Life on a strip : essayism and emigration in contemporary chinese literature

Krenz, J.

CHAPTER 3

Essayization Inside Out:
What Happens in the Cells of Essayized Texts

At this stage we will need a quantum microscope which will allow us to (un-)read the literary discourse to its cellular and sub-cellular level: to the atomic and quantum structures of written worlds. Using techniques and tools tentatively designed in the interlude – and updating and perfecting them as best as I can whenever my methodological apparatus turns out not to match actually occurring phenomena – I will try to observe changes in the behavior of textual cells in different moments of their afterlives, i.e. during their interactions with the cultural intertext and its co-creators and recipients. By activating the texts' essayistic potential, I will attempt to get access to its most hidden and ephemeral secrets, and test its inward plasticity.

I. Who Writes Whom? Transcending the Physics of the Genre

There exists one significant group of genre-bound texts, in verse and in prose alike, which seem to be crying out to have applied to them the Einsteinian laws derived from the physics of the essay based on the idealistic assumption of unhindered interconvertibility of the intra- and extratextual reality. These are texts whose predominant function is meta-literariness: their explicit content focuses on discussing their implicit features and/or their own literary constitution. They are self-referential, self-reflexive, and, to a large extent, self-sufficient, as they create and complicate their own interior and exterior, crossing over the boundaries between them. It comes as no surprise that when looking for essayistic literature, essay theorists often turn to these works first. They famously include Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities*, and Joseph Conrad's meta-narrative *Lord Jim* (1900) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899), all taken as harbingers of an era of essayism.[1]

Chinese emigration literature, too, includes many texts that are characterized by conspicuous meta-literariness. However, I will focus on works whose meta-literariness is less absolute: it may be local, optional, accidental, contextual and controversial, visible perhaps only from specific angles and in specific places, and not in every text-author-reader constellation. Those who do not (want to) see it, usually enjoy a peaceful readerly / writerly life in a safe world that is ruled by Newtonian physics of the genre; those who (hold that they) see it may be led into endless essayization. Among the most interesting cases, effectively polarizing readers' and writers' attitudes, are those in which the allegedly meta-literary text,

[1] Cf. Harrison 1992.

on the literal level, evidently refuses to open up and interact with its surroundings, and is drawn in by other agents, seemingly in spite of itself.

To make matters more concrete, I propose to start from two radical examples. I will observe how a deeply autistic written world, that emerging from Wang Xiaoni's poem "Becoming a Poet Anew" (重新做一个诗人), and a deeply claustrophobic literary space, in Gao Xingjian's play *Escape* (逃亡), react when they are forced to transcend their literary boundaries and engage in essayistic processes that aim to re-join the written with the lived on "more appropriate" conditions. Subsequently, I will try to grasp the somewhat more moderate, but equally meaningful, fluctuations of textual matter in Gao's novels *Soul Mountain* (灵山) and *One Man's Bible* (一个人的圣经).

When a poem becomes a poet

Wang Xiaoni herself is described by her husband, the poet and critic Xu Jingya, as a kindhearted mother and wife who cherishes a tranquil home life, showing no interest in the hustle and bustle of the modern world.[2] By contrast, due to her poetry's growing popularity in China and abroad, many of her poems enjoy stormy afterlives, with essayization arguably being one of the most challenging adventures. It is difficult to say whether "Becoming a Poet Anew" was a product of essayistic thinking, but there is evidence that it has been confronted with such thinking and transformed more than once, in different circumstances and to different effect. The poem has twice become subject to capital essayizations executed by the author herself: it was first elaborated as an essay, and several years later attached as an appendix to another essayistic piece, "My Own Home" (自己的房子), in *North All the Way*.[3] But let's start from the beginning, meaning its birth and its early crimes, focusing on those against its author.

According to an authorial note under the text, the poem was written in June 1995 in Shenzhen, that is ten years after Wang Xiaoni settled there, and one year before her first collection of essays, *Exiled to Shenzhen*, discussed in chapter 1, was released. Created as a part of a poem series called "Becoming a Poet Anew", it was originally entitled "Work" (工作).[4] In 1996, Wang published an essay called "Becoming a Poet Anew", containing an explication of some of the images contained in "Work".[5] Perhaps this is why it received more critical attention and became more popular than the other three poetic texts in the series, and took on a life of its own, hijacking the title of the entire cycle. Since then, it has been rewritten more than once by the author herself. In 2007, modified and reprinted in *North All the Way*, it became a part of her essayistic *recollecting* project. Below I cite in my translation only the edition published in October 2010 in the journal *Poetry Monthly* (诗刊), in the column "Representative Work" (代表作),[6] which was reprinted in the 2017 collection of

[2] Xu 2008.
[3] Wang Xiaoni 2007: 197.
[4] Wang Xiaoni 1997.
[5] Wang Xiaoni 1996a.
[6] Wang Xiaoni 2010: 28.

Wang's poetry (again as "Work"),[7] but I will refer to earlier editions and other existent translations where I find this instructive.

Becoming a Poet Anew

At the shortest end of the century
the Earth bobs
humans bustle about like monkeys between trees.

While my two hands
dangle idly in China's air.
The table and the wind
are both sheets of pure paper.
I make my sense
happen only at home.

When I rinse the rice
whitish water drips onto my page like milk.
The gourds, at the sight of new-grown fingers
cry out in fear.
Outside the sun shines with a stab wound
snow fills the sky.

Every day from dawn to night
my door is shut.
I hang the sun at the angle that I need it
people say in this city
lives someone who doesn't work.

Walls tightly closed
sandwiched between two small glass shards the world self-ignites.
Quiet butterflies flutter everywhere
Creation unknowingly leaks out.
I predict the tiniest rustle of grass leaves in the wind
without eyes.
Without hands.
Without ears.

Every day writing but a few words
it's like when a knife
cuts a tangerine's skin to release a fountain of finely woven juice.
Let the layers of blue light
penetrate a world that's never been described.

No one sees my
silk-like finely woven light.

[7] Wang Xiaoni 2017: 144-145.

In this city I
silently work as a poet.

Judging by its title, the poem belongs in the category of autothematic meta-literature, and so it is interpreted by most critics: as poetry about poetry. To be precise, about Wang Xiaoni's poetry and its place on the "bobbing Earth". But this is what *we* know of it, or think we know of it, observing the poem and author's life from – as we think – the outside, and spotting similarities and differences between the lived and the written. We act like a child earnestly seeking the missing parts of a "deficient" copy of a picture in a book of riddles, forgetting too often that this is a quantum copy, and hence bears as many features of the external experience as of discursive textual matter that accumulates in the author's pen while writing, and of ourselves who are measuring, i.e. interpreting, it. In other words, it is as representative of the author's thought and her lived experience as it is of our reading attitude.

The more we try to capture and describe relations between the lived and the written, looking for magical Einsteinian equations that could smoothly connect them, the more we complicate the structure of the system. Let's try an excercise in imagination for a moment, and go back to a time before our "obvious" essayistic reading, trying to answer what would happen if instead, we agreed to know only as much as the poem knows of itself, and as much as it wants to tell us, and to stay patiently outside its "tightly closed walls", respecting the indirect yet clear request that comes to us from the intratextual world: do not intrude on the creation process? What if we stopped at the question of what the poem *is*, rather than asking what it is *about*? And what changes when we read and try to conjoin it with external reality?

Seen from this pre-interpretive perspective, "Becoming a Poet Anew" is a monologue of a human(-like) being who... *zuo yi ge shiren* 做一个诗人. While this phrase appears in the title and in the last line, I rendered it in different ways, as "become a poet" and "work as a poet", the latter inspired by the original title "Work". In Eleanor Goodman's translation, these lines read accordingly: "starting anew as a poet" and "serve as a poet".[8] In Diana Shi and George O'Connell's: "be a poet anew" and "[I dwell in this city / soundless and] a poet".[9] And these renditions do no account for all possible readings of the original Chinese.

The verb *zuo* 做 appears to be the most problematic. Basically it means "do, make", and it is used in expressions such as "do a job" (e.g. 做老师: 'work as a teacher, be a teacher'), and "be a human being" (做人; rather as a moral quality, with regard to a constant process of maturing, not intrinsic biological features), but also: 'make = construct / create / produce something', usually concrete and material (e.g. 做家具: 'make furniture') – in contradistinction to its homophone 作 – and also 'put on a show, pretend' (做样子). Whichever option one chooses, there is one common feature: the I-speaker does not definitely identify as a poet. The capacity of being a poet appears to be secondary to the subject's core identity, accidental, and perhaps temporary. Otherwise "I" could well say: 我是（一个）诗人 – 'I *am* a poet'.

Although in extra-textual analysis 'work', 'serve as' or 'be(come)' appear to be the only defensible translational choices, inside the textual reality, without existential context,

[8] Wang Xiaoni 2014: 24-25.
[9] Wang Xiaoni 2013.

'make', 'produce' and perhaps even 'pretend' are no less justified. Alternatively, these renditions may all be appropriate, depending on the moment – not a temporal moment, but a point somewhere on a spectrum of being. This is characterized by correlatives such as a degree of subject-ness and object-ness of textual matter, determined by what Benjamin identified as "the structuring, the inwardly plastic principle". This principle may "turn [literary constellation] inside out", to the effect that "the god [here taken as any agent from (meta)physical reality] becomes wholly an object", and "the temporal form is broken from the inside out as something animated". It finally leads to the point where

> [t]he god ceases to determine the cosmos of the poem, whose essence – with art – freely elects for itself that which is objective: it brings the god, since gods have already turned onto the concretized being of the world in thought.[10]

In light of Benjamin's words, it could be said that in the author-text-reader constellation existence becomes a transitive quality. Crudely put, it is not unlikely for the poet to be wholly "existed" by the I-speaker. Hypothetically, extra-textual reality might be entirely supported by the intratextual one. At least, the linguistic construction of the poem appears to have such potential. It covers a whole spectrum of modes and intensities of existence: from static being, through active doing, to calling to existence something else. If this still sounds a little abstract, let me concretize my thought using one more trick learnt from physicists.

The text does not say whether "I" has a pet at home, but if s/he does, this might be Schrödinger's cat, which has recently fallen out of favor with physicists and was threatened at gunpoint by their tacitly elected leader Stephen Hawking.[11] There is every reason to believe that Wang Xiaoni, who calls for *anfang* 'putting in a safe place' all living creatures (in this case, "living" is actually the most problematic epithet), would not reject an animal asylum in her written world, especially as conditions inside her poem seem perfect for this "species". Glossing over the issue of animal rights, I will proceed directly to the bottom line of Schrödinger's thought experiment,[12] explained by Eric Martell as follows:

> If you put the cat in the box [along with a vial of poison, a hammer, and a radioactive substance characterized by unpredictable time of decay], and if there's no way of saying what the cat is doing, you have to treat it as if it's doing all of the possible things—being living and dead—at the same time [...] If you try to make predictions and you assume you know the status of the cat, you're (probably) going to be wrong. If, on the other hand, you assume it's in a combination of all of the possible states that it can be, you'll be correct.[13]

Obviously, if one opened the box – that is, read the text or, in the case of the author, unlocked it with an interpretive key which is commonly believed to be in their hands – one would immediately see whether the (textual) cat is alive or dead, and what it is doing. Or,

[10] Benjamin 2002c: 32.

