

AACS 2014 Paper

Presenter: Fang-yu Li

Rhizomatic Writing and the Problematics of Taiwanese Identity
in Wu He's *Thinking of Abang Kadresengan*

“‘Interpreting life’ is not ‘life itself,’ compared to a constantly flowing life, static language would always be stranded.”¹

As one of the most innovative writers in Taiwan, Wu He’s novels are particularly hard to read due to its boldness in experimenting and challenging traditional forms of narrative. Not only does his use of language defy our regular usage of Chinese grammar, the unique form he implemented also problematizes our understanding of “fiction” as a genre. Wu He’s play with language and form, however, should not be regarded as merely a product of the postmodernist trend; rather, it reflects Wu He’s dissatisfaction with narrative conventions and the failure of language to fully represent the sophistication and subtlety of life as he observes.

“Life” (生命) as a subject of inquiry, however, is never a philosophical quest for Wu He, but something that is always rooted in real life experience. As Wu He mentions in an interview, the “secular” (俗世的) is what interests him the most, therefore, his novels are mostly based on

¹ From *Thinking of Abang Kadresengan*, 189-190 「解讀生命」不是「生命本身」，相對河流一般流動的生命，靜態式的語言文字必然處處擱淺。

his personal experiences.² *Thinking of Abang Kadresengan*, for example, is composed after Wu He left Haocha village, a Ruaki tribal village where Wu He lived for three years. He recorded his experience living with a photographer named Abang and a Rukai writer named Auvini Kadresengan, and reflects on the social, political, and cultural conflicts between various ethnic groups in Taiwan.

While many criticisms have focused on the content of the novel, trying to determine Wu He's political stance in the ethnic conflicts between Han Chinese and indigenous Taiwanese, few take into account the significance of the narrative form and its relation to the content, which, I argue, is an essential factor in interpreting this novel. In this paper, I will discuss the significance of the narrative strategies, and argue that the ways in which Wu He frames the various aspects of the ethnic conflicts between indigenous Taiwanese and Han Chinese can be interpreted as a process of searching for the meaning of Taiwan and the meaning of being a writer in Taiwan.

I will begin by analyzing the opening paragraph:

“In a late evening like this, I met Abang and Kadresengan for the first time in the mountain village Dawu, approximately two hours away from Wutai highway. Following the guide who also came to conduct studies on indigenous culture, I introduce Abang as: a maverick “photographer,” who recently fell in love with Rukai. (Since the Marxist-Leninist collaboration during the second half of 19th century that made “proletariat” the voters of society, intellectuals with a moral conscience and writers all felt guilty to the extent: “I never stopped writing, now I write with hoe” “writing is a type of labor” “I’m a literary farmer lying in a pool of blood” etc. etc. (Similarly I never dare to identify myself

² For example, Wu He lived at Danshui for several years before writing the short story collection *Wu He Danshui*. Also, he spent sufficient time in the gay bars before writing *Guier yu Ayao*. *Thinking of Abang and Kadresengan* is composed after he lived in Haocha village for three years.

as a “writer” who sits at home to read all day; if necessary, I’ll introduce myself as a “language worker.”)...).”

In this passage, we can sense that the narrative is constantly being interrupted. In Yang Kailing in “Hardcore Writing and the Heterotopia of National Language,” he argues that this constant disruption, distraction, and redirection of the main narrative is in fact a manifestation of the narrator’s “thinking” process. He compares the narrative movement to the Deleuzian “rhizome,” and illustrates how the random narrative flow and the rampant movement of parenthetical statements forms an open-ended “cartography” that represents the act of “thinking.” Though Yang’s Deleuzian reading of *Thinking* is insightful and fairly convincing, his conclusion seems to overemphasize the aesthetic value of the text, and neglected the motivation behind the act of thinking. So what is the narrator thinking about? Can we detect an inner drive that motivates him to think?

If we examine closely the movement of narrative in time and in context, we can see that one of the questions Wu He constantly thinks about is his role as a writer. This is evident from the very beginning, in which we see a construction of a narrative identity that is closely tied to the role of the “writer.”

So if we focus on the first-person pronoun “I” in this passage (marked in red), we can see that each “I” indicates a different subject in time. In the first sentence, the “I” refers to Wu He in the past meeting Abang and Kadresengan for the first time. In the second sentence, we see an ambiguous “I” that can refer to the “I” in the past following the guide to the mountain and being introduced to Abang, or it can refer to the “I” in the present time introducing Abang to readers the way the guide had introduced Abang to him. The “I” in this sentence, then, is at the same time the written object in the past, and the writing subject in the present time. When we get to the

last sentence, Wu He shifts to a declarative tone to indicate an “I” with a conviction to identify himself as a “language worker” and not a “writer,” which renders this “I” neither in the present nor in the past, but an “I” that endures the change of time.

