



Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Haunting of a Repressed
Past: Yu Hua's Avant-Garde
Works in the 1980s*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:
Tanvi Negi

2 July 2025

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Speaker: Ms. Tanvi Negi, Assistant Professor, Department of Chinese Studies, School of Languages, Doon University, Dehradun.

Chair: Dr. Manju Rani Hara, Associate Professor, Centre for Chinese and South East Asian Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Date: 2 July 2025

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar focused on the works of the popular Chinese author and essayist, Yu Hua. The Chair, Dr. Manju Rani Hara, introduced the seminar's theme as an exploration of contemporary Chinese literature, centering on Yu Hua's novella *1986*. While Yu Hua is globally recognised for works like *To Live* (活着) and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (许三观卖血记) the seminar examined his contributions to the *avant-garde* literary movement in China. It situated *1986* within a broader literary trend of post-Cultural Revolution China, highlighting how writers used fiction to process and narrate collective trauma and personal memories.
- Dr. Hara underscored how, after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, Chinese writers turned to literature to grapple with traumatic historical experiences. The “traumatic past” became a central theme, with authors recounting personal memories and societal wounds through experimental narratives. In *1986*, Yu Hua embodies this tendency, using fiction to probe the lingering psychological and social scars left by the revolution and to question how individuals and society remember — or choose to forget — painful histories.
- Dr. Hara contextualised Yu Hua's work within the *avant-garde* literary trend that blossomed in China between 1985 and 1989. This movement was marked by writers pushing narrative boundaries with unconventional storytelling techniques, fragmented structures, and innovative language. Terms like *ling lei* (另类, offbeat) captured this spirit of experimentation. *Avant-garde* literature sought to challenge traditional norms and

open space for new aesthetic and thematic possibilities, setting the stage for Yu Hua's unique narrative style.

- The speaker, Ms. Tanvi Negi described how Chinese literature was fundamentally transformed after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, driven by a profound reckoning with history and collective trauma. This shift, known as New Era Literature, marked not just stylistic innovation but an ideological and epistemic break from Maoist orthodoxy. The influx of Western literary theories and global cultural currents in the 1980s facilitated an environment of vibrant experimentation. Writers silenced during earlier political campaigns resurfaced, while a younger generation — the so-called “Mao’s children” — emerged to articulate narratives shaped by revolutionary disillusionment.
- Ms. Negi grouped memory writing into three categories : returnee writers who re-entered literary circles after years of silence; educated youth or “Mao’s children”, whose disillusionment shaped personal narratives of suffering; and, the *avant-garde* writers of the late 1950s-60s generation. While the first two groups wrote testimonial literature rooted in lived trauma, *avant-garde* authors, less directly impacted by earlier political violence, engaged with memory as an inter-generational burden. Their works reflected alienation and formal experimentation, grappling with ideological residues even amid reforms and modernization.
- *Avant-garde* fiction emerged as a distinct literary phenomenon in the mid-1980s, and reached its height with the 1987 special issue of *Harvest* journal featuring experimental narratives by writers including Yu Hua. This movement embraced meta-fiction, narrative fragmentation, and linguistic estrangement, influenced by Western modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. *Avant-garde* fiction rejected stable historical truths and instead highlighted the artificiality of narrative itself. While it coincided with newfound cultural openness under Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, it also exposed deep contradictions in a society transitioning from revolutionary ideology to capitalist modernisation.
- Ms. Negi mapped Yu Hua’s trajectory from his early influences, especially that of the Japanese writer Kawabata Yasunari, to a pivotal encounter with Kafka in 1986, which fundamentally reshaped his writing. Kafka’s works offered Yu Hua “freedom of writing”, liberating him from the constraints of realist conventions dominant in Chinese literature.

Yu Hua's *avant-garde* writings display hallmarks of postmodernism: unreliable narrators, narrative fragmentation, and a rejection of grand historical narratives. He crafts narratives that interrogate reality's unknowability, and critique the violence inherent in both historical events and their representations.

- The speaker provided an in-depth analysis of Yu Hua's short story *1986*, where a history teacher returns as a madman after disappearing during the Cultural Revolution. The madman self-mutilates, re-enacting ancient punishments, symbolising a violent return of repressed historical trauma. The narrative is nonlinear and polyphonic, shifting perspectives among the madman, his wife, and daughter, destabilising any singular truth. Through this fragmented storytelling, Yu Hua reveals how memory erupts unexpectedly, haunting individuals and communities long after historical atrocities have ostensibly ended.
- The seminar highlighted how trauma in *avant-garde* fiction manifests through grotesque imagery, violence, and narrative madness. Yu Hua portrays trauma as belated and repetitive, surfacing years after the events. Not only the madman but his wife and daughter embody trauma's lingering effects, showing how even those who outwardly "move on" remain psychologically scarred. Ms. Negi emphasised silence as a significant motif: the community's indifference to the madman's suffering reflects societal apathy and the violence of forgetting, where trauma becomes spectacle yet is swiftly erased from collective consciousness.
- The speaker concluded by situating *1986* as both a meditation on historical trauma and a critique of modern consumer culture's complacency. While the horrors of the Cultural Revolution continue to haunt individuals like the madman, society has retreated into the comforts of material consumption, eager to forget the painful past. Yu Hua's narrative confronts readers with uncomfortable ethical questions about collective memory, moral responsibility, and the human tendency to silence trauma for the sake of normalcy. His work stands as a powerful testament to literature's role in bearing witness to the unspeakable.

- Dr. Hara noted that the characters' return to familiar places symbolise the resurfacing of past wounds. However, these characters often face indifference from those around them, illustrating society's divided approaches to coping with traumatic history — some obsessively remember, while others rush to forget. This particular dynamic raises complex questions about how collective and individual memory shape identity and historical understanding.

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