



Lovecraftian Elements in the Writing of ‘Three Icons of Dongbei Renaissance’

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Abstract

Literary works based on Dongbei (China’s Northeast) or composed by Dongbei-born writers have been playing a preponderant role in modern Chinese literature. There is a recent resurgence of Dongbei-born writers who are collectively referred to as ‘neo-Dongbei writers’, exemplified by ‘three icons of Dongbei Renaissance’, aka ‘three swordsmen in the Tiexi District’. Notwithstanding reality-oriented depictions pertaining to social issues such as redundancy and dipsomania, fiction composed by Ban Yu, Zheng Zhi and Shuang Xuetao bears re-semblance to Cthulhu Mythos. To be more specific, through hermeneutic textual analysis, I show that the three leading neo-Dongbei writers portray preternatural creatures, and their narratives convey fear of the unknown and nameless approximations of form.

Keywords: *Ban Yu, Zheng Zhi, Shuang Xuetao, Cthulhu Mythos, Northeast China*

INTRODUCTION

东北 Dongbei is a terminology denoting China’s Northeast, viz. a geographical region comprising three provinces of People’s Republic of China to the east of the Da Hingan (Greater Khingan) Range (Coogan 1994, Nelson 1995). A cohort of 新东北作家群 *xindongbei zuojia qun* ‘neo-Dongbei writers’ (Trans. Mine), who were predominantly born in the 1980s, have attained critical attention and adulation since the 2010s, exemplified by three celebrated writers, viz. 班宇 Ban Yu, 郑执 Zheng Zhi and 双雪涛 Shuang Xuetao. Given the fact that all of the three Dongbei writers were born in the Tiexi District of Shenyang, they are dubbed 铁西三剑客 *Tiexi san jianke* ‘three swordsmen in the Tiexi District’ (Trans. Mine) by mainstream media (Xin and Hu 2019, Han 2020). Nonetheless, the most widely renowned collective label denoting Ban Yu, Zheng Zhi and Shuang Xuetao is 东北文艺复兴三杰 *dongbei wenyifuxing sanjie* ‘three icons of Dongbei Renaissance’ (Trans. Mine) (Liang and Jia 2020, Yang 2020, Tong 2021).

Ban Yu is renowned for a 2018 novel anthology entitled 冬泳 *Dongyong* ‘Winter Swimming’ (Trans. Mine) (Zhang and Chen 2020) and a 2020 compilation 逍遥游

Xiaoyao You ‘Free and Easy Wandering’ concerning fate and struggles of individuals embedded in complex social background (Lu 2020). The chefs-d’oeuvre of Zheng Zhi are an award-winning full-length novel 生吞 Sheng Tun ‘Swallow Alive’ (Trans. Mine), which is acclaimed as the Chinese equivalent of Keigo Higashino’s Journey Under the Midnight Sun (Zhang 2019, Zhou 2019), as well as a 2020 novella collection 仙症 Xian Zheng ‘Divine Sickness’ (Trans. Mine) featuring prevalent redundancy and psychological trajectory (Zheng 2019a, 2019b, Su 2020, Yang 2020). In terms of Shuang Xuetao, he is illustrious for a 2016 novel anthology 平原上的摩西 Pingyuan Shangde Moxi ‘Moses on the Plain’ unravelling predicaments of laid-off workers in an industrial representation, which is felicitated to usher in the era of neo-Dongbei writers (Wang 2019, Huang 2017, 2020).

The neo-Dongbei writers have been producing thought-provoking works since the late 2010s, whereas they have not attained deserved academic attention. Moreover, although the neo-Dongbei works are predominantly realistic and, as indicated by their category, have their setting locally in Dongbei, these works are enriched by the alien Lovecraftian elements, which has not been discussed before. Therefore, in this article, I scrutinise fiction composed by ‘three icons of Dongbei Renaissance’, viz. Ban Yu, Zheng Zhi and Shuang Xuetao, so as to investigate Cthulhu-related representation in their works.

