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## Entrapment and Enclosure: The Poetics of Space and Time in Yu Hua's Two Short Stories

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Yu Hua has been one of the most critically acclaimed and frequently translated contemporary Chinese authors. Thanks to the availability of English translations, the Western reader has perceived Yu Hua's "cruel, incisive realism" through his early avant-garde stories and his "revisionist retelling of the history of modern China, especially of Mao-era socialism" through his three family sagas, *Cries in the Drizzle* (在细雨中呼喊, 1991), *To Live* (活着, 1993), and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (许三观卖血记, 1994) (King). Yu Hua's bestseller, *Brothers* (兄弟, 2006), has captured the Western reader's interest, as may be verified in the September 2006 *New York Times*' review, "A Portrait of China Running Amok." Accordingly, the scholarship on Yu Hua has focused on either his early avant-garde stories or his full-length novels: *Cries in the Drizzle*, *To Live*, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* and *Brothers*. As for Yu Hua's avant-garde stories, literary critics have tended to utilize the framework of modernism to explore his experimental techniques and thematic obsession with violence and death. For example, in *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*, Zhang Xudong regards the avant-garde or meta-fictional experiments of Yu Hua, Ge Fei, Mo Yan, Ma Yuan, and other writers as Chinese literary modernism (122-200). In her preface to *Chinese Avant-garde Fiction*, Jing Wang reads some of Yu Hua's stories as "a mere linguistic maze, a pure energy field, and an aesthetic game of narration" (9). As for his full-length novels, critics have focused more on the author's questioning of the Communist Revolution and other aspects of official Chinese historiography, his dismantling of the revolution as progress, his emphasis on individual experiences, and his resistance to the complete fusing of individuals into the collectiveness of socialist China, as well as analyzing his exploration of the coming-of-age experiences of China's younger generation during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>1</sup> In spite of this upwelling of scholarship, some of Yu Hua's works have remained neglected and thus understudied, namely: his 1990s short stories; the large number of late-1990s prose essays he wrote for *Du Shu* (读书 *Reading*) and *Shouhuo* (收获 *Harvest*); and his latest volume of essays, *China in Ten Words* (十个词汇里的中国, 2009). This

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article serves to complement existing studies of Yu Hua's fiction by attempting to fill the void of scholarship on his short stories, especially "Boy in the Twilight" ("黄昏里的男孩," 1996) and "The Boisterous Game" ("蹦蹦跳跳的游戏," 1995). To date, there are no studies in English on these two stories. Here, they are specifically contextualized in a productive dialogue with studies of the short story genre and its narrative strategies, as well as in the context of contemporary China and its not-so-distant past.

My aim is to give a thorough and comprehensive close-reading of "Boy in the Twilight" and "The Boisterous Game," both from Yu Hua's 1999 collection of *Boy in the Twilight and Other Stories* (黄昏里的男孩, 1999), with a view to explore one of the understudied aspects of Yu Hua's works.<sup>2</sup> *Boy in the Twilight and Other Stories* consists of twelve stories completed within four years, from 1994 to 1997. These years show a hiatus between Yu Hua's completion of three full-length novels (*Cries in the Drizzle* in 1991, *To Live* in 1993, and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* in 1994) and the inauguration of his prose compositions, which he wrote for *Reading* and *Harvest* magazines in 1996 (Yan 43-49). These short stories are radically different in form and theme from Yu Hua's avant-garde stories written in the late 1980s. As Yu Hua has said, "Among all my works these twelve short stories are the closest to the reality of the times depicted" (*Huanghun* 2). The dramatic conflicts in these stories are derived from urban family situations. Reflecting the author's observations of urban life in the first decade or two of the post-Mao era, when China first launched its market-opening economic reforms, these stories appear accessible and heartwarming at first glance, yet they leave the reader with a lingering sense of uneasiness. This uneasiness stems from the traumatic memories buried within the characters, and may be interpreted as the result of the Cultural Revolution, the government's violent June Fourth crackdown on public demonstrations against corruption and despotic rule in 1989, and the dehumanization of the post-socialist 1990s. In addition, these short stories are relevant to Yu Hua's full-length novels.

Certain motifs and character types appear in Yu Hua's earlier novels, including the premature death of youthful protagonists, abandoned or orphaned boys, and women running away from home. In a sense, these stories provide a chance for Yu Hua to further develop minor characters or themes that he had not fully worked through in his earlier full-length novels. More importantly, these stories provide us with a sense of Yu Hua's artistic utilization of various writing techniques to portray and convey the characters' vision of the world within the constraints of a given genre—the short story.

This article also focuses on the poetics of space and time in "Boy in the Twilight" and "The Boisterous Game," and the inter-linkages between these two

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stories. I will argue that the narrative strategies and themes of these short stories have been articulated through Yu Hua's poetic use of space and time. On the one hand, constricted space and compressed time are crucial to the author's control of narrative structure, the narrator's point of view, voice, and distance between the narrator and characters, thus achieving the characteristic brevity of the short story. On the other hand, particular types of settings or space such as a kiosk, a house, a fruit-stand, a stairway, windows, and a room not only allow the daily routines of the two isolated protagonists to unfold ("life paths in time-space") but, more importantly, they contain the compressed time of their past, and become paramount within each protagonist's memory. Yu Hua conveys the characters' tragic and fatalistic vision of life—the ubiquity of entrapment and enclosure—through his poetic use of compressed time and constricted space, thereby depicting the daily life of those alienated individuals who were swept up by the economic reforms and the general trend of "looking ahead to the future" (not back to the past) of the post-Mao era.

