

MAGICAL REALISM IN POST-MAO CHINESE LITERATURE

A THESIS

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INTRODUCTION:

There are many theoretical discourses on the term “magical realism” in terms of its definition, origin and style etc., but a standardized answer remains unattainable under the constant debate and development of this relatively new literary genre, though systematical launching toward the goal had been made. In fact, even the basic statement that magical realism is a literary genre could not be made, since some critics consider it to be a ‘mode’ rather than a literary genre.¹ But it is without question that mentioning magical realism to anyone who has heard of the term, he or she would immediately perceive the images of Latin America. It is then ironic that the term magical realism actually originates from Europe, coined by art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe German post-expressionist painting². However, with few exceptions, the prevailing view among critics is that Roh’ s concept, and German post-expressionism for that matter, have little to do with Latin American literature. By the time the term migrated into Latin America in the 1940s, magical realism has formally mutated for a few times already. And in the very beginning, magic realism was developed in Latin America by three pioneers who were influenced by French surrealism to develop their own narrative modes: Miguel Angel Asturias, Arturo Uslar-Pietri and Alejo Carpentier.

¹ Ignacio Lopez-Calvo mentions in “On Magical Realism as an International Phenomenon in the Twenty-First Century” that magical realism has been considered a mode because this style or technique can be used across literary genres and films. xxix.

²Camayd-Freixas, Erik. “Theories of Magical realism.” *Critical Insights: Magical Realism*(Grey House Publishing,2014) 3

Its flexibility and fluidity, however, represent an unlimited potential for it to be re-utilized and re-explored. Erik Camayd-Freixas, after tracing the developments and debates around magical realism, concludes that “there is a tradeoff in theorizing magical realism: the more precise and rigorous the definition, the fewer the works that meet such strict criteria; conversely, the more inclusive the term, the vaguer the definition.”³ Thus, in order to preserve its constructive capacity, I would not go into the enormous bibliography on the subject but merely focusing on the basest working definition of it which involves its ability to depict reality objectively but with a magical dimension.

Thanks to its flexibility and fluidity, while a literary mode with strong landmark and tag of Latin American, magic realism is now becoming a global product, traversing boundaries of languages, nationality and times. Kim Anderson Sasser mentions that “Following the boom of the 1950s and 1960s, magical realism has now become been written by authors from innumerable countries of origin and thus is not the sole property of Latin Americans.”⁴ And China is among those countries that has received the most influence of magical realism.

In China, literary creation has been centralized and restricted to a small domain for few decades due to the Communist Party and Mao’s political control and institutional censorship, especially during the cultural revolution from 1966 to 1976.⁵ Not only the diverse voices are repressed into a monotonous expression and simplified thematic diagram, but that all literary

³ Erik, 14

⁴ Kim Anderson Sasser, *Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism*. Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2014 p.1

⁵ Richard King mentions in “Chinese Literature Post-Mao” that the final decade of the Mao era, the Cultural Revolution, previously hailed in the Chinese press as Mao’s crowning triumph, was castigated as a time of brutality, irrationality and economic stagnation. also mentions that during the final decade of Mao era, art had focused on struggles along class and political lines, dominated by heroic figures utterly loyal to Mao, with their adversaries exposed and humiliated. And the class enemies refer to those considered as feudalistic and bourgeois.

productions and ideologies are rigidly served for political purpose. One of the most representative and probably the only literary form during the time becomes the revolutionary opera, or the Eight Model operas which tell stories from China's recent revolutionary struggles against foreign and class enemies and glorify the People's Liberation Army and the Mao's thoughts.⁶ As a result, Chinese literature entered an ice age and became the wasteland when the literary world was bereft of any freedom, diversity, and thus vitality and creativity.

Following the death of Communist Party chairman Mao Zedong in 1976, China enters the New era (1978-) which signifies a brand-new stage for China, economically, sociologically and culturally. In all of the sudden, Chinese writers are given back the pens which were once taken away by the government. The eagerness to rethink, reflect and redefine Chinese culture and history could be seen in nearly every Chinese writer's works. And a literary genre called wounded literature immediately came out, portraying the suffering and traumatic experiences of Chinese intellectuals. To many extent, the category of wounded literature remains as a realistic depiction and reflection of history, by which I am suggesting that its political significance far exceeds the aesthetic significance. And Chinese writers are going beyond that to further revitalize Chinese literature.

In Zhong Xueping's *Masculinity Besieged*, while the main focus is the link between the male search for masculine identity and the intellectual movement in search of cultural roots, the presumption on which all of his argument is based offers us a way to understand the background of the New Era, as it is the period when "intellectuals once again took Chinese culture to task, advocating wenhua fansi, or 'rethinking and reexamining the culture'"⁷. Another critic, Zhang

⁷ Zhong, Xueping, *Masculinity Besieged?: Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of late Twentieth Century*. Duke University Press, 1997 p.150

Xudong, mentions that literary productions in the 1980s were often subject to a modernist reductionism, which set as its goal to sunder the “modern” and “innovative” from the “backward” and “obsolete.” Under this aesthetic censorship, not only the literary New Era as a whole, but also the modernist movement were practically separated from their prehistory and from their current social, political and ideological contexts.⁸

If we take a close look at the literary trend of Chinese literature of the era as reflected from the two critics mentioned above, we would probably realize a paradox in terms of New era Chinese literature. On one hand, writers are eager to reexamine and reevaluate traditional Chinese culture, hoping to draw from it the energy and nutrition for literary creation, and more importantly a sense of cultural roots to reconstruct cultural identity. But on the other hand, with modernization as a driving force, Chinese writers are struggling to break from the chain of the past and the old stuffs which stand in opposition to the modernization. Kirk mentions, for example, that “Like the May Fourth writers, who portrayed themselves as emerging from the shackles of a deadening Confucian tradition, post-Mao writers saw themselves as struggling against the legacy of an equally oppressive Maoist system.”⁹ Suffering from the centralized and repressive force for a long period, Chinese writers are hesitating to embrace the cultural legacy and traditional culture that have been used and standardized as part of the repressive force in the past few decades.

