and gave him due credit for evoking “the quintessence of youth and vitality” in the “traditional” heritage. David Der-wei Wang elaborates on Hsia’s views on the two writers, and his contribution has been of essential importance in accounting for the revival and growth of critical interest in the two writers both in mainland China and in Taiwan.

Border Town (1934) by Shen Congwen

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33 C.T. Hsia, A History of Modern Chinese Fiction: 1917-1957, 211. Such a comment might not be unfamiliar to a Western reader of D. H. Lawrence. In the following sections of my textual analysis of Border Town, a similar echo may be heard.

34 Hsia 395.


36 Wang’s critical attention to the two writers has been consistent. He discusses the boundary of the real in Shen and points out that Shen presents a poetics of imaginary nostalgia in his fiction. See Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China (New York: Columbia UP, 1992) 201-281. He also writes productively on Zhang and actively presents his views on Zhang as a prominent figure in modern Chinese fiction. See Der-Wei Wang, Zhongsheng xuanhua: sanshi niandai dao wushi niandai de zhongguo xiaoshuo (Sounds and Fury: Chinese Fiction from the 1930s to 1980s) (Taipei, Yuanliu Publishing Company, 1988).
Shen Congwen is a legendary figure in the history of modern Chinese fiction. Born of a minority family in the southwestern region of China, receiving little regular education, he started to write fiction in 1924 in Beijing after Peking University rejected his application to enrol. He soon gained fame for being a writer of the Peking style. He later defined himself as “a countryman” living in a big city—his physical presence in a big city only sharpens his perception of a remote rural memory.\(^{37}\) His writings show a recurring tendency: he uses a typical northern form of written Chinese to narrate stories set against the background of his native southwestern border town. The stories are all from his memory of early childhood, and he injects the lyrical aspect of northern written Chinese language into his memories of that distant southern place. The marginal status of his native town is thus subverted by challenging the geographically central position represented in the Chinese language he uses to present the cultural values of a minority people.

To present his personal memories in the form of fiction to his reading public, Shen Congwen assumes a third-person voice but restores transgressive force in his prose fiction by employing poetic language that engages a lyrical tradition other than Confucianism-centred traditional classical poetry.\(^{38}\) *Border Town*, a piece of fiction in twenty-one chapters published in 1934, illustrates how Shen Congwen employs a sense of literary *qi* that enables the personal nostalgic memory of a remote town to infiltrate the consciousness of an urban public readership at a time of national crisis. It tells a tale of two naive young people whose romance is twisted by bad luck in the setting of a lyrically portrayed rural Hunan region in south China. It is also a tragic story about “Grandpa,” the old ferryman who loses his daughter in such a romance and then, when trying to help his granddaughter Cuicui avoid a similar romance, loses his own life.

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\(^{38}\) For Shen Congwen’s borrowing from the *Chu* lyrics or *Songs of the South*, see David Der-wei Wang, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992) 201-234.
Cuicui falls in love with Nuosong, nicknamed No.2, at first sight; however, mistaking No. 2 for his elder brother Tianbao, nicknamed No. 1, she encourages her grandfather’s arrangement with No. 1, to propose to her. When Tianbao finds out the truth that he is in fact not Cuicui’s love, he sadly leaves the border town and later dies in an accident. Nuosong then leaves the border town, too, overcome by a sense of guilt over his brother’s death. Grandpa dies of remorse and Cuicui decides to take Grandpa’s job, waiting for Nuosong to return, though no one knows when or even whether he will come back.

*Border Town* is reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence’s elegiac fiction of a dying rural England. Shen Congwen’s rural Hunan scenery, like that of Lawrence’s pastoral England beset by industrialization, is constantly endangered by the sophisticated central Chinese culture. The old ferryman’s daughter falls in love with a soldier from the outside world. The soldier is ready to give up his military duties and elope with her, yet the girl refuses to leave her primitive hometown. The young soldier commits suicide at her decision, and so does the girl after she gives birth to Cuicui. The otherness of the outside world only leads to destruction for both sides. The soldier, with his implied military power stemming from a central culture ready to conquer rural values, is alien to the local people; and the beautiful local maiden, with all her youthfulness and devotion, is similarly a fantasy of otherness to the soldier. When crushed by reality, both die, and yet they together leave a legacy for the continuation of their fantasy in their baby Cuicui.

The young parents’ tragic fate seems to foreshadow what Cuicui will go through when she grows up. The competition of the two brothers also displays Shen Congwen’s attitude toward the increasingly structured and hierarchical social values that are representative of central Chinese culture. Tianbao, the older brother, respects hierarchical order and consults the elder’s opinion first. Upon receiving his approval, he proposes to Cuicui. It is a normal, conventional, and socially acceptable proposal. Nuosong, in contrast, acts out of passion and gives romance a true
lyrical touch by singing love songs to Cuicui. His approach evidently differs from the principle of restraint that is so valued by Confucianism. Instead, it recalls the shamanistic passion that is commonly seen in the Chu lyrics. If Tianbao’s proposal is what a reader expects to see in real life, then Nuosong’s version is what the writer constructs as a fantasy for his readers, one which cannot end well in the real world.

Whatever her sense of social convention approves of, Cuicui’s primitive desire refuses; and when fate finally takes Tianbo away and when the clan accepts Nuosong as an appropriate lover for Cuicui, Nuosong flees the border town out of an unconscious concession to his elder brother’s choice of social structure. Primitive human desire is sadly defeated by social relations again, and fantasy, after emerging in the literary beauty of Nuosong’s love songs, collapses under the weight of the structures of reality. Human desire and societal strictures stand as adversaries to one another, and the old ferry man and his granddaughter Cuicui come to embody the human suffering that results from the conflict, bearing it with a full dignity sustained by lyrical beauty.

Throughout the story Shen Congwen maintains a calm, sometimes even cruelly indifferent tone, a tone that sharply contrasts with the disturbing sadness of Cuicui’s fate as an orphan and as a deserted girl. For example, the deaths in the story are presented with a simplicity that shows so much restraint that it evokes powerful sympathy from the reader. Cuicui’s father’s death is briefly narrated in two sentences: “Though they could not join each other in life, nothing could stop them from coming together in death. He took the poison first.”

Frustration at hopeless love, despair at any possible solution, and the dilemma and paradox in such a choice of death in order to get a living chance for love—all are omitted and yet left for the reader to imagine. Similarly, the old ferry man’s death is presented in an even more distanced tone:

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…so she shrilly called out for her grandpa. When Grandpa did not get up or answer her, she ran into the house and shook him back and forth. Still he made no sound. The old man had died as the thunderstorm faded away.

Cuicui began to wail.⁴⁰

Cuicui’s grief over Grandpa’s death is described in a series of actions as observed and heard from a disinterested perspective, like that of a camera. Her psychological responses are not mentioned at all. The writer seems to withdraw from forming any organic relation with the scene and instead seems to only record externally observed impressions in the text for the reader to receive. This is in fact a skilful way to counteract impressionistic perspectives on such a scene. The death of Grandpa is so profound a reality in Cuicui’s life that to this point, a reader can hardly take the writer’s surface perspective to be deliberately superficial. Instead, the effect of such a disguise of disinterestedness works against its appearance. All are presented as if a nightmare is replayed, with no clue provided to the viewer. Yet more meanings and a stronger emotional impact are concealed in such a seemingly withdrawn writer’s tone, awaiting decoding and affective response by the reader. Cuicui’s emotional reliance on old Grandpa, her helplessness, her despair at the silence of her only relative, and her burst of fear, grief, and final acknowledgement of the old man’s death are all there for observation. The writer’s seemingly objective record of her actions gives the scene an uncanny qi-like atmosphere at first reading, as though the actions are being witnessed in a dream, yet the tangibility of Cuicui’s actions convinces the reader of their actuality. The imagination of the reader steals into the reality of depiction in such a reading experience and thus the literary quality of qi emerges in unexpected ways.

Shen Congwen also engages the lyrical force of poetic language to create a sense of fantasy to transgress the seemingly impassable boundary of brutal reality in his prose narrative in

⁴⁰Shen 151.
Border Town. He imposes a poetic rhythm to his ostensibly disinterested tone in prose, particularly when he describes the rural scenery where all these tragedies take place. It is evident from the first paragraph of the first chapter:

An old imperial highway running east from Sichuan into Hunan province leads, after reaching the West Hunan border, to a little mountain town called Chadong. By a narrow stream on the way to town was a little white pagoda, below which once lived a solitary family: an old man, a girl, and a yellow dog. Kinkley’s English translation faithfully conveys Shen Congwen’s literary style and poetic rhythm. Yet to illustrate my point, here is the Chinese version for a comparative reading:

由四川過湖南去，靠東有一條官路。這官路將近湘西邊境到了一個地方名為“茶峒”的小山城時，有一小溪，溪邊有座白色小塔，塔下住了一戶單獨的人家。這人家只一個老人，一個女孩子，一隻黃狗。

The first two sentences would remind an educated Chinese reader of travelogue prose by Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819) in the Tang dynasty, not only in its attention to physical detail but also in its special rhythm of syllables--7-7-24 and then 4-8-11--which presents a short-short-long pattern. The pattern is not only pleasant to the ear but almost soothing to the eye. The last sentence, in order to create a repetitive rhythm, deliberately engages a number-plus-measure-word structure three times consistently and without any connecting words, even though this technique is more often used in poetry than in modern Chinese prose. For the reader, such formal poetic power provides an other-worldly perspective on the border town. In contrast with the seemingly emotionless description of actions to follow in the text, it is almost a lyrical effort to mitigate the stark reality.

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41 Shen 1.
I have mentioned above that in *Border Town* Shen Congwen borrows from the tradition of *Chu* lyrics. He also uses simple but beautiful folk ballads to display his preference for the primitive, simple power of desire over sophisticated, structured social reality. In the conversation between the local folks, he deliberately manipulates the vernacular language and imparts to it a rhythm and a compact force that belongs to folk ballads, as when Cuicui sings a complete ballad extolling the idyllic spirit of rural beauty.\(^{42}\) Cuicui’s idealistic lover, Nuosong, is said to be a supreme singer, and wins Cuicui’s heart by singing for her at night. Nuosong’s poetic power is also shown in his special way of speaking: his lines in conversation are always short and simply structured, and from time to time he talks as if he were singing a ballad, simple, straightforward, and full of powerful lyrical force. Nuosong’s chat with Tianbao in chapter 12, for instance, clearly distinguishes him as the more poetic one and Tianbao as the more prosaic of the two. The difference is also displayed in their choices of style in courting Cuicui.\(^{43}\) Nuosong’s lyrical words strongly contrast with Tianbao’s prose narration, breaking down Tianbao’s well-established frame of discourse. Shen Congwen engages the lyrical power of poetic language to interrupt the easy flow of everyday life.

In short, while mainstream writers overtly but clumsily express their anxiety or ecstasy over the collapse of old central cultural values, Shen Congwen’s subtle opposition to geographical centralism by his choice of subjects provides a different perspective on his time. Unlike his contemporaries, who are eager to impress upon the reader a simple assertive narrative tone, he veils his artistic complexity by appearing to withdraw his presence from the narrative text. Furthermore, his trust of his reader’s recognition and appreciation of poetic language leads him to confidently produce a type of text that constructs fantasy out of the vague memory of a

\(^{42}\) Shen 64-65.  
\(^{43}\) Shen 98-100.
remote region that is lyrical enough to unsettle everyday reality. It is a subtle use of literary *qi*, one that subverts the dominant discourse of the centre even as it must succumb to its power.

**Chuanqi 傳奇 (1947) by Zhang Ailing**

Zhang Ailing explores equally subtle ways to employ literary *qi* in her fiction. In her collection of short stories *Chuanqi*, she selects the seemingly boring parts of life to write about, giving her readers a unique perspective on them. She ingeniously develops a way to make that perspective accessible to her readers by an original usage of narrative language. Meng Yue’s “Chinese Literary Modernity and Zhang Ailing” provides a solid analysis of the element of *qi* in Zhang’s fiction and connects it with the Tang tales of marvels for the first time. Chen Jianhua follows Meng Yue’s argument that Zhang Ailing reveals an aspect of *qi* in everyday life in terms of time, space and imagery, and discusses Zhang’s presentation of *qi* in narrative texts in more detail. This vein of research surpasses the criticism that treats Zhang more as a writer of triviality, and frees the reader from a purely feminist reading of her work.

Zhang’s attention to the literary quality of *qi* is first shown in the title she uses for her collection of stories: *Chuanqi*, or *Tales of Marvels*, which she glosses in the first edition of 1944 as the location of the everyday in fantasy and the fantasy in the everyday. It is the key she provides for the reader to approach the stories in this book. When the 1944 collection was revised,

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46 Such a feminist reading reveals the special values of Zhang Ailing as a female writer in the 1930s and gives credit to her significance to a complete picture in modern Chinese literature; however, it also endangers her literary contribution in a discourse too narrowly focused on her identity as a female writer. See Ray Chow, Women and Chinese Modernity (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991).
47 “書名叫《傳奇》，目的是在傳奇裏面尋找普通人，在普通人裏尋找傳奇。” Zhang Ailing, Chuanqi (Shanghai: Shanghai zazhishe, 1944).
enriched, and republished in 1946, she changed the title to Xin chuanqi 新傳奇 or New Tales of Marvels, partly in order to further explain her intertextual references to the archetypal concept of qi in her fiction. She also asked her friend Fatima Ohideen (炎櫻 1920-1997) to design a new cover for the book, and painstakingly colored her friend’s sketch herself. The cover is a picture showing a late Qing lady playing a game of leisure, with a nanny holding her child. It is a homely picture of a homely life, except for a figure placed at the margin of the picture and obviously out of proportion in every sense: a modern person with her face covered gazing into the pre-modern scene:

Fig. 1 Front Cover of Zhang Ailing, Chuanqi (Shanghai: Shanhe tushu company, 1947)

Meng Yue interprets such a design as “the encountering [of] gazes and the meeting of two experiences”.48 The daily life of the Qing lady becomes a fantasy in the curious (unseen) eye of the modern person. With the faceless figure as a vague and ambiguous perspective on everyday life of the past, the picture straddles the territories of factual and fictional, past and present, creating a new fantasy world. Pre-modern or modern, facial features shown or concealed, the ladies inside the picture offer multi-layered interpretations awaiting discovery by the reader. In

48 Meng Yue 354.
combining two sets of cultural codes of different periods into one picture, Zhang Ailing and her friend preserve the codes while also transforming them for further interpretation. The figure of the modern lady appears to represent many roles--the writer, the reader, or the character in the stories--but the meaning is up to each individual reader to decipher. Zhang Ailing, the writer, in the act of filling in the figure with her favourite aquamarine color, also establishes an intertextual relation with the reader/viewer. In this sense, this specially designed cover picture becomes part of the whole text. The writer’s perspective participates in constructing a fantasy in the everyday world from cover to cover and invites her reader to join her in doing the same.

Meng Yue avers that the stories collected in Zhang Ailing’s *Chuanqi* share a cyclical structure that begins with the protagonists’ flight from the bondage of tedious everyday life into a world of “fantasy” which often leads to fatal disaster. It is true that the adventure in Zhang Ailing’s fantasy often ends in a surface return to plain or even squalid everyday life; however, I would claim that it is not a return to the old life in the end. Instead, it is more like going beyond that life with the legacy of fantasy. For example, in “Love in a Fallen City”, the female protagonist Liusu dates the male protagonist Liuyuan out of ennui caused by her repressive family. When going for a date in Hong Kong, both witness the fall of Hong Kong under Japanese bombing. At the crucial moment, both experience an emotional change that reveals a different aspect of their feelings that survives even the most brutal destruction of a city. After that moment, however, the two get back to their routine life: a sense of ennui engulfs their highly routine everyday activities, and it seems that neither of these two bored protagonists changes essentially. They are married and live together, yet it seems that they live their old lives once more. However, the reader, who has followed the entire narrative, can tell the difference between the two types of ennui before and after their exhausting adventures. Before, Liuyuan may easily break away from Liusu if being bored, but after, the two are connected forever with their common experience of
life and death. So long as the moon shines over everyday life as it did on that unforgettable night before the fall of Hong Kong and the epiphany of their love, the couple will always find a way back to each other. The apparent similarities lie on either side of the moment of transgression, which gives a different perspective on their routine life, which lets the literary quality of qi steal into even the dullest aspects of life.

Another good example is “Red Rose, White Rose” which follows the same narrative pattern, describing how a model family man Zhenbao, tired of his boring wife Yanli, falls passionately for a married young lady Jiaorui. Yet after the controversial affair, he returns to his family and becomes a model family man again, at least in appearance. It almost appears to be a case of much ado about nothing, yet Zhang Ailing successfully creates a new perspective on this clichéd situation by crystallizing the common flow of time into a lyrical expansion of moments. One of the original literary techniques she uses to provide such a perspective is “uneven contrast,” or cenci 参差, to borrow her own label. Indeed, the uneven contrast actually takes place more explicitly in the reader’s response to the text, when the reader is offered Zhang Ailing’s literary description of the moment of transgression. In her text, the brief moment of transgression is portrayed in expansive detail, while the long but tedious duration of everyday life is often described in brisk, brief sentences. For example, in order to portray Jiaorui’s transgressive appeal to Zhenbao, the writer interrupts the narrative flow of time and spends a long, poetic paragraph describing the posture of Jiaorui as she picks up the phone. The actual action of Jiaorui might take only a few seconds, but the writer successfully shows through her elaborate style that the moment has become an eternal image that is pressed onto Zhengbao’s mind. Another display of such “uneven contrast” happens at the end of the story, where three long paragraphs relating a quarrel between Zhenbao and his wife proceed in a fast pace. But then Zhang concludes the whole story in one line: “The next day Zhenbao rose and reformed his ways.
He made a fresh start and went back to being a good man.  

It is as if after the moment of transgression in Zhenbao’s perception of time and life, his life with his wife is only endurable as a sweeping statement at the end of the story. He is still the good man, but in the eye of the knowing reader who has been affected by Zhang Ailing’s “uneven contrast,” he is not the same as before. A literary quality of qi is thus produced in the narrative through the participation of the reader.

Considering the overwhelming political demands on xiaoshuo writing in 1940s, it is no wonder then that after the publication of these stories, Zhang received some negative comments for her lack of “themes” in her writing. Out of self-justification, she published “My Own Writing” in 1944, in which she explains her views on life and writing. She acknowledges different ways of writing extant in and before her time, and she claims that her own writing aims to grasp the solid basis underneath the surface excitement. She believes that “uneven contrast” is closer to the real exactly because she is aware of her time being such a “troubled era.” As for her choice of so trivial a subject matter as love affairs over political revolution, she argues that by nature they are the same: irrational and violent. When facing the charge of lacking “main themes,” she argues with great force and clarity:

…Therefore, the main theme of my works sometimes isn’t clear. But I feel that we should perhaps move beyond the notion that literary works should have “main themes.” Fiction should involve a story, and the story should be allowed to make itself clear, which is better than concocting a story around a main theme….It may be that the difference between modern literature and past literature lies right here: we no

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longer emphasize a main theme but allow the story to give what it can and the reader to take whatever is available.\textsuperscript{50}

What is revealed here is, I believe, a modern expression of the traditional literary quality of \textit{qi}: it is the writer’s individual fantasy about life distinct from what is registered by the eye. This might be something calm that the writer sees in a time of political unrest and social turmoil, just as it could be something irrational that the writer sees in a well-arranged family life. Zhang’s modern touch added to the literary tradition of writing \textit{qi} in her fiction indeed reveals her quest for a perception of the true essence underneath the fragmentary, vague impressions of life.

As for engaging literary techniques to help fix a sense of the moment within the flow of time, Zhang Ailing finds answers in the potential of the Chinese language’s long history. She describes her own style of language as follows:

[It is the] Chinese in the fiction of Pearl Buck speaking with the flavour of British literary speech—everything is borrowed. My intent at the time was this: there is already a great distance between me and my descriptions of the romantic atmosphere Hong Kong evoked in the heart of someone from Shanghai, and in the Hong Kong of fifty years ago, the weighty distance of time is even greater. So I used a kind of outdated vocabulary to represent this immense distance.\textsuperscript{51}

The complexity of language styles in providing different perspectives on life is here based on the concept of temporal distance: while Pearl Buck uses her British speech to add an orientalized flavor to her writings about modern China, Zhang Ailing goes back to native Chinese classical language and gives it a twist from her modern time. Her language is thereby also borrowed—not from another country, but from an alien past of her own culture, thus making it very suitable for representing a distanced and seemingly outdated reality as perceived by the writer. Such a

\textsuperscript{51} Zhang 442.
perception, fantasy as it is, may not be aligned with the so-called “main theme” of her contemporary moment, and could be paradoxically truer to human experience in the long run. All that is tangible in her fantasy is her desire to put down in words what is already distanced from her. Once the words harden into the text, the writer can do nothing but see her work through the eye of her reader, and the reader can only take whatever is available to him/her at the moment when he/she encounters the text. The text is then the locus where perspectives on life other than the “main theme” are fully justified as acceptable. Readers living in the natural and factual flow of time are privileged to share a moment of fantasy when they read Zhang Ailing’s fiction, as a result of the workings of qi.

Conclusion: Survival of Qi

The literary quality of qi did not thrive after the Tang dynasty, and the tendency to contain fiction writing within the boundaries of political and social demands became more urgent at a time of social and national turmoil in modern times. The literary quality of qi in Chinese fiction was reduced in prestige in imperial China, and in Republican period it was suppressed by more immediate and urgent political and social needs, as most fiction writers were politically motivated rather than literarily and aesthetically. In short, the practical and political mission of xiaoshuo again dominated the writing and reading of fiction after the Tang dynasty. The literary quality of qi survives in sporadic expressions in works such as Liaozhai, Border Town, and Chuanqi; and it continues to display its transformative power and vitality in work by writers who would show to their readers their perceptions of the world rather than merely convey surface impressions. These rare but powerful expressions add to the possible forms literary qi may take in Chinese fiction after the Tang.
The literary quality of qi was dimmed in pre-modern literature as writers gradually lost sight of the power of transgression via freedom of roaming and become more and more obsessed with setting up and elaborating upon the formal requirements of old genres such as chuanqi tales and chuanqi plays. Pu Songling did produce a genuine quality of qi in his tales, which were written in apparent formal similarity to zhiguai but with buried elements of literary experimentations that altered the narrative outcomes of his tales in unconventional ways. His confirmation of other-worldly values, as represented by the autonomy of female fox and ghost spirits in his his longer romantic tales, breathes a quality of qi in literature.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Shen Congwen and Zhang Ailing challenged the dominant worldview of their time and managed to restore the transgressive force of qi to Chinese fiction. In Border Town, Shen challenges the Han-Chinese concept of central China that is represented as a well-organized structure of hierarchy. His narratives memorialize a geographically marginal Hunan province that transgresses the standard Northern Chinese written language. Zhang Ailing uses her knowledge of everyday life and ingeniously presents a different perspective on life that crosses the borders of time. Her experimentation with language is more advanced than Shen Congwen’s in that she discovers a transgressive power in “unbalanced contrasts” embedded in Chinese language. In works by these two writers, qi finds its connection with modern Chinese fiction.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how after half a century’s bondage to the spell of politics, qi gives new power to Chinese fiction in the 1980s and 1990s. When writers resume their search for qi, they rediscover freedom of roaming and use their fiction to cross all kinds of barriers that divide subjects politically, socially, and culturally. Step by step, qi achieves subversive power through literary transgression in the contemporary age.
Chapter IV

Breaking the Bondage: Qi in Chinese Fiction of the 1980s and 1990s

In the last chapter I described the decline of qi in Chinese fiction after the Tang dynasty and explored social, political, and cultural causes for such a decline. I argued that with social, political, and cultural demands for clearer boundaries in fiction, the literary desire for qi fell by the wayside in narrative texts. The transgressive power of qi was either deprived of its essence of freedom of roaming, or overwhelmed by the contemporary demands made upon the modern Chinese fiction writer to meet the political needs of national crisis above all. The vital force of transgression in literary fiction became the last consideration in writing xiaoshuo.

The literary quality of qi, however, survived in fiction by a few rare writers after the Tang, both pre-modern and modern. As we have seen, Pu Songling of the Qing dynasty successfully preserved the power of transgression in qi in his long tales depicting romances between fox/ghost spirits and human scholars in his zhiguai collection Liaozhai. In Border Town, Shen Congwen challenged central Confucian conventionalism with the quality of qi by intertwining his personal memories of a marginal local culture with the mainstream northern Chinese written language. He also explores the generic transformative power of Chu lyrics and Hunan regional folklore. In a sense, the literary quality of qi is clearly revealed in the poetic discrepancy between the lyrical language and the prosaic life described in such a language, as well as between the prosaic language and the intensity of tragic human fate portrayed in it. Zhang Ailing’s purely female narrative perspective in her Chuanqi has a transgressive purpose too evident to ignore. The cover, the stories, and the language style in her Chuanqi are thoroughly invested with her pursuit of qi.
Despite their innovations (or perhaps because of them), Zhang Ailing and Shen Congwen were not given much attention from so-called mainstream literary critics in the first half of the twentieth century in China. Their best writings were even banned in both mainland China and Taiwan after 1949, when politics generated more fierce censorship on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. In mainland China of the 1980s and 1990s, however, the quality of literary qi in their writings found an eager audience in many young Chinese writers. In this period of modern Chinese literature the pursuit of qi expands in more forms and with more subtlety in works of fiction. In this chapter I will examine several Chinese fiction writers and their major contributions to reviving and developing the literary quality of qi in the 1980s and 1990s.

Decades of Silence and the Contested Field of Chinese Fiction from the 1980s to 1990s

If the political demands of the early Republican period controlled literary fiction’s cultural status, then Mao Zedong’s 1943 talk in Yan’an on the political function of literature officially extinguished the last glimmering of qi for the next 40 years.1 Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) annulled the literary pursuit of qi in the name of “revolutionary literature,” i.e., literature in service of the political agenda of the CCP. Any fiction writers’ efforts to display a perspective other than the Party’s line were thus designated as anti-revolutionary and banned. As a result, between 1949 and 1978 few non-Party voices in literature were heard in mainland Chinese fiction. The silencing of other literary voices in fiction was often achieved at the cost of the deprivation of personal freedom and the physical destruction of lives.

Even though it was hailed as “revolutionary”, the single monotonous narrative voice from 1949 to 1978 ironically supported the values of a long tradition of grand narrative in Chinese literary history. In the premodern era, Confucian principles require a writer to harmonize the world through compromises—if the function of literature is to convey the Confucian way (*wen yi zai dao* 文以載道), then the form of literature must be subordinated to that mission. Similarly in the modern era, the Socialist standard for a “good” Chinese fiction writer insists that a writer should bend his or her self and writing completely and unconditionally to the demands of the CCP. Premodern mainstream literature forbid any doubt against texts that conveyed Confucian principles; and the modern Socialist writers are literally ordered to present “typical characters” to their readers. Of course, typicality in socialist fiction was defined directly by the political demands of the CCP.

The literary field in mainland China after 1949, therefore, had little to offer to amaze its readers until 1978. In 1978, along with economic reform, the CCP officially granted the “freedom to create” to “literary workers” and as happened before, sometimes to their detriment, Chinese intellectuals took such a granting of freedom seriously. Fortunately, they were right this time.\(^2\) And by the year 1985 there seems to be a dividing line in mainland contemporary Chinese fiction. Before, it was a virtual dark age of monotonous propaganda in the name of “revolutionary literature”; after, a booming period rich with a variety of literary experiments, an emergence of individual expression, and a search for new ways to represent the diverse contemporary perceptions of a China caught in an increasingly globalized world.

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\(^2\) Similar promises to Chinese intellectuals from the CCP were not uncommon in the short history of the government, yet more often resulted in subsequent punishment for those who took such liberties. For example, the Anti-Rightist Movement immediately follows the “Hundred Flowers” period, and many writers who expressed other voices than the monotonous Party line were labelled as “Rightist” and sent to the camps.
Indeed, the mainland Chinese literary field of the last two decades of the twentieth century saw not only a newly regained sense of possible survival, but also a stronger awareness of individuality after ten years of the destructive “Great Cultural Revolution” (1966-1976). In those ten years of darkness, all sounds of dissent were silenced, yet writers’ imaginations soared high despite the nightmare conditions. Once the repression lifted, in the early half of the 1980s, almost all writers became eager to produce new innovative literature: literary journals, such as Harvest 收報, October 十月, and Beijing Literature 北京文學, were widely published and eagerly received; and a kaleidoscope of literary “schools” led to many literary experiments, including a revival of interest in the literary qualities of qi. The booming literary diversity was so robust that even the notorious June 4th political event in 1989 failed to crush it. In fact, in the few years after 1989, when intellectual debate and cultural ferment were quashed by government censors, the literary pursuit of qi continued, and even became stronger, adopting a surface-level apolitical tone to avoid censorship. And yet it proved to be subversive to the political power of the CCP at a profound level.

