

Pursuing this biopolitical paradigm further—and further refining accounts of its applicability to different media and categories of life—might yield invaluable answers to other questions. For example, how does the conceptual content of the term “biopolitics” change when the object of analysis shifts from a literary or visual representation of bodies to, say, the actual performance of a human body? If, as Lu proposes, biopolitics encompasses the techniques of governing and tactics of enacting not just bodily life but also “the psyche” and “libidinal economies,” what exactly constitutes the *bios* of desires and affects, and what differentiates the biopolitics of the body from that of the mind? Lu’s capacious engagement with diverse cultural forms and practices fruitfully broadens the horizon of biopolitical criticism, permitting us to chart these new lines of inquiry for China and beyond.

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Ma Yuan. *Ballad of the Himalayas: Stories of Tibet*. Translated by Herbert J. Batt. Introduction by Yang Xiaobin. Portland, ME: MerwinAsia, 2011. xiv, 315 pp. Hardcover \$50.00, ISBN 978-0-9832991-9-6. Paperback \$24.95, ISBN 978-0-9832991-8-9.

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This long overdue collection of stories by a major writer should be read by anyone, China specialist or not, who appreciates good literature. Ma Yuan’s work offers the simple yet detailed observations of Hemingway, the humor and poignancy of

Salinger, the stylistic coherence of Woolf, and the playfully serious and formal irony of Borges or Cortázar.

Ma Yuan is a Chinese writer probably best known for writing about Tibet, although he also wrote fiction set elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> He was born in northeast China in 1953, sent to work in a factory and in the country during the Cultural Revolution, and eventually graduated from Liaoning University in 1983. After graduation, Ma moved to Lhasa, where he lived for eight years, worked with Tibetan Radio, and began to write fiction. He published novels and stories from 1984 to 1989; he then moved in new directions as a screenwriter, essayist, and teacher. This volume presents eight of Ma's Tibetan stories, masterfully translated by Herbert J. Batt. The stories include "Vagabond Spirit," "The Black Road," "The Numismatologist," "The Master," "A Fiction," "The Spell of the Gangdise Mountains," "Three Ways to Fold a Paper Hawk," and "Ballad of the Himalayas." The book also includes an introduction by Yang Xiaobin and an afterword by Batt. Unfortunately, the volume does not include the Chinese titles and original publication dates of the stories.<sup>2</sup>

Ma Yuan's fiction was central to the busy Chinese literary scene of the 1980s. The middle of that decade has been identified with the predominance of roots-seeking literature, in which writers ambivalently sought to wrestle an authentic and modern Chinese identity from the nation's turbulent past and its present effects.<sup>3</sup> Root-seeking literature was followed by avant-garde writing, with its suspicion of history and culture and its seemingly purposeless narrators. For writers of this type of literature, any new Chinese identity cannot simply be imagined or willed into being from the past because subjectivity itself has been transformed by the complications and contradictions of modern history. Storytelling, therefore, becomes part of an identity, not simply a means of representing an identity that is already present. Narrators and characters are not content to simply rely on representation to tell their stories, but self-consciously exploit the techniques and conventions of literature in order to expose the constructed nature of real life.

For Ma, roots-seeking and avant-garde literature come together in the colonial context of China's presence in Tibet. In fact, colonial fiction has always blurred the boundary between these two kinds of writing, broadly speaking, combining questions of cultural heritage with critiques of identity. Consider Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Kipling's *Kim*, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, or Coetzee's *Foe* as examples. All feature characters who experience confusion in their identities, and their uncertainties are intimately linked to the forms their stories take.

Ma's experiences as a Chinese man in Lhasa—and his imagination as a writer—reflect the colonial encounter on a very human and individually psychological level, as well as any metaphorical levels that readers might identify. The stories showcase a remarkably sensitive observer-creator of and participant in relationships that are simultaneously unequal, symbiotic, exploitative, compassionate, tragic, and life-affirming. Ma's stories develop new forms for articulating a

consciousness emerging, for good as well as for ill, in a colonial context. Of course, these are not the direct accounts of colonized people or cultures, but of the colonial resident outsider who recognizes that writing about his interactions in China's Tibet sets in motion any number of powerful metaphors, stereotypes, and prejudices. It is tempting and sometimes well-meaning to reduce the Tibet-China relationship to one in which the component parts map easily onto oppositions between the spiritual and the material, or between traditional Tibetan life and Chinese modernization. Furthermore, it may be possible to feel that Ma's stories are patronizing colonialist allegories—the narrator as a personification of China in Tibet, or the leper village as an allegory for Tibet. Yet if this were all that the stories reflected, we would be left with rather thin narratives. Instead, Ma creates worlds in which important allegorical implications never stray far from the individual lives and experiences of narrators and characters. It all comes down to the questions, "What did I just see?" or "What just happened?" and how a writer goes about responding to these questions.