Both stories are tightly controlled narratives, though on the first reading the reader is struck by their apparent simplicity of language and minimalist form. Each story focuses on a single situation in which everyday reality is broken up by a crisis, thereby revealing the protagonist's inner world. In "Game," Yu Hua provides vendor Lin Deshun's observations from the window of his vending kiosk: a boy of six or seven years of age plays a game in a boisterous manner with his mother in front of the hospital, while his father is anxiously inquiring about the availability of a bed for his son. A week later, Lin learns from the father that the boy has died. "Twilight" also features a boy as a leading character. It describes how a fruit vendor named Sun Fu brutally tortures a hungry boy who steals an apple from his fruit stand on an autumn afternoon.

In both stories, Yu Hua's material covers a broad canvas, but he carries out narrative strategies (narrative economy, ellipsis, summary) to condense his text into a short-story narrative. In the stories, the period of time dramatized in the narration is much shorter than the total period of time covered by the story. In "Game," the actively dramatized episodes cover only a week or so during which time Lin Deshun witnesses a couple's loss of their beloved son. However, the total length of time covered by the story begins many years before, when Lin "suddenly lost his footing" while "rushing up the stairs" to close the window on a rainy day—and "from then on was paralyzed" (*Boy in the Twilight* 166). How Lin fared during those years remains a mystery, except for the fact that he operated a small vending kiosk on a street corner. Similarly, in "Twilight," the actively dramatized portion of the narrative totals only a half day, from noon to dusk, yet the total period covered by the narrative also starts many years before, when Sun Fu was still

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a joyful young man with a beautiful wife and a five-year-old son who was always happily tugging at his mother's jacket. Utilizing a similarly elliptical structure as he does in "Game," Yu Hua sums up Sun Fu's experience during these years in three short paragraphs—brief in comparison with the lengthy narrative on the consequences of the thefts that occurred that afternoon.

These stories' omission of large swaths of Lin Deshun's and Sun Fu's past does not hinder the reader's understanding of the two men's lives. This is because the reader's imagination is expected to do its part in piecing together the episodic information supplied by the narrator and restoring the whole picture of Lin's and Sun's lives. Each omission of Lin's and Sun's past experiences is what the literary critic Suzanne C. Ferguson refers to as the "hypothetical" plot, because "the reader must to some extent construct this hypothetical plot in order for the actual story to seem meaningful" (222). In reading "Game" or "Twilight," we recognize that various incidents within the two stories have not been fully recounted, and thus remain obscured behind segments of the narrative that have been rendered in greater detail. This elliptical structure suggests that each story has two layers of plotting, the actual plot and the hypothetical plot.

On the surface, "Game" and "Twilight" both recount a story of a young boy. These unnamed boys appear to be the protagonists of their respective stories; incidents in their lives provide the titles of the stories. The author devotes considerable attention to describing how a sick boy plays a game in a boisterous manner with his mother in "Game," and how a starving boy is tortured for having stolen in "Twilight." These are the plots of the two stories. However, closer scrutiny reveals that the vendors named Lin Deshun and Sun Fu are the actual protagonists in these stories' hypothetical plots. Lin and Sun are the only characters identified by name; everyone else remains anonymous. However, the literal meaning of the given names of Lin Deshun (德 "virtuous" and 顺 "smooth") and Sun Fu (福 "fortunate") create an ironic contrast with these individuals' eventual fate, which is anything but smooth or fortunate. In addition, the disclosure of the two men's past experiences at the end of the stories sheds new light on Lin's observations and Sun's brutality. This technique allows the reader to look beneath the surface appearances of their lives, and explains how and why these two men react as they do to their situations.

Yu Hua provides a compressed version of Lin Deshun's and Sun Fu's life stories, thereby crafting an "elliptical" plot structure marked by the brevity of the short story. Tightly framed settings also keep each story compact. Each narrator uses Lin Deshun or Sun Fu as a focalizer.<sup>3</sup>

Both stories adopt a narrative structure *in media res*, while background information about the protagonists is mainly provided at the end of the story. The

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stories open with a succinct description of the setting—a vendor in his marketplace stall at mid-day. “Game” begins as follows:

In a street-corner vending stall that sells groceries and fruit, a tired and sagging face spends year after year in the company of cookies, instant noodles, candies, tobacco, and cans of soda much like an old calendar stuck on the wall. A body and four limbs are attached to this face, along with the name Lin Deshun. (*Boy in the Twilight* 162)

“Twilight” opens with a similar scene:

One midday in autumn, a man named Sun Fu was sitting next to a fruit stand, his eyes squinting in the bright sunshine, his body tilted forward, his hands on his knees. His grizzled hair seemed gray in the sunlight, gray like the road that lay before him, a wide road that extended from the far distance, passed him and then stretched off in the other direction. (*Boy in the Twilight* 23)

These details in the opening sections not only convey a streetside setting and the characters’ social standing as marketplace vendors, but also reflect the mood of the characters and the narrative. These descriptions bring the two men into the reader’s view and create an unrest bordering on despair, tedium, and alienation. The tired and sagging face and grizzled hair reveal that both men have been worn out by life, and have reached their twilight years. In addition, the boring and lifeless setting leads the reader to expect the characters to become engaged in some sort of meaningful activity.

