

Transnational urban encounters: existential wanderings in Xue Yiwei's collection *Shenzheners*

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Abstract: The fictional works of the Chinese writer Xue Yiwei, who migrated to Canada in 2002, can be regarded as a byproduct of cross-border mobility and cultural displacement. This paper examines the relationship between the individual and the metropolis in four short stories from the collection *Shenzheners*, focusing on the impact of the writer's transcontinental relocation on his representation of city dwellers and intercultural encounters. This research adopts an interdisciplinary framework, which merges textual analysis with the approaches of Cultural Studies and Literary Urban Studies, and places this theoretical construction within a transnational context. By investigating the multiple narrative forms Xue Yiwei uses to question stereotypical cultural boundaries and to build a bridge between Chinese and global literatures, the connection between his experience of mobility and his hybrid fictional microcosm will be explored.

Keywords: Global Chinese literature, transnational writers, transculturalism in Chinese fiction, Chinese urban literature, Shenzhen fiction.

1. Introduction

The Chinese writer Xue Yiwei 薛忆沩 (b. 1964) comes from a complex background of domestic and international migration: born in Hunan province, he lived in several Chinese cities, before expatriating to Canada in 2002.¹ His prolific oeuvre stands out against the broad landscape of contemporary Chinese literature for its textual heterogeneity, for the writer's meticulous investigation into the complexities of language, and because it overflows with literary hybridity and cultural intermingling.² The genesis of this multidimensional fictional uni-

¹ He was born in Chenzhou 郴州 (Hunan), a place "situated within the borders of the ancient kingdom of Chu" (Lin and Nashef 2021, 8), grew up in Changsha and graduated in computer science in Beijing. Subsequently, he turned to literary and linguistics studies and became a professor of literature at Shenzhen University in 1996. Since 2002 he has been living in Montreal. His first novel, *Yiqi 遗弃* (*Abandonment*, 1988), was partially inspired by his own experiences. Over the last decade, his writing activity has intensified with publications in China and abroad.

² The term hybridity, employed in Cultural Studies and other fields to designate an amalgamation of Western and Asian cultures, specifically refers here to the multicultural elements which shape Xue's fiction. The term heterogeneity is used in connection with the multiplicity of textual practices which characterize his works.

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verse is deeply embedded in the writer's personal experience of transcontinental resettlement and in his intimate knowledge of Chinese and Western literature. From this perspective, the works of Xue Yiwei can be regarded as the outcome of transnational mobility and transcultural encounters on multiple levels: they relate the detached gaze of a migrant writer on his homeland; they challenge the common nation-bound literary categories and theoretical discourses; they cross the boundaries between literary genres; they reconceptualize Chinese fictional writing through the intercultural negotiation between Chinese and Western literary modes.

As Hu stated (2021, 35): "Xue engages in a close dialogue with writers from all over the world [...]. He takes as his homeland [...] the whole of world literature." Widely acclaimed in his native country, he prefers to remain on the sidelines of literary circles. However, Xue's literary production is almost unanimously viewed by scholars as a distinctive phenomenon which, as Lin Gang observed while interviewing him, "goes some way to restore the reputation of Chinese contemporary literature" (Lin and Nashef 2021, 5), because it does not succumb to the commercial demands of the publishing industry.³ Since 2016, following the translation of his works into English, Xue Yiwei's fiction has been attracting the attention of an enthusiastic worldwide audience.

The collection *Shenzheners* (2016), the first of his works to be translated into English, includes nine of the twelve stories of the Chinese edition.⁴ The original Chinese title, *Chuzuche siji: Shenzhenren xilie xiaoshuo* 出租车司机: 深圳人系列小说 (*Taxi driver: Fictional series People of Shenzhen*, 2013), was borrowed from the short story "The Taxi Driver" (*Chuzuche siji* 出租车司机, Xue 2016e), which is regarded as Xue's most influential work, and his most well-known inside China (Zhao 2020, 8). Most significantly, the profession of the protagonist, expressed in the title, is based on permanent mobility, which symbolizes the migrant condition of the majority of Shenzhen's population (Wang 2021, 71). In this collection, the writer's acute transnational awareness is articulated through the harmonious interplay between Chinese and non-Chinese visions of the city, with a primary focus on the psychological and existential condition of the individual within the urban environment. The city was a key motif in Western literary modernism (Mullin 2016), an intrinsically transnational movement.⁵ While

³ In the 1990s, following the accelerated pace of the economic reforms, a process of commercialization impacted Chinese culture. Scholars were concerned about a devaluation of literature and intense debates about the loss of its artistic value ensued. Many Chinese writers did long for commercial success, and this certainly influenced their literary output. The marketization of the publishing industry also played a part in the diversification and renaissance of fiction (Wang 2016, 207).

⁴ A translation by S. Nashef of *Nü mishu* 女秘书 (*Secretary Girl*), one of the three stories excluded from *Shenzheners*, was published in *Chinese Literature Today* in 2021. The novel *Celia, Misoka, I* (*Xilali, Mihe, Wo* 希拉里, 密和, 我, 2016) and the collection *Xue Yiwei's war stories* (*Shouzhuan Gaojie* 首战告捷, 2016) are examples of recent translations of his works.

