

GENDERED CHINAS AND THE NATIONAL FUTURE: INTERPRETING LU YAO

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Abstract: A few years ago, the Chinese government called on Chinese to build a “harmonious society.” This proposal connects us to a famous Chinese writer, Lu Yao (1949-1992). He has been well-known with his *Life* and *The Ordinary World* since the early 1980s. In all his works, Lu Yao focused on the “Urban-Rural Intersection,” harshly criticizing bureaucracy and social discriminations created by the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This author argues that the writer, because of his personal experience, cherishes a gendered approach. He genders cities into a corrupt and bureaucratic female that is to be regulated; northern Shaanxi (Shaanbei), which all his writings focus on, is endowed with a male gender. Putting hopes on a few aspiring rural male characters, he believes that the future of China lies in male rural area and male heroes with rural origin. He is also confident that these people would be able to carry the burden of developing the rural regions and regulating the corrupt cities.

In March, 2003, Sun Zhigang, a college student from Hubei province, went to Guangzhou to look for a job. Because he was not carrying his Identity Card (*shenfen zheng*), he was treated as a jobless wander and detained. After some quarrels, he was eventually beaten to death in a Collecting Post by local Urban Management Officers (*chengshi guanli ren yuan*).

At the 2007 Spring Festival Eve Party (which has been hosted by the China Central TV station since 1983), the most impressive program was performed by 30 children of peasant workers working in Beijing. They collectively recited a verse, *Innermost Thoughts* (*xinli hua*). Through the national medium, the children described to all the Chinese their bitterness over life in urban China. It is their parents who construct city buildings and clean urban streets, and, like their city cousins, they are also the children of China. So, as the verse implied with these specific mistreatments, why do urban children laugh at them for their rural origins even though their homework is superb, and why are their informal schools (mostly private) equipped with collapsing chair, dark classrooms, and simple campus?

These two cases seriously remind us of the social and political discrimination created by official policies in the PRC. Social discriminations and inequality were historical problems in China.¹ The confronting binary urban-rural division was a creation at the very

¹ The author would like to especially thank Professors Ming Dong Gu and Lung-kee Sun for carefully reading and commenting on earlier versions. Thanks also go to three professors. Professor Minoru Yasumoto sent me his publications on Lu Yao from Japan, He Zhili gave me his book, and Liang Xiangyang provided me with related information. All errors in this paper are mine.

For example, the bad experience of Subei (northern Jiangsu province) people in Shanghai, see Emily Honig, *Creating Chinese Ethnicity, Subei People in Shanghai, 1850-1980* (Yale University Press, 1992); similar experience occurred to Anhui people staying in Shanghai, in the 1990s, see Lei Guang, “Rural Taste,

beginning of the PRC. In 1950, the central government ordered the detention of prostitutes, beggars, migrants without jobs, and the people who had associated with the Nationalist government in the Republic period (1912-49). This policy evolved in 1982 into an executive directive, *Regulations on Urban Wanderers and Beggars* (*chengshi liulang qitao renyuan shourong qiansong banfa*). With the purpose of helping, educating, settling, or repatriating people who stayed in cities but had no residence permit and job, this directive lays the foundation for separating China into two confronting sections: rural regions and cities.² The case of Sun Zhigang forced the State Council to replace the 1982 directive with *Regulations on Rescuing Urban Jobless Wanderers and Beggars* (*chengshi shenghuo wuzhaoluo liulang qitao renyuan jiuzhu guanli banfa*) in June, 2003. For the peasant workers going to cities to seek/take job, social and legal discriminations have been consistent. As complained in the verse, peasant workers cannot enjoy the same welfare that the urban residents have.

Lu Yao (1949-1992) has been well-known with his *Life* (1982) and *The Ordinary World* (1986-8). As Dengist reforms started in 1978, many intellectuals lamented the disasters that the Cultural Revolution brought forth. He was not a member of any literary trends³ that were popular during the transition period from Maoism to Dengism. Instead of generally complaining about the chaos that the Cultural Revolution brought out, he criticized the binary urban-rural system that had mistreated and bedeviled the rural people. Specifically, he kept his eyes on “the Urban-Rural Intersection”⁴ during his lifetime. “My efforts [in writing] are not to entertain the public, but to write the bloody and sweaty history of my mind.”⁵ His *Outcry* (the title of Lu Xun’s famous short story) has met active responses from society. Even in the 1990s, as China went to a market economy, numerous readers, such as students, peasant workers in cities, widely read his works.⁶ Ironically, he has officially been recognized as a writer extolling Dengist reforms and was awarded the Mao Dun Literary Award for novels in 1986.

