

# Rewriting Tradition: Yu Hua's Avant-garde Transformation of Crime Fiction in *Mistakes by the River*

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**Abstract**—As one of China's most renowned avant-garde writers, Yu Hua adopts a stark and detached narrative style in his early works, depicting scenes of violence, bloodshed, and death to highlight the absurdity of human existence. This stylistic choice stems from his selective adaptation and transformation of Chinese classical literature. Using *Mistakes by the River* as a case study, this paper examines Yu Hua's literary choices, analyzing how he both subverts and reconstructs narrative conventions to achieve a distinctive avant-garde quality. This study argues that Yu Hua reconfigures and integrates elements of traditional Chinese crime and detective fiction through three key aspects—plot structure, character portrayal, and narrative perspective. In doing so, he dismantles the rationality and moral justice typically upheld by these genres. In this so-called “crime novel,” truth remains elusive, justice is never served, and the protagonist's investigative process is riddled with inconsistencies—ultimately constructing a world governed by irrationality.

**Keywords**—avant-garde literature, Yu Hua, crime depiction, narrative subversion, irrationality

## I. BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

On October 2023, *Only the River Flows*, directed by Wei Shujun, was released across Chinese cinema and discussed widely by public [1], which also brought the original work with the same title into people's eyes. That is the *Mistakes by the River* (the Chinese title is 河邊的錯誤), a short novel written by Yu Hua, a Chinese avant-garde writer. Published in 1988, although not very mature, this early work of Yu still indicates his writing style at that period. It tells the story of a police captain named Ma Zhe who, after unsuccessfully arresting a “madman” suspected of committing three murders, ends up shooting the “madman” by himself and being treated as a psychopath as a result [2]. Yu depicted death, bloodshed and violence in a calm tone, revealing the cruelty of human nature, the absurdity of existence and the irrationality in the world, of which the “irrational” world is the background of the whole story and is what Yu intends to show us.

Here is a question: how did Yu manage to construct the “irrationality” during his early writing period? Did he refer to the western works or traditional Chinese novel, borrow the technique and make some changes to form his own style?

Currently, there have been some researchers pointing out that Yu actually used elements of pre-modern Chinese literature, such as “images, symbols, literary genres and norms, and religious and philosophical concepts”, to build his own image of the world in “new and redirected ways”, which is portrayed in Yu's *The Affairs of the World Are Like Smoke* (往事如煙), *Fresh Blood Plum Blossoms* (鮮血梅花) and *Classical Love*, (古典愛情), all of which belong to Yu's

early works [3].

Judging from the story itself, “crime fiction” can well describe *Mistakes by the River*: with murders, police, detection and killing the “criminal”. Start from that and trace back, then *gongan* novels (the Chinese name is 公案小說, I translate it using the *pinyin* of Chinese) in the Ming and Qing Dynasties and Chinese detective novels appearing in the Qing and early Republic of China period should be considered as the origins, all of which focus on crime, both occurring and solving. There are lots of research about these two novel forms. The main point is to find out the features of each and compare them from various perspectives, while some also try to discover how the *gongan* novel could affect the generation of Chinese detective novel. Both of these two kinds highlight the purpose of educating public, leading them to be either more aware of the traditional qualities or enlightened; they all pay attention to the crime designing, making the cases complex by adding some surrealistic elements; the main characters in both are, to some degree, served as incarnates of justice, morality, science and laws. Meanwhile, both of them differentiate with each other in terms of plot setting, description of crime detection and narrative perspective [4–10].

The *Mistakes by the River* itself is also a highly discussed topic. The majority of the research is about the metaphorical nature of the plot, which reflects the “irrationality” of the world. While some researchers do compare *Mistakes by the River* with traditional detective novels, many scholars still study it in the context of western literary theory, like viewing it as a Kafka-style allegory, using the *Caligula* of Albert Camus to understand the meaning of “madman”, or even linking the “rationality” with the Enlightenment [11–14].