[11] Stephen Hawking is famously quoted as saying: "When I hear about Schrödinger's cat, I reach for my gun". For controversies around the experiment in question, see e.g.: Johnson 1996, Zimmerman Jones 2017. For new propositions based on Schrödinger's experiment, see e.g.: Crew 2016, Feltman 2016. For more detailed explanations and comprehensive discussion on the cat and its relation to the problems of quantum physics, see: Kaku 1994: 260-263; Gribbin 1984, 1996; Baggott 2004.

[12] Schrödinger's experiment was originally described in Schrödinger 1935.

[13] Kramer 2013.

more precisely, one would *make* the cat do it, by one's very observation, without any purposeful action. What the physicists describe as the "*superposition* of the cat – the idea that it was in both states – would collapse into either the knowledge that *the cat is alive* or *the cat is dead*, but not both".[14] The quantum world would be disambiguated to one of its countless parallel Newtonian systems. This might work obviously only for infinitely small and independent cats: in a literary environment, say, cats of the size of one word or one expression.

Returning to what was said in the interlude, the cat-phrase *zuo shiren* 做诗人 is an underdetermined language particle that has not been pinned down in the process of writing and still exists in its multiple simultaneous states. They are finally disambiguated in the act of reading or translating, when the poem is confronted with circumstances that enforce higher contextualization, for example a lack of an equally ambiguous word in the target language. Wang's "cat" is particularly powerful. It is given a honorary place in the title, so in a sense, its condition determines the meaning and the fate of the entire poem.

Wang's cat-phrase's actual meaning is a complex function of temporary and largely haphazard factors. One of them is the "real poet's" presence. If the author is "present for" her poem, her presence disambiguates the cat: the linguistically polyvalent *zuo shiren* 做诗人 may mean no more than 'pretending', 'enacting', perhaps 'serving as' or 'working as' a poet; that is, repeating her existence within the textual world in various ways – not always very faithfully, and not always in good faith, as we will see. While she is "absent for" the text, this signifies 'becoming' and – in the extreme case when the I-speaker's subjectivity and agency reach their peak – 'being' or 'producing' the poet anew.

As long as the author is "in her place", which is implicitly determined by the generic convention of a poem, there is also something gravitational in the Newtonian sense – or mythical, in the Epsteinian sense – in the situation described in the text. This is akin to Adam's or Jacob's struggles with God in the Bible, or Prometheus' theft of the divine fire in Greek mythology, or the doomed determination of the Chinese Cowherd who travels to Heaven to face the Goddess and reunite with her daughter Weaver Girl. Obviously, the narration of the I-speaker in Wang Xiaoni's poem is a far cry from the grand narratives of ancient times. But there is an echo.

The scene in the first stanza resembles a caricaturized Eden at the dawn of the world, when Earth is not yet stable and bounces in space, while monkey-like people, who have not tasted the fruit on the tree of knowledge, are playing in the garden. There, "making one's sense happen" is a forbidden thing, and thus may be practiced only in hiding. "I" does not have any fig leaf to cover their nakedness and face the author, the One who Is-That-She-Is, and about whom "I" knows nothing else. Instead s/he may hide themselves behind the closed door of voiceless poetic words that – according to what Wang wrote in *Exiled to Shenzhen* – unlike the essay, should not let one's inner world get through.[15] But they do.

In the first edition of the poem, after "making their sense happen", the I-speaker becomes very talkative, as if trying to reinforce their home built from language. S/he compares themselves to the sea which "never works for anyone / just breathes and thinks", and imagines themselves as living between something like one-way mirrors or maybe TV

[14] Ibidem.
[15] Wang Xiaoni 1996: 241.

screens: s/he can see the world outside, but the world will never see her/him. Finally, however, in the last stanza, s/he finds themselves in a place full of sunlight which penetrates the walls and enters the "spoken home". This brings to mind another poem by Wang Xiaoni, "A Rag's Betrayal" (一块抹布的背叛), where "I" feels themselves – in Goodman's translation – "exposed to people beyond these four walls", like "a poor bare body" that wants to hide in wooden strips of a thatched peachwood chair or to be reduced to "the pit of that peach tree seed".[16]

In the later edition of "Becoming", the perilousness of the sun is presaged much earlier: the third stanza ends with an almost apocalyptic vision of the sun compared to a knife wound, and the heavy snow which covers a wounded heaven. In this place life apparently starts to "leak out" from the poem, as if its substance were spilling out through that heavenly wound. Yet, the penultimate stanza brings a sudden breakthrough. The *written* poet repeats the *writing* poet's act in their microscopic written universe – i.e. making a sun-shaped wound in heaven – by dealing a "verbal" deathblow to the tangerine, so that it starts bleeding with silk-like (and light-like) juice. This scene, like a patricide performed on a voodoo doll, wins "I" the longed-wished-for invisibility and allows them to contemplate their own "finely woven light". This is a bloodless coup d'état by poetry, as so felicitously phrased by Wystan Auden: "poetry makes nothing happen: it survives".[17]

This is a weird, half-blind victory, achieved "without eyes[,] [w]ithout hands[,] [w]ithout ears". Tellingly, "I" does not know whom – or *against* whom – s/he survives. The collective noun *renlei* 人类 ('humanity, mankind') in line 3 says nothing about the identity of the I-speaker's rival for "being", who – as the penultimate stanza suggests – belongs to "a world that's never been described". It remains non-languagized, and hence cannot be grasped from the inside of the text by the subject, whose only sensory receptors are words. It is only through words that s/he both sends, and sometimes receives, impulses from external reality.

Seemingly, some of these words are too active, and transport more sense than "I" is able to deal with. S/he appears to be particularly afraid of "sun(shine)" (太阳, 阳（光）) and "light" (光), which put "I" into closer contact with a mythical reality beyond their horizon. These are words of high symbolic potential. From time to time they endow the written poet with unexpected, ephemeral epiphanies of the exterior, which the textual subject receives as something undesirable and painful – as a wound. This undecidable wound is a trace that the mysterious external presence left on her textual world to mark its domination and existential "firstness", which "I" merely reenacts in her written reality.

But this makes sense only when the one who is reenacted stays within the poem's horizon. Then, the I-speaker's efforts to hang the sun at a suitable angle acquire a ritual sense. They can be taken as a reenactment of the unknown, mythical external author-reader's reality; this may be a pious and zealous act, as well as grotesque and blasphemous one. In Wang's poem, it is probably the latter. This is not to say that Wang Xiaoni herself is grotesque and blasphemous or that she writes grotesque and blasphemous poetry, but that here and there, the relation of her poetry to herself appears so. The written poet is existentially utterly dependent on the author, and simultaneously utterly mutinous. Their struggles at the very basic, cellular

[16] Wang Xiaoni 2014: 21-22.
[17] Auden 2007: 246-247.

level of existence, could be interpreted through the notion of autopoiesis, borrowed by Ira Livingston from biology, and explained by him as follows:

> The short way of saying all this is that an autopoetic system is a kind of parasite; it thrives on other differentials, sources of energy, and raw materials, which it taps into to sustain its own little inflorescence, more or less unnoticed by its host. This brings us around to another version of the contradiction encountered before: this kind of autonomy can be sustained only along with an equally thoroughgoing dependence. [...] You know you have found an autopoetic system when you find together more autonomy and more dependence, more closure and more openness.[18]

What would happen if the mysterious external presence parasitized by the I-speaker were to disappear? If the vertical transport of the "substance" through the symbol were to cease? In all likelihood, "I" would not notice the difference: s/he would continue the ritual activity, still feeling "pain" in the place where the skin of the poetic world was cut by the overactive symbolic sun. However, in this case, it would be rather a phantom pain whose "material cause" has been removed, becoming a product of the imagination, one that "is existed" by the I-speaker's mind. In Benjamin's words: the godlike author would be "turned into the concretized being of the world in thought". The written poet would make the writing poet happen. The writing poet would be a byproduct of the written poet's experience of pain and uncertainty, and their effort to find explanations, contexts and an appropriate form for these.

When the poet and her world disappear, the I-speaker's working as a poet and the poem's working as the world begin to resemble the process of essay-writing, where the one who creates constructs a seemingly two-sided but really one-sided universe, whose only edge is s/he themselves. Something similar happens if she enters the poem and takes the position of the written subject. Then, the poem becomes her story – her essayistic reflection on life and writing, as readers and commentators otherwise usually tend to see it. In this latter case, she is the one who tries to become a poet anew, construct her identity and give it a textual shape, and not one who is "made anew" by her poetry. But – are these possible situations? Does the poem really allow for such re-formation? Let's have a closer look.

First, let's assume that there is only the written. Written poet, written gourds, written sun, written sky, written tangerine, written knife – all of them "make sense", or make their respective senses, freely and unrestrainedly. They all can mean almost everything. But they are not able to make *one* sense, that is, make the poem in its entirety make sense. No matter how much light they release – this light remains dark ("no one sees my finely-woven light"). Or, perhaps, the "waves" of sense they produce cancel each other out, and hence never break the barrier of language? Or, even if they break it, they leave on paper just a scattered pattern of points of interference instead of a consistent picture, as happened in the case of the first, accidental quantum experiment? We are no less helpless than the physicists who still cannot answer the question of what it is that pins down particles with originally undecided quantum states. Is it a near presence of some other bigger object that somehow binds them with itself, or does it happen under the influence of consciousness? And if so, does this mean that consciousness is a physical thing? Similarly,

[18] Livingston 2006: 84.

linguistic reality for some reason does not want to automatically interpret and disambiguate itself even if it seems to be well-structured by grammar, interpunction and line breaks. Its entropy grows, the written home bursts at the seams, but nothing else happens.

So, what is the situation like when there is only the lived – the author thrown inside the poem, in the role of the I-speaker? If everything that exists in the poetic universe comes from her? She looks strong. She can, for example, position the sun at what she deems a suitable angle. Nevertheless, she cannot control all. Small things easily get out of hand. What are these quiet butterflies (沉默的蝴蝶) – incidentally, another cat-phrase in the poem, alternatively renderable as "butterflies of silence" – that exist as both lively creatures and dead bodies of a metaphor? And what is the creation that leaks out? Perhaps these are some "free particles" of experience that escaped the consciousness of the poet and now enter into random connections with particles of language? Again, we do not know. The senses multiply and intersect, and there is no end in sight, nor a closed structure in any sense. A poem somehow protects itself from being re-made into an essay-like shape.