This article will explore how Lu Yao describes political and social discriminations that the binary system brought out, and how he expects to prosper and strengthen China. I argue that the writer, because of his personal experience, cherishes a gendered approach. In his works, he genders cities into a corrupt and bureaucratic female that is to be regulated; northern Shaanxi (Shaanbei), which all his writings focus on, is endowed with a male gender. Putting hope on a few struggling rural male characters, he believes that the future of China

Urban Fashions: The Cultural Politics of Rural-Urban Difference in Contemporary China,” *Positions*, Volume 11, Number 3, Winter 2003, pp.613-646.

² For details on the Hukou (household registration) system, see Cheng and Mark Selden, “The Origins and Social Consequences of China’s Hukou System,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 139 (Sep., 1994), pp.644-668, and Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang, “The Hukou System and Rural-Metropolitan Migration in China: Processes and Changes,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 160 (Dec., 1999), pp.818-855.

³ These trends include the Scar Literature that condemned the Cultural Revolution, the Reflective Literature that criticized Maoism, the Reforms Literature that praised Deng’s new policies, and the Root-Seeking Literature that tried to identify the roots of Chinese civilization.

⁴ Lu Yao himself coined the term at a conference on his writings which was held in Xi’an in October 1981; for the detailed discussion of this concept, see, Minoru Yasumoto, “The Key Word in Lu Yao’s Literature: Intersection,” *Novel Review*, 1999:1.

⁵ Lu Yao, *Lu Yao Florilegium*, 552.

⁶ For the specific examination of this issue, see Shao Yanjun, “*The Ordinary World* is Unordinary,” *Novel Review*, 2003:1, pp58-65.

lies in male rural area and the male heroes with rural origin. He is also confident that these people would be able to carry the burden of developing rural region and regulating corrupt cities.

Gendering Cities

Lu Yao was born to a very poor peasant family. At the age of seven, he was adopted by his childless uncle. As a leader of his home county in the Cultural Revolution, he fell in love with an Educated Youth who was officially sent from a city for Maoist re-education. The failure of the first love troubled him for a long time. His second lover, later his wife, was also an Educated Youth. Very much different from her, Lu Yao tended to prefer a peasant's stark, dry, and "patriarchal" life style; he could even focus on writing for many days without paying attention to others things. So, happiness from the marriage did not last long, partially because of his strong characteristic that was "hard to deal with,"⁷ and partially because of his focus on writing. Finally, he signed the divorce file on the dying bed in 1992.⁸

The troubles from his love/marriage influenced his writings; he repeated similar plots again and again. Not only do his stories continue the traditional love affairs between "gifted scholars and beautiful ladies," but also they take place between rural males and urban females. Ma Jianqiang in *Difficult Days* is praised by a county (*xian*) government clerk's daughter who is moved by Ma's spirit in overcoming difficulties. Gao Jialin in *Life* and the radio program host in a county site, Huang Yaping, have an affair. Tian Xiaoxia, daughter of a party leader at county level, and Sun Shaoping in *The Ordinary World* are another pair of this kind.

After he settled in Xi'an as a professional writer, Lu Yao could not help but have his mind on poor northern Shaanxi. He usually traveled back to this region to write important works. It is here he feels attached to the environment. Facing the *Maowusu* Desert, Lu Yao experiences a "familiar and ordered life,"⁹ feels spiritual satisfaction, and finds aspirations for writing. "I have a special feeling for or familiarity with deserts; for example, the *Maowusu* desert in my hometown. That is a piece of pure land for human enlightenment of life. When I have to make important choices, especially about life and spiritual crises, I unconsciously go to the *Mowusu* desert."¹⁰ On his dying bed, he still wanted to go back to Northern Shaanxi.

Given that Lu Yao prefers his rural home place, why did he have an affair with another urban girl after his first failure? His two biographers, Zong Yuan and He Zhili, ascribe the breakdown of Lu Yao's marriage to his failure to pay family duties. He Zhili goes further, suggesting that Lu Yao's repetition of similar love stories indicates his revengeful psyche, and that Lu Yao's love for two urban girls also shows his revenge on urbanites.¹¹ These two interpretations are not exactly right for us to understand the writer.

⁷ He Zhili, *The Son of the Yellow Earth* (Beijing: zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2005), 117.

⁸ Zong Yuan, *On Lu Yao* (Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1999), 40; He Zhili, 39.

⁹ John H. Paterson and Evangeline Paterson, "Shropshire: Reality and Symbolism in the Work of Mary Webb," in Douglas Pocock (ed.), *Humanistic Geography and Literature* (London: Croom Helm. 1981), 210.

¹⁰ Lu Yao, "Mornings Start from Noons," *Lu Yao Florilegium*, 324.

¹¹ He Zhili, 119.

