Psychological with a Xuanyi Afterthought: A Translation of Cai Jun's "Kidnapped" and a Critical Introduction to His Popular Suspense Fiction

Katherine G. Holtrop
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Psychological with a Xuanyi Afterthought:
A Translation of Cai Jun’s “Kidnapped” and a Critical Introduction to His Popular
Suspense Fiction

A Thesis Presented

by

KATHERINE G. HOLTROP

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Chinese Language and Literature
PSYCHOLOGICAL WITH A XUANYI AFTERTHOUGHT:
A TRANSLATION OF CAI JUN’S “KIDNAPPED” AND A CRITICAL
INTRODUCTION TO HIS POPULAR SUSPENSE FICTION

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Cultures
DEDICATION

To my mother,
who first inspired me to share stories across worlds.
I would like to thank first and foremost my advisor, Professor Enhua Zhang, for putting up with my off-the-wall ideas, insanity-inspired writing habits, and general procrastination, and for giving me translation advice, shaping the scope of the project, and keeping me focused.

Second, I would like to thank Professor David Schneider and Professor Zhongwei Shen for being on my committee, giving me translation advice and cultural and linguistic insights, and putting up with my last-minute, frantic extension emails.

Third, I would like to thank my parents for their constant support and spot-on nudging. My mother remained proud of my accomplishments with this thesis to the end.

I would also like to thank my housemates for listening to me spin dastardly tales of thesis writing, research woes, and frustrations, and for letting me steal their coffee. For my co-sufferer Bethany, for letting me cancel thesis writing sessions with only an hour’s notice and for being a bouncing board for translation ideas and cringe-worthy sentences. For my editor and translation expert Elizabeth, for letting me take over her kitchen table, giving sage translation and grammar advice, reviewing and critiquing my translation, reading my thesis draft at a moment’s notice, and for generally telling me to stop being a perfectionist. And for my boyfriend Micah, who uplifted and encouraged me the entire way.

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ABSTRACT

PSYCHOLOGICAL WITH A XUANYI AFTERTHOUGHT:
A TRANSLATION OF CAI JUN’S “KIDNAPPED” AND A CRITICAL
INTRODUCTION TO HIS POPULAR SUSPENSE FICTION

MAY 2018

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Directed by: Professor Enhua Zhang

Often hailed as “China’s Stephen King,” Chinese psychological suspense author Cai Jun occupies a position at the peak of the new wave of young authors flooding China’s popular literature market. In order to understand Cai’s popularity as an author, the impact his works and writing have on this market, and how he creates his particular brand of suspense fiction, it is both necessary to put his works into a larger context and analyze his writing. This thesis provides a brief overview of the recent literary scene in China, from the rise of internet literature and the comeback of genre fiction to the advent of mooks, the evolution of young adult literature, and the development of the author marketing industry, and also addresses the “pure vs. popular” controversy in China’s literary world, identifies how Cai fits into these trends, and determines who Cai is as a writer in terms of genre, story content, and literary reception through the translation and analysis of Cai’s short story “Kidnapped.”
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART I: CRITICAL INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective and Goal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Kidnapped”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Method and Approach</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminology</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roadmap</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERARY AND CULTURAL CONTEXT</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Literature</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of Online Literature</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarities to Chapter Novels, Twitter Fiction, and Microblog Fiction</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popularity</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre Fiction</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspense Fiction</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazine-books, or “Mooks”</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercialization, Capitalism, and Branding</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Adult Literature</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Pure” vs. Popular Literary Divide</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrap-Up</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “CHINA’S STEPHEN KING”</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison to Other Suspense and Fiction Writers</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cai’s Works</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with Reality</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influences and Suspense Development</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awards, Adaptations, and Literary Acclaim</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critics’ Response</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right Time, Right Medium, Right Audience</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Beginnings</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in Mooks and Editing</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## 4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF “KIDNAPPED”

- Character, Description, and Narrative Elements .................................................. 71
- Symbolism .................................................................................................................. 79
- Literary Themes ......................................................................................................... 82
- Young Adult Themes ................................................................................................ 89
- A Hint of New Realism .............................................................................................. 92
- Weaknesses and Awkward Writing ......................................................................... 95
- Trying Too Hard ....................................................................................................... 100
- Suspense in the Making ......................................................................................... 101
- Social Commentary ................................................................................................. 104
- Popularity of Cai’s Writing ..................................................................................... 106
- Final Verdict ............................................................................................................ 107

## 5. “I DID PHYSICS FREEFALL MOVEMENTS” AND OTHER NOTABLE TRANSLATION MOMENTS

- Authenticity and Closeness to the Text ................................................................. 109
- Toughest Translation Areas .................................................................................. 112
- Translation Choices ............................................................................................... 114
- To Footnote or Not to Footnote ............................................................................ 116
- Translating Cultural and Literary Context ............................................................ 118
- Summary ................................................................................................................. 119

## 6. CONCLUSION

- “Kidnapped” ............................................................................................................. 122

### PART II: KIDNAPPED

- KIDNAPPED – 绑架 ................................................................................................ 124
- BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................... 162
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Often hailed as “China’s Stephen King,” Chinese psychological suspense author Cai Jun occupies a position at the peak of the new wave of young authors flooding China’s popular literature market. His first short story was published online in 2000, and his first novel *Vir* was also published online the following year. He has since switched to print publishing and has written over thirty short stories and twenty-one novels with sales past fourteen million copies worldwide.¹ Five of his novels have been adapted into movies and television series, contributing to large box office sales for China’s suspense and thriller movie genre, and his works have been translated into ten languages, including Russian, Thai, Vietnamese, and English.² ³ He has received both the Bertelsmann People's Literature Award for New Writers and the Sina Literary Award and is the editor-in-chief of “Mystery World,”⁴ a popular suspense magazine-book, as well as the CEO of his own publishing company, Shanghai Haolin Cultural Communications Company. Both of these roles lend him the position and influence required to take a personal hand in shaping the future of China’s suspense genre.

As a forerunner both in writing and publishing in the suspense genre, Cai Jun is not only influential in terms of content, but also in terms of marketing and audience. His readership consists mainly of young adults and 20-30 year-olds, a reading demographic

² Ibid.
⁴ *Xuanyi Shijie* (悬疑世界), better translated as “Suspense World”
that wields considerable purchasing power and has grown up in a consumerist culture. Cai’s continued popularity suggests he has found the key to literary success in a publishing world dominated by post-80s authors, and his continued relevance in the “young writers for young readers” market indicates that he is well situated to trend-set for many years to come.

Because his writing falls squarely into the realm of popular fiction, however, literary critics are slow to recognize much, if any, literary value in his works. Cai Jun also faces strong pushback in his field from other suspense writers, such as Zhou Dedong, and from readers remaining unenthralled by his stories. In addition, due to his internet beginnings, some readers and critics consider him to be less legitimate than authors who originally began publishing in print. As such, there is limited academic research on Cai Jun in Chinese or English and even less research devoted to delving into his actual stories.

In spite of these contentions and research gaps, an author whose works exert this much market pull deserves a critical study. If Cai Jun’s writing is as poorly-constructed and lacking in literary quality as some suggest, his market popularity for well over a decade is all the more intriguing. A thorough yet brief critical study will not only aid academics to better understand this rise to popularity, but also the rapid development of Chinese popular literature and the extent to which internet writing influences print literature. In addition, by looking at Cai Jun’s works, we can see which story elements, such as setting, symbolism, and characterization, contribute to Cai’s signature psychological suspense style and capture readers’ attention, and from these in turn, we can weigh the overall

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5 Karen Coats, “Young Adult Literature,” in Handbook of Research on Children’s and Young Adult Literature, ed. by Wolf et al. (New York: Routledge, 2011).
literary value for ourselves and gain a greater understanding of the evolving suspense genre in China as a whole.

**Objective and Goal**

In this thesis, I intend to use a representative short story, “Kidnapped,” from Cai's early writing years to translate and analyze as a case study for his writing style and his particular brand of suspense fiction. By analyzing this short story and where it falls in the realm of modern Chinese popular fiction, we can better understand recent fiction trends in China, identify elements of the new and growing Chinese suspense genre, examine the influence that internet writing has had and continues to have on print literature, and determine if Chinese works such as Cai’s would receive as much acclaim in a Western market.

The purpose of the translation is multi-fold. First, I wish to showcase and stretch my own understanding of Chinese language and literature, including connotation, slant, vibe, slang, and linguistic art. Second, I pursued this project as a challenge to myself to try to represent this story as authentically as possible in English. Third, a translation such as this will be able to contribute to a cross-cultural exchange of literature that currently seems predominantly one-sided. Fourth, this translation will enable other scholars to verify the findings I present in my critical introduction, albeit these scholars will have to trust that my translation is accurate; I propose that this is better than having no translation at all.

Some may wonder if we, as a Western audience, can even understand this story as it was meant to be understood by native Chinese speakers. Perhaps the cultural and linguistic knowledge required is beyond what we have at our disposal. I would like to argue, however, that it is possible to understand most everything in context with enough
care, attention to detail, and background knowledge. Coming from a Western point of view, we might still lose out on some subtler meanings present, but we may on the other hand bring other interpretations to the table that enhance the overall scholarship concerning Cai’s works and also enhance the global reader’s analysis of this particular story. Thus, the gains from doing a translation and case study such as this are more significant than the losses.

“Kidnapped”

“Kidnapped” was published in literary journal *Dangdai* in December 2000 and is the first story of Cai’s to win literary acclaim; it was awarded the Bertelsmann People's Literature Award for New Writers in August the same year. The story is narrated by a young, mentally ill youth in modern-day Shanghai who describes the moment he kidnaps his father’s lover, imprisoning her in a penthouse room with her child born by the affair, and the ensuing ransom negotiations, his own sexual rite of passage, and a past he must come to terms with. Told via an extended flashback, the story makes heavy use of symbolism as well as foreign references and contains themes of outside-looking-in, father-son tension, finding one’s identity, the struggle between old and new, seeing and being seen, and the need for control.

This story is significant and representative for a number of reasons. First of all, the Bertelsmann prize affirms Cai Jun’s writing and craft on an international level instead of simply a country-specific scale and is also the first of any of his works to win literary recognition. Second, the story caters to Cai’s signature demographic and contains similar

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themes to his other works as well as early stylistic tendencies that still continue today, making this story not only a snapshot of his early writing career and the developmental stages of the psychological suspense genre, but also a key to helping readers define Cai’s particular writing style. In terms of translation and the expansion of academic research, the story’s short length makes it a manageable project because it is easier to analyze, deconstruct, and translate without getting lost in the pages and because it is, ironically, a consumer-sized piece of Cai’s larger canon to introduce to a Western audience who may only be familiar with his single English translated work, *The Child’s Past Life.*  

**Research Method and Approach**

For my research, I read as many overviews of Cai Jun’s works as possible as well as significant portions of the English version of *The Child’s Past Life* to get a good idea of his writing style, how he crafts his stories, and how his work has been previously translated. In addition, I surveyed articles, interviews, critical reviews, blogs, and Amazon listings to gain a greater understanding of suspense and other genre fiction in China, internet literature, Cai’s works and writing style, and reader and critic responses to his works. These endeavors, coupled with a close reading of “Kidnapped,” are the basis for my analysis and critical introduction.

**Terminology**

A brief note should be made regarding how certain terms and phrases will be defined for the purpose of this thesis. For terms such as “modern” and “literature,”

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7 *Shengsi He* (生死河), translated literally as “The River of Life and Death,” published in 2013; English translation by Yuzhi Yang, published in 2014.
definitions do affect the interpretation and meaning of critical analysis as well as the assignment of literary value, so it is important to be clear from the start.

In literary terms, “modern” may have many definitions, indicating anything written in the last few decades or referring to whatever is culturally modern at the time, with the exact definition depending on context. This type of application of the term “modern” and its concurrent evaluation of literature is sometimes closely related to periodization in history, which tends to assign a less thorough evaluation, often missing key movements and themes. In terms of “modernity” in Chinese literature, this concept was already embodied in literature in the mid-19th century, far before most academics define the “modern” period. Lu Xun is generally a good point at which to place the “modern” marker for Chinese literature, so for the purpose of this thesis, “modern” will refer to anything written approximately in the last one hundred years.

The term “literature” itself often has different definitions depending on context and may refer to anything that is written or anything good that is written, exclusive of amateur writings and inclusive of those writings not accepted into literary canon by critics, writers, readers, and especially time. This, of course, raises a significant issue for popular literature, which includes popular fiction or anything mainstream. I will return to this particular issue later in the thesis, but for the ease of discussion, I will define literature in this thesis as anything published in print and longer than a pamphlet, including those works that are academically and critically accepted as “true” literature as well as works that are popular and mainstream. Where the term “internet literature” is used, on the other hand, it will indicate writing of a literary nature that is published online (e.g., stories, not blogs or newsletters) but that lacks acceptance into any literary canon.
It is necessary to also define what is meant by “Chinese” in this context. “Chinese” often refers to anything created in the Chinese cultural sphere that includes countries and communities whose primary or national language is Chinese (China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas communities). However, for the purpose of this thesis, I will apply a narrower definition and limit this to mainland China even though the literature and pop culture that comes out of mainland China may be very prevalent in these other communities. Thus when the term “Chinese literature” is used in this thesis, it will refer to literature of mainland China only.

**Roadmap**

In order to begin this case study, I first plan to provide a literary context for Cai Jun’s works to enable us to better understand where his works fall in the general spectrum of Chinese literature, modern literature, popular literature, internet literature, and genre literature and how to interpret them. I will look specifically at how commercialism and marketing influence the publishing world, and at the development of the young adult (YA) literary scene and the growth of the suspense genre in mainland China.

In Chapter 3, I will provide a comprehensive introduction to Cai and his works by giving an overview of him as an author and a short background on his works and writing style, then compare him to other writers in the suspense field to see where he stands. I will discuss influences on his work and the more prevalent themes in his writing; mention reader, peer, and critical literary reception; discuss the significance of Cai’s writing within different literary spheres; and conclude with a comparison of the advantages and disadvantages of studying him.
Following this contextual and background information, I will analyze Cai Jun’s story “Kidnapped” through writer’s voice, style, and story content in Chapter 4. I will look specifically at story elements such as narrative, character, setting, detail, suspense, and imagery and will pay attention to themes, symbolism, and metaphors, including larger questions and issues Cai Jun raises in this story as well as any inherent cultural commentary. My analysis will include reflections on what drives the story, how this story fits into Cai Jun’s collection of works, whether it can be considered “good writing,” if the psychological suspense genre label is appropriate, how this compares to Western suspense stories, any significant differences between editions, and general reader and critic takeaways.

Chapter 5 will focus on translation issues and solutions. I will introduce any particularly rough spots I encountered and discuss how I addressed writer’s voice, made choices between literal and aesthetic translation, and approached content, story impression, and audience. In this section, I will also explain important translation choices, highlight Cai’s author choices, and discuss gaps between word meanings and cultural concepts in Chinese and English that required extra attention, and in some cases explanation.

The conclusion will address what we can expect to see in the future from Cai and the suspense genre in China and will note any remaining questions or areas for further study.

Part II of this thesis is my translation of “Kidnapped.”
CHAPTER 2

LITERARY AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

In order to understand Cai Jun’s popularity as an author and the impact his works and writing have on the contemporary Chinese popular literature market, it is first necessary to put his works into a larger context. To begin, we will take a short look at the recent literary scene in China: the rise of internet literature, the comeback of genre fiction, the advent of mooks, the evolution of young adult literature, and the development of the author marketing industry. Then we will look at the ways in which these trends have helped shape the “pure vs popular” controversy in China’s literary world.

Internet Literature

Internet literature began with internet magazines, most of which were set up by Chinese students and Chinese communities abroad before the “worldwide web” was invented. These reflected print culture magazines and were a unique combination of print culture and internet culture in the making. The first of these e-magazines, Huaxia wenzhai, featured various genres that included original and well-known works.

In addition to online magazines, entire literary sites began to surface. Under the Banyan Tree is the longest-standing one of these in China with “the most recognizable brand,” according to one researcher. Founded in 1997 by a U.S. citizen who moved to

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2 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 35.
Shanghai, it has since become the symbolic beginning of internet literature.\(^5\)\(^6\) The site was taken over in 2002 by Bertelsmann, a very influential German company that sets up many literature prizes in China, and sold in 2006.\(^7\) In 2009, it was bought by Shanda Interactive Entertainment, a company that currently owns all major literary websites in China.\(^8\)

Much of Under the Banyan Tree’s attraction perhaps lies in the fact that its content seems more like print literature, since works that appear on its site are subject to editorial review. One of the site’s main editors, Chen Cun, also publishes his writing in print, which lends a certain credibility to his online presence. Other editors and moderators are chosen by peers and do not share this online-print crossover background.

**Characteristics of Online Literature**

The writing that surfaces on these literary websites has become itself a literary genre, having a distinct, recognizable writing style that consists of “colloquial language broken down into many short segments.”\(^9\) This appears as short sentences, bold statements, and the use of more sensational language than one may see in print.

In terms of content, it is very materialistic, and there is an ambiguous blurring between public and private life for marketing purposes. Intimacy, secrets, and personal matters are sold online for profit. Internet writers know these types of personal matters are a good selling point, although they are hardly the first to come to this conclusion. In the world of print, for example, author Ding Ling’s sequel to her short story “Miss Sophia’s

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\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Yang, “Chinese Internet Literature and the Changing Field of Print Culture,” 333.
\(^7\) Hockx, *Internet Literature in China*, 35.
\(^8\) Ibid., 35-36.
\(^9\) Ibid., 31.
Diary” features her protagonist exchanging personal letters for rent. Other characteristics of content include writing that contains a more fundamental, avant-garde spirit, with ties to post-socialist publishing.\(^\text{10}\)

Perhaps the largest, and most important, characteristic of online writing is reader interactivity. The interactivity element is particularly attractive to younger audiences, though is not in fact new in the world of storytelling. In traditional storytelling, for example, the audience is physically present and can give verbal and non-verbal responses. While on the internet, where it is more difficult to receive feedback in the form of non-verbal responses, other methods of communicating non-verbal feedback, such as using emojis, role-playing (actions put in little asterisks), gifs, and memes, can go a long way. All of this enables readers to express their opinions as the story unfolds and gives writers usable feedback that they can apply to crafting their online image, overall story, and “brand.” Writers are also able to use this to gauge the popularity of characters, themes, and plot devices, which enables them to cater more to their audience in future writings and gives them a springboard off of which to explore new areas if something is not working out well for them in their stories.

Many popular internet authors maintain this close relationship with their internet fan base and readers. Readers sometimes suggest plot development, and the virtual community lends itself well to creating pockets of shared thoughts, interests, and tastes. Despite the new medium, reader interaction is not a new feature exclusive to internet writing, though its immediacy more closely parallels that of oral storytelling than of print. In the world of print, for example, author Zhang Henshui, who wrote popular novels in the

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 63.
1930s that were serialized through biweekly magazines, often included readers’ responses and inquiries about the fate of characters. In the West, perhaps one of the greatest examples of reader feedback affecting the plight of a character is the upset created when Sherlock Holmes was killed off; consequently, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle brought him back.

However, according to Chen Cun, the art director of Under the Banyan Tree, there is a need to differentiate between the terms “works” and “writings” when discussing written material on the internet. Chen says, “I have never published any works [zuopin] online. What I do online is just random writing. My real literary work has all appeared in print.”\(^\text{11}\) Chen writes online daily and has managed several successful literary websites, and according to researcher Hockx, “he was almost single-handedly responsible for the eruption of a nationwide debate about web literature in 2001.”\(^\text{12}\) Even though Chen is very active on the literary website, he still has an implicit preference for print literature. This disparity between an online writer and a “proper” writer has persisted\(^\text{13}\) despite claims that “famed authors in the print cultural field have embraced the market of Internet literature.”\(^\text{14}\)

**Similarities to Chapter Novels, Twitter Fiction, and Microblog Fiction**

Internet literature contains defined similarities to other types of writing, especially traditional serial Chinese chapter novels, Twitter fiction, and microblog fiction. Serialization is the strongest overlap between these mediums, but online writers also have a sense of being “chroniclers.” This is similar to the pace of traditional chapter novels when readers’ expectations and stories’ structural linearity are taken into account. The

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\(^{11}\) Ibid., 59.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 67.


\(^{14}\) Yang, “Chinese Internet Literature and the Changing Field of Print Culture,” 338.
attention to readers’ input and serialized form is also similar to 1930s magazine-published stories in China and of popular novels of the same period. The venue has merely changed.

Online writing is also similar to Twitter fiction in the U.S. and China as well as cell phone novels in Japan. For Twitter fiction, Chinese writers can create considerably more content with Chinese characters in the 250-character limit than English writers using the same limit, which contributes to more of a short-installments medium as opposed to a novel written snippet by snippet online. Similarly, Japanese cell phone novels adhere to a 70-100 character limit due to limited cell phone screen space. Although themes between cell phone novels and internet fiction appear to be the same, the cell phone medium lends itself more to short sentences and conversation-style writing. In China, many users have noted that language in Twitter fiction writing and on Twitter accounts contains too much cursing, probably from a desire to sound cool online.

In Western countries, fan fiction instead of cell phone novels tends to dominate the internet. These stories may be released chapter by chapter on blog sites, such as WordPress, fan fiction sites, literary “collection” sites, such as Creepypasta, or forums such as Reddit. Readers often have the ability to purchase the PDF of an online kickstarter novel or the printed volumes of serialized web comics. Perhaps the most notable successes for online writing are the birth of the Slender Man games, based on the backstory for a monster from a “creepypasta,” a term for online horror fiction that is shared across the internet, and 50 Shades of Grey, which began as an online fan fiction of Twilight, although successes such as Worm, a famous web serial, are also notable.

Online writing also shares similarities with microblog fiction. Both are written on interactive platforms, and for both, writers tend to be aware that they are pioneering, using
various techniques “to blur the lines between author, narrator, and reader.”\(^\text{15}\) The first-ever serialized novel written on Sina Weibo, a Twitter-inspired format, was authored by Wen Huajian, and was popular enough it was also printed with two extra chapters not included in the online version.\(^\text{16}\) Despite the similarities, online writing and microblog fiction differ in the choice of genre that their writers pursue and also writers’ need to engage in self-promotion.\(^\text{17}\)

**Popularity**

Internet literature has become popular quickly for several reasons. First, it is easy to write and easy to read. Sites promote a type of “light” writing that can be quickly produced. Second, there is less risk publishing online than there is for print publishing; authors already know their works will sell. Third, readers do not need to use their real names on their accounts, allowing for a comfortable amount of anonymity. According to one article that analyzed motivations for “publishing original literature works online”\(^\text{18}\) and why readers flock to online social network markets, “millions of Chinese are embracing the internet as a discreet space for their thoughts and emotions.”\(^\text{19}\) For such readers, “the internet serves not only as [an] information source but also an emotional outlet, a venue for airing opinions, and a space for creativity.”\(^\text{20}\) Authors, too, are able to remain out of the spotlight more so than if they published in print. Last but not least, there are also strong offline sales of online literature, lest income be a worry for some writers.

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\(^{15}\) Hockx, *Internet Literature in China*, 92.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 85.  
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 93.  
\(^{18}\) Zhao, “Social network market,” 85.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 87.
In addition to the wide selection of writing that online literature sites offer, they also provide a certain amount of flexibility for consumers. There are mobile options for reading, e-copyrights for old classics, and much crossover between print-based writers and online writing.\textsuperscript{21} However, the simple connectivity and freedom that the internet provides remains one of online literature’s largest promoters. In China, there are large populations for whom reading was never a part of their lives. When they get a phone, and get connected, they follow sensational news and browse anything from shopping to literary sites—the internet shakes their lives and transforms the ways in which they spend their time.

Much of this popularity boils down to common sense, of course. The ease of circulation and dissemination is something of a matter of course for an internet medium. E-literature is simply accessible to more people than print in many cases. Internet culture, rather than internet development, has impacted the rise of internet literature.\textsuperscript{22} The urban middle class is its biggest audience, especially young new professionals with purchasing power, time for leisure, and a craving for entertainment. In turn, these characteristics contribute to a so-called “literature of leisure” (\textit{xiuxian wenxue}).\textsuperscript{23}

The nature of online writing draws both readers and writers in. For some, it is the wispy fantasy of finding their \textit{zhiyin}, or literary soulmate, online. Readers can recognize and appreciate a writer’s work, but the \textit{zhiyin} relationship runs both ways; reader and writer each participate in a mutual admiration. For writers, responding to reader comments leads to good relations, or \textit{renqi}, and there is also the draw of peer review and promotion enabled by cross-listing and publicizing each other’s works. Many writers seek professional

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{22} Yang, “Chinese Internet Literature and the Changing Field of Print Culture,” 339.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 340.
development through reader feedback, writing to reader tastes, commenting on each other’s works, and attending offline writer events.\textsuperscript{24} Still others appreciate online writing for its symbolic progressiveness and freedom, clinging to idealistic visions of internet literature by believing it to be the democratization of literature, a great way to bypass unfair editorial committees, and a manifestation of the spirit of casual, agenda-less communication.\textsuperscript{25}

The literary community has had a mixed response to internet literature. Some are condescending or dismissive of it, convinced these are poor quality “apprentice works” that are more like word games or “play” writing than serious literature.\textsuperscript{26} Chen Cun, in discussing his own online writing, points out that much of it is “fragmented” and diary-like. “If it were to become a book, there would have to be significant addition, expansion, and revision. Therefore it is not a ‘work.’ At most it is a draft. Such a semifinished [sic] product is acceptable on the web, but in other forms it would be difficult.”\textsuperscript{27} Similar voices believe that online writing should not in fact be labeled “literature” since it is not superior to print literature.\textsuperscript{28}

Others voices in the literary community, however, are more supportive and open to the idea of online literature, believing that it shows a promising future. Some literary awards, such as the Lao She Literary Award, have been given while taking internet popularity into account.\textsuperscript{29} Nevertheless, for both sides the category of zuojia, or author, remains “sacred” to the degree that internet writers do not refer to themselves as “online authors,” although some of their readers might.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{24} Zhao, “Social network market,” 88.
\textsuperscript{25} Yang, “Chinese Internet Literature and the Changing Field of Print Culture,” 343.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 345.
\textsuperscript{27} Hockx, \textit{Internet Literature in China}, 82-83.
\textsuperscript{28} Yang, “Chinese Internet Literature and the Changing Field of Print Culture,” 345.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 342.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 345.
There are, however, downsides to the world of online writing. Polls sometimes suffer from rigged voting, in which individuals are able to spam their preferred choice, and copyright choices are often filled with tension.\(^{31}\) For example, a copyright with Qidian, one of China’s literature sites, forces writers to choose one of three options that do not allow for any story spinoffs created by users, which leads to a negative ripple effect.\(^{32}\) Plagiarism is also a large problem. “The similarity in the author’s pen name, the main characters’ names, the plot development, and the writing style betray the copyright violators.”\(^{33}\) Statistics for copyright losses can be staggering. “As a 100,000-word novel costs 1 Yuan to read online,” and “the 10 most popular novels on Qidian are reproduced without permission on average 8 million times each,” the economic loss can be as high as eight million yuan for one novel alone.\(^{34}\) Some writers do not care about these losses, however, since after a one-time lump sum is paid to the writer, Qidian owns all copyright, benefits, and adaptation rights, so it is only Qidian that loses.\(^{35}\) Other drawbacks to online sites play on people’s fears that a website will be a scam, or that it will steal their payment information or give them a computer virus. Additionally, something as simple as “hits” can be difficult to define, and can be misleading. In the world of internet fiction, “hits” are equivalent to “copies sold,” but whether a “hit” counts as a single, quick click or a user lingering on a web page remains unclear for many sites.

