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# Metafiction, Cannibalism, and Political Allegory: *Wineland* by Mo Yan

Kenny K. K. Ng

The confusion of our age . . . leaves no room  
for guilt and responsibility.

Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in  
Art and Literature*

In the context of contemporary Chinese literature, it is no easy task explicating the sociopolitical significance of the upsurge of the metafictional narrative. The most recent decade has witnessed the rise of avant-garde fiction with a penchant for self-reflexivity and intertextuality; examples are the works of Ma Yuan, Yu Hua, and Ge Fei. The craze for this “meta-sensibility” in fiction writing, as critics have pointed out,<sup>1</sup> has revealed a deep distrust of existing interpretive systems in both political and cultural terms. By deliberately excluding thematic concerns and social experiences from a self-referring fictional universe, writers

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I would like to thank Karl Kao, Ling-tun Ngai, and William Tay for their comments and advice on drafts of this article. All errors that remain are mine.

<sup>1</sup> Although some writers in China may find metafiction particularly appealing, Zhao argues, they lack a critical and historical understanding of the literary form. He also notes that a majority of writers rarely had experience in reading Western metafiction. None of the Western masters—say, Donald Barthelme, John Fowles, John Barth, Robert Coover, Italo Calvino, and Samuel Beckett—has had adequate translation and critical review in China. John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), for example, was translated and published in 1985, but with the omission of the most characteristically metafictional section, Chapter 13, for fear that readers might not be able to understand it, or because the translator himself was baffled by it (Zhao 1992: 90-99).

will, nevertheless, run the risk of lapsing into “escapism” by merely playing with formal techniques. In my view, the fact that Chinese avant-garde writers have striven to shun any interpretive commentary on their writings is itself something that literary criticism has an “interpretation” to offer. It is only through deciphering the literary form of self-referentiality conspicuously displayed in these works that critics can begin to explicate the dynamics of metafiction.

莫言 酒國

In this sense, Mo Yan’s *Jiuguo* [Wineland] deserves a critical appraisal. The novelist has endeavored to invest the metafictional form with the imperative of social criticism by his unceasing literary attempts to maintain the inextricable tie between literature and politics. In this paper, I argue that both the mimetic illusions of the real and unreal and the grotesque delusion of cannibalism presented by the novel are only surface distractions from real social concerns buried beneath the narrative. Indeed, the work critiques the Party-state’s ideological control of literary activities and gross official corruption that occurred at the historical juncture in which political conservatism and aggressive economic development coexisted in a schizophrenic state in Chinese society.<sup>2</sup> Adopting the technique of self-reflexivity and a seemingly apolitical stance, the author has wittingly manipulated the form to represent social reality, transgress the boundaries of political and aesthetic criticism, and transform fantastic tales into social allegories.

### Self-Referentiality and the Institution of Ideology

Broadly speaking, metafiction denotes the category of novels which seek to highlight their fictional nature and their own compositional procedures.<sup>3</sup> In the West, metafictional writing

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<sup>2</sup> The novel was written from 1989 to 1992. I am referring to the social situation during that period in China. While economic development was gaining momentum, the process of political reform was retarded by the Party-state.

<sup>3</sup> The term “metafiction” was firstly coined by the American critic and novelist William H. Gass to apply to what has loosely been conceived as “antinovels” (1979: 25). To Patricia Waugh, the notion designates fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions

became particularly prominent from the 1960s to the 1980s. Although critics often consider its rise to be a response to the social milieu in America and Britain or even situate it within a broader cultural context of “post-modernism,” Patricia Waugh provides a more elastic definition of the notion so that it will cover a wide range of fiction in different times and places. Metafiction, she argues, is more than a manifestation of the contemporary era. Self-consciousness in storytelling is regarded as a tendency or function inherent in all novels. In the Bakhtinian sense, novelistic language itself is “dialogic.” The novel tends to assimilate a variety of discourses to the degree that they question and “relativize” each other’s authority through their internal oppositions and tensions (Waugh 1984: 5-7).

This paradox of self-referentiality is characterized by Linda Hutcheon as the “narcissistic narrative.” In her *Narcissistic Narrative*, she suggests a paradigm shift that rethinks the relationship between metafiction and postmodern culture.<sup>4</sup> Textual and thematic self-consciousness in fiction is one of the prototypical cultural forms of what Jean-François Lyotard has called the “postmodern condition” (Hutcheon 1984: xii-xiii), which marks both the collapse of the grand narrative and the de-legitimization of knowledge in Western culture (Lyotard 1984: 31-41). To support her argument, Hutcheon draws an analogy between the postmodern architectural forms in the 1960s and the fiction of the same period, claiming that they both reveal “striking ideological and structural similarities” in their self-referential codes and forms (Hutcheon 1984: xiii). In this regard, such terms as “postmodernist metafiction,” “postmodernist novels,” and “metafiction” are used with similar meanings in Hutcheon’s theoretical framework. They all denote narratives that seek to make readers aware of their own linguistic

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about the relationship between fiction and reality. See Waugh (1984: 2).

<sup>4</sup> In the original 1980 edition, Hutcheon acknowledges that she rejected the term “postmodernism” in the past because it seemed to be an insufficient label for a contemporary phenomenon as broad as metafiction. In the 1984 edition, however, she added a nine-page “Preface” to the original 1980 version, claiming very briefly that the discussion of textual self-consciousness has to be reconsidered in the paradigm of postmodernism.

construction and fictive representation. Meanwhile, she characterizes “historiographic metafiction” as a new kind of experimental writing uniquely capable of fulfilling the “poetics of postmodernism” (Hutcheon 1988: 105-23). The importance of historiographic metafiction, she asserts, lies in its ability to both challenge the belief in the absolute knowability of the past, and to contest the ideological assumptions on which the reconstruction of history in fictional narratives is based.

