The Remains of History: Gao Xingjian’s *Soul Mountain* and Wuhe’s *The Remains of Life*

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**Abstract**

This essay analyzes Gao Xingjian’s *Soul Mountain* (*Ling shan* 1990) and Wuhe’s *The Remains of Life* (*Yusheng* 1999) and their reflections on history and what lies beyond or outside of history. In the face of past traumas, the Cultural Revolution in Gao’s, the Musha Incident, in Wuhe’s case, both authors and their respective protagonists turn to prehistory. Gao and his protagonists, split into different perspectives, travel through China in search not only of the “soul mountain” of the title, but of natural preserves and minority cultures. Wuhe’s protagonist dwells among the indigenous Atayal in Taiwan and becomes especially interested in the practice of headhunting—one of the rituals conventionally associated with the “primitive.” And yet, each author effects much more than a simple return to an imagined prehistory. In their texts, the renegotiation of historical trauma acquires a complex temporality: not only a return to the traumatic event, not merely a finally unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire for a world untouched by trauma and history, but also a reflection on what remains of and after trauma. These texts highlight and question the construction of history with and through its other(s): If the logos of history always needs its own constructed other—as non-logos, as nature or *bios*—in order to function, how can we rethink its temporal and conceptual logic? Can we craft the remains of history into a site of possibility? Can we glimpse a moment that neither succumbs to the dichotomy between history and its ineffable other nor to a total immanence of history? What is the hallmark of a representation of the past that would allow us not to become absorbed in it without remainder? What kind of text can reflect on history’s violent character without inviting an eternal return of trauma, but also without fetishizing a pristine prehistory, unmarked by trauma?

**Keywords**

History, Gao Xingjian, primitivism, temporality, trauma, Wuhe
In his reflections on the construction of the past in *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (*Future's Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*), Reinhart Koselleck raises the question of how historical time becomes visible in everyday life, rather than only in history books:

He who wants to grasp historical time in the everyday might want to pay attention to the wrinkles of an old man or to scars in which a past fate becomes present. Or he might recall the contiguity of ruins and new structures, and he will look at the evident change in style that lends a row of houses in space its temporal dimension of depth. . . . Finally, and above all, he will think of the series of generations in his own family or work life, in which different realms of experience overlap and future perspectives become intertwined, with all the seeds of conflicts they contain. Even this panorama suggests that the generally measurable time of nature (*Zeit der Natur*)—even though it has its own history—cannot be transposed immediately onto a historical concept of time. (9-10)

For Koselleck, looking to such signs as the wrinkles on a face or the scars on a body for an understanding of the passage of time merely constitutes a precarious supplement for historical time. Objects and bodies marked by time are outside of history, and yet, as belonging to the time of nature, they have their own “history.” The juxtaposition of historical time and natural time in this passage is symptomatic of the temporal logic of history as a construct itself: nature lies outside of history as its other, and yet, it still functions as history’s illustrative parallel. Here, Koselleck raises an issue that lies at the heart of different concepts of history. Theories of history strive for total immanence, but, at the same time, they are always in need of history’s own other(s): nature as the outside of history and/or prehistory, as unchartered ground before the advent of history.

According to a Hegelian concept of history, irrespective of whether the often-invoked end of (this kind of) history is envisioned as a fearful cataclysm, a utopian future, or a kind of stagnation, history exists only as a means to its end as objective or aim. “[History] understood as a single coherent, evolutionary process”

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1 Where not indicated otherwise, translations are my own.
(Fukuyama xii) depends on figurations of its own other, signifiers of prehistory such as nature, or “primitive” cultures. The “primitive,” defined as civilization’s contemporaneous antecedent, anchors history while, at the same time, enabling a future projection: since they are read as the “pre-histories of the future,” “primitive” cultures allow for the construction of “future’s past.” The construction of a progress story for history presupposes the inclusion of its other at its core—the a-temporal realm of what has yet to enter history, enters history differently, or resists historiography.

