

2. Documenting the Past

HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS AND FICTIONAL RE-CREATIONS of events complement each other in the transmission of historical knowledge, particularly after an extended period of suppressed information and a forced absence of political dissent. During the martial law era (1949–1987) in Taiwan, information about the 2/28 Incident of 1947 and the Formosa Incident of 1979, as well as their impact on people's lives, was withheld from the populace, buried behind a facade of harmonious existence under the predictable pretense of national stability and economic prosperity. Even the discussion of these and related events could, and often did, lead to dire consequences. The release of formerly classified documents concerning these events after martial law was lifted finally made available to the Taiwanese people much of the history that had been denied them. But these documents cannot tell the whole story. The gaps have been partially filled by literary works, which occupy a more privileged position owing to the poetic license their authors enjoy. It is precisely this freedom that makes it important to study how literary works represent historical events, for we must aim to “understand the manner in which historical actuality and the forms in which it is delivered to us may be intertwined: it is to know what happened in *how* it is represented,”¹ as James E. Young states in his pioneering work on representing the Holocaust. Novelists' incorporation of authentic testimony into fictional texts as a literary device in Holocaust fiction has created significant narratological consequences and raised an important question: Can documentary fiction ever really document events, or will it always fictionalize them?² This question must be asked about writers who

have used authentic material, like testimony and newspaper reports, to re-create Taiwan's past as a means of recouping the realities, however unpleasant, of those lost decades.

To explore these issues concerning the documentation of the past, this chapter focuses on two novellas. The first, Lan Bozhou's "Song of the Covered Wagon" (1988) a fictional rendering of the experience of real-life characters, narrates the life of Zhong Haodong and Jiang Biyu, who were born and educated in colonial Taiwan.³ In 1940, they and three friends went to the mainland to fight in the war with Japan, and upon their arrival in Guangdong, they were arrested under suspicion of spying for the Japanese. After being released shortly before they were to be executed, the five friends spent five years in southeastern China. When the war ended, they returned to Taiwan, just in time for the 2/28 Incident. In early 1950, both Zhong and Jiang were arrested by the Guomintang police; Zhong was executed, but Jiang was released.

The second text, Dong Nian's "Last Winter" (1979), is the story of the fictional characters Chen Linlang and Wang Rong, who come of age in Taiwan in the 1970s. Wang's left-leaning radicalism lands him in a Guomintang prison for the subversive. After first waiting for him, Chen, mistaking the lack of news as a sign that he has been executed, gets married. But then Wang is released from prison and marries An'an, who later gives birth to a baby boy. In the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Formosa Incident, a chance encounter between the then-divorced Chen Linlang and Wang Rong, now the contented middle-class owner of a bookstore/café, ends with Chen's kidnapping of Wang's son and her subsequent suicide.

These brief outlines are linear recountings of the lives of two couples in the aftermath of two major political events, the 2/28 Incident and the Formosa Incident. Neither story proceeds chronologically, however; instead, both employ unconventional narrative techniques requiring the reader's active participation. Dong Nian's story reads like a detective novel, not only juxtaposing past with present, but also framing the narrative around newspaper reports. Lan Bozhou calls on witnesses to testify on behalf of Zhong Haodong, supplementing his narrative with records of historical events.

As I will demonstrate, these techniques enable the authors to involve the reader in a joint effort of recalling a Taiwanese past and challenging the customary understanding of how history is written. These narrato-

rial strategies also raise many questions. Both stories use a technique that Young labeled “documentary fiction,” which touches on issues of writing history, creating memory, and narrating trauma. If an author intends to highlight the supremacy of people over their amorphous national history, which is usually written by those in power, how much space should be given to historical events and how much to the individual? Is it even necessary to situate the individual in historical events? How should the author define and represent a victim of historical circumstances, and does the inclusion of moral superiority or personal accomplishment heighten the injustice of political persecution?

Sharing a number of similarities and differing in other aspects, both works reflect the political climate and representational politics in Taiwan. To be sure, the relatively relaxed censorship policy gives Lan Bozhou more creative freedom than Dong Nian had. Lan’s work, written and published one year after martial law was lifted (1987), deals with real-life figures and their travails in the first half of the twentieth century. Dong Nian’s story, completed immediately after the Formosa Incident of 1979, is a fictional account that had to pass censorship under martial law. Both feature left-leaning historical and fictional young men and women, some of whom were either executed or imprisoned. Moreover, both Lan Bozhou and Dong Nian incorporated documentary material into their texts. Together, these two works shed light on not only the strategies of documenting the past but also the politics of representing radicals and activists at a tumultuous time.

“SONG OF THE COVERED WAGON”

Lan Bozhou’s narrative adopts the form of personal testimony, having three witnesses speak directly to the reader about Zhong Haodong’s life: an individual identified as Zhong Shunhe, who was arrested with Zhong; Zhong Haodong’s wife, Jiang Biyu; and Zhong Liyi, Haodong’s younger brother. Following a roughly linear progression, from Zhong’s birth in 1908 to his execution in 1950, the story opens with a preface followed by five chapters, whose titles are those of movements in a musical composition, and ends with an epilogue. Each chapter is divided into subsections whose headings further identify stages of Zhong’s life. At various points, brief accounts of political

events, as well as quotations from the diary and writings of Zhong Lihe, another brother of Zhong Haodong, are inserted as the preface, or prelude, to each movement.

Authenticity Versus Artificiality

When reading Lan Bozhou's story, we are immediately confronted with the question posed by Zhan Hongzhi, the editor of the collection in which this story was reprinted. In his brief comment on the story, Zhan declares that "Song of the Covered Wagon" is his favorite story of 1988, one that he recommended for the Seventh Hong Xingfu Short Story Prize, which Lan ultimately won. "But," Zhan writes, "I must first resolve a thorny issue: 'Is this fiction?'"⁴

Zhan's solution is to apply a Russian Formalist approach in his reading; that is, fiction can be defined simply as "an art form that constructs a plot with words to narrate a story."⁵ He goes on to observe that "Song of the Covered Wagon" incorporates all the elements of a good story, and "it just so happens" (*pengqiao*) that everything in it, including the personal testimony, is factual. The effort to re-create through witnesses' accounts "ignores the fact that anything processed by memory is already fiction. Imagination and memory can be names for the same thing."⁶ Ultimately, whether or not this story is fiction should not concern us here; what deserves our attention is the fissure opened up by Zhan's dilemma. As Zhan claims, if the author's intention is to restore history, how does he do that?

