Repugnant Bodies. An Analysis of the Disgust Aesthetics in Yang Xianhui's *Chronicles of Jiabiangou*

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Abstract:

Yang Xianhui's *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (2003) is a collection of stories detailing life and death during the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957-59) in the homonymous laogai camp located in the middle of the Gobi Desert, in the Chinese north-western province of Gansu. Based on the author's extensive research, fieldwork and interviews with Jiabiangou survivors, in many instances the text dwells on particularly foul descriptions, mostly related to the harsh living conditions of prisoners undergoing reform, further exacerbated by the hostile geographical setting and by a famine that had struck the whole country. Physically and morally offensive descriptions of bodily expulsions and incorporations are portrayed with straightforward yet evocative accuracy, revealing very appalling aspects of the laogai experience.

Building on psychological analyses and phenomenological interpretations of disgust, this paper interrogates some key passages in the *text* where the literary iconography is built through the use of this aesthetic technique, with a special attention to the representation of carceral bodies - often construed as the true repugnant objects. Through the analysis of this symbolic bodily iconography, this paper addresses the text's contribution to the construction of alternative narratives of incarceration and political persecution that have the potential to challenge Chinese orthodox historiography.

Keywords: Jiabiangou, disgust, Yang Xianhui, prison, Chinese prison writing, carceral bodies

Launched by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 in 1957, the Anti-Rightist Movement (*fanyou yundong* 反右运动) was a political campaign that targeted citizens who dared speak out on what they perceived as ambiguities and deviations within the Chinese Communist Party orthodoxy, both in theory and in practice. As a result, many intellectuals, political figures, but also common people, were arrested as "rightists" (*youpai* 右派) and sent to the country's most remote areas to undergo reform or re-education through labour. As pointed out by Sebastian Veg, while there has been a significant amount of literary attention to representations of the Cultural Revolution, the same cannot be said for the Anti-Rightist Movement, which remains underrepresented in literary works (Veg 2014, 516). Yang Xianhui 杨显惠's *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (*Jiabiangou jishi* 夹边沟记事) is one among the relatively few literary texts that engage with the memory of this overlooked part of Chinese history.

Located in the middle of the Gobi Desert, in the north-western province of Gansu, Jiabiangou 夹边沟 was home to a re-education farm that, between 1957 and 1961, reportedly received about 3000 prisoners, mostly rightists (Lei 2003).[1] In those years, China had been hit by a devastating famine, a consequence of wildly mistaken political and economic choices of the Great Leap Forward (Lieberthal 2008). The extent of material and human loss directly related to the famine is perhaps impossible to measure accurately, though according to the estimates built on the data gathered by Yang Jisheng 杨继绳 in his work *Mubei* 墓碑 (Tombstone), the death toll could be a number around 36 million between the years 1957 and 1962 (Yang 2008, 199). In Jiabiangou – as well as in other remote areas where most prison camps were located – food scarcity was particularly serious, and many of the camp dwellers perished as a consequence of extreme starvation.

Chronicles of Jiabiangou (hereafter *Chronicles*) is a collection of 19 stories based on the research, fieldwork and interviews that the author, Yang Xianhui, conducted with the survivors of the prison camp.[2] Nonetheless, the book is presented as fiction (*xiaoshuo* 小说), as the interviews have been re-elaborated in literary form by the author (Veg 2014, 517). According to Cao Xugang 曹旭光 and Song Xueqing 宋学清, *Chronicles can be framed* as an example of what they call "documentary novel" (*jishi xiaoshuo* 纪实小说) or "non-fictional novel" (*feixugou xiaoshuo* 非虚构小说) (Cao and Song 2019). In their analysis, Cao and Song suggest that even though the text strives to maintain a truthful, objective angle, it nonetheless displays certain elements of narrative fiction, which in their opinion are required in order to protect the actual survivors and at the same time to maintain narrative coherence. That is to say, even though *Chronicles* can be framed as a work of fiction, it in fact presents the reader with key factual details in order to convey an idea of authenticity. In other words, the novel constitutes a practical exercise, a constructive methodology through which look back at history and historical truth (ibid., 184).

Each story in *Chronicles* focuses on the testimony of a former Jiabiangou prisoner who recounts his or her experience in the camp. Different aspects of camp life are portrayed, including the unfolding of daily work activities, the inmates' constant and desperate procurement of food, sickness, and the regular presence of death. In many parts of the text the author dwells on the description of particularly gruesome scenes that mostly have to do with food incorporation and expulsion, such as scooping out faeces from someone else's anus, eating someone else's vomit, as well as cannibalistic practices on corpses. The recurrence of these disgusting literary constructions suggests a narratological strategy that the author deliberately pursues in order to achieve an emotional effect, namely to catalyse the reader's imagination toward the physical and psychological distress caused by the extreme living conditions in the camp.

