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Authenticity, Postmodernity, and Translation: The Debates around Han Shaogong's *Dictionary of Maqiao*[*]

In December 1996, the critics Zhang Yiwu and Wang Gan claimed that Han Shaogong's *Dictionary of Maqiao* was an imitation of *Dictionary of the Khazars* by the Serbian writer Milorad Pavic.[1] This charge of inauthenticity caused a stir; in the following year, articles debating the qualities of Han's work and the rights and wrongs of the critics were regularly published in literary journals as well as in the popular press, awakening readers' curiosity. Han Shaogong was also invited to participate in television talk shows, and eventually the debate ended up in the courtroom. Far from being a mere episode of literary gossip, the debate shaped the reception of the book and affected its afterlife. In the 2001 edition of the *Dictionary of Maqiao*, the 'Afterword' of the previous editions was replaced by an interview with Han Shaogong and an essay (Gao Bo – Hai Ping 2001) which both address the details of the polemics.

In various open letters and interviews, Han Shaogong claimed that he had not read the *Dictionary of the Khazars* before writing his own *Dictionary*. Some

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[1] Han Shaogong (b. 1953) is a well-known fiction writer and essayist. He was one of the founders of the journal *Hainan jishi*, which closed down in June 1989 and from 1995 to 2001 was the editor-in-chief of *Tianya*, a literary periodical based in Hainan with sections devoted to the discussion of Chinese local languages. Han is commonly associated with the 'Roots-seeking' (*xungen* 寻根) literary trend of the 1980s, but some critics have noted modernist features and the influence of magic realism in his post-1985 fiction (Duke 1989; Curien 1991; 1992; Lau 1993; Zhao 1993). Han Shaogong's *Dictionary of Maqiao* (*Maqiao cidian* 马桥词典) was published in February 1996 in the literary magazine *Xiaoshuo jie* and subsequently as a book by Zuojia chubanshe and by Shandong wenyi chubanshe. The Chinese translation of Milorad Pavic's *Dictionary of the Khazars: a Lexicon Novel in 100,000 Words* (*Hazarski recnik: roman leksikon u 100.000 reci*, first published in Belgrad in 1985) was published in *Waiguo wenyi* in February 1994.

critics argued that, while Han's claim was impossible to prove, the issue of imitation was irrelevant to the evaluation of his work and that the accusations had nothing to do with serious literary criticism (Chen Sihe 1997; Chen Zigan *et al*. 1997). In this article, I hope to show that the 'Maqiao debate' not only revealed the anxiety concerning foreign influences on Chinese contemporary literature but that it also touched on such issues as the function of literature in contemporary society, the relationship between literary themes and ideas of national authenticity, and the reception of postmodern theory in the Chinese literary field.

Zhang Yiwu, the critic who started the Maqiao debate, is one of the proponents of postmodern theory in China. Zhang argued that China's entering postmodernity meant her release from a Western model of development, and claimed that the main source of inspiration for Chinese writers in the 1990s were the fast transformations taking place in the urban milieu. He criticized Han Shaogong not only for copying a Serbian author, but also because, in his view, Han was dealing with Maqiao merely as the 'Other'. Apparently, Zhang found it problematic that the *Dictionary* was set in the countryside and that it did not focus on the rapid changes that he deemed at the core of the Chinese postmodern age.[2] His criticism was based on a vision of postmodernity that privileged ideas of transformation and speed and did not take into account an important aspect of Han's work, namely his reflection on language, which is evident in his use of the dictionary form.

The *Dictionary of Maqiao*, a fictional lexicon of the local speech of a village in Hunan, was not Han's first experiment with the dictionary form. In 1992, he had written a short essay, *Ciyu xinjie* 词语新解 («Words explained anew»), where he had given humorous definitions of such words as 'Freedom', 'Name-card', and 'Postmodernism'. In the few introductory remarks, he noted that, since all languages change incessantly, in foreign countries many dictionaries of neologisms had been published; ironically, he stated that he merely wanted to imitate them, in an attempt to give order to his personal experience. His essay had nothing to do with linguistics, he argued, and was unsuitable for general use: it was nothing more than a small personal lexicon (Han Shaogong 1994: 9-12).

The *Dictionary of Maqiao*, too, has little to do with conventional dictionaries (Curien 1999; Leenhouts 2002). The text is preceded by an index of entries ordered according to the number of strokes of the characters; however, as the 'Editor's Preface' notes, in the text the entries follow a sequence chosen by the author in order to make the reading smoother (Han Shaogong 1996: 6). Interestingly, most of the words explained are commonly used in standard

[2] The discussion on the authenticity of the urban experience *versus* rural idealization recalls the polemics between *haipai* 海派 and *jingpai* 京派 in the 1930s. However, then as now, the polemics involved internal contradictions and a broad diversity of views. For an analysis of the debate in the 1930s, see Carletti (1996).

Chinese, but they have different usages in Maqiao;[3] only in a very limited number of cases do we encounter words that have no correspondence at all in the standard language. Meanings are explained by recourse to anecdotes, involving the villagers and, at times, the first-person narrator, who spent six years in the village as a sent-down student (*zhiqing* 知青). The narrating voice, ranging from storytelling to musing, is often humorous and self-doubting.

More than representing a rural community, *Dictionary of Maqiao* constructs a model for literary language. While its aim seems to be that of mediating between the local and the national language, the *Dictionary* is neither a bilingual dictionary that codifies two separate systems nor a monolingual lexicon that defines meanings inside a closed linguistic whole. The dictionary, an indispensable tool that 'articulates' languages through translation, is here used not to codify, but rather to question spatial and chronological categories inside what is commonly considered as 'one' language.[4] Maqiao speech also corresponds to Han's ideas on literary language that he expressed in his earlier essays and interviews. From this perspective, I propose to read *Dictionary of Maqiao* as a fictional exploration of the qualities that the language of fiction should ideally have.

