

Vignette: Reading Memories in the Drizzle: On Yu Hua's Novel *Zai xiyu zhong huhan* and its Reception

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Abstract

This vignette presents Yu Hua's novel from 1991 and analyses two different interpretations of the novel with fifteen years between them written by the same prominent critic, Chen Xiaoming. The first interpretation was written in 1992 when China was in the early stages of economic reform. The second was written in 2007 when deep-going social changes had affected the life of the individual. By comparing these two essays, I aim to show how a literary text may act as a catalyst for bringing out existential issues at stake at a particular point in time.

Keywords: reader-response theory; memory; adolescence; individualisation; social change

Introduction

Memories are as much about the present as they are about the past. When we remember, the past is not preserved, but reconstructed based on the present (Halbwachs 1992). In a literary text such as a novel featuring individual memory as both theme and structure, a layer of carefully crafted fictionality is added. A further level is that of the reader, reacting to the text from the perspective of where, when and who the reader is. Therefore, not only the text itself, but also its reception can tell us something about how changing social and temporal contexts may cause values and concepts to be reconfigured, and how this may influence the interaction between individual and collective memory (Neumann 2008) – a highly contested issue in the public sphere in China.

Throughout this article, I explore Yu Hua's novel, *Zai xiyu zhong huhan* (Cries in the Drizzle). This novel, written in the wake of demonstrations on Tiananmen in 1989 and the subsequent massacre, is a unique psychological portrait of a boy growing up in the countryside over a period of about ten years, concurrent with the years of the

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Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Below, I present the novel and discuss the implications of differences in the reception around the time of its publication in 1991 and fifteen years later when it was re-evaluated.

This first long novel by well-known writer Yu Hua (b. 1960), structured as a memoir, is a remarkable and moving narrative of solitude and loneliness. The story is told by a grown-up narrator, yet everything is seen through the eyes of the child. This double narration creates an effect of memory upon memory. The dual voices of the mature narrator and his younger self sometimes blend and imperceptibly interact. As the older I-narrator is trying to retrieve his childhood past, Yu Hua skilfully manipulates the gap of time that simultaneously connects and divides the man and the child. This calls to mind comments by American sinologist, Stephen Owen (1986). Owen sees the presence of the past as the main trope of Chinese literature. He argues that the fascination with the gap of time, between memory and effacement, between remembering and what is remembered, is so fundamental to Chinese literature that it corresponds to the western fascination with the gap between a text and its meaning, between surface appearance and truth. Similar to the western concept of mimesis, where what imitates is always secondary and posterior to what is being imitated, memory always moves towards what is remembered, but a gap of time, of incompleteness, intervenes. It is in this gap, which simultaneously promises and denies access, that the force of literature lives (Owen 1986: 1-15). In modern literature, such as this novel, this phenomenon is reinforced by an awareness of the instability of the act of remembrance and how it can be represented in literature.

Although Owen's observations relate specifically to classical poetry, they come to mind when we turn to *Zai xiyu zhong huhan*. The story takes place in a village or small town during the 1960s and 70s (with scenes stretching further back in time) where the protagonist-narrator lives in a family consisting of a father, mother and three brothers of whom he is the middle one. At the age of six, his parents sent him to live with a childless couple in a small town, from where he returns six years later. What makes this story especially poignant is that we never learn why this child in particular is looked upon as an outsider; why he is not loved, but either ignored or scolded. That is just the way it is. In fact, there is very little love in the text. In a sense, the protagonist-narrator's mental (and often physical) isolation is just an extreme case of the lack of human concern and warmth we meet elsewhere in this novel. The narrator's solitude is primarily a result of being physically

and spiritually rejected by his family. Still, it is also an aspect of his psychological character, partly conditioned by the time in which he lives. Thus, the novel is at the same time a detailed and sensitive description from the inside of the mind of a lonely child, and a keen and almost detached presentation of private life in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution period, as observed by this outsider-figure who is simultaneously at a distance and part of it all. Extreme cases of political or ideological violence, associated with the Cultural Revolution, are conspicuously absent (which may reflect the actual situation in places far away from big cities). Instead, we get a psychologically complex and often humorous, episodic portrait of growing-up, imbedded in scenes showing abuse and deceit among grown-ups.

