

Breaking Up From What? The Corporeal Politics of Values in the Duanlie *yundong* (Rupture Movement)

Melinda Pirazzoli

Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna, Italia

Abstract This study, which provides close readings of short stories written by 朱文 (1967-), Han Dong 韩东 (1961-) and Dong Xi 东西 (1966-), major exponents of a Nanjing-based group of writers called *Duanlie* 断裂 (Rupture), suggests that for these writers the body is represented in terms of human capital (*suzhi* 素质) in a way that resonates well with what the political scientist Crawford Brough Macpherson has defined as “possessive individualism”. In fact, their characters’ individual private body is for them the most important capital as well as the primary object of self-investment; they owe nothing to society; they regard personal relations as market relations breaking free from traditional kinship bonds and, finally, they regard themselves as ‘proprietors of themselves’. What these middle-class intellectuals introduce in their writings is the newly-born middle-class consumer willing to celebrate, as Paterson says, “carnavalesque consuming bodies celebrating popular pleasures, not of the mind, but of the body” (2005, 105).

Keywords Body. Rupture Movement. Possessive Individualism. Chinese Values. Chinese Middle-class Consumers.

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1 The Duanlie 断裂 (Rupture) Movement and the Question of Values

The decade of the nineties was both fascinating and complex for Chinese society. During these ten years, radical economic, social, political and ideological changes occurred as a consequence of the transition from a planned to a market economy. It is not surprising, therefore, that such a transformation inevitably triggered off debates about the relationship between material (economic) and social, political, ethical and aesthetic values. As Luigi Tomba has once remarked, “the legitimacy of the post-Mao communist regime has relied on the simultaneous development of two aspects of civilization: material (*wuzhi* 物质) and spiritual (*jingshen* 精神)” (2009, 591). He has also convincingly highlighted the pivotal role played by the spiritual side – “individual behaviors and commitment to the values of civility, order and stability” (592) – within the Chinese Communist Party’s civilising project whose most important actor is “the urban, educated and resource-rich middle class” (592).

Ann Anagnost has demonstrated that the interconnectedness between this newly born Chinese middle-class spiritual values and consumer culture can be best understood if we focus on the concept of *suzhi* 素质, which “roughly translates as culture” and “encompass[es] the minute social distinction between defining a person of quality in practices of consumption and the incitement of a middle-class desire for social mobility” (2004, 190).

As Tamara Jacka has amply demonstrated in her study, it is impossible to provide an unambiguous definition of *suzhi* since it is a keyword that connects a wide array of discourses:

Suzhi, which refers to the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct, is, in Raymond Williams’s terms, a “keyword”. In its contemporary usage, it has become widespread only since the 1980s. However, it intersects with, and contains powerful traces of, other keywords, such as civilization and modernity, whose histories are long and fraught and entangled with developments across languages and cultures. Laden as it is with cultural and historical associations, *suzhi* is of critical importance to contemporary China’s booming, globally oriented market economy and to new, ‘post-socialist’ forms of state governance and social control. It plays a central role in contemporary processes of citizenship, simultaneously contributing to understandings of the responsibilities, obligations, claims, and rights that connect members of society to the state; to determinations of which individuals and social groups are included in this set of rights and responsibilities and which are excluded; to discourses on how to produce the ‘ideal’ citizen as well as what

to do about the less-than-ideal citizen; and to processes and institutions that produce and reproduce boundaries and gradations between different types of citizenship and citizen. [...] Suzhi is very much a part of contemporary public culture, being reproduced by numerous different social actors and in a variety of popular, as well as official, discourses. It is both a common, taken-for-granted word and a 'difficult' term whose meaning and function vary and are much contested but which nevertheless seems to distill a set of values that are central and specific to particular historical and social conditions. (2009, 524)

The Chinese Communist Party's political zeal to promote discourses on how to produce the 'ideal citizen' and on how to discipline and regiment "the urban, educated and resource-rich middle class" had a profound impact on Chinese writers and writings in the early nineties. Neorealist writers belonging to the *Zhongguo zuojia xiehui* 中国作家协会 (China Writers Association) such as Liu Heng 刘恒 (1954-), Liu Zhenyun 刘震云 (1958-), Fang Fang 方方 (1955-) and Chi Li 池莉 (1957-) among others, reacted polemically by devising a new form of realism that represented in minute details the degrading daily lives and the derogate bodies of sexually repressed common people whose desire for upper social mobility was thwarted by an unjust social system.¹ A group of young urban writers - the so-called *Wansheng dai* 晚生代 (Late-Born Generation) or *Xinsheng dai* 新生代 (Newly Born Generation) - preferred instead to focus on the material aspects of civilisation, more specifically on the bodily pleasures and practices of consumption of the newly born Chinese middle class consumers. In their stories and novels, however, they do not endorse the Chinese Communist Party's civilising project either. In fact, they represent young urbanites who, while enjoying all the advantages of the new market economy, eschew all forms of 'responsibilities and obligations' towards society and the state.

The present study aims to discuss the innovative literary achievements of Zhu Wen 朱文 (1967-), Han Dong 韩东 (1961-) and Dong Xi 东西 (1966-), major exponents of a Nanjing-based group of writers within the *Wansheng dai* called *Duanlie* 断裂 (Rupture). These writers also seriously reflect upon notions such as the status of writers and writing, embodied values, and middle-class consumer culture not from *within the institutions, but against them*.

Jason McGrath thus explains the appearance of the *Duanlie* movement on the literary scene:

¹ A detailed analysis of neorealism is provided in the second and the third chapter of Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明 (1997), *Shengyu de xiangxiang: Jiushi niandai de wenxue xushi yu wenhua weiji* 剩余的形象: 九十年代的文学叙事与文化危机 (*Residual Imagination: Literary Representation of the Nineties and the Cultural Crisis*).

As Chen [Xiaoming] gleefully proclaimed, with the Rupture group, “The Chinese literary scene unexpectedly had a community of people dare to suddenly make public an attitude which clearly defined themselves as an alternative outside the dominant culture, the first time in over half a century such a bizarre absurdity had appeared”. With the Rupture authors, “those serving as the subject of literature, those literary writers most able to hit the mark on contemporary life, are no longer part of the general literary institution”, and yet “they have suddenly emerged on the surface of history to occupy the primary position in contemporary literature”. This was clear evidence that “the tradition of literature from its socialized organizational structure to its spiritual essence” had “undergone a fundamental transformation”. It also indicated a legitimacy crisis occurring in the general institution of contemporary Chinese literature – that is, a welcome one in which the establishment corresponded to a new unprecedented degree of self-determination. (2008, 78)

While it is certainly true, as Jason McGrath points out, that the Rupture movement was not the first one to assert institutional autonomy because writers such as Wang Shuo 王朔 (1958-) and Wang Xiaobo 王小波 (1952-1997) had already “shattered the mystery enshrouding the literary institution and demonstrated the multifaceted feasibility of writing outside the system” (78), it was nevertheless the first one to address the interconnectedness between the individual body and the Chinese middle-class consumer values engendered by the new market economy.

This study, which provides close readings of short stories written by Zhu Wen, Han Dong and Dong Xi, suggests that while these writers represent the body in terms of human capital, they nevertheless show no commitment to the values of civility, order and stability. On the contrary, in their fictional production there is a clear disconnect between the individual body and the state/civil society. Their representation of the body, instead, resonates well with the logic of what the neoliberalist political scientist Crawford Brough Macpherson has defined as “possessive individualism”.

According to Macpherson,

1. What makes a man human is freedom from dependence on the wills of others.
2. Freedom from dependence on others means freedom from any relations with others except those relations which the individual enters voluntarily with a view to his own interest.
3. The individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society.
4. Although the individual cannot alienate the whole of this property in his own person, he may alienate his capacity to labor.
5. Human society consists of a series of market relations... (1962, 263-4)

The literary works of the Rupture movement reflect all the characteristics of possessive individualism. In fact, their characters' individual private body is for them the most important capital as well as the primary object of self-investment; they owe nothing to society; they regard personal relations as market relations breaking free from traditional kinship and social bonds and, finally, they regard themselves as proprietor of themselves. What these middle-class intellectuals introduce in their writings is the newly-born middle-class consuming body, which as Paterson suggests, celebrates "popular pleasures, not of the mind, but of the body" (2005, 105).

