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## Madness in Southern China: Illness as Metaphor in Su Tong's *The Tale of the Siskins* and “Madwoman on the Bridge”

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## I. Introduction

Su Tong 蘇童 (1963-) has been tirelessly and diligently telling stories about southern China. Two fictional streets located in a fictional city in southern China, namely Mahogany Street and Maple-Poplar Street, are the main scenes of Su Tong's novels. According to David Der-wei Wang 王德威, Su Tong's novels such as the Maple-Poplar Street series, *Mi* 米 (*Rice*), *Yijiusansi nian de taowang* 一九四三年的逃亡 (*The Escape of Nineteen Thirty-Four*), *Feiyue wo de fengyangshu guxiang* 飛越我的楓陽樹故鄉 (*Fly Over My Maple-Poplar Hometown*), and the Mahogany Street series including the *Chengbei didai* 城北地帶 (*North Side Story*) and *Chunzhuangshujie de gushi* 香椿樹街的故事 (*The Story of the Mahogany Street*), depict vices, violence and sexual excesses of a southern city, unveiling the decadence of humanity and delineating the falling of a southern city.<sup>1</sup> In his novel *Huangque ji* 黃雀記 (*The Tale of the Siskins*) published in 2013, Su Tong develops and expands the fictional Mahogany Street.<sup>2</sup> The story spans a long time from the 1980s to 2000s. As time goes by, a mental hospital is built as an additional setting in Mahogany Street. The story of *The Tale of the Siskins* revolves around the Jing Ting Hospital. The grandfather of one of the protagonists is mentally ill stricken by his own suspicion that he lost his soul. Jing Ting Hospital serves as a sanatorium where the grandfather recuperates, a crime scene of the rape of a young girl named Xiannu, and a shelter for Xiannu after giving birth to an illegitimate child. In “Qiaoshang de fengmama” 橋上的瘋媽媽 (“Madwoman on the Bridge”), an earlier short story written by Su Tong in 2005 which also sets in Mahogany Street, one of the scenes is located in a mental hospital. There is the hustle and bustle of large crowds going over the bridge everyday. Under the bridge, there is a road leading to the Sanli Bridge Mental Hospital. A story begins with a madwoman coming to the bridge abruptly, though she is eventually sent to the mental hospital. Both stories use a mental hospital as a key scene. In Su Tong's work it represents an abnormal realm and beyond its ambit is the normal world.

Nevertheless, how does one distinguish normality from abnormality? Michel Foucault argues that hospital compounds, generally situated in suburbs, imply a spatial dichotomy between

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1 David Der-wei Wang 王德威, “Nanfang de duoluo yu youhuo Su Tong lun,” 南方的墮落——與誘惑——蘇童論 (“The Decadence and Temptation of the Southern China: On Discussion of Su Tong Fiction”), in *Kuashiji fenghua: dangdai xiaoshuo ershi jia* 跨世紀風華：當代小說 20 家 [*The Splendor Across Centuries: Twenty Contemporary Chinese Writers*] (Taipei 台北: Rye Field 麥田出版社, 2011), 136.

2 Wei Yan 魏艷 discusses the fictional extension of the Mahogany Street, which includes a detention centre and a mental hospital in *The Tale of the Siskins*. See Wei Yan 魏艷, “Su Tong de ‘xiangchun shu jie’ shuxie,” 蘇童的「香椿樹街」書寫 [“Su Tong's Writing on the Mahogany Street”], *Xianggang wenxue* 香港文學 [*Hong Kong Literary*] 8 (2014): 17.

normality and abnormality. Marginalisation of abnormality creates a dichotomy in the use of medical discourse, of “power-knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, abnormality is an outcome of labelling normality. The concept of normality rationalises the existence of abnormality. Hence, the main issue of madness study is the normality discourse, which is developed against the background of madness and insanity. In addition, as argued by Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor*, illness is often used as metaphor. For instance, cancer is regularly used in political discourse to describe evilness in politics.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, in Su Tong’s novels, the term madness is more than a medical term and it carries metaphorical meanings. In *The Tale of the Siskins* and “Madwoman on the Bridge,” Su Tong uses madness as a metaphor to challenge the dichotomy between normality and abnormality, and draws an analogy between mental hospitals and contemporary society. Unlike Yu Hua’s 余華 (1960-) novels, which intertwine sanguinary violence with madness, Su Tong depicts madness mainly to unveil the absurdity of the Mahogany Street. This paper analyses the use of patients’ illnesses in mental hospitals as metaphors in these two stories. In “Madwoman on the Bridge,” Su Tong displaces the role of doctors and madmen. In *The Tale of the Siskins*, Su Tong dismantles the clear-cut distinction between normality and abnormality. By reversing the two signifying concepts of normality and abnormality, Su Tong leads us to re-assess a variety of conventions, customs and acts we deem reasonable and legitimate in contemporary society.

## II. “Madwoman on the Bridge”: Clothes and Physical Constraints

### 1. Abnormal Person: The Madwoman

“Madwoman on the Bridge” is a story about a madwoman in her thirties who lives in Mahogany Street and waits for her daughter to return from school on the bridge. The story begins with how the woman is considered abnormal in the eyes of others. Su Tong portrays her as “wearing a white velvet cheongsam, and in her hand she held a sandalwood fan. Standing on the bridge, she revelled in her own elegance”<sup>5</sup> (穿著白絲絨旗袍，手執一把檀香扇，儀態萬方地站在橋

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3 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 2002), xii.

4 Susan Sontag, *Illness As Metaphor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 80-81.

5 Su Tong, “Madwoman on the Bridge,” in *Madwoman on the Bridge*, trans. Josh Stenberg (London: Black Swan, 2008), 9. Subsequent citations in parentheses.