In order to counter what is usually perceived as the progress-oriented and Eurocentric thrust of teleological history, poststructuralist thinkers such as Hayden White and Jean-François Lyotard have proposed alternative ways of thinking history. In the context of a critique of overarching ideological concepts that pose as “natural,” more diverse alternative narratives are called upon to supplant history. While the valorization of other traditions and experiences as history certainly holds liberating potential, ultimately this is not too far from a cultural “othering” framed in a positive light. In other words, these alternative histories are charged with the burden of resisting the meta-narratives of the West, and are thus, in the worst case, still very much tied to the rhetoric of otherness.

A dark other of history’s teleological thrust is the temporality of trauma, which is also the non-linear temporality of psychoanalysis. This is history as a vicious circle of violence, a recurring indifference of horrors, a repetition compulsion that starts in the individual psyche and is often generalized for communities, nations, or history as such. History as trauma is devoid of any notion of progress: the past can teach us nothing beyond the fact that the future is already marked by it. At first sight, the circular structure of trauma permits no outside. Nevertheless, it cannot function without a thought of its past, of a condition unmarked by trauma. The temporality of trauma, as Cathy Caruth explains in *Unclaimed Experience*, drawing on Sigmund Freud, is always doubled. When trauma haunts those it has struck, its first impact is no longer present or accessible. In Lyotard’s words, in *Heidegger and the “Jews,”* trauma obeys the logic of belatedness:

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2 These two formulations are taken from titles of relevant books: *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* edited by Elazar Barkan, and Ronald Bush and Koselleck’s *Future’s Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. For a strong critique of primitivism that reintroduces primitivism on a conceptual level, see Torgovnick.

3 For reflections on alternative histories, see White and Lyotard’s *La condition postmoderne*. 
Nachträglichkeit thus implies the following: (1) a double blow that is constitutively asymmetrical, and (2) a temporality that has nothing to do with what the phenomenology of consciousness . . . can thematize. The double blow includes a first blow, the first excitation, which upsets the apparatus with such "force" that it is not registered. . . . The first blow, then, strikes the apparatus without observable internal effect, without affecting it. It is a shock without affect. With the second blow there takes place an affect without shock. . . . This “before” of the quod is also an “after” of the quid. For whatever is now happening . . . does not come forth; it comes back from the first blow, from the shock, from the “initial” excess that remained outside the scene, even unconscious, deposited outside representation. (15-16, emphasis in text)

Even though trauma is always belated, it presupposes a before that is constantly out of reach. Paradoxically, this causes the invocation of a time unmarked by trauma as an escape from trauma’s spiral of pain. In the face of trauma, it seems, only civilization’s and history’s other can provide the ultimately futile hope for an antidote, for example when the Claude Lévi-Strauss of Tristes Tropiques searches for primitive cultures in Brazil’s rainforest as an alternative to the horrors of Europe’s Second World War and the Holocaust.

What remains beyond and outside of history? According to the three concepts of historical temporality discussed above—history as teleology, the construction of alternative histories, and the circular temporality of trauma—the answer would by default be “nothing.” While the first concept of history visibly exhausts time in the process (which is also a progress) of history, the second concept integrates what it sees as history’s unresolved remains in the shape of alternative histories, by declaring all histories equivalent (and yet other) to history. The temporality of trauma is, in this sense, probably the most paradoxical one. Even though it seems the most closed of the temporal systems evoked here, it also depends most visibly on an unresolved outside that lies at its very core. More radically than the other concepts of temporality invoked here, its origin, the traumatic event, remains forever outside of its own purview, precisely as its inside. But if the logos of history always needs its own constructed other—as non-logos, as nature or bios—in order to function, how can we rethink its temporal and conceptual logic? Can we craft the remains of history into a site of possibility? Can we glimpse a moment that neither succumbs to the dichotomy between history and its ineffable other nor to a total immanence of history? What is the hallmark of a representation of the past that
would allow us not to become absorbed in it without remainder? What kind of text would neither turn away from the past nor become oblivious to the present as well as the future? What kind of text can reflect on history’s violent character without inviting an eternal return of trauma, but also without fetishizing a pristine prehistory, unmarked by trauma, stagnating in the antechamber of history?