The Maqiao Debate

Soon after its publication, *Dictionary of Maqiao* received many positive reviews. Typically, critics took it as a sign of the vitality of the Chinese contemporary novel and a landmark in the evolution of a specifically Chinese narrative form; others saw it as a fine example of Chinese postmodern text.[5] In December 1996, however, critic Zhang Yiwu, a professor at Beijing University, and Wang Gan, a literary critic based in Nanjing and editor of the literary magazine *Zhongshan*, questioned the critics' positive reception. Zhang Yiwu (1997*b*) writes:

> Some critics enthusiastically praised this work as a «masterpiece, a postmodern text», but it is nothing more than an evident imitation [*nizuo* 拟作] or copy [*fangzuo* 仿作] … There is nothing wrong in imitating [*mofang* 模仿] others; imitation is also the first step of literary creation. But a responsible writer cannot hide the merit of the talented writer whom he imitates … If Han is the idealistic writer he professes to be, I hope that, when reprinting the *Dictionary*, he will add to the back cover a sentence of most sincere confession: «The form and content of this book were borrowed from *Dictionary of the Khazars*, by the Serbian writer Milorad Pavic. This volume was modelled on it». Only this would make *Dictionary of Maqiao* an authentic work.

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[3] In some cases, the local pronunciation is indicated.

[4] My reading of the *Dictionary* has been inspired by Naoki Sakai's (1997) theory of translation.

[5] Among others, Nan Fan (1996: 10) defined it as «a unique work», and Zhang Sanxi (Mo Zhelan *et al.* 1996: 15) as «a work that opened up a new field for narrative creation». For an overview of critical appraisals of *Dictionary of Maqiao*, see Han Mei (1997).

In the same issue of the journal *Wei nin fuwu bao*, Wang Gan (1997) also argued that the *Dictionary of Maqiao* was an imitation (*mofang* 模仿) of a foreign work and that it had been unduly praised by the critics. However, the thrust of Wang's argument was a critique of Han Shaogong's professional ethics. In Wang Gan's opinion, Han Shaogong, who voiced contempt for the 'market' and 'postmodernity' in his essays, had used marketing strategies for his own ends.[6] Wang argued that there was nothing wrong in advertising *per se* and that he would not criticize such people as Wang Shuo 王朔, who had always declared himself to be a 'literary tradesman' (*wenxue shangren* 文学商人). From such an idealist as Han Shaogong, however, he would have expected something different.

In sum, what both articles attacked was not so much *Dictionary of Maqiao* as a literary work but rather a certain view of literature and of the role of the intellectual that Zhang Yiwu and Wang Gan saw personified in Han Shaogong. His 'idealism', they believed, was not in keeping with the times; his criticism of mass culture and postmodernity was hypocritical.

It was the charge of lack of authenticity, however, that caused a sensation: the mass media focused on it, and other issues that initially motivated Zhang's and Wang's criticism were soon eclipsed. In the weeks following the publication of Zhang and Wang's articles, such journals as the *Wenhui bao, Laodong bao* and *Shukan wenzhai daobao* all published similar articles which used the word 'plagiarize' (*chaoxi* 抄袭), a term that amplified Zhang and Wang's statements. While in later interviews Zhang stressed that he had never used this term, for Han Shaogong it did not make much difference which words were used, and he eventually brought the dispute to court. Zhang Yiwu and Wang Gan, as well as some of the journals, were charged of 'seriously violating the plaintiff's reputation'.[7] In March 1999, the Haikou tribunal decided that *Dictionary of Maqiao* was neither a 'plagiarism' nor a 'complete copy' of the *Dictionary of the Khazars* and that Zhang Yiwu, Cao Peng, *Wei nin fuwu bao*, and *Laodong bao* were guilty of having damaged Han Shaogong's reputation.[8]

Many writers intervened in the dispute to express their solidarity with Han Shaogong. Fang Fang 方方 and Jiang Zidan 蒋子丹 denounced the carelessness with which critics had launched their attack; others said that the attack reminded them of the aggressiveness of literary criticism in the 1960s and

[6] In particular, Wang mentioned an open letter Han had written to the newspaper *Yangzi wanbao*; the letter dealt with literary topics and therefore, Wang argued, should have been more aptly sent to a literary magazine. Wang then suggested that the letter was sent to a widely read newspaper in order to advertise the magazine *Tianya*, of which Han Shaogong was the editor-in-chief.

[7] Moreover, the journalist Cao Peng 曹鹏, as well as journals *Wei nin fuwu bao*, *Laodong bao*, and *Shukan wenzhai daobao* were all charged (Tian Dao – Nan Ba 1997: 172).

[8] They each had to pay him an indemnity of 1750 *renminbi*, while Wang Gan was found innocent (Gao Bo – Hai Ping 2001: 510-13).

1970s and urged the critics to safeguard a climate of quiet and constructive discussion. Eleven writers, including Shi Tiesheng 史铁生, Wang Zengqi 汪曾祺, Yu Hua 余华, Li Rui 李锐, and Wureertu 乌热尔图, wrote a petition to the Chinese Writers' Association, stating that Zhang's groundless words contravened the critics' professional ethics, and, jointly with the magazine that had first published the *Dictionary*, *Xiaoshuo jie*, asked the Association to intervene and arbitrate the dispute (Han Mei 1997: 77-78; Tian Dao – Nan Ba 1997: 136-41). But *Wenyi bao*, the Association's journal, did not seem to take an explicit position on the issue.[9] It reproduced the main articles published in other journals, and while assessing the merits of Han's literary work, it also gave some space to Zhang Yiwu. One of the few articles that was not reproduced from other journals, signed by Mu Gong,[10] rebuked Han Shaogong's excessive sensitiveness to criticism. Mu Gong lamented that critics had always been too supportive of writers, giving readers the impression that Chinese contemporary literature was flourishing, whereas in reality only a few good works had been written. In this case, what Zhang Yiwu had expressed was simply a subjective opinion, which the writer should be able to accept (Mu Gong 1997).

