

## SEARCHING FOR ROOTS AND LOST IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE LITERATURE\*

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In the years 1984–1987 searching for roots of literary identity was quite wide-spread and popular among the Chinese men of letters in the PRC. The aim of this article is to analyse this phenomenon against the background of the situation in the Latin American countries, and to show the strong and weak points of this short-lived, but important literary movement.

In eighty years long span of modern Chinese literature after the May Fourth Movement 1919 (and written on the Mainland), we hardly find a more successful (from the axiological point of view) period than that immediately preceding and following the year 1985. Future scholarship will find an adequate explanation for this phenomenon, but I suppose that it was due to the new orientation of Chinese literature of the end of the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s and its new, “second” opening to the foreign, interliterary scene. Chinese men of letters (and chiefly novelists and short story writers) began to devote more time to reading and study of the great literary personalities neglected up to that time in the PRC: Franz Kafka (1883–1924), James Joyce (1882–1941), William Faulkner (1897–1962), Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), Kawabata Yasunari (1899–1972), and three representatives of Latin American literatures of the last decades: Mario Vargas Llosa (1936– ), Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) and Gabriel García Márquez (1928– ). From the last three nothing was translated in the 1970s, and they were completely unknown among the readers. From these literatures there were some exceptions, as was the case also in other literatures of the “socialist” countries: Pablo Neruda (1904–1973), Euclides da Cunha (1866–1909) and Jorge Amado (1912– ). The situation changed very much after 1979.

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The first article about the most important part of contemporary Latin American literature – Magic Realism – in the work of the Guatemalan writer Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899–1974), decorated with Lenin Prize in 1966 and Nobel Prize in 1967, was published in probably the most popular and influential journal devoted to foreign literatures: *Waiguo wenxue yanjiu* (*Studies in Foreign Literatures*) in 1980.<sup>1</sup> If the two authors of this article use for the term “magical” the Chinese word *moshu*, they have in mind its ritual side, i.e. magical as ritualistic and formal. In a later study published in the same journal at the end of 1984 (exactly on the first Christmas Day), another author uses the word *mohuan* which seems to be new Chinese word in a better way expressing the literary and artistic side of the magical in this kind of fiction.<sup>2</sup>

There was a great boom of interest in Latin American literatures in the years immediately preceding the Christmas of 1984. Márquez’s short stories together with those of Borges and Vargas Llosa were published in the journal *Waiguo wenyi* (*Foreign Literature*) in Shanghai at the beginning of the 1980s. At the same time Latin American short stories have also been published in the People’s Publishing House, Peking.<sup>3</sup> In 1982 when Márquez was decorated with the Nobel Prize, Yiwen chubanshe (Translation Publishers) of Shanghai published a volume of Márquez’s short stories and novellettes containing all his more important works between 1950 and 1981, with the exception of the *Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Autumn of the Patriarch*.<sup>4</sup> In the same year in Changjiang wenyi chubanshe (Yangzi Literature Publishers) another representative selection of short stories of 44 authors, 9 different trends from 15 Latin American countries appeared.<sup>5</sup> It acquainted curious Chinese readers with the works of Asturias, Borges, Vargas Llosa, Alejo Carpentier, João Guimarães Rosa and others. In 1983 new works of these literatures were added: *The Death of Artemio Cruz* by Carlos Fuentes, *Green House*, and maybe also *Conversation in Cathedral* by Vargas Llosa and a selection of short stories by Borges.<sup>6</sup>

One of the reasons for a broad official campaign against “spiritual pollution”, October 1983–January 1984, was fear of the consequences of the impact of Magical Realism on the Chinese literary scene, the dissolution of the then

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<sup>1</sup> ZHU JINGDONG and KONG LINGSEN: “Moshu xianshizhuyi zuojia Asitulasi” (“Miguel Ángel Asturias: Magic Realist Writer”), *Studies in Foreign Literatures*, 3, 1980, pp. 136–138.

<sup>2</sup> CHEN ZHONGYI: “Ladingmeizhou wenxue de jueqi” (“The Abrupt Rise of Latin American Literature”), *ibid.*, 4, 1984, pp. 59–63.

<sup>3</sup> *Zhongguo 1981 chuban nianjian* (*Chinese Publishers Yearbook 1981*), Peking, Commercial Press 1981, pp. 263–264.

<sup>4</sup> *Zhongguo 1983 chuban nianjian* (*Chinese Publishers Yearbook 1983*), Peking, Commercial Press 1983, p. 405.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 405–406.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 613.

“Socialist-Realist tendencies”, whatever were their names, and the rise and development of modernist literary trends on Chinese soil.

