Viajes y escrituras: migraciones y cartografías de la violencia

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Escaping Bodies on the Dark Roads of China: Space and Displacement in Ma Jian's *Yin zhi dao*

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Résumé : La littérature chinoise migrante est riche en histoires de sujets en fuite, et celle de Ma Jian est l'une des voix les plus puissantes qui raconte l'histoire de la Chine à partir de l'exil. Ma Jian aborde la question de la politique de l'enfant unique en Chine dans son œuvre *Yin zhi dao* 陰之道 (*The Dark Road*, 2014). Cet article analyse les liens entre les subjectivités déplacées de l'auteur et l'héroïne du roman.
Mots-clés : littérature migrante chinoise, Ma Jian, *Yin zhi dao*, politique de l'enfant unique , espace littéraire

Resumen: La literatura china migrante es rica en historias de sujetos en fuga, y la de Ma Jian es una de las voces más poderosas que cuenta la historia de la China desde el exilio. Ma Jian aborda la cuestión de la política del hijo único en China en su obra *Yin zhi dao* 陰之道 (*The Dark Road*, 2014). Este artículo analiza los vínculos entre las subjetividades desplazadas del autor y de la heroína de la novela.
Palabras clave: Literatura china migrante, Ma Jian, *Yin zhi dao*, política del niño único, espacio literario

Abstract: Chinese migrant literature is rich in stories of individuals fleeing. Ma Jian is one of the most powerful voices, recounting the history of China from exile. In *Yin zhi dao* 陰之道 (*The Dark Road*, 2014), she discusses the question of China's one-child policy. This chapter analyses the links between the author's displaced subjectivities and the heroine of her novel.
Keywords: Chinese migrant literature, Ma Jian, *Yin zhi dao*, one-child policy, literary space

Since June 1989, China has witnessed various waves of emigration that have led many of its citizens abroad. Some of these emigrants have felt the need to inform the rest of the world of the injustices they have suffered in recent years. Ma Jian 马建 is one the most popular writers to have been labelled a 'dissident' because of his covert denunciations of the Chinese government's policies – an ideal who has cost him the legal right to return to his motherland. However, before being an *éxilé* writer, Ma Jian is first of all a migrant. Before leaving China for good, he moved to several countries, facing the same hardships as many of his compatriots. The migrant's wandering often translates into the subject's displacement, due to the disorientation, the sense of inadequacy, and the underlying bond that inevitably ties the individual to his or her land of origin. In his novel *Yin zhi dao* 隐之道 (The Dark Road), Ma Jian narrates a peculiar story of migration, that of a family trying to escape China's one-child policy, by roaming across their own country like exiles with no future. On concentrating on the woman protagonist, not only does the author provide a vivid picture of the misery such measure brought to many families, but he also offers a deep reflection on the female body. In this article, I will investigate the interconnections between spatial movement and mental dislocation by exploring the dimension of space in two of its representations. The first will be the space of the female body, which represents the subject's physical embodiment and a mirror for physical and psychological violence. The second will be the space of China, through which the migrant subject desperately wanders, in search of a better place to call home.

A Life in Exile

Ma Jian was born in Qingdao, Shandong province, in 1953. After interrupting his education during the Cultural Revolution, he trained as a painter and as a photographer in Beijing. Subsequently, he travelled across China for three years as a photojournalist and on his journeys he gathered the material and

the inspiration that later allowed him to write the collection of short stories *Liangchu ni de shetai huo kongkongdangdang* 亮出你的舌苔或空空蕩蕩 (Stick Out Your Tongue)[1] and the travel account translated into English as *Red Dust: A Path through China*[2]. In 1986, after Deng Xiaoping's reforms and the first steps towards the opening up of the country, Ma Jian left Mainland China for Hong Kong, where he met his current wife and translator, Flora Drew. When the P.R.C. gained control of that area in 1997, he manifested his opposition by joining the writers and artists' protest against the handover. In the end, he decided to leave again and, after first moving to Germany, he eventually settled in London, where he still lives with his family. In 2017, he moved temporarily to Berlin as guest of the year of the German Academy Exchange Service. Ma Jian's overt criticism of the Chinese government has hindered the free circulation of his books, which – apart from *Red Dust* – are all banned in Mainland China, and their Chinese versions have been published only in Taiwan. Ma Jian left his native country spontaneously, declaring himself to be in self-exile. Initially he would fly back to Mainland China from time to time, where his first wife and his daughter lived. However, in 2011, after the publication in Taiwan of his highly political novel *Rou zhi tu* 肉之土 (Beijing Coma)[3], Ma Jian's violent denunciation of the Tiananmen incident prevented

[1] The novel was published in Mainland China in 1987, but its circulation was soon forbidden by Chinese censorship. Its English translation came out almost twenty years later, in 2006, with the title *Stick Out Your Tongue* (2006).

