

The fantastic dimension in Mo Yan

A new way of narrating the supernatural encounter?

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In the enthusiastic revival of the marginal genre of the *zhiguai* tale that characterized the 1980s, Mo Yan's tales of the supernatural deserve particular attention. In stories such as *Qiyu* 奇遇 ("Strange Encounter") and *Yeyu* 夜渔 ("Night Fishing") collected in *Xuexi Pu Songling* 学习蒲松龄 ("Learning from Pu Songling," 2011), the protagonists experience an unexpected and unsettling encounter with the supernatural, especially when returning to their home villages from modern cities. While borrowing themes already present in the *Liaozhai*, Mo Yan's return to this ancient genre shows stylistic innovations that recall rhetorical devices described as central in the Western fantastic tale. In Mo Yan, this especially concerns the new context in which the strange event takes place and the new reactions of his modern protagonists towards the supernatural.

Adopting some descriptive categories proposed by critics of the Western fantastic, this analysis focuses on the frontier space of the countryside as a central rhetorical device that activates a fantastic mode of 'hesitation' towards supernatural encounters. As soon as they 'cross the threshold' to the fantastic dimension, Mo Yan's modern protagonists are led back into a world in which the unforeseen return of an ancient and apparently overcome order causes bewilderment and incredulity.

Keywords: *zhiguai* tales, fantastic (*qihuan*), countryside, return, Pu Songling, *uncanny*.

1. Introduction

This paper presents a preliminary analysis of the fantastic dimension in *Qiyu* 奇遇 ("Strange Encounter") and *Yeyu* 夜渔 ("Night Fishing"), two tales with supernatural elements collected in *Xuexi Pu Songling* 学习蒲松龄 ("Learning from Pu Songling," 2011), by the contemporary author Mo Yan 莫言 (1955).

Celebrated for his distinctive style, which seamlessly blends reality and imagination, in this collection Mo Yan (2011: 1-2) openly draws inspiration from the work of the famous Qing (1644-1911) author Pu Songling 蒲松龄 (1640-1715), who brought the ancient genre of the *zhiguai* 志怪 (anomaly

tale) to its apex. The selected works, however, not only imitate themes typical of Pu's collection, but also foreground a new sense of bewilderment experienced by protagonists of rural origin as they return to the countryside, physically or through memory, and unexpectedly come into contact with the supernatural. This sense of loss becomes significant if we consider that the author has partially engaged with the tradition of the Western fantastic tale, whose distinctive feature has been described as a sense of 'hesitation' (Todorov 1975) or 'incredulity' (Lugnani 1983) experienced by the protagonist of a strange encounter who no longer believes in the supernatural.

The two short stories by Mo Yan will be compared to tales written by Pu Songling which revolve around similar themes or employ similar rhetorical devices. This will allow us to highlight common features as well as innovative ones. Following a proposal by Ceserani (1996), the analysis will focus on the 'crossing of the threshold' (here the liminal space of the nocturnal countryside), a central rhetorical device that activates or enhances the fantastic mode by leading the protagonists back into a world in which the unforeseen return of an ancient and apparently overcome order causes bewilderment and incredulity.

2. Returning to a marginal genre: A new way of narrating the supernatural encounter?

Born in Northeast Gaomi Township, not far from Pu Songling's birthplace, as a child, Mo Yan grew up listening to the stories of the grand master, whose style inevitably influenced the way of narrating halfway between reality and imaginary he developed in his adult life. After leaving school, Mo Yan was thrown into the adult world, where he "embarked on the long journey of learning through listening" (Mo 2012: 4); all of the strange stories that had filled his ears during that period of time unexpectedly became material for his novels and short stories in a way similar to Pu Songling, famous for recording "many fantastic tales, perchance heard or made up on the spot" by the passersby (Mo 2011, as cited in Liu and Lee 2009).

Despite their great success, one should not forget that the two storytellers have known the suffering that comes from failure and marginalization since childhood, an experience that has certainly forged their ability to formulate their own "minor discourses."¹ While Pu Songling (1880: 21-22) described himself as a thin child, "constantly ailing, and unable to hold my own in the battle of life," Mo Yan has declared that he was often mocked by villagers and beaten up by bullies because of his ugliness. Things did not improve for Pu Songling as he got older: after failing the imperial

¹ On Pu Songling as a writer of minor literature, see Luo (2009).

examinations, he lived in solitude and poverty for most of his life, forced to live far from home and earn money as a secretary of high officials or a private tutor of wealthy landlords. Although Mo Yan was able to enjoy success due to his works, the judgement of his style by Chinese critics has been controversial (see Song 2018, for more detail); however, as he declared, his ability to imagine alternative worlds and to give rise to all sorts of fanciful images was generated by the deep sense of loneliness that he had experienced when becoming a sheep-herder shortly after leaving school (Mo 2012: 3). Thus, it is no wonder that, in the literary fervor of the 1980s—when Mo Yan goes from being the boy who listens to stories to the experimental writer that pens them—he almost immediately chooses to talk not about good people or model citizens, but about *his* people: the bad heroes and outcasts from his hometown on the edge of the Chinese countryside.

