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Article:

Dodd, S (2016) The Real and the Unreal in Contemporary Chinese Short Fiction. *Moving Worlds: a journal for transcultural writings*, 16 (2). ISSN 1474-4600

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Writing the Strange

The stories I examine in this paper tell of strange transformations and of familiar spaces becoming unfamiliar. Some of the stories are violent, some funny, some disturbing. But all are by writers concerned with new ways of looking at their contemporary world, making it strange and unhomely in order to see it anew. Whether it is in the violent and claustrophobic narratives of Chen Xiwo (陈希我) and the textual playfulness of Sun Yisheng (孙一圣) on the mainland, or through the surrealism of Dorothy Tse (谢晓虹) in Hong Kong, contemporary writing in Chinese blurs the boundaries between the real and the unreal, between genres, and between the everyday and the extraordinary.

The three writers I discuss have all been featured authors in the Writing Chinese project at the University of Leeds. This project, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council through the White Rose East Asia Centre (WREAC), aims to introduce new writing in Chinese to a wider audience; it focuses on writers who are only just beginning to be translated into English – having either a few short stories published in literary magazines, or a novel or collection recently translated.¹ One aspect which has become increasingly apparent is the number of new or only recently translated writers who deal with the strange – the familiar world turned unfamiliar; the unreal intruding into the real. The stories in Chen Xiwo's award-winning

¹Notes

See <http://www.writingchinese.leeds.ac.uk/> for more information on this project.

collection, *The Book of Sins* (冒犯书) concern murder, incest, mutilation. They are not, needless to say, for the fainthearted. In *Snow and Shadow*, Dorothy Tse creates strange city-scapes and absurd situations. And Sun Yisheng, the newest of the three writers and yet to release a full collection, is surreal and expressionistic, playing games with language and genre.²

Writing about the strange has a long history in China. *Zhiguai* (志怪) tales, or 'records of anomalies', can be traced back to the Six Dynasties period, in the 3rd to the 6th centuries.³ For much of the twentieth century, however, anomaly tales were discredited, seen as backwards, superstitious, 'feudal'.⁴ It was only in the 1980s that writers such as Can Xue (残雪), Yu Hua (余华) and Ge Fei (格非) started to experiment with the strange, magical and monstrous, looking to the unreal for ways of representing the challenges and contradictions of the real – China's tumultuous past and its rapidly changing contemporary society. These writers were influenced not only by Chinese traditions of the strange, but also of broader intercultural traditions, through the work of writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, who themselves stand at the intersection of genres – of horror, fantasy, science fiction – and who were popularised in China in the 1980s and 90s.⁵

² All of these writers' stories have been translated by Nicky Harman, with the exception of Sun Yisheng's 'The Flame', translated by Dave Haysom.

³ For a good introduction to Chinese anomaly tales, see Zhao Xiaohuan, *Classical Chinese Supernatural Tales: A Morphological Study* (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), p31-32.

⁴ Luo Hui discusses how ghost tales were, 'politicized, exorcized and banned' during the anti-ghost campaigns of the Maoist era. Luo Hui *The Ghost of Liaozhai: Pu Songling's Ghostlore and its History of Reception*. (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2009), p205. However, Mao did approve of certain tales from Pu Songling's (蒲松龄, 1640–1714) *Liaozhai zhiyi* (聊斋志异), which were seen as criticizing feudal China (Luo Hui, p219).

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe was first translated into Chinese in 1903, but received little attention in China in the middle of the century. Poe studies became popular again in the 1980s and 1990s, during the reform period. For an overview, see Ruijuan Hao, 'Edgar Allan Poe in Contemporary China', *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, 10.3 (Winter 2009), 117-122.

The strange, fantastical and monstrous, argues the theorist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, is inevitably boundary-crossing, always escaping, and always being born again, and thus needs to be understood within the culture in which it appears, whilst at the same time acknowledging its trans-cultural nature.⁶ Chen Xiwo, Sun Yisheng and Dorothy Tse can all be seen as occupying a 'crossroads' position, influenced by earlier Chinese traditions and by ideas from elsewhere, whilst at the same time being very much products of their own time and contexts. This article argues that all three writers provide useful insights into the way in which contemporary Chinese writers play not only with the boundaries of the familiar and unfamiliar, but also of generic conventions and traditions, presenting visions of the contemporary world in which the lines between the real and the unreal waver in unique ways, throwing eerie light on the familiar and everyday.