In order to attempt both incipient and tentative answers to these questions, I will analyze the work of two very different authors who nevertheless show intriguing affinities in their treatment of history: Gao Xingjian and Wuhe. I will focus more particularly on one novel by each author: Gao’s Soul Mountain (Ling shan) of 1990, and Wuhe’s The Remains of Life (Yusheng) published in 1999. In spite of their authors’ different backgrounds—Gao a mainlander who has been living in Paris since 1987, Wuhe a native of Southern Taiwan—the two novels under scrutiny here share significant traits. Both their subjects and their contexts of production explicitly negotiate and experiment with different turns to and from history. In the face of past traumas, the Cultural Revolution in Gao’s, Taiwan’s colonial history, and more specifically the Musha Incident, in Wuhe’s case, both authors and their respective protagonists, clearly marked as authorial personae and paralleling the authors’ real life experiences, turn to prehistory for an answer. Gao and his protagonists, split into different perspectives, travel through China in the search not only of the soul mountain of the title, but of natural reserves and minority cultures. Wuhe’s protagonist dwells among the indigenous Atayal and becomes especially interested in the practice of headhunting—one of the rituals conventionally associated with the “primitive.”

And yet, each author effects much more than a simple return to an imagined prehistory, since prehistory is only the outside that history constructs for itself and is thus, ultimately included in history as its other. In their texts, the renegotiation of historical trauma acquires a complex temporality: not only a return to the traumatic event, not merely a finally unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire for a world untouched by trauma and history, but also a reflection on what remains of and after trauma. Gao constructs history as cryptohistory, history not as an objective given, but as dependent on individual perception and interpretation and thus, ultimately, unknowable. Wuhe attempts to readdress trauma by breaking away from a writing of death, a thanatogaphesis, an exclusive focus on the pain, loss, and violence of the past, and by attempting a biographesis, a writing of life and survival. The strength of both texts does not lie in suggesting a clear solution, but rather in breaking through existing patterns in which history is conventionally perceived. As
they offer a reflection on history and its temporality, both novels explore the
remains of history.

**Cryptohistory: Gao Xingjian’s *Soul Mountain***

Split into the two personal pronouns “I” and “you,” the protagonist of Gao’s
*Soul Mountain* tours remote parts of China—as did the novel’s author—in an
attempt to escape persecution during the “Campaign against Spiritual Pollution.”\(^4\) Visiting natural preserves and regions where ethnic minorities dwell, eager to
witness rituals and folk art that the Cultural Revolution had suppressed, his flight—
including the search for the fabled soul mountain, as well as “you’s” interaction
with the female character “she”—is also, in a way, an attempt at escaping history.\(^5\)
And yet, history inevitably catches up with him. Everywhere he goes, history has
already left its mark.\(^6\) An especially dense array of historical inscriptions awaits the
protagonist in chapter 71 of *Soul Mountain*, as he reaches Shaoxing.\(^7\) Here, a tablet
commemorating Lu Xun’s famous character Ah Q, a monument for the pre-
republican revolutionary martyr Qiu Jin, the residence of the poet Xu Wei, and the
tomb of Emperor Yu are juxtaposed: the historical, the mythical, and the fictional
placed together to form a palimpsest of different time periods. And yet, all are in the
service of documenting China’s cultural heritage and national essence. All, as the
“I” muses while recalling a line from a poem by Lu Xun, “I spill my blood for the
Yellow Emperor,” document the gruesome realities of history, even as they are
instrumentalized in the name of China.

Against this history, first written in blood, and then immortalized in stone,
Gao’s protagonist pits another kind of history, one that privileges individual
interpretation over and above the structurally integrating sweep of history.\(^8\) It comes

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\(^4\) For a discussion of Gao’s technique of using personal pronouns as protagonists, see Lee,
“Pronouns as Protagonists.”

\(^5\) Several critics dwell on Gao’s penchant for primitivism, see Kinkley 131 and 146. For a
discussion of Gao’s relation to the Chinese movement of “Searching for Roots,” see Quah 72-76.

\(^6\) This is even true for supposedly pristinely natural spaces. Indeed, even in the depth of the
primal forest the protagonist cannot do without marks. For a discussion of *Soul Mountain’s*
inscribed landscapes, see Moran.

\(^7\) Gao’s novel presents a rich tapestry of different voices, characters, and stories. My analysis
here focuses on moments in which the reflection on history is particularly prevalent, but it cannot
do justice to the complexity of the novel as a whole.

