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

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CHAPTER 5

Aberrant Narratives?
Essayistic Fashion in Fiction

In 1990 Wang Anyi (b. 1954) wrote an exquisite novella called *The Story of Our Uncle* (叔叔的故事).[1] Being itself a fastidious combination of novelistic and essayistic techniques, the work thematizes and problematizes a transformative moment in Chinese literature in the twilight of the 20th century, through the evolution of the narrative.

Uncle is a writer. He belongs to the first generation of intellectuals who grew up after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. In the late 1950s, at the outbreak of the Anti-Rightist Movement, he was just about to start his independent adult life and literary career. Instead, deemed a "rightist", persecuted and banished to a remote village on the Qinghai Plateau, Uncle suffers poverty and disgrace through the mid-1970s. This is the mass-market edition of his life which we read at the beginning of the novella. But the story is immediately confronted by the I-narrator with another partially witnessed by the narrator, and partially heard from other people. In reality, Uncle's "heroic deed" amounted to no more than an innocuous parable published in a school magazine at a time when anything that was not socialist realism was automatically labeled as reactionary. And his "exile" boils down to being sent home quietly, to a little town, where he was assigned to work at school, first as a blue-collar worker and later as a teacher. This is the place where Uncle's story and the narrator's own story intersect for the first time. The narrator – who is male, as we can conclude from several paragraphs devoted to his rather unsophisticated attitude to women and a few stories about how Uncle "hit on *our* girls" (43) – represents the generation of so-called "educated youth" (知识青年) whose formative experience is that of being "sent down to the countryside" in their teens during the Cultural Revolution. He was subjected to compulsory reeducation-through-rustication in a nearby village. Although he did not even know about Uncle's existence at that time, and discovered the said coincidence only after Uncle became known as an author, he takes this fact as something that legitimizes his right not only to retell Uncle's life, but also to use it to "protect [his] own story".

After the Revolution, Uncle's fate turns again. His "traumatic ordeal" proves to be perfect material for bestselling autobiographical books. He becomes a literary superstar. In these new circumstances, Uncle undergoes what is presented by Wang Ban as a

[1] Citations in the following paragraphs come from the 2006 edition of *The Story of Our Uncle* (Wang Anyi 2006). Pages indicated in parentheses.

metamorphosis from a novelist-epicist who sticks to grand narratives to an essayist who withdraws from History.[2]

As a celebrity, Uncle travels the world, enjoying his status of a public figure and engaging in controversial love affairs. Increasingly, notes Wang Ban, "sightseeing and superficial impression of exotic foreign countries become the only materials he can summon: he becomes a tourist and a writer of travelogue".[3] Both his existence and his life adopt what Wang Ban calls an "essayistic mode". This is consistently questioned from an ethical point of view by the storyteller and it proves, in the words of Tang Xiaobing, to be an "unspeakable failure", existential and artistic alike.[4] Wang Ban sums up:

> [...] Emptied of historical substance and filled up with fragmentary and rambling impressions [...] [h]is writing begins to take on essayistic quality, and borders on sheer images of simulacra, getting closer and closer to those of the younger generation. [...] Tragic suffering is now only a literary category, and the "awareness of this is the hallmark of Uncle's becoming a pure writer" (225). Parallel with this essayistic quality is Uncle's changed lifestyle. He is more taken with things he would have considered vulgar, low or quotidian; he becomes more listless and yuppieish. [...] In short, he metamorphoses from an image of the epic novelist and organic intellectual to a middle-class professional writer, whose favored form is the essay and whose lifestyle takes on the "essayistic" quality of a ramble for self-pleasure.[5]

In Wang Ban's interpretation, Uncle's story is an example of the "emigratology of the essay". Unlike in most cases analysed so far, its evaluation is unambiguously negative. On the level of the plot, the translation of an existential model into a literary one leads to jointly condemning "drifting" types of life and writing. "Drift" evinces here the same dynamic structure as the cultural model of exile abstracted from Bei Dao's poetry in chapter 4, albeit deprived of exile's heroic undertones.

But fiction has another layer between fictional universes and life: narration. It may serve as a buffer zone, facilitating control over the work's essayizability. In Wang Anyi's novella, the essayization seen in Uncle's writing and life becomes wrapped into the storyteller's narration. It is absorbed into the storyteller's utterance as a fact, with which he deals as if it were part of a literary-historical process that will be overcome, perhaps by the next – that is, his own – generation. Importantly, this overcoming is achieved by means that originate in the very reality that is overcome. After all, *The Story of Our Uncle*, with its myth-dismantling, self-subversive narration is one of the most successful cases of essayization in Chinese contemporary literature. By encouraging critical and creative reading, the meta-essayization handled expertly by the skilled narrator limits the "bad essayization" of Uncle's artistic and existential activity, minimizing its impact on the reception of the work. It testifies to the narrator's attempts to resituate Uncle within History, and to build the narrator's own identity against this History. He claims: "If I don't finish this story, I won't be able to tell any other one" (1).

[2] Wang Ban 2000a:182-187.
[3] Ibidem: 186.
[4] Tang Xiaobing 2000: 326.
[5] Wang Ban 2000a: 186.

This strategy is in line with a transformation of historical paradigms. After the failure of historiosophies based on linear order which served humans for many centuries and the fiasco of the dialectic model, whose consequences the generation of Wang Anyi and the narrator of her novella experienced especially painfully, the complex structures of history once again have to be radically reexamined. This time what has been brought into particular focus is the individual's participation in the history-shaping process at its most basic subcellular level, and a need for critical awareness of what has gone before. In the words of Gianni Vattimo, in this emerging dynamic model, at every stage and in every sphere, history must be

> *verwunden*: recollected, distorted, accepted as a destiny. [...] [W]hen critical overcoming is "distorted" into the notion of *Verwindung*, history itself can no longer appear in its linear light. History reveals its "ironic" essence: interpretation and distortion, or dis-location, characterize not only the relation of thought to the messages of the past but also the relation of one "epoch" to the others.[6]

Among other things, essayization, if treated with formal awarness, may serve as a way to recode literature into another paradigm, to make it oppose one and develop in sync with another specific mode of historical existence. In the interlude, I argued that the emergence of the modern essay and the essayization in fiction in the early 20th century in Lu Xun, Wang Zengqi, Shen Congwen and other authors is evidence of literature's sensitivity to its historical environment, at a basic "physiological" level, without thematizing or making explicit the need for a connection between literature and history. Essayization's critical remake toward the end of the century, which ridiculed those who believed they had acquired "historical consciousness", may be another manifestation of this sensitivity.

Obviously, when writers take the step of "distorted overcoming" of an inherited essayistic mode, they do so with different individual visions of a new literature into which a previous literature is expected to evolve. To outline this process and the span of emerging new concepts, I propose a contrapuntal reading of the oeuvres of two authors who made brief appearances in chapter 2: Ha Jin and Han Shaogong.

I. Expanding or Shrinking? Fictional Universes in Ha Jin and Han Shaogong

Ha Jin vs. Han Shaogong. Citizen of the world vs. "root-seeker". Architect of the other shore vs. folklorist-archaeologist. Linguistic emigrant vs. native ethnolinguist. These labels are simplifications, but they highlight salient differences between the literary strategies employed by Ha Jin and Han. Thrown into an epoch touched by an essayistic syndrome à la Wang Anyi, and themselves arguably affected by this syndrome, each in his own way wrestles to subdue the wayward processes of essayization to his own conception of literature.

