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2015

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### Recommended Citation

Wang, Yanjie. "Heterogeneous Time and Space: Han Shaogong's Rethinking of Chinese Modernity." *KronoScope: Journal for the Study of Time*, 15(1): 26-42. 10.1163/15685241-12341319.

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**Heterogeneous Time and Space:  
Han Shaogong's Rethinking of Chinese Modernity**

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**Abstract**

This article is set against the post-Mao official discourse on modernity, in which the conceptualization of a homogeneous, progressive time dominates the public consciousness. The focus is on Han Shaogong, one of the most important writers and cultural theorists in contemporary China, and on how he imagines a heterogeneous spatiotemporality away from the centralized and teleological paradigm. Han's emphasis on the heterogeneity of time and space puts the homogenized, Hegelian-Marxist, developmentalist logic at the core of China's modernization project into question. The article begins by examining how the linear and evolutionary concept of time has determined the perception of history and reality in modern China. It then moves to an exegesis of Han's famous literary treatise, "The Roots of Literature," illustrating how Han's insistence on tracing multiple *roots* rather than one singular *Root* challenges the monocultural, essentialized notion of Chineseness that prevails hegemonically in the discussion of Chinese modernity. The last section analyzes Han's "Homecoming," a story centered on an educated youth's compulsive return to the village where he was rusticated. Moving beyond the conventional interpretation of identity crisis, the present study illuminates a different sense of time toward which Han gestures—a multi-directional and displaced temporality, to which the unconscious and the repressed both claim access.

## Keywords

time – space – heterogeneity – Chineseness – modernity

### 1 Time, Modernity and Its Discontents

A steadfast link exists between the perception of time and the concept of modernity. To put it differently, defining the “modern” depends a great deal upon how we perceive time. In his *A Singular Modernity*, Fredric Jameson calls the first maxim of modernity “periodization,” a phenomenon in which rupture and continuity move dialectically with each other. In his view, what is at stake in “periodization” is the unwavering focus on the passage from past to present.<sup>1</sup> In other words, modernity is largely predicated on the view of history as continuous development, with one historical period succeeding another. Indeed, the notion of modernity, originating in post-medieval Europe, refers primarily to an understanding of historical time in linear, progressive, and irreversible terms. The cultural critic Wang Hui notes that Hegel’s view of history fully illustrates such a conception of modernity based on temporal linearity, defining the “new age” after the medieval period in European history as modern. This linear temporal formula not only determines our views of history and reality but also contributes to forging the master narrative of modernity that encodes individuals as subjects of teleological development.<sup>2</sup>

A review of twentieth-century Chinese history reminds us of the longstanding bond between the modernity discourse and the Western concept of progressive time, which supplanted

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 23-30.

<sup>2</sup> Wang Hui, *Sihuo Chongwen* (Rekindling the Dead Fire) (Beijing: Remin wuxue chubanshe, 2010), 3-4.

its traditional Chinese counterpart after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912).<sup>3</sup> The May Fourth Movement that took place in the early twentieth century adopted the Western view of time as a succession of events and periods, enthusiastically advocating it as part and parcel of the movement's enlightenment agenda.<sup>4</sup> A well-known poet and intellectual from that era, Guo Moruo (1892-1978), exemplified this attitude when he wrote, "History is evolutionary. All things in the universe are evolving. Human society is progressing. No one could deny this reality. History is like an irreversible arrow pointing toward one destination. Nothing is outside of this plot."<sup>5</sup> Crucially, the May Fourth Movement did not just promote a progressive notion of time; it presented that notion as an indisputable truth, designating other perceptions as false, feudalistic and backward. Thereafter, the seasonal, cyclical concept of time passed down in Chinese tradition was gradually ejected from the dominant historical discourse. The Mao era (1949-1976) saw a continuation of this linear perception of time. The Chinese Communist ideal is

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<sup>3</sup> The linear notion of time was introduced to China as early as the end of the nineteenth century during the late Qing dynasty. The Chinese scholar and translator Yan Fu (1854-1921) rendered Thomas Henry Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* into Chinese and published it as *Tianyan Lun* in 1898. This book stirred up among intellectuals an intense and widespread interest in terms such as "evolution" and "progress."

