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Pui Yin, Vivian LEE
City University of Hong Kong

Omens of History:
Su Tong's Southern Landscape and Dynastic Histories
歷史的凶兆：蘇童的南方景觀和朝代歷史

Vivian Pui-yin LEE
李佩然

Department of Chinese, Translation and Linguistics, City University of Hong Kong
香港城市大學中文、翻譯及語言學系

Born in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province in 1963, Su Tong 蘇童 belongs to the post-Mao generation of writers whose experimental spirit in creating "new languages and literary forms in order to provide new meanings for society"[1] has earned them the status of the "avant-garde" on the Mainland. He began publishing poems and short stories in literary magazines in the early 1980s. His *tour de force* in the West, *Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas* (1990),[2] originally titled *Qiqie chengqun* 妻妾成群 (*A Profusion of Wives and Concubines*),[3] won him international acclaim, especially after director Zhang Yimou's 張藝謀 film rendition from which the book derived its English title. Many critics have commented on Su Tong's "decadent" style, particularly "decadence" as a subversive gesture toward the utopian rhetoric of revolutionary literature sanctioned by state ideology.[4] Like their Western counterparts, these avant-garde writers usually exhibit a *fin-de-siècle* consciousness, or what Arnold Hauser calls "the feeling of doom and crisis," "the consciousness of standing at the end of a vital process and in the presence of the dissolution of a civilization."[5] Apparently, this apocalyptic temperament finds a not so distant echo in contemporaries like Mo Yan 莫言 and Han Shaogong 韓少功, whose sense of "devolution" and cultural decline provokes a literary reinvention of the past as a resistance to (and sometimes a redemption of) the flux of time. As David Der-wei Wang 王德威 observes, Su Tong's depiction of Fengyangshu xiang 楓楊樹鄉 (Maple-Poplar Village), his fictional homeland, is a nuanced continuation of the "imaginary nostalgia" in modern Chinese fiction championed by Shen Congwen 沈從文 and Lu Xun 魯迅 decades ago, only that in Su Tong's case the "return" to the past is fraught with incomprehension, revulsion and disgust, while the predominant movement is, ironically, "escape."[6]

What further differentiates Su Tong's "nostalgia" from search-for-roots fiction is that his imaginary homeland is a self-conscious fictional construct concentrating on the dubious and demonic aspects of "home." The I-narrators in "Yijiusansinian de taowang" 一九三四年的

1 Li Tuo, "The New Vitality of Modern Chinese," eds., Wendy Larson and Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg, *Inside Out: Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1993), 273-277.

2 Su Tong, *Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas*, trans., Michael Duke, (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1993).

3 Su Tong, *Qiqie chengqun* 妻妾成群 [*A Profusion of Wives and Concubines*] (Taibei 臺北: Yuanliu 遠流, 1990).

4 The subversive nature of "decadence" in Su Tong's fiction is discussed in Deidre Sabina Knight, "Decadence, Revolution and Self-Determination in Su Tong's Fiction," *Modern Chinese Literature* 10 (1998): 91-111. See also Robin Visser, "The Urban-Rural Confrontation in Su Tong's Fiction," *Modern Chinese Literature* 9 (1995): 113-137.

5 Deidre Sabina Knight, "Decadence, Revolution and Self-Determination in Su Tong's Fiction," *Modern Chinese Literature* 10 (1998): 91-111.

6 See David Wang Der-wei 王德威, preface to, *Tianshi de liangshi* 天使的糧食 [*The Food of an Angel*], by Su Tong 蘇童 (Taibei 臺北: Rye Field 麥田, 1997), 11-36. Also see Chapter 7 in David Wang Der-wei, *Fictional Realsim in 20th Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

逃亡 ("1934 Escapes") and "Feiyue wo de fengyangshu guxiang" 飛越我的楓楊樹故鄉 ("Flying over to My Maple-Poplar Home Country"),[7] for example, try to rewrite their family history by overtly creating the characters, setting and action as a kind of psychological quest for meaning and self-knowledge. Be it Fengyangshu xiang (the country) or Xingchunshu jie 香椿樹街 Fragrant Cedar Avenue (the city), the decadent South is shrouded in an obscure atmosphere (oppressively moist, exotic and opaque) that illuminates the inner world of emotions and desire of its inhabitants. History, says Su Tong, is "a heap of paper scraps" from which he constructs his fictional world, in which both the author and the reader are to discover the "defects of history" and the "defects of mankind in history" that constitute the world of fiction.[8] In fact, the interest of Su Tong's work lies less in a direct criticism or reflection of the "defects of mankind and history," as in critical social realism of the May Fourth tradition, or the post-Mao scar literature, than in the experimentation with different possibilities of fiction writing, from metafiction to neo-realist fiction, from fatalistic predestination to more open-ended melodrama, and from the twentieth-century to ancient dynasties. Current critical studies of Su Tong have amply demonstrated the writer's complex engagement with history in the stories of the South, Su Tong's imaginary homeland where most of his fictional narratives of the past take place. As the primary locale of Su's fictional histories, the South is both the beginning and end of a recurrent pattern of escape and return, a pattern revolving around a profound sense of home and homelessness. History, in these stories, is both a source of anxiety and self-knowledge that always returns with the narrative. On the meta-textual level, this cyclical pattern of escape and return is echoed in the literal-contextual level, in the characters' (usually the I-narrators') incessant desire to return to a past whose meaning ineluctably eludes the perceiving subject.

While the South as Su Tong's fictional homeland has been widely discussed by literary scholars, his two most overtly "historical" novels, namely *Wu Zetian* 武則天 (*Empress Wu*)[9] and *Wo de diwang shengya* 我的帝王生涯 (*My Life as Emperor*),[10] have received relatively less attention in discussion of Su Tong's fictional topos. In this paper, I will look at the emplotment (i.e.

7 Su Tong, "Feiyue wo de fengyangshu guxiang" 飛越我的楓楊樹故鄉 ["Flying Over to My Maple-Poplar Home Country"], *Shijie de liang ce* 世界的兩側 [*Two Sides of the World*] (Nanjing 南京: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe 江蘇文藝出版社, 1993), 155-167.

8 Su Tong, preface to, *Tianshi de liangshi* 天使的糧食 [*The Food of an Angel*] (Taibei 臺北: Rye Field 麥田, 1997).

9 Su Tong, *Wu Zetian* 武則天 [*Empress Wu*] (Taibei 臺北: Rye Field 麥田, 1994).

10 Su Tong, *Wo de diwang shengya* 我的帝王生涯 [*My Life as Emperor*] (Taibei 臺北: Rye Field 麥田, 1994). English quotations from this novel are based on the recent translation by Howard Goldblatt, trans., *My Life as Emperor*, by Su Tong (London: Faber and Faber, 2005). Other standard English translations of Su Tong's novels used in this paper are: Michael Duke, trans., *Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas*, by Su Tong (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1993)., which contains "Opium Family," "Wives and Concubines," and "1934 Escapes"; and Howard Goldblatt, trans., *Rice*, by Su Tong (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1995). All other translations from Su Tong's writings are mine.

narrative framing and points of view) of these fictional histories in accounting for the themes of dynastic decline and the fatalism connected to kingship. By establishing some intertextual links between these two texts and others, I want to show how Su Tong's venture into China's dynastic past is part of a bigger network of the metonymic signs of "the South."