⁵ Modernism developed from the 19th to the mid-20th century, spreading across several European countries. It was a heterogeneous movement, characterized by different ap-

carefully examining the impact of globalization on the everyday existence of ordinary people within the particular context of present-day China, Xue exploits the typical approaches of Western modernism to the exploration of the city, as a lens for investigating both the urban transformations and the emotional responses of the individual to them. Beyond modernists, a constellation of other foreign genres, authors and philosophical trends of different epochs can be found in the texts. In this respect, existentialism and absurdism provide this collection with an insightful philosophical background and a paradigm of literary alterity, which allows the writer to interpolate Shenzhen's process of modernization into a broader cross-cultural outline of urban modernity. Linder (2001, 57) calls attention to the concern for the relationship between philosophy and literature which references to Wittgenstein, Hegel and Nietzsche in Xue's works reveal; she maintains that by adopting a style strongly reminiscent of Kafka, Beckett, Camus, Proust, Joyce and Sartre, the writer reflects upon the influence of culture on the individual. Through these cross-cultural allusions, Xue takes world literature as the benchmark against which Chinese literature can be reframed, establishing a relationship of intertextuality with foreign fiction (Lin 2022, 206).

Shenzheners is dedicated to James Joyce (1882-1941), whose masterpiece *Dubliners* ([1914] 2000) was the avowed inspiration for Xue's collection. Several sources (Huang 2022; Ye 2019; Zhang 2018; Jiang 2017) debate the similarities and discrepancies between the two collections and their authors.⁶ It is particularly relevant to the current discussion that both authors were living abroad when they completed these collections, hence casting a deterritorialized gaze respectively on Dublin and Shenzhen. Furthermore, by providing a thumbnail sketch of several urban characters, each the subject of one short story, both works actually scrutinize human fate in the urban context. However, while the city in *Dubliners* is a synecdoche for an economically and culturally paralyzed Irish nation (Hamlin 2016, 129), Xue's Shenzhen is a vibrant place full of opportunities.

The writer's experience as an overseas Chinese was also instrumental in crafting his hybrid writing on Shenzhen (Huang 2022, 15). In fact, he wrote the majority of the stories in the collection while living in Montreal.⁷ Being an expatriate, who actually lived in Shenzhen during the momentous years around 2000,⁸ Xue is able to strike a subtle balance between displacement and belonging when portraying this rapidly modernizing metropolis. Put differently, he reconciles local particularity and global integration in a transnational account of

proaches and themes, whose common feature was the defiance of traditional norms (Williams 1989, 43).

⁶ A broad comparison between the two works is beyond the scope of this research. Insights on the topic are provided throughout the paper when related to the purported arguments.

⁷ "The Taxi Driver" (Xue 2016e) is the only exception: first published in 1997 in the journal *Renmin Wenxue* 人民文学 (People's Literature), he wrote it while living in Shenzhen.

⁸ At the turn of the 21st century, alongside the acceleration of the economic reforms, urbanization and related processes such as inner migration dramatically increased. In 2001 China joined the WTO, thereby consolidating its commitment to globalization.

Shenzhen, which is a hallmark of his cross-cultural identity. While the motifs of alienation, absurdity and social isolation characterize the existence of Shenzhen's inhabitants in this collection, a variety of fictional practices and literary devices are used to address transcultural interactions and pinpoint the virtual crossroad at which the geo-cultural universes forming the writer's creativity converge.

The protean metropolis envisioned in *Shenzheners* can be examined from multiple perspectives. To narrow the scope, this paper brings into focus the impact of Xue's transnational background on his image of Shenzhen, by following two strands of analysis: the representation of the urban subject and the characterization of intercultural encounters, with the implied matters of otherness and displacement. These issues are investigated through the analysis of four short stories, each showcasing a particular facet of the ongoing discussion: "The Taxi Driver" (Xue 2016e) deals with the feeling of alienation of a man who suddenly realizes he is a stranger in the metropolis he has lived in for years. "The Dramatist" (*Juzuojia* 剧作家, Xue 2016c) tells of a man benumbed by the absurdity of his fate. In "The Country Girl" (*Cun gu* 村姑, Xue 2016a) a chance encounter between a Chinese painter and a Canadian translator leaves an indelible mark on both. In "The Peddler" (*Xiaofan* 小贩, Xue 2016b) a rural migrant endures the ostracism of urban dwellers.

In order to foreground the literary practices located at the intersection of national and transnational, which originate from the writer's physical mobility and subsequent cultural hybridity, the remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the following section will illustrate the theoretical rationale. Next, whilst focusing on the first two short stories, the representation of urban dwellers will be examined in the light of transcultural influences. The final section will deal with the representation of intercultural encounters in the last two short stories.

2. Theoretical framework: Xue Yiwei's Shenzhen between Chineseness and globality

Xue Yiwei's elaborate representation of Shenzhen stems from the conflation of diverse cultural, literary, historical and biographical components, which are entrenched within the dialectical interplay between Chinese identity and worldwide culture. From a socio-historical angle, this literary hybridity is the result of the multiple material and immaterial flows which pervade society in an age of global capitalism. On the other hand, the unique circumstances of the process of modernization in Shenzhen, repeatedly referred to as "China's youngest city" (Xue 2016a, 1, 8, 11, 20; Xue 2016c, 70) in the selected stories,⁹ provide the collection with strong local distinctiveness. Developed into a densely populated megacity in just a few decades, it was a fishing village in 1980 when the first Special Economic Zone was established there.¹⁰ As the emblem of China's

⁹ All the quotes from *Shenzheners* are taken from the English edition.

