CHAPTER FOUR

Translation and Avant-garde Fiction in 1980s China

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BORN TRANSLATED

Avant-garde fiction in 1980s China was "born translated" in more than one way.[1] The basics are well known: first, Chinese writers found inspiration in twentieth-century international modernism; second, literary critics and scholars read their texts through structuralist and poststructuralist theories of language; and third, their status as the Chinese avant-garde was further validated by their translation in French, English, and Japanese, and through comparisons to their alleged foreign counterparts.[2] Nonetheless, as so many theorists of translation remind us, translation does not need to refer exclusively to the interlingual transfer of texts. Various notions of "cultural translation" have been employed to examine interpretive processes occurring within what is conventionally understood to be the same language (van Crevel 2017–2018; Klein 2019). A broad notion of cultural translation encompassing the interpreting that occur both within and across languages might shed new light on the complexities of avant-garde fiction as a cultural formation that entails more than the literary provocations that shook the Chinese literary sphere in the late 1980s. Translation broadly conceived, I would suggest, allows us to complicate the directionality of the sequence sketched above and to tease out how, after literature was decoupled from the task of representing the masses, avant-garde fiction in China came to stand as the culmination of a decade of aesthetic experimentation that reassessed the transformative potential of literature through the foregrounding of form.

The plural dimensions of avant-garde fiction compel us to work with more than one concept of translation. Emerging in the context of rapid urbanization, social stratification, and intense re-examination of the cultural and political underpinnings of Chinese society that culminated in the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, China's avant-garde fiction was neither the expression of a cohesive poetics nor was it accompanied by a manifesto, even as it occurred in parallel with experimental trends in poetry, literary criticism, theatre, and the visual arts. A critical construct that took shape retrospectively, it encompasses the experimental stories by authors such as Ma Yuan

[1]I adapt "Born translated" from Walkowitz (2015) and will elaborate on it below.

[2]Ge Fei was often compared to Jorge Luis Borges, and Yu Hua to Franz Kafka and Alain Robbe-Grillet. One of the earliest introductions of structuralism in China is an article in the periodical for internal distribution *Dongtai* edited by the Philosophy and Social Sciences Department of the Chinese Academy of Science released in 1975.

马原 (1953–), Can Xue 残雪 (1953–), Hong Feng 洪峰 (1959–), Yu Hua 余华 (1960–), Ge Fei 格非 (1964–), Su Tong 苏童 (1963–), and Sun Ganlu 孙甘露 (1959–), who published in state-supported literary magazines even as they rebelled against established conventions of characterization and plot. Hence the institutionally ambivalent position of China's avant-garde fiction, which flourished within a porous and heterogeneous literary system that was being transformed by the onset of the market economy and new forms of popular and mass culture.[3]

Its dates of beginning and end are contested. Most critics situate it between 1986 and 1992, although some emphasize that 1985 was the real turning point (Li Tuo 1994; Li Jiefei 1996), and by 1989 it was already declared in crisis (more on this below). Yu Hua recalls how at a time in which literary journals tried to boost subscription rates for the following year,《收获》(Harvest) turned to barely known young authors like himself. It was in the autumn of 1987 that he received his copy of issue 5, where his story《四月三日事件》(The April 3rd Incident) appeared alongside a novel by Ma Yuan and stories by Su Tong, Hong Feng, and Sun Ganlu. The issue was then considered the first of four avant-garde issues published by *Harvest* over the next year. Several years later, recalling how some critics lamented that avant-garde fiction did not even deserve to be called literature, Yu Hua mused:

> After all, what is literature? We felt narrative structure should be open, indeterminate, and never fixed. Our reading habits helped inform our understanding of what literature was. After enduring the Cultural Revolution, when there were virtually no books, we suddenly found ourselves surrounded by veritable swarms of literary works, including both classical and modern Chinese works … we read works by Lev Tolstoy, Franz Kafka, and many others. We read with little regard for literary history, and had no interest in understanding the era and background of the works' authors. Instead, we just read works for their own sake, and in this way we were exposed to all sorts of different narrative forms. When we ourselves started to write, accordingly, we knew that it was possible to write using virtually any narrative structure. The literary establishment, however, found it difficult to accept our modernist tendencies. They felt that the critical realism found in the works of nineteenth-century authors such as Tolstoy and Honoré de Balzac was part of its own literary tradition, while Kafka, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, together with symbolism, expressionism, and absurdism, were all regarded as foreign. We found this attitude to be rather odd, since were not Tolstoy and Balzac themselves also foreigners?
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> (2017, 790–91)

"We just read works for their own sake." These words remind us that the rise of avant-garde fiction reflected a revolution in habits of reading, the desire for fictional worlds unconstrained by conventional logic, morality, and notions of utility, and for a broader literary universe.[4] Yu Hua

[3]Ma Yuan, Can Xue, and Hong Feng are generally considered precursors of the avant-garde. In the 1980s, Mo Yan was also often mentioned as a precursor, and some English studies of the avant-garde include his work (Yang 2002). Writers such as Sun Ganlu, Bei Cun, Chen Cun, and Ye Zhaoyan who were included in early Chinese-language surveys have been marginalized in recent accounts.

