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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Intertextual Trajectories of Remembering: Taiwan's Authoritarian Past in Contemporary Fiction

Serena DE MARCHI
Stockholm University, Sweden
serena.demarchi@su.se

With the end of the Kuomintang's authoritarian rule, in the late 1980s, Taiwan gradually opened to a public discussion of its own traumatic past, characterised by systematic government abuse, violent dissent suppression, and general disregard of civil and human rights. The memories of that history found ways to be expressed through a number of different media, including literature. This paper investigates two pieces of post-martial-law fiction, namely Zhu Tianxin's "Once Upon a Time There Was an Urashima Taro" and Huang Chong-kai's "Dixson's Idioms", which, in different ways and from different authorial perspectives, elaborate on the experience of political imprisonment during the White Terror. In these texts, intertextuality is consistently used as a strategic narrative device to conjure the past into the present, and therefore constitutes a productive analytical perspective from which to look at Taiwan's post-authoritarian literary mnemonic practices.

隨著上世紀八十年代國民黨威權統治的結束，臺灣開始公開審視人們經歷的歷史創傷，深入探討政府對權力的濫用、對異見者的暴力打壓、以及對公民權利和人權的忽視。而文學作品成為這段歷史記憶的重要載體。本文選取朱天心《想我眷村的兄弟們》中的《從前從前有個浦島太郎》和黃崇凱《文藝春秋》中的《狄克森片語》作為研究對象。這兩篇作品在作者立場和寫作風格上雖然有所不同，但描述的都是白色恐怖時期政治犯的被囚經歷。其中，互文性被用作一種敘事手法，巧妙地將歷史融入現實，構建出一個分析臺灣後威權時代文學記憶的獨特視角。

Keywords: Taiwan literature, intertextuality, White Terror, memory, history

關鍵詞： 台灣文學, 互文性, 白色恐怖, 記憶, 歷史

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This paper analyses two pieces of post-martial law short fiction that focus on the experience and the afterlives of political imprisonment during Taiwan's White Terror. They are Zhu Tianxin's 朱天心 "Cong qian cong qian you ge Pudao Tailang" 從前從前有個浦島太郎 ("Once Upon a Time There Was an Urashima Taro," hereafter "Urashima Taro"), and Huang Chong-kai's 黃崇凱 "Dikesen pianyu" 狄克森片語 ("Dixson's Idioms"), published in 1992 and 2017 respectively.[1] The aim is to explore, within a comparative framework, the narrative strategies the two short stories use to actualise the memory of Taiwan's authoritarian past. Having been published twenty-five years apart from each other, the two texts need first to be read against the background of the very different socio-historical and cultural contexts in which they were produced (and, more recently, reproduced).

After the lifting of martial law, in 1987, the literary scene in Taiwan saw the emergence of a growing corpus of politically engaged fiction. The end of the Kuomintang (KMT) authoritarian rule and the shift toward a pluralistic form of government encouraged writers to explore themes and issues that had strong political connotations (Berry 2016, 422). *Zhengzhi xiaoshuo* 政治小說 (political fiction), as the genre came to be known in Chinese, together with its related sub-genre, *er er ba xiaoshuo* 二二八小說 (228 fiction),[2] reflected Taiwan writers' attempts to address those traumatic events in their country's history at a time of newly found expressive possibilities (Chou 1992, 24).[3] The shift from apolitical to politically-engaged writing was so momentous that the genre became mainstream, and gradually widened its thematic interests to include previously marginalised (or non-existent) genres, such as queer and indigenous fiction (Berry 2016, 425).

Among the writers whose production took a political turn toward the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s was Zhu Tianxin (b. 1958), a second-generation *waishengren* 外省人,[4] the daughter of mainland Chinese writer and KMT official Zhu Xining 朱西甯, and a Taiwanese Hakka translator of Japanese. Zhu grew up in a *juancun* 眷村, or "military village". Military villages were living quarters that had been built throughout the island to accommodate the people who had fled the mainland with the Nationalists after 1949.[5] These self-contained spaces, which separated the mainlander community from the rest of Taiwanese society, were a sort of "microcosms of China" (Pino 2022, 38), whose inhabitants shared a common culture and a nostalgia for their motherland, which they passed on to

[1] Throughout this article, I have adopted Hanyu Pinyin for the romanisation of the titles of literary works as well as for the transliteration of Chinese terms. As regards the names of Taiwanese authors and other historical figures, I have chosen to sacrifice formal consistency and to report people's names in the style in which they most frequently appear in English. This means that in some cases I have preferred the hyphenated forms, such as for the names of Huang Chong-kai, Lo Yi-chin, Ko Chi-hua, etc; while in other cases, such as for the names of Zhu Tianxin (sometimes also rendered as Chu T'ien-hsin), Zhu Xining, and Chen Yingzhen, etc., I have kept the regular Pinyin style, as this is how they have come to be most frequently rendered since relatively recently.

[2] The 228 Incident (*er er ba shijian* 228 事件) marks the symbolic beginning of the White Terror era. On the night between 28 February and 1 March 1947, thousands of Taiwanese civilians took to the streets to protest against the KMT political monopoly over the island, but were met with brutal violence and indiscriminate killings.

[3] For an in-depth analysis of literary and cinematic representations of the 228 Incident and the White Terror see: Lin 2007.

[4] This term identifies all the people that came to Taiwan from the mainland after the end of the Second World War and after the Nationalist defeat in China. Conversely, the people (Hokkien and Hakka) who had already been living on the island prior to that period were called *benshengren* 本省人.

[5] For an overview of Taiwan's *juancun wenxue* 眷村文學 (the literature of the military villages), see: Pino 2022.

their children. Zhu, for instance, was educated to think of China – rather than Taiwan – as her imagined homeland, to which she would at some point return (Haddon 2004, 106; Chen 2016, 363).

