THE TELLING OF SHI TUO'S "A KISS"

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Shi Tuo (Wang Changjian) rose to prominence as a writer of short stories in the mid-1930s under the tutelage of Shen Congwen, during the latter's tenure as editor of the literary supplement to the liberal Tianjin newspaper Dagongbao. Perhaps as a result of the older writer's influence, Shi Tuo's early stories are largely set in the countryside, a countryside transfixed by a paralyzing combination of entropy and stagnation that, as C. T. Hsia has noted, is in certain respects similar to the rural decline envisioned in Lu Xun's seminal vision of village inertia.[1] Shi Tuo's wartime fiction continued in the same mood, although he extended his scope to include depictions of urban life. Of the wartime writing, Guoyuan cheng ji (Records of Orchard City) continues his preoccupation with life in backward rural areas. It is a varied collection of pieces unified only by a common setting, a persistently melancholic tone, and its publication between two covers in 1946. It contains eighteen mostly short tales that were written and published separately over the eight-year period from 1938 to 1946, a period, as Shi Tuo notes in his preface, almost identical in extent to the Chinese War of Resistance Against Japan.[2] Aside from a shadowy dramatized narrator who drops out toward the end of the collection, almost no characters appear in more than one story; the conventional unities of plot and time-sequence are dispensed with as well. The individual stories partake of this amorphousness, each having little in the way of character or plot development or even temporal unity.

"Yi wen" (A kiss), written sometime in 1944, is the penultimate story in the collection and was originally published in Japanese-occupied Shanghai in the magazine Wanxiang (Phenomena), edited by Ke Ling.[3] The tale is a deceptively simple niece of narrative told in tw0 halves. The first half takes place just after the 1911 Revolution, but before its effects have reached such backwaters as Orchard City. Shi Tuo convincingly renders the sights and particularly the sounds of a small county city. Its bustle, its easy self-satisfaction, its petty fears, and its pervasive corruption are all given equal play. The pivotal events of the story are set in motion when, in an excessively boisterous moment, the adolescent apprentice Tigerfish kisses his childhood playmate Sister Liu. This event awakens Sister Liu's mother to the fact of her daughter's incipient maturity, and she quickly sells the young one off as a concubine to a rich old man while her virginity is still intact and at full market value. The drastic lack of proportion between the transgression and its consequences recalls the... traditional "folly and consequences" stories[4] of the late Ming dynasty.

The short sentence, "time then passed by," connects the two parts of the tale; the second half consists of Sister Liu's return to a much declined city after a substantial number of years that the narrator cannot quite seem to specify. Arriving at the station, she takes a rickshaw into the city, pulled by none other than Tigerfsh, whose apprenticeship at the tinsmith's came to naught when the shop in which he was employed failed. Tigerfish does not recognize Sister Liu, and most of the second half consists of dialogue between the two in which Sister Liu asks after the people and places she had known and is told by Tigerfish of their almost universally sorry fates. Upon reaching the intersection where she had once run a small food stall, she sees the devastation visited upon it by the intervening years and hastily orders Tigerfish to return to the station. In the last scene, she presents Tigerfsh with a large tip, which provides the first definite indication that she has recognized him, and the author

breaks in to announce his hopes that her children, should she have any, will be able to escape the sort of life that she has led.

The sketchiness of the plot, the distance the narrator keeps from his characters, and, in particular, the predominance of static description over narrative movement lend "A Kiss" many of the characteristics of a prose essay. The tale, in fact, falls into a nebulous area somewhere between story and essay. The generic imprecision of the piece extends to its thematic properties as well: the story's subject matter conforms neither to contemporary notions of rural decline nor to a more traditional idea of the powerful determinacy of fate. Zbigniew Slupski, in his perceptive remarks on Shi Tuo's novel Ma Lan, elegantly captures the writer's recusancv with the comment that "He starts from the assumption that every theme, plot, or motif in the story contains the germ of a certain conventional solution, which he is careful to avoid."[6] Shi Tuo was himself well aware of his tendency to depart from conventional expectation, for as he wrote in the preface to an earlier collection, Limen shiji (Records gleaned from the village home), of the "things" in the collection, "some resemble fiction, some resemble essays and some resemble nothing at all, but that cannot be helped." [7]

