

## HASTALIK ANLATISI VE AVANGARD ÇİN EDEBİYATI'NIN MODERN KONUSU (1985-2000)

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**Öz:** Hastalık, modern ve çağdaş Çinli yazarlar tarafından en çok tercih edilen temalardan biridir. Hastalık anlatıları, modern konunun sınırlarını farklı sosyal ve tarihsel bağlamlarda yansıtmaktadır. 1985'te ortaya çıkan yeni bir edebiyat tarzı olan Çin Avangard edebiyatı her tür hastalık anlatısıyla doludur. Bunlar arasında zihinsel hastalık ve şehir hastalıklarının anlatısı en tipik olanlardır. Zihinsel hastalığın anlatısı çoğunlukla 1980'lerin Çin Avangard edebiyatında ortaya çıktı. Yeni Çağ literatüründe (1976-1985) Aydınlanma rasyonalitesinin baskın pozisyonunu, insan doğasında irrasyonelitenin varlığını kabul ederek yapılandırdı. Kentsel hastalıkların anlatımı 1990'larda, Çin'in piyasa ekonomisini geliştirmesini hızlandırdığı dönemde ortaya çıktı. Kentsel hastalığın anlatımı, okurlara materyalist bir toplumun ahlaki ve yıkılışı hakkında ahlaki bir yansıma ile içgörü sahibi olmaları için bir ayna sunmaktadır. Bu makale, Çin Avangard edebiyatının en etkili eserlerinin okunmasıyla hastalık anlatımı ve modern konu arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hastalık Anlatısı, Modern Konu, Avangard Çin Edebiyatı.

## NARRATIVES OF DISEASE AND THE MODERN SUBJECT IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE AVANT-GARDE LITERATURE (1985-2000)

**Abstract:** The narrative of disease is one of the most preferred themes used by modern and contemporary Chinese writers. Disease narratives reflect the limitations of the modern individual's state in different social and historical contexts. Chinese Avant-garde Literature, as a new literary movement, is considered to have emerged around 1985; during this time, it manifested itself through all different kinds of narrative forms of disease and trauma. Among these forms, narratives of a diseased state of mind as well as a diseased urban environment are the most typical ones observed.

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Narrative themes of the “disease of the mind” began commonly appearing in Chinese Avant-garde Literary works in the 1980s. These works often aimed at deconstructing the dominant ideological position of the so-called *New Enlightenment Rationality* during the Chinese New Era (1976-1985) by admitting to the existence of the irrationality of human nature and its influences on the individual in society. The narrative of urban disease, on the other hand, began appearing during the 1990s when China began its acceleration of its newly formed market economy. In contrast to the previous disease narrative, the narrative of urban disease offered readers a mirror into urban society and gave them insight into the morbidity and decadence of a materialistic society. This article analyses the relationship between these disease narratives and the modern individual’s subjective consciousness through a close reading of some of the most influential works of Chinese Avant-garde literature.

**Keywords:** Disease Narrative, Modern Subject, Chinese Avant-garde Literature.

### Introduction

Modern and contemporary Chinese literature has often been associated with images of disease and illness ever since the father of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936), wrote the first modern Chinese short story “*A Madman’s Diary*” (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日记) in colloquial speech in 1918. Disease narration subsequently became the preferred narrative model among modern and contemporary Chinese writers, leading to several peak periods of disease narration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including during the May Fourth New Literature (1917-1930), the New Sensation Literature (1928-1940), and the Chinese Avant-garde Literature (1985-2000). Academics have focused on the metaphor of disease in the former two periods; however, little attention has been paid to the last period although it clearly reflects an important trend of the deconstruction and reconstruction of the modern individual’s subjectivity in contemporary China. This paper aims to offer an insight into the relationship between disease narrative in avant-garde literature and the reconfiguration of the modern subjective consciousness in contemporary China from 1985 to 2000. Before engaging in the particular Chinese cultural contexts and representative avant-garde works, it is particularly important to first introduce the theoretical foundation underlying this paper.

