

# HUMOR AS A “PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE” IN THE CHINESE ART MOVEMENT OF “CYNICAL REALISM” AND POST-NEW ERA LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** *This paper is trying to create a theoretical link between the way the concept of humor is conceptualized within the theoretical discourses on humor of China’s post-Avant-garde emerging artistic trend called Cynical Realism and the literary movement called Neo-realism. My analysis shall be based on the literary and visual art criticism proposed by the Chinese scholarship in the 90’s and on “Chronicles of a Blood Merchant”, a fiction novel written by Yu Hua. Yu is an ex Avant-garde writer who switches in the blink of an eye from highly elitist experimentalism and heavy use of black humor to melodrama, realism and a much more sympathetic kind of humor which keeps nevertheless its grey side from the tsunami-like prodigal Avant-garde. My analysis shall also try to give humor, as defined by the two kinds of arts, a melodramatic, cynical reading, which overlaps with the Chinese XX century continuous obsession with reality. This yin-yang game between the two opposite takes in defining the concept turns it ultimately into a pure blood Chinese style “philosophy of life”, which is meant to cope, like anywhere else in the world, with the emotional “shortcomings” of Modernity.*

**Key words:** *cynical realism, humor, Chinese avant-garde, Yu Hua, Chinese art*

We shall first proceed to going back briefly to the Chinese Avant-garde period in the 80’s, when, after the traumatic historical period of Maoism and its Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), China opens up to the Occident importing all kinds of literary and artistic, poststructuralist and postmodernist theories from the West, in an attempt to set up a theoretical background for its young emerging Modernity. This is the time when the concept of black humor is borrowed from Friedman’s anthology of

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American black humor represented by writers such as Joseph Heller, Vonnegut, Bart, Pynchon etc<sup>2</sup>. The concept is quickly adopted and is heavily backed within the theoretical discourses of the time, being considered as the unique plausible and artistic technique capable of recuperating in a genuine way the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. Black humor, along with other poststructuralist techniques proves to be only half digested by the Chinese literati.<sup>3</sup>

Mesmerized by the diverse literary modes ranging from Dostoyevsky to Kafka, Garcia Marquez or Borges (Zhang, 1994), they unleash an unstoppable trend of experimentalism meant to oppose and de-canonize the traditional representational Socialist Realism. But at the end of the 80's, the crackdown on the students in Tiananmen Square showed intellectuals that the new discourses they had embarked on with so much enthusiasm had failed to accomplish their hidden political agenda of representing a genuine social discourse endowed with political and social force.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) era and its opening to capitalist and market values decentralized the position of the intellectual and "brought mass culture at the center of cultural relations" (Gong, 2012). This determined writers and plastic artists to immediately take a new stand and adapt themselves to the new realities.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of "black humor" 黑色幽默, is quickly adopted by the Chinese scholars and explored as a critical idiom in the Literature journals of the 1980's, such as *Shanghai Wenxue* ("Shanghai Literature") and others. See for instance the following articles by various scholars who propose *heiseyoumo* as unique plausible critical mode in traumatized post-Mao China: Yang, Jiangyuan. „Lun heise youmo”, (“Discussing Black humor”), *Sichuan shifandaxue Xuebao*, (*Sichuan Normal University Journal*) Nr. 1 (1992): 55-63., Wu, Qingyun „Wang Meng de Shishi tichu changshi he meiguo heise youmo” („Romanul lui Wang Meng și umorul negru american”) *Fuzhou daxue xuebao* (*Cotidianul facultății din Fuzhou*) (1986): 17-24. Wu, „Heise youmo dui zhongguo dangdai xiaoshuo yinxiang luoshuo” („Black humor and its influence on Chinese Literature”), *Hunan Xuezhuan Xuebao*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1994:32-36.

<sup>3</sup> See, for that matter, Andreea Chirita thesis "Chinese Black Humor in Yu Hua's Fiction", which makes a deep analysis of the Chinese theoretical discourse in the 80's and 90's, which links the choice of black humor as main literary technique to the trauma of the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>4</sup> Huang Yibing in *Chinese Contemporary Literature: from the Cultural Revolution to the Future* and Gong Haomin in *Critical Intervention*, as long as many other Western Scholars such as Zhang Xutong or ArifDirlik link China's switch to Realism in the 90's to the disillusionment brought by the elitism of the avant-garde which failed to feed the right food for real freedom etc.