If it is by following in the steps of two masters such as Gabriel García Márquez (1927–2014) and William Faulkner (1897–1962) that he learns “that a writer must have a place that belongs to him alone” (Mo 2012: 5) (Northeast Gaomi Township), it is perhaps also from Italo Calvino (1923–1985) that he learns the “surreal vein” and “taste for the fairytale” which are so evident in the collection *Xuexi Pu Songling* (Mo, as cited in Del Corona 2015: 21). Most of the tales from the collection were written right after the 1980s, a period that not only saw Chinese contemporary writers coming into contact with foreign literature, but also witnessed a revived interest in the ancient genre of the *zhiguai* tale in mainland China as well as in Taiwan and Hong Kong (Wang 2004: 265–266). This enthusiastic revival deserves particular attention, especially if one considers the traditionally subordinate position that such narratives have always had in the rigid hierarchy of the genres of discourse in China,² and the radical questioning, in modern times, of a particular worldview that has always included the supernatural within the realm of the natural.

Born from the transcription of stories and legends previously circulating in oral form, the *zhiguai* 志怪 (lit. “anomaly accounts”) developed as a literary genre during the Six Dynasties Period (220–589), an era of political and social turmoil in which ghost stories served as a medium to explore the delicate and complex relationships between the living and the dead, often aiming to convince the skeptics that “ghosts do exist and that they exert serious claims on the living” (Campany 1991: 34). Whether authors and readers believed it or not, the *zhiguai* remain the richest literary testimony of an ancient worldview that never distinguished the “supernatural” from the “natural,” but sees the beyond as “an inherent part of the natural system” (Huntington 2001: 110). This allowed the literary ghosts, not only to return

² Confucius refused to talk of prodigies, feats of violence, disorders, and spirits (Analects 7/20).

to earth to avenge a wrong suffered in life or repay a debt, but even to rejoin the world of the living.³ This is still true in many of Pu's stories revolving around the encounters between young scholars and beautiful women eventually turning out to be supernatural beings who aspire to remain in the earthly realm.⁴ From a literary point of view, compared to the position of absolute authority that history has occupied for its ability to narrate true facts and thus transmit moral teachings,⁵ the *zhiguai* tales, although presented by the authors as integrations of the official history, were seen as mere annotations of fabricated events written only to satisfy the authors' desire to escape from reality. Loved and widely practiced by literati, they were nevertheless considered a subcultural genre and consequently suffered from major marginalization. Despite renewed popularity among literati and readers during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) eras, during which Pu Songling achieved exceptional success, the *zhiguai* tale was nearly completely abandoned in the modern epoch, when progressive writers took 19th century European canons of realism as a model. With very few exceptions, ghosts and other supernatural elements were therefore associated with obsolete superstitions.⁶

After coming to a halt in the period of revolutionary literature, the tradition of narrating the supernatural eventually made a wide comeback in the works of renowned contemporary writers such as Bo Yang (1920-2008), Mo Yan, Su Tong (1963),⁷ and others (Wang 2004). However, the radical questioning, in the modern epoch, of a traditional worldview that has always considered the supernatural as an integral part of the natural may have laid the groundwork for a new way of

³ Anthony Yu (1987) talks of “the avenging ghost” (415-422) as a vengeance seeker who often makes their appearance because they have suffered bad deaths and are victims of injustice, and of “the amorous ghost” (Yu 1987: 423-434) to refer to those ghosts who make their appearances to reunite with living mates or when “the lovers are not allowed to be united until one or both of them have passed through death” (Yu 1987: 423).

⁴ This interest of the stories—and thus of critics—in the interactions between spirits and humans continues in more recent times. One example is Barr's (1989: 501-517) analysis of the descriptions of “alien women” in Pu Songling. While proposing a new interpretation of these female figures, he continues to focus on the dynamics at work in their relationships with humans and within society.

⁵ According to Zhao (2001: 57), the hierarchy of genres was at the basis of the Confucian definition of social order.

⁶ Lu Xun's 鲁迅 (1881-1936) *Zhufu* 祝福 (“New Year's sacrifice”) perfectly exemplifies this tendency. The protagonist, who refuses to take part in the ceremony of “the sacrifice” to the God of Fortune, embodies the typical modern intellectual who rejects anything supernatural. The end of the story, which explains the strange encounter with a ghost as part of a dream, also confirms the modern tendency to lead every supernatural phenomenon back to a rational dimension.

⁷ The collection *Secrets* by Bo Yang (1985), translated in English by David Deterding, contains at least two short stories which may be analyzed from the perspective of the fantastic tale, namely “Dragon-eye Rice Gruel” (*Longyan zhou* 龙眼粥) and “Chiang-shui Street” (*Qiangshui jie* 强水街). For the Chinese version of the tales, see: Bo Yang (2013). Su Tong has also published at least three collections (2004 a, b, c) that contain tales with supernatural elements, such as *Yishi de wancheng* 仪式的完成 (“The Completion of the Ritual”), *Zhi* 纸 (“Paper Cut”), and *Hudie yu qi* 蝴蝶与棋 (“Butterflies and qi”).

narrating the supernatural encounter. One that focuses less on the interactions between humans and spirits, and more on a general sense of disorientation experienced by modern protagonists faced with the possible re-emergence of partly forgotten beliefs, thus coming closer to the Western tradition of the fantastic tale.

Distinguishing it from the ‘marvelous’ (in which the supernatural is accepted as part of the natural), and the ‘uncanny’ (in which it eventually finds a rational explanation), Todorov (1975: 25) defined the fantastic as “that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.” Albeit numerous critiques and revisions (Lazzarin 2016), Todorov’s definition has the merit of having catalyzed the attention of international critics on an important caesura in the way modern protagonists—and readers—react to the supernatural encounter. It is not by chance that their reactions are the main focus of authors who lived during the period of rigorous scientific and philosophical discourse known as the European Enlightenment, as if the fantastic was the other side of the enthusiastic leap towards scientific and technological progress that characterized that epoch.