Consider the opening to "The Black Road," which I believe is the best story to read first in the volume:

Nobody is more prone to fantasy than the eyewitness to a murder. That's why somebody with the luck I've had usually gives inconsistent testimony, until at last they turn their whole statement inside out. It's not from cowardice or lack of nerve. The facts are never real. From firm faith to wavering belief, then on to delirium, then to groundless fabrication. First you disbelieve your eyes, then you start to disbelieve yourself. I can tell you my own experience. (p. 26)

What does the story begin to suggest about the narrator's experience? What issues are set in motion by the phrase "[t]he facts are never real"? Does this suggest that nothing is true, that nothing really happens in Ma's story? Just the opposite. This narrator is exploring and describing the condition of having to account for some experience, of having to bring the experience to someone else. An "eyewitness to a murder" is called to testify in his fiction, and his statements must somehow negotiate the interests of various judges, or readers. Kafka, of course, is known for writing of the complicated path from experience to narrative. In Ma's case, a general concern with believing your own eyes merges with the difficulties of testifying to other people. "Inconsistent testimony" is the charge leveled against those who cannot seem to keep their stories straight, yet this story explores how the inconsistencies emerge from at least two sources. First, there is the use that others make of the story, the interpretations that others impose on the events as told. Maurice Blanchot's "The Madness of the Day" (*La folie du jour*) is another example of this type. Second, there is the deceptively simple recognition that events mean one thing when experienced and another when remembered or described. Julio Cortázar's "Blow-Up" (*Las babas del diablo*) offers another example of this, featuring a photographer who confronts entirely new feelings when he revisits a picture in detail—and in hindsight. Ma's story is filled with similar provocative images,

including, in fact, a Japanese camera, which makes sense as a factual detail as well as an allegorical reminder of Japan's colonial presence in northeast China.

"The Black Road" addresses other allegorical issues, such as whether China's presence in Tibet is even recognized as colonial or detrimental: "As far as the police are concerned this murder never happened" (p. 26)—as far as much of the international community is concerned, there has been no Tibetan cultural genocide. And yet, Ma seems to emphasize that while it is impossible to ignore the sociopolitical context of these stories, it is only through individual experiences that human events, however broad, make sense. "From firm faith to wavering belief, then on to delirium, then to groundless fabrication"—this is a line that stands to describe the nature of experience itself as much as an individual Chinese writer's feelings about Tibet.<sup>4</sup>

The story concludes with the narrator admitting, "I had a dream that I can't explain that repeats itself over and over. I just can't work out whether it's real" (p. 40). Yet, despite a reader's temptation to interpret this as an admission that nothing really happened, nothing matters, or even that ambiguity is the point of the story, I would suggest the ending reasserts the complex fate of very real events. The story shows that terrible things do happen, but certainty over relating them and having them understood is hard to come by. Ma's work has been described as absurdist, without plot, or fragmented, yet the stories in this volume remain true to the depiction, not just of facts, but of the perception and memory of intensely transformative events. Reading Ma's stories benefits from an appreciation of Hemingway's or Woolf's modernist experiments, in which fictional techniques are employed as extensions of experience, not simply replacements for that experience. Notice how the penultimate section of "The Black Road" illustrates this by turning the reader into a witness of facts. In this section, which is not narrated, but set out like a script, we find the following:

Scene V: The rider of the chestnut, fleeing, looks back.

Scene VI: The lone rider of the second white horse, a black dog behind him, recedes farther and farther into the distance. (p. 39)

Here, we are asked simply to witness the details of the story. As an example of the subtle and precise cinematic descriptions that appear throughout Ma's stories (and also rather like Hemingway's work), there are no explicit cues to how something is said or even seen. Instead, the truth of this section—how it really appears to us as we read and as we remember the story—is up to us and our responses. This truth is like Ma's response to his subject matter throughout the stories in this volume. Significant things happen—there are facts—the words on the page—but the facts alone are not what make the story meaningful.

