

The Significance of Scatological Humour: A case study of Zhu Wen's *What is Garbage, What is Love* and Han Dong's *Striking Root*

Pamela Hunt¹

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Abstract: Why are there so many modern Chinese novels in which, as Cindy Carter put it so nicely in an earlier post, 'faeces play a starring role'? Any reader of contemporary Chinese fiction will tell you that you don't have to look very far to find a joke about bodily functions. But at the same time humour is rarely discussed in academic writing on Chinese literature, let alone humour that centres around the toilet. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed a shame, which is why I decided to tackle the subject myself in a recent essay for the MA in Modern Chinese Literature at SOAS, University of London, focusing on the work of two authors much discussed on the pages of Paper Republic, Han Dong and Zhu Wen. Although there may be much to be said about the scatological aspect to the Chinese sense of humour, I start this essay from the viewpoint that jokes about shit are not simply a question of culture. Nor is it, as the authors might have us believe, merely a form of 'plain-speaking'. Instead, two things seemed important. The first is that cleanliness, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas argued, is often equated with progress and order. The second is that progress and order are two inflated ideals that Han and Zhu seem to enjoy puncturing. The 'Glorious Banishments' of the Cultural Revolution, the shining modernity of postsocialist China, the elevated role of literature – all these sacred cows of Chinese society are happily ridiculed by both authors by associating them with bodily functions. Focusing on two particular scenes within *What is Garbage, What is Love* (<http://paper-republic.org/books/shenme-shi-laji-shenme-shi-ai/>), and *Striking Root* (<http://paper-republic.org/books/zhagen/>), this essay explores how Han and Zhu's excremental visions are a means both of challenging China's social and political bodies, and an expression of their own iconoclastic power within the literary field. The significance – and potential power – of scatological humour, to me, lies in its subversive quality, in its transgression of the boundaries of order and good taste.

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From the mid-1980s, a wave of taboo-breaking fiction made its raucous appearance onto the Chinese literary scene. In an atmosphere of literary experimentalism and commercialism, an increasing number of works, as well as describing a China filled with hooliganism, violence, sexual depravity and drug-taking, have indulged in scatological humour.² Yet relatively little has been written about humour in modern Chinese fiction, and even less about scatology.³ This essay will argue that scatological humour is a significant feature in modern literature, and that, just as with other instances of humour in modern Chinese fiction, it actively engages with social, political and humanistic issues.⁴ Moreover, the question of scatological content ties neatly with some critics' preoccupation with the body in Chinese literature. If the body is, as they have argued, a site for the exploration of social and political change in Chinese society, then surely the question of scatology deserves more attention.⁵ What we might call the 'excremental vision' of some Chinese writers may also be considered in the light of other studies of scatology.⁶ In his study of Rabelais, Bakhtin famously presented the use of scatological humour and the grotesque body as means of inverting hierarchies and creating a sense of regeneration.⁷ The anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued that dirt is a relative concept, as 'matter out of place,' dirty not because it is unhygienic but because it is outside of the ordered system of what is acceptable. Thus breaking taboos, and writing about dirt,

² Bonnie McDougall, 'Literary Decorum or Carnivalistic Grotesque: Literature in the People's Republic of China after 50 years', in *The China Quarterly* 159 (September 1999), pp.723-372; For other examples of scatological humour in contemporary Chinese fiction which McDougall does not refer to, see Qiu Huadong, *Chengshi Zhanchu*, (Beijing, 1995), Yu Hua, *Xiongli*, (Shanghai, 2005), Cao Naiqian, *There is Nothing I Can Do When I think of you Late at Night* (New York, 2009) trans. John Balcolm. Scatological humour is, of course, far from a new phenomenon in Chinese culture— but it is now increasingly visible in so-called 'literary' fiction.

³ For a rare example of studies of Chinese humour, see the special issue of *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 20:2 (Fall 2008). The online forum dedicated to literary translations of Chinese fiction, Paper Republic, has recently begun discussing scatological humour. See Nicky Harman, 'Translating Scat', *Paper Republic* (published 9th May 2008), <http://paper-republic.org/nickyharman/translating-scat/> (accessed 1st May 2010); and Cindy Carter, 'Studies in Scat', *Paper Republic* (published 20th July 2007), <http://paper-republic.org/cindycarter/studies-in-scat-excerpts-from-yu-hua-zhu-wen-and-li-er/> (accessed 1st May 2010).

