

INTERACTIVE CANVAS:
A NEW CONCEPTION OF THE FEMALE PORTRAITS
IN THREE NOVELLAS BY SU TONG

by

FANG ZHAO

BA. HONOURS, The University of Alberta, 2000

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Department of Asian Studies)

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

April 2001

© Fang Zhao, 2001

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of Asian

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date April 30 2001

Abstract

This study consists of an analysis of the major female characters in Su Tong's three novellas: "Wives and Concubines," "Embroidery," and "Lives of Women." Beginning with a brief introduction to the progress of Chinese literature to the emergence of the avant-garde to which Su Tong belongs, an introduction to Su Tong and his three novellas follows. The analysis of the novellas focuses on the character portraits painted by Su Tong that depict the twelve female characters' fates, characters and thoughts. Su Tong's artistic style and elements such as symbolism, imagery, the *yin* principle and magic realism are analysed in detail.

I subjected my study to a traditional formal analysis as articulated by Norman Friedman in *Form and Meaning in Fiction*, then examined the novellas in light of David Der-wei Wang's evaluations of Chinese contemporary literature from *Running Wild: New Chinese Writers*. When the results of both analyses were compared, then combined with Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, the resulting impasse evolved into common ground.

I propose that each reader, in the 'trying on' of alternatives discovered in narratives, makes personally meaningful interpretations that are relevant to his/her own particular life situation. Literature is still meaningful for the reader, but the source of the meaning or messages that the reader finds in literary works derives from the reader in an interaction with the characters and implied author of the narrative that engages him/her.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter One: About Su Tong	8
Chapter Two: The Characters	13
Chapter Three: Critical Analysis	44
Chapter Four: Su Tong's Artistic Style	66
Chapter Five: Conclusion	79
Glossary	83
Bibliography	87

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my grateful acknowledgement and sincere gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Michael S. Duke whose encouragement, generous guidance and expertise allowed me to complete this study of the work of Su Tong. I am also indebted to Dr. Lorcan Fox for his invaluable editorial assistance. Thanks also extended to my family for without their assistance and patience I would not have been able to complete this project.

Introduction

Modern Chinese literature has been centered on reforming society, with the exception of very few writers such as Qian Zhongshu, Shen Congwen and Zhang Ailing. The manifesto of the Literary Research Society (*Wenxue yanjiu hui*) states this clearly: "It is time to say good-bye to regarding literature as a game for fun or a venting machine for sentimentality. We believe literature is a job, an extremely important job for Life."¹ This "art for life" and pure realism result in "the strivings of an average protagonist are directed towards the change of his environment, so that he rarely attains to the more interesting philosophical or psychological dimension."²

Following Mao Zedong's 1942 *Talks At the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art* where literature and art became weapons for class struggle,³ between 1942 and 1979 literature's role became propaganda for the Communist Party. During the period between the end of the Cultural Revolution and the early 1980's, while literature was still heavily influenced by politics, Chinese writers' "Obsession with China" was demonstrated in their excessive sentimentality concerning the catastrophic horrors and sufferings during the Cultural Revolution.

¹ Yi Xinding, *Ershi shiji zhongguo xiaoshuo fazhan shi* (The history of Chinese fiction in the twentieth century), Beijing: 1997, 149.

² C.T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971, 503.

³ Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1980, 25.

It was not until the mid 1980's, with the rise of nativist fiction (*xungen wenxue*) and experimental fiction (*shiyan xiaoshuo* or avant-garde fiction), that a break away from socially concerned realism was seen in Chinese literature. Although the nativist literature led by such writers as Han Shaogong, Ah Cheng and Wang Anyi demonstrated an artistic quality in contrast to the previous lack of "imaginative power" or "technical brilliance,"⁴ the tradition of writers as social critics was maintained in their exploring Chinese tradition in order to determine the cause of the problems in Chinese society. In "Walking Towards the World," Michael S. Duke sees Ah Cheng's *San Wang* as thematically presenting "a frontal attack on impersonal and instrumental Maoist values through a reaffirmation of a whole range of traditional Chinese values."⁵

According to David Der-wei Wang, it was only from the beginning of the 1990's that Chinese avant-garde writers such as Ma Yuan, Yu Hua, Ge Fei and Su Tong "tried to break away from hard-core obsession with China"⁶ and led the push to return literature to being art, with whatever the reader comes away with being a product of the reader. Su Tong says in an interview, "For me, the biggest difference between the roots school [who centered on searching the past to solve China's problems] and my generation is the fact that for us, literature no longer has a didactic or political role to play in society."⁷ Taking Su Tong's three novellas as an

⁴ C.T. Hsia, *History*, 499.

⁵ Michael S. Duke, "Walking Towards the World: A Turning Point in Contemporary Chinese Fiction," *World Literature Today* (Summer 1991, Vol. 65) 389.

⁶ David Der-wei Wang, *Running Wild: New Chinese Writers*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 253.

⁷ Mark Leenhouts, "The Contented Smile of the Writer: an Interview with Su Tong," *China Information*, (1997, no.11) 79.

example, the reader will see anti-traditionalism in both the author's aesthetic style as well as his intended deconstruction of meaning and history. There is a "turning inward"; instead of exposing "social consciousness," exploration and probing of self and the nature of human beings is much more evident. The "psychological poverty" and "mediocrity in artistry" in Chinese literature voiced by C. T. Xia is no longer a concern in avant-garde writers such as Su Tong. As Su Tong has argued in his introduction to *A Sad Dance (Shangxin de wudao)*, "A good novelist builds up the novel as a house, according to his own aesthetic approach, which demands the courage and wisdom of the individual."⁸ "The new yardstick by which the avant-garde measures literary merit is no longer the work's social efficacy but the artist's unique subjectivity."⁹

While a definition of Chinese 'avant-garde' fiction is difficult to locate, Jing Wang in *China's Avant-garde Fiction*, provides a description. According to her, the Chinese Avant-garde School first appeared in the mid-1980's in a time of stalling reforms and general disillusionment, producing narratives characterized by irreverence to history and culture, inhabited by rootless subjects having no core drifting through their fictional lives.¹⁰ Jing Wang describes Su Tong as part of the group that formed the core of the avant-garde school (5), there to capture the emptiness and impotence of the next generation in China who missed the important episodes of history, yet were brought up on ever expanding promises for the future (9). The avant-gardists deconstruction of meaning and voicing the end of history fit the times they were in (11). Unlike the avant-garde of the west, or at least what the west expects them to be, the Chinese avant-garde

⁸ Su Tong, *Shangxin de wudao (A Sad Dance)*, Taipei: Xiaoshuo Guan Publisher, 1991, 10.

⁹ Robin Visser, "Displacement of the Urban-Rural Confrontation in Su Tong's Fiction" *Modern Chinese Literature*. (Vol.9, 1995)115.

¹⁰ Jing Wang, *China's Avant-garde Fiction*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, 3.

are apolitical, and not human rights focused, obsessed only with the pleasure of story telling (14).

As an avant-garde writer, Su Tong has attracted serious critical attention. Chinese critics such as Zhang Xuejin claim that “Su Tong’s imagination is creative, and moving. Imagination and passion inspire his writing and connect to his readers and the world.”¹¹ David Der-wei Wang calls Su Tong “one of the most charming storytellers of the early nineties, who displays a rich, elaborate symbolism and an ornate vocabulary,” and says he is “at his best in writing family melodrama with a gothic touch; looming behind the facade of domestic tales are decadent motives and unspeakable desires.”¹² Simon Patton in his book review for *Raise the Red Lantern*, translated by Michael S. Duke, says that “Su Tong’s oeuvre is characterized by a hallucinatory imaginative power complemented and constrained by realist narrative techniques.”¹³ In his book review for *Rice*, Jeffrey Kinkley remarks that Su Tong “has a talent for revisualizing China’s vastest landscapes and most sordid, tangled human relations in full, wide-screen technicolor.”¹⁴

Su Tong has written many stories about women, such as “Wives and Concubines” (Qi qie cheng qun), “Lives of Women” (Funü shenghuo), “Embroidery (Cixiu, also called “Another Kind of Lives of Women”), “Rouge” (Hongfen), *Empress Wu Zetian* (*Wu zetian*), and “Horticulture” (Yuanyi). Almost all of these stories are told from the point of view of a female character. Perhaps for this reason, many critics claim that Su Tong is at his best when writing

¹¹ Zhang Xuexin, “Xiangxiang yu yixiang jiashe de xinling fuqiao” (The floating bridge of the soul built by imagination and imagery), *Zhongguo xiandai dangdai wenxue yanjiu* (1998, no.11) 203.

¹² David Der-Wei Wang, *Running*, 246.

¹³ Simon Patton, “Asia & the Pacific: China,” *World Literature Today* (Summer 1994) 634.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Kinkley, “World Literature in Review,” *World Literature Today* (Spring 1996) 469.

about women; some think that the femininity in Su Tong's works may have something to do with the environment (Suzhou) that he grew up in.¹⁵ A well-known Chinese critic, Wang Gan, remarks that some of Su Tong's success comes from his "sensitivity and amazing grasp of women's psychological perversion."¹⁶ In "Su Tong's Imagery," Wang Gan again comments that:

The best and most typical images in Su Tong's fiction are those chattering, clever, acrimonious, beautiful but promiscuous female images. His advantage lies in expressing emotions and creating images. As soon as his pen touches a female topic, it is uniquely fine (literally, the pen blooms). Women's secret and complex psychology naturally comes to the fore. We can almost say that the psychological depth of the personalities of these women fill an empty space in contemporary [Chinese] literature.¹⁷

Su Tong says in an interview, "When I'm writing of women, I never limitlessly beautify them, nor do I like to create a long suffering or whining female image."¹⁸ According to Su Tong, all female characters have as many weaknesses as male characters, and he does not agree that women are victims of men. Instead, Su Tong claims "they are independent." Nor is Su Tong happy with the dichotomous classification of "a good woman" and "a bad woman" in conventional Chinese fiction. He claims that he writes about women as he understands them and as he believes they truly are.¹⁹

¹⁵ Li Feng, *Xin shiqi zhengming xiaoshuo zongheng tan* (Criticizing Contending Fictions of the New Era), Sichuan: 1995, 312.

¹⁶ Wang Gan, "Su Tong Yixiang" (Su Tong's Imagery), *Huacheng* (1992, no.6)198.

¹⁷ Wang Gan, 202.

¹⁸ Su Tong, "Miandui zuojia" (Facing the Author), *Shijie ribao*, (The World Journal, Vancouver Edition. Novovember 26, 2000, C4).

¹⁹ Su Tong, *Shijie ribao*, (The World Journal, Vancouver Edition. Novovember 26, 2000, C4).

Su Tong's unique approach to writing about women is the reason that I started to research his works. I chose "Wives and Concubines" as it is the most well known of Su Tong's novellas due to the award winning movie based on this novella, as well as its translation into English by Michael S. Duke. I chose "Lives of Women" and "Embroidery" because of Su Tong's recognized talent for portraying women, and because his images portray the life women lead. While desperate, Su Tong's images are realistic, and so beautifully fashioned they remain in the reader's thoughts long after reading the novellas. Su Tong's talent for portraying women through images, along with divergent criticism and praise for him, led me to focus this paper on his female portraits.

"Wives and Concubines" centers on the trials and crises of the nineteen-year-old protagonist Lotus, who, following her father's suicide, marries into a rich family as a concubine. Here the constant power struggles in the household, culminating in the murder of another concubine, shatter what is left of Lotus's sanity. "Embroidery" concerns itself with two sisters who are reclusive artists living above a soy sauce store. The younger sister manages to free herself from their isolated life with the assistance of one of the saleswomen in the store. She escapes to become just as ordinary as the constantly fighting saleswomen in the shop below. Ultimately, the older sister commits suicide, leaving a damaged piece of art that resembles the saleswoman who helped her sister leave. "Lives of Women" centers on the single female offspring in each of three generations of one family, who follows the same pattern of developing a relationship with a man either in an affair or in marriage, encountering conflict, and running home when abandoned by the man. These women are left with a female child who due to the family's inability to connect and communicate, carries on this cycle of the life of women in the next generation.

Su Tong is seen as misogynous by some critics, such as Lu Tonglin in her book *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism, and Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction*.²⁰ Ironically Su Tong is also called a “feminist writer.”²¹ In my opinion, Su Tong is neither a misogynist nor a feminist. Su Tong has succeeded in his spirit of stressing creativity and in avoiding the false dichotomy between “good woman” and “bad woman.” Even though Su Tong claims “women are more excellent than men, and [they have] have a positive view of life, a spirit of pioneering, and they sacrifice a great deal for their family. . . [and finally] that women are connected in many ways,”²² I find it hard to justify his remarks based on the pathetic existence that women characters lead in his fiction. Perhaps what Su Tong says in this interview is his true opinion about women, but undoubtedly, in his fiction the negativity in women’s character is more stressed. I assume that Su Tong’s intention is to encourage women to face their psychological problems by exposing them.

²⁰ Lu Tonglin, *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism, and Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction*, Stanford University Press, 1995.

²¹ Su Tong, *Shijie ribao*, (The World Journal, Vancouver edition. Novovember 26. 2000, C4).

²² Su Tong, *Shijie ribao*, (The World Journal, Vancouver edition. Novovember 26. 2000, C4).

Chapter 1: About Su Tong

I begin with general background about Su Tong before looking at his three novellas. How his life experiences have affected his writings, if they have, will be speculated on only briefly here. Su Tong, whose real name is Tong Zhonggui, was born in Suzhou, China in 1963. His father was a machinist and his mother was a factory employee. He is the youngest in his family, with one brother and two sisters.¹

Su Tong grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and in interviews has said that he still has a vague memory of armed struggle (*wu dou*),² when a bullet whistled through the back door of his home. His mother wrapped him in a cotton quilt and put him in a relatively safe spot to sleep. Is it possible that this early exposure to violence is related to the violence that abounds in his novellas?

When Su Tong went to elementary school at the age of six, he resented that a teacher had him sit beside a dirty and ugly looking girl, instead of a pretty girl wearing a red skirt. Even

¹ All my biographical information about Su Tong comes from Su Tong, "Wode Zizhuan" (My Autobiography), *Zuojia* (May 1990) 48; *Shiyi ji* (Eleven Blows) Maitian Press, 1994, 173; and Wang Gan, "Su Tong's Imagery" (Su Tong yixiang), *Huacheng* (June 1992) 198.

² Yan Jiaqi, *Ten Year History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, Institute of Current China Studies, 1988, 392-398. *Wudou* was first raised by Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing in July 1967 in her slogan "Literary Attack, Military Defense (*wenzheng wudou*)." Soon it developed into conflicting emotional groups in all areas across China and brought on armed struggles and the firing of thousands of weapons against one another. It lasted until 1969 and even 1970.

today he still holds a grudge against the teacher. Tying this incident and his relationship with his sisters to his attitude to women in his novellas is an area that a critic might explore, but a path that would need to be trod cautiously.

The tenuousness and fragility of life seen in his characters' crises and upheavals may again have roots in Su Tong's childhood. When he was nine, his life was threatened by severe nephritis, so he had to stay home for most of the year, and that is when he started to read novels brought home by his older sister. Although he was only nine, he claims to have been able to grasp the basic meanings of the novels, called by Su Tong his "earliest enlightenment in literature." Being able to locate and grasp the meaning in a novel at such a young age opens more questions. Does this early discovery of meaning in literature imply that Su Tong's novellas have messages or meanings contained in his novellas for the reader and critic to discover?

In middle school, Su Tong's writing was often praised by his teacher, and this praise gave him the confidence to send a prose manuscript to a newspaper, but it was not accepted. Did this rejection affect the path that his writing has taken, or are rejections just a normal occurrence for someone wanting to be a writer?

In 1980, Su Tong enrolled in the Chinese Department in Beijing Normal University, a highly accredited university in China, where he spent most of his time reading novels, writing, and dreaming about becoming a famous writer. The western writers that he admired were Chekov, Golgol, Hemingway, and later James Joyce and Raymond Carver.

Su Tong's literary career began in 1983 with the publication of four of his poems and two short stories. Among them was his maiden work: "Di ba ge shi tongxiang" (The Eighth One Was a Bronze Statue). These early works were considered by Su Tong himself as too immature to include in a collection published later when he was more acclaimed.

After graduating from university, Su Tong was assigned to an art college in Nanjing, where he felt he was an outsider. His supervisor intended to develop him into a Communist but this idea was soon dropped after he realized that Su Tong had a passion only for writing. Su Tong demonstrated his lack of concern for politics, even when becoming a Communist might have helped his writing career or provided access to the power to put his beliefs into action.

In 1985, Su Tong left the art college and started working for *Zhongshan*, a famous literary magazine in China. Soon after, his works were accepted for publishing. Su Tong's movement away from the literary establishment and into the realm of magazine writing, where the avant-garde would be situated at this time, is again interesting but inconclusive. Did he move there because his writing matched magazines' avant-garde quality, or did he write to match their avant-garde style so that his work could be published? One of his stories, "Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes" (Yi jiu san si nian de taowang), was published by *Shouhuo* (Harvest), a famous literary magazine that made many new writers well known. Su Tong's early works received much criticism, which he read secretly while telling his friends that he did not care about the criticisms. Writers and artists work to have an effect on their audience, and not being noticed would be worse than being criticized.