Along with the paradox is another important phenomenon during the new era—the influx of foreign culture and literatures. The political policy of reform and opening enables Chinese writers to encounter foreign works previously condemned as pernicious. Under those

⁸ Zhang, Xudong, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reform*. Duke University Press, 2000 p.102

⁹ Kirk A. Denton, *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*. Columbia University Press, 2016 p.16

circumstances, it would be interesting to see what literary phenomenon and foreign influence would stand out in such a transformation point of China. As it turns out, in China, since the 1980s, Latin American literature, especially the internationally well-known *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has gained unprecedented acceptance and popularity in contemporary China, and along with that is the inflow of the literary genre magic realism in which Chinese writers find unlimited potential. Traces and evidence of the huge impact of magical realism on New era Chinese literature could be found everywhere from the personal accounts and interviews of Chinese critics and writers. One Chinese writers, Wang Meng, for example, has mentioned in an interview that “Many of us [writers] admire Marquez. We are influenced by Kafka when writing about psychopathy, we are influenced by Aimatov when writing about humanitarianism, but among all Garcia Marquez has made a most powerful influence.”¹⁰ Zhang Wei, another writer who I will be focusing on later in this paper, also openly mentions in an interview that “he [Marquez], is charming, and his influence in new era Chinese literature has overpassed all other foreign writers.”¹¹ The literary critic Gao Xudong then concludes in *Comparative Literature and twentieth century Chinses Literature* that “it’ s not an exaggeration to say that One Hundred years of Solitude has influenced a whole generation of Chinese writer. Mo Yan’ s *Red Sorghum* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hip*, Han Shaogong’ s *Bababa*, Wang Anyi’ s *Baotown* have all been influenced, to different extent, by Latin Magical realism.”¹²

¹⁰ 王蒙：《关于 90 年代小说》（About novels of 1980s），《王蒙讲稿》，上海文艺出版社 2001 年 1 月版

¹¹ <http://book.sina.com.cn/author/subject/2007-04-24/1435213994.shtml>

¹² 高旭东：《比较文学与二十世纪中国文学》（Comparative literature and 20th century Chinese literature），人民文学文学出版社 2003 年 7 月版 p104

Why among all foreign literary genres would magic realism stand out? What could we tell from this phenomenon? And how does magical realism shape post-Mao Chinese literature? While there may never be a right answer, those are some interesting questions to consider. In this thesis, I intend to examine the incorporation of magical realism as both a writing mode and a thematic approach through close analysis of three representative texts of the New Era. By mentioning magical realism as a writing mode and thematic approach, I'm suggesting that rather than answering directly to the question "Why magic realism stands out," I would be basing my paper more on a practical dimension, on what magic realism brings to post-Mao Chinese literature and how it affects post-Mao Chinese literature. And to examine magical realism in post-Mao Chinese literatures, I decide to divide the thesis into three thematic sections. For the first section, I would like to investigate the representations of regional cultures and construction of communities through the use of magical realism. In another word, how magical realism helps to build the big pictures in post-Mao literature. In the second section, I would look more specifically into the texts and line out the hidden power structures in those novels to examine how subaltern voices are reflected through the use of magical realism. The final section

The research on magical realism's practical values then leads me to my central argument of this thesis. Coincidentally or not, Chinese magic realism works of the New Era represent a shared pattern of deviation from the centralized, authoritative and mainstream literary representations into the more peripheral and marginal focal points. At the same time, by implanting magic realism on the large ground of China, post-Mao Chinese literature revitalizes diversity in cultural values and forgotten past that have been suppressed and centralized for few decades, resulting in the reconstruction of cultural identity and national consciousness.

The three literary texts I'm using are *The Red Sorghum* by Mo Yan, *The Song of Hedgehog* by Zhang Wei, *Ash to Ash Dust to Dust* by A Lai. *The Red Sorghum*—probably the most internationally well-known one among these three novels due to Mo Yan's winning of Nobel literature prize in 2012, tells a historical romance that revolves around three generations of a Shandong family between 1923 and 1976. The narrator who is the youngest generation tells the story of his family's struggle, first as distillery owners making sorghum wine and then as resistance fighters during the Second Sino-Japanese war. *Ash to Ash, Dust to Dust* depicts the Tibetan world and its extinct Tusi system. Tusi is a national minority headman who has the control of a local tribe or clan. And in this novel, the protagonist is a so-called idiot is the son of a Tusi. Through his eyes we witness the long history of Tusi era and its tragic collapse. The last novel, *The Song of Hedgehog* centers on the romantic story between two protagonists and depicts a sequence of bizarre and uncanny mythical stories that cross over one hundred years of history in a seaside town and wild land. My primary reason for choosing those three texts is that I intend to show the fact that the absorption and use of magical realism is not a single phenomenon in China but a wide-ranged one. At the same time, the different geographical and historical settings of each novel make each of them representative in one way or the other.

Section One

“Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” ----Benedict Anderson

As early as in 1926, Massimo Bontempelli has urged his fellow writers to become primitives with a past. Being “primitives with a past” meant returning to one’s national traditions, archetypes, and foundational myths—a very meaningful proposal for the young Latin American writers who were flocking to Europe at the time, and who would launch, a few years later, their own magic-realist proposals.¹³ When it comes to the literature in New era China, it is nearly without exception that Chinese writers all turn into regional cultures for the “primitives with a past”. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, Chinese writers are facing such a paradox that on one hand they are eager to reexamine Chinese culture but on the other hand tend to escape from the mainstream culture which has been oppressed them for decades. As a result, the turning away from the mainstream culture into the more regional, more local and more marginalized ones seems to offer Chinese writers a panacea for their dilemma, a panacea which more or less falls into the category of minor literature¹⁴ and which simultaneously allows magical realism to plunge in. Although it may be too arbitrary to conclude that all post-Mao Chinese literatures are minor literature, the idea of considering them to some extent “minor” would provide a surprisingly valuable way to understand the internal connection between post-Mao Chinese literature and magical realism and the reflection of collective voices in those works.

¹³ Erik Camayd-Freixas, *Theories of magical realism* p.6

¹⁴ By mentioning the term minor literature, I’m referring to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s discussion of minor literature.

