External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of

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Multilayered Subversion and Double-edged Subjectivity: Chinese Avant-garde Literature of the Second Half of the 1980s

Submitted in 2019 at the Filizifiká Fakulta, Ústav Dálného východu, Teorii a dejiny literature zemí Asie a Afriky

PLEASE NOTE: Out of convenience, page references given as (6) in this evaluation report are to the pdf pages (generally about 6 pages ahead of the print page numbering).

1. Brief summary of the dissertation

This thesis analyzes Chinese avant-garde literature (xianfeng wenxue 先锋文学) of the second half of the 1980s. It identifies a number of characteristics in this literature:

1. its use of the metafictional and the metanarrative, 2. its approaches to memory as an expression of unreliability, 3. its perspectives of subjectivity, 4. its expressions of rootlessness and 5. its multilayered subversion. The dissertation considers Chinese avant-garde literature as the highpoint in literary developments during the so-called "New Era" (Xin shiqi 新时期), a period understood to begin with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and culminating in the Tian' anmen protests in 1989.

While stating that the avant-garde was a special phenomenon of this time, the dissertation nevertheless focuses less on the historical context in which this literature comes into being but instead highlights its particular literary qualities and its rhetorical and textual constitution which is considered unique to the period: only one of the authors considered in this dissertation (Can Xue) is said
to have continued her literary experiments without any significant change after
the end of the "New Era."

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

The candidate convincingly shows that the 1980s were an era of heated
intellectual and political debates, an era when it was possible to voice
hitherto unheard opinions and ideas. The candidate illustrates that these
debates were all-encompassing and swept through the political field as well
as literary and theoretical circles. Evidently, as is formulated in the
dissertation, the literary avant-garde was not only a product, but a
constitutive component, an important building block, indeed, of this era.
The candidate provides careful readings both of the theoretical discussions
on China's avant-garde (or postmodern?) writers by Chinese intellectuals,
inclusive of a discussion of their rhetorical formation in Maoist China—by
going back to the Yan'an Talks (chapter 2: Refurbished Strategies, Bold
Voices, Wishful Thinking: Contemporary Background of Chinese Avant-
Garde Literature). He then turns to an analysis of some of the shorter prose
works by a selection of seven avant-garde writers (novels and poetry are
excluded from the discussion). These works are read through the lens both of
Western and of Chinese theories of avant-garde and (post)modernist writing
(chapter 3: Seven Unique Branches on a Unifying Trunk: Analysis of
Selected Works of the Chinese Avant-garde Literature).

The dissertation is lucidly written. The arguments are nicely substantiated
with excerpts in Chinese and translation taken from the primary sources. By
focusing exclusively on the "New Era" period, however, and by choosing not
to provide at least some background information on the authors and their
writings before and after the period under discussion, the dissertation does
not give quite enough substance to the claim for the uniqueness and
particularity of this literary trend. A more thorough engagement with the
many rhetorical and narrative traditions—apart from the Maoist tradition
that is very well fleshed out—that clearly inspired Chinese avant-garde
writers (even if ex negativo) and a view to how their writing changed after
1989, would have made the argument even more convincing. A more
thorough engagement with paratexts and contemporary reviews of the
literary works discussed would have shown their relevance to audiences at
the time and would have supported the argument proffered here that they
feature "multilayered subversion and double-edged subjectivity" (as
formulated in the title of the dissertation).
III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

1. Structure of the argument

The dissertation is characterized by a clear structure and a lucid writing-style, major arguments are usually nicely substantiated in close readings of relevant literature. The arguments could have been formulated a bit more provocatively in style with and connected to chapter titles and subtitles which now stand a bit isolated and unexplained.

The author clearly formulates how his approach to the Chinese avant-garde differs from previous work (11): the dissertation is not just focused on how this literature deals with trauma and memory (of the Cultural Revolution). His is an approach to the avant-garde as a literary phenomenon. His close readings of the works indeed substantiate this approach, but a closer orientation at the possible rhetorical and intertextual inspirations (both Chinese and Western, in the sense of xifang 西方 as used in contemporary writings) that these authors were playing with, would have been even more fruitful in order to substantiate this approach. Due to the fact that this dissertation restricts itself to reviewing works only from the “New era” and nothing before or after, it is unable to answer the question of “how come there is something like the Chinese avant-garde?” (12).