Later, with the end of the KMT's regime, the decline of *juancun* culture, and the rise to prominence of the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) political narrative, *juancun* writers like Zhu had to renegotiate their identity and position as writers within Taiwan society. This personal and cultural crisis found a space for elaboration in Zhu's literary production of the time, and is reflected in the 1992 short story collection *Xiang wo juancun de xiongdimen* 想我眷村的兄弟門 (*Remembering My Brothers from the Military Village,* hereafter *My Brothers*). The texts included in the collection explore issues of identity and belonging in the face of change by featuring a gallery of misfits who linger on their nostalgic feelings of an idealised past, and struggle to find their place in a new world (Haddon 2005, 108). In the story after which the volume is titled, for instance, the author portrays an interesting picture of life inside a *juancun*, focusing on the feelings of anxiety and "rootlessness" its dwellers had to navigate, and describing the chasm (social, linguistic, cultural) that separated the *juancun* people from the Taiwanese outsiders (Peng 2009, 380–81).

Among the stories included in *My Brothers* is also "Urashima Taro",[6] which focuses on a freshly released political prisoner and his everyday struggle to re-adapt to life as a member of a family and of a changed society. Zhu Tianxin, a person whose social position during the White Terror was protected by her association with the dominant system of power via familial connection, here takes on the perspective of a Taiwanese man who, because of that same system, has encountered enormous injustice and violence. In terms of narrative structuring, the traumatic displacement of the political imprisonment survivor is intertextually related to the Japanese folk story of Urashima Taro, the man who journeys to the Dragon King's castle at the bottom of the sea and comes back as an old man.[7]

More than two decades after the publication of *My Brothers*, Taiwan literature is still very much concerned with the exploration of White Terror memories, as part of an ongoing identity discourse which is consistently interested in unearthing and re-actualising key events of the country's past.

In terms of narrative approach, as Kuei-fen Chiu 邱貴芬 (2021) points out, recent years have witnessed the emergence of a new trend, especially supported by Taiwanese writers who were born in the 1980s onward. Namely, Chiu notes that these millennial writers' production actively engages with Taiwan's cultural and literary traditions, by directly or indirectly referring to the works and lives of Taiwanese writers of the past. This kind of intertextual relation with a country's literary legacy is normally found in other national literatures, but seldom in Taiwan. While the previous generation of Taiwanese authors capitalised on Western, Japanese, and Chinese literature as sanctioned literary influences, the names of other Taiwanese writers are not so frequently found (Chiu 2021). This peculiarity, again as pointed out by Chiu (2021), has certainly to do with Taiwan's history of colonisation

[6] Before being included in the 1992 collection, the story was originally published in the literary supplement of Taiwanese newspaper *Zhongguo shibao* 中國時報 (*China Times*) in 1990.

[7] There exist several versions of this folk tale. Perhaps the oldest one is found in the Japanese poetry anthology collection *Man'yōshū* (万葉集) compiled sometime after 759 AD. See: Keene 1965.

and reshuffling of political systems, which made the discussion around national literature more complicated – an issue that Taiwanese writers have in fact been preoccupied with for decades.[8]

Huang Chong-kai (b. 1981) is one of the millennial writers Chiu mentions. Originally from Yunlin county in western Taiwan, he attended National Taiwan University in Taipei where he graduated from the history department. He is part of an experimental writers' collective, the "Alphabet Lab" (*zimuhui* 字母會) which, starting in 2013, has published serialised collections of short fiction inspired by keywords beginning with a letter of the French alphabet.[9] Huang's fiction often incorporates Taiwan's history (political and literary), that is woven into the main narrative theme in experimental and unconventional ways. The short story collection *Wenyi chunqiu* 文藝春秋 (*The Contents of the Times*), published in 2017, perfectly exemplifies Chiu's observation on Taiwanese millennial writers' engagement with their country's literary legacy.

Each story in the book is inspired by Taiwanese (as well as foreign) cultural or literary figures, such as Nieh Hualing 聶華苓, Wang Zhenhe 王禎和, and Ko Chi-hua 柯旗化, among others. As pointed out by Lo Yi-chin 駱以軍 (2017, 312–13) the eleven stories that make up the collection can be read independently from one another, but at the same time they also function together, as chapters of a novel. The opening story, "Dang women tanlun Ruimeng Kafo, women tan xie shenme" 當我們談論瑞蒙·卡佛，我們談些什麼 ("What do we talk about when we talk about Raymond Carver") functions as the interpretive key. In the story, Raymond Carver is the symbolic means through which the characters actually discuss, for instance, the relationship between Taiwan and China. In a similar way, the other short stories in the collection use symbolic figures and objects to bring Taiwan's history and literature into the present. In the story titled "San beizi" 三輩子 ("Three Lives"), for example, Huang reconstructs the life and work of famous Taiwanese writer Nieh Hualing from the point of view of a retired KMT spy who used to gather intelligence on her, whereas in the story "Ruhe xiang Wang Zhenhe yiyang shenghuo" 如何像王禎和一樣生活 ("How to live like Wang Zhenhe"), set in 2140, the generational divide between those who have lived through the White Terror and those who did not is embodied by a grandfather from Earth who goes to visit his grandchild who lives on Mars and has to write a school assignment on Taiwanese writer Wang Zhenhe.

"Dixson's Idioms," the story that will be closely analysed here, was inspired by the life and work of Ko Chi-hua (1929–2002), writer and teacher of English, author of one of the most popular manuals for Taiwanese high school learners, *Xin Yingwen fa* 新英文法 (*New English Grammar*), which in turn was based on the work of American teacher Robert Dixon (1908–1963). During his life, Ko was arrested and sent to prison twice, from 1951 to 1953 and from 1963 until 1976, both on Green Island[10]

[8] For a history of Taiwan literature, and the debate around what should be called such, see: Ye 2020.

[9] See: Hu et al. 2017; Hu et al. 2018; Hu et al. 2020.

