Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies 42.1
March 2016: 99-118
DOI: 10.6240/concentric.lit.2016.42.1.05

Propaganda and Memory in Li Kunwu and Philippe Ôtié's *A Chinese Life*[*]

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Abstract

A Chinese Life is a graphic autobiography first published in France as *Une vie chinoise* in three separate volumes between 2009 and 2011. With a single volume English translation appearing in 2012, the work has reached a global audience and speaks to a growing interest in the graphic narrative form as a mode through which comics artists are able to explore questions of identity, politics, and memory. Documenting the life of a Communist Party member who faces severe personal adversity and struggles to maintain his faith in Party ideals, *A Chinese Life* is a work that addresses issues of history and memory on both personal and political levels. The result is a provocative, sometimes unsatisfying, account that speaks to larger underlying problems of cultural memory and narrating Chinese history, particularly as this history is translated and negotiated across national and political borders.

Keywords

graphic autobiography; propaganda and memory; memory studies; collaborative autobiography; *A Chinese Life*

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> History is the raw material of nationalistic or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material of heroin addiction.
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> —Eric Hobsbawm
> *On History*

In a discussion of Asia's troubled history, and in the context of the "textbook wars" that have emerged in Japan and elsewhere in Asia, historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki suggests that contestations around historical memory need to be considered beyond the textbook and in relation to a wide range of cultural forms. In her study Morris-Suzuki shows that popular forms of cultural expression are not only able to reach wide audiences but can also challenge readers to reconsider aspects of history from diverse perspectives. She writes, "The inventive novelist, filmmaker or comic-book artist can push the boundaries of the medium, and at times break the mould of convention in ways that expand the limits of historical conceptions" (21). By considering forms of popular culture, many of which have been ignored within academia, cultural historians are able to gain new perspectives on critical issues, particularly in a context where history is highly sensitive and ideological.

Comics, according to Morris-Suzuki, are a particularly capable medium for historical reflection. Popular manga artists such as Tezuka Osamu and Chiba Tetsuya, whose works can be problematic in some respects, are able to offer perspectives on Japan's troubled past by presenting multiple viewpoints and by expanding readers' imaginative landscapes:

> By extending their own visual imaginations, comic-book readers can recognize how the comic positions them in relation to a historical event, and can conjure up their own alternative images of that event as it might appear from other angles. In this way, they can begin to free themselves from the writer's sometimes totalitarian hold on their visualization of the past. (204)

A Chinese Life (2009), a graphic autobiography co-produced by the Chinese artist Li Kun-wu and the French writer Phillipe Ôtié, is a work that similarly demonstrates both the limitations and the liberating potential of the comics form. As it explores questions to do with the mediated nature of memory and history, it challenges us to consider the visual and visceral dimensions of historical knowledge in China and reveals the inherent conflicts between personal and political commitments. Furthermore, the collaboration between a French writer and a

Chinese artist creates a level of complexity that challenges our understanding and interpretation of the text. While collaboration of this kind is not uncommon in the production of comics, *A Chinese Life* is unique insofar that it depicts Li and Ôtié as characters in the story and draws attention to the cross-cultural dimension of their collaboration. While in some respects *A Chinese Life* repeats a version of Chinese history that is familiar to most educated readers, through a de-centered authorial and linguistic position, the work ultimately raises questions about the ethical and political role of the artist in society and explores what exactly "a Chinese life" means in an increasingly globalized and transnational context.

"Pure. Red": Viewing and Reviewing the Past

Comics have a long history as a popular and commercial form of storytelling, but by the late 1960s, the format took a very different turn. In the US, Britain, and other Western countries, underground "comix" (as they were known) explored risky and taboo topics and themes. Often self-published through small presses, artists like Robert Crumb famously depicted sex and drug use, while others such as Gary Panther became associated with the punk movement. While recent graphic narratives have become much more mainstream and are now published by large companies and have a wide distribution, in many ways the connection with the alternative aesthetic remains.