2 Zhu Wen: Dollars, *Renminbi*, and the Translation of Values

当然出门前我没忘了把压在席子下的钱统统揣上。那是我所有的积蓄，我要把它们花完，一个子也不剩，那是一件快活无比的事情。可惜我从来没有过很多的钱可供我挥霍，我真不走运。但是我相信自己会有那么一天变得大名鼎鼎，然后一开门就有大把大把的支票劈头盖脸地冲我砸过来，躲也躲不掉。那种叫美元的东西，满是让人神往的异国情调。一张美元在半空中又化为更多的人民币支票，就像魔术一般，往下飘呀飘呀，我双手展开眼望蓝天，满怀感激地享受着这缤纷的幸福之雨。我不会因此感到苦恼的，给我一个机会，我就做一次给你看看，我就想做一次让你激动不已的永不锈蚀的花钱机器。最后正如我朋友预言的那样。晚年的我必将在贫穷和孤独中死去。(Zhu 1995, 379-80)

Naturally, I took out all the money I had stuffed under the mat. It was everything I had saved; I wanted to spend it all, didn't want a single cent left at the end of the day – I could think of nothing more than satisfying myself. Sadly, I didn't have much money to squander in the first place; maybe I've just been so unlucky so far in my life. But one day I am sure I'm going to make it big, great handful of bills will hit me in the face whenever I open the door; there will be nowhere to hide. Dollars, they have this intoxicating generosity of spirit. The way a dollar bill can generate endless *renminbi* out of thin air, it's just like magic; down they float into your outstretched hands, your eyes raised heavenward, gratefully receiving this riot, this shower of fortune. Just give me a chance and I'd show the world exactly what kind of carefree rust-less spending machine I could be. Then after throwing it all away, just as my friends have predicted, I'd live out my years in lonely poverty. (Zhu 2007a, 10)

This is an excerpt of the highly acclaimed novella *Wo ai meiyuan* 我爱美元 (I Love Dollars) written in 1995 by Zhu Wen. This was a year characterised by an increasing interest on the part of intellectuals in the debate about the interconnectedness between Chinese spiritual

and economic values. In May, Jiang Zemin 江泽民 (1926-) commented that “if the Chinese people were to neglect traditional moral teachings, China would become a vassal of foreign particularly Western culture” (quoted in Dynon 2008, 94). In 1996, “resolutions had called for the Party to carry the cream of [Chinese] national culture, prevent and eliminate the spread of cultural garbage, [and to] resist the conspiracy by hostile forces to ‘westernize’ and ‘split’ the country” (94). Not surprisingly, in 1996 and in 1997, leading Chinese conservative intellectuals published two important nationalistic best sellers, *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu* 中国可以说“不” (China Can Say No) and *Wo xiangxin Zhongguo* 我相信中国 (I Believe in China) (94).

In this context, it is clear not only the import of Zhu Wen’s revolutionary story “I Love Dollars”, but also the meaning and the scope of the literary contribution of the Rupture movement, which aspired to suggest the incompatibility and the oddities between the newly imported consumer cultural values and the bombastic rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party. It is a rupture with both the past and present institutional cultural, ethical and social values.

Dollars, in this passage, seem to have an intoxicating power, a power of seduction that Chinese *renminbi* seem to lack. By displacing traditional Marxist process of fetishization of the commodity to a foreign currency, Zhu Wen creates a brand-new concept of value, a value that must be searched for in what is now commonly defined as consumer culture. Dollars’ ‘intoxicating generosity of spirit’ is a metaphor of the transmutation of the foreign currency into something almost transcendent and metaphysical that is not easily distinguishable from a fetish.

Zhu Wen represents consumption in a way that appears to sing the praises of consumer culture and consumer habits of late-capitalist society, as “a way to experiment [with] new modes of subjectivity” (Paterson 2005, 49). Indeed, as such a pseudo-metanarrative describing the adventures of a writer celebrating the birth of consumer culture, “I Love Dollars” is conceived as a novella that aims to establish close connections between practices of consumption and different categories of culture in order to reflect upon the role of writing and writers in post-socialist China.

The text narrates the feats of the protagonist, a writer quite tellingly named Zhu Wen, who is interrupted during sexual intercourse with a woman named Wang Qing, by his unnamed father’s sudden entry into his room. After inspecting his eldest son’s apartment, Father confesses the purpose of his visit: he needs the diegetic Zhu Wen to dissuade his younger brother from dropping out from school. The elder son then escorts his father on an instructive tour of the city. He attempts to hook up Father with young girls in order to have him experience the new urban erotic pleasures, accompanies him first to a hairdresser to have his hair cut according to the latest fashion, and then to the movies where they are exhibiting a cinematographic adap-

tation of the diegetic Zhu Wen's own literary work. These are all strategies to teach his old mannered and low-*suzhi* father the principles of hedonism that, as Paterson reminds us, are "a new consumption ethic in the late-capitalist consumer culture" (2005, 24).

Alternatively put, Zhu Wen deploys an ironic discourse on "the formative power of *suzhi* as an ideological formation that enables the transfer of economic value from one body to another" (Anagnost 2004, 191). The protagonist's first and apparently only concern is to invest all his money in order to transform his coarse father into a sophisticated urbanite and into a modern consumer.

From the beginning of this story, there is a manifest disinterest on the part of the protagonist in his father's past:

额上有一块伤疤,这是我们近几年对父亲的一大发现。几十年来我们都没有注意到。父亲说,他小时候在老家那阵子就是厉害的角色,可以攀着树枝从一棵树蹿到另一棵树上,就像猴子一样敏捷。但是这块伤疤是怎么落下的,他始终没有讲清楚。(Zhu 1995, 375)

He had a scar on his forehead, a great discovery we'd made about him in recent years. For decades, we'd never even noticed it. Father said he'd been a real daredevil in the town he'd grown up in, that he could climb trees, scrambling from one branch to another, quick as a monkey. But he'd never explained how he'd ended up with the scar. (Zhu 2007a, 5)

This passage is a prelude to Father's initiation into the pleasures of urban life. The description of the narrator's enlightenment about Father's scar reminds readers, in a very subtle and ironic way, of the awakening of Lu Xun's 鲁迅 (1881-1936) madman in his *Kuangren riji* 狂人日记 (A Madman's Diary) (1918). Just as in the case of the madman, in fact, reality is abruptly disclosed to the narrator's eyes. However, writers of the Rupture movement such as Zhu Wen, unlike in the narratives produced up until then, keep away from epistemological questions.² The scar described here is not a mere metaphor of the important literary movement called 'scar literature'.³ It is above all a bodily trace as well as a signifier of a socialist revolutionary past that is forever gone and that no longer raises any curiosity or interest.

The scar is introduced in this novella as a reminder of a past in which the notion of *suzhi* bore a radically different meaning. As Ann

² An important epistemological analysis of Lu Xun's story is offered by David Der-Wei Wang in his introduction to *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China. Mao Dun, Lao She and Shen Congwen* (2010, 5-10).

³ "Scar Literature" is discussed by Sabina Knight in her "Scar Literature and the Memory of Trauma" (2016, 293-7).

Anagnost reminds us, in fact, it came into being as a term by the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties “in state documents investigating rural poverty that attributed China’s failure to modernize to the ‘low quality’ (*suzhi di*) of its population, especially in rural areas” (2004, 190). In other terms, the scar is an expedient to represent the incommensurability between a socialist past – when neither commodities nor urban pleasures were available – and the present urban reality characterised by a wholesale commodification of values.

In the Maoist era, as Zhu Wen comments, even libidinal economy was experienced in radically different terms:

现在想起来, 父亲是个性欲旺盛的人, 只是有一点生不逢时。它们那会儿的性欲不叫性欲, 而叫理想或者追求。父亲每天早晨起来, 都要到操场或者公路跑上一万米, 这个习惯现在他老人家大概已经灭掉, 因为不再需要。所以他也知道那几毫升凝固汽油要省着点用, 不能时刻都开足马力。和这个世界一样, 能源问题是你今天以及明天的主要问题。(Zhu 1995, 379)

Thinking about it, I realized Father was a man with quite a libido, just that he was born a bit before his time. In his days, libido wasn’t called libido. It was called idealism. Early every morning, Father used to go to the sports field or run six miles along the road, but he has since dropped the habit, I suspect because there is no need for it. So, I knew his few remaining ounces of congealed gasoline had to be used sparingly; that he couldn’t go full throttle all the time. Energy: it’s a problem for the planet, it’s a problem for us, both in the present and in the future. (Zhu 2007a, 9)

The body plays a pivotal role in all the fiction produced by writers of the Rupture Movement. Father’s sexual and libidinal repression serves as an important foil to the present consumer culture because, as Paterson argues, consumption practices do not necessarily consist in the purchase of desired objects, but by the emerging setting out of desires, because “with bodily pleasures comes release and, rather than guarded subjectivity and temperance encouraged by prevailing social order, a loss of self is incurred, a release from socially constructed subjectivities” (2005, 107).