⁴ Christopher G. Rea and Nicolai Volland, 'Comic Visions of Modern China: Introduction', in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* (20:2), pp.6, 13-14.

⁵ The critical studies that focus on images of the body in Chinese literature range from Wendy Larson's study of female May Fourth writers, *Women and Writing in Modern China* (Stanford, 1998), pp 84-130, to studies of hunger and body politics in David Der-Wei Wang, *The Monster that is History: History, Violence and Fictional Writing in Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley 2004), pp. 117-148, to Sheldon Lu's study of Weihui and Mian Mian's 1990s 'body writing', in *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* (Honolulu, 2007), pp. 53-67.

⁶ The term 'excremental vision' is borrowed from Norman Brown's study of scatological humour in Swift, in *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Wesleyan, 1985), p.179. He in turn borrowed from John Middleton Murray.

⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, (Indiana, 1984), trans. Helene Iswolsky, pp.18-23.

involves a transgressing of boundaries; this in turn brings with it potential power.⁸ These studies suggest a fruitful way of approaching scatological humour in Chinese literature: as a means of confronting and challenging modern China's social and political bodies.

I will consider the scatological content in two novels: *What is Garbage, What is Love* (1998) by Zhu Wen (born 1967), and *Striking Root* (2003) by Han Dong (born 1961).⁹ The former, Zhu's only full-length novel, follows a year in the life of Xiao Ding, a writer who drifts through his life, devastated by boredom and a strong feeling of alienation. *Striking Root* follows the fortunes of the Tao family, who, as intellectuals, are sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. As the family prepare themselves to 'dig in' to Sanyu village for many generations, country life, the process of building a house, growing food, and going to the village school are described in painstaking detail, often from the point of view of the child, Young Tao. In both cases, scatological jokes abound, though in this essay I will focus in particular on one scene in each which act as useful starting points for a discussion about the significance of scatology to both authors. As well as these specific instances of excremental humour, I will consider the context and stated aims of Zhu and Han's literary projects, earlier representations of the body in Chinese fiction, and the link between hygiene and modernity in contemporary Chinese discourse. If we consider the contexts of scatological humour in China alongside broader studies of scatology and taboo, a number of questions arise, which I will consider throughout the essay: is the excremental vision in Zhu and Han's work a deliberately subversive act, or simply an attempt to focus on the quotidian? In breaking former taboos in literature, are the authors in a position of power, or are they expressing powerlessness? I will ultimately argue that scatological humour in their work, in emphasising the grotesque physicality of the normal human body, subverts the prevailing discourse both of literary norms and the society which Zhu and Han are writing about. There is thus a 'subversive normality' in writing about excrement which, although presenting powerless, even degraded, individuals, paradoxically results in a statement of power by the authors themselves.

A brief look at Zhu and Han's discussions of the Chinese literary field suggests that scatological humour fits well with their notions of the purposes of modern literature. Friends and co-creators of the famous 1998 manifesto, 'Rupture: One Questionnaire and Fifty Six Responses', Han and Zhu were strong advocates of 'art for art's sake', determined to break away from what they saw as the destructive influence of literary institutions and traditions in China.¹⁰ Zhu has frequently been associated with a deliberate 'plain

⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1984), p.162.

⁹ Zhu Wen, *Shenme shi laji shenme shi ai: Xiao Ding Gushi*, Shijie Chuban Jituan (Shanghai, 2008); Han Dong, *Zha Gen (Striking Root)*, <http://book.sina.com.cn/liter/zhagen/>, accessed 1st May 2010. All translations that follow are my own.

¹⁰ Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford, 2008), pp.74-75'; Zhu Wen, 'Rupture: One Questionnaire and Fifty Six Responses ('Duanlie: Yi fen wenjuan he wushiliu fen dajuan')', Beijing wenxue 10 (1998), pp. 19-47.

speaking' in their work, eschewing 'literary' language.¹¹ Equally, Han is known best for his colloquial (*kouyu*) poetry. Determined to write in an 'earthly' rather than an 'elevated' language, Han and his associate Yu Jian are known as 'desecrators, or demystifiers, of the self-aggrandizing tragic heroism of the Obscure poets'¹². In other words, Han is, like Zhu, known to advocate a kind of plain speaking in his literature. Earthly literature, of course, does not inexorably lead to scatological language; but a determination to speak plainly and to resist the niceties of 'intellectual' literature certainly paves the way for excremental humour. Indeed, even in discussions of the Chinese literary field, scatological metaphors appear to come easily to Zhu Wen:

