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Carnival & Sadness
Impressions of Chinese Literature in the 21st Century

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Brought about by a polarized society, twenty-first-century Chinese writers are confronting social issues with two contradictory narrative patterns—the Internet-based carnival and grassroots-based sadness.
The Chinese people are never lacking in the spirit of drama. Extremes of sadness and happiness have always been evident throughout its long history. At the turn of the twenty-first century, such tastes are getting even stronger, primarily because of China’s fast-changing social situation—the booming economy coupled with the tremendous accumulation and distribution of wealth have deeply polarized Chinese people and society. It has also brought on two strikingly different styles in the realm of writing: the relaxed mood of hedonism and consumerism versus the grief and indignation caused by the overthrow of social ethics. Therefore, in the world of literature, we are witness to two contradictory ideas and trends almost simultaneously: the carnival-like, downward, disenchanting, deconstructive, totally subversive, technological, entertaining, visual, and Internet-based trend, on one hand, and the socioethically centered, indignant, worrying, antipolarizing, and grassroots trend. Both have partially reworked our history and tradition. With their intellectual value and moral power, they are entirely different yet consistent and deeply connected.

First, let’s look at the carnival. It has been said in recent years that the authors who have made the most money are the so-called “post-1980s” young writers, including Guo Jingming and Han Han. Most became famous in the cyberworld before claiming territory in the traditional “literary world.” Their works are mainly dedicated to content and attitudes that are rebellious, alternative, antitraditional, obsessed with another way of living and thinking, imaginary, and magical. These writers achieved great success among young people and spawned their own sponsorships and readers’ groups. Apparently, some publishing company owes Guo Jingming more than 5 million RMB (about $650,000) in overdue royalties. This is more than what Yu Hua (b. 1960) made on his two-volume novel, Xiong Di I (Brothers) and Xiong Di II, published in 2005 and 2006. To everyone’s surprise, Yu’s combined volumes have set a record for the highest paying single work (more than 3 million RMB, about $400,000) in history among China’s elite writers. The next example is Han Han’s online polemic with mainstream critic Bai Hua. Han Han’s words were so sharp and bitter that Bai Hua later had to close his blog.

It suggests the collapse of the traditional “literary world” and the order it defined. Another example comes from the genre of poetry. According to recent data, there were 381 poetry websites in China by the first half the 2005, with thousands of poetry fans and writers. The countless second-rate poems written by these writers are influencing and controlling the tastes, trends, and even direction of Chinese poetry.

The emergence of the Internet has had more of a significant influence on the direction and taste of literature than that of any other medium. This must be well recognized by now. The biggest change is that the Internet has transformed the role played by the writer from a self-sufficient individual who must be responsible for his words into an invisible person in the virtual and gaming world. Such writers don’t need to reveal their true identities. By doing this, the online writer thinks differently because the ethics of the online world are totally different from those of the real world. In addition, the Internet has another layer of meaning to the Chinese—namely, the more these authors feel oppressed by the orders and rules of reality, the stronger their confrontational attitude in the virtual world, and, consequently, the higher degree of vulgarity and irresponsibility. In Bakhtin’s words, the main characteristic of the “carnival” is to denigrate authority and disturb orderliness. As a result, rational liberalism and defamatory vulgarity emerged at the same time. This echoes China’s contemporary cultural situation in a rather dramatic, even subtle way.

In many serious literary writings, the carnival-like, or carnivalesque, narrative patterns have become many writers’ favorite style. Mo Yan (b. 1955), for example, has published three epic novels in the new century: Tan Xiang Xing (2001; The torture of sandalwood), Sishi Yi Pao (2003; Forty-first canon), and Sheng Si Pilao (2006; Fatigue of life and death). All these works are filled with carnivalesque narrations. After more than ten years of work, Yu Hua published the novel Xiong Di, in which he further developed his comic style that was first seen in

Xu Sanguan Maixue II (Xu Sanguan’s story of selling his blood). This could not be a coincidence. Writers’ works naturally reflect their sensitive observations on the times. Take two recent novels, Xiong Di and Sheng Si Pilao, as examples; both are dramatic narrations of history over-
turned in contemporary China. From the fanatical political movements of the 1950s through the 1970s to the rapid economic development in the 1980s, the spiritual journey endured by the Chinese people is barely imaginable to any other people in the world. In this massive exchange of material and spirit, many lives were engulfed by a whirlpool of tragedy and suffered miserably in a turmoil of biblical scope. Subsequently, they were thrown out as the rubble of history into a wasteland of the spirit. The surviving souls are then dismantled by the invincible power of money and the market. Xiong Di vividly summarizes this, the so-called development from the time of “fanatical spirit, oppressed instinct, and tragic fate” to the time of “overthrown ethics, hasty indulgences, and overwhelming diversity”: “The enormous differences between two times that take a westerner four hundred years to experience are witnessed by the Chinese in forty years. The turmoil and changes of four hundred years were condensed to forty years” (Yu Hua). Without using dramatic techniques, a writer can hardly re-create the dramatic nature of history, let alone uncover the tragedies beneath a veneer of comedy.

Next, let’s look at the sadness. Such an attitude certainly has its basis in history, but it mainly comes from contemporary society. It is a universal law to every nation that a developed economy and changed social structures will always bring about a deep social, ethical crisis. Despite China’s massive current GDP, there is an equally huge number of unemployed, extreme polarization between the rich and poor, and astonishing environmental catastrophes. People who believe in righteousness cannot overlook such “costs of social development.” Behind those costs are not only the rising skyscrapers and expanding cities but also the backdoor deals between coal lords and local officials and their cold-blooded exploitation of the wealth of the people and the nation. Against this background, in the cyberworld and in the comedy of the ever entertaining media, a large-scale movement of literature by lower-class workers was launched, which later prompted some wide-ranging discussions of “literary ethics.” Let me give an example from a poem called “Wei Yi Kuai Mei Ku Qi” (Cry for a chunk of coal), written by a little known poet, Yu Jin. This poem was written for fifty-one coal workers who lost their lives in the Chengde Nuanshuile coal mine: “In this world, nobody can live without coal / but who would cry for a chunk of coal? // Let us pray, that these fifty-one chunks of coal / won’t burn out so quickly / pray that no wind can blow out / the fifty-one coal lamps, like stars in sky.” Such poems indicate that universal concepts of social ethics and justice have never vanished.

The above examples, perhaps, do not prove anything. Sadness, however, is seen in more general topics. The epic novel Ren Mian Tao Hua (Face and peach blossom) published by novelist Ge Fei in 2004 rewrites the revolution of the early twentieth century. Mo Yan’s Tan Xiang Xing reexamines China’s modern history. Li Er’s Hua Qiang (2001; Coloratura) is a reflection on the tragedy of the “death of the individual” in the course of modern revolution. Jia Pingwa’s Qin Qiang (2005; The Qin opera) captures the tragic fate of folk history and folk culture in contemporary time. Yan Ge Ling’s Di Ji Ge Gua Fu (The ninth widow) depicts the miserable past of contemporary Chinese peasants. All these books strongly state the writers’ acknowledgment of historical tragedy. Tan Xiang Xing, for example, not only inherits the Lu Xun style of criticism on nationality—as it vividly narrates the tragic drama performed by the whole nation and the carnivalesque farce performed by the killers, victims, and bystanders—but it also deeply reflects upon the fate of the Chinese people, who were tragically dominated by Western powers in the process of modernization.

All these examples suggest that contemporary Chinese literature is becoming mature after some kind of transformation.

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