Methodology

In this article, I explore the writing of ‘three icons of Dongbei Renaissance’ through hermeneutic textual analysis, drawing on examples from seven works by the three authors. To be more specific, the novels and novellas I investigate are 刺杀小说家 *Cisha Xiaoshuojia* ‘A Writer’s Odyssey’, 飞行家 *Feixingjia* ‘Flier’ (Trans. Mine), 光明堂 *Guangming Tang* ‘The Chapel of Illumination’ (Trans. Mine) and 长眠 *Changmian* ‘Decease’ (Trans. Mine) by Shuang Xuetao, 仙症 *Xian Zheng* ‘Divine Illness’ (Trans. Mine) and 蒙地卡罗食人记 *Mengdi Kaluo Shiren Ji* ‘An Account of Cannibalism at Monte Carlo’ (Trans. Mine) by Zheng Zhi, as well as 云泥 *Yun Ni* ‘Cloud and Mud’ (Trans. Mine) by Ban Yu. Through the hermeneutic approach, I interpret the seven works and scrutinise the Lovecraftian elements in the texts, so as to pinpoint the affinities between neo-Dongbei literature and Lovecraftian horror.

Findings and Discussion

Fear of the unknown

Cthulhu Mythos, as a fully-fledged literary subculture and a cultural phenomenon, is derived from an all-important narrative *The Call of Cthulhu* composed by an illustrious fantasy-horror writer H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) in 1926 (Burlinson 1990a, Kneale 2006), which has inspired legions of Lovecraft’s successors exemplified by Stephen King, Joanna Russ and Jorge Luis Borges (Xiong and Song 2018, Bauer 2019, Zeller 2020). The alternate version of reality in Lovecraftian horror is characterised by outer gods and alien powers (Guy 2020), though as an agnostic or atheist, Lovecraft did not believe in the supernatural realities he created (Saler 2012: 138, McConeghy 2020).

‘The point of the horror genre...is to exhibit, disclose, and manifest that which is, putatively in principle, unknown and unknowable’ (Carroll 1990: 127). According to Lovecraft, ‘[t]he oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown’ (Lovecraft 2005: 105), and ‘[a] certain

atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present' (Lovecraft 2005: 107). Consequently, Lovecraft's fiction integrates fantastic ideas into strong narratives that revolve around the conception of disclosure (Kneale 2006). 'Typically, Lovecraft grounds the species's predilection for horror with an atavistic genetic inheritance', and '[t]he artistic merit of "the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form," therefore, is guaranteed not by transcendental notions but by profanely material ones: the literary re-enactment of the primal terror of self-awareness' (Wilson 2016: 21).

I posit that Lovecraftian fear of the unknown can be attested in fiction composed by neo-Dongbei writers. For instance, the story *A Writer's Odyssey* composed by Shuang Xuetao has been adapted into a phenomenal film (Teng 2020, Wang 2021), in that the original novel is enriched by values appertaining to fatherhood and heroism of the grassroots. From an aesthetic perspective, the work is lauded to be intriguing by virtue of its multi-faceted characters, abundant plot twists as well as a mirror structure entailing parallel narrative strands (Shuang and Tian 2021, Zhan 2021, Zhang 2021). In the narrative, an unemployed and impoverished father is hired to murder an obscure novelist so as to fund his commitment to look for his abducted daughter, while in the fantasy world created by the novelist, a recalcitrant and irrational pubescent boy is exacting revenge on an autocrat for decapitating his father in an ancient setting; the reality and the fantasy are inextricably intertwined and mutually impinged upon, constructing a veritable cornucopia of representations of morality and amorality as well as adamant will and ineluctable apprehension.