[10] *Lüdao* 綠島, a small volcanic atoll off Taiwan's south-east coast that under KMT rule became a detention complex for political prisoners.

and in Taiyuan (Taitung county).[11] Huang's "Dixson's Idioms" weaves together Ko's and Dixon's stories, which are accessed from multiple points of view, including that of the author himself, who ties his experience of learning English in high school to Ko's manual.

Let the past become this moment

In 2020, both Zhu Tianxin and Huang Chong-kai's short stories were included in a publication sponsored by Taiwan's National Museum of Human Rights (NMHR), which came out as a four-volume collection: *Rang guoqu chengwei cike: Baise kongbu xiaoshuoji* 讓過去成為此刻：台灣白色恐怖小說選 (*Let the Past Become This Moment: Selected Works of the White Terror Period in Taiwan*), edited by Hu Shu-wen 胡淑雯 and Tong Wei-ger 童偉格. The collection brings together thirty short stories penned by established and emerging Taiwanese authors on the memory of the White Terror, including Wu Zhuoliu 吳濁流, Huang Chun-ming 黃春明, Li Ang 李昂, Walis Nokan 瓦歷斯・諾幹, and others. In the preface that appears in all four volumes, Chen Jun-hong 陳俊宏, NMHR's director at the time, positions the work as part of a broader effort toward transitional justice,[12] with the aims of compensating the victims and holding the perpetrators accountable, as well as prompting the entirety of Taiwanese society to critically rethink and re-address these issues, as part of a social and cultural discourse of democratic development (Chen 2020).

In other words, this publication testifies to Taiwan's current efforts at creating a cultural memory of its authoritarian past at an institutional level, which is consistent with the development of a national consciousness that takes the White Terror as a foundational experience for the construction of the new narrative – especially promoted by the DPP – of a free and democratic Taiwan. The collection features works by *bensheng, waisheng*[13] as well as indigenous writers, some of whom have a personal or familial history of KMT brutality.

My choice to analyse comparatively the two aforenamed texts by Zhu and Huang has to do with the form and content of the texts themselves, as well as with the identity and position of their respective authors. In terms of subject matter, both stories focus on the experience of a political prisoner during the White Terror, and his strategies for coming to terms with that experience after release. In terms of narrative techniques, both texts make use of intertextuality to bring to the present the experience of the past. Finally, from an authorial perspective, neither Zhu Tianxin nor Huang Chong-kai writes from the point of view of their lived experience, as neither of them was imprisoned on political grounds.

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[11] Ko has recounted his imprisonment experience in his memoir, *Taiwan jianyu dao* 台灣監獄島：柯旗化憶錄 (*Prison Island Taiwan: Ko Chi-hua's memoir*, 1992).

[12] In 2018, the Taiwanese government established the Transitional Justice Commission (*Cujin zhuanxing zhengyi weiyuanhui* 促進轉型正義委員會), an independent agency whose purpose is to address the crimes committed by the KMT during the White Terror period. Among its aims are: to expedite the opening of judicial files; to eliminate the symbols of the authoritarian regime; to preserve historical places of injustice; to redress wrongly convicted cases and restore historical truth; to promote social reconciliation. The commission was dissolved in May 2022. See: Transitional Justice Commission 2018.

[13] See note 4.

However, the authors' generational divide together with their different personal and cultural backgrounds are worth mentioning, for the scope of the textual comparison.

As discussed above, being a second-generation *waishengren*, Zhu Tianxin occupied a privileged position within the social and political system established by the KMT under martial law. This does not mean that her writing represents or enforces the political agenda of the KMT. On the contrary, as scholars have suggested, her post-martial-law fiction consistently engages with social critique (Chen 2016, 366), and includes unflattering portrayals of mainlander characters (Haddon 2004). At the core of Zhu's production of the time is the problematisation of Taiwanese identity, which is often accessed from the point of view of her personal – albeit fictionalised – experience. In "Urashima Taro", though, Zhu takes on the perspective of a Taiwanese man who has greatly suffered under the KMT regime. The narrative, however, does not focus on the protagonist's trauma derived from his incarceration, but rather, as Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang suggests, maintains a somewhat condescending – or detached – attitude toward the man's efforts at making sense of personal and collective history (Chang 2004, 164).[14]

Having been born in the early 1980s, Huang Chong-kai, on the other hand, did not directly experience the political and social turmoil of the White Terror. He grew up immersed in the ongoing discourses around Taiwanese identity and Taiwan literature, rekindled, at that time, by the political openness brought about by the end of KMT authoritarianism, the influence of global capitalism, and the development of new media. This latter aspect, suggests Zhan Min-xu 詹敏旭, is in fact a peculiar feature of Huang's production, using popular media (such as film, manga, and literature, among others) and media history as a distinctive access point to engage with Taiwan's past (Zhan 2020, 104).

If the immediate post-martial-law period was characterised by a collective turn toward political engagement, most recent years have witnessed a general attitude of political withdrawal (*qu zhengzhi* 去政治), as noted by Hu Shu-wen (2020, 10). In the preface to *Let the Past Become This Moment,* Hu writes that in today's Taiwan, people have learned to hate politics, and pride themselves in displaying a general disregard toward everything "political," as the word has come to be associated with something dirty and impure (*ibid.*). However, the unwillingness to contribute to public political discourse has only made it easier for the structures of power that dominate that discourse to force-feed the people with their political narrative. A way to counteract this tendency is literature, writes Hu (*ibid.*, 11), who frames the publication of the volume as a sort of political (re-appropriating the transformative power of the term) activism.

This paper takes "Urashima Taro" and "Dixson's Idioms" as case studies to analyse diachronically the mechanisms of remembrance of personal and collective history through literary reconfiguration. Both texts deal with Taiwan's past by creatively exploring the possibilities and the limits of language that has to re-elaborate history, and use intertextuality as a narrative strategy to bring the past into the present.

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[14] Chang (2004, 164) notes that a sceptical and detached attitude in representing political victims in late and post-martial-law period fiction is not only Zhu's prerogative, but is rather shared by writers as different as Li Ang 李昂 and Huang Fan 黃凡.