When studying writers like Ah Cheng 阿城 (b.1949), Han Shaogong 韓少功 (b. 1953), Mo Yan 莫言 (b. 1955), Ma Yuan 馬原 (b. 1953), Su Tong 蘇童 (b. 1962), Yu Hua 餘華 (b. 1960), and Ge Fei 格非 (b. 1964), critics tend to divide them into two different schools of fiction writing--“roots-searching” and “avant-garde” schools. Categorizing writers into

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3 Indeed, there are a dozen underground shouchao ben xiaoshuo 手抄本小說 (hand-copied texts of fiction) circulating among youthful readers during the ten years of “Great Cultural Revolution.” Due to the lack of archives and critical neglect, these texts remain to be studied. However, from extant materials it could be said that literary fantasy works very much into these texts. Inge Neilson discusses some of these texts in “Prized Pulp Fiction: Hand-copied Literature from the Cultural Revolution,” published in China Review International, 9.2 (Fall 2002), 344-356.

4 The legacy of the New Literature in the literature of 1980s has been discussed by many critics. See Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, Oldřich Král and Graham Sanders, eds., The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China’s May Fourth Movement (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Asia Center, 2001).

“schools” helps correlate the “schools” with cultural, political, and social contexts in the study of contemporary China. According to most critics, the roots-searching trend starts in the mid-1980s and is so named from an essay by Han Shaogong, one of its major members. The mission of this group of writers is to locate cultural roots that are different from the hegemonic official ideology of contemporary China. Some opt for classical Chinese philosophies, like Ah Cheng; and some opt for regional and minority cultures, like Han Shaogong and Mo Yan. The avant-garde fiction writers, in contrast, come into full bloom around 1987 and soon overwhelm readers with a more radical dismissal of overtly political agendas. The dominant political agenda, common in official narratives from 1949 to 1976, still remains discernible in the roots-searching fiction, but writers of the avant-garde group, like Ma Yuan, Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei, surprise their readers with their narrative labyrinths, experiments with Chinese literary language, and an explicit erasure of overtly political agendas in their writings.

Most Western critics accept the division of the two schools tacitly, and move directly to exploring their differences further. For example, according to Jing Wang, the differences between the two groups of writers seem to be shaped by the positions they take toward history. In Wang’s opinion, the roots-searching writers are influenced by post-Mao cultural fever and are thereby still burdened with a drive for writing or restoring the rationality of history. On the other hand, the avant-garde writers are radically subversive in defining human subjects as drifting in history, and history itself as a form of the imaginary, directly reflecting “the epochal
categorizes fiction writers into different groups based on their political attitudes toward the CCP government and politics in this article. Before this survey essay, Zhao also provides studies of individual writers such as Gao Xingjian and Ma Yuan, and he explores how narratives help shape themes in the two writers’ texts. See Henry Zhao, “Ma Yuan the Chinese Fabricator,” *World Literature Today*, 69.2 (Spring 1995). Similarly, Lu Tonglin takes the perspective of gender study to read a group of so-called “experimental” fiction writers, among which such writers as Mo Yan, Can Xue, Zhaxi Dawa and Su Tong are read in the context of a historically patriarchal Chinese society. See Lu Tonglin, *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism, and Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995).

6 Han Shaogong, “Wenxue de gen” 文学的根 (The Root of Literature), speech at Hangzhou Meeting, Dec 1984.
disillusionment with humanism and heroism.” In fact, prior to compiling an anthology of Chinese avant-garde fiction, Jing Wang discussed in detail the “roots-searching” literature in *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China*, in which she associates “roots-searching” with the tradition of “teleological and utopian” visions. In contrast, she sees the avant-garde narratives in contemporary China as “devoid of memory,” which allows them to open “dangerous narrative space.” She points out that avant-garde writers have “come a long way since the May Fourth period.”

In 2001 Catherine Vance Yeh argued otherwise. She states that there is an identifiable connection between May Fourth and roots-searching literature, which she translates into English as “root literature.” Her survey of the “root literature” writers reveals several major characteristics of this literary movement: root literature moves away from “personal voice,” from “the highly moral stance,” toward a tie with “lost traditional culture”; it expresses revulsion towards the linguistically impoverished “Mao style”; it also explores and experiments with “regional dialects, mystic language used in folklore, oral narratives, and religious ceremonies in an attempt to revive and reinvent the rich narrative traditions of the past.”

It seems that the same texts evoke two sharply different interpretations in the above-mentioned critics. Are the two groups of writers so distinctive from each other or are they *de facto* reviving the same tradition of *qi* in Chinese fiction that has always worked with an undaunted vitality to erode boundaries in both form and content? Chang Hsu-Tung, a literary

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critic who personally witnessed the ups and downs of literature in mainland China in the last twenty years of the twentieth century, presents an insider’s view of these two groups of writers:

It is not surprising to see a series of social crises evoking a group invention of a national cultural genealogy. In this sense Search-for-Roots fiction represents a transitional modernism, a project to be completed by a new mode of cultural production that is ideologically and culturally alien to it. The root-searchers seemed to view the avant-garde in precisely this light.\(^{10}\)

In other words, instead of contrasting the two schools of fiction writing that appear on the literary stage one after another, Chang considers the two as constructive forces with escalating yet similarly subversive political potential within one single project of modernism in Chinese literature: what the roots-searchers fail to complete is fully completed in the avant-garde writers’ bold and sometimes reckless experiments.

All these studies contribute to our comprehension of the diversity of the literary field of the 1980s. The categorizing act of literary criticism also helps correlate the different literary “schools” with changing cultural, political, and social contexts in contemporary China. However, these categories also build up boundaries in critical reception at the same time. Readers, as assisted by critics, are paradoxically led to a limited reading experience if they take these categories as defining elements, in spite of the categories’ ultimately external and subsequent position in relation to the texts. And so my focus of discussion in the next section, by contrast, is not upon categorizing fiction, but rather upon the writers’ literary thoughts in relation to their common pursuit of qi in their texts without reference to their “school” affiliation.

**Out of the Bondage of “Schools” and “Groups”: Writers on Their Own Writing**

Relatively speaking, of all the above-mentioned critics’ views, Chang’s critique is closest to the writers’ respective self-images. The self-images, in spite of all the writers’ biographical differences, have two things in common: a haunting memory of the Cultural Revolution and an intrinsic love of the aesthetic beauty of fiction writing. These two similarities help us to see the seemingly separate clusters of writers as one. They both revive the marginalized tradition of qi in their works as a suppressed desire for aesthetics is fully released in these writers’ imaginations. In this section I will discuss how the writers themselves are reluctant to accept the “group” labels imposed by literary critics. Indeed, reading their “self-defensive” literary thoughts on why and how they write fiction, we will see their common yearning for qi.

Ah Cheng’s response to his assigned position as the forerunner of the roots-searchers is expressed in his essays published in 1994, in which he makes three major points: first, the so-called roots-searching school of fiction is a failure in the aesthetic sense as it starts to show a certain stylization (qiang腔) in writing; second, the search for cultural roots should occur in the field of academic research, for fiction is instead based on writers’ imaginations; and third, the literary contribution of roots-searching fiction lies in the fact that it opens for readers a door to fantasy worlds in the everyday world. The first point speaks to the negative effects upon readers and writers of explicitly labelling a “roots-searching” school of writing, as such categorizing contains, shapes, and fixes fiction writing. The second point dismisses the practical and social priority assigned to fiction writing. The third point argues that qi is precisely what makes fiction matter in everyday life. Indeed in his essay, Ah Cheng values most the

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transgressive function of fiction in Chinese literature, and he identifies poetic force in prose narratives as its key medium.

Similarly, after publishing his landmark essay, “The Roots of Literature,” in 1985 and encouraging his fellow writers to look to local cultural norms for inspiration, Han Shaogong continues modifying his position in almost all his later interviews. He later considers his initial formulation of roots-searching fiction as “premature,” and he accepts part of another contemporary literary critic’s (Li Tuo) views about roots-searching fiction, i.e., that these works are characterized by local flavour. His definition of “roots” is expanded to combine local culture with an awareness of a global existence. In his interview with Cui Weiping in 1999, he explicitly bases his evaluation of good fiction on its openness in structure, on its poetic essence in the form of prose, and on its writer’s inevitable yet artistically restrained presence in texts. In other words, it is not roots, but subtle communication to/with the readers, that fiction writers seek; and the bridge between the two parties is mainly composed of an openness in literary texts and a poetic presence in prose that is made not only accessible but also acceptable to readers.

Mo Yan, another writer whom many critics consider a typical roots-searcher in fiction writing, also provides a self-defensive articulation of his literary thoughts in his interview with critics. He emphasizes the importance of writing from the perspective of the common folk in fiction writing. Yet his interpretation of this perspective reveals more about how to construct

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13 Wu 26.
14 Wu 33.
15 Wu 36.
16 Wu 64-65.
rather than to search for such roots. In his eye, it is more important to write as a member of the common folk than for common folks. According to him, to write as a member of the common folk is de facto to write about one’s self in one’s own way (寫自我的自我寫作) so as to differentiate oneself from any other individual. In his self-evaluation, he envisions himself contributing the most to contemporary fiction insofar as he presents a special narrative voice that can connect the past to the present. He is also proud to be able to connect his style in fiction to other forms of art, for example, local folk opera. Indeed, given the fact that he successfully makes readers transgress time as well as formal borders through such a narrative voice, he deserves the Nobel Prize committee’s praise that “with hallucinatory realism” he “merges folk tales, history and the contemporary.”

Personal fantasies out of his past memories enter into the imagination of his reading public, and the readers cross temporal limits in his texts through the use of hallucinatory realistic details.

As for younger avant-garde writers like Su Tong and Yu Hua, they dissolve personal memories into impersonal representations of individual experiences in the public domain. Both like to recall their poignant and confused childhood and adolescent years during the Cultural Revolution in their essays and interviews, and both successfully translate these hallucinatory feelings into their fiction. Besides, both, like Shen Congwen, were born in the southern part of China and speak a dialect distinctly different from standard modern Chinese, and both finally achieve a peaceful blend of music and poetry in filling in the linguistic discrepancy between the

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19 See Yang 68.
20 See Yang 102-103.
22 The perspective on the Cultural Revolution from a puzzled and poignant child or young person as displayed in the two writers’ early works has been adequately unearthed by many critics. For the most recent critique, see Hua Li, Contemporary Chinese Fiction by Su Tong and Yu Hua: Coming of Age in Troubled Times (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011).
languages they use in everyday life and in their writing. These two avant-garde writers’ efforts in terms of musicality in their fiction writing are as anxious as they are remarkable. For example, Su Tong’s writing in My Life as an Emperor 我的帝王生涯 (1993) is reminiscent of Suzhou pingtan 蘇州評彈, a form of local performance art that mixes story-telling with singing. Yu Hua states that “Old Black Joe”, an American folk song, inspired him to write To Live 活著 (first published in the significant literary journal Harvest in 1992). Yu Hua also mentions that he imitates the structure that belongs to the fugues by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) in The Chronicle of a Blood Merchant 許三觀血記 (first published in Harvest in 1995).

For assistance in how to interpret these writers’ efforts to cultivate musical features in their fiction, perhaps Su Tong’s words provide the best assessment:

Some still follow a habitual pattern when thinking about fiction, i.e., to differentiate it from all other forms of art. [They believe that] to write fiction one must use the language that we speak everyday, and therefore must record social events and human relationships in that everyday language, etc. An ambiguity is therein embedded. Actually a fiction writer, nonetheless, is identical to a painter or a musician, in terms of inner spirit. A new form of art is considered to have contributed a new form of human meditation on the world, and no one faults it for not paying attention to social reality, yet a fiction writer is often so accused.

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24 Yu Hua repeatedly makes a note of all these musical connections of his writing, both in interviews and in his essays. These points are especially made clear and explicit in his interview with Mr. Yang Shaobin, another Chinese writer, in Hangzhou on Oct 22, 1998, collected in Yu Hua yanjiu ziliao 余華研究資料 (Research Materials on Yu Hua) (Jinan: Shandong wenyi chubanshe, 2006) 25-40.
25 Su Tong yanjiu ziliao, 28. The Chinese text reads as follows: 我們現在一些人考慮小說，仍有這麼一種習慣的思維模式，就是想將小說從藝術中分開。小說因為用語言說話，它必須記載社會事件、人際關係等等，這就引起歧義，實際上一個小說家跟一個畫家、一個音樂家在內在精神聯繫上是一致的。一種新的音樂會
This may be the boldest complaint from a Chinese fiction writer against all the social and political expectations imposed on fiction by literary traditions, critics, and readers. Contrary to the many Chinese fiction writers in both the premodern and modern eras, Su Tong resolutely rejects the historical mission that earlier writers accepted with humbleness and eagerness. In addition to this rejection, he explicitly shifts literary values toward the long marginalized end of the dichotomy between the pragmatic and the aesthetic, the educational and the entertaining, the factual and the fantastic.

In short, the same tendency to prioritize aesthetic pursuits over obedience to political agendas joins both groups of writers (the root-searchers and the avant-garde) into one single force to create literary works that move beyond a slavish representation of life. These writers use various forms of *qi* in their fiction to challenge grand narratives and official discourses, and they clearly present their different perspectives on what they see through different forms of literary transgressions in their texts.

*The King of Chess* 棋王 (1984) by Ah Cheng

Published in 1984, *The King of Chess* written by Ah Cheng is considered by many critics as one of the landmark early roots-searching novellas. It is told by a first-person narrator, and the titular protagonist Wang Yisheng (王一生) is presented to the reader through the point-of-view of a number of characters, including the narrator, a youth named Ni Bin (倪斌) (also known by his nickname, Legballs [*jiaoluan* 脚卵]) and Wang Yisheng himself. The story takes place during the Cultural Revolution, when the narrator, from a culturally upper-class family, is sent to the countryside along with many other young people to become “rusticated youth.” He
comes to know Wang Yisheng during his long journey away from home. Wang’s addiction to chess games and his genius at playing the game attract the narrator and later earn respect and devotion from Ni Bin, who is also from a culturally elite family. When Wang Yisheng is rejected by a chess tournament due to bureaucratic errors, Ni Bin wants to bribe the committee with his own heirloom of an antique chess set in order to secure a place for Wang. Wang refuses such a costly means of acquiring the opportunity. Instead, he single-handedly challenges nine chess masters, among whom are the top three winners of the tournament. He wins eight games and calls it a draw with the tournament champion. The tournament champion is an aged hermit, and he sees hope for China’s chess future in Wang. Wang retreats to his rusticated youth group after the overwhelming victory.

The literary quality of qi in The King of Chess is mainly presented through the mysterious connection between Wang Yisheng and the game of chess he plays; the text’s representation of this connection is steeped in the traditional philosophy of Taoism. The language used in the novella is also different from that of most contemporary fiction, in which the dryness and stiffness of the so-called “Maoist” style continued to dominate. Bonnie S. McDougall, one English translator of The King of Chess, argues that the book appeals to critics, both at home and abroad, because “the complex vocabulary” gives “bones and sinew to the apparently artless style,” because it is rich in “linguistic borrowings from traditional Chinese novels,” and because a reader can appreciate “the references to Taoist philosophy” throughout.26

Ah Cheng later hints in his essays that he uses diverse literary and generic elements in The King of Chess, claiming that such elements are drawn from “tales of marvels and heroes” (英雄傳奇 yingxiong chuanqi), “elaborated records from reality” (現實演義 xianshi yanyi), and

even romances (言情 *yanqing*). He confesses that his literary language in the book is indeed a staged variant of *huaben* 話本, a type of traditional Chinese vernacular *xiaoshuo* popular in the Song and Yuan dynasties. He admits that he adapts in his own writing details and plots that appear repeatedly in the tradition of Ming and Qing vernacular *xiaoshuo*. He also mentions that images and metaphors from significant works of pre-modern classical prose provided inspiration to him in writing the book.

If these self-explanations are read side by side with the narrative text of *The King of Chess*, they connect Ah Cheng with the Tang literati who wrote tales of marvels with their literary knowledge and taste for generic experimentation. Through a mosaic of lively language and an intricate narrative structure, multiple layers of reality as perceived by the writer are revealed through diverse literary forms. The text’s poetic strain resides in Wang Yisheng’s persistent hope to escape a hard life through the chessboard; and even though the rusticated youth suffers from physical and spiritual hunger most of waking hours, his vital connection with a literary past of Taoism reaches the reader through the narrator’s text.

The four chapters of this book of 28,000 words develop momentum through a plot that displays many transgressions of life’s restrictions. Chapter One narrates the journey away from home and the acquaintance of Wang Yisheng with the narrator; Chapter Two tells of Wang’s visit to the narrator’s quarters and Wang’s acquaintance with Ni Bin through chess games. The first two chapters are equally long and equally rich in prosaic descriptions of everyday details, such as how to cook a snake or how to enjoy every morsel of food. Chapter Three, however, takes a more lyrical turn in its language. The group of rusticated youths set out from their

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28 Ah Cheng 211.
squalid quarters for the chess tournament as though they were soldiers leaving for the battlefield. It is a short but brisk chapter with intense lyric force. For example, the artist in town who hosts the youths provides an occasion for the narrator and his fellows to voice their long suppressed aesthetic yearnings. The scene in which the rusticated youths bathe themselves in the river after their long journey is written with a beauty that is rich in symbolism. Short as the lyrical chapter is, it successfully transgresses the prosaic frame of life of the young men, and brings out the vitality and beauty of their youth. Chapter Four concerns Wang Yisheng’s chess battle against the nine masters. The climax comes when Wang cries out for his dead mother at the moment of victory, and yet this climax is immediately followed by the narrator’s short summary of the moral lessons the narrator himself has learned from all these events.

This narrative relates more than events to the reader. In other words, it is more lyrical than prosaic. Even though Ah Cheng himself claims Ming and Qing vernacular novels as his prototypes for writing, his difference from the Ming literati is essential. In the first two chapters, Ah Cheng seems to imitate the emphasis on the verisimilitude of a depicted Confucian hierarchical order that was typical of the prose narratives of the Ming and Qing vernacular novel. He constructs a conventional frame that confines and defines Wang Yisheng as a common rusticated youth, who comes from a humble family, suffers from hunger, and loves chess games. However, the last two chapters break that traditional frame into pieces with a lyrical discovery of the youth’s power of transgression. Wang Yisheng’s final compromise to call a draw with the aged champion does not mean any concession to the world that confines him. Rather, it constitutes a gesture of his newfound confidence, which shows the world his perspective on it, and grants him the freedom to travel between it and his own inner world. Through narrative innovation, Ah Cheng thus brings the quality of qi to the old genre of the vernacular novel.
The other generic source that Ah Cheng claims to use in *The King of Chess* is the Yuan and Ming *huaben*. A look at Ah Cheng’s use of language, however, shows how he transforms it. Traditionally *huaben* uses vernacular language for conversations and literary language for its introductory parts. *The King of Chess*, however, assigns new functions to these language styles. Wang Yisheng speaks in colloquial Chinese when he talks about his childhood, and yet his language becomes more lyrical and literary whenever he utters his views on how to play chess. In contrast, the first-person narrator’s language remains unchanged throughout the book and therefore provides a sense of consistency within the narrative frame that contains the lyrical force. In this sense, the first-person narrator’s short concluding summary of the moral lessons comes across as weak. It is weakness in comparison with the operations of *qi* in the book. The weakness evinces the destruction of the narrator’s impression of the world, which no longer sound convincing. Wang Yisheng’s otherness—his otherworldly chess skill in particular—in this world alters the flow of the narrative and shifts the reader’s trust away from the narrator to the source of *qi* in the story. The textual irony thus formed between the narrator and the tale reminds the reader of some Tang writers’ works, such as *Yingying’s Story* and “The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest,” where the immediate reader’s response to *qi* is even faithfully recorded and becomes part of the frame narrative.

Ah Cheng’s literary quality of *qi* is also manifested through the contrast of two major traditional philosophies, i.e., Confucianism that traditionally secured the hierarchical order of society through constraints upon the individual, and Taoism that traditionally favored a freedom of roaming and spontaneity in art. For example, both the first-person narrator and Ni Bin come from culturally elite families and believe in Confucian values like social obligations and hierarchical order. The narrator’s efforts to sustain boundaries become evident in the narrative
frame. Ni Bin consolidates one such boundary both in his very name and in his behaviour. His name Bin, or 斌, is composed of two Chinese characters, wen 文 and wu 武, and therefore implies a wish for influence in both traditional spheres of literary and military feats. Ni Bin also demonstrates two cardinal Confucian virtues, i.e., essential humanity (ren 仁) and sympathetic brotherhood (yi 義) when he sacrifices his heirloom in order to secure a place for Wang Yisheng at the chess tournament. All these traditional boundaries, however, are transgressed by Wang Yisheng. His name yisheng 一生 comes from the first chapter of the Taoist canonical text the Daode jing (Classic of the Way and Its Power) and represents the starting point of all things, literally meaning “out of one is born.” With a Taoist-inflected viewpoint he refutes the first-person narrator’s mundane views on eating and reflects instead on the essence of hunger so as to illustrate the importance of eating. As for Ni Bin’s false “justice” gained through bribery, he refuses to accept it. Instead, he transgresses the boundaries of the tournament and challenges all with a true spirit of freedom. Wang Yisheng seldom speaks aloud in the narrative, and his conversation with the narrator is almost the only outlet for his self-declarations. The implicit Confucian values set up the narrative frame like a net that tries to contain, twist, and bend the Taoist beliefs in freedom and spontaneity represented by Wang Yisheng; yet Wang’s straightforward expressions and undaunted actions break through, transcend, and even transform the quotidian narrative frame. The reader is left with a sense that Wang Yisheng’s potential to revitalize the world of Chinese chess stems not so much from his otherworldly skill as his willingness to transgress traditional boundaries.

Ah Cheng enhances literary qi with his knowledge of and experimentation with traditional narrative genres. The prosaic narrative frame set up in service of the narrator’s strongly Confucian social values is pierced time after time by the protagonist’s poetic simplicity
and freedom in his action and speech; Wang Yisheng’s outcry with his ultimate victory mortally weakens the narrator’s effort to sustain his deeply conservative framework.

*Red Sorghum 紅高粱 (1986) by Mo Yan*

In March, 1986, Mo Yan published *Red Sorghum* in *People’s Literature* (人民文學 *Renmin wenxue*), a well-known literary journal that generally only published “mainstream” literary works. Naturally the novella aroused fierce critical responses. *Red Sorghum* centers its narration on the Anti-Japanese War in Gaomi, a remote Shandong village. In official historical narratives as well as most mainstream fiction in Communist China, the War of Resistance is indisputably portrayed as a victorious one led mainly by the CCP and its members; however, it was not represented as such in Mo Yan’s fiction. Even though more and more alternative narratives of the War had come to people’s knowledge in the 1980s, many of the official narratives remained unchallenged. Mo Yan’s fiction alerts his readers to other perspectives on war and national crisis. He narrates a different War of Resistance against Japan, waged by local heroes and heroines who know little or even nothing about Communism and who—unlike the simplistically characterized proletariat heroes with nerves of steel in typical fiction—are full of primal passion for life and love. In addition, instead of criticizing his grandparents’ ignorance and lack of “communist ideals,” the first-person narrator laments the lost past and deplores his own diminished present state that hardly projects a bright future.29

Truly, as he himself says, Mo Yan invents a first-person narrator in *Red Sorghum* who builds a bridge between past and present. The first-person narrator intrudes upon the past with

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29 Mo Yan’s play with the concept of time through his usage of the narrator in *Red Sorghum* is thoroughly explored in G. Andrew Stuckey’s Ph.D. dissertation entitled “Memory - tradition - history: Ties to the past in modern Chinese fiction” (UCLA, 2005). Chapter 5, “Memory or Phantasy: Honggaoliang’s Narrator,” discusses how the first-person narrator adopts and appropriates other peoples’ memory as his own via vividness in detail (111-136) and how by experimenting with the order of events a sense of control over the past is achieved in the present.
self-deprecation and satirizes himself when he talks about the future. The first-person narrator’s self-deprecation is displayed overtly in the text; and yet his irony toward his external world is shown exclusively in a self-reflexive elaboration of voices and language styles. He travels freely back and forth between the past and the future, and between the world he sees in his eyes and the world he feels and experiences in his mind.

The nine sections of the story relate two major events: a love affair between “My Grandma” and Commander Yu, and a pyrrhic victory at the ambush against the Japanese army at the Black Water River by Commander Yu. Both events are narrated several times by the first-person narrator from various angles, all borrowed and retold by him from other people’s memories. His perspective is thus removed from the immediate impressions of these events and defamiliarized by his personal connection with the past. He is biologically connected to the protagonists in the events, yet physically removed from them by time and narrative perspectives. The resulting prism of perspectives formed in the first-person narrator thus complicates the reader’s reading and comprehension of these events. The first-person narrator takes on a transgressive role that presents a dialogical, multivalent image of the past.

At the same time, as if to make up for the lack of linguistic richness in the Maoist language that dominated Mo Yan’s adolescent years, the writer deploys lyrical phrases and highly symbolic expressions. Mo Yan’s experiments with the modern Chinese language are complicated and self-reflexive. He gives the first-person narrator a distinctively modern voice while also exposing the narrator to other voices from historical and cultural pasts. In the first-person narrator’s attempt to incorporate others’ memories into his own experience of the past, the writer produces a poetic power that adds layers of self-reflexive irony to the narrative. The narrator also incorporates uncertainty into his narrative as to whether he is speaking from a
present reality or just a fantasy of the past. The reader comprehends this ambiguity thanks to the literary quality of *qi* present in the narrator’s own voice. For example, the beginning of *Red Sorghum* starts with a historical date, a fragmentary phrase that introduces the identity of “my father,” and then a brief summary of “my father’s” career as a “bandit” and an anti-Japanese hero. Such a beginning recalls the formal traditional biographical style. However, this imitation is immediately interrupted by a short conversation between “Grandma” and Commander Yu with all the colloquial style of Shandong dialect faithfully preserved in the text. After the conversation is a long paragraph in which the narrator shifts to a lyrical description of what “my father” sees as he walks along with “my” biological Grandpa Commander Yu:

Howard Goldblatt’s English translation is almost as beautiful as the Chinese text I quote here:

> Heaven and earth were in turmoil, the view was blurred. By then the soldiers’ muffled footsteps had moved far down the road. Father could still hear them, but a curtain of blue mist obscured the men themselves. Gripping tightly to Commander Yu’s coat, he nearly flew down the path on churning legs. Grandma receded like a

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30 Unfortunately, the local color of style is often difficult to render in translation.

31 The phonetic symbol in brackets following each last character in each sentence is provided by me. I would like to indicate the rhyming pattern that Mo Yan intends in his prose, which, considering the time he writes, is uncommonly unrealistic and poetic in the traditional sense.
distant shore as the approaching sea of mist grew more tempestuous; holding on to Commander Yu was like clinging to the railing of a boat.\textsuperscript{32}

In this sensual description the narrator speaks in the first-person’s voice, but the perceptions of things in his speech belong to the senses of his father, i.e., “my Father.” The views, sounds, and feelings of the third-person “my father” therefore cross the boundaries of time and sense, deepening his relation with the voice of his biological son in the future, “me.” When the narrator enters into the private senses of his “father” he violates the limits of regular first-person narration. And so the reading of this paragraph invites the reader to make a choice: either one accepts Mo Yan’s transgression of narrating voice and accepts the narrative as a journey into the past; or one refuses to accept this transgression and then rejects the veracity of all that is to follow in the book. If the reader accepts such a transgression, then it welcomes a blend of voices and subjects that materialize in the first-person narrator’s poetic imagination of the memory of his father, ultimately enabling him to incorporate the father’s perception of the past into the narrator’s present.

A look at the Chinese text of this passage also shows that the narrator’s sentences are of uneven yet rhythmic lengths, and that the group of sentences with their ending rhyming vowels make the prose more like verse. The uneven yet rhythmic lines look familiar to a sophisticated Chinese reader who is familiar with the form of Song lyrics 宋词 songci. It is a poetic genre that gives poets more space to express individual feelings than the classical regulated poetry form, and has gained popularity especially among common readers because of its musicality. This structure is an ideal generic element for Mo Yan to use in presenting his highly private

perception of the War of Resistance to readers who possess the knowledge and willingness to accept his vision.

To achieve the literary quality of *qi*, Mo Yan projects his first-person narrator’s personal present onto the past through the narrator’s paradoxical self-portrayal: on one hand, the narrator self-deprecatingly describes himself as one of an “unfilial generation” that is plagued with “a nagging sense of our species’ regression”; on the other hand, the narrator nevertheless leaves an ineradicable mark, unique to himself and his own generation, upon his narration, upon historiographical writing, and upon the language in the narrative text. This complex narration by such a multivalent and resourceful first-person narrator creates a reading space where the present transgresses the boundary with the past and vice versa; and the reader, by following such a journey, is given the autonomy to interpret any possible messages buried therein.