More significantly, the narrative abounds in enigmatic and fearsome depictions of nameless entities. In Example (1), an elephantine Buddhist temple and a gargantuan statue of Buddha are not portrayed in graphic detail, whereas the implicit and imagery-provoking depiction triggers readers' megalophobia. Moreover, I propound that the mist in Example (1) bears resemblance to that described in the award-winning psychological horror novella *The Mist* by Stephen King who is inspired by Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos (Xiong and Song 2018, Bauer 2019): parallel to the dense fog enveloping a town and accommodating pre-historical monsters, the thick mist in *A Writer's Odyssey* is also enigmatic and baleful, as it conceals rocks, sewage, stench and a fearsome head.

(1) 果然是一座佛堂。不是什么宫殿,可比宫殿还要高大,高耸入云。佛堂正中,一尊硕大的泥佛,久藏和小橘子站在他面前,好像一对走失的蚂蚁。泥佛上面伤痕累累,脸上竟然钉着一把尖刀,直没刀柄,不知是谁有这么大的力气,扔得这么远,钉得这么深。身后的雾气没有消散,反倒越来越浓,快要伸手不见五指了...赤发鬼的眼睛越瞪越大,终于“咔嚓”一声,他的脸上裂开了一道大缝,久藏手里握着刀,掉了下来,小橘子扑过去把久藏接住,两人滚进雾里,血雾发出一声惊呼,紧接着又是一阵拍手,接住了,接住了...这时赤发鬼的身上发出轰隆隆的声音,坍塌起来,石块,污水,臭气,从雾里面涌出来,四面八方流去。终于停止了,从雾里面滚出一颗头颅,常人大小,上面长着蓬乱的红发,一双眼睛睁着,不再转了,嘴闭成一条细线,右脸上有一道红亮的刀疤。

It was indeed a Buddhist temple, rather than a palace, yet this skyscraper was even taller than a palace. A clay statue of Buddha in the middle of the shrine was so elephantine that Jiu Zhang and Little Orange looked like two lost ants in front of it. The clay Buddha was covered by cuts, and there was even a sharp knife in his face. Whoever threw the knife all the way up to the statue must be extremely powerful, as the entire blade was buried into the statue. The mist behind them did not disappear, but became denser and denser, rendering them almost blind...The eyes of Red-Hair Ghost was widening, and

his face finally cracked open. Jiu Zang fell off with the knife, and Little Orange caught him before he hit the ground. They fell into the sick bloody mist and heard the mist exclaiming and clapping: 'Bravo! Bravo!'...Suddenly, Red-Hair Ghost began to roar and collapse, while rocks, sewage and stench burst from the mist and dispersed. After everything eventually stopped, a human head with tangled red hair rolled out of the fog: the eyes were wide open yet the mouth was close shut; there was a noticeable red scar on the right cheek.

(A *Writer's Odyssey*. Trans. Mine)

In terms of *Flier* composed by Shuang Xuetao, it is compiled in his namesake anthology published in 2017, which entails slang expressions in Dongbei dialect and punctilious embroidery, rendering the narratives detail-enriched and reality-oriented (Huang 2017). In the collection, there are myriads of tumbledown factories and disorganised areas in a post-Maoist and post-industrial era, as well as legions of marginalised and impoverished characters, including the 'flier' (China Writer 2017). The protagonist in *Flier* is a middle-aged man in a turbulent matrimonial relationship, and his son suffers from depression; he was born into a populous, poverty-stricken family, so he has been striving to keep his head above water via a surfeit of fruitless attempts. At the end of the narrative, the first-person narrator witnesses the 'flier' flying away in a hot air balloon, along with his depression-plagued son, polio-affected brother and two other middle-aged people, and the 'flier' claims the destination to be South Africa. Nevertheless, the apocryphal ending is preceded by realistic depictions pertaining to barbarous slaughter during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1937-1945), suicide in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and excruciating decease in the contemporary era, which renders the journey by hot air balloon menacing. That is to say, the departure at the ending augurs the doom awaiting this cohort. In Example (2), the hot air balloon is depicted in a fearsome manner, and the fate of its passengers is marked by fear of the unknown.