¹⁰ A megacity is a metropolis with more than ten million inhabitants. SEZ are delimited areas which benefit from more liberal economic rules, encouraging private and foreign invest-

modernization,¹¹ this newly formed conurbation attracts huge inflows of internal migrants and foreign investors. It is now a global manufacturing and technological hub, and the driving force of China's urban development and market economy (UN 2019, 2, 4). This particular urban setting, harbinger of social paradoxes, allows Xue to speculate on human nature in the context of both Chinese economic progress and global modernity.¹²

Indeed, the investigation of the entanglement between individual life, society and history is the epistemic logic undergirding his multifarious narrational stance. In a time of high-speed modernization and planetary socio-spatial interconnectedness, this inevitably implies disclosing human fragility in the face of the incongruity of urban life. In the course of the 20th century, many urban theorists have maintained that the variegated reality of the city influences the perception of the urbanites, with consequences on their psychological condition (GUST 1999, 110). In *Shenzheners*, the focus on the mental state of modern city dwellers is an essential feature, which the writer highlights by avoiding any mention of Shenzhen's landmarks and toponyms (Lu 2020, 129; Huang 2016, 80). Moreover, even though the narration revolves around this metropolis, its name is barely mentioned in the stories. These omissions place Shenzhen in a symbolic realm, making it an icon of generic urban modernity (Lu 2020, 129; Liu H. 2018, 60), thereby setting in motion a process of displacement of the city from the Chinese context to a transnational sphere. Jiang (2017, 99) interprets this technique, which enables the writer to decontextualize the urban experience of the characters from a specific national setting, as a component of Xue's "awareness of the global village" (*diqu cun yishi* 地球村意识).

The underlying complexity of these narratives demands a cross-disciplinary engagement with the fictional representation of the city in order to shed light on the interaction patterns between the writer's textual practices, the identity issues raised by his national and transcontinental mobility, China's recent history, and the multicultural landscape of globalization. On these grounds, this chapter uses Cultural Studies and Literary Urban Studies, transdisciplinary and interrelated fields, as the primary theoretical tools for the investigation of the literary texts. The concepts of transnationalism and transculturalism, widely

ment. After Shenzhen, SEZ were established in Xiamen, Shantou, Zhuhai, Hainan and other territories.

¹¹ With the Reform and opening-up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放), launched by Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 in 1978, China embarked on a path toward modernization, which involved a gradual assimilation of capitalism. In 1992, during his Southern Tour, Deng advanced the idea of "socialism with Chinese characteristics", which implied the coexistence of socialism with a market economy. The striking growth which followed has led China to become the second largest economy in the world.

¹² Dirlik (2003, 276–77) theorizes global modernity as a reconceptualized modernity which questions the Euro-American cultural hegemony. He contends that in a time of globalization, a single modernity with multiple forms and articulations encompasses the whole world. Other scholars postulate the existence of multiple modernities. For Wang (2009, 116) Chinese modernity is alternative to Western modernity, in dialogue with Chinese and Western tradition.

used in literary studies in relation to works focusing on migration or the hybrid identities of migrant writers, underpin the discussion. However, regardless of whether it is used to describe characters, writers or texts, the term 'transnational' does not jeopardize the idea of nation. On the contrary, it underlines the fact that in a globalized world which is nonetheless divided into countries, people, ideas and capital flow across national boundaries (Wiegandt 2020, 7-8). Therefore, transnationalism calls into question conventional notions of cultural identity.

Cultural Studies are frequently used in literary analysis as a tool to investigate matters of identity, ethnicity and migration, and consider everyday life and popular culture as valid objects of research. In this field, cultural phenomena, including literature, are investigated within their social context. In the selected works, the characters are ordinary people, intent on their daily activities, while major social and economic transformations destabilize their microcosm. The interconnection between city dwellers and urban environment has long been a field of investigation for writers from across the world, especially at times when processes resulting from economic progress bring about dramatic transformations which affect people's lives. At the turn of the 21st century both Literary and Cultural Studies are confronted with the critical interpretation of a reality which is increasingly global and interconnected. Spivak (1991, 66) asserts that cultural research today is "the study of contemporary global capitalism [...], the theory, history and philosophy of the various components of the globe." She raises awareness of the need to consider people outside the Euro-American sphere as agents rather than passive receivers of historical processes. By looking at the short stories under scrutiny through the lens of Cultural Studies, one can detect Xue's desire to direct an unbiased gaze towards the other, be it embodied by the foreign civilization he assimilated or the homeland from which he is voluntarily dislocated. He offers a perspective of Shenzhen as a place embroiled in a consumerist global culture, populated by a multitude of others. This polymorphous approach of the writer to otherness steers a path through the tension between locality and globality, and conveys the heterogeneity of his urban imagination. The characters, migrants in a city where large segments of the population are non-natives, embody cultural alterity; the writer, once a stranger in Shenzhen himself, describes them from the perspective of an external observer, while living in another country. Foreign cultural products, like American movies and European novels, represent cultural otherness for the Chinese characters, while for the only foreign protagonist, the Canadian woman in "The Country Girl" (Xue 2016e), China evokes a pervading sense of exoticism.

The urban sociologist Park (1925, 3) highlighted the importance of fiction for the understanding of urban life in his time. Almost one century later, Xue's urban writing provides readers with a vivid cross-section of Shenzhen's modernity. In this regard, key concepts formulated in the field of literary urban studies offer an insightful rationale for the exegesis of his works. Unlike traditional approaches to the representation of the city, this burgeoning field foregrounds the reality and the contradictions of the urban context (Gurr 2021, 2-3), fulfilling the growing academic need to make the research on the relationship between

the city and the text comparative and global (Finch 2021, 6). Furthermore, literary urban studies are concerned with how literary texts represent urban complexity (Gurr 2021, 19) and look at the city as an open system characterized by social and cultural heterogeneity, “a translocal network of complex relationships, connections and interdependencies subject to rapid change over time” (Gurr, 2021, 14). The blistering pace of social and economic transformation in Shenzhen and its place within the discourse of global modernity make the concept of urban complexity particularly illuminating in literary analyses involving this city.

In the works under scrutiny, hybridity and transculturality, on both a national and international plane, are relevant components of Shenzhen’s inherent complexity. This transcultural dimension is enacted in multiple forms: the displaced perspective of the writer and of the characters; the temporal setting in the multicultural context of globalization; Shenzhen’s appeal as a destination for migrants; narrative strategies which express cultural encounters; inspiration from Western literature and philosophy; intertextuality.¹³ In this respect, Xue’s works not only abound with allusions, individual references and quotations, but also share relevant motifs of foreign masterpieces, borrow structural elements from their plots, or hark back to Western fictional and theatrical genres.