[2] Two Chinese editions of the book are available. In the P.R.C. it was published as *Langji Zhongguo* 浪跡中國 (Wandering in China) (2002), while in Taiwan it was issued one year later with the title *Feifa liulang* 非法流浪 (Wandering Illegally) (2003).

[3] Owing to the censorship problems in China, the novel was first published in the United Kingdom in 2008, in a translation by Flora Drew, and the English version became the source text for all subsequent translations. The original Chinese version was published only in 2009 in the United States and in 2010 in Taiwan.

him from re-entering China, and he officially became an exiled author.

Ma Jian's 'linguistic situation' is indeed a peculiar one. Although he has been living in London for years, he still is not particularly confident with the English language, and Chinese has remained his only means of literary expression. He chose to exile himself from Mainland China, yet was unable to sever his ties with his mother tongue. But for Ma Jian English translation is not merely a necessary step to reach a broader readership. Close collaboration with his translator has contributed to shaping his literary works, making the two artistic sources perfectly attuned. While Drew's translations have played a central role in attracting a Western audience – not least by virtue of their own literary value – Ma Jian has opened his literary creation to direct cooperation with the translator. He concretely allows her to adapt and change the original Chinese texts to best fit the scope of the English versions, generating a phenomenon of 'overlapping of authorship' (Pesaro, "Authorship, Ideology, and Translation" 165).

By contrast to the proliferation of interviews on the Web, there are only a few academic studies dedicated to Ma Jian's works. Existing studies on *Yin zhi dao* deal with the issues of its ecocritical nature (Li and Liu, "Red China, Green Amnesia"), the author's controversial relationship with Mainland China (Codeluppi, "Inner and Outer Resistance") and the peculiarities of his translational authorship (Pesaro, "Between the Transnational"). Moreover, Ma Jian's most popular work *Rou zhi tu* (Beijing Coma) has been the object of several studies, conducted from different perspectives (Kong B., *Tiananmen Fictions*; Pesaro, "Authorship, Ideology, and Translation;" Kong S., "Ma Jian and Gao Xingjian;" Loh, "The Epic Spirit in Ma Jian;" Codeluppi, "History, Memory, Exile"). Owing to the ban imposed on Ma Jian's books by Chinese censorship, no academic studies concerning his oeuvre were retrieved from the national database.

Escape and Delusion

Yin zhi dao is a novel about women, violence, resistance and escape. It tells the story of Meili, a woman whose destiny is to struggle against the implementation of China's one-child policy. Her husband Kongzi, the 76th descendant of Confucius, is determined to bring a son and heir into the world, despite the strict rules imposed by the government in order to control the population size. Meili has already given birth to a girl, Nannan, and falls pregnant for the second time before the expiration of the five-year interval that would have made her second pregnancy acceptable for the current legislation. This is 1990s rural China and the authorities are implementing invasive policies, like heavy fines and compulsory contraception, to enforce the rules. The consequences for women who do not abide by the rules can go far beyond unaffordable fines: disinfectant may be injected into the fetus' cranium, causing its immediate death. Scared by the violence raging in the village, the Kong family leave their home on a mission to find a quiet place that may serve as a safe haven for their second child. During their journey across China, Meili faces many obstacles that prevent her from becoming a mother for the second time. She falls pregnant three times, yet she never succeeds in giving her second-born the serenity she longs for.

Ma Jian's sensitive pen narrates Meili's painful escape with the help of a peculiar narrator: the spirit of her unborn child that repeatedly tries to become embodied and enter the world. The author defines this narrative technique a "fourth-person narrator" (Ma, *Rou zhi tu* 339), an eyeless point of view that enriches the novel with a placeless and timeless voice. The result is a double perspective that reflects the author's "shifting identity" (Pesaro, "Between the Transnational" 123), which cannot be confined to China, just as the 'infant spirit' is unable to start its earthly life through a body whose location is wrong in terms of both time and space.