[4]On the circulation of modernist literature in Chinese translation during the 1960s and 1970s, see Bei Dao (1993); van Crevel (1996a; 1996b); and Iovene (2014, 72–6).

and his peers were contesting the very notion of "borrowing," reclaiming the right to "inherit" a legacy available to whoever took the responsibility to carry it on (He Guimei 2005, 13).

Nonetheless, anxieties of influence ran high, and declaring one's familiarity with foreign authors attracted charges of imitation or of not being sufficiently "Chinese" (on the ubiquity of these charges, see Klein in this volume). Ge Fei recalls how in 1986, Ma Yuan gave a talk at East China Normal University where Ge Fei himself was teaching. Ma Yuan, who had just returned from Tibet, was already a celebrity in literary circles. During the presentation, a student asked Ma Yuan to elaborate on Jorge Luis Borges's influence on his work, but Ma Yuan said he had never even heard the name. Later he admitted to having lied! Ge Fei comments:

> In 1986 very few people saw the connection between Borges and Ma Yuan, so he [Ma Yuan] might have been taken aback. But on the other hand, it seems he was extremely wary of the profound immaturity of Chinese criticism at the time: as soon as you openly acknowledged the influence of any writer (although this is completely normal), critics would obsessively draw comparisons between your work and theirs, which could put you even more under pressure and thus impair your creativity. Therefore I completely understand why, when confronted with this sort of questions, Ma Yuan would come up with names that totally confused people, such as Selma Lagerlöf, Sven Heding, Mao Zedong, and Agatha Christie.
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> (2001, 65)

Ma Yuan's playful response, a playfulness that is reflected in his fictional works, ought to be read as a challenge to critics who struggled to come to terms with the question of reading, and living, in translation.

In her discussion of the contemporary anglophone novel, Rebecca Walkowitz designates "born translated"—an expression she models on "born digital"—those works originating in several languages. "Many books do not appear at first only in a single language," she writes. "Instead, they appear simultaneously or nearly simultaneously in multiple languages. They start as world literature" (Walkowitz 2015, 1–2). Literary works traveled in translation long before the twenty-first century, she concedes, but what sets the contemporary era apart is the speed with which this happens, a speed that intensified from the 1960s on. Some of Walkowitz's examples—*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, which appeared in fifteen languages in the second half of 2005, or J. M. Coetzee's *Childhood of Jesus*, published in Dutch translation before it appeared in English—could not be more remote from the Chinese avant-garde fiction I discuss in these pages. Nonetheless, "born translated" captures something essential about avant-garde fiction in China:

> [B]orn-translated literature approaches translation as medium and origin rather than as afterthought. Translation is not secondary or incidental to these works. It is a condition of their production … In born-translated novels, translation functions as a thematic, structural, conceptual, and sometimes even as typographical device. Pointing backward as well as forward, they present translation as a spur to literary innovation, including their own.
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> (Walkowitz 2015, 3–4)

Born-translated works show that "translation is the engine rather than the caboose of literary history" (5). Building on the metaphor of the engine, I would submit that Chinese avant-garde

fiction depended on a complex "translating machine" operating both within Chinese and across languages. I use the term "machine" to emphasize its being multilocal and dispersed, irreducible to a circumscribed group of agents and to operations of interlingual transfer, and to call attention to its reliance on vast media and institutional networks, including academic institutions, periodicals, and publishers. Each operation of the translating machine—each act of translation—conjures up an ideal of literary cosmopolitanism based on relations of debt.

Chinese avant-garde fiction was indebted to translation and built this indebtedness into its form. This condition of debt, which Chinese avant-garde writers flaunted through citation and allusion, turned out to be both an asset and a liability. An asset insofar as it bespoke novelty and provoked disorientation. And a liability because it attracted countless charges of gimmick and imitation. Hence the paradox of Chinese avant-garde fiction, deemed by some critics as derivative, and by others as the peak of a century of literary experimentation, as the moment when modern Chinese fiction finally came into its own. Even to this day, scholarly responses are divided. Not many other moments in the history of modern Chinese literature have been so widely acclaimed and so easily dismissed.

