

Irmay Schweiger

## From Representing Trauma to Traumatized Representation: Experiential and Reflective Modes of Narrating the Past

**Abstract** In contrast to history, which strives for a neutral and objective stance from which to narrate the past, literature can be thought of as multi-functional when it comes to traumatic history: as *healing*, in that it restores meaning where it has been destroyed; as *subversive*, in that it tells counter-histories of the master-narrative; as *complementary*, in that it integrates suppressed voices and painful experiences into the collective memory; or as *disturbing*, in that it narrates trauma as a persisting condition that continues into the present. This article looks into literary representations of trauma that make use of different narrative modes to reconstruct the past and to deal with collective trauma in 20th-century China. In order to understand the relationship between historical trauma and collective memory and to demonstrate the way in which memory relates to the past and to what extent memory shapes the collective identity of the present, the paper utilizes the concepts of communicative and cultural memory, as formulated by Jan and Aleida Assmann.

**Keywords** experiential and reflexive narratives, communicative and cultural memory, traumatic history, Zhang Yigong, Yu Hua

---

### Introduction

In view of environmental pollution, climate change, demographic explosion, shortages of resources and a growing economic and social imbalance, to name just a few current challenges, the make-believe inexhaustible “resource future” seems both to be depleted and to have lost its illuminating power. In people’s minds, the future is no longer the guarantor of a better life to come; progress, economic globalization and global development are no longer synonyms for a

---

Irmay Schweiger (✉)

Department of Asian, Middle Eastern and Turkish Studies, Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm, Kräftriket 4B, Sweden

E-mail: irmay.schweiger@orient.su.se

change for the better. The future seems to be neither a stable anchor nor the focus of people's hopes, desires and longings. Instead, it is the past that has taken over our imagination and is pushing forcefully into our consciousness. The heavy burden of the last century's violent history is still felt in the present. Even though we have left the 20th century, the 20th century has not yet left us; on the contrary, its historical burden remains with us.

Although these issues were earlier detected in the European context,<sup>1</sup> in China there are also increasing signs of social unrest, in the form of critical voices, intellectual discussions, and, above all, general disillusionment and disenchantment signaling that contemporary China is no longer exclusively driven by an unbroken ideology of progress.<sup>2</sup> Social problems, including the unequal distribution of wealth and rampant corruption, have exacerbated the sense of disillusionment. In addition, the discrepancy between the orthodoxy of an alleged socialist country and its *de facto* reality is commonly recognized. The negative effects of the economic globalization have pervaded each layer of society. These effects range from social injustice to environmental devastation, from spiritual homelessness to a general sense of non-belonging.

What criteria do we use to define an event as "traumatic?" An event is traumatic when the amount and degree of suffering it causes is incomparable and there is no way to comprehend or integrate this experience into one's own understanding of the world. It constitutes "too much" for the self to process. Such an event is meaningless; that is to say, no meaning can be bestowed on the event. But it is not only the unbearable degree of suffering. Collective traumas destroy what the collective involved used to regard as its common identity. Therefore, one would expect, collectives directly involved in traumatic experiences will feel forced to redefine their identity or to attempt to return to the identity they had before the event occurred by transforming and integrating the

---

<sup>1</sup> Aleida Assman in a public interview she gave at the Goethe-Institut Russland on the topic of "Zukunft der Erinnerung: Neue Herausforderungen und Perspektiven" (The Future of Memory: New Challenges and Perspectives) in 2011, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzFL1JqtjOY>, accessed February 2, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Obvious "symptoms" of this discontent include the development of the so-called "New Left" (with Wang Hui as one of its most provocative leaders, see his *China's New Order: Society, Politics and Economy in Transition*, 2003), and the peculiar revival of Maoism and the resurgence of leftist ideology (for further reading, see Willy Lam, "The Maoist Revival and the Conservative Turn in Chinese Politics," 5–15). For a general discussion of these issues, see, among other publications, Yang Dali L., "Economic Transformation and Its Political Discontents in China: Authoritarianism, Unequal Growth, and the Dilemmas of Political Development," 143–64. Apart from these publications, social media currently represents one of the clearest outlets for critical voices.

traumatic experience.<sup>3</sup>

There is no doubt that, during the 20th century, China experienced multiple horrific atrocities and catastrophes that can be characterized as traumatic. Obviously, traumatic events defy comprehension and cannot be overcome or integrated meaningfully within ordinary cognitive structures through simple recollection. However, they clearly call for conscious efforts at representation and narration.

How is the traumatic past in China dealt with, at the official level? Party history refers to the Great Leap Forward as a leftist mistake committed as a result of over-enthusiasm;<sup>4</sup> it is generally labeled as “a great tragedy with good intentions.”<sup>5</sup> The collective suffering and starvation, which mainly afflicted peasants, was excluded from the discourse—they were not accorded the status of victims. Basically, the same applies to the Cultural Revolution (CR). The *Resolution* of 1981 reads: “History has proven that the Cultural Revolution was erroneously launched by the leadership, was used by a counter-revolutionary group, and was an internal disturbance that brought severe suffering to the nation and to the people of all nationalities.”<sup>6</sup> Euphemistically called “the ten lost years,” the CR has been rationalized, and its history appears as a chain of basically meaningful events, albeit with minor stains here and there. State-sponsored CR memory projects—executed and supported by intellectuals and party cadres mainly in the late 1970s and 1980s—excluded the voices of ordinary people. However, whereas the *Resolution* recognizes that the CR “was responsible for the most severe setbacks and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state, and the people since the founding of the People’s Republic,” it is much less detailed when it comes to the Great Leap Forward, which is referred to

---

<sup>3</sup> In the European context, traumatic experiences as collective memory typically find a public form in monuments and rituals. The remembrance of collective traumatic experiences is ritualized in order to give people the opportunity to mourn the dead, to express their solidarity with those who lost their relatives or friends, to cherish their own survival or sometimes even to show respect to those who sacrificed their lives for a common cause. Traumatic events are also written into narratives, offering a chance to remind those who did not experience the trauma themselves of the concrete details of the events. Last, but not least, monuments and rituals are used to educate people and to (re)define an identity on the basis of the collective acknowledgement of the wrongs of the past.

<sup>4</sup> See “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China,” 1981.

<sup>5</sup> Bo Yibo, “Respect and Remembrance—Marking the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Founding of the CCP,” K26–36. For further information on Party Historiography and Post-Mao views on the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, see A. Joseph William “A Tragedy of Good Intentions: Post-Mao Views of the Great Leap Forward,” 419–57 and Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “Re-Imagining the Chinese Peasant: The Historiography on the Great Leap Forward,” 28–50.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. fn. 5.

vaguely as a range of “serious difficulties between 1959 and 1961 which caused serious losses to our country and people.”<sup>7</sup>

The overall classification of these historical events as “great tragedies of good intentions” clearly has two main functions. First, by integrating people’s stories into the official master narrative, people are given a general model and framework through which to discuss and process about their individual experiences. Dissonant voices, traumatic experiences, and stories of individual victimization are either excluded or presented on a very abstract level and made part of history only formally. Second, official historiography presents itself as a narrative of unrestrained development and progress, which supports the legitimacy of the Party and its leadership. The Party’s interpretive authority over history provides a retrospective and a prospective outlook that assesses and defines the past and, even more importantly, the future.

