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**Farewell to ‘History’: New Historical Fiction’s Alternative Visions of 20<sup>th</sup>  
century China**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

The University of London

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**Declaration for PhD thesis**

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## Abstract

This thesis provides a reading of the movement of New Historical Fiction in 1990s China within the context of ideological change in the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese society at large, as well as the changing relationship of history and fiction in modern Chinese discourse.

The thesis has two opening chapters on the rewriting of history in Chinese culture and its implications for cultural politics and ideology, with an introduction to the movement of New Historical Fiction. A brief history of the relationship between history and fiction is sketched to provide a context for the discussion. Novels of four authors are analysed as case studies of fiction acquiring the power of the discourse of history to provide a meaningful narrative of the past. The first novel, *White Deer Plain* (*Bailuyuan* 白鹿原) by Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实 offers a rehabilitation of Confucian family values as an alternative to Maoist-Marxism. The second novel, *Chrysanthemum's Hometown* (*Guxiang tianxia huanghua* 故乡天下黄花) by Liu Zhenyun 刘震云, gives an account of twentieth-century Chinese history as one of power struggles in an immoral universe. The last two authors analysed, Li Er 李洱 and Wang Xiaobo 王小波 present an experimental play on form and discourse fully exploring the relationship between history and fiction.

The extent to which novelists are offering a meaningful alternative to traditional and Party historiography through a fictional rewriting of twentieth-century history is investigated. This alternative may be a temporary phenomenon until a more coherent narrative of Chinese twentieth-century history is constructed by scholars and accepted by society.

## **Table of Contents**

Title page	1
Declaration	2
Abstract	3
Table of Contents	4-7
Acknowledgements	8
Introduction	9
Section I – Fiction and history in contemporary China	21
Chapter 1 - Introduction to New Historical Fiction in China	21
1.1 Context of Chinese cultural scene	22
1.2 Rewriting	24
1.3 Cultural movements acting as sources	26
1.4 Influence and outcome of Western theory	28
1.5 Definitions and sketch of movement	31
1.5.1 Early works	32
1.5.2 Chinese critics' Definitions	34
1.5.3 History	35
1.5.4 'New'	36
1.6 Development of New Historical Fiction in China	37
1.7 New Historical Fiction survey	40
1.8 English-language secondary literature	44
1.9 Conclusion	48
Chapter 2 – History and Fiction in China	50
2.1 History in pre-modern and modern China	50
2.2 History in the PRC	54
2.2.1 Official CCP Historiography	55
2.2.2 Legitimacy	58
2.3 Revolution	60
2.3.1 'Farewell to Revolution'	63

2.3.2	Responses against Li and Liu	64
2.3.3	Challenges & Management	67
2.4	‘Outside’ history	71
2.5	Conclusion	76
Chapter 3 – Critical Framework: definitions and theory		78
3.1	History	79
3.1.1	Empiricist view	80
3.1.2	Postmodern views	80
3.1.3	Hayden White	83
3.1.4	Moderate views	86
3.1.5	Myth	87
3.1.6	Mythistory	88
3.1.7	Identity	89
3.2	Fiction	92
3.2.1	Mikhail M. Bakhtin	92
3.2.2	Heteroglossia	93
3.2.3	Polyphony	96
3.2.4	Carnival	98
3.2.5	Postmodern fiction	99
3.2.6	Intertextuality	100
3.2.7	Metafiction	103
3.2.8	‘Historiographic Metafiction’	104
3.3	Conclusion	106
Section II – ‘De-revolutionising’ twentieth-century Chinese history		110
Chapter 4 – <i>White Deer Plain</i>		110
4.1	Chen Zhongshi and <i>White Deer Plain</i>	110
4.2	Background to traditional culture and Confucianism	112
4.2.1	The changing fortunes of Confucianism (1900-1949)	114
4.2.2	Confucianism in 1990s China	115
4.3	Cultural continuity and gradual change: anti-revolution	117

4.3.1	Modernisation and change	121
4.4	History of people and the land	123
4.5	Folk Culture	130
4.6	Conclusion	138
Chapter 5 - <i>Hometown's Chrysanthemums</i>		142
5.1	Liu Zhenyun and <i>Hometown's Chrysanthemums</i>	142
5.2	Land reform and the revolution	143
5.2.1	Comparison of <i>Hometown</i> with <i>Hurricane</i>	144
5.2.2	'Revolution' means riches	145
5.2.3	Brutality of revolution	150
5.3	Folk Culture	152
5.3.1	Orality	156
5.4	Voices clambering for power	159
5.5	Conclusion	167
Section III – The discourse of history in fiction		170
Chapter 6 – <i>Coloratura</i>		170
6.1	Li Er and <i>Coloratura</i>	170
6.2	Fabrication of history	171
6.3	Reading History	181
6.4	The Individual and History	184
6.5	Carnivalisation of History	189
6.6	Language and Register	196
6.7	Conclusion	200
Chapter 7 - Wang Xiaobo		205
7.1	Wang Xiaobo and his work	205
7.2	History	208
7.2.1	History of Stupidity	212
7.2.2	History as Bodily Oppression	214
7.3	'Historiographic Metafiction'	217

7.4	Carnival and the Imagination	222
7.5	Conclusion	228
	Conclusion	230
	Contribution to New Historical Fiction	230
	Revolution and Folk Culture	231
	Farewell to 'History'	235
	Methodologies for a 'New' History	237
	Identity	239
	Future Research	241
	Final Conclusions	241
	Bibliography	244-258



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## **Introduction**

This thesis is concerned with the relationship between fiction and history in the post-Mao period in Mainland China. The implications of this relationship will be examined within the context of political ideology and state legitimacy, and in particular the works of fiction classified by Chinese critics under the heading of ‘New Historical Fiction’ (*Xin lishi xiaoshuo* 新历史小说) will be analysed as a movement. Four case studies taken from the movement will be given an in-depth analysis to demonstrate the relationship of the novels to history at a textual level. The main question of the thesis is to investigate to what extent the novels included in the four case studies, as representative of the movement as a whole, challenge and subvert the master discourse of history in the People’s Republic of China. The socio-political implications of such a subversion will then be discussed, and the fictional representation of history and its ability to ‘rewrite’ history will be examined.

The inclusion of ‘Farewell to History’ in the title of the thesis is a recognition of the centrality of Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu’s argument in their book *Farewell to Revolution*, that ‘revolution’ should now be discarded as a means of understanding modern Chinese history. In this thesis I will investigate the extent to which such a radical idea can be extended from rejecting revolution as an optic for viewing this historical period, to rejecting the discourse of history completely as a possibility for a meaningful understanding of the past.

Apart from one recent monograph<sup>1</sup> (Lin Qingxin 2005), there remains little reference in current English-language scholarship to New Historical Fiction in China as a movement. There have been a number of studies done on the theme of history in Chinese culture and politics (see the literature review in Chapter 2), mainly tending to focus on literature of the Republican period, and drawing in other media, such as film, into the discussion. Much discussion of history and the past in the post-Mao period tends to focus on nostalgia and memory rather than

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<sup>1</sup> This monograph on New Historical Fiction in China will be discussed in Chapter 1.

the discourse of history as an official ideology or discipline. With regard to cultural investigations of the past in the secondary literature in English, there continues to be an emphasis on movements such as Roots-Seeking, or on the avant-garde, analysing the works of Su Tong, Han Shaogong, Wang Anyi, Ma Yuan, Yu Hua and Ge Fei, to name a few. Apart from brief mentions in the English secondary literature of the authors in the case studies for this thesis, almost no article-length studies of the novels, with the exception of Wang Xiaobo's *The Golden Age*<sup>2</sup>, have been published. Large amounts have been written in Chinese however, both on the authors individually and on the movement as a whole. The considerable critical debate among Chinese critics on the definition and significance of the movement of New Historical Fiction in itself justifies a close study of some of the seminal works of the movement. The case studies address this, and Section II situates the movement within the broader cultural and political context of contemporary China during and after the 1990s. A more in-depth review of the critical literature of the movement in Chinese and English will be given in Chapter 2.

As far as I am aware at the time of writing, no English translations exist of any of the novels analysed here with the exception of a recent translation of Wang Xiaobo's *The Golden Age*. Coupled with the importance ascribed to the movement by Chinese critics, the need to bring these as yet untranslated novels to a wider critical audience is a significant motivation for pursuing the topic of this thesis. This thesis arose out of an interest in the Chinese writer Wang Xiaobo 王小波 (1952-1997) who it seemed to me had achieved something remarkable through his fiction that none of his contemporary Chinese authors had expressed. A reading of his novels on the three ages of humankind, past, present and future, led me to an awareness of his interesting treatment of Chinese history in particular, and history as a discourse in general. Partly due to his untimely death, Wang Xiaobo has usually been treated by critics as a maverick writer, completely free of any critical alignment or literary movement. I realised however that his concerns were shared by a large number of writers from the 1990s to the early twenty-first century; I felt therefore that the questions on the

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<sup>2</sup> Larson 2003.

relationship of fiction and history that his work provoke would be better examined in the wider context of cultural movements in 1990s China and of other authors working with similar themes.

The question of ‘history’ has been a hot topic in China<sup>3</sup> since the end of the highly politicised Mao Zedong (1893-1976) period of the People’s Republic of China (hereafter PRC; 1949-). The last Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) Resolution on history was promulgated in 1981 and, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, did not differ significantly from earlier positions. Since then, there has been no official pronouncement on twentieth-century Chinese history, with the interpretation of important questions regarding official history being left out. The important economic reforms and the ‘opening up’ of the Chinese government from 1978 onwards and the massive rise in living standards of large sectors of the Chinese population have often been contrasted with the seeming lack of political change. The tension felt by the Chinese leadership in the 1990s, and continuing to the present day, may be represented as follows: on the one hand the leadership needs to allow the country and economy to develop as fast as possible to maintain the growth required to provide around 8-9 million new jobs every year (and a minimum of 100 million over the next decade) (Dahlman & Aubert 2001, 16); on the other hand the leadership also needs to maintain the political loyalty of a huge, diverse population to legitimise its ongoing monopoly of political power without a democratic political system.

Along with the liberalisation of the economy in the post-Mao period the creative and cultural industries became commercialised, leading to significant freedoms to publish more politically risky material. This did not mean anything close to a Western conception of ‘freedom of speech’ however, as cases of newspaper and publishing editors being arrested for pushing political limits too far have shown<sup>4</sup>. Despite this, the freedoms to publish have increased significantly, for example,

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<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, ‘China’ will refer to Mainland China whether during the end of the Qing Dynasty, Republican and Warlord Period, or the People’s Republic of China.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the Editor of the Guangzhou-based Southern Metropolis Daily (Nanfang Dushi Ribao 南方都市报), Cheng Yizhong 程益中 was jailed for five months in 2004 for allowing the publication of a story on a young college graduate beaten to death in police custody (Pan 2004).

the creative industries have been able to allow greater artistic freedoms to express important questions with which the population is concerned. A result of this tension between the government wanting to increase economic freedoms and growth while keeping tight control on political freedoms<sup>5</sup> has been the proliferation of cultural products relating to the immediate and modern past from which the current political situation has arisen. With no possibility of commenting directly and openly on the present, artists (in the broadest sense) have used a range of media to 'rewrite' the past as a comment on the present and future. The radical nature of some of these 'rewritings' has led to heated critical debate and censorship, examples of which will be given in Chapter 2.

The demythologising of the Chinese revolution and possibility of alternative historical narratives that these rewritings represent can be read in one sense as inevitable in the changing political, economic and social climate of the 1990s and onwards in China. This concept was developed fully and clearly articulated by Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu in the aforementioned *Farewell to Revolution*, a collection of dialogues between the two thinkers while outside China. The book was published in Hong Kong in 1995, and the fact that it has still not been published in Mainland China shows that the directness and clarity of such a call to reject the revolutionary legacy as a part of the Chinese people's historical identity is unacceptable to the CCP. A direct refutation of revolution as a positive driving force in twentieth-century Chinese history cannot yet be publicly endorsed by the CCP leadership as it would compromise its current ideological position and legitimacy. An example of this is the censorship of the television series *Marching Towards the Republic*, which will be discussed in Chapter 2. This example demonstrates that what can be considered as a politically suspect portrayal of twentieth-century history, through a medium of mass consumption, will not be tolerated by the CCP.

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<sup>5</sup> An example of this ongoing control on political freedoms in the PRC up until 2009 includes iconoclastic critic and human rights Liu Xiaobo (b. 1955) 刘晓波 being formally arrested on 24 June 2009. According to an article by Jonathan Watts in *The Guardian* (Watts 2009), Xinhua news agency quoted a police statement in Beijing as saying, "Liu has been engaged in agitation activities, such as spreading of rumours and defaming of the government, aimed at subversion of the state and overthrowing the socialism system in recent years."

Apart from the political intervention of censorship, there is also scholarly opposition to the idea of disregarding and reconsidering the revolutionary legacy in a rewriting of modern Chinese history. Such opposition is evident in books such as *The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* by Mobo Gao (2008). Gao argues against what he describes as the 'anti-revolution thesis' proposed by Li and Liu, claiming it is part of the drive to homogenise Chinese history and culture in line with the confines of a neo-liberal ideology. This shows that the 'de-revolutionising' of the twentieth century is not taken for granted. Li and Liu are making a provocative argument even in the increasingly post-Marxist society of China today. In the case studies in this thesis I will investigate the extent to which the novels under analysis call for a rejection of the official readings of China's twentieth-century history by 'de-revolutionising' their narratives.

After this brief introduction to the central questions of the thesis, a description of the structure will now be given. The body of the thesis is divided into three sections, with the use of fiction to deal with the specifics of history and history as a discourse analysed in four case studies of fiction from the New Historical Fiction movement. Section I will provide a conceptual apparatus and cultural background for the analysis of the case studies. Within this first section, Chapter 1 will analyse the significance of 'rewriting' in the post-Mao period and in Chinese culture generally, and it will also examine the conceptual background and sources of the movement of New Historical Fiction. A definition of the movement will be provided followed by a survey of the critical literature and major works. Chapter 2 will sketch a background of the relationship of fiction and history in Chinese culture from premodern China up to the late twentieth century. The significance of the portrayal of the revolution in twentieth-century Chinese history will also be discussed, and its centrality to the unchallenged legitimacy of the CCP. Chapter 3 will provide the critical framework for the thesis through definitions and discussions of concepts such as history, fiction, carnival, heteroglossia, polyphony, and historiographic metafiction.

Section II will present the first two case studies. These case studies will analyse the significance of the ‘de-revolutionising’ of twentieth-century Chinese history by fiction in various examples of New Historical Fiction. This is an important subversion, as revolution is still considered a sacred part of the legacy of the CCP in ‘liberating’ the Chinese people from centuries of oppression. Chapter 4 will discuss *White Deer Plain* (*Bailuyuan* 白鹿原) by Chen Zhongshi 陈忠实, showing how the novel rejects a linear national history of the twentieth-century through the discrediting of revolution as a moral standard and way of interpreting and narrating the past. Chapter 5 will discuss *Hometown’s Chrysanthemums* (*Guxiang Tianxia Huanghua* 故乡天下黄花) by Liu Zhenyun 刘震云; this chapter will show how Liu Zhenyun reads Chinese twentieth-century history as a farcical series of power struggles, in which revolution becomes a twisted carnival of base human instincts. Through an analysis of these two novels, this section shows how using revolution as the key to understanding China’s twentieth century has been thoroughly rejected by these novelists as a mode of historical enquiry. The discussion problematises the legitimacy that the CCP claims through the victory of the Chinese revolution and establishment of the People’s Republic of China.

Section III will present the second pair of case studies which investigate the form of the discourse of history. Part of the subversion of the official historical narrative (Party history, *Dangshi* 党史) by New Historical Fiction is achieved through a complete rejection of the capacity of directional, politically-motivated history to provide meaning for a people and for society. Chapter 6 analyses *Coloratura* (*Huaqiang* 花腔) by Li Er 李洱. This novel provides a complex investigation of the discursive possibilities and limits of history through an interweaving of different texts and voices. The metafictional and metahistorical qualities of the novel both invite and require the reader to construct meaning and interpret the events presented. The ‘truth’ to which linear history aspires is thus considerably thrown into doubt. Chapter 7 presents a reading of the series of novellas by Wang Xiaobo known under the collective title of *Modern Times Trilogy* (*Shidai Sanbu Qu* 时代三部曲), which itself consists of collections of

stories under the headings *Golden Age* (*Huangjin shidai* 黄金时代), *Silver Age* (*Baiyin shidai* 白银时代), and *Bronze Age* (*Qingtong shidai* 青铜时代). This final case study focuses on more than one novel, as it will be argued that Wang Xiaobo is the author who most obviously succeeds in carrying out the complete subversion of history in Chinese culture and history as a discipline. As a result, his novels require a wider analysis; the three novels collectively should be read as one meditation of the past, present and future of Chinese culture and history. Furthermore, Wang Xiaobo is the only one of the case studies and indeed the only author in this movement who also investigates the theme of futurity in his fiction. The analysis of the implications of futurity for the authority of history as a discourse represents a fitting conclusion to a discussion of novels that subvert official history.

The principle methodology that this thesis will employ is close critical textual analysis; the interpretation of political and cultural contexts is also used to inform this. The novels will be read for the judgements made on both the specifics of Chinese twentieth-century history and the revolutions, as well as Chinese culture more generally and the discourse of history itself. The essential viability of the discipline of history will be analysed through a close reading of the literary texts in the four case studies. The thesis will analyse to what extent the case studies presented subvert the official historiography of the CCP, and the implications of the textual analysis in terms of cultural politics will be outlined and discussed. The thesis will not engage in a methodology or analysis from the social or political sciences to uncover fully the actual power politics occurring with the CCP or literary circles. However, these questions will be alluded to and identified in the conclusion of this thesis as potentially interesting avenues of future research.

Critics have raised concerns about the suitability and appropriateness of employing Western critical theory in a cultural context markedly different from its own<sup>6</sup>: in this case, that of contemporary Mainland China. I contend in this

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<sup>6</sup> One such example can be found in Fredric Jameson's (1986) essay, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism".



thesis that such concerns are of little relevance as the movement of New Historical Fiction in China is directly influenced by the theory of the Western movement of New Historicism, as propounded by critics such as Greenblatt, Hayden White and others. Furthermore, novelists such as Li Er and Wang Xiaobo have self-avowedly been directly influenced by Western critical theory and literature. Wang Xiaobo's literary style pushes the boundaries of metafiction to their limits throughout his novels. He constantly tells the reader what he is doing and alludes to instances in his life or reading that are relevant to a particular point in the story. Regularly citing Western authors that he likes, Wang Xiaobo implies their influence on his literary taste and output. Indeed the movement of New Historical Fiction in China is a typical example of Chinese intellectuals and writers absorbing ideas from a different culture, in this case the modern and postmodern West, and using these ideas to address particularly Chinese issues. As the concept of a linear, directional history originated during the European Enlightenment, the theoretical and formal judgments of Chinese novelists such as Li Er and Wang Xiaobo on history as a discourse are as relevant for other cultural contexts as they are for the Chinese one. The modern discipline of history that they are subverting is not unique to China, even allowing for the mixture of Confucian, Hegelian and Marxist historiographies that constitute modern Chinese historiography.

As it is clear that the movement of New Historical Fiction in China absorbed critical theory from New Historicism in the West, it is useful to give a brief context to the treatment of history as a theme by other world literatures. Chinese critics have compared Chen Zhongshi's *White Deer Plain* to the Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez's famous novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Liu Chengyou 1994). The critics have noted similar attempts by the two authors to provide a fictional version of a century of history of their respective countries. This fictional version contains strong elements of local knowledge and folk culture that combine to tell a 'story' of the century rather than a 'history'. However, Marquez's work is a representative of the Latin American genre of magical realism and is thus quite different to the novels in the case studies in this thesis. An example again from another cultural context is Salman Rushdie's

novel *Midnight's Children*, the chaotic narration of which has been read as an allegory or 'chutnification'<sup>7</sup> of India's twentieth century history (Hutcheon 1989, 65-6). While the contexts and results of these two novels are markedly different from those of the novels analysed in this thesis, they all share the need to create a version of the twentieth century that is more meaningful than a conventional historical narrative. Also, in various ways, the three cultural contexts of Colombia, India and China share some sort of legacy of oppression – whether colonialism in the case of the first two, and a mixture of foreign aggression and political upheaval in the case of China. The occurrence in completely different cultural contexts of a similar desire to rewrite history through fiction highlights the importance of the relationship of fiction and history in the postmodern period. An awareness of this universality of human desires places contemporary Chinese literature within a global culture on the terms of its 'literary' qualities and themes alone. While this thesis focuses on the significance of New Historical Fiction as a movement for Chinese culture and history, the above discussion has briefly alluded to the broader, shared context of world literature on its own terms, rather than exclusively in terms of the culture that produces it.

One of the two central themes that Chinese novelists grouped under the movement New Historical Fiction are addressing, is the introduction of a more nuanced reading of Chinese revolutions in the twentieth century. This nuanced reading concludes that revolution is not the driving force behind the experience of the twentieth century in China. The second major issue addressed by the movement is a questioning of the continuing viability of history as a discourse and discipline to provide a meaningful narrative and interpretation of the past. The meta-theoretical nature of the latter transcends the specifics of one particular cultural context. It is however especially relevant in the Chinese cultural context as history has always been a dominant repository of cultural significance and meaning. History, for example, enjoyed a position at the top of the cultural hierarchy in premodern China, affording historical texts similar status to sacred texts. These issues will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

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<sup>7</sup> Hutcheon (1989, 65) interprets this term used by Rushdie as an image for his metafictional process whereby memory is saved from time through preservation as a story.

The above two themes helped guide the choice of novels for the case studies and led me to view the case studies in two separate sections. The novels were chosen as it was felt they best showcased the efforts being made collectively by this group of authors. The novels were also chosen because they have certain elements in common and feed naturally from one to the other. The first section focuses on the specific treatment of revolution as a series of historical movements throughout the twentieth-century in China, dealing with the ‘content’ of history in modern China. The second section analyses novels that investigate the discourse and discipline of history as a genre through the peculiarities of fiction, dealing with the ‘form’ of history.

Chen Zhongshi’s *White Deer Plain* was chosen as it is one of the most important works of the movement in its portrayal of twentieth-century Chinese history. The cultural and political ramifications of its rehabilitation of Confucianism as an ideology for the Chinese people make it a particularly interesting case study. Its strong assertion of cultural and local history through folk culture as the only meaningful way of understanding China’s twentieth century constitutes a radical stance against the hallowed place of revolution in official CCP historiography. The political tensions in the novel between rejecting revolution and rehabilitating a culturally conservative ancient ideological and social system, identify it as an important example containing the most salient themes of New Historical Fiction. The potential to use Confucianism for the purposes of contemporary nationalism in China add to the complexity that the novel evokes.

Liu Zhenyun’s *Hometown’s Chrysanthemums* was chosen as it offers a sharp critique of land reform, which is one of the most significant revolutionary achievements of the early People’s Republic of China. It extracts all moral behaviour from the revolution and demythologises it as a progressive, liberating force that drove history on to the correct way towards the enviable political status quo of the present, and the vision of an even better future. The themes of folk culture and village life are continued from *White Deer Plain*. Stronger elements of farce and absurdity are introduced in Liu Zhenyun’s novel taking it towards

the full carnivalisation of history that is found in the fiction of Li Er and Wang Xiaobo.

Li Er's *Coloratura* was chosen because through its highly experimental nature it throws into doubt the whole question of the genre of history as traditionally conceived. In addition, the novel was published in the early twenty-first century (2002) when New Historical Fiction was losing momentum as a movement. It continues the parody and absurdity found in *Hometown's Chrysanthemums*, contributing another volume to the carnivalisation of history.

Wang Xiaobo's *Modern Times Trilogy* was chosen, as stated above, because it represents the most powerful attempt to problematise, overturn and mine Chinese history and give it a fictional meaning. Wang Xiaobo is a master of the carnival subgenre, and of parody; he rejects both revolution and the possibility of linear history itself. His style has been praised by critics as having the ability to reveal the traces of history (Zhao Yiheng 2008, 63). However, Wang Xiaobo has not been aligned with the movement of New Historical Fiction by many critics as his novels encompass other themes apart from revolution and history. This thesis will show however that the movement of New Historical Fiction in China was not self-defined or self-proclaimed, but was so called by Chinese critics analysing trends within a body of literature (see section 1.5.2, p.34). The case can therefore be made to include other authors,<sup>8</sup> and in this case Wang Xiaobo can be seen to qualify as one of the leading proponents of fiction overtly and self-consciously grappling with history as a modern discourse.

Analysing a sizeable and important literary movement such as New Historical Fiction in its entirety is not possible or necessary within the confines of this thesis. This is true also for the works of all authors from the movement, and therefore only a selection of authors and novels has been identified for a close reading. The novels which are analysed in this thesis, as has been mentioned above, are of specific import because of their relatively unknown status in the

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<sup>8</sup> Chapter 7, pp.204-5, will show that a couple of critics do consider Wang Xiaobo's fiction as New Historical Fiction.

West. Mo Yan's 莫言 *Red Sorghum* (*Hong Gaoliang* 红高粱) has been hailed by critics as the first work of New Historical Fiction and has not been included in this thesis primarily because it is well known in China and abroad. A film adaptation of Mo Yan's novel was made in 1987 by Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 and the novel also exists in translation in English and other European languages. Furthermore it is often analysed along with works from the Roots-Seeking movement, and could therefore be considered as distinctly different from those novels which are purely New Historical Fiction.<sup>9</sup> Another work not discussed in this thesis is Zhang Wei's 张炜 *Ancient Boat* (*Guchuan* 古船). This was not included as I felt that while it shared themes with both *White Deer Plain* and *Hometown's Chrysanthemums*, it was published in 1986 and this thesis concentrates on the 1990s into the early twenty-first century primarily because the ideological climate had shifted in China during this period. These two important works will be discussed in more detail in Section II.

This introduction has presented the question that this thesis is raising and proposes to answer, namely the extent to which the novels in the four case studies in this thesis subvert the official discourse of history in the PRC, and the socio-political implications of this subversion. Finally, all quotations from Chinese critics and novelists that appear in English in this thesis are my own translations, unless otherwise specified. Section I will now provide an overview of the movement of New Historical Fiction and the relationship between fiction, history, and revolution in Chinese culture, as well as providing a critical framework for the thesis.

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<sup>9</sup> The relationship between New Historical Fiction and Roots-Seeking will be discussed in chapter 1.

## **Section I – Fiction and history in contemporary China**

### **Chapter 1 – Introduction to New Historical Fiction in China**

This chapter will present the cultural background in China from the mid-1980s onwards to provide a context for the novels and authors analysed in this thesis. This will serve to introduce the fiction that is being analysed and will help answer the question of how far the novels achieve a subversion of the official historiography of the PRC and the implications of this. In this period, cultural debate among intellectuals and artists began to explore issues outside the previous cultural and political restraints imposed by Mao Zedong that culture and literature should serve the revolution and the people and be completely controlled by the government. It will be shown that many of these movements share a concern for ‘rewriting’ of some kind, whether of history, identity, literature, or a return to ‘origins’. This period also saw the large-scale importation of literary and cultural theory and method from outside China, which served to deconstruct cultural discourse from the dominance of revolutionary and Marxist-Maoist discourse. The novels considered by critics as New Historical Fiction will be presented and analysed in this cultural context.

After an introduction to the cultural debates known as ‘Culture Fever’ (*wenhua re* 文化热), the chapter will discuss the concept of ‘rewriting’ in this period. The cultural and literary sources and movements that led directly to the establishment of New Historical Fiction as a movement will be identified, and an overview of the Western theories that influenced New Historical Fiction as a movement will also be provided. Definitions of New Historical Fiction provided by Chinese critics will follow along with their sketch of the development of the movement. This will be followed by a literature review of the movement in English-language secondary literature. Finally, a survey of some important works of fiction classified by critics as New Historical Fiction will follow in order to provide an overview of the movement beyond the four case studies presented in this thesis.

## 1.1 The Chinese cultural context

The 1980s in China was a period of great cultural debate and openness. Intellectuals and artists believed that they had regained the right and authority to serve as a directing force for society. Starting in the mid-1980s, a series of debates on culture began in China that became known as ‘Culture Fever’. These discussions were intended to debate the direction of Chinese culture in the Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) era of reform after the enormous cultural changes that had taken place following close to a century of continuous political turmoil. Some critics, such as Qingjia Edward Wang, have seen parallels with the enlightenment of the May Fourth Movement of the early twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> The role and essence of Chinese culture was discussed in relation to continuing the project of modernity begun in the early twentieth century after decades of socialist revolution. The opening up to the outside world also meant that Chinese culture and tradition was again compared to other cultures and traditions, most notably those of the West.

The debates mainly centred either on the use of ‘science’ to improve philosophy (Jin Guantao), or on tradition and modernity in cultural politics discussed by Li Zehou, Gan Yang, the enlightenment school, and the New-Confucianists (Jing Wang 1996, 40). The early debates discussed scientific knowledge and methods, and resulted in the Futurologist School, led by Jin Guantao. Jin saw Chinese history as an ‘ultra-stable system’, and subscribed to the view that China had not changed for three thousand years. (Xudong Zhang 1997, 40). He believed that in order to advance towards the future, society should separate itself from its history. This demonstrates that the subject of history also became relevant in debates on science and the future.

The Chinese Culturalist School focussed their discussions on Chinese tradition, and formed around the International Academy for Chinese Culture (*Zhongguo*

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<sup>10</sup> “Their search resulted in the so-called ‘culture fever’ (*wenhua re*) in the mid-1980s, which dwelled on many issues that had concerned their predecessors in the Republican era” (Qingjia Edward Wang 2001: 205).

*wenhua shuyuan* 中国文化书院), which was founded in October 1984 in Beijing and directed by Tang Yijie. Xudong Zhang argues that the proponents of this school were not always culturally conservative, but adopted radical positions on tradition and modernity (Xudong Zhang 1997, 42). For example, they viewed Confucianism as transformed by a ‘modern intellectual intervention’, and Marxism as part of ‘tradition’. They identified traditional culture as a vital and important part of social and cultural reconstruction (Xudong Zhang 1997, 43). Furthermore, Tang Yijie contended that modernisation should transform the deeper content of culture and be considered a ‘modernisation of culture’ (Xudong Zhang 1997, 45). The Culturalists gave importance to local ethnographic content and structure in the national culture tradition. The New Confucianists were opposed to modern Western culture, which was linked to their opposition to Chinese socialism.

The discussion of the traditional and modern in turn led to a series of workshops on comparative methodology in cultural studies (Jing Wang 1996, 51). Jing Wang notes that critics sought to show the difference of the current movement in its ‘higher theoretical level’, saying that it stemmed from internal cultural contradictions, rather than external crises and need for survival as in the May Fourth Movement (Jing Wang 1996, 51).

The 1988 television documentary series *Heshang* 河殇 (River Elegy) brought the culture debates to a wider audience through television. Jing Wang shows that the May Fourth Movement was a missed historical opportunity to remove China from its cycle of ‘ultrastability’, and argues that the culture debate promoted by *Heshang* quickly lost its strength as it promoted the reform programme implemented by Zhao Ziyang, and was used by those in power as an ideological instrument (Jing Wang 1996, 54).



## 1.2 Rewriting

Many writers and artists agreed that a change of attitude and direction was needed for Chinese culture. This reappraisal of Chinese culture naturally led to the desire to ‘rewrite’ cultural narratives and discourses in the broadest sense. This rewriting took many forms including avant-garde fiction, realist fiction, television documentaries and series, and films. The act of rewriting by definition implies glancing backwards in time into events and narratives that require new interpretation, culminating in challenging the very discourse of history itself. Jing Wang has argued that:

“...aesthetics and the sociocultural are so closely intertwined that it is inadequate to examine the Chinese definition of modernity solely from the perspectives of cultural philosophers,” (Jing Wang 1996, 39).

In view of this, writers and artists contributed as much to the cultural debates as philosophers and cultural critics.

‘Rewriting’ of stories and histories has a long tradition in China as in other countries, and will be discussed in Chapter 2. The combined efforts towards rewriting history from the 1980s onwards are not therefore something completely new in Chinese culture. In China ‘rewriting’ in a cultural context had an overt political intention since it was not possible openly to voice political dissent from the ruling elite. In the post-Mao period the government has lost claims over ideology as a means of legitimacy to rule, especially after the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 4 June 1989. The loss of claims to meaning in writing official history has meant that culture in the form of literature, television and film has been the forum for debates to take place on cultural and political ideology. Since there has still been no possibility for open public debate of these issues in China from the 1980s onwards (culminating in 4 June 1989), the cultural discourse has provided a space for these ideas to be discussed and new forms of meaning to be created. The period under discussion is well known for its huge economic and

social changes, and coupled with a lack of political reform. The only way to bridge this gap allowing for new structures of meaning to be created has been to find refuge in the broader cultural and creative media. Official history and ideology have been at worst silent and at best unimaginative on these important questions. This thesis will show how these efforts at ‘re-writing’ in their different ways have succeeded in dismantling the power of history and the revolutionary discourse in post-Mao China.

The economic liberalisation and commercialisation of the economy in the post-Mao period has led to a proliferation of output from the creative industries to the extent that the government cannot maintain the same control over output and discourse as under Mao. The sheer volume of output of fiction, memoirs, television documentaries and series, to name just a few genres, has meant that these cultural outpourings occur in a large-scale marketplace. Thus the government has had to compete with cultural products that between them construct different accounts of reality, whether past, present or future. Dai Jinhua (in Jing Wang & Barlow eds. 2002, 213-221) makes the interesting argument that the change in the use of the term *guangchang* 广场 from its original meaning of ‘square’ or ‘large open public space’ to ‘plaza’ in the commercial sense of a shopping centre is symbolic of the change from the political to the commercial in Chinese society. Dai Jinhua argues that rather than mass movements for or against the government, or leadership by the elite culture or elite intellectuals, in 1990s China, leisure and consuming “serve the important function of mobilising and organising Chinese society” (in Jing Wang & Barlow eds. 2002, 221 ). It is against this sociocultural background that the novels of new historical fiction should be read. As works of fiction they are to be ‘consumed’ by intellectuals and students and therefore have an important role in constructing a new historical discourse against which twentieth century Chinese history and culture can be read.

Turning to history to search for direction, identity and confidence as a way of ‘rewriting’ Chinese culture was natural.<sup>11</sup> Chinese writers found that conventional history writing could no longer provide contemporary Chinese culture with a new direction or substance (Zhang Qinghua 1998, 198). Writers realised they could no longer hope to make a real, scientific judgement on history, and began to take more subjective approaches. They experimented with different forms for expressing the past, and fiction was an important part of these new efforts.

### 1.3 Cultural movements acting as sources

Critics have identified the three main sources feeding into New Historical Fiction as a movement as being Roots-Seeking Fiction (*Xungen xiaoshuo* 寻根小说), New Realist Fiction (*Xin xieshi xiaoshuo* 新写实小说), and Avant-Garde Fiction (*Xianfeng xiaoshuo* 先锋小说). New Historical Fiction has inherited the emphasis on history and folk culture from Roots-Seeking. The difference is that Roots-Seeking searched for the essentials of Chinese literature in the space of rural folk culture, whereas New Historical Fiction aimed at recovering rich and varied historical truths from the folk culture more broadly (Tang Yu 2006, 80). New Historical Fiction has been influenced by Roots-Seeking Fiction’s attempt to create authentic Chinese-language novels (*Zhenzheng de Hanyu xiaoshuo* 真正的汉语小说) from the sources of traditional culture. New Historical Fiction has inherited the value given to urban popular culture and life from New Realist Fiction. The content of both types of fiction is very similar, including topics such as natural disasters, famine, war, death, and daily life. New Historical Fiction writes about history and the past, whereas New Realist Fiction concentrates on present reality. The influence from Avant-Garde Fiction has been the introduction of Western deconstructionist theories that emphasise the subjectivity and fictionality of traditional historical narratives. In terms of avant-garde narrative technique, New Historical Fiction has been influenced by stories told in non-chronological order, and by metafiction (which will be discussed in more

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<sup>11</sup> On the importance of history in conceptions of Chinese culture, see section 2.1, p. 50.

detail in Chapter 3). The above characteristics differentiate New Historical Fiction from traditional historical fiction and Revolutionary Historical Fiction (Tang Yu 2006, 80). Tang Yu (2006, 77) further argues that New Historical Fiction expresses the ‘history’ in the hearts and minds of ordinary people. The movement is classed as ‘new’ because the novels and stories record history in lower case; they are fictional micro-histories. They extract fragments from folk culture and everyday life, using personal, or local family histories to substitute national history. Such histories are often subjective and do not claim objectivity. The novels problematise the truth claimed by ‘upper case’ History and subvert the official, macro-history that forms the master narrative, which results in expressing the randomness of history.

After the Cultural Revolution, the cultural movement that first began to look at the immediate past was ‘Scar Literature’ (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学). While this was not rewriting history or narrative in a pure sense, it was still backward looking and focused on expressing the emotional and psychological trauma of the immediate past in order to attempt to reconstruct a new meaningful historical discourse. Scar Literature was one of the first cultural movements in the post-1978 reform era that was less subject to party control. Although works produced contained explicit criticisms of the Cultural Revolution, authors did not repudiate Communism. Jenner summarises the movement thus:

“They infringed some earlier literary taboos with impunity, created a sense of interest and expectation, and prepared the way for the much bolder efforts that were to follow.” (Jenner 1981, 277).

One of the most important literary movements in the post-Mao period concerned with investigating history and the past was the Roots-Seeking literature movement. While Scar Literature examined the turmoil specifically of the Cultural Revolution, the Roots-Seeking movement was keen to analyse the starting point or ‘root’ of Chinese culture. After the decades of the arts serving Communist educational propaganda under heavy state control, this movement sought to reinvigorate marginalised cultures and discourses in China. It did this

by going to the geographical margins of the country and examining folk culture and literature. The movement was mainly concerned with peeling back the historical layers of Chinese culture to seek the origin, whether of culture or literature. It did not, however, take on the whole written discourse of history in pre-modern or modern Chinese culture. The first work in the movement was A Cheng's 阿城 *The King of Chess* (*Qi Wang* 棋王) published in 1984 (Xudong Zhang 1997, 137-142).

Critic Zhang Qinghua argues that looking at the Roots-Seeking movement in this light, we can see similarities with the May Fourth movement and Lu Xun's work using literature as a utilitarian tool to achieve the goal of bettering culture and society. History in this context has to bear the burden of cultural meaning and show coherence. Zhang sees this as a product of the mixing of an old historical viewpoint with anthropology, and reads the clear utilitarian goal of this collective effort as seeking to reconstruct a national spirit. This same spirit and aim can be seen in the work of the late Misty poets, and in the roots-seeking manifestos of writers such as Han Shaogong, Li Hangyu, A Cheng, Zheng Wanlong around 1985. However, they soon found that this primitive, backward spirit went against their intention to change and improve folk culture. This made the movement enter its second phase, away from Roots-Seeking to New Historical Fiction. (Zhang Qinghua 1998, 201).

#### **1.4 Influence and outcome of Western theory**

The changes occurring in intellectual debates had an important influence on New Historical Fiction in China. As new methodologies, such as cultural sociology and cultural anthropology, were introduced in the 1980s, the study of history became more sophisticated and nuanced, allowing the historian to get closer to the workings of history. This naturally led to a move away from a macro-history of large-scale events towards a micro-history of family stories. History was no longer a unified structure of meaning, but rather lots of small fragments. Historical rhythms or direction could no longer be identified as the concept and

narration of history became more blurred. All these factors contributed to the turn from Roots-Seeking fiction to New Historical Fiction.

Cultural anthropology is a useful methodology for analysing the themes of New Historical Fiction, and their significance. As a discipline, cultural anthropology takes culture as a meaningful unit of analysis. It allows also for the importance of local experience and knowledge. Cultural sociology offers the possibility for understanding cultural change that is central to the reading undertaken by New Historical Fiction of China's twentieth century. Culture has been defined by many critics; a useful definition is by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942):

“‘Culture, comprises inherited artefacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits and values.’” (Malinowski quoted in Raymond 1957, 16).

Zhang Qinghua (1988, 199) notes that in the West, New Historicism emerged from post-structuralism and Michel Foucault's theory of history. Historical and cultural theories deriving from structuralism widely influenced China in the mid-1980s. These theories highlighted the inner workings of texts, and led to doubts as to the relationship between style and content. Writing about history in fiction shows a doubt surrounding the truth of history as a discourse, while also leading to a curiosity towards untold and repressed histories that were not included in official historiography.

Critic Tang Yu (2006, 78) shows that the main three aspects of New Historicism in the West include focusing on micro-history, bringing history to the present and making it relevant to current reality, and finally reconfiguring the relationship between literature and history. Fiction was considered as having equal discursive value to history, and ultimately considered as more important in reflecting reality, whether past or present. Fiction was seen as able to bring out the most intimate contradictions in reality. Wang Fengzhen introduced New Historicism to China in 1988 in a book on Western literary theory (Wang Fengzhen 1988). Other articles and books were published on the subject, including an article by Zhao

Yifan (1991) in *Dushu* magazine in 1991. New Historicism highlighted the structure of history as a linguistic discourse like any other, as well as emphasising the theme of representation.

According to the main proponents of New Historicism in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, Gallagher and Greenblatt, the unsettling of genre hierarchies is not revolutionary, but is democratising, refusing to limit creativity to the achievements of groups of trained specialists (Gallagher & Greenblatt 2000, 11). If a whole culture is regarded as a text – if all the textual traces of an era ‘count’ as both representation and event – then it is increasingly difficult to invoke ‘history’ as censor. New Historicism becomes a history of possibilities: while interested in the collective, it remains committed to the value of the single voice, the isolated scandal, the idiosyncratic vision, or the transient sketch (Gallagher & Greenblatt 2000, 16). I would argue however that the main influence of New Historicism on New Historical Fiction in China was the freeing of the hierarchy of genre, providing fiction with possibilities of expression equal to those of history as a discipline. New Historicism in the West is more concerned with mining literature and other marginalised ‘historical’ texts for information about a culture and its past. Whereas the novelists grouped under the category of New Historical Fiction in China are more preoccupied with using fiction to capture the past allowing its complexity and nuances to be expressed in a more effective way than empiricist historiography would allow.

Zhang Qinghua (1998, 201) notes that in the late 1980s in China, writers such as Su Tong, Ye Zhaoyan, Ge Fei, Yu Hua, Beicun, Fang Fang, Liu Heng and Liu Zhenyun began to move away from imitating the ‘real’ in their historical writing towards exposing the ‘fabricated’ in writing and history. People no longer believed the discourse or discipline of history to be the sole authority for accurate, coherent accounts of origins. The democratisation of genre hierarchies was very important however in allowing novelists to consider fiction as capable as history, if not more capable, of representing the past.

One of the major results of this infusion of Western theory and rethinking of history was the realisation that there could no longer be a unifying discourse of history, no master narrative, against which events could be narrated and explained. Writers now saw history in fragments and were thus keen to explore micro-histories at the grassroots levels of society and at an individual human level. Coupled with the general theoretical assertion that historiography as a discourse had nothing to offer intellectuals was the more local realisation in the Chinese context that twentieth-century Chinese history contained a lot more than just revolutionary historiography. Thus at a local level the revolution was deconstructed, and at an abstract theoretical level history as a discourse was deconstructed. Novels that attempt to undertake one or other of these two tasks will be analysed in the case studies of this thesis. The unifying myth of twentieth-century revolutionary Chinese history was eroded, and along with it the discourse of history that supported it.

### **1.5 Definitions and sketch of movement**

A literary or artistic movement can arise in several ways. One way is through a manifesto published by a group of artists stating their aims in propagating a new style of art or writing. This was a common occurrence during Modernism in the West and Asia in the early twentieth century. New Historical Fiction in China in the 1980s and beyond was identified as a movement by critics rather than having a self-conscious manifesto. A survey of the secondary literature in Chinese on this topic reveals a diversity and disagreement on a definition of the movement or type of writing. This is natural for such a recent phenomenon that is still ongoing.

For the purposes of this thesis, a definition will include works of fiction produced from 1986 onwards that treat the broad themes of China's past and history, whether as specific historical events or history as a written discourse. I find this definition the most useful as it is inclusive of a wide range of material dealing with 'history' or the past in some way. As the movement is very recent and still ongoing, it makes sense at the time of writing to allow for as wide a



range as possible of fiction to be included. The case studies analysed will only treat fiction from the 1990s however. A survey of critics' definitions and analyses of the movement will now be given to show the impact such writing caused.

#### 1.5.1 Early works

Shi Jinju notes that critics have traced the movement of New Historical Fiction back to 1986 with the publication of Mo Yan's 莫言 *Red Sorghum* (*Hong Gaoliang* 红高粱), Qiao Liang's 乔良 *Spiritual Banner* (*Lingqi* 灵旗), and Zhou Meisen's 周梅森 *Army Song* (*Junge* 军歌) (Shi Jinju 2008, 55). Zhang Liquan (2007, 113) notes that around this time novels about the past began to appear as family stories. These novels could be mistaken as purely family stories or as traditional historical novels, but the difference lies in their concern for historiography. These novels were initially called New Historical Novels or New Historicist Fiction, the differences of which will be discussed below.

Mo Yan's series of novels starting with *Red Sorghum* and Qiao Liang's novel *Spiritual Banner* can thus be seen as the starting points of New Historical Fiction. In *Spiritual Banner* history and politics are removed from the narrative, leaving bare the brute reality of war as a locus of life and death. *Spiritual Banner* delves into memories of the Long March, reliving those historical moments of significance (Shi Jinju 2008, 56), but Shi notes that it is more concerned with the story-telling potential of historical moments, not their capacity to convey an ideology. These two novels deconstructed and overturned the claims to truth of the memory and narrative of revolutionary history (Shi Jinju 2008, 56), as well as destroying the truths that had been previously narrated about the revolution.

History here is seen as random, and without any direction, which encompasses the historiography espoused by New Historical Fiction. This fiction privileges the folk over the political, and frees history from the textbook, combining elements of folk culture, which as a literary practice has a long history in Chinese

classical fiction.<sup>12</sup> But New Historical Fiction allows folk culture to exist on its own terms, without being sanitised to express socialist ideals and morals. The commercial success of *Red Sorghum* has influenced the path of this movement, which has tended towards a popular register in literary content and style.

These new historical novels no longer write about heroic revolutionary qualities of their characters. Personal experiences of history inform the narrative and historical consciousness expounded in these novels. *Red Sorghum* is filtered through the memory of an ancestor, which personalises the whole story. Shi Jinju discusses the metaphor in the second paragraph of the novel<sup>13</sup>, of characters only being able to hear the muffled footsteps of the ‘soldiers’, not actually see their shape or form. Shi argues that this description is a metaphor for history in the novel: Mo Yan is implying here that in approaching history, all we can hope to capture and retrieve is the ‘sounds’ and ‘shapes’ of people and events, not their complete existences in a clear picture (Shi Jinju 2008, 55). The narrator in *Red Sorghum* admits he does not know if the person he is describing is himself or not. He thus frees himself from the limits of reporting pure ‘true’ facts. Furthermore, the narrative voice confidently proclaims that the text is a ‘story’, and not history. Historical memory and feeling entered a period of subjective representation after these two novels (Shi Jinju 2008, 56).

