

*The Seventh Day: Reclaiming Community in Contemporary China*

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Explosive Transformation: Globalisation and its Discontents in Asian Fiction

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## Introduction

In the opening paragraph of Yu Hua's novel *The Seventh Day* the renaming of the crematorium as a funeral parlour demonstrates how cultural processes in China may be repackaged according to political expediency. It is an interesting opening gambit as it signals a superficially concealed discussion on the politics of death. How death and mourning are used to reflect wider issues of social justice and the loss of tradition following China's rapid economic growth is the central concern of this essay.

The novel expresses a yearning for the revival of a communitarian spirit that would combine the filial piety of a Confucian heritage with the selfless ideals that motivated communism. The primary vehicles for exploring this reinvigorated sense of social responsibility are the protagonist's relationship with his father and the community of victims occupying the land of the unburied. It can be understood as memorialising the passing of a distinctly Chinese identity and set of values, whereby the painfulness of the individual stories that make up the story are used to describe the pain of a nation. There are clear inferences to the spiritual credo of Buddhism as well as the rationalist strictures of the Confucian social hierarchy which order the moral codes of conduct deemed to have been lacking during the social and economic transformation of the last forty years. In order to explore how death symbolism operates I will give a brief overview of the religious and political conditions that existed in China from the time of the Cultural Revolution through to the present, before undertaking an analysis of what elements of death symbolism are used to explicate the loss of regard for cultural and religious traditions, and the detrimental effect this has had on Chinese society. To this end, I have divided my discussion on the treatment of death into sections whose thematic content overlaps. I start with an outline of how cremation is understood in China, before looking at what role ghostly apparitions, bones and misfortune play in Chinese

belief and thus what significance they have in *The Seventh Day*. I then move on to look at what the loss of flesh symbolises, before finishing with a discussion of how all these features of death and mortuary culture feed in to the preoccupation with ethics and social cohesion as performed through the expression of emotion.

## **The Cultural Revolution and Religion**

Yu Hua was born in China in the 1960's, at a time when Mao was restating his power through a series of political purges known as the Cultural Revolution. The destabilisation was felt at all levels of Chinese society and set back economic progress by decades (Guthrie 28). The purging of opposition to Mao was disguised as a so-called purification of society. It entailed the attempted elimination of "old ways" that were deemed to no longer serve China's interests. These "olds" were customs, habits, culture and thinking. Traditional Chinese society became the enemy of the state, but its erasure was unguided and erratic. The mayhem that ensued left Chinese society reeling (Guthrie 35). It was an era of complete intolerance for any doctrine or belief system that did not further the aims of the government. Once Mao had secured his own power again, the government's priority was stability, or, as Yao puts it, "the continuation of a particular regime" (Yao 140). Anything that could be associated with traditional culture had been banned, while everything remaining was purely expedient. Traditional death rituals, formularised as they were by religion, were regarded by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) as feudal superstitions with no place in Chinese modernity (Cheater 68).

Mao's death in 1976 made it possible for Deng Xiaoping to initiate a series of economic reforms aimed at creating more flexible, responsive markets, as well as encouraging industries to pursue foreign investment and export opportunities. These gradual

changes, combined with a focus on stability through the social control exercised by the government, were to unleash the potential of the workforce and thus initiate the massive economic growth for which China is now famous. No longer allowed to identify with its own ethical traditions, China's ensuing rush into modernity meant that there were no checks in place to curb greed. The chaos of the Cultural Revolution was replaced by that of unimpeded economic development (Guthrie 37). Feuchtwang refers to this recent period of growth as "the emphatic present", arguing that the Maoist attempt to transform China through the mobilisation of political will has since been replaced by "the more familiar discipline of cultivating opportunity to get rich and to improve self". This he associates with the "cultivation of smaller family units and of individual opportunism" (Feuchtwang 24). At the same time, however, Yao points out that under Deng Xiaoping there was a relaxation of the government's anti-religious stance, which led to an expansion of religious activity in China, coinciding with the controlled extension of individual freedom" (Yao 75). Thus in comparison with pre-communist China, religion became relatively self-serving in its orientation. While political expression is still tightly controlled, the combination of religiosity with greed and prosperity has accommodated a version of familial piety that is arguably removed from the ethics based on the teachings of Confucius.