The Chinese artistic worlds realize that during this times of transition they need to adapt to the new social realities, which brought to the center a more and more representative and dynamic middle class who had its own expectations from art. Chinese artistic fields, from cinema to plastic arts reposition and embrace an anti-elitist discourse meant to ridicule the allegorical narratives and intellectualist avant-garde discourses. The purpose was to create a more credible discourse, and by credible the Chinese meant a narrative close to reality, which “turns back to reality”<sup>5</sup> 回归现实-*huiguixianshi* (He, 2013) in a mimetic sense, which nevertheless keeps a lot from the features of the sophisticated Avant-garde<sup>5</sup>. In this context, the concept of humor stays alive as unique philosophical stance capable of embracing the absurdity of life in an authentic manner. Nevertheless, along with the new waves of redefining reality in the new Chinese social context, the concept of black humor gets a touch of Chinese-ness which mixes the apocalyptic, disillusioned and hopeless side of black humor and its Western understanding of the concept with a sympathetic, melodramatic view *à la Chinois* full of compassion for the absurd human condition and even endowed with a sort of optimism. They call it “grey humor” 灰色幽默 *huiseyoumo*, which is a combination of, as the Chinese scholarship would name it, “white humor” 白色幽默, which is “pure, sympathetic and wise” (He, 2013) and the chaos and disillusionment of black humor. The result is a sort of, what we call, **cynical and melodramatic humor**.

### **1. The Chinese artists take on cynical humor as a form of realism**

The first ones to become aware of the increasing social futility of the metaphysical badly digested heaviness of the avant-garde as a whole would be the plastic artists who would raise up against their own utopian and idealistic artistic stance and come up with a new trend that they call Cynical Realism 玩世现实主义-*wanshixianshizhuyi*- and which they claim to be more “true to life” 走向真实 *zouxiangzhenshi* (Peng, 2009). These artists specialize in depicting portraits of ordinary, “typically Chinese people” (Gao, 2003, 2011), with slightly exaggerated features, wearing a big idiotic and stupid smile, all bald and set up on a background that

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<sup>5</sup> The Chinese Avant-garde takes shape and develops in the second part of the 80’s in both arts and literature and it is often judged as a strange mixture of modernism and postmodernism, due, among others, to the Chinese lack of theoretical criticism understanding at the time.

seems unrelated to the actual portrait. Gao Minlu, define their art in a recent study from 2011 on Cynical Realism in China as "exhibiting a free-floating cynicism unrelated to any dogma and uncommitted to any one belief system; they approach the existential situation with a sense of humor" (Gao, 2011). Indeed, humor seemed to be a defining feature of the Cynical Realism, a life-survival philosophy of life. The trend got extremely popular also worldwide and emphasized humor as main feature and artistic technique meant to deal in an authentic and real way with the trauma generated not so much by the brutality of Maoism, but by the new market oriented society that brought along the widening gap between rich and poor, consumerism, alienation etc. Humor as main artistic *modus operandi* seems to be a result of the Chinese historic contingency, a "psychological reaction" (Huang, 2007) to its new socio-historic condition, a representational attitude which is by all means conditioned historically. In this light, its effect and purpose was that of diminishing the gap between art and reality that the savage experimentalism of the previous decade had created.