Yang Xiaobin claims that Lan Bozhou creates the atmosphere of a roundtable discussion through the narrative strategy of journalistic reportage, which produces multiple voices, all of which touch on the same person, but from different angles. There is, however, no contradiction among the voices, because each repeats and reinforces the single voice of the author. Yang is critical of both this strategy and the descriptive section headings (for example, "Pure and Simple Feelings for the Motherland"), which reduce the work to "the glorious theme of the biography of a revolutionary" and turn the story into a "standard interpretation of Grand History."⁷ A scholar of postmodern theories, Yang obviously based his criticism on a deconstructive denial of subject position, and his reading of authorial intention can be substantiated

by the circumstance of Lan's writing (the photographs and eyewitness accounts).⁸ But these features should probably be regarded more as characteristics of a literature of atrocity than as Lan's failure to complicate the historical narrative. As John Treat points out, one of the strategies "to circumvent the pitfalls of rhetoric and figural structure is, most commonly, to be as literally 'historical' as possible so as to preclude the corruptive effects of language."⁹ Obviously concerned that the controversy surrounding a long obscured event would be further obscured, Lan Bozhou chose to present Zhong's story in the most literal form of historical writings. In other words, Lan's story should be contextualized in the historical background of four decades of silence and oblivion.¹⁰

What deserves our attention is not the illusion of Grand History but the implication of this representational model—the testimonials—itsself. The "interviewers' questions do not merely elicit testimony but quite literally determine the kind, shape, and direction [that the] survivors' stories take."¹¹ When reading the eyewitness accounts, we have to be aware of the potential, though perhaps unintended, manipulation of the interviewer's questions, for "the subtle urging of an interviewer, who after all is no more than an emissary of the outsider's point of view, can lead a witness to shift from one form of memory to another, and indeed control and shape the content of each."¹² In writing "Song of the Covered Wagon," Lan draws liberally from his interviews with Zhong's family and friends but never tells us the questions he asked or the format of the interviews. We get the impression that these eyewitnesses have spoken voluntarily, which falsely conveys a sense of autonomy and authenticity through the representational style. In addition, "the aesthetic and moral implication of what amounts to the author's abdication of creative responsibility rest[s] not in the verifiability of individual facts but rather in the premises which underlie an ostensibly undoctored reconstruction of historical events. The very claim to historicity lends such works a certain authority."¹³

While Lan may be concerned, as other docu-novelists are, that "the essential rhetoricity of their medium inadvertently fictionalizes the events themselves,"¹⁴ the more realistic strategies he uses only reinforce the fictionalized, constructed nature of his narrative. For instance, as the story opens, we are introduced to the first eyewitness, Zhong Shunhe, and are immediately drawn to the word "pseudonym" (*huaming*) enclosed in parentheses under the name. But as readers of a

fictional work, we do not need to question the identity of Zhong Shunhe (or why Lan does not use his real name).¹⁵ It certainly is possible that this particular eyewitness did not wish to be identified, as the interviews that provide the material for this story must have taken place shortly before or immediately after martial law was lifted in July 1987. Nonetheless, whether this was a narratological decision or a genuine concern, the word “pseudonym” appears to make the account more authentic, suggesting that Zhong Shunhe is a real person who participated in the actual event and that the risk of political persecution has forced him not to identify himself. The pseudonym creates only the illusion of authenticity, not authenticity itself. By highlighting a presence—Zhong Shunhe (pseudonym)—the author introduces the possibility of an absence—the real Zhong Shunhe—or the agency of this locutional act. It simultaneously convinces and dissuades the reader by raising doubts about Zhong Shunhe’s identity, authenticity, and existence.

Another feature that casts doubt on the presumed authenticity is the structure of the story. In the preface/prelude, Zhong Shunhe recalls his own arrest, along with Zhong Haodong, and Haodong’s unsuccessful reeducation and eventual execution. Zhong Shunhe’s narrative paints a detailed picture of the prison and of Zhong Haodong’s final departure from his cell as he sings in Japanese “Song of the Covered Wagon,” from which the story takes its title. The narrative is then picked up by Jiang Biyu, who interprets the meaning of the song in Chinese and relates how Zhong taught it to her after they met in the hospital where she worked. By describing the last moments of Zhong Haodong’s life and explaining the title of the story, this preface enhances our understanding of the effects of the White Terror on an ideological level and the life story of Zhong Haodong on a narrative level. Such an arrangement, despite its potential to elicit the reader’s sympathy, reveals the narrative’s constructed nature.

Personal Life Versus Public Events

The first two testimonies, by Zhong Shunhe and Jiang Biyu, placed side by side as a preface and shifting from the imminent execution to the explication of a song, underscore the narrative’s strategy of alternating between the private and public Zhong Haodong. The purpose,

obviously, is to present a more complete portrayal of “the tragic tale of a Taiwanese intellectual.”¹⁶ The arrangement of the remaining chapters continues the juxtaposition of political events and personal life, with the political dominating, driving, and overtaking the personal, thereby calling into question the representation of an individual in relation to historical events. By using a single person as a microcosm, the narrative turns the individual into a victim of history while reaffirming the omnipotence of historical events. In a word, the hero of the narrative is deprived of subjectivity. For instance, the third chapter, “Principal Zhong Haodong and His Comrades,” quotes a page from Zhong Lihe’s diary, dated February 28, 1947, to highlight the theme of the chapter. Zhong Haodong does not, however, appear in this excerpt, which focuses instead on a young victim of the 2/28 Incident with a detailed depiction of his face and his bullet wounds. “The bullets entered from his left chest and exited from under his right arm. Some of the entry wounds were very deep, giving the appearance of black holes. A piece of flesh at the edge of the exit wound looked like a young woman’s nipple.”¹⁷ The images of black holes and a young woman’s nipple are so strikingly incongruous that we wonder how we can learn more about Zhong Haodong from such a gory, perhaps even titillating, description. Does the diary entry imply a parallel between Zhong Haodong and the nameless victim? That is, are we to associate the scene with Zhong Haodong’s execution (which is not described in Lan’s text)?

