

Writing History on the Body: Contingency, Rumor, and Realism in Feng Tang's *Tianxia luan*

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ENG Abstrac: This article reads Feng Tang's *Tianxia luan* (2012) as a radical displacement of historical fiction in which sovereignty is no longer grounded in moral legitimacy or narrative causality, but in the negative inscription of power on the body. It argues that mutilation, loss, and corporeal deprivation function not as thematic motifs but as structuring operators of both political authority and narrative intelligibility. By foregrounding rumor, bureaucratic euphemism, and archival residues, the text replaces explanation with procedural opacity and fragmentation, thereby exposing the contingent conditions of historical "truth." This epistemic instability extends to temporality itself: history is no longer organized by continuity but by irreversible gaps and belated effects. *Tianxia luan* thus articulates a poetics of contingency in which bodies, archives, and temporal disjunctions jointly produce historical experience.

Keywords: Contemporary Chinese literature, Feng Tang, *Tianxia luan*, Poetics of Contingency, Narrative Temporality.

1. Toward a Corporeal Counter-Historiography

Published in 2012, *Tianxia luan* 天下卵 (which we could translate as *Imperial Testicles*) is the opening story of a homonymous collection¹ that brings together eight narratives set in different historical periods and united by a sustained exploration of power, corporeality, and transgression. In *Tianxia luan*, political power is not grounded in moral authority, dynastic legitimacy, or historical necessity, but in mutilation, loss, and bodily negation. The narrative unfolds in a world where access to sovereignty passes through castration, where the most effective political agents are deprived bodies, and where history is not stabilized by causal explanation but circulates in the form of rumors, bureaucratic euphemisms, and material residues. From its very first pages, the text displaces the traditional coordinates of historical fiction: instead of exemplary actions, it foregrounds physiological processes; instead of teleological progression, it stages a sequence of irreversible temporal gaps; instead of authoritative narration, it constructs an archive of fragments, traces, and procedural formulas.

This article argues that *Tianxia luan* should be read as a radical reconfiguration of historical fiction in which sovereignty is conceived as a form of embodied deprivation and history itself becomes a problem of narrative authority and temporal ethics. By focusing on the figures of the doctor, the castrator, and the emperor, it shows how Feng Tang transforms the body into a primary site of political inscription and turns rumor and archival opacity into structural principles of historical experience. The result is not simply a grotesque allegory of power, but a narrative experiment that exposes how truth, responsibility, and agency are produced—and foreclosed—by the material and temporal conditions of storytelling itself.

It is not accidental that such a project emerges from the work of Feng Tang 冯唐 (b. 1971; pseudonym of Zhang Haipeng 张海鹏), one of the most distinctive and controversial voices in contemporary Chinese literature. Although commonly associated with the so-called Post-70s Generation (*qiling hou* 七零后),² a cohort about which Li Jingze 李敬泽 has remarked that "for the 'people of the Seventies' history has entirely

¹ Four stories from the collection have been selected and translated into Italian by the author of this article. See Feng Tang 2020. To date, this remains the only translation of the collection into a foreign language.

² See Zhou Xuehua 周雪花 2008, 67-69.

withdrawn; what we witness is a non-historical growth in the ‘present continuous’ (历史在‘70年代人’那里全面隐退，我们看到的是‘现在进行时’的非历史性的成长),³ Feng Tang occupies a markedly eccentric position within this generational constellation. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he has treated history, from the very beginning of his literary career, as a persistent and obsessively revisited problem rather than as a neutral background. This historical sensibility (*lishi gan* 历史感), however, does not initially take the form of a classical concern with origins or teleological coherence. In his early and middle-period fiction—including works later grouped under the label of the “Beijing Trilogy” (*Beijing san bu qu* 北京三部曲)—it designates instead a disturbed and stratified experience of time, in which bodily maturation, affective life, and the rhythms of social change intersect without converging into a stable narrative of development.⁴

Only after completing this cycle does Feng Tang explicitly identify time itself as the central problem of his writing. In the postface to *Beijing Beijing* 北京北京 (2007), he formulates this shift in programmatic terms, declaring his intention to “I will try to write about history, to enter the realm of fiction. I will write only about history: the knives and the fists of history, the pillows and the embroidered beds of history. About monsters, power, chaos, and the sacred; I will write even more brazenly about others, I will write about time” (...会试着写历史，进入虚构之境。只写历史，历史的刀和拳头，历史的枕头和绣花床。怪，力，乱，神，更放肆地写写别人，写写时间).⁵ *Tianxia luan* emerges precisely from this shift in horizon: it marks the passage from narratives still partly anchored in autobiographical experience to a more radically impersonal and speculative engagement with history, in which the problem of time is no longer thematic but structural.