Contemporary Chinese critics were also well aware of Shi Tuo's characteristic departures from the norm. Wang Yao, for instance, although writing during the ideologically constrained 1950s, was very much in the mainstream of twentieth-century Chinese critical thought when he insisted upon treating the work more as an unmediated reflection of reality than as a literary artifact. He criticizes Shi Tuo for his inability to write up documentary accounts of the rural scene: "The work shows that even if a writer has a well-intentioned sense of what is right and relatively good technique, the significance of his work will be greatly diminished if he is removed from actual life, even should he be able to write up his recollections or things he has experienced." [8] For his part, Shi Tuo had long been inured to this propensity of critics to misunderstand him, as can be seen from his 1937 response to remarks that Li Jianwu-a critic of a very different persuasion from Wang Yao-had made about him the year before: "I am not sure what Chinese critics are up -to; their tastes are decidedly narrow and they become uncomfortable whenever they see something that disturbs them." Shi Tuo goes on to add that "because of these barbs [of mine], admonition [from them] soon follows."[9]

Given the didactic bent of modem Chinese critics, it is perhaps understandable that most should either object to or thoroughly misconstrue Shi Tuo's literary iconoclasm. The coupling of political sanction to this literary judgment, however, significantly raised the stakes of this discourse. Wang Yao, for instance, does profess admiration for Shi Tuo's style. But he draws the predictable conclusion that in Shi Tuo's bleak 1930s' depictions of rural China, "we are able to see ... scenes of the bankruptcy of [the country's] interior, but we cannot sense the underlying unrest."[10] The calmer but even glummer sketches that comprise the Orchard City collection inspire in Wang both respect for the writer's advances in craftsmanship and a palpable unease about the collection's theme: "The style is graceful and somewhat more crisp than before, but he only describes certain aspects of ttte city In its process of decline, and [there] is a pervading mood of sentimental dejection. It is as if the feudal order of the past is actually taken for a golden age worthy of fond memory."[11] In passing this judgment, the critic admits of no possibility that Shi Tuo's focus might be on ways of remembering the past rather than on the simple representation of it. But even beyond this, he lays the text open to the charge of being an apology for political reaction.

In assessing a text that seems to bear such an adversarial relationship to its original context, the Western critic is left in something of quandary. One possibility would be to ignore the context and simply to apply a variety of critical methods that proclaim their universal applicability but that in fact are unavoidably and inextricably based on Western literary practice. Or the critic can attempt the difficult if not impossible-task of deracinating himself or herself and trying to appreciate the story as its contemporaries would have understood it. The former course risks doing real violence to the horizon of meaning that gave the story whatever resonance it originally had, while the latter risks trivializing the text in a morass of arcane fact about original situation and audience that could end up almost defiantly ignoring any consideration of universal interest.

The problem in taking the former course of insisting upon finding some way to link Chinese and Western ways of looking at literature is rendered more acute by the fact that the most influential theories of literature developed in the West between the late 1920s and the 1970s were working in a field where, it was insisted, the issues of history and specific rhetorical traditions were essentially irrelevant. This denial of context also applies to the literary methodologies that coalesced more recently to form the field of "narratology," a discipline that must ultimately be traced back to a structuralist perspective that sought and generally found universal patterns of grammar and rhetoric within narrative work.

Since the early 1970s, however, literary theories have come to the fore that tend to focus both on the seams within what were once taken as smooth narrative textures and on the influences of context on the generation and reception of fictional work (i.e., deconstruction and reception theory). From the point of view of the analysis of Chinese literature, all of these approaches have the disadvantage of being based upon narratives produced within the Western tradition. From the structuralist perspective with its insistence upon universality this had never been seen as a problem. But the later theories, in insisting upon the significance of either textual lapses, on the one hand, or genetic factors, on the other, at least allow the critic room to question whether the specifics of Chinese culture may render attempts at analyzing Chinese literature through the glass of Western theory as unjust and distorting to the texts under examination.