In the case of graphic non-fiction and graphic autobiographies, we often encounter the spirit of dissent that has been historically associated with the genre: for example, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) provides a powerful and surprisingly literary account of the author's emerging lesbian identity, and many readers will be familiar with Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical work *Persepolis* which depicts a conservative black and white world where people are literally boxed-in during the Iranian cultural revolution. First published in France in four volumes between 2000 and 2003, Satrapi's graphic autobiography has gone on to reach a global readership and has had an unprecedented influence on the genre. Rocío Davis is one of several critics who have commented on how Satrapi's graphic autobiography negotiates complex questions to do with memory and identity.[1] In a particularly telling image that speaks to the graphic narrative's subversive aims, Satrapi is depicted as a young girl wearing her "Punk is not Dead" T-shirt over her

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[1] Davis makes a compelling argument that *Persepolis* provides a sophisticated treatment of identity and memory as the author negotiates national affiliations along with ideas of selfhood, see "A Graphic Self," 264-79.

traditional garments as she is dragged away by dour school mistresses. In works such as these, the comics form, a medium that is sometimes viewed as a genre for sub-literate juvenile readers, is employed as an irreverent statement of rebellion against the values of the establishment while addressing poignant social and historical issues.

Unlike these works of graphic non-fiction, however, *A Chinese Life* cannot be so easily situated within the ethos of Western counter-culture. Similar to graphic autobiographies like *Maus*, *Fun Home*, and *Persepolis*, *A Chinese Life* is structured as a künstlerroman narrative as it traces the struggle and development of the autobiographical subject into an artist. However, unlike the rebellious artist who is shown to have broken free of social constraints, the protagonist of *A Chinese Life* is unable to separate himself from, and in many ways actually becomes, that which oppresses him. Propaganda is shown to be a way of viewing the world and an utterly destructive and repressive form of social control, yet it is also inextricably linked to memory and woven into the fabric of experience.

The memoir begins with two photographs: one of Li as an infant with his parents and the other of him in a schoolboy's uniform. These images are accompanied by a bold expression of the author's political background: "Pure Red." The first pages of the memoir depict Li's early indoctrination into the Party; here, loyalty and discipline are shown to be both extreme and cruel. These early pages focus on the ways in which Li's father was the main contributor to the artist's personal development: depicted in the visual idiom of propagandistic art, "Secretary Li" is an overarching and conflicted presence—a figure who is at once a Communist hero and a tyrannical patriarch. In one frame, the father is shown to be a brave leader in the vanguard of the Communist movement and the foreshortening of the figure depicts him as larger than life as he preaches the rise of New China to illiterate peasants. However, alongside such images readers encounter a violent fanatic. In a telling sequence, Li shows his father desperately trying to get his son to say "*Mao Zhuxi Wansui*" (May Chairman Mao live 10,000 years) as his first words. Utterly dominated, the child is called an imbecile for not being able to properly proclaim his love for Chairman Mao.

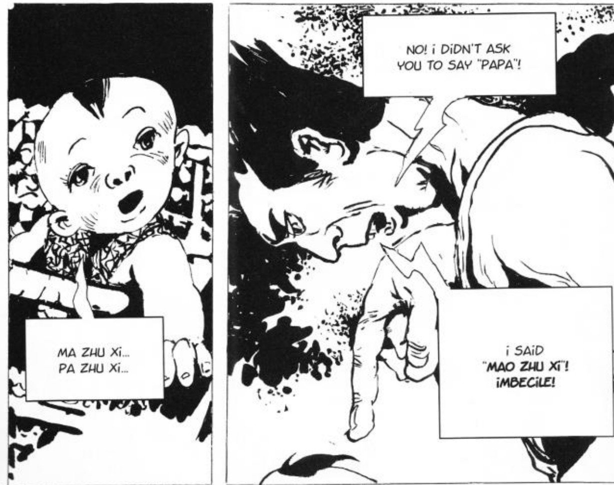

Fig. 1. Philippe Ôtié. *A Chinese Life*. Art by Li Kunwu (London: SelfMadeHero, 2012), 12.

Yet whereas his verbal skills fail, Li's talent for drawing flourishes. With his father's guidance and encouragement, Li learns to draw propagandistic images from "The Illustrated Yearbook of 1960," a work that caricatures Western capitalists at the bottom "in the sludge" trying to take away from China's success (the slogans read, "Each day we are little better off. Each day our enemies are little worse off") (52). As the narrative progresses, Li's artistic ability leads to a successful career in the Party as an official propagandist. In his capacity as a state sanctioned artist, he learns to draw Mao Zedong's image in various official formats. The seemingly endless repetitions of Mao's image lead to deep introspection and reveal the inextricable connection between the visual and the verbal:

> Chairman Mao . . . I immersed myself in your words and proclaimed them with pride. I have drawn and painted your face so many times. What have you done to me? To us? The strange feeling I nurtured for you cannot be described, so complex, so contradictory, is it, going back to my first breath and shaped through all of the years of my childhood. Xiao Li, 'Little Li', was born with you, and will die with you. (236)

Li's description of his feelings towards Mao's unshakable and contradictory image reveals the powerful and silencing effects of visual propaganda on memory, as the

repeated images of Mao's face elicit complex emotional responses that defy verbal description.