頭),<sup>6</sup> the style of which is apparently coquettish, and she “gazed around her and raised her fan to wave at the children going past,” (9) (左顧右盼，舉起扇子向過路的孩子們揮手示意) (126), and “would wave at them with her fan, slowly undulating her svelte waist in greeting. Then she would poke playfully at their hands with her fan and say, ‘Oh, the heat. I’m just burning up.’”(9) (向人家揮動檀香扇，扭著美人腰款款地迎上去，她拿扇子柄去戳人家的手臂，說，天氣好熱，熱死人了) (126) Whether one dresses properly or improperly hinges on the judgment of that society. The bridge gives passersby an excellent opportunity to offer random personal remarks on the madwoman. One of such instances is that a Shaoxing woman considers the madwoman poorly dressed, “[i]t looks more like you were worried your cheongsam might go mouldy in its chest, so you thought you’d come here to show yourself off. Do you know what season this is? You must think it’s still summer, coming out here wearing your cheongsam and waving that fan around. Winter’s coming on, you know!”(9) (我看你是怕這件旗袍在箱子裡會發霉，非要穿出來開展覽會！你知不知道現在是什麼節氣，還以為是夏天呢，又穿旗袍又搖扇子的，馬上都要立冬啦) (126) The weather and climate are minor issues. The main issue, however, is the cultural significance behind what dress code an individual should adhere to.<sup>7</sup> The Shaoxing woman believes the madwoman in white velvet cheongsam corrupts the standard of social conduct. Ironically, she is a foot-binding female of the feudal society. In traditional Chinese society, females with bound feet were regarded as a symbol of elegance. Further, foot-binding was conventionally one of the requisites of marrying into a good family.<sup>8</sup> Foot-binding substantiates gender inequality in its full form, in which the physical body of a woman is a cultural signifier dominated by a patriarchal discourse. Gender suppression is fully embodied in the constraint imposed on physical bodies. Paradoxically, the constrained ones now restrain others from their free view and liberty. The conservative Shaoxing woman is revolted by the madwoman in the gaiety of her clothes, and therefore criticises her as being

6 Su Tong 蘇童, “Qiaoshang de fengmama,” 橋上的瘋媽媽 [“Madwoman on the Bridge”] in *Qiaoshang de fengmama* 橋上的瘋媽媽 [*Madwoman on the Bridge*] (Shenyang 沈陽: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe 春風文藝出版社, 2005), 126. Subsequent citations in parentheses.

7 In the theory of the two bodies, Douglas is of the view that the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, such as grooming, therapy, exercise and sleep, in fact includes how the cultural significance constructed by the social body is infused into the physical body, such that the physical body becomes a carrier of the social body. It also mentions flowing locks and unruly hair which represent normality and abnormality respectively. Hair becomes a natural symbol of the body, symbolising various complicated relationship between individual and social culture. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 65.

8 Guo Hongxing 高洪興, *Changzushi* 纏足史 [*A History of Foot-binding*] (Shanghai 上海: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe 上海文藝出版社, 1995), 96.

too free-spirited:

the Shaoxing woman glared disapprovingly at the madwoman's cheongsam. She fingered the neckline for a moment and patted the waist. Then she asked, "Can it be comfortable to wear it that tight? [.....] The reason you've had such hard luck is that your thinking is rotten through and through. If you think wrong, you act wrong, you rub people up the wrong way. It's not all your own fault that you're ill, though, half of it is your own problem and half is other people's. If I were your mother-in-law," the Shaoxing woman ran on, lifting one hand as if to hit her, "I would beat you. I'd beat you every day, and when I was tired I'd get my son to beat you. I might beat you half to death, but at least I'd make sure you knew how to be a good wife! (16-17)

(紹興奶奶不滿地瞪著瘋媽媽的旗袍，在領口那兒抓了一把，在腰那兒又拍了一下，說，包得這麼緊，穿著能舒服？[……]你就是思想壞了才倒了霉，思想一壞生活作風也壞，這麼個生活作風，誰看得慣？不是我說你，你這個病，一半怨別人，一半還是怨你自己我要是做了你婆婆呀，紹興奶奶說到這兒一只手衝動地舉起來，向她做了個打人動作，我不打你才怪，天天打你，打不動讓兒子打，往死裡打，非把你打賢惠不可！) (129-130)

Choosing the colour, fibre, cut and design of clothes is analogous to selecting a position to take up in society. Clothing styles have their symbolic meanings. The strong correlation between clothing and gaze affects how people perceive the types of clothing one wears and self-orientation in society. In this regard, the madwoman wears a cheongsam to show off her feminine physique and draws further apart from the conservative image of a traditional, virtuous wife. The madwoman has defied the gender role of women in the eyes of the Shaoxing woman.

Su Tong portrays in great detail the madwoman's passion and obsession for clothes and elaborates on her unique personal fashion style. The story caricatures the rules on dress during the Chinese Cultural Revolution through the madwoman's improper understanding of the social norms on dressing during such time. "The madwoman raised her head and walked daintily around, pointing at the clothing hanging on the racks with her sandalwood fan. She pointed at a tawny army uniform and said, 'The People's Liberation Army.' Then she pointed at a white shirt and said, 'Red Guards.' Then it was blue trousers: 'Junior Red Guards.'" (30) (瘋媽媽仰著頭蓮步輕移，她舉著檀香扇點著橫架上垂掛著的服裝，點一點黃軍裝，說，解放軍。點一點白襯衫，說，紅衛兵，點一點藍褲子，說，紅小兵) (136) The madwoman's misunderstanding of clothing styles explains why her unsuitable clothes and belongings, including her lambskin boots, high-heeled shoes, jade bracelets, and silk stockings, etc., were confiscated as they are considered individual belongings under capitalism. This demonstrates how certain political ideology during the Chinese Cultural Revolution restrains and transforms body images. In this short story, military uniform, the dress code during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, refreshes our memory of an era of political suppression over personal affections.