Mo Yan elaborates a linguistic incongruity between classical elegance and contemporary tediousness through the first-person narrator’s use of modern Chinese language (especially that of the Maoist style) in his narration. On one hand, the first-person narrator is given a mature voice that echoes the past nostalgically and sometimes almost elegiacally; on the other hand, the first-person narrator is ready to recalibrate the reader’s response at any time with a typically contemporary voice that can only belong to a Chinese educated in Maoist discourses. For example, the first-person narrator recalls his feelings for his hometown Gaomi in a typical Maoist style. He uses bureaucratic terms such as “extremely” (極端 jiduan), “passionate love (熱愛 re’ai)”, “rival hate (仇恨 chouhen)”, and clichéd sentence patterns like “I study hard to gain the knowledge of Marxism when I grow up (長大後努力學習馬克思主義)”, which were commonly used in propaganda by the CCP government in the 1960s and 1970s (and even continue to be used today). It might be hard for the reader to decide if the narrator is speaking
satirically or sincerely, but the incongruity of language styles in the same narration is drastic enough to alert the reader to the need for a more sophisticated reading.

Similar examples of linguistic incongruity can be found throughout *Red Sorghum*. The incongruities accumulate to create a sense of *qi* in the reader’s comprehension. Take the portrayal of a minor character, Arhat Liu, for example. The first-person narrator borrows heavily from “Father’s” memory and the villagers’ rumours. When re-telling the details of those memories and rumours, the narrator’s language abounds in local accents. At some points, when describing “Father’s” retrospections on scenes of the past, it seems that the first-person narrator has completely merged his own voice with his “Father’s” voice. However, the reader is not always provided with such seamless and complete returns to the past in the text. From time to time, the first-person narrator interrupts the narration of a past conversation, a past event, or a revelation of “Father’s” inner mind to insert a line about Arhat Liu’s background. These intrusive lines are written in an obviously contemporary Maoist style. For example, after narrating how Arhat Liu accompanied “Father” on a wonderful and idyllic adventure to catch crabs under the starry night sky, the following sentence occurs: “Uncle Arhat had been overseeing the work of the family distillery for decades (劉羅漢大爺在我家工作了幾十年，負責著我家燒酒作坊的全面工作).” The Chinese sentence structure echoes a pattern that has been used to introduce Communist cadre officials in government reports since 1949: 在……工作了……年，負責……全面工作 (have been overseeing the work ...for...years). It sharply contrasts with the earlier idyllic descriptions of the night sky that contain colourful associations with implied myths. In another instance, after a lively paragraph in colloquial Chinese that relates how Grandma seduces Uncle Arhat, the first-person narrator abruptly changes his

33 Mo Yan 7.
narrative tone and dryly concludes: “Uncle Arhat didn’t leave at all. Instead, he became our foreman 羅漢大爺沒走，一直在我家擔任業務領導.” The reader is thus reminded of the existence of disjunctions only made possible by literary transgressions in the narrative, especially the disjunction between past and present memories, emphasized by the discrepancy between the linguistic pleasure of the narrator’s imitation of a lyrical past and the implied hollowness of his narration of a superficial and tedious present. A unique sense of irony arises from such literary transgression for most mainland Chinese readers, one that is echoed in their everyday lives when they read government reports or official announcements that are still written in the Maoist style.

To summarize, Mo Yan mainly achieves qi in Red Sorghum through his invention of a first-person narrator who connects present and past, and exists only in the liminal zone between the two planes of experience. The liminal status of the narrator is both created by and figured in the intertextual relations between contemporary styles of writing and pre-modern literary traditions through imitation, adaptation, and transformation of the lyrical force of the Chinese language. Mo Yan’s ironic and subversive use of the Maoist style is instrumental in producing a sense of qi for the reader. By insistently imposing his first-person narrator’s own contemporary voice incompletely upon the retelling of the past—which has the power to return and shape that contemporary voice—Mo Yan uses irony to miraculously transform the tedium and ugliness of a barren contemporary literary landscape into one rich with potential for a marvellous reading of everyday reality.

34 Mo Yan 7. Howard Goldblatt’s English translation is generally faithful to Mo Yan’s Chinese text here. However, the ironic edge is unfortunately lost. A literal translation of Mo Yan’s sentence may sound as stiff and dry as a Communist government report to English readers: Uncle Arhat did not leave. He stayed to become a leading cadre in business at my home.
“Classical Love” 古典愛情 (1989) by Yu Hua

Yu Hua personally experienced the culturally devastating decade of the Cultural Revolution while a neglected younger child of an intellectual family. He received his first education in Chinese writing from the aggressive propaganda he encountered in “Big-Character Posters” (大字報 dazibao). Literary critics of 1980s’ China almost universally recognized and applauded his challenging experimentalism and, without hesitation, they designated his youthful style as avant-garde. These same critics were disturbed, though, by some of his early short stories, where he tends to fragment modern Chinese language and uses excessively violent images.35 However, his first novel, To Live, presents a drastic change in style from his early short stories. Most critics in China applaud it as a return to mainstream “realist” writing. Some Western critics, like McDougall, argue that Yu Hua’s pre-1989 stories are more like political allegories, while in contrast his post-1989 fiction, such as To Live, is less surreal in presentation and the violence is less graphic.36 As mercurial as his unpredictable styles are, Yu Hua’s short story “Classical Love,” written in the pivotal year 1989, reveals much about his contribution to the literary tradition of qi in contemporary fiction.

Yu Hua fully displays in “Classical Love” his understanding of qi exerting the subversive power of irony. The story was first published in Beijing Literature in 1989 and transplants the clichéd scholar-beauty motif of traditional Chinese literature into a bizarrely brutal context. As the story’s English translator Andrew F. Jones says, the story is “a prime example” of how Yu Hua experiments with traditional Chinese narratives.37 Howard Y. F. Choy

agrees with Jones and considers it a “pastiche of the traditional popular romance of ‘scholar and the beauty’ (caizi jiaren 才子佳人)” that ends in “a quasi-ghost story.” On its surface “Classical Love” imitates many aspects of the cliché of “scholar-beauty”--in its frame narrative, characterizations, motif, and even language. Beneath the surface imitation, however, Yu Hua produces a subversive parody of such love stories: he destroys the traditional happy endings of these stories with literary weapons ironically borrowed from a variety of traditional narratives.

“Classical Love” narrates how a pre-modern young scholar named Liu 柳 (Willow) falls in love with a maiden named Hui 蕙 (Boat Orchid, or Faber Cymbidium) in the Spring on his way to take a civil service examination in the Capital. In Autumn, on his way back home after failing the exam, he finds Hui’s grand residence in ruins. Three years later, when famine strikes the area, Liu returns to seek Hui. He is then shocked by a massacre scene in which a mother and a daughter are taken as food by a starving mob. As if foreshadowed by this latter scene, the next afternoon Liu finally finds the body of Hui, whose leg has been cut off to prepare a dish for travellers. Liu buries Hui out of love for her. Disillusioned, he goes back to his hometown to have a frugal and fruitless life. A few years later, he comes back again to Hui’s town and finds Hui’s residence restored to its grandeur. Haunted by a strong sense of déjà vu, he decides to settle down near the tomb of Hui. After a few days, he wakes up from a weird dream and sees Hui’s ghost. Just as the scholar in Peony Pavilion did (whose last name is also Liu and whose love affair with a ghost girl revives her), he digs up Hui’s corpse. But his untimely disinterring

of Hui’s body does not revive the maiden; instead she tells him that it leads to her eternal death.39

Yu Hua’s adaptation of a traditional frame story, characterization, motif, and even language in “Classical Love” can be interpreted as both paying homage to pre-modern Chinese literary romances and as a post-Mao response to subvert the suppression brought about by the political agenda of communist China. The first part of Yu Hua’s story is the most conventional part, and the reader is comforted by the clichéd beginning: a scholar on his way to the civil service examination encountering a beautiful young woman and her maidservant is a very old story. The setting of this scene and the conversation between the two would-be lovers are presented in full accordance with the tradition of romantic tales of the “scholar and the beauty,” except for two details: first, instead of the normal exchange of love poems such as we have read in Yingying’s Story of the Tang dynasty, the modern reader is presented with a sensual description of Liu’s response to Hui’s reciting voice; second, instead of articulating the male protagonist’s joy of love in poetic lines, Yu Hua reveals it in a third-person omniscient description of Liu’s psychology. The latter change also prepares the reader for the narrative of Liu’s ghostly experience at the end of the story, an experience that belongs more to the inner world of a bereaved man. These two non-traditional details signal that this is not a conventional “scholar and beauty” romance. In pre-modern narratives like Peony Pavilion, the scholar unearths the body of his maiden and revives her with his love, and they live happily ever after. In Yu Hua’s story, the usual happy ending is twisted, and a horribly tragic conclusion is presented to Liu as well as to the reader. The reader, earlier drawn into the text by the familiar genre of “scholar and beauty,” is waiting for a happy ending, yet simultaneously uneasily

39 Peony Pavilion is a well-know chuanqi drama produced in Ming dynasty by Tang Xianzu. It tells how Scholar Liu Mengmei (literally meaning Willow Dreaming of Prunes) falls in love with Maiden Du Liniang in a dream and then unearths and revives her corpse to marry her in reality.
suspecting something different; a sense of the uncanny is produced in the reader by the strange combination of pre-modern expectations and modern perceptions in the form of an ironic fantasy. The modern literary quality of *qi* is therefore produced by a particular usage of subversive irony.

At the end of “Classical Love” the ghost of Hui speaks as Liu sadly gazes at her lingering shape: “I, a humble maiden, was to return to life, but, young sire, it is only because you uncovered me that this will not come to pass.”40 And then, weeping, she leaves never to return. Yu Hua plays with the reader’s textual and generic expectations up to the last moment and the reader can enjoy *qi* in a state of readerly freedom, roaming inbetween the interacting genres. The reader, furnished with his/her expectations from past literature, like *The Peony Pavilion*, may hope for a possible revival; deprived of this, he/she may be partially satisfied by the rare classical elegance of Hui’s language. However, the reader’s generic expectations are completely subverted by the dark despair carried in Hui’s words. The genre of “scholar and beauty” romance is closely associated with the use of elegant literary Chinese narrative language. Yu Hua’s modern version swerves from the comfort zone suggested by his literary language as soon as Liu’s inner world is revealed to the reader without the normal constraints of poetic language; the disturbing force of such a transgression reaches its zenith at the last moment of the narrative. Under Liu’s gaze as well as that of the reader, the bubble bursts and the light fades. The ghost leaves Liu forever. The literary quality of *qi*, however, still lingers; it is still within the text, preserving a legacy of transgression for the reader.

40 The English translation is mine. Yu Hua’s Chinese text is: 小女本來生還，只因被公子發現，此事不成了。”說罷，小姐垂泪而別. See Yu Hua, “古典愛情 gudian aiqing ” in *Yu Hua* (Beijing: People’s Literature Press, 2001) 276. The English translation by Andrew F. Jones is more literary than mine, yet as I argued above, Yu Hua’s intertextual strategy in writing shapes much of its reading. I give more weight to Yu Hua’s intertextual reference to Chinese pre-modern language and style.
As can be seen in my previous discussion, Yu Hua writes both in and against the tradition of pre-modern fiction in “Classical Love.” He successfully integrates a more traditional sense of qi within a modern perception of the human inner world. This focus on the interior is reminiscent of the literary tradition of Western modernism. Indeed Yu Hua himself has never hesitated to admit how significantly many Western and Japanese modernist writers helped shape his writing. The newness of Yu Hua’s writing is also part of his contribution to the transformation of literary qi in modern Chinese literature.


Compared with Yu Hua, Su Tong seems to be less subversive when he turns to traditional Chinese artistic forms for models of qi in his own writing. His relative mildness is sometimes characterized as femininity in style. He is often praised for his subtle and precise presentation of conventionally feminine sensibilities, and some critics even consider his writing more feminine than that of female writers. For a sophisticated reader of Chinese literature, such a literary inclination and the level of its achievement are rare but not unfamiliar. Pre-modern Chinese poets writing in the lyrical tradition extending from the *Chu* lyrics to the Song lyrics, were praised for the same achievements. As discussed in previous chapters, intertextual and intergeneric relations between poetry and prose have long played a formative role in constructing qi in Chinese fiction. Su Tong provides a perfect contemporary case for the

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41 Yu Hua’s list of Western and Japanese writers that have influenced his writing is found in his self-portrayal and literary essays, typically in Yu Hua, “Writing for the Heart: Preface to To Live in 1993,” in *Ling Hun Fan* (Haikou: Nanhai Chuban Company, 2002) 221-22.


43 I have discussed the major literary features of the Chu lyrics in Chapter II. As for the representation of feminine sensibility in male poets’ lyrics, Stephen Owen’s selection of *wanyue* style Song lyrics and his concise introduction of the school’s development in the Song dynasty provide an interesting perspective. See Stephen Owen, ed., *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: Norton, 1996) 559-589.
interplay of these often dichotomized pair of literary forces in his two thematically similar yet stylistically divergent fictional works: *My Life as Emperor* 我的帝王生涯 (1992) and *Wu Zetian* 武則天 (1993).

*My Life as Emperor* and *Wu Zetian* form an interesting contrast in terms of intertextual and intergeneric relations to pre-modern Chinese fiction. Both stories relate the lives of pre-modern Chinese royalty. *Wu Zetian* is a traditional historical novel featuring Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty as its female protagonist. Su Tong in this fictional work, as with many earlier Chinese fiction writers, is beholden to historical documents. As if to prove historical truthfulness in his fiction writing, he frequently refers back to various historical documents from the Tang dynasty.\(^{44}\) Most of the story’s plot derives from historical documents and records from 624 to 705 in the early Tang dynasty. Su Tong as a writer seems to have done little more than translate these classical historical materials into modern standard Chinese. As a result, he leaves little space and resources for himself to construct a sense of literary qi; neither does he leave much space for his readers to experience it.

Thanks to *Wu Zetian*, Su Tong has been considered a typical “new historical fiction” writer by many critics. He himself repeatedly and openly protests against such an association between history and fiction in his essays. In his interviews and prefaces, he often claims that, except for *Wu Zetian*, he has always avoided historical documents and historical records in his fiction writing.\(^{45}\) He even overtly complains that his own text in *Wu Zetian* is so confined by

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\(^{44}\) Su Tong is critically acclaimed by many critics for his “new historical fiction,” among which *Wu Zetian* is sometimes quoted as a good example. As for “new historical fiction” in contemporary Chinese literary field, please see Howard Y. F. Choy, *Remapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng’s China, 1979-1997* (Boston: Brill, 2008), and Lin Qingxin, *Brushing History Against the Grain: Reading the Chinese New Historical Fiction (1984-1999)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2005).

\(^{45}\) *Su Tong yanjiu ziliao* 92.
historical records that it lacks the force of imagination. As a fiction writer, Su Tong loathes to talk about this book unless it is apologetically. One of the possible causes for his dissatisfaction might be his compromise with his aesthetic and literary principles in the face of confining historical records. According to David Der-wei Wang Wu Zetian presents “more compromise than originality, more hesitation than critique (妥協多于創新，猶疑多于批判).”

Comparatively speaking, Su Tong’s previous literary effort in My Life as Emperor is more experimental, original, and capable of producing qi. In My Life as Emperor Su Tong writes “from a dream world.” The reader must suspend disbelief at the outset when one notices that the story is not set in any particular historical time. As a result, the reader and the writer are freed from the limits of historical documentation. Instead, their full attention is justifiably given to the inner world of the protagonist Duanbai. Duanbai undergoes drastic changes in his life: as an exiled prince he is forced onto the emperor’s throne; then, ousted by his own brother, he is reduced to being a self-made “Emperor of Tightrope,” and ultimately he becomes “Emperor of the Patch.” Following his personal vicissitudes is the fate of his Xie Empire. Su Tong’s poetic representation of Duanbai’s inner world is foregrounded by a prosaic sketch of historical events. The literary quality of qi in this first-person narrative in Duanbai’s voice is mostly displayed in the contrast between a world of imagination built inside Duanbai’s mind and his external world, which is reduced to a series of vague impressions.

Critics’ attention to Su Tong’s sharply different styles in My Life as Emperor and Wu Zetian has been intense. In contrast to Der-wei Wang’s disapproval of the lack of originality in

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46 Su Tong yanjiu ziliao 49.
47 Su Tong yanjiu ziliao 39.
48 David Der-wei Wang, “Nanfang de duoluò yu youhuo” (The Decadence and Allurement from the South”) in Su Tong yanjiu ziliao 322.
Wu Zetian, Vivian Pui-yin Lee gives a more detailed reading of these two books from the perspective of historical fiction writing. In her view, Su Tong attempts to “discover new possibilities in fiction writing” in these two books, and the tension in these two books embodies the tensions “between certain historical perceptions and fictional representation,” which could also be “construed as that between historical ‘facticity’ and literary ‘fictionality.’” However, Vivian Pui-yin Lee ignores Su Tong’s own preface to *My Life as Emperor*, in which he insists that his reader should “not approach *My Life as Emperor* with the idea that it is historical fiction.” Vivian Pui-yin Lee’s reading nevertheless admits that *My Life as Emperor* is “a highly imaginative, lyrical invocation of China’s dynastic past rich in symbolic meaning.” In her reading, fictional characters in the book intrude upon real history and produce in the reader a perception of these characters’ self-knowledge and self-realization that attains a kind of truth status.

Other critics, such as Zhang Qinghua, complain of Su Tong’s failure to adhere to historical verisimilitude in fiction in *My Life as Emperor*. According to Zhang, Su Tong could have done better than offering a “floating narrative and vague implications that are meant to be profound.” Zhang complains that he looked in vain for the “factuality of history and force of social critique.” This negative response to Su Tong’s fiction attests to Su Tong’s success in developing the power of transgression through the form of *qi*. Indeed, the “factuality of history and force of social critique” are exactly what Su Tong wishes his reader not to look for in this book, and what Zhang sees as a failure happens to be a fiction writer’s achievement as defined by Su Tong.

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51 Su Tong, *My Life as Emperor* vi.
52 Vivian Pui-yin Lee 58.
Su Tong both imitates and challenges the traditional literary genres from which he takes elements to shape his own writing in *My Life as Emperor*. For example, he mentions in a number of interviews and prefaces that his narrative style and rhythm in *My Life as Emperor* are inspired by a local poetic performance called *Suzhou pingtan* (蘇州評弾, or the Suzhou ballad style of story-telling). *Pingtan* features a slow-moving narrative in prose that foregrounds its lyrical climax in poetry; such a slow narrative prepares both the performer and the audience and soothes them before and after the climax. Su Tong uses this slow narrative style and encourages his reader to become comfortable with it. At the same time, since he has warned his readers in his preface that fantasy is to be found in the narrative, the reader is also prepared for moments of transgression. For these Su Tong borrows the usage of dreams in traditional Chinese fiction. But he goes further than the pre-modern dream-addicted writers: while they bring the reader back to reality after the dream is over, Su Tong guides his reader directly from one dream to another. His purpose is to portray everyday societal life as signs in a dream, while his protagonist lives his life as if taking a journey to escape from all those confining signs, in order to return to his true self, which is ultimately alienated from society.

*My Life as Emperor* is a highly dramatic story about a person and his country narrated by a first-person narrator/protagonist who learns to know his true self through the narration. Divided into three sections chronologically, the story focuses on the three most critical and transformative moments in Duanbai’s life: Chapter I relates Duanbai’s acquirement of the Xie throne; Chapter II records his short reign as the Xie Emperor; and Chapter III presents the most

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54 *Pingtan* is literally a combination of *pinghua* and *tanci*, two local performing arts that originated in southern China and date back four hundred years. Popularized in the highly commercialized Song dynasty, it is characterized by prolonged story-telling enhanced by singing, and focuses more on the lyrical representation of characters experiencing events rather than on disclosing the events themselves. See Zhou Liang, ed., *zhongguo suzhou pingtan* (中國蘇州評彈, The Pingtan Art of Suzhou in China [Shanghai: Bajia chubanshe, 2002]).

55 See Su Tong, “Interviews by Zhou Xinmin,” in *Su Tong yanjiu ziliao* 90-91.
dramatic events in his life, in which he is dethroned but then acquires the title “Emperor of Tightrope” through hard work. However, after the loss of everything he inherits and gains, he becomes a recluse, and is assigned the title of “Emperor of the Patch” for the little patch of field where he finally settles.

These moments in Duanbai’s life are presented in a form more dramatic than conventional Post-Mao narrative; in the reading experience generated by the text, events matter less than Duanbai’s perceptions in and of those moments. In other words, in the narrative text, the chronological flow of events is less important than what Duanbai’s mind perceives and envisions of those events. The shift of narrative focus away from events to perceptions makes the work totally different from Wu Zetian. In Wu Zetian Su Tong borrows materials from historical documents to illustrate how historical events unfold along Empress Wu’s journey to her throne; but in My Life as Emperor similar details are either omitted or covered only briefly in the gossip of court ladies and in the courtly debates of ministers. The narrator/protagonist Duanbai pays little attention to these events. In contrast, his emotional responses to the gossip and debates are magnified by his own highly personal narration. For example, Duanbai acquires the throne on the day of his father’s funeral, which leads to a commotion among his father’s concubines, causing them to dispute his father’s will. The scene is narrated completely from Duanbai’s personal perspective. Instead of solid details of political plots and their effects that are found in Wu Zetian, the reader of My Life as Emperor only has access to 14-year-old Duanbai’s inner confusion as he hears the hollering and screaming of his father’s widowed concubines. Duanbai does not give any heed to the contents of his father’s will at all, merely gazing upon his grandmother Madame Huangfu. The will gives him the right to the throne and deprives all the concubines of any hope for their sons, but Duanbai only feels the physical
commotion. He tries to get away from it, if not physically, then mentally. In physical reality, he
cfails; but in his narration, he succeeds. By staring at and yearning for a “jade ruyi, the symbol of
power, hanging from” his grandmother’s girdle, he transgresses the limitations of the physical
world and withdraws his mind from it. 56 From then on, the gesture of staring blankly at the jade
ruyi becomes a textual signal for the reader: whenever it appears, the reader knows that Duanbai
is setting to escape from Madame Huangfu’s formidable presence and from his literal and
figurative identity as the Xie Emperor. The narrative focus thereby is trained more upon the
person in history than upon the history of dynasties. The reader, similarly, is restricted by the
text from trying to comprehend the chronology of historical events; rather, the reader is
encouraged to track the character’s emotional responses to events that are depicted at a distance
and in a fragmentary fashion.

Su Tong deliberately adds a lyrical force to the text at climactic moments in Duanbai’s
internal world. Such moments of lyrical transcendence of the prosaic confinements of Duanbai’s
external world are largely expressed in the following ways: through repeated refrains that use
certain words with ambiguous implications; omens repeatedly recognized by different people;
dramatic monologues by Duanbai; and, finally, the image of a bird as a symbol of flight, escape,
and freedom.

Su Tong uses Song dynasty-style lyrics deliberately in this novel. For example, writing
lyrics seems to be the only outlet for Duanbai’s emotions. He writes lyrics whenever he is
emotionally touched by power, love, and even tragedy. Even within the narrative prose, the
practice of repeating one single Chinese character three times consistently at certain points in
the book is an intertextual reference to a well-known lyric pattern. It echoes the ending line in

56 Su Tong, My Life as Emperor 5.
Chaitou feng (釵頭鳳 Phoenix Hairpin), a famous lyric composed by Lu You (陸游, 1125-1209) and his ex-wife Tang Wan (唐婉). In My Life as Emperor the Chinese characters that Su Tong repeats in this pattern are sha (殺, to kill) and wang (亡, to decline, to disappear). Sha-sha-sha appears twice in the book: in chapter one, after a visit to the border of his own empire, Duanbai comes back to the Capital with a tormented conscience. He utters the single syllable in one breath three times in his feverish sleep and thereby releases his anger and anxiety. The other time the reader reads the Chinese character three times in one line is near the end of the text. The Xie Empire is conquered by the Peng Empire, and the Emperor of Peng utters the syllable three times exactly in the way that Duanbai did in his feverish sleep as Xie Emperor. From the one who utters those words as a refrain to the one who receives the fatal effect of those words, Duanbai has completed his journey through the nightmare of life and death. Wang 亡 (to perish, to flee) is the other Chinese character that appears in such a haunting and mournful pattern. It first appears at the end of chapter two when Duanbai shamefully loses his throne as the Xie Emperor. Strictly speaking, the reader can hardly tell if it is a human word, as it appears to be uttered by a flock of flying birds. In Duanbai’s construal, however, the sound acquires the shape and meaning of a Chinese character that stands for decline and disappearance. The pattern of wang-wang-wang appears four more times after this. The recurrences intensify the tension in Duanbai’s efforts to realize his personal dream as Emperor of Tightrope in the Xie Empire, where he used to govern as a real-world Emperor. It also bolsters Duanbai’s concealed desire to

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57 The first two lyrics written to the tune of Phoenix Hairpin were by Lu Yu and Tang Wan, the latter as a response to the former’s lamenting lyric. Mourning over their previous happy marital life which comes to a tragic end due to Lu You’s mother’s interruption, both lyrics end by repeating a single character three times, as if it were a prolonged sign. For more details about the paired lyrics by Lu You and Tang Wan, please see Tony Barnstone and Chou Ping trans., The Anchor Book of Chinese Poetry: From Ancient to Contemporary, the Full 3000-Year Tradition (NY: The Anchor Books, 2005) 271-273.
overcome the limitations produced by worldly attachments.\textsuperscript{58} The intergeneric borrowing of haunting lines from a Song dynasty lyric thus adds lyrical force precisely at the moments in which Duanbai ruptures the narrative flow with his thoughts of transgression.

Su Tong also borrows from traditional verse drama to build a sense of literary qi in \textit{My Life as Emperor}. In traditional Chinese verse drama, characters often repeat ominous words in order to help frame the dramatic plot for the audience. Su Tong applies this generic practice to his prose narrative and thus adds a feeling of qi to it through an aura of inescapable and mysterious fate. In the 126,000-character-long \textit{My Life as Emperor}, the ominous words “Calamity will soon befall the Xie Empire” (燮國的災難要降臨了) are dispersed throughout the book and repeated more than twenty times by a variety of characters. These characters include the protagonist Duanbai, his aged attendant Sun Xin, his uncle Duke Zhaoyang, Li Yizhi the peasant rebel who was tormented to death, Duanbai’s favourite eunuch Swallow, and a ghost in Duanbai’s memory. These ominous words bring an external sense of ontology to the prose narrative, which otherwise would be so focused on Duanbai’s inner fantasy that the external world would fail even to register as a background to his thoughts. These ominous words are also literary attempts to rationalize the unexplainable and to familiarize the strange via common sense. The latter function paradoxically verifies the existence of Duanbai’s otherworldly perceptions, though. These ominous words, their speakers, and the contexts in which these words are uttered, together form a further paradox that invites and affects the reader’s response to the story. A brief summary of the ominous sentence is as follows:

\textsuperscript{58} The English version of \textit{My Life As Emperor} as translated by Howard Goldblatt hardly preserves the first repetition pattern as he applies more a liberal translation in his rendition of first \textit{sha-sha-sha} as “Kill, kill, kill” (81), and the second variant \textit{sha-sha-sha} as “Kill, kill, kill, kill” (274). The intertextual reference to the Song lyrics’ haunting line is thus lost in his translation. However his transliteration of \textit{wang-wang-wang} displays a different dilemma in translation: the multiple meanings of Chinese character \textit{wang} are completely lost in his efforts to present the phonetic implication of the character as an intended imitation of bird chirpings by Duanbai. The latter pattern’s intertextual reference to the Song lyrics’ line is thereby preserved, though.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Narrative Context/Cause for Utterance</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Autumn is deepening</td>
<td>Duanbai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Autumn is deepening</td>
<td>Sun Xin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>The fire is out</td>
<td>Sun Xin, and repeated by Duanbai 4 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>An assassin's arrow has been shot</td>
<td>Sun Xin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Duanbai plays childish games with his eunuch</td>
<td>Sun Xin, repeated 7 more times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Juekong (the monk master of Duanbai) was gone</td>
<td>Duanbai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>The chamber pot is shattered</td>
<td>Duanbai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>I saw little white demons</td>
<td>Duanbai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Now that eunuchs have gained favor</td>
<td>Sun Xin, and repeated by Sun Xin 12 more times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>The Emperor is young, and very cruel</td>
<td>Duke Zhaoyang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Sun Xin is dead</td>
<td>Sun Xin's ghost in Duanbai's imagination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>If Lady Hui (Duanbai's favorite concubine who was victimized by the jealous Empress and all the other royal concubines) remains as she is now</td>
<td>Duanbai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>When torture becomes this cruel, humans are worse than wild beasts</td>
<td>Li Yizhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>They (the little white demons)’ve come back</td>
<td>Duanbai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>You will see ninety-nine spirits,</td>
<td>Sun Xin as recalled by Duanbai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>The Xie Emperor is mired in debauchery</td>
<td>A muted sorrowful sound emanated from somewhere deep in the canopy of heaven (heard by Duanbai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>I believe in nothing any longer</td>
<td>Duanbai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>As I looked up at the blue Double-Eagle (Flag of the Peng Empire that conquers the Xie Empire) flapping in the morning breeze above the watchtower</td>
<td>Duanbai recalling Sun Xin's sad face</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2 “Calamity will soon befall the Xie Empire” (變國的災難要降臨了)

As shown in Fig. 2, some causes of the dark omen of “calamity” sound logical, as in number 13, where Duke Zhaoyang is worried about state affairs under the reign of an inexperienced yet ruthless young emperor. So does number 16, spoken by Li Yizhi, who had pleaded in vain for
the young emperor to show mercy over the plight of the commoners. Some causes, however, are absurd and even illusionary, like that of number 3: the fire is out, and then a dark omen of “calamity” is uttered by Sun Xin, the old eunuch. Furthermore, there is a paradoxical relation between the rationality of the causes for the utterance of the omen and its immediate effects on the audience. Unlike conventional explications of the surface world, the more absurd and illusionary these causes are, the more receptive the immediate audience depicted in the narrative becomes to the omens: they repeat the ominous words for no apparent or feasible reasons. It seems that by repetition they can perhaps come to believe these words, whether intentionally or not. For example, in situations 10, 17, and 18, disturbed by his own hallucination, Duanbai utters these words, and his attendants repeat these words immediately, even though they do not physically share his hallucination.