The Lure of the South: Fictional Landscape

Su Tong's fiction of the South is generally referred to by critics as the Maple-Poplar series. The South, as it were, has become the "hall-mark" of Su Tong's new historical fiction through which the decadent world of Maple-Poplar Village and Fragrant Cedar Avenue comes to life as a horrid, perverse, and yet alluring realm of human experience:

> **I have never depicted my birthplace, Fragrant Cedar Avenue, with so much love and affection. Nor have I praised that pallid, callous gravel street, those two rows of dilapidated old-style houses that have neither beginning nor end, the mossy air full of mosquitoes, and the dwarfish, sordid-looking figures of my neighbors appearing and disappearing in the dark windows. I was born in the South without any choice, like a grain of seed dropped from the mouth of a swallow, but my disgust with the South has had a long history: Fragrant Cedar Avenue has left its indelible mark on me.**[11]

The South signifies "a corrupt yet seductive existence." It is also "an ideal setting for movies about the river country of the South."[12] Indeed, in the Chinese literary tradition, the South is associated with romance, decadence, extravagance and ruin.[13] As some critics observe, the literary landscape of the South in Su Tong's fiction is invariably gloomy, humid, filthy, smelly, corrupt, and mysterious; it is this unique physical and cultural climate that defines Su Tong's aesthetics.[14] As a metaphorical space, the decadent South consists of two distinct yet interrelated places: Fragrant Cedar Avenue and Maple-Poplar Village representing the city and the country respectively. In the following, I attempt to map out the fictional "geohistory" of these two places that constitute the locus of desire in Su Tong's fictional histories.

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11 Su Tong, *Nanfang de duoluo* 南方的墮落 [*The Decline of the South*] (Taibei 臺北: Yuanliu 遠流, 1992), 73.

12 Ibid., 73-74.

13 This "literary geohistory" is noted in David Wang Der-wei, preface to, *Tianshi de liangshi* 天使的糧食 [*The Food of an Angel*] (Taibei 臺北: Rye Field 麥田, 1997), 13-16.

14 Mo Luo 摩羅 and Shi Chunsheng 侍春生, "Taodun yu xianluo – Su Tong lun" 逃遁與陷落——蘇童論 ["Escape and Decline – on Su Tong"], *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 當代作家評論 [*Contemporary Writers Review*] 2 (1998): 12-20.

Fragrant Cedar Avenue: Past and Present

As the epitome of Su Tong's southern city, Fragrant Cedar Avenue is a dystopian space of waste and decay:

> **The river thus flows along the north front of Fragrant Cedar Avenue as it has for centuries. In winter it is icy blue-green. Nobody knows why it becomes blackish yellow in spring and summer […] There is no longer any fish in the river. Barges carrying coal and cement pass by everyday. Oil, garbage and dead rats float on the water […] The scenery of the olden days is fading away bit by bit, but it has left its traces in Fragrant Cedar Avenue.**[15]

The contrast between past and present seems to imply a critique of modern life. The "colorful" pollutants from the chemical plant are like a sedative to human sensitivity, while modernization, symbolized by the barges carrying coal and cement, has destroyed the natural scenery and habitats. This nostalgic tone, however, is offset later when the narrator discovers the untold secrets of the past. Just as Mo Yan's "Strange Records of Liquorland" in *Jiuguo* 酒國 (*The Republic of Wine*)[16] leads to some stunning discoveries of China's culinary tradition, the "Xiangjie mishi" 香街秘史 ("Unknown History of Fragrant Avenue") in "Nanfang de duoluo" 南方的墮落 ("The Decline of the South") contains equally unnerving anecdotes of murder, adultery and violence since antiquity: "Since time immemorial the world has been full of all kinds of dark secrets and crimes, and Fragrant Cedar Avenue is no exception."[17] "Even now, what happened centuries ago still happens in every corner of the street. In reality and in dreams, sex and murder overflow our everyday life."[18] The dilemma of writing about the past sometimes results in self-loathing: "In exposing vulgarities I have become vulgar myself." The narrator's ironic self-distancing thus makes the "indelible mark" of the past even more prominent as he seeks to undermine it.

Similar portraits of the city abound in Su Tong's fiction. As a recurring image of the urban space, Fragrant Cedar Avenue is the prototype of Su Tong's cityscape even when its name is altered:

> **One rainy morning Lingfeng arrived at Fengming Road […] the wooden buildings on both sides of the street were shabby and run-down. It seemed they were slanted in the same direction […] garbage, dead rats and human feces floated on the water pits.**[19]

15 Su Tong, *Chengbei didai* 城北地帶 [*The Northern Zone of the City*] (Taibei 臺北: Rye Field 麥田, 1995), 28.

16 Mo Yan 莫言, *The Republic of Wine*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Arcade, 2000).

17 Ibid., 109.

18 Ibid., 112.

19 Su Tong, "Yuanyi" 園藝 ["Horticulture"], *Ciqing shidai* 刺青時代 [*The Times of Tatoos*] (Hong Kong 香港:

[T]he air in the squalid northern district, home to the city's poor, stinks of excrement and decay. Apart from the hum of spinning wheels in nearby textile mills, the deserted streets are silent as death.[20]

The squalid cityscape prefigures the public and private lives of the inhabitants. They are gossipy, cheeky, violent, adulterous, and above all lacking any moral awareness or sense of shame. It is also a self-enclosed world where characters are trapped within their self-created spiritual prison. The spinster sisters in "Cixiu" 刺繡 ("Embroidery")[21] submit themselves to a life of self-confinement in the attic room of their father's sauce and pickle shop long after it has been confiscated by the State. The owner of Meijia Chaguan 梅家茶館 (Mei's Family Teahouse) in "The Decline of the South" has terminal cancer and lives like a zombie in his second-floor bedroom until he dies, while his wife indulges in debauchery downstairs. The listless youths in *Chengbei didai* 城北地帶 (*The Northern District of the City*) are trapped in a meaningless cycle of gang fights, looting, lust and vengeance. Fragrant Cedar Avenue, it seems, is a bed of evil, the home of murderers, miscreants and scoundrels who are, ironically, the "heroes" of Su Tong's fictional homeland.

The oppressive atmosphere of the city is matched by the prevalence of evil in a claustrophobic space. Every attempt to break away is doomed to failure or disgrace. "Everything makes me vomit. This is the reality of the gentle, beautiful 'South' people used to imagine […] I admit I am an unfilial offspring of the South, I hate it because it is humid, filthy and overcrowded."[22] Unlike Mo Yan's narrator in *Honggaoliang* 紅高粱 (*Red Sorghum*),[23] the sense of being "unfilial" is positively affirmed as a rebellion against the sordid reality of the South rather than a nostalgic yearning for a lost connection with the past. And yet, this fictional setting of the southern city also contains a negative charm that appeals to the imagination of Su Tong's I-narrators whose moral (and physical) revulsion, for reasons unexplained, seems to effect a compulsion to narrate:

I am disgusted with the reality of Fragrant Cedar Avenue, but I have no choice but to give it an objective description.[24]

If I could, I would rather die than watch this kind of stupid drama, but I did, and very much enjoyed it.[25]

Cosmos Books 天地圖書, 1995), 30.