Su Tong's portrayal of clothing during the Chinese Cultural Revolution is one of the examples in "Madwoman on the Bridge" of how clothing styles and physical bodies are bound. This short story correlates clothing to gender roles and explains how clothing styles are manipulated and influenced by political ideology. In addition, this paper takes the view that Su Tong inclines to resolve the question as to how a physical body continues to be reshaped in contemporary society, an era when the influence of the suppressive Chinese Cultural Revolution has long gone. The influence of the Chinese Cultural Revolution relates to tangible restraints, such as clothing and the taming of individuals by the contemporary mental hospital.

## 2. Normal Person: Doctor Cui Wenqun

Doctor Cui is a young woman in Mahogany Street and has provided treatment to the madwoman. The madwoman and the doctor share the same passion and obsession over clothes despite the difference in their social status. During the madwoman's treatment, her beautiful and exquisite clothes are obvious to the discerning eyes of Cui. One day on the bridge, Cui bumps into the same madwoman in white velvet cheongsam. As Cui closely inspects her cheongsam and exclaims, "What soft material. And tailored so snugly. And aren't the fastenings beautiful? Are these called lute frogs? How are they made I wonder?" (22) (多軟的料子，載得多合身呀，扣子也漂亮，這是叫琵琶扣嗎，不知道是怎麼盤起來的？) (132) Cui initially gazes and touches the cheongsam as if she is measuring it. Her fingertips gently trail along the madwoman's body. She tries hard to convince the madwoman to lend her the cheongsam, so that her tailor may make a pattern. When Cui meets her tailor Li, Li coldly responds to her, "Last time I made you bell-bottoms, but I haven't seen you wearing them ever." (22) (說上次給你做的喇叭裙，也沒見你穿) (135-136) Cui often leaves her tailor-made clothes to rot away in her closet and wears a plain military uniform to work, as usual. Compared with the madwoman who gives no heed to others and flaunts her exquisite clothes on the bridge, Cui is clearly conscientious of what she should wear. In the eyes of the masses, doctors are in white coats without too many accessories, they are clean and orderly, and emanate a sense of professionalism. No wonder her colleague says, "You would look good in it, too. Too bad there's nothing wrong with your head! Because even if you did have a cheongsam like that, you'd never dare put it on!" (21) (你穿也好看，可惜你腦子好好的，沒毛病，那樣的旗袍，你有了也不敢穿) (132) Further, Cui in the story is concerned about what her superiors think. The eyes of her superiors form a mirror of "the Others"<sup>9</sup> that shapes Cui's self-image.

9 Cui Wenqun's mentality of fearing others' judgment is an embodiment of Jacques Lacan's "Mirror Stage"



This mirror is omnipresent as one cannot avoid the constant surveillance and criticism of others. Therefore, Cui dares not wear the madwoman's flamboyant outfits or the bell-bottoms. Cui admires the madwoman's beautiful clothes as if she appreciates a piece of art, but she has to adhere to the dress code in order to suit the image of a doctor. Su Tong writes with a mockery that a madwoman's values have become the projection of a doctor's desire.

Normal people in the story do not always behave reasonably. Without the madwoman's consent, Cui rips the lute-shaped button off the madwoman's white velvet cheongsam to use as a pattern. The madwoman subsequently finds out, cries loudly and quarrels fiercely with Cui in Sunflower Alley. Sadly, a madman's words carry no weight in the everyday world. Nobody takes heed of the madwoman's allegations towards Cui. No one bothers if a madwoman cries. Cui simply gets rid of the woman by making a phone call and sends her to the Sanli Bridge Mental Hospital.

But those who had to come over came over. Three men jumped out of the ambulance; they were wearing suits and surgical masks, and one of them even had a length of rope in his hands. They seemed prepared for the patient to resist, but now that it was actually happening, the madwoman had lost all her strength. She just curled up into a ball and her whole body shuddered violently. She said, "I beg you, don't come over here." She raised one hand, meaning initially to ward them off, but in effect meekly presenting them with it. (42-43)

(該過來的人還是過來了。救護車上跳下來三個人，穿著白衣服，戴了口罩，有一個人的手上還帶著一團繩子。他們大概是準備病人抵抗的，可是事到臨頭，瘋媽媽失去了所有的力氣，她只是蜷縮成一團，整個身體都劇烈顫抖著，她說，求求你們，別過來。一隻手舉起來，本意是阻擋別人，結果卻把自己的手柔軟地交給了他們。) (143)

The madwoman is terrified when confronted with a team of paramedics, knowing she will be tied up no matter how hard she resists. She completely succumbs to fear. Eventually, the madwoman is sent to the Sanli Bridge Mental Hospital. Abnormality is conceptualized as a disease by the medical discourse of "power-knowledge."<sup>10</sup> Nobody shows concern as to who has stolen the lute-shaped button of the white velvet cheongsam. The power of discourse redefines good and evil, black and white in a split second.

Using madness as metaphor, Su Tong unveils the abnormality of the normal world that defines madness. In the normal world, the idiom "clothes make the man" remains the maxim of society.

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theory. The *I* that an infant sees in the mirror is not the true self but a mere image. The infant mistakenly believes that the image in the mirror is the ideal-I, thereby illustrates that the formation of self includes the approval of others. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2001), 132.