I see this movement of the first-person pronoun in time similar to the process of constructing a narrative identity. Narrative identity is a theoretical concept discussed across the field of psychology, sociology, and literary criticism. It postulates that one makes sense of one’s self identity through telling the story of the self, and through that process one integrates one’s life experiences to form a unity of the self and a sense of purpose in life. Paul Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another* also tackles the question of narrative identity. He sees the identity construction process as a dialogue between the self as the writing subject and the self as a written object, and through that dialogical process, the writer weaves together discordant elements (sometimes a mixture of historical and fictional elements) of his life to form a unity of the story of the self. Ricoeur further points out that this process involves what he calls “self-attestation,” that is, a conviction or a confidence that the self, no matter how it changes in time can always be attributed to the “same” or “permanent” characteristics that the self believes it embodies.³

From the opening passage, we can see that Wu He creates a dialogue between “I” as a written object and “I” as a writing subject in the first and second sentence. Moreover, he ties together discordant elements--the self in different time frame and in different narrative worlds—to form a unity of the story of the self. The working self-attestation is also demonstrated through the first-person narrator’s ability to re/evaluate one’s role in society as a “writer” or “a person who writes,” despite its change of meaning in time.

³ Ricoeur talks about “discordant concordance” in *Time and Narrative*, and “self-attestation” is introduced in *Oneself as Another*.

Other than the movement in time, the narrative also jumps from one context to another, facilitated by the use of parentheses. Yet the change of narrative context is not entirely random, if we examine the nodes of connections between one sentences to another. Using the same passage for example, we can see that the point of connection between the first and second sentence is Abang. Between the second and third, it is the term “photographer” (攝影家). The word “jia” prompts the narrator’s reflection on “writer” (作家) for the two shares the same word “jia,” which is used to refer to a person who is a master of a certain profession. Therefore, “zuo jia,” though commonly used to refer to a writer or an author, still connotes the elite status of writer. This connotation generates another parenthetical statement in which the narrator reflects on himself as a writer and seeks to brush off the “elitist” sense of the word by declaring that he is never a “writer” but will always be a “language worker.” These nodes of connections (Abang—photographer—writer—Wu He) that appear right from the opening are the main subjects of inquiry that are tied to the larger questions Wu He is contemplating throughout the novel—the meaning of being a writer/photographer, the limit of artistic representation (visual/textual), and the problematic conceptualization of “culture” and “identity.”

Considering both the movement of narrative in time and in context, as illustrated above, we may conclude that Wu He is not only constructing a self-identity through narrative, but also shows a specific concern of the self as a writer. Yet rather than forming a coherent image of oneself as a writer, Wu He instead puts the two subjects, that is, the “self” and the “writer” constantly under questioning. In this sense, what Wu He presents in the novel is an ongoing process of identity construction that remains incomplete. But what forbids Wu He to complete a

formation of a self-identity? We can perhaps find answers by looking at Wu He's relationship with two other major characters in the novel—Abang and Kadresengan.

Abang is a photographer dedicated to the preservation of Rukai culture, and Kadresengan is a Rukai writer who devotes his life to write for his people. Throughout the novel, Wu He shows ambiguous attitude towards Abang and Kadresengan's work, on the one hand, he is critical about the artificiality of artistic representation and skeptical about the "culture preservation movement" as a popular trend under the postcolonial discourse; on the other hand, Wu He also admires Abang and Kadresengan for their devotion to the preservation of Ruaki culture, regardless of its problematic implications. For Wu He, Abang and Kadresengan together as one individual functions as the "other" whom Wu He constantly compares himself to. While Wu He identifies with Abang and Kadresengan in their devotion to use artistic means to represent an ethnic culture tradition, Wu He's critical view on the limits of artistic representation and his doubt on the possibility of forming an "authentic Rukai culture" forbids him to be equally devoted as a writer for Taiwan, for Taiwan is also a subject of inquiry Wu He constantly contemplates in the novel. Therefore, towards the end of the novel, Wu He expressed apologetically that he feels resentful and regretful for always being an "outsider" looking with "clear observing eyes."⁴

Despite the fact that Wu He sees himself as a writer without a mission, we can see that Wu He's writings always show a strong sense of purpose, that is, to write about Taiwan, as we can see how he addresses major social/cultural issues of Taiwan in his novels, such as urban and queer culture in *Que'er yu Ayao*, the traumatic memory of White Terror in *Diaocha*, *Xushu*, and the aborigines' resistance of Japanese colonialism in *Yusheng*. In these works, Wu He engages in

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 231. (但我有憾恨，我恨我永遠抱持「作為一個局外人」的「觀照」的清澈的眼睛。

multiple angles and contradictory points of view, forming a “mobile narrative” that lead readers to travel in time and cross boundaries (gender/cultural/ethnic). Therefore, what makes Wu He different from “Abang Kadresengan” is not Wu He’s lack of mission to write for Taiwan, but the fact that such mission, that is, “Taiwan,” remains to be an unstable signifier, especially when Wu He has witnessed how the term has been formed, challenged, and reformed throughout history.