In this novel, Yu Hua's characteristic literary technique of direct, detached description without explanation, so effectively employed in his previous avant-garde work, is skilfully combined with the subjectivity of an emotionally sensitive, highly individualised, human observer. The novel abounds with acts of cruelty, stupidity, tragedy and bad luck. This is demonstrated in several improbable but not impossible events (e.g. using the frozen body of a dead father as a weapon, drowning in the cesspool, suicide by hand-grenade) – yet softened by vivid, light-hearted scenes of friendship and contact between the protagonist and other children. Though often told in a tone of dry humour, this is a world where morality, ethics and human self-respect are all but non-existent. Most prominently in the portrait of the narrator's father, but in fact, all fathers in the book, they either abandon, betray or abuse their close family. The Cultural Revolution exists only as an atmosphere of gloom (drizzle), uncertainty and hypocrisy. Incidents such as forced confessions at school, accusations, or arbitrary punishments are things that simply happen. The father's pathetic and unfounded hopes to turn the death of his youngest son into his elevation from ordinary peasant to "revolutionary hero", is another example. Human dignity reduced to pathetic revolutionary epithets. These incidents stand unexplained, functioning paradoxically as ways of detaching, disentangling or breaking loose of any grand narrative of national memory. It is simply irrelevant in the context of this novel's universe – unless we choose to look upon such events as a kind of reverse testimony, of witnessing against history (Braester 2003).

Cries (*huhān*), in the title, stands as the symbolic response to the predicament of solitude, rejection and abandonment that permeates the text. In the opening of the novel, the grown-up I-narrator looks back

on his own self as a six-year-old, as he is about to fall asleep. From far away comes the sound of a woman's anguished wails,

I can see myself now, a startled child, eyes wide with fear, the precise outline of my face obscured by darkness. The woman's cries persisted. Anxiously, I expected to hear another voice, a voice that would respond to her wails, that could assuage her grief, but it never materialized. I realize now, why I was gripped by such intense disquiet: it was because I waited in vain for that answering voice. Surely, there is nothing more chilling than the sound of inconsolable cries on such a desolate night (Yu 2007: 3, 1993:1).

We are never told who the woman is, the scene is simply a preamble, a condensed image, emblematic of the angst and solitude within and around this little boy. To 'wait in vain for that answering voice' precisely expresses a fundamental state of existential aloneness, here reinforced by the image of two separate souls, the boy and the woman, each left alone and lost in the darkness. This scene is echoed later in the novel when the only genuinely positive character, the narrator's friend, dies from brain haemorrhage, left alone by his father (a doctor), mother and brother, who do not care to notice his agony and silent cries for help.

Solitude, therefore, is what follows the dissolution of the family as a base of respect and love, and by extension, the general distrust and fragility of human relations in the shadow of a rural society in which old values are hollowed out with nothing to replace them. Symbolically, the only 'answer' to the woman's cries, as perceived by the child, is a strange man dressed in black, later found dead. Death, as unexplained as cries, seems to be a token of the era (Yu 2010). Yet Yu Hua's memory portrait of the rejected child, the solitary outcast, is far from a one-dimensional one of angst and an unfulfilled desire to belong. It possesses a dual perspective in that it also includes integrity and the ability to see as 'other'. The outsider role involves a certain voluntary self-protection, and a core of pleasure and calm. Here the village pond, the place to which the protagonist withdraws for reflection, functions both as a *lieu de memoire* and as stationary locus of his outsider position.