For several decades the fat ass of ideology has sat squarely upon Chinese literature as if for a single day, and several crops of writers have been thus suffocated, because there is no air, just farts...Now it is as if this ass has been raised just a little, allowing some air in, but Chinese literature inevitably still bears the imprint of that ass.¹³

This mirrors a tendency to equate literature and intellectualism with the most earthly of bodily functions in their own work. In his infamous short story 'I Love Dollars', for example, Zhu's narrator compares writing to 'taking a laxative.'¹⁴

The significance of using scatological references cannot be fully grasped without a consideration of how the body was depicted in Socialist Realist literature. In the literature of the Cultural Revolution, for example, heroic characters were not only painted as morally flawless, polar opposites to the model villains, but they were also perfect physical specimens: 'tall and strong, with marked facial features, abundant and glossy hair, bright eyes and red lips.'¹⁵ As Xiaobing Tang notes, while illness was frequently used as a moralistic metaphor in pre-Mao literature, the hero's body in Socialist Realist work had to be disease free in order that it remained 'positively charged and externalised as part of an imaginary social body of plenitude.'¹⁶ Of course, vulgar humour was not unheard of in the Maoist years: Mao himself was fond of

¹¹ Julia Lovell, 'Filthy Fiction: The Writings of Zhu Wen', in *China Beat* (published 8th May 2009), <http://thechinabeat.blogspot.com/2009/08/filthy-fiction-writing-of-zhu-wen.html>, (accessed May 1st 2010)

¹² Magheil van Crevel, "Desecrations? The Poetics of Han Dong and Yu Jian (Part One)." *Studies on Asia Series II*, 2, 1 (2005), p. 30-31. 'Earthly' and 'elevated' are van Crevel's terms; he notes later that for all of Han's pretensions to 'earthliness' he does not always succeed in avoiding elevated language.

¹³ Cited in McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, p. 75.

¹⁴ Zhu, 'Wo Ai Meiyuan', in Zhu, *Kan Nu Ren* (Shanghai, 2007), p.196.

¹⁵ Bonnie McDougall and Kam Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1997), p. 368. See also Lan Yang, 'The Ideal Socialist Hero: Literary Conventions in Cultural Revolution Novels', in Woei Lien Chong (ed.), *China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counter Narratives* (Boston, 2002) pp. 193-4.

¹⁶ Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham, 2000), p.160.

using scatological language to make his point.¹⁷ Elizabeth Perry and Li Xun have argued that Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution saw language as tied to class stance: ‘The cruder one’s language, the closer one felt to the workers, peasants and soldiers.’¹⁸ Nonetheless, as Lan Yang has noted, heroes in Cultural Revolution-era novels were not only perfect physical specimens but also used unfailingly polite language. Unlike the protagonists of Zhu and Han’s fiction, literary heroes in the Maoist era were totally dissociated from both grotesque bodies and grotesque language.¹⁹ In general, therefore, we might interpret the use of scatological humour in contemporary Chinese fiction as a shift from the Maoist era presentation of the human body as the epitome of the healthy, modern collective, to a far more problematised concept of the body and its relation to society and state. Equally, if we consider how notions of progress and modernity in China have been linked to hygiene and cleanliness, the question of scatological humour in literature takes on an extra dimension. Many studies have suggested that modernising projects are often linked to a desire for hygiene; thus the ordering of waste is a means of ordering a population.²⁰ Ruth Rogaski sees the hygienic mission in China as one which has stretched from the late nineteenth century to the present day, and which is inextricably tied up with concepts of modernity and national strength.²¹ The Patriotic Hygiene Campaign, for example, extending from the late 1940s to the late 1980s, aimed to improve hygiene, eradicate pests and further civilisation.²² In both Han and Zhu’s fiction, therefore, we must consider the official discourse of the modernising mission, be it postsocialist or the era of the Cultural Revolution, and the implications of their excremental visions.