10 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 205.



Clothes and accessories, the inescapable shackles of our daily life, carry a variety of profound cultural meanings that our physical bodies bear. The dreadful issue is that not only is one's body chained, but one's soul is also shackled. Under such circumstances, one will act like Cui who self-censors her clothing style and avoids clothes which may attract criticism from her superiors. "Madwoman on the Bridge" discusses the issue of bound souls and echoes with the metaphor of illness in *The Tale of the Siskins*.

### III. *The Tale of the Siskins*: The Absurd World and Bound Souls

#### 1. Using a Mental Hospital as a Metaphor and the Surreal World

*The Tale of the Siskins* describes a rape case involving three adolescents, Baorun and Liusheng and a young girl called Xiannu. Baorun ties Xiannu up, and Liusheng rapes her, but Baorun becomes a scapegoat and is sent to jail. The rape occurs in a water tower in a mental hospital named Jing Ting Hospital, the key scene of the novel. The mental hospital is a crime scene, a sanatorium where Baorun's grandfather recuperates, a place with profitable business opportunities for Liusheng, and a shelter for Xiannu a decade later. Similar to the Sanli Bridge Mental Hospital in "Madwoman on the Bridge," this one is located in the suburb, a remote area dividing the normal and abnormal realms. The existence of mental hospitals substantiates the dichotomy between rationality and irrationality. As Su Tong narrates daily life of ordinary men in the mental hospital, his subversive writing utterly overturns the disparity between normality and abnormality. Su Tong employs madness as metaphor to describe the normal world and demonstrates that in reality, social conventions are not necessarily rational. The irrationality of our society often conceals the truth of reality.

Madness is often used in surrealist literature. Surrealists believe that mad people possess vivid imagination, explore the world in defiance of usual customs and practices, and unmask the close view of persons and things. In this way, surrealists criticize and challenge the assumptions our rational world is built on.<sup>11</sup> Such an aesthetic narration originates from a world view distinct from that of realist literature. Nan Fan 南帆 points out that realist fiction stresses simulation and he considers reality as something that may be represented. A novelist may, by means of literature (language), faithfully reproduce an authentic reality using the propositions of scientific and logical

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11 Liu Mingjiu 柳鳴九, ed., *Weilaizhuyi chaoxianshizhuyi mohuanxianshi zhuyi* 未來主義超現實主義魔幻現實主義 [Futurism, Surrealism and Magical Realism] (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中國社會科學出版社, 1987), 136-138.

positivism. However, surrealist literature casts doubt on objectivism as an ideal technique to reflect the essential aspects of the real world; embraces the view that an absolute objective narrative overarches the description of daily life; and gives an impression of artificial and forged depictions. Surrealist literature advocates the involvement of subjective elements in the course of constructing reality, thereby liberating writers to freely imagine and rediscover reality in its genuine form.<sup>12</sup> *The Tale of the Siskins* demonstrates a world view of surrealist literature through madness in the Jing Ting Hospital, a rhetoric technique Su Tong adopts to depict an absurd yet realistic world.

Su Tong partitions the Jing Ting Hospital into different segments. The hospital is a nursing home before the sunset and at night wards become a strip club. The water tower is rebuilt into a Buddhist temple for public worship. Juxtaposition and displacement of establishments form a collage, yet paradoxically maintain a sense of harmony. Zheng, the richest patient who brings substantial income to the mental hospital, is highly valued by the hospital. Zheng is diagnosed with the “sudden wealth and fortune possession mental disorder syndrome.” (財富的暴增與財富擁有者的精神紊亂綜合症) On his 30th birthday, thirty strippers are invited to sing a song, turning hospital wards into an entertainment establishment, with an attempt to keep his body and mind at ease. Cries of “C’MON! Get ‘em off! C’MON! Get ‘em off! Just do it!” COME ON, 脫, COME ON, 脫, 快脫!<sup>13</sup> from Zheng’s ward echo through the halls of the hospital.

Jing Ting Hospital was startled by that ungovernable clamour. Patients in the wards leaned out of the windows to make sense of the lyrics and the cheers. Not long after, someone caught on and joined the cheers passionately, “C’MON! Get ‘em off! C’MON! Get ‘em off! Just do it! [.....].” They successfully aroused the hypersexualists. Young male patients on the second and third floors rushed out like racing horses and hollered all the way, “C’MON, Get ‘em off! Get ‘em off! C’MON, Get ‘em off! Just do it!”. They grew hot and got excited. They ran down to the first floor, to the wild and rapturous Eden, as if they were invited to the party.<sup>14</sup>

(那股放肆的聲浪驚動了整個井亭醫院，很多住院病人從病房窗口探出了腦袋，分辨著歌詞與歡呼的內容，很快有人聽懂了，熱烈地呼應起來，卡忙，脫，卡忙，脫，快脫！[……]它們有效地感染了某性欲亢進患者，從二號樓三號樓裡衝出來很多年輕的男性病人，像一匹匹脫韁的野馬。他們一路大叫，卡忙，脫！脫！卡忙，脫！快脫！他們面紅耳赤，以參與者的姿態奔向一號樓，奔向狂歡的樂園。) (210)

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12 Nanfan 南帆, “Wenxue xianshi yuchao xianshi” 文學：現實與超現實 (Literature: Realism and Surrealism) *Shanghai wenxue* 上海文學 (Shanghai Literary) 12 (1989): 68-70.

13 Su Tong, *Huangqueji* 黃雀記 [*The Tale of the Siskins*] (Taipei: Rye Field, 2013), 210. Subsequent citations in parentheses.