\(^{31}\) Zhao, “Social network market,” 94.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 95.
\(^{33}\) Ibid.
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
\(^{35}\) Ibid.
Genre Fiction

As internet fiction rises, so does genre fiction. While not new in China by any means, genre fiction is more prevalent now with the digital age. The internet, with its interactivity and options to read on screen and in installments, not only offers a large variety of reading material for all sorts of readers’ tastes, but has also begun to redefine genres and distinguish between genre fiction and wenxue, or “literature.”36 Although “genre fiction is usually thin in ideological content, [it] always expresses some ethical values, such as good and evil, hero’s revenge, [and] romantic and other ideas receptive to mass audiences.”37

Readers have different tastes, and genre fiction comes in many forms to meet those tastes. Some genre fiction caters more to women,38 for example, while some contains explicit content. Common factors often include “transport[ing] readers to a dream world” and readers’ ability to “identify with implausible superheroes.”39 Romance, or “YY fiction,” arising from yiyin, or “lust of the mind,” is popular. Boys’ love (BL, also known as danmei, which translates as “beautiful”) and slash (fanfiction between well-known characters of the same sex, also known as tongren) are also popular, especially with characters such as Snape and Harry from J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series. Erotica, too, has many readers, although it is sometimes blacklisted and banned for obscene or pornographic content.40 This leads to many debates over what legally constitutes as porn and what can be considered to have “artistic value,”41 all of which is part of a larger “vulgar” vs. “elite” divide in fiction.

36 Hockx, Internet Literature in China, 111.
38 Hockx, Internet Literature in China, 111.
39 Ibid., 112.
40 Ibid., 115-116.
41 Ibid., 119.
There are several overall trends in this wake of consumer culture apparent in recent genre fiction. According to one article, a strong difference between boys’ genre and girls’ genre fiction has emerged in addition to the pursuit of exoticism, or a strangeness factor, in literature. Genre fiction plays a large role in readers’ social identity, and there is an emergent struggle between personalization—a consumer culture trait—and depersonalization as seen in stories that deal more with collective identity and overarching cultural values, the kind of which are resplendent in traditional classical Chinese literature.  

According to some critics, “Modern Chinese fiction also supports these goals, and national identity, but the trend of contemporary novels is to exploit the average person’s weaknesses and actually splinters society by making more distinctions.” However, genre fiction is able to satisfy the needs of both the individual and the community, according to one reviewer: it is able to meet the needs of the public that depends on one another as a common group, imitates each other, and seeks refuge in one another psychologically, but genre fiction also meets the needs of the individual within this, catering to each person’s different tastes and psychological needs.

However, critics have noted a collapse of consciousness or thoughtfulness in consumer culture overall, and this is apparent in genre literature as well. A general sense of prosperity in modern culture clashes with the reality of deteriorating relationships. Especially in fiction that features “human vs. human” themes as opposed to “human vs. nature” ones, the predominant consumer culture only deals with surface, superficial issues and can come off as impersonal and transient. A dog-eat-dog world, both in reality and

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43 Ibid., 13.
44 Ibid., 14.
fiction, leads to a sense of unspeakable loneliness and soul-solitude that is full of anxiety and a general feeling of being lost.

This is something not unique to Chinese genre fiction and is apparent in Japanese manga and anime as well as many Western novels and movies. Across the board, countries face the same kind of consumer culture and issue of spiritual loss. It is perhaps for this very reason that young readers, who are already trying to figure out who they are, figure out what their place is in the world and in their communities, and navigate the complicated venues of school and home, turn to fiction. Although this turn to fiction occurs across all literature, perhaps genre fiction, in its pursuit of the new and the strange and the curious, lends itself better to minds with ample time to read, ability to surf online, and desire to discover new things. This turn, however, could also be viewed as a form of escapism, where readers with an “inability to face social reality” run to genre fiction for relief.

**Suspense Fiction**

Within genre fiction, one of the most popular genres to rise has been suspense fiction, which often shares space with mystery and detective fiction. Suspense is a relatively recent genre to take the stage in China, although it is not a new or imported one. Chinese suspense stories historically are more mysterious than their Western counterparts, tracing their roots back to detective stories, popular judge fiction, and influences from the West, such as *Sherlock Holmes*, and suspense was very popular in the 1930s. However, as a genre, suspense was mostly suppressed in the PRC until recently. By nature, suspense fiction goes against Mao’s famous Yan’an talks, with unresolved mystery sometimes relying on heavenly intervention, and is not very conducive to socialist ideology.

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45 Ibid.
As such, recent Chinese suspense fiction is better seen as an internet-enabled revival. Its main influences have been Western detective novels, English gothic fiction, post-1970s American thriller/horror fiction, and *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*.  

“The focus of the suspense novel is not to laud its inspiration or to incite heroic emotions, but rather to satisfy curiosity." Similar to science fiction in this way, this genre also aims to “characterize human nature and show both good and bad examples of humanity.”

In the psychological suspense subgenre, influenced by European and U.S. “black suspense novels” of the 1940s-60s, the focus is not to solve a case or punish the criminals, but instead to analyze a case that has a confusing background and analyze a criminal’s state of mind.

Influences from the West and Japan are heavy in this new revival. In Japan, reasoning-based novels are very popular and can and are often regarded as suspense novels in China. Edgar Allan Poe and Dan Brown also carry weight in this genre realm. According to one article,

“Poe’s footsteps echo in contemporary Chinese suspense novels, [but] if Poe’s impact on Chinese contemporary suspense novels can be viewed as distant footsteps to follow, American writer Dan Brown’s are much more recent. [Brown’s] novels portray a variety of story elements, such as murder, horror, detective, decryption, suspense, chase, romance, etc. all in one, but also integrate various cultural symbols and contemporary high-tech.”

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48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 138.
50 Ibid.
According to Wu Bingjie, director of the Department of Creative Studies from the Chinese Writers Association, the “craze of local suspense and horror novels” did not really start until 2005.53 “In this year, American writer Dan Brown’s Da Vinci Code was introduced to China. As a result, suspense novels received the highest degree of attention, and the number of publications and their influence has reached the highest ever.”54 The Da Vinci Code swept through China, sold madly, and prompted subsequent popularity for the genre. “In 2005, Gui Gu Nu e-published “Broken Face,” which made network traffic soar over one million hits in the first few weeks.55 Li Yijen’s “Butterfly,” heralded as the Chinese Da Vinci Code, followed in September of the same year.56 2006 and 2007 saw the rise of the Ghost Blows Out the Light and the Grave Robbers series. However, published suspense novels came under attack in 2007 following the release of the Japanese manga Death Note,57 an extremely dark story tiptoeing the line between horror and suspense. “Suspense genre’s signature mystification, sensory stimulation, and bloody violence was restricted, but despite these constraints, suspense novels continue to sell fast.”58

In general, “suspense stories can be divided into two categories: reality-based and supernatural,” according to one article. “Reality-based characteristics include having a bizarre plot that advances the story,” readers being hooked into the story by their own curiosity, and “rigorous reasoning” that is used to make everything clear.59 Supernatural-based stories, on the other hand, “feature supernatural phenomena, much more obvious creative thinking, and often face the problem of being ‘too incredible’—readers doubt the

53 Xu, “Chinese Suspense Novel Readers Boost Writing Standards.”
54 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
authenticity of the novel.” The authors note that both of these types of suspense fiction “stem from a bizarre, real-life or seemingly real life event, and are full of suspense fragments woven together with logical reasoning, creating a mysterious atmosphere—this is the core creative thinking behind a suspense novel.”

Horror suspense forms a large part of both of these suspense categories, popular for a variety of reasons. For one, fear followed by catharsis is a strong literary technique that is difficult to top. Another reason the subgenre thrives is that it often juxtaposes love and horror to fully entrap and entrance readers. In these stories, love “appears timely to make [readers] feel happy,” and the “great contrast of these two extreme emotions” creates a unique horror suspense culture that “exudes great charm” and caters to a wider audience than the suspense, horror, and romance elements would by themselves. Third, although in the past the horror suspense genre promoted “rough, empty, vulgar content” and was “abandoned by the public,” modern horror suspense “creatively showcases heavy influence from popular culture… [as well as] a reflection on individual, human nature, exploring social perspectives [and] advocating the spirit of mainstream culture…” Fourth, horror fiction is able to address certain societal issues through subtle, subverted, but legal means. Human instinct, desires, and impulses mix with the accelerated pace of modern life, civilized society, social norms, and cultural practices of repression in these stories, and it is “only through mythology, religion, fantasy, and art’s subliminal transfer” that society can “give vent” to these.

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60 Ibid., 139.
61 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 130.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 129.
Ghost fiction, tomb stories, and psychological suspense make up the rest of the suspense genre, respectively.

**Magazine-books, or “Mooks”**

In the grand standoff of print literature vs. internet literature, the rise and popularity of mooks is noteworthy as the third large medium of a great publishing trifecta for modern popular fiction, contributing to the explosion of genre literature, writers’ overnight popularity, and the production of consumer-driven literature. 2006 and 2007 became known as the “golden years” of mook publishing, mirroring the surge of suspense and suspense-horror fiction, and many writers and editors were eager to move into the spacious market to capitalize on these flourishing trends.

Mooks are a modern twist on an old medium that has morphed to cater to a consumerist age and younger readers, and many of its characteristics mirror those of internet writing. For instance, it is easier to publish in a mook than with a publishing house, and it is also an easier medium with which to test the waters for new authors, new genres, and new stories. Additionally, the serialization of stories, including short stories, novellas, and novels, contribute to the growing popularity of authors and overall financial success and stability for authors, editors, and mook publishers. Mooks also build readership much like television series, manga, web comics, and internet literature, and many popular genre writers in China have published online, in print, and in mooks.

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Mooks began springing up in China as early as the late 1990s. Creative imitation of Korean magazines and writers as well as heavy influence from literary magazines in Japan both played a role in mook beginnings. The modern popular rise did not start until author Guo Jingming established his writing studio in 2004 and began publishing his mook *Island*, which instantly became a market best-seller at over 200,000 copies per month. *Island* quickly raised interest in the market’s potential, and in 2006, Guo and the Changjiang Publishing Company together “released *Top Novel*, whose fashionable, exquisite style caused…issue numbers to reach 500,000 copies” monthly. Following these successes, mooks entered the market in droves. Mook sales quickly surpassed those of contemporary literary magazines such as *Renmin Wenxue*, *Dangdai*, and *Shouhau*, and became a major portion of the book market.

An important distinction to make is the difference between mooks and literary journals or literary magazines, although many Chinese articles still use these terms interchangeably. Audience, first of all, is a key indicator. Literary magazines do not target young adults nearly as proactively, whereas mooks, with their entertainment and magazine features, have pursued the YA audience from the start. Second, mooks are sometimes defined by industry insiders in terms of their relation to a certain group of authors working and collaborating, causing mooks to emerge as an entirely new, distinct style.

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69 “The Powerful Appeal of Youth Literature Mooks’ Accumulated Brand.”
70 Huang, “Mook Youth Literature and Its Implications for the Book Publishing Industry,” 18.
71 Xiao, “Young Writers Publishing Becomes Customary.”
72 “The Powerful Appeal of Youth Literature Mooks’ Accumulated Brand.”
in *Publishing Research* lumps this together with the celebrity status of mooks’ editor-in-chiefs.  

Still other industry spokesmen claim that the “blend of information and entertainment and a target of post-90s popular trends…breaks away from pure literature magazines’ editing framework,” or in other words, fashionable packaging and interactive marketing are key features. Last but not least, the medium’s resonance with youth psychology is strong. These five attributes—audience targeting, celebrity editor-in-chiefs, fashionable packaging, interactive marketing, and YA resonance—are what sets mooks apart as a new medium.

Most mooks rely heavily on physical bookstores and newspaper or magazine stands for distribution rather than mail subscriptions, although Cai Jun’s *Suspense World* may be starting a trend to publish online only, having e-published since 2014. Even with this limitation, sales volumes for typical mooks are considerable, with average sales just under several 10,000 copies per month at worst and passing 100,000 at best. Like internet writing, mooks do not appear to be bound by location or geography, nor are they particularly connected to university towns. Because their main writers are usually swept up from the masses, they appear to be geographically universal, if not in rural China, then at least in its urban areas.

According to an article in *Beijing Review*, mooks are popular because of their post-80s generation writers, models, and accessibility to young readers through various external entertainment features—many of the same features that set mooks apart from literary

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73 Huang, “Mook Youth Literature and Its Implications for the Book Publishing Industry,” 19.
74 Ibid., 19.
75 Ibid., 18.
magazines—although attractive layout, celebrity authors, and versatility certainly play key roles as well.

Lead authors perhaps play the biggest role not only in defining and creating the style for their mooks, but also in the popularity and success of the mook market in general. Big names include Guo Jingming, Han Han, Zhang Yueran, Rao Xueman, Cai Jun, Guo Ni, and Ming Xiaoxi. Most of them fall under the label of “post-80s writers,” and all of them are best-selling authors who come to the market with an already-formed, enormous fan base and celebrity status. None of them seem to be professionally trained in writing. Cai Jun, for example, turned to writing only after failing to gain admission to a fine arts school to pursue mapmaking. Han Han is a high school dropout and a professional car racer, and Guo Ni is a former television journalist. Yet these names can now be considered representative of the whole youth literature market and have taken the place of famous literary writers’ names on magazine stands. Due to the writers’ relative youth, they have come to perpetuate a trend called “young writers for young readers.”

Most such writers surface from the masses of Chinese young adults on the internet, or win a mook-sponsored contest and are subsequently published. As such, these new writers are rarely, if at all, professionally trained or groomed to be experts in any one style. Many current popular mook authors started their own writing careers in exactly this way: Guo Jingming, for instance, won a national essay contest sponsored by a mook called

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77 Huang, “Mook Youth Literature and Its Implications for the Book Publishing Industry,” 18.
80 Xiao, “Young Writers Publishing Becomes Customary.”
81 Lai, “Popular Trends of Mooks.”
82 Xiao, “Young Writers Publishing Becomes Customary.”
Mengya in 2001 when he was in high school. In a never-ending circle of popularity, authors first become popular by being published in mooks, use their popularity to establish new mooks, and then use those mooks to amplify their popularity.

However, there are several other features worth mentioning that have significant weight when it comes to popularity: reader interaction, content, strong ties to films, movies, television series, internet, and manga, connection with readers on an emotional and psychological level, and serialization.

As with internet literature, reader interaction plays a huge role in the popularity of mooks. Editors listen to suggestions and feedback through internet groups and QQ, a Facebook-like website, and actively create products based on reader response and opinion. Some mooks boast reader participation throughout every stage of editing and publishing, claiming that this “not only cuts down on the psychological distance between a mook’s brand and its readers, but also most importantly maximizes the mook’s influence and [reader] satisfaction.”

Mooks also hold essay contests and give prizes and awards, often featuring the winner’s photo and winning entry in an issue, and sometimes snapping up a winner to be a regular writer or to work on one of the mook’s creative teams. Top Girl looks for talented young writers to participate in mook writing, editing, and publishing in their “Top Girl” contest; M-Girl invites different “book models” and fans to share their perspectives in a special column every month; and Top Novel works with China’s largest blogging and Twitter-like website, Sina Weibo, to maintain reading platforms, reading

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83 Lai, “Popular Trends of Mooks.”
84 Huang, “Mook Youth Literature and Its Implications for the Book Publishing Industry,” 20.
channels, and a blog that “posts information about signings and answers readers’ questions.”

Content-wise, mooks generally focus on a single topic per issue. Themes can be anything from loneliness, dishonesty, or ambiguity to curses, magic, or vengeance. Mooks will often feature an article or story from the editor-in-chief as well as original short stories or serialized pieces of novels. Some base their content entirely on previously published books, especially by famous authors, as a means of supporting themselves before they can stand on their own. International material also makes a small appearance. In addition to reprinted manga from Japan, mooks will sometimes feature stories from non-Chinese writers, such as Japanese writer Osamu Dazai’s work in Generous. The target audience determines the proportion of pictures and manga to text in a given mook.

The market is relatively quiet politically-speaking, preferring instead to focus on reflecting youth feelings and emotions rather than social commentary. Instead of pushing a political agenda, mooks are concerned with creating safe “dreamlands” for readers and catering to the needs and desires of the YA audience. There is more of an identity-formation theme rather than an explicitly ethical dimension, however. According to one researcher, this “light-hearted approach to teen life and culture is a large and important part of their appeal, as well as the appeal of much commercially successful young adult literature.”

86 Lai, “Popular Trends of Mooks.”
87 “The Powerful Appeal of Youth Literature Mooks’ Accumulated Brand.”
88 Xiao, “Young Writers Publishing Becomes Customary.”
90 Coats, “Young Adult Literature,” 321.
Despite the competition in the mook market, mooks generally ignore each other and are quite content to develop in their own little worlds, which do not overlap much. As such, mook editors do not make a habit of trashing other mooks, parodying them, or including any “meta” content. This is likely due to the fact that they are too short-lived to develop a serious rivalry with another similar style mook, and without being vetted by time, it would be difficult to maintain a good stance from which to pick on other mooks—they are all in the same boat.

Mooks have a strong link to films, movies, television series, internet, and manga, since many stories published in mooks make their way to the big screen or beyond. In March 2010, Guo Jingming’s team released four manga works based on screenplays or scenarios from readers. Other mook-published stories, such as Ming Xiaoxi’s There Will Be an Angel to Love You Instead of Me and Summer’s Desire (literally “Bubbles of Summer”), already published in manga form within mooks, have been reproduced into popular television series.

Additionally, mooks connect with readers on an emotional and psychological level. Many stories feature “adolescent problems such as eating disorders, abuse, depression, [and] drug use” and reflect real life with all of its humor, worry, friendship, family, and romance, while others “take a decidedly lighter view of contemporary culture.” When written well, these stories “easily resonate with young people and meet their emotional needs,” whether by providing an avenue of escape or mirroring what adolescents face in real life, and thus validating and supporting their thoughts and emotions.

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91 Huang, “Mook Youth Literature and Its Implications for the Book Publishing Industry,” 19.
92 Ibid., 18.
93 Coats, “Young Adult Literature,” 321.
94 Huang, “Mook Youth Literature and Its Implications for the Book Publishing Industry,” 19.
This validation that mooks provide “is a crucial factor for all teens as they develop the affective and imagistic aspects of their identity”95 and may be especially important for teens in the post-One-Child Policy era. Because most mook writers were born after the policy’s implementation in 1979, they share a similar background with their readers, and are possibly better equipped to connect to readers who grow up with issues of loneliness and isolation, further cementing the “young writers for young readers” trend.

Mooks play a variety of roles in literary and business markets. They inspire and find new writers, serve as “fishing” venues where publishers can find new talents, establish “author empires,” prepare the market for new releases of novels, serve as companion materials to other magazines, and provide space for genres to grow and form. Very sensibly, mooks also put money into publishers’ pockets.

Not only do mooks provide more regular and predictable income for publishing companies, however, but they also revive the paper publishing market, provide good business for the magazine market and small bookstores, and expand into the nearly untapped YA literature market. Many publishing houses originally viewed mooks as a “testing-the-waters” type of experiment but have been pleasantly pleased with the results: mook serialization “allows for the release of brand-name products and merchandise on a schedule,” cultivates a regular readership, and rejuvenates and renovates creative teams while maintaining the brand’s “freshness.”96

95 Coats, “Young Adult Literature,” 321.
96 “The Powerful Appeal of Youth Literature Mooks’ Accumulated Brand.”
Commercialization, Capitalism, and Branding

As seen in the rise of internet fiction and the popularity of mooks, China’s literary markets have experienced an explosion of content written expressly for commercial gain, complete with commodity characteristics and heavy branding campaigns. Understanding the links of this trend to reading demographics, lighter content, the author stardom complex, and the incredible role consumerism plays helps us understand the background factors for the popularity of genre fiction and internet writing.

The growth of consumer culture, as well as the concepts of an “urban author” and a “commercial publisher”97 has affected not only online writing and magazines, but also the world of print. Authors turn secrets or private affairs inside out and market them in the spirit of capitalism. Publishing houses become “best seller machines”98 instead of procurers and producers of art. These changes in the publishing world occurred in 1987 when publishing houses switched over to privatization, ending the state monopoly that had been in effect since the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942.99 Following this, editors became more responsible than authors for any “dubious” content that may be published,100 and authors were free to write whatever they pleased—so long as it would sell. The notion of a “best seller consciousness” or commercial consciousness marks a return to publishing-for-gain in China, since commercial consciousness has existed since the Tang dynasty.101

98 Ibid., 328.
99 Ibid., 326-327.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid., 325-326.
Branding campaigns that spring out of this trend are fierce, both for writers and their stories, and the biggest popularity draw for commercialized literature lies with the authors, both online and for mooks. These celebrity writers “make use of their personal stardom” not only to draw attention to their writing, but also to guarantee their sales in a competitive market.¹⁰² For mooks, they bring the fame, exercise the final say in publication matters, take credit for creative teams’ works under their name, and even sometimes act as models. In one case, based on author Han Han’s connection with an upcoming but not-yet-released mook titled *Party*, fans left numerous comments and expressed their support on the author’s blog well in advance of the mook’s publication, and their backing was so strong, its “first printing numbers reached more than 300,000 copies.”¹⁰³ As a result of this kind of power in the market, big authors are expected to keep up their image and brand by contributing regularly to mooks, publishing their own work on the side, and fully acting out their celebrity roles.

Not all celebrity authors feel positive about their position, however. Zhang Yueran, another post-80s celebrity author, called these writers “commercial instruments” and drew attention to their exploitation, noting that although some celebrity authors scheme and flaunt their position, ignore their own faults, or disregard consequences, they are all “exploited by various people to make money” and are all “entertainment tools used and played by media and critics.”¹⁰⁴ It is almost never the author who decides to create a mook; instead, publishing companies are the ones who invite authors to be chief editors,¹⁰⁵ and

¹⁰² “The Powerful Appeal of Youth Literature Mooks’ Accumulated Brand.”
¹⁰³ Huang, “Mook Youth Literature and Its Implications for the Book Publishing Industry,” 19.
¹⁰⁵ Lai, “Popular Trends of Mooks.”
many authors, says Zhang, do not know what they are in for. This can often deepen conflicts of interest between investors and authors, since investors are focused on using authors’ star power to back projects, and authors often want to focus on writing for the sake of writing, not on writing purely intended to “go commercial.”

The authors that make up these commercial-driven campaigns are themselves part of China’s “urban youth culture,” a quality that gives them plenty to write about but also, for many, undercuts their ability to write beyond themselves. According to one researcher,

This generation grew up with Deng Xiaoping’s opening-up policy and is exposed to and tantalized by western culture to an unmatched degree. They live in the gap between Chinese conventions and western values. As the target consumer of local and global industries, this generation has been ambushed by the powerful invasion of globalization. Their subordinate social status and unguarded willingness to cater to the fast materialization of their lives have unwittingly made them the victims of global capitalism.

Authors such as Chun Shu, a high school dropout-turned-writer known for the “punk spirit” in her works, “quickly become the voice of the generation born in the 1980s that has to deal with their parents’ obsession with high education, while being distracted by the diverse and shifting values caused by China’s commercialization and the influx of western cultures.” Although these writers are determined to be famous, they often lack “the skill and experience of a writer.” For Chun Shu, “despite her audacious pose as a rebellious teenage punk, her life is reduced to a receptive text selling whatever sells,

106 (Viola Tricolor), “MOOK — A Publication Somewhere between a Magazine and a Book.”
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid., 207.
suggesting to us that her flamboyant ‘I-generation’ is actually a generation without a soul, a generation of airheads born from cross-cultural encounters and a consumer society.”

Many writers creating works in such a consumer environment suffer from similar harsh criticism, although mook writers, who are perhaps tied closest to tangible consumer products, seem to receive the worst of it. “Tao Dongfeng, a professor at Capital Normal University in Beijing who has harshly criticized some post-80s writers for their lack of social conscience and their reliance on overblown fantasy elements,” has also criticized mook writers’ very claim to their author status, remarking that “young fans see authors like Guo [Jingming] less as writers than as ‘entertainment idols,’” indicating that what they write is not nearly as important as their looks or the cars they drive. Lest anyone think these critics and older writers are jealous of mook authors’ overnight fortune, they are quick to clarify that such speedy publication produces only low-quality books that are clearly designed for quick profit—an accusation that is “worsened by the presence on the market of several copycats.”

In line with this, chief editors of mooks have noticed that the numbers of talented young writers are not in fact “as high as many imagine,” and the writers that do exist are often “not mature in their work.” Despite the promise of a quick rise to fame in a commoditized market, many writers just as quickly fall by the wayside as leftover dregs of the very market that gave them fame. The influx of new, young writers in the YA market has decreased tremendously in the last few years, and even previously published young writers have decreased their work, with as many as nine out of ten no longer writing at

110 Ibid.
111 King, “China’s Pop Fiction.”
112 Zhang and Dalby, “Writers from the 1980s: A Golden Generation Tarnished.”
113 Lai, “Popular Trends of Mooks.”
The reasons for these drop-offs lie with the extreme difficulty of receiving publisher backing, without which young writers easily fall back into obscurity.

Of the young writers that manage to make their careers, however, many particularly dislike the “post-80s writers” tag, and within reason. They are quick to point out that other countries do not designate literature based on generation but on quality. Famous author Han Han “refused” the brand, and Zhang Yueran has called it “ludicrous.” Many young writers view the label as the destructive “alienation of younger writers,” and this pushback has caused many in the mook and literary worlds to look to international literature as a model, noting that in Western literature especially, “artistic and literary praise and achievement...[are not] compartmentalized and judged by generation” but rather by “talent and impact.” Writers and readers also observe how the “ideals and styles of newer generations [are] seen as an integral part of the publishing tapestry”—not simply supplanting or disrespecting older writers, but instead becoming part of a larger whole—and many call for a new literary world view that reflects this.

Young Adult Literature

Another byproduct of the digital age and of China’s urban youth has been the rise of literature for young adult readers. While this age range is flexible, with some writers focusing on the middle school to high school range and others including adults up to their 30s who have already entered the workforce, the qualities that are displayed in this genre overlap with the qualities of mook writing and are similar to internet fiction: materialistic,

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114 Zhang and Dalby, “Writers from the 1980s: A Golden Generation Tarnished.”
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
intimate, interactive, easy to read, easily accessible, and with themes that touch on social identity, loneliness, and everyday matters.

It should be noted that as a genre, “young adult literature” does not exist as such in modern China. Part of the reason for this is that it is not as clearly defined as it is in Western literature, although the Western definition is itself amorphous. While originally referring to “realistic fiction that was set in the real (as opposed to imagined), contemporary world and addressed problems, issues, and life circumstances of interest to young readers aged approximately 12-18” when the term originated in the late 1960s, the Western definition of this genre now caters to readers aged 10-25, is often read by adults, and has expanded itself from “a genre consisting of little more than problem novels and romances” to “literature that welcomes artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking.” In China, this genre is more similar to the early Western definition of YA literature and can additionally be defined as white collar, with a larger target demographic of teens to early 30s that has both purchasing power and time for leisure.

