

## WANDERING THROUGH THE CRACKS OF TURBULENCE: ON ZIJIANG DING'S THE ABSURD GENERATION

Yeyan Gao\*

*Abstract: Deviating from the conventional route of grand narrative, Zijiang Ding's new novel The Absurd Generation exploits the life of Zhao Lu, a Beijing-educated youth mostly nicknamed "Lu Ye--Master Deer." Through constant analepsis and prolepsis, it provides an overview of the family backgrounds and a detailed account of the tragedies and joys of the relevant characters. With those side stories branching off and interspersing, the author expands this personal story into family history and even a tale of the times. What readers appreciate in the novel is not just the historical events but the unique experience that, at some point, touches their hearts and moves their souls. This novel has four narrative characteristics: 1. the narrative layers that are constantly superimposed; 2. frequently changing narrative perspective; 3. the narrative time of jumping back, and 4. the use of meta-narration. In general, The Absurd Generation broke through the perceptual limitations of previous reports, showing the apparent characteristics of rationality in scholars' novels, bearing the imprint of "post-modern" narratives.*

One day in late Fall of 1967, 18 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, two high school students, Zhao Lu and Lang Xingguo, wove their way, with their respective friends, through the heavy hills northwest of Beijing. These two young men were preparing for a duel with each other for a glamorous girl at the Huangguan 皇姑庵 (Royal Aunt Nunnery). And so the story began.

Those teenagers, after the duel, could no longer return to the joyful and carefree naughtiness of their childhood sheltered by their parents but, wrapped up in the tide of the times, ignorantly followed paths entirely beyond their imagination until many years later, their paths crossed again. Four of them met and poignantly recalled past times, picking up stories of people and events scattered in their memories, trying to construct order and connections out of disorder and disorganization in calamitous China in the twentieth century.

It was a time of war and tribulation, with chaos, destruction, and violence hammering China. The ancient land was not only under fire from the outside world but also subjected to the onslaught of a torrent of foreign cultures. Breaking in Western ideas and cultures was a tumultuous process, one that at the same time heralded the slow but arduous start of modernization of this country. It was a time of turmoil, a time of confusion, a time full of treacherous personal destinies, and a time when individuals were utterly disoriented. Almost all the writers, with their ambitions to reveal the pulse of the times hidden behind the chaotic events, excavate the feelings and sensations buried in the abyss of rich and mysterious history, and deal with the conflict between foreign culture and traditional Chinese culture, are committed to writing about.

Nor is Zijiang Ding an exception. Deviating from the conventional route of grand narrative, Zijiang Ding's new novel *The Absurd Generation* (吾輩) exploits

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\* YEYAN GAO, PhD candidate in contemporary Chinese literature at Shaanxi Normal University. Her writing has appeared in *China in Culture* and other academic journals.

the life of Zhao Lu, a Beijing educated youth 北京知青 mostly nicknamed “Lu Ye-Master Deer 鹿爺.”<sup>1</sup> Through constant analepsis and prolepsis, it provides an overview of the family backgrounds and a detailed account of the tragedies and joys of the relevant characters. With those side stories branching off and interspersing, the author expands this personal story into family history and even a tale of the times.

A historical novel as it is, *The Absurd Generation* is not just about history. As we all know, what readers appreciate in the novel is not just the historical events but the unique experience that, at some point, touches their hearts and moves their souls. As Scott H. Dalton states, “We write historical fiction, and read it, not to learn about history so much as to live it. It is the closest we can get to experiencing the past without having been there.” (Dalton, 2006) This historical fiction serves this purpose by “focusing on the persons — the characters,” portraying what it was like at that time and affording a fascinating contemporary insight into the characters’ response to history.