20 Su Tong, *Rice*, trans., Howard Goldblatt, 2.

21 Su Tong, "Cixiu" 刺繡 ["Embroidery"], *Nanfang de duoluo* 南方的墮落 [*The Decline of the South*] (Hong Kong 香港: Cosmos Books 天地圖書, 1992), 9-70.

22 Su Tong, *Nanfang de duoluo*, 95.

23 Mo Yan, *Honggaoliang jiazu* 紅高粱家族 [*Red Sorghum Family*] (Taibei 臺北: Hongfan 洪範, 1988).

24 Su Tong, *Nanfang de duoluo*, 80.

25 Ibid., 95.

This ambivalent impulse, the simultaneous sense of revulsion and attraction, is characteristic of the I-narrator's fictional memory. Corollary to this paradox is the tendency to escape from the haunting nightmare of the past. At the end of "The Decline of the South," the narrator is exhorted by the familiar voice of a dead man to run for his life: " 'Run, child!' Therefore I ran. I could feel the familiar noise of the South chasing after me like the soul of the wrongfully accused."[26] Compared to his contemporaries who share a similar interest in history and cultural decline – such as Mo Yan, whose narrators lament the inevitable loss of cultural inheritance, and Han Shaogong, whose critical gaze at his cultural roots alternates between disillusion and awe – Su Tong's fictional homeland is more a display of extravagance than revelation of deep meaning. By turning the *xungen* 尋根 (search-for-roots) motif upside down, Su Tong has initiated a counter-movement that displaces the "imaginary homeland" into a condemned (and self-condemning) living hell.

If, as Su Tong's narrators insist, the South is such a plethora of evil, how does one account for his obsession with the "scenery of the olden days"? And why do they return time and again to this filthy, humid and disgusting world of the South? Is it simply because, as his narrators confess, one was born in such a place, without a choice and therefore "fated"? After all, in what way should we understand the "fatalism" and "decadence" so self-consciously displayed in these fictional narratives of the past? In order to answer these questions, one has to dig deeper into the meaning of the South as a historical and cultural metaphor.

Maple-Poplar Village: Omens, Disasters and Death

Su Tong's Maple-Poplar Village is, first of all, a radical deviation from the image of the countryside in most modern Chinese literature. It defies the formulation of rural-urban opposition in most native soil fiction since the May Fourth, and most notably the ideological glorification of rural life in socialist realism. It does not contain any hint of a possible self-renewal (so powerfully invoked in *Red Sorghum*), or problematic indeterminacy (as in Han Shaogong's *Maoqiao cidian* 馬橋詞典 [*A Dictionary of Maqiao*][27] and "Nü nü nü" 女女女 ["Woman Woman Woman"][28]). Instead, the bipolar movement between city and country in Su Tong's Maple-Poplar series dramatizes the "fundamental similarity of the [two] spaces."[29] Thus Maple-Poplar Village

26 Ibid., 118.

27 Han Shaogong 韓少功, *Maqiao cidian* 馬橋詞典 [*A Dictionary of Maqiao*] (Beijing 北京: Zuojia chubanshe 作家出版社, 1996). English translation by Julia Lovell, *A Dictionary of Maqiao* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

28 Han Shaogong, "Nü nü nü" 女女女 ["Woman Woman Woman"], *Han Shaogong zuopin zixuanji*. 韓少功作品自選集 [*Selected Writings of Han Shaogong*] (Guilin 桂林: Lijiang chubanshe 灕江出版社, 1997). English translation by Martha Cheung 張佩瑤, *"Homecoming?" and Other Stories* (Hong Kong: Renditions, 1992).

29 Robin Visser, "Displacement of the Urban-Rural Confrontation in Su Tong's Fiction," *Modern Chinese Literature* 9 (1995): 136.

(the rural space) and Fragrant Cedar Avenue (the urban space) can be seen as metonyms of the complex universe of the South:

> **Chencao's feelings were confused as he stood there facing the blood-red opium fields and the tenant farmers […] "This is my family's opium; this is the opium plant that always remained outside of the botanical curriculum; it comes from father's land, but it can turn your face ghostly pale and make you feel as though you're floating in a nightmare." The sweet, pungent odor of opium poppies rose up from every corner of the fields […] there is only that murderous odor penetrating your lungs.**[30]

The historical significance of opium in China does not need further elaboration here. By evoking the deadening effect of opium on a fragile young man who is eventually destroyed by his shameful heritage, however, this initial image of rural life subtly *prefigures* the doom of the entire clan. The sense of premonition is intensified by the recurrent vision of the *zaixing* 災星 (star of evil) variously associated with different main characters, e.g., Grandmother Jiang 祖母蔣氏, her eldest son Dingo 狗崽, and the sexual pervert Chen Wenzhi 陳文治 in "Yijiusansi nian de taowang" 一九三四年的逃亡 ("1934 Escapes"), and Liu Chencao 劉沉草, the accursed descendent of the decadent and exploitative landlord family in "Yingsu zhi jia" 罌粟之家 ("Opium Family"). In fact, decay and decline are like a curse cast upon the far from ideal countryside:

> **"Star of evil, where's the star of evil?" […] Thousands of Maple Village residents appeared before the black-robed sorcerer that day, kowtowing and seeking the spirits, hoping that he could reveal to them the cause of the plague devastating the countryside […] "Just look, all of you." The crowd stood on tiptoes and gazed off to the southwest. All they saw was a dense milk-white vapor rising over a far-off stretch of hillside […] Only a single black brick building could be seen crouching there like some huge beast lying in wait for the people of Horsebridge.**[31]

The sense of omen, again, prefigures the human and natural disasters in both "Opium Family" and "1934 Escapes," where epidemics and floods seem to be predestined by an unknown Fate. However, human evil is a more destructive force. Adultery and incest beget feeble and deformed children; moral degeneracy and sexual perversity make neurotic self-destruction inevitable; economic and psychological exploitation initiates an endless cycle of hatred, violence and revenge. These, without exception, are common denominators of the South where a pervasive sense of doom infiltrates both the rural and the urban space.