While the manner of self-reflexivity characteristic of Mo Yan’s novel bears a striking resemblance to Hutcheon’s notion of “narcissistic narrative,” we have to attend to the marked differences between the sociocultural milieux in China and the “postmodern condition” in the West. If, as I argue, the surface celebration of formal play and the strategy of parodic intertextuality in *Wine Land* really imply a critical engagement with history and an unspoken assault on societal phenomena, our inquiry into the “meaning” and “content” of the text is not possible without a proper knowledge of the sociopolitical context that informs the work. My task is therefore to unveil the metafictional mask and to treat the narrative as a distorted appearance concealing an assemblage of sociocultural problems in contemporary China. Specifically, I find Mo Yan addressing the heightened control of political discourses, the tightened censorship of literary activities, and the lack of freedom of expression.<sup>5</sup>

*Wine Land* consists of many eccentric parables and bizarre characters that are apparently disconnected from the mundane world and alien to our common-sense experience. On the one hand, there are nine pieces of strange tales written by Dr. Wine (*Jiuboshi*) and inscribed in separate chapters of the novel. The fairy tales and romantic stories resemble the two ancient Chinese narrative genres known as *zhiguai* [accounts of anomalies] and *chuanqi* [accounts of the extraordinary]. There

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<sup>5</sup> My analysis here is indebted to Fredric Jameson’s strategy of allegorical reading, deployed to tease out the contextual significance of the formal structure of the metafiction and restore the “referential” values of the work (its meaning, the “reality” it presents, reflects, or imitates) from beneath the “distortions of the censor.” See especially his “Metacommentary” (1988: 1. 3-16).

is, for example, an ancient book written by an anonymous author in the story. Entitled *Jiuguo qishilu* [Strange records in Wineland], it centers on a young boy's unrequited love for a girl (Mo Yan: 1992: 215-29). Adding to the bizarre nature of the story is the fact that the geographical locus of Wineland portrayed by Dr. Wine is a fictitious realm that seems to be isolated from the outside world. We might also be stunned by the outrageous story about the greedy state officials' pursuit of children's flesh for their sumptuous feasts. In short, the narration of extraordinary tales departs radically from the principle of objective representation of reality. On the other hand, Dr. Wine's accounts exhibit a strong tendency to write "non-fiction." For instance, he offers readers a detailed report on the process of manufacturing wine (31-44), on the primitive practice of collecting edible bird's nests (*yanwo*) (303-20), and on the meticulous procedures for cooking the delicious dish of *hongshao ying'er* [braised baby] in the gastronomy institute (255-72). Using an episodic style of narration, the novelist goes as far as to abandon the causality of events in these episodes, presenting the subject matter under the pretense of professionalism and scientific objectivity.

酒國奇事錄

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In fact, any analysis that attempts to categorize Mo Yan's various experimental writings into the bipolar extremes of being either "true to life" or mere attempts to fabricate a "reality effect" would be too simplistic and fails to explore the complex relationships among ideology, narrative forms, and the historical subtext underlying Mo Yan's works. Only by probing the intricacies of literary imagination and fantasy can his works be explicated and analyzed, for this novelist has never ceased to grapple with the problematic of the unreal and the unconscious. Stressing the importance of imagination in fiction writing, he once stated:

What is the point of pure realism in literature today? How can literature rival the television with its colors and sounds? Literature can only present the world of dreams and its dreamlike atmosphere. (Mo Yan 1994: 3)

Undoubtedly, *Wineland* is replete with weird accounts and freakish events which at first sight baffle any effort at critical interpretation. Yet, I suggest that the fabulous accounts imply

less an extreme rejection of historical experience than a subtle response to the “real” world. In order to examine the interaction between the fictive and the real, I have to turn at this point to the subversive nature of fantastic narratives.

Fantasy, as Rosemary Jackson contends, does not so much avert its focus from reality as invert and reconstitute the real. Fantastic literature bears a parasitic relation to real life that it seems to find frustrating and finite (Jackson 1981: 20). In Jackson’s view, any fictional narration is inextricably linked to the unconscious realm of the human psyche and the narration’s sociopolitical context. Thus she contests Tzvetan Todorov’s methodology, which concentrates only on the narrative effects of fantastic stories. In Todorov’s sliding scale, the fantastic exists between the marvelous (in which events are explained by supernatural forces) and the uncanny (in which strangeness is attributed to unconscious forces in the human psyche).<sup>6</sup> The purely fantastic expression is identified with the notion of “hesitation” on the “pragmatic” level of narrative, in which characters and readers are left suspended in indeterminacy before the strangeness of events they encounter. Besides his dismissal of the social dimension, Jackson argues, Todorov’s theory of the fantastic narrative is also flawed by its repudiation of the Freudian unconscious. She asserts that psychological drives manifest deeper cultural issues hidden below the surface content of human fancy (Jackson 1981: 1-10). Daydreaming and illusions in literature could, in this sense, be construed as an articulation of disturbing desires which may threaten to disrupt the sociocultural order. Thus, Jackson argues, fantastic narratives serve to open up the domain of chaos and illegality by

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<sup>6</sup> See Todorov (1970). Todorov’s scale of different kinds of literary fantasies, however, should point to its historical contextualization. For in the West the fantastic was distinctly a later product than the supernatural in literary history. In his comparative study of the classical Chinese tales of the supernatural and the fantastic, Karl S. Y. Kao examines Todorov’s notion and claims: “The fantastic was a product of an uneasy, “pulverized” consciousness resulting from the loss of faith in the unity of man and nature with the advent of the Enlightenment, when the belief in animism and magic was no longer possible” (Kao 1985: 3).

their negation of dominant value systems in society. The link between an individual work of fantasy and its social context is in an obscure and unspoken form.

In this light, Jackson's statement is apparently analogous to Pierre Macherey's reflection on the workings of ideological commitments and unconscious desires on narratives. He contends that a work can never directly express the author's ideology nor the work's social subtext because the articulation of certain things is ideologically forbidden. Therefore, symptomatic gaps and fissures always exist within the textual space, which rather bespeak the "meaning" of the work under critical scrutiny (Macherey 1978). In a tone echoing Macherey's, Jackson also states that "the fantastic traces the *unsaid* and the *unseen* of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made '*absent*'" (Jackson 1981: 4, italics mine).

I will consider the blending of the fantastic and mimetic impulses in *Wineland* by studying the active interplay of ideological restraints and unconscious desires that are mediated by the "narcissistic narrative." At first sight, the novel could be likened to Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, especially in its well-knit plot structure and the emphasis on the incomplete processes of reading and writing as quintessential components of the work. While Calvino's ingenious literary practice could well be read as a meditation on whether the art of writing can survive the vast changes brought about by the communications technology in Western countries, Mo Yan's formal experiment actually seeks to contest the guidelines authorized by the Party-state's ideological apparatuses, which are relentlessly exerting control over literary creativity. In fact, the radical turn to the "unreal" and the unconscious, as seen in the figuration of weird characters and eerie events, demonstrates the author's efforts to deride and overthrow the official category of the "real," which is embraced by the obsolete representational system of socialist realism, whose beliefs and values linger in the post-Mao era.