Strange Spaces

In ghost stories and horror stories across cultures, space is contested. Ghosts cross back into the world of the living; intruders enter the home; protagonists are trapped in fearful spaces. The familiar – the homely – becomes unfamiliar, uncanny. The crossing of thresholds is both feared and desired. In his famous essay on 'The Uncanny', Freud discusses the blurring between the ambivalent meanings of the German 'homely' and 'unhomely', or *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, which occurs when something that is *heimlich* - which belongs to the house and home, with its associated feelings of security - gradually takes on the dimensions of its opposite; the unhomely, something secret and concealed. One of the best illustrations of this is the 'haunted

⁶ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in Cohen, ed. *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p4.

house', in which the space of the home invaded by the monstrous or strange. It first contains the meaning of *heimlich* as, 'belonging to the house or family'; intimate, homelike, at ease, free from fear. But when the boundaries of the home are crossed – when the walls are breached – the space changes, moving towards the more negative meaning of the term; the sense of something 'unhomely', 'something withdrawn from the eyes of others, something concealed, secret...'⁷ The uncanny, then, is something secret which has been 'brought to light'. And it is this 'bringing to light', or revealing, which all three of these writers engage in.

In Chen Xiwo's story 'Kidney Tonic', a voyeur becomes so obsessed with his neighbour and his wife that he begins to lose his grip on his own life and identity.⁸ The narrator and his family live in a seventh floor flat in a smart residential district where they can look over the landscaped garden and all the expensive cars parked outside. The block of flats opposite, however, is empty, and described just like a haunted house in a ghost story; 'The flat had no security grille, as if no one had ever lived there. I broke in through the bathroom window to find the place empty and deserted. It had grey walls and a concrete floor thick with dust.'⁹ The narrator begins to watch his neighbours, and becomes obsessed by what he sees as the husband's sexual deviance. Watching, unseen, the narrator starts to fulfil the role of ghost – haunting not only the empty apartment, but also his neighbours' lives; their marriage. Like all ghost stories, it is about boundaries, and their crossing. And the boundary crossing that goes on within the story itself is repeated in the story's generic conventions – its

⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, ed. *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p154.

⁸ Chen Xiwo, *The Book of Sins*, trans. Nicky Harman, (London: Forty-six, 2014), pp23-81.

⁹ Chen, *The Book of Sins*, pp25-26.

quiet blurring of literary fiction with horror and crime, and the use of real events within its invented world (in case, the selling of organs for medical purposes).

The crossing and blurring of boundaries also plays a key role in Dorothy Tse's 'The Mute Door'.¹⁰ This story tells of an apartment block built as an 'experiment' in housing development in City 24, in which the apartments are like 'face-down playing cards on a table-top, moving around, taking their doors with them, in a completely random way.¹¹ Each time someone leaves their apartment, there is no guarantee they'll be able to find their way back. Some residents simply take a suitcase with them whenever they leave. Familiar and apparently real on the outside, inside the walls the apartments become unfamiliar and strange, a fitting description, perhaps, for the stories themselves. As translator Nicky Harman writes in her introduction, Tse's stories, 'often start in a vein of apparently innocent realism. Then we find ourselves brought up short by an unexpected twist...'¹²

Her stories further confound our expectations by refusing to be pinned down to one place. City 24, like the other urban landscapes of Tse's tales, can perhaps be read as Hong Kong, but for the most part, she avoids naming and specificities, creating instead the sense of 'floating' famously used by the writer Xi Xi (西西) in a short story in the 1980s to describe Hong Kong's 'betweenness', hanging in the sky between the clouds and the sea, between China and Britain.¹³ Hers is a city of constant transformations and sinister omens; in one story, the protagonist's wife has turned into a fish, yet 'the waters are receding', and the ground collapses as the couple drives

¹⁰ Dorothy Tse, *Snow and Shadow*, trans. Nicky Harman (Hong Kong: East Slope Publishing, 2014), pp151-162.

¹¹ Tse, *Snow and Shadow*, p156.

¹² Nicky Harman, 'Introduction: Dorothy Tse's Short Stories', *Snow and Shadow*, p9.