Su Tong married in 1987, and his daughter was born in 1989, the year the novella "Wives and Concubines" (Qi qie chengqun) was first published. This is a novella which Su Tong claims he totally made up, nourished by well-known novels such as *Hong lou meng*, *Jin Ping Mei*, and *Jia, Chun and Qiu*. The novella "Wives and Concubines" was made into a film called *Raise the Red Lantern* (Da hong denglong gaogao gua) by Zhang Yimou, the best known film director in China, and starring Gong Li, a very popular actress. The film was nominated for an Oscar and brought Su Tong fame both nationally and internationally. Soon another of his novellas,

“Hongfen” (Rouge), was made into a movie by Li Shaohong. It won the Silver Bear prize, one of the top prizes at the Berlin film festival.

The next five years, from 1991 to 1996, proved fruitful for Su Tong as he published many novels as well as long and short story collections, including *Mi* (Rice, 1991), *Shangxin de wudao* (A Sad Dance, 1991), *Nanfang de duoluo* (The Decadence of the South, 1992), *Hunyin jijing* (Marriage Scene, 1993), *Yige pengyou zai lushang* (A Friend On the Road, 1993), *Shijie liangce* (The Two Sides of the World, 1993), *Lihun zhinan* (A Guide To Divorce, 1993), *Shiyi ji* (Eleven Blows, 1994), *Wu Zetian* (Empress Wu Zetian, 1994), and *Qiaobian chaguan* (The Tea House By the Bridge, 1996). Su Tong’s three novellas, “Raise The Red Lantern” (Qi qie chengqun), “1934 Escapes” (Yi jiu san si nian de taowang) and “Opium Family” (Yingsu zhi jia) were translated into English by Michael S. Duke and published in 1993. Su Tong's first long novel *Mi* (Rice), was translated into English by Howard Goldblatt and published in 1995.

Along with others such as Ma Yuan, Mo Yan, Yu Hua and Ge Fei, Su Tong has become a famous avant-garde writer.³ Su Tong claims that he does not have a defiant personality or strong masculinity, and that his only ardent belief is in literature, through which he has been liberated from many unspeakable troubles and much bitterness.⁴ Whether or not this liberation from bitterness and troubles can be used by a critic as evidence that there must be a message in Su Tong’s works is unclear, and puts the critic on shaky ground. The key area not to overlook is the avant-garde variable in the criticism. What this variable does to formal analysis is a concern throughout my thesis.

³ Mark Leenhouts, "The Contented Smile of the Writer: an Interview with Su Tong" *China Information*, (1997, no.11) 70.

⁴ Su Tong, “Wo de zizhuan” (My Autobiography), *Zuojia*, (1990, no.5) 48.

For a writer only in his thirties, Su Tong has achieved tremendous success. Once he said in a magazine, "Fiction is like a huge maze which I have been exploring carefully like other contemporary writers. All of our effort is focused on looking for a light switch, hoping a bright flash will light up our novel and life in an instant."⁵ The key question addressed in my thesis is whether formal analysis will illuminate the insights that Su Tong has in his works, if he has put any there for his readers to discover. On the other hand, as an avant-garde writer, has he designed his novellas to be exuberant, but general enough, so that each reader may find his/her own light switch on the wall of the maze? In the next chapter, I examine the galleries of character portraits provided by Su Tong in each of his novellas, as well the plots that hold the galleries together.

⁵ Zhang Xuexin, "Xiangxiang yu yixiang jiashe de xinling fuqiao" (A Floating Bridge Built By Imagination and Imagery), *Zhongguo xiandai dangdai wenxue yanjiu*, (1998, no.11) 203.

Chapter 2: The Characters

In this chapter, I will analyze the female characters in Su Tong's three novellas: "Wives and Concubines," "Embroidery" and "Lives of Women." This analysis will focus on the fortune, thoughts and character of twelve women: Lotus, Cloud, Coral and Joy in "Wives and Concubines"; Jian Shaozhen and Jian Shaofen, as well as Gu Yaxian, Hang Suyu and Su Meixian in "Embroidery"; and Xian, Zhi and Xiao in "Lives of Women."

I begin with Su Tong's most famous novella "Wives and Concubines."¹ Lotus, the protagonist, becomes Chen Zuoqian's fourth concubine at the age of nineteen before her university career is finished. The first impression given by the author about Lotus is that she is dressed in a black dress and a white blouse, wearing no make-up, with short hair. This image, combined with Lotus wiping her sweat with her sleeve instead of a handkerchief, leaves the reader with the impression of a typical university student. However, seeing Lotus's first encounter with the servant girl Swallow, the reader is shown that there may be more to Lotus, and that Lotus is not as simple a character as the reader may have expected.

An incident that betrays Lotus's individuality is that she did not cry when her father committed suicide. She is not portrayed as weak or fearful by Su Tong, which makes her insanity at the end of the novella more perplexing and unsettling. Instead, "she stood beside that sink

¹ For the Chinese version, please see Su Tong, *Qi qie cheng qun*, Taipei: Yuanliu, 1990; for the English translation, please see the translation by Michael S. Duke, *Raise the Red Lantern*, New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1993. All the quotations for "Wives and Concubines" throughout the thesis are from Michael S. Duke's translation.

[where her father committed suicide] washing and combing her hair out over and over again, it was her way of calmly planning for her future” (Michael S. Duke, *Raise the Red Lantern*, New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1993, 19). When she is given the choice by her stepmother between going to work and getting married, she chooses the latter without a second thought. Between the choice of marrying into an ordinary family as a first wife and marrying into a rich one as a concubine, she takes the latter with no hesitation. Hence, Lotus has had a say in choosing her crises.

As soon as Lotus walks into the Chen household, Su Tong lets her personality unfold. First she insults Swallow by checking her hair for lice, then forces her to go re-wash her hair. Later, whenever Swallow dares to be defiant, Lotus simply throws her comb at her. When Lotus accuses Swallow of stealing her flute, a crime she did not commit, Lotus breaks Swallow’s suitcase open with an ax to search for it. After the cloth figurine resembling Lotus was found, Lotus “suddenly let out a shrill scream, jumped up, grabbed Swallow by the hair, and bashed her head repeatedly against the wall” (40).² Later, when Lotus finds a paper image of a woman that resembles her in the toilet, for retaliation she has Swallow eat the paper while claiming, “This is known as using someone’s own methods to control them” (79). This incident later results in Swallow’s illness and death.

Lotus says farewell to her naiveté the day she meets Chen Zuoqian in the western style restaurant, when she blows out nineteen candles as a celebration of her nineteenth birthday. This

² It is an ancient Chinese superstition, similar to Voodoo, that stabbing a paper or cloth figurine (that resembles the target) with needles will curse the target and misfortune or even death may result.

almost seems like a ritualistic way of saying good-bye to her former life. Once the reader reaches the end of the story, he/she may also wonder if Lotus was also saying good-bye to her sanity.

Lotus enters the Chen household anticipating a battle among the wives that she is not prepared to lose. She laughs at the oldest wife Joy's age and provokes the other wives every chance she gets. Taking advantage of her youth and beauty, Lotus tries her best to keep Chen Zuoqian in her bed every night, a way to irritate and undercut the second wife Cloud and the third one Coral. Later she even goes as far as deliberately nipping Cloud's ear when cutting her hair.

However, the personality of Lotus that Su Tong reveals is more than a practical, cold, cruel, easy to provoke, vicious woman. The complexity of Lotus's personality is demonstrated in her momentary communication with Coral. After discovering Coral's adultery, armed with this knowledge, Lotus could use it to her advantage by spreading rumors. This rumor mongering might provide Lotus with leverage or status as one not to cross within the household, but she says nothing. Lotus shows her dignity when she refuses to perform "kinky sex" when asked by her impotent husband. She feels guilty about how she treated Swallow; when Swallow is dying, she feels "Swallow's dry, jaundiced eyes looking right through the window curtain and piercing her heart" (80). Despite her malicious actions leading to Swallow's death, Lotus has "a secret pain in her heart, as though she had been cut with a dull knife," so she says to herself, "Good God, how am I supposed to live now" (80)? When Lotus hears of Swallow's death, she is "very shaken" (86). While it does not seem that Lotus intended to cause Swallow's death, she has no way to let go of the guilt and it weighs heavily on her conscience, eventually becoming another of the reasons that leads her to insanity.

To add to the complexity of the character Lotus, Su Tong provides the communication between Lotus and Chen Zuoqian's homosexual son Feipu. These heartfelt, fleeting moments show her genuine sentiment and insight, adding a layer of an educated and perceptive woman to her character's personality. Besides admiring Feipu's skill at playing the flute, there is true understanding between them. Feipu thinks that she is different from the rest of the women, and Lotus feels that "he had given her a sort of elemental comfort, faintly perceptible, like winter sunlight, bearing with it a modicum of warmth" (65). Their secret understanding is seen in the following passage:

Lotus took a few steps forward and said: "Flowers are not flowers and people are not people; flowers are people and people are flowers; don't you understand such a simple principle?" Lotus suddenly raised her head and caught sight of a strange gleam drifting by briefly, like a leaf, on the surface of Feipu's eyes; she saw it and she understood it (28).

Both the curiosity and affection, between Lotus and Feipu, grow with each encounter between them. Feipu claims, "You are an interesting person. I can't imagine what's in your heart." Lotus replies, "I feel the same about you, too. I can't imagine what's in your heart either." Later, she even goes as far as "wondering what would it be like if Feipu was lying in bed beside her" (69).

Chen Zuoqian's fiftieth birthday is the turning point in Lotus' life. Unable to send him an expensive birthday gift, she gives him two kisses in front of everyone, and an embarrassed Chen Zuoqian insults her. Even the serving women standing beside the table "were acutely conscious that it would become a major turning point in Lotus's life in the household" (57).

After realizing Chen Zuoqian is impotent, Lotus “felt quite at a loss what to do,” and later, “her sobbing would grow louder and louder, she covered her face and let herself cry without restraint” (70). She is inconsolable because she is perfectly aware that she now has no chance of becoming pregnant. Despite her feminist ideas, Lotus knows the reality of her place in her world. Su Tong portrays Lotus as believable and real, and on the slope to insanity. Her world is continuing to close in on her. Her barrenness, physical and spiritual, by now a certainty, her only hope for her physical and emotional security is Feipu, her only friend in the household.

Her discovery of Feipu’s homosexuality is the final blow for Lotus. Her only possible savior has proved to be an illusion. All her hope is gone, and her barrenness becomes the absolute reality that she has to face, but is unable to. Michael S. Duke says in an essay that “her insanity has two causes. The first being a lack of love or, more specially sex, something she enjoyed very much till the old man grew impotent. She prudishly rejects his whispered invitations to perform kinky sex. The second more immediate cause occurs when looking out her bedroom window early one morning, she saw the family servants drown Chen’s third wife Meishan (Coral) in a well in the back courtyard for having an affair with a local doctor.”³

I agree with Duke’s points, but I think that there are two more reasons for Lotus’s insanity. Her involvement in Swallow’s death is a huge shadow on her heart that she does not have the courage to face or to forget. This guilty conscience and fear of being avenged keep her in a state of weakness and vulnerability. The other reason for her insanity is that her love for Feipu leads nowhere due to the latter’s homosexuality. She tries to escape harsh reality with alcohol, but it does not work. After she sobers up, “she felt as though she had returned from a

³ Michael S. Duke, “Walking Towards the World: A Turning Point in Contemporary Chinese Fiction,” *World Literature Today*, (Summer 1991, Vol. 65) 393.

trip to the Heavenly Kingdom; she could not believe that she was still living and that she would have to live for another day in the same old manner” (92). Left without any alternative, Lotus is doomed to madness.

In his artistry, Su Tong develops a complex character for Lotus. She has all the typical qualities and more than a female university student would be expected to possess in the historical context. Her fate resides in the outcome of the situation that the author places her in at the start of the novella. Lotus goes from a poor fortune to less to madness. The successful delineation of the internal conflicts that bring out the various aspects of Lotus makes her a well-rounded character in the story.

Compared to Lotus, the other wives in the novella can be considered as foils. Joy, the first wife, is a self-proclaimed Buddhist, but her actions in the Chen household betray her as cold and unfriendly. The author connotes the dark side of Joy's character the very first time Lotus meets her:

Just as Lotus was about to step forward and greet her, Joy was using the Buddhist rosary, and sent the beads rolling all over the floor. Joy pushed away her amboyna chair and knelt down on the floor to pick up the beads, mumbling all the while, “It’s a sin, it’s a sin” (15).

Is Joy saying that dropping the beads onto the floor is a sin or that her fifty year old husband Chen Zuoqian’s marrying a nineteen-year-old girl is a sin? Joy’s status as a woman does not allow her to openly criticize her husband, especially in front of a concubine, so she can only vaguely complain. Joy, an ironic name, is also an expert at power -- and she scores a point against Lotus in their first encounter. The tiny action of dropping the beads is a suggestion of psychological shock and dissatisfaction when Joy beholds Lotus.

Later, Joy points out to Lotus, "Why don't you look at yourself in a mirror and see what the hell you amount to in the Chen household" (47)? In other words, Joy does not want her own authority in the household to be challenged or threatened, and Lotus should be perfectly aware of her assigned spot as the most junior wife. Joy criticizes Lotus for not tying a red ribbon on her birthday gift for Chen Zuoqian, another trifle that really should amount to nothing. But in the isolated world of power manipulations in the Chen household, this insignificant item is yet another demonstration of power by the joyless Joy. Joy also interferes with, or perhaps is jealous of, the communication between her son Feipu and Lotus, so she tries to stop him from going to see her. When Lotus is heartbroken and drunk, Joy chants "Amitabha Buddha preserve us," and takes advantage of the situation to give Lotus a slap on the face, while calling her a "drunken bitch" and "shameless slut" (91).

Joy is not a passionate Buddhist, as she claims, but instead acts superficially. "She plays at being a Buddhist" (15), according to her husband. She is cold and cruel, and does everything to protect her authority as the first wife in the household. Joy takes every advantage to abuse the other wives, especially when they are in a fallen condition. This leads to a predictable reaction in the reader, sympathy for Lotus and disgust for Joy, but Su Tong arranges the encounters between his characters so well that the reader enjoys the friction among the characters.

Chen Zuoqian's second wife, Cloud, seems like a very agreeable person on first impression. Her room is the only place where Lotus "is enthusiastically welcomed," and Lotus very quickly addresses her as "Elder Sister" (16). Later, it is Cloud who brings a roll of silk for Lotus as a welcoming gift. Cloud seems nothing but friendly and pleasant, as both the reader and Lotus miss the power play going on here. However, Cloud's lethal character unfolds quickly. Because Cloud has only two daughters but no son, Lotus becomes a big threat to Cloud's status

and financial security in the household. Lotus's beauty and youth keeps Chen Zuoqian in Lotus's bed and increases these fears in Cloud, so she coaxes Swallow into spying on and cursing Lotus with paper figurines.

The story's historical context is a time when superstition was still dominant, and the ideas of science had not fully developed. Cursing somebody with a paper figurine was considered a deadly weapon, but Cloud does not hesitate to use it. If Lotus's irrational rage indirectly results in Swallow's death, Cloud is also an accomplice who should feel just as guilty. From what Coral discloses to Lotus, the reader finds out that Cloud put abortion medicine in Coral's tonic after finding Coral was pregnant at the same time she was. When this was not successful, in order to give birth before Coral, she "spent a lot of money on foreign labor-inducing shots which dilated her cunt so much it tore open" (45).

Cracking melon seeds is a habit shared by many women in China, but in the story, Cloud's cracking melon seeds is a demonstration of her cold and devious nature. The narrator mentions this action at least four times in the story. The first thing that Cloud says to Lotus when they meet for the first time concerns melon seeds. Later, when Cloud is hinting at the relationship between Lotus and Feipu, "she was cracking a melon seed between her front teeth" (64). The most striking reference to melon seeds is when Cloud reveals Coral's adultery:

It was afternoon when Coral was brought back home by two male servants. Cloud walked behind them cracking melon seeds all the way. The way in which events reached this conclusion was simple: Cloud caught Coral and the doctor in bed at a nearby inn. Cloud threw Coral's clothes outside and then gloated, "You stinking whore, did you think you could get away from me" (94)?

Again, later when Coral is cursing Cloud, "Cloud did not say a word, but just kept on cracking melon seeds" (94). The action of Cloud cracking melon seeds seems more like an expression of secret planning, scheming and gloating over others' misfortunes. With the full knowledge that the disclosure of Coral's adultery will lead to her death, Cloud does it with full resolution, making Cloud more dangerous than the other wives.

Coral is a beautiful opera singer, and when she sings, her "long sleeves flowing in the wind, the shadow of her dancing body resembled an enchanting apparition" (71). She is also a hot-tempered, defiant woman who dares even to confront Chen Zuoqian. On Chen Zuoqian's first night with Lotus, Coral manipulates him into leaving his new bride Lotus in the middle of the night to sleep with her. Coral's power and charm over Chen Zuoqian is unquestionable. The first time Coral and Lotus meet, their curiosity about each other is clearly shown in the following paragraph:

Lotus stopped in front of the windows for a moment; suddenly unable to control her desire to peek in, she held her breath and gently pulled open the curtains. The shock she received then nearly frightened her to death: Coral was also watching her from behind the curtain. Their eyes met straight on for only a matter of seconds, then Lotus ran away in dismay (16).