There is a beautiful notion of asymptotic freedom in physics, which means that in some cases the closer elementary particles are to each other, the weaker become their interactions, so they seem totally free and independent when they are divided by short distances, and when mutual distances grow, they start interacting strongly and prevent collapse of the entire structure. And this, I believe, somehow translates into poetry. You read a poem freely, adding new contexts and senses. Its form stretches out when fed with existential content, and right when it appears so broad and loose that the poem should really cease being the poem and turn into something else, for example an essay, it suddenly refuses to do so and signals that it does not want to get transformed, and becomes ever more poemlike again. Is this how all those seemingly elusive boudaries between genres work in general? (How) does this work for other literary forms? Answering this question would require much broader analyses. But during further readings of novels and plays, I will be bearing this question in mind, if only to see whether it is worth some future research.

At this point, we need to move from Wang Xiaoni's neat and tidy, and poetic "my own home" to an old warehouse.

Playing the author

The said warehouse is the setting of one of most commented-on works by Gao Xingjian, the 1989 play *Escape* (逃亡). *Escape*'s popularity is paradoxical, as in terms of artistic quality, it is arguably one of the least successful plays he ever published. If it were not for the historical-political circumstances of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, the play would likely have received much less attention. Although, to my knowledge, the author has never said so, he seems to have realized this early on, and to have spared no effort to distance himself from *Escape*.

The Chinese edition of the play was completed in October 1989, in response to a request by an American theater group for a play about China that was to be translated into English without delay. The request was prompted by Westerners' growing interest in the solical and political situation in China after June Fourth. Mabel Lee, who has translated many of Gao's texts and extensively written about his work, reports that since it did not contain any

heroic scenes of the Protest Movement, *Escape* did not meet the expectations of the Americans, who asked for radical changes. Gao did not agree and withdrew his manuscript, declaring that: "In China the Communist Party couldn't get me to revise my works, and an American theater group certainly isn't going to". *Escape* was then published in Chinese in 1990, in the first issue of the then Stockholm-based exile revival of the literary journal *Today* (今天), ten years after the original, Beijing-based *Today* was closed down by the police. Ironically, in 1991, what had not been "reactionary" enough for its American commissioners was printed in China in a government-sanctioned collection called *On the Diaspora 'Elite': Who They Are And What They Are Doing* (亡命 "精英" 其人其事), together with texts by writers such as Liu Binyan, Yan Jiaqi and Wan Runnan – as "incriminating evidence of 'reactionary writings' by 'unpatriotic,' 'anti-Party,' Chinese 'elite' living abroad".[19]

Like in most of Gao's plays, the plot of *Escape* is minimal. Two twenty-somethings, referred to as Girl (姑娘) and Young Man (青年人, literally Young Person – we will return to Gao's handling of gender issues below), hide out in an abandoned warehouse, having fled from an unnamed square that has sunk into warlike chaos and evening darkness. As they are trying to recover from the horrors they have witnessed, a third character appears, the Middle-aged Man (中年人; again, this literally means Middle-aged Person). He is a writer living nearby, who has fled his apartment after his elderly neighbor was shot to death while tending flowers on a balcony. Yet, if his self-revelations are to be believed, he fled not as much from the massacre as "from his self". Political and ideological dust-ups between the two Men constitute the main thread of the action. As we gradually discover, they flow from brutal sexual instincts to which the Girl falls victim. It is only from the protagonists' emotional, fragmentary utterances that we can guess what has happened outside the warehouse. When the Young Man goes out to assess the situation and does not return right away, the other two are sure he has been killed. The Middle-aged Man exploits his absence to enter into sexual relationship with the Girl, which may be taken as a primitive attempt to confirm his supremacy over the "defeated" adversary. But the Young Man comes back safe and sound. After a heated exchange of views revealing the misogynist attitudes of the two male characters and the emancipatory ambitions of the woman, in the final scene the Young Man rapes the Girl. According to the stage directions: they "roll around in the muddy water", the Girl "moans, then howls loudly like a wounded animal" to finally lose consciousness for a short while; "[e]verything happens slowly and solemnly, accompanied by the continuous sound of dripping water".[20]

A lot has been said about possible messages conveyed by *Escape*, in both sociopolitical and ethical terms. Chinese emigrant circles, including many "Tiananmen exiles" and democracy activists, were disappointed with Gao's skeptical assessment of the Protest Movement. Others, especially literary critics and translators, e.g. Gilbert Fong, Mabel Lee and Sy Ren Quah, wrote approvingly about the author's intellectual consciousness, which kept him from creating heroic odes and hymns in praise of the reckless youths – the students who were at the heart of the Movement.[21] Commentators who tried to focus on matters other than

[19] Lee Mabel 2007: xiii-xiv.
[20] Gao 2007: 65-66.
[21] Sy 2004: 180.

the merely political, such as Gao's treatment of otherness, interpersonal relationships and social mechanisms, especially his views of gender and women, are likewise divided. Henry Zhao, for instance, notes the playwright's social commitment and sense of responsibility, and Gang Gary Xu emphasizes his effective translation of political issues into gender discourse, but others, like Claire Conceison and Carlos Rojas, urge more critical examination of Gao's approach to femininity and masculinity.[22]

Here, it is not my aim to reassess the above-mentioned aspects of *Escape*. I would just like to note that the discussions and the disagreements originate in one common assumption, namely, that the author is close to the text, and is significantly engaged in the issues that constitute the social-historical context of his work. Largely, he is believed to be pronouncing his views through the Middle-aged Man as his textual alter ego.

Notably, Gao himself, perhaps unknowingly, encouraged such interpretations by attaching to the play a set of authorial instructions. In the first two of five points – in Gilbert Fong's translation – he claimed:

> 1) Since ancient times, human existence has been an unending tragedy. Our play is an attempt to express modern man's dilemma in the classical tragedy form. The performance should be infused with the solemnity of ritual and adopt the recitative style common in the tragedy of fate in Greek theatre.
> 2) *Escape* is about the psychology of political philosophy. It should not be made into a play of socialist realism, which seeks only to mirror contemporary political incidents. The actors should avoid representing the reality of the trivialities in everyday living. Their movement should be clean and simple.[23]

It is evident that Gao's explicit motivation was to distance himself in both space and time from the here and now of his native country. Nonetheless, what the reader sees as implied by such precise guidelines may turn out to be the opposite. No wonder, then, that his instructions backfired, and the play has been interpreted mostly as a more or less metaphorical public utterance or confession by the author, whose intention should be decoded as faithfully as possible, and judged for its philosophical and existential depth and truth. Many readers threw themselves into the play as if it was indeed a sinicized, cathartic Greek tragedy positioned on the moral high ground. They ignored the fact that the antique form was indeed used to lay out, and not to contract, the distance between Gao's art and current political issues, i.e. that it was aimed at creating a "second space" and producing estrangement, and not at domestication of the subject matter.

By reading *Escape* as a conventional classical drama, one determines not merely its logos – in fact, as the various interpretations show, meaning appears to be the least determined element – but the shape, structure and physics of the field force within the text-author-reader constellation. In all engaged readings, exemplified by several studies mentioned above, the space inside the warehouse is presented as a more or less remote paraphrase of Plato's cave. Like the prisoners described in *The Republic*, for whom the shadows cast on the wall constitute true people and things, the protagonists in the warehouse can only guess what

[22] Conceison 2001: 752, Rojas 2002, Xu Gang Gary 2002, Zhao Henry 2000.
[23] Gao 2007: 67.

happens outside, by reading the sounds that come in. As such, the ancient drama performed here has its tragic hero: the Young Man whose hubris moves him to leave the shelter and reach for the dangerous knowledge of the external world. There is also an element of the Ancient Greek hamartia, in the rape scene, unmitigated by the Young Man's immediate regret. This allows one to see the protagonist as an Aristotelian "character between these two extremes[:] that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty".[24] Ultimate ethical appraisals vary, as we have seen, depending on the spectator.

But when thus interpreted, the Platonic-Aristotelian mythical antique-ness of *Escape* also translates into levels other than just the play's action. It affects the less tangible linkage between the historical and the written world, the author and the text, lived experiences and the plot. The text itself behaves like the cave-warehouse. Whatever disappears beyond the stage made of language is annihilated from the perspective of the intratextual subjects, while for the audience, it just melts into the horizon of the author's world backstage. For example, when the Young Man leaves the "cave", from the perspective of the spectators / readers, he does not enter just "any square", as the text asserts, but it is usually taken for granted that he goes to Tiananmen Square, perceived as an important element of authorial biography.

Akin to the I-speaker in Wang Xiaoni's "Becoming a Poet Anew", Gao's protagonists are obsessively afraid of the slightest invasion by an extratextual reality that occasionally leaks into their world like the water they discover on the floor of the warehouse, dripping from an unknown source. From the middle of the play, this occupies the characters and fills them with anxiety throughout the last scene, constituting an axis of scenic spacetime. At one point this becomes also a mirror in which the actors see themselves. This dirty self-image adds to their consternation:

> Middle-aged Man: (*Gets up and walks away. He steps in a puddle of water*.) Where did this water come from? (*Flicks on his lighter and notices a puddle of water beneath his feet*.) Where's the leak?
>
> Young Man: (*Comes over to have a look*.) It didn't seem to be there when we first came in.
>
> Girl: Maybe someone didn't turn the tap off properly? Let's go find the tap. (*Gets excited and hurriedly goes to get her dress*.)
>
> Middle-aged Man: (*Lights up the source of the water with his lighter*.) It looks like the water's coming in from outside...
>
> Young Man: Maybe they broke a water pipe at a construction site somewhere around here?
>
> Middle-aged Man: Who knows?
>
> Girl: (*Squats down by the puddle and washes her dress. Smells it*.) Yuck! Smells like mud! (*Gets up. Throws the dress away*.)
>
> Young Man: Maybe the water seeped in from an underground sewer. (*Climbing up the scaffold and looks down rather childishly*.) The place'll soon be flooded and turn into a swamp!
>
> Girl: It'd be good if it really became a swamp. Then nobody'd be able to come in here.

[24] Aristotle 1902: 45.

> Middle-aged Man: (*Watches by the side of the puddle*.) The water's flowing very slowly, as if it's not really moving. It's probably been like this for a while. (*Looks down intently with the light from his lighter*.)
> Girl: What are you looking at?
> Middle-aged Man: A mirror.
> Girl: Pardon me?
> Middle-aged Man: Right now it's calm and smooth, just like a mirror. You can see yourself in it. And it looks so deep and so serene...
> [...]
> Girl: (*Closes her eyes.*) It's only a puddle of dirty water.
> Middle-aged Man: You can't really be sure which is more real, the dirty water or the reflection. The simplest things are always the hardest to understand. [...][25]

To use another term from Greek antiquity, an assumption of the author's minimal engagement in, and control over, his work transforms the play into an agon, similar to what takes place in "Becoming a Poet Anew". The text, not always loyally and well-intending, enacts its godlike author. But regardless of how it "plays", this is the author who is inevitably judged by the audience, both aesthetically and morally, through the (im)perfection of the written world.