I am not here to contest the research mentioned above, but only try to point out another path of studying *Mistakes by the River*. When Yu had just begun his writing, he absorbed the pre-modern Chinese literary tradition to form his own style, which can also be found in *Mistakes by the River* but this has not been fully studied yet. And that will be how I organize my paper. Whether *gongan* or detective novels, they have the basic elements of novel: plot, characters, setting, time, and the narrative perspective of the case. But in the *gongan* novels, there is a very brief description of setting and time - in this there is no very obvious comparison with the detective novels' emphasis on the background circumstances of the case and the time it takes place - and more attention is paid to build vivid characters and attractive plot. In that case, I will explore the connection between *Mistakes by the River* with traditional Chinese *gongan* novels and detective novels in these 3 ways: plot setting, character setting and perspectives of narration.

By doing these, I hope to explore Yu's avant-garde writing style further deeper, revealing its relationship with traditional Chinese literature, rather than only with the western literature works. From that, how the classics of Chinese literature still impact today's writers can also be seen, which can link up the ancient and modern development of Chinese literature, performing a more integrated picture of it.

## II. PLOT SETTING

In terms of plot, Yu draws on the "melodrama" plot of *gongan* novels and the plot settings of the "solving case" mode in detective novels, making appropriate changes to both.

From the online dictionary, "melodrama" is: 1, a story, play or novel that is full of exciting events and in which the characters and emotions seem too exaggerated to be real; 2, events, behavior, etc. that are exaggerated or extreme. Nevertheless, it cannot be simply interpreted that exaggerated is the only prominent feature of "melodrama" in terms of plot. Apart from "exaggerated", which is also possessed by The Theatre of Absurd that, according to Patrice Pavis (1988), features being unable to be placed into "dramaturgical, theatrical and ideological contexts" [15], the "melodrama" is also underpinned by some "benevolent moral principle", indicating that the "melodrama" should also convey some moral judgement, values and even exhortation when necessary [16].

As far as Chinese *gongan* novels are concerned, their plots also have the characteristics of "melodrama" mentioned above: the plots are full of coincidences, twists and turns; they emphasize the violence and crises that lurk in the surrounding environment. At the same time, the plots of the novels are not only about coincidences and crimes, but also about the deeper values that underlie the apparent crises: either the pursuit of justice, or the exhortation to pay attention to one's words and deeds. Among the crime novels, "The Wrong Beheading of Cui Ning" (錯斬崔寧), one of the earliest, although not a mature one, embodies the above characteristics: just because of a playful remark and a chance encounter between Officer Liu's wife and Cui Ning, two cases of injustice arise; and Officer Liu's death occurs extremely suddenly; at the end of the story, the author warns the reader to be careful with what he says and to think before speaking; or else the words that he speaks may cause trouble [17]. Lately, in *The Case of Bao* (包公案), a collection of *gongan* novels in which cases are judged by official Bao, the "melodrama" features in the stories become more obvious. In the case *You Zihua's drunkenness drove his concubine to her death, Fang Chunlian eloped and became a prostitute* (遊子華酗酒逼死妾，方春蓮私奔淪為娼), Fang's husband, Lin Fu, is put into prison due to a misunderstanding:

Lin is disgusted by Fang's experience of having gone out and committed adultery with someone and spends his days scolding Fang. Unable to cope with the beatings, Fang elopes with her neighbor Xu Da. Afterwards, Lin cannot find Fang and asks Fang's parents for help. When Fang's parents hear about Lin's scolding of their daughter, they think Lin has a grudge and kills their daughter and dumps her body, taking Lin to court; coincidentally, the concubine of another character in the title, You Zihua, who couldn't stand You's

alcoholism, committed suicide by throwing herself into a well, and when her body was found, it was mistaken for Fang. Thus, the evidence of Lin's guilt is established in this series of "misunderstandings" caused by coincidence. Afterwards, Bao comes to the county town to judge Lin's case, and sends his man Tang Guan to investigate the case. Then Tang meets Fang accidentally, and learns about her elopement with Xu, and then returns to the county town to report to Bao. At this point, the case is truly cracked. At the end of the story, Pao's judgement mentions that Lin was justified in scolding Fang because of her lecherous nature, and that the woman was advised to keep her chastity [18].