Revolution is portrayed as an unnatural process in these novels, and is often the cause of natural disaster. In *Spiritual Banner*, the Long March is described, but the difference with other fiction treating the same theme is that in this novel the victory of the revolution is not seen as a given, necessary historical outcome. Indeed, the revolution is not portrayed as the progress of history, rather as another means to personal gain, as in *Hometown's Chrysanthemums* by Liu Zhenyun. Many different kinds of revolution are portrayed in these novels, often at the margins of society. This replaces the dichotomous revolutionary or reactionary paradigm common in previous historical fiction treating similar

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<sup>12</sup> This tradition will be discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>13</sup> Shi quotes the following sentence, “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.” (Mo and Goldblatt 1994, 3).

materials. The complex portrayal and demythologising of revolution as a theme in New Historical Fiction is one of the major ways in which fiction subverts the official discourse of history. The first two case studies in section II of this thesis will analyse this question in detail.

### 1.5.2 Chinese critics' definitions

One of the first critics to define fiction that treated the subject and content of history was Chen Sihe 陈思和 (Tang Yu 2006, 77), who said that the trend arose out of the school of realist fiction. Chen Sihe (1992, 6) noted that the rewriting of history also occurred in the Republican period (1911-1949) and included writers such as Shen Yanbing 沈雁冰 (pen name Mao Dun 茅盾, 1896-1981) and Li Jieren 李劫人 (1891-1962), remarking that Shen aimed to raise awareness of the political, whereas Li sought to raise awareness of folk culture (*minjian wenhua* 民间文化). Chen Sihe also cites Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* as beginning the movement of New Historical Fiction in contemporary China. Chen argued that elements of folk culture had a long history in Chinese classical fiction, but that the portrayal of folk culture was used for political propaganda means from the 1950s onwards, whereas New Historical Fiction allows folk culture to exist on its own terms, without being sanitised (Chen Sihe 1992, 6). Zhang Qinghua sees the movement of New Historical Novels as peaking between 1987 and 1992 (Zhang Qinghua 1998, 202), and places all fiction dealing with history into the category of New Historicist Fiction, including writers as diverse as Mo Yan, Su Tong, Ge Fei, Ye Zhaoyan, Fang Fang, Yang Zhengguang, Beicun, and even Yu Hua (Zhang Qinghua 1998, 201).

Zhang Qinghua (1998, 200) has divided different elements within fiction writing about history from the 1980s onwards as New Historical Fiction and New Historicist Fiction, the latter being more narrowly defined as a category. Although it has elements in common with New Historical Fiction, Zhang (1998, 200) sees New Historicist Fiction as having newer content as it is the result of the merging of many new theoretical 'avant-garde' discourses from the West such as

existentialism, structuralism, postmodernism, and deconstruction. This fiction is the result of the merging of new philosophy from the West and the maturing of China's traditional methodologies for writing history. As indicated above, this thesis will not make a distinction between these two kinds of writing as separate movements, rather as different kinds of fiction occurring at different stages of the development of the larger movement of New Historical Fiction. Of course, this is only a working definition for the thesis and may need to be revised in future literary criticism that has the critical advantage of temporal distance from the cultural phenomenon under analysis.

New Historical Fiction takes a pluralistic historical viewpoint from a merging of folk culture, negating a one-sided position. It uses a narrative of folk culture, replacing socialist ideology with the return of culture and aesthetics, and replaces simple dichotomies with more complex comparisons. Zhang Qinghua notes that New Historical Fiction in fact has more in common with traditional Chinese historical fiction such as *The Three Kingdoms* (*San guo yanyi* 三国演义) and *The Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水浒传) in that they all examine history through folk culture, and narrate a kind of 'unofficial' history such as *yeshi* 野史 or *baishi* 稗史 (Zhang Qinghua 1998, 200). It approaches history from a different viewpoint and depth. This shows that the category of New Historical Fiction is very broad and can contain any fiction that treats history from the point of view of folk culture. Furthermore, New Historical Fiction is different from traditional Chinese fiction in that it is now providing a more meaningful record of the past than the traditional discourse of history itself. This relationship will be discussed further in chapter 2.

The following two sections will help define the movement further by exploring the terms 'history' and 'new' in the name of New Historical Fiction.

### 1.5.3 History

The history portrayed by fiction classified as New Historical Fiction is mostly the history of the Republican period in China (1911-1949). The gap between the

Republican period of history and these writers has possibly allowed novelists to reconstruct history through the changes in popular and folk culture. These novels use unofficial historical materials to reconstruct the history of the period. The difference in Party and non-Party materials is not the use of different materials, but more the historical concepts used to reflect them. Indeed, New Historical Fiction considers mainly the history of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese revolution (CCP) as its subject matter, according to critic Xu Yingchun (2004,105). In this regard it can be read as a response to historical fiction about the revolution written before 1986. There are examples, including those in the case studies in this thesis, that do not only treat the revolution and twentieth-century Chinese history as their theme. Some novels that concentrate on the discourse of history use premodern Chinese history as their material, such as Wang Xiaobo's *The Bronze Age*. Despite this, most of the novels in the movement write about the twentieth century and investigate the various stages of the Chinese revolution. For the purposes of this thesis, 'the Chinese revolution' will encompass the revolutionary movements in twentieth century China as a whole continuous process, unless specified as referring to one historical event in particular. The main stages of the Chinese revolution in the twentieth century include the overthrow of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) in 1911, the Civil War (1927-1949) in 1949, and the Cultural Revolution from 1966-76.

#### 1.5.4 'New'

The 'new' part of this historical fiction is the historical viewpoint and the method of narration. The material treated is similar to that covered in socialist historical novels from the post-1949 period. Some authors of New Historical Fiction actively parody the revolutionary idealism of previous fiction, thus betraying new historical values for judging the past. As the concept of new historical novels is vague, critics do not fully agree on which novels should be classified in this category (Jin Xinlai 2003, 25). But the most basic qualification is that the historical viewpoint used in the novel is different from traditional official treatments of modern Chinese history and the revolution. Jin Xinlai (2003, 25) identifies four kinds of novels: firstly, those with a different viewpoint from revolutionary novels such as *White Deer Plain*; secondly, those opposing a

historical viewpoint or concept: avant-garde novelists like Ge Fei 格非 (b. 1964) and Yu Hua 余华 (b. 1960); thirdly, folk or personal histories such as *Hometown's Chrysanthemums*; lastly, private histories such as the novels of Wang Anyi 王安忆 (b. 1954). Zhang Liqun (2007, 115) sees New Historical Fiction as the avant-garde movement turning its efforts to history.

### 1.6 Development of New Historical Fiction in China

Chinese critics have further divided the movement of New Historical Fiction in China into three rough periods of development each with separate themes. This section will provide an overview of this development. A group of novels published between 1986 to 1990 tackled subjects such as clan or family history and the fate of individual characters in history. From 1990 to 1992, novels were more allegorical in character, showing that the historical narrative had been hollowed out. These novels explored the themes of history, existence, and the world. *The Enemy* (*Diren* 敌人) by Ge Fei, published in 1990, is a family fable about revenge, and life and death. From 1990 to 1993, there were also novels published about bandits and vagabonds. These intended to subvert the traditional moral values of historiography which preferred accounts of heroes to those of criminals. Such novels only appeared on the edge of the movement of New Historical Fiction and have a long tradition in Chinese literature with well-known precedents such as *The Water Margin*.

In the 1990s, New Historical Fiction entered a phase of greater deconstruction, fragmentation and subjectivity (Shi Jinju 2008, 56). Apart from large historical events being marginalised and deconstructed, the whole philosophical construct of history as a discourse came under attack. This included the directionality of history, which was ruptured thus removing any notion of progress or future projection from the course of history. This process echoes a statement from Karl Popper,<sup>14</sup> stating that history cannot hope to describe the past accurately. Rather,

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<sup>14</sup> "To sum up, there can be no history of 'the past as it actually did happen'; there can only be historical interpretations, and none of them final; and every generation has a right to frame its own." (Popper 1945, 297)

historical writing can only aspire to providing explanations of history and the past. Writing history now had infinite possibilities, but this also meant that history was no longer seen as reliable for pure objectivity and fact. New Historical Fiction has deconstructed the traditional philosophy of history<sup>15</sup> and the genre of history itself (Shi Jinju 2008, 57). But, it has been constructed on the ideology and historical viewpoint of the past, and is naturally subject to its own limitations. Whatever the limitations, New Historical Fiction has certainly provided a wider and more diverse historical context in which to reconstruct the past.

An important aspect of New Historical Fiction is the representation of a range of alternative discourses. Critics view this as highly significant and cite the importance ascribed to the treatment of discourses as abstract entities as ‘unprecedented’ (Zhou Xinrong 2007). Zhou identifies the main theme of these novels as discourses, rather than historical facts. History has become highly subjective and is a stage or background for the individuals to act against. In this context, the writers’ interest has shifted from historical events to personal stories against the backdrop of these events. The historical discourse has changed so much that the reader no longer experiences the logical unfolding of historical events, they are just left with fragments (Zhang Liqun 2007, 115).

Zhang Qinghua (1998, 203) identifies the last stage of New Historical Fiction as after 1992, when it entered a stage of history as ‘play’. He sees these novels as moving further away from history itself, and their cultural content also became thinner. They are concerned with humour and entertainment. Zhang Qinghua concedes that from 1993 onwards longer, more realist novels continued the movement of writing about history in fiction. Classic examples include *White Deer Plain*, published in 1993, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (*Fengru feitun* 丰乳肥臀) by Mo Yan, published in 1995, and *Clan* (*Jiazu* 家族) by Zhang Wei, published in 1995. Zhang Qinghua further admits that these writers are clearly subverting traditional historical discourse and structure and are actively engaged in a ‘rewriting’ process. In Zhang Qinghua’s (1998, 205) opinion, the movement

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<sup>15</sup> See section 2.1 in chapter 2 for an explanation of the traditional philosophy of history in China.

gradually died out after novels moved too far away from history and became concerned only with play and entertainment. This has proved to be untrue however with the continuing publication of interesting works of New Historical Fiction into the twenty-first century, such as *Coloratura* by Li Er published in 2002, as will be discussed in Chapter 6.

There is a long tradition of the arts as ‘play’ in the west and in China. After the experimentation of the avant-garde novels that gave ‘play’ an aesthetic manifestation, and through the deconstruction of discourse and language, New Historical Novels have developed the concept of play further. Play has been introduced into historical narration. Critics have identified novels that introduce play into history such as *The Legend of Hometown Togetherness* (*Guxiang xiangchu liuchuan* 故乡相处流传) by Liu Zhenyun (Shi Jinju 2008, 58) and *The Bronze Age* by Wang Xiaobo (Wang Aisong 2001, 69) as containing elements of historical farce, combining historical figures from the past and present, and from China and abroad all in one historical narrative. These novels contain elements of the farcical and absurd, and use history as a vehicle for the expression of existential feelings. This irreverent, playful interpretation of history serves to remove the mystique and seriousness of the genre of history. On the contrary it reflects the emptiness and poverty of history as a claim to truth and power, turning history into a discourse of the play of desire. Thus, it is important to view this movement in broad terms as fiction which treats the content or form of history in a new, different way from previous writing. An overview of some fiction in this movement will serve to illustrate this point.

As the movement emphasised the ‘fictionality’ of history, a popular entertainment version of the movement became popular in the 1990s. This did not diminish the achievements of the movement however, but merely served to present challenges to the official historical narrative in popular mainstream culture. Since this was more risky politically, the history being portrayed had to become even more ‘fictionalised’. The implications of this will be discussed in the chapter 2, and the Conclusion.



## 1.7 New Historical Fiction survey

Types of novels treating the broad subject of history before the movement of New Historical Fiction will now be briefly summarised to provide a context for the novels that come under the category of New Historical Fiction.<sup>16</sup> Most historical novels from the 1980s onwards seek to expose the underlying rhythms of history, for example Liu Sifen's 刘斯奋 *The Willows of Baimen* (*Baimen liu* 白门柳). An early vein in historical fiction expressed the class struggle inherent in overthrowing traditional social structures, with novels doing this including: *Jin ou que* 金瓯缺, *Xingxing cao* 星星草, *Boxer Rebellion* (*Yihetuan* 义和团), *Heavenly Country Regret* (*Tianguo hen* 天国恨). In the early 1980s some novels focused on the turning points in history and were called 'reform novels' (*gaige xiaoshuo* 改革小说), an example being *103 days* (*Yibai ling san tian* 一百零三天). After this came cultural novels of new Confucians, including the 'Hunan series' novels by Tang Haoming 唐浩明, such as *Zeng Guofan* 曾国藩, *The Peerless Genius* (*Kuang dai yi cai* 旷带逸才), and *Yang Du* 杨度. The three-volume historical novel *Zeng Guofan* was published in 1993 and caused great sensation being printed nineteen times between October 1993 and May 1996, and selling over a million copies in the first two years alone (Guo Yingjie 2004, 49). This brought the debate more into the open. The novel portrays Zeng Guofan as a Confucian hero who crushed an uprising against Chinese culture and tradition inspired by Christianity, a foreign ideology.

Under the same category of 'cultural' novels is the 'Master' series about important Chinese thinkers, with novels by Yang Shu'an 杨书岸 such as *Confucius* (*Kongzi* 孔子), *Laozi* 老子, *Sunzi* 孙子, and the Qing dynasty novels by Eryuehe 二月河 *Yongzheng Emperor* (*Yongzheng Huangdi* 雍正皇帝), *Qianlong Emperor* (*Qianlong Huangdi* 乾隆皇帝). Zhou Baoxin and Zhang Lan (2002, 12) argue that all the aforementioned works strive to achieve a narrative of epic proportions of a linear historical process. The novelists present their own

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<sup>16</sup> The novels identified in this section come from a useful article by Zhou Baoxin and Zhang Lan 2002.

judgements on the historical characters and mine the individuals and the periods for cultural essence (Zhou Baoxin & Zhang Lan 2002, 12).

Zhou and Zhang (2002, 11) describe author Ye Wenling 叶文玲 as using emotion as a way of reading history. *Qiu Jin* 秋瑾 narrates the last few days in the life of the eponymous revolutionary (1875-1907), including the emotions of her friends, family and colleagues. Another example of this type of historical novel is Zhang Xiaotian's 张笑天 *Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (Taiping Tian Guo)* 太平天国). This novel traces the Taiping Rebellion through the passions and love stories between the characters, resulting in a series of personal tragic events unfurling against the backdrop of the rebellion.

Zhou and Zhang (2002, 13) read the New Historical Fiction which followed the earlier historical fiction as authors investigating history through their own subjective experience and understanding of history. The following works all provide a subjective reading of history beyond the realms of pure historical truth: Ge Fei's 格非 *Lost Boat (Mi Zhou)* 迷舟), Zhou Meisen's 周梅森 *History. Earth. People (Lishi. Tudi. Ren)* 历史。土地。人), Ye Zhaoming's 叶兆明 *The Moon Tower (Zhuiyue lou)* 追月楼), and Chi Li's 池莉 *Premeditated Murder (Yumou sharen)* 预谋杀人).

Zhou and Zhang (2002, 14) note that alongside New Historical Fiction, works on leaders and milestones of the modern revolutionary wars and conflicts continue to be published. These works are practically non-fiction since they still seek to describe the traces left by history and important historical figures. Examples of works in this category include: Li Ruqing's 黎汝清 *Wannan Incident (Wannan shibian)* 皖南事变) and *War on the Xiangjiang (Xiangjiang zhi zhan)* 湘江之战), Deng Xian's 邓贤 *Sunset in the East (Ri luo Dongfang)* 日落东方) and *The Spirit of the Great Country (Da guo zhi hun)* 大国之魂), Quan Yanchi's 权延赤 *The Leader's Tears (Lingxiu lei)* 领袖泪) and *Mao Zedong off the Altar (Zouxia shentan de Mao Zedong)* 走下神坛的毛泽东), Qiao Liang's 乔良 *Spiritual*

*Banner* (Lingqi 灵旗), and Zhao Qi's 赵淇 *Boundless Songs* (Cangmang zuge 苍茫组歌).

An important work in the movement of New Historical Fiction is Zhang Wei's 张炜 novel *The Ancient Ship* (*Guchuan* 古船) published in 1986. Jian Xu distinguishes this early work of New Historical Fiction from roots-seeking literature since the former represents the centre of Chinese culture rather than going to its margins, as the roots-seeking literature did (Jian Xu 2006, 247). At the time Zhang's rewriting of modern Chinese history in a realistic literary style was radical, as the influence of socialist literature was still keenly felt. According to Xu, Zhang portrays the peasants as "unthinking masses capable of senseless destruction" and denies their role as agents of history in Maoist-Marxist historiography. Jian Xu reads the novel as removing the Maoist discourse of class struggle from history through a counter narrative.

In an article containing a dialogue between Wang Xiaoming 王晓明 (1994) and his students, Wang Xiaoming identifies a common thematic line following from Zhang Wei's *The Ancient Ship* to Liu Zhenyun's *Hometown's Chrysanthemums* through to *White Deer Plain* by Chen Zhongshi. Wang sees this new direction in fiction beginning from Zhang Wei's *The Ancient Ship*, and being developed by the two works by Liu and Chen respectively, and describes his reaction after reading *Hometown's Chrysanthemums* in the following way:

"...I read the whole thing as if in one breath, feeling exhilarated, as if a load of pent-up frustration had been expelled." (Wang Xiaoming 1994, 18).

Wang argues that the fiction exemplified by these three novels aims to subvert official historical interpretation by expressing a subjective, personal view on history. In the same discussion, critic Li Nian 李念 reads *The Ancient Ship* as a rebellion against the traditional socialist mode of historical fiction, and by extension against the Maoist socialist ideology on which that fiction was based. Luo Gang 罗岗 agrees, saying that after the 1950s in China one of the priorities

of ideology at the time was to construct a meaningful historical discourse of the course of the victory of the Chinese revolution, and the bitter struggle to build the People's Republic of China (in Wang Xiaoming 1994, 18). Li Nian continues this argument by saying that these novelists came to realise that history does not develop in a 'public' or official way:

“We can say that this is a process that is gradually discarding official ideology” (Wang Xiaoming 1994, 19).

Ni Wei 倪伟 sees a “strong desire to rewrite history” (Wang Xiaoming 1994, 20) in the three writers, which Ni believes has weakened their ability to describe human existence within history. This palpable desire to rewrite history of the three writers is further criticised by Luo Gang who sees *The Ancient Ship* as having history forced into the narrative at the expense of the development of the characters: he finds Zhang Wei too preoccupied with history in this novel (Wang Xiaoming 1994, 21). Critic Mao Jian 毛尖 also finds that the preoccupation in the three novels to rewrite history overrides their focus on 'people'. Mao also notes that the three male authors depict female characters in a negative light, and only in supporting roles to the male characters, saying that “death is the high point in these women's lives” (Wang Xiaoming 1994, 26). The negative depiction of women in these novels is discussed below in relation to Jianmei Liu's (2003) analysis of *White Deer Plain*. Wang Xiaoming concludes the discussion by saying that although there are many imperfections in the way that these three authors have used fiction to rewrite history, their attempt to use fiction in this way is nonetheless highly significant. Wang's final point is that these novels could “only have been written by Chinese authors” (Wang Xiaoming 1994, 27). This last statement is important as it locates the cultural concerns with regard to fiction and history firmly in the Chinese context, and as more than just copying a Western-inspired literary theory in the form of New Historicism.

One last novel will be mentioned here that has not been included as a case study in this thesis, is Li Rui's (b.1950) 李锐 *Silver City (Jiu zhi 旧址)*.<sup>17</sup> The novel tells the story of two clans, the Bai and Li families, from the early period of the communist revolution up to the 1970s. The CCP is portrayed in a strongly negative light beginning from the mass execution in 1951 undertaken by the Communists in which nearly all the men of the Li clan are killed. The remnants of the family compound are destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The novel ends with relatives trying to remember the family history but failing, leaving only a gap of suffering wrought by the series of revolutions in twentieth-century China. Critic Fu Meiqing has described the narration in *Silver City* as fragmentary, allowing an expanded space for expression and richness of imagination to reign, freeing the author from traditional linear narrative structures (Fu Meiqing 2007, 81).

### 1.8 English-language secondary literature

As stated in Chapter 1 of this thesis, an important motivation for undertaking this study was the comparatively small number of studies that examine New Historical Fiction in English-language secondary literature. This thesis seeks to contribute to this growing literature by offering a reading of New Historical Fiction as a cultural movement. There are however some noteworthy examples of scholarly literature in English treating the topic of New Historical Fiction, and this section will present an overview of the important examples.

Lin Qingxin's *Brushing History Against the Grain: Reading the Chinese New Historical Fiction (1986-1999)*, published in Hong Kong in 2005, has been the first, and to date, only study focusing exclusively on the movement of New Historical Fiction in China. Lin's main argument is that New Historical Fiction constitutes an 'oppositional discourse' that challenges the discourses of revolution and Chinese modernity. Lin concentrates on the temporal aspect, saying that New Historical Fiction negates the temporal logic of irreversible linear time that characterises the project of modernity and discourse of

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<sup>17</sup> This novel has been translated into English by Howard Goldblatt (1997).

revolution. The book includes a useful chapter on Wang Xiaobo, but in my opinion does not consider adequately the implications of Wang's fictional experiments and subversion of historiography. Apart from last chapter on Wang Xiaobo, the authors discussed are different from those in the case studies of this thesis; some authors are well known (Su Tong, Han Shaogong), while others such as Zhang Chengzhi have been less studied, although his work is analysed in Choy's book, discussed below. Lin concludes that New Historical Fiction at once returns to traditional perceptions of time and history, while simultaneously transcending tradition through its difference in epistemology and rhetoric to traditional historical fiction. He states that "many of the NHFs [New Historical Fiction] have taken on a somewhat postmodern look" (Lin Qingxin 2005, 209), but that the sub-genre cannot be classified as postmodern as such. I will reach a different conclusion, stating that New Historical Fiction offers postmodern methodologies combined with Chinese traditional culture to construct a new historiography, which contributes to the process of constructing a new identity for the Mainland Chinese. To summarise, Lin's book taken as a whole offers an excellent reading of a broad range of works from the sub-genre of New Historical Fiction.

Howard Y. F. Choy published a monograph in 2004 entitled *Remapping the Past. Fictions of History in Deng's China, 1979-1997*. Choy analyses how historical fiction has tried to re-create China's past. In his introduction, Choy provides a useful summary of the discourses of fiction and history in twentieth-century China, introducing Linda Hutcheon's work on the theory of metahistory. Choy analyses a range of authors that provide alternative readings different from revolutionary historical fictions. He includes a mixture of well known authors such as Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, Wang Anyi, Ge Fei, Su Tong, Wang Shuo, Liu Heng and Yu Hua, as well as less known works such as Zhang Chengzhi's Islamic fiction and Tashi Dawa and Alai's visions of Tibet. Choy shows how these writers have read Chinese history through themes such as idiocy, identity, decadence, memory, food, sex and violence (Choy 2004, 14). Choy's book provides a useful introduction to the range of fiction concerned with questions of history in the Deng era, but does not in my view examine in enough detail the

implications of alternative visions of the past provided by these writers. Choy concludes his study by asserting that the movement of New Historical Fiction dissolves into entertainment in the late 1990s, seeing “the death of the spirit of resistance in fictions of history” (Choy 2004, 236), and mourning the loss of literature. As my third and fourth case study in this thesis will show however, this is far from the case. Choy only mentions *White Deer Plain* briefly (Choy 2004, 25) in his study, and makes no mention of the work of Liu Zhenyun, Li Er, or Wang Xiaobo. This thesis therefore intends to complement the initial work done by Choy in providing a critical analysis of other fiction that provides an alternative vision of China’s modern past.

Jianmei Liu’s (2003) study of literary history, modernity and gender in modern China, *Revolution plus love: literary history, women's bodies, and thematic repetition in twentieth-century Chinese fiction*, includes a chapter on *White Deer Plain* and one of Wang Xiaobo’s novellas in *The Golden Age* (Jianmei Liu 2003, 193-209). Liu does not group the above novels under any literary movement, but she chooses them for their shared literary investigations on the themes of revolution and love in 1990s China. Her choice of authors that form my first and last case studies reflects their importance in discussing the themes of rewriting the history of revolution in 1990s Chinese fiction. Liu’s inclusion of Wang Xiaobo alongside Chen Zhongshi further justifies my own choice of Wang Xiaobo as a case study of fiction rewriting history, despite the almost total silence of Chinese critics on the work of Wang Xiaobo contextualised and compared to his contemporaries. In her reading of *White Deer Plain*, Liu provides a useful critique of Chen Zhongshi’s idealistic return to tradition and patriarchal Confucian family values. She notes that Chen’s portrayal of the Confucian cultural values “uncritically endorses misogynistic elements and reinforces women’s inferior status.” (Jianmei Liu 2003, 200). As this thesis is preoccupied with the undermining of the revolutionary official historical narrative by fiction, an analysis of gender issues has not been undertaken, although this question will be addressed in my final appraisal of *White Deer Plain* in Chapter 4. Liu further criticises what she perceives as Chen Zhongshi’s inability to engage with the process of globalisation in his fictional depiction of

Chinese history. She finds that the local cultural system “is stripped of history and incapable of explaining dynamic social change,” (Jianmei Liu 2003, 201). I will argue in this thesis however that Chen Zhongshi is trying to endow local folk culture with the ability to explain dynamic social change by moving beyond history and its discursive assumptions. The perceived ‘stripping of history’ has other implications that provide useful insights into experience of the past and present. Liu concludes that Wang Xiaobo’s novels “fail to provide a solution for Chinese intellectuals facing the various problems and contradictions brought by commercialization and globalization.” (Jianmei Liu 2003, 209). I will argue that Wang’s fiction in fact does provide an interesting solution to these problems, although possibly not a solution congenial to some people. This thesis will therefore provide a continuation to some of the questions and themes on questions of fiction rewriting history and on specific authors after studies by other scholars.

Yiyan Wang’s (2006) study of the author Jia Pingwa 贾平凹 (b.1952), *Narrating China. Jia Pingwa and his fictional world* provides a useful introduction to the concept of ‘native place’ and literary nativism in Chinese literature. Yiyan Wang defines literary nativism as localising creative writing while adopting ‘indigenous’ writing practices (Yiyan Wang 2006, 10). I discuss her assessment of *White Deer Plain* in chapter 4.

David Der-wei Wang’s (2004) monograph *The monster that is history: history, violence, and fictional writing in twentieth-century China* discusses a wide range of important literary works of the twentieth century from Mainland China and Taiwan. His analysis treats themes such as the interaction between grand history and historical detail, infliction and representation of pain, the writing of violence and writing as violence, and history as testimony and as plot (David Der-wei Wang 2004, 12). Despite the range of authors discussed in Wang’s study, apart from a brief mention of Liu Zhenyun’s novel *Remembering 1942 (Wengu 1942 温故一九四二)* (David Der-wei Wang 2004, 145), the four authors in the case studies in this thesis are not analysed.



## 1.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, New Historical Fiction in China combines literary and non-literary styles of writing about a historical period, believing that literary and non-literary materials are not separated by boundaries of genre linked to other power structures. Another important aspect is that it views literature as critical and rebellious. Critics Zhou Baoxin and Zhang Lan (2002, 10) argue that New Historical Fiction has succeeded in merging the formerly separate discourses of history and fiction. New Historical Fiction and folk history have destroyed the unifying myth of History and the role of the revolution in modern Chinese history, according to critic Shu Xin (2006, 76). Shu notes that this new treatment of history led to a realisation of the lack of absolute truth in history, which led to a dismantling of the mainstream ideology, and that this new historical discourse differentiates between the 'centre' and the 'margins' (Shu Xin 2006, 77). Critic Zhang Qinghua (1998, 201) sees contemporary Chinese literature as making a great contribution by reconstructing a historical meaning that has not been possible in theoretical discourse or in the discipline of history itself. As it will be argued throughout the thesis, this is highly significant in Chinese cultural history and has never occurred to the same extent as in the post-Mao period.

This overview has provided an introduction to the preoccupations of novelists grouped by Chinese critics under the movement of New Historical Fiction from the late 1980s onwards. As the movement is still recent at the time of writing, and indeed possibly ongoing, the definitions and analysis of the movement in this chapter are necessarily provisional, and may need to be revised in future research once more historical distance is possible. The movement has shown how the far-reaching influence of Western critical theory has interacted with Chinese cultural debates from the mid-1980s onwards to produce a Chinese response through literature of the significant cultural shifts that began to occur in China from the mid-1980s onwards. The movement of New Historical Fiction has so far been given little critical space in English-language scholarly literature, and has often been viewed in a fairly negative light, as the literature review above has

demonstrated. The publication of Lin Qingxin's excellent study shows, however, that the situation is changing. The discussion in this chapter, together with the case studies in sections II and III will demonstrate that the movement of New Historical Fiction provides valuable insights into the complexities of cultural change in contemporary China.

The next chapter will discuss the relationship between history and fiction in Chinese culture, as well as introduce the political implications of historiography in China.

## **Chapter 2 – History and Fiction in China**

The recording of past events in a coherent structure and narrative may be called ‘history’. ‘History’ as a discourse has many definitions according to different cultures and periods. For the purposes of this thesis however, ‘history’ will be taken to mean the discourse of written, objective knowledge about the past that is expressed as a chronological narrative of events and has the status of ‘truth’. The critical theory and secondary literature concerned with the term ‘history’ and its definition will be explored at greater depth in chapter 3, section 3.1.

This chapter will analyse the discursive relationship of history and fiction in Chinese culture, and the relationship of this legacy to the shifting power structures in contemporary Chinese culture. The influences that have combined to create the modern concept of ‘history’ in the PRC will be traced, including a survey of historiography in pre-modern China. The uses of history as a discourse by the CCP will be presented and analysed, including a discussion of official CCP historiography and the political legitimacy claimed from history by the CCP. The significance of ‘revolution’ as a social phenomenon and historical event in twentieth-century Chinese history will be discussed in section 2.3, including radical calls to reject the revolutionary legacy of Chinese history, and direct challenges to the CCP official historiography. Finally, the role of non-historical texts in discursive cultural politics such as *xiaoshuo* 小说 in pre-modern China, and ‘fiction’<sup>18</sup> in modern China will be analysed.

### **2.1 History in pre-modern and modern China**

Chinese civilisation boasts the one of the longest and most extensive written historical records in the world. The authority ascribed to the written historical record as knowledge and as precedent on which to base power in the present elevated the historical record to one of the most highly esteemed discourses in Chinese culture. The philosophical system that came to represent moral and

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<sup>18</sup> I am deliberately not equating *xiaoshuo* in premodern China with ‘fiction’ (also *xiaoshuo* in modern Chinese) as the two terms denote different kinds of writing, see Ming Dong Gu 2006, 19.

ideological orthodoxy in China, Confucianism, emphasised the need to emulate the great deeds of past sages to restore a lost ‘golden’ age. Thus the writing and interpretation of the historical record gave access to great reserves of cultural, moral and political power.

It would now be useful to discuss the concept and methods of writing history in China. In pre-modern China the dominant practice of historiography was the Confucian system of knowledge adopted in the Han dynasty. The prose works of historians of the period such as Sima Qian 司马迁 (145–87 BC) and Ban Gu 班固 (AD 32–92) were seen as models on which future historical writings should be based. The discourse of history was placed at the top of the cultural hierarchy in pre-modern China and was ascribed an authority on moral matters in the past from which present and future deeds could be measured. Unger remarks that emperors and censors would read historical treatises by scholar-officials carefully for hidden allegorical suggestions (Unger (ed) 1993, 1). The writing and interpretation of history thus became the prime way the Chinese elite would manipulate knowledge for gaining power.

The most important theory of history in pre-modern China was known as the ‘dynastic cycle’ which held that if the emperor and ruling elite lost the Mandate of Heaven to rule over the Chinese lands, the dynasty would crumble and another would take its place. This cyclical view of history led the Chinese to believe that no new political administration would be radically different from the last and would in time suffer the same fate as its predecessors. This fate could entail falling due to official corruption, famine and natural disaster, or foreign invasions, but was ultimately predicated on a retrospective moral judgement on the dynasty.

Pre-modern Chinese historiography was based on the idea that the ideal state of the *Dao*<sup>19</sup> 道 had been achieved early Chinese history during the ‘three

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<sup>19</sup> The *dao* is a term that can be seen in this context to refer generally to the essence of reality, to a form of truth that is impossible to grasp, but that underlies all things. Rulers and their subjects had to behave according to strict moral codes for the *dao* to be experienced.

dynasties', the Xia (2205 BC–1766 BC)<sup>20</sup>, Shang (1766 BC–1122 BC) and Zhou (1045 BC–256 BC), as shown by Benjamin Schwartz (1996 28, 30). This time was considered a golden age in which the *dao* was maintained and high levels of morality reigned. This 'golden age' then became the standard according to which the present (of any historical period) was measured. Schwartz observes that the Chinese attitude to history does not support a separation between the human and non-human worlds (Schwartz 1996, 29). The stabilising and immanent order of the *dao* was considered the underlying principle of history. Referring to Yves Chevrier, Schnieder has noted in this context that the writing of history was accorded special status in Chinese culture because of the close relationship between the *dao* and history itself. This was achieved by giving shape and expression of the *dao* to the present through the writing of history (in Schneider 1996, 55). Historians occupied an important political and quasi-religious position in Chinese society because they upheld and expounded the *dao* through the writing of history which formed the basis for the legitimacy of the ruler, the Emperor (Schneider 1996, 55).<sup>21</sup> As a result of this close relationship between history and the *dao* the classic texts of the Confucian canon became considered as 'history' since they too were held to be upholding and reflecting the *dao*. Schneider points out that this concept was expressed in the eighteenth-century by the scholar Zhang Xuecheng 章学诚 (1738-1801), who said that 'all the classics are history' (六经皆史 *liu jing xie shi*), since all texts recording the past reflected the *dao* (Schneider 1996, 55). History was therefore the most authoritative discourse of knowledge production and a great repository of morality.

In the early twentieth century China experienced great changes in all aspects of political and intellectual life, and the concept and writing of history was no exception. Schneider (1996, 57) describes how in 1902 Liang Qichao 梁启超

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<sup>20</sup> Some scholars still argue whether the Xia Dynasty really existed or was mythical, although over the past few decades archaeologists increasingly believe there is evidence to suggest it could have existed, see Shelach 1999, 201.

<sup>21</sup> Astronomers in premodern China had a similar role to historians in that they predicted future events from observing the stars and read the heavens to justify the current order. They looked to the future to justify the present, whereas historians looked to the past (see Bonnet-Bidaud & Praderie in Whitfield 2004, 81). Both were upholding the *dao* to justify the authority of their rulers.

(1873-1929) wrote a treatise in a search for a new historiography called *New Historiography* (*Xin shixue* 新史学), and how Liang was keen that history should no longer serve the interests of the ruling dynasty or elite. History should rather address the needs of the present and the future path for the Chinese people and nation, conceived as a nation like any other in the world. Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 (1868-1936) advocated the separation of history from politics claiming the six classics were ‘merely history’ and should be used as historical sources, not for political aims (Schneider 1996, 58).

Chinese intellectuals became increasingly dissatisfied with the epistemological limitations of traditional Confucian historiography and began to use theory from Europe to widen their historical scopes of enquiry. From the 1920s onwards, Chinese intellectuals became interested in a major new system of thought on history, that of Marxism. Dirlik argues that:

“The Marxist outlook on Chinese history completely inverted the traditional Confucian view of the past.” (Dirlik 1978, 7).

Dirlik concedes however that it is possible to see commonalities between the two thought systems based on their common aspirations to universalism and their perception of history as a practical, political tool to be used for the present. Dirlik (1978, 7) shows that the Confucian historical view saw the individual as the key unit of analysis, and that a person’s behaviour could be judged according to moral standards that were extracted from the precedents in the historical record. Writing history was an officially sponsored and controlled activity that served as a guide for administration and upright behaviour in public office.

Dirlik (1978, 8) notes that Confucian officials viewed history as a measure of the ideals of order and harmony against chaos and conflict, whereas the Marxist conception of history radically changed the Chinese view of the past. Rather than the moral qualities of the individual as the unit of historical analysis, historical development was measured by Marx in terms of forces in the socioeconomic structure of society (Dirlik 1978, 8-9).

Before the Marxist conception of history took root in China, Chinese intellectuals engaged with a range of new theories imported from the West. For example, the Hegelian system of understanding historical development was influential. From this system came the idea of progress in history. This view saw the unfolding of human history as a movement towards civilisation and a better future. Marxist historiography fitted well into Chinese cultural politics in that it treated history “simply as an extension of politics,” (Dirlik 1978, 14). The Marxist historian was further separated from other veins of Chinese historiography by the need to create an appropriate revolutionary strategy.

Although the philosophical content and underpinnings of historiography in pre-modern China and twentieth-century China were radically different, the treatment and respect afforded to history as a privileged discourse remained the same. History has been the most privileged narrative genre in Chinese culture and knowledge systems from Confucian times to the early twentieth century. Henry Zhao (2001a, 47-69) notes that the canonisation of the Confucian classics was never seriously contested.

Historiography became the narrative model, and as such history has always been a discourse of power controlled by the cultural elite to provide a coherent narrative and interpretation of the past. The interpretative concepts that inform the discourse have a direct bearing on an ideological vision of the present.

## **2.2 History in the PRC**

This section will discuss the centrality of history as a narrative and discourse to the control of power by the CCP. A brief sketch of the use of history by the CCP in official pronouncements and judgements will be provided. The ideological legitimisation and maintenance of power by the CCP and the challenges to this from outside and inside the CCP will also be discussed, and examples of historical narratives doing this will be given. Definitions will be given for the use of the term ‘revolution’ in this thesis, and the importance of revolution as a

conceptual apparatus through which to understand the Chinese twentieth century will be discussed.

The importance attached to history by the CCP mirrors the sanctity of history as a discourse in the Confucian canon of pre-modern China, as was discussed above in section 3.1. History in the PRC was almost exclusively officially sponsored and controlled, in a way similar to pre-modern China. Thus for China, the manipulation of power was achieved through managing interpretations of history and the past. Examples abound through Chinese history of ‘using the past to criticise the present’ (*yi gu feng jin* 以古讽今), a famous example in recent history being that of Wu Han and his play about Hai Rui the upright Ming dynasty official<sup>22</sup>.

#### 2.2.1 Official CCP Historiography

The control and interpretation of history has always been significant to the CCP. The Marxist view of history as directional and passing through different stages of development adopted by Mao Zedong is central to constructing and maintaining the legitimacy of the CCP’s monopoly on power and its mandate to rule. The high moral position won by the CCP after liberating China from imperial oppression, foreign aggression and invasion, and leading the Chinese people out of poverty is the most important part of modern China’s history for the Party. Since the Marxist view of history assumes a linear directionality in history, control of the interpretation of the past is vital for justifying the present and projecting the Party and country in the right direction towards the desired future. Furthermore, the official Marxist historiography under Mao consisted of a re-writing of the dynastic histories and stressed the importance of peasant rebellions throughout Chinese history against the injustices of the feudal system and the oppression of officials and the emperor.

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<sup>22</sup> The historian Wu Han 吴晗 (1909 – 1969) wrote a play in 1960 called *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* (*Hai Rui Baguan* 海瑞罢官) about a Ming dynasty (1368-1644) official, Hai Rui losing his post for criticising the Emperor. The play was later interpreted as an allegory of Mao Zedong’s dismissal of Peng Dehuai 彭德怀 (1898-1974) for daring to criticise Mao for the Great Leap Forward. See Cohen 2009, 169-170.



A summary of the use of history as an official discourse by the CCP will now be given to show the changing powers of the CCP over the past and their control over the historical narrative. Official CCP historiography began in 1945 at the Seventh Plenary Session of the Party's Sixth Central Committee that passed a 'Resolution on Some Questions of History' (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik in Unger (ed) 1993, 153). This was later followed by another resolution on historiography called the 'Resolution on Huabei History' when Huabei University opened in May 1945. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (in Unger (ed) 1993, 153) notes that this was when the term 'Party history' (*Dangshi* 党史) was first used; before then, students had learnt history of the revolution (*Gemingshi* 革命史). In the PRC, the important texts for studying CCP history were Hu Qiaomu's *Thirty Years of the Chinese Communist Party* (Hu Qiaomu 2008), published in 1951, along with writings by Mao Zedong.

During the Cultural Revolution history was used in political debates about the present and future of China, even though it was no longer taught since the universities had closed. After Mao's death, publications on CCP history were openly available, and the Committee for Party History was established to supervise the continued writing of CCP history. A new 'Resolution on Some Questions Concerning the History of the Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China' was approved by the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Party in the summer of 1981 (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2007, 220). It stresses the importance of the 1945 Resolution and offers a theoretical framework for interpreting the period from 1945 to 1976. The master narrative that had begun in the Yan'an Rectification Campaign (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2007, 221) had become institutionalised in the 1950s and 1960s containing the conceptual framework for every applicant to the Chinese bureaucracy after 1949.

The last 'resolution' on history made by the CCP was the 1981 Resolution 'On some questions regarding the history of the Party since the founding of the PRC'. As the title indicates, this only deals with official history since 1949. For history prior to 1949 the most recent official resolution is the 'On some historical

questions' passed in 1945. This has remained essentially unchanged down to the present day and textbooks of all levels base their narrative on this. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (2007, 220) argues that the master narrative on how the CCP legitimately took control of the Chinese mainland remains in official discourse. Indeed Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (2007, 216) writes that it:

“...has served as the unchallengeable basis for official history writing in the PRC.”

The challenge to this period of history and its surrounding official historiography is therefore all the more radical and potentially subversive. The official narrative has not changed or given up its claim to power, especially since it is easier to make claims of legitimacy when the CCP did win the Chinese Civil War and restore order and peace on the Mainland. Henry Zhao (2001b, 451) argues that 'History' as an official narrative is no longer possible in China after the deluge of memoirs and biographies that have emerged since the marketisation of publishing in the reform period. This is because so many different versions of past events now contradict the official CCP narrative.

As was outlined in chapter 2, the influx of cultural theory and methodologies from the West in the 1990s in China, coupled with an outpouring of historical novels in a new style and memoirs, meant that any effort made by the CCP to re-impose its official historiography as the only truth on the Chinese people was doomed to fail in the 1990s.

By the twenty-first century, when the CCP wanted to reduce the influence of Mao Zedong Thought in Party historiography, an effective way was to include more data and a greater range of subjects in the narrative to minimise the space given to Mao Zedong and his philosophy. They could not however dismantle the 'general principles' and fundamental assessments. They were able to please readers who wanted to read more facts. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik notes (2007, 22) that the accumulation of facts would get so large that it would put pressure on the historiography and concepts for interpreting the facts. The CCP rewrote history

prior to 1949 by adding more facts and incidents to the official narrative although the overall conceptual framework did not change. They did not however offer any narrative of the post-1949 period.

History textbooks had not changed during the 1980s and 1990s and it was only in 2006 that a radically new style of history textbook was published for middle and high school students. In these new textbooks the revolution was only given a short chapter amidst subjects such as economics, technology, social customs and globalisation (Kahn 2006). However these textbooks are more concerned with the future than the present or past. They also include key ideological concepts promoted by the CCP such as political stability and social harmony. Although they have reduced the importance of the revolution, it is still included in the narrative, which is different from overturning the very concept of revolution as a useful way of reading modern Chinese history. Sensitive historical issues that might undermine the present right to rule are avoided.

### 2.2.2 Legitimacy

Any government, whether elected under a system of liberal democracy on the Western model or otherwise, needs legitimacy to rule. This legitimacy arises from its moral right afforded by the population to hold power. Legitimacy is even more important in a state such as the PRC where one political party holds a monopoly of power and does not compromise on sharing that power with other sections of society. The CCP employs a range of strategies to maintain and further its claims to legitimacy through one-party rule. This section will discuss the role that historiography plays in maintaining the legitimacy of the CCP.

The historical legacy of the Chinese revolution underpins all legitimacy claims of the CCP to the monopoly they hold on power in government. Vivienne Shue (2004, 24-50) has argued that the CCP does not tolerate any counter-claims to its monopoly of rule, and the claims to 'Truth' that that entails. In her analysis of the Falun Gong crackdown in 1999, she analyses the causes behind such a strong reaction from the government. She traces the history of similar 'protests' or rebellions by grassroots religious cults or groups that have a long history in

China, including important episodes such as the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), to name but one (Shue 2004, 26). Shue (2004, 30) argues that it is not the actual threat of a peaceful group of people engaging in esoteric practices that threatens the government, but it is rather their overriding ideology and the claims they make to ‘truth’, ‘benevolence’, and ‘tolerance’ that constitute an assault on the monopoly of ‘truth’ and values that the government claims as its own. Shue (2004, 41) argues that providing jobs and economic stability is not enough of itself to provide continued legitimacy to the CCP. Such stability may prevent social unrest in the short-term as people are content to see their material lives improve. In the long-term however they do not go far enough to justify the government’s monopoly on power.

It is clear that in the 1990s after a decade of reform and opening up to the outside world, and after the Tiananmen Square Incident of 1989, the CCP finds claiming moral legitimacy from the revolutions of twentieth-century China a greater challenge. However, Dickson (2004, 144) notes that the victory of the 1949 revolution still has a ‘residual impact’, and that as it had the moral victory of ousting an unpopular government, the CCP did not have to concern itself with planting roots in society and is able to demonstrate that it came to power with clear popular support. Large sections of society continue to believe that the CCP is the best and only safeguard against national disunity and political instability (Dickson 2004, 144). Indeed the Party capitalises on the cultural preference for stability over the recent turbulence of the Mao period and the Democracy Movement of 1989. Dickson (2004, 144) argues that this is why the CCP has been happy to encourage nationalism as a popular sentiment. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik writes that:

“The credibility of the master narrative on pre-1949 history was built on the indisputable victory of the revolution; the writing of post-1949 history lacked this credibility by the absence of success.” (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2007, 222).

Dickson (2004, 145) notes that as moral authority from history is becoming harder to take for granted for the reasons already stated, namely the chaos of the

Mao period and the 1989 Democracy Movement, the CCP has pursued a number of other policies to aid its ongoing claims to rule. Indeed, the CCP believes that the range of reforms implemented will help legitimate its claim as China's sole ruling party. Dickson (2004, 145) shows that despite periodic unrest and protest at displacement and the loss of jobs, the CCP still holds certain advantages that help it survive. He identifies ideology as a concern among the leadership to justify the CCP's continued rule and reform policies. Jiang Zemin's (2004, 149) 'Three Represents' is a move away from the traditional sections of society that the CCP represented, the peasants, workers and soldiers. The CCP claims to be more inclusive of whom it represents, including advanced productive forces, advanced culture, and the interests of the majority of Chinese people. The theory is thus an important development as it highlights the attempt of the CCP to appear more open to diverse groups in Chinese society. The CCP is still not open however to those who openly contest its legitimacy and claims to 'truth', as the Falun Gong case cited by Shue (2004, 26) shows.

## **2.3 Revolution**

History remains closely associated with power and ideology in the PRC and informs cultural and ideological debates, as discussed above in section 2.2. The Chinese revolution is still a significant and contested issue in the post-Mao era whether it is discredited, or revisited and rehabilitated by theorists and officials. This section will introduce the most important theoretical debates about the revolutionary legacy in modern Chinese history and the implications of such judgements on cultural politics from the 1990s up to the present day. The fact that the CCP and certain sectors of society still consider the revolution as essential to understanding and giving meaning to twentieth-century Chinese history makes any refutation of this same historiography more controversial and provocative.

During the twentieth century China underwent a series of revolutions, of which the most significant can be considered as being the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, the Great Revolution of 1926-27, the 1949 Revolution that ended the Civil War and

brought the Communist Party to power, and the abortive Cultural Revolution from 1967-77<sup>23</sup>. As has been argued above in section 3.2, the cumulative force of this revolutionary legacy of the twentieth century serves as a major source of legitimacy for the continued rule of the Communist Party in the post-Mao Reform Era. Depending on their distance from the present and living memory, the three revolutions are ascribed varying degrees of importance. As a combined legacy, all the revolutions are naturally important. I would argue however that it was the first and third revolutions that are the most important part of modern Chinese history for the CCP's ongoing legitimacy. Since the revolutions of the first half of the twentieth century are almost now beyond living memory, it has become easier for the government to control interpretations surrounding their place in history. The Cultural Revolution was more of a purge than a real revolution, and does not feature in the CCP's legitimacy.