Clearly, this is not what Gao Xingjian would desire for himself or for his play. Throughout his career, he has consistently tried to convince his readers that the distance separating him from Tiananmen should not be so recklessly passed over, and encouraged the audience to join him in his escape from everything, including his own works. He argued that true art does not need historical reality, the author's patronage or the readers' interest to survive, for "it is not up to Don Quixote whether and how the windmills turn".[26] According to Gao, the power of literature rests in language which engenders the world. For all the intellectual and philosophical effort that has resulted in his theory of universal existential flight, still only a small minority of his audience tends to accept Gao's total emigration and his absence from political life and his own works, and hence also grasps an essayistic moment in that it is the text that transforms extratextual reality into an object of its experience – not the other way round. A similar situation takes place in Wang Xiaoni's "Becoming" after "exiling" the author. She tries to prevent by inscribing her poem into bigger, stronger Möbius strips and making it integral part of her experience and literary strategy in autobiographical essayistic book *North All the Way* and the interpretive essay "Becoming a Poet Anew".

As an interpretation of *Escape* that creatively explores the artistic and conceptual potential of this essayistic moment I would point to the first part of Belinda Kong's *Tiananmen Fictions outside the Square: The Chinese Literary Diaspora and the Politics of Global Culture.* Kong takes to heart the playwright's reflections on displacement. With a "diasporic eye"[27] she traces emigrant discourses in and on his works, to conclude that a significant part of these originates not in Gao's life, but in his literary output, and before all else in *Escape*. She argues:

[25] Gao 2007: 34-35.
[26] Gao 2001: 21.
[27] Kong 2012: KL 843.

> From social resistance to spiritual purging to self-salvation, fleeing fulfills ever more escalated functions for Gao, even as it becomes ever more singular as a means of human survival. It is at once a psychological attitude, a sociopolitical posture, and a metaphysical ideal. That Gao's most commonly used word for flight or escape – *taowang* – derives from the title of his Tiananmen play is of central significance, as I will explicate below.[28]

Unlike many other critics, Kong underscores differences and disproportions between the sociopolitical background and the play's action. She undermines also a common conviction that it is the author himself who speaks through the written author, the Middle-aged Man:

> But if there is one significant difference between Gao and the Middle-aged Man, it is surely their degree of distance from the massacre itself. This difference of location, I would argue, matters essentially. As much as Gao fashions the Middle-aged Man in his own image, it is patently not the case that he at any point lived on the threshold of Tiananmen's violence. [...] If anything, given that *Taowang* [Escape] precedes Gao's many essayistic formulations of existential flight and political noncommitment in the 1990s, we can say he has gone on in the post-Tiananmen decade to compulsively write and rewrite himself back into the play, in the exact image of his protagonist.[29]

The above rendition of *Escape* displays how the text actively curves the non-textual spacetime and makes it gravitate toward the written core of the constellation, and also comes close to acquiring the ability of re-creating and re-experiencing this on its own terms, according to the textual rules. Here, the warehouse – or the text – is no longer a contemporary analogy to Plato's cave. Instead, it brings to mind a postmodernly recycled Platonic chora, the 'margins of a polis', explored by Plato in *Timaeus*: the undecidable interval between being and non-being, the Receptacle of all forms ever born in the universe, which accommodates ongoing creation, like a womb, or a matrix, of the cosmos. Plato argues

> that Being and Place and Becoming were existing, three distinct things, even before the Heaven came into existence; and that the Nurse of Becoming, being liquefied and ignified and receiving also the forms of earth and of air, and submitting to all the other affections which accompany these, exhibits every variety of appearance; but owing to being filled with potencies that are neither similar nor balanced, in no part of herself is she equally balanced, but sways unevenly in every part, and is herself shaken by these forms and shakes them in turn as she is moved. And the forms, as they are moved, fly continually in various directions and are dissipated.[30]

Quite aside from the discrepancies between various contemporary choras, theorized by scholars including Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, John Caputo, Judith Butler and Richard Kearney,[31] translating Plato's original reflection into metaliterary language, one may say that in the space generated by a choraic text all things simultaneously exist and do not exist, and are both true and false, and that therefore neither cognitive engagement nor a subsequent

[28] Ibidem: KL 852-855.
[29] Ibidem: KL 1117-1126.
[30] Plato 1929: 52d-52e.
[31] Kristeva 1984, Butler 1993, Derrida 1995a, Caputo 1997, Kearney 2011.

alethic judgment is possible. The work projects, or produces, extratextual reality, including its own ostentatiously absent author and the audience excluded by Kong from the constellation (it is only the author who "writes himself back"), but it does not concretize, differentiate or individualize them. While they "sway" inside its space, the existential substance flows from one to another and divides itself between them in various proportions: sometimes the author becomes more real, and sometimes the reader.

This coincides with the ambitions of Gao's creatorly, *re-collecting* essays that were tangentially discussed in chapter 2, but it does not mean that one's essays must catalyze the essayization of other works. As Kong convincingly demonstrates, in the case of Gao such compatibility plays a pivotal role. But, for example, in the oeuvre of Wang Xiaoni the essayistic potential of poetry seems often unwelcome, and the author attempts to nip it in the bud – also through the form we know as the essay, which she employs to explain and contextualize her poems within her biography. Interestingly, the different strategies employed by Wang and Gao have a near-identical side effect. Both lead to quantitatively constituted essayization, i.e. to a quantitative increase of the essay as form within their creative output.

Novels erring between history and fiction

As for Gao Xingjian's oeuvre, his novels *Soul Mountain* (1990) and *One Man's Bible* (1999) strike me as both more myth-proof and more liable to essayization than his plays. Despite clear interfaces with the author's biography, they display an abundance of techniques that make the unstable distance between the intra- and extratextual realities hard to ignore, even for those who are hungry for tidbits from the writer's life. Both books are, in a sense, realist in nature. Yet, this is not a traditional mimetic realism, neither in a naturalistic nor in an oneiric or hallucinatory guise, but rather a deictic realism. While the former is aimed at replicating certain spheres of the non-textual world, the latter is not concerned with conventionally understood copying (in contradistinction to the quantum copying discussed above, in the inerlude), or representing. Instead, it vaguely points beyond the text, subtly signaling the existence of some not-yet-defined exterior.

To clarify this, let me peer through a quantum microscope at a much-discussed feature of Gao's novels, that is his employment of personal pronouns instead of proper names. This seems particularly radical in *One Man's Bible*, where "I", still quite prominent in the earlier *Soul Mountain*, is jettisoned from a narration that is driven by interaction of "he" and "you" (He and You from here on, for legibility), and used exclusively in (self-)quotation marks in dialogues of He and You with other people. He and You refer to the same person: a playwright who left China because of persecution and lack of artistic freedom. Chapters in which the third person narrative is employed, deal with He's youth during the Cultural Revolution, while second-person passages refer to You's present life. The text mirrors the process of building and strengthening narrative identity through a constant self-interpretation of what Charles Taylor calls a "radically reflexive" subjectivity.[32] Again, without downplaying the existential and philosophical dimensions of Gao's use of pronouns,

[32] See e.g. Taylor 1989 (esp. Part II "Inwardness").

scrutinized from various angles by various scholars,[33] I would first like to obtain insight into how pronominality shapes the substance of the text itself.

At first glance, pronouning seems less possessive than naming, as naming assumes a hierarchy regulating relationships between namer and named, while pronouns produce uncertainty about what they denote. They are, so to say, half-bounded: determined at one end by textual and linguistic rules, but unconditionally open at the other end to external, non-verbal reality. A pronoun behaves like a gravitational field which pulls in whatever approaches its core. Sometimes this is an author, sometimes a reader, sometimes some other prominent figure – all of these may happen to fall into this field and become You or He. They constitute a means by which the narrator half-blindly attempts to draw the author and the reader into the horizon of her/his own world.

Perhaps in a fairly motion-less play like *Escape*, where actors speak from the same place all the time, waiting for those specific moments when the authorial world finds itself in a position parallel to theirs, and the author is right above their heads, so to say, the mythical, vertical relationship between the two realities may be temporarily retrieved, and the artifice – to use Gao's term – of the author may be filled with his real presence, as we can see in some of the Platonic interpretations of his plays. However, in the dynamic novels, such an encounter of horizons is less likely, and gives way to less obvious force fields between the written and the lived.

The written world in *One Man's Bible* is in permanent motion. The narrator is on the road, calls himself an exile, and seems to be intentionally strengthening this quality of his life. Very telling is, for instance, his passionate lovemaking in a hotel room with Margarethe, who is an embodiment of prominent emigrant discourses: a female German Jew born in Italy, traveling around the world (they meet in Hong Kong), with good Chinese and interested in dramatic moments of Chinese history, precisely those that lie at the basis of the narrator's exile. Because the narrator constantly changes his physical and mental location, He and You are heard from different places, as if someone were moving the core of gravitation which sucks in the particles of the extratextual world. Given that the author also migrates, indeed escapes, from the text – also half-blindly, as he is unable to separate the horizons of the text and of the readers, and can only try to encourage the audience to follow him – and that the readers are free to change their locations as well, obtaining a stable structure of three horizons running parallelly for a long time is all the less probable.

Indeed, only a few critics who focus on Gao's Chineseness hold views such as those of Jeffrey Kinkley, who writes that "all the while, the traveler [narrator] *enacts* the self-exile of Gao Xingjian the author".[34] Predominantly, the two novels are perceived as relatively independent, generative structures, which trigger the active "memory labor" reconstructed by Sy Ren Quah and Zhang Yinde,[35] allow to patch identity gaps, or "expunge the trauma", in the words of Mabel Lee.[36] Referring to Gao's specific use of pronouns, Zhang Yinde sums up:

[33] See e.g. Zhang Yinde 2010, Lee Mabel 2012, Kinkley 2002.
[34] Kinkley 2002: 135. Italics in original.
[35] Quah 2010, Zhang Yinde 2010.
[36] Lee Mabel 2007: ix.