The plot full of coincidences, the sudden death, and the final warning to the readers all reflect the distinctive characteristics of "melodrama".

Yu adapts the "exaggerated" plot in *gongan* novel: three murders occur within three years, and the murderer is lurking in a small town by the river, and the murderer had no motive for the murder, which all make every murder full of suddenness and randomness; when the novel is supposed to end, the murder reappears, bringing a twist to the plot while allowing the story to continue to develop; the protagonist Ma Zhe suddenly shoots the "madman"... This series of plots symbolizes the obvious and ubiquitous crisis and violence, and the plot is full of abrupt changes. The plot characteristics of "exaggerated" are vividly displayed. However, while learning from it, Yu omits the deep value support in the "melodrama". In the novel, the presumed murderer, the "madman", cannot be tried because of his "madness", and "justice" is therefore absent; there is also a lack of sufficient reasons and values behind Ma Zhe's act of shooting the "madman" without permission:

"How could you do such a stupid thing?"

"Because the law can't do anything about him." said Ma Zhe.

"But you're bound by the law." the Director almost shouted.

"I don't think about that." Ma Zhe said still calmly.

"But you should always think for yourself." the Director couldn't sit still at the moment, and he walked around the room in annoyance.

...  
"But why don't you?"

"I don't know." said Ma Zhe [19].

Both the twisted and coincidental storyline and the omission of moral values in "melodrama" amplify the "irrational" factors in the "melodrama" - sudden turns and crimes, and also ubiquitous crises. At the same time, the story shows the impact of these factors on the characters - the characters in the novel are affected by them and gradually lose their rationality. From this, the "irrationality" theme of the novel is revealed: the residents of the small town gradually lose their minds in the shadow of the very abrupt murders, because the "madman" cannot be punished, and his existence has a negative impact on everyone's life; Ma Zhe's act of shooting the "madman" also made himself become a psychopath, all of which are the result of the combination of "exaggerated" plots and the lack of values or justice.

As for detective novels, the plots take "solving case" as the basic mode. To solve a case, going through the process of report of the crime, investigation, arrest, and restatement of

the crime is needed. In the “investigation” period, there are questions, investigation of the scene, discovery of evidence, identification of the murderer and other links. In Cheng Xiaoqing’s *Detective Stories of Huo Sang* (霍桑探案集), the plot of the *Midnight Cry* (夜半哭聲) case starts from Ni Jinshou’s report to Huo Sang. And after a series of scene investigation and inquiry in Huo, Yan Yugang and Xu Huifang are subpoenaed to the court as a suspect, then finally Huo revealed the process of a suicide that looks like a murder case. In the end, Huo’s restatement of the case echoes the plot of the bullet wound found in Tian Wenmin’s home before [20]. The setting of this plot emphasizes the correspondence between clues and the case and the logical sequence of the plot, and the speculation is all based on evidence rather than subjective guess. It can be seen that the plot of “solving case” mode pays attention to logic, and the feature of “rationality” is very distinct.

Yu uses the plot of “solving case” from detective novels. Specifically, the process of Ma Zhe’s solving each murder case retains the basic plot flow of report, investigation, and arrest, although the first two arrests result in the release of the “madman”:

“...Granny Me Si went to the river from 4:00 to 4:30 in the afternoon. And it was around seven when the child found the head. So, the culprits committed the crime in those three hours or so. It was found that there was a pit where the body was buried, and now that pit is gone, so that pit was ready-made. So, it is estimated that the culprits probably committed the crime in less than an hour [21].”

“So, Ma Zhe decided to search the madman’s room. Inside his cluttered house, they found the missing wood knife of Granny Me Si. It was stained with blood. After testing, the blood type of the blood on the knife was the same as that of Granny Me Si [22].”