Both stories utilize a third-person limited omniscience in their narrations, with each vendor serving as the lone focalizer. Yu Hua gives a sustained presentation of what Lin has seen through his window, and what Sun has experienced in the street. In “Game,” the narrator seems to find it useful to restrict his story exclusively to what can be observed through Lin Deshun’s view—“through the tiny window” of his vending stall and “looking at the entrance to the hospital across the street” (*Boy in the Twilight* 162). Therefore, the reader gets little in the way of unbiased observations and interpretations about other characters, e.g., the couple, the sick boy. This view restriction to a lone focalizer helps emphasize Lin Deshun’s sensations and inner thoughts, while underlining his alienation and loneliness. Lin Deshun is physically trapped in a wheelchair and enclosed in a small vending stall after his stroke. The stall window is the only opening through which he can watch the outside world. His vision is restricted because the window faces the entrance to the hospital and piles of merchandise block his view in all directions. The entrapment of his body and his limited vision turn Lin into a spectator of life, and, since his window faces a hospital, he observes much sickness and death. Precisely because of his situation, Lin brings great intensity to his observations

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of the world. Of all the people who see the couple and their ailing child, Lin is probably the only one who truly notices them, identifies with their plight, and is conscious of a possible impending tragedy in their lives.

In “Twilight,” however, the reader experiences a shift in narrative perspective. The story is partly recounted from Sun Fu’s viewpoint and centers around the starving boy. Earlier portions of the story utilize Sun Fu as the focalizer; Sun Fu keeps an eye on the boy until he chases him for stealing an apple from the fruit stand to satisfy his hunger. The narrative voice then shifts to a third-person omniscience to recount how Sun Fu punishes the boy that afternoon, and later, at dusk, drinks liquor alone at home. This shift within the second part of the story helps reveal how Sun is isolated in his community, with only rare moments of communion or shared experience. The image of Sun drinking alone at home is suggestive of a lonely individual cut off from society.

We could characterize the narration as covert, for there is no narrative persona explicitly present in either story. However, it would be wrong to assume that the third-person narrator is a stranger to the small towns where the stories unfold. Both stories are refracted through the consciousness of a person who holds more than a passing interest in individuals like Lin Deshun and Sun Fu. The narrator is keen to observe their lives, follow their destinies, and provide commentary. His presence and voice are strongly felt in the text, especially at the end of each story, when he focuses on the private thoughts of Lin and Sun.

The narrator overlaps with the implied author of the stories. With the confident use of a third-person narration to control distance and cause sympathy, Yu Hua appears to be observing Lin Deshun and Sun Fu during certain crucial times of their lives, freezing their movements for a short while to create a tableau, and revealing them in all their struggles and despair without comment, but with a pervasive voice of elegiac quietness. Standing above and apart from his story and communicating directly with his readers, the implied author has a compassionate understanding of the human suffering experienced by Lin Deshun, the anonymous couple and their son, Sun Fu and his family, and the boy. The narrator’s attitude is crucial in understanding the stories’ thematic significance. The lack of personal involvement on the part of the narrator, in addition to the temporal gulf between the events of the story and the time of narration, makes the atmosphere even bleaker and more desperate.

At the stories’ end, the author again delves into the private thoughts of the respective vendor, using flashbacks to help trace the vendor’s life. The concluding sections shed startling new light on the preceding narrative, adding strength and depth to each story. Yu Hua’s special attention to the ending is typical within the short story genre. When discussing the differences between the short story

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and the novel, the Russian formalist critic Boris Eichenbaum emphasizes closure in the short story. He identifies two important features of the short story genre: brevity throughout, and an attention to the finale's impact on the overall plot. He argues that skilled short story writers, such as Edgar Allan Poe and O. Henry, construct their stories with "an awareness of the particular importance of the final impact. Hence—the particular attention paid to the unexpected in the finale and, connected with it, a story structured on the basis of a riddle or an error which holds back the significance of the plot mainspring until the very end" (Éjxenbaum 85). This is the case in both "Game" and "Twilight." Both stories introduce a riddle and the finale provides the clues to solving it. In "Game," the posing of the "riddle" occurs at the beginning of the story. Yu Hua mentions Lin Deshun's disability in the first sentence of the second paragraph. He then sets the riddle aside, and starts to provide seemingly unrelated details, which will unexpectedly come together at the end. The riddle of Lin's paralysis is solved by two sentences included at the story's conclusion. Only then, the reader understands that the boisterous game that the ailing boy plays and his sudden death symbolize Lin Deshun's own life.

In contrast with "Game," the riddle in "Twilight" is gradually posed within the development of the narrative and suddenly resolved at the end. With the increasing intensity of Sun Fu's harsh treatment of the young thief, the reader becomes increasingly curious: why is Sun Fu so preoccupied with the loss of a single apple and with its petty thief? Only at the end does the reader gain a full understanding of Sun Fu's fuzzy logic.