Cultural Revolution, "culture fever", root-seeking and root-taking

Similarly to Wang Anyi, Han Shaogong's and Ha Jin's early youth coincides with the decade of the Cultural Revolution. Han, born in 1953 in Changsha, was "sent down" for six years to Miluo village in Hunan province at the age of 15. Ha Jin, born in 1956 in the

[6] Vattimo 1987: 16-17.

northern province of Liaoning, was spared the fateful experiment of rustication but did not enjoy a carefree adolescence either. As a teenager, in 1970, he was in the People's Liberation Army for five years, following in the footsteps of his father, a military officer. Han's and Ha Jin's respective experience became their source of themes and artistic images for decades to come. Nevertheless, it was not until the late 1980s that they decided to directly process this past into literature.

Crudely put, between the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the beginning of "high culture fever" (文化热) in the mid-1980s following Deng Xiaoping's policy of "reform and opening-up" introduced in 1978, Han Shaogong and Ha Jin were looking for the right language. In that period Han published several well-received novellas and short stories. Yet, in light of his later works, these resemble exercises rather than the independent literary voice that is audible in the 1985 "Homecoming" (归去来), *Pa Pa Pa* (爸爸爸) and *Woman Woman Woman* (女女女) and reaches its full range in *The Dictionary of Maqiao* (马桥词典, 1996). According to Mark Leenhouts:

> If Han's early fictional work still betrays influence of the political novel in vogue in the late 1970s, his stories and novellas written around 1985 [...] are so permeated with Taoist relativity that they transcend any straightforward social commitment.[7]

While Han was searching for his voice, Ha Jin was struggling to master English, which would later become his first language as a writer. In 1984 he graduated from Shandong University's English faculty and enrolled at Brandeis University. There he inched toward a literary career, initially as a poet and later as a fiction writer. When in 1985 Han wrote his famous manifesto "The Roots of Literature" (文学的根) that marked the root-seeking movement in Chinese culture, Ha Jin was gradually taking root in the soil of American culture and the English language; he has said that at the time, he did not expect to stay in the U.S. beyond his doctoral studies.

There is a phase in Ha Jin's work that can be seen as a form of Uncle-like exhibitionism and catering to a Western need for Aristotelian "pity and fear". I am thinking especially about his first collection of poetry, *Between Silences* (1990), which is laced with bombastic rhetoric and martyrological overtones. In the introduction to this volume he refers to his purported historical mission in a very outspoken fashion:

> [...] I went to the army, which was a privilege that I could have only because my father was an officer then – although I was also ready to die like other soldiers at the border area between Russia and China. Unlike millions of people of my age who don't have the opportunity to study in formal schools and have to struggle with books at night schools or in adult-education programs, I managed to have some education and am studying abroad.
>
> As a fortunate one I speak for those unfortunate people who suffered, endured or perished at the bottom of life, and who created the history and at the same time were fooled or ruined by it. If what has been said in this book is embarrassing, then truth itself is cold and brutal. If

[7] Leenhouts 2011.

> not every one of these people, who were never perfect, is worthy of our love, at least their fate deserves our attention and our memory. They should talk and should be talked about.[8]

The titles of the poems in Ha Jin's collection confirm the impression one gets from the "mission statement". Between rather ocassional silences we listen to "The Dead Soldier's Talk", to the footsteps of brave men "Marching towards Martyrdom", we hear how "The Hero's Mother Blames Her Daughter", how "A Thirteen-Year-Old Accuses His Teacher", and many other echoes of History. However, as we have seen in *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin eventually realized the naivety of his thinking. With the development of his literary consciousness, he worked hard to undo various spokesman attitudes, drawing on self-mockery among other things.

To find a less obtrusive formula to rejoin life and writing and, perhaps, to dam his rhetorical effusion, in the late 1990s Ha Jin devoted himself to fiction, which is conceivably more suited than poetry to creating a distance between the author and the textual reality, if only due to the presence of the intermediary institution of a narrator. At the same time, his subsequent works remain infused with military and revolutionary imagery, and set in historical spacetime. Two collections of short stories, *Ocean of Words* (1996) and *Under the Red Flag* (1997), tell of life in the military during the Cultural Revolution, which also constitutes the background for the novel *Waiting* (2000). His interest in war-related subjects manifests itself in *War Trash* (2004), while revolutionary and political themes return in *The Crazed* (2002). Specifically this 2002 book, to which we turn in the next section, shows how complicated the relationships between the (un)lived and the written become in Ha Jin's fiction. The apparent convergence of some points from the author's text and his life may suggest that the two can be joined easily. But the context of Ha Jin's emigrant experience complicates the picture, making the places of writing (from the perspective of the reader) and the places of reading (from the perspective of the writer) unlocalizable.

Compared to those set in China, Ha Jin's U.S.-based stories from the late 2000s, *A Free Life* (2007) and *A Good Fall* (2009), lend themselves more easily to generic classifications – which, as noted earlier, define default distances and relationships between the participants of a textual constellation. The 2014 novel *A Map of Betrayal* near-perfectly fits the model of a spy novel. *The Boat Rocker*, from 2016, keeps up the momentum and takes on the motive of investigation, combining detective fiction, set in a journalism environment, with certain features of the satirical novel. All these genres – the spy novel, detective fiction and the satirical novel – assume immediate intellectual cooperation on the part of the audience, based on the reader's familiarity with the context and their knowledge and acceptance of the rules of the genre. While Ha Jin's earlier works invite essayizing readings, *A Map of Betrayal* and *The Boat Rocker* resist them. The rest of the present chapter is devoted to a discussion of this decreasing essayizability in Ha Jin, in parallel to a discussion of *in*-creasing essayizability in Han Shaogong.

Han Shaogong came to realize the pitfalls of what he calls "scar shows" and "nose-wiping contests" earlier than Ha Jin, and has tried hard to avoid repeating what he sees as the mistakes of older generations. He promoted positive values and constructive solutions

[8] Ha Jin 1990: 2.

instead of bemoaning the lost years of the Cultural Revolution. Root-seeking as an alternative to "scar literature" (伤痕文学), a movement that emerged in Chinese fiction in the late 1970s, was one of such propositions. When, over time, certain root-seekers also started to lean in the direction chosen by the older generation, Han expressed disillusionment with the throngs of nieces and nephews of Wang Anyi's Uncle. He left no doubt about his own stance on the condition of the fiction of "educated youth". This fiction, he claimed, lacked a nuanced, self-reflexive approach and the necessary distance, which he himself would try to achieve through techniques learnt from essayistic novels in Chinese (he refers to the genre of *biji(ti) xiaoshuo* 笔记（体）小说, literally 'novel in notes') and Western traditions. In a 2013 interview with the *Southern Epoch* (南方时代) magazine, he argues:

> There is already a great number of works that revolve around the "educated youth" experience, they are a big treasure of contemporary literature. But some of them betray too much self-love or self-pity. They have turned into scar-showing and nose-wiping kvetch contests. And led to distortions of memory. [...] Everybody blames someone else, who becomes a shadow without a body. Therefore, I appreciate efforts to remember historical suffering, but while we question the society [around us], we should also hang a question mark on ourselves.[9]

On the other hand, he is equally far from the opposite pole of the experience of modernity, epitomized by Uncle. If, as Wang Ban holds, the "essayistic mode" of life equals drifting without destination and meaning, then it is self-evident that Han employs essayization exactly to counteract such experience.

Han Shaogong is a master at producing illusions of distance. His experiments with conventions create an impression of a free readerly experience, satisfying modern audiences' expectations. However, in all, for reasons that will be discussed below, his reader is unlikely to stray too far from where the author wants them. The labyrinthine, narratively confusing *Dictionary of Maqiao* promises a language-driven play, but after our reading of Bei Dao's "Local Accent" among other texts, we know a thing or two about the supposed randomness of such games, and we should look into their rules. *Intimations* (暗示, 2002),[10] which may be read as a sequel to the *Dictionary*, further complicates the mutual positioning of author, text and reader. While the *Dictionary* is written against, or minimally makes unconventional use of, the generic conventions of the autobiographical novel and the dictionary, these may still be taken as certain points of reference. But *Intimations*, suggests Han, was created a-generically. He claims:

> When *Intimations* was released in mainland China, it was labeled by the publisher as a "novel". In Taiwan the book was marketed as a novel-in-notes / essayistic novel. In neither case did I protest. Someone said [the book's] form does not come under the novel at all, and this time, too, I didn't mind at all.[11]

[9] Han & Zhao 2013.

