VOICELESS WITNESSES: THE ROLE OF THE BEGGAR IN FOUR WORKS OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY CHINESE LITERATURE

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Thinking of China in the early 20th century and China today, one tends to highlight the great transformations dividing past and present. However, Chinese literature offers evidence of interesting thematic continuities, too. The figure of the beggar, an extremely significant yet voiceless outcast of society, is just one remarkable example. Represented by modern characters such as the protagonists of Lu Xun's "Kong Yiji" (1919) and of Ba Jin's "Dog" (1931), the beggar continues to appear in contemporary narratives, including A Yi's short story "An Accidental Murder" (2010) and his novel *Wake Me Up at 9:00 in the Morning* (2014). Which continuities are traceable among these works? If literature has the power to voice the voiceless, what do the outcasts portrayed by these authors reveal to their readers? Drawing on Agamben's reflections on the concept of testimony and on psychoanalytic categories, this chapter offers a comparative analysis of four case studies.

Keywords: Chinese literature, Lu Xun, Ba Jin, A Yi, Agamben

1. A thematic connection between early 20th century literature and today's literature: The topic of deviance, the image of the beggar

Reading through both early 20th century Chinese literature and contemporary novels, it is quite easy to detect a common topic – deviance – which recurs in different forms, e.g., characters deviating from a traditional familiar system, from a socially accepted idea of "health," as well as from a pre-established concept of social order, or the boundaries of legality. In fact, "the metaphorization of disease as socio-cultural symptom and symbol of traumatic modernity emerged in modern

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Chinese literature [already] from the late Qing to May Fourth periods," and even if "the writing of disease as a counter-discourse to the dominant Mao discourse had disappeared in the People's Republic of China," it has recently re-emerged "as a marginal voice against the mainstream of marketization" (Choy 2016, 4), thus returning as an object of undoubted interest for literary criticism.

Drawing inspiration from this reflection, this chapter analyzes the thematic continuity between early 20th century literature and today's literature by electing a slightly broader criterion, namely the topic of "deviance." This topic, undeniably close to that of "disease," shares a similar etymology with the word, as disease literally means "a lack of ease," or a disconnection from wellness. Meanwhile, deviance is the result of "deviating," or drifting away from the "way" (in Latin, *via*). Both terms bear a reversative or privative prefix (*dis-* and *de-*). So, why are these destabilized and destabilizing perspectives – those offered by sick or deviant characters – such a relevant issue both in the early 20th century and in contemporary literature? And what is the universal interest of inquiring about this literary *topos*?

First and foremost, narrating deviance – like narrating disease – means providing alternative narratives vis-à-vis a dominant discourse of harmony (和谐 *hexie*) and health (健康 *jiankang*), which not only neglects those sick, diseased, and dissenting voices, but also precludes any chance of treasuring their perspectives. Second, narrating deviance means naming problems, thus providing a language to discuss them. Thence, if narrating deviance means voicing the symptoms of a critical condition, it also means affirming the possibility of facing that criticality, or even healing it. Therefore, by filling the shoes of a deviant character (e.g., a beggar), the reader is enabled to experience a constraint-free, rule-free, superstructure-free perspective: a place of abstraction, and hence, of understanding.

In order to explore that place of understanding, this chapter offers a multidisciplinary analysis of four fictional beggars: firstly, Lu Xun's (鲁迅) Kong Yiji (孔乙己) (孔乙己 "Kong Yiji," 1919); secondly, the protagonist of Ba Jin's (巴金) "Dog" (狗 "Gou," 1931); thirdly, He Shuiqing (何水清), a young poet who risks becoming a city beggar in A Yi's (阿乙) story "An Accidental Murder" (意外杀人事件 "Yiwai sharen shijian," 2010); and finally, Fuzhong (福忠), a mute beggar from A Yi's novel *Wake Me Up at 9:00 in the Morning* (早上九点叫醒我 *Zaoshang jiu dian jiaoxing wo*, 2014).

The figure of the beggar or the homeless person is not uncommon in contemporary Sinophone literature. Examples of this figure are found not only in the production of post-1970s authors such as Sheng Keyi (盛可以, 1973–), A Yi (1976–), and Xu Zechen (徐则臣, 1978–), but also in several works by older authors, such as Jia Pingwa (贾平娃, 1952–) and Yu Hua (余华, 1960–), just to mention a few well-known names among many others. It should also be said that this figure, dear to both the Taoist and Buddhist traditions, is already present in the premodern

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landscape, with specific characteristics and functions that would certainly require a separate discussion. Therefore, this research does not intend to trace an exhaustive overview of this literary figure, but, starting from and limiting itself to the selected case studies, it intends to provide a few interesting insights about its recurrence and significance, that is, about its being indicative of certain social situations, and witness to a possibility of existence outside any concept of "normality." In fact, it is namely in literature that this figure, often banned from the streets or denied by government-orchestrated narratives, does actually survive, together with its destabilizing testimony.

As for the contemporary panorama, the choice of limiting the case studies to two characters by A Yi, which undeniably precluded many other possibilities, was determined both by the clarity with which these characters offer a counterpoint to contemporary society and its dominant narratives, and by some significant analogies with Lu Xun's and Ba Jin's characters. In fact, He Shuiqing can be considered a failed scholar like Kong Yiji; while Fuzhong, like the protagonist of "Dog," is the example of the beggar considered to be almost inhuman, as he even lacks that verbal language that would neatly distinguish man from beast.[1]

When I began researching the figure of the beggar, I came across a paper mentioning a series of New Year's pictures issued in Shanghai during the 1920s and "entitled '360 walks of life' (360 *hang*) [...], meaning 'every walk of life' or 'all professions,'" in which "a beggar was one of the subjects" (Lu 1999, 7). This means that, in the realm of those 1920s New Year's pictures, the beggar was considered a profession or a walk of life. In other words, it could be seen as a possibility of existence. This fact should not be surprising, being it a consequence of the Taoist and Buddhist traditions, and of a social order in which this figure was not only a concrete presence but a recognized and respected one from the earliest times. As Aude Lucas interestingly observes, it was seen already in classical literature – in Pu Songling's (蒲松龄) stories, for example, but soon before even in the *Zhuangzi* (庄子) – that the figure of the beggar might happen to represent, if not a real profession (such as a healer), a marginal yet mysteriously resilient "walk of life."

> *Liaozhai* [聊斋] beggars are quite expectedly repellent characters, [...] however, they are more often than not endowed with supranatural abilities that actually make them powerful protagonists. [...] [They] are not represented by [Pu Songling] at the bottom of the society, but as characters

[1] The man-beast connection, and, in particular, that between man and dog, is also a frequent thematic knot in contemporary Sinophone literature. Consider, for example, the uncanny bestiary staged by Can Xue (1953–), or the literature of Mo Yan (1955–), whose masterpiece *Red Sorghum* (1986) includes a long chapter having dogs as protagonists and telling their story just as if they were human characters.

> whose marginalization goes along with a *superior understanding of life*. (Lucas 2021, n.p., emphasis added)

The figure of the beggar as an absolutely negative and unproductive element is instead a product of modern times, of the Cultural Revolution, of the following race for economic development (last decades of the 20th century), and of rules, such as the 1982 vagrancy law (officially called "Custody and Repatriation of Homeless Beggars Law"), which empowered the police to jail anyone without an identity card, work permit, or temporary residence certificate. Although this law was abolished in 2003, it was then replaced by bans on begging in numerous areas of the city centers, deliberately reiterating the very same intolerant mentality towards beggars, along with the will to erase their inelegant presence. Therefore, compared to the times of Pu Songling, there is no doubt that, at least at a sociological and anthropological level, the life of Chinese beggars has significantly changed. Their presence on the sidewalk of glamorous streets is now vanishing, and they're becoming less and less disturbing. Their status is not a profession anymore, and their humanity is neglected. They barely receive any reaction from the passers-by, and nobody producing a New Year's picture series in today's China would ever consider including a beggar in it.