This paper investigates a selection of stories from *Chronicles*, with the aim of analysing the ways in which disgust has been aesthetically constructed, and for what purposes. Theoretically, I build upon psychological and phenomenological analyses of disgust, to explore how the emotion can be used as a means of aesthetic expression, and argue that the choice to use repulsive imagery and descriptions is not only a literary, but also a political choice. In doing so, I shall consider Hannah

Arendt's postulation that, in fact, storytelling is always political, in the sense that it is not merely concerned with the production of personal meaning, but is also interested in the "subjective in-between" that is created by the exchange of action and speech among humans (Arendt [1958] 1998, 183-84). In other words, for Arendt, through storytelling, the personal and the public meet; together they generate a space where individual and collective experiences and perspectives come together to co-create narrations of the past, the present, and the future.[3] From this perspective I shall read Yang's storytelling of Jiabiangou, that uses disgust as a strategic focus with the purpose of creating that affective connection between different articulations of individual repugnant experiences in order to reflect on the horror of national history.

The disgusting aesthetics in the Jiabiangou stories is crucially conveyed through a particular focus on the corporal dimension – Veg too has noted the centrality of corporality in Yang's stories (Veg 2014, 521) – and particularly through the violation or degradation of the bodies of the prisoners. Therefore, in my analysis of the text, I shall draw from phenomenological constructs that privilege embodiment and lived experience as explorational and analytical perspectives. Ultimately, this paper aims at demonstrating how the author, by disturbing the reader with disgusting iconography, effectively aims to redirect that disgust from the bodies of the prisoners - the elicitors - toward the prison enforcers, and by proxy the ruling power.

Phenomenology of an Emotion

From a sensory perspective, disgust is a strong, reactive emotion. It is usually aroused in response to the contact with or proximity to something we perceive as foul. In the English language, its etymology comes from Latin *dis* (negative prefix) and *gustus* (taste), which already clarifies the emotion's close relation to eating. In Chinese, disgust is usually expressed with the character 惡 (*e* or *wu*), which is in fact a polysemous word that the Kangxi Dictionary associates with terms such as *choulou* 醜陋 (ugly), *chi* 恥 (shameful), *ji* 忌 (that which has to be avoided), *cu* 粗 (coarse, vulgar, or rough), and also *fenhui* 糞穢, which indicates the filth typical of faecal matter (Kangxi Zidian, xin bu 8, 104). The term appears in early Chinese texts such as *Shiji* 史記, where it is used as an attribute of the word *shi* 食 (food; eat), to signify unappealing food (*Shiji*, Xiangyu benji: 28). Already by looking at its etymological meanings, we understand that disgust is normally prompted by the prospect of incorporation of foul objects, and it involves mainly our senses of taste and smell, but also, more subtly, those of sight, hearing and touch.[4]

From a bodily perspective, disgust is manifested through involuntary movements, such as pursed lips, pinched nose – as to metaphorically shut down the body's boundaries – gag reflex, and so on. Disgust is a primordial emotion – psychologist Paul Ekman has famously classified it as one of the six "basic emotions," together with happiness, sadness, fear, surprise and anger – of key importance to our survival (Ekman & Cordaro 2011). German philosopher Winfried Menninghaus describes it as "a state of alarm and emergency, an acute crisis of self-preservation in the face of an unassimilable otherness, a convulsive struggle, in which what is in question is, quite

literally, whether 'to be or not to be'" (Menninghaus 2003, 1). In other words, disgust arises as a defence mechanism every time our proximity with the repugnant is perceived as virtually a vital threat, to which we react by recoiling.

Disgust has been recognised as universally experienced by all humans, though the perception of what is considered foul varies considerably, depending on certain cultural constructions as well as personal inclinations that influence our perception. Nonetheless, research efforts have been directed toward trying to pinpoint the general categories of substances that are likely to arouse disgust in humans. For instance, psychologist Paul Rozin, who has dedicated much of his work to investigate this emotion, recognises the existence of a "core disgust" that is triggered by contaminated or offensive food (Rozin et al. 2008). Beyond the realm of taste, there are other objects that can trigger disgust, which Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley organised into seven additional categories, to include: "body products" (vomit, pus, mucus) "sex" (perverse sexual activities) "envelope violations" (gore, surgery, puncture wounds), "socio-moral violations" (Nazis, drunk drivers) "animals" (especially insects) "hygiene" (everything that has to do with dirt and germs), and "death" (contact with human or animal bodies) (Haidt, McCauley, Rozin 1994, 702-3). These categories have further been tested by Chinese scholars on Chinese subjects, and the results have been confronted with Rozin and colleagues' "disgust scale," essentially confirming the validity of these categorisations (Tan, Cong, and Lu 2007; Zhang, et al. 2021).