30 Su Tong, 'Opium Family,' *Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas*, 192-193.

31 Su Tong, "1934 Escape," *Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas*, 147.

Ironically, the narrator in "Opium Family" reckons that Maple Poplar Village is a "typical southern village," while "the soul of the countryside" makes it impossible to avoid "the history of flourish and decline of the big black house" of the opium family.[32] Thus the "soul" of the past in the countryside is as powerful as that hovering over Fragrant Cedar Avenue. Unlike Mo Yan's narrator in *Red Sorghum*, Su Tong's narrators do not have that deep reverence for their ancestors, nor are they tortured by a deep sense of guilt and an unsatisfied desire for self-renewal. If the fictional Gaomi 高密 in Mo Yan is a cultural symbol of the past that stands proudly against a decaying present, the South in Su Tong signifies a spiritual vacuum, a perpetual state of being where the *formal* differences between the rural and urban landscape are undercut by their essential similarities. Instead, the characters that inhabit or move between these spaces are usually caught within a vicious circle of psychosexual desire. As such, the fictional configuration of the South is a lyrical and haunting presence in which history unfolds in the most bizarre tales of human perversion. "The Decline of the South" metaphorically encompasses a vision of human historical experience that hinges on fatalism. As Wang Biao observes, "fatalism" in new historical fiction is the result of the distance between the narrator (narrating present) and the narrated past, the bleak and melancholy apprehension of providence or "inevitability" as one looks back in time.[33] However, it is precisely this sense of accursed destiny that provokes a devious gesture to "escape" from history, or from the haunting premonitions and prefigurations that result from such a conception of history. On the other hand, as some critics have pointed out, decadence and fate are closely connected to a desire to break away from the dominant discourse of history of the State,[34] so that a *literary* escape frees the imagination to reinterpret reality in the form of "seeing…as…,"[35] i.e., to effect what Paul Ricoeur calls a "categorical transgression or *para-doxa*[36] through a metaphorical transformation of the real."[37] As David Der-wei Wang observes, Su Tong's fictional histories express a desire to "escape from," as opposed to "escape into," a deterministic historical pattern.[38] As the primary motif of Su Tong's fiction (and fiction writing), escape takes on a duality of meaning through the multiple narrative "returns" to the South. That is, the inner logic of escape necessitates "return" as a complementary move precisely because escape in this sense will be meaningless or at least incomplete if it does not enable a

32 Su Tong, "Opium Family," *Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas*, 85.

33 Wang Biao 王彪, et. al., *Xin lishi xiaoshuo xuan* 新歷史小說選 [*A Collection of New Historical Fiction*] (Zhejiang 浙江: Zhejiang wenxue chubanshe 浙江文學出版社, 1993), 6.

34 See Knight, 91-111; Visser, 113-137.

35 In the Wittgensteinian sense, "seeing … as …" underlies the semantic content of figurative language but does not nullify its truth content. See Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans., Robert Czerny with Katherine McLaughin and John Costello, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 6.

36 In Greek, *para-doxa* means a deviation from a pre-existing doxa.

37 Ricoeur, 27.

38 David Wang Der-wei, "Introduction," 19.

creative re-visioning of the past. The intricate relationship between decadence, fate, and escape continues to inform Su Tong's ambitious rewriting of dynastic histories in *My Life as Emperor* and *Empress Wu*.

The Majestic Realm: Dynastic Elegies

Being a writer extremely conscious of his *fengge* 風格 (style), Su Tong frequently expresses the anxiety of being trapped in "a pair of small shoes" of his own making (i.e., a certain way of writing).[39] On the other hand, his concern for a personal *xingshigan* 形式感 (form) requires that a good writer constantly instills into his work *jingshen shiti* 精神實體 (a concrete spiritual being) to give a deeper meaning to stylistic innovation.[40] Just as his indulgence in time past always leads to reflections on the present, Su Tong's venture into China's dynastic history is an attempt to discover new possibilities in fiction writing. This is at least what he had in mind when he was working on *Empress Wu*: "[I] intended to write an extraordinary story, to use new methods to retell a well-known ancient tale."[41] *Empress Wu* is preceded by *My Life as Emperor* (hereafter *Emperor*), an earlier historical novel about the life of an imaginary monarch.

To Su Tong himself these two novels about China's dynastic past are quite different in form and in conception. While *Empress Wu* is a conscious (and somewhat "revisionist") reworking of a well-known historical legend, *Emperor* is "a pleasure cruise through my inner world."[42] While *Empress Wu* portrays the life of Wu Zetian, the legendary empress of the Tang dynasty in the eighth century who usurped her husband's throne to become the first and only "female emperor" in Chinese history, *Emperor* is a fictional autobiography of a deposed monarch, an imaginary life story intended to be a personal testimony to the rise and fall of dynasties. To Su Tong himself, *Emperor* seems to be a more successful work than *Empress Wu*, which he regards as the most demanding task he has ever set for himself, and the reward does not seem to match the efforts.[43]

My discussion here will consider the fictional landscape and Su Tong's treatment of the themes of dynastic decline and kingship in *Emperor* to provide a ground for comparison. Then I will look at the portrayal of Empress Wu *as a fictional character* to reveal the dilemma Su Tong probably faced in rewriting the life story of China's most memorable *femme fatale*. By comparing the two novels, I hope to reveal the aesthetic and cultural factors that contribute to the creation of Su Tong's historical personae, and to what extent these two "traditional" stories embody the tension between certain historical preconceptions and fictional representation. This tension can also be construed as that between historical "facticity" and literary "fictionality."

39 Su Tong, preface to, *Qiqie chengqun*, 8-9.

40 Su Tong, preface to, *Hongfen* 紅粉 [*Rouge*] (Taibei 臺北: Yuanliu 遠流, 1991), 10.

41 Su Tong, epilogue to, *Shiyiji* 十一擊 [*Eleven Short Stories*] (Taipei 臺北: Rye Field 麥田, 1994), 188.

42 Su Tong, preface to, *Wu Zetian*, v.

43 Su Tong, epilogue to, *Shiyiji*, 188-189.

The Legend and Legacy of Kingship.

As a fictional autobiography, *Emperor* covers the time between the I-narrator's ascension to the throne at the age of fourteen to his downfall and eventually becoming a Buddhist monk some sixteen years later. The fifth son of his royal father and Lady Meng 孟夫人 (his father's concubine), Duanbai 端白 is a spoiled boy who has neither ambition nor expectations in life. His succession to the throne is the result of a bitter power struggle between his grandmother and the empress who intends her eldest son Duanwen 端文 to be the new ruler of the Xie state 燮國, thus paving the way for the growing antagonism between the new ruler and his brothers who finally overthrow him in a *coup d'état*. As in Su's tales of the South, the Xie state is submerged in a *fin de siècle* decadence and ominous signs abound. From the beginning Duanbai intuitively predicts "calamity will soon befall the Xie empire,"[44] an omen he learns from a demented palace servant. This mysterious forewarning of disaster once again invokes Fate as a historical force. Yet, the portents perceived by Duanbai are largely the young emperor's subconscious apprehension of the real dangers that befall his country. At the time of his succession to the throne, the Xie state is already in decline, threatened internally by famines and plagues and externally by foreign invasion. Within the imperial court, the young emperor is simply a puppet manipulated by his influential mother and grandmother. Yet Duanbai is not an innocent victim, for he, too, inflicts random sufferings on his subjects as a convenient channel for his own frustrations. All this suggests that the dynastic cycle is heading toward a catastrophe.