“The madman spent two years in a mental hospital, where he tasted the pain of electrotherapy... In the last six months he was bedridden... So, the hospital notified the town, requiring the madman to be taken back [23].”

However, Yu intentionally omits the link of “restatement of the crime”. Throughout the whole text, we can’t find any detailed and comprehensive description of the murder case: there is no relevant content on how the murderer got Granny Me Si’s wood knife, how he followed her, how he dealt with the body after killing her, and how he left the scene of the crime; in that case, there is no corroboration of whether or not the “madman” really did commit the murder, and the key aspects of how the murder was carried out. Being unable to determine who committed the crime, the designation of the “madman” as the criminal was hence full of arbitrariness and lacked “rationality”. In addition, the specific aspects of the “investigation” section are also flawed: in the detection of the case of the Granny Me Si, Ma Zhe only organizes four interviews with the suspects, and the only reason why these four are suspects is because they all happened to be present at the crime scene, and there is no direct connection between each interview; the scene investigation of bullet marks in the room, as mentioned above in *Midnight Cry*, does not appear in the novel. The only means of solving the case seems to be the interviews. Additionally, some of the words, such as “emphatically thinks” and “has already been determined” also show the arbitrariness of the investigation process and

the lack of necessary links in the process:

“It seems that madman has already been determined as the murderer in the mind of Ma Zhe.

But after a week of searching in all the right places, the money could not be found. Ma Zhe can’t help but be a little impatient... In order not to let the case drag on for too long, he emphatically thinks that Granny Me Si has hidden the money in an unknown place, and decided to arrest the madman [24].”

The partly absence of this mode of “solving case” implies that the color of “rationality” is dimmed in the process of investigation, which highlights the manipulation of the case by “irrational” forces.

### III. CHARACTER SETTING

Apart from the storyline, Yu transforms the settings of characters in *gongan* novels and detective novels to highlight the “irrationality” theme. Specifically, it is manifested in the following three methods: retaining and expanding the symbolic nature of the characters, retaining and expanding the contrastive relationships between the characters, and writing out the changes in the character’s features.

In *gongan* novels and detective novels, characters have obvious symbolism. The officials are impartial and won’t be affected by personal feelings in crime-solving, symbolizing feudal morality and justice. In *The Case of Bao*, Judge Bao was described as “as uncorrupted as clear water, as bright as the moon”, “divine”, and his sentences to prisoners often refer to such things as “disregard for benevolence and justice”, and “disliking poverty and being crazy about wealth”, and “examining Fang...is a lecherous woman...her husband has heard of her filthy behavior and has repeatedly beaten and scolded her, which is only natural” and other ethical and moral contents [25–29].

The detectives in detective novels, on the other hand, symbolize “science” and “rationality”. In the case of *Blood Handprint* (血手印) in *Detective Stories of Huo Sang*, Huo proposed to Bao Lang the method of detecting bloodstains by using Arminian fluid, and at the same time, Cheng Xiaoqing also expresses his views on Huo and other detectives through Bao Lang: “Huo’s prudence in handling things and his diligent research spirit are indeed honorable and admirable. In fact, this kind of applied scientific knowledge, all engaged in detective work should be involved in, the treatment of the case will not pose injustice to the innocent [30].”

This “symbolism” is inherited by Yu. Ma Zhe symbolizes “rationality”: in the course of questioning the suspects, he is always able to grasp the key questions, such as when the suspects went to the river, how long they stayed there, what they did there, and he keeps his questioning very brief; even when the suspect loses control of his emotions in the course of the questioning like Wang Hong, Ma Zhe is not disturbed by it and asks questions patiently:

...

“Did you go to the river that evening?”

“Yes.” he said. “I’m not afraid you’ll suspect me.”

Ma Zhe continued: “You went out a little after half past five and came back at six o’clock. Were you by the river all this time?”

“I am not afraid of you doubting me. I’m telling you, I’m not afraid of anything. You can inquire about it in the

factory.”

“Now answer my question [31].”