Generally speaking, as insightfully synthesised by Aurel Kolnai – who authored the first comprehensive phenomenology of disgust in 1929 – the things that disgust us as humans are never related to "inorganic, lifeless things," as even in the dead body, or in the decaying flesh there is "rampant life" (the corpse is actually crawling with insects). That is to say, disgust always has to do with key – though gross – aspects of being alive (Kolnai, as quoted in Menninghaus 2003, 16).

Representing the Foul: Disgust Aesthetics in Art

Granted, we do not need to be in physical proximity to the foul in order to experience disgust, and in fact, coming into contact with even just the representation of the foul can arouse the sentiment. We are likely to turn our head, or close our eyes at the sight of a nasty scene in a film, or we may pause and turn away from the page upon reading a particularly repugnant description. In all those occasions, we are not in the physical proximity of the foul, nor is the disgust in us a reaction to an actually perceived danger for our own wellbeing. Still, our imagination of disgust, prompted by artistic representation, is enough to make us react. Sometimes we tend to recoil, or to move away from the object that elicits disgust, but also – interestingly – sometimes disgust can attract us and arouse appreciative emotions.

Disgust in art has been investigated by many scholars and from multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives. For instance, Julia Kristeva's theorisation of abjection as something that "beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire" is perhaps one of the most influential reflections on the ambivalent nature of disgust (Kristeva 1982, 1). In a similar way, Noël Carroll talks about

"the paradox of horror," to reflect on why people are attracted to what would normally be considered repulsive (Carroll 1990). Carroll's analysis investigates the aesthetic consumption of horror movies, a genre that, despite displaying significant amount of repulsive and grisly content, has no lack of consumers. To Carroll, we are ultimately drawn to representational experiences of horror because "objects of horror are fundamentally linked with cognitive interests, most notably with curiosity" (ibid., 187). In other words, the experience of horror is fascinating for its narrative structure rather than for the sake of horror itself. According to Carroll, we go through the experience of watching a horror movie or reading a horror story for the pleasure that derives from our cognitive engagement, and disgust is a side effect of some sort, the process we have to go through in order to achieve some kind of aesthetic gratification (ibid., 158-94).

Carolyn Korsmeyer has also reflected on the use of disgust in art and on its ambivalent power to elicit sensations that oscillate between repulsion and attraction. She has defined "aesthetic disgust" the kind of disgust that is "purposively aroused by art," including paintings, films, music, performance, photography, and literature (Korsmeyer 2012, 753). However, Korsmeyer further elaborates, aesthetic disgust does not necessarily provoke disapproval or rejection, but rather a sort of aesthetic appreciation, a response to the work of art that "no matter how unpleasant, can rivet attention to the point where one actually may be said to *savor* the feeling" (Korsmeyer 2011, 4). While admitting that disgust can be aroused in art in straightforward "nonappreciative" ways, Korsmeyer is more interested in investigating the attraction mechanisms that make us appreciate a kind of art that uses foul and repugnant elements as the main focus of aesthetic representation.

At this point I shall briefly assess the question of *savouring* pieces of art (and writing in particular) when it comes to reconfigure extremely traumatic experiences, as this is relevant for our analysis of *Chronicles.* Scholar Yenna Wu, in her study of Chinese prison camp writings, for instance, problematises the practice of aesthetic assessment itself. "When 'regarding the pain of others,'" she asks citing Susan Sontag, "is it appropriate for us to look for the 'aesthetic' in the victim's suffering? Is it ethical for us bystanders to 'appreciate' or 'savor' the spectacle of a sufferer's pain?" (Wu 2011, 38). If, on the one hand, Wu questions consumption as a merely aesthetic practice, on the other hand, she also highlights the need to analyse political prison literature from perspectives other than the "activist" approach (ibid.). She resolves the apparent conundrum by taking into consideration Janet Hart's contribution, who, following Bourdieu's sociological approach to aesthetic analysis, puts forth what she calls a "political prison aesthetics," i.e. a "stylized response to oppression" that "transforms the most dire circumstances into a fabrication which is a source of pride, can be appreciated as a compelling art of creation, engages the senses, and has a lasting value for those who are able or care to remember" (Hart 1999, 487-88, quoted in Wu 2011, 40).[5] In other words, Hart crucially connects her idea of political prison aesthetics to "survival" – the conditions of art production matters and therefore prison aesthetics is about survival because "the predominating alternative is a deathly one" (Hart 1999, 488) – and