The author adheres to the writing attitude of “big things are not empty, small things are not restricted (大事不虛，小事不拘).” However, the author of this novel points out: at most, as Alexandre Dumas says: “History is like a nail on which you can hang anything,” and unlike Victor Hugo’s *Quatrevingt-Treize*, which takes many historical facts as the support of the novel content. (Ding, 2021, vi) He makes the era become the background and stage of the story, as well as the footnotes of the characters’ “absurd” thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The work analyzes the complexity of human nature revealed during the ups and downs of life and death and secretly condemned the harm of unreasonable social culture to human nature in the era of extreme material scarcity. At the same time, it also praises the “self-love” and “compassion” that exist before human reason and social politics, law, and morality in the original state of chaos. It returns to nature, presenting an absurd and desolate picture. However, “absurd” characters, events, thinking, and spiritual appeals are more or less existing in any era. “What touches the heart is not the presentation of phenomena, but the author’s unique observation perspective, observation path, and narrative strategy.” (Gao, 2022, 290)

This novel has four narrative characteristics: 1. the narrative layers that are constantly superimposed; 2. frequently changing narrative perspective; 3. the narrative time of jumping back, and 4. the use of meta-narration.

Readers are put into the scene of a turbulent history from an ordinary intellectual’s perspective; they can feel the cool breeze brushing ears on the bike to the duel and the protagonist’s passion for winning it. Readers could see the pale, cold moon when Master Deer’s mom Yueti 月啼 suffered from dystocia and feel her father Yue Huasheng’s desperation and contradictions. Readers could hear the helpless whimper of Little Sparrow when she was laboriously pouring water into a giant pot beside a rugged country lane and feel Master Deer’s towering rage after her gruesome death. Readers could fear for his life in the moments when he was caught in the mire of the meadow. Readers are bewildered by his bewilderment—how to confront the reversal of values, fight against the overriding order, and

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<sup>1</sup> In English spelling, “Lu” has many homonyms, one of which is “road 路,” the other is “land 陸,” and one more is “deer 鹿.” Zhao Lu (趙路)’s name, “Lu,” originally means “road.”

preserve the freedom of mind. Readers care about the seemingly trivial details like what happened to his friends and family instead of those abstract concepts like the international situation, national strategic deployment, etc.

Ilya Ehrenburg, a Russian writer, once noted that a writer could not write about everything or every character. Writers must choose characters and subjects that move them deeply and are closely linked to their own experiences. (Ellenburger, 1998, 26) From the perspective of this narrator, “Porpoise,” Master Deer’s childhood friend and now an American sociologist, Zhao Lu, as an epitome of contemporary Chinese intellectuals, is an “anti-hero,” somewhere between a criminal and a virtuous man, a civilian and a nobleman, an illiterate and a great scholar. He becomes the work’s protagonist by his “original goodness” and “original truth,” virtues people would expect an intellectual to manifest. In this book, the choice of this character and the description of his wandering life is a reflection of intellectuals’ search for what life is all about in the adversities. People could see him wandering away from his homeland, joining the Burmese Communist Party, and forcibly fleeing in the desert, among the grassland tribes, and along the Yellow River. Even faced with frustration and humiliation, he struggled to navigate his way through the confusion of his mind and the restlessness of his soul. He did not sap his love for life, depart from the statute of morality and faith, abandon the pursuit of justice and humanity, and be reborn from the purgatory of wandering into a transcendent realm of life.

As Zhao Lu (nicknamed “Roadman (路子)” then)<sup>2</sup> said when he bid farewell to the Yellow River and then set off on his “wandering,” “The land is connected to the road, and there is no place in the world where there is no road. Moreover, as my name indicates, I can connect wherever I want to access it. Despite the unevenness of the road, I can make it through.” (Ding, 2021, 227) These words are not only the reflection of the significant character’s attitude towards life but also the external presentation of the author’s own spiritual serenity and his freewheeling soul. He went through all the trials and tribulations until he finally broke the shackles of the mundane and gained complete spiritual freedom. Overwhelming as the hustle and bustle of society was, Zhao Lu held fast to his value judgment and developed the philosophy of life amid his vagrancy. Furthermore, that is what Ding holds on to as an intellectual.

Ding received a master’s degree from Peking University, a master’s degree, and a doctorate in philosophy from Purdue University, and is currently a professor of philosophy at California State Polytechnic University. With the passion of an insightful philosopher, he blended his discipline into the creation of his novel, making it thought-provoking and philosophy-inspiring. Ding’s erudition is demonstrated in this writing, as the fiction addressed a wide range of knowledge from the ancient to the modern and from the Chinese to the Western. He spares no effort to show the intricacies and nuances of Chinese and foreign cultures, covering from Lao Tzu to Plato, from folk songs to ballads. Thus a complex cultural development is outlined. In the social modernization process, there is an inevitable “collision and fusion” of various social relationships, as the writer puts it. However, Professor Ding’s multifaceted perspective on them strikes a chord in the reader’s

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<sup>2</sup> As pointed out earlier, in English spelling, one homonym of “Lu” is “road,” and the other is “land.”

heart. It provides a new lens through which to examine our national self-knowledge, making it a heartfelt work that records a century of China.