¹³ Dorothy Tse on 'Writing Between Languages' in Hong Kong, <http://www.snowandshadow.com/author.php>. Xi Xi's story can be found in her collection, edited by Eva Hung, *Marvels of a Floating City* (Hong Kong: Research Centre for Translation, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1997).

away.¹⁴ In another, the city is menaced by a wolf, dressed in women's clothing and eating dead fetuses. The protagonist is matter-of-fact about the city's decay; 'The meteorologist suggests we regard the stink from our own bodies as part of the city's destruction. There are always omens before any business is wrapped up. It's like the changing of the seasons.'¹⁵ This acceptance of the strange recalls the kind of magical realism popularised by South American writers, yet there is a darker undertone, a suggestion that what is 'brought to light' is decay, and fragmentation.

If both Chen Xiwo and Dorothy Tse focus primarily on urban spaces and lives, Sun Yisheng's stories 'The Stone Ox That Grazed' and 'The Flame' explore rural space. Both of these stories share a similar village setting, in which peculiar events occur – the disappearance (or not) of an ox; the appearance of a strange blue flame.¹⁶ Familiar images of rural life – aduki beans, oxen, and other details anchor the stories in the real, from which the author spins strange and stranger circumstances. The familiarity of the setting in 'The Stone Ox That Grazed' shatters into apocalyptic visions; 'As the leaves grew, more water spurted from them, filling the paddy fields. Day by day, the water rose until one night a mighty flood swamped the entire village, drowning all its buildings and everyone who lived in them. Wave after wave of water pounded by, glittering silver under the moonlight.'¹⁷ And 'The Flame' begins with eerie imagery – a sky dark with crows, and frogs 'everywhere: the surface of the road, the walls, the roofs, the trees – all crawling with them, squirming in their futile efforts to hurry.'¹⁸

¹⁴ Dorothy Tse, 'Woman Fish', *Snow and Shadow*, pp13-19.

¹⁵ Dorothy Tse, 'Monthly Matters', *Snow and Shadow*, p132.

¹⁶ Sun Yisheng, 'The Stone Ox That Grazed', trans. Nicky Harman, *Asymptote Journal*, http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Fiction&id=67&curr_index=25&curPage=Fiction, accessed January 2015; 'The Flame', trans. Dave Haysom, Spitting Dog website, <http://www.spittingdog.net/translations/sun-yisheng-the-flame/>, accessed January 2015.

¹⁷ Sun Yisheng, 'The Stone Ox That Grazed'.

¹⁸ Sun Yisheng, 'The Flame'.

In all of the stories, whether their settings are rural or urban, what is made clear is that it is *this* world which is strange. It is stylish modern apartments which become uncanny, not creepy old houses in the wilds. It is the villages of contemporary China in which strange things happen, not the old traditional places of the past. In the preface to *The Book of Sins*, the author writes, 'This is a dark world. I can see that, even if you can't. When I tell you about it, you say, What you see isn't real...'¹⁹ But the author argues back to this unseen interlocutor – he'll show, 'life as it really is. Take a good look...' And that's what he proceeds to do in his stories, as twisted and unlikely as they are. *The Book of Sins* is a book that insists you see. Its unwavering gaze disturbs, but also enlightens.²⁰

Strange Bodies

Other stories in Chen's collection, like those of Tse and Sun, describe changes which are even closer to home, and thus even more disturbing – the human body itself fragmented, transformed, turned strange. In Tse's 'The Mute Door', the space of the apartment block changes randomly. Boundaries are put up and taken down, walls drilled to make doors that are then filled in again. The final image is of a hole in the wall as 'a mouth, slowly opening to swallow you up.'²¹ This movement from geographical space or man-made space to the space of the body is something which has frequently been exploited by writers of the strange, in different times and contexts. In traditional Chinese thinking associations were drawn between the human body and the wider world. Just as the boundaries of house and home needed to be raised and

¹⁹ Chen Xiwo, *The Book of Sins*, pviii.

²⁰ Chen himself has experience of the 'darkness' of contemporary society, through his own entanglement with censorship and the legal system. See publisher Harvey Thomlinson's description of Chen's work and his legal difficulties: <http://writingchinese.leeds.ac.uk/2014/10/05/chen-xiwo-rebel-by-harvey-thomlinson-2/>

²¹ Dorothy Tse, 'The Mute Door', *Snow and Shadow*, p162.

protected, so too did the human body's boundaries need to be kept properly contained.²² Breaking boundaries – the failure of containment – brings change and danger.