(2) 这时气泵的声音更响了, 我看见一只气球, 在主席像的旁边鼓起来, 越来越大, 终于稳稳当地飘在半空中, 底下是一个大篮子...我跟你讲, 人出生, 就像从前世跳伞, 我们这些人准备再跳一次, 重新开始, 你呢, 回去就说见着我们了, 我们准备去南方做生意, 你要是你爷的孙子, 你爸的儿子, 就成全我们一下...大篮子里站了大概五个人, 四个男的, 一个女的, 四个人年纪和我二姐夫相仿, 我哥年纪最小。我没再往前走, 不知该说什么, 只是远远地看着。二姐夫拉了一下一个灯绳一样的东西, 一团火在篮子下方闪动起来。气球升起来了, 飞过打着红旗的红卫兵, 飞过主席像的头顶, 一直往高飞, 开始是笔直的, 后来开始向着斜上方飞去, 终于消失在夜空里, 什么也看不见了。

At that time, the burner's noise became louder. I saw a hot air balloon expanding besides the statue of Chairman Mao and finally rising into the air, with a huge basket underneath...My uncle said to me: 'You know, your birth is like parachute jumping from a previous incarnation. We're jumping again to start again. Go back and tell them you've found us, and just say we're heading down to the South to do business. Son, if you still think I'm your uncle, don't stop us.'...There were four men and one woman standing in the basket. Those people were roughly of the same age as my uncle, and my cousin was the youngest. I did not approach closer, but just watched them quietly. My uncle pulled a string and lit a flame above the basket. The hot air balloon flew past the Red Guards waving flags and the statue of Chairman Mao. After flying straight up, it tilted slightly and finally vanished into thin air.

(*Flier*. Trans. Mine)

Analogously, Zheng Zhi's novella *Divine Illness*, which is collected in the namesake anthology published in 2020, alludes to the dipsomania rife in Dongbei as well as suppression during the Cultural Revolution. More significantly, the title of the narrative, divine illness, denotes insanity that functions as a pivotal theme in Lovecraftian horror (Kneale 2006, Zeller 2020). The novella not only describes the protagonist's mental confusion (Example (3)), but also the narrator's construals during and after an exorcism (Example (4)). It is worth mentioning that the description regarding an enormous octopus in Example (3) accords with those in Cthulhu Mythos, which embodies preternatural creatures depicted in neo-Dongbei literature (see below for more detailed discussion).

(3) 王战团说, 那次, 水下三千八百多米, 那只大章鱼展开八只触手, 牢牢吸附住他的潜水艇, 艇整个立了起来, 跟冰棍儿似的, 舱内的一切都被掀翻了, 兵一个擦一个地滚进前舱, 你说可不可怕? ... 王战团站在楼顶中央, 两臂平展开来, 左右各套着腰粗的葱捆。葱尾由绿渐黄的叶尖纷纷向地面耷拉着, 似极了丰盛错落的羽毛。王战团双腿一高一低的站姿仿若要起飞, 两眼放光, 冲屋檐下喊, 妈, 葱够不?

Wang Zhantuan said: 'We were more than 3,800 metres under the sea. That huge octopus sucked our sub tightly with its eight tentacles, making our sub upright like an ice lolly. Stuff inside was tossed everywhere, and we all rolled over to the front. Spooky, ain't it?' ... Wang Zhantuan stood on the roof, with his arms wide open. He tied a big bunch of spring onions to each arm, and the long yellowish leaves looked like thick feathers. Wang Zhantuan bent one leg slightly and struck a pose of taking off. There was light shining in his eyes. He shouted: 'Mum, do you want more spring onions?'