Although this novel does not overtly address any grand political or ideological issues, the text easily lends itself to interpretations where the state of the family reflects a broader mental and social climate (e.g. Yu 1993, 2005). Furthermore, the family-state metaphor has a long tradition, expressed in notions like *jia guo tong gou* (family nation same

construction) or *jia guo yi ti* (family nation one system). Family relations, and the individual's position within the family, may not only be the lens through which social change and historical events are seen unfolding, but may symbolically reflect wider issues at stake at a particular point in time. As we shall see, this approach becomes relevant when we go on to analyse the critical reception of this novel.

Critical Reception: From Despair to Rejection

German reader-response theorist, Wolfgang Iser (1978), proposes the idea that literature is a performative art form, where each reader performs the text, acting as both audience and director, much like dealing with a musical score, where each performance may be different. Iser further argues that the text in part controls the reader's interpretation, by way of its specific literary devices, but also contains 'gaps' which the reader creatively fills, according to his/her own context. Thus analysing different performances, i.e. readings or critical receptions, of a particular text, may tell us something about the issues at stake and the spiritual climate in changing contexts. It is therefore interesting to see how this novel was received, first, in the immediate context around the time of its publication, and much later, at a time when Chinese society had undergone some important changes, related mainly to an accelerating process of individualisation.

At its publication in 1991, the novel was largely ignored, but for a few mixed reviews. It received criticism for overly emphasising a personal story, by way of private memory, without placing it in its explicit context of national memory (Liu 2004: 122-123). The novel was seen by some critics as not participating in the necessary construction of a revised collective memory of the historical period of the Cultural Revolution, and thus not sufficiently contributing to a shared *minjian jiyi* (people's memory) that might supplement or correct national memory discourses.

One of these critics was Chen Xiaoming. Below, I look at how this 'informed' (Fish 1980) and prominent reader chose to 'perform' *Zai xiyu zhong huhan* in the different contexts of 1992 and 2007. Chen, who has the same age as Yu Hua and is a professor at Beijing University, was already from the late 1980s, one of China's most prolific and influential literary critics. He published two lengthy essays on Yu's novel, the first immediately after its publication, and the second – almost twice as long – fifteen years later. While large parts of the actual close-reading, and the examples given, are more or less the same, the

overall approach to, and general positioning of, the novel are fundamentally different in the two essays.

In the first essay, entitled '*Shengguo fufa: juewang de xinli zizhuan*' (Surpassing the Law of the Father/Patriarchy: A Mental Autobiography of Hopelessness), Chen takes the word *juewang* (despair or hopelessness) as the key concept in his analysis (Chen 1992). However, he also stresses that the sense of despair that permeates the text is complemented by a sense of defiance and self-respect in the young protagonist. What Chen finds most remarkable, is its total negation of paternal authority, especially the fact that the portrayal of fathers as villains comes from the perspective of the sons. This, he notes, has symbolic significance. As the traditional idea of the father figure is deconstructed, the resilience of most of the children shines through. Chen even points explicitly to political implications: Since the fathers in this novel are themselves living under the sway of a 'fatherly' system fraught with deceit, dangers, misfortune and arbitrary politics, what else can they do, but violently suppress the children?

Chen recognises the intensely subjective voice as the distinctive feature of the narrative and ultimately what makes it a masterpiece, indeed a high point in contemporary Chinese novelistic art. Yet he concludes on a critical note. The rebellion against the fathers is doomed to fail, since there are already numerous sons and grandsons ready to take over. What Yu Hua seems to have forgotten, is to address the thorny question of how to enter into dialogue with a new and ever changing social reality. To do this, he claims, it is not enough to delve into the inner life of the self, one has to go into the vast limitless reality of life. 'It is not only about *my* story, but *our* story, not only *his* existence, but *their* reality' (Chen 1992: 10). By emphasising the importance of the plural and the collective, and blaming the novel for being too individualistic, Chen, writing in 1992, presents himself as being in tune with prevailing conditions in society. His basic approach to the novel is to view it as a summing-up of recent years' revolution in fiction, as marking the end of an era, rather than the beginning of a new one. He compares it to an old tree blooming, without sprouting new twigs, and predicts that it will drown in the incoming flood of cultural garbage.