In what follows, I will first briefly point to the significance of intertextuality as a productive narrative technique to investigate mnemonic practices. In the two sections "Fissures in Time" and "Being Trapped in a Fairy-Tale", I will specifically delve into Zhu Tianxin's "Urashima Taro"; in the first, I will examine the rupturing of history's spatiotemporal linearity embodied by the protagonist and, in the second, I will unpack the intertextual intricacies the story evokes in relation to memory work. In the section "Intertext as Literary Legacy", I will contextualise Huang Chong-kai's production within the broader literary space occupied by Taiwanese millennial writers, and in the section "The Grammars of the Past", I will demonstrate how intertextuality is used to reinstate an affective connection between Taiwan's millennial generation and the country's authoritarian past. A concluding part will summarise the main findings and suggest how the two texts engage with the past to intertextually co-create meaning for the present.

The past through the intertext

Both Zhu's and Huang's short stories consistently make use of intertextuality. This intertextual work is actually what meaningfully sustains both narratives, which is why it is an aspect worth investigating.

In the works of Zhu Tianxin, intertextuality, framed as a narrative technique that embodies the representation crisis in the postmodern text, has been addressed by Peng Hsiao-yen (2009, 392–99), who notes that its use in Zhu's novella *Gudu* 古都 (*Old Capital*) is used for political criticism, often conveyed by means of irony, evoked by the choice and use of intertextual references.[15] As regards Huang Chong-kai, not only is "Dixson's Idioms" entirely built on intertextual work, but the whole collection *The Contents of the Times* is structured around the intertextual conjuring of Taiwan's cultural and literary history.

The concept of intertextuality was first introduced by Julia Kristeva in her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel", where she suggested that "every text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva 1986, 37). Put differently, every text is an intertext; it only exists in relation to a network of other textual bodies. It is therefore an open-ended entity, a repository of multiple meanings and interpretations that are construed together with the reader.[16] This notion resonates with Roland Barthes' idea of text as a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (1977, 146). Barthes introduced this concept in his very influential essay "The Death of the Author", in which he challenged the idea of authorship as the text's sole agent of meaning-making, and argued for a removal altogether of the author as a way to

[15] For instance, the main narrative thread in *Old Capital* is consistently interwoven with references to Kawabata Yasunari's homonymous novel published in 1968 and set in the Japanese city of Kyoto. As noted by Peng (2009, 393), in Zhu's text, both cities –Kyoto and Taipei– appear, but, in the narrator's eyes, while Kyoto remains the beautiful city it used to be in ancient times, Taipei, after the end of the Japanese colonial rule, has become uglier, because the new government that has come after the Japanese made sure to destroy the political symbols left by the previous one. The intertextual evocations that support the narrative construction of Zhu's novel (other texts besides Yasunari's include the 5th century Chinese fable *Peach Blossom Spring* and Lian Yatang's *The Comprehensive History of Taiwan*) contribute to create a sense of nostalgia toward an idealised and wholesome past, while the present appears as corrupt and broken. (For a study of nostalgia, memory, and spacetime fragmentation in Zhu's *Old Capital* see: Møller-Olsen, 2020).

[16] Kristeva was inspired by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on dialogic criticism, which considered texts as complex sites where contrasting and interacting voices and viewpoints meet.

liberate texts from their being bound to a predetermined system of meaning (Barthes 1977). With the sacrifice of the author, the text is open to polysemic readings and becomes a "tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 1977, 146).

Intertextuality is also a productive way to investigate how texts elaborate, manipulate, and produce memory. One could say, following Renate Lachmann, that the "semantic explosion" that occurs when two or more texts collide in the intertext is precisely where literature's memory lies (2008, 309). Therefore, by looking at the intertextual relations texts invoke – through stylistic replication, plot re-enactments, characters' re-evocations, and so on – we are seeing memory at work.

Zhu Tianxin's and Huang Chong-kai's short stories actualise the memory of the White Terror by intertextually relating their fiction to other symbolic texts. For instance, Zhu ties her protagonist's story to that of Urashima Taro of the eponymous Japanese folktale, while Huang weaves his protagonist's story into his own (and by symbolic extension into that of the post-martial law generation of Taiwanese to which he belongs) by referring to Ko Chi-hua's *New English Grammar*.

Furthermore, both "Urashima Taro" and "Dixson's Idioms" reflect on the communicability of historical trauma, in transgenerational as well as transcultural terms, while displaying a rather cynical consideration of the written word as a means for appropriately conveying historical truth. Both the protagonists of Zhu's and Huang's stories are men who used to hold an unshakeable trust in the sacredness of writing; this trust is put to the test during their ordeals as political prisoners, and ultimately fails to form their symbolic lifeline, the repository of sense and meaning in a world that seems to have been shattered to incomprehensible pieces.

Fissures in time

Zhu Tianxin's post-martial-law writing stems from a profound personal and political crisis. As mentioned above, the dismantling of the Nationalist system and the gradual demolition of the KMT's historical narrative left writers who had been spiritually fed by that narrative disconnected and confused about their place in the world. In Peng's words, *juancun* writers suffered a "traumatic disillusionment" that made them extremely wary of any totalising narrative (2009, 377). This aspect is evident in Zhu's short fiction of the time and is expressed through narratological devices such as spatiotemporal fragmentation, a crisis of the narrating self, and a general scepticism toward language's claims of truth. In other words, Zhu's writing engenders a crisis of representation – a mistrust of history as a unified narrative and a mistrust of narrative as a way to convey meaning (Peng 2009, 377).

This issue is conspicuously explored in "Urashima Taro", where Zhu probes the spatiotemporal disjointedness embodied by the protagonist of the story, a man named Li Jiazheng 李家正 who, after being detained for thirty years as a political prisoner on Green Island,[17] has difficulty reintegrating into the habits of his old life. Upon his return home, he does not really recognise his family members (his

[17] The name of the island is actually never mentioned in the story, but always only referred as "the island" (島) or "that island" (那島).

wife, who has grown old, and his grandson, Junjun 君君, who for a while he believed was his son), and has developed a form of persecutory delusion – he believes that he is constantly being followed by secret agents, which is why he changes routes every day when taking Junjun to school.

