An Impossible Healing? Representation of Doctors in Fictional Works about the Great Famine (1958-62) in China

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ABSTRACT: From Lu Xun's choice to heal Chinese people with a literary movement instead than medicine in 1922 to "scar literature" (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学), which first re-elaborated Maoist past in the late 1970s, the metaphor of the "cure" has been widely used to describe the function of literature within Chinese society since modern times. It seems therefore justified to read the representation of medicine in fictional works, especially those dealing with historical trauma, as an allegory.

In the paper, I examine in these terms the recounting of the famine that stroke the Chinese countryside after the Great Leap Forward (1958-62), a period chosen both for its contested inclusion in collective memory and for the representation of illness it imposes. From an overview of some of the few novels set in those years (by authors such as Zhang Yigong, Liu Qingbang, Zhi Liang, Yan Lianke, Mo Yan), a recurrent negative connotation of the doctors emerges: when not directly harmful, they are either absent, passive, or impeded in acting. I suggest that this pessimistic depiction symbolizes not only the historically attested neglect of, and refusal to "heal", rural areas during the crisis, but also literature's struggle to play a therapeutic role in a context of denied collective trauma.

KEY WORDS: Great Famine in China; collective traumatism; Scar Literature *Shanghen Wenxue*; Zhang Yigong; Liu Qingbang; Yan Lianke

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INTRODUCTION: LITERATURE AS HEALING IN CHINA

LITERATURE AS MEDICINE IN MODERN CHINA: FROM LU XUN TO "SCAR LITERATURE"

When Lu Xun 鲁讯 (1881-1936), in the famous introduction to his *Nahan* 呐喊 *(Call to Arms*, 1923), explained his decision to write literature in order to "change the minds" of the Chinese people, rather than merely heal their bodies as a doctor (439), he established a link between literature and medicine. The trope of medicine in Lu Xun's stories reinforces this metaphorical link. The author uses traditional medicine to denounce the shortcomings and harmfulness of traditional Chinese culture, and therefore describes it as a backward and useless, if not harmful, discipline (*Yao* 药 "Medicine" v. 1 463-472; *Mingtian* 明天 "Tomorrow" v. 1 473-480). Doctors (often a semi-autobiographical narrator) are unable to heal, and even to understand the people around them (*Guxiang* 故乡""Hometown" v. 1 501-511; *Zhufu* 祝福 "New Year's Sacrifice" v. 2 5-23).

His influence probably contributed to the idea of writing as a healing (or toxic) tool, as well as to the symbolical representation of medicine in Chinese modern and contemporary literature. During the Cultural Revolution (*wenhua da geming* 文化大革命 1966-76), for instance, if a literary work was considered counter-revolutionary, it was labelled a "great poisonous weed" (*da ducao* 大毒草) and when, in the late 1970s, artistic and literary production experienced a new flowering, one of the first literary genres to develop in this context was "scar literature" (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学). The hardships suffered during the revolutionary years gave a new meaning to the "healing" powers of literature[1] in the occurrence of historical traumatism.[2]

COLLECTIVE TRAUMATISM AND LITERATURE

Maurice Halbwach's studies on collective memory have been expanded by Patrick Garcia to define collective traumatism as "une catégorie de la pathologie de la mémoire collective qui s'élabore […] dans la tentative de rendre compte des effets sociaux des passés réputés 'ne pas passer'" (38; see also LaCapra). For Paul Ricoeur, the place for healing this kind of trauma is the "espace public de la discussion", perceived as "[une] région intérmediaire entre le thérapeute et l'analysant" (95).

Concerning the response to the event, and thus its possible representation, Cathy Caruth speaks of a "delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucination" (181). The "delay" further enhances the importance of the public sphere, since the response to traumatism might even occur in later generations (Leys; Hirsch): if properly

[1] Ba Jin, for instance, declared that a *ducao bing* 毒草病, "disease of poisonous weeds" prevented him from writing any more fiction after the persecutions he endured (Ba Jin 55-56).

[2] In Euro-American scholarship, this topic has extensively been explored in relation to the aftermath of the Shoah. See for instance White; LaCapra.