Li's personal and political ambitions are clearly centered on becoming a Party member, since it is only through the Party that he is able to survive as an artist and meet his father's expectations. Yet from the very beginning doubts appear, particularly in relation to China's progress as a nation and the vain belief that "each day we are little better off" (52). The harsh realities of the Great Leap Forward (the period between 1958 and 1961 when millions died as a result of both drought and misguided economic and social programs) are particularly powerful. For example, Li depicts the abject image of his uncle who nearly died of constipation after trying to survive by eating dirt, only to be saved by his great grandmother who cleans out his anus with her finger. Similarly, the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) is shown to be a period of fanaticism and chaos; in one sequence, he portrays one of his fellow Red Guard members pinning a medal of Mao to his skin in order to prove his loyalty. Here, the individual makes a grotesque spectacle of himself to prove his unwavering love for the political cause to his close clique of comrades.

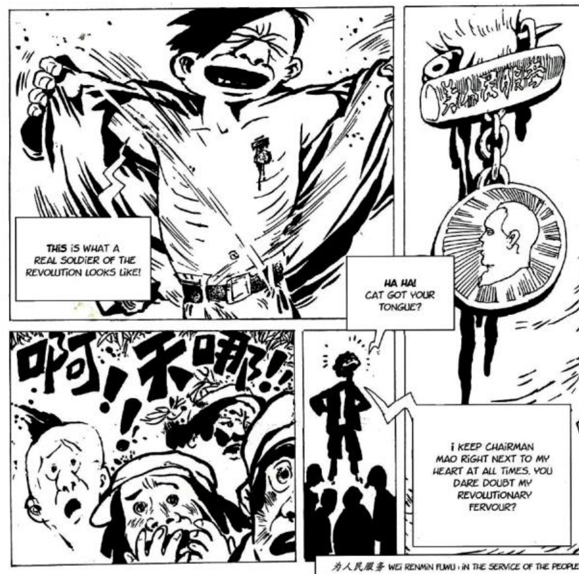

Fig. 2. Philippe Ôtié. *A Chinese Life*. Art by Li Kunwu (London: SelfMadeHero, 2012), 135.

These examples demonstrate how memory is not a faculty that is purely intellectual and cognitive but also a modality that is intricately linked with the body

and with physical sensations. Along these lines, Davis argues compellingly that the graphic narrative form is particularly capable of eliciting intellectual, emotional, and physical responses. In her study of G. B. Tran's graphic memoir *Vietnamerica* (2011), Davis shows that Tran's story speaks to the ways in which historical knowledge is constructed through memory and in relation to a range of emotional and physical responses. In the context of remembering the effects of the Vietnam War (a conflict that involved an unprecedented involvement of visual mediation), Tran's graphic narrative comments on how the graphic form is able "to mediate our access to history through the reconstruction of family stories that are also historical accounts" (253). By placing himself within the narrative, Tran "shows how historical events became catalysts for the ways a subject evolves and might be represented, with emphasis on the embodiment of the subject, memory, and strategically, emotions" (253). Like Tran, Li and Ôtié make a similar comment on how emotions and psychological dispositions relate to acts of historical mediation.

Furthermore, as these graphic memoirs draw attention to multimodal reading practices they also foreground the actual processes involved in storytelling. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud provides a detailed discussion of temporality and space in comics, referring to "eye time" and the sense in which the panel, or frame, acts as a general indicator that time and space is being divided. According to McCloud, durations of time and the dimensions of space are defined more by the contents of the panel than by the panel itself. He writes that as the eye pushes time forward "both past and future are real and visible and *all around us*! . . . Like a storm front, the eye moves over the comics page, pushing the warm, high-pressure future ahead of it, leaving the cool, low-pressure past in its wake" (104; emphasis in original). Such effects can disrupt the expected progression of narrative and linear experience that for many readers has been conditioned by other media and the "real time" of every day. Similarly, comics critic Hillary Chute has commented on a "disjunctive back-and-forth between looking and reading" that non-fiction comics can elicit ("Comics as Literature" 452).[2] The circular movement of the eye as it negotiates the frames can lead to a slowed-down reading experience, causing the reader to change direction, review, or reread—actions which provoke moments of thoughtful interpretation and draw attention to the ways that personal and historical narratives are structured and organized. Chute writes that:

> The ability to use space on the page to interlace or overlay different temporalities, to place pressure on linearity and conventional notions

[2] See also Chute's study "Decoding Comics" where she makes similar points.