In truth, there is a significant overlap between the writers and the readers of this genre not only in terms of age, affinity, and background experiences, but also in regards to what they like, what piques their interest, how they react to situations, what they feel, what they want to know, and so on. This is part of the draw of the “young-writers-for-young-readers” market, although it can make distinguishing these writers from their readers difficult in certain situations. The same can also be said for young internet writers. Especially for internet and mook mediums, reader interaction is so much a part of the creative process that it may be difficult to tell where writer creativity stops and reader influence begins, although this is certainly a key piece to the marketing and financial
success of popular fiction. Writers and publishers for this genre know how to read the market, identify what readers or consumers want, and give it to them.

In the words of Lu Jinbo, a famous publisher of YA literature in China, the “post-70s, post-80s, and post-90s culture of consumerism” that the market caters to has a definite preference for youthful, suspenseful, and fantastical types of fiction. Influenced by manga and the internet, this readership generation’s tastes are distinct, and thus “a new market between youth literature and children’s literature” has also opened up for development. In other words, “tween” literature has made an appearance in China.

For the young adult genre, a question of legitimacy arises that necessitates defining not only what makes “literature” but also designating who decides what fits that definition. In the West, YA literature has faced similar problems of legitimacy, especially due to its focus on youth psychology and emotion, a shared trait with mook content. These emotions are deemed “vital components of identity” for youths, whose brain development perceives them as having more importance than adults give them, but these same emotions “are often dismissed as unimportant or even silly and distracting in institutional settings, where concern for linguistic, intellectual, and cognitive growth outweighs attention to other aspects of development.”

Fiction that mirrors young people's emotions, therefore, is well-received by young adult readers but tends to be passed over as not serious, and not “overly invested in the project of growth toward maturity” or “challenging moral or social problems” by adults. However, if viewed as an integral part of youth development and “a more complex

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118 Xiao, “Young Writers Publishing Becomes Customary.”
119 Ibid.
120 Coats, “Young Adult Literature,” 321.
121 Ibid.
formulation of identity, one that takes into account emotions and image perception as well as ethical and intellectual development,” 122 one might be able to see the deeper implications and usefulness of mediums that publish it. Until then, this question of legitimacy is one that writers and critics will be debating for a while.

“Pure” vs. Popular Literary Divide

This question of legitimacy also haunts popular literature, whether produced online or in print. For the most part, critics have been slow to accept popular works as having any similar quality to traditional forms of literature. Many voices point to the shoddy, unfinished quality of popular works, with their shallow themes, vulgarity, and lack of spiritual, moral, or philosophical consciousness. According to some, genre fiction floods the internet with pulp.123 Others blame consumerism.

“Zhi An, literature critic and deputy chief editor of New Star Press, expressed his pessimism for the future of the publication industry” when he lamented the fact that the publishing industry “only cares about the short-term hype.”124 He argued that catering to general interests leads to overall decline of quality, and where previously “it took one year to prepare, edit, print and publish a book…now, many books are ready in one or two months,” concluding that this “is stupid.”125 It is important to note that perhaps the largest inherent issue critics face with popular and YA literature, and by extent, mook-published literature, is the problem of how to “think seriously about texts that are apt to have a short

122 Ibid.
124 Zhang and Dalby, “Writers from the 1980s: A Golden Generation Tarnished.”
125 Ibid.
shelf life because their success depends on their responsiveness to a readership who are, by definition, in a state of flux.”

Wu Bingjie, the Director of Research for the Chinese Writers Association, believes the low quality writing of China’s best-sellers is due to the sheer volume of popular works that falls below the average literacy level of educated readers. “Best-selling works are not necessarily ‘low level,’” he says, “but have low-level authors.” However, he notes that many writers in the suspense and detective fiction fields have broken away from the low-quality status caused by simplified, cookie-cutter, and shallow writing that often mars these works.

None of this is really new, though. Back in the 1600s, for example, Chinese critics had similar debates over classical poetry and unrhyming prose written in vernacular Chinese, something only fit for the masses, until intellectuals began producing similar prose. In the West, Dickens, for example, was paid by installments for his popular fiction that was published serially and considered entertainment fiction rather than serious literature, but his works are now considered classical literature. Other popular fiction, on the other hand, has not stood the test of time. Penny dreadfuls, for instance, were literally labeled so because they were so cheap and terribly written, and nowadays, they have been all but forgotten. Perhaps the defining factor for whether popular fiction becomes readily acknowledged as “real” literature or not in the end comes down to the craft and skill of the writing itself, and time.

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126 Coats, “Young Adult Literature,” 321.
127 Xu, “Chinese Suspense Novel Readers Boost Writing Standards.”
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
Critics are quick to judge the popular content in mooks as well, and like Wu Bingjie, they also have plenty to say about the writers. For the most part, their distaste for mook authors is based on the latters' pop icon status and overnight popularity—two points that may be said to overlap with critics’ distaste for popular literature in general. Content-wise, critics take issue with the quality of works produced and denounce mook writers for their lack of long-term planning, or inability to see the big picture. However, the biggest question when evaluating mooks seems to be not whether mook-published content has quality, but whether it can be defined as “literature” at all. Critics argue that mooks are “unworthy of the tradition of Chinese literature because they are simply entertaining stories,” showing “no commitment to social issues or improving moral philosophy”—they are not even very original.130

This divide may boil down to a simple generational clash of values, however. One china.org.cn article refers to the current “golden” generation of writers as “fashionable, care-free, always seeking to challenge authority figures and traditions,” iconoclastic, and similar “to those the West has tackled for over three decades.”131 However, the article also points out that in China, this set of values is perceived by elders as a lack of social responsibility and, when it appears in literature, which is “usually the realm of venerable and experienced sages,” clashes are inevitable.132 Post-80s writer An Yiru, in a comment about her peers, notes that although “what they write may not be classic...these books do attract younger kids to read, which is better than smoking, drinking and hanging around bars.”133

130 Coats, “Young Adult Literature,” 320.
131 Zhang and Dalby, “Writers from the 1980s: A Golden Generation Tarnished.”
132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
Some authors, such as Teddy Carey, do not appear to care what critics think. “I don't care if these old men accept me. Their formalism doesn't concern me. I just use my words to record my life, and find those who understand me.” Others, however, return the attack. For example, Han Han published a series of articles that “derided classical Chinese literature circles ‘as meaningless and corrupted’” in retaliation for several “unfriendly comments” made about himself and other post-80s writers by Bai Ye, a famous writer and literature critic. This somewhat immature response spurred a nationwide debate as “famed figures from the worlds of literature, movies and music as well as thousands of netizens joined the fray” and weighed in on either side. It would seem that these debates over popular fiction and “pure” literature are far from over.

Wrap-Up

With the rise of internet literature, the comeback of genre fiction, the advent of mooks, the development of the author marketing industry, and the evolution of young adult literature, the literary climate in China was perfect for someone like Cai Jun, purveyor of the psychological suspense genre, to make his debut. In the words of one researcher, “Cai Jun’s success isn’t incidental, but due to his conscientious pursuit of the genre-ization of fiction at a time in which internet literature was beginning to become popular, and, in an age that emphasizes leisure and entertainment more and more, also due to the popularization of story-reading with corresponding readership support.” In other words, Cai struck the iron while it was hot.

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134 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
Now that we have examined the larger context of the literary scene in China, we can better understand the relevance and popularity of Cai and his works in the Chinese popular literature market.
CHAPTER 3
“CHINA’S STEPHEN KING”

Born in 1978, Cai Jun is one of the only non-post-80s authors to hold significant traction in the popular literature market, rubbing shoulders with the likes of Anni Baobei (b. 1975), another famous internet author known for “her tales of desolation and loneliness.” Success seems to have followed Cai since the beginning. Sources vary on whether he knew he wanted to be a writer from a young age or not, although Cai has admitted reading and writing were the “antidotes” to his “gloomy adolescence.” According to an article in the Beijing Review, Cai switched to writing after failing to gain admittance to a fine arts school to pursue his lifelong dream of mapmaking. Not long thereafter, his first novel Virus soared to popularity in 2001, followed swiftly by his second novel Curse later the same year.

Cai draws his inspiration from a variety of global cinematic and literary media spanning China, the U.S., Britain, Japan, France, and the Netherlands. He wrote his first novel Virus, for instance, after reading two Japanese horror stories, “Wuye xiongliing” (The Ring, a series by Koji Suzuki) and “Cuimian” (Hypnosis) —and because he had been challenged by one user to write something more “suitable for the public to read.”

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1 Yang, “Chinese Internet Literature and the Changing Field of Print Culture,” 337.
4 Liu, “Cai Jun.”
6 Ibid., 185.
According to Zhou Zhixiong in an article in the *Lanzhou Academic Journal*, “Cai Jun is influenced by [Sir Arthur] Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and also Japanese mystery writers Edogawa Rampo, Seishi Yokomizo, Shaping, and Xia Shujingzi, [as well as] France’s Maurice LeBròn, the Netherlands’ van Gulik, [and] China’s Cheng Xiaqing, Sun Liaohong, and Dan Lu’an, among others”—not to mention Stephen King. This U.S. and Japanese influence shines through in plot similarities more than writing techniques. For instance, the plot in Cai’s novel *God is Watching You* is very similar to the plot of *The Da Vinci Code*. According to Zhou, Cai “also shows significant Edgar Allen Poe influence” and influence “from Western films…such as the Butterfly Effect.” Synthesizing these Western suspense and thriller trends with Chinese traditional ghost stories, cultural heritage, and reality, Cai aims to create a unique, reality-based suspense brand.

Cai has high aspirations for his works. Not only has he professed a desire to write the best novel possible in Chinese “because he believes Chinese is the most beautiful language in the world,” but according to an article in *Beijing Review*, “he [also] aims to build his Chinese thriller series into a brand comparable to Alfred Hitchcock.” Moreover, he has indicated a wish that his writing connect with readers and promote self-reflection. In the epilogue of his novel *Curse*, Cai writes that, regarding the psychological side of his stories, “I don’t need Freud to come explain the reasons [behind our actions] to us, because all of this comes from our own making. I hope this book carries to people, and in addition to the suspense, fosters personal soul-searching and contemplation.” It is precisely this

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7 Ibid., 187.
8 Ibid., 186.
9 Ibid., 187.
10 Ibid.
11 Liu, “Cai Jun.”
12 Lai, “Popular Trends of Mooks.”
focus on the psychological, combined with Western influence, Chinese literary heritage, and reality, that defines his suspense style and sets him apart from other writers.

In this chapter, we will look at who Cai is in terms of genre, writing, and literary reception and address his swift rise to popularity.

**Comparison to Other Suspense and Fiction Writers**

After the explosion of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* and the subsequent spotlight on suspense fiction, suspense writers moved from relatively niche positions in the market to the center of attention. Writers in the genre began to stratify. “From Cai Jun’s psychological suspense, Zhou Dedong’s horror suspense, [and] Cheng Gang’s spiritual suspense to many types of supernatural suspense, Gui Maxing’s reasoning suspense, Lei Mi’s criminal suspense, and Guan Wuye’s psychedelic suspense, the national suspense fiction market expanded by leaps and bounds…”

Compared to other Chinese writers, Cai is often mentioned in the same breath as Gui Chuideng and Zhou Dedong. Gui and Cai are often lumped together as writing in the same genre, although this is actually not the case; Gui writes mainly fantastical, mystical mystery fiction whereas Cai writes unnatural, mysterious fiction with an explanation. The close comparison between these two comes down to a similarity between genre terms in Chinese—*xuanhuan* and *xuanyi*, or “fantasy” and “suspense”—but the difference lies in the way these writers treat that which is mysterious in their works. Gui writes a more “unbelievable, no explanation” kind of mystery fiction, where strange events simply happen and can be attributed to mysticism. Cai, on the other hand, tends to write stories

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14 Xu, “Chinese Suspense Novel Readers Boost Writing Standards.”
that are more unnatural or uncanny, as opposed to bordering magical realism, with reasons behind their mystery that can be attributed to scientific knowledge.

Cai Jun and Zhou Dedong, however, do write in the same genre—so much so that the title “China’s Stephen King” has also been applied to Zhou. According to one article, Zhou Dedong “has ranked at or near the top in several national polls of horror readers, including one that sought to name ‘China's Stephen King.’”15 Bestseller editor Daniel Dan Fei, who has worked with Bertelsmann, Xiron, and ComicFans publishing houses, considers both authors to be forerunners in China’s horror suspense genre.16 Zhou’s works contain more horror elements than Cai’s, however.

Oddly enough, Zhou began writing romance stories in the United States before writing for literary magazines Reader and Girlfriend in China,17 which makes his switch to horror fiction peculiar. In an interview with Sina, Zhou told a moderator that he chose horror fiction for three reasons: first, because one’s eyes become more “x-ray-like” after turning thirty, and see more of the ugly, evil, helpless things in life—and the horror genre is the best genre for “exposing the evil side of humanity.”18 Second, he made the switch after he had already begun writing commercialized popular fiction, and third, he told the moderator, “At that time there was no Chinese horror fiction, no ghost stories on the internet, or only few, and it was a blank space in the market.”19

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
Despite different beginnings, there are many other similarities between the two authors. For instance, both Cai and Zhou have been involved in the commercialized popular fiction market, perhaps seen no clearer than in their involvement with literary magazines and mooks. In 1999, Zhou Dedong “founded China's first horror magazine in Beijing.” Cai, too, jumped headfirst into this market and became heavily involved in mooks as writer, editor, and publisher, making his mark on the industry by founding the first psychological suspense mook, *Suspense World*.

Both authors also aim to expose different sides of humanity with their works, although they go about this in different ways. Zhou takes his inspiration directly from personal nightmares, using his dreams as raw story material. This way, in addition to events containing a natural unexpected quality, there is also a distinct feeling of terror. Cai, on the other hand, draws his story material from real life, and instead of focusing on conveying an atmosphere of terror or involving characters in a dream-like maze, he aims to draw attention to unnatural, unexplained phenomena and uncover their secrets scientifically, bit by bit.

Perhaps the biggest similarity between these authors’ works is their intent to actively involve readers. For Zhou’s fiction, he insists his stories are not “flat…but [rather] a three-dimensional horror maze” that readers integrate into and participate in, using their own knowledge and guesswork to understand his stories—in other words, an “open narrative.” Likewise, Cai draws heavily on readers’ own interest in the reasoning behind his characters’ actions and the explanation behind story events; the question *why* propels...
his works. For both authors, readers must use some of their own intuition and reasoning skills to make sense of things.

While Cai and Zhou compete for the title of “China’s Stephen King,” the similarities between Cai’s writing and the real Stephen King’s work end beyond writing in the same genre. King’s stories exhibit ghosts and bloodthirsty scenes, describing characters’ life-and-death struggles with the paranormal; Cai’s works, on the other hand, focus not on the supernatural but the unnatural. In addition, the writing techniques between these two authors differ greatly. While King’s works embody techniques that jump back and forth not only in terms of space, but also time, Cai’s works use chronological order to unfold the plot.22 Yet another difference between the authors is the way they approach ideas of good and evil. In his novel Bag of Bones, King focuses on depicting how the devil does not actually exist in real life. Cai, on the other hand, focuses on the description of real, or normal, people in his story Abandoned Village and the ways in which there is a little bit of evil inside everyone.23 Although one might expect an impressive mastery of atmospheric tension, shockingly real character revelations and reactions, and bold plot developments with a title such as “China’s Stephen King,” it would seem that the real Stephen King still holds the upper hand.

Cai’s Works

Any analysis of Cai’s works will swiftly unearth his distinct writing style and show that his stories have many themes and character types in common. In particular, Cai tends to work with a distinctive type of protagonist, usually under-develops his characters,

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23 Ibid., 37.
mirrors the real world as much as possible, and develops suspense in his plots in a unique fashion.

Cai’s works contain strong influences from *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, as do most works in Chinese suspense fiction. His heroines mostly have a “Nie Xiaoqian” temperament: silent, melancholy, and sensitive. “Romance between characters is usually implicit, [and] female characters generally are godlike and intelligent and initiate the love interest, characteristic of an emerging male fiction writer trend.” Cai considers these qualities, as well as the presence of female characters and the “emotional drama” they add to a story, “very important,” however, since tomb fiction—grave-based supernatural thriller fiction, which he also writes—and suspense fiction are often dominated by male characters; he has told interviewers that “a female character in my fiction is not just a vase.” Other *Strange Stories* characteristics also find their way into Cai’s stories, such as houses full of dark secrets, “deformed” white shadows, and odd or paranormal events.

The distinctive protagonist in Cai’s works may be described as a character that encompasses a “blank slate” third person objective point of view. The protagonist is usually a loner and socially awkward. The absence of shared internal thoughts and other characterization accentuates this awkwardness by making these characters less accessible to readers, in effect cutting readers off from understanding them and making them as enigmatic as their surroundings. This is especially prevalent in “Kidnapped” and *A Child’s Past Life* (*Shengsi He*), where even when partial internal rationalization or characters’

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24 A famous female lead character from one of the stories in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*
27 Shen, “Cai Jun’s ‘Tomb-Guarding Beast’ is Anti-Tomb Fiction.”
reactions to events are present, the reader still does not feel as if he or she is actually seeing
the character for who he or she is. It is, instead, as if the reader is attempting to rapport
with a stage player or a mirror that has “no personal bias,”²⁹ as one article insightfully
notes. It would seem as though Cai intentionally leaves characters up to readers’
interpretation as part of his crafted psychological suspense—a psychological intrigue that
heavily involves the readers and their own determinations of “good” and “bad.”

The psychological intrigue in Cai’s fiction is key. According to one critic, there is
one basic overall characteristic across Cai’s works that enables this: all of the protagonists
have an adverse or unfortunate life experience, and their fate is enormously dramatic. Most
have lost both parents since childhood, or in some cases, the family suddenly suffers an
accident. Sometimes in order for their emotions to be injured, the characters’ psychology
itself carries the shadow of a haunting, traumatic past. All of this brings about a character’s
mental defect or flaw, which leads to all kinds of murder and revenge-based action.³⁰ Cai
roots this in Freud’s idea that people are not always able to become their own master and
that every person has his or her own multi-faceted personality.³¹ Unfortunately, Cai
focuses so heavily on the psychoanalysis that the plot or the depth of the characters
themselves often falls away, which can create problems with his stories’ dependence on
reality-based circumstances.

²⁹ Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, ed., The Chinese Novel at the Turn of the Century (Toronto: University
³¹ Ibid.
Relationship with Reality

Part of Cai’s strategy for creating a vivid, present psychological suspense in his works hinges on his presentation of reality. Settings and situations are supposed to be real enough to evoke a strong recognition from his readers, making them wonder if the events that unfold in the story could truly happen. To do this, Cai leans heavily on “his own interest in cultural and historical knowledge”32 and “includes lots of details concerning everyday life, such as gardens and architectural details, porcelain pieces, references to poetry, Huishan clay figurines, and so on.”33 Since Cai lives in Shanghai, naturally more Shanghai elements come through in his works, such as old alleys, Shanghai dialect in characters’ speech, and crab tofu.34 This incorporation of much of Shanghai life has led some media to claim him as a “grassroots” writer.35

Cai also conducts research to include authentic details and convey certain historical settings. For his most recent novel The Tomb-Guarding Beast (2017), for example, he spent two years poring over hundreds of photos of the town his story is set in, downloading and reading hundreds of archeological reports, and perusing countless historical documents and academic papers all as background research for his novel.36 One journalist notes that compared with Cai’s previous works, The Tomb-Guarding Beast is a breakthrough in terms of its “grand and magnificent historical and cultural background.”37 The novel takes place at the end of the Qing Dynasty and covers the beginning of the Republic of China, the Boxer Rebellion, the Eight-Nation Alliance, and the Manchu Restoration and blends the

32 Ibid., 187.
34 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
manufacturing process for tombs, mausoleum culture, metaphysics, archeology, and art together with this rich historical setting and the storyline to form an eye-catching novel.\(^{38}\)

According to an article in *Literary Contention*, “[Cai’s] novels generally open with [this] real historical setting or during a real event, and are [then] followed by bizarre twists and a mysterious plot…taking something weird and creepy that actually occurred and making it the catalyst for a story.”\(^{39}\) Often, Cai takes something small and ordinary and turns these tiny details of everyday life into focal points for suspense and unease. Or, as critic Zhou notes, he “turns them into something creepy instead of innocent.”\(^{40}\) Hence his stories can be based off of a sense of madness from a particular historical era or something as small as an “‘artifact’ that holds intrinsic mysteries,” such as an old letter or diary.\(^{41}\)

According to Sina, 2011 marked a shift in Cai’s works toward more social-oriented fiction, with Cai intentionally trying to impact current issues or reflect current society since he believes “writers should pay more attention to the real world and intervene in it.”\(^{42}\) Cai has also remarked in an interview that while current fiction set in China can very well tell Chinese stories, it fails to tell China’s stories.\(^{43}\)

Chinese stories do not really have to be explained, as long as they happen in China, but China’s story needs to have a kind of Chinese universality that includes culture, values, and current social reality. This universality is not really touched upon by many types of fiction in our country, or is relatively

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38 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 187.
In The Tomb-Guarding Beast, China’s story is exemplified mainly on a Chinese culture level.\footnote{Ibid.}

Despite this meticulous attention to detail, research, and social awareness, however, Cai’s mirroring of reality stops there. The way in which his characters react to events and to other characters, and the way in which the plot unfolds, tend to be a little strange. Reactions do not always ring true, and plot events are not always connected in a logical pattern. Rather than heightening the sense of unease or strangeness that Cai is looking to create in his suspense fiction, these actually detract from the overall experience of his story and make it feel unsound. And when readers start questioning the soundness of plot or character, it does not matter how reality-based the story’s setting is; the story’s spellbinding quality is broken, and with it, all suspense.

**Influences and Suspense Development**

Cai Jun’s writing shows heavy influence not only from Stephen King, but also from Dan Brown, whose *Da Vinci Code* inspired a new generation of suspense writing in China that focused on plot, scientific explanation, twists, and rational thinking.\footnote{Zhou, “Psychological Suspense—On Cai Jun’s Fiction,” 186.} In a novel that analyzes Dan Brown’s formula for thriller fiction, authors Zhu Zhenwu and Zhang Aiping note that the “knowledge + suspense” model that is a key underpinning of Brown’s fiction has also been utilized recently by many Chinese suspense writers, though this model itself is not new. It can be identified in such works of fiction as *Flowers in the Mirror* and *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* dating back to the Qing dynasty.\footnote{Zhenwu Zhu and Aiping Zhang, *The Dan Brown Craze: An Analysis of His Formula for Thriller Fiction* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 16-17.} Quoting a 2005
report from *China Book Business*, they cite Cai as one of many Chinese fiction writers who have “acknowledged their debt to Brown.” In Cai’s own words,

Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* has [had] a huge influence on me. It gave me a clear definition of thriller fiction, and it boosted my self-confidence about exploring the ‘suspense + knowledge’ model for genre fiction, which has been the strongest technique in my writing all along.

Cai’s works also show many similarities to mystery and detective fiction with an emphasis on frame of mind. These “basic elements of detective fiction” include “plot twists and irregular bouts of uncertainty and suspense one after another, vivid details, a pinpoint-precision type of reasoning, [and] a surprise ending.” These qualities, however, are also shared with suspense fiction in general. Author Mai Jia, “who has been called ‘the Dan Brown of China,’” uses similar techniques in his writing, “build[ing] his stories on a fast-paced quest that is often complicated by a series of suspenseful and surprising events. Also, he is good at blending history, legends, mysteries, anecdotes, codes, and unsolved cases seamlessly into the plot and funneling bits of information on various subjects into the tight narrative”—much like Cai.

Cai’s works begin to differentiate themselves from others in the suspense genre by focusing on psychological suspense. Specifically, the reasons why something happens or why characters make certain choices are the driving force in Cai’s stories. As critic Zhou notes, Cai’s fiction combines qualities from many genres into a type of “comprehensive fiction,” but “its most distinct feature is the combination of suspenseful story with

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47 Ibid., 16.
48 Ibid.
50 Zhu and Zhang, *The Dan Brown Craze*, 16.
psychological analysis.” Zhou uses a cloth wrapper analogy to describe how Cai’s writing causes readers to desire “to get at the heart of things”: the story unfolds bit by bit, and the more answers readers obtain, the more they understand, but also the more questions are raised. Thus readers are pulled in further. Instead of depending on fantasy or supernatural forces to explain his story quirks, Cai is known for his use of tight logic and science to solve questions, even when supernatural elements are involved, and according to some critics, always leaves a little mystery in the end.

Cai’s personal definition of suspense is, according to Zhou, “facing life and delving deep into history and the future, and recognizing life’s unknowability. This kind of exploration of space, time, and psychological dimensions radiates outward and enriches the story’s meaning.” In Cai’s own words, as seen in the epilogue of his novel Tianji, the writer says:

Suspense in fiction and suspense in real life are the same thing. Suspense is the inadvertent explosion of a tiny atom millions of years ago. Suspense is the night Eve fell from the tree, hundreds of thousands of years ago. Suspense is the deep trenches before the Duke of Wellington’s troops at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Suspense is the bullet fired at Archduke Ferdinand on the street in Sarajevo in 1914. Suspense is a single tear in the deep of a Shanghai night in 2007.

Awards, Adaptations, and Literary Acclaim

In 2000, Cai won second prize in the new writers category for the Bertelsmann People’s Literature Award competition for his short story “Kidnapped,” which was then published that December in Dangdai, a contemporary literature magazine—the first of his

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
stories to appear in print. His novel The 19th Floor of Hell won the Sina Literary Award, and he has also won awards for his shorter works. His short story “Fei Xiang” won third prize in a short story contest sponsored by Under the Banyan Tree, and “A Night in Beijing” won the Maitai Bei Short Story Award and the Baihua Literature Award.\(^{56}\) Receipt of these prestigious awards indicates that the literary world is taking some notice, strengthening the success of Cai’s suspense writing. From this point on, his stories were published and republished across the internet.

Cai’s works have proved so popular that several stories have been adapted into television series and even been the basis for films. “Kidnapped” was adapted into a movie in August 2006, and its movie script version was published in Cai’s collections Airen de Toulu (2005) and Sheng Ying (2006). The 19th Floor of Hell and Secret have also been made into feature films. In December 2003, an adaptation of his short story “Abandoned Village (Huang Cun)” appeared on stage. Curse was adapted into the television series “Hunduan Loulan.” Fifteen of the stories in his collection “That Longest Night (Zui manchang de na yi ye)” have been adapted for television. Cai’s “That Longest Night” series has been so popular, one source reported that almost one hundred film and television companies were scrambling for the rights for movie, television, and online drama adaptations.\(^{57}\) Cai’s short story “Sharen qiang” was adapted into a radio drama by Fate Never Studio, and “Mousha si shuixinhua” was adapted into a film in 2016 and released both in China and Hong Kong (English title: Kill Time).\(^{58}\)

\(^{56}\) Xiao, “Cai Jun’s ‘That Longest Night Volume 2’ Continues Wonderful Stories.”

\(^{57}\) Ibid.

\(^{58}\) Shang, “Interview with Cai Jun.”
Cai’s literary success is further indicated by his inclusion on panels as a valuable critic and source of experience. From 2005 to 2007, Cai was included on an international literary symposium panel for turn-of-the-century literary discussion and several judging panels for Sina-sponsored creative writing competitions, and in June 2008, he had his own focus panel with the “China Writers Association.”