<sup>4</sup> The May Fourth Movement was a nation-wide, nationalistic, anti-imperialist movement, which sprang from the massive student demonstrations in Beijing on May 4th, 1919. It followed the announcement of the terms of the Versailles Treaty that transferred Germany's territorial rights in China to Japan rather than return them to the Chinese. The present article uses the term "May Fourth Movement" in a broader sense, referring it to the New Culture Movement (1915-1921) whose participants blamed harshly traditional culture for the dramatic fall of China into a subordinate international position and promoted Western notions instead, especially science and democracy.

<sup>5</sup> Guo Moruo, *Anthology of Guo Moruo's Works: History 3* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1984), 27.

teleologically oriented, having as its purpose the overthrow of a “backward” feudal system and the furtherance of the goals of “advanced” socialism and communism. During this period, China witnessed the national campaign of the Great Leap Forward, whose slogan ran, “To surpass England within fifteen years and to catch up with America within twenty years.” This objective alone dramatically reflects the degree to which China plunged itself into the logic of linear development.

In the Post-Mao era (1976- ), China’s promotion of teleological development simply continues and reinforces the symbiotic relationship between modernity and linear time that has prevailed since the beginning of the twentieth century. In his 1978 landmark speech, “Emancipate the Mind, Seek Truth from Facts; Unite as One, and Look Forward,” Deng Xiaoping instructed the Party and the nation to shift their focus from class struggle to the realization of the Four Modernizations—of industry, agriculture, defense, and science and technology.<sup>5</sup> Deng appropriated the teleological view of history to rationalize his call for the reorientation of the national enterprise. Comparing the modernization project to a new Long March, Deng stressed, “We must look forward. Only if we consider new situations and resolve new issues can we move forward smoothly... Let us advance courageously to change the backward condition of our country and turn it into a modern and powerful socialist state.”<sup>6</sup> Implicit in his directive is the assumption of a linear movement of history from one stage to another, from backward to modern; it is hence imperative and urgent for the country to keep pace

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<sup>5</sup> The “Four Modernizations” project was first set forth by Zhou Enlai, the then prime minister of China, in 1963. It was not fully enacted until Deng Xiaoping did so in 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Deng Xiaoping, “Emancipate the Mind, Seek Truth from Facts, Unite as One, and Look Forward,” in *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection*, ed. Pei-kai Cheng, Michael Lestz and Jonathan Spencer (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), 451.

with the economies of other industrialized nations. The linear view of time constitutes the epistemological premise for the state-sponsored modernization project. The official discourse, in its turn, reinforces the exclusive validity of linear time through new ideological coinages such as “looking forward”<sup>7</sup> and “development as the overriding principle.” The complicity between linear time and the post-Mao modernity discourse gives rise to a developmentalist climate in contemporary China, prioritizing the performance of the nation’s economy over other measures of social wellbeing.

What remains less addressed, or perhaps repressed, in modern China is the possibility of envisioning time and modernity in alternative ways. In a well-known passage from “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin draws attention to Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* in which an angel, facing the front with his back twisted toward the opposite direction, fixes his eyes on the accumulation of ruins over the course of history. The angel is propelled into the future and witnesses “the pile of debris before him growing skyward.”<sup>8</sup> According to Benjamin, the storm that forcefully moves this angel is what we know as “progress.” In many respects, Benjamin’s storm metaphor aptly describes the modernization project in the post-Mao era, to the extent that the project engulfed China in a torrent of fast-paced development. The angel’s imagined orientation bears emphasizing: while his spread wings speak to an existence turned toward a future, his eyes linger on the ruins, a reminder of a wealth of energy, possibility and potential. The angel’s gaze calls our attention to the excluded, to all that the “storm” of modernity has left smashed and splintered. Much like the lingering eyes of Benjamin’s/Klee’s

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<sup>7</sup> “Looking forward” (xiang qiankan), ironically, is a homonym for “looking at money” in Chinese, a locution that betrays the fetishization of money in the post-Mao society.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257-258.

angel, Han Shaogong's writing attends to the heterogeneous existence that differs from, contests and defies the official discourse and narrative. Han's essay "The Roots of Literature" and his short story "Homecoming" are textual places wherein he crafts an alternative spatiotemporality, one that reimagines a Chinese modernity unbound by the imperatives of full-scale industrialization.<sup>9</sup>

## 2 "The Roots of Literature": Interrogating Chineseness

Born in 1953 in Changsha, Hunan Province, Han Shaogong was sent to a village in western Hunan at the age of 15 to receive re-education from the peasants through manual labor. The Rustication Movement, a function of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), kept him in rural Hunan for six years<sup>10</sup>; the site of his rustication continued to be thematically significant in the