Trained as a medical doctor and later active in corporate management before devoting himself fully to writing, Feng Tang brings to his literary practice a distinctive attentiveness to corporeality, vulnerability, and material process—an orientation that decisively shapes both his narrative ethics and his engagement with history. *Tianxia luan* is one of the texts in which this approach to history and historiography becomes particularly legible. The story is characterized by a striking stylistic hybridity, combining anatomical precision with ironic detachment and juxtaposing coarse vernacular, classical allusion, and historical pastiche. This polysemic register has generated polarized responses, frequently dismissed as vulgar excess yet equally praised as radically innovative.⁶

Feng himself explicitly situates his work within a classical historiographical lineage, invoking figures such as the great historian Sima Qian 司马迁 (c. 145–86 BCE) and the *Shiji* 史记, which he has repeatedly described as one of his three major literary models.⁷ Like Sima Qian, Feng dismantles moral hierarchies and replaces linear historiography with a fragmented, embodied vision of human experience. His realism appears deliberately excessive precisely because it operates as a form of counter-historiography, rewriting history from below through desire, corporeality, and irony.

This counter-historiographical impulse is inseparable from Feng Tang’s sustained attention to the body as a site of inscription. Across his fiction, corporeal processes—fluids, decay, mutilation, and transformation—function not as mere provocation but as instruments for interrogating power, authority, and historical legitimacy. Rooted in his medical training, this focus grounds a narrative ethics that privileges physical truth over moral abstraction and exposes sovereignty as a structure dependent on bodily regulation and loss. As Feng Tang himself has remarked, reflecting on the convergence of his professional trajectories, “life is the known, writing is the unknown” (生活是已知，写作是未知)⁸: writing, in this sense, becomes the space in which lived experience is estranged, reworked, and transformed into an instrument of inquiry rather than recognition.

Despite his popularity and cultural visibility, Feng Tang has long occupied an ambiguous position within institutional literary criticism. His refusal to align himself with established schools and his resistance to canonical domestication have rendered his work difficult to classify. As Li Jingze has noted, Feng Tang’s fictional world seems to resist both narrative identification and generic stabilization, appearing structurally refractory to adaptation or critical domestication.⁹ This ambivalence also characterizes the reception of *Tianxia luan*: the collection achieved remarkable commercial success—selling over 130,000 copies across three editions (2012, 2015, and the revised 2017 edition retitled *Anyang*)—while receiving remarkably little attention in academic literary criticism. This uneven reception must be read in conjunction with Feng Tang’s broader polemical stance within the literary field of those years, particularly his articulation of the so-called “Golden

³ Li Jingze 李敬泽 1998, 72.

⁴ Dong Xiaoxia 董晓霞 2010, 161–164.

⁵ Feng Tang 冯唐 2017, 150 (附录一：初版后记). Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

⁶ Often at the centre of heated controversy, Feng Tang 冯唐 has been harshly criticized both for his essay “How to Avoid Becoming a Greasy, Wretched Middle-Aged Man” (《如何避免成为一个油腻的中年猥琐男》, 2017), which popularized the term “greasy middle-aged man,” and for his highly disputed translation of Tagore’s *Stray Birds* (《飞鸟集》), which was withdrawn from the market in 2015 after intense public debate. At the same time, he has also received strong praise from leading intellectuals, most notably Li Jingze 李敬泽, whom Feng Tang frequently cites in interviews, as well as Wu Congju 仵丛巨 and Li Yinhe 李银河.

⁷ The other two are Zeng Guofan 曾国藩 (1811–1872), a Qing official and general, and Li Yu 李渔 (1611–1680), author of the late-imperial erotic novel *Rouputuan* 肉蒲团. See Feng Tang 冯唐, “Wo de rensheg san da ouxiang zhi yi jiu shi Sima Qian” 我的人生三大偶像之一就是司马迁 (One of the three great idols of my life is Sima Qian), available at <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/QdjQq7Ozoqk>.

⁸ https://china.cnr.cn/xwwgf/20150902/t20150902_519751733.shtml

⁹ “What we call a story is nothing more than the account of human beings, through countless trials and perilous turns, striving to take command of themselves or to hold the world together, whether they succeed or fail. Feng Tang’s world has no stories; indeed, Feng Tang’s world has not even characters.” (所谓故事，不外乎是人千难万险千回百转，力图主宰自己或hold住世界而成或不成的事。冯唐的世界无故事，冯唐的世界甚至无人物). See 于颖浩 2015, 30.

Standard” (*jinxian* 金线),¹⁰ an uncompromising aesthetic principle rejecting both commercial accommodation and institutional legitimation and often dismissed as an expression of aesthetic arrogance.

Such critical ambivalence has paradoxically contributed to his prominence within contemporary Chinese literary discourse, situating his writing in a liminal space where literary experimentation, corporeal knowledge, and historical consciousness intersect, and where the normative boundaries of historical fiction are persistently tested and displaced. It is therefore no coincidence that Feng Tang adopted as his pen name that of the Han-dynasty official remembered for his uncompromising frankness and his courage to confront imperial authority.¹¹ The name functions as a symbolic declaration: an assertion of intellectual defiance and moral candour that prefigures a literary practice committed to exposing the corporeal and temporal violence underlying historical power.

