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WRITING SPIRITUALITY IN THE WORKS OF CAN XUE: TRANSFORMING THE SELF

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Within the annals of contemporary Chinese literature, Can Xue (b. 1953) is in a league of her own.¹ This experimental writer enjoys widespread critical acclaim, including a receptive audience abroad that is drawn to her eclectic, idiosyncratic style. Can Xue's works are informed by modernism (*xiandai zhuyi*), her native Chu culture, and Chinese and Western neo-classical thought. The result is a surreal imagery and a Kafka-like existentialist probe into the human condition. Western readers, in particular, are drawn to the extraordinary quality of her prose—the rhizome-like flows that converge in nodes and images and lead down labyrinths that end nowhere and everywhere. Besides issues of style, a predominant concern is the revelation and transformation of the authentic self. In China, the subject (*zhutixing*) of texts made a debut during the feverish post-revolutionary decade termed the “new epoch” (*xin shiqi*) (1979-1989). During the ten-year period following the death of Mao Zedong nothing held greater attraction than the notion of “I”—the entity that had been historically suppressed and that came into being with the post-revolutionary reform. Jing Wang notes that in the 1980s the linguistic subject (*yuyan zhuti*) moved from the age-old subaltern position to the subject-position of texts (1996: 207). Couched in epistemological terms, the construct spiced up the debates about how to achieve modernization (Cai, 2004: 1). Subjectivity is an inherent part of Can Xue's works: the author herself comments on the processes of reading and writing that lead to a higher, more rational self.² The construct intersects with China's emerging identities that are a crucial part in the functioning of the new society. The remapping of the cultural-ideological terrain of the 1980s provided the context for this notion in China's critical thought. The discussion thus commences with the changes

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- 1 Can Xue was born in Changsha, Hunan province, one of eight children of a veteran Communist intellectual, who was a chief editor of the *Xin Hunan ribao* (New Hunan Daily News). Her mother also worked in the newspaper office. In 1957, both parents were branded ultrarightists and, the next year, underwent labor reform (*laogai*). The family was forced out of the newspaper's residential area and into a tiny dwelling of ten feet square. During the Great Famine of 1959, their meager monthly income condemned them to near-starvation, and Can Xue's grandmother died of starvation the next year. At the start of the Cultural Revolution, her father was jailed and her mother was sent to a May Seventh Cadre School to be re-educated. Can Xue stopped attending school after the fifth grade and began perusing Russian and other literature. As an adult, she trained and worked as a tailor before being accepted as a member of the Hunan Writers Association in 1988.
 - 2 See “Jingshen de cengci” and other essays for this idea.

that engendered China's socio-economic transformation. It then turns to Can Xue's early stories and a novel published in 2008.

"China's Kafka" emerged on the literary scene in the early 1980s, that is, the period of reform and opening up (*gaige kaifang*). In post-Mao China, this was a time of expectation marked by utopia and crisis. The communist party's economic reform had completed its first initiative in the rural-based responsibility system. The second, or urban, stage of reform had also just begun. The reform opened up the country to foreign investment and enabled private entrepreneurs to start up businesses. This stage of the reform centred on privatisation and led to the catchphrase "commodity economy" that described the emerging socialist market economy, or "socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics." The feverish leap toward socialist modernization engendered unprecedented growth with the result that China's economy became the second largest after the United States. Finally, high-ranking officials proclaimed the imperative of political reform. The imperative, which ultimately proved to be short-lived, did the most to further the growing nationwide expectations of a better future based on wealth and enlightened reform.