## **The Market Economy and Massive Change**

In essence, *The Seventh Day* is preoccupied with the social cost of China's modernisation. Goossaert describes how the renovation of entire suburbs and city blocks throughout China in the last twenty-five years, one after another, resulted in the eradication of "local memories and communities..." (Goossaert 272). With the economic expansion of the cities, the rural poor began to move en masse to work in the growing manufacturing industries. Hua taps into

this movement of people from village to city as both a real phenomenon and as a metaphor for the changes in values that have come about. In the novel, the archetypal, ancestral village, from whence the father Yang Jinbiao comes, has fundamentally changed. The narrator's relatives still live there, but the place is not as he remembers it, nor are there any people of working age in the streets, having all left for the city. In an interview Hua described the speed of change in China as a rollercoaster ride that "left Chinese people lost", and claims that ordinary people had not had time to acclimatise, becoming alienated in their own country and from their own traditions (Zhang n.pag.). Similarly, Hua uses the metaphor of unidirectional travel and speed in the novel to parallel the shift of focus in China from spiritualism to selfism. The primary vehicle for this is the narrator's birth on board a moving train. In a typical passage, the narrator—who is deceased—nostalgically recalls the scene of his birth as subsequently related to him by his father and birth mother. The rails onto which he falls are described as tentative "rays of light that had lost their way" (Hua 57). An idealistic picture of a spiritual, reverent and truly communitarian China is never explicitly formulated, but nevertheless intimated through scenes such as this. That rays of light might lose their way suggests, if one chooses to accept that the light is a metaphor for the wisdom that comes of a traditional spiritual education, that China has indeed found itself on the wrong track, and needs to be guided—by literature perhaps—back towards more suitable goals and productive social relationships. The chaos of the Cultural Revolution is extended into the fictional present through the symbolism of change, actuated by the rush to modernise. The selfism of capitalist expansion is depicted as no different from the total erasure of self in the Maoist years. Both are held up as the antithesis of the Confucian emphasis on filial piety and the sense of community associated with the village (as opposed to the city). Indeed, it is a villager that scoops up the infant narrator left defenceless on the tracks, and nurtures him. The father's own stoicism and virtue is repeatedly described throughout the novel by the

loving son; their pious relationship representing that desired correspondence between ethical tradition and modern condition.

### **Confucian Ethics and Buddhist ritual**

The death symbolism in the novel is rooted in two predominant religious traditions. Although China has always been religiously diverse, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have been roughly equal in importance for centuries. Confucianism, itself dating back to 480BC is the source of the notion of filial piety, while Buddhism has had a significant influence on Chinese mortuary ritual. Yao describes the interpenetration of religious traditions in China, whereby the three main religions could be understood as three “fundamental aspects of the Chinese way of life: Confucianism represented the politico-religious and moral side of national life, taoism the ascetic, spiritualistic and magical side, while Buddhism the *vanitas vanitatum* of mundane existence and salvation for the life to come.” (Yao 12). In this equation, Buddhism figures as that part of spiritual tradition focussed on the hereafter, or memorialisation of the deceased, while Confucianism is that element which ensures the memorialisation is focused on immediate family. While the majority of Chinese would incorporate some elements of all three traditions into their lives, it would be according to necessity (Yao 14). Thus Chau argues that what defines religiosity in China is not the number or nature of religions per se, but the relation people have to religious activity. That is, the Chinese population tends to have a relation to religious ritual that is based on efficacy and need (Chau 149). This observation is confirmed by the use to which Buddhist ritual and Confucian ethics have been put in recent years. Although rarely named explicitly, Buddhism surfaces as the primary religious code in the structuring of the novel into seven days, corresponding with the seven days of ritual

mourning in Chinese Buddhist practice (Watson 165 and Buswell 21), while Confucianism exerts its influence over the ethical concerns exhibited in the novel.