One year later, in 1985, once again on Christmas Day, in *Studies in Foreign Literatures*, another essay by Leo Ou-fan Lee appeared, which added new oil to the fire: “Shijie wenxue de liangge jianzheng: Nanmei he Donggou wenxue dui Zhongguo xiandai wenxue de qifa” (“Two Witnesses of World Literature: The Inspiration from the Latin American and Eastern European Literatures for the Modern Chinese Literature”).<sup>7</sup> Leo Lee put before the eyes of his Chinese readers by the side of Márquez another eminent personality – the Czech exile writer Milan Kundera (1928– ). He introduced them to Kundera’s novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera is now, the most read Czech author in contemporary China. He certainly complies with the tastes of Chinese critics and experienced readers, but he also does not achieve the standard of Márquez popularity and his impact on contemporary Chinese writing is probably negligible. The author of the study knew this well, and if he mentioned and analysed this writer from a former communist country, it was because he was enthralled by him and because the models for the new, post-Cultural Revolution generations of Chinese writers should not serve only those coming from the Euro-American Western sphere, but also those, up to the end of the 1970s almost completely neglected Asian, African, Latin-American countries. The translation and reading of the dissident writers from the communist countries was a new phenomenon in China. Kundera fascinated Leo Lee by his tendency towards the lyrical as a counterweight to the epic typical of Márquez. For traditional China the lyrical vision was more important than either the epic or dramatic vision, and Leo Lee was very well aware of this.<sup>8</sup> Not only for him, but also for innumerable Chinese readers, the “unbearable lightness of being” of Kundera’s novel, was reminiscent of Sima Qian’s (ca.145–ca. 86 B.C.) famous saying: “A man has only one death. That death may be as weighty as Mount T’ai, or it may be as light as a goose feather.”<sup>9</sup> These words were written in Sima Qian’s letter to Ren An (Shaoqing) after his castration on the order of the Emperor Han Wudi (141–87 B.C.).

For one “preliminary opinion” is this essay interesting for the students of Chinese literary scholarship. Modern Chinese literature after the May Fourth Movement lacked what Leo Lee calls *zhuguan de shiye* (subjective vision), which expresses on the one hand the individual opinions of creators issuing from their knowledge and artistic conscience, and on the other, their peculiar, but deep

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<sup>7</sup> 4, 1985, pp. 42–49.

<sup>8</sup> Here Leo Lee followed the idea of Jaroslav Průšek expressed in his well-known study: “Subjectivism and Individualism in Modern Chinese Literature”, *Archiv orientální*, 25, 1957, pp. 261–283 and reprinted in LEO OU-FAN LEE (ed.): *The Lyrical and the Epic. Studies of Modern Chinese Literature by Jaroslav Průšek*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1980, pp. 1–28. He also consulted Ralph FREEDMAN’s book: *The Lyrical Novel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1963.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted according to Burton WATSON: *Ssu-ma Ch’ien. Grand Historian of China*, New York, Columbia University Press 1958, p. 63.

views on history, culture and society. At the same time, the basis in this new endeavour should be formed by the original Chinese culture silently transforming itself into a new entity, like in the eighteenth century *Honglouloumeng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) by Cao Xueqin (ca.1715–1763). The antitraditional and pro-Western tendency of modern Chinese literature was to some extent problematic. It was a pity that its mostly young representatives did not try to use better the indisputable positive qualities of the traditional Chinese literature, just as the writers of the Latin American literatures did in the 1940s and later.

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In his contribution to the conference entitled *The Commonwealth of Chinese Literature*, held in Reisenburg Castle, Günzburg, Germany in 1986, Leo Lee found two groups of writers or two kinds of literature in the PRC which he personally preferred: *xungen wenxue* (literature of searching for roots) and literary modernism.

“Searching for roots” and literary modernism “engaged in experimenting with novel narrative techniques deriving from the West”<sup>10</sup> may be regarded as two sides of the same coin. In the first half of the 1980s, contemporary Chinese writers start with more essential self-reflection. This was connected with the successes, but much more with the failures of the preceding periods in relation to the indigenous and foreign literatures. With respect to the years 1919–1937, when the Euro-American, at first mostly Western and classical Russian literatures, and then also “revolutionary” or “proletarian” literatures were the centres of attention, now for the first time Latin-American literary area begins to find readers and followers. These literatures were, of course, not the sole sources of inspiration for the Chinese. The names of those introduced at the beginning of this essay were not mentioned in vain.

The ideological fermentation among the Chinese intellectuals between the campaign against “spiritual pollution” mentioned above, and “bourgeois liberalism” (1987), was among other things caused by the overall disappointment with the mostly poor achievements of Chinese literature and culture and its inability to compete with the top achievements of foreign individual (national) cultures, and also of their inadequate study. It is necessary to say that Latin American literatures were products of the Third World, to which the Chinese also belong.

In spite of some scholars who speak of the burdens of the May Fourth Movement literature (there were certainly many inadequacies and mistakes within its framework), it is not proper to doubt its positive impact for the development of modern Chinese literature and culture. The new Chinese culture which was a final product of it, was a part of the broad Asian movement, and it was inevitable. Sooner or later Chinese literature and culture should become part and parcel of

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<sup>10</sup> LEO OU-FAN LEE: “Beyond Realism: Thoughts on Modernist Experiments in Contemporary Chinese Writing”. In: GOLDBLATT, H.: *Worlds Apart. Recent Chinese Writing and Its Audiences*. New York, M.E. Sharpe, Inc. 1990, pp. 64–77.

this endeavour. The disadvantage of this movement was too much conscious or subconscious effort to achieve Europeanization, and reluctance, or inability to follow the indigenous traditions and to use their creative potency within the framework of the contemporary development.