The utterances with logical external causes thus connect Duanbai’s internal narrative with the flow of historical events in the Xie state. In contrast, those with illusionary or nonsensical causes are more like a ghostly echo of what is taking place in Duanbai’s internal world. The latter, however, reflect more profoundly Duanbai’s desires, inner fears, and fantasies. These two types of utterances with different causes subtly overlap each other in Duanbai’s first-person narrative and together foreshadow what is to come in the text. From number 19 to the last utterance of these ominous words, the reader witnesses a transgression from two sides. Duanbai’s fantasy transgresses into the surface, everyday world, finally overwhelming it. Duanbai stops uttering these ominous words; instead, he is an imagined hearer of these words from the ghost world. From then on, the only time he actually utters them again is when he claims that he believes in nothing now. His total negation of his external world is immediately confirmed in front of his own eyes and physically felt by his immediate audience, which has
already witnessed the calamity of the fall of the Xie Empire. His external world is in ruins. The ominous utterance sounds like the words of the chorus in a tragedy, accompanying every step of the protagonist to his dreadful last step off the stage.

The reader’s experience of *qi* via Duanbai’s fantasy in words is thus partly achieved by the repeated dramatic, ominous words. Additionally, Su Tong uses symbolism in *My Life as Emperor* to enact a metaphoric relation between the protagonist and birds, symbols of flight. Throughout the first-person narrative, Duanbai feels at ease when he uses a bird’s image to interpret his perception of the world. The story starts as the 14-year-old Duanbai gazes at “a flock of white herons sweeping in low from the black tallow tree”\(^{59}\) and ends when Duanbai the recluse experiences nearby residents’ gazing upon him, “a strange monk standing on a rope strung between two pine trees, either walking rapidly or striking a one-legged crane pose.” “That person is me,” Duanbai thus claims in his last words of the book.\(^{60}\) Changed from a subject who observes the flight of birds to a bird-like observed object of flight, Duanbai gradually escapes from the bondage of the external and the internal and takes flight in his fantasy. Searching for a way to fly, physically and spiritually, he makes his final decision to give up performing flight-like tightrope walking for others. Instead, he resumes a reclusive life and only walks tightropes for himself. The literary quality of *qi* is fully displayed in the metaphorical connection between Duanbai’s yearning for flight and his self-image as an object of flight.

The symbolic relevance of birds and flight to Duanbai’s pursuit of freedom and self-knowledge is carefully set up by Su Tong in the text. For example, Duanbai is reluctant to become the Xie Emperor, so in his perception, the Xie palace is like a prison, and the map of the

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\(^{59}\) Su Tong, *My Life as Emperor* 3.

\(^{60}\) Su Tong 290.
Xie Empire seems to him nothing but an image of a dead bird “that would never fly again”; all he can acutely feel is “a desire to fly.” It is under such circumstances that he meets Lady Hui, another bird-like soul who is later ensnared by dark plots in the palace. To console Lady Hui in her despair, Duanbai sends her eighteen birds in cages as gifts, all of which she tries in vain to set free. Yet when the two lovers reunite after he is dethroned, he finds that they have each “reached the same goal”:

That was my deepest wish. My beautiful, unlucky Lady Hui has already been transformed into a free-flying white bird, and from now on we would soar in the same skies, our meetings limited to brief encounters and a wave of the hand; this would legitimize our worshipping of birds and our dreams of becoming one.

Duanbai is highly lyrical at this moment in the dark first-person narrative. Another equally lyrical outcry by Duanbai occurs in this section a few pages earlier when he finally masters the skills to walk the tightrope. He “saw a beautiful white bird fly up from somewhere deep in my soul and haughtily soar through the vast sky above the heads of the people below. / I was the Emperor of the Tightrope. / I was a bird.” Against the otherwise doomed tone of the narrative and the haunting chorus of ominous words that pervade the story, these two lyrical celebrations of a personal victory, even if a pyrrhic one, reach deep into the reader’s mind. Tragic, poignant, but still undauntedly victorious, these two moments shed light on the silent and lonely ending of Duanbai’s worldly life. When he shows a boy buried bird-cages in the palace ruins, he realizes that it is he himself who “hid those things,” and that, “priceless” or “worthless,” he cannot keep

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61 Su Tong 82.
62 Su Tong 83.
63 Su Tong 265.
64 Su Tong 263.
them anymore.\textsuperscript{65} When all his followers in the Circus are killed by the invading army, he accepts his responsibility as their survivor and buries their bodies single-handedly. After this, he is “truly a man alone.”\textsuperscript{66} The buried cages in the palace ruins and his burial of his followers’ corpses echo each other, yet Duanbai’s words describing the two reveal their basic differences. His burial of the cages is his way to escape the bondage of court life; and his burial of his followers’ corpses is a farewell he bids to the external world. Paradoxically, when he loses everything in the external world, he comes closest to his true internal desire:

\begin{quote}
The sky and I were so close that I had one dream after another about birds. All the birds I had dreamed about were white as virgin snow; the sky I dreamed about was transparent and boundless. All the birds I dreamed about flew into that sky. I dreamed of a new world.\textsuperscript{67}
\end{quote}

This sky is a new world of freedom, accessed after flight from suffocating reality. Reading between these lines, the reader can feel the text’s power in instantiating \textit{qi}. Disillusioned by everyday reality all his life, Duanbai finds strength by discovering his true desire, and finds peace in going beyond the boundary that divides his mind and his world, his perceptive imaginations and his surface impressions, even life and death. Duanbai enters an area that both embodies and frees his inner desire. To the reader of his first-person narrative, that area is the effect of \textit{qi}.

It is therefore no wonder that Su Tong himself prefers \textit{My Life as Emperor} to \textit{Wu Zetian}. In the former he is a fiction writer who is endowed with a literary freedom of roaming and draws inspiration from his knowledge of traditional literature. He freely crosses textual and generic boundaries in his writing, constructing a \textit{qi} that reveals new perspectives on historical

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{65} Su Tong 284.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Su Tong 286.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Su Tong 286.
\end{itemize}
events. In the latter, he is bound by his reading of historical documents and constrained within the narrative frame that is fixed by those documents. When Su Tong flouts historiography he realizes his fantasy about history in his text. The writer’s power to create an imagined reality makes anything possible.68

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, through key representative texts, I explored the fate of qi in contemporary Chinese fiction over the last two decades of the twentieth century. My discussion, however, in fact moved before and beyond the 1980s and 1990s. I briefly explained why and how a cultural and intellectual debate emerged after the suppression of independent thinking from the late 1940s to 1976, and how fiction writing benefited from the post-Mao cultural ferment. At the same time I pointed out the limitations of criticism of the era’s fiction, mainly due to the categorizing of writing into groups often at the cost of accurate investigations of individual works. My argument is that writers of these two decades shared in common a desire for qi, and that, thanks to the emancipation of individuality created by cultural ferment, they present highly individual and unique forms of qi in fiction.

By reading works like *The King of Chess*, *Red Sorghum*, “Classical Love,” and *My Life as Emperor* I have analyzed four major writers’ unique ways of constructing qi in fiction. Ah Cheng overcomes a totalizing political agenda by presenting traditional Chinese philosophical beliefs in freedom of roaming in his characterization of a King of Chess. Mo Yan successfully goes beyond an imitation of traditional lyrical lines, reaching a hallucinatory zone where the past, present and future meet in a first-person’s narrative voice. Yu Hua subversively adapts the

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68 Su describes his writing in *Wu Zetian* as a way to write history, which he detests. In contrast, he admits that his imagination as a fiction writer achieves full release via writing *My Life as an Emperor*. See *Su Tong yanjiu ziliao* 26.
traditional clichéd romance of the scholar and beauty; by parodying the genre he gives it a new postmodern twist. Su Tong explores the different realms of history and fantasy in his two historical fictions, revealing his preference for fantasy, since it maximizes qi.

In these contemporary Chinese writers’ works, qi emerges mainly through the writers’ literary transgressions. Their literary visions achieved through qi can only be decoded by the reader; nonetheless, readerly interpretation is limited by the boundaries these writers set for themselves. However, the mixed critical reception of these works reveals another aspect of qi in fiction: i.e., that it hinges upon the reader’s literary knowledge in decoding the message left by the writer. I have discussed briefly how this aspect may work in chapter II. The Tang literati mainly produced their literary quality of qi through a prior understanding that their targeted readers were fellow members of the literati who largely shared their knowledge of literature and values. In chapter III, however, I have delineated how qi was domesticated. In the 1980s and 1990s, most writers yearned for a “correct reading” of their fiction, and yet they seemed to be more reserved in committing themselves to such a relationship with their readers, at least openly in words. A large part of qi then remains to be explored. In the next chapter, I turn to Wang Xiaobo for a key to further understanding the creation and reception of literary qi in Chinese fiction.
Chapter V

The Tang People and Our Time: Qi in Wang Xiaobo’s Intertextual Travel

In the last chapter I explored how contemporary writers revived qi in fiction during the last two decades of the twentieth century. I argued that fiction writers like Ah Cheng, Mo Yan, Yu Hua, and Su Tong in their writing display perspectives on their world that are different from those prescribed by communist official discourse. These writers’ different literary efforts manifest themselves in various forms of roaming freely across generic and textual boundaries in their major works.

In this chapter I continue my exploration of qi through the work of Wang Xiaobo 王小波 (1952-1997). Often, contemporary writers lament the death of fiction’s popularity when they find that their readership dwindles, but Wang Xiaobo celebrated the exclusiveness of his intended readership in his writing. His pursuit of aesthetic values in fiction, his love for the lyrical force of literary language, and his ultimate preference for fantasy in fiction align him with the writers of qi I discussed in previous chapters. His major contribution to the tradition of elaborating literary qi in fiction lies in his undaunted stance against boundaries external to literary values. He also openly invites his small readership to forge a sense of qi along with him in his works of fantasy. In this chapter I discuss his literary thinking, his critical reception among both common readers and mainstream literary critics, his intratextual practices, and his legacy for the future of Chinese fiction. Two of his major works are analyzed for this purpose:

*Tales of the Tang People* 唐人故事 (*Tangren gushi*, 1989) and *The Bronze Age* 青銅時代 (*Qingtong shidai*, 1997), written and published respectively in the late 1980s and late 1990s.

Wang Xiaobo: Literary Critics’ Gaze and Common Readers’ Reception
According to Ai Xiaoming 艾曉明 who is considered the most authoritative critic in mainland China regarding Wang Xiaobo’s works, Wang Xiaobo was ahead of his time.\(^1\) His posthumous popularity among Chinese readers seems to be good evidence for the truth of such a statement. Born in 1952 to an intellectual family, Wang Xiaobo witnessed many major political movements in his early youth in mainland China, and his writings are flavored with his memory of the Cultural Revolution. He began to write fiction in the early 1980s, but he did not receive plaudits from literary critics until 1992, when the first recognition of his literary merit came from Taiwan in the form of a prize given to *The Golden Age*. Before that he published his first collection of short stories in 1989 at his own cost in mainland China, but received little immediate praise.\(^2\) Indeed, he was better known in mainland China as an essayist, even though he would rather people appreciated his talents as a fiction writer.\(^3\) He never gave up his efforts to write fiction, and even resigned from his teaching position at Renmin University in 1992 to pursue writing full-time. In 1997 he wrote to Zhu Wei 朱偉, general editor of *Sanlian Life Weekly* 三聯生活周刊, which published most of Wang Xiaobo’s essays, and indicated his

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1. Ai Xiaoming, “Shijizhijiao de wenxue xinling” (“A Literary Mind at the Turn of the Century”) in *Wang Xiaobo shinianji* (The Tenth Anniversary of Wang Xiaobo’s Death, ed. Li Yinhe [Nanjing: Jiangsu meishu chubanshe, 2007]), 298. Ai Xiaoming is a one of the earliest and maybe the most immediate critic of Wang Xiaobo’s fiction works. She was also trusted by Li Yinhe, Wang’s widow, to edit the unfinished manuscript left at the time of Wang Xiaobo’s untimely death. In the essay she stresses that Wang’s writing is different from whatever writings have come before in Chinese fiction, and that his childlike love of fun, his humorous irony, and his fantastic imagination go far beyond the literature of his time.

2. The collection was entitled by its then editors *Tangren michuan gushi* (The Mysterious Tales of the Tang People) and published by Shandong wenyi chubanseh in Jinan. Both Wang Xiaobo and his wife Li Yinhe felt unhappy about the revised title but had to compromise for commercial reasons. Later, when the five stories were incorporated into his posthumous publications, the original title *Tangren gushi* (Tales of the Tang People) was restored.

3. Wang Xiaobo is barely mentioned in any comprehensive “history” of contemporary Chinese literature, except for *A History of Contemporary Literature* written by Hong Zicheng, the English version of which was published by Leiden in Boston in 2007, in which he is mainly credited as an essayist with a straightforwardness in his language style and a sharp sense of social criticism. According to Li Yinhe, however, Wang Xiaobo was more annoyed than pleased by his fame in essay-writing. In fact, Wang Xiaobo himself stated explicitly in his preface to his essay collection *The Pleasure of Thinking* (siwei de lequ) published in 1995 that “[m]y major occupation is fiction writing, and sometimes in order to state my attitudes of the worldly affairs, I would also write a few essays.” (我以寫小說為主業，但有時也寫些雜文，來表明自己對世事的態度), as seen in 王小波全集第一卷 *The Complete Anthology of Wang Xiaobo*, vol. 1 (Kunming: Yunnan People Press, 2006) 1.
inclination to stop writing essays completely in order to give more time to writing fiction. It seems that in writing fiction, he writes against his contemporary world’s expectations of him.

Wang Xiaobo’s “Age Trilogy,”--*The Golden Age* 黃金時代 (*Huangjin shidai*), *The Silver Age* 白銀時代 (*Baiyin shidai*), and *The Bronze Age* 青銅時代 (*Qingtong shidai*)--reveals much about his fictional aesthetics. It was his last literary project working with his editor Ai Xiaoming, who suggested the use of the concept of “ages”. Ai Xiaoming believed that the titles could metaphorically remind the reader of human perceptions and ambitions in each titular age of Greek mythology. In addition, the three volumes of the “Age Trilogy” have their own particular focus on periods of time. *The Golden Age* collects five stories about “current life” that bear echoes of the Cultural Revolution; *The Silver Age* projects the writer’s reflections on current life upon a canvas that features imagined future worlds across three stories; and *The Bronze Age* is composed of three stories originally adapted from Tang tales of marvels.

Wang Xiaobo’s fiction about contemporary life has attracted the most critical attention in his canon since this life echoes the Cultural Revolution. The stories collected in *The Golden Age* are the critics’ favourites. These stories won him literary awards in his life, and two of them are also among his only fictional works ever translated into English. 

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5 Ai Xiaoming, “Notes About *The Iron Age* and Other Fiction Manuscripts Left by Wang Xiaobo” in Han Yuanhong, ed., *Wang Xiaobo yanjiu ziliao*, 455. Ai’s article was written in 1998, and she states that “Wang Xiaobo entitles his own fiction series with such a mythical reference,” yet, in my interview with Li Yinhe, Li says that it was the editor’s idea instead of Wang’s own authorial wish. Wang, however, did not object to it, according to Li Yinhe. The “Age” titles seem more like a postscript to the fiction works collected in them. For example, two stories in *The Bronze Age* were first finished in 1993 and Wang Xiaobo at that time put them and another story later collected in *The Golden Age* together and entitled the grouping *The Trilogy of Doubts* (*huaiyi sanbuqu* 懊疑三部曲). In 2002, it was finally published by Wenhua yishu chubanshe (Culture and Arts Publishing House) in Beijing with the purpose of “compensate[ing] Xiaobo’s lost wish in early years” (*對小波早年心願的一個補償*) (*Huaiyi sanbuqu*, “Preface by Li Yinhe” 1).

6 *The Golden Age* won the Literature Award of *United Daily News* (Taiwan) in 1993; and *Future World* won the Literature Award of *United Daily News* (Taiwan) in 1995. *2015, The Golden Age* (novella), and *East Palace, West
most critics pay a great deal of attention to the political, social, and cultural contexts of Chinese literature in their studies. In this vein, many critics respond to Wang Xiaobo’s stories in *The Golden Age* for their seemingly realistic depiction of the decade of the Cultural Revolution, and these critics are inclined to elaborate on the political and cultural meanings they perceive in these texts more than the aesthetic or literary qualities. In fact, nearly every one of the essays in the first significant volume of criticism on Wang Xiaobo’s works is a response to these stories.\(^7\)

These first critics in emphasizing the extrinsic value of Wang Xiaobo’s fiction set the tone for subsequent criticism. In his 2005 book, Lin Qingxin devotes a whole chapter to Wang Xiaobo’s “The Age Trilogy,” which he calls “The Time Trilogy” in English.\(^8\) He interprets *The Golden Age* as a literary effort with the aim of “sexing Chinese history”;\(^9\) *The Silver Age* as a literary response to “living in totalitarian terror”;\(^10\) and *The Bronze Age* as an allegorical exploration of mass memory and amnesia in the wake of the most traumatic event in modern China, the Cultural Revolution.\(^11\) In 2007, Huang Yibing’s study of contemporary Chinese literature also lists Wang Xiaobo as an indispensable subject.\(^12\) His focus, similar to that of Lin Qingxin, is mainly on Wang’s fiction as a mode of “writing against the gravity of history,”\(^13\) and therefore most of the time he discusses how Wang Xiaobo awakens from “a modern arcadia,

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\(^8\) Lin Qingxin, *Brushing History Against the Grain: Reading the Chinese New Historical Fiction (1986-1999)* (Hong Kong: HK UP, 2005).

\(^9\) Lin Qingxin 176.

\(^10\) Lin Qingxin 182.

\(^11\) Lin Qingxin 186-206.

\(^12\) Huang Yibing, *Contemporary Chinese Literature: From the Cultural Revolution to the Future* (NY: Palgrave/ Macmillan, 2007).

\(^13\) Huang Yibing 137.
and into History."\textsuperscript{14} Huang also argues that by describing “the melancholy of being”\textsuperscript{15} and “Eros perverted,”\textsuperscript{16} Wang Xiaobo in fact presents a dystopian world to his reader.\textsuperscript{17}

Few critics attend to Wang Xiaobo’s literary technique. In 2009, however, Wendy Larson noticed Wang’s literary contribution to fiction, perceiving it “in his language, sense of time, and the relationship between action and understanding.”\textsuperscript{18} She claimed that via “dislocation and irony”\textsuperscript{19} in the narrative voice, his work reduces its political background to nothing but a “dull white noise.”\textsuperscript{20} Unfortunately Larson only focuses on *The Golden Age*, which she refers to as *The Golden Years* in English, and like the above-mentioned critics, she does not dwell on its literary values for very long, either.

In short, the social critiques implied in Wang Xiaobo’s fiction have been explored by many critics. His resistance to authoritarianism, his refusal to cooperate with totalitarianism, and his rebukes of conventionalism in his works have been identified by these critics. The critics also claim that these social critiques are expressed through the following literary strategies: he selects characters as protagonists in his narratives that are not accepted as “heroes” in mainstream writing; he manifests a disillusioned attitude toward the Cultural Revolution and the cultural ferment of the 1980s; and his stories have a dystopian quality, often presenting literary carnivals that function to dissolve any possibility of authority. Even sexual politics, which are used by some contemporary writers to voice resistance to conventionalism and totalitarianism, acquires a layer of self-irony and self-dissolution in his fiction.

\textsuperscript{14} Huang Yibing 141.
\textsuperscript{15} Huang Yibing 147.
\textsuperscript{16} Huang Yibing 154.
\textsuperscript{17} Huang Yibing 165.
\textsuperscript{19} Larson 138.
\textsuperscript{20} Larson 152.
With the cultural, political, and historical meanings of Wang Xiaobo’s work explored so thoroughly by critics, the literary questions posed by his writing remain to be answered. For example, what is Wang Xiaobo’s concept of “good fiction”? What is Wang Xiaobo’s definition of the function of fiction? Where is Wang Xiaobo’s place in the great tradition of Chinese fiction? What is “new” in Wang Xiaobo’s fiction that could transform fiction writing in his time and possibly in the future? If he opposes totalitarianism and conventionalism, with what does he replace them? My study finds answers to all these questions in his pursuit of qi. Wang Xiaobo’s pursuit of qi in fiction is the most thorough, absorbing, and successful among Chinese writers of the 1980s and 1990s. In the following sections I read his literary essays for a clue to his self-defined mission in writing fiction, and then I read his Tales of the Tang People and The Bronze Age to display the intertextual and intergeneric relations with Tang tales used in his own writings, as well as his own literary development between the two books.

**Writing Fiction to Communicate: Wang Xiaobo’s Self-Definition**

Wang Xiaobo seems to be aware of the danger of being misinterpreted, so he clearly expresses his views about fiction in his literary essays. Most of his essays were first published as columns in weekly journals and daily papers, and then collected in two collections, The Pleasure of Thinking (思維的樂趣 Siwei de lequ, 1996) and My Spiritual Home (我的精神家園 Wode jingshen jiayuan, 1997). In these essays he clearly defines his mission in writing fiction. As with his predecessors in pre-modern and modern times, Wang Xiaobo is sensitive to the marginal status of fiction writing in the long history of Chinese literature. In response he takes a firm stand for fiction, considering it a product of human imagination that can fight against despair in the everyday world. In his essay “Life and Fiction” (生活和小說 Shenghuo he...
xiaoshuo), he defines the essence of fiction as a form that, harnessing falsehood and fabrication, follows whatever path one pleases. In other words, for Wang Xiaobo, the essence of fiction is that it provides the writer and the reader the chance to develop a world that can extend, reverse, or negate the world external to them. Above all, compared to the external world that fixes, confines, and conditions the human being, the world in Wang Xiaobo’s concept of fiction can be limitless and thus emancipatory. He therefore believes that the standard for good fiction should be aesthetic rather than political, although fiction can still have political effects. He sees great potential in fiction for transforming factual life. In fiction he seeks a channel that can subvert the status quo political agenda and that leads to a life of fantasy that surpasses quotidian life.

Wang Xiaobo also delineates in his essays what he intends to write in his fiction and how he should write it. He is strongly against politicizing fiction writing or emphasizing the didactic mode of fiction; instead, he selects the inner world as the proper subject for his fiction. In “The VR Skin Suit by Mr. Gates,” he states that it is “perception in the human inner mind” that should be written in fiction. He distinguishes fiction displaying “perception in the human inner mind” from what he calls “claustrophobic fiction.” The latter, according to Wang Xiaobo, focuses on personal experiences in ways reminiscent of cages and nightmares and factually records these feelings with a touch of despair. Wang Xiaobo also believes that in order to present “perception in the human inner mind,” the best way is to harness the “vigorous power of imagination” (澎湃的想像力 pengpai de xiangxiangli): only then can a writer plunge into the “limitless field” of literature in order to break the cages and dispel the nightmares.

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Wang Xiaobo thus endows fiction with the transgressive power of fantasy, thereby revealing a paradoxical potentiality for fiction. On one hand, this stance echoes and confirms his prioritizing of the imagination and aesthetics in fiction over the slavish mimesis of immediate impressions of reality; but on the other hand, it ironically validates what he earlier tried to deny for fiction writing: a political and social agenda. This is because with the fulfilment of his first goal (valorizing the imagination), his fiction will break the boundaries of politics and lead readers to a new, hopeful, and possibly eternal reality in their inner minds. In other words, by annulling the political agenda prescribed by the Party dictates for literature, he revitalizes literary fantasy’s political function as a means to resist a nightmarish reality and even to dissolve it through the literary imagination. Many of his contemporaries, as discussed in previous chapters, also work toward such ends; yet it is Wang Xiaobo who declares it most loudly and clearly, in his essays as well as in his fictional works. What he achieves with this stance in his fiction is a literary qi that is even more powerful than that in the Tang tales of marvels.

In his literary essays, Wang Xiaobo also considers carefully how he should achieve the quality of qi in his fiction as he “constructs a world out of pure imagination” to share with his intended readers “of equal intelligence.” He intends for his fiction to discover, describe, and enact something he perceives in life that is appealing to human minds, and for lack of a better word, he calls it tentatively yunlu or “the rhythm of the verse.” Yunlu is a literary feature of classical poetry, and Wang Xiaobo joins a great tradition of Chinese fiction in pursuing qi by linking his fiction to poetic force. He explores the poetic aspect of modern standard Chinese language in representing yunlu. Unlike Ah Cheng, who pays homage to pre-modern vernacular

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Chinese, or Mo Yan, who seeks meaning beyond or even subversive of the Maoist version of the Chinese language, Wang Xiaobo uses a modern literary Chinese that is proper for writing poetry and good fiction. In Wang Xiaobo’s estimation, this language is cultivated in works by modern Chinese poets/translators such as Zha Liangzheng 查良錚 (aka Mu Dan 穆旦) and Wang Daoqian 汪道乾. Wang Xiaobo considers Zha and Wang his exemplars in mastering language, and in turn he boldly experiments with language in his own fiction.

Wang Xiaobo’s literary experiments in fiction writing are more than experiments with modern literary Chinese, though. Indeed, he has more literary fantasies to share with his readers. Though as a writer he disclaims any relation with his texts once the texts are published, he leaves clues in his essays as to how to decode his literary puzzles. He declares that his fiction has its own targeted readership. Hence his texts are written and read as intertexts from the moment they are out of his hands and enter the reader’s world. As he tells Huang Jiwei, in his fiction he produces something that is as strange as history: his fiction uses history as a background, it is of a certain length, and it bears a clear individual mark. To achieve such literary goals, he adopts literary techniques so as to write about the solemn with lightness, as well as the light with solemnity 舉輕若重，舉重若輕. In other words, he writes in a diametric reversal of normal styles, and the results of these literary efforts become part of Wang Xiaobo’s singular form of qi.

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26 See Wang Xiaobo, “My Masters” (我的師承, wo de shicheng), a preface he writes for The Bronze Age, collected in The Complete Works, vol. 3, 1-4. And also, in his essay “Life-long Learning of Arts” (用一生來學習藝術, yong yisheng lai xue yi shu), in The Complete Works, vol. 2, 56-57, Wang Xiaobo emphasizes that “we have already acquired a literary language that is regular in its form and smooth in its tone, with which we could write the best poetry and the best fiction. 我們已經有了一種字正腔圓的文學語言，用它可以寫最好的詩和最好的小說”.

27 In Wang Xiaobo’s own words, “I have my own readers for my own fiction. 本人的作品有自己的讀者群” (The Complete Works, vol 2, 64).

In this section I read Wang Xiaobo’s *Tales of the Tang People* and *The Bronze Age* comparatively in order to trace the origin, development, and ripening of his mode of *qi*. The five tales collected in *Tales of the Tang People* are Wang Xiaobo’s first published fictional works, and the three novellas in *The Bronze Age* are among his last literary projects. Between these two works, his fiction matures from imitative pastiche to transformative experimentation. However, the two works also share something else. The texts in these two groups are not mere texts; they are both intratexts in Wang Xiaobo’s corpus and intertexts for linking Wang Xiaobo and the Tang literati who wrote Tang tales.