Looking at the context in which this first essay was written, two issues immediately come to mind: the trauma of Tiananmen less than three years before, and Deng Xiaoping's all out call for marketisation at the time of writing. As Chen fills out the gaps in Yu Hua's text, his

focus on the negation of the law of the father by the young generation, the suppression and betrayal by authorities and the defiance of the young, resonates with events in 1989. One easily gets the impression that Chen reads Yu Hua's memory narrative through the lens of a more recent memory, adding extra meaning to the text. However, his final call to accept a new and changing social reality, where the time for challenge and rebellion is over, is clearly in unison with the prevailing political climate of selective amnesia and forward-looking focus on economic liberalisation. The message seems to be that literature should be mobilised to help the formation of a collective memory more in tune with contemporary realities.

In 2007, fifteen years after his first review-essay on *Zai Xiyu zhong huhan*, Chen Xiaoming published another article in which he takes a radically different approach (Chen 2007). Replacing the *juewang* of his 1992 article with the term *qijue* (rejection/abandonment) as a central concept in his analysis, he now describes the novel as one of the most profound texts in post-Mao literature, emblematic of the mental and social experience of people in contemporary China. Referring to, among others, Kierkegaard and Camus, he implicitly argues that only individual memory is existentially valid and stresses that Yu Hua's use of the first-person child narrator is not about relating a childhood past, but serves to project a uniquely individualised point of view, uncontaminated by preordained linguistic discourse. Therefore, rather than a story about growing-up, this is a story about the experience of rejection. In contrast to his first article, in which he places *Zai xiyu zhong huhan* as marking the end of a short-lived literary development, Chen now considers this novel to be a breakthrough. He sees it as a first-mover in exploring a predicament that has been wrongfully erased from PRC literature.

The whole essay is a thorough exploration of the concept of *qijue* with Yu Hua's novel as a point of reference, posited in a literary genealogy, including writers such as Lu Xun, Proust, Camus, Kafka, Kierkegaard and Ibsen. *Qijue*, as Chen writes, touches upon the deepest trauma of human existence, and is simultaneously the most common and the most extreme experience of that specific period, i.e. the Cultural Revolution. With *qijue*, he writes, we are at the sorest spot of human existence, and in this novel, it is not only the child narrator or the crying, unknown woman at the beginning, who have been rejected. In fact, it goes for most of the characters. The bullying, pathetic, poor-peasant father himself is also rejected, by history, by society and even by the revolution.

A central issue in this condition, therefore, revolves around the complete negation of the law of the father, the system of paternal authority. As noted in the 1992 essay, the portrait of the central father figure, the narrator's mean, irresponsible, good for nothing, immoral father, can certainly be read as a symbolic deconstruction of the very idea of paternal authority. Yet it is also a realistic description of the degradation of human dignity prevalent at that time. As noticed by Chen, both of these readings have strong political connotations.

Indeed, Chen finds that nearly all of Yu Hua's fiction is about *qijue*. Far from his concluding insistence on objectivity and collectivity in his previous discussion, he now embraces the idea of the single individual as primarily defined by his identity in the close family.

Generally, his exploration of the complexity and existential duality inherent in the concept of *qijue* is the most intriguing change in the 2007 essay. To feel rejected is indeed the ultimate, unbearable feeling, so man invariably searches for friends, partners and the warmth of the family. Still, it is only in solitude that man can get to know himself, can reach the depths of his soul. Chen here points to the close connection between *qijue* and the modernist concept of aloneness, solitude, in Chinese, *gudugan*. *Gudugan*, in contrast to *qijue*, contains a core of individual identity and integrity. *Qijue* is an existential condition of being left out and therefore much worse than feeling alone. In Chen's optics, *gudugan* has positive connotations and is something that is denied mean and hateful people with no genuine self. To feel alone, you must possess individuality, *getixing*, a core of selfhood, which enables you to stay away from the collective. This *gudugan* at the bottom of the experience of *qijue*, is what allows the young protagonist in *Zai xiyu zhong huhan* to honestly confront the *qijue*, to watch as 'other', and even reach a kind of transcendence and happiness in recognising the uniqueness of 'I' as myself (Chen 2007: 125).