In the following months, critics especially disapproved Han's resort to court, for letting judges decide on literary issues was not conducive to a serene exchange of ideas. While noting that Han's reaction was exaggerated, these critics also argued that the question of imitation was, after all, irrelevant to the evaluation of any literary work (Chen Zigan *et al.* 1997).[11]

Authenticity and Zhang Yiwu's Version of Postmodernity

The debate over the authenticity of Han Shaogong's work revealed a deep concern about the relationship between Chinese and Western literatures. The critic Nan Fan (1997), who wrote several articles in Han's defense, espoused the time-honored idea of sinification when he argued that «no writer can have the monopoly of a literary form. Gogol wrote *A Madman's Diary*, and Lu Xun could also use the same title and literary form, and this short story even became the founding work of China's New Literature». Postmodern critic Wang Ning, on the other hand, noted that the twentieth century was the century of imitation and that Chinese writers should have the courage to admit their indebtedness to foreign works, just as foreign writers admitted theirs.[12] An arti-

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[9] However, Gao Bo and Hai Ping (2001: 500-1) describe the position of *Wenyi bao* as hostile to Han Shaogong.

[10] Joint pseudonym of the critics Zhang Ling 张陵 and Li Jiefei 李洁非.

[11] In addition, Chen Sihe (1997: 30-31) wrote that in the contemporary world it was becoming more and more difficult to define the national elements of a literary work and that Zhang Yiwu's criticism of Han Shaogong was a personal attack disguised as academic discourse.

[12] According to Wang Ning, notorious for his fondness for numbers, it was already quite satisfy-

cle in the *Wenyi bao* (Song Dan 1997) argued that reciprocal influence among writers was normal but that there was not much in common between Han and Pavic: Han's work was rather influenced by Milan Kundera,[13] a fact that the writer himself had no difficulty acknowledging.

At the end of January 1997, Zhang Yiwu intervened again in the debate. He presented the readers with a detailed comparison of Han and Pavic's texts in eight points, arguing that he still believed that Han's work was not original but that lack of authenticity was not his main concern.[14] The main flaw in *Dictionary of Maqiao*, he pointed out, was not that it was an imitation but rather that it was a bad one, for the following reasons:

> First of all, *Dictionary of Maqiao* is unable to fully reveal the spirit of the culture of the Chinese [*Zhongguoren de wenhua jingshen* 中国人的文化精神]; in many of its arguments it does not show strong reflection, and by limiting itself to display 'wonders' and 'folk customs', it treats Maqiao as a pure 'Other' and represents modern and contemporary Chinese history in an extremely simplistic and caricatural way. Secondly, it lacks narrative imagination, it is composed of single narrative threads, and the characters are not as interesting as the ones in *Dictionary of the Khazars.* This novel has not reached a level of excellence (Zhang Yiwu 1997*e*).

This statement swiftly shifted the focus to a different plane of argumentation. Did Zhang Yiwu remark that Han's work did not aptly reflect «the spirit of the culture of the Chinese» imply that he believed in the existence of a 'national essence', which literature was required to «reveal»? And did he have precise expectations of the ways literature should reflect history?

Zhang Yiwu is prominent in China as one of the critics who enthusiastically endorsed postmodernist theories and minted such definitions as the 'post-New Era' and the 'post-intellectual'.[15] In his analysis of contemporary Chinese culture, Zhang argued that China's obsession with 'modernity' in the 'New Era' (the 1980s) implied that she acknowledged her status as a 'Third-world' nation and that she uncritically followed the Western model of development. In those years, he claimed, China's anxiety to enter modernity was accompanied by a cult of individualism, an attitude that had been imported

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ing if a work could claim 30% originality. This would seem to be the case with Han Shaogong, who after all had only imitated the literary form of the Serbian work (Tian Dao – Nan Ba 1997: 151-53).

[13] Han translated (1992*b*) Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* into Chinese and wrote essays introducing the author to Chinese readers (*Milan Kundela zhi qing* 米兰昆德拉之轻, in *Id.* 1994: 74-86).

[14] The eight aspects which Zhang compared were narrative form, method of expression, overall style, narrative content, view of language, view of time, concrete linguistic interpretations, and plot. In all these aspects, he noted striking similarities between the two works. Chen Sihe (1997) responded to this article by emphasizing the differences between the two dictionaries, and by claiming that Han's *Dictionary* was a more accomplished work from a formal point of view.

[15] He was therefore nicknamed one of the 'post-masters' (*houzhu* 后主).

from the West but was already deeply questioned in the West itself.[16] By the end of the 1980s, however, the development of a Chinese market economy brought about cultural changes that questioned the subject's ability to interpret and control reality and, at the beginning of the 1990s, China entered a «completely different» phase, the «post-New Era» (*hou xinshiqi* 后新时期). Zhang uses 'post-New Era' as a synonym for China's postmodernity. Its main characteristic was the development of a mass culture that fully responded to the demand of the Chinese internal market; its heroes were the rock musician Cui Jian崔健 and the writer Wang Shuo; its most emblematic form of entertainment were the TV series *Yearning* (*Kewang* 渴望) and MTV. In all these phenomena, Zhang claimed, China showed that it was no longer a Third-world country modeling itself on the West or producing an aestheticized version of the East for Western consumption. China now had her own version of postmodern mass culture. Hence, China's 'post-New Era' meant her liberation from a Western narrative of development (Zhang Yiwu 1997*a*: 61-73; 1997*c*).

Zhang noted that the postmodern mood of Chinese culture was quite contradictory, ranging from excitement to a sense of loss. But he generally hailed the shifts in the 1990s in enthusiastic terms and also implied that the new 'spirit' was typical of the whole of China. While hailing 'pluralism' as one of the characteristics of the post-New era, he considered literary writing as closely linked to national development. In his essay on the new literary trend of 'community literature' (*shequn wenxue* 社群文学), for instance, he argued that since «the complex structures brought about by 'speed' [*sudu* 速度] require a 'new man'», writers and intellectuals had to propose new values to contrast the tendency toward extreme individualism encouraged by the market, keep a tight relationship with society, and work together towards the 'development' of the national community. In his words,

> the 'development' of the Chinese nation is still the enormous historical theme of today. One has to respond to the problems generated by the process of commercialization by identifying oneself with the community; only this can constitute the prerequisite for the 'undertaking of the nation' (*Id.* 1997*d*: 72).