First, we shall bring into question the theoretical considerations of art critic Wang Zhong, who, in 1994, writes an article named "The new artistic wave after 1989", meant to better conceptualize what the Chinese artistic scholarship understood by humor. First, he's eliminating the already embarrassing comparison of cynical humor specific to the Chinese with the black humor in its Western understanding. "The humor of cynical Realism is not as glacial and indifferent as that of black humorists, it rather resembles a sort of hooligan-ruffian like humor—泼皮幽默 *popiyoumo*" (Wang, 1994:112). The critic also dismisses the blasphemous allegations that cynical humor would be the equivalent of the *hippy* wave in America: "The hippies were pure and idealistic whereas the cynical realism is completely anti-idealistic and, unlike the hippies, it is endowed with a serious intake of humor." (Wang, 1994:112) The ruffian-like humor of the cynical artists rather embodies "a tragic world the absurdity of which you cannot simply avoid. It emanates a self-mocking flavor, as behind every happy laughing expression lies a gigantic pain." (Wang, 1994: 113)

Another art critic, Zhao Gong adds up another feature specific to the humor of cynical realism, which he defines as "caricature". But, unlike a caricature, the humor of the cynical realists is "void of any missionary or satirical purpose, it doesn't have as final purpose the progress of society, it

is much more ambiguous and expresses the ugly features of life.” (Zhao, 1996: 10)

Guo Zhenming, in an article from 2008, sees humor as a “tool to annihilate the meaningless political and consumerist ideologies”, claiming the impossibility of values such as the tragic and sublime. “Everything is just a game”, the critic claims, “nothing is serious, nor scary, humor creates an escapist art deprived of critical powers.” (Guo, 2008) Diaoyun takes a much more socially engaged take, and beside the air of relaxation and ridicule that cynical realism seems to be endowed with, proposes also a form of “high humor”-高级的幽默—*gaojideyoumo*, which he defines as “self critical, lucid and wise which turns back to reality and stops seeing it though a distorted mirror.” (Diao in He, 2013: 102) Wang Zhong, nevertheless, uses two very Chinese terms in order to define cynical humor: the elegance 雅 *ya*-which he sees as “the cynicism of the English gentleman” and the vulgar 俗 *su* which he sees as “cynical, ruffian- like mocking attitude 恶作剧 *e zuoju*”. (Wang, 1995: 111)

The above mentioned examples shape up a very schematic definition of cynical humor with the help of which plastic artists claim to get back to reality, taking humor as an escapist tool which best expresses the sophistication of their surrealist approach to life.

## **2. Chinese Writers and their cynical melodramatic humor as life wisdom**

On the other hand, inside the literary scene, a similar attitude is taken by the Chinese authors and literary critics, but they seem to be much more concerned not only with reaching to the masses through a more mimetic perspective on reality, but also with replacing their position in the center of the social political world. (Gong, 2012) The idea of the social mission of the Chinese intellectual is more emphasized in their discourse which turns, accordingly, into a cynical vision on life, a means of getting closer to reality but intertwined with a deep sense of melodrama meant to touch emotions and also to take a more sympathetic and engaged take on the Chinese historical drama. Their writings, just like in the case of Yu Hua, the author selected for analysis in this article, stick to the idea of humor as unique narrative mode capable of encapsulating reality authentically. Their humor is less ironic and closer to the idea of innocent humor. The cynical realism is rather ironic, in the sense that it strives for indirectness, whereas in the case of Yu Hua humor is a philosophical attitude to life that brings

melodrama and cynicism in one single narrative formula, just like in the following excerpt from *Chronicles of a Blood Merchant, XuSanguan* (*Xusanguanmaixueriji*):

“If you drink so much water, doesn’t blood get thinner, accordingly?”

“It might get thinner but at least you get yourself more blood to donate.”

“Then I also want to drink some. Who wants to lend me a bowl?”

“Take mine”, said Genlong.

Xu Went by the river, leaned over the stream of water while Genlong would advise him:

“Be careful! The water up the stream is dirty and so is the water at the bottom, so you should better drink from the middle!”

(...)

“How many bowls of water have you drunk?”

“I had three, said A-fang.”

“And he had 4”, said Genlong.

“You’re all nothing but a bunch of farts, said Li Blood-head, rolling his eyes. I can’t even picture how big your bladder can possibly be. To hell with you, that bladder of yours bumped up more than the uterus of a pregnant woman. You should be able to drink at least 10 bowls.”