At the outset, the novelist succeeds in convincing us that the novel is merely a fabrication by obscuring the boundaries between fancy and reality. We find in the story a renowned author named "Mo Yan," who is straining to bring to light the



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abominable practice of eating children in Wineland.<sup>7</sup> We will cast no suspicion on the fact that “Mo Yan” is strikingly similar to the flesh-and-blood novelist, for we are told that he is the author of *Hong gaoliang jiazhu* [Red Sorghum Family, quoted as *Red Sorghum* hereafter].<sup>8</sup> In another plot line, Dr. Wine, a devotee of literature and admirer of “Mo Yan,” is exploring different styles of fiction writing and pleading with “Mo Yan” to send his works to *Guomin wenxue* [People’s literature], probably the Party’s highest literary institution. In this sense, the writer adopts the narrative strategy of what Hutcheon has called the “overt diegetic self-consciousness” by focusing on the composition of the fictional text that one is reading (Hutcheon 1980: 53). By unveiling its own creative process (“baring the device” in the terminology of Russian Formalism), this piece of metafiction aims to frustrate our expectation of and desire for verisimilitude.

In an effort to explicate broader contextual meanings, I treat the private lives of the two authors, Dr. Wine and “Mo Yan,” as a form of collective storytelling. My analysis bridges the invisible link between the private sphere shaped by textual self-reflexivity and the changing literary institution that is essentially sociocultural and historical.<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy that the self-referential sensibility manifested by the novel is emblematic of the present social situation in China, a moment in which people are increasingly aware of their freedom to choose what they want to write and read. By self-consciously exposing the process of reading, with the implication that each act of reading is always a new interpretive event, this piece of metafiction stimulates

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<sup>7</sup> For the sake of clarity, hereafter “Mo Yan,” highlighted with quotation marks, designates the character in the novel. The flesh-and-blood author is indicated by “novelist,” “writer,” or “Mo Yan” without quotation marks.

<sup>8</sup> All references hereafter to *Hong gaoliang jiazhu* are made to Mo Yan (1988).

<sup>9</sup> From a comparative perspective, I am drawn to Todd Kontje’s recent survey that undertakes to examine moments of literary self-consciousness of the German *Bildungsroman* as reflections on the rapidly-transforming literary institutions in eighteenth-century Germany (Kontje 1992: 1-17).

readers to reflect on the practice of reading, in which most of them would have engaged with little thought about the fictitious nature of what they are reading. (This was especially so in the past because under the guidelines of socialist realism, people had to believe what they read.) It could even be argued that the open system created in the fictional realm by a self-referentiality of books in plenitude is antithetical to what it was during the Maoist era, in which all publications were strictly controlled by the Party-state. In this novel, the universe of books is worth our attention, especially when compounded by the practices of private readings, revisions, re-interpretations, and personal judgments made by Dr. Wine and "Mo Yan." It is only through their internal dialogue and secret exchange of personal opinions that freedom in expression can be achieved. The novelist can thus in this imaginary space offer with ease his reflexive commentary on literary writing and criticism with respect to such politically sensitive issues as critical judgments, aesthetic tastes, and the problems of authorship. In brief, the intimate communicative context serves as a kind of substitutive space, a symbolic realm of discourse, where attempts are made to repudiate political and artistic dogmas in the public domain.

The strategic deployment of the metafictional structure is symptomatic of the social atmosphere in which confusing politico-aesthetic values await negotiation and contemplation. Problems like the social status of the writer, the reading habits of the public, and the rapidly transforming institutional context of literature and politics have become matters of grave concern in China. In this respect, the narcissistic narrative touches the hidden crises of society stemming from the new economic and political realities of the late 1980s. Since irreversible trends of marketization and commercialization have led to the speedy disintegration of Maoist ideological beliefs, including their principles guiding literary writing and interpretation, the present is the crucial stage in which an ideologically weakened Party-state fights, against all odds, to tighten its grip on what people read and write.

The novelist has endeavored to develop a heightened sense of literary self-consciousness by maintaining the "dialogic" tension in the correspondence between Dr. Wine and "Mo Yan." Dr. Wine is a writer endowed with unbridled imagination and inclined to invent absurd and surreal fables. "Mo Yan" is,

however, caricatured as a figure on the brink of failure in his career. He is incapable of finishing his work, which is also entitled "Wineland," since he has lost control of the characters, who are wreaking havoc on the story development. How can a writer whose status is being contested by his characters aspire to write a novel to condemn corruption and nepotism in society? To add to his failure, his books have invariably been mauled by critics on the Mainland because of their perverse and erotic descriptions. Worse, the novelist is gravitating toward a crisis of moral putrefaction, for he is increasingly interested in the monetary reward rather than the artistic achievement that writing can bring him.

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It is no wonder that readers are tempted to delve into the biographical origins of the novel. In reality, Mo Yan has been one of the most controversial figures in literary circles ever since his emergence in the mid-1980s. For instance, *Tiantang suantai zhige* [Garlic ballads] was banned for its severe social critiques when it first came out in the late 1980s (Mo Yan 1989b). His penchant for the carnivalesque dramatization of scatological images, as eminently exhibited in *Red Sorghum*, was assailed for being "anti-culture," "anti-loftiness," and "anti-civilization."<sup>10</sup> His latest novel, *Fengru feitun* [Supple breasts and full buttocks], provoked instant controversy and was removed from circulation shortly after its publication on the mainland.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, there are many other extratextual references to the contemporary literary scene in *Wineland*. In Chapter Two, we find a short story entitled "Rouhai" [Flesh child]. It is written by Dr. Wine in his strenuous efforts to hold out against the literary trend nicknamed *wanshi*, which shows irreverence and irrelevance toward literature and life. The text's parodic intent is apparently directed against Wang Shuo, the Beijing novelist for whom writing is just a great way to make a buck, and whose

<sup>10</sup> For criticism of Mo Yan's works on the Mainland, see Wang Gan (1988); Wang Meng and Wang Gan (1989).