In China, while the modern era had already witnessed a first timid attempt to explore the dark sides of modernization in a way similar to what the authors of the Western fantastic did,⁸ contemporary Chinese authors are certainly not immune to contact with Western works interpreted by critics with the categories of the fantastic, as Mo Yan’s admiration for Calvino shows. The attempt to analyze Mo Yan’s short stories with supernatural elements with descriptive categories proposed by critics of the European and American fantastic finds in this its *raison d’être*.

Todorov’s essay was only translated into Chinese in 2015 (Todorov 2015) and, as Tan (2014) notes, has received very little attention among Chinese critics. Even when Western critics have tried to apply Todorov’s theory to Chinese literature on the supernatural, the concept of ‘hesitation’ was either not in the main interests of scholars or was essentially different from that described by the Bulgarian-

⁸ Both close to Shanghai’s modernist current, Xu Xu 徐訏 (1908-1980) and Shi Zhecun 施蛰存 (1905-2003) used themes typical of traditional ghost stories in urban and cosmopolitan settings, with modern protagonists and plots largely influenced by masters of the Western fantastic such as Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), in the case of Shi (Wang 2013: 37-39), and Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870) in the case of Xu (Rosenmeier 2017: 82). In comparison to traditional works, these modern tales are not only longer, but also display a psychological characterization that the former lacked (Lee 1999: 155-177; Shi 1992: 1-13). Works such as *Yecha* 夜叉 (“Yaksha,” 1933) or *Modao* 魔道 (“Devil’s Road,” 1933) by Shi Zhecun and *Lusenbao de yi su* 鲁森堡的一宿 (“A Night in Luxembourg,” 1936) by Xu Xu display a rupture with traditional religious beliefs that leads characters not only to fear the supernatural, as was already the case in the *zhiguai* tales, but to openly doubt and reject it, attempting to explain it rationally as a product of hallucination or mental illness (Shi) or as an externalization of the fears and anxieties of the protagonists (Xu Xu).

French critic. In general, critics in and outside China drew on Todorov for their analysis of classical Chinese works (Kao 1985: 2; Company 1996: 207-209; Wei 2011), but it is likely more appropriate to use the category of the fantastic to describe works belonging to the modern and contemporary eras, like Chen (2007) does.

Although Chinese cultural and philosophical tradition has always seen the supernatural as part of the natural world, the penetration of foreign literary and philosophical works that began during the May Fourth movement and continued in the 1980s, together with the 20th century's anti-superstition campaigns (Macdonald 2019: 8-14), may have laid the foundations for a shift in the perception of the supernatural. If scholars have documented significant differences in style, themes, plotting, and worldview between early *zhiguai* and those of the late Qing period (1644-1911), emphasizing an increasing tendency of the latter to “mingle the human and the ghostly” (Wang 2004: 264), it is legitimate to wonder if the extraordinary flourishing of the genre in the contemporary epoch shows even more explicit differences. This is especially true when considering that, with the advent of the modern era, the traditional tendency to censor any discourse on the supernatural takes on the characteristics of a true caesura with the aforementioned traditional worldview.

While there are certainly hints, in Mo Yan, of a return to Pu Songling's way of narrating and themes, is it true that some of the stories in the collection are merely “a pale mimicry of the *Liaozhai* in format and thematics” (Wang 2004: 288)? Or rather, focusing on what seems to be a peculiar feature in Mo Yan, i.e. the liminal space of the nocturnal countryside to which a modern adult protagonist comes back, we may not glimpse something more than imitation in these tales?

As Liu and Lee (2009: 30-31) noticed, Mo Yan combines the Enlightenment nativist tradition represented by Lu Xun with the cultural conservatism of Shen Congwen 沈从文 (1902-1988) in his works. On one hand, he transforms his homeland into the object of representation at the manner of Lu Xun. On the other hand, he turns his gaze to that primitive and magical state of existence previously depicted by Shen Congwen.⁹ In the collection *Xuexi Pu Songling*, the countryside on the edge of the village is not only a background for the events narrated, but also becomes a central rhetorical device that activates or enhances a fantastic mode of ‘incredulity’ (Ceserani 1996; Lugnani 1983). This is particularly evident in short stories like *Qiyu* and *Yeyu*, in which the rural landscape on the margins of the native village becomes a central space that activates a series of anomalous events that cause not only fear, but also a sense of loss and bewilderment in the modern protagonists.

⁹ For the centrality of the hometown as a fictional space in Mo Yan, see also: Zhang (2014), Wang (1993).

3. *Qiyu*: An uncanny return of the supernatural in the liminal space of the countryside

Qiyu narrates a man's encounter with an old neighbor who was waiting for him to repay a small debt he had contracted with his father. The protagonist, an officer of the liberation army, a member of the Communist Party and a materialist, meets him on his way back to his home village from the county-level town of Baoding, where he now resides. Unable to use his money, the old man gives him a pipe mouthpiece and asks him to bring it to his father. Come for a visit to his parents, the protagonist eventually meets them at home, only to discover that the old neighbor had died three days before.