Deleuze and Felix have mentioned in their discourse on minor literature that, because collective or national consciousness is often inactive in external life and always in the process of break-down, literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation. It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness.¹⁵ And In Latin America, the badge of magic realism has signified a kind of uniqueness or difference from mainstream culture—what in another context Alejo Carpentier has called *lo real maravilloso* or marvelous American reality.¹⁶ The latent words behind those two essays would find an intersection point for magical realism and minor literature, especially in the idea that a louder voice of national consciousness would be surprisingly heard from a farther place from the centralized system. The idea of moving away from the centralized system or mainstream culture, in China's unique social and political environment, directs literature into a new direction—regional culture. In another word, literature of regional cultures can be described as minor literature of China. And as moving back to the regional culture, it refers to the long-established and unique cultural and traditional customs in a certain area of China. Varied by geography and history, it's an inheritance of tradition and culture that's still meaning today. China is a land of diversity. And regional cultures preserve the diversity, bestowing people in that area senses of identity and cultural belonging.

As mentioned earlier, Chinese writers find potential and possibility in the use of magical realism, and Tibetan writers are the first group to pay attention to that. A Chinese Critics Zeng

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is a minor literature* P.17

¹⁶ Stephen Slemon, *Magic realism as post-colonial discourse* P.9

has mentioned that “In place where the modern and cultural impact is relatively low, magical and fantastic stories tend to grow. Tibet is the kind of place.”¹⁷ And many Tibetan writers realize that magical realism could be a powerful weapon to represent Tibet in a vivid and lively way and to evoke a sense of shared feeling among Tibetan people. The rise of Tibetan literature, to a large extent, is a result of the absorption of Latin magical realism. The Snowy Plateau of Tibet not only provides the mystical and attracting natural landscape, but also contains rich resources of unknown myths, legends and religion. Thus, for Tibetan writers, they don’ t even need to try hard to create a magical world, because the world they are in is already magical enough. To them, reality is magic and magic is their reality.

A Lai, a famous writer, has always been bothered and bounded by the theme of the representation of reality in his literary creating. In order to break through the conundrum, he turns into the regional culture of Tibet. In his long novel *Ash to Ash, Dust to Dust*, A Lai depicts the Tibetan world of Tusi system and its long history. As mentioned by Miguel Angel Asturias, magical realism is to use the Indians’ traditional consciousness to percept and reflect Latin America’s reality. A Lai absorbs Asturias’s concept and stresses on Tibetans’ own lens to percept and describe the history and culture of the west northern Tibet area and minority group. In the novel, the frequent repeated Tibetan myths and folk songs reflect Tibetan people’s unique view of history and world. For example, at the quite beginning of the story, the protagonist introduces the origin of the world he lives in through the narration of a myth.

在关于我们世界起源的神话中，有个不知在哪里居住的神人说声：‘哈’立即就有了虚空。神人又对虚空说声：‘哈’！就有了水，火和尘埃。再说声那个神奇的‘哈’

¹⁷ 曾丽君:《魔幻叙事: 20世纪80年代以来的中国小说》, 人民出版社2007年3月版 p.67

风就吹动着世界在虚空中旋转起来。世界就由水，火，风，空构成了。黑头藏民顺着
一根羊毛绳从天而降，到了这片高洁峻奇的土地上。(15)

In the myth of the origin of our world, there was a god-like man whose dwelling was
unknown. He shouted 'Aha' to himself and immediately vanity came into existence. The god-
like man again shouted 'Aha' and there came water, fire and dusts. After another amazing
"Aha", wind blew the world and it revolved in the vanity. Thus, the world came into being,
constructed by water, fire, wind and sky. Tibetan people of Black Head descended from the
Heaven through a fleecy rope, arriving at this noble and arduous land.¹⁸

The using of myth here not only exemplifies a mode of "primitives with a past" --returning to
one's national traditions, archetypes, and foundational myths, but also sets a basic magic tone of
the novel. It is also through this myth that the protagonist himself starts to form a worldview as a
child who hears the bedtime story and starts to percept the image of the world he lives in. And
this image evokes a sense of belonging that simultaneously distinguishes itself as a unique
community. Even in this apparently unreal and nearly absurd story, however, we can still see
how the cultural and geographical reality of Tibetan community play out. Especially the last
sentence: Tibetan people of Black Head descended from the Heaven through a fleecy rope,
arriving at this arduous land. The description of Tibetan people descending from the Heaven
immediately points to the religious and pious nature of them. At the same time, it also implies
the geographical nature of Tibet as a plateau—a noble and arduous land that's high in altitude
and thus closer to Heaven. In this example, magic and reality are combined together to depict the
geographical reality of the Tibetan world.

¹⁸ This paragraph and the followings are translated by the author of this thesis.

And then through another myth, the writer further delineates the historical background of this region by narrating how the ancestors came far away to settle down and conquer the land.

多少年以前-到底是多少年前，我们已经不知道了。但至少是一千多年前吧，我们的祖先从遥远的西藏来到这里，遇到了当地土人的拼死抵抗。传说里说到这些野蛮人时，都说他们有猴子一样的灵巧，豹子一样的凶狠。再说他们的人数比我们众多。我们来的人少，但却是准备来做统治者的，要统治他们必须先战胜他们。祖先里有一个人做了个梦。托梦的银须老人要我们的人次日用白色石英石作武器。同时，银须老人叫抵抗的土人也做了梦，要他们用白色的雪团来对付我们。所以，我们取得了胜利，成了这片土地的统治者，那个梦见银须老人的人，就成了首任‘嘉尔波’—我们麦其家的第一个王。(89)

Many years ago-we don't know exactly how many years, said, at least one thousand years, our ancestors came far away from Xizang to here and faced the temerarious resistance by indigenes on this land. According to the legend, those indigenes were as nimble as monkeys, and as fierce as cheetah. Even worse was that they had more people than we had. We only had few people coming, but we were ready to be the ruler. To rule them our ancestors must defeat them. One man among our ancestors had a dream, in which a white-bearded old man appeared and told our people to use White Quartz the next day as the weapon. At the same time, the resistant indigenes also dreamed of the white-bearded old man, who told them to use white wrapped snowball to fight with us. Thus, we won and became the ruler of this land. And the man who dreamed of the white-bearded old man had then become "Jia Erbo"—the first king of Maiqi family.