> These words and actions reveal themselves to work as demon-chasers: by *giving birth* to memories, they make it possible to *transfigure* them. No longer imprisoned by the verifying memory, the recollections that emerge in this way give the narrator the possibility of reconciling himself with his past and beginning the process of *rebuilding* his identity. Thus a complicity between the "you" and the "he" is revealed behind their apparent separation: not only is the distinction belied by moments of confusion, and even of fusion, but also the "he" can *take leave of his status as a historical character* and engage in dialogue with the "you."[37]

Gao, placing himself in the position of the reader rather than the author of his novels, shares this view. In a conversation with David Der-wei Wang, he says:

> For me, it was not particularly interesting simply to use language to describe characters, a plot or circumstances. I decided that the calling of names, at its most basic level—that is, pronouns—was in itself a subject worthy of investigation. Pronouns therefore became the plot. [...] If I used the first person (I or me) then it was obvious who was being referred to. But by using "he" or "she," then a certain distance was created. By creating some distance, it gave a different perspective and allowed me to create an artifice. It was an artifice for me, a different perspective for looking at myself. This was not merely playing games with language.[38]

The structure of the textual world of *One Man's Bible* can hardly be taken as biblical – here meant as an epitome of the mythical – with the narrator as a writer inspired by the author-God. On the other hand, it is also unlikely for it to become the essay proper, i.e. undergo capital essayization, whether under the author's pen or in the reader's mind. Consistently highlighted distance, inner mobility and dynamics of intra- and extratextual realities, the very same features that prevent mythical stratification of the text-author-reader constellation, also hinder an essay-like conflation of these three horizons.

The author shows no interest in sticking together the ends of the strip on whose two sides his work and his life develop. He prefers to seek existential benefits from interaction with his text as the other in whose eyes he can see himself. Also, the written world seems to be owing its vividness and attractiveness to permanent, sophisticated manipulations targeted at the author's reality rather than to a totalitarian desire of incorporating this sphere once and for all, and being identified with its creator. Readers' reactions are unpredictable, but here, too, a clear tendency can be distinguished: among a good twenty interpretations of *One Man's Bible*, I have not come across any study that might have resulted from the actualization of the liminal "essayistic moment", and treated the book as an essay or a collection of essays. Although, hypothetically, the He chapters could be – rather unappealingly – analyzed as a series of *recollecting* essays, the You sections could be seen – no less drearily – as essayistic *collecting*, and the rare face-to-face confrontations of He and You as *re-collecting*.

*

I hold that in Chinese emigration literature, especially among works that somehow process historical, sociopolitical background such as the Cultural Revolution or the Tiananmen Massacre, there are many texts whose reading may gain from the dynamics of the

[37] Zhang Yinde 2010. Italics in original.
[38] Gao 2009: KL 137-140.

continued essayization process – as opposite to "capital" essayization – i.e. not tamed by the author's re-writing or reader's re-reading the text as the essay proper. Although it easily gets out of hand and the processes it initiates seem endless, all in all, on the strength of asymptotic freedom, it somehow restrains itself and does not destroy a poem's poeticness or a novel's novelness. My choice of works in the preceding pages was purposely confined to texts containing verisimilitudinous portraits of writers, which reveal maximally varying authorial ways of self-positioning vis-à-vis their textual artifices, and provoke maximally varying readers' responses. This becomes evident especially in places where linguistically underdetermined free particles of a text are left – such as Wang's cat-phrase *zuo shiren* 做诗人 and Gao's pronouns – and it is the reader whose intervention makes the text congeal into a specific shape. The emigrant biographies of the authors in question additionally catalyze this dissociation of interpretations, as readers variously project the author's movement in geographical space into their movement within and in relation to the text and "catch" the author in different places. This selection was aimed at demonstrating the scope of inward plasticity, i.e. the possible modes of the text's existence while this is involved in specific entanglements. I tried to test this plasticity by reappropriating distances between authors, readers and texts, and their respective positions; in most cases, for practical reasons, treating the texts' locations as constants, and the authors' and the readers' locations – including my own – as variables.

Images obtained by confronting the works' various entanglements and interactions with other particles of text and life during the process of essayization will not allow us to produce any final interpretations, successfully grasping the essence of the works under scrutiny. What we arrive at resembles quantum clouds of probability instead. Every text exists not *in* a cloud – arguably, even with a big dose of luck, we will never be able to pin it down – but *as* a cloud. It is its own (im)probability. Conceivably, this does not refer exclusively to texts displaying essayization. Let's say, rather, that tracing threads of essayization is but one of several effective ways of painting the clouds. In chapters 4 and 5, I will consider how, why and to what effect authors perfect and govern the firmaments of their oeuvres by reshaping the probability clouds of their texts. Prior to this, however, I would like to examine one more type of cloud, this being heavier stuff than the relatively innocent cirruses we have been watching so far.

II. From Life-Writing to Live Writing

The present section will consider examples of so-called life-writing in its personal, autobiographical variant. As previously, I will examine literary portraits of writers. This time, however, the criterion will be not verisimilitude, but veritableness. I will be observing if and to what extent the law of the genre by which the author and their work are supposed to abide on the strength of the "autobiographical pact",[39] in Philippe Lejeune's phrase, limit the inward plasticity of a text, and what happens if this limit is exceeded.

The answer to this last question depends, of course, not only on the offense itself, but also on who it is that supervises the process of the law's execution. In practice, there are two

[39] Lejeune 1989: 3-31.

possibilities. First: audiences, i.e. readers or their representatives such as critics, other authors, various institutions. Second: the author themselves as their own most rigorous judge. By and large, the former is often a decisive factor in broadly defined witness literature, while the latter plays a particularly important role in what in the discourse on literary autobiography is usually referred to as confessional writing.[40]

I will focus on two books representing the above currents of life-writing: Liao Yiwu's *June Fourth: My Testimony: From an Avant-Garde Poet to a Lower-Caste Political Prisoner* (六四：我的證詞：從先鋒派詩人到底層政治犯, 2011; translated into English as *For a Song and a Hundred Songs: A Poet's Journey Through a Chinese Prison*) and Su Xiaokang's *Self-Record of Spiritual Kalpa* (離魂歷劫自序, 1997; translated as *A Memoir of Misfortune*). Both works and their pre- and afterlives betray their authors' attempts to reconcile form-seeking with truth-seeking, as a milestone on the road to more fundamental reconciliations: Liao's reconciliation with society, and Su's reconciliation with himself. The texts' inward plasticity appears almost unlimited, just like in the examples of fictional writing discussed previously, but their linguistic surface and the rules of the genre evince little flexibility, and need to be re-done if one wants to continue their pursuit of the existential Whole. In both cases this finally happens during the process of translation, in its conventional, lingual sense. This turns out to be an opportunity to shrewdly switch old generic pacts with new, liberal ones, that legalize essayization and allow it to be performed openly, on the surface, with underdetermined free particles – just like Wang Xiaoni's cat-phrases – exposed in the very titles of the books in question.

From testimony to travelogue

The core story of Liao Yiwu's *June Fourth: My Testimony* begins in circumstances that are characteristic of his young years: on a bus, on his way to the train station. In the morning of a cold day in March 1990, Liao, an avant-garde poet who had failed the university exams and had been leading the life of a wanderer, was heading to Beijing. He was carrying in his bag a tape with the film *Requiem* (安魂) he had made together with some friends in Chongqing right before the trip. The film was based on a poem by Liao that was dedicated to the victims of the Tiananmen massacre. After getting off the bus, he was approached by police officers, pushed into a car, and taken to the Investigation Center. Thus began a five-year journey through police offices and jails.

Released in 1994, Liao could not find a place for himself. Feeling abandoned by friends and despised by family, and no longer able to write poetry, he continued wandering. Soon his aimless loitering started morphing into a more active attitude, that of a reporter. In several volumes published in Hong Kong and Taiwan, he gathered dozens of interviews with people from the lowest rungs of society: political activists, former landlords, Christians and so on. After the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, he tried his hand at investigative journalism, disclosing evidence of the local authorities' negligence in regard to the quality of construction work. In April 2011, denied permission to travel abroad, he illegally crossed China's border with Vietnam. From there he flew to Germany, where he settled. Four months later his

[40] Cf. Czermińska 1987, 2000.

account of the life of a political prisoner *June Fourth*, smuggled out from Mainland China after many failed attempts, was published in Taiwan and Germany.

There is a bitter irony concealed behind what might appear to be a stroke of luck and Liao's double victory over the communist system in 2011. Since the fateful Spring of 1989, he has been torn between two attitudes: that of a witness who wants to stay as inside as possible, and that of a refugee, wanting to escape from his country, even if this would mean death. This is how he recalls the first weeks after the massacre:

> When I was alone in the hotel, I was gripped by the urge to correspond with friends. I wrote letter after letter, adopting the tone of someone who might soon leave this world. While invoking the foulest images to condemn the government, I also declared repeatedly that I wanted to run away. I vowed to earn some money, bribe a coastal fisherman, and glide across the sea. Each time I saw old friends and acquaintances, I would play the "Massacre" tape and gauge the reaction to my reading. I never intended to be a hero, but in a country where insanity ruled, I had to take a stand. "Massacre" was my art and my art was my protest.[41]

Years spent in prison intensified this inner conflict. As strenuously as Liao was trying to complete and publish manuscripts of *June Fourth: My Testimony*, confiscated one by one by the police, he was also seeking opportunities to flee from China. Once he finally escaped and could free himself of this inner struggle, his testimony immediately caught up with him. Of course, this did not happen against Liao's will. He wished to speak out. But perhaps he was not yet aware how uncomfortable it can be to speak for a long time standing in a witness box, and how little indeed one is allowed to say in this (dis)position.

Many books are marketed and interpreted as testimonies, but not all are entitled to this epithet. Hardly any author officially signs the "testimonial pact" with the publisher and, consequently, their readers. Technically, it is no more difficult than any other autobiographical contract. It commits the author to tell the truth in an unambiguous manner. Its style should be maximally transparent, without figurative language, as this could deform or obscure the message, and distract readers from the reality that was witnessed. Any visible markers or triggers of essayization are obviously forbidden, too. In quantum terms, the truth must not be measured. Openly provoking readers to do so, for example by leaving some fissures in a factographic narration that may suggest that the text is not a closed, complete structure, is wrong. Of all of autobiographical subgenres, it is arguably testimony that is most seriously questioned during what Laurence Kritzman identified as the post-Montaignean crisis of autobiography after its confrontation with the paradigm of the essay:

> The Montaignian self-portrait, therefore, is one that is out of joint, and accordingly it aims to question the supremacy of the "auto" of the biography. [...] Like Jacques Derrida four centuries later, Montaigne engages in a process of "auto-immunity" that produces a crisis of what might have become autobiography; the teleological imperative that appears to underlie autobiographical narrative is registered in its infinite difference: "This is a record of various and changeable occurrences, and of irresolute and, when it so befalls, contradictory ideas:

[41] Liao 2013: 40-41.

whether I am different from myself, or whether I take hold of my subjects and in different circumstances and aspects" (III.2, 611).[42]

But the testimonial ban on essayization goes further. It also prohibits and prosecutes clandestine essayization, that is: any attempts at reconfiguring mutual relationships and distances between author and reader, and between them and the text, in search of a better form, even if this does not affect the text's surface aesthetics and surface meaning. Authors seen to violate this rule, or seen to provoke readers to do so, have been mercilessly judged. This happened, for instance, to Elie Wiesel whose case will be briefly revisited below.