When Mao died, his funeral was a reflection of his position at the pinnacle of Chinese society. The lavishness of the proceedings as well as the monumentality of his mausoleum stood in direct contrast with the socialist, egalitarian belief system he purported to uphold. Similarly, according to Cheater, there was a deliberate manipulation of the meaning of mortuary ritual in post-Maoist China, especially in relation to the commemoration of party leaders, whereby imperial Chinese symbolism was selectively used to encode the longevity of Chinese tradition, even though such symbolism stood in direct contrast with the tenets of communism. On the one hand, this manipulation allowed for social continuity where party policies had created division. On the other hand, the return to quasi-religious symbolism allowed the CCP to further mould the party image as preserver of Chinese identity (Cheater 97). Yet at the same time, Cheater describes how the inability to mourn publicly during the Cultural Revolution led to mourning-as-political-protest in the years following, in which a desire to protest found expression through mass public mourning rituals for moderate party leaders. It was in fact one such event that indirectly led to the 1989 demonstrations in Tiananmen Square (Cheater 80). In light of this, it is possible to see how funerary rituals occupy a significant place in state politics, both as a government tool for the manipulation of the public and as a form of protest. But the connection between death and protest is not limited to the relation between the party and the public. By the 2000s, Chinese citizens had begun to vent their frustration with growing inequality on social media. One common complaint was the lavishness of funerals for the wealthy. The sense of inequity was keenly felt because of the soaring cost of upholding the newly reclaimed funerary traditions. This change was a direct result of the Deng era economic reforms, which made financially possible a return to “the traditional measurement of family status by the expense of the



funerals a family can support” (Cheater 68). Indeed, voices on social media coined the term ‘grave slave’ to describe families who had gone in to debt to purchase a plot of land for the burial of a family member (Kaiman n.pag.). This clearly demonstrates the continuing influence of the Confucian system of filial piety, whereby great emphasis is placed on the dutifulness shown by offspring towards their parents, and on the respect they demonstrate for their ancestors as a whole. The relationship works both ways, however, as there is also emphasis placed on the importance of property inheritance. Thus commemoration of parents is foremost the responsibility of the male heir (Jones 323). The cultural origins of the relationship of the narrator to his father in the novel may be seen here. In the novel, the depth of the narrator’s filial piety is demonstrated when he closes his shop in order to search for the missing father, just as the father’s commitment to the son is equally demonstrated through the sacrifices he made in order to raise the foundling boy. The reciprocity coincides with the traditional expectation that the male heir will both receive and reciprocate filial piety (Taylor 223). Poignantly however, the narrator is not the father’s biological son. This has the effect—at least within the scope of the novel—of making Confucian tradition available to a wider set of contemporary familial alignments than an older, narrower understanding of family may have allowed for.

Confucianism continues to be practiced then. But its relevance is not limited to funerary ritual or inheritance rites. Fostering a sense of community in times of upheaval might also be a part of the attraction it holds, as de Bary suggests in his analysis of the modern return to Confucian ethics. He sees in China a disparity between talk about the benefits of globalisation and the “great moral and social disarray” within which the population lives (de Bary 371). Similarly Adler suggests that among the intellectual class in China there is a view that the move away from Maoism to economic reform has left a moral vacuum of sorts, and that a “modernized, less patriarchal form of Confucianism... might

provide a set of moral principles better suited to Chinese culture than one imported from the West” (Adler 1611). Bell proposes that Chinese history is steeped in Confucianism, and that the communist century was but a temporary diversion. The Confucian moral requirement that family be placed above and beyond any other social bond is still in place (Bell 228). Indeed, it is “literally beyond choice” (229). Thus the tragedies that befall people in the novel almost always revolve around the sense of loss and mourning that is afflicted upon loved ones, and when not, then upon the victims themselves as they mourn the very fact that they are not mourned by surviving family members. The novel acts as a plea for empathy. Taylor points out how for Confucius, it is not enough to appear to be dutifully serving one’s parents or worshipping ones ancestors. More difficult and important is “the countenance, that is, the inner feeling as it is reflected on the face.” (Taylor 224). Confucius assumes that the face will betray a person’s true intentions. Accordingly, the narrator in *The Seventh Day* is able to read the emotional state of those skeletons he meets, for he can ‘feel’ their tears and smiles (Hua 203). His empathy motivates the reader’s own.