Father and son, just like Baudelaire’s *flâneurs*, roam around the city in search for pleasures and release. Father, however, still immersed in his old-fashioned world, is unwilling to give up his equally old-fashioned ideals. As a consequence, he constantly objects to his son’s attempts to have him appreciate the values of ‘carnavalesque bodily pleasures’. The author’s representation of the hiatus between the Father’s and the Son’s relationships with their own bodies and with the reality that surrounds them is a successful expedient to depict not only the radical changes occurred in China in the last decade of the twentieth century, but also the different *suzhi* in urban and rural China. Fa-

ther's coarse manners, his ineptitude at relating both with the modern urban environment and with his libido as well as his stubborn refusal to comply with his son's world view inevitably undermines their relationship. Not only does Father refuse to seduce the young girls whom his son is setting him up with, he also implores him to give up his licentious conduct and to stop being a writer of what he conceives to be vulgar and shallow novels. The protagonist tries to defend himself and his fictional production:

“生活中除了性就没有其他东西了吗？我真搞不懂！”父亲把那叠稿纸扔到了一边，频频摇头。他被我的性恼怒了。

“我倒是问你，你怎么从我的小说中看到性呢？”

“一个作家应该给人带来一些积极向上的东西，理想、追求、民主、自由等等、等等。”

“我说爸爸，你说的这些玩艺，我的性里都有。”

我觉得心里空洞极了，我讨厌自己嘴里的那股胃酸的气味。房间里的一切都有一股令人作呕的胃酸味。在台灯的光线下，父亲的脸庞，那高高的鼻子以及一侧鼻子的阴影，椅子，床，烟缸上正在消散的烟，在这一刻都深陷于一种难以摆脱的无意义之中。每当有人用父亲一样的立场评价我的作品，我就有一种与这个世界通奸的感觉，知道吗？你们让我觉得自己是一个充满疑虑、焦灼、不安的通奸者。但是我现在准备继续充当这个角色。(Zhu 1995, 404)

“Is sex the only thing that matters? Is there nothing else?” Father threw one pile of manuscripts to one side, shaking his head furiously.

“Let me ask you a question: how come you only pick up on the sex in what I write, and nothing else?”

“A writer ought to offer something positive, something to look up, ideals, aspirations, democracy, freedom, stuff like that.”

“Dad, I am telling you, all that stuff, it's all there in sex.”

My mind still an aching void, I was nauseated by the taste of stomach acid washing around my mouth. Around the whole room. Beneath the circle of light cast by the table lamp, Father's face, his high angled nose and the shadow it cast, the chair, bed, ashtray and cigarette burning down on it suddenly all seemed sunk into meaninglessness. Whenever someone criticizes my writing as Father had just done, I get this feeling that I am an adulterer, that everything I do in the world is false and empty, like adultery. Do you know what I mean? I get an adulterer's misgivings, anxieties, guilt, unease. But then I carry on as before. (Zhu 2007a, 34)

Sexual freedom, one of the most important conquests of post-socialist China, is one of the Rupture movement writers' most important themes to address the principle of possessive individualism. The diegetic Zhu Wen's obsessive concern to invest all his money for both finding a wom-

an willing to offer his father a sexually gratifying experience and transforming him into a modern middle-class consumer stems from his urgency to represent the radical transformation of values occurred in urban China.

As Peter Brooks (1993, 180) once observed, the birth of the middle class, and its fictional representation, are in fact intimately connected to an interest in the private life of the individual subject as well as its relation to the domain of leisure. Eroticism, as he argues, becomes essential to the production of a new urban space dominated by middle-class urban desire. This is also what Henri Lefebvre highlights in his acclaimed works: in the trilogy *Critique of Everyday Life* (1958, 1961, 1981) in which he conflates the existentialist and, more specifically, the Sartrean notion of alienation with Heidegger's concept of "everydayness" (*Alltaglichkeit*); and in *The Production of Space* that claims that there is an anatomy of space generated by "a practical fleshy body conceived as a totality complete with spatial qualities (symmetries, asymmetries) and energetic properties (discharge, economic, waste)" (1991, 61).

In this light, it can be inferred that eroticism in the literary production of the Rupture movement is the manifestation of the newly born subject who, moving into a new kind of social space where consolidated social practices that rely on social and kinship bonds (commonly known in China as *guanxi* 关系) have been replaced by forms of anonymous and impersonal relationships, experiences his subjectivity less through his emotions and affections than his bodily perceptions and relationships. As is clear, sexual and erotic relationships in "I Love Dollars" constitute neither emotional bonds nor spaces of intimacy. They are here - and even more in Han Dong's "Dollars Are Harder than Renminbi", discussed in the next section - a way to manage the "energetic properties of the body (discharge, economics, waste)".

Seen from this perspective, the overwhelming sense of alienation and the pervasive sense of nausea on the part of the protagonist described in the passage above are crucial aspects of the process of the subject's self-reflexivity in the reified and commodified society produced by the capitalist economy, an aspect already widely explored in the philosophical writings and fiction produced by French existentialist writers such as Albert Camus (1913-1960) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980).

More specifically, 'Nausea' appears prominently in Sartre's *Being and Nothing* (1943) and in his novel *The Nausea* (1938) to define the complex relationship between self and the Other. As Richard Kamber explains:

The expression 'Nausea', '*la Nausée*' with a capital N, is used consistently throughout this novel to designate a way of apprehending external object (or one's own body used as an external object) and

the world in which they are situated. Essentially, it is a mode of apprehension which nullifies the categories, concepts, and instrumental associations in terms of which we ordinarily perceive the world, and through this nullification reveals worldly entities as mere existents. This mode of apprehension is accompanied by a feeling of disgust, distaste or repulsion and is capable of transforming the world *in* which one is a practical agent to an agglomeration of undifferentiated existents *within* which one is a captive observer. (1983, 1280)

Zhu Wen's representation of Nausea overlaps to a great extent with Sartre's. Exposed to the wide array of stimuli that the external environment provides, he can only perform as a captive observer of external objects, people, including his own body and his own father. He never acquires full agency. In the passage mentioned above, just like in the passage where the diegetic Zhu Wen observes Father's scar, there is a "mode of apprehension which nullifies the categories, concepts and instrumental associations", which entails, from the aesthetic point of view, a mimetic mode of representation. The thorough and meticulous descriptions of the environment and of the people with whom he interacts are in fact simple descriptions of "worldly entities as mere existents".

The writer's refusal to provide a moral and ideological reading of the world, on the one hand, and his constant focus on the impossibility to decode, to internalise or make sense of the world surrounding him, on the other, are exactly what distinguishes the Rupture movement from all previous literary movements.

Indeed, as Patrick McGrath has observed, this mode of writing calls to mind that of the *Xin ganjuepai* 新感觉派 (New Sensationists) of the thirties (2008, 76).⁴ However, what is radically new in the Rupture movement of the nineties is the way in which anti-ideological discourses are deployed. As the diegetic Zhu Wen explains to his father, this new urban milieu in which everything, including the body, is configured in terms of capital and libidinal economy inevitably replaces residual Maoist or pre-Maoist ideals and values with values of possessive individualism via the body. This new approach to the newly born middle-class subject, to the world and to the real is indeed the most important contribution and revolution of the Rupture movement.

The ending to "I Love Dollars" represents the author's desire to break radically with the past. In fact, not only does the protagonist Zhu Wen fail to convince his younger brother to meet his father, he also forgets about his father's existence immediately after the latter's departure:

⁴ For an in-depth analysis of this literary movement cf. Lee 1999.