to the notion of "citizenship" which is seriously engaged with the development of private and public identities" (ibid.). To sum up, in analysing prison texts, Wu recognises Hart's conceptualisation of a "political prison aesthetic" as one way through which prison writers can regain "control" over their experiences, and literature as a means through which affectively and effectively reconfigure them.

Though I find both Wu and Hart's approaches sensible when it comes to the analysis of autobiographical prison writing, I also believe that a further problem arises when the prison text is authored by someone who has not experienced prison himself, as is the case with Yang's *Chronicles*. How do we assess the agency of the protagonists of these stories in relation to regaining control over their carceral experiences if these experiences have been re-elaborated and shaped into literary form by a third person, who has even labelled them as "fiction"? How do we frame Yang's use of disgust as part of a political prison aesthetics that embodies an expression of "survival"? The thorny issue of the representation of traumatic experiences that are not our own (which implies not, or at least not only, to aesthetically consume the pain of others, but rather to narrate it) cannot be resolved here, but I believe that if we, like Hart, take as our focal framework "the cultivation of shared perspectives" (Hart 1999, 490), i.e. the interplay between personal and collective subjectivities - which is also a key focus in Arendt's idea of storytelling - the aesthetic assessment of this prison text will still hopefully contribute to pinpoint the complex, multi-layered cultural and political significance of Jiabiangou.

Furthermore, to aesthetically consume works of art – even those that reconstruct traumatic experiences – does not automatically entail the reader's gratification as the ultimate goal. Engaging with Carroll and Korsmeyer's reflections on horror and revulsion in art, Tarja Laine contends that disgust is in fact not necessarily a condition to overcome in order to achieve a higher kind of aesthetic pleasure (Laine 2011).[6] Namely, Laine constructs her argument on the analysis of Roman Polanski's film *Repulsion*, and ultimately contends that disgust there is "explicitly unpleasant and noncathartic, offering neither delightful narrative satisfaction nor any 'purifying' release of emotional tension" (ibid., 45). In other words, sometimes disgust can be an overwhelmingly unpleasurable experience, it can take us by surprise, and in ways that we cannot fully control. I contend that Yang's *Chronicles* are narratively constructed on a similar rationale. The text showcases different varieties of embodied disgust not to provide aesthetic gratification but to uncover the horrific reality of Jiabiangou re-education camp.

Faeces, Vomit, Cannibalism: Disgusting Bodies in Jiabiangou

"Woman from Shanghai" (*Shanghai nüren* 上海女人) was one of the Jiabiangou stories to receive most attention from the Chinese readership. The woman in the title is the wife of Wen Daye 文大业, a rightist sentenced to undergo reform in Jiabiangou, who embarks on a journey from her home in Shanghai to Jiabiangou to visit her husband, only to find, upon her arrival, that he has died from the consequences of starvation. Wen's story is recounted by his friend and fellow rightist Li Wenhan 李文汉, who relates the circumstances that brought to Wen's tragic death. As

mentioned, at that time, China was hit by a famine, which was particularly severe in remote, deserted areas such as Gansu, and especially in the labour camps. In Jiabiangou, the prisoners were constantly engaged in an obsessive search for anything edible; they would resort to any means to sate their hunger, even if that meant ingesting unknown or outright harmful substances. In the area that surrounded the camp, there used to grow a type of cogon grass (*huang maocao* 黄茅草), whose seeds could be eaten after being boiled into a soup. This soup would quickly solidify into a lump, which in fact had no nutritional value, but it could bring some sense of fullness. Prisoners would ingest this preparation while still liquid, with the consequence that it would solidify inside their stomach, thus becoming very hard to expel. This could prove lethal for some, as it indeed happened to Wen Daye. "At that time in Jiabiangou," recounts Li Wenhan, "we would dig our excrements out of each other" (Yang [2003] 2008, 5)[7]. It was common for the inmates to help each other dig out the hardened lumps, an understandably painful process. The operation is described in detail:

> We would squat at the latrine for half a day and not even one piece would come out, so we needed each other's help: a man would lie on his stomach on the ground with his buttocks lifted, and another man would start digging from the back. Most of us even had a dedicated tool, a wooden spoon made from a red willow twig [...]. Those who didn't have such tool had to resort to the metal spoon they used for eating (Yang [2003] 2008, 5).