The five tales of *Tales of the Tang People* were completed by Wang Xiaobo during his short stay in the United States in the 1980s. Physically removed from his home country and mentally more engaged by the study of classical Chinese, he begins his bold experiments with modern literary Chinese in these texts. All five stories in *Tales of the Tang People* are modern adaptations from Tang tales of marvels. The first three are adapted from well-known Tang tales that have strong female characters. “No. 1-A Lixin Street and Kunlun Slave” (立新街甲一號與昆侖奴 *Lixinjie jia-yi hao he kunlun nu*) is textually adapted from “Kunlun Slave” written by Pei Xing; “Red Thread Steals the Casket” (紅綫盜盒 *Hongxian daohe*) is adapted from “Red Thread” written by Yuan Jiao; and “Red Whisk Elopes at Night” (紅拂夜奔 *Hongfu yeben*) is adapted from “The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest” by Du Guangting. The other two stories in *Tales of the Tang People* are also textually adapted from Tang tales. “The Night Journey” (夜行記 *Yexing ji*) is adapted from the Tang tale “The Monk Knight-Errant” (僧俠 *Seng xia*); and “A Lover of Uncle” (舅舅情人 *Jiujiu qingren*) is adapted from the Tang tale “General Pan”.}

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29 The three Tang tales were previously discussed in chapter II in this dissertation.
將軍（Pan Jiangjun）。These last two Tang tales are less known to common readers than the first three.

In the 1990s, Wang Xiaobo continued his project of re-writing Tang tales. Out of the five stories in *Tales of the Tang People*, he selected the story of Red Whisk and elaborated, transformed, and extended it into a more complicated novella. He also adapted another famous Tang tale of marvels “A Biography of Peerless” 無雙傳 (*Wushuang zhuan*) by Xue Diao 薛調 (829-872) and transformed it into a complicated novella, *Looking for Peerless* 尋找無雙 (*xunzhao wushuang*). He had planned to publish these two novellas together with a modern story in his *Trilogy of Doubts* 懷疑三部曲 (*Huaiyi sanqu*). When that plan failed, he replaced the novella with a modern background in *Trilogy of Doubts* with *The Temple of Longevity* 萬壽寺 (*Wanshou si*), a novella version of “Red Thread Steals the Casket,” again using both the famous Tang tale and his own previous adaptation of the same Tang text in *Tales of the Tang People* as its source texts. The collection of these three novellas was finally accepted by a publisher as *The Bronze Age* not long before his death.

A series of questions arise if we take the two sets of texts by Wang Xiaobo and study them in relation to their Tang source texts. Why did Wang Xiaobo initially select these Tang tales to adapt early in the 1980s, especially the three tales he readadapted later? What are the common elements in those tales that influenced Wang Xiaobo? Why, almost a decade later, did he turn back to his own adapted texts to re-write them? What are the differences between his

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30 TPGJ 4001-05.
two sets of texts? If, as some critics argue, Wang Xiaobo’s imaginative fiction reaches its zenith in *The Bronze Age*, then what criteria support that judgment?\(^{31}\)

In addition to the textual and intertextual perspectives elicited by *Tales of the Tang People* and *The Bronze Age*, there is one more noteworthy aspect of Wang Xiaobo’s writing in these two books: in both he writes with an awareness of his communication with readers through the medium of the texts. Bonnie S. McDougall asserts that contemporary Chinese literature caters to a certain group of educated readers,\(^ {32}\) and this is to some extent true of Wang Xiaobo’s fiction. As stated in his essays, Wang Xiaobo aimed to write for readers who ideally share with him cultural and intellectual codes. My analysis below of Wang Xiaobo’s intertextual and intratextual dynamics in *Tales of the Tang People* and *The Bronze Age* will reveal how he achieves *qi* by creating fantasy out of history, opening up his texts to his readers, and crossing the textual barriers that separate writer from reader. Although my selection of texts is limited, they serve to reveal the great literary and aesthetic depths within them.\(^ {33}\)

*Tales of the Tang People* 唐人故事 (*Tangren gushi*)

Among the five stories in *Tales of the Tang People*, the first three—“No. 1-A Lixin Street and Kunlun Slave,” “Red Thread Steals the Casket,” and “Red Whisk Elopes at Night”—share several aesthetic and literary features, which later influence Wang Xiaobo’s *The Bronze Age*. The same narrator/character, Wang Er 王二 (Wang Number Two), appears in all three

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31 As noted by Prof. Allan Barr in regards to my paper on Wang Xiaobo’s early stories, the longer and later work of fiction by Wang Xiaobo is “more mature, accomplished and successful” (quoted here with permission from Prof. Barr in his email to me on June 22, 2010).


33 As I said before, the political and historical implications of Wang Xiaobo’s texts have been thoroughly discussed by many critics. To avoid repetition, I will not quote their points again. Instead, my discussion will engage more with literary and aesthetic topics.
stories. Wang Er the name also indicates a possibility that implicitly he could be an alter ego of Wang Xiaobo the writer since Wang Xiaobo and Wang Er share the same family name and Wang Xiaobo in fact is the second son in his own family. However, the Tang source texts haunt Wang Xiaobo’s texts in diverse ways. In terms of language, Wang Xiaobo’s self-consciousness as a reader/writer informs his various efforts to imitate, incorporate, and even parody the classical literary Chinese that is used in Tang tales and other traditional texts. Moreover, as I mentioned in Chapter II, the three Tang tales are thematically connected and known to readers as a group from the Tang dynasty on. By comparison, the other two stories by Wang Xiaobo, “The Night Journey” and “A Lover of Uncle,” interesting as they are, most resemble their Tang source texts in producing a mood of otherworldliness. The source texts for these latter two tales are not so familiar to modern readers. In terms of narrative style, voice, and linguistic experimentation, however, these two stories differ from the first three stories by being more conventional than original. In the last two stories, Wang Xiaobo’s self-reflectivity in the first-person narrative voice of Wang Er disappears; instead, a third-person omniscient voice takes over each narrative. The sense of fantasy therein is mainly produced by the strangeness of the plots which, echoing Tang source texts, still very much rely upon representing supernatural facts as if they were real.\(^{34}\) All in all, these texts are less relevant in illustrating Wang Xiaobo’s modern literary quality of qi as they do not rely on transgressing boundaries of language or narrative conventions. Hence my discussion here will be mainly devoted to the first three stories.

\(^{34}\) Indeed, the Tang source texts for these two stories are not among the the best of the existent Tang tales of marvels, mainly because they are more historical than fictional in terms of their authors’ intentions, more flat than lyrical in their descriptions of details, and, in terms of reader’s response, they leave great doubts about the fantasy they create.
“No. 1-A Lixin Street and Kunlun Slave”

The Tang tale “Kunlun Slave” relates a romance that breaks social boundaries between an incompetent scholar and a gifted maid through the help of a slave who comes from a society alien to Tang society. By comparison, Wang Xiaobo’s adapted tale “No. 1-A Lixin Street and Kunlun Slave” is a pastiche of such a romance. In Wang Xiaobo’s text, the contemporary version of a romance is both created and crushed by the everyday world. Wang Xiaobo deploys what he reads in the Tang text as a shadow tale that has been read and re-used by the protagonist Wang Er in order to represent Wang Er’s perceptions of his own situation. The Tang text and its characters cross several boundaries to arrive in Wang Xiaobo’s text: the limits of time that separate the Tang dynasty and Wang Er’s “present”; the limits of vision that separate the worlds of Wang Er’s eyes and of his mind; and the limits of communication that separate what characters say and what they feel. The literary quality of qi emerges through Wang Er’s narration, which successfully overcomes these differences.

“No. 1-A Lixin Street and Kunlun Slave” displays in its very title that it contains a double plot: it is a story about what happens in contemporary times, as well as a story about a Tang slave. The two plots are intertwined by Wang Er’s first-person narration. The contemporary protagonists are Wang Er and Xiao Hu.35 Both were orphaned in their early years. Living under the same roof in one shabby apartment due to some bureaucratic callousness, both have the same dream: to fall in love with their ideal man/woman and move out of the squalid apartment. Wang Er imagines his life as it would be in the Tang dynasty, weaving his story of a

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35 Wang Er 王二, literally mean Wang Number Two. Character/Narrator Wang Er appears repeatedly in Wang Xiaobo’s fiction. He Huaihong 何懷宏 has written an article discussing the character of Wang Er in which he lists all his identities and functions in Wang Xiaobo’s fiction. See He Huaihong, “A Person Out of Place: The Protagonist in Wang Xiaobo’s Fiction” (不合時宜的人: 王小波小說中的主人公), written in 1998 and collected in Wang Xiaobo yanjiuziliao, vol. 2, 476-501. Xiao Hu 小胡, is a special Chinese way to address the girl whose last name is 胡. And 胡, a homonym character that is used as a family name, and also means nonsense as in 胡說, probably implies an ironic pun: literally it is Hu the Younger One; potentially it may suggest “Petty Nonsense.”
Wang Er of the Tang dynasty and a Kunlun slave; and Xiao Hu plays the role of a commentator on his vision until she dispels his fantasy by marrying herself to him in real life. The contemporary strand of the plot ends in a poignant but seemingly optimistic compromise with reality: on the one hand, Wang Er is aware that his marriage with Xiao Hu would end his fantasy; on the other hand, he feels that he does enjoy his relationship with Xiao Hu. While it is not love that leads to their marriage, the marriage nevertheless delivers Xiao Hu and Wang Er from their everyday world, epitomized by their shabby apartment in real life.

At least three levels of narrative can be discerned in “No. 1-A Lixin Street and Kunlun Slave” for a reader who shares Wang Xiaobo’s knowledge of the Tang tale of marvels “Kunlun Slave”: the highest level is Wang Xiaobo’s frame narrative in which Wang Er appears as a character; the next level is the version of the “Kunlun Slave” story told by Wang Er himself in which he appears as a character; and the final level is the original Tang dynasty source text of “Kunlun Slave”, which informs the other two levels of narrative. The following is a simple chart of comparisons and contrasts between the Tang text and the two levels of Wang Xiaobo’s text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>“Kunlun Slave” (source text by Pei Xing)</th>
<th>“Kunlun Slave” (core story imagined by narrator/character Wang Er) in “No. 1-A Lixin Street and Kunlun Slave”</th>
<th>Frame Narrative of “No. 1-A Lixin Street and Kunlun Slave”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kunlun Slave</td>
<td>Kunlun Slave</td>
<td>Wang Er</td>
<td>Wang Er</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Master Cui</td>
<td>Hong Xiao (Ms. Red Scarf)</td>
<td>Dancing Maids</td>
<td>Xiao Hu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Chinese Dancing Maid</td>
<td>Ideal love/lover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General’s Dog</td>
<td>General’s Servants</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Possible Dating Partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dog (cooked by Wang Er)</td>
<td>Unit Chief/Leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Hong Xiao gestures to Cui</td>
<td>2. Kunlun Slave recalls his freedom in childhood</td>
<td>2. Wang Er fails in his dream career due to his color blindness while Xiao Hu becomes an visual artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Kunlun Slave offers to help solve the puzzle</td>
<td>3. Kunlun slave magically brings dancing maids to Wang Er</td>
<td>3. Xiao Hu and Wang Er date different people, introduce friends to each other, and provide opinions on dating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Kunlun Slave visits the General’s Household secretly</td>
<td>4. One dancing maid admires freedom in Wang Er’s home</td>
<td>4. Wang Er and Xiao Hu have to marry if they want to leave the shabby apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Kunlun Slave slays the dog</td>
<td>5. Wang Er falls in love with a typical dream girl</td>
<td>5. Xiao Hu proposes a marriage of convenience to Wang Er, and Wang Er accepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Kunlun Slave brings Cui to Hong Xiao</td>
<td>6. With help of Kunlun slave, Wang Er marries the girl.</td>
<td>6. Xiao Hu and Wang Er marry each other and find a way out of the shabby apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Hong Xiao affirms her love for Cui and initiates elopement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Kunlun Slave delivers the young couple out of General’s Household</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Discovery by the General’s servants, Futile Efforts to Catch Kunlun Slave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Endings of all characters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style of Language</td>
<td>Classical Literary Chinese mixed with Classical Chinese poetry</td>
<td>Classical Vernacular Chinese in imitation of Ming vernacular xiaoshuo Modern Standard Chinese with mock epic style</td>
<td>Modern vernacular Chinese Colloquial Chinese with Maoist style idioms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 3. Comparison of “Kunlun Slave” and “No.1-A Lixin Street and Kunlun Slave”
As shown in Fig. 3, Wang Xiaobo inserts the Tang tale of “Kunlun Slave” into his short story through Wang Er, who interprets it, transforms it, and finally creates his story out of its shadow. As a result, in the eye of a knowing reader, the different layers of the source text, Wang Xiaobo’s text, and the “fictional text” by Wang Er in his fantasy, while distinctive from one another in the narrative, also unfold simultaneously in the reader’s reading. The possible meanings that a reader might pick up and interpret from the three levels of texts roam freely across the limits that Wang Xiaobo thus transgresses via his intertextual experiments. The reader’s comprehension of the Tang tales is transformed by reading Wang Xiaobo’s narrative, just as Wang Er’s imagining of his own tale with Kunlun slave is transformed by Xiao Hu’s intrusion into his life. At the core of the sense of literary qi achieved in this text is Wang Xiaobo’s bold experimentation taking place between the original Tang text he reads and the new text he presents to his readers.

In the Tang text of “Kunlun Slave,” even though the Kunlun slave through his bold actions outshines the scholar Cui in the romance narrative, the scholar remains essential to the narrative as the lover. Wang Er, as the narrator in Wang Xiaobo’s text of a modified version of the “Kunlun Slave”, replaces the young scholar with a fantasy version of himself as a common youth, poor and warm-hearted, living a hard life during winter in the Tang dynasty. The Kunlun slave in Wang Er’s text still plays an instrumental role in Wang Er’s imagined romance. Red Silk, the gifted maid in the Tang text, however, is completely removed from Wang Er’s imagined Tang adventures. In her place, a series of dancing girls parade by in his fantasy, and keeping true to the conventions of the Tang text that he has adapted, he deploys a stereotype of a talented but fragile lady as his ideal love:
It is a Chinese girl. She sits upright on the mat, and keeps her eyelids half closed from the beginning to the end. She wears dresses in soft white silk, and her face is as pale as from anaemia. Extremely fine are her features: her mouth is extremely tiny, her nose extremely straight, and her eyebrows extremely light. Also extremely fine are her form and shape: shoulders are extremely sloping, waist extremely slim, fingers extremely slender, and feet extremely small. Sitting there for a long while, she only makes a request as soft as the mosquito’s flitting and asks for a sip of tea. 這位中國少女，在席上坐得筆直，從始至終，眼簾低垂。她穿著白紗裙的衣裙，臉色蒼白有如貧血，面目極其娟秀，嘴極其小，鼻極其直，眉極其細，身材也極其苗條，肩極其削，腰極其細，手指極其細長，腳極其小。坐了許久，才發出如蚊鳴的細聲，請求一口茶。36

To a naive reader, this is nothing but a portrait of a dainty and elegant lady. To a reader who shares Wang Xiaobo’s familiarity with traditional Chinese literature, however, this portrait of a young Chinese lady produces different meanings. The intertextual references to the pre-modern cliché of “scholar and beauty” (caizi jiaren) romances saturate the portrait, and yet Wang Er’s fantasy implies a discrepancy between the social role of a “dancing girl” in the Tang dynasty and the portrait of a woman he fancies. The fact that this favourite dancing girl in Wang Er’s imagination is more like an aristocratic lady of letters—the paragon of which is Lin Daiyu 林黛玉 (who is the female protagonist in the Qing vernacular novel, A Dream of Red Mansions 紅樓夢 [Honglou meng]), provides a possibility for an ironic reading of this short paragraph.

Alongside Wang Er’s fantasy world of the Tang dynasty, his contemporary world as portrayed by Wang Xiaobo is dominated by Xiao Hu, a lively young lady he has known ever since childhood. Ironically, in contrast to Wang Er’s fantasy of a Tang lady, Xiao Hu actually resembles Red Silk in the Tang source text, and outshines Wang Er in their own modern romance. She takes on his ideal occupation, rises to a rank higher than his, and continually breaks into his reclusive daily life. In short, Xiao Hu is more an imposing intruder than a meek soul mate. Even Xiao Hu’s own fantasy resembles that of Red Silk in Pei Xing’s Tang text: Red Silk waits for a young member of the literati to deliver her from the General’s household; similarly, Xiao Hu yearns for a decent young man to ask for her hand so that she can leave the shabby apartment. Xiao Hu finds a substitute for her “decent young man” in the narrator Wang Er and by a twist of fate she achieves her departure from the squalid place. Such an ending appears as a fantasy from twelve hundred years ago finally reaching its conclusion in the modern world, but the status of Wang Er as an unreliable narrator casts such a conclusion into doubt. The intertextual relations between the female characters depicted in Wang Xiaobo’s story delineate a complicated web of transgressions of time and space, bringing entirely new perspectives on the squalid reality inhabited by Wang Er and Xiao Hu.

The Tang tale of “Kunlun Slave” is well known in China, so the irony and transgressive power of qi in Wang Xiaobo’s text can hardly escape notice by Chinese readers. The romantic female figure in the Tang text is faithfully translated into Xiao Hu but the male one encounters a distorted contemporary adaptation in the figure of Wang Er, who is also the narrator of his own story. The text’s irony is also poignant in that it reveals a sad aspect of contemporary times: even with such an emotional legacy inherited in Xiao Hu’s modern version of romance, Xiao Hu finds herself deprived of resources and unable to complete her romance in its fullest sense. For
example, Red Silk in the Tang source text designs a sign language of her own to express her desire, and later she resorts to lyrical poetry to express her passion. By contrast, the Xiao Hu in the contemporary time of Wang Er’s narrative can only tease Wang Er via vulgar conversation and make her proposal as dry as a business contract.\(^{37}\) Even at her most lyrical moment, Xiao Hu has to copy the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, a play alien to her native culture both geographically and historically. Maybe Xiao Hu means to create a pastiche of the balcony scene, but to the reader it appears as parody. A strong sense of absurdity and humour overwhelms the romantic sentiments between the young couple due to the triple distantiation of the scene’s quotations: the poetic lines are voiced in imitation of the Chinese translation by Zhu Shenghao 朱生豪 (1912-1944), who translated the modern English version of Shakespeare’s famous lines into Chinese in the 1930s:

> At midnight she would stand at my door and give a long sigh:

> “Alas, Wang Er, Wang Er, why are you Wang Er?”

> Then I would answer: “So Wang Er would, were he not Wang Er call’d, go without that title.” So we play Romeo and Juliet and talk as lovers on the balcony.

半夜三更她會站在門口長嘆一聲:

> “啊, 王二, 王二, 為什麼你是王二?”

> 我就說: “聽了你的話, 我從此不叫王二。”混充羅密歐與朱麗葉, 在陽臺說情話哩。\(^{38}\)

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\(^{37}\) Indeed, Xiao Hu’s conversation with Wang Er is delivered in Chinese business language, and their agreement to marry each other is reached and written down in point form, as if it were a business contract. See *The Complete Work*, vol. 8, 134.

\(^{38}\) Wang Xiaobo, *The Complete Works*, vol. 8, 135. Zhu Shenghao’s translation of Shakespeare might be the most popular since 1930s. His Chinese, however, is so steeped in the literariness of classical Chinese and seasoned with a touch of modern vernacular Chinese, that it is more accurate in presenting the elegant and sublime aspect of
Sharp incongruities exist in the text between the youthful aristocratic Italian couple consumed by passion and the common Chinese couple feigning a love affair in order to gain ownership of a shabby apartment, between the romantic association with the original names of “Romeo and Juliet” and the familiarity and informality implicit in Wang Er and Xiao Hu, and between the original source and the adapted parody. The incongruities inspire the knowing reader to read the text in a sophisticated and complex manner. However, considering that Wang Er is the narrator and the text is Wang Er’s perceptions of the “facts,” the reader may also take a step back and ask: is this fact or fantasy? Is this a deconstruction of the classical romance, or a construction of a modern romance out of everyday life? Is this, after all, a way to signal the death of the symbolic power of beautiful words, or a unique modern confirmation that this power is not dead but is merely transformed in order to preserve its essence in a new context? Thus inspiring his reader with the tantalizing possibility of finding a revitalized romantic qi through fantasy, Wang Xiaobo attains a uniquely ironic touch in his understanding of romance— an irony that teeters on the edge of actually achieving what it ironizes, although in a compromised form.

Wang Xiaobo’s experiments with the language of modern Chinese fiction are evident in this story. In this early stage of his fiction writing, his experiments involve more imitation than transformation. He uses a melange of linguistic styles in this short story, just as his Tang predecessors did with in their Tang tales of marvels. Wang Xiaobo’s text comprises classical literary prose, classical poetry, pre-modern vernacular Chinese novelistic prose, modern vernacular Chinese novelistic prose, modern colloquial Chinese from everyday conversation, and even the Maoist style of Chinese language common in the Communist government’s reports and propaganda. Wang Xiaobo arranges the contrasts and differences among these styles in such Shakespeare’s lines. Hence I did not use Shakespeare’s original words here, but instead presented the modern version in Wang Xiaobo’s text.
a natural way that the reader enjoys the journey of linguistic discovery. He alternates the classical style with the modern vernacular in order to achieve an aesthetic effect of distance that is constructed by the contrast of the past with the present, the imagined with the factual, and the vulgar with the elegant.\textsuperscript{39}

A sense of almost absurd fantasy is produced by these linguistic and stylistic contrasts running through the whole story. This sense is heightened by Wang Er’s repeated assertion, “there is no difference between ancient times and the present,” which is repeated thirteen times in the story.\textsuperscript{40} The critic Lin Qingxin interprets these assertions of similarity between different times as evincing “an intention to bridge the gap between the past and the present” that consequently conflates “a historical narrative, which is associated with facts, and a fictive narrative, which is associated with fabrication.”\textsuperscript{41} However, Lin’s reading posits the Tang text as a historical text, which is obviously not the case. Also, even if the Tang people took the Tang text as a quasi-historical narrative, Wang Xiaobo the modern reader/writer certainly would not have. Instead, the Kunlun slave story as imagined and narrated by Wang Er in Wang Xiaobo’s text is so different from the Tang version that it would be naive for a reader to take Wang Er’s assertions of similarity at face value. Wang Xiaobo makes his readers aware of the differences precisely by his narrator’s repeated assertions of there being “no difference,” and the disjuncture between the two levels of reading in the same text adds a sense of qi to his fiction generated as much by the telling of the story as the story itself.

When Wang Er tries to imagine how his Tang counterpart can feel the same as he does, the reader is aware of the fact that such a Tang dynasty only exists in Wang Er’s imagination. In other words, the reader’s reception of Wang Er’s narrative helps Wang Er create his fantasy in

\textsuperscript{39} Wang Xiaobo, \textit{The Complete Works}, vol. 8, 124.
\textsuperscript{40} Wang Xiaobo, \textit{The Complete Works}, vol. 8, 123-139.
\textsuperscript{41} Lin Qingxin 195.
words. Feelings are highly individual sentiments, and Wang Er’s forceful reassertions remind readers that the Wang Er in the Tang dynasty is nothing but a projected image of the contemporary Wang Er; and Wang Er of the Tang dynasty is allowed to exist only if the reader crosses the dividing line between subjectivities and experiences so as to travel between those temporal and psychic limitations. By replacing the pale young scholar of the Tang source text with a poor peddler (Wang Er) who makes a living selling soup, Wang Xiaobo disrupts the continuity of the Tang source text in his narration, insisting upon the differences between the “historical” and the present. By disrupting a clichéd romance, he creates space in it for his own perceptions. The literary quality of qi in “No. 1-A Lixin Street and Kunlun Slave” does not flow directly from the Tang dynasty “Kunlun Slave” story, nor is it to be found solely at “No. 1-A Lixin Street”. It is generated by the “and” of the title, the juxtapositions so distinctively constructed by Wang Xiaobo’s attention to the differences between the past and the present, emphasized by his experiments with Chinese language, revealing the ironic edge and transformative force of qi.

“Red Thread Steals the Casket”

Wang Xiaobo’s “Red Thread Steals the Casket” again makes full use of the intended reader’s knowledge of its Tang source text to achieve its modern version of qi. The frame narrative relates how the narrator Wang Er (again) reads a story about General Xue Song and his maid Red Thread. This time Wang Er is a worker at a Tofu Factory. He is interested in Chinese classical literature, and he explores historical documents—both factual and fabricated by Wang Xiaobo—to assemble and represent what might have happened in his understanding of history—an understanding that the reader perceives as more fantasy than fact. In this sense, “Red Thread
Steals the Casket” is also a story about the reading experience itself: Wang Er is a prototypical reader reading poeticism into a romance that has been lost in many different versions of texts. He acquires a sense of *qi* when he restores words to the romance, even if his real-world life remains everyday and colourless.

In “Red Thread Steals the Casket” Wang Xiaobo follows the plot of the Tang source. In both texts Red Thread helps General Xue Song when he is threatened by his military rival, and in both texts she leaves him for freedom in spite of his earnest request to keep her in bondage once the threat is resolved. The first paragraph in Wang Xiaobo’s text is also evidently written in a tone that imitates the Tang source text’s pseudo-biographical model.

Wang Xiaobo, however, passes from imitation to adaptation early on in his text. He immediately confronts his readers with surprises: first, the female protagonist Red Thread engages in a tug of war with General Xue over narrative tone, successfully changing it from sublime elegance to light playfulness. Then after eight pages of third-person narrative about events that occur in the historical Tang dynasty, a first-person narrative voice that belongs to the contemporary Wang Er comments on differences between the Tang source text and the modern text written by him. Wang Er casts himself as a critical and analytical modern reader of historical documents related to the events that he uses to write his own text. From then on, the reader/writer/narrator Wang Er keeps explaining why he writes the modern text about Red Thread and General Xue as he does. He quotes from various sources: some are actual ones, like the Tang source text; some, however, to a sophisticated reader, are evidently fabricated—for example, the so called “Chronicles of the Xue Clan” (薛氏宗譜 Xueshi zongpu) and “Confidential Documents of the Xue Clan” (薛氏密籍 Xueshi miji). Occasionally, Wang Er deliberately creates an analogy between himself and the General Xue in his narrative; and he
also applies what he perceives in his writing of history/fantasy to his actual life. In the second half of the narrative, there is less narration of action taken by the Tang protagonists than there is Wang Er’s discourse on how he discriminates between more and less reliable sources in the source material for his writing. Even though an ending similar to that in the Tang source text is finally provided at the end of Wang Er’s text, Wang Er the narrator undermines such a conclusive ending. Through his industrious research work, he finds several alternative endings, each of which seems plausible on its own. Wang Er the narrator thus virtually surpasses the limits of a “story-teller” and negotiates with his readers for the credibility of his writing.

Wang Xiaobo’s literary project to establish his own definition of qi is also realized by his exploration of modern Chinese words and expressions in “Red Thread Steals the Casket.” A good example is the scene in which he describes how an assassin attacks General Xue in his garden. The implied narrative voice portrays the situation via a contrast of moods: Xue Song serenely takes his morning saunter in his own quiet garden, but then an assassin abruptly appears as if from nowhere, disguised in black mud and exotic apparel. Once the two moods—and the two characters meet—the narrative voice infuses the narration with negative expressions. A desire to negate lurks in these sentences: expressions like “wufa 無法 have no way to,” “bingbushi 并不是 be not in fact,” and “kebushi 可不是 not possibly be” indicate that the narrative voice is struggling to render an imagined scene: the narrator deliberately pronounces his world as “not being true” even in the process of constructing it in words. His negation implies possible transgression, and yet the completion of the scene in words validates the transgression. The literary quality of qi thus again displays its power of creating something out of nothing even as it denies its own reality. For Wang Xiaobo, negative phrases convey not
merely negative results; instead, they show the existence of a world beyond the empirical one, and by negating this world in vain in the text it is displayed even more vividly for the reader.

Another example of Wang Xiaobo’s experiments with negative expressions is found in his portrayal of Red Thread’s first appearance in Wang Er’s narrative. Negative expressions again paradoxically confirm the existence of that which is denied in words. The description goes as follows:

This maid and concubine is not a beauty with delicate features and dainty make-up, not that kind of lady who goes in a phoenix-head hairstyle dotted with rose gold hairpins, neither is she dressed in silk and satin, and combing and primping herself in front of her mirror. Her hair is black and thick, yet messy, and she has not yet got up, still lying on her plank bed.