The crucial point of many theoretical discussions on witness literature is a conviction that the prerequisite for testimony is not only the author's presence in the past situation that was witnessed, but also their – minimally psychological – immersion in this reality at the moment of testifying. This is literature written, as Horace Engdahl puts it, in the "perpetual present tense":

> One does not become a witness only by observing an event with one's own eyes. A witness is a person who speaks out and says, "I was there, I saw it, I can tell people!" As an act of speech, testimony is inseparable from this kind of self-reference and from the accompanying claim to immediate credence.
>
> Pronounced by a different person in a different situation, the same series of words could be a fable. [...]
>
> There is a clear objection to coupling testimony with literature. What we normally require of true evidence is the opposite at every point of what we usually allow in a literary work, since literature enjoys the privilege of talking about reality as it is not, without being accused of lying. It is also evident that testimony can be mimicked as can every other way of using language. [...]
>
> Only testimony with its perpetual present tense and its direct touch can lift out of us this delusion and destroy the semblance of necessity, logical end, and meaning. [...] The other dilemma that brings the two [literature and testimony] together may be expressed in the following paradox: the true witness is the one who cannot testify.[43]

Such reasoning, if taken to extremes, leads some theorists to the conclusion that the perfect, unblemished figure of a witness is an abjectly debased prisoner called *Muselmann* in the Nazi concentration camps. In Agamben's interpretation: a mutilated and muted individual reduced to the bare *zoe*, "the non-human who obstinately appears as human [...] the human that cannot be told apart from the inhuman".[44] In the gloomy light of this logic, any kind of witness literature and of literature at large, is a deviation from this dubious ideal: "the value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its centre it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority".[45] In Primo Levi's words cited by Agamben:

[42] Kritzman 2014: 53-54.
[43] Engdahl 2002: 3.
[44] Agamben 1999: 82.
[45] Ibidem: 52.

> We, the survivors are not the true witnesses…we survivors are not only an exiguous but also anomalous minority. We … did not touch bottom. Those who did so, who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the 'Muslims', the submerged, the complete witnesses …[46]

In witness literature in the strictest sense, leaving is a taboo. Once brought into the narration, explicitly or actualized by readers, leaving is often treated like (an irrational kind of) guilt, and as invalidating the testimony. Let us recall here the story of Elie Wiesel, to whom Hu Ping compared Liao Yiwu in the Introduction to *June Fourth*, albeit apparently with a different intention, and referring to another aspect of his witnesshood. Wiesel's opponents would justify their accusations of his bearing false witness with the argument that he would not want to confirm his "self-reference" and reassure the audience's "immediate credence" by showing the prison number tattooed on his arm, which, he claims, he has not removed.[47]

Having every physical, psychological or textual tattoo of the past ordeal numbered and catalogized, and being held accountable for their "improper maintenance" is uncomfortable. Attempts at nursing the collective memory in the bodies and the minds of witnesses are but another side of the biopolitical coin with which they were paid in death camps, gulags and prisons for their will to inform the world of what happens inside the walls. Obviously, hardly any reader will raise such unreasonable – to put it mildly – demands. Still however, echoes of such reasoning are discernible in many debates, and the discourse around the Tiananmen massacre is one of those that lay bare its tricky mechanisms. And not only Western audiences with their irredeemable Orientalist syndrome are to be blamed for their clearly self-contradictory attitude, in expecting pure testimonies from emigrant writers who are, essentially, "survivors" that have not "seen the Gorgon", and in rating their books based on the extent of the author's immersion in the reality described. Among the Tiananmen exiles themselves, too, many arguments have come down to haggling over who was "more inside" the Square and hence has a righter right to speak, and a truer truth to tell.

But back to Liao Yiwu. In 2011, in the middle of his drifting life, we see him entering the ocean of world culture, voluntarily tied to his truth like Odysseus to the mast, in Wang Jiaxin's metaphor from "London Essays", at the mercy of the elements, unable to steer a ship that is made from text. Its boards seem too high to allow anybody to jump in and help him. He cannot cry for help, because he does not know the language. He looks unprepared, as if he believed that the ship is strong and well-balanced enough to take in all the water pushing in from outside during the storm, without sinking. This is not a caricature, but a faithful metaphorical reconstruction of a black grotesque painted by Liao's fate which translated also into a gloomy mental image that lingered in his consciousness for many months after he reached the other shore – and, as he said,[48] made him unable to feel at home

[46] Ibidem: 33.

[47] Their arguments were collected by Carolyn Yeager on a website: www.eliewieseltattoo.com titled: "Elie Wiesel Cons the World: A Website Dedicated to Exposing the False Testimony of the World's Most Famous Holocaust Survivor".

[48] Private conversation with Liao Yiwu in May 2012 during his visit in Poznań on the occasion of receiving the 2012 Ryszard Kapuściński Award.

in his new place. Hopefully, adding some past and future spaciotemporal background to this picture will slightly light it up.

According to Liao's preface to the Chinese edition, the first version of *June Fourth* were laconic notes he had made on scrap paper and envelopes while in prison. Based on these, in 1995, one year after leaving prison, he compiled the first manuscript of the book. This is probably when he signed the testimonial pact, with himself, and only with himself, being still very much inside, immersed in his loneliness and hardly believing that anyone else could be interested in acting as the second party of this agreement. The manuscript was confiscated by the police during one of countless searches in his home in Chengdu. In the conversation with Jiayang Fan, he recalls:

> At that time, the only people who came looking for me were policemen. In Chengdu, you felt that you were so quickly abandoned and forgotten. It's likely that that generation of people had totally forgotten. Then you began to remember. You remembered, remembered, remembered. You felt you had to write it all down. As for what the future held, it was hard to say.[49]

It took him three years to write the text anew, only to have it seized again in 2001. The 2011 edition is the third.[50]

About the former two, we can only speculate. In terms of compliance with generic conventions, the earliest manuscript was probably the purest, the least processed testimony, with a virtually undisturbed self-referentiality. Later on, the non-testiomonial factor must have started to play a more and more important role. And arguably, Liao may have intuitively felt that his isolation could not last forever, and sooner or later he would have to renegotiate his position in society and in his writing. But he did not disentangle the knot. Instead of breaking or redefining the old pact with himself before it saw the light of day, he chose to rewrite the reality, so that it would still "fit in". His whole life, claims Liao, with reference to Wang Xiaoni's poem "Those I Don't Know I Don't Want to Know" (不认识的人就不想再认识了), is nothing but an endless process of leaving prison.[51] He extended the testimonial situation to make it encompass also the spacetime stretching outside. But he might not have expected how far this space would soon spread: that from this psychological strait between China and the West, he would get to the open ocean.

As a poet, Liao achieved a certain mastery in taming metaphors. He used to be very efficient at disabling metaphorical and symbolic usage, narrowing the space between signified and signifier and limiting the reader's interpretive space. And he expertly used those skills in the Chinese edition of *June Fourth* to protect his truth. But he was not technically versed in essayization. He tried to throw all the poetry out of the narrative and into the appendices, as well as his correspondence with a friend outside the prison walls, as if he wanted to make sure that the boat was tightly closed, and perhaps prevent the reader from jumping in and changing its course. However, when he eventually let the exterior aboard, all his years "after", all his further readings on the Holocaust, on the Soviet Gulag, and his masters and soulmates: Solzhenitsyn, Wiesel, Kundera, Kapuściński, Fučik, named in the narration and asked to

[49] Liao & Fan 2014.
[50] Liao 2011b: 3, Liao 2013 (Preface).
[51] Liao 2011b: 215.

support his testimony – they turned everything inside out. They demanded a more spacious ship, or minimally one with better infrastructure: separate rooms below deck to "make their senses happen" without being disturbed. Liao's one-cabin-one-mast vessel with the author tied in its center would no longer do, especially if they were to sail to the ocean. So they untied him and forced him to re-build – and luckily so. As it happened, Liao soon had the chance to register his ship anew, in another place, under another name, within a new contract, and under a new law. With the indispensable help of his translator, Huang Wenguang.

In my view, rebaptising *June Fourth. My Testimony: From an Avant-Garde Poet to a Lower-Caste Political Prisoner* in Huang Wenguang's rendition as *For a Song and One Hundred Songs: A Poet's Journey Through a Chinese Prison* was not just a cosmetic enhancement or a market trick even if it was intended as such. Purposely or otherwise, in cooperation with Liao, Huang drew the most radical conclusions from the inward plasticity of the literary work. Some adjustments had been made already in the German translation *Für ein Lied und hundert Lieder: Ein Zeugenbericht aus chinesischen Gefängnissen* (2011) by Hans Peter Hoffmann. Compared to Huang's intervention, Hoffmann's version still counts as a faithful translation, if only because it left untouched the essential function of the book as a witness record (*Zeugenbericht*). To shed some light on the transformation the text underwent in the hands of its English translator, let me make a brief comparison of the pacts signed with Liao's name on the Chinese- and English-language covers.

First, what can one say about the identity of the signatory? In *June Fourth* the narrator-to-be is referred to as "I" ("*my* testimony"), whose subjecthood appears unstable and devolves from that of an avant-garde poet to that of a lower-caste prisoner. In *For a Song*, the subject is a poet who experiences the ordeals of the journey, yet this experience does not affect the core of his identity. He could be imagined as a modern Dante traveling through a human-made hell. The book lays no explicit claim to being a testimony; consciously judging by the cover and the title in its literal sense, it may be taken as something between travelogue and reportage.

Second, who is the target audience? The form of the testimony implies the existence of some "external world" that the witness addresses and that is supposed to act as a tribunal judging the oppressors – even though it sometimes judges the witnesses instead. In turn, the dedication *For a Song and One Hundred Songs*, borrowed from Liao's 1990 poem "Written for a Song and a Hundred Songs" (为一首和一百首歌而作),[52] redirects the communication and makes it circulate inside the milieu of one person – the poet. The "energy" flows constantly from his life to his songs. And the other way around, for this is poetry that lends him identity and ensures the position from which he may safely pronounce his truth. In this cosmos, as Benjamin – who is, incidentally, one of Liao's favorite philosophers – would say, it happens sometimes that "poet and poetry [...] are not differentiated". The poetry, taking up Benjamin's reflection, preserves not just his bare existence, but the law established by him. It helps him recover his self-respect and, as Liao claims in the last sentence of the Epilogue, a "sense of dignity"[53] of the homo sapiens: the "wise man" capable not only of *being*

[52] Liao 2011b: 478-479.
[53] Liao 2013: 390.

somewhere, but consciously reflecting on his whereabouts. Too often, this is put in doubt in the case of witnesses. Peter Englund points out that

> [w]hen it comes to *understanding* an event, a process, or an era, the importance of eyewitnesses cannot be challenged: "I know because I was there." When the same event, process, or era needs to be *interpreted*, their footing is less stable: "I know although I was there."[54]

Third, from where does Liao speak? In *June Fourth*, probably from inside prison or the gates of prison, which he psychologically still cannot pass. In *For a Song*, where he underscores the Chineseness of the place, feasibly – at least mentally – not just from outside the prison, but from outside his homeland, putting himself in the shoes of someone for whom China is not an obvious context, and who needs geographical markers to localize the book's plot. He has already perpetrated the act of the leaving that constitutes a taboo in the testimony genre. Moreover, he feels free to project this experience onto textual matter, and in the title emphasizes the importance of this gesture as the beginning of a new order in text-author-reader constellations.