It is interesting that structuralism has its roots in Russia, a country in which there has always been an ambiguous relationship with the West (and which was ultimately to serve an important function in mediating the West to China). Some have seen Russian formalism at least partly as a radical formulation reacting to a stale and fruitlessly eclectic late-nineteenth-century Russian disposition to borrow from Western models. In this view, formalism is something uniquely Russian rather than something growing out of the mainstream of the Western European tradition itself. i[2] The response of M. M. Bakhtin and his circle to the formalists can be seen, in turn, as an effort at an equally radical counterassertion of historical relativism and the relevance of history to literature. According to Gary Saul Morson, the two movements share the spirit of "ritual inversion of European form" that Russian writers and critics "have celebrated [as] characteristically Russian."[13]

The upshot of this reaction to formalism was that, instead of obscuring historical and cultural particulars, Bakhtin in many ways anticipates some of the movements that developed as responses to structuralism in the West by insisting upon both the necessity of context and the uncertainties of the text. The most radical aspect of his thinking on this subject is that literary language, far from constituting a closed, self-referential

circle, is so open that it can only be understood as a process of interaction between speaker and listener, and that all speaking profoundly anticipates an interlocutor's response. As he said, "every literary work faces outward away from itself, toward the listener-reader, and to a certain extent thus anticipates possible reaction to itself."[14] For the purposes of looking at literary communication across cultures, Bakhtin's view of textual flexibility not only demands maximum sensitivity to the particulars of each culture, but the very model of communication he sets forth virtually obliges the critic to take into account the nuances of reception and response that occur when literary ideas cross cultural boundaries. When applied to the enterprise of cross-cultural comparison, in other words, Bakhtin problematized the very act of literary transmission itself.

Bakhtin believed the novel to be the literary form that best embodies the literary diversity he so prizes, since the form not only involves a relationship between text and reader, but also contains different "languages" that carry on dialogues among themselves within the individual work. The resulting mixture of these languages, which Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia," creates "images" of the modes of discourse available to a culture. It is through these images that languages reveal their basic relativity through various sorts of parody or "hybridization," "the mixing, within a single concrete utterance of two or more different linguistic consciousnesses, often widely separated in time and social space" (p. 429). Like the linguistic structures from which it is built, the novel as a form must be seen as a kind of antigenre, in which the monologues of which other forms arc constructed are forced into dialogue and robbed of their authority. Bakhtin thus saw the novel not only as central to modem literature, but also as a distinctly subversive form. Indeed, as Michael Holquist sums up the critic's concept of the novel, any positive view of the genre is thrown into question:

> "Novel" is the name Bakhtin gives to whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that system. Literary systems are comprised of canons, and "novelization" is fundamentally anticanonical. It will not permit generic monologue. Always it will insist on the dialogue between what a given system will admit as literature and those texts that are otherwise excluded from such a definition of literature. (p. xxxi)

Bakhtin's theory would thus seem to provide one of the best explanations of why the novel has achieved near universality in the contemporary world. In an environment in which traditional cultural formations are under constant bombardment from a variety of alien voices, only the novel as Bakhtin conceived it can hope to represent the multiplicity of discourses that have come to echo against one another in the twentieth century. While his theory is uniquely positioned to allow the celebration of the potential for multiplicity in the modem world, however, it failsno doubt for very good reason, given the sordid political environment pertaining in the Soviet Union when Bakhtin was working-to deal explicitly with the sort of political barriers to multivocality applied to such nonconformists as Shi Tuo. In approaching this issue, one immediately runs up against the problem that Bakhtin regards "dialogism" in two analytically distinct ways-one, that it is the' natural state of language and, two, that all language ought to be that way, even if restraints have been placed in the way of its natural development.[15] As a result, discussion of the political ramifications of Bakhtin's ideas often conflates the two assumptions into the militant notion that any resistance to a view of language as a protean and subversive entity is both politically repressive and contrary to nature.

As I have tried to demonstrate in the introduction to this collection, however, the situation in China ultimately resists any such simple formulation: most intellectuals concerned with language and literature regarded these pursuits as uniquely privileged avenues of national identity. This created an environment in which virtually all writers in the twentieth century admitted of at least some claim on them by a nationalism that most often included a highly dogmatic sense of language's function in maintaining cultural distinctiveness. While this view of language hardly put an end to literary controversy, it did tend to limit dispute to matters of linguistic application and to discourage speculation on the nature of literary language itself. In other words, while questions such as the sociology of audience and the degree of political overt-ness in writing were constant topics of debate, there was an equally constant pressure to avoid questions about the ultimate efficacy of literary language itself.