> of sequence, causality, and progression, is a reason comics can address itself so powerfully to historical and life narrative. ("Comics Form" 105)

In *A Chinese Life*, similar moments of disjunction between looking and reading are conveyed as the reader is invited to negotiate the spatial and visual aspects of this history. During the Cultural Revolution, the world is portrayed as cluttered: cigarette packages, bus tickets, slogans, posters, and banners appear everywhere and reveal a linguistic landscape saturated with the verbal and the visual. In one image on page 152, we see citizens posting and reading *da zi bao* (big character posters), a practice which provided a way for people to denounce those deemed to be ideologically questionable; in both the frame on the page, and in the social space depicted, there is a fight for visual space as people simultaneously watch, read, and surveil each other. Below this image, a man looks back, directly out of the page, seeming to implicate the reader and drawing attention to the power of the gaze.

In her discussion of Spiegelman's work *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Marianne Hirsch writes of the graphic novel's ability to operate outside the conventional and commercial as it "performs an aesthetic of the trauma: it is fragmentary, composed of small boxes that cannot contain the material which exceeds their frames and the structure of the page" (1213). Such an interpretation may also be applicable to *A Chinese Life* where readers similarly encounter a sense of excess and fragmentation in the context of historical trauma. By provoking alternating modalities of watching and reading, Li and Ôtié call attention to the persuasive and potentially destructive power of the gaze and at the same time express a self-reflexive concern with the destructive and alienating effects of the Revolution.

As the narrative progresses, visual and spatial aspects of the text suggest a correspondence between the Maoist period and the capitalistic present-day. In Li's depiction of the reform and opening period of the 1980s and 90s, gone are the slogans of the Cultural Revolution and the intense visual propaganda of the State; instead advertisements, billboards, and television screens compete for space (552). Instead of reading the signboards that denounce enemies of the state, people are depicted in similar pictorial fashion as they scramble to read job postings on notice boards. Modern China is portrayed as thriving and is clearly very different from the earlier days, but the importance of the visual, of seeing and being seen, remains as a vital and a key aspect of maintaining social order. In some ways, society is shown

as not having completely progressed past the madness of the 1960s and 70s, but as only having transformed itself into another kind of disorder and hysteria.

This sense of continuity and connection with the past as it is depicted in the narrative is particularly significant when we consider how the Cultural Revolution has taken on mythical status in China and has become the subject of numerous films, television shows, and novels. Scholars have explored the extent to which memories of this period can evoke a powerful sense of nostalgia, particularly among the "*zhiqing*" generation (those who were "sent down" to the countryside) (Yang; Davis). While in some cases popular portrayals of this period rely on tropes of violence and victimization in order to exploit consumer-driven impulses and desires, in other instances, they can provide a meaningful and advantageous way for audiences to understand and to critique concerns to do with economic inequality and differential opportunities for "success" in contemporary China. By suggesting parallels between the Cultural Revolution and the present day, and by drawing attention to the ubiquitous presence that visual modalities continue to play in the formation of social identities, *A Chinese Life* participates in this complex negotiation with the period and avoids relegating the Cultural Revolution to a contained and ideologically safe position in the past.

Autobiography, Collaboration, and Negotiating History

As it comments critically on the ways that history and memory are informed and interpreted through visual modalities, *A Chinese Life* also challenges assumptions about autobiography as a genre and the extent to which memories are revealed and constructed through verbal and visual narratives. In his introduction to *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, Michael Chaney describes how the comic form can amplify critical questions about the production of authorial identities that we have come to expect in conventional autobiographical texts.[3] Chaney writes:

> When the "I" of autobiography is explicitly stylized as a kind of cartoon, the result is a brazen departure from the "seemingly substantial" effects of realism that traditional autobiographies

[3] Several other studies have similarly explored the complexity of autobiographical comics and how they challenge or subvert reader expectations. For example, see Gillian Whitlock's discussion of Satrapi's *Persepolis* in *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* and Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*.