Another important character in the novel, “madman”, symbolizes “irrationality”: he behaves strangely and erratically, throwing baskets into the crowd, beating up Granny Me Si for no reason, or going to the river to “wash clothes” after the murder, all of which are “irrational”.

While retaining the “symbolism” of the characters, Yu also expands the scope of the “symbolism” by giving it to other creatures, institutions and even the plots. The “asylum” and the “town government” all symbolize the social order. The failure of the “asylum” to accommodate the “madman” and the powerlessness of the “town government” to deal with the “madman” mean the powerlessness of the social order when facing “irrationality”. The “geese” in the novel are the only witnesses to the murder of Granny Me Si, but they are unable to speak, it is also impossible for Ma Zhe to make them speak. The silent “geese” means the inaccessibility of the truth. Ma Zhe asks about the geese after the third murder, showing the denial of the pursuit of “truth” by means of “rationality”, which indirectly denies the power of the latter. Moreover, the four times of questions and answers between Ma Zhe and the doctor at the end of the novel can be viewed as the alienation of “irrationality” by the world of “rationality” to human beings – Ma Zhe is forced to become “mentally ill”:

The doctor’s been here for the fourth time.

...

“When were you born?”

That’s the sound again. Both rhythm and tone are the same as the first three times. The sound makes Ma Zhe find it difficult to breathe.

...

“1981.” Ma Zhe replies.

...

The doctor continues, “Name?”

Ma Zhe answers his wife’s name at once.

...

“Do you have children?” The doctor asks like a machine.

“I have not married yet.” Ma Zhe replies. He finds this answer very interesting.

The doctor stands up, showing that he has finished his work. He says, “Let him go to hospital [32].”

In the character setting of detective novels, there is also a contrasting relationship between different characters. The detective is often contrasted with his assistant or client. This contrasting relationship often focuses on highlighting the detective’s calmness and “rationality”. The former is like Huo Sang and Bao Lang, and the latter is like A Nie and A Yi in *The People Inside the Net* (網內人). The two protagonists, A Nie and A Yi, go to school to find classmates to talk to, and A Yi’s reckless impatience is used to highlight A Nie’s delicate and calm. This contrasting relationship is often only that of assistant/client and detective, with the emphasis of the detective’s image [33].

Yu indeed utilizes this contrasting relationship - contrasting Ma Zhe with the “madman”. However, he further developed this relationship into a double contrast in this novel: first, Ma Zhe contrasts with “she”, Wang Hong, Xiao Li and Xu Liang, and in the description of the panic of these suspects because of being suspected and Xiao Li’s inexperience in solving the case, Ma Zhe’s inquiry process is

clear: his analysis of the case and his grasp of the information are better:

“I’ve been waiting for you all day, and I’m getting tired of it.”

“Then why don’t you turn yourself in?” Xiao Li interjects. Ma Zhe cannot help but give Xiao Li a discontented look [34].

However, Ma Zhe is contrasted with the “madman”, which symbolizes the contrast between “rationality” and “irrationality”. A clear progressive relationship exists between these two levels of contrast: The “rational” character of Ma Zhe is firstly highlighted, and then it is used to further strengthen the “irrational” force represented by the “madman”, doubly reinforcing the latter as an overwhelming power in the novel.

The fixed settings of characters in *gongan* novels and detective novels are abandoned by Yu. In these two kinds, the characters’ emotions, thoughts and behaviors are stable and do not change much. However, *Mistakes by the River* shows how characters gradually lose their minds under the influence of “irrational” forces. Xu Liang gradually goes crazy due to constant self-doubt; Ma Zhe initially investigates the case according to the law, but in the end cannot bear the existence of the “madman” and acts privately and shoot him; and the townspeople starts out laughing at the sight of a “madman” and ends up panicking at the sound of just the name of him. These four changes show readers the process of characters going from consciousness to loss of mind under the influence of “irrational” forces, highlighting the oppression and destruction of people by “irrationality”.