半个小时以后,我躺在那张柔软的席梦思上昏昏欲眠,难以克服的厌恶在一个单身女人卧室里蔓延开来。恍惚之中,我忽然觉得自己在在这已经过去的一天里什么也没做,哪儿也没去,只是和一个三十四岁的女人在虚无的中心终于干完了一件可以干的事情。(Zhu 1995, 414)

Half an hour later, as I lay on Wang Qing's soft mat, drifting towards sleep in her single-woman's bedroom, I was attacked by self-disgust. I suddenly felt that I hadn't done anything the entire day just past. All I'd done, inside the vacuum that had been the last twenty-four hours, was taken to its logical conclusion, the most logical thing you can do with a thirty-four-year-old woman. (Zhu 2007a, 44)

Zhu Wen's representation of the ways in which former symbolic values and ideals have been replaced with material corporeal and economic values is also articulated in other works. The short story *Bang, ang-si he rou* 磅、盎司和肉 (Pounds, Ounces, Meat) (2008) is exemplary in this regard. Just like in "I Love Dollars", it also narrates the feats of a diegetic Zhu Wen who, after coping with the payment of the electricity and telephone bills, "a contradiction of everyday life" (215),⁵ ventures to the market with his girlfriend to buy 400 grams pork fillet. Upset by the fact that the pork fillet comes with a bone, which they refuse to pay for, they are both determined to verify the exact weight of the meat in order to pay a fair price:

但是问题是,到哪去找一台值得信赖的秤呢?不远处的一家炒货店里就有一根老式的杆秤,但是我们从小就知道这种秤里可能灌有水银,你怎么能相信呢?再多走几步就是国营桂花鸭的下关区指定销售点,那里也有一台油腻腻的电子秤,但是多年来我们相信桂花鸭,却还是对它身下的秤没有十分的把握。我的女友开始后悔没有带上她那只袖珍的弹簧秤。不过带来了也没用,弹簧老化了,一斤栗子能称出两斤来,让你每次都觉得自己捡了个大钱包。我想了想以后说,我看就是手感最可信了,行家一搭手就知道没有。(Zhu 2000, 3)

The problem was, where could we find a dependable set of scales? There was a set of old-fashioned suspension scales at a fast-food stall not far off, but they were no good: everyone knows scales like

⁵ Zhu Wen's irony on the bombastic rhetoric of Maoist propaganda is evident in his sentence 什么是日常生活中的矛盾?电费和电话费就是一对矛盾 (Zhu 2000, 1) (What are the contradictions of everyday life? The electric bill and the phone bill are a pair of contradictions - Zhu 2007, 2015). It evokes ironically the opening sentence of Mao Zedong's ground-breaking philosophical essay *Maodun lun* 矛盾论 (On Contradiction) (1937): 事物的矛盾法则,即对立统一的法则,是唯物辩证法的最根本的法则 (Throughout the history of human knowledge, there have been two conceptions concerning the law of development of the universe, the metaphysical conception and the dialectical conception, which form two opposing world outlooks - Mao Zedong (1952). *On Contradiction*. Beijing: Foreign language Press, 1).

those can be tampered with. A little farther down, there was a set of greasy electronic scales at a state-owned osmanthus duck stall. We had no problems with osmanthus duck, naturally, but were the scales beneath it to be trusted? My girlfriend was beginning to regret not having brought her pocket-sized spring balance out with her. But even if she had, it wouldn't have been much use: the springs were so old they sometimes turned 500 grams of chestnuts into a kilo. You didn't know when you had been lucky or when you'd been had. I think we should go by feel, I said, after thinking it over. All we need is an expert to do it for us. (Zhu 2007, 217)

Passages like this one are not only the demonstration of the Rupture movement's astounding capability to reproduce, aestheticize and magnify in a mimetic way the most minute aesthetic details of everyday life. They also evidence the important project that lurks behind the only apparent shallowness and pettiness of this movement's literary output: these stories address the important issue of the inevitable conversion of values occurred in the radical passage from Maoist ideology and economy to a new market economy informed by new ideas and values.

Scales and balances are important protagonists of this interesting passage. The difficulties of the diegetic Zhu Wen and his girlfriend of finding a modern and proper scale to ascertain the commensurability between the weight of the meat and its price suggests the intrinsic contradictions between a past dominated by incommensurable and unquantifiable symbolic and political values and the present values dictated by the newly born market economy in which everything can and must be quantified in terms of economic values.

While the unreliability of the old scales is a powerful metaphor of a residual cumbersome and useless past, the unreliability of the scale of the protagonist's girlfriend seems to allude to the arbitrariness of individual judgments on unfathomable values. The writer's last and almost desperate appeal to an external impartial expert suggests the young generation's helplessness in coping with the unsteady and unclear values of the present reality.

It might also be inferred from passages like this one that the sense of alienation present in the fiction of the Rupture movement, also discussed above, can be interpreted as the result of a world in which values are no longer other-directed, homogeneous and uniform. It is impossible in fact to overlook that, while during the Maoist era shared social and ideological values were uniquely imposed by the political establishment, in the ambivalent Chinese post-socialist era, values dominated by the impersonal and arbitrary forces of the market still coalesce with old values of the Maoist era.

Forced to confront two systems of coexisting values at odds with each other, the self-constituting subject in the post-socialist era cannot but be vacillating and ambivalent. In other terms, the social space

of the present, a hybrid space where old and new values coexist, compels the subject to rely uniquely upon his own personal self and body as well as his bodily experience in order to self-construct.

Interestingly enough, the story goes on narrating the protagonist's encounter with an old woman who decides to help the protagonists to solve the riddle of the bone's weight. She even converts, upon their request, the weight from pounds to grams. Realising that, even after the conversion, the diegetic Zhu Wen cannot still make out whether they have paid a fair amount of money, the old woman flies off the handle:

“瞧瞧,你们这些年轻人,连这种简单的换算都不会,做饭也不会!就像古人说的,四体不勤,五谷不分,六亲不认。一个个两条膀子两条腿,还要让我一个老太婆整天起早摸黑地给你们做三顿饭,你说你们心里说得过去吗?” (Zhu 2000, 5)

“You youth of today! She pointed her liberated right hand up at my nose. You can't cook, you can't convert pounds into metric, you can't do anything! You don't study, you can't tell rice from beans, you treat your family like dirt. You're all useless. Look at you! You've hands and feet of your own, why d'you need an old woman to cook your meals?” (Zhu 2007b, 219)

Through the woman's tirade, the Chinese writer once again highlights the hiatus between the older and the younger generation. Their mutual desipement stems from their opposite approach to society. Spoiled by a market which easily satisfies all their material, economic and libidinal desires, the younger generation is portrayed as irresponsible, indecisive and irresolute.

As the story moves on, the old woman, in a fit of rage due to the impertinence of the young man, throws the potatoes and tomatoes bought at the market onto the floor. Soon after, she and her merchandise are run over by a middle-aged man riding a trailer-bicycle. The old woman demands a compensation for her losses. When she finds out that the man does not want to take charge of the damage he has caused, she asks the diegetic Zhu Wen to speak on her behalf. He refuses to support her and leaves in search of his impatient girlfriend who has already departed. The story ends with the consumption of the meat:

完事以后,我们并排躺在床上,谁也不想去做饭。通常在这种情况下,我会主动担当起这一责任。因为我自己人高马大,比别人更迫切地需要吃,因为我从来不会委屈自己,因为我比我的任何一个女友都更爱我一些。我几乎是带着仇恨把那八两一钱精肉统统做了。由于仓促,肉没能炖烂,味道也没有烧进去。我的女友只吃了半块就不吃了。而我却一块一块坚决地咀嚼着。这肉虽然嚼起来像是木头,而且塞牙,但是它是肉!肉!里面有我需要的营养。我饿坏了,没有一点力气。(Zhu 2000, 14-5)

After [I and my girlfriend had made love], we lay side by side on the bed, neither of us wanting to get up to cook. Normally, when this happened, I'd take on the job. Because I'm tall and well built, I need food more urgently than others; because I'm never hard on myself, I love myself more than any girlfriend. So, I got up and cooked the entire 405 grams of fillet like I bore it a grudge. Because I refused to take any time or trouble, the meat didn't tenderize or take any flavor in the cooking. My girlfriend laid down her chopsticks after half a mouthful. But I chewed indomitably on. Though it was like eating wood, though it got stuck in your teeth, it was still meat. Meat! It contained the nourishment I needed. I was starving – weak with it. (Zhu 2007b, 228)

Consumption, which as Paterson suggests is “what people do” in a society dominated by consumer late capitalism (2005, 2), is here represented in a very straightforward manner. What is also at stake in this passage is an almost grotesque portrayal of the selfish and voracious nature of the newly born narcissist consumer. Disrespectful of the needs of anyone else, including his girlfriend, the protagonist Zhu Wen chews and gulps down the chunks of barely cooked meat. Once again, what is highlighted in this passage is the insatiability of bodily desires as well as the tension between social norms and individual values.

3 Han Dong's *Meiyuan yingguo renminbi* 美元硬过人民币 (Dollars are Harder than Renminbi)

Han Dong's short story “Dollars are Harder than Renminbi” is, as its title suggests, complementary to Zhu Wen's “I Love Dollars”. However, unlike the former story, it does not focus on a father-son relationship, but rather on men-women relationships. It recounts the story of Hang Xiaohua, who is married to the beautiful Zhou Mei. He forges a long-distance friendship with his old classmate Cheng Yin, a confirmed bachelor who spends all his time bragging about his worldly success at whoring and gambling. During their long phone conversations, Hang Xiaohua becomes more and more enthralled by his friend's lifestyle and decides to visit N city (presumably Nanjing), where his friend lives. Although his friend is not there, he has nevertheless an interesting encounter with a prostitute who thrills his imagination. He eventually goes to N city a second time where he finally meets his friend Cheng Yin. He finds out that his friend is a liar: he lives in a lousy place, he is broke and does not know where brothels or prostitutes are.