Behind the urban girls are cities which have differed from rural areas in every aspect since the later 1970s. Comparatively, no female protagonists in his writings experience as much hardship as the males do; they cross the Urban-Rural Intersection by marrying the powerful in cities (Sister in *Sister* and Lanlan in *Quiet Moon Light*) or attending college in cities (Jin Xiu and Sun Lanxiang in *The Ordinary World*). Attending college in the early 1980s was an officially accepted way for rural people to obtain a footing in urban area. Unfortunately, no male character can pass the college entrance examinations. Most male protagonists in Lu Yao's stories have a high school education which is very much respected as the elites in the rural area; they try hard to enter cities to look for/take better jobs corresponding to their personal capabilities. From the fact that Lu Yao gives less hardship to the female protagonists on their way to entering into cities, I argue that he tries to build a connection between the female and the city. Indeed, numerous examples in his works force us to conclude that he genders urban life into a female which, to him, is soft, frail, flippant, decadent, despicable, and bureaucratic. If he did have the "consciousness of modernity," as Zong Yuan claims, and recognize the primary importance of cities in China's future, I argue that he believes urban life needs to be regulated by people from outside.

Life, which I would argue is Lu Yao's most influential work, describes two urban ladies, Huang Yaping and her first boyfriend's mother, (Zhang) Ke'an's Mother (Ke'an ma). The reason for creating her is to provide a foil for Gao Jialin's work abilities and personal attraction to urban girls; the story even does not mention Huang Yaping's thinking about urban life. Ke'an's Mother represents the urban lifestyle, "full of the taste of urban petty bourgeoisie and bureaucracy,"¹² as Lu Yao writes. She insults Gao Jialin at first and then reports her illegal employment which finally results in Gao's unemployment in the county site and his return to his rural home.

Gao's first suffering from the woman exactly indicates the confrontation between urbanites and rural people. Being a peasant working in his home village, he goes to carry dung in her work unit's restroom (which is quiet different from western toilets) at dusk when she enjoys the cool in the yard. Angry at the bad smell of the dung, she quarrels with and slights Gao. Though impolite to Gao Jialin, Ke'an's Mother is very kind to Huang Yaping, the arranged girlfriend of her son. Taking advantage of her position as the deputy manager of a department store, she pleases Huang with the store's products and foodstuff. After illegally getting a job in the county government (he does not know the illegality), Gao soon starts an affair with Huang. This leads to his second meeting with Ke'an's Mother. Out of reprisal for his son's loss of Huang, the mother reports his illegality, and Gao is fired. Lu Yao agrees that though illegal actions should not be taken in seeking jobs, he, nevertheless, refuses to comment on this case and says, "The tragedy of Gao Jialin results from complex reasons---all these are left to the public to remark."¹³ Obviously, he is not satisfied with the suffering.

The Ordinary World is supposed to "panoramically reflect the transition of China"¹⁴ during the decade 1975-1985. To the villagers that the fiction focuses on, urban life is represented by some fake cheap watches and a "degenerate" woman. The watches are not welcome in market; the woman is Wang's business friend and sex partner. Both of them are

¹² Lu Yao, *Complete Works of Lu Yao* (Guangzhou chubanshe, 2004), 126.

¹³ Lu Yao, *Lu Yao Florilegium*, 180-1.

¹⁴ Lu Yao, *Lu Yao Florilegium*, 325.

threats to the peaceful and quiet village life. To escape the trouble of consumers' complaints, Wang and the woman go back to his home village. In his private cave dwelling (*yao dong*), he orders that the Wang couple, their two children, and the woman sleep in a row in the same bed at night. Such an arrangement does not prevent him from the intention of having sex with her as his wife stays between them. He is well beaten by a brother-in-law; the woman is driven out of the village. In Huangyuan city, Du Lili is the representative of modern urban life of Dengist era. She tries to be a poet by learning from a notable male poet, and later, she decides to divorce her husband. To look for romantic love and to pursue her literary success, she starts a love affair with the poet. Her dream, however, is a failure as symbolized by the small market of poems: the poet has to give poem collections to friends as free gifts.

Both in his life and works, Lu Yao strives to cross the Urban-Rural Intersection. He, however, fears urban life. He favors the rural females who successfully enter into the city, since they bring toughness, the characteristic of rural males, to cities. So talented and reasonable, Sun Lanxiang in her high school years works part time to earn money for her tuition with a job of carrying mixed cement and sand rock at a construction site. Instead of demonstrating her physical power, this story shows her perseverance in the face of difficulties. With such a spiritual power, she can definitely overcome whatever hardship that would occur in the future. These rural women, to Lu Yao, would be capable of enduring the hardship ahead and play significant role in transforming the despicable urban life symbolized by Du Lili and the fake cheap watches.

There are also a few urban male characters in Lu Yao's stories. Lu Xiaohua in *Yellow Leaves Falling down in Autumn Wind* is the deputy director of a county Educational Bureau; he, to a larger degree, represents the bureaucratic system. He divorces his first wife and pursues a married rural woman, who is not satisfied with her husband's poverty and rural residence status. After they get married, bureaucratic Lu is insufferably arrogant at home and shows no respect for the woman, always beating her. His young sister, Lu Ruoqin hates his bureaucracy and mistreatment of women. She provides precious help to the woman's former husband and they almost have an affair. After knowing the whole stories of her brother and the wife, she decides, at the end of the story, to write a letter to save him. Though bearing Maoist tone of educating the people with sublime expectations, Lu Ruoqin has a nice character of helping her brother's second wife and her former husband. "Life! Life! Aren't you like the strong autumn wind? You blow seeds of life to maturity, and the shrinking yellow leaves to regeneration! On the twigs without leaves, can new ones emerge?"¹⁵ In this story, the regeneration of the urban brother lies in her rural sister.