The plot is typical of many ghost stories found in the *Liaozhai*: a man encounters a ghost, thinking it is a human being; despite more or less explicit hints suggesting it might be a spirit, he only discovers its true identity later on; the ghost enters in contact with the human to complete a task that kept it tied to the earthly realm, in Mo Yan's case, to repay a debt. However, many are the differences, the more evident being the new identity of Mo Yan's protagonist and his reaction to the strange encounter, reflecting both the different identities of the authors and their respective life experiences and cultural backgrounds.

The encounter with ghosts of deceased people is a recurring theme in the *Liaozhai* and one of the most popular ever. In many cases, the protagonist of Pu's ghost stories is an aspiring scholar-official travelling far from his usual adobe. Residing temporarily near a semi-abandoned temple, during the night he receives the visit of a beautiful young woman who turns out to be a ghost of a girl dead prematurely.¹⁰ She often asks the man to help her recover her bones and rebury them in a more appropriate place, or is taken as a wife or concubine by the man. Whether they are spirits of unknown women or recently deceased relatives, ghosts in Pu Songling come into contact with humans mainly out of interest or because something still binds them to the earthly world. In the case of spirits of relatives, these are mostly benevolent ghosts who manifest themselves to help relatives who are still living, sometimes in exchange for something.¹¹ Whether they act in a benevolent or malignant way, Pu's ghosts testify to a close link between the afterlife and the earthly realm. This link is, in most cases, accepted by the protagonists, who welcome the supernatural encounter at most with an initial reaction of surprise.

According to Luo (2009: 80), ghosts in the *Liaozhai* "exist on several levels: they manifest themselves as concrete evidence of popular belief, as projections of the human unconscious, as the author's private metaphors, and as allegorical vehicles for social and cultural commentary." In Mo Yan,

¹⁰ It is the case of the famous *Nieh Hsiao C'ien*.

¹¹ See, for example, *The Shui-mang Plant* (Pu 1880: 136).

popular beliefs about the close relationship between the world of the living and the dead are recovered in *Qiyu*, manifesting in the ghost's gesture of gratitude towards a living. However, these beliefs are repeatedly questioned in the story, and Mo Yan seems more interested in describing the perceptions and emotions of his modern and materialist protagonist when confronting the sudden and unexpected re-emergence of the supernatural.

In *Qiyu*, the protagonist's neighbor had died three days earlier at dawn, but he still lingers at the village's edge, waiting to meet the narrator to settle a debt incurred during his lifetime with his father. Mo Yan thus recovers and develops a theme already dominant in Pu Songling's works: the appearance of a benevolent ghost that manifests to a human in order to complete an important task. As Santangelo (2019: 18) noted, gratitude and loyalty are among the "virtues extolled in the *Liaozhai*, where they stand for the basic moral structure of love, friendship, and affection." In the tale "Tian Qilang" a hunter scrambles to repay the money he received from a high-ranking gentleman by sending material goods such as hides, hares, and deer until he is forced to repay him with his own life. As Santangelo (2019: 21) observes with respect to this story, "the favor one receives establishes mutual expectations and reciprocal duties." These duties often extend beyond one's lifespan, as Mo's *Qiyu* demonstrates: the ghost of the neighbor, aware of his debt, appears to the living and, unable to repay his debt with money, he does so by giving an object to his son. Mo Yan thus brings together two important themes present in Pu Songling's works (the appearance of the ghost and gratitude/loyalty) and reiterates something already clear in the *Liaozhai*: alongside malevolent ghosts who harm humans, there also exist benevolent ghosts.¹²

Mo Yan, however, does not merely reiterate a critique of certain negative representations of ghosts already evident in Pu. This critique is only subtly hinted at in the conclusion of *Qiyu*, implicit in the benevolent gesture of the ghost, which ultimately proves that ghosts do exist,¹³ and they are sometimes more human and loyal than humans themselves. However, this message does not appear central to the story, which focuses more on the protagonist's perceptions, sensations, and emotions in a way never seen in Pu Songling's work.

In *Qiyu*, the protagonist starts experiencing conflicting feelings as soon as he comes back to his home village and penetrates the rural landscape just outside of it. Arrived at the train station, a sense

¹² Despite, as Zeitlin (2007: 17) notes, the fox-spirit is more often associated with "healing, laughter, warmth, and wisdom; the ghost with disease, melancholy, coldness, and infatuation," in the *Liaozhai* ghosts are most often not fearful but sentimental and lovable beings, in some cases even better than humans (Santangelo 2009: 38).

¹³ In *Qiyu*, we see the protagonist trying to convince himself of the impossibility of encountering a ghost, even if it seems much more a way to take courage as he walks alone through the nocturnal countryside (see section 3).

of attraction of landscape elements such as the moon accompanies him, foreseeing the fantastic encounter and, ultimately, the return of ancient beliefs:

举头看天，见半块月亮高悬，天清气爽，我便决定不在县城住宿，乘着明月早还家，一可早见父母，二可呼吸田野里的新鲜空气。(Mo 2011: 3)

I raised my head and saw the half-moon shining high in the clear sky, so I decided to take advantage of the moonlight to walk home rather than spending the night in the county town. That way I would be able to see my parents sooner, and also breathe the fresh air of the open fields.¹⁴

The rural landscape located just outside of his hometowns is not only attractive. Soon we realize it is also the perfect threshold for an unsettling return of ancestral fears. While being close to the native village (which is certainly a place of familiarity to the protagonists), it is also a space in which the human presence starts to withdraw and give way to wild nature, particularly at night. In this moment of the day, the semi-anthropized landscape of the countryside, with its semi-abandoned roads extending through dense crop fields, seems once again populated with spirits, and the natural world is again a threat for men:

土路因为近年来有些地方被挖断了。行人稀少，所以路面上杂草丛生，只是在路中心还有一线被人踩过痕迹。路两边全是庄稼地，有高粱地、玉米地、红薯地等[...]路越往前延伸庄稼越茂密，县城的灯光早就看不见了。(Mo 2011: 3)

In recent years, the dirt road had been dug up in several places. Not many people walked that way, so the road surface was covered with weeds and brush, with just a trace of a trail down the middle, trampled down by people. Crops were growing on both sides of the road: sorghum, corn, sweet potatoes... [...] As the crops became denser further down the road, the lights of the county town disappeared.

