

# Chinese “Avant-Gardism”: A Representative Study of Yu Hua's “1986”

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IN THE 1980S, A GROUP OF YOUNG CHINESE WRITERS, including Ma Yuan 马原, Can Xue 残雪, Su Tong 苏童, Yu Hua 余华, Gei Fei 格非, Sun Ganlu 孙甘露, Bei Cun 北村 and others, emerged in mainland China at a particular historical juncture when the utopian mood of the country was on the decline. Their experiment with language and writing technique differentiated them from the writers that preceded them. In the preface of *China's Avant-Garde Fiction*, Jing Wang labels this cluster of young writers with the term “avant-garde school” (*xianfeng pai* 先锋派) and analyzes the historical background from which they stem.<sup>1</sup> Her general introduction to the Chinese “avant-garde” writers helps us to learn a great deal about the literary scene of Mainland China in the 1980s. However, does the military metaphor “advance-guard” accurately reflect the nature and features of the works of these Chinese writers? This essay will examine the theory of avant-gardism as it relates to Chinese literature in general and to one work of one particular Chinese author in particular, “1986” by Yu Hua, in order to discern the applicability or usefulness of this term.

Before discussing the avant-garde, we must first consider “modernism.” Early in the twentieth century, the process of modernization expanded to take in virtually the whole world, and the developing world culture of modernism achieved striking triumphs in art and thought, enjoying popularity especially after World War One.<sup>2</sup>

It is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts, and styles of literature and the other arts . . . It involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases not only of Western art, but of Western culture in general.<sup>3</sup>

Modernists challenge the certainties of traditional modes of social organization, religion, morality and so forth. The phenomenon of avant-garde is itself a prominent feature of modernism. Renato Poggioli, in his *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, examines avant-garde art through what it reveals, inside and outside of art itself, of a common

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<sup>1</sup> Jing Wang, ed., *China's Avant-garde Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 16–36.

<sup>3</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 167.

psychological condition and a unique ideological position. The term “avant-garde” is originally a sociopolitical concept rather than a cultural and artistic one. However, in the early decades of the twentieth century, “the isolated image and the abbreviated term avant-garde became another synonym for the artistic avant-garde, while the political notion functioned almost solely as rhetoric and was no longer used exclusively by those faithful to the revolutionary and subversive ideals.”<sup>4</sup> M. H. Abrams gives a useful and accurate definition of avant-garde:

That is, a small, self-conscious group of artists and authors who deliberately undertake, in Ezra Pound's phrase, to “make it new.” By violating the accepted conventions and proprieties, not only of art but of social discourse, they set out to create ever-new artistic forms and styles and to introduce hitherto neglected, and sometimes forbidden, subject matter. Frequently, avant-garde artists represent themselves as “alienated” from the established order, against which they assert their own autonomy; a prominent aim is to shock the sensibilities of the conventional reader and to challenge the norms and pieties of the dominant bourgeois culture.<sup>5</sup>

In this definition, three main elements are emphasized: (1) ever-new artistic forms, (2) neglected or forbidden themes, and (3) an alienation from the established order. The frame of reference for the Western avant-garde is bourgeois culture. When transplanting this Western term onto Chinese soil, however, many elements need to be taken into consideration. The frame of reference must first be clarified for Chinese avant-garde. Jing Wang sets such a reference by limiting the region to Mainland China and the time from the May Fourth period to the mid-1980s.<sup>6</sup> She tries to frame the new fiction in Mainland China in the mid-1980s as avant-garde writing by addressing their innovative writing style and technique, their rebellion against traditional morality and ideology, and their alienation from a supposed traditional readership.

