



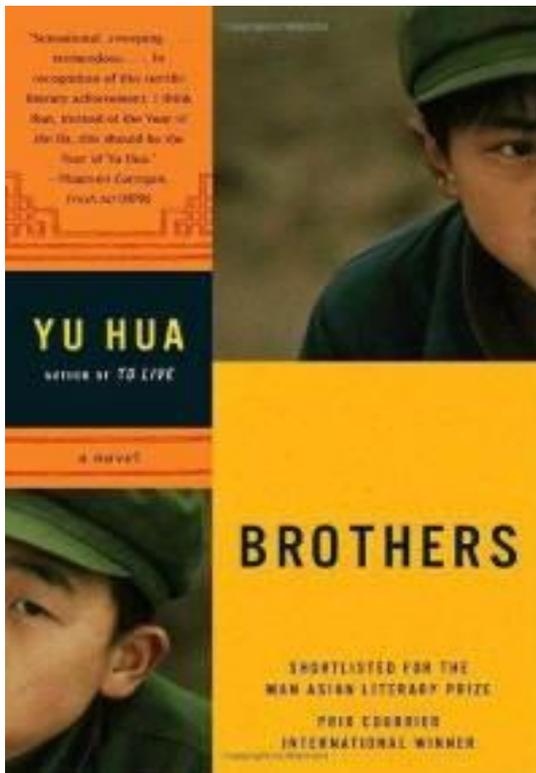
Brothers: A Novel

By Yu Hua

Trs. by Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas

Reviewed by Christopher Rea

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Yu, Hua. *Brothers: A Novel*. Trs. Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas. New York: Pantheon Books, 2009. 656 pp. ISBN: 978-0-307-38606-9 (paper)

"读书好啊，一天不读书，比一个月不拉屎还难受。" (II.75) [1]

"Reading is good, and going a day without reading is even more uncomfortable than going a month without taking a shit." (279)

In Yu Hua's latest and longest novel, *Brothers* (兄弟), our hero, Baldy Li, utters this affirmation in an effort to reinvent himself as a literary man and win over the town beauty, Lin Hong. Lin finds his sentiments uninspiring, so he tries out two less vulgar substitutes, to no avail. The line, however, gets straight not to the heart, perhaps, but to the bottom of what makes *Brothers* worth reading. This is a funny book, an assault on prudery and other social mores that is brash, surprising, and at times even revolting. Yet scatology is but one (albeit important) ingredient in a work of comparative brutality that juxtaposes the cruelty of China's revolutionary past with the injustices of its commercialized present. With *Brothers*, Yu Hua revives themes of death, violence, and family that permeate his earlier works. Readers will also find in abundance Yu Hua's famed black humor.

The object, duration, and even tone of his humor, however, is noticeably altered. To read this novel is to plunge into an ambitious, relentless, and uneven, yet often inspired, farce.

Brothers tells the story of step-brothers Baldy Li and Song Gang, inhabitants of a fictional Liu Town, from their scrappy childhood and inseparable friendship during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to their growing estrangement into adulthood from China's "Reform and Opening" period of the late 1970s up to the present. The book is divided into two parts, which were

published as separate books in China in 2005 and 2006. Part I, set during the Cultural Revolution, concerns events of the brothers' childhood and adolescence, including the re-marriage of Li's mom, Li Lan, to Song's dad, Song Fanping; their encounters with local bullies; and the successive deaths of Song Fanping and Li Lan, which leaves them orphaned.

The novel opens in the twenty-first century with the septuagenarian tycoon Baldy Li sitting on a gold-plated toilet seat and imagining himself carrying the ashes of his late brother into orbit as China's first space tourist. The true hook, however, appears soon thereafter when the narrative reverts to a formative moment in his adolescence in the 1960s. Like his late father before him, Baldy Li gets caught peeping at women's butts under the partition separating the men's and women's sections of a public toilet. Unlike his father, who falls into the shit trough and drowns,^[2] Baldy Li lives to tell the tale, and tell it he does. Every adult male in Liu Town surreptitiously approaches him to learn the secret of Lin Hong's *derrière*, which he sells to all comers for a standard price: a bowl of house-special noodles. The incident (after which we move back in time again to Baldy Li's birth) takes on outsized importance in the narrative, because this first in a series of victories over his fellow townsfolk immediately establishes Li as a winsome rascal. Subsequent (pre-)pubescent transgressions in Part I cement his larger-than-life persona as a mischievous and enterprising trickster, a persona that is further developed in Part II.