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault ascribes the origin of the study of modern anatomy to the spirit of the enlightenment, which brought investigations of death

into the discursive system of science and technology at the time. As a result of this epistemological change of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people began learning about themselves through objective observations and self-examination, reconfiguring conceptions of life and death, health and illness, as well as the modern individual's subjective consciousness. During this ever-changing historical period, the disease narratives found in literary works embody the way people think about themselves. As Foucault mentions, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, death has become the absolute point of view within the trinity comprised of life, disease and death. Disease loses its previous status as an accident "*and takes on the internal, constant, mobile dimension of the relation between life and death. It is not because he falls ill that man dies; fundamentally, it is because he may die that man may fall ill.*"<sup>1</sup> In other words, during the Enlightenment period, people tended to view disease as the embodiment of human mortality and finitude leading to the awareness of an internal crisis, which is the necessary condition for the formation of the modern subject.

Accordingly, if we want to describe the development of the modern subject, it is feasible to trace it by analysing disease narrative in turn. In particular, disease narratives in literary works often contain an abundance of information testifying to the crises found in modern society and individuals. Overall, analysing the metaphorical meanings of disease narrative in literary works can be an efficient way of illustrating the history of modern subject.

As mentioned in the first paragraph, this article concentrates on the disease narrative of Chinese Avant-garde Literature from 1985 to 2000. Hence, it is important to make a brief introduction to the cultural and literary background of 1980s' China before beginning the analyses of disease narratives.

After the relative lack of disease narration of literature during the Cultural Revolution<sup>2</sup> (1966-1976), disease regained its presence in New Era Literature (1976-1985)<sup>3</sup> and was quite prevalent in Chinese Avant-garde Literature from 1985 to 2000. Intellectuals of the New Era are generally believed to be heirs of

<sup>1</sup> FOUCAULT, M. (1997) *The Birth of the Clinic*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. London: Routledge, P.155.

<sup>2</sup> According to Chinese scholar Guanghui Tan's doctoral dissertation "The Symptom of Symptom: Disease as a Metaphor in Modern Chinese Fiction", Cultural Revolution literature from 1966 to 1976 utterly avoided aesthetic description of sickness. Seldom does the protagonist in those fictions get sick, physically or mentally. There are several scenes in which the protagonist gets injured in the battlefield but recovers very soon. Therefore, it is pointless to include literature works of the Cultural Revolution in this discussion.

<sup>3</sup> The term "New Era" was originally a political term brought up by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. As the words imply, it marks the beginning of a new age different from the Cultural Revolution period. Influenced strongly by political trends, Chinese scholars adopted the term and identified the literature of 1978-1984 as "New Era Literature". New Era Literature is constituted by "Scar Literature" 伤痕文学, "Introspection Literature" 反思文学, and "Reform Literature" 改革文学.

the predecessors during the May Fourth Movement (1919) by present scholars; for they both emphasised the significance of humanism by encouraging writers to focus on universal human nature, feelings, emotions and individual rationalities as opposed to social class and collectivism, which were the only permissible ideologies allowed during the Cultural Revolution.

It is true that Chinese Avant-garde Literature was once inspired by the enlightenment values of the New Era Literature. However, what makes it even more distinctive is the adverse deconstruction of the works of their predecessors. Avant-garde literature challenged and undermined the core values of New Era Literature notably by demonstrating a strong degree of scepticism in modern rationalism and humanism. In the redefinition of the modern subject, the avant-garde writers gradually transferred their energy from the rational world to an irrational one. It can be said, these disease narratives in their works realistically records this process.

Presented in sequence, mental disease and urban disease are the two most typical images of disease found in Chinese avant-garde literary works. Emerging from different cultural contexts, the two types of disease narratives manifested different spiritual and mental symptoms of contemporary China. The former, developing in the 1980s, aimed at converting the relationship between rationality and irrationality; the latter presented the decadence in a more commercialised and material 1990's China. In the following sections, I will discuss these two types with a comparison of former literary movements so as to map out the differences and changes and highlight the features of disease narrative in Chinese Avant-garde Literature.

### **Mental disease and the presence of irrationality: From Enlightenment to Counter-Enlightenment**

The awakening of the modern individual in China has a deep and profound relationship with the mental disease narratives found in the literary works during the May Fourth Movement. Many images of mental disease exist in these works for they convey enlightenment values of the "New Culture Movement" (*Xinwenhua Yundong* 新文化运动) exemplified in both Lu Xun and Yu Dafu's 郁达夫 (1896-1945) short stories. For example, in "*A Madman's Diary*" and "*The Eternal Flame*" (*Changming deng* 长明灯) by Lu Xun, the protagonists embodied with enlightenment values are diagnosed as psychopaths by traditional society. In actuality, however, it is the protagonists who were observing the sickness and ossification of the decayed Chinese Qing Dynasty through the so-called madmen's eyes.