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elaborated and transmitted, events can be inscribed in the category of "communicative memory" theorised by Aleida and Jan Assmann (Assmann); if the access to traumatic memory is hindered by the public space conditions, however, there's a risk of "instrumentalization, "manipulation" er even "abuse", if not directly of suppression (Ricoeur 97-98). Stephan Feuchtwang points out that, in the People's Republic of China, the lack of institutions responsible for transmitting critical memories, together with economic development, which has removed the pressure of political discontent, has facilitated the process of forgetting (166).

The "hallucinatory" response translates in literature as a recourse to grotesque or allegorical representations, which is often found in postmodern literature (Hutcheon).[3] We show two examples of this distortion in the last section; the majority of texts dealing with the period we consider, however, have a rather traditional narrative structure, and we argue that this is precisely due to the limited public space available for addressing and reworking this experience: literature, as Dutrait suggested, had to fill the role that was partly denied to historiography (Introduction).

In the first section, we briefly outline the events of the Great Famine and its place in the public arena today, to justify our choice of analysing its literary representation in the light of medical presences (or, as it turns out, absences). In the second and third sections, we present an overview of some fictional works set in the period and argue that the negative connotation of the medical figures they contain stands to signify an impossible healing from this traumatism.

THE GREAT FAMINE IN CHINA: CONTESTED NARRATIVES

In 1958, at the completion of the First Five-Year Plan (1953-1957) and as a result of the deterioration in relations with the USSR, China adopted a "Chinese way" to socialism to radically transform its economy from an agricultural to an industrial one. The "Great Leap Forward" (*da yuejin* 大跃进) movement became official during the Second Session of the Eighth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

On a narrative level, it was characterised by what has been called a "wind of exaggeration" (*fukuafeng* 浮夸风) (Luo Pinghan 9), i.e. a tendency to boast about production data and forecasts. In October 1957, a multiplication of agricultural production in 12 years was predicted; only three months later, the period was reduced to three years. In 1957, Mao Zedong declared that China would surpass England in steel production in 15 years; in June 1958, that China would "catch up and overtake England" in just two years (Luo Pinghan 5-7).

To achieve such ambitious results, the workforce in the factories increased dramatically, and the countryside was filled with unproductive small blast furnaces operated by peasants without specific training, engendering a shortage of labour in the fields and a consequent neglect of crops that, together with the bad weather that

[3] Benjamin already suggested that the trauma of modernity had provoked a complete renovation in literature (Benjamin and Monnoyer).

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allegedly affected the country in those years[4] and the failure of some of the new agricultural techniques, provoked a decline in grain production estimated at up to -30% (Xie Chuntao; Lin Yunhui; Yang Jisheng). While newspapers still described the economic results as "miracles" (*qiji* 奇迹) (Jia Yanmin 87-98), from 1959 to 1961 China, and especially its rural areas, was struck by a famine of extreme severity (*da jihuang* 大饥荒, "Great Famine"). The priority given to industrial production, in fact, strongly favoured the urban centres in food redistribution (Pairault 80).

The number of victims has never been fully acknowledged: estimates range from ten to fifty million victims (Coale; Ashton et al.; Ding Shu; Cao Shuji; Yu Xiguang; Jia Yanmin and Zhu Jin); as late as 2012, however, a state-sponsored study suggested to reduce the number to 2.5 million (Sun Jingxian). This confusion is representative of the consistent ambiguity around the period, which we address in the following section.

An Undigested Past: Studies and Narratives about the Great Famine in China

As He Fang notes, there are still a number of "taboo areas" (*jinqu* 禁区) in Chinese historiography on contemporary China (20.4), such as the suppression of student protests in Tian'anmen Square in 1989 or the independence struggles in Tibet and Xinjiang. The Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine do not fall entirely into this category: as it can be seen from the sources mentioned above, some academic research is carried out within the PRC, and Chinese citizens are generally aware of their existence (Zhao Hui and Liu Jun; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 40).

The period, however, has not been the subject of in-depth historical research: in order to be published in the PRC territory, scholars are implicitly requested to maintain a positive attitude[5] and to focus on precise regions rather than on the entirety of China.[6] The period has not received a proper artistic or literary reworking neither. As Weigelin-Schwiedrzik notes, there are psychological, cultural and political[7] reasons for this silence. Another aspect worth exploring, though, is the social factor.