Maoist-Marxist historiography is centred on the premise that a series of revolutions liberated the Chinese people from the 'Three Mountains' of feudalism, imperialism and bureaucratic capitalism identified by Mao Zedong.<sup>24</sup> Different revolutions from different periods of history are used for different purposes however, and arouse different sentiments among people. As the Cultural Revolution was within living memory for a large number of Chinese people in the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century, it has been harder for the CCP to control interpretations and meaning about it. This will be discussed in more detail below in section 3.3.3. The controversy and condemnations of the idea of dismantling the framework of revolution to history reveal that the revolution remains a highly sensitive subject area, and the source of identity and nation-building for many Chinese people. Indeed the CCP has had to position

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<sup>23</sup> The Cultural Revolution was an expression of revolutionary sentiment more than an actual revolution.

<sup>24</sup> Mao identifies feudalism, imperialism and bureaucratic capitalism as enemies of the people in his 'Speech at a Conference of Cadres in the Shanxi-Suiyuan Liberated Area' on 1 April 1948. He specifically calls these three 'evils' the 'Three Big Mountains' in a speech entitled 'Beat Back the Attacks of the Bourgeois Rightists', given to a conference of cadres in Shanghai on 9 July 1957.

itself somewhere between the two sides of neo-left and neo-liberals in these debates.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the widespread awareness in China and in the West, in academic circles and beyond, that China has embraced a form of capitalism as part of its market reforms to develop the country's economy, and resulting loss of faith in socialist ideology, there still remains significant respect for the leftist, revolutionary legacy of China's twentieth century. A book published in 2008 by Mobo Gao (2008) argues against complete rejection of Mao Zedong, the Cultural Revolution and China's revolutionary heritage. He argues that the drive to disregard revolution in China is part of a liberal political agenda inside and outside China. Such publications show the continuing importance of China's revolutionary modern past to many people. Although the book argues against the Western-led and CCP-supported personal discrediting of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution, its general point that significant numbers of Chinese people still cherish the revolutionary legacy is an important one. It shows that rejecting the Chinese revolutionary legacy is not stating something that is now assumed a commonplace in contemporary discourse; rather such a rejection still constitutes a radical challenge to an established historiography and ideology. In his introduction to the book, Mobo Gao writes:

“The book is therefore not just about memories of the past, but also about what is happening in the present. It is not just about the Cultural Revolution, Mao the man and the Mao era. It is also about contemporary China. On a deep level it is about liberalism versus revolution and about continuity versus change. It is about alternative models of development, and...” (Mobo Gao 2008, 8).

This statement also shows that feelings over a particular revolution from China's twentieth century translate into general perceptions about the political activity and legacy of 'revolution' in general. Thus in this thesis, the argument that the

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<sup>25</sup> Misra (2003, 718) notes that new groupings of leftists and conservatives emerged in the 1990s. Basically, the neo-liberals were in favour of market forces and a strong government role to redress the ideological inconsistencies that threatened to destabilise society. Whereas the neo-left, or neo-Maoists condemned bourgeois liberalisation and capitalism.

revolutionary legacy of China's twentieth century as a cumulative whole is being investigated, and, it will be argued, discarded is reasonable in light of the cultural-political implications of the debate from 1990s China up to the present day. The next section will discuss Li Zehou's 李泽厚 (b. 1930) and Liu Zaifu's 刘再复 (b. 1941) thesis on discarding the Chinese revolutionary legacy.

### 2.3.1 'Farewell to Revolution'

The phrase 'farewell to revolution' refers to a book containing a collection of dialogues by Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu while in the USA published in Hong Kong in 1995 with the title *Farewell to Revolution: Looking Back on Twentieth-Century China* (*Gaobie geming: huiwang ershishiji Zhongguo* 告别革命：回望二十世纪中国, Li & Liu, 2007). The book's main thesis is to bid farewell to revolutions, whether initiated by the right or left, that have caused upheaval and tragedy in the twentieth century in China. Li and Liu dismantle the dominant intellectual and social currents of the century such as ideology worship, dialectical materialism, the theory of class struggle, and the view that supports violent revolution as a means of social change (Henry Yuhuai He 2001, 136). The model of development that they suggest in place of revolution includes: taking the economy as the fundament, class compromise, class cooperation, pluralism, coexistence, reformism, freedom of public opinion, and the reconfirmation of human values. They suggest the following order of gradual reform (as opposed to revolution): development of the economy, individual freedoms, social justice and political democracy, all of which pre-suppose social stability (Henry Yuhuai He 2001, 136-137).

Regarding Liu and Li's call for discarding the revolutionary legacy of the PRC and for a more pluralistic ideological arena, Elizabeth Perry writes that the:

“Prospects for fundamental political transformation look less promising today than they did in the early post-Mao period when leaders like Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang spearheaded serious, if short-lived, efforts at political reform.” (Perry 2007, 1).



She shows how important Mao Zedong's mass campaigns of raising literacy and hygiene standards in the countryside from the 1950s to 1970s are to the current prosperity of China at the turn of the twenty-first century:

“China's stunning economic strides in the reform era can *only* be understood against the background of a revolutionary history that remains highly salient in many respects.”... “Despite valiant philosophical efforts to bid ‘farewell to revolution’, China's revolutionary past has not yet been relegated to the dustbin of history.” (Perry 2005, 5).

The authoritarian nature of the Chinese state has meant these reforms have been easy to implement. Also the culture instilled through the series of revolutions in China of mass mobilization for a national cause has greatly facilitated the success of economic development and reform. Arguments such as this aim to explain the success of economic reform in China from the 1980s onwards. I would argue that efforts by philosophers, cultural critics, and novelists to discard the concept and relevance of revolution are more radical attempts to construct a new, relevant identity and value system for contemporary China. This conception of history and modern Chinese identity does not need to hold a monopoly. Aspects of the revolution may be meaningful to certain sections of society and certain people.

### 2.3.2 Responses against Li and Liu

Guo argues that the prosperity, success and freedom of the present are due to the victory of the revolution led by the Communist Party. He says that the past revolutions should not be forgotten nor bidden farewell. He quotes Maurice Meisner as saying that the revolution of 1949 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China was no less important than the French revolution of 1789 or the Russian revolution of 1917 (Guo Genshan 2005, 56).

An article by Xing Bisi 邢贲思 (b.1930), Vice-Principal of the Central Communist Party School and Editor in Chief of *Seeking Truth* (*Qiushi* 求是)

*Magazine* was published in the *People's Daily* on 16 June 1996 in response to the book and in support of sticking to the Marxist line, 'Unwaveringly uphold Marxism – clearly demarcate the boundary between Marxism and anti-Marxism (Jianchi Makesizhuyi bu dongyao – huaqing Makesizhuyi yu fan Makesizhuyi de jixian 坚持马克思主义不动摇 – 划清马克思主义与反马克思主义的界限)'.

This article accused Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu of aiming to demolish the mainstream ideology of Marxism. They were even accused of advocating a theory that would enforce China's 'peaceful evolution' from an American perspective since they published the book from the USA. Liu Zaifu (1998, 37) believed that these criticisms were not based on a close reading of the book and reiterated that they were not denying the existence of revolutions in history, rather they were calling for an abandonment of the sacred status of revolution in discourse and the idea that the revolution was a necessary outcome in history. They were arguing against the view that the only way society can progress is through violent revolution, which they see as causing unnecessary bloodshed and tragedy. They argue that this view has dominated historiography on the Chinese mainland over the previous decades, citing Hu Sheng's (1991) book, *From the Opium War to the May Fourth Movement* as a classic example of this view. They accuse Hu Sheng of reading and writing history only from the perspective of the three large revolutions, the Taiping Rebellion, the Boxer Rebellion, and the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, as well as disregarding the other intellectual movements such as the Self-Strengthening Movement (*Yangwu yundong* 洋务运动) and the Hundred Day Reform movement are the rotten core of modern history.

Liu Zaifu affirms the importance of the Self-Strengthening movement and the Hundred Day Reform movement as establishing a base for cultural reform in China, and widening perspectives on other countries and systems, as well as providing Western industrial technology (Liu Zaifu 1998, 37). Liu argues that Hu Sheng purely uses a Maoist historiography to interpret and write modern Chinese history, and says that no professional historian on the Chinese mainland dares to challenge his interpretation of history (Liu Zaifu 1998, 37).

In writing this article to defend their book, Liu Zaifu calls for a rewriting of modern Chinese history while also demanding a new conceptual apparatus with which to interpret that history (Liu Zaifu 1998, 37). Liu says the complexity and richness of that history require a more sophisticated approach than simply heroes and villains, and accuses Hu Sheng of being obsessed with revolution, claiming that Hu believes the only way to deal with environmental protection is through socialist revolution (Liu Zaifu 1998, 37).

The official condemnation and banning from Mainland China of a book such as *Farewell to Revolution* shows that the revolutionary legacy is still an important part of official ideology in 1990s China. An attack on the revolutionary past is perceived as veiled criticism of the current post-1989 regime. The next section will discuss other kinds of challenge to the ideological hegemony of the CCP, including popular media such as television.

### 2.3.3 Challenges & Management

The government seems to be quietly approving the historiography portrayed in elite fiction, as can be argued from the awards of prestigious literary prizes to certain novels, such as Chen Zhongshi's *White Deer Plain*, as will be discussed in chapter 8. Their literary qualities serve to protect them from the censor on the one hand while also endowing them with a range of powers to undermine and be radical. The government can dismiss them as literary pretensions and fictions to deflect any negative portrayal of sensitive subjects. At the same time their literariness increases the range of discourse and subject matter that they can explore.

While literary fiction may have more space for manoeuvre when treating controversial historical and political subjects, the same cannot be said for more popular media like television series. Two examples will be discussed here, including one that was banned for presenting an over-controversial view of history. The second is more distant from the present and portrays the contemporary's government's line.

An important part of the fictional rewriting of modern Chinese history is the repudiation of the Chinese revolutions, an important one being the 1911 Revolution that resulted in the fall of Manchu Qing Dynasty. It has been shown above that while the CCP may not yet have offered a coherent narrative interpretation of history post-1949, the victory and continued relevance of the early Chinese revolution remain essential for maintaining the ideological framework for the Party's legitimacy and survival. The first example is the 59-part television series *Marching Towards the Republic* (*Zouxiang Gonghe* 走向共和) that was aired on CCTV in 2003, and dramatises the period leading up to the 1911 Revolution. When it was to be aired for a second time, the government stepped in and banned it from being shown on TV, although it is still sold openly

in video stores<sup>26</sup> (Associated Press 2003, 12). The historical drama was set during late nineteenth-century China, through the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the early years of the Republican government. The controversy was caused by portraying characters that were normally seen negatively in the Communist official history, in a positive light. For example, the empress Dowager Cixi was shown in a new, more nuanced way that did not fit with official history. This was among the official reasons given for the banning. President Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 (b. 1942) was reported to have written instructions stating that the series:

“...did not conform with historical truth and ran counter to history’s final verdict on Cixi.” (Associated Press 2003, 12)

Critic and dissident Liu Xiaobo<sup>27</sup> was quoted as saying:

“She was beautiful in the series. Her mistakes were blamed on government officials who hid the truth from her. It reversed the official verdict on Cixi.” (Associated Press 2003, 12)

Other controversial figures normally portrayed negatively by the CCP such as Yuan Shikai and Li Hongzhang were shown more sympathy.<sup>28</sup>

I would argue that such a portrayal of the early revolution is particularly sensitive to the leadership of the CCP since the 1980s because while they have lost control of interpretations of post-1949 history that is still within living for most Chinese they have still sustained their official version of modern Chinese history pre-1949, especially concerning the transformation from the Qing empire to the Republic through the civil wars to the victory of the Communist revolution. It is easier to control a period of history that is more remote from the present day. It is

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<sup>26</sup> The DVD set was available in stores in Beijing in 2006.

<sup>27</sup> As was noted in Chapter 1, Liu Xiaobo is currently under arrest as a political dissident. His support of a more radical reading of the history of the early twentieth century in China coupled with his current situation shows how sensitive the subject was that the series raised.

<sup>28</sup> The information on the series in this paragraph comes from a newspaper article from the Associated Press in the *Manila Standard*, ‘China axes TV series to placate president’, 27 June 2003.

also more important to control this period of history since the official version of events and judgement on them is the essential component of any attempt to create a present and future ideology to sustain legitimacy. Another reason (among many) for the sensitivity of portrayals in *Marching Towards the Republic* is that people saw it using the traditional device of ‘using the past to ridicule (criticise) the present’ (*yi gu feng jin* 以古讽今) showing that the early twentieth-century reformers only reformed the economy and not the political or cultural system, with poignant resonances for contemporary China. Furthermore, by stressing themes such as democracy, freedom and equality, it brings the perceived lack of their reality in contemporary China into sharper focus. This was a turning point in modern Chinese history that suggested provocatively that the official CCP historiography could be incorrect, or not giving a complete picture of the complexities of that period of history.

Essentially, the series raises the highly sensitive question of whether the Chinese revolution was necessary at all. The conclusion of the viewpoint portrayed is similar to that put forward in New Historical Fiction that de-revolutionises twentieth-century Chinese history (the first two case studies are examples). While it is true that the fiction in question was awarded literary prizes in the 1990s before the banning of *Marching Towards the Republic*, I would argue that the difference in leadership does not make a significant difference. More important is the fact that more time has passed since the publication of the novels and the torrent of counter-histories has only grown, making maintaining a coherent ideological hold over the past and present an even harder task for the government. I would argue that the sensitivity over subject matter in this case is due to the medium of the established form of entertainment of the historical television series. The medium was familiar to large audiences of Chinese people who were used to seeing historical dramatic and comic television series of several dozen episodes. They were even more used to deciphering the social commentary on contemporary society and politics shown in these ‘historical’ dramas. Their popularity attests the importance of history in Chinese culture and its use to investigate questions big and small of culture, identity and political leaning. Therefore by 2003, an audience would have been well primed to

interpret and think over the revisionist historical interpretations advocated in the series. Indeed the series was based on a novel which neither caused the same widespread sensation nor was banned by the censor. The revisionist tendencies of the series were reported in the Western media as delighting those in China ‘who quietly long for political reform’<sup>29</sup>. Thus the link between cultural products, whether popular or elite, expounding revisionist versions of history and political reform had been made, hinting at the sensitivity of revising history to the current status-quo and future of the Chinese polity.

In contrast to *Marching Towards the Republic*, the 3-season<sup>30</sup> CCTV television series *The Eloquent Ji Xiaolan* (*Ji Xiaolan tie chi tong ya* 纪晓岚铁齿铜牙) presents a less radical view of history. The series is about famous scholar Ji Xiaolan 纪晓岚 (Ji Yun 纪昀, 1724–1805), who served under the Qianlong emperor (1711–1799) and worked as one of the Chief Editors of the *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries* (*Siku Quanshu* 四库全书) and is intended to be a comedy rather than serious historical drama. Similar to other television series set during the Qing dynasty, the emperors are not presented as feudal despots but as enlightened, benevolent rulers with the difficult job of ruling such a large, diverse empire. The CCP is tolerant of such portrayals because although they go against the official Marxist narrative of portraying the ruling classes in pre-modern China as evil feudal tyrants, they portray an unelected government doing its best in a difficult situation to rule over a large territory of diverse peoples. Indeed one particular storyline (in episode 33 in the second season) would be clearly understood by the Chinese audience as a commentary on the present situation of when it was aired. Ji Xiaolan, He Shen and the Qianlong emperor are discussing a case of villagers being fooled by a hoax glowing Buddha. Ji Xiaolan uncovers the hoax which had used germinating beans. A debate ensues on why people would believe in superstition and follow a religion. Ji Xiaolan argues that even Buddhism is suspect. One possible reading of this could be as a reference to the government crackdown on the Falun Gong sect in 1999.

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<sup>29</sup> See Brookes 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Season 1 consisted of 40 episodes shown in 2001; Season 2 had 43 episodes shown in 2002, and Season 3 had 40 episodes shown in 2004.

### 3.4 ‘Outside’ history

The last section of this chapter will provide an overview of the history of certain forms of writings that were not considered ‘history’ in pre-modern Chinese culture. I have purposefully avoided calling this survey a short history of ‘fiction’ in China, since there has been much interesting debate in scholarly literature as to when ‘fiction’ began in China, and which genres of pre-modern Chinese writing corresponded to the Western term ‘fiction’. This section will inevitably draw on secondary critical literature of the genre of writings classified as *xiaoshuo* 小说 in Chinese, whether classical or modern. Discussions that follow therefore about *xiaoshuo* are not intended to imply that *xiaoshuo* is equivalent to fiction. This thesis investigates the extent to which New Historical Fiction in 1990s China, as a non-historical form, has challenged and partially replaced the official historiography in providing a reflection of the past. This section serves to provide a contextual and historical background of the relationship between history and other non-historical forms in China.

*Xiaoshuo* as a literary form has been notoriously difficult to classify in Chinese history.<sup>31</sup> Ming Dong Gu (2006, 83) argues it is a “pivot point upon which different forms of writing converge”. As an extended form of narrative *xiaoshuo* can deal with any subject matter weaving a heterogeneous set of themes together. In traditional *xiaoshuo* there were no boundaries between time and space, animate and inanimate things, life and death, and humans and animals.

In early Chinese culture, the writing of history took precedence over all other writings. The ‘classic’ texts were considered the source of knowledge worth knowing to the man of culture and integrity, the *junzi* 君子. In the Chinese cultural hierarchy, history (*shi* 史) was placed above all other genres. Indeed Henry Zhao argues that the six classics were considered as ‘history’ and took the

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<sup>31</sup> Useful studies on the definition and history of both *xiaoshuo* and fiction in China, and their relationship include Sheldon Hsiao-Peng Lu 1994, Liang Shi 2002, Ming Dong Gu 2006, and Berg 2007.



place of religion and sacred texts in other societies as the state ideology (Zhao 2001a, 48). The classics (*jing*) and history (*shi*) constituted an epistemological space that determined the Chinese structure of knowledge, including an ideological discourse and a fact-oriented paradigm. The texts, such as *xiaoshuo* that fell outside this domain were not accepted as historical knowledge, and were therefore of less ‘use’ to the *junzi*. (Liang Shi 2002, 49, 52).

Much has been written on the history and development of ‘fiction’ in China. When talking about the history of ‘fiction’ or ‘novels’, scholars usually begin from the first use of the term *xiaoshuo* 小说 (literally ‘small’ talk or ‘petty’ talk) in texts in pre-modern China. Ming Dong Du (2006, 21) notes that the term is highly problematic however as it changed meaning several times over throughout Chinese history from its earliest use to the early twentieth century. In 1902, Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929) used the term in an essay<sup>32</sup> talking about the necessity for a ‘fiction revolution’ (*xiaoshuojie geming* 小说界革命) to represent something close to the Western term ‘fiction’. Furthermore it was used in pre-modern China to indicate a range of heterogeneous writings that did not fall into the divisions of the six classics (Ming Dong Gu 2006, 21).

The earliest use of the term *xiaoshuo* appears in the *Zhuangzi* but its exact meaning there is far from clear. One can already discern a negative judgement that possibly set the tone for later condemnation of the form even though the term referred to something other than ‘fiction’. The quoted sentence is: “If a person cultivates *xiao shuo* for the sake of pursuing fame, he strays far from the great enlightenment.” (quoted from Shi 2000, 39). In the Han dynasty Ban Gu identified *xiaoshuo* as coming from street talk at the bottom of the social hierarchy placing it on the same level as genres of unofficial, ‘coarse’ histories, the *yeshi* 野史 or *baishi* 稗史 (Ming Dong Gu 2006, 22). Ban Gu further denigrated *xiaoshuo* by claiming the *xiao dao* 小道 (small path) referred to in

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<sup>32</sup> The essay was entitled “Lun xiaoshuo yu qun zhi zhi guanxi” 论小说与群治之关系 (On the relationship between fiction and the governing of the masses), and appeared in the *Xin Xiaoshuo* 新小说 (New Fiction) literary journal published in Yokohama, Japan.

Confucian writings also included *xiaoshuo*. A more useful approach would be to consider the development of writings that are placed in the category of *xiaoshuo*.

The early creative impulse in Chinese writing found an outlet in historical writing rather than fictional writing (Ming Dong Gu 2006, 32). Some scholars (Ming Dong Gu 2006, 44) have argued that fiction did not exist in China until the advent of Buddhism when the Indian narrative models it brought as texts such as *jataka* stories were transmitted and translated. Ming Dong Gu (2006, 32) disagrees with this hypothesis stating that fiction begun much earlier in China and was not imported from other cultures. Early examples of fiction often had to masquerade as historical writing to escape the censor and attain some level of respectability. Ming Dong Gu (2006, 33) gives the example of *An Account of the Travels of Emperor Mu* (*Mu Tianzi zhuan* 穆天子传), from the fourth century BC that was considered as history for over two thousand years and only identified as fiction by the general editor of the *Siku quanshu* 四库全书, Ji Yun as late as the Qing dynasty. Shi notes that *xiaoshuo* could legitimate themselves by claiming to be *youxi* 游戏, or play (2002, 139). Novel-reading was seen as a frivolous pastime, and not referring to anything serious beyond itself. Before the Tang dynasty, *zhiguai* tales (records of the strange) were categorised under history even though they had more discernable literary qualities. Ming Dong Gu (2006, 38) credits Dewoskin as identifying the Six Dynasties period as the time when history and the *zhiguai* tales began to separate from each other.

In China, history is written according to the principle of *shu'er buzuo* 述而不作 (transmission not composition) (Ming Dong Gu 2006, 48). Historical fiction in China deviates from this principle, but never completely discards it. Indeed a historical novel is often an extension of official history treating people and chronology in a similar way so that people often confused the two forms. Ming Dong Gu (2006, 49) reminds the reader that even in official histories fiction is not completely absent.

Historical fiction was dependent on the historical record for subject matter and often read as extensions of official history. The structure and treatment of characters and plot were similar to official history, hence the perception that these novels were ‘inferior’ histories. The discourse of history dominated cultural space in China and determined the Chinese structure of knowledge. The historical record constituted a mine of examples that could be manipulated and cited as good or bad precedents to justify contemporary courses of action. Officials could appeal to the historical record to check the power of the emperor and question his decisions. As in other cultures, in China the historical record served as a source of authority and those who were in charge of writing and interpreting history wielded enormous power. In China the power of history was especially strong given the cultural prestige accorded to the written word. This was compounded further by a civil service that consisted of officials selected for their ability to master and manipulate a huge number of complex texts, including large quantities of historical texts.

Fiction would imitate history to attain a level of respectability otherwise unavailable. This view contends that fiction later grew out of its subordinate relationship to history and achieved a level of independence. Ming Dong Gu argues that this linear view of development ignores the continual tension and struggle that existed between *xiaoshuo* and historiography (Ming Dong Gu 2006, 5). Thus while historiography may have been used as the official discourse where power lay, fiction has long been pushing against those barriers of discourse to create its own space of meaning creation.

Historical fiction was a popular genre in pre-modern China because of the dependence of early fiction on historiography. There was also no clear distinction between historical narrative and pure fiction. The tradition in China exemplified by the classic *Romance of Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三国演义) used events, people and places that existed in the past to construct stories. This early stage of the development of fiction relied heavily still on historical sources and the structure of historiography. Ming Dong Gu (2006, 49) quotes the

example of Lu Xun arguing that the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* is 70 percent history and 30 percent fiction.

A further influence from the historiographical tradition in Chinese fiction is the concern for truth in fiction that appears in the Tang *chuanqi*. This concern was routinely expressed by the author at the end of the tale. Ming Dong Gu (2006, 76) argues that the reason for this was the historiographical method that privileged transmission of ideas rather than creation (*shu'erbuzuo* 述而不作). The historiographical style propounded by Sima Qian had also served as a model for prose writing and influenced the writing of fiction. The historiographical legacy also made itself felt from the initial status of *xiaoshuo* as an inferior branch of history writing. Shi Liang notes that while the historical concern for truth made itself felt in early fictional writings in China, other scholars have emphasised a philosophical preference for the transcendental, all-pervasive nature of the *dao* in Chinese philosophy as informing Chinese prose, whether historiographical or fictional (Shi Liang 2002, 27). Whatever the degree to which 'truth' was pursued, fiction in China gradually moved away from the strictures and methods of historiography.

Gu (2006, 67) identifies two major shifts in the nature and composition of *xiaoshuo*. The first is the change from street talk and gossip to actual storytelling. The second change is from storytelling to fictional art. This change was influenced by Tang literati culture. In its later stages of development in the Ming and Qing Dynasties the narrative structure in fiction became more complex and multilayered evolving into an epistemological system of multiple discourses. Ming Dong Gu argues that this maturity of the genre and ensuing complexity led to a more open discourse that supported multiple viewpoints and interpretations. As a genre the *xiaoshuo* can accommodate any form of discourse weaving all kinds of subject matter together. There was a clear movement in the development of Chinese *xiaoshuo* from historical narrative towards pure fiction. From Tang times unrealistic modes of representation were used that anticipated modern techniques such as surrealism, magic realism and metafiction. The most

important innovation of fiction after the Tang Dynasty was more complex narrative structure (Ming Dong Gu 2006, 84).

The complexity of narrative structure in later fiction led to an openness of narrative:

“Openness in theory means that a literary text is not an enclosure of words with finite and limited messages, but a hermeneutic space constructed with verbal signs capable of generating unlimited interpretations. In common usage, it means that a literary text has no ‘correct’ interpretation, or has multiple interpretations” (Ming Dong Gu 2002, 82).

The openness of novels is potentially subversive to other meaning systems and ideologies. The *xiaoshuo* was thus considered a rebel in cultural discourse which gave it certain freedoms to express things that would have been forbidden from the official historical discourse. This survey has highlighted the complexities of non-historical genres in pre-modern China, but shows at least that these non-historical writings, which fed directly into the modern Chinese concept of ‘fiction’, were constantly pushing at the boundaries of their genres to gain the same respectability afforded to history.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has shown the importance of the long relationship between history and fiction in Chinese culture. Pre-modern and modern Chinese historiographies may espouse contradictory philosophies, but they all posit history as the primary discourse over all others. The centrality of history as a discourse of power of the CCP has been demonstrated through its historical and continuing reliance on the victory of revolution in modern Chinese history for political legitimacy. The relevance of ‘revolution’ both as a Marxist view of history and as a series of key political movements in twentieth-century Chinese history has been highlighted in the discussion of radical theoretical and cultural attempts to discard it. The sketch of the development of non-historical writings in China, focusing on the *xiaoshuo*

form, gives the background to the fact that as the modern inheritor of these traditions, modern Chinese fiction has continued to challenge the claims made by history to the point where fiction now claims to stand on an equal moral and epistemological footing. Although non-historical writings have gradually grown in influence in the Chinese cultural hierarchy, fiction as a genre has never been able openly to challenge history as it is now attempting to do.

The trajectory of official historiography, and its loss of power, as described in this chapter strengthens the argument articulated in the previous chapter that in the period being discussed fiction seems to be replacing history as a legitimate means of exploring new views and ideas of the past. The case studies in Sections II and III will now investigate to what extent that fiction could be the most powerful tool to provide a real alternative view of history. While memoirs can fill in gaps and give individual testimonies and have more authority in that they are purportedly reporting fact, novels can tackle larger, more universal themes and explore and overturn other discourses.

The next chapter will contain the critical framework that will be assembled from the theories and concepts which will be used in the thesis.

### **Chapter 3 – Critical Framework: definitions and theory**

The last two chapters have given an overview of the cultural context in 1990s China and an introduction to New Historical Fiction, as well as describing the relationship of history and fiction in Chinese culture. This chapter will provide the critical framework by discussing the theories and concepts which will be used in the thesis. This chapter will be divided into two sections, a theoretical discussion on ‘history’, and a discussion of ‘fiction’.

The history section will present the debates surrounding the nature of history and history writing to provide a context against which the fiction in the case studies can be read. Three positions will be presented: the postmodern view, the empiricist view, and a moderate view. Postmodernist views of history will be used as part of the critical framework to analyse the case studies, as they are most appropriate to the fiction under discussion, the rationale for which will be expanded upon later in this chapter. The ‘empiricist’ and ‘moderate’ views of history will also be briefly discussed to provide a complete picture of the different conceptions of history.

The concepts of myth, identity and culture will also be discussed within the section on history. The place of myth in history, and the concept of ‘mythistory’ will be addressed, and the potential for these concepts to be used to write history in a new way. The concept of mythistory will be used as an analytical concept in the first case study on *White Deer Plain*. A discussion of identity will follow to show how history and ‘the past’ are important elements in the construction of identity in contemporary China.

The fiction section will discuss theories and concepts of fiction that will be used in the case studies. Firstly, Bakhtin’s theories of heteroglossia, polyphony, dialogism, and carnival will be covered. Secondly, the postmodern theories of historiographic metafiction and metafiction are introduced, concluding with a discussions on intertextuality.

### 3.1 History

This section will introduce empiricist, postmodern, and moderate views of history, by presenting an overview of the debates in the secondary literature over the last few decades on the nature of history and historical knowledge. Before proceeding further, a basic definition of history would be useful. At its most literal level, history can be defined as referring to the past itself, and to what historians write about the past. Historiography is the process of writing history, or the study of that process itself (Arnold 2009, 6). History is a selection of ‘stories’ from the past, whether one believes them to be ‘true’ or not (Arnold 2009, 10). Over the twentieth century, an immense diversity of historical approaches and traditions began to appear (Fulbrook 2002, 15). This diversity has problematised the ability of history to be construed as a faithful record of the past ‘as it actually happened’:

“The diversity of historical perspectives, and the close links between particular theoretical approaches and political standpoints, have presented a major challenge to any notion of history as the pursuit of truth.” (Fulbrook 2002, 17)

Munslow (2003, 3) also notes that this epistemological self-consciousness is widespread from the proliferation of books, articles, and journals on the subject.

As briefly stated above, views on history as a discipline and discourse can be broadly divided into three areas: the empiricist view of history at one end of the spectrum, postmodernist critics following on from Hayden White’s historiography at the other, and some critics in the middle who reject the empiricist view but remain cynical towards the claims of a postmodernist view. These differing views will now be sketched, beginning with the empiricist view.



### 3.1.1 Empiricist view

The empiricist view of history believes that it is epistemologically possible to represent the past in a written narrative through rigorous methodology and interrogation of all sources available. A vociferous proponent of the empiricist view of history as an account of the past constructed through an objective assessment of the available sources is Arthur Marwick. In his book *The New Nature of History: knowledge, evidence, language* (Marwick 2001) he states his position thus:

“I have set out my assumptions. The most important one at this juncture is that there are strict historical methods and principles and that the application of those has produced a great corpus of historical knowledge.” (Marwick 2001, 4)

Marwick (2001, 12) argues that historians use language differently from novelists, poets and playwrights, and that they should “convey their findings as clearly and explicitly as possible.” He acknowledges the difficulty in communicating clearly and objectively in language, but believes that through great effort on the part of the historian clear and objective expression is possible and essential. Marwick uses condescending and aggressive language towards scholars with whom he disagrees, for example, “Keith Jenkins in his feeble *Rethinking History...*”, (Marwick 2001, 20), and rejects all the theoretical work carried out in the second half of the twentieth century that has made history a more nuanced and complex discipline. This conservative stance means Marwick’s theory, similar to empiricist views more broadly, is limiting in its application; it is this view of history as an ‘objective’ and ‘faithful’ record of the past that is contested by postmodern views, and is addressed in the last two case studies in section III of the thesis.

### 3.1.2 Postmodern views

This section will present postmodern views of history that emerged out of a critique of the empiricist view. Among the group of postmodern critics who believe that history cannot reflect any objective truth about the past are Keith Jenkins, Alun Munslow and Hayden White. The work of Jenkins and Munslow

will be considered together, whereas Hayden White's theory will be introduced separately on account of his importance as a critic on history and fiction. They all assert as the cornerstone of their position that history and the past are not one and the same thing (Jenkins 1991, 5). History in postmodern views generally is seen as a literary representation that constructs a narrative of interpretations, and cannot claim epistemological truth in any scientific way.

Alun Munslow (2003, 1) begins from the premise that history is "a narrative about the past", while Jenkins argues that postmodernism has:

"...produced that multiplicity of histories that can be met everywhere throughout our democratic/consumerising culture, a mass of genres (designer/niche histories) to be variously used and/or abused." (Jenkins 1991, 65).

This realisation of the multiplicity of histories and genres that simultaneously compete for the attention of the historian destroys the notion of one correct version of history that acts as a master-narrative. This democratising process also widens the subject matter for inclusion in an account of the past. The historian can only recover fragments of the past rather than a complete, 'truthful' picture (Jenkins 1991, 13), and as Munslow (2003, 190) suggests, 'mine' the past in response to the demands of their own culture at a given time. Postmodern views therefore propose that there is no possibility of finding the 'correct' method with which to reconstruct the past in language, and that once the historian changes perspective, new readings will appear:

"...all these things destabilise the past and fracture it, so that, in the cracks opened up, new histories can be made." (Jenkins 1991, 66).

This new way of writing history may reveal aspects of the past that have hitherto remained hidden. Jenkins sees the fragmentation and multiplicity of meaning inherent in interpretations of the past as liberating rather than limiting:

“Between the Scylla and Charybdis of, on the one hand, authorised history and, on the other, post-modern pastlessness, a space exists for the desirable outcome of as many people(s) as possible to make their own histories such that they can have real effects (a real say) in the world.” (Jenkins 1991, 67).

Jenkins sees the potential for fresh insights that can make a difference to the present in the recognition of history as a discursive practice through which people can manipulate the past to construct a meaningful identity in the present. He concludes by saying that historians can write effectively about the past by adopting a reflexive methodology that deconstructs and historicises their own interpretations:

“There is no such thing as an ‘unpositioned centre’ (actually a contradiction in terms); no possibility of an unpositioned site. The only choice is between a history that is aware of what it is doing and a history that is not.” (Jenkins 1991, 69).

For Jenkins history cannot objectively ‘reflect’ the past in a neutral, objective way, and cannot completely ‘recover’ the past to be understood in the present: it is always written from an ideological position (Jenkins 1991, 66). Munslow (2003, 2) also believes that historians must acknowledge their epistemological choices, saying that historians can only exert any control on the past through their chosen theory of knowledge or mode of perception (2003, 4). He also makes the point that historical narrative is the most effective means of transmitting ideology, a point which is central to the argument of this thesis. As is discussed in chapter 2, p51, this is particularly true in the case of Chinese culture:

“The historical narrative is – in effect – the most potent cultural vehicle for ideology we have because narrative is conventionally taken by its practitioners (and uncounted millions of consumers) to be primarily denotative rather than connotative. Its key concern is to denote or reference what actually was, and then connote or suggest what it meant. It is at the level of the

connotative that ideology operates...It is for this reason that histories are thus always more plausible to a readership that shares the moral inflection built into them and less to those who do not.” (Munslow 2003, 192)

Jenkins is one of the more radical critics and is often viewed suspiciously by other critics who while accepting that elements of history are similar to fiction, still believe in the ability of history to give a truthful, objective account of the past. Jenkins is aware that denying the ability of history to reflect the past accurately is challenging to the people who have the power to write the authoritative version of history (Jenkins 1991, 67). The solution to writing history for Jenkins is:

“...my own preference would be for a series of histories that helped us to understand the world that we live in and the forms of history that have both helped produce it and which it has produced.” (Jenkins 1991, 70)

Munslow also sees the possibilities for continuing to write history in a new, unconventional way:

“...history has a truth-value precisely because of its re-classification as a literature and not through correspondence. All this adds up to a widening rather than a diminishing of the possibilities for our engagement with the past.” (Munslow 2003, 194)

Munslow and Jenkins both believe that empiricist history writing is no longer possible, but argue that the fictionality of history invigorates the discipline and provides new possibilities for capturing the past. The next subsection will develop these ideas by discussing a major theorist of this area, Hayden White.

### 3.1.3 Hayden White

Hayden White is the critic who has argued in the most persuasive way for history to be considered as a written discourse no different from that of literary fiction:

“...in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.” (White 1992, 82)

White argues that historical reality can be glimpsed, but in a different way from the positivist/empiricist approach of historians, suggesting it can only be grasped through the mixing of tropes. He proposes irony as the trope through which historical reality can be ‘glimpsed’ most easily. Irony situates itself in the ‘cracks’ and ‘fissures’ between the other tropes (Ankersmit 1998, 188/9)

In *The Tropics of Discourse* (White 1992), White argues that a historian uses two levels of interpretation in order to create a historical work. At the first level he identifies, the historian creates a story out of the chronicle of events, then moves to the second level using a narrative technique to identify the kind of story that is being told, categorising it in the following way: comedy, tragedy, romance, epic, or satire (White 1992, 59). For White, the same sequence of events can be narrated as a particular kind of story, without changing the facts. White calls this process of telling the story of history ‘emplotment’:

“The types of stories that can be told about the French Revolution are limited to the number of modes of emplotment which the myths of the Western literary tradition sanction as appropriate ways of endowing human process with meanings.” (White 1992, 60-1)

White continues by identifying four different conceptions of explanation in historiography: the idiographic, the contextualist, the organicist, and the mechanist (White 1992, 66). The idiographic historian clarifies the happenings of a particular historical field so they appear sharper to the mind’s eye (White 1992, 64). These insights are then turned into generalisations of historical trends and movements, as ‘contextualist’ explanations. The ‘organicist’ on the other hand attempts to integrate all the different historical contexts into a whole, seeking to

identify the principles by which different periods of history can be viewed as a process of 'development' (White 1992, 65). The mechanist seeks to distinguish the causes and effects in the historical process, and identify the conditions necessary for their appearance at specific times and places (White 1992, 66). These conceptions incorporate four dominant tropes in White's historiography: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. The first three provide models of direction that thought might take to provide meaning to areas of experience that are not underpinned by common sense, tradition or science. Irony is more complex and can provoke more ambiguity, and uses scepticism as a method of explanation, and satire as a mode of emplotment (White 1992, 73-4).

White's analyses outlined above led him to consider the historical text as a 'literary artefact':

"Historians may not like to think of their works as translations of fact into fictions; but this is one of the effects of their works. By suggesting alternative emplotments of a given sequence of historical events, historians provide historical events with all the possible meanings with which the literary art of their culture is capable of endowing them." (White 1992, 92).

White's identification of the fictional elements inherent in historical narrative in no way denies the continuing validity of historiography. He considers history as a discipline to be 'in trouble' on account of forgetting its origins in the literary imagination, and in so doing "surpressing its own greatest source of strength and renewal" (White 1992, 99):

"In my view, we experience the 'fictionalization' of history as an 'explanation' for the same reason that we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit along with the author. In both we recognize the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it seeks to inhabit comfortably." (White 1992, 99).

#### 3.1.4 Moderate views

Despite the ‘new’ methodologies for analysing ‘history’ described above, there are different groups of critics who challenge the postmodern contention that history is pure fiction. Some critics are prepared to admit that historical writing has fictional elements to it, but they still believe in the ability of history to represent the past in a meaningful way. For example, Curthoys and Docker (2005) argue against Jenkins, and disagree with the postmodern premise that the past can never be recovered:

“...some cultural theorists’ discussions of history and fiction do indeed come perilously close to denying the value of the discipline of history altogether. We find, for example, the work of the postmodern historical thinker Keith Jenkins to be very problematic in this respect.” (Curthoys & Docker 2005, 5)

They argue that an awareness of the ‘fictive elements of historical writing’ is a strong element in the search for historical truth (Curthoys & Docker 2005, 6), while continuing to adhere to a historiography that is closer to the traditional epistemological claims to truth than to fiction:

“Our general argument will be that the very doubleness of history – in the space between history as rigorous scrutiny of sources and history as part of the world of literary forms – gives it ample room for uncertainty, disagreement and creativity. And perhaps this doubleness is the secret of history’s cunning as a continuing practice, an inventive, self-transforming discipline.” (Curthoys & Docker 2005, 11)

Mary Fulbrook also seeks to find a middle ground between the radical stance of Hayden White and others who claim that history provides no more an objective truth than can fiction. Fulbrook argues that historical knowledge is different from fiction or propaganda (Fulbrook 2002, 3), and believes in the continued ability of history to contain some element of truth within it:

“I believe a way can be found both to circumnavigate some of the real naiveties of those empiricists who deny the postmodernist case any credibility, and at the same time to salvage a view of history which does accord it a degree of truth value, a status apart from fantasy and myth.” (Fulbrook 2002, 27)

Fulbrook agrees with the postmodernists that there is no single true master narrative, and that there can exist in principle a number of ‘partial narratives’. She departs from the postmodernist view however by stating that not all of these narratives are equally acceptable. She believes historians can develop criteria for discarding some of these narratives, but that theoretical sophistication and debate are essential for this process. (Fulbrook 2002, 29)

The identification of the fictional qualities inherent in historical narrative by these critics has enabled fiction to engage with the past in a more meaningful way. An important implication of the theories described in this section is the destabilising of a single, authoritative narrative of the past, such as those wielded by nation states to feed into nationalism and maintain their legitimacy. It is argued in the case studies in this thesis that the authors and their novels as well as New Historical Fiction in China more broadly, are creating a series of fictional ‘histories’ that allow a new sort of engagement with the past.

### 3.1.5 Myth

This section discusses the concept of the ‘myth’ and provides an overview of the relationship between myth and history, and introduces the concept of ‘mythistory’. A basic definition of myth considers myth as a story:

“To begin with, I propose defining myth as a story...Theories that read myth symbolically rather than literally still take the subject matter, or the meaning, to be the unfolding of a story.” (Segal 2004, 4-5)

Segal’s definition of myth as a ‘story’ is useful, however it is argued here that myth is more than just this, as it incorporates aspects of symbolism, and shared



cultural meanings drawn from folk culture and traditions from the shared memory of a particular people.

In the Western tradition, Mali (2003, 1) notes that the salient point of Herodotus' (c.484 BC – c.425 BC) historiography was that it was not important whether the historical myths of nations were true or false, but what they meant. Heehs points out that a general trend in post-Enlightenment historiography has been to eradicate myth from the historical record (Heehs 1994, 2). Mali notes however that in recent decades scholars of historiography have changed from scientific to hermeneutic questions. He continues to argue that myths are not actually historical in themselves, but that they lend meaning to history (Mali 2003, 4). The ability of a myth or 'story' to convey meaning will be shown in the novels analysed in this thesis to be significant as a way of expressing the Chinese twentieth century.

#### 3.1.6 Mythistory

This section will discuss the concept of 'mythistory', 'a term applied by historian Donald Kelley in his essay 'Mythistory in the Age of Ranke' that shows the importance of myth in history and historiography. Critics who engage with this concept include Donald Kelley, Francis Cornford, and Joseph Mali. Cornford who reinvented the term in modern historiography in his book *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, published in 1907 (Mali 2003, 19), argued that contrary to Thucydides' reputation as an objective historian compared to Herodotus, Thucydides in fact rationalised myths believing he could thus turn them into history. His proposition was that Thucydides omits causes in his history, which makes it read more like a story (Conford 1965, 59). Cornford suggested that the result was a 'mutilated legend', which may be so well 'mutilated' that the elements of fiction present are hard to discern. In his analysis, Cornford argues that rationalised myths do not occur as single incidents, but rather are integrated into Thucydides' text as a series of events fashioned into a plan "determined by an *art form*" (Conford 1965, 134).

It may be argued that mythistory allows the full range of human experience to be included in any account of the past:

“As Kelley [Kelley 1991, 3] adds elsewhere, mythistory reminds us that ‘the study of history, like the human condition it affects to portray, cannot entirely disengage itself from the irrational and the subconscious; as a form of human memory, it cannot entirely escape its own primitive heritage.’ This, *in nuce*, is what mythistory is all about.” (Mali 2003, 9)

This ‘mythical method’ of writing about the past reveals the continuity between ancient civilisations and the present day and expresses the unity of all human experiences (Mali 2003, 12). I will argue that Wang Xiaobo utilises this method of writing in his novels, as shall be discussed in chapter 7. This thesis will argue that New Historical Fiction in China provides a more nuanced, meaningful account of the past than traditional historiography, which echoes a realisation in theory that the arts, including literature, have developed more appropriate techniques and forms to express the past than history itself:

“... it seems to me that, unlike their fellow artists and human scientists, historians have not yet come to realize the full potential of the ‘mythical method’ and therefore have failed to produce a historiography that is really and clearly ‘modern’ in the same way that ‘modern literature’ or ‘modern art’ are.” (Mali 2003, 13)

### 3.1.7 Identity

This section will attempt to define the concept of identity in 1990s China, as well as discussing the relationship between history and identity. This thesis argues that the rewriting of twentieth-century Chinese history in fiction is providing one of many new ways of viewing the twentieth century in China, and is an important part of an attempt to construct a Chinese identity for the twenty-first century.

Lingchei Letty Chen provides a comprehensive discussion of many of the issues of identity in the Chinese cultural context. She usefully defines the abstract notion of identity in the following way:

“When the word ‘identity’ is uttered, it is always cultural identity that we speak of. Identity, when understood simply, means how individuals articulate who they are in relation to their immediate environment such as family, to the larger communities such as society and nation, and to more abstract notions such as history and tradition.” (Lingchei Letty Chen 2006, 12).

As has already been argued in chapter 2, the reconfiguring of the past to endow it with a new meaning for the present is an essential part of Chinese identity:

“For mainland Chinese writers to question their cultural identity or even to conceptualize an alternative cultural identity, they must inevitably deal with the claim of authenticity. How the individual is able to wrestle with tradition, history, and the collective or the masses, the main ingredients for ‘cultural authenticity,’ becomes a central challenge for contemporary Chinese writers in reimagining their cultural identity amidst a more open society and market economy.” (Lingchei Letty Chen 2006, 7).

For the purposes of this thesis, the importance of history and tradition in constructing an identity is the salient point. The themes of history and tradition in New Historical Fiction can thus be read as an attempt by Chinese writers to investigate identity and to forge a new Chinese identity. The freedom of fiction to absorb multiple discourses and voices allows for a complex identity to be formed as part of a dynamic, ongoing process that culminates in a hybrid. The novels in the case studies appropriate elements of traditional Chinese culture and mix them with a postmodern style of writing, including influences from Western fiction and literary theory:

“The hybrid must be conceived to be a fresh and inventive cultural entity with new self-understandings, beliefs, and practices. It signifies freedom and

open-endedness; with its transformative power via imitation, appropriation, juxtaposition, subversion, and negotiation, it alters the established cultural dominant and forces the canonized to reconfigure its status and identity.” (Lingchei Letty Chen 2006, 24).

The question of how far a literary hybrid can translate itself into a hybrid of cultural identity goes beyond the scope of this thesis, which proposes that the fiction analysed in the case studies does represent at least a beginning of the formation of a new cultural identity for the Chinese people. Chen argues that history and culture are important resources for Chinese writers exploring the question of identity. She suggests that from the late twentieth century, Chinese writers “are inclined to subvert or even disregard orthodox cultural ideologies” (Lingchei Letty Chen 2006, 35).

This section on history has given a broad overview of the theoretical discussions of history. The postmodern identification of the fictional elements in historical narrative has undermined any single historical narrative claiming a monopoly on the truth. The emphasis on the ‘fictionality’ of history allows writers of fiction to use the form of the novel to provide accounts of the past that are as ‘meaningful’ as any history. Theories and concepts of fiction will now be discussed in the second section of this chapter.