\(^8\) In the speech delivered upon receiving the Nobel Prize, “The Case for Literature,” Gao
explicitly voices his resistance to history as an all-encompassing structure of meaning, see Gao,
*Cold Literature* 10-41.
in the guise of a reflection on and theory of history on the basis of decrypting—in this case of the unreadable inscription in the tomb of Emperor Yu. Indeed, since the script has not been deciphered, the “I” of *Soul Mountain* does not really decrypt. Rather, he fantasizes about a radically different understanding of history:

> 這禹陵裡如今殘存可考的古蹟，只有大殿對面的一塊石碑，斑剝的若干蝌蚪般的文字專家學者尚無人能辨認。我左看右看，琢磨來，琢磨去，恍然大悟，發現可以讀作：歷史是謎語
> 也可以讀作：歷史是謊言
> 又可以讀作：歷史是廢話
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> 再諸如： 历史即歷史
> 和：歷史什麼都不是
> 以及： 歷史是感嘆
> 歷史啊歷史啊歷史啊歷史
> 原來歷史怎麼讀都行，這真是個重大的發現！(469)

> [In Yu’s tomb there are now artefacts for reference but the experts still cannot decipher the tadpole-like script on the stone epitaph opposite the main hall. I look at it from various angles, ruminate for a long time, and suddenly it occurs to me that it can be read in this way: history is a riddle,

> It can also be read as: history is lies
> and it can also be read as: history is nonsense
> 
> and furthermore: history is history
> and: history is absolutely nothing
> even: history is sad sighs
> Oh history oh history oh history oh history
> Actually history can be read any way and this is a major discovery! ] (450-51) \(^9\)

Before history is defined through a series of attributes, it is characterized as that which cannot be deciphered, likened to an inscription that has turned into empty

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\(^9\) Page numbers after the Chinese quotations refer to the Chinese original, those after the English quotations to Mabel Lee’s translation, except where indicated differently.
signifiers of a sign system to which no one has access any longer. On the basis of a cryptic script, Gao’s “I” can invent meaning. And yet, the signification he reads into the text is another lack of meaning, through an excess of irreconcilable signifieds.

History is a riddle. Like an undecipherable series of traces, it suggests meaning, but ultimately means nothing. In its extreme, history thus becomes tautological (“history is history”), a marked absence of signification (“history is absolutely nothing”). At the end, it comes to signify two things that are beyond signification proper: one that is beyond meaning, namely affect as expressed in the repeated exclamation “oh history,” and one that is above meaning, the meta-reflection on the manipulativity of history. This series of definitions of history, a list that exhausts different possible readings and endorses none, thus proposes an encrypting, rather than a decrypting of history. Paradoxically, this is precisely what frees history from logos, from the necessity to signify. Ultimately, history becomes both unreadable—in the sense that it does not really form a coherent, meaningful whole—and immensely readable—as a textual production by and through the reader, of history.\(^\text{10}\)

The reading of history as a wealth of competing, discordant, and at times contradictory stories is not restricted to the protagonist’s reflections, but governs the novel as a whole to a large extent: after all, the text consists in large part of the stories “you” imagines for and tells to the female protagonist “she” who accompanies him on part of his journey. It also reverberates with the incessant search for alternative voices, for other cultural traditions. This view of history certainly resonates with a postmodern relativity of values that sounds the knell of history as meta-narrative. And yet, history here is not merely criticized for marginalizing other voices. More importantly, the readerly invention of histories is not of the order of poststructuralist playfulness. After all, throughout chapter 71, as well as throughout the list of definitions, history is repeatedly invoked in its violence. Both the fictional Ah Q and the historical Qiu Jin are executed. Yu’s feat of civilized what is to become China by controlling rivers and waterways is a euphemism for violent subjugation and conquest.

The performance of interpretation does not facilitate an escape from the violence of history into a space or time unmarked by trauma. The very fact that most, if not all the stories told in and by Soul Mountain feature traumatic kernels, however, already highlights that the power of performance (both as telling and as reading) is tenuous. In the face of stories that compulsively return to violence, death,\(^\text{10}\)

\(^{10}\) In a forthcoming essay, “Found in Translation: Gao Xingjian’s Multimedial Sinophone,” I discuss this passage in a different context.
and loss, what kind of readerly or narratorial agency or control remains? If the horrors of history forever repeat themselves, if, as the “I” discusses with a man of the Yi ethnicity in chapter 21, the cruel punishments of old were not “much different from what happened during the Cultural Revolution,” (123) then where is this creative agency vis-à-vis history that Gao’s reading seems to suggest?