As we have emphasised, the countryside suffered most from the famine, while urban areas largely benefited from food redistribution (Walker 115). Unless they were living in re-education camps as a result of the anti-rightist campaign of 1957 (Veg 515),

[4] Several scholars point out that the scale of the bad weather, or "natural disasters" (*da zainan* 大灾难) as the propaganda will call them, would not in itself justify the dramatic reduction in agricultural production, and that the environmental damage caused by human intervention during the Great Leap Forward was largely responsible for the flooding and decline in field productivity (Zhou Xun 90; Zhang Letian; Yu Xiguang).

[5] An attitude that might be resumed by the Maoist slogan "to emphasise the present and minimise the past" *(houjin bogu* 厚今薄古): focus on the successes of the present, rather than on the mistakes of the past.

[6] These conditions were confirmed by series of interviews I conducted in March 2016 with historians such as Cao Shuji, Li Jiangyu, and others that explicitly asked not to be mentioned.

[7] The policies of the Great Leap Forward were largely implemented by the same governors who replaced Mao Zedong.

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thus, the intellectuals were not directly affected by the famine. As Perry Link denounced in the preface of a collection of essays dedicated to the Great Famine, "the vast majority of those who died in the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine were peasants with a low level of culture who struggled to make their own voices heard" (Dàyuèjìn——dà jī huāng zhōng sǐwáng de rén juédàduōshù shì wénhuà shuǐzhǔn dī de nóngmín? Tāmen zìjǐ jiào nàn fāchū shēngyīn? 大跃进——大饑荒中死亡的人绝大多数是文化水准低的农民？他们自己较难发出声音？) and this might have contributed to the relatively scarce attention consecrated to this episode (Song Yongyi and Ding Shu V, our English translation).

In the last fifteen years, there have been academic, artistic and literary attempts to recover the peasants' memory of the famine. Zhou Xun remains the only scholar to have devoted herself entirely to the subject, while memoirs have been published in Hong Kong and the United States by the descendants of survivors (Niu Ben; Yi Wa). These collections rarely appear in the PRC: only Pan Yongxiu 潘永秀 (b. 1948) has published a pre-censored collection of testimonies (Pan Yongxiu and Zheng Yuzhuo). Documentary filmmaking has also contributed to collecting survivors' experiences, notably through Wu Wenguang's 吴文光 *Minjian jiyi jihua* 民间技艺计划 ("The Folk Memory Project", 2010-ongoing) and independent productions such as Hu Jie's 胡杰 *Xinghuo* 星火 (*Spark*, 2014), but they have little or no distribution in mainland China.

Unlike the period of the Cultural Revolution and the contemporary movement of the "educated youth" (*zhiqing* 知青), which inspired countless literary works, and although hunger lingers as a recurrent trope in Chinese contemporary literature (Yue Gang), only a few fictional short stories and novels focus on the timeframe of the Great Famine. Most of the writers who set one or more works against this background did so either in a non-fictional way (see for instance Hong Ying's 虹影 *Ji'e de nü'er* 饥饿的女儿, *Daughter of the River*) or in a falsely fictional way, such as in Yang Xianhui's 杨显惠 collections of short stories, whose "emballage" (*baozhuang* 包装) (Veg 516) recalls a short story while being in reality re-elaborations of real interviews with survivors conducted by the author (Yang Xianhui).

Given the small number of narrative texts devoted to this period and the scant scholarly attention that has been paid to them, in what follows we aim to give an idea of some of the different voices that have given a narrative account of the Great Leap Forward through an overview of five novels. The selection is based on the pertinence of the theme of "healing" in the plot and the relevance of the novels, either because of the time of their publication or the reputation of their author. The comparison of these novels will reveal some of the diachronic and stylistic variations in the portrayal of the Great Leap Forward in Chinese fiction, allowing us to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to deal with a traumatic historical episode in a context of contradictory public acknowledgement. Three realistic fictions about the Great Leap Forward will be presented in the next part, and works with an allegoric and postmodern stance will be analysed in the third part.

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AN IMPOSSIBLE RECOVERY: REALISTIC DEPICTIONS OF THE FAMINE

Various scholars have pointed out that, despite its dramatic content, "scar literature" usually maintains a conciliatory attitude towards the dramatic events it narrates (Chen Xiaoming; Chen Letty; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik). As Chen Xiaoming observes, "[s]car literature is not merely about wounds, for it addresses healing; more importantly, it proves not the wounds themselves but the strong will that endures and thus transcends wounds" (94).