2. *Tianxia luan* and the “Zi bu yu Trilogy”

Tianxia luan, together with *Anyang* 安阳, the second story in the 2012 collection, constitutes the latter two components of what Feng Tang initially conceived as the “Zi bu yu Trilogy” (*Zi bu yu sanbuqu* 子不语三部曲). The trilogy was meant to open with the novel *Bu'er* 不二 (2011),¹² which therefore stands as its first instalment. Although the so-called “Zi bu yu Trilogy” was never published as a formally unified cycle, it can nonetheless be approached as a coherent conceptual project within Feng Tang’s oeuvre, organized less as a narrative sequence than as a constellation of conceptually and structurally interrelated texts.

The designation “Zi bu yu” (“What the Master Would Not Speak of”) alludes to a passage in the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 论语 7.21), in which Confucius is said to have refrained from discussing matters of disorder (*luan* 乱), violence and power (*li* 力), the strange (*guai* 怪), and the supernatural (*shen* 神). The title also invokes the Qing-dynasty writer Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1797), whose eponymous collection sought to recuperate precisely those marginal and heterodox themes excluded from Confucian orthodoxy. By adopting this title, Feng Tang would seem to inscribe his project within a lineage of dissenting literary traditions that foreground what official discourse seeks to bracket off or suppress. Read through this grid, the three components of the trilogy may be approached as differentiated engagements with the very categories the *Analects* excludes: *Tianxia luan* as a narrative of disorder (*luan*) and power (*li*), *Anyang* as an exploration of the strange (*guai*), and *Bu'er* as a text that reopens the question of the sacred and the supernatural (*shen*).

Each component of the trilogy is set at a different historical threshold and explores a specific regime of power. *Bu'er* is situated in the Tang dynasty and revolves around the contested succession between the Fifth and Sixth Patriarchs of Chan Buddhism; *Anyang*, set in the Shang dynasty, turns to the origins of Chinese civilization itself, reimagining them as the contingent and opaque outcome of a non-human encounter; *Tianxia luan*, unfolding in a fictionalized Liao context, focuses instead on the internal mechanics of political authority and on the bodily technologies through which it is sustained. Through this tripartite structure, the trilogy could be said to reconceptualize history not as a narrative of origins or progress, but as a series of critical junctures in which power, belief, and embodiment are continuously reconfigured. Within this constellation, *Tianxia luan* occupies a privileged position, functioning as the conceptual core of the project: the text in which the relation between sovereignty, corporeality, and historical conceptualization is articulated in its most concentrated and extreme form.

Set in Shangjing 上京, the ancient Khitan capital in present-day Inner Mongolia, during a deliberately undefined “Iron Age” (*tieqi shidai* 铁器时代), *Tianxia luan* merges historical reconstruction with postmodern distortion. Although no dynasty is explicitly named, the presence of the Khitan ruler Yelü Tianzhu 耶律天柱—a fictional descendant of the Yelü clan, founders of the Liao dynasty—anchors the narrative in what could be described as a warped and unstable reflection of Liao history. The court mirrors the bureaucratic structure of the Chinese imperial system and is populated by civil and military officials, concubines, and eunuchs whose influence reaches grotesque and hypertrophic proportions. Within this hybrid and anachronistically saturated historical framework unfolds a darkly ironic meditation on masculinity, genealogy, and corporeal power.

The narrative centres on Liu Fast Knife (Kuaidao Liu 快刀刘), a prosperous professional castrator who seeks to elevate his lineage by offering his pregnant concubine to the emperor. The child born from this arrangement, Miguli 迷骨离—biologically Liu’s son but officially acknowledged as the emperor’s heir—proves inept and cruel. When the emperor takes another concubine, Liu Fast Knife devises a more radical strategy: he has his firstborn son, Liu Jin 刘瑾, castrated and sent into the palace in order to block the production of a new heir. Mutilated at his father’s behest, Liu Jin gains access to the palace, enters the imperial medical service, and gradually rises through its ranks. The paradox governing this trajectory is formulated by the patriarch Liu Old Knife, who declares that “without testicles, one can do what men cannot” (没了卵袋, 做成了有卵袋的

¹⁰ Feng Tang 冯唐 2013, 82–84.

¹¹ The biography of Feng Tang appears in the *Shiji* under the title “Zhang Shizhi–Feng Tang liezhuan” 张释之冯唐列传 and constitutes the forty-second biography in the *Liezhuan* 列传 (Biographies) section. In Chinese popular culture, the name Feng Tang is commonly associated with a line by the Tang dynasty poet Wang Bo 王勃 (650–684?): “Feng Tang ages easily; Li Guang is hard to enoble” (冯唐易老, 李广难封), a phrase traditionally used to evoke frustrated talent.

¹² *Bu'er* followed a complex publication trajectory: after being rejected by several publishers in mainland China and Taiwan, it was eventually published in Hong Kong in 2011. Although commercially successful, it has since circulated in the PRC in a regulatory “grey zone,” subject to intermittent informal censorship (including partial character masking, temporary takedowns, and algorithmic suppression) without ever being officially banned.