Su Tong's tale, however, goes further than retracing the dynastic cycle. Instead of reaffirming the conventional pattern of the rise and fall of empires, Duanbai's "reign" problematizes the notion of kingship through the different stages of the protagonist's individuation, first as "Emperor of the Tightrope" 走索王 and finally "Emperor of the Patch" 一畦王. After Duanwen's coup, Duanbai is demoted to civilian status and goes into exile. As he travels south with Swallow 燕郎, a faithful eunuch and his only true friend, Duanbai finds himself passionately drawn to the art of ropewalking, a talent he never got to develop in the Xie palace. As the popular "Tightrope Emperor" returns to the Xie capital he witnesses another bloodbath in which the entire Xie court and his own circus are brutally massacred, thus ending his second "reign." Stripped of all his worldly ties, Duanbai finds his true vocation as a recluse. Eight years ago his teacher, the Buddhist monk Juekong 覺空 (realizing the emptiness of all things) predicted that his unenlightened student would return to the Bitter Bamboo Monastery 苦竹寺 as "Emperor of the Patch" to continue his education in Confucian classics. Duanbai's life as emperor, commoner, and Buddhist monk reflects a common destiny of the traditional Chinese intellectual: a failed political career results in retreat to a life of reclusion in search of spiritual transcendence, while at the same time Confucian thought is still the foundation of one's learning.

The fatalistic, *fin de siècle* sentiment of Su Tong's tales of the South strikes a similar note here. As in "Opium Family," *Emperor* is pervaded by an overbearing sense of predestination on

44 Su Tong, *Wo de diwang shengya*, 4.

the thematic and structural level, and ends with the destruction of an old "empire." The state of Xie, in many ways, resembles the South in modern times. Away from the imperial palace, there are rice fields, water channels, teahouses and brothels. Xiang County, for example, vividly recalls the decadent ambience of the South in the earlier works:

> **The little town of Xiang County had the reputation of being a center of sensual activities. Even during calamitous times, bright red lanterns and cheerful music surrounded the town's brothels and pleasure quarters […] my nose was besieged by feminine perfumes carried on the hot air. Powdered and rouged women of ill repute [plied] their seductive airs on each man who gawked his way past them […] an air of abandonment filled the lanes and byways […]**[45]

The amorous mystique of this little town that so typifies the allure of the South is also rampant with disaster and decay. In the heat of the summer mosquitoes and insects join the army of fugitives fleeing from natural and human disasters:

> **I was disgusted […] by the fly-specked, maggot ridden manure vats by the roadside; particularly disgusted by the squalid, tumbledown inns where we were forced to spend our nights and endure the contstant buzzing of mosquitoes and unpalatable food.**[46]

While in "Opium Family," the downfall of "the last landlord in China" is completed with the Communist Revolution, the destruction of Xie by a foreign invader recalls a familiar pattern in China's dynastic history. In *Emperor*, Su Tong has attempted a condensation of certain aspects of "several thousand years of Chinese history." What emerges from this imaginary historical anecdote are the manifold realities of the human world, or what the writer perceives as "the interpenetration of joy and suffering," and the "organic unity of fire and water, poison and honey" that makes life "perfect."[47] This kind of perfection, or this *sense* of perfection, I must say, is more difficult to attain in life than in art. Even Su Tong's emperor is but one of those rare survivors of human and natural disasters. This is probably why Su Tong has eschewed any specific references to the historical past, moving the time back to an unspecified "presence" where a deposed emperor gives his personal testimony to the downfall of a dynasty. Here political history and personal history exist on the same plane to the extent that they become indistinguishable. Instead of a self-doubting narrator in search of knowledge of the distant past, the emperor speaks to us from the inside, not as a "historian" but as a commoner speaking from the "here and now" of his life time. Given the emotional intensity of his first person narration, this is something "new"

45 Ibid., 236-237.

46 Ibid., 214.

47 Ibid., 3.

in Su Tong's fiction, something necessitated by the *conception* of the novel as a legend, or more precisely an elegy to a glamorous and decadent by-gone age that can be made *perfect* through a metaphorical transformation.

Like many of Su Tong's heroes, Duanbai is a "weak character," one that drifts passively through the contingencies of life. Yet, Duanbai's autobiography also reveals a highly complex character. Despite his royal birth, he tries to find his place in the world not as an emperor but as a fellow sojourner trying to run away from his accursed destiny. In this sense, he is also a fugitive in life, for he never finds himself truly at home either in the palace or as an itinerant circus performer. His last journey to the capital signifies a "return," or a desire to "return" home with a new identity, ironically named "Emperor of the Tightrope." Indeed, as Duanbai performs on the tighrope "stretched taut nine feet in the air," he derives a soaring sense of freedom that he begins to see his true self emerging from within and amidst the cheers of the crowd: "I walked, I hopped, I tumbled […] I saw my real shadow swell quickly under the setting sun of Xiang County 香縣, I saw a beautiful white bird fly up from somewhere deep in my soul and haughtily soar through the vast sky above the heads of the people below. I was the Emperor of the Tightrope. I was a bird."[48] This subconscious drive to "take flight" thus prefigures his final journey to the temple, where he, as "Emperor of the Patch," spends the rest of his life reading the *Analects* 論語, a task he never finished in the past. From the emperor of Xie to emperor of the tightrope to emperor of the patch: Duanbai's "imperial" career can be read as a process of *Bildung*, in the sense of a systematic losing of one's social and political identity and the attainment of enlightenment. As has been mentioned, Duanbai's process of individuation finally "returns" him to the role of the traditional intellectual recluse embracing both Buddhist spirituality and Confucian values.

Su Tong's treatment of his character therefore plays on several conventional themes: the cycle of prosperity and decline, the tragic love between a monarch and his favored concubine, the theme of initiation, and finally hermit-like withdrawal as a form of transcendence and dénouement. The combination of these thematic elements drawn from pre-existing literary conventions bespeaks a nostalgia at the formal level, i.e., the aspiration toward a literary imagination akin to the Chinese tradition. Nonetheless, the historical vision projected from an apparently conventional theme is extremely modern, in the sense that its analysis of the nature of power associated with kingship reveals the complex and rigid network of relations behind power itself. Apart from the familiar "dynastic cycle" that characterizes Duanbai's reign, this fictional memoir creates the character of the monarch as a prisoner of palace life and a helpless victim of the political ambitions of his family members and ministers. This side of the (historical) reality is precisely what Ray Huang 黃仁宇 tries to capture in *1587: A Year of No Significance* 萬曆十五年.[49] His study of this apparently insignificant year in the Ming Dynasty 明朝 reveals not only that the power

48 Ibid., 262.

49 Ray Huang 黃仁宇, *1587: A Year of No Significance* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1979). Also available in Chinese: Ray Huang, *Wanli shiwu nian* 萬曆十五年 [*1587: A Year of No Significance*] (Beijing 北京: Xinhua shudian 新華書店, 1995).