Given the reigning positivism about the nature of language and literature and the highly political cast to discussion on the subjects, it is hard to imagine how serious demurral to prevailing views could avoid falling into the dominant polemical patterns of the day. If, in other words, Shi Tuo, as he implies more than once in his comments about his own writing, had fundamental reservations about the determinism of the contemporary Chinese literary scene, how could he state them without setting forth an oppositional discourse that was likely to be (or at least perceived to be) just as dogmatic as the dominant discourse to which he was opposed? Shi Tuo's remote and even somewhat mysterious narrative voice is perhaps the only possible way out of this impasse. Rather than intensify the polemical atmosphere, he instead seems to stand on the sidelines with an ironic detachment that calls into question the categories of contemporary debate rather than disputing any specified discursive position. The result is a singular narrative style that Slupski sums up astutely with the observation that it embodies "the intense feeling that the world is unknowable and human behavior senseless, which leaves the reader with the impression that behind all that happens is a fourth dimension, as it were, unknown, unseizable, but ubiquitous."[16]

At least in the Orchard City collection, this feeling of uncertainty is most powerfully represented by the peculiar narrative voice Shi Tuo employs. While the narrator marks his presence throughout the collection (even after he has ceased to dramatize himself within the individual stories), he does so more with a singular equivocality and casualness rather than by any positive manifestation of personality. It is as if he were addressing us orally rather than demonstrating the sense of control over his material that is ordinarily expected of a narrator in conventional realism. Phrases such as "do not know in complete detail," "or maybe it was," "we don't know how," and "or perhaps we should say" abound and leave the reader with a peculiar uneasiness as to whether the speaker recalls or even really cares about what he is telling us. This narrator breaks with the self-confident authority of the story-teller manner in traditional fiction even as he separates himself from the routine omniscience of 1920s' realism or the obsessive confessionalism of the first-person stories of such modem writers as Yu Dafu.

While this type of narrative stance is not particularly common in Western literature (indeed, it would be anathema to the careful disposition of point of view so vital to Henry James and the large group of critics who follow him), it was identified and named skaz by the Russian formalist critics working in the period before and after the Russian Revolution. First extensively discussed (without, however, first being extensively defined) by Boris Eichenbaum in his 1919 essay "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made,"[17] it has come to mean that a story is told

in such a manner as to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce "the illusion of oral narration."[18]

A more rigorous definition has been set forth by Martin P. Rice in his 1975 article "On 'Skaz,' " in which he adduces some of the specific elements that render skaz a unique form rather than simply a loose agglomeration of stylistic features. Most important in creating the illusion of an oral tale is that the narrative avoid "the characteristics of most specifically literary genres, traditionally recognized as written."[19] There must also be no framing device that would call attention to the gap between the narration and literary form. A third important point that separates skaz from traditional first-person form is that "the 'I' of a 'skaz' narration cannot be a central figure in the plot" (p. 418). The reader gains his or her impression of the narrator strictly through the way the story is told rather than through any direct information presented. Ironically, the obtrusive style through which the narrator presents himself serves to deflect attention away from the often insignificant details of the plot and onto himself and his purposes.

While the filiation of Shi Tuo's style to that of the traditional essay would seem to be at odds with at least part of this definition, one of the most important features that Eichenbaum identifies with Gogol's narrator in "The Overcoat" is plainly evident in "A Kiss":

> This skaz style is especially marked in one sentence: "Just where the clerk who had invited him lived, we can't say, unfortunately; our memory has begun to play real tricks with us, and everything in Petersburg, all the houses and streets have gotten so muddled and mixed up in our 'head that it's extremely difficult to get anything out of it in proper order." If we add to this all the numerous expressions like some . . . or other, "unfortunately, little is known," "nothing is known," "I don't remember," etc., then we get, as a result, the impression of a device which creates the illusion that the work as a whole is a real story, related as a fact but not known to the narrator in every small detail.[20]

What is noteworthy here is not the illusion of oral narration as such, but the uncertainty of the narrator, the deliberate manipulation of information so as to raise questions in the reader's mind about the teller's reliability.

This contrasts sharply with rural stories created in response to Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" in 1942. In stories such as Zhao Shuli's "Rhymes of Li Youcai," its author scrupulously mimics the manner of oral story-telling. The difference between Zhao's mode of narration and that of Shi Tuo in "A Kiss," however, is that Zhao always has his story-teller maintain strict command over his material. Indeed, in many post-Yan'an stories, the narrator revels in his knowledge of every small detail. The distinction in world views between Shi Tuo and later users of the oral manner is not only sharp but extremely instructive: whereas the latter narrators give one the feeling of an ordered universe in which everything is predictable and justly fated, Shi Tuo leaves one with a sense of the utter caprice of fate and the complete lack of any measure between action and its ultimate consequences. Even more than this, the uncertainty of the narrator leaves the reader with profound questions about the possibility of accurate perception.