It is difficult to reconcile Zhang Yiwu's reading of China's postmodernity

[16] In his writings on postmodernity, Zhang Yiwu drew inspiration from Fredric Jameson's work (1984; 1986; 1991). Rey Chow (1986-87: 69, 71) questioned Jameson's «'postmodernist' schema of modern Chinese literary history» and argued that «a critical response to postmodernism as 'global culture' is possible only with a rewriting of modern Chinese literary history from within». In addition, Jameson's notion of 'third-world literature' was aptly criticized by Aijaz Ahmad, who pointed out that «Jameson's construction of 'a theory of the cognitive aesthetics of third-world literature' … rests … upon a suppression of the multiplicity of significant difference among and within both the advanced capitalist countries and the imperialised formations. We have, instead, a binary opposition of what Jameson calls the 'first' and the 'third' worlds» (Ahmad 1987: 3).

with the emphasis on the development of the Chinese nation that underlie such statements. Although he claimed that China's entering postmodernity meant the 'liberation' from Western narratives, his argument was based on a homogeneous view of Chineseness, which revealed anxiety about catching up with the West. In addition, his emphasis on 'speed' does not seem very different from the obsession with modernity of the 1980s that he vehemently criticized. According to Wang Jing (1996: 236):

> … Chinese intellectuals and citizens in urban centres alike adhere to a notion of progress that pursues a straight or spiral course at ever escalating speed … An extremely progressive, *aggressive* attitude toward the future is not new or peculiar to China in the 1980s … Whether we label it cultural utilitarianism or simply the utopian vision of a Chinese modernity, the rationality has an unmistakably close resemblance to the Maoist Great Leap Forward mentality. We can perhaps designate this irrationally optimistic mode of self-introspection as 'characteristically Chinese'.

Although Wang Jing argued that the 'Great Leap Forward mentality' was dismissed by the 1990s, still this kind of attitude was lurking behind Zhang Yiwu's statements on China's postmodernity. Zhang (1997*c*: 250, 258) indeed claimed that «reactions to … speed are the source of creativity for current mainland Chinese literature» and praised literary works that expressed the «unique cultural imagination of a globalized and marketized China». For example, what he found most impressive in Xu Kun's 徐坤 novella *Hot Dog* (*Re gou* 热狗) were the words 'unprecedented speed', used to describe the fast pace of the changes around the main character, an academic living in the city (*ibid.*: 247; cf. also 1997*d*). He noted that in the 1990s what 'Chinese readers' wanted to read, if anything, were stories that portrayed their own daily lives and suggested that literary works had to describe places where big changes were under way. In the name of what he defined as the demands of the readers, he requested that literature portray the authentic «spirit of the culture of the Chinese». In other words, he assumed the existence of a homogeneous body of Chinese readers which coincided with the totality of the Chinese people. And yet, how many Chinese people were readers, and how many readers experienced the 'speed' he described? How many people were excluded from his definition of postmodernity?

Zhang's criticism of *Dictionary of Maqiao* can only be understood if it is connected to his views on the function of literature in contemporary China. From his outlook, the countryside was either to be portrayed as the place where dramatic transformations were under way, or it became the place of the 'Other'. Apart from these two clear-cut options, it could not have any place in a writer's memory, imagination, or concern.

Zhang Yiwu also criticized the self-importance and sense of mission that had characterized many intellectuals since the May Fourth Movement. Lampooning the slogans of the debate on the role of 'humanistic spirit' which took place in the first half of the 1990s, he wrote (1996):

> To stir up such fanatic, exaggerated arguments as 'resist capitulation'; to be willing to 'clean' the majority of Chinese common people… to appoint oneself as 'teacher of all living creatures'… or to assert that all those who do not believe in their 'humanistic spirit' are all 'wild beasts and cannibals'… all this is merely to fetishize one's own ego.

Han Shaogong's involvement in these debates was only indirect,[17] but he voiced his concern about the 'value vacuum' of contemporary Chinese culture[18] and criticized postmodernism, which he defined as a «general term that could be used to define all the contemporary cultural phenomena that are difficult to explain» and as a dehumanizing indifference to all values.[19] In addition, Han (1997*b*) expressed concern about the homogenizing effect of mass media and the impending disappearance of popular culture. Zhang Yiwu therefore considered him as the embodiment of an elitist intellectual, who espoused ideals of enlightenment and progress, who believed that he could speak for the people from a privileged position, and who forged his own intellectual subjectivity by reproducing the image of a static rural China.

But Han Shaogong's works are more complex that Zhang Yiwu's reading allows. In the next sections, I will examine Han's experimentation with literary language and will show that they actually question May Fourth ideals of enlightenment and progress and instead propose a view of literature and a type of community based on internal diversity that is quite at odds with Zhang's idea of national community.

Local Languages and Fiction

Han Shaogong's views, as well as his writing style, underwent considerable change in the more than twenty years of his literary career. However, some of the themes he explored in his early writings are addressed in *Dictionary of Maqiao*.[20] His early theoretical writings criticize the political jargon that

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[17] Han's involvement in the debates on the social role of intellectuals in the early 1990s was apparently limited to a spat with Liu Xinwu. In a conversation with Zhang Yiwu (Liu Xinwu – Zhang Yiwu 1996: 77), Liu had stated that Han Shaogong believed that «intellectuals should stand on the opposite side of common views; they have to evaluate society according to the highest criteria and to provide society with the highest principles». Han wrote to the journal, saying that he did not recognize himself in these statements (A Qing 1997).

[18] Cf. *Linghun de shengyin* 灵魂的声音, in Han Shaogong (1994: 3-8).

[19] Cf. *Ciyu xinjie* 词语新解 (Han Shaogong 1994: 11) and *Yexingzhe mengyu* 夜行者梦语 (*ibid.*: 103-15). As a consequence, he was called one of the 'three musketeers of the literary world' (*wentan san jianke* 文坛三剑客), together with the writers Zhang Wei 张炜 and Zhang Chengzhi 张承志 (Gao Bo – Hai Ping 2001: 483).