Yet, contemporary literature still does. That is to say, within the fictional world of stories and novels, the character of the beggar, differently from its real counterpart, can still play a significant role, offering an external and critical eye towards the dominant concepts and practices, if not even that "superior understanding of life" typical of his Taoist and Buddhist ancestors.

2. The beggar as a witness, the reader as a witness of the witness

To investigate the role of the beggar in the following case studies, the textual analysis hereby proposed will make use of a multidisciplinary approach and take advantage of Peter Brooks's (narratological), Massimo Recalcati's (psychoanalytical), and Giorgio Agamben's (philosophical) reflections.

As Peter Brooks states in his work *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1986), "the study of narrative needs to move beyond the various formalist criticisms that have predominated in our time," and his proposal is that of looking to "a convergence of psychoanalysis and literary criticism" (Brooks 1992, 35–36). He suggests employing the dynamic model of the psychic processes for analyzing the dynamics of texts, and he defines the plot as a dynamic mechanism both started and fostered by the engine of "desire;" the desire of the protagonist to achieve a goal, which, according to Brooks, does actually elicit and coincide with the reader's desire to follow the plot and establish a senseful connection between its incipit and its conclusion. Brooks's examples are mostly drawn from European

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novels of the 19th century, in which "ambition" and "Eros" were the most common drivers underlying the dynamics of the text. Whereas going through the four stories hereby analyzed, the reader's "desire for the plot" is not a curiosity about the outcome of any brave deeds. The protagonists of these narratives are not heroes, so the reader is not made curious by their actions, but instead about *them*, as human beings. Namely, about who they are and what they represent. When approaching "Kong Yiji," for example, the main interrogative triggering the reader's desire is: Who is Kong Yiji? Why should the internal narrator still remember him? Similarly, when reading "Dog," one's main curiosity will be about the protagonist's identity: Who is this character? Is it a man or a dog? And this is also the very same question the protagonist himself is trying to answer.

Recalcati's book *Il soggetto vuoto* (*The Empty Subject*, 2011) raises further questions about the purpose of their begging. What do these characters beg for? Are they begging to remedy a *lack*? Do they represent an alternative vis-à-vis another trend – dominant among the other characters, as well as in reality – in which we see a compulsive search for *jouissance* (mainly represented by a greed for money) as the only – though deceptive – way to remedy a sense of *emptiness*? In fact, the concept of "lack" and the concept of "emptiness" are very different from each other. The concept of lack is related to that of "desire," because people desire what they lack. Thus, reversibly, this lack generates their desire. As Lacan explains, this (real) desire is never addressed toward consumable objects (e.g., money), but is always a desire of reaching (the) *Other*, or, an ever-missing and never attainable object. In other words, it is a desire that triggers a productive dynamism. On the contrary, the experience of "emptiness" is produced by a disconnection between lack and desire; emptiness is not a desire-triggering lack, but rather the downfall of any desire. It does not elicit any creativity, but repeatedly searches for a deceptive solution through the device of *jouissance*. All of those gadgets and addictive behaviors (e.g., money, alcohol, drugs, violence, food and sexual disorders, compulsive shopping, etc.) providing human beings with ephemeral solutions to that emptiness can be considered *jouissance* devices (Recalcati 2011, 21–24). Hence, are these beggars able to awaken others from this deadly trend? Can they re-propose a model of life that is not afraid of looking for the Other instead of looking for money? Or of chasing an unattainable – but vivifying – "Real," a fully human existence, rather than settling for a mere consumer's one?

Actually, it may be exactly through his Sisyphean existence and his experience of failure and *shame* (since "Real" is always unattainable) that the beggar eventually reveals himself to be an authentic witness, both of his human nature and of his time. As Giorgio Agamben states in his book *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, "the subject of testimony is the one who bears witness to a desubjectification" (Agamben 2002 [1998], 121); the one who has experienced – and has

simultaneously seen himself – being inhuman. In this sense, if the *Muselmann* is the human-who-has-witnessed-himself-being-inhuman, or "the downed," the "remnant," and hence, the "complete witness" of Auschwitz (Agamben 2002, 133–134), these fictional beggars can also be considered the legitimate witnesses of their respective times. All the more so, these characters are *voiceless* – thus, "impossible" – witnesses: Kong Yiji speaks a barely understandable Chinese; the dog-man never speaks, it/he just listens to the others and occasionally barks; He Shuiqing is a failed poet, while Fuzhong is a mute. Indeed, these four characters being wordless is the exact proof of their paradoxically bearing witness, by "bearing witness to the impossibility of witnessing" (Agamben 2002 [1998], 34).

Accordingly, it becomes self-evident that the recipient of these beggars' stories is not just a simple listener being entertained by a work of fiction, but quite the opposite. The reader of these stories is required to be the addressee of an impossible testimony, and thus is, through the very act of his or her reading, the possibility of accomplishing that testimony. This reader is not a passive receiver of the plot, but, as Brooks keenly suggests, he or she is to play a rather active role. By collecting the clues provided within the narration, and tracing connections between its beginning and its end, the reader finally *realizes* (understands and implements) the sense of its plot, as well as the meaning of its beggar character: the (inhuman) remnant, that ultimately is the human. Otherwise said, stepping into the shoes of these fictional beggars allows the reader to understand how losers are often more mindful of their own humanity than winners. In fact, winners automatically become part of their society's mainstream narrative, joining its legitimate members. Whereas losers become not only the living testimony of a possible existence *outside* the abovesaid narrative, but also witnesses to the many critical issues about this narrative that insiders fail to notice.

The following textual analysis will therefore shed light on these significant characters, by investigating their main characteristic and functions, and by contextualizing them in their respective time periods. As the following case studies will demonstrate, although times and plots have inevitably changed, the role of these characters has almost kept unchanged: they are there to provide an alternative narrative, and to be the voiceless voice of the society's human conscience.

3. "Kong Yiji" (1919)[2]

"Kong Yiji" is the title of the story, as well as the name of its protagonist. However, this character is not introduced to the reader until the end of the third paragraph. Instead, the very first phrase of the text is: "The layout of Luzhen's taverns

[2] All the quotations reported in this section refer to Lu (2000 [1919]).

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is unique" (鲁镇的酒店的格局，是和别处不同的), and the narrative actually begins by describing the environment of Luzhen's taverns, where hot water is always kept ready for warming rice wine and where customers are sorted on the basis of their wealth and education, which is deducible from their clothes: most of them are "the short-coated class" (短衣主顾), whereas the richer and educated ones are referred to as "those in long gowns" (长衫主顾).

In the second paragraph the internal narrator reveals his own identity; at the time of the narrative, he was little more than a child and worked as a potboy in Prosperity Tavern. According to his boss, he was "too much of a fool" (太傻) to serve long-gowned customers, but he was also unable to dilute wine for the short-coated ones. Therefore, his only task was to warm wine and he was easily bored.

> 只有孔乙己到店，才可以笑几声，所以至今还记得。
>
> The only times when there was any laughter were when Kong Yiji came to the tavern. That is why I remember him.

The first piece of information provided about Kong Yiji is that he brought laughter in the tavern, this also being the reason why the former potboy remembered him. The topic of *ridicule* is strictly related to the topic of *shame*. Ridiculing Kong Yiji is a way for the potboy to detach himself from that miserable customer, to feel safely and happily distant from the fearful uncanny demeanor that he embodies. Subsequently, the narrator comes to describe Kong Yiji, whose exterior aspect and behavior are rich in paradoxes. He wears a long gown, *but* his gown is dirty, his beard is unkempt and, differently from any other long-gowned customer, he drinks his wine standing. He speaks using archaisms, as if pretending to be an erudite, but his words are hardly understandable, and everybody mocks him for his vicious habit of stealing books. The narrator explains this situation as follows:

> 孔乙己原来也读过书，但终于没有进学 4，又不会营生；于是愈过愈穷，弄到将要讨饭了。幸而写得一笔好字，便替人家钞钞书，换一碗饭吃。可惜他又有一样坏脾气，便是好吃懒做。
>
> Kong Yiji had studied the classics but never passed the official examinations and, not knowing any way to make a living, he had grown steadily poorer until he was almost reduced to beggary. Luckily, he was a good calligrapher [...], but unfortunately he had his failings too: laziness and a love of tippling.