In Sun Yisheng's 'The Flame', the character known only as 'you' moves uncannily between an unknown woman and the narrator's dead wife, before finally appearing to have been transformed or transported into the ox. And many of Tse's stories too deal with strange transformations, whether it is from a woman into a fish, in 'Woman Fish', or into animal-human hybrids in 'Snow and Shadow'²³. Here are echoes of classical Chinese tales of the strange, which often dealt with animal-human transformation in a matter-of-fact way – animal spirits turned to and from their human form with ease; humans turned into animals in order to achieve goals which would be impossible in human form.²⁴ Such stories in Europe and America, on the other hand, have on the whole tended to emphasise the more fearful aspects of bodily change. In medieval European literature metamorphosis was a warning, a sign of the moral degeneration of the human. Later, representations of metamorphosis focused more on issues of identity and self, the horror of bodily changes beyond one's control, with perhaps the most famous work of fearful bodily transformation in the twentieth century being Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, in which a young salesman wakes one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect, a transformation which has been read

²² For a further discussion of this, see Keith McMahon, *Misers, Shrews and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth Century China* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1994), p35-36.

²³ Tse, 'Woman Fish', pp13-19; 'Snow and Shadow', pp179-208.

²⁴ See Roel Sterckx, *Animal and Daemon in Early China* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), for more on animals, and animal-human transformation, in the Chinese context.

as a terrifying loss of identity, a questioning of the self which leads Gregor Samsa to his inevitable end.²⁵

Yet Tse's stories are able to take in all these different points of view. In an interview, she has said that she does not draw distinctions between East and West in her reading or her writing. 'Snow and Shadow', written especially for the translated collection, provides an illuminating example of this, playing gleefully with traditional fairytale tropes: a woman in the mirror, dwarves in the forest, two princesses, one linked with light and one with the dark. But she also subverts these tropes, and the human/animal mutability found in fairytales appears in the story as graphically bloody experiments in the creation of animal-human hybrids; '[E]very day she ordered a serving woman's arm to be cut off, after which she would clumsily sew a pig's trotter onto the shoulder in its place. But her implants either dropped off as soon as the thread came loose, or caused gangrene. The women gave off a nauseating stink as they walked around the palace...'.²⁶

Whilst bodily transformation and dismemberment in 'Snow and Shadow' is terrifying, elsewhere it is more humorous, though arguably just as dark. In 'Head', a father donates his head when his son loses his own.²⁷ There is pitch black humour in the story as the wife disconsolately drops pumpkin seeds on her husband's headless body, and is then surprised to learn that he has not lost his sexual urges along with his head. In 'Blessed Bodies', a young girl and her brother are newly-arrived in a country in which there is no marriage system, but a prosperous sex industry in which, 'Even bartering was allowed: when the male clients could not afford to pay, they could obtain sexual services by trading their body parts.'²⁸ And in

²⁵ See *Kafka and China*, ed. Adrian Hsia, for a longer discussion of Kafka's work and their relationship to Chinese fiction. The *ungeheures Ungeziefer* is literally 'monstrous vermin', and has been translated as beetle, bug, or insect.

²⁶ Tse, 'Snow and Shadow', p202.

²⁷ Tse, 'Head', pp45-65.

²⁸ Tse, 'Blessed Bodies', p67.

another, an absurd escalation of events leads to two lovers dismembering themselves.²⁹ At the end of the story, as the lovers decide they should probably go to the hospital, one asks the other to scratch his back. She obliges – using his own arm. These stories are darkly, grotesquely comic, their strange, casual violence of the stories bringing to mind Can Xue's equally disturbing, and darkly fairytale-like dreamscapes (a debt that Tse acknowledges in the story 'Hairdressing', in which her protagonist is reading Can Xue's 'Yellow Mud Street' 黄泥街).³⁰