#### IV. PERSPECTIVES OF NARRATION

Finally, Yu also highlights the theme of “irrationality” by adapting the narrative perspective of *gongan* novel and detective novel.

The omniscient perspective in *gongan* novel is mainly reflected in the third-person narrative, in which a series of processes, such as committing a crime, reporting the crime, investigating the crime, and convicting the criminal, are told in the capacity of a bystander, and the biographies of the characters are interspersed with descriptions of the characters’ lives, which are highly objective and carry the meaning of “recording the truth”. In the case *Lady Ding Endured Humiliation to Avenge her Wrongdoing, Monk Xing Hui Held Ding’s Husband in Custody* (丁娘子忍辱報仇冤，性慧僧匿婦扣人夫), the author portrays the characters’ identities at the beginning, then describes how Monk Xing Hui abducts Lady Ding, including how he deceives her to come to his resident, how he molests her and how her husband is detained by Xing Hui:

“There was a scholar Ding Rizhong in Chengfanfu, Guizhou Province, who often studied at Anfu Temple and was good friends with the Monk Xing Hui. One day, Xing Hui went to Ding’s house to visit him. Ding happened to be out of town, so his wife, Deng, prepared a meal to entertain Xing Hui. When Xing Hui saw Deng’s beauty, he fell in love with her [35].”

Then after Deng is cheated and raped by Xing Hui, the thoughts of her are also be written as below:

“Deng thought: she had been molested, and if she died, she

would never see her husband or be able to take revenge, so she might as well put up with it for a while. If she could see her husband and take revenge, it would not be too late for her to die afterwards [36].”

Also, the process of Bao’s solving the case is also recorded by the author, like how he dreams of a black dragon, how he discovers the husband Ding and Lady Ding, and how he judges and sentences Monk Xing Hui in the end. This kind of omniscient perspective can be called “Third Omniscient”, in which the figure who tells the story is “an all-knowing figure who has access to every character’s internal discourse and possesses absolute knowledge about the plot’s happenings [37].” It is hard to define whether the author had input his own thoughts or feelings into the narration or not because the “Third Omniscient” perspective is so objective, making the *gongan* novel like a record of “crime and truth”.

In the detective novels, on the other hand, the main body of the story is first narrated from a limited point of view, and at the end from an omniscient point of view when the whole process of the crime is revealed. This perspective shift, combined with the “solving case” plot mode, makes the plot of the novel present a color of “uncover the truth”, and the final perspective shift marks the “exploration” of the success, represents the challenge of “rational” force to the unknown represented by the detective and highlights the power of the former. In the case *Murder Under the Wheel* (輪下血) of *Detective Stories of Huo Sang*, Bao Lang, as one of the protagonists, describes what he hears and sees on the train before the murder occurs, and the stories that follow are also all told in the first person, from Bao’s observational point of view, which include his questions, his dialogue with Huo Sang, and Huo’s conversations with others. For instance, Bao goes to Huo’s room, hoping Huo can answer his questions about the murder:

“Huo suddenly said, ‘Do you feel sorry for him?’

‘Yeah, I’m sorry that he died.’

‘But what I mean by “sorry”, and what you mean by “sorry”, are not the same thing.’

I was surprised, ‘So, what’s your opinion?’

Huo answered with a sullen face, ‘That man died, not from a car accident, but from murder.’

...

I asked, ‘you said Kong Weixin was murdered, how did you know that?’

...

‘Didn’t you see the guy with me at that time? He lay straight, his arms and legs unbent, and even his robe and waistcoat were perfectly straight and without wrinkles. In such a state, would you believe it if he had fallen down onto the track by himself?’

I can’t answer that. It’s true when you think about it that way. But I didn’t think at the time that he had been murdered, and I didn’t pay attention to those details [38].”