According to the Translator's Note, *For a Song* is the author and translator's attempt at reconfiguration, re-contextualization and (Western-)reader-friendly presentation of the threads contained in the Chinese version.[55] In a sense, this specific travelogue is the safest formula for the new pact, if only because it presupposes many calculated risks that might result from the author's being on the road. These include confrontations with and constant re-measuring of his own life and text by new readers, changing environments and languages, and measuring himself against these; which implies the increased possibility – or, perhaps, the danger – of essayization. Together with lifting the taboo on emigration, the said travelogue-like formula lifts the taboo on essayization, allowing for the text's various reconfigurations and different disambiguations, as it enters into entanglements with author, readers and contexts, within or outside China's borders. And by lifting the taboo on essayization, the updated generic pact also lifts the taboo on the re-socialization of the witness. The new installment of his work requires the author's and the readers' joint search for form. Sharing his truth, the author shares also his responsibility for it, both material (readers are co-responsible for its maintenance and further circulation) and formal (they are involved in the process of creating coherent and transparent individual forms for it). Here, the essayistic crisis of autobiography turns into an opportunity, one of possible responses to Nancy Miller's postulate that:

> Perhaps it is time to understand the question of relation to the other—to others—as being as important, foundational, to the genre as the truth conditions of the "autobiographical pact." Not the exception but the rule. Put another way, in autobiography the relational is not optional. Autobiography's story is about the web of entanglement in which we find ourselves, one that we sometimes choose.[56]

Readers are still free to take the book as a testimony, but never at the cost of the author's freedom. The inner structure of such an entanglement is different from that of the testimony

[54] Englund 2001: 54.
[55] Liao 2013 (Translator's Note).
[56] Miller 2007: 544.

genre. The one who ties themselves to the mast of truth is the reader. The reader's presence inside the text, their re-experiencing of signified reality through language, makes up for the author's absence, which is no longer perceived as a trespassing. S/he lends their own subjecthood to the author's textual avatar. This is what, for example, Hertha Müller does, in a sensitive and tactful manner, in the foreword to the English edition:

> Liao Yiwu's literary art is such that the sarcasm found in his sentences is always shown to be the other side of pain. Testimonial passages alternate with poetic ones, and the resulting mix not only bores into the brain, it presses against the stomach. [...] Like the author, his language has swallowed disenfranchisement and torture, it roars and whispers all at once and finally frees itself. [...]
>
> I am happy that Liao Yiwu managed to come here to Germany, to this foreign place, instead of landing in prison. For him it is a bitter happiness, far more so than we can comprehend. [...] Bitter happiness is not something that carries us away, it has to be dragged along. It reigns over us with all its "other-worldly tenderness." [...]
>
> Liao Yiwu will not be allowed back home in the near future. But bitter happiness is cunning, it intentionally mistakes homesickness for the absence of homesickness. And it is an excellent master of the subjunctive. It says very bluntly: you really never wanted to be the way you would have had to be if you'd been allowed to stay home. This particular subjunctive is not used to express a wish: it is a conclusion. It drives away all melancholy, knowing full well it will come back without going away. But then the master subjunctive comes back, too.[57]

Müller accepts and supports the author's leaving in every sphere of existence, from linguistic through physical to psychological. Herself showing other-worldly tenderness and respectful empathy, she fills his painful subjunctives with wisdom drawn from her own experience of life under Ceausescu's regime in Romania and the hardships of her subsequent emigration. In this other world there are, I believe, many readers who, like her, are able and willing to read Liao's work in a way which does not betray that ounce of trust they were finally given by him – at the same time expecting that he will not abuse their confidence. The pact of the generic law makes way for the pact of trust.

Confusion – confession – memoir – reprint

If one looks at the 2012 Taiwanese edition of Su Xiaokang's work, and is lucky enough to understand both Chinese and English, one is faced with a perplexing palimpsest of different generic definitions of the book. On the bilingual front cover, vertically, from right to left, in two rows, is written: "離魂歷劫自序 [lit. 'self-record of the soul's / spiritual kalpa'] / 增訂版 ['expanded edition'] // A Memoir of Misfortune / Enlarged edition".[58] Never mind the accuracy of the translation which has to negotiate discrepancies between Chinese and Western genre systems, each of these two headings by itself looks confusing enough, if not oxymoronic.

If we stick to rigorous definitions, both "memoir" and "self-record" – which are indeed worlds apart in terms of implied writing and reading attitudes – have limited

[57] Liao 2013: xiii-xvii.
[58] Su 2012.

possibilities for "enlargement". Not as limited as testimony, but still. If they were written out of experience and personal memory, what else can be added or amplified? Don't memories naturally tend to shrink and disappear rather than grow and multiply? Was the first version (self-)censored or the second fictionalized – for instance, to meet the needs of the market, like remakes of cult movies – and is what is "enlarged" is, so to say, mainly the author's ego? Either way, the original and extended versions seem to undermine one another's credibility. If one is taken as trustworthy, then the other automatically loses authenticity. In sum, the book may be either a self-record / memoir, *or* an enlarged edition. Yet, as hopefully shown in the previous section, such an over-suspicious approach does not necessarily benefit the reader, nor does it do justice to the work and its author. Therefore, instead of nitpicking, I propose to look at those three "keywords" as terms marking three respective stages in the author's understanding of his own writing. Let's start from the zero hour.

Su Xiaokang (b. 1949) was an investigative reporter and social activist who made his name in mainland China as co-author of the controversial 1988 TV series *River Elegy* (河殇), which caused a national debate about China's future and its relationship to Western culture. In 1989 he supported the students during the Protest Movement, and after the crackdown found himself number five on the government wanted list. He was smuggled to Hong Kong, stayed briefly in Paris, and settled in Princeton. As a "visiting scholar" – with some self-mockery, Su places the expression in inverted commas – he became a member of the Chinese "elite in exile" (ibidem). Only after two years were Su's wife, Fu Li, and their four-year-old son Su Dan permitted to join him abroad. Reunited with his family, he believed the worst was behind him, and even started enjoying life as a celebrity:

> The exile wife shopped, cooked, entertained guests, and minded the child, while the husband did one thing—gave interviews. The description in the diary is a perfect capsule of our life in Princeton, true for every family here. Journalists flew in from all over the world, with their cameras and recorders and flashlights, flashing their way right up to Fox Run, following their subjects even to their English lessons and their driving tests.[59]

Then, on 19 July 1993, Su and Fu were in a terrible car accident, rending their new life to shreds. Su woke up from a coma one week after the crash to learn that Fu remained unconscious and would probably never be able to move or speak again. This is the "misfortune" with which Su has been trying to cope, and which pushed him to write and publish the first edition of *Self-Record* (1997), translated in 2001 as *A Memoir...*, and in 2012, "enlarged" and republished in Taiwan.

The accident, as Su has stressed, was a turning point in both his life and his approach to writing. Before, he had been indulging in what he now assesses as a deceptive and destructive pseudo-romantic myth of exile cultivated by the emigrant community. After, all the myths proved useless. The accident deprived him of all metaphysical illusions and made him unable to comfort himself with any elevated value. Confronted with Fu Li's helpless "bare life", he completely withdrew from public and social spheres, and focused on satisfying her most basic needs. Before, he had started writing a neat and tidy *Diary of Exile* (流亡日记), to be like many famous emigrant writers. After, his writing became an amorphous mass of

[59] Su 2007: KL 1926-1929.

words, illegible even to himself. What finally emerged as *Self-Record* had originally not been intended for publication at all. In 1997 Su recalls:

> For the last couple of years, however, as I kept Fu Li company, I felt the compulsion to write and couldn't let a day pass without putting down something on paper; after putting it down on paper, I never looked at it again. For the first time in my life I was writing without being conscious of what I was doing. In China we had prided ourselves on being the unique species of the animal kingdom—the animal that "crawls over paper." It was the only activity we deigned to pursue. Some relied on interviews, some on collecting data, some on scholarship, and then there were the superior species who relied on inspiration or imagination, calling it "creative writing." I suppose I had also dabbled in "creative writing." But reduced to my present state, my writing seemed instinctive, a cry for release, an impulse to empty out something on a daily basis. As I "crawled" along, for the first time I did not have a readership in mind, and no desire to turn my crawlings into print.[60]

Su's crawling was much less than catharsis, often associated with (creative) writing, and, as he notes elsewhere, it was not aimed at any other kind of self-healing.[61] If it could not heal Fu Li, it could not heal him. Su does note that writing would give him some pleasure.[62] Nevertheless, this was by no means pleasure in and of itself, but rather a side effect of a daily physiological activity, just like eating and drinking, which, for all their compulsoriness, can still provide satisfaction. Or like what Su euphemistically calls "emptying out something on a daily basis", as a source of the most basic feeling of corporeal freedom. David Der-wei Wang referred to Su's writings at that time as a "testimony of disaster".[63] Indeed, these notes, if published "unprocessed", like Liao's scrap paper, feasibly would have much in common with what is theoretically the purest form of testimony, with one significant difference. While testimony is driven by the witness' will to communicate the ineffable, this writing seems to have been aimed mainly at disposing what otherwise might have been in one undesirable way or another discharged in interpersonal communication, either with friends, or with Su's son, or with Fu Li herself.

Later on, Fu did in fact get better and with her slow recovery Su's spiritual condition also started to improve. When he could think again about more elevated values, such as giving his wife a feeling of safety and rebuilding family life, the need for privacy and intimacy set in, as did the experience of embarrassment and shame. At that stage, also the need for a form for his writing grew stronger. Before the first publication of the book the author hesitated:

> Writings thus put together reveal purely private feelings and should not be made public. I doubt if one's personal life experiences, however unusual, are worth sharing with others. Of course if you have packaged it in exquisite literary form, that is another matter. Readers can at least enjoy your verbal skills. But in my own case, I discover as I write this afterword that I am bad at packaging and have no desire to do it. But can I just spill everything out so bluntly? Nowadays in the United States, it seems to be the thing. In nonfiction some people expose

[60] Ibidem: KL 3405-3412.
[61] Su 2012: 19.
[62] Ibidem.
[63] Su 2007: KL 3460.