[10] The first edition of *Intimations* was published in 2002 by People's Literature Publishing House (人民文学出版)社. In this chapter I will cite from the 2013 edition published by Anhui Literature & Art Publishing House (安徽文艺出版社) (Han Shaogong 2013a).

[11] Han & Wang 2004.

Yet, as the conversation unfolds, Han increasingly accedes to the classification of *Intimations* that was proposed by the Taiwanese publisher. To justify his reasoning and anchor it in tradition, he presents his private interpretation of the early history of Chinese prose. According to it the Chinese novel originates in the *sanwen*-essay while the ancient "novel in notes" is the earliest case in point.[12] Still, essayistic-ness does not imply Han's consent to unleashed essayization getting out of (the author's) hand. In his view of things, the author carefully pre-measures and tries to pre-set "safe distances" within his textual constellations. Han has to his credit an interesting invention meant to provide theoretical support for the project of *Intimations*: an auxiliary metrical system with fixed narrative units (叙事单元) for enabling a topology of the literary universes of his essayistic fiction. We will return to this point toward the end of this chapter, taking into account the tricky features of "measuring" in quantum space.

Prior to examining individual texts, I propose to have a panoramic look at the landscapes of Han Shaogong's and Ha Jin's works. We will localize them on a map of literary discourse and consider what measures the authors take to establish the boundaries of their territories, symbolically enclosing them with a fence construed – as Zhai Yongming put it – from "time and history, imagination and reality".[13] If one's intra-textual architecture is to be practical and lasting, it cannot be built without engaging with the surrounding discourse, in multiple ways. In the next section I will reconstruct configurations of the forces within and around Han's and Ha Jin's oeuvres, by observing free particles of the intertext as these are thrown into their respective magnetic fields.

Memory and imagination as intertextual matrices

In part one we saw different ways adopted by authors to harness the intertextual potential of their works. I discussed, for example, Wang Jiaxin's attempts at broadening the scope of intertextuality and enhancing his poems to automatically inscribe themselves into trans-cultural space, and Yu Jian's poetry's aim of swallowing the intertext. Wang and Yu avail themselves mostly of textual measures to equip their works with mechanisms that may intensify certain types of intertextuality and counteract others. Han Shaogong and Ha Jin, by contrast, appeal directly to the reader's cognitive and hermeneutic abilities. Han focuses on memory, while Ha Jin underscores the role of the imagination. This is justifiable if one considers that for novels, the audience is usually broader than for poetry, and – again, usually! – in search of the pleasure of reading rather than abundant meta-textual reflection. This pleasure can continue for the full duration of reading the novel, and novel readers are arguably more susceptible to subliminal messages than poetry readers, because the latter are more likely to pay maximum attention to textual detail. Also, poetry arguably has many more underdetermined particles than fiction. In long, more or less chronologically structured novels virtually all of them are disambiguated by their context.

[12] Ibidem.
[13] Zhai 1997: 1-2.

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The analogy of memory and intertextuality has been explored by many contemporary scholars, and many contemporary writers have drawn on it. As Renate Lachmann writes, "the memory of a text is its intertextuality", and literature "sketches out a memory space into which earlier texts are gradually absorbed and transformed".[14] To this absolute literary space, no reader has full access, defined as they are by their individuality.

Regardless of its scope, the reader's involvement in textual memory is usually twofold. What, after Laurent Jenny, could be called explicit intertextuality works largely in sync with explicit memory, while implicit intertextuality encodes and decodes itself in implicit memory. By explicit memory, sometimes also called declarative memory, I mean a reservoir of consciously, intentionally revocable memories that may be accessed verbally or otherwise by a subject. Implicit memory is acquired and used unconsciously, as a background to explicit memory. It can affect thought and behavior, and the content of explicit memories, unbeknownst to the one remembering. Analogously, implicit intertextuality, according to Jenny, denotes textual realization or transformation of genre models and other cultural codes, being thus an indispensable condition of writing and comprehending any text, while explicit intertextuality consists in that the text itself informs about, or alerts a reader to, its intertextual make-up, through allusion, citation, collage, imitation, polemic etc.[15] This and similar pairs dating back to Jenny's *Strategy of Form* (La stratégie de la forme), constitute the cornerstone of memory-oriented literary studies.

As for explicit intertextuality, Han Shaogong usually does not give this much critical attention. In his fiction, citations and direct allusions appear quite frequently. They add to the discursiveness of the texts, but do not significantly influence their overall reception. The author does not care about their impact on the novels' essential qualities, arguing that:

> The novel is a relatively liberal genre, it can easily encompass poetry and drama, utilize media news and theory, there are countless examples for this. Narration is the boundary of a novel, hence as long as other non-novelistic factors do not disturb the narration, as long as they enhance it, they may be employed at will, there is no need to restrain myself from incorporating them. Considering contemporary readers' knowledgeability and their good education, as well as the rapidly growing amount of information, storytelling doesn't need to be limited to trivial everyday issues either. Quite the contrary, employing erudition and encouraging intellectual communication seems to be a new requirement for modern storytelling.[16]

However, Han's seeming intertextual liberalism is undergirded by cultural conservatism. This becomes evident in his approach to implicit intertextuality, specifically of the type that manifests itself most tangibly through the formal structure of his works. His views on implicit intertextuality, and on relations between the implicit and the explicit, specifically in its transcultural dimension, are clarified early on, in "The Roots of Literature", and have not necessarily changed much since then. With reference to Lu Xun's critique of "grabism" (拿来主义) pronounced in 1934 in the eponymous essay, Han claims:

[14] Lachmann 1997: 15.
[15] Jenny 1988: 34-37; cf. Juvan 2008: 43-44.
[16] Han & Zhao 2013.

> The time will come when conventional [规范] things will be brought back to life, and critical absorption of non-conventional things will nourish them, providing a new *élan vital*. Song-dynasty *ci* [poetry], Yuan-dynasty *qu* [theatrical songs], Ming and Qing-dynasty novels, all testify to this. Therefore, in a sense, this is not Earth's crust, but the subsurface magma that writers should be particularly concerned about.
>
> This absolutely doesn't imply conservative hermeticness and opposing cultural openness, on the contrary, only by absorbing and digesting external elements can a culture recognize itself, and enrich itself. [...] In the atmosphere of stirring reforms and constructions, "grabbing" what can be grabbed from Western science and technology, China is arriving at modern lifestyle. [...] [But] despite constant evolution, China is still China, especially in the field of literature and art, our national self is manifest in the sphere of national spirit and cultural heritage. It is our duty to release the energy that comes from new ideas and use it to recast and galvanize this self.[17]

In light of these words, Han Shaogong's concern about the "strategy of form", or – as Wu Jun calls it in Han's case – the "ideology of form",[18] comes as no surprise. In line with his holistic approach, in order to improve people's "digestion" of imported literary products, he needs to improve all other functions of the collective organism of the nation. This can be done by appealing to hidden foundations of the nation's self-consciousness, by activating implicit frames that determine the reception of particular cultural phenomena.