Together they venture in the city in search for a prostitute, but their attitude and their attire raise suspicions in the mistresses of the music bars and nightclubs they go to. In one of these, they eventually find one prostitute who is willing to comply with Hang Xiaohua's re-

quest. When Yin and Xiaohua discover that she does not have a condom, they decide to leave the nightclub. They take a cab and learn from the taxi driver that N city does not have a red-light district, only a sex club right next to Cheng Yin's apartment. When they hear, during the night, that a police raid is occurring in the sex club, they decide to call the prostitute they had previously met. After both have sex with her, Chen Yin decides to pay her with an American one hundred-dollar bill that he had earned as a compensation for a publication of one of his essays in a foreign journal. Hang Xiaohua eventually pays him back half of the sum in *renminbi*, although he is aware that "dollars are harder than *renminbi*".

The protagonists of Zhu Wen's "I Love Dollars" and Han Dong's "Dollars Are Harder than *Renminbi*" are both idlers constantly craving for sex. In both stories, they are writers who display their writings as a commodity and who disregard either kinship or conjugal bondages. In Han Dong's novella, Hang Xiaohua relies on his body to build an extramarital social life. At the beginning of the story he is a very good dancer who never misses an opportunity to display his physical skills. It is only after meeting Cheng Yin that phantasies about whoring and extramarital liaisons become an irresistible physical urge. The protagonist's first contact with a prostitute stimulates both his body and his imagination as well:

那女郎就势抓住他的手,似乎为了将时间看得更真切些。她抓着杭小华的手腕,看了足有五秒钟,似乎他那张中年男人的脸上有着秘密的指针一样。短暂或漫长的五秒钟很快过去了,女郎道一声谢谢,摔掉杭小华的手扬长而去了。杭小华注视着她的背景,那背带特长的小包一下一下地拍打着她远去的屁股。她到底从他的脸上看出了什么?杭小华永远不得而知。但他终于反应过来:她是一个妓女。他与妓女终于有了正式的接触,说了话,说肌肤相亲也不为过(她尖锐的指甲在他的手腕上留下了依稀的印痕)。这怎么可能呢?太不可思议了!虽然实际接触只有短短的几秒,过后杭小华在那家商店门前站了足有半小时。他望着女郎消失的方向怅然若失,很长时间里都忘记放下那条如今已不再相同的胳膊。杭小华就像商店门前伫立的时间雕像,极其深入地看着手腕上的手表。回到宾馆后自然一夜未眠,那种激越的情绪一直持续到返回他所在城市。(Han 2000, 298)⁶

That woman grabbed his hand, as if she wanted to check the time more accurately. She grabbed Hang Xiaohua's wrist and looked for at least five seconds as if on the face of that middle-aged man there were a secret clock hand. Those five seconds, no matter whether they were long or short, passed very quickly and the young woman said "Thank you!" and swaggered off letting go of Hang Xiaohua's hand. Hang Xiaohua gazed at her back, that small bag with extremely long

6 All the translations of the following stories are made by the Author.

straps was patting on her buttock which was moving far away. What did she see on his face? Hang Xiaohua would have never known. Yet his final reaction was: she is a prostitute. He finally had a formal contact with a prostitute, they talked, to say that they even touched each other's skins would not be an overstatement (her sharp nails left a light mark on his wrist). How was that possible? Unbelievable! Even if their actual contact lasted only a few very short seconds, it was enough to block him standing in front of the shop's door for a good half an hour. He was gazing in the direction where the woman had disappeared disappointed and frustrated and forgot for a long time to put down that arm which was no longer pressing against hers. For all the time he stood completely still in front of the shop's door he was looking thoroughly at the watch on his wrist. After going back to his hotel, of course he could not fall asleep, his excitement lasted until he went back to the city where he lived.

The description of Hang Xiaohua's meeting with the prostitute is ambivalent. On the one hand, there is a very matter of fact description of the encounter, on the other one, it also reminds readers of George Bataille's interpretation of "erotic ecstasy". As Peter Conner suggests, according to the French philosopher,

[o]neself is not the subject isolating itself from the world, but a place of communication, of fusion of the subject and of the object. Clearly, a vision of the subject not as the subject of knowledge (of the self or of the world) but of its own excess – an ecstatic subject that thereby demands a name other than 'subject' – appears on the surface more threatening to society bound by the values of reason. The subject of the inner experience complicates and seems to compromise moral action as it opposes the reigning social order, [...] the violent re-introduction of the heterogeneous elements this order has had to banish from its realm precisely in order to constitute itself: "violence, excess, delirium, madness". (1993, 31)

His happy marriage notwithstanding, Hang Xiaohua decides to have a liaison with a prostitute not because he has stopped loving his wife. What he is looking for is precisely what Bataille would define as "excess, delirium, madness", a condition that can only be attained by introducing a heterogeneous element (e.g. the prostitute) banished by the reigning social order. This also explains why his first encounter with a prostitute is described as a state of trance, a moment of transcendence. While it cannot be defined as truly erotic, it awakens nevertheless desires of real transgression. This is why Hang Xiaohua goes to N city for a second time to visit Cheng Yin. Although Hang Xiaohua realises that Cheng Yin has blatantly overstated his sexual performances with local prostitutes, he nevertheless accepts his friend's offer to

accompany him to bars and pubs. They eventually run into a prostitute willing to have sex with Hang Xiaohua. Realising that the woman does not have condoms, the two friends discuss about the risks of having unsafe sex:

为买避孕套的事成寅骂不绝口,杭小华却在小心地为小姐辩护。他说:“实际上不戴套子也行的。”成寅说:“你不怕得病?”杭小华说:“她没有病,我检查过的。”原来小姐要打火机就是为了照给杭小华看。他不仅仔仔细细地看了个究竟,还将手指送到鼻前嗅了很久,没觉出有任何异味。成寅道:“你怎么不早说呢!”他的眼前不禁浮现出一幅奇异的画面:黑暗之中那小姐将裤子褪至膝弯,尽力岔开双腿,并亲自在前方点燃了一朵火苗。光影摇曳,杭小华俯下身去细看,一面用手指翻弄着。后来火苗熄灭,他的眼前一片漆黑,但某种奇特的构造和精微的肌理却停留在两眼之间的脑际,熠熠生辉。火苗再次燃起,与脑际中的画面相互映照,对比和修正,努力掌握住变化多端的动态,固定下来,加以储存。成寅欣喜地拍了拍老同学的肩膀,说:“真有你的,不仅摸了,而且看了,这一百块钱小费花得值得!”杭小华于是深感幸福地笑了。(Han 2000, 311)

Cheng Yin began to scold without an end because of the condom but Hang Xiaohua carefully spoke in the prostitute's defense. He said, "Actually it would have worked even without the condom". Cheng Yin replied: "Aren't you worried about contracting a disease?" Hang Xiaohua replied "She has no diseases, I have checked". Originally the prostitute had lit a lighter just to allow Hang Xiaohua to have a look. He had not only carefully examined every single part, he even said for a long time that, after bringing his fingers before his nose, he did not smell anything weird. Cheng Yin said: "Why haven't you said that before?!" he couldn't help seeing the amazing picture before his eyes: in the darkness she had lowered her trousers to her knees, she had parted her legs wider, and, on her initiative, she had even lit a flame before her. In the flickering light, he had bowed and looked carefully while fiddling with his fingers. Then the flame went down, it was all dark in front of him and all sorts of peculiar creations and profound textures remained engrained in his mind, glistering between his eyes. The flame kindled once more, the flame and the image in his mind reflected each other, mutually comparing and adjusting, trying to grasp the unceasingly changing mutation which eventually came to a halt and then settled down. Pleased and happy, Cheng Yin patted on his old classmate's shoulder and said: "Look at you, not only did you touch, you even looked. It was really worth one hundred *yuan*". Hang Xiaohua laughed wholeheartedly.

The attitude towards sex and the female naked body is different from the previous passage. The stakes here are erotic bodily experience. The happily married Hang Xiaohua finally has an erotic encounter with a radically alien Other that excites his imagination. What the reader

witnesses is an erotic experience that goes beyond mere transgression because it also involves the overcoming of the experiential and epistemological limits of the knowable and the awareness of new modalities of sensual and sexual experience.