In addition, from a thematic viewpoint, these retrospective glances occur naturally at the end of each story; neither Lin Deshun nor Sun Fu has a friend in whom each can confide. The flashbacks at the end render plausible the present-day incidents within the narratives, and give the reader a chance to ponder the private thoughts of the protagonists. As Yu Hua discloses the past life of Sun and that of Lin at the end, we hear how both of their voices enter into an intense dialogue with various characters in their respective stories. Sun's brutality towards the child thief and Lin's apparent apathy toward the death of the ailing boy make the psychological processes particularly intense and open to inspection. In addition, there is a special irony in the fact that these silent internal dialogues take place in the minds of those who are barely capable of speaking with real interlocutors. In reality, Sun and Lin are accompanied by nothing more than the silent commodities in their vending stalls. Loneliness and a lack of profound relationships are at the heart of these men's existences.

Yu Hua has successfully used compressed time and constricted space to carry out his narrative strategies. Meanwhile, this type of time and space creates an

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atmosphere of entrapment and enclosure, as well as a strong sense of deprivation and despair, which are central underlying motifs in the story. From a thematic viewpoint, “Game” and “Twilight” amount to tragic studies in human frailty and misery. People are deprived and entrapped by life, and their reactions of despair, endurance, rebellion, and frustration frequently meet with tragic results.

Both stories are good examples of deprivation and despair. In “Game,” the young boy is deprived of his life by illness, the couple is deprived by their son’s death, and Lin Deshun is deprived of his physical freedom by a stroke. Poverty is also an accomplice to the deprivation experienced by the characters. The young couple’s impoverished circumstances come across clearly in two episodes. Lin Deshun is first struck by the father’s thriftiness when the latter buys only one tangerine for his son. A week later, the couple loses their son and the father returns to Lin’s marketplace stall. This time he buys his wife a bun. Much information about the couple remains unknown. However, from Lin Deshun’s observations, the reader may assume that the family has probably traveled to the city hospital from the countryside or from a nearby town because “the father’s face was covered with stubble; both his eyes were swollen from lack of sleep, and the collar of his white shirt was soiled” (*Boy in the Twilight* 163). The family might have stayed in a nearby hostel so that they could walk to the hospital to inquire about the availability of treatment for their son. If the family had had enough money, the boy might not have had to wait for an available bed in this hospital, or could have sought treatment at another hospital.

Similarly in “Twilight,” the young boy is mercilessly demeaned by a combination of poverty and brutal treatment at the hands of an adult. Neither the narrator nor the other characters know where the boy comes from and why he is roaming the streets penniless. This image of an orphaned and estranged child constantly recurs in Yu Hua’s short stories and novels; some prominent examples are Lulu and Guoqing in *Cries in the Drizzle*, along with Laifa in “I Have No Name of My Own” (“我没有自己的名字,” 1996). For the reader familiar with *Cries in the Drizzle*, the unnamed boy in “Twilight” is reminiscent of Lulu in *Drizzle*. In that novel, Lulu’s mother, Feng Yuqing, is arrested and detained by the police because of her involvement with prostitution. Because Lulu’s father has always been absent, he begins a life of vagrancy near the labor camp where his mother has been imprisoned. What eventually happens to Lulu remains unknown to the reader. The plight of the starving boy in “Twilight” recalls Yu Hua’s portrayal of Lulu in *Drizzle*. Fate disfavors these children and deprives them of a happy childhood; it makes them venture into the adult world before they have the experience and wisdom needed to protect themselves. They are thus ruthlessly exploited and abused by adults.



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In “Twilight,” the young Sun Fu and his wife, like the couple in “Game,” also lose their son in an accident, and Sun subsequently loses his wife. Parents’ loss of their sons by accident or illness is another recurrent theme in Yu Hua’s stories, as may be seen in the premature deaths of Sun Guangming, Su Yu, and Liu Xiaoqing’s brother in *Cries in the Drizzle*, the son Youqing and the grandson Kugen in *To Live*, and the nameless boy who plays a harmonica in “April 3<sup>rd</sup> Incident” (“四月三日事件,” 1987). These deprivations reveal the frailty of all bonds between people, including those created by family ties.

As for the thematic concern of the stories, Yu Hua focuses more on the entrapment and despair the characters endure after losing a loved one. He has successfully maintained his proper distance and created an atmosphere of enclosure. In “Game,” as previously analyzed, Lin Deshun is physically trapped in a wheelchair, his daily activities are confined to the stall, and his vision is restricted by the small window. These entrapments lead him to observe the outside world with great intensity of emotion. When he witnesses the death of the little boy and the subsequent young couple’s silent grief, this becomes just another incident among the many that Lin observes daily. Thus the tragedy seems to have no emotional impact on him. However, the reader soon understands Lin’s lack of empathy. At the story’s end, the darkened sky makes Lin recall that he lost his footing on a similar rainy day many years before. Yu Hua uses only a few sentences to note this tragic turning point in Lin’s life. However, the final touch of Lin’s solitary contemplation of life’s drudgery and toil casts a light on Lin’s seemingly numb and apathetic attitude toward the boy’s death, and reveals his fatalistic and tragic understanding of living: life is just a boisterous game like the boy played with his mother, but nobody can ever know when such winsome pleasures will evaporate in the face of adversity. Suddenly, the couple loses their son and becomes overwhelmed with grief and despair; just as abruptly, Lin is paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair. Therefore, these confined spaces and settings turn into symbols of Lin’s fate—entrapment and enclosure.