The countryside is an in-between space, a bordering area that separates the space of humans (the village) from the natural, non-anthropized landscape. Describing the ‘crossing of the threshold’ as a recurring rhetorical device in the fantastic tale, Ceserani (1996: 80) points out that “the main character suddenly finds himself in two different dimensions, with different codes to orient himself and

¹⁴ Translations from Chinese are mine.

understand.” As soon as he enters the fields, alone in the darkness, Qiyu’s protagonist seems to enter into a different dimension in which his senses are amplified as a consequence of a lack of clear vision:

我忽然感觉到脖颈后有些凉森森的，听到自己的脚步声特别响亮与沉重起来。我有些后悔不该单身走夜路，与此同时，我感觉到路两边的庄稼地里有无数秘密，有无数只眼睛在监视着我，并且感觉到背后有什么东西尾随着我，月光也突然朦胧起来。(Mo 2011: 4)

Suddenly, I felt a biting coldness behind my neck, and heard my own footsteps becoming louder and heavier. I began to regret coming this way alone at night. I felt that countless secrets were hidden under the crops on each side of the road and that countless eyes were scrutinizing me. I also felt that something was tailing me. All of a sudden, the moonlight grew dim.

Unable to see clearly in the darkness, he returns to an ancient method of orienting himself in the natural landscape, where noises, smells, and tactile sensations become fundamental. However, this old modality has a frightening effect on him, as it offers an incomplete representation of the surrounding world, especially if compared to the more reliable sensation of sight, the most important sense of modern rationalism.

The obsession of modern men for (the lack of) vision is a feature worth noting here as it is also central to Western fantastic tales (Jackson 1981: 30-31). In *Qiyu* it is evident, including in the reference to “countless eyes scrutinizing me,” followed by the renewed awareness that “nature is full of mysteries” (Mo 2011: 4). As soon as the faint light of dawn comes back to illuminate his path, the protagonist looks back in relief, making fun of himself for believing that nature could be full of invisible dangers. However, immersed in the liminal space of the nocturnal countryside, such dangers had seemed more than real to him.

The in-between status of the countryside, frequently described as a space that frightens and disorients, echoes the condition in which the protagonist of *Qiyu* finds himself. Coming from a rural culture that believes in spirits, he moved to the city and adopted the rational and material conception of reality typical of the modern era. His reluctance to believe in the possibility of a supernatural encounter, or its total rejection (有鬼吗? 有邪吗? 没有! 有野兽吗? 没有! *You gui ma? You xie ma? Meiyou! You yeshou ma? Meiyou!* “Are there ghosts or evil creatures here? No! Are there wild beasts here? No!” Mo 2011: 4) come from his complete adherence to modern urban culture and materialism, in which all forms of spiritualism have no place.

As Lugnani (1983: 196) noticed, the ‘incredulity’ that surrounds the protagonist as soon as he crosses the threshold to the fantastic dimension “is the resistance of the established order to the possible disorder induced [...] by the unexpected reappearance of an ancient order that was believed

to be forever overcome.” In Mo Yan such disbelief is the result of the background of the protagonist, a self-declared materialist and member of the Communist Party who had fully experienced the erasure of the supernatural from literature in the Maoist period. Thus, it is no coincidence that this re-emergence of an ancient order occurs precisely when *Qiyu*'s protagonist returns to his native village, a cradle of beliefs in spirits and monsters strongly rooted in his culture of origin.

While in traditional ghost stories the encounter with spirits often took place in a desolate space far from home to where the aspiring scholar-official traveled in order to take part in the imperial examination, or in their own house,¹⁵ in *Qiyu*, the ghost appears to the protagonist as he is about to enter his native village (正欲进村). The desolation of the surrounding landscape and the absence of human traces typically foreseeing the appearance of a spirit in Pu's tales¹⁶ are still present, but the fact that here the ghost returns in a place that was once familiar to the protagonist leads to the idea of a fantastic closely linked to the Freudian concept of *unheimliche* (“uncanny”).¹⁷

Described by Freud (1919: 13) as a form of anxiety coming from “something repressed which recurs,” the “uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression” (emphasis in original).¹⁸ According to Amigoni (2004: 29), this ambivalence of the word *unheimliche* “accompanies the fantastic hero without abandoning him for a moment, and from him, it is propagated to the rather but immune reader.”¹⁹ That sense of bewilderment that captures Mo Yan's protagonist when he returns to the countryside is a sign of the contradictory feelings of attraction and repulsion, or familiarity and unfamiliarity, that he has towards the countryside itself and the cultural heritage it represents. The rural landscape is part of the protagonist's past, like all of the beliefs and superstitions typical of a popular culture that revolves around the countryside. The semi-abandoned road cutting across the fields taken by the protagonist of *Qiyu* to return home is both familiar and unfamiliar: it is the shortest way to one's birthplace, the familiar place par excellence, but it is also a path that leads back to a system of beliefs that questions the modern world to the point that the protagonist is momentarily pushed to

¹⁵ See, for example, “Miss Lien-Hsiang” (Pu 1880: 168-185).