What is Garbage, What is Love, as with much of Zhu Wen’s work, is permeated with a strong sense of the grotesqueness of human bodies. His protagonist Xiao Ding seems to be constantly sweating in the unbearable humidity of a Nanjing summer, and, despite his father’s recommendation that he look after his body, he soon finds himself suffering from a sexually transmitted disease. Xiao Ding compares himself to

¹⁷For example: ‘If you have to shit, shit! If you have to fart, fart! You will feel much better for it’, (‘Speech at the Lushan Conference’, July 23 1959, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_34.htm (accessed May 1st 2010).

¹⁸ Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun, ‘Revolutionary Rudeness: the Language of Red Guards and Rebel Workers in China’s Cultural Revolution’, in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (ed.), *Twentieth Century China: New Approaches* (London, 2003), p. 225.

¹⁹ Lan Yang, ‘The Ideal Socialist Hero’, pp. 192-200.

²⁰ Warwick Anderson, ‘Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the Poetics of Pollution’, in *Critical Inquiry* 21:3 (Spring 1995); Dipkesh Chakrabarty, ‘Open Space/Public Space: Garbage, Modernity and India’, in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 14:1 (June 1991), p.16, 28; Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*, (Berkeley, 2004).

²¹ Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*, pp. 1-3, 225-253, 300-306.

²² *Ibid.*, p.298. Indeed, we might find strong parallels with the campaign to ‘clean up’ Beijing before the 2008 Olympics. (迎奥运讲文明树新风)

a ‘wart’ on the body of society, and as Jason McGrath has commented, his genital warts slowly become a ‘structure for Xiao Ding’s subjectivity’ as the relation Xiao Ding has to the body politic is reproduced on to his own body.²³ Thus the body and its more unpleasant workings are a thread running through *What is Garbage*. Yet one particular scene stands out for the purposes of this essay, striking not only because it is in the very first few pages of the novel, but especially because of its explicit scatological content. On a sweltering day, Xiao Ding has been sitting in a bar, agonised by the heat and the laughing stock of the hostesses, when he has a sudden and very urgent need to defecate. After stumbling into a stairwell by mistake, he eventually finds a toilet, which is described in detail:

Once he found the unbearably filthy washroom, Xiao Ding hurriedly chose what seemed to be the cleanest cubicle - though in reality it was still incomparably dirty - and squatted down. It was a very narrow space, and Xiao Ding’s head was already near to the stall door which was covered in graffiti and the traces of phlegm. He tossed back his hair, and thought of shifting backwards, but when he turned around he discovered a turd, blackened and congealing. So he extended a hand and propped open the door instead.²⁴

And so Xiao Ding struggles to get comfortable while he goes about his business, sweating profusely and with soaking feet after he inadvertently stepped in a puddle of urine. Another man enters the bathroom to use the urinal, and a surreal exchange follows: the stranger, who Xiao Ding can only hear, but not see, and who stands at the urinal but does not actually go, guesses that Xiao Ding has forgotten to bring toilet paper. Xiao Ding, his head lowered and by now fighting ‘a powerful urge to shit’, prepares to ask the stranger for some paper. Yet the latter, who is finally able to urinate now that he has guessed correctly, suddenly leaves the room, saying triumphantly, ‘Fuck, let’s see how you get out of this one!’²⁵ With this abrupt end to the chapter, the readers are left guessing how Xiao Ding handled the situation from there.

We might draw a lot from this scene. It is a depiction, familiar for readers of Zhu’s fiction, of urban China as squalid and uncomfortable. This in itself is arguably a subversive act. Recalling Rogaski’s study on the modernising/hygienic mission in China, when Zhu opens his novel with an account of a disgustingly filthy toilet, he is surely in part deliberately resisting a picture of a glittering, modern, urban China. Within the novel itself, this scene sets the tone for Xiao Ding’s lot; a long-suffering drifter, he is alienated from the postsocialist narrative of modernity and economic growth. The stranger’s unkind trick on Xiao Ding is only the beginning of a series of surreal and dysfunctional encounters with people across the city. As Robin Visser observes, the novel is dominated by Xiao Ding’s fruitless search for a real ‘connection’ with

²³Zhu, *Shenme Shi Laji*, p. 121; McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, p.90.