of the emperor is largely limited by a two-century old bureaucracy that has grown in scope and in scale to become virtually invincible as a collective political force; but also that the emperor, as "a prisoner in the Forbidden City," is an "institutional requirement" whereby the monarch is best devoid of personality and feelings to fulfill his obligations as the symbolic head of state.[50] Huang's study reveals the emperor in such a system to be little more than a prey to the ambitions of his ministers supported by a powerful bureaucracy, the tedious conventions, ceremonies and formalities, and finally the domestic disharmony as a result of his lack of freedom to deliberate on even his own personal matters.[51] The emperor's power therefore is largely derivative: first from the established hierarchy of the monarchy (with the support of powerful ministers and royal families), and then from ossified social conventions to which even the Son of Heaven 天子 must succumb disregarding his personal feelings and desires. This portrayal of a weak emperor overwhelmed by the pressing demands of his times fits well with the crisis-stricken reign of Duanbai. Being intelligent, sensitive but irresolute, Duanbai, like Emperor Wanli 萬曆皇帝 of the Ming Dynasty, resorts to passive resistance, or simply indifference. Of this Duanbai is not unaware: "What kind of dog-shit Xie emperor am I? The weakest, least competent, most pitiful Emperor under the sun."[52] The Mandate of Heaven 天命, it seems, is falsified from within at the very beginning, for Duanbai is deeply troubled by his precarious position as a "fake" monarch of Xie hooked to the strings of his powerful grandmother Lady Huangfu 皇甫夫人, the puppet master. In fact the entire royal family can be seen in this way, for they are bound to their respective roles, a kind of "fatalism" that is not mythical but ideological. In the eyes of the mature Duanbai, the worship of the emperor is "an ancient trap" and "a gigantic hoax."[53] After all, his popularity as the Tightrope Emperor is also an effect of this deception: "the Tightrope Emperor Traveling Circus prospered […] drawing large crowds of the curious mainly to lay eyes upon […] a once powerful ruler [who] had fallen to the status of circus performer."[54] The omens of calamity frequently invoked in the text are therefore more an expression of Duanbai's melancholy and helplessness as a passive agent in a rigid political system than the ultimate *cause* of historical change. In this connection, all characters are implicated in what I would call a "determinism of role play" necessitated by an ossified political institution founded upon the notion of kingship and the Mandate of Heaven.

The *Femme Fatale* as Historical Persona: Empress Wu

Unlike the subjective first person narration in *Emperor, Empress Wu* approaches the

50 Huang also portrays Emperor Wanli as a "flesh-and-blood" human being whose individuality was crushed by a rigid hierarchy of power.

51 These include the choice of the crown prince, pleasure travel and the arrangement of his own burial. See Huang, Chapters 1 and 4.

52 Su Tong, *Wo de diwang shengya*, 175.

53 Ibid., 268.

54 Ibid., 267.

legendary life of China's first and only "female emperor" from different narrative points of view. The difference in the use of narrative voices in these two novels creates an interesting case for our consideration of historical representation in Su Tong's fiction. First and foremost, the proliferation of points of view in *Empress Wu* is an indication of Su Tong's effort to seize upon the ambiguities surrounding the career of his formidable heroine, a notorious and controversial female usurper who has left an indelible mark on Chinese history. As opposed to the first person narration in *Emperor*, the third and first person narrators in *Empress Wu* not only testify to the Empress' character and dubious conduct but also, at the most technical level, help to create an image of the heroine as she is observed from a distance. The significant *absence* of the Empress' personal voice in telling her story, then, is what we have to consider in this fictional biography. As we shall see, this absence signifies not only a self-conscious play with perspective and the notion of representation, but also, probably, an authorial reticence toward conventional historical interpretations of the Empress as an anomaly in an essentially patriarchal political system. This reticence, I would argue, is attributable to the author's uneasiness toward these interpretations *and* the relative difficulty in writing against them for the sake of an alternative (more original) interpretation. This also explains why Su Tong feels uneasy about his second attempt to rewrite Chinese dynastic history in fictional form.

The narrative introduces Wu Zhao 武曌 as a young and resourceful girl of middle class origins. After being chosen to be a concubine of the aging Tang emperor Taizong 唐太宗 at the age of fourteen, she soon realizes the gloomy future that awaits her. She is horrified by the sight of the older concubines who have wasted their lives like the emperor's plants withering in the palace courtyard. Her failed attempts to win Taizong's affection further reinforce her feeling of disgust and determination to break free from this living hell, and the only way of doing so in a restrictive, patriarchal political order, she reckons, is to usurp the power of the monarch. This sympathetic portrayal of Empress Wu's early life ends with Taizong's death. As a rule all his concubines are sent to a monastery where they are to remain Buddhist nuns for the rest of their lives. By this time Wu has already captured her first prey, the Crown Prince Li Zhi 李治 (later known as Gaozong 唐高宗) who succeeds Taizong as the new Tang emperor. Li Zhi is so infatuated with Wu that he eventually summons her from the monastery to become his concubine. Told from a third person point of view, this first chapter sets the stage ready for Wu's systematic reach for power. Like Lotus 頌蓮 in "Wives and Concubines," Wu Zhao's extraordinary character is considered to be a threat to the patriarchal system where social and sexual inequality are written into the social code. The narrator has subtly indicated the psychological complexities that contribute to Wu Zhao's political ambitions and self-conception. It is suggested that Taizong's caution toward Wu has something to do with the supernatural: sometime during his reign he was alerted by an oracle predicting the usurpation, and in a rage he ordered the execution of all suspicious officials associated with the surname Wu. All but one escaped the emperor's eye, and she proves herself to be the ominous "star of Venus" 太白金星 (*taibai jinxing*) in the end: "It is I who have protected

myself […] I know I was the star of Venus."[55]

The rest of the story alternates between first and third person narrations covering the entire career of the Empress. She successfully eliminates all her rivals for the emperor's affection and starts interfering in political affairs. Her husband, Emperor Gaozong, is portrayed as an indecisive, sickly character too weak to resist his wife's manipulation. As a first step to consolidate her power in court, she kills her infant daughter in order to incriminate the then Empress Wang 王皇后. As a mother, Wu plays the infallible matriarch controlling the life and death of her children. The first person narrator in "Prince Hong" 弘太子 recalls the circumstances leading to his murder by the Empress and gives this final warning to his siblings: "Be careful of the Heavenly Empress. Be careful of Mother."[56] Like his elder brother, Prince Xian 賢太子 dies also in suspicious circumstances associated with his diabolical mother.

The "reign of terror" of the Empress is mostly rendered in third person narratives, where historical sources are frequently cited. This citation of sources further removes the narrator (and the implied author) from the inner life of his heroine. The resulting "objectivity" is achieved, therefore, at the cost of psychological depth and emotional immediacy, a "privilege" that fictional biography has as a rule over historiography. This life story of Empress Wu ends with her death soon after her removal from the throne in a *coup d'état* launched by a prime minister who remains faithful to the Tang court. Her death is nonetheless dignified, for she is not subject to any grave penalty typical for most usurpers. She is given the "Shanghuang" 上皇 (grand emperor) title and is left undisturbed until she dies of old age. Even the narrator in the "Epilogue" continues to address her as *nü wang* 女王 (female emperor): "For thousands of years the story of female emperor Wu Zhao is unique. Who will forget female emperor Wu Zhao? Who can imitate female emperor Wu Zhao?"[57] All this points to the inevitable conclusion that Wu remains, after all, a controversial and mysterious figure unmatched by any in Chinese history.