(*Divine Illness*. Trans. Mine)

(4) 木剑竖劈在我脑顶正中, 灵魂仿佛被一分为二。我感觉不出丝毫疼痛。赵老师再度高呼, 吐出来! 剑压低了我的头, 晕漾在我嘴里的一口鲜血借势而出, 滴滴答答地掉落在暗红色的地板上, 顷刻间遁匿不见。一袋香灰从我的头顶飞撒而下, 我整个人被笼罩在尘雾中, 如释重负。我再也听不见屋内王战团的呼声了。许多年后, 当我置身凡尔赛皇宫中, 和斯里兰卡的一片无名海滩上, 两阵相似的风吹过, 我清楚, 从此我再不会被万事万物卡住。

The wood sword struck my head right in the middle, cutting my soul into half. I could not feel the slightest pain. Master Zhao shouted again: 'Spit it out!' As soon as the sword pressed my head down, blood gushed out of my mouth, dripped down on the crimson floor and vanished immediately. A bag of incense dust was poured above my head and I was surrounded by the dust. I felt released, as I could not hear Wang Zhantuan's scream anymore. Many years later, when I was in the Palace of Versailles and on a nameless beech in Sri Lanka, I felt two similar blasts of air. I became aware that I would never be bemused by anything in the world.

(*Ibid.* Trans. Mine)

Preternatural creatures

Being a tacit philosopher and an author of horror, Lovecraft was saliently anti-idealist and had created horrific content exemplified by monstrous and invincible creatures (Harman 2012a). In addition to Cthulhu, celebrated Lovecraftian monsters such as Azathoth, Nyarlathotep and Yog-Sothoth are regarded as religious totems in a Durkheimian sense (Guy 2020). The category of monsters plays a preponderant role in this movement across the known and the unknown, in that they epitomise discrepancy and foreshadow an impending 'category crisis' that defies the well-established world (Cohen 1996, McConeghy 2020).

In stark contrast to Lovecraftian creatures, animals depicted in neo-Dongbei fiction are more realistic, despite elephantine size. For instance, Zheng Zhi's anthology *Divine Sickness* is constituted of a story entitled *An Account of Cannibalism at Monte Carlo*. The narrative has its setting in a dilapidated small restaurant called 'Monte Carlo', and it is characterised by reality-oriented plots alluding to redundancy and social unrest in Dongbei. However, the narrative possesses an aberrant ending that the narrator, a quotidian human being, transforms into a gargantuan bear and gulps down two human heads, which bears similitude to the style of *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka (Su 2020, Yang 2020). In Example (5) extracted from *An Account of Cannibalism at Monte Carlo*, the narrator transforms into an elephantine bear, which, I propound, manifests a Lovecraftian element. In a 1932 story *The Horror in the Museum* ghost-written for Hazel Heald, Lovecraft recounts a deity Rhan-Tegoth correlated with 'a black paw ending in a crab-like claw' and a curator's wax statue that has been drained off blood and covered with myriads of puncture wounds. The 'black paw' in the narrative is reminiscent of Lovecraft's another work, *Under the Pyramids* (Joshi and Schultz 2004: 116), in which the narrator dreams about being 'in the grasp of a great and horrible paw; a yellow, hairy, five-clawed paw' (Lovecraft 2016: 300).

(5) 当我再认真端详魏军, 他整个人正一圈圈地缩小着, 这变化很细微, 只有我才察觉, 竟然有那么一丝想笑, 我能感到自己的嘴角在不自觉地向耳根咧着, 魏军看我的眼神突然变得惊恐无比, 嘴巴大到能撑圆一个盘子, 一声尖嚎逃出他的喉咙, 这下我又对他敞开了耳朵, 那个嗓音果然令我厌恶至极。与此同时, 锁匠捧着木盒快步走来, 盒盖敞着, 果真有一把短枪躺在其中, 两个学生成功了。而锁匠看我的眼神, 比魏军还要夸张, 仿佛吓破了胆, 我这才伸手去摸自己的脸, 终于觉出不对, 首先不是脸, 而是我的一双手不再是手, 那是一副利爪, 手背覆满长毛, 左腕上的电子表也不见了。正午漆黑, 窗玻璃被衬成镜面, 映照其中的是一颗熊的头颅, 尖嘴鼻, 圆眼, 耳朵竖着, 利齿龇出牙床。我扭回头之际, 魏军手中的短枪已对准我的眉心, 我借助两只爪子支撑桌面, 猛地站立起身, 一口吞下了他的头, 没等他有机会扣扳机, 那颗头已经脱离了自己的躯干, 鲜血如喷泉一般, 射进天花板里。站在一旁的锁匠, 滚躺在地, 想要起身逃窜, 也被我一口咬断了脖颈, 没了呼吸...我饥饿难耐, 再多几颗人头也恐难果腹。我在风雪中思考着, 我应该先回家, 再等我爸回家, 跟他好好谈谈, 告诉他, 我注定是要远走的, 不管有没有崔杨, 我都是要走的。假如他不同意, 也许我别无选择, 只能将他也吞掉, 连同他毕生的委屈与苦难。