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<sup>11</sup> *Yunnan dangdai wenxue* in April 1996 contained a special issue denouncing the novel for its blatant descriptions of sexism, eroticism, and mental aberrations, which are not in line with the dominant socialist principles that emphasize loftiness and idealism in art.

books have captivated the masses and been profitable.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to Wang's dismissal of profundity and sincerity in literary writing, Dr. Wine, a serious writer, has been pursuing narratives that recount tales of disgusting sins in order to reflect social reality. Having gathered compelling evidence about the gruesome crime of eating children in Wineland, Dr. Wine attempts to disclose to the public stories about the terrifying cannibalistic criminals and to launch a scathing attack on moral standards. He proudly confesses to "Mo Yan" his ambitious plan that the appalling and scandalous accounts will make his work successful reportage fiction (*baogao wenxue*) and bring him fame. But the stated goal of the literature enthusiast must be taken as self-undermining. On the one hand, the writer's attempt at social indictment will definitely be thwarted by the Party-state's censorship. The invisible but ubiquitous presence of the official publication, *Guomin wenxue*, is indicative of a vital apparatus for ideological control. There is no doubt that Dr. Wine has not received any feedback since he sent his work to the official journal. On the other hand, the enterprise of seriously writing about societal problems alludes to the objective of critical realism in May Fourth literature. Its grand idea of cultural enlightenment is, however, utterly antithetical to the contemporary emphasis on triviality and superficiality.

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Illustrating the literary context of the novel, as my analysis does, certainly disregards the poststructuralist critics' belief in the "death of the author." I want to point out that the novelist's manipulation of the authorial voice resides in an "in-between" that separates two polar extremes—at the one end the principle of impersonality, and at the other biographical illustration. It is exactly by hovering on this obscure boundary and by playing with the notions of fictive referent and intertextuality that the novelist mounts his implicit attacks on the Party-state's literary institution, and more importantly, safeguards his work against empiricist readings and reproaches by critics in China. In this regard, the work opens up another possibility for metafictional

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<sup>12</sup> The mention of Wang Shuo here is not meant to be derogatory. His best-sellers, as well as his television dramas and movies, however, have been subject to official censorship in Beijing these days. Party hard-liners recently banned his four-volume anthology as "revolutionary" and "vulgar" (Wehrfritz 1996: 47).

writing that is out of tune with the extremity of anti-realism or skepticism about social reality.

The problems of authorship and literary innovation also deserve critical attention. To begin with, the elitist May Fourth intelligentsia's idea of the "author" as savior in the vanguard of collective regeneration for the country cannot remain unchallenged in the post-Mao era. Nowadays, however, writers are faced with different social conditions arising from intense infrastructural and institutional transformations. Economically, they are either patronized by the Party-state, or subject to the changing tastes of the reading public. Ideologically speaking, authors seem to be more free from the state's control and less bound by the fetters of humanist idealism and moral ideals that limited their May Fourth predecessors. But to a serious writer (like Mo Yan), literary creativity today has been brought virtually to the edge of degeneration when authors pander to the tastes of the masses and fall under market rule; these conditions are at odds with the May Fourth project of national salvation and cultural revival. The craze for profit from writing has culminated in the phenomenon dubbed *xiahai* (literally meaning "down into the sea"): since the 1990s, a great number of writers have given up their literary pursuits and gone entrepreneurial.

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It is with such contextual understanding that readers should comprehend the metafictional frame-breaking at the end of *Wineland* (383-411). Invited by Dr. Wine, "Mo Yan" agrees to make a visit to Wineland and meet Yu Yichi, the villainous character and dwarfish mastermind of the moneymaking territory created in his own story. Lured by Yu's highly remunerative reward, "Mo Yan" cannot but yield to the temptation to compile a biography for the suspected ringleader, who has resorted to bribery and corruption in building his capitalist province. The denouement is indicative of a writer's moral degradation when confronted with alluring monetary benefits. In a self-derogatory manner, the flesh-and-blood novelist even dramatizes "Mo Yan," his caricatured self, as a wicked being fond of money, sex, and wine. The writer who previously enjoyed a prestigious status has tumbled to his moral descent by becoming an absurd, comic, and even pathetic figure. His fate vividly reveals the moral predicament of most Mainland writers amid the irreversible trends of commodifying literary production. This destiny reveals as well the dilemma in which most writers have been caught:

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they are torn by the sanctity of the artistic calling, the moral obligation of writing for the masses, and the need to earn a living.

The strained relationships among the longing for creative autonomy, the Party-state's ideological inhibition, and financial pressures on writers are distortedly expressed in an episode which demystifies the referent of the sorghum wine (109-13). It bears an intertextual reference to another episode found in *Red Sorghum*, one in which a sweet-scented alcoholic drink known as "Shibali hong" [Eighteen miles red] is manufactured in Northwest Gaomi County. As the legend of the family goes, the marvelous and unscientific formula of wine-making is inspired by Grandpa's unruly act of urinating into the spirited liquid. This exaggeration of the lower bodily functions as regenerative, however, has been condemned by critics for its unethical and immoral overtones. With this in mind, we will find no difficulty detecting the veiled attempt to dismiss the orthodox and "serious" judgment since the episode in *Red Sorghum* is parodied as no more than a figment of the imagination in *Wine Land*. We can also feel a certain wry amusement on discovering the truth, as disclosed by "Mo Yan," that the miraculous production of wine is merely a fictive construction and a textual effect failing to tally with any "real" social experiences. In "reality," "Shibali hong" has actually been registered as a new brand in a legal way by a dishonest businessperson. To our surprise, the "real" wine has turned out to be a great success in international trade, and earned for the nation enormous profits from foreign countries.

The implications of the subtle association between literature and reality are twofold. On the one hand, it seems that what is described in the text has no correspondence with reality. The aromatic wine as depicted in the novel has nothing to do with the extratextual object, the real wine as a lucrative product subject to market forces. On the other hand, the erasure of the "real" referent of sorghum wine bespeaks a desire for the autonomy of literature in a social environment in which writing and reading never exist without political judgment and official censorship. By emphasizing the fictiveness of "Shibali hong," the author makes an oblique comment: aesthetic judgment must not become the vehicle for political campaigns. Literature has to be dissociated from the outmoded system of socialist realism.