**Critics’ Response**

While some critics seem enamored by Cai’s writing, others find it too patchy to comment on. Solid literary response to his works and reviews of his writing are difficult to come by as a result.

Critics who favor Cai are in love with his talent and the way he shapes the atmosphere in his stories. Some view him as part of the revitalization of China’s pop fiction and literary markets, while others savor the intellectual enjoyment they gain from the wealth of knowledge demonstrated in his works. His stories are praised for being multi-faceted, combining elements from different genres, having a strong readability, and containing a deep psychological element. Literary critic Wang Gan observes that “[Cai’s] novels aren’t simple genre fiction or simple ghost stories” but rather “pure literature and genre literature wrapped together... There are poetic and pure literary expressive elements in his text.”

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59 “Three Decades of Study in Literary Theories - From the New Era into the New Century” (International Symposium of the Fourth Representative Conference of China’s Chinese and Foreign Literary Theories Society, 2007), hosted by Central China Normal University. Panel judge for Sina’s 3rd and 5th Creative Literature Big Prize Competitions, 2005 and 2007, respectively.
60 Zhou, “Psychological Suspense—On Cai Jun’s Fiction,” 188.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 187.
63 Ibid., 186.
64 Xiao, “Cai Jun’s ‘That Longest Night Volume 2’ Continues Wonderful Stories.”
Critics are also quick to pick up on Cai’s attention to social issues in his works, particularly since this departs from most readers’ expectations of genre fiction. According to the Director of the Novel Division of the Shanghai Writers Association, Shen Jialu, “Cai Jun tells the story from the outside in, analyzing the current emptiness, absurdity, and thrill-seeking of the wealthy class. In reality, it reveals the general deterioration of values in present society caused by the lack of culture in the present rapid economic development.”65 Chen Cun, Vice President of the Shanghai Writers Association, notes that although Cai writes genre literature, “he [adds] a lot of human elements and his own ideas about the world. His stories aren’t only about ghosts or murder.”66 Another book reviewer, Meng Fanqi, claims that Cai’s “That Longest Night,” for example, “isn’t so much a suspense work as a novel describing the plight of human existence.”67 Zhang Chu, a Hong Kong writer whose works encompass young adult fiction and larger social issues, holds a similar view: “Cai Jun takes the mental anxiety disorders or delusional disorders of modern Chinese people and magnifies them in order to analyze the reason behind everything that makes people anxious, everything that drives them to madness, everything that causes delusions. The reason is nothing more than desire.”68

Cai’s inclusion of social issues and “pure” literary techniques are not the only ways he diverges from other suspense genre writers. Critic Wang Zheng is also keen to note Cai’s unusual take on psychological suspense:

This is a brilliant young writer. His works draw on classic detective and reasoning-based fiction’s best features, but the style of demonstrating that is completely changed, leaning instead towards horror scenes and

65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
atmosphere-building, towards bizarre plot designs, towards character portrayal. Combined with a kind of poetic, beautiful, emotionally rich descriptive language, this gives his works an attractive force like that of a poppy. His trademark psychological suspense is an inward look into human nature and an excavation of what lies in people’s hearts and their desires, not at all like the psychological analysis style [of writing]. Suspense is its outward appearance; psychological is its inner momentum. 69

But there are also deficiencies in Cai’s work. Critic Li Jianjun is quick to point out that Cai’s writing is “seriously divorced from social reality, lacks social content, [and has] no lasting impact on our hearts,” though he hopes to see a more “meaningful stance” in Cai’s writing now that Cai is a bit more mature in his craft and successful in the market. 70 Others point out that Cai’s work is so driven by plot and suspense development that there is not much room left for characterization; in effect, the characters are dominated by the plot. This sentiment seems to be echoed the most. One article title, “Cai Jun: the Suspenseless Suspense Writer” 71 references this directly.

Zhou goes one step further and claims that Cai’s fiction boils down to nothing more than “popular fiction that relies on the interest of a thoughtful reader,” since “characters on the whole are genre-cized so much that they are only stereotypes,” and the psychological analysis that does exist exists only in the characters rapidly experiencing their narratives, causing them to drown in their experiences rather than promoting character complexity through deep introspection. 72 Ultimately, Zhou notes, readers are left with a needlessly complicated and odd story about some common, everyday happenstance. 73

70 Ibid., 188.
71 Li, “Cai Jun: The Suspenseless Suspense Writer.”
73 Ibid.
This has not escaped readers’ notice, either, though many readers are more charitable when it comes to the way Cai’s writing strings them along. In a review of a 2016 collection of Cai’s stories entitled “That Longest Night,” one anonymous online reader offers valuable feedback:

Cai Jun’s “A Night of Ex-girlfriends’ Secrets” is gorgeous and eye-catching on the surface and rich and fulfilling underneath. The text is both finely woven and spacious, and with a few strokes of the brush draws people into a particularly imagination-inspiring atmosphere. Deep history and a strange reality work together to pique readers’ interest. Among several ex-girlfriends, is there one acting to hurt the others? Cai Jun’s ending is perhaps soft-hearted, or perhaps trying not to fall into old habits—in truth it succeeds and fails at both. If you want to know who the master culprit is behind everything, only life and fate are to blame. This is dissatisfying for readers—readers need an object to let their anger out on: a bad guy, or a bad thing. If you encounter hardship but there’s nothing to blame, that leaves a bad taste in your mouth.74

Cai Jun is aware of the flaws in his own works and, according to some, has made efforts to rectify his character portrayal and development. Critic Zhou notes that in one of Cai’s more recent works, Tianji, realistic character portrayal makes somewhat of a breakthrough.75 In an interview with Sina, Cai acknowledged that the same kind of protagonist often runs through his stories but admitted that this is not his greatest concern when he writes; instead, he considers it more important to fashion a story that connotes Balzac’s “human comedy.”76 There is also evidence that Cai updates his stories from print to print. Later editions of “Kidnapped,” for example, contain slight changes in prose and omit awkward sentences or phrases present in previous versions.

74 Xiao, “Cai Jun’s ‘That Longest Night Volume 2’ Continues Wonderful Stories.”
76 Shang, “Interview with Cai Jun.”
As for the overall lack of focus concerning Cai in literary commentaries and publications, Cai believes one reason to be simply that “literary critics generally pay more attention to works with pure literary aspects, so their scope is narrower”—and, he adds, “they clearly haven’t read the current market bestsellers.”

Right Time, Right Medium, Right Audience

With this mixed literary reception, it may seem curious that Cai is as popular as he is. However, this easily comes down to logistics in the world of publishing and trends in Chinese literature instead of being based so much on the content of Cai’s writing.

The age of internet, of genre fiction, of mooks, and of young writers all combine to create a particularly fertile moment in the world of Chinese literature and publishing for someone like Cai to soar to popularity. As discussed in the last chapter, the advent of internet writing in China made it possible for anyone to write and be read, thereby circumventing publishing houses’ slush piles and journals’ niche quality requirements. It also enabled overnight popularity, with no wait times for printing or editing. With genre fiction also on the rise, it is also the perfect time to explore and trail-blaze one of China’s newer genres. Readers are interested in anything new in a genre they want to explore, and the print industry responded by exploding the market with a plethora of genre-specific magazine stories in short, easy-to-read and cheap-to-buy format: mooks. Since Cai has been involved in all three of these mediums, he was in the perfect position to attain success as an author.

Internet Beginnings

The internet was not only the popularity hurdle, but also the reading hurdle for Cai Jun’s works, according to critic Zhou. This important litmus test gauged readers’ interest in Cai’s writing; if he had not received favorable feedback from readers online, it is unlikely his works would have taken off. More importantly for Cai was where he managed to get published. In 2000, he submitted his short story “Tianbao daqiuchang de xianluo” (天宝大球场的陷落) to Under the Banyan Tree and was published that spring. He consequently published twenty additional short stories that year. Being published on this site not only lent credibility to his works, but also provided a solid base of readers.

From this point on, Cai’s works have been published, reprinted, and made available on several online literature sites, including Under the Banyan Tree, Sohu Reader, Tengxun Reader, Sina Reader, Online Bookstore, China’s New Age Reading Net, Zhulang Fiction, China Fiction Coalition, This Age Fiction Net, Yiwen Xinyuan, Shulu Literature Net, Starting Point Chinese Net, and Fiction Readers Net. In terms of internet popularity, he is one of the most popular writers to read.

To this day, Cai’s works share qualities with internet literature in terms of brevity, plot construction, and character development. One might expect his works to break away from this early internet writing influence, and become more like print literature. However, due to the particular nature of internet writing, there is a significant amount of “writing for readers” that authors must adhere to. If his readers are reading more and more internet literature because internet literature is more prevalent, it becomes what they expect to read,

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78 Ibid., 186.
79 Ibid., 185-186.
80 Ibid., 186.
and what they want to read, so the fact that Cai’s writing has stayed true to his internet beginnings makes sense from this point of view.

**Involvement in Mooks and Editing**

In terms of mediums, Cai is also well-situated for success in the realm of mooks and editing. Since 2007, he has been the editor, lead writer, or producer for several genre-based mooks, including *Mystery Fiction*, *Suspense Magazine*, and *Angel Detective Agency*, and as editor-in-chief of *Suspense World*, he uses his brand and name to sell copies, find new writers, and genre-build. According to one article, “the writer's style decides the mook's style,” and Cai’s projects tend to circle the suspense or horror genres. *Suspense World*, for example, features darker stories about demon worlds, cursed objects, death, grim reapers, and the blurred line between dreams and reality, with a little science fiction thrown in. The blurb inside its cover claims it is the “king of China’s suspense genre monthly periodicals” and also outlines its goal to promote the suspense genre by “choosing best-selling works, defining a new position of ‘emphasizing literature, emphasizing thinking, and emphasizing culture’” and promoting high quality manuscripts.

In July 2016, Cai also launched a new suspense mook, *Rashomon Recollections*, whose title is based off the idea of the Rashomon effect. This effect is central to the 1950s film *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa—a film that is itself based on a short story by Ryunosuke Akutagawa called “In a Grove” (Yabu no Naka), which was originally published in a literature magazine. The idea is that a single event can elicit contradictory

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81 Lai, “Popular Trends of Mooks.”
83 Ibid.
interpretations and points of view from different individuals—a theme that has been quite popular in Western film in the last few decades.

Perhaps most interesting is Cai’s broad vision for mooks. *Suspense World* transitioned entirely to online publishing in 2014, and is the first mook in China to make this leap. With internet publishing comes more accessibility to readers, and possibly a return to Cai Jun’s roots.

Cai predicts the suspense genre will only continue to grow in China.84

**Audience**

Another key to Cai’s popularity may be audience. Not only is Cai perfectly positioned to choose new writers and define the suspense genre by running a popular suspense mook, his very genre and medium choices predispose him to a specific, younger audience, making him highly influential in the market. Cai writes mainly for the high school to post-college age,85 a huge demographic that is very powerful in terms of ideas and consumer pull. More stable than a 12-16 age range in terms of interests, the wider age span encompasses a more mature demographic while still catering to fanciful whims of its younger members. As of 2009, Cai was included in a list of the top five names that an article in the *Beijing Review* claimed could be “regarded as representative of the whole youth literature market,” rubbing shoulders with Guo Jingming, Han Han, Zhang Yueran, and Rao Xueman.86

84 Shang, “Interview with Cai Jun.”
86 Lai, “Popular Trends of Mooks.”
According to Lu Jinbo (a major writer-turned-publisher who has had a hand in lifting internet literature and youth writing authors such as Wang Shuo, Han Han, Guo Jingming, and Anni Baobei to popularity), in addition to being “influenced by manga and internet, this ‘post-70s’, ‘post-80s’, and ‘post-90s’ culture of consumerism already has a system”—in other words, members of this culture know what they want, and how and where to get it. “They like youth, suspense, and fantasy types of fiction novels and magazines,” likely because of the relatable characters, relatable circumstances, and relatable dreams found in these types of writing. As new markets emerge to cater to these wishes, popular writers gain incredible influence in terms of creating and defining what will satisfy readers.

Wider than the mook market, however, internet writers like Cai Jun and Anni Baobei first found traction “with China’s disaffected internet youth.” China’s “Net Generation” is formed of youth who were born after economic reform and in the age of internet, and as they grow up, they seem to be ardently searching for stories that reflect characters who are similar to them. Baobei’s early stories, for example, “are filled with disturbed characters, all navigating the confusing new world of boom-era China. …Each story features the brash, ambitious but spiritually empty products of the one-child generation. These are the Chinese kids who grew up looking inwards. They are fast and loose with feelings and sex, hungry for money, material goods and all things foreign – and

88 Xiao, “Young Writers Publishing Becomes Customary.”
89 Ibid.
90 Hewett, “Interview: Annie Baobei.”
91 Yang, “Chinese Internet Literature and the Changing Field of Print Culture,” 341.
they’re messed up.” As one interviewer notes, “To her fans, Li is a saviour-figure [sic], a writer who understands their pain, who is one of them.”

Successful writers also pay attention to what their fans want, and Cai has shown he is receptive to this. He used to run a blog where he would interact with fans on a frequent basis, respond to questions and posts, and take readers’ opinions into account. Between November 2005, when Cai began his blog, and July 2008 when he closed it, visit numbers had already surpassed 2.6 million. His publishing company, however, still listens to reader feedback and pays close attention to reader demands and requirements, endeavoring to “take its lead” from them.

In one memorable instance, a chat with an online reader named “23” changed the direction of Cai’s career. In a conversation about “the future direction of [his] writing, ‘23’ suggested that Cai Jun write some more readable works.” According to Cai, he was suddenly reminded of Koji Suzuki’s Ring series and felt he could write similar fiction. He and “23” immediately made a bet that he would write a horror novel, and this was his impetus for writing Virus.

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92 Hewett, “Interview: Annie Baobei.”
93 Ibid.
95 Cai had to close this blog due to copyright issues once he was published in print.
96 Shen Xian Dao, “About Cai Jun.”
97 There is also a link to “send Cai Jun a letter” on the “About Cai Jun” page on Sina, though I am unsure if this would actually reach him.
99 Ibid.
The Case Study

Although there are many good reasons to study popular authors, in the world of literature it is not enough to be popular or to be the first in something. Trends shift and change, and popularity comes and goes. It is more interesting to study someone who has demonstrated a constant presence in the field of popular literature, and Cai has done just that. While it is always possible that a newer, brighter, younger, and more popular author will come along to debunk him from his position at the head of this genre—famous crime fiction and psychological thriller writer Lei Mi, for instance—Cai has established deep roots for himself and his works, in many ways laying the foundation of the psychological suspense genre in China. In light of his unique pioneering activities in genre-building, his continued popularity and relevance in a young-writers-young-readers market, his audience, and his influence, he is worth a critical study, not only so Western scholars can keep an eye on important authors and trends in young adult fiction in China, but so they can also better understand the rapid development of Chinese popular literature.

Furthermore, in choosing a small piece from Cai’s works, it is possible to gain an insight into Chinese psychological suspense and popular fiction at a particular moment in time. It is also possible to see Cai’s signature style and developing writing skills in action. Since “Kidnapped” is the first of Cai’s stories to win literary acclaim and the first of his works to appear in print, thus opening up the world of print publishing to the author who traverses internet, print, and mook circles, it is a turning point in Cai’s career and an intriguing text for discussion.
A translation and analysis of this short story promises to be beneficial not only to academic scholars, but also to the average English-speaking reader interested in the Chinese suspense genre and looking for more stories to read.
CHAPTER 4
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF “KIDNAPPED”

Cai Jun’s works have been said to include the “supernatural,” but this is better understood to mean the “unnatural,” or the abnormal. As noted in the previous chapter, Cai bases his stories on regular, everyday life and then investigates the slightly out-of-the-ordinary persons and events. “Kidnapped” is a prime example of this.

Beginning with a classic “bear at the door” scenario, the story immediately sparks readers’ curiosity and draws them into the plot. However, Cai’s story does not flesh this plot out very much, or provide many other plotlines to satisfy readers, which leads to a feeling of deficiency and overall dissatisfaction. Rather than plot, the emphasis of the story is instead on the psychological motives of the main character, whose name is never revealed, and how these motives prompt the character to act once the reader has caught up on all the events leading to the climax on the roof. Unfortunately, this psychological motivation is superficial and trope-ish, easily seen through, and instead of prompting the readers to anticipate what happens next in the plot and in the characters’ personal development, it creates a dull, surprise-less tale that readers struggle to slog through.

Despite these rather serious faults, “Kidnapped” is a rich text. Genre-wise, there is not as much suspense as a Western reader might expect, but thematically speaking, there is plenty of content for readers to mull over, and plenty of content for literary scholars and critics to analyze and dissect. Some of this content is borderline obtuse and clichéd, while some of it is difficult to catch the first, second, or even third time through. Ultimately, this creates a multi-layered tale with themes that speak to the societal ostracization of mentally unstable teens, the depth to which materialism has crippled family structures, and the
human need to be understood. From this perspective, it is no wonder that “Kidnapped” won a literary award and international recognition.

For the following analysis, I will first review and analyze the main components of this story, namely narrative style, characterization, description, language, and setting, and indicate how they fit with or depart from Cai’s signature writing style. Next I will address the wealth of symbolism in the story, focusing specifically on the importance of the peephole and the blind man. I will then address various themes throughout the text, including references to both foreign and Chinese literature, “daddy” issues, on the outside looking in, portrayal of mental illness, adulthood, sexism, the clash between old and new, seeing vs. being seen, transformation, and young-adult-specific themes. Next I will address the awkwardness of the writing, tropes and stereotypes, plot holes, suspense that falls flat, and the lack of psychoanalysis. I will then discuss how this compares to Western suspense and traditional Chinese stories and how this could be viewed in terms of “literature.” I will end with larger questions that this story raises and overall takeaways.

Character, Description, and Narrative Elements

Cai Jun uses a first person narrative throughout the entire story that borders on first person omniscient. There are a few key places where he switches to third person omniscient. For example, the narrator always speaks in an “I” voice but conveys details about his face or the aura he emits that no first person character would be able to know without a mirror. In other instances, the readers get a glimpse into Milan’s head and her internal reactions at certain moments—things the narrator could not possibly know, with no indication that he draws these conclusions from her facial expressions. This slip into third person omniscient is not unheard of in fiction and actually occurs in many well-known
novels, such as chapters in the *Harry Potter*, *Alex Rider*, and *Redwall* series, but the difference in those series is that the switch does not happen between paragraphs or even sentences but is separated by sections or chapters. However, slipping into first person omniscient is a mark of amateur writing that new writers often fall into when they are unused to the line between characters knowing information and themselves as the omniscient writer knowing certain information. The most obvious example of this is after the narrator has thrown himself off the roof and is watching the different apartments on the different floors, and the people within them, flash by. The narrator somehow knows what these cameo characters are thinking, as if by throwing himself off the roof and letting go of the money—figuratively relinquishing his hold on life, on materialism, and on what others think and want of him—he has suddenly reached enlightenment.

In terms of character, the protagonist in this story, a young twenty-something or late teen, is far from likeable due to his passivity, a limited sharing of his internal thoughts, his manipulative nature, and his habit of peeping. There is an overabundance of passive tense, which normally may be a prose irregularity that could be chalked up to Cai’s early writing, but it bears mentioning here because of how many times the protagonist makes passive statements instead of making himself the agent or doer of an action, almost as if he does not take responsibility for his own actions or admit that he might be at fault. For example, the protagonist continuously tells Milan, “You have been kidnapped” instead of “I have kidnapped you.” This continued passivity and its by-product, a sense that all the protagonist feels is tranquility, could imply that he does not view himself as the one effecting the kidnapping, or perhaps that he somehow does not put the blame on himself at all.
This sense of tranquility is false, despite the fact that it pervades the story. Instead of tranquility, this impression might better be described as a lack of emotional response. Although the story is told from the first person perspective, the prose is oddly devoid of much of the character’s internal thoughts or feelings, which makes the text seem bare-boned and the protagonist seem standoff-ish and aloof. Based on other stories in Cai’s collection, this is a common theme of his writing. While it may have been unintentional here, this aspect of his writing cannot be chalked up to his early, amateur stories because it continues in his later works; for example, the protagonist who is framed in *The Child’s Past Life* also exhibits this lack of emotional connection. It may simply be that Cai’s protagonists are not that likeable in general, and we might conclude that this is done purposefully, although whether this is due to a writing idiosyncrasy or intentionally to challenge readers, it is difficult to know.

Oddly enough, the only time the protagonist exhibits any emotion beyond a dull curiosity, apathetic victimhood, or the brief feelings of wonder at the end of the story, is when he is being manipulative. When he manipulates on purpose, he exposes a suave, sardonic side of him that immediately piques the reader’s interest. It may seem as though he never uses this manipulative side verbally with Milan, possibly due to chivalry or the strong empathy he feels for her because they are both victims of their circumstances; however, his internal thoughts after he opens up to her and before they have sex indicate that he sounded childlike and innocent on purpose to secure her trust, and her love: “Saying this made me sound like a child, but this [child’s] voice could elicit sympathy from any woman”—or, more literally, “No woman could resist me after I spoke like a child.” The protagonist also uses this manipulative side with his father in their various cell phone
conversations, and also arguably with the police officers at the end. In every case, the protagonist displays significantly more showmanship and control than the average person and acts a certain way to get what he wants, whether it be sex, his father’s monetary assets, or a dramatic exit.

Another reason the protagonist comes off as unlikable is his constant peeping through the peephole. He watches Milan when he cannot sleep, watches her undress, watches her feed the baby, and watches her watch the window and long for freedom. This is the epitome of a “creeper,” and not only does it display the protagonist’s near psychopathic tendencies, but it also strengthens the theme of the protagonist’s irresponsibility: peepholes effectively only go one way. The person being spied on is usually unaware of the spying unless he or she is at the peephole and looking through it. This voyeuristic tendency is a classic male teenager trait, and despite the fact that the protagonist is likely a little older, his stunted maturity due to being locked up for most of his life in a psych ward is believable. However, this voyeurism alienates most readers and is only compounded by his awkward interactions with Milan that betray his desire to own her and bed her as opposed to awkward but milder and relatable teenage crush symptoms.

The other characters in “Kidnapped” are not much more fleshed out and characterized than the protagonist, with perhaps the exception of the father. The father refers to himself in the third person, which seems out of context but may be an overly humble brag on his part, similar to the humility displayed in older Japanese contexts when people refer to themselves as “this one” instead of saying “I.” However, it is more likely that the father does this as a way of speaking down to young children, a habit that is terribly insulting to his adult son. This, coupled with the protagonist’s descriptions of his father’s
strength and vigor as well as reminisces about their past family life, makes him arguably the strongest character second to the protagonist. Despite being less two-dimensional than other characters, the father’s characterization still hinges on brief phone conversations and the protagonist’s recollections and comes off as threadbare.

Milan, as another main character, receives less characterization likely due in part to her supplementary role. Milan is rather traditional and plays to stereotypical feminine tropes: beautiful, luscious, weak-willed, physically weak, and although smart, ultimately ruled by her heart and emotions. One way we see this is how she falls in love with the protagonist’s father after he pushes her into being his mistress. Another example is how she falls in love with the protagonist after he locks her up. Both cases are classic examples of Stockholm syndrome. There is, however, a bit of a clash between the smart and stereotypical labels when Milan tells the protagonist “I am a weak woman”; this appears to be nothing short of a pathetic “feminine” response to a male with power coming on to her, which underlines the patriarchal and male- and sex-dominated undertones of the story, but is complicated by the reference to Yu Dafu’s story, “She is a Weak Woman.” This reference to Chinese literature indicates that Milan is actually smarter and more educated than she appears, which in turn keeps the readers guessing at her true motives, a puzzle that turns out to be a red herring at the end when she declares her unconditional love for the protagonist with an absolution that Western audiences find often in soap operas and poorly written fan fiction. In the end, Milan is perhaps best understood as a limited agent: two-dimensional, easily steered, and incapable of coming to a conclusion that pushes the protagonist out of her life permanently because the plot demands that she does not.
The rest of the characters in the story do not receive much, if any, characterization or growth. The mother sits at home and is sad; the same could be said about a statue, and the only characterization the readers see of her is the fact that she knew the baby was the father’s, not the son’s, and agreed to keep the son in the dark anyway. The blind man, on the other hand, is actually the only character who can truly see into the protagonist without knowing his backstory; his role as a spiritual guide or mentor puts him in a position that receives the protagonist’s grudging respect. His unnatural ability to “see” the situation for what it is even garners a little fear since the protagonist is unsure how to react to the fact that he knows too much. While providing a bit of irony, this also relates to the theme of seeing and being seen and will be discussed further later.

It is also noteworthy that the baby is not so much a character as a stage prop. The protagonist mentions that the father used to play with the child, but based on the rest of the story, the father’s love for and attention to the baby is perhaps more due to the fact that he has an heir to inherit his business, an heir who is mentally sound. In other words, he shows more care for the role the child plays than for the child itself. Milan, likewise, shows little concern over her child or extra attention to him beyond feeding and changing him, as if he is merely a responsibility, like cleaning a kitchen stove, and not her son. This cements the idea that the baby is simply a prop in a larger drama. Strangely enough, the only character to treat the child like a person and part of the family is the protagonist, who finally warms up to the child in the end, tenderly kissing him goodbye and wishing him success while regretting that the baby will never know his older brother. This is the first time he acknowledges his brother as a character—when he himself is about to jump off a building. Previously, he paid no attention to the baby except as part of his preparations for Milan’s
lengthy interment in his makeshift jail-room. For example, when he likens Milan and her breastfeeding to the Sistine Chapel’s Madonna and Child painting, the “and child” part of the painting’s reference is suspiciously absent. These indications may be particularly telling in terms of Cai’s commentary on Chinese family structure in this story, but they ultimately give the protagonist a little bit of heart and enough redeeming quality that the readers care about him before he jumps off the roof.

Description in “Kidnapped” is minimalistic, but unlike the story’s characterization and narration, it is effective and quick, like brush strokes of rapid color. Cai Jun paints a picture of a scene with short impressions, which in turn lends a much-needed credibility to the story and enriches the reading experience. For instance, the morning of the money exchange, the protagonist notes that when people begin to fill the streets, they are “riding bicycles listlessly,” almost like the walking dead. Sentences such as “As the Santana began to descend from the elevated highway, my heart, too, was pulled back toward the ground” also read beautifully. It is important to note that these descriptions deal with places and setting more than feeling or mood. Where they occur, they assist in ironing out the wrinkles created by stilted characterization and a molasses-like plot, providing a breath of fresh air for readers.

Cai also makes excellent use of setting in “Kidnapped.” Street names, buildings, types of roads, and history entwine together to give the reader a real sense of being in Shanghai. This creates the feeling that the story could happen in the real world, in this city, to anyone. Cai’s references to setting come off as natural and completely organic instead of strained, and the reader truly has the impression that this happened in Cai’s own backyard. This astute attention to place, setting, and spatial awareness may be a direct
result of Cai’s interest in mapmaking and may help to explain why amidst his more amateur aspects of writing in this story, the street names and places are so well described.

As mentioned before, however, Cai falls short when it comes to descriptive language for setting a mood or for the interaction between two characters. Part of this is due to the protagonist’s pithy narration and either inability to feel normal feelings or unwillingness to share this with the reader. Other writing choices are also telling. For example, Cai’s text includes a repetitive overuse of qingqing de or qingsong de (softly or gently) to indicate soft or quiet movements instead of a variation of other adjectives for these instances. In addition, Cai uses simple verbs that are not very metaphoric and employs similes too often so that they become strained and nondescript. Combined with short, irregular sentences and some jumping around between paragraphs, with concepts not always fluid from one paragraph to the next, these are classic indications of amateur writing.

