

Chinese popular culture in modern literature and film

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Abstract

The reflection of popular culture in Chinese literature may be traced back to *Shi Jing*, but its modern roots are to be found in the period of the westernising May Fourth Movement, which seemingly refuted traditional values. The early Chinese film also reflected popular culture from its very beginning. Popular culture survived further westernization in China up to our times. Traditional drama, narrated and chanted arts, as well as popular rites, beliefs, cuisine, medicine, clothes and even bathhouse and latrine culture appear highly relevant and influential for contemporary literature and film. Works by contemporary writers such as Yu Hua and Jia Pingwa or cinematographers such as Zhang Yimou (*Lifetimes*), Chen Kaige (*Farewell my concubine*), Jia Zhangke (*Xiaowu*) and the Taiwanese Hou Hsiao-hsian (*The Puppet Master*) display deep involvement with the immediate and indirect reflection of traditional performing arts and practices, which hints however at current social or cultural reality.

Key words: China, Taiwan, popular culture, Yu Hua, Zhang Yimou, Hou Hsiao Hsian

The aim of this paper is to analyse the Chinese popular culture and its reflection in modern literature and film from two perspectives. First, we would like to address the history of popular culture reflection in literature and film. Second, the traditional culture as a creative paradigm in contemporary literature and film will be looked upon from three angles, i.e. popular culture elements directly present in the plot, traditional ways of narration and description, and popular culture symbolism.

Before considering these two issues, two preliminary questions should be answered. The first one is: what is popular culture? This question can obviously be answered in many ways. What we mean by 'popular culture' in this paper is not the mass culture that has come to China from the West. We are rather talking about traditional centuries-honoured cultural practices, many of which are still alive in China and heavily influence contemporary art. The second question follows: is it humanly possible to analyse the seemingly endless subject of popular culture reflection in modern literature and film on a few pages? Of course not if one wishes to embrace everything, however superficially. Yes, if one rather concentrates on a few representative examples. This is the strategy that has been chosen for the present research project.

History of popular culture reflection in Chinese literature and film

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give an exhaustive (in any sense of the term) survey of the history of popular culture manifestations in Chinese literature and film, therefore only most obvious examples will be given here. The reflection of popular culture in Chinese literature and film may be traced back to *Shi Jing*, or *The Book of Poetry*, second millennium BC (Shi Jing, n.d.). This work has been traditionally regarded as a collection of folk songs representing the whole range of popular life, including incantations, such as I,I,11; I,I,5; I,II,14; poetry of calendar rites (II,VI,7; II,VI,8; I,XV,1 etc.), wedding songs (including praise to the bride: I,V,3), funeral songs (including mourning songs), warriors' and hunters' songs

(III,III,6), the cult of the dead and ancestors (II,VI,5), the emerging state cults, social satire and criticism (II,III,3).

It is a wide-recognised fact that the ancient Chinese have not produced a stable literary form of mythology and *epos*, as they were understood in Ancient Greece or India. We can still find traces of their oral existence in Shijing: mythical *epos* (III,II,1), heroic and historical *epos* (III,I,7; III,I,2). We also see the process of the cyclisation of individual songs, e.g. in (IV,4). Shijing songs show typical features of folk poetry: coinciding descriptions, role of details and repetition. The characteristic of songs in the *Great preface to the Shijing* further confirms their initial folk status, as their syncretic merging of poetry, music and dance is emphasised.

Similar representations of popular beliefs and rites can also be found in other Confucian, as well as Taoist classics (*Shujing, Shanhaijing, Zhuangzi*).

Works ascribed to Qu Yuan (we use the word ‘ascribed’, as there have been arguments about their attribution) have also been regarded as manifestations of the southern Chu popular tradition, including the ‘wanderings’ of witchdoctors.

The yuefu poetry, initially collected by the Chamber of Music, is a further development of folk song representation in the literary sources. It is also characterised by syncretism of lyrics and tunes associated with them. The yuefu were popular not only with the aristocracy or at emperor Wudi’s court, but also in the peasant world, where they were born. Imitations of the genre by individual authors show a new form of popular tradition reflection in works of literature.