## 3.2 Fiction

### 3.2.1 Mikhail M. Bakhtin

The literary theory of the novel of Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) informs the discussions on the potency and form of the novel in this thesis. The thesis argues that fiction has the ability to provide an alternative account of the past that is as meaningful as that traditionally provided by historiography. Indeed, Bakhtin claimed that the novel was a ‘marker for a revolution in human perception’ (Holquist 1990, 68).

Bakhtin produced a vast corpus of theoretical works; his theories are complex, interconnected and fluid, as can be seen from the concepts outlined below. Bakhtin became a marginalized intellectual in Soviet culture leading him to an awareness of a conflict between two forces in culture and language, the centrifugal and the centripetal. Of the two forces, the centripetal forces language towards unification and standardisation, results in the closure of a system, and in the monopolizing of the single truth. This centripetal force is countered by the centrifugal that attempts to promote ambivalence while allowing openness and transgression (Lachmann & Eshelman & Davis 1988-9, 116).

An early concept in Bakhtin’s work concerns ‘unfinalizability’, which means the impossibility of any final conclusion. Bakhtin proposed that the subject is an unfinalizable mixture of identities, desires, and voices (Hitchcock 2008, 51-2), and as an individual is not finalizable, a single voice can only exist together with a multitude of other voices. This realization led to Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism that considers all discourse, whether literature or speech, as ‘dialogical’, or an intersection of myriad voices (Hitchcock 2008, 52).

Another of Bakhtin’s concepts was that of ‘novelness’, which is the name he gave to a form of knowledge (such as a literary text) that can most effectively put different orders and languages of experience into dialogue with each other (Holquist 1990, 87). Bakhtin suggests that this ‘dialogue’ between words in

literary texts takes place at different levels: between the centrifugal forces that keep things apart, and the centripetal forces that bring them together; between language at the level of signifier and signified, and language at the level of discourse; and, between the different meanings a given word has throughout the history of a particular language, and in different situations within the same historical period (Holquist 1990, 69).

Critics have noted that boundaries between many of Bakhtin's concepts are fluid, for example between heteroglossia, polyphony, and dialogism (Dettmar 1996, 29). This section on Bakhtin will be divided into subsections that will attempt to define the concepts of polyphony and heteroglossia as far as possible, as they emerge from the idea of dialogism described above. Carnival will also be discussed as the place where the voices of the text may be heard.

Bakhtin's theories will be a major conceptual tool in this thesis to argue for the power of fiction to provide an alternative version of twentieth-century China. Bakhtin argues that the power of the novel to relativise other genres by revealing their monologic nature makes it unique in literary discourse (Farmer 1998, xvii). Furthermore, Bakhtin discerns higher degrees of consciousness in history through multiplicity and variety, as opposed to singularity and unity, as in the work of Hegel and Lukács (Holquist 1990, 75). Finally, Bakhtin ascribes the novel's subversive capacity to its historical background of low-class identity and forms of resistance. Also, the modern novel relativises other discourses by absorbing them into its structure and parodying them, bracketing the official ideology as a discourse among others (Hirschkop & Shepherd 1989, 158).

Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia, polyphony and carnival will now be discussed.

### 3.2.2 Heteroglossia

'Heteroglossia' ('different languages') is the English translation given to Bakhtin's Russian term *разноречие* [raznorechie] ('different-speech-ness'), described in his essay 'Discourse in the novel' (Bakhtin & Holquist 1981, 259-

422). The concept stresses context above text so that one particular set of conditions (for example social, historical, physiological to name just three) will give a different meaning to the same word uttered under other circumstances. All utterances are heteroglot because they all function in a web of forces that are impossible to identify in totality, making them therefore impossible to resolve (Bakhtin & Holquist 1981, 428).

Bakhtin distinguished two types of heteroglossia, one linguistic, the other literary. In the linguistic sense, all speakers behave in a heteroglossic way by using language in different ways, socially and historically, as well as in ways determined by age, class and profession (Farrell 1995, 3). The second literary phenomenon describes the way in which heteroglossia enters the novel:

“Literary heteroglossia is achieved through a number of now familiar techniques...that bring varieties of speech into the novel, highlight the differences between them, and contextualise each of them in a specific world view.” (Farrell 1995, 3).

The different languages of age, class, profession (for example) therefore constitute different points of view on the world. Thus for Bakhtin, heteroglossia refers to the variety of languages present in everyday life, and importantly their entry into literary texts (Vice 1997, 18). Dialogic interaction will occur between these languages with the potential to change the ideological positioning of the text (Vice 1997, 18). This dialogue is facilitated by the ‘internal differentiation’ inherent in all languages (Farrell 1995, 67). The simultaneity of these dialogues results in the discursive and social forces of heteroglossia (Holquist 1990, 69). The languages of heteroglossia are contextual, social and historical views of the world (Farmer 1998, xviii).

The rest of this section will summarise Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia as expounded in ‘Discourse in the novel’. Bakhtin identifies three forms of novel that contain heteroglossia. The first of these forms is the comic novel, of which Bakhtin gives examples from the English novel (Bakhtin & Holquist 1981, 301).

The comic novel parodies all forms and levels of literary language. The second form of incorporating heteroglossia in the novel is through the language used by the characters:

“The language used by characters in the novel, how they speak, is verbally and semantically autonomous; each character’s speech possesses its own belief system, since each is the speech of another in another’s language; thus it may also refract authorial intentions and consequently may to a certain degree constitute a second language for the author. Moreover, the character speech almost always influences authorial speech...sprinkling it with another’s words...and in this way introducing into it stratification and speech diversity.” (Bakhtin & Holquist 1981, 315).

This type of heteroglossia will be useful when discussing the qualities of speech in *Hometown’s Chrysanthemums*. Bakhtin notes that even where there is no comedy, parody or irony, and no narrator, the diversity of speech still underpins the style of the novel (Bakhtin & Holquist 1981, 315). The third, final form for incorporating heteroglossia that Bakhtin discusses is what he calls ‘incorporated genres’. These are both artistic, such as short stories, lyrical songs, poems, dramatic scenes, and non-artistic such as everyday language, rhetorical, scholarly, and religious genres. These genres often preserve their own structures and languages within a novel, thereby intensifying its speech diversity.

Bakhtin summarises heteroglossia in the following way:

“A comic playing with languages, a story ‘not from the author’ (but from a narrator, posited author or character), character speech, character zones and lastly various introductory or framing genres are the basic forms for incorporating and organising heteroglossia in the novel.” (Bakhtin & Holquist 1981, 323).

Heteroglossia is the speech of another in another’s language, creating a ‘double-voiced’ discourse (Bakhtin & Holquist 1981, 324). Two different intentions are



simultaneously served, the intention of the character speaking and the intention of the author, meaning that the double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogised. Bakhtin sees heteroglossia as personified in the disagreements and different wills of individual characters, but that these differences are submerged in social heteroglossia. Bakhtin therefore states that the internal dialogism of double-voiced prose can never be exhausted thematically (Bakhtin & Holquist 1981, 326):

“This double-voicedness in prose is prefigured in language itself (in authentic metaphors, as well as in myth), in language as a social phenomenon that is becoming in history, socially stratified and weathered in this process of becoming.” (Bakhtin & Holquist 1981, 326).

To conclude, the usefulness of heteroglossia as a concept lies in its ability to accommodate a multitude of voices and viewpoints that challenge one monologic and authoritarian narrative voice.

### 3.2.3 Polyphony

Polyphony is a concept introduced by Bakhtin in his discussion of the novels of Dostoevsky, in which he sees a plurality of consciousnesses emerging. Bakhtin claimed that Dostoevsky created the polyphonic novel which constituted a new novelistic genre (Bakhtin 1984, 6):

“Dostoevsky attempted to perceive the very stages themselves in their *simultaneity*, to *juxtapose* and *counterpose* them dramatically, and not stretch them out into an evolving sequence. For him, to get one’s bearings on the world meant to conceive all its contents as simultaneous, and to *guess at their interrelationships in the cross-section of a single moment*.” (Bakhtin 1984, 28).

This concept of polyphony as including simultaneity will be used in analyzing *The Golden Years* by Wang Xiaobo. Polyphony is problematic as a concept because Bakhtin never explicitly provides a definition (Makaryk 1993, 610; Morson & Emerson 1990, 231). He reformulates it at different stages in his

career. Bakhtin first considers Dostoevsky's novels as containing the ideal of polyphony, whereas later on he came to see it as inherent in all novelistic discourse (Makaryk 1993, 610). Polyphony is concerned with the position of the author in the text, and is the multiplicity of voices in the novel as a result of characters being liberated from authorial control. The author continues to be present and express views in a polyphonic text but assumes a different position within the text (Morson & Emerson 1990, 232-3). The author relinquishes omniscient control over the characters and engages the text in a discussion as an equal partner (Fairclough 2010, 193).

Morson & Emerson provide a useful discussion of Bakhtin's concept of polyphony in fiction. They show how for Bakhtin, modern thought has been dominated by a monologic conception of truth over the past hundred years, reflected in philosophy and literature. In order to explain the dialogic nature of Dostoevsky's works, Bakhtin challenges an entire intellectual culture that puts its own version of truth forward as the only one (Morson & Emerson 1990, 234). He considers a monologic concept of truth as arising from the idea of a 'separate thought' and the 'system of thoughts', seeing the philosophies of Hegel and Marx as examples of monologic thought (Morson & Emerson 1990, 235-6). Bakhtin sees truth and full of 'event potential', coming out of the 'open' present:

“The dialogic sense of truth manifests unfinalizability by existing on the ‘threshold’ of several interacting consciousnesses, a ‘plurality’ or ‘unmerged voices’. Crucial here is the modifier *unmerged*. These voices cannot be contained within a single consciousness, as in monologism; rather, their separateness is essential to the dialogue. Even when they agree, as they may, they do so from different perspectives and different senses of the world.” (Morson & Emerson 1990, 236-7).

The idea of an 'open present' will be discussed further in an analysis of the works of Wang Xiaobo in the fourth case study. In polyphony, several consciousnesses meet as equals and engage in a dialogue that is in principle unfinalizable (Morson & Emerson 1990, 238-9). Indeed, Bakhtin sees polyphony

as consisting of a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtin 1984, 6). Morson and Emerson (1990, 241) note that polyphonic creation is an ‘open process’ that seeks ‘surprisingness’ at each step of its creation. Polyphonic works allow the reader to experience the dialogue ‘as it unfolds’ (Morson and Emerson 1990, 246).

### 3.2.4 Carnival

Bakhtin expounds his theory of the carnivalesque (or ‘carnival’) in *Rabelais and his world* (Bakhtin 1984b), where he describes the aesthetics of medieval European peasant culture and the importance of apprehending the grotesque to appreciate this aesthetics (Elliot 1999, 130). Bakhtin argues that Rabelais and Dostoevsky write in a similar tradition of genre that has its origins in Menippean satire, which constitutes a counter-tradition to the ‘epic’ or classic line of European prose through its thematic, stylistics, and narrative structure (Lachmann et al. 1988-9, 119). He uses the concept of the carnival as a literary mode to subvert the natural order and hierarchy of things:

“As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and complete.” (Bakhtin 1984b, 10).

Bakhtin’s description of ‘grotesque realism’ was intended to counter the official image of the body in Socialist Realism (Lachmann et al. 1988-9, 119). The laughter inspired by the focus on the ‘lower body stratum’ of grotesque realism both degrades and regenerates:

“To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts

of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a new regenerating one.” (Bakhtin 1984b, 21).

The carnivalesque allows for a plurality of discourses that disrupt uniformity of thought (Elliot 1999, 129), and uses the potential of the novel to overthrow official discourses such as history. The liberation allowed by carnival allows for an equal dialogue between people and utterances. Real folk culture can be found in carnival and is the true unofficial culture, not the official folk culture that appears as ‘folk culture’ (Lachmann et al. 1988-9, 118). Bakhtin sought to liberate the carnal, corporeal body from the functional body of socialism. Indeed the theory of the carnival situates both novels and bodies as part of a flux in constant flow, and not shut off from one and another:

“The body is, if you will, *intercorporeal* in much the same way as the novel is intertextual. Like the novel, the body cannot be conceived outside a web of interrelations of which it is a living part.” (Holquist 1990, 90).

These bodies and texts interact through dialogism:

“Dialogism figures a close relation between bodies and novels because they both militate against monadism, the illusion of closed-off bodies or isolated psyches in bourgeois individualism, and the concept of a pristine, closed-off, static identity and truth wherever it may be found.” (Holquist 1990, 90).

Taken together, Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia, polyphony and carnival all undermine authority and monologic conceptions of truth. The next section on theories of postmodern fiction will extend some of Bakhtin’s concepts, reinforcing the multiplicity of discourses and voices that are present in fiction.

### 3.2.5 Postmodern fiction

This section will discuss postmodernist theories concerning the relationship between fiction and history to provide a theoretical context for the analysis

undertaken in the case studies. Building on Bakhtin's literary theory, the concept of intertextuality will be introduced, followed by a discussion of metafiction and self-conscious historical fiction, termed 'historiographic metafiction' by Linda Hutcheon (1989).

From the 1960s onwards, postmodernist critics have focused their attention on the relations between history and literature:

“This shift inaugurated – or was accompanied by – a widespread scepticism about being able to know and/or say anything about the real past which was not in some sense fictional.” (Fulbrook 2002, 18)

Hutcheon (1989, 126) argues that the crossing of boundaries between literatures and histories in postmodernism originates in part in Julia Kristeva's expansion of Bakhtinian concepts of polyphony, dialogism and heteroglossia.

### 3.2.6 Intertextuality

Intertextuality was coined as a term by critic Julia Kristeva in her essay 'Word, dialogue, novel', the fourth chapter of *Semeiotike* published in Paris in 1969, which was published in English in 1980 as *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Kristeva 1980). She brought the work of Bakhtin to the attention of the scholarly world in France, and developed his ideas of heteroglossia and dialogue. A common definition of intertextuality is “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double.” (Kristeva 1980, 66).<sup>33</sup> Kristeva's concept of intertextuality views the text as a dynamic site in which relational processes and practises are analysed (Clayton and Rothstein 1991, 147).

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<sup>33</sup> For a useful discussion of an appraisal of Kristeva's critical reception, see Orr 2003, 21-24.

The origins of the modern theory of intertextuality can be traced back to the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth century. To summarise very briefly for the purposes of this discussion, Saussure defined the linguistic sign into the 'signified' and the 'signifier', where the former is the concept being communicated and the latter is the sound-image. This brought attention to the fact that a linguistic sign does not refer directly to something concrete in the world, but is a result of the combination of a signified and a signifier (Allen 2000, 8). Intertextuality also emerged from theories that are interested in the existence of language within specific social situations (Allen 2000, 3), such as the work of M. M. Bakhtin. Julia Kristeva produced the first account of intertextuality in her combination of the theories of Saussure and Bakhtin.

Authors create texts from pre-existent texts, and intertextuality is the space where utterances intersect and neutralise each other (Allen 2000, 35). Bakhtin expresses this in terms of human subjects whereas Kristeva uses text and textuality (Clayton and Rothstein 1991, 149). For Kristeva, the text is produced as a result of generative activity called 'signifying practice' and 'productivity' (Martin and Ringham 2006, 231), as utterances existed before and will continue to exist together in tension after the moment of utterance. In Bakhtinian terms, this would be 'double-voiced' (Allen 2000, 36). The structures and meanings of texts are not specific to a particular text itself which leads Kristeva to see the parts of a text as 'ideologemes'. Allen (2000, 37) gives useful examples of ideologemes as abstract concepts such as 'justice' and 'natural' that are subject to diverse cultural connotations and definitions and therefore exist in a state of tension in any text. The realisation that such complex linguistic units exist in a text leads to the realisation that the text's appearance of unity is illusory and its arrangements of utterances have a significance outside the text itself (Allen 2000, 37).

Kristeva conceives the dynamic literary word through horizontal axes and vertical axes. The relationship between the writer and reader exists on the

horizontal axis, whereas on the vertical axis the word exists in relation to a present or past literary corpus (Orr 2003, 26).

It is worth mentioning that Roland Barthes was also a major proponent of the theory of intertextuality, using the work of Kristeva and Jacques Derrida. He saw intertextuality as a prominent feature of the production and consumption of texts (Juvan 2008, 79). Barthes opposed the modernist strategy of using an author's life as a means to interpret a text by a particular author. He argued that the meaning of a given text can only be found in relation to other texts, and not in the intentions of its author, which led him to consider every text in dialogue with others, leading him to intertextuality (Hitchcock 2008, 58). Kristeva's theory of intertextuality is also reconfigured by structuralist theorists Gérard Genette and Michael Riffaterre (see Allen 2000, 95-132), but an exposition of their theories is not necessary for the purposes of this chapter.

For the purposes of this thesis, intertextuality is a useful means of reading the novels in the case studies, especially the work of Li Er and Wang Xiaobo. The implications of considering novels as texts as defined by intertextuality are profound as no one discourse, such as history, may continue to claim authority and the final interpretation on reality or its past. Hutcheon (1989, 118) reads postmodern intertextuality as a desire "to rewrite the past in a new context". Allen expresses thus the subversive nature of the theory of intertextuality:

"If intertextuality stands as the ultimate term for the kind of poetic language Kristeva is attempting to describe, then we can see that from its beginning the concept of intertextuality is meant to designate a kind of language which, because of its embodiment of otherness, is against, beyond and resistant to (mono)logic. Such language is socially disruptive, revolutionary even. Intertextuality encompasses that aspect of literary and other kinds of texts which struggles against and subverts reason, the belief in unity of meaning or of the human subject, and which is therefore subversive to all ideas of the logical and the unquestionable." (Allen 2000, 45-6).

### 3.2.7 Metafiction

The term ‘metalanguage’ was in use before the 1960s, but it was during that decade that it would play an important part in the future of literary criticism and theory, especially in the work of Roman Jakobson and Roland Barthes (Hall 2007, 488). A derivative of this is metafiction, for which Patricia Waugh’s definition is the most useful:

“*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.” (Waugh 1984, 2).

The term ‘metafiction’ belongs to the lexicon of poststructuralist literary theory (Hall 2007, 488), but the practice of self-conscious fiction has been established as long as the novel has existed, if not longer (Waugh 1984, 5). Waugh continues by arguing that metafiction is a tendency in all novels. Metafictional texts are explicit in referring to their status as linguistically derived artefacts, while also critically analysing the processes of their own construction and of the reader’s interpretation (Amago 2006, 17). These texts are informed by the continuous opposition between constructing a fictional illusion (similar to traditional realism) and then exposing that illusion, creating a fiction and speaking about the creation of that fiction (Waugh 1984, 6). Postmodern fiction uses metafiction to parody traditional literary-fictional discourse rather than a particular genre or text (Korkut 2009, 106).

The debt to M. M. Bakhtin of the theory of metafiction is clear in the insistence on the different ‘languages’ that are present in fiction, echoing Bakhtinian notions of heteroglossia:

“There is no one privileged ‘language of fiction’. There are the languages of memoirs, journals, diaries, histories, conversational registers, legal records, journalism, documentary. These languages compete for privilege.” (Waugh 1984, 5).



The processes active in contemporary metafiction are a response to the notion that reality and history are constructed out of a series of impermanent structures (Waugh 1984, 7). The historical world and the world of fantasy are held in a state of tension in works of metafiction, and the relationship between ‘play’ and ‘reality’ is the main focus of the text (Waugh 1984, 38). Waugh finally concludes that metafiction also exposes historiography as fiction, in a position close to that of Hayden White:

“Metafiction suggests not only that writing history is a fictional act, ranging events conceptually through language to form a world-model, but that history itself is invested, like fiction, with interrelating plots which appear to interact independently of human design.” (Waugh 1984, 49).

The last two case studies in this thesis on the works of Li Er and Wang Xiaobo will investigate the liberatory powers features of metafiction and their implications.

### 3.2.8 ‘Historiographic Metafiction’

Postmodern theory focuses on what history and fiction share as modes of writing, rather than on how they differ (Hutcheon 1989, 105). As stated above in the section on myth, discussions on the nature of history and literature have taken place since ancient times. In the postmodern age, fiction is believed to have the ability to capture the past as well as any historical narrative:

“Such novels both install and then blur the line between fiction and history. This kind of generic blurring has been a feature of literature since the classical epic and the Bible, but the simultaneous and over assertion and crossing of boundaries is more postmodern.” (Hutcheon 1989, 113)

Hutcheon calls postmodern reflexive novels that deal with history, ‘historiographic metafiction’, describing them thus:

“those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon 1989, 5).

For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction combines fiction, history and theory. She notes that a wide range of sources such as comic books, fairy tales, almanacs and newspapers all endow historiographic metafiction with “culturally significant intertexts” (Hutcheon 1989, 133). These novels not only explore the literary qualities and expose the ontological status of fiction of a text, they also explore the parallels between writing literature and historiography. The novels thus posit both fiction and history as acts of construction that reinvent reality and the past (Butter 2011, 626). Plots are often centred on characters openly striving to capture or deal with the past, such as historians, detectives, or archivists. In the case of the fiction studied in this thesis, the figures are a reporter (in *Coloratura*) and novelist and historian (in *The Bronze Age*). Often the plot unfolds on two different levels, in a fictional present where the characters try to make sense of the past, and in the fictional past that these historians or investigators are studying (Butter 2011, 626).

Historiographic metafiction exposes the textuality of the past as reflected through the discourse of history by highlighting its own intertextuality (Butter 2011, 627). The exposure of this textuality of history and fiction is subversive of the epistemological claims to ‘truth’ of empiricist history:

“The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction enacts, in a way, the views of certain contemporary historiographers: it offers a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces — be they literary or historical.” (Hutcheon 1989, 125)

Critics such as Colavincenzo and Fludernik simply see what Hutcheon calls ‘historiographic metafiction’ as the late twentieth-century postmodern version of historical fiction (Colavincenzo 2003, 46 & Fludernik 1994, 93). I find Hutcheon’s terminology useful however because it emphasises the self-reflexive

nature of some postmodern historical fiction, especially in the case of this thesis, the work of Li Er and Wang Xiaobo. Onega also notes how the term combines the parodic, self-reflexivity of metafiction with the historical element and a joy of storytelling to create plots and characters using realism-enhancing techniques similar to classic realism (Onega 1995, 7).

To conclude this section on postmodern fiction and its interaction with history, an opposing view of the relationship between history and fiction will be given. Monika Fludernik believes there are important differences between history and fiction that are not necessarily discernable on the textual plane, but on the levels of production and reception (Fludernik 1994, 82). Fludernik admits that both fiction and history have to deal with the tensions between a real and imagined past, but from complementary points of view (Fludernik 1994, 89). She considers history as describing human interaction in terms of the institutional and economic, whereas fiction depicts the typically human according to an individual's relations with others. Thus Fludernik believes fiction comes closer to evoking a feeling of being in the world for the reader. She sees historical evidence as valid in differentiating the historical narrative from the fictional one.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the concepts which form the critical framework for the thesis. The conclusion will summarise how the different theories discussed above will be used in each of the case studies. Theoretical debates in the field of historiography have been included to show how concepts of history in the West in the late twentieth century have developed; this complements the discussions of history in premodern and modern China in the previous two chapters. The postmodern critique of history will support the argument that the authors of New Historical Fiction in the case studies are using fiction to write about the past using methods that the postmodern theorists are suggesting that historians use when writing history. In other words, the authors of New Historical Fiction are already writing the kind of 'history' that the postmodern theorists of history are advocating. For example, the multiplicity of histories identified by critics such as

Jenkins and Munslow provides a space for ‘new’ histories to appear. These new histories are the strands of narrative that are either suppressed or not followed for the sake of a coherent, single narrative that professes objectivity. If it is possible to use fiction to write history, then it follows that history and historiography would be seriously undermined as forms of ‘objective’ knowledge.

In the first case study on Chen Zhongshi’s *White Deer Plain*, ‘mythistory’ will be used as an analytic concept to show that Chen Zhongshi’s method of capturing the past through the myths and stories of folk culture constitutes the most modern form of potential ‘history’ writing. While *White Deer Plain* is obviously fictional, the aforementioned method it uses for capturing the past could conceivably be used by future historians as a means of incorporating myth and story into a historical narrative. The use of myth in the recounting of the Chinese revolution in *White Deer Plain* shows the need for a recovery of meaning in Chinese culture, particularly as the official CCP historical narrative does not provide this:

“They [myths] become significant precisely in moments when common traditional meanings of life and history have become indeterminate, as in wars or revolutions, and their social utility is to sustain the structural tradition of society by some dramatic re-activation of its original motivations.” (Mali 2003, 5)

This strengthens the argument that New Historical Fiction with its fusion of Chinese folk culture and tradition, and theory from the West could play a role in the construction of a new identity for the post-socialist Mainland Chinese.

In the second case study on Liu Zhenyun’s *Hometown’s Chrysanthemums*, Jenkins’ (1991, 66) point regarding the multiplicity of histories destabilising the past and fracturing it to allow new histories to be ‘made in the cracks’ will be used to frame the analysis of the four parts of the novel as constituting individual ‘histories’ that can be read in any order. These four fragments of the Chinese twentieth century are told from the perspective of extreme sarcasm and irony, deflating the moral legitimacy of the Chinese revolution. Bakhtin’s concept of

heteroglossia will be used to analyse the varieties of speech present in the novel, while his concept of the carnival will be used to discuss the theatricality of specific scenes.

In the third case study on Li Er's *Coloratura*, postmodern theories of history will be used to show how the novel does not settle on one 'version' of history but allow several different versions to run alongside each other creating a complexity that otherwise would be suppressed for the sake of clarity. Theory on intertextuality and heteroglossia will support examples from the novel of different texts existing in tension, competing for the reader's attention, and showing again the impossibility of viewing history as a single, monologic narrative of the past.

In the fourth case study on Wang Xiaobo's *Modern Times Trilogy*, as well as postmodern theories of history, Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia, polyphony and carnival will be engaged to analyse the complexity of Wang's narrative, and its resistance to categorisation and its subversive qualities. Wang Xiaobo's preoccupation with the human body in all its grotesque forms and perversity will be read using Bakhtin's conception of the 'lower body stratum' in his theory of the carnival. The theory on the subgenre of 'historiographic metafiction', identified by Linda Hutcheon, will serve to make the argument that Wang Xiaobo should be considered a writer of New Historical Fiction.

This chapter has discussed theories in the fields of both history and fiction to provide a conceptual framework for the thesis. The theories used in the case studies are mostly postmodern in conception, and together argue that the discourse of history contains high levels of fictionality, bringing it epistemologically very close to fiction itself. As Hutcheon notes, both history and fiction are narratives that try to impose meaning on life:

"All of these issues — subjectivity, intertextuality, reference, ideology — underlie the problematized relations between history and fiction in postmodernism. But many theorists today have pointed to narrative as the one

concern that envelops all of these, for the process of narrativization has come to be seen as a central form of human comprehension, of imposition of meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events.” (Hutcheon 1989, 121)

Analysis of all the case studies will show that these authors have made some progress in the construction of a new, more complex identity through their fiction, but that these attempts only represent the beginning of the process:

“The issue of subject/subjectivity and the question of identity are only beginning to be formulated by Chinese writers.” (Lingchei Letty Chen 2006, 35).

This shows however that identity has not had a thorough examination and is only tentative in this fiction, as it is still in the process of being constructed.

Section II of the thesis will present the first two case studies that address the status of revolution as a lens for viewing twentieth century Chinese history. The first chapter of this next section focuses on *White Deer Plain* by Chen Zhongshi.

## **Section II – ‘De-revolutionising’ twentieth-century Chinese history**

### **Chapter 4 – *White Deer Plain***

This chapter will analyse Chen Zhongshi’s 陈忠实 award-winning novel published in 1993 *White Deer Plain* (*Bailuyuan* 白鹿原) and discuss its role in the effort played by novelists to offer an alternative reading of twentieth-century Chinese history. In *White Deer Plain*, Chen Zhongshi provides a rewriting of CCP history by writing a novel of historical and cultural poetics that ‘de-revolutionises’ history. After an introduction to the author’s other works, a summary of Chinese critical opinion of *White Deer Plain* will be given. Since an important theme in the novel is the historical decline of Confucianism in China, and its possible contemporary revival, the politics of Confucianism re-emerging as a discourse in contemporary China will be sketched. Three sections will follow on the main themes that the novel uses to provide an alternative reading of twentieth-century Chinese history, namely tradition, a history of the land, and folk culture.

#### **4.1 Chen Zhongshi and *White Deer Plain***

Chen Zhongshi was born in 1942 in Xi’an. He joined the Chinese Writers’ Association (*Zhongguo zuojia xiehui* 中国作家协会) in 1979, and is currently the Chairman of the Writers’ Association of Shaanxi province. Chen is a member of the CCP, and has held positions in local government cultural organisations.<sup>34</sup> The subversive elements of *White Deer Plain* are all the more interesting in view of Chen’s position within the CCP.

Some of Chen’s works before he wrote *White Deer Plain* will now be discussed.<sup>35</sup> *The Old Woman from Shaanxi* (*Bangzi laotai* 梆子老太), a medium-length novel published in 1984, recounts the tragedy of a woman forced to do men’s work, a woman who can’t have children, who is ugly, and with whom no

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<sup>34</sup> Please see bibliography: ‘People’s Government of Shaanxi Province’.

<sup>35</sup> The works cited are all contained in Chen Zhongshi 1996 in the bibliography.

one sympathises. Chen Yong (1998, 7) notes that most tragic figures in *White Deer Plain* are women. *Zhenzhu* 珍珠, a short story published in 1981, is about a girl whose dreams are shattered by the Cultural Revolution because she refuses to criticise her teacher and marry the right person. Another work by Chen Zhongshi is *Early Summer* (*Chuxia* 初夏), a medium-length novel published in 1984, that tells the story of a diverse cast of characters in a production team in the early Reform and Opening Up period in a Chinese village.

*White Deer Plain* tells the story of a village in northern China from just before the 1911 Revolution until the early years of the People's Republic. The story is centred around the two clans of the village, the Bai 白 clan and Lu 鹿 clan, both giving their surnames to the name of the plain. The symbolism of their clan names matching the name of the plain shows the depth of their associations with the land on which they live. The plain was named the White Deer Plain of Righteousness and Benevolence (*Renyi Bailuyuan* 仁义白鹿原) after the efforts by the doctor Mr Leng and Mr Zhu mediated a land dispute that once broke out between the two clans. The story follows the vicissitudes of the two clans through the outbreak of revolution and war, including death and personal tragedy. The young characters such as Heiwa rebel against traditional values and leave the plain, only to return not only to the place of their roots, but to readopt the traditional values that they rejected.

*White Deer Plain* won the Mao Dun prize for literature in 1996 and received high critical acclaim. Critics consider the main theme of the novel to be Confucianism during the twentieth century, from its criticism in the early twentieth century through to its rehabilitation and reaffirmation in the late twentieth century. Xie Chengcai (2006, 115) cites *White Deer Plain* as the most representative work of historical novels treating Confucian culture during the period. Xie sees the novel as affirming, criticising, rebelling against, and finally reconfirming Confucianism (2006, 116). Another critic notes ambivalence in Chen Zhongshi's attitude to Confucian traditions in the novel, both lamenting their decay and also praising their demise (Ji Fangfang 2005, 164). Whereas



Zhang Mingwu (2006, 69) considers the novel as an affirmation of the continuing vitality of Confucian values.

In their final judgements on the novel, critics have identified both limitations and important original contributions: Chen Jinhai (in Wang Xiaoming 1994, 25) sees the inclusion of a multitude of discourses as creating a chaotic mixture in the novel, and views the main problem with the novel as its failure to provide a consistent philosophy of history, portraying contradicting views. Whereas Zhang Dongxu (2007, 88) says that in *White Deer Plain*, Chen Zhongshi has pioneered a new way of reflecting the history of a nation through culture. This chapter will address these last two points and consider their validity.

#### **4.2 Background to traditional culture and Confucianism**

In China traditional culture was composed of a complex mix of folk traditions, philosophies and the philosophical and religious systems of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism (known as the ‘three doctrines’):

“In the traditional and social and religious life in China, there seems to be a recognised division of labour between the three doctrines. Confucianism was expected to provide the moral principles for social and political life, while Daoism and Buddhism were to sanction Confucian morality and deal with psychological and spiritual issues. This labour division played a key role in maintaining the balance between them and contributed to the co-existence and mutual acceptance that existed in all the three doctrines.” (Xinzhong Yao 2000, 224)

Although villagers in traditional rural China were influenced by all three systems of thought and belief, they also generally believed in supernatural forces and beings that moulded their world view. Villagers thought that by mastering these supernatural forces and aligning them with an individual’s will they would be able to achieve success in life. The astrological forces present at birth were an important factor in the kind of ‘luck’ one could expect to enjoy. Further

influence of supernatural forces could be achieved through the control of positive *fengshui* 风水, an energy called ‘wind and water’ that pulsated through the land. The ancestral cult was another important part of life in rural China (Potter & Potter 1990, 23), whereby family ancestors would be worshipped daily in lineage ancestral halls. The ancestral cult was informed by the ideas about family in Confucianism.

Confucianism in White Deer Plain refers specifically to the social system based on the unit of the family and the relationships within that. The importance of the Confucian conception of the family in Chinese culture can be summarised in the following way:

“Confucians believe that a sense of eternity can be obtained through the continuity of the family in which each generation is treated as a necessary link in the family chain and every life is considered a contribution to the huge enterprise that was initiated by the ancestors and continued by their descendants.

Confucians taught that through the performance of their duties in the family, the young would obtain a sense of moral responsibility, the elderly gain respect, the dead live in the hearts of their descendants and the newborn be given a mission. In these ways an individual would last as long as his family lasted, and would acquire a sense of eternity in the midst of temporal life.” (Xinzhong Yao 2000, 204)

The folk culture of symbols, values and language used to construct reality by the inhabitants of the village on Bailuyuan are taken from the thought systems and culture that surround them. These various strands of traditional culture and value systems are therefore as valid in reconstructing the past as an official historical narrative, and as such are exploited in various ways by Chen Zhongshi in *White Deer Plain*. The concept of mythistory will be used to analyse the inclusion of myth and traditional culture.

One way in which both critics and novelists, including Chen Zhongshi, have sought to re-create a culture that is particularly ‘Chinese’ is therefore to re-

examine Confucianism, the mainstream ideology that had dominated Chinese culture for two millennia.<sup>36</sup> Below, I shall provide a brief context of Confucianism in the first half of the twentieth century in China, and the renewed interest in Confucianism in post-Mao China.

#### 4.2.1 The changing fortunes of Confucianism (1900–1949)

Until the Chinese republic was established in 1912, Confucianism remained the dominant value-system in education and society in early twentieth-century China. The 1906 ‘Aims of Education’ stated that Confucius should be ‘worshipped’ and ‘heterodox doctrines’ such as Western liberal democracy were to be resisted, meaning that any viewpoint that contradicted Confucianism was not permitted in schools or in society generally, (Zheng Yuan 2001, 202). Once the republic was established in 1912, Confucianism lost and regained its status as state orthodoxy several times over the following decades until 1949. These constant changes gave Confucianism a contradictory, complex status, as shall be seen below in the analysis of *White Deer Plain*. During the early years of the republic, Western democratic and liberal thought was able to spread through schools and some parts of society (Zheng Yuan 2001, 204). This period did not last long however as Yuan Shikai 袁世凯 (1859–1916) restored Confucianism to its former position of state orthodoxy to support his position as president and his programme of conservative reform. The Ministry of Education stipulated in June 1914 that Confucianism should be the ‘guiding ideology of textbooks on moral self-cultivation and in the textbooks for teaching Chinese in elementary and secondary schools’ (Zheng Yuan 2001, 204). The May Fourth Movement of 1919 made more educated people aware of the political uses made of Confucianism in the past and present. From the late 1920s onwards, Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 (1887–1975) rehabilitated Confucianism to form part of the theoretical basis of the Three Principles of the People (*Sanmin zhuyi* 三民主义), the philosophy developed by Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙 (1866–1925) and subsequently used by the Nationalist government, once again becoming official orthodoxy.

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<sup>36</sup> I am not suggesting here that the mainstream of Chinese culture was a monolithic form of Confucianism, just that the hierarchical family system was the predominant social structure and that values were made from that base.

Zheng Yuan (2001, 209) summarises the reason for Confucianism constantly regaining its position as state orthodoxy thus:

“The decree [issued by Chiang Kai-shek in 1930] specifically stated that ‘a student devote himself/herself exclusively to studies, cultivate the mind, and follow the ancient instruction that “[a noble man] does not consider things outside [his] position.”’ It was no coincidence that the Qing court, Yuan Shikai, and Chiang Kai-shek all cited this same saying from Confucius’ *Analects*. Their purpose in advocating Confucianism was simply to command the people’s obedience: to be loyal to the ruler, to work hard to increase the country’s wealth, but not to consider political affairs.”

Even during the Japanese occupation, Confucianism was advocated in schools to reinforce obedience (Zheng Yuan 2001, 212).

#### 4.2.2 Confucianism in 1990s China

Proponents of Confucianism have attempted to reconstitute ‘cultural Chineseness’ in order to see China once again as an advanced traditional and modern nation. Yingjie Guo argues that this undermines “the legitimacy of the Chinese Party-state as ‘a people’s democratic dictatorship,’” (Yingjie Guo 2004, 72). This, if true, is a very strong position to take against the CCP in a state that still does not tolerate open challenges to its rule. The debate in the 1990s on tradition and modernity has been taking place again between New Confucianism, Marxism and Chinese liberalism. Marxists are keen to use elements of Confucianism to help their reconstruction of Chinese identity, whereas New Confucianists seek to distance themselves completely from China’s Marxist past, seeing it as irrelevant and unhelpful. Party leaders have shown their willingness in public to allow the re-emergence of Confucianism as an ideology<sup>37</sup>. Yingjie

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<sup>37</sup> Yingjie Guo mentions the official celebration in 1994 of the 2545<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Confucius’ birth as an example of the change in attitude of the CCP towards Confucius:

“[Vice-premier] Gu Mu’s keynote speech, made in Jiang Zemin’s presence, left the audience with no doubt at all about the change of heart towards Confucius by the CCP leadership. Instead of condemning Confucianism as ‘feudalistic’ and ‘reactionary’, as the Communists had done previously, he claimed Chinese culture as quintessentially Confucian and presented Confucianism as enlightened and progressive.” (Yingjie Guo 2004, 74).

Guo argues the reason for the revival is linked to the emergence of the market economy and a focus on East Asian economic development (Yingjie Guo 2004, 74). Jing Wang analyses the role and complicity of the CCP in the revival of Confucianism from the late 1980s onwards. She argues that the CCP sought to endorse and even promote the re-evaluations of Confucianism during the Cultural Debates because of its status as a Chinese system of thought that might resist the influx of ideas and theories from the West. Jing Wang views the internal cultural politics of the CCP that accompanied the official support for the re-emergence of Confucianism as ‘unambiguously domineering without much liberatory potential’. (Jing Wang 1996, 68) This was because the Confucian revival stressed the hierarchy of social structure of subjugation of its citizens to one leader, in this case the CCP, reinforcing its mandate to rule. Therefore any perceived break from Maoist-Marxism to re-adopt the traditional ideology of Confucianism was not necessarily going to lead to a more pluralistic society.

Marxists realise that as a philosophical system Confucianism is largely incompatible with Marxism. They are of course aware that elements of it can be expediently used to support the Party-state, such as loyalty to the ruler of the country and filial piety. Jing Wang argues that the contradiction implied by the CCP declaring allegiance with both tradition and modernisation:

“reveal[s] not only the nature of the expedient measures required for its political survival, but more importantly, suggest[s] that tradition is by no means immune to the regimen of instrumental reason whenever it plays into the hands of political authorities.” (Jing Wang 1996, 70)

Far from allowing the resurrection of an officially discredited ideology to be easy, Marxists remind the New Confucianists that the Confucian discourse and project are illegal according to the PRC constitution. This highlights the complexity of ideological struggle in China from the 1980s onwards. While the freedoms of the post-Mao era can certainly not be denied when compared to previous decades, it does not mean that the old guard of Marxists are prepared to surrender their

ideological monopoly easily. Fang Keli 方克立 (b. 1938), a Marxist Confucianist, writes:

“To take a New Confucian stand conscientiously is to adhere to idealism (cultural determinism, moralism, abstract humanism, etc.), to oppose historical materialism and dialectical materialism, and to negate Marxism.” (quoted in Yingjie Guo 2004, 75).

New Confucianists argue that China has lost its spiritual and cultural heritage through the foreign incursion of Marxism. An important element of the New Confucian challenge to Marxism is the subversion of historical materialism and the idea of class struggle. It will be shown below that *White Deer Plain* achieves this subversion on several levels and is thus a prime example of a work of fiction operating within this greater movement to discard the revolutionary legacy and inaugurate a revitalised form of Confucianism.

#### **4.3 Cultural continuity and gradual change: anti-revolution**

This section will discuss traditional culture and the Confucian system of social and moral values in the village as a critique of revolution in *White Deer Plain*. Within this, the erosion of traditional Chinese culture and the family system will be addressed, followed by an analysis of modernisation and change. It will be argued that historical change is understood as occurring gradually in a non-uniform, contradictory way.

The central historical line from which all others in the novel radiate is that of the Confucian family system of social organisation and moral values. The gradual dissolution of the traditional system is traced in the novel. Indeed, the novel portrays the modernisation of Chinese culture and society as it drifts away from Confucianism and traditional culture. This process is not portrayed through the linear process of revolution, but rather as a contradictory, complex process operating at the innermost level of individual and collective consciousness.

Chen Zhongshi has an ambivalent attitude towards Confucianism. On the one hand he acknowledges its erosion, and sees this as inevitable. On the other hand he writes about the positive side of Confucianism, affirming it as a modern value system. This culture has evolved over thousands of years and has both official and popular or folk manifestations. He identifies the large gap between Confucian culture and current reality in the novel (Zhang Dongxu 2007, 90). Brutal natural and man-made disasters in recent Chinese history have meant that people have rejected humane, Confucian values in order to protect themselves. This obliquely implies that man-made disasters, such as revolution and civil war, have led to a rejection of humane values among the Chinese people.

The village in the novel is called the White Deer Plain of Benevolence and Righteousness (*Renyi Bailuyuan* 仁义白鹿原), and this appellation serves as a motif throughout the novel. There is a sign with this name above the village hall, where children are taught to recite the Confucian classics. The meaning of the two characters *ren* 仁 and *yi* 义 is never considered or probed; they represent the traditional system. This is further reinforced by the village representative of Confucian values Mr Zhu using the characters in each of his sons' names, with one called Huairen 怀仁 and the other called Huaiyi 怀义.

Heiwa 黑娃 is one of the tragic, marginalised figures of the novel; he changes status and identity several times in the novel. He is a bandit, and joins the Nationalists, then the Communists, and finally he returns to traditional culture as a Confucian. His constant change of heart is due to his lack of self-confidence, similar to Lu Xun's Ah Q. After the 1911 Revolution, Heiwa brings a gang of men to take the sign down and smash it, which can be read as symbolic of the destruction brought on the traditional family system. So far, there is nothing subversive about such a representation as destroying objects that represented the old value system was in line with the revolutionary discourse of rejecting tradition and the old society. It is also reminiscent of *The True Story of Ah Q* (Lu Xun 1972) where the revolutionaries destroy an imperial tablet with the words 'Long Live the Emperor' inscribed on it, showing the absurdity of history and

revolution. The historical narrative breaks away from orthodoxy however when it is shown in the novel that the process of change from Confucianism through revolution to a Marxist-Maoist ideology has taken many turns and contradictions. For example, Heiwa is seen as quite ‘modern’ to be able to choose his own wife independently of his family. He is unsure whether the comments of fellow villagers about this are complementary and derogatory:

“I can’t tell whether you’re talking rubbish or making fun of me...”  
(Chen Zhongshi 2003, 145).

Thus the attitudes towards both traditional culture and new revolutionary ideas are shown to be ambiguous, that the process was not abrupt or neat. People both clung to old ideas and embraced new ideas at the same time, and later changed from one to another. The complexity of the narrative is evident from the multitude of different values co-existing and colliding. The destruction of the sign with the name of the village during the 1911 revolution brings the narrative close to a traditional socialist realist novel. Chen Zhongshi is providing a critique of the use of binary opposites for an understanding of this period of history. He includes the conventional response of the revolution engaged in literally smashing the vestiges of traditional culture. He also shows the reality that despite the physical destruction of the symbols of a culture, the culture itself still lives in the minds of the people and resurfaces even after new symbols have been forced into the place of the old. The cultural, folk narrative thus challenges but does not expel the socialist narrative from the novel.

The new revolutionary thought has not reached the village even after the May Fourth Movement of 1919, showing the uneven spread of the Chinese revolution. The village is described by the novel’s hero and clan chief Bai Jiaxuan 白嘉轩 as too feudal to change. Bai Jiaxuan is a protector of Confucian values. When the village organises a public meeting, they have a music group with gongs and drums to accompany the meeting. The narrative compares this group with a local legend from the Tang Dynasty. The Tang legend tells of an emperor out hunting hearing the beating of a drum. He liked the sound so much he made it part of



family worship ceremonies. The narrative gaze is shifted backwards, not forwards in the direction that the revolution is trying to propel society, showing how old this tradition is. Historical allusions are used to interpret new social structures and institutions, which has been common practice in Chinese culture for thousands of years. This brings out the tension between tradition and change in the novel, and is a strong argument for gradual cultural change of a social system as opposed to revolution. This creates an ambiguity as to the response of people to the new society after the 1911 revolution. It shows the uneven, contradictory development rather than the linear path towards a future fuelled by progress that the official discourse espouses. It also recognises that the revolution would have taken time to form in people's consciousness. Heiwa is aware that the revolutionaries will need time to gain people's trust:

“We don't people to be afraid of us. The crux of the issue is whether the masses trust us or not.” (Chen Zhongshi 1993, 179)

These examples show the doubt caused by the revolution, and the local discourse being disrupted.

When Mr Zhu needs to add an entry to the village gazette after the revolution, he does not know the terms of reference within which to express the event. In the past he would have added eight characters in classical Chinese that would have succinctly summarised the situation. Now a new form of discourse requires more ideological padding and context, which Mr Zhu is not able to provide. The revolution has not yet embedded its thought structures in the village and people are not yet conversant with the new language necessary for public discourse. The chapter (13) ends with a question about how to record information in the new discourse:

“Deep water, thick earth, unsophisticated folk customs. Mr Zhu thought, can I put this kind of conclusion into the new version of the county gazette?” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 188).

An important indicator of the decline of the Confucian family system is seen in the deaths of Mr Zhu and Heiwa. Mr Zhu worked for others throughout his life, and represents the Confucian ideal of selflessness and service (Yan Min 1997, 50). Since Mr Zhu is considered as the embodiment of the virtues of Confucianism, it is worth analysing the circumstances surrounding his death. When he is found dead his sons carry him into the classroom where he habitually taught students the Confucian classics and values. His soul is left to find peace there before he is finally buried. His death can thus be read as the final demise of Confucian values in the village, and generally in society as a whole. When his body is laid out people notice how thin he had become:

“His legs were skinny too, just skin over the bones, showing how people really can get that thin, his flesh and blood had already completely dissolved.” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 531).

This could be read metaphorically to show the slow wasting away of Confucianism as a value system in the village. It gradually lost strength and power until it was defeated. Mr Zhu’s legacy lives on after his death, suggesting a space for the rehabilitation and revival of Confucian family and moral values. This legacy will be analysed in more depth in section 4.5 on folk culture.