When Li Wenhan tries to help his friend Wen Daye, he realises the situation is ill-fated:

> The lump's diameter was much bigger than [Wen Daye's] anus' diameter, so that it was blocked there, impossible to dig out. I tried to break the lump into pieces, but I failed. I couldn't use much strength either, else Wen Daye wouldn't stop screaming with pain. Eventually, my tool caused severe bleeding, it was a total mess, and the lump remained intact (ibid.).

The association between food and bodily waste is a quite common representation of disgust. Here the emotion is further enhanced by the parallelism between the sophistication needed for the preparation of the lump and the similar industriousness required for its disposal. The arousal of disgust through the correlation of food with excrement suggests a circular process that involves the two main human orifices: the mouth and the anus. Namely, disgust is aroused because what would otherwise be a natural bodily process – food incorporation and expulsion through digestion – in this case becomes corrupt, as it requires invasive external assistance in order to be executed. The digging operation is a violation of the body envelope, as Rozin and his colleagues have put it, that "when breached, reveal[s] blood and soft viscera that display[s] our commonality with animals" (Rozin, Haidt, McCauley 2008, 761). In fact, just like animals, we humans are involved in activities like eating, mating, defecating, and so on; however, these activities are heavily codified, from a cultural perspective, precisely as a way to differentiate ourselves from animals. As

a consequence, the violation of our body envelope is disgusting because it is a reminder of our animal vulnerability (Rozin & Fallon 1987, 27).

A similar scene involving the digging out of hardened excrements is described in the story titled "Hospital ward number one" (*Yi hao bingfang* 一号病房). Prisoner Zhang Jixin 张继信 has eaten some tree leaves which eventually have solidified into "dung balls crammed at the anus' entry" (Yang [2003] 2008, 304). Zhang' s friend, Chen Yuming 陈毓明, starts to dig them out using an aluminium spoon, until "Zhang's anus suddenly spurted out a gooey watery substance" which ended on Chen's chest, causing him to shout in anger: "What the hell is this? I am digging your shit out and you make this mess!" (ibid.).

From the reader's perspective, scenes like these can hardly be appreciated in an aesthetic sense, as there is arguably no hidden sense of beauty, nothing to be *savoured* here. On the contrary, these passages are disgusting in the most unambiguous sense of the term. This kind of disgust aesthetics does not call for the overcoming of repulsion and its conversion into pleasure. Disgust is supposed to remain disgust, as its intended role is to cause distress and aversion and redirect these emotions toward the perpetrators of disgust, that is, the prison enforcers and the labour camp system.

Another type of disgusting object upon which Yang has constructed his Jiabiangou aesthetics is vomit. In the story titled "Eating one's fill" (*Baoshi yi dun* 饱食一顿), the protagonist, Gao Jiyi 高吉义, has been assigned to a team in charge of stacking potatoes on a truck to be delivered elsewhere. Once the job has been accomplished, the team leader rewards the labourers by allowing them to eat as many potatoes as they wish. This event was nothing short of miraculous for the starving prisoners, who ended up eating more tubers than their bodies could physically bear. Back at the barracks, all the team members felt sick, including Gao, who eventually spent the whole night vomiting, being cared after by his friend Niu Tiande 牛天得. The following morning Gao woke up but couldn't find his friend Niu, who in fact had been busy collecting his friend's vomit to eat it. The scene is described from Gao's point of view, in the following terms:

> In front of him [Niu Tiande] was a blue, square-shaped cloth wrapper, on top of which a layer of thick, sticky paste was evenly spread. The sticky paste was already solidified, but one could discern several white and yellowish potato chunks. The sticky paste was of a colour I couldn't even properly describe, some mix of brownish, yellowish and greenish stuff. My heart tightened (Yang [2003] 2008, 154-55).

The narration is constructed by describing in detail the foul element before even revealing what it is, though the reader can already easily guess. The whole scene is a crescendo of disgusting whose climax we are about to encounter very soon.

> Oh my god! It was my vomit from the night before that he had spread on his cloth wrapper to dry. From that filthy stuff he was taking out the small, finger-sized potato chunks, and stuffing them in his mouth. After having stuffed a couple of chunks, he broke a piece of that solid paste and started putting those in his mouth, just like one would do with a piece of layered pancake (ibid.).