The bianwen genre shows a new kind of popular culture practice: a didactic narrative in the vernacular language, probably performed by storytellers, incorporating new Buddhist elements.

The form of prosopoetic narrative is further developed in the huaben genre of the Song and Ming dynasties. It demonstrates typical qualities of folk performing arts: combination of prose and poetry (the latter also closely associated with musical motives), different versions of the same plots, commonalities of descriptions, the use

of poetical insertions for depicting the appearances of personages and sites, as well as for moral instruction and compositional retardation. They also give an account of the urban popular culture through their content.

The Yuan dynasty plays (which probably show a transitional stage from folk performing practices to the drama by individual authors) take after the huaben genre in their plots and use of vernacular. The vernacular novels (*Jin-Ping-Mei*, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*) also show the continuity of the huaben tradition in their structure, language and content.

Pu Songling's collection *Liaozhai zhiyi*/《聊齋志異》 is an interesting example of folk culture representation in the late Classical Chinese prose (probably concentrating most on the popular religious beliefs: conjuring of spirits, fortune-telling etc.).

After this unavoidably incomplete account of popular culture manifestations in classical Chinese literature let us proceed to the reflection of folk traditions in modern literature and film.

The westernising May Fourth Movement (from 1919 to 1927 or 1937) seemingly refuted traditional values. Ironically, it was within this framework that Lu Xun wrote a number of stories and articles (*Village Opera*/《社戲》, pieces from *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*/《朝花夕拾》 etc.) that presented popular folk practices in a positive, somewhat nostalgic light and promoted their preservation and research. This trend was followed and developed by his brother, essayist Zhou Zuoren, as well as Lao She (*The Drum Singers*/《古書藝人》, 1952) and Zhao Shuli (*Li Youcai's Rimes* /《李有才板話》) in the 40's and 50's. Zhao Shuli, together with Ma Feng, belonged to the "Yam group" (山藥蛋派) movement, which received its name from a dialectal Shanxi word and united writers wishing to describe the popular life in their home province.

The early Chinese film also reflected popular culture from its very beginning: the first Chinese movie was *The Battle of Dingjunshan* (《定軍山之戰》, 1905), based on a traditional drama. The 1960s have witnessed the emergence of animated films

based on popular art forms such as paper-cuts, shadow plays, puppetry and traditional painting. In the maelstrom of the tradition-annihilating Cultural Revolution the “Eight Model Plays” / 樣板戲 (many of them filmed, e.g. *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* / 《智取威虎山》) still had plenty of traditional popular features both in plots and staging. A new revival of popular culture in literature and cinema began at the turn of the eighties, when the “Root-Searching Literature” / 尋根文學 movement (Mo Yan, A Cheng, Wang Anyi) came to existence, with their emphasis on local and minority traditional cultures.

Modern literature and film: popular culture elements directly present in the plot

Traditional drama, narrated and chanted arts, as well as popular rites, beliefs, cuisine, medicine, clothes and even bathhouse and latrine culture appear highly relevant and influential for contemporary literature and film. Works by contemporary writers such as Yu Hua and Jia Pingwa or fifth and sixth generation cinematographers such as Zhang Yimou (*Lifetimes* / 《活著》), Chen Kaige (*Farewell my concubine* , 《霸王別姬》), Jia Zhangke (*Xiaowu* , 《小武》) and the Taiwanese Hou Hsiao Hsian (*The Puppet Master* , 《戲夢人生》) display deep involvement with the immediate reflection of traditional performing arts and practices, which hints however at current social or cultural problems (this paradoxically sends us back to the time-honoured Chinese method of describing the past or ‘the timeless’ for criticising the present).