Dismemberment is also a theme in some of Chen's stories. 'The Man With the Knife' is a tale of a claustrophobic and confrontational encounter between a young poet and an older professor/reviewer.³¹ The sexual encounter is awkward, devoid of feeling, either emotional or physical, with the story ending in shocking, self-inflicted violence, neither of the two protagonists seeming to understand what it is that is that 'hangs from the knife'. And like the representation of uncanny, haunted space, the dismembered body is itself an intercultural, inter-genre space. As Larissa Tracey and Jeff Massey point out in their book on decapitation, *Heads Will Roll*; 'The spectacle of the severed head...is a monstrous encounter with our own mortality.'³² Jeffrey Jerome Cohen equates decapitation with monstrosity and the uncanny, as being, 'the becoming-monstrous of the human through fragmentation, through the reduction of embodied identity from five limbs and torso to a liminal object, an uncanny thing.'³³ The fragmented body threatens concepts of identity and personal stability, suggesting that what was thought of as stable and whole is in fact capable of change; of dissolution and breakdown.

²⁹ Tse, 'The Love Between Leaf and Knife', pp22-29.

³⁰ Tse, 好黑 *Hao Hei* (*So Black*, Tapei: Aquarius, 2005), p99.

³¹ Chen, 'The Man With the Knife', pp191-201.

³² Larissa Tracey and Jeff Massey, *Heads Will Roll: Decapitation in the Medieval and Early Modern Imagination* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p5.

³³ Cohen, 'Preface: Losing Your Head', Tracey, and Jeff Massey, *Heads Will Roll*, pix. See also Isidore of Seville's categories of monstrosity in Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), p107 – both 'superfluity of bodily parts' and 'deprivation of parts' are mentioned.

These writers' stories show us, as Chen writes in his preface, 'the skull beneath the skin.'³⁴ They are a *memento-mori*, a dark reminder of inevitable decay.

The physical dissolution portrayed in the stories is mirrored in the psychological dissolution of the characters, and ultimate fragmentation of many of the narratives. The stories of each of these writers depict obsession, confusion, memory loss, until finally the act of writing, too, seems at times to dissolve. In Tse's 'Hairdressing', the narrator begins to forget not only the sequence and reality of events, but also why she is writing. 'I forget why I had wanted to write this story,' she says, as she forgets her city, her past; as her own body becomes unfamiliar.³⁵ And in Sun Yisheng's 'The Flame' (which very much recalls Han Shaogong's (韩少功) 1985 short story, 'Homecoming' (归去来) in which the protagonist finds his own sense of self called into doubt by his encounters in a remote village)³⁶ the character known only as 'You' unsettles the narrator's own sense of himself; "If you don't remember me then why did you come looking for me?"... "I don't know," you continue. "I don't remember *me*."³⁷ Eventually, the story begins to echo its characters' breakdown of identity and self. Like Chen Xiwo's 'Kidney Tonic', it plays with genre conventions. What begins as an almost folktale-like telling of a rural ritual elides into a ghost story, before becoming science-fictional, with the appearance of a kind of spacecraft, then finally ending on a fantastical, transformational image – the human 'you' and the ox seeming to become one. The narratives of Sun's stories, with their abrupt cuts and different styles, create something dreamlike and peculiar, fragmenting alongside their characters' own relationships and selves.

³⁴ Chen, *The Book of Sins*, pviii.

³⁵ Tse, 'Hairdressing', *Hao Hei*, p99.

³⁶ Han Shaogong, 'Homecoming', *Homecoming? And Other Stories*, trans. Marth Cheung (Hong Kong: Renditions, 1995).

³⁷ Sun Yisheng, 'The Flame'.

Haunted Fiction

To return to Freud's conception of 'the uncanny', this feeling of strangeness occurs when the homely and unhomely elide into one another; when something that should be familiar and safe takes on the dimensions of something hidden and dangerous. Whilst none of these stories can be described as 'ghost stories', all are nonetheless haunted. Like ghost stories, in which the supernatural intrudes into the natural, the real and the unreal in these contemporary tales become blurred, a breaking of boundaries which is underscored by the stories' own blurring of genre and traditions. All three writers are involved in the 'making strange' of spaces, bodies and language. They take the familiar spaces and situations of contemporary life and show, 'the skull beneath the skin'. They shine a light on this world and its petty cruelties, as Sun Yisheng depicts in his rural tales, or the violence behind closed doors that Chen Xiwo reveals, or the dehumanising city shown in Dorothy Tse's stories. They make things strange to make us look at them again; to show, as Rosemary Jackson says in her influential work on fantasy, 'the unsaid and unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent'.³⁸

³⁸ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1991), p4.