Some preliminary considerations

Among the feverish events of the "new epoch" those at mid-decade were among the most memorable. The time witnessed the influx of new thought from the Western world. The resulting explosion of new ideas engendered the "methodology fever" on the nation's cultural agenda (Wang, 1996: 1). Believing that they could steer the course of the modernization, the country's intellectual elite devised their own enlightenment discourse that centred on identity, the idea of modern consciousness (*xindai yishi*), westernization versus sinification, and indigenous versus global cultural politics. The discourse included an ideological engagement with the party that culminated in the disastrous events in Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989. The events leading up to the incident included the discussion on Marxist humanism in 1983, the Culture Fever (*wenhua re*) of 1985, the constructs of subjectivity of the same year on, the controversial television series *Heshang* of 1988, and propositions of modernism and post-modernism (*houxiandai zhuyi*) in the late 1980s (*Ibid.* 2). China's post-revolutionary literature mirrored the successive evolution of these ideas. Of particular note is the searching for roots school (*xungen pai*) of mid-decade and the avant-garde group (*xianfeng pai*) that emerged in 1987. The latter include Can Xue, Ge Fei, Yu Hua and others and proved to be the most experimental among the various schools. The avant-garde challenged the reigning paradigms in modern Chinese literature, including the discourse of grand history that postulates a teleological order of historical progress. Divorcing the aesthetic from the sociopolitical, the school transformed the role of literature from a cultural force to an aesthetic project. More to the point, the avant-garde presented a linguistic utopia and the subject as a rhetorical construct and autonomous self (*Ibid.* 159-160, 227). Can Xue notes (2007: 127) that, in contrast to the literary mainstream, a fictionalized subjective experience is a unique feature of China's "new experimental literature" (*xin shiyan wenxue*).

Can Xue was the sole female author of the avant-garde group and sums up all one may wish to say about the exhilaration of that time. More important, she sums up all one may wish to say about modernism, the movement that caught the literary imagination toward the end of the decade. In the West, modernism is tied to a modern practice and thought and the end of tradition and God as we know him. The mode's cultural tendencies relate to changes in western society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hegel defines modernism as an "immediacy of mediation," or a vision that systematically challenges the preexisting cultural paradigms— realism and the certainty of Enlightenment thinking— and provides symbolic space for new social positions (quoted in Zhang, 1997: 2). Where Can Xue is concerned, modernism squares with her neo-Kantian idea that reality is chaotic, that the human mind alone is responsible for rational order, and that social discourse and communication are essentially unnamable. Modernism enabled the author to convey not only her idea of culture as fundamentally irrational but also the prospect that acceptance of the irrational is the only way to transcend these processes.

The development of modernism in China was indebted to the introduction of Western theories and works during the twentieth century. In the 1980s, western thought amounted to a continuation of the infusion of western ideas that had commenced eighty years previously.³ The thought included Kant, Heidegger and the Frankfurt School. Writers such as Camus, Salinger, Eliot, Garcia Marquez, Borges, Kafka, and others influenced the literary side of the new mode. Chinese modernism subsequently evolved as a local and culturally distinct national project with its own set of "Chinese characteristics." Zhang Xudong notes (1997: 3) that the modernist project had long transcended its apprenticeship to Euro-American modernism, acquiring a set of features that suited its particular purposes. He adds that the fetishised system of knowledge production became the object of a dialectical critique that was hermeneutical and elite (*Ibid.* 15). Modernism evolved into a representation of the post-Mao socio-cultural dilemma at fin-de-siècle. For the cultural elite looking for ways to address the dilemma, it offered a means to examine the social-cultural problematic of Maoist China. In short, modernism represented one possibility among several possibilities that enabled the nation to come to terms with the disasters of the recent past (Yang, 2005: 19).

With respect to literary texts, modernism's primary conventions express uncertainty and provisionality, the indefinite state of the text and epistemological doubt (Fokkema, 1984: 19). Peter Childs (2000: 8) comments on the solipsistic mental landscape, the presence of an unreliable narrator and the obsession with language for its own sake. He adds that modernist texts focus on social or spiritual collapse and subsume history under mythology and symbolism (*Ibid.* 20). In Can Xue's works, the conventions extend to a set of Kafkaesque features that include the hopelessness and absurdity of existentialism, the themes of alienation and persecution, the surreal humour and the almost exclusive preoccupation with the inner world. Those of a modernist bent embrace the idea that the mode of realism, with its mirror held up to nature, is unsatisfactory and insufficient. On the contrary, art and literature must

3 Western literary modernism was initially introduced into China during May Fourth (1919).

consider the unknowable depths of the subconscious realm, psychic instability, and the distortions that subjectivity brings into awareness. China's avant-garde marked a continuation of the modernist agenda through three basic features—the self-reflexive interplay with language, the constitution of social individuality through language games, and the adaptability of the mode to the emergent consumer society (Zhang, 1997: 5). Foremost among these is a linguistic maze with a dynamic of interiorization and non-referentiality. Faced with the challenges, the reader of modernist texts must accommodate the complex aesthetics and the self-enclosed subject that engages with language to convey a meaning that is both elusive and incomplete.