Hou Hsiao Hsian’s *The Puppet Master* is a biopic of a famous Taiwanese puppet master name Li Tianlu / 李天祿. Here we find vivid detailed descriptions of puppet drama budaixi / 布袋戲, Taiwan singing drama, Japanese-language war propaganda puppet drama. We see the performances from the auditorium and from behind the stage, the make-up process and the rehearsals. However folk culture manifestations are definitely not restricted to traditional theatre. There are ethnographically rich scenes of cooking and eating in the film. We come across popular medicine practices, such as treating a carbuncle with a toad. Another example is the protagonist’s mother, who gives her health to his grandmother, after which the mother dies, and the

grandmother recuperates. The grandmother is a jinx leading anyone staying near her to illness and death, but her grandson, who eventually has to take care of her, remains immune to her evil influence because he is protected by Kuixing / 魁星 constellation spirit. We witness a traditional coffin kept by the old father at home. Ultimately this coffin kills him: the drunken old man rests in it in hot weather, catches cold and dies. This reminds of a partially similar episode in Yu Hua's biographical essay, where he recalls staying in mortuary corpse compartments to avoid heat.

Yu Hua is a good example of contemporary writer whose plots abound in popular culture elements. The rite of summoning the soul of the deceased is described in great detail in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* / 《許三觀賣血記》. The rite is performed already under the Communists, but there are no visible signs of impediment on the part of the authorities. Geomancy (風水) is used to find a site for the communal steel furnace in *To Live* / 《活著》 during the Great Leap Forward. Zhang Yimou, who made a screen version of the novel, added scenes of traditional and modernised shadow shows, as the protagonist is a performer in the film. For a broader survey of Chinese popular culture elements in contemporary literature and film see e.g. (Bronfen E., Riemenschnitter 2004), (Zavidovskaya 2004) and (Zavidovskaya 2007).

Traditional ways of narration and description

The traditional culture aesthetics is also present in modern art as a subtler creative paradigm. Yu Hua's early stories of the 1980s often unwind against the background of popular culture elements. *Classical Love* / 《古典愛情》 is one example. It uses such traditional motives as “maidens and scholars” (才子佳人), ghost stories, tales of resurrection, as well as sacrificing one's own flesh (cf. the *Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars, Dong Yong Sells His Body* / 《二十四孝·董永賣身》). However, the last motive has no moral justification in Yu Hua's story. *Blood and Plum Blossoms* / 《鮮血梅花》 is based on the popular folk genre of knight-errantry (武俠小說). Yu Hua has also constructed a revenge tale, but “the moral center of the narrative mold has

been hollowed out, casting the reader into an enigmatic world of chance, coincidence, and uncertainty” (Yu Hua 1996: 266).

As for Yu Hua’s later works, he says that his almost exclusively dialogue-based novel *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* ‘could be sung as Shaoxing drama (越劇)’ (personal communication 2005) and speaks about ‘the folk-song melody of [his] work’ (余华 1998b: 4).

Chronicle of a Blood Merchant tells the life of an average worker Xu Sanguan and his family: his marriage, his and his wife’s extramarital affairs, the birth of their children, a denunciation meeting he is made to hold over his wife, the deportation of his children to the country, and also the family’s way of life, psychology and opinions.

We can find some formal devices in the novel that confirm Yu Hua’s statements. The novel does not have a single storyteller, but a host of ‘conventional narrators’. In chapter 18 Xu Sanguan tells his wife about the Great Leap Forward:

“This year is 1958. We’ve had People’s Communes, the Great Leap Forward, Backyard Steel Furnaces, and what else? They took back my grandpa’s and my fourth uncle’s land down in the countryside...’ (Yu Hua 2003a: 110)

The fact that a husband is telling his wife what year it is now, emphasises the conventionality of the narrative (whose true addressee is the reader rather than the wife). We can find a similar technique in *The Puppet Master*, which uses the protagonist’s explanatory monologues directed to the spectator.