Additionally, protagonists in Yu Dafu's "Sinking" (*Chenlun* 沉沦) and "Moves to the South" (*Nanqian* 南迁) were typical portraits of young intellectuals who had accepted Western Enlightenment values but failed in seeking ways to fit in with the old society and save the Chinese nation. Suffering from melancholia and depression, they usually saw themselves as patients abandoned by society. Introspectively, they treasured their own uniqueness of thoughts and tended to blame any faults on society. In a word, they were inclined to present the sickness of the time through their own symptoms of mental disease and anguish. Overall, whether being diagnosed as insane or presenting one's own depression as a symptom of the time, the mental disease narrative in May Fourth New Literature shared the same discursive logic in a self-reflexive way. The Enlightenment spirit of the New Culture Movement feints insanity so as to deconstruct the failed legitimacy of traditional ideologies. In other words, the modern rationality strategically disguises itself with irrationality in order to reveal the irrational part of traditional Chinese ideology.

Portraying the protagonists as insane and isolated from Chinese society was an artful strategy for May Fourth Enlightenment intellectuals to challenge the position of traditional culture and gain discursive power in the 1920s. However, themes of craziness in the New Sensationalists' works can be seen as a subversion of modernity that challenged the mainstream position of May Fourth Enlightenment intellectuals in the 1930s. For the New Sensationalists, modernity was not as enlightened and rational as May Fourth writers imagined. The pressure of modern life invokes neurasthenia and other mental disorders among urban residents. Short stories like "An Evening in the Rainy Season" (*Mei yu zhi xi* 梅雨之夕)<sup>4</sup> by Shi Zhecun 施蛰存 (1905-2003) and "A Female Figure of Platinum" (*Baijin de nvti suxiang* 白金的女体塑像)<sup>5</sup> by Mu Shiyong 穆时英 (1912-1940) show the sickness of modern

<sup>4</sup> The short story "An Evening in the Rainy Season" depicts a normal office staff member's abnormal stream of consciousness during his walk home in the rain. He follows a young lady without an umbrella and keeps relating her to a woman he once knew. At the end, he successfully convinces himself that the young lady actually was his first love. He came home very late after seeing the young lady home and lied to his wife about his delay. As in other works related to delusional disorder, Shi Zhecun tries to reveal the irrationality of the orderly appearance of urban life through male protagonists' erotic fantasies.

<sup>5</sup> In the short story "A Female Body of Platinum", Mu Shiyong reveals the inner desires a professional doctor has for a gorgeous female patient whose skin is as bright as platinum. The doctor gives up his celibacy and marries a beautiful young lady soon after seeing the female patient. It is true that the doctor was diagnosing his female patient in the story, but actually it is the narrator who is diagnosing the doctor's mental condition. Although attracted by the female patient, the doctor should keep the professional and rational appearance of his identity, but he fulfils his desires in his personal life in a twisted manner, representing the inevitable pressures placed on individuals resulting from the conditions of the schizophrenic modern life.

urban life under the perspective of psychoanalysis. The enlightened rational world has its own darkness in the eyes of these New Sensationalists.

However, when it comes to New Era Literature, narratives of mental disease again took the role of presenting Enlightenment values which subverted the dominant position of revolutionary ideology after 1976. Unlike the strategic expression in May Fourth Literature, the mental disease narratives found in New Era Literature were expressed in a more straightforward way accusing the Cultural Revolution of oppressing humanity. “*Who am I*” (*Wo shi shui* 我是谁) by Zong Pu 宗璞 (1928-) published in 1979 was the first short story of mental disease depicting intellectuals’ trauma caused by the Cultural Revolution. The protagonist, Wei Mi, is a scientist who goes crazy after a “struggle session” (*pi dou hui* 批斗会). In the short story, she keeps asking herself the question: “Who am I”, since she has become deeply confused by other people’s critical definitions of her identity as a kind of “killer” and “poisonous insect” of society. At the end of the short story after running to the suburb of the city, she surprisingly sees a flock of wild geese flying over the sky forming the shape of the Chinese character of “human being” (*ren* 人) which symbolizes humanity or the humane. After witnessing this character in the sky, Wei Mi gradually calms down; her nearly disappearing subjectivity finally finds its path and rises up from the abyss of suppression. The writer finally ends the story in an optimistic and lyrical way: “*Humanism will be back as the spring of the nation comes. In other words, the spring of the nation will be back only if humanism ascends the stage again.*”<sup>□</sup>