Indeed, the unique position of the Empress in Chinese history has been widely recognized by historians both in the past and in the present, for she was the only woman who could ever usurp the throne and establish a new dynasty, albeit a short-lived one. Thus, the first and only "female emperor" is not only an exception but also an embarrassment to the entire social and political tradition that is basically patriarchal in nature. Traditionally, this view is predominant among the circles of scholar-officials:

> **The woman Wu, who has falsely usurped the throne, is by nature obdurate and unyielding, by origin truly obscure […] she brought disorder to the palace of the crown prince […] she usurped the pheasant regalia of empress and entrapped our ruler in incest. / Then, with a heart like a serpent and a nature like that of a wolf, she favored evil sycophants and destroyed good and loyal**

55 Su Tong, preface to, *Wu Zetian*, 19.

56 Ibid, 61.

57 Ibid, 234.

officials. She killed her sister, butchered her elder brothers, murdered the ruler, poisoned her mother. She is hated by gods and men alike.[58]

Traditional historiography, while maintaining a larger degree of objectivity in describing her usurpation, differs more in tone than in basic valuation:

[…] whenever the emperor attended to business, the empress then hung a curtain [and listened] behind. There was no matter of government, great or small, which she did not hear. The whole power of the empire passed into her hands; reward and punishment, life and death, she decided. The emperor folded his hands and that is all. In court and country, they were called the Two Sages.[59]

What draws attention here is that the portrayal of Empress Wu in Su Tong's novel seems to concur with the conventional attitude:

I am Li Hong, Crown Prince of the Eastern Depot. Whenever my father was ill I would take care of his duties in the Gate of Light or the Hall of Prolonged Blessings, but [I could feel] my mother extending her iron wrist through the bead curtain to grip me. I was in her hands, the entire court was in her hands. I clearly saw the big white hand of hers stretching and grasping in every single place […] The hand […] had ensnared my royal father, her puppet.[60]

Su Tong has obviously consulted a variety of historical sources to gain access to the Empress' life. On several occasions references to historical sources are integrated into authorial comments as if they were indirectly authenticated by the implied author:

[My mother] won her first victory in a battle among powerful rivals. It is so recorded in all major history books: "Empress Wu became a dictator in court

58 An indictment written by the Tang poet Luo Binwang 駱賓王, quoted in R.W.L. Guisso, *Wu Tse-tien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China* (Bellingham, Washington: Western Washington University Press, 1978), 5. Guisso sees it as representative of "the reaction of the Confucian mind against a woman who had not only betrayed such cardinal virtues as humanity and wifely submission, but in so doing had challenged an ancient tradition which guaranteed worldly (sic) harmony and gave both lilvelihood and self-respect to the Confucian scholar-official [...] in order to defend the state system."

59 Guisso, *Wu Tse-tien*, 20. Guisso's quotation is from Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒 [*The Comprehensive Mirror*], 205: 6509-6510.

60 Su Tong, preface to, *Wu Zetian*, 55.

ever since."[61]

On the second day after the deposition of emperor Zhongzong, Prince Dan, the Lord of Xiang, succeeded his elder brother as the new emperor of Tang. He was known to later generations as Ruizong […] Everyone knew he was the gentle, unambitious "shadow" emperor […] Generations later historians discovered that in AD 684 the emperor's reign title was changed three times […] It clearly revealed the mastery and ambition of the woman behind the curtain.[62]

I am not prepared to cross reference Su Tong's fictional history with the possible sources he might have used. What is of interest here is the concurrence between this fictional history and traditional historiography; in the frequent references to well-known historical records, unofficial histories and speculations, moreover, bespeak the difficulty of Su Tong's task. The "burden of the past" presents a technical challenge here as the burden of the conventions against which the past is to be understood. Consciously or subconsciously, these conventions get in the way of fictional representation. Just as R.W.L. Guisso has pointed out, traditional interpretations of the Empress' usurpation are influenced by Confucian ethics, while the concept of a *nü tianzi* 女天子 (female son of Heaven) is "a semantic and cultural violation of the Confucian tradition to which the elite […] gave perhaps their deepest loyalty."[63] In Wu's case, says Guisso, the source of her legitimacy was personal, i.e., the female emperor was accepted as long as her performance concurred with her charismatic image.[64] In fact, throughout her reign the Empress proved herself to be a better-qualified candidate given the unimpressive character of her heirs (and her husband). Moreover, she remained popular among her subjects and less orthodox commentaries gave her credit for exceptional ability as a ruler.[65] In modern times, the legend of Wu Zetian lends itself to many popular and serious rewritings of the woman's extraordinary life. Lin Yutang 林語堂, the renowned essayist and translator, offered his version of Wu's history in a book length biography in which the author, like Su Tong, adopts the voice of Wu's grandson as the I-narrator. To Lin, Wu Zetian, "as woman, was an anomaly,"[66] "a unique character combining criminality with high intelligence, whose ambitions reached truly maniac proportions, but whose methods were cool,

61 Ibid., 47.

62 Ibid., 122-123.

63 Guisso, 127.

64 Ibid., 128.

65 Ray Huang notes that Li Zhi 李贄 (Li Chih), a Ming scholar known for his non-conformist behavior, repeatedly remarked that Wu was a "saintly empress" who was "ten times better than T'ang Kao-tsung 唐高宗 (Gaozong) and myriad times better than T'ang Chung-tsung 唐中宗 (Zhongzong)." Huang, 208; 257 n. 75.

66 Lin Yutang 林語堂, *Lady Wu: A True Story* (London: William Heinemann, 1957), ix.

precise and eminently sane."[67] In Lin's view Wu is more controversial than other controversial figures in more recent times, such as Catherine the Great, Elizabeth I, and even Stalin, in whom Lin sees the most resemblance. But, after the ruthlessness, strength, and cruelty of these historical figures have been duly considered, Lin suggests that Wu seems to surpass all in her distinction as a tyrant because she was "mistress, usurper, empress," and above all "female emperor,"[68] and because of her "great political skill by which she dominated the government for half a century," she "deserves a place among the wicked great of the world."[69] Unlike Su Tong, Lin takes pain to emphasize the authenticity of his project, which was based on careful research into orthodox sources (the *Xintangshu* 新唐書 [*New Book of Tang*] and the *Jiutangshu* 舊唐書 [*Old Book of Tang*]). It should therefore come as no surprise that Lin's "true story" reads like a modern version of its orthodox sources. What is more worth noting is that the Lady Wu in Lin's narrative emerges as a kindred spirit of Su Tong's creation: she had the "blind fury…of a woman against her rivals, raw, instinctive, and savage like nature."[70] She "held the dagger in her hand"[71] and gradually Gaozong became "powerless, his wings clipped. The empress had not snatched the power away from him; it had merely slipped out of his hand."[72]