A spirit runs through it

In Can Xue's modernist works, subjectivity unfolds as a Heidegger-like being-in-the-world that she terms "spirit" (*jingshen*) or "soul" (*linghun*). Narrated as "I," the construct presents an unbounded being state at one with the natural world. Often, it is locked in oppressive familial bonds that mirror China's deadly social relations. Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg (1994: 9-10) points out that the first-person consciousness invades the entire space of texts. In turn, Jon Solomon (1988: 238, 248) notes that, within the psyche of the "I," what was a dialogue often becomes an interior monologue, which assumes a function that was assigned earlier to the narrative voice. Elsewhere, the "I" may split into opposing elements of "I" and "you" in which the "you" is identical to, or a mirror image of, the "I." The pathology of Can Xue's work originates in an enmeshed, or undifferentiated, ego state that signifies a wider pathology. She maintains that the cause of the pathology traces to a tendency to devalue the soul.⁴ Writing that can "liberate the soul" (*jiefang linghun*) simultaneously possesses the "capacity to re-constitute the soul" (*fuzhi linghun de nengli*) (Can Xue, 2009b: 196; 2008: 26, 25). Ultimately, Can Xue's goal is the same as her predecessors Lu Xun and Franz Kafka. In short, she aims to spiritualize the world-reality, thus liberating it from an existing malaise.

The revelation of the subject of texts is an intrinsic part of the author's "re-constitution." In the discussion of four works that follows the entity takes the form of a split subject, or "split soul" (*linghunde fenlie*), the expression of desires and phobias in the face of a hostile world, the transformed configuration of the inner self, and an entity in a libidinal relationship with the same/other. Throughout Can Xue's oeuvre, the presence of folklore, magic and myth colour the processes of transformation.

"Dialogues in Paradise" (Tiantanglide duihua, 1988) traces a being state plotted as a soul in flight. After the manner of *Chuci* (Songs of the South), China's second oldest anthology of poems, the work maps the ecstasy of the self in a trance-like state. The modern-day rendition of spirit travel reinvents the mode and philosophical worldview of the *Chuci*. The anthology of poetry is attributed to Qu Yuan, the fourth dynasty B.C. poet and officer-holder who was sent into exile after being slandered at the Chu

4 See "Zhongguoren buzhong jingshen" in *Can Xue wenxueguan*.

court.⁵ Post-1949 China experienced an extraordinary resurgence of the Qu Yuan myth due to the parallel fate of the country's loyal intellectuals. The poetry implies that the more worthy the official, or intellectual, the greater the chance of a ruined career or death (Schneider, 1980: 5). Laurence Schneider notes (*Ibid.*: 2, 8) that the folk tradition surrounding this figure has been an intimate part of the identity of Chinese intellectuals since 1949. In Can Xue's works the evocation of the hubris re-works China's perennial problems and the challenge posed by intellectuals with their altruistic ideals. A final consideration is the lyrical tradition represented in the anthology, the relationship between private sentiment and public obligation and the concern with self and sentiment, idealism and imagination (*Ibid.* 4).

"Dialogues" proceeds with the "I" (*wo*) of the speaking subject and the "you" (*ni*) of the same/other. The splitting represents the two, or complementary, parts of the spirit and earthly realms (Can Xue, 2009b: 192). In critical practice, the split writerly persona refers to the multiplicity of characters and the oscillation between personal pronouns that perform as loci of enunciation (Derrida quoted in Bachner, 2005: 161). The lyricism of the "I" discoursing with "you" lays bare the feeling state of the soul as it shifts between these loci.