A few lines later, the narrator points out another paradox; Kong Yiji is a lazy worker, *but*, in Prosperity Tavern, he is a "model customer who never failed to pay up" (品行却比别人都好，就是从不拖欠). In regard to the other customers, they never speak with Kong Yiji, but rather they mock his literacy, which they constantly doubt. The former potboy himself remembers that Kong Yiji had once tried to test him

by asking whether he was able to write the character for "aniseed." The boy's irritation and indifference, however, had left the failed scholar invariably frustrated and alone in his own wordless wordy world. "That was how Kong Yiji contributed to our enjoyment" (孔乙己是这样的使人快活), states the narrator, and then another: "but we got along all right without him too" (可是没有他，别人也便这么过). That is to say, Kong Yiji is not necessary; his language – along with the cultural system it represents – is obsolete, unusable, and incomprehensible; his presence is just something to distance oneself from, an uncanny remnant of the past which cannot be dealt with but by the means of ridicule. In other words, other characters are dealing with him by making him the representative, and ultimately the scapegoat, of a shared sense of inadequacy. In this light, it is no coincidence that, at the time of the narrative, the potboy himself felt largely inadequate to do his job.

One day the boss of the tavern is making out his accounts, and, by realizing that Kong Yiji's name is still written on the tally-board, he deduces that the failed scholar "hasn't shown up for a long time" (长久没有来了) and "still owes nineteen coppers!" (还欠十九个钱呢！). One of the customers explains that Kong Yiji has been caught while stealing books and beaten until his legs were broken.

> "后来呢？" "后来打折了腿了。" "打折了怎样呢？" "怎样？……谁晓得？许是死了。"
>
> "And then?" [asks the boss to the customer.] "Well, his legs were broken." "Yes, but after?" "After? ... Who knows? He may be dead."

The boss needs to ask twice ("And then?", "but after?"), because the fact that Kong Yiji "may be dead" is irrelevant to the customer who is giving the account of his disappearance. Kong Yiji's absence, like his presence, is something irrelevant and almost *unreal*, detached, separate, and far away from the supposedly authentic *reality* of the human world in Prosperity Tavern. No wonder he has no *real* name, his surname being the *kong* (孔) of Confucius (孔子), and his nickname, *yiji* (乙己), being the first two characters of the old-fashioned children's copy book, that is a senseless word and a mockery in itself.

After some time, Kong Yiji comes back to the tavern, *but*, differently from his old habit, he cannot drink his wine standing, and now he is squatting cross-legged on a mat. His voice is "low *but* familiar" (虽然极低，却很耳熟), and he looks like a wreck *but* invariantly asks for his usual bowl of wine: "Warm a bowl of wine" (温一碗酒), he says entering the tavern; "Warm a bowl of wine," he repeats after a while. Just as in the past, he is teased by the boss and by the other customers because of his vice of stealing books, *but* this time he does not admit the truth, nor does he insist on his old adage that taking books could not be counted as stealing. He does not even pay his debts. Rather, he just pretends to have broken his legs in a fall, pays the price for this bowl of wine, and eventually leaves the tavern. As hereby

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emphasized, this last appearance of Kong Yiji at the Prosperity Tavern is marked by a contradictory tension. On one hand, it bears familiar features like Kong Yiji's voice, his asking for a bowl of wine, and his being teased by other customers. On the other hand, it betrays something unusual, unfamiliar, and uncanny, such as his squatting on the mat, the low volume of his voice, his denying the truth about his legs, and his failing to pay his debts, which the insistent repetition of the usual, familiar, and comfortable phrase "warm a bowl of wine" does nothing but attempt to control, and thus, to conceal.

After a long period, the boss of the tavern realizes that Kong Yiji's name is still on the tally-board. This time, however, Kong Yiji does not reappear, "nor have I ever seen him since" (我到现在终于没有见), affirms the former potboy, by ending his account: "No doubt Kong Yiji *really* is dead" (大约孔乙己的确死了; emphasis added).

What could this ending mean? The phrase is clearly structured as a deduction: *since* the narrator has not seen Kong Yiji since (his very last appearance at the tavern), *he deduces that* "no doubt Kong Yiji really is dead." This deduction, however, is founded on two assumptions. The first assumption is that Kong Yiji *really* is a "model customer." The second assumption is that his existence or non-existence can be simply deduced from his frequent visits to the Prosperity Tavern. In other words, this ending should rather be stated more similarly to "no doubt *our beggar-like customer* Kong Yiji really is dead." However, this begs the question: What about the *man* Kong Yiji?[3] His nickname – though as bizarre as it sounds – is still written on the tally-board. The memory of him is still fresh in the narrator's mind and his contradictory, uncanny existence, which the former potboy was once able to ridicule and exorcise, is now coming back to his mind. Although he does not admit it, indeed it constitutes a problematic memory, a *present doubt*, which eventually results in his need to narrate it. If there was really "*no doubt*" about Kong Yiji's death, there would be *no need* to call back his story, to set it – and thus, to control it – within the frame of a plot. In other words, to transform it into a sense-desiring, sense-searching structure.

So, what was so scarily uncanny about Kong Yiji? What was the most fearful – and thus, the most ridiculed – part of him? Given the period in which this story takes place, the most shameful feature of Kong Yiji is not his material poverty, nor the supposed laziness which eventually catalyzed his bankruptcy. Most likely, Kong Yiji's uncanny character consists in his failure as a literate, of which his exterior aspect and his material poverty are merely symptoms: the witnesses. Kong Yiji is

[3] In regard to the neglected humanity of Kong Yiji, Foley (2012, 380) affirms: "Neither the owner nor the narrator allow themselves any sort of emotional investment in Kong Yiji as a person […]. Accordingly, his absence is marked only by his debts, rather than by any memory or feeling of his human presence in the establishment."

nostalgic for language. Namely, he is nostalgic for a language system that, at the time of the narrative, has already disappeared. Yet, he invariably struggles to keep it alive by mumbling unintelligible archaisms and by stealing books (an allegory of this language), until this spiritual lack turns him into a beggar, eventually causing his physical death.

What is the language that Kong Yiji begs for by witnessing the unbearability of its loss? Is it the grammar of cultural and ethical values, which several intellectuals among Lu Xun's contemporaries had long started to perceive as insufficient, obsolete, shameful, and hence, *ridiculous*? The abolition of the Chinese imperial examinations (1905) was just 14 years older than this short story. One might well assume that while Lu Xun was writing "Kong Yiji," China taverns were still *really* crowded with several sorts of neglected, unappreciated Kong Yijis. If the abolition of any examination system can be fixed through an established set of bureaucratic operations, the abolition of a language, the dismissal of generations of literates who have been trained with the exact purpose of speaking *that* language and entering *that* system is not so easily done automatically. Rather, it involves a cluster of people speaking the words of the *past*, but suddenly finding themselves on the threshold of the *future*. They lack the *present* in between. They lack *time*, and indeed, they beg for it. That language, and that socio-cultural grammar that once was their dignity, their privilege, their legitimation, and their social status, is now of no use and no value. With their surrounding society embracing a modern devotion to scientific knowledge and technical progress, their identity is left empty, their existence meaningless, and their presence voiceless.

4. "Dog" (1931)[4]

> "我不知道自己的姓名[...]。我不知道谁是我的父亲，谁是我的母亲。"
>
> "I don't know how old I am or what my name is. [...] I have no idea who my parents are."