> presume. The larger consequence of this tension between objective and subjective truths in creating realistic fictions of the self prod us to reconsider what is at stake in telling our life stories in pictures and how it is that we have come to visualize identity in particular ways and according to particular sociohistorical contexts. (7)

Autobiographical comics, then, are able to push readers to reconsider the fictive nature of life stories and their sociohistorical contexts in interesting ways. However, in the case of *A Chinese Life*, these self-reflexive effects, which call attention to the constructed nature of the autobiographical text, are further emphasized by the work's collaborative nature. As a work that is co-produced, with two names on the cover, two author prefaces, it transgresses what Philippe Lejeune refers to as "the autobiographical pact" (the notion that the author, protagonist and narrator of the autobiographical text are identical); instead of articulating a controlling sense of authorial presence, the text challenges the idea of privileged subjectivity that is able to speak on behalf of history.[4]

While the work is intended to trace the growth of an individual, on another level, it is about the collaboration between Ôtié and Li and the inherent difficulties of conveying personal experience across cultural and political boundaries. The result is a text that betrays a pervasive sense of duality: a double vision that both repeats and subverts dominant ideological and political discourses on China and its historical development. In his foreword, the writer Ôtié introduces his role in the production of the text and casts himself as an outsider and provocateur. He writes:

> I am the Foreigner. He who has everything to learn. Who sometimes annoys with his failure to understand things obvious to the Chinese. Who can't love China as much as the Chinese. Who worms out information, who wants to make Lao Li talk about what he won't talk about. To dive into his life. To help him reconstruct it. To negotiate, with the real Lao Li, what inflections to give the dialogue, the story. My story—no, his story. (Ôtié, Foreword)

[4] In *On Autobiography*, Lejeune outlines the main limitations of autobiography and points to its failure to differentiate clearly between autobiography and the autobiographical novel. From Lejeune's point of view, there is no way to distinguish between the two. In the foreword of Lejeune's book, Paul John Eakin describes the importance of Lejeune's study of autobiography but suggests that if taken too far autobiographies run a risk of losing their status as a distinct genre and collapsing completely into fiction.

As Gérard Genette reminds us, such paratextual features—that is, those aspects of a published work that accompany and surround the "main" text—can be viewed as a liminal "threshold" or "a zone between text and off-text . . . [one] not only of transition but also *transaction*: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy" (2; emphasis in original). In this case, the paratext opens a critical space, a sense of undecidability, or in the language of deconstruction a sense of aporia, which challenges the linguistic and ideological coherence of a text. Not only is there a frustration with the dichotomy between "the Chinese" and "the Foreigner," there is a conflation of ownership between "my" versus "his" story, the self and the other, the insider and the outsider. Whether or not there is resentment in Ôtié's preface as he declares himself to be a foreigner (in this case written with a capital "F") who is unable to love China as much as the Chinese or grasp relevant cultural and historical concepts, there is a clear tension between the artist and the writer as Ôtié negotiates with Li in the production of the text. Ôtié appears later in the graphic narrative consulting the artist and helping to organize the layout and narrative arc of the work, but his presence goes beyond practical issues of organization and style as he "annoyingly" challenges Li on certain points.

The idea of collaboration in autobiography is a vexed area with many questions emerging about material and social relations between the so-called co-writer and the autobiographical subject. Lejeune comments on the fact that historically many collaborative autobiographies involved a member of the ruling class "collaborating" with a subject of a lower social class. Lejeune views the process of writing these autobiographies in terms of an unequal exchange because:

> [the] network of communication of the printed work [. . .] is in the hands of the ruling classes and serves to promote their values and their ideology. Their autobiographical narratives [. . .] are the place where a collective identity is elaborated, reproduced, and transformed, the pattern of life appropriate to the ruling classes. (198)

While the collaboration in *A Chinese Life* is not a matter of upper versus lower class, it nevertheless involves different expectations and a negotiation of different ideological positions.

Thomas Couser has described collaborative autobiographies as needing to confront a number of ethical problems: "Although the process by which the text is produced is dialogical, the product is monological; the single narrative voice—a simulation by one person of the voice of another—is always in danger of breaking,

exposing the conflicts not manifest in solo autobiography" (35). Couser goes on to suggest that collaborative authorships "are rather like marriages and other domestic partnerships" with both partners having "strong interests in the fate of that offspring" (35-36). In the case of *A Chinese Life*, the story of Ôtié and Li's partnership appears within the text as they discuss their shared responsibilities and views. While the use of such metanarratives may be common in graphic narratives, there is arguably more at stake in this example as Ôtié and Li need to work out the ethical commitments to their work and confront sensitive political problems. Near the beginning of the third and final section of the book, Ôtié and Li depict themselves discussing their progress and plans (484-86). In one sequence Ôtié raises the question of Tiananmen Square and the events of June 4th: "We have to settle the 6/4 question," Ôtié states, "We've been banging our heads against it for six months. Curfews, arrests, disappearances, deaths—we'll have to try harder than usual to stick to the objective viewpoint of a simple witness" (484). Li then objects, "Witness, witness—but what did I see? I told you before in June 1989, I was studying sculpture near the border. What little I knew about Tiananmen I heard on the radio" (485).