#### 4.3.1 Modernisation and change

Heiwa’s return to the village demonstrates that the revolution and new society was superficial and external to ordinary people in the Chinese countryside. Heiwa’s re-adoption of Confucian values and ancestor worship reinforces this. His physical return to the village, the mythical heartland of the pre-revolution Chinese Confucian family social system, is symbolic of a personal return to fundamental, inherent values. The language used in the passage describing his return to the village of White Deer Plain and his worshipping of the ancestors show that traditional social structures are still in place and in the psyche of people, even if no longer in official public organs: “this clan this village 本祖本村”. Once back in the village, the physical instinct within him to bow his body before the graves of his ancestors returns (Chen Zhongshi 1993, 493).

New words and concepts are coming into the consciousness of the Chinese people, including the villagers of White Deer Plain. An example of this is the term ‘revolution’ (*geming* 革命), which villagers assume means a change of ruler, as has happened throughout Chinese history with the rise and fall of dynasties. These new concepts have to sit on centuries of traditional thought and history. Bai Jiaxuan worries about how the village will continue to live without an emperor on the throne:

“With no more Emperor, how are we going to get through the days ahead?” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 68).

This worry about the future marks the beginning of the long, difficult process of grafting a new political system and ideology onto a system that has been evolving for hundreds of years. The thought behind this seemingly innocuous question runs very deep and arises out of the traditions of Chinese culture. People defined themselves in society by their different relationships with other people, whether in the family or community. This whole system of identity was only given meaning by the Emperor placing himself at the top of social hierarchy and legitimising cultural identity. The Emperor was also responsible as the guardian of all cultural knowledge such as the classic Confucian texts and histories that were at the core of all Chinese culture. Once the Emperor and two thousand years of social and cultural history were gone, the individual Chinese villager of a certain age would have felt that their cultural core had been ripped out. This is also symbolic of the beginning of the erosion of history as a privileged discourse in Chinese culture.

The concept of the new word ‘democracy’ (*minzhu* 民主) is not grasped at all, along with other words to describe politics and history in the new ideology:

“Bai Jiaxuan still didn’t get it, what ‘democracy’, what ‘feudalism’, what ‘politics’, what ‘people’ [*min* 民], what ‘opinions’ [*yijian* 意见], the more these new words piled up the more confused he became.” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 96)

The revolution has not properly reached the village at this early stage in the novel, and the process of adjustment in receiving a new vocabulary for a new ideology is shown in its infancy. The idea that a revolution liberated people's minds is shown to be false. Although done in a crude way, the series of bewildered questions demonstrates that the new concepts and categories will first be understood in the context of old patterns of thought and systems. At first they will not be imbued with much meaning at all, but rather be new approximations of old terms. This shows how this change in twentieth-century Chinese society changed organically, building on the past rather than discarding it, in a similar way to cultural patterns of change in the past. It also shows how ideology needs the building blocks of language to construct a system of meaning.

#### **4.4 History of people and the land**

This section will discuss the history of the land as one of the many alternatives to CCP official historiography that Chen Zhongshi provides. Such a portrayal of history can be read as critical of the narrative of the Communist agrarian revolution in which the peasants rebel against the landlords and create a revolution that transforms society. It will be seen that in *White Deer Plain* it is the land that controls history and people, rather than people using land as their tool to change history and realise social revolution.

The Marxist-Maoist ideology that underpins the Chinese revolution is based on the base of production of society and the struggle between different classes of society over resources and capital gained from that base. Therefore in a large country with a predominantly agrarian economy such as China, Mao Zedong identified the importance of peasant rebellions throughout Chinese history as the main progressive force. It was therefore natural for the Communists to continue to focus on agrarian revolution as a priority after winning the civil war against the Nationalists. Marxism-Maoism also stresses the importance of agency and forward progress directing history. Such an ideology allows easy justification of large-scale human intervention to mould nature for the benefit of the

development of society. To portray nature and the land as having an independent historical narrative, as well as being closely related to the anthropological narrative of the inhabitants of the village, therefore constitutes an important attempt to belittle and overturn the importance of the agrarian revolution. independent narrative of the land controls the memory and historical narrative of the village. If natural disasters such as floods occur, historical memory is wiped and the process of history interrupted. This point will be discussed in more detail below. An analysis of how Chen Zhongshi achieves this will be undertaken in this section.

Providing a narrative that recounts the history of the land allows both a close-up version of micro-history as well as a removed, disinterested perspective, away from the affairs of history and the nation. The land and soil the villagers live on has historical memory, and is called an ‘ancient land’ (*gulaο tudi* 古老土地, Chen Zhongshi 2003, 42). There are recurrent phrases throughout the novel of ‘this piece of land’ (*zhe kuai tudi* 这块土地). This is the background to the anthropological history of the people that is portrayed in the novel. The novel calls for an anthropological history of the village (and by extension the Chinese nation), arguing that all sources need to be included, such as the oft-cited ‘local conditions and social customs’ (*fengtu renqing* 风土人情, Chen Zhongshi 2003, 337) referring to people and their environment. Such a stance implicitly condemns viewing history in terms of one linear process accounting for the present state of China.

The history of the land is seen as cyclical in the novel, especially in the rural context of the village. The leitmotif of variations on the phrase ‘life returned to normal’ recurs throughout the novel.<sup>38</sup> This can be read as an argument against historicity and the ideology of Maoist-Marxist historiography. Whatever traumas occur, whether in the internal affairs of the village, or through external historical events, the natural and old rhythms of life are eventually restored. The portrayal of the cycle of drought and disease rejects historicity. The government changes

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<sup>38</sup> See Chen Zhongshi 2003: 91, 159, 183, 198, 226, 241, 521. As the range in page numbers crudely shows, the phrase recurs throughout the whole novel.

names of places and institutions in White Deer Plain on a ‘certain morning’, (*mou tian zaochen* 某天早晨). The exact recording of a date, the conventional means of writing history, is rejected in favour of a mode of historiography that implies that every day is the same with no past, present or future. The implication here is that the actual day or event did not hold great significance in the chain of events experienced in the village – it was just like any other. Near the end of the novel, after the revolutions of the first half of the twentieth century have taken place, and processes of change are already occurring, the scene of a new chapter is still set with the climatic cycle and agricultural calendar (*nongli* 农历):

“At the fourth month of the agricultural calendar...we entered the early summer period.” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 556)

On the same page, however, one day completely changes the history of the village. Thus it can be seen that two layers of narration are intersecting and co-existing. One is eternal, cyclical and agricultural, fixed to the rhythms of the natural world. The other is told through a detailed, modern dating system, and is extreme and revolutionary:

“On 12<sup>th</sup> May 1949 of the Common Era...changed the history of the plain for ever.” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 556)

A narrative that contains many different kinds of discourse all operating under their own terms, directions and speeds constitutes a strong challenge to an all-encompassing, grossly simplifying master narrative.

The Chinese land, through its geology and geography, affects history and subjects the people and the events they experience to its own laws and rhythms. At one point in the history of the village, a flood washes away the village and clan temple, which not only physically obliterates the physical setting of the village, but also interrupts the village history. Natural disasters erase memory. Thus the land becomes a text on which history is inscribed or destroyed according to the whims of nature. Human beings are thus powerless to influence

this form of narrative. They can only take measures against it, but ultimately do not positively direct history through progress to a more advanced future. The history of the land therefore takes precedence over the history of the people and has the power to ‘stop’ human history in its tracks. The histories and fates of people in the village and by extension the Chinese people are therefore intimately linked to the land. The old people in the village are fond of saying that the village will never have more than two hundred households, or a population larger than a thousand people:

“...if it [the population] went over a thousand, some natural disaster would bring it down again.” (Chen Zhongshi 1993, 51)

All peoples are ultimately subject to this important narrative of nature, but in China the land was also traditionally important for the beliefs of geomancy. The flow of energy from the land needs to be properly channelled so that life may prosper. The importance of the historical narrative of the land and physical environment can be seen in the erasure of memory when natural disasters occur. The canvas is wiped clean for new events and histories to occur, making nature a cleansing force of history. It is cyclical, inevitable and inescapable. It is clear from the narrative that the revolution has caused imbalance in the land, and by implication has upset the lives of the people who are sustained by that land.

The history of the land and people fuse into one grotesque narrative in the tradition of burying miscarried children in cow pens where eventually their flesh and bones merge with the cow excrement and turn into manure. This social practice would be condemned in official historiography but is presented from a neutral position in the novel. Indeed Bai Jiaxuan’s four children all die in exactly the same way before they reach their seventh day. This is explained by saying they are not of the human world:

“They are clearly not from the world of the living.” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 62)

Fate seems to take over here and the family seems locked into this cycle of life and death of children who are ultimately made into manure. This could be seen as a metaphor for historical processes taking place on the land of China, or by extension to the whole surface of the world. Beings are born and are returned to the soil to regenerate other life forms such as crops which sustain human life further. The Buddhist cycle of *samsara* is a similar cycle of life and death through which all beings have to pass until they extinguish their karmic debt and achieve nirvana. Bai's children come from the spirit world (*yinshi* 阴世) for a short period into the world of the living (*yangshi* 阳世) and vanish back into the spirit world again. Bai and the other villagers are powerless to stop this cycle of life and death. The author has exaggerated the dimensions of the cycle here by giving Bai four children who all die in the same way, and by shortening the cycle of life and death to less than seven days. This is a natural law that no government, revolution, or ideology or 'history' can overturn. Indeed the novelist presents this natural law in more physical detail by comparing Bai's wife getting pregnant and giving birth almost continuously as similar to the daily bodily functions of excreting waste (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 63).

An historical explanation is given for the food eaten in the village that existed during the Qin Dynasty (221 BC–206 BC), saying that it was first eaten during an ancient war, and is still being eaten during the war of the present day. This is an obvious way for the author to express a lack of interest in the politics of the contemporary conflict, but also reflects the universal reality of war as survival and conflict and not specific to certain national historical conditions.

“It originated from a war in the distant past, and is still suitable for war today.” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 558).

This attempt at de-historicising a contemporary event goes against the use of war and righteous victory in the formation of a nationalist history in the service of political authorities. Also the mention of food as a means of understanding history again anchors the gaze in the cultural sphere. The type of food that a people eat is a strong indication of their culture from the way it is prepared and



consumed. In a rural setting in the early twentieth century it is also closely linked the land on which the people live since they would only have been able to eat what was produced locally in season. The use of this historical allusion to food culture of the Qin dynasty, around two thousand years ago can be read as emphasising the cultural continuity that has occurred in a place like White Deer Plain, and by implication will continue to exert its influence by sheer historical accumulation.

Revolution is portrayed in the novel as an awkward outsider in the history of the village land, something that intrudes as something fake and forced. A brutally imposed revolution that causes societal disaster is worse than natural disasters, because at least the latter are limited in time and cyclical: man-made disaster has no end (Yan Min 1997, 51). This seemingly veiled assertion is quite radical since it judges the revolution in a very negative light. It certainly argues against viewing twentieth-century Chinese history only through the lens of revolution. The novel does not deny that the revolution happened, but contests the previous monopoly of discourse of the Communist political ideology that privileged revolution as the driving force for change and progress in history.

Before they have seen or met a single communist, people in White Deer Plain consider communists as more frightening than the white wolf that symbolised bad omens. Such clear identification of the Communists with the personification of evil is a clear criticism of the revolution and the role of Communists in the new society. The whole novel argues the case that an accurate representation of all the stories of twentieth-century China acknowledges that change is gradual and organic, not abrupt and instant. By replacing the master narrative or revolutionary narrative, the novel shows that other narratives can tell the story just as accurately and just as effectively. Such a negative portrayal of the revolution in White Deer Plain is a strong call to reject revolution as a lens through which to view the twentieth century in China. It points again to the idea of gradual cultural change over revolution.

A master narrative of History with a capital 'h' is rejected in favour of local histories of the land that are not restricted to a chronological list of events. For example, village history unchecked by the central authorities is taught as a subject. Towards the end of the novel, Bai Jiaxuan teaches the children about the number of dead in the famines, and the number of young men who did not return from fighting. This is done in quite explosive terms, with rhetorical questions repeated, almost shouted:

“Was the famine bad?... How many of our village young left but never came back?” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 512).

Although if projected on to a national scale it could feed into a nationalistic view of history, it is clear that in this context the fate of people living on the land of White Deer Plain is equally valid as a story of the past as a master narrative of national history told to justify current power structures. The question of nationalism and nostalgia will be addressed in the conclusion of this chapter.

Local knowledge is important since meaning does not only come from a master narrative. The holistic view of local experience and knowledge can be usefully employed in the narrating of the history of a place. This can then be reintegrated within the national history as an organic, representative whole. ‘Little’ traditions are important in defining ‘great’ traditions. This knowledge can be seen in the form of orality, folk stories, supernatural events as narrating events beyond the village experience. Local history and traditions tell their stories, and change over time in different ways from other parts of country. Changes from the outside also affect the village in different ways.

One can read Chen Zhongshi’s reaffirmation of traditional culture as a critique of the CCP’s political movements from the 1950s onwards as going against nature and against Chinese reality, and doing great harm. It is significant that it is ‘Chinese’ nature against which the revolution impinges. I would argue that ‘nature’ here might also be read as ‘culture’ since the two have been shown to be interlinked in the Chinese village. The novel thus makes a veiled but powerful

criticism against the political movements started by the Communists in the twentieth century as harming Chinese culture deeply, what it means to be 'Chinese'. This is a very strong statement to make as it turns the Marxist critique of imperialism on its head to argue that as a Western, foreign import Marxism itself has done great damage to the indigenous culture of China and in so doing has denied its own 'natural' path of development.

#### 4.5 Folk Culture

Folk culture is used as both cultural content in the histories of the people being told as well as in the narrative structure in the novel. The use of culturally specific folk culture is a powerful way of overturning a modern, foreign ideology such as Marxism that does not countenance religion or superstition. The use of Chinese specific folk cultural symbols and meaning subverts the totalising philosophy of history and development such as Marxist-Maoism. It is the 'Chineseness' of the folk culture that stresses the notion of gradual cultural change over revolution and is a strong refutation of the Marxist-Maoist reading of history.

The whole novel is framed in terms of cultural references from local northern Shaanxi folk culture, that can be seen to represent 'Chinese' folk culture generally as the region is considered to be the 'cradle' of Chinese civilisation. Thus the setting of the novel is unmistakably 'Chinese' in culture and reference<sup>39</sup>. As will be shown below, the 'white deer' contains deep cultural references in the Chinese context. At its most basic, local level of meaning it represents the Confucian cultural values of society structured through the family, and values of study and agriculture, some of the basic values of pre-modern Chinese civilisation. Chen Zhongshi is explicit in his pursuit of a cultural history of China's twentieth century in *White Deer Plain* by his introduction to the theme of the white deer early in the novel:

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<sup>39</sup> I am aware that the all-encompassing term 'Chinese' is problematic in that it includes a multitude of peoples, cultures and traditions of the geographical area spreading outwards from the Central Plains. Questions of identity and Han ethnicity are not analysed in this thesis as they require an anthropological analysis that extends beyond the range of my topic.

“In very, very ancient times (legends don’t seem to worry about exact dates), a white deer appeared on this plain, with a white coat, white legs, and white hooves, and antlers that gleamed bright white. The white deer jumped and leaped across the plain from east to west as if both running and flying, suddenly disappearing. The village found that just after the deer had floated past the corn shoots suddenly sprouted very fast, the feeble yellow shoots turned into dark, smooth green shoots, filling the whole plain and rivers with green corn shoots.” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 22-3).

The playful tone at the beginning of this quotation shows Chen’s disregard for conventional historical language and structures for narrating the past. The full imaginative powers inherent in legend are exploited to the full in this example, requiring the reader of the novel to frame the rest of his or her reading with this point of reference in mind. Rational historical explanations and narratives are thus abandoned at this early stage in the novel. The reader will have to construct a cultural meaning from the story from these symbols as a reference point. The landscape and cultural norms of the local area have been established and the rest of the story rests on this. After this quotation, the narrator continues by explaining that after the white deer had run through the plain, all the pests and insects were found dead, including a wolf and fox. This shows that the white deer is an integrated part of the agricultural landscape of traditional Chinese culture that emphasises the harmony of man and nature for the survival of man. Buddhist notions of compassion to all sentient beings cannot dominate the cultural landscape in this novel, even though popular folk religion in China was heavily influenced by Buddhism. One of the characters that represents traditional Chinese culture, Bai Jiaxuan, remembers that he heard his parents and grandmother telling slightly different versions of the legend of the white deer as one of the first things he could understand of adult conversation as a child. This shows the depth of the cultural significance of local legend to life in the Chinese countryside.

The symbol of the white deer occurs in both the title of the novel and the name of the village. In Chinese culture, the symbol of the white deer stands for a spirit and culture that combines the traditional ideal of ‘ploughing, reading and continuing the family line’ (*geng du chuan jia* 耕读传家), which is the highest ideal in the countryside. At the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) when society is unstable and peasants are facing starvation, the white deer evokes the hope of a good harvest, as well as a more spiritual yearning. The imagery and symbolism of the novel are an important part of its overall structure.

The symbol of the deer is used as one of purity and peace; in Chinese culture it also indicates longevity. One hundred deer in a painting symbolise good fortune a hundred times over since the character for ‘deer’ in Chinese, *lu* 鹿, has the same pronunciation as a character meaning ‘official salary’ and by extension good fortune, *lu* 禄 (Welch 2008, 117). Chang Jing also points out that the deer can represent the emperor’s position (Chang Jing 2005, 68). Although Chen Zhongshi creates a mythical fictional universe in *White Deer Plain* in which to probe Chinese tradition and modern history, the author found out that east of Xi’an there is indeed a plain called ‘White Deer Plain’ where people speak of a legend of a white deer (Chang Jing 2005, 69).

The setting for the novel in the village on *White Deer Plain* is dominated by the symbolism of the white deer. Critics have spoken of the ‘white deer culture’ as part of the local culture, where the white deer symbolises peace, happiness and prosperity (Chang Jing 2005, 68). The white deer appears to the people of the village when something terrible happens to give them strength to deal with change or tragedy. For example, whenever people die in the novel, such as Bai Ling or Mr Zhu, the white deer appears.

Near the end of the novel Bai Jiaxuan comes to see Mr Zhu early one frosty morning when the ground is covered in snow to tell him about a dream he has just had. The fact he comes to see him in spite of the conditions indicates that the dream is very important to Bai Jiaxuan and his understanding of what he is experiencing. He does not usually remember his dreams, and so is especially

touched by the dream. He dreamt of the white deer from local legend, except that in his dream the deer was weeping profusely as if deeply aggrieved. The deer turned to him and cried out ‘Dad’, and Bai answered but then woke up. His wife had exactly the same dream, which convinced him that his daughter Bai Ling had died that night. Mr Zhu said he had also dreamed about the white deer, but could not make it out clearly. The narrative uses this technique of communicating to the reader the grief caused in wartime as families are destroyed and people killed. After this section, the narrator explains that nearly twenty years later, a group of officials find Bai Jiaxuan in the village and inform him that his daughter is dead. This immediate juxtaposition of the folk and historical narrative, with nearly twenty years chronological gap, shows the effectiveness of folk culture for providing a way of understanding and psychologically coping with personal tragedy:

“Mr Zhu’s accurate and surreptitious prediction unfortunately turned out to be true, Bai Ling really did meet the end of her days that night.

One spring nearly twenty years after that bizarre dream, five officials in four-pocket uniform and one soldier in grey uniform came to the White Deer village, asking after Bai Ling’s family....saying ‘Comrade Bai Ling died a hero’s death....’” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 451).

Myth enables the nation as a people to withdraw from the historicity of events they are experiencing and enter a spiritual dimension where the meaning and universality of their experiences lies. China is different from the case of modern Latin America where myth is used to write a history for a ‘young’ continent (in the sense of its modern, post-Columbus and postcolonial identity) that has been denied its own history and is now finding its voice after centuries of colonialism.<sup>40</sup> China has had its own sophisticated and developed historiography for over two millennia. The use of myth in *White Deer Plain* to recount historical events or changes is intended to remove such events from the power structures of

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<sup>40</sup> Critics have compared *Bailuyuan* to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, see Liu Chengyou 1994.

traditional historiography and place them in a context that allows the author to explore their universality and meaning to those experiencing them.

When the emperor is deposed and the new Chinese republic has recently been inaugurated, the white wolf appears on the plain. This is seen as a sign that a significant change has occurred. Mr Leng says he has heard that the white wolf has been spotted and views this as completely ‘natural’. He says that whatever people say, the emperor is still a dragon. The folk culture of understanding the land and village through the symbol of the white deer is extended to a higher level of cultural significance whereby the Emperor, or the ultimate authority and representative of Chinese culture is described in similar folk terms using another symbol of an animal, the dragon. The ‘whatever people say’ is significant since it implies a realisation that change is occurring to meaning and the political discourse. This change is still understood in terms of a mythological natural landscape:

“‘Brother, I guess you still don’t know, the white wolf has appeared on the plain!’ ‘I know. I heard everyone talking about it on my way back,’ Mr Leng said, ‘whatever people say, the emperor is still a dragon! Once the dragon returns to the sky, all the beasts and creepy crawlies come out from the mountain, that’s natural.’” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 68-9)

Thus local folk culture is used as a way of expressing and understanding major political changes. The fact that Mr Leng says this is ‘natural’ belies a confidence in the natural world to regulate human affairs, that is linked to the ideal of Confucian cosmology of man and nature existing in harmony as one. It is natural for this ‘piece of land’, China, where the laws of culture and nature operate in this way. Once the symbol that holds Chinese culture together, the Emperor dragon, returns to the heavens, the underside and bad elements of Chinese culture are released, the ‘beasts and creepy crawlies’. This can be read as either a purging of the darker side of human nature, or as a full release of this dark side similar to the Pandora’s box story. The latter reading supports the sense

throughout the novel that the revolution and civil war brought out the negative side of humanity in China and went against the nature of the people.

The overthrowing of the foreign Qing dynasty as the last bastion of feudal rule in China figures highly in CCP historiography. *White Deer Plain*'s status as a novel however means that it can recreate the past as it unfolds in the story, although the meaning of the events is not understood by the characters in the novel. The *White Deer Plain* is described as the 'hot plate' of history (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 229) and the Chinese nation. People are tossed and turned by the events, but do not benefit from wider perspective and totalising view of the historian even several decades apart from the events. This kind of narration recreates events and experiences and through mimesis tries to simulate them as they happen. Each person maintains his or her own understanding of events. This does not descend into subjective anarchy, but rather allows people to use other cultural systems to interpret and understand what is happening around them, without privileging one particular way of understanding. Therefore meaning structures that the Communists would dismiss as 'feudal superstition' that fail to appreciate the significance of the 1911 revolution for the liberation of the masses are allowed their own space to hold meaning.

Indeed the overthrow of the emperor is acknowledged as causing fear in the village, but the narrative focus for the rest of the long paragraph that ensues is centred on a more serious threat to the village. Rather than being concerned about a change in political power that has happened repeatedly in Chinese history, the villagers are concerned about an incident where the white wolf has broken into the pig sty and cattle pen several times and severed the pigs' throats, killing them without a sound. This happened when the pens were firmly locked, and so no one knows how the wolf managed this through tightly locked gates. After this, the villagers had to burn corn outside the villages at night to scare the wolf away. The space and importance in the narrative given to this supernatural incident show that people still used myth and the supernatural as a belief system and means for explaining strange events. Thus the big change of the fall of the



Qing dynasty as recorded in history at the time was insignificant to the villagers who continued with their own narrative of events relevant to their daily lives:

“The change in government in the town only incited a bit of confusion and fear, whereas the white wolf on the plain created a direct threat.” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 69)

Fortune telling is victorious over later Communist purges of tradition in the names of Lin Biao 林彪 (1907-1971) and Confucius. A group of Red Guards wanted to dig up the graves of some people who represented the traditions of the past, and selected Mr Zhu as an ideal candidate. They found after digging however that Mr Zhu had not been buried in a coffin, but had been cremated:

“Oh! Before he died, Mr Zhu predicted that he would be exhumed, so he didn’t have a coffin, or use a brick tomb.” (Chen Zhongshi 2003, 537).

The wisdom of traditional values to read trends in society is shown in this crude example of traditional folk culture triumphing over the new revolutionary Communist values. Folk culture resounds from beyond the tomb as Mr Zhu, the personification of both Confucian and folk culture in the novel, successfully predicts what will happen and so decides not to be buried in a coffin. This parodies the new revolutionary values showing them to be shallow and weak, and unable simply to sweep away values that people have cultivated over centuries. It is ironic that the very ‘dead’ values that the revolution is trying to overthrow are not so ‘dead’ that they cannot still challenge and subvert it. Historical progress through revolution is satirised as one old man whose world view is dominated by both folk tradition (fortune-telling) and Confucian values manages to resist the operations of the revolutionary campaign to disinter bodies of those who personified Confucianism.

The tradition in Chinese culture<sup>41</sup> of saying the correct thing aloud at the correct time is expressed towards the end of the novel as an important part of being a ‘man’, and by extension behaving as a decent human being:

“A real man is able to grasp what must be said aloud, and that which must not be said aloud.” (Chen Zhongshi 1993, 449).

I do not think this is hugely significant to a reading of *White Deer Plain*, but as a cultural right of expression it will recur in Section III in later case studies that examine the discourse of history. It is significant that it occurs as a part of the morals of folk culture, and making the general point that history records the ‘correct’ version of the past.

The ancient tradition of divination is echoed in the tossing of coins to decide whether to join the Nationalists or Communists. Such randomness goes against a directional version of history of progress towards a greater goal. According to critics, (Zhang Yi et al 1995, 29), the tossing of the coin shows how chance and tragedy are inextricably linked, dramatising the randomness of life, including making the wrong political choice. It also shows that the revolution was random and poorly planned, rather than directing the culture intelligently in a direction suitable for the circumstances of the country at the time.

Symbols are used in the novel to encompass a whole range of feelings and experiences. The symbol of the hot plate is used to depict the land of China as one of continuous blood and strife (Zhang Yi et al 1995, 29). It is also a symbol of Chinese history as such a narrative. The novel retells the story of this strife and tumultuous changes as they happened, but the range and diversity of the narrative itself presents a challenge to history as a master discourse at a more subtle level. Thus the form of the novel itself is the most powerful, ‘invisible’ symbol that represents the experience of the past without calling it ‘history’. Its detachment from the discourse of history allows the novelist greater freedom to

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<sup>41</sup> This is not of course exclusive to Chinese culture; all cultures have ‘taboo’ subjects that are not easily spoken about. Chinese culture is known for favouring indirect expression through suggestion.

include a greater range of experiences in the narrative. The novel appears to be trying to move away from the ‘hot plate’ of history towards a subtler, more sensitive understanding of the human condition. Indeed, the symbol of the ‘hot plate’ can be extended to all human history, and not just China. In the space left by a lack of official history of the period, the novel fills the gap. The democratic structures of the novel allow the narrator to present events from a variety of possibilities. A novel cannot have one narrative line from beginning to end. The conflicts between values and characters in the novel bind the story and take it away from History as a master narrative that is clearly trying to communicate an ideological position through its recounting of events. In *White Deer Plain*, there is no overt moral viewpoint raised. This stands in direct contrast to more overtly propagandist official versions of revolutionary history.

#### 4.6 Conclusion

Yiyan Wang argues in her study on the writer Jia Pingwa 贾平凹 (b. 1952) that *White Deer Plain* provides the CCP with legitimacy by reinforcing its myth that Shaanxi province is the native place for the modern Chinese nation (Yiyan Wang 2006, 20). She concludes that:

“*White Deer Plain* proves to be the most articulate of the CCP’s ideal for the native place of the Chinese nation.” (Yiyan Wang 2006, 20).

Yiyan Wang implies that Chen Zhongshi won the 1995 Mao Dun Prize for Fiction and was appointed the Chairman of the Shaanxi Writers Association because of his articulation of the CCP’s legitimacy gained from linking the land to the national spirit. She provides no evidence or analysis for her claim however, and as this chapter has shown, *White Deer Plain* undermines the CCP’s legitimacy in a serious way by its portrayal of the first half of twentieth-century history. In this novel the revolution and Communist victory is portrayed as a negative event, worse than any natural disaster that has rocked the village of Bailuyuan. Indeed in a review of a literary history of Chinese literature

(Diefenbach 2004) Martin Winter highlights Diefenbach's appraisal of *White Deer Plain* in the following way:

“The ‘provocation’ of a ‘very unglorious civil war’ in Chen Zhongshi’s *Bailu Yuan*...stand[s] out very forcefully, ...and it is quite surprising that such novels have been canonized as contemporary classics and republished several times, including in 2004.” (Winter 2004, 326)

This interpretation fits with my own reading of the novel as profoundly anti-revolution and anti-communist, showing that *White Deer Plain* does not support the legitimacy of the CCP. I agree, however, with Yiyan Wang's assertion that Chen Zhongshi won the officially-sponsored prestigious literary prize as he had struck a chord that pleased the CCP, as is discussed below.

The importance of Chen Zhongshi's *White Deer Plain* to New Historical Fiction is therefore his denial of the significance of revolution in the history of twentieth-century China by its removal and discrediting from the narrative. The themes of family and folk history present in *White Deer Plain* can also be found in early works of New Historical Fiction, as discussed in section 1.5.1. For example, *Red Sorghum* and *Spiritual Banner* both present family stories over several generations against the backdrop of war and revolution. In a similar way to *White Deer Plain*, another work of New Historical Fiction, *Silver City*, tells the stories of two clans through China's twentieth century, portraying the CCP in a negative light. Chen's subversion of CCP historiography by writing Confucian and folk culture back into a prominent position in that history constitutes an important contribution to a central theme of New Historical Fiction, evident in works such as *Red Sorghum*. This leitmotif in New Historical Fiction uses stories of individuals and families as ways of narrating the twentieth century in China. Another theme in New Historical Fiction is the depiction of marginalised figures such as bandits and outlaws. In *White Deer Plain*, figures such as Heiwa represent the de-marginalisation of bandit figures that has occurred in New Historical Fiction. Similar marginalised characters can be found in other novels

such as Sui Baopu in *Ancient Boat*, Yu Zhan'ao in *Red Sorghum*, to name two examples.

Chen Zhongshi shows the contradictions and changes in Chinese society in this period, people pursuing revolution, then returning to traditional values. Different stories compete with each other, and the narrative is composed of many ways of experiencing and recording time, resulting in a complex narrative resonating with the qualities of Bakhtinian heteroglossia and polyphony. Chen's narrative also provides a model for historians to integrate myth into history more fully, enabling a new form of 'mythistory' to emerge. Furthermore, the novel makes a powerful critique by suggesting that the official history of the revolution in fact went deeply against Chinese culture and therefore caused great damage to the people, land and culture of China. The novel in particular offers an analysis of the traditional Confucian family system of morals and social structures, and expresses history in terms of folk culture and symbols such as the 'white deer'.

I would argue that such an extensive and positive treatment of Confucianism feeds into the larger project in Chinese society in the 1990s to rehabilitate the Confucian past as a 'Chinese' cultural heritage that can be used as an inspiration for contemporary China to construct a new hybrid identity composed of traditional and contemporary culture. It represents a shift in ideology from pure politics and economics to a softer cultural approach. The previously unwelcome old values of the last one hundred years of Chinese history are being called on to provide depth and substance to a society that has lost faith in ideology and authority. The novel is particularly complex since on the one hand it undermines a part of the CCP's legitimacy in its deconstruction and demythologisation of the revolution. On the other hand it helps construct a new conservative cultural ideology that could feed into cultural nationalism. In doing this it has fully exploited its powers as a work of literature, allowing the polyphony of different voices and languages be felt beneath the text's surface. I would therefore argue that its greatest achievement lies in its ability to use the 'weapon' of fiction to undermine a political ideology and discourse while creating the illusion of being a story of a village told in the style of realist fiction.

It seems that elements in the government such as the cultural conservatives are approving of the novel. The rehabilitation of a culturally conservative ideology such as Confucianism feeds well into the project of nationalism emphasising the ‘Chineseness’ of value systems. The novel is also subversive of the official version of the centrality of revolution in twentieth-century Chinese history. It could be that other elements in the government tacitly approve the preparation of the ideological ground for rejecting the revolutionary legacy in Chinese history. The leadership is not currently able or willing to do this publicly, but is possibly tolerant of such ideas being circulated in fiction so they gain some public airing. They may be considering disconnecting the revolutionary legacy from political legitimacy by focusing instead on their ability to deal with real, present issues facing the Chinese people.

The next chapter will discuss *Hometown's Chrysanthemums* by Liu Zhenyun, showing another version of fiction ‘de-revolutionising’ twentieth-century Chinese history through its treatment of land reform and morality. The theme of folk culture will continue to be analysed, focusing on orality and introducing the carnivalesque in history.

## **Chapter 5 - Hometown's Chrysanthemums**

This chapter will discuss the novel *Hometown's Chrysanthemums* (*Guxiang tianxia huanghua* 故乡天下黄花) by Liu Zhenyun 刘震云, first published in 1991,<sup>42</sup> and hereafter abbreviated to *Hometown*. The novel recounts four historical periods in the twentieth century as experienced in a village in north China. The portrayal of historical events in the novel is heavily influenced by the power struggles of individual characters and their families. The extent of the subversion of the revolution and the Maoist-Marxist historiographical discourse will be examined through an analysis of the following themes in the novel: land reform and revolution, folk culture and orality, and the interweaving of discourses.

### **5.1 Liu Zhenyun and *Hometown's Chrysanthemums***

Liu Zhenyun's fiction has been described by critics as full of humour, and as deconstructing 'Chinese life', ultimately providing it with new meaning (Zheng Chongxuan 2000, 67). His early fiction has been described as belonging to the New Realist Movement (*Xin xie shi xiaoshuo* 新写实小说) including works such as *The Corridors of Power* (*Danwei* 单位), *The Official* (*Guanren* 官人), *Chicken Feathers all over the Ground* (*Yi di ji mao* 一地鸡毛). Critic Zheng Chongxuan (2000, 68) describes this early fiction as depicting a world full of putrid smells, decay, corruption, paralysis, bereft of feeling or meaning, and with no possibility of salvation. Liu Zhenyun depicts such a world in a light tone, full of humour. According to Zheng Chongxuan (2000, 68) Liu uses this same humour when he turns his attention to 'historical games' in works such as *Hometown's Chrysanthemums*, *Remembering 1942* (*Wengu 1942* 温故一九四二), and *The Legend of Hometown Togetherness* (*Guxiang xiangchu liuchuan* 故乡相处流传).

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<sup>42</sup> Quotations from the novel are from the second edition (2004), so will cited as Liu Zhenyun 2004. The English translation of the title of the novel is by Jian Xu (2006, 248). I would like to thank Michel Hockx for alerting me to Jian Xu's article.

The first section of *Hometown* describes the struggle for the position of Head of the village between the Sun and Li family, including the murder of the current village head Lao Xi. The second section tells of the plotting and killing surrounding the Japanese invasion. The third section moves to the civil war and struggle between the Nationalists and Communists. The fourth section sees both factions in the village acting violently towards each other under the banner of Mao Zedong.

## **5.2 Land reform and the revolution**

This section will discuss the theme of land reform within the broader context of revolution as portrayed in *Hometown*. The importance of land reform in the early stages of the implementation of the Chinese revolution post-1949 will be examined. The various ways in which Liu Zhenyun undermines the historical importance of land reform in the 1950s will be discussed, and a brief comparison with an earlier novel about land reform will be made. These cumulate to present a picture of the post-1949 revolution as random, corrupt, violent, inhumane, and against Chinese culture.

Land reform was one of the first major changes made by the Chinese Communist Party after it came to power in 1949. Party administrators were sent to the villages, chose leaders among the peasants, and organised struggle sessions. The peasants' reclaiming the land from the 'feudal' landlords was one of the major victories and measures of success of the communist revolution in an agrarian country like China. The smashing of the feudal landlord class and the freeing of peasant productivity was essential to the establishment of people's communes and rural movements that followed, and was a pivotal part of the Communist victory (Huang Yong 2006, 81). The theme of history acting on the 'land' of a community on which they depend for their livelihood is common to both *White Deer Plain* and *Hometown*. In *White Deer Plain* land is part of the symbolic identity of the village of Bailuyuan, whereas in *Hometown* it is another commodity over which the villagers exercise their power and fight.



### 5.2.1 Comparison of *Hometown* with *Hurricane*

According to critics, Liu Zhenyun's *Hometown* succeeded in directly destroying and subverting the 'huge significance' of the official reading of land reform in Chinese history (Huang Yong 2006: 81). This official reading is exemplified in previous novels, but most particularly in Zhou Libo's 周立波 (1908-1979) *Hurricane* (*Baofeng zhouyu* 暴风骤雨, 1948).

Land reform can be described in definite, concrete stages such as organising officials to go to the countryside and ask about the peasants' suffering, and organise meetings, including celebration and conclusion meetings. *Hurricane* describes land reform in stages in this way, thus providing a 'complete' account of the value of land reform. In this account, the ideology accompanying land reform gradually seeps into the consciousness of the peasants as the different stages of the movement are implemented, culminating in its becoming commonplace thought in the countryside. It expresses the revolutionary logic of one victory following another, presenting a sense of inevitability in the course of history. The historiography behind such a reading is that of directional Maoist-Marxist history that reaches a defined end goal through progress.

By contrast, *Hometown* strives to break out of this rigid structure of events and adds strong elements of randomness into the narrative. Randomness and inevitability contend with each other in this narrative. Land reform occurs as a result of a stream of random events, which is a more real reflection of history. A clear example of this is the peaceful land reform that is later followed by a second more violent land reform. The fact that the landlords still face death in the end shows that randomness is not completely free from the inevitability of history. The result is the same, but the path to the point of arrival is different. The inevitability oppresses and confines the randomness. The struggle between the inevitable and the random in the novel at least overcomes linear history and a particular order of events. This interpretation of events highlights the complexity of the past and the driving forces in history. It easily perforates the façade of a

coherent historical narrative by combining inevitability and randomness to varying degrees (Huang Yong 2006).

The portrayal of characters is another indicator of stance towards land reform and the revolution. In earlier fiction about the revolution, characters were usually depicted as political types or classes. For instance, in *Hurricane* the landlord Han Laoliu is a classic example of the evil landlord. He behaves unlawfully and grabs land and public facilities from other people. By contrast landlord Li in *Hometown* is a more nuanced character. He supports land reform and the redistribution of land. Han Laoliu got his land and wealth by helping the Japanese invaders and by oppressing the poor. The Li family obtained theirs more gradually first by acquiring salt fields, then selling salt. Moreover Li is cordial and humane to those beneath him in social status, where Han Laoliu treats his inferiors as tools. In earlier novels about land reform, people's relationships are determined by class. Being poor is considered desirable as it means the poor can pitch themselves against the evil landlord class. In *Hometown* however, the author rejects binary opposites and explores diversity in human relationships. In *Hurricane*, the opening already reaches towards the future, suggesting a narrative rooted in history, with the past already a painful memory. In *Hometown* the opening is more neutral, and is not overtly at a moment before or after land reform.

In *Hometown* the rhythms of the narrative function to provide a sense of 'déjà-vu' (He Zhiyun 1991, 24), as is discussed below in section 5.3 on the circularity of history. The novel clearly shows that human nature is more or less the same in all people. Class, social position, or wealth do not make a great deal of difference.

### 5.2.2 'Revolution' means riches

A powerful way in which Liu Zhenyun undermines the moral legitimacy of the revolution as a positive, liberating force in twentieth-century history is by turning the values of the revolution upside down and portraying it as a chance for the villagers to grab wealth and power. The ideals of freedom and equality for all

espoused by the revolution are thus grossly parodied. The revolution is equated with another opportunity for individual or family gain rather than solidarity and equal distribution of wealth.

When the revolution has just come to the village, the different characters understand that it is the new ideology against which personal worth and power can be measured. At the beginning of section 3 of the novel, the District Party Head explains to Lao Jia the reasons why some people are rich and others poor. These questions are presented in simple, patronising language to Lao Jia, but the implication here is that the socio-economic analysis behind these arguments is just as weak and open to refutation. Lao Jia thinks he's been treated badly and exploited, and therefore happily agrees to join the revolution, in a way reminiscent of Lu Xun's character Ah Q:

“Lao Jia thought he had been hard done by...and so agreed to join the revolution.” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 133).

Other characters ridicule Lao Jia being chosen to teach the others about the revolution:

“The whole world is changing, and this cretin Lao Jia suddenly becomes somebody, and preaches to us.” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 133).

An example of the cynical manipulation of the revolution can be seen in the struggle sessions. At first the villagers do not understand this process and think it unnecessary. Once they realise however that there is material gain to be had from the process, they do not hesitate to throw themselves headlong into the sessions:

“If we topple another one, don't forget we'll still have to split their stuff, how could we not go for it!” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 167)

An indication of the extent to which the villagers undertake these struggle sessions can be seen in the unexpected fervour with which they carry out the

activity. Disbelief in this fervour is expressed by Li Xiaowu, Li Wenwu's son, as he tells his brother about the series of tragedies that have struck their family after they were branded as 'landlords', including the murder of their father:

"I didn't think they would be so ruthless," (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 177).

The moral legitimacy of the revolution is ridiculed by characters manipulating it as a measure of their own moral status, and by extension position in society. Lu Xiaotu tries to laud his moral superiority over Lao Jia by arguing that he joined the revolution, and by extension had been worthy of recognition and position in society, before the revolution even started. He says that he was a revolutionary by fighting the Japanese and the landlords during the war. This comic vying for power between two morally suspect characters parodies the writing of history from a Marxist-Maoist, revolutionary point of view, especially when the events in question occurred before the awareness of the new ideology to which allegiance promised material benefit and power took hold. The historicity of the revolution is thus denied as any individual can claim to be a revolutionary at any time in history, even from questionable behaviour and claims. The Maoist practice of reading all twentieth-century and pre-modern Chinese history through the Marxist optic is here ridiculed as false.

In the land reform process, the two families take opposite sides in the same village power struggle. The Sun family become Communist Party officials (*ganbu* 干部) and the Li family as former landlords agree to land reallocation. The reactions of the farmers receiving land after the reallocation shows that although they were happy, some of them also felt uncomfortable taking land off other people:

"People were uncomfortable accepting such unexpected wealth dropping out the sky. Some even thought it not proper." (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 135).

Those responsible for dividing the land became confused as to which piece of land belonged to which farmer after the land had been divided. The unease of

people taking the land of others shows that in the village, and Chinese society at large, despite the power struggles and hatred, there was still a feeling of community. The contradiction inherent between such bonds of community that went back generations and the selfish craving for power was too complex for Maoist-Marxist class analysis to accommodate. Characters behaving in radically different ways that their class structure would usually allow in the official discourse (or in fiction supporting that discourse) add to the critical mass that topples the significance and monopoly on meaning to which the official historical discourse aspired.

The opposition of the two families after land reform further strengthens the feeling that there is nothing special about this new change in the political masters (enforced through the civil war and revolution). Indeed the abrupt change in the holders of power from one family to another is reminiscent of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in this context of continual power struggle. In Orwell's novel the oppressed animals rise up and take over the farm only to become as power corrupt and greedy as the people they have replaced. The implication in *Hometown* is similarly that the Sun family will not behave any better than the Li family once they obtain political power. This is a powerful critique of revolution since it undermines the values of equality and justice that upheld it.

Once the land had been divided, people still assured their former landlords that after this political movement had passed, they would return the land to its rightful owner. Unlike orthodox reform novels, this example belies the amoral atmosphere created in this novel. Thus the positive liberating effect of the revolution is mocked as people believe that the change is only temporary. This reflects the traditional belief in Chinese culture that time and history are cyclical and that political power is never permanent.<sup>43</sup> The linearity of history and the power of revolution to direct society towards a new utopian future are denied their power and faith. No sooner had the revolution achieved some initial success in the form of land reform than people's values and thinking are revealed as unchanged beneath. The reallocation of land is presented as awkward and

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<sup>43</sup> This theme is echoed in *White Deer Plain* and is discussed in chapter 4.

unnatural. The value and tradition of land and geomancy are negated by outside directives that have little meaning in the village initially.

Land reform, and by extension the revolution itself, is grotesquely parodied as insufficiently violent in the novel. Lao Jia is criticised for not using more violent means to implement land reform. He reports that the work is done, and is rebuked for being too soft on people. Thus, far from being a correct, natural part of the historical process leading towards a future socialist utopia, land reform is portrayed as being a brutal power struggle. Indeed the revolution itself is portrayed as a cynical power struggle rather than a social movement infused with moral values that will lead to a better future. Characters soon become aware of the ‘benefits’ of revolution and seek to take advantage of the situation:

“From the respect of others, Lao Jia felt that he had been right to go along with the Communists, he could feel the advantages of revolution.” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 140).

Such selfish behaviour goes completely against the ideals of the revolution for equality and social justice. It also demonstrates how in many cases the values of the revolution had to be enforced on people rather than assumed naturally as liberating in themselves. This portrayal of revolution in *Hometown* shows that rather than being the most important turning point in twentieth-century Chinese history it was simply another change in history that sat on centuries of power struggles between families and individuals. The radical hopes of the revolution were dashed as the change in power was cynically manipulated by people who did not care about the larger context of the nation, but only for what scraps of local power they could muster. Although the power they crave is only local, they are satisfied with that level of power since that is what rules their social context.

Another artificial aspect of the revolution that does not work effectively is the movement to incite the memory of the masses to help propagate the revolution as a just cause. The idea of a collective politicised memory is a false one against the

backdrop of power struggles and individual interests. After a struggle session, the people did not feel sufficient natural hatred towards the landlords:

“After a struggle session, people don’t even slightly hate the landlords, but want to listen to the horn, that’s not good enough! It proves our work was too superficial. The leaders of our poor peasant league must keep going down to rouse the masses, to arouse the memory of the masses.” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 145).

The exhortative verb ‘to arouse’ in the phrase ‘arouse the memory of the masses’ illustrates the requirement of inciting a process that is not naturally there or felt necessary by the local population. This further expresses the artificiality of revolution for people in the village.

### 5.2.3 Brutality of revolution

Amidst the land reform process, Lao Li is asked to remove his family’s ancestral grave from the land (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 136-7). The villagers do not see the need for this, and the demand is perceived as unnecessary and cruel. The ancestral grave is an image of the old order, the Confucian family values, and is rooted firmly in the physical landscape, and so by implication in the moral and cultural landscape of the villagers. In Chinese culture ancestor worship was an important part of everyday life and acquired part of the status of religion in other societies.<sup>44</sup> Coupled with this was the belief in the sacred flow of energy in the universe in the land that sustained people and communities. The process of removing arbitrarily a symbol of tradition that provides sustenance and meaning to a group of people is portrayed as brutal.

The revolution and the land reform that accompanies it are finally discredited in a violent incident that ends with powerful imagery of condemnation. After people in the village discover that former landlord Lao Li has a new baby in his family and that they are living more comfortably than the poor villagers, their anger rises. Lao Li is attacked by a mob of people and dies by accident in the

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<sup>44</sup> For a useful discussion of ancestor worship in Chinese culture, please see Chin & Freedman 1970: 164.

violence. The popular sentiment is that he deserves his fate; Lao Fan tries to rationalise Lao Li's death in the following way:

“...just consider this as the people repressing him!” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 165)

Liu Zhenyun is showing here that mob justice has taken over in the village. Within the discourse of official historiography such moral values could have been permitted since they crushed the evil forces that the revolution was supposed to be overthrowing. In this novel however the aftermath of Lao Li's death suggests a different interpretation of such values endorsed by the revolution. Lao Li is buried insufficiently deep in the ground so that his corpse is disinterred by dogs. The shallow burial in itself can be read as a criticism of the appropriateness of revolutionary values as a force for good in society. The dogs eat one of Lao Li's legs and make a bloody mess all over the snow. This creates a powerful visual image of the violence undertaken in the name of the revolution.