On the other hand, Cai sometimes uses wording to his advantage. For instance, when the protagonist switches between referring to his father as “Father” and “Dad” (or “Daddy”), depending on the scene, this subtly indicates his subconscious feelings of closeness to or alienation from his father. He often uses this sarcastically to dig at his father and subvert the father’s treatment of him as a child by playing along and calling him “Daddy” when they converse. In addition, the protagonist constantly uses jingshenbingren, or “psycho,” to refer to himself, indicating that he has on some level accepted this term and its associated derision as part of who he is. In these instances, it is easy to see Cai wielding language purposefully to characterize and develop the protagonist.

One analogy that stands out as too on-the-nose, but also curious in its exceptionalism, is the coffee analogy in the scene where Milan drugs the protagonist in his
father’s office. Prior to falling unconscious, the protagonist likens the sexual tension in the room to the coffee in his hands—it is foreign. Sex, or intimacy with a woman, is also a foreign thing to him. His mind is bitter like the Brazilian coffee, but Milan infuses herself into it. She herself becomes like coffee to him—dark, mysterious, and pervading, like the room with the coffee’s smell and the protagonist’s mind with thoughts of Milan. When he notes that the coffee is hot enough to burn, this indicates an element of danger and some foreshadowing. The language is simplified and overemphasized to guide readers to equivocate A with B, or Milan with coffee, to the extent that it grates when reading it.

However, this analogy is also a curious one, and alludes to more than meets the eye. For instance, why does Cai specifically use “bitter” as an adjective for the protagonist’s mind? Why does he use “infused” or “mixed with” or “poured into” when talking about Milan’s enchantment? There are overly obvious correlations with the “enticement factor” present in this scene, but this analogy also equivocates sexuality and arousal with internationality and foreignness to some extent. Given the rest of the emphasis in this short story to foreign objects, this instance perhaps does not stand out, but it is the first subtle reference to this theme, which bears notice. Additionally, this analogy raises intriguing questions that lead to a richer understanding of the characters and inter-character relationships in this text.

**Symbolism**

What “Kidnapped” lacks in description, characterization, and linguistic fluidity, it makes up in spades with symbolism. The blind man and the peephole are the two symbols that stand out the most in this story, although Cai Jun also includes several smaller ones.
The blind man draws readers’ attention immediately by embodying a typical literary trope of “blind man ‘sees’ the clearest.” In this sense, he becomes a sort of spiritual guide for the protagonist by asking leading questions and wishing him well. His “grotesque” eyes are offsetting to the protagonist, possibly indicating that the protagonist has a deep aversion to anything or anyone “unnatural” or broken. This speaks volumes about the protagonist himself, seeing as he grew up in a mental hospital, but also displays a Chinese cultural aversion to those with disabilities. Interestingly, Cai appears to flip this on its head by making the blind man into a positive example of a person with a disability who has power—in this case, the power of knowing and “seeing” into others. Additionally, Cai also gives the blind man the power to effect change. It is the blind man who tells the police about the protagonist and his plan, which enables them to be prepared when he jumps off the building, and ultimately saves the protagonist’s life. Based on the character trajectories in the story, none of the other characters would have been able to change or influence the course of events and the protagonist’s final leap from the roof, yet the blind man did.

Aside from tying in to the story’s theme of seeing and being seen, this leads to several interesting extrapolations. Perhaps people who can see more of the bigger picture than others can act on that knowledge for the benefit of others and do good. In this way, the blind man comes across as an omniscient force acting for the overall good of others. This indicates that there were other forces at work that can explain aspects of the story—in this case, the blind man telling the police so that the protagonist did not die—which is signature to Cai’s writing style. “Omniscient forces at work for the good of others” is intriguing from a psychological and religious perspective as well.
The peephole is the second main symbol in this story and embodies the theme of being on the outside and looking in. This is riddled throughout the story, and always exists in terms of looking at Milan and at the baby, or in other words, at family, at warmth, at life, at love, and at sexual desire. Two exceptions to using the peephole in terms of outside-looking-in is when the protagonist recalls staring at the sky through the bars of his window in the psychiatric hospital and when he is falling off the building. In the latter instance, he is quite literally on the outside, looking in to various apartments on different floors on his way down. In all of these instances, however, the protagonist is separated by a locked door or a building and thin air, something he himself imposed in most cases. From this, the reader can infer that he longs to have a normal family but he refuses to allow himself one, or rather, he resigns himself to watching from the outside, as if he already knows it is not for him. He rejects all his father’s attempts to reconnect the family and rejects all of Milan’s attempts to make a family with him, albeit a slightly messed up one. It is as though he pines for his lost childhood and his “normal” family but is not willing to try to create a new one, as though he is set on a path of “it can never be,” as if convinced he is cursed, when in fact he is an active agent in his “curse’s” design. This relates strongly to the young adult themes that run through the story, which will be discussed later.

Other symbolism includes money and sex as symbols of power. Money and sex are well established as symbols of power not only in literature but in real life, and Cai uses this specifically to indicate a transition of power. When the father gives the five million yuan to his son, it indicates that the protagonist is the one calling the shots; the description of the father’s white hairs and lost vitality strengthen this transition of power and draw on themes of passing the mantle from father to son and the chronic transition of old to new.
When the protagonist finally has sex with Milan, this also symbolizes a transition of power from father to son and the passing of power from the older generation to the newer one. These instances also form a significant rite of passage for the protagonist and become an integral part of his maturation, defining himself, and splitting his identity from that of his family—themes that will be discussed later.

There is also a simple symbolism concerning phones, which represent connection from individual to individual or from an individual to the outside world in this story. For instance, in the first part of the story, readers are made aware that it took the protagonist some work to get Milan’s phone number. Later on, Milan is worried about her bag missing because her phone was inside it. While these mentions of phones could be attributed to a normal inclusion of modern technology in a modern story, it is also symbolic that the protagonist only communicates with his father via phone until the end, as though their relationship is so deteriorated that in order for them to communicate at all, they must distance themselves by cutting out their faces—another small reference to the power of seeing and being seen.

**Literary Themes**

Themes in this short story abound. One of the most obvious of these is the way in which Western or foreign objects or literature are referenced seemingly at random. The intent behind this may be to make characters appear more educated and globally aware, but its randomness is questionable. Some critics have attempted to defend this by saying “a successful author is also a good reader”¹; however, random foreign references with no

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¹ Zhou, “Psychological Suspense—On Cai Jun’s Fiction,” 188.
organic connection to the plot is actually a post-modern feature of Chinese literature\(^2\) and a quality of Cai’s writing in general.

In this story, these references show up in Milan’s European, non-Chinese name, the protagonist’s knowledge of random international facts, the Volkswagen Santana cab, and the movie stars that were influential and popular in the protagonist’s childhood recollection. The protagonist references Chinese stars, too, but they seem to be an afterthought, especially because they are mentioned second, and the fact that the protagonist makes a point of saying they should not be discounted seems more like evidence of a guilty conscience for not thinking one’s national heroes are as memorable—the logical reason to mention them first. This shadows a bit of a clash between East and West, which is fitting considering the Shanghai setting.

References to Chinese literature form another prevalent theme in this story. The first reference is rather indirect and occurs when the protagonist and Milan are counting the ransom money. The protagonist describes the scene as “we looked like two major-league outlaws, sitting down and divvying up our spoils.” The Chinese phrase here is *jiangyang dadao* (江洋大盗), meaning outlaws or brigands of rivers and lakes who forcefully and violently rob and loot, similar to highway robbers, and invokes an allusion to *Outlaws of the Marsh*. Whether this is a true nod to *Outlaws* or not, the idea present in that novel and in this scene is that the “outlaws” are, in fact, in the right, even if their methods are harsh and questionable.

The second, direct reference to Chinese literature is when Milan says “I am a weak woman,” which the protagonist points out to the readers is a play on the title “She Is a

\(^2\) As opposed to stories such as Yu Dafu’s “Sinking,” in which Western references are integral.
“Weak Woman” by Yu Dafu. This same author wrote “Sinking,” which contains numerous themes of East vs. West, Western ideas undermining and pervading Chinese traditional culture while transforming it, sexual awakening, loneliness, being an outcast, and losing one’s culture. This reference is like a literary Christmas cracker because it opens the door to much analysis; however, its inclusion comes across as a bit of a piggy-back on another, established author’s work in order to make Cai’s story more highbrow. Normally a reference like this might work, but here it falls flat because the rest of Cai’s story cannot keep up in terms of character, plot, and inner psychoanalysis.

“She Is a Weak Woman,” however, is a story about a strong-headed, bisexual female student in Shanghai who, after experimenting with her sexual preferences, ends up gang-raped, mutilated, and killed by invading Japanese soldiers.³ It is appalling that after this mental reference, the protagonist was able to make love with Milan at all. On the other hand, this reference put him in a catch-22: he had to either prove his manhood and be the villain or continue to be weak and almost like a lesbian, an unnatural failure of a person that did not live up to cultural or national standards. By having sex with Milan right after this, he proved that he is a man, not intimidated by a woman. This unfortunately also puts him in the position of the Japanese soldiers taking what they want, despite Milan’s consent. Referencing this story also puts Milan in the position of the strong but ultimately destroyed female protagonist, although there is nothing else in “Kidnapped” that supports this version of her. However, this reference could possibly be understood as a subtle appeal to the main character not to take advantage of her.

A third reference to Chinese literature may be the tale of the executioner and the lady thief that the protagonist remembers. It is safe to assume that this tale is less well known because Cai summarizes the story for the readers in his text. Because of this reference, the protagonist rejects the idea of settling down and living with Milan, although it is unclear if this is because Milan and the lady thief both put forth an amount of love and gratitude that contrasts sharply with their poor living conditions and indicates that they themselves may be mentally unstable, or for another reason.

One of the largest themes running through “Kidnapped” is the idea of being on the outside looking in. The peephole is a physical manifestation of this, and the fall down the outside of the building is another literal example, but this theme also manifests itself through the protagonist’s passive voice. As previously mentioned, the protagonist often uses passive and does not make himself the agent or doer of an action, as if he himself is on the outside looking in at what he, and others, are doing. This in turn alienates the readers and highlights the fact that we, too, are on the outside of this story, looking in to its events and looking in to the protagonist’s mind, wanting to discover what happens next and why. Because of the passive voice, we cannot be a part of the protagonist’s experience even as he shares it with us; the way he tells us shuts us out. The protagonist continues to shut both readers and himself out, strengthening the idea that he does this to himself, and that he could have what he wants but will not allow himself to have it.

Another important theme in “Kidnapped” is that of seeing, being seen, and the elements of gaze. Throughout the story, Cai makes several references to pairs of eyes and the feeling of being watched, but there are other ways in which this theme is incorporated. For instance, the protagonist was shut away in a mental institution so nobody would “see”
him and consider him a disgrace to his father. In the same way, the protagonist shuts away Milan and the baby in a room. He watches Milan from afar and also watches his mother waste away with everything his father has been doing. In the West, this is a classic theme that incorporates the concept of the “gaze” and the idea of the gazer holding power over whomever or whatever he or she gazes upon, a power that is often objectifying and sexual. For someone shut away in a mental institute for the majority of his life, it is no wonder that the protagonist seems particularly vulnerable to the existence of gaze, whether it be the city lights, the looks of passerby, the blind man who should not even be able to tell he is there, or Milan’s fiery, piercing stare. Milan’s stare in particular, although most likely used as merely a dark, mysterious, sensual trope, at least does the courtesy of giving Milan some semblance of power to gaze back.

On a different note, the sexism that runs through this story is difficult to ignore, and although Cai seems to play around with traditional conventions, in the end the protagonist conforms to the pervading social sexist stereotypes. In this story, the men—or at least the “real” men—are seen as strong and mature, while the women are viewed as frail and weak. We see this vocabulary for the father arise at the money hand-off when the protagonist describes him as having been, in a nutshell, a “manly” man who has now lost his vitality. What may strike the reader’s interest is the fact that the protagonist does not actually fit this stereotype; he is everything his father is not. However, he too cannot fully escape sexist attitudes. He assumes he understands what emotional and physical needs Milan has, and also assumes that he can fulfill these. In the end, the mantle of sexual and monetary power have passed to him, he gets to keep the girl, and his frayed relationship with his father is restored. One may argue that this is because all parties came to their senses and
realized family was important, but this resolution of conflict can also be understood in terms of manhood: the protagonist was not a man, the father tried to replace him, the protagonist became a man via a sexual rite of passage and a gutsy leap off a roof, and the father awarded the protagonist with acceptance.

On the female side of this, the ladies are all but literally confined to their homes. The mother figure is absent from all plot action, effectively a home furnishing that the protagonist feels generic affection for. Milan exhibits more agency, but as already noted, is constrained by her position as mistress, love-object, love-teacher, and mother, and not given a voice that does not fall in love with the protagonist or express her own wishes or needs, despite several “let me go” lines. She does not even express a need to go to the bathroom without the protagonist first thinking of it. Her requests to be set free are borderline cursory and without real urgency or desire, or even fear, making her presence in the story little better than a doll’s. The protagonist certainly takes his time viewing her as a person instead of a sheep—dumb, docile, and obedient—which he refers to her as more than once.

It is not clear by the end of the story that any of these ideas have changed. One could argue that Milan is no better than a small child who stubbornly stayed put exactly where she was, waiting for her parent, or in this case, spontaneous love interest, to return, but even small children run off, and even sheep wander. This instead appears to indicate that her actions are intended to be romantic; after all, she waited for him. However, given that the reasons she fell in love with the protagonist are vague and appear to be motivated solely by her sexism-mandated role in the story, her devotion is suspicious, and the story’s saccharine ending seems a little too perfect and not very convincing.
Time is also a strong theme in this story. We see this in the clash between past and present, childhood and adulthood, then and now, but we also see this in aspects of the story that we might not expect, such as building names and setting. For example, Cai mentions the Jiushi Renaissance building, which speaks for itself. This mention may also count as a bit of foreshadowing, although at this point in the story, the reader does not yet know how the protagonist will achieve this revival or renaissance—whether by somehow fixing the relationship with his father or by dying and moving on to a new world. Cai also references the Old Jiangsu and New Jiangsu buildings at one point, in almost the same breath as drawing the reader’s attention to a father and son pair, and the protagonist notes that these two buildings live in harmony, like next-door neighbors. This highlights his desire to restore his relationship with his father and resolve the tension between present and past. In addition to the building names, there is also a pertinent book title that Cai drops at the beginning of the story: Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. This hint lets the readers know that this theme will be a crux to the entire story, and that the past will be juxtaposed with the current situation. And what better place to host this tension than in Shanghai? Out of all the cities in China, Shanghai is most notable for being the meeting ground between old and new, both in terms of architecture and culture. However, the protagonist also references the Shanghai Exhibition Center by its old name on purpose, and almost in the same breath mentions the sculpture in the back that was put in only in 1987, which leads to the notion that he is stuck in the past, on purpose.

Although the protagonist shows a strong desire to return to the way things were in his childhood, before money came and interrupted his family’s happiness, he actually shows a hesitation and a dislike for things remaining the same. For instance, when Milan
proposes staying in the room forever, and keeping things the way they are, the protagonist backs off. Despite this proposal being exactly what he wants, it does not change his relationship with his father, which is what he truly wants to revert and why he pines for “the good old days.” In a sense, he views the “old” status quo as the happy family of his childhood, and in pursuing the restoration of that, he changes the “new” status quo—that is, his shattered family—by kidnapping Milan and his baby brother, and he intends to keep it changed; he does not want to settle and go back to a life of imprisonment, whether literally in the mental institute or metaphorically by settling down with the little family of his hostages.

**Young Adult Themes**

“Kidnapped” also contains several noteworthy YA-specific themes revolving around sexuality, growing up, and relationships. In terms of finding self-identity, separating the self from parents, leaving childhood and becoming an adult, and coming of age themes, the protagonist runs the gamut in this story. Specifically in terms of his father, the protagonist wants to separate himself from his father and not be controlled by him any longer; however, since he has always been under his father’s thumb and desired his approval, this separation is also about finding his own identity as separate from who he has always been, which in large part has been defined by his father. We may also observe that this idea of the young generation acting out against the old generation is a very May Fourth trait, especially in terms of toppling the patriarchal family. This father-son tension colors several of the other themes in this story and is only resolved at the end, following a transition of power that is demarcated in terms of both sex and money, but is also highlighted by a newly mature, mutual understanding between the two characters.
Part of this separation includes a sexual rite of passage, moving from child to man. In many cultures, adulthood is defined in part by being sexually experienced and virile, and a person’s manhood is strongly linked with having been with a woman. This is a classic rite of passage for any YA story. However, this experience does more than make the protagonist a “man”—it forces him to see things from his father’s perspective and confront what it is about his father that he despises so much. The protagonist condemns his father, rebels against him, and wants to control him, but ultimately father and son are not too different; after all, they both bed the same woman. The sex scene with Milan is a glaringly obvious overlap between father and son, and an incredibly oedipal case in which the son follows in his father’s footsteps almost to a T. Other oedipal aspects of the son’s transition from boy to man include the son’s intense admiration-turned-hatred for his father as a child and, finally, taking his father’s place as the virile male of the story and the alpha male of a nuclear family that functions as a hopeful, renewed version of the protagonist’s childhood family unit. As a byproduct of the love scene with Milan, the protagonist’s ability to see his father’s perspective and understand his motives, while on one hand a function of this Oedipus complex, is on the other hand a sign of maturation and a significant part of moving from boy to man psychologically, not merely physically. This maturation is strengthened by the protagonist saying “I love you” to his father when he spots his father in the crowd before he hits the ground—a clear indicator that their rivalry is finished.

The need for control is particularly strong for the protagonist. Control is linked with power, and thus with manhood in this story, so although this theme is not necessarily a YA theme so much as a human theme, in this case it is very much a part of the protagonist’s transition from boy to man. In the story, he demonstrates a need to control
his own life and a desire to control the lives of other people, perhaps as a surrogate for acting like an adult. After all, his only example has been his father, who controlled him by delineating his world and confining him to the mental hospital. More than anything, the protagonist wants to break free, but he does this not only by seizing control of himself but also control of Milan and the baby, and thus his father, too—which is a solid step farther than just wanting to be free. Ironically, seizing control is something his father did, and turns into another way he is more like his father than before. We see this need for control arise in the event of the kidnapping but also in the protagonist’s hidden manipulative nature, when he acts a certain way to get what he wants.

Part of this need for control erupts from a juvenile rejection of responsibility. This is a classic situation of defining one’s world to fit one’s likes and to fit that which one can control, which does not include unpleasant consequences to actions. As discussed previously, this can be seen in the way the protagonist takes no responsibility for looking at Milan through the peephole and his own use of passive voice and reluctance to state that he is the doer of an action. In addition to these, the protagonist also uses his mental illness as an excuse to avoid providing a real explanation for his actions, thoughts, and feelings—a trump card to steer the conversation away from dangerous personal waters. When Milan confronts him on his mental stability, noting pointedly that in kidnapping her and discussing the kidnapping, he seems normal enough to her, he replies with a manipulative question: “Do you want me to act like a normal person?” The implication here is clearly that any normal person would be entitled to some severe feelings of hatred and might lash out at her and/or the child. This threat is hollow, but the protagonist implies it nonetheless to stop Milan from using logic and reason on him and to regain control of the kidnapping.
situation psychologically. What he cannot admit to, or take responsibility for, and what Milan hints at already in the story, is that he may in fact be perfectly sane. Rather than facing this or considering it, however, he chooses to use his mental instability as a false front because it is easier than the alternative, and quite a convenient fear-inspiring, pity-grabbing tactic.

With all of these crisscrossing, roiling themes, the protagonist looks more than ever like the main character in a YA drama. He wants atonement with his father but wants to rub his newfound control in his father’s face; he wants to kidnap Milan and the child and extort a ransom but wants to be discovered and wants the police involved. It seems, actually, that the protagonist does not know what he wants other than a vague sense of family and love. This goes beyond a repaired family, and is more like reaching back into the past and bringing what once was back into existence; the protagonist has a sense that this will not work, which may help to explain why it appears that his plan all along was to jump off the roof in the end no matter what happened. This restless sense of not knowing what one wants is left unanswered at the end of the story, despite the happy love-and-family-themed fairytale glaze, and perhaps is the most telling theme that places this story solidly in the realm of YA literature.

A Hint of New Realism

“Kidnapped,” as already noted, contains a mix of awkward, inexperienced writing and notes of true literary prowess. Another hint of literary prowess can be seen in the mention of a horse sculpture near the back entrance to the Sino-Soviet Friendship Building that the protagonist walks past with his suitcase full of money. On the surface, this is nothing more than Cai’s inclusion of a real sculpture in Shanghai to solidify the “real feel”
setting that is one of his writing’s strong suits. A quick internet search, however, reveals that the sculpture was fashioned by a French-American artist, Arman; thus this piece of art becomes yet another international reference in Cai’s already riddled story. While there is nothing particularly special about this, further research reveals that this sculpture in fact contains references to new realism, and it is this undertone that contains huge story implications.

New realism is an artistic movement that focuses on the mundane, everyday world and seeks to destroy the idyllic idea that art has to mean something. As such, its artists tend to use or even violently destroy everyday objects to prove that old attitudes toward art are dead, and that art has moved on into a new world with “new perceptions of the real”—a movement that lines up well with the New Culture or May Fourth Movement.

The sculpture Cai mentions briefly in “Kidnapped” reflects this. *Cavalleria Eroica* is made of several metal, skeletal horses arranged on top of one another as if in a frame-by-frame, slow-motion capture of one horse rearing. The following excerpt, taken from an online page dedicated to the sculptor, notes several themes present in Arman’s work that Cai clearly meant to pull upon to deepen his story.

Many of Arman's early sculptures point to the strangeness inherent in the idea of identical, mass produced *[sic]* objects. Gathering these identical objects together, he distracts us from their functional purpose and presents them instead as endlessly repeated forms - forms which seem to have a deeper meaning that, [via] the processes of modernization, has been lost to us. In his focus on repetition, Arman's work echoes that of many American Minimalists and Pop artists of the same period. …Arman's persistent use of trash was a deliberate nod to the waste that mass production generates when time passes and goods are discarded. It also points to the wreckage of

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human history and the threat that humanity's production of waste might eventually literally bury us.\textsuperscript{5}

Many of these themes overlap with Cai’s story. First of all, being unique in a culture that mass-produces everything the same is a great coming-of-age motif for young adult fiction not only in terms of content, but also business: it sells books. Young readers are constantly embroiled in a quest to discover who they are and what their identity means in terms of existing or future social relationships. Second, Arman’s use of trash to create art and comment on society mirrors the way Cai uses a mentally ill protagonist for the same purposes. His protagonist is effectively discarded by his family, especially his father who clearly prefers a younger, healthier offspring, and it certainly leads to a wreckage of their family. Lastly, the rejection of modernization and mass consumption, and a trend toward obliteration and the act of destruction present in Arman’s work mirrors the way Cai’s protagonist rejects his new family unit and social conventions and goes against what everyone expects of him, opting instead for a self-obliterating strategy for the sake of making a point. The implications of this become darker still because in the end, the protagonist fails to kill himself and therefore make his point. What, then, can be said of the themes and ideas he represented? Have they, too, failed? Is going against societal norms utterly useless in the end?

These questions carry deep and dark philosophical implications. Unfortunately, most readers will miss this subtle nod and the consequent ideological explosion it creates in the text. Out of all the culturally relevant references Cai could have chosen from such a large, bustling city as Shanghai, he chose to mention this particular sculpture, and it is

worth noting because it is one of the only literarily complex attributes present in Cai’s work, and a rather strong one.

**Weaknesses and Awkward Writing**

These positive attributes of Cai’s writing aside, his story contains more than its fair share of awkward language, forced character interaction, stilted dialogue, strained or missing character development, unrealistic story aspects, and tropes, even for an early piece from his career. These elements of style and storytelling are so poorly presented in places, yet so intrinsic to good writing in their uncontrived forms, that they cannot be left unaddressed.

In terms of action, plot, and dialogue, “Kidnapped” is not very engaging at all. Most action scenes are so awkward to read, it is similar to watching a play-by-play of the Sims, but worse. Additionally, the story’s content is closer to soap opera material than a short story. Not only do the characters behave in predictable, dramatic ways, but Cai loses out on the opportunity to pose real social questions and promote introspection by denying his characters more development. In this same vein, the protagonist’s mental illness and experience of being shunned by family and society, with no friends to turn to, comes across as a little too convenient and simplistic. This simplification and the unrealistic unfolding of the story dull the impact of this story’s otherwise intriguing aspects.

This problem with disengagement is perhaps seen nowhere so clearly as in the sex scene. This scene is utterly manga-like in its execution: first the protagonist reaches for her hand, then her shoulder, then he digs into her shoulder, and so on. The motions are automaton-escape and clunky. The action in this scene, which should count as one of the most emotionally-driven scenes in the story, is bare and almost textbook. It is so far
removed from a natural, flowing kind of event as to be reminiscent of a sex scene from *Vive L’Amour* (a 1994 Taiwanese film concerning urban alienation and private life), but even that wordless, emotionally distant sexual encounter had more naturalness in its movements. The scene is too problematic and bare-boned to be passed off as a sexually immature boy’s “first time.”

The reader’s experience of “Kidnapped” is further undermined by wooden dialogue and over-narration. Because the characters are underdeveloped, they do not sound natural speaking to one another. This is compounded by the protagonist’s tendency to describe how characters say something or what his own reaction is, as opposed to Cai using alternate diction to indicate how characters talk or how the protagonist feels. For instance, there is a difference between telling readers something (e.g., “I hate you.” She said these words forcefully.) and showing them (e.g., “I hate you!” she screamed.) Similarly, there is a difference between the protagonist describing his outward appearance—which he cannot possibly see—(e.g., My face was blank.) and actually feeling something (e.g., I didn’t know how to respond. Somewhere in me, I felt a current of hatred surge forth for her question, but I kept my voice light.) Cai simply “tells” his readers more than he “shows” them, leading to clunky character interaction and exposition.

It is not only action, plot, and dialogue that suffer this disengagement, unfortunately. Cai’s characters also suffer from unrealistic and overdramatized presentation. Every single one is a walking stereotype. The deranged, unstable son of a well-to-do businessman. The alluring, mysterious secretary involved in an affair with her boss. The overbearing father, concerned with keeping up appearances. The defeated mother, wasting away in a chair, quietly accepting her younger replacement and growing obsolescence.
As such, it is difficult for a reader to identify with any one of them. It is not just that the protagonist is mildly unlikable. Readers cannot feel invested in any of the characters because Cai does not give readers enough to relate to. His characters do not have enough mannerisms or dialogue with which to spark a feeling of connection that would make a reader specifically side with any one character, or want to understand why they say or do certain things. There is nothing to “see ourselves” in and sympathize with. This is probably the main reason the protagonist comes off as “unlikable.”

The one exception to this is when the father brings the money to the street corner. This is the first time that we as readers feel bad for him. We have, subconsciously or not, been on the protagonist’s side for most of the story up to this point, but at this moment where we see what this situation is costing his father, the father-son rivalry is put aside for a second, and the audience starts to wonder for the first time if the protagonist is as sane as he seems, or if he really is touched in the head and making everyone around him suffer. This is actually the first time in the entire story that the audience feels any sort of emotional connection or empathy for a character, and it is not with the protagonist.