As a young man, Li Jiazheng was a fervent socialist; he read Gorky's novels and used to sing Nie Er 聶耳 and Tian Han's 田漢 socialist songs. He grew up, during the Japanese occupation, as the son of a landlord, though he liked to mingle with the tenant farmers who worked for his father. He promised them that once he had inherited the land, he would give it to them if they agreed to work it and not sell it. Back from Green Island after three decades, Li's socialist faith is still very strong, albeit discomforted by the consumerist attitude of contemporary Taiwanese society.

Li is the embodiment of a spatiotemporal disjuncture that makes us question the linearity of space-time and invites us to radically rethink the working of memory and the construction of history. The protagonist does not know how to navigate the fractured setting he now inhabits, and is literally stuck in the architecture of the city he has come back to:

> One day not long after his return, he walked back and forth at a busy intersection all afternoon, unable to cross the street, not out of fear of the heavy cross traffic (in fact, when he was young, the traffic in town was as chaotic as street scenes you saw in movies set in India and Africa), but because he had yet to find a kind of order, a consistency [一種秩序、頻率] – something basic belonging to residents of the city who were willing to follow and make sure others did the same – to take part in. (23; 33–34)[18]

An ardent idealist, our protagonist has the habit of writing denunciation letters to various institutions (to the district police, or city councillors) to express his complaints about certain new government policies, or to respond to some other bureaucratic issues the authorities bother him with. These "letters of question and dissent"[19] as he calls them, represent a "continuing quest for self-protection" (17; 30), that is, a means through which, as a sort of post-traumatic response, to keep track of his existence, in case the government should decide to make him disappear again. Li's habit of writing letters, however, dates back to his days on Green Island. When he was imprisoned there, he used to regularly send missives to his family, enquiring about his children's and wife's daily lives and dispensing advice on mundane affairs as well as on important family matters – like dissuading his wife from buying a house or suggesting meaningful names for his newborn grandsons. These letters were the only connection to his life on the "other" island outside the prison, proof that he still existed in the hearts and minds of the people he cared about.

The protagonist's graphomania is a way to counterbalance the feeling of being stuck in a disorienting place; to write is to try to make sense of reality and to find a sense of situatedness in his new-found life.

As a matter of fact, Li's faith in the power of writing (and of language in general) is emphasised throughout the story. His "letters of dissent" were delivered "to anywhere he could think of", including news

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[18] All translations of Zhu's text are Sylvia Li-chun Lin and Howard Goldblatt's (in Rowen 2021). All quotations are followed by page references to the English and the Chinese versions.

[19] Lit: "聲明疑義異議書"

reporters and writers, "one of whom he reminded that literature was a sacred and responsible public service" (26; 36). As the story develops, however, Li's faith in the world-making power of words is consistently put to the test. As soon as he comes back from Green Island, the man finds out that not one of the instructions directed to his family has been met. The names he had decided for his grandsons, Gaozhen 高真 and Gaoshan 高善,[20] had been dismissed, and the boys were actually named Li Zongwei 李宗偉 and Li Zongjun 李宗君. His wife did buy the houses Li had told her not to, and his son did not go to study agriculture or engineering, as per his wishes, but law. In other words, the reality Li had so meticulously crafted in those letters does not exist in the world he found upon his return. Nor did he bother to enquire, thirty years later, why his views, and even his existence had been so blatantly ignored, because

> he realized that time can wear things down and fissures can develop [他發現時間，是會磨損的、會出現縫隙] until a great many things, important or not, fall through the cracks and become impossible to retrieve. (41; 49–50)

Being trapped in a fairy-tale

To avoid his sense of self being shattered by these fissures in space-time, our protagonist takes refuge in a relatable, linear past, that is resuscitated into the present. For instance, to his only friend (and fellow former political prisoner) Old Cai (*lao Cai* 老蔡), Li never mentions that his grandsons have not been named according to his wishes, so "Cai continued to believe Junjun was called Gaoshan" (39; 48). Or again, when Li visits the farmers in the mountains, he's happy to see that there "nothing much had changed" (41; 50).

While walking on a mountain path, Li Jiazheng suddenly starts to sing a Japanese tune that references the story of Urashima Taro, which strikes him as uncannily similar to his own. The lyrics are nostalgic and sentimental ("missing home after spending too much time away", "my heart fills with happiness and longing on the way") but also evoke feelings of discomfort and disorientation ("everything had changed when I got home. The old house and the village had vanished, and not a single passersby looked familiar" [42; 50]).[21] Here is where we understand that Li's story is actually a re-enactment of the tale of Urashima Taro, which Li's mother used to tell him as a child, and which made him uncomfortable ("he would panic, wanting his mother to stop" [42; 50]).

According to one version of the tale, Urashima Taro ("Urashima of Mizunoé" in Keene's translation)[22] is a young fisherman who, after seven days out at sea in his fishing boat, meets the Sea God's daughter. The two fall in love, and she takes him to the "Land Everlasting", the Sea God's Palace, where they live three years of blissful happiness. At this point, however, the fisherman feels homesick and wishes

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[20] The "*Gao*" 高 in both boys' names is a tribute to Gorky, which in Chinese is translated as *Gao'erji* 高爾基.

[21] Even though the song is Japanese, the lyrics reported in the original text are in Chinese.