If we agree that historiography—which ideally strives for an objective stance from which to narrate the past—has failed to convey the meaning of the past in the present, we might almost naturally turn to literature as an alternative medium through which to convey the meaning of the past. In his book *The Monster that is History* (2004), David Der-wei Wang points out that “modern Chinese historiography has not sufficiently addressed the scale or the moral and psychological aftermath of China’s violence and pain, but that literature, particularly fiction, can be drawn on as a complementary *and* contesting discourse.”<sup>8</sup> Wang’s analysis implies that the numbers, statistics and facts of historical accounts are not as powerful as art, particularly literature, in bringing back individual lives and experiences from oblivion. The utterly hegemonic, highly selective, and outright amnesic nature of the Party’s master narrative has led to the composition of individual memoirs and a conscious choice to narrate the traumatic past. Historiographic discourses have failed to integrate individual and collective traumatic experiences into the collective memory and, therefore, have not even begun to initiate the process of collective self-understanding and re-definition in the wake of a traumatic past. Literature, in contrast, has always served as a medium of memory that fulfills a multitude of mnemonic functions. Literature possesses the potential to heal the individual and the collective by restoring meaning where it has been destroyed by trauma. Literature on the Cultural Revolution can complete official historiography by integrating suppressed voices and painful, forgotten experiences into collective memory. Literary accounts can also be disturbing in that they narrate the trauma as a persisting condition, as an open wound that continues into the present. As noted

---

<sup>7</sup> “Resolution,” 29, 32.

<sup>8</sup> David Der-Wei Wang, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China*, 2.

by Astrid Erll, “Literature fills a niche in memory culture, because like arguably no other symbol system, it is characterized by its ability—and indeed tendency—to refer to the forgotten and repressed as well as the unnoticed, unconscious and unintentional aspects of our dealings with the past.”<sup>9</sup>

In the following, we will examine literature as a symbolic form of cultural memory, as a specific “way of worldmaking.”<sup>10</sup> Cultural memory, according to Aleida and Jan Assmann,<sup>11</sup> preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity. The past does not exist by itself and cannot be preserved by memory; it can only exist in the way the actual present relates to it. Cultural memory does have the capacity to reconstruct the past; it is comprised of fixed points corresponding to fateful events, the memory of which is maintained through cultural formations and institutional communications.<sup>12</sup>

Traumatic collective experiences as “fateful events of the past” are, in the first place, local events, known for their traumatic character only to those suffering and demonstrating the solidarity of those not directly involved in the tragedy.<sup>13</sup> Communication often takes the form of testimonies that inform those who were not been directly involved in traumatic events, which occurred in isolated spaces (e.g., prisons, labor camps), distant places (e.g., theatres of war, starving villages), or in the more distant past. The integration of people involved and not directly involved into the collective act of remembering calls for a conscious act of commemoration; rituals must be defined, monuments must be erected, texts must be written.

In other words, traumatic events can originally only be part of the communicative memory. In order to be remembered by later generations (time) and by people of other localities (space), they must become cultural memory.

---

<sup>9</sup> Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, 153.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*.

<sup>11</sup> Aleida Assmann is Professor of English and Literary Studies at the University of Constance. Until his retirement in 2007, her husband Jan Assmann was Professor of Egyptology at the University of Heidelberg. In the 1990s, they coined and developed the concepts of cultural and communicative memory, which received a great deal of international attention.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 129. Cultural objectivation plays an important role in stabilizing cultural memory. In order to be transformed into part of the culturally institutionalized heritage, communicated knowledge needs to be objectivated; otherwise it will be forgotten. In contrast to communicative memory, cultural memory involves cultivation, specialized practice, and formulization. *Ibid.*, 130, 131; in detail Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, 35–42.

<sup>13</sup> Communication here includes both speaking and listening. This means that, in the integration and transformation of traumatic memory, the reception of literature dealing with a traumatic experience is as important as the production of narratives about the traumatic experience.

Thus, integrating a traumatic experience into the cultural memory implies that some form of concrete representation for the event must be found so that it can function as a store of knowledge from which a group derives its awareness of unity and peculiarity. Abstractions, in the form of numbers or formal and general statements, are inadequate. The event must be given some kind of meaning; otherwise the group cannot collectively move beyond the trauma.

Contemporary Chinese literature has time and again pointed to “fateful events of the past,” a phrase that mainly refers to the Cultural Revolution and the victimization of intellectuals. Scar Literature (*shanghen wenxue*) is the most prominent example of 1980s literature that, while holding the potential for moral reflection, also represents the transitional phenomenon of parting with the past and complying with the new ideology. Regarding the fact that time is running out for the communicative memory, it seems worthwhile to revisit literary texts that deal with collective trauma in 20th-century China so as to explore different narrative modes. On a broad level, we will differentiate between experiential and reflective narratives, asking to what extent and in what ways they aspire to build cultural memory. To what extent can these texts make trauma visible? What is their role in the creation of memory culture? How and in what ways do these texts refer to the past? Can they claim the power of forming a counter-narrative historiography? Although these texts differ vastly in terms of their literary approaches, linguistic codes, ideological norms, and aesthetic qualities, they pursue several common overall aims: to bring traumatic history to light; to contribute to the social recognition of individual and collective suffering; and to help readers to come to terms with a traumatic past.

---

## Experiential Narratives—The Crisis of Truth

### 1. Testifying About the Great Famine

From 1992 until 1993, the Malaysian Newspaper *Xingzhou ribao* serialized a novel entitled *Starving Lijiagou*, by Wang Zhiliang, a well known translator of Russian literature, journalist and editor, who also held a professorship at East China Normal University in Shanghai. After rewriting a large portion of the book and changing the title to *A Starving Mountain Village*, it took Wang Zhiliang almost two years to find a mainland publisher. Publishing houses considered the nearly 400 page-long novel to be unfit for commercial purposes. Nevertheless, after it went into print in 1994 at the Lijiang Publishing House in Guilin, it did not take long for its second and third editions to appear. Soon after its publication, readers’ responses filled the author’s mail box, and newspapers spilled a great deal of ink expressing relief and gratitude that the novel had rescued a cruel page of history from oblivion—referring, as a matter of course, to the devastating

“Great Famine” that accompanied China’s “Great Leap Forward.”