Part I also follows another arc in a pathetic key: the abject widowhood of Li's mother, Li Lan; her reluctant courtship with the virtuous widower Song Fanping; the brief happiness of their marriage and family; the climactic trauma of his death; and the denouement of Li Lan's own final decline. In this narrative arc, society's violence escalates from the petty bullying of the boys to a murder that robs a vulnerable family of its happiness.

Part II, which is three times the length of Part I, follows the brothers diverging paths and the disintegration of their relationship into adulthood. Once an underdog, Li transforms himself into the top dog in Liu Town through a series of entrepreneurial ventures, including running a charity factory, brokering Japanese "junk suits," wholesaling scrap metal, and eventually heading a diversified conglomerate that achieves an economic monopoly over Liu Town. Song Gang, who is as weak-willed, naive, and passive as Baldy Li is resourceful, worldly, and opportunistic, manages to marry Lin Hong despite his brother's opposition, but their blissful marriage and his livelihood are eventually crippled by the new economic order Baldy Li has imposed upon Liu Town. Subjected to an escalating series of emasculating indignities, Song eventually has his woman stolen by his brother while the itinerant swindler Wandering Zhou is dragging him around the country to serve as, among other things, a male virility pill hawker and boob-implant model. Soon after returning home, he kills himself.

Brothers is intriguing not least as an A-list writer's first novelistic response to the questions: What has become of China since the Cultural Revolution? How is a writer to respond to a society in which the absurd has become commonplace? While exploring the dynamics of human relations through such themes as kinship, loyalty, and betrayal, the novel also offers an outlandish portrayal of contemporary society run amuck. Rather than attempt to touch on all of its myriad subplots, I focus the rest of my comments on two of the novel's notable features: the trope of the trickster, personified by Baldy Li; and the manipulation of modal registers under the rubric of farce.

Farce is a compelling yet underestimated and often misunderstood creative mode. At its plainest, it is a one-note-samba of sarcastic abuse, the register most likely responsible for its generally low reputation as disconnected episodes of pointless buffoonery or laughter for laughter's sake. (Chinese terms for farce, often used in a pejorative sense, include 插科打诨, 笑剧, 闹剧, 滑稽戏.) As scholars have been at pains to point out, however, farce may pursue a variety of agendas, not least making its audience complicit in its transgression or suspension of moral norms.^[3] Further, farcical registers may be loud or subliminal, even imperceptible. Works as different as Nabokov's *Lolita* and Lao She's *Camel Xiangzi*, for instance, have been read as works of both realism and farce.^[4] A key distinction between farce and comic modes based on "reality" (such as satire) is that the former creates its own fantasy world rather than attempts merely to represent a presumed "real world."

In *Brothers*, farce is primarily a mode of offence in the dual sense of seeking to offend the moral status quo, as the author defines it, and doing so aggressively—taking the offence, so to speak. This broad register is one of the easiest to recognize as farce because it bludgeons the reader/audience with outrageous conceits. The beauty contest of "virgins" with reconstructed hymens that opens in Chapter 63 is one of the novel's most obvious farcical sequences, but farce is also at work in the abjection of father and son Song, which I discuss below.

The novel's alternation between tragedy and farce has been one of its most difficult aspects for critics to reconcile. Yu Hua has likened writing the novel to composing a symphony in which passages of Wagnerian bombast push the audience to the brink before abruptly shifting to a single, sublime note of Bach,^[5] and the musical metaphor seems apt to describe the novel's repeated tonal shifts. The death of Song Fanping in Part I is one such example. Having suffered beatings, public humiliation, and incarceration for being a "landlord," the estimable man is finally beaten to death on the street, where his disfigured corpse is left for the better part of a day. When Baldy Li and Song Gang arrive and recognize the body by its clothes, they are mocked by bystanders for asking "Is that my father?" Eventually the kind-hearted vendor, Mama Su, confirms to the distraught children that it is indeed Song Fanping and persuades a man to transport his corpse home on a borrowed cart. (The man is mocked and assaulted by gawkers en route.) Li Lan, devastated, is too poor to afford a big enough coffin, so the men from the coffin shop settle on this solution:

From the outside room the man in charge yelled, "Let's start smashing!" Li Lan's body jerked as if she were being electrocuted, and Baldy Li and Song Gang's bodies jolted in response. By this time a crowd had gathered outside the house, including neighbors and passersby, as well as others attracted by the commotion. A mass of them crowded the door, and a few even tumbled into the house. They excitedly discussed how the men from the coffin shop were shattering Song Fanping's knees. Li Lan and the children hadn't realized how they were going to smash his knees, but now they heard them talking about bricks, which then shattered, and how they used the back of a cleaver. There was so much din outside that they couldn't make out clearly what everyone was saying. They could only hear people whooping and hollering, as well as the sounds of smashing, dull thuds, and occasional sharp snaps—that was the sound of bone crunching. (149 / I.175-176)

This farce revisits the post-mortem indignities suffered by Shangang, the executed brother in Yu Hua's early story, "One Kind of Reality" (现实一种). For Yu Hua, death is never the fall of the curtain but rather the overture to new brutal excesses.