2. Formal aspects of the dissertation

In terms of formalities, the dissertation is quite satisfactory. The candidate must be lauded for including the Chinese quotes directly with the translated texts and not in the footnotes, as this enables both readers capable of reading Chinese and those not, to go through this text and learn from it.

The English is at times unidiomatic (wrong sentence order, wrong use of adjectives/adverbs, colloquial use of singular, inconsistent and faulty uses of “the” and “a”, use of “ago” instead of “earlier” in indirect speech; indeed: rules of inversion and indirect speech are clearly not grasped, use of “that” instead of “who” when subject is a human being, no clear distinctions between verbs that have transitive and intransitive functions only). A few key terms are used incorrectly (e.g. contra-revolutionary instead of counterrevolutionary, polemical instead of polemicize). Usually, pinyin transcription is correct, I have noticed some smaller mistakes, e.g. (116) Xinshi zhi xin 信使之函 should be Xinshi zhi han, correct on (124), however.

3. Use of sources and/or material

Secondary and primary sources are transparently used and properly
referenced. The candidate is thorough in his reading on the subject matter and has covered both Chinese and non-Chinese writings (secondary and primary) on the subject. He quotes from the original sources, both in the original and providing a translation where necessary, and he substantiates his arguments by referring in detail to the sources.

The (primary) source selection itself is not entirely transparent, however: why restrict oneself to short prose (because the authors appear to have a preference for short prose, but why? Unfortunately, the candidate decides not to address the question (13): "Why was the shorter prose being so dominant (sic!) in this period is not a question this dissertation asks or tries to answer"); why choose only the 7 writers discussed here? How representative are they for avant-garde writing at the time, what are their commonalities, how are they different from other writers? Why are they (not) root-seeking or realist/modernist/postmodernist writers, for example (the comparison with these writing styles proffered in the dissertation is exclusively theoretical and does not go into any detailed analysis of primary texts that would have provided clues as to how to separate between different "traditions")? How is their style developing before and after their "avant-gardist" period? And what does that mean in terms of their "avant-gardist" uniqueness? How come their works represent a "stable corpus" (8), how come they form a "unifying (sic? should this be "unified") voice of the Chinese avant-garde" (221) if they do not, as stated right in the first paragraph of the introduction, constitute a "school" at all (7)1?

The selection of works chosen for analysis is insufficiently explained, and thus appears more or less associative (especially in chapter 3, where the candidate links the works through albeit beautiful and apt, but nevertheless associative observations). This is all the more so as the candidate does not give a short introduction to each of the authors’ oeuvre which would have made the selection criteria and the particularities of each of the authors’ styles and backgrounds more transparent to the reader. Then, the arguments drawn from the analytical findings in the sections on these works would have been even more convincing.

4. Personal contribution to the subject

By taking seriously the literary text of these avant-garde authors and by carefully reading and interpreting the message of the text as such, this

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1 (7) 'It can hardly be considered a literary school in the strict sense of the word, as the authors came from different backgrounds and there was never any common manifesto published. The avant-garde also certainly was not an isolated phenomenon, because it coexisted and shared some features with other literary trends of that period, such as "root-seeking literature" (kugeng wenxue 寻根文学) or "new realism" (xin xianzhishou 新现实主义). Still, there are many indications that from the point of view of history of Chinese literature, it is something essential and unique.'
dissertation makes a substantial, original and organically formulated contribution to the field. The candidate successfully fulfills his intention to find out (12) "what exactly are (sic) the literary features (stylistic, syntactic, semantic) these works have in common that we can reflect upon on the background of the era of its production and literary theory in general". The section on Chinese literary theories of the avant-garde and the postmodern, is extremely valuable and creative: it offers this material (e.g. Gao Xingjian’s 高行健 Preliminary Discussion on the Art of Modern Fiction (Xiance xiaoshuo qijiao chutan 现代小说技巧初探) published in 1981) which is seldom translated to the sinologist reader as well as the reader from world and comparative literature with no knowledge of Chinese. The chapter on Chinese theorists (which surely should have been mentioned prominently in the self-composed abstract to the dissertation) brings these texts into a conversation with Western theoretical writings on avant-gardist, modernist and postmodernist techniques of writing. This method is sustained in the second part of the thesis when the candidate offers his interpretations of some Chinese avant-gardist texts again referring both to Chinese and to Western theories of avant-gardist, modernist and postmodernist techniques. It is important to be writing dissertations that cross the boundaries of area studies and the disciplines and that enable a conversation across these borders which this dissertation does successfully by engaging especially theories that a reader from comparative or world literature would come from and offering translations of theories and a comparative discussion with theories that such a reader would never have come across before.