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高密

Such self-referentiality has rich overtones in the broader sociocultural context. Still haunted by the old and ossified ideologies, the literary space has been pervaded by the threat of wholesale commercialization in the post-Mao era. It is by the design of inward referentiality that the novelist can maintain the substantive function of social criticism, confront the Party-state's literary institution, and allay his anxiety that literary writing and reading will ultimately surrender to the all-pervasive force of marketization.

### The Grotesque, the Fantastic, and the Rural/Urban Antithesis

Readers will certainly be startled by the mesmerizing trope of cannibalism in *Wineland*, which revolves around the terror of suspected atrocities committed by some state officials allegedly involved in the vicious crime of eating children's flesh. In "Flesh Child," an anxious father is going to barter his small boy to the gastronomy institute, where the notorious dish "Braised Baby" is prepared for state cadres as their favorite dish. With its overt imitation in both style and plot, the frightful tale reminds us of Lu Xun's "Yao" [Medicine]. Written in 1919, the short story is invested with the horror of "therapeutic cannibalism" built on a Chinese legend that human blood has unusual medicinal properties. Obsessed with this superstition of traditional China, an old couple is driven to obtain blood from an executed revolutionary as medicine to cure their dying child. The deliberate imitation, however, should not be treated as frivolous play on the part of Mo Yan. The allegorical recycling of the human-eating parable actually serves as a severe social critique which, in a metafictional framework, can be safely shielded from political accusations since the self-referring text is shown to bear no direct connection with reality. For Lu Xun, the profound psychological fear of being eaten epitomizes the repression of traditional Chinese beliefs and values that he seeks to condemn.

But the panic of being swallowed in *Wineland* has broader sociopolitical meanings. Especially noteworthy in "Flesh Child" is the fact that the small child being sacrificed to and eaten by people in the city of Wineland has an agrarian background. His family is so poverty-stricken that his father has no choice but to

trade him for money. In the surreal narration, the body of the child becomes a marketable commodity. The father has lost the basic paternal love for his son, for his caring feelings are only aimed at preserving good-quality fresh in order to exchange it at a good price. This disturbing episode should not be taken lightly, for it betrays trends of commodification and alienation in the developing rural economy. The proposition the fable seems to advance is that "rural children are ruthlessly eaten by powerful figures in the city." The thesis in fact arises from the author's obsession with the peasantry's plight and their grievance against uneven economic developments of rural and urban sectors in the post-Mao reform period; these concerns are masked by the alimentary discourse.<sup>13</sup>

The novelist's ideological commitments to depicting the peasantry and the rural world in the course of his literary career are worth noting at this point. Coming from a rural family, Mo Yan thinks of himself as a representative of the peasants and responsible for making their voices heard in his works. He once expressed his grave concern over their plight, particularly the fact that most of them cannot share the fruits of economic reform implemented during the 1980s (Mo Yan 1989a: 39-43). Compared with that of urban dwellers, he claimed, the peasantry's livelihood has hardly improved since 1949. In fact, Mo Yan's view was vindicated by experts in Chinese studies who pointed out that peasants had lagged far behind urban residents

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, the horror of cannibalism can suggest a variety of references in the context of Chinese culture. There is, for example, the story of "Yiya xianzi" [Yiya cooking his son] in the ancient *Guanzi*. In modern Chinese history, unfortunately, rumors about the feral acts of cannibalism are never in short supply. It is widely believed that there were instances of eating human flesh during the great famine of the early 1960s. There are also shocking accounts reported by Zheng Yi about people eating their class enemies in Guangxi during the bitter class struggle of the Cultural Revolution (Zheng 1996). For a survey of the discourse of eating from ancient to modern Chinese narratives, see Yue Gang (1993). While Mo Yan would not be ignorant of all these accounts, I would rather consider his fabulous alimentary discourse as symptomatic of the immediate political issue of rural-city conflicts in the nation's socioeconomic development.

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in their income.<sup>14</sup> As the funds from the central government have increasingly been diverted to the urban sector to step up its development—a phenomenon not uncommon in many developing countries—economic growth in the rural society has been suffering serious setbacks. Owing to this rural-urban polarization, the last decade has seen a mass exodus of job-seeking peasants to the cities, since rapid economic development has been pushing surplus manpower from rural villages to urban areas. The fundamental rural-urban antithesis is concealed beneath the surface structure of the fantastic narrative. Interestingly enough, as a story portraying the cityscape, *Wineland* is distinguished by a rare absence of the peasant world, to which almost all of Mo Yan's works were devoted. In this regard, the “unsaid” or “unseen” aspects of the fiction cannot be illuminated without comparing *Wineland* with his many other novels about the peasantry, in particular *Garlic Ballads*, which dramatizes a peasant protest against official corruption and gross administrative inefficiency plaguing a rural village. Only from this comparative perspective can we comprehend the very shadowy “non-appearance” of the peasant world in *Wineland*, which underscores the urban-rural hierarchy and the social marginalization of the peasantry.

一尺

The city territory staging the “presence” of magnificent feasts and conspicuous corruption is described as the realm of absurdity and nightmare that embodies material wealth and spiritual decay. *Wineland*, the seemingly fictive referent, is typical of the rapidly-developing special economic zones where foreign investments and international corporations are enticed by tax benefits offered by the central government. In order to attract foreign investors, Yu Yichi (*yichi* literally meaning “one foot”), the individual entrepreneur, has borrowed from the central administration an enormous amount of money for the city's infrastructural innovations, like the construction of tourist hotels, exhibition halls, and entertainment centers, and for organizing the wine festivities. Yu's success in acquiring excessive loans, as rumor has it, must have been due to collusion with high-ranking officials in the administration (174-76). In the surreal presentation, both the individual entrepreneur and corrupt officials are imagined as cannibals. *Wineland* is “literally” the

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, John Gittings (1996: 22-59).

large gaping mouth of a vampiric monster that not only consumes children's flesh but also exhausts and exploits human labor and the resources of rural villages.

The investigative experience of Ding Gou'er, the detective, turns out to be a journey into an incomprehensible underworld and a descent into the character's "heart of darkness." Setting out to arrest the cannibalistic suspects, Ding fails to obtain any evidence of their brutal crime. He is, however, invited by some state cadres as a distinguished guest to their sumptuous feast as soon as he steps into the unknown world. Tormented by self-loathing for his collaboration with these vicious criminals at the table, he overhears vague cries of babies from the kitchen (91-101). He decides to take action and points his gun at the cadres around him, trying to stop the joyful human-eating celebration. But the whole table keeps saying to him that what has been perplexing his mind is nothing more than an illusion. Convinced, the detective then drinks heavily.