"The Numismatologist" reminds us of Ma's fascination with identity as formed by circulation—of culture, history, objects, and conversation. The numismatologist in the story, as a coin expert, allows Ma to consider how the face value of an object is derived from social circumstances. Identity, for example, whether Tibetan,

Chinese, or otherwise, is determined not only by what something is, but also by how it is circulated. A coin has its intrinsic value, the value of its silver, for example, but its real value is established by the system to which it belongs, and that system can change over time. Ma's story seems fascinated by the logic of circulated value and recognizes its effect on lives in China's Tibet. Coins, therefore, serve as images of storytelling itself, as the main character recognizes that "each coin has a tale of its own" (p. 66) and tries to exploit the values added to objects, people, and stories as they come to be viewed as exotic, rare, or special—in other words, as they come to be treated as money. Ma's stories tend to feature thoughtfully extended metaphors, and "The Numismatologist" accordingly considers several complications of circulation, including the gradual contamination of items that circulate and the danger of contagion they pose. Objects, people, and stories cannot remain pure if they acquire the value that circulation adds, and this contamination (the dirty coins and diseased suits, and consider also the leprosy that is central to "A Fiction") provokes fear and paranoia among those who would prefer to see value circulate without mutual influence.

Provocatively, "Vagabond Spirit" asks the central question, "What's scary about coins?" and proceeds to explore the intersection of value, fiction, and history. Here the importance is not so much on any particular story, but on the ability to fabricate new stories, like Scheherazade in "One Thousand and One Nights." Ma's narrators frantically, happily, casually, or cleverly recognize the need for stories and storytelling: As the narrator says in "The Spell of the Gangdise Mountains," "What, you want another '*and then*,' Dear Reader?" (p. 255), storytelling keeps identities alive. The characters of "Vagabond Spirit" are not satisfied with any single coin, no matter how historical, but with the possibility of obtaining a mold to make new coins. The predicament, however—at once an aspect of plot and of symbolism—is that it takes two sides of the mold to make those new coins.

In "The Master," an elderly painter strives to finish his masterpiece before he is overcome by a creeping petrification, progressing up his body from his feet. The image resonates with Ma's interest in art, the artist, and the journey from personal artistic expression to national tradition. "A Fiction" is probably the story most likely to be called classic Ma Yuan, and it is also the object of some rather heavy-handed interpretation, including Batt's translator's note. Yet enduring interest in the story may be based less on what it represents or symbolizes and more on the exploration of representation itself as both our greatest attraction and our biggest threat. That is, as readers, we want to hear stories, and as narrators we want to tell them, yet how do we square the attempt to be true or sincere with the use of made-up forms? Plato's *Republic*, of course, considers this problem in the allegory of the cave, which "A Fiction" explicitly references, as does "Ballad of the Himalayas."

"The Spell of the Gangdise Mountains" is an outstanding story that is long, challenging, and genuinely funny. It unfolds through several narrators and concerns events ranging from hunting and Tibetan sky burials to an abominable

snowman and one character's fixation on owning a truck. Yet at the story's thematic center is the relationship between myth and ideology. Ma plays with the expectation that readers (Chinese and otherwise) will see the world view of Tibetans as inherently different from their own world views, when the truth is we all must face the ways in which myth and ideology support our lives and identities. A paragraph of sociology-speak that includes the statement "their everyday life is indistinguishable from myth" is called out by the narrator for being a "long-winded harangue." While he asks the reader to "please forgive the sophistry," he knows that the remarks still stand, that the jury cannot disregard what has already been spoken, and that people inevitably live with truths they know to be fictions (p. 207). Even materialist notions of false consciousness are specifically explored in this story, as the main characters, named for "action" and "knowledge," try to unify their sense of what they see and what they are told. The narrator's wrap-up of the plot—for the benefit of a reader always asking "and then?"—ends the story with the sagacious wry humor characteristic of Ma's stories.