²⁴ Zhu, *Shenme Shi Laji*, p.7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

another individual.²⁶ A further theme that this scene draws out is that of the antiheroic, earthly intellectual. Xiao Ding has been cut adrift from the *danwei*, and, although a writer, he is not employed by the state and has no fixed salary. He lives, therefore, an unstructured life as an intellectual in the new sense, caught up in the transitional phase of China's economy and drifting through life, his days punctuated only by the physical needs of sleep, sex, eating and, of course, shitting. Zhu constantly emphasises his protagonist's flawed character; Xiao Ding has affairs, constantly fights with his girlfriend, and is deeply reluctant to help his friend whose daughter has been abducted. Xiao Ding's body can thus be seen as another indicator of his helpless anti-heroism, and the graphic way in which his bodily functions are described can be seen as yet another reminder of his 'earthly', rather than elevated, status as a writer. Indeed, the toilet is an oft-visited site in *What is Garbage*; though we are not treated again to a scene as graphically described as this, we are constantly reminded that Zhu's characters use them.²⁷

Bakhtin's influential study of the lower bodily stratum in the work of Rabelais provides an interesting point of comparison. In *Rabelais and his World*, the scholar argues that the grotesque body, consisting of orifices and bodily fluids, is a joyous celebration of the lower body and a challenge to the dominant structures of society. It is, in this sense, a central image of the carnival.²⁸ We are encouraged to laugh as urine and faeces 'degrade and relieve' at the same time; fear or anxiety is turned into laughter.²⁹ Moreover, Bakhtin sees the lower body as complemented by a gaping mouth: 'the open gate leading down into the bodily underworld'.³⁰ This calls to mind the first line of *What is Garbage*, in which Xiao Ding wordlessly opens and closes his mouth.³¹ Zhu Wen himself has referred to a desire to create a 'carnavalesque' in other works in an attempt to capture the tumultuous Deng era.³² Yet I do not find the link between scatology and a celebration of the productive human body convincing in this case. Rather, although we are certainly encouraged to laugh both at Xiao Ding's predicament and at the sheer nerve of starting a novel with such a scene, the atmosphere of the novel from the outset is far more one of despairing humour, rather than an exuberant carnival. The Rabelaisian image of a mouth taking in matter to be merrily excreted does not really fit; more appropriate perhaps is Robin Visser's comparison of Xiao Ding to the classic portrayal of

²⁶ Robin Visser, 'Urban Ethics: Modernity and the Morality of Everyday Life', in Charles Laughlin (ed.), *Contested Modernities in Chinese Literature* (New York, 2005), p.207.

²⁷ For example, Zhu, *Shenme Shi Laji*, pp.27-8, 103, 109

²⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 18-24, 368-436.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

³¹ Zhu, *Shenme Shi Laji*, p.3.

³² Julia Lovell, 'Filthy Fiction'.

urban alienation in Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893).³³ Returning to the scene in question, it is striking that, apart from the unkind stranger, Xiao Ding is only joined by two flies in the washroom. This might at first add to the squalid feel of the room, but Ding almost immediately reconciles himself to their presence: 'Fuck, he thought, how come I never noticed before how close humans are to flies?'³⁴ We are reminded of Lu Xun's tendency to associate the morally bankrupt people of China with insects; equating humans to flies demonstrates a disgust at mankind and the human body, rather than a celebration of it.³⁵ In discussing Swift's emphasis on the 'anal function', Norman Brown argues that scatological humour is the author's 'decisive weapon in his assault on the pretensions, the pride, even the self-respect of mankind.'³⁶ Equally, it seems more convincing to see this extended scene as an exploration of the degrading business of being human, treading the line between absurdist humour and misanthropy. Ironically, however, Mary Douglas notes that the transgression of boundaries is not a necessarily negative act; just as a Rabelasian carnival celebrates a positive reversal of hierarchies, the transgression of a boundary from cleanliness into dirt can be an 'enormous source of power.'³⁷ Although Zhu presents his intellectual, urbanite protagonist as helpless and alienated, by writing about a 'dirty' subject, as an intellectual urbanite he is himself asserting his own power on the literary field.

The clash between the urban intellectual and the scatological is also a feature of Han Dong's *Striking Root*. In the process of settling in, one of the major obstacles the Tao family face is the excremental reality of the countryside.³⁸ Particularly difficult for the Taos, for example, is the way the Sanyu villagers deal with their faeces: the villagers use it as manure for their fields, and as such take a cheerily practical view of the process, happily defecating in public, shielded only by a small fence and with the children even allowing their dogs to lick them clean afterwards.³⁹ In contrast, the Taos continue to use an indoor toilet, something that they consider more private, but which the villagers find grossly unhygienic.⁴⁰ This discussion of the different attitudes towards faeces in the novel is important for a number of reasons: firstly, it reminds us of

³³ Visser, 'Urban Ethics', p.208.