Although Zong Pu’s work subverted the legitimacy of the Cultural Revolution, her discursive and thinking patterns have not avoided the Cultural Revolution’s influences in general showing a logic of binary opposites between two ideologies: one negative which leads to mental disease and one positive that cures it. In *Who am I*, Wei Mi’s mental health is destroyed by the Cultural Revolution; however, at the end, her illness is cured by humanism: a core concept of the Chinese Enlightenment values during the New Era. Nevertheless, the way Wei Mi finds her remedy seems to be too accidental to be convincing enough for readers; it is as if the writer rushed to reach a conclusion without providing enough details of her thinking process. This is not a unique phenomenon found in New Era Literature and can only be deeply understood when we relate it to the social and historical contexts of China during the 1970s when the influences of the Cultural Revolution left no space for a development of individual subjectivity. Therefore, it is quite natural for intel-

lectuals in the New Era to adopt a new philosophical stance in such haste so as to erase the adverse impacts of the detrimental ideology of the Cultural Revolution. In the eyes of Chinese intellectuals during the New Era, humanism appears to be the best remedy for the sequelae of the Cultural Revolution due to its emphasis on human nature and individual rationality, which are exactly the opposite values advocated during the Cultural Revolution. Additionally, for the first time in the history of contemporary China, intellectuals and the central government shared similar beliefs. Therefore, it can be said, intellectuals in the New Era were more optimistic about humanism than the previous May Fourth intellectuals due to the support from the central government, which unfortunately led an underestimation of frustrations they would encounter a decade later.

Indeed, the “utopia” of humanism proposed by Chinese intellectuals during the New Era was undermined by the commodities economy and materialist values during the 1980s Chinese Economic Reform (gaige kaifang 改革开放). As Joseph Schumpeter writes, “*all logic is derived from the pattern of the economic decision.*”<sup>6</sup> The transformation from a collective and planned economy to a liberal and market economy had a strong impact on how people viewed and defined themselves in the 1980s. As opposed to full governmental control, the “Invisible Hand” principle of market economy is so dehumanised that we cannot correctly predict the changing trends of the economy, which metaphorically resembles the uncertainties and contingencies of human desire. Since then, a long and repressed irrational world seemed to have emerged to the Chinese people. This tremendous leap took place not only in the economic domain but also in the field of cultural production, including creative writing, which reflected Chinese peoples’ changing attitudes in society. Afterwards, contemporary Chinese individuals had to face challenges both from the materialistic society and a newly born literary movement—Chinese Avant-Garde Literature (xianfeng xiaoshuo 先锋小说).

Avant-garde writers and the New Sensationalists shared the same reflexive attitude towards enlightenment values and modernity. However, the avant-garde writers went further in the way of subversion. The New Sensationalists subverted the rational appearance of the modern urban life while avant-garde writers not only undermined modernity but also human rationality; the avant-garde writers presented irrationality in a much more radical way when compared with the New Sensationalists who still believed that truth could be found and interpreted in a

<sup>6</sup> ZONG, P. (1987) *Magnum Opus of Zong Pu*. 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin publish House, P.99.

scientific and rational way, such as in psychoanalysis as it was perceived during that time. In other words, the mental disease narrative in avant-garde literature gave irrationality a central ontological position within human nature.