It is noteworthy that Yu Hua has his young character, the ailing boy, still immersed in the joyous game just days before dying. This scene finds a parallel in *Cries in the Drizzle*. With death lurking, the fatally ill brother of Liu Xiaoqing tries to enjoy his favorite activity—teasing the younger children on the street. It is not because they are young and unaware of their impending deaths, but because “when facing extinction, life reveals its infinite attachment to the past,” as Yu Hua explains through the mouth of the first-person narrator who sees a water buffalo shedding tears after being secured in *Cries in the Drizzle* (190). Similarly in “Game,” Lin strongly feels the despair and attachment to life found in the boy’s

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joyous game, and knows the impending tragedy about to befall the child and his parents.

Lin's fatalistic attitude could be described as stoic. Though Lin's tacit endurance is not impressive or admirable, it represents a decent and necessary way of coping with circumstances beyond control or understanding. His apparent acceptance of the status quo, of leading an uneventful life within a closed world, is a manifestation of an understanding of his place in the order of things—his significance as a human being in the great chain of being and his position in a hierarchical society. Similar to Lin Deshun, the young couple silently endures what life has presented. Yu Hua briefly describes the interaction between the couple after their son's death. "[The husband] extended his arm toward his wife, and she compliantly laid her head on his shoulder. He put his arm around her, and slowly and quietly the two of them walked off in a westerly direction" (*Boy in the Twilight* 166). Both Lin Deshun and the anonymous couple's endurance reveal their adaptability to the pathetic and tragic changes taking place in their lives.

Themes of entrapment, despair, and endurance are also well developed in "Twilight" through its characters' interaction with confined spaces, e.g., the fruit stand, the courtyard. The young boy is trapped in the fruit stand because of his hunger and the hatred and brutality of an adult, while Sun Fu is also trapped in his fruit stand, his small room with an old picture on the wall, which are the materialization of his memories and his resentment of his lot in life.

Similar to the experiences of Lin Deshun and the couple in "Game," what Sun Fu experienced is also tragic. He was young and joyful and had a happy family. Then things changed. Yu Hua uses only three sentences to describe the turning point in Sun Fu's life:

Later, one summer lunchtime, several boys ran in, shouting Sun Fu's name, and they said that his son had fallen into a pond not far away. He ran like a man possessed, his wife following behind with piercing wails. Before long it was clear that they had lost their son forever. (*Boy in the Twilight* 31)

This accident reminds the reader of the similar tragedy that befalls Sun Guangming, the narrator's young brother, in *Cries in the Drizzle*: Yu Hua gives a detailed description of how the boy is drowned in the pond while attempting to save his friend's life and how the father and the brother dove into the water to find Guangming; then, after a futile effort to revive him, the two ran with the boy's body alternatively on their shoulders.

As with the couple who lost their son in "Game," Sun Fu and his wife silently endure their loss. "In the sweltering darkness, they sat opposite each other, moaning and sobbing. Later on still, they began to regain their composure, carrying on with

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their lives as they had before, and in this way several years quickly passed” (*Boy in the Twilight* 31). The rest of their lives could have passed in this manner. However, one of them is not able to stay put and endure the suffocating status quo. Sun Fu’s wife reacts to the grim situation by leaving the family and starting a new one—she runs away and sets up household with a barber. Her elopement is an attempt to escape past memories and the meaningless existence that she endured with her husband after their son’s death. After getting a haircut and massage from the barber, “she felt that her body had never been as relaxed as it was that day, so relaxed that it seemed to be melting away. So it was that she gathered up her things, and under cover of darkness, left Sun Fu and went off to follow the barber” (*Boy in the Twilight* 31). This elopement scene parallels the one in *Cries in the Drizzle* in which Feng Yuqing, a beautiful and buxom young woman, runs away one night with a passing peddler after being abandoned by her boyfriend. Unlike his wife, Sun Fu cannot run away, nor can he do much about his wife’s flight, except to await her return by setting up his stand next to a bus station and staying in the house where the family had been living. Sun Fu has experienced how things wither and pass away, and all that is left is loss and loneliness; he tries to resist such changes. Sun Fu’s life becomes a reviewing of his past—a sheltered memory cherished and brought to life through the family portrait on the wall. “His son was in the middle, wearing a cotton cap much bigger than his head. His wife was on the left, her two ponytails falling on her shoulders as she smiled blissfully. He was on the right, his youthful face brimming with life” (*Boy in the Twilight* 31-32). As a spatial image, the family photo asserts a dominating presence within Sun Fu’s life story.