One of the best parts of the dissertation is its careful discussion of the Yan’an Talks and their relevance to avant-garde writing. This, too, is done in a manner which is both philologically sound and historically informed. Thus, this interpretation allows both the specialist and the reader from world or comparative literature to understand and reconfigure the significance of this important text to the writing of avant-garde authors in China.

IV. Questions for the author

1. Fleshing out the sources of China’s avant-garde writers

   a. On (9) the dissertation makes a very important point about Euro-American (西方) sources being a great and important inspiration to Chinese avant-garde writers. I would suggest to speak in greater detail about these inspirations: what works were being translated at the time, what did the authors discussed actually read? Where are the intertextual borrowings?
We know how important translation was during the Culture Fever Period, but we know very little concretely about it: who and what was available in original, in translation, what did these authors read and how did that inspire them to write what they wrote? Are there any paratexts we can find that tell us about reading experiences that these writers had and shared? The candidate only mentions the well-known fact that Mo Yan read Marquez (169), but gives the reader nothing to muse about in terms of possible transmission belts: where and how did Mo read the Marquez and why? Who else did?

Concretely, I would be very interested to know about the interconnection between “The Island” (Daoyu 島屿, 126) and John Donne’s “No man is an island” (1624). Was Donne’s piece of writing known? In the original? In translation? The Chinese story revolves around writer Huo De 霍德 who lives on an island and “The Island” is at the same a short story he writes. He is the island and he seems to be self-contained (in the same manner, 196, as Can Xue considers herself an island). This of course is very different from Donne’s idea that “No man is an iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the maíne; if a Clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Manner of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind.” What is the interconnection between these works and do they show any awareness of Donne? If not, why not? If so, why? How do these two writers react to Donne’s ideas? Are they actually reacting, modifying and radically rethinking them?

b. The dissertation acknowledges, intermittently, borrowings from Chinese traditions, too. It is especially strong in spotting socialist and/or Maoist traditions and how they are being subverted (here, the marvelous description of the Yan’an Talks should be mentioned again). It is a bit strange that while Liu Zaifu really seems to attack reflection theory (63) this important aspect of Marxist literary theory which is clearly subverted in the type of narrative created by Chinese avant-garde writers is under-reflected throughout in the dissertation (it is only mentioned briefly on 108).

c. And there is much more to be said in terms of other, more or less recent Chinese traditions which clearly inspire the writers of avant-garde fiction: there are (130) many thematic and linguistic interconnections to Obscure Poetry (menglongshi) which, unfortunately, are left out of the picture completely. I also wonder to what extent Can Xue in her uses of the Owl alludes to Huang Yongyu’s Winking Owl of 1973 rather than any European models (204 ff.); the
Daoist connection (Mo Yan’s Story 秋水 Qiushui bears the name of a chapter in Zhuangzi: no connection?) and the Chan connection (blindness, dreams, enlightenment) could have been played out much more forcefully as well. That way, the postmodernist argument perhaps could have been made more convincingly, too! Surely, the autumn symbolism which is such a frequent motif in Chinese literature, both in prose and in poetry, could have been elaborated upon... (e.g. 143 in Ge Fei) and there are many important and significant metaphors (the rain, as well as camphor and tong wood come to mind immediately). Historiographical narrative traditions (here a reference to Hayden White would have been at hand, 186) and more generally, uses of the past (historical drama) could have been addressed providing a bit more detail (the madman’s self-mutilization in the sense of making himself a eunuch and the name of Sima Qian must ring a bell, for example... ).

The obvious connectedness too, with Chinese texts and heritage is a very important aspect of Chinese avant-garde literature, and the traditional depth in a generation “scarred” by the Cultural Revolution and its particularly restrictive policies toward (some) Chinese traditions might be worth reflecting. Perhaps, in our discussion, we could engage a bit more in intertextual contextualization: there is a lot that is being said about the socialist traditions (and rejections and subversions of these) but other “traditions” are mentioned all too superficially (as genres: Wuxia, Caizi Jiaren), even though they may have been quite important to the “multi-layered subversion and double-edged subjectivity” that the candidate rightly finds in these writings.