The narrow minded and doubtful effort of the people around Mao Zedong, who in the years 1939 and 1940 proposed to create a "fresh, lively Chinese style and spirit which the common people of China love",<sup>11</sup> was at first sight sufficiently and even attractively formulated, but the consequences for the contemporary Chinese literature after these years were disastrous. Even those who participated in this broad discussion and did not agree with "orthodox" Party speakers, such as Chen Buoda, Zhou Yang and their followers, for instance, Hu Feng, He Qifang or Mao Dun, were not able to hit the target and to find an appropriate solution to the crisis of modern Chinese literature after the beginning of the Anti-Japanese War in 1937.<sup>12</sup> The most preferred models were usually European realist literature, then that of the "small and oppressed nations" of Central, Eastern or South-Eastern Europe, "revolutionary" and "proletarian" literature, which from literary and axiological point of view was already at that time obsolete or even dead. Modern Chinese literature between the years 1937 and 1976-77 (the end of the "Cultural Revolution"), for four whole decades fell away from the world literary development, but it did not come near to its own indigenous legacies, and if it did, then not in a successful way, and this effort did not bring enough considerable literary achievements.

On the other side of our globe, in Latin America, the situation was partly similar, and in any case, comparable. In these countries, in 1940, after the victory of General Franco in the Spanish Civil War and after the first triumphs of Adolf Hitler on European battlefields, in Latin America there evolved a creative vacuum which had to be overcome. The old authors were no longer read and well-known authors from the Iberian peninsula found exile there. The new situation led to more activities in cultural life: new journals, publishing houses, research institutes. The exiled scholars, but also the domestic writers tried to change the overall face of the Latin American literary scene. This was the flourishing time of essays, when the most attention was paid to the problems of, let us say Mexican or Argentinian identity, its indigenous roots, which could be later, and they really were, used for building up great literatures, or excellent literary works, on this continent.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Selected Words of Mao Tse-tung*. Vol. 2, Peking 1965, p. 210.

<sup>12</sup> GÁLIK, M.: "Main Issues in the Discussion on "National Forms" in Modern Chinese Literature", *Asian and African Studies* (Bratislava), X, 1974, pp. 97-111 and HOLM, D.L.: "National Form and the Popularisation of Literature in Yenan". In: *La Littérature chinoise au Temps de la Guerre de Résistance contre le Japon (de 1937 à 1945)*, Paris, Éditions de la Fondation Singer-Polignac 1982, pp. 215-235.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. MONEGAL, E.R.: "Die lateinamerikanische Literatur". In: WILPRET, G. von and IVASK, I. (eds.): *Moderne Weltliteratur. Die Gegenwartsliteraturen Europas und Amerikas*. Stuttgart, Alfred Kröner Verlag 1978, pp. 159-161.

“Roots” became a catchword of Mainland Chinese literature forty five years after that of Latin American. The discussion about it was first pointed out by Han Shaogong (1953– ) in 1985. In contrast to Latin America, China has no authors comparable to Octavio Paz (1914–1998) and his *Labyrinth of Solitude*, about the gods and demons of Mexico of the bygone ages and of our time. There are many others who analysed the “spirit” of Latin American civilization in the various realms, including literature. China, as far as I know, did not have these works, and books as Zhang Zhengming’s *Chu wenhua shi* (*A History of Chu Culture*) are quite rare even now.<sup>14</sup> Han Shaogong wrote an interesting essay about West Hunan, his native region, but his admiration is connected with the culture of Chu, a great ancient kingdom existing between 1050 and 256 B.C., around the Middle Yangzijiang. He observed some impact of it even in our days. This short essay is not a deep study. Anke Pieper agrees with the idea that his characteristics of Chu culture are “primitive, or half-primitive”, or “its religion, philosophy, science, literature and art are not sufficiently differentiated”,<sup>15</sup> are written without deep study of the phenomena and of their substance. Some of Han’s observations are interesting in his first article, but they are probably too impressionistic, full of enthusiasm, for example, for the music, dance, gods and demons of the Dong national minority, or for the Yao and Tujia in their mountainous surrounding.<sup>16</sup> Han Shaogong himself admits that the knowledge of this kind “was not well documented and studied up to now, and it was mainly preserved among the people”.<sup>17</sup> Han Shaogong lived for years by the Miluo River, about twenty kilometers from the place where Qu Yuan (ca. 340–278 B.C.), the great initiator and partly also author of *Chuci* (*The Song of South*) committed suicide. He did not find there many relics of Chu culture there and began to assert that “the belief that Chu culture moved itself to West Hunan is not without evidence”.<sup>18</sup> It is a pity that he did not supply us with concrete proofs.