Letty Chen understands this conformism as a manifestation of the incommunicability of the historical trauma, due to the short temporal gap between the hardships endured and their fictional retelling. The fact that the Great Famine has not enjoyed public recognition on the public arena, however, suggests that, for works dealing with this period, a similar lack of re-elaboration might be encountered even in later works. Of the three works cited below, only the first legitimately belongs to scar literature. Nonetheless, they all share a traditional narrative structure, a realistic depiction of the events and an attention to past sufferings which does not aim to denunciate responsibilities.

The sense of displacement connected to the progressive facing of the trauma might in part explain why, in these texts, healing figures are either absent or useless: the characters have to deal with their illnesses, disabilities and sickness on their own, and they often die before any kind of medical support is available. The historical reality of countryside isolation partly justifies this recurrent absence. Doctors are never characterized as properly guilty, but they are either far away, incapable or useless, and thus underline the neglect of the countryside.

ZHANG YIGONG'S ABSENT DOCTOR

The first novel to "pull back the curtain on the truth about the three years of 'natural disasters'" (Sīkāile "sān nián zìrán zāihài" lìshǐ zhēnxiàng de mùbù 撕开了“三年自然灾害”历史真相的幕布, Xu Qingquan), is Zhang Yigong's 张一弓 (1934-2016) novella, "Fanren Li *Tongzhong de gushi* 凡人里同种的故事 ("The Story of the Criminal Li Tongzhong", 1980) (Zhang Yigong).

The novella is adapted from a testimony Zhang Yigong collected in the 1950s when he was working as a journalist in the countryside (Zhang Yigong, "The story" 80-81). The protagonist Li Tongzhong is a village secretary in Henan who lost a leg in the Korean War. He is accused of criminal looting and arrested for distributing the stocked grain to the starving villagers. He manages to prove his innocence, but dies of malnutrition before his trial begins and is posthumously rehabilitated.

The narrative is characterised by a mixture of sarcasm and pathetic tone. The former helps to move away from the rhetoric of the revolutionary years. When the

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protagonist is sceptical about the "substitute food" (*dai shipin* 代食品) made from waste, for instance, others respond to him through propaganda jargon exposed in all its absurdity ("Miracles were happening", "opposing rightist tendencies can produce food") ("The Story" 89).[8] In those passages, the lexicon of the disease is mostly used to the same end. The word "contagion" (*zhuanran* 转染), for instance, is used both to refer to the villagers crying for the famine (rather than to its actual medical consequences),[9] and to the tendency of the brigade leader to lie about the agricultural production: "in the year 1958 […] he had been infected with the contagion that made brains feverish and throats itchy" ("The Story" 75).

The passages in which the narrator directly addresses the protagonist in the second person ("Li Tongzhong, you have a remarkable capacity for endurance") ("The Story" 70), however, counterbalance this trend by portraying him as a martyr seeing further than his governors (they, in turn, are redeemed for posthumously recognizing his innocence). The lack of medical care endured by the protagonist is underlined at two levels: firstly, in relation to his disability, which enhances his heroic dimension; and secondly, in the form of the consequences of the famine, which eventually kill him. In the following passage, both aspects are present: as Li Tongzhong goes in person to the commune siege to report the lack of food in his village, his difficulty in walking is emphasised; then his weakness almost causes him to faint.

> Li Tongzhong had to hobble back again, his artificial leg clattering on the black stone steps up to the commune office. […]
> [H]e was dizzy, lost his footing, and tumbled into a ditch. He lay motionless in a snowdrift, too weak to pull himself up. He really wanted to just lie there like that, lie down forever and never get up again. But then he thought of the hundreds of people waiting for him […] He swallowed a few mouthfuls of snow and struggled to his feet. ("The Story" 70)

Only the scene of his death takes place in an "emergency room" but, although "the county clinic was doing all it could to save the life of Li Tongzhong" ("The Story" 124), all the doctors actually do is providing a death certificate for "Malnutrition and exhaustion leading to œdema and jaundice" (126). The mention of malnutrition is a significant step forward in naming the tragedy that, despite the widening time gap, is not equated by the two following novels.