人做不成的事情).¹³ Here, power is no longer grounded in virility or generative capacity, but seems instead to emerge precisely through their symbolic and material negation.

Within this logic, the body ceases to function as the site of sovereign potency and becomes instead the locus of political inscription. Castration is not presented as a punishment, but rather as the very condition of possibility through which Kuaidao Liu's desire for power becomes thinkable and operative. The eunuch thus materializes what may be termed a politics of deprivation, in which power is produced through the systematic negation of physical integrity.¹⁴ The emperor himself, increasingly debilitated and obsessed with his own corporeal decline, stands as a grotesque emblem of a political order founded upon bodily loss. Power, in this configuration, appears as a parasitic structure that feeds on the bodies it disciplines and exhausts.

Feng Tang's art of naming further intensifies the text's symbolic density. The eunuch Liu Jin evokes multiple historical referents: most prominently the infamous Ming-dynasty court eunuch Liu Jin 刘瑾 (1451–1510), but also, more obliquely, the childhood name of Sun Yaoting 孙耀庭,¹⁵ remembered as the last eunuch of the Qing court. Through this layered onomastic strategy, distinct and discontinuous historical moments collapse into a single narrative figure. The name thus functions as a temporal hinge, inviting the reader to reconstruct meaning through historical resonance rather than through linear causality.

The title *Tianxia luan* performs a similar operation of symbolic condensation. The term *tianxia* 天下 (“all under Heaven”) evokes the cosmological and moral totality of traditional political thought, while *luan* 卵, colloquially referring to the testicles, introduces a register of crude corporeality. The collision of these two semantic fields may be seen as enacting a deliberate desacralization: sovereignty is stripped of transcendence and re-exposed as a bodily condition grounded in vulnerability, mutilation, and loss. Castration thus becomes not a mere motif but a structural metaphor for political order itself.

This narrative strategy explicitly recalls, on the one hand, the historiographical model of Sima Qian's *Shiji*, where biographical writing functions as a mode of historical inquiry that sometimes is grounded in contradiction, fragmentation, and moral ambiguity.¹⁶ *Tianxia luan* may in this sense be read as a contemporary reactivation of Sima Qian's mode of writing: an imagined historical archive that grants narrative space to marginal figures—castrators, eunuchs, concubines, doctors—whose lives unfold at the unstable edges of political legitimacy. At the same time, the text also appears to draw on the legacy of late-imperial erotic fiction, in which sexuality may also serve as a privileged site for exposing political hypocrisy and moral contradiction.¹⁷ Through the convergence of these traditions, *Tianxia luan* constructs a narrative space in which history and corporeality become inseparable, and in which power appears as a fragile and self-consuming formation rather than as a stable and teleologically grounded structure.

From this perspective, Feng Tang's procedure might also be read, in a more tentative but perhaps productive sense, as a literary analogue to what Michel Foucault, in *L'archéologie du savoir*, defines as an “archaeological” mode of historical inquiry. Rather than reconstructing a continuous past or seeking foundational origins, *Tianxia luan* seems to organize history as a stratified field of discontinuities, thresholds, and discursive reconfigurations. It does not so much ask what power “is” in a given period, but rather under what conditions certain bodies, practices, and forms of sovereignty become thinkable, visible, and operable. In this sense, this short story might be said not so much to narrate history as to excavate it: staging a kind of literary archaeology of corporeal politics in which heterogeneous temporal layers, marginal figures, and incompatible regimes of power are brought into unstable and potentially productive co-presence.

3. Temporal Contingency and Narrative Ethics in *Tianxia luan*

For the writer, there is no distinction between past, present, and future.

Feng Tang 2020.¹⁸

If, as the previous section has suggested, *Tianxia luan* constructs power through corporeal deprivation and the systematic negation of bodily integrity, this logic ultimately culminates in a more radical displacement: the transformation of temporality itself into an ethical problem. From this perspective, it becomes particularly productive to read the story in light of Gary Saul Morson's distinction between “closed” narrative time—retrospectively organized by an ending—and the open temporality of lived experience, in which meaning remains suspended, provisional, and often irrevocably undecidable.¹⁹ Within this framework, *Tianxia luan* reveals that temporal openness is not merely a formal strategy but an ethical principle: the narrative

¹³ Feng Tang 2012, 9.

¹⁴ On the eunuch as a key figure in the articulation of power, sexuality, and bodily governance in late imperial and modern Chinese culture, see Howard Chiang 2018. For a classic historical study of eunuchism and its political structures, see Taisuke Mitamura 1970.

¹⁵ Sun Yaoting's childhood name was not only Liu Jin 留金, a homophone (though not a homograph) of Feng Tang's character, but, moreover, Sun Yaoting himself was castrated by his own father. For an English-language biography of Sun Yaoting, see Jia Yinghua 贾英华 2008.