In *The Ordinary World*, Gu Yangmin and Wu Zhongping are younger high school/college students, and both bear the quality of traditional scholar-officials with mild and gentle temperament. They grow up in economically better families and never know hardship that life brings to human being in rural China. Though easy to deal with and ready to help others, the male urbanites seemingly cannot be trusted to take the laborious task of strengthening and prospering China. At high school, Gu is suspected to have a close relationship with Sun Shaoping's first girl friend. Soundly beaten by Sun's friends, he has no courage to face the confrontation squarely. Wu, though very nice and warm, is too timid and shy, in his affair with Sun Lanxiang. Langxiang, by contrast, is impressive with firmness and maturity. In Lu Yao's works, she is the only female figure that shows such a character in her relationship with

¹⁵ Lu Yao, *Lu Yao Florilegium*, 466.

males. These feminine qualities of urban males further strengthen my argument that Lu Yao intentionally genders cities into a female.

Gendering Northern Shaanxi

In Lu Yao's most influential novel, *The Ordinary World*, Sun Shaoping goes back to the city where he and his beloved, Tian Xiaoxia (died in an inundation before this trip), had a happy time. Actually, they agree to visit the place together. As he gets off the train, Lu Yao writes:

Huangyuan [city], my kind and stern father! I come back to your embrace again.
Do I come here to seek the lost dream in the past? to seek my sweetness and bitterness? or to seek my lost youth and happiness? ¹⁶

The saying, "stern father and loving mother," has been very common in Chinese culture. As early as during the May Fourth era, Bing Xi (1900-1999) could be the first person who promoted the social status of mother in China;¹⁷ and China could be one of the three cultures that have likened a country to a mother.¹⁸ This tradition has become increasingly stronger in the PRC. Mao Zedong said "women are upholders of half of the sky." His theory, however, transformed and socialized them into an androgynous revolutionary ideal, so the patriarchic tradition of China and motherhood merged into the high prestige that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has held. The impressive popularity of the song in the middle 1980s, *The Party, Our Dear Mother* (1984)¹⁹ indicated that the CCP was the hope of China and that mother regained the highest social status in Chinese cultural system. In ordinary life, this metaphor has been very popular. The Yellow River, for example, is called the mother river. For many times, the yearly Spring Festival Eve Party, have included programs that laud mothers; mothers have become great heroes at this momentous time. Similar to the Valentine's Day in the west, the Mother's Day has been a prestigious holiday in China. Comparatively, the Father's Day is less important.

The geographic paragon of *The Ordinary World* is Shaanxi province which consists of three different parts. Being the major part of the dry Yellow Plateau, northern Shaanxi is historically, socially, and culturally different from the other two sections in the province. Beyond the Great Wall (the northern border of Shaanxi is a little further) is the *Gobi* desert in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region. The prototype of fictional Huangyuan is Yan'an, the revolutionary capital in the 1930s and 1940s. In the citation above, Lu Yao uses "father" to signify the land of northern Shaanxi. It, however, would be wrong if one tries to connect this metaphor to the primary concern of Lu Yao's writings, rural people's hardship, bitterness, and anguish on the Urban-Rural Intersection. Even though working in different parts of the province, both Sun Shaoping and his lover are urban residents now: Sun is still suffering from difficulties at a mining site in northern Shaanxi, while Tian does her job with ease in the provincial capital located in the middle part of the province. They are ready to get married.

¹⁶ Lu Yao, *The Ordinary World* (Beijing: renmin chubanshe, 2005), 687.

¹⁷ Lung-kee Sun, *Unweaned Nation* (Taipei: jvliu, 1995), 162.

¹⁸ Lung-kee Sun, *The Deep Structure of Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: Jixian, 1992), 185.

¹⁹ The lyric was written by Gong Aishu and She Zhidi, music by Ma Dianyin and Zhou Youzuo.

To Sun Shaoping, life in the mine is much harder, but because of his personal aspiration and the precious relationship with his girlfriend, he is spiritually satisfied.