這位侍妾也非細眉細目粉雕也似的美人——頭上梳風頭髻，插紫金釵，穿絲紗衣袍，臨鏡梳妝者。此女披散著一頭烏髮，在板鋪上睡著未起. 42

In this paragraph Wang Xiaobo elevates Wang Er’s fantasy of Red Thread over the image of her that Wang Er has read in the Tang source text. The double negation structure in his Chinese sentences is what raises Wang Er’s fantasy above the version of Red Thread in the Tang source text, and Wang Er’s contemporary imagination transforms the past in words. I mentioned in Chapter II that the Red Thread of the Tang text is indeed a female gifted with non-female talents and that her identity as a talented woman transgresses Tang values. In Wang Er’s text, however, Red Thread is deprived of all the Tang male talents. Instead, she is a daughter of a tribal chief in the “savage” southern region of China. Unlike the Red Thread of the Tang source text, Wang Er’s Red Thread does not have any sincere respect or loyalty for General Xue; instead, she is

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attracted to him not because of his political ambition or literary talents (as a lady of the Tang
dynasty might have been) but because of his handsomeness and sexuality.\(^43\) Her criteria are
normal for her marginal tribe yet abnormal and transgressive according to Xue’s social values.\(^44\)
In such a fantasy, the reader is incessantly reminded by the narrative of what is not to be and
what is instead to be. As a result, the reader’s mind is trained to see beyond the empirical world
to a constructed one.

In Wang Er’s narrative, tensions emerge between competing images of the self. The
General Xue Song comes to the marginal frontier regions to subdue the primitive tribespeople
and aims to tame Red Thread into a domestic lady. However, Red Thread intends to tame Xue
with her game of love, and therefore she agrees to play the role he assigns to her on the
condition that he in turn cooperates with her in her game. At the core of the exchange and
negotiation of intentions and roles is the work of language in the conversations between the two
parties. A reading of the role-playing scenes between the two protagonists shows how Xue Song
is gradually manipulated by Red Thread and comes to accept the role she assigns to him, how
Red Thread--despite explicitly accepting Xue’s insistence on her using a pejorative moniker for
herself (\textit{nubi 奴婢}, or your bonded and humble female slave)--coaxes Xue Song into partnership
in her game.\(^45\) At the times when Xue’s sincerity in taking the game as true threatens to destroy
the fun of the game for Red Thread, she rejects her moniker and stops using the literary Chinese
language that she learns from Xue. She will instead talk in her natural, colloquial style,
sometimes vulgar yet always vital.\(^46\) Xue’s language also notably changes throughout their
conversations: his tone is stern toward Red Thread in the beginning but then self-pitying as he

\(^{43}\) Wang Xiaobo 150.
\(^{44}\) Wang Xiaobo 141.
\(^{45}\) Wang Xiaobo 141.
\(^{46}\) Wang Xiaobo 147.
deplores his loss of authority. The key change in Xue Song’s language stems from his realization that Red Thread is not what he had expected in real life and that she will only be possible in his fantasy. Following this acceptance, a switch of language styles between Xue Song and Red Thread in their role-playing occurs: Xue develops a colloquial Chinese while Red Thread sticks to the classical Chinese until the termination of their relationship and their conversation.

Wang Er the narrator also displays powers of analytical reading in his composition of the text. Like the Wang Er of Red Silk’s story, Wang Er in Red Thread’s story also works in a Tofu factory for a living, and his wife’s last name is also Hu 胡, a possible pun on the Chinese word for “nonsense”. Unlike Wang Er in Red Silk’s story, though, Wang Er, the narrator of Red Thread’s story, has minimized his own presence as a character in his text. Instead, his identity as a critical reader is maximized, adding self-reflexivity to his multiple roles as reader/writer/narrator/character in the narrative. His link to the intended reader is therein consolidated. What Wang Er presents in his text is not only his composition of Red Thread’s story, but also the process of his composition. As a narrator, Wang Er does not appear in the text until the reader is already briefed on the story’s intertextual link to Yuan Jiao’s source text, and after this point he appears in the text mainly as a self-reflexive reader of “source documents” as well as a writer who hopes to restore fantasy in words, but seldom as a character in the tale. For example, once his identity as a reader/writer is revealed, Wang Er no longer hides his writer’s hand. On the contrary, he pops up in the narrative text from time to time like an annotation, commenting on the Tang source text; acknowledging the factual source text as well as the

47 Wang Xiaobo 143.
48 Wang Xiaobo 147.
imagined source text;\textsuperscript{49} making trivial interpretations of sublime details or making pseudo-
sublime interpretations of trivial details in his readings;\textsuperscript{50} referring the words of the protagonists
back to the long tradition of classical Chinese poetry;\textsuperscript{51} connecting the lyrical as well as the
euphemistic phrases in pre-modern Chinese literature to contemporary cultural expressions in
literature and movies;\textsuperscript{52} describing his own responses to the factual and fictional source texts;\textsuperscript{53}
and even officially declaring the end of the story of Red Thread. Wang Er’s voice is not only the
narrator’s voice but also an external force that freely intrudes in the plot.

Therefore in his own description of his experience as a reader, Wang Er is no longer a
passive reader of the Tang story. His imagination in the act of reading makes him a creator of
the past. As a Tang tale of marvels, the story of Red Thread in its original form seems doomed
to clichéd interpretations, and the development of events in the story leaves little space to arouse
more surprises in the course of reading it. It is not so in the eyes of Wang Er, who becomes a
modern version of the Tang literati participating in the storytelling. Despite a social identity as a
factory worker that is detached from literary circles in his own time, he believes in a power of
language and literature to access what is underneath a story’s surface. He adapts the story from
the Tang source text and then twists it with his implied narrative voice, with his playing with
language styles, and with his multiplication of the story’s possible endings. To Wang Er, Red
Thread may leave for freedom, but she may have other options, too. The dead text is no longer
dead in the eye of a creative reader with literary competence who knows the symbolic power of
language.

\textsuperscript{49} Wang Xiaobo 150.
\textsuperscript{50} Wang Xiaobo 151.
\textsuperscript{51} Wang Xiaobo 153.
\textsuperscript{52} Wang Xiaobo 154.
\textsuperscript{53} Wang Xiaobo 157.
“Red Whisk Elopes at Night”

The Tang source text “The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest” by Du Guangting (850-933) was discussed previously in Chapter II of this dissertation. Also in Chapter III, I pointed out that such a story of marvels about a Tang lady with great transgressive powers devolved into a clichéd story of domestication in later pre-modern literature. Wang Xiaobo’s re-writing of this Tang tale restores much of the transgressive romance to the story. As he does in the two stories I discussed earlier, he introduces a first-person narrator, Wang Er, and a paratextual commentator, Xiao Hu. Through self-reflexivity, Wang Xiaobo deconstructs those elements he sees as constraining in the Tang text and constructs his own perspective on the events in the tale. He uses the title, language, and characterization to build up qi in this story—and the quality of qi in his text ultimately stands up against and even subverts what would be a common orthodox understanding and interpretation of the world by most readers.

First, the title of Wang Xiaobo’s text, “Red Whisk Elopes at Night,” imparts a subversive power to its Tang source text “The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest.” It shifts readers’ expectations from a publicly oriented tale to a private one. Second, Wang Xiaobo tailors the plot elements he borrows from the Tang source text. The majority of his narrative is about how Li Jing and Red Whisk run away from the persecution of Yang Su, Red Whisk’s aged adopted father, who tries to retain Li Jing in order to destroy him. In Wang Xiaobo’s text, Li Jing is a smart and free city-drifter. Yang Su selects Li Jing to be Red Whisk’s husband. Red Whisk is in fact Yang Su’s secret agent disguised as his adopted daughter. She is aware of the political conspiracy in the arranged marriage, and she chooses to escape from Yang Su with Li Jing instead. Yang Su sends another secret agent, known as the Curly-Bearded Guest, after the fleeing couple, but when that agent catches them, he decides to release them. Throughout Wang
Xiaobo’s version the chaos of the political context is minimized, even if it haunts the plot residually. Li Shimin, the shadowy but instrumental political figure that shapes major events in the original Tang narrative, is not even mentioned in Wang Xiaobo’s text of the 1980s: instead, there are new characters such as Li Erniang, or Second Lady Li, who is Li Jing’s wine-selling mistress; Pangpang, a fat maid waiting on Li Erniang; and Widow Qian, a legendary prostitute who earns money by offering sexual services to rich people and then uses the money to support a number of poor young scholars. Many of these scholars later become influential politicians by passing civil service examinations, and Widow Qian acquires great power through her influence over them. These new minor characters are of little political significance but pivotal to the romance between Red Whisk and Li Jing. Their own special perspectives on the love affair reveal alternative aspects of it not explored in the Tang text.

In addition, Wang Xiaobo thoroughly subverts the traditional priority of historiography over literary fiction writing in this story. He parodies historiography in “Red Whisk Elopes at Night” in the beginning of his text. He pretends to follow the formal conventions of traditional historiography, carefully providing a “preface” by the first-person narrator’s wife, who, as with all of Wang Ers’ other wives in Tales of the Tang People, tellingly has the last name Hu 胡, a Chinese character with connotations of “nonsense”. The preface reads as follows:

…Du [Guangting]’s bad writing narrates one thing at the cost of tens of thousands of other things, and it is full of errors. My humble husband Wang Er, reading extensively in all kinds of documents, finally composed the following account after ten years of painstaking work. What is recorded in his writing about the three knights is thorough and solid in its details. My humble husband ignored his sleep and meals in order to compose his writing: he totally forgot his housework duties of
washing diapers and filling the gas containers, and he completely brushed away from his mind his family obligations to earn bread and toss away garbage. He grabbed every moment to sit constantly at his desk, smoking and writing. Now the writing is completed, I am delighted for the new assets it brings to historical texts, and I am exhilarated that from now on, he has no further excuse for shirking his domestic duties.

杜氏惡撰，述一漏百，且多謬誤。外子王二，博覽群書，竭十年心力方成此篇，所錄三俠事，既備且鑿。外子為營此篇，寢食俱廢。洗褲子換煤氣全付腦後，買糧食倒垃圾未掛于心，得暇輒穩坐于案前，吞雲吐霧，奮筆疾書。今書已成，余喜史家案頭，又添新書，更喜日後家事，彼無遁詞。

I hope my English translation conveys the irony in Wang Xiaobo’s Chinese text. The irony mainly manifests itself in the discrepancy between the content of Xiao Hu’s frivolous complaints against her husband’s negligence of housework and the serious, formal tone in which she writes them, between her elegant literary Chinese and the vulgar images presented in that elegant language, and between her accusation of the Tang source text for being unreliable and her allusion to her husband’s composition as a tale made out of “smoke.” Her applauding of Wang Er’s return to the tedious chores of actual life projects a motif that comes to haunt Wang Xiaobo’s writing later in 1990s: the literary quality of qi can help the writer and reader to transgress limits of real life and unleash unspoken desires, and yet upon the completion of writing and reading, the factual world will always surge back to overwhelm the fantasy—even if one hopes that the apparent status quo has been transformed at its core by the literary transgression. Even so, the very writing and reading of literary qi can deliver the writer and the

54 Wang Xiaobo 160.
reader from the pains of everyday life. This last point is expressed in the text of “Red Whisk Elopes at Night.”

After preparing the intelligent reader via Xiao Hu’s ironic preface for the text’s twisted plot and characters, Wang Xiaobo starts the narrative in Wang Er’s first-person authoritative voice, which claims for itself a historical veracity based on “historical documents” and “his personal research into the evidence.” The irony lies in the fact that his “historical documents” are nothing more than the text of the Tang tale “The Tale of the Curly Bearded Guest” and some other evidently fabricated resources such as an autobiography attributed to Li Jing called “A Brief Account of My Life,” which does not appear in any extant historical record. As for Wang Er’s “personal research into the evidence,” it results in recording lively and intimate conversations among characters in the tale, which is not so much historical evidence about the characters in his tale as it is evidence of the narrator’s vivid powers of fantastic imagination. All of the Tang characters’ letters and memoirs “quoted” by Wang Er are written in classical Chinese, but then Wang Er as the first-person narrator provides his interpretations of these documents in modern colloquial Chinese immediately after quoting them. The modern linguistic interruption again betrays the illusionary quality of his “historical authenticity.” Wang Xiaobo’s intended readers, sometimes addressed by Wang Er as “my respected readers,” are therefore constantly reminded that this is a purely fictional story manipulated and interpreted by Wang Er throughout his text.

Wang Xiaobo also makes subversive changes to other elements of the Tang source text of “The Tale of the Curly-Bearded Guest.” The revival of Red Whisk’s unconventionality is calmly, ironically, and intricately presented in his writing. In the text, Red Whisk’s gradual

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55 Wang Xiaobo 160, 195.
56 Wang Xiaobo 175.
57 Wang Xiaobo 175.
changes in language style are fully explored. Wang Xiaobo’s story of Red Whisk portrays how she is entrapped in the establishment of Yang Su but then tries to break away from this structure by deconstructing it. In Wang Xiaobo’s re-writing, Red Whisk is restored to being a lady with transgressive powers, as well as having an ironic spirit greater than her equivalent in the Tang text. She surprises the reader through the discrepancy between her seeming inability to express herself in words and her manifest ability to assert her will in action.

Red Whisk’s romance with Li Jing in the Tang source text starts from their very first meeting. Li Jing goes voluntarily to Yang Su’s residence out of political ambition, and Red Whisk, attracted by his ambitious nature, elopes with him on the same night. Li Jing then becomes her new master. The flow of events remains roughly the same in Wang Xiaobo’s text as in the source text, yet the meaning of the characters’ actions changes drastically. In Wang Xiaobo’s text, instead of offering himself to Yang Su’s service, Li Jing tries to escape the “honours” imposed by Yang Su, among which the highest is an arranged marriage with Red Whisk. By such a twist Li Jing is no longer a talented hero eagerly waiting to be recruited, but an individual with a free spirit who evades various societal structures, be they in the form of political systems or arranged marriages. In Wang Xiaobo’s text, Li Jing’s will to reject Red Whisk vanishes when she decides to come to him of her own free will rather than being forced onto him as an unwanted gift. His affection for her matures into love when she becomes his partner to escape from persecution. Red Whisk’s identity is thus transformed completely by her betrayal and defiance of the political system that has generated her identity. Before she comes to Li Jing, she is an instrument of the system, educated to seduce and destroy any free spirit. With her decision to join Li Jing of her own free will, she transgresses the limits of her identity and starts her own journey of self-creation.
In Wang Xiaobo’s text, gradual changes in the manner of Red Whisk’s speech signal her escape from authority structures. She was raised in Yang Su’s household to be an educated, seductive performer who fatally attracts those who resist the system set up by Yang. In the story’s first part, her speech has a performative tone that recalls the dramatic lines of traditional Chinese opera: elegant, flowery, but with only scant communication with the audience. In contrast, Li Jing speaks with a forceful directness that resembles the vernacular Chinese used by most male characters in the Ming dynasty vernacular novel *Water Margin* (Shuihu zhuan). This conversation in the early part of the story is a good example:

[Red Whisk:] “When a humble maid as I am is without a brain in her head, my honourable dear must have one. My dear, speak forth the marvellous plan you have hidden in your brocade bag; your humble maid washes her ears and listens with respect!”

[Li Jing:] “Why, you do speak so strangely from time to time! Right now we’re facing a problem caused by you: you came here and now my two plans are useless. We can only take option three. Too early, though, so let’s go to bed for a rest.”

“奴家無腦時，郎君須是有的。郎却說出那錦囊妙計來，奴家洗耳恭聽！”

“你這人怎麼一會兒人話，一會兒鬼話！現在的形勢是，你這一來，把我的頭兩個計劃統統破壞。只能執行第三號計劃了。現在太早，上床去歇會兒。”

In the course of merging herself into Li Jing’s world, Red Whisk begins inserting vulgar words into her speech. With these changes in her style of speech she incorporates the vitality of Li Jing’s tone, vocabulary, and even sentence patterns. She also learns how to express her free will.

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58 The closed structure of the Ming and Qing drama as expressed in the language styles is discussed in chapter three of this dissertation.
In the last duel scene between Li Jing and the Curly-Bearded Guest—unlike the Tang analogue, he is a self-interested sword-fighter who secretly covets Red Whisk for her physical beauty—Red Whisk displays her change clearly. The Curly-Bearded Guest orders her to sing songs to his taste, taking for granted that she should follow his orders without question, as they both come from the same system. To his surprise, she curtly rejects him based on arguments that eloquently express her newly acquired free will. She tells him that those songs are “hurting her voice,” “are not singing but shouting,” and in terms of gender, they “are not fitting for her, a female singer,” leading her to declare, “I will not sing!”

Red Whisk thus casts off her training in search of something unknown but attractive to her: the alternative self-made otherness represented by Li Jing. The text’s ending creates irony in two ways: first, the narrator Wang Er is a worker/scholar who earns his wage in a Tofu factory and delves privately into (what he describes as) past records about the three knights-errant. At the end of his narrative, he claims the honour of a knight-errant on the basis that he does “not even” steal a piece of Tofu when working at the factory. Second, the final clue to Red Whisk’s action against the Curly-Bearded Guest in the final duel scene (when Li Jing is in a coma) remains a mystery to Li Jing and is exposed to the reader by Wang Er. Wang Er claims that he has discovered the Curly-Bearded Guest’s last will, written in elegant classical literary Chinese and long concealed by the Curly Bearded Guest’s descendants. The contents of the will, however, contain a story similar to the Tang source text narrative: Curly-Bearded Guest is moved by Red Whisk’s high morals, and he willingly retreats to a remote small country. The doubt that attends this clue, however, lurks beneath the beautifully woven “historical record”: is this the ultimate truth, or another veil of lies? Are all these “truths” a factual documentation of reality, or nothing but the whim of a highly imaginative mind? Through a mock sublime style, a

60 Wang Xiaobo 206.
perfect imitation of historiographical form, and a contemporary parallel narrator/character uncovering the Tang tale in his own modern voice, Wang Xiaobo critiques conventional and clichéd understandings of the Tang tale as well as of his own time, thereby exposing greater creative potentials in the acts of reading and writing our everyday reality.

**The Bronze Age: General Introduction**

Critical attention to Wang Xiaobo’s extended re-writing of Tang tales of marvels in the 1990s is more intensive than that given to *Tales of the Tang People*. As I mentioned above, the three novellas of *The Bronze Age* (*The Temple of Longevity, Red Whisk Elopess at Night*, and *Looking for Peerless*) arouse critical interest mainly because these novellas present more explicit political references than his other works. Among the three novellas collected in the book, *Red Whisk Elopess at Night* has the similar title with the short story “Red Whisk Elopess at Night” I discussed in the above section, but the two sets of texts are different and present an interesting intratextual relation in my discussion below.

Wang Xiaobo identifies the Tang source texts that inspired him to write *The Bronze Age* in his preface and he emphasizes that “the three Tang tales of marvels are suited to people’s tastes and so popular that their texts have been selected for anthologies in every dynasty. My readers will find that the three novellas by me have some relation with those tales and their texts.”\(^{61}\) Wang Xiaobo thus claims his identity as a writer explicitly even before the texts in Wang Er’s voice come to the reader’s eye. Additionally, he himself takes the role of a reader of the texts prior to his writing, citing his source texts’ popularity and possible clichéd reception among readers, thus mediating their reception from the outset. In such a role he connects

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\(^{61}\) Wang Xiaobo, *The Bronze Age* (Xi’an: Shaanxi Normal UP, 2003) 4. 這三篇唐傳奇脍炙人口，歷代選本均選。讀者自會發現，我的這三篇小說，和他們也有一些關係。
himself to his own readers, providing his readers with channels of communication across limits of time, space, and roles. He openly admits the intertextual relations between source texts and his own texts, pointing them out to the reader. The Tang source texts are collected into anthologies and arguably still popular with contemporary readers, so he writes with reference to source texts that are accessible to both writer and reader. He uses the modifier “some” before the word “relation,” thereby preserving space for making his text a new source text for a future reader/writer like himself. By thus accepting the legacy of the popularity of his source texts yet denying a slavish bondage to them, Wang Xiaobo releases himself as well as his readers from the confinements of prior literary knowledge. The reader’s reading of Wang Xiaobo’s writing is also thereby redirected from a passive reception to a creative communication in the action of reading/writing that absolutely transgresses and transforms the traditional definition of reading.

Generally speaking, Red Whisk Elopess at Night and Looking for Peerless are not only thematically similar; compositionally they also share many traits. In contrast, The Temple of Longevity displays more openness in structure than the other two novellas. For example, in addition to the general preface, Wang Xiaobo also includes in The Bronze Age two separate prefaces written for Red Whisk Elopess at Night and Looking for Peerless, respectively. The two separate prefaces recall each other in structure: both work as a reader’s “guide” and in both he states explicitly his intended theme for the stories, telling us that Red Whisk Elopess at Night is a book about “amusement” or “fun” in life, while Looking for Peerless is a book about “wisdom.” Also, each preface is affixed with a note under the subtitle: “About the Book” (關於這本書) for Red Whisk Elopess at Night, and “About the Novella” (關於這本小說) for Looking for the Peerless. Wang Xiaobo provides a brief note “about the narrator Wang Er” in

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62 Wang Xiaobo 273.
63 Wang Xiaobo 521.
each of these two notes as well. Also, in terms of textual structure, *Red Whisk Elopess at Night* and *Looking for Peerless* resemble one another. Both novellas consist of ten chapters, while *The Temple of Longevity* has eight chapters in total. Besides, *Red Whisk Elopess at Night* and *Looking for Peerless* each situate “Wang Er” in a literary tradition of narrator/characters. This is so because in each text the centre of events remains the Tang characters, thus recalling Wang Xiaobo’s earlier versions of “Wang Er” in his *Tales of the Tang People*. In each novella, the reader witnesses Wang Er’s fantasy in his own complete narration. In contrast, *The Temple of Longevity* displays a narrative complexity that makes fantasy read like reality. Overall, analyzed from intertextual and intratextual points of view, there is a decreasing narrative complexity in the order in which these three novellas appear in their final version; and the first two novellas are in fact closer to each other in many aspects. Furthermore, in his preface prepared for the last novella in the book, *Looking for Peerless*, Wang Xiaobo clearly states, “This is my first fiction of any length.” In order to track qi’s diminution in this text, I read the last novella first, where it appears in its barest form.

*Looking for Peerless*尋找無雙 (*xunzhao Wushuang*)

*Looking for Peerless* is the shortest of the three novellas in *The Bronze Age* and may be the simplest one in terms of narrative complexity. It still bears traces of Wang Xiaobo’s literary efforts from the 1980s. The narrator Wang Er, according to Wang Xiaobo’s note “About the Novella,” is an engineer in a hospital, aged 45 in the summer of 1993, and married to a Doctor Sun. The story Wang Er narrates is adapted from at least three Tang source texts, i.e., first, “The Biography of Peerless” 無雙傳 (*Wushuang zhuan*) which Wang Xiaobo notes as a source

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64 Wang Xiaobo 520.
65 Wang Xiaobo 521.
text in his preface; second, “General Pan,” the same source text Wang Xiaobo uses in his “A Lover of Uncle” in *Tales of The Tang People* and from which he borrows for the novella the character of a Tang petty official of justice; third, “Green Longfeather” 綠翹 (*Luqiao*), a story of the trial and execution of a female Tang poet Yu Xuanji 魚玄機, from which Wang Er the narrator develops a sub-plot for his protagonist Peerless’ punishment and death. Wang Xiaobo also incorporates many contemporary social and cultural allusions into Wang Er’s narration of these Tang tales. Indeed, unlike in *Tales of the Tang People*, Wang Xiaobo mixes Tang tales and characters in his text with contemporary elements, yet writes consistently in modern standard Chinese. Wang Xiaobo thus transgresses his contemporary temporality as represented in modern Chinese language via his fantasy about the past.

Simple as it is in narrative terms, *Looking for Peerless* nevertheless displays a maturing of Wang Xiaobo’s literary talent in constructing *qi*. Wang Er, in the narrative, does not acknowledge his source text, even though Wang Xiaobo the writer mentions the intertextual relation in his general preface. Secondly, Wang Er’s narration is completely delivered in modern Chinese. It is as if through Wang Er’s narration Wang Xiaobo declares that while this may be a fantasy of past times, it is built in the present and articulated in contemporary language and images.

Wang Er the narrator tells the story through his own contemporary idiom. His fantasy derives from both his imagination and his wide reading of the past source texts. Wang Xiaobo portrays his narrator’s efforts to surpass the barriers to expressing this fantasy in the text. Self-reflexively representing Wang Er’s process of articulating fantasy through words reveals a potential role for the reader, i.e., witnessing the construction of fantasy. In other words, the

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66 TPGJ 922-23.
reader, exposed to the process of making a fantasy, is thus encompassed in that fantasy’s structure. In this process, the boundary between reader and writer is miraculously broken by the force of a clumsy narrator who struggles to narrate his story. Examining the beginnings of each of the ten chapters, we can see Wang Er’s various efforts to keep the narration under his own control:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ch.</th>
<th>Chinese text</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>建元年間，王仙客到長安城裏找無雙，據他自己說，無雙是這副模樣：……(The Bronze Age, 522)</td>
<td>During the reign era of Jianyuan, Wang Xianke goes into the City of Chang’an to look for Peerless, and according to his own words, Peerless looks like this…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>王仙客到長安城去找無雙那一年，正好是二十五歲。(544)</td>
<td>Wang Xianke sets out for the City of Chang’an in order to look for Peerless, and in that year he is exactly twenty-five years old.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>王仙客到長安城裏找無雙，長安城市這麽一個地方：……(559)</td>
<td>Wang Xianke goes into the City of Chang’an in order to look for Peerless, and the City of Chang’an is such a place: …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>小時候我常做這樣的夢，……(577)</td>
<td>In my childhood I often had such dreams: …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>王仙客到宣陽坊裏找無雙，無雙總是找不到。(594)</td>
<td>Wang Xianke comes to the Xuanyang Quarter to look for Peerless, and Peerless is never to be found.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>建元年間，王仙客和彩萍到宣陽坊裏去找無雙，和單獨來時大不一樣。(607)</td>
<td>During the reign era of Jianyuan, Wang Xianke and Caiping go into the Xuanyang Quarter to look for Peerless, and it is very different from the time he came alone.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Wang Xianke and Caiping are looking for Peerless in the Xuanyang Quarter, and in my opinion, it is a strange place and no one can account for what is happening here.

Wang Xianke arrives at the Xuanyang Quarter to look for Peerless, and it is the place where Boss Sun resides.

When Wang Xianke is looking for Peerless in the Xuanyang Quarter, he always sees a rabbit on top of the roof.

Without my saying it, you already know that all around us there are so many people, and that their lives are, in every way, the weaving of a story.

Fig. 4. Chapter Beginnings in Looking for Peerless

The first four chapters show that Wang Er is still in charge of his narration. The first sentences in these four chapters all involve Wang Xianke and the object of his quest, Peerless. In Chapter 1 Wang Er is most confident and points precisely to the target Peerless in his first sentence. In Chapter 2, his narrative focus switches to Wang Xianke, the subject carrying out the quest. In Chapter 3, the City of Chang’an, the setting in which the quest takes place, intrudes to unbalance his narration. Indeed, the reader as well as Wang Er becomes lost in the narrative uncertainty of that moment. To the reader, Wang Er’s fantasy about Wang Xianke and his love Peerless shifts from a vague outline to clear-cut detail, but ironically the initiating core of the fantasy blurs in the face of the solidity of its setting. As if to catch the fleeting object of his fantasized subject, Wang Er has to let them go first so as to merge himself into “their” location. So does the reader.
In Chapter 4, Wang Er turns to his own inner world as the site of a quest. It is a point of departure in Wang Er’s efforts to initiate fantasy, and it implies that his previous efforts to build fantasy from historical images in external readings failed. It is as if to say that true fantasy first of all should originate from the creator’s own internal world, be it through childhood memory or youthful desire.

Chapter 5 renews as well as poignantly echoes Chapter 1. The subject, object, and setting of the quest are all in the sentence again, yet, the second half of the sentence provides a negative end to the journey, stating that the object of the quest is never to be attained. Similarly, as if to restore the lost focus, Wang Er starts his narration of the quest in the next chapter by discussing the subject(s) of the quest; and not surprisingly, unlike the confidence in Chapter 2 with which he describes the twenty-five-year-old Wang Xianke in precise detail, all he can say about the subject in Chapter 5 is that the two subjects of the quest make the quest itself different. The diluted narrative continues in the next two chapters, where Wang Er tries to comprehend through Wang Xianke’s experience the specific setting of the quest, i.e., the Xuanyang Quarter within the city of Chang’an. What Wang Er reaches in his narration, however, is a sense of increasing distance from his target. The Xuanyang Quarter, as he says, is a place where everything beyond understanding can happen, and is the home of a local boss who misleads the stranger yearning for his lost love. If the reader accepts Wang Er’s textual argument about looking for fantasy inside one’s own inner world, then Wang Xianke’s lost journey reveals the ruins of other people’s fantasies, which open up many possibilities. For example, enjoying the dramatic irony of the local boss lying to Wang Xianke, the reader may begin building a fantasy of his or her own, side by side with Wang Xianke’s frustration. Or, if the reader chooses to stay
outside Wang Er’s inner world, he or she may read in a more traditional way and see the fantasy collapse again.