[8] This novel has been translated into English, as it is the case for Mo Yan's *Wide Breasts and Wide Hips* and Yan Lianke's *The Four Books*. In the three cases, we cite directly the existing translations; in the others, we provide our own, along with the original Chinese text. For Mo Yan's and Yan Lianke's English versions we refer to an e-book version, and thus, for quotations, we provide the chapter number instead of page number (see Works Cited).

[9] When Li Tongzhong states that "If you cry too much, you'll harm your health" ("The Story" 65), the inversion is complete.

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ZHI LIANG'S INCOMPETENT DOCTOR

Zhi Liang 智量 (pen name of Wang Zhi Liang 王智量, 1928-2023) experienced a period of rehabilitation in the Taihang Mountains, that might have inspired his *Ji'e de shancun* 饥饿的山村 (*A Hungry Mountain Village*, 1994). The story is set in Anhui, one of the most famine-stricken provinces in China, and the introduction presents the novel as a "third-person autobiography" of Wang Liang, a teacher sent to a small mountain village for re-education. The narrator states that the manuscript was entrusted to him by a student, and describes himself as its "publisher" (*fabiaozhe* 发表者) (2).

When Wang Liang arrives, the Li Ditch village is prostrated by the lack of food. Hunger seems to have reduced the villagers to animals, as they are constantly searching for food and are driven by an obsession with sex (representing both the disappearance of any moral barrier and an instinctive fear of extinction). While the famine is described as an experience of physical and moral decay, the novel has a tone of despair rather than of denunciation: as Wiegelin-Schwiedrzik puts it, "[t]he way Zhi Liang treats the problem is not to incite action against the party. Rather, it is to encourage the party to remember the sufferings of the people so as to avoid anything like this to happen again"(55).

Two characters in particular are associated with sickness and healing. The first is the village teacher, who suffers from severe liver pain. His medical knowledge is of no use to him, as he can only resort to useless "substitutes" as temporary placebos,[10] while his condition worsens throughout the narrative. As he approaches death, he is eventually sent to the municipal hospital, but with no chance of survival (456). The impossible cure and the marginal, belated presence of an actual medical structure deliver, once again, a sense of abandonment.

The second relevant character is a "healer": Qigu 七姑 (Seventh Aunt) is the village *wushi* 巫师 (sorceress) and maintains a "shrine" where she performs magical rituals. Her practices, however, cannot prevent, nor heal, the damage caused by the famine. At the end of the novel, the protagonist urges her to give up her magical practices and instead study to really help other villagers:

> "七姑，不要再办那个神堂了，你去学些本事，比如扎金针啥的。再学学中医，以后就给人治病。李家沟人离不了你的！"(451)
>
> "Qīgū, bụ̀yào zài bàn nàge shéntáng le, nǐ qù xué xiē běnshi, bǐrú zhā jīnzhēn shá de. Zài xué xué Zhōngyī, yǐhòu jiù gěi rén zhìbìng. Lǐ jiā gōu rén lí bu liǎo nǐ de!"

[10] "他凭自己的医学知识知道，糖精不是糖，并不能给肝脏以营养，但是这些时候，每当肝痛想吃糖时，他都是用这点糖精来欺骗自己的。"Tā píng zìjǐ de yīxué zhīshi zhīdao, tángjīng bụ̀ shì táng, bìng bùnéng gěi gānzàng yǐ yíngyǎng, dànshì zhèxiē shíhou, měidāng gān tòng xiǎng chītáng shí, tā dōu shì yòng zhè diǎn tángjīng lái qīpiàn zìjǐ de." "He knew from his medical training that saccharin was not sugar and would not nourish his liver. However, in those moments when he had liver pain and wanted sugar, he fooled himself with it" (91).

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> "Seventh Aunt, close the shrine and go learn some skills, like acupuncture. Once you'll have learned some Chinese medicine, you'll be able to heal people. Li Ditch villagers won't be able to let you go."

Medicine (and interestingly, traditional Chinese medicine) thus becomes a possible solution, but still a remote one, located in the distant future.