To tackle this paradox, this chapter will proceed in three steps, each centered on a type of translation. Through a reading of Ge Fei's short story《青黄》(Green Yellow; 1988), I will discuss how avant-garde fiction employs forms of *intralingual translation* involving transcription and incorporation to thematize the alterity of a language that is supposed to be one's own. Secondly, I will examine how the issue of adopting foreign forms was debated in relation to the problem of Chinese modernism, in what could be described as a form of *intralingual cultural translation*. Finally, I will discuss the writings of the scholar and translator Henry Y. H. Zhao 赵毅衡 (1945–), which I take to be an exemplary case of *interlingual cultural translation*.[5] While the aim of the first two sections is to engage translation as a poetics and as an aspect of the critical discourse surrounding the avant-garde, the goal of the last section is to show how its transnational canonization was partly due to the work of bilingual critics, such as Zhao writing in Chinese and English, adapting their writings to the linguistic context of reception. In all the cases I examine, translation is obviously something other than establishing equivalences between languages.

INTRALINGUAL TRANSCRIPTION: THE ART OF INCORPORATION

Words, not people, and the shameful secrets these words conceal are at the center of Ge Fei's "Green Yellow." The story opens with the narrator reading about "floating whorehouses" in a local gazetteer and in a history book. The prostitutes and their families living on the boats moved ashore in the 1940s and seem to have left no trace. Intrigued by the term *qinghuang* 青黄, "green-yellow," which he encounters in these sources, the narrator visits Mai Village several times to find out what it means. The narrator's trips seem to take place between the late 1960s and the late 1970s, but with no reference to the historical context, the encounters he describes could happen

[5]I draw on Roman Jakobson's three kinds of translation: intralingual translation or *rewording*, interlingual translation or *translation proper*, and intersemiotic translation or transmutation. My discussion, however, will be limited to the first two (Jakobson 1959).

at any time or place. His investigations deliver fragmentary tales of displacement, violence, and death, but nothing about the term: each revelation, the narrator muses, covers up something else. By dwelling on a myriad of ordinary details—the deep lines on a man's face, a strong smell of sheep, the suffocating dust in a room, and the endless, pouring rain—the story conjures up intimate scenes of rural life, some placid, some violent, some ghostly. "Green Yellow" depicts the banality of forgetting, the discarding of the past that makes it possible for communal and individual lives to go on, and ponders on the difficulty of interpreting fragments that survive out of context. Words denoting color, in particular, become meaningless if their referent is unknown. The story stages the feeling of not being at home in one's language, questioning that there is any language that one can call one's own. It thematizes the need for intralingual interpretation, showing that interpretation is fragile and amendable to revisions.

In *Translation as Citation*, Haun Saussy discusses forms of "language hybridity" that elude conventional understandings of translation—techniques such as transcriptions and loan words that are found when looking "askance of translation." For Saussy, "loan words are an opposite to translation in the following sense: with translation, interpretation always precedes the restatement; but with loan words, incorporation occurs without interpretation" (2017, loc 544). "Language B," he goes on to explain, borrows from "language A" when no adequate term for it exists in "language B." Such acts of borrowing call attention to the ways languages expand through processes other than translation. Thus, "the fact that incorporation can be separated from interpretation installs a strangeness in language, a zone … where the native speaker and native competency are no longer in command" (loc 545).

Similarly, Ge Fei's "Green Yellow" works by incorporating without interpreting. Detached from the contexts that would help making sense of them, common terms appear as foreign, hybridizing the language. While in the case of interlingual incorporation, foreignness results from contact with a language from another place, in "Green Yellow" strangeness results from the contact with texts from another time. Yet with a loan word we tend to know what the term refers to, whereas in the case of *qinghuang*, its referent is unclear. This suspension of interpretation, in turn, generates a plurality of meanings, as the text proposes more than one way to understand *qinghuang*. It is significant that the term serves as the title of the story, which conventionally should indicate its theme. What is supposedly the main theme of the narrative turns out to be a pretext to piece together the ordinary fragments of forgotten lives. By the end of the story, even the narrator stops caring about its meaning, and the reader is confused about whether his effort should be taken seriously or should rather be read as a parody of ethnolinguistic research. No wonder so many critics have commented that the central concern of avant-garde fiction is the craft, the process of storytelling itself—a reflection on how storytelling works and what it does both for the narrating subjects and for the reader.