[20] In the *Dictionary* there are many intertextual references to Han's previous works. For instance, the word *luojiaman* 罗家蛮 («People of Luo») at the entry *Manzi* 蛮子 (Han Shaogong 1996: 10) appeared in *Shiyi sanlu* 史遗三录 («Three Records Handed Down From History»; *Id.* 1986*b*: 86). The words *qu* 渠 (which can approximately be translated as «he»; *Id.* 1996: 66)

characterized the literary production of the 1960s and 1970s and argue that, in order to grasp the complexities of reality, literary language should be subjective, imaginative, and concrete.[21] Much of his fiction of the late 1980s is characterized by devices that break the stylistic conventions of realism. In particular, relations of cause and effect are broken, and phenomena that are logically unrelated are linked.[22] The tendency to give voice to subjective perceptions often translates in vivid descriptions of visionary experience (hypotyposis). In the novella *Woman Woman Woman*, for example, hypotyposis often substitutes conventional sensorial perception, links together the characters, and foreshadows later events.[23]

Han adopted a sort of 'primitivism' when he claimed that «literary thought is a kind of direct or instinctive thought» which can be better expressed through a paradoxical, relativist, and ambiguous language (Han Shaogong 1992*a*: 153). These ideas are further explored in *Dictionary*, especially in the passages referring to dreams as a source of knowledge, but now a subtle irony underlies them. The entry *Mengpo* 梦婆 («Mrs. Dreamer»), for example, introduces Shuishui 水水, a woman who has become insane at the death of her child and who has subsequently developed an ability to guess lucky numbers for the lottery. A radio editor from the city comes all the way to the village to ask her on which numbers he should bet. When only two out of his four numbers are chosen, he blames himself for not having interpreted correctly the woman's message. In this episode, the narrator quotes Freud and argues for the value of dreams and of altered states of mind. However, he does not identify dreams and irrationality with the countryside: Shuishui does not take her abilities very seriously, and it is the lottery-obsessed city intellectual who is ridiculed (Han Shaogong 1996: 39-41).

Han Shaogong (2001: 458-60) believes that local languages like the one spoken in Maqiao can highlight some universal aspects of human nature. On the other hand, he describes fiction (*xiaoshuo* 小说) as a form of knowledge which deals with problems that do not have any clear-cut solution; fiction does

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and *huafen* 话份 («right or authority to speak»; *ibid.*: 72) were already introduced in *Ba ba ba* 爸爸爸 («Pa pa pa»; *Id.* 1986*b*: 155-99). *Fage* 发歌 (a sort of antiphonal singing; *Id.* 1996: 26), was already described in *The Prophecy of the Northern Gate* (*Id.* 1993).

[21] Early essays dealing with literary language are included in Han Shaogong (1986*a*: 97-103, 130-44). On the relationship between language, knowledge, and literature see also *Id.* (1982; 1986*d*) and Lin Weiping (1986).

[22] In *Nü nü nü* 女女女 («Woman woman woman»), for example, he wrote: «As soon as I saw the flies, I had the odd feeling that the deafness of my Auntie would never heal» (Han Shaogong 1986*b*: 211).

[23] For example, the hallucinatory perception described in «It clearly did not look as if Auntie was slicing ginger, clearly the blade was slicing fingers – it was the fragmentation of cartilage, the tearing of flesh, and then it was the knife stuck deep down to the junctures» foreshadows Auntie's physical degeneration (Han Shaogong 1986*b*: 202).

not fear self-contradiction, and «naturally combats dogmatism» (*ibid.*: 476). Both local languages and fiction thus offer access to self-knowledge and truth, but they only provide temporary respites in an uninterrupted search nurtured by imagination and contradictions and not a source of unquestionable authority. The alignment of fiction, the language of Maqiao, and self-contradiction becomes evident if one considers that many of the words in the *Dictionary* contain their own negation. In the entry *Yuantou* 冤头, for example, Han (1996: 63) writes that

> once words enter actual usage, they may undergo strange modifications. Their contrary meaning is born and breeds inside them, it emerges and spreads unchecked, and they eventually reach self-destruction and complete self-negation. In this sense, these words from the very beginning contain their latent antonym, even though people are not easily aware of it.

Yuantou, which in standard Chinese can mean «bitterness» or «hatred», is here described as a form of resentment that is the expression of both love and hate, the state in which «since the other does not have any lovable quality left, the love that survives by inertia is no longer a feeling, but merely a sort of rational perseverance and bitterness» (*ibid.*: 65).

Other words contain different, but not necessarily contradictory, meanings, such as *hen* 狠, which in standard Chinese means «ruthless». In the Maqiao language, it primarily means «skilled», but it also retains some of the standard meaning. Possessing knowledge or technical skills is seen as a threatening condition, maybe because, the narrator speculates, people who possess knowledge often represent a threat and exercise ruthless power (*ibid.*: 136). Generally, words associated with knowledge have negative meanings: for example *kexue* 科学, which in the standard language means «science», for Maqiao people means «laziness» (*ibid.*: 23-24).

In the Maqiao language, terms that are historically and politically charged convey different meanings according to the speakers and circumstances. Such is the case with *Hanjian* 汉奸 (*ibid.*: 61-63), which in standard Chinese means «traitor to the Han». Wakeman (2000: 299) argues that the various usages of the words imply a connection between political treason and ethnic transgression: «According to the most authoritative dictionary in use in the People's Republic of China at present, a *hanjian* … 'is someone who helps a different race [*yizhong*] harm his or her own race [*tongzhong*]'».

How is treason represented in *Dictionary of Maqiao*? The main character in this entry is Yanzao 盐早. His father, Mao Gong 茂公, was the owner of a piece of land on a hill that came to be known as 'Taiwan' because, during collectivization, Maogong had refused to give it up, and hence it had been seized by village activists who claimed that they were thus «liberating Taiwan» (Han Shaogong 1996: 58-59). Yanzao participates in the productive activities of the village by taking up the toughest jobs, but since he is the son of a 'landlord-

traitor' (*dizhu hanjian* 地主汉奸) he is also considered a 'traitor'.[24] Therefore, when the sent-down students want to make him a 'labor model', Yanzao claims that he cannot become one. In addition, he is marginalized because his grandmother is believed to be a witch who spreads poison (*gu* 蛊), and nobody accepts his invitation to dinner even after helping him rebuild his house. He is also too poor to get married and almost commits incest with his sister.[25] Gradually, he becomes dumb and mute. Because of his submissiveness and because of the rumors concerning his grandmother, he is considered the most appropriate person to spray highly toxic chemicals in the fields. In fact, another farmer who tried to do this work had become poisoned and the village leaders did not know to whom to assign the job. They considered ex-landlords and rich peasants, but feared that they might poison the animals of the collective or even the *ganbu*. Eventually, they decide that the «honest, law-abiding traitor» is the most reliable candidate to take up the job. At the beginning, Yanzao shows signs of poisoning, but soon grows accustomed to it, and eventually does not seem to suffer at all. A new series of rumors thus develops around him: he can even eat with his hands soiled with chemicals, and at night he does not need to protect himself from mosquitoes because his poisonous body functions as an insecticide and keeps them away.