¹⁶ On the narrative and structural complexity of the *Shiji*, see J. R. Allen 1981, 31–66. The strongly literary and narrative dimension of Sima Qian's historiographical writing had already been emphasized by Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), who famously praised the *Shiji* for its poetic and narrative power. See Lu Xun 鲁迅 2011, p. 366.

¹⁷ See Andrew H. Plaks 1987, ch. 1.

¹⁸ Feng Tang, promotional video for the Italian translation of *Tianxia luan*, 2020. Unpublished video recording, in the author's possession; cited from direct viewing.

¹⁹ Gary Saul Morson 1994, 2–14.

persistently withholds causal consolidation, disperses interpretive authority, and compels the reader to assume responsibility for provisional acts of sense-making.

From its opening gestures the text installs an explicitly anti-teleological horizon. Time is introduced not through historical anchoring but through an impersonal present: a world named only as “Iron Age,” a capital called Shangjing, and an environment rendered in bare material terms, as though narrative itself were being stripped of its explanatory privileges:

Iron Age [...] Blue sky, cloudless; yellow sand, no grass. [...] A beggar under the eaves spits onto the sand; dust scatters. In an instant, the phlegm is dried by the sun, emitting a faint hissing sound.

铁器时代。[...]碧蓝天，无云，黄沙地，没草。[...]房檐下的乞丐一口痰吐在沙地上，溅起尘土。痰在瞬间被阳光抽干，发出细细的嘶嘶的响动。²⁰

This radical presentism—matter before motive, sensation before causality—displaces narrative hierarchy. Meaning does not unfold teleologically but accumulates as residue. The world is not explained; it is exposed. The ethical demand placed on the reader is therefore not interpretive mastery but attentiveness to contingency.

A second axis of this temporal ethics emerges through rumor as an epistemic regime. Knowledge circulates not as truth but as hearsay, conjecture, and projection. The social space is structured by voices that speak without authorization and desire without certainty. Early on, a group of young eunuchs debate who is “most fortunate” in the empire:

The eunuch Helu put down the rabbit in his hands and rolled his eyes toward the sky, as if asking He Shi and He Ci, or perhaps asking Heaven itself: “Tell me—who do you think has it best in the world today?”

Eunuch He Shi said, “The Emperor, of course. He can sleep with whoever he wants—one a day, never the same in a month.”

Eunuch Helu, who had entered the palace earlier than the other two, said, “You call that sleeping? That’s breeding.”

Eunuch He Ci said, “I think General Bai Chezi of the Shiwei has it best.”

Eunuch He Shi said, “In that case, it’s still Kuaidao Liu who has it best. He’s got more money than he can spend, can buy whatever he wants.”

Eunuch Helu said, “But Kuaidao Liu is nothing at all—just a butcher. When he dies, he’ll be the same as us: a lump of stinking flesh.”

太监曷鲁放下手上的兔子，白眼向天，像是问曷石和曷刺，又像是问天：“你们说，当今世界上谁最爽？”[...]

太监曷石说：“皇上啊。想睡谁就睡谁，一天一个，一个月不重样。”

太监曷鲁是三个年轻太监中进宫时间最长的，说：“那也叫睡？那叫配种。”[...]

太监曷刺说：“我看白车子室韦大将军最爽。”[...]

太监曷石说：“这么说，还是快刀刘最爽。钱多得花不完，想买什么就买什么。”[...]

太监曷鲁说：“但是快刀刘什么都不是，就是一个屠夫。死了之后，和我们一样，就是一块臭肉。”²¹

Here, rumor operates as what Morson terms *sideshadowing*:²² each claim opens onto a competing evaluative universe, none of which ever achieves narrative sovereignty. Meaning thus proliferates laterally rather than progressing toward resolution, and the reader is compelled to inhabit contradiction rather than to overcome it.

The line that concludes the exchange—“but Kuaidao Liu is nothing at all—just a butcher”—quietly reframes the entire economy of desire. Without offering any explanation, and in a manner whose significance becomes fully legible only on a second reading, it anticipates Kuaidao Liu’s underlying motivation: the aspiration to elevate his social and ontological status through his position as the father of the man destined to become emperor. It is this logic that retrospectively renders intelligible the sale of his pregnant concubine to the emperor, the castration of his own son, and his obsessive pursuit of lineage. To be “a lump of stinking flesh” is to occupy the lowest ontological tier—fungible, unmarked, and disposable. Kuaidao Liu’s ambition, therefore, is not power per se, but ontological elevation: the transformation of bare flesh into titled substance. The tragedy lies in the fact that the son, Miguli, proves incapable of performing the symbolic labor required by such an ascent. The future for which bodies were sacrificed ultimately collapses under the weight of its own incoherence.

Temporal contingency also governs the novel’s treatment of foresight. Liu Old Knife’s claim that mastery of a craft enables one to foresee one’s own death—“when you reach the peak, you know when you will die” (任何一个行当，做到顶尖[...]自己什么时候死[...]基本是清楚的)²³—posits a form of knowledge grounded in embodied repetition rather than transcendence. Yet this foreknowledge does not grant control; it merely anticipates

²⁰ Feng Tang 2012, 7.