Of all the uncertainties that array themselves before the reader of "A Kiss," the notion of time is the most insistent. It is so strong an entity that it almost encapsulates the full force of the elusive yet fatally determining "fourth dimensional" quality that Slupski

describes. For all its capacity to effect change, however, those it acts upon remain steadfastly insensitive to the nature, or even the fact, of its power. The most telling instance of this is in the ultimate disposition of the tale's main "character"-the town itself. At the end of the twenty or so years (actually "ten, fifteen, or even close to twenty years" [p. 161]-at this point the narrator suggests the full impenetrability of 'time with his own inability to be much more certain about it than the characters he is describing) through which the story passes, the city is transformed. In the beginning a busy center of country life, it is by the end merely a shell wholly superseded by the collection of "odd buildings" that had grown up around the station. Those who remained suffered similar fates.

Yet, upon her return to Orchard City, no one that Sister Liu encounters seems aware of the contrast between the past and the present. In fact, time here is merely asserting its constant unknowability, something the narrator signals with his remark that "as usual, no one had paid any attention to when [the shift from old to new city] had started" (p. 156, emphasis added). Only Sister Liu, having been away for the whole period, is in a position to perceive what has happened. Even she, however, can only realize the omnipotence of time up to a point. When confronted with the depressing collection of images that signifies the cruel passage of time, she can only sigh; it is left to the narrator pointedly to break into the narrative with the comment that

> to tell the truth, it really is worth sighing over: people give no concern to fighting, shouting, crying, laughing, and are full of mechanical calculation; but then they suddenly open their eyes and discover that, when confronted with iron-faced and impersonal time, they are so insignificant, hollow, pitiful, and that they are so powerless!

After Orchard City itself, Sister Liu is the story's most important character. Significantly, she is the only mainr nlaver in "A Kiss" to he in a circumstantially better position in the second half of the story than in the first. She becomes rich and mistress of her own fate-at least to the extent of being able to indulge in the great luxury of traveling for what appears to be her own amusement. The major potential sources of restraint on her, her mother and her husband, are both "probably long since dead". She has lost her youth, but there is no particular indication that that is any source of discomfort. Yet Shi Tuo[21] feels obliged to end the story with the strongest possible hint that there is much to be regretted over the course her life has taken: "If she had a son and a daughter-if you will allow the person who wrote this piece a word-she would want them only to grow up, have good fortune, and not copy their mother's example".

On the face of it, the most obvious source of regret would seem to be Sister Liu's lack of say in how her life was decided, her failure ever to have been in the position of making a meaningful choice. For in spite of her having "accepted whatever was arranged for her" in the matter of her marriage, it is also true that it had "never occurred to anyone to consider whether Sister Liu had been willing or not". But if the reader is tempted to assume that the story is making a case for the nobility of human choice, he or she immediately runs up against the counterexample of Mother Liu, who had taken such pains to arrange things on her daughter's behalf in large part out of a sense of regret over the consequences of a willful determination to decide her own fate when she was young: "She had sowed her wild oats, but having sowed them, she had eventually tasted their bitter, medicinal flavor" (p. 156). This careful balancing of the two sides of the question of free will, combined with the narrator's propensity to draw conclusions beyond what the characters seem capable of on their own, would appear to lead the

search for the story's theme in the direction of some fundamental and chronic discontent with the human condition itself.

If Shi Tuo were merely giving expression to a negative sense of life's possibilities, however, he would simply be falling into the trap of presenting the trite and equally romantic antithesis to the romantic idea of the infinite potential of the self. Instead, I think what gives "A Kiss" its special poignancy is its relentless forcing of attention on the individual inability to perceive the full dreariness of life as it passes by and its highlighting of the mind's paradoxical habit of playing tricks on itself even as it believes it is groping, toward the truth. Time and its mental adjunct, memory, are the agents of this confusion. The question of free will, then, is in itself less important than the way in which mother and daughter conceive (or misconceive) it, and the actual nature of past experiences is less relevant than their belief that the pursuit of alternative courses of action would have meant happier lives for them. Shi Tuo delineates this unmistakably in the case of Mother Liu, with her terror "that the daughter had the mother's blood flowing in her veins". For the daughter, however, the pain of regret is heightened by the subtlety of its depiction, a subtlety so fine, in fact, that we are never told explicitly whether or not it is really there.