Another promoter of “searching for roots” was Li Hangyu, who even more strongly stressed the potential impact of this culture, mainly of the poet Qu Yuan on Chinese literature and regretted that the impact of the Northern region around the Yellow River was much stronger than that of the Southern Chu, or Wu-Chu.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Shanghai, People’s Publishing House 1987. See also earlier WEN CHONGYI: *Chu wenhua yanjiu* (*A Study of Chu Culture*), Taipei, Academia Sinica 1967 and later XIAO BING: *Chuci wenhua* (*Chu Culture*), Peking, Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 1990 (2nd print. 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. A. PIEPER: *Literarischer Regionalismus in China. Entstehung, Themen und Funktionen*. Dortmund, Projekt Verlag 1997, p. 51 and HAN SHAOGONG: “Nach der ‘Wundenliteratur’: Lokalkulturen und eine Periode der Ermattung und Reife”. In: MARTIN, H. and HASE-BERGEN, S. (eds.): *Bittere Träume. Selbstdarstellungen chinesischer Schriftsteller*. Bonn, Bouvier Verlag 1993, p. 167.

<sup>16</sup> HAN SHAOGONG: “Wenxue de ‘gen’” (“The ‘Roots’ of Literature”), *Zuojia* (*Writers*), 4, 1985, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>19</sup> LI HANGYU: “Li yi li women de ‘gen’” (“Let us Cope With Our ‘Roots’”), *ibid.*, 6, 1985.

He was enthralled by the “romantic” spirit of the *Songs of South*, their use of mythic stories and of mystic colouring.

Zhuangzi (3rd cent. B.C.), a great Taoist thinker and writer, could serve or even served as another source of inspiration. According to Ma Yuan (1953– ), about whom more will be said presently, Zhuangzi and Einstein were “the greatest magical thinkers of mankind”<sup>20</sup> Zhuangzi as a philosopher was and still is much studied and analysed in China and abroad, and translated into different languages of the world. Whether enough attention has been devoted to *Zhuangzi* from the literary point of view, is another question. Here it is necessary to point to Burton Watson’s experience with the text, who says that the “central theme of the *Zhuang Tzu* may be summed up in a single word: freedom”.<sup>21</sup> This means that enlightened human beings (or the spiritual elite) should free themselves from the “baggage of conventional values” before he/she can be free.<sup>22</sup> This is possible to do whether using the paradoxical anecdote similar to *gongan* (*koan*), known later from the Japanese or Chinese Chan/Zen literature, or with the help of at first logical premises and proceeding (and ending) outside of logic, “reducing language to a gibbering inanity”.<sup>23</sup> Zhuangzi’s, but also Qu Yuan’s “free and easy wandering” through time and space is famous. Just as a Holy Man “living on faraway Ku-she (or Ku-yi) Mountain, with skin like ice or snow, and gentle and shy like a young girl. He does not eat the five grains, but sucks the wind, drinks the dew, climbs up on the clouds and mist, rides a flying dragon, and wanders beyond the four seas.”<sup>24</sup>

This “wandering beyond the four seas” was probably the uniting thread of all “searching for roots”. The “theoreticians” and writers were mostly *zhiqing* (educated youth) who roamed between the four (?) seas of the PRC, between Heilongjiang and Himalayas, between Tianshan and Hainan. They did not spend much time on deep study, and usually they did not even have the books to read, the experts to consult. The years of university studies, were not enough for achieving a deep knowledge of the subject. They did not have enough time to rediscover their lost identity. All the writers engaged in searching for roots had their places, which they tried to describe in their works, usually in short stories or novels, but also in poems. These places were connected with those where they were born or had lived. They reproduce or create new modern myths on the basis of the old stories or their germs. One of the most successful writers

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<sup>20</sup> MA YUAN: “Xiangjia de tianmi” (“Thinker’s Sweet Honey”). Quoted according to Ji HONGZHEN: “Menglong de gudian jingshen” (“Mistiness and Classical Spirit”). *Zhongguo xiandai, dangdai wenxue yanjiu* (*Studies in Modern and Contemporary Literature*), 12, 1990, p. 25. Originally published in *Wenxue ziyoutan* (*Free Talks About Literature*) (Tientsin), 4, 1990.

<sup>21</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Trans. by Burton Watson. New York, Columbia University Press 1968, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