Yin zhi dao is a story of atypical fugitives trying to escape the deadly grip of their own motherland. Although projected into a peculiar context, the novel provides an excellent portrait of the migrant's experience, expressing the unease of displacement enhanced by the anxiety of the runaway. In line with Ma Jian's previous works, the novel exploits fiction to voice politically sensitive issues, sacrificing the possibility of reaching a wide Chinese readership for the sake of freedom from censorship. However, despite its evident political orientation, *Yin zhi dao* is also a refined expression of individual conscience, which takes an unexpected feminine form. Meili desperately tries to escape state control over her private life, struggling to protect the precious fruit of her own womb. The migrant's escape is depicted as a distorted spatial experience, which is articulated into two distinct levels: the space of the body and the space of China. By juxtaposing physical sensations and a multidimensional perception of distance, Ma Jian offers a provocative account that highlights the hardships endured by those who are forced to leave their homeland.

The Dark Roads of China

No matter where we go, or how much we actually move, we are always somewhere. Being 'situated' in space – as well as in time – is a necessary condition in order to be a part of what René Descartes called the *res extensa*, literally the 'extended thing,' which can be translated as the 'corporeal substance.' In other words, one must occupy a portion of the planetary surface shared by all humanity before claiming to actually 'be' someone or something. The only thing allowing us to do so is our own body, which represents the only channel of interaction between the individual and the space surrounding him, as well as the starting point of any knowledge of a specific place (Casey, *Getting Back* 46-50). Without the body, any awareness or experience of space would be impossible. Consequently, the unavoidability of the physical

dimension offers an inspiring starting point from which to analyze the perception of space in Ma Jian's novel.

Ma Jian has always paid attention to the corporeal aspects of his stories and characters. He has never been afraid to provide meticulous descriptions, sometimes of extremely raw and violent scenes. This is the case with his novel *Rou zhi tu*, which narrates in minute detail the various phases of the Tiananmen student protests of 1989. By literally bringing the reader under the skin of one of the protesters, the author exploits the power of memory to bring back the atrocities of those days. Ma Jian shows the same care for the most immanent features of human beings also in his following work, *Yin zhi dao*. This time the focus is on the female body and on its relationship with the protagonist's journey towards freedom. Meili's repeated pregnancies are the driving cause of her wanderings, and her role plays a prominent role in the incessant whirl of amplified sensations caused by her eternal flight. Not only does she experience the displacement caused by the continuous changes of outside space through her body, but she is also aware of her own inner physical dimension, most strikingly represented by her womb. Indeed, in this work the uterus is a key element, which constitutes at once the mother's most intimate channel of communication with her unborn baby and the fetus' only living space.

Yin zhi dao begins with an agitated scene that immediately sets the novel's tone. Meili and her husband Kongzi witness the violent implementation of the one-child policy by the local authorities, who force one of their neighbors to be sterilized, and decide to take the road (Ma, 5-6). Since Meili too has illegally fallen pregnant with her second child, she must run away in order to escape the abortion cruelly imposed on all women caught in her situation. Throughout the whole story, the most striking feature of Ma Jian's portrayal of the body is indeed its biopolitical

implication.[4] Although the author's dissidence has often been overstressed, almost to the point of obscuring the literary value of his works (Pesaro, "Between the Transnational" 110), in this case these two aspects are someway complementary. The depiction of Meili's body as a political 'possession' discloses its role in the spatial structure of the novel, which presents a skillful juxtaposition of private and public space, as well as of physical and mental displacement. A woman's womb, which should naturally be regarded as her most private space, is depicted instead as a territory possessed by men and, before them, by the Chinese State.

Rulers' right to decide about their subjects' life and death is one the peculiar privileges that have shaped the history of humanity (Foucault, *La volonté* 177). The forms of its implementation are not only limited to wars and death sentences, but also extend to a higher level, where the mechanisms of power exert their influence on the biological architecture of the body. Even in the case of China, the use of such "*bio-pouvoir*" (biopower) (Foucault, *La volonté* 184) to control the population has been seen as an essential economic measure for the development of the country. Yet, there is a fundamental difference between what has often happened in Western history and the social picture provided by Ma Jian. Indirect control over migrants' reproduction is nothing new, and has been implemented in the past in order to preserve the welfare of certain countries, as the United States has done to stem Hispanic immigration in California (Inda, "Biopower, Reproduction" 106). But the case of China is peculiar. It is not about a State claiming to protect its 'space' by warding off unwanted 'menaces' coming from outside, but about a government forbidding its own citizens to further 'occupy' the surface of the country, by in turn 'invading' the bodies of its own women.