The "I" confesses a desire for the object of desire—the lover/confidante/playmate, who is invested with the power to listen and to attend to the "I." Every night s/he waits for the tuberosa (*yelaixiang*) to bloom, s/he transforms into a fish, s/he drifts into a drought-stricken landscape where she searches for bees, and s/he undertakes a flight during a cold and drizzling night. Exchanges take place about leaping off a cliff; there is a black cat as big as a leopard; and excursions along a riverbank. The tête-à-tête between these two souls, or two parts of one soul, takes place within the transcendence of an imaginary world, a world that contrasts with the material world with its impurities and lack.⁶

The celestial traveler itemizes the objects that embellish the trek— stars in the night sky, spirits, animals, mystical creatures and exotic flowers and plants. There are disconnected images and lines of flight and a "quivering live ether" reminiscent of Chu (Can Xue, 1988 [1989]: 132). There are sun-dappled lizards, a lion roaring in the distance, a sea of stars rolling like waves, white knotweed flowers, the sun and moon rising together, a gray-white night bird, boars and leopards, sweet-scented osmanthus, ghostly will-o'-the-wisps, lascivious plant roots, vines growing like bacillus, ferocious plants roaring in the black wind, and mayflies with pink wings. The descriptions link intertextuality with the *Lisao* (Encountering Sorrow), the longest poem in the *Chuci* that is conventionally seen as Qu Yuan's suicide note and attempt to apprise his

5 According to myth, Qu Yuan suffered the jealousy of his peers at court, was banished and went into exile. The Chu kingdom (1030-223 BC) was the largest of the six states at the end of the Warring States (403-221 BC) and was the seat of the indigenous shamanistic Chu culture.

6 Can Xue's ideas about the soul world can be found in her interview with Laura McCandlish and her autobiography *Quguang yundong* (2008: 69-70).

contemporaries of the truth (Schneider, 1980: 4).⁷ The poem evokes the self-pity of the official who is cursed with moral insight and a benighted sovereign (*Ibid.*).

Jon Solomon notes (1988: 252) the similarity of Can Xue's writing with the *Lisao* style. The ways include the supernatural world, the profusion of plant and animal life, and a first person narrator who aspires to be a magician (*Ibid.*). Both deal with spirit travel and a séance-like rendezvous of a sensitive misfit and an imaginary lover or friend. "Dialogues" evokes the shamanistic séances that were the origin of the poems.⁸ More important, there is the speaking subject of the text, who articulates the desire for love uninhibited by social and other constraints. This aspect resonates with the lyrical tradition and the concern with private sentiment and imagination.

A further canonical work is "Hut on the Hill" (Shanshangde xiaowu, 1985), a story about the desires and phobias of the feeling self. The work narrates the frustration of spiritual growth by the forces of the status quo. The turmoil of the experiencing self parallels the psychological torment of the family itself: the swelling, cold sweat, ice forming in their insides and purple pouches under their eyes are the signs of an etiology and its accompanying malaise. Ultimately, the "I" finds refuge in an imaginary hut—the icon that embodies a room of one's own and idealized spiritual space (Xiao, 2009: 82).

Set within the contours of the imaginary realm, "Hut" unfolds with a Daoist-like force that dissolves the boundary between inner and outer worlds and sutures the human environment with the natural and animal worlds. A cacophony of sensory output proceeds with the tumultuous north wind, the howling of wolves and dodgy thieves that circle the family home. Next come swarms of hideous beetles that hurl inside and flop down on the floor. The effect is a self-vibrating tornado, or "orchestration of crashing bricks" (Massumi, 1987: xiv). The animism represents the "demonic energy" (*guiqi hensheng*) of Chu that subverts the inertia of the traditional cultural norms. "Hut" closes with "white pebbles glowing with flames" (Can Xue, 1985 [1989]: 53). The author comments that the so-called "movement toward the light" (*quguang yundong*) stems from a primeval instinct that assists the soul to shine. Without it, there are few available means to achieve self-realization (Can Xue, 2009b: 141).

"Bull" (Gongniu, 1988) in turn, deals with the transformed configuration of the inner, or feeling, self. The work contains a libidinous sign that is one and the same as the devil/death. George Bataille (1986: 11) comments on the age-old relation between Eros and death, or the eroticism that is not alien to death. More to the point is the transformation of humans into other ontological forms— Old Guan into a bull and the self that is reconstituted through the space of the mirror.