Wang Zhiliang’s *Starving Mountain Village* has for a long time been the only novel-length book published on the subject. The well-known writer Zhang Xianliang, the author of, among other books, *Mimosa (Lühua shu)* and *My Bodhi Tree (Wode puti shu)*,<sup>14</sup> has taken up the topic in shorter texts that explicitly attempt to present eyewitness accounts of famine and labour camp experiences, which gloss over the extent of the hardships experienced by the masses. In writing about a traumatic past, the Tianjin writer Feng Jicai elaborates on the concept of the writer as “physician of the human soul”: “The historian has to lay particular emphasis on the historical facts of the disaster, while the writer has to lay particular stress on the souls of the victims. [...] I don’t want to collect all sorts of spectacular sites of the sufferings; rather, I am trying to search for the truth of the victims’ souls.”<sup>15</sup> Feng furthermore stresses the importance of the concreteness of the events and the concreteness of people as opposed to abstraction and aestheticization, yet clearly defines literature as a means to prevent amnesia. It is not sensationalism that the author is after, but truth. Feng distinguishes between historical and literary writing and stresses the didactic value of remembering the past and importance of developing a historical consciousness, because only then there is a possibility of “not falling back into the same old track.”<sup>16</sup>

Writers like Feng Jicai, Wang Zhiliang and Zhang Xianliang were born before or during the Communist take-over and were brought up, educated and socialized in Maoist China. Their writings seem to be in accordance with official discourse, pointing to human failure and misdeeds—mostly by high-ranking cadres, representatives of the Party—and the negative effects of over-ideologization. At the same time, they strive to erect a written monument commemorating the victims of these disastrous events; they aspire to integrate their suffering and victimhood into history. These authors attempt to re-establish the individual (in general the victim, not the victimizer) as the agent of history. For obvious reasons, individual voices have been negated by what has been considered objective, historical forces. The texts written by these authors are dedicated not to the “heroes” from the Maoist period considered to have made history, but to those who lived through history. However, although these writers direct their attention to a rarely highlighted fateful event, although they are critical of the official historical discourse that neglects individual or local memory by building an all-inclusive national memory, they primarily express intellectuals’ outcries for political rehabilitation and symbolical redemption in view of their betrayal by

---

<sup>14</sup> For bibliographical details cf. references.

<sup>15</sup> Feng Jicai, “Jinian guoqu he qishi weilai—wo xie ‘yibai ge ren de shi nian,’” 217.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

Maoist politics. One of the rather rare examples of a writer who explicitly deals with the Great Famine and focuses on the majority of victims—the peasants—is the writer and journalist Zhang Yigong.

## 2. Forming a Story of the Past—The Case of the Criminal Li Tongzhong

Born in 1934 in Henan, Zhang Yigong (张一弓) started his first, very short-lived writing career in the late 1950s during China's agricultural collectivization process. Because one of his short stories was criticized,<sup>17</sup> he was silenced for more than twenty years, but took up fiction writing and publishing again in the early 1980s. His novella *The Story of the Criminal Li Tongzhong* (*Fanren Li Tongzhong de gushi*) was first published in 1980 in the magazine *Harvest* (*Shouhuo*) under the editorship of Ba Jin. Two years after its publication, Zhang Yigong became a member of the China Writers' Association. Critics classify the novella as an outstanding example of either "scar literature" (*shanghen wenxue*)<sup>18</sup> or "retrospective/reflection literature" (*fansi wenxue*).<sup>19</sup> However, Zhang Yigong made clear in several interviews and written statements that he had based the characters and plotlines on real people he had met and on personal observations he had made during his time as journalist delegated to the countryside to report on the success of collectivization policies and to cover model workers and socialist heroes.<sup>20</sup> In a consciously orchestrated way, Zhang adopts the narrative perspective of a testifying witness, who describes the past as lived experience. In the epilogue to his short story collection, Zhang refers to the more than thirty years that he spent as journalist and his concern for people's welfare. Zhang clearly seeks to distance himself from his contemporaries, who favored a "clear cut" (*yi dao qie*), that is, inaugurating the "new period" by leaving behind things of the "distant past" ("*juli*" *de shijian*). Zhang adopts the position of a trustable witness and positions himself in the tradition of Balzac, who also started his writing career as a journalist and considered this experience crucial to his development as a fiction writer. In this vein, Zhang claims that a writer is a "secretary who transcribes the history of his or her time" ("*tongshidai ren de mishu*").<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> His short story "Muqin" (Mother) was condemned for praising his "rightist" mother and suggesting that love could transcend class. See Richard King, *Heroes of China's Great Leap Forward: Two Stories*, 249, note 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Kaixuan Jing, "Contemporary Chinese Fiction: Politics and Romance," 83.

<sup>20</sup> See Richard King, *Milestones on a Golden Road: Writing for Chinese Socialism 1945–1980*. Zhang reported for *Henan Dazhong Bao* and *Henan Ribao*.

<sup>21</sup> Zhang Yigong, "Lishi zai xianshi tiaojianxia de xianying," 288–89. On the Balzac-Marx-China connection, see Rudolph G. Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade: Studies in Contemporary Chinese Prose*, 12.

*The Story of the Criminal Li Tongzhong* begins by traveling back in space and time. The narrator's physical return to the place where the horrific incidents took place is paralleled by his mental journey back to a traumatic past. The main plotline is firmly anchored in the present, but an omniscient narrative voice resurrects the past for the reader. Set during the Qingming festival—a festival for remembering and mourning the dead—the story centers on a district party secretary who is heading to a remote mountain county to attend a rehabilitation ceremony. As he travels back to the mountain county, the upright official remembers a “story” that happened 19 years ago (in 1960), a story about which “history had reached a new verdict.”<sup>22</sup> The party secretary's flashbacks are accompanied by a sense of guilt and deep regret for what went wrong. As the story unfolds, the reader is drawn into an upsetting narrative comprised of a series of events, each of which surpasses the last in absurdity and tragedy. Although the story begins and ends in the present time, the majority is dedicated to the past, to a process of looking back and remembering that does not imply striving forward towards a bright future.

The text consists of small chapters that document the interactions between the village people and party officials. We soon find out that the village people have been fooled and kept ignorant. For example, chemistry is utilized to prepare artificial food substitutes that were inedible. At this point, the time is ripe for “Party Branch Secretary-turned-Criminal Plunderer Li Tongzhong” to take action. After seven days without food supplies, Li Tongzhong, who lost a leg in his heroic service in the Korean War, “borrows food” from the state granary and saves the village from starvation—not without leaving a promissory note written in his own blood. Before the hero dies of exhaustion, he ensures that others will carry out his mission to save the peasants' lives. The story ends with a moral imperative in the voice of the narrator: “Remember the lessons of history! [...] Those who live should strive to gain greater wisdom at a lesser cost!”<sup>23</sup>

To a certain extent, this deep-drawn sigh echoes party historiography's “great tragedy of good intentions” and can easily be read as Party-approved commemoration; however, it is a far cry from the obligatory “bright tail” (*guangming weiba*), one of the distinctive features of scar literature, which “reinforced the Deng regime's efforts to consolidate its power by distancing itself from Maoist ideology,” thereby propagating a better future to come.<sup>24</sup>

Assmann's concept of cultural memory, which refers to the way in which a society ensures cultural continuity, is useful in understanding this story. Zhang

---

<sup>22</sup> Zhang Yigong, “Fanren Li Tongzhong de gushi,” 1. All translations are taken from Richard King, “The Story of the Criminal Li Tongzhong by Zhang Yigong,” 63–128, here 64.