Compared to the previous myth, this story seems to bear more historical reality. The battle between “our ancestors” and indigenes, after all, could be based on real historical events. However, rather than depicting the event in realistic tone and with accurate

details, the author inserts magic elements by bringing up the dream of the ancestor. The dream plays an important role here, making the story more mystical and legendary. Again, the author is creating a unique community, one that is distinguished by the way it is imagined¹⁹. At the same time, if we take a close look at the content of this dream: the white-bearded old man, the white Quartz(a kind of stone) and wrapped snowball, they all point to one cultural identity of Tibetan group—the fascination of whiteness. In fact, the white color could even be considered as the totem of their community, as identified by the following paragraph:

白色，在我们生活里广泛存在。只要看见土司辖地上，人们的居所和庙宇—石头和黏土垒成的建筑，就会知道我们多喜欢这种纯粹的颜色。门楣，窗棂上，都垒放着晶莹的白色石英；门窗四周用纯净的白色勾勒。高大的山墙上，白色涂出了牛头和能够驱魔镇邪的金刚等等图案；房子内部，墙壁和柜子上，醒目的日月同辉，福寿连绵图案则用洁白的麦面绘制而成。(69)

Whiteness existed everywhere in our lives. Once you see people's dwellings and temples here—built by stones and clays, you would know how we love this pure color. On the lintel of doors and windows, white Quartz are placed; The frames of doors and windows are delineated with white color. On the huge mountain walls, ox-head and other pictures like Kong Kim that have the effects of expelling evil spirits are painted. Inside the room, images that have the blessing meanings are painted by white flour.

Through those nearly absurd narration of myths and history, the setting of the community is delineated, fully addressing the regional culture of the Tibetan area. And the magical tone not

only helps to establish the unique social reality of the area but also preserve its cultural characteristic.

Zhang Wei, as a writer from Shandong province, has made outstanding contribution to the enhancement of the culture from his hometown, which descended from ancient Qi culture(齐文化). And Qi culture is one of the oldest regional cultures in China. Centered on Shandong province, Qi culture was formed and developed since the Qin dynasty. It includes Daoist culture (道家文化), Legist culture (法家文化), and Mohism (墨家文化) culture, and also absorbed local indigene culture (东夷文化). Thus it is fair to say that Qi culture is kind of local culture free to reformation, innovation and diversity. In short, the most distinguishable characteristic of Qi culture is its openness to nearly everything. Zhang Wei's most famous long novel *The Song of Hedgehog* is the fruit grown on the land of Qi culture. And it in turn fully emphasizes the openness and free nature of Qi culture.

For Zhang Wei, Qi culture is different from Lu culture whose core element is Confucianism. He said in an interview that “To make it simple, Qi culture is bohemian, unconstraint and gibberish. It's a kind of purely imaginary, half real half illusory culture, open to discovery and investigation.”

齐文化，简单地概括一点，就是放浪的，‘胡言乱语的’，无拘无束的文化，是虚无缥缈的，亦真亦幻的，寻找探索开放的文化，很自由，很放浪的文化。²⁰

And setting in this kind of bohemian and gibberish environment, the novel contains abundant uses of magical realism, which tallies and cooperates with the Qi culture. Centered on the romantic story and twist and turns between the two protagonists Liao Mai and Mei Di, the novel

²⁰ <http://book.sina.com.cn/author/subject/2007-04-24/1435213994.shtml>

delineates a sequence of bizarre and uncanny mythical stories that cross over one hundred years of history in a seaside town and wild land. In this world, absurd and unordinary things happen, but people seem to be quite familiar of all those things, showing no surprise or fear. For example, in the world the boundary between humans and animals is blurred. Wild animals can speak and walk like humans do. And humans can become friends with wild animals, and can even fall in love and get married with those animals. For example, at the beginning of the novel, there's a paragraph that tells the relationship between people and animals.

人们自古以来就不嫌弃畜生，相反却与之相依为命，甚至与之结亲。海边村子里只要是上了年纪的人，谁说不出一两个有头有尾的故事，谁不能指名道姓说出几个畜生转生的，领养的，活脱脱降下的人命啊。有人是狼的儿子，有人是野猪的亲家，还有人半夜爬上岸的海猪生下的头胎娃娃(13)

Since long ago, humans have never disliked and avoided animals; on the contrary, they depended on each other (humans and animals) and even get married. Any person at old age can tell at least one or two weird stories, can point out some humans either reincarnated or adopted by animals. Some are sons of wolves, some are relatives of wild boars, and some are first child of sea boars who climb up to the bank in the midnight.

There is another example of how the novel creates a mystical atmosphere later in the novel.

林子里河有河神，溪有溪主，每个沟沟坎坎都有特定的生灵管辖；大树死前会托梦，老熊得病会求医，这些事棘窝镇人人清楚。(28)

In the wood, river has River god, stream has its master. Every gully and pathole has some creature who's in control of the place: Huge tree will deliver a dream before it's dying; Old bear will seek medical advice if it's sick. People in Qiwo Town all know about those things.

All those mystical and bizarre stuffs in the story, are the product of nutrition of the regional culture of Qi. Those "balderdash" reflects the rich imagination of Qi culture and its people,

whose common and collective character is best described as free, vital and not bounded by rules. And those wild animals in the novel--foxes, hedgehogs, wolves, boars etc. all bear personalities that make them lively and vivid creatures, which reflects the trait of “Wan Wu You Ling” (literally means everything has soul) in Qi culture. What’s more, Qi culture bestows Zhang Wei lots of direct inspiration. Lots of resources he uses in the novel, are from the local myths and folk tales in Qi history and culture. For example, the story of Xu Fu, who sailed eastward into sea in search of way to become immortal is from local legend.

你大概听说过徐福这的人物吧？今人？不，人家是和秦始皇一辈的，原籍不远不近，就是咱这海边的人。秦始皇住在西安城，一直想长生不老...（284）

You may have heard of Xu Fu, right? A person from our generation? No, he was the same generation of the first emperor of Qin Dynasty. His hometown was neither far away nor near to us, as he was from there seashore areas. Accordingly, Qin Shi Huang lived in Xian and was eager to become immortal...

