The avant-garde in contemporary Chinese fiction is often seen as a phenomenon that belongs exclusively to the 1980s. Radical narrative experiments by Can Xue 殘雪 (1953), Ma Yuan 馬原 (1953), Yu Hua 余華 (1960) and others are presented as having come out of nowhere and having led to nothing. By the 1990s, most if not all avant-garde authors supposedly turned away from extreme experimentalism and instead started producing work that was more accessible and more marketable, or simply stopped writing. This in itself is remarkable. Most theories of the avant-garde postulate that its programs or techniques will be gradually assimilated by the establishment, after which they cease to be avant-garde. In the case of this particular avant-garde, the opposite seems to have happened: the authors previously belonging to the avant-garde voluntarily adopted establishment techniques, thus normalizing their own work, rather than waiting for it to be normalized. For this reason, as well as for non-literary reasons such as the ideological inclination of many critics to view the political events of 1989 as the end of an era of cultural liberalism, contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction is frozen in time and rarely if ever discussed on the basis of texts selected from a later decade.¹

¹ The use of narrow period terms (“the High Tang,” “the late Qing,” “the May Fourth,” “the 1980s,” “the Fifth Generation,” etc.) is pervasive in the study of Chinese culture and often results in the neglect of larger trends and continuities. Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft’s A Guide to Chinese Literature (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1997) is one of few textbooks attempting a different form of periodization, based on the material context of literary production: the invention of paper, the spread of book printing and the introduction of Western printing methods. For a further discussion of periodization and the historiography of modern Chinese literature, see also my “Wenxue shi duandai yu zhishi shengchan: lun ‘Wu si wenxue’” 文學史斷代與知識生産:論“五四文學” (The Periodization of Literary History and the Production of Knowledge: On “May Fourth Literature”), Wenhua yu shixue 6 (2008): 109–120.
This paper focuses on a lesser-known member of the avant-garde, the Shanghai-based author Chen Cun 陳村, and his writing career from 1979 to the present. In looking at some examples of Chen Cun’s work and literary activities, my aim is to show the various ways in which he has attempted to uphold the avant-garde spirit beyond its supposed heyday in the 1980s. In this paper, I define this spirit as a writer’s desire to engage in experiments that challenge, shock or deny literary convention. This is a more intrinsic definition than the one I have used in my research on the Republican period, where the avant-garde spirit is to be found in the manifestoes and activities of small groups running their own literary journals, openly challenging and attacking more established literary styles or figures. In the context of the 1980s, such an avant-garde could not have existed in China. Many works usually considered to belong to the 1980s avant-garde were published with establishment approval in widely distributed major literary journals. In other words, these works and their authors were already “established” when they first appeared in print. They were therefore not avant-garde in the wider sense but only in a narrow textual sense. At the same time, I do hope to convey a sense of the more fundamental—i.e. not merely textual—avant-garde potential of web literature (wangluo wenxue 網絡文學) as practiced by people like Chen Cun in China today. In other words, this paper suggests that a real avant-garde in the wider sense may only have developed in the PRC in recent years.

CHEN CUN

Chen Cun is the pen-name of Yang Yihua 楊遺華, born in Shanghai in 1954.² Like many of his generation he was sent to the countryside (in his case in Anhui) during the Cultural Revolution. He returned to Shanghai in 1975 for health reasons, suffering from a progressive rheumatic disease. The fact that he walks with crutches and is unable to stand upright is mentioned in virtually every article I have read about

² Biographical information about Chen Cun taken from various online articles and interviews. I found the most useful information in Guyun 孤雲, “Chen Cun: tangzhe du shu qi le wu qiong” 陳村: 躺著讀書其樂無窮 (Chen Cun: Lying Down to Read Gives Endless Pleasure), http://blog.tianya.cn/blogger/post_show.asp?idWriter=0&Key=0&BlogID=102&PostID=2889814 (accessed 5 September 2008; also available in the DACHS Leiden online citation repository to the present volume, http://leiden.dachs-archive.org/citrep/vancrevel_tan_hockx_2009/).