<sup>23</sup> Zhang Yigong, “Fanren Li Tongzhong,” 48; Richard King, “Criminal Li Tongzhong,” 128.

<sup>24</sup> Deirdre Sabina Knight, “Scar Literature and the Memory of Trauma,” 528.

Yigong seems to be aware that communicative memory is temporally limited (the memory will not be preserved for more than three or four generations, ca. 80 years) and that, in order to ensure cultural continuity, collective knowledge has to be passed down from one generation to the next.

The story is written in highly suggestive metaphorical language, where weather forecasts point to the political climate and general social atmosphere: In the wintertime, flocks of desperate people from neighboring villages come begging for food, while snowflakes dance wildly in the north wind and Li Tongzhong's heart turns to ice (p. 39/115); when District Party Secretary Tian Zhongshan sets out for the mountain hamlet, it is, of course, raining—"Why does it always have to rain at Qingming?" (p. 1/63)—insinuating that even heaven is "joining the flood of tears shed by a whole nation."<sup>25</sup> This lachrymose sentiment is intensified by the author's equation of Tian's state of mind with the surging floodwater. These passages seem to foreshadow a cultural critique framed in descriptions of the past: "History is a Yellow River, washing its way east. But the Yellow River is muddy, it contains massive quantities of silt, it needs a long time to come clear. Would nineteen years be enough?" (p. 47/126–27).<sup>26</sup>

Zhang's depiction of social interactions suggests how history operates at the local level, where it is experienced by the rural masses. In this way, the rural peasants emerge not as pawns of external historical forces, but as agents of history who were blinded. Zhang Yigong's text contrasts with official historiography in according peasants the status of victim. Furthermore, he in some respects describes the world of the peasants as a carnivalesque "world upside-down" by contrasting their naiveté and down-to-earth worldview with sacrosanct official ideology: It's the peasants who mockingly prove the overwhelming success of the Conference to Appraise the Patriotic Health Campaign (*aiguo weisheng pingbi dahui*) by telling a hypocritical story about a glorious young donkey getting into the habit of having his teeth brushed, and the success of the Campaign to Stamp out Illiteracy (*saomang yundong*) is provided evidence by another story about a heroic act of an old couple in their seventies, who "didn't feel sleepy at night, so the old man would write characters on his wife's back and teach them to her, going on like this until the second cockcrow."

---

<sup>25</sup> Here I am referring to the *locus classicus*, Lu Xinhua's short story "Scar" (*Wenhuibao*, August 11, 1978), which set the tone for the following wave of scar literature. The story exerted a (controlled) cathartic effect that allowed people nationwide to lament their cruel past. Because of the popularity of "Scar," *Wenhuibao* had to print an additional 1.5 million copies, giving rise to the popular saying, "the tears of a whole nation are merging into a river" ("quanguo duzhe de yanlei zuyi liucheng yi tiao he"); See, [www.baik.com/wiki/shanghen](http://www.baik.com/wiki/shanghen).

<sup>26</sup> It is hard to resist not associating this passage with the legendary documentary *River Elegy* (*Heshang*), which would become extremely popular with Chinese intellectuals only eight years later.

Last but not least, the “successful execution” of the Campaign to Eradicate the Four Pests (*chu sihai yundong*) is proofed by claiming that cats are plaintively meowing because there are no more mice left, only a handful of sparrow shit in an abandoned nest in a former ancestral hall.<sup>27</sup> “High culture” is revealed by the “(countrified) profane” as absurd; Zhang’s text thus represents a literary act that creates space for resistance to authority.

For the most part, we are dealing here with a text that, in a very traditional manner, reminds the “son of heaven” to fulfill his duty and to make sure that what is “under heaven” can live in peace and harmony. In this respect, the text functions as a medium through which the laments of the people are communicated to the emperor at court. However, the fact that the “Great Famine” was taken up through writing by those who experienced it in some way or another recalls what Shoshana Felman has called the “crisis of truth.”<sup>28</sup> Felman has noted the desire among victims of trauma to give testimony: “It is a strange appointment, from which the witness-appointee cannot relieve himself by any delegation, substitution, or representation.”<sup>29</sup> Testifying has a quasi-judicial function; it always comes into play, when—as in a courtroom situation—facts are not clear, historical accuracy is in doubt, when *a crisis of truth* is apparent. Testimony serves a double purpose; it is not only a means of overcoming trauma, but also a way “to speak *for* others and *to* others.” In the case of Zhang Yigong, the urge to speak for others and to others might not derive directly from personal traumatic experience, but it certainly is reinforced by the traditional literati self-image as the people’s advocate, whose duty it is to remind the “son of heaven” to return to the Way and to protect what is “under heaven.” In either case, literature is imbued with an ethical dimension; by taking on the role of an “emphatic witness,”<sup>30</sup> literary narrative cannot remain neutral when testifying about traumatic history.

In the broader contemporary Chinese context, I would argue that a *crisis of truth* can be identified in at least two respects. First, the mnemonic control that dominated this period led to the absence or the purely formal description of traumatic events in history. This situation calls into question the legitimacy and

<sup>27</sup> Zhang Yigong/Richard King, 79–82/12–14.

<sup>28</sup> Shoshana Felmann, “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” 14.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Judith Herman points to the impossibility of maintaining a neutral stance when dealing with suffering willfully caused by human beings: “When the events are natural disasters or ‘acts of God,’ those who bear witness sympathize readily with the victim. But when the traumatic events are of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator. It is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict.” Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 7.

truthfulness of historical records.<sup>31</sup> Second, the radical transition to a market economy and the explosion of consumer culture in the 1980s led to a crisis, as people attempted to bridge the (mental) gap between the ideology ridden past and the consumer oriented present. The feeling of having been betrayed by history and the general crisis of consciousness might have contributed to the urge to voice the “true” story of the “glorious past.” To build the future on an unacknowledged traumatic past is like entering a blind alley.

In the case of the Great Famine, it goes without saying that the victims, mostly of rural origin, were in need of someone to give voice to their suffering and make their invisible traumatic experiences visible in the form of, for instance, written texts that communicated their forgotten stories. Traditionally, this was the task of the *wenren*, the literary official, who finds his later incarnation in the socialist writer, who speaks for the people and educates the masses. In terms of style and language, Zhang’s story is reminiscent of critical socialist realism, which points to the “dark spots in the red sun.” The text even shares the cathartic function of scar literature, which provided an officially acknowledged public space for telling and sharing a traumatic past (albeit CR related). In terms of literary approach, the author creates an experiential narrative that gives voice to repressed collective memories. He seems less optimistic about the possibility of a glorious future but feels obliged to unearth the truth. In its endeavor to document experiences of historical trauma, the story gives people back their human dignity, insisting that those traumatic events must be acknowledged as part of the collective memory.