³⁴ Zhu, *Shenme Shi Laji*, p. 5.

³⁵ Lu Xun compares human beings to mosquitoes and fleas in his *zawen* 'The Warrior and the Flies' and 'Three Summer Insects', in *Huagai Ji* (1925).

³⁶ Brown, *Life Against Death*, p. 179.

³⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p.36.

³⁸ The phrase 'excremental reality' comes from Carole Fabricant, *Swift's Landscape*, (Paris, 1995), p.24. She reminds us that excrement was a highly visible feature of Swift's life, not simply a metaphor. We could argue the same of rural China.

³⁹ Han, *Zha Gen*, chapter 1, section 9, <http://book.sina.com.cn/zhagen/2003-09-16/3/17997.shtml> (accessed 1st May 2010).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

the centrality of human waste for production in the Chinese countryside. In this sense, on one level, all Han Dong is doing is showing us a realistic, and plain-speaking, view of rural life – and this is what Han himself has claimed to do.⁴¹ Moreover, as he has pointed out, much of the novel is written from a child's point of view, and faeces are typically a childish preoccupation.⁴² One might therefore argue that faeces as subject matter is not subversive; it is, in fact, entirely normal and natural. The importance of waste and the highly ordered system of defecating in Sanyu brings to mind Douglas' famous description of dirt as, 'matter out of place.' 'Dirt' is dirty because it is outside the ordered system of what is acceptable.⁴³ If we apply this to the differing attitudes between Tao and the villagers as to where they should shit, we can see that what is considered dirty by each side is only what is not part of what we could call their excremental system. In part, therefore, scatology simply serves as a means of highlighting the difference between the urbanite Taos and the villagers. As readers, we are reminded that all dirt is relative, and what appears transgressive is in reality a plain-speaking account of the countryside.

However, to argue that Han's excremental vision is simply a 'normal' account of the systems of dirt would be disingenuous. If we consider that socialist realist literature painted the countryside as a shining beacon of hope for China's future, it is surely subversive for Han to show it to be literally covered in shit. The intellectuals from the city, however, are treated with even less respect by Han; although they are supposedly involved in a 'Glorious Banishment', and young Tao describes the excitement and pride the family feel as they prepare to leave, he also describes the convoy of trucks leaving the city as 'one long turd.'⁴⁴ *Striking Root* also contains one scene in particular which shows an entirely different kind of excrement: not ordered and productive, but thoroughly disordered and destructive. This is the unfortunate way in which Grandpa Tao, an old-fashioned former supporter of the Guomindang and an obsessive-compulsive cleaner, dies. During his time at Sanyu Grandpa spends his time tidying the Tao's house; yet he is also chronically constipated, and so is unable to 'keep his own bowels in order' as the narrator puts it.⁴⁵ Driven to commit suicide by his wife's constant grumbling, Grandpa drinks pesticide. The family take him to hospital for an enema which soon takes its effect, and Grandpa Tao has his first 'good crap' since

⁴¹ Han has discussed this with his English translator, Nicky Harman, arguing that excrement is a far more acceptable part of daily conversation in China than it is in the West. By way of example, he points to a commonly used phrase: 猫不能不吃鱼, 鸡不能不吃虫, 狗不能不吃屎 (From interview with Nicky Harman, 28th April 2010).

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, pp.2, 36-37.

⁴⁴ Han, *Zhagen*, Chapter 3, section 4, <http://book.sina.com.cn/zhagen/2003-09-16/3/18011.shtml> (accessed May 1st 2010); The translation of 'Guangrong Xiafang' into 'Glorious Banishment' comes from the English translation of *Zhagen*, entitled *Banished!* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), trans. Nicky Harman.