Coral and Lotus share momentary understanding and sympathy for each other. Coral cheers at Lotus's courage in cutting Cloud's ear. When she sings in the garden and notices that "Lotus's eyes were brimming with tears," she comforts her: "It's only acting; it's not worth feeling sad about. If you act very well, you can fool other people, but if you act badly, you only fool yourself" (31). Coral is not a woman without talent or sympathy, and indulging herself in singing opera is her way of escaping the undesirable world of the Chen household.

Coral does not just submit to her fate. She defies Chen Zuoqian by "cursing his ancestors for eight generations" when she is not happy (32). Being unsatisfied with her third wife position in the household, and probably with the lack of intimacy with Chen Zuoqian, Coral goes as far as having an affair with a local doctor. Coral's conflicts center mostly on Cloud, who tried in vain to ruin her chance to conceive a baby many years ago. Since Coral has a son, she can be fearless. To retaliate for a quarrel between her son and Cloud's daughter Yiyong, Coral even bribes a schoolboy to hit Cloud's daughter on the head. However, Cloud finds the boy and brings him in front of everybody to turn the tables on Coral. This incident shows that Coral is no match for Cloud in terms of tactics, and her doom comes when the latter discloses her adultery with the doctor.

In summary, Coral is a talented and courageous woman, and her warmth is shown in her communication with Lotus. However, she is just as competitive and aggressive as the rest of the women in the household. Her fatal weakness does not lie in her adultery but in her underestimation of Cloud.

Now I will examine the characters in "Embroidery,"⁴ beginning with the Jian sisters. Jian Shaozhen and Jian Shaofen live in an alienated world. There is a strict border between their quiet life and the noisy outside world. When they are buying things, they do not even ask for their change because they never want to touch anyone's hand. When they have to buy something from a peddler, they would rather drop a basket and a rope from the upstairs window with a bowl

⁴ "Embroidery" (Cixiu or "Another Kind of Lives of Women"), is not translated into English yet. The translations throughout the thesis are mine. For the Chinese original, see Su Tong *Modai Aiqing*, Jiangsu: 1994.

and money in it. This is so much more revealing than if Su Tong just told the reader they were recluses.

Although Jian Shaofen, the protagonist, seems just as isolated from people as her older sister Jian Shaozhen, she has a secret restlessness and longing for a different life. Now and again, the narrator hints that Jian Shaofen flees in her thoughts from the death cell like solitary home that she shares with her sister. To depict the differences between the two sisters, Su Tong utilizes images that linger in the reader's mind:

It was gently raining outside and Jian Shaofen was fixing her eyes on a colorful wedding car in the rain. The wedding car was long gone before she tried to have a good look at the bride. A few kids were chasing behind it, soaked in the rain.

"What're you looking at?" asked Jian Shaozhen.

"A wedding. There were six pieces of bed covers for the dowry, all silk. The groom may be the man living next to the school. There are five sons in that family."

"On such a dark rainy day, even if they get married, they will run into bad luck," said the elder sister, who then asked the younger one to close the window (Su Tong, *Modai Aiqing*, Jiangsu: 1994, 327).

Observing the wedding car subtly manifests Jian Shaofen's secret desire for marriage. The fact that she seems to live an isolated life, but can guess where the groom lives and how many sons there are in the groom's family, suggests that Jian Shaofen is not totally ignorant of the outside world, especially of the men in the neighborhood.

The action of "closing the window" is a characterization of the psychological makeup of Jian Shaozhen; she truly insists on living in isolation. She is determined to live with her choice, and have her sister, willing or not, share in it. Hence, Jian Shaozhen curses anyone and anything that poses a threat to the world she shares with her sister. The old clock's ticking, the clumsy

old-fashioned furniture, the yellowish portrait of the Jians' parents on the wall, the medicine soup that Jian Shaozhen drinks every day and her long thin grey hair are all painful reminders to Jian Shaofen that she is not content to follow her sister's path and end her life as a spinster. That is why Jian Shaofen is frightened to find that she is already in menopause at the age of forty six; she cries for an entire day while sitting on the toilet seat.

Jian Shaozhen does not think that Jian Shaofen should even feel sad; for her, as long as the two of them are together, their world is complete. Jian Shaozhen wants things to stay this way, because "she discounts men's mouths and only believes in her own eyes" (329). However, for Jian Shaofen, her sister's "being there" for her is not sufficient, thus she is always longing for a different life. She hates the looks of pity thrown by other people, and "was waiting for the dull pain that came from hearing their words" (342). So, while acknowledging the pain, Jian Shaofen does not avoid it but even chooses to face it. Jian Shaozhen senses this and so distrusts her sister as much as she distrusts anybody from the outside world. Thus even the two peaches growing outside the window are taken by Jian Shaozhen as such an ominous sign that she has to cut them off.

If Jian Shaofen's fear is ending her life as a spinster like her older sister, it is precisely this fear that causes the deepest fear in her older sister. When Jian Shaofen goes out for only three minutes, the older sister feels it is a long time, and her heart feels so empty that she can not even hold a sewing needle. Very soon Jian Shaozhen experiences what she is really afraid of: Jian Shaofen confronts her directly for the first time by smashing a bowl onto the floor in rage. Immediately following this, Su Tong has Jian Shaofen come into contact with Gu Yaxian, one of the women from the soy sauce store downstairs who has "the curiosity of a hunter" and "can tell

correctly the sound of going to bathroom made by the sisters and even the sound of a needle dropping” (323). By Su Tong’s exquisite design, the two worlds are doomed to interact.

As Gu Yaxian intrudes into their home as the first visitor in decades, Jian Shaofen’s isolation declares its own ending: she goes out to a wedding feast where she meets Mr. Zhang. At first it seems that Gu Yaxian initiates this contact; however, I suspect that Jian Shaofen subconsciously makes this opportunity possible by doing her needle work out in the backyard in plain view. By promising to embroider two pillow cases for Gu Yaxian, Jian Shaofen makes her first direct interaction with outside people, and the occasional contacts that follow are a threat big enough to crush the world that she unwillingly shares with her sister. Later, when Jian Shaofen “suddenly realized she had become a puppet held by Gu Yaxian on a string, and nothing was of her own volition” (341), she appeared neither discontent nor surprised. Su Tong has her dismiss Gu Yaxian’s role, and so does his reader.

Jian Shaofen longs to leave her stuffy home, while at the same time she is afraid of what awaits her. She desperately needs a guide, and Gu Yanxian is a voluntary one. While Jian Shaozhen does her best to dampen Jian Shaofen's eagerness to attend Gu Yaxian's son's wedding, it does not stop her from going. When Gu Yaxian comes to invite her to the wedding for a second time, Jian Shaofen “looked at her with half puzzlement and half gratitude” (345). It is realistic and provides a touch of believability when Jian Shaofen “had a feeling of being cheated for there did not seem to be a spot for her to fit in anywhere in Gu Yaxian’s whole place, and she did not know why she was there” (346). Then she makes the acquaintance of the old-fashioned teacher, Mr. Zhang, who is wearing a pair of out-of-fashion shoes. I think it is precisely this pair of shoes that comforts Jian Shaofen in a crowded place where she does not feel she fits in.

Jian Shaozhen is not ignorant about what is happening to her sister. When she hears her sister swearing at a fly, she is shocked and perhaps disillusioned. It is not until this moment that Jian Shaozhen fully realizes that Jian Shaofen has let go of their reclusive life style and adopted a more colorful one. The only contact that Jian Shaofen receives from the outside world is from the three women working downstairs. The first thing that she has learned is what the three women are good at -- swearing, especially oblique accusations.

The sarcasm that Jian Shaozhen throws at her sister is meant to make Jian Shaofen doubt her decision, but instead, the latter takes it as a catalyst in her resolution. Accepting Gu Yaxian's invitation, Jian Shaofen goes to see an opera, where she again runs into Mr. Zhang. Obviously, Gu Yaxian has arranged the meeting and Jian Shaofen, more or less, has anticipated it. Mr. Zhang's old-fashioned shoes again assure her that she is secure with him, but subconsciously she struggles in this unfamiliar closeness with a man:

Jian Shaofen watched the dark purple screen gradually open on the stage, and the actors start their action. Her thoughts were confused, and there was a dim and sharp voice coming from an invisible place that was ordering her to leave. But, Jian Shaofen found her body could not carry out take this order and she was not able to get up and leave (355).

Whose voice is that? Her sister's? Or the part of Jian Shaofen herself that still needs the security of isolation from the world? The fact that Jian Shaofen does not give in and obey this inner voice becomes a symbol of victory in her internal struggle. From the substantial questions that Jian Shaofen poses about Mr. Zhang's family on their way back home, the reader is very aware that she has made up her mind to step into a new world.

The relationship among the three saleswomen in the soy sauce store, Gu Yaxian, Hang Suyu, and Su Meixian is “delicate and changeable” (324). While the three play one part -- the role of a typical woman in the society of the day -- Su Tong makes them believable enough to keep the reader involved. Su Meixian seems the most outspoken and has a lasting conflict with Hang Suyu. That Su Meixian carries an empty bottle into the soy sauce store every day to steal soy sauce shows her as a character who takes any advantage that opportunity permits. When curious women in Xiangchun Street question her about the relationship between Gu Yaxian and the manager of the store Sun Hanzhou, Su Meixian’s answer is very subtle, “The dog who barks doesn’t bite” (325). So, if Gu Yaxian is the barking dog, the one who bites has to be Hang Suyu.

Hang Suyu is not a person to be pushed around easily by anyone, especially her colleagues. Instead, she seems to enjoy provoking verbal battles between her two colleagues in contempt of their alliance. Hang Suyu is fearless because she has the support of her crude and brash husband Old Song, whose is easily angered and who has been arrested a few times for violence. Whenever she is in a less advantageous position, Old Song rushes into the store to help by threatening the rest with a big chopping knife. The verbal abuse as well as the violent acts threatened by Hang Suyu show her to be a real manipulator, a believable and a pathetic one.

Gu Yaxian has the most tactical ability. When she suspects her colleagues after some money is missing, she secretly checks up on them. After Su Meixian is excluded as a suspect, Gu Yaxian whispers her suspicion concerning Hang Suyu to Su Meixian while claiming, “I didn’t say anything, Meixian. Don’t you spread any rumors, or else you’ll be responsible for them” (332). Gu Yaxian knows well that it is unlikely a simple-minded woman like Su Meixian would keep any secrets. She expects Su Meixian to confront the suspect while she pretends ignorance. What sets them apart is that Gu Yaxian is cunning enough to use an unsuspecting Su

Meixian while Gu Yaxian herself hides in the dark. This subplot is basically an illustration of the life that Jian Shaofen is choosing.

There does not seem to be any substantial conflict among the three saleswomen, but they never declare a ceasefire, and their mutual verbal abuse becomes an obsession. Soon, the war between Hang Suyu and Su Meixian reaches its highest point:

A few days later, a rarely seen fight broke out in the store. . . passersby heard women shrieking from inside the store. Through the half closed door, they saw Su Meixian and Hang Suyu grappling together and, to most people's surprise, Su Meixian's hand was determinedly digging out something from inside Hang Suyu's pants while the latter was pulling out the other's hair, pinching her hand with her finger nails, and cursing. Gu Yaxian was standing aside as a peacemaker, but everybody could tell she was not very devoted to her role and was just putting on a show.

"Dig! I'll let you catch me!" yelled Hang Suyu at Su Meixian, and all of a sudden, she pulled out a dirty sanitary napkin covered with blood and hit Su Meixian with it. Su Meixian was unprepared for that, and was dumbfounded when a few drops of blood splashed onto her face. Hang Suyu laughed at her victory, "Now have you found the stolen money?" The bystanders were startled at first but soon they too began to laugh. It was common that women fought among themselves on Xiangchun Street, but this scene was new to everybody (332).

Due to the unresolvable conflict, Gu Yaxian secretly suggests to their work unit leader that he reassign Hang Suyu, but Hang Suyu will not take the assigned relocation. I think the reason is not that Hang Suyu really enjoys staying at the soy sauce store but that she would rather stay in an unfriendly environment than let Su Meixian and Gu Yaxian get what they want. Hang Suyu knows that her very existence in the store is a victory and to secure that she does not hesitate to get help from her simple-minded and hot-blooded husband who often jumps into the store with a chopping knife.

Soon, another big fight breaks out between Su Meixian and Hang Suyu when the latter, with the aid of her husband, threatens to use a pair of new scissors to cut out the former's tongue. This slapstick comedy is juxtaposed with the deadly game being played by Gu Yaxian and Su Meixian behind Hang Suyu's back. Su Meixian catches Hang Suyu 'sleeping' with Sun Hanzhou in the storage house, and takes Jian Shaofen along as a witness. Again, Gu Yaxian's tactical ability is displayed here by her hinting to Su Meixian that she get into the storage house from upstairs -- the Jian sisters' house.

The uncovering of Hang Suyu's adultery results in her outraged husband Old Song killing her with the knife with which he has repeatedly threatened her two colleagues. Both Su Meixian and Gu Yaxian go to the funeral to mourn their colleague, but the former, blamed by the relatives of Hang Suyu for her death is chased out of the funeral. Although Gu Yaxian is an indirect accomplice in the killing of Hang Suyu and is just as guilty as Su Meixian, it is Su Meixian who takes the blame. Gu Yaxian's duplicity is therefore further shown when she cries beside Hang Suyu's body while lamenting to her relatives, "Who is a hundred percent clean anyway? Poor Suyu! Married to this lousy Old Song! Had she listened to me many years ago and not married him, she wouldn't have ended up like this" (362).

When Jian Shaofen marries Mr. Zhang, Jian Shaozhen blames Gu Yaxian and takes revenge on her by regular harassment. Jian Shaozhen comes downstairs into the soy sauce store, dressed in funeral attire with a pair of scissors in her hand and stares threateningly at Gu Yaxian's lips. This scene is repeated so often that in the end Gu Yaxian gets used to it.

After being rejected and insulted by her sister when she comes back to visit, Jian Shaofen swears she will never go back again until she returns to collect her elder sister's corpse. When what Jian Shaofen swears comes true, she goes back and finds her sister dead in a bloodcurdling scene. By using many embroidery needles, Jian Shao-zhen opens an artery, dying sitting on an old red wooden chair as the last drop of her blood drains out. Before she kills herself, Jian Shaozhen mutilates her last masterpiece of embroidery:

Jian Shaozhen's last piece of art was unfinished, and damaged at the time of her suicide. It was a rare piece of embroidery since it was a portrait of the face of a woman. The face on the embroidery resembled Gu Yaxian, the manager of the soy sauce store, and the damaged part was mostly on the portrait's two pink lips. According to the memory of Jian Shaofen, when she first saw the embroidery, there was a pair of scissors stabbing into where the mouth was, causing an unrepairable hole in the silk cloth (365).

Jian Shaozhen chooses to die because as soon as her younger sister abandons her for a different life, her eccentric dream of a world of only two people collapses. It appears that the absolute single-mindedness and negativity in Jian Shaozhen's character does not permit her to face the mistake that she has made in her own life, nor is she able to accept the relative happiness of her sister. By killing herself in a ruthless way, she escapes into death and bequeaths an unforgettable shock to her survivors. Jian Shaozhen's obsession with isolation makes her incapable of existing in a society that is dependent upon interaction with other human beings. In Jian Shaozhen's imagination, it is Gu Yaxian who talked Jian Shaofen into leaving, and since Jian Shaozhen is too old and weak to kill Gu Yaxian, she embroiders her enemy in her art and vents her hatred by damaging the mouth of the portrait.

Jian Shaofen does not seem to resent her sister's shocking death; in fact, she is more impatient with the trouble that it has caused her. When Jian Shaofen swears at her sister's

corpse, even Gu Yaxian, a symbol of the coarse everyday world, is astonished to hear the nasty words coming out of her mouth and “can hardly believe that Jian Shaofen has changed so much in such a short time” (365). However, Gu Yaxian does not realize that she herself is Jian Shaofen’s very first teacher about the outside world. From the beginning of the novella, Jian Shaofen is not the pious recluse that readers expect to find; she hates her sister from the start. Moreover, the petty jealousies, intolerance, suspicions and verbal abuse that the three saleswomen often use against one another must not have failed to enter Jian Shaofen’s ear. After stepping into the outside world, Jian Shaofen quickly becomes a woman with all the qualities expected of a woman on Xiangchun Street.

Now I will examine the three women characters in “Lives of Women”-- Xian, Zhi and Xiao.⁵ These three women represent three generations from one family. Although different in the rich personality that Su Tong provides for each of them, their situation and their fate in the end could not be more similar: all three are abandoned by their lover or husband, and left behind with a daughter they do not care about. That we are not given a last name for them makes them even more a symbol of women living unthinking lives. Tracing the roots of the cyclical tragedy of the family, it is not hard for the reader to realize that the fate shared by all the women in this family goes beyond these three generations and extends at least as far back as Xian's mother, and it will probably be continued from Xiao to her baby daughter. This is because, at least in this family, the tragedy that runs in this family cycle is the “life of women” -- at least life as they unthinkingly choose to live it.