Here, though, the murder of Song Fanping and the abuse of his corpse highlight a unique feature of the novel: its collective "voice." The third-person narrator who speaks of "our Liu Town" does not represent a single, collective voice of the fictional locale; rather, it is societal heteroglossia, a premise for the dramatic shifts in narratorial tone and perspective. Using this device, Yu Hua stages countless "Weizhuang moments" in which the people of Liu Town—like the townsfolk who tormented and were bullied by Ah Q—revel in their own passivity and spectatorial blood lust. These reenactments underscore both the power of Lu Xun's staging and the intractability, in Yu Hua's mind, of a moral flaw of his countrymen.

Yu Hua modulates his farce with elements of realism, parody, and tragedy by means of a variety of devices. One of these is the figure of the trickster, Baldy Li. Li is both a suffering scapegoat of and a triumphant victor over societal forces. Bullied as a youth, as an adult he succeeds in maximizing the hedonistic excesses afforded by society but ends up isolating himself in the process. Critics have picked up on this ambivalence, likening Li to both a "modern-day Ah Q" (现代阿 Q) and a "folk hero" (民间英雄) for being an opportunistic and self-defeating clown, as well as a self-made man of the people.^[6] Li is also a comic archetype of the cultural entrepreneur—the wheeling-dealing, market-making man of his age—one resonant not just in contemporary China, but with historical tropes dating back to the Republican era.^[7]

Baldy Li is primarily to thank for *Brothers* being Yu Hua's most epigrammatic work to date. A brief sampling:

"In an hour I will spread my wings like a great roc and soar away!" (324)

"I won't take a single needle or thread from the masses." (391)

"When it comes to history, truth will always win out." (457)

Though Baldy Li has an individual personality and at times appears in "realistic" scenarios, his mouthing of these set phrases keeps the reader's sense of reality askew, again and again transforming profound and lofty sentiments into mechanical and reflexive utterances. The trickster's speech transforms reality into parody, and then into farce by sheer weight of repetition.

Another modulating device—one of the novel's best inventions, in my opinion—is the Greek chorus of fools, bullies, blind men, and con men who trail Baldy Li from an age of revolutionary excess into an age in which opportunism and media spectacle rule the day. First to appear is the Tweedledum and Tweedledee pair of Writer Liu and Poet Zhao who magnify each other's high-art pretensions and gang up on the young Li (who eventually divides and conquers them). They are later joined by Blacksmith Tong, Popsicle Wang, Yanker Yu, and Baldy Li's "fourteen loyal minions" at the Good Works Factory. Besides acting as a sounding board for Baldy Li's pronouncements, these supporting characters also provide structure and continuity to a lengthy and picaresque work through their predictable self-repetition and their mimicry. While Baldy Li becomes Director Li, Scraps Li, and so on, Writer Liu (aka Success Liu) is also reincarnated as PR Liu, Deputy Liu, and CEO Liu (C Liu for short), and Blacksmith Tong and his fellow

investors in Li's enterprises are transformed into VPs and shareholders. This replication projects what might have been simply a parodic, tongue-in-cheek biography of one "successful individual" (成功人士) into a more generalized societal narrative arc. Nowadays, even the most passive and witless person cannot help but become an entrepreneur.

Brothers is a symphony of many movements, and the novel shifts registers (to both comic and tragic effect) so often that the endless oscillation between the hilarious, the malicious, the tragic, and the improbable becomes a type of continuity itself—history as an emotional rollercoaster. In the latter chapters leading up to the beauty pageant, the narrative passage of time accelerates to convey a growing sense of the surreal. Yu Hua's farce is as much about emotional intensification as it is about narrative movement. This partly explains why the novel is, as the translators note, "often deliberately repetitive" (viii).

Earlier reviewers have nevertheless tended to favor Part I, which contains a tight package of comedy, pathos, and violence in a familiar Cultural Revolution setting. Part II has attracted moral objections from readers offended by its scatology, sex, misogyny, and general irreverence. Some readers less susceptible to the author's baiting have been offended by the perceived self-indulgence of Part II, in which the narrative sometimes seems geared mostly to enumerating contemporary societal ills. The inventory approach is well suited to installment fiction—think Wu Jianren's *Strange Events Eyewitnessed Over Twenty Years* 二十年目睹之怪现状—in which discrete episodes may be enjoyed in small doses, and *Brothers* is full of many triumphant set pieces. For a reader accustomed to the linguistic and structural economy of Yu Hua's earlier novels, however, *Brothers* may appear to lack restraint.