Similar to this lack of emotional connection, there is a distinct lack of romance in “Kidnapped,” despite love being a relatively large theme. As mentioned previously, the sex scene is more robotic than sensual, almost as though described by a middle schooler looking through a set of binoculars. Additionally, the prose does not contain romantic language at all. There are assuredly drastically different ideas between East and West regarding what romantic language is or should be in a text, but this story’s romance more closely resembles the power play “romances” of old films than it does a modern-day meeting of the hearts. It is also worth mentioning that what little love story does exist is
nothing more than Stockholm syndrome. It is mostly one-sided and just as resigned to and content with its fate as the protagonist’s mother in her chair.

Another weakness in Cai’s writing is his overuse of international or foreign references. At best, these references become irritating for readers and lose their shine. At worst, they serve as a crutch to hide the fact that the story’s content is lacking in some way. For example, when the protagonist draws a comparison between his own mysterious Shanghai night (i.e., his recent sex with Milan) and Arabian Nights, this feels to the reader more like a case of leaning on Western stories to make his experience more “awesome”—literally the stuff of legends—than a nod to a widely read, well known piece of literature. Cai could have instead written the scene to, in fact, show us that it was as “awesome” and mysterious as an Arabian night.

In effect, the persistent use of these references comes off as pretentious and amateurish. Granted, this notion of focusing on the original instead of references to other established works may be a more Western approach to a text. However, given that Chinese literary critics have not bothered to comment much on any of Cai’s works, it seems it may be an opinion held by more than just Western audiences and reviewers. If Cai had reduced his use of these references, nodding his head at a few classics before continuing with his story, it would not have detracted so much from his work.

Cai’s short story also suffers from prose that comes off as trope-ish and unrealistic. One of these “story traps” is the often-used, distorted idea that making love for the first time for women or young girls does not hurt at all; it is simply too magical for reality to intervene. Another unrealistic scene is the protagonist’s awkward “first time,” already discussed above. While a scene like this is typical for a young adult coming-of-age story,
it is rendered in “Kidnapped” in an almost awkward perfection, with the writing and
description matching a “first time” fantasy as opposed to the clumsy, abashed, overeager
foibles of a real couple.

Another trope-ish scene is the protagonist’s existential, post-death experience. While this scene is mildly interesting and relevant to the protagonist’s emotional journey in the story, it is filled with so many stereotypes that it falls flat. Waking up in a darkness and walking without a real purpose, heading toward the light, seeing a dead or historical figure—these are all tropes. What is refreshing about this short scene is the army dress and rifle that the father sports. This is the first mention of it in this story and raises questions about the father’s backstory that taunt readers and make them want to know more. However, these personal details and backstory hints are overwhelmed by the stereotypes in this scene.

The part of the story that takes the cake with its unreality is, of course, the ending. It is too perfect. The protagonist is released from the insane asylum, is on talking terms with his parents, and finds Milan, who waited for him. He sort of finds love in the end. Although very poetic, the ending comes across as sappy and a complete turnaround from the direction the story was headed before. When it comes down to it, this ending is not ridiculous because the main character found love too easily or ended up happy, but rather because Cai has not laid the groundwork with these characters to make such an ending believable. The readers walk away from this story feeling swindled and having a vague sense that Cai did not really know what he was doing. It is obvious that his goal for the story is what shaped its plot rather than events naturally playing out based on his characters’ personalities and reactions.
Trying Too Hard

Other aspects of Cai’s story simply seem stretched too far. The most obvious example is the blind man being the only character who clearly sees. As poetic as this concept is, it is overused in film, literature, and television to the point of becoming a trope, and it is overemphasized even in the scant few pages of this story. Almost every time the protagonist sees, hears, or thinks about the blind man, he mentions how odd it is that the blind man seems to know more than he should, or recognizes his footsteps, since he has no sight. This character appears to be set up intentionally as a foil to the protagonist, especially in the sense that he is not limited by his disability; however, Cai draws far too much attention to him, making him a focal point of strained writing instead of a stylistic and valuable story element.

Another area of stretched writing is the melodrama around the story’s title drop. When the protagonist is sharing his life story with Milan, he tells her, “In truth, it’s like I was kidnapped right after I was born… My spirit was. We will never be able to escape these kinds of chains, no matter how hard we try.” Like the figure of the blind man, the concept of being kidnapped in spirit, not just in body, which contrasts Milan’s kidnapping and the protagonist’s own past, is very aesthetically rich. There are many diverse analyses readers can make from this that not only deepen the meaning behind the story but also further develop the character of the protagonist. Rather than being alluded to or quietly mentioned in passing, however, Cai pounds this concept in: the protagonist’s spirit was kidnapped from birth, and he can never escape. It is as though Cai does not trust readers to come to this conclusion themselves, so he does not give them a chance to and introduces
the concept much too obviously for any further reflection. Thus the title’s play on words and the story’s central existential dilemma feels forced.

**Suspense in the Making**

Characterization flaws and clunky prose aside, perhaps the most disappointing part of this story for readers is the suspense that is not actually suspenseful. This story is strange, because the tension and suspenseful vocabulary that readers would expect to find in a psychological suspense story is missing. Even when Milan is kidnapped, we would expect some sort of response from her: palms sweating, breathing in and out, staring at the door, thinking fast, rushing over to the door handle, starting to panic, etc. But, in fact, there is no panic. No rushing. No action-by-action, breath-by-breath vocabulary.

At first this lack of suspenseful vocabulary and mood works for the story, because it lulls the reader into thinking that Cai is establishing the background for the story and setting the mood, despite a few interactions between the characters sounding a bit unnatural. However, when the suspenseful moments arrive, the prose becomes choppy and awkward. It does not help that at the crucial moment of kidnapping Milan, the prose seems to shift to her point of view without warning. Its bumpy point of view transition slows the reader down and makes them more aware that they are reading a story instead of grabbing them by the collar and pulling them right in.

Likewise, there is not much psychology in the psychological suspense in this story. There is a suspicious lack of psychological terminology, which could be explained as being written for lay people but instead makes the story sound superficial. The only keys Cai gives us are the protagonist’s “daddy” issues, a hint that he is a “momma’s boy,” and the repeated fact that he grew up in a mental institute. However, this background does not
appear to constitute a significant influence on the protagonist’s character to form his psyche or to affect his thoughts, words, and actions. Since the psychological side of the prose is also bare, the story fails to work as either suspenseful or psychological.

Contrary to common sense, it appears Cai may actually avoid developing inner character on purpose. In effect, this causes more questions for the audience and makes them wonder what the characters are thinking. Thus “Kidnapped” is more a psychologically awkward experience for the readers than it is a psychologically suspenseful story in and of itself. One could also argue that the story is making a point about consumerist culture and the consumerist nature of popular literature, and that Cai as an author does not care if we as readers are unsatisfied with the story we chose to read or consume because literature is not about catering to consumerist needs, but rather is about art. However, nothing in the story indicates that Cai intended this.

Cai’s psychological suspense is very different from the Western suspense genre as seen in literature and film. A good example of modern Western psychological suspense is the recent film Gone Girl (2014). In this film, there is an undercutting, unsettling tension. The audience wants to know what happens next, the reasons it happens instead of something else, and why the characters act as they do. The story is fully character-driven as opposed to action-driven, and there is an emphasis on the inner world of characters that informs their decisions and therefore affects the outer world. The action that does exist in the film serves a higher purpose, since it is not purely for the sake of action itself. During and after these action scenes, the audience pays close attention to the characters’ reactions to them—how they perceive them, how they process them, and what they feel. This puts the audience in an analytical mood while still being entertained. It makes them second-
guess the characters and themselves, and wonder if they caught the right details, and what the details mean. This works especially well with characters who are also descending into guessing games and the wispier parts of sanity. In effect, characterization and psychology control the plot.

Psychological suspense walks the line between the inner world of characters and how it translates into action or plot, drawing the reader forward with curiosity. There is often a tenterhooks question of “what will happen next?” but the genre is not high-octane like an action-based genre; instead, it is the internally knife-twisting sort. So there is a bit of a macabre fascination present, since the audience is torturing itself to see what happens next. Very often there is a mental instability aspect somewhere—psychopathy, sociopathy, personality disorder, insanity, etc. In effect, this genre deals a little bit with fascination with the weird, or with the “other.”

In “Kidnapped,” we see many of these same genre-specific aspects, but in subtler forms. There is clear evidence that this is the genre Cai is aiming for; however, due to his rough writing skills, this genre does not always shine through clearly. The story does not contain a “sit on the edge of your seat” type of psychological drama or any macabre fascination. What drives the story is not answering the question “what will happen next?” but rather a limited psychological unfolding of the protagonist’s thought process behind his actions, his backstory, and his reasons for kidnapping Milan. After these have been revealed, the remainder of the story’s drive hinges on readers wondering what the protagonist will do next and why, and how he will act on new information, but since not much has been given to readers throughout the story to predict the protagonist’s actions, the remainder of the plot is less involved than other psychologically suspenseful stories.
Because Cai’s prose does not inspire readers’ natural curiosity to understand the story’s main character, and thereby discover what that character will do, and because there are no psychological layers or red herrings or a sense of the complexity of a real person, “Kidnapped” leaves readers unsatisfied both on the psychological and suspense fronts.

Can this story be considered an adaptation of a Western genre into the Chinese literary realm? It seems unlikely. Rather, it may be best to try to understand this story as part of a new shift on the vast canvas of “Chinese literature,” and as an incorporation of internationalized literary themes with distinctive Chinese-specific notes, such as the influence of internet literature, web novellas, and serialized stories, all of which are intensely consumer-based. In addition, some grace must be given in the analysis for any story published at the start of a new genre, which is guaranteed to be choppy as it tries to “find its feet” and establish its genre’s trademark characteristics.

Social Commentary

“Kidnapped” features several nuggets of pertinent cultural commentary on societal expectations, one of which is the negative effect of modernization, symbolized as money. For instance, when the protagonist is falling down the side of the building, Cai puts more emphasis on the money falling than the protagonist himself. The lady in the window is also more interested in the money after her initial shriek, and people below reach up to grab the floating bills instead of pointing at the falling man. These details, in addition to the original conflict between the father and the protagonist that sprouted from the father’s dedication to money instead of his son, put a spotlight on the destructive social power money possesses because of how it can replace what should be more important to people—
such as a father-son relationship, on a personal scale, or a man falling from a building, on a community scale.

Another important piece of cultural commentary is the protagonist himself. His role as son, mentally unstable person, and criminal accentuate the labels society has given him, and he is seen as almost nothing but these labels. The police are more interested in apprehending a criminal. The protagonist’s father is more interested in ensuring the safety of his infant son. It is as though the only ones who care about the protagonist as a person, or even notice him as a person and not as a label or a body filling a role, are the blind man and Milan.

One observation that may be made from this is that conforming to societal expectations of gender and family is somehow better for everyone’s emotional and mental health, and that people who do not fit fulfill these expectations have no place in normal society or normal family structures. This is certainly the protagonist’s case, which explains why he desperately tries to fit this despite resenting it. In the end, the desire to be loved pushes him into conformity with these very stereotypes. Incidentally, these larger themes are probably why we do not know what kind of mental illness the protagonist actually has. It is not as important to the story as the way people, both inside and outside his family, treat him because of it.

“Kidnapped” also features several YA themes that lead to dubious conclusions and cannot be omitted in a discussion of themes with social impact. Youth rebelling against adults, the son rebelling against the father, and distinguishing oneself from one’s parents are all typical YA themes that generally reflect the toils and pains of growing up. Even if they seem a little heavy-handed in this story, there is nothing unusual about them. Love
winning out in the end, on the other hand, although another quite common literary theme, seems unusual at the end of this story, and when combined with the previous themes, has mildly disastrous ramifications. Love wins in two ways in “Kidnapped,” first through the restored family relationship, and second through Milan’s dedicated waiting. Although these would appear to be reasons for hope, since they indicate that love overcomes many difficulties no matter how terrible a situation may be, this ending comes across as fairytale-ish in context and prompts readers to wonder at its realness. One logical conclusion from such a happy ending suggests that if one’s actions are outrageous enough, one can fix one’s broken relationship with one’s parents; it only took jumping off a building for the father to see that he valued his son. Another questionable conclusion that seems promoted by this story end is that if a young adult kidnaps a lady and her baby, but has a sad backstory that people only need to understand, the lady will fall in love with the young man and never leave him. These are not great morals for any young adult audience, and certainly do not contain enough wisdom, restraint, self-control, or responsibility to be adult literature.

**Popularity of Cai’s Writing**

Aside from containing socially pertinent literary themes, strong historical and locational roots, and the scattered piece of good description, it remains curious how a story written without much characterization, realistic plot, suspense, or fluidity could be so popular. It may be true that Cai’s popularity is exaggerated by his publishing company and several magazine-books, but commercially-speaking, he has a solid foothold in popular literature. It is worth pointing out that the parts of Cai’s writing that seem “trope-ish” for a Western audience or for Chinese young adults who have read a considerable amount of Western fiction narratives may not be trope-ish for Cai’s intended young adult readers,
who are hungry for anything to read. However, it does not seem entirely plausible that there exists a large percentage of the Chinese young adult population that has not read much Western fiction. While this statement feels overly Western-centric, it necessitates reflection. Because stories such as *Harry Potter* and Stephen King’s works are internationalized, there is a solid “ground zero” for what the average Western story looks like and reads as, so young Chinese teens undoubtedly have canons to compare Cai’s stories to. The popularity of “Kidnapped” is intriguing, therefore, and may lean more on the fact that it is one of the first stories in the Chinese psychological suspense genre.

**Final Verdict**

Reading “Kidnapped” is frustrating because all the pieces for a high literary caliber story are present, but it still misses the mark, even as a piece of popular literature. This is not entirely attributable to Cai’s early days of writing, or to early days of genre-building; Cai’s writing shows a good amount of skill in both these areas, especially for an amateur writer. What this story lacks, however, is a feeling of art, or soul. Thus “Kidnapped” is perhaps best described as having the potential to raise profound themes and craft an impactful story, but this potential is, unfortunately, buried under poor writing.

Sadly, not that many people are going to read this story, or any of Cai’s works, if it is not packaged correctly (i.e., if it is not well written), which is odd considering Cai’s relatively stable position in a fluctuating market catering to consumerism and advertising. There is evidence of Cai improving his craft, but this is all on the technical side; he still has leaps and bounds to go concerning the artistic side of writing. If he could write well, there is no doubt he would break out of his genre bubble and garner serious feedback from literary critics. His writing would likely cross over into “real” literature instead of
remaining in the popular literature category. However, until that happens, no matter what themes his stories contain or how many books he sells, he will likely be confined to his genre and to the popular literature realm, and not be taken too seriously by Chinese critics or critics abroad. Because of this, his writing is not likely to make a Pacific crossover any time soon.

Based on Cai’s interviews over the years, he does not appear to care much about any of this, since he just wants to write good stories. It is more of an affront to his pride that critics do not take him seriously and label him. This appears to stem from the fact that he considers anything beyond writing a good story as more of a bonus, though it may instead be the case that Cai thought literary acclaim was a given if he wrote a good story. But he has not written stories that are written well, and literary critics in general have not provided accolades.

This leaves Cai in a bit of a strange blank space of popular culture—trailblazing but not considered worthy enough, addressing culturally pertinent themes but not considered an artist or a voice, but rather a champion of pulp. This is an unfortunate position to be in, although difficult to climb out of without a significant writing change. After all, a writer can learn technique, but he cannot learn art, since one must be inspired to create art, and Cai’s stories betray a lack of this inspiration. Market success clearly does not equate to artistic success. Thus while Cai’s writing, and this story by extension, is worthy of study for its market success and influence, it is not worth studying as a piece of art.
CHAPTER 5

“I DID PHYSICS FREEFALL MOVEMENTS” AND OTHER NOTABLE TRANSLATION MOMENTS

Throughout this translation, I endeavored to convey the story, Cai’s style, and a sense of suspense to the best of my abilities, although the process was not always perfect. No matter how hard one might try to remain true to the original, there will always be places in which one must make difficult choices for the sake of meaning, clarity, flow, or target readers’ understanding. Translations are, when all is said and done, as much a creative project as the original writing. In this chapter, I will address the major issues I encountered while translating “Kidnapped,” specific solutions I employed, difficult choices I made and the reasoning behind them, and how cultural context played into these decisions.

Authenticity and Closeness to the Text

To be as authentic to the original and as smooth in the English version as possible, my strategy for translating this story included making several drafts before finalization. The first draft was translated the roughest; in this stage, I focused mainly on diction and conveying the meaning behind sentences as a whole. I also highlighted sections I was unsure of grammatically and words that may have alternate translations depending on tone, mood, or style to return to and address later. For the second draft, I modified phrases, sentences, and paragraph breaks to act more like fluid English. I also referred back to the original Chinese for all highlighted sections, finessed word choice, and resolved most grammatically murky areas. In the third draft, I incorporated my advisor’s recommendations and addressed any obvious translation errors in the text. For the fourth
and fifth drafts, I read through the story with a fine-toothed comb and ensured it read smoothly as a whole. In this stage, I paid close attention to tone, mood, style, suspense, and how a reader might experience the story as a whole, how individual paragraphs conveyed certain emotions, and how the characters talked or expressed subtleties. For any spots that sounded a bit off or seemed as though they were missing something, I compared the translation sentence by sentence to the original Chinese and finalized diction, concentrating on which words were used and why.

During each of these draft stages, I kept an eye out for diction, slant, aura, mood, smoothness of prose in phrase, sentence, and paragraph structuring, and authenticity and closeness to the original text. Doing this led me into trouble immediately. I struggled at the beginning of the story with choosing to use past or present tense for narration segments, and I wrestled over diction, connotations, and subtext for individual words or phrases. It became clear that I was attempting to produce a complete translation in merely a single draft or two, and that I needed to break it up into smaller segments so that I could focus on the needs of the current draft with my full attention.

In terms of authenticity and closeness to the original text, I began this translation project dedicated to being exact to the original story and finished it as a disciple of aesthetic translation. This is apparent in textual elements as simple as paragraph breaks and punctuation. Whereas I began with the intention of keeping paragraph breaks in the same places as the original text, I soon decided to change these in the English version to follow an internal paragraph structure that English readers would expect. Likewise, with punctuation, I began with the intention to keep every comma and period as close to the
original as possible, but I soon changed punctuation left and right to assist the text’s fluidity in English, and to work for the story instead of against it.

This initial dedication to conveying the original in its exact form caused me the most trouble when I attempted to reproduce Cai’s unique “writer’s voice.” Not only was his writer’s voice particularly difficult to identify, but his protagonist’s narrating voice and the story’s descriptive sections also presented challenges to convey in English. Since “Kidnapped” falls into the very early stage of Cai’s writing career, there is not as much writer’s voice developed and evident in the text as that which appears in his later works. Additionally, Cai’s style hinges on a close-knit array of short, direct sentences, courtesy of his internet influence and expounded by the limited inner thoughts and feelings that the protagonist has or else intentionally keeps from the reader. This often makes the prose come across as choppy and disengaged. To complicate the translation further, Cai’s description is minimalist but effective and quick—easy to confuse with choppy, disengaged writing but not actually the same. Transferring this rapidity and simplicity into English, complete with color and splashes of vivid, even tender imagery in some cases, became particularly confounding. The Chinese reads smoothly in some places but is jumpy in others, like pinging off a wall, and ultimately endows a flexible, live feeling to the prose. To replicate these indications of early writing, limited inner voice, minimalist sentence structures, and snappy descriptions as best as possible in English required switching some elements around and revising my translation strategy.

At first I attempted to mimic these shorter types of sentences and be as literal as possible with diction, limiting the number of transitions and splashy, more creative words. Yet this method quickly led to a linguistic barrenness. I found myself switching more and
more to aesthetic translation to make the English prose smoother in terms of readability, or when it made more sense on a word-by-word basis, or for the sake of conveying the larger picture of a scene or the specific effect of a metaphor or simile without becoming obsessed over the individual words or phrases in the Chinese. I did this by adding more connecting language and focusing on the effect of words and similes, i.e., figuring out why Cai included them instead of writing some other word or phrase, and then using words or phrases in English that would carry the same weight or sense as the Chinese but that were not in fact a direct translation.

Overall, I am content with the way these choices changed the English translation, since I believe an aesthetic translation enables more of the protagonist’s sardonic disposition to shine through with its distinct glibness. Since this is as much the protagonist’s voice as it is Cai’s in this early story, potential readers will gain more from an aesthetic version than they would otherwise.

**Toughest Translation Areas**

Other translation difficulties were grammatically based and more tangible. For example, the most difficult section of the entire story to translate was, without contest, the scene on the street when the protagonist is carrying his suitcase full of money. The difficulty of this section was purely a result of a simple misunderstanding of word usage and connotations. In the Chinese, the prose appears to mention imagery concerning a stripper in the middle of the sidewalk, when in fact, it is actually a descriptive sentence containing a slightly complicated metaphor that gives the reader a rare insight into the protagonist’s mind and state of emotions. Woe be unto translators who only use the first few readily available dictionaries! After months of parsing the grammar of this sentence
and consulting several dictionaries, I finally realized my mistakes. Below are the amusing before and after versions of this sentence:

**Before**  
*The first real bustle in front of me made colors fade away. It appeared to be a stripper, only a party consort, who was commonplace behind people’s backs.*

**After**  
*For the first time in my life, the downtown district in front of me was devoid of all color, like a woman without makeup, or a prom queen: mediocre and forgettable after the fact.*

For translators working in Chinese, it is often the case that *chengyus*, or idioms, and four-character phrases produce the most headaches, and this story contained its fair share. In one instance, an internet dictionary I consulted told me that one particular *chengyu* meant something along the lines of losing car insurance, which was equally laughable and perplexing in context. The phrase (*diu cu bao che/ju* 丢卒保车) is actually a chess term for sacrificing one’s second most important piece for the sake of one’s most important piece. More literally, it means losing one’s foot soldiers to safeguard one’s chariot(eer)(s). I translated this as “cutting one’s losses” in context. For this and other similar instances, I spent a decent amount of time tracking down the exact meaning of these phrases, looking through several Chinese dictionaries, minding the overall context, and paying close attention to the effect of the phrase.

In other cases, no amount of Chinese dictionary perusal was helpful. For instance, when I ran into a part of the text that literally read as “I did physics freefall movements,” the meaning was quite clear. This occurs right after the protagonist jumps off the roof with the suitcase of money. However, Cai does not specify *which* freefall movements the protagonist engages in, simultaneously giving readers a general idea of the action while letting them imagine his exact movements as they please, and thus getting away with lazy
description. There are any number of movements one can make in freefall. This phrase unfortunately does not pass muster in English and would be mocked in an instant by readers, so I chose to translate this instead as “flips and somersaults in midair” to maintain the idea of constant movement. What else is an amateur translator to do in a case such as this but make something up? In this and similar instances, the story required more specificity in English than it did in the Chinese, and the gap had to be filled.

Other translation issues fell more into the category of language-to-language differences, where several of the biggest problems I faced were rooted in Chinese syntax and grammar. Chinese sentence order is different from English sentence order not only in terms of word placement but also in terms of sentence flow and emphasis. This was a bit tricky to translate, and I ended up switching around several phrases, sometimes even borrowing phrases across sentences, to create the most flow in English. In addition, Chinese has several verb patterns that simply do not translate well into English, specifically “V 了 V” and “V +下来.” In these instances, I went as far as I could grammatically and then translated the rest based on the overall atmosphere of the sentence and how the verb operated semantically in context. Some of this, sadly, is simply lost in the English.

Translation Choices

The largest translation choice I made, and the one I went back and forth on for a long time, was how to translate the title. In Chinese, Bangjia (绑架) can be translated as “The Kidnapping,” “Kidnapping,” “To Kidnap,” or “Kidnapped” depending on context. The last one, of course, shares a title with a well-known, classic novel by Robert Louis Stevenson. I cannot say how many times I was startled by seeing the Chinese/English, side-by-side edition of Kidnapped show up in my searches for academic material relating
to this story; it alarmed me to think that someone had translated Cai’s story before I did. However, this brought to light a significant issue I had previously been unaware of: is the story indeed meant to have the same title, or is it a coincidence? Was Cai borrowing a sense of established literary credence and Western flair by giving his story the same title? Was he counting on the inevitable connotation? Regardless, are those reasons good enough to give the story the same title in English?

Whether intentional or not, this connotation will exist for a Western audience if Cai story shares the same title. The choice I faced as translator was whether or not to let the story keep such a title. Based on Cai’s incorporation of Western references, I doubt he was unaware of the title duplication, and I can readily believe this decision was intentional. I had originally set the title as “The Kidnapping” but changed it to “Kidnapped” once I read the part of the story in which the protagonist realizes he has been kidnapped metaphorically from birth. This fits the idea that the protagonist had been kidnapped by his father, family, and circumstances his entire life, and it also ties in with the significant theme of Western references. I especially liked the past tense in this word, “kidnapped,” since it reflects the sense of freedom, of not being chained by the past, and of moving forward into a new period of life that is prevalent at the end of the story. Thus, “Kidnapped” fits the story better and also underlines Cai’s inherent pretentiousness.

Other translation choices were simple by comparison. For example, I decided to keep street names in Chinese to maintain the feel of a Shanghai setting. I also left meters in for this same reason; translating this story into American English is not enough of a reason to change the metric system. Moreover, keeping the metric units of measurement,
like the decision to keep the street names in *pinyin*, contributes indispensably to the story’s setting.

On the other hand, there were some instances in which I intentionally chose to use English or to simplify the text for English readers. For example, with books, places, or buildings that already have their own name in English, I did not re-translate their names but left them as the current established English translation. The only exceptions to this are the “Old” and “New” Jiang buildings. These actually do have English names, but I left them translated as Old and New Jiang because of their meaning in context; these buildings draw attention to the old vs. new theme of the story and also the father-son relationship. For simple money monikers, on the other hand, I intentionally left out references to *renminbi* (RMB) on the basis that it would be too confusing to include both RMB and *yuan* in the same story. I felt it was too simplistic for a footnote, which would only slow the story down, and too out-of-the-blue to leave in. Instead, I chose the term I believe most non-Chinese readers would be more familiar with.

In each of these cases, I made translation choices with regards to story integrity, cohesion, flow, and meaning, specifically weighing these as more important than direct translation.

**To Footnote or Not to Footnote**

Throughout the story, I made several footnotes that I believe will benefit both the average reader as well as readers more familiar with Chinese culture. I made the decision to footnote based on what was integral to understanding the story or not. For example, one footnote gives a short background to a Japanese movie star so readers can understand why
the protagonist mentions him, while another explains a reference to four figures on a bill since the current bill only has one.

One of the most important of these footnotes involves a *chengyu* for highway robbers. This phrase (*jiangyang dadao* 江洋大盗) indicates outlaws or brigands of rivers and lakes who forcefully and violently rob and loot. This is a mouthful for any translation, much less a footnote, and after much deliberation, I ended up translating this with an Americanism. I turned the phrase into “major-league outlaws” to convey the grand scale of these ruffians’ ventures and also give a little bit of a Wild West connotation, which I believe is useful in understanding not only the societal position of these types of people and the way they have been romanticized, but also a sense of danger and roughness. Since this footnote is not integral to the story, I left it rather sparse in my translation in order to refrain from disrupting the story’s natural pace.