Other examples of conventional narrators in the novel include characters spreading rumours (chapters 8, 13), they can either be personalised (Xu Sanguan, Xu Yulan, Blacksmith Fang) or impersonal (then the formula ‘they say’ is used). It is typical of the traditional Chinese vernacular novel to be based primarily on dialogue. The same is true of Yu Hua’s novel. Therefore, even though ‘we should talk not only about different narration manners, but also about different viewpoints’ (Uspenskiy 2000: 66) regarding prose and drama, it is quite natural to see much similarity between the two genres.

Further similarity may be found from the perspective of plot schemes. Popular drama and prosaic narration share many stories. *The Slaughtered Mandarin Ducks* 《刎颈鸳鸯会》 is an interesting example. We know it only in the form of a huaben tale from the Ming collection *Tales from the Cloister of Purity and Peace* (《青平山堂話本》), initially entitled 《六十家小說》), however Ye Dejun (叶德君 1957) has shown that it originated from a ‘drum tale’ (鼓词) and was performed with considerable elements of drama. The story of conjugal infidelity among common folk (a pedlar, his wife and a shop owner in this case) and its tragicomical treatment remind one of a similar motive in Yu Hua’s novel.

Here the Chinese literary term *ji* / 記, used in the original title of *Chronicle*, also comes into play. As we know, it could be applied to various forms of classical Chinese literature. It could appear not only in the titles of novels (cf. *Journey to the West* / 西遊記 by Wu Cheng’en, *The Bureaucracy Exposed* / 《官場現形記》 by Li Baojia, *The Travels of Lao Can* / 《老殘遊記》 by Liu E) or dramas (examples are many, including the famous *Romance of the West Chamber* / 《西廂記》 by Wang Shifu), but also of ‘notes’ (cf. *Eight Notes on Yongzhou* / 《永州八記》 by Liu Zongyuan or *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* / 《浮生六記》 by Shen Fu). Meanwhile many motives persistent in classical ‘notes’ are also present in *Chronicle* and other Yu Hua’s works (going to the offender’s neighbours to obtain justice, the rite of adopting a ‘blood son’, conjuring the soul of the deceased on the roof of his house, kowtowing to parents on their birthday, the wedding rite and rite of returning the bride into the home of her father, the ceremony of opening a new bridge, an attempt to hang oneself in front of the offender’s house etc.). No matter which genre of traditional literature the author meant by introducing the term *ji* in the title of his novel, he definitely referred to the popular narrative culture.

Let us now turn to the compositional aspect of division into chapters. The first genre of traditional Chinese prose that may be associated with this problem is the serial novel (章回小说) such as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Here the narration in each chapter starts from the very point it paused at in the previous one. The only thing that breaks up the action is clichés of the kind ‘if you what to know what happened

next please read the following chapter'. These are, apart from chapter titles of course, the only textual markers delimiting the chapters. Thus the text could be split up into chapters in a different manner by putting these markers in different places. Just two rules probably have to be observed: the narration should be suspended at turning points and chapters should be roughly of the same size (it is worth mentioning that chapter sizes vary considerably in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, e.g. chapter 6 takes one page, while chapter 28 contains thirty-six pages). This purely formal device, originating from the so-called 'end-selling' technique (賣關子) of traditional storytellers, reminds one of the classical English 'family-reading' novels of the 18th and 19th centuries (those by Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Dickens etc.) and the French roman-feuilleton (by Dumas-père, Sue, Hugo). These genres used similar techniques to similar ends: the author either expected that a chapter would be read every evening, or published a chapter in every newspaper issue. In both cases he had to observe a certain volume and to intrigue the reader till the next portion.

Other classical Chinese novels basically follow the outlined model of text partition (some extra devices can also be found, such as reminding the reader where the previous chapter was concluded or verses at chapter ends). The 17th-century collection of vernacular stories *The Twelve Towers* / 《十二樓》 by Li Yu has a double structure: the whole book is divided into twelve novellas united by the image of the tower, but with independent plots; while some novellas are broken into chapters. Li Yu does not disrupt the 'relay-race connection' narrative principle; however he brings the fragments together through general content, rather than particular situations, using Western-style authorial excursions instead of clichéd markers.