Xian, the “restless girl,” likes going to the movies much more than taking care of her family photo studio. A movie star magazine is the only place where Xian finds comfort, and

⁵ “Lives of Women” is called “Funü shenghuo.” All translations are mine.

getting out of the family studio and going out to earn the fame that she feels she deserves is her biggest ambition. When Mr. Meng shows up in the studio, Xian “seems to have predicted that the encounter with Mr. Meng would change her fate” (*Modai Aiqing* 276). When Mr. Meng offers to take a picture of her, Xian “unconsciously” assumes a fashionable pose for him. Soon she becomes Mr. Meng’s mistress and is pregnant with his child even though aware that he is married. Xian does not seem to care about status as long as she can be a famous actress, which makes the relationship with Mr. Meng a material exchange; for him, sex, and for her, fame. It sounds like a fair trade, except the game ends with her in a less advantageous position. Being afraid of the pain, Xian does not have the abortion demanded by Mr. Meng, and later she finds out that he has gone to Hong Kong with all his money.

However, what eats at Xian’s heart is not the betrayal by Mr. Meng but the resentment she feels, because, in her mind, if she had gone through with the abortion, everything would be great:

If she had not run away from the abortion at the hospital, but had gone along with Mr. Meng’s suggestion, things would not be as bad as they are today. Maybe Mr. Meng would have taken her to Hong Kong with him. She pulled her hair out in frustration and was deeply aware of the proverb “one false step leads to eternal regret” (280).

The relationship between Xian and her mother consists only of negative interactions. She does not regret intruding back into her mother’s home with a soon to-be-born baby who does not have a father. Xian’s mother, who was probably in the same situation eighteen years earlier, does not show any sympathy for her daughter’s gloomy situation.

The most typical thing about this family is that they do not learn from the mistakes made by the former generation. Related directly to this is their refusal to talk with one another. Instead, they take pleasure in asserting power over each other. They seem to feel better only when they can make the other feel worse. An argument between Xian and her mother after Xian returns home is a good demonstration of how, in the family relationship, the mother is not like a mother, and the daughter is not like a daughter:

“Why did you come home? Gave up becoming a movie star?”

“The company is finished.”

“Where is your big boss then? Doesn’t he want you any more?”

“He died, died of a heart attack.”

“Liar! Turn your stomach towards me and let me have a good look!”

“What’s the big deal? Wasn’t your stomach big once?”

“What a cheap bitch! After carrying a man’s seed, now you’re home to sow the seed? Who told you to come home?”

“This is my home,” said Xian, trying to push the door open but it was locked from inside. “Who’s there? I guess it must be a man.” The door opened and indeed a man came out. Xian recognized Old Wang, the barber from Guoguang barber shop who regularly did her mother’s hair. She smiled at Old Wang and sneered back at her mom, “Who is the cheap bitch? You! You sold our property and hide a man in our house!” Seeing her mother’s speechlessness and that her face had turned purple, Xian felt content with the triumph of retaliation. She had not tasted contentment for days (282).

Xian is jealous of her mother because she, at least, has a regular relationship with a man. She finds her only source of power in hurting her mother, and her daughter later. However, as much as Xian regrets running away from the abortion, there is a corner in her heart that subconsciously wishes she had never left home. The proof of this is when she starts crying after finding a little plant's flowers and leaves on the window in the sunshine; to her the plant seems

like a virgin. This is the first time that Xian cries; she does not even cry when Mr. Meng leaves her. Thus, the word "virgin" is ironic, and the crying becomes a psychological reflection of Xian who must wish she had not chosen to develop a relationship with Mr. Meng.

At first, Xian does not imagine having an affair with her mother's boyfriend, Old Wang. However, when Old Wang flirts with her, mentions her short-lived acting career, and asks her, "You have acted in movies before, how could you be so conservative?" (285), Xian's eyes become red, and she suddenly feels there is no need to reject Old Wang's advances. Xian's fear seems to be that she might have to admit that she has sacrificed for nothing. The harm that her affair with Old Wang would do to her mother is not her main concern. Nevertheless, Xian is not totally immune to her mother's feelings, for when "Xian's eyes finally met her mother's, she found there was some kind of cold desperation in them. Somehow touched, she turned her eyes away and rolled her face towards the wall" (286).

Because Xian hates to be disturbed while napping, when her mother leaves home, she does not even open her eyes (286) -- literally living life with her eyes closed to the consequences of her actions. Her mother can no longer live because Xian has crushed her small dream; and Xian knows it but she does not regret it. So after her mother has been gone for days, Xian is not even worried. After being told that her mother is dead, she does not want to collect the body, her excuse being that she fears dead bodies. Is she really afraid of dead bodies or is she more afraid of facing her mother, who has been indirectly killed by her? Although Xian shows courage in slapping Old Wang on the face in front of the crowd, and in seizing back her mother's gold watch, she never has the courage to examine herself and the life that she is leading.

How Xian treats her daughter Zhi is probably how Su Tong wants us to believe Xian was treated by her mother when she was young. This trend continues in the family to the next

generation, setting each generation up to make the same mistakes as the last. Xian does not show any affection for her daughter Zhi in the expectation that the baby will not live long, so "she does not feel the necessity to fulfill a mother's duty" (284). She hates Mr. Meng; therefore, she hates Zhi. But she also blames Zhi for her suffering and thinks that without Zhi, she would be with Mr. Meng in Hong Kong. So, Xian does not really hate Mr. Meng; in fact she only hates the fact that she has lost her dream of fame because of him and especially because of the baby. That is why Xian "let Zhi cry with hunger for a long time in the cradle, which seemed to lessen her anger a bit" (288).

Zhi does not like her mother, just as Xian did not have any affection for her mother. Since Zhi does not want to be like her mother, as their similarity in appearance hints she might be, she tries to be as different as possible. First Zhi chooses a remote area of study for women in contrast to her mother's colorful dream of becoming a movie star, and then she chooses a quiet boyfriend with a proletarian background. Zhi looks like she is avoiding her mother's path, but ironically, she is following it exactly by refusing to communicate with her mother or anyone else, thus ending up in the same situation as her mother. One characteristic of Su Tong's writing is that each of his female characters is caught in an invisible net with no way out; and sometimes when it looks like she is fighting her way out, she is falling in even deeper.

Zhi does not tell her mother about her boyfriend, and of course when the latter finds out, she is irate. Zhi's boyfriend Zou Jie is a Communist, which at the time is a very enviable position. Xian is a practical woman and it is unlikely that she does not know nor care that political status means power and prospect. At this time in China's history, what other consideration could be more important? I think Xian disagrees with Zhi's choice simply because she prefers to disagree. Since there is no other communication in the family, choosing to

disagree and provoking the other is also a way of communication. The following episode illustrates how mother and daughter “communicate”:

“You don’t know? You don’t even know about his family background and already fell for him?”

“What I know is he is a Communist. He is the only Communist in our class.”

“Just for that you fell for him? How much is a Communist worth per pound?”

“He has a good political awareness; he is the captain of the school basketball team and he knows how to play the flute.”

“Do those count as skills? Break up with him right away. There are many men in the world so take your time to pick one out. Don’t ever rush into a relationship with a man.”

“No.”

“You don’t know what counts as a good man, and I will find a good one for you later. Break up with that Communist tomorrow!”

“No,” said Zhi again, pursing her lips while raising up her voice. Xian was peeling peanuts in a basket, and when the second “no” was heard, she grabbed the peanut shells and threw them into Zhi’s face. When a third “no” was heard, Xian threw the whole basket at her daughter.

“You cheap bitch. If you don’t listen to me, you’d better get out of this house!” Zhi, who avoided being hit by the basket, stood there leaning against the door for a moment and tried to hold back the tears in her eyes. Then she said, “OK, I will leave. Do you think I love this home” (290)?

Zhi swears not to ever return home and goes to Zou Jie's home, as she has nowhere to turn. Zou Jie probably is not ready to propose marriage to her so soon, but Zhi’s manipulations get her what she wants in the end. He suggests that she live with his parents for a while, but she says that she does not want to do so for fear of causing rumors. Then he suggests that she stay

with his sister, but Zhi only agrees to it as a temporary arrangement, with the excuse that she would feel restrained as a visitor in anybody's home. His suggestions countered, Zou Jie gives up and proposes to her, and Zhi just "smiled in the dark and did not utter another word" (291).

It seems it is Xian who finally gives in by inviting Zhi and Zou Jie home for supper. But instead of presenting herself in front of her guest as an image of motherhood, Xian takes great trouble in dressing herself up by "wearing lipstick and a yellow flowers on blue background silk traditional dress, tight from the waist up" (292). While blue would be the dress code in the historical context, the reader is left wondering if Xian is trying to entice her daughter's boyfriend as she did her mother's boyfriend in the past.

Zhi seems unhappy from the day she gets married. She feels an attitude of hostility from Zou Jie's family members as well as a sense of insecurity about her husband, although she does not understand why. Despite her contempt for her own mother and family background, Zhi never manages to fit into her husband's family. When an argument finally breaks out, she simply moves back to her mother's home, which is an echo of Xian's youth when she was abandoned by Mr. Meng.

After Zhi returns to her own bedroom, seeing a little yellow mark on her white sheet, she feels her past life as a young unmarried girl hanging over her like a dream, and that "something was lost and the whole world lost its color" (296). Did not her mother Xian feel the same way when she moved back from the expensive condominium where she had resided with Mr. Meng?

Following the family tradition, Zhi does not communicate with her estranged husband. After they separate, she tries to avoid him although she has been waiting for him, feeling that "her heart was drenched with cold water" (296) when he does not come to see her. Then she decides that she will wait only nine days and if he does not come on the tenth day, their marriage

is over. Luckily (or maybe unluckily), Zou Jie comes to her home on the tenth day, leaving Zhi to wonder, “What would have happened if he hadn’t shown up today” (297)? If he had not shown up on the tenth day, their marriage would not have continued; and perhaps he would not have felt the need to take his own life later.

Zhi suspects that her mother is spying on her and her husband’s sex life, and when this suspicion is confirmed, she can not let the thought of it go. She often dreams of intimate relations between her husband and her mother. Zhi has never trusted her mother nor her husband, and blames this insecurity on her childhood when her mother would lock her in a dark, separate room while she was having an affair with a dentist. Zhi tried knocking on her mother’s door but the door never opened.

... If the shadow cast on her childhood results in Zhi’s insecurity and suspicion, discovering her own infertility is a nearly fatal blow. In despair, Zhi attempts suicide, leaving a strange note written on the wall in the bathroom, “Zou Jie, don’t forget to pay the fifty yuan living expenses to my mom this month. I love you” (302). Why should she care about the living expenses that she owes her mother, when she does not even care about her own life?

Zou Jie needs Xian’s help to rush Zhi to the hospital after she has taken half a bottle of sleeping pills. Xian does not even get up because she does not believe that her daughter would commit suicide. This is an echo from many years past, when Xian did not believe that her mother would commit suicide, and so she did not get up to see her leave.

When Zhi comes back to life, “she vaguely felt her soul was wandering outside like a little bird, hopping up and down” (303). In Zhi’s deepest heart, she has been longing for a home for a long time. Though she has built a home with her husband, because of her infertility she

does not feel like she belongs there. For some reason, Zhi believes in destiny more than her mother, and her belief is depicted in her unusual request to her husband:

Don't say anything. First, go outside and buy a bunch of carnations for me. If you get that, it means I won't die; if not, it proves I have no right to keep on living and I shall commit suicide again (303).

Zhi's request is very extravagant at a time when fresh flowers are rare. She knows this, but precisely because of the difficulty of fulfilling her request, it is a good way to test her husband. If he does not care whether she lives or not, he will quickly give up looking for fresh flowers.

Just as in the past breakup when he shows up on the tenth day, Zou Jie does run everywhere and comes back with a bunch of red carnations. When he opens the door, "a gleam lit up in her eyes but then went dim again as before" (303). Zhi almost allows herself to risk love and life, but can not go through with it. Even after her test of his love, she is still feeling insecure and afraid of losing him.

Zhi's suspicious mind and melancholia go to further extremes, as seen in the development of her habit of inspecting her husband's underwear, which leads him to talk her into adopting a daughter -- Xiao. Zou Jie names her Xiao because xiao is a bamboo flute, regarded as an instrument that plays sentimental or plaintive music. It is a bad omen right from the start.

Continuing the family tradition, Xiao does not like her mother or grandmother, and as to Zou Jie, her stepfather, Xiao has had an unknown fear of him since she was a child. In her diary, she laments her misfortune in having such an unusual family background, but never does she mention her stepfather; instead, she avoids him altogether.

When Xiao is fourteen, Zou Jie attempts to sleep with her but his attempt fails because a cup knocked onto the floor by Xiao brings both her mother and grandmother. Zhi's threat to

disclose the scandal is enough to make Zou Jie end his life on a railway track. This time Zhi goes insane for real and for ever. The psychological shock that Xiao receives from Zou Jie's brutal suicide is not any less than her mother's:

Xiao came to the railway and saw the body had been pulled away leaving no remains except a big puddle of blood which appeared an odd purple color in the sun. The wind was blowing on the shrubs and bushes on the side road, and when contemplating the pool of blood, Xiao shivered. She felt everything was like a dream (306).

Zou Jie's death affects Xiao and Zhi differently. Xiao fears Zou Jie and this probably comes from her secret sympathy for him, since both live with her half insane mother. It is precisely because of this sympathy that she fears he is going to turn to somebody for love or for sex, and Xiao is the only convenient somebody. What Xiao probably hopes for most to remove this fear is Zou Jie leaving for somewhere else, but not for his death. As for Zhi, before Zou Jie's death, she is obsessed by her insecurity about him. She possibly feels guilty about causing his death but it is only after, when abandoned by his death, that her insecurity ends. Hence, it is Xiao who lives in secret guilt in the shadow of Zou Jie's death, but it is Zhi who lives in peace with his death. Thus, each Wednesday, when Zhi goes to the railway to mourn her deceased husband, Xiao "felt an icy feeling rising in her heart" and "the puddle of purple blood left on the railway still smelled of grief ten years after the tragedy" (306).

Both generations, Zhi and Xiao, choose to escape reality rather than face it. Zhi escapes into her insanity, and Xiao takes the political opportunity to escape her home by volunteering to work in a remote place. In such an extremely poor and remote area, Xiao "tried to recall her family, but she could not remember anything. She felt a true loneliness and fear" (307). This "true loneliness and fear" is visible in Xiao's inability and unwillingness to stand the extreme

conditions of an impoverished countryside. Voluntarily, she returns home, even when to reach her goal she has to keep rubbing her knees with ice and pretending to have rheumatism.

Ironically, when Xiao finally is allowed back home, she does end up with rheumatism. This echoes Xian's return home after being abandoned by Mr. Meng, and Zhi's move back from Zou Jie's parents' home. None of the characters, Xian, Zhi or Xiao, seem to care about their home. In fact, they all have chosen to run away from home once, but whenever they have to face a difficult situation on the outside, they abandon their options and run back home.

Zhi's lamenting and mourning her husband's death is a constant reminder of the past that Xiao would prefer to forget, so she rids herself of her mother by talking Zhi's work unit into sending her to a psychiatric clinic. Xiao's determination and manipulation here is not unlike Xian's grabbing back her mother's gold watch from Old Wang, or Zhi's manipulations in marrying Zou Jie.

Xiao works in a meat store and soon she does not even care about taking a bath to erase the bloody meat smell on her body. This is due to her attitude of "no action is action," an attitude that signifies the loss of her femininity. She marries Little Du only for practical reasons, just as Xian's pursuit of fame was the motive for her relationship with Mr. Meng, and just as Zhi married Zou Jie because she was chased out by her mother.

Instead of feeling insecure in love like her mother, Xiao has an insecurity about money. She feels that it is essential for her to save in order to buy domestic electrical appliances. To reach her goal, she cuts back Xian's milk, which she has been drinking for decades, and forbids her husband Little Du to spend money on smoking, despite the fact that she does not care if he smokes. Little Du is left to beg cigarettes from his colleagues and is laughed at by them -- a sign of stripped away self-esteem. Xiao also buys cheap food, preserves it, and stores it everywhere

in the house. This leads to Little Du's food poisoning as well as the ominous sign of a failed marriage.

When Xiao goes to the hospital to see her husband, she avoids the chance of really communicating with Little Du, and instead tells him that she looks down upon herself. Could low self-esteem explain these women's fates? Probably this is the first time that Xiao reveals the truth to her husband. Since there is a family tradition of not living with truth, Xiao has already given up on her husband at the very moment she lets him have a glimpse of her heart. Right at the very moment of true communication that could lead to a real relationship, Su Tong's character abandons all hope.

After realizing that Little Du has a girlfriend, Xiao follows him around but does not confront him face to face until she hears the woman laughing. If she is not happy, why should Little Du's girlfriend be happy? Little Du seriously humiliates her by revealing his knowledge of her stepfather's attempt to seduce her. Even if Xiao had already given up on the marriage before then, it is not until now that she is finally disillusioned, leaving her feeling that "she does not need to explain, but to retaliate against the man who has hurt her" (315). The reader must be wondering who has let out this deadly secret, and the suspects can only be Zhi or Xian. Why would either of them tell Little Du this, when they have to know what a deadly effect it would have on Xiao -- their daughter or granddaughter?

With such a suspicion in her mind, it is no wonder that Xiao is impatient to look after her grandmother, who has been in her sickbed for a long time and finally is approaching death. Even just before her death, Xian still has the movie album lying on her pillow, and still believes that, had she not run away from the abortion, she would have had a good life. Before dying, Xian asks Xiao to bring her a chopping knife. What Xian wants the knife for before her death is left

unknown. The main issue is that Xian never does forgive herself for her own past choices, especially refusing the abortion, and she regrets these choices until death.