Yanzao is a traitor only because he has inherited this label and not because he has done anything to harm his group. He works hard to become part of the village community; it is not clear whether the villagers profit from him or whether his work with chemicals also empowers him. In any case, his being a 'traitor' is eventually seen as a guarantee of reliability. In Maqiao, this word has paradoxically taken up a meaning that is the opposite of the one in the standard language.

One can argue that this portrait of a dumb and hard-working fellow falls back on a stereotypical representation of the Chinese peasant and that this may be read as yet another story about unjust political labels. But Yanzao does not refuse to be called a traitor; he does not think that this epithet is wrong. Rather, his case questions what it means to be a 'traitor', thus showing the murkiness that underlies the apparent clarity of definitions of belonging to a community.

Writing and Translating in Baihua

In order to achieve effective communication, the *Dictionary* relies on the

[24] In Maqiao the social and professional status of the head of the family automatically extends to the rest of the family. This would seem similar to the Maoist notion of family background, but it represents a more extreme version of it, since individual intention to undergo radical change does not seem to change one's status as a traitor.

[25] The character *jian* also means «adultery» or «sexual transgression».

national language: it is inside the 'standard' Chinese language that semantic specifications are made. Translation thus emerges as a practice occurring not between two distinct language systems but as a shift of words within what is usually taken to be one single language. As Nan Fan (1996: 10) notes:

> The writer is not acting as a translator; his aim is not to translate Maqiao vocabulary into standard Chinese and to stand on the latter's side to ridicule and satirize Maqiao. To the contrary, what he does is precisely to carve Maqiao words out of the standard language, … to show how Maqiao is hidden behind the curtain of the standard language.

Literary writing, in Han's view, exposes a heterogeneity of experiences and utterances and unveils the continuous translations at work beneath the surface of the standard language. In his 'Afterword' to the *Dictionary* (1996: 153), he writes that the «ephemeral images» emerging from individual memory can resurface through literary writing and alter the standard language and that individual diversity and specificity should be preserved, so that communication does not become a «reciprocal erasure». Which concept of language underlies these statements that seem to downplay its social conventionality? Han Shaogong here seems to see language as a tool that, if properly used, allows one to access the reality of experience. But, on the other hand, in some sections of the *Dictionary*, he questions a binary system of correspondences between words and things that this referential view may suggest and emphasizes that language is a social construct that molds experience and determines knowledge (*ibid.*: 69). When asked about the relationship between reality and writing, he indeed expressed some skepticism:

> Every time you describe the real through language, you have already left the real behind. Where is the real after all? You can approach it, but you can never get to it. In this sense, we do not have the 'real' but only the expression of the real. In other words, every kind of expression of reality is all the 'reality' we can get. The tree that has long been on paper in the eyes of the writer is a tree that really exists … To be unable to reach the real and yet to be unable to break away from it – this is the destiny of fiction and the challenge that it necessarily has to face (*Id.* 2001: 469, 471).

The *Dictionary* thus oscillates between a notion of language as a tool to describe preverbal experience and one of language as a mould that makes that experience possible in the first place; between the attempt to grasp 'the real' and the exposure of the difficulty of this task.

This issue is taken up in the entry *Baihua* 白话 (*Id.* 1996: 149-50). In standard Chinese, *baihua* conveys both the sense of vernacular and of modern written Chinese. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals promoted the abandonment of classical language and the adoption of a modern Chinese language which was to be based on the vernacular of traditional fiction and on the dialects spoken in the North of China.[26] The new

[26] Modern Chinese was also heavily influenced by the style of the translations from the Western

baihua was seen as a more effective instrument to describe reality than classical language and hence as an important instrument to achieve social change and to unify the nation across classes and regions; in short, it was considered as a fundamental vehicle on the road to Chinese modernity.

On the other hand, in standard Chinese, *baihua* also means 'empty promise' or 'groundless talk'. Similarly, in the Maqiao speech *baihua* indicates both «modern Chinese» and «unimportant, even false and groundless chitchat, something one says just for the sake of saying it». In addition, since the character *bai* («white», «plain», or «in vain») in Maqiao is pronounced *pa* (as in 怕, «to fear»), *baihua* also means «scary words» and refers to the local custom of telling ghost stories in the evenings or in rainy days.[27] These various meanings were not differentiated until recently:

> 至少在90年代以前, 白话就是白话, 明白的话就是白说的话, 捏白的话，它仍然是与任何严肃宏大的主题无关, 仍然只是 '街谈巷议道听途说' 代名词.
>
> At least before the 1990s, *baihua* was just empty talk: clear words were ineffectual words, mere fabrications that did not have anything to do with serious and grand themes and were still a synonym for 'street gossip and hearsay' (*ibid.*: 150).

From the perspective of Maqiao, then, *baihua* is both a frivolous way of spending time and an ineffectual code. The importance of *baihua* as the standard national language is thus questioned. A similar doubt is expressed concerning fiction, and language in general:

> The effects of fiction should not be overestimated. Furthermore, not only fiction but all language is nothing more than language, nothing more than symbols to describe facts, just like the clock is only a symbol to describe time… Even if all clocks and all instruments for measuring time broke down, time would still flow as usual. Therefore, we should say that all language strictly speaking is 'empty talk', and also its function should not be overestimated (*ibidem*).

If one looks at Han Shaogong's early essays, one can see that his concept of *baihua* changed over the years. In an essay on this theme written in 1980, the writer lamented that contemporary *baihua* was «a bookish literary language, lacking imagination, and contrary to the rules of the language spoken by the masses».[28] The flaws of this language, such as an excessive use of 'empty words' (*xuci* 虚词), stereotyped phrases and lengthy sentences, were the result, in his opinion, either of excessive reliance on classical Chinese or of blind imitation of Western languages. *Baihua*, Han argued, should be as clear

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languages and from Japanese.