The hallucinated detective resembles the paranoid protagonist in Lu Xun's "Kuangren riji" [Diary of a madman]. The detective is persecuted by his terrifying vision, caught in psychological confusion, and unable to figure out whether the food on the table is made of human flesh. A dreadful picture appears before his very eyes: a living boy on the plate grins and blinks at him. But unlike the deranged narrator in Lu Xun's fiction who is under the threat of being devoured by people around him, the neurotic detective eventually becomes a collaborator in the heinous crime of cannibalism. He ends up eating the food with joyous abandon when persuaded by people that it is the startling sophistication in cookery that has made the food look as though it were a living child. The manic humor in this banquet scene highlights the moral predicament confronting him. The origin of his grotesque vision seems to lie as much in the individual's psychological feelings of guilt and fear as in the external and objective conditions of disorder. This gives rise to a sense of irreconcilable tension between the contemptible self (because he might have become a cannibal) and the dehumanizing outside world that renders him powerless (so that he could not help but become a cannibal). In a state of complete ignorance, the detective can never discern whether the seeds of sin and irrationality reside in his own heart or the external world. His battle with the human-eating culprits is doomed to failure.

丁鈞兒

狂人日記

The fascination with the ugly and the abnormal in the novel differs from Mikhail Bakhtin's utopian and lyrical picture of grotesque realism in his study of François Rabelais (Bakhtin 1984: 1-58). For Bakhtin, the grotesque body in its gross physiology is closely connected with the carnivalesque spirit that is typical of medieval and Renaissance literary forms. The transgression of the high and low images in the poetics of the body constitutes a subversive force against the established social structure and suggests a positive potential of regeneration and liberation for the populace. In historical terms, the carnivalesque spirit is deeply rooted in the culture of folk humor arising from the effort to pursue freedom and eliminate fear under the domination of the medieval ruling regime. But the bizarre and gloomy universe in *Wineland*, charged with an atmosphere of moral degeneration and existential angst, instead shows a greater affinity to the grotesque temperament of modern art forms as observed by Wolfgang Kayser (1957: 184-89). The German critic notes that the grotesque is the artistic expression of an estranged world incomprehensible to human beings. The grotesque seeks to instill fear of life in the human subject appalled by the suddenness and strangeness of a terrifying environment. The sense of estrangement as such may be comic, tragic, or the combination of both. The grotesque is, among other things, a game with the absurd.

In light of Kayser's observation, what is worth mentioning in the banquet episode is the peculiar narrative effect of fabricating a contradictory mixture of laughter and horror. The striking point lies in the coexistence of the amusing and the spine-chillingly uncanny, which work together to produce monstrous and ludicrous feelings in the reader. For one thing, the grotesque, as "an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence," is essentially characterized as "a fundamentally ambivalent thing" and "a violent clashes of opposites."<sup>15</sup> The quintessential elements of ambivalence and contradiction are exactly what readers will especially appreciate in the scene of the cannibalistic feast. However unreal or unnatural the human drama seems, it is narrated in an entirely realistic, matter-of-fact fashion, particularly in the detailed

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<sup>15</sup> Here I borrow Philip Thomson's expression of the grotesque (1972: 11).

account of the ingredients and cooking methods. The meticulous description of the dish of the “braised baby,” served in the shape of a living human figure, cannot but conjure up a feeling of fear. Fusing the real and the fictive, the novelist can thereby transform the symbolic rhetoric of “eating” into the figural meaning of “exploitation.” The naked truth is aptly and blatantly conveyed by the detective’s accusation against the state cadres at the table: “You are killing the sons of the people to feed yourselves” (95).

Here it is worth mentioning again Jackson’s analysis of the relationship between reality and fantasy in literature. She argues that it is in the unconscious that social norms and power relations are represented, reproduced, and sustained in fantastic narratives (Jackson 1981: 61-91). In this sense, the narrative of uncanny phantasms torturing the detective functions to unveil a long hidden social nightmare, which is “naturalized” by the ruling regime as a familiar and common experience shared among the social subjects. The horror of cannibalism plaguing the protagonist thus brings to light his unconscious drive to condemn gross social injustice in reality, in particular, the growing inequality between rural and urban people in terms of their social status, economic wealth, and work opportunity. The profits of market reform are literally “swallowed up” to appease the voracious appetites of the gluttonous criminals—the state cadres and individual entrepreneurs.

Besides being haunted by the repugnant illusion of cannibalism, the detective undergoes an appalling process of moral degeneration. Instructed by the Party’s legal institution to investigate a syndicate of cannibals (metaphor for the devilish capitalists!), Ding’s mission is conceivably an overt parody of the Maoist revolutionary model drama, in particular the heroic adventure of Yang Zirong in *Zhiqiu Weihushan* [Taking Tiger Mountain by strategy]. In this highly didactic political play, the “typical” revolutionary hero is endowed with an unyielding spirit to battle against class enemies and with a “pure” soul immune to sexual desires and human love. Ironically, the detective plays the role of an anti-hero subservient to his libidinal impulses when *enmeshed in a messy affair with a woman driver in the labyrinthine city of wine*. The woman functions as the sexual foil for the protagonist’s inquisition into the mysterious crime. She possesses knowledge about the stratagem of killing children

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because she is a participant as well as a victim in the plot. She has intentionally undergone abortions five times because human fetuses are savored by the savage officials (235). When the detective tries to use the woman to obtain real evidence of Yu's offense, he realizes that she is the mistress of the criminal leader; the detective finds himself at that moment entirely ensnared in the intrigue of his enemies. In a fit of rage immediately after learning the truth, he sets out to assault Yu and the woman. After drinking a great deal to pluck up his courage (as well as to unleash his transgressive impulses), the detective imagines himself a revolutionary hero in his mission of eliminating the "class enemies." Having gunned down the wicked couple, he strides out of the sordid world under the bright red sun, which symbolizes the hero's boldness and daring (291). The bravado, ironically, appears to be just the protagonist's mental aberration. In "reality," unfortunately, Yu has never died. What is more unbelievable is that the dwarfish master then breaks through the diegetic boundary of the metafictional narrative to meet his author, "Mo Yan," and succeeds in cajoling him into writing an autobiography for him.