Xiao's erasing all the traces left behind by Little Du in her life, cutting Little Du from the wedding picture and flushing it down the toilet, brings a naive smile to her face, a smile which exhibits her childishness and immaturity. Xiao is not successful in killing Little Du only because of her baby's arrival at that very moment. Of course, Xiao has a baby girl, leaving the reader to wonder if the tragic cycle will continue running in the family. What will happen to Xiao's daughter, who just like the rest of the women in the family, does not have a father? Will Xiao be able to break the cycle and communicate with her child?

The female characters in Su Tong's novellas lack any sense of unity and familiarity. Woman-to-woman discourse is almost nonexistent, and there are few instances of positive female friendships. When woman-to-woman dialogue does arise, it is usually hostile. Coral and Lotus are the sole example of momentary real communication between two women in the three novellas. Even this case is limited as an example since their exchange consists of only a few lines. The disunity among the women creates disharmony and chaos which impedes any progress towards equality and freedom.

Chapter 3: Critical Analysis

This chapter begins with the application of the traditional formal approach to literature delineated in Norman Friedman's *Form and Meaning In Fiction* to Su Tong's three novellas. The conclusions from this analysis are then reexamined in light of both David Der-wei Wang's *Running Wild: New Chinese Writers*, and Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*.

FORMAL ANALYSIS BASED ON FRIEDMAN'S APPROACH

1. "Wives and Concubines"

This novella has a relatively simple plot made extraordinary by the richness and detail of the images that Su Tong includes in his writing, as examined in detail in the last chapter. The plot consists of a progression of crises that result in little change in the character, fortune or thought of the protagonist Lotus. The plot seems just enough to develop the characters and does not drive for resolution of an issue. Insanity is the logical completion of the pattern in the story, and it does not signal any change or resolution.

The plot in "Wives and Concubines" is unified (Friedman, *Form* 66). It has a clear beginning, the father's suicide setting in motion a series of crises. A middle section centers on the end of university and marriage into the Chen household. The end uncovers another wife's adultery, and Lotus goes insane after witnessing her murder.

Plot, according to Friedman, is a composite of fortune, character and thought; the incidents selected by the writer give rise to these, resulting in the novella's final cause or end effect. While Su Tong employs these elements, he has the protagonist change little. Su Tong's

novella revolves around Lotus the protagonist, yet a search for the principle that unifies the plot, usually a change in fortune, character or thought, ends fruitlessly. Lotus's character changes little as she moves from crisis to crisis. Her movement from one crisis to another shows that her fortune is relatively the same from beginning to end.

At first, I viewed change in thought, as Lotus became insane, as the principle used by Su Tong to unify the plot; yet she changes little here as well. Lotus shows little mourning after her father commits suicide as she plans her future. Lotus knows that the punishment awaiting Coral will be serious, yet she does not protest nor plead with Chen Zuoqian on her behalf. She contributes to the death of Swallow, yet her concerns dealing with it center on herself. Her thought may have changed on the path to insanity, but only in degree, not in the patterns of thought or beliefs that she holds. Through the narrative style that Su Tong employs, we have access to her thoughts and find little change here as the story progresses.

Lotus is trapped from beginning to end, even as she is presented to the reader as the most modern of women in her era -- a university student. She is trapped by circumstances in her society, and to some degree by her choices. Her choices seem more choices of traps than anything else. There is no main change or resolution of a main issue, despite the illusion of choice presented by Su Tong, in a story centering on entrapment.

Su Tong seems to have written this novella with an end in mind, and my hypothesis is that it was to delineate the trap that Lotus is in. She is trapped with no way out, and Su Tong selected and arranged the materials that he had to work with to serve this end. Su Tong gives the reader flashes of Lotus almost being able to get beyond her trap, yet she is never able to quite make it. With the novella arranged in this manner, the reader is left feeling sympathy for Lotus and with an impression of how it would feel to be in such a predicament. The effect on the

reader is made even more real when he/she realizes that Lotus chose her trap by not marrying into an ordinary household.

The pervading atmosphere, examined in detail in the section concerning imagery, is created by Su Tong's reliance on the *yin* principle. In Chinese philosophy, *yin* is the passive dark female principle of the universe.¹ The *yin* principle provides an uneasy feeling to the reader who senses through Su Tong's *yin* imagery that an ominous and unfortunate future awaits Lotus. This uneasiness builds for the reader as he/she begins to see parallels to the trap that Lotus is in in his/her own life.

Su Tong employs the *yin* principle in his work, yet there is little aesthetic emotion provoked in the reader except that the readers' expectation of impending doom is met (*Form* 69). This provides little in the way of catharsis as it is more of a confirmation (70). Su Tong is more successful in activating the readers' moral emotions; throughout the novella the reader is fighting off the gloom provoked by the *yin* imagery, hoping for a good life for Lotus but failing to find it (71). That Lotus made choices contributing to her doom, means that she is partly responsible for it. This results in the reader's uneasiness that carries over into examination of the reader's life lived unexamined by him/her. That there is no resolution except insanity adds to the lack of catharsis for the reader, who might be expecting some justice done to the Chen household.

At first, I saw the novella's unifying principle as the progression of Lotus into madness, but this hypothesis did not hold up. From beginning to end, Lotus seems to be mentally off

¹ Charle-James N. Bailey, *On the Yin and Yang Nature of Language*, Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishing, 1982, and A.C. Graham, *Yin, Yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking*, The Institute of Asian Philosophies Press, 1986.

balance. The issue Su Tong raises is wider than the descent of one woman into madness. He is raising the issue of being trapped in life. There may be an illusion of freedom provided by choices presenting themselves, just as Lotus faces choices, but the person in question is trapped nonetheless.

2. "EMBROIDERY"

In "Embroidery," we again encounter female characters living unexamined lives in some trap or another. Briefly, the plot here consists of two sisters living a reclusive life with one of the sisters managing to escape to the world outside. The subplot centering around the saleswomen illustrates the poverty of the life that Jian Shaofen, the protagonist, chooses as her new trap, causing the reader to see it as little improvement on the original "prison house" that she lived in with her sister.

As in "Wives and Concubines," there is little change in fortune, character or thought in the protagonist. Jian Shaofen changes her "prison house," but little else. Jian Shaofen escapes from a life with her sister to the bland life portrayed by the saleswomen in the shop, illustrating little change in her fortune throughout the plot. That Jian Shaofen's character and thought change little is demonstrated by her temper in the beginning, middle and end of the story. Despite their caring for each other, from beginning to end of the novella, Jian Shaofen hates her elder sister and the life that they lead. Like Lotus, Jian Shaofen undergoes little change in any way throughout the story, finding herself in a new "prison house" in the end much as does Lotus. Jian Shaofen knows from the beginning of the story how many sons live where, and closely watches the wedding cars that pass, so marriage is a logical conclusion for the protagonist in this story, but her marriage does not resolve an issue.

As in "Wives and Concubines," the reader is left feeling sympathy combined with an uneasiness that grows as the reader sees parallels in the story to his/her lived reality. The story, an involving story in its own right, has a message for the reader to look again at the life he/she leads, to see if there might be unrecognized traps surrounding him/her.

3. "LIVES OF WOMEN"

The female characters in "Lives of Women" even more blatantly represent the entrapment of women in society. The plot of this novella is a simple one that repeats itself in each successive generation. The detail and imagery that Su Tong employs portray a cyclical story that is again interesting to read in its own right, but that also affects the reader in the same way as the other two novellas. The readers' recognition of the pattern here reinforces the message in Su Tong's novellas.

That Su Tong does not preach his message is a testament to his art. Even this story delineating the cycle of entrapment that each generation encounters is written with detailed imagery and multiple subplots to draw the reader in and have him/her care for each of the female protagonists in each generation. The lack of change in fortune, thought or character is depicted in each generation's protagonist, and the lack of inter-generational change only makes the author's message clearer to the reader. Su Tong's works contains thematic messages that go beyond his plots of sex and violence. None of Su Tong's characters or protagonists in "Lives of Women" takes the time to examine his/her life. The message that Su Tong is sending to his reader is that he/she should take the time to examine his/her life.

The most distinctive feature of the development of Su Tong's female characters is the women's lack of an individualized concrete image. He gives them a detailed portrait, but little to set them apart as individuals. This may seem to contradict Su Tong's production of character

portraits. However, as one can imagine, I may love the portrait of the Mona Lisa, yet know nothing about her as an individual. Su Tong supplies enough individuality for his characters to draw the reader into the story, yet much is general and abstract. In my later discussions of the distinctions between didactic and mimetic plots for Su Tong's novellas, I look further into this. His characters are mostly abstract, but he gives them just enough detail or description. The appearance, or dress, or bearing is mentioned only to involve the reader. Su Tong's ability to supply just enough about his characters is echoed in what he claimed in an interview: "It is not me who is especially good at writing about women. I'm just not happy with the mechanical description of women in past Chinese literature."²

In my opinion, Su Tong does achieve what he aims for in his unconventional way of developing abstract female characters in his fiction, and especially in his indirect revealing of their mentality or psychology. Thus, as abstract as their appearance may be, the female characters in Su Tong's fiction strike the reader as true and alive. For instance, when Lotus is checking for lice in Swallow's hair, the hatred felt by Swallow is shown subtly when "she felt Lotus's hands, like the ice-cold blade of a knife, cutting into her hair, hurting her slightly" (*Raise* 13). Before Lotus attempts to avenge herself on Cloud, when she sees Cloud, "she shudders inexplicably" (42). After hearing of Swallow's death, Lotus's guilty conscious is shown as she "blanched slightly" (86). The reader is not explicitly told about each woman in Su Tong's novellas, but he/she has access to the mental states that arise in the interactions between characters.

Su Tong shows his ability to capture the essence of Gu Yaxian and Su Meixian's satisfaction with their victory in catching Hang Suyu in adultery, as well as the curiosity and

² *Shijie ribao*, The World Journal Vancouver Edition, (November 26, 2000, C.4).

nosiness of the women from the neighborhood: “the next day, the women who came to buy soy sauce were particularly more in number than usual, and when asked about the process of apprehending the adulterers, Su Meixian took the trouble and repeated it again and again” (*Modai Aiqing* 361). Su Tong’s ability to delineate personality is further illustrated in Xian’s guilty conscience after having an affair with her mother’s boyfriend. Su Tong shows the reader, rather than tells him/her, what the characters are like through their thoughts or behavior. Xian’s guilt is connoted in the way that she avoids her mother’s eyes. Psychological reaction is conveyed often as physical reaction, and thus, the motivation of an action, as well as the unconscious level of mind, becomes apparent. As Hegel says, “The deepest aspect of a human being, such as a person’s character, thoughts and aims, can only be expressed clearly through action.”³

Comparing the women characters in the three novellas, I see Lotus in “Wives and Concubines” as the most successfully developed character; yet closer examination reveals her to be more of a well-painted portrait than an individual. Lotus appears developed, textured and “realistic” because the reader observes her during a period of crises when she is contemplating her life’s options. The reason that Lotus seems more complex and dynamic than her counterparts is that we see her insanity gradually revealing itself, even as the reader resists acknowledging it. The development of her character has been arrested both psychologically and aesthetically by the tragedies that she has encountered in her life, tragedies already underway when we meet her for the first time at the start of the story. Lotus’s guilty conscience redeems her, and gives her depth and humanity.

³ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, (volume one) 303.

The three other wives in “Wives and Concubines” and the three saleswomen in “Embroidery” can be looked upon as one person, a character who embodies everything typical of a woman with little education in China; each having weaknesses such as nosiness, rumor mongering, selfishness, irresponsibility and a thirst for revenge. The two sisters in “Embroidery” and the three women in “Lives of Women” are representatives of their station in life. Su Tong develops them by making them a little more peculiar than most ordinary women since they alienate themselves from the outside world and have a distorted way of viewing reality and shaping what society offers them. This again draws the reader in to interact with his characters.

I originally saw Su Tong as having designed the three novellas with pathetic plots to result in sympathy for each protagonist. The reader’s long-range fears for the protagonists materialize, and despite aiding in their downfalls by the choices that they make, all the protagonists are “steamrolled by circumstances” (*Form 84*).

In a mimetic plot, Friedman argues, the change in or resolution of the main issue needs to be contained in the novella. Su Tong overwhelms the reader with detail and image, yet there is no resolution and only little change in fortune, character or thought for any protagonist. To be able to explain the ends of the three novellas, all of which are artfully arranged by Su Tong, one must look outside the story, and classify all three novellas as having didactic plots. The action, while artful and detailed, is subordinate to an idea, and the whole story is designed to point to this idea (*Form 102*).

What unifies the plot in each novella is the idea that all the characters are trapped by both society and their choices, and that the reader may be in the same position. Su Tong is issuing an artistic wake-up call to the reader to examine the life he/she is leading. In Su Tong’s novellas,

the end effect is deliberately unsatisfying, and the reader's dissatisfaction is meant to prompt him/her to contemplate his/her own life.

An examination of the artistic details supports this hypothesis. The male characters are prototypes of hostile "bad seed" men, and any such character could fill their shoes (*Form* 107). The saleswomen in "Lives of Women" are almost typecast, and despite the well-developed images of them interacting, they could be anyone from this class of character. In a didactic work, the ideas of the author, that are intended for the reader, govern the whole (*Form* 108). Su Tong has included enough detailed, individual traits of the characters in his stories to involve the reader and draw him/her into interaction with his portraits, but superior to Su Tong's characters are the messages that Su Tong has embedded in his works. Any female university dropout could easily be an adequate Lotus, for example; but it is the authorial skill of Su Tong that allows him to embed the messages that he is sending to the reader.

Friedman concludes this section of his text with generalizations about didactic works, and these generalizations apply well to Su Tong's novellas (*Form* 116). According to Friedman, the hero at the end of a didactic story is free but rudderless, as are all of the protagonists in the three novellas. Lotus, for example, is free of the prison that is her life in the Chen household, but is drifting rudderless in a sea of insanity. A didactic work involves an open-ended plot with typical characters, but there is more concern with a problem than the action in a story. "Lives of Women" centers more on the continuing unbroken cycle than on the individual characters, no matter how well Su Tong elaborates upon them. Friedman sees a didactic work as being an attack on the reader to wake him/her up, to force the reader to see the truth about him/herself and society going beyond the action in the story. In all three novellas, Su Tong is urging his readers to contemplate their lives and act to remedy any problems found.

Su Tong made numerous choices to achieve the effect that he wants his stories to have on his readers; the wake up call not to live unexamined lives, as his characters do. This desired effect on the reader governed how he presented his stories. Su Tong sugarcoats his wake-up call through the techniques that he employs. The reader is presented with rich and detailed contexts, as well as simple but engaging plots, that have their desired impact on the reader. Su Tong produces an insight in his readers by his manipulations of writing technique. His stories may seem dark and violent, but feel right when read. Friedman sees a good work of art as one that achieves its desired effect in the best way possible through the techniques chosen by the artist. Su Tong creates images that linger in a reader's mind, forcing the reader to think about the characters and their lives. This contemplation causes parallels to emerge between the fictional world that Su Tong has created and the readers' lived reality. Su Tong's end effect is accomplished in a way that has the reader believing that he/she has discovered insights into life, making them more treasured and acted on in the reader's life.

Su Tong accomplishes this effect through his choice of narrator. All narrators in the three novellas discussed speak in the third person, from the limited omniscient point of view, with the focus on the main character. The narratorial choice is "limited" because the narrator does not seem to have complete knowledge of the character's actions or thoughts. Character is established primarily through narratorial reporting. While the language of narrating becomes the protagonist's stream of consciousness, and conveys her most secret thoughts and emotions, the reader is given the chance to understand the outer conflicts as well as to have a glimpse of the protagonist's inner sufferings caused by the conflicts.

Su Tong's skill at utilizing narratorial technique is illustrated in the scene when Coral is singing, deeply touching Lotus, leaving her with tears in her eyes. This passage is narrated from an omniscient third person point of view, with inner focus on both Lotus and Coral, while emotion is subtly conveyed through poetic language and a sentimental tone. Without looking at this passage, it is difficult for the reader to realize the true sufferings of the characters. This is especially true for Coral, who seems arrogant and aggressive and not to care in the least about anything. In this situation, however, she shows a different side of her personality. Coral is sentimental and talented, for she sings "in a delicately plaintive manner" (*Raise*, 30). She is also sensitive, for she has noticed "Lotus' eyes were brimming with tears" (30), and she is lonely and sad for "her entire appearance was damp and laden with sorrow, like a blade of grass in the wind" (31). Meanwhile, by the tears in Lotus's eyes as she listens to the plaintive song, the reader can guess that despite the expectation that these two women are to be competitors, they have communicated on an emotional level, and there is understanding and sympathy between them. The reader's emotions and compassion, therefore, are simultaneously aroused.

However, narrating from the third person point of view by focusing on one or two characters and hiding the narrator is not enough to achieve the purpose of fully developing a character portrait. To supplement this, Su Tong does not silence the voice of the narrator completely. Now and again, he lets the narrator intrude into the story and give a brief description or comment:

Lotus's arched-over body shook uncontrollably like a waist drum played by some unseen hands (*Raise* 12).

As they listened to the ticktock ticktock of the clock on the wall, Lotus and Coral each harboured her own secret anxieties; they harboured them like two trees face-to-face in the wind. This is also a situation seen often in history (57).

At noon, when the store was quiet, the three saleswomen were chasing disgusting flies everywhere with a fly swatter. Very often, there were dead flies drowned in the soy sauce tank and the women simply scooped them out with their hands. This action did not really match the health regulation concerning food handling posted on the walls, but according to the idiom “out of sight, out of mind,” it must be OK. Customers never really care if there are germs in the soy sauce or not (*Modai Aiqing* 323).