The emphasis on public events is heightened in the narrative throughout this chapter. It opens with Jiang Biyu’s recollection of Haodong’s and her life in Taiwan after returning from wartime China, when she took a job at a radio station in Taipei and he became the principal of a high school in the northern port city of Keelung. It was during this time that their second child (the first, she recalls for the reader, was put up for adoption in China) died of malaria. Zhong Liyi continues the story by relating what kind of principal Zhong Haodong was and how the elders from their hometown were impressed by his simple and frugal lifestyle. Zhong Shunhe, who apparently worked at the same high school, adds his observations of the democratic way in which Zhong Haodong ran the campus. Even though Jiang describes her heartbreak over their child’s death, the narrative structure leaves little room to explore her sorrow, as Zhong Liyi and Zhong Shunhe “invade” the private aspect of their life and replace it with something

akin to a character witness. As the critic Chen Fangming observed: “Whether it is historical writing or literary creation, he [Lan Bozhou] needs to solve an urgent problem—his penchant for ideological pre-determination. . . . In order to compose his work under this ideological hubris, he inevitably focuses on the hero of his work, while other victims in related cases of persecution become obscured.”¹⁸ Indeed, Lan Bozhou’s Marxist bent and interpretation of causal history ultimately shape his representation of Zhong Haodong’s life, subsuming personal tragedy under Lan’s need to explain historical events.

This concentration on the hero also results in moralistic overtones in Zhong Liyi’s and Zhong Shunhe’s recollections of Zhong Haodong, whom they describe as a generous person and a competent educator with only the interests of the school in mind.¹⁹ Indeed, owing to Zhong Haodong’s democratic style of leadership, “the whole Keelung High School, from the principal to the janitors, focused on the students; no one fought for power or personal interests.”²⁰ Such a moralistic judgment appears to heighten the tragic nature of Zhong Haodong’s death: the death of a good man.²¹ While it may seem insensitive to question the necessity of stressing a victim’s positive attributes, we cannot overlook the implication that a victim’s worth is contingent on his or her lifestyle. To put it differently, and more bluntly, would it lessen the injustice of his death if Zhong Haodong had been an ordinary person or a mere bystander during the indiscriminate shooting on February 28, 1947? Others have called attention to this tendency to ascribe goodness to victims, which we can see in, for instance, Sidra DeKevon Ezrahi’s critique of Jean-François Steiner’s documentary fiction:

It is not the highly subjective selection or distortion of facts *per se* but the composite stereotype, a simplistic reductionism in the portrayal of character and situation. . . . What emerges in this novel is a glorified sense of Jewish superiority and revisionist nationalism. It is an extreme example of a quality inherent in the literature, something which R.J. Lifton calls the “documentary fallacy”—an overriding loyalty to the dead which generates a kind of hagiographical excess, denying them the “dignity of their limitations.”²²

In Lan’s story, the moralizing tendency derives from perhaps an underlying discursive anxiety over the proper way to describe a vic-

tim of such tragic proportions. It is a fact that many intellectuals like Zhong who would have made post–World War II Taiwan drastically different were killed by the Nationalist government and, moreover, that his life was buried in history for several decades. It is not easy to handle this sort of subject matter, which is likely why Zhong needs to be presented in such a positive light.

The contention between personal and public is most obvious in the second part of the chapter, in which Zhong Shunhe and Jiang Biyu relate the 2/28 Incident. Zhong Shunhe first describes what he saw on that day and his worried search for Zhong Haodong, who looks like a mainlanders.²³ Jiang continues the narrative by recounting what was happening in Keelung. A group of Taiwanese came to the high school and asked Jiang and other teachers to hand over the rifles used for the military education class. As Zhong Haodong was away, Jiang was forced to take charge. When she refused to turn over the rifles, the Taiwanese scolded her, “You’re a Taiwanese yourself. Why won’t you open the storeroom?” Eventually she told them that she wouldn’t give them the key but that they could do whatever they wanted. The Taiwanese broke down the door and took all the rifles. When Zhong returned from Taipei, he praised her for properly handling the people’s demand. What she remembers and deems important to include in her testimony is extremely impersonal; there are no personal feelings or private exchanges between Jiang and Zhong. All we know about Zhong’s reaction to this encounter is, “You handled it very well.”²⁴ We have no idea how she felt when the Taiwanese questioned her allegiance or what else Zhong, as her husband, might have said to her. Here Zhong appears only as a public figure, his emotion stripped away in the narration, and consequently, so does Jiang, who appears to be a mere mouthpiece.

The overemphasis on Zhong’s public image in Lan’s eulogistic rendition also reveals an insidious side of documentary fiction, as evidenced in the ambiguity of (Jiang’s) memory and (Lan’s) re-creation, for it is unclear where Jiang’s recollections cease and Lan’s representation of her memory begins. That is, by selecting parts of Jiang Biyu’s remembrance of the past and turning it into a coherent, chronological narrative, Lan erases his own presence and thus infringes on Jiang’s memory. “Memory” as Lawrence L. Langer asserts, “sacrifices purity of vision in the process of recounting, resulting in what I call tainted memory, a narrative stained by the disapproval of the witness’s own

present moral sensibility, as well as by some of the incidents it relates.”²⁵ In Lan’s story, the narrative technique of testimonial makes it impossible for the author to clarify the ambiguity, thus tainting both Jiang’s memory and the memory of Zhong Haodong.