## **Cremation**

Prior to the communist revolution of 1949, cremation was sporadically employed in Buddhist practice, however the belief in an after-life for the soul more often than not entailed a dictum on leaving the body intact (Buswell 206). Burial, however requires space, and rotting corpses can pose problems for sanitation. Thus the Communist regime set rules governing the performance of mortuary rituals, favouring cremation and insisting that it take place within two days of death. This law made adherence to the traditional Buddhist seven day period of mourning difficult to maintain. Chinese families “lost to the state a major source of of honour, self-respect and status.” (Goossaert 230). The insistence on burial became even more heavily

policed during the Cultural Revolution when Red Guards took it upon themselves to destroy tombs belonging to wealthy (or formerly wealthy) families (Goossaert 230). The state had assumed control over both the life and death of the people. The denial of burial rites was understood as a way of purging the state of class inequalities, as the elaborateness of a funeral was in direct relation to the means of a family. Yet in fact what resulted was simply the replacement of one class system with another: one built on the scale and power of the work unit to which a deceased person belonged, as well as their rank within that unit. The appearance of change during the Maoist era masked the reality that some were better equipped to benefit than others when economic momentum returned to the Chinese economy.

By the mid 1990s, funerary laws had been sufficiently relaxed to see a slight rise in the popularity of burial, but only amongst the who could afford it, having become extremely expensive. Yu Hua's generation, which had been born during the Cultural Revolution, mostly accepted cremation as standard, though often chose instead to memorialise the loved ones by keeping or burying the ashes in an urn (Goossaert 235). Cremation enacts a final separation of the deceased from the world of the living. It is not so much the burning of the body that causes the separation of the deceased's soul however. Burial, or indeed any ritualised process of mourning would suffice. Within the context of the novel, cremation is simply taken as the norm. Rather, it is those who have not undergone rituals of separation through mourning that remain connected to worldly nature—a connection exploited in the novel as a positive attribute, through the representation of the land of the unburied as an organic haven. At any rate, the use of cremation as the primary mortuary ritual in the novel correlates with Cuevas' observation that the preservation of ashes is a combination of the Buddhist desire to achieve separation and the Confucian emphasis on the memorialisation of ancestors (Cuevas 33).

Yet cremation itself is not held up to scrutiny in the novel so much as the exercising of privilege, where VIP cremations are fast-tracked. The crematorium is usefully similar to a

factory in its processual nature, allowing the author to exploit the anonymity of government service provision as a metaphor for the unfettered industrialisation of life in general. The economic conditions may have changed, but the political conditions remain largely the same, with government decision-making remaining faceless. Of the two workers at the cemetery who appear in the novel only the father, Yang Jinbiao, is recognisable. The other is simply a voice on the telephone requesting the protagonist's presence at a certain time and identifying itself metonymically as "Funeral Parlour" (Hua 6). The anonymity is suggestive of the individual's relationship to government and to the sheer scale of the Chinese population.

## **Ghosts**

Hua employs typically Buddhist conceptions of the 'bad death' when describing tragic accidents. Feuchtwang lists some causes of a bad death, such as violence or the impossibility of retrieving the body of a loved one due to its whereabouts. Such scenarios result in the deceased becoming ghosts which exist in a state in-between life and the finality of death (Feuchtwang 170). Ludwig underlines the social construction of the Chinese Buddhist belief in ghosts:

"Ghosts can point to unresolved conflicts, trauma and bad death; to a life that through violence and untimeliness has not had a proper ending and has yet to be finalised. Persons who have died a bad death are denied passage and are caught in between worlds. Nevertheless, ghosts are social beings that are addressed and play a role in the lives of the living, or indeed can be seen, heard or spoken to in specific contexts and have specific desires. Therefore, one should not approach ghosts as remnants of a 'primitive belief', but as important figures of the social fabric" (Ludwig 14).