14 All translations of *Huangqueji* in this paper are mine with the help from Travis Law and Joanna Tai.

Su Tong portrays a laughter-provoking and hilarious plot by juxtaposing two incongruous places in the mental hospital and turns it into a strip club. The repetitive cries of “C’MON” from the madmen declares the beginning of a chaotic era at the mental hospital. Such a chaotic scene has driven obscenity to its climax. Lunatic scenes of madmen are cinematic, absurd and yet realistic. These illusionary and surreal scenes in the mental hospital perfectly weave a world of erotic fantasies. When the hospital discharges Zheng, the madmen inflate Zheng’s unused condoms as technicolored balloons and decorate the mental hospital with a blast of colour.

Su Tong makes use of spatial transformation to construct a surreal world, transforming the hospital into a strip club and the water tower into a Buddhist temple. Zheng’s sister finds no noticeable results from his psychotherapy and subsequently resorts to religion and pilgrimage. She consults with the hospital director, Qiao, and subsidizes the construction of a temple inside the hospital. Qiao contracts Liusheng to convert the water tower into a temple for the exclusive use of Zheng. Zheng’s sister manages to bring a Bodhisattva statue from the reputable Chongguang Temple. On the day of consecration, the golden statue of the Bodhisattva glistens in the water tower. Its sublimity and solemnity attracts flocks of worshippers to make offerings. Combining a temple and a mental hospital as a complex is bizarre but somehow resonates in harmony at the functional level in spiritual healing. A temple is a worship place where troubled worshippers revere and pray for blessings to purify their minds. “Someone worships the deity of the Bodhisattva to help a child named Pang Pang to get into an esteemed high school and the other worships its deity to help Wang Caixia secure an accounting practice license with ease.” (有人拜托菩薩，讓一個名叫胖胖的孩子來年考上重點高中，有人要菩薩保佑王彩霞順利獲得會計師執照) (224) A mental hospital serves a similar purpose of healing the mind and soul but the public generally keeps a great distance from it. When a temple is located inside a mental hospital, it surprisingly becomes a popular pilgrimage.

The race to offer the second incense stick was fierce. Pilgrims tried their best to occupy a propitious spot. Conflicts and disputes were inevitable and arguments turned into fights. The chaos shook up the hospital, and the hospital director, Qiao had to send people to the water tower to restore order.

(搶燒第二炷香的競爭非常激烈，香客們忙於爭搶最有利的地形，不免發生衝突，有人互相爭吵，吵著吵著就動起手來。這種亂象驚動了院方，喬院長不得不派人去水塔，專門維護香客們的秩序。)(228)

Distance is not an issue. We can burn the incense outside if we cannot get into the water tower. The Bodhisattva will still answer your prayer as long as you pray faithfully.” Everyone was buoyed by Mr. Wu’s words. They swarmed back and burnt the incense that they had brought around the water tower.

(距離不是問題，水塔進不去，我們就在外面進香麼，只要心誠，菩薩一定會看見你的

香火。眾人受到吳老師的鼓舞，一窩蜂地回到水塔，圍繞著水塔的塔身，供上了各自帶來的香火。)(230)

The unmoving support of the masses towards Wu, who has a profound knowledge of Buddhism, and their unyielding faith, show how the traditional value of “pray and you shall receive” has long been rooted in the consciousness of the masses. Faith is reduced to a ritual. Worshipers, not unlike madmen, are sworn to accomplish, albeit hysterically, an important mission of making offerings. All insane behaviours, when the masses make their offerings, coincidentally chime with the ambience of the mental hospital.

## 2. Outside the Mental Hospital

The mental hospital in *The Tale of the Siskins* is a metaphor for contemporary society, and yet the absurd phenomena depicted are more authentic than the real world. Away from the mental hospital, a succession of madness reins free in Mahogany Street. Su Tong reveals all sorts of chaotic abnormality following the growth of consumerism. As Zheng's sister says, “It is the world of commerce now. Money is status.” (現在是商業社會，錢就是級別) (179) Money has gained a supreme status as the impregnable and rational rule of the contemporary world. Under the notion of money above all, Zheng has the power of turning a mental hospital into a strip club and a temple, which demonstrates how contemporary society is full of madness and absurdity.

Mammonists in *The Tale of the Siskins* are numerous. Traditional values upheld by Baorun's grandfather are distorted by mammonism. He has lost his mind and pathetically digs everywhere in search of his soul. He is then sent to the mental hospital for psychotherapy. His empty bedroom opens up a business opportunity for his family to make a profit. Baorun's parents sell his grandfather's mahogany bed frame to a businessman for five hundred dollars. The empty room is leased to a tenant Master Ma, who then renovates it into a shop to commence his start-up business. The lease generates a monthly income of two hundred dollars for the family. Baorun's grandfather remarks, “Look how the landscape of our home country metamorphoses with the passage of time!” (祖國的面貌日新月異啊) (163) A spontaneous expression of admiration by a madman manifests the repulsive urban landscape that has resulted from economic reforms that aimed to “initially foster a moderately well-off middle class.” The family ruthlessly abandons the core values upheld by and in memory of their ancestors for the sake of money. The ancestral spirits take revenue through the cracks of the dismantled mahogany bed frame, “the ghosts of the ancestors bore ice-cold teeth” (祖宗的幽靈

長著冰冷的牙齒) (34) and ferociously bite their depraved descendants' hands. The ancestors are represented as the bed frame with wooden spines, dramatizing the abandoning of traditions, history and the past with sorrow. Eventually, ancestral spirits take possession of the grandfather's body, staging an odd return.