among those “searching for roots” Mo Yan (1956– ) wrote about his native place Gaomi in Shandong Province. His works were probably most similar to the Magical Realism of the García Márquez sort.<sup>25</sup> Like his well-known colleague Jia Pingwa (1952– ), whose short stories and novels are about Shangzhou, a town in Shaanxi Province, who was born in a village nearby, Mo Yan exalts his native place which is “undoubtedly the prettiest and the ugliest, the most unworldly and the most mundane, the holiest and the most vulgar, the most heroic and the rottenest, the most drunken and the most romantic place on earth”.<sup>26</sup> Jia Pingwa also praises the beauties of his native country. “This is an incredibly beautiful piece of land,” he wrote prostrated on the allegedly clean sandy shore of the Danjiang River. “The air from here could be sold in the whole world.”<sup>27</sup> The works of these two have a high literary level in the Chinese literary world. One of Mo Yan’s stories bears the title *Baozha* (*Explosions*) which is synonymous with *El Boom*, as Magical Realism is sometimes termed in Spanish. According to Michael Wood, this kind of literature freed Latin American authors “from an earnest, wrong-headed realism” and one of them García Márquez “freed other writers and readers from other bondages...”<sup>28</sup> In one of his “confessions” Mo Yan wrote: “In the year 1985 I wrote five novellettes and more than ten short stories. There is no doubt that where their world view and artistic devices are concerned, they were strongly influenced by foreign literature. Among Western works the greatest impact came from García Márquez’s *Hundred Years of Solitude* and William Faulkner’s *Sound and Fury*.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> According to my inadequate knowledge, at least one article has been written specifically on relations between these two writers. See, WANG GUOHUA and SHI TING: “Mo Yan yu Maerkesi” (“Mo Yan and Márquez”), *Studies in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature*, 7, 1987, pp. 215–221. Originally published in *Yitan* (*Talks on Art*) (Hefei), 3, 1987. More on the impact of Magical Realism on contemporary Chinese writers, see LÜ FANG: “Xin shiqi zhong Zhongguo wenxue yu Lamei ‘baozha’ wenxue yingxiang” (The Impact of the Latin American Literary ‘Boom’ on Contemporary Chinese Literature”), *Wenxue pinglun* (*Literary Review*), 6, 1990, pp. 87–99 and 55. Márquez’s impact on Mo Yan is treated here on pp. 92–93.

<sup>26</sup> MO YAN: *Honggaoliang zu* (*The Red Sorghum Family*), Peking, Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe 1988, p. 2. Quoted according to DAVID DER-WEI WANG: “Imaginary Nostalgia: Shen Congwen, Song Zelai, Mo Yan, and Li Yongping”. In: WIDMER, E. and DAVID DER-WEI WANG (eds.): *From May Fourth to June Fourth. Fiction and Film in Twentieth Century China*. Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press 1993, p. 123.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted according to JIA PINGWA: “Das Leben wandelt sich auch in den Bergen von Shangzhou”. In: MARTIN, H. and HASE-BERGEN, S. (eds.): op. cit., p. 107. Chinese original see in *Pingwa wenlun ji* (*Essays by Jia Pingwa*). Xining 1985, pp. 32–38.

<sup>28</sup> See the opinion of Michael Wood, whose opinion from the book *Garcia Marquez: 100 Years of Solitude*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1900, p. 104 quoted Janice Wicker in her “Introduction”. In: MO YAN: *Explosions and Other Stories*. Hong Kong, The Chinese University of Hong Kong 1991, pp. viii–ix.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted according to WANG GUOHUA and SHI TING: op. cit., p. 215.



*Explosions* means here not only what was suggested above, but also something connected with the daily life of hundreds of millions of Chinese: the population explosion and the process of abortion during the hunt for the fox, the mythical animal in Chinese history, capable of various changes. As in old traditional stories, the fox evades the chase by dogs and villagers, but a woman who would like to give birth to a boy, ends on the obstetrician's table. One of the millions of tragedies in Chinese families is presented here in this novellette.

After two or three years, with the end of the "searching for roots", the "magical" side of Chinese reality, began to be less interesting for Mo Yan. His novel *Tiantai suantai zhi ge* (*Garlic Song*), published in 1988, was highlighted by Michael S. Duke as his "finest effort",<sup>30</sup> where he much more successfully than in his previous works "goes beyond the ordinary conventions of realist narrative...borrows techniques both from China's traditional fiction and the literary world of Western modernism, and produces an emotionally and intellectually attractive narrative."<sup>31</sup>

Jia Pingwa remained faithful to his Shangzhou County, but also his later work, lost something of the "magical" of his previous works. His *Fuzao* (*Turbulence*), just as *Garlic Song* goes back to political and economic problems of post-Mao China.<sup>32</sup>

It is a pity that in the China of recent years development in literature has proceeded too fast. The search for Latin American identity that lasted about three decades, in China could not have been finished within three years. The theoretical essays concerned with the "search for roots" in the years of its blossoming abound. According to the excellent study by Huang Jichi more than fifty pieces were written in the year after April 1985<sup>33</sup> and in the literary yearbook for 1986 we find more than thirty.<sup>34</sup> Quantity does not mean quality. Even this quantity was not sufficient, since the contributions were usually too sketchy. Hopefully the Chinese writers and literary, cultural critics, anthropologists and scholars in

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<sup>30</sup> DUKE, M. S.: "Past, Present and Future in Mo Yan's Fiction of the 1980s". In: WIDMER, E. and DAVID DER-WEI WANG (eds.): op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>32</sup> Howard Goldblatt's English translation *Turbulence*, appeared at Baton Rouge and London, Louisiana University Press 1991. According to Th. Weyrauch's review of the German translation of *Garlic Song*, this novel, because of its critical attitude to Communist bureaucrats, was forbidden in the PRC. See *Orientierungen* (Bonn), 1, 1999, p. 159.