[4] On the issue of biopolitics in Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma*, see David Der-wei Wang (2010) and Belinda Kong (2012).

The time span of *Yin zhi dao* is the nine years of the Kong family's flight. A feeling of displacement pervades every single page of the narration, in which Meili's body and those of other Chinese women occupy a central place. From the beginning of the novel, the woman experiences a controversial relationship with the reproductive system that defines not only her sex but her whole life. Meili's perpetual fear of violating state laws collides with the anxiety of not being able to fulfill her husband's expectations by giving him an heir. Such twofold pressure rouses contrasting feelings in the woman's mind, and an overall disdain towards the tyrannical state:

> 只要你褲襠裡還是個屄，走到哪兒都有人檢查，男人管陰道，政府管子宮，你鎖不住，鎖上了鑰匙也在他們手裡。當屄的就是這個命。(29)
> […] If you're unlucky enough to have been born with a cunt, you'll be monitored wherever you go. Men control our vaginas, the state controls our wombs. You can try to lock up your body, but the government still owns the key. That's just women's fate. (27)

This passage quotes the words of a woman from whom Meili seeks advice on how to escape her fate. It expresses the disenchantment with which the women in the novel face their lives, but also offers an important clue about their relationship with their own bodies. *Dang bi de* literally means "if you *are* a cunt," a nuance that could hardly have been maintained in the English translation. According to this woman, in the eyes of the government there is an absolute equivalence between the human being and the anatomic element that establishes her sex, which is exactly the principle behind the brutal practices narrated in the novel. Seen from this perspective, the body is not the 'first space' occupied by the subject, but the defining element of an individual conscience reduced to a minimum. Yet, the author carefully emphasizes Meili's different awareness of her physical form. The

relationship between the woman and her body is complex and controversial. Her physique is nothing less than her embodiment, yet nothing more than the first step of her biological fulfilment. The imbalance in the general consideration of the body, which elevates Meili's womb to the role of the main character in the novel, is caused by a biased logic fueled by the mind's perpetual gravitating around the most primitive animal instinct – a sort of biological synecdoche with devastating consequences. What triggers this distorted perception is the failure to recognize the body as an individual space. According to Merleau-Ponty, when we try to perceive the space of our own body, we are unable to situate it in terms of its position, as we would do with an ordinary object. The spatiality of our body is a 'situational spatiality' (*spatialité de situation*) (Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie* 116). Depending on what we are doing, we tend to stress a particular part of our body, which allows us to sense its occupation of the surrounding space and its motions.

In *Yin zhi dao*, Meili's repeated pregnancies create a vicious circle that leads the woman to constantly identify her uterus as her fundamental bodily space. Yet, this does not completely efface the boundary between the subject and his or her body, conceived as a space that, while necessary, remains 'other' to some extent. This is particularly clear in one of the most striking scenes of the novel: once Meili has found a peaceful place to give birth to her fourth baby, she penetrates her own vagina with a hand. She is determined to grasp a limb of the fetus, who has been inside her for five years, and to forcibly pull it out. As soon as she touches her 'dark channel,' she immediately experiences a feeling of estrangement towards this part of her body, which she perceives as not belonging to herself, but to men (Ma, 332). Her journey down the dark road thus becomes a psychedelic trip into her past that traces all the abuses she has suffered throughout her life back to the unquestionable power of the Communist party. Her secret garden becomes the gate of the party's headquarters, on which she is clearly forbidden to bang. With this metaphor,

Ma Jian explicitly overturns the equation between the subject and the body, drawing a clear line that separates Meili and her reproductive system.