The image of a man yelling at the top of his lungs in the “*Hut on the Mountain*” (*Shanshang de xiaowu* 山上的小屋, 1985) written by the avant-garde writer Can Xue (残雪, 1953-) compared with the image of the “shouting man” in *Iron House* written by Lu Xun in “*The Author’s Preface to ‘Call to Arms’*” (*Nahan zixu* 《呐喊》自序, 1922) have opposite metaphorical meanings. Lu Xun’s shouting man is a literary image of the typical May Fourth intellectual who represents rationality and aims to awaken others to destroy the confining “iron house” that symbolises the decadence of traditional society. The shouting man in Can Xue’s work who was deliberately positioned outside the protagonist’s home but who is still within an arm’s reach is a symbol of irrationality. This metaphor is used to remind people of the existence of the darkness and irrationalities of daily life. Except the protagonist, other members of the family choose to ignore the strange calls coming from the hut on the mountain and even continue with their daily routines:

*“Up there on the mountain, I told them at mealtime, there’s a hut.*

*They all lowered their heads, drinking soup noisily. Probably no one heard me.”*<sup>7</sup>

However, the deliberate neglect of the existence of irrationality does not lead them to the good in their lives. They begin suffering from all kinds of mental illnesses, such as insomnia and delusions, and they subsequently fail to communicate with each other effectively:

*The light from your room glares making all my blood vessels throb as though drums were beating inside. Look, my mother said, pointing to her temple where the blood vessels bulged like fat earthworms. I’d rather get scurvy. There are throbbings throughout my body day and night. You have no idea how I’m suffering. Because of this ailment, your father once thought of committing suicide.*<sup>8</sup>

In the story, the mother blames her own and other families’ disorders on the protagonist’s repetitive behaviour of drawer cleaning. Furthermore, they fail to listen to the protagonist’s warnings of potential dangers and threats and treat her words merely as symptoms of her delusional disorder. As a result, family life continues under this morbid and isolated atmosphere. Symbolically, the shouting

<sup>7</sup> SCHUMPETER, JA. (1950) *capitalism, socialism, and Democracy*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, pp.122-123.

<sup>8</sup> CAN, X. (1989) *Dialogues in Paradise*. 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, P.49.



man embodies the madness of the entire family and reflects the irrationalities of the seemingly normal daily life and family relationships.

In other narrations of mental illness, Can Xue continued deconstructing the rational order of daily life and family relationships by manifesting the ontological status of irrationality. Published in 1986, “*The Fog*” (*Wu 雾*) illustrates how a haunted fog drives all the members of a family into complete mental disarray. In this text, the omnipresence of the fog resembles irrationality, which reveals its infectious influences on all the people under its control. No one is capable of escaping from the irrational just like nothing can escape the icy grips of a haunted fog. In “*A Strange Kind of Brain Damage*” (*Yizhong qiguai de danao sunshang 一种奇怪的大脑损伤*), published in 1990, the narrator depicts a sophisticated housewife living a seemingly normal life but who imagines herself suffering from a strange form of brain damage. Her delusion and self-destructive tendencies almost lead to the death of her father and husband and completely destroy her relationship with the narrator who was once her best friend. At the end of the short story, Can Xue again suggests to us that irrationality exists everywhere beneath the rational and sophisticated appearance of normal people. In this world, we do not notice it, not to mention to get rid of it:

*Year after year, we keep bumping into each other. But she never casts even a sidelong glance, as if I no longer exist. When I observe her in secret, I find her facial expression as calm as before, and her steps are very smooth. Indeed, in such a noisy city as ours, she doesn't appear conspicuous at all.*<sup>9</sup>

The mental disease narrative of Can Xue's works mainly focuses on the field of private life whereas another Chinese avant-garde writer Yu Hua 余华(1960-) expands the influence of irrationality to the space of public life in story “*The Mistake beside River*” (*Hebian de cuowu 河边的错误*) published in 1988. This work is about the case of a serial murder committed by a madman who is responsible for killing several people beside a river without any apparent motive. The policeman in the story Ma Zhe shoots the madman to death in order to end the fears and chaos among the citizens in the town; in turn, however, he also becomes a murderer himself as a result. In *The Mistake beside River*, the symptoms of mental illness not only manifest themselves in the behaviors of the madman but also in those of the people involved in the case. Xu Liang, one of the witnesses, also suffers from a delusory disorder that cause him to worry he will eventually be accused as

<sup>9</sup> CAN, X. (1997) *A Strange Kind of Brain Damage*. *BOMB*. 61(10). P.99.