Because the scene is told from Gao Jiyi's point of view, we see it unfolds just as if we were him; we participate in his shock and disgust, which is prompted by the vision of his friend eating the vomit. As shown in the quoted passages, in Yang's narratives, disgust is usually presented to the reader from an observational point of view; it is the friend, or the fellow inmate that describes the event, and we never access it from the angle of the disgusting body itself. That is to say, the disgusting body is the object of experience of another corporal individuality, the observer. The disgust we perceive, therefore, is in fact the same disgust that the observer has felt, and which he is telling us.

The focus on corporality is a distinguishing element in Yang's narratives, where the carceral bodies are virtually reduced to their (dys)functionality – they are crooked examples of the embodied processes of eating and evacuating. Yang's special attention to corporality and its physical and moral humiliation works as a way to highlight the true consequences of reform or re-education through labour. In writing about Jiabiangou, Yang is not interested in political or ideological discursive criticism; he prefers to directly show the reader the effect of the camp system, which, to quote Veg, eventually reduces "humans to self-destructive instincts and repugnant bodily functions" (Veg 2014, 523).

It is interesting, at this point, to compare Yang's disgusting bodies to certain representations of corporality that appear in Socialist Realist literature. In the literature of the Cultural Revolution, for instance, heroes are not only portrayed as morally and ideologically impeccable, but also as physically attractive, strong, healthy, and young. They are the perfect embodiment of *xinling mei* 心灵美, a kind of "spiritual beauty" that in fact speaks for their correct ideological consciousness, as Lan Yang points out (Yang 2002). To borrow Mark Elvin's words, the revolutionary body is "a remarkable all-purpose tool and weapon, hardened in a training that removes the old supportive physical affection and toughened by constant tests" (Elvin 1989, 317). The difference between the healthy, beautiful bodies that we encounter in communist aesthetics and the bodies in *Chronicles* is quite striking. The scrawny, sick, disgusting bodies of Jiabiangou are the exact opposite of the ideal revolutionary body, and they tell a very different story of China's glorious construction of socialism.

Let us fast-forward some twenty years, and we find a renewed use of disgust – and scatology in particular – in post-Maoist Chinese fiction as well. As pointed out by Pamela Hunt, some contemporary authors use scatological humour as a way to problematise the depiction of the Maoist perfect bodies to subvert the bodily symbols of a complicated past, and to represent, instead, the complexities that regulate the modern bodies of post-Maoist China (Hunt 2010). Even though – I contend – Yang's use of disgust is not humorous or satirical, still, the Jiabiangou bodies too succeed in deconstructing the communist ideal of the perfect body, and portray a very different reality.

Going back to the construction of Yang's aesthetics, beyond faeces and vomit, there is one more instance of embodied disgust that deserves our attention, I believe, and that is cannibalism. A documented practice during the years of the Great Famine (Dikötter 2010; Yang 2008), cannibalism

is also an established literary trope within the Chinese context, that has been used to symbolise certain rapacious aspects of Chinese culture, and epitomised by Lu Xun 鲁迅 in his *Diary of a Madman* (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日记) where China was symbolically portrayed as a man-eating society. In *Chronicles*, Yang references practices of cannibalism in Jiabiangou as one of the extreme consequences of hunger, a necessity for the prisoners' survival. But the discovery of fellow inmates feeding off human corpses brings about an initial shock that gradually transforms into a philosophical reflection on morality and propriety in a context such as the camp. In the story "On the train" (*Zai lieche shang* 在列车上), some prisoners have caught other fellows secretly cooking and eating an unidentified item – a rare and therefore worth investigating occurrence in times of famine. The team supervisor, Si Jicai 司机才, eventually finds out the truth and, without anticipating anything, leads Li Tianqing 李天庆, the protagonist of the story, to the camp burial site. Li realises that there is something wrong with the corpses, as it looks like they have been moved. The scene is again constructed from Li's point of view, so we gradually realise – together with him – that the bodies have indeed been desecrated, the organs removed from their chests for consumption.

> "This cannot be the work of wild dogs, could it?" Si Jicai asked me. "It doesn't look like it," I said. "Dog bites couldn't have been so neat." At that point, I understood what Si Jicai meant, my head went numb, and then, shocked, I asked him: "Do you think...?" The rest, I didn't dare say. He continued: "Look, look inside the chest." I was afraid to look, I retreated a few steps. "What are you afraid of?" said Si Jicai. Then he got closer to the dead body, and with his hands pried open the wound: "Look inside!" he told me. I finally took a glance: it was an empty hole (Yang [2003] 2008, 432).

Both Si Jicai and Li Tianqing are shocked and disgusted at learning that the prisoners were feeding off human corpses.