Writing dictionaries is one possible way of excavating forgotten, no longer active layers of cultural memory, especially those concealed in language. However – as Han told his American readers when he was awarded the 2011 Newman Prize for Chinese Literature – "[a]ll the existing theories appear to be inadequate to describe this gigantic but nameless reality, or to diagnose the inconceivably distressing predicament and abounding vitality of linguistic indeterminacy".[19] Therefore, he can only create a tiny private corpus of mutilated words, without claiming to save the linguistic universe in its entirety and variety. Another way is utilizing bigger and more complex culturally coded linguistic structures, organized, for instance, according to generic rules, to effectively cover a greater area of the map of collective oblivion. Theoretical support for such a strategy is found, for instance, in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning's study on conventions and genres as repositories of cultural memory:

> Realities and pasts are formed and interpreted through a variety of genre patterns familiar in the culture, which are generally made available through the system of literature.
>
> One can assume, however, that particularly strongly conventionalized genres are used (consciously and unconsciously) as familiar formulas to give a meaningful shape to collective experiences which are hard to interpret, or to encode values and norms. Thus the image described here of genres as 'repositories' of different systems and levels of memory comes full circle, as the genre as a part of the inner-literary memory (the memory of literary genres) is

[17] Han Shaogong 1985: 21.
[18] Wu Jun 2008.
[19] Han Shaogong 2011: 23.

> actualized in such cases and takes on a function in the cultural memory as an interpretive formula already filled in with meaning appropriate to the culture (memory genres).[20]

Perhaps this is the reason why the author, for all his declared indifference to generic taxonomies, ultimately appears satisfied with the classification of *Intimations* as an indigenously Chinese novel in notes, if only because of the chance to mobilize a broad cultural background. At the same time, this archaeological discovery unties his hands and, paradoxically, allows him to move forward in his experiments with narration. When the basic structures of this cultural background function properly, there is no need to be afraid of small deviations such as those caused by essayization. One can even allow some "careless sloppiness":

> Whereas the traditional European novel is "post-dramatic" [后戏剧], the traditional Chinese novel is "post-*sanwen*-essayistic" [后散文], they have different origins and different concepts at their base. Ancient China was the Empire of the *sanwen*-Essay. Ancient [Chinese] writers believed that literature has no fixed rules and methods ["文无定规"、"文无定法"], they preferred natural ways of creating, giving free rein to their emotions, following their heart. Having left the womb of the essay, the novel was first called "notes" [笔记] and "vernacular story (script)" [话本] and later "chapter novel" [章回小说]. It evolved in the process of narrativization, vernacularization and popularization of the essay. The *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* [三国演义] was based on the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* [三国志]. In the very beginning such novels were to some extent essayistic. For instance, in the case of "tales of marvels" [传奇] works like *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* [太平广记], it is nearly impossible to distinguish clearly between the novel and the essay. Among Ming and Qing-dynasty novels, except the *Dream of the Red Chamber* [红楼梦] which resembles European novels, the other novels [...] all betray the marks of some careless sloppiness [散漫无拘].[21]

In his early literary career, shortly after he returned to Changsha from the countryside, Han treated essayistic phenomena with a hostile distance, perceiving them as typical of the works of intellectuals and philosophers who are annoyingly ahead, in "offside position". Once he discovered that essayization can lead neither the author nor the reader beyond the matrix of cultural memory, since it is one of most basic mechanisms developed by this memory, he incorporated it in his own artistic repertoire. This is how he describes his evolution as a writer between *Dictionary of Maqiao* and *Intimations*:

> I used to believe a thought-inclined writer [思想型作家] is an invidious label, but now I think it is a glorious crown, I feel flattered [wearing it], although I'm afraid it is too big for me. I used to believe that sensations are very literary and thinking is very theoretical. A writer should rely on their feelings, avoid finding themselves on the offside position, and at all cost control their reflection. "Man thinks, God laughs" used to be a very popular catchphrase then, to which I also would somewhat recklessly submit. But the condition of the 1990s' spiritual culture made me seriously question that statement. Since we, authors,

[20] Erll & Nünning 2005: 273-276.
[21] Han & Wang 2004.

> abandoned thinking, have our sensations gained in abundance or, conversely, become poorer? Have they been more vivid or gone numb?[22]

In *The Book of Days and Nights* (2013) Han again employs the essayistic technique, this time apparently fully consciously, and taps into its strategic potential – which he may have discovered thanks to his publishers' and critics' response to *Intimations*. By looking at his "narrative units", I will investigate what specific measures he undertakes in *The Book of Days and Nights* to subdue essayization to his overall conception of fiction, and how this translates into the design of his writing.

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While for Han Shaogong, the text's topography should be based on cultural memory, Ha Jin prefers deconstructing schemes rooted in one's (sub)consciousness, and subduing their components to topographies of imaginary homelands. In *The Writer as Migrant* (2008), he writes:

> Just as a creative writer should aspire to be not a broker but a creator of culture, a great novel does not only present a culture but also makes culture [...]. [The author] should imagine what kind of cultural order the book may enter into should it succeed.[23]

> Thus, we hear the expressions "my new homeland," "my second homeland," "my newly adopted homeland," or "homeland security." We may come across lines like these: "My mother always said / your homeland is any place, / preferably the place where you die." In other words, homeland is no longer a place that exists in one's past but a place also relevant to one's present and future.[24]

Certainly, one cannot expect that the imagined "cultural order" of a "newly adopted homeland" could at once penetrate one's mind so deeply that it would function as implicit memory, unknowingly navigating one's way of thinking and writing. Newcomers absorb the constituents of local citizens' cultural identity as explicit information, as something to be actively sought if one wants to accommodate themselves to local life. Therefore for a long time it was almost exclusively explicit intertextuality that occupied Ha Jin's attention; and only explicit intertextuality was accessible to him in practice. During his university years, as a student and a teacher, he learned how to comprehend and skillfully use the American intertext. After over 20 years of living abroad, *The Writer as Migrant* still revolves around the author's cautious, strategic selection of authorities and patterns to follow. Ultimately, he sees a place for himself somewhere close to Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, V.S. Naipaul, Milan Kundera, and Salman Rushdie. To the rocks of this Parnassus he attaches the tightrope he uncertainly treads over the Pacific Ocean, from China to America.

If we compare *The Crazed* (2002), his earliest-written novel but published as his eighth, with *Map of Betrayal* (2014) and *The Boat Rocker* (2016), we can estimate the distance Ha Jin has covered. In a nutshell, it could be said that after the publication of *The Boat Rocker*, he is now as close to the Western shore as he was to the Eastern shore while writing the first drafts of *The Crazed* in 1988. The moment of his debut novel's

[22] Ibidem.
[23] Ha Jin 2008: KL 166-169.
[24] Ibidem: KL 633-635.

publication in 2002 constitutes the exact middle of this way, both temporally and artistically. At this critical moment, Ha Jin was pulled equally strongly by Chinese and American culture and had to make a decision whether or not to make the final switch from the former to the latter. After taking that step, the magnetic field of American culture would facilitate his journey, in the same manner in which the field of Chinese culture had made its first half burdensome. Threads of the explicit intertext would work like lines of this field, marking the direction and vector of the forces leading him, and consequently also his readers, onto new territory with a stable cultural topography. Not by the shortest possible distance, through Newtonian gravitation of the traditional genre-based literary system, but mostly on half-elliptical tracks like those matching poles of magnets. But first he had to survive the magnetic storm of essayization halfway.

According to Ha Jin, *The Crazed*, which later morphed into a semi-political book about the Tiananmen massacre, was designed as a conventional story about the student-mentor relationship.[25] That book, says Ha Jin, "was a long struggle. I didn't have the ability I needed to write it so I put it aside and returned to it again and again and again".[26] The plot was based on the author's experience when as a student of Shandong University he was looking after a mentally ill professor at a psychiatric hospital. Since that experience proved too personal and too ambiguous to be transformed into literature, he decided many years later to rejoin the abandoned narrative with another part of his biography. He believed that temporal and geographical distance would help to build a coherent story. Yet, the operation proved more complicated and consequential than he might have expected, in life and writing alike.