The Individual in History

The erasure of authorial presence is most evident when Zhong Shunhe takes over and the narrative is dominated by a day-by-day account of riots and massacres, starting on March 1 and ending on March 9. Told in an intentionally objective voice, this historic event is reduced to its barest essentials, in which individuals such as Zhong Haodong and Jiang Biyu are swept away in history. For example, “March third. A group of dock workers attacked the military warehouse on Pier 14, but were forced back by armed soldiers. Many were killed or injured, all of whom were thrown into the ocean.”²⁶ Or “March fifth. Rumors everywhere about the imminent arrival of the Nationalist soldiers and military police to quell the riot in Taiwan. Everyone was frightened and on edge.”²⁷ In order to recount the daily occurrences succinctly, Zhong resorts to an impersonal tone and converts a story about Zhong Haodong into an itemized, reductive historical record. It is only in Jiang’s final addition to this chapter that we learn more about Zhong Haodong. But her brief description is nothing more than that of a character witness: that Zhong had taught his students so well that none of them was arrested or killed and that he was among a handful of Taiwanese high-school principals who were able to keep their jobs. The arrest and killing of high-school students, as well the discriminatory treatment of the Taiwanese, are glossed over in the narrative. That is, where we expect outrage over the senseless killing, we instead find absurd praise for Zhong as a good teacher and a capable principal.

As a leftist intellectual, Zhong Haodong presents a problem for Lan Bozhou, the author, writing in the early days of the post-martial law era. Given the lingering anti-Communist atmosphere, a left-leaning socialist is seen as a de facto Communist. How, then, does Lan praise Zhong without appearing to endorse Communism?²⁸ Another attempt to give Zhong Haodong a place in modern Chinese history appears in the fourth chapter, “The Motherland That Turned from White to Red,” which is prefaced by a brief account of the civil war on the mainland

and the eventual retreat of the Nationalist government to Taiwan. The source of the account is not identified, though it reads like a description from a history text. We recall that earlier chapters are introduced by either a passage from an essay or a diary entry. What, then, is the reason for quoting impersonal historical accounts that by the time of the story's publication would have been well known to readers in Taiwan? A possible answer is implied in Jiang Biyu's narration immediately following the accounts, in which she summarizes Zhong's ideological transformation and shift of political allegiance. As a youngster, he had worshipped Chiang Kai-shek, but the corruption of Guomindang members he witnessed in China then changed his mind. This is an attempt to situate Zhong in the historical moment when his left-leaning ideology and the 2/28 Incident intersected to culminate in his arrest and execution, but it leaves unanswered the question of whether Zhong had agency or was simply being acted on by history. In other words, was he merely a victim swept away in the torrent of historical events? The remaining narrative in the chapter seems to inscribe agency to Zhong's actions, for Jiang reveals that in his belief in the need for socialist reform, Zhong published an underground newspaper, *Enlightenment* (*Guangming bao*), to spread his ideas about class differences. But by incorporating historical events into the text, the author has, perhaps inadvertently, privileged the role of history and minimized the significance of the individual.

The difficulty of writing about a socialist in an anti-Communist country is underscored in Jiang Biyu's narration of the days leading up to Zhong's death, in which she juxtaposes the personal with a bare-bones description of political events from the spring of 1950 to October 14, when she was notified that Zhong's body was ready to be picked up at the morgue. Here we encounter a startlingly detailed and yet depersonalized account of the day, when we are told the cost of the coffin demanded by the morgue and the total amount of money that her father had with him. The only personal moment is Jiang's reflection on the way Zhong was executed:

Little sister told me that Haodong was shot three times, all in the chest, and that the injury to his forehead was probably caused by his fall. He also clasped some dirt in his hands. I thought to myself that he probably hadn't suffered much, since the shots in the chest meant he died instantly.²⁹

Here we observe an incongruity between the mundane detail of money and the heartrending image of an executed husband. To be sure, we can regard Jiang's mention of the morgue's demand as a criticism of the policy regarding the bodies of executed political prisoners. More important, this seemingly unnecessary detail points up the injustice of Zhong's execution while lessening the unease of eulogizing a figure long considered by the government to be subversive and seditious.

In contrast, details regarding the amount of money seem to overshadow the grief that the family must have felt. In his comments, Zhan Hongzhi argues that the author cruelly suppresses all emotions until the end when Zhong Liyi, Haodong's younger brother, lies to their mother about his ashes. After telling her that the ashes came from a temple, he says, "I couldn't control my sadness. I ran into my room and shut the door. At first I just howled, then I started to wail, tears falling uncontrollably." Even this final outburst of emotion, Zhan claims, "is not allowed to run unchecked. The author's restraint enables his story to display a kind of 'unfinished sorrow,' which is endless."³⁰ Zhan's comment echoes his earlier claim that this story should be treated as a fictional work that "happens to" (*pengqiao*) describe real people and actual events. Such a viewpoint underscores the artificial rearrangement of events, which does not, however, devalue the artistic accomplishment of the work. Even though the author may have tried to create the glorious theme of the biography of a revolutionary in his intentional restoration of history, the text is a fictional work filled with fissures and the clash between the personal and the public.³¹

Critics like Zhan Hongzhi and Chen Fangming have praised Lan Bozhou for the breakthrough in his use of a simulated eyewitness account. In the context of writings about the White Terror, Lan's story was the first to look at the ambiguous space between documentary and fiction. A survey of novelistic works on the 2/28 Incident reveals that a significant number of short stories fall into two categories: imagined characters set in a historical background, and the fictional re-creation of documentable figures.³² Lan Bozhou presents us with a third possibility—a fictionalized documentary—and thus introduces a new form for representing Taiwan's past. Nonetheless, the reader must bear in mind that Lan's story is fiction, which may still claim equal footing with written history, since the latter is "never a mirror but a construction, congeries of data pulled together or 'constructed' by

some larger project or vision or theory that may not be articulated but is nonetheless embedded in the particular way history is practiced.”³³

“LAST WINTER”

Like Lan Bozhou’s “Song of the Covered Wagon,” Dong Nian’s “Last Winter” uses an uncommon narrative style to relate the story of two former political radicals and their divergent fates during and after the 1979 Formosa Incident. Also similar is the difficulty facing Dong Nian in creating a story about dissidents who engage in violent acts. In order to appear impartial and to circumvent possible repercussions during the martial law era, Dong Nian opts for a complex organizational structure and incorporates seemingly authentic news reports to draw a parallel between the characters’ past actions and current affairs in Taiwan in the immediate aftermath of the Formosa Incident, which was a rally on International Human Rights Day that resulted in riots and the arrests of prominent members of the opposition. Convoluting as it might appear, this narrative strategy highlights crucial issues of atrocity and trauma while questioning the concept of knowable history, causality, and memory.