[22] See Keene 1965.

to return to the surface. The princess then bids him farewell by giving him a mysterious casket with the admonition never to open it. Back on the surface, Urashima Taro realises the world is nothing like he remembered; everything has changed. His friends and family disappeared, nobody knows who he is. When he eventually opens the box the princess gave him, a cloud rises from it, and the man suddenly becomes old and decrepit. Like Li Jiazheng, Urashima Taro has also experienced a temporal fissure; three years in the Sea God's Palace correspond to many more on Earth, so when he comes back, he does not recognise the places and the people that used to live there, because they are all gone. In the Japanese folktale, the narrative climax is the opening of the mysterious casket, which contains the time difference between life under the sea and life on Earth. The temporal disjuncture is thus fixed, albeit at the cost of the life of the protagonist.

At this point, it is quite clear that the intertextual evocation in the story is in fact a foreboding manifestation: Li Jiazheng is Urashima Taro. Like his fairy-tale counterpart, the man is destined to succumb to the impossibility of the re-telling of his own past. The equivalent of Urashima Taro's magic casket is, for Li Jiazheng, a box of letters he finds at his house, the letters he had sent to his family from Green Island many years ago. They represent the auto-fictional story of his own life, the way he had envisioned it, but that was never actualised because those letters have never been opened, which means his family never read them. Eventually, a cloud of white smoke rose from the box that contained the letters, and Li "did not need a mirror or a second look to know he'd become a gray-haired old man" (49; 57). The story ends with Li's desperate wailing, the same wail he erupted in when he was a scared child listening to his mother telling him the tale of Urashima Taro.

The intertextual dynamic Zhu Tianxin weaves into her story serves to reflect on the difficulty of remembering without textual elaboration. If memory is discursive, or textual – if the text is, again borrowing Lachmann, the site of memory (1997, 15) – Li Jiazheng experiences the impossibility of actualising his own text (the letters from prison), in favour of a borrowed one, that of the Japanese folktale. As a result, he has no way of assigning meaning to his own past and carrying it into his present sense of self. Ultimately, he bursts into wails, a regression to a pre-textual, childhood state.

Because of the author's personal position and the story's peculiar point of view, when "Urashima Taro" came out, it received quite a lot of criticism, some of it claiming that Zhu's point was to discredit the experience of political victims (Liu 2003, 396), by portraying a survivor as a borderline deranged man. In an interview published in *Taiwan guanghua zazhi* 台灣光華雜誌 (*Taiwan Panorama*, Teng 1992; as quoted in Liu 2003, 396), Zhu defended herself by specifying that the character of Li Jiazheng was inspired by her uncle who spent six years on Green Island as a political prisoner. In the same interview, she also remarked that while the experience of political imprisonment has been definitively consecrated in literature by renowned Taiwanese author Chen Yingzhen 陳映真, his fiction tends to focus on characters that are undisputable victims, whereas Zhu's perspective engages with aspects of the political persecution experience that have been overlooked (Teng 1992; Liu 2003, 396). For instance, in "Urashima Taro," she shows how Li Jiazheng's family consistently devalued the man's experience of political imprisonment and undermined his dignity as a victim by being dismissive of his political ideals (which Li still unflinchingly upholds), ultimately considering him a psychologically disturbed person.

As a matter of fact, Chen Yingzhen too refers (albeit rather inconspicuously) to the story of Urashima Taro as a symbol of the psychological and affective disintegration of a political prison survivor. The novella "Zhao Nandong" 趙南棟, published in 1987,[23] explores the disruption of self-perception and familial relations caused by the White Terror for the Zhao family members. The protagonist, former prisoner Zhao Qingyun 趙慶雲, like Li Jiazheng, feels out of place in the new personal and social setting he found upon his return. Lying in a hospital bed as an old man, he reminisces about his past and observes how much everything has changed in the twenty-five years he has been away, comparing this sense of disjointedness to the tale of Urashima Taro (Chen 1990, 15–16). The reference to the Japanese story has been noted by Yomi Breaster (2007, 216), who, in analysing Chen's political fiction, points out how his protagonists are, in fact, "dislocated Rip van Winkles who cannot adjust to the changes brought by time."

In light of this, we can further read Zhu Tianxin's intertextual evocation of Urashima Taro in her story as a way to position it in a dialectical relation with Chen's work, and by extension, with the *zhengzhi xiaoshuo* genre. In particular, Zhu's portrayal of Li Jiazheng as a deluded idealist does not imply the belittlement of the experience of political victimhood but rather sheds light on the double wound some political victims had to face in Taiwan's post-authoritarian era: to carry their personal trauma on one hand, and to face a world that no longer values their political struggle on the other.

Intertext as literary legacy

How has Taiwan's post-martial-law literary culture evolved in the new millennium? How does contemporary historical fiction confront the legacy of the post-authoritarian political novel? As mentioned above, Huang Chong-kai's *The Contents of the Times* is one example of a broader trend in the contemporary Taiwanese literary scene, which especially concerns Taiwanese millennial writers and the way they elaborate on a past they have not directly experienced but rather received as a mediated narrative. Specifically, these writers' production is structured on intertextual work that sheds light on their country's past literary traditions.[24] For instance, 2020 saw the publication of *Bainian jiangsheng: 1900–2000 Taiwan wenxue gushi* 百年降生：1900–2000 台灣文學故事 (*100 Years of Taiwan Literature: 1900–2000*), edited by twelve millennial writers and literature scholars.[25] The book, as the title suggests, is a narrative elaboration of the figures and the movements that characterised Taiwan literature in the past century, with special attention to what has previously been neglected or overlooked. Another example is a 2021 publication: *Tamen mei zai xie xiaoshuo de shihou: Jieyan Taiwan xiaoshuojia qunxiang* 他們沒在寫小說的時候：戒嚴台灣小說家群像 (*When They Were Not Writing Novels: Portraits of Novelists from Taiwan Under Martial Law*) by known millennial author

[23] The novella is part of a trilogy that explores the aftermath of political imprisonment in Taiwan, and includes: "Lingdang hua" 鈴鐺花 ("Bellflowers", 1983) and "Shan lu" 山路 ("Mountain Path", 1987).

[24] This practice is not limited to referring to martial- and post-martial-law literary production, but includes earlier literary traditions, such as, for instance, Taiwan literature under Japanese colonial rule.