Fig. 3. Philippe Ôtié. *A Chinese Life*. Art by Li Kunwu (London: SelfMadeHero, 2012), 484.

Apart from stating the fact that he was not physically present at the events, Li goes on to offer a deeper and more philosophical justification for his unwillingness to portray the events of 6/4. In a series of frames that depict him as a lone figure overlooking a modern urban landscape, he describes the "dark mark" on public opinion and the "great suffering" that the events of Tiananmen created. He then goes on to confess that despite a sense of inner pain, "the truth is, like almost all of my countrymen, my mind is occupied with so many other things I find even more important." Part of this neglect to face historical facts, he explains, is due to his personal habit of "putting behind me parts of the past that are liable to make me uncomfortable" and also out of a belief that "China needs order and stability to develop" (488-89). In offering this last justification, that is, the need for "order and stability," Li admits that others would disagree:

> I know that might be shocking, especially to Westerners, whose primary discourse is fundamentally different. This isn't just me taking up some official line on my own. No—it's a deeply rooted feeling that many Chinese share, I think. . . . Those who know or understand our misfortune must also be able to understand my profound desire for order and stability, in which I await our growth and rebirth. (489)

For many, Li's bifurcated view that Chinese and Westerners have a different "fundamental discourse" and would therefore view the past differently is deeply problematic, as is Li's apparent faith that order and stability (and we presume the Party itself) will lead the country into a "rebirth." Furthermore, the emphasis on "order and stability" above all else has long been used in China (and recently in other regions such as Hong Kong) as a justification for repressive or controversial policies.

Yet one must keep in mind that there are justifications and pragmatic reasons why a person or a society might choose to forget. In the field of memory studies, there have been a number of discussions on the nature and ethics of forgetting. Paul Connerton, for example, has reminded us that acts of remembering and commemorating have historically been aligned with virtue while forgetting is quite often associated with failure; these associations, which might seem axiomatic to some, should not be viewed as universal, nor should all acts of forgetting be viewed in the same light. Indeed, as Connerton shows, there are many different types of forgetting (at least seven types that he outlines): repressive erasure, forgetting that is

constitutive in the formation of new identity, structural amnesia, forgetting as annulment; forgetting as planned obsolescence, forgetting as humiliating silence.

While these forms of forgetting are likely to overlap, it is nevertheless useful to consider how some forms of forgetting are more or less practicable in different circumstances. In one sense, the choice to forget about 6/4 appears to be a clear case of "repressive erasure"; that is, the official, and sometimes brutal, denial of a historical fact to serve the interests of power. Yet there are other types of forgetting which can serve less political and ideological purposes. Connerton describes "forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of new identity" as "the process by which newly shared memories are constructed because a new set of memories are frequently accompanied by a set of tacitly shared silences" (63). One example he offers is forgetting details of a previous marriage or partnership, which could impair a current relationship. Or, in another example, one might choose to forget the details of life within a particular religious organization or political affiliation when one has moved on and sought to consciously embrace a new affiliation. In these cases, "Not to forget might . . . provoke too much cognitive dissonance: better to consign some things to a shadow world . . . [such memories] are, so to speak, like pieces of an old jigsaw puzzle that if retained would prevent a new jigsaw puzzle from fitting together properly" (63). Li's decision to avoid the topic of 6/4 may not be justifiable in these terms, but the point is that despite the stated effort to forget, the narrative paradoxically draws attention to the events even while not actually depicting them. Rather than imposing a hegemonic view of history, the text provides more questions than clear answers as issues of cultural memory and the ethics of forgetting are shown to be a negotiated problem.

By dramatizing this reconstruction of a personal history in terms of collaboration, *A Chinese Life* makes a gesture towards a cosmopolitan vision and can be viewed as an exception to the didactic and monocultural paradigm that has historically characterized much autobiographical writing in China. Indeed, a number of scholars have commented on the didactic tendencies of autobiographical writing in China which go back to classical literature. In *When "I" Was Born: Women's Autobiography in Modern China* (2009), Jing M. Wang has described how autobiographical writing traditionally existed outside of the Confucian canon and was therefore not taken seriously as having literary merit.[5] Similarly, Pei-Yi

[5] According to Wang: "For centuries the writing of lives (*zhuan*), the chief means to historiography, referred to as biography, and autobiography existed as prefaces and postscripts to the author's larger works or otherwise outside of the Confucian canon. In other words, autobiography was dismissed as mere personal accounts unworthy of critical attention and was never looked at as a genre in its own right" (4).