Standing on the bridge in Huangyuan city, Sun Shaoping looks at the mountain and tower. Lu Yao writes,

He stands by the cement banisters on the old bridge of the Huangyuan city, lifts his head and gazes at the ancient tower and the mountain. The mountain remains the same as it was; the nine-floor ancient tower, staying there like a giant, has not become lower and taller. But the mountain and tower in his mind sink, leaving behind a handful of yellow earth and some detritus ...²⁰

The yellow earth and detritus are the symbols of the rural, while the tower and mountain are those of the urban. Now these two kinds of symbols disappear sinking into the “yellow earth and debris,” the image of integrated natural environment of Northern Shaanxi. It is very clear that the difference between the urban and rural regions evaporates. Since the geographic focus of this novel is northern Shaanxi and the situation of the other two parts of Shaanxi are not articulated, this image only refers to the northern part. With the urban-rural integration and the metaphor about “father,” I argue that Lu Yao genders northern Shaanxi into a male, who is sometimes cruel and sometimes kind. Indeed, Lu Yao is consistent in endowing a male gender to northern Shaanxi in his works.

Historically, northern Shaanxi was the border area between many successive nomads and the agricultural Han Chinese, the relationship between the two groups is represented by the Red Stone Canyon.²¹ It is a miracle that there exists such a canyon this region characteristic of yellow earth and deserts, and it is also a miracle that the Canyon includes numerous poetic sentences written by Chinese military generals who defended the border against the nomads and by the literati who visited the border area. These heroic people left behind their patriotic passions in Chinese calligraphies carved on the Canyon’s high stone cliffs. Impressively, the calligraphies describing patriotism of the Han Chinese against the nomads are vigorous and smooth, or grand and majestic, or delicate and restrained. The great Canyon, the passionate patriotic poetic sentences, and beautiful calligraphies embody the historical patriots’ heroic pathos and generous mettle.

Lu Yao himself shares lots of similarities with these male historical heroes, “I like things great: epic literary works, symphonies, oil paintings with grand topics, colossal sculptures, boorish national landscape, rough ancient architectures, and heated soccer games.”²² Gao Jianqun found a pinch of hair in Lu Yao’s ear, which is similar to the nomads in physiology. Lu Yao’s self-identification with “the posterity of *di* from the north”²³ clearly

²⁰ Lu Yao, *The Ordinary World*, 687; the tower, built on a mountain top in the Song dynasty, served as the symbol of Maoist Communism.

²¹ There are interpretations to the origins of the Red Stone Canyon. According to *Yulin Fuzhi*, it was first created as the tomb place for one Western Xia (1032-1227) emperor by redirecting the water and digging a valley. Another explanation claims that a general of the Ming dynasty dug it for trapping the local bandits in 1472; Between this year and Mao’s arrival in northern Shaanxi, numerous military leaders, civilian officials, scholars and tourists had visited this border city, Yulin, and left their calligraphies inscribed on the valley’s two sides.

²² Lu Yao, “Reply to the Editorial of *Yanhe* [Periodical],” *Lu Yao Florilegium*, 406.

²³ *Di* is the name of a minority in the Shang dynasty (ca. 1766 BC - ca. 1050 BC), and it was treated as barbarians.

tells his attachment to the nomads/minorities heroes who were rougher, more vigorous and energetic than the agricultural Chinese. Actually, one would certainly become broad-minded and energetic, when visiting the Canyon with history in mind.

Time went to 1936 when Mao Zedong went to this area. He found aspiration here and wrote one of his most famous poems, *Snow* (1936)²⁴ Lu Yao's keen appreciation of *Snow*²⁵ further demonstrates his spiritual connection to the heroes. Mao's revolutionary regime was called "the Border Government," but the name did not prevent him from "pointing to our mountains and rivers, setting people afire with our words, and counting the mighty no more than muck"²⁶ since the time he studied at a small normal college in Changsha, Hunan province. With tremendous efforts, Mao changed the marginal city, Yan'an, to the revolutionary Sacred Place. He also changed the otherness of the nomadic area into the new inspiring center of communist China. With his strategy of "Encircling the Cities from Countryside," he marginalized the Nationalists by driving them to a small island. The best example that represents the masculinity of the Communist regime is Nanniwan. Led by General Wang Zhen, Division 359 turned the poor place into a beautiful "southern China." The dramatic change helped the communists to renew China's old image that was weak and poor; it has also been instrumental for the communists to throw away the nickname of China, "the Sick Man of the East Asia."²⁷ The masculine local programs from northern Shaanxi, *yangge* (means "sprout song", a kind of dance), *yaogu* (waist-drum), and *xintianyou* (improvised pastoral songs), for example, were also played by androgynous communists to indicate their virility and the brighter future of China under communist leadership.²⁸

Minorities had gradually been integrated into China and Reform Era China dropped Maoist policies. So, in northern Shaanxi, what Raymond Williams refers to with his concept of "residual culture"²⁹ means two traditions: the nomads and Maoism. Both of them have been marginalized, idealized, fantasized, and exoticized in the new era, becoming the antithesis and opposition of the past to be renewed. Except his biographical similarity to the nomads, Lu Yao likes the heroic confrontations between nomads and agricultural Chinese. And he

²⁴ This is translated by Jerome Ch'en, in his *Mao and the Chinese Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1965), p340. There are different arguments on the time of writing this poem, 1936 or 1945. This poem certainly played a role as Mao went to Chongqing for the Peace Discussion with Jiang Jieshi. At the request of Lu Yaozhi, Mao's friend, Mao gave the poem to Liu who spread it. The table carrying this poem with Mao's calligraphy is hanged above the front door, inside the Historical Museum of China located in Beijing.