Other examples involve the mythical story like Hiderigami, and Huli jing(literally fox spirit), all of which are inherited from Qi culture. The combination of myths in the novel, not only strengthens the power of artistic expression, but also reflects the cultural history. Thus, in Zhang Wei’s example, we again see the interrelationship between the choice of magical realism and regional culture. Magical realism serves as a powerful tool to reflect regional culture in Qi area, while Qi culture is the base for the Magical realism to work.

Moyan, another most representative of Chinese writers, also draws from magical realism in his novel-writing, particularly influence by Garcia Marquez. As mentioned by Nobel Committee, Mo can combine “magic realism, folklore, history and contemporary social realities together.” Just like other magical realism, the line between reality and

fantasy is blurred in Mo Yan's novels, by using ancient myths or folktales and adding magical elements with the realistic tone. And his hometown, Gaomi, provides Mo Yan most inspirations and literary resources. The influence and vestige of Gaomi, could be seen in nearly all of his novels. Immediately after Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Macondo Town*, Mo began to pay attention to the Northeast Gaomi Township in China in which he saw the potential for literary creation. He arranged the stories and plots in the works in Gaomi, featuring magical folklore, which was learned from the rural old people there. Born from rich and varied narratives, Mo's magical realism is a direct representation of the local and regional culture of his hometown. In *Red Sorghum*, many plots are actually from the local myths in Gaomi told by old people.

当天夜里，天降大雨，把骡马场上的血迹冲洗得干干净净，罗汉大爷的尸体和皮肤无影无踪。村里流传着罗汉大爷尸体失踪的消息，一传十，十传百，一代传一代，竟成为了一个美丽的神话故事。（37）

The night in that day, there was a sudden pouring of rains that cleaned the bloody spots on the plaza. Uncle Luo Han's corpse and skins were gone. The message of his disappeared corpse was spread in the town. One to ten, ten to hundred, and one generation to the next generation. At the end it becomes a magnificent and beautiful myth in our town.

Also, the title of *Red Sorghum* is a symbol of the whole work, or its focal image system. Sorghum grows in the northern China, in a dry climate according to the Chinese standards. Mo paints scenery of bloody Sorghum field, which symbolizes the tenacious fire of life:

生存在这块土地上的我的父老乡亲们，喜食高粱，每年都大量种植。八月深秋，无边无际的高粱红城洸洋的血海，高粱高密辉煌，高粱凄婉可人...

In this land, my fellow citizens like sorghum, and grow it in a large amount every year. Late autumn in August, a myriad of Red Sorghum turns into a vast ocean of redness. In the field of glorious, sad sweet and passionate sorghum... teams shuttle through dark-red sorghum for several decades.

The obvious connection between those three Chinese writers is that they all delve into local folklores and regional cultures, resulting in the resuscitation of the magic of the past. Kim Sasser has mentioned that “The indigenous sources from which magic was derived were frequently utilized as a toll for the region’s self-definition. The autochthonous was a means through which to recuperate a buried identity and culture.”²¹ The use of magical realism, in another word, is a process to define the cultural and national identity of the community, and a simultaneous process to evoke national consciousness.

And here I would like to delve more into national consciousness. Benedict Anderson suggests in *Imagined Communities* that the nation is “an imagined political community because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”²² Thus, national consciousness could be understood as the specific image of nation in the minds of fellow members. And what’s attached to the national consciousness are the collective values and emotions. What magical realism does, is to help creating a strong, vivid and impressive “image” of their local communities among fellow members, reminding them of the collective past in Tibet, Shandong or Gaomi...

²¹ Kim, 5

²² Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 2016, 7

Section Two

Just like minor literature and magic realism, in one way or the other, magical realism and subaltern studies have also been closely associated with each other. The discussions of liminality and marginalization, which are so common in magical realist criticism, are also the major focus of subaltern studies. The definition of the subaltern has been first proposed by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak in her essay “Can the subaltern speak” as “A person without lines of social mobility”. As according to Spivak, the subaltern is disallowed any voice, agency or authority in society due to their sex, ethnicity, or religion etc. And Spivak relates this image with a colonial woman who are marginalized due to their race, sex, and class.²³

While the relationship between Subaltern Studies and magical realism has been oddly underexplored, as mentioned by Maggie Ann Bowers, there are several critics of magical realism who use the term “subaltern” or “subalternity”. Maggie Ann Bowers also mentions that “Despite the risks of ventriloquism, critics have often discussed the radical possibilities of magical realist discourse, focusing upon its capability to express the voices of those who are oppressed or silenced by authority, particularly and often by colonialism.”²⁴ In China, colonialism is certainly not the major cause of the silence of voice. And Spivak’s definition of Subaltern, though useful, need to be resituated and reconsidered within a different social and historical environment. However, the fact that there is no external colonizer does not mean that colonization is never an issue in China. In fact, I would like to suggest that there is an internal cultural colonization in China resulting from an epistemic and political structure. To consider what constitute “the

²³ Gayatri Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak? The post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995) 115-23

²⁴ Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magical Realism and Subaltern Studies* P37

subaltern”, I would like to take out from the term of those what remain outside the power structure and epistemic dimension, and what remains silenced and unexpressed in literary texts for few decades

Red Sorghum is a historical romance. As mentioned by David Wang, Mo Yan “brings together the legendary romances of his red-sorghum forebears, thus providing the most important historical space in contemporary Mainland Chinese fiction.”²⁵ The historical space to which he is referring, is “how writers like Mo Yan three-dimensionalized a linear historical narrative and imagination, and how they locate concrete people, event, and places into a flowing, kaleidoscopic historical coordinate.” The historical space, however, is a product of historical imagination and temporal narration, a fact we should never ignore. And in another word, through the construction of imagined “historical space”, a liminal space between the official and unofficial history is established. What I would try to argue, is that this historical space created by Mo Yan in red sorghum is where the subaltern voices are played out. In Chinese Communist artistic and political theory, history has always been a major focal point. Under the influence of more than thirty years of Maoist discourse, a codified form of language originating from Mao’s revolutionary utterances, “history” has become a self-evident truth. Essentially, the official history and the codified language become a hegemonic discourse perpetuated by the structures of power to repress all “heterogeneous” voices, eventually making those voices “subaltern”. And in the following paragraph, I would like to examine how in *Red Sorghum* those voices that could be considered as subaltern are reflected through the use of magical realism.