[27] The origins of traditional narrative literature in *baihua*, the narrator argues, are related to this last meaning.

[28] *Kefu xiaoshuo yuyan zhongde 'xuesheng qiang'* 克服小说语言中的 '学生腔' («To Get Rid of the 'Student's Tone' in the Narrative Language»; Han Shaogong 1986*a*: 130).

as ordinary speech.[29] He therefore claimed that a modern, national narrative language still needed time to mature. In this essay, Han implied that literary writing should promote the evolution of *baihua* by imitating speech. He thus adhered to an abstract concept of 'language spoken by the masses' without asking himself where and by whom such a language would be spoken. Furthermore, he assumed that it was possible to isolate a Chinese modern speech untainted by Western syntax and clearly distinct from classical Chinese.[30] On the other hand, he contrasted *baihua* with local (Southern) speech. In his fiction he sometimes made use of Hunanese because, he argued, «local language [*xiangtu yuyan* 乡土语言] sometimes can better convey the flavour of life».[31] By using a limited number of non-standard words, the writer declared, he hoped to convey subjective feelings, to enhance the local character of his writings, and to enrich *baihua*.[32]

The writer of the *Dictionary of Maqiao* distances himself from the evolutionary view of *baihua* and from the clear-cut juxtaposition with the local speech that had characterized his earlier essays and highlights the ambiguous nature of language in general. Sometimes he sees it as a series of unstable relations among words, while at other times as a social construct that shapes experience. But he also reminds the reader of the physical world which exists independently of language and which sometimes can be better experienced through silence. The writer is therefore unwilling to make clear-cut statements, attracted by words and seduced by dumbness, torn between the lure of representation and the knowledge of its inadequacy. The intellectual subjectivity emerging from the relentless doubt of one's ability to grasp reality is far from the role of the self-assured intellectual that Zhang Yiwu ascribed to Han Shaogong.

Han Shaogong and Native Authenticity

One of the reasons why Zhang Yiwu attacked Han Shaogong might be that he identified him with the root-seeking literary trend of the 1980s.[33]

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[29] This statement evoked Hu Shi's concept of *baihua*.

[30] Han's concept of *baihua* echoes the debates on modern language from 1920s to the mid-1940s (Gunn 1991) as well as Mao's Talks at the Yan'an forum (McDougall 1980: 88).

[31] *Xuebu huigu – 'Yuelan' xiaoshuoji daiba* 学步回顾 – '月兰'小说集代跋 (*«*Going Back to My First Steps – A Postscript to the Short Story Collection *Yuelan*»; Han Shaogong 1986*a*: 93).

[32] «I intend to enhance the cultural aspect [*wenhua secai* 文化色彩] of language, therefore my interest in Chu culture is also a linguistic search … However, you cannot use characters which are not understandable to everybody. Some of these characters are only known by very few people … If what a southerner writes is obscure to a northerner, this won't do. We have to use standard Chinese anyway. Only in opportune circumstances can we use words, characters, expressions rich in 'local colour'» (my interview with Han Shaogong, Haikou, May 1993; in Iovene 1994).

[33] Han Shaogong first introduced the term in his famous essay *Wenxue de 'gen'* 文学的 '根'

Roots-seeking writers, in this critic's view, tended to reproduce an image of timeless China and uncontaminated native authenticity (Zhang Yiwu 1997*a*: 22-26). In the 1980s, Han Shaogong (1986*c*) indeed argued for a perfect correspondence between cultural identity and creative subjectivity and a clear-cut opposition between China and the West. In recent essays, however, Han Shaogong emphasizes the hybrid character of 'Chinese culture' and questions the relationship between native culture and literary writing. In the article *The Critic's Native Culture* he acknowledges that even some words used in Hunanese local speech are actually derived from Sanskrit. The ancient myth of Pan Gu 盘古 is derived from India.[34] However, the fact that cultures are inherently mixed does not mean that one cannot distinguish between one culture and the other. Karaoke in France, he argues, is not the same thing as karaoke in China. While defining native culture as the specific interaction of global phenomena with local circumstances, he emphasizes that all this has nothing to do with literary creation: «A healthy kind of writing is the natural expression of one's heart … and does not need to search painstakingly for any cultural pose» (Han Shaogong 1997*a*: 72). Han thus claims that the issue of cultural identity is not relevant for writers, whose main problem is «whether one's creativity wins over one's stupidity». In sum, Han leaves it to the critic to decide whether a literary work does or does not have native elements: what matters for the writer is whether he can write well and whether his work is able to move readers. Furthermore, «to devote oneself to collecting native or non-native cultural material is the job of travel agencies and not ours». This essay, published at about the time when the Maqiao debate was at its peak, dissociates literary writing from issues of native authenticity, and shows a critical distance from issues of cultural representation.

The idea that «the countryside is the past of the city» played an important role in Han Shaogong's early essays (1986*a*: 7). But Maqiao is not relegated to the past. Rather, although the structure of the *Dictionary* is not chronological, there is a clear sense of the passing of time and of the effects of change. But perception of time is locally specific. In the past, the villagers were sometimes unaware of major historical turns and therefore defined time by referring to local events which were more relevant to them than the major national upheavals. These local ways of defining chronological sequences offer the narrator one more occasion to reflect on problems of perception and knowledge, and on how events seem to actually happen only when one gets to know about them. In this sense, and in apparent contradiction with the above-quoted passage on the relationship between language and time, time exists not as an objective reality, but as subjective perception (*Id.* 1996: 47-50, 55). Thus, when

(«The 'Roots' of Literature»; Han Shaogong 1986*a*: 1-12).

[34] Since the 1980s many cultural critics have shared the view of a China whose strength lies in an open attitude toward foreign influence (Friedman 1994: 84).

in the 1990s the narrator goes back to the village where he spent six years as a sent-down youth, he comes to the realization that it is his own memory that has frozen everything in time, and that the Maqiao he remembered has gone. Some of the houses are now well-equipped with TVs, electric fans, and air-conditioning. True, the electric voltage is too low, antennas do not work properly, and it will probably take longer for the new technology to become something more than a set of objects to exhibit to the neighbours, but what matters is that the village, its inhabitants, and its language are no longer the same. Many of the words of the 1960s and 1970s are either no longer used or their meanings have changed, and new words have become popular (*ibid.*: 132-35). In Maqiao, only stones and mud live on unchanged (*ibid.*: 149):

> In Maqiao there is no trace left of the years when we were here, even the familiar line of scratches on the cob wall is gone. I can still vaguely remember a few old friends, but they are nowhere to be found. Last year or the year before the last or three or four years ago, one after another they passed away. They make Maqiao sink in my memory bit by bit; it will soon be completely drowned (*ibid.*: 117).