The enlarged scene [Old Song coming to threaten Sun Hanzhou with a knife over the suspicion of an affair between Sun and his wife] ended before it got out of hand, and there was no need to clarify the truth. Anyway, Xiangchun Street is not a place of etiquette (*Modai Aiqing* 326).

Buying things without asking for their change is a common habit shared by the two sisters. They never touch anyone’s hand, no matter if it is a man or a woman’s (*Modai Aiqing* 335).

Because she was afraid of the pain, her beautiful prospects were ruined (*Modai Aiqing* 279).

The tepid relationship between them continued, and part of the reason was that neither of them wanted to let the other go easily. They were involved because Little Du was thirty one years old, a university graduate, with an intention to get married but without his own place to live. Xiao was twenty eight with a job as a butcher and had a permanent right of inheritance to the place on top of the photo studio. They both had passed the romantic age by then, so everything should be considered realistically (*Modai Aiqing* 309).

Xian kept crying when she was delivering the baby, and the nurses thought her cry was due to the pain of delivery. Of courses the nurses could not tell the real reason she was crying. In fact, each cry had its own content (*Modai Aiqing* 320).

This is the fall of 1987. There are many young women who are divorcing this year and Xiao is just one of them (*Modai Aiqing* 321).

In the examples above, the voice of the narrator is strongly heard, and the effect of it depends on the context. Sometimes the intrusion of the narrator describes or illustrates something that could not be explained through the action and thought of the highlighted character, and sometimes it illuminates the psychology or mentality of the character. At other times the narrator intrudes to offer an abstract generalization that reveals his understanding of life, such as “each cry had its own content.”

If the narrator had not included the detail about the Jian sisters’ habit of never touching anyone’s hand, the reader would not have obtained such a strong impression of the life of complete seclusion led by the two women. If the narrator had not said that Lotus’s body “shook uncontrollably like a waist drum played by some unseen hands,” the reader would not have sensed her fear as a concubine walking towards her doom on the first day, or have sensed the tragedy awaiting her.

Su Tong employs irony in the narratorial intrusions. The irony exposes the mentality of the character and the flaws in society, and also reflects the author’s perception of life and cultural values. When the narrator says that “Lotus and Coral each harboured her own secret anxieties,” the reader gets the message that they do not really communicate, but the clear transmission of the message does not seem to satisfy the narrator, and instead, he has to add an ironic statement, “This is also a situation seen often in history.” The attitude of the narrator is so ironic here that it is almost playful. Unprepared for encountering a line like this, the reader has to wonder if the narrator is saying that these two women who “harbour their secrets like two

trees” are common in history, or that the lack of communication in women is their inheritance and has resulted in their unfortunate situation and tragedy.

Su Tong furthers the effect of his use of irony in the other passages. The saleswomen’s ignoring the dead flies in the soy sauce tank is an ironic contrast to the health regulations posted on the walls. That “customers do not care if there are germs in their soy sauce or not” is a verbal irony that is the opposite of what the narrator really means. When the reader understands the narrator’s deriding, he/she perceives the superficiality, vanity, selfishness and senselessness of the saleswomen. “They have passed the romantic age, and everything should be considered realistically” is ironic because the latter part is a famous saying spoken by Mao Zedong, and the narrator uses it here to ridicule both Mao and his followers who take Mao’s sayings superficially and mindlessly.⁴

The other examples, such as “Anyway, Xiangchun Street is not a place of etiquette,” “Because she was afraid of the pain, her beautiful prospects were ruined” and “There are many young women who are divorcing this year and Xiao is just one of them,” are all demonstrations of the narrator’s explicit voice where the reader can detect a distinctly ironic tone that mocks the women characters. This mocking of the female characters echoes in the reader’s mind and leads him/her to contemplation due to the effect of irony. Some critics say that avant-garde writers show little moral emotions in their narrative.⁵ As much as Su Tong seems indifferent to direct moral judgment, the distinct tone of scorn and irony on the part of his narrator, seen in the

⁴ Mao Zedong, *Mao Zhuxi Yulu* (Recorded Sayings of Chairman Mao), China Liberation Army Press, 1967, 174.

⁵ Tao Dongfeng, *Wenti yanbian jiqi wenhua yishi* (The Change Of Style and Its Cultural Consciousness), Yunnan: 1994, 228.

previous paragraphs, depicts moral emotion, and calls upon the reader's alertness and attentiveness to decipher the message that the irony conceals.

In his novellas, Su Tong shifts the narrative voice from showing to telling, thus keeping the reader engaged and interacting with the people in his plots. Aristotle, referred to by Friedman argues that judgments on works of art is to be based on the criteria of whether the work was created "to attain a greater good or avoid a greater evil" (*Form* 165). On this basis, I see Su Tong's novella as an artistic wake-up call to readers to avoid the greater evil of sleepwalking through life.

According to Friedman, the purpose of art is to enlarge the mind, broaden feelings, and cause exploration leading to change and growth (165). Despite little change and growth in his characters, Su Tong accomplishes change and growth in his readers while writing popular stories of sex, violence, entrapment and hopelessness. Modern writers explore the complexities of life honestly by avoiding easy answers and controlling the ambiguity that they produce in their works to have the effect of stimulating their readers to search for solutions. Su Tong has economically accomplished this exploration in novellas that appeal on multiple levels, from commercial stories of sex and violence to thought provocative works that linger in the readers' minds to become catalysts for deeper thought and insight.

In summary, the results of my formal analysis point to Su Tong having expended great effort to develop his novellas to appeal on multiple levels, the end result being the transmission of catalysts for contemplation and insight. My examination of Su Tong's novellas has led me to see them as didactic in that the message he intends for his readers unifies his works and makes their other aspects subordinate this transmission.

The values that Su Tong has incorporated in his works are not found in his characters directly, but are apparent in his message for the reader to fully open his/her eyes to see anew the life that surrounds his characters, and in turn, the life the reader lives. In other words, Su Tong challenges societal frames of expectations and meanings with the intent to revolutionize the world of the reader (*Form* 168).

Traditional formal analysis sees any art work as always formal, a matter of ends and means. For writers, the medium of language governs how the writer can say what he intends to say, as well as what the final product means to the reader. Su Tong arranges the content of his work to have a multiplicity of meanings, from the literal story level to the intended effect of deep impact on his readers' world. In showing the reader the traps that his protagonists live in, and letting the reader discover them, Su Tong dramatizes insights instead of just stating them. This leads to triggering thought and character change, not in the characters of the story but in the readers themselves. The author plays on the expectations of the reader and his/her comparison of the real and fictional worlds encountered. This makes the discoveries of parallels between the novella and the reader's lived reality possible and meaningful.

Though his works are didactic, Su Tong does more than just teach the reader, in that the reader experiences the unfolding of life and its patterns, through the tension, conflict and questioning of values in his abundantly detailed and image-filled stories. This results in an ingestion and internalization of the insights in each novella ready to be unearthed. This is art, and all art aims, whether mimetic or didactic, to heighten, broaden and deepen the reader's awareness of life.

When a work is examined, the traditional critic interprets the created world of values, and this analysis shows the author's way of regarding life embodied in his writings (211). Su

Tong is an avant-garde artist who, by definition, intends to break conventions. We have seen how Su Tong illuminates the ornate traps that his female characters mindlessly live in. Here we see his vision of the relationship between woman and woman, and woman and society. Patterns and qualities in Su Tong's artistry of image and detail suggest implications beyond the novella and about the lives of the readers themselves. Since his novellas are didactic, Su Tong reveals much about his vision in the messages that he embeds in his novellas for the reader to discover.

Su Tong examines the tensions between individuals and society, tensions that are richly portrayed in his family-based novellas. Friedman argues that a writer confronts his/her protagonist with something threatening. How this confrontation is resolved results in a change in a character's fortune, character, or thought. Although Su Tong's characters change little over the course of his stories, they do encounter something that threatens them -- the traps that they are mindlessly living in. The reader experiences the protagonists' encounters with this threat, and it is the reader who undergoes change as a result.

DAVID DER-WEI WANG'S CONCEPTION OF CHINESE AVANT-GARDE

Su Tong's interview in *Contemporary Chinese Literature and Art*, by Richard J. Smith, has a line that stands out from the page: "It is the critic's job to make comparisons between fiction and society -- not the writer's."⁶ In another interview Su Tong says the same thing, but follows it with "I do not want to exercise influence on society with my work."⁷ Have I been fulfilling my role as critic by discovering messages that were only of my making and ascribing

⁶ Richard J. Smith, "Contemporary Chinese Literature and Art (draft)" <<http://www.owl.net.rice.edu>> (Dec. 20, 1997).

⁷ Mark Leenhouts, "The Contented Smile of the Writer: an Interview with Su Tong," *China Information*, (1997, no.11) 79.

them to Su Tong? As I place my conclusions concerning form in the larger context of what Su Tong intends, it would seem so.

In *Running Wild: China's New Writers*, David Der-wei Wang sees the unifying principle in the new writers' works as the literal story itself; anything else seen in them is put in place by the reader. The writers record a slice of life, in stories about (that mean) nothing (*Running* 346). Mao Zedong, at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and the Arts, stated that the mission for artists and writers is to awaken and arouse the masses to unite and struggle for change. This is exactly what I argued earlier seeing Su Tong's novellas as wake-up calls to change the lives of his readers. To be avant-garde, Su Tong could not possibly follow the mission set out by Chairman Mao. Is Su Tong creating art for art's sake with no utopian illusions, or sending messages to change society as my formal analysis seemed to be able to discover?⁸

Henry Y. H. Zhao, in *The Lost Boat*, notes that even though "Chinese fiction tends to be didactic to send a message through the text," the avant-garde does not do so.⁹ Zhao sees the new writers as sending no messages or clues about how to interpret the text. He sees the new literature as more of a corrosive that eats away at society's foundations, and argues that it must be read and criticized in a new light. David Der-wei Wang answers the question "Does the new literature mean anything?" with another question "Does it matter?" (*Running* 246).

Related to this notion is the aversion of the new writers to the "hard core realism" of former writers and their obsession with saving China (*Running* 253). The new writers see writing as neither political action nor a solution to China's problems. Su Tong says he "just writes about people: their lives and relationships with others, the way they look at others and at society, the

⁸ Richard J. Smith, "Contemporary" (Dec. 20, 1997).

⁹ Henry Zhao, *Lost Boat*, 15.

world."¹⁰ David Der-wei Wang sees the new writers like Su Tong writing to "titillate not teach" (*Running* 254) in "stories that lead nowhere, that end before anything happens" (*Running* 255). Nonetheless, his character focus and slice of life emphasis does account for much of the evidence that I used to characterize Su Tong's novellas as didactic.

The unifying principle is the story, the literal story that I found myself praising as artistic and elaborate in imagery and description. The new writers' "unabashed attachment to the subject matter" makes irrelevant my categorizing their works as mimetic or didactic, when the focus and the only focus is the richly ornate story itself (*Running* 253). The writers are no longer in the service of society for they are independent artists, seeing literature and writing as fun and finding their pleasure in the art of storytelling.¹¹

The search for solutions in fiction is also seen by the avant-garde as a projection onto the story itself. Su Tong says, "the writer does not have to give solutions to the problems he raises in his fiction. As a writer he does not discuss social issues, but merely depicts on the basis of his own observations."¹² Su Tong is saying that he does not even bring up the issue of living unexamined lives -- never mind if the readers are also living similar lives.

Where does this leave the reader or critic? On the one hand, traditional formal analysis based on Friedman's approach leaves me with a supportable interpretation of Su Tong's three novellas. David Der-wei Wang's conception of Chinese avant-garde literature reduces my findings to the projections that I, the reader, have imposed on the stories supplied by Su Tong. How can I account for the meanings that I discovered in the novellas, yet respect the avant-garde writers' stated intentions? The writer should know his/her story best, yet readers do come away

¹⁰ Mark Leenhouts, "Contented Smile," 71.

¹¹ Howard Goldblatt, *Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused*, New York: Grove Press, 1995.

¹² Mark Leenhouts, "Contented Smile," 80.

from literature with insights that can be life altering. David Der-wei Wang states that readers project meaning on to the story, yet does not elaborate further.

POSSIBLE MIDDLE GROUND

Despite their professed rejection of a societal role, the avant-garde writers' product has a needed function in society. My hypothesis allows for a compromise that combines the traditional and avant-garde conceptions of literature. In his paper "Thoughts On Politics and Critical Paradigms In Modern Chinese Literature," Michael S. Duke refers to the strict adherence to either conception, in the belief that it will lead the reader or critic to truth, as "method fetishism."¹³ Equally limiting is dividing literature into two camps and each side writing one academic paper after another defending its position. There is middle ground between these two positions that proponents of each do not examine due to their paradigm fetishism.

I propose that the avant-garde writers, because of their focus on the story, with no intent to teach or reform society, produce a canvas with the necessary background painted in. In Su Tong's novellas, for example, the setting is painted by the *yin* principle dominant in his work, with ornate but abstract character portraits completed, including a protagonist attractive enough to engage the reader. That each novella includes sufficient drama compels the reader to interact with the canvas.

Wayne Booth provides the 'how' to my proposal that interaction with the portraits produces effects in the reader's character and the life that he/she leads following engagement with a narrative. The seed for change "may not be in the [narrative] poem itself actually, but it is actualized by me [the reader]. It could not be actualized if it was not there, in potential, in the

¹³ Michael, S. Duke, "Thoughts On Politics and Critical Paradigms In Modern Chinese Literature," *Modern China* (January 1993) 62.

poem” (Booth, *Company* 89). Booth points out that it is in the interaction between the reader and the narrative that any effect is produced. Despite modern writers stating that their works mean nothing, the world’s history of censorship and book bannings points to the belief that the stories people read will determine who they will become (160). When a reader interacts in a conversation with the canvases provided by Su Tong, he/she can ‘try on for size’ new ways of thinking, living, and being, allowing him/her to live a richer and fuller life than he/she could manage on his/her own (223). Living and conversing with the otherness of these fictional characters can lead the reader to practice ways of living more profound, more sensitive, more intense and more generous than he/she might ever consider doing. The author can correct the reader’s faults, rebuke his/her insensitivities, and mold dreams by showing the reader what life could be if he/she works to “earn the title of equal and true friend” (223).

While the lofty possibilities inherent in Booth may seem out of touch with the dark worlds in Su Tong’s fictional worlds, the reader can learn as much from a negative example of what is not desirable, as from positive examples in narratives. The quality of a reader’s life is seen in large part as identical to the quality of the company he/she keeps (172). The company in Su Tong may be more like a dose of bitter medicine to remedy a reader, but is valuable for just such a gift offering (57). In this way, Su Tong provides companionship for his readers that will cause them to consider his/her own character, and reconsider how each is living his/her life. This Su Tong accomplishes by providing friends to interact and converse with. Real friends are able to share deep and intimate conversation and thus enter and influence each other’s lives (178). The canvas is in itself a more than adequate work of art to be enjoyed for its own sake, but when the reader interacts with it, it becomes a life changing personal masterpiece.

A look at my traditional analysis demonstrates just how much the reader can be influenced during an interaction with the characters, setting and the implied author provided by Su Tong. It was my intention to edit out most of the painting that I did on Su Tong's canvas, but it is a strong example of how this addition to a story canvas can occur even when the reader's intent is to analyze only what the writer provides. Su Tong's works need not be characterized as didactic or mimetic, but are to be enjoyed for themselves, and like any piece of art, for the chance they provide readers to examine themselves to see alternatives to the way they are living. The messages that I concluded Su Tong embedded for the reader to find are a joint production of the conversation between the reader, the implied author, Su Tong, and the setting and characters in the novellas.

--- As the reader of this thesis may conclude, I find myself between the positions taken by Wang and Friedman, with newfound friends on both sides. Readers can come away from all art with insights into life. Rather than call for the abandonment of Friedman's detailed approach to literature analysis, I propose a refocusing of Friedman's approach. Combined with elements from Booth in the way I propose, the approaches of Friedman and David Wang, open a path to literary enjoyment satisfactory to all involved, as well as avoiding academic infighting between these approaches.

Chapter 4: Su Tong's Artistic Style

Friedman concludes his text, *Form and Meaning*, with an extensive review of vision, imagery and such elements. While there has been a shift away from Friedman's type of criticism, (*Company* 84), I will include my analysis of these elements as they appear in Su Tong's three novellas, not as support for Friedman's approach, but rather because it shows Su Tong's skill. All of the elements that follow show the exquisiteness of the canvases that Su Tong provides for each reader to interact with to better his/her life. Intended by the writer or not, art has such an effect.

To produce art, writers tap into the transcendental as a source for the illuminating insights into life that they try to capture in their writings (*Form* 265). Artists and writers protest convention in their works and clear the way to solutions for their reader's problems. Su Tong does just this in providing an exquisite canvas with which I interacted, trying on new roles and characters allowing insights meaningful for me. The sex and violence of Su Tong's fiction takes on a new light when seen in this manner, as he allows each reader to discover what he/she needs to discover -- if anything at all. Su Tong, through his provision of canvases depicting dark fictional worlds, calls his readers to transcend the mundane, and see what life might be like.