In *Shenzheners*, existentialism and modernism are certainly the main points of reference.¹⁴ In literary existentialism, writing and philosophy are inextricably bound together (Malpas 2012, 104). The same thing occurs in Xue’s works. However, he does not assimilate existentialism passively, but connects it with the reality of present-day China (Hu 2014, 82, 84).

Modernism is particularly noteworthy in relation to Xue’s representation of Shenzhen. In the history of Western literature, modernism and the modern city have always been connected (Lu 2020, 128). The fascination of modernist writers with the city and the psychological state of urbanites lay in the dramatic transformations that the urban environment was undergoing in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. At the time, the extraordinary growth of major cities heralded the emergence of new phenomena including dynamism, mobility and complexity, which strongly impacted upon the cultural sphere (Bădulescu 2015, 67–8). Studies on the urban aspects of literary texts produced in that period unanimously point to the unprecedented scale of transformations in the metropolis as a source of existential bewilderment and social diversity (Finch 2021, 98–9). A striking parallel can be drawn with the situation of Chinese urbanization one century later.¹⁵ Therefore, by utilizing modernist motifs, the writ-

¹³ Another notable example of Xue’s intertextuality is the book *Yu Make Poluo tongxing* 与马克波罗同行 (Traveling with Marco Polo, 2015), in which he engages in a dialogue with Italo Calvino’s masterpiece *Invisible Cities* (1972). See Hu (2021).

¹⁴ The specific literary influences found in each of the four selected short stories will be discussed in the following sections.

¹⁵ In China, large scale urbanization is a relatively recent phenomenon, which has increased particularly since the end of the 1990s, closely connected to the advanced stage of the reforms.

er reconceptualizes the modernists' backlash against the disconcerting social transformations of their time in the context of today's Shenzhen. Migration to the metropolis, a new phenomenon brought about by economic development, was also a key element of modernist fiction (Williams 1989, 45), whose relevance in *Shenzheners* has already been mentioned. However, the centrality of the alienated urban subject is undoubtedly the element most reminiscent of modernism in this collection. Random coincidences, epiphanies and chance occurrences are also recurring modernist devices which appear in the selected stories. In urban narratives, these strategies, which revolve around the concept of simultaneity, allow the reader to perceive the overwhelming feeling caused by the synchronous occurrence of thousands of great and small events in the city (Gurr 2021, 36; Finch 2021, 6). This simultaneity is a key component of urban complexity (Gurr 2021, 34).

In recent decades Shenzhen, which is at the forefront of the reforms, has increasingly attracted the interest of Chinese writers, who have looked at the consequences of capitalism, globalization and related processes on individual life, with a focus on subaltern strata.¹⁶ Xue's fascination with Shenzhen recalls some aspects of "Shenzhen fiction" (*Shenzhen xiaoshuo* 深圳小说), a component of the broader landscape of Chinese urban literature.¹⁷ However, while migrants in Shenzhen fiction actively pursue the "Chinese dream" and, in spite of their issues of identity in the city, desperately want to be a part of it (Ye 2019, 61), all the protagonists in *Shenzheners* hope to find an escape from the metropolis. The melancholic mood and detached attitude of the writer and his tone of philosophical speculation clearly distinguish Xue's urban writing from the general features of the trend (Ye 2019, 59–60).

Widely regarded as an independent thinker and a maverick (Huang 2022, 14),¹⁸ Xue is certainly a beacon of our times. Due to his singular literary standards, different from both mainstream Chinese fiction and overseas Chinese literature (Lin 2021, 201), critics usually find his writings difficult to categorize (Wang 2021, 68). Even though he lives in Canada his touchstone is not Canadian culture, but the whole world. Therefore, his works can hardly be defined as Asian Canadian literature.¹⁹

¹⁶ Among the contemporary writers who focus on Shenzhen: Deng Yiguang 邓一光 (b. 1956), Wu Jun 吴君 (b. 1969), Wang Shiyue 王十月 (b. 1972), Fu Guanjun 付关军 (b. 1980), Cao Zhenglu 曹征路 (1949–1921).

¹⁷ After temporarily thriving in the 1930s, urban literature disappeared during the Maoist period. In the 1980s, following the reforms and the gradual resumption of urbanization, the city reappeared as a setting in fiction. In the 1990s, increased urbanization fostered the interest of writers in the consumer culture of the metropolis. Chen (2014, 89) points out that only in the 21st century did this genre flourish and obtain recognition in literary circles.

¹⁸ The Chinese-American writer Ha Jin 哈金 (b. 1956) was the first to define Xue Yiwei a maverick (Lin and Nashef 2021, 5).

¹⁹ Asian Canadian Studies are currently a booming field of study (Beauregard 2008, 11). It is widely agreed that the publication of the anthology *Inalienable Rice* (1979), edited by Christopher Lee, is the starting point of Asian Canadian literature (Liu Z. 2018, 82).

In the 21st century, a new generation of transnational writers has emerged: their writing crosses the borders of their primary cultures, but is significantly different in themes and style from the previous migrant literature (Dagnino 2012, 1–2). The subsequent two sections will define how this new transnationalism is articulated in *Shenzheners*.