a suspect in the murders. One of victims' wives, another character in the story, is unable to express her grief after finding herself widowed. She becomes stuck in the beautiful memories of their newly-married life almost to point as believing her husband is still alive. Citizens in the town also irrationally become terrified by the false news of the madman's return. However, the most meaningful insanity is embodied by Ma Zhe who kills the madman despite knowing that he is killing another human being. As a defender of social order, Ma Zhe represents the rational part of society; in all actually, his behavior demonstrates to the readers an irrevocable passion for self-destruction. Driven by the obsession to maintain human rationality, Ma Zhe denies his own irrationality, which also plays a crucial role in the constitution of human nature. Out of Ma Zhe's expectations, the death of the madman does not end the spread of irrationality. Ma Zhe's own behaviour in shooting the madman becomes, perhaps, the solidifying factor of a proof of the existence of human irrationality. Moreover, in order to escape legal penalty, Ma Zhe feints insanity and is committed to a mental hospital showing his final inevitable submission to the irrational forces inside.

At the end of the story, the power relationship between irrationality and rationality is turned upside down: irrationality dominates rationality despite the expected reverse relationship. During the process of Ma Zhe's submission to irrationality, the most contradictory and meaningful details are the ambiguousness of the supposedly rational law. This law can both sentence Ma Zhe to prison and can also protect him from punishment as long as he gives up his strands of rationality and joins the world of irrationality. Furthermore, the author not only tries to reveal the subversion of the power relationship between rationality and irrationality but also that rationality is an intrinsic part of human nature. To prove this point, the author makes Ma Zhe discover his own insanity. Ma Zhe's wife arranges a mental health exam for him and persuade him to pretend to be crazy so as to avoid being accused. At first, instead of acting crazy, Ma Zhe keeps silent for a long time and is confused about the situation he has found himself in. After being asked the same silly questions repetitively by the psychiatrist who has been corrupted by Ma Zhe' wife, Ma Zhe gradually changes his mind and begins to fabricate unreasonable and contradictory answers to the questions. He becomes surprised by his own words at the beginning but feels more and more relieved afterwards. Finally, when the doctor diagnoses him as a psychopath, he cannot help but bursting into laughter. One can conclude from this scene that Ma Zhe has finally realized that he has become exactly what he was originally opposed to.

Rationality leads to its own opposite when it tries to cure the disorderly society by annihilating irrationality within human nature. The dialectic relationship between rationality and irrationality is the essence of avant-garde literature, which resembles the dialectic of Enlightenment as Adorno reveals in “*Dialectic of Enlightenment*”:

*Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense at the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.*<sup>10</sup>

In this case, Enlightenment rationality has become a new totalitarianism. Science has been converted into scientism; technology has been transferred into instrumental rationality; and humanism has been changed into anthropocentrism, which in turn represses human liberty since there is no space for the existence of irrationality within human nature.

However, Adorno’s criticism of Enlightenment rationality does not aim at getting rid of human rationality absolutely but rather seeks the manifestation of the mechanism of self-examination and self-correction within modernity and modifies the over-developed rationalism by making an appeal for a more advanced status of Enlightenment. In Contrast, Chinese avant-garde writers amplify their criticism in an artistic and radical way leading to the subversion of the introspection of Enlightenment rationality to a Counter-Enlightenment and the reasonable emphasis on irrationality to the exaggeration of irrationality.

On the one hand, the mental disease narrative in Chinese Avant-garde Literature historically continued criticizing the over-development of modern rationality as New Sensation Literature did; on the other hand, after deconstructing Enlightenment rationality, it did not offer any remedy for the morbid society. Instead, historically, the mental disease narratives in Chinese Avant-garde Literature continued questioning the absurdity of human nature by amplifying its irrational parts. In this way, avant-garde writers in the 1980s deconstructed the humanistic and rational connotations of the modern subject formed in the period of New Era by replacing it with irrationalism and subsequently leading other writers to explore new meanings of the modern subject in the next decade.

<sup>10</sup> ADORNO, TW. (1997) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London: Verso Press, P.1.

### **Urban Disease: the moral introspection on desires**

Nihilism and economic centrism are the most dominant ideologies in 1990s' China. Together, they freed the Chinese people from the restrictions of morality and allowed them to celebrate a new era full of economic and sensual desires. As the main field of commercialization and modernization, the urban field became an assembling center of various kinds of human desires. Under these circumstances, urban disease gradually became a prevalent phenomenon among urban residents and frequently presented itself in the 1990s avant-garde literature as a moral introspection on irrational desires.