A gust of stale, strange odor rose from the shop in which half-dressed mannequins were placed askew in a corner. They first spotted an old man, asleep and snoring loudly, at the cash desk. [.....] He was still wearing the blue and white striped Jing Ting Hospital gown and a patient's red wristband, number 9-17. The air in the shop was filled with a rancid, rotten smell carried across from grandfather.

(店堂內湧出一股污濁的怪味，模特兒都衣冠不整，歪歪斜斜擠在一個角落裡。他們一眼看見收銀台上睡著個老頭，嘴裡打著響亮的呼嚕。[.....] 他還穿著井亭醫院的藍白條睡衣，手腕上拴著一個紅色的號牌，9-17。有一股又酸又餿的怪味從祖父身上散開來，悠悠地蕩漾在店堂裡。) (157)

The shop owner and tenant's wife Mrs. Ma finds it baffling and inexplicable when the grandfather pays an unexpected visit to the shop. The grandfather behaves as if the ambience of the mental hospital extends to the shop. This juxtaposes the normal and abnormal worlds and their interaction leads to peculiar and hilarious scenes. Mrs. Ma eventually succeeds in sending him back to the mental hospital to ensure that everything resumes to normal.

If ancestors can be betrayed, so can one's physical body. Su Tong wrote a scene for Xiannu, the rape victim, who becomes a mistress of Pang, a wealthy Taiwanese businessman, a decade later, and is now known as Ms. White. It is a purely physical relationship for money. Chargeable services offered by Xiannu include accompanying Pang to meet with his clients, smooching and intimate talks. Xiannu who makes a living with her body, finally pays with her body. She is pregnant and bears Pang's child. To ascertain the DNA of the child, Pang forces Xiannu to enter into a commodity futures contract, in which "he stresses that the womb of a woman is no more than a human mine, just like iron ores, copper ores, cotton and oil which produce commodities for trading." (強調女生的肚子其實就是人類的礦山，鐵礦石、銅礦石、棉花、石油都有期貨)(316) Social relationships descend into a relationship between inanimate objects, and child bearing is modernized as a commodity transaction, which suggests that mammonism alienates and distorts human relationships, and moreover reduces them to a financial relationship. Readers may find this plot ridiculous and nonsensical, but it indeed captures the changing nature of human relationships in contemporary Chinese society.

Absurdity permeates the entire novel and infuses the conduct of fictional characters, which leads to a series of grossly exaggerated trifles. *The Tale of the Siskins* depicts superficial mammonists

and their daily life, and unveils the fragility of certain social values, including the legal system generally perceived as a yardstick as to reasonableness and legitimacy of social behaviour. *The Tale of the Siskins* tells of a rape case as a prologue, followed by the trial process and self-incrimination. Su Tong describes in great detail the ornaments and ambience of a remote pavilion situated at a rockery in a tree garden where the trial is held: “the two interrogators, a man and a woman, sat side-by-side by beautifully decorated windows.” (一男一女兩個提審員並排坐在花窗前) (141) The interrogators’ comical appearance discredits the authority and rationality of the judicial process. Judicial due process is not maintained. The interrogators coerce Baorun into pleading guilty and convict him based solely on the testimony of a single witness, rejecting any testimony from Baorun. Baorun has not committed rape, although he has assaulted Xiannu by tying her up. He has no clue of the crime he was convicted of. The traditional view is that everyone should be equal before the law and a suspect is presumed innocent before proven guilty. However, Liusheng’s mother makes use of money and her connections to bribe the interrogators who in the end tell Baorun that “cross examination is unnecessary. The victim has dismissed her accusation against Liusheng. She now accuses you alone. You are now the only suspect.” (不需要對質，受害者已經撤銷了對柳生的指控，她現在只指控你，你是唯一的犯罪嫌疑人了) (143) After receiving a bribe, the interrogators exploit legal principles to rationalize the tainted evidence and testimony. The loopholes and corrupt legal system are disgraced. The more implausible part is that Baorun’s family considers bribery a customary means of winning a trial and their failure is attributed to offering a smaller bribe.

*The Tale of the Siskins* is a kaleidoscope showcasing the grotesque and whimsical phenomena in a contemporary society where ethical values and human relations are abandoned; human affections and physical bodies can be betrayed; and natural justice cannot be served. It is pathetic that people become accustomed to these distorted social values. Su Tong uses the mental hospital as metaphor to unveil how an illogical, unreasonable and chaotic world operates. *The Tale of the Siskins* then addresses the issue of self-redemption.

### 3. The “soul of madmen”

In *The Tale of the Siskins*, Su Tong explores the issue of self-redemption in a rape case. Liusheng, a rape suspect, acquits a criminal charge a decade ago. Later, he returns to the crime scene, a former water tower now converted into a Buddhist temple.

He knelt on the prayer mat, looking keenly into the eyes of the statue of Bodhisattva. That Bodhisattva was quite in her element, seemingly pleased to embrace him. Her gilt face shines in benevolence as always, suggesting not the slightest hint of agony. He felt peace. There was electric lighting in the temple but he preferred not to turn it on. He chose to kowtow to the Bodhisattva in the dark, although the thought of mere kowtowing was not good enough without a single tribute of incense. He remembered Mr. Zheng had bought a lot of incense sticks stacked in a carton box. He searched for the box and from it he retrieved and offered his first stick of incense with his best wishes. The incense flew straight above the shrine, asserting a spurring passion and filling the atmosphere with the aroma of sandalwood and wormwood. What happened in the water tower was now an unbearable memory for him that he fought hard not to entertain it. Nevertheless he was suddenly caught by Ms. White's [i.e. Xiannnu's] words uttered that day. He immediately returned to the shrine and solemnly offered another incense stick. He said to the Bodhisattva, "This is from Ms. White. Kindly accept her tribute."