3. Explorers of urban absurdity in a global literary space

The urban individual, captured in their subjectivity and trapped in their existential angst within the aloof environment of a rapidly modernizing metropolis which has become inexplicable and devoid of humanity, is the focal point of all the stories included in *Shenzheners*. The characters stumble about in an urban labyrinth (*chengshi migong* 城市迷宫) which they cannot decipher, where they risk getting lost (Chen 2014, 85–6). These nameless protagonists, only identified by their professions, are faced with existential choices and unforeseen kismet within an urban fabric whose impersonal rationality makes them feel profoundly estranged. The writer chronicles their psychological despondency, whilst empathizing with their condition (Jiang 2017, 99). Ye argues that their anonymity, which results in an extensive use of third person pronouns, emphasizes that their identities are paradigmatic of the spiritual background of the time (2019, 61). However, they do not embody the successful businessmen depicted in the media (Liu H. 2018, 59), nor are they enthusiastic advocates of Shenzhen's miracle. These ordinary people, befuddled in the chaos of the metropolis, harbor universal feelings of restlessness and anxiety, through which their experience is transported into a realm of worldwide metropolitan imagination (Chen 2014, 90).²⁰ They constitute an uneasy fringe of the urban population, which destabilizes the glamorous rhetoric of both Chinese modernization and world globalization. As migrants, they do not even represent the official residents of the city, but people who live there in a broad sense (Huang 2022, 16). Moreover, they are absorbed in their everyday reality: “they could be any unknown stranger who walks through the streets of Shenzhen” (Liu H. 2018, 59).²¹

In his ground-breaking essay on the cultural patterns of urbanization, Park claimed that “the city is a state of mind” (1925, 1) and that “the structure of the city has its basis in human nature” (1925, 3). In the works under scrutiny, rather than focusing on the cityscape, Xue constructs the fictional image of the city around the characters' perception of the urban experience. Hence, the urban dimension is conceived as an expression of their frame of mind and manifested through the emotional response of characters to the surrounding conditions. This is particularly evident in “The Taxi Driver” and “The Dramatist” in which,

²⁰ In existentialist thought, angst is aroused by the acknowledgement of the absurdity of life, while a pivotal role is attributed to individual existence: these motifs in the short stories discussed in this section, are a relevant manifestation of intertextuality.

²¹ The quotes from Chinese sources have been translated into English by the author.

as will be discussed in more detail in this section, random snapshots of the physical reality of the city merely express the subjective impressions of characters, while the narration concentrates on their innermost feelings.

The protagonists of these two short stories, a driver who has just suffered a terrible loss and an established artist with a miserable sentimental life, differ in social status and in their personal trauma, whereas they share a strong consciousness of the absurd, a nagging feeling of alienation and utter loneliness. These motifs, which can be traced back to a long tradition of urban denizens in modernist and existentialist fiction,²² are either subverted or reconceptualized, in order to reconcile the local particularity of Shenzhen with the multicultural flows of today's world. Therefore, by tackling these themes, Xue denationalizes the urban experience of the characters, which become archetypes of the metropolitan identity in an increasingly globalized world. These literary contaminations are not restricted to the aforesaid, but span over Western genres and authors of other periods.

In "The Taxi Driver" a third-person narrator recounts the mental agony of a man who, following the tragic death of his wife and daughter who were killed in an accident, meanders through the urban space, which he scans in search of helpful signs to fathom his personal tragedy. He is gripped by a feeling of aloofness and alienation in the metropolis which should be so familiar to him, since "He'd spent the past fifteen years shuttling through those city streets [...] he hadn't left a single trace" (Xue 2016e, 174). This story expresses his thoughts after his last work shift, during which every corner of Shenzhen reminds him of his departed loved ones, while the loneliness and sorrow he detects overhearing the private conversations of his last customers make him regret that he had always taken his family for granted. Hence, he resolves to resign and return to his hometown to take care of his old parents because "he could not go on living in such a foreign city" (Xue 2016a, 174). Mourning triggers a true epiphany in the taxi driver, in a pure Joycean style:²³ the idea of leaving Shenzhen releases him from grief, as if it could disappear together with the city.

The urban spaces are deeply linked to the personal experience of the protagonist: the parking lot, the office, a restaurant where he used to eat with his daughter. Nonetheless, they convey a feeling of emptiness and anonymity. Sporadic references to the roadways offer a glimpse of the bustling metropolis: "The road was so congested it was hard to make any headway at all" (Xue 2016e, 171). And: "It was still rush hour. Many cars had their brights on; an awful glare" (Xue 2016e, 166). Western food and an Italian pizzeria provide an idea of the consumerist culture of Shenzhen in the 1990s. In this respect, drawing attention to

²² Alienated urban subjects appear in novels by Döblin, Joyce, Woolf, Proust and other modernist writers. Concerns about absurdity and alienation are the focus of the existentialist works of Kafka, Kundera, Camus, Sartre.

²³ *Dubliners* abounds with epiphanic realizations, directly and indirectly presented, usually triggered by irrelevant events (Suzuki 2005).

the representation of the impact of globalization on everyday life, Huang (2022, 15) remarks that in this work “the city is no longer a background [...]; an inter-textual symbiotic synchronicity between the city and literature is established.”

Nostalgia for the native village, the identity issues of rural migrants, the rural-urban divide and the marketization and westernization of the urban space are typical themes found in recent Chinese urban literature. In “The Taxi Driver”, the writer transcends their usual representation, making them seem tangential to the subjective experience of the taxi driver. Unlike the other selected stories, this one contains no direct references to foreign writers or foreign novels. However, this emblematic character conjures up a wide array of alienated figures in modernist fiction. In the Western context, literary reflections on the alienated and doubtful Self are closely connected to the representation of the urban subject (Mullin 2016). Writers of previous generations also wrote about the city, but modernists developed a new interest in the psychological impact of urban existence. The taxi driver shares many features of the flâneur, a figure that emerged within the European context of the 19th century, and is today a cultural symbol in discourses about the individual’s relationship with the city.²⁴ Typically a dandy, he is a wanderer in the urban space who idly strolls without purpose and is characterized by acute observation skills. He scours the city looking for signs which could help him understand reality. The taxi driver, unlike the typical flâneur, is not an indolent rambler: he roams as a part of his profession, and is not a member of the wealthy middle class. Contrary to the flâneur, the driver’s absentmindedness is due to his intimate pain. He is not an enthusiastic spectator of the urban jungle, which he only scrutinizes in search of a meaning for his personal tragedy.