¹⁶ See, for example, “The Magic Sword” (Pu 1880: 124-135).

¹⁷ Note that the Freudian concept of ‘uncanny’ is different from Todorov's ‘uncanny’ as opposed to ‘marvelous.’

¹⁸ Wang (1993: 110) says something similar about writers of native soil fiction such as Mo Yan, who describe “the homeland as a both familiar and foreign place, [...] taking objects seen and experienced as ‘ordinary’ in their own land and ‘making them strange.’”

¹⁹ According to Todorov (1975), thanks to the use of a first-person narrator the reader can experience the feelings and emotions of the protagonist.

take into consideration the disturbing possibility of the existence of a vast unknown space extending beyond the boundaries of what is known and visible. It is *that* path that makes the encounter with strange phenomena still possible, shaking the modern man in spite of his alleged materialistic and rationalistic certainties, “like an atavistic and dissonant voice not yet included in the world system” (Fišer 2012: 42) or, in the case of Mo Yan, not anymore.

4. Literal realization of metaphors in *Yeyu*: autosuggestion or perfect fantastic tale?

Yeyu opens with an everyday scene that may well be part of the author’s childhood memories in Northeastern Gaomi Township. One mid-autumn evening, the protagonist finally gets permission to accompany Ninth uncle to catch crabs at the river. After leaving the village and crossing the sorghum fields, they arrive at the dam, set the traps, and wait. But the animals take a long time to arrive. It is here, in the vacuum of a wait filled with expectations, that the child starts noticing a series of oddities in his uncle’s behavior and appearance. The surrounding landscape also seems to change in an unexpected and frightening way. Soon after, attracted by the delicate scent of a lotus flower, the child becomes quiet and, as if hypnotized by its beauty, enters the water to reach it. Suddenly a hand grabs him by the scruff of his neck and pulls him out. Convinced to see his uncle, he is surprised to find a woman whose ethereal beauty reminds him of the celestial beings of legends, and whose ability to catch the crabs leaves him astonished. Insisting she is a human being, she eventually leaves the child with what sounds as a promise: in twenty-five years they will meet again on an island on the south-west; then, he will understand. Waken up by the worried voices of his relatives, the child discovers that shortly after leaving the village, Ninth uncle had lost sight of him and is now surprised to find him with two sacks full of crabs. The tale closes in a Singapore marketplace where the protagonist, now an adult, feels faint at the charms of a woman whose elusive smile reminds him of the beautiful lady met exactly twenty-five years earlier at the river.

Upon reaching the river, the first event that the child perceives as anomalous (怪事 *guaishi*) occurs when he and his uncle set the traps and awaits the arrival of the crabs: 怪事怪事真怪事，今夜里应该是过蟹子的大潮啊，又说西风响蟹脚痒，蟹子不来出了鬼了 (*Guaishi guaishi zhen guaishi, jinye li yinggai shi guo xiezi de dachao a, you shuo xifeng xiang xie jiao yang, xiezi bu lai chu le gui le* “Strange, really strange! There should be plenty of crabs tonight. They even say: ‘When the northwest wind hisses, the crab’s leg itches.’ There must be something strange if the crabs are not coming;” Mo 2011: 9), says Ninth uncle. It is precisely the “literalization” of this popular saying that generates the fantastic: from this moment, a series of strange events start to occur. According to Zeitlin (1993: 145),

what Todorov (1975) has defined as the literal realization of metaphoric language is one of Pu Songling's most common mechanisms for generating fantasy. As Ceserani (1996: 78) points out, it is not a rhetorical device exclusive of the fantastic mode, however, the fantastic tale uses it "in a systematic and original way."²⁰

Used in narrative terms, become a narrative procedure, metaphor can enable those sudden and unsettling threshold and frontier crossings that are a fundamental feature of fantastic fiction.

As observed in *Qiyu*, the threshold to the fantastic dimension is again, in *Yeyu*, the countryside surrounding the home village. As he walks through the sorghum fields, *Yeyu*'s protagonist enters into a different dimension in which his distorted perceptions of time and space (感到走了很长很长时间, 才从高粱地里钻出来 *Gandao zou le hen chang hen chang shijian, cai cong gaoliang di li zuan chulai* "I had the feeling that we took a long long time to get out of the sorghum fields;" Mo 2011: 7) are a first clue of the fantastic events that follow. Lugnani (1983: 195-196) defines such clues as "threshold signals," i.e. hints that signal the threshold between a familiar dimension and an alien one, "between what is codified and what is not (or not yet, or not anymore)," adding that "they intervene where a certain cultural code imposes them as its safeguard [...] and as a guarantee of its endurance." We have already seen in *Qiyu* that the new cultural code accepted by the protagonist—or rather, that the protagonist was forced to accept as part of his new identity—completely rejects the possibility of the supernatural. Thus, as Lugnani (1983) suggests, the news the protagonists bring back from their travel into the fantastic dimension generate incredulity precisely because they imply the existence of something previously negated, as in the case of Mo Yan. If in *Qiyu* this incredulity is expressed by the hesitation of the protagonist's father to accept the pipe mouthpiece in the final scene (我把烟袋嘴递给父亲, 父亲竟犹豫着不敢接 *Wo ba yandaizui digei fuqin, fuqin jing youyu zhe bugan jie* "I handed the mouthpiece of the pipe to my father, but he hesitated, as if he did not dare to accept it;" Mo 2011: 6) in *Yeyu* it is implicit in the silence of the child, unable to tell Ninth uncle how he was able to catch the crabs.