Chapter 9 is where reality and its attendant logic are fully dissolved by fantasy: before the eyes of Wang Xianke, a rabbit arrives. Wang Er successfully transforms his narration into a pure fantasy. This points to his belief that it goes without saying that fiction is fabricated around us. In Chapter 10, in concluding his story, Wang Er realizes that whatever we try to do is full of difficulties; and therefore according to his estimation, “Wang Xianke could not find Peerless.” This is the paradox of a failed fantasy. Exhausted by all his previous efforts, Wang Er ceases searching for fantasies external to him, and he admits that in his narrative Wang Xianke could not reach Peerless. Furthermore, the reader of the text may heed Wang Er’s conclusion and decide to break off reading Wang Er’s literary efforts. The text thus becomes an unfinished journey. But the text’s various transgressions serve as inspiration for the reader to start new journeys. Maybe at sometime, somewhere, somehow, he or she may accomplish his or her own fantasy as a result of reading Wang Xiaobo’s text. Then, the story of Looking for Peerless would continue. That’s the key enduring quality of *qi* that Wang Xiaobo achieves in this novella.

**Red Whisk Elopes at Night** 紅拂夜奔 (*Hongfu yeben*)

*Red Whisk Elopes at Night* has two source texts: the Tang source text as noted in Chapter II, and Wang Xiaobo’s own short story “Red Whisk Elopes at Night” collected in *Tales of the Tang People*. This latter work casts much light on the 1990s novella *Red Whisk Elopes at Night*. The parallel narrative pattern of a contemporary Wang Er’s life, side by side with that of Li Jing

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and Red Whisk, exists also in the novella. However, Wang Xiaobo achieves greater narrative complexity here than he does in *Looking for Peerless*.

In the preface for *Red Whisk Elopes at Night* Wang Xiaobo states that his general credo in writing is that amusement (*youqu* 有趣) should be the *raison d’être* and benchmark for fiction. He complains that in historiography-oriented fiction writing, a writer feels like Dr. Faust in Goethe’s *Faust*: he can only helplessly lament the doomed loss of the beautiful moment. To achieve the beautiful moment, Wang Xiaobo insists on a writer’s freedom to produce the “fictional.” Later in the postscript note, “About the Book,” he introduces Wang Er, the first-person narrator/character, as he does in *Looking for Peerless*. The Wang Er in *Red Whisk Elopes at Night* is different from that in *Looking for Peerless*, and the difference subtly reveals Wang Xiaobo’s bold plan for constructing *qi*: Wang Er in *Red Whisk Elopes at Night* is younger (41 years old in 1993), has more training in writing (by profession he is an assistant researcher in mathematical theory in a university), and is more open to new experiences (living with a woman, Ms. Sun, but not married to her yet). Using a narrator with great potential to either cling to conventionality or break boundaries, Wang Xiaobo locates his goal in his reader’s response: “The book is as unbelievable as this person, but it contains the most truthfulness,” and announces that for “those readers who are familiar with history,” they would find the book “more like a history book than a fictional work.” “That is exactly the author’s intention,” and if there is anything absurd in the book, “it is then not the author’s intention, but the true look of history.”

Reading between the lines, these words show that Wang Xiaobo expects his readers to treat his first-person narrator as a fantasy who is also a truthful person, and to read his fiction

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68 Wang Xiaobo 274.
as a fantasy that is also as true as history. His expectation subverts the common sense division
between fantasy and history held by most readers.

The status of the note itself is unusual, as it is not a note about the person in the
narrative, but a note about the book that the person in the narrative writes. If we read the note
not as external to the narrative text but internal, the frame narrator for the tale is no longer Wang
Er but Wang Xiaobo, the writer, who provides the general narrative frame at the start. The rest
of the story in Wang Er’s voice then must be read as speech by Wang Er reported by Wang
Xiaobo the writer. The writing by Wang Xiaobo the writer then falls into the generic boundary
of fiction rather than history: he is treating obviously fantastical elements (the story told by
Wang Er) as though they were the truth. In this way, it is the very aspect of fantasy that shapes
the essence of truthfulness. In other words, it is via fantasy that the factuality of history is truly
revealed. His intended reader is persuaded not to read fiction in the “normal” way, but in a way
that allows history to be presented in fiction, i.e., absurd, but true as it is presented. The lines
that divide fantasy from reality are forced to merge in the reader’s response. A writer’s fantasy
is thereby made a reader’s reality. Or the reader may ignore this note about the book and follow
a traditional way of reading, starting his/her journey with Wang Er’s narrative voice. Whatever
choice is made, Wang Xiaobo provides an extra layer of complexity in this text that is part of
the literary qi in his fiction.

Such a writer’s note warns against a reader’s expectation of a totalized narrative in the
fiction; instead, he or she is prepared to read the book as he or she experiences history. Details
are presented to the reader’s eye, not in their comprehensible shapes as processed and contained
by time and supplementary information, but in their immediate, fragmented, absolutely partial,
and inevitably misleading way. Sometimes “history,” as rendered in Wang Er’s voice, is so
similar to a reader’s contemporary perception that it is almost incomprehensible to see it as a fantasy in the reading.

In *Red Whisk Elopes at Night*, Wang Xiaobo is even freer than in *Looking for Peerless* in his bold usage of modern Chinese language in writing a fantasy with a pre-modern background. All boundaries between past and present, between history and the perception of history, and between a writer’s expectation and a reader’s response are eliminated in this fantasy. The artistic freedom of roaming, or *you yóu*, as I discussed in Chapter II, is fully revived in this text. He deploys a modern vernacular Chinese that is familiar to contemporary readers in this fantasy of a Tang tale full of pre-modern characters. Not only the modern Chinese language itself, but also all the symbolic powers of that language, all the connotations along with its terms and expressions, and all the associations with the images thus shaped by the language, inflect his literary world.

As early as in first chapter of *Red Whisk Elopes at Night*, the reader sees Li Jing living a life that is close to a contemporary reader’s experience, and yet the reader is told that the time setting is the Tang dynasty. A sense of absurdity stemming from this ironic disjuncture adds to the literary quality of *qi*. The reader is told that Li Jing is so intelligent and independent that he invents all kinds of instruments, among which some are beneficial to the society but earn him nothing. The only profitable instrument he invents earns him the favour of Emperor Taizong (Li Shimin) and subsequently deprives Li Jing of his freedom. Later in the same chapter, the narrative voice of Wang Er starts to speak in his capacity as a mathematical theorist, and claims that his great achievement is his discovery of the connection between pre-modern Chinese ballads and modern mathematical theorems. To a reader who shares a knowledge of pre-modern

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69 Wang Xiaobo 281.
Chinese literature with the writer, this claim might sound more amusing than annoying. Amongst the blurred boundaries between past and present, mathematics and literature, history and fantasy, the reader finds out, with help from the narrator, that Li Jing’s great discovery of an important mathematical theorem remains unknown to anyone because he writes it out in the form of an erotic poem.\footnote{Wang Xiaobo 261.} The evidently illogical statement amuses the reader, and it also demonstrates that plausible worldly events are not the narrative core of this novella, but rather fantasy and its perception through absurdity.

Guided and released by the freedom of roaming displayed by Wang Xiaobo in time, language, and images, the reader is soon lost in Wang Er’s narrative voice. Li Jing of the Tang dynasty, in his clichéd romance with Red Whisk, loses much of his significance in this narrative. Instead, Wang Er starts to make comparisons between Li Jing’s mysterious research results that connect erotic poems with mathematical theory, and Wang Er’s own current, similar job. The difference between the two, as noted by Wang Er, is that Wang Er is paid by his “leaders” or “cadres” while Li Jing is kept in bondage to the Emperor. Wang Er’s conclusion is that he, as does Li Jing under the Emperor’s control, would think that there is no meaning in such a life. The rest of the narrative leaves off its description of Li Jing’s life in the city of Luoyang; instead, it now focuses upon Wang Er’s thoughts on the contemporary intellectual’s meaningless life. The seemingly illogical narrative is full of lively details that are familiar to modern audiences. For the reader, its historical absurdity bolsters its effectiveness. \textit{Qi} thus emerges through transgressions of time and space produced by more complicated uses of language and connotations that jar in the plot’s historical context.

The narrative becomes disjointed when Wang Er the narrator starts to insert his own contemporary life into the Tang tale he narrates, but the completeness of the narrative structure
remains, existing alongside a parallel narrative strand in transpositioned time or space. For example, Chapter 1 begins with a description of Luoyang as a most magnificent city, and it ends with a ghastly rumour about “dish men” (cairen 菜人), i.e., human beings used for food.

According to Wang Er, “dish men” are recruited by the Emperor and then are served at national banquets for missionaries from foreign countries. The horrible part of the rumour is that sometimes dish men are eaten so as to preserve a hollow shell of their body; then they wake up on the plate, noticing that they have nothing but an empty husk of a body left. They would shout in alarm: “That’s the fear!”\textsuperscript{71} The rumour can be read as a political allegory of people deprived of rights, independent thought, and free will. Such a rumour forms a horrible contrast with the magnificent image of Luoyang as described in the beginning. Also, a contemporary reader of the description of Luoyang may recognize the shadow of modern Beijing in it. If so, his/her reading of the symbolic rumour may point to deeper interpretations. Meanwhile, Wang Er the narrator concludes his narrative with a reference to the city of Luoyang:

As far as I know, applicants for dish men positions are numerous every time the emperor starts to recruit them, because they all want to live in Luoyang for a few days before they are eaten. I can hardly make sense of it, for Luoyang is nothing but a muddy puddle. Besides, mosquitoes swarm there. But many people do not agree. To them, Luoyang is the centre of the universe, and it is where the sun rises. It is the greatest city anytime, anywhere.\textsuperscript{72}

The contrast between Wang Er’s down-to-earth yet superficial analysis of dish men’s “choices,” and his equally factual presentation of his opposite view of Luoyang enacts a paradox in its effect in the reader. The apparent fantasy in Wang Er’s literary words is indeed the reality of

\textsuperscript{71} Wang Xiaobo 306.
\textsuperscript{72} Wang Xiaobo 306.
actual life if read between the lines. In this case, Wang Er’s fantasy is not the opposite of his desire, but a subversive reflection of a deplorable reality. That reality’s core is veiled by a narrative voice that relates the narrator’s reflections upon his historical fantasy. Simultaneously, the reader, involved in the process of reading as well as in the construction of a fantasy through reading, crosses a dividing line and encounters the text in that transgressive manner.

In Red Whisk Elopes at Night, Wang Xiaobo thus familiarizes an absurd fantasy of a historical past to achieve a sense of qi. Subtle use of the first-person narrative voice and bold experiments with modern Chinese language, as well as the language’s words, expressions, and images--all these help Wang Xiaobo transgress the limits of time and space in the narration. Wang Xiaobo also creates a sense of distantiation in his text by inserting short “summaries” before most chapters narrated by Wang Er. The nine “summaries” are all short paragraphs in a pseudo-third-person voice, briefly summarizing the events in the chapters to follow, and providing key words that are thematically essential to these chapters’ narratives. These “summaries” sometimes emphasize that Wang Er is “the author,” and that “the author” is writing the text in relation to “the author’s” reality. In addition, from time to time, in these “summaries” Wang Xiaobo provides clues for an intertextual reading of the text narrated by Wang Er. For example, in the preface to Chapter VIII, he writes: “The content of this chapter is influenced by Kafka’s The Metamorphosis, and the author closely resembles Kafka the great master in personality.” The reader then reads with an intertextual awareness that in this chapter the Curly-Bearded Guest is transformed into a slimy, flat fish, with “soft and bent bones,” and “portrait-like facial features” after he becomes the King of Japan. The fish-shaped Curly-Bearded Guest develops “fishy virtues” that are defined as making love without emotion, acting

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73 Wang Xiaobo 448.
74 Wang Xiaobo 465.
“obedient and content in one’s place, [...] never to rebel,” and installing “fishy virtues” as national laws. 

Inserted in the narrative text of the fantasy is also Wang Er’s fragmentary account of his experience as an assistant to a “leader” who is reminiscent of the Curly-Bearded Guest. Wang Er’s narrative tone is eloquent when he articulates his depression and frustration at the fact that he has to feign obedience to his leader. He is also eloquent in analyzing the hollowness in his leader’s personality and research. This mood might be familiar to readers in similar situations, thus arousing sympathy. When Wang Er narrates Japanese subjects’ relations with their King, the fish-shaped Curly-Bearded Guest, he portrays it as a form of false worship and instinctive fear. These responses to higher rank may be distanced from each other in space and time, but they share an essential insincerity. Therefore, no matter whether it is the familiarization of details and defamiliarization of voices, or vice versa, the reader encounters a fantasy that reflects an underlying reality.

In *Red Whisk Elopes at Night* the narrative does not stress the sequence of plot events; instead, the events become a mere locus where human perception of a single event can travel across time and space, moving beyond the regular comprehension of the physical world. Consequently, creative use of language creates a *qi* that transgresses the limits of normality. Absurd details are offered in a mode of alternating familiarization and defamiliarization. Furthermore, the reader is offered, in Wang Xiaobo’s “summaries,” a sophisticated approach for reading the texts via rich intertextual references. The fantasy thus presented in *Red Whisk Elopes at Night* is indeed another kind of reality in the sense that it is either contrary to surface reality or beneath it. *Red Whisk Elopes at Night* provides a loose plot that covers diverse characters and a long span of time mixing the stories of Li Jing, Red Whisk and the Curly-Bearded Guest, along with information about Wang Er’s own private and intellectual life. The

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75 Wang Xiaobo 466.
reader, reminded incessantly by the “summaries” and by Wang Er’s lively modern Chinese language in his narration of premodern events, is made fully aware of the disjunctures in the temporality of the writing and thus has his or her attention drawn to the everlasting truth of fantasy in the writing rather a conventional sense of verismilitude.

*The Temple of Longevity* 萬壽寺 (*Wanshou si*)

*The Temple of Longevity* has been positively reviewed by many critics. However, as with other fictional works by Wang Xiaobo, it seems critics are most eager to decode its political and cultural meanings, and pay little attention to its sense of *qi*. For example, Fang Wei considers it Wang Xiaobo’s work of fiction with “the freest style,” and interprets Wang Er’s repeated efforts to give clues about his own writing as a symbolic gesture to escape from reality. The text’s S/M scenes also cause much debate. Fang Wei argues that these scenes display Wang Xiaobo’s inevitable involvement in his own contemporary political world. My critical focus is more on the aesthetic and literary features through which Wang Xiaobo constructs *qi*. In my reading of *The Temple of Longevity* the S/M scenes are parts of Wang Er’s depicted fantasy life that reveal suppressed desires. Wang Er’s suppressed desire can be read as a subversive reflection of his everyday life through words and narration. Fang Wei also notices the narrator’s complex voice in the story, yet his critical focus on political and social meanings leads him to understand the multiple levels hidden in the voice as instruments for displaying a “dialogue” between values represented by the “context” and the “individual” in the events. Fang Wei speaks little of the poetics of this complex voice, though. The “dialogical pattern” in the narrative text, however,

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76 Fang Wei 109, 114. Fang’s critical focus is very much on the political interpretation of the S/M scenes designed in the story, especially between Red Thread and Xue Song, between Young Prostitute and Red Thread, and between the Female Assassin and Red Thread.
does cause some critics to complain on aesthetic grounds. Wang Aisong, for example, notes that the “dialogical pattern” degrades the fluency of the text and breaks the narrative rhythm. In his opinion, Wang Xiaobo’s efforts to exhaust multiple possibilities of narrating one story spoil the “artistry” of fiction writing.

I would argue that, far from spoiling the “artistry” of fiction writing, Wang Xiaobo offers a new point of departure for Chinese fiction in The Temple of Longevity. The qi that Wang Xiaobo defines in the book multiplies readerly responses as readers are forced to negotiate different paths to a new point. If the reader believes that the writer of the text is the sole producer of textual meaning, then Wang Aisong’s complaint of Wang Xiaobo’s lack of “artistry” is understandable. For such readers, while he resides beyond the published text, Wang Xiaobo as the writer is always the sole authority to provide a “truly” comprehensive perception of the world(s) represented within the text. In this model, if the writer leaves any space for competing interpretations, then it signals the writer’s failure to contain the meanings of his text. On the other hand, if the reader believes that the text is a space where writer and reader meet across time and space to share messages, as I described in Chapter I, then Wang Xiaobo’s literary moves in The Temple of Longevity provide a perfect field for such an exchange. Indeed, it is the latter type of autonomous readers for whom Wang Xiaobo writes—his texts may even be seen as using a sense of qi to grant his readers the freedom to roam within the realm of multiple interpretations.

However, even under the more traditional model of writer as god, Wang Aisong’s complaint is unreasonable, for he fails to distinguish Wang Xiaobo the writer, from Wang Er the first-person narrator, from Wang Er the character. Under the collaborative writer/reader model,

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77 Wang Aisong, Cultural Positions and Narrative Arts of Contemporary Writers (dangdai zuojia de wenhua lichang yu xushi yishu 當代作家的文化立場與敘事藝術 [Nanjing: Nangjing UP, 2004]) 308.
78 Wang Aisong 311.
the text Wang Xiaobo provides can be viewed as intentionally and explicitly challenging the belief that the writer is the sole reliable source of textual meaning. Meaning is instead negotiated in the text between the writer, who leaves early, and the reader, who comes late. Such a challenge necessitates the breaching of “fluency” in the text and yet prioritizes the lyrical force of language in creating poetic connections between writer and reader within the text. The text of *The Temple of Longevity* illustrates such a challenge and the possible meanings thus produced by such transgressions.

The first of the three novellas in *The Bronze Age*, *The Temple of Longevity* displays the most prominent qualities of *qi* in all of Wang Xiaobo’s fiction. The general preface for *The Bronze Age* can be read as devoted mostly to this masterpiece of writing, given that the other two novellas each have their own minor preface. In this “general” preface Wang Xiaobo stresses the relevance of poetic rhythm and lyrical language to good fiction writing. He also applauds the great contributions of modern Chinese poets/translators, who have helped the formation of modern literary Chinese, a language that according to his own words is best designed for writing poetry and fiction.

Wang Xiaobo’s promotion of literariness in modern Chinese fiction via these statements conveniently answers the questions that I raised at the outset of my dissertation. To Wang Xiaobo, a modern literary Chinese language, suitable for writing both fiction and poetry, is instrumental in helping him valorize human perceptions over an account of bare events narrated in a text. Wang Xiaobo thus opposes the elimination or domestication of *qi* in fiction. Instead, he adds a new aspect to it through his unique understanding of fiction, fantasy, and the processes of communication with the reader through the symbolic power of language. Below, I analyze the
poetics of qi in The Temple of Longevity. The story exemplifies his writing in this category, and he engages almost all the techniques I have discussed before, but now with full maturity.

Wang Er again appears in The Temple of Longevity as a first-person narrator. He loses his memory in the beginning and thus turns himself into an unwitting reader of his own manuscript. Such an identity conveniently dissolves potential barriers between reader and writer, between writer and text, and between reader and text. Wang Er as the amnesia patient reading his own past, acquires a privileged position that allows him to roam across restrictions freely. Transgressing the frame narrative he himself has written, he is the reader/writer revising it forever. Trying to comprehend a forgotten part of his self in this writing, he is a reader who makes new discoveries in the reading process. Interacting with other characters beyond his earlier text but inside his current journey to find himself, he literally lives through the creation of meaning in writing and reading. The literary quality of qi finds its freest form of expression in this novella.

In his efforts to decode and rewrite a familiar manuscript, Wang Er comes to realize that he himself writes the unfinished story about Xue Song and Red Thread. He remembers that his “real” social identity is a research assistant in the field of history studies and that his work station is located within the Temple of Longevity. As in all of Wang Xiaobo’s other historiography fantasies, Research Assistant Wang Er’s contemporary world is analogous to the Tang tale he selects to re-write. Yet Wang Er’s reading/re-writing of the Tang source text is transformative and at times subversive. For example, when re-telling the Tang tale of marvels in his modern version, Wang Er at a certain point identifies himself as Xue Song’s young lover in the capital city of Chang’an. It is a move that not only transgresses the line between the writer and the character, but also between genders. Once that line is crossed, he starts composing a
new story within the frame story. With the force of literary transgression made possible by his amnesia, Wang Er the narrator escapes almost all boundaries. He no longer consistently identifies himself with any single one character in his fiction and thus finds himself at ease in his own fantasy.

The risk of such a freedom of roaming is also implied in Wang Xiaobo’s writing. For example, when Wang Er, the writer suffering from amnesia, is aware of the division between himself and the forgotten self who wrote the manuscript, he becomes a more critical reader. His narrative then opens up broader interpretive horizons for himself and for the reader of the narrative about his reading of his narrative. However, once his narration drags him completely into the writing and provides a complete realization of his new meanings, then the text is so heavily revised by him that he, the amnesia patient, becomes the new authoritative author, supplanting the pre-amnesia version of his self. The reader of the text is then excluded from his narration as he, the new author of new meanings, approaches the end of his project to fix the meaning and leaves little space for any other interpretation. This exploration into the risks associated with the freedom of roaming in creating qi is something new for Wang Er. Indeed, in The Temple of Longevity, Wang Er’s journey into the land of fantasy gradually becomes a lonely quest for possibilities for his own identity that constantly threatens to slip away from him. In “Red Thread Steals the Casket” in Tales of the Tang People, Wang Er the narrator often quotes from “historical documents” in order to defend himself, but in the latter half of the narrative in The Temple of Longevity, Wang Er as the first-person narrator sounds increasingly indifferent to his intended reader and does not bother to explain at all. At some points, Wang Er’s narrative reads like a monologue. For example, in the last chapter of the novella, Wang Er describes the landscape of the city of Chang’an, and his text is carefully structured, so no space is left for the
reader’s inference of other possible interpretations. It is “Wang Er’s” Chang’ an and only that. Yet the reader is also aware that this is a Wang Er re-assembled by Wang Xiaobo piece by piece, for Wang Er’s previous narration shows the reader his quest for memories. At the end, when Wang Er, after being incessantly criticized by his factual wife, the “woman in white,” exhausts his narrative and finally concludes his tale, he has to fully acknowledge his factual life. Then he finds himself ultimately separated from his fantasy and must return to everyday worldliness. He is thereby apparently re-connected with his readers again as he now shares with his readers the despair of witnessing a collapsed fantasy; he becomes the object of their reading rather than the author of his own story.

This interpretation of The Temple of Longevity’s ending is not the only possible one, though. Read in the context of the whole narrative, such a desperate ending can point in a different direction. Indeed, for a reader willing to join Wang Xiaobo’s textual trip across various borders, the ending could be an example of the ultimate cooperation of writer and reader in creating literary fantasy.

The multiple positions of the first-person narrator also make possible the double and subtly intertwined plots. On the one hand, we have a story of how Wang Er finds his lost memory through reading, re-writing, and completing his own draft before he even knows it is his own manuscript; on the other hand, we have a tale of Xue Song and Red Thread that is intratextually adapted from Wang Xiaobo’s “Red Thread Steals the Casket.” Wang Xiaobo adds more characters to the 1990s version, and pays less attention to the events in the tale of Xue Song and Red Thread. Unlike the 1980s tale, the reader comes to know the novella’s minor characters in the same way that Wang Er gropes for a full knowledge of his own actual life. As with “Red Thread Steals the Casket,” the frame story of the novella tells how Xue Song leaves
Chang’an for the Miao region in southeastern China in pursuit of fame and honor. There, his rival, General Tian, attempts to assassinate him, but he is rescued by the talents of his lover Red Thread. Within such a frame, the novella develops a fantasy that contains so many minor characters full of vitality and subversive potential that, textually speaking, it threatens to break through the narrative frame. For example, the novella presents very characterizations of two sets of contrasting minor characters: the aged and young prostitutes who live in Xue Song’s barracks, and the male and female assassins. These newly added characters enlarge the space in the text where the reader can extend his/her interpretation. Also, the delicate balance between enriching the narrative through these characters and potentially breaking through the frame narrative with these characters’ own minor narratives, reminds the reader of Wang Er’s various narrative positions. This balance adds challenge and amusement to the reader’s experience of the text, and it becomes part of Wang Xiaobo’s special quality of qi.

Wang Xiaobo’s skillful experiments with the transgressing aspect of the identity of his first-person narrator open more possibilities for the reader in experiencing the text. The reader is challenged by such transgressions and must respond to the challenge through active reading to make sense from the story. Wang Xiaobo the writer also challenges himself in the act of writing. For example, in the final two chapters, the double narratives gradually become one in Wang Er’s narration. Using the first-person voice, Wang Xiaobo twists Wang Er’s narration into a monologue, where Wang Er and Xue Song finally become one as Wang Er’s “monologue” gets more and more delusional. Then, in his efforts to continue telling the tale, he comes to a revelation, claiming himself/herself to be Xue Song’s lover. In other words, Wang Er the narrator becomes many figures in the text. The reader has been following Wang Er’s long
progress towards this moment, and if he or she accepts all the previous fantasies of Wang Er, he or she would probably accept the last fantasy as well.

That being said, The Temple of Longevity is also a fantasy in which acts of reading and re-writing are tentatively decoded; it thus exemplifies a new outlet for a “dying” fiction. Wang Xiaobo the writer endows Wang Er with the identity of a historian/writer suffering from amnesia. The text narrated by such a first-person yet fragmentary voice cannot possibly be closed; instead, in order to present the process of assembling lost pieces of events, the text has to appear seductively ambiguous, inviting the reader’s interpretation.

Wang Xiaobo’s intertextual construction of qi is more ambitious here than in any of his other stories. For example, Wang Er, as the reader/writer/editor of his own text, gradually recalls his other readings in life, among which are works by Patrick Modiano, Kafka, and the Tang source text of the novella “Red Thread.” Every time Wang Er mentions these potential source texts, he shows how he integrates elements of those readings into his own “writing”. For example, Rue des Boutiques Obscures by Modiano appears in the first line of the novella, and this conveniently helps Wang Er begin his narrative. After the first line quoted from Rue des Boutiques Obscures, Wang Er relates his perception of that book as an object in his physical world: its location (“on the windowsill”), its colourful cover (“in black and yellow”), its paper quality (“rough”) , and its surroundings (a patient’s room in early morning sunshine). The sequence of the narration is fragmentary, conforming to the perspective of an immediate observer. It thus displays Wang Er’s perceptions as being immediate, familiar, and accessible to the reader. We might note, however, that the content of the book is not mentioned. Only the surface reality of the book registers with Wang Er the observer, yet he feels that he must be its owner and must have read it at some point in the past. And yet, Wang Er is not certain to whom

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79 Wang Xiaobo, The Bronze Age, 5.
the book belongs; he feels that it might belong to someone else, and so it is with a somewhat uneasy heart he takes it. After a long period of temporary ownership, he finally claims it as his own. Then later he realizes that he was in fact the legitimate owner all along. When he is discharged from the hospital, he leaves the book there, giving up ownership of the physical object. But, by this time, his thorough reading of it has already made him the virtual owner of its content. He leaves the hospital and starts his journey of self-discovery, just like the protagonist in *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*. In Wang Xiaobo’s story, the act of reading literally changes Wang Er’s life.

Wang Er is indeed a reader of Modiano’s text and he is changed by his act of reading. The copy of *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* is a clear example of the destiny of the text. Once published, Modiano the writer cannot do anything to change the text that has gone out into the world; waiting between the covers, the text belongs to no one until it is read. The meaning that Modiano inscribes in his writing awaits decoding by Wang Er the reader. Wang Er first hesitates before the meaningless object; only by taking the book and reading the text therein does he finally own it. The fate of *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* foreshadows that of Wang Er’s own manuscript in *The Temple of Longevity*.