To approach the question of whether or not a text like *The Criminal Li Tongzhong* can function as a counter-narrative, we must return to the issue of trauma-related historical narratives. We should question the validity of the binary model that constructs official versus un-official history, national history versus local records, since a new player—the market—has entered the scene. Its forces and its power cannot be overestimated. On the one hand, consumption and commodification, the market with its mass media culture, can aid in communicating and mediating traumatic events. On the other hand, media accounts of trauma flatten the meaning of historical events, trivializing and sensationalizing traumatic experiences. In this vein, Zhang Yigong’s text can be understood as reacting to the *crisis of truth* by giving testimony *for* those victimized by the past *to* those living in the materialistic present, who would otherwise lose their historical consciousness. Zhang’s text stands as a quiet but

---

<sup>31</sup> In discussing the “politics of truth” in scar-literature, Jing Kaixuan has noted that, “The most heated argument was about what the truth was. In modern China, the discourse about the truth relates not only to facts but also to political correctness.” See Jing Kaixuan, “Contemporary Chinese Fiction: Politics and Romance,” 78.

nevertheless urgent reminder that the extreme fetishization of materialist culture and ideological progress is built on the ruins of a past populated with wounded souls.

---

## Reflexive Narratives—The Crisis of Representation

### 1. Trauma, Memory, Identity

The second group of writers that I will address is comprised of authors who have not personally experienced the “Great Famine,” although they all have childhood memories of the CR. These post-modern writers emerged in the mid-80s. They do not form a self-conscious literary group, but they have been labeled as avant-garde, meta-fictional, experimental, post-new age or new wave writers by literary critics. Their emergence clearly coincides with the decline of the optimistic and utopian mood of the early 1980s.<sup>32</sup> Freud’s concept of “aftereffect” (*Nachträglichkeit*), referring to a deferred reaction to early traumatic childhood experiences, might help to explain why it took nearly a decade after the end of the CR for Chinese literature dealing with the traumatic past to appear. Compared to the first group of authors, who deal with specific historical events, the second group of writers, which includes, among others, Yu Hua, Ma Yuan, Sun Ganlu, and Can Xue, are more likely to avoid writing about specific past events, in order to explore issues surrounding history, trauma and memory as realms of individual and collective experience.<sup>33</sup> Their works often focus not on the historical traumatic event as such, but on its lasting effects on individual and cultural identity; consequently, they focus on the present. Their works thus offer both a glimpse into the past and a critical reflection upon the representation of the past; they build and observe memory at the same time. Their texts—often labeled as meta-histories—demonstrate the impossibility of integrating traumatic experiences into individual and collective memory. Trauma is not something external that can be narrated. Trauma resists narrative representation; its absence of meaning conflicts with the need to narrate a meaningful story.

Like history and memory, identity is a temporal concept of coherence; the process of identity building can be visualized as a two-dimensional process of development. Synchronically, identity integrates the different relationships of an

---

<sup>32</sup> For further discussion, see Wang Jing, *China’s Avant-Garde Fiction: An Anthology*.

<sup>33</sup> Yan Lianke, who was never labeled an avant-garde writer, wrote arguably one of the most provocative fictional inquiries into Chinese cultural identity. His novel *Four Books* (*Si shu*) refers in detail to the Great Leap Forward. His authorial approach is not realistic; rather, he employs cannibalistic and grotesque images, thereby crafting a mythic and often surrealistic narration.

individual or collective Self. This integrative process corresponds to the formation of individual and collective memory, which are formed through communication with others. Within the coherent unity that forms individual or collective identity, the Self is aware of itself and can reflect on itself. Diachronically (developing over the course of time), this self-awareness is related to changes that occur in the Self and its relationships to others.<sup>34</sup> Both individual and collective identity are deeply social and intertwined with cultural memory, “a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation.”<sup>35</sup>

In the meta-historical fiction of Can Xue and Yu Hua, these processes of identity building are, generally speaking, disturbed and out of balance. Their stories operate according to concepts of time and space that no longer follow their expected logic, and their protagonists are, more often than not, completely helpless and disoriented; social relationships can no longer be trusted, as common social rules and forms have lost their consistency. Neither time nor space forms a stabilizing framework through which to orient and understand the self.

## 2. Trauma as a Persisting Condition—Haunting Ghosts

Yu Hua’s work is typical of the meta-historical fiction that began to emerge in the mid-1980s. Born in 1960 in a small town near Shanghai, he started publishing in the mid-1980s. Mainland critics have bestowed on him a reputation as literary provocateur and promising avant-garde writer of postmodernist literature. Like other contemporary writers, Yu Hua is clearly aware of and distances himself from both the moral burden of the traditional writer and intellectuals’ complicity in ideology. As a writer, he tends to develop his own poetology, give explanations of his creative processes, and comment on his own works.<sup>36</sup>

His short story *1986*, first published in the literary magazine *Shouhuo* in 1987, confronts readers with a madman, who reappears throughout the story. “During the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution,” he was “a mild and unassuming high-school history teacher [who] suddenly disappeared, leaving behind his young wife and three-year old daughter.”<sup>37</sup> Many years later, in 1986, the madman comes back to town and mutilates his own body in public places in

---

<sup>34</sup> Jörn Rüsen, “Using History: The Struggle over Traumatic Experiences of the Past in Historical Culture,” 14–18.

<sup>35</sup> Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 126.

<sup>36</sup> In addition to the many interviews he has given since the late 1980s, Yu Hua’s “Xuwei de zuopin” can be read as an explanation of his early avant-gardist works.

<sup>37</sup> Yu Hua, “Yijiubaliu nian,” 142–80, here 142. I follow the translation of Andrew F. Jones, “1986,” 132–80, here 132. References to both will be given throughout the text.

the most brutal ways possible, using various forms of traditional torture. All the while, people take no heed of what he is doing and, instead, look forward to the coming of spring after a fierce winter: “He walked into spring along with the residents of the town. And though they saw him, they paid him little heed, for as soon as he had been noted his image had already been cast aside and forgotten. They were walking wholeheartedly into spring, walking happily through the streets.”<sup>38</sup> Although the public in general either ignores him or consumes his performance of self-mutilation, his former wife is terrorized and frightened by the madman: “She heard the footsteps for several nights in a row. The footsteps terrified her. The footsteps made her cry aloud with fright.”<sup>39</sup> His re-appearance agonizes her and gradually brings her family’s social life to a standstill, they stop communicating with each other and seeing other people.

As mentioned above, the “aftereffect” of traumatic symptoms points to a delayed reaction in processing traumatic experience. “Repressed” memories find some sort of expression after a period of “latency.” In Yu Hua’s *1986*, the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, in particular, the political persecution of intellectuals, literally returns in the metaphorical figure of the madman who mutilates his own body, thereby haunting people and disturbing tranquil present-day life. The story suggests that the transformation of the world into a big shopping mall, the progress towards a consumer society, has made history fade away: “The girls stuffed their pretty handbags with make-up and romantic novels by Qiong Yao. [...] The boys’ pockets were full of Marlboros and Good Friends cigarettes.”<sup>40</sup> There is nothing to see and nothing to hear about the past and no one wants to be reminded of the traumatic past. Everybody sits comfortably in front of a color TV, and “the disastrous years of the CR have faded into the mists of time.”<sup>41</sup> The horrific past is not explicitly suppressed, but rather is annihilated, as people’s attention is diverted away from narratives of trauma. People are too busy to listen, too occupied by their present-day lives; at best they observe the madman’s performance of self-mutilation: “The circle kept expanding until the entire street was choked by onlookers.”<sup>42</sup> They either laugh away their anxiety at the disturbing scene or simply attempt to remove what they no longer can bear to see and hear: “They sensed that if the madman wasn’t captured now, his howls would keep ringing in their ears, no matter how hard they tried to escape.”<sup>43</sup> No one confronts the madman; thus, the traumatic past is beyond (narrative) control and continues to haunt the village as a lingering nightmare. Because trauma has

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 149/142.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 148/140.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 150/143.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 161/157.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 161/159.

no “addressable other,” it cannot be translated into narrative memory: “The absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story.”<sup>44</sup> In Yu Hua’s story, blankness and indifference replace memory, which enables later generations to reconstruct their cultural identity through developing collective historical knowledge.