The body is described by Ma Jian as a territory, a land that should belong to the subject but that is instead constantly invaded. Such violations are always committed by men and by the Chinese government, which claims total control over women's lives. The raw descriptions of forced insertions of IUDs (11), the brutal murder of her first illegal child (69-72), Kongzi's personal decision to secretly sell their third baby because it is a girl (169), and the violent rape by her boss (192-4) are only a few examples of the incessant abuses perpetrated against Meili's body/territory. Such cruel practices provoke contrasting feelings in the female protagonist, and despite her natural maternal instinct, she gradually develops an inner rebellion against reproduction. Due to the unbearable social pressure, she is consumed by the tension between a spontaneous inclination towards motherhood and a rational rejection of pregnancy. Every time she tries to regain control over her own womb, by secretly having an IUD inserted (94-5) or by considering the possibility of aborting her fourth baby (219-23), she fails miserably. Either the contraceptive fails to prevent her from falling pregnant again, or the abortive pill doesn't work. The result of such a seesaw of feelings for Meili is a strange awareness of being a stranger to her own body. Ma Jian pictures a woman who ends up being 'displaced' first of all in her own flesh and bones. After being robbed of her most private space, she feels as though she does not belong anywhere, not even in her own body, since there is no place which is not part of the land, and the whole land is controlled by the government. Consequently, instead of representing the material form of her individuality, the body becomes a spatial constraint for the spirit or, in Bergsonian terms, "a limit to the spirit's life" (Bergson, *Matière et mémoire* 199).

The twofold value of the body and the supernatural link to the spirit are the basis of the author's original view. After challenging

the narratological conventions by introducing a 'fourth-person narrator,' he widens the canonical three-dimensional space by inventing a parallel dimension – Meili's womb. By doing so, Ma Jian connects the discourse-space (Chatman, *Story and Discourse* 96) dedicated to the infant spirit with a story-space. Such passage enriches the whole novel, since Meili does not merely perceive the surrounding space in the usual way, namely in terms of height, breadth, and depth, taking her body as the center (Casey, *Getting back* 75). Rather, she is also able to separate herself from her 'inside space' inhabited by the fetus, which in each case represents a new incarnation of the infant spirit. Whereas Meili's body is a burden for her, for her baby it is a shield, the only safe space she is able to provide. At the end of her fourth and last pregnancy, the unborn child Kong Xingfu (Happiness) refuses to leave his mother's tranquil uterus and see the light of the dreadful world in which he is nothing but a crime, performing the ultimate act of resistance to the successful incarnation of the infant spirit (Codeluppi, "Inner and Outer" 5). According to Nicoletta Pesaro, the image of the wandering spirit is directly connected to Ma Jian's nomadic consciousness ("Between the Transnational" 123). Analogously, the impossibility for the spirit to come into the world can be regarded as the extreme consequence of a perennial displacement. After describing the conflict between the woman and her body, Ma Jian further refines his depiction of the relationship between the subject and space by showing the impossibility for a truly free spirit to be subject to physical constraints. Nevertheless, the author clearly illustrates that authentic freedom comes at a price, and that this price is life itself.

An Unmappable Journey

If we take a step back and look at *Yin zhi dao* from a more general perspective, we can see how the fabric of the novel is composed of a series of elements that can easily be ascribed to the experience of migration. The first element is the constant

incertitude about the destination of the journey. After Ma Jian left the P.R.C., more than thirty years ago, he moved from one country to another, occasionally going back to China, until he finally settled in the United Kingdom. This repeated change of scenery implies an underlying restlessness that is likely to characterize a migrant's first years abroad. Kongzi and Meili undergo a similar experience during their flight across China, leaving the village of Kong to chase the illusion of a free land where the unlawful fruit of their love can peacefully come into the world. The obligation to leave is made stronger by the feeling of decay emerging from Meili's view of the place that had become her home. The description of the tombs and the icy landscape surrounding them (Ma, 20-1) paints the picture of a motherland that steeped in death, from which the protagonist cannot but run away. This is not the first time Ma Jian deals with the theme of the journey in his works, but what makes *Yin zhi dao* unique is precisely the element of 'space.' Ma Jian wrote this novel in 2012, more than twenty years after his departure from China – years in which spatial distance from his homeland provided the kind of detachment that made him an 'intellectual nomad' (Kong S., "Ma Jian and Gao Xingjian" 128). From such a distant position, both intellectual and physical, the author looks back at China and puts himself in a fugitive's shoes, changing his perspective from that of a man who was able to leave to that of a woman who succumbs to her deadly motherland.