In the final version of *The Crazed*, the private and individual experience of the author takes a back seat to political and collective experience. Moreover, the intense experience of his involvement with the hospitalized professor is overshadowed by the experience of unspeakable or, as Belinda Kong proposes, melancholic absence in the place of the massacre.[27] This radical change of existential "content" is implemented in a radically heterogeneous textual space. Implicit intertextuality in *The Crazed* is constituted by the pattern of the autobiographical novel, and presumes knowledge of Chinese society that is obvious to Chinese citizens, for example the Confucian model of intergenerational relationships. This structure is overwritten with abundant explicit linkages to texts from various times and from Eastern and Western cultures, including records and narratives about the Tiananmen crackdown that are created by Chinese authors but brought into the text mostly by Western readers. And, finally, the structure is covered with the mental map of the cultural memory of the Western audiences to whom the book is addressed. The chaotic intertext produced largely in delirium by the mentally ill professor and sandwiched between two cultural maps proved difficult to digest, and caused confusion among the novel's readers. Although, of course, most critics, similar to Bei Dao's academic audience, hid any interpretational problems under generous acclaim for exilic / diasporic literature, which by its nature cannot *not* be internally conflicted. Quite aside from the value of this "common knowledge" of emigrant writing, as one surmises after reading *The Writer as Migrant*, in

[25] Jin & Fay 2009; cf. Kong Belinda 2012: KL 1831.
[26] Jin & Fay 2009.
[27] Kong 2012 (chapter two).

which he rejects notions of exile and diaspora as artistic attitudes and/or literary-critical concepts and trades them in for the concept of immigration based on "elective affinities" with a place, in Goethe's words, Ha Jin could not have been satisfied with the above interpretation of his work.

After *The Crazed* the author has written no more novels that are geographically and intertextually set in contemporary China, trying instead to locate the plot in the cultural order of his not yet fully domesticated new homeland. An interesting thing happens in *A Free Life*, which appeared in 2007. In this novel, explicit intertextual signals coming from Western culture to which the text is very receptive gradually lead the author and the reader onto the firm territory covered with the generic structures shaped by implicit cultural memory.

A Free Life actualizes two generic patterns: those of the immigrant novel and those of the *Künstlerroman* ('artist's novel'), discussed at length in the context of the novel in question by Clara Juncker and by Bettina Hofmann.[28] As an immigrant novel the book shows an immigrant's accommodating to life in America, while as a *Künstlerroman* it displays his simultaneous growth toward poethood. While for the major part of the book the model of the immigrant novel appears more active – it also attracts more attention among critics – toward the end it weakens in favor of the *Künstlerroman*, deeply rooted in Western culture. Nan, a Chinese expat, struggles hard to survive in America. He works various menial jobs, at the same time strenuously making his way to the literary world. Nan writes poetry and seeks opportunities to establish contacts with other authors. He is spiritually pulled toward literature by American poets he admires, who are often explicitly invoked in the text. One of them is Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose poetic phrase "hitch your wagon to a star" earned Nan the nickname Wagon Man among his friends. It returns several times in the book, to finally become its "moral" as explicated by the narrator in the last chapter:

> This must be the true meaning of Emerson's dictum "Hitch your wagon to a star." To be a free individual, he had to go his own way, had to endure loneliness and isolation, and had to give up the illusion of success in order to accept his diminished state as a new immigrant and as a learner of this alphabet. More than that, he had to take the risk of wasting his life without getting anywhere and of becoming a joke in others' eyes. Finally, he had to be brave enough to devote himself not to making money but to writing poetry, willing to face failure.[29]

Parallel to Nan's existential journey from "sandy Mount Capitalism" – to borrow a metaphor from Walter Kirn's review[30] – toward the realm of poetry, dense explicit intertextuality leads the reader from one generic matrix onto another. Intertextual threads work like a stream of GPS signals by the moment when the reader finally enters a well-known path along which they will be driven by implicit cultural memory. The "poetic" ending suggests to re-read the book along the lines of the Western "artist's novel" shaped throughout centuries by authors such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 1795), William Wordsworth (*The Prelude*, 1805), Charles Dickens (*David*

[28] Juncker 2010, Hofmann 2010.
[29] Ha Jin 2007: 619.
[30] Kirn 2007.

Copperfield, 1850), Romain Rolland (*Jean-Christophe*, 1904-12) or Milan Kundera (*Life Is Elsewhere*, 1973), instead of the immigrant novel.

The more rooted Ha Jin feels in his adopted cultural environment, the more confidently he follows these implicit maps based on the topography of American culture. *A Map of Betrayal* (2014) is a case in point. Unanimously accepted as a spy novel, despite its obvious explicit references to Chinese socio-cultural reality, quasi-philosophical monologues and long "essayistic" pauses in narration, the work raises little controversy as to its generic label. Also the role it purports to play, that of literature before anything else and not an act of political ambassadorship or a textual manifestation of author's exilic or diasporic identity, appears to be commonly accepted. Self-reflexive threads, monologues of Gary Shang, a Chinese mole within the C.I.A., and his daughter, are absorbed by the audience as fitting the Western model of spy novel thanks to intertextual association with the novels of John le Carré, in which, as Albert Wu and Michelle Kuo note, akin to Ha Jin's book, usually "the spy himself is morally conflicted".[31] Explicit intertextual lines of the Chinese cultural field, in turn, prove not to be magnetically active any longer. As if trying to test the durability of the generic structures and make sure about his own status within American culture, Ha Jin included a thread of Gary's daughter's travel to China, in search of the roots of the spy's ethically questionable decisions. Although this "repatriatory" motive constitutes the axis of the work's narrative, it does not shatter the re-mapped cultural-generic order. Long ago naturalized as an American citizen, Ha Jin has perhaps only recently been entirely naturalized as an American writer.

One may well ask whether recoding memory is a reasonable price for such a privilege. Isn't it the case that the book first and foremost maps the author's betrayal of his geographical and spiritual homeland? Basically, I do agree with many of the critical comments that have been made on the insufficient artistic attainment and the lack of profound, original reflection in Ha Jin's work. Still, for all my own objections to Ha Jin's literary success, I hold that this is not a fair accusation. What has changed is mostly the way of remembering. This matrix switch does not necessarily mean voluntary oblivion, or the author's rejection of the past. Of course, memory's implicit structure is a co-determinant of the selection of explicit memories, but there is also another side to the matter. To remember most efficiently we need to connect objects we want to remember to the maps of what does not need to be actively memorized, i.e. of those spaces we are most familiar with and that we enter on the daily basis. Ancient philosophers and rhetoricians knew this and built their speeches locating particular elements on imagined maps of well-recognized spaces. Contemporary cognitive and memory studies confirm their discoveries.[32] We cannot exclude the possibility that Ha Jin wants to remember better, or maybe he finds this strategy the only effective way to share memories with the people surrounding him – and his responsibility for passing them on to next generations. If Han Shaogong tries to bring his findings back to China wherever he physically, intellectually

[31] Wu & Kuo 2015; cf. Cha 2014, Cruickshank 2014, Jollimore 2014. Jollimore is the only reviewer who expresses some doubt as to Ha Jin's affinity with masters of spy prose in the words: "*A Map of Betrayal* strikes out for related territory but never really gets there".

[32] See e.g. Yates 1966, O'Keefe & Nadel 1978, Spence 1984, Small 1997, Carruthers 1998, Rossi 2000, Maguire et al. 2002, Parasuraman & Rizzo 2008. These publications represent different approaches to memory studies, from historical-sociological through to neuroscientific.

and textually travels, Ha Jin's book brings a revisited China back to America and fills the Western cultural matrix with Chinese stories.