²¹ Feng Tang 2012, 10–11.

²² Gary Saul Morson, 117.

²³ Feng Tang 2012, 8.

loss. The proverb he imparts to his son—"To seek power, first be castrated" (想得势，先去势)²⁴—appears prophetic only retroactively. What seems like foresight is revealed, in narrative time, as a cruel misrecognition.

Mutilation becomes the condition of agency, yet this inversion never stabilizes into triumph. The ethical shock lies precisely in the gap between intention and outcome, between symbolic mastery and corporeal loss.

This logic reaches its most extreme articulation in the novel's obsessive attention to physiological process. Drinking, cosmetic application, ejaculation, and excretion are narrated with anatomical precision:

Wine—[...] absorbed into the bloodstream, flowing through the kidneys, seeping into the bladder, and discharged into the gutter.

Rouge and powder—[...] wiped from a man's hands and lips with a handkerchief, then tossed into the gutter.

Semen—[...] expelled from the body through the urethra, wiped away with a cloth, [...] and thrown into the gutter.

酒，[...]被吸收进血液，流淌过肾脏，渗透进膀胱，尿进阴沟。

脂粉，[...]一张帕子抹掉男人手上和嘴唇上污浊的脂粉，然后被丢进阴沟。

精液，[...]经尿道射出体外[被]一张帕子抹掉，[...]被丢进阴沟。²⁵

Such passages replace narrative progression with biological duration. Time is no longer measured by plot but by metabolism. Action leaves residue; nothing is redeemed or sublimated. The ethical force of these sequences lies in their refusal of symbolic transcendence: bodies do not signify; they persist.

The most devastating instance of temporal asymmetry occurs when Liu Jin awakens from anaesthesia to learn that he has been castrated while unconscious:

Kuaidao Liu said, "You've been asleep for two days and two nights."

Kuaidao Liu pressed his hands onto Liu Jin's shoulders. "You still have to lie there. You'll have to stay down for another twenty-eight days."

Liu Jin said, "Why?"

Kuaidao Liu said, "Because two days and two nights ago, I cut off your testicles."

快刀刘说：“你睡了两天两夜 [...]"

快刀刘按住刘瑾的双肩：“你还得躺着，你还要躺二十八天。”

刘瑾说：“为什么啊？”

快刀刘说：“因为两天两夜前，我切了你的卵。”²⁶

Consent here is structurally impossible. The violence resides not only in the act but in the temporal gap that nullifies agency altogether. Harm is accomplished in the interval where no subject can respond. In this sense, *Tianxia luan* advances a radical ethics of time: wrongdoing is defined less by intention than by temporal foreclosure.

Even imperial power succumbs to this logic. The emperor's sexual decline, rendered in grotesquely medical terms, reduces sovereignty to a function of bodily endurance. The therapeutic regimen that objectifies the consort as a mere "thing" (*wujian* 物件) momentarily restores potency, only to precipitate death days later. The subsequent reign of the prince—brief, violent, and meaningless—confirms the futility of temporal mastery. Authority here is not inherited or seized; it flickers, misfires, and expires.

The novel's final irony lies in its refusal to grant narrative compensation. The emperor dies. The heir dies. Liu Jin ascends. Yet no moral equilibrium is restored. What remains is a world governed by contingency, where power is an effect of timing rather than virtue, and meaning is perpetually deferred. In this sense, *Tianxia luan* radicalizes Morson's concept of *sideshadowing*. It does not merely juxtapose unrealized possibilities; it exposes temporality itself as an ethical problem. The novel offers no reconciliatory horizon, only a field of irreversible presents in which responsibility persists without redemption. Meaning, like power, survives only as a function of timing—and timing, finally, belongs to no one.

3. Realism beyond Realism: Truth, Contingency, and the Archive

When he wrote history, Sima Qian worked with the utmost reliability; he was concerned with what was true, and this is what sets him apart from ordinary writers—this is what moves me.

Feng Tang 2021²⁷

Feng Tang's realism does not aim to secure factual accuracy or historical transparency. Rather, it constructs a regime of truth grounded in multiplicity, contingency, and procedural opacity. Events are not stabilized through causal explanation but refracted through incompatible accounts, partial testimonies, and

²⁴ Feng Tang 2012, 9.

²⁵ Feng Tang 2012, 16-17.

²⁶ Feng Tang 2012, 30.

²⁷ Feng Tang, webinar for the University of Catania, [May, 11, 2021]. Unpublished video recording, in the author's possession; cited from direct viewing.

material residues. In this sense, realism functions not as representation but as exposure: it reveals how “truth” emerges from the friction between competing narrative frames rather than from their reconciliation.