This is the opening of a five-chapter short story. The narrative is delivered by the voice of a first-person narrator who is also the protagonist. His poor conditions are evident from the very beginning, as he is unaware of his name, age, and roots. Most of all, he is completely alone. These are the features that mark the insurmountable difference between him and other people. All he knows about himself is his exterior appearance, which he describes by listing a series of characteristics, that is, "skinny [literally, short] body, yellow skin, black hair, black eyes, and a flat

[4] All the quotations in this section from the original Chinese text refer to Ba Jin (1991 [1931]). Their English translations are from Ba Jin (2007).

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nose" (黄的皮肤，黑的头发，黑的眼珠，矮的鼻子，短小的身材). This unmistakably recalls the image of a stray dog. "Every person has a childhood," he explains, "but mine was different [...]. All I've known is cold and hunger" (每个人都有他的童年。[...] 我的童年却跟别人的童年不同。[...] 我知道的只是寒冷和饥饿). Nevertheless, the first thing he recalls about this childhood is something "human:" an old man suggesting he go look for a school in order to receive a good education. However, when the abandoned child tries to enter the imposing buildings of the schools, he only received fierce refusals, and eventually started doubting his own human nature: "A voice in my head kept asking, 'Are you really human?'" (在我的耳边似乎时常有一个声音在问：'你究竟算不算是一个人？').

To answer this question, he eventually decides to enter an "abandoned temple" and begs the temple god – whose statue is significantly damaged to the point that "the gold had peeled off his body, and one of his hands was missing" (身上的金已经脱落了，甚至一只手也断了) – to give him a sign. The decaying god (probably, an allegory of an obsolete tradition system), gives him no sign, but the boy eventually solves the problem by himself. He decides that, judging by his way of living, he cannot possibly be a person: "I begged for scraps like a dog, because I wasn't human" (我乞讨残汤剩饭，犹如狗之向人讨骨头。我并不是一个人). Because he feels like an object, he sticks a sign on his back and tries to sell himself, ready to serve anyone as faithfully as a dog. However, the attempt of selling himself as an object or a pet results once more in failure, proving him to be "totally useless" (完全不需要的东西). Finally, after recovering from his desperate mourning, he goes back to the temple and begs the god statue to become his surrogate father: "Though the Holy One didn't reply, he didn't refuse my request" (神的口永远闭着，他并没有说一句反对的话).

There are two points worth noticing. The first point is the lack of language both in the dog-man and in his statue-father, which obviously *never* replies. The second point is the (illusory) response that the dog-man eventually creates in order to remedy his sense of lack. That is, by providing himself with a surrogate father because his real Father (an allegory of China, its culture, or its social system?) is unknown (disappeared or failed?), and thus unable to provide his son with any legitimacy to exist, nor, consequently, with any right to speak (Recalcati 2016, 199–200).

The second chapter's opening is marked by the important change of the dog-man adopting the god statue as his surrogate father:

> 我虽然跟平常一样每天出去向人们讨一点骨头，但是只要有了一点东西塞住我的饥饿以后，我便回来了，因为我也跟别的人一样，家里有一个父亲。
>
> I went out to beg for bones as usual, but returned to the temple as soon as I had a little something to fill my stomach, because now I had a father at home, *just like other people*. (emphasis added)

This new sense of belonging provides the guy's existence with a renovated self-confidence in his own human nature (after the first chapter's long list of animal similes – "like a dog," "as he would kick a dog," "like a wounded dog," etc. – the reader is hereby delivered a human simile: "just like other people"). However, this step toward humanization is *not* produced by any concrete transformation, nor by any practical action. The statue-father is not able to speak any comforting words to his son, not to mention providing him with any tangible help. On the contrary, the humanizing function of this surrogate father is rather to be found in his *symbolic* presence. In other words, it is found in his representing the inhibition and in his symbolizing the Law which defines the limit of *jouissance* by providing his son's life with an Order: "I went out to beg for bones as usual," says the protagonist, *but* "returned to the temple as soon as I had a little something to fill my stomach" – and here is the change elicited by the symbolic father, that is, the inhibition of the (otherwise deadly) *jouissance*. He does not beg for more food than the little he really needs because he does not have any *empty* time to fill by trying to satisfy any *illusory* desire. Instead, he knows exactly what his *real* object of desire is: a womb-like warm sense of belonging and of being legitimate and useful. In other words, he has a longing desire of *being* human, *living* as a human, and completely fulfilling his human nature (Recalcati 2011, 18).

Yet, this tension toward humanization, which the protagonist manages to trigger through the device of the surrogate father and which is made all the more evident by his starting to nurture human desires ("I hungered to live like other people, to eat good food, live in a grand house, wear beautiful clothes," 我渴望跟别的人一样：有好的饮食，大的房屋，漂亮的衣服和温暖的被窝) is punctually contradicted by an opposite tension toward animalization. The latter tension is particularly evident in other people's derisive laughter that the protagonist happens to raise while trying to approach a pair of woman's legs walking along the sidewalk, as well as in the frustrated barks he later gives out from inside his temple-home, eventually begging his surrogate father to turn him into a dog. In other words, this second chapter is crossed by two paradoxical trends: a tension toward humanization and a tension toward animalization. These two processes, though apparently opposite, are strictly linked to each other. The second one – that is, the animalizing process which culminates with the protagonist praying to be turned into a dog – is simply the result of the first one, which is the humanizing process that, through the topic of derision and the desubjectifying experience of shame, makes the protagonist all the more aware of his (human) condition. To put it simply, the human protagonist eventually begs to be transformed into an animal (namely, a dog) in order to escape the (expressly human) experience of shame. Because human beings can detach from themselves – to see themselves from the outside – they therefore

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are able to experience shame.[5] However, a dog is poor without having the *word for*, thus, the *awareness of* "being poor." Thence, the protagonist's tension toward humanization, indeed *leads him* to his tension toward animalization, and finally pushes him to beg for an animal life.

The third chapter can be divided into two parts. The first part describes how the protagonist considers other people and starts classifying them in different categories. The most honorable of these is composed of those wearing "white caps" (白色帽子) and "white uniforms with blue trim" (蓝边的白色衣裤) and speaking a language that the protagonist cannot understand. These "more honorable people" (更伟大的人) are likely foreigners, but the dog-beggar does not envy them. On the contrary, he secretly worships them:

> [我]祝福他们。我因为世界上有这样的伟大人物而庆幸，我甚至于因此忘记了自己的痛苦。
>
> I wished them well. I felt blessed that this kind of honorable persons existed in the world. Because of them, I forgot my own misery.

Thence, the second part of the chapter narrates how his dystopian wish (of turning into a dog) eventually comes (almost) to fruition. One evening, he is sitting against a wall by the roadside when an "honorable person" happens to stumble upon him and consequently cries out, "Dog!" (狗!). Despite being kicked and bruised by the collision, the dog-beggar is overjoyed; he takes the incident as a baptism and runs back home (to the abandoned temple) to thank his surrogate father.

The fourth and the fifth chapters are the shortest ones. In the fourth chapter, the protagonist, who now considers himself a dog, happens to encounter those same pair of beautiful legs that he had once tried (and *ridiculously* failed) to approach. This time, he manages to control himself and waits for the legs to walk over to him. The legs, however, are accompanied and guarded by a white puppy, which suddenly attacks the beggar, starting a scuffle between *dogs*: "Hands were pulling at me, hitting me, but I held on to the little white dog with all my might" (许多只手在拖我，打我。可是我紧紧抱住那条白毛小狗死也不放). After this phrase that marked the end of the chapter, there is a narrative blackout. The reader does not state how the scuffle eventually ends, as the fifth and final chapter of the story begins with a completely new scene:

5 "'The phenomenon of *aidos* (the Greek term for "shame") [...] unites respectively active vision and passive vision, the man who sees and is seen, the seen world and the seeing world' [...]. In this reciprocity of active and passive vision, *aidos* resembles the experience of being present at one's own being seen, being taken as a witness by what one sees. [...] Whoever experiences shame is overcome by his own being subject to vision; he must respond to what deprives him of speech" (Agamben 2002 [1998], 107).