When I was staring at Wei Jun closely, he seemed to be shrinking. The change was so subtle that I was the only one who noticed it. It was a bit funny, so I could feel I was grinning in an uncontrollable way. All of a sudden, Wei Jun's eyes on me became terrified, and his mouth was extremely wide open. He burst into an utterly annoying scream. Meanwhile, the locksmith was walking towards us eagerly, holding the opened box. There was indeed a gun inside, so it seemed the two students managed to crack the combination lock. But the locksmith looked at me in an even more frightened way. I felt my face and finally realised there was something wrong. I first noticed that my hands had turned into giant paws with sharp claws and long fur. The digital watch on my left wrist was gone. The glass on the window was turned into a mirror by the dim light at this overcast noon, showing my reflection as a bear with a protruded mouth, round eyes, upright ears and pointed canine teeth. Upon I withdrew my eyes, Wei Jun aimed at my forehead with the gun. I stood up fiercely on my hind legs and bit his head off before he could pull the trigger. Blood gushed from his headless corpse like a fountain, splashing all the way onto the ceiling. The petrified locksmith fell on the ground, and before he struggled up and fled, I bit his head off too...I was so starving that I was eager to binge on more heads. I was pondering in the snow: I should go home first and talk to my dad. I would inform him that I was determined to leave here, with or without Cui Yang. If he

disagreed, perhaps I would have to swallow him as well, along with his lifelong grievance and agony.

(*An Account of Cannibalism at Monte Carlo*. Trans. Mine)

Analogously, a gigantic fish turned from a human being is depicted in a novella entitled *The Chapel of Illumination* that is compiled in the 2017 novel collection *Flier* by Shuang Xuetao. The majority of stories in the compilation are characterised by barbarous deeds and bloody elaborations (Huang 2017), including *The Chapel of Illumination* that entails murders. Parallel to *An Account of Cannibalism at Monte Carlo*, the first two chapters of *The Chapel of Illumination* allude to real historical events such as struggle sessions during the Cultural Revolution as well as a real setting on Yanfen Street that encapsulates pollution, bankruptcy, redundancy and crime of Tiexi District in Shuang Xuetao's writing (Wang 2019). The dramatic transition is preceded by depictions concerning a relentless cross-examination of a juvenile delinquent in a pseudo-documentary manner, yet the narrative style abruptly changes from crime fiction into magical fantasy, as in Example (6).

(6) 眼镜猛烈地摇晃脑袋, 礼帽掉了下来, 透过衣服, 光里面是一片鱼鳞。眼镜的眼镜和衣服不见了, 露出巨大的尾巴, 如同船锚, 背后有三对黑色的鳍。胸前有两只干瘦的爪子, 紧紧抓着写好的材料。它发出尖利的叫声, 好像被鱼钩钩中了下巴... 它突然有了脖子, 眼珠突出, 伸嘴来咬姑鸟儿, 我把姑鸟儿一拽, 它咬了个空, 我看见它的眼神里都是疯狂的恐慌, 仿佛如果再不进地洞去就要枯死。它一口咬断了自己的尾巴, 我和姑鸟儿一下子被弹了出去, 我抱住姑鸟儿, 看见少年犯紧紧地抱着大鱼的身子, 手铐在水流中闪闪发亮, 他朝我们看了一眼, 点了一下头。它拖着一半的身体把他带进了洞里, 残缺的尾巴露出鱼骨, 好像折断的树干, 很快消失不见, 洞口转瞬被淤泥掩上。