If the circumstances leading to Sister Liu's marriage are ambiguous as to the quality of her assent to it, what she encounters upon her return to Orchard City should at least convince her that her alliance and subsequent departure were the lesser of two evils. The place she remembered is largely gone, replaced with nothing but decay. Tigerf sh, the most likely vehicle to a different life, is so reduced in condition that he would "not have [had] the leisure to recall her", even if he had not completely forgotten her. The long sequence of questions, answers and encounters on her rickshaw ride into the city and back again should at every step disabuse her of any fantasies she might wish to entertain. Indeed, her abrupt return to the station demonstrates that she consciously realizes the impossibility of any alternative. Nevertheless, the final comment of the "specified" author implies strongly that she would prefer integration into the collapsing city to her current exalted alienation. The reader cannot help wondering at a perceptual resiliency evident in this wish that exceeds even those who have lived in the city all along. Their failure to see anything amiss can be reckoned as gradual accommodation to a long decline; her failure to take any comfort in the vast contrast between what she could have been and what she has become, however, must be counted as a special and particularly moving sort of delusion.

In his discussion of Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, Wolfgang Iser comments perspicuously on the power of time to foster delusion:

> The present actualizes particular impulses in the past, which appear strange and fragmentary because they are not remembered as they were, but as they are now under the influence and in the context of the present. This breaking up of the past is a sign of the inevitable change which it must undergo in the course of its re-enactment, for now something is added which did not exist at the time imposing an order which discounts the conditions and demolishes the context which originally prevailed. 22

In Sister Liu's case, it is the very dreariness of her present, much reinforced by her return to Orchard City that seems to render the past so alive with possibilities. The bitter irony beneath this, however, is that it was sequences of events beyond the ability of anyone to see, ineluctably at work in the past that brought about the dismal and alienating present. Once in that present, the mind must take refuge in fondly romantic

visions about roads not taken in the past. What Shi Tuo has thus created is a cycle of incapacity to see in which the hopelessness of the present is so painful that it cannot be faced, and people must build illusions based upon a past that never was. In taking the path of least resistance, the mind thereby forecloses any realistic attempt to cope with the present on its own terms.

This cycle exists independently of specific personalities or as a simple function of the particular viciousness of modem times. Mother Liu's distaste for her circumstances at the beginning of the story had caused her to reach back retrospectively to create for her daughter the sort of future that the older woman had come to imagine had always existed. The narrator's intervention in the story's final paragraph plays a key role in drawing attention to this process of self-delusion. Instead of ending with Sister Liu's revelry of what might have been, the narrator takes it upon himself to summarize the point of the story and thereby to reinforce the notion that no one within the story itself would be capable of this perception. But in making the wish that her children have better lives, he paradoxically joins in the story's ruling delusion: that things can somehow be better if only we undertake them in a different fashion.

The narrator's professed uncertainty about time and memory ("It was 1913 or 1914 or 1915, I do not know in complete detail,") is the essential mediator of the doubt about whether positive knowledge of the past is at all possible. But the narrative voice in "A Kiss" is complicated by a countervailing tendency from time to time to enter into a sententious and declamatory mode. The previously quoted intrusion about "iron-faced and impersonal time" is only the most marked of a series of comments the narrator interjects on behalf of a capricious and omnipotent fate. As Eichenbaum pointed out in the case of a similar layering of narratorial voices in "The Overcoat," the mixture must be seen as adding decisively to the story's theme [2][3] The narratorial oscillation between fatal earnestness and cavalier indifference is the ultimate emblem of the finality of human uncertainty: If the narrator must yaw between these two extremes, how can the reader of the story possibly gain a firm footing concerning the meaning of his text? The terrible unknowableness of the world is most forcefully brought home by the narrator's conscious inability to recount his story other than from a position of profound ambiguity.

The structural device that brings this deliberate thematic uncertainty into being, however, has profound implications for the world of Chinese fiction and of Chinese writing in general. Bakhtin has noted the characteristic phenomenon of the novel in which the narrator is used to represent the nature of the refraction of language upon reality rather than reality itself. The implied author makes the narrator speak in a particular language of literary convention that invariably stands at some distance from the author himself. The resulting dialogue sets "one point of view opposed to another, one evaluation opposed to another, one accent opposed to another." Through this,

> the author utilizes now one language, now another, in order to avoid giving himself up wholly to either of them; he makes use of this verbal give-and-take, dialogue of languages at every point in his work, in order that he himself might remain as it were neutral with regard to language, a third party in a quarrel between two people.