<sup>33</sup> HUANG JICHI: "Zhongguo dangdai wenxue de wenhua 'xungen' taolun shuping" ("A Review of the Essays in Cultural 'Root Seeking' in Modern Chinese Literature"), in his book *Wenxue chuanguo yu xiandai* (*Literary Tradition and Modernity*). Hong Kong, Huashan 1988, pp. 173-178. Another interesting treatise of the discussion from the year 1985 is the essay by CAI YI: "Wenxue 'xungen' shuo yi lan" ("A review of the Discussion On Searching For Literary Roots"). In: *Zhongguo wenxue yanjiu nianjian 1986* (*A Yearbook of Chinese Literary Studies 1986*), Peking, Zhongguo wenxian chubansongsi 1988, pp. 100-106.

<sup>34</sup> *Zhongguo wenxue yanjiu nianjian 1987* (*A Yearbook of Chinese Literary Studies 1987*), Peking, Zhongguo wenxian chubansongsi 1989, pp. 511 and 587.

different fields, did not leave the problem of their own literary identity for good after 1987.

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In the paper read at Reisenburg Castle, Germany, Leo Lee mentioned Mo Yan as one about whom "recent rage evolves". Jia Pingwa was at that time put by him among the "emergent names",<sup>35</sup> as well as some other writers, including Ma Yuan. I do not remember whether in Leo Lee's paper, Ma Yuan was mentioned or not in Leo Lee's paper. His read and published paper differed to a great extent: the first was an intelligent draft well received by the audience, the second was much better elaborated. I remember it clearly. We read our contributions successively in one room.

Ma Yuan as a writer is somewhere between "searching for roots" and the so-called *tansuopai* (experimental school). I also cannot remember when I read or heard about him for the first time. Maybe it was in the Slovak journal *Revue svetovej literatúry* (*Revue of World Literature*), where Anna Doležalová in a report from the Jinshan 1986 Contemporary Literature Conference wrote that among all the writers of that time she liked Ma Yuan most of all. He was allegedly her most favoured "literary discovery".<sup>36</sup> In 1989 the same journal published her short account of Ma Yuan in a sketch entitled "Rozprávač príbehov" ("A Story Teller") together with her translation of Ma's short story *Tuman gu-guai tu'an de qiangbi* (*A Wall Depicted by Old and Strange Signs*).<sup>37</sup> According to Doležalová, Ma Yuan in contrast to many other Chinese writers, did not see his models in Latin American Magical Realism, but he was enthralled by the simple stories from the *Old Testament* of the *Bible* and from *Zhuangzi*. His library included the books by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864), Albert Camus (1913–1960), André Gide (1869–1951), Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1921–), Samuel Beckett (1906–) and Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961). Perhaps Ma Yuan did not see the models to follow in any of the men of letters and literature just mentioned, but Borges' book *El libro de arena* (*The Book of Sand*) is the only foreign book compared to very strange book entitled *Fotuo facheng waijing* (*A Spurious Classic of Buddha's Law Vehicle*), found by Lu Gao and Yao Liang, two curious characters who are often the "heroes" in Ma Yuan's works.<sup>38</sup> *A Spurious Classic of Buddha's Law Vehicle* may have never existed, like Borges' land called Uqbar, allegedly found in the "Volume XLVI of the 'Anglo-American Cyclopaedia' which is, according to the narrator, 'a literal but delinquent

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<sup>35</sup> LEO OU-FAN LEE: "Beyond Realism: Thoughts on Modernist Experiences Experiments in Contemporary Chinese Writings". In: GOLDBLATT, H. (ed.): op cit., p. 72.

<sup>36</sup> DOLEŽALOVÁ, A.: "List z Číny" ("A Letter from China"). *Revue of World Literature*, 5, 1987, p. 172.

<sup>37</sup> 4, 1989, p. 134.

<sup>38</sup> Loc. cit. and Henry Y.H. ZHAO: "Ma Yuan the Chinese Fabricator". *World Literature Today*, 69, Spring 1995, 2, p. 313.

reprint of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* of 1902.”<sup>39</sup> Now here is an allusion to Borges’ fantastic story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* which probably has more common with Ma Yuan’s story under analysis than *The Book of Sand*. Borges’ story, the very first in his *Ficciones*, translated into English under the same title, otherwise “the longest and most complex as well as the most imposing of all the narratives gathered”<sup>40</sup> in *Ficciones*. According to Gene H. Bell-Villada, this is “also one of Borges’ most personal stories; it sets forth nearly all of his key ideas, preoccupations, mannerisms, stray notions and conceits – and is therefore the most ‘Borgesian’ of all of Borges’ works.”<sup>41</sup>

The country of Uqbar, as well as of Tlön, the second allegedly situated in Asia Minor, is pure Borgesian fiction, of course, fabricated for a special purpose. The Tlönese “do not reason about reality”. They are objective idealists, they speculate about metaphysics, they regard existence as a dream. They consider absurd the presumption that an “exact likeness might constitute an identity”.<sup>42</sup>