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that voices competing against the linear view of time and modernity have emerged constantly in the course of the twentieth century. During the May Fourth period, for example, the writer and critic Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967) challenged the linear historical consciousness by problematizing the teleological understanding of history according to political events. Shen Congwen's (1902-1988) literary works in the 1920s and '30s, concerning people's lives in the western Hunan region, also deviated from the linear view by conjuring out of history a sense of timelessness. See Tonglu Li, "To Believe or Not to Believe: Zhou Zuoren's Alternative Approaches to the Chinese Enlightenment," in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 25:1 (2013): 206-260; see also G. Andrew Stuckey, "The Lyrical and the Local: Sheng Congwen, Roots, and Temporality in the Lyrical Tradition," in his *Old Stories Retold: Narrative and Vanishing Pasts in Modern China* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010), 83-98.

<sup>10</sup> It is also called the Sent-down Movement, or the Re-education Campaign. In 1968, Mao Zedong issued a directive instructing that urban youths would be sent to mountainous areas or farming villages in order to learn from the workers and farmers there. A nationwide rustication of urban youth followed. Between 1968 and the end of the Cultural Revolution, approximately 17 million urban youths were transferred to the countryside. Massive return was

majority of his literary works. After the Cultural Revolution, Han returned to the city and began his career as a writer. His early works followed a then-current trend toward cathartic narrative, which critics termed “scar literature.” Stories such as “Echoes,” “Flying over the Sky,” “Orchard,” and “Distant Trees” voiced a similar sentiment of indignation, which arose in response to the senselessness of the Rustication Movement and the destructiveness of the ultra-leftist ideology of high Maoism. Han’s early writing served as a sort of psychological release valve—an outlet for the emotions repressed by a decade of social upheaval. Despite their overt therapeutic function and topical features, Han Shaogong’s works manifested an inclination that persists in his later fiction: looking upon and lingering on the ruins.

In the mid-1980s, Han Shaogong remolded his writing and reemerged as a pioneer of “roots-seeking literature,” a movement that dominated the mid-1980s literary scene. The “roots-seeking” writers proposed to excavate and embrace the indigenous culture in the hope of revitalizing Chinese literature and redefining Chinese identity.<sup>11</sup> Han’s 1985 essay “The Roots of Literature” was hailed as a manifesto for this movement, and established him as its main

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not allowed until the end of the Cultural Revolution. The urban young people who were sent down to the rural areas are collectively called the “educated youth,” or the “sent-down youth.” For more detail, see Thomas P. Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), and Yihong Pan, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace: China’s Youth in the Rustication Movement* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that the Roots-Seeking Movement did not emerge through concerted orchestration, but became a self-conscious trend after the publication of the “roots-seeking” essays in 1985, including Han Shaogong’s “The Roots of Literature,” Li Hangyu’s “Combing through Our Roots,” and Ah Cheng’s “Culture Restricts Mankind.” Roots-seeking writers, who have continued to be the driving force of contemporary Chinese literature over the past thirty years, include Han Shaogong, Ah Cheng, Mo Yan, Wang Anyi, Jia Pingwa, among others.

representative. The success of this theoretical pronouncement was followed by several exemplary roots-seeking stories including “Homecoming,” “Pa Pa Pa” and “Woman, Woman, Woman.” If, as Joseph Lau points out, Han’s early fiction “draws its material from a particular political or historical context to give meaning to the text,”<sup>12</sup> a tangible divorce from this mimetic mode is evident in his works of the mid-1980s. Obscure, elusive, complex, and at times unsettling, his fictional experiments interrogated the entire course of China’s post-Mao development.<sup>13</sup>

Han Shaogong’s “The Roots of Literature” has generated plenty of scholarly discussion since its publication. Much of it has touched upon the temporal dimension of this essay: how Han calls for an excavation of cultural roots to re-energize and remap Chinese literature in the modern milieu. Jing Wang argues, for instance, that “this literature represents not simply an innocent return to Nature and Culture, but a besieged embryonic modern consciousness that struggles to come to terms with itself, or more specifically, with its inability to map itself on the new modern space.”<sup>14</sup> The intense interest in the past, as Wang suggests, is keenly associated with the anxiety over the current situation of Chinese literature. Xiaobin Yang further points out

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Lau, “Visitation of the Past in Han Shaogong’s Post-1985 fiction,” in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*, ed. Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 25.