²⁵ He Zhili, p154.

²⁶ This is from another Mao's poem, *Changsha* (1925).

²⁷ This term is coined during early twentieth century by the Japanese who looked down up the Chinese as the Qing dynasty was repeatedly defeated.

²⁸ For the local programs and Maoist revolution, see David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). Even after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, the central government has used local programs from northern Shaanxi to show national masculinity. For example, *yao gu* (waist-drum) has participated in the Opening Ceremony of the 1990 Asian Games, the application for the 2008 Olympic Games, the celebration of Hong Kong's return to China, and the 45th and 50th National Days; and many local programs have also been shown beyond China mostly with the sponsorship of Chinese governments at various levels.

²⁹ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University, 1977), 122.

shares more with Mao: strong political aspirations (see below), the peasants' style of life, predilection to the masculine land, and the appreciation for "abundance, vigor, and depth."³⁰

Realizing the importance of cities in Dengist China, Lu Yao still cannot detach him from the rural life. He is anxious and nervous living in cities during his lifetime. By reciting Mao's *Snow*, he shows us his heroic complex, political aspiration, and ideal for the masculine land. In the nomadic and Maoist traditions, he finds enjoyment in the strong, powerful historical heroes and seeks men of vision among the present generation. It is in this masculine land that he could find inspirations for most of his works, creating such heroes as Ma Yanxiong, Ma Jianqiang, Gao Jialin, the Sun brothers (Shaoping and Shao'an in *The Ordinary World*) and Tian Fujun. These male protagonists basically do two things similar to those that the writer experienced: to overcome economic troubles and try to cross the Urban-Rural Intersection.

Cashing Bitterness with Hopes

When Mao Zedong arrived in Yan'an, the communists invited poor people to "tell (the) bitterness (*suku*)" imposed on them by land owners and the Nationalist government. This strategy not only helped the communists strengthen their social base but also created a channel for the poor to seek social equality and improvement. It did work very well in the years before 1949. Nowhere to tell their current bitterness during this PRC, the rural people never stop struggles against new bitterness as expressed in Lu Yao's works.

The tenet of *Life* is to speak for the rural youth who are qualified to work in cities but are blocked by the binary system and bureaucracy. The protagonist, Gao Jialin, is a high school graduate. After first getting a teaching job at the elementary school in his village, he is soon replaced by the village head's son who is less knowledgeable and inexperienced. Returning to physical laboring, Gao initiates to improve the quality of the water that the villagers drink, which cause a "social revolution." Soon, he is given a job in the county government by someone who wants to cater to Gao's uncle, a higher official. Though his performance is salient at the new position, he has to go back to his home village after the case was exposed.

In the Coda of the story, the writer refuses to come to the conclusion that Gao Jialin finally settles in the rural village. A few senior critics clearly see this point, requiring Lu Yao to articulate that Gao Jialin decides to settle down after the failure (which is the second in the story), showing no efforts to cross the line. In his dialogue with Lu Yao, Wang Yu says, "I think...you already point out, that people like Gao Jialin should take roots in rural region and will have a good start. You express a hope in Gao Jialin."³¹ Lu Yao does not reply to Wang and switches to another topic. In his letter to Lu Yao, Yan Gang acknowledges that he understands Lu Yao's point depicted in the story, but it was not possible for them to clearly express it under the then political situation. He is kind of regrettable that Lu Yao "does not write about [Gao Jialin's] awakening."³² The awakening, to say it clearly, is that Gao accepts

³⁰ Lu Yao, *Lu Yao Florilegium*, 432.

³¹ Lu Yao, "Dialogue on *Life*," *Lu Yao Florilegium*, 418.

³² Yan Gang, "Correspondences with Yan Gang on *Life*," *Lu Yao Florilegium*, 544.

the constraints of the Hukou system,³³ makes no efforts to resist it, so he should quietly stay in the rural village. This is not the original purpose of Lu Yao's writing; it does not match his aspiration for social equality. He keeps people guessing in the Coda of the story, entitled, "The end that is not the end." Lu Yao refuses to see Gao's settlement in the rural region, saying that he only wants to tell a story and really has no idea about what Gao would do next.

By contrast, the conclusion of the film based on Lu Yao's adaptation, *Life*,³⁴ is clearer. Gao, carrying a brief luggage, quietly goes back to his home village by crossing a small bridge symbolizing the narrow connection between the rural and urban sections. Ahead of him are the ice-covered hills and layered fields, signifying the difficult prospect for his future. The actor's facial expression is always the same in the film; it is hard to interpret Gao's emotion under the consistency which may mean the cruelty of the political system he deals with. On his face, sadness about his unemployment is indiscernible. This dull ending seems to say that the return is a routine, if not a happy thing. The filmic conclusion may not be understood as Lu Yao's idea. Because the accessibilities of fiction and film were quite different in the early 1980s, the degree of governmental control over different media varies.