Part of Sun Fu’s tragic situation stems from the fact that he is unable to adjust to a world that has been almost completely transformed. He lives in a past full of shadows and is unwilling to abandon his futile dreams of recapturing it. On the surface, he accepts reality. He runs a small business during the day and leisurely sips rice wine at home in the evening. However, his endurance is not extraordinarily strong and there is little meaning to a life as an abandoned husband and bereft father. Deep down, he is consumed with frustration and exasperation. His frustration is not only a result of having been deprived of his son and wife; it is also the result of his understanding of what a normal life is and his inability to recover or reconstitute that previous life. The wife finds an exit from the couple’s dilemma, but Sun Fu remains trapped in it. He simply finds little with which to be satisfied and cannot transcend the bleak reality of his daily life, nor can he break loose in a meaningful and positive sense.

Sun Fu’s sense of loss and deprivation accounts for his overreaction to the hungry boy who stole an apple from his fruit stand. His unhesitating use of violence

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and abnormal hatred of the thief reflect his personal insecurities and project his resentment over his miserable state of loneliness and loss. He justifies his brutality against the boy by saying, “I want him to understand that he must never steal anything again” (*Boy in the Twilight* 28). He gets his satisfaction by urging the boy to shout, “I am a thief” (29). He repeatedly tells strangers, “If there’s one thing I hate, it’s a thief” (26). The barber was not his only thief. Life or fate itself is the giant thief that has stolen the good Sun enjoyed as head of family. However, he cannot fight against the barber or fate itself, so the boy becomes a scapegoat, and brutality becomes a means to vent Sun Fu’s psychological troubles. Yu Hua has explicitly discussed the tension between physical violence and psychological malaise, which can be witnessed in many of his fictional characters, especially Sun Kwangtsai, the father figure in *Cries in the Drizzle*. Yu Hua argues that “coarse language and brutal actions” are a “human protest against a society where minds are repressed’ and “assert our existence as human beings” (Marx, “Growing up during the Cultural Revolution”). Yu Hua admits that “it is a sad thing to say, but it is precisely how we Chinese made it through those years” (Marx). Without exception, Sun Fu, like Sun Kwangtsai, releases his cry of anguish by torturing the starving boy. The torture scene also reminds the reader of Yu Hua’s earlier avant-garde stories. From 1984 to 1987, Yu Hua wrote stories such as “On the Road at Eighteen” (“十八岁出门远行”), “The April Third Incident” (“四月三日事件”), “The Year Nineteen Eighty-six” (“一九八六年”), “Mistakes by the Riverside” (“河边的错误”), and “One Kind of Reality” (“现实一种”). The unifying motifs in these stories are cruelty and violence. Yu Hua has mentioned in various occasions that he developed a deep skepticism about commonsensical reasoning in the 1980s, which directly resulted from his rather extreme preoccupation with chaos and violence at that juncture of his career. Then, he no longer trusted everyday experiences, common sense, or linguistic conventions. As he remarked in “Contrived Works,” he started to pay more attention to violence and catastrophe, through which he reveals a multi-dimensional and contradictory reality (“Xuwei de zuopin ” 161). When he wrote these stories, Yu Hua thought violence stemmed from an individual’s innermost desires, and that violence was filled with passion. In the face of violence and chaos, civilization had degenerated into a slogan, and social order into an illusion. Xiaobing Tang has summarized this situation, “Violence and catastrophe have their thematic value because they expose a chaotic reality that is the suppressed truth of our seemingly well-ordered existence” (18). Although “Twilight” revisits the motif of violence in Yu Hua’s earlier stories, the difference between Yu Hua’s treatment of violence in these later stories and how he handled it in his avant-garde stories is noticeable. This difference is particularly evident at the stories’ conclusions.

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At the conclusion of “Twilight,” which takes place at the twilight of an autumn afternoon, people in the town “observed that [the boy’s] middle finger dangled against the back of his right hand, and watched as he walked into the distant twilight and disappeared” (*Boy in the Twilight* 30). This image of the boy provides the title for the story, and it recalls the fading view of the couple walking away from the focalizer in “Game”—standing behind a departing couple and watching them fade away in the distance adds a touch of human frailty and helplessness to these stories. Chinese critic Zhou Limin argues that there is a feeling of warmth at the end because Yu Hua did not make this young character die a violent death, as he often did in his earlier avant-garde stories. Instead, Sun Fu allows the boy to leave town. Zhou points out that this relatively mild treatment of violence illustrates a major change in Yu Hua’s writing during the 1990s—he now hesitates to portray violent behavior, and expresses a sense of forgiveness for his characters’ shortcomings (552). I agree with Zhou, but he does not offer an interpretation as to why these changes came about in Yu Hua’s 1990s fiction. In truth, we can observe these changes in Yu Hua’s fiction written before the two short stories being analyzed, such as his *Cries in the Drizzle*. If we place Yu Hua’s toned-down portrayal of violence in a sociopolitical context, it is a natural response to societal changes in China, and reflects his increasingly nuanced understanding of that society. Both the extreme violence in his early avant-garde stories and the later milder treatment of violence in his critical realist fiction denote Yu Hua’s conscious choices. His experimental writing from 1986 to 1989 is a response to China’s transformation from a “revolutionary society to a post-socialist state, and bore the imprint of ‘global’ (Western) cultural fashions and trends from high modernism to postmodernism” (Liu 103). Yu Hua and his contemporaries (e.g., Su Tong, Mo Yan, Can Xue, Ge Fei) were then searching for alternative writing modes to challenge established literary conventions, mainly the Mao Era’s formulaic ideological writing and the early post-Mao Thaw Era’s Scar Literature.<sup>4</sup> Their innovations occurred mainly at the linguistic level and in form. For Yu Hua, this sort of formal experimentation is crystallized within his portrayal of extreme violence. These early works also grew out of the tension between an imaginative world and daily reality. He vented this tension by frequently writing of violence and death and, for a time, became an angry and grim writer.