Ge Fei's fiction from the late 1980s to the early 1990s features individuals who misread the situations they are in and fail to predict the consequences of what they do. Often presented as appendixes filling the gaps of historical records, his stories depict a raw desire driving individuals to action and eventually to their death (see, for instance,《迷舟》[The Lost Boat; 1987]). The focus on memory, desire, and death may be specific to Ge Fei, but the act of incorporating words and narrative fragments without providing interpretation constitutes a quasi-translational strategy adopted by other avant-garde writers, as well. In one of his essays, Yu Hua states that what he wants to reach is an authentic 真实 core that is obstructed by conventional storytelling (Yu Hua 1989).

Some of the means he employs to do so are the crude depiction of violence, and a language emptied of emotion and moral reflection that insistently focuses on surface detail (Wedell-Wedellsborg 1996). Sun Ganlu instead resorted to dreamlike scenarios filled with incongruous images. Avant-garde writers presented their efforts as a rebellion against conventional realism 现实主义 and at the same time as a search for authenticity. Perhaps no other binary than that between realism and modernism/experimentalism was more instrumental to the formation of the avant-garde, not only in the writers' own theoretical elaborations but also in those of the critics, as we shall see below.

STILLBORN IN TRANSLATION? LITERARY MODERNISM IN 1980S CRITICAL DISCOURSE

Reconsidering the problem of the avant-garde through the lens of translation entails revisiting the problem of Chinese literary modernism, any formulation of which is itself a translational operation that draws a new line between native and foreign, and which risks reproducing a narrative of Euro-American origin, even when it aims to contest it (Hayot 2012). Debates on how to relate to foreign techniques were first spurred by the publication of Gao Xingjian's 高行健 (1940–)《现代小说技巧初探》(Preliminary Exploration into the Techniques of Modern Fiction; 1981) and by the rise of Obscure or Misty Poetry 朦胧诗 around the same time, which then became targets of the Campaign Against Spiritual Pollution in 1983. Discussions revolved around whether a Chinese modernism was possible and desirable, now that China had embarked on the path of the Four Modernizations, and what characteristics it should have to be truly Chinese. By 1984, the official line was that it was necessary to "scientifically study" Western modernism to criticize its ideological contents and borrow the techniques that may "boost the flourishing and development of a socialist literature and arts with Chinese characteristics" (He Wangxian 1984, 2).

Nonetheless, the issue at stake was not simply how to harmonize foreign forms with local experience (however defined) or merely catching up—though there was all of that, as well (Wang Jing 1996). These debates in fact entailed crucial questions that re-emerge whenever a previously hegemonic utilitarian theory of literature is called into doubt: how to reassess the transformative potential of literature after it is decoupled from the prospects of a socialist revolution, how to theorize its relationship to reality once deterministic notions of class and historical materialism are called into question, and how to redefine the social functions of form. These issues are still as relevant today as they were in 1980s China.

Back then, these issues were discussed through various competing terms, all of which were seen as the nemesis of a stifling notion of realism finally about to be overcome. From 1985 on, phrases such as exploratory fiction 探索小说, new wave fiction 新潮小说, and experimental fiction 实验小说 began to emerge. Shidai Wenyi Publishing House 时代文艺出版社 released an eight-volume series titled《新时期流派小说精选丛书》(Fiction Trends in the New Era—Selected books), which included anthologies titled *Structuralist Fiction* 结构主义小说, *Magic Realist Fiction* 魔幻现实主义小说, and *Symbolist Fiction* 象征主义小说, co-edited by the Shanghai-based critic Wu Liang 吴亮 and collecting the works of young authors, some of whom were then considered precursors of the avant-garde.[6] The phrase "Avant-garde literature" 先锋派文学 began to be used in late 1988,

[6]On literary anthologies in the 1980s, see Xu Yong (2017).

particularly to refer to younger authors based in Shanghai and other cities in the Jiangnan region, thus conveying associations with urban modernity (Cheng 2009). From 1989 on, Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明 (1959–) penned several articles analyzing the narrative strategies of the avant-garde, using the term interchangeably with "post-new wave" 后新潮 (Chen 1989, 1990). While eluding systematic mapping, this proliferation of terms provides a powerful illustration of translation "as a continuous process of re-articulation and re-contextualisation, without any notion of a primary origin" (Hall and Chen 1996, 393, quoted in Bachmann-Medick 2009, 13). This process contributed to the making of Chinese avant-garde fiction as a distinctive movement within a wider range of modernist trends, as a rupture, and as a point of arrival, highlighting distinctions between generations of writers just a few years apart and claiming the most radical innovation for the avant-garde itself.[7]