According to Jing Wang, the major and prominent difference between these young writers and the previous modern Chinese writers is their experiment with language. She describes it as “a mere linguistic maze, a pure energy field, and an aesthetic game of narration.”<sup>7</sup> She argues that “Ma Yuan, Yu Hua, Ge Fei, to name a few of them, discover something that May Fourth writers (especially Lu Xun and his cohort of left-wing writers) could never have imagined or afforded: writing is fun on its own terms.”<sup>8</sup> She even tries to use postmodern theories to explain the works of these writers. For example, she claims that these young writers endeavour to “construct a new fictional subject that has no historical,

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<sup>4</sup> Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Abrams, 168.

<sup>6</sup> Wang, 1–2.

<sup>7</sup> Wang, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Wang, 2.

socio-political or even personal identity, the avant-gardists map out an imaginary subject position that language simultaneously creates and deconstructs.” She further argues that “underlying this thematic cluster of the new fiction is an anti-humanist position, a rebellion against a morally, historically and epistemologically centered subject assembled laboriously throughout the decade of the 1980s by the different schools of writers that preceded the avant-gardist.”<sup>9</sup> Jing Wang accentuates the fact that the avant-gardists adopt an impious attitude toward history. They consciously work to shatter the myth of man and utopia and to shock and alienate the traditional readership at home. She employs Yu Hua's “1986” 一九八六年 as an example to illustrate her point with the following:

Those who look in their stories for trenchant critiques of the Cultural Revolution will be disappointed. What they display, instead, is a voracious appetite for the clinical depiction of unmotivated violence, which represents a metonymy, rather than just a metaphor, of the historical cataclysm of the Cultural Revolution (Yu Hua's “1986” is a case in point).<sup>10</sup>

Jing Wang's interpretation seems, however, to be a misreading of Yu Hua and other writers of experimental fiction. For his part, Yu Hua has given us his understanding of avant-garde, one differing from that of Jing Wang, stating that “the avant-garde school is the people who are at the forefront of the era.”<sup>11</sup> Given this position, it is unlikely that he would agree with the accusation that this “avant-garde writing is fun on its own terms.” He underscores his own sincerity in his writings, recalling his motivation and that of other avant-gardists' writings in 1980s:

We were sincere. When we started writing short stories at the very beginning, we were unsatisfied with the current literature. At that time, most literary works had the same narrative as quality essays written by a high school student, except the works of Mo Yan, Ma Yuan, Can Xue and ever earlier writers as Zhang Chengzhi, Han Shaogong, Wang Meng and Wang Zengqi. We tried to use a kind of expression that was most authentic in our point of view. . . . In the 1980s, we improved the language to a great degree of professional proficiency, and our language was sincere. 我们是真诚的。当我们最早写小说的时候，对当时现存的文学不满意。那时除了莫言，马原，残雪，还有更早的张承志，韩少功，王蒙，汪曾琪等以外，大部分的文学作品在叙述撒谎能够和中学生作文一样，而我们则用我们认为最真实的表达方式。 . . . 80

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<sup>9</sup> Wang, 9–11.

<sup>10</sup> Wang 4.

<sup>11</sup> Xu Xiaoyi 许晓熠, *Tanhua ji daolu* 谈话即道路, [book online] (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 1998, accessed April 4, 2001), available from <http://www.xys2.org>. In this book, Ms. Xu, a young journalist, interviews many famous Chinese writers. Yu Hua is one of them. In the interview, Yu Hua discusses his point of view on writing and the Chinese literary scene. This and all succeeding quotations from Xu are my own translations from the web page cited above.

年代，我们把一种语言推到炉火纯青的地步，并且我们的语言还是很真诚的。<sup>12</sup>

In fact, Yu Hua and his fellow writers were against the writing model preferred during the Mao era, and not, as Jing Wang claims against “different schools of writers which preceded him.” He parallels his writings with that of Mo Yan, Shi Tiesheng, and Wang Meng, regarding his experiment with language as simply another kind of literary exploration. He never sees the writing technique as an end in itself but rather finds that

writing technique is a kind of expression, a kind of accumulation of knowledge obtained through reading, life experiences and training of the thought processes. The talent and accomplishment of the writer determine what kind of technique he will apply. 技巧就是一种表达，是作家阅读，生活和思维训练的一种积蓄。一个作家自身的素养和才华决定了他如何使用他的技巧。