The man in glasses shook his hat off forcefully and some fish scales appeared underneath his clothes. His glasses and clothes vanished, showing three pairs of fins and a tail as giant as an anchor. Its two skinny claws were still tightly grasping the paperwork. It burst into piercing screams, as if its jaw was pierced by a fish hook... It suddenly grew a neck and turned around to bite Guniaor. I pulled Guniaor away and saved her, but I could tell the crazy panic from its eyes—it seemed the fish would die if it did not enter the hole soon, so it bit off its own tail. While Guniaor and I were bounced off, I managed to hold her. I saw the juvenile delinquent grasping the fish's body firmly and the handcuffs shining in the water. The juvenile delinquent glanced at us and nodded, before the half fish pulled him into the hole. The bones inside the broken tail looked like trunks. The tail vanished into thin air very soon, and the hole was covered by mud immediately.

(*The Chapel of Illumination*. Trans. Mine)

I postulate that there are close affinities between *The Chapel of Illumination* and Lovecraft's 1931 story *The Shadow over Innsmouth*. In the coming-of-age Lovecraftian narrative, a young narrator escapes from an eponymous village replete with cursed fish-amphibian people and finds solace in transforming into an immortal human-frog-fish hybrid dedicated to worship an ancient malevolent sea god (Saler 2012: 153, Zeller 2020). *The Chapel of Illumination* also involves hybridity of a repugnant and barbarous fish-like creature with claws that is transformed from a human being, as in Example (6). More significantly, Shuang Xuetao's story also pertains to the coming-of-age process of the young narrator and a juvenile delinquent: the former solaces his cousin on worrying about her missing mother, while the latter confesses to a murder in order to save the narrator and his cousin from drowning.

Nameless approximations of form

Discrepant from other imaginary creatures in literary works featured by definite attributes and contours, Lovecraftian monsters can be ‘as vague as the cosmic background radiation left over from the Big Bang, or even the barest vacuum fluctuation from a blank field of nothingness’ (Harman 2012b: 206). The utmost form of nearnothingness can be epitomised by *The Dreams in the Witch House* published in 1933, in which a formless monster transforms into an even less tangible form and undergoes further abstraction into mist (Harman 2012b). ‘He had been taken there by the bubble-congeries and the little polyhedron which always dogged him; but they, like himself, had changed to wisps of milky, barely luminous mist in this farther void of ultimate blackness. Something else had gone on ahead—a larger wisp which now and then condensed into nameless approximations of form’ (Lovecraft 2019: 941). Similarly, the 1926 novel *The Strange High House in the Mist*, which is written in an effective and visually oriented style (Burlinson 1990b), also concerns ‘mists and the dreams of mists’ (Lovecraft 2016: 426).

In neo-Dongbei writing, there are ghoulish and outlandish portrayals that are consistent with the nameless approximations of form. For instance, in an abstruse novella entitled *Decease*, which is collected in the 2016 anthology 平原上的摩西 *Pingyuan Shangde Moxi* ‘Moses on the Plain’, Shuang Xuetao reflects on decease in a philosophical fashion, by means of elaborating barren plains, gun fighting and the frozen corpse of an obscure poet who is as nugatory and marginalised as indolent loafers residing on the dilapidated Yanfen Street (Wang 2019). Analogous to his *A Writer’s Odyssey*, Shuang Xuetao also deploys the representation of dense mist in *Decease*, whereas disparate from the former that entails salient fantasies, *Decease* can be perceived to be non-fiction, in that the scenery embroidered in Example (7) is realistic. Nonetheless, notwithstanding absence of surrealistic descriptions, Shuang Xuetao still manages to express melancholy via the depressing scenery.