> "Those bastards! They don't have a shred of humanity! Do you know what they were cooking? Human organs! Human hearts, livers, and lungs! Those dead people had no flesh, years of prolonged hunger and hard labour had reduced them to skin and bones. Nothing edible there, so they had the idea of cutting open their chests and stomachs!"
> I didn't dare speak, I still hadn't recovered from the shock, my head was still numb. When I reported to Si Jicai, I just thought that the situation was suspicious, but I never thought these people could do something like this! (ibid., 431-32).

The disgust that Li feels at the sight of the bodies and at the realisation that they have been cooked and eaten by other prisoners prompts a reflection on propriety and on what it means to remain human in such extreme circumstances. If the people were already dead, then technically no crime has been committed, from the perspective of the law. According to Yin Shi 尹诗, a "moral paradox" (*daode beilun* 道德悖论) arises when the conditions of existence are as exceptional as they were in Jiabiangou (Yin 2012). In such cases, morality is a concept that no longer makes sense,

because individual agency and subjectivity need to adjust to the circumstances. These conditions of existence make us ponder whether actions that normally would be morally and lawfully considered reprehensible – like stealing, cheating, becoming dumb to death and suffering, to the point of eating corpses – in Jiabiangou become a sensible solution, and possibly the only one, in order to survive.

In biopolitical terms, the disgusting carceral bodies portrayed in *Chronicles* can be framed as expressions of what Giorgio Agamben has called "bare life," i.e. a condition of existence that reduces humans to their biological functions, and essentially deprives them of political and social agency (Agamben [1995] 2005).[8] Engaging with Foucault's notion of biopolitics, Agamben posits that the concentration camp and the structure of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century are the places "*par excellence*" of modern biopower (ibid., 6). In other words, the concentration camp, which Agamben characterises as the epitome of the "state of exception," i.e. "a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter in a threshold of indistinction" (ibid., 195), is the paradigm for the exercise of power in the modern western world. The state of exception materialises in all sorts of circumstances, and therefore "we are virtually in the presence of a camp every time that such a structure is created, independently from the crimes committed, whatever their classification and specification might be" (ibid.). However, as it has been noted by critics, Agamben's concept of "camp" risks to be too general, and offers little space for the recognition of the complexity of life within the camp itself, especially when it comes to register and conceptualise practices of resistance (Walters 2008). Therefore, identifying Jiabiangou as an articulation of Agamben's idea of "camp," the disgusting bodies portrayed by Yang can in turn be recognised as expressions of "bare life." On the other hand, however, from the perspective of lived experience, we also see those disgusting bodies as active subjects that react, adjust, and to some extent resist the prison power. In other words, it is true that the circumstances of the camp force the inmates to practice morally objectionable acts (stealing, cheating, etc.), but it is also true that they help each other. They assist their fellow prisoners in the evacuation process, they understand and forgive practices of cannibalism on corpses. In short, through disgust, Yang shows us the horrifying mechanisms of biopower in Jiabiangou, but he also reveals practices of active response to that power, in which the agency of the carceral bodies is clearly manifested.

From the perspective of embodiment, Yang's disgusting bodies very well exemplify the notion of intercorporeality (or intersubjectivity), elaborated by Maurice Merlau-Ponty as a way to explain the essentially relational nature of human perception (Merleau-Ponty 1964). The concept was employed to explain how humans experience and perceive the world with the body and, at the same time, are also perceived and experienced by others (humans but also non-humans). In other words, our actions are often prompted by our experience of the other - when we see someone yawn we are likely to yawn back. The same goes with the disgust that is aesthetically constructed in *Chronicles*. The text displays different layers of intersubjectivity that is built through disgust, both intra- as well as extra-textually. On the one hand, disgust is constructed through

the intercorporeal relationships between two or more bodies – in which one is the elicitor, and the other the perceiver. On the other hand, on an extra-textual level, the disgust that the reader feels is the disgust that the narrator is telling him/her – the consequence of the reader's intercorporeal relation with the text.

Conclusion

The use of disgust aesthetics in Yang Xianhui's *Chronicles* is a conscious narrative strategy aimed at exposing the harrowing effects of the Anti-Rightist Movement and of re-education through labour. Shit, vomit, cannibalism; the prisoners undergoing re-education in Jiabiangou are involved in many disgusting activities which are presented to the reader in excruciating detail. By appealing to such gruesome iconography, the author is showing what the camp does to carceral bodies: it reduces them to their most repugnant bodily instincts. The disgust evoked by these descriptions – and which engages the readers in intimate, unpredictable, sometimes uncontrolled ways – is first directed toward the bodies of the prisoners. On a deeper level, though, it comes to transcend the instinctual dimension to involve the moral aspect. It is the re-education system, the labour camp and its enforcers that have turned the carceral bodies into disgusting objects. The reader's disgust is re-directed and turned into sympathy for the victims and contempt and indignation toward the agents and mechanisms of power responsible for the degradation of the foul Jiabiangou bodies. In short, disgust is a mirror that reflects and reveals the regime's own ugliness.