In the resulting possibilities for parody, Bakhtin sees "the ground being prepared . . . for a radical skepticism toward any unmediated discourse and any

straightforward seriousness, a skepticism bordering on rejection of the very possibility of having a straightforward discourse at all that would not be false".

The uncertain voice alone, therefore, lacks the ability to point beyond its own tenuous existence to comment upon the nature of literary language itself. It is the mixing of two completely antithetical voices that ultimately provides the text with its most subversive moment. By juxtaposing a portentously omniscient and thus quite orthodox narrative voice with one that at every moment confesses to its own uncertainty, Shi Tuo effectively undermines the Chinese tradition of authoritative narration. When the combination that I discussed previously of the traditionally sacrosanct- essay genre with the storytelling mode is added to this mix, the result is a thorough upsetting of both stylistic and generic norms, norms that had for the most part been strictly observed within Chinese literary history. And in the twentieth century, for all their professed iconoclasm, most Chinese writers were moved by a new sense of nationalism to be even more observant of careful taxonomies of styles and genres.

The extent to which less mixed, "univocal" narratives could not avoid being infused with traditional notions of social responsibility can be demonstrated even in the case of Lu Xun. This is true in spite of the fact that he was one of the few writers in modem China almost obsessively intent upon questioning not only the content of the intellectual heritage, but also the forms in which it was expressed.[24] The self-undermining first-person narrator who appears in many of Lu Xun's most significant stories is, among other things, emblematic of the author's awareness of the danger of falling into the old ways of doing things. 25 On a more basic level, however, Lu Xun's incessant flirtation with the possibility of hope bespeaks an at least partial commitment to that profoundest of Confucian tropes: that the universe is ultimately rational and amenable to disposition by intelligent and morally upright people. His eventual turn to Marxism (if not to its particular representatives in China) bears out this view, as the most conspicuous point in common between Marxism and the old Chinese world view is a faith in the utopian prospects of human society.

Lu Xun's Guxiang (My old home) shares with "A Kiss" a concern with the effects of the passage of time and thus provides an ideal vantage point from which to compare the authors of the two stories. At the very beginning of Guxiang, the dramatized narrator sets forth the issue of time's passage with great clarity:

> The old home that I remember was not like this at all. My old home was much better. But if I were to recall its beauty or to describe its charms, I would have neither images nor words with which to do it. Yet, it seems now as if it were always just like this. I thus explain it to myself: the old home was like this all along, and although it has not progressed, neither is it as bleak as I sensed; it is merely a change of disposition on my part, because in coming back home this time I have not been in a particularly good mood 2[6]

What Lu Xun does here is to present the possibility of self-delusion-represented by the idea that things must have been better in the past-only to close it off immediately by forcing himself to come to grips with the probability that things were always as bad as they seem to him in the present.

This introductory passage prefigures the message of the body of the story, an account of an urban intellectual's fruitless search for the remembered pristine innocence of his boyhood. The story differs significantly from "A Kiss" in at all times representing the protagonist/narrator

as being aware of the sad chain of events which both brought about the disillusioning circumstances of the present that in all likelihood had made the actual past just as bad. Every attempt Lu Xun's narrator makes to conjure up possibilities out of the past is met by an icy wall of present impossibility, each of which he becomes starkly conscious of. The paradigmatic example is the salutation "Master!" uttered by his childhood "friend" (and representative of the hope that things might have been better than they actually were), the peasant Runtu, a greeting that makes all too clear the gap between peasant and intellectual, fantasy and reality.

For all the stolidity of the walls that Lu Xun erects around himself in this reminiscence, he will not, or perhaps it is better to say cannot, consciously make self-delusion one of them. The message that the protagonist/narrator finally imparts, therefore, for all its guardedness, is one of opening new ground for clear sight, no matter how tenuously this sight is linked to any possibility of decisive action. When the final words of the story tell of roads not yet created and what people must do to open them, we arc at least being presented with the possibility of escape from the cycle of history. "A Kiss," however, directed as it is by a narrator so remote as barely to remember the facts that he is presenting, contains no such guarantees against the powers of memory to lead itself astray. Its effect is quite the opposite: it shows the inevitability and even necessity of self-delusion. If we can thus say that Lu Xun, for all his iconoclasm, in the final analysis sought to reassure his audience about a continuation of the potential for clear perception, no matter how painful, that had always been one of the basic ideas in Chinese thought, Shi Tuo bears the still more unsettling message that even this cannot be counted on. The latter's cynicism can perhaps be thought of as the ultimate revolt against the Chinese tradition: a willingness to countenance the lack of meaning in the posttraditional age.