⁴⁵ Han Dong, *Zha Gen*, Chapter 8, section 4, <http://book.sina.com.cn/zhagen/2003-09-16/3/18067.shtml>, (accessed 2 May 2010).

being banished to the countryside.⁴⁶ Sadly, the enema has come too late, and he eventually dies in a fly-strewn hospital toilet, in a rather inelegant position:

he had collapsed into the latrine pit, and was already dead. His mouth was wide open, his tongue sticking out of one side, his body covered in shit from head to toe. Some had even got into his mouth.⁴⁷

Again, as with Zhu's work, Han refuses to grant the physical body any dignity, painting it instead as grotesque. The relentless irony of Grandpa Tao's life and death - he is a compulsive cleaner but can't void his bowels, he spends his life killing germs and pests but dies drinking pesticide, his first 'good crap' since coming to Sanyu is what kills him - adds to the humour. As the narrator puts it: 'Poor Tao Wenjiang: he was obsessively clean while he lived, but he died covered in his own excrement.'⁴⁸ It is interesting that, again, the lower body is combined with an image of a gaping mouth. It is, perhaps, more convincing to see this as a carnivalesque novel than *What is Garbage*, with scatological details described throughout with relish. Indeed, one might observe that the Cultural Revolution itself had an element of the carnival in its intended reversal of hierarchies. Yet in this particular instance, the lower bodily stratum provides the very opposite of the joyous productivity that we see in Rabelais and in earlier accounts of faeces in *Striking Root* - it is very much destructive. Our narrator teasingly invites us to consider why Grandpa dies in such a way:

Why was his life story inextricably bound up with excrement, right until he died? This is a question I have long pondered on, just like my readers, and still I have no answer.⁴⁹

At one level, we could read this simply as a supreme case of irony. Yet it is tempting also to consider why a member of the old, urban generation suffers such an indignity. Perhaps, as in the case of Zhu's novel, Han deliberately seeks to subvert elevated notions of urbanites by emphasising - indeed exaggerating - their earthly bodies. Moreover, any attempt to 'order' the rural population was ultimately doomed; dirt remained 'matter out of place.' The depiction of a man who had been sent down to the village in a 'Glorious Banishment', yet ends up covered in shit, is thus a subversion of the idealistic narrative that attended the Cultural Revolution. Yet although Han is exploring the powerlessness of the Tao family to bring any order to a disordered situation, by transgressing the literary boundaries of 'dirt' and 'cleanliness',

⁴⁶ The phrase that Han uses is 'tongkuai linli', literally 'joyful flow'. *Ibid.*, chapter 11, section 6, <http://book.sina.com.cn/zhagen/2003-09-16/3/18093.shtml>, (accessed 2 May 2010).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Han demonstrates his own kind of power. Just as with Zhu, scatological humour reveals both his characters' helplessness and his own agency as a writer, revelling in a subversive normality.

The excremental visions of Han and Zhu take characters and concepts that were once elevated – intellectuals, urbanites, the 'glorious banishment' and the countryside of the Cultural Revolution – and debase them, turning them into figures of fun. In transgressing these boundaries that lie between dirt and cleanliness, or order and disorder, I have argued that they produce a despairing kind of humour, rather than engaging in a joyful carnivalistic inversion of hierarchies. This essay has also argued that beyond merely bringing humour to a text, scatological humour also invites us to consider the role of the writer and the act of transgressing boundaries in modern Chinese fiction, bringing up questions of subversion versus 'normality', and power versus powerlessness. Indeed, it could be argued that the humour of these scenes is derived precisely from this subversion. In both Zhu and Han's work, what is ostensibly an exploration of the normality, or the 'earthliness', of excrement is also in reality an exploration of its subversive potential. Zhu and Han's scatological humour is part of a wider project of iconoclasm; not necessarily full-scale attacks on postsocialist China or the Cultural Revolution, but certainly bitter deflations of the elevated ideals of progress that both eras held. More than this, however, Zhu and Han's excremental vision is also part of a process of challenging the lofty ideals of the intellectual and the field of literature. Urbanites with supposedly elevated professions are linked incongruously to excrement, and Han and Zhu poke fun at their own professions by writing so enthusiastically about defecation. Sebastian Veg argues that Zhu refuses to act as any kind of guide to enlighten readers.⁵⁰ This is a compelling argument for both authors under study here. Yet for all their declarations of plain-speaking and 'earthliness' in their literature, Han and Zhu's writings, in their deliberate subversion, are also a limited declaration of strength. Paradoxically, in exploring how excrement degrades and weakens their characters, Han and Zhu are also, in testing the boundaries of literature, expressing a kind of power within the literary field.

⁵⁰ Sebastian Veg, 'Review: *I Love Dollars Other Stories*', in *China Perspectives* (published January 2007), <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/document1503.html> (accessed 1st May 2010)

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Nicky Harman, April 28 2010.