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Yu Hua considers the scope of avant-garde writing in much broader terms than provided by Jing Wang's definition, as he would also include Wang Shuo, Mo Yan, Liu Zhen Yun, Wang Anyi, Zhang Chengzhi, Shi Tiesheng, and Han Shaogong in this school. He regards the avant-garde school as part of modern Chinese literature more generally, declaring that

after the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, from Trauma Literature (伤痕文学), Introspection Literature (反思文学), Nativist Literature (寻根文学) to Avant-garde literature (先锋文学), a period [the punctuation mark] can be drawn. This period indicates that China has its own literature.” 文化大革命以后，从伤痕文学，反思文学，寻根文学，到先锋文学，划了一个句号。这个句号表明，中国已经有文学了。<sup>14</sup>

For Yu Hua, it must sound ridiculous that the avant-garde writers attempt to shock and alienate the traditional readership at home, because at least for his part, Yu Hua has always paid attention to his communication with the readership through his writing. He states, “I am a reader myself. For any writer, reading starts earlier than writing. When I write stories, I definitely consider how to write it from the perspective of the reader and what the effect is after reading . . . I often use the reader's viewpoint to examine my works . . .” 我本身就是一个读者。任何一个作家阅读总是早于写作。当我写作时，肯定会考虑从读者的角度怎么写。读了会产生什么效果 . . . 我时常用一种读者的身份去审视 . . .<sup>15</sup>

When examining the meaning and significance of his own writing, Yu Hua remarks, “My experience is that writing can constantly evoke memory; I believe these memories

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<sup>12</sup> Xu.

<sup>13</sup> Xu.

<sup>14</sup> Xu.

<sup>15</sup> Xu.

belong not merely to myself. It is possibly an image of an era, or a brand left by the world in the inner heart of one person.” 我的经验是写作可以不断地去唤醒记忆，我相信这样的记忆不仅仅属于我个人，这可能是一个时代的形象，或者说是一个世界在某一个人心灵深处的烙印。For Yu Hua, writing is meaningful; it is the record of memory and history: “Experience is always more powerful and brighter than memory. . . . Memory cannot restore the past. It only reminds us once in a while: what did we once have?” 经历总是比回忆鲜明有力。 . . . 回忆无法还原过去的生活，它只是偶然提醒我们：过去曾经拥有什么？<sup>16</sup> These statements refute Jing Wang's judgment that the avant-garde works are imaginary fictions with no basis in historical, sociopolitical or personal reality.

With “1986,” Yu Hua demonstrates his attitude toward history. He reminds people not to forget history, showing his deepest respect and veneration for it. “1986” tells a story of a history teacher who disappears during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and suddenly returns as a lunatic one beautiful spring ten years later. Over the course of these ten years, everything changes. People gradually forget the trauma of the Cultural Revolution and are eagerly embracing their new life. The teacher's wife has married another man, and his daughter has in him a new stepfather. The teacher has been buried in the memory of these people. His reappearance in the city destroys the peaceful life his ex-wife and daughter now enjoy, wreaking extreme panic and fear on them. Unable to deal with such devastating changes to his life, the lunatic, using brutal ancient Chinese punishments, cuts himself into pieces on the noisy street. A policeman takes his body away on a tricycle. All the audience—including his wife and daughter—relax as if they have been relieved of a heavy load. They are then able to continue living a peaceful, happy life and once again look forward, as the party slogans exhort them to do.