Writers like Hemmingway, who immerse themselves in experience in the hope that experience will produce insights into life, live in what Friedman refers to as "middle vision" (274), with grinding meaninglessness in the time between insights. Su Tong depicts the grinding

meaninglessness on a societal level, when a society is between insights concerning how life should be lived.

One wider context that Friedman emphasizes for viewing literature is the context of the story itself. The world of the women in the three novellas, for the most part, is limited to the narrow confines of one area, the immediate context. The action takes place in a narrow space, either in a household or in a small store. This limited space is stable and, most of the time, sealed. Even when it does have an exit, for example, when Jian Shaofen in "Embroidery" goes from an inner circle to the outside world, the foreign environment and its life never break the seal. Moreover, the setting is symbolic. Lotus and her counterparts, the Jian sisters and Xian, Zhi, and Xiao are all limited to their home, symbolizing that the inner space of each of the individuals is sealed.

Beyond the limited immediate context, Su Tong usually ignores the cultural and historic settings. It is as if Su Tong is only telling the stories through the minor details of the life of the past, and where that past is located in history does not matter. In "Wives and Concubines," there is little that indicates the story's historical context. The reader has to estimate that it is set between the early 1910's to the 1920's, based on the immediate context of the story. Lotus is a university student and there were almost no female university students until after the May Fourth movement; even then, few women entered university. Lotus has short hair, and wears a white blouse and black skirt; typical dress for a female student of this era. Chen Zuoqian has many wives, which tells the reader that it is unlikely that the historical context is later than 1940, because by then polygamy was very rare.

In "Lives of Women," the author does specify the year: for instance, Xian's time is 1938, Zhi's time is 1959, and Xiao's time is 1987. But Su Tong rarely suggests the influence that these

historical backgrounds would have had, despite the fact that these three periods are historically crucial to China. In 1938, the anti-Japanese war was raging. In 1959 the People's Republic of China launched a series of nation-wide political movements, such as the Great-Leap Forward, People's Communes, and campaigns like the Anti-Rightist campaign. Yet the only glimpses that the reader has of these upheavals are when Zhi goes back home to steal a metal pan to participate in the steel-making movement, or when Xiao runs away to the countryside to escape her home life. In 1986, China's economic reforms reached their height, and by 1987 when Xiao is the focus of the story, the splendour of the reform, that should be apparent, is nowhere perceptible in the story. In a word, the historic context casts no shadow on these women's lives. The only possible exception is the lack of consequence for the Chen household following Coral's murder for adultery.

Realistically, it would not be likely that these women could be exempt from any influences from the historical or political context. Xian's unusual family background should have caused much suffering for her or her daughter during the Cultural Revolution. Even Zou Jie, the only Communist in his class and the son of a proletarian family, does not seem to have a second thought in marrying Zhi, who is from a petty bourgeoisie background. If placed in the real historical context, this marriage is bound to negatively affect him; yet in Su Tong's story, neither Zhi's nor Zou Jie's prospects are affected by their family background. If anything, Zhi benefits during this period as she is allowed to participate in an important project in her work unit, and later is "photographed with leaders from Beijing and the province" (*Modai Aiqing* 300). The picture is published on the first page of *Liberation Daily* -- one of the most important government propaganda newspapers. The Cultural Revolution is hardly mentioned, the only exception being when Xiao goes to the countryside as a high school graduate. Ironically, a

Communist like Zou Jie does not die for the Party but for a woman; Xiao volunteers to help in the countryside in order to escape her personally stressful family environment, and not in response to Mao Zedong's urgent call for educated urban youth to work in the rural areas.

The historical context of "Embroidery" is just as unclear. There is no way to guess its year. The only time history is vaguely mentioned is when Su Meixian says that "there have been sixteen or seventeen male managers from the joining of state and private ownership (*gongsi heying*) to the present."¹ Since Su Meixian started working in the soy sauce store at the age of seventeen (*Modai Aiqing*, 323), and since the last year of joining of state and private ownership was 1956, it is appropriate to guess that the historical context of the story is the late 1970s or early 1980s, when wearing a pair of liberation shoes (*Jiefang xie*), as does Mr. Zhang, would have been seen as out of fashion. In the real historical context, it is most likely that the Jian sister's bourgeois family background, as well as the isolated life led by them, would have drawn political reprisals during the Cultural Revolution. Given the personalities created by the author in the story, it is very likely that one of the women in the soy sauce store, for example Gu Yaxian or Su Meixian, would have questioned the motivation of the two sisters' isolation, and would have informed on the sisters to gain some advantage with the local authorities. This merging of just enough reality, fiction, and history underlies Su Tong's novellas -- or Su Tong is ignorant of history. With the effort he expends on his portraits, it seems more a purposeful choice than ignorance.

Friedman argues that imagery is a key to infer meanings and interpret literature (*Form* 297). Imagery exists in the relationship between the statement on the page and the sensation that

¹ Zhu Yang, *Zhonghua renmin gonghe guo sishi nian* (The Forty Years of History in People's Republic of China), Jilin: 1989, 326.

it produces in the readers mind (289), making it a powerful tool for writers to achieve their work's intended effect. Su Tong's imagery is so well-developed that an examination of imagery in his novellas will confirm his artistic abilities, and thus justify his focus on the literal story to provide a forum for interaction with the reader.

Su Tong's genius lies in his ability to paint an engaging canvas for the reader to interact with, through his exquisite use of imagery. One prominent example can be found in the description of the wisteria vine and the well in "Wives and Concubines." The ghostly imagery of the vine and the well imbues the scene with an ominous, sinister mood foreshadowing Lotus's fate. The first time that Lotus sees the well, "she felt a coldness as hard as stone rubbing slowly up against her body" (*Raise*, 22), hinting to the reader that the well plays an important role in the story. The ominous foreshadowing continues when Lotus sees that "the wisteria vine swaying in the wind takes on the appearance of a person, and in the well [she sees] two women -- one is herself and the other looks like herself, floating on the bottom" (36). Later, Lotus sees "the withered wisteria vine blowing in the wind and [she hears it] emitting some sort of desolate murmur; and the well is still eerily calling her" (53). Then she perceives "a pale white hand, dripping wet, reaching out to cover her eyes from the unfathomable depth at the bottom of the well" (53) and "the water in the well suddenly bubbled up as the sound of a vague and very distant voice [of death? fear? of the other women who died in this well?] penetrated her ears: 'Lotus. . . come down here, Lotus. Lotus. . . come down here, Lotus'" (54). So, whenever Lotus goes near the abandoned well, "she [can] not escape those nightmarish hallucinations while feeling a cold vapour, emitted by the well, enveloping her body and spirit" (74). In the end, Lotus "saw the pale luminosity of that hand reaching through her window, dripping wet and beckoning

to her” (84). The recurring images linger within the reader arousing sombre emotions and establishing a dire mood.

Su Tong employs metaphors and symbols that help to focus ideas and feelings so that each novella's impact is stronger and deeper for the reader. In "Embroidery," the soy sauce store serves as a metaphor for the three saleswomen's trivial lives, as well as a symbol of the life that Jian Shaofen escapes to. Soy sauce is an ingredient that Chinese people use in their everyday meals. "Oil, salt, soy sauce and vinegar (*you yan jiang cu*)" is a common expression used to describe everyday trifles in China. The three saleswomen have the traits shared by women with less education, being overly concerned with the trifles of life, while ignoring the reality of lives they are leading. The two peaches growing in the two sisters' garden are a symbol of change that is going to happen to their home. The medicine soup that Jian Shaozhen drinks every day symbolizes the bitterness of her life. In "Lives of Women," the plant on Xian's window and the yellow mark on Zhi's white sheet are symbols of their virginity. The sadness or puzzlement that Xian and Zhi feel when seeing them is a reflection of their regret and fear; they recognize their loss in playing love as a game, and they mourn the loss of their authentic self as they succumb to a life of hypocrisy.

Despite being considered avant-garde, Su Tong does not avoid using conventional literary devices in his writing. A dominant traditional characteristic in his writing that can result in an effect on his readers is poetic images of nature to expose the psychology of the characters by alluding to the *yin* principle. In China, the *yin* principle connotes darkness, coldness, submissiveness, negative feelings as well as a sense of temptation and evil; in contrast, *yang* connotes the light, active, intellectual or Apollonian side.² For example, fire, sun are *yang*, but

² Charle-James N. Bailey, *On the Yin and Yang Nature of Language*, 1982, 6.

water and moon are *yin*. A rainy day is called “*yintian*,” a dead soul is called “*yinhun*,” and hell is called “*yinjian*.” The imagery of the *yin* principle in Su Tong’s three novellas seems to suggest the female character’s mental and emotional states. The images that are associated with the *yin*, such as rain, wind, moon, snow, darkness, autumn, sorrow and death, occur repeatedly to strengthen the story’s atmosphere and emotion.³ Su Tong’s choice of images suggests the protagonist’s restlessness, sexual desire, retaliatory intention imbuing *yin* dominated scenes with a mood that foreshadows disaster.

To show the domination of the *yin* principle, I will include some examples from each of Su Tong’s three novellas. In “Wives and Concubines,” it is through a “moon gate” (*Raise* 11) that Lotus is carried into the Chen’s household. Coral’s appearance is “damp and laden with sorrow, like a blade of grass in the wind” (31). It is on a rainy day that Lotus meets Chen Zuoqian and later she does not understand why it is that “everytime it was dark and rainy her sexual desires were heightened” (35). Lotus has sex with Chen Zuoqian “all because of the cold rain” (35). When it is raining and windy, “the entire world was unbearably damp” (35), and “the wisteria vine swaying in the wind took on the appearance of a person” (36). When “in the garden the autumn rain was bleak and dreary” (37), their lovemaking “had an aura of death about it” (37). It is after “the autumn cold had arrived” that “the leaves fell all around, converting the garden into a single patch of brown” (45). It is in the wind that Lotus took on a ghostly image: “blowing back and forth in the wind, her full skirt looked just like a white butterfly” (46). When she is restless, “outside, the autumn wind was blowing again; it was a cold wind that blew the darkness little by little in to the garden” (48). After she refuses Chen

³ A. C. Graham, *Yin, Yang, and the Nature of Correlative Thinking*, The Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986, 33.

Zuoqian's demand for kinky sex, "she saw the moonlight shining on the floor through a crack in the curtain, a cold sliver of moonlight, very white and very dull" (70). Coral's death is foreshadowed when she is dancing in the garden, her "long sleeves flowing in the wind, the shadow of her dancing body resembling an enchanting apparition" (71). She then said to Lotus, "The female [*yin*] principle is too powerful in this garden; it would only be what fate ordains if it injures the masculine [*yang*] principle" (74). On a snowy night Lotus dreams of Swallow's retaliation. Finally, on a snowy day Coral is caught in adultery and is sentenced to death by the Chen household. I think it is exactly due to this *yin* principle that Feipu says, "since I was little, I thought women were frightening" (90).

In "Embroidery," it is during the rainy season that the three women in the soy sauce store chase and kill flies (*Modai Aiqing* 323). After the last male manager is chased away, Gu Yaxian comments, "Maybe the *yin* principle is too heavy at this place, so no man can last here" (326). On a rainy day Jian Shaofen's eyes look longingly at a wedding car (327). The "now and again rain falling on the stone street" agitates Gu Yaxian (331). It is raining on the day Gu Yaxian invites Jian Shaofen to her son's wedding feast (342). It is "the suffocating wet wind from the south" as well as a fly that lit up Jian Shaofen's well-hidden fire of anger (351).

In "Lives of Women," Su Tong continues his use of *yin* imagery. It is on a windy day, with "parasol tree leaves dancing wildly in the air," that Xian meets Mr. Meng and predicts that this encounter is going to "change her fate for a lifetime" (*Modai Aiqing* 276). The day Xian leaves the condominium rented by Mr. Meng, a breeze is "blowing on the red flowers in front of the entrance" (281). When the summer is "hot and and wet" (283), and Xian contemplates the rain, her heart is like "dead water" (283). On the last day Zhi awaits her husband's coming, "the pouring rain outside of the window made her disheartened" (296). Facing the scene of Zou Jie's

death, Xiao shivers when the wind “blows on the shrubs and bushes on the side road” (306).

Finding her husband has cheated her, Xiao “felt her heart was sinking little by little, and a deep feeling of cold was undulating inside her fragile body. She looked at the sky which was becoming darker and darker, and the whole world became completely empty” (314).

Besides the images from nature, there are many other descriptive words that signify the *yin* principle informing the three novellas. In each work words recur that signify darkness, coldness and vagueness, such as dusk (*muse*), autumn (*qiu*), lonely and grieved (*qiqing*), desolate (*xiaotiao*), greyish (*huimengmeng*), fainting (*youyou*), sad and sentimental (*qice*), dark (*heian*), dim (*anran*), empty (*kongkong dangdang*), cool feeling (*liangyi*), shadow (*yinying*), cloudy (*yinchen*) and cold (*lengleng*). These words help to build a grey and obscure atmosphere that foreshadows misfortune. Also contributing to the *yin*-atmosphere is Lotus’s dreaming of Swallow and her father following their deaths, and the operas sung by Coral, such as “The Hanged Woman (*nü diao*),” “Tears on a Barren Mountain (*Huangshan lei*),” “Tenth Sister Du (*Du Shiniang*)” and “Autumn Lament (*Qiuyuan qu*).” This *yin* element expresses the emotion of each character and is conveyed in Su Tong’s poetic language. Such an abundant use of traditional literary elements like *yin* imagery differentiates Su Tong from other contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers.

It is through this inner world of *yin* that the characters’ psychological reaction is conveyed. The *yin* principle seems to connote a passiveness for the victim, the absence of realization and awareness, as well as weakening and faltering as a result of losing one’s moral strength and courage. When the reader frequently comes across the words and expressions listed above, he/she may unconsciously sense the gloomy or ghostly atmosphere and feel the lonely sentiment and the foreshadowing of danger and fear for the character.

To delineate *yang*, the counterpart to *yin*, Su Tong describes one or two scenes of sunlight in which the scene changes to light and animation. This change is due to the *yang* connoting a totally different meaning and mood. In "Wives and Concubines," the communication between Lotus and Feipu is "like the winter sunlight, bearing with it a modicum of warmth" (*Raise* 65). In "Embroidery," when Jian Shaofen was young and naive, "her eyes were like a scared deer, and she was totally soaked in the sunlight under which her skin gave off a snow-white glint, like a piece of thin and fragile wax paper" (*Modai Aiqing* 329). Xian's recollection of her virgin life in "Lives of Women," was prompted by her contemplation of "a delicate little flower and its fragile and green leaves, that to her seemed quiet like a virgin in the sunlight" (282). However, the most striking sunny description is of Jian Shaofen:

Jian Shaofen felt the sunlight of the early summer was a little too bright, so she slowed down her needle work, and even so, working outdoors brought her such a sense of freshness and relaxation that she was thinking that if the weather was nice she would do more sewing in the yard, sewing flowers, birds, water, lotus leaves and love birds etc. Hanging the colourful thread on the clothes rope, she thought that the colour looked particularly beautiful under the outdoor sun. She changed position and sat down so the brightness did not hurt her eyes. She smiled at the window when she noticed that somebody from the store was peering at her and the things she was drying (339).

Su Tong often depicts struggles between the outer world of temptation and the inner (*yin*) world of darkness. The sunlight that bathes each of these women lets the reader witness her mental reaction to the suppressed, authentic part of herself. The sun is a stimulus as well as a reflection of her longing. Jian Shaofen's enjoyment of the exposure to sunlight suggests her secret unconscious longing for a life different from the one she is leading. However, the occasional *yang* quality manifested in the stories is far less dominant than the contrary *yin*

principle, which indicates the pre-eminence of the theme of “despair and solitude” in the three stories and is much more abundantly explored and developed.⁴

To further expand his character portraits, Su Tong expresses the workings of each of his character's unconscious mind by including a non-logical and surrealistic element in the three novellas. In her dream, Lotus sees the dead Swallow coming through the window at night and stabbing her with a hair pin. In the morning, when Lotus wakes up, she “noticed there really was a long hairpin struck into the brocade bed covers; she picked it up and held it in her palm. It was cold as ice” and “the window was partly open, just as in her dream” (*Raise* 93). So she is left wondering why she did not die. When Jian Shaofen, in “Embroidery,” is watching an opera with Mr. Zhang, her first date with a man, she hears a sharp voice ordering her to leave. She struggles with it but does not comply with the order (*Modai Aiqing* 355). In “Lives of Women,” as Xian is leaving the main door of the condominium that she shares with Mr. Meng, she hears her own crying coming out of the window on the eighth floor, and when “she covered her ears with her hands, the sound of the crying continued” (281). Just before Xian dies, Xiao thinks that she can hear a plaintive melody floating into the room from outside the window as if it were a ceremony accompanying Xian's death (317).

It is unlikely that a voice would order Jian Shaofen to leave the theatre, and the voice is probably coming from the part of Jian Shaofen's psyche that is afraid of walking into reality or away from her sister. It is also impossible for Xian to hear her own crying coming out of the window when she is in fact at least eight floors down from the room; nor is it likely that Xiao would hear a melody accompanying her grandmother's death. It is too great a coincidence that Lotus would dream of Swallow stabbing her with a hairpin, and then actually find a hairpin. Su

⁴ Mark Leenhouts, “Contented Smile,” 71.

Tong's use of surrealism does point to his skill as a writer, to depict his characters encountering moments of irrationality when undergoing acute crises.