Is it paradoxical to demand restraint of a work whose underlying mode is excess? In trying to explain the bagginess of Part II, Chen Sihe, among other critics, has dubbed *Brothers* "carnavalesque"[\[8\]](#)—an interpretation that Yu Hua himself has praised as most nearly approximating the novel's agenda. And indeed, one can tick off a list of Rabelaisian elements, including scatology, sex, a parodic and profane linguistic stew, and an air of merry effervescence. The sacred cows may be different than those of the French Renaissance, but the rhetoric of excess and theme of universal degradation are similar.

What the carnivalesque paradigm cannot explain away is the heavy-handed juxtapositions, which to me is the novel's main flaw. This is partly a structural issue: the contrasting trajectories of Baldy Li and Song Gang (echoed to a degree by the ascendant Writer Liu and abjected Poet Zhao) are simply too stark, and the dualistic narrative framework (two eras, two brothers, life and death, exultation and despair, revolution and commercialization, virginity and licentiousness, etc.) leads Yu Hua toward pat morals—witness the "nice guys finish last" lesson of Song Gang's decline. The buffoonish Greek chorus is especially welcome in this respect because it breaks the dualistic structure and because its members' predictably reflexive antics keep bathos at bay. But heavy-handedness is occasionally a matter of narration too, as, for example, in Chapter 74. As Baldy Li and Lin Hong embark on their final, epic bout of sex (during which Baldy Li straps on a miner's headlamp to inspect Lin's fake hymen), Song Gang eats his last meal of "straw-embedded buns" before walking to the train tracks to commit suicide. The narrator remarks:

Thus was life: Someone who was walking toward death might linger over the setting sun's glorious rays, while two others who were hedonistically pursuing pleasure might be completely oblivious to the beauty of the sunset. (603)

The didactic impulse behind such mawkish moments tips the farceur's hand. The effect is patronizing, but more to the point it is unnecessary, since the contrast is clear enough. Insofar as broad farce paints in bright colors and takes reductionism as its stock in trade, *Brothers* is a satisfying romp whose iterative mode continually refreshes its comic muse. The novel truly offends only when it switches from the farcical mode of offense to defensive moral apologia—moments at which the sound we hear is neither Wagner nor Bach but Muzak.

The English version of *Brothers* was a joint effort by two translators, each of whom translated one book (Chow, Part I; Rojas, Part II) and then revised the other's work. On the whole, this division of labor has resulted in a consistent narrative voice and style between the two parts. The translators have also made a good strategic decision in italicizing idioms, proverbs, literary allusions, and other set phrases,^[9] which collectively play a key role in the novel's strategy of linguistic misuse and abuse. Each truism is held up for ridicule, either applied in an incongruous setting, as when Song Gang acts as "military advisor" to Baldy Li and tells him to pursue Lin Hong by *penetrating behind enemy lines* (250), or voiced by a buffoon, as when Poet Zhao sighs that by letting his girlfriend coerce him into marriage Writer Liu has become a case of a *single misstep leading to regret of a thousand ages* (14). (The townsfolk retort that "He bedded her a hundred times, so at the very least that would make it a hundred missteps.") The numerous names, slogans, and titles are also generally as vivid in English as the original Chinese. "Yanker Yu," for instance, is an inspired rendering of Yu Baya 余拔牙, the double-Y nicely substituting for the double-A alliteration in Mandarin.

This reader's only quibble with an otherwise splendid translation is that occasional lines of dialogue could have benefitted from a more colloquial rendering. Baldy Li's pronouncements, for example, are generally translated in formal diction, in keeping with the staginess of Yu Hua's farce. The tone of deliberate artifice could still be attained (and Li's newfound enthusiasm for reading conveyed with more punch), however, if the line cited at the beginning of this review were rendered as: "Reading's great! Going a day without reading's even more uncomfortable than going a month without taking a dump." To take just one other example, the punch line of Chapter 2—Baldy Li's reproach to Poet Zhao for having arrived at the public toilet too early and preventing him from seeing all of Lin Hong's nether regions—might have been shortened as follows (after the original and Rojas's and Chow's translation):

"十分钟?"李光头低声叫道,"你这王八蛋晚进来十秒钟都成了。"(I.25)

"Ten minutes?" Baldy Li grumbled. "If you had arrived ten seconds later, even that would have been enough, you bastard." (23)

"Ten minutes?" Baldy Li grumbled. "Ten seconds later would have been enough, you son-of-a-bitch."