The urban environment is, just like in the case of “I Love dollars”, a space providing pleasure and excitement. Money instead is

the tool that has the greatest possible number of unpredictable uses and so possesses the maximum value attainable in this respect. The mere possibility of unlimited uses that money has, or represents, on account of its lack of a content of its own, is manifested in a positive way by the restlessness of money, by its urge to be used, so to speak. (Simmel 1990, 212)

Certainly, the writers of the Rupture Movement demonstrate through their stories that they agree that money’s ‘lack of content’ has an important positive side: it ‘urges to be used’. The protagonists, in fact, are willing to use up all their savings to satisfy their bodily urges and to attain their moment of ecstasy. What is at stake in passages such as these is a wholesale commodification of bodies, feelings, emotions and affections.

At the end of the story, they both consummate their passion with the prostitute. While Hang Xiaohua’s sexual prowess is astounding, Cheng Yin’s sexual performance proves less than adequate. Cheng Yin, who has so far accepted his friend’s presents and offers to pay for all the meals consumed together, eventually decides to pay the prostitute in cash. He uses a one hundred-dollar bill that he had received as a compensation for his script published in a foreign magazine. The prostitute is very excited to be paid in dollars:

鉴别的结果这的确是一张真钞，面值一百美元，可兑换八百五十七点几人民币。至于说到美元相对人民币的好处，那倒不需要杭小华多费口舌，小姐知道得清清爽爽，仅就收入一项而言，她也可多得五十多元（人民币）。还有它是硬通货，可保值增值。它硬得一塌糊涂，至于到底硬到何种程度，小姐心中自然有数，显然是柔软的人民币所无法相比的。因此鉴别活动一完，她一把抓过美元，以意想不到的速度将其藏入了身体的某一部位，并与之结合为一体了，再也难以找到。(Han 2000, 325)

Analysis results proved that it was a genuine banknote worth one hundred dollars which could be converted into 857 *renminbi*. Hang Xiaohua did not need to bother to dwell on the advantages of dollars over the *renminbi*, the girl knew all too well, accepting that note would mean a profit of over 50 *yuan (renminbi)*. Furthermore, it was a hard currency, its value could increase. It was hard to the extent that it could mess everything up, and the woman knew very well the degree and the extent of its hardness; there was obvious-

ly no comparison with the softness of the *renminbi*. Only upon completion of the validation process, did she grab the one hundred-dollar bill and, with an inconceivable speed, hid it in a certain part of the body. She and the bill were so bound together to form one single entity. After that, it would have been very hard to get it back.

The physicality and the sensuality of the foreign banknote, also present in Zhu Wen's "I Love Dollars", is here related to the prostitute's physical body. In this passage there is not a wholesale westernisation at stake. In fact, there are neither foreigners, nor direct evocations of foreign countries in this story. This novella, written in 1999, should be interpreted as Han Dong's powerful response to the dominant nationalistic afflatus of that epoch. The incommensurability between dollars and *renminbi* can be understood as a metaphor of a new society, which, unlike pre-modern society, is no longer exclusively based on traditional autochthonous values. The protagonists' intercourse with an unknown prostitute is mediated by a currency that cannot but be 'Other' than Chinese.

As is clear from this passage and from the expression "dollars are harder than *renminbi*", the foreign currency is an eloquent index of a (monetary) value introduced with foreign neoliberal social practices that foster new desires, new habits and new kinds of human interactions.

In the epilogue, Hang Xiaohua goes back to his daily routine and sends a remittance of four hundred *renminbi* to his friend Cheng Yin with a couplet as an attachment:

千金难买朋友情
美元硬过人民币(Han 2000, 326)

A thousand pieces of gold will hardly buy the affections of a friend
Dollars are harder than *renminbi*.

The only residual value, as it seems in this novella, is companionship and comradeship. It is not the case that Cheng Yin uses this amount of money to visit the prostitute a second time, keeping instead the couplet for himself as a reminder of the new yet already indispensable (neo-liberal) pleasures of life.

4 Dong Xi's *Shangpin* 商品 (The Commodity)

爱情这个古老的题目，它像肥沃之土或高原之水，滋养了一代一代的写手，它像我们传统的项目，不断地被写手们翻新、炒卖也不停地走俏。不用担心，某一天爱情会油尽灯灭，不同的种植能手种植出不同的爱情，诡计多端的说法使许多与爱情牵连的作品成为经典，爱情似乎成为写手们的基本或者说是写手们的衣食父母，不能超凡脱俗的写手们会一如既往地爱情作为原料生产小说。

这种时刻，我会和所有的写手一样重视工具——汉字。爱情和汉字现在成为我的原料和工具散落在我面前，如遍地倒伏的草木，等待我去整编收割。我带上草帽拿住农具走出我栖息的家园，开始踏上辛劳的路程。(Dong 2003, 151)

Love, this ancient topic, just like fertile soil or highland water, has nourished writers from generation to generation, like our traditional items constantly renovated by writers, advertised and sold incessantly well. There is no need to worry that love will someday be used up like the oil of a lamp; different skilled gardeners will grow different forms of love; ingenious sayings will produce works related to love which will in turn produce masterpieces. Love apparently becomes the foundation for a writer, in other words, love is the dress, the nourishment, the father and mother of a writer. Writers unable to rise above mediocrity and coarseness will always be able to turn to love as raw material for producing a piece of writing.

In this very moment, just like any other writer, I pay attention to the tools - characters. Now, love and characters become my raw material and my tools, just like grass and trees all over the place waiting for me to organize the harvest. I wear my straw hat, grab my farm tools and walk out of my peaceful garden to venture on my laborious journey.

This is the beginning of Dong Xi's "The Commodity", a surreal metanarrative that describes an unlikely day-long journey. The protagonist sets off the day of the Qingming festival to go to the city of Mayang in the hope of coming across his father's grave. As a matter of fact, Father had disappeared in 1966 in the most mysterious circumstances after leaving their hometown with a relatively conspicuous sum of money. The protagonist's mother had entrusted his cousin with the task of finding where Father was, and in the case of his death, of burying him. His cousin comes back with a scrap of paper on which he had drawn the map of the site where his father's grave was. Not only mother and son do not trust their cousin, they even suspect him of having murdered Father.

It is an unlikely journey, indeed long and fatiguing, which the protagonist experiences. On the one side, it is a mental experience in which the protagonist's stream of consciousness brings him back to

both his lived past experience – as he recalls his own uncle’s tragedy – and the fictional characters of the classical erotic novel *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (Jin Ping Mei) (namely Ximen 西门, Dalang 大郎 and Jinlian 金莲); on the other side, it is an experience of love. In fact, he meets a female travel companion, Weidong, to whom he recounts his stories, and with whom he falls in love and eventually has a baby. Not only does he forget his family of origin and the purpose of his journey, it seems he eventually even abandons Weidong and their newly born baby. The last part of the story, apparently disconnected from the main corpus, is a collection of mock reviews written by unlikely critics and published on equally unlikely literary journals, which discuss, review and, in some cases, advertise the story that the reader has just read.

As the subtitles of the story suggest, this story, which is a surreal reflection about filial and romantic love in an epoch of wholesale commodification, is divided into three sections respectively entitled “Gongju he yuanliao” 工具和原料 (Tools and Raw Materials), “Zuopin huozhe chanpin” 作品或者产品 (Literary Work or Commodity), “Pinglun huo guanggao” 评论或广告 (Literary Criticism or Advertisement).

The first section, translated at the beginning of the present analysis, foregrounds the corpus of the story conflating past and present imaginaries. The Chinese agrarian and rural past and the process of literary production are metonymically juxtaposed. The aesthetic and economic outcome of such a process – the harvest and the writer’s literary output – cannot but remind readers of the traditional Marxist definition of labour. Interestingly, while Dong Xi straightforwardly reflects upon the intrinsic relationship between the value of the commodity and labour, alongside with a Marxist traditional interpretation of value, he does not mention the crucial relationship between the commodity and money.

Money, as well as the fictional stories invented by the protagonist to seduce his female travel companion, become instead important exchange values in the second section of the story. They constitute the fabric of this complex novella and the grounds upon which the bulk of the narrative is built. While the prefatory section introduces an idyllic comparison between the labour of the farmer and the creative and artistic skills of literary compositions, the central part of the narrative consists in fictional stories that are fabricated by the protagonist to seduce his companion and are used to demystify all forms of traditional symbolic values.

The murder of the protagonist’s father, presumably perpetrated by the protagonist’s greedy cousin, is the beginning of a sequence of events that can be read as the author’s expedient to deconstruct consolidated discourses on economic and ethical values, political power and human relationships. The first target of Dong Xi’s irony is the virtue of filial piety whose violation is recounted and represented at several points in the story.