> 等到我回复知觉的时候，我是在一个黑暗的洞里。[...] 身子给绳子缚住，连动也不能够动一下。我又想，在那个破庙里，断了一只手的大公无私的神，作为我父亲的神 [...] 在等我。我要回去， [...] 不管我全身痛得怎样厉害，我毕竟是一条狗，我要叫，我要咬！我要咬断绳子跑回我的破庙里去！
>
> I found myself in a dark cave when I regained my senses. [...] I was tied up with a rope so I couldn't move. My thoughts returned to the dilapidated temple where my surrogate father [...] was *waiting* for me. I had to go back. [...] No matter how much I ached, I was still a dog. I wanted to bark and bite, to bite through the rope and run back to my abandoned temple.

The dog-beggar has been imprisoned. Nonetheless, he is not scared, nor depressed. On the contrary, he holds tight to his identity. "I was still a dog," he says, and he can affirm that, because he knows his surrogate father is waiting for him, he holds a legitimacy to exist. He exists in light of the waiting, as one extreme of a bipolar system. He belongs to this symbolic order. He *is*, thus, no matter how he suffers, he *still is*. And if he calls himself a "dog," it is just, as previously explained, to avoid the burden of shame. Defining himself as a "dog," he declares himself out of a social order to which, being orphan and poor, he would not be allowed to belong anyway. Claiming to be a dog is claiming to belong to another kind of order, thus, admitting that another kind of existence is still possible outside and regardless of the dictates of the dominant society.

The dominant society is represented here by the legs of passersby, that constantly come and go, almost without noticing the beggar. They are the legs of busy people; sometimes they are feminine and charming legs, other times they are the legs of people speaking incomprehensible languages, supposedly of wealthy foreigners. They are the legs that walked on the sidewalks of Chinese cities at the beginning of the 20th century: those of a new bourgeoisie and of its growing interest in the West; legs of new ideas and new ways of living, which irremediably left behind a certain type of individuals and of concepts, rejecting them or simply forgetting them, in the dazzling light of the modern beacon of progress.

The dog-man character of Ba Jin constitutes a physical and symbolic counterpoint with respect to this kind of legs and society. First, his gaze on the world is a gaze from below, as it is physically anchored to the ground; moreover, it is not in motion like the pedestrians, but has a fixed and constant position from which the beggar watches the comings and goings of other people. Also, he often stays in closed and dark places, while other people are portrayed as they move freely in the open air. The substantial stasis of this beggar-character could be interpreted as the symbol of that traditional society, deemed as backward and miserable, mired in the superstitions and beliefs of the past, from which the Chinese intellectuals of the early 20th century intended to emancipate themselves, in order to catch up with the other world powers. On the other hand, however, this stasis does indeed

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preserve a positive element: humanity, that is, the awareness of every human being's desire for the Other, or of the intrinsic need and capacity to love of any human being. In this way, this outcast character manages to surprise the reader with the effectiveness of his paradox. On the one hand, his semi-canine identity is for the Sinophone reader an immediate reminder of an idea of derangement and insults. For example, in the word for "crazy", *fengkuang* (疯狂), the character 狂 (*kuang*), meaning "mad," "violent," "wild," or "insane," significantly contains the radical for "dog," 犭 (*quan*). Whereas phrases such as *gouzaizi* (狗崽子), *gou dongxi* (狗东西), *gou niang yangde* (狗娘养的), etc., which can be translated with the expression "son of a bitch," refer to a degradation which is precisely associated with the image of a dog, or *gou* (狗). On the other hand, however, this dog-man's will to exist as a member of a relationship, that is, his will and ability to love, which he even places ahead of shame and fear, effectively contrasts with the emotional ineptitude of passers-by, who are clearly unable to feel any human empathy.

Although the world changes, and runs towards progress, and speaks different languages, the beggar, still and silent, simply remains a human being, in need of relationships and eager to love, that is, a living testimony of what being human means. One might therefore conclude that this beggar's determination to keep on existing as a dog, his resolute will "to bark" and "bite through the rope" for going back to his surrogate father, is his paradoxical way of preserving the man within the dog, the continuous need for love within the ephemeral race for progress, or the humane within the inhumane.

5. "An Accidental Murder" (2010)[6]

This medium-length narrative is part of A Yi's story collection *The Bird Saw Me* (2010) and is a multi-perspective account, delivered by an internal narrator, who – as revealed only towards the end of the story – works as a policeman in the township of Hongwu. Instead of introducing himself, the narrator starts his account by describing the rat-infested train station of Hongwu, because the railroad section near Hongwu is the place where, on October 10, 2010, "around evening, a bit later than 7 pm, [...] a [passing] train window spat out a demon, as it was a jujube seed" (傍晚7点多 [...] 车窗里吐出一只妖怪来，随意得像吐一只枣核). The reader is not told who this monster is, but the narrator reports that, concomitantly with that evil creature being spat out of the train and landing somewhere near Hongwu, a strong wind rises, the sky gets suddenly dark, and six local people of Hongwu, coming from six different lanes of the town center, eventually end up – each for

[6] The quotations reported here are from the original Chinese text (A 2010) and are accompanied by my own translation.

a different reason – in the same main road. This road is where the demon himself is soon going to pass through and bump into each of them. To be as precise as possible, the narrator provides the reader with a graphical representation of those six streets' disposition vis-à-vis the main road:

求知巷　青龙巷　朱雀巷	Qiuzhi Lane　Qinglong Lane　Zhuque Lane
———————————————	———————————————
（西）建设中路（东）	(West) Jianshe Middle Road (East)
———————————————	———————————————
明理巷　白虎巷　玄武巷	Mingli Lane　Baihu Lane　Xuanwu Lane

Figure 1: Graphical Representation of Six Lanes

This use of visual elements is eloquent of a need for order, or for systematization. It is a graphical attempt to master the uncanny chaos of reality, or the unpredictable inhuman within the human. Time and duration of the mishap are also provided very precisely: "That odd accident was over within twelve minutes, it started at 10 pm and ended at 10.12 pm" (这诡异的事只发生了12分钟，10点开始，10点12分结束).

After this introductory part, the narrative is divided into seven chapters, each of them being named after a character: Zhao Facai (赵法才), Jin Qinhua (金琴花), Langgou (狼狗), Ai Guozhu (艾国柱, A Yi's namesake), Yu Xueyi (于学毅), Xiao Qu (小瞿), and Li Jixi (李继锡). The first six people are the locals who happen to walk down the main street of Hongwu on the night of the "odd accident," while the last one is the stranger: the demon "spat out of the train." Every chapter reports the same day – that October 10, 2010 (10.10.10, *shi shi shi*, which in Chinese is almost homophone of 死死死 *si si si*, "death death death") – but narrating the perspective and the background story of its respective protagonist. This means that the reader is taken back in time seven times and repeatedly reconstructs that night from seven different angles.

All these characters are problematic, tormented, unsuccessful, unsatisfied, and somehow even dangerous people. Zhao Facai is a heavy drinker. He has long given up having sex with his wife and, after being forced to leave his secret lover, has become depressed. Jin Qinhua is a decayed prostitute, and her days are all alike. But on this unlucky night, she happens to be caught in the act and brought to the police station. When the "demon" arrives in town, she has just been released and she is still hanging around, feeling sad. Langgou is a failed mob boss and a hypochondriac. Ai Guozhu is a young colleague of the narrator, and a disenchanted policeman who likes writing poetry and is determined to leave his dull job in Hongwu to move to the city. The night of the mishap, he is sitting at a night market stand together with another guy, He Shuiqing, who failed to have a career in the city and eventually returned to his rural hometown to escape a life of beggary. Yu Xueyi is mentally ill; he went crazy after his first heartbreak and never recovered. As the former house of his beloved one is set to be torn down, he spends most of

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his time – including this unlucky night – sitting in front of the house to guard against its destruction. Xiao Qu is the village idiot who became famous after saving a few people from drowning. He consequently has based the sense of his life on the outcomes of that heroic episode. He spends his days meeting journalists and rescuees, giving interviews and speeches. On this night, an old friend of his, a vicious man who once raped a young girl in the countryside near Hongwu, happened to come visit him. However, after Xiao Qu's wife leaves the two friends alone, the man (named Lei Mengde 雷孟德) seems to lose any interest in staying with Xiao Qu and eventually leaves his house. Therefore, as the "demon" is passing through Hongwu's main street, Xiao Qu is looking for his friend Lei Mengde. While going through these chapters, the reader, who knows that an "accidental murder" is about to take place but has no clue *who* is going to be the murderer, is kept in a constant state of alertness, gradually suspicious of every character.