"Bull" is set against the backdrop of a naturalistic sweep: the drizzling rain, falling mulberries, rotting roots of the rosebushes and the petals turned deathly pale evoke Lu

7 Qu Yuan committed suicide by throwing himself into the Milo River. The event occurred after he advised the obtuse King Huai (328-299 BC) not to visit the rival Qin state. The king ignored the advice and was murdered. Qin subsequently annexed Chu.

8 See Arthur Waley (1955: 13) for the origins of the *Chuci* in shamanistic chants and séances between shamans (*wu*) and spirits (*shen*).

Xun's *Yecao* (Wild grass) without the accompanying pessimism. On the contrary, they signify renewal and transformative change. The animism inscribes the movement of the text with the language of white noise—ferocious long-legged mosquitoes carrying white dots, field mice scurrying between decaying teeth, the withered berries of the Chinaberry tree, green secretion oozing from eyes and a rattlesnake hanging from a tree branch. The word *zhuya* (tooth decay) exemplifies the quickening of the animist force: the compound comes to life as field mice that bore into Old Guan's teeth.⁹ Last but not least are the sensuous perambulations of the bull as it lumbers around the house.

The companionable, albeit hit-and-miss, interactions of Old Guan and "I" typify the Kafka-like alienation and lack of connection. While Old Guan obsesses about tooth decay—a sign of diminishing youth—the "I" monologues about the purple flashes of the bull that she spies in the space of a mirror. There is a moment when Old Guan draws sustenance from the vital force: a molecular exchange takes place when the horn pierces the wall and transmutes into his head. The process in which the sign thought of symbol shifts to another sign engenders a "raging bull." Rejuvenated, Old Guan rises up with a hammer that he aims at the mirror. The text closes with the revelation of the true form of the bull, leaving the reader to imagine the vanquishing of the devil that keeps death at bay.¹⁰ The release by the ego for the sake of the Real—the broken mirror—enables an alchemy that transforms death into life and a new significance. In Lacanian terms, the subjective reconstitution at the moment of ruin enables access into the Symbolic that leads to integration.¹¹ In short, "Bull" exemplifies the conviction on the part of the experimentalists that subjectivity is a "product of the symbolic in an instance of discourse" (Wang, 1996: 228).

With respect to Old Guan, the character's metamorphosis into the shape of a bull betrays a visceral level of feeling reminiscent of the allotropic state. Andrew Gibson (1996: 56) comments on the protean character state that is in composition with its surroundings. Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 274-275) similarly comment on the "molecular" processes involved in transformation. Becoming animal is not a "real" becoming; instead, one "becomes dog" by barking. If barking is done with enough feeling and composition, one can emit a "molecular dog" (*Ibid.* 303). The process is a figuration of difference that undermines the notion of human subjectivity as the centre of the world (Neimanis, 2007: 283). Alternatively, the Daoist-like transformation exemplifies a form of awakening into an evolved authentic self.

To turn to the role played by sexuality in psychological processes, *Breakthrough Performance* (*Tuwei bianyan*, 1988) narrates the self/other libidinal relationship through the space of a mirror.¹² The performative quality of Can Xue's work peaks with

9 The character *zhu* means "gnaw" or bore holes.

10 The end recalls China's shamanistic practice in which mirrors were used in the belief that they could make devils show their true face (Ji, 2004: 197).

11 See Lacan's "The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the *I* as revealed in psychoanalytic experience" in the first of his *Écrits*.

12 The novel is alternatively known as *Wuxiang jie* (Five Spice Street). *Five Spice Street* is the title of the English translation.

this novel that pulsates and flows like a turbo charger on high octane. *Breakthrough Performance* reveals how *jouissance* powers the human soul into dionysian bliss. Not even gossip puts a dent in the devil-may-care attitude of Madam X—the spirit at play—in her pursuit of self-realization through a libidinal state. The message of the text is that trusting to the primordial instinct is the speediest route to get there.

The mysterious X amounts to a *je ne sais quoi*, or image of the surreal or sublime. Even Dai Jinhua comments (2000: 15) that Madam X's libidinal appeal overturns the "fascist" ideology of authoritarian control. In this "lovely surrealist romp" the inhabitants give themselves over to gossip; they spy on each other; and they seduce one another ad infinitum. A large portion revolves around whether or not there is an affair going on between Madam X and a Mr. Q. Accordingly, the inhabitants let loose with a chorus of voices that argue, interrupt, dispute and gossip, generating a hyper-babel in which rumor and slander abound. Ultimately, the authorial self alone is in possession of the truth: in the guise of a reporter she takes note of the goings-on. But other than this insider's view, no one comes near to the truth.