There are also various kinds of walking, somehow related to the idea of flânerie, in Joyce’s *Dubliners*, in which the mobility of characters around the city is futile, their journeys are circular (Hamlin 2016, 129-131). This is the same condition of Xue’s taxi driver, who only shuttles customers around, always returning to the same parking lot.

Lu (2020, 131) contends that in *Shenzheners* “there is always a latent antagonism between the individual and the city. The city is an external force which controls people.” Even though they belong to different social categories, the protagonists of the stories discussed in this section succumb to obscure forces which overwhelm their destiny.

Passion, drama, death, coincidences, fatal mistakes, jealousy, anathemas and unexpected twists, weave the fabric of the tragedy-like plot of “The Dramatist”, in which Shakespearean echoes are blended with Beckettian enticements. The protagonist, a solitary playwright, has abandoned a successful career because “he had been exhausted by the drama in his personal life” (Xue 2016c, 54). Ev-

²⁴ The concept of flâneur evolved through the theorizations of several writers and intellectuals, the most relevant of whom are Baudelaire and Benjamin (Coates 2017, 29). The latter fully conceptualized the flâneur and its pivotal role in modernist fiction.

ery morning at 10:20 he mysteriously stands in front of a row of trees wearing a Shakespeare T-shirt. Due to his secluded life “The neighbors called him a weirdo. But I felt that [...] eccentric would be more apt. He didn’t seem to belong to our community, or even to this city” (Xue 2016c, 51). The reasons for the preposterousness haunting his life, manifested in his romantic relations, are only revealed to the internal narrator, one of his neighbors, when the dramatist, after leaving Shenzhen, sends him a tape from a remote village. Years before, on the day of his wedding, an old flame contacted the dramatist, informing him of a parcel she sent from Shakespeare’s hometown, where they had dreamed of spending their honeymoon. Disappointed by the news of his marriage, the woman put a curse on him. Exactly one year after, a violent argument erupts between the playwright and his wife, who evidently knows about the parcel that the man never opened. Convinced that he does not love her, she falls into a severe depression and eventually commits suicide at 10:20 in the morning. He finally finds out that the parcel contained a Shakespeare T-shirt and *The Complete works of William Shakespeare*.²⁵ Therefore, through the performance of his morning ritual at the exact hour of his wife’s demise, wearing the garment received from his ex-girlfriend, he reunites his two doomed love stories in one absurd theatrical act. Shakespeare’s book is the vehicle through which the narrator meets the introverted man. His feelings for the dramatist evolve from initial suspicion to thorough identification in the final: “I felt as though he and I were the same person” (Xue 2016c, 71). A last unexpected twist happens when the narrator, as though in symbiosis with the dramatist, completes his story: the dramatist had left his old flame out of unmotivated jealousy. As in Greek and Shakespearean tragedies, a fatal flaw of the protagonist, jealousy, ignited a chain of inauspicious events.

Camus wrote that in “a universe suddenly divested of illusions [...] man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy [...]. This divorce between man and life [...] is properly the feeling of absurdity” (Camus 1959, 6). This is exactly the condition of the dramatist. He repeatedly mentions absurdity: “What could be more absurd than that? Silence is a revolt against absurdity” (Xue 2016c, 67). And: “I couldn’t write a more absurd play if I tried” (Xue 2016c, 70). When he is asked about his whereabouts he answers: “I am waiting for Godot” (Xue 2016c, 59). However, while Beckett’s characters in *Waiting for Godot* (1952) continue waiting, the dramatist finally leaves Shenzhen.

Liu Hongxia (2018, 60–1) identifies escape as a dominant motif in all the stories included in the collection. Escape is a central topic in existentialist thought, variously connected to issues of freedom and responsibility. The dramatist, as a consequence of his hapless love for two women, is overwhelmed by the absur-

²⁵ The dramatist owns an English version of this book, which he cannot read, while the narrator, who teaches English, can. Two of the protagonist’s plays have been translated into English, Italian and Japanese. Through these details, the topic of translation, further discussed in the next section, also emerges here.

dity of life and wants to leave Shenzhen. The taxi driver abandons his job in an attempt to heal his wounds.

Urban spaces in “The Taxi Driver” and “The Dramatist” allegorically indicate the foremost position attributed to the emotional sphere. While the taxi driver explores public spaces which are actually very familiar to him, the dramatist does not emerge in public, and appears in semi-private urban spaces. His sporadic interactions happen in the limited areas shared with neighbors, mostly anonymous figures: the building where he lives, the garden outside the compound, the stairs. In the collection, the residential building (*juminlou* 居民楼) symbolizes urban life and is a metaphor for the cold human relations in the metropolis, where anonymity and material greed have replaced the warm social interactions of the past (Zhang 2018, 78).

In both these stories, a series of happenstances determine the fate of characters, as they deal with individuals looking for signs or coincidences which can help them to fathom their alienation and perplexity. As previously mentioned, coincidences and chance encounters can be interpreted as metaphors of the simultaneity and contingency which distinguishes urban life. In this case, they are also allusions to typical existentialist motifs. Small serendipities, unexpected hazards, fortuity and random coincidences also appear in the two stories discussed in the next section. While for the taxi driver and the dramatist they emphasize the absurdity of their personal fate, for the protagonists of the other two, they emerge in the exploration of otherness and displacement, in the unpredictability of encounters.