Jun Liu 劉俊, a professor at Nanjing University, agreed with this philosophical orientation when he once said that “history is an area of great concern for ‘new immigrant’ writers, but if history is not sketched with philosophical reflection, it is no more than a backdrop to the story.” (Liu, 2022) Yang Ye 葉揚, Emeritus Professor at the University of California, Riverside and Consulting Professor at Fudan University, compares the novel with *Notre Dame De Paris* and *Les Miserables* in the postscript of this novel. He suggests that the historical research, scholarly discourse, and the details laid out in the book, have been verified and that this knowledge aids the reader’s understanding of the plot and characters instead of hindering the flow and development of the story. (Ye, 2011, 447)

As Susan Sontag, author of *Against Interpretation* puts it in her essay “At the Same Time: The Novelist and Moral Reasoning,” “The understanding of the novelist is temporal, rather than spatial or pictorial. Its medium is a rendered sense of time — time experienced as an arena of struggle or conflict or choice.” (Sontag, 2005) The novelists’ job is to stand in the torrent of time, observing the characters’ trajectories at the bifurcation of time, seriously and ruthlessly showing the meeting and separation, gain and loss, joy and helplessness of individuals. In this novel, with time being the warp and character relationships being the weft, those scattered individual tales are interwoven into a web that embraces not only the four stories about Zhao Lu — the duel, the journey of “Down to the Countryside Movement,” the experience of becoming a fugitive and later a Yellow River tracker, and his marriage, but also the other three stories of Zhao Lu’s mother, girlfriend Lin Yan and paternal relatives. This delicately crafted web completes the historical picture of 20th century China by encompassing three major historical events: the anti-Japanese war, the Great Cultural Revolution, and the Reform and Opening-up of China. Grasping the warp and weft, stories emerge like a fat bunch of grapes, crystalline yet somewhat harsh. Ding, in this way, shared with us the world he created through acts of imagination and his unique styles and, therefore, evoked readers’ empathy.

As the author states in the preface, this writing attempts to be reader-friendly and meet the general public’s needs while pursuing a more ambitious goal and making a wiser attempt. The meticulous weaving of the text not only expresses the spiritual aspirations of the individual intellectuals and their in-depth thoughts on the plight of modern people but also presents the author’s efforts to incorporate social relations, lifestyles, folk culture, human nature, changes in the clan system and the humanistic spirit into the coverage of the novel, forming a grand scheme of social history.

China has always been aiming to reach out to the world. Behind the change in China’s relative position in the world are years of struggle, and Ding deploys his words to express the fate and contemplation of several generations in this thorny, crisis-ridden journey. His enlightening and sobering work, in tribute to his most revered philosopher, Bertrand Russell, is full of “longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering,” (Russell, 2009, 3) and serves as “a ray of wisdom, conscience, and justice,” in order to confront the darkness and absurdity of fate. Furthermore, that, the reviewer believes, is what both of them have lived for.

Overall, the novel embodies the exploration and development of the possibility of the text narrator and narrative perspective—the narrator’s setting and the narration’s overall construction present diversity and uncertainty. In slowly advancing the narrative, readers follow the narrator and plunge into absurd and sinister stories. They can also quickly withdraw from the narrator’s retrospective perspective and commentary dialogue in the first layer of the narrative, gaining rational understanding and improvement. The changing limited view of the work and the omniscient perspective presented after the interview allow readers to have an omniscient perspective and penetrate the characters’ hearts. With the help of “meta-narrative,” readers can also jump out of the current narrative and engage in in-depth rational thinking and historical significance questioning. “In general, *The Absurd Generation* broke through the perceptual limitations of previous reports, showing the apparent characteristics of rationality in scholars’ novels, bearing the imprint of ‘post-modern’ narratives.” (Gao, 2022, 296)

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