(他跪坐在蒲團上，瞪著菩薩。菩薩就是菩薩，菩薩看起來願意收留他，菩薩金色的面孔一如既往地慈祥，並無愠色，他感到心定了。香火堂裡裝了電燈，但他不敢開燈。他在黑暗中給菩薩磕了頭，心想光磕頭不成敬意，還應該給菩薩上一炷香。鄭老闆當初置辦了很多香火，都藏在一隻紙箱裡，他找到了那隻紙箱，為自己上了第一炷香。香煙在佛龕上筆直地上升，帶著某種衝刺的熱情，空氣裡開始溢滿檀香和艾草的香味。水塔的往事不堪回首，他努力克制著自己的回憶，突然記起白小姐那天的囑咐，又到佛龕前鄭重地獻上了一炷香，他對菩薩說，這炷香是白小姐的，請菩薩收下她的一點心意吧。) (270-271)

The water tower reminds Liusheng of his youth. He cannot bear his sins and has a naive belief that offering incense to the Bodhisattva is a means of salvation. Penance is reduced to a simple religious ritual. Pilgrims offer incense and pray for the blessing of the Bodhisattva. However, our contemporary society emphasizes the form, but not the substance, of rituals to show one's devout religious beliefs. Slavoj Žižek considers religion to be a belief, which is exterior, embodied in the practical, and an effective procedure. He observes that religious belief is a practice that takes the form of ritual. He gives an example of Tibetan prayer wheels: putting a piece of rolled paper into a wheel and turning it automatically represent the praying of pilgrims. Regardless of what goes through the pilgrims' minds, the wheel itself is praying for the pilgrims through the medium of the wheel.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it may be radical to compare Žižek's example to the events in the novel. However, Liusheng considers kowtowing and incense offering as necessary. Whether the Bodhisattva will reveal its power in response to sincere prayers depends on "Who has the most pilgrims? Whose pilgrims the most is the boss!" (誰哪兒的香火最旺？誰的香火旺，誰就是老大！) (369) In other words, what matters is how much money is spent on pilgrimage. Liusheng's motive behind the rituals originates from his fear of punishment. When he hears the echoes of sounds resembling Baorun's voices in the

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15 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London; New York: Verso Books, 1989), 33-35.



water tower, he rushes to the temple and offers an incense stick to the Bodhisattva. The ritual is not a genuine atonement but an attempt to dissipate one's fear. This indicates that Liusheng never feels regretful of his mistakes, let alone repentance.

In *The Tale of the Siskins*, the issue of self-redemption revolves subject of the Buddhist temple and God. When Liusheng and Xiannu bear a grudge against the businessman Pang, they run into his wife, Mrs. Pang, a devout Christian. Su Tong portrays Mrs. Pang as being “in a beige suit, without a tinge of make-up, and her hair is in an old-fashioned bun. A crimson red-covered book on her kneecap is likely to be a Bible.” (龐太太穿著一套米色的西裝，不施脂粉，梳復古的髮髻。膝蓋上那部暗紅色封皮的書，應該是《聖經》) (369) She does not wear expensive accessories, for she believes it to be a sin in the eyes of Jesus Christ. A jade bracelet on her wrist looks expensive, but in fact is not, manifesting her beliefs. When she finds out about her husband's extramarital affair, she behaves as if she is the Saviour who judges her husband. “[Mrs. Pang said] Repent if sinned; pray, repent and redeem yourself before God. Let it be known to God, and God shall forgive. Mrs. Pang, I [i.e. Liusheng] admire you. You are so clever. Allow me to remind you, the child is in her womb, not in God's! May God forgive him, but what good does it do for Ms. White? [Mrs. Pang said] God is here to save you all.” (按：龐太太說) 有罪要贖罪。要禱告，要懺悔，向上帝贖罪，讓上帝聽見，寬恕他的罪。龐太太我（按：柳生）佩服你，你太聰明了，我提醒你，孩子在她肚子裡，不在上帝的肚子裡！上帝寬恕他，白小姐有什麼好處？（按：龐太太說）上帝是來拯救你們的) (371) Penance and prayers are means of atonement. Penance means that a sinner honestly recounts his sins and confesses them to a priest. In the course of his confession, a sinner has a sense of disgrace, giving the priest a reason to absolve the sinner. Bringing the three steps of “Penance-confession-forgiveness” together is a procedure to examine the consciousness of sinners.<sup>16</sup> However, penance becomes a mere formality. Foucault argues that confession is a technique of controlling the “soul”. Xiannu looks for Pang and finds one of Mrs. Pang's books entitled, “How to redeem your lost soul from God,” a way of atonement presumably implied by Mrs. Pang to her. In fact, it is Mrs. Pang who has lost her soul. She always speaks of God and quotes the Bible. Her body and soul have become completely alienated by the repetition of scripture. The novel suggests with irony that resorting to religion is not true atonement, be it Liusheng's prayers in the Buddhist temple or Mrs. Pang's reciting of the Bible. The novel reminds us that heavy reliance on religion may lead to an individual losing his or her character and soul.

In the novel, religion is perceived to be a chain that confines the free will of a soul, and is

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16 Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at The Collège de France*, trans. Graham Burchell (London; New York: Verso, 2003), 171-172.

comparable to the figurative expression of trussing in *The Tale of the Siskins*. The grandfather of Baorun, one of the protagonists in the story, has lost his soul. The Shaoxing woman warns the grandfather that without his soul he will not be able to be reincarnate as a human in his next life. In search of his soul, the grandfather digs everywhere and looks for a torch containing his ancestors' bones he has buried long ago. The soul digging exercises drive him mad, and in the end he is sent to the Jing Ting Hospital. The hospital is a prototype of a modernised mental hospital as described by Foucault. Su Tong depicts in detail the surveillance of patients by the mental hospital, in addition to its suburban location.