The Maqiao Debate and the Literary Market

In December 1996 *Ningbo wanbao* reported that, in contrast to the enthusiastic reactions by the critics, common readers did not like *Dictionary of Maqiao*: «I tried, but I really couldn't read it», some of them said. «Too experimental, no story, no characters», most readers complained. «Apparently, for these authors literary creation is an individual activity, which does not take the reader into account», commented the writer of the article (Tian Dao – Nan Ba 1997: 145-46). However, the Maqiao debate helped to raise interest in the novel. In the first months, before the case was brought to court, some people even thought there was a tacit agreement between the two parties: the fact that the issue was mainly discussed in the mass media and not exclusively in literary journals seemed suspicious; some hinted that the polemics were entirely a marketing operation. An open letter to a newspaper also suggested that Zhang Yiwu had been hired by the publisher in order to promote sales and wondered whether he would eventually share the profits (*ibid.*: 144). After a few weeks of debate, indeed, the sales of the novel went up, and already by February 1997 the third edition of *Dictionary of Maqiao* was issued. As it often happens, a writer of 'high' literature enjoyed market success thanks to the entertainment press and television.

In the 1990s, many Chinese writers did not welcome the spread of commercial mass culture. Han Shaogong (1997*b*: 6-7), for instance, saw it as the expression of a few cultural producers and as a treat to the true popular expressions represented by local traditions. Therefore, in the perception of the critics who welcomed the increasing blurring of borders in contemporary Chinese culture, he embodied the 'high-brow' writer who is attached to obsolete hierarchies

of knowledge. This was the case of Zhang Yiwu, for whom the writer should integrate himself with the national mass culture, be attentive to the taste of the 'Chinese public', and cater to the internal market. The fact that the Maqiao debate helped Han Shaogong to sell more copies of his book, in some sense, vindicated Zhang Yiwu's and Wang Gan's argument that literary work was not independent from the market, and showed that high literature, local traditions, and 'mass culture' are not necessarily at odds.

Conclusion

Zhang Yiwu claimed that by criticizing *Dictionary of Maqiao* he mainly intended to question the critics' celebration of Han Shaogong's creative originality and national authenticity. However, in this article I hope to have shown that his own criteria of evaluation were not at odds with ideas of national authenticity or originality. To the contrary, it was the belief that an authentic representation of China had to reflect the speed and the 'postmodern' mood of the contemporary era that led him to criticize Han Shaogong's work.

Zhang emphasized that writers from the May Fourth period to the end of the 1980s constructed their modern subjectivity as spokespeople for the nation through the representation of a backward countryside. While this is often the case, it cannot be extended to all writers of the Chinese twentieth century prior to the 'postmodern 1990s': the differentiated landscape of Chinese modern literature does not allow for Zhang's unilinear reading. Zhang followed the binary structure underlying Jameson's notion of 'third-world literature', which led him to condemn all writings set in the countryside unless they focus on rapid changes. In this perspective, he could not but criticize Han's work.

By relating the *Dictionary* to Han Shaogong's earlier essays on literary language, this article has argued that this writer is less interested in the representation of a rural community than in reflecting on the function of literary language and on the possibility of representation itself. For Han, literary language should question conventional codes of representation and remind the reader of the processes of translation which in hegemonic historical narratives are rendered unperceivable. This suggests a 'heterolingual' mode of address, which assumes that «every utterance can fail to communicate because heterogeneity is inherent in any medium, linguistic or otherwise … In the heterolingual address … translation takes place at every listening or reading» (Sakai 1997: 8-9). In this perspective, the *Dictionary of Maqiao* can been read as a self-referential examination of the relationship between literary language, experience, and memory, and as a proposal for a kind of community based on the valorization of personal idiosyncrasies, in an open-ended search for forms of shared meaning.

The dispute between Han and Zhang is also a clash between two opposite ways of conceiving of the relationship between literature and mass culture and

of the role of the writer in contemporary society. In their writings, both Han and Zhang refer to the increasing marginality of the intellectual in the contemporary world. Still, Han sees the market as a homogeneous force and therefore argues that the intellectual needs to protect a space for critical thought, while Zhang believes that the market opens up a plurality of possibilities and that the intellectual may intervene only to regulate extreme attitudes from within, rather than criticize them from without. The debate itself and its paradoxical outcome – a lawsuit to defend high-minded principles ends up increasing the sales volume of the book – showed that the borders between mass culture and 'high' literature are not clearly defined, and that there are close links and interactions between the two.

The dispute between Han Shaogong and Zhang Yiwu could be seen as a handbook case of difference between a 'modernist' and a 'postmodernist'. Yet, the paradoxes that rid this debate question these categories. For, if Han Shaogong could be considered a modernist as far as his ideas on the role of the writer are concerned, his foregrounding of language and his exposure of the instability of meaning have much in common with theories of language in which Han is certainly very well versed and which some would define as postmodern. On the other hand, for all his emphasis on postmodernity, Zhang's argument falls very much within the limits of the developmental, modernist model of the nation-state. What this debate does, then, is to reveal how theories themselves involve a plurality of issues which constantly need to be scrutinized and discussed. While Zhang Yiwu claims that the 'modern' has been criticized in the West, he does not seem to take into account that notions of postmodernity are a contested ground as well.

Theory produced in the Western academia has a high value on the Chinese intellectual market; its mastery is a source of strength for the young generation of literary critics in their interaction with older critics and writers. Some intellectuals feel that this is the symptom of an unevenness that characterizes the contemporary global intellectual marketplace. While the retreat to notions of native authenticity presents well-known dangers, conditions for more critical appropriations are perhaps being created by the plurality of media and venues for discussion that characterizes contemporary China. In this respect, at least, I have to agree with Zhang Yiwu.

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