I think Su Tong uses this surrealism to delve more deeply and reflect more realistically the unconscious mind of his characters. These three women, Lotus, Jian Shaofen and Xian, have a tendency to escape reality by not examining themselves or the lives they are leading. Lotus does this by daydreaming: "the things she thought about were all so aimless and irrelevant that even she herself could not make any sense out of them" (*Raise* 84). Jian Shaofen accomplishes this escape by listening blindly to her sister, and Xian by blaming her life's fate on the "accidental pregnancy." In Lotus's unconscious mind, she feels guilty about her involvement in the death of Swallow, but she does not admit her guilt to anyone, including herself. Nor does the omniscient narrator give any indication that the protagonist has ever repented her involvement in the death of Swallow. Does that mean she is not regretful at all? For Lotus, the answer is no, for through the surrealistic passage, the reader has a glimpse at her unconscious mind and realizes that what is bothering Lotus is more than what she has admitted even to herself. Jian Shaofen and the women in "Lives of Women" live similarly unexamined lives. Through the surreal passages revolving around these characters, Su Tong gives his readers a glimpse into unconscious factors in people's lives and dreams. When readers encounter such a canvas, this may cause them to more deeply examine their own lives and unexamined motivations.

The surrealism displayed by Su Tong is another kind of reality or part of reality, or at least can be regarded as symbolism. Lotus's half death in her dream is a symbol of her insanity; the voice that Jian Shaofen hears is a symbol of inner struggle, and the crying that Xian hears is a symbol of death -- Xian subconsciously knows that things will never be the same when she leaves the condominium with no money, no love, and no career, but with a baby whom she does

not love. Thus, the surrealism used here is symbolic of Xian's inner death and indicates that she passively accepts that life has nothing to offer in the here and now. Xian sees her life's course as irrevocably fixed, a view that will prevent her from accomplishing anything from then on. At that moment, Xian actually has given up struggling, as she waits for fate to choose her outcome. So when Xian is indeed physically dying, the song of death returns.

As the above examples show, Su Tong provides engaging canvases for his readers to interact with to sort through alternative roles, characteristics and life views that each reader needs to examine to live a more fulfilling life. His use of selective historical context, imagery, *yin* principle and surrealism, draw the reader to his canvases, and make his characters linger in his readers' minds. Combining approaches to literary interpretation -- Booth's, Friedman's and David Wang's -- does not exclude the reader from gaining insights into life, it just refocuses the source of the insights to a conversation involving the reader, the writer through the implied author, and the canvas the writer develops. If the writer did not provide such a canvas for the reader, and engage the reader in the process of friendship development, the insights would remain buried. Interaction with the textured canvases of Su Tong allows a reader access to great stories that can be enjoyed for their own sake, as well as a place to unearth insights to enrich his/her life.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Friedman approach led me to conclude that Su Tong has expended great effort to develop his novellas so that they appeal on multiple levels, with the end result being the transmission of catalysts for contemplation and insight to the reader. The examination of the form of Su Tong's novellas led me to see them as didactic in that the message that he intended for his readers unifies his works.

Mao Zedong, at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and the Arts, stated that the mission for artists and writers is to awaken and arouse the masses to unite and struggle for change. Hence in Mao's era, a 'correct' interpretation to all Chinese literature was expected. In sharp contrast "avant-garde fiction deliberately denies the reader any clue to a 'correct' interpretation" (*Lost Boat* 16). This denial of a correct interpretation -- possibly in reaction to the Maoist control of Chinese literature for so many decades -- is possibly why David Der-wei Wang sees the literal story itself as the unifying principle in new Chinese writers' works, with anything else seen or discovered in the story having been put there by the reader or critic. The writers record a slice of life in stories about nothing, and make art for art's sake with no utopian illusions. The messages for the reader, that I saw as unifying Su Tong's works during my analysis based on Friedman's approach, would be seen by avant-gardists as mostly having been placed there by me.

Booth sees the unique value of fiction being its relatively cost free offer of trial runs allowing each reader to try out a mode of life, or a new element of character which in real life would come with costs (*Company* 484). In narratives, these trial runs have little consequence,

and a rich antidote for any choice is in good supply in rival narratives. In one month of reading, a reader can try out more lives than he/she can test in a lifetime to see if any are an improvement on the life he/she is living. If the readers sees him/herself as in the process of becoming and therefore open to experience, all will be well as he/she tries on these alternative life modes and roles. The reader is able to find these alternatives by interacting with the portraits produced by the writer.

That so many interpretations exist of Su Tong's writings led me to more closely examine Friedman's approach and David Wang's description of the Chinese avant-garde in light of Booth. This multitude of interpretations makes a combination of approaches seem plausible. The multiple interpretations are the result of each critic discovering, in friendly conversation with the portraits from the narrative, insights needed to live a fuller life. Su Tong's works are seen by various critics as misogynous, feminist, portrait filled, cheap sex and violence, as well as message filled (by me).¹ It would be almost impossible for Su Tong's works to be all of these, yet each conclusion is supported by critics and their evidence. The combination of the ideas of Friedman, Wang and Booth into one approach, is supported by these many conclusions about Su Tong's works.

Until combining Friedman, Wang and Booth, I was puzzled that the avant-garde positioning seems to preclude any social function for their artistic works. The avant-garde writers, because of their focus on the story with no intent to teach or reform society, produce canvases populated with engaging portraits ready for the reader to interact with. The canvas in

¹ Lu Tonglin, *Misogyny*, Stanford University Press, 1995; *Shijie Ribao*, The World Journal Vancouver Edition, (November 2000, C4); David Der-Wei Wang, *Running Wild*; Mo Luo & Shi Chunsheng, "Taoxun yu xianluo" *Dangdai zuojia pinglun*, (Beijing, No.2, 1998).

itself is a more than adequate work of art, but in friendly interaction with a reader and the 'trying on' of alternative lifestyles and characteristics, produces personally relevant insights into life specific to the reader's needs. The reader discovers great and meaningful (to this reader) possibilities in the narrative being examined, that cause him/her to contemplate his/her own life.

My canvas hypothesis may seem too metaphysical, but art, even art for art's sake, does affect the reader. If the writer of the story intends no effect in an agnostic or atheistic society, who is left to be the source of the effect that literature or art has on the viewer? In a religious society, the source of the effect on the reader could be seen as the hand of God showing the reader areas in his/her life that need to be examined. In light of Booth, the source of the effect is found in the interaction between the reader, the writer through the implied author, and the narrative's characters and situations. Here the reader has the opportunity to 'try on for size' alternative ways of living and being in the course of interacting with the story, causing an effect that carries over into the reader's life.

To really develop my canvas elaboration would entail further research and investigations. A first step could be to design a slice of life story canvas populated by engaging portraits with minimal plot that involves little change or resolution for the protagonist. If such a story was designed to have no intended message for the reader, yet written well enough not to just be boring, it would be a way to test the concepts presented by my proposal. The measure of the concepts would be to see how many meanings or interpretations arise from interaction with the characters and situations in this story. A large number of interpretations of this study's story could be seen as supporting the concept that the reader, in interaction with the narrative, develops meanings that he/she requires to better live life. If such personally relevant meanings

were discovered in an inert piece of writing, they could be seen as support for my canvas hypothesis.

The most significant feature that Su Tong leaves for his readers to experience is exuberant portraits of believable characters. My examination of his novellas began with a detailed examination of Su Tong and the characters that he artistically paints. His portraits are almost overdone in their texture and vitality. These character portraits linger in the reader's mind like the enigmatic smile of the Mona Lisa, causing the reader to think deeply. The inclusion by Su Tong of traditional literary elements like poetic, beautifully haunting imagery accompanying these characters creates an atmosphere that also lingers in the reader's mind and heart. Though the novellas have little plot, the characters, the imagery and the atmosphere combine to have their effect on the reader.

I began my research into Su Tong because I was drawn by his poetic artistry in depicting characters that linger in the mind of the reader. Long after I forgot the details of one of his stories I had researched, a character from an obscure plot would rise in my memory. This experience led me to research why it happened, because I have read hundreds of other stories without encountering this phenomenon before or since. The textured characters of Su Tong led me to a combination of approaches to literary analysis, and not just another interpretation of this author's works. This combination allows the reader to come away from literature with the insights his/her life requires. Regardless of whether or not it was intended by Su Tong, his writings had an effect on me, his reader.

Glossary

Ah Cheng	阿城
Anran	黯然
Chen Zuoqian	陈佐千
"Chun"	<<春>>
"Cixiu"	"刺绣"
David Der-wei Wang	王德威
"Diba ge shi tongxiang"	"第八个是铜像"
"Du shiniang"	"杜十娘"
"Ershi shiji zhongguo xiaoshuo fazhanshi"	"二十世纪中国小说发展史"
Feipu	飞浦
"Funu shenghuo"	"妇女生活"
Ge Fei	格非
Gong Li	巩莉
Gongsi heying	公私合营
Gu Yaxian	顾雅仙
Hang Suyu	杭素玉
Heian	黑暗
"Hongfen"	"红粉"
"Honglou meng"	<<红楼梦>>
"Huang shan lei"	"荒山泪"
Hui mengmeng	灰蒙蒙

"Hunying jijing"	"婚姻即景"
"Jia"	<<家>>
Jian Shaofen	简少芬
Jian Shaozhen	简少贞
Jiefang xie	解放鞋
"Jin ping mei"	<<金瓶梅>>
Kongkong dangdang	空空荡荡
Lao Song	老宋
Lengleng	冷冷
Li Feng	黎风
Liangyi	凉意
"Lihun zhinan"	"离婚指南"
Li Shaohong	李少红
"Ling yizhong funu shenghuo"	"另一种妇女生活"
Ma Yuan	马原
"Mi"	<<米>>
"Miandui zuojia"	"面对作家"
"Modai aiqing"	<<末代爱情>>
Muse	暮色
"Nanfang de duoluo"	<<南方的堕落>>
Nanjing	南京
"Nu diao"	"女吊"
"Qiaobian chaguan"	<<桥边茶馆>>
Qice	凄恻

"Qi qie chengqun"	"妻妾成群"
Qiqing	凄清
"Qiu"	<<秋>>
Qiuyu	秋雨
"Qiuyuan qu"	"秋怨曲"
"San Wang"	<<三王>>
"Shangxin de wudao"	<<伤心的舞蹈>>
"Shijie liangce"	<<世界两侧>>
"Shijie ribao"	"世界日报"
"Shouhuo"	<<收获>>
Shiyan xiaoshuo	实验小说
"Shiyi ji"	<<十一击>>
Su Meixian	粟美仙
Sun Hanzhou	孙汉周
Su Tong	苏童
"Su Tong yixiang"	"苏童意象"
Su Zhou	苏州
Wang Gan	王干
Wenxue yanjiu hui	文学研究会
"Wode zizhuan"	"我的自传"
Wudou	武斗
"Wu Zetian"	<<武则天>>
Xian	嫫
Xiangchun jie	香椿街

"Xiangxiang yu yixiang jiashe de xinling fuqiao"	"想象与意象架设的心灵浮桥"
Xiao	萧
Xiaotiao	萧条
"Xin shiqi zhengming xiaoshuo zongheng tan"	<<新时期争鸣小说纵横谈">>
Xungen wenxue	寻根文学
Yan Jiaqi	严家其
yang	阳
"Yige pengyou zai lushang"	<<一个朋友在路上>>
"Yi jiu san si nian de taowang"	"一九三四年的逃亡"
Yi Xinding	易新鼎
yin	阴
Yinchen	阴沉
"Ying su zhi jia"	"罌粟之家"
Yinying	阴影
Youyou	幽幽
Yu Hua	余华
"Yuanyi"	"园艺"
Zhang Xue-xin	张学昕
Zhang Yimou	张艺谋
Zhi	芝
"Zhongguo xiandai dangdai wenxue yanjiu"	<<中国现代当代文学研究>>
"Zhongshan"	<<钟山>>
Zou Jie	邹杰

General Bibliography

Booth C. Wayne.

----- *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

----- *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Chen Mao. "Irony As Counter-Discourse: Su Tong and the Historical Novel In China"

Philological Papers (West Virginia University, no.144)1998.

Duke. Michael S.

----- *Blooming and Contending: Chinese Literature in the Post-Mao Era*, Indiana, 1985.

----- "Thoughts On Politics and Critical Paradigms In Modern Chinese Literature" *Modern China* (January. 1993).

----- "Walking Towards the World: A Turning Point in Contemporary Chinese Fiction" *World Literature Today* (Summer 1991, no. 65).

Friedman Norman. *Form and Meaning in Fiction*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975.

C.T. Hsia. *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971.

Knight Deirdre Sabina. "Decadence, Revolution and Self- Determination in Su Tong's Fiction"

Modern Chinese Literature (1998 no.10).

Leenhouts Mark. "The Contented Smile of the Writer: An Interview with Su Tong" *China*

Information (1997, no.11).

- Li Feng 黎风 *Xin shiqi zhengming xiaoshuo zongheng tan* (Criticizing New Chinese Controversial Literature) 新时期争鸣小说纵横谈 (China, Sichuan). 1995.
- Li Tuo. "The New Vitality of Modern Chinese" *Inside Out: Modernism and Postmodernism in Chinese Literary Culture*. Eds. Larson Wendy and Anne Wedell (Aarhus University Press, 1993).
- Lu Tonglin. *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism, and Oppositional Politics*, California: Stanford, 1995.
- McDougall Bonnie S. *Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan). 1980.
- Meng Yue. "Su Tong de 'jiashi' yu 'lishi' xiezuo" 苏童的家史与历史写作 (Su Tong's Geneological and Historical Writing), *Jintian* 今天 (1990, no. 2).
- Mo Luo and Shi Chunsheng 摩罗, 侍春生. "Taoxun yu xianluo" 逃寻与陷落 (Escape and Entrapment), *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 (1998, no. 2).
- Qi Shuyu 祁述浴. *Shichang jingji xia de zhongguo wenxue yishu* 市场经济下的中国文学艺术 (The Art of Chinese Literature Under The Market Economy), (Beijing, China). 1998.
- Su Tong 苏童.
- *Dahong denglong gaogao gua* 大红灯笼高高挂 (Raise the Red lantern) Taipei: Yuanliu, 1992.
- *Hongfen* 红粉 (Rouge), Taipei: Yuanliu, 1991.
- *Lihun zhinan* 离婚指南 (A Guide to Divorce), Taipei: Maitian, 1993.
- *Mi* 米 (Rice) Taipei: Yuanliu, 1993, Trans. by Howard Goldblatt, William Morrow, 1995.
- "Miandui zuojia" 面对作家 (Facing the Author), *Shijie ribao*, (World Journal) Vancouver

Edition, Nov.26. 2000 C4.

- *Modai aiqing* 末代爱情(Love of the Last Century), Jiangsu: China, 1994.
- *Nanfang de duoluo* 南方的堕落(The Decadence of the South), Taipei: Yuanliu, 1992.
- *Qi qie chengqun* 妻妾成群(Wives and Concubines), Taipei: Yuanliu, 1990.
- *Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas*, Trans. by Michael S. Duke, William Morrow, 1993.
- *Shangxin de wudao* 伤心的舞蹈(A Sad Dance), Taipei: Yuanliu, 1991.
- *Tianshi de liangshi* 天使的粮食(The Food of An Angel) Taipei: Maitian, 1997.
- "Wo de zizhuan" 我的自传(My Autobiography), Zuojia, (1990, no.5).
- *Yige pengyou zai lushang* 一个朋友在路上(A Friend on the Road), Hongkong: Tiandi tushu, 1993.
- *Wo de diwang shengya* 我的帝王生涯(My Life as an Emperor), Taipei: Yuanliu, 1997.
- Wang, Der-wei David. 王德威.
- *Yuedu dangdai xiaoshuo* 阅读当代小说(Reading Contemporary Fiction), Taipei: Yuanliu, 1991.
- "Shiji mo de xianfeng: Zhu Tianwen yu Su Tong" 世纪末的先锋:朱天文与苏童 (The Fin-de-siecle Avant-garde: Zhu Tianwen and Su Tong) *Jintian* 今天(1991, no.2).
- *Running Wild*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Wang Gan 王干. "Su Tong Yixiang" 苏童意象(The Image of Su Tong), *Huacheng* 花城(92, no.6).
- Wang Jing. *China's Avant-Garde Fiction*. Duke University Press, 1998.
- Yan Jiaqi 严家其. *Ten Year History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Institute of Current

China Studies), 1988.

Yi Xinding 易新鼎. *Ershi shiji zhongguo xiaoshuo fazhan shi* 二十世纪中国小说发展史
(The History of 20th Century Chinese Fiction), (Beijing: China), 1997.

Visser Robin. "Displacement of the Urban-Rural Confrontation in Su Tung's Fiction" *Modern Chinese Literature* (1995, no. 9).

Zhang Qinghua 张清华. *Zhongguo dangdai xianfeng wenxue sichao lun* 中国当代先锋文学思潮论
(Thoughts About the Avant Garde of Chinese Contemporary Literature)
(Jiangsu: China), 1997.

Zhang Xuexin 张学昕. "Xiangxiang yu yixiang jiashe de xinling fuqiao" 想象与意象架设的心灵浮桥
(The Soul's Floating Bridge: Built by Imagination and Imageries), *Zhongguo xiandai dangdai wenxue yanjiu* 中国现代当代文学研究(1998, no.11).

Zhao Henry. *Lost Boat: Avant-Garde Fiction From China*. Wellsweep Press, 1993.