In his *Atlas of the European Novel*, Franco Moretti endorses the use of literary maps as a means to reveal the '*internal* logic of narrative' (5). My intention here is to retrace the experience of the migrant in Ma Jian's narration of the Kong family's desperate journey and, in particular, to search for significant details in the representation of escape. It is impossible to trace a precise map of Meili and Kongzi's journey, owing to the approximate description of their movements. Sanxia, Sand Island, and the village of Guai are only a few of the places mentioned in the novel and, as mere dots on its imaginary map, they seem to have

little value. Unlike Balzac's Paris or Dickens' London, Ma Jian's China is depicted as having only one spatial distinction: that between places where the authorities can find you and places where they cannot. Besides the urge to escape, the decision to take the road is triggered by another element that unites the Kong and other migrant families: the mirage of an ultimate heavenly destination where all problems will be solved. For Kongzi and Meili, this place is Heaven Township, a mecca for the family-planning fugitives, where rumors say no woman can ever get pregnant. To reach it, they take the most furtive path: the waters, *zou shuilu* (Ma, 20). The hazardous journey towards their dystopic paradise constitutes the perfect synthesis between human beings and the surrounding space. The wilderness further emphasizes the bodily dimension (Casey, *Getting Back* 259), and the natural context in which their journey takes place highlights the physical response to spatial alteration. The second element that I would include among those recalling the experience of the migrant is the feeling of inadequacy, which gnaws Meili throughout the whole journey. On the physical level, she is seasick and unable to swim, therefore she feels constantly out of place. On the emotional level, the feeling of 'non-belonging' is first of all caused by the fact that China is depicted as a forbidden place, even for its own citizens. The government's strict rules on migrant workers and residence permits (*hukou*) make urban space inaccessible to ordinary peasants, worsening Meili's situation and making her and her husband renegades in their own country.

> 「你周遊什麼名勝古蹟了，那些旅遊景點讚從未去看過，咱是躲計生，孔老二，你聽好了［…］。」(146)

> "Touring the country, you say? We're not tourists, we're fugitives, you idiot. […]" (151)

Since they are determined to win their own freedom, they decide to buy a boat and live on the waters, *zhu shuili*, becoming truly 'placeless.' The drifting of the boat calms the anxiety burning under Meili's skin (Ma, 51) and, like a placebo, gives her the illusion of relief from what is instead permanent trouble. This floating, a symbol of impermanence and of "modern social liquidity" (Pesaro, "Bambini negati"), provides Meili with a safe non-located space, which is, however, also the cradle of death. Although the first sight of the Yangtze reminds Kongzi of the greatness of Chinese culture and civilization (Ma, 35), they soon discover the macabre nature of those gloomy waters. Indeed, these rivers have the unique power of reuniting life and death, in a cycle that leads the human being back into the wilderness. The waters of China are a grave for many people and, particularly, for Meili's first aborted baby, Happiness. She and her husband lay him down and let him be swept away by the current (Ma, 78), which gradually swallows him up. Yet, it is on the same waters that, at the end of the novel, the woman feels finally ready to deliver her last baby. With the birth of the creature, "shiny as a green apple" (Ma, 334), her struggle comes to an end: placing the infant in her husband's hands, she slowly sinks into the filthy waters of the river. With her death, the infant spirit travels back to the family grave, ending his tormenting and unfulfilled samsara.

The link between man and nature is another key element in *Yin zhi dao*. In addition to being a denunciation of the one-child policy, the novel tackles the issue of the Chinese environmental crisis and for this reason it has been analyzed as an example of Chinese ecocriticism (Li and Liu, "Red China, Green Amnesia;" Berman, "Chinese Ecocriticism"). Ma Jian's straightforward condemnation draws the reader's attention towards the disastrous condition of the natural landscape in certain regions. Indeed, the novel is rich in graphic descriptions of Kongzi and Meili's journey across the polluted valleys and the tainted waters at the heart of a country that is turning into an economic giant. Polluted

rivers (Ma, 122) and "metallic" rain (135) shape the background of their voyage, until they finally reach Heaven Township – the 'paradise' of electronic pollution. By describing how Western countries exploit China as a colossal dump for their electronic waste, Ma Jian extends his accusation to a transnational level (Li and Liu, "Red China, Green Amnesia" 47), broadening the reader's critical horizon. Nevertheless, the author carefully keeps his focus on the body and on the subject's view of the surrounding space.