Intra-text: narrative units

In the interview quoted at the beginning of the previous section, Han Shaogong declares his trust in readers' erudition and their ability to deal with non-narrative, i.e. mainly intertextual and discursive, constituents of his works. In the three novels under scrutiny here, especially between *The Dictionary of Maqiao* and *Intimations*, one may discern a gradual loosening of narrative structure. This implies both setting the bar for readers ever higher and acknowledging their growing freedom of reception, including the author's acceptance of all kinds of reader-triggered essayizations. Still, the scope of this freedom is not unlimited. Han measures the distances he will allow between himself, his texts and his audiences using specific "post-Newtonian" units that are introduced in the same interview:

> In the past, writers used to care only about characters and their actions. Picking up the pen, they would press forward scene by scene. Anything else would be deemed "idle writing" [闲笔] or refused a place in a novel at all. This way of thinking was limited to our observations of everyday life, to our traditional novelistic and theatrical understanding of life, and in this conception an "individual" was the basic narrative unit. Considering the broadening scope of human knowledge and sensations, narrative units can well be enlarged too, exceeding the "individual", for example encompassing the story of a group of people, like in Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* [长恨歌] whose initial chapters refer to the "Wang Qiyao's", presenting a whole category of people through one protagonist, in a somewhat sociological or ethnological way. The narrative unit can be smaller than an "individual" as well, the story can narrate, say, trivial things, this is what I do in *Intimations.* In this book I tell, for instance, a story of a hat that temporarily suspends people's fates. This situation can be likened to what happens in physics. In a Newtonian world, that is the world we see before our eyes, which functions according to certain laws, the basic unit of distance is one meter. But with the emergence of micro- and macro-science, we needed new units: light-years and nanometers to measure our world. Our reality is no longer the Newtonian. In such a world where new knowledge and new sensations, bigger and smaller than an "individual", spring up on a daily basis, can our narrative remain unchanged? Certainly not. Those passages of Wang Anyi's novel where she speaks of the "Wang Qiyao's" perfectly exemplify "transindividual" and "trans-actional" writing, at the same time being also the most *sanwen*-essayized part of her book.[33]

In *The Dictionary of Maqiao* the basic units are single words, presented tongue-in-cheek as dictionary entries. Language organizes action and leads the reader through the everyday life of Chinese villagers and their young guests from the city who were supposed to learn from peasants instead of school education. Described from the perspective of a teenager who understands Dostoyevsky but can hardly grasp the technique of milking a cow, the countryside appears as a near-mythical place that functions according to incomprehensible, magical rather than natural, laws. The work was written, as Han says in the introduction to the

[33] Han & Wang 2004.

subsequent *Intimations*, in spirit of Wittgenstein's thought.[34] The world encompassed by the narration is limited to what can be named. Broadening the reality requires broadening semantic fields of words, which Han does throughout the book by bringing to light various, often mutually contradictory or marginal, or magical, meanings and collocations that are specific only to the community that is portrayed.

To break free from the stiff construction of linguistic signs, Han wrote another book structured not according to words-as-entries, but to larger narrative units, covering the phenomena he calls *juxiang* 具象. This can be rendered as 'images', 'representations', 'concretizations' or 'figurations'. In my opinion, 'figurations' is the most adequate translation, since it invokes, helpful for Western audiences, association with an artistic movement named "narrative figuration" (in Chinese: *xushi juxiang pai* 叙事具象派) whose critical-realist approach to art was somewhat similar to Han's way of constructing narrative in *Intimations*. Every figuration constitutes a chapter, structurally designed like a micro-essay. Yet, those little Möbius-strip-like structures are not firmly glued, but, say, buttoned. Their ends may be easily unfastened and joined with others to create one, or several, longer strip(s). There are abstract figurations, like "Space", "Time", "Memory", "Love", "Identity", and very concrete ones, such as "Clothes", "Russian Songs", "Smoking", etc.

Figurations are bigger than words by an extra-lingual dimension that allows for abstract reflection and seeing things from various sides, beyond a single surface that overlaps with the semantic field of its name. As I argued in the interlude and in my analysis of Zhai Yongming's intermedial practices – and this resonates with what Han notes with regard to Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* – this spatial "surplus" empowers essayization and, on the other hand, helps to keep it in check. In a sense, *Intimations* resemble Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, though its ambition is to go one step further, not only unmasking the myths of everyday life, but recoding them. The final aim is to connect language with experience in a more complex way than the vertical relationship between signifier and signified that produces a dangerously simplified and ideologizable picture of the world. Han fleshes this out:

> *A Dictionary of Maqiao* is a book about words, and I needed to dissect the existential content of these words. I was writing and writing, and this is how the novel emerged. And [*Intimations*] is a book about figurations. I needed to extract the sense of these figurations, establish some intepretational frame for them. I was writing and writing, and what emerged somewhat resembles theory, although I didn't intend to write theory, I simply wanted to record scattered pieces of experience. In the first part of the book I tell of some common examples of secret messages, including scenes, facial expressions, faces, clothes, ceremonies etc., recording how they speak to us. Subsequently, I invite a reader to reflect together with me on the place and role of these in human life, considering also how they enter our memory, sensations, emotions, personality and finally our fates. Furthermore, we can reflect on these figurations' place and role in the society, see how they function in our education, politics, economy, violence, market and cultural tradition. Eventually, in the last, and the most difficult to write fourth part of the

[34] Han 2013: 1. All citations from *Intimations* in this section come from the 2013 edition (Han 2013), page numbers are indicated in parentheses.

> book, I look back to inspect ways in which language and figurations mutually enhance and limit, and from this perspective I consider the recent crisis of knowledge (2).

Tellingly, the initial two figurations included in *Intimations* are "Scene" (场景, 5-7), explained as a set of chiefly haphazard circumstances of a particular event or of one's life, and "Homeland" (家乡, 8-10), taken as one of the most important "scenes", since it is a natural background to the existence of every individual. The chapter titled "Scene" contains a story of a Communist Party secretary known as an unfriendly, conceited man, who, to the narrator's surprise, turns out to be a hospitable, modest person when visited at home. This metamorphosis "I" explains to himself as follows:

> I believe the secretary [at home] didn't forget about class conflict nor did he give up his hostility toward me, but it was as if this kind of hostility could erupt only in public, and hardly ever at home. [...] Much later I came to realize that human emotions frequently are but a product of certain scenes.

"Homeland" tells a similar story, from a macro-perspective. It records the case of an official known far and wide for his malpractices, but seen as a respected role model by his neighbors.

> Perhaps, this is because in the homeland, his childhood and adolescence are preserved, the situations that shaped his childhood and adolescence. That particular threshold, an old tree, the face of some adult, the smell of smoke from a kitchen chimney, all of these can revive certain feelings and suppress other, so that in this particular scenography he returns to particular lines and scenic actions, for example going to the mountains to look for his cattle or going back to one's mud hut to have a cup of liquor. Poets understand this truth. They establish scenery to strike the chords in the reader's heart by exposing them to familiar objects, to revive a forgotten innocence that resides deeply in them. Religious people also understand this.

Placing these two stories at the beginning of the book seems to be another confirmation of Han's general meta-literary concept of reconstructing home in a text and bringing the world home through this text. The aim is to "repair" reality, i.e. to restore its nature, which is fundamentally good – just like in Mozi's philosophy, discussed by Han as another figuration. And to fasten it to this spiritual soil, if only artistically, using the essayistic Möbius strip.

But does the world want to be fixed – meaning both "repaired" and "fastened"? Are readers willing and ready to embark on the upstream journey to the roots? What if they go astray?

The scholarly reception of the book shows that Han's experiment was, by and large, accepted. Of course, along with those who praised Han's mature and creative "command of form",[35] there were also critics who did not pull their punches. Yu Jie called it "the product of an exhausted middle-aged man, who has lost all intellectual and physical vitality".[36] In general, virtually all interpretations of the book have one thing in common, regardless of their evaluation of Han's work. Readings of particular chapters usually look convincing, since their reception does not pose a problem bigger than reading a micro-essay encompassing one of

[35] Dong Zhilin, "Escaping the Demon of "Language": Reading *Intimations*" (逃离"语言" 的魔障——— 读长篇小说暗示), cit. from Cai 2006: 374.