Her figure is also connected to the theme of cannibalism.[11] She makes a desperate attempt to ensure a descendant for her people by serving human flesh (taken from the dead) to the unwitting only pregnant woman in the village, and she even declares that she is prepared to do so again:

> 我又没害人，我是为活人，为我们李家沟传宗接代，才去惊动死人的！我心狠，我死后一个人下十八层的狱还不行？(391)
>
> Wǒ yòu méi hàirén, wǒ shìwéi huórén, wèi wǒmen lǐ jiā gōu chuánzōngjiēdài, cái qù jīngdòng sǐrén de! Wǒ xīnhěn, wǒ sǐhòu yī gèrén xià shíbā céng de yù hái bùxíng?
>
> I haven't harmed anyone, and if I'm bothering the dead, it's only for the living, to ensure a descendant to the Li Village! If I'm really that bad, won't it be enough for me to go to the eighteenth circle of hell after I die?

The way she takes responsibility for her choice and its moral consequences saves her from an upright moral condemnation. Her complex characterization, from the "superstitious" performances to the horror she enacts, challenges the reader's judgment and impedes an upright condemnation. Her lack of competence, however, represents once again the abandonment of the countryside to inadequate and backward practices.

Liu Qingbang's Useless Doctor

Born in 1951 in the Henan countryside, Liu Qingbang 刘庆邦 (b. 1951) directly experienced the famine as a child. He published two works set during the Great Famine: the 1980 short story "Kankan shui jia you fu" 看看谁家有福 ("The good luck bun") (Link 83-101), which does not offer relevant representations of doctors; and *Pingyuan shang de gediao* 平原上的歌谣 (*Ballad on the Plain*, 2004).

The story is set in the northern plains of China (*Hua bei pingyuan* 华北平原) and follows the ordinary lives of the villagers during the famine. It has been defined as an "anti-modernist" work (*fan xiandaixing* 反现代性) (Wu Yiqin), and a "poignant portrait of rural life" (Nóngcūn shēnghuó de qī měi huàmiàn 农村生活的凄美画面) (Li Shuyou). One of

[11] Beside assuming a profound symbolic value since Lu Xun's "Kuangren riji" 狂人日记 ("Diary of a Madman", 1919), cannibalism was a documented phenomenon during the Great Famine and therefore stands as a recurrent trope in stories about it. For an analysis, see (Rojas; Yue Gang).

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its main focuses is the depiction of the countryside and its traditions, as evidenced by the fact that each section is introduced by a folk song (hence the tile).

Medicine appears in the novel when a villager becomes seriously ill and, after much hesitation, a doctor is finally called:

> 医生像是犹豫了一下，说："也不能说一点救都没有，不过我是没办法了。病人需要打吊针，需要连续输水。公社卫生院不能打吊针，也没有葡萄糖水。要打吊针，只能到县医院去。"
> 文凤楼离县城七十多里，要把病人送到县医院是不可能的，没有钱是一个方面，交通工具也是大问题。全村没有自行车，没有架子车，汽车更是连见都没见过。(186)

> Yīshēng xiàng shì yóuyùle yīxià, shuō: yě bùnéng shuō yīdiǎn jiù dōu méiyǒu, buguò wǒ shì méi bànfǎ le. Bìngrén xūyào dǎ diào zhēn, xūyào liánxù shūshuǐ. Gōngshè wèishēngyuàn bùnéng dǎ diào zhēn, yě méiyǒu pútao tángshuǐ. Yào dǎ diào zhēn, zhǐnéng dào xiàn yīyuàn qù.
> Wén fèng lóu lí xiànchéng qīshí duō lǐ, yào bǎ bìngrén sòngdào xiàn yīyuàn shì bù kěnéng de, méiyǒu qián shì yī ge fāngmiàn, jiāotōng gōngjù yěshì dà wèntí. Quáncūn méiyǒu zìxíngchē, méiyǒu jiàzichē, qìchē gèng shì lián jiàn dōu méi jiànguo.

> The doctor hesitated for a moment, then said: "I don't say he has no hope of survival, but there's nothing I can do. The patient needs a drip, he needs to be rehydrated constantly. We can't do that in the commune hospital, and we don't have the glucose solution neither. The only way is to go to the county hospital."
> Wenfenglou [*village*] was more than seventy *li* away from the county seat, so it was impossible to take a patient there. Nobody had the money, but more importantly nobody had a means of transport. There weren't any bicycles or carts in the village, and as for cars, nobody had ever seen one.