The application of a particular Western view of literature to this text, while suggestive, serves to point out the ultimate incommensurability of the two narrative tranditions more than anything also …… at Chinese literature through the eyes of Bakhtin does highlight one particularly illustrative difference between Western practice and modem Chinese literature. For the Russian critic, the mixing of genres and styles so characteristic of the novel creates an exuberant and "carnivalesque" form of writing with virtually unlimited powers of cultural introspection. In twentieth-century China, by contrast, the very gravity of the tasks that literature set for itself largely precluded the notion that writing could seek its truth through the celebration of its own infinite and playful variety. Perhaps this is the ultimate penalty a literature that asks too much of itself must come to pay.

Notes

1. C. T. Hsia, A History of ModeChinese Fiction, 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 463. 1

2. Shi Tuo, Guoyuan chengji (Shanghai: Shanghai chuban gongsi, 1946), "xu" (preface), p. 4.

3. On Wanxiang, see Edward M. Gunn, Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peking, 1937-45 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 53-54.

4. On this concept, see Patrick Hanan, "The Early Chinese Short Story: A Critical Theory in Outline," in Studies in Chinese Literary Genres, ed. Cyril Birch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 325-28.

5. "Yi wen" can be found in Guoyuan chengji, pp. 191-204. This and all future citations to the story are from my appended translation. This sentence is found on p. 156. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

6. Zbigniew Slupski, "The World of Shih T'o," Asian and African Studies (Bratislava) 9 (1973): 25.

7. Shi Tuo, Limen shiji (Shanghai: Wenhua shenghuo, 1948), v.

8. Wang Yao, 7_hongguo xin wenxue shi gao (Draft history of the new Chinese literature) (Hong Kong, Bowen, 1972) 2:138.

9. Shi Tuo, Ye niao ji (Wild bird collection) (Shanghai: Wenhua shenghuo, 1948), ii. Shi Tuo was responding to a review of his Limen shiji by Li Jianwu [Liu Xiwei] collected in the latter's Ju hua er ji (The second tasting flowers collection) (Shanghai: Wenhua shenghuo, 1947), pp. 13-22.

10. Wang Yao, Zhongguo xin wenxue, 1:246.

11. Ibid., 2:138.

12. See P. N. Medvedev and M. M. Bakhtin, The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics, trans. Albert J. Werle (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 55-56.

13. Gary Saul Morson, "The Heresiarch of Meta," PTL 3 (1978): 424.

14. M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 257. Emphasis in the original. Subsequent references to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

15. Ken Hirschkop, "A Response to the Forum on Mikhail Bakhtin," in

Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work, ed. Gary Saul Morson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 75.

16. Slupski, "The World of Shih T'o," p. 15.

17. Boris Eichenbaum, "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made," in Gogol from the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays, ed. and trans. Robert A. Maguire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 269-91.

18. Victor Erlich, Russian Formalism: History, Doctrine (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), p. 238.

19. Martin P. Rice, "On 'Skaz,' " Russian Literature Triquarterly 12 (1975): 419.

20. Eichenbaum, " Gogol's `Overcoat,' " p. 284.

21. The widespread use of pseudonyms by modem Chinese writers probably was meant in many cases as an attempt to signify something like Wayne Booth's concept of "implied author." My use of "Shi Tuo" at this point takes advantage of this phenomenon. That readers and critics have persistently identified these pseudonyms and the characters they have created with their historical authors is another facet of the problem this paper is trying to address.

22. Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 144.

23. Eichenbaum, "Gogol's 'Overcoat,' " p. 282.

24. See Lin Yu-sheng, The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Anti-traditionalism in the May Fourth Era (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), pp. 104-51.

25. For discussion of Lu Xun's first-person narratives, see my "Blossoms in the Snow: Lu Xun and the Dilemma of Modem Chinese Literature," Modern China 10.1 (1984):49-77.

26. Lu Xun, "Guxiang," in Nahan (Outcry), in Lu Xun quanji (Complete works of Lu Xun) (Beijing: Remin wenxue, 1981), 1:476. For a different English rendition, see Selected Works of Lu Ilsun, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1964), 1:63.