[36] Yu Jie, "Patchwork Impressions: Exhausted Middle Age" (拼贴的印象: 疲惫的中年), cit. from Cai 2006: 374-375.

many "scattered pieces of experience". But connecting tens of figurations poses a challenge. Most of the critics still seek the overarching principle at the level of the plot, just like in traditional novels, and against Han's suggestions. They try to distinguish and connect dispersed threads of stories or reconstruct unilinear biographies of persons whose names appear here and there in various chapters. As a result of such measuring in the units of the physics of traditional textual worlds, instead of those designed by Han for his work, they are bogged down in contradictions, and some in accusations. Hong Zhigang sums up some of the controversies around the book:

> The focal points of these discussions were as follows: [*Intimations*] entirely overturned traditional concepts of narration and the shape of the discourse around the novel. Moreover, it powerfully does away with the differences between novel, *sanwen*-essay, theoretical writing and other genres. By this strange transgeneric gesture, [Han] threw reality and fantasy, narration and opinions, personal experience and History into one furnace. Hence the text somewhat resembles the ancient novel in notes, while at the same time it has much in common with the modern philosophical *sanwen*-essay – there's no coherent story, no stable spaciotemporal order, and no central character that appears throughout the whole narrative. There are people like Lao Mu, Da Tou, Da Chuan, Xiao Ya or Lu Shao, who appear from time to time, but they are only transitional props used when the need arises.[37]

One noteworthy exception from this general trend is Wu Jun's "The Ideology of Form in *Intimations*" (《暗示》的文体意识形态). Wu consistently employs Han's self-designed metric system to measure also the macro-structure of the text, and discovers a surprising homology, if not a sameness, of form and content which I earlier identified as a defining feature of the ideal essay:

> Its content is about figurations but its form as such turns out to be figurational too. At the same time, due to the "coexistence of language and image" [言与象的互在], or due to the insurmountable conflict between the sense of the figuration and its linguistic expression, it has no way but accept and adhere to the suggestiveness of "language and image". I suppose that the author didn't want it to be read as a pure novel or as any other work determined by language (or any linguistic form).[38]

Perhaps it were the readers' confusion and the author's observation that in their hands the "fixed" world still collapses into chaos that urged Han Shaogong to rethink his strategy again. In *The Book of Days and Nights* (2013) he adds one more dimension. This one is not spatial but temporal, a dimension he mostly ignores in his previous books in favor of the space-oriented reflection that he believes needs special attention in the era of "essayistic rambling". In broad strokes, *The Book*'s narrative focuses on the lives of several girls and boys who were "sent down" to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, over the next thirty years or so. It explores and interrogates their personal choices. Among the protagonists there are artists and entrepreneurs, officials and workers, exiles and intellectual knight-errants, all portrayed from various angles and at different moments in their biographies. Often, as Han

[37] Hong Zhigang 2006:362.
[38] Wu Jun 2006: 359.

admits, in embarrassing ways. This is how he explains the intention that pushed him to return yet again to the same source of literary inspiration, i.e. the experience of rustication:

> It seems that thirty years is a sufficient distance, from which I can see more clearly, in close-up and in long shots, *en face* and *en profile*, from different angles, their secret wounds, deeply hidden dreams, inescapable destinies or unexpected metamorphoses. Many of these things would have been hard to grasp ten or twenty years ago.[39]

Once again he broadens the scope and freedom of reflection by providing one more dimension from which to observe the world. But this time this generous "broadening" instead proved to inadvertently tie the reader's hands. When one travels "freely" in the fictional universe of the novel along its only edge constituted by the twisted narration, at some point one is very likely to find oneself "inverted" – as described earlier, with one's heart on the right side, in the geometrical and the axiological sense of the word, that is basically sharing the author's vision and interpretation of the world.

The logic behind the concept of broadening narrative units as one gradually departs from the hard ground of historical experience and the soil from which it grew is simple. One can find analogies for it in real-life architecture. The further one goes, the less stable the inner structures of the literary universe become, and the more unpredictable phenomena appear, causing local heterogeneities in the written world. A textquake-proof structure needs an essayistically flexible base, isolated from the environment with a layer of narration. Only then can it survive semantic movements of the linguistic crust of the discourse that are caused by essayization under the surface of modern culture, and preserve the "essence" the author wants to preserve.

Writing *The Crazed*, Ha Jin was in a similar situation to Han Shaogong when Han was writing *The Book of Days and Nights*: far from all stable cultural matrices. And he, too, tried that flexible multidimensional narrative with a broad margin for essayization. *The Crazed* contains a detailed sketch of the Chinese cultural discourse from various angles. There is ample space for active reflection, and a clear time span: from the Cultural Revolution that emerges in the mental patient's memories through to the Tiananmen Massacre which marks the end of the plot and to the early 2000s when the book was finished. But, as we saw before, the "trick" did not work. Life did not fit the text. Readers were disoriented and did not know where to stand while the Square portrayed in the book was moving under their feet as they tried to immerse themselves in a literary universe. Belinda Kong's study gives an account of readers' perception problems:

> Indeed, [Ha] Jin outlines a perfect spatial counterpart to Hall's sense of diasporic identity's doubleness – to wit, the lost Square as a site similarly "framed" by two "vectors," at once centripetal and centrifugal, at once intensely craved and deeply traumatic but also ultimately unfathomable and unrepresentable. [...] The vanished Square delimits an encounter, fortuitous but far from aporetic, between this elite institutional circumstance and an instant of diasporic traumatic witnessing. Yet, without appreciating the traumatic and melancholic undercurrents in Jin's writing, one can all too easily misread or deride his compulsive imaginary returns to

[39] Han & Zhao 2013.

> China as gullible hubris or ideological misguidedness, or worse, multiculturalist collusion and calculated opportunism.[40]

Perhaps the reason for Ha Jin's architectonical catastrophe is that time, which in Han's work curves and entangles space, stands still and assumes proportions that are tiny, when viewed as relative to the size of the constellations built around the text in *The Crazed*. The spatial distance between the text and its readers equals the distance between China and America, while the temporal one is a mere thirteen years. This seems too close to employ any systematic overall projection method. Besides, fresh matter is easy to mold but there is no telling whether it will congeal in the shape desired. But counting passing years in silence was not what Ha Jin had mastered the English language for. Instead of waiting for a better moment, he started pulling himself onto firm land with a fixed topography of cultural memory as laid out through by the intertextual lines of American discourse. The closer he was, the less elastic were the artistic solutions he needed. As a result, he gradually reduced the dimensions of the narration and tightened its structures.

In 2005, Ha Jin published *War Trash*, a fictional memoir, which however soon turned out to be less fictional than its author had claimed, and he was accused of plagiarism. The work was suspected of being a near-direct translation of a real memoir of a Chinese soldier who fought in the Korean War.[41] The credibility of this allegation aside, Ha Jin arguably did not worry a lot about it, since his target audience was that of Western readers, for whom the putative plagiarism was hardly detectable – and even if it had been, it might not have been terribly discrediting, as the "authentic" image of the war-torn East was arguably what his readers wanted most. In light of the discussion of *A Memoir of Misfortune* in chapter 3, one could say that the memoir is a morally safe form of life-writing that allows for reasonable essayistic variations on what is believed to be, or approximate, historical truth. Purported fictionality unlocks additional interpretational possibilities, mostly metaphorical and allegorical ones, and enables re-connecting the text with other elements of lived reality. Jing Tsu, for instance, writes:

> The treatment of Chinese POWs appropriately touched on the sensitive nerve of the then stirring controversy in the United States over the detainees at Guantanamo Bay. In this way, the novel brought the question of historical accountability to bear on its English context as well. The novel made one historical experience into an allegory for another by using one language to speak for another.[42]

In 2007, in *A Free Life*, Ha Jin leaps onto the American shore and learns how to use American generic positioning systems. Four years later, in 2011, he published *Nanjing Requiem*, which roughly fits the Western pattern of a historical novel, taking into account a reasonable margin of "morally allowed" reader-dependent, contextual essayization guaranteed by the New Historicist thought that is deeply rooted in Western literary discourse. Finally, the year 2014 sees the publication of *A Map of Betrayal*, almost entirely measurable in Newtonian units, and

[40] Kong 2012: KL 2060-2070.
[41] More on this subject in Tsu 2010: 80-111.
[42] Ibidem: 110.

showing no suggestions that would encourage readers to tamper with quantum mechanisms seeking any other, better form than that of the Western spy novel.