The author's "breakthrough experiment" (*tuwei de changshi*) (Can Xue, 2007: 36) commences with at least twenty-eight separate views of Madam X's age. At one end of the spectrum, she is as young as twenty-two; at the other she is in her fifties. In scopophilic fashion, the description focuses on her eye. The first time when "Mr. Q looked at X's whole face, he saw *only one* immense continuously flickering saffron-colored eyeball" the intensity of which could illuminate all things in the universe (Can Xue, 1988 [2009a]: 7, 17). As for Mr. Q, he is a "large man, either ugly or handsome, or with nothing remarkable about him, with a broad square face and an odd expression—he looks a little like a catfish" (*Ibid.* 16). Madam X, however, insisted that that she had never laid eyes on him (*Ibid.*). But just who is Madam X? Does she even exist at all? The investigation rages on with speculation, fantasies, and positive and negative views. Madam X's essential qualities change depending on whom one asks and who offers a view: she is a sexual sorceress, temptress or tease; she is the object of adulation; she is the target of detestation. Her supernatural powers extend to her abilities to bring the good people to their knees, in particular, the young men of the street. On the one hand, she manufactures dynamite with which to destroy a public toilet. On the other, she engages in Eros-inspired relations with the space of the mirror—her magical portal into cosmic transcendence (Madera, 2009). At the end of the day, Madam X is the "vehicle through whom people bare their souls, reveal their innermost selves, even as they try to discover the mystery of her extraordinary powers."¹³

The images add up to this: Madam X is an occultist, a collector of mirrors, a home wrecker, a threat to communal morality, a sexual deviant, a virgin, the embodiment of desire, the socialist ideal, the elected representative of Five Spice Street and the society of the future (Epstein-Deutsch, 2009). Alternatively, she presents an allegory about the nature of truth—the hyperreal that suggests that anything that originates in the human mind may be construed as the truth. Ultimately, the truth lies in language,

13 From *Five Spice Street* jacket cover.

the nature of seeing and believing and the participation by everyone— the X in us all— in the co-creation.

The re-working of dionysian bliss revisits this fundamental area of human existence. The liberation from the normal constraints of social or cultural norms restores meaning to a world that is otherwise unfulfilled. X's libidinal relations resonate with the Tantrism that liberates the individual to a more primal state. The unbearable lightness of X is a reminder of the price paid by civilization and its cultural norms, that is, the loss of connection with the true self and resulting malaise. The novel closes with the peanut vendor-cum-representative of the street, who advances in pseudo-feminist fashion to assume her leadership role. In her final incarnation, the "representative of the wave of the future" signifies the agency of a rational social being who has the power to create a civil society with the potential to become more humane.

Looking for and finding Canaan

Can Xue's exploratory probe reveals an authentic being state in the process of transformative change. *Frontier* (Bianjiang, 2008) contains a similar process narrated within the context of a quest. Reclaiming the elided areas of one's personal past is a further part of the inquiry into origins and death: the novel deals with death as a release and a return to a spiritually higher plane. The postmodern-like travel writing combines the *Chuci*-like exile theme with exotic and surreal travel. Finally, the travel to a marginal area on China's northwest frontier resonates with searching for roots. The quest combines indigenous discourses with the recognition that the quintessence of Chinese culture is found outside China's central plains (Wang, 1996: 222).¹⁴

Frontier's minimalist plot evokes few features of the classic novel genre. Rather, the rhizome-like root systems map off acentred plateaus connected by lines of flight. In between are liminal spaces that are volatile and unfixed. The figures of Liujin, Qiming, Hu Shan, Niansi and others designate nomadic being states rather characters per se. Finally, there are folkloric images that estrange and perplex. They include a divine messenger in the form of a bird, a tropical garden with a promise of plenitude, a tropical garden inside a dog's eye, aliens and rebels, birds one can hear but not see, mystical flora and fauna, dogs that transform into falling leaves, the sound of melting snow, and others. The "spirit daydream of Chu" (*Chu mo bairimeng*) locates perception in the spatially anterior other. As the contours of normal experience come into focus once more, defamiliarisation "reconfigures" the consciousness of the reader.