"Three Ways to Fold a Paper Hawk" revisits the imagery of painting and the critique of what it means for something to represent something else. This story is remarkably sad in spots, involving the story of an old woman who starves herself in order to feed stray dogs, and offers a very poignant example of Ma's mingling of self-consciousness and pathos. When the narrator concludes the story with his own literary criticism of two tales he has heard, we are confronted again with the relationship between what is authentic and what is true, which runs throughout Ma's work: "I know maybe Luo Hao's version of the story is more down to earth, more authentic, but Liu Yu's version brings out the meaning better" (p. 280). The final story in this collection, "Ballad of the Himalayas," ends the volume with a virtuoso choreography of images involving seeing, not seeing, and ignoring. The story's narrators and characters see things from a variety of shifting perspectives, they see others in the act of seeing, and at times they find their sight cut off or obscured, either because of others or through their own actions. Like the man who escapes Plato's darkened cave only to return for the benefit of his fellow prisoners, the narrator explains at one point that "coming inside out of the piercing light, I couldn't see" (p. 291). Ma's story follows the intense attraction of the shadow-stories in the cave, the enlightenment of the true sunlight, and the human imperative of having to always shift between the two situations.

Hebert J. Batt's achievement in bringing these stories to English readers should be recognized and rewarded by attracting a very broad readership. As Henry Y. H. Zhao has written, it would be a shame if these stories were read only by those with an interest in specialized sociological matters. To be sure, Ma's Tibetan stories are intimately part of the Chinese literary scene of the 1980s, but they can be that while also being stories with enduring interest for readers of all sorts. Batt's translations in this volume, some of which improve even on his own earlier published versions, produce texts that, to an English ear, are delightful,

forceful, and memorable.<sup>5</sup> *Ballad of the Himalayas* is not only a truly essential text for scholars of modern Chinese literature, but an enjoyable and stimulating collection of brilliantly accomplished fiction for any reader.

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NOTES

1. The stories of Tibet in this volume can be distinguished from and related to several other categories of literature, including fiction written in the Tibetan language, fiction written by Tibetans (in any language), and fiction written about Tibet. Interested readers should consider the following sources for an elaboration of these distinctions: Tsering Shakya, "Language, Literature, and Representation in Tibet," in *Tales of Tibet: Sky Burials, Prayer Wheels, and Wind Horses*, ed. and trans. Herbert J. Batt (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), pp. xi–xxiii; Tsering Shakya, "The Waterfall and Fragrant Flowers: The Development of Tibetan Literature Since 1950," *Mānoa* 12, no. 2: 28–40; and Steven J. Venturino, "Where Is Tibet in World Literature?" *World Literature Today* 78, no. 1: 51–56. For an invaluable discussion of Ma Yuan's work specifically, see Henry Y. H. Zhao, "Ma Yuan the Chinese Fabricator," *World Literature Today* 69, no. 2: 312–316.

2. For a list of English translations of Ma Yuan's work, see Kirk Denton's bibliography, available at <http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/bib4.htm>. Two other excellent translations currently available include the heartbreaking "Mistakes" (set in Liaoning rather than Tibet), by Helen Wang, in *The Lost Boat: Avant-Garde Fiction from China*, ed. Henry Y. H. Zhao (London: Wellsweep, 1993), pp. 29–42; and the delightful and very brief "Little Zhaxi and His Load of Wonderful Thoughts," by R. Tyler Cotton, available at his website, [rainboomstudio.wordpress.com](http://rainboomstudio.wordpress.com).

3. See Jing Wang's *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); as well as Wang's concise, informative introduction to her edited volume *China's Avant-Garde Fiction: An Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); and see Henry Y. H. Zhao's introduction to his edited volume *The Lost Boat: Avant-Garde Fiction from China* (London: Wellsweep Press, 1993).

4. In a footnote to this story, the translator informs us that "the black road" is "a Chinese expression for the world of crime" (p. 31), and this helps to explain the circumstances of the characters' behavior. A reader might also consider, however, that "the black road," as an image important to Native Americans (and likely of interest to Ma Yuan), refers to the path of misery and unsatisfied desires that people must walk when they stray from spirituality and toward greed.

5. There are some odd details for critics to quibble over productively. In "Vagabond Spirit," for example, is it French or German (or European) that the tall woman speaks, and should it be pointed out that she "doesn't speak Tibetan" rather than Chinese?