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# House Without a Ceiling

## - Uncanny places in the works of Can Xue

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### **Introduction: Uncanny Places**

Sigmund Freud describes the uncanny (das Unheimliche) as a “species of frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had been long familiar.” (Trigg 2011: 271; Freud 1998: 16) The familiar thus being established as the home of the uncanny, philosopher Dylan Trigg concludes that it is the everyday world, which is most vulnerable to the sudden reversal from homely/Heimlich to uncanny/Unheimlich.<sup>1</sup>

The stories of Chinese writer 残雪 Can Xue (邓小花 Deng Xiaohua) take place in the everyday world of ordinary people, and yet they have been criticised for being anything from nightmarish to mentally insane.<sup>2</sup> This is the result of the subtle, yet determinative, displacement in her writing that transform quotidian scenes into uncanny dreamscapes. She accomplishes this transformation through various literary means, such as fragmented narrative, illogical monologues, and blurring of the boundaries between dream and reality as well as between the figurative and the literal. In this paper I will limit my analysis to focusing on uncanny places in the short stories of Can Xue. Because her stories are highly complex narratives with no single plot line, I will use the story ‘Two Unidentifiable Persons’ as my main text for analysis in order to facilitate consistency and understanding throughout the paper, while providing relevant examples from other of Can Xue’s stories.

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<sup>1</sup> Freud notes that the prefix ‘un’ is the mark of repression, thus linking the uncanny to memory, something I shall get back to later (in the full paper).

<sup>2</sup> For overview of critical receptions of Can Xue see Cai (1997): 41 and Wedell-Wedellsborg (1994): 9.

Briefly 两个身世不明的人 ‘Two Unidentifiable Persons’ (hereafter ‘TwoPersons’)<sup>3</sup> is about the woman Rushu and the nameless ‘he’, who move into a house together. Neither one of them is able to remember their own life stories, yet they feel that they belong together. Living together however proves difficult, not least because of the presence of a strange old man 老鸷 Lao Jiu (Old Vulture), who follows them everywhere. When they try to escape from him, he invariably finds them, and in the end they all three settle down together.

The paper begins by looking at buildings as material metaphors for the self, then proceeds to investigating the uncanny aspects of these buildings and their possible links to a traumatic past, and finally discusses how Can Xue’s elevation of the subjective reality inside the house of the self can be read as a critique of a purely rational world view. (This shorter version of the paper includes only the part of the first and last sections, and the analysis focus on the character Rushu.)

## **The House of the Self**

One of the main topics of Can Xue’s literary endeavours is what Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg fittingly terms ‘the predicament of the self’ (1994: 19), including the conflict between the complex inner life of the subject and the outside world of social norms and rational causality.<sup>4</sup> As Wedell-Wedellsborg points out, Can Xue, despite writing about the inner life and motions of human beings, uses very few adjectives describing emotions and states of mind of her characters. (1994: 12) I would argue that instead she makes use of what could be deemed literal or manifest metaphors, such as insects swarming on a person who feels under attack, (‘Hut on the Mountain’) the way love between two people materialise in the form of a living tree

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from Janssen and Zhang’s English translation in the compilation *The Embroidered Shoes* from 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Individualistic tendencies were prevalent among the avant-garde writers of the 1980s, see Larson (1989):47; Duke (1991):389.

that needs care and attention, ('TwoPersons') or indeed a building as a metaphor for the self.<sup>5</sup> These metaphors are integrated into the narrative with no hints that they should be taken less literally than more usual occurrences.

The building as a three dimensional metaphor allows reader and writer to investigate the human self as a complex and unpredictable landscape, rather than an elusive mental capacity. In 'TwoPersons', house and inhabitant develop into an organic whole, affecting each other as time goes by: "Staying in the stale air had caused purple spots on her face, and her fingers were getting bonier every day." (16) This echoes the interconnectedness of place and subject in Trigg's description, where "The body activates place and vice versa." (2011: 11) The spatial limits of the metaphor permit the investigation of its contents to run more freely, because it is tied to a tangible point of reference (a building) that the reader and writer agree on. The concrete building is the solid structure around which the inconsistencies and ambiguities crucial to Can Xue's understanding of the self can flow, change and intertwine.

Can Xue's choice of a spatial metaphor for the self accentuates the human condition described by phenomenologists as being-in-the-world (Inderweltsein).<sup>6</sup> In recognition of the logical impossibility of being nowhere, a sense of place seems to them a basic condition of existence and identity. Furthermore the notion of place (as opposed to space) requires a degree of human interaction: "Places are defined in their relationship with the particular subject who experiences them." (Trigg 2011: 5) The house of the self in Can Xue's short stories, not only allows us to investigate the inner world of the self in 3D, it also enables us to investigate the boundary between self and world, the site where outer stimuli and inner responses interact. For the phenomenologist the home of this interaction is the body placed in the world, for Can Xue it is the house of the self.