Because of my inadequate knowledge of Ma Yuan’s life and work, I cannot claim that the story selected by Doležalová for our Slovak (and probably also Czech readers) was most “Mayuanean”. But some assertions in *A Spurious Classic of Buddha’s Law Vehicle*, quoted as a motto to his short story and later explained in the text, show that Ma Yuan’s work was stimulated and to some extent influenced by the Borgesian world view, even if not just by this story. We read in Ma Yuan’s work that when Lu Gao read the spurious classical book, he found that the the “manuscript (the book was not printed, M.G.) is only a *hushuo badao* (nonsense). In fact, it does not exist. There is no difference between its existence or non-existence.”<sup>43</sup>

I do not know what was behind Doležalová’s decision to select precisely this work for translation and not another longer, and according to me, more successful story entitled *Xugou (Fabrication)*, of which she was well aware. The title story alludes to *Ficciones*, a part of which was called *Artificios*, when published for the first time in 1944.<sup>44</sup> Its motto comes also from the same spurious manuscript: repeated fabrication is the method of the gods’ creation.<sup>45</sup> In this they are

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<sup>39</sup> ZHANG LONGXI: “The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West”. In: YANG ZHOUHAN and YUE DAIYUN (eds.): *Literatures Histories and Literary Histories. The Proceedings of the 2nd Sino-U.S. Comparative Literature Symposium*. Shenyang, Liaoning University Press 1989, p. 193.

<sup>40</sup> BELL-VILLADA, G.H.: *Borges and His Fiction. A Guide to His Mind and Art*. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press 1981, p. 128.

<sup>41</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>43</sup> “A Wall Depicted by Old and Strange Signs”. *Beijing wenxue (Peking Literature)*, 10, 1986, p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> BORGES, J.L.: *Obras completas, 1923–1949*. Vol. 1, Barcelona, Emecé Editores 1989, pp. 481–531.

<sup>45</sup> MA YUAN: *Xugou (Fabrication)*, *Shouhuo (Harvest)*, 5, 1986, p. 48.

similar to men, writers and artists. "I am the person known as Ma Yuan, a Han Chinese. I am a writer,"<sup>46</sup> are the first words of the novellette. Ma Yuan was born in the northeastern China, in the town of Jinzhou, Manchuria, and after spending about ten years in the countryside and finishing University studies in his native Liaoning Province, he volunteered for southwestern Tibet. One critic compared him to Sven Hedin (1865–1952), but the article also pointed out that probably Zhuangzi was nearest to him among traditional Chinese writers.<sup>47</sup> In one of his "confessions" Ma Yuan wrote: "I think that the most outstanding story in *Zhuangzi* is that about Hundun (i.e. Chaos, M.G.). It is about two of his friends who were sorry for him, since he had no eyes, nose and ears and therefore he could not see, hear and or even breathe. They consulted together and decided to bore him seven openings. 'Every day they bored another hole, and on the seventh day Hun-tun died.' I call it Hundun's method and this is also my method."<sup>48</sup> This story is probably too short to know what Zhuangzi had in mind. In another story told by a Taoist hermit to Yan Hui, Confucius's disciple, and in an ironic way put into the mouth of Confucius, practitioner of the arts of Chaos, and of Zhuangzi himself "looks after what is on the inside but doesn't look after what is on the outside". Such a man is one "of true brightness and purity who can enter into simplicity, who can return to the primitive through inaction, give body to his inborn nature, end embrace his spirit, and in this way wander through the everyday world – if you had met one like that, you would have real cause for astonishment".<sup>49</sup>

Ma Yuan's *Fabrication* is just such story. Ma Yuan enters the world represented by a Tibetan village called in Chinese Maqacun, that sounds similarly as Márquezian Macondo, inhabited by lepers, all except for one old Chinese Guomindang officer, inhibited and mutilated by this terrible illness. All Borges' stories from the *Ficciones* are "not entirely free of symbolism",<sup>50</sup> and it is the same with this one by Ma Yuan. According to me it allegorizes a mythical world where all human beings have some kind of pandemic illness, but they are different in their inner or external habitus and outfit. They are all disabled in this leprosarium (or in this "world"), with corrupted faces, "with two holes which would have been nostrils if she (a single woman with a child one year old,

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<sup>46</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>47</sup> HU HEQING: "Lun Acheng, Ma Yuan, Zhang Wei: Daojia wenhua zhehui zhaoge" ("On Acheng, Ma Yuan and Zhang Wei: Herolds of the Wisdom of Taoist Culture"), *Studies in Modern and Contemporary Literature*, 4, 1989, p. 129. Another critic XU ZHENQIANG, Ma Yuan's schoolfellow at Liaoning University, Shenyang, wrote very interesting article about him and his works: "Ma Yuan xiaoshuo pingxi" (A Critical Analysis of Ma Yuan's Fiction), *Literary Review*, 5, 1987, pp. 86–93.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. HU HEQING, op. cit. p. 130 and *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 97. Ma Yuan in his text probably forgot Hundun's mouth. Ma Yuan's original remained inaccessible to me.