Li Jixi, the protagonist of the last chapter, is a paranoiac. On October 10, 2010, he turns out to be the monster spat out of the train near the station of Hongwu. The reason he's on the passing train is because he recently obtained 3,000 yuan and was travelling to a medical clinic to pay for an infertility treatment. Feeling suspicious of a young couple – a boy and a girl – sitting next to him, he decides to entrust his money to the train conductor. Due to his severe persecution complex, however, he soon starts nurturing the fear that the boy might intend to kill him. Thus, he first locks himself in the toilet, then desperately decides to jump off the train.

At this point, the seven threads of these seven-perspective backstories eventually merge into a unified narrative. While Li Jixi is walking toward the town center, the narrator updates the reader about the situation in Hongwu (respectively, who is simultaneously doing what). Any character's gesture, emotion, doubt, or tension, as well as all the narrative suspense, is pressed down into a flat, precarious simultaneity.

The next scene takes place at the police station, where the identity of the narrator is finally revealed to the reader. The narrator is none other than the policeman doing the night shift exactly at the time when the mishap occurred, and several people started calling the station to report a murder. It is soon clear that they are not reporting the *same* murder. Indeed, they are reporting six different murders; the killer being the "demon" spat out of the train, the paranoiac stranger who tried to overcome his desperation, and remedy his powerlessness and incapability of facing reality by stealing a fruit knife and stabbing those six people passing by to death. The reader is told this last part of the story by the means of a flashback, as the policeman-narrator reconstructs the chain of the events, as well as the motives underlying the absurd massacre. In the end, after Li Jixi is easily found and arrested, the policeman goes to the township hospital, where he discovers that his

young colleague Ai Guozhu is among the six victims. As if suddenly aware of the precariousness and unpredictability of life, he immediately feels the need to call his lover and reassure her that he will always be there to protect her.

> 这只是当夜无数个许诺之一。当夜，红乌镇的人 [...] 彻夜不眠，他们紧紧抱着女人和孩子，就像后者正发着致命的高烧。
>
> That was just one of the innumerable promises of that night. The inhabitants of Hongwu [...] were sleepless all night long; everybody was holding his own wife and children in a strong embrace, just as if they had a fatal fever.

This ending can be considered a gateway to interpret the whole story. There is no real focus on the killer as a legal person, nor is his gesture judged from any ethical point of view. On the contrary, Li Jixi is almost described as a victim (e.g., he is affected by infertility; he is convinced that the boy on the train wants to kill him; he is poor and lost in a place, Hongwu, where nobody helps him). His fatal act is rather automatic, predestined, and *ineluctable*; when he stabs his first victim, Zhao Facai, it is precisely as if he had no real command of his own action:

> 就好像不是刺，而是沼泽似的肉将刀子吸进去，又慢慢吐出来。
>
> It was not like he was *stabbing* him, but rather as if the marshy flesh [of Zhao Facai's body] was itself sucking the knife in, and then slowly throwing it out.[7]

The murderous act is deprived of any sense of responsibility. Accordingly, the reader is offered no chance of ethical blame. That uncanny plague which Li Jixi is representing is actually nothing unfamiliar or *foreign* – thus, limited to the only *foreigner* of the story – but rather, as Freud puts it, "something familiar [...], which ought to have been kept concealed, but which has nevertheless come to light" (Freud 2004, 429). In other words, the uncanny character Li Jixi is no surprise to the reader, who has just gone through the daily lives of a depressed drinker, a decayed prostitute, a failed criminal boss, an unsatisfied policeman, a desperate psychopath, and a friendless idiot. The uncanny element – that "fatal fever" – is

[7] As regards this excerpt, two issues are worth noticing. First, the combination of the topic of violence with the semantic field of "eating" (which the verbal expressions "sucking in" and "throwing up" do clearly belong to); a combination which might remind us, for example, of Lu Xun's *Madman's Diary*. Second, the same passage, the same sense of ineluctability, the same impossibility of judging a killer, given his concurrently being a victim – both of himself and of his (cannibalistic?) society –, is clearly traceable in another work by A Yi, namely, in the short novel *A Perfect Crime* (下面我该干些什么 *Xiamian, wo gai gan xie shenme*), where he writes almost the same line: "It was not like he was stabbing her, but rather as if the mire-like flesh [of the girl's body] was itself swallowing the knife" (就好像不是刀子在刺，而是泥潭似的肉将刀子吞吸进去) (A 2012).

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indeed "something *familiar*" in each of these people's lives. Therefore, this absurd "monster" spat out of the passing train is nothing but the waste, the remnant, the witness, and the (re)emerging evidence of all of the uncanny incongruities characterizing and shaping these lives. In the end, though usually "kept concealed," this uncanny sense of dullness, inadequacy, dissatisfaction, and lack of sense is actually ubiquitous and never-ending, to the point that – and all the more so, given that A Yi himself admits his debt to Albert Camus (Hong 2012, 41) – one cannot help comparing this story ending with *The Plague*'s:

> As he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew [...] that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years [...] and that perhaps the day would come when [...] it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city. (Camus 1972, book ending)

Given this summary, one can now focus on the character He Shuiqing, the ambitious writer who ends up as a beggar while trying to make a living in the city. Although he is a minor character, He Shuiqing is all the same a significant part of this story's mood and highly representative of its uncanny-concealing system. More precisely, one might say that this failed man does nothing but embody the uncanny element of Ai Guozhu's life. The two of them share the same sense of dullness and unsatisfaction, which results in their desire to leave Hongwu and move to the city. They both like writing and have a critical perspective on reality. The only difference between them is that He Shuiqing has already made his attempt and failed. After becoming a city beggar, he finally decided to come back to Hongwu. He was perfectly aware that by coming back, he would be the object of the locals' mockeries (again, note the topics of ridicule and shame), but those mockeries, as well as the dullness of a whole life in Hongwu and the frustration of wasting his own talent down there, were seemingly more bearable than the hunger, the cold, and the humiliation he had suffered in the underground passageways of the city. His speaking of those city pedestrians' "shoes," and not of their whole body, might remind us of Ba Jin's dog-beggar, who rather mentions the people's "legs." Moreover, both Ba Jin's beggar and He Shuiqing experience the desperate circumstance of eating a dirty bun that had fallen to the ground (first story) or been thrown into a trashcan (second story), and both of them eventually internalize this episode as the evidence of concretely being beggars, and thus less-than-human or inhuman.