Wu has described how forms of biography and autobiography have traditionally held a practical historiographical function: to transmit knowledge, usually about some meritorious deed or infamous act; this style of writing has conventionally been kept separate from *wen* (literary writing or belle lettres).[6] Furthermore, Wu describes how autobiography and biography were traditionally very similar in terms of tone, style, and genre: "Nearly every subgenre of the former can be traced back to the latter; the derivative and its model are often indistinguishable in tone, style, and narrative stance" (268). Wendy Larson examines both pre-modern and modern autobiographical texts in terms of their representational strategies, identifying a number of polarities in both older and modern autobiographical texts. In pre-modern texts, she describes the tension between the circumstantial (that is elements that emphasize ancestry, kinship, "real" time, and place, names and historical dates) and impressionistic elements (which have to do with allegory, literary allusions, and rhetorical flair). In twentieth-century autobiographies, however, there is instead a distinction between "textual" practice, which is literary and intellectual, and "real" productive labor, which is physical. In this way, modern autobiographies often seek to define themselves as a kind of purposeful labor.

Although *A Chinese Life* is clearly meant to appeal to younger readers and uses the graphic narrative form to challenge past conventions of autobiographical discourse, some of these didactic elements nevertheless remain, particularly near the end of the text. In the closing pages, Li repeats the view that stability and order are necessary for development and progress, even if this means that individual rights are sometimes neglected. Alone again, and walking through an empty neighborhood, he reflects: "China is not perfect yet" but despite its faults it has much to be proud of since "China's progress did not come from armed conquest or inherited capital but was built on sweat and sacrifice." He goes on: "only hard work will lead us down the road to development," and then quotes Deng Xiaoping that "development is our first priority; the brightest moon is that of the homeland; the prettiest countryside is that of the homeland" (690). These words are presented as

[6] Brian Moloughney makes a similar assertion, describing biographical writing in China as traditionally understood as a form of historiography. The transition to modern biography, according to Moloughney, began to take place during the 1920s and 30s when May Fourth writers experimented with different modes of biography and autobiography. By the 1940s and 50s, however, biographical writing became largely associated with patriotic and nationalistic discourses. William Ayers describes biographical writing in Communist China as "a highly purposeful craft, but rarely, if ever, is its primary purpose to portray an individual personality for its own sake, to inform objectively, or to entertain. The aim, instead, is to convince, enshrine, or inspire. Biography is didactic, hagiolatrous, or propagandistic" (477).

an emotional plea and an attempt to justify and make sense out of a history of suffering. Yet for many readers, such justifications are not easy to accept. Indeed, when one considers the Communist Party's repressive policies over regions like Xinjiang and Tibet, this view that China's progress "did not come from conquest" is questionable. And the notion of "perfection" as the ultimate goal repeats a Marxian view of progress and a vision of worker equality that is hard to imagine in today's China.

It is important to recognize, however, that Li's views are characterized within the narrative as a personal confession and a way of thinking that is increasingly out of step with reality. Rendered wearing the drab clothes of an artist and sporting an unfashionable and a rustic looking hat, his image contrasts with the modern cityscape and he appears isolated and cut off from society. Furthermore, there is a disparity between the words and images: the difference between uttering the official line of history and letting the pictures tell another story. Ôtié remarks in his foreword that Li's visual style changed as they worked on the narrative:

> Before *A Chinese Life*, his lines were smooth, quick, airy, modest; his brush strokes barely touched the paper. This was the style of the first few pages, the first few attempts. It didn't allow for digging deep, for spilling your guts. Like an actor who suddenly had to play himself, Lao Li let the masks drop and went looking for a style. His own style. Tortured. From the suffering of the first book to the fullness of the third. (Ôtié, Foreword)

In a telling sequence, Li's transformation as an artist is dramatized as he describes his visit to Paris where he enters a comic shop. The shelves, we can easily surmise, are lined with everything from superhero graphic novels to underground comix. Inundated and overwhelmed by a new view of narrative art, he exclaims: "Who could have thought comics could be like this? The shock was as great as when, fifteen years earlier, they'd told me that a man had walked on the moon. A new world had opened up" (665). As the artist experiments with different aesthetic modes, the work reveals an ironic and self-reflexive impulse, something that Chris Hatfield recognizes as a common feature of alternative autobiographical comics. In Hatfield's assessment, autobiographical comics often provoke a sense of otherness between the discursive (the Word) and the concrete or visual (the Picture): "Such verbal-visual tension opens up a space of opportunity, one in which pictorial metaphors can multiply promiscuously, offering a surreal or wildly subjective

vision to counterbalance the truth claims that certify the text as autobiographical" (128).