<sup>49</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 136.

<sup>50</sup> BELL-VILLADA, G.H.: op. cit., p. 102.

M.G.) still had a nose".<sup>51</sup> Just as one, who took Yuan, frozen to death and feeling feverish, to her poor room, with her rejection of conventional values, which are usually a source of our bondage and suffering. This unnamed Tibetan woman had her own wanderings. Spatially they were limited by the two-storey building where she lived with some likewise leprous neighbours, basketball playground in the centre of the village and the divine trees with the prayer-wheels outside the village. But inwardly, she had a "sign" or "evidence" of complete virtue. It is just as in the Chapter Five of *Zhuangzi*, where all the main characters were mutilated. She spoke Chinese, knew a few characters, lived according to her inner inclination and did not care for the opinions of others. She was truly like them: one-legged Wang Tai, ugly Ai Taituo, Mr. Lame-Hunchback-No-Lips, or Mr. Pitcher-Sized-Wen. For all, then, as for leprous Tibetan woman: "knowledge is an offshoot, promises are glue, favours are a patching up, and skill is a peddler. The sage hatches no schemes, so what use has he for knowledge. He does no carving, so what use has he for glue? He suffers no loss, so what use has he for favours? He hawks no goods, so what use has he for peddling."<sup>52</sup> In contrast to the mutilated sages, she had the human feelings: for his son, for her Loba and Chinese lover (by the way, Ma Yuan himself). At least in his "fabricated" story.

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After 1987 the "searching for roots" movement ended in China, and "Ma Yuan's sensational writing career was cut shortly in early 1989".<sup>53</sup> Later in the same year, exactly on October 16, I received Ma Yuan's volume of stories entitled *Gangdisi de youhuo* (*The Lure of the Gandisi Mountains*), its first edition, with his signature, dedicated to his friend, who kindly gave it to me, when I assured him about my great sympathies towards Ma Yuan as a writer. At that time the streets of Peking were full of patrolling soldiers and police sent there by the government afraid of the consequences of the June 4th massacre. It seems that nobody knows his whereabouts and the reasons for his disappearance.<sup>54</sup> It seems that he finished his literary travels nearly at the beginning of his literary career, but nobody could be sure about it. If he remained faithful to the roots of Chu culture, which certainly had great impact on him, he may be roaming on a long, long spiritual journey, going up and down to seek his heart's desires like

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted according to Helen Wang's translation in Henry Y.H. ZHAO (ed.): *Lost Boat. Avant-garde Fiction from China*. London, Wellsweep Press 1993, p. 109.

<sup>52</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 75.

<sup>53</sup> Henry Y.H. ZHAO: "Ma Yuan the Fabricator", p. 312.

<sup>54</sup> Loc. cit. His works began to be published once again in 1995. See WANG PU: "Zhongguo xianfengpai xiaoshuojia de Boerhesi qingjie: chongdu xianfengpai" ("The Borgesian Group of Modern Chinese Avant-garde Writers: Re-reading Their Works"), *Zhongguo bijiao wenxue* (*Comparative Literature in China*). 1, 1999, p. 49.

Qu Yuan,<sup>55</sup> or like a Holy Man from Zhuangzi's "Free and Easy Wandering", musing about the deep and unsolved questions of human existence, more important than the troubles of our everyday life: "This man... is about to embrace the ten thousand things... Though the age calls for reform, why should he wear himself out over the affairs of the world? There is nothing that can harm this man. Though flood waters pile up the sky, he will not drown. Though a great drought melts metal and stone and scorches the earth and hills, he will not be burned. From his dust and leavings alone you could mold a Yao or a Shun! Why should he consent to bother about more things?"<sup>56</sup>

Not much was done in China in the middle of the 1980s in "searching for roots", and not much in finding the lost identity.<sup>57</sup> This work has to be done in the future, and we, foreign Sinologists should participate in this task. More was been done, and some very good literary pieces were written during those years, among others, under the inspiration of the literary magicians of Latin American literatures, and especially the two literary giants: Márquez and Borges. Mo Yan and Ma Yuan are probably the best proofs for this assertion.

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<sup>55</sup> See *Lisao (On Encountering Sorrow)*. In: Hawkes, D. trans.: *Ch'u Tz'u. The Songs of South*. Oxford, At the Clarendon Press 1959, pp. 22-34 and *Yüan Yu (The Far-off Journey)*, *ibid.*, pp. 81-87, although this poem, traditionally attributed to him, is obviously not his (cf. p. 81).

<sup>56</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>57</sup> The Chinese writers also felt themselves not secure with their Han traditions, and often devoted much attention to the border areas, as Tibet, Xinkiang, Mongolia, inhabited by non-Han national minorities. See, for instance, BAI JIEMING (GEREMIE BARMÉ): "Zhongguo wenyijie de 'biansai re'" ("The 'Border Craze' of Chinese Literature and Arts"), *Jiushi niandai (The Nineties)*, 10, 1986, p. 97.