This story seems absurd, apathetic and cruel. It is for these reasons that Jing Wang accuses it of having a “voracious appetite for the clinical depiction of unmotivated violence.” In fact, the meaning and implication of this story are significant. “1986” was written in December 1986, ten years after the end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. At that time, Deng Xiaoping voiced an interest in a turn to embrace some elements of a market economy and political reform, and the Communist Party called for people to look forward. The nationwide expectations for a more enlightened and enriched future excited the masses, and they looked to it expectantly. Yu Hua and his history teacher, however, remind people to look back and reconsider the past. In the first chapter of “1986,” the author carefully lays out the time and social background for the coming debut of the history teacher:

The catastrophe over ten years ago has faded into the mists of time. The political slogans pasted again and again on the walls have all been painted over. The **past** is obscured from the view of pedestrians strolling through the spring night, invisible to those for whom only the **present** can be seen. Now crowds

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<sup>16</sup> Yu Hua, “Wo yongyou liang ge rensheng” 我拥有两个人生 (I Have Two Lives), in *Wo neng fou xiangxin ziji?* 我能否相信自己, (Beijing: People's Daily Press, 1998), 148. The translation is mine.

surge excitedly down the streets. Now bicycle bells sound out across the avenues. Now cars leave clouds of dust in their wake, now . . . 十多年前那场浩劫如今已成了过眼云烟，那些留在墙上的标语被一次次粉刷给彻底掩盖了。他们走在街上时再也看不到过去，他们只看到现在。现在有很多人都在兴致勃勃地走着，现在有很多自行车在响着铃声，现在有很多汽车在掀起着很多灰尘，现在 . . .<sup>17</sup>

In the story, the girls stuff their pretty handbags with makeup and romance novels by Qiong Yao. They are enveloped in the aroma of their own perfume, and fall in love with the heroes of the novels. The boys' pockets are full of Marlboro and Good Companion cigarettes. They too are fond of Qiong Yao's novels. They move through the streets in search of someone who will remind them of a Qiong Yao heroine.

It is through this type of description that the narrator establishes the sharp contrast between the past and present. The masses had been tortured almost to death and fettered stiff as corpses by the malicious past. Now, the nightmare was over, and “the warm and humid breezes of the southeast stroke their faces. They walk out of their rooms, walk out of their bulky overcoats.” 风开始从南方吹来了，温暖又潮湿。吹在他们脸上，滋润着他们的脸。他们从房屋里走了出来，又从臃肿的大衣里走了出来。<sup>18</sup> At the same time, they walk out of the self-imprisonment and inner fear of the Cultural Revolution. After their escape from such negativity, their first aim is to resume a secure and comfortable material life. They pursue happiness, entertainment, love and material benefits, enthusiastically running toward to these aims, and leave behind the past that connects them with suffering and death.

It is just from this social and psychological background that the history teacher appears. His debut is somewhat absurd and shocking:

It was around that same time that the man came to town. His hair tumbled from his head like a waterfall and dangled about his waist. His beard cascaded down to his chest, obscuring most of his face. His eyes were swollen and cloudy. That was how he limped into town. His pants were tattered, and from the knees down, all that remained were some dangling strips of torn cloth. His upper body was naked save for a piece of burlap thrown over his shoulders. His unshod feet were criss-crossed with deep, callused cracks. The cracks were filled with black grit, and the feet were unusually large, so that each footstep rang out like a hand clapping against the pavement. He walked into spring along with the residents. And though they saw him, they paid him little heed, for as soon as he had been noted, his image had already been cast aside and forgotten. They were walking

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<sup>17</sup> Yu Hua, “1986,” in *The Past and the Punishments*, trans. Andrew F. Jones (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 143. I have modified Jones’ English translation and have added the emphasis seen above. The Chinese text is quoted from Yu Hua, “1986” 一九八六年, in *Shiba sui chumen yuanxing* 十八岁出门远行, (Taipei: Yuanliu chubanshe, 1990), 57–58.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, trans. 141. I have modified the translation. Yu “1986,” 55.