Chronicle of a Blood Merchant is doubtless fragmentary against the traditional prose background. E.g. at the end of chapter 1 Xu Sanguan is talking with his friends in a restaurant, while at the beginning of chapter 2 he is sitting in his uncle's melon patch; at the end of chapter 2 he is still there, but at the beginning of chapter 3 his work at the factory is described; at the end of this chapter the girl he just married is telling him about their future married life, and at the beginning of chapter 4 she is already giving birth to their son.

It is quite clear that chapter junctions correspond to substantial temporal gaps in the narration. Still the freer inter-chapter connection of Li Yu has already something in common with the structure of the novel. Even more similarity could be found in the cross-motive principle underlying both Li Yu's whole collection and Yu Hua's trilogy (the motives being, correspondingly, the tower image and the theme of different stages of human life as well as fathers-and-sons theme). Yu Hua, unlike his predecessors, does not converse with the reader; but the protagonist often sums up the latest developments with a popular saying at the end of a chapter, which also brings us back to the literary tradition:

“She's like the broken pot that's not afraid of shattering, and I'm a dead pig who no longer minds that the water's coming to a boil” (Yu Hua 2003b: 91).

We also find some traditional techniques of character description in Yu Hua's novels, which include expositional description and its expansion later, description through action, brief descriptions of protagonists (mainly of their clothes), detailed descriptions of incidental characters, and little psychological description.

Yu Hua uses the exposition + expansion scheme, when he begins his story with the words ‘Xu Sanguan worked in the silk factory in town, distributing silkworm cocoons to the spinners...’ (Yu Hua 2003a: 3), and supplements them after a while: ‘Xu Sanguan's job was to push a trolley heaped with puffy white silkworm cocoons back and forth across a huge workshop’ (Yu Hua 2003a: 20). Fugui, the main

character of *To Live*¹, is described according to the same scheme: ‘... I saw an old man in one of the nearby fields patiently trying to coax an ox into working... I noticed the old man’s back was just as black as the ox’s’. (Note that a human and a beast are described on the same terms). After a few passages the description goes on: ‘Seeing the old man’s dark face smiling in the sunlight was quite moving. The wrinkles on his face moved about happily. They were caked with mud, just like the small dirt trails that ran through the fields’ (Yu Hua 2003b: 6-8).

Yu Hua is very concise with his appearance descriptions. It is especially true of the main characters. Xu Sanguan has virtually no expositional description, over twenty-eight chapters it is only mentioned that he put on weight in the middle age, and a rather brief description of him as an old man is present in the last, twenty-ninth chapter: ‘His hair was white, and he had lost seven teeth, but his eyes were still good and he could see things just as clearly as always had. And he knew his ears were still good because he could hear things that were happening very far away... When he walked down the street, Xu Sanguan’s face was awash in smiles and the wrinkles that covered his face rippled like river water. The sun shone on his face, etching the ripples in light and shadow’ (Yu Hua 2003a: 244).

A very succinct description of the old Fugui has already been quoted. He depicts himself in more detail as a youth: ‘I wore a white silk shirt, and my hair was smooth

¹ *To Live* describes the life of a landlord’s son Fugui. As a young man he fools away his time in brothels and gambling-houses and ruins his family. His father, who used to be a similar spendthrift in his youth, dies from vexation and rage at his ‘unfilial’ son. The family have to work in the field, like ordinary peasants. Bankruptcy turns Fugui into a different, hard-working and humble person. Once, when he goes to the town to sell some vegetables, he is forced to join the Kuomintang army. Without having fought for a single day he finds himself in the encirclement, and is taken prisoner by the Communists, who let him go. At home he sees his mother on her deathbed and his daughter made dumb by an illness. Ironically, by bankrupting his family, he had saved them from being repressed as ‘landlords’. However his life is full of tragedy: one by one he loses his son, daughter, wife, son-in-law and grandson. In spite of his misfortunes, Fugui keeps his love for people. After sacrificing his life to his family and burying all its members, he commits a good deed in his old years, saving an old ox. The main idea of the novel, turned into its title, is ‘one has to live, just for the sake of life, and not for anything outside of life’ (余华 1998b: 6).

and shiny. Standing in front of the mirror and seeing my head of black, flowing hair, I knew that I looked like a rich man' (Yu Hua 2003b: 11). In *Screaming in the Drizzle* there is no description of the protagonist's appearance at all.