In the context of Chinese culture, the experience of trauma has triggered a turn to history’s other that has come to be known as “尋根” (xungen) or “Searching for Roots” in the People’s Republic of China, famously defined in Han Shaogong’s essay “文學的‘根’” (“The ‘Roots’ of Literature”). In the face of trauma, most notably the Cultural Revolution, a turn away from official culture and a turn to alternative cultures—to the rural rather than the urban, nature rather than technology, the ethnic other rather than Han culture—represented an imaginary return to trauma’s past. Rey Chow has aptly described this tendency as “primitive passions,” as the fantasy of an origin that arises precisely in the moment of cultural crisis (see 22-23). And yet, “Searching for Roots” is itself a multiply conflicted as well as temporally complex move: it conjugates past and present, as well as the cultural same and other in paradoxical ways. When intellectuals in the context of “Searching for Roots” invoke alternative Chinese cultures as a way of turning China back from its self-destructive rampage to another national essence, the question of cultural same and other comes into clear focus. How Chinese are these alternative cultures that are charged with representing another, more positive Chinese identity? Ultimately, the roots that are being searched are suppressed parts of Chinese culture itself. Both temporally and culturally speaking, these roots are at once necessarily different from what is commonly perceived as Chinese culture in order to present an alternative, and precluded from being other, because of a nationalist focus.

From this perspective, it makes sense that the protagonist’s fascination with ethnic minorities and their cultures plays an important role in Soul Mountain. From the outset, all the trappings of “Searching for Roots” are in place, while the text itself takes great pains to disavow this very aesthetic affiliation.11 In the novel’s first chapter, for instance, the narrator’s voice delivers a deliberate pastiche of “Searching for Roots”: “這裡是人家的故鄉，活得沒法不自在，祖祖輩輩就扎在這塊土地上，用不著你遠道再來尋找。” (1, emphasis added) [“This is their home, and living here, they cannot but feel at home, since for generations and generations they have taken roots in this piece of soil, they don’t need you to come

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11 Different critics have discussed Gao’s flirting with “Searching for Roots.” See, for instance Xu 117, or Kinley 136.
from afar to look for them.”)] A similar gesture occurs in the squarely metafictional chapter 72, where the “he” (a permutation of the “I” and “you”) answers to another voice that critiques his writing and disavows his link to “Searching for Roots.” In spite of these disclaimers, the very structure of disavowal, of reactivating something in order to be able to negate it, creates a present absence of “Searching for Roots.”

I read Gao’s fascination with and critique of “Searching for Roots” in two ways. Firstly, for Gao there can be no pristine cultural ground, no tradition untainted by civilization’s and history’s violence. The dialogue in chapter 21 between the “I” and a member of the Yi that I referred to earlier is actually about questions of civilization, “savagery,” and cruelty. Upon the “I’s” enquiries regarding the “barbaric” customs of the Yi, his interlocutor has no difficulty convincing him that cruelty and violence are also to be found in Han culture, most recently in the Cultural Revolution. What is more important, however, neither the Han nor the Yi have a monopoly either to violence or to non-violence, to civilization or to barbarism. In this sense, minority cultures with their cultural articulations can only always become the pretense for another culture’s desire for authenticity. These cultures and the would-be alternative characteristics others seek in them are “Chinese,” in the sense that what is called “Chinese” culture has always been the outcome of cultural contact and hybridization to begin with. The various examples of the protagonist’s thoughts about the similarity between minority cultures and what is perceived as Han culture throughout the novel show the investment of “Searching for Roots” in one’s own cultural other to be flawed from the beginning: in order to claim the other as one’s own roots, it has to be part of one’s own tradition to begin with; at the same time, it has to be outside of one’s own culture, now subject to criticism. An ironic reminder of the flawed temporal logic of “othering” is the culmination to the fetishistic fixation on the Wild Man throughout the text. In chapter 61, “I’s” schoolmate gives an account of how he captured a Wild Man during the Cultural Revolution. Of course, what had seemed like a specimen of primal men, of a being on the brink of humanity, turns out to be a prisoner who had escaped from a labor camp during the anti-Rightist campaign and had hidden in the countryside ever since.