Not only is belief in ghosts ordinary, but they have an active role to play in daily life. The preternaturalism in the novel, whereby the tragically, unexpectedly dead are mobile and actively engaged in preparing for their own funerals therefore has a precedent in Chinese religious supposition. Be it a suicide, the result of fire, abortion, building collapse or even physical exhaustion, all the deaths in the novel are bad in so much as the deceased is alone or unable to be found. They are all candidates for the ghostly reanimation that Buddhist lore postulates. Their skeletal existence is a logical result of the rotting of the flesh, but also a confirmation of the traditional seventh day of mourning, after which a corpse must be cremated or interred for the soul to be released from the mortal world. Bad deaths complicate the passage of the soul, but the author appears to pin the blame on the forces of modernisation and faceless government. At least through the act of narration the victims of China's success are mourned and given a burial of sorts.

## **Bones**

According to Watson, traditional Chinese Buddhist mortuary rituals forge an association between the soft tissues and yin, which is itself associated with the feminine. Bones, by contrast, are associated with yang and masculinity. Bones are the rigid, lasting component of the body and are therefore that which lends itself to the act of memorialisation. Thus the preservation of bones, even as ashes after cremation, is understood as bringing men into community (and continuity) with the spirits of their ancestors (Watson 179). In the novel, however, Hua somewhat paradoxically posits a transgressive afterlife (that of the unburied and therefore un-sanctified) in which men and women alike are equally free. That is, they are free of the burden of filial memorialisation: that very tradition which the novel would seem to uphold as the glue holding society together. Inconsequential to the wider community—though

not their own families, should they have them—the unburied preserve their own memory and grieve their own passing. The land of the unburied is nature stripped of cultural operations. A place where “heart-shaped leaves” flutter to a “heartbeat rhythm” (Hua 213). It is an Edenic rendition of the natural world in which those deceased who have not undergone mortuary rituals merge with and relinquish themselves to the not-nothing of the biosphere: a non-hierarchical cornucopia of love. The logic of the novel appears to reject the yin-yang distinction as it relates to bones, at least in so far as it maps onto gender. The boniness of the dead as a universal property brings all into community, irrespective of age, sex or rank. The only significance to carry across from the mortal world is the tragedy of having left others alone through one’s death. As such, those with whom one died or by whose actions one was killed constitute family, which is why the chess players remain together, despite their former enmity. It is therefore possible to see a double negation of the status quo in this gesture. There is the broad refusal of discrimination in cultural traditions which place men as more worthy of filial piety than women and maintains social hierarchy (one earns respect through power and wealth, even under communism). There is also a refusal to accept an attitude to community in which the weak are expendable. The weak, those victims of the great (economic) rush forward, are not forgotten because they memorialise themselves. They are not reduced to ashes but remain intact, steadfast in their boniness.

## **Misfortune**

Throughout the novel, the tragic deaths that occur are recounted passively, without the overt laying of blame. The freakish accidents are associated with, amongst other things, regulatory oversights, hasty development and poor construction methods, suicide, accidental suicide, illegal abortion, illegal organ donation, demolition and murder. In all cases, the immediate

causes are explained, but it is left to the reader to infer what relation these untoward deaths might have to the mechanisms of economic growth. This subtext is something of an elephant in the room in the sense that it occupies a significant place in the novel, without being discussed as such. And while this might afford some protection from censorship, it is also interesting to consider the expression of misfortune in the novel in relation to the Chinese aversion to openly discussing it. For many Chinese, talk of misfortune is in fact a taboo. By way of example, Chan's analysis of the life insurance market in China shows how insurance agents have faced a dilemma when trying to discuss the possibility of accidents with potential clients. One agent reported:

“People saw accidents happen, but they insisted that that kind of misfortune would not happen to them. Our job as an agent was to teach them that accidents were neutral, that accidents could happen to everyone. We told them that buying life insurance was a way to show love and care for their family. You know, the Chinese do everything for the benefit of their family... But it was difficult. They didn't want to hear about misfortunes” (Chan 117).