**(*Chronicles of a Blood Merchant named XuSanguan*, by Yu Hua, 1995)<sup>6</sup>**

The protagonist, in the modern sense of melodrama as defined by Ben Singer<sup>7</sup> are unaware of their own drama as being the unknown heroes of dramatic times. And the incongruence between the traumatic times the victims of which they are and the unawareness of their central role of victims of both the Maoist and new capitalist times is the source of the melodramatic and cynical humor with which the reality of their existence is being represented. Their bodies already destroyed by the horrors of the Cultural Revolution is now the body placed at the very center of the new capitalist relations, a product and only means of survival. The trauma of the Cultural Revolution is replaced by the trauma of the market society and they are completely oblivious of the fact. Still an episode as dramatic

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<sup>6</sup> Personal translation from the original Chinese text written by Yu Hua into English

<sup>7</sup> Ben Singer defines the modern hero as a melodramatic hero. See *Modernity and Melodrama*, Ben Singer, Columbia University Press, 2012

as the one of the blood vendors discussing techniques of increasing the amount of blood into their veins for profit is put into such a humorous, sympathetic mode along with a touch of cynicism resulted from the critical distance and naïve stance of the dialogue. It proves once again that, the New-Era of post-Mao China is an era of “post-seriousness” 后严肃性 *houyansuxing*, as Chinese critic Zhang Yiwu would claim in an article written in 2012, named “Seriousness in New Literature and Ways to Get over Seriousness.” Seriousness, sublime, tragic are all meaningless concepts, unlike China’s early Modernism in the 20’s, when a dramatic, serious approach would be perceived by the Chinese intellectuals as a way of approaching the epistemic shifts the nation would undergo at that time. The Chinese literary critic compares the need for seriousness in early XX century China, when the first wave of westernization came into the Middle Kingdom, with the post-Mao historical need of giving up on seriousness and adopting a humorous attitude in grasping the truth of life. That would put into light the humorous narrative mode of the Chinese as a pure inner psychological result of the historical contingency.

It is also interesting the fact that **the Chinese academic literary criticism never tries to create any discourse or theoretical link between the concept of humor within its own framework of already existing discourses on humor, like the one exemplified above, with the Cynical Realism artistic movement.** Literary critics perceive the idea of black Chinese humor as a combination of abysmal disillusion in the absurdities of life with a sympathetic, optimistic outlook. They look obsessively at the West, at writers like Chekhov or Kafka. Many studies, for example, declare humor the main narrative of Yu Hua’s literature. One critic says that Yu Hua new type of humor is very “Chekhov like”, in the sense that “behind the incontrollable laughter that it provokes lies a huge amount of pain impossible to represent but through humor”. (Wu, 2007) The Chinese literati only marginally tie the hooligan literature<sup>8</sup>-痞子文学 *piziwenxue* set in motion by another writer, Wang Shuo<sup>9</sup> with the cynical realism of the arts. His humor is indeed very much

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<sup>8</sup> Term coined down to define Wang Shuo’s literature, which shocks China with its direct colloquial style, emphasis on the vulgar aesthetics and deprived of ethics, lost in Modernity characters

<sup>9</sup> Wang Shuo is the only post Avant-garde writer associated with the idea of Cynical Realism as understood within the ideology manifesto of Chinese post-Avant-garde artists. His works are subject to heavy criticism from the Chinese literary critics of the time, His literature is marginalized in elitist fashion, although, market-wise, it takes central stage. For more, see, Yao Yesheng, 2004

in line with the stance of the Chinese contemporary painters: the characters are a bunch of vulgar hooligans, bastards of the history, who laugh stupidly and idiotically in the new market relation order and fail to reinvent themselves.

### **Conclusions**

Yu Hua's characters seem equally cynical but deeply caught in the new social order, even if as sure victims. My theory is that Yu Hua, as a much more respected writer who painfully tries to restore the position of the intellectual as the one speaking the truth to the masses couldn't have been linked to the too radical Cynical Realism social agenda. They were way too close to the triviality of mass culture, and that was debasing in the eyes of the critics. Yu Hua strikes for them a perfect balance between the will of the masses and the critical social take his literature is supposed to have, unlike the hooligans of Cynical Realism who, in time, shall transform their art into such consumerist objects (irony is a market product) that a socially engaged intellectual world was supposed to despise.

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