wholeheartedly into spring, walking happily through the streets. 那人就是在这个时候走进小镇的。他的头发象瀑布一样披落下来，发梢在腰际飘荡。他的胡须则披落在胸前，胡须遮去了他三分之二的脸。他的眼睛浮肿又浑浊。他就是这样一瘸一拐走进了小镇。那条裤子破旧不堪。膝盖以下只是飘荡着几根布条而已。上身赤裸，披着一块麻袋。那双赤裸的脚看上去如一张苍老的脸，那一道道长长的裂痕像是一条条深深的皱纹。裂痕里又嵌满了黑黑的污垢。脚很大，每一脚踩在地上的声音，都象是一巴掌拍在脸上。他也走进了春天，和他们走在一起。他们都看到了他，但他们谁也没有注意他，他们在看到他的同时也在把他忘掉。他们尽情地在春天里走着，在欢乐里走着。<sup>19</sup>

The past is not purely a concept of time; it will not disappear with the passage of time. The catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution had carved its image on the body of the history teacher. He now embodies the past, the past they have attempted to forget. Through the person of the history teacher, the past can now be seen and touched by the masses; he presents it in all its ugliness before their eyes. He appears in this unreal spring with his body traumatized and swathed in delirious violence. His existence is in sharp contrast to the silent, smug, sluggish, and cowardly masses; his existence is a protest to the spirit of the masses, and Deng's Communist Party and its slogans, its myths. His feet slap the silent pavement; he is in fact slapping the face of the numb populace. This contradiction between the history teacher and the people is a personification of the contradiction between the past and present.

The history teacher's wife is the first to realize his existence. When she sees the yellowing manuscript of the ancient punishment in the recycling station, she immediately faints. She swoons not because of the strong love she has for her husband, but because this manuscript recalls a history as grave as its contents. If this period of history overlapped with her current life, she would face serious psychological and mental distress. When she gets home from the recycling station, she starts to feel strangely distracted. Every night, she hears mysterious footsteps: The history teacher could be standing in front of her door at any time. In order to resist his coming, she shuts up the windows and door, pulls the curtains, and hides herself as in a in a dark cave. The history teacher walks around in the small town like a ghost. Perhaps, deep in his heart he also secretly wishes to return to his home and resume his previous life—but he is separated from it by the blood and fire of the Cultural Revolution disaster. He needs someone to share this suffering with and alleviate the traumas he experienced, so he naturally supposes that his wife and daughter are the right persons to take this responsibility.

Only his wife truly knows his interests, wishes and aspirations. The manuscript she views in the recycling station can be regarded as an agreement between the history teacher and his wife. They are supposed to jointly condemn barbarity and violence, having signed the agreement in a kind and humanistic spirit. His daughter is his own flesh and blood, and

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<sup>19</sup> Jones, trans. 141–142. Yu “1986,” 56.

as such should tacitly understand and naturally empathize with him. However, the wife is no longer his wife; the daughter is no longer his daughter. They are members of the masses—a mass trying to forget him. He has to roam the streets, repeatedly performing the ancient punishments. In fact, his self-mutilation presents the most serious and vivid reminder to his wife, for he believes his actions will solicit tremendous psychological changes in her, lacerating himself in an endeavour to help his wife overcome the psychological barrier she has erected, awakening her soul so that she can shoulder the suffering with him. During his self-mutilation, he constantly looks at his daughter among the spectators. He has always instinctively followed his daughter through a sense of consanguineous knowledge, understanding, and being. When his daughter appears in front of the cinema, or at the exhibition, he shows up in these places as well. He wants his daughter to sense his existence in the same manner he does.