²⁵ David Der-Wei Wang and Michael Berry *The Literary World of Mo Yan* Board of regents of the University of Oklahoma pp.488

To Chinese people and government, the second Sino-Japanese war represents painful and humiliated memories. While there are several novels and dramas that are either produced during the war period or focusing on this period later on, those war-literatures appear to be quite homogenous. According to Kirk, Marxist literary historians in the PRC have often portrayed the war period as one of great homogeneity; writers happily abandoned their personal motivations for writing and devoted themselves and their pens to the political cause of national salvation.²⁶ To arrive at this purpose, they also tend to ignore work produced out of the Communist-controlled area.²⁷

Thus, the first category that I would like to illustrate on are the voices of victims, particularly those victims in territory under Japanese control at the time. Rather than being courageous and skillful in battlefields, they are a group of people who appear to be vulnerable and weak. Not catering to the glorified character that could be serving for political inspiration, their works and voices remained underemphasizing. In *Red Sorghum*, however, Mo Yan does not avoid representations of those victims whose experiences and voices remained unrepresented for few decades. It is not a coincidence, though, in places where victims' voices are depicted, some forms of supernatural phenomenon would accompany. For example, in one scene from the novel, Japanese soldiers invades the town and captures Uncle Luo Han—a worker at the family's distillery. And Uncle Luo Han is humiliated and tortured to death before many villagers. The cruel and tragic scene, however, is depicted in the following way:

²⁶ Kirk, 11

²⁷ During war period, most of China was divided into three distinct political region: the Communist-controlled area, the Japanese-occupied area and the GMD-held region.

孙五把罗汉大爷那只肥硕敦厚的耳朵放在白瓷盘里。孙五又割掉罗汉大爷另一只耳朵放进瓷盘。父亲看到罗汉大爷那两只耳朵在瓷盘里活泼的跳动，打得磁盘叮咚叮咚响。

Sun Wu placed Luo Han's fat ear on that white porcelain plate. He then he cut down Uncle Luo Han's another ear and placed it on the plate. Father saw the pair of ears bouncing lively and energetically on the plate and making some sonorous sounds.

日本兵托着瓷盘从民夫面前，从男女老幼面前慢慢走过。父亲看到罗汉大爷的耳朵苍白美丽，瓷盘的响声更加强烈。

The Japanese soldier hold the plate and walked slowly through the farmer, through the men and women, young and olds. Father saw the ears of Uncle Luo Han, pure and pretty, making even stronger sounds. (35)

Rather than skipping the session or narrating the reactions of Uncle Luo Han in a realistic way, Mo Yan turns to a nearly absurd depiction of the scene, of Uncle Luo Han's ears being cut down and put on a plate. The sonorous sounds of the bouncing ears are a metaphor—an exaggerated literary representations of Uncle Luo Han's voices in the form of magical realism. As the same time, there is a weird atmosphere here, as the descriptions of this cruel and unhuman scene are conducted by words like “lively” “energetically” and “sonorous”, all of which are supposed to evoke pleasant and positive feelings. Apparently, in such context it is not appropriate to choose those words. The weird combination, however, results in a surprising irony that has an effect of showing the victim's unyielding character and wordless voice. And at the same time, it implies a mocking tone of the author toward those homogenous war-time literatures and similar pattern of representations.

Another example of the representations of subaltern voices involves the use of red sorghums. In several places, those plants are treated as if they have lives and spirits. Their

existence would thus work as an indication of the repressed presence of thousands of victims and villagers in Gaomi.

那些半干的高粱叶子，着了油，委委屈屈地燃烧起来。高粱们在火之上，低垂着沉重的头，发出喑哑的哭泣（128）

Those sorghum leaves caught fire and burnt in grievance. On the fire, sorghums drooped their heavy heads and cries in a low voice.

The inexpressible and repressed voices of those villagers and victims that constitute the most ordinary group of Chinese people at the time, are now conveyed through the yelling and crying of the sorghums. And sorghums serve not only as a totem or symbol of regional culture as I mentioned in the first section, but now an accumulation and sublimation of the national consciousness and memories of every ordinary victim in the war. While neither magnificent nor inspiring, those repressed voices evoke a true “Chineseness”, a true cultural root many writers are trying so hard to construct. And this “Chineseness”, as according to Mo Yan, is complex, heterogenous, and could not be simplified into any generalization.

奶奶注视着红高粱，在她朦胧的眼睛里，高粱们奇异瑰丽，奇形怪状。他们呻吟着，扭曲着，呼号着，缠绕着，时而像魔鬼，时而像亲人，它们在奶奶眼里盘结成蛇样的一团，又呼喇喇地伸展开来，奶奶无法说出他们的光彩了。它们红红绿绿，白白黑黑，蓝蓝绿绿，它们哈哈大笑，它们号啕大哭，苦楚的眼泪像雨点一样打在奶奶心中...(69)

Grandmother stared at red sorghums. In her dim sight, sorghums are in weird beauty and twisted shapes. They groan, twist and shout. Sometimes they are like demons while the other time they are like dear relatives. They are red and green, black and white, blue and green. They laugh and cry. Their bitter tears hit the heart of grandmother like rains.

As moving from *The Red Sorghum* to *Ash to Ash, Dust to Dust*, the question of “What is subaltern” has a clearer and more direct answer. The ethnical identity of both the writer and the characters as minor Tibetans immediately enable them to fit into the traditional category of subaltern group (particularly in Spivak’s sense). By mentioning traditional, I’m suggesting that there is a clear power structure of colonization involved in the setting of this novel. The power structure includes the dominant or colonizing Han group, and the dominated or colonized minority group. In a country as politically centralized as China, their voices are oppressed and silenced by government for well-known political and religious reason. I would like to go into the texts to examine how does the author deal with their subaltern voices in literary dimension, which could be a politically sensitive topic. It is also noteworthy that, A Lai’s own identity as the Tibetan minority not only avoids the risk of epistemic violence²⁸ but also gives him a desire to represent the repressed voices of his group. In several places in the novel, the author is using the mouth of the protagonist to express something he himself wants to say.