Schematically put, the critical debate on avant-garde fiction in the late 1980s unfolded in the space between two contrasting poles, one largely dismissive and the other largely supportive of modernist experimentation, with younger critics gravitating toward the latter. Even so, critics on both sides initially articulated a sense of inadequacy and crisis. At the very moment when avant-garde fiction was emerging in 1986, a debate on "pseudomodernism" broke out, which questioned the authenticity of Chinese modernism on multiple fronts (Wang Jing 1996, 163–77). In "On the difficulties of exploratory, experimental fiction" (1987), Li Jiefei 李洁非 (1961–) and Zhang Ling 张陵 (1957–) deplored the excessive enthusiasm with which experimental works (探索 or 实验性小说) ranging from Zong Pu's 宗璞 (1928–)《我是谁?》(Who Am I?; 1979) to Ma Yuan's《冈底斯的诱惑》(Temptations of Gangdisi; 1985) had been received, arguing that they failed to convey a "modern consciousness" characterized by relativism and doubt. The main problem of these works, in the critics' view, was that they illustrated ready-made concepts (such as, for instance, alienation or the unconscious) rather than conveying them through their linguistic form (Li and Zhang 1987, 36, 39). In the works of Ma Yuan, in particular, Li and Zhang detected "a gap between the author's theoretical awareness of structure and his actual ability to construct it in language" (41). These stories did not transcend the confines of "nineteenth-century anthropocentric realism" and did not match the modern concept of "text" 文本, which Li and Zhang drew from Roland Barthes's notion of the writerly and upheld as a model for Chinese writers to pursue.

Much of Li and Zhang's article resonates with the critique made by Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 (1955–2017) of Chinese modernism's residual attachment to humanistic values (Wang Jing 1996, 167). Drawing on structuralist approaches partly mediated by the work of Terence Hawkes, whose *Structuralism and Semiotics* was published in Chinese translation in early 1987, and on the volume《新小说派研究》(Studies on the Nouveau Roman; 1986) edited by the translator and scholar of French literature Liu Mingjiu 柳鸣九 (1934–2022), they identified "real" modernism with antihumanism and called for an aesthetic revolution that would give free rein to irrational impulses. Taking a certain vision of Western modernism as the standard against which to judge Chinese aesthetic experimentation, their rhetoric bespeaks the asymmetry that Eric Hayot detects in the "'two worlds' model of East/West interaction," one in which Western references to the East can be interpreted as fantastic projections, whereas "Chinese figurations of the West end up looking

[7]This process is comparable to the "machinery of selective tradition" that Raymond Williams sees at work in the "late-born ideology of modernism," which does not concede any innovative role to realist writers such as Gogol, Flaubert, or Dickens (Williams 1989, 49).

like failures of imitation or failures of understanding – like, that is, intellectual and circumstantial failures rather than ontological ones" (Hayot 2011, 102).

And yet, Li and Zhang's adoption of such a standard could also be seen as a strategic form of occidentalism (Chen 1995) aimed at reaffirming the guiding role of literary criticism and at promoting their own vision of literary modernity. Their embrace of Barthes's writerly text as the standard for literary modernity constituted a response to the accusations of unintelligibility, escapism, and empty formalism addressed against Obscure poets in the debates on modernism that took place in 1980 to 1983. What Li and Zhang were resisting was precisely the dichotomy of realism and modernism that had characterized the early 1980s debates, and that continued in the assumed binary of referentiality and word play in the late 1980s reception of the avant-garde. While the modern (a term they used interchangeably with modernist) text did not provide an "exact counterpart" to reality, Li and Zhang emphasized that "actually, the modern text seeks to more authentically express the constitution of reality, by structuring a synchronic pattern of reality and history in the manifold intertwining of time and space" 其实,现代小说的本意是企图更加真实地表现现实的构成,在多种时空的交织中结构现实与历史的共时形态 (Li and Zhang 1987, 42). The modern text differed from traditional realism, in their view, not because it disengaged reality but because it invited readers to consider the structuring function of language and to participate in an equal exchange 交流 aimed at "changing readers' habits, transforming passive reception into active reception, and creating an equal and free reading atmosphere" (42). Li and Zhang held writers responsible for creating such a space of exchange, but they concluded that whenever their efforts failed the fault lay not only with writers but also with the general social conditions in which their texts emerged. Their literary criticism, then, constituted its own form of cultural critique.