Both his wife and daughter disappoint him. Just as his wife rebuffs his arrival by tightly closing the windows and door, his daughter also attempts from the very beginning to forget him. “When her mother explained that she was talking about some other father, the girl felt frightened. This other father was a stranger. She hated him. She wouldn’t let him into her heart, because she knew he would take away the only father she had ever had.” 当知道母亲指的是另一个父亲时，不禁惶恐起来。这另一个父亲让她觉得非常陌生，又非常讨厌。她心里拒绝他的到来，因为他抢走现在的父亲。<sup>20</sup> She is willing to admit to neither her blood nor spiritual relationship with the history teacher. He is destined to be a lone spirit. No matter how furiously he cries out the words “Branding! Nose-cutting! Leg-cutting!” 墨，劓，非<sup>21</sup>, words with which his wife used to be familiar, she nervously tries her best to repel the daggers that enter her ears. The wife and daughter do not find themselves in commiseration with the history teacher until his self-inflicted wounds kill him. They secretly pray that he will die as soon as possible, so that they can banish the distress and detestation from their hearts. When the body of the teacher is collected and taken away by the tricycle, the wife and daughter immediately feel relaxed and jubilantly walk into the hypocritical sunshine. In fact, the two are not attempting to absolve themselves of ethical embarrassment, but are denying the intense trauma of spirit. They have no confidence or ability to be introspective about the past and its pain. They cast the history teacher, who remembers and deliberates upon the past, into darkness and loneliness. Their aloofness and indifference toward the teacher is the same aloofness and indifference they have, or the populace has more generally, toward the spiritual life.

The wife and daughter represent the masses obedient to the Deng CCP. Their attitude reflects the attitude of the masses toward the history teacher; the only difference being that the general populace has no ethical or blood relationship with him. Because of these differences, the masses do not feel the same emotional response as the wife and daughter do. Their attitude is much more apathetic. They are completely ignorant of the existence of the history teacher. When he walked into the small town with his scarred body, he “walked

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<sup>20</sup> Jones, trans. 149. Yu “1986,” 64.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, trans. 133. Yu “1986,” 46.



into spring along with the residents. And though they saw him, they paid him little heed, for as soon as he had been noted, his image had already been cast aside and forgotten. They were walking wholeheartedly into spring, walking happily through the streets.” Without prior conspiracy the masses launch the history teacher into nothingness. They know only about the present, the present “sunshine.” They fling the past, no matter how painful or joyous, into nihility. The history teacher, as the personification of the past, is thus regarded as nonexistent. What the masses need is admission tickets to movies, parties, carnal indulgence and lecherous enjoyment. They need the material, the touchable. They embrace “sunshine, spring, comfort and happiness.” They do not need to be introspective about the past, nor can they endure to be tortured by it. The past is but the spiritual existence, yet it retains the ability to turn what they have now into heaviness, possibly crushing their present contentment.

The history teacher, however, cannot share the happiness of the populace, representing as he does a period of history involving ancient punishments and dismemberment by this same obedient populace. His historical memory and cultural conception deviates greatly from that of the masses, so that his feelings for the present also deviate similarly from theirs. He sees the rising sun as a bloody head, the buildings in the town as tombs, the concrete road as a skeleton, the street lamps as the heads of dead bodies, the light from the lamp as flowing blood, the breath of people as the stench of a corpse, the surging river as pus, the drifting boats as corpses, the willow leaves as the hairs of a dead person, and so forth. These contrasted psychological experiences confirm the spiritual barrier between the history teacher and the masses. They cannot communicate with each other. In the eyes of the teacher, what a black and horrifying place the town is! Even much darker and more evil than the iron house described by Lu Xun! The people, on the contrary, consider it full of “sunshine, spring and happiness.” It is sheer ignorance! An intellectual with great cultural aspirations cannot bear the degeneration of the masses. He realizes his responsibility; he must disclose the hypocrisy of the “sunshine, spring and happiness,” and awaken the masses from the delusion of material existence. The masses, however, are benumbed and self-degenerate. They refuse to be enlightened by the history teacher, and the resultant anger and desperation kindle the insane and vengeful actions of the history teacher. He twice imagines slaughtering the masses. The first scene of carnage is at the cinema, a typical entertainment site where people often grab admission tickets from one another. He cannot bear their intemperate sensory indulgence any more. The second imaginary massacre takes place at the sales exhibition. People's greed for beautiful clothes and other possessions ignites his hatred again. Again, he uses various ancient punishments to perpetrate his killings. This bloody vision is branded in his heart by his experiences in history and reality.