This logic is particularly evident in the fate of the favoured consort, Consort Li (Li Fei 丽妃). Her death is never narrated as an event with a single, authoritative cause. Instead, it first appears as a material trace, stripped of narrative mediation: “*In the rear garden... a thin stream of bright red blood seeped out from beneath the closed gate; it quickly dried.*” (后花园。[...]鲜红的纤细的血水从后花园紧闭的院门流出来，很快，干了)。²⁸

The narrator offers no explicit explanation for the consort’s sudden death, although the traces of blood strongly suggest a violent end. At the same time, the narrative makes it clear that she has fallen victim to a plot and that, shortly before her death, the emperor was interrogating her on suspicion of adultery. Even so, the version that subsequently circulates among the ministers remains deliberately vague: rather than clarifying the cause, it envelops it in bureaucratic obscurity. What is offered is not an account, but a formula of administrative normalization—“Consort Li has died of illness” (丽妃病故了)。²⁹ The juxtaposition of these two registers—one sensory and implicit, the other institutional and declarative—does not resolve ambiguity but instead formalizes it. The violence of the act is neither openly denied nor explicitly acknowledged; it is translated into a form that is legible to power. Much as in Sima Qian’s *Shiji*, where contradictory testimonies are allowed to coexist without being synthesized,³⁰ Feng’s narrative preserves dissonance as a structural principle. Truth, here, is not a hidden kernel to be excavated, but the unstable coexistence of incompatible accounts.

This narrative logic finds a striking historical parallel in Ban Gu (班固 (32–92)’s critique of the *Shiji*.³¹ Ban Gu famously faulted Sima Qian for dispersing teachings across lineages, tolerating contradictions, privileging heterodox traditions, and allowing ethical judgments to deviate from orthodox norms. Read alongside *Tianxia luan*, this critique appears uncannily transferable: what Ban Gu condemned as historiographical failure—excess, inconsistency, and moral non-alignment—re-emerges in Feng Tang as a deliberate method. Feng’s writing is so deeply inspired by Sima Qian’s historiographical practice that Ban Gu’s objections seem to describe *Tianxia luan* as much as the *Shiji*: a mode of truth grounded not in coherence, but in accumulation and unresolved plurality.

A similar logic governs political decision-making. When confronted with strategic uncertainty, the emperor abdicates deliberation altogether and submits judgment to chance:

Yelü Tianzhu said, “Let me show you something new—dice. When you can’t figure things out, [...], throwing dice works best. Roll two dice together: if it’s more than six, you fight; if it’s less than six, you don’t.”

耶律天柱说：“给大家看个新玩意儿，骰子。想不明白的时候，[...]，扔骰子，最管用。两个骰子一起摇，大于六，就打，小于六，就不打。”³²

The gesture is comic, but its implications are severe. By converting decision into aleatory procedure, the sovereign transforms contingency into policy. The dice do not symbolize irrationality so much as they literalize it: governance becomes an algorithm of randomness. Authority persists not through reasoned judgment but through the performance of decisiveness. History advances not because decisions are justified, but because they are made.

This logic extends beyond the court into the story’s broader archival economy. Political memory is not preserved in annals or monuments but in fragments: severed organs, coded inventories, circulating rumours. The archive assembled by Liu Fast Knife exemplifies this perverse materialism:

“At first you asked for no money. You made sandalwood boxes and put the cocks and the balls inside [...] You began to found a superstition [...] You erased all the fingerprints from the red silk wrappings and pasted on numbers that only you knew [...] Whoever comes to redeem them pays by weight, at a price a hundred times that of gold.”

“你开始不要钱，做了檀木盒子，装了鸡巴和卵[...]你开始创立迷信[...]你消灭了所有红绸包里的指纹，贴上只有你知道的数字[...]谁来赎，按重量计价，百倍于黄金。”³³

Here, the archive does not preserve truth but manufactures it. Indexing, numbering, and secrecy replace evidence; the fetishized object becomes both proof and currency. The very mechanisms meant to guarantee authenticity—cataloguing, inscription, classification—render verification impossible. Knowledge survives only as circulation.

²⁸ Feng Tang 2012, 41–42.

²⁹ Feng Tang 2012, 42.

³⁰ See Allen, J. R. (1981). *An Introductory Study of Narrative Structure in the Shiji*, Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR), 3(1), pp. 31–66.

³¹ In the “Biography of Sima Qian,” Ban Gu criticizes Sima Qian for privileging narrative, anecdotal, or personal criteria over a properly ordered Confucian historical hierarchy: “[*Shi ji*’s] words about Qin and Han are very detailed. When it comes to citing the classics and selecting among their traditions, it divided and scattered [the teachings] of several schools. Many matters are neglected or sketchily discussed; sometimes it has contradictions” (其言秦汉，详矣。至于采经摭传，分散数家之事，甚多疏略，或有抵牾)。See Han Shu 62. 2737. The English translation is provided in Lei Yang 2016, 12.

³² Feng Tang 2012, 23.

³³ Feng Tang 2012, 10.