The Past and Its Consequences

In her discussion of Cathy Caruth’s work on trauma, Ann Whitehead observes that “if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional sequence.”³⁴ With a fragmented narrative and highly inaccessible interiority of characters, Dong Nian intentionally employs an unconventional literary device to confront and record a traumatic sociopolitical event. He documents the Formosa Incident by looking backward and at the same time asking whether the past and its impact can ever be fully comprehended. He uses dates as section headings to guide our reading progression. This elaborate scheme serves several purposes: to emphasize that the past is always implicated in the present; to symbolize the disjointed nature of the past for the story’s characters; to imply that causal links between events are not always readily apparent; to question the possibility of interpreting and understanding the past; and to highlight the false concept of linear history:

12/7	1979	A1	Wang Rong and An'an's prenatal exam
12/12	1979	A2	News report about the Formosa Incident
12/13	1979	A3	Wang at his own bookstore/café
12/14	1979	A4	News report about the incident / An'an in labor—going to the hospital
12/15	1979	A5	News report about the incident / Wang and An'an arguing—going to the hospital
12/16	1978	A6	<i>News report about the U.S. and PRC normalizing their relations</i> ³⁵
12/16	1979		News report about the incident / Wang waiting at the ward
12/19	1971	A7/B3	<i>Linlang getting an abortion</i>
12/20	1979	A8	News report / An'an's baby is born
12/22	1979	A9	News report / Linlang at work
12/23	1979	A10	News report / Wang and his mother
12/25	1969	A11/B1	<i>Wang and Linlang going into the mountains</i>
12/29	1979	A12	News report / Wang and his mother at the train station
01/01	1970	A13/B2	<i>Linlang and Wang on the train</i>
01/03	1980	A14	News report / Wang seen by Linlang, denying knowing her
01/04	1980	A15	News report / Linlang at home
01/10	1980	A16	News report / Wang and his mother talking about baby and Linlang
01/12	1980	A17	News report / Wang's college reunion; Linlang goes to see him
01/13	1980	A18	An'an at her home in the south
01/14	1980	A19	Wang goes to see Linlang
01/15	1972	A20/B4	<i>Wang in prison</i>
01/17	1977	A21/B5	<i>Wang is released</i>
01/17	1980	A22	Wang at game arcade; sees Linlang and they argue
01/18	1980	A23	Wang and Linlang go on a trip
01/19	1980	A24	Wang sees his son and An'an
01/24	1980	A25	Linlang sees Wang and An'an leave; goes to see his mother; takes baby
01/26	1980	A26	Wang searches for the baby; An'an angry at him
01/27	1980	A27	Linlang and baby; tired
01/29	1980	A28	Wang goes to pick up the baby; Linlang kills herself
02/11	1980	A0	Wang visits Linlang's grave

The story's first entry, December 7, 1979 (when Wang Rong accompanies his wife, An'an, for a prenatal examination), is marked A1, followed by December 12, 1979, marked A2, and so on. We read on until we come to an earlier date, December 16, 1978, and although it obviously is in the past, the author marks the entry A6, in order that the reader will consider this event, the normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China, as an integral part of current history. But how the changes and setback in the Republic of China's foreign relations will figure a year later in the Formosa Incident is left for the reader to speculate. The first event, the Formosa Incident, frames the background of the story of Wang Rong and his reencounter with Chen Linlang at the end of 1979, and the second event, the normalization of relations, takes place in 1978. These events are presented in the format of news reports and appear either as a single entry on a particular day or precede personal events also occurring on that day. Nowhere does the author make clear how these events affect the characters' lives, so the reader can only make inferences based on the scanty information revealed in the entries dealing with Wang's prison life (A20 and A21) and his conversation with his mother (A12). For instance, the first entry, Wang Rong and An'an's hospital visit (A1, December 7), is followed by a summary of the outbreak of the Formosa Incident in Kaohsiung (A2, December 12), which is then followed by a description of Wang at his bookstore/café (A3, December 13). Judging from the publicity the incident generated in Taiwan at the time, it is incomprehensible that Wang Rong would be totally unaffected. Only in his conversation more than two weeks later with his mother, who has just returned from the United States and inquires about the incident, are we given a brief glimpse of what he feels deep down, however unsatisfactory that may be:

“I heard that something happened in Kaohsiung.”

“A minor riot.”

“You're not involved with those people, are you?” She looked worried. “You should have learned your lesson.”