<sup>45</sup> The violence of this incident fits into the narrative of power struggles and violence that occurred before and after the revolution, and without the political change incited by the revolution. Indeed, the violence continues in the gruesome example of Lu Xiaotu murdering Lao Fan and his wife by beheading, and bringing their heads back:

“Out of another bag rolled two bloody fleshy human heads, scaring everyone. They all went up to have a look at the heads, saw one was male one female: the man was the worker Lao Fan, the woman couldn't be recognised.” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 190)

Liu Zhenyun creates a grotesque image of the revolution. In doing so he is not saying that the revolution was particularly violent or bad. Indeed it is no worse than any other previous historical change or power contest in the village. The important point is that he is demythologising the revolution as a force of good

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<sup>45</sup> I would not, however, read the whiteness of the snow as symbolising any purity in the village before the revolution was inaugurated.



against evil and the dominant lens through which to read twentieth-century Chinese history. When Lu Xiaotu is asked why he has killed Lao Fan and his wife, his reply reveals the warped logic that the revolution has brought out in people:

“Although Zhao Ciwei and Lai Heshang should also be killed, I hated this idiot the most! It was he who did not let me join the revolution early on, which led me to this state today! As he wouldn’t let me be a revolutionary, I have revolutionised his life!”<sup>46</sup> (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 190)

The motivation for his action is not that Lao Fan and his wife have committed crimes against the workers or peasants, but that he ‘hates’ them because Lao Fan would not allow him to join the revolution, which he perceived as withholding power and gain from him. In the narration of land reform in the novel, the narrator stays silent and does not offer any moral judgements or commentary. This is a striking difference from earlier fiction treating the revolution where an explicit moral commentary on characters’ behaviour would be offered. The silence and lack of moral verdict emphasise the amoral context in this novel expressed by Liu Zhenyun.

Thus to question the validity of that victory is to question the foundation of the Chinese revolution and the legitimacy on which the CCP’s moral right to rule rests.

### 5.3 Folk Culture

New Historical Fiction has sought to erode the power of the master narrative of history, which includes removing any international element to history writing. History is no longer read from a universal, theoretical point of view that can be applied to all societies throughout the world and across time, as Maoist-Marxism

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<sup>46</sup> The original Chinese for this phrase is “Wo jiu xian ba ta de ming gei ge le 我就先把他的命给革了! (so I took his life first).” A similar disrespectful pun on the word revolution (*geming* 革命) occurs in *White Deer Plain* (Chen Zhongshi 2003: 67), and in *The True Story of Ah Q* (*A Q Zheng Zhuan* 阿Q正传, Lu Xun 1972)

prescribes. As a logical extension of that idea, the history of the nation was also discredited. Such a large, complex society as China could not be reduced to a linear, 'national' record and explanation of events. Such macro-history, whether told from an international or national viewpoint, implies a moral judgement and context in which the history is written. In *Hometown*, the narrative is drawn purely from the local, and cultural context, and can be read as a view of the past through folk culture, rather than national history.

*Hometown* subverts the official historical narrative by filtering the four historical events or periods into which the novel is divided through the individual experiences and motivations of the characters. Of course folk culture in the countryside in China has always been able to do this. In the past the significance of folk culture to reflect and process important historical events or political changes would have been disregarded. Liu Zhenyun in this novel is arguing that an understanding of political change through the lives of ordinary people that live in their own small society with its own 'histories', 'politics' and mechanisms is as valid and important as any other interpretation or recoding of events. By providing a local, cultural understanding of events, the novel highlights the way in which a linear master narrative of history sits above and simplifies the great multitude of local cultures and stories that come under the necessarily fabricated and artificial category of 'national history'. Thus although the scale of the viewpoint is small and history is only viewed from the point of view of one village and community, the implication of this stance is that there are thousands of communities across China experiencing the same events but in markedly different ways according to their internal logic and circumstances.

By allowing such a micro focus, different discourses and individuals gain a prominence they would never have achieved before. The traditional workings of Chinese society are seen in the positions held by individuals in the village. For example, the relationship between Xu Budai as former landlord and Lu Mazha as former worker retains its historical connotations as the former worker is embarrassed to take the landlord's land and says it is only temporary while the political movement continues. The 'nobody' of the village is now given a voice

and ascribed a much more important role in history that would have been allowed in an official version. Also, individuals are presented as they truly are, reflecting the contradictions and motivations inherent in any political change in a community. The actors of history change from people in high positions to the masses leading ordinary lives. The motivations and driving force behind historical change are exposed in more personal terms. Again, this reveals the artificial nature of conventional history since so many individual, contradictory motivations cannot be included in the master narrative. The backdrop of folk culture in this novel argues strongly that any rejection of idiosyncratic, individual voices in history will ultimately distort the historical record.

An example of folk culture transforming historical reality to fit in with local circumstances is the lack of awareness in the village that the Qing dynasty rulers were Manchus and not Han Chinese. To the villagers the established dynasty was simply the ruling elite under which the villagers knew their position in the social hierarchy, as Sun Maodan says:

“Flat Nose [Ta Bizi] told me that the Qing dynasty were also a foreign lot, that Empress Dowager Cixi was not Han, but didn’t our grandpa shout out ‘long live...’? The point is it depends on who takes the empire in the end! Just you wait, wait until the Japanese have taken the empire, I’ll become an important official, and then you lot will be glad you know me!” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 73).

This shows the complete ignorance and cynicism towards any national, or historical allegiance to values beyond the folk culture of the village. Sun Maodan can only relate politics and history to his own sphere of local power.

As the narrative perspective focuses on the local and individual, objectivity becomes blurred and eventually fades away. The reference points against which events can be measured and understood become personal relationships and dynamics that may go back generations, or several years at least. This is the point at which the folk culture absorbs changes imposed from the outside world. The changes are suddenly only understandable from within the culture of the village

and the society of people who live there. The implications of this are that the constructed narrative meaning that a nation gleans from history is punctuated and ultimately deflated by these local events and communities. Although a nation consists of a shared culture and history, these are merely constructed from the fragments of experience that accumulate in communities in villages, towns and cities. The claims made on History by folk culture in *Hometown* highlight its flawed and artificial nature as a discourse. Indeed it reveals History to be used by the political elite to justify their policies in the present society. Folk culture reflects how events are experienced on the ground and how local codes and values are used to interpret and express them.

Once the folk discourse has blurred objectivity and absorbed any possibility of a national history, historical meaning is lost. The foundations of history as a discipline and as a discourse depend on identifying objective 'facts' and constructing them in a meaningful, logical and chronological sequence to build up a plausible narrative of events. This point is potentially highly subversive since it takes away meaning from history in a culture that has always used history as the prime conveyor and repository of meaning and identity. *Hometown* aims to show that the official historical discourse contains no meaning. The revolution that is now in the past can no longer be used to create form and meaning for the present. From the past through to the present, there is therefore no direction for the future. If all the past is just reflected through subjective accounts that are stories from a group of individuals embedded in their local cultural practices and assumptions, then a single direction forward to the future is impossible. The future is rather more open to these different strands of past experience extending in many different directions simultaneously.

A novel such as *Hometown* shows how past experience may be experienced and recorded in a way that is more meaningful to the individual and community. Thus in one way it could be argued that meaning has been restored to the people concerned rather than lost and destroyed. While meaning may have been restored to individuals, the greater historical meaning is lost. As meaning is rehabilitated to individuals, it is lost to the nation state. Any history writing in the

conventional form now will lose a considerable amount of bearing and meaning as it is clear that it is a simplified version that disregards the complexity of reality.

The geographical and social location that rebels against the official, national historical discourse is the unit of the village in the countryside. This is the natural location for folk culture to be situated and in this sense New Historical Fiction follows closely behind Roots-Seeking fiction in its choice of settings. The location of the village is highly symbolic of the move to writing small histories as opposed to writing history with a capital 'H' as master discourse. Indeed Liu Zhenyun has written a series of 'hometown' novels known as the *guxiang xilie* 故乡系列. The village is historically considered slightly 'freer' than the city in that it is far from the capital, and far from centres of authority. In the Communist revolution, Mao Zedong sought to redress this by appointing members of village communities in 'poor peasant leagues' to implement the revolution and new policies or movements. Therefore it is entirely natural in one sense that a re-writing of revolutionary history should have its locus in a small community in a village. At the same time, it is also highly ironic that the very place from which the revolution was supposed to work, the countryside, is the place that challenges and problematises the recording of its history. The revolution was fought for the poor peasants to liberate them from the evil landlords. As shown in the section on land reform, *Hometown* highlights the contradictions and misunderstandings that took place during such 'historical' movements.

### 5.3.1 Orality

As folk culture constitutes such an important position in the structure of *Hometown*, it is natural that much of the text is composed of dialogue. Thus the history recorded moves between the boundaries of written testimony and oral history, with no long literary passages describing the psychologies of characters. These are rather presented directly to the reader in dialogues that record endless meetings of different groups of characters. Many of these dialogues are filled with naïve exclamations about events and changes occurring around them. The

phrase ‘ruling dynasties come and go’<sup>47</sup> (*gaichao huandai* 改朝换代) appears several times in these dialogues reflecting the way political change was traditionally felt by the ordinary person in the countryside far removed from the political process and the intrigues of top political power in the large urban centres. Many of these dialogues are occasions when characters are scheming about how to advance themselves in a changing or new political climate. They reflect in great colour how certain events are planned and plotted, while showing in lively detail the historical motivations behind their actions and plans. Oral history has always been important to agrarian communities in creating and maintaining a culture and identity. The language used is colloquial, informal and local, which expresses and forms part of the experience itself. The history recounted orally continues to live in the speaker and the expression they choose to use.

An excerpt from early in the third section of the novel at the beginning of land reform and direct rule by the CCP that provides examples of the strong orality present in the novel will be analysed:

“Lao Jia asked Zhao Ciwei:

‘Is the Communist Party good?’

Zhao Ciwei replied:

‘Good!’

Lao Jia asked:

‘How is the Communist Party good?’

Zhao Ciwei replied:

‘Before I would go around bollock-naked begging, now the Communist Party has come and given us stuff to share!’

Lao Jia asked:

‘Are you afraid of landlords?’

Zhao Ciwei said:

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<sup>47</sup> This phrase is echoed in *White Deer Plain*, showing it was a common way of understanding political change in the Chinese countryside.

‘All the land has been shared out, they aren’t landlords any more, why should I be afraid of them?’

Lao Jia felt Zhao Ciwei had spoken the truth, and guffawed loudly.” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 134)

The simplicity and directness of the dialogue shows how the plot and meaning of this novel is driven forward by the humorous subjective opinions of the characters. Zhao Ciwei’s logic is an example of people in the village only caring about material gain or power. The simplicity of the logic is expressed in the colloquial style of the language that does not understand or seem to need Marxist class struggle built into an understanding of events.

The orality in folk culture, and present in this novel, accentuates the fictionality of this account of history. The narrative has a more story-like quality to it and has a lively tone. The tone is markedly different from the cold, objective, academic style that conventional history requires. Fiction is therefore an excellent medium for expressing experiences of past historical events since the writer is completely free to experiment and include a range of tonal registers in the narrative through heteroglossia, especially in the dialogues that support the oral history in the story. This is different to CCP fiction since the sarcastic and parodying tone in *Hometown* deflates any notions of political propaganda. Folk culture is ideal as a discursive heading for recording past experiences or ‘history’ since it encompasses so many genres and styles. While there are elements of traditional disciplines such as history and literature in folk culture, it is not bound by any limits of genre. Experience can be recorded in ways that aim to preserve its rawness and immediacy. The oral, story-like qualities of *Hometown* do much to achieve this effect. The story element in the orality of this novel means that the historical events and experiences are easier for the reader to apprehend. The problem arises when the reader is not sure how far to trust the truth of such accounts. These fictionalised accounts of history are supposed to represent the experiences of individuals that can then be relived by the reader. There is no absolute truth or meaning relating to the past, present and future, but the reader can experience these fragments of the past through the stories and dialogues that

appear in a novel such as *Hometown*. The idea of a fragmentary experience of the past is developed further in chapter 6 in the analysis of *Coloratura*.

The colloquial nature of the dialogue highlights how the range of language available and its use affect the understanding of historical change among the residents of the village:

“In the winter of that year, Yuan Shikai restored the imperial system, and the republic was no longer a republic.” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 21)

The repetition of the word ‘republic’ with no verb in the original Chinese text emphasises its ephemeral status at that time in the village. It was a new word that people did not fully comprehend, and was tossed aside as soon as the republic was overthrown. The repetition of the word in a colloquial sentence with a disrespectful tone shows that new political systems and their vocabulary are initially swallowed by folk culture.

#### **5.4 Voices Clamouring for Power**

One of the strengths of *Hometown* is that it introduces a range of discourses within the narrative fictional framework. While the text is obviously a work of fiction, it contains a range of layers and voices. The text may be called a historical novel since it is divided into four sections that trace different historical events or periods in twentieth-century Chinese history. The experiences of characters surrounding these events are an important part of the novel. The first section is not explicitly about national history however in that it is concerned with a contest to be village head. This beginning sets the scene for the main theme of Liu Zhenyun’s novel, which is that of power struggles between individuals and families in the village. It is against this background that the story is introduced. Characters go to extraordinary lengths to plot and scheme for the coveted position of village head. Indeed, Lao Feng and Lao De even attempt to assassinate Li Laoxi. This attempt is successful in outcome but not in the way intended. Laoxi dies of fright once he realises he is about to be assassinated, so in



one sense he is not murdered by physical intervention. He dies from the intention and motive behind the actions of the others in their struggle for power. Thus the power struggles in the village are shown to be the motivators for action, and although that action itself is thwarted, the intended result remains the same. This incident can be read as a parody of motivation, cause and effect. In the broader context of the novel historical events are understood by the characters only in terms of their own power struggles and position or status within the community. They see political and historical changes nationally merely as opportunities for self-advancement. Presenting political and social change as a power struggle focuses the narrative on the Chinese cultural tradition of coveting official posts. This stems from the bureaucratic system of two millennia where hierarchy is an important social definition, and where position and power to make decisions mean a huge amount to people (Huang Liuhuang 1991, 18).

The range of discourses operating within the text in *Hometown* shows that the dominance of the official revolutionary discourse has been breached. History is not read in terms of one class replacing another, and the Marxist-Maoist historiography by itself is no longer tenable in a novel such as *Hometown*. The range of voices and discourses mean that only diversity of viewpoint is now possible, with no clear indication as to which viewpoint is correct factually or morally. The narrator is silent in the novel and does not make moral judgements on characters as was the usually the case in earlier fiction about the revolution. The orality of the novel means that meaning is less fixed and can be found in the register, tone and style of language used by characters, along with the emotions they express. The large amount of dialogue in the narrative provides a very different texture to the novel, thus disallowing the dominance of one master narrative of official revolutionary history.

The novel's use of multiple voices and discourses releases the grip of revolutionary history on narrative, truth and experience. Just as important however is the lack of a fixed moral code in the fictional universe created by the novel. The lack of morality is obvious in the first section as the village head Laoxi is "murdered". It moves away from personal immorality and criminality to

historical events and movements causing immoral behaviour. It is clear in the novel that people advance themselves by immoral means. People who are morally suspect gain power after the revolution, and continue to abuse their status for personal gain. That such people rise from a lowly status in society serving others to a higher status wielding power over others problematises the success and moral rectitude of the revolution. Also, very importantly, it removes the unquestioned notion of progress from the history of the revolution. An essential part of the revolutionary ideology is moving from a lower state to a higher state of social awareness and putting society on the path of progress towards a better future. Liu Zhenyun is directly parodying ideas of progress as he allows morally degenerate characters to benefit from the revolution and take positions of power over others.

Liu Zhenyun turns a brutal event that is perceived as an important step in liberating the masses during the early revolution after the Communist victory in 1949 into one of carnivalesque farce. The struggle meetings to which ‘capitalist enemies of the people’, such as landowners, were subjected could be considered as class struggle in action, aimed towards liberating the masses. Zhao Ciwei is in charge of organising the meetings. To provide some atmosphere he arranges for musical accompaniment and drum playing during the meeting. The comedy of the thinking behind the event is apparent in Zhao Ciwei’s reasoning for including more people apart from only Li Wenwu:

“Zhao Ciwei said, ‘I’ve been thinking, if we only have Li Wenwu at the struggle session today it’ll be a bit thin, we need to find a couple of others to include!’” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 143).

The farcical scene continues as Zhao Ciwei suggests a dead man, Li Wennaoh, without explaining:

“Lao Fan was shocked: ‘Li Wennaoh? How come I haven’t seen him before? How come this evil tyrant hasn’t been flushed out?’

Zhao Ciwei said: ‘He’s already dead!’

Lao Fan let out his breath: ‘If he’s already dead, how are we going to include him in a struggle session?’

Zhao Ciwei said: ‘He still has two sons, one called Li Qingyang, another called Li Bingyang!’” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 143).

The choice of people to include in this process is based on whether the event will be ‘lively’ enough, as if it is an entertainment venue. The theatrical side of the revolution is thus fully exploited, not as a politically effective tool for motivating social action, but as farcical entertainment. Lao Fan asks Zhao Ciwei to justify their inclusion in the struggle session, apart from as the sons of a landowner. Lao Fan represents a more realistic figure from outside the village. He has experience of running struggle sessions in northeast China that were deemed ‘successful’ because people left them in tears.

Zhao Ciwei justifies his choice of including drums and music in the struggle sessions, in order to create a fun atmosphere, by claiming:

“‘If you’re going to get liberated you may as well do it in style!’” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 144).

The session descends further into farce when Lao Fan suggests Zhao Ciwei incite hatred against the Li family by accusing them of pushing his mother to suicide. Neither Lao Fan nor Zhao Ciwei reckoned on the folk narrative of the local village ‘history’ or ‘common knowledge’ imposing itself into the narrative:

“Zhao Ciwei did as he was told and went straight up on stage to reveal all. Once the trumpet and drum had played a piece, he started to talk, saying on a certain day in a certain month in a certain year, landlord Li Wennao went to his home and upset his mother, forcing her to hang herself. At this point an old man in the audience, Li Shoucheng (also a poor peasant) pointed at Zhao Ciwei saying:

‘Ciwei, all of us old folk here know about this, it wasn’t Li Wennao’s fault, it’s what your mother intended!’

Everyone in the audience laughed. Zhao Ciwei was immediately furious, gesticulating at the old man:

‘Li Shoucheng, screw your mother, it was your mother what had ‘intentions’ with the landlord!’

Ciwei then took out a hand grenade as if he wanted to blow the old man up, scaring the old man so much he attached himself to someone’s crotch.” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 145)

The vulgar style and descent of the political act into personal insults shows the artificiality and absurdity of the methods, such as struggle sessions, through which revolutionary ideals were propagated throughout the Chinese countryside.

The structure of the four parts of the novel contributes to the disorientating effect of the impossibility of historical direction. The postmodern critic Jenkins notes that the multiplicity of histories destabilises the past, allowing for new histories to be made. The structure of *Hometown* has this effect. There is a lack of a logical narrative progression linking the four sections of the novel; each section can almost stand on its own as a short story (Weng Zhihong 1993, 17). The division of the novel into four parts indicates an importance ascribed to the four historical turning points in China’s twentieth-century history. In Liu Zhenyun’s fictional universe these are the turning points when power is available for taking, and are thus natural moments for individuals to strive for power. It is at these moments that the character of a culture and the negative legacy of the past and tradition emerge. Weng Zhihong (1993, 18) describes each of the four parts as recounting ‘power struggles’ and ‘bloodbaths’, saying that the beginning of each new section returns to the same state as the previous section. Each beginning serves only to inaugurate a new round of power struggles and violence. The structure of the novel therefore reinforces the traditional idea that history is circular. The tone that Liu Zhenyun uses to convey this idea through tragedy and absurdity portrays history as playing games with the characters. The notion that history is circular is embedded in the Chinese psyche from the experience of a long history of changing dynasties. This historical awareness is evident from the idiom ‘ruling dynasties come and go’ that occurs early in the novel (Liu Zhenyun

2004, 16), and then recurs much later on when other changes have occurred (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 152).

Each section of the novel has an epilogue in a lighter font, and the third and fourth sections have prefaces too (also in the alternate font). These passages serve to fill in the silent parts and gaps of history. They provide an interpretative context to the events that have occurred or that follow. Their structural opposition to the main narrative also allows them to disrupt the historical narrative. This is an eye-catching way for the author to present the textuality and fabrication of history. Two kinds of text compete for the reader's attention. The main body of narration in standard font is where the plot of the story unfolds. Story-telling is thus given priority as a conveyer of cultural meaning rather than the historical narrative itself. The texts of these prefaces and epilogues clearly convey the point that the individual characters and plot of the novel are afforded far greater importance than any conventional chronology of historical events. The first sentence of the epilogue of the first section identifies the theme of the section as divorced from a historical background:

“After the death of Li Laoxi, Ma village was again suddenly without a village head.” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 64).

As a short piece of text intended to summarise the events of the first section and provide a framework for their interpretation, the motif of killing for personal power is clearly articulated. The passage suggests no lessons learnt from the death of the former village head. The reader's expectations are set up to believe the villagers may change from their former immoral behaviour:

“Don't ever mention the village headship, don't ever mention the village headship for the position of village head, I've already lost Dianyuan and two servants, please don't make any more trouble for me!” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 64)

This is a typical sentiment that is often expressed at the end of stories where tragedy or conflict has occurred. The characters make mistakes only to realise at

the ‘end’ of the story that they have acted immorally and regret it. Such a conventional narrative device is soon thwarted however as the logic of killing to seize power is quickly resumed after only a few lines from this realisation of regret over destruction caused by contending to be the village head. Li Wennao becomes village head and expects Lu Xiaohei to be his deputy. Lu Xiaohei is not willing to undertake this role and only accepts it after Li Wennao threatens violence. A few lines later, Li Wennao is assassinated, throwing the village into further chaos. Once again, one of the characters appeals for a cease of hostilities:

“Son, so many people have died for this village head position, let’s just have a peaceful life, don’t let them try and kill you!” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 65-6).

Xu Budai’s answer to this exhortation is to respond to the threat of violence with a pre-emptive strike, killing their opponents first. The others agree to this strategy of survival. It is only in the penultimate sentence of the epilogue to the first section that historical events enter the narrative with a mention of the ‘devils’<sup>48</sup> entering China. No date or precise historical information is given:

“By the time the devil army came to China, he was already a young man in his twenties. This group of people had all already grown up.” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 66).

This demonstrates that outside, historical events barely register in the narrative, and when they do register, the events are expressed in popular, folk language. The last sentence sets the scene for the next episode of absurd conflict between people in a new generation. Liu Zhenyun’s depiction of historical time here is therefore clearly circular rather than linear and progressive. The implication is that while revolution, war, and foreign invasions may occur, human nature does not change and does not progress through time to a more idealised social or existential state.

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Devil’ was a colloquial term for the invading Japanese army in modern China, *Riben guizi* 日本鬼子 (Japanese devils).

The notion of circularity of history provides a background to the understanding of historical change among the villagers. Developing this idea further, the recurrence of certain imagery suggests that this understanding sees the villagers as powerless in the first instance in the face of historical change, or at turning points where power is amassed in new configurations and open for seizing. Similar to Chen Zhongshi's *White Deer Plain* imagery of a hot cooking vessel occurs several times in *Hometown*. In *Hometown* it is not obviously linked to history, but the recurrence of the phrase, and its use as a simile for a state of high emotion, indicates that it is intended to refer to historical turning points and the movement of history affecting individuals:

“...in a panic like ants on a hot saucepan.” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 96 & 178).

The size of the ant compared to the saucepan reflects the scale of the individual against the large currents of history. The temperature and state of panic point to important moments in history when lives can be changed and power reconfigured. However, in *Hometown* characters are far from resigned to fate. Although they are influenced by the hot temperature of events acting on them, individuals realise that each change and crisis offers opportunity. They search for opportunities to seize power for themselves. The ancient and folk belief in the circularity of time and by extension history is further emphasized in the suggestion of the Buddhist idea of karma that would have been understood in folk culture. Lu Xiaohei is trapped by the Nationalists after escaping from the Communists. He ends up being shut in a cage in which he himself used to imprison other people. This is a powerful image of the laws of karma. The bad karma or ‘causes’ he had created by imprisoning and harming other individuals had now returned to him in some way to see him imprisoned in his own cage. While such an understanding of time does require a belief in cause and effect, it is very different to the Maoist-Marxist concept of history. While not cyclical in a simple sense, karma operates over generations and effects from the past, near or distant, will recur and have an impact on the present and future.

## 5.5 Conclusion

Through its portrayal of four historical periods in the twentieth century in a Chinese village, *Hometown* aims to examine events from the recent past and their significance both in Chinese history and culture. Through its use of parody, black humour and mixing of tones and registers, the novel also presents a strong case against the hegemony of History in the interpretation of the past through historical narrative.

*Hometown's* contribution to New Historical Fiction lies in its powerful rejection of the revolutionary legacy through its parody of land reform, the first major policy implemented after the Communist victory in the civil war. It subverts the claim to political legitimacy claimed of the CCP as the liberator of the Chinese people. The literary techniques used to convey the amoral atmosphere that pervades the novel could be appropriated by historians attempting to write a more modern type of history that allows for the representation of a more subjective experience of history.

A similar portrayal of revolution to that found in *Hometown* can be seen in other works of New Historical Fiction such as *Spiritual Banner* where revolution is not perceived as a driver of progress in history but as a means to personal gain. The revolution is experienced in different ways by different people, often at the margins of society. The dismantling of the significance of revolution as a driving force of twentieth-century Chinese history, present in *Hometown* is further echoed in another work of New Historical Fiction, *Ancient Boat* where the Maoist discourse of class struggle is removed from history by portraying the peasants as 'unthinking masses'. The portrayal of characters during and after the revolution in *Hometown* is also similar to that found in other works of New Historical Fiction. The character Zhao Duoduo in *Ancient Boat* is a parody of the typical liberated peasant who becomes a village leader: he is greedy and revengeful, and does not embody the social justice to which the revolution aspires. Such a portrayal is similar to the character of Zhao Ciwei in *Hometown*.



The alternative reading of twentieth-century Chinese history that Liu Zhenyun is offering consists of a carnivalesque power struggle against a backdrop of folk culture. The structure of the novel in four sections that can be read independently as short stories serves to accentuate the pressure building up at moments of historical change. The simile of ants hopping across a hot pan is similar to Chen Zhongshi's understanding of twentieth-century Chinese history as a hot plate on which the lives of people are tossed and turned according to the different movements (see Chapter 4). Liu Zhenyun creates a complex moral universe in *Hometown*. On the one hand former farmhands who are given land are not comfortable accepting it from the landlord in a show of loyalty and respect for property. The landlord Lao Li is presented as having gradually earned his wealth and land rather than obtaining it through immoral means such as collaborating with the Japanese invaders. On the other hand villagers resort to murder to secure the position of head of the village. They also succumb to mob justice when Lao Li is finally beaten to death. No authorial or narrative judgement is ever pronounced on these incidents. This lack of overt moral commentary constitutes a marked change from earlier revolutionary fiction such as *Hurricane*. Such a moral stance leaves the reader to judge each situation apart from a deterministic historical narrative. The form of fiction in the post-Mao era is thus fully exploited to provide a multi-textured medium for deconstructing the ideology and meaning created by the official historical discourse.

*Hometown* ends as it began in a power struggle. The whole village get into a large fight near the end (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 248) and the remaining criminals are executed. The conclusion of the novel is that the cycle of power struggles continues and is never-ending:

“Years later people were still taking and losing power.” (Liu Zhenyun 2004, 260).

The next section will focus on the subversion by New Historical Fiction of the discourse of history itself. The next chapter will analyse *Coloratura* by Li Er, and investigate further the theme of orality and the carnivalesque in history,

while continuing to question the moral legitimacy claimed from the revolution in the early twentieth-century. It will also introduce the themes of metafiction and the individual in history.

### **Section III – The discourse of history in fiction**

#### **Chapter 6 - *Coloratura***

This chapter will discuss the ways in which Li Er's 李洱 *Coloratura* (*Huaqiang* 花腔) overturns the importance of revolution in twentieth-century history in China. The main preoccupation and achievement of the novel however is the unmasking of the workings of the discourse of history. After an introduction to the plot of the novel and its critical reception, the chapter will discuss the novel through the following themes: the fabrication of history, the individual and history, the carnivalisation of history, and language and register.

##### **6.1 Li Er and *Coloratura***

Li Er was born in 1966 in Henan province, and has published five collections of stories, two novels and around fifty novellas; his work regularly appears in mainstream literary journals in China.<sup>49</sup> The novel *Coloratura* is composed of the accounts from three narrators of Ge Ren's life and death. The name Ge Ren 葛任 is a pun on *geren* 个人 meaning 'individual'. The implications of this will be discussed later. The three narrators tell the story to people at different times after the event. The first narrator Dr Bai Shengtao tells the story shortly after it happened in 1943. The second narrator Zhao Yaoqing (A Qing) narrates his version during the Cultural Revolution in 1973. The third narrator Fan Jihuai speaks in the year 2000. Each account is told orally and written down by another person. The person who records the first account, General Fan Jihuai, is the narrator of the third and last account. The accounts all speak of Ge Ren's life as a revolutionary, poet and translator. Ge Ren studied abroad in Japan and the Soviet Union, met Trotsky and heard speeches by Lenin. They record Ge Ren as dying from Japanese bullets, and the Yan'an newspapers hail him as a hero of the revolution. Parties on all sides become aware however that he may still be alive, and send out various individuals to find him. The first narrator is sent from

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<sup>49</sup> This information is from the website Paper Republic, see bibliography for full citation.

Yan'an to rescue Ge Ren, and the other two are both from the Nationalist army to intercept him. Although he is reported as dead, Ge Ren becomes a primary school teacher in the mountains. He does not take the opportunities presented to him to escape from the Communists and Nationalists who are both pursuing him, and thus does not escape death (Jing Wendong 2003, 43-4).

Li Er is writing about the individual through Ge Ren's death, since death is the most 'individual' point of a person's life; it is never to be repeated and with no possibility for the individual to be replaced. Liu Siqian (2003, 109) writes that the contribution of *Coloratura* is that it explores the meeting point between history and the individual.

## **6.2 Fabrication of history**

This section will discuss the statement that history is fabrication made by the novel *Coloratura* through both its form and content.

New Historicism maintains that the written discourse of history is subject to the same limits of objectivity as fiction. From this supposition arises the view that the narrative that is recognised as 'history' is therefore fabricated and created in a similar way to fiction, and thus just as 'subjective'. This theory became influential on Chinese literature in the 1990s. *Coloratura* has been cited by critics as an example of a fictional version of the theory of new historical fiction in China (Liu Siqian 2003, 108). Since a host of other Western literary and cultural theories had an important impact on Chinese literature of the post-Mao era, the theoretical absorption from New Historicism is hardly surprising. The content of the history analysed and the dynamics of power politics are particularly Chinese however. For a more detailed analysis of these questions, please refer to Chapter 2.

*Coloratura* dramatises the process of talking nonsense and lying in the making of history. In a broader context, learning to express oneself in an appropriate way is part of the socialisation into the human family and community. Children are

taught that certain things cannot be said at certain times. As an individual grows up and joins adult society, he or she realises that language and reality have constantly to be modified in a way appropriate to the social context and interlocutor(s). One solution, although morally dubious, is to study how to present these falsehoods in the most beautiful way. The weaving together of a convincing, logical narrative that is ‘beautiful’ in its unity and coherence then becomes history. We are slowly accustomed to accepting the falsehoods of history, whereas fiction does not have to try to be accepted, as it is only fiction.

Jing Wendong (2003, 44-5) says that the discourse of *Coloratura* is in fact the dramatisation of falsehoods that are usually submerged. The three narrators in the novel all state that they are being objective and show that the individual narration of past events aspires to be a narrative similar to history. Indeed the narrators all repeat expressions stating that their accounts are completely true, examples of which will be given in the next two paragraphs.

The first narrator Dr Bai Shengtao gives his account of Ge Ren’s life in March 1943, shortly after the death of Ge Ren. His oral testimony is presented to and recorded by General Fan Jihuai. The first sentence of his account is an avowal of the truthfulness and objectivity of what follows:

“General, I’ll tell you how it was, I got these facts from Tian Han.” (Li Er 2007, 2)

Doctor Bai is reassuring his listener that he is simply recounting whatever really happened to the best of his knowledge. He thereby reveals his information source in an attempt to show objectivity by saying that he is repeating what he was told and knew. General Fan’s status as a revolutionary of senior status undermines the objectivity of the account however, since Dr Bai will only express himself in terms that General Fan would want to hear.

The second narrator is Zhao Yaoqing, a criminal undergoing correction, who also affirms his trustworthiness with regard to telling the truth in the first few lines of his account of Ge Ren. He says:

“Comrades, the good thing about me is I don’t tell porkies.” (Li Er 2007, 92).

The third narrator General Fan Jihuai is already suspect before he begins the interview since he pressured Doctor Bai to give the ‘politically correct’ version of events back in 1943. He admits to lying about his motive for taking the train from Beijing to Bailing instead of the aeroplane to save money for the ‘Hope project’ primary school. The real reason is that he is afraid of flying and prefers to take the train. He admits that his motive and thought cannot be expressed out loud (although he is telling his interviewer):

“...but, even if I think that, I can’t say it out loud, I just have to say I’m doing it to save money.” (Li Er 2007, 188)

The fourth narrator finds that documents relating to Ge Ren mentioned by Bai Shengtao are no longer existent. The difficulties of writing a coherent historical narrative from a paucity of written sources are shown in this process. We learn that a number of sources concerning Ge Ren were all burnt. The forces that mould history are exposed here, including the possibility that the documents were destroyed deliberately to suppress information from the historical record. The randomness of selection of materials for the historical narrative is also highlighted. The fourth narrator is acutely aware of this as he describes the fate of the human being as the fate of writing. This comparison dramatises the fabrication and falsehood that inherently creep in while creating a historical narrative:

“Up until today, I still haven’t been able to find these texts. Maybe they ended up the same as Ge Ren’s other articles and have already been burnt? Because the fate of man is the fate of text.” (Li Er 2007, 66)

In the extract from the book recounting Ge Ren's time in Russia his Russian name is used, although in Chinese it occurs in two different versions due to slight changes in radicals of the character 'you', Youyusiji written either 尤郁斯基 or 忧郁斯基. This shows how mutable a person's name and identity is. Once the person is in a different cultural context, he or she will be recorded in history under a different name, often with variations in the transcription or name in the adopted culture. There is potential for even greater confusion in this case since Ge Ren's Russian name has been re-transcribed back into Chinese, removing it further from his original name. This examples dramatises the difficulty of grasping Ge Ren as a person since his name is so evasive. It can be compared to trying to search for mention of Marco Polo (c.1254–1324) in historical documents in Asian languages where his name may have become so distorted as to be unrecognisable.

The title of the novel in Chinese is *Huaqiang* 花腔, the meaning of which encompasses the themes of the novel, especially its contradictions since it has multiple meanings. *Huaqiang* can refer to a twisting of sound and voices, and can be thought of as the 'rhetoric' or embellishment of sound. The translation used in this thesis is *Coloratura*, which is a technical musical term referring to the trilling effect achieved by a soprano. The use of the word *huaqiang* in this context indicates that history is exaggerated for the benefit of those who come after the event. *Huaqiang* also has a sense of banter and joking within it. This banter comes from the seriousness with which the narrators claim to be telling the absolute truth in their accounts, when they are fully aware of the untruths that are bound to emerge in their narrative.

The subjective voices of the three narrators in the novel can be considered a kind of microhistory in that they are all one person's version of events competing for entry into the official master narrative known as 'history'. They become integrated into this master narrative of history through the intervention of the fourth narrator, called 'I'. This person intervenes late in the narrative and Ge Ren's life needs to await his arrival before any sense can be made of it. The task

of the fourth narrator is to select from these accounts anything that is relevant to Ge Ren's file. His brief is to excavate the true picture of the inner workings of Ge Ren's mind as a revolutionary intellectual.

The novel uses the subjective first person narration to dramatise how people who had lived through an event distort the facts in their accounts of the event. This is an analysis of the 'voice' of history. Eyewitness accounts are thought to be fairly reliable accounts of history, even allowing for the biases and understanding of each individual. They 'saw' and 'experienced' these events so at some level they must be 'true'. The narrative is full of expressions to authenticate the eyewitness accounts, such as, "This is how it happened." (Li Er 2007, 80).

The whole novel dramatises the writing of history as the piecing together of fragments of people's lives. When a person is living in a different culture, they may adopt a name in that language, as mentioned above. Furthermore, when people are children they often have nicknames or are called by a different version of their name. The fourth narrator's text provides explanations to the reader reminding him or her that extracts of contemporary accounts of Ge Ren's life only contain 'fragments of life':

"The following text is an extract from *Great Classics of the East*. This book has recorded some life fragments from Ge Ren and Tian Han's childhood. It should be noted that in the text the name 'Ge Shangren' is the name used by Ge Ren in his childhood." (Li Er 2007, 51).

The reader finds out later in the novel that Ge Ren's 'milk name' is A Shuang 阿双. Ge Ren is accumulating so many names that whatever name anyone calls him from now on will be acceptable. His own name Ge Ren is thus a temporary convention that strikes doubt in the reader's mind about who actually this ineffable person is. His identity as a person who lived becomes increasingly harder for the reader to grasp.



Therefore before the reader has even read one word of this text, he or she is made aware that it is a only selection by one of the four narrators of this novel, the information it does contain is very scant, and that he or she has to believe the narrator that the name of the person under enquiry is different in this text to his usual name. None of the above in itself detracts from the credibility of the text, it is the quiet accumulation of factors that one has to take on trust that create a feeling of scepticism. The phrase ‘it should be noted’ before the last caveat in the quotation above aims at reassuring the reader of the professionalism of the historian composing the narrative.

The reader is frequently reminded that the ‘fragments’ of reality being narrated as ‘history’ in the novel are the selections from the materials or memories that the narrator deems appropriate to include. Near the end of Bai Shengtao’s narration he admits that he has included what he thinks relevant or important:

“General, as for the rest, there’s nothing much worth saying.” (Li Er 2007, 79).

This reticence could be for a number of reasons, namely that he judges that other experiences are not politically safe to recount to the General, or that other incidents could be embarrassing to him personally, or that he does not deem them important. They could be very interesting to a later reader however, which demonstrates the need for the continual rewriting of history since any narrative, historical or otherwise, is just the best approximation of the past at the time of writing. That approximation will always be subject to the values and ideologies of its period.

At the end of Bai Shengtao’s narrative, he again reveals that he is almost speaking in a pact with General Fan, as if there is some mutual understanding about the correct version of events and method of narration:

“General, as for what happened next, you all know what happened whether I say any more or not.” (Li Er 2007, 88).

The fragmentation of life and experience is seen as represented in textual fragments. Part of Bai Shengtao's mission is to recover Ge Ren's writings, once he has passed the order to A Qing to kill Ge Ren. The ownership and power wielded over these writings is shown in an absurd way to belong to the 'revolution' as if they are valuable to further its cause in the way they are referred to as 'paper fragments':

“He reiterated the point that those paper fragments are the property of the revolution, and do not just belong to Ge Ren. He said the senior officer wanted to see just what Ge Ren had written.” (Li Er 2007, 50)

The team leader evidently did not want Ge Ren's potentially subversive writings to fall into the wrong hands and thus declared them as property of the revolution. They would then either be destroyed or manipulated to fit into the master narrative of revolutionary history.

The full force of the need and reality to fabricate history according to the political demands of the time is already felt on the second page of the novel. When Bai Shengtao hears the news that Ge Ren is in fact alive, and not dead as previously thought, he is incredulous. Partly behind this reaction is the fact that he has already accepted Ge Ren's death and has absorbed it into his mental makeup of reality. It also introduces a disbelief in the ability of the truth to exist and go against the established historical narrative:

“...I really couldn't believe my ears” (Li Er 2007, 3)

The established, official narrative follows a few sentences after Dr Bai's surprise at hearing that Ge Ren is alive:

“At Erligang there is a temple to Guandi<sup>50</sup>. Ge Ren’s battalion fiercely fought off the enemy (Japanese) army for several hours from all directions of the temple. Finally they died for their country and became national heroes. He told me, some people had privately talked of Ge Ren as some kind of General Guan figure, and the local people were even shouting about erecting a memorial stone to Ge Ren inside the Guandi temple.” (Li Er 2007, 3)

Ge Ren has therefore already entered both the official Communist historiography as a hero of the people as well as the local pantheon of god-like figures that form part of the local landscape.

A Qing makes it clear to the reader that he is closely following the wishes of his interviewers, and practically admits to being willing to fabricate his account if they require it. For example, he begins a new section with:

“Right then, wherever you point to, I’ll forge ahead that way.” (Li Er 2007, 95)

He also asks several times whether the way he is speaking is acceptable:

“Is it OK if I say it like this?” (Li Er 2007, 101)

He needs constant reassurance that he is speaking in a way ‘politically’ acceptable; a few pages later he asks again:

“So, am I OK speaking like this? Right, I’ll go on then.” (Li Er 2007, 105)

A narrator would not usually admit to seeking to please the listener, and would pretend to be completely objective. In this novel however, elements that would usually lie beneath the surface of the text are fully exposed and become part of the story. Thus the artifice of history actually speaks through the coarse, amusing

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<sup>50</sup> Guandi 关帝 is the god of war named after a famous general in Chinese history, Guan Yu. Ge Ren is compared to this General.

voice of A Qing. While this may be entertaining, it removes the seriousness and academic claims to objectivity of history as a discipline.

A Qing expresses the underlying message throughout Bai Shengtao's account that the Party must be extremely careful and subtle about how it disposes of Ge Ren if he is indeed still alive. It is clear that the Party is behaving immorally for the sake of its own image and survival. A Qing says aloud what would normally be implied or hidden within a historical narrative:

“He said, because Ge Ren is a high profile figure, if not dealt with appropriately, it would spread muck on the face of the Party and country.” (Li Er 2007, 102)

This is an admission of the immoral machinations of power operating in the Party over the planned assassination of one of its followers.

A Qing alludes to his right to make factual and value judgements on the events that he is narrating:

“I didn't check whether he was a worthy progeny of Kang Youwei, and so don't have the right to speak about it.” (Li Er 2007, 104)

This implies that he does have the right to speak about things that he believes he has checked out and believes to be true. The seriousness with which he makes the assertion that he has no 'right' to speak about this matter is parodied for the grandeur he allows himself to assume. He is enjoying the power given to the person who 'speaks' and creates a narrative for others to use for whatever purpose in whatever way.

A Qing uses comically colloquial language to reinforce that he is telling the truth. The comic effect is enhanced by his naivety that a reader would take his account seriously when he continually makes mistakes and asks his listeners if he proceeding in the 'correct way'. The expression he uses several times is

reminiscent of child in a school playground: “Honest, cross my heart hope to die.”<sup>51</sup>

In the middle of the novel, the inclusion of a photograph in the historical narrative is mentioned for the first time:

“At the beginning of the book there was a group photograph of Bingying, Ge Ren and A Qing.” (Li Er 2007, 117).

The narrative proceeds to describe in detail what the people are wearing, their positions and expressions. This inclusion of a visual medium amidst the text aims to give an impression of authenticity, showing that history of the modern period relies not only on text and eyewitness accounts, but also on images from photography and potentially early film. This attempt falls flat however since in the novel there are no photographs. The photograph is described here in detail, but the description comes from the historian, the fourth narrator. Therefore the objective façade of the photograph falls as the reader realises he or she is still dealing with a textual narrative for this information.

At the end of the novel, the fourth narrator tells the reader that after hearing so many testimonies, he has the feeling that the end of the story (or narrative) will be the most ‘true’. A psychologist told him that in his unconscious he believes in the theory of human progress that states that human beings become more reliable through the passage of time; his immediate reaction is:

“Actually, ‘truth’ is an unreal concept. If we use the example given by Old Fan of the onion, ‘truth’ seems to be like the centre of the onion. Layer after layer is removed, leaving you with nothing there. As we are using onions as an example, I’ll say something else while I’m at it, the fact that Old Fan mentioned A Qing eating an onion is dubious, as they only starting growing onions in Baipo in 1968.” (Li Er 2007, 282)

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<sup>51</sup> The original Chinese here is *Hong ni shi gou* 哄你是狗, literally ‘[if I’m] teasing you [then I] am a dog’. I used an English child’s equivalent here.

Despite the efforts of the fourth narrator throughout the novel to make sense of the various eye-witness accounts and other evidence, he concludes by admitting that this story has destroyed his natural propensity to believe in human progress and betterment. By extension, this denies the possibility of a linear history reaching forward to a utopian socialist goal, such as that prescribed by Maoist-Marxism. His own disillusionment with truth is reflected in the casual nature with which he inserts another judgement on Lao Fan's account into the narrative. It is only because he was using the metaphor of an onion to reflect on the nature of truth and reality that another piece of evidence against the truthfulness of Lao Fan's account is remembered and included. The implication is that he would either have forgotten this detail, thus depriving the historical record of complete evidence, or that his own narrative is poorly structured in a way that resembles a writer indulging their 'stream of consciousness' on paper. He continues a few lines down by casting doubt on the psychological state of Lao Fan to know himself what is true and false:

“Furthermore, it seems that Lao Fan cannot distinguish himself whether he is speaking the truth or fibbing.” (Li Er 2007, 283)

This implies that the wits or memory of Lao Fan are at fault, which makes his account all the harder to believe in any sense.

### **6.3 Reading History**

*Coloratura* is a work of metafiction in so far as the reader can clearly see the different texts and narrators intermingling. This is palpable since within each of the three main sections containing the eyewitness accounts by the three narrators are the interventions of the fourth narrator, known only as 'I'. These text fragments are easily differentiated to the eye by the ampersand symbol (&) before each title. The text is in a lighter font so the reading experience within the

novel actually feels different to the reader requiring an adjustment of the eye.<sup>52</sup> Within the sections in italics written by the fourth narrator are also other textual fragments from excerpts of published works containing information on the life of Ge Ren. Thus the reader of the novel as a whole is continually diving in and out of a range of texts by different authors, all with different agendas. The process of deciphering the meaning from these various sources empowers the reader as a ‘creator of history’. Thus any pretence at the unifying logic and authority of any kind of historical narrative becomes impossible.

The highly metafictional qualities displayed in *Coloratura* have important implications for the relationship of the writing and reading process of texts, whether historical or literary, or indeed both. A metafictional text by definition displays its inner workings and dramatises the process of its own production. It is often fragmentary in nature, as in *Coloratura*. Such a text provides different strands of raw narrative that have not been prepared and written into one final narrative. The reader therefore is obliged to do this for him or herself and create meaning and narrative from the text that is being read. Roland Barthes’ essay ‘The death of the author’ (reproduced in Lodge (ed.) 1988) provides useful insight into the reader as the place where the multiplicity of meaning lies. The author of a text, whether historical or fictional, loses power over the text the moment it is created. The original meaning that the author was trying to communicate then becomes part of a network of meaning that relies on context and intertextuality between all kinds of other narratives:

“...the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any of them.” (Barthes in Lodge (ed.) 1988, 170)

The reader is identified by Barthes as the place where the meaning can be recreated and fully integrated into the text in all its complexity:

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<sup>52</sup> This effect can also be felt in Liu Zhenyun’s *Hometown’s Chrysanthemums*, analysed in chapter 5, whereby prefaces and epilogues are written in a lighter font on either side of the ‘story’.