Yu Hua’s text points to another feature of trauma that conforms to what Dori Laub has described, in his psychoanalytical theory of trauma, as the “impossibility of completion”:

Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect.<sup>45</sup>

The madman’s preoccupation with continuous self-mutilation is more than just an allegory for the attempt to achieve closure, or “completion.” Again and again he carries out the traditional punishments on his own body, trying to finalize the traumatic event by physically reenacting the mental torture of the experienced horror. The madman finally succeeds in achieving closure when the bystanders can no longer endure his presence. At this point, “his body, which seemed to have been varnished deep red, was slumped against a postbox”<sup>46</sup> and, unexpectedly, “It was then that [another] madman came hopping towards them like a flea.”<sup>47</sup> The identity of this new madman remains a mystery; is he a reincarnation of the original madman or another madman? The narration proceeds cyclically; earlier in the story, the death of the madman was foreshadowed when, as a teacher, he witnessed the atrocities perpetrated during the Cultural Revolution: “He saw someone slumped beside a postbox. He was dead. The blood was still fresh, still wet.”<sup>48</sup> In addition, later in the story, the madman’s wife and daughter reemerge as his wife and daughter the next spring. “She [the daughter] watched the women and her daughter walk past the madman as if they had never met.”<sup>49</sup> It remains unclear whether they are the same persons or duplicates, but their timeless reemergence corresponds to what Dori Laub above describes as “event that [...] has no ending, attained no closure, and

---

<sup>44</sup> Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” 68.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>46</sup> Yu Hua/Jones, 178/178.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 179/179.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 144/134.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 179/180.

therefore, [...] continues into the present and is current in every respect.”<sup>50</sup>

Apart from mention of the four seasons, the story seems to evolve arbitrarily without a reliable or omniscient narrator, so that the reader repeatedly loses track of the plot. The narrative perspective frequently shifts; the “madman scenes” are constantly interrupting the “Cultural Revolution story” of the mother and daughter with staccato cascades of incoherent, repetitive narrative fragments. The narrative also mixes together cultural and religious practices and texts of different origin. Before he is taken away by the Red Guards, the madman several times envisions himself washing his feet, an image that inverts the scriptural scene of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples before the Last Supper.<sup>51</sup>

Whereas Lu Xun framed madness (persecution complex) by establishing a rationality that was stabilized by historical and medical research, as represented by the narrator, elder brother, doctor and spectators, Yu Hua abandons metaphorical representation by creating irrationality as the motor of narration. The “CR past” and the “madman present” converge at a recycling station, where the mother spots a sheet of paper that refers to the traditional “five punishments,” which had been the focus of the history teacher’s research. Already in the introductory passage, the narrator struggles to maintain the CR storyline, which is repeatedly interrupted by the appearance of the madman,<sup>52</sup> whose shockingly violent fantasies are only outnumbered by the cruel details of his (real) self-mutilation. In trying to disentangle the “CR past” from the “madman present,” the realistic narration is invalidated by irrationality and perversion.

If, as in Yu Hua’s story, trauma cannot be communicated through realistic narration of a particular historical event, it becomes a condition that persists into the present; it does not disappear with the passage of time, because the past can no longer be temporally confined. Although the traumatic event (the “CR past”) occurred in real historical time, it cannot be represented within “regular” narrative parameters, such as place, time, causality and sequence.

Critics and writers of avant-garde literature have for a long time utilized the concept of the Unspeakable (void) to explain trauma’s function in literature. In general, these discussions emphasize linguistic indeterminacy and ambiguous referentiality. In these theoretical discussions trauma becomes the unrepresentable event, the Unspeakable. In her book *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America*, Naomi Mandel argues that

---

<sup>50</sup> See fn. 49.

<sup>51</sup> This observation is made three times: “He saw that he was washing his feet” (p. 143/134); “He saw himself washing his feet” (p. 144/135); “He saw that he was washing his feet” (p. 145/136).

<sup>52</sup> “The man limped into the small town” (Yu Hua/Jones, 148/141); “It was around that same time that the man came to town” (Ibid.); “It was just around then that the man limped into town” (Ibid., 149/143).

the Unspeakable “is wielded to simultaneously assert the compelling fact of historical victimization and to safeguard the inviolability of the victim’s (or victims’) pain, simultaneously articulating the *presence* of suffering and the *absence* of its voice.”<sup>53</sup> She goes on to argue that “[T]o abandon the unspeakable is to abandon the lure of the moral high ground and to recognize that all of us, literary authors and critics alike, are the producers and the products of our culture and hence always already complicit in the ugliest aspects of our histories.”<sup>54</sup> Mandel’s implication is that not only is corporeal suffering pushed to the background, when trauma becomes the Unspeakable, but we also fail to acknowledge our role as compliances. Beyond the trans-historical model of the Unspeakable, Yu Hua’s work is characterized by violence that annihilates the body, the basic constituent element of identity: “He began to look for his head, for his limbs, for his torso. [...] He didn’t know where he could have lost his body. He couldn’t go home without a body. His heart would break if he didn’t go home.”<sup>55</sup> Howard Yuen Fung Choy has pointed out that, “The author uses not only the *performance of violence* to reveal the authority’s abusive exercise of power throughout Chinese history, but also the *violent performance of language* to challenge the rational, innocuous language of the grand narrative.”<sup>56</sup>

I would like to take Choy’s argument a step further and suggest that Yu Hua’s depictions of torture are meant to represent the politics of violence as the interplay of domination and subjugation. In particular, the madman embodies the split psyche of both victim and perpetrator.<sup>57</sup> The story’s reference to the “fateful event” of the Cultural Revolution renders this reading even more plausible. To a certain extent, Yu Hua’s madman can be understood as a post-modern reincarnation of Lu Xun’s socially alienated prophet who no longer speaks the truth. *1986* exists in a realm beyond the differentiation between good and bad, right and wrong, past and present, victim and victimizer. The story leads the reader through scenes of meaningless violence and brutality without providing a perspective that makes it possible to achieve distance. The narrative voice does not comfort the reader by adopting a moral or at least rationalist position. Even worse, the act of reading forces the reader into a voyeuristic stance; he/she is forced into complicity, in the sense that the most disturbing aspect of the violence, the indifference of the bystanders, merges with the gaze of the reader. The *kan*

---

<sup>53</sup> Naomi Mandel, *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America*, 7.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>55</sup> Yu Hua/Jones, 172,176/171,175.