As we have seen, Yang's disgust aesthetic is usually portrayed as a collective, intersubjective, intra- and extra-textual corporeality. Two or more bodies are needed to evoke disgust: one functions as the elicitor, the other – together with the reader – as the perceiver. This corporeal multiplicity in the midst of dehumanising circumstances paradoxically reveals a rather emotionally moving kind of humanity; in Jiabiangou people help each other even when caught up in the most repulsive situations. They dig faeces out of other people's anuses, they condone disgusting acts (eating corpses, eating vomit) because they know the laws of morality and propriety do not work in the camp. In other words, while disgust is used to highlight certain mechanism of dehumanisation and bodily annihilation proper of the labour camp logic, it also reveals a counter-narrative, a way that challenges that logic, based on mutual assistance and cooperation.

With his Jiabiangou stories, Yang Xianhui uncovers a part of Chinese history that has largely been overlooked, accessing it through the experiences of those who have actually lived it. Through writing, these personal experiences are then reconfigured in a collective, representational – and therefore political, to reiterate Arendt's position – dimension. The human body, though disgusting and humiliated, here becomes, as insightfully articulated by Howard Choy, "a locus of historical writing – [...] a text on which the past is violently inscribed" (Choy 2008, 186). Through literature, the bodies of Jiabiangou re-appropriate and carry the memory of a troubled past that mainstream narratives have tried to keep hidden, and reintegrate them in their historical and affective significance.

Endnotes:

1. Regarding the labelling of citizens as "rightists," Shenshen Cai points out how *Chronicles* reconstructs the history of the sentenced prisoners exposing the absurdity of some accusations: a disagreement with the country leader regarding grain purchase; an extra-marital affair; an unflattering comment on the Soviet Union, and so forth. See: Cai 2016.
2. There exist several versions of this book. As explained by the author in the afterword to the 2008 edition, Yang first published the story "Woman from Shanghai" (*Shanghai nüren* 上海女人) in Chinese literary magazine *Shanghai Wenxue* 上海文学 in the spring of 2000. Later, this and other Jiabiangou stories, plus some other Yang's non-Jiabiangou related writing, were published in book form with the title *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (*Jiabiangou jishi* 夹边沟纪事). In 2003, Shanghai Wenxue publishing house re-organised the corpus to include only the Jiabiangou stories, and titled the book *Goodbye Jiabiangou* (*Gaobie Jiabiangou* 告别夹边沟). In 2008, Huacheng publishing house republished the book restoring its original name, *Chronicles of Jiabiangou*. In 2009 an English version has been published, with the title *Woman from Shanghai* and translated by Wen Huang. However, the collection includes only 13 of the 19 stories, and in many parts the translated texts have been significantly altered. This article was based on the 2008 Chinese version, and the translations are all mine.

   In 2010, the stories of Jiabiangou were transposed into a documentary film, *The Ditch* (in Chinese *Jiabiangou* 夹边沟), directed by Wang Bing 王兵 and presented at the Venice Film Festival.
3. For an in-depth analysis of Hanna Arendt's conception of storytelling, see: Jackson 2002.
4. Scholars generally agree on the strong sensory nature of disgust, though there is some debate on which sense is primarily involved. Many theorists agree on the centrality of taste, others believe smell is critically important. See Korsmeyer 2011.
5. Hart's research focuses on political prison culture in post-war Greece.
6. Laine is talking about the cinematic experience, but I contend that her analysis can be extended to other kinds of aesthetic experiences, including reading.
7. The English translations of the excerpts from *Chronicles* reported in this article are mine.
8. Agamben uses the metaphor of the "homo sacer," an expression that in traditional Roman law indicates a person who has committed crimes against the "pax deorum" - the set of rules that characterised the relation between the gods and the collectivity. These crimes could only be judged by the gods themselves, and the criminal was deemed "unsacrificable" ("insacrificabile") for ritualistic purposes, though his/her killing would be met with impunity (Agamben condenses this concept with the word "uccidibilità," or "killability"). See Agamben [1995] 2005.

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