It is not until the end, when the story is narrated by both Huo and the murderer, that the point of view changes to an omniscient one, meticulously showing the entire process of the murder as well as the faking of the scene. The majority part of the case is shown with the “First-Person Protagonist” perspective, meaning that “this narration style uses first-person pronouns (I, me, my, etc.) to describe what is happening from the character’s perspective... This

perspective limits viewers to the protagonist’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences, essentially leaving us blind to everything beyond the character’s immediate knowledge [39].” The protagonist then will help the detective to solve the crime, in which his views, feelings and experiences will be questioned and changed; then along with the criminal and other people, the protagonist and detective can rebuild the whole process of committing the crime and “discover the truth”.

In the *gongan* and detective novels, the omniscient view represents the “truth” and “solving the crime”, while the limited view represents “searching for truth”. Should the “truth” be revealed, the story would develop from limited perspective to omniscient perspective, which is also the embodiment of “rationality”. Yu notes the difference between these two narrative methods. He, however, narrates the main body of the novel from a limited view, with the exception of the omniscient perspective at the very beginning when Granny Me Si was killed:

“At this time, Granny Me Si feels the sound of footsteps coming behind. When she notices the sound, the man is actually standing behind her, so she looks over her shoulder.....” [40]

From now on, the omniscient perspective is changed to limited perspective:

“It is then that he sees the flock of geese, and he goes to them with great interest. But when he gets among the geese, he is shocked [41]...”

“When she turns around, she utters a cry of surprise, stands still for a moment, and then runs as fast as she can. She doesn’t get very far before she hits the ground [42]...”

The limited perspective continues until the end of the story.

This change in perspective is totally different from either the *gongan* novel or the detective novel in China, placing the omniscient perspective in front of the limited one, making the whole story become a myth which cannot be broken even the suspect “madman” is killed. Myth is still myth, representing the obscuring of the “truth” and the covering up of details. The “omniscient to limited” setting of narration means that the “truth” is obscured, and the limited perspective fails to become omniscient again, representing the failure of “rationality” to seek the “truth”, indicating the powerlessness of “rationality” and the author’s criticism of it, thus echoing the “irrationality” theme of the novel from the side.

The use of narrative perspective in *Mistakes by the River* can also be seen in Yu’s other early novels like *One Kind of Reality* (現實一種), which constructs what the researchers call “Indifferent Narrator” in his early works. With this limited perspective, Yu reduces the intervention of the narrator’s discourse, comments and value judgement, and tries to objectively show the “other reality” of the external world [43]. In this sense, the first-person limited perspective used in *Mistakes by the River* is a narrative perspective that unveils the world through the eyes of Ma Zhe, who sees the “absurdity” of the world after the “rules”. Yu’s use of limited perspective seems to obscure the “truth” of a particular murder case, but it explains the “truth” of the world in a deeper sense.

## V. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

As one of the earliest Avant-garde writers in China, Yu possesses his unique literary style. It does not come from nowhere, and this paper is devoted to explore this origins by referring to classical Chinese literature. By analyzing Yu's early work *Mistakes by the River*, it can be concluded that he makes adaptation and modification to Chinese *gongan* novel and detective novel from three aspects to highlight their "irrationality" themes and hence forms his own avant-garde color. It draws on the "melodrama" plot of *gongan* novels, but omits the value support in deep layer; meanwhile it draws on the "solving case" plot model in detective novel but omits the key links in it. This work also retains the symbolism of the characters in the *gongan* and detective novel, as well as the contrasting relationship in detective novel, but simultaneously expands the scope of symbolic action, expands a single contrast into a double contrast, and also depicts the changing process of the characters. Moreover, the narrative perspective of the novel changes from an omniscient perspective to a limited perspective, showing a reference and adaptation of the narrative perspective of the novel in order to reverse the power of "rationality" and stress the "irrational" power in the story.

By doing this, this paper provides an alternative perspective to interpretations based solely on west-east comparison, and shows how classical Chinese literary traditions continue to influence contemporary literature. However, due to constraints in scope and methodology, this study does not include Yu's other works. While this study concentrates on plot, character, and narrative perspective, further research could explore aspects such as linguistic style and symbolic imagery to examine how Yu's avant-garde expressions manifest in finer details.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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