<sup>56</sup> Howard Yuen Fung Choy, *Re-mapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng’s China, 1979–1997*, 204 (italics in the original).

<sup>57</sup> On violence during the CR, see Rolf Haubl, “Red Terror: The Experience of Violence During the Cultural Revolution,” 57–82.

*re'nao* (fun watching complex) is a cultural critique that points to a collective refusal to (actively) redefine or recover identity by processing the traumatic experience. Instead of looking back to the past, Yu Hua implicates both the characters in the story and the reader:

[T]hey cheerfully ate and talked. [...] Everything made them laugh. After a while they started to talk about the crazy things they had seen, the crazy rumors they had heard going around in town. Some of them had seen the madman. Some of them had only heard about him. They said they couldn't believe he had cut apart his own body with a cleaver. They registered their surprise. Finally, they burst into laughter. [...] Their sighs had more to do with sheer amazement than pity.<sup>58</sup>

The story ends with a note of sarcasm:

She [the daughter] watched the woman and her daughter walk past the madman, as if they had never met. The madman kept on hopping down the sidewalk, calling all the while for his "sister." The mother and her daughter kept on walking down the street. They didn't look back. Like before, they moved forward with ease and grace.<sup>59</sup>

The past futilely attempts to connect with its "sister" present. The ironic twist to the expected "bright tail" ending suggests a bleak vision of a future that has already collapsed. The closing vision of a positive outlook being no more than the cynical lip service of the narrator in the face of an overwhelming past.

Yu Hua confronts us with the absence or eradication of the individual self, whose identity is formed over time through social interactions. In the story, the individual is stripped of his or her social, emotional and cultural qualities, which make possible self-awareness and unity of identity. The concept of communicative memory, as developed by Assmann & Assmann, is built through everyday communication and is thus unstructured.<sup>60</sup> It is nevertheless through everyday communication and social interaction that each individual creates memories.<sup>61</sup> In Yu Hua's story, the communication necessary to create memory is nullified or fails. When the mother explains to her daughter that the madman is

---

<sup>58</sup> Yu Hua/Jones, 171/172.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 179–80/180.

<sup>60</sup> Assmann & Assmann are following Maurice Halbwachs, who holds that communication with others constitutes a form of individual memory, in so far it is socially mediated and group related. See Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire Collective*.

<sup>61</sup> Here Jan Assmann refers to Maurice Halbwachs' "cadres sociaux," cf. his *La mémoire Collective*.

her real father, “she was confused [...] she felt frightened. This other father was a stranger. She hated him. She wouldn’t let him into her heart because she knew he would take away the only father she had ever had.”<sup>62</sup> In 1986, the “making” of individual identity is replaced by a surgical, amoral description of surface details. There is no reliable social context for the formation of individual identity. The individual does not become self-aware over time; time has no stabilizing effect on the Self and its relationships to others, it does not move forward. On the contrary, historical time appears as a cyclical, repetitive force that destroys the possibility of stabilizing the individual within a temporal-spatial order. The temporal structure created by Yu Hua is driven by inevitability and pathology. The story suggests that trauma has become a persisting condition that deprives any totalizing concept—like history or identity—of its power. The conventional notions of history and identity are taken absurdum, but, within the narrative, the meaning of trauma is not irrevocably lost; rather, it can be found in the madman’s tortured body, which is condemned to compulsively reenact violence and self-destruction and which cannot be healed.

---

## Conclusion and Future Directions

Literature and art are effective means through which to narrate trauma; individual and local experience can be transformed into narrative representation. In Chinese literature on trauma, we can detect a shift of focus from *what* to write about to *how* to write, from content to form. Zhang Yigong is representative of an earlier group of writers who wrote about the traumatic event itself. Often adopting the perspective of first-hand experience, their works demonstrate a more “traditional” or realistic narrative mode and self-conception. The authorial stance adopted by these writers inherits much from the traditional trope of the upright official who remonstrates against a wayward emperor who has lost sight of his people’s need. Their writing is driven by the urge to add the *true stories* of the people to *grand history*. Here literature serves as a means to communicate another, perhaps neglected narrative that yearns to be inscribed into the cultural memory.

Later authors, such as Yu Hua, do not necessarily refer directly to the traumatic event as such, but also do not simply use the trope of trauma as a mode of linguistic experimentalism. Rather, they explore new ways of looking at history, identity and narration. The notion of trauma is not exhausted by the trope of the Unspeakable. Yu Hua explores the emotions and memories that have been forgotten or repressed by previous generations. Nicolas Abraham has suggested

---

<sup>62</sup> Yu Hua/Jones, 155/149.

the term “phantom” for this psychological and social phenomenon of repressing the past: “The phantom is therefore also a meta-psychological factum. That means, not the dead are hunting us but the void created by the secrets of others that remains with us.”<sup>63</sup> Although Abraham is referring here to what in the discourse of the Holocaust has been termed “the family secret after Auschwitz,” his discussion also seems relevant to the Chinese context. In the Chinese case, we might understand the “family secret” to be what official history has excluded from its records, what has been left out or rendered taboo. Yu Hua however, formulates a cultural-political critique by prominently exhibiting family microcosm against Deng-macrocosm, retracing an utopian discourse that has been redirected from spiritual utopia to material economy. As Yang Xiaobin writes, “Because of the collapse of Mao’s spiritual community, Deng’s polity resorts to the more vulgar and more pragmatic picture of Elysium, through which the depressed citizen can be awakened to reconstruct a new utopia on the ruins of the previous utopia—or, rather, dystopia.”<sup>64</sup>

If we agree that communicative and cultural memory operate within structures of power and legitimacy, then how the past is referred to in literary-historical discourses inevitably becomes a political issue.<sup>65</sup> The interests of the ruling elite in preserving their status and power play a decisive role in determining which events become part of a “meaningful past.” Contesting the legitimacy of the ruling elite also implies contesting the cultural memory shaped by their interests, creating space for the emergence of alternative and potentially conflicting interpretations.

In light of today’s “exhausted future,” which forces people to contemplate the meaning of their lives and confront their mortality, the famous maxim seems particularly self-evident: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to relive it.”<sup>66</sup> Time is running out for the creation of communicative memory, and if the “fateful events” of the past do not enter the cultural memory soon, they might be forgotten or lead to an explosive mélange of counter-remembrance and resistance. Although it might be legitimate to read meta-historical texts like Yu Hua’s *1986* as postmodern linguistic indulgences, these works are better

---

<sup>63</sup> Nicolas Abraham, “Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud’s Metapsychology,” 287.

<sup>64</sup> Yang Xiaobin, *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-garde Fiction*, 240–41.

<sup>65</sup> In *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Judith Herman demonstrates the close connection between trauma research and political movements. She affirms that medical trauma work can only be successful when supported by political and human rights movements. US Vietnam veterans for example, only succeeded with their call for medical care after Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was officially acknowledged as a serious illness requiring treatment.