Farce is by no means an inevitable response to the absurdity or surrealism of reality, no matter what stage of capitalism or (post-)modernity one believes China to currently inhabit. Indeed, Yu

Hua's most recent book, *China in Ten Words* 十個詞彙裡的中國 (Rye Field, 2010), takes a more expository approach to many of the same issues broached in *Brothers* through a combination of autobiography, theory, etymology, and other narrative styles.

While it is beyond the scope of this review to situate *Brothers* within the rich genealogy of modern Chinese farce, it is easy to find within its pages echoes of Wu Jianren, Li Boyuan, Chen Baichen, and Lao She, as well as points of comparison with contemporaries such as Wang Shuo, Yan Lianke, and Mo Yan. Baldy Li, for instance, might be read as a more universalized reincarnation of Wang's entrepreneurial hooligans, who were so tied to their Beijing milieu; Yan's retribution tale *Dream of Ding Village*, meanwhile, is a carnival of death in a different key, created and exploited by a ruthless entrepreneur.^[10] Mo Yan's *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* bursts with hilarious farcical episodes voiced by his animal narrators.^[11] It is worth asking why farce has so appealed to Yu Hua's generation of writers, as well as how they have brought it to bear on fictional works set during the Cultural Revolution versus those set after the Cultural Revolution. Given how many of them have represented both periods as eras of frenzied violence—one physical, one economic—to what extent does the past, which can at least be reimagined with some affection, hold more appeal to them than the vulgar trappings of contemporary society? Whatever the answer, *Brothers* is a rich and complex work that is sure to be recognized as a landmark in the history of modern Chinese literary farce.

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Notes:

[1] Chinese page numbers cited are from the Shanghai wenyi editions, 2005 (I), 2006 (II).

[2] Patriarch privy deaths also occur in Yu Hua's earlier fiction, notably the grandfather figures in "The Death of a Landlord" (一个地主的死; 1992) and *To Live* (活着; 1992).

[3] See especially: Edith Kern, *The Absolute Comic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); and Jessica Milner Davis, *Farce* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

[4] See Kern, *The Absolute Comic*, pp. 87-102 on *Lolita* as farce, and passim on the relationship between farce and tragedy, which I discuss further below. On *Camel Xiangzi* as a farce, see: David Wang, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), ch. 4: "Melancholy Laughter: Farce and Melodrama in Lao She's Fiction."

[5] Yu Hua, "China's Vast Disparities: A Self-Portrait" (巨大差距的自画像). Fourth Annual Yip So Man Wat Memorial Lecture, The University of British Columbia (Feb. 25, 2009). Subsequent references to Yu Hua's comments about *Brothers* refer to those made at this event and during personal interviews during his Vancouver visit. For another potential example of this modal shift, see the passages surrounding Song Gang's death at the end of Chapter 73.

[6] See: 陈思和，〈评《兄弟》〉.Reposted on:
www.yuedu.org/books/%E5%85%84%E5%BC%9F/10528.

[7] See, for example, my article about the Republican cultural entrepreneur and comic personality Xu Zhuodai 徐卓呆 (1880-1958) in *MCLC* 20:2. Abstract:
<http://mclc.osu.edu/jou/abstracts/rea.htm>.

[8] See: 陈思和〈我对《兄弟》的解读〉《文艺争鸣》第二期（2007年）. Reposted on:
www.douban.com/group/topic/17345823/. For more on the reception of *Brothers* within China, see: Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg. "Multiple Temporalities in the Literary Identity Space of Post-socialist China: A Discussion of Yu Hua's Novel *Brothers* and Its Reception," in Jens Damm and Andreas Steen, eds., *Postmodern China* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

[9] See, for example, pp. 14, 24-25, 250, 256, 269, 279, 280, 289, 431, 530.

[10] Ding Hui, the village's "bloodhead" and the narrator's father, is something of an unrepentantly evil Baldy Li. See, for instance, their contrasting entrepreneurial responses to death: Ding Hui's "discount" sale of ornate coffins to the AIDS victims he is responsible for infecting; and the jerry-rigged "exclusive-use cart" Baldy Li "filially" procures and assembles for Li Lan to ride on to Song Fanping's grave.

[11] See, for instance, the short-lived love affair between donkeys Naonao and Huahua: Mo Yan. *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out: A Novel*. Tr. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2008), pp. 59-60.

<http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/pubs/reviews/rea.htm>