Dong Xi's discourse on values is coherent with Zhu Wen's and Han Dong's. Self-fulfillment and personal claims to self-possession are dominant themes also in this short story. Dong Xi's representation of his cousin's crime foregrounds a broader discourse on the loss of traditional virtuous relationships established among members of one same family or of one same clan. In other words, he ironizes on the overwhelming power of *guanxi* as a Chinese foundational ethical and social value:

母亲坚信死于族人的谋杀。为父亲收尸而远行的是我本村的一位表哥[...]。父亲怀里的银元下落不明... 母亲对我说也许父亲根本没有死, 从麻阳传回的消息或许是讹传。你表哥到麻阳之后, 找到你活着的父亲, 然后杀死了他, 谋了他身上的八十块银元。(Dong 2003, 152-3)

My mother firmly believed that my father's clansmen had plotted to murder him. It was a cousin living in my same village to embark on a long journey to recover my father's psalm. [...] Nobody knew what had happened to the money that my father had. [...]. My mother said: "Presumably, your father wasn't dead, and reports of his death circulating at Mayang were fake. After reaching Mayang, your cousin has presumably found your father who was still alive and has murdered him. Then he has taken with him his eighty *yuan*".

While, strictly speaking, this murder is not a parricide, it is nevertheless an index of the dissolution of a kind of pre-modern organic society grounded on kinship relations that, as Anthony Giddens reminds, is a traditional "organizing device for stabilizing social ties across time-space" (1990, 102). It is not surprising, therefore, that the stories that the protagonist narrates to his female companion all revolve around the dissolution of kinship bonds and the creation of personal relationships of friendship or sexual intimacy, of the very "means of stabilizing [new] social ties" (102).

The first narration recounts the way in which his uncle, an important political cadre, is attacked by a dog that chews off his penis:

为了迎接舅舅, 村口早已挤满参差不齐的人群。舅舅和那一串衣冠楚楚行动缓慢的干部照亮了肃杀的季节和村人的眼睛。有人嘴里衔一杆喷呐, 吹奏出村庄的欢快激动胆怯。舅舅向他的爹妈他的乡亲们挥手致意。突然... 一条疯狗像一把刀子避开人群, 朝舅舅刺过去。我看见舅舅周围的人群如秋天的黄叶, 纷纷从舅舅的身边闪开。沉浸于欢喜中的舅舅独立寒冬等候疯狗。最终疯狗在舅舅的小腿上扯下一块肉。狗嘴挂着舅舅的鲜血跑下山坡。(Dong 2003, 156)

A multiform crowd had swarmed a long time before at the entrance of the village to welcome him [and to congratulate on his new pro-

motion]. Uncle and that queue of cadres were advancing slowly in their immaculate dresses dazzling the stern season and the eyes of the villagers. Some of them, with a trumpet in their mouths, were whistling the happiness, the excitement and the worries of the village. Uncle waved his hands towards his father, mother and his countrymen. Suddenly...

A rabid dog pushed through the crowd like a knife. I saw the crowd surrounding uncle scattering like autumn leaves, dodging uncle. Still in a euphoric state, uncle found himself alone to confront the rabid dog. Eventually, the rabid dog tore apart a shred of flesh from his penis and ran down the hill with uncle's blood dripping from his mouth.

Castration in this passage works as a powerful metaphor to suggest that the brutal downfall of traditional political power can only entail the crowd's disavowal of uncle's leadership. Just like in the former stories, the physical bodies of old fathers and figures of authority in the stories of the Rupture movement always become derogate bodies, sexually unproductive and seemingly barren.

This is also the case of the rich but impotent Third Brother, who assists the protagonist's uncle during his recovery. He is equally unhappy because his riches are to no avail to him:

三哥说不瞒舅舅，我有钱但那个不成，我每当拥抱女人，总在裤裆里塞一沓钱，女人抓到那个硬东西，便十分热情，但高兴之后发现不对就失望，失望了我就把钱摔给她们，她们接着装成激动的模样，激动一阵转而再失望。舅舅你当那么大的官，你能治好我的病吗？(Dong 2003, 159)

Third brother said: "Uncle, I don't deny that I am rich, but I am impotent. Every time I embrace a woman, I fill the crotch of my trousers with a wad of money, when women grab that hard stuff, they get really enthusiastic. After a moment of enthusiasm, however, they find out that it doesn't work, therefore, they become disappointed. At that point, I throw the coins at them and when they reach for the coins they act as if they were excited, yet, after a moment of excitement, they become disappointed once again. Uncle, you are such an important cadre, can you cure my illness?"

Dong Xi's obsession with the body is, as suggested before, an expedient to define a modern society in which, as Giddens says, sexual intimacy is the only "means of stabilizing social ties" (1990, 102) and in which, as Anagnost underscores, individual bodily practices and performances define people's worth as human capital. The power of Uncle and the riches of Third Brother prove to be quite useless in a society in which relationships are built upon different premises from the past. In this sense, Ann Anagnost's definition of *suzhi* as a "kind

of value coding that moves from embodied value to power to desire” (2004, 198) perfectly resonates in the stories of the Rupture movement where desire is not only the main narrative drive, but also the very ground upon which the foundation of the post-socialist self/subject is built. What all these protagonists desire, however, is less the upper social mobility that Anagnost carefully describes in her study, than erotic and aesthetic self-fulfillment.

This becomes clearer in the second story that the protagonist recounts, a radical reworking of the plot of the first chapters of the *Jin Ping Mei*. Unlike the original story, Dalang is not Pan Jinlian’s cuckold husband; instead, he is Ximen’s son. Both Ximen and Dalang fall in love with the widow Jinlian. At first, Dalang considers Jinlian as a stepmother. However, as time goes by, he also falls in love with her. After a violent altercation with his son, Ximen allows his son to have a romantic liaison with her. After a first period of passionate love, Dalang becomes jealous of his father:

秋天来了，大郎和金莲自由恋爱比翼双飞，他们发生了男女关系。一百天金莲和大郎闲着无事，金莲便想干那事，金莲说大郎，我们换一个花样，你从后面来，像牛那样。金莲躬腰等着大郎动作，但大郎没有动。大郎的脸一点一点地青。大郎朝着金莲赤裸的屁股踢了一脚，大郎说你骗我，骗了我的爱情。大郎认为从后面干是他父亲的爱好，金莲一定尝到了父亲的甜头，现在又叫他像父亲那样干她。大郎觉得金莲像一口飘荡污水的池塘，令人恶心。

金莲穿好了衣裤，说大郎你怎么了？大郎说我要去死。金莲说何苦？大郎说为了爱情，我把我的爱情献给了一个肮脏的婊子，我没脸活了。金莲看见大郎朝小河奔去，金莲一边呼救一边追赶。金莲听到大郎最后说，我死了你好叫我爹从后面干。大郎说完投入河里，尸体三天之后才浮起来。(Dong 2003, 163-4)

The autumn came, Dalang and Jinlian were loving each other freely, just like a real couple and it happened that they had sexual intercourse. One day, while Jinlian and Dalang were idling, Jinlian felt like having sex. Jinlian said “Dalang, let’s change position, let’s have doggy-style sex, as bulls do”. Jinlian bowed waiting for him to get a move on; however, Dalang was standing still, his face was turning blue little by little. He kicked Jinlian’s naked ass and said: “You are making fun of me and of my love”. Dalang thought that doggy-style sex was something his father used to like. Jinlian presumably enjoyed having sex with his father and now she wanted him to fuck her the same way. Dalang firmly believed that Jinlian was like a pond filled with fetid water; she was nauseating.

After dressing up Jinlian asked “Dalang, what’s the matter with you?” Dalang said “I want to die”. Jinlian replied “Why on earth?” Dalang answered “For love, I have offered my love to a dirty slut. I don’t have the guts to go on living”. Jinlian saw that Dalang was

rushing towards a rivulet. Jinlian was running after him, crying out for help. Jinlian heard Dalang's last words "After my death you'd better call my father and have sex the doggy way with him". After pronouncing these words, Dalang threw himself into the river only for his corpse to emerge three days later.

This straightforward and matter-of-fact treatment of eroticism bears some similarity with Han Dong's representation of Hang Xiaohua's sexual intercourse with the prostitute. However, while Han Dong is interested in representing the two facets of sexual encounters (as already discussed, erotic encounters with prostitutes are described either an ecstatic moment or discharge of libidinal energy), Dong Xi is more interested in deconstructing, manipulating and 'recycling' the *Jin Ping Mei*, the most celebrated Chinese classical erotic novel whose protagonist is, not accidentally, a merchant. In line with the other works of the Rupture movement, he focuses instead on different forms of human relationships: dysfunctional kinship bonds, abnormal sexual intercourses and personal relationships mediated by monetary transactions.