The plateaus-like formations move from south to north and terminate in the imaginary realm of Stone City (*Shicheng*): the location with its snow, wolves and leopards suggests Mongolia or Tibet. The voluntary exile to the northern frontier provides the context for the questions of destiny and the passage of the feeling self toward the final goal. Stone City and its Institute of Design (*Sheji xueyuan*) comprise

14 The writers of the searching for roots school were rusticated youth sent to marginal areas during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

the site for the exploration that is both ontological and existential. A Kafka-like allegory re-inscribes the site as a playground in much the same way that the castle in the work by the same name frames analogous issues.

Frontier combines exile with the existential dilemma of Franz Kafka's *Castle*—Can Xue's professed model from the western world (Mu, 2009: 117). The ramifications include Stone City as the terminus of mind and soul and as the outward manifestation, or projection, of an inner realm. There are shared constructs of exodus, the metaphorical implications of wandering in the wilderness, the concept of land as a way of life and state of the soul, and tracking down and finding Canaan.¹⁵ In terms of characterization, the fraught relations of K with the castle are echoed in the surreal relations with the Institute of Design: none of the characters knows why s/he is there or what to expect. Finally, there is a choice of response to the existential dilemma, that is, to capitulate, to continue the struggle over a meaningless state, or to engage in processes that are meaningful to the self.

The first narrative plateau is devoted to Liujin, the main actor of the quest. Drawn by the mystique, Liujin sets out to re-capture the enchantment that at one time seduced her parents—Hushan and Niansi who underwent exile there when Liujin was a child. The travel entails the awakening of memories from the earlier time. Qiming, a Barnabas-like persona who works under the Institute Head, plays the role of a shaman in the awakening of the self.¹⁶ As a medium or a guide, he guards the souls of all individuals who undertake the journey north. Other figures include Old Stone, a former lover; Rui, a young child dressed in leaves; Ying'r, an African-American who works at the Institute; and Ah-yi, a sublime fox fairy-like being with roots in the far north.

Further narrative plateaus relate the journeying of the couples to the northern frontier. Hushan and Niansi travelled north in response to a newspaper advertisement. As they cross the threshold into the subliminal realm, the couple encounters “formlessness over form,” “persons of unclear identity,” “different individuals who share the same name” and “a place where things are not what they seem” (Can Xue, 2008: 33, 9, 10, 160). But eventually all persons find their identity within this place (*Ibid.* 19). Soon after he arrives, Hushan comments that Stone City is paradise (*shiwai taoyuan*) and that “things that were once hidden are gradually revealed before his eyes” (*Ibid.* 29). The revelation takes place within the unfolding dream state—the wind in the couple's room despite the windows being shut, a view of a tropical garden that mysteriously appears and disappears, the sound of crying in the night, a broken chair that magically fixes itself, and a skylight that miraculously opens without the aid of a human hand. When the couple meets the Institute Head, she merely tells them to relax. The Klammm-like figure is largely beyond view due to a mysterious “spiritual wound” (*Ibid.* 161).

Zhou Xiaoli and Zhou Xiaogui are similarly mystified by the summons to go north. They experience the vision of the garden that comes and goes and birds that incessantly flock in various realms. Above them, a room on the second floor is full of dead birds. Once again, the Institution Head puts in an appearance, but only adds to the mystique.

15 See Spann (1976: 140-163) for this conception of *Castle*.

16 See Ma Haixia (2002: 19, 21, 35) for a discussion of the shaman role in Can Xue's works.

Liujin's unbearable lightness takes place against the enchantment of this other realm—the mountains and rocks, geckoes, pangolin, wolves, snow leopards, magic and voodoo and the transformations of people and animals into a range of life forms. She re-inscribes her subjectivity with her metaphysical other—Ah-yi. The two “offspring of the Institute” (*Ibid.* 324) act out their otherness like dual parts of one being, remembering and forgetting, and recalling the alterities of an ideal being state. A séance-like transfer takes place in which Liujin comes into possession of her spiritual self. The scene takes place in a wooden cottage in the snow where a baby lies on a bed, snow leopards come and go and a hunter hovers like the animals he tracks down and kills (*Ibid.* 331). By her side, the shaman channels the spirit of the soul as it experiences epiphany: Liujin attains insight into her earthly and spiritual original. *Frontier* closes when Ah-yi meets her demise in a snowy crevasse and Liujin follows after.