<sup>66</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 284.

understood as fictional reflections on historical amnesia or explicit reminders that it is time to step down from the “moral high ground” and recognize our complicity “in the ugliest aspects of our histories.”<sup>67</sup>

---

## References

- Abraham, Nicolas. “Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud’s Metapsychology.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1987): 287–92.
- Assmann, Aleida. “Zukunft der Erinnerung: Neue Herausforderungen und Perspektiven” [The future of memory: New challenges and perspectives]. Goethe-Institut Russland, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzFL1JqtjOY>. Accessed February 2, 2015.
- Assmann, Jan. *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen*. München: Beck, 1997. (Translated: *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- . “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.” *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125–33.
- Becker, Jasper. *Hungry Ghosts: Mao’s Secret Famine*. New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1996.
- Benjamin, Walter. “Thesis on the Philosophy of History, IX.” In *Illuminations*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1968.
- Bo Yibo. “Respect and Remembrance—Marking the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Founding of the CCP.” *Hongqi* 13, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report: China, July 29 (1981): 26–36.
- Choy, Howard Yuen Fung. *Re-Mapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng’s China, 1979–1997*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- Dikötter, Frank. *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–62*. London, Berlin, New York: Bloomsbury, 2010.
- Erl, Astrid. *Memory in Culture*. Translated by Sarah B. Young. Palgrave Macmillian Memory Studies, 2011.
- Felman, Shoshana. “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching.” In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, 13–44. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Feng Jicai. “Jinian guoqu he qishi weilai—wo xie ‘yibaige ren de shinian’” [Remembering the past and revealing the future—Writing “Ten Years of Madness: Oral histories of China’s Cultural Revolution”]. *Wo shi Feng Jicai* [I am Feng Jicai], edited by Feng Jicai, 214–18. Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 1996.
- Gao Zhangwu. “Xin Zhongguo chengli di yi nian jiejie liangshi wenti de shijian he jingyan” [Solving China’s food problem: Practice and experiences during the first year of the PRC]. In *Mao Zedong Deng Xiaoping lilun yanjiu* [Theoretical studies of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping] 10 (2009): 14–19.
- Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978.

---

<sup>67</sup> See fn. 57.

- Halbwachs, Maurice. *La mémoire collective* [On collective memory], edited by J. Alexandre. Paris: PU de France, 1950.
- Hao Ran. *Jingguang dadao* [The golden road]. Beijing: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 1972–74.  
———. *Yanyang tian* [Bright sunny days]. Beijing: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 1966, 1972.
- Haubl, Rolf. “Red Terror: The Experience of Violence During the Cultural Revolution.” In *Landscapes of the Chinese Soul: The Enduring Presence of the Cultural Revolution*, edited by Tomas Plänkner, 57–82. London: Karnac Books, 2014.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997.
- Jing Kaixuan. “Contemporary Chinese Fiction: Politics and Romance.” In *Macalester International*, vol. 18, (2007): 77–99. <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol18/iss1/11>. Accessed January 28, 2015.
- King, Richard. *Heroes of China’s Great Leap Forward: Two Stories*, edited by Richard King. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010.  
———. *Milestones on a Golden Road: Writing for Chinese Socialism, 1945–1980*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013.
- Knight, Deirdre Sabina. “Scar Literature and the Memory of Trauma.” In *Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, edited by Moshua Jostow, Kirk Denton A. and Bruce Fulton, 527–32. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Lam, Willy. “The Maoist Revival and the Conservative Turn in Chinese Politics.” *China Perspectives, Special Feature 2* (2012): 5–15.
- Laub, Dori. “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening.” In *Testimony*, edited by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, 57–74. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Ling Feng. *Zhonggong fengyu bashi nian* [Eighty stormy years of the Chinese Communist Revolution]. Edison: Epoch Publication Co., 2001.
- MacFarquhar, Roderick and Michael Schoenhals. *Mao’s Last Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Mandel, Naomi. *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006.
- Nünning, Ansgar. “Crossing Borders and Blurring Genres: Towards a Typology and Poetics of Postmodernist Historical Fiction in England since the 1960s.” *European Journal of English Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1997): 217–38.
- “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China.” In *Resolution on CPC History*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1981. <http://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm>. Accessed November 25, 2014.
- Rüsen, Jörn. “Using History: The Struggle over Traumatic Experiences of the Past in Historical Culture.” *Historiein* [Online] 11 (2011): 14–18. Accessed April 12, 2015.
- Schmid, Wolf. “Implied Reader.” *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn et al. Hamburg: Hamburg University Press. [http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/search/node/implied\\_reader](http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/search/node/implied_reader). Accessed April 17, 2015.
- Wagner, Rudolph G. *Inside a Service Trade: Studies in Contemporary Chinese Prose*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1992.
- Wang, David, Der-Wei. *Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in*

- Twentieth-Century China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.
- Wang, Hui. *China's New Order: Society, Politics and Economy in Transition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Wang, Jing. *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*. Berkeley, LA, Oxford: University of California Press, 1996.
- . *China's Avant-Garde Fiction: An Anthology*, edited by Wang Jing. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Susanne. "Re-Imagining the Chinese Peasant: The Historiography on the Great Leap Forward." In *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine*, edited by Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer, 28–50. Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press 2011.
- William, A. Joseph. "A Tragedy of Good Intentions: Post-Mao Views of the Great Leap Forward." *Modern China*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1986): 419–57.
- www.baik.com/wiki/伤痕. Accessed December 29, 2014.
- Yang, Dali L. "Economic Transformation and Its Political Discontents in China: Authoritarianism, Unequal Growth, and the Dilemmas of Political Development." *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006): 143–64.
- Yang, Guobin. "Days of Old are not Puffs of Smoke: Three Hypotheses on Collective Memories of the Cultural Revolution." *The China Review*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2005): 13–41.
- Yang Jisheng. *Mubei—Zhongguo liushi niandai da jihuang jishi* [Tombstone: An account of the Chinese famine in the 1960s]. Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 2008.
- Yang, Xiaobin. *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-garde Fiction*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002.
- Yu Hua. "Xuwei de zuopin" [Hypocritical works]. In *Yu Hua zuopinji*, 2 [Collected works of Yu Hua, vol. 2], 277–88. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1989.
- . "Yijiubaliu nian" [1986]. In *Yu Hua zuopinji*, 1 [Collected works of Yu Hua, vol. 1], 142–80. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1989.
- . *The Past and the Punishments*. Translated from the Chinese by Andrew F. Jones. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996.
- Zhang, Xianliang. "Mimosa." In *Mimosa*, edited by Zhang Xianliang, 13–181. Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Publishing House, 1985.
- . *Wo de putishu* [My Bodhi Tree]. Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 1995.
- Zhang Yigong. "Fanren Li Tongzhong de gushi" [The story of criminal Li Tongzhong]. *Zhang Yigong ji* [Collected works by Zhang Yigong], 1–48. Fuzhou: Haixia wenyi chubanshe, 1986.