The text’s insistence on the performative power of interpretation is inextricably linked with perspectival distance. Absolute immanence in a system of

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12 I have provided my own English translation here, since Lee’s does not render the allusion to “Searching for Roots.”

13 For a reflection similar to the first part of my argument, see Kinley 141.
beliefs—the authenticity, immediacy, or even “naturalness” singled out as desirable in so-called primitive cultures—precludes the kind of postmodern interpretability that Gao’s text keeps proclaiming. The “I’s” encounter with the Miao culture in chapter 39 for instance, with its clichéd presentation of a fantasy of “going native,” reactivates the unbridgeable gap between the protagonist and the Miao. In order to appreciate the “utter sincerity,” the “totally instinctive, uncontrived, unrestrained and unembellished” (228) charm of the Miao girls’ love songs, the “I” must set himself aside from that which he seems to desire most. The protagonist’s desire, as most instances of “primitive passions” in general, is complex. Triggered because of the insurmountable distance between desiring subject and desired object, these passions remain forever unfulfilled and are thus kept forever alive as an impossible nostalgia. The dichotomizing analysis of culture versus nature, of civilization versus barbarism fundamental to these primitivizing desires is also what finally precludes the success of going native, precisely because this has to be presented as an unachievable ideal.

Gao’s protagonist cannot become one with another culture—especially because that culture’s own access to cultural and emotional authenticity is already problematic, not least because of the Cultural Revolution. Instead, the protagonist interacts with and reads the others’ cultural artifacts, which are, at the same time, the remains of history. One of the most interesting examples of such an interaction comes in chapter 24 when the “I” finds a ritual mask, the fragment of a lost practice. Confiscated as superstitious objects in the early fifties, the set of masks it belongs to has been miraculously saved from the ravages of the Cultural Revolution, locked into the vaults of a museum that catalogues, stores, and keeps them hidden from view. When the protagonist chances upon it, the mask becomes a node for different temporalities: it has been marked by China’s recent history and touched by modernity’s inscriptive media, for instance photography, even as it embodies the uneasy threshold between human and animal as imagined by a minority culture in the late Qing dynasty. In this sense, underlined by the aged face portrayed—part old man, part ferocious animal—the mask is not merely an object marked by time, but a reflection on temporality itself.

What makes this vision of temporality so spectacular, what causes the protagonist to single out this object among a whole assortment of archeological artifacts, is the fact that the mask allows for a multi-perspectival play. The “I” does not only describe the mask and reacts to it, but also imagines how it is being worn. It is both an object he looks at, another’s face that confronts him, his own mask, and, finally a figurative part of his own being:
人無法擺脫掉這張面具，它是人肉體和靈魂的投射，人從自己臉面上再也揭不下這已經長得如同皮肉一樣的面目，便總處在驚訝之中，彷彿不相信這就是他自己，可這又確實是他自己。他無法揭除這副面目，痛苦不堪。而它作為他的面具，一經顯現，便在也抹不了，因為它本依附於他，並沒有自己的意志，或者說徒有意志而無法謀求實現倒不如沒有意志，他就給他留下了這麼一副在驚訝中審視著自己的永恆的面貌。(143)

[Man cannot cast off this mask, it is a projection of his own flesh and spirit. He can no longer remove from his own face this mask which had already grown like skin and flesh so he is always startled as if disbelieving this is himself, but this is in fact himself. He cannot remove this mask, and this is agony. But having manifested itself as his mask, it cannot be obliterated, because the mask is a replica of himself. It has no will of its own, or one could say it has a will but not means of expression and so prefers not to have a will. Therefore it has left man with an eternal face with which he can examine himself in amazement.] (141)

Even as the mask and its animal face represent the so-called primitive for modernity, they actually express the face of civilization in striking terms, as the invention of self-reflexivity, but also of a permanently split identity. If this spells the loss of innocence and authenticity that modernity fetishizes as primitivism—but note that the very “primitive” object actually best expresses this very loss—it is also the basis for perspectivism, and thus for the aesthetic values proclaimed in Soul Mountain.