Pressed by the family, the doctor agrees to inject the patient who, however, dies shortly after. The doctor receives a positive characterization: for example, he provides his services even though the family cannot pay because "medicine is public and so is money" (*yào shì gōngjia de, qián yě shì gōngjia de* 药是公家的，钱也是公家的, 186). His presence, however, does not save the patient: his lack of means transforms him in a mere simulacre of the actual cure, which is inaccessible from the countryside.

Immediately after the quoted passage, moreover, the narrator explains that the character's "death had something to do with the famine; however, it was not directly linked to it, but rather to the disease" (*tā de sǐ gēn jī'è yǒuxiē guānxi, dàn tā bú shì zhíjiē èsǐ de, zhǐnéng suàn shì bìngsǐ de* 他的死跟饥饿有些关系，但他不是直接饿死的，只能算是病死的。, 187). In this respect, the novel is even more conciliatory than Zhang Yigong's novella, as a proof that the time shift is not the sole element responsible for a critical re-elaboration of an unaddressed traumatism.

In the following part, we present two novels that, on the contrary, propose a throughout condemnation of the events through the adoption of a postmodernist stance.

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The Grotesque and the Criticism: Re-elaborations of the Great Famine

After the opening of the 1980s, literature experienced greater freedom in the use of language and content. A "postmodernist" trend developed (Dirlik and Zhang Xudong; Wang Ning), and the "new wave" writers started to approach historical themes, which remain central to contemporary Chinese narrative (Wang Der-wei; Berry; Kinkley), through parody, grotesque and carnivalesque deformation of the body (McDougall), in order to arouse interest in the new audience, and to challenge ideological orthodoxy (Tang Xiaobing 286). Use, or abuse, of the body and of its illnesses thus became symbols to shed light on forgotten sides of history, or even to convey, through allegory, some forms of social criticism.

In what follows, we mention two novels that combine these characteristics and the depiction of the Great Famine: first Mo Yan's 莫言 (b. 1950) *Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀 (*Big Breast and Wide Hips*, 1995) which, despite not being entirely centred on the historical episode, describes it in length, and Yan Lianke's 阎连科 (b. 1958) *Si shu* 四书 (*The Four Books*, 2010), the only Chinese novel with postmodernist features to focus entirely on the Great Famine. These novels not only insist on the impossibility of healing, but even harshen the tone: Mo Yan's doctor becomes a victim of the system's violence; while in Yan Lianke's depiction, she completely denies, and even inverses, her healing role.

Mo Yan's Victimised Doctor

Mo Yan experienced the Great Famine in his youth and returns to the theme in various essays (*Hui Changge de Qiang* 会唱歌的墙 The Wall That Can Sing) and fictional works. In *Big Breast and Wide Hips*, which covers the historical development of China from the Civil War to the present day, he describes the period in its main features with his typical tone, that combines the dramatic to the grotesque.

While doctors are present at various points in the novel, one main character stands out in the passages describing the Great Leap Forward: Qiao Qisha, a former medical student ("the flower of the medical college") (*Big Breasts* Chapter 6) who is condemned as an ultra-rightist and forced to take part in the absurd "scientific experiments" that characterised the Great Leap Forward (in the novel, the attempt to mate a sheep with a rabbit). She does her best to resist ("No," […] "I won't do it. It flies in the face of common sense!") and is eventually reassigned to a less qualified task (*Big Breasts*).

When the director has a heart attack during his one-off visit to the farm, she immediately steps up to help, but her medical expertise is of no use. While this episode does not empower her figure, the reversal of power roles in the doctor-patient relationship reveals a different approach: the all-powerful character who dies on his first visit to the countryside, and cannot be saved by an oppressed medical figure, is more a laughable victim of his own crimes than someone the reader can sympathise with.

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As a punishment for covering up for her comrades who are stealing food to survive, Qiao Qisha is later deprived of her grain rations. She ends up selling her body to the canteen cook in exchange for steamed buns, and dies choking on one of them. During the sexual act, she is compared to an animal:[12] when he penetrates her, her attacker raises her "invisible queue" (*wuxing de weiba* 无形的尾巴, untranslated in the English version) (437), while she concentrates only on eating, "like a dog stealing food" and "thrust[ing] out her neck like a duck" (*Big Breasts* Chapter 6).

Despite the grotesque portrayal, Qiao Qisha's fate is presented with a compassionate eye and, despite the violences she endures, the 'doctor to be' retains a moral stature that disappears completely in Yan Lianke's novel.