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<sup>5</sup> Jianguo Chen notes this in relation to Can Xue's famous short story 'The Hut on the Mountain', (Chen 1997: 379) but the trope of buildings of self is appears frequently in her writings. See for instance '奇异的木板房' translated as 'Bizarre Wooden Building,' '断垣残壁里的风景' 'Scenes Inside Dilapidated Walls', and 归途 'Homecoming.'

<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to Heidegger's terms, see Staehler&Lewis (2010): 72.

## **Inside or Outside**

On the surface the house as a metaphor for the self clearly distinguishes inside from outside. Some scholars have interpreted this to mean that Can Xue separates the world into a positive, free private sphere and negative, oppressive social one. This seems significant in a Chinese context because it questions the long standing elevation of social nexus such as family or class. (Wedell-Wedellsborg 1994: 14; Chen 1997: 356). It is however important to note that Can Xue representation of the inner world is not unvaryingly positive, and that there are necessary connections, not to say doors, between the two realms.

In many ways the inside of the house of the self does act as a haven for Rushu: “she feared light, sound, air currents.” (14) In short all things coming from outside. But at the same time the refuge threatens to become a prison, and she also fears being shut in from the world: “Rushu insisted that once the door was closed the air pressure inside the room would become so great that her temples would well with pain.”(13)

This ambiguity incorporates the essential insight that to be a conscious self is to separate oneself from one’s surroundings, and that includes having an outside. On the other hand the relation to the outside, the wall, is essential to maintain the self as an entity. As Rong Cai notes in her essay on the scopophobia in Can Xue, the self conscious sense of an outside comes from seeing oneself through the eyes of the Other. (Cai, 1997: 49) In the dream like logic of Can Xue’s fiction the Others surrounding and sometimes breaking into the house of the self, can be read as mirror images of that self. If we read the Others in the text as dream incarnations of the self, then the social norms they stand for are both a threat to and an internalised part of the self. Just as the wall is needed to build the self against and outside, so is the exchange of looks- of looking and being looked at -needed for the self to be conscious of its individuality.

In much of her work (most notably in 我在那个世界里的事情 'What Happened to me in Than World') Can Xue paints a picture of the inner realm as a cold, immovable, infinite world of beauty, where imagination reigns. In terms of spatial metaphors, this world is mostly located 'upwards' - above the everyday world of social realities.<sup>7</sup> This dream world is part of the house of the self, but even further removed or elevated from its surroundings. In 'TwoPersons' this dream world can be glimpsed in the "ceilingless house" that Rushu finds herself in towards the end of the story.(31) This unfamiliar structure has nothing to separate her from her mental world above, as doors and walls separate her from the social realm. While sitting in the ceilingless house, and thus open to her own innermost dream world, she observes through the window, a woman going to a fragrant but cold grassland, an image connected with the purely subjective world of childhood, before socialisation.<sup>8</sup> (31) The scene is fraught with longing for that supremely subjective world, yet ambiguity still thrives, and not even childhood memories prove to be painless, as a snowstorm engulfs the grassy plains. (31)

If the inner world is not uniformly pleasant, the outside world of social realities is certainly uniformly unpleasant. It is a world of suspicion, where everyone is a spy. It is not only Rushu who hides from this, also the 'he' of the story sleeps during the hard time of winter, wrapped up in himself like silkworm in its cocoon, while people try to break in through his windows. (12) This state of affairs with neighbours and even family members spying on each other occurs frequently in Can Xue's stories, and recalls the situation during the Cultural Revolution, which Can Xue lived through when she was in her teens.<sup>9</sup>

Staying in the spatial metaphor of the house, windows are the membranes of the self where people can spy and break in, but also where self can secretly observe others. The uncanny element re-enters when the windows turn on the eyes looking and becomes mirrors. As Rushu observes the woman going to the grassland, she is in fact daydreaming her own return to the realm of imagination. Freud

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<sup>7</sup> See 山上的小屋 'Hut on the Mountain' and 我在那个世界里的事情 'What Happened to me in Than World.'

<sup>8</sup> In the story 归途 'Homecoming' the grassland signify a pre-rationalised, childhood memory of place.

<sup>9</sup> For more about the Cultural Revolution in Can Xue's work, see Cai (1997): 55; Chen (1997): 361. For a Can Xue biography, see Solomon (1988): 235; Cai (1997): 44.

describes the Doppelgänger or the ability to treat oneself as an object as an instance of the uncanny,(Freud 1998: 35) and through Rushu, the reader relives the uncanny experience of being both the looked at object and the subject looking.