Moreover, with He Shuiqing being a failed intellectual, we cannot help but to bring back Kong Yiji's failure as a literate and, thus, as the bearer of a language that is no longer appreciated, nor even understood, by his surrounding reality. It might be no coincidence that He Shuiqing is an intellectual, and more precisely,

a humanist. In the past, he published his poetry works on the *Renmin Wenxue* (人民文学). He speaks the language of poetry, and the language of humanistic cultivation; a language which, given his bankruptcy, might prove to be as obsolete as Kong Yiji's archaisms. Humanistic discourse is no priority for He Shuiqing and Ai Guozhu's contemporaries. It is not appreciated within the confined rural context of Hongwu, nor is it required in that glamorous city society, where He Shuiqing has suffered the worst disappointment and humiliation. Therefore, he has come back. He has given up his battle between nurturing his soul and feeding his body, and he has chosen the latter. In He Shuiqing's eyes, this conclusion is ineluctable; as ineluctable as that marshy flesh swallowing the knife; as ineluctable as the "fatal fever" which imaginarily affects the whole township of Hongwu. Ai Guozhu, however, does not accept this ineluctability, and after listening to He Shuiqing's story, he reflects to himself as follows:

> 你失败不代表我失败；即使所有人失败，也不代表我失败；即使我已失败过两次，也不代表会失败第三次 [...] 我不能在临死前追悔莫及。
>
> Even if you [He Shuiqing] have failed, this doesn't mean that *I* am to fail; and even if everybody fails, this also doesn't mean that *I* am to fail; and if I've failed twice, this doesn't mean that I'll fail the third time [...]. When I will be on my deathbed, it will be too late for regrets.

Ironically enough, that night was *really* the time for Ai Guozhu to lie on his deathbed. Nonetheless, and despite this all of the more patent sense of ineluctability, Ai Guozhu does undoubtedly play a fundamental and somehow cathartic role within this story. It is no coincidence that the view of his corpse, together with the policeman's phone call, constitutes the ending scene of the narrative: the last image that one bears in mind. Ai Guozhu is the witness of the possibility to choose. Despite any (almost) ineluctable failure, he stands out as a Sisyphus, as an *homme révolté* (again referring to Camus). He also stands for the possibility for anybody to try one's own luck. He Shuiqing's testimony is nothing but the catalyst for Ai Guozhu to carry out his critical reflection, strengthen his will, and deliver *his* own witness. It is the witness of a person who chooses to choose, and who chooses to (dare to) *desire*, within a society (represented in this story by the township of Hongwu) where the other characters have all given up nurturing any real *desire*. In other words, one might conclude that He Shuiqing's witness is functional to Ai Guozhu's witness. His role as a beggar-character is not to raise any moral judgment, but rather to put any passerby (who could be Ai Guozhu, or even the reader) in front of one's own innermost conundrum: the ineluctability of failing, yet the possibility to choose.

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6. *Wake Me Up at 9:00 in The Morning* (2014)[8]

Wake Me Up at 9:00 in The Morning is A Yi's first long-length work of fiction, and it is hereby impossible, nor pertinent, to provide a comprehensive summary of the whole novel. Instead, after briefly giving account of its structure, we'll focus on its interesting beggar-character, Fuzhong the mute.

This novel is not only a multi-perspective narrative, but also a multi-narrator one. When not employing a third-person omniscient narrator, the storytelling often relies on the voice of a character named Hongliang (宏梁), who is the youngest and most educated among the brothers of the story's (dead) protagonist, Hongyang (宏阳). During the preparations for Hongyang's funeral, Hongliang has a long conversation with his nephew Xu Yousheng (许佑生). Therefore, while the preparations for Hongyang's funeral constitute the framework and the main narrative (delivered by an external narrator), it is instead through Hongliang's account to his nephew that the reader is informed of the funeral's backstories. Among the minor characters that recurrently appear in the novel, the beggar Fuzhong is the most peculiar. His singularity, however, is not much due to his being mute and mentally retarded, but rather to his way of feeling and behaving both during Hongyang's funeral rites and in his everyday life. This stands as a counterweight to the rather phony, greedy, selfish, opportunistic, and *homo-homini-lupus* discourse represented by most of the other characters.

Who is this mute beggar named Fuzhong? Even before his introduction, he appears on the scene of Hongyang's burial chamber by bringing a page-long list of sacrificial offers, which is a name parade of both Chinese and imported brands, including any sort of soft drink and snack. This is undoubtedly an estranged narrative device. As he is desperately crying, the sound of his mourning is compared to a wolf cub's call (the inhumane within the humane), but it is also said to sound sincerer than any sweet human voice (the humane within the inhumane). It is no wonder that, when Hongbin and Hongliang (Hongyang's brothers) approach this desperate man, who has just brought in an entire supermarket of offerings and is now crying as sincerely as can be, they themselves cannot help feeling their eyes getting watery and admitting:

> 还好有这个妥子，正是这妥子让我们想起自己所面对的并不是一具待处理的尸体而是一个值得追忆的有血有肉的人。
>
> It's a luck that this idiot has come; he has reminded us that here, in front of our eyes, is not a corpse to be disposed of, but a flesh-and-blood person who deserves being remembered.

[8] The quotations reported here are from the original Chinese text (A 2018) and are accompanied by my own translation.

A few lines later, the external narrator eventually informs the reader about this good-hearted mute: "The man, whose name was Fuzhong, was of unknown age and unidentified origins" (这个叫福忠的人没有年龄和故乡). Like in Ba Jin's "Dog," the description starts from the unknown origins of the character and the mystery of his chronological age; his existence being as ageless as that of a mythological creature. Afterwards, the narration shifts to a flashback reconstruction of this person's life in Fanzhen (范镇), the village where the story takes place. It is a life that, despite the poor character's blurred provenience, is actually pragmatic and satisfying.

Before Hongyang's arrival in Fanzhen, Fuzhong the mute was just a beggar. The other villagers initially help him to survive by providing him with food scraps. After some time, however, they conclude that their help would just prolong the beggar's suffering, and that "[p]erhaps, the only way to show him [their] humanity was to let him die" (也许只有死对他才是人道). But, Fuzhong does not die. He manages to survive until the day of Hongyang's arrival, when – to everybody's envy – he receives a 100-yuan handout, which is just the first of a long series of handouts. By regularly receiving money from Hongyang and observing the other people exchanging cash for purchasable products, Fuzhong the mute gradually becomes aware of the meaning of cash, and finally, "[he] realized that the sense of human life lies in possessing as many of those pieces of paper [read: banknotes] as possible" ([他]明白人活着的意义其实就是尽量占有这些纸). When Hongyang comes to give him the 51st banknote, the beggar eventually refuses it, since now, as he tries to gesticulate to his donor, *he has understood*. Now he knows that "[a] man's value lies in selling his force and skills, as well as those things [read: products] in which these force and skills can be transformed" (人的用处就在于他可以卖自己的力气、技术以及由它们变出来的东西).

A man named Zhu teaches him the language of trade (e.g., the meaning of words like "buy," "sell," "barter," "value," "price," etc.), and Fuzhong's mastering the language of trade results in his mastering the language of reality. Despite his being mute and rather unintelligent, he finally becomes a shoemaker. He saves up a small fortune and eventually gets married to a mentally retarded but good-hearted woman. They move into a comfortable house, and soon have a healthy and intelligent baby. In short, if Fuzhong understands that the goal of human life is to make money, he also instinctively perceives that this goal is just a (trade) language, or a *medium*, and a means to achieving *another* goal. Specifically, he wanted to reach a relevant life goal: the possibility of *belonging* somewhere and creating a product as an act of participation in a collective dialogue, or the possibility of being a craftsman as an act of affirming his own useful – thus legitimate – presence within his own society. In other words, Fuzhong manages to join his society system by mastering its most conventional and simplistic legitimating

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language: the language of trade. However, his personal development goes beyond this, as in the end, the sense of *his* existence lies not in earning money, but in *creating*. He creates products through his "force and skills," which are the exact substitutes of his words. Also, and most importantly, he creates another life – his son – and authentic relationships with others.