That people in a nation can exist and even propagate silently and composedly under such ruthless circumstances! This unfortunate fact drives the history teacher to take revenge upon the muzzled populace, but it is as their Christ, their bodhisattva, their “sunshine.” His hatred toward the somnolent masses is actually a form of ultimate concern for human beings, for their sufferings only harm the awakened individual. He abhors the

fact that the populace can neither become conscious of nor resist this suffering. His hatred is a double-edged sword—bent toward both the masses and himself, and his later acts of self-mutilation involve these dual psychological elements. On one hand, his hatred of his own weakness forces him to take on more responsibility. On the other hand, he tries to use his incessant self-mutilation to torture the masses. He unveils the bloody past of the Cultural Revolution in front of them, attempting to shatter their present dormant state and wrench their minds into an authentic awareness of life. He wants them to grasp the connection between the present, the past and the possible future.

The history teacher is not a person and confined by reality and indulging in a material lifestyle. He has a strong and active imagination, and uses his vast mental energy to build an imaginary ego. When the populace refuses this vision and his attempts to enlighten them, he does not accept his failure but tries to find another way to communicate with them. As a result, he makes up his mind to undertake a second procedure: self-sacrifice. He wanders through the small town to find a suitable time and place for his final self-demise, choosing the peak hour of the noisiest, busiest and most heavily populated place in order for the crowd to appreciate the ceremony. During his gruesome performance, he is also watching the response of the people at all times, searching for a hint of understanding and recognition of humanity from them. They, however, do not act as the history teacher expects, having the same apathetic, pessimistic attitude of his wife and daughter. They can only act as the similarly numb spectators Ah Q (阿 Q) and Hua Laoshuan (华老栓). They are surprised to see such an important and solemn self-sacrifice, but “their sighs have not even half a hint of sympathy,” let alone mental shock. They remain corralled within their thorough numbness, docility and materialism, a herd of animals devolved from human society, lacking the cultural memories and mental activities necessary for re-humanization. They sweep away the corpse of the history teacher like garbage. The result of this self-sacrifice is nothingness. The spiritual ceremony of saving people's souls has deteriorated into a meaningless self-slaughter. However, to a certain degree, this slaughter also symbolizes the slaying of individual and human dignity in an abnormal society during an abnormal era.

From the above analysis, we can see that “1986” is profoundly connected to history, it is neither a “mere linguistic maze” nor a “clinical depiction of unmotivated violence.” From this, it can perhaps be concluded that the term “avant-garde” in modern Chinese literature, at least in the sense Yu Hua applies it to “1986,” and contrary to Professor Jing Wang's view, has totally different implications than in the West. It is presuming a rather monolithic and dogmatic definition of avant-garde to interpret the works of Yu Hua and other Chinese “avant-garde” writers with western postmodernist theories. If it is true that Yu Hua is representative of this larger group, it can be argued that the Chinese avant-garde writers use an innovative writing technique to express their understanding of the past, present and future. Writing is meaningful to them. They take the elements of readership into their consideration, attempting to communicate with readers through their fiction. They are sincere and passionate.

Let me conclude this paper with what Yu Hua himself says about writing:

I think a writer must retain two kinds of passions: one is grimness; you have to put the characters into certain situation even though it painful to you or you cannot bear to do so. Sometimes I feel very bad about this, but the work demands that I do it. Another is affection. A writer has to love all his characters, especially the protagonist. You must love him deeply. Only in this way can a writer produce works that move his readers. 我以为一个作家要保持两种激情，一个是冷酷，你必须把人物放在某一个位置，虽然你于心不忍。有时候我很难受，但作品要求我这样做。另一个是作家要对人物充满了感情，你要爱你笔下所有的人，特别是主人公，你必须深深地爱着他，这样的作家才能写出激动人心的作品。<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Xu.

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