Han Shaogong starts from generically conventional works to subsequently try his hand at easily essayizable narration that reaches its peak in *Intimations.* Although not fully satisfied with the effect, he ventures to take the next step and overcome undesirable effects of essayization by extending it to a temporal dimension in *The Book of Days and Nights*. Ha Jin, perhaps tired of the essayistic magnetic storms after *The Crazed* – and less patient than Han, who waited twelve years between *Intimations* and *The Book* to embark on the same subject for the third time – chooses to withdraw, year by year, novel by novel, from the quantum cosmos to finish with a 2D memory map of the other shore.

II. Three Readers

Drawing conclusions from chapters 4 and 5, one could say that the success of essayization in what – half in jest – I called oeuvre management largely depends on the author's basic understanding of their (potential) audiences and their reading habits, for poetry and prose alike. This does not need to be an in-depth market analysis. In practice, I believe, an experiential, fluid model of readership like the typology construed by Herman Hesse in the essay "On Reading Books" will suffice.[43] Since my own experience in creative writing is limited, when trying to see a reader through the eyes of an author, I will rely on Hesse's reflections, and add to his description of three types of readers my observations on the attitudes these respective audiences display toward essayization

The first kind of reader, according to Hesse

> assumes in an uncomplicated way that a book is there simply and solely to be read faithfully and attentively and to be judged according to its content or its form. Just as a loaf of bread is there to be eaten and a bed to be slept in (101).

They expect that in a text there will be a safe, fixed place prepared for them, where they will feel comfortable listening to the self-assured voice of an author, be it a bedtime story, philosophical food for thought or a lecture in some serious discipline. Hesse specifies (with some stereotyping that is fairly typical for the time when he wrote the essay):

> This reader consumes a book as one consumes food, he eats and drinks to satiety, he is simply a taker, be he a boy with a book about Indians, a servant girl with a novel about countesses, or a student with Schopenhauer. This kind of reader is not related to a book as one person is to another but rather as a horse to his manager or perhaps as a horse to his driver: the book leads, the reader follows. The substance is taken objectively, accepted as reality. But the substance is only one consideration! There are also highly educated, very refined readers, especially of belles lettres, who belong entirely to the class of the naïve… (101-102)

In all likelihood, readers of this kind would not enjoy essayization. They need a stable, reliable Newtonian narrative, not a dynamic constellation that plunges into chaos more deeply with every attempt to measure it. If they do not feel secure, they are likely to blame an author:

[43] Hesse 1974. All citations come from this edition, page numbers indicated in parentheses.

> [Such a reader] evaluates the events in a novel according to their suspense, their danger, their erotic content, their splendor or misery; or he may evaluate the writer instead by measuring him against aesthetic standards, which in the final analysis always remain arbitrary (102).

All the same, if there is any group of readers that an author perhaps should feel responsible for, it is this group, or to be precise, it is people who are currently immersed in this form of reading experience; for, as Hesse explains, everyone may become any of the three types of reader. Undoubtedly, "[e]veryone reads naïvely at times". In this hour of naïvety a reader is most vulnerable to a "message" they may draw from a text, be it purely informative, emotional or moral. It is very likely that our inner readers' naïve number one will assure us that being driven into a stable field of two overlapping generic matrices and treated with a soothing moral about "star wagons", as in Ha Jin's *Free Life*, is the highest form of participation in culture. Barthes' *Mythologies* and Han Shaogong's *Intimations* are meant to warn us against their whisperings.

Reader number two is like a clever child that can bear responsibility for themselves. Furthermore, they feel ready, if not actually obliged, to take responsibility for an author and for what they perceive as the author's weaknesses, trying to justify or make up for them in a way they believe to be appropriate. In Hesse's words:

> This reader treasures neither the substance nor the form of a book as its single most important value. He knows, in the way children know, that every object can have ten or a hundred meanings for the mind. He can, for example, watch a poet or philosopher struggling to persuade himself and this reader of his interpretation and evaluation of things, and he can smile because he sees in the apparent choice and freedom of the poet simply compulsion and passivity. This reader is already so far advanced that he knows what professors of literature and literary critics are mostly completely ignorant of: there is no such thing as a free choice of material or form. [...] From this point of view the so-called aesthetic values almost disappear, and it can be precisely the writer's mishaps and uncertainties that furnish much the greatest charm and value, [...] and a glimpse suddenly gained into what lies beyond the apparent freedom of the poet, into the poet's compulsion and passivity, can enchant him more than all the elegance of good technique and cultivated style (102-103).

This is chiefly the kind of audience that I was referring to while speaking about readerly justice as a mechanism that may trigger essayization on the part of a reader. This reader aims to arrive at a moment of total transparency, seeking an optimal location for themselves, as well as for an author within a textual constellation – especially a lost, drifting, exiled, newly arrived author, and often in the act of (post)colonial pity. Spelunking Gao's storehouse like Plato's cave, teaching the autistic "I" in a poem by Wang Xiaoni how to confront interpersonal and intertextual reality, tethering Bei Dao to his mirror image, are also ideas of this reader, or – indeed – of any person currently experiencing a text in this way.

Finally, the third reader. Who "is really no longer a reader at all". It would be irrational to expect from an author to take responsibility for such a reader. This reader, too, doesn't care much for an author, "doesn't give a hoot about Goethe, [...] doesn't read Shakespeare." Not because they lack respect, but exactly because they are so inspired that they want to go one step further, or a hundred steps, or a light-year. They are on their way to create an essayistic Möbius

strip, perhaps but an unwritten and ephemeral one, by themselves. With the unique readerly experience on "one side" and their own narrative on the "other side" – which may be an emigrant narrative, in light of the last lines of the excerpt below:

> [The third reader] wishes neither to educate nor to entertain himself, he uses a book exactly like any other object in the world, for him it is simply a point of departure and a stimulus. Essentially it makes no difference to him what he reads. He does not read a philosopher in order to learn from him, to adopt his teaching, or to attack or criticize him. He does not read a poet to accept his interpretation of the world; he interprets it for himself. He is, if you like, completely a child. He plays with everything—and from one point of view there is nothing more fruitful and rewarding than to play with everything. [...] He is a child insofar as he puts a high value on associative thinking, but he knows the other sort as well. And so this reader is able, or rather each one of us is able, at the hour in which he is at this stage, to read whatever he likes, a novel or grammar, a railroad timetable, a galley proof from the printer. [...] In this stage one can read the story of Little Red Riding Hood as a cosmogony or philosophy, or as a flowery erotic poem. Or one can read the label "Colorado maduro" on a box of cigars, play with the words, letters, and sounds, and thereby take a tour through the hundred kingdoms of knowledge, memory, and thought (104).

It is my humble hope that, along with intense intellectual explorations of the previous two types, some of our quantum leaps from textual worlds to various distant spheres of reality have also given the reader a sense of the last of the three forms of the literary experience, and encouraged them to take the plunge. Well, with one provisional caveat to be revisited in the final chapter: that they are a "private reader", not a translator.