Occasionally, you can easily see Baorun and his grandfather in Jiang Ting Hospital. To be fair, they are having a stroll and rope as a necessary accessory. Generally speaking, it would still be called a stroll even though one is trussed up. Taking a stroll can help to improve the grandfather's mental status, or so the doctor advises.

(某些氣候宜人的早晨，你很容易在井亭醫院遇見保潤和他的祖父。公平地說，他們在散步，繩子是必須的，被縛者的散步，通常也稱之為散步。散步有益於改善祖父的精神循環系統，這是醫生的說法。) (55)

Grandfather says he needs to be trussed up, otherwise he would not be allowed to go out. He says this is discipline.

(祖父說，他不讓鬆的，不綁就不能出來，出來了就得綁著，這是紀律。) (54)

Foucault argues that the relationship between nursing staff and madmen in mental hospitals implies the see/being seen dichotomy. Madmen are constantly under their nurses' surveillance, whatever their slightest move. The nursing staff consistently order the patients to behave. When the patients have learnt how to restrain themselves without the presence of their nurses, they progress toward self-objectification.<sup>17</sup> The grandfather who has lost his "soul" is a typical example. The grandfather fully accepts trussing as required by the hospital. The grandfather, with his soul in bondage, wishes to be trussed up by one of Baorun's signature knots, a stability knot which the grandfather craves as a sense of stability and tranquillity at the expense of his own self-determination. It shows that trussing is an effective means of, not only binding the physical body, but also the "soul of madmen." In other words, losing a "soul" is a process of transforming one's body and self-awareness. The characters of *The Tale of the Siskins* face losing their "souls," despite their struggle for self-redemption. For example, Liusheng and Xiannu, who have sound minds, cannot escape their fate of being mentally trussed up, like the grandfather. Su Tong portrays this group of people

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17 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 247.

who “believe that they have a soul.”<sup>18</sup> Xiannu, one of the characters, miscalculates herself as the leading partner in her trading of sex with men. She meticulously calculates the worth of her body with the aim of making a profit, in the hope of living a better life. Her efforts come into nothing when she becomes pregnant with her client’s child. She abruptly realises that she has become a loser and the passive partner in the trade, in which her body is a mere commodity. Paradoxically, Xiannu thinks “it was no big deal to lose her soul or her face, given she feels no shame. She is now nothing but a human mine to be exploited.” (無論是魂，還是臉面，丟就丟了，她並沒有那麼羞愧。現在她是誰？誰也不是，她只是一座礦山了) (317) She is converted into the subject matter of a mere commodity contract and her self-awareness is redundant. Tempted by money Xiannu becomes more comfortable with the influence of money dominating her free will. In this case her self-awareness is gradually worn away by her material desire.

#### IV. Conclusion

In his paper “The Falling of a Southern City and its Temptation – A Discussion of the Works of Su Tong,” David Der-wei Wang categorizes Su Tong’s series of works set in southern China into four genres: 1) strange tales of towns and villages; 2) secret histories of royal families; 3) chronicles of family clans; and 4) biographies of revolutionaries. These series of Su Tong’s works illustrate people’s indulgence in sensual pleasures, lust, vulgarity and extravagance in a fictional southern city of China, and describe death as a grand finale of the fall of the city.<sup>19</sup> *The Tale of the Siskins* and the “Madwoman on the Bridge,” categorized as strange tales of towns and villages, continue to describe vices and sexual excesses of the Mahogany Street, located in the northern part of the southern city. Neither story ends with a death scene. Su Tong ends the story with the protagonists in mental hospitals as their final destination, or in other words, a new beginning in their lives.

While Su Tong’s previous works unveil the fall of a southern city and the decadence of humanity, *The Tale of the Siskins* and “Madwoman on the Bridge” use mental hospitals to highlight the madness and absurdity of contemporary society. In “Madwoman on the Bridge,” Cui’s authoritative discourse sends the madwoman to the Sanli Bridge Mental Hospital. Su Tong ends the story without further describing the madwoman’s life in the mental hospital, stressing the subjugation of the mentally ill by a group of people. Cui tries to eliminate madmen so as to maintain sane people’s social order. An

18 Zhu Ling 朱玲, “Renmen de linghun sichan zai yiqi meiyouyingjia,” 人們的靈魂撕纏在一起，沒有贏家 [“No Winners amongst Entangled Souls of Men”] <http://bjyouth.ynet.com/3.1/1306/07/8060227.html> (accessed Nov. 14, 2014).

19 David Der-wei Wang, “Nanfang de duoluo,” 152-153.

individual will inevitably be considered abnormal if they disobey the social norms in clothing. In *The Tale of the Siskins*, Liusheng was killed by Baorun in revenge at his own wedding ceremony. The novel ends with a scene in the mental hospital where Xiannu, one of the protagonists, gives birth to a baby who bears a red birthmark on its face, a signifier of her disgrace. In the end, the baby falls asleep in the arms of Baorun's grandfather, a madman. The use of mental hospital as metaphor in both stories hints at an analogy between the structure of a mental hospital and that of contemporary society. Su Tong attempts to replicate how the social community operates in a mental hospital, implying how similar the two different worlds operate, within and outside a mental hospital. Hence, returning to a mental hospital is no different from being reborn in a world of madness. When people in contemporary society are bound by countless ties that restrain their bodies and thoughts, living becomes the most ridiculous state of being, even worse than death.<sup>20</sup> ※

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