In confronting the intolerable situation, fortunately, rural people keep with them perseverance. They are represented in *The Ordinary World* by the Sun brothers with each being one plotline. The life of younger Sun Shaoping is the expansion of Gao Jialin. Having a mining job that is more laborious than being a peasant, he does finally cross the Urban-Rural Intersection Starting from scratch, Sun Shao'an, in the end, becomes the owner of a brick-making factory in his village. Their progress comes with unbearable hardship and intense struggles with poor natural environment, waning Maoism, and the negative side of the Reform Era political system.

In *The Ordinary World*, Lu Yao continues downplaying the bureaucratic system represented by a few female petty bourgeoisies in his early works. Most officials in this fiction follow Lu Ruohua's style. As the official put tough control over peasants in the name of leadership, they try hard to negotiate for power among themselves. The best example is Tian Runye's marriage. In order to maintain a good relationship between Tian Fujun and his political rival who formerly was the subordinate of Tian's father-in-law, the father-in-law proposes the marriage between the two families. It is the perfect replay of the "peace marriage (*he qin*)," the state policy of the Han and Tang dynasties to pacify the nomads who always attacked the Chinese border. The girl has no love for her husband for years but she cannot escape the arrangement. Finally, she is emotionally conquered by the husband after he becomes disabled, and has to continue dedicating to the political deal.

The rise of Tian Fujin from the county to the provincial level is the third plotline in *The Ordinary World*. Gao Jialin's primary problem lies basically in crossing the Urban-Rural Intersection, the significance of the Sun brothers is to challenge the lower- and middle-level bureaucratic system, and the mission of Tian Fujun is to ameliorate the bureaucratic system with more flexible tactics. After knowing his father-in-law's arrangement of Runye's (his niece) marriage, he harshly criticizes him for creating such a notorious event. One by one, he

³³ For details on this, see Cheng and Mark Selden, "The Origins and Social Consequences of China's Hukou System," *The China Quarterly*, No. 139 (Sep., 1994), pp. 644-668, and Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang, "The Hukou System and Rural-Metropolitan Migration in China: Processes and Changes," *The China Quarterly*, No. 160 (Dec., 1999), pp.818-855.

³⁴ This film was directed by Wu Tianming, Director of Xi'an Film Studio, in 1984.

defeats his political enemies. Understandably, the price is very high; for about a year, he is sidelined.

“To be above the power of riches and honors to make dissipated, of poverty and mean condition to make swerve from principle, and of power and force to make bend—these characteristics constitute the great man.”³⁵ In addition to these, Lu Yao requires more from a man. He must show their efforts, fortitude, and perseverance to overcome difficulties of any kind. Though Sun Shaoping’s track is based on Lu Yao’s personal life, Tian Fujun’s rise could be seen as the goal of the writer himself. Xiao Yunru comments, Lu Yao shows “clear contradiction between the long solitude in spiritual work and his strong consciousness for participation.” To Xiao, “his life responsibilities and goal, frankly, are to directly engage in social historical practice and to some degree to affect historical process.”³⁶

Mao Zedong discerned in the 1920s, the peasant problem is the primary one in China; and he concentrated his efforts on this point during his lifetime with a perfect ideal in mind. Superficially, Lu Yao continues Mao’s strategy of “Encircling the Cities from Countryside,” and echoes the great leader with the progression of the rural male characters. His basic goal, however, is to stop the binary urban-rural system that the PTC had created. The rise of the rural males testifies to the fact that the males from rural China have the capabilities to carry the heavy burden of prospering rural regions and regulating feminized cities. The writer is confident that they will finally accomplish the mission.

Conclusion

The mobile, brave, and fierce nomads endued to the land a conquering image. The glow from Mao’s aspiration has overshadowed China, and has been influential in the world through the first relay of Edgar Snow.³⁷ Mao toppled the Nationalist national power and dramatically changed the dilapidated image of old China. These are the historical origins of Lu Yao’s inspirations. The writer totally identifies himself with the two Northern Shaanxi traditions, and intentionally genders the place as a male with tremendous historical power.

“On the way of realistic writing,”³⁸ Lu Yao stayed with peasants. “To me, writing is not self-entertainment. It is a quiet ponderous thing. I write when some ponderous thing has to be expressed.”³⁹ True, he always treated writing as heavy-laboring. But there are very few writers who have seen writing as so heavy a thing. From his work style, we envision a trudging cow, who struggles all the time, until the end of his life. He also looks like a northern Shaanxi peasant with consistent perseverance and fortitude working on a

³⁵ Mencius (Meng Zi), *Mencius*: Teng Wengong, part II. Translated by D.C. Lau, in his, *Mencius* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1984), volume 2, 117.