Interestingly, the child's fear in *Yeyu* are directly related to the changes he observes in the behavior of his uncle, who takes a leaf and begins to whistle on it, emitting strange sounds (怪声 *guai sheng*). Frightened to the point of shivering (我感到我身上很冷 *Wo gandao wo shenshang hen leng*), the

²⁰ Two examples quoted by Ceserani (1966: 78) are E.T.A. Hoffmann's famous tale "The Sandman" (*Der Sandmann*, 1816) and Luigi Pirandello's (1867-1936) novella *Soffio* ("A Breath," 1931), the latter built on the literal realization of a common Italian saying.

child asks him to stop because: 俺娘说黑夜吹哨招鬼 *An niang shuo heiye chuishao zhao gui* “Mother says whistling at night attracts spirits (Mo 2011: 9).” Another literal realization of a metaphor brings to fantastic phenomena: as Ninth uncle continues whistling his “exceedingly strange” gaze (好生怪异 *haosheng guaiyi*; Mo 2011: 9) makes him appear “absolutely unfamiliar” (十分陌生 *shifen mosheng*; Mo 2011: 9) to the child.

What has been observed in *Qiyu* with respect to the countryside applies here to the uncle: what was familiar suddenly becomes unfamiliar for the child, who begins to sense strangeness in the landscape around him as well:

天上不知道何时出现了一朵黄色的、孤零零的云，月亮恰好钻了进去。我感到这现象古怪极了，这么大的天，越来那个有的是宽广的道路好走，为什么偏要钻到那云团中去呢？(Mo 2011: 10)

I don't know when, a lonely yellow cloud appeared up in the sky, pierced by some strange combination, by the moon. It seemed really strange to me: with such a big sky and all that space to go, why on earth did the moon have to come up right behind that pile of clouds?

If analyzed from a psychological point of view, the child's reaction of surprise is not uncommon: Ninth uncle is the only familiar element in an unfamiliar space he has been fantasizing about for a long time. To make the nocturnal countryside appear even more dangerous in the child's eyes were not only the prohibition by the adults to go there and the mother's worried comments right before departure, but also the memories of all the supernatural stories the child had heard. Mo Yan skillfully plays with this body of popular beliefs and literary representations, something the child in *Yeyu* is well aware of. Immersed in strange stories in a way similar to what Mo Yan has described for his own childhood, he immediately fears that Ninth uncle may have transformed into some kind of supernatural being. As soon as he touches him, the cold from his back penetrates his bones (冷得刺骨 *leng de cigu*), recalling a common feature of the spirits described in Pu Songling's stories.

Another way Mo Yan incorporates references to popular beliefs and representations of spirits is by inserting a female character whose extraordinary beauty reminds the supernatural beings of legends. Although, when touching her backside to make sure she is not a fox, the child finds it as smooth as Princess Lotus Flower's body in Pu Songling's omonymous tale, the woman in *Yeyu* repeatedly claims she is human. In Pu Songling's tale “The Fox Dream,” on the contrary, the beautiful woman soon reveals the man she is a fox. This not only confirms the supernatural encounter has happened, but also

that it has happened with no surprise from part of the protagonist, an aspect that places Pu Songling's tale nearer to Todorov's definition of the 'marvelous.'

Mo Yan's choice to let the woman claim she is a human being, on the contrary, seems to echo the negation of the supernatural which is at the basis of the fantastic tale and already present in *Qiyu*. Interestingly, in *Yeyu* it is the supernatural (i.e. the apparently supernatural woman) to deny its own supernatural status. We may be tempted to conclude, as Lei (2008: 104) and Zhu (2002: 6-8) do, that the supernatural apparitions in *Yeyu* are part of the child's hallucination, clearly imbued with strange stories heard from the adults. However, the presence of an 'object mediator of reality' (Lugnani 1983: 177-288), i.e. the fishing net full of crabs that the woman had helped him to capture, proves that the fantastic encounter with the woman has indeed happened. Described by Ceserani (1996: 81) as that object whose "concrete insertion in the text proves that the protagonist has actually crossed the threshold for the fantastic dimension," this rhetorical device ensures the prolongation of the doubt until the end, thus making *Yeyu* a perfect fantastic tale for its ability to maintain the hesitation until the end (Todorov 1975).

In support of the possibility of describing *Yeyu* as a perfect fantastic tale, it is useful to reflect on the use of the child narrator in Mo Yan. Pesaro (2016) finds Foster's description of the juxtaposition of the adult's perspective and the child's one appropriate to Mo Yan:

La voix enfantine est utilisée pour mettre en avant la tension entre adulte et enfant, créant une crise d'identité que souvent l'adulte ne réussit pas à résoudre. De tels récits renvoient au passage de la recherche de l'identité nationale, si prévalente au début du xx^e siècle, à des réflexions, dans la fiction, sur l'identité individuelle, à la fin du xx^e siècle. (Foster 2013, as cited in Pesaro 2016 : 148)

The inability to answer, peculiar to the child as much as to the adult (朋友问我怎么回事，我心不在焉地摇摇头，没有回答 *Pengyou wen wo zenmehuishhi, wo xinbuzaiyan de yao yao tou, meiyou huida* "When my friends asked me what had happened, I absentmindedly shook my head and did not answer;" Mo 2011: 15), would then be a direct expression of this never-solved identity crisis, a crisis that here affects a modern man as he returns to his childhood's memories in the home village.