Drawing on Jan Mukařovský's *Preface* to Shklovsky's Czech translation of the *Theory of Prose* (1934), which was published in Chinese translation in the seventh volume of《世界艺术与美学》(World Art and Aesthetics) in March 1986, Li and Zhang rejected the binary of form and content underlying the early 1980s debates. They rejected the idea that formal experimentation constituted an escape from reality, rather, they insisted on its social function:

> [M]odern fiction and social reality have a closer, more organic relation with social reality than classical fiction … The creation of the modern fictional "text" needs to rely on the participation of the reader, and the degree of the reader's participation depends on the whole thinking of society and on the cultural conditions. As a sign, the "text" implies its entire sociocultural background.
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> (Li and Zhang 1987, 43)

Li and Zhang's effort to rethink the social function of form invites us to consider how unexplored convergences between French structuralism and the Prague Linguistic Circle shaped Chinese literary criticism in the 1980s, in that short window that opened before the field was taken over by the debates on postmodernism at the turn of the 1990s. Li and Zhang translated a literary concept (the writerly text) into a tool for cultural critique, to simultaneously reclaim the (potential) cultural and social functions of experimentalism and to declare the inefficacy of the way in which it was carried out. In their view, both the linguistic inadequacies of emerging writers and contemporary "cultural conditions" (what these were exactly they left it for the reader to guess) inhibited the formation of a modern, active readership. Hence the predicament

in which Chinese modernism found itself in, in 1987—the stillborn child of a "theoretical awareness" unable to grow into aesthetic practice.

Did the avant-garde fiction that appeared over the following two years overcome this predicament? By early 1989, literary critics were even more split. The critic Li Tuo 李陀 (1939–) credited avant-garde fiction with defamiliarizing the linguistic patterns and ideological preconceptions 先结构 that conditioned experience and knowledge, thus striking a deadly blow to the discursive system that he termed "Mao Style" 毛文体, which in his view had dominated Chinese society up to the mid-1980s (Li Tuo 1991, 1997; Tang 1993).[8] The manipulation of language carried out by the avant-garde constituted a rebellious act that could bring about new ways of thinking and living, though what the latter entailed remained unclear (Li Tuo, Zhang Ling, and Wang Bin 1989, 79). Other supportive critics acclaimed the avant-garde for addressing "the common destiny that the whole of humanity has to face" rather than some specific Chinese experience, turning what some critics had previously framed as lack of historical authenticity into a claim to universality (76).

Occupying the opposite pole of the discursive field were critics who dismissed avant-garde fiction as a passing fad that did nothing but alienate readers, stating that it was already over by late 1988. Dismissive critics tended to speak on behalf of actual readers put off by the difficulty of the texts, rather than speculating on the "new readers" that the new fiction might help create. The symposium 现实主义与先锋派文学 (Realism and Avant-Garde Literature) was symptomatic in this respect. Organized by《文学评论》(Literary Review) and《中山》(Zhongshan) and held on October 12–16, 1988, in a state-managed resort by Taihu Lake, the symposium was as much about drawing distinctions between old and new realisms as about making sense of the avant-garde, demonstrating how the latter was defined in contrast to the former even as critics recognized that the literary field was too diverse to be reduced to these two categories alone (Li Zhaozhong 1989; Cheng 2009). The critic Nan Fan 南帆 (1957–) reminded those in attendance that the Chinese term for "realism" did not refer to a fixed set of aesthetic principles, but rather to a certain conception of the function of the writer as a spokesperson for the people and as an intermediary between the citizens and the state. Within the constraints of (a thus defined) realism, Nan Fan lamented, literature could hardly gain its autonomy. Echoing his views, other attendees complained that Chinese realism lacked the critical spirit that ought to characterize it. Nonetheless, some argued that after the limits of "realism" had been exposed first by modernism and then by the avant-garde, now finally a "neorealism" 新写实主义 (so named to stress the difference from official realism) was emerging that was closer to readers' everyday concerns, as exemplified by the works of Liu Heng 刘恒 (1954–) and Liu Zhenyun 刘震云 (1958–). In other words, avant-garde fiction's temporary rebellion was already superseded by the neorealist turn. Several critics harped on the imitative character of the Chinese avant-garde, some going so far as to compare them to inert "wax sculptures." Shanghai-based critic and editor Wu Liang was the only one to express support, claiming that he did not read literature "to find reflections of real life, but in hopes to find things that could not be experienced [in the real world], the same way one would find them in painting or music" (Li Zhaozhong 1989, 28).

[8]Li Tuo (1991) defines 毛文体 as "hegemonic discourse" 占据霸权地位的话语 and includes the word "discourse" in parenthesis to translate 话语. However, Li emphasizes that *Mao wenti* is different from Foucault's notion of discourse, in that the latter is not concerned with concrete aspects of language such as the use of specific adverbs or sentence structures (pers. comm. with Li Tuo, February 2021).