“...but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.”... “...a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology.” (Barthes in Lodge (ed) 1988, 171).

This is an interesting claim to make with regard to literary texts, but since they are by nature ‘fabricated’ and are considered as belonging to the arts, this theory does not seem at first glance to be too radical. When applied to a historical text however, the notion that objective meaning cannot be expressed by a single author is provocative in the extreme, and seriously undermines the capacity of any official, master narrative of history to hold sway. The logical conclusion of this theory is that the experience of the past through a historical narrative will be different for every individual reader.

The novel *Coloratura* can only be apprehended as a text by the reader jumping between sections and slowly building up a picture of the events and his or her judgement on the events through the variety of textual material and narrative voices in the form of different narrators. For example, at the end of Bai Shengtao’s narrative, the fourth narrator says that the reader needs to continue to the second narrative by A Qing to decide the veracity or otherwise of Bai Shengtao’s account:

“...as for the way in which Bai Shengtao conveyed orders to A Qing, the reader will understand once he or she has read A Qing’s own account.” (Li Er 2007, 89).

The narrator is assuming that the reader will ‘understand’ once he or she reads the following account by A Qing. The ‘understanding’ on the part of the reader will require considerable interpretative faculties and skill when presented with the range of texts and viewpoints present in the novel. This shows that one text written by one author as a linear narrative no longer serves the purpose of interpreting the past.



Despite Bai's insistence that he has been completely truthful, the reader is left to interpret for him or herself. Thus the historical narrative is shown to be completely open to interpretation and meaning. Any narrative cannot thus hope to convey complete historical truth to the reader. The confidence of directional, state-controlled linear history has been shattered and would have a considerable challenge to reconstruct itself.

#### **6.4 The Individual and History**

The novel *Coloratura* argues for importance to be given to the individual in history, although it also highlights the difficulties in grasping an individual life and existence through the textual discipline of historiography and its written expression as 'history'. Such a position on the importance of the individual is an important subversion of the official Maoist-Marxist ideology informing CCP historiography that identifies class as the main unit of analysis, not the individual. Literary critic Liu Zaifu articulated the importance of subjectivity in Chinese literature in his controversial essay, 'On Subjectivity in Literature' (*Lun wenxue de zhutixing* 论文学的主体性, Liu Zaifu 1985). His main aim was to restore the human subject to a central position in Chinese literature after the restrictive ideological limitations imposed on socialist literature in the Mao period. Previous socialist literature focused on groups in society, most notably the workers-peasants-soldiers paradigm (*gong-nong-bing* 工农兵) as units of analysis. Liu argues that literature should express the 'history of the human soul' (Liu Zaifu 1985, 5) that allows for the depth and complexity of the inner world of an individual. He contends that the most basic element of literature is people, which by extension means allowing the individual the full respect required for a convincing literary portrayal:

“The individual's subjective position needs to be recovered in every part of the literary process with the individual person as the centre and goal of literature. In more specific terms: the writer's creation should fully express his or her own subjective strength, bringing his or her subjective value into being, and

should not take some external concept as a starting point. This is the implication of the concept of subjective creativity; works of literature should have people as their central concern, endowing characters with a subjective dimension, and not writing people as play objects or heroes to emulate.” (Liu Zaifu 1985, 12).

Liu Zaifu extends his argument from literary creation and representation to the writing of history. He argues that if history only describes the external universe then it can only hope to give a one-sided account of human nature. He cites the example of Engel’s conception of history as a parallelogram advancing through time, to which Liu asserts that the subjectivity of man’s inner universe must be added. It thus falls to the arts and humanities to reflect the true face of history (Liu Zaifu 1985, 12-13). Liu says that up to the mid-1980s in China, authors of fiction had allowed history and revolution to describe the human condition (Liu Zaifu 1985, 17). Liu Zaifu’s theory of subjectivity was criticised by traditional Marxist scholars at publication. For example, writing in the Party magazine *Red Flag* (*Hongqi zazhi* 红旗杂志), Chen Yong 陈涌 (b. 1919) attacked Liu’s theory for being too radical and undermining the fundamental principles of Marxist theory (Chen Yong 1986, 21-32). Chen’s main contention about Liu’s theory is that it does not begin from the assumption that Marxism represents absolute truth that analysis of any subject must respect. Liu’s theory was also criticised by younger scholars as not being radical enough, claiming his thought is based on ideas of modernism, and on the humanism of the Western Renaissance. This mixed reaction to his theory is typical of the early stages of the liberalisation of the cultural discourse in China. It shows however that a foundation for breaking away from ideological structures and representations in literature was laid in 1985 with Liu Zaifu’s essay. Although Liu’s essay was referring to the individual in literature, and *Coloratura* is a novel that examines the fate of the individual in history as a discourse, the emphasis on subjective, individual experience expounded by Liu Zaifu finds its true representation in all its complexity in a literary creation such as *Coloratura*. The journey that the reader undertakes in *Coloratura* is one of searching for the individual Ge Ren. The subjectivity of his own experience and personality is hardly expressed in the narrative at all (apart from short excerpts of his writing). Subjectivity is apparent in the accounts given

by the other characters: they express themselves according to all their limitations, whether of knowledge or morals. The search followed by the reader for an individual character is a testimony to the difficulty of grasping actual individual experience through history. The implication is that fiction is a more effective way of conveying that highly subjective experience, as opposed to history in which the individual is completely lost and overwhelmed by a plethora of voices fighting over truth and past experience.

*Coloratura* is about the search for these possibilities and details that are denied voices in the historical record. The search for the relationship between history and the individual in the novel is by three historian narrators. The novel is composed of the accounts of the three historians who write the life and death of Ge Ren from historical documents.

The full randomness of history as experienced by the individual is expressed towards the end of Bai Shengtao's narrative. This is not actually experienced as history however, but by folk belief in fate or 'heaven'. The randomness prevents Bai Shengtao from being murdered together with Ge Ren. The difference between life and death for the historical eyewitness emphasises the weighty implications of the randomness of history as a fact:

“Afterwards I often thought, if I hadn't come across Dabao, or if heaven hadn't sent down rain, I would have gone to my grave without knowing what was inside the secret letter.” (Li Er 2007, 86).

Two paragraphs after this realisation, there is a paragraph that contains six examples of 'what ifs'. These are intended to help justify Bai's behaviour in the Ge Ren case. The last 'what if' alludes to the possibility of his death. If it had not rained, exposing the contents of the secret letter, alluding to the possibility of his own death as well as Ge Ren's then A Qing would have probably tried to kill him also. He says he would have accepted 'his fate' from the machinations of the heavens (not his political masters):

“I also thought about this, that if A Qing had seen through its hidden meaning, and realised Dou Sizhong wanted me dead too, then I would just have had to accept the will of the heavens. I would not have resisted, definitely not.” (Li Er 2007, 87).

The ‘what if’ sentences also discuss the possibility of interpreting the message in the secret letter in different ways. For example, Dr Bai says the final phrase “don’t leave living witnesses” could be an order to himself to murder Ge Ren. It would also depend on how A Qing understood the message if Dr Bai had given him the letter. A Qing could have decided to spare Bai Shengtao, and either kill or spare Ge Ren also.

Bai Shengtao had been carrying the secret letter in his underwear for safety. The secret letter was an important catalyst for events, or even for history itself. Therefore Bai’s constantly referring to them in connection with his genitals and underwear again ridicules the seriousness of his mission. The pursuit and murder of Ge Ren is the driving force of the plot of the novel as well as ‘history’ itself. Therefore it seems the course of history rests on the letter getting soaked by rain through Bai Shengtao’s clothes. The envelope of the letter was open, enabling Bai Shengtao to read the letter. He defends himself continually stressing the random nature of these events, that he did not purposefully read the letter:

“I didn’t mean to, I really didn’t mean to.” (Li Er 2007, 86).

The text of the secret letter read:

“Quickly kill number 0, destroy all writings. Details will be explained later, don’t leave living witnesses”. (Li Er 2007, 86).

In the version of history presented in this novel, the individual at its centre, Ge Ren, has almost no opportunity to make his own voice heard. It is telling that the first piece of Ge’s own writing does not appear until half way through the novel (Li Er 2007, 115). It is unclear how much of Ge Ren’s own writings have

survived, but the tone of the fourth narrator implies the latter is only publishing it here for his own motivations:

“Regarding this period of his life, let’s first look at a piece of Ge Ren’s own writing.” (Li Er 2007, 115).

This implies that there could be other writings by Ge Ren, but thus far they have not been included. While it is true that any autobiographical writing is subject to limitations of the various motives and strategies of the writer describing his or her own life, it would at least allow more of the person to emerge, as much can be learnt through a person’s mode of expression. The hint at possible other writings by Ge Ren highlights the challenges of trying to capture the past in narrative. If ‘texts’ are missing, the gaps left behind need to be filled by other means.

While Li Er is exploring the importance or lack of importance ascribed to the individual in history, he also parodies people of so-called status that take themselves so seriously they use exaggerated language when talking about their own pasts. Fan Jihuai exaggerates in a comic way when he describes his entrancement (along with everyone else in Shanghai) with film star Ruan Lingyu 阮玲玉 (1910-1935):

“From that moment my fate underwent a historical turnaround.” (Li Er 2007, 200).

The individual sees their life in terms of history but in fact it was just a moment in Fan’s life like any other. He is now looking back on his life several decades later and is seeing it as ‘history’ with a meaning and direction. The use of the word ‘fate’ (*mingyun* 命运) implies a trajectory with cause and effect. As an individual reflects back on a long life it is easy to ascribe one moment with more importance than necessary.

## 6.5 Carnivalisation of History

Critic Jing Wendong notes that history is irrational, full of libido and desire and therefore needs to be controlled by narrative. In *Coloratura*, Li Er releases the sarcasm and chaos of the carnivalisation of history, but he also uses the structure of the novel to control it (Jing Wendong 2003, 46). David Der-wei Wang (2004, 6) inverts this logic by stating that history is a record of violence and brutality. Chinese historians traditionally recorded the brutality and added a moral commentary admonishing the reader and society at large not to repeat such debased, immoral behaviour.

In a novel about the contortions of logic and emotion that history imposes on the reality of the past, love as a positive force of regeneration and social bonding is parodied to grotesque and twisted proportions. One example is from the text of a book written about China by two Western missionaries, Ellis and Beal, called *Great Classics of the East*. They cite the example of an old man who loved a cat more than he loved his own grandchildren. The man would tell the time by the shape of the cat's eyes that would change according to the passage of time throughout the day. The love becomes twisted to such a degree however that tragedy ensues for the cat:

“But in China, love will always bring disaster! That cat called Mimi was to be entombed with love. Before the old man died, he killed Mimi, and turned her into a soup which he drank. He must have thought that was the highest kind of love towards the cat.” (Li Er 2007, 52).

Ellis and Beal summarise this case in the following way:

“Since the cat served as a clock, we have every reason to think that the old man considered his death as the end of history.” (Li Er 2007, 552).

It seems that this is a parody of the human desire to control time and the destiny of the individual. This individual demonstrates the desire to twist history to fit

his own lifespan. The idea that a cat represents history is a further parody of the discourse of history that is contorted by people to fit their own agendas. There is of course a further level of meaning suggested by Western missionaries writing a narrative of Chinese history and culture according to their own values and judgements.

The fourth narrator initially believes that Dr Bai Shengtao had some sort of bowel problem because he kept referring to excrement. He realised that Dr Bai is in fact an expert in this area of study and admitted to misunderstanding him. The occurrence of such subject matter in a historical narrative is farcical, and behind the seriousness with which the fourth narrator introduces the topic, the sarcasm of Li Er can be seen. Also, the narrative is situated clearly in Bakhtin's lower body stratum, which implies potential for renewal. The account, presented by the fourth narrator, of Bai Shengtao's classmate Dr Yu Chengze recounts the knowledge they learnt on the subject of excrement, taught by a Japanese doctor, known as Kawada 川田. This extract is intended to provide the reader with information on Bai Shengtao's background. History is continually parodied as this section hilariously is also intended to provide an insight into Dr Bai's 'historiographical' background. As a recorder of history through his narrative on Ge Ren, Dr Bai has assumed the role of historian. At university, Drs Bai and Yu were taught important facts such as:

“Over a lifetime, people break wind over 100,000 times, and produce 30 tonnes of excrement.” (Li Er 2007, 45)

For this type of medical specialist, the study of excrement is a perfectly serious occupation, although the 'facts' in the above quotation seem to belong more in a joke book than a serious historical account. Within the context of Bai Shengtao's 'true' and 'serious' account of Ge Ren's life it intrudes as a farcical aside. In Kawada's account, Dr Bai's glowing revolutionary credentials are listed alongside his enthusiasm for tasting dung in class:

“I remember, among the students, the first one to bite a ball of dung was Bai Shengtao. He certainly was someone who could give his life for truth. Later on, in the same group of students, he was the first to go to the Soviet Union, and the first to arrive at Yan’an.” (Li Er 2007, 45).

Truth for Bai Shengtao was tasting dung and being a good revolutionary. The juxtaposition of high political ideals and excrement is hardly accidental and introduces a carnivalesque equality of discourses which de-sanctifies revolution as a hallowed narrative. The discourse of history viewed through this optic becomes one of flatulence and excrement. Thus both revolution as the content and history as the form have been subverted in this instance.

This same section continues to provide detail about the constipation of Mao Zedong and other revolutionaries on the Long March and at Yan’an. This in itself is nothing original, since many accounts of Mao’s medical problems have been published (Zhisui Li; Thurston, 1994), making such matters public knowledge. The fourth narrator cites another account from an eyewitness to that period of events, Tian Han. In his text, Tian Han adds his interpretation:

“At that time the inability to smoothly empty one’s bowels, in some way or other, had already become an important problem for the revolution.” (Li Er 2007, 46).

However true this may have been historically, linking the success of the revolution (and hence the subsequent moral victory and legitimacy to rule of the CCP) to the ability to empty the bowels brings the history of the revolution down to the level of bodily functions. It also associates the notion of waste disposal with the revolution, which undermines the lofty idealism of the revolutionary historical discourse.

The twisted logic of politically motivated morality where anything that serves the revolution is valid is exposed in the morally suspect justification given for ordering the murder of Ge Ren:



“Dou Sizhong also said, ‘Comrade Bai, we all have the bodhisattva heart inside us, but in order to protect the name of a revolutionary, we can only kill him. Yes, that’s right, kill him. Comrade Bai, please don’t think of him as a person, just think of him as a kind of person.’” (Li Er 2007, 49)

In this carnivalesque historical narrative, the moral continuum is completely distorted so that the meaning of the Buddhist ideal of ‘having the heart of a bodhisattva’, referring to someone who protects and helps other sentient beings unconditionally, is reverted on itself by justifying murder, which obviously goes against the precepts of Buddhism, or any moral system. The awareness that mentioning bodhisattva and murder in the same breath is absurd is betrayed by the emphatic repetition of the word ‘kill’ to confirm the brazen contravention of morality. From a historical point of view, it is clear that in a war people get killed and sacrifices are inevitable. However, Li Er is here exposing the hypocrisy of claiming the moral victory of the revolution through ‘people’s heroes’ who in fact were killed by their own side for the sake of propaganda.

The expediency with which ordinary people show allegiance to an ideology is shown where Dr Bai Shengtao bows to images of very different religious and political systems. He enters the room of some local people in the countryside, and decides to ‘follow the local custom’ by bowing to images of a bodhisattva and a folk god (General Guan):

“There were two paintings stuck on the walls of the wooden hut, one was of a bodhisattva on a lotus throne, the other was of a red-faced General Guan.”... “...then they turned to the bodhisattva and bowed and brought their hands together in prayer. I instantly thought of my last night at Hougou, when I also bowed and clasped my hands together in front of a picture of Lenin on the wall. Following local custom, I also clasped my hands together here.” (Li Er 2007, 81).

This willingness to ‘follow the local custom’ and fit in is typical of the person who follows the prevailing mainstream ideology. In this case Dr Bai bowed to

Lenin because of the new revolutionary discourse. In the novel he does not indicate if he was alone when doing this, if so, then he possibly really believed in communism and the revolution as forces for the greater good. His admission of this could also be to please the recorder of his interview, General Fan Jihuai. The place in his heart for Lenin, a Buddhist bodhisattva and a deity of popular Daoism reveals the complexity of the Chinese respect for authority, whether spiritual or secular. It could also, as hinted above, reveal the awareness that whatever figure is popularly considered an authority needs to be shown due respect for purposes of expediency. It shows that one ideology will struggle for monopoly in a cultural tradition such as this. Gupta has noted the tendency in Chinese culture to follow simultaneously different ‘ideologies’, whether in the form of religions or philosophies:

“Treating all three [Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism] as philosophical schools, rather than different religions, the Chinese can follow all three teachings simultaneously. This foundation of Chinese culture has made the Chinese intensely practical...” (Gupta 2004, 214).

A Qing fully reveals his ignorance in a passage about Hu An’s time in France. He confuses different historical periods and facts, and highlights the hilarity and absurdity of making superficial judgements about people and other cultures on the basis of simplistic revolutionary logic, such as whether or not they eat bread. A Qing first of all admits that at first he did not even know what bread was, which indicates that his judgements on it were learnt from other people. He reports his interviewers wondering whether Hu An was enjoying a capitalist lifestyle in France because he ate bread every day. His answer to defend the reason for eating bread every day is not the obvious answer that bread has been a European staple for hundreds of years, but that it is acceptable in France because of the Paris Commune. His warped logic is that it is acceptable to eat ‘unrevolutionary’ food in France because it has great revolutionary precedents in its history. The simplicity of CCP revolutionary propaganda is exposed by its workings in the consciousness of A Qing. The political language of the Cultural Revolution, that is taking place at the time of the interview, has permeated A

Qing's mind to the extent that he uses its terminology to express something from a completely different cultural and historical context:

“I bet that soon after arriving in France he was a member of a production team [*chaguo dui* 插过队] at the Paris Commune, went down to the countryside, and served as a soldier of the people, ...” (Li Er 2007, 107).

Hu An went to France in the early decades of the twentieth century, several decades after the Paris Commune of 1871. Furthermore, A Qing's use of political terminology and policies from the Chinese Cultural Revolution is risibly anachronistic. It makes the reader aware that his use of words carries the signifier so far from the signified that the tears in the fabric of the text, and by extension history, are unflinchingly exposed and raw for the reader to see and feel. The 'feeling' of history is now disturbed by uncomfortable disbelief and comic absurdity.

A Qing shows how although he has learnt to some extent to 'speak the language of revolution', its meaning has not actually been fully internalised as part of his outlook on the world. He claims he is not superstitious and that superstition is the one thing that he opposes most. He has understood the word 'superstition' to be extremely negative in the official, imposed ideology of his time. To him however it is a loose term the semantic coverage of which he cannot completely reject. This tension is comically expressed in his childlike repetition of the adverb 'most':

“I'm certainly not superstitious, the thing I most most most oppose is superstition.” (Li Er 2007, 107).<sup>53</sup>

And yet A Qing believes in the concept of *yuanfen* 缘分 (fate through which people or circumstances are brought together) as the only explanation for Ge

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<sup>53</sup> The original Chinese for comparison is, “俺可不迷信，俺最最最反对迷信”.

Ren's father being murdered at a place with the same name as his surname, Ge. He can only admit:

“...there are some things that just cannot be explained.” (Li Er 2007, 107)

The carnivalisation of history includes literary history. In the second section of the novel, a piece of Ge Ren's own writing recounts his meeting Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1831-1936) at Hangzhou. In this version of history, Lu Xun is a friend of Ge Ren's from their time studying in Japan together. In the novel, Lu Xun writes an essay that mentions Ge Ren, Bingying and A Qing. It is described thus:

“Mr Lu Xun's essay was half in *wenyan* 文言 [classical literary style] and half in *baihua* 白话 [modern colloquial style], both Chinese and Western, typical of contemporary style. For example, he called Ge Ren Ah R, A Qing was called Ah Q, and Bingying was Ah Y.” (Li Er 2007, 116).

This is a clear reference to Lu Xun's classic short story *The True Story of Ah Q* (*A Q Zhengzhuan* 阿Q正传, 1921). It is particularly farcical in that all characters in this version are called by a letter from the Roman alphabet preceded by the dialectical, familiar appellation ‘Ah’ (阿), whereas in Lu Xun's story only the protagonist is called that. The idea is diluted by using the same convention to name all characters. In Lu Xun's story, Ah Q is known for his naivety, stupidity and self-portrayal as a victim of circumstance while believing he is superior to other people without justification for such a belief. Li Er's character A Qing does of course have a similar character to Ah Q. This adds another reason to the mounting case for the reader against believing almost anything A Qing says in his narrative. This block of evidence can be added to the pile that the novel as a whole produces against trusting the veracity of the discourse of history itself.

## 6.6 Language and Register

According to critic Liu Siqian (2003, 110) *Coloratura* shows the use of different kinds of language and register by the narrators in their terror and worship of discourses in power. Examples of these types of language include the language of advertising, of authority. The three narrators all seek to emancipate the individual from being sacrificed to the master narrative of history. They resist the authority and the lack of humanity in history.

The revolution is continually parodied throughout the novel. One way in which this is undertaken is to use colloquial, simplified language from the mouths of ordinary people who reveal what revolution means to them, in this case a poor cart driver:

“He said, revolution is about first killing the minority who have money, then sorting it so the majority that doesn’t have any money gets money, at this stage, Communism is not far away.” (Li Er 2007, 29)

While this sentence contains an element of truth of what actually happened in the implementation of the revolution in China, the simple, direct terms in which it is expressed make it sound brutish and naively idealistic. There is no distinction between taking from the minority ‘who have money’ and giving it to the majority who have none so that they too ‘have money’. The logic seems circuitous from the inarticulate way in which it is expressed, from killing those who ‘have money’ to giving others money so they too ‘have money’. Allowing ordinary people to express themselves naturally in the way they understand a political philosophy, even if distorted or expressed cynically, opens up a previously sensitive discourse to a more honest appraisal.

The warped logic of individual narration is exaggerated with the example of a man talking ‘backwards’. Words used by this man are inverted, so for example he would say *jigong* 鸡公 for *gongji* 公鸡 (rooster), or *naore* 闹热 for *renao* 热

闹 (lively), (Li Er 2007, 80). The fourth narrator explains this later (Li Er 2007: 83) as a linguistic habit of the Hakka people (*Kejiaren* 客家人).

The second eyewitness account by A Qing is written in a very colloquial, at times vulgar, style. The discrepancy between A Qing's high opinion of himself and the low style in which he expresses himself brings a great deal of humour to his narrative. Through A Qing, Li Er questions the possibility of an articulate, truthful narrative of the past. A Qing is a curious character who seems to have picked up some elements of an education that he interjects within his coarse, inarticulate narrative. He tells the person writing down his account to use *pinyin* if they are not sure how to write the Chinese characters. He also quotes people using English, and offers to write out the English word for them if they cannot spell it:

“His catchphrase was ‘Damned fool!’ .... You don’t know English? Here, I’ll write it for you.” (Li Er 2007, 100).

A Qing digresses from the main flow of the narrative about Ge Ren's life and his pursuit of him to include pieces of gossip and personal digressions. He is clearly aware of this, as revealed by phrases like:

“Right, let’s get back to the official narrative.” (Li Er 2007, 101).

A Qing talks in riddles which impedes comprehension of his account. His overly colloquial language is the wrong register for the seriousness of the story of a person's life that he is telling:

“But then in the spring of that year, Ge Cundao blew out his light forever. What does that mean? Blew out his light, snuffed it, died.” (Li Er 2007, 107)

The personal narratives are characterised by popular wisdom in the form of clichés. In the first two case studies of this thesis, folk culture has been shown to be an interesting and effective way of recounting the past, which provides an

alternative version of the past as compared to the official CCP historiography. In *Coloratura* however these clichéd fragments of popular wisdom are used to mock the confidence with which philosophies and ideologies are appropriated into ordinary discourse and taken as ‘truth’. Bai Shengtao disagrees with Ge Ren’s philosophy that the suffering of others is also one’s own suffering. Bai believes that:

“...if one lot of people are having a good life, then another lot must be having it really bad.” (Li Er 2007, 64)

The intellectual Ge Ren himself is not immune from spouting clichés that sound ridiculous, the difference is just that as an intellectual he uses a form of poetry to express this (assuming these were his words):

“Ge Ren said to me in a politic style ‘have you smelt it, the smell of the sea, the smell of salt, the smell of freedom.’” (Li Er 2007, 62)

Li Er mixes registers and cultural registers from different contexts and historical periods. This creates an immediate humour in the narrative, similar to the style of Wang Xiaobo, as will be seen in Chapter 7. It also liberates the narrative from the seriousness of linear history and puts cultural references that do not sit easily together side by side:

“Tianqiao is outside the Temple of Heaven of where the Emperor made offerings, and is early twentieth-century China’s *Along the River During Qingming Festival* and Disneyland.” (Li Er 2007, 36).

As a famous Song dynasty painting, *Along the River During Qingming Festival* would not usually be used as a metaphor together with an example of modern American (and now world) popular culture. The juxtaposition of high classical Chinese culture with modern Western popular culture is interesting in that it presents a postmodern notion of culture as not unified and pure, but composed of many disparate elements.

The third narrator, Fan Jihuai's account is told in the year 2000 sixty years after the events. He uses cultural references and speech patterns from the early twenty-first century to discuss the Chinese revolution and civil war. His use of football terminology while speaking of the civil war parodies the confidence of the popular historian to make the past accessible in modern-day language. More importantly it introduces yet another disrespectful tone and nuance into a discussion of the revolution which in turn serves to de-sanctify it from the historical discourse:

“Whatever you do don't underestimate the importance of that leather ball [football], it's the microcosm of Chinese history and reality. You like watching it too? Great, then I can explain more clearly. The sound of canons from the October Revolution gave us Marxism and Leninism. The sound of canons from Reform and Opening Up gave us Bora Milutinovic. Yes, Milu is the coach of the national team, enough of him, let's talk about the club. Li De [Otto Braun] was a coach with a foreign nationality. Foreign coaches don't understand Chinese conditions.” (Li Er 2007, 216).

Fan Jihuai is talking seriously in this mixture of colloquial and sarcastic tone. He inserts another cliché inherent in thinking about the complexities of the past and history as a discourse, that of seeing a reality that is enormous and difficult to conceptualise in one small symbol. In this case it is seeing Chinese reality in a football. Although this is a cliché, Li Er could be mischievously hinting that a football indeed contains more truth about Chinese history and reality than a rational narrative. It could on the other hand be that he is parodying such understandings of history as ridiculous. Fan continues to use the metaphor of canons sounding to describe the outbreak of revolution in Russia, going on to compare them to the Reform and Opening Up period in China in the late seventies. He compares the arrival of an overseas football coach in the Reform period to the arrival of Marxism and Leninism in China. This is a provocative and subversive statement to make. The parallelism and humour in the comparison is however reflective of popular sentiment in China in the early



twenty-first century. It mocks the revolutionary discourse but does not go any further by openly analysing the ideologies of Marxism and Leninism. By comparing the ideology that sustained China for most of the twentieth century, and that still formally is the public ideology of the present day, to an overseas football coach diminishes the continued importance of the revolutionary discourse to Chinese people.

## 6.7 Conclusion

Towards the end of the novel, the fourth narrator summarises the contribution towards understanding the past that a text such as *Coloratura* can provide:

“As for those narratives for which it’s impossible to tell if they’re true or false, while I feel despair, I have also slowly understood some sort of fact that goes like this: the narratives of each person in this book are in fact all the echoes of history. Let’s use Lao Fan’s example of the onion again: although the inside of an onion is empty, this does not in any way affect its flavour, with each layer unwrapping as onion pieces, all with the same pungent flavour.” (Li Er 2007, 284).

Li Er’s contribution to New Historical Fiction is therefore his articulation through fiction of a total distrust for the discourse of history as containing reliable facts and capable of creating a narrative that can hold and communicate ‘truth’ of any sort. He does not deny that the past can be apprehended in other ways that may constitute the ‘echoes’ of history. These echoes are by definition slightly muffled and far from the original source, but nonetheless a series of fragments in the form of echoes may provide the reader with an experience of the past. This possibility is only allowed in so far as it recognises the inherent limitations of recording the past in the construct of language. The playfulness of the narrative in *Coloratura* is also present in works of New Historical Fiction such as *Remembering 1942* by Liu Zhenyun. In this novel people’s memory of the natural disaster in 1942 in Henan is subjective and unreliable, and is composed of fragments and distortions from fifty years previously. Similarly, in

Wang Anyi's *Fact and Fiction* the protagonist tries to find an identity in the past by constructing a false family genealogy. The instability and fictive nature of the past mean that the protagonist is constantly thwarted in her attempts to find a stable identity. The mixing of fact and fiction in this imagined past has strong resonances in *Coloratura*. In Ge Fei's *Lost Boat*, breaks in the narrative disrupt the flow of the story, making interpretation and understanding on the part of the reader difficult, leaving a fragmented narrative similar to *Coloratura*. Furthermore, in Li Xiao's *Meeting in K City* historical truth and fabrication are freely mixed along with art and reality. The first-person narrator in the story attempts to recreate the biography of a revolutionary martyr, with strong echoes of the plot of *Coloratura*.

The last section narrated by Fan Jihuai is entitled 'History is written by the victors' echoing a quote by Winston Churchill (1874-1965). This is a parody of the authority that Fan Jihuai perceives himself to have, and of his superficiality in relying on cliché:

“I am also a good person, although I couldn't save Ge Ren, I'm still a good person. Otherwise, how would the newspaper say in black and white that I enjoy high prestige and command universal respect?” (Li Er 2007, 296).

Fan Jihuai is expressing the direct link between the written historical narrative and power. To him, an individual's integrity is only measured by how he or she is portrayed by the 'victors' in their historical narrative according to their values. Such a naïve statement on the part of Fan Jihuai highlights the corruption and betrayal of truth that is possible in an official historical narrative written according to one totalising view of history and for the purposes of justifying an elite in power.

In this last section, Fan Jihuai is completely honest about his cynical manipulation of power to influence the historical record as he sees fit, and in accordance with the official CCP historiography:

“As he [Ge Ren] said that the Nationalists would definitely fail and the Communists would definitely win, does my killing him not make him a martyr? Hu Shi said that history is like a young woman, you can dress her up any way you like and she becomes like that. You should know that the victorious triumph as kings while the losers become bandits, history is written by the victors.” (Li Er 2007, 297).

This quotation openly expresses the hidden logic of the official historiography of a state that relies heavily on its historical legitimacy to justify and maintain its power. Ge Ren’s accurate prediction of the outcome of history, that agrees with the official version that the Communist victory was inevitable, leads to his own death in this perverse universe of logic. The outcome of this historiography is that the direction of this history leads to the death of an individual: for his own good.

The individual is finally sacrificed for the coherence and benefit of the official historical narrative. Fan Jihuai admits this in a perverse turn of logic:

“I can say in all honesty that I did this because I was very fond of Ge Ren.” (Li Er 2007, 297)

Fan Jihuai’s ‘did this’ refers to ordering Ge Ren to be murdered so that his status as a hero of the people could not be untarnished and lose its propaganda worth. Such a warped statement shows the complete divorce from a reality informed by morals that is implied by a historical narrative that is driven by motives of propaganda and power legitimacy.

Near the end of his account, Fan Jihuai asks the journalist interviewing him not to include the absolute truth of Ge Ren’s death in her account:

“However, I’ll warn you again, best not put down what I say next into your account.” (Li Er 2007, 297).

This is a veiled threat to the journalist, especially after everything Fan has said about the victors writing history: the implication is, he will decide what goes into the record. The kind of master narrative written by those wielding power for their own legitimacy is ultimately shown as completely flawed however by this concluding section of the novel, that summarises the main message being communicated in the novel. The fact that Fan Jihuai has given an open account of events leading to the murder of Ge Ren to the journalist, including his warped morality and justifications shows that unofficial, ‘other’ narratives will always fight to record different versions of history. Li Er has shown however through the complex structure of *Coloratura* that ultimately any written narrative of events is flawed in its ability to be completely objective. The confidence of Fan Jihuai (and those whom he represents) in the power of the victorious over the historical narrative is shown to be naïve and untrue since the weight of all the fragments, voices and echoes from the past add up to a critical mass that punctures enough holes in the official narrative that it is destroyed.

Although no alternative, coherent narrative has been offered in its place, the call has been made for a different way of recording, interpreting and experiencing the past from the linear, homogenous historical narrative. Li Er suggests that a metafictional, fragmented and experimental form of fiction is the only way at the time of writing of representing some of the experiences from the past. This view of writing history is replicated in the theories of the postmodern historians such as Jenkins, Munslow and White as discussed in chapter 3. Li Er has shown how fiction can lead the way in developing such methodologies through its mastery of literary technique. *Coloratura* therefore provides another strong case in the argument that fiction has strong claims to representing the past as effectively as history. While Li Er directly attacks the revolution, his total undermining of history as a power structure is, I would argue, a more powerful attack on the official historiography of the CCP and all the claims of legitimacy that it represents. It is a fitting development of the genre of New Historical Fiction in the early twenty-first century after other novels (as was shown in section II of this thesis) have exerted great efforts on undermining the importance of revolution in modern Chinese history, culture and identity. Indeed, viewing the

past through these complexities and contradictions could constitute a first step in forging a new hybrid identity for the Mainland Chinese.

The next chapter, and final case study, will discuss the fiction of Wang Xiaobo, and continue to investigate the themes of metafiction, the carnivalesque in history, and the individual in history. It will develop the probing of history as a discourse by undermining the historicity of past, present and future time.

## **Chapter 7 – Wang Xiaobo**

The final case study in this thesis focuses on the novelist Wang Xiaobo 王小波 (1952-1997). Although he is not included by many Chinese critics in the movement of New Historical Fiction as introduced in this thesis, it will be shown below how Wang's fiction can be considered as New Historical Fiction.

### **7.1 Wang Xiaobo and his work**

Wang Xiaobo was born in Beijing in 1952, and was sent to the countryside in Yunnan province during the Cultural Revolution. He later studied for a Master's Degree in the United States of America at the University of Pittsburgh. During his time abroad, Wang Xiaobo read extensively in western literature and critical theory. As this chapter will show, this western influence is an important part of his writing, whether fiction or non-fiction. Wang Xiaobo's life came to a tragic end on 11 April 1997 when he died of a heart attack alone in his apartment in Beijing (his wife, anthropologist Li Yinhe 李银河, b. 1952, was overseas at the time). His published work was republished after his death along with unpublished works, and his fan base greatly increased. Critic Liyan Qin (in Esherick et al, eds. 2006, 256) provides a useful overview of the literary fervour that arose after Wang Xiaobo's death, that became known as the 'Wang Xiaobo phenomenon' (*Wang Xiaobo xianxiang* 王小波现象).

Wang's fiction can be divided into carnivalesque excursions into Chinese history through different periods. *The Bronze Age* is set in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), *The Golden Age* is set in the Cultural Revolution (1968-1978), and *The Silver Age* is set in an imagined future dystopia. All of Wang's novels broadly investigate the themes of freedom of thought, the absurdity created by power in the hands of the foolish, and the experiential capacities of fiction to capture the past and make it interesting; all of these themes are explored against the larger theme of history, whether the specifics of Chinese history, or the general nature of history as a written discourse used by ruling elites. The stories are told by a narrator, often known as Wang Er, who makes frequent digressions from the

stories on his own life and thoughts, and explains to the reader how he is weaving the strands of the stories together, discarding some and using others.

The titles of Wang's three trilogies of novellas are different kinds of precious or semi-precious metals, and together form a trilogy under the title of *Modern Times Trilogy* (*Shidai sanbu qu* 时代三部曲). *The Bronze Age* (*Qingtong shidai* 青铜时代), first published in 1997, contains *Temple of Longevity* (*Wan shou si* 万寿寺), *Hongfu's Night Elopement* (*Hongfu yeben* 红拂夜奔) and *Looking for Wushuang* (*Xunzhao Wushuang* 寻找无双), the main stories of which are all set in medieval China. *The Golden Age* (*Huangjin shidai* 黄金时代), first published in 1994, is composed of *The Golden Age*, *Love in the Age of Revolution* (*Geming shiqi de aiqing* 革命时期的爱情), and *The Yin-Yang Spheres of my Life* (*Wo de yinyang liang jie* 我的阴阳两界), all set in the recent past, the Cultural Revolution. *The Silver Age* (*Baiyin shidai* 白银时代) trilogy, first published in 1997, includes *The Silver Age*, *Future World* (*Weilai shijie* 未来世界), and *2015*, which are set in an imagined future dystopia.

Although not always considered as an author of New Historical Fiction, I contend that Wang Xiaobo's work contains several important aspects shared by the fiction grouped under this category. His novels are preoccupied with history as a written discourse compared to fiction, which is a characteristic of New Historical Fiction. He investigates folk culture in history through the carnivalesque aesthetic that permeates his fiction. Finally, his work is highly self-conscious and playful, which allows it to be considered as historiographic metafiction, as will be shown below. Other scholars writing in Chinese and English have in recent years also begun to view Wang's work as New Historical Fiction. A brief summary of their reasoning will be given below.

In his book on New Historical Fiction, Lin Qingxin writes:

"Wang Xiaobo's *Tales of the Tang People* and *The Age of Bronze* undoubtedly make him a NHF [New Historical Fiction] writer. Fictions included in the two

series of works are without exception ‘historiographic metafiction’. Moreover, his three trilogies, taken together, express a pessimistic view of the historical process and his critique of Chinese culture. What makes him different from other NHF writers such as Ge Fei, Su Tong and Ye Zhaoyan is his bitter irony and black humor.” (Lin Qingxin 2005, 205)

Lin (2005, 176) argues that the trilogy of the three ages represents a retrogressive concept of history, from gold, through silver to bronze. I find this argument unconvincing however as the chronology of when the ‘ages’ of mankind are set does not fit Lin’s pattern of regression. The stories set in the earliest period, the Sui and Tang Dynasties (581–907), are in the ‘bronze’ age, which is followed by the ‘golden’ age set in the Cultural Revolution. The regressive chronology from gold through silver to bronze may represent stages in the narrator’s own life span. I would argue that the different precious metals represent Wang’s brilliant transformations of history and reality into life-affirming fabrications.

Chen Xushi (2007, 93) also classes Wang Xiaobo as a writer of New Historical Fiction. Indeed, Chen asks whether there is a writer of New Historical Fiction who takes the position of intellectuals, concluding that Wang Xiaobo is one such author, citing the example of *The Bronze Age*. Chen views Wang’s fiction as an expression of Wang’s influences from Western culture (such as postmodernism), and as a search for something ‘interesting’. Chen argues that like all New Historical Fiction, Wang’s fiction uses history as its subject matter, exposing the thought and symbols behind history.

This chapter will be divided into sections on history, historiographic metafiction, and the carnival and power of the imagination. The first section on history will be further divided into sections on history as bodily oppression and history as stupidity. The chapter will argue that through the subgenre of historiographic metafiction and the power of the imagination Wang represents aspects of Chinese history in their complexity and contradictions that can be used to form the beginnings of a new identity for the Mainland Chinese. Wang can be compared to an alchemist who transforms base metals into more precious metals,



and ultimately into gold. He views Chinese history (and by extension history as a discourse) as base, repressive and uninteresting and transforms this ‘base’ material into something enjoyable, interesting and meaningful in the form of fiction.

## **7.2 History**

This section will explore the theme of history in Wang Xiaobo’s fiction. An introduction to Wang’s view of history will be given, followed by examples from his fiction. Subsections on the history of stupidity and history as bodily oppression will follow. For Wang Xiaobo, Chinese history is viewed as an expression of power on people. The control over the population by the ruling elite has stifled creativity and originality, whether by an emperor in the Tang Dynasty, by the Communist government of post 1949-China, or by an imagined government in a future dystopia.

Wang Xiaobo’s condemnation of political ideology is expressed strongly in his essay ‘The unhappy state of intellectuals’ (Zhishifenzi de buxing 知识分子的不幸, Wang Xiaobo 1997c, 10-18). Wang argues that the most terrifying thing to an intellectual (and by extension any thinking person) is to live in an age that is contrary to reason. He gives examples of scientists in history who have fought for the voice of reason, such as Galileo. Wang further identifies blind faith in the form of religious extremism as inimical to intellectuals and the development of free thought (Wang Xiaobo 1997c, 10-11). At this point in the essay, the reader has a growing feeling of Wang’s resistance to ideology in the PRC. Later in the essay, Wang is more explicit about his stance on ideology:

“In modern times, the greatest crime of an intellectual is to build a prison for their own thought. Cutting down an olive tree extinguishes the rich fertility of a large piece of land, constructing ideology extinguishes the rich fertility of thought.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997c, 15)

Wang continues in this essay to discuss the ideology and lack of freedom of thought in Chinese traditional culture. He finds ‘national learning’ (*guoxue* 国学) particularly frightening as it links traditional Chinese learning and culture to a modern nationalist agenda. This one word, ‘national’ means that no one can criticise it or express a contrary opinion (Wang Xiaobo 1997c, 17). The word ‘national’ allows people to construct false ideologies under any name, whether it is known as historiography or philosophy. Wang has linked ideology in premodern China to history and philosophy, saying that these are the two areas where the power of ideology has been most strongly exercised. Wang views ideology as imprisoning human freedom and creativity as being as pernicious in humanistic terms as the nuclear bomb in practical terms. He says that science has given the world a nuclear bomb that can destroy the world, whereas intellectuals have given ‘thought hooligans’ a terrible weapon called a ‘smoke bomb’ that exists as ideology. Although Wang is explicitly making a general point about ideology at a time when the cultural discourse was becoming more liberal in China, the implicit criticism of the official ideology of the CCP is daring and radical. This criticism of ideology finds expression in Wang’s fiction through his revealing the discourse of history to be fabricated, and through his humour and ‘carnivalisation of history’.

Wang Xiaobo as author and narrator is explicit about the centrality of history as a theme in his fiction. He says in the preface to *Hongfu’s Night Elopement* that his fiction is “the real face of history” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 252), despite his continual reference to the fictional status of his novels. He also states that the novella may show signs of influence from Fernand Braudel’s (1982-4) *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, and that despite the ‘bizarre’ elements in the stories, they still convey the essence of history.

For Wang Xiaobo, written history is completely fabricated, and is just a different form of ‘fiction’ to his novels. In *Future World: My Uncle* (*Weilai shijie: Wo de jiujiu* 未来世界：我的舅舅), the narrator is an official historian who openly admits that he invents history:

“I’ve experienced a small part of history, about thirty years I suppose, which is hardly even one per cent of all written history. I know this one per cent of written history is completely fabricated, even if there are a few elements of truth, this is not through deliberate design. As for the remaining ninety-nine per cent, I can’t easily judge whether it’s true or not, and as far as I know, nor can any person living today, which doesn’t leave much room for optimism.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997a, 65)

This confession shows a lack of faith in the objectivity of the written historical record and the ability of history to correspond to any kind of reality. Indeed, the narrator further expresses his disregard for the ‘profession’ of historian by recounting that a prophecy from a policeman when he was young that he would be a ‘bad sort’ had come true because he had written five history books. As will be seen below in the section on historiographic metafiction, the implication here is that the narrator considers it immoral to claim that history is a faithful account of the past. He believes it is better to admit openly that it is fabrication, which historiographic metafiction such as Wang Xiaobo’s novels does. The narrator views history therefore as ‘bad’ or ‘boring’ fiction since it is forbidden to include elements of ‘interest’ (*you qu* 有趣) that Wang includes in his novels.

Wang Er views his official position as a historian as relatively ‘safe’ since he can distance himself from the past, saying historical knowledge is by definition limited:

“...I now have an amulet – I am an historian, history is not understood by everyone. Once I have history, I can write down what I want to say, although even history is not full proof. If I were a minor, I would have another amulet. Everyone knows that our country protects women and children.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997a, 76)

Wang Er recognises the power of history by using the metaphor of an amulet, which gives a sense of the protection and power afforded by the position of official historian. The magic qualities of history can be used to fool people who

are not aware of its fabrications. History offers writers an official structure to express themselves although Wang Er is aware that the restrictions in place from official ideology will ultimately stifle him. In this context, the author Wang Xiaobo returns to his theme of a lack of freedom of thought in Chinese culture:

“If a Chinese person enjoys freedom of thought, he must only be thirteen years old; or he must be like my uncle, with a decaying, putrid heart that has essentially already died.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997a, 76)

Wang Xiaobo uses dream and a search for memories to dramatise the ineffability of grasping the past and that such rational attempts through the writing of history are flawed. For example, Wang Xianke feels that his life in Xuanyang Street is like a dream, and he cannot separate the states of dream or reality. This is because in his simple search for a simple fact, whether Wushuang exists, and beyond that where she is, he encounters enormous resistance and absurdity. His mind and intelligence are numbed by the experience to the extent that he is almost hallucinating. His status as a historical subject in historical time is undermined since he can make no coherent reference to the past. An important part of his search is a journey into the past to discover the whereabouts of Wushuang. His recollection of true events and dreamed ones becomes blurred:

“...as far as he was concerned, dream and memory could no longer be separated.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 528)

Wang Er the narrator intercedes at this point and tells of a comic episode while in Shanxi during the Cultural Revolution. The incident involves Wang Er sharing a bed with five or six other men in the freezing cold. They put an overcoat on the duvet to keep warm, but in the night it falls off the bed into their full chamber pot. The coat is then stuck in the frozen urine, and they have to boil it to free the coat. The absurdity and unpleasantness of the episode make it seem like a dream. (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 527). This anecdote demonstrates that when reality is pushed to its absurd and unbearable limits, life begins to resemble a dream, or in this case, nightmare.

### 7.2.1 History of Stupidity

Wang also portrays a history of stupidity in his fiction, showing that history is not just great achievements. It also includes missed opportunities, and plain stupidity. In *Hongfu's Night Elopement*, Li Jing 李靖 is a general who turns inventor for the Emperor invents many things that were never used because they were seen as subversive and dangerous. For example, he invents bellows for the kitchen fires of a restaurant (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 259). Until then, the restaurant employed people to stand in front of the ovens and blow. After a while, they started to grow beak-shaped mouths as a result of spending all their time blowing. They did not know how to use the bellows properly and did not seek to find out, and so managed to suck the fire back engulfing the restaurant in fire in the process.

In *Hongfu's Night Elopement*, Li Jing is asked by the Emperor to design a new capital city in Chang'an. Li Jing makes three designs, two of which are inspirational and creative but which are rejected by the Emperor. The first design is for a new capital by the sea so that the wind power can be utilised through building windmills, and for citizens to be inspired by the beauty of the sea and landscape. The narrator eulogises the beauty of the sea surroundings of the ancient Greeks and cites the reason for their fanciful and creative imaginations (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 393). The Emperor rejects this idea for the absurd reason that he wants his capital to be 'different from a windmill', and because he does not like the sea:

“But this design was rejected by the Emperor, the reason being ‘One’s capital should not be like a windmill’”. (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 391)

The Emperor also considers it improper that as the Son of Heaven he should walk naked on the beach and get too suntanned. Wang Xiaobo is mocking the Emperor for his lack of vision and for citing child-like, ridiculous reasons for rejecting something as important as the design of a future capital city. There are also possible overtones of the television documentary *River Elegy* whereby the

Emperor is mocked for not realising the creative and economic benefits of being by the sea similar to the praise of the blue ‘ocean’ of the West compared to the Yellow River of China. The Emperor also rejects Li Jing’s second design for Chang’an city: a city perched on the slopes of Mount Emei, similar to Venice, and powered by water. The reason for the rejection is similar to the first time:

“One’s capital should not be like a watermill.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 391).