What are the contradictory features of human desires? How do they help people recognize themselves and then drive them to self-alienation through radical irrationalism? This is the main question posed from the urban disease narratives of the 1990s avant-garde literature, which explicitly distinguishes itself from that of New Sensation Literature. As mentioned in the last chapter, protagonists in the New Sensationalists' works, such as "*An Evening in the Rainy Season*" and "*A Female Figure of Platinum*", often suffer from mental disorders caused by over-repressions from modern rationalism. Thus, they express their irrational desires in a distorted way.

Different from the New Sensationalists, the urban disease in the 1990s avant-garde literature was not caused by over-repressions from rationalism but over-indulgence of irrational desires. Following the critical thinking of "*Dialectic of Enlightenment*", avant-garde writers in the 1990s discovered the *Dialectic of Desires* which illustrated how the modern subject confirmed its existence through the fulfilment of desires and how irrational desires destroyed the individual's subjectivity in turn. Avant-garde writers were interested in behaviours, emotions and thoughts of people who were relieved from the crucial moral restrictions of Cultural Revolution and who were encouraged to fulfil economic ambitions and realise secular desires through commercial activities. In other words, secular desires were legitimised by the economic reform policies in the name of developing the economy of the nation. Therefore, what really matters in the urban disease narrative of 1990s avant-garde literature is not the repression of irrationality but the contradiction of the modern subject liberated from repression.

The main urban disease image in "*Rice*" (*Mi* 米, 1991) written by Su Tong 苏童 (1963-) is syphilis. The protagonist Wu Long is a refugee from a small village who is forced to leave his hometown because of flooding and seek his fortune in

the city where he becomes an underworld kingpin in his middle age. Accidentally, he catches syphilis in a brothel bringing him from the peak of life to the depths of despair. Fellow gangsters do not listen to Wu Long anymore and his children begin to seek his huge mysterious property and even look forward to their father's death.

Disease and his imminent death confine Wu Long's scope of activities, however, at the same time, they also give Wu Long the ability of introspection through which he observes the delusional emptiness of desires and the urban life:

*The city is a huge decorated cemetery..... It is constructed naturally for the dead..... It is a boundless coffin, with its cover revealed, being filled with money, jewels and delicacies inside. It keeps on grabbing people from streets into its cold and dark embrace with its invisible hands.*<sup>11</sup>

For Wu Long, the city is a place where he realises his ambitions and encounters much physical and mental pains. The city in *Rice* is a diseased and even demonic place full of alluring and commercially available items that provoke Wu Long's desires and drive him to the peak of the urban life. However, the limitless pursuit of power, sex and money never fulfil his emptiness inside. Adversely, they even kill him through his contraction of syphilis, which becomes metaphor of the moral punishments for irrational desires. Syphilis here becomes a symbol of the sickness of urban life and irrational desires while rice, the totem of the rural world, becomes a symbol of Wu Long's idealistic world where he is born and is willing to die.

The two symbols represent the contradiction of Wu Long's subjectivity. Although Wu Long was a powerful kingpin in the urban underworld, he actually has no sense of belonging within the city. Deep inside, he is still a peasant living in the countryside whose final will expresses his wishes of being buried in the rice fields of his hometown and becoming a respected landlord. Hence, we can infer that the real disease in *Rice* is not syphilis but rather a disordered self-identity, which composes Wu Long's tragedy. Constantly wavering between two identities, Wu Long is attracted by the urban life but simultaneously suffers from an intense nostalgia for the rural world.

Addictive disorder is a prevalent urban disease in "*Ruined City: A Novel*" (*Feidu* 废都) by Jia Pingwa 贾平凹 (1952- ). First published in 1993, this book was soon banned for explicit sexual descriptions. Besides the sexual addiction of the main protagonist Zhuang Zhidie, a famous writer of the so-called ruined city Xi Jing,

<sup>11</sup> SU, T. (1996) *Rice*. 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. Nanjing: Jiangsu Art Publish house, P.201.