By introducing himself to Weidong as Erlang - Dalang's younger brother - the protagonist of this story transforms himself into a sign, an integral part of the narrative that he himself has fabricated. Unlike in Han Dong's and Zhu Wen's narratives, Dong Xi's story is not represented as autobiographical. On the contrary, it is grounded in a glorious literary past that the market era has transformed into an artefact; or, as the title of the second section of the story suggests, into a 'product' created for commercial entertainment and amusement.

As a site of value among a wide variety of values and as a commodity in an integrally commodified world, literature enjoys a privileged status. As the protagonist observes after his long and eloquent storytelling:

我想我所有的故事，都是为了勾引这个叫薇冬的女孩。为了搜集这些乱七八糟的故事，我专门请教了一个寡妇。寡妇用她委婉动听的讲述引诱了我，今天我又用这些故事勾引薇冬。(Dong 2003, 165)

I think that all my stories were aimed at seducing this woman called Weidong. I specifically ask for a widow's help to put this messy story together. The widow has used her captivating story to seduce me and today I have used these stories once more to seduce Weidong.

From this passage, it can be inferred that the writer's role is to mimic old stories that have a strong aesthetic and sensual appeal. The evocation of scenes of sexual intimacy, comradeship and defiance of traditional kinship values provide the foundation of a new aesthet-

ic imaginary whose grounds can be found in the new market economy. In this sense, the term ‘product’ (*chanpin*) as a subtitle of the story is an expedient to evoke both the process of labour and production (introduced in the prefatory part of the story), of consumption (evoked in the sentence “today I have used this story once more to seduce Weidong”), and finally of exchange (the dialogue between the protagonist Erlang and the woman Weidong).

The last section that contains mock reviews of the story represents the last part of the economic process: advertisement and commercialization. Dong Xi, via a mock reviewer called Qian Hou, advertises and questions the modernity of his own text:

写手:

你好!细读你的作品,觉得有后现代主义的某些成分。比如艺术的商品化,印象代替故事。你所说的故事不管真不真实,但目的只有一个:为我所用。每当你说一个故事时,你都表白这是绝对真实的,最终却只能是靠近真实而不会有绝对。内行人会看去过去文学作品对你的影响,比如一些荒诞情节运用会使人想起卡夫卡的“变形记”、陈村的“一天”(写一个工人早上上班下午退休)。民间笑话的大量抄袭,使整个作品犹如拼盘杂烩。这些都具备后现代小说的特点,可惜的是你写得太后现代了,拟不用。(Dong 3003, 168)

Writer:

Hi! I have read carefully your story and I believe there are some post-modern features. For instance, the commodification of art, impressions that replace the story itself. Your so-called stories, not matter whether they are true or false, have only one goal: you use them for your own sake. Every time you narrate a story you explain that is perfectly true; however, eventually it can only get close to the real, there is no such thing as an absolute real. Experts can easily recognize which literary works had an impact on you. Some absurd plots which you rely on remind of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* or Chen Cun's *One Day* (which describes a worker who goes to work in the morning and retires in the afternoon). Furthermore, the plagiarism of some popular jokes transforms your work into a mixture of many elements. All these characteristics are typical of post-modern fiction. It is a pity that what you wrote is too postmodern, there was no need to even conceive such a thing.

Dong Xi here evokes postmodernism, without nevertheless embracing postmodernism as a definite interpretative key to understand his short story. The other reviews, which approach Dong Xi's narrative from different perspectives, are all strategies to underscore the hybrid condition of literature in China's post-Maoist era. Clas-

sical stories, Maoist and post-Maoist narratives metonymically co-exist without nevertheless merging. This polyphony of voices, plots and narrative registers all convey an image of China open to a totally new global dimension in which past and present values, local and global dimensions can only stand side-by-side. Such values are not defined; on the contrary, they are “liquid”, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it:

Forms of modern life may differ in quite a few respects – but what unites them all is precisely their fragility, their temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change. To be ‘modern’ means to modernize – compulsively obsessively; not so much just ‘to be’ let alone to keep its identity intact, but forever ‘becoming’ avoiding completion, staying underdefined. Each new structure which replaces the previous one as soon as it is declared old-fashioned and past its use – by date is only a temporary settlement – acknowledged as temporary until further notice. (2000, 82)

Erlang’s sequel of classical and modern stories, his final abandonment of Weidong and their baby and his forgetfulness of his filial duties suggest, by all means, an open ending to the story. His decision to leave everything behind and to walk to the centre of Mayang city suggests that Dong Xi wanted to create an ‘underdefined character’ in an equally ‘underdefined story’. This is coherent with Bauman’s definition of “liquid modernity”, a modernity characterised by the “conviction that change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty” (2000, 82).

In such a state of indeterminacy, the materiality of the commodity and bodily knowledge entailed by embodied experience become the foundation upon which the representation of the relationship between the self and the outer world is made possible. The commodification and reification of sexual intimacy and eroticism, hence, become necessary premises for the creation of new kinds of interactions which can displace and replace traditional kinship bonds.

5 Conclusion

The Rupture movement is so far a widely unexplored phenomenon. However, it is important because it sheds a light on the Chinese society of the nineties. China was then undergoing radical social changes. The political discourse on *suzhi*, as shown here, has had major effects on the literary field. The degree and the extent of the changes entailed by the transition from the Maoist society to a hybrid society controlled by both the State (which was engineering and promoting a discourse on *suzhi*) and by the market (which was fostering individual claims to possessive individualism) are well represented by the

works of the Rupture movement that depicted the vacillations of the newly born middle-class citizens, all too aware that their autonomy and individuality had to be confined to the economic sphere (the political sphere being still directly controlled by the State). Works such as “I Love Dollars”, “Pounds, Ounces, Meat”, “Dollars Are Harder than *Renminbi*” and “The Commodity” unsurprisingly focus on economic and material values and the status of the new intellectuals who, after the downfall of the Maoist ideology, could not but reflect upon the relationship between themselves and such values. Their happiness to produce, to consume and to exchange material (and symbolic) goods also led, to a certain extent, to their awareness of new possibilities of autonomy and self-determination. In fact, as Pater-son suggests, consumption practices involve necessarily “a claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of external culture and techniques of life” (2005, 23).

Seen in this light, the fiction produced by these writers is the outcome of their claim to possess and have control over their body and their emotions. Unsurprisingly, eroticism, which in these stories is always directly connected to consumption practices, is represented as a form of desecration of collective socialist norms and as an expression of the subject’s will to both self-construct outside the direct control of the State and to disentangle from both moral and ideological obligations as well as traditional kinship bonds. In this sense, the confrontation between Father and Zhu Wen about symbolic/spiritual values and eroticism in “I Love Dollars” (“A writer ought to offer something positive, something to look up, ideals, aspirations, democracy, freedom, stuff like that”; “Dad, I am telling you, all that stuff, it’s all there in sex”) is revelatory of these writers’ attempt to construct a new representation of self. In these stories, in fact, sex becomes a privileged tool to test the boundaries and the limits of their own self.

The Rupture movement, if and when approached from the perspective of the body and bodily practices and values, has indeed entailed a radical rupture in literary history. Their representation of the reification and commodification of the human body, the discourse about desire and self-fulfillment deployed in their narrative, their speculation about the end of kinship bonds contribute to the reader’s understanding of an epoch that laid the foundation of the Chinese contemporary society. Their contribution to the construction of a new aesthetical approach to urban China is equally important. It paved the way for a new style that asserts the autonomy of the aesthetic from the ideological and political.

The fictional production of this movement did not last very long. Shortly after the beginning of the second millennium, these writers’ interest in representing the troublesome relationship between the symbolic and material values had waned. This is far from being sur-

prising. Since the official debate about the interconnectedness between material and spiritual values was no longer of interest, there was no point on these writers' side in continuing pursuing these topics and this kind of narrative. Han Dong's later novels, *Wo he ni* 我和你 (You and I) (2005) and *Zhongguo qingren* 中国情人 (The Chinese Lover) (2013) continued to focus on eroticism. However, these novels no longer address the problematic issue of the reification and commodification of social relations. Dong Xi's later successful novel, *Houhuilu* 后悔录 (Record of Regret) (2005) recounts the complex relationships between a father and his son. Unlike his previous production, the novel recounts all the regrets of a son for having ruined his father's life. Zhu Wen, after a second important novel, *Shenme shi laji, shenme shi ai* 什么是垃圾, 什么是爱 (What Is Love, What is Garbage) (2004), became an important movie director.

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