The detective's identity has abruptly switched from a crime fighter to a criminal (not to mention his involvement in the cannibalistic banquet). Mo Yan endeavors to highlight the problematical nature of human existence by dramatizing the metamorphosis of ego-identities and the unstable human relationships among the characters. The ideological notion of a unified "character," as exemplified by the socialist hero ("Gao Daquan," literally denoting loftiness, greatness, and faultlessness), is dismantled into an incoherent and contradictory concept of self embodying at once good and ugly attributes. In fact, the self-conscious, parodic undermining of the revolutionary discourse not only unveils a distrust of form, but also reveals a crisis of ideology. On the one hand, the inclusion of abnormality and eccentricity signifies a negation of the past, and ridicules the ossified literary doctrines and political ideals of socialist idealism. On the other hand, the detective's mental delusion reflects his hidden anxieties and revulsion toward the present society. What he has discovered is, to his great astonishment, an alien domain ceaselessly transforming into a market economy amid conflicts of contrasting values and mores. Born in 1941, the middle-aged detective is just old enough to

experience the vigorous promotion and eventual collapse of socialist idealism. It is owing to this radical transition of society, marked by irreconcilable clashes of old and new ideologies, that the detective is inevitably persecuted by paranoia. In the last second of his life, he is again stunned by an astounding vision of a cannibalistic feast entertaining his friends and relatives. Driven to madness, the guilt-ridden man commits suicide by hauling himself down into a filthy drainage ditch filled with garbage. "After a few seconds," the detective thinks, "all such holy virtues as idealism, righteousness, dignity, honor, and love will sink into the lowest stratum of public lavatories" (382). The underground world, filled with scatological substances, alludes metaphorically to the developing wineland characterized by consumption and alienation.

One recurrent theme of the story is the fascination with physical deformity. As the incarnation of the entrepreneurial spirit and the post-Mao "get-rich-first" philosophy, Yu is ridiculed as having a grotesque body. Irrespective of his disproportionately small body, Yu is a giant of wine-drinking endowed with a limitless capacity to take in a large amount of spirits and an enthusiast indulging in the corporeal pleasure of sex. With a ludicrous exaggeration of his dwarfish figure, however, the author features him as a competent and intelligent moneymaker. Readers may easily be confused by the heterogeneous and incompatible qualities that make him at once funny, disgusting, and fearsome. The international hotel he runs is also satirized, since *all the restaurant attendants and employees are under-sized, no taller than three feet in height* (173-76). It is in this period, since the 1980s, in which the government has decided to step up the development of special economic zones, that the physically-malformed figure can grasp the opportunity to open his hotel. He appears as the typical character sucking out state capital for his own investment. Recalling our discussion of the rural-urban economic confrontation, the description of extravagant food consumption is certainly not a triumphal celebration for the masses in the Bakhtinian sense. It expresses instead the contentment and satiety of profit-seeking individuals in their gluttony for human bodies and for culinary delights in cannibalism.

The "unsaid" grievance of economic inequality in reality is therefore displaced and crystallized in the culinary images,

accompanied by the horror of body fragmentation and ingestion. Readers are immersed in the sensuous and excessive details related to Chinese cuisine in the story. The author apparently seeks to magnify the vast edibility of animal body parts from head to tail in the Chinese culinary tradition. For instance, the recipe and menu for the notorious “Feast of the Donkey” (182-87) are reported in precise detail. The all-too-informative writing goes to the extreme of recounting how a plethora of animal organs, including the genitals, are cooked using various methods to produce delicious dishes. The tone of celebration and satisfaction, however, masks the dread of the atrocities involved in mutilating and devouring the body. It is noteworthy that it is the donkey (that is as miserable as the village boy in “Flesh Child”) that must succumb to the insatiable appetites of the state cadres. At this point, readers are immediately reminded of the last episode in *Red Sorghum*. In an effort to feed the Communist soldiers, the protagonist, a peasant hero, has to kill his donkey—the real companion and loyal partner of the peasantry in many of Mo Yan’s stories. (Mo Yan 1995b: 382-427). In a sense, the presentation of the magnificent Feast of the Donkey could be construed as a close parallel to the last episode of *Red Sorghum*. The sacrifice of the donkey for the Communist soldiers or state cadres suggests the gross social unjustness leading to the peasants’ suffering under the Party’s rule. In *Wineland*, the terror of killing and the brutality of dissection are, however, tolerated and indulged in with crude indifference during the cannibalistic festivities.

西遊記

Only in light of the mechanisms of repression and distraction can we fully understand the revolt of the under-sized goblins who are going to be devoured in the gastronomy institute (115-33). Modeled on the monkey hero’s adventure in *Xiyouji* [Journey to the west], the grotesquely oneiric story recounts the escape of a demon leader who attempts to mobilize a crowd of his companions to fight against the human-eating dictators. The fantastic account apparently conveys the message that the underdog in society is growing restive to the point of running amok and disrupting the dominant social order. Yet the longing of the oppressed for subversion is self-defeating, for the goblins’ protest is itself marked by violence and cruelty. The dream-like narrative seems to raise an issue of grave concern: giving human desires free rein (as seen in the pursuit of self-interest

and individual aspirations) does not necessarily release a positive force for reforming existing social systems. Instead, unrestrained libidinal energies and desires, once unleashed, may lead to destruction and chaos.

Crucial to my analysis is a reading of the latent social meanings behind the veneer of alimentary discourse, which is characterized by the dread of butchery and the panic of body dismemberment. Beyond the complex and symbolic category of culinary images and beneath the oral-libidinal impulse of massive consumption lies an agonizing collective experience that is well within living memory of the peasants and the peasant writer: the physical experience of hunger. With regard to the peasants' unceasing struggles to improve their lives under the Maoist economic policy, what springs to one's mind is the widespread famine in the early 1960s. This was the result of the failure to ameliorate poverty, taking a heavy toll on the rural areas. What may easily elude one's attention is that the psychological horror of hunger is inscribed in the narrative as its opposite: the exhilaration derived from the instant gratification of human appetites in the enjoyment of food and wine.