> their private lives and are applauded for it. But what I am spilling out is not only myself but Fu Li—all that she went through in her pitiful unconscious state—it is her privacy; does she want me to write it out?[64]

As he did not know how to package his text, he followed the advice of a friend, Yu Yingshi, who proposed the title "離魂歷劫自序" (self-record of soul's / spiritual kalpa').[65]

The word *jie* 劫 preceding "self-record" (自序) in the Chinese title also occurs in other contexts than the religious, and could be well translated as 'disaster, misfortune'. Yet in the context of Su's book its religious etymology, which was effaced in its subsequent English translation, is crucial. In Buddhism and Hinduism, "kalpa" means a period of time between the creation and recreation of a world, whose beginning and end are usually marked by heavenly signs and catastrophes. In the course of Su's actual narrative, the word appears precisely in this context. It attests to author's attempts at localizing himself and his generation against the background of History writ large, and to his efforts at gaining access to a spiritual world in which, at the same time, he ultimately finds himself unable to believe. His self-record at that stage is, more than a memoir, a confession addressed to a God who, as Su says, "has left", [66] and hence every word of remorse and self-incrimination recurs to him as an undelivered message, overburdening his consciousness and conscience.

The bilingual palimpsest of the title was probably designed by the author or his publisher for marketing reasons. Still, I hold that it accurately reflects the process of the author climbing the Maslow pyramid from its lowest level of "physiological needs", to which Su was thrown by the accident, through the subsequent levels of "safety", "love / belonging" (social needs), "esteem", to the highest, i.e. that of "self-actualization".

In Su's initial writing strategy – that is when it emerged after years of "physiological writing" where both creative authorship and readership were completely irrelevant – the form appears decidedly a-essayistic. I would not go as far as to say that it is resistant to essayization, but to all appearances, it is reluctant to any kind of reconfiguration, by its author or its readers. One is not supposed to pay attention to petty literary matters when important things happen in life. The notion of a self-record sets the boundaries of textuality quite tightly. The text gets access solely to basic facts of everyday existence, and only helps fulfill fundamental needs. The notion of a memoir mobilized in the English translation slightly expands these limits, signaling that the literary contract also includes the writer's right to the reconfiguration, selection and artistic processing of experience, as if Su had now reached Maslow's esteem level, which means longing for values such as self-confidence, respect for oneself and respect from others. His isolation is being gradually dismantled. This is confirmed by Su's return to the broader community and through the very fact of translation, which gave all kinds of readers from all over the world access to his intimate life.

Finally, along with more or less reconfigured facts, the "enlarged edition" that appeared over a decade after the said translation entitles the author to explicit interpretation of these facts, and to an attempt to not only satisfy intersubjectively expressible needs, but also openly seek access to the pyramid's highest level, i.e. "self-actualization", by virtue of

[64] Ibidem: KL 3439-3444.
[65] Ibidem: KL 3462-3465.
[66] Ibidem: KL 2313.

aesthetic values. It is only in the last version of the book that Su Xiaokang writes about the beauty he discovered in Fu Li, and – as he feels that the appropriate Chinese equivalent is lacking – coins for it a new word, patterned after the English "beauty": *lizan* 麗贊. In the last few lines of the preface, having glorified the intrinsic virtues of his wife and the universal value of the spiritual connection between two partners, he dwells on his own metamorphosis:

> Perishment is a fact. I should experience it myself, go through it. If I don't manage, I will be destroyed and defeated. But if I manage, I will become a new man.[67]

The recent edition is not a continuation of the earlier two. The narration begins and ends with exactly the same stories told in exactly the same words. Indeed, narrative "extensions" and reconfigurations throughout are not particularly salient. Yet, they bespeak an essential change in the author's self-positioning, and in the work's ontology.

Step by step, the writer withdraws from the text, as if he broke the last glass ceiling in his life and in his text, the one that divides a static "esteem" undergirded by fixed laws of nature and morality from a "self-actualization" that hinges on the individual's creativity. The esteem is the object of Su's pursuit as mirrored in the confessional self-record and in the memoir, while the self-actualization is discreetly intimated by the gesture of "enlarging" the autobiography. In a sense, in spite of the equally limited, more or less factual content, the last edition, unlike the earlier two, remains inwardly open-ended. It transcends itself throughout and becomes truly interested in actual life, or – with reference to Livingston – makes use of its autopoetic potential:

> Boundary negotiations (in bodies, for example) do not take place only where skin meets air or where food is being digested; such negotiations are going on everywhere "inside" as well, at the cellular and the molecular and the atomic levels. [...] We are fractal creatures, crazed through and through with cleavages. If you look closer at a feature that seems firmly in the interior, you are likely to find the hairline fracture, the edge, that joins it to the outside. To cultivate this way of looking—to learn to see performativity—you really just have to follow through on the mandate to look at nouns and structures until you see them as participles and processes: an edge is an ongoing negotiation rather than a structure; or to take it from the legalistic to the ludic, the party was going on before the guests showed up.[68]

In the latest edition of the *Self-Record*, the party is finally morally allowed, and not considered as an inappropriate disturbance of the grave seriousness of life. All the clandestine negotiations, including essayization as a negotiation of form, can come to the surface, and advance the process of self-actualization. The text is permitted to penetrate and influence extratextual reality, trying to adjust itself to a dynamic existence, and vice versa, to curve it to its shape. The author agrees for his life to be re-read and himself to be "co-existed" by his own text. He makes this clear to his readers not only in a vague subheading on the cover, but also explicitly in the preface:

> [Rereading and rewriting this book after fifteen years] demonstrates that only from a certain distance can one find another truth. It allowed me to also find the Source from which I escaped

[67] Su 2012: 21.
[68] Livingston 2006: 83.

> fifteen years ago. Then I hardly saw that behind burning emotional suffering, there was something more: a total spiritual and psychological collapse. I did not realize that our story is indeed that of a mental paralytic accompanying a physical paralytic.[69]

It is also in the preface that Su accepts that his wife's tragedy has become a "cultural event" and a "collective concern" among Chinese emigrants, and that it has started an independent afterlife not limited to his own experience and his writing, and that it influences and re-creates the surrounding reality.

But the most important reason why Su Xiaokang is interested in performative and creatorly functions of textuality is Fu Li, whom he treats now as his most important reader, and for whom the book became an opportunity to live the unlived time, and "self-actualize" herself after long years on the margins of existence:

> She is now reading herself. After the horror of losing memory, she can again find herself and her son, countless times she would cry silently, countless times, while closing the book, she would sigh and praise me: how come I didn't know before that you can write? This is my greatest reward.[70]

*

Needless to say, the second part of this chapter was not aimed at questioning Liao Yiwu's radicalism or Su Xiaokang's suffering, or suggesting that either could have taken other itineraries than the arduous roads they traveled in their writing since 1990 and 1993, respectively. Nor does it imply that the English *For a Song* is better than the Chinese *June Fourth*, or that *A Memoir of Misfortune* surpasses the *Self-Record of Spiritual Kalpa*. As far as my personal readerly experience is concerned, especially in the case of Liao's book, I even preferred the Chinese edition because it is less smooth, and imposes a slow, careful rhythm of reading. If the reader should wish to seek any axiological dimension of my ponderings at this stage of the research, I shall add that my concern was mostly about relationships between truth and freedom.

The situation of testimony can be disadvantageous and indeed destructive for a witness. It establishes an artificial contradiction between truth and freedom, instead of pointing to possibilities of their coexistence, which may be mutually beneficial and beneficial to the witness. Only while pronounced by an author who is not forced to constant "self-reference", and received by a reader who has no obligation of "immediate credence", the truth allows them enter into an equal, existential dialog. What they negotiate is not the content of this truth – as we can see in Müller's interpretation, the explicit message remains the same – but a way in which it exists and reacts to a constantly changing reality.

Something similar may be said about confessional literature, whose generic laws of truth-telling enforce secret self-censorship, usually hardly discernible on the text's surface, but crucial for its inner structure which is blocked and locked by them. In her study on the genre of confession, Leigh Gilmore unmasks its hidden paradoxes:

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[69] Su 2012: 13-14.

[70] This utterance of Su Xiaokang is used by the publisher in the book's description, as an appendix to the foreword to the 2012 edition of the work (see e.g.: http://www.books.com.tw/products/0010558845 [1.06.2017]).

> [A]utobiography recuperates the technologies of self-representation present in the confession and deploys them to authorize and deauthorize certain "identities." [...] [A]utobiography draws its social authority from its relation to culturally dominant discourses of truth-telling and not, as has previously been asserted, from autobiography's privileged relation to real life.[71]
>
> What we have come to call truth or what a culture determines to be truth in autobiography, among other discourses, is largely the effect of a long and complex process of authorization. [...] Authority in autobiography springs from its proximity to the truth claim of the confession, a discourse that insists upon the possibility of telling the whole truth while paradoxically frustrating that goal through the structural demands placed on how one confesses. "Telling the truth" so totalizes the confession that it denotes the imperative to confess, the structure of that performance, and the grounds for its judgment.[72]

I insisted on re-creating this performance on the moving boards of the quantum Laboratory Theatre, if I may borrow Grotowski's famous brand for my modest purposes, believing that the drama will not be interrupted, but will start seeking for itself a new multi-dimensional form, engaging spectators and re-engaging its director and actors; and that while being co-responsible for building a new theatrical space, all will focus more on building than on (self-)judging. Su's inwardly open-ended, "enlarged" *Self-Record* shows that this is possible. Even though no new self-contained consensual Whole emerges from those processes, just a common pursuit of it, this is still more constructive than sitting in a theatre as if in court. And a tricky, wayward truth that sets one free only to enable one to seek for it is still better than the totalizing truths of culturally dominant discourses. Especially when the book in question travels between various cultures. And so it is in the case of Liao. The two authors placed the most undecidable phrases in the titles of their books, which carries the risk of their being scandalously misread in their entirety. Even so, in the hands of a sensitive and good-willing reader who is able to tune their own movements to the dynamic of the surrounding discourse to obtain an existentially true image, the works' most basic structures and the sense they convey were not decomposed.

That tangled threads of essayization from life-writing led us to life sciences rather than to history and literary history archives, is, I think, a good sign, and a good point of departure for further reflection. In fields like emigration literature, where a significant part of entire literary production is (self-)judged according to the laws of non-fiction genres, enlivening life-writing at a structural level may contribute to vivifying the entire discourse. In the next two chapters, we will exchange the quantum microscope for a quantum telescope, to see how the (sub)atomic and cellular reactions scrutinized here translate into macro-scale processes, within authors' oeuvres and in the discursive space between them.

[71] Gilmore 1994a: 9.
[72] Gilmore 1994b: 54-55.