YAN LIANKE'S COMPLIANT DOCTOR

Yan Lianke's *The Four Books* is one of the most critical novels about the Great Famine published in Chinese. It focuses entirely on the period, presented from a multiplicity of perspectives through the literary stratagem of "multiple manuscripts" that are combined into one story, and uses an allegorical stance to denounce the responsibility of both the Party and the literati for the catastrophe (Pezza). Set in a fictional re-education camp for righters, it contains scenes of great symbolic violence, including one of the only explicit depictions of consumption of human flesh (Goldblatt).

The Physician (in the original, *nü yisheng* 女医生) is one of the camp's prisoners, which are all nominated by their sole profession, and she stands among the least morally upright ones. She does not hesitate to steal whatever she can from her fellow prisoners to improve her living conditions and is suspected of fraudulently cutting herself the "red stars" which allow to earn freedom:

> [W]here did this pair of medical scissors come from? Given that she herself was a doctor, was there any plausible explanation other than that she had used her position to steal them? (*Books* Chapter 4)

She seems deprived of any sense of responsibility towards other prisoners. During a long expedition on the Yellow River banks, for instance, she leaves her medical equipment behind to lighten her load, "deciding that even if she saw someone on the verge of death, she wouldn't try to help them" (*Books* Chapter 7).

It is in the darkest pages of the novel, where cannibalism is depicted, however, that her role as human saviour is completely reversed. Two of the main characters, the Writer and the Scholar, discover some prisoners in the act of eating human flesh. While

[12] While in Zhi Liang's novel the villagers' return to an animal state was simply functional to describe the degradation caused by the famine, "'humanimal' entanglement" is a stylistic trait typical of Mo Yan's writing (Zhang Yinde).

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the first person they meet, a teacher, is ashamed of her actions and tries to justify herself ("Everyone is doing this. It's not just me"), the Physician does not show any moral concern:

> When the Physician saw me and the Scholar, she slowly and deliberately took the piece of kindling she had been in the process of lighting, placed it inside the stone stove, then sat back down. She gazed at us evenly and asked, "Do you want to see what I'm cooking?".
>
> Neither of us responded, and instead we simply looked at the cardboard on the bowl. Elsewhere, other people had finished cooking and extinguished their fires, and were already starting to eat from the tea tins and porcelain bowls that they were using as pots. The sound of them eating and drinking flowed over to us like water. The Physician looked and calmly remarked, "They are eating human flesh. […]". (*Books* Chapter 14)

The even tone of the Physician (in the original, *bùlěngbùrè, bùkàngbùbēi* 不冷不热，不亢不卑: "neither cold nor warm, neighter haughty nor humble", *Si shu* 342further emphasises her choice to respond to her persecution by abdicating all moral responsibility: the contrasts with Zhi Liang's Seventh Aunt will to descend into hell to save the lives of her companions, while refusing to eat human flesh herself, is sharp. In *The Four Books*, the inversion of roles is completed: even worse than the absence, the incompetence or the lack of means of the healing figures, the guilts of the Physician stand to denunciate an incurable catastrophe.

CONCLUSION: AN IMPOSSIBLE HEALING

The application of trauma studies to the field of literary representation might lead us to consider the time lag as an important factor to attain a mature re-elaboration of the events. The lack of proper public discussion and debate of the issue, however, better explains why, even in the later works we analysed, the need for reconciliation can take precedence over a critical representation of facts (as in Liu Qingbang). The tone, in fact, becomes increasingly accusatory as the level of reworking increases, but the degree of re-elaboration is not entirely related to the time intercurred between the events and the moment of writing.

The scarcity of fiction that deals in depth with the Great Famine, indeed, confirms our hypothesis of a public debate that places this period in a "grey zone": an event that has not been completely erased from collective memory, but has not been fully analysed and digested neither. Against the background of this incomplete reappraisal, the negative connotation that accompanies, in various forms, all medical figures in the works cited (ranging from a complete absence at the beginning to grotesque victimisation, or even guilt, in the most postmodern works) is a revealing sign of the authors' perceived impossibility of healing from the traumatic experience of the famine.

The overall picture leaves little hope for an eventual overcoming of this trauma, whose direct witnesses are dwindling over time and whose descendants are deprived of a healing space in the public arena.

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