It is only said about Xu Yulan that she is 'very beautiful', and also (in the form of a rumour) that 'her fingers are too short and thick' (Yu Hua 2003a: 22) and that 'she has not grown fat with age' (Yu Hua 2003a: 51). It is true that all her new clothes are mentioned as the narration unfolds, but only really cursorily: 'She changed her outfit three times a day, because the fact was that she only had three outfits in which to change. And every day she changed into four different pairs of shoes, because she only had four different pairs of shoes to wear. When there was nothing new left to wear, she would wrap a silk scarf around her neck' (Yu Hua 2003a: 21). Note again the traditional enumeration of clothes as an appearance description, as well as description through action: we do not so much see what she looks like, as what she does with her looks (cf. also chapter 9, where Xu Yulan puts on clothes and wears scent before going out to see her former lover, but nothing is said about the final result of her preparations).

Fugui's son-in-law in *To Live* is described in a similar vein: 'Wan Erxi showed up just a few days later. His head relay was crooked; when he saw me he raised his left shoulder. When he saw Fengxia and Jiazhen he did the same thing. Fengxia started to giggle the moment she laid eyes on him. Wan Erxi was wearing clean and neat tunic suit. If it hadn't been for his crooked head he would have looked just like one of those big city cadres' (Yu Hua 2003b: 176).

On the other hand, incidental personages often receive a rather detailed characterisation at their first appearance, e.g.: 'Blood Chief Li sat behind a desk in the blood donation room, feet propped atop an open desk drawer, and his legs splayed reveal his crotch. All the buttons on his fly had fallen off, and a pair of flower-print underwear peeked through the gap between... As soon as Xu Sanguan saw him, he thought to himself, So this is Blood Chief Li. Isn't he the bald guy who comes by the factory to sell fried silkworm chips?' (Yu Hua 2003a: 11)

When Blood Chief Li saw Ah Fang and Genlong shuffle in with their carrying

poles, his feet slid back onto the ground, and he gave out an affable chuckle. “So it’s you two! You are back again.” (Yu Hua 2003a: 12).

Here is another example:

‘At the time there was a Mr. Shen at the house of Qing. He was about sixty years old, and his eyes were as cunning and bright as a cat’s. He wore a long blue gown and would usually sit in a corner with his back straight. His eyes would be closed as if he were dozing off. Only after the action at the gambling table started to get exciting, would Mr Shen begin to cough and casually walk over, selecting a good spot from which to watch. He would never have to stand for long before someone would get up and offer him his place: “Mr. Shen, have a seat.”’ (Yu Hua 2003b: 18)

Here we can see the direct description (clothes, gestures, postures), perception by another character (in the first example), description through action and speech characterisation.

Other incidental characters are also described quite at length: the old flame of Xu Sanguan’s, Lin Fenfang (her portrait, both as a young and mature woman is much more detailed than Xu Yulan’s, chapters 3 and 14), her husband (chapters 14 and 16), peasants Ah Fang and Genlong (chapter 15), a gambler Longer (*To Live*), idiots living together with Lulu (*Screaming through the Drizzle*) etc.