“Hmm,” he said. “More or less,” he added after a brief silence, “But I can't say I've learned my lesson. I should say I've wised up, really wised up.”³⁶

From this snippet of conversation, we can deduce that Wang apparently was involved in a similar incident, which resulted in his imprisonment. But exactly what he did is again left to the reader to guess. Ann Whitehead elucidated the function of such disjointed narration:

History is no longer available as a completed knowledge, but must be reconceived as that which perpetually escapes or eludes our understanding. Such a notion of history implicitly repositions the relation between language and the world, so that the text shifts from a reflective mode—based on a position of self-awareness and self-understanding—to a performative act, in which the text becomes imbricated in our attempts to perceive and understand the world around us.³⁷

Indeed, not only does history cease to be accessible in its entirety, but the causal connections between events often are obscured. In this story, as if to exemplify this notion, the author places, in news report-like language, the normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China and subsequent protests in Taiwan (December 16, 1978) immediately before the protest carried out by pro-independence Taiwanese in the United States against the arrests of those involved in the Formosa Incident (December 16, 1979). Here we have two protests that took place on the same day one year apart, but we are not told why they appear together in the narrative. Instead, we have to determine the connection ourselves, even though scholars like Chen Fangming argued that the former contributed to the inception of *Formosa* magazine, which led to opposition activities that culminated in the arrests and imprisonment of dissidents in late 1979.³⁸ As we have seen, this story was written immediately after the incident, and the author did not have the kind of hindsight and narrative freedom available to scholars and writers after martial law was lifted. Read twenty years later, the story not only serves as an exemplary case of a consequence of censorship but also illustrates the impossibility of ever fully recording the past and grasping its significance.

The intentionally jumbled past and present also demonstrates the difficulty of interpreting the causality of events, as the news reports that precede many of the entries reinforce the author's (presumed)

reluctance to comment on causality. Not only are there two separate political events, but the connection between them and their connection to the main story are never explained. Immediately apparent in the juxtaposition of the events from different points in time is Dong Nian's intention to comment on the connection and the disconnect between past and present, which he does through his narrative strategy. First, the artificially arranged dates and events present an apparently seamless, linear narrative because the dates that head each section give the reader the (false) impression that events narrated in the story take place from December 7, 1979, to February 11, 1980. Only when we look at the year do we realize that the events can be traced back as far as 1969, ten years before the beginning of the main story. When we look closely at the years, we discover that not only are the past and present mixed up, but the events in the past are similarly out of order. Second, the author's numbering of events (for example, A7/B3) interrupts the narrative flow and creates more uncertainty about how the story should be read. Should we completely disregard the numbering and follow the narrative flow, or must we rearrange the events to "set the record straight"?

Moreover, there is an unresolved ambiguity in the main character, Wang Rong, that further weakens the dubious connection between the past and the present. As Wang Rong waits while An'an is in labor, the narrative cuts back to Linlang's abortion eight years earlier. The flashback appears to belong to Wang Rong, who is reminded of the aborted baby by the imminent arrival of the new one. But the itemized narrative style makes the connection vague, and the reader is left in the dark regarding Wang Rong's thoughts and feelings. We therefore must assume that the birth of his new baby triggers old memories of another time and another life, creating a tantalizing relationship between the past and the present. On the one hand, the author's insertion of the past into the present convinces us that only an amnesiac can have a clean slate and that no one is immune to the shadow of the past. On the other hand, facing the opaque inner world of Wang Rong, we are forced to confront the issue of interpreting the past and its consequences. "The distinction between past and present is an essential component of the concept of time. It is therefore fundamental to both historical consciousness and historical knowledge."³⁹ The insertion of the past into the present—that is, the absence of

distinction between the two—entails a lack of historical knowledge, which reflects the author’s intention of underscoring the impossibility of knowing the past.

Domesticity and Atrocity

Although Dong Nian is reluctant to clarify the connections between historical events and their impact on the individual, that does not mean that his decision to frame the narrative in the events of 1978 and 1979 was random. Rather, Dong Nian chose to approach the issue of atrocity from a completely different angle—that is, domesticity. We recall that the novella begins with Wang Rong driving An’an to the hospital for a prenatal examination, in which much of the narrative concerns the baby boy whom Wang’s former girlfriend later kidnaps. Unlike Lan Bozhou’s story, in which the protagonists’ private life is constantly marginalized, Dong Nian’s story centers on personal events and family. Familial life (or the lack of it) thus becomes an important trope, for the birth of the baby and the reappearance of the childless Linlang in Wang’s life after his incarceration are intertwined, producing a narrative tension that can be resolved only through her death.

Dong Nian appears to stress the importance of familial life, the lack of which eventually leads to ostracism. For instance, Linlang comes from a poor family whose inability to afford medical care causes her mother’s early death from a lung disease. Linlang later has an abortion, resulting in infertility, which, in turn, prompts her to kidnap Wang’s baby. She starts on a downward spiral toward desperation and self-destruction once she meets the now married Wang again. In contrast, Wang evolves from an indifferent father-to-be and a distracted husband into a caring and responsible adult. In a way, the development of the story represents Wang Rong’s domestication. At the beginning of the story, we are told that Wang never expresses any opinion about the imminent birth of a baby boy and that “he was quiet on the subject and showed no sign of happiness.”⁴⁰ “In contrast with her [An’an’s] concern over the baby, he had almost no reaction whatsoever.”⁴¹ But after the kidnapping, he is quickly transformed into an “average” father, who also succeeds in appeasing his young, petulant wife.

Wang Rong and Chen Linlang clearly are on different, even oppo-

site, trajectories. In his younger days, Wang evidently was more radical, someone who, as the story hints, may have been a bomb maker or at least contemplated such an extreme act to protest against the many evils of capitalism. He also is the one who indoctrinated Linlang into opposing the capitalistic society developing in Taiwan. Upon his release from prison, however, he is a completely different person, someone who believes that bombs are useless and that “the nation is still the last and the most concrete organizational unit.”⁴² Linlang, in contrast, has nearly become his former self, a woman who visits the office of *Formosa* magazine and publishes essays on democracy and politics. Her kidnapping of his baby seems to reinforce the author’s emphasis on domestic life and its positive effect of changing Wang into a gentler person. Simply put, Wang finds new meaning in life and hope for the future in his growing family, whereas Linlang, divorced and without a family or close friends, turns into a fanatic. Their outcomes are predictable: Wang is reconciled with his wife and the family of three will live happily ever after, whereas Linlang is doomed, with suicide her only solution.