4. Encounters: displacement in the city of otherness

In the 21st century, due to the growing impact of globalization on everyday life and the unparalleled circulation of population on a global scale, the boundaries of nationhood, even at the level of individual identity, are increasingly blurred. Intercultural encounters may entail interactions of different cultural identities not only across national boundaries but also, as in the case of domestic migration, between people from different backgrounds within the same country. As a typical phenomenon of our times, this interrelatedness results in the unfeasibility for displaced subjects to mobilize pre-existing discourses to articulate their uprooted condition. For writers, as in the case of Xue Yiwei, this implies the need to fabricate new patterns of representation.

Matters of alterity, displacement and identity are broached from multiple perspectives in *Shenzheners*. Each character epitomizes a different facet of social and cultural diversity in the context of the metropolis. Furthermore, intercultural encounters of people and ideas, flowing either across or within the national boundaries, make the process of othering integral to the identity construction of the characters. Displacement and otherness are also expressed through conceptual markers of transculturality. A notable example in this regard is translation, metaphorically understood as the emblem of cultural transfers. It appears in the form of quotations of translated editions of famous masterpieces, or it is

the job of one character, or is addressed through reflections about the limits of literary translation.

The singularity of Shenzhen as a city of multiple alterities has been discussed earlier. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that “moving to the city” (*jincheng* 进城) and “going abroad” (*chuguo* 出国) are the most common tropes regarding mobility in contemporary Chinese culture, the first referring to the relocation of rural dwellers in the urban context, the latter hinting at international mobility (Sun 2002, 43). In both cases the migrant is faced with displacement, which stems from the hybrid condition of having departed from the familiar and inhabiting a strange place (Sun 2002, 44). Both these processes are involved in *Shenzheners*.

This section explores issues of displacement and otherness in the context of intercultural urban encounters in “The Country Girl” and “The Peddler”. These stories respectively turn the spotlight on a fleeting yet life-changing intercontinental contact between two persons searching for deeper meaning in life, and on the dire predicaments of a rural migrant. The matter in question is addressed from a dual perspective, encompassing both the condition of the protagonists, strangers to Shenzhen, and the particular standpoint of the author, whose wide-ranging depiction of the city springs from a constant identity negotiation that involves his national origin, his experience of Shenzhen and his relocation abroad.

“The Country Girl” (Xue 2016a), partially set in Canada, significantly is the first story in the English edition.²⁶ It expands the range of action of Shenzhen inhabitants in the direction of the Western world (Jiang 2017, 100). The female protagonist, an English-to-French translator from the Quebec countryside, is introduced to the existence of Shenzhen by a Chinese artist expatriated to Canada, who had previously been a migrant in Shenzhen. Towards the end of the story the woman will move to Shenzhen, metaphorically suggesting the shift of focus of the whole collection, since the other stories are all set in Shenzhen. This work is an allegory of transcultural encounters: the protagonists, owing to a fortuitous encounter on a train bound for Montreal, challenge the common stereotypes about each other’s cultures. The train symbolizes geographical mobility and the insatiable desire to be somewhere else. Their mutual attraction allows them to cross conventional ethnic boundaries by looking at themselves through the eyes of the other. More importantly, the two are attracted to each other because of a book by Paul Auster²⁷ that she is reading in English and he happens to have in Chinese. In fact, linguistic displacement is addressed through scattered references to translation: the woman loves the act of translating, discusses the untranslatability of poetry and in Shenzhen will teach foreign languages; the

²⁶ It is the penultimate in the Chinese edition.

²⁷ The American writer Paul Auster (b. 1947) was born in New Jersey. Among the recurring motifs of his works are coincidences, destiny and the city. *The New York Trilogy* (1987), mentioned in this story, is Auster’s most renowned work.

man repeatedly questions the reliability of translation; and their favorite writer has translated a modern history of China from French to English.

These two people hailing from different continents are fatefully brought together by a series of coincidences that are inextricably related to the cultural hybridity and the increasing international exchanges of contemporaneity. Afterwards, apart from some random contacts, they will never meet again. In fact, the man, who defines himself a failed artist, is a terminally ill cancer patient. The woman only discovers the truth when the Chinese man, just before he dies, sends her a letter with a special gift: a nude painting of her, fruit of his imagination.

She then decides to move to Shenzhen, because “She wanted to know why an original Auster would meet a translated Auster on the train” (Xue 2016a, 20). The transfer of this rural woman to a fast-growing metropolis epitomizes China’s transition from a predominantly agrarian society to an industrial and highly urbanized one. In Shenzhen, she enthusiastically experiences the thousands of options, from entertainment to relationships, that the city offers. However, even though she enjoys the atmosphere, she finally gets homesick and decides to return home.

On the train from Hong Kong to Shenzhen, the Canadian interpreter is faced with feelings of displacement and otherness when she notices that everybody else is Asian. The atmosphere of cultural contact is highlighted by the dialogues between the two characters even before her departure: “What’s it like to feel rootless in your native land? [...] I feel just as rootless here, a stranger in a strange land” (Xue 2016a, 11).