However, I did opt to leave some concepts out of the footnotes. These were also cultural in nature, and I made the distinction between footnoting or not based on not only the integrality of the concept to the reader’s understanding of the story, but also on the purpose of this translation: to introduce Cai’s writing to a Western audience, not to explain every Chinese aspect of the story to them. Consequently, I left out a footnote about the elevated ring roads, considering these distinct Chinese city features that readers can look up online.

Regarding the significance of the ransom money being genuine, on the other hand, I waffled on whether or not to footnote and eventually did, even though it is also something a reader could easily look up. Unlike the elevated highways, this fact does affect the reader’s understanding of the story. The 100-*yuan* bill is the largest bill in China (PRC),
so it is the most counterfeited; therefore, it is a bit impressive that not a single bill in the entire suitcase was fake. From this, the reader can extrapolate that the father was very serious about getting his infant son back and not playing any tricks. This type of cultural knowledge is completely lost on someone who has never studied China or traveled there before, so even though it is not explicitly necessary to understand the story, its potential to enhance the reader’s experience and comprehension of the text warranted a footnote.

**Translating Cultural and Literary Context**

In addition to the examples above, there were other areas of the translation that presented a puzzle to translate because of their inherent cultural context that a non-Chinese reader may not find obvious. For instance, when the protagonist visits his father’s office, in order to leave the elevator foyer and enter the office, he needs to be buzzed in. This is not an irregular office feature, and there are many Western office setups like this one, but much of the vocabulary for this action is actually missing from the text. Either it is simply understood in the context of entering an office or Cai was a bit lazy with his writing. Regardless, it is a bit of a stretch to assume that non-Chinese readers will know how the protagonist moved from one place to the other, so some extra vocabulary was necessary in the translated version to complete the picture and smooth the logical flow of one action to the next.

Another pertinent cultural difference that arose in translation is how sexual attraction is described between East and West. In Chinese culture, a person’s sexual attraction may be described as their “flavor” and can, therefore, be tasted; there is no real equivalent to this in Western euphemisms. “Tasting” a woman, or a man, is an older, out-of-date, or psychopathic phrase in an English context, so I opted to modernize this and
present it as least awkwardly as possible, since the phrase in its Chinese context did not appear to specifically contain psychopathic overtones. It is enough in English to say someone has “slept” with someone else.

The last cultural-specific example deals more with the logistics of Chinese prose than language euphemisms or logical flow. This is the frequency and diversity of conversation or dialogue tags, such as “he said” and “she said.” English writing tends to use these more frequently, so the prose felt a bit naked without them. To improve the flow of dialogue in the story, I added several of these wherever I saw fit. Rather than detracting from the original, however, I believe this translation choice aligns well with the story. These tags are understood in Chinese but assist the English readers in keeping track of who said what and how, and offer the opportunity to characterize in terms of the type of verb used in the tag: said, shouted, screamed, whispered, yelled, spoke, told. This is a characterization technique that Cai Jun rarely makes use of, so I endeavored to keep these tags simple for fear of embellishing too much, but overall felt they were necessary for a complete story in English.

**Summary**

Translating “Kidnapped” to be literarily palatable for English-speakers and engaging while maintaining its Chinese cultural context and a sense of trueness to the intent of the original was a tricky business made trickier by Cai’s writing style. No matter how hard a translator may try to make something exactly like the original, the new translation will simply be different. This is perhaps a saving grace in the face of translating a text that is not particularly written well.
With another writer, the difficulties presented by individual writing style may not have been as pronounced. However, it became clear over the course of the translation and supplemental research that Cai’s writing in this particular story is not merely a case of less refined writing from the early days of an author’s career, although it is certainly a factor and is very convenient to leave it at just that. Rather, the jarring textual barrenness, dotted with aberrant flashes of colorful description, is his style. It pervades all his writings, and its offsetting-ness only improves minimally with time.¹

As a translator, I feel there is a responsibility to the author to be authentic and sincere in a translation, but there is also a responsibility to target readers to produce something they might want to, or even can, read. How, then, does one go about translating something that is written with holes in it? At which point does one stop translating text and start translating the story as it should have been, or as one imagines it could be? A translator can always fill in gaps left by an author, but a line must be drawn somewhere lest the final product be more of an inspired rewriting than a translation.

These questions, and many like them, have been explored extensively by translation theorists; there are discussions that could fill countless books, and they do. “Kidnapped” could be translated a dozen different ways, each with a different level of attention to voice, suspense, characterization, diction, and more. Despite my alliance with aesthetic translation, I chose in my translation to keep a short leash on any supplemental creativity I could bring to the text. By doing so, I hope to convey Cai Jun’s writing in a sensible, readable manner—but his writing nonetheless, with all its flaws and virtues.

¹ If one were to pick up a copy of The Child’s Past Life (2013), for example, and open to any page, Cai’s style is strikingly similar. The improvement is very likely due to Cai’s 12+ years of writing experience at the time of publishing, as evidenced also by better developed characters.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

Chinese popular literature and genre fiction is currently filled with many developments intrinsically tied to culture, consumerism, and globalization. Some writers rise to success overnight and are blown away by new writers just as swiftly, while others keep their ear to the ground, follow the trends, and entrench themselves on all possible platforms. Cai Jun belongs to this latter group.

There are certainly faults to Cai’s writing. Full characterization, intriguing psychoanalysis, and actual suspense only appear in blips, lessening the overall impact of his fiction and its ability to engage readers. As a result, it falls to the plot to keep readers engaged, but when even this falls short, story gaps that are normally bridged by other story elements appear all the wider. Yet despite this, Cai’s fiction and popularity have persisted.

Without the meaty content, thematic imagery, symbolism, and hints and glimpses of commentary on larger societal issues that he employs in his stories, Cai’s work could understandably be discounted as popular trash. However, since his fiction does include these elements, it must be taken seriously at least on a certain level. As such, it is not fair to simply label him a “popular fiction” phenomenon and move on. Although his writing leaves much to be desired, he has accomplished a considerable amount in Chinese genre fiction, and this makes him impossible to ignore.

Additionally, Cai has clearly been honing his craft. Regarding his recent plunge into yet another suspense magazine, Cai commented that although he has prepared for this release for three years, he still “needs more wisdom, more eyes, more pens and jigsaw
puzzles to create this never-ending story”¹—something only a writer who recognizes that there is more to perfect would acknowledge. As for the disconnect his fiction has with Western readers, Cai has stated that although “there is more room to tap” in the Chinese domestic market and he predicts suspense fiction will continue to grow, “there may still be a little gap”² for foreign markets.

Cai’s writing may never be popular in Western markets, but his acknowledgement of this gap, his dedication to the suspense genre in China, and his own growth as a writer indicate he is still learning, which is very promising. It may well be that, with time, he achieves success on a global scale and transitions to an international popular suspense author. He is certainly capable, and his writing is worth a closer study for these very reasons.

“Kidnapped”

It would be amiss to minimize the importance of the translation of “Kidnapped” in this thesis. On the surface, this translation seems like an extra, slightly unnecessary step in the greater work of the critical introduction, the discourse on traversing genres, and the age-old question of defining “literature.” However, this translation is not merely a prop to this work, but rather signifies a personal investment in this ongoing dialogue and a dedication to the belief that literature should be internationalized, that the world needs more intercultural exposure, and that the U.S. and China specifically could benefit from cross-cultural literary engagement.

¹ Shang, “Interview with Cai Jun.”
² Ibid.
For these reasons, and for the purpose of introducing Cai’s early writing to the English-speaking world and choosing a case study in which to highlight his writing style, craft, and merits, a translation is necessary and worth reading.

I hereby present “Kidnapped” by Cai Jun.
KIDNAPPED – 绑架

I exited the Shanghai Library embracing a copy of Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*\(^1\) to my chest, yet it was obvious to me that I simply didn’t have that much of a past to recollect. The noonday sun shone down on the glossy marble so that I could see my reflection, the tranquility on my face like that of the marble itself. I passed through the crowds, all the clamor and noise flying away from my ears toward the sky, and walked on until I saw Milan.

Her head hung low, her body seeming curvier and her chest much ampler than before, but I could still see her face clearly. Even though this was our second time meeting, my stomach suddenly began to turn over and over nauseatingly, and I recalled the smell of coffee. I quickened my pace.

“It wasn’t easy to find your phone number,” I told her. “Let’s…talk.”

“Where should we go?”

“Come with me.”

I hailed a cab. We went eastward along Huaihai Road until we turned down a smaller road near the elevated highway, lined with French-style gardens and foreign houses. At the end of the street stood a towering high-rise. We got out there.

A blind person was begging outside the entrance. Walking past him, we went on up and finally reached the apartment on the top floor, a suite with two bedrooms and a living room.

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\(^1\) 追忆似水年华, or “Recollecting Fleeting Years”
I led her into a small room. There was a bed next to the window, but also a baby carriage with a six-month old who was sound asleep.

Startled, Milan bent down anxiously and checked the child, then asked me, “Why did you bring him, too?”

There was no answer.

She didn’t see anyone in the room. Her bag was gone, and her cell phone had been in the bag.

The door shut. Milan went to open it and discovered it was locked from the outside.

“Open the door!” she yelled. Then she shouted my name.

I waited outside the door quite a while before replying—

“Listen up. You’ve been kidnapped.”

Right now, we’re on the top floor. Which is fitting, because everything started on a top floor.

On that afternoon, more than a year ago, my father was planning to travel outside of Shanghai for a business something or other, and for the first time in my life, he’d asked me to go to his office. This was unheard of. He had never asked me to go there before—had never asked me to do anything, in fact, because my mind was a little off.

Actually, they said my IQ was a little higher than the average person’s. But despite this, my childhood was spent almost entirely in the loony bin. They said I had a condition. Sometimes it was barely there; sometimes it was serious. Nowadays, even though I’ve been released, I still need to go in every week for a checkup.
Several years prior, my father had set up a private business, and it had done pretty well. His office was located in the center of the city on the top floor of a 30-floor office building. I took the elevator up, and upon arriving, rang the bell.

A young woman opened the door for me. She was pretty, a typical white-collar beauty. But when her eyes stared at me, I noticed a unique kind of beauty in them. Those eyes were mysterious, like a night straight out of *One Thousand and One Nights*, and in them, it was almost as if her pupils were ignited like a fire, flickering at me.

She promptly read my name aloud. I nodded, and she invited me inside. I, however, continued to stand there like an idiot.

I admit that in that moment, I forgot everything. I was so captured by her eyes that I was not even aware of my own existence. She smiled a little, extended a hand, and pulled my arm. She pulled me into the office, and then closed the door.

As I said, I had never been to my father’s office. It wasn’t big—about twenty meters square—yet the interior decorations were very comfortable and homey. The view out the window was quite good, as if a little less than half of Shanghai were laid out beneath one’s feet. I looked down. We were up so high, everything seemed tiny and withdrawn, like in a camera shot. I couldn’t help but sit down dizzily. The young woman made me a cup of coffee, then sat down across from me.

“My name is Milan,” she said, introducing herself. “I’m your father’s secretary.”

Milan—that was an interesting name. It was also the city where AC Milan and Inter Milan\(^2\) were based, as well as the name of a flower. I stared at her closely for a moment, then looked down at the floor.

\(^2\) Professional Italian soccer teams
“It’s only you here?” I choked the question out with difficulty.

“Yes, it’s just me. Actually, your father doesn’t come here often. For the most part, he’s in his factory in Pudong.³ Aiya—you haven’t touched your coffee yet.” She pointed to the coffee cup. The strong smell of coffee pervaded the entire room, boring its scent into my nostrils and slightly numbing my nerves. “Have a drink.”

I had never drunk coffee before. I looked at the rich color in the cup, then looked up at her face. She was staring at me. My mind went completely blank, as if I had just walked into an immense labyrinth. I suddenly felt a twinge of fear and began to tremble. Maybe my condition was flaring up. The coffee before me was not the only enticing thing in the room.

In that moment, I was unable to resist any form of temptation. Despite my lifelong aversion to coffee—it was such a foreign beverage—I couldn’t say no to it. Nor to the temptation in her eyes. The coffee appeared to hold numerous swirling infernos, burning hot inside it. Nevertheless, I took the cup with both hands and lifted it to my lips, facing her. And shuddered.

She was smiling. Simply smiling at me. And just like her name, her smile was as beautiful as a blooming milan flower.

The edge of the cup touched my lips.

Our paths were destined to end in grief.

It only took that one sip of Brazilian coffee. Just like that, Milan, your enchantment completely infused my bitter mind. Ever since that moment, I have been captured by your spell.

³ Sub-provincial district of Shanghai
The door was installed with a large, custom-made peephole. From outside, one could clearly see everything inside, but from inside, one could not see out. I looked in through this and saw Milan breast-feeding the child.

It was already close to dusk. An ethereal, gleaming brightness fell over her body and the child’s, like painter’s strokes, and gilded her full breasts as if they had been polished. From the peephole, it was like looking at one of Raphael’s oil paintings, the Sistine Madonna. I admired this scene quietly, not daring to interrupt her, as though pausing in a cathedral to listen to snatches of a Father’s sermon. None of this could affect my resolve to carry out the plan I had already put in motion, however.

I waited until she had finished breast-feeding, and then opened the door and entered. Giving her a small box of gourmet food, I told her in a quiet voice, “Eat.”

“Let us go.”

“No,” I replied. “As I said already, you have both been kidnapped.”

“But he’s your son.”

The second I heard this, I began quivering from head to toe. My gaze shot straight at her, and she cowed back from me a little.

“Don’t you know you’re breaking the law?” she asked.

“There’s actually a provision in the law, that people with mental illness don’t assume any responsibility whatsoever.”

She let out a bitter laugh and jerked her head. “You look more normal than a normal person at this point.”
“Have you ever treated me like a normal person?” I shot back. Before she could answer, I left the room and locked it behind me.

I continued watching through the peephole. She kissed the child’s forehead and put him back into his baby carriage. She didn’t touch the food, but rather leaned over the windowsill and peered out.

It was useless. The windows here were completely obstructed by iron bars. The glass was also shatterproof and would not break even if struck.

For this kidnapping operation, I had actually thought everything over quite carefully and planned the whole thing out thoroughly. I had rented this apartment two weeks in advance, and in addition to installing the iron grates over the windows and putting in an iron door, I had also sound-proofed the walls. This room was a very special prison cell.

“You should eat,” I said through the door. “The food will get cold soon.”

She looked in the direction of my voice but didn’t say a single word. Instead, her gaze suddenly became intense enough to penetrate the thick, iron-clad door. So she was a strong woman after all. Her gaze bore down upon me relentlessly, overpowering me. I left the peephole and went to the other room to sleep.

Day had not yet broken when I awoke. I carried breakfast to the peephole and noticed that the food was gone, though I don’t know when it was eaten. Milan was not in bed, but rather reclined by the bedside, her eyes half closed as if she hadn’t slept the entire night.

It was then that I remembered something. Opening the door, I said, “You must need to use the bathroom. You should use it now.”
“Release us.”

“I don’t want you to die from holding it in.”

The bathroom was only one door away. Eventually she went in, and I stood guard outside the door. After she came out, she didn’t resist anymore. Milan was smart. She knew that rebelling against a mentally ill person could have any number of outcomes, and not all of them favorable. After this, she changed the baby’s diaper with one of the many disposable diapers I had prepared earlier.

“You should eat breakfast,” I encouraged.

“Please leave,” was all she said.

• • •

Back to how this all started. That day inside my father’s office, I lost track of everything once I drank the coffee Milan had given me.

When I woke up, a full two days had passed. I was in my bed, in my house. Although I tried hard to remember something—anything—it felt like nothing was staying in my brain. It was like chaos in my head. The only things I could remember for certain were Milan’s name and the strong scent of coffee. I felt a little nauseated.

A month passed. Without letting my father know, I went to his office again by myself, but no one was there. The room on the top floor was locked and dark inside. So I returned home.

There were several times I wanted to ask him about it, but as soon as the words reached my mouth, I swallowed them. The way he looked at me made me feel like he and I didn’t even live in the same world.
Then, a year later, my father brought back an infant. It was a boy, only a few months old. He looked healthy.

“This is your son,” he told me.

I didn’t understand. “My son?” I repeated. I was still a kid myself, more or less.

“Did you forget who it was,” he replied in a severe tone, “who brought you home from my office a little over a year ago?”

It came back to me then. Yes, I remembered. But—“I don’t see what that has to do with the kid,” I said.

“Idiot!” he shouted. “You’re such a disappointment!”

I knew this, of course, but—

“You can’t even own up to it, can you?”

Before I could say anything to the contrary, he cut me off. “You. You can’t be this irresponsible. You bastard.”4

This was not the first time he’d ever called me that. It was practically my second name.

“Do I have to admit to doing this?” I asked.

“Yes, bastard. Be a man about it.”

I admitted it.

Father had also brought back a wet nurse with him. From then on, he kept the child in his room, and as soon as he would come home from work, he’d pick the boy up with a smile and a laugh and play with him.

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4 Contains xiao 小 (little) to indicate a nickname, though this nickname is not typical. “Bastard” here is synonymous with “animal” and refers to livestock, specifically barnyard animals.
I, on the other hand, was somewhat at a loss as to what to do. So I spent most of
my time with my mother. She looked even older these days. Lines of worry had
engraved themselves deep into her forehead, which made my heart ache for her.

I suggested going to see Milan, to straighten all of this out, but my father utterly
rejected this idea.

“You are in no position to meet her,” he lambasted me. “You hurt her. She won’t
ever want to see you again.”

Hearing this, my body tremored all over like it had back in the office that day, and
I began to flare up. Before I was taken to the mental hospital, my father beat me. As
usual.

A month later, I was released.

I began to loathe going home. I also started having doubts. Maybe my father was
right. Maybe I had behaved like a bastard. Lately, in addition to seeing my father
delightedly holding the child, I would also catch sight of my mother crying when she was
alone. I didn’t want to stay at home a second longer. My father didn’t care whether I left
or not, so I did. I went out and roamed the city, straying to every single nook and corner
of it.

There was a hypnotist who had treated me once. It had been really effective, too,
but because he wasn’t licensed to practice, our sessions had been cut short, and I had
never gone back. But I trusted him. I found him at the same address he’d been at before.

Unlike previous sessions, however, this time I was slow to enter the trance. My
consciousness was struggling—resisting—as if engaged in a fierce war. The hypnotist
and I both used up all our strength in the battle over my psyche, but finally, he succeeded
in getting me into the trance. And then everything in my head poured out in a torrent—all my conscious and subconscious thoughts, my memories, and even things from the depths of my soul.

After the hypnosis was over, we were both sweating profusely. He told me why this time it had been so difficult to enter the trance.

When I returned home, my father was gone off to the Pudong factory again. I found my mother, who was looking older by the day, and I leaned over her shoulder and cried. It had been a long time since I had last cried. As soon as she saw me, she cried, too. We both seemed to have some kind of implicit understanding, and the moment we saw each other, we were unable to control our tears.

“Mom, you must have realized the truth. This child is not mine.”

“Don’t talk nonsense. You’re an adult.”

“Mom, I’m so clear-headed right now,” I insisted. “I know you’ve been wronged. Just tell me.”

My mother looked at me. From her eyes, I could see she knew I had grown up now and could handle the truth. With the softest of sighs, she told me.

This child was my half-brother.

• • •

I locked the door of the apartment and went downstairs. Outside on the street level, the blind beggar seemed to notice me. There was something extremely off-putting about his blind eyes. I stood in front of him for quite a while, staring at his dirty face and clothes. In my hand, I fingered a 100 yuan bill, but in the end I put it back in my pocket.
I hailed a cab, a Volkswagen Santana, and had the driver do a loop on the city’s inner ring elevated expressway. This made the driver cheerful. Once we reached the expressway, I called my father from inside the car.

“Dad. I have the kid.”

“Bastard,” he replied. “Bring him home immediately.”

“I also have Milan.”

His side of the line went silent for a moment.

“Son, you’re sick. You need to visit a hospital.”

“Yeah, I am,” I agreed. “I can flare up at any time, in any place.”

“That’s it. Come home this instant, and bring your son home with you.”

“No,” I said. “You see, you should really call him my brother.”

My father was silent again for a long time.

“You know?”

“I hate you.”

“Son, I’m sorry. Come home.”

“Dad, I’ve grown up. I understand everything. You also understand, I think—that my brother is my greatest enemy.”

“Son, what do you want?”

“Give me five million.”

“Okay,” my father said. “I’ll turn my factory over to you. It’s worth more than that.”

“No, I want cash. Checks won’t work, either. It has to be cash. Why don’t you sell the factory?”
“Son, you really need to get to the hospital. This factory is your daddy’s own sweat and blood, set aside for you. Look—I’m writing the paperwork now, transferring all the factory shares to you. They can make you even more money. Son, come home right now.”

“Dad,” I replied conversationally, “at this point I have no way to guarantee my little brother’s safety. He’s very small. Very weak.”

My father could no longer show restraint. “You bastard,” he roared at me through the phone. “If I had foreseen this day, I would have thrown you out as soon as I gave life to you! You will not lay a hand on your brother—you will not!”

“My current psychological condition is very unstable,” I replied smoothly. “I have no way of controlling myself. And a mentally ill person…well…” I trailed off. “Anything could happen. You may take some time to think it over. I’ll call you again later. Bye, Dad.”

“Don’t you—” He still wanted words with me. For the first time in my life, I was one of the most important things on his mind.

I snapped the phone shut. The Santana continued to speed along the elevated expressway. Numerous buildings retreated out of the corner of my eye, all of them becoming indistinct.

Father had once loved me, back when he and my mother had no money. They were both ordinary, working people. Our life had been average but happy. Back then, my mental health was fine. Father often let me ride on his shoulders, and we would all go out as a family. It didn’t matter that we didn’t have much in the way of entertainment or money to spend, because we all felt a sense of happiness.
It was after he went into business, however, that my psyche began to show signs of problems. But by then, my father had no time to take care of me or my mother, so he threw me into a mental hospital.

I spent the rest of my adolescent years there. My mother came to see me every day. My father rarely appeared.

My condition worsened by the day. When it broke out, I tended to be violent. There was a doctor I attacked once who got beaten up so badly, he was bruised from head to toe afterward. Yet after this incident, I had no memory of what had happened.

The relationship between Father and me began to strain. Or, to be more precise, I became his disgrace. He never dared mention me to other people. I could see an utter loathing in the way he looked at me. The more things went on like this, the more my mental health suffered, and I began to hate his factory, his car, and his money.

As the Santana began to descend from the expressway, my heart, too, was pulled back toward the ground.

Milan finished eating lunch across from me and picked up the child. “How long are you going to keep us locked up?” she asked stiffly.

“Milan, I know about everything. I’m not going to harm my little brother.”

She lowered her head and said, “I’m sorry.”

“Do you like my father?”

“You don’t understand,” she lashed out. “You couldn’t possibly understand.”

“You make me sick,” I told her.
“Look,” she said, “I admit, your dad and I hurt you, and we also hurt your mother. He just wanted to have an heir who could inherit his business. You disappointed him too much. But he couldn’t divorce your mother, because doing so would make him lose half his own holdings and estate, so he had no other choice but to take advantage of you.

“This was all a ruse,” she continued. “That day in the office, your dad arranged everything. He had you go to his office. I was already pregnant with your brother by then. That cup of coffee had some medicine in it. You fell asleep quickly, and I brought you home afterward.

“Your mother actually knew about this early on, but she had no other choice but to go along with it. She and your dad reached a compromise—so that only you were kept completely in the dark.”

“Because I’m mentally deranged, right?”

Milan paused for a moment, then nodded her head. I watched her expressionlessly. A blank face is actually the scariest expression. But I didn’t do anything. I just threw *Remembrance of Things Past* at her so she’d have something to read during her imminent long-term loss of freedom.

I left the room but not the apartment, and watched her from the peephole. Her calm composure vanished at once. She sat down on the bed and covered her face, her body trembling all over. She was crying.

The kid was crying, too.

It suddenly felt as if the sound of crying was growing louder and louder, coming from inside the room, from outside the window, from the walls, from the floor, from the sky, and from my heart.
The sky darkened. I gazed out my window. The city lights were like stars and specks of light, just like the Milky Way. They twinkled, becoming bright one moment and dark the next, like countless pairs of eyes—staring at me. Perhaps beneath the lights, in the darkness, there were many strange things happening tonight.

The lit sections of Huaihai Road, however, seemed exceptionally clear. I went out.

The blind person was still outside the building. He seemed to sense my presence.

“Hey Mister, what’s the hurry?”

“I need to speak with my father.”

“I wish you both harmony, as father and son.”

How did he know? I realized he could hear it from my scrambling, hurried footsteps and tone of voice. “Thanks,” was all I said.

Like I’d done earlier, I called a cab and had him take Nanbei Highway north and go straight until we reached Zhongshan North Road before coming back.

In the car, I called my father. This time he actually sounded a bit worried.

“Son, come back home quickly. Your mom misses you so much she’s going to lose her mind.”

“Dad, I suggest you report this to the cops, or put some sort of recording device on your phone,” I replied. “So. Have you considered my proposition?”

“Son, I will find you,” he promised. “There is absolutely no way I’m going to give up my business over this.”

“Okay, Dad. I’ll make sure you never set eyes on us again.”
“Son,” he interjected quickly, “let’s do it this way: I’ll give you one million in cash, then you bring your brother back home. After that, I’ll officially transfer my factory and all my other shares and property rights to you, okay? Daddy has never asked anyone like this before.”

“Sell the factory—sell it! I’m getting impatient.”

“Son, you don’t want to push me. In the past, everything was Daddy’s fault—I admit this. And I swear, I will never hit you or yell at you again, so long as you and your brother come back.”

“No. Now you listen to me. Next Monday morning at five o’clock sharp, bring the money to the intersection of Kanding Road and Xikang Road and leave it beneath the street sign for Kanding Road, then leave immediately. That’s all I have to say. Goodbye.”

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On Monday morning at 5:00 am, I watched, hidden, from the corner of a small alley near the intersection of Kanding Road and Xikang Road. The streets were devoid of traffic at this hour, their tranquility permutated by a tinge of desolation. Driving his car, Father arrived alone. He got out of the car and placed a large suitcase underneath the street sign.

My father had always had a stateliness about him, so much so that he looked taller and more robust than I did. With a full head of black hair, he looked many years younger than he actually was and exuded a mature attractiveness. I was convinced it was both his looks and his money that swayed women. I was jealous of him.
But now, he seemed to have aged overnight. The white hairs on his head had increased by no small amount, and the spark in his eyes had dulled. He looked around, scanning every direction, but naturally he did not see me. Then he let out a small sigh, took out a handkerchief, and wiped the tears on his face. After that, he followed the instructions I had given him yesterday and left.

I waited until his car was long gone, then hurried over and picked up the suitcase. It was heavier than I anticipated, so I adapted my plan. Instead of calling a cab, I began to make my way back to the apartment on foot. The going was quite slow, to the point that you could call it taking a stroll instead of walking. As I followed Xikang Road south, the weight of the case made me constantly switch hands to carry it.

The roads gradually began to fill with people leaving for the early morning shift. They were up so very early, most of them blue collar workers. Torpidly, they took to the roads, riding bicycles in a listless haze. They needed to. It was all for a meager wage, to earn enough to be able to eat. They were completely unaware of the five million yuan right next to them, in the hands of the person they brushed past. I suddenly felt a bit sad.