The manifestation of Linlang’s radicalism is disconcerting to the reader. After the news of the Formosa Incident has been widely disseminated, Linlang is worried that she may be implicated, since she has visited the office of *Formosa* magazine. She even entertains the idea of lying about her whereabouts during the tumultuous days leading up to the incident. The plan also attests to the author’s privileging of familial life: a young man working for Linlang declares his feelings for her, which prompts her to consider making up a story about spending the night of the incident with him. The thought, although immediately dismissed, then leads her to consider marrying the young man:

She really should get remarried; she should say yes if the young man brought it up again. She had nothing to lose, since she had enough money and was capable of living an independent life.

“Oh, that’s really not true,” she muttered to herself, “I’m not capable of living alone; I’m strong because of my ideals. But so what if I’m strong?”⁴³

Her self-doubt precludes any possibility for her to be a “hero.” Worst of all, while her radicalism is glossed over in a few references

to her visits to the office of *Formosa* magazine, her “real” radical act is kidnapping her former boyfriend’s newborn baby boy! Not only does she not take part in any protest activities, but the kidnapping is actually the result of jealousy of Wang’s new life and is carried out on a defenseless baby. In drawing a parallel between family and the nation, we see Linlang as the disrupter of familial/national stability, and so she must be eliminated. Even though suicide is sometimes portrayed as an act of courage or, at the very least, a force of will, Linlang’s action is presented more as a desperate act.

Writing Trauma

We have seen how seemingly unrelated political events conveyed through news reports and the jumbled dates make for a difficult read. That may have to do with when the story was written. Under martial law, writers were often wary of directly referring to sensitive topics, let alone offering personal comment. Nonetheless, “Last Winter” displays unmistakable characteristics of “trauma fiction,” for which the best definition can be found in Ann Whitehead’s discussion of Cathy Caruth’s work: “Caruth’s conceptualisation of trauma profoundly problematises the relation between experience and event. Trauma carries the force of a literality which renders it resistant to narrative structures and linear temporalities.”⁴⁴ Both Wang Rong and Chen Linlang are traumatized by the experience of her abortion and his imprisonment, and both exhibit symptoms of trauma patients, even though the author, whether intentionally or not, assigns them opposite outcomes based on how they come to terms with their traumatic experience.

According to Caruth,

trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.⁴⁵

To be sure, Caruth is referring to real, specific, physical, and emotional trauma and its resultant effects on the psyche, not to fictional characters. Nevertheless, a closer examination of Wang Rong and Chen Linlang as victims of trauma will help shed light on our overall understanding of the story.

Linlang, perhaps, suffers from the more severe posttraumatic symptoms, first from her abortion and then from Wang Rong's imprisonment. But Wang's inability to deal with his situation and their relationship also contributes to her problems: "What can I do? You stopped writing to me, so I thought you'd been executed. . . . I nearly killed myself. Ah, things might have been better had I had done so back then."⁴⁶ At the end of story, she does, in fact, commit suicide, which can be regarded as evidence that she has failed to deal effectively with her traumatic experience. "Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience."⁴⁷

Linlang's failure in her struggle for survival by traumatizing another person can best be explained by using Dominick LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through. Simply put, "acting out is related to repetition, and even the repetition compulsion—the tendency to repeat something compulsively"⁴⁸—and "in working through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future."⁴⁹ Most immediately evident is Linlang's repeated contemplation of suicide. Even kidnapping Wang's child represents a kind of reversed repetition. By forcefully taking Wang Rong's baby as her own, she is not only repeating the experience of having Wang's baby but also trying to repeat her own loss of the baby in An'an.

Wang Rong, conversely, seems to have worked through his problems. But his character remains problematic owing to his transformation from a radical youth who condemns the increasingly capitalistic society in Taiwan⁵⁰ to a contented middle-class husband/father who appears to be apathetic to political events. We wonder whether he has indeed achieved a critical distance from his problems and learned to distinguish past from present, or if he has simply isolated himself in his new life by convincing himself that he is a changed person. In a long

conversation with Linlang, during which she accuses him of capitulation, he has the following to say about his new view:

We need stability, for we continue to live in a state where too many people are concentrated in a comparatively crowded space with an unequal distribution of wealth. Such a situation accelerates an oversecretion of adrenaline and makes us easily irritable, prone to sleepiness and to tearing each other up. We're accustomed to throwing the military, the people, wealth, hope and everything else into self-destruction, plunging us into an inferior position in worldwide competition. We really do need stability because we need time. We need everyone to be self-aware, so that we can really tackle practical problems on a more permanent basis, after we struggle and learn.⁵¹

However grandiose his rebuttal may appear, we cannot help but question how Wang Rong will ever accomplish the task he sets out for others, since he seems to be mired in personal anguish, emotional detachment, and constant quarrels with his wife. He is, in essence, a contradictory character. So while he seems to have worked through his traumatic experience, his emotional state suggests that he is at best a disillusioned man living with compromise or self-delusion. These contradictions can best be explained by the narrative style, the jumbled past and present, as well as the disconnect between external events and inner worlds, in the way a traumatized person experiences and relates to the world.

Private Lives and Public Events

Wang Rong's troubled psyche brings us to the topic of writing private lives and public events, a major issue in my discussion of Lan Bozhou's text. As I mentioned earlier, a conspicuous feature of Dong Nian's story is the use of dates as section headings, which begin with December 7, 1979, and end with February 11, 1980. The main story line of this section is the birth of Wang Rong and An'an's baby, the return of Wang's mother from the United States, Linlang's kidnapping of Wang's baby, and her suicide. Earlier dates and events are interspersed in this

linear progression and disrupt the narrative flow: December 16, 1978; December 19, 1971; December 25, 1969; January 1, 1970; January 15, 1972; and January 17, 1977. Although the narrative moves back and forth between the present and the past (for instance, Linlang's abortion in 1971 is sandwiched between two current events, before and after the birth of Wang Rong's baby), the author has intentionally ordered the dates so that the story first reads as if the events occurred in a chronologically sequential fashion.⁵²

Each of the entries from December 14, 1979 (two days after the Formosa Incident), to January 12, 1980, opens with a news report that stands alone without comment from the author or the characters, thus conveying the impression that the characters in the story are living under the shadow of public events but are reluctant to voice their views. Moreover, with dates preceding each section, the story reads like a diary without a first-person diarist/agent. "Last Winter" also can be regarded as an abbreviated version of history, although it immediately calls into question whose history the story is relating. The use of itemized news reports not only enables the author to bypass government censorship but also emphasizes the effects of the White Terror on the characters and, to a less evident degree, on the author. In other words, Wang Rong and Chen Linlang, who are former dissidents, are necessarily afraid to express their personal views for fear of further persecution. For the author, Dong Nian, the fear was all the more real, as he completed his story while the Formosa Incident was still unfolding.