## **Dreams are Real**

In the 1980s, supernatural elements were reintroduced into Chinese literature by several avant-garde writers. (Wedell-Wedellsborg 2005: 21) This was not only a break with the official line, which encouraged social realism, but can be seen as a critique of the rationalistic ideology behind realism. (Larson 1989: 42; Yang 1994: 236) These fantastic stories were criticised for being escapist and for not dealing with reality, (Larson 1989: 47) but one could argue that what they did was exactly dealing with reality, not as a given but as a concept: They questioned our understanding of what constitute reality. Broadly speaking social realism privileged logical causality, linear chronology, the value of social structures and a rational world view, while disregarding subjective experiences that are not immediately relevant for the 'masses'.

Can Xue and other avant-garde writers reversed this hierarchy, arguing that social structures and historical narratives are imaginary and oppressive, while subjective experiences are in fact the only way we can engage with and understand reality. In 'TwoPersons' the dictum that rationality and reason brings us no closer to reality but are in fact abstraction from it, are reiterated in the words of Rushu: "Those things that everybody considers counter to reason happen to me every day." (18) This re-evaluation of the subjective world of the individual was exactly what made avant-garde writers the target of critique during the anti-spiritual pollution campaign in 1983, and made one critic accuse Can Xue of "eras[ing] surrounding reality to fabricate world of irrationality" (Chen, 1997:248)

The ideological critique of 'TwoPersons' is most apparent include in the following soliloquy, which reads as a caricature of rational reasoning, revealing the misinterpretations arrived at by attributing a logical causality to a world that is largely governed by coincidence and unconnected impulses:

"The truth of the matter disappears like a stone sinking into the vast sea. Everything relevant to it remains in silence. To sum up, the whole thing is a swindle. Here we have too many similar things. It's time to call an end to it. Why should we look into the straw hat that a certain man threw away on a rainy day in a sudden impulse? Only when we observe this world in silence can we gain real enthusiasm." (21)

Parodying the forceful rhetoric of Maospeak 毛语<sup>10</sup> the monologue presents an illogical trail of event as if they were connected. The style is self assured and conclusive, but the conclusion arrived at seemingly has no connection to the various elements discussed. The story links up with Rushu and the 'He's musings over how they themselves make stories about reality, and they reach a similar conclusion: Forcing events into a narrative is a form of violence that leads to little result. The real goal is not coherence but passion or enthusiasm, and it is arrived at by accident and not by pursuit. (21)

In the works of Can Xue, the characters rarely pretend to know anything for certain about themselves or the world they live in. Instead they tell stories. This candid practise of 'lying' produces an uncanny feeling because it confuses and fuses the realms of fiction and reality.<sup>11</sup> Can Xue continues her "fight against an iron strong reality." (Can Xue in Chen, 1997: 349) by putting dreams and fiction above rational and 'realistic' explanations, and by letting Rushu encourage the 'he' not to try to understand the world by force, but to float *up* into the world of subjective imagination: "Everyone is involved in the cheap trick of getting to the bottom of things, while you have almost reached the height of a flying horse galloping in the sky[...]" (22) The image is doubly anti-rational, as it criticise the urge to 'get to the bottom of things'

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the relation between Maospeak and the avant-garde, see Yang (1994): 230.

<sup>11</sup> Freud (1998): 46.



by logic, while evoking the supernatural image of a flying horse to describe the triumph of imagination over reality.

## **The Uncanny Text**

The text repeats the alienation it describes,<sup>12</sup> by transplanting into the reader that existential uncertainty about the nature of reality and our access to it that the characters of the story experience. In 'TwoPersons' Can Xue's re-evaluation of imagination over rational reality is carried to its fullest: As Rushu draws night time memories on her walls, mirroring the writer writing from imagination, the daytime ceased to interest her.(31) To her, fantasies and memories are alive and produce emotions as real as anything perceived by the senses. This scene reads almost as a manifesto for Can Xue's writings, as she wilfully looks inward way beyond the point of painfulness, by techniques of estrangement, fragmentation and splitting to examine the self from within: The self writing on the inside walls of its own house of the self. The stories produced by this self scrutiny appear uncanny exactly because they function like a mirror in which the reading self is allowed to examine itself from the inside and outside simultaneously, both as the subject scrutinising and object of scrutiny.

Just as all the characters in the story are incarnations of the narrative 'I', so the reader mirrors the writer and must turn the writing inward in order to grasp what is being written. Thus I would argue that what so many critics find mad and strange about Can Xue's writings<sup>13</sup> is not that they are so far removed from reality, but that they by function of the uncanny warp the most familiar of all – the reader's own self - into something slightly strange. This technique allows us to see what is not normally visible, like the inside of our own eyelids, and to do what is not rationally possible, that is looking simultaneously in and out of a window in the house of the self.

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<sup>12</sup> Freud describes the text as a means of alienation: Freud (1998): 52.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of critical reception of Can Xue see Cai, 1997: 41; Wedell-Wedellsborg, 1994: 9.

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