(7) 车子前面的道路上渐渐露出雪迹, 路边枯树的皮也大多裂开, 刚才没有看见鸟, 这时有鸟, 几只乌鸦被车惊起, 从地面飞到了树上。司机的手一直没有放回到方向盘, 他从脚下拖出一张渔网, 逮住一个窟窿, 用两只梭针织起来, 梭针舞得飞快, 他的眼睛兀自看着前方, 好像一台陈旧的缝纫机。路上的雪厚了, 没有车辙, 也没有脚印, 两旁枯树林里, 树皮没有了, 成了一片默然站立的棕色木材。不知是从道路上, 还是从枯树林里, 升起了雾, 贴在四周的车窗上, 车子好像给什么托着, 向前飘动。

Snow gradually appeared on the road in front of the car, and most trees along the road had split trunks and branches. Birds began to emerge, and a few crows flew up to the trees to avoid the car. The driver’s hands had not been touching the steering wheel. He pulled a big fish net out besides the car brake, and started to patch a hole with two knitting needles. While his eyes were looking straight ahead, he knitted swiftly like an obsolete sewing machine. The snow on the road was getting thicker, yet there were no ruts or footprints. Two rows of split trees along the road became a sea of silent upright timbers. Mist rose from nowhere and steamed the windows up. Shrouded in the mist, the car was floating ahead.

(*Decease*. Trans. Mine)

Analogously, depictions appertaining to nameless approximations of form can be attested in a novella *Cloud and Mud* composed by Ban Yu, as in Example (8). Although the narrative is void of supernatural and paranormal forces and Example (8) has its

setting in a school in Shenyang, the imagery-provoking depiction of the dim sky generates apprehension and dolorousness.

(8) 我骑着自行车去学校门口接余娜,好几个家长也在等着接孩子,聚在一起说话,叽叽喳喳,大多是女的,我不认识,也没加入。我站在稍远处,抬头望天,很久没看夜晚的天空了,没想到现在晚上也这么亮,跟白天区别并不明显,略阴沉,但似乎要更广阔一些,也更苍茫,深邃,暗光在其中涌动着,云层遮蔽,仿佛混沌的黑洞,吞噬掉时间、力与经验,空荡荡的没有回响。乌云如湿泥,遮住左眼的一部分,不断游移、膨胀,即将遮住天空更多的部分,我愿有明亮而年轻的精魂驻守其背后。

I cycled to my daughter's school to pick her up. There were other parents waiting and chattering outside the gate, and most of them were women. I did not know any of them, so I stood away from them. I looked up at the sky, the sky that I had not looked for a long time. To my surprise, the sky looked quite bright in the evening, almost like daytime. It was slightly overcast, but more profound than daylight. The dim light was shuttling between clouds like higgledy-piggledy black holes that devoured time, energy and experience in an echoless manner. Grey cloud was like mud, blinding part of the left eye and drifting around. It kept expanding and was about to cover a larger portion of the sky. I wished there were robust and young spirits guarding behind it.

(*Cloud and Mud*. Trans. Mine)

Conclusion

Literary works of the 'three icons of Dongbei Renaissance', aka Ban Yu, Zheng Zhi and Shuang Xuetao, are featured by reality-oriented descriptions of Dongbei's social issues as well as ordinary people's trivialities and travails. Nonetheless, there are salient Lovecraftian elements in their fiction, predominantly occurring at the ends of narratives. Neo-Dongbei writing manifests fear of the unknown and insanity, both of which function as preponderant themes in Cthulhu Mythos. Furthermore, parallel to Lovecraftian horror, neo-Dongbei narratives entail supernatural and paranormal creatures that stand in stark contrast to the mundane portraits of quotidian Dongbei cities. Moreover, the 'three icons of Dongbei Renaissance' convey nameless approximations of form by means of depicting mist and dolorous scenery in their writing.

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