To complicate this already complex reading process, or perhaps to guide the reader through the maze of events, the author adds two sets of sequential numbers (A-number and/or B-number) to each entry. The A-sequence marks the narrative's liner progression, and the B-sequence, out of order, flags past events, which are given an A-sequence number also, to highlight the order in the progression of present events. This intricate system demands full participation by the reader, who must rearrange events into chronological order and sort out the entangled connections between public events and their impact on the characters' private lives. Most significant, the intentional anachronism blurs the distinction between past and present, between the private and the public, thus invalidating causality and underscoring the illusiveness of panoramic historical knowledge.



Lan Bozhou's and Dong Nian's texts are similar and dissimilar in so many ways that studying them side by side enables us also to examine the politics of recalling, recording, and reading the past. Lan's "Song of the Covered Wagon" was written four decades after the occurrence of the real event, and Dong Nian's "Last Winter" fictionalizes the Formosa Incident almost as it unfolded before the eyes of the author. In addition, Dong Nian published his story while Taiwan was still shrouded in the stifling atmosphere of martial law, which ended a year before Lan Bozhou's text was published. The varying degrees of freedom to write indeed affected how the two authors approached their subject matter. Nonetheless, read now, both these stories have become texts that record the past, and "what was evidence for the writer at the moment he wrote is now, after it leaves his hand, only a detached and free-floating sign, at the mercy of all who would read and misread it."⁵³ It is precisely this transformation from truth to fiction that makes it important to examine the particular characteristics and pitfalls of their representations.

Lan Bozhou's text tries to restore history by focusing on an individual; his employment of eyewitness accounts nevertheless underscores the reality that no account can claim to be complete. The narrative strategy of beginning Zhong Haodong's story with the moment just before his execution also entails an artificiality that makes the reader aware of its constructedness, despite the linear, progressive history—from his childhood to his unjust death—that follows. Moreover, by inserting itemized historical events, the narrative also introduces the perception that public events are somehow more important than an individual's life, which, in turn, privileges the very government-oriented historical writings that Lan sets out to refute. All the witness-narrators, although themselves victims of the White Terror, are trotted out to corroborate Lan's story of Zhong, but Lan has cleverly manipulated the forum style of narrative structure, which allows him to avoid characterizing and depicting the other characters' inner worlds. If indeed this strategy was intended to enable the author to focus on Zhong, in order not to lose sight of what he set out to accomplish—the depiction of the death of one good man—it unfortunately also

makes Zhong hollow, a scarecrow dressed up as a man of lofty ideals and admirable moral character, but little else. Moreover, notwithstanding the fact and heinous circumstances of Zhong's execution, the narrative style and focus leave little room for other victims, such as Jiang Biyu and Zhong Shunhe, and, when stripped of all subjectivity, Zhong Haodong appears to be either superhuman or nonhuman. Lan, who has been continually interviewing and unearthing eyewitnesses and survivors, as well as writing fictionalized accounts of victims,⁵⁴ is keen on rediscovering the past.⁵⁵ But in his effort to comprehend and recover it, Lan cannot avoid the logic of causality. As "Song of the Covered Wagon" shows, Zhong Haodong's eventual execution is a result of his involvement in leftist activities, which is directly linked to the Guomindang's anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s.

In contrast, Dong Nian avoids an explicit explanation of causal links between events, to the point of glossing over the reason for the imprisonment of the main character, Wang Rong. Again, Dong Nian's story was written under martial law, and both the story and its narratological style exemplify the suffocating atmosphere of the White Terror, in which writers practiced self-censorship and skirted sensitive topics. To be sure, the tension between authorial intent and narratorial reality is itself witness to Taiwanese history, but Dong Nian's "Last Winter" also illustrates the difficulty of representing government atrocity at any time. Unlike Lan Bozhou, Dong Nian uses fictional characters and situates them around the time of the 1979 Formosa Incident. The rehabilitation of Wang Rong, whose earlier subversive act landed him in prison, appears to be successful, as the disjointed juxtaposition of national and international events with personal, domestic life bespeaks his total detachment from the incident. That detachment is disconcerting, since the reader expects more intense reactions from a former victim of the government's suppression of dissidents. But the muted reaction is understandable when approached from the perspective of trauma; Wang Rong, like Chen Linlang, has yet to work through his traumatic experience.

In addition, by situating his characters in a domestic milieu, Dong Nian problematizes the notion of victimhood and runs the risk of trivializing the effects of state terror manifested in the persecution of dissidents. That is, what message is conveyed to the reader if Chen Linlang, who is only peripherally involved in the Formosa Incident,

does nothing more than kidnap her former boyfriend's baby? What is the reader to think when she contemplates fabricating a romantic liaison with her employee as an alibi? Or her suicide, for that matter? There is a notable discrepancy between her passionate denunciation of a capitalist, material world⁵⁶ and her actions. To be sure, we cannot and should not expect the kind of martyrdom exemplified by Zhong Haodong, but the rendering of victim into victimizer is disconcerting and requires the reader's vigilance. Because the two texts rely on the narrative structure and strategies to re-create the past, it is incumbent on the reader to be wary of the documenting fallacy, for "by allowing himself to be moved to the willing suspension of disbelief by the documentary novel's contrived historical authority, the reader risks becoming ensnared in the all-encompassing fiction of the discourse itself, mistaking the historical force of this discourse for the historical facts it purports to document."⁵⁷