I walked past Shanghai Shopping Mall and then made my way down Nanjing Road.\(^5\) On the other side of the large pedestrian boulevard was the back entrance to the Sino-Soviet Friendship Building,\(^6\) where a very modern sculpture had been set in front of the old-fashioned meeting hall.\(^7\) When I was a kid, Father often took me here to see movies, and of course brought Mother along, too. Even though our family didn’t have

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\(^5\) Shanghai’s main shopping street.

\(^6\) Now called the Shanghai Exhibition Center after name changes in 1968 and 1984.

\(^7\) This refers to the *Cavalleria Eroica*, a metal sculpture of skeletal horses arranged on top of one another as if in a frame-by-frame, slow-motion capture of one horse rearing. The sculpture was created by Arman, a French-American artist in the New Realism movement, and was set in 1987.
any money, he would inevitably find a way to pay for the tickets. Jet Li’s *Shaolin Temple* was popular then, and so were Ken Takakura’s<sup>8</sup> films.

Back then, lots of people went to see movies, unlike the sparse theater crowds nowadays. Sometimes getting a top-grossing movie ticket required going through back channels, and it came down to who you knew. We were captivated by a young Jet Li and Ken Takakura in his prime, as well as many Chinese stars who were underrated but worth watching. But that was a long, long time ago, and I’d long since forgotten what those movies were even about. All that remained were scattered bits and pieces, and Father’s face.

His face now was nearly a stranger’s.

I left Nanjing Road and went east for a short ways before turning onto Shaanxi Road. The suitcase in my hands was terribly heavy. I had no choice but to rest a bit at the intersection, outside the door of the Ping’an Donggan Cinema. Several cabs swept by me, slowing their speed, but I didn’t hail any.

By six o’clock, Nanjing Road was still quiet. Only people working the early morning shift were out, walking by in a hurry. For the first time in my life, the downtown district in front of me was devoid of all color, like a woman without makeup, or a prom queen: mediocre and forgettable after the fact.

I stopped for over half an hour, and then continued along Shanxi Road, going south. At this point, the breakfast sellers had already begun to bustle. I hefted the suitcase up the pedestrian walkway under the elevated Yan’an Road, then passed Moller

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<sup>8</sup> Japanese actor well known for playing outlaws and stoic heroes.
Villa\textsuperscript{9} and several small streets until I went around the corner beneath Huaihai Road’s Jiu Shi Renaissance Building.\textsuperscript{10}

Now I was walking down Huaihai Road, and the advertisements that packed the street were somewhat glaring, so I raised my head and gazed toward Old Jinjiang and New Jinjiang.\textsuperscript{11} They resembled a father-son pair, coexisting so near to each other. Moving slowly, I reached the intersection of Si Nan Road and finally turned off of Huaihai Road. Reportedly Si Nan Road attracted more people than Huaihai Road. I was very familiar with this road, and could recognize one by one the houses in which Dr. Sun Yat-sen, Zhou Enlai, Guo Moruo, Chen Duxiu, and Mei Lanfang had once lived. Walking on the same ground where they had once tread, I surprisingly began to relax a little. Students began heading off to school, and adults began going off to work; the morning’s rush hour had arrived at last. I noticed a father-son pair: the father driving a scooter, and the son wearing a backpack and sitting behind his father. I remembered my father used to bring me to school on his bicycle—a memory that I hadn’t recalled in a very long time. At this, I called my father again.

“Dad, you should report this to the police.”

“Son, Daddy forfeits,” he answered. “Daddy sold the factory. Daddy loves you both. Bring your brother back home, okay? Everything—absolutely everything is yours.”

\textsuperscript{9} Moller Villa Hotel Shanghai

\textsuperscript{10} A tall and imposing foreign affairs office building also known for its pleasing architecture; the \textit{jiushi} translates literally to “lengthy matters” or “things that have gone on for a long time.” “Renaissance” can also be translated as “revival.”

\textsuperscript{11} Famous restaurant and grand hotel in Shanghai
“No, it’s already too late. I don’t have any more demands, just that I hope you’re able to report this immediately. If you don’t, my brother will be in my hands forever. And tomorrow will be very dangerous for him.”

“Son.” He was nearly crying as he said, “My business is done for. What reason do I have left to live? I only have your mom, you, and your brother now. You are everything to me. Daddy can’t lose any of you.”

I couldn’t listen anymore—I couldn’t bear it. I was truly afraid that I was going to change my mind, so I interrupted him rudely. “Stop talking, Dad. Go tell the police. That’s the only way out of this.”

I snapped the phone shut again and picked up the heavy suitcase.

Back at the building, the blind man already seemed to be familiar with the sound of my footsteps. “Hello, mister,” he greeted.

“Hello.”

“Mister, you’re carrying such a heavy thing. It seems pretty taxing. Do you need some help?”

This blind man was genuinely strange. I couldn’t help but admire his hearing ability and discernment, but I didn’t want to answer and quickly went on up.

• • •

After Milan had finished eating breakfast and had fed my brother, I opened the suitcase in front of her.

Together, we counted: there were 100,000 yuan to each bundle of cash, and fifty bundles total. When we finished, I pulled out a money counter\(^{12}\) I had stashed a while

\(^{12}\) Counts bills quickly and checks for counterfeits
ago and ran the cash through it to double check. The machine made a slight rhythmic sound as it counted the bills. Every bundle was made up of a thousand 100-yuan bills, yet not a single one was fake. This time, Father had finally been more honest. There was exactly five million.

Cash filled the room to the brim, our vision packed with the portraits of four great leaders. At this point, we looked like two major-league outlaws, sitting down and divvying up our spoils. I looked at her, and she suddenly seemed nervous.

During the evening news on TV that night, the latest arrest warrants were broadcasted. Pictures of Milan and me, as well as my brother, were shown on the screen with the words, “Criminal suspect is afflicted with serious mental illness, prone to violence, extremely dangerous, possibly carrying a large sum of money on his person,” and so on. I was famous now, thanks to my father; he had finally gone to the police.

The next day, I went out to buy breakfast for Milan and my brother and noticed the breakfast seller looking at me strangely. I paid hastily and went back to the apartment. After that, every time I left the apartment, I felt like many pairs of eyes were on me, watching me the same way they might watch a feral animal. They never dared to look straight at me, instead constantly glancing my way out of the corner of their eyes. Then, as soon as I was in their line of sight, they immediately turned their heads away, jolted, and looked anywhere but at me, as if nothing had happened. It got to the point

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13 The 100-yuan note is the largest Chinese bill and targeted the most by counterfeiters.
14 An older version of the RMB 100-yuan note (1990 to 1999) featured Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, and Zhu De; the current note (1999-present) features only Mao.
15 Jiangyang dadao, or outlaws or brigands of rivers and lakes who forcefully and violently rob and loot, similar to highway robbers
that even people outside the apartment building would point and gesture at me, whispering to each other.

Really, it was laughable—I had no other wish than that they all report me to the police. Maybe the people who took notice of me were all cowards. I reasoned that they must need time to think it over first: carefully compare me to my TV picture, not daring to be sure. And even if they were sure, they didn’t have the courage to call the police. Just as they were so incredibly bright, they were also incredibly stupid. In an abrupt decision, I decided to keep waiting like this, until someone had the guts to go to the police.

I was waiting.

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I would constantly put money in her room and ask, “Do you hate me? If you hate me, tear the money up.”

“Why would I hate you? All of this is my fault. It has nothing to do with your dad—you shouldn’t force him into ruin—and it has even less to do with your brother. The only one who should get punished is me, so however you want to carry out your revenge against me, I’m willing to take it.”

“I underestimated you,” I remarked and turned to leave.

“No, wait, please promise me—every day you’ll come in and talk with me, every day. I need us to talk, face to face. I promise I won’t try to escape.”

“Did you finish reading the book I gave you?”

“I’m very grateful for the book, so I need us to talk.”

“Are you lonely?”
“I am. But not only because you’ve locked me up in here.”

“When you and my father were together, were you lonely then, too?”

“Yes.”

“I promise.”

From this point on, I spent the majority of each day with her. She never rebelled or pulled anything funny, behaving instead like a docile sheep. Me, on the other hand—I had never had this kind of outpouring about everything from my painful childhood before. I never expected my hostage to be the first person to listen to everything I had to say. In exchange, she spent a month delicately disclosing how the relationship between her and my father unfolded, including the most essential details.

Milan’s parents were always away. She had grown up in Shanghai ever since she was young and was very envious of the life I had with my parents. She didn’t have a college diploma, and her educational background was lacking, so naturally, she wasn’t able to work at my father’s office on merit. It was only possible because he fancied her looks.

For the first few months she worked for him, everything was normal. Then out of the blue, my father began to come on to her fiercely. Milan had in no way returned those advances. Just when she had decided to resign from her job and leave my father, her mother contracted a serious illness while abroad, and Milan suddenly found herself in the dangerous situation of urgently needing several hundred thousand yuan for medical fees. My father, despicably, took advantage of people’s personal crises. He sent 300,000 yuan to Milan’s mother and proposed a deal with Milan.
Milan said there was no moonlight that night. Inside my father’s office, my father bared his rugged shoulders and wide chest, exposing his well-developed muscles and giving off his intoxicating and attractive musky scent. Supposedly, this particular pheromone could drive women mad. Milan said my father’s movements were very considerate—gentle and tender, like a compassionate father towards his daughter—and she recalled them vividly.

I wanted to throw up. A quivering had started all over my body that I needed to get control of, and I had to keep listening.

My father was actually very wonderful that night—or at least, Milan believed so. It had been her first time, and she fully enjoyed the experience despite not having volunteered. She said that sometimes, she really did feel a kind of deep love toward my father, to the extent that she couldn’t imagine leaving him for a single moment. Yet at other times, she felt like she was trapped in an immense amount of distress and self-blame. My father could never divorce my mother, so Milan could only ever be a tool of my father’s—a tool for his pleasure, simply a means of ensuring he left behind an heir. And my brother existed as a result.

My father bought a house in the western suburbs for her to live in. Her so-called “going to work” was merely a façade. For the majority of the time, she hid in a room like a captive bird, waiting for my father to arrive. Kind of like she did now.

I don’t know how much of what she said was true, but I kid you not, every evening we both talked long into the night. She would speak and then cry, and I would, too—maybe because crackpots have weak nerves—until I couldn’t take it anymore. Only then would I leave and lock up behind me.
A good long while passed like this, and I quickly forgot about my danger of being arrested outside. In addition to allowing her to go to the bathroom, I even allowed her to take a shower. As a result, I intentionally asked someone to come fix the water heater.

• • •

There was one night, after I left her room, that I just didn’t sleep for the rest of the night. Instead, I secretly watched her. She gazed attentively at the window, maybe counting the iron bars of the grate, completely motionless. After a long while, she turned off the light and lay down to sleep. Her outline continuously turned and shook, proving her inability to fall asleep, like me. It appeared neither of us could achieve that tonight. She was a woman—one who had already experienced the pleasure of being with a man—a mature young woman who had already given birth to a child. And as such, it became clear to me what kinds of needs she ultimately had right now, both in the depths of her heart and in the depths of her body.

When the sky gradually lightened, I opened the door, went in, and quietly sat down next to her bed. She didn’t show even the tiniest reaction. Her eyes were still closed and she was lying prone, as if asleep, but I knew she was pretending. She knew I was there.

In a quiet voice, I told her, “I grew up imprisoned, ever since I was young. This room is based on my room in the mental hospital. While I was there, every day, like a machine, I would eat, sleep, and get another ‘treatment.’ It was really only getting shots, taking medicine, and listening to music, and that was it.

“But in my hospital room, there were only two things I could actually do,” I continued. “One of those was to grab onto the bars of the window and look up at the sky.
I developed this habit early on. Occasionally a bird would fly by overhead, and that would cheer me up all day. I even developed a kind of special affection for the iron bars of the grate. Light would shine in, and the grate’s silhouette would fill the whole room. These long shadows would cast themselves onto my face and over my eyes. The light would grow brighter and fade away, and with it, those shadows would constantly shift, breaking up the sky. Breaking up my world.

“My other habit was staying up late after lights-out. I would open my eyes in the dark and try to make out shapes around me, even though I couldn’t see a thing. But it was like I could still see something, from the very depths of my innermost being, you know?

“In truth, it’s like I was kidnapped right after I was born,” I finished. “My spirit was. We will never be able to escape these kinds of chains, no matter how hard we try.”

Milan was still not even the teensiest bit responsive, but I knew she had heard everything. She was beautiful like this, her eyes closed as if waiting for something. It felt like everything about her posture gave off a sense of openness. She had bared her arms, her smooth skin giving off the same plumpness and rosy glow as a woman who had just given birth.

I reached over and caressed the back of her hand. This was the first time I felt like I had the ability to dominate another person, even though this was just my own wishful thinking. She still didn’t react. My fingertips followed her arm up toward her shoulder, perhaps the same way Father’s had. His hand was definitely gentler, more experienced, and more able to make Milan happy.
I grabbed her shoulder experimentally. Its roundness, like a ripe apple, gave off the sense that it was ready for the plucking. For my plucking. I strengthened the grip of my fingers, and Milan’s eyebrows furrowed, possibly in pain. Then my hand began to shake, and the trembling spread immediately to my whole body. I let go and left the room.

That afternoon, a fine, misty rain floated in the sky, turning into a downpour in an instant. The people on our secluded street opened umbrellas. Cars slowed their speed. Everything was overcast.

The raindrops hitting the window sounded like the sky knocking to me. I pressed my face to the window, my skin ice-cold. When I checked the peephole in Milan’s door later, I saw her face was also pressed against the glass of the window. After all, she longed for freedom. Was her longing the same as mine?

After dinner, and with my permission, she took a shower. After she finished washing, she murmured her thanks and then returned to the room without prompting. I followed her in.

“I’m sorry,” she told me, “but tonight I’d like to ask you to leave.”

“No,” I refused.

She was wearing the bathrobe I had set aside for her a long time ago. Steam wafted off her from head to toe. Her hair hung loosely, beads of water rolling off, and her skin seemed rosier than normal. She was, unquestionably, a woman in full bloom.

I could imagine that after encountering this kind of allure, my father had been unable to control himself, too. “My dad made you his mistress after seeing you like this,” I guessed.
“I am a weak woman.”

My heart grabbed onto these words—I was so weak. She Is a Weak Woman was a short story by Yu Dafu. I approached her and said, “Lie down.”

“Why?”

“Lie down. Trust me, I won’t hurt you.”

She knew that resisting a mentally ill person was futile, so in the end she complied, and laid down on the bed. I sat next to her. “This morning, why did you pretend to be asleep?”

“I didn’t pretend.”

“You weren’t able to sleep the entire night, though, right? I watched you all night. I wasn’t able to sleep, either.”

She started in surprise. “Why couldn’t you sleep?”

I didn’t answer, but grabbed her hand. She didn’t pull away. I leaned my head in closer toward her. “This morning when I grabbed your hand, why didn’t you resist?”

“I told you,” she said. “I am a weak woman.”

“Is it because my dad grabbed your hand like that, too? You look like you haven’t felt a man’s touch in a long time—like you haven’t been happy in a long time, right? So when I held your hand, you remembered my dad’s hand holding yours. Isn’t this what you’ve been thirsting for? I want to help you quench this kind of thirst. Tell me how my dad did it. Teach me—I don’t know how. Please teach me.”

Saying this made me sound like a child, but this voice could elicit sympathy from any woman. My hands felt boiling hot all of a sudden; the more they reached out and
grabbed at her, the tighter they held on. I didn’t know whether what I was doing counted as some sort of retaliation against Father or if it was some sort of imitation.

I had once thought her eyes were mysterious, like one of the nights in *One Thousand and One Nights*. Now the night in them suddenly burst into flame. She looked at me for a long time, her gaze electrifying me like a current. Her lips parted as though she wanted to drink me in.

Finally, she said, “Grab my shoulder.”

Grabbing her shoulder was like opening a door. Oh, she taught me alright. Step by step, she taught me everything, down to every last detail of what she and my father had done. It was as if I were my father, and had taken his place and performed a kind of duty.

A light was turning on for me. What happened in the room during that Shanghai night revealed everything.

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“You could have escaped from the beginning. Why didn’t you leave?” I asked her, whispering into her ear. By now the sky was light. The door was wide open.

She didn’t answer.

“Tell me, who makes you happier, me or my dad? He’s stronger than I am, isn’t he?”

She still didn’t reply. I left her and re-locked the door.

I went out again and gave my father another call from a cab. As if purposefully reporting some sort of good news to him, I said, “Dad, I’m so very sorry, but I’ve already slept with Milan.”
His end of the line was silent for a long moment. I understood everything he was thinking right now quite clearly.

“I promise I will no longer see Milan,” he said. “Milan is yours now. Son, whatever you’d like, it’s yours. I only want you and your brother.”

“Dad, isn’t this like cutting your losses? I’ll be sure to pass this on to Milan.”

“Son, the police have already started a complete investigation. Come back, while Daddy can still save you. Later it will be too late.”

I suddenly felt a little sad. “It’s already too late, Dad.”

Back at the building, the blind man said hello to me like it was a routine, like we were already old friends. I finally gave him a thousand yuan.

• • •

These days she seemed like she had already grown accustomed to a life of captivity. I wondered if she might have fallen in love with the room, fallen in love with the bed, fallen in love with the iron bars, fallen in love with the iron door, or fallen in love with the peephole that allowed people to spy on her. She didn’t display an ounce of resistance. Every day, she looked out the window quietly, fed my brother, changed his diapers, and waited for me to come home, like this was a normal life. There were many times I purposefully or even accidentally didn’t close the door when I left. She could have taken the child and fled, but in spite of everything, she didn’t.

In the end, there came a day when she said, “Let’s live here forever. I can’t leave this room. It’s my life—you and me, and your brother.”
I stared at her, my emotions confused. This was the first time I had looked at her and felt a kind of twisting in my heart. This feeling consistently urged me to take action; it urged me to truly grow up.

“But I’ve kidnapped you. You and my brother are both my hostages.”

“So? That’s not important.”

I had once read a story, written in I don’t know what dynasty, in which an executioner captured a thief who was a woman. In the time it took him to bring her to the execution grounds where he would have chopped off her head, the thief fell in love with him, so in the end, the executioner didn’t kill her. Instead, he took her and had her, sullied her, and imprisoned her in a dungeon. The thief felt extremely fortunate in spite of this, and she was more than happy to live out the remaining years of her life in the dungeon with him.

“But I’m a nutcase.”

“No. You’re a gift.”

This was the first time anyone had said something like that to me. I felt a wave of gratitude all of a sudden, so I told her, “Go. Just take my brother and go.”

“No, I’m your hostage. I’m not leaving unless you come with me.”


“Don’t ask why.”

Actually, I understood why. I knew from the first time I saw her that I had fallen into her snare. I had never been able to pull myself free. Even though I had kidnapped her, and slept with her, I still wanted to be destroyed by her hand. Maybe from the very beginning, it hadn’t actually been me who had kidnapped her. Maybe she had kidnapped
me. The power that a beautiful woman held was catastrophic, despite her still being a weak woman.

“And if I didn’t happen to be in possession of five million yuan, what then?” I finally said what I was thinking.

She looked like she couldn’t believe what I just said, her eyes immediately piercing me like two sharp arrows. Then she raised her hand and slapped me in the face.

The skin on my left cheek began to burn painfully. Her hand wasn’t large, but the slap it delivered was especially strong. I imagined my face had five red imprints from her fingers. She extended her hand again, and I couldn’t avoid her a second time. I could only take the hit. But she didn’t hit me. Instead, she covered my left cheek with her hand and caressed me softly, just like a mother caressed a child.

“I’m sorry.” She was crying. “Does it hurt?”

She was a weak woman, in the end. I left and locked the door.

I had a nightmare. In it, I went back to the mental hospital. When the dream broke, the sky was already bright. I felt my heart beating fast, and involuntarily leaned toward the window, gazing down below. I saw police cars, several of them with flashing lights, coming toward the building.

The last day had arrived, I told myself.

Then I got up and opened the door to Milan’s room. Mother and son were sleeping soundly. I carefully picked up my brother. He looked a lot like me, surprisingly. He would grow up. He would become a great man and inherit all my father’s property, and become someone like my father. Maybe by the time he grew up,
he would have no idea he ever had an older brother. Even if he knew, he could only regard me—a psycho and a kidnapper—as a disgrace.

“I love you, little brother,” I whispered and softly kissed his forehead.

I put him back in the cradle. By now the police would definitely be downstairs in the management office inquiring about my whereabouts and room number. Maybe they had already gotten on the elevator. I looked down at Milan’s body and kissed her forehead. Then I picked up the leather suitcase containing the five million yuan and left the room. I headed to the roof.

Like I said before, everything started on a top floor. And everything ended on one.

It was early morning on the rooftop, and the air was unusually cool and refreshing. The wind was strong and blew my hair around chaotically. The spacious rooftop contained nothing except me, all alone and gulping in the wind. I carried the leather suitcase and went over to the side of the roof, taking a look out over the edge. It made my head dizzy for a moment. Slowly, I sat down on the railing on the edge. If the railing came loose, I would fall.

Making up my mind, I glanced down again. The early morning sprawl of Shanghai was shrouded under a layer of mist and appeared damp. Parts of distant taller buildings, such as the eastern side of the Oriental Pearl Tower and Jinmao Tower, were indistinct. Beneath me, even more high-rises extended into the distance like the peaks and valleys of mountain ranges, or like wave after wave tossed by a mad wind. On the side of the road that ran beneath many of these buildings, several police cars of all sizes were stopping. The police were definitely searching the room below me by now. Maybe
they thought I had already taken the money and absconded in the night, but they had
discovered Milan and my brother. They were looking for me. Maybe there were a few
smart ones who would climb up to the roof.

Come on. Come on up, my friends.

The police eventually came up. Their movements were brisk. They surrounded
me as if approaching a dangerous target. I could tell they wanted nothing more than to
rush forward and bring me to justice, but one experienced old officer halted the younger
ones with a loud shout: “Careful, he might jump!”

They immediately stopped, leaving only a short distance between them and me,
and called out, telling me not to jump.

“Friends,” I addressed them, “thank you for your trouble. You officers are
extremely efficient—really the best! I’m sorry to have brought you away from your
families so early in the morning just to catch me, I really am. You have my highest
respect.”

As I stopped talking, I swung a leg over the railing so that I was straddling it. I
stood opposite them for a long moment, until I saw Milan.

“Wait!” she cried. She was carrying my brother and rushing up toward the roof.

“Don’t jump! Come back!”

“Milan, I’m sorry. You’re free now. From this point on, you should erase me
from your memory.”

“No,” she sobbed. And she cried. She really cried, beautifully. My brother cried,
too, and the sound gripped everyone’s heart. Milan seemed like she wanted to rush
forward, but her way was barred by the police.
She was almost shouting now. “Come back! Even if you go to prison or a mental hospital for the rest of your life, I’ll still wait for you. In the same room you imprisoned me in, I’ll always, always wait for you to come back. We’ll always be together.”

Always—always—

This word was assauling my ears. She was beautiful, especially when she cried. On top of that, she was dressed head to toe in white, just like a woman attending her husband’s funeral in more traditional times.

My brother suddenly stopped his weeping, opened his eyes wide at Milan’s chest, and looked at me. He would never get to know me.

I straightened myself up, lifted my other leg, and saw how everyone present seemed to draw in their breath as Milan shouted, “Don’t!”

I jumped, carrying the five million yuan leather suitcase with me.

The second I left the roof, I opened the suitcase. Money flew everywhere—old notes of blue and green and new bills of red and white—they were free now. They fluttered in the sky, dancing all sorts of dances—ballet, ballroom, Latin, tango, cha cha, disco, and other traditional dances. Five million yuan, fifty thousand pieces of paper in total: it was like fifty thousand large armies, vast and mighty and a force to be reckoned with. They flooded out from the tops of ten or more buildings for what seemed like a thousand miles, bent on attacking a single target—the ground.

I was free now. I did backflips and somersaults in the air, money swarming around me. I was this grand army’s commander-in-chief. The wind poured into my ears, and I couldn’t hear a thing. I could only open my eyes wide, looking up at the sky one second, looking down at the ground the next. Mostly the windows of the building
dominated my view. I saw a housewife opening a window on the 21st floor, probably wanting to breathe in the fresh morning air, but what she saw was me, and tens of thousands of bank notes. She started to shriek, but within moments, several paper bills that had floated into her home convinced her quite happily that this year would definitely bring good luck.

This was the first time I had peeped into windows like this. On a window sill on the 18th floor, there was a pot of milan flowers that were just starting to bloom, the tiny flower petals emitting a strong, sweet smell. On the 16th floor were four people still playing mahjong; they would sleep during the day and stay up all night like a flock of night owls. On the 13th floor, a middle schooler had gotten up early to study English vocabulary. On the 9th floor, a man was upending a room in a search. The room was a mess. I knew this apartment’s owner had gone away on a business trip, so I called out in a loud voice: “Catch the thief!” If only any police could hear me.

I felt the earth’s gravity getting stronger, the earth extending a mighty hand to drag me down with all its strength. On the street below, I saw that countless people had gathered. Cars and busses were stopping on their routes. I also spied that strange blind man. The people were in a hurry to get to work but had no choice but to stop and appreciate the most money they had ever seen in their lives, and also me. What they saw was such a peculiar sight. Each person stretched their neck, staring with wide eyes and rolling up their sleeves, getting ready to catch this flying, easy cash.

Father. I saw my father. He was hurrying toward me, shouting something. I couldn’t hear what. But it was as if I could see his face clearly, and his eyes; it was as if
he were ten years younger. I so wanted to say something to him. There were so many words, words that would never run out.

But no, I was crashing toward the earth—no, the earth was crashing toward me. I embraced the earth. The earth wanted to embrace me, too.

*Dad, I love you.*

Everything ended…or so I thought.

• • •

I traveled in the pitch-black for a long time. Just me, alone. I walked and walked. It seemed as if the darkness would never end. Just when I was about to give up all hope, I saw a ray of white light. I rushed toward it.

In the middle of the light was a young man, tall with fair skin and a heavy-hearted expression. He was wearing a green military uniform and the standard shoes worn by the People’s Liberation Army, and in his hands, he held a rifle. He was coming toward me, and we embraced.

He was my father from 1972.

• • •

This was still a room made of iron bars. The shadows from the bars projected onto my forehead.

I was still alive.

Before I had hit the ground, I was caught by a nylon net held by several police officers. Countless foam cushions had broken my fall. Because of this, I only sustained minor injuries and was checked into a mental hospital where, once more, I began to live
my past life. But as time went on, I began to understand that my sickness was gone, and that I was no longer a psychotic, unstable person.

Half a year later, my parents checked me out of the hospital. Father told me that after I had jumped, Milan had taken my brother and disappeared. They had searched for her continuously, but to no avail.

• • •

I arrived at the building where I had kidnapped Milan half a year ago. The blind man that used to hang around the entrance was gone; it was only afterward that I had learned it was he who had alerted the police, which had surprised me. It was inconceivable. Had he been faking his blindness? I tracked down the landlord I had rented the top floor apartment from and asked if I could buy it, but the landlord told me someone had already purchased the suite.

Dejectedly, I exited the building. As I crossed the street outside and raised my head to look up at the penthouse windows, I saw the line of iron bars was still there. Then another window opened, and a woman stuck her head out.

It was her. It was Milan.

I recalled what she had once said, and I understood everything. My heart throbbed fiercely in my chest, and I dashed on up toward the penthouse room.
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