这一天里，没多少功夫，我就听见了两句有意思的话。先是牢房里那一句：为什么宗教没有教会我们爱，而教会了恨？小尔依又说了这一句。我觉得太有意思了，都值得记下来。可惜的是，有史以来，好多这样的话都已经灰飞烟灭了。(138)

I heard two intriguing comments in just one day. The first one was from the jail: why religion teaches us how to rather than how to love? And now little Eryi is making this comment.

These words are so interesting and worth remembering, and I just regretted that many of them has disappeared over time.

²⁸ According to Spivak, epistemic violence means the infliction of harm against subjects and it occurred through the marginalization of certain voices within Western discourses.

The seemingly casual and random expression in the last sentence “I just regretted that many of them has disappeared over time” reflects A Lai’s own regret toward their losing of voices in the “official history”. And his efforts to reconstruct those voices constitute a thematic focal point in *Ash to Ash, Dust to Dust*. Following this, I would like to delve into more details from the text. In chapter five, a Buddhist missionary Wengboyixi (翁波意西) comes to the territory of the Maiqi Tusi (the headman and the protagonist’s father) in order to preach. Unfortunately, his religious doctrines and prophecies are considered as threatening to Maiqi Tusi’s ruling and as a result he is treated as religiously heretic. In the following scenes, the missionary is being executed following the ruler’s decision to cut his tongue.

刀光一闪，那舌头像一只受惊的老鼠从受刑人的嘴巴和行刑人的手之间跳出来，看那样子，它是想往天上去的，可它只蹿上去一点点，还没有到头顶那么高，就往下掉了。看来，凡是血肉的东西都难于灵魂一样高扬。那段舌头往下掉了。没有了舌头的叫声含混而没有意义。有人说，黑头藏民是因为一个人受到罗刹魔女诱惑而产生的种族，也许，祖先和魔女的第一声叫喊就是这样的吧：含混，而且为眼前这样一个混乱而没有秩序的世界感到愤懑。（141）

With a flashing light of the knife, the tongue jumped out of his mouth and executer’s hand like a frightened mouse. It seems that the tongue wants to go up into the sky, but unfortunately before it could reach the height of people’s head it starts to fall. After all, everything that’s made of flesh and blood cannot be flying like souls can do. The tongue starts to fall. Yelling without the tongue is chaotic and meaningless. Some people say that Tibetan people of black head are a race that comes into being because one person is seduced by demonic witch. It’s possible that the first shouting by that ancestor and the witch is like this: chaotic, angry toward this disordered and ruleless world.

Just like the case of bouncing ears in Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*, tongue as part of human body is taken out separately as a metaphor. And again, we can see how magical realism plunge in as a helpful and powerful literary tool. In this example, the tongue which is trying to go up into the sky represents the person's desire to speak, while its falling implies the difficulty of speaking in such social and political environment. In magical realism, supernatural phenomenon does not always exist without reasons and purposes. Most time those supernatural elements would work as an indication of the repressed presence of the subaltern, which for reasons of race, religion, or ethnicity, lies on the wrong side of the law. The supernatural phenomenon of the tongue in the paragraph is an example of such "represses presence" that for religious reason lies on the wrong side of the law. Ironically, at this point the Tusi family represents the right side of the "law" and serves the role as the hegemonic group. But later on, as they encounter Han government, the Tibetan group would turn into the "subaltern". Thus, I'm arguing that the magical realistic description of the Wengboyixi's experience contains two metaphors. The first layer, as I already mentioned, refers to the subaltern status of Wengboyixi in local Tibetan community. The second layer would then be the subaltern status of the Tibetan groups in China. One textual evidence could be the protagonist's attitude toward Wengboyixi—he adorns and respects him, and has a strong feeling of sympathy toward Weng. As I mentioned earlier, in several places the author is using the protagonist's mouth to express his own thoughts. And the protagonist's sympathy toward Wengboyixi not only forebodes the future of Tibetan group but also parallels the author's own regret and emotion. Also, it is not coincidental that the protagonist relates the yelling of Wengboyixi to the shouting his ancestor at the last sentence, implying an internal connection between the Wengboyixi's current situation and Tibetan people's future condition. The "chaotic,

angry shouting” toward the disordered world, as disguised in magic realism and double metaphors, could be interpreted as the Tibetan people’s angry shouting toward the highly-homogeneous and Han-dominated China.

At this point I would like to return to Deleuze and Felix’s discourse on minor literature again, as they mention that political implication as one characteristic of minor literature, demonstrated as “the connection of the individual to a political immediacy.”²⁹ Different from major literature, minor literature’s cramped space forces each individual to connect immediately to politics. Every individual concern and daily moment depicted in the minor literature would thus more or less bear some political significance. Ironically, while the turning away from the centralized system into the marginal and local points marks an effort for Chinese writers to escape from the draconian national cultural policy after the establishment of the PRC in 1949, they never successfully untie the connections between literature and politics. In fact, the choice of magical realism as a literary technique to represent subaltern voices could already sufficiently demonstrate some political implication, while those writers’ initial intent is to free literature from politics. However, the use of magical realism does offer Chinese writer a way to maximize literary freedoms and to revitalize vitality, resulting in the possibility to reconstruct losing roots of the past few decades.

²⁹ Deleuze& Felix, 17

THIRD SECTION

In this section, I would like to focus on the construction of individual identity in *Red Sorghum* and *Ash to Ash, Dust to Dust* particularly because the narrators in both novels use first-person perspective. And how do they identify their own roles and perceive their positions in history offer a surprisingly interesting perspective to further understand magical realism's practical values in the novels.

The protagonist of *Dust to Dust, Ash to Ash* is an idiot. At the very beginning of the novel, he tells audiences the fact that “In the regime of Maiqi Tusi, everyone knows the son of Tusi's second wife is an idiot. I am that idiot.” (12) The construction of the protagonist's role as an idiot is not only a result of the external force—perceptions and comments from other people, but also an internal one, as the protagonist himself is deeply entrenched in his own role as a fool.