<sup>13</sup> In 2000, Han Shaogong, after twenty odd years of habitation in the cities, chose to resettle in the rural village where he had been rusticated. According to him, living a simple life, like a farmer, “can help me reflect on modern civilization.” See Han Shaogong, “Literature: Dream and Awakening,” in *Xiaoti Dazuo* (Contemplation on trivial matters), (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2008), 79.

<sup>14</sup> Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 214.

that the roots-seeking literature's "re-evaluation of national history was not purely nostalgic but, to a great extent, [it] reaffirmed the validity of grand history by guiding the historical development toward an ideal future through the detour of recalling the presumably purer and more vital primitive."<sup>15</sup> For Yang, the evocation of the imagined past conforms to, rather than challenges, the *telos* of history. Insightful as it is, the current scholarship tends to invoke the past as a monolithic given, as indicated in the frequent use of the capitalized "Nature" and "Culture"; it therefore fails to spell out the intricacies of the roots that Han Shaogong intends to rediscover and reclaim. The notion of "root" in his writing departs crucially from the conventional understanding of the term. Han's emphasis on the plurality of roots forms a centrifugal drive, away from any monocultural concept of Chineseness and away from any centralized narration of Chinese history.

The notion of "root" resides at the center of the discourse of Chineseness. When speaking of "root," Chinese people usually refer to themselves as "Descendants of the Yellow Emperor" or "Heirs of the Dragon." Both phrases impart the idea of a single origin of Chinese civilization, one that is intimately connected with the culture of the Central Plains and that emanates from the banks of the Yellow River in northern China. In his essay about Chinese cultural identity, Tu Weiming writes,

Although it is often noted that culture, rather than ethnicity, features prominently in defining Chineseness, the cultured and civilized Chinese, as the myth goes, claim a common ancestry. The symbol of the "children of the Yellow Emperor" is constantly re-enacted in Chinese literature and evokes feelings of ethnic pride.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Xiaobin Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-garde Fiction* (Ann Arbor: the University of Michigan Press, 2002), 35.

<sup>16</sup> Tu Weiming, "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center," in *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 3.

Indeed, “root” in the consciousness of Chinese people has an established and unambiguous meaning, which, as Tu incisively points out, is a “constantly re-enacted” myth that revolves around the same authoritative figure—the Yellow Emperor—and the same region—the Central Plains. In contemporary China, such a vision of homogeneous Chinese identity is aggrandized through propaganda, as typified in the ideological emphasis on ethnic unity and solidarity. The slogan “China as a multi-ethnic family” places more stress on a patriarchal Confucian family structure—or, in this case, on the *Han* Chinese majority—than on the history and culture of any individual ethnic group. An overriding Chinese identity is used as a vehicle to carry the nation toward economic development, unifying all Chinese around a common goal.

Han Shaogong, however, enacts a rupture of a monogenetic cultural narrative of Chinese identity. In “The Roots of Literature,” he does not join the search for the conventional cultural legacy of the Yellow Emperor. Instead, he opens his essay with an earnest interest in difference, apparent in his question “Where has the splendid Chu culture gone?”<sup>17</sup> Originating in the ancient Chu Kingdom (largely the present-day Hunan and Hubei provinces) during the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BC), the Chu culture is characterized by its mystic and splendid qualities, and has been a major cultural tradition contrasting with the Confucian orthodoxy in the Central Plains. As Han elaborates in the essay: “The Chu culture clearly differs from that of ‘descendants of the dragon’ along the banks of the Yellow River. People of Chu are ‘descendants of the bird’ who worship, extol and imitate birds.”<sup>18</sup> More interestingly, numerous

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<sup>17</sup> Han Shaogong, “The Roots of Literature,” in *Zai houtai de houtai* (Behind the backstage) (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2008), 273. The article was originally published in the *Zuojia* magazine, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

legends regarding the genesis of Chinese civilization trace the Chu people's ancestry to the virile and charismatic tribal leader Chi You, who fought against the Yellow Emperor but suffered an unfortunate defeat. The search for Chu culture is therefore a purposeful strategy to displace and demystify the narrative of a single common Chinese ancestry that centers on the Yellow Emperor, father of the nation.