The writer’s detached gaze on Chinese culture is conveyed through seemingly casual allusions to distinctive traits of his native culture, meant to enable foreign readers to capture a glimpse of Chinese reality. Gandara and Sartori (2016, 588) contend that fictional works produced in situations of cultural or language contact manifest patterns of discursive heterogeneity, which convey the tension between different cultural universes. With particular reference to fiction by overseas Chinese writers, they argue that one of the expressions of this heterogeneity is the use of glosses and other kinds of elucidations directed to a hypothetical non-Chinese narratee (Gandara and Sartori 2016, 579). In “The Country Girl”, while talking about his life, the Chinese man provides details of Shenzhen and China’s history that are undoubtedly glaringly obvious to Chinese readers. Furthermore, in an attempt to explain how rural identity is perceived in his homeland, he utters: “In China a country girl is a girl without culture, taste or an urban *hukou*” (Xue 2016a, 10). This is an unnecessary clarification for a Chinese reader which, however, serves as an explanation for those who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture.²⁸

²⁸ This explanatory device also appears in other stories. In “The Dramatist” the narrator gives what would be a superfluous detail for a Chinese reader about the place where the playwright moves to, and this is undoubtedly intended to help foreign readers: “I got a parcel from Xishuangbanna, an ethnic minority area in Southern Yunnan” (Xue 2016c, 62).

The issues under discussion are approached from the perspective of an internal migrant in “The Peddler” (Xue 2016b), whose protagonist belongs to the lowest strata of urban society. The isolation suffered by this street vendor is even more severe compared to the other protagonists, inasmuch as it is exacerbated by his destitution and his low social standing. Persecuted by spoiled children and vexed by security officers, the beleaguered man strenuously resists the abysmal evilness which besieges his existence in the city. In this case it is the schoolboy narrator, detachedly observing the constraints of the wretched man, who becomes aware of the preposterousness of the man’s predicaments. The narrator also feels alienated in the urban environment: he does not like school, does not care about anything and angrily disapproves of the resignation of the peddler to the abuses of urban people. Although the protagonist, as a migrant, endures social bias in the city, he is the only character of the whole collection who does not want to leave. He does not even know where else he could go to obtain that something he is waiting for (Liu H. 2018, 61).

In this respect, this man who sells glutinous rice and popcorn is a typical character of Chinese subaltern fiction.²⁹ Even when the bullies steal the popcorn and physically assault him with a brick, and unidentified people in uniform throw his goods in the garbage and spit on them, he is only interested in getting on with his business, and is not concerned about feelings of displacement and otherness. Through the constraints of this character, who does not even have the means to fulfill basic everyday needs, the writer expresses compassion for disadvantaged urban people (Huang 2016, 80). His experience of rural-to-urban migration is harrowing and challenging and characterized by intense loneliness, as he suffers social ostracism and is excluded from all the advantages of the urban life.

In this case, linguistic otherness is approached through considerations of the narrator about dialects. The narrator, who has a standard Mandarin accent, likes the only girl who cannot speak Cantonese.³⁰ His classmates and teachers, from various parts of China, have different accents, which disturb the narrator. One of the reasons he empathizes with the peddler is the familiarity of his accent, but this is also the reason why he never helps him: “His provincial dialect was very close to the one my mother spoke. I wanted to help him [...]. But I didn’t dare. I was afraid the students [...] would make fun of me” (Xue 2016b).

International culture appears in this story through the enthusiasm of the merciless students for some aspects of Western commercial culture: American movies, the Italian A Series soccer league. Furthermore, during the spring term, while the first-person narrator is “excruciatingly bored” (Xue 2016a, 34), some of his classmates fulfill their dream of moving to England.

²⁹ Subaltern fiction (*diceng xiaoshuo* 底层小说) is a thriving trend in 21st century literature. The characters are migrant workers or other disadvantaged people who live in the metropolis. Shenzhen is one of the cities which most often appears in these works.

³⁰ Shenzhen is situated in Guangdong Province, where the local population mainly speaks Cantonese.

Before concluding, one last facet of the writer's displaced identity is worth mentioning, even though it is not closely related to urban representations. Over the last decade, Xue Yiwei has undertaken an intense activity of rewriting his works published before 2010. As he explains, after his voluntary transfer to Montreal his perception of the Chinese language changed and he felt that something was wrong in the old versions (Lin and Nashef 2021, 11). This rewriting reflects the need to perfect his artistic self-image (Zhao 2020, 11) and demonstrates a feeling of belonging and commitment to his mother language that was aroused in the writer upon migration, since he "firmly believes that his homeland is not defined geographically but linguistically" (Hu 2021, 35). Even though rewriting his works was a response to a feeling of linguistic homesickness, to improve his mother-language he engaged in a systematic reading of foreign masterpieces (Hu 2021, 34) which has most certainly contributed to a continual broadening of his singular fictional universe, built on a constant intercultural dialogue.

5. Conclusion

In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the metropolis is the intersection of international networks of ideas and identities and the site where the social and existential repercussions of global modernity emerge most clearly. In light of the foregoing, literary representations of the metropolis often transcend national boundaries, address issues of alterity and cultural diversity and explore the effects of urban transformations on humanity. Of equal importance, fictional representations of the global metropolis may also be grounded in the cultural hybridity of writers with significant transnational backgrounds.

With this in mind, this contribution has endeavored to argue that in *Shenzheners*, Xue Yiwei's portrayal of Shenzhen at the turn of the 21st century is an outcome of his cultural fluidity and geographical mobility. By engaging in two main theoretical strands, which respectively revolve around the delineation of urban characters and the tangible manifestation of discourses of otherness and displacement in situations of intercultural encounters, the transcultural dimension of his urban writing has been examined.

Evidence has been adduced that transculturalism in the selected stories is not only manifested in the form, structure, themes and textual practices, but it also emerges as an intrinsic element of the socio-cultural background. Intercultural encounters in all their forms are, in these narratives, common contingencies of the characters' urban experience. The writer interweaves cross-cultural literary and philosophic references, heterogeneous writing techniques, universal fictional tropes related to the portrayal of the urban individual, and first-hand knowledge of the reality of his homeland, which he looks at with the detached gaze of an expatriate. Through this multisided approach, Xue Yiwei impels readers to rethink their perception of China and of human relations across boundaries, and draws the map of a literary path embedded in a global literary modernity.

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