It is certainly unfair and irrelevant to judge a literary work against historical scholarship. The purpose of invoking the historical tradition is that Empress Wu as a *fictional* character – indeed the central figure of the novel – seems to lack the kind of imaginative autonomy and versatility that characterize Su Tong's powerful heroines (e.g., Lotus in "Wives," Grandmother Jiang 祖母蔣氏 and Huanzi 環子 in "1934 Escapes," and the prostitute Qiuyi 秋儀 in "Rouge"). What is most extraordinary in Su Tong's rendering of Wu's legend is perhaps the discrepancy between the narrators' observation and their knowledge of the heroine. As seen from the above, the multiple points of view are less conflictual than collaborative; for they constitute a *coherent* picture of Wu Zhao – as seductive, unscrupulous, deviant, autocratic, adulterous, mysterious and demonic – that largely concurs with traditional historical interpretations (and the resultant image of Empress Wu in the popular imagination). In short, she is an archetype of the Chinese *femme fatale* akin to the witch-mother figure in popular literature. In the opposing camp are the male characters that are little more than her hand puppets. Empress Wu thus invites comparison with such well-known heroines as Lady Macbeth, except that Wu lives a longer life and apparently does not suffer any significant retribution. And yet, the narrative avoids a direct confrontation with the Empress as an abomination to the political and cultural order of her times. Instead, it creates Emperss Wu as perceived by those who share similar assumptions about *who she is*. This explains why in the end the Empress remains a "mystery" unsolved, an indication that the implied author may not be

67 Ibid., viii.

68 Ibid., ix.

69 Ibid., xii.

70 Ibid., 40.

71 Ibid., 65.

72 Ibid., 56.

totally convinced by what he has constructed from the "grand narratives" of the past.

Compared to the heroine (and the fearful empress dowagers in *Emperor*), the dramatized narrators in the novel are more complex and original as fictional characters. The first Crown Prince Li Hong 李弘 resembles Chencao in "Opium Family," a pale, fragile and sensitive young man struggling in vain to rectify or dissociate himself from his family's disgraceful past:

> **I was curious about everything in the history of the Li family, and secretly I had given a fair judgment on every ancestor…. Well before the now well-known banquet in Jade Unity Palace, I had foreseen the fatal bed of disease in my family. The origin of disease was my royal mother Wu Zhao.**[73]

> **I thought my illnesses were the result of the incestuous blood and semen of my parents […] A life begotten in sin was doomed to be fragile and miserable. This I thought was in accord with the law of Heaven and Earth.**[74]

His brother Li Xian 李賢, the next Crown Prince in line, is allegedly the illegitimate son of Gaozong and Wu's sister, Lady Han 韓夫人. He lives a life of debauchery, and his illegitimate birth becomes an obsession with him the more he tries to unveil the secret. In order to test his royal parent, he composes a highly subversive poem incriminating the Empress in the murder of Prince Hong. His passive strategy finally brings a curse upon himself. The Empress, unsettled by Xian's hostility, eventually orders his suicide. Xian's unsuccessful revenge is not without a Hamletian trait. He is "a sensitive child who would doubt anything," but his intelligence and arrogance fail to reverse the course of events; and needless to say he does not achieve "poetic justice" in the end.

If Li Xian is the tragic hero who tries in vain to defy his mother's powerful grasp by a subversive unmasking of the woman's pretentions, his younger brother, Li Dan 李旦 (later emperor Ruizong 唐睿宗), is the unwilling monarch who takes refuge in submission to his mother's will. His narrative covers the story of his brother's deposition and the death of his literary friend, Wang Bo 王勃, a famous poet in the early Tang period. Unlike his elder brothers, Li Dan is a meek and timid character terrified by the prospect of being an emperor. His recollections of the past are so full of misery and horror that he prefers to remain silent on the subject: "I liked to tell my children about my acquaintances with literary men. I liked to remember them instead of the history of my royal family […] because [it] had the smell of blood."[75] Meek and unimpressive as a ruler, Li Dan's reticence is of the same nature as the "muteness" of the I-narrator and his father in "1934 Escapes." In this light, can we interpret the implied author's reticence about the inner life of his heroine as an awareness of the same predicament as the I-narrator in the other stories of

73 Su Tong, preface to, *Wu Zetian*, 36.

74 Ibid., 50.

75 Ibid., 190-191.

the South? The superstitious, melancholy and skeptical narrators in *Empress Wu*, I would argue, exhibit an exceptionally "modern" consciousness compatible to those in Su Tong's narratives of the South, only that these diverse centers of consciousness seem to be underdeveloped precisely because the subject of their narration is a product of a powerful historical traditional from which the novel itself seeks to escape, but to which it eventually, and ineluctably, returns.

What remains to be said is that *Emperor* and *Empress Wu* occupy the two poles of Su Tong's fictional creation. While *Emperor* is a highly imaginative, lyrical invocation of China's dynastic past rich in symbolic meaning, *Empress Wu* is a circumscribed, seemingly more "referential" text that incorporates conventional historical moralizing within a literary frame. Reading *Empress Wu* one wonders whether certain historical preconceptions have shaped and thereby confined the writer's creative transformation of "what happened," while the relative insignificance of these preconceptions in *Emperor* – due to its conscious avoidance of specific historical time and place – results in a more original and multi-dimensional vision of the past that still informs our consciousness of the present.

My reading of Su Tong begins with the South as a metaphorical space where "felt history"[76] (as opposed to documentary history) is re-enacted in the form of a categorical transgression of the real. In creating the decadent world of the South, the fictional homeland is systematically "deconstructed" into a nightmare. In these stories, history is not a given, but something to be decoded, or a silence that has sealed up decades of dark secrets. This conception of history necessitates a fictional form that can accommodate the contradictory impulses of escape and return, i.e., to escape from pre-existing modes of historical representation in order to "return" to an imaginary home of the past. This kind of "homecoming" reveals a past that is neither romantic nor idyllic, but more often frightening.

The notion of fate and the repetitive, almost compulsive, cycle of escape and return found in the stories of the South (as well as the family histories such as "Opium Family" and "1934 Escapes") is also present, both on the literal-textual level as well as the conceptual-metatextual level, in the two dynastic histories discussed above, which in part explains the prominent presence of omens and oracles as a kind of aesthetic encoding in the two novels in which the historical cycle is most vividly present. The allegorical meaning of *Emperor*, however, goes beyond the cyclical view. More significantly, it questions the notion of the Mandate of Heaven by creating a hero out of a fake emperor who realizes in the end the whole enterprise of kingship is – to him – a deception. *Empress Wu*, which tells the story of a historical *femme fatale*, turns out to be a surprisingly "traditional" novel that bespeaks the difficulty of attaining "novelty" in reworking familiar, if not clichéd, historical themes. It is possible that the amorphous collocation of established points of view in *Empress Wu* is targeted at the "new" interpretations of Wu Zhao

76 "Felt history" is used by John Burt Forster Jr. to characterize the nuanced relation between fictional representation of history and historical reality. See John Burt Forster Jr., "Magical Realism, Compensatory Vision, and Felt History: Realism Transformed in *The White Hotel*," eds., Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995), 267-284.

by some Marxist historians on the Mainland,[77] but in any case Su Tong is less inventive when he tries to authenticate his fictional creation by sorting out historical "facts." And so, of the two dynastic novels, *Emperor* is clearly closer to the kind of subjective presence that enlivens his fictional South, a *fin-de-siècle* world at the end of time. The breakdown of empires and individual worlds, after all, are reflections of the *metaphorical* escapism of a writer "at the crossroads" of history.※

77 One such viewpoint holds that Empress Wu's case represents the success of a class struggle in imperial times; others praise her for her achievements in bringing about social and economic progress. See Guisso, 6, 202 n. 47.