This report on how to operate in the Chinese marketplace shows very clearly just how significant the psychological investment in superstition is. Superstition, an openly declared enemy of the communist regime, has not been dislodged for the very fact that it is tightly bound up with all three major religious currents in China, which in turn are bound to one another. Tragedy and the suffering of the weak or disadvantaged is however a topic that can be approached through literature. Comprised of a succession of tragedies, the novel inserts its deliberation on misfortune into the public sphere as a critique of inequity and unsustainability in the modern Chinese state. The misfortunes related in the novel abundantly illustrate the systemic problems that China faces, giving a human face to the tragedy.

In his study of how death acts as a force in the construction of society, Arnarson points out how in Iceland, freak accidents can be naturalised in the way they are recounted, such that no blame is laid or explanation given (Arnarson 195). He uses this example to describe the way loss creates a sense of collective identity (189). The same would appear to be the case in Hua's depiction of China, where the victims of accidents can be understood as anonymous individuals swept away by the fast moving tide of change, and their deaths can be tallied as a cost to the community. As individuals they remain unmemorialised—although within the logic of the novel they are then collectivised in the land of the unburied—while on the other hand as a group of stories reminiscent of minor news reports, they are collected and told, thus forming a community on the page. The inability of un-cremated or unburied souls to properly pass away within the seven day cycle can be understood as a threat to the moral order defined by the nexus of Chinese religious traditions. Society, constructed through its relationship to death, is in turn threatened by deaths that do not conform to its strictures. The land of the unburied is an anarchic paradise, flying in the face of tradition. Yet it is not for the sake of challenging tradition per se that Hua builds this scenario. On the contrary, the novel appears to argue for a return to the stable ethical framework that Confucianism provides, albeit on a new, truly egalitarian footing. The position taken by the author would appear to be both conservative and progressive, simultaneously.

### **The ambiguity of flesh**

The walking, waiting dead find themselves stuck in limbo, potentially forever. In this zone of indeterminacy, metaphors work multi-directionally, whereby the gradual loss of flesh in the novel through decomposition renders the dead anonymous: they cannot be recognised as



individuals<sup>1</sup>. Yet in this coming together through the loss of signs, the dead express emotion no less strongly than if alive. Emotions are not seen however. They are intuited. Thus the narrator can ‘feel’ a smile, not see it (Hua 203). The metaphor of the dead shedding flesh, akin to foregoing ties to mortality and to mortal concerns renders them social equals. They harbour memories and are subject to emotional affect. They empathise with one another. The sociality of the skeletons stands in direct contrast with the asocial anonymity of the corporate and governmental machinations at play in the real world. Death, that final withdrawal from society and identity, is inverted. Relevant here is Baudrillard’s summary of the societal fear of death as an annihilation of identity. For Baudrillard, the anonymity of the skeleton is a notional return of the deceased to sociality:

“Every society has always done this. They have always staved off the abjection of natural death, the social abjection of decomposition which voids the corpse of its signs and its social force of signification, leaving it as nothing more than a substance, and by the same token, precipitating the group in to the terror of its own symbolic decomposition. It is necessary to ward off death, to smother it in artificiality in order to evade the unbearable moment when flesh becomes nothing but flesh, and ceases to be sign. The skeleton, with its stripped bones, already seals the possible reconciliation of the group, for it regains the force of the mask and the sign” (Baudrillard 180).

In Baudrillard’s hypothesis the skeleton is not *the* person despite being *of the* person. It is a sign in itself. One that, through being characterless, is rendered as both a sign of death and a sign of death’s place in the structuring of society. The deceased is recouped by our very understanding of what it means to live socially. The meaning of the group exceeds that of the individual. Baudrillard goes on to note how decomposition is intolerable because it obscures

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<sup>1</sup> Their anonymity is itself a metaphor, of course, for their lack of visibility in the world of the living.

the distinction between life and death. In order to confirm living social bonds, we need the dead to be readable as dead, for “when the primitive showers the dead with signs, it is in order to make the transition towards the state of death as quick as possible, beyond the ambiguity between the living and the dead which is precisely what the disintegrating flesh testifies to” (Baudrillard 181). The reassertion of life over death is achieved in part by clarifying the distinction between flesh and bone again. In the novel, the dead that remain in paradise—forever unburied—“feel” one another’s emotions and are no longer reliant on outwardly visible signs. The ambiguity of decomposition gives way to the certainty of bones; those relics which were traditionally venerated in the system of filial piety promoted through Confucianism and Buddhism.