[25] A previous issue of *The Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* has published a review of this volume. See: Schweiger 2022.

Chu Yu-hsun 朱宥勳. The book is dedicated to nine famous Taiwanese writers of the martial-law period whose lives the author narratively reconstructs to show readers how influential their personal stories have been for Taiwanese literature, beyond their literary contribution.

It is not easy to define the genre of these works, as they consistently blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction. Being based on, or inspired by, actual lives and works of Taiwanese writers of the past, they are non-fictional, but the way the stories are constructed and combined with other narrative elements arguably makes them works of fiction. However, the discussion on the genre of these works is beyond the scope of this paper, and it is sufficient to observe here that the publication of these texts in fact testifies to the existence of a trend within the contemporary literary discourse in Taiwan, which seems to engage with the country's past by reviving or (re)discovering past literary heritage. In what follows, I will take a closer look at this tendency by taking Huang Chong-kai's "Dixson's Idioms" as a representative example.

The grammars of the past

"Dixson's Idioms" is a story about finding a grammar to tell the past. If memory is actualised through text, text, in turn, is actualised through a system of codes and symbols we call grammar. In Huang's story, grammar is the metaphorical vehicle that makes the reconstruction of the past possible, because it establishes relations among words, thus conveying meaning to a disarticulated and disordered archive of memories.

Huang's story is narratively structured as if it were an English grammar manual, with English idioms functioning as entry points into the diegetic events, which follow three storylines. The main one is inspired by the life of English language teacher and former political prisoner Ko Chi-hua. The second narrative follows the life of Robert Dixson's wife, a Cuban immigrant named Lolita (蘿莉塔).[26] Dixson was an American writer who, in the 1950s, started to teach English to Puerto Rican immigrant workers, and ended up writing several books on English grammar and English language learning, which inspired many other English learning manuals all over the world, including, of course, Ko's *New English Grammar*. The two stories intertextually interact with each other, and this interaction is enriched with a third narrative thread that takes the point of view of the author himself, who in some parts intervenes by recounting his own experience with the grammar book as a student.

On the one hand, Huang uses intertextuality to emphasise how Taiwan's past continues to feed the present, and does so by connecting an English manual that has been used by generations of Taiwanese learners with the story of the man who wrote it, which, in turn, is tightly connected to the national wound in Taiwan's history that is the White Terror. On the other hand, however, the nature of the intertextual object – a grammar book – is highly suggestive, in that it points to the utter ambiguity of language as a vehicle of meaning. Grammar shows the inner workings of language, the structure of rules and practices that sustain it, making it appear as an ordered system of meaning-making. However,

[26] At the beginning of the story she is referred to as María (瑪利亞), but she will later change her name to Lolita.

when confronted with reality (the unpredictability of the present, the ineffability of the past), language appears as an utterly flawed medium through which to reproduce or describe it.

In "Dixson's Idioms," then, grammar becomes the symbolic means through which the dichotomy between signifier and signified, between textual and extra-textual reality is expressed. Huang divides Ko's story into some of the "Lessons" one can find in *New English Grammar*, such as phrasal verbs and grammatical moods. For instance, in one part of the story, Huang describes Ko writing the "Lesson" on conditional sentences (or "if clauses") while in prison:

> They [the "if clauses"] helped him to imagine buying a car that he could take on trips (*If I had a car, I should be very happy*), or that he was a bird, able to fly free (*If I were a bird, I could fly*). He could fire questions back at the people holding him down (*What would you do if you were in my place?*). Practicing these sentence forms was a way of preserving a space for his deepest wishes. (176; 336)[27]

By displaying different degrees of possibilities to express past, present, and future through grammatical moods, Huang reveals the possibilities to narrate one's own story, but also history. Ko's *New English Grammar*, like Li Jiazheng's "letters of dissent", functions as a way to make sense of the incarceration experience, a way to anchor the protagonist's reality to reference points that are somehow recognisable. Grammar appears to have a sort of conspicuousness, a codified and therefore predictable nature, in blatant contrast to the utter incomprehensibility of history.

As the story proceeds, however, Ko becomes wary of words and the power they hold within, as he discovers that they can do "real harm to his body and spirit" (342; 181). After all, he was imprisoned because of the words he had written and pronounced, because of the "fictional charges" uttered by other people that eventually resulted in him being placed in solitary confinement. We see then how Huang Chong-kai uses the character of Ko to interrogate the referential relation between language and reality, ultimately wondering about the possibility of existing in a world without language and therefore without text.

When Ko is released and returns home, he gradually gives up on language. His memory begins to fade, resembling "an English fill-in-the-blank exercise, with more and more gaps appearing" (193; 353).[28] Our protagonist forgets things: what his wife tells him, or to come back home after going out for a drive. He speaks less and less; language seems to be slowly disintegrating. "This was a return to an original way of facing the world: without language, things had no names, and history was yet to begin." (195; 353)[29] The story ends with these words, with Ko (together with Lolita) embracing silence, entering a dimension with no language and no grammar. This of course cost them their memory. History appears to have no meaning because there is no text that can bring it into the present.

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[27] All translations of Huang's text are Brian Skerratt's (in Rowen 2021). All quotations are followed by page references to the English and the Chinese versions. In this quote, the sentences in brackets appear in English in the original Chinese text. They are direct quotes from Ko's *New English Grammar*.

[28] Lit. "他的記憶逐漸像英文克漏字測驗，出現愈來愈多的空格."

[29] Lit. "他們 [Ko Chi-hua and Lolita] 退回到面對世界的原初狀態，語言還不存在，事物還沒有名字，歷史正要開始."

Both Lolita and Ko Chi-hua, as well as Zhu Tianxin's Li Jiazheng, are symbolic embodiments of the crisis of referentiality and representation as a consequence of the historical trauma experienced by that generation. However, Huang Chong-kai engages with that crisis and proposes a way out of it, by re-contextualising those experiences within a wider memoryscape that, through intertextuality, makes visible the affective connections he and his generation have with that part of the country's past.