It would be misleading, however, to conclude that Han Shaogong attempts to erect another cultural authority—the Chu culture, as well as its ancestor Chi You—to combat or supplant the current one. At stake in Han's retrieval of the Chu culture is a profound appreciation of the diversity of Chinese history. This appreciation comes out in the delight he draws from the accomplishments of his culturally diverse fellow root-seekers. With excitement, Han writes:

Jia Pingwa's "Shangzhou" series is pregnant with the vigorous color of the Qin and Han culture. It reflects his keen observation of Shangzhou's geography, history and ethnicity, forms a unique style, and expands the literary space. Li Hangyu's "Gechuanjiang" series grasps the spirit of the Wuyue culture....The Mongolian writer Ureltu, who lives in the heart of the grasslands, connects the historical past of the Ewenki culture with its present and future via his writing....All these authors are seeking for roots, and have just found their own cultural footholds.<sup>19</sup>

By displacing the dominance of the Central Plains Culture with a constellation of cultures, Han Shaogong cultivates an awareness of, as well as openness toward, the diverse cultural roots of China and re-establishes thereby a manner of viewing Chinese race, culture and literature as heterogeneous, not as singular or uniform.

The marginalized legacies on the periphery are highlighted. Han Shaogong states,

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

“Slang, unofficial history, legends, jokes, folk songs, traditional myths, local customs, sexual styles, etc. are rarely seen in the canons or listed in the cultural orthodoxy; they however bear the original look of life.”<sup>20</sup> These non-standard cultures have survived to refresh a grand culture that would seek to subdue them, and are hence essential for the revival and prosperity of Chinese literature. Han elaborates his thesis with a famous line: “Literature has roots. These roots of literature should be deeply planted in the soil of traditional folklores and legends, for if the roots are not deep, then its leaves will not flourish.”<sup>21</sup> Along with his effort to decenter the orthodox culture, Han Shaogong also de-emphasizes the *Han* ethnicity’s domination through calling attention to the cultures of diverse Chinese ethnic groups such the Miao, Dong, Yao, Tujia, White Russian and Muslim minorities. Contrary to the hegemonic view of minorities as cultural Others in need of being “civilized,” Han recognizes them as indispensable, invaluable and active cultural actors who greatly enrich the national culture. In his words, “Only when different cultures converge and when the tragic history of each individual minority group gets preserved, can we cultivate magnificent cultural flowers and extraordinary fruits.”<sup>22</sup> Foregrounding the marginalized cultural peripheries delivers a subtle critique of the center-periphery dichotomy as well as of the power structure lying beneath the ideological claim of a unified and univocal Chinese identity. The essentialist notion of Chineseness is thus scrutinized, just as it is when Rey Chow argues that “Chineseness can no longer be held as a monolithic given tied to the mythic homeland but must rather be understood as a provisional, ‘open signifier.’”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>23</sup> Rey Chow, “Introduction: Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem,” *Boundary 2* 25:3 (Fall 1998): 24.

Multiplicity of roots points to a polyphony of cultural pasts and, at a deeper level, to a heterogeneous sense of time itself. In the light of Benedict Anderson's theory, a nation is an "imagined community" in which people live in a homogeneous time, the time of capital/modernity.<sup>24</sup> In the case of China, the time of modernity, which is articulated in teleological and deterministic terms, assumes unshakable authority and subsumes all rhythms of the society into one uniform pace and tempo. People are summoned to march with the national agenda of economic development and keep in step with its rapid processes of industrialization and urbanization.

Han Shaogong's insistence on the spatial-cultural heterogeneity of China beyond the capital/center thus emphasizes a heterogeneous experience of time that is not necessarily congruent with "modernity." The roots of China, in Han's words, "resemble the enormous, seething and ambiguous deep layers of the earth that lurk beneath the earth's crust and support its surface—the standardized Culture."<sup>25</sup> Prioritizing the hidden, irregular, yet warmly animated and enduring magma over the crust, Han Shaogong dethrones the standardized universal Culture, an untenable truth-claim that can never stop an inherently heterogeneous existence from surfacing from within. Han's search for multiple roots of China exists outside of a homogeneous spatiotemporality.