Although the Chinese tradition has always considered the "supernatural" as part of the real, the marginal position traditionally reserved to any discourse about the strange, and the total rejection of the supernatural in the modern and Maoist eras, contributed to create such a juxtaposition of irreconcilable orders of reality. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that the apparitions witnessed by the child at the river occur in the mid-1960s, right at the dawn of a Cultural Revolution that aimed to unhinge a system of thought considered backward and harmful. As it is probably no coincidence that

the mysterious woman reappears on an island located on the edge of the motherland, a setting certainly not frequent in Mo Yan's works.

Masi (2000: 20) also speaks of uncertainty about one's identity in some of Mo Yan's stories, expressed precisely by a first-person narrator:

Far from the ubiquitous and anonymous figure who observes and records men and facts in the realist novel, the narrating self is a subject who is somewhat uncertain about his own identity and the attitude to take, between rational knowledge and identification with the magical world, between participation in the intellectual-urban culture and elite dimension [...] and belonging to the submerged sphere. Where animals [...] carry a message comprehensible to those who share their corporeality and are not unaware of the mystery, but indecipherable (intolerable) to the urban intellectual's bodiless mind.

By "submerged sphere" Masi (2000: 15) means that "subsoil" consisting of both the deep self and the immense and submerged sphere of the subaltern, that is, that "deep and submerged popular reality" that resurfaces in Root-seeking writers such as Mo Yan. Interestingly, what she calls "uncertainty" about the attitude to take comes close to Todorov's 'hesitation' or Lugnani's 'incredulity,' and when she speaks of "indecipherable (*intolerable*)" message that certain magical encounters carry, she seems to come close to Lugnani's (1983: 225) description of the 'object mediator of reality' as that object whose presence disturbs because it proves a passage between different levels of reality that is not considered as possible by the code, therefore is *not tolerated* and left *submerged*.²¹

5. Concluding remarks

As this preliminary analysis has tried to show, from a thematic point of view, Mo Yan's short stories *Qiyu* and *Yeyu* both borrow themes widely explored in Pu Songling's collection, such as the return of a ghost who enters in contact with the human to accomplish a task (*Qiyu*), or the encounter with a woman whose extraordinary beauty recalls that of supernatural beings of legends (*Yeyu*). However, they also present significant differences deeply related to the respective identities of their protagonists (and authors), and the diverse cultural contexts that surround them. These differences are especially evident in Mo Yan's characters' reaction of bewilderment and incredulity to the strange encounter, a central feature in the fantastic tale, according to Western critics.

²¹ Italics are mine.

“Learning from Pu Songling” certainly means coming back to a storytelling tradition that has starved to make minor discourses on the supernatural accepted by the Confucian elite. But for a contemporary author of rural origins such as Mo Yan, this come-back bears further significance. It inevitably means coming back to something that his formation as a young adult living during the period of the Cultural Revolution has firmly negated, but which is deeply rooted in his childhood experience as a cattle herder living in contact with nature and listening to adults’ most extraordinary stories. For this reason, this return cannot but have an unsettling effect on his protagonists, clearly bearing autobiographical traits. As we have tried to show, this effect is activated as soon as the protagonists come back, physically or through memory, to the rural landscape on the edge of the home village, an in-between-space that mirrors the condition of the author and the protagonists.

According to Zeitlin (1993), Pu wrote in an era in which the expectations of readers were not based on an idea of shared reality (as in the Western fantastic described by Todorov), but on their familiarity with other literary texts. In Mo Yan, we can find both. On one hand, readers are familiar with the genre of the *zhiguai* tale. On the other hand, they are led to doubt about the supernatural based on their modern and rationalistic idea of reality. If Pu’s supernatural beings testify to beliefs in a close link between the afterlife and the earthly realm that is recovered by Mo Yan, in the first such beliefs are mostly accepted by the protagonists, while in the latter they are repeatedly questioned. Mo Yan seems more interested in describing the perceptions and emotions of his modern and materialist protagonists when confronting the sudden and unexpected re-emergence of the supernatural, in a way similar to what masters of the Western fantastic like Hoffmann and Pirandello had done.

In Mo Yan, the in-between status of the countryside is a central rhetorical device that, echoing the contradictory condition in which the protagonists find themselves, activates and amplifies their sense of loss as they cross the threshold to the fantastic dimension. Moreover, as observed in *Qiyu*, the fact that the ghost returns in a place once familiar to the protagonist leads to the idea of a fantastic closely linked to the Freudian concept of *uncanny*. In *Yeyu*, the literal realization of metaphors, already present in Pu Songling, becomes a narrative procedure that enables an unsettling threshold crossing. Although the supernatural apparitions in *Yeyu* may be dismissed as mere suggestion of an imaginative mind imbued by the strange stories, the child’s travel to the fantastic dimension is proved by the presence of an ‘object mediator of reality’, thus making *Yeyu* a perfect fantastic tale for its ability to maintain the hesitation until the end.

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