Loathing the present chaotic modernization of the country, the author exhibits a nostalgic fondness for a pre-modern rural world characterized by primitive production relations and moral integrity not yet disturbed by social changes. The sentiment is well observed in Dr. Wine's account of the old and ritualistic practice of collecting edible bird's nests in a remote southern corner of the country (303-20), which has been replaced by modern industries emerging in the 1990s. Nowadays, Dr. Wine explains, it is much more profitable to employ aggressive and scientific methods to fully exploit nutritious natural food. The excessive consumption by urban dwellers adds to the disturbing evidence of economic inequality between the rural and urban sectors. While quite a number of children from rich families in the city can afford the luxury of herbal nutrients, an effective solution to the poverty of peasants remains unseen.

The overwhelming nostalgia for a utopian pastoral idyll is also keenly expressed by the flesh-and-blood author himself in the afterword (419-26). In this appended section, Mo Yan evokes the legends of wine told to him as a child by his grandfather. The past was cherished by the grandfather as one in which people would treat their neighbors honestly, appreciate their labor, and



relish the plainest fare at a time of material impoverishment. The rural hometown was in the novelist's memory always embellished with stories about two old wineries dating back to the pre-Communist era. This harks back to the sorghum wine distillery in *Red Sorghum*,<sup>16</sup> in which the process of wine production is enveloped in a harmonious atmosphere characterized by family organization, communal support, and, in particular, an absence of individual competition. Mo Yan seeks to present a loving portrayal of a peasant culture unperturbed by social upheavals. It was exactly the turbulent period of the early 1960s when the rural economy was struck by poverty and extensive starvation that raged for more than three years, with human-eating rumors surrounding the rural areas. The psychological inclination to awaken the past was indeed a wish-fulfilling desire that conveyed much about the peasants' sufferings during that time in history.

But what seems intriguing is the fact that the novelist has to appeal favorably to his grandfather's stories. Although the brief autobiographical information given here secretly provides for readers a certain "illustration" of *Wineland*, this episode need not be used to illuminate the text in a straightforward manner. Rather, I suggest that the autobiographical narrative can be treated as another nested story, which offers us a glimpse of the sociopolitical connotations beneath the figuration of wine. Spanning a history of more than half a century, from the past (as recollected by the grandfather), through the Maoist period, and to the post-Mao reform era, the socioeconomic changes in the rural economy constitute a diachronic dimension of the text—a seemingly indecipherable and labyrinthine narrative replete with fables, fantasies, eccentric acts, and extraordinary situations. It is also out of such profound social changes that the human obsession with eating well (or having a well-developed economy) has been thrown into disorder. In this sense the novelist ventures to organize the social and instinctual upheavals into an allegorical discourse of food and wine.

Though images of food are closely linked to corporeal satisfaction and pleasure, spirits and liquor are associated more with mental activity, which involves human imagination and desires. Most importantly, wine drinking in the story bears an

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<sup>16</sup> See the English edition (Mo Yan 1993: 89-173).

obscure relation to political reality. Mo Yan has admitted that he attempted to make an untendentious and apolitical gesture in the course of writing the novel, almost to the point of ignoring concrete social and literary issues. But he could not. As he remarked in the Afterword, "I wanted to slide away from politics to only write about wine, focusing on the interaction between the marvelous liquid and human life. But I recognized that it was impossible when I really engaged in it" (424). Try as he might to create a realm of literary self-sufficiency detached from all political and ideological commitments, however, he failed to abandon his preoccupation with history and society for a purely fictional world.

By contrast, the rhetoric of wine generates a range of implications in the sociocultural context. What is pinpointed in *Wine* is the analogy between drinking liquor and literary creativity. The aspiration for freedom from the fetters of society is personified in the character of Dr. Wine, an enthusiast of literature as well as an expert on wine. He strives to contest the monolithic aesthetic ideology of socialist realism, which emphasizes unity and greatness on political grounds. Conceivably, writing and drinking in the novel are inextricably tied to human fancy and imagination and invested with a subversive thrust. With regard to the relationship between literary fantasies and their social function of subversion, it has been argued that the overriding concern of fantastic narratives is naming as "evil" the category of Otherness that any social structure tends to exclude and eliminate precisely due to its radical difference from social norms.<sup>17</sup> In this light, the phantasmagoria of "evil" thoughts haunting both Dr. Wine and "Mo Yan" and appearing in their works—for instance, the detective's murder of the cannibalistic entrepreneur, the goblins' protest against their oppressors, the willful celebration of the grotesque and the fantastic, etc—actually reveals the wishful thinking (especially after drinking too much) that the hegemonic social order could be undermined.

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<sup>17</sup> For Jameson, "the concept of evil is at one with the category of Otherness itself: evil characterizes whatever is radically different from me, whatever by virtue of precisely that difference seems to constitute a very real and urgent threat to my existence" (1975: 140); cf. Jackson (1981: 52-53).

But *Wineland* certainly goes beyond its original intention to annihilate dominant ideologies. The constructive power of copious drinking is nevertheless undermined by a series of wicked crimes it at once engenders, such as extramarital affairs, homicides, and cannibalism (all of which are committed by the detective). Readers could see that the characters in the story suffer tragic fates when plagued by mental intoxication and moral putrefaction. The detective jumps to his death; the writer "Mo Yan" loses his moral courage by accepting Yu's generous offer; Dr. Wine gives up his literary ambition and chooses to become a state cadre in charge of organizing activities and entertaining guests for the wine festivities in Wineland.

As though compelled by the novelist's intention to mime the sense of breakdown, the novel ends with a five-page epilogue (413-17), which is highly imitative of the stream-of-consciousness presentation in the last chapter of *Ulysses*. By adopting the modernist manner of Joyce's narration, Mo Yan has attempted to round off his piece of metafiction as a unified whole by creating a linguistic labyrinth without punctuation and writing in a haphazard fashion without attention to causality. Although he originally endeavored to create a feeling of chaos with such a stylized closure (as if this part has been written by an intoxicated mind), he seems eventually to have become dissatisfied with this formal experiment; this part was removed in the latest edition of the novel.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, this deletion has restored the open structure of the work. The original ending appears to have offered an authorial interpretation for the text by providing random endnotes and references (for instance, Lu Xun's short story about cannibalism, the political reality of the 1950s, the rampant corruption of state cadres in the 1980s, etc). However, in perfecting the novel's discontinuous structure, Mo Yan has opted for an open interpretation by readers of the allegory of food and wine.

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<sup>18</sup> The latest edition of the novel is found in *Mo Yan Wenji* (1995b: 1-347).

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