The essay brings in the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, in order to reflect on yet another aspect of *qijue* – besides its link to the concept of angst, *kongjugan*, primarily associated with Kierkegaard's existential philosophy. With Kierkegaard, *qijue* can be a positive, subjectively induced action, grounded in the act of taking on responsibility. Here, the English translation of *qijue* would be more like 'renounce' – to renounce the mundane, to voluntarily and actively give up something, referring to Kierkegaard's abandonment of his fiancée, and of family life, in order to submit to an unconditional faith in God (Chen 2007: 128-129).

Memory and Social Change

Zai xiyu zhong huhan is a book about memory. Chen Xiaoming's two readings testify to the novel's powerful impact in activating a mental and intellectual process of interpretation and memory, and of relating its theme to existential issues of contemporary relevance. However, the differences between them also indicate that between 1992 and 2007, Chinese society had fundamentally changed – most importantly, it had entered a process of individualisation.

Primarily, since the turn of the millennium, economic reforms came into effect, including a full-scale market economy in numerous spheres of life, loss of state-funded social security and increased individual freedom, entailing responsibility and risk with regard to areas such as education, housing, employment and medical care, hitherto controlled by the state. These significant changes in social structure left the individual in what may be called 'a state of aloneness' – leading, for some, to a loss of values, civil conduct, ideology and belief in authority (Hansen and Svarverud 2010).

In 1992, the year of the first essay, Chinese society was still in the early stages of economic reform and still reeling from the intense debates and reflections on the state of Chinese culture and society in the 1980s, culminating in the tragedy of the 1989 massacre. The increased focus on the individual in the literature of the 1980s had mostly reflected a concern with how to reinstate it within the context of nation and history as part of the larger picture, rather than searching for meaning within the inner realms of the personal self (Wedell-Wedellsborg 2010).

Fifteen years later, Chinese society had undergone deep-going structural and social changes affecting the life of the single individual in essential ways. In the words of sociologist Yan Yunxiang: 'By the turn of the new century, changes in Chinese society had developed into a twofold social transformation, namely the rise of the individual on the one hand and the individualisation of the social structure on the other' (Yan 2010: 495). Yan further argues that such transformation can be found both in the objective domain of life situations and in the subjective domain of consciousness. Pointing to a radical breakthrough in the subjective domain, a re-formation of the self and a search for individual identity, Yan finds that the increasing importance of emotionality and desire in one's private life is one of the most important changes that has occurred in the individualisation process (Yan 2010: 510).

Viewed upon this background, we may understand how individualisation on the structural and personal level may create the conditions for a change in reception, or with Iser (1978), for a different performance of the literary text, one which resonates with a somewhat different mood, a mental climate open to interpretations rooted in subjective experiences of precarious existence and aloneness. The notion of *juewang* despair – the key concept in the 1992 review – means giving up, a sense of hopelessness, of no way out, which the critic can only counteract by superimposing a hollow-sounding call for the writer to leave the confines of the inner self and delve into ‘the reality of life’. However, by pointing to another key concept in the review written fifteen years later, that of *qijue* rejection, and embracing the state of rejection as a human condition, the critic adds another dimension. Although rejection in itself is worse than despair, it also opens up to the modernist notion of solitude, which entails a positive core of individual identity and integrity. Chen Xiaoming’s second reading of Yu Hua’s novel, in a different social and spiritual context, therefore, presents a much more ambiguous and complex interpretation, highlighting the novel’s relevance beyond the time in which it was written. Rather than reading it as a closed work, evincing a narrative closure and describing something past, Chen demonstrates how the novel may generate new ways of activating a memory process, one that links to the present through psychological or emotional contingency, not just through facts and events. He thereby points to an alternative form of shared mental memory that forms a different kind of link between the personal narrative and a collective one.

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