The same logic governs the story's communication networks. Messages travel by carrier pigeon, stripped to bare transmission: "A white-tailed carrier pigeon flew to Fast-Knife Liu's carp pond..." (一只白尾信鸽飞到快刀刘的金鱼池...)³⁴

Even large-scale institutional projects—the construction of the Eunuch Village or the Eunuchs' Cemetery—are reported through hearsay:

Three things happened, and all the eunuchs in the palace, great and small, were delighted.

First, Hechi was dragged out and executed. The money he had owed everyone was repaid in full, interest included. It was said that Liu "Fast Knife" had added some of his own money to make up the sum.

Second, a cluster of houses was built on a recently developed oasis outside the city. It was called the Eunuchs' Village. Eunuchs who left the palace after the age of fifty could move there. They would not have to work; they would be waited on, and all their needs—food, clothing, shelter, and daily expenses—would be provided free of charge. It was said that the Crown Prince, Miguli, had paid for it.

Third, a cemetery was opened in the hills outside the city, called the Eunuchs' Graveyard. All deceased eunuchs could be buried there. It was maintained by dedicated caretakers, cleaned regularly, and proper sacrifices were offered on schedule. Hechi became the first eunuch to be buried there. It was said that the National Preceptor, Liu Jin, had devoted to this Eunuchs' Graveyard all the wealth the emperor had bestowed upon him.

出了三件事，宫里的大小太监们都很高兴。第一件，曷刺被抓出来杀了，原来亏欠大家的银两，连利息都补上了。据说，快刀刘添了钱。第二件，在城外最近的一块绿洲建起了一片房子，叫中官村，太监过了五十岁出宫，都可以过去。无须劳作，有人伺候，衣食住行免费。据说，太子迷骨离出的钱。第三件，在城外山上开出来一块墓地，叫中官坟。死了的太监都可以安葬进去，有专人看护打扫，按时祭奠。曷刺成了第一个进去的太监。据说，国师刘瑾把皇帝赐给他的全部财宝都贴到了这个中官坟上。³⁵

The repeated formula "it was said that" (据说) installs rumor as the dominant epistemic mode. Credibility no longer derives from verification but from circulation itself. What matters is not whether something is true, but whether it travels.

In this sense, *Tianxia luan* articulates a realism of procedures rather than of facts. It exposes the mechanisms—archival, linguistic, bureaucratic—through which reality is produced, authenticated, and remembered. The novel's world is not opaque because it withholds information, but because it multiplies the forms through which information is made to appear. What emerges is an ethics of contingency: a vision of history in which meaning is always provisional, authority is performative, and truth survives only as residue.

4. Conclusion

This article has argued that *Tianxia luan* exceeds the boundaries of the grotesque historical tale and the provocative allegory of power, emerging as a systematic reconfiguration of what historical fiction can do and what it can mean. By following the intertwined logics of corporeal deprivation, temporal contingency, and archival opacity, Feng Tang constructs a narrative world in which sovereignty is grounded in the management, mutilation, and exhaustion of bodies rather than in legitimacy, causality, or transcendence; in which history no longer unfolds as a sequence of meaningful actions, but as a field of irreversible temporal gaps; and in which truth no longer appears as a stable referent, but as the unstable coexistence of incompatible accounts, procedures, and residues.

Seen from this perspective, the castrated body functions as the structural operator of the entire narrative economy, far more than a recurring motif. It names a political logic in which power is produced through loss rather than possession, through subtraction rather than accumulation, and in which agency is inseparable from irreversible corporeal damage. At the same time, this politics of the body is inseparable from a politics of time: the novel persistently stages situations in which action comes too early or too late, consent is structurally impossible, and responsibility survives only as a remainder after the fact. In *Tianxia luan*, contingency constitutes the very form of history.

The analysis of rumor, bureaucratic euphemism, and archival fetishism has shown that Feng Tang's realism lies in exposing the procedures through which something comes to count as reality, as fact, as history. The novel's world is opaque precisely because it multiplies and formalizes the channels through which information is produced, circulated, and neutralized. More importantly, *Tianxia luan* it stages, with radical clarity, the material and discursive conditions under which history is made thinkable at all.

What emerges from this reading is a poetics of contingency that displaces the very horizon of historical narration. Feng Tang offers neither a counter-history in the sense of a hidden truth to be recovered nor a postmodern game of relativism. He develops, instead, a rigorous and disturbing inquiry into the ethical, corporeal, and temporal costs of making history narratable. *Tianxia luan* thus forces us to rethink realism not as a regime of representation, but as a critical practice: one that does not reconcile, does not redeem, and does not close, but instead holds open the space in which bodies, power, and time remain irreducibly entangled.

What this reading ultimately suggests is that the value of Feng Tang's experiment—and, indeed the necessity of taking it seriously within contemporary Chinese literary studies—lies precisely in its refusal of

³⁴ Feng Tang 2012, 27.

³⁵ Feng Tang 2012, 37-38.

consolation. *Tianxia luan* shows that when history is written on the body, and when time itself becomes an ethical problem, narration can no longer promise meaning—only responsibility for what remains after meaning has collapsed.

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