The 1989 June Fourth Incident is a crucial sociopolitical catalyst that spurred Yu Hua and a number of his fellow experimental writers to change their narrative styles. After the Crackdown, the relatively relaxed political and cultural atmosphere that characterized most of the 1980s no longer existed. With the deepening of the Party-state’s economic reforms and the increasing commercialization of PRC society in the 1990s, these avant-garde authors’ aesthetic experiments appeared

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less and less relevant to general societal and political trends and, unsurprisingly, attracted fewer and fewer readers. These writers thus began to explore alternative writing styles and techniques in order to adapt to new social realities and to better attract readers. Therefore, these writers' retreat from avant-gardism and movement toward alternative modes of writing were conscious efforts to bridge the gap between their literary aesthetics and the ever-changing social realities (Li 152-54). By the early 1990s, Yu Hua had gained a broader range of life experience. He gradually altered his world view, and "as the anger in [his] inner heart gradually calmed down," he came to "look upon the world with sympathetic eyes" ("*Huozhe zhongwenban zixu*" 144). This turn to greater empathy became a thematic concern in Yu Hua's later novels. His more empathetic approach surfaced noticeably in *Cries in the Drizzle*, *To Live*, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* and in the two short stories discussed here. These were written in a relatively unadorned narrative style that incorporates gentle irony with humor, deals with ordinary characters and their fate in the midst of wrenching societal change, strongly affirms the strength and perseverance of human dignity, and the will to muddle through and go on living under great adversity.

Let us now compare and contrast these two short stories. Both stories are structurally open-ended. The reader is not told where the couple and the boy are heading, or what will happen to them. If we connect the stories together, we can find internal links between them. The stories can even be read as one cyclical story, since each story contains incidents that recall incidents in the other story.

Foremost, both stories present how two sets of parents—the anonymous couple and Sun Fu and his wife—are saddened by the premature deaths of their sons. The reader does not know what will happen to the young couple in "Game." Is it possible that the unhappy fate of Sun Fu and his wife will befall this couple? Will the couple also be trapped in their sadness and their memories of the past? And after a few years, will this wife also leave her husband to escape from the stagnation of their lives? On a symbolic level, we can interpret the two stories thus: the life of the young couple and their son in "Game" is a flashback to Sun Fu's younger days in "Boy in the Twilight." What Sun Fu and his wife have experienced, after the loss of their son, is the young couple's lot. The young husband's future replicates Sun Fu's past.

What is the link between Sun Fu and Lin Deshun? They are both vendors who have reached their twilight years, but we are still aware of their age difference and their contrasting ways of understanding life. Though the author does not explicitly inform us how old each man is, from his character description at the beginning of each story, we can surmise that Sun Fu is in his fifties and has been in his fruit stand near the bus stop for the last three years. Lin Deshun, on the other

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hand, ought to be much older than Sun Fu; Lin has engaged in his small business for many years, as revealed in this description of his humdrum existence: “[He has] a tired and sagging face, spend[ing] year after year in the company of cookies, instant noodles, candies, tobacco, and cans of soda, like an old calendar stuck on the wall” (*Boy in the Twilight* 162).

In addition, their understanding of life and attitudes toward the past are different. Sun Fu does not willingly yield to the pressure of his environment or his troubled self. He still hopes his wife will return, and has dreams of recovering his lost happiness. The past is a means to survival, but he can hardly escape his current life and problems. In contrast, Lin Deshun has tacitly accepted his destiny. It is possible that, at a metaphoric level, Lin Deshun is an older version of Sun Fu. Perhaps one day Sun Fu will lose his footing while rushing upstairs to close the windows on a rainy evening, and will have to be consigned to a wheelchair. He would then have to give up waiting for his wife and his fantasy of recovering the past. He would move his fruit stand from the distant bus stop to a nearby street corner, and observe other people’s lives through the tiny window in his stall. He would understand that life is at times like a joyous game. Happiness may disappear suddenly, just as he unexpectedly lost his son and wife. Life has taught him to endure suffering and misfortune, while expecting little or no reward. Consequently, Sun Fu stands midway between the anonymous father and Lin Deshun.

The young boy, fading into the twilight, will grow up and have a family of his own. He might lose his son and wife, just as Sun Fu has lost his. He might also become a vendor and reach a fatalistic understanding of life in his later years as Lin Deshun has. He will learn to understand that a combination of strange coincidences and social and historical circumstances caused his present situation, one that he will have to endure. People cannot escape the intrigues that fate, society, and history bring. The frailty of all bonds between people, including those of family members, explains the complexity of human behavior.