Wang Xiaobo views Chinese history pessimistically as emperors and officials abusing their power and stifling free thought and creativity. The narrator further parodies the Emperor for not using a similar reply for his assent to Li Jing’s third design for Chang’an city built out of earth, and like all premodern Chinese cities, is powered by man power:

“This time the Emperor was satisfied, and instead of saying ‘One’s capital should not be like a pig sty’ said ‘Li Aiqing has a smart head on him, he just doesn’t know how to use it.’” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 391)

Clearly to the narrator a traditionally-designed Chinese city is like a ‘pig sty’, especially when compared to Li Jing’s brilliant, technologically advanced cities set in beautiful surroundings. The narrator argues further that there can never be too many Chinese people in order to power everything by man power, echoing and hence ridiculing as absurd Mao Zedong’s now widely discredited early policy of encouraging population growth to make the country stronger (Mao Zedong 1969, 453). When he was designing Chang’an city, Li Jing assigned each person a ‘program’ to follow in life. The narrator cites a typical ‘program’ as: “Eating – working – being obedient”. This example of the Emperor refusing Li Jing’s progressive and creative ideas illustrates how Wang sees the ‘unhappy fate of wisdom’ as a driver in the development of Chinese history and culture.

### 7.2.2 History as Bodily Oppression

Wang Xiaobo's novels continually show the physical oppression of the state, and history and culture through time, on the human body. The theme of revolution and gender in China has been extensively covered in the scholarly literature, one notable example being Liu Jianmei's work (2003). In China the emphasis has predominantly focused on female sexuality and femininity in Chinese culture; the anthropologist Fan Hong (1997, 289) has written about the physical constraint to which women's bodies were subjected under Confucianism. Wang Xiaobo is unusual for a heterosexual male writer to focus his attention on female and male sexuality and the relationship of power over male and female bodies throughout Chinese history and in Chinese culture more generally.

In *Future World: My Uncle*, Wang Er's uncle's heart condition can be read as a metaphor of restriction and prohibition of the body. Near the end of the novella, the narrator reminds the reader that his uncle had heart problems from a young age. I would argue that this could serve as a metaphor for general power, control and fear exerted over the individual in a real, physical sense. Uncle is told by the doctor that he is unable to do many things, including making love. The doctor only gives him free rein to do anything he likes if he decides not to live anymore:

“But the doctor said, if you were to decide you didn't want to live anymore, you can do anything you want.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997a, 101).

The will to live therefore becomes a constant brake on the body and on consciousness. This interpretation is further supported by the parallelism of the next sentence:

“Officials say to us, as long as you don't step out of line, you can write anything.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997a, 101).

This near-death struggle is the process of living creatively, and searching for a meaning in life. Indeed at the end of the novella *Future World: My Uncle*, the narrator says creativity comes from the death instinct:

“...so-called creativity, actually stems from the death instinct.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997a, 108)

The effect of the state on the human body can be seen in the illness of Wang Er’s uncle in *Future World: My Uncle*. His body is scarred by an operation that was carried out in the wrong place. The physical remnants of power exercised over the body can be seen in the scar on the narrator’s uncle’s body. His uncle continues to have heart problems, leading the narrator to wonder whether they operated on the wrong part of the body:

“Because the hospital didn’t act responsibly, the first time he had heart surgery was on his stomach. This was why after the operation, his heart was still in poor condition, and he now had stomach problems.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997a, 62)

The pressures of social history on the body in daily life are experienced by Wang Xianke in *Searching for Wushuang* as he is made to feel ashamed of his reproductive organs. Wang Xianke’s private parts are described in great detail as big and coarse, with too much pubic hair (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 509). This is contrasted to the gentlemen (*junzi* 君子) of Xuanyang Street, who have been circumcised and have little hair and pale skin, similar to children. This latter standard is seen as appropriate and decent. Wang Xianke’s body thus reinforces his status as an uncivilised outsider. His reproductive organs cause offence and anger; other men storm off in silence when they see him. Through this example, Wang Xiaobo is rehabilitating individual bodies that do not conform to ‘civilised’ standards as prescribed through official culture and history. Wang Xianke does not let officialdom influence his body in the way that the ‘civilised’ men of Xuanyang street do.



In *Hongfu's Night Elopement*, once Li Jing has died, his wife Hongfu decides to commit suicide as she can no longer bear to live without Li Jing (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 448). She also comes under social pressure to commit suicide as the correct thing to do. The absurdity of official power is expressed through her needing to 'apply' to commit suicide as a widow (...*shenqing wei fu xunjie* . . . 申请为夫殉节). Once she makes public her decision to commit suicide, people show her great respect. It soon becomes apparent however that once she hands herself over to the authorities she loses all freedom to decide how and when to die, and becomes like any criminal who is punished to set an example for public morality. Her preparation and death becomes a torture whereby she is starved for several days so her body is clean. She is tied up very tight and told to position herself at the right angle so that 'it looks good'. Her eyes are covered so that they don't bulge out when she is hanged, which would look "unspeakably ugly" (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 455). Hongfu protests at this treatment:

"Hongfu said, 'Goodness, what a pain! I've decided to die myself, not as a spectacle for other people!' Old Matron Wei said, surprised, 'as a widow committing suicide, of course you're doing it as a spectacle for other people!'" (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 455)

Hongfu is left hanging for days before she dies in an awkward position that is extremely uncomfortable. When she protests, she is told by Old Matron Wei that it is better to think of herself as already dead, and not to imagine she has the rights of a living person:

"Don't keep thinking you're a living person, feeling uncomfortable here or in pain there, there's no good in doing that. You'd be much better off thinking of yourself as a dead person hanging on a scaffold." (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 458)

When Hongfu tries to protest further and threatens to tell other people how she is being mistreated by Old Matron Wei, the latter tells her that her voice is too weak for other people to hear as by then she has already been hanging for a night.

The farcical absurdity that envelops this long sequence of events leading to Hongfu's death dramatises the hold of different sorts of power over the body in history. There is political oppression that demands an example be set of a widow doing the right thing by following her husband in death. There is also the cultural and social expectation that the death be aesthetically pleasing and perfect in every detail, even if this is at the expense of the comfort and wishes of the individual concerned. History is thus seen in this example as restricting the body by binding it tightly and making it 'perform' in a grotesque way before it dies. The individuality and identity of the person whose body it is are lost, and they become just a body that is acted upon by the unstoppable forces of history. The forces of history demand that the individual 'die' spiritually before dying physically.

### **7.3 'Historiographic Metafiction'**

This section will discuss the qualities of Wang Xiaobo's fiction that qualify them to be considered as 'historiographic metafiction', as termed by Linda Hutcheon (see chapter 3). Wang's novels have narrators that are self-conscious and explain to the reader the processes they are undertaking to write the narrative, which allows the novels to be classed as metafiction. The novels are often composed of two basic levels: the story of a narrator set in 1990s China and a 'fictional' story set in an imagined historical period, whether in the future or the past. The narrators' surnames are usually Wang and they situate themselves in a position close to the author. Some of the narrators are historians and bring the two levels close to each other on several occasions, ostensibly merging their 'true' reality with the 'fictional' reality that is the subject of their writing. One example is in *Temple of Longevity*:

"I've mixed up things that happened in the story and in reality together in my writing, so people will find it difficult to believe me." (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 199)

Shifting between different periods of historical time is typical of the subgenre of historiographical metafiction. One typical example of Wang Xiaobo engaging the parallel texts of the ‘present’ and ‘past’ is in *Temple of Longevity* where the narrator inserts himself into the text of the ‘past’ as a character alongside the protagonist Xue Song:

“One autumn afternoon, I waited for Xue Song in the pagoda.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 205)

Wang Xiaobo also does this in *Golden Age* through Wang Er wondering whether China has returned to an imperial system of government with his supervisor as a local chieftain:

“I even thought that maybe China had returned to feudal times, and that the army officer had become a local chieftain.” (Wang Xiaobo 1994, 27)

Wang Er makes frequent comparisons between his imagined past and the real present of 1990s China in which he lives. This is typical of historiographic metafiction in that two historical periods (in this case the Sui Dynasty and 1990s China) separated by over a thousand years collide together in one sentence, forcing a wide view of history that accommodates multiple perspectives on time:

“When Li Jing and the others lived in the city of Luoyang, everywhere was covered in muddy water...in those days when people wanted to cross the road, they had to use things called ‘stilts’...at that time ordinary people all did this, just like now ordinary people can all ride bicycles.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 254)

Wang Xiaobo’s narrators constantly show the reader how the story they are telling develops. In this way they display the qualities of metafiction in terms of fiction; in terms of history they are ‘self reflexive’ (see chapter 3, pxx):

“Continuing in this direction, the result would be clear and easy to see: Xue Song turned into a horse.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 187)

The following paragraph begins with the sentence:

“But, the story did not continue in this way.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 187)

Wang Er the narrator is honest that his texts and stories are constructed completely according to his own whim and taste:

“The above story could happen before Xue Song arrived at Phoenix Village, and could also happen after he left Phoenix Village; so, this could be the beginning of the story, or the end of the story. The woman in the story could be an old prostitute, or could be a young prostitute, Hong Xian, or another woman. Only Xue Song would not change. That’s because I like Xue Song.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 203)

In this example Wang Xiaobo implies that all texts are constructed according to the whims of their authors, and have no grounding in reality. By implication history is no different to fiction in this regard.

Novels considered historiographic metafiction often have narrators who are historians and talk about their methods of writing history in a self-reflexive way. In *Future World: My Uncle*, the narrator is a historian who exposes the absurdity of the official historiography in the future in which he lives. This absurdity is intensified by the narrator’s position of writing in an imaginary ‘future’. His comments as an official historian on the age contemporary to Wang Xiaobo writing the novel, 1990s China, are exposed as ridiculous to a reader from the 1990s (or not long after) who has experienced life in that period and can immediately see the absurdity of the explanations given in the future. The narrator informs the reader of a rule of Chinese official history: that people are not allowed to know anything about history more than thirty years into the past from the present:

“There is one thing that we all know: in China, history is limited to periods of thirty years, we can’t know about anything that happened thirty years ago. My uncle is thirty years older than me, so I don’t know much about his life – or to put it more correctly, I am not allowed to know.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997a, 57)

The narrator intersperses his account of his uncle with phrases such as “the only thing we know is...” (Wang Xiaobo 1997a, 57-8). The repetition of this statement emphasises the limits of historical knowledge, mocking serious historians who are openly modest (whether in a genuine way or not) about their historical knowledge of certain periods, people or places. The example analysed by the narrator, and the hypotheses put forward by official historians and archaeologists concerns bicycles. The attempt by the ruling elite to control the past is shown as lamentably flawed and laughable by the pronouncements of archaeologists on material remains from only thirty years ago, clearly within living memory. A professional archaeologist would of course usually deal with remains significantly older than thirty years. The bicycles that have come down from the ‘past’ of thirty years ago fall into two categories: with saddles or without. The archaeologists are puzzled by this and deduce the following hypotheses, one rational, and the other absurd. The rational hypothesis stated that the missing saddles could be explained by the assumption that they got lost over time. The absurd hypothesis claimed that the missing saddles implied that there were two types of bicycle at the time: those with saddles were for people who could be trusted, and those without saddles were for people who could not be trusted. As a result of their untrustworthiness, these people had to torment themselves physically by riding bicycles without saddles. In this case they had to torture their backsides and reproductive organs (Wang Xiaobo 1997a, 58). The narrator has some memories of that time, and thinks the latter explanation of the two types of bicycles as ‘far-fetched’. He has no choice but to respect that opinion however as the authorities trust him at that time, and he does not want to cause trouble for himself by challenging their judgement.

Situating this example in the future renders the dislocation and mockery clearer as it demonstrates the fabrication involved in making historical judgements about the past when that 'past' is in fact the present for the author and reader. There is intertextuality operating here between the comparisons of bicycles of 1990s China to people using stilts in medieval Luoyang. A dense network of references through history is operating across the word 'bicycle'. This is also an example of heteroglossia where the social and historical contexts merge resulting in a multiplicity of voices that are impossible to trace or contain one meaning. This example has shown how Wang Xiaobo treats the theme of historiography in his (meta-)fiction as absurd and epistemologically flawed.

This subsection has shown how Wang's fiction displays characteristics of historiographic fiction through its movement between levels of historical and contemporary time and its self-reflexivity. These both serve to undermine the unity of the discourse of history.

Wang denies the single voice of an official historical discourse through the use of heteroglossia throughout his fiction. As was stated in chapter 3, heteroglossia depends on the context of words and the social, historical and psychological connotations of them in an untraceable web of influences. Wang brings together different voices and languages that result in a complex narrative characterised by multiplicity rather than unity. He uses colloquial modern Chinese to narrate his stories, and his characters also speak modern Chinese filled with slang and swear words. In one example he introduces an old saying still used by people in Beijing in the 1990s:

"We Beijingers have an old saying: you can have anything except an illness and you can lack anything except money. This is indeed very true. But Wang Xianke had never experienced these two things because he was young, strong and in very good health; also because he was the brother of a prince, and only worried about having nowhere to spend his money. But later on he came to experience these two things." (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 521)

The context of an old saying and its cultural memory in contemporary Beijing is situated next to a period in history over a thousand years earlier. The associations reverberate between contemporary Beijing, the original source of the saying itself, and the Tang Dynasty. Another example of vulgar, contemporary slang is Wang Xianke's reference to his penis as "my knob (*wo de que'er* 我的雀儿)":

"This also puzzled Wang Xianke: just because my knob looks weird, that's my problem, how is it an insult to you?" (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 510)

The voices of contemporary China and Tang China meet in one utterance. Wang's narrative is full of such examples, which taken together expose the cultural, historical and social resonances that are created in any text, whether historical or fictional. The impossibility of extracting a final meaning from some utterances shows how an objective historical discourse is epistemologically flawed. In Wang's fiction, these webs of voices are visible to the reader due to the nature of Wang's metafictional style. The implication is that historical narratives try to repress this multitude of voices in an attempt to be objective and to convey the 'correct version' of events in the appropriate language (see Marwick's theory of historiography, chapter 3). Wang extends the use of heteroglossia by introducing English words that are fashionable or in common use in contemporary China to the lexicon of his Tang characters, such as 'party' (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 556), or 'taxi' (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 255). The markedly different looking script of English stands out in the page of Chinese characters and draws the eye and ear into the voices and relationships that exist between the two worlds of the Chinese and English languages as well as all their internal contexts and resonances.

#### **7.4 Carnival and the Imagination**

The history that Wang Xiaobo actually describes turns Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque on its head in one way by describing a reality that is an eternal carnival of absurdity that is repressive rather than liberating. This reality does not allow the temporary release and subversion of real carnival, but is imbued with

absurd and permanent oppression. The power wielded by emperors and officials throughout history results in the ‘unhappy fate of wisdom’ (*zhihui de zaoyu* 智慧的遭遇, Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 473), and a reality that is comically absurd in order to please the whims of those in power. This section on carnival and the imagination will also show however that within this overall atmosphere of absurd oppression, the possibility for renewal and liberation exists through individual creativity and the focus on the ‘lower body stratum’. The carnivalesque as a literary style thus facilitates rebellion against the controlling narrative of official history, whether that of premodern China or the CCP.

Wang Xiaobo fills his novels with the atmosphere of carnival through his hilarious depictions of the human body. While these descriptions are humorous, they also present the body as something entirely ‘natural’ that is not repressed or embarrassing. These depictions resist the power exerted on the body as described in the first section of this chapter. For example, the narrative is filled with descriptions of the private parts of the characters, of their bowel movements and of breaking wind. Bakhtin views such depictions of the ‘lower body stratum’ (see chapter 3) as degrading in the sense that they bring the focus of the narrative down to ‘earth’, which allows for the possibility of regeneration and vitality. Despite Wang’s inherent pessimism regarding the fate of the Chinese people in history, the prominence of the ‘lower body stratum’ in his narrative brings in the regenerative force of the carnival into his fiction. The freedom and regeneration implied in this register of the ‘lower body stratum’ is further expressed in Wang’s fiction by a metaphor of ‘exposure’. Several of the male protagonists find themselves in situations with their genitals ‘exposed’. In *Hongfu’s Night Elopement* for example, Li Jing flies quickly through the sky with the result that the prostitutes down on the street can look up and see his hairy legs and “other things” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 260). In *Temple of Longevity*, Xue Song walks naked through the tropical heat of Hunan (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 13). In *Looking for Wushuang* Wang Xianke’s genitals are ‘exposed’ and commented upon at the public baths. This metaphor mirrors the ‘exposure’ of the narrator’s method in constructing the texts of his narratives. Thus body and text intersect further through exposure. Xue Song has the characters for ‘Phoenix Army’ and



‘Governor’ tattooed on his buttocks (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 15), but they were done too lightly and so the text dissolves to become invisible. The text and body had intersected, but the text is lost from the body, showing the impermanence and renewal of the carnival. Bodies are thus shown to be dependent on other bodies and texts for their existence and identity. This implies that fixed truths about people, culture or identity are impossible.

The body is influenced by text in *The Golden Age* when a man communicates with a doctor through the written word of the text rather than by speaking directly. This man wants to see a doctor but is too embarrassed to say what he is wrong with him. Instead he writes a short note to Wang Er who is a medical scribe, saying “*dianbu teng* 电部疼” (my electrics hurt). He meant to write “*tunbu teng* 臀部疼” (my buttocks hurt), referring to his backside and haemorrhoids, hoping that the higher register of vocabulary would deflect his embarrassment. The man writes the characters, which are wrong anyway, so badly that Wang Er thinks they are “*guitou teng* 龟头疼” (my glans hurts), which he then tells the doctor. People find out about this incident, and the man is suspected of all sorts of misdeeds. The instability of the written word, compounded by the complexity of Chinese characters, leads to a medical misunderstanding. The problem of a scribe making a similar kind of mistake in premodern China is well known to palaeographers. The existence of ‘popular characters’ (*su zi* 俗字) that ‘deviate’ from the standard graphs means that reading of manuscripts can be open to several interpretations. If historical knowledge is made from such documents, this only hints at the complexity and subjectivity of constructing ‘objective’ historical knowledge. The example given concerns the penis, to which reference is frequently made in Wang’s writing, and so situates the anecdote within the ‘lower body stratum’ region. The implication is that such incidents would be considered too ‘vulgar’ to include in a historical narrative.

References to characters breaking wind feature several times in Wang’s fiction. These references arguably could be deleted as they serve no real purpose other

than to stimulate laughter. Details that could be omitted from any narrative account are included, such as the size of horse penises that embarrass bystanders (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 550). This laughter is important as part of the carnival in which the narrative is continuously immersed. The continual references to the lower body stratum serve to remind the reader of the absurdity of linear narrative that claims epistemological objectivity:

“As he was helping us into the bus compartment, my cousin didn’t manage to control his anus, and farted loudly.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 137)

Carnival is concerned with creativity, change and renewal. Wang Xiaobo uses his active imagination to create a world in which physical and temporal boundaries are constantly stretched and broken. The imagination makes history and fiction more interesting and appealing. Wang takes it for granted that his readers will not be surprised if people change into animals in his fiction. This happens often, and can be read as a metaphor for people’s adaptability in strange situations. For example, the narrator wonders what innovative ideas people will have to cope with the absurdity of having to walk around a city covered in water using stilts and holding at least two umbrellas to keep themselves dry in the rain:

“Who knows what other feats ordinary folk will manage to achieve in the future – if necessary, maybe they’ll grow six legs like insects.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 254)

The ordinary people have to carry two umbrellas with them, one to shield themselves from the spray of passing carriages, the other to shield themselves while changing out of their wet clothes.

In Wang’s novels animals form part of the background to the stories to add to the sense of creativity and fun. The presence of animals also endows the landscapes and atmosphere with mythical qualities. The absurdity of city life in Sui Luoyang for ordinary people is conveyed by piglets floating around in the water that engulfed parts of the city:

“There were countless piglets bobbing around in the muddy water. The ordinary folk and the pigs together made up a three-dimensional picture on the street.” (Wang Xiaobo 1997b, 254)

The civilised city has become a carnivalesque farmyard where water erases the hierarchy between humans and animals. In *Hongfu's Night Elopement* the roofs of the houses are covered with running rabbits. In Li Jing's new Chang'an city there are no frogs, so he makes mechanical cicadas to keep the emperor happy so that he will still hear their croaking on a summer evening. A crazy invention by Li Jing becomes a household item for people in Chang'an who must put them outside at the appropriate time in the evening to croak. Therefore within the layers of text, even the mythical animals need to be physically 'fabricated'. This has the effect of creating a wildly imaginative and playful atmosphere, while also subverting the natural world, the seriousness of official discourse (the frogs are 'made' to please the emperor) and showing how writing about the past requires great leaps of imagination on account of all the 'gaps' in material culture and historical records.

Exaggeration for comic effect in the depiction of the absurd is a device that Wang employs in his carnivalisation of history. Numbers are frequently exaggerated, with ridiculous, comic effect. Numbers are usually rational, reliable units for recording experience that enter historical records to give a sense of proportion of events. In Wang's recounting of history however, numbers are inflated into gargantuan proportions. For example, the soldiers following Li Jing around Luoyang begin to double in number, until he has 600 soldiers following him around, even when he needs to relieve himself. In the novella *2010 in The Iron Age* (Wang Xiaobo 2002), a punishment scene of mass caning takes place after an orgy. The author also provides a carnivalesque atmosphere through the grand scale of the event, the presence of the leaders and their speeches, and the fact that it will be broadcast live to the nation and possibly the whole world:

“Later on they said, if there are lots of people it will be more fun, and will seem painless.” (Wang Xiaobo 2002, 524)

The officials blame Wang Er for organizing the whole affair and on account of their innumeracy believe that he had the capacity to fill half a skip of condoms all by himself. The comic limitations of the officials also include the fact that they will repeat the same thing a thousand times, boring their listener into subservience. Wang Er says that even if they were told this, they would not understand the concept of repetition as it reposes on quantification and numerical skills.

By futurising experience, Wang Xiaobo takes it out of a specific historical context and liberates it into an imagined space. Henry Zhao argues that crossing temporal barriers in fiction requires a greater feat of imagination than crossing spatial ones (Henry Zhao 2003, 456). Zhao (2003, 467) shows that novels of the future cannot occur when the directionality of history is part of the exclusively prevailing ideology, the Grand Utopia, since no speculation about the future is required or allowed. Zhao (2003, 471) points out that only when the directionality of history is challenged and no Grand Utopia dominates society, can the imagination be called upon to produce the novel of the future. Wang Xiaobo's novels of the future, written in the 1990s, come in the second wave of such fiction in China. Following Wood's (1990, 3) argument that once the ideal of justice has been destroyed, then so the concept of time as progression towards a Grand Utopia that supported it also dies. Since time as progression has died as a concept, it befalls the novelist to invent a new trajectory of time. This virgin temporal ground has provided Wang Xiaobo with an ideal site for experimentation and fabrication.

This section has discussed the liberating aspects of Bakhtin's theory of the carnival in Wang Xiaobo's fiction. The regenerative possibilities and humour arising from the focus on the lower body stratum provide a different perspective on history. Furthermore, the concentration of experience into the 'cross-section of single moments' through polyphony is possible through Wang's experiments

with historical time. His imagining the future is a particularly effective way of achieving this.

## 7.5 Conclusion

This case study has shown Wang Xiaobo's contribution to New Historical Fiction. Wang's playful use of metafiction to expose the inner workings of a text has revealed the impossibility of a unified historical discourse. Furthermore the richness of Wang's narrative as seen through an analysis using the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia has revealed the complexity of written discourse through all the resonances and influences that exist simultaneously. Such richness denies the possibility of a unified historical discourse that provides one 'correct' account of the past. The high level of self-reflexivity allows Wang's fiction to be considered as belonging to Linda Hutcheon's category of 'historiographic metafiction'.

Wang's fiction is important in the context of New Historical Fiction in China as he integrates aspects of Chinese folk culture into his stories while creating a style of writing that is influenced by Western postmodern literary theory and fiction. This playful absurdity and mixing of Chinese folk culture and Western theory and fiction present in Wang Xiaobo's fiction are also found in other works of New Historical Fiction such as *The Legend of Hometown Togetherness*. In this novel Liu Zhenyun mixes past and present, East and West, merging objects and people from premodern China and the present day, similar to Wang Xiaobo in *The Bronze Age*. Furthermore, the fantastical aspects of Wang Xiaobo's fiction find resonances in other works of New Historical Fiction. For example works such as *Red Sorghum* and *White Deer Plain* are infused with myth and legend. *Red Sorghum* also displays elements of metafiction. Ye Zhaoyan's "Story of the Date Tree" contains multiple plots within the narrative framework. The story explores themes such as writing and lying, revenge and revolution, and sex and

existence by interweaving historiographic, fictional, and metafictional texts into one narrative (Lin Qingxin 2005, 54). Such a mixture of texts is typical also of Wang Xiaobo's novels.

Wang Xiaobo has deflated the authority of official history by his portrayal of the large part that stupidity and absurdity plays in that history. He has depicted Chinese history as one of intellectual and bodily repression, but crucially his deployment of the carnival in literature and his rich imagination provide a way of expressing and understanding the absurdity and repression. The use of futurity in Wang's novels highlights the extent of his experiments with fabrication and the imagination. The multiple stories and layers present in Wang's fiction, and his mixing of Chinese folk culture and Western theory and fiction provide a new cultural hybrid, from which a new identity relevant to concerns of 1980s Mainland Chinese intellectuals can be seen to be emerging. His experimentation with literary form could also offer a new style and approach for writing history for Chinese historians.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis set out to investigate the relationship between fiction and history in the post-Mao period in Mainland China and the implications of this relationship within the context of political ideology and state legitimacy. This was done through an overview of the movement of New Historical Fiction and the lens of four case studies taken from the movement. This concluding chapter will summarise the analyses of the case studies, and address the following considerations: the contribution of the fiction in the case studies to the movement of New Historical Fiction; the extent to which the fiction analysed is able to 'rewrite' history, and the role it could play in constructing a new identity for the Mainland Chinese people of the late twentieth century and beyond.

New Historical Fiction in China was defined in chapter 1 as fiction produced after 1986 that deals with history or the past. Characteristics of New Historical Fiction as identified by Chinese critics may be briefly summarised as fiction that aims to destroy the unifying myth of 'history' as an objective account of the past, including displacing the centrality of the role of revolution in twentieth-century Chinese history. Another important characteristic of New Historical Fiction is that it explores the realm of folk culture (*minjian wenhua* 民间文化) from a new perspective, compared to the CCP's version of history, which has been used for political propaganda from the 1950s onwards. This fiction allows an investigation of culture on its own terms, a reflection of the folk culture of Bakhtin's carnival, not an officially sanctioned version of 'folklore'. Finally, New Historical Fiction has absorbed influences from Western postmodern critical theory and literature that include a high degree of self-awareness expressed through metafiction.

### **Contribution to New Historical Fiction**

This section will discuss the contribution made to New Historical Fiction by the novels in the case studies. The first two case studies in Section II of the thesis illustrate how the novels analysed subvert official CCP history by de-

revolutionising twentieth-century Chinese history and the concept of a directional history that progresses towards a future utopia. The last two case studies in Section III show how the capacity and authority of history as a discourse to record the past objectively is subverted by the authors. The following summarises the analyses of these two subversions, beginning by considering the portrayal of revolution in Section II.

### Revolution and Folk Culture

As has been demonstrated in chapter 1, a rejection of the revolutionary legacy in modern Chinese history and culture is highly subversive in view of the importance attached to this legacy by the CCP in the 1990s and up to the time of writing. The central points in the portrayal of the process of revolution in the case studies as a group are outlined below to show how the ideology of revolution has been discredited in the works of fiction analysed.

The revolution is portrayed in the fiction as a superficial, artificial process that has to contend with other thought and cultural systems. The implication of the strong representation of folk culture in *White Deer Plain* and *Hometown's Chrysanthemums* is that the new philosophical, political and cultural concepts inherent in the class struggle of the revolution are absorbed by the deep narrative of folk culture that exists in the two villages. Other themes and concerns about the first fifty years of the twentieth century in China are given equal if not greater prominence. Jenkins (1991) argues that the multiplicity of historical narratives and genres destabilises the past and allows for 'new' histories to be made from different points of view. Folk culture offers a mode for expressing the experience of twentieth-century Chinese history from a different view point to that of revolution. The extensive use of folk culture in the fiction analysed in the case studies in this thesis shows how this fiction further uses methods of destabilising the past and de-revolutionising twentieth-century Chinese history that are common to works grouped as New Historical Fiction.



In *Hometown's Chrysanthemums*, the theme of individual and family, human instinct battling against others in petty power struggles overrides any new utopian ideology or promise of immediate emancipation. Furthermore, the representation of revolution and history is fractured by the multiple forces operating through the heteroglossia that exists in the representation of a multitude of voices in the orality of the novel. The superficiality of the revolution as a new 'fad' is felt in *White Deer Plain* through Heiwa's physical return to the village as the locus of traditional Chinese culture and values before a change in the political system and values occurred; a 'return' to home values physically expressed by his bowing to the family grave. The implication here is almost that the revolution was seen as an invading, aggressive ideology that tore people from their 'home' culture.

The superficiality of the revolution is further expressed alongside an even more negative viewpoint that the revolution is 'unnatural'. The political changes that occurred in the twentieth century in China are portrayed as going against Chinese nature. Despite the seemingly amoral universe depicted by Liu Zhenyun in *Hometown's Chrysanthemums*, if the villagers do not see any point initially (gain of wealth or power in their case) in causing violence and conflict, they will not naturally fight against one another. The novel makes it clear that the whole village is dominated by fighting and violence, and so there is no need for an outside force to intrude and create extra conflict. The community in the novel is comically told they have failed in their struggle sessions because there was not enough conflict displayed, and failed to undertake land reform which was achieved too quickly and with too much equity. This sarcastic parody, with the 'success' of land reform in the novel being 'wrong' and criticised, reveals the absurdity of the values inherent within it. Liu Zhenyun thus portrays the process of land reform as inciting the natural greed inherent in human beings and driving them towards conflict unnecessarily. This parody is particularly keen, as the community involved is known for being more than capable of generating its own conflicts according to its own laws and circumstances. Revolution is therefore portrayed as adding fuel to an already flammable situation.

Liu Zhenyun develops the point of an immoral revolution by putting morally suspect characters in positions of authority in the new social order. For example, the character Lao Jia is entrusted to communicate the new revolutionary values to the people of the village, however they cannot take him seriously as he is a morally flawed character himself. The lack of understanding of an outside ideology imposing itself in a community with a long history of personal conflict and where people know each other very well is shown to be ridiculous. Once the characters realise what the new ideology of class struggle allows them to do, the phrase ‘the advantages of revolution’ enters the local vocabulary; with a recognition of the profit to be gained from revolution, they are only too happy to participate actively.

In *White Deer Plain*, the negativity of the revolution is expressed by considering the revolution as worse than a natural disaster, inflicting itself on the land of the village, and by implication on the land of Chinese culture; however natural disasters are bound by the regenerative laws of nature and therefore eventually end.<sup>54</sup> In this comparison, Chen Zhongshi seems to be implying that the revolution has a more negative effect on the Chinese land and culture than natural disasters because it is man-made and unsuited to the local conditions. The revolutionary ideology tries to ignore the centuries of tradition that live in the village. In a culture that has traditionally respected the energy flows of the land and sought to integrate humankind and nature, depicting the revolution as upsetting that natural balance that sustains communities is a harsh condemnation of an ideology that was supposed to be liberating. The novel presents the natural world as having a historical memory, with the land on which the changes are being enacted referred to as an ‘ancient land’. Thus the political changes are not only felt by the people towards whom they are directed, but the unity of the people with their environment is also affected. The superficiality of the revolution can also be seen in its inability to provide an organic, integrated vision for the future for a culture (symbolised by the ‘village’) that prefers to find some form of workable balance and harmony with the natural environment in which

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<sup>54</sup> This is the case unless those laws are broken so badly that the ecological balance is destroyed permanently.

they live. The background of folk culture in *White Deer Plain* and *Hometown* is similar to the ‘mythical method’ of writing history discussed in chapter 3. This way of writing about the past reveals the bonds between the ancient past and the present day and allows for a wider range of human experiences to be expressed.

The case studies in this thesis have shown that New Historical Fiction has offered a number of alternative and meaningful understandings of the past that are different to the official CCP historiography. As Henry Zhao (2001b, 451) has proposed, the outpouring of memoirs in the post-Mao period has made a linear, coherent historical narrative impossible to construct, unless a totally new official historiography is developed to accommodate the proliferation of voices making claims on history. The demand for a vision of history that allows for a more pluralistic ideology and historiography encompassing local experience and knowledge, traditional values and folk culture is overwhelming and shakes any firm belief in CCP historiography to offer a meaningful expression of China’s modern past. The case made by Chen Zhongshi through *White Deer Plain* for understanding the true course of the twentieth century in China as one of slow, uneven change rather than abrupt, radical change stands as a powerful alternative to the CCP official historiography.

In the case studies, one of the most powerful rejections of this linear, directional and progressive conception of history as espoused by official CCP historiography is the view of historical time as circular. Both *White Deer Plain* and *Hometown’s Chrysanthemums* present historical time in the two villages as cyclical. In both novels the Chinese idiom *gaichao huandai* 改朝换代 (the rise and fall of dynasties) recurs as a leitmotiv. This phrase betrays a cynicism with regard to political change that is deeply embedded in the Chinese historical cultural memory through such idioms. The four sections of *Hometown’s Chrysanthemums* begin and end with the same themes. At the end of the first section, the author concludes that the next generation has grown up and is ready to continue the same patterns of behaviour as their ancestors. Heiwa’s return to Confucian values symbolises a kind of temporal ‘homecoming’. Critics have pointed to conceptions of the circularity of time as having deep roots in Chinese

culture, for example, mythologist Wang Xiaoliang sees the Chinese creation myths as displaying concepts of circular time, describing them as ‘circularly returning to the original order’ (quoted from Yang & An 2005, 76). Wang also sees the concept of circular time as ‘deeply influencing’ classic Chinese novels such as *The Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, *The Dream of Red Mansions*. This cultural conception of time is strengthened by the circularity of the natural world felt in *White Deer Plain*.

The above analysis has shown how the works analysed in the case studies destabilises, and reflects an alternative view to the official CCP historiography by de-revolutionising twentieth-century Chinese history through negative portrayals of revolution and the extensive use of folk culture as an alternative discourse. This destabilisation ensures that the novels make an important contribution to New Historical Fiction.

#### Farewell to ‘History’

The case studies illustrate how the fiction subverts history as a discourse along with its ability to record the past objectively; another important contribution to New Historical Fiction. The fiction analysed in the last two case studies of section III achieves this in a number of ways that will now be summarised.

Due to the possibilities for experimentation with language and tone inherent in fiction, it is the most effective tool for exposing the intertextuality of other textual narratives such as history and the fluidity between history and fiction. The craft of the novelist is well suited to a thorough investigation of the assumptions and rules of that narrative, and for allowing the multiplicity of the past to be expressed through the forces of heteroglossia and polyphony. Through these forces, fiction seeks to capture a greater range of human emotion and response to historical events. The literary effect of the carnival<sup>55</sup> is also employed by Li Er and Wang Xiaobo as part of this strategy to subvert reason and allow the creative qualities of the imagination to flourish.

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<sup>55</sup> See Berg 2002, 202-3 and 355-365 for a discussion of carnival in a Chinese literary context.

The metafictional qualities in Li Er's and Wang Xiaobo's novels make the reader aware of the artifice of fiction and by implication the artifice of history, that both novelists deride through their use of parody and sarcasm. Li and Wang's fiction can further be classified as historiographic metafiction as their work reveals the different narrative strands that can potentially constitute a historical narrative, and the problems that arise from contradictions and multiple versions. The different versions of stories told for example in *The Bronze Age* dramatise the different types of emplotment (as conceived by White) through which stories and histories can be recounted.

Li Er fully exploits the form of the novel in *Coloratura* to expose the fabrication inherent in the construction of a historical narrative. The novel is composed by the juxtaposition of fragments of texts by different narrators addressing different audiences, all claiming to be true eyewitness accounts of past events. Apart from the three eyewitness accounts, there is a fourth narrator who is presented as a historian seeking to find the true version of the events from the fragmentation of texts and the occasional photograph. The proliferation of different versions and the awareness on the reader's part that each narrator's version becomes less and less trustworthy, imposes the task of 'reading' and interpreting history on to the reader him or herself. Li Er thus exposes the intertextuality inherent in any written narrative by revealing the fragments of texts and different viewpoints expressed through a range of narrators. The dynamic complexity of the past can be experienced through Kristeva's concepts of the horizontal axis of the relationship between writer and reader and the vertical axis of the relationship of the utterance to a past or present literary corpus. The change in viewpoint of the different narrators exists in a simultaneity and tension reminiscent of Bakhtinian polyphony, which also serves as a technique to represent the past in a narrative form.

The prevalence of heteroglossia, polyphony and carnival in Wang Xiaobo's fiction shows the complexity of narrative in the simultaneity of resonances and influences from within the text, and from different versions of the same story.

The authority of the discourse of history is further subverted by Wang's depiction of the stupidity and absurdity that exist in history. The occurrence of futurity in the fiction of Wang Xiaobo is an instance of the novel exploiting the possibilities of fabrication and the imagination to the full. Futurity is one of the strongest refutations of directional linear history, which has a set course towards a preordained future, as it must by definition be imagined and invented.

Section III of the thesis has therefore shown how the fiction analysed subverts the concept of a monolithic history that claims objectivity in recounting the past. The next section will now discuss the potential methodologies offered in the fiction for writing the new kind of history as espoused by postmodern critics such as Jenkins and Munslow.

### **Methodologies for a 'New' History**

Paradoxically many of the techniques and methods used by New Historical Fiction to subvert the discourse of empiricist history generally, or CCP history specifically may be used to write a 'new' history of the sort advocated by postmodern historians such as Jenkins and Munslow. In other words, the very methods used by fiction to subvert history, may be used to write history. This section will discuss possible methodologies for writing the different kind of history that New Historical Fiction may be able to offer. The use of myth and folk culture in New Historical Fiction could provide a model for integrating stories and symbols from the ancient past into a history (or histories) that would provide a cultural continuity between the ancient past and present, as well as possibly constructing meaning from history, culminating in a new form of writing such as 'mythistory'. The exposure of the multiple discourses, languages, and intertexts that operate in any attempt to compose a narrative may provide a way of expressing complexity and ambiguity in a depiction of the past. Within those discourses the heteroglossia and polyphony of individual words may enter into dialogue with each other, permitting a fuller expression of the forces operating in a particular historical moment.

The different viewpoints evident from polyphony and intertextuality and the numerous emplotments in the fiction in the case studies could allow for a variety of conflicting views of history to co-exist in the same narrative without interpretation or hierarchy of importance. The reader would have to enter into dialogue with the historian and text to find meaning from the multiplicity of viewpoints. Different hypotheses on the meaning or cause of historical events could be juxtaposed for the reader to decipher in a way similar to the methods employed by the empiricist historian. *White Deer Plain* shows how the contradictions of history can be expressed through the local history of one village.

The self-reflexivity displayed by the novels in the case studies through their metafictional qualities reminds the ‘new’ historian of the importance to adopt a reflexive methodology and to state their position clearly at frequent intervals throughout the text. As Jenkins (1991, 69) argues, a neutral or central viewpoint is not possible: historians must be aware of how their own methodologies and approaches shape the construction of their narratives and their interpretations of the past.

The above points are purely tentative and intended as models for historians to investigate. Critics such as Mali (2003, 13) and White (1992, 99) have noted that historians could learn a lot from the literary imagination of novelists. The challenge is to write a ‘new’ history that takes full advantage of these methods appropriately for expressing the past as ‘history’ rather than ‘fiction’. As this thesis has argued however, maybe such a distinction is no longer possible, and historians will have to discover a radical new way of writing about the past. In the West, some historians are beginning to write history in this way. One example is the British historian Simon Schama (b. 1945) who uses a highly literary style in his history writing, employing “creative modes of multiple narration” (Halttunen 1992, 631). Halttunen identifies the playful intellectual qualities of Schama’s book *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (Schama 1991), but finds it falls short of writing actual history. This radical way

of writing history is very recent, and it remains to be seen whether it will develop or be dismissed as a 'fictionalisation' of history.

In China, the inclusion of themes not usually found in the official histories of the CCP constitutes a call from the authors of New Historical Fiction for a new way of thinking about and recording the past in the PRC that claims equality with the discourse of official history. This new way represents a radical break from the traditional discourse and discipline of national history.<sup>56</sup> The complexities of social and cultural change and continuity experienced by people in Mainland China in the twentieth century requires a new, more nuanced historiography for people in the present day to begin to make sense of the recent past for themselves. This new stream of narratives and voices may not be a particularly 'neat' way of understanding the modern past, and indeed shows that it is no longer possible to write history in an objective, neutral way. However, until greater historical distance is possible, this fragmented 'history' offers a better resource and conceptual apparatus for the Chinese people to extract cultural meaning from their recent history and move towards an identity of the future without recourse to simple nationalism. The achievement of the movement of New Historical Fiction has been to identify and analyse the problems facing a historian in contemporary China as well as suggesting other themes and materials to include in the historical narrative. It may be that the account of the past implied by New Historical Fiction cannot be called 'history' at all in its traditional sense, but is a disparate category used as a temporary cultural repository until a completely new cultural ideology and historiography is developed in China.

## **Identity**

I would argue that the fiction in the case studies constitutes the beginning, even if tentative and modest, of the construction of a new identity for the Mainland

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<sup>56</sup> Themes not present in official histories in premodern China have always been included in literary works, see Berg (ed) 2007, XIII-XX. The difference between premodern China and contemporary China is that New Historical Fiction is filling a real gap left by the ideological inadequacy of official history. One can thus claim that New Historical Fiction represents one of the many attempts in Mainland China to replace official history.



Chinese people. There are naturally many other important sources for construction of a complex 'Chinese' identity from the space of the Chinese language within and beyond the political borders of the People's Republic of China, and the Chinese diaspora. These other sources however, are beyond the scope of this thesis. This section will offer some considerations on the contribution to the formation of a new identity for the Mainland Chinese from New Historical Fiction in China.

New Historical Fiction does not provide a coherent vision of the twentieth century in China. The fiction is more focused on breaking down the edifice of the revolutionary discourse in CCP official historiography, and questioning the discourse of history itself. The novelists are not offering one alternative vision based on a clear historiography; through the themes analysed in the fiction, one can see patterns appearing for a new way of viewing the recent past. The view offered through the range of styles such as the carnival, parody, the absurd, folk culture, rehabilitating ancient thought systems, is multi-faceted and at times contradictory. Through the meta-qualities of many of the texts discussed, the reader is required to fill in the gaps in meaning for him or herself. The fiction manages to provide a cultural context and psychological profiles through the characters for understanding the twentieth century up to and including the Cultural Revolution.

Lingchei Letty Chen (2006, 12) argues that 'identity' refers to cultural identity, which in turn refers to the way individuals understand themselves in relation to their social environment, such as family and society, as well as to more ephemeral notions such as history and tradition. The multiplicity of voices and localities depicted through intertextuality, heteroglossia and polyphony in the fiction in the case studies expresses a greater range of experience from twentieth-century history in Mainland China than would be permitted in official CCP history. The focus on Chinese folk culture and its combination with methods of writing from Western literary theory and literature present an opportunity to construct a new cultural hybrid through which an identity relevant to contemporary China could be articulated. Such a hybrid would also be able to

contain contradictions and conflicting viewpoints of history. Lingchei Letty Chen (2006, 24) states that a hybrid identity implies a subversion of canonised and dominant culture. The extent to which New Historical Fiction may contribute to such a hybrid identity remains to be seen.

### **Future Research**

This thesis has analysed a number of examples of New Historical Fiction to determine the extent to which they present literary challenges to the official historical master narrative in twentieth-century China. The question of the extent to which elements of the CCP actually do wish to reject the Maoist revolutionary legacy has not been investigated in this thesis using a methodology from the political sciences. However, an investigation to judge attitudes within the CCP towards a public change in official ideology would be worthwhile considering the findings of this thesis, which show cultural products such as fiction to be providing alternative views of history that do not sit comfortably with the public face of mainstream CCP ideology from the 1990s to the present day.

This thesis has suggested that the awards of prestigious literary prizes such as the Mao Dun prize could point to the desire from within the CCP to debunk and remove the moral significance of the Chinese revolutionary experience in Chinese history. Other experiences and processes of change are now needed to provide the Chinese people with a wider lens through which to view their modern past and understand their present. This issue could be the beginning of a study of the relationship between different elements of the CCP with artists and writers.

### **Final Conclusions**

The ability of New Historical Fiction to provide a meaningful alternative in understanding China's twentieth century and the transition from the Qing Empire through the Republic to the People's Republic could be a temporary phenomenon while official history is silent on the significance of the revolution in China's

history. Indeed, no coherent narrative of modern Chinese history from the Revolution down to the present day has been put forward either by official historiography or unofficial historiography. Such a narrative may well no longer be possible or desirable after the proliferation of viewpoints expressed in fiction and other cultural media. Fiction has the potential to lead the way for a more pluralistic reading of history from a range of viewpoints and theoretical perspectives. The exposure of the process of ‘fabricating’ the narrative of history provided in the four case studies and other New Historical Fiction may sharpen the critical eye of the Chinese public when considering the twentieth century and their recent past. Readers of Li Er and Wang Xiaobo may view the outpouring of real memoirs and eyewitness accounts, as well as historical narratives by specialists and establishment-approved academics with a more informed and critical awareness. While the novels may not have offered concrete answers to factual historical questions, they have offered a cultural rejection of the values of Marxist-Maoist linear history driving society forwards towards a Communist utopia. The revolutionary past that was once consulted for moral inspiration and social direction and progress is now deflated as a drive against Chinese ‘nature’, whether the culture, the people, or the land of China.

The reduction in importance of the revolution could indicate an official desire for a strategy of gradually moving away from a Marxist-Maoist ideology. It may be suggested that the government is slowly moving towards a completely new ideology and legitimacy to rule by completely disassociating itself from its communist past. The government (or elements within it) seems to be preparing the ground through nationalism and an appeal to Chinese culture and tradition to establish a new legitimacy. The CCP is possibly realising that it can only stay in power by creating a whole new base of legitimacy and ideology to support it.

Finally, it is worth reiterating critic Zhang Qinghua’s (1998, 201) judgement of contemporary Chinese literature as making a great contribution by reconstructing a historical meaning that has not been possible in theoretical discourse or in the discipline of history itself. Fiction has taken on the role of exploring new terrain ahead of society before an official decision is taken to steer history in a new

direction. Zhang also argues that New Historical Fiction is not just a Western by-product, but is significant for the development of Chinese culture:

“...the wave of contemporary Chinese New Historical Fiction is not the result of the direct ‘direction’ of theoretical methodology from Western New Historicism, it is the product of the deconstruction and changing shape of the whole of contemporary Chinese culture, and as part of this, shifts in the historical consciousness of contemporary Chinese people must occur...” (Zhang Qinghua 1998, 207)

This thesis has shown how New Historical Fiction in China subverts the official history of the CCP as well as the discourse of history more generally. The undermining of the specifics of revolution and the authority of history in Chinese culture on the one hand constitutes a significant threat to the legitimacy of the CCP. Indeed, the revolutionary legacy is still an important part of official ideology in 1990s China. The fiction in this category provides a new and radical view on the Chinese twentieth century that official history and historiography more broadly cannot provide. The methodologies and literary styles employed by this group of novelists may be able to lead the way for a ‘new’ kind of history to emerge, a history that can contribute to the ongoing process of a new hybrid identity being forged for the contemporary Mainland Chinese.

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