In reaction to the Taihu meeting, the symposium 保卫先锋文学 (Protect the Avant-garde), organized by the cultural critic Zhu Dake 朱大可 (1957–) on March 30, 1989, in the Shanghai branch of the China Writers' Association, was designed as a response to those who wanted to "send avant-garde literature to an early grave" (Zhu et al. 1989, 76). The concept of avant-garde emerging from the Shanghai gathering again emphasized rebellion and experimentalism. Stressing its radical autonomy both from commercial mass culture and from the imperative to "serve the people," it resonated with the concept of "pure literature" that would be more widely discussed in the early 2000s. For the writer Sun Ganlu, "the courage to soliloquise sometimes is the courage to flee. Run away from the crowd. The most basic theme of my works is escape" (Zhu et al. 1989, 79). The critics that gathered in Shanghai, though motivated by the wish to "protect" the avant-garde, also seemed to consider it beyond salvation. Zhu Dake pointed out that, in contrast to poets, avant-garde fiction writers had failed to launch their own journals; establish their own groupings; and coin their own slogans, theories, and manifestoes. He urged writers to "protect themselves" by sharpening their counter-critical tools and respond to the attacks that "mediocre and foolish" critics waged against them, but also suggested that they had already missed the opportunity to do so (Zhu et al. 1989, 80).

Literary scholar Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 (1968–) has proposed that avant-garde fiction was a short-lived, elite phenomenon that could only emerge thanks to the support of state institutions. When journals and publishers were weaned off state support, they found themselves in trouble and started to "incline" toward market-driven literature and socially engaged realist fiction (Shao 2003; Hockx 2012). Meanwhile, it is undeniable that avant-garde fiction has come to be considered as a turning point in contemporary Chinese literary history. A full validation of avant-garde fiction only took place from 1989 on, mostly thanks to emerging critics such as Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明, who enthusiastically read it through the lens of postmodernism. Many other factors contributed to its canonization, including the trauma of 1989 and the ensuing assumption that these authors represented the last pinnacle of individual creativity squeezed between the state and the market; the expansion of academic literary criticism in China; the publication of the anthology《中国先锋小说》(China's Avant-Garde Fiction), edited by the influential critic Zhu Wei 朱伟 in 1990, as well as several avant-garde series (e.g., the Avant-garde Novel Series by Huacheng Publishing House, 先锋长篇小说丛书); the translation into foreign languages; the prolific output of some of its representative authors (especially Yu Hua and Su Tong) and their film adaptations; and last but not least, the work of critics who wrote both in Chinese and English and edited collections of translated works. It is to one of the critics, Zhao Yiheng/Henry Zhao, that I now turn.

SELF-TRANSLATING MEDIATORS

The literary scholar Henry Zhao played an important role in the transnational canonization of China's avant-garde fiction in the early 1990s by curating anthologies and writing critical essays. Zhao earned his master's degree from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, where he studied English literature with the poet Bian Zhilin 卞之琳 (1910–2000). He went on to obtain his doctoral degree at the University of California, Berkeley and was hired at SOAS University of London in

1988. Zhao curated the collection *The Lost Boat: Avant-garde Fiction from China* (1993), followed by two more volumes co-edited with John Cayley in 1994 and 1996.[9]

In three essays published in the early 1990s (Zhao 1990, 1992, 1993), Zhao emphasized the originality of China's avant-garde fiction. In the first essay, published in《今天》(Today) in 1990 and translated into English in 1992, Zhao claims that what sets China's avant-garde fiction apart are its "strong metafictional tendencies" (Zhao 1992, 91). Borrowing the term metafiction from Robert Scholes's *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979), Zhao explains that metafictional features, which he defines as "fiction about fiction," are always present in any work of fiction, but "what contemporary metafiction does is to de-naturalise and re-semanticise the conventional metafictional features, thus foregrounding them so that they can no longer be ignored by critics" (Zhao 1992, 91–2). The article examines various metafictional elements in the works by Ma Yuan, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei, with the aim of demonstrating their originality. Zhao notes that an "influence trap" is at work in the study of China's avant-garde, which "has been repeatedly attacked as being an imitation, or even plagiarism, of Western avant-garde literature" (95). However, he continues, none of the "recognised masters of metafiction," except perhaps for Jorge Luis Borges, had been translated into Chinese. The work of the bilingual critic in this essay, then, is to identify elements in Chinese avant-garde fiction that cannot possibly be the effect of translation: "The meta-sensibility in recent Mainland China fiction seems to be something of which even the Chinese metafictional writers themselves are not aware. For this simple reason it can be concluded that metafiction in China cannot be a 'bogus metafiction' or an imported fashion. The emergence of meta-sensibility has been brought about by the development of Chinese culture itself" (95). After tracing a "meta-sensibility" back to Chinese tradition, especially to Daoism and Buddhism, Zhao emphasizes that in contemporary times, the meta-sensibility emerged from the "methodology fever" of the early 1980s and of the "deep distrust of the existing interpretive systems [that] already led to a crisis of codes" (96). Given this crisis of codes, what the metafictional works express is "a fundamental doubt about the possibility of creating a fictional world to 'reflect' the real world" (97). Zhao concluded his article by noting how in 1989, the publication of avant-garde fiction was tacitly discouraged, and expressing hope that "Avant-Garde fiction as a movement will survive" (99).