³⁶ Xiao Yunru, “The Conscious World of Lu Yao: An Outline,” in Chang Guangyuan, ed., *Peeking at the Uncanny Box* (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1993), 174.

³⁷ The American journalist (1905 -1972) moved to China in 1928 and stayed until 1941. While in China, he wrote and published numerous articles and books. He also worked for the Chinese government in Beijing. In 1937 he published the work that was to make him famous, *Red Star Over China*, an account of the Communist revolutionary movement from its founding, through the Long March, and up until the Communists settled temporarily in Yan’an around 1936. He visited the PRC in 1960, 1964, and 1970. His last trip was instrumental to the normalization of the Sino-American relations.

³⁸ Li Xing, “On the Way of Realistic Writing – Lu Yao,” *Literary Review*, 1991:4.

³⁹ Lu Yao, “To Cai Kui,” *Lu Yao Florilegium*, 551.

mountainous farming field. Behind his stories are so many capable rural people who are prevented by state regulations from seeking/taking urban jobs. In addition to the destitute natural environment, they have to deal with the political and social discriminations, which basically lie in the binary urban-rural separation and bureaucracy.

Life occasioned a riot among readers, while *The Ordinary World* brought big fame to Lu Yao. In the latter, the writer basically took the middle line similar to that of the famous film director, Xie Jin,⁴⁰ just ascribing the wrongdoings and disasters to the lower-level leadership, such as Gao Minglou, Tian Futang, Zhang Youzhi, and Miao Kai. Again, similar to Xie Jin's success, the eclectic stance gained him an established notch in the political pantheon of communist China. The novel was broadcast on China National Radio before the writing was finished; it finally helped him take the Mao Dun Literary Award, the highest one for novels.

Lu Yao praises top officials in *The Ordinary World*. For example, Qiao Bonian (the new provincial party secretary parachuted from Beijing), is warm, generous, integral, righteous, responsible, and concerned with his subordinates. After arrival, he instantly decides to improve the transportation system in the provincial capital, and soon promotes several reform-minded officials, including Tian Fujin. As critic Li Jianjun remarks, "'Positive characters,' like Tian Fujun and Qiao Bonian, completely coming from the writer's imagination, sound gray and drab."⁴¹ He Zhongming concludes that this novel "carries too much political utilitarianism."⁴² In terms of this point, the essence of *The Ordinary World* fails to surpass that of *Life*.

We need to understand Lu Yao and his writings against the historical background. During the early 1980s, political pressure was very strong. Numerous waves of Maoist political purges were vivid in people's mind; new governmental operations, such as "Cleaning Spiritual Pollution,"⁴³ were very pressing. He was a pioneer in looking for reforms on the binary urban-rural system that created social inequality and discrimination in new China. Compared to the 1990s realistic writings which use bitterness as an aesthetic tactic for the writers/protagonists to extricate from the repressive reality,⁴⁴ Lu Yao should be remembered as a writer who speak for rural people and weak classes (*ruoshi qunti*).

The Maoism-Dengism transition was a time when actions on the binary urban-rural confrontation could be easily taken. Unfortunately, no dramatic change happened. Today, social, economic, and even political gaps between coastal and inland Chinas, between the rich and the poor, have become larger, and many social and political problems have deteriorated. Until recently, the government calls to build a "Harmonious Society (*hexie shehui*)" under the fourth-generation leadership; improvements on the binary urban-rural

⁴⁰ Xie Jin's practice of this style is obvious in his films, *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1982) and *Hibiscus Town* (1986), see, Lin Yong (Lam Yung), *Post-Cultural Revolution Chinese Films and Global Culture* (Beijing: wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2005), 34-37.

⁴¹ Li Jianjun, "Problems on Literary Writing—in Memory of Lu Yao," *Epoch and the Enemies of Literature* (zhongguo gongren chubanshe, 2004), 4.

⁴² Zhong Zhongming, "Analyzing the Phenomenon of *The Ordinary World*," *Wenyi Zhengming*, 2005:4.

⁴³ In 1983 and 1985, the CCP made efforts in China to clean "rotten bourgeois liberalism and spiritual pollution" coming with Dengist reform policies.

⁴⁴ Chen Xiaoming, "'Peopleness (renmin xing)' and Aesthetic Extrication," *Literary Review*, 2005:2, pp. 112-120.

system is on the agenda. When this paper was in progress, good news came up. According to a survey done by *China Youth Daily*, 91.7% of the Chinese required to revise the binary separation represented by the Hukou system. Late last year, 6 teams comprised of members from 14 Ministries under the State Council did surveys on the current Hukou policy in 12 provinces, they concludes that time is mature to make changes on it.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Tang Yonglin, "91.7% Interviewee Believes Necessary to Chang Hukou System," *China Youth Daily*, February 26, 2007.