Popular culture symbolism

Popular culture symbols also abound in modern literature and film. Let us take the example of Hou Hsiao Hsian’s *The Puppet Master* once again. Here we find life and theatre fused. The very original title 《戲夢人生》 (‘human life – theatre dream’) demonstrates that these two concepts form communicating vessels in the film. A performance is often shown both from the auditorium and the backstage. Sometimes alternate perspectives are used, while sometimes a single side perspective is shown, when the spectator sees the audience and the backstage at the same time. We also come across overlaps of a life scene with performance sound and parallel action in life and on stage, e.g. weeping is enacted during a performance and it is mentioned

simultaneously that a female character is crying.

In Jia Pingwa's novel *Qinqiang* / 《秦腔》 ('mouth [i.e. singing style] of Qin principedom') (贾平凹 2006) the traditional genre of Shaanxi popular drama serves as a symbol of the dying traditional way of life in the countryside. The plot of the novel has little to do with the art of Qin opera, but in the preface the author explains this image as an embodiment of regional culture and gives a detailed account of how Qin opera is sung. A critic also sees the novel as a 'slow and sad traditional song' (悲凉慢板) (徐春萍 : 2006).

Yu Hua's novels are also rich in symbols of popular tradition. Thus blood is turned into a symbol in *Chronicle*, and a multifaceted symbol at that. It represents not only sacrifice, but also family bonds. All the main conflicts of the novel relate to the fact that, as it eventually becomes clear, the main character's eldest son is another man's child. According to the patriarchal moral, which everyone around follows, Xu Sanguan loses his face and has no obligation to feed a 'bastard'. The problem is that Xu Sanguan loves both his wife and his son. However hard he may try to take the 'correct' attitude towards his son (not to pay the debt incurred by him, not to take him to the restaurant to treat him to some noodles in the famine years), ultimately he cannot stick to his guns and treats him as his own son. At last, after the death of the boy's real father, Xu Sanguan makes a cut on his face before the crowd, smears the blood and announces that since then they are blood-bound father and son. As Xu Sanguan doubts his wife's chastity for a long time, he is troubled by the question whether there was blood during their first night – thus blood also symbolises conjugal ties.

To Live is as much symbolic as *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*. Fugui repeatedly tells the story of how his family became rich: first they had a chicken, then swapped him for a goose, then for a lamb and ultimately for an ox. First this story is used as a parable, but as the plot is unfolding Fugui's family indeed buy chickens and lambs. Life continuously ruins their plans: the fowl have to be sold, lambs are confiscated and slaughtered by the production brigade. Yet finally the lonely old Fugui finds a friend, an old ox that stands for his gone family – it is not a coincidence that Fugui

gives the ox the names of his family members, as well as his own name. The allegory implies that this ox is an embodiment of hope.

Symbolism of names is equally important. Fugui (福贵) may be translated as 'happy and noble'. Here we find the ironic confrontation of the 'auspicious' name and the tragic fate, but also a kind of natural connection: Fugui escaped the repression, while the man who got his house was shot by the Communists; moreover, at the end of his life Fugui is happy in a sense, as he is not lonely, he is at peace with himself, and retains his noble attitude to the world. His wife's name Jiazhen (家珍) means 'family treasure', and indeed, Fugui was happy with her. In his story Jiazhen emerges as an ideal woman, who is wise, loving, patient, and forgiving. As Fugui puts it: 'for me to have had the good fortune to marry such a virtuous person in this life must have been repayment for having been a barking dog in the last' (Yu Hua 2003b: 16).

The name of their son-in-law Erxi (二喜) 'second joy' is also symbolic: he brings joy to the couple that have lost their son and despaired of ever finding a husband for their dumb daughter. The symbolism of their grandson's name Kugen (苦根) 'bitter root' is emphasised: Fugui gives the child this name in memory of his mother's death while giving birth.

The storyteller of *To Live* has the job of collecting folk songs in the country, a practice symbolising listening to vox populi in China from time immemorial (here *Shijing* and yuefu practices should be remembered once again).

We have been able to analyse only a few examples in this paper. Still we hope that they are representative enough to convince the reader that popular culture manifestation forms an essential part of Chinese contemporary literature and film and is indispensable for their understanding.

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