2. Using both Western and Chinese theories of literature in understanding avant-garde writing in China

While I have already stated that the candidate does a very good job in combining Western and Chinese theory of avant-garde writing in analyzing the works of Chinese authors, he could have gone even further in his enquiries:

d. It would be interesting to know whether these authors knew any of the Western theoretical writings about avant-garde techniques that are used and cited by the candidate. To what extent did they play with some of the theories as applied in other (foreign or Chinese) works they knew?

e. What the dissertation does, by bringing different types of theoretical
narrative to bear on these works, is very well done and very useful in order to make it a good read not just for the sinologist but also for the student of world and in comparative literature. It could have gone much further, though, by bringing in the author’s reflections as paratext: this happens only once, with Can Xue’s “I am an island.” In this case, one small reference is made to paratextual matter, to the readings she makes of modernist and postmodernist writers and to her own theories about this (198 ff).

While it would have been necessary to contextualize Can Xue’s writings on theory a bit more, too (as they range from 1993 to 2007 in time, for example, see 201). This usage of theoretical reflections by the author’s themselves could have been engaged with more often and perhaps we can discuss some of the other writers’ theoretical reflections during the defense.

f. A more self-confident and critical edge should also be applied in uses of Western and Chinese theory: on (224), the dissertation lauds Jameson for his approach to Third World Literature. Yet, he does not really ask how those texts should be read from the point of view of Chinese literary theoretical traditions, indeed, his assumption is clearly that there are no such theoretical traditions. So of course, Western literary theory must be used? No, untrue, and this dissertation shows it very aptly. Yet while it could, this self-confidence is not always played out, to the contrary. To give an example: on (13), the dissertation introduces different Chinese categories for shorter fictional prose works but in the footnote, it cites introductions to Western short stories only. Where are the works that explain the Chinese categories we have established?

g. Something similar could be said when it comes to the discussion (74) of Avant-gardism and postmodernism. This should have been discussed in a bit more detail and perhaps also a bit more China-specific, because from the beginning, it becomes very clear that uses of “(post-)modernism” are very different in China and elsewhere.

3. Providing a Before and After to avant-garde writing in China

Thinking about post-modernism, the candidate for the first time addresses

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3 See ft. 1: “I am following the Chinese model of dividing works of fiction into three categories according to their relative length: “duanpian xiaoshuo” means “short-story-length prose,” “zhongpian xiaoshuo” means “medium-length prose” and “changpian xiaoshuo” means “long prose.” In my analysis, I choose the titles “short story,” “novella” or “novel” for a given piece of fiction according to how it was labeled in the Chinese collection of author’s works I am using. For more information about the theory of short story, including the difference between short story and novella in Western literature, see Martin Pila’s Pokus a zamroze vynezeni povídky or Susan Lohafer’s Coming to Terms with the Short Story.
questions of time beyond the "New Era". I would suggest that his dissertation would gain enormously from situating the current discussion of the "New Era" in a broader historical context that allows the reader to take a glimpse at the Before and After of avant-garde writing in China, so as to understand its particularity and uniqueness better. Currently this is not sufficiently explained in the dissertation.

a. The candidate’s unwillingness to reflect the importance of earlier and later events and his exclusive focus on the "New Era" period, leads him to turn a blind eye to some of the influential visits by French intellectuals such as Sartre, Kristeva, Ivens etc. during the 1960s and 70s: their works were translated during the Culture Fever period and their thoughts may thus have played a role in the writing of Chinese avant-garde fiction. Do we have any evidence to know more about these early intellectual traditions and their inspirational effects on the particular making of avant-garde literature in China?

h. At the same time, the Cultural Revolution which finds an end with the "New Era" is a moment when the boundaries between “dear reader” and author are being redrawn. The characterization given on (109) where it is mentioned that the 'dear reader' in Chinese avant-garde writing is "no longer quite so passive and becomes in effect an acknowledged fully active player in a new conception of literature as a collective creation rather than a monologic and authoritative version of history" is one which can be both linked to the production of Cultural Revolution shouchaoben and to contemporary internet fan-fiction. Here, again, the Before and After and the differences between these types of writing would be important to explore in order to situate and evaluate the uniqueness of Chinese avant-garde writing.

i. On the other end, it is important to know how and why the avant-garde ended as the problems discussed in their writings remained unsolved or even multiplied after 1989: did avant-garde literature really end then, why and how?

V. Conclusion
This is a fine dissertation, well done in terms of its philological soundness and creative analytical approach. I am grateful to the candidate as he has started me thinking in many new directions.

I therefore recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of Pass.