天哪，一瞬间，我居然就有了要篡夺权利的想法，但一想到自己不过是一个傻子，那想法就像是泉水上的泡沫一样无声无息地破裂了。你想，一个傻子怎么能做万人之上的土司，做人间的王者呢？天哪，一个傻子怎么也会有这样的想法。（64）

Oh God, in one moment, I even had the thought of usurping and seizing the power. But as I reminded myself of the fact that I'm an idiot, the thought burst like the bubbles on the fountain. Let's say, how could an idiot be the powerful Tusi, be the king of human? Oh God, how could an idiot have such thought.

What is then paradoxical and ironic, is that throughout the novel, it is always this so-called idiot who could always accidentally speak and find the truth many wise people are unaware of. In several places, his role as an idiot would even changes into a prophet who bears supernatural envisioning and phenomenon. This paradox in his identity contributes a lot to the magical realistic tone of the novel. In one place, for example, the protagonist is talking to his father, the

Maiqi Tusi, and he starts to make the prophecy of the future while he himself is not conscious of what he's saying:

但我却听见自己说：“因为你的儿子是最后一个土司了。”父亲大吃了一惊。我又重复了一次：“要不了多久，土司就会没有了！”接着，我还说了好多话，但我自己却不记得了。在我们那地方，常有些没有偶像的神灵突然附着在人身上，说出对未来的预言。这种神灵是预言之神。这种神是活着时被视为叛逆的人变成的，死后，他们的魂灵无所皈依，就会变成预言的神灵。我不知道是自己在说话，还是我身上附着了一个那样的神灵。（328）

But I heard myself saying: “your son will be the last Tusi in the world.” My father was too surprised to react. And I repeated again: “Soon there would be no Tusi anymore!” And then, I kept speaking and speaking but I couldn't remember at all. In our place, there are some spirits that would suddenly stick to a person and foretell the future through that person's mouth. Those spirits are the gods of prophecy. They were converted from those capricious and rebellious human beings when they were still alive. When they died, their spirits had nowhere to go and they would become the gods of prophecy. I don't know whether it was me speaking or such spirit who was speaking.

His identity as a fool could be understood as the intentional mocking and overturning of rationality. It is the irrationality in him that ironically endows him to approach truth. Again, I would like to point out the latent force of magical realism that works in the construction of his identity. Erik Camayd-Freixas has mentioned in *Theories of Magical realism* that “[...]coherent (but non-rational) perspective should not be unnecessarily restricted to that of a marginalized ethnic culture, but could also be that of an individual psyche.”(11) The construction of the protagonist's identity through magical realism not only intensifies the tone of the novel but also

hits at some central thematic information that the author wants to convey, something that echoes to the subaltern voices mentioned earlier in section two.

At the same time, the gradual transformation of the protagonist represents a process of his realization of self-identity, as he starts to perceive his real role in history. What I'm trying to argue here is that the realization of his true identity is an epitome of the realization of national identity through the reconstruction of history. At end of the novel, the protagonist realizes his fate and mission in this world.

我当了一辈子傻子，现在，我知道自己不是傻子，也不是聪明人，不过是在土司制度将要完结的时候到这片奇异的土地上来走了一遭。是的，上天让我看见，让我听见，叫我置身其中，又叫我超然物外。上天是为了这个目的，才让我看起来像个傻子的。

(330)

I have been an idiot for me whole life. Now I know I am not an idiot, neither a smart person. I just came to this bizarre world to witness the ending of its Tusi history. Yes, God let me see and hear, let me be a part of this world but also let me more than the world. It is for this purpose that God makes me like an idiot.

The protagonist's realization of self-identity through the witness of history, to some extent, parallels the readers' construction of national identities through the reading of this novel. It is for this reason, I believe, that the author is deliberately applying magical realism to build the character.

Similarly, in *Red Sorghum*, the narrator's search of identity could be seen as the effort to reconstruct and search for national identity. It is worth noted that in *Red Sorghum*, the narrator's voices and role are weak. While he is a narrator of the whole novel, the protagonists are actually the older generation: his grandparents and father. The role of the protagonist as a narrator seems insignificant, and to some extent even confusing as it blurs the line of time periods and spaces.

However, the narrator's vague identity and voices are already a metaphor of the losing of national identity of the younger generation, which the narrator openly comments in the text:

我爷爷辈的好汉们，都有高密东北乡人高粱般鲜明的性格，非我们这些孱弱的后辈能比。(174)

The people of my grandfather's generation have distinct characters like sorghums of our hometown, which our younger generation cannot compare to.

At the same time, the narrator's consistent struggle of going back and forth into history and digging into the story of the older generation does represent his desire to continue family lineage and reconstruct that losing identity. His failing of reconstructing such identity, however, reflects the cultural dilemma of the writer and his whole generation at the turning point of Chinese history.

Conclusion

As a global phenomenon, magical realism has gained so much popularity among the world, and China is without exception. Through the examination of magical realism in three thematic layers, we can now turn back to the central question in the first place: “Why Magical Realism?” While we may never know the exact reason of magical realism’s popularity in China since there will never be a single right answer, it does not mean that the study of this literary phenomenon is meaningless. As we can just tell from the result: by absorbing and using magical realism, those post-Mao literature works. They successfully deviating from the centralized and homogeneous literary representations. They succeed in revitalizing diversity, cultural values, collective memories in China. They reach the point of reconstructing cultural and nation identity that have been missing in literature for few decades.

We could say that magical realism offers Chinese authors a safe zone to avoid political censorship. We could say magical realism as a technique makes their literary representation powerful. We could just say magical realism makes Chinese literature interesting again. Or we could just say magical realism is a literary experiment in the new Era. But all those statements point to one fact—that the rise of magical realism is never a coincidence. What’s under this seemingly random rise of magical realism are so many causalities. Thus, to say that Chinese magical realism is a pastiche or parody of Latin American literature or that it is merely a catering to the most fashionable literary trend in world literature today would not do Chinese writers justice.

However, at the end of this thesis, I would like to propose a new question. As the interests in magical realism is gradually decreasing in China today, many writers who were into magical

realism during the 80s are now moving back to the realism. While magical realism has become the panacea to Chinese writers' dilemma at the turning point of New era, it is a temporary one and is now declining. In fact, similar trend of its gradual decline happens in its hometown—in Latin America, magical realism has gradually declined since the literature boom in 60s. After magical realism, then, what will be the next panacea?

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