### **3 "Homecoming": Troubled Time and the Repressed Other**

Also known as "Déjà Vu," Han Shaogong's 1985 work "Homecoming" narrates a story that is permeated with a mythical, enigmatic and ambiguous ambience. In it, reality, dream,

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<sup>24</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London and New York: Verso, 1991)

<sup>25</sup> Han Shaogong, "The Roots of Literature," 276.

memory and illusion interweave to the degree that they are no longer distinguishable from each other. The first-person narrator/protagonist Huang Zhixian is found to be on a phantom-like journey to a mountain village that looks at once exotic and familiar to him. People in the village seem to know him; but strangely enough, they address him not as Huang Zhixian but as Glasses Ma (Ma Yanjing). According to the villagers, this other man was an “educated youth” who once settled in the village but left it more than ten years earlier. While Huang insists emphatically that they must have mistaken him for Glasses Ma, some vague memories of himself as being Glasses Ma surface nevertheless. The protagonist is drawn into an uneasy tension between the two identities, which claim simultaneous access to the same psyche. The story ends with Huang Zhixian disconcertedly escaping from the village, and in a state of mounting perplexity about who he may be.

The story is usually interpreted from a perspective of the identity crisis faced by the educated-youth generation. Scholars read Huang Zhixian’s confusion as a living representation of the educated youth’s feeling of rootlessness—their sense, after they returned to urban areas, of belonging neither to the cities nor to the countryside. Yi-Tsi Mei Feuerwerker argues, “The notion of a fractured self, the lack of a coherent, continuous, autonomous subject, may coincide with the theories of postmodernism, but it can be seen no less as the product of a specific history, the destructive effects on selfhood from the countryside experience during the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>26</sup> Emphasizing how the young were victimized by a misguided Maoist social enterprise, Feuerwerker sheds a sympathetic light on the educated youth’s experience of

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<sup>26</sup> Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker, “The Post-Modern ‘Search for Roots’ in Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Wang Anyi,” in *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-representation and the Peasant “Other” in Modern Chinese Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 210.

displacement and fractured identity. Beneath the crisis of identity, however, lies a fragile sense of time. Rather than a unidirectional return, what Han Shaogong intimates in this story is a non-linear, multi-directional, and fragmented *temporality*.

The writing of the educated-youth experience in the wake of the Cultural Revolution often promotes a redemptive narrative that runs parallel to the official ideology of “moving forward.” For instance, in Zhang Chengzhi’s novella *The Black Steed* (1982), the educated-youth protagonist achieves a spiritual rebirth through a homecoming journey, reconnecting with the Mongolian ethnic minority into which he was sent down. By contrast, Han Shaogong’s “Homecoming” appears to cast the hope of healing and moving on as a mere fantasy. The village in Han’s narrative is not a spiritual home but the site of a nightmare, or a ghost that haunts, terrifies, and disrupts the temporal flow.

In the phantasmagoric land of “Homecoming,” the boundaries between the past, the present and the future blur and collapse. The Chinese title of this story, “Gui Qu Lai,” sensitively captures its manner of interlacing temporal strands. “Gui Qu Lai” literally means “return, go, come.” This title reminds one of the fourth-century Chinese poet Tao Qian’s famous work “Gui Qu Lai Xi Ci,” which is also translated as “Homecoming” in many English versions. Tao Qian was known foremost for his reclusiveness, as he sought out a bucolic and serene existence away from the hustle and bustle of government affairs. His “Gui Qu Lai Xi Ci” celebrates the idyllic village way-of-life and reaffirms his withdrawal from government service. Allusive as it is to Tao’s title, Han Shaogong’s story conveys a feeling quite separate from the relaxed and contented sentiments of the poem. Rather than enjoying his return to the village, Han Zhixian is hopelessly baffled by spatiotemporal disorientation.

Han Shaogong's slight play on Tao Qian's original title makes this sense of disorientation palpable. Tao Qian's poem is titled "Gui Qu Lai Xi Ci," whereas Han names its story "Gui Qu Lai," with the last two words "xi" and "ci" omitted. According to Dai Qinli, an expert on Tao Qian's poetry, the title of Tao's poem has a clear meaning of "gui qu," or "return," as both "lai" and "xi" in his title are merely functional words.<sup>27</sup> By simply juxtaposing the three words "gui," "qu," and "lai" in the title, Han Shaogong guides the reader to construe "lai" as an autonomous word meaning "come." Han's modification of Tao Qian's title thus creates new implications that stray away from the original. Aligning "gui" (return), "qu" (go), and "lai" (come) side by side obscures the notion of spatiality as well as temporality. One is pressed to ask: to which direction does the story lead—to return, to go, to come? Where is the destination—the city, the countryside, neither? Which action precedes which? The timeline is rendered anarchic. This utter disorder and puzzlement presents an important challenge to the rosy picture of the national identity reconstruction project following the Cultural Revolution. It also looks skeptically at the romantic ideal of a seamless transition from present to past.