### **Reclaiming community**

*The Seventh Day* is very much a book concerned with the restoration of empathy and social bonds. Death is used as a vehicle precisely because, although it can be understood as threatening the termination of community, it is used to the opposite effect. Bauman quotes Harontunian on how death can be conceived as being at odds with society:

“Since life is a transaction, a communion, death is the end of transaction or a failure of communion. The being which is annihilated by death is a being with a coexistence, a fellowmanhood [sic]. Death, therefore, is not the cessation of physical life, or the dissolution of organism as such, but the separation of fellowmen from one another, which is the death of the human being” (Harontunian 84).

Bauman then goes on to note that those aspects of modernity we associate with the alienation of the individual (the anonymity of the administrative regime, the atomisation of society) are responsible for the loneliness of life. Death does not bring loneliness then, but life does

(Bauman 128). Thus Harontunian's conception of death as terminating community is based on a sense of loss but does not take into account the very coming together of community in order to process that loss. The coming together is arguably the most important part of death, for it is the prerogative of the living. It is not that Harontunian's analysis is wrong, but that it focuses on the lack of reciprocation with the deceased rather than on the ongoing responsiveness of the community. It therefore possible to understand how through the device of a community of skeletons, Hua provides an idealistic model of communal life based on a deeply nostalgic view of the Chinese cultural community as it might have been—though perhaps never was—before the terror of Maoism and before the coming of Deng-inspired deregulation. In other words, before the gradual onset of modernity. It is a model of family-oriented communitarianism—not communism—rooted in traditions of the past but offered as a counteragent to the excesses of the present. Therefore in *The Seventh Day*, the very fear of a loss of community through modernisation is turned inside out by making the victims of anonymity the bearers of identity in the afterlife. Those that suffered, and continue to suffer for lack of funerary rites come to be those blessed with an eternal spring in something akin to a garden of Eden. The real world effect of the novel, then, is the generation of empathy for the victims of modernisation, which is itself a political bond.

Writing on the social consequences of mortality, Zygmunt Bauman noted the centrality of bonding to any sense of identity. In a passage that appears to predict the rise of social media he writes how his “continuing being makes sense only in as far as there are others who go on needing me [...] they make me [the] unique, irreplaceable, indispensable individual that I am” (Bauman 40). It is this sense of completeness that comes from being in a community that Hua accesses when he has the land of the unburied figure as a place of safety and respite; a place of collective identity beyond the confines of individualism; a place where emotion is sensed, not seen. Identity is achieved through an empathetic community, and thus

the individual is recognisable as such in its relation to the society. On the fifth day, the narrator meets a group in the land of the unburied who died together in a fire. The children understand themselves to be getting prettier as they lose their charred flesh (Hua 139). In their innocence the children do not recognise that their beauty here is no longer physical. The visibility of the flesh (its exteriority) gives way to lasting truths about inclusivity. Flesh, that very cloak of individuality, has been hiding the true individuals underneath, who in their skeletal permanence are members of a family forged in sorrow, and all the closer for it.

## **Conclusion**

The *Seventh Day* attempts to engender empathy in the reader for the victims of China's economic miracle and in doing so expresses a yearning for the revival of a purportedly lost communitarian spirit. This plea for the revival of an ethical and empathetic society is built upon a return to Confucian respect and Buddhist ritual. In the China that Yu Hua portrays, those disempowered individuals that do not receive mortuary rituals are forgotten, not memorialised. Yet the politicisation of their hypothetical existence through Hua's act of writing renders powerful the very idea of them. In an effective reversal of the logic of top-down governance, the individual lives of the disenfranchised are celebrated in the novel, while the political and economic powers that dominate the lives of the victims remain faceless and thus both unresponsive and irresponsible. Our position as readers is on the ground, so to speak, alongside those whose tragedy is narrated.

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