From the above analysis we can establish that “Twilight” may be read as a supplement to “Game.” A deep understanding of human frailty and misery pervades these stories. Through fictional characters—the starving boy, the anonymous father, Sun Fu and Lin Deshun—Yu Hua depicts man’s suffering during different periods of life. He also reveals how an ordinary person’s dreams of a peaceful and happy family life can be shattered or crushed by harsh realities. Sometimes we have to face bravely the fact that many people must live and die in solitude, people like Sun Fu and Lin Deshun. Reading the two stories as one cyclical story also creates an enclosure and entrapment corresponding to their themes.

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If we view these stories within a larger socio-economic and political context, we can see that entrapment, enclosure, alienation, and silent acceptance of the status quo have a profound implication. These stories were written in the 1990s, a few years after the 1989 June Fourth Incident. As mentioned, after June Fourth, Chinese intellectuals set forth upon a more conservative and establishmentarian path, while ordinary Chinese often became preoccupied with obtaining their share of the much greater material affluence created by the market reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping and continued by his successors. However, there are people who cling to the past and refuse to forget it, like Sun Fu in “Twilight” and the history teacher in Yu Hua’s earlier story, “The Year Nineteen Eighty-six.” “The Year Nineteen Eight-six” was written in 1986, ten years after the end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. At that time, Deng Xiaoping voiced an interest in embracing certain elements of a market economy and embarking on political reforms; the Communist Party called for people to look forward instead of dwelling in the past. Nationwide expectations for an enlightened and enriched future excited the populace, who understandably wished for a much better life. However, Yu Hua and his history teacher advise the Chinese people to reconsider the past. The story describes the teacher’s self-mutilation, an action intended to remind people of the catastrophe that was the Cultural Revolution and other phases of a violent past. Compared with the teacher’s extreme way of protesting the populace’s amnesia and the Party’s indifference, Sun Fu in “Twilight” draws upon a subtler way of recalling the past. For Sun Fu, his past happiness and pain are crystallized and retained in a family photo. His persistence on waiting for his wife’s return and his hatred for the thief are how he remembers the past, including its most painful aspects. In “Games,” Lin Fushun’s unspoken acceptance of the status quo is representative of Chinese society in the Post-June Fourth period—most Chinese seemingly accepted the social realities of the early 1990s.

In addition, both Lin and Sun are small businessmen. This too reveals the strong impact of Deng’s economic reforms in the post-Mao era. However, although both Lin and Sun are better off financially, their somewhat higher level of material wealth does not bring them happiness. Yu Hua thus makes it clear that economic reform is not a panacea, for it does not help people recover from past traumas. Economic reform in China has brought a relatively affluent way of life, but the grief that the Culture Revolution and the June Fourth debacle brought the Chinese have left deep psychological wounds. This type of pain is what many feel nearly every day. Underneath the characters’ quite acceptance of their situation is the lingering agony of past memories. Sun Fu and Lin Fushun are confined in their stalls and small rooms, and are also trapped in their recollections of China’s tragic past.



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From the above observations, we can establish that Yu Hua uses these two stories to reflect on Chinese life in the 1990s, specifically how past experiences and lasting anguish affect people's present lives. Yu Hua vividly expresses Lin Deshun and Sun Fu's psychological traumas by means of his control of narrative structure, narrator's point of view, voice, distance between narrator and characters, and typical short story techniques identified as "techniques of limiting point of view, constructing elliptical or metaphoric plots, and using representative details for setting and character development" (Ferguson 226). In both stories, compressed time and constricted space not only function as the temporal and spatial setting of the narratives, but they also create an atmosphere of entrapment and enclosure. The stall, the fruit stand, and the small room all represent compressed time. Sun Fu and Lin Deshun sit motionless in their stalls and small rooms, where they witness a world grown old and worn; what they see before them becomes crystallizations of sadness, regret, and nostalgia. Yu Hua's profound insight into human nature is linked to his desire to examine as deeply as possible why and how people react to certain situations. His tireless search for understanding has led him to link episodes in "Game" and "Twilight" together in order to determine whether they shed new light on each other, to describe an event from a different angle, to illustrate the interconnectedness of things, to accord depth to what seemed more superficial, and to affirm that every situation has the potential for a deeper understanding.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of Yu Hua's coming-of-age stories, see Hua Li's "Fallen Youth: A Trembling Loner" in *Contemporary Chinese Fiction by Su Tong and Yu Hua: Coming of Age in Troubled Times*. This is the first in-depth book-length treatise in English about the contemporary Chinese *Bildungsroman*.

<sup>2</sup> "Boy in the Twilight" was written in November 1996 and made its debut in the literary magazine, *Writer*, in January 1997. "The Boisterous Game" was written one year earlier, but remained unpublished until 1999, when it was compiled into a single collection with "Twilight" and ten other stories by New World Press. For an English translation, see *Boy in the Twilight and Other Stories*. Trans. Allan H. Barr. Manuscript. I am using Barr's translation in this article.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion on perspective, focalization, and the role of the focalizer, see Genette 189–94.

<sup>4</sup> Some critics argue that the emergence of Chinese avant-garde writers and critics was a "self-conscious and self-reflexive" response to the postmodern critical and theoretical discourses primarily introduced to Chinese intellectual circles by Fredric Jameson in his lecture at Beijing University in 1987 (Liu 111).

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