Such a temporal condition evokes the Freudian realm of the unconscious, in which a fixed point of temporal reference is lost; a psychic timeframe replaces the external one. Indeed, rather than facing the prospect of a bright future, the protagonist, Huang Zhixian, journeys into the unconscious, and therein confronts the real. Huang's simultaneous feeling of familiarity and unfamiliarity further calls into mind Freud's notion of the "uncanny," or "unheimlich" in German, a word that surprisingly contains in itself the meaning of its opposite, "heimlich" (homely, familiar). Analyzing E.T.A Hoffman's short story "The Sandman," Freud contends that

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<sup>27</sup> See Dai Qinli, *Taoyuanming ji jiaozhu* (Collation and annotation of the collection of Tao Qian) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979).

“the uncanny is that class of frightening which leads back to *what is known of and long familiar*” (emphasis added).<sup>28</sup> In other words, the feeling of uncanniness is triggered precisely by what looks homely or familiar. Huang Zhixian is terrified by his familiarity with the locale and his twin-like resemblance to Glasses Ma. In an act of psychic defense, he deliberately positions himself as an outsider and ethnographic observer of the village, writing lengthy descriptions of its surroundings, customs and dialects to maintain a reassuring measure of detachment. However, the narration betrays that he already knows what he is describing before he describes it. The homeliness of the place engenders a deep sense of uncanniness. In Huang’s words, “The entire village made me suffocated, astounded, half-asleep and half-awake. I found it inexplicable.”<sup>29</sup>

In Freud’s analysis, the uncanny inspires dread not through what is unknown or unfamiliar, but through what has remained secret and hidden, such as the reoccurrence of something previously borne but repressed. (Of course, for Freud, this has to do with the castration complex and a male’s exposure to the female genitalia, which remind him of the castration threat.<sup>30</sup>) As other critics have discussed, the familiar, sent-down location serves as a reminder of the educated youth’s suppressed memories: the aborted ideals of youth, the ache of defeat and the passage into disillusion.<sup>31</sup> I want to reveal another layer of their collective memory—one that inhabits perhaps the deepest stratum of their psyches.

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<sup>28</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. V.B. Leitch et al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2001), 930.

<sup>29</sup> Han Shaogong, “Homecoming,” in *Gui qu lai* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2008), 67.

<sup>30</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 929-951.

<sup>31</sup> See, for instances, Joseph Lau, “Visitation” and Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker, “Post-Modern ‘Search’.”

A scene in which the protagonist glimpses his own scar provides a rare opportunity for this deep-seated memory to surface. During his visit, Huang Zhixian, in accordance with local custom, is made to take a bath. A process of self-objectification then occurs:

I [Huang Zhixian] looked at this blue body of mine and suddenly had a weird feeling. The body seemed strange, and alien. I had no clothes on, and there was no one here but me, so no one to cover myself up for or pose for. There was only my naked self, my own reality.<sup>32</sup>

Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker asserts that Huang is now “verging onto a moment of ‘truth’,” which comes in the recognition that he actually *is* Glasses Ma.<sup>33</sup> When the gaze of others is absent, Huang subjects himself to his own gaze, and his alter ego, a former educated youth, emerges from the scrutiny of his naked form. This scene, however, does more than simply clarify the mystery of his identity. The act of undressing exposes a salient scar on Huang Zhixian’s body. While bathing, Huang soon notices this scar on his leg and sinks into a reverie of doubt about what seems to have happened:

I started to wipe an inch-long scar on my calf. I had received the injury in a football pitch, where I was hit by a studded boot. But, it seemed not so...I got the scar from a nasty bite by a dwarfish man. Was it on that rainy misty morning? On that narrow mountain track? He was coming towards me holding an opened umbrella. He was so frightened as to tremble at the sight of me staring at him. Then he fell on his knees and swore that he would never do it again, never, and that Second Sister-in-law’s death had nothing to do with him, nor was he the one who incriminated Xiongtou and caused his imprisonment. In the end he reacted against the rope, his eyes nearly dropping out of their sockets, and he bit my leg hard. He jerked and pulled at the curb-rope round his neck. Then, abruptly,

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<sup>32</sup> Han Shaogong, “Homecoming,” 63-64.