In *Frontier*, the transformation of humans into a higher self is achieved through the experience of death and the willingness of the self to give up the ego. In transitioning through death, one attains to a higher plane regardless of the fact that the outcome may be physical death (Sha Shui, 2004: 445). Through embracing a metaphorical death, Liujin moves beyond adolescence into self-acceptance, attaining thereby a more mature, adult-like state.

The power to transform human beings into a higher state works through the labyrinthine medium of Stone City in much the same way that the castle transformed K into a better human being. Ronald Gray notes K's awakened potentiality, his awareness of the castle's good will and his eventual entry into a state of grace (1956: 78-79). In working through despair, K shifts from someone who distrusts to someone who is more charitable and forgiving (*Ibid.* 80). Only by being willing to die metaphorically is he freed from his self-imposed existential prison (Sheppard, 1973: 80). Where these figures are concerned, Carl Jung might add that the transition represents the perfection of the personality achieved only in death.

To sum up, *Frontier* represents the apogee of Can Xue's artistic endeavours. The artistry entails the restoration of the fantastical to a central place, the introduction of humour and the absurd, and the creation of narrative styles based on modernism. The non-representational qualities are well suited to the task, due to their interventionist tendencies that resist reification. The performative aspects of Can Xue's work open up space for new ways of writing and reading that interrogate the foundation of China's traditional literary practice. The new imagining bound up in performance re-writes the subjectivity of texts that intersects with China's emerging identities and their modern consciousness. The development reflects the need for an agent in the post-Mao reconstruction—its social progress and spiritual enlightenment. Can Xue notes that her ability to “reconstitute the soul” emerged after reading the darkest and most disturbing works from Chinese and western literature (Can Xue, 2008: 26, 25). The pattern of their influence traces an exploration into ontological states and the search for an agency for change. The notion of subjectivity was the result of a conscious process by many writers including Can Xue, who sought an alternative to the non-individuated models imposed by the past, in particular, the collective hierarchies of traditionalism and the class consciousness of Maoism (Cai, 2004: 7). In place

of the non-individuated states the new subject-position plays a more active role in modernization.

Can Xue's work dovetails with the collapse of old mythologies and the rise of alternative beliefs. The latter include indigenous practices, notions of spirituality and an awareness of nature in the face of globalisation. The notions include the spirit in nature and signify a new paradigm of the "ecology of the soul." When life becomes radically fragmented as in China, the "ecology of the soul" plays an essential part in putting it back together (Tacey, 2004: 220). For Can Xue, the restoration takes place through a re-configuration that centres on body-mind integration, ecological integrity, sexual wholeness and forms of psychological development leading to a fully functioning self.

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Glossary

<i>Bianjiang</i>	边疆	"Tiantanglide duihua"	天堂里的对话
<i>Chuci</i>	楚词	<i>Tuwei biaoyan</i>	突围表演
Chu mo bairimeng	楚魔白日梦	tuwei de changshi	突围的尝试
fuzhi linghun de nengli	复制灵魂的能力	wenhua re	文化热
"Gongniu"	公牛	wo	我
guiqi hensheng	鬼泣狠盛	wu	巫
jiefang linghun	解放灵魂	<i>Wuxiang jie</i>	五香街
linghun de wenxue	灵魂的文学	xiandai yishi	现代意识
<i>Lisao</i>	离骚	xiandaizhuyi	现代主义
ni	你	xin shiqi	新时期
Quguang yundong	趋光运动	xianfeng pai	先锋派
"Shanshangde xiaowu"	山上的小屋	xin shiyan	新实验
Sheji xueyuan	设计学院	yelaixiang	夜来香
shen	神	<i>Yecao</i>	野草
Shicheng	石城	zhutixing	主体性
shiwai taoyuan	世外桃源	zhuya	蛀牙

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