The intertextual reconfiguration of Taiwan's past is consistent throughout the whole collection *The Contents of the Times,* which, as Zhan points out (2020, 104), Huang Chong-kai implements by accessing it from the perspective of popular media. Furthermore, Huang's creative re-mediation shows the connections between Taiwan and world history, thus repositioning the island country within a global, hyper-connected mediascape. In the case of "Dixson's Idioms," for instance, the author uses Dr. Martin Luther King's memorable "I Have a Dream" speech as an intertextual connection to Taiwan history, once again actualised through the English grammar manual, which in turn becomes a contact point between Huang himself and Ko.

Intervening in the narrative with his first-person account, the author reminisces: "My recollection of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is that his portrait in my textbook featured a mustache, gap teeth, and horns, courtesy of my classmates" (191; 351). He remembers when his English teacher made the whole class listen to Dr. King's speech from a portable stereo, an experience that young Huang found deeply moving ("I felt goosebumps over my whole body" [191; 351]). Ko Chi-hua was also familiar with Dr. King's speech which, by the end of the 1980s, had been included in the English textbooks adopted by the Taiwanese high school system:

> He [Ko Chi-hua] read through the text of the speech, doubting on the one hand if Taiwanese high school students could really understand Dr. King's pursuit of fairness and justice, but on the other hand he was still feeling hopeful that after martial law, Taiwanese society might experience a new climate. (192–93; 352)

Huang Chong-kai highlights the conjunction points between Ko and Dr. King: they share the same birth year (1929), and the famous speech was delivered one week before Ko was sent to prison for the second time. In other words, through a microhistorical close-up of the life of a Taiwanese teacher and writer, Huang in fact outlines the macrohistorical interconnections between a small island in the Pacific and the world.

While his protagonists are symbols of a rupture between past and present, between words and reality, Huang's story eventually finds a way to mend the fissure between history and its representation, and does so through an intertextual connection embodied by an object, an English grammar manual, that affectively reconnects that history to the post-authoritarian generation of Taiwanese people.

Conclusion

Reflecting on Bakhtin's dialogism as a constitutive feature of every textual reality, Lachmann writes: "The text arises from the act of crossing its own borders and at the same time from the movement back into its own domain." (1997, 38) This double movement, which can only be realised in a process of reading, is very similar to the undulatory oscillation between past and present – but also between self and out-of-self – that is remembering.

Zhu Tianxin's "Urashima Taro" and Huang Chong-kai's "Dixson's Idioms" ideally situate themselves in a dialogic relation with Taiwan's literary tradition of the *zhengzhi xiaoshuo* genre, and are narratively structured on and through a network of intertextual references that carry the memories of Taiwan's past into the present. In particular, the two main intertextual objects referred to in the two stories – a children's tale and a grammar book – heavily rely on mnemonic effort and readers' engagement in order to be passed on.

By making her protagonist re-live the tragic Japanese folktale of Urashima Taro, Zhu Tianxin hints at and dialogically relates to Chen Yingzhen's politically engaged fiction, by utilising the same intertextual reference he uses in the story "Zhao Nandong." The narrative is non-linear and follows the protagonist's ramblings into his past – which is also made of intertextual reverberations, namely the Russian socialist literature he consumed, the Chinese socialist songs he learned by heart, and so forth. Li Jiazheng thinks through citations, but citations are not bearers of meaning; he is reproducing the world of his past but is not able to integrate it into the reality of his present.

Huang Chong-kai, on the other hand, weaves together his own autobiographical story into a specific non-fictional text that has virtually been consumed by every Taiwanese who has gone through high school since the 1960s – including the author. By narrating the stories of the people behind the English grammar book (Ko Chi-hua and Robert Dixson), Huang is thus inviting his readership to look at how history is brought into the fabric of everyday life through a meta-reflection on language as a maker of meaning.

From the perspective of memory work, both Zhu Tianxin in "Urashima Taro" and Huang Chong-kai in "Dixson's Idioms" use their fictional protagonists, Li Jiazheng and Ko Chi-hua, as narrative embodiments of the fragmentation of memory and of the rejection of history as a homogeneous narrative. Both of them live in a fragmented reality, and are dissociated from their pre-traumatic selves: Li dwells in the remembrance of his life before his detainment, and cannot integrate the spatiotemporal chasm he lives in. Ko, on the other hand, lives vicariously through his English grammar book and eventually is faced with the realisation that words are not bearers of absolute truth.

Both of them eventually perish, in a metaphorical sense. Zhu's Li Jiazheng, after finding out that his family had never read his letters, erupts in a primordial wail and, following the destiny of his fabulous alter-ego, withers into an empty simulacrum. Similarly, the trauma endured by Huang's Ko Chi-hua makes him radically rethink his relationship with language, the object around which (as an English teacher and writer) his entire life was built.

If we go back to Barthes' approach to texts as plural entities – not because of the ambiguity of their content, but for the ontological "*stereographic plurality* of its weave of signifiers" (Barthes 1977, 159; italics in the original), it might be worthwhile to reflect on that very plurality of meaning makers. The crisis of representation conveyed in Zhu Tianxin's text, which stems from the author's unstable and ambiguous position within the new post-martial-law socio-political system, is reflected in the way she makes herself invisible (dead) as author, leaving the meaning-making work – meaning being something she has become very sceptical of – to the reader. In this way, the fissure between past and present, embodied by her protagonist, is never really mended, and history is a narrative with no clear reference and no clear meaning.

On the other hand, Huang Chong-kai's approach is quite different. In "Dixson's Idioms" the author appears in the story. Not only does he make himself very visible (as reader, prior to author), but, in his story, he also makes the other author, Ko Chi-hua, very much alive. However, neither of them is framed as an authoritative agent of meaning, but rather as symbolic connections to a forgotten (or removed) history that is finally made visible again, through a work of affective reconfiguration actualised by intertextual practice.

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