other roles in the novel also suffer from addictive disorder, including alcohol, drugs, gambling and so on. Therefore, Xi Jing is described as a morbid city whose citizens are driven by irrational desires and who are continuously chasing after sensual pleasures and other alluring things, such as fame, money and power. At the beginning of the story, Zhuang Zhidie leads a peaceful but empty life after moving from his rural hometown to Xi Jing for ten years. Suffering from erectile dysfunction, he finds himself a failure in the eyes of his wife who was born in Xi Jing and who provided him with a pleasant home life. Carelessly, he is caught up in an affair with a married woman and also maintains several relationships with young girls who admire him for his talents and fame. He finds his self-value being proven by the worship of his lovers. In order for even more personal gain, Zhuang Zhidie utilises his interpersonal networks to help these women even though some of their requirements go against the morality and law. In this way, these affairs surprisingly cure his sexual dysfunctions and relieve his symptoms of nihilism. Gradually, he becomes used to imagining himself as a legendary lover who saves his partners from hopeless and tragic lives. Being satisfied with sensual pleasures and the admiration of his lovers, Zhuang Zhidie became stuck in the irrational desire for love and sex. Unfortunately, at the end of the story, his affairs are detected by his wife and his lovers eventually leave him. His relationship with the married woman even endangers her since her husband is a man with a tendency for violence and who eventually imprisons his wife and almost beats her to death for the affair with Zhuang Zhidie. Zhuang Zhidie's erotic fantasy finally collapses as well as his writing ability in the real world.

It seems that the realisation of the sexual desire had cured Zhuang Zhidie's sexual dysfunction helping him build a new personality, which suits the urban life quite well; however, this is just an illusion. The feeling of failure comes back more fiercely when the illusion is dissolved. Although being caught in sexual addiction, Zhuang Zhidie is not totally unaware of the meaninglessness of his behaviours and the absurdity of other citizens' fantasies. That is how the dialectic of desires works in this novel. Knowing the lies and deceitfulness of desires, people living in a morbid urban space still cannot stop feeding themselves with fake satisfaction in order to fulfil the emptiness inside. Similar to Wu Long in *Rice*, Zhuang Zhidie also projects his idealistic world onto the rural area, which metaphorically represents the "other" of the urban environment. He used to drink fresh milk from an old cow fed by a farmwoman living in the suburb instead of milk produced by

dairy industries. He even visits the cottage where the cow is fed seeking comfort from the rural world when he becomes sick with the urban life. However, at the end of the story, the cow dies and the farmwoman goes bankrupt.

Returning to a pre-modern rural world seems to be the same remedy for protagonists suffering from the urban disease in these novels: a remedy that is too impractical to prescribe leading to writers deconstructing it in the end. Material modernization, including commercialization and urbanization, was an inevitable process for contemporary China during its transition time. That is the changing reality observed and expressed by the 1990s avant-garde writers. The urban disease narrative in their works honestly records people's ambitions and frustrations of that time and captures shadows of the rapidly developing Chinese society where secular desires and economic development have dominated everything. In this way, the urban disease in the 1990s avant-garde literature not only offers us a moral introspection on irrational desires but also the negative side effects of modernisation.

**SUMMARY****NARRATIVES OF DISEASE AND THE MODERN SUBJECT IN  
CHINESE AVANT-GARDE LITERATURE (1985-2000)****Lan YOU\***

From the dialectic of Enlightenment in the mental disease narrative in the 1980s to the dialectic of desires in the urban disease narrative in the 1990s, we can see that the changing history of disease narrative in Chinese Avant-garde Literature is actually a history of the changing connotations of the modern subject from 1980 to 2000. Humanism and Enlightenment values, economic centrism and material modernization, sequentially become the dominant ideologies among the Chinese people after 1976 and quickly reveal their shortcomings and limitedness in the disease narrative of avant-garde literature, which reflects the spiritual traumas and emptiness of contemporary Chinese people after the Cultural Revolution. Grand beliefs such as the revolutionary ideology has lost all its validity. Likewise, other ideologies, such as those mentioned above, fail to rewrite the cultural connotations of the modern individual's subjectivity as well. However, it does not mean the disappearance of the modern subject in its totality. Adversely, as Matei Clinescu writes in "*Five Faces of Modernity*", it suggests the incompleteness of the modern subject: "*when modernity comes to oppose concepts without which it would have been inconceivable—it is simply pursuing its deepest vocation, its constitutive sense of creation through rupture and crisis*"<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> CALINESCU, M. (2006) *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Durham, NC: Duke UP, P.92.



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