The beginning chapter of *The Temple of Longevity* sets up Wang Er as a first-person narrator/reader, and by allowing Modiano to be nothing but a name related to *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, the narrative in Wang Er’s voice turns the book into an object of Wang Er’s reading, thus prioritizing Wang Er the reader over Modiano the writer in disclosing the message encoded in a published text. The portrayal of such productive reading is positive, considering that Wang Er, not unlike the readers who face the text narrated by Wang Er, also searches for his own factual memory through reading. In this sense the reader of Wang Er’s narrative is similarly
prepared for the next part of the text. Wang Er returns to his actual life facing his own manuscript without recognizing his ownership and authorship of it: “In front of me lies a tale. I have no choice other than reading it.” Then he continues: “I open the volume randomly, and it happens to be the beginning of the tale.” He finds that it is a tale about Red Thread, and Wang Er applies his experience with Modiano’s text to the text about Red Thread:

If I were not the writer of the tale, then no one could be, even though I do not recall any part of the tale. The manuscripts lie here, just like Rue des Boutiques Obscures on the windowsill at the hospital. If I had not come to claim it, then no one would. There are objects without owners in this world, exactly because there are memories lost by people.

Wang Er the reader is now the writer. The text awaits Wang Er’s interpretation, and the message the writer, who is the former self of Wang Er, leaves in the text beforehand is now subject to Wang Er’s revising and interpretation through reading. If the reader of The Temple of Longevity accepts Wang Er’s act of revision as legitimate, then the dramatic irony here emphasizes freedom in the act of reading. In the novella, it is Wang Er’s act of decoding his own message that he encoded before and later forgot. His loss of past memory makes his conventionally legitimate re-writing of his own old text a virtual violation of the text in his capacity as an active reader: as a reader/former writer, he changes the text from time to time without consulting the permission of his lost former self, and yet is entitled to such transforming actions.

Such a controversy caused by textual dramatic irony is crucial to Wang Xiaobo’s qi in The Temple of Longevity. The appeal of the seemingly vulnerable text, the hesitation to violate it as a reader, the incredulity at the potentiality implied in its incompleteness—all these sentiments

80 Wang Xiaobo 8.
81 Wang Xiaobo 8.
82 Wang Xiaobo 8.
find subtle and precise expression in the narrator’s own words, his pauses in narration, and his repeated efforts to experiment with the development of textual events. Therefore, while Wang Aisong labels such interruptions of the narrative as violations of artistry, I argue that they are the contrary. Instead, I believe Wang Xiaobo’s poetics of reading and writing fiction through qi are embodied in his presentation of these interruptions, in Wang Er’s reacquisition of confidence in re-writing, and in the increasingly independent tales of fantasy appearing in Wang Er’s text. The fantasy in the unfinished tale in the manuscript falls under the control of Wang Er, the self-defined independent reader. The text enveloping Wang Er’s reading acts subsequently reveals that Wang Er’s readerly revisions are indeed Wang Er’s desires as a writer.

Wang Er’s interruptions in his narrative, which occur more often during his reading of the first three chapters, indicate his urge to violate the existent texts. Wang Er the reader claims the manuscript as his own yet finds it unfamiliar to his own perceptions. He reads it and tries his best to interpret it, but is frequently frustrated in his attempts to perform “faithful” interpretations. As he encounters different beginnings of the same tale, he complains:

There is a smell of dissent in this manuscript….I firmly want to reject it. I could only keep what is written by me, if it were not —— then what is the point of having it?83

...

I do not like the turn of events, for I already identified myself with Xue Song. …the color of the tale is thus changed.84

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In the Temple of Longevity, I read, ...85

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83 Wang Xiaobo 9.
84 Wang Xiaobo 16.
The writer of the manuscript thus branches out his narrative…

I vaguely feel that the tale, starting at a slow pace and messing about with many clues, hardly implies any meaning. Let it be put away like that.

I really can’t make any sense of my thoughts in the past.

Wang Er claims authorship of the text from the beginning, but refers to the author in the third-person as “the writer.” His frustration at his failure to comprehend his own message in the text aligns him more with the text’s other readers and, in an extended sense, with us, the readers of Wang Xiaobo’s text.

Wang Er’s criticism of the writing technique becomes more forceful with Chapter II of the manuscript. He reads the text as a writer, concerning himself with the possibility of plot continuity, the narrative artistry, the reader’s response to certain plot developments, and the extent to which a reader’s imagination is allowed to veer from the text. He compares three possible ways to narrate the same event, claiming that if there is any better way of narration, then all the other alternatives should be deleted. He compares and analyzes fragments of his

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85 Wang Xiaobo 18.
86 Wang Xiaobo 22.
87 Wang Xiaobo 27.
88 Wang Xiaobo 39.
89 Wang Xiaobo 42.
90 Wang Xiaobo 43.
91 Wang Xiaobo 44.
92 Wang Xiaobo 45.
93 Wang Xiaobo 48-53.
own narrative and, in spite of his efforts to write consistently, he finds himself bound to, as well as driven outward by, many sub-generic elements of fiction writing.\footnote{Wang Xiaobo 65.}

After Wang Er adapts his writerly reader’s reflective approach to the text, with Chapter III he finds himself more frequently in agreement with Wang Er, the earlier writer of the text. He also shows more confidence in experimenting with various generic elements of fiction. With his acceptance of his identity as the writer of the text, all fantasies become possible in his writing. Yet he is soon annoyed by the challenges facing a writer who tries to communicate with his reader through the text: directly addressing the reader as “you,” he envies the external reader’s ability to adopt a stance of uncommitted indifference toward a text. Wang Er laments his own newly-discovered position as writer, a position which causes him to lose the privilege of indifference that belongs to a reader. To him the position of writer means a deplorable permanent association with and responsibility for the written text.\footnote{Wang Xiaobo 87.} In a reversal of conventional values, the external reader’s inability to do anything to the text becomes a desirable privilege of freedom, while Wang Er’s power to re-build his fantasies as he likes becomes a burdensome responsibility.

Wang Er the newly-restored writer is also frustrated by the seeming impossibility of presenting everything he wants to about himself in the text. No matter how hard he tries, there is always a part of his reality and his perception of that reality that is barred from entrance to his text, due to the boundaries of time, space, gender, or even of fantasy.\footnote{Wang Xiaobo 93.} The act of writing the text, it seems, selects part of him and allows that part into the writing but at the same time severs it from the rest of him. The part of himself that is admitted into the text finds an affinity with many similar elements derived from the many source texts behind the writing, and is inexorably
drawn apart from the self that writes. Naturally the intertextual relation of his own writing with
his previous reading of source texts makes him ask: “Why did I write down the tale? I could not
possibly be Defoe, nor Kafka, not even Fowles. I bear little resemblance to anyone, least of all
to the guy who wrote down all these words--who on earth am I?”

In his fiction, he both is and is not Wang Er. His text is full of his past, as well as of the present he lives in, and both are
inscribed in the text for a future reader. To Wang Er, the text is by its very nature an intersection
of previous texts he has read; it is also a vehicle to preserve part of the writer for the reader’s interpretation. The writer is severed from his/her writing once the action of writing is completed,
leaving part of him/her in the text, a part that is subject to change when it is interpreted by the reader.

In his approach to the next three chapters, Wang Er gains authority as a writer, yet
because he has successfully acquired the identity of a reader previously, the text here continues
as a dialogue between the narrator/writer and the reader(s). Wang Er’s wife, the lady in white,
also plays the roles of his first reader, first critic, and sometimes a tentative proxy for Wang Er
the reader. When in dialogue with his text, Wang Er uses auxiliary verbs such as “should,”
“must,” and “can” to assert his determination to rewrite the text of the past in the present, and
he “sees” himself in his text about Red Thread and Xue Song. Lost in his own vision and at a
loss as to where the text will lead the story, he finds that the scenes of fantasy that he creates
“swallow” his thoughts time and time again. At times, Wang Er seems to be able to restore
himself to the position of a writer who travels freely between the text and a surface reality
external to the text. It is “my tale” now, he says, intertextually related to “my old

97 Wang Xiaobo 101.
98 Wang Xiaobo 106.
99 Wang Xiaobo 120-21.
100 Wang Xiaobo 141.
manuscripts,“101 inspired by “my memory,”102 and affected by a “life” that is as trivial as what happens on “my dinner table.”103

Wang Er’s hard-won self-confidence and self-assertion as a writer is challenged by his wife, the lady in white, who points out where literary clichés are used in Wang Er’s text.104 She thus denies Wang Er’s originality as a writer, as well as the possibility for originality based on intertextuality. Wang Er responds with exhaustive experiments in narrative plots and lyrical descriptions of fantasies of metamorphoses.105 Wang Er directly addresses his writing in Chapter IV and admits that it is adapted from a Tang source text, claiming that all the main characters in his tale are named after counterparts in the Tang tale. However, he continues: “Once so explained, the tale is lost to me, and Red Thread and Xue Song are lost to me, too. But I don’t think these are significant losses. What is significant to me is that I acquired some changes in myself through my writing.”106 This is the key point in Wang Xiaobo’s quality of qi as exemplified in the first-person narrator Wang Er: the writing transforms the writer. Speaking from a writer’s position to his future reader, Wang Er implies that part of him is added to the text, and thus lost to his self when he stops writing. At the same time, it is not a lost cause. Indeed, his writing returns to strike back at his lived surface reality. In other words, when his self emerges from his act of writing, it is changed by his writing.

The second time Wang Er mentions the intertextual relationship between the Tang source text and his own text, he says:

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101 Wang Xiaobo 143.
102 Wang Xiaobo 145.
103 Wang Xiaobo 151.
104 Wang Xiaobo 152.
105 Wang Xiaobo 175.
106 Wang Xiaobo 190. My emphasis.
All those readers who have read *Ballad of Sweet Lake*\textsuperscript{107} know the ending of the tale about Red Thread stealing the casket…. Feminist literary critics think… and I think their views are insightful…. I have no objections to them, yet what I want to say is, there indeed is a possibility that…. After I thus portray Xue Song [in my narrative], I break away from any relation with these characters. …I then remember what I promised to my leader. …I decide that a promise is a promise, so I am using the fiction for my research paper. …The lady in white is so excited at my decision that she rolls on our double-bed, which makes me quite happy…. Yet later she says to me: Don’t take it for true. …What confuses me the most is: what can I take for true, what can I not?\textsuperscript{108}

Between the seemingly tongue-in-cheek lines, Wang Er is portrayed as a serious modern writer writing at the intersection of past texts and his own production of self, of past readings and future texts to be read, of shared literary codes and his own individual views, and of his fantasy of the real world and the real presentation of his fantasy.

In Chapter VII, Wang Er’s first-person voice gets ever stronger until it overwhelms the conventional division between a narrator and character(s) in his narration. The clear-cut chronological flow of events is completely blurred so as to present Wang Er’s suppressed desires and his visionary reflections on his internal world: all appear as a fantasy articulated in words. To Wang Er, “the thing that actually happens in the world,” no matter how much it resembles a fantasy, “is not a tale.”\textsuperscript{109} It is only in his tale that he can portray his leader as a

\textsuperscript{107} *Ballad of Sweet Lake* (甘澤謠) is the original title for the collection of Tang tales by Yuan Jiao in which “Red Thread” is included.

\textsuperscript{108} Wang Xiaobo, *The Bronze Age*, 207-8.

\textsuperscript{109} Wang Xiaobo 213.
“pander,” and his wife as a young girl waiting for his rescue from the pander’s control.\textsuperscript{110}

Meanwhile in Wang Er’s “real life,” Wang Er’s leader talking to Wang Er is unaware of Wang Er being “not a single person, but a micro-universe; …and also a certain broad time and space, …with much lyrical force, as well as malicious power.…”\textsuperscript{111} Wang Er thus evokes his fantasy to counteract and even transform his depressing physical reality. Reality and fantasy intersect with one another frequently and naturally in this chapter, and the text thereby generates reading pleasure. Wang Xiaobo explores the power of transgression through \textit{qi} in his literary experiments, echoed in Wang Er’s displays of true freedom of roaming in his fantasy narrative; as he declares: “Fiction is not restricted. I could be at any time, at any place. I could be anyone. I can as well refuse to be at any time, or at any place. I could as well refuse to be anyone. If it were not so, then what is the necessity for fiction?”\textsuperscript{112}

The final chapter of \textit{The Temple of Longevity} is a beautiful prose narrative in a confident writer’s voice, tinged with a poignant touch that belongs to a first-person narrator. Time as represented by the chronological flow of events is completely broken, and a fundamentally human perception of events, as free as it is intangible, emerges. It is more lyrical than prosaic, and the city of Chang’an in this chapter is more like a fantasy materializing in physical reality in words. Yet once the journey to gain the writer’s full position ends, the text’s openness to its readers closes down. The text, now fully exhausted by the reader’s reading, retreats into memory and, together with the meaning produced by the reader, becomes a past. It is in this chapter of \textit{The Temple of Longevity} that Wang Xiaobo reduces the importance of representing reality with verisimilitude and simultaneously displays the lyrical force of modern literary Chinese. With the power of modern literary Chinese, he represents the physical world of

\textsuperscript{110} Wang Xiaobo 217.
\textsuperscript{111} Wang Xiaobo 217.
\textsuperscript{112} Wang Xiaobo 235.
Chang’an as perceived by Wang Er, which is actually Wang Er’s fantasy of Chang’an rendered into a tangible text.

The final chapter of The Temple of Longevity is truly a conclusion as it closes every door that Wang Xiaobo opened via his first-person narrator Wang Er. The source story of Red Thread and Xue Song ceases to frame Wang Er’s narrative; instead, the text becomes nothing more than Wang Er’s monologue about his perception of his life and world, with only faint echoes of his past readings. The three subsections in this closing chapter are about the same events, as perceived and narrated separately by Wang Er in the city of Chang’an in the past, and in the city of Beijing in the present. Wang Er’s narrating the same events in different forms confirms his success at transgressing restrictions of time and space. He reveals through his narratives that Chang’an and Beijing are de facto the same city in his fantasy. Time cannot restrict Wang Er’s representations of his true perception of these two cities in different times. He reveals that all these events may as well occur at the same time through his perceptions. Time markers such as “a thousand years ago” or “in the year of 1975” appear in his sentences, but his vivid sensual memory of events essentially blurs the time difference. His narrating voice, claiming the story as its own, displays its powerful self-assertion. It is as if after an initial sputtering start in previous chapters the narrative finally gains full momentum, pouring out its lyrical force for the reader in the closing chapter. Wang Xiaobo’s artistry is fully displayed in the transition from Wang Er’s initial doubts and clumsiness in narration to the ultimate lyrical, uninterrupted narrative that chronicles his inner world in the final chapter.

Once fantasy helps Wang Er transgress boundaries of time and space, his actual workplace at the quiet Temple of Longevity shifts in his perception. The same transformation
happens to his perception of his family life in his small attic.\textsuperscript{113} Wang Er’s Chang’an is such a place that “in this city, no names of people or places matter, what matters is its essence.” In contrast, Wang Er’s narration of the same events set in Beijing assumes a different style: unlike the soothing rhythmic description of Chang’an in his fantasy that emphasizes the “essence” of the city over particulars, his sentences in the Beijing version display clear references to the actual city layouts of Beijing. Beijing is presented as concrete, hard and emotionless: “It’s full of names. I have a Grandma, a cousin, and myself, all having our own names. We live on a street in the east part of the city, and the street has its own name.”\textsuperscript{114} The repetitive syntax in such statements implies the coldness and fixity of everyday reality, which the narrator frequently tries to escape or to forget even as it is the very memory that he once lost and now seeks to recover.

The urge to break the bondage of the physical world and produce fantasy finds voice repeatedly in sentences such as “I am still in the City of Chang’an.”\textsuperscript{115} Memory seamlessly merges into Wang Er’s present perceptions without distracting the reader from the pleasure of reading. Wang Xiaobo displays linguistic dexterity in engaging lyrical forces embedded in the modern Chinese language. He uses poetic rhythms to project Wang Er’s Chang’an fantasy onto his everyday life in Beijing. Beyond that, Wang Er’s narrative focuses largely on moments, images, and sensual fragments, which make the transgression of temporal and spatial limits not only possible but even inevitable.

The last subsection in the last chapter contains the climax as well as the poignant ending of the whole novella. When Wang Er says, “My past is not a piece of vagueness anymore. One day in the past I had a wedding,”\textsuperscript{116} the split between the physical world and fantasy resumes via

\textsuperscript{113} Wang Xiaobo 249-50.
\textsuperscript{114} Wang Xiaobo 250.
\textsuperscript{115} Wang Xiaobo 255.
\textsuperscript{116} Wang Xiaobo 264.
the re-establishment of boundaries. The narrator tries, unlike in the first three chapters, to stem the split, trying to merge the two again by mixing two types of narratives, which is evident in statements such as, “I part with the lady in white in the City of Chang’an,” or “In my own story, it is way past midnight,” or “At present, I have no place to go other than the City of Chang’an.” Yet these efforts to merge the two narratives only betray his awareness of their differences. The more he tries, the more obvious the incongruities between the two versions become. The final blow of reality lands home, and Wang Er says, “When everything inevitably falls into reality, my story is going to end.” It is at this final moment that he again addresses the external reader:

You’ve already known how this story ends: I merge with the past self and we become one person. The lady in white merges with the young girl in the past and they become one person. I then merge with her and we become less. The so-called reality is thus helplessly dull.

The separation inevitably divides the past and present, the physical world and Wang Er’s fantasy of it. If the reader wants to reject the separation so clearly stated in Wang Er’s conclusion and wants to keep the possibilities of fantasy alive, then he or she must start a new story by himself or herself. But if one passively accepts the narrator’s voice, then the end of the text is the end of one’s reading. In this case, the text, together with the writer’s message and the reader’s interpretation, die together as the reading ends. Wang Xiaobo gives his readers this choice in Wang Er’s last gesture. Wang Er lies down in bed, recalling his past, staring into the darkness in despair. He knows that the next morning everything will end as his story ends, as he has already warned the reader. To him, the prior union of fantasy and the physical world must

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117 Wang Xiaobo 268-9.
118 Wang Xiaobo 270.
119 Wang Xiaobo 270.
inevitably dissolve, and he must eventually face everyday reality. Wang Er then turns away from addressing the reader directly, as if by this arrangement Wang Xiaobo opens up an interpretive gap to for the reader to fill in. The reader can choose to follow Wang Er and leave the text, or to remain in the text and enter it perhaps at another time and at another location. The fiction is therefore ended, and yet not ended entirely. The literary quality of qi thus created by Wang Xiaobo redeems the amnesic Wang Er in his act of writing and reading, and thus holds out the possibility to do this again for readers to come.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have discussed Wang Xiaobo’s views on writing fantasy in fiction, and studied his two major works that elaborate his mode of qi. In *Tales of the Tang People*, Wang Xiaobo is aware of his own identity as reader/writer, and in his texts there is explicit evidence to show intertextual links with source texts. The intertextual relationship between Wang Xiaobo’s text and Tang texts is more imitational than transformational. He borrows heavily from Tang source texts in terms of characters, narrative frames, and even major dramatic conflicts, and he inserts his contemporary presence through the complexity of the first-person narrative voice, as well as through his clumsy experiments with various Chinese language styles in narration. When the same Tang source texts later travel into *The Bronze Age*, however, an essential change happens to the intertextual relation between Wang Xiaobo’s writing and his Tang source texts. Unlike the overtly imitative style and a merely implicit literary urge to transform the source, Wang Xiaobo creates his own contemporary solution to the question of how to revive and enrich that tradition. In the three novellas collected as *The Bronze Age* he displays fully the literary quality of qi, as well as its effects on the reader. Through his experiments with modern Chinese
literary language Wang Xiaobo explores its transgressive force. The increasing complexity of the first-person narrator Wang Er throughout the three novellas opens a new direction for fiction: with the literary transgression enacted in and by qi, human perceptions of reality can cross limits of time and space both for the writer and the reader, both within and without the written text.

Beyond the traditional engagement of lyrical language and intergeneric crossings common to the shaping of qi in fiction of ages past, The Bronze Age adds a new dimension of irony to the tradition that is mainly realized though Wang Xiaobo’s use of Wang Er in the narration. The three tales about the three Tang women with a common “Red” in their names are extended into longer narratives, but the epistemological structure in these tales is fragmented and undermined by the first-person narrator, Wang Er. Wang Xiaobo gives his first-person narrator multiple positions as a critical reader of past texts, as a write of new ones, and as the main character in his own narrative. Wang Xiaobo’s deft handling of Wang Er’s multiple positions in the narrative brings a new level of sophistication and complexity to literary qi in the long history of Chinese literature.
Chapter VI

Conclusion

In these chapters I have explored the emergence, decline, and revival of qi 奇 in Chinese fiction. Qi was the means for members of the literati in the Tang dynasty to transgress the restrictions of historiography through an aesthetic pursuit of freedom of roaming. Qi was also a vital force in fiction for post-Tang writers who saw through the spell of Neo-Confucian conventionalism in writing; for the Republican writers who distanced themselves from the danger of being overwhelmed by the call of social and political needs; and for fiction writers in the 1980s and 1990s who looked past a recent history of Socialist Realism to the long tradition of Chinese literature, and fashioned their contemporary interpretation of this special quality in Chinese fiction.

I therefore selected texts steeped in qi in order to trace its ups and downs between the Tang dynasty and the end of the last century, where it takes such lively and various forms in Wang Xiaobo’s tales adapted from the Tang tales of marvels. I found that, except for the Tang dynasty and in Wang Xiaobo, qi has often been marginalized and reduced in Chinese fiction. However, it is equally evident that even from such a marginalized and reduced position, qi still enabled its writers to provide new perspectives, thereby inspiring readers in unpredictable ways.

The revival of qi in fiction of the 1980s and 1990s was a gradual process. Different writers present highly individualized forms of literary qi. In works like The King of Chess, Red Sorghum, “Classical Love” and My Life as Emperor, the writers mainly use qi as an element to add lyrical force to their works so that they present an alternative understanding of reality. In Wang Xiaobo’s two major works, which are textually and generically related to the Tang tales of marvels, qi is thoroughly situated in a contemporary literary context. The intertextual
comparison between the Tang tales of marvels and Wang Xiaobo’s *Tales of the Tang People*, and also between those two sets of texts and his last literary project *The Bronze Age*, reveals much about how he constructs his literary quality of *qi* and how he deploys literary *qi* to create a sense of disjunctive irony. He enriches the definition of *qi* that began with the Tang tales of marvels, making it a transformative force relevant to today’s Chinese fiction.

Indeed, if we go beyond the Tang dynasty and discuss the umbrella concept of classical Chinese fiction, or *xiaoshuo*, in its pre-Tang formation and nature, we see that *xiaoshuo* was born first as a subordinate supplement to grand historical narratives, as well as a source of reading pleasure created through free fabrication and literary beauty. Until the Tang dynasty, however, aesthetic and literary pursuits in *xiaoshuo* had always been secondary to historical and political ones, and the writing of *xiaoshuo* had long been bound within the generic restriction of biographies and other forms of historical writings. The literary quality of *qi* in the Tang tales of marvels, however, made it possible for members of the Tang literati to write down what was perceived in the images the world left in their minds. For writers with the emancipated spirit of you 遊, or freedom of roaming, *qi* can thus be understood as the skilful literary application of genres and values in constructing these images. It is human fantasy created in words. With such freedom, the Tang literati roamed between the restrictions of genres like historiographical biography and lyrical poetry. This transformative poetic power works to dissolve the narrative frame in a text such as “An Explication of the Lament from Xiang River.” The literary experiments with literary transgressions and the actual responses from fellow members of the literati who witnessed such experiments were also recorded in such tales as *Yingying’s Story* and *The Tale of Li Wa*. The significant shift of focus from the political and practical purposes of writing to the literary ones generated, justified, and historically validated the thematic changes.
Themes of transgression in tales like “The Tale of Curly-Bearded Guest,” “Kunlun Slave,” and “Red Thread” subvert the restrictions of generic biography writing. Indeed, they introduce a new literature to the reader: a literature that does not present what is already there in a person’s eye, but constructs what might be, and what is only in the writer’s imagination.

The literary quality of qi did not thrive after the Tang dynasty, and the tendency to contain fiction writing within the boundaries of political and social needs increased in times of social turmoil. In short, the practical and political mission of xiaoshuo again dominated the writing and reading of fiction after the Tang dynasty. Weak as qi was, it did not die out, though. Instead, in its sporadic expressions in Liaozi, Border Town, and Chuanqi, it survived and continued to display its transformative power and vitality as used by writers who valued human perceptions of events through the lens of the imagination over mere impressions through the senses. These expressions add to the possible forms qi may take in Chinese fiction. For example, in the Qing dynasty, the other-worldly values present in Pu Songling’s lyrical portrayal of female fox spirits create a quality of qi in his longer romantic records of the strange and supernatural. In the 1930s and 1940s, Shen Congwen and Zhang Ailing challenged the dominant mood of their time and managed to bring qi back to Chinese fiction.

After half a century’s bondage to politics, qi gave new power to Chinese fiction writers of the 1980s and 1990s. When they resumed their quest for qi, they recovered freedom of roaming and crossed, in their fiction, all kinds of barriers that had once contained them within political, social and even cultural bounds. Step by step, qi released its subversive power of literary transgression. For example, Ah Cheng breaks the spell of politics by presenting the traditional Chinese philosophical belief in freedom of roaming via his characterization of a King of Chess. Mo Yan successfully goes beyond imitation of traditional lyrical lines, reaching a
hallucinatory domain where past, present and future meet in a first-person narrative voice. Yu Hua subversively adapts a traditional clichéd romance of the scholar and the beauty, and by a parody of that very genre he gives it a new postmodern twist. Su Tong displays highly subjective perceptions of history and fantasy in his two works of historical fiction, and clearly reveals a preference for fantasy as it fosters the strongest sense of qi.

In these writers’ works, qi works as a transformative and transgressive literary force within the narrative frame. When we turn to Wang Xiaobo, we find a writer who is completely devoted to the quality of qi and displays it thoroughly, consistently, and persistently in his short career of fiction writing. He adds to the tradition of qi in fiction by his undaunted resistance to boundaries external to literary values. He also openly invites his small readership to forge qi with him in his fantasies. Two of his major works, Tales of the Tang People and The Bronze Age (published respectively in the 1980s and 1990s), represent his quality of qi in fiction, first in its early development and then in its maturity. In Tales of the Tang People, the intertextual relationship between Wang Xiaobo’s text and the Tang text is more imitational than transformational. He borrows heavily from the Tang source texts in terms of characters, narrative frames, and even major dramatic conflicts, but he inserts his contemporary presence through the complexity of the first-person narrative voice and through his experiments with various Chinese language styles in narration. When the same Tang source texts travel to The Bronze Age, however, an essential change happens to the intertextual relation between Wang Xiaobo’s writing and his Tang texts through the intratextual transformations he creates.

In the three novellas collected in The Bronze Age, Wang Xiaobo elaborates qi in a contemporary context. His experiments with modern Chinese literary language explore its full transformative force, and his enrichment of the first-person narrator Wang Er throughout the
three novellas opens new directions for fiction writing: via literary transgression in and by qi, perceptions of events through imagination can cross the limits of time and space both for the writer and the reader. In addition to the traditional use of lyrical language and intergeneric crossing common to qi in fiction since the Tang dynasty, Wang Xiaobo adds a dimension of irony to the tradition. It is mainly realized by Wang Xiaobo’s use of Wang Er in the narration. Wang Xiaobo gives this first-person narrator multiple positions: as a critical reader of the past texts, a writer of new ones, a main character in his own narratives, and even a namely alter ego for Wang Xiaobo the actual writer. Wang Er’s complex narration makes the humour of qi more ironic and sophisticated in a literary sense.

Shaped by the generic requirements of historiography, Chinese xiaoshuo was forced historically to prioritize its political and practical functions above its literary ones. The philosophical freedom of roaming liberated Tang writers from this historical burden, allowing them to create a sense of qi in their bold generic transgressions and subsequent thematic transgressions. The lyrical force of literary language helped the Tang literati establish in chuanqi tales of marvels the first xiaoshuo that upended the hierarchy of the practical and the literary. Twelve hundred years later, the same literary quality of qi helped subvert the political agenda imposed on xiaoshuo, through similar experiments with lyrical language, generic transgression in creating fictional worlds, and experiments with narrative form. Such a seemingly apolitical literary quality can actually turn out to be more world-changing than literature with an explicitly political agenda, as happens in Wang Xiaobo’s The Temple of Longevity: the act of writing changes the writer, and the act of reading changes the reader, all thanks to the use of qi in the text. Indeed, in his last literary project, Wang Xiaobo seems to have revealed the mystery of the meaning-making experience in the text as the object of writing and reading. Finally, I would
argue that, by echoing a very old tradition of fiction writing, Wang Xiaobo offers a new point of departure for Chinese fiction. The *qi* that Wang Xiaobo defines multiplies readerly responses as readers are forced to negotiate different paths to a new point. That being said, Wang Xiaobo brings a new power to literary quality of *qi* through his complexly-layered narrative and narrator, in both of which acts of reading and re-writing are tentatively decoded. The *qi* in Wang Xiaobo’s writing thus exemplifies a new outlet for a “dying” fiction.
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