In a way that further draws out this tension between words and images, seeing and believing, the present and the past, the graphic novel ends with an ambivalent view of the past. Near the end of the third and last book, the Olympics have come to Beijing. Li is with his mother watching television, which is broadcasting China's monumental achievements. As the television plays back clips from the 60th Anniversary of the Communist Party and the military parade, Li writes of his longing for the past: "That China—How well I knew and loved it. Like Proust, with his madeleine, I feel nostalgia and hold it tight against my heart, but heavens how unhappiness abounded in that China!" Li clings to a past vision of China, one full of sadness and suffering, but which also had meaning: "That's the country I come from. Not the land of 'Made in China,' skyscrapers, the Olympic Games and the World Expo" (689). In these final pages, the reader once again confronts unresolved questions about the relationship between nostalgia and memory. Proust's love for madeleine serves as a narrative through which Li is able to express his nostalgic attachment to the past, but the ways in which memories occur in the narrative as "involuntarily" and in fragments suggest a deeper interaction with a Proustian view of autobiographical memory. The text ends by calling attention to and indeed contrasting multiple forms of mediation: while the authoritative discourses of the state and its collective memories are narrated in a clear teleology through the one-way spectacle of the television, personal memories are shown to be spontaneous, out of temporal sequence, and only understandable in relation to emotional circumstances.

Conclusion

Twentieth-century Chinese history continues to be an area fraught with politics, propaganda, and problems of collective amnesia. China-based fiction writers and historians must watch their step carefully, while those outside of the country continue to maintain a strong critical focus on aspects of history that have been neglected or ignored. Revisionist histories, such as Frank Dikötter's *The Age of Openness: China Before Mao* (2008), elaborate on the humanistic cultural exchanges that took place during the first half of the twentieth century, a perspective that challenges official communist historiography that has long viewed the pre-Mao period primarily in terms of catastrophe and social chaos. In literary and cultural studies, there have been a number of challenges to a Mainland-centered

or a "China-centric" perspective on history and culture; Shu-mei Shih and others have argued against a perceived monolingual and monocultural paradigm that pervades Chinese studies and instead prefer a more inclusive and geographically diverse notion of the "sinophone" which can encapsulate linguistic and cultural diversity both within China and on its peripheries. Others, such as David Der-wei Wang, have argued that "modern Chinese historiography has not sufficiently addressed the scale or the moral and psychological aftermath of China's violence and pain" and have sought to work against a teleological socialist narrative of "progress" by examining a range of literary texts from different periods (2).

If we consider how the medium has been used historically, comics may not appear to be the most reliable format for a critical commentary on Chinese history. Morris-Suzuki and others have reminded us of the historical linkage between the emergence of comics and the rise of advertising and political propaganda during the early twentieth century.[7] It is well documented that during periods of historical crisis, comics, along with other forms of visual culture, have been at the forefront of ideological warfare. In the context of China, comics and cartoons were often used for the purposes of state propaganda.[8] In fact, as a non-elitist form of popular expression, comics were deemed to be an acceptable and effective way of educating the masses during the early years of the Communist period. While in some ways *A Chinese Life* seeks to provide a sense of closure and provoke a sympathetic interpretation of China's political and social progress during the twentieth century, the result is a text that is saddled with doubt and which raises problems of perspective. While the novel is ostensibly intended to instruct a foreign audience about China and its history, it actually tells a story about the problems that emerge when facing such a task.

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[7] Morris-Suzuki writes that "[s]equential art . . . owes much to the techniques developed by propaganda experts and advertising executives in the first half of the twentieth century. The spread of mass markets and the advent of total warfare, together with the emergence of the sciences of psychology and statistical sociology, brought a new sophistication to the use of visual images to communicate messages to wide audiences" (167). In a similar discussion, Hatfield remarks that autobiographical comics are paradoxically energized by the tension between "mainstream commercial habits and counterculture sensibility" (112).

[8] Cartoons were particularly prevalent as a form of propaganda during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-45). Louise Edwards provides a detailed study of how China's official cartoon artists during this period sought to boost morale, generate patriotism, and ultimately repel the Japanese military. These images are particularly problematic insofar as they rely on highly racialized and sexualized imagery and as they depict disturbing visions of militarized violence, see 563-86.

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[Received 5 June 2015; accepted 6 November 2015]