In contemporary anglophone literary criticism, metafictional devices are associated with postmodernism (Waugh 1984; Hutcheon 1988). "Postmodernism" does not appear at all in Zhao's 1990/1992 article, but it is brought up and explicitly rejected in his "The necessity of the avant-garde in China," published in Chinese in 1993. The article, which can be read as a rebuttal to Zhang Yiwu 张颐武 and Chen Xiaoming's proposition that avant-garde fiction constituted one of the manifestations of China's turn to postmodernity, strategically drops the term "metafiction" and insists on the "necessity" of the concept of "avant-garde" itself. According to Zhao, Chinese avant-garde fiction featured both modernist and postmodernist characteristics. Modernism in China had not yet been institutionalized, and therefore Chinese postmodernism was not so much a rebellion against modernism but rather its continuation. Most crucially, the term avant-garde was "necessary" because it did not take the West as a model and did not presuppose a specific stage of economic and cultural development in the way postmodernism did (Zhao 1993, 201).

[9]A complete list of English-language anthologies is available in Liu (2021).

The term avant-garde was no less comparative, but its characteristics could, in his view, be assessed through the textual analysis of formal qualities in relation to earlier moments in Chinese literary history.

Zhao saw in the avant-garde a form of high literature resistant to both ideological and market co-optation. Drawing on Bernard Rosenberg's *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (1957), he argued that the pressure of commercialization had brought about a polarization between avant-garde and mass culture. The avant-garde thus testified to a return of the "stratification of genres" that had been erased during the socialist period, when cultural egalitarianism had prevailed:

> Avant-garde literature restored Chinese culture's intrinsic structure of genre stratification: this culture has always needed a formally complex collection of texts that only a minority of people can read; its aim is to preserve the vitality of the language, preserve cultural values, and make sure that they are not submerged by the success of popular literature.
>
> (Zhao 1993, 203)

Zhao's "cultural translation" mobilized Western literary criticism to stress Chinese avant-garde fiction's local roots. This was a hybrid local, harmonizing aspects of the Chinese tradition with the critical spirit of the May Fourth Movement and the relentless pursuit of formal innovation—a sinified version of high modernism holding the promise of aesthetic autonomy and resistance to the market at the very moment when the latter led to its demise.

Chinese avant-garde fiction—a heterogeneous phenomenon the theorization of which "remains unfinished" (He Guimei 2005), often read as a "social allegory" (Zhang 1997, 19) and as the ironic displacement of generational trauma in postmodern key (Yang 2002)—rejected the sociopolitical mission in which Chinese literature was invested since the beginning of the century, replacing it with subversive commentaries on the nature of fiction itself (Jones 2003, 555). As Wang Jing put it in her introduction to the collection *China's Avant-Garde Fiction*, "the avant-gardists demonstrate eloquently that writers in China could afford to turn an impervious back to sociopolitical consciousness. What is collected in this anthology is, in a nutshell, a dramatic manifesto of the aggressive making of a postrevolutionary literary sensibility obsessed with form and the pleasure of storytelling" (1998, 14).

What exactly was at stake in these writers' "obsession with form and pleasure of storytelling"? In Ge Fei's own recollections (themselves a form of self-translation),

> When I started to write in 1986, two things deeply attracted me, and at the same time gave me doubt and pain. One was the freedom of writing. The freedom I aspired to had nothing to do with the empty slogans of fighting for certain rights in a sociological sense, but with the possibility to do whatever I wanted in the process of writing itself, without being restrained by stereotypes and clichés.
>
> (2001, 66–7)

While multiple forms of translation—encompassing, as we have seen, both interlingual and intralingual processes of interpretation—fed the aspiration to find freedom in writing, an important aspect of the poetics of the avant-garde was its bringing into visibility the difficulty of interpreting, the recursive disclosure of the narrator's failed attempts to adequately translate. The foregrounding

of the difficulties of interpreting might well be one of the enduring legacies of China's avant-garde fiction, after most of its practitioners turned away from their youthful experimental phase to reach a broader number of readers.

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