<sup>33</sup> Feuerwerker, “Post-Modern ‘Search’,” 209.

he stretched out his fingers, and they began scratching and digging into the earth. I did not dare to think any more....<sup>34</sup>

Scars, as David Der-wei Wang notes, are both a sign of healing and a reminder of the moment of violence. In Wang's words, "Implied in the scar is its corporeal testimony, pointing to the infliction upon the body of intrusion, to the passage of time, and to a contested desire to deny, while revisiting, the scene of violence."<sup>35</sup> To put it another way, despite its signification of healing, the very presence of the scar inevitably evokes memories of violence. The scar on Huang Zhixian's calf did just that, recalling his violent elimination of Shorty Yang, the village bully. This mental picture scares Huang so deeply that he dares not think of it further. So deep is his terror that he cannot even bear to look at his own hands. "Was there a smell of blood on them?" he asks, horrified and distressed.<sup>36</sup> It becomes visible that Huang Zhixian's rejection of being Glasses Ma is really a *disavowal* of violence he has committed.

Huang Zhixiang's scar indexes the dual identity of educated youths, who are not simply victims, but also perpetrators. While most of Han Shaogong's literary contemporaries lamented the sent-down subject's loss of youth and dream, Han contests such a self-pitying mode of remembrance, almost cruelly unveiling hidden and unobserved violence. A testament to Huang Zhixian's murderous act, the scar discloses a different history of the sent-down youths, who were mostly former Red Guards. In this history, they are revealed as partakers in self-righteous violence during the Cultural Revolution. Even before the revolution, the notion of violent means

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<sup>34</sup> Han Shaogong, "Homecoming," 64.

<sup>35</sup> David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 148.

<sup>36</sup> Han Shaogong, "Homecoming," 64.

justifying noble ends had been rooted in Chinese tradition and hailed in revolutionary language.

Mao argues thus in “The Survey Report of Hunan Peasant Movement”:

A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an *act of violence* by which one class overthrows another.<sup>37</sup>

For Mao, violence is a sublime and legitimate means of revolt. The Red Guards Movement, in which most educated youths were involved before their rustication, fervently implemented Mao’s revolutionary theory of violence. By detailing the disturbing psychological consequence of physically hurting another person, Han Shaogong calls to attention the ethical responsibility of the perpetrators against the grain of the revolutionary rhetoric. For protagonist Huang Zhixian, the harm he did in the name of social justice is perhaps the most horrifying layer of the hidden secret—what Freud calls the repressed—dwelling in the homely, sent-down village. “Homecoming” thus discloses the memory repressed by the post-Mao official narrative of moving forward—a narrative that brought discussion of the Cultural Revolution to a premature close.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Han Shaogong’s writing carves out a literary space of heterogeneity for the marginalized but recalcitrant Other to confound the logic of progress, centrality, and universality. The two literary texts discussed in this article approach a heterogeneous spatiotemporality from different

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<sup>37</sup> Mao Zedong, “*Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* [Mao Zedong], vol. 1 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 28. (Italics are mine.)

perspectives. “The Roots of Literature” defies both the homogeneous understanding of space-time and the unified Chinese identity that it predicates by highlighting the diverse cultural sites, legacies, and ethnic groups that traditionally remained on the margins of Chinese civilization. “Homecoming,” by contrast, resists the linear progression of time by bringing forth the repressed layer of memory that has been heavily glossed over by a state-imposed “forward-looking” ideology. In both works, Han delineates a route that circumvents the prescribed consciousness of modernity and leads instead to the realm of heterogeneity, to the possibility of difference, and to the discovery of the concealed and repressed.

Han’s vision of heterogeneous temporality/spatiality remains relevant to today’s China. As China has entered the twenty-first century, its modernization project has merged with the process of globalization. The current state modernity discourse narrates globalization as both necessary and inevitable for China’s development, a premise apparent in slogans like “integrating with the world.” By reifying notions of linearity and teleology, the nation has entered further and faster into the developmentalist mentality. Its leaders claim to work toward a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*) in the midst of inequality, injustice and vast disparities of wealth, all factors that could precipitate social unrest. Ironically, this social ideal is invoked less to improve social welfare than to justify the government’s suppression of dissent. So as to achieve “harmony,” whatever smacks too much of difference, contestation, resistance and challenge gets conveniently smoothed over in the name of China’s economic development. In the context of present-day China, so immersed in the logic of development and homogeneity, revisiting the work Han Shaogong wrote three decades ago can invite a rethinking of well-entrenched teleological narratives concerning history, culture, and development.

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