> 船流過橋時一片開闊湖面，沿湖的樓房倒影閃著光點，水如子宮般平靜。充滿化學味道的夜空，無論怎麼說，都讓美黎和老二感到被人從土地和空氣拋棄，滑入了地獄般的荒涼之都，如此可以踏實地住下，不用再漂浮地生活了。幸福便湧上了美黎的臉：「到了，找到了，她咳嗽了幾聲抱著老二的大腿，咱真的來到天堂鎮了［…］。」(209)

> Once they have sailed under the bridge a vast lake spreads out before them. Lights twinkle on buildings reflected around the margins. The water is as tranquil as a womb. As they breath the sulfurous stench, Meili and Kongzi feel they've been banished from the sky and the earth and have slipped into an underworld city, a peaceful heaven where they can safely settle down and put an end to their floating life. Meili's face glows with joy. She coughs into her sleeve and hugs Kongzi's thigh. 'We're in heaven at last – we've found it! […]. (222)

The sensory descriptions of Heaven Township suggest a distorted perception of what such place represents for Meili and her family. Merleau-Ponty states that, seen from the perspective of the perceiving body, a hallucination stands 'before' the actual world, and is a symptom that the body has lost its integration

with the system of appearances (*Phénoménologie* 391). Meili does not see the danger, she only sees the possibility of freedom. Her mind is clouded by her never-ending dislocation, and the hope of a barren happy ending affects her judgement, which is based on bodily perceptions more than on logical reasoning.

Besides the illusion of better living conditions, what characterizes Meili's journey is a constant yearning to return to her original home – the third feature that makes her experience ascribable to that of a migrant. The metaphorical call of her true home is not a loud cry, but rather a muffled lament. At the beginning, she is reluctant to leave and, even when she surrenders to the urge of escaping, she never stops looking back to her native soil, the Nuwa cave. She treasures her roots, to which she is determined to return (Ma, 55), and believes that holding fast to them is a duty no one should avoid. A symbol of fertility, the aura of the Nuwa cave follows her to such an extent that the place defines Meili as a human being. She is convinced that, due to its concentration of *Yin* forces, women from there are unlikely to produce sons (Ma, 116). A similar logic applies, *mutatis mutandis*, also to the babies, who are defined by the place where they are born because, according to the level of 'security,' it can determine their survival or their death. In Meili's view, places leave the inner stamp of destiny on the subject, and I would add that they exemplify the relativity of one's contentment. She was happier in her hometown because there she was a woman, with a role in society, and not merely a desperate fugitive. Nothing speaks 'displacement' more clearly than the longing to go back. Despite how inhospitable and cruel their village has become, the memory of that place guides Meili and Kongzi's frantic wandering. The instability of the flowing water of the rivers keeps the family alive, like an amniotic fluid ensuring a livable environment. But the image of the road stretching before their eyes like an umbilical cord (Ma, 144) reminds them that China is like a placenta from which there is no true escape. Unable to cut the cord that is no

longer providing any nutrition, Meili can never leave her prison, and the only way out is to let its waters swallow her.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to reconnect the displaced subjectivity of the migrant author to the displacement felt by his heroine, who finds herself fleeing from – and across – her own country. I have analyzed the dimension of space in two of its main codifications: the space of the body, which constitutes the embodiment of the subject, and the space of China, representing the context of an impossible escape.

Incertitude, inadequacy, and longing for home are the three main features through which Meili shows the migrant's displacement. Although she never really leaves her country, the feeling of having lost her right to live decently make her more alienated than any fugitive might ever be. The only space she feels she can rightfully occupy is that of her own body, which is nonetheless perceived in a peculiar way because of the key role of her womb. While the country tends to identify the woman with her uterus and to control its functions, Meili perceives her 'inner space' as a no-man's land that no one but the infant spirit can reach. Consequently, the authorities' physical violence is enhanced by the psychological shock provoked by the impossibility of belonging somewhere.

The sense of dislocation and detachment expressed in the novel is further emphasized by Ma Jian's narrative technique and language. The choice of introducing the external voice of the infant spirit splits the narrative perspective, creating a gap that evokes the distance from which the migrant author approaches the violent critique of his homeland. Finally, although I have not addressed the issue of translation and of the translatability of Ma Jian's works, it is worth pointing out that the migrant author's ultimate sign of displacement is represented by the impossibility of voicing this displacement in his own mother tongue while at the same time reaching a wide readership. In this sense, Meili's

feeling of estrangement towards her own homeland can be compared to Ma Jian's sense of *étrangeté* with regard to his language-less de-localization of Chinese migrant literature.

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