This failure to define “Taiwan” can be partially attributed to the two conflicting cultural discourses that dominate Taiwan since the 90s, that is, postcolonialism and postmodernism. According to Liou Liang-ya, the literary aesthetic of the 90s can be characterized as a dialectic between postcolonial and postmodern discourse.⁵ She points out that despite the same emphasis on decentralization, the development of postcolonial discourse and postmodernism move in different directions. While postcolonial discourse focuses on localization, the reconstruction of national/cultural identity, and the rewriting of history, postmodernism emphasizes on the liberation of senses, the deconstruction of history, and the disintegration of a unified subjectivity. That is to say, while the postmodernist force facilitates the decentralization and deconstruction of political centers, and thus provides the space for the formation of a new Taiwanese identity, the same force also forbids the completion of a new identity formation as the process always implies the emergence of a new “center” that would in turn be challenged.

I see Wu He’s *Thinking of Abang Kadresengan* a response to this dilemma, demonstrated in the dual motion of thinking and searching (hence the title “si, suo”), that is, to think about one’s role as a writer and to search for the meaning of “Taiwan.” Through the extensive implement of parentheses, Wu He presents a rhizomatic cartography in which we see how he struggles to construct a self-identity as a writer of Taiwan while mapping out the complicated

⁵ 劉亮雅，〈後現代與後殖民：解嚴以來台灣小說專論〉，39

cultural, political, and historical entanglement of various ethnic groups in Taiwan. Such an open-ended “cartography” of Taiwan, in my view, is a rather accurate representation, for “Taiwan” is never a fixed entity but has always been an “assemblage of multiplicities” that is always in the process of “becoming” in the Deleuzian sense. In the end, I quote Wu He’s last sentence in this novel, as it demonstrates once again how Wu He’s “rhizomatic language” that constantly moves in time and in space represents “life” as Wu He experiences in the island called “Taiwan”: “The mountains and rivers of Taiwan, the vicissitudes of the indigenous tribe, me and my contemporaneity: every time these three come together, I sense the serene beauty of life.”⁶

Works Cited

- Bruns, Gerald L. "Becoming-Animal (Some Simple Ways)." *New Literary History* 38.4 (2007): 703-720. *Project MUSE*. Web. 4 Apr. 2016. <<https://muse.jhu.edu/>>.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. Print.
- Ke, Pinwen. “Han minzu zuojia yi xiaoshuo shuxie yuanzhumin zuqun celue de chutan—yi Wu He de *Sisuo Abang Kalusi* danpian xiaoshuo weili,” *Shuping* Vol. 57, p. 15-23, 2002.
- Lin, Liru. *Lishi yu jiyi—Wu He xiaoshuo yanjiu*. Taipei: Da-an Chubanshe, 2008. Print.
- Liou, Liang-ya. *Houxiandai yu houzhimin: jieyan yilai Taiwan xiaoshuo zhuanlun*. Taipei: Rye Field, 2002.

⁶ 「台灣的山水，原住民部落的滄桑，我渾身洋溢著的我的當代：這三者每一貼觸，讓我感受到一種生命沈靜的美。」《思索》，236。

Liu, Naici. *Shehua meixue yu Taiwan dangdai xiaoshuo shengchan (1987-2005)*. Dissertation, Fujen University. Taipei, 2006.

Ricœur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1994. Print.

---, and Kathleen McLaughlin. *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: U of Chicago Pr, 1988. Print.

Wu He. *Beishang* [Sadness]. Taipei: Maitian chubanshe, 2000. Print.

---. *Sisuo Abang Kalusi* [Thinking of Abang Kadresengan]. Taipei: Maitian chubanshe, 2002. Print.

--- *Wu He danshui*. Taipei: Maitian chubanshe, 2002. Print.

Yan, Junxiong. “Guiquba! Wode xiangchou: Wu He Sisuo Abang Kalusi de wenben jiedu,” *Wenxun*, No. 206, (2002): 60.

Yang, Kailin. “Yingrui shuxie yu guoyu yitubang—taiwan xiaowenxue de Wu He nanti,” *Wenhua yanjiu*, No. 10, p. 7-36, 2010.

Zeng, Yueqing. *Wu He de xiaoshuo meixue*. MA thesis National Cheng-kung University. Tainan, 2003. Print.