In conclusion, if the other characters' sense of life lies in making money and attending Hongyang's funeral is nothing more than an empty formality, Fuzhong's sense of life lies in creating and belonging to human relationships. Therefore, his participation in the funeral rites can only be desperate, intense, and sincere. This contrast – between the authenticity of Fuzhong's feelings and the emptiness characterizing most of the other characters – is highlighted through the means of eloquent details. For example, when the Taoist priest arrives and urges the funeral participants (including Fuzhong) to leave the burial chamber, the good-hearted mute cannot stop crying. While being dragged out of the room, he continues to reach for Hongyang's daughter-in-law, who, in contrast, is frivolously laughing at the situation. Xu Yousheng adds to this scene, thinking: "[h]e [Fuzhong] still had the loyalty of a dog" (他有着狗一样的忠心). Although the character is compared to an (inhuman) dog, his (human) loyalty is precisely guaranteed by his affinity to the beast. In other words, the *humanity* of Fanzhen society is preserved, defended, and represented by the former beggar himself, and not even by his "civilized" side, but by his "animal" one, as the dog-like Fuzhong is clearly far more human than all of Fanzhen and Hongyang's other relatives.

Afterwards, when the time comes to nail down the coffin lid, nobody seems willing to own the action other than Fuzhong. He not only takes control of the task, but he carries it out in a very meticulous way, which is distinctly representative of the authenticity of his feelings. Here is a brief but significant excerpt of its description:

> 灯光照耀，阴影盖住半边房，他的行动看起来像史诗有种不可褫夺的庄严感。
>
> In that half-dark, half-illuminated room, his gestures seemed to have an epic-like undeniable sense of solemnity.

Fuzhong's gestures are *epic*; they are *solemn*, but not *ridiculously* solemn, nor *deceptively* solemn; they are *authentically* and *meaningfully* solemn. To put it in another light, Fuzhong is not only participating in the rites; he symbolically *is* the rites.

Later in the novel, when the men are digging an unrefined grave, it will again be Fuzhong who solves the problem by shaping it properly. And finally, at the end of the funeral, when most of the participants have already scattered, Fuzhong is still there crying on the grave, unable to sever a *real* bond and unable to face a *real* loss. To him, the funeral rites are not an empty ceremony, nor a past tradition, and

not even an obsolete language. In fact, they are a present and useful language, the undying language of a human suffering for a human's loss. It's a language of prayers, acts, repetitions, mourning and tears, which only allows a human being to narrate a loss, to comprehend it, to decompose it and reabsorb it within life's continuity. Once again, the former beggar is hereby the *human*, the one able to feel *reality*, and to nurture authentic relationships and meaningful desires. "Look at him!," says Xu Shuang to Xu Yousheng, "Indeed, he lives an enthusiastic life!" (瞧他活得那么起劲).

One might not say whether in that very moment, while crying for his benefactor's loss, Fuzhong was aware of living an "enthusiastic life." But this line by Xu Shuang does certainly make a point. With his mute but attentive participation to reality, Fuzhong stands out as a counterpoint to a cluster of rowdy and careless characters, and as a witness, a living reminder – both to Hongliang and Xu Yousheng and to the reader as well – of what it really means to be human.

7. An immortal beggar for passers-by to see

The conclusions of these analyses lead back to their premises, and namely to the substantial difference between the concept of "lack" and the concept of "emptiness." As previously mentioned, in psychoanalytic terms, the concept of lack is related to that of "desire" because people desire what they lack; and reversibly, this lack generates their desire. Meanwhile, "emptiness" is produced when lack and desire are disconnected. Thus, emptiness is not a desire-triggering lack, but rather the collapse of any desire. Considering these definitions, the wish of Ba Jin's dog-beggar to be *recognized* as a human, or at least as a dog – that is, his will to *belong* somewhere – is an example of real *desire*, whereas the compulsive thirst for money of Hongyang's relatives and of Fanzhen's inhabitants might be representative of a *jouissance* device. Lacking a Father symbol, thus, lacking one's own right to speak (like in the case of Ba Jin's "Dog"), *indeed* is experiencing a *lack*. Whereas those people (like Hongyang's relatives) collecting "pieces of paper" (money) are not addressing their real lack. Instead, they are distracted by an illusory *emptiness* which comes with the promise of a quickly and easily attainable legitimization, but which, they surely will never manage to fill up.

Thus, to conclude, what is the role of the beggar in these four literary pieces? What is his meaning? In light of the above-given analyses, one can certainly affirm that, similarly to what Lucas sustained about the figure of the beggar in classical literature, this kind of character remains an ambivalent one in modern and contemporary literature as well. If, on one hand, he is the outcast of society (the ill-treated or the scrap), on the other hand, he is also the immortal, the poet, and the keeper of a knowledge that others do not have or do have forgotten.

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Kong Yiji is a failed and derided scholar, but his figure reminds us how the traditional knowledge and education system prior to the abolition of the imperial exams were not simply a matter of bureaucracy and institutions. They were the reason for living and the social legitimacy of many intellectuals like him. Kong Yiji is the human side of what was merely regarded and treated as a retrograde legacy from the past. His long gown is eventually replaced by his beggar-like appearance, but this does not prevent the narrator from remembering Kong Yiji, because his paradoxical posture, his silent desperation, is the expression of a very human discomfort; it represents that feeling of exclusion and inadequacy of those who have suddenly found themselves deprived of their role, and therefore of their place in society. Kong Yiji is immortal because he remains in the narrator's memory, and because the news of his death is not a certainty but a deduction. Therefore, he remains a suspended character, both in the sense that he is suspended above the changes of his time, and in the sense that his life story is suspended from a narrative point of view; neither the narrator, nor the reader can be sure of his death. In this way, Kong Yiji remains a forever silent witness to the fact that reforming society is not a mere operation of transforming institutions. On the contrary, it requires providing people with a new place in society, or a new way of existing in – and belonging to – the environment in which they live.

The protagonist of Ba Jin's story is different from Kong Yiji because he's so poor and miserable, that no school accepts him among its students, thus, he does not receive any education. His misery precludes him from any kind of social legitimacy, or excludes him from society. Society not only does not accept this man, it does not even see him. In fact, it is not passers-by who notice him; not even the man who, tripping over his body, furiously swears by calling him a "dog." It is the reader who notices him and listens to his testimony, finding in his sincere affection for his surrogate father much more humanity than that shown by all the passers-by appearing in the story. This character by Ba Jin is therefore a witness to a humanity that is mistreated, or forgotten, by a society that is too busy and dazzled by the alluring myth of the West; of a humanity made up of affections and even rituals, made of a faith that is no superstition, but an authentic desire of being seen by the Other.

And the same faith in life and human relationships is that shown by Fuzhong the mute in the abovementioned novel by A Yi. Fuzhong testifies to this kind of humanity: a humanity capable of loving in an authentic way, and of using work and money as tools rather than as ends in and of themselves. His testimony – like that of the failed poet, or the idealist, He Shuiqing – acts as a counterpoint to a panoply of indifferent, if not mischievous characters, blinded and corrupted by a spasmodic search for success, appearance, and money, which well represent the contemporary society, and not just the Chinese one. In the midst of a com-

plex narrative, full of backstory and of any kind of degeneration, Fuzhong in all its simplicity testifies to the possibility of a happy life with authentic emotions. He testifies that, despite all their crimes and their ugliness, men still know how to love, and that their emotional vulnerability is ultimately the force that vivifies them, making them creatures in need of the Other, and therefore desiring the Other, and therefore reaching out towards the Other, and therefore alive. It is not the desire for any kind of success, but the desire for what is truly unattainable – poetry for He Shuiqing, his dead friend Hongyang for Fuzhong – that makes human beings really human. The beggar, who has nothing, and for whom *everything* is unattainable, is in this sense the best connoisseur and the best representative of human desire, or of the human beings' capacity and power to desire.

In conclusion, the beggar's recurrence in literature can be interpreted not only as an eloquent symptom of specific historical periods and social settings, but even as representative of human condition itself, which implies – and is defined through – a perpetual desire-producing tension to (the) Other. The beggar is precisely the one who asks for remedying his *lack*, or the one who *desires*. He is the "impossible witness," yet the very custodian of our human essence, because he testifies to the possibility of surviving a lack, not by neglecting it and moving one's attention to an ever-refillable (but never-fillable) emptiness, but by embracing its uncanniness and making it visible for passersby to see.

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