If sites, people, and objects carry history like a palimpsest that can be read, deciphered, and interacted with in Gao’s novel, then the protagonist’s performance depends on his distance from those sites, people, and objects. Only perspectival distance, not least realized in the text’s protagonist split into different voices, allows for another temporality in which history’s different, often traumatic impacts become synchronized—in the realm of aesthetics. The lived present (and presence) of aesthetic time, as an interpretive performance of and against the cruel marks of history, however, comes at a price. It makes a bracketing of lived historical experience necessary. In this sense, it remains cryptohistory in different ways. Firstly, its construction of an alternative temporality is limited. The very emphasis of performance resurrects primitivism even where it comes under scrutiny most
severely. Secondly, the claim of interpretive freedom remains seriously curbed by the seemingly inevitable dark narratives elicited by history. Thirdly, history here becomes confined to the realm of signification, albeit in a negative way: what remains of history—apart from the palimpsestic objects in *Soul Mountain*—is an urge for decrypting that which has to remain encrypted.

**Beyond Thanatographesis: Wuhe’s *The Remains of Life***

Wuhe’s *The Remains of Life* presents a similarly complex reflection on primitivism coupled with a different view of history. When the first-person narrator-protagonist of the novel arrives at the Atayal village of Chuanzhongdao in order to do research on the 1930 Musha Incident, not all the members of the indigenous community welcome his presence among them. One of them, the cousin of the young woman called the Girl throughout the novel, the protagonist’s neighbor in the village, outright questions the “I’s” research:

「我們原住民這麼小有甚麼好研究的，你們漢人可以研究的可多呢，為什麼不回去研究你們自己？」...「先研究漢人呀，漢人才值得好好研究，」...「好好研究清楚大漢的民族性，無聊時晃到山上看看我們這些小番怎麼生活在你們大漢之中，」(50-51)

[“We natives are so small, what is there to study, there is so much about you Han Chinese for research, why don’t you go back and research yourself?”... “Why don’t you first study the Han Chinese, only the Han Chinese are worthy of thorough research”... “after you have thoroughly researched the ethnic identity of the Great Han, whenever you feel bored, swing by the mountains and see how we little savages lead our lives among the Great Han. . .”]

Fairly at its beginning, *The Remains of Life* raises one of the main problems of ethnographic research: the question of its objects and its perspective. Ethnography being—as in this case in which the educated Han Chinese, a *persona* of the author, converts the indigenous Atayal community into his object of study—largely a revisiting of so-called primitive cultures by the agents of civilization, and consequently a kind of navel-gazing via the cultural (inferior) other. Here, however, not unlike some of the strategies advocated in the influential “Writing Culture”
group that sought to rethink ethnography, the “object” of the ethnographers gaze retorts, by suggesting—half defiance, half self-deprecation—an auto-ethnographic approach instead. Surprised by the woman’s belligerent attitude, the novel’s protagonist is shamed into reflecting on his own perspective, becoming painfully aware what his attempt at understanding Atayal life must sound like to one who has been forcibly “civilized” and assimilated throughout Taiwan’s history, first under Japanese occupation, and subsequently under the Guomindang’s rule. The “I” of Wuhe’s novel is thus charged (and to some degree indicts himself) with perpetuating the power dynamics and structures of fantasy and projection that emerge in the context of ethnographic fieldwork. It is not the suppression of fascination with the cultural other that is conducive to a better (since more objective) portrayal, but rather the self-conscious exhibition of just such a fantasy of alterity. Thus, from the very beginning, the protagonist abandons the pretense of a neutral point of view and highlights his personal emotional investment in his “object” of study. His writing seeks out other voices beyond Han-centrism. While he gives in to a fascination with the primitive other, his is a self-reflexive and self-critical primitivism.

The “I’s” fascination focuses on Atayal history, most importantly the 1930s Musha Incident, in which, according to some historical records, under Mona Rudao’s leadership, the Atayal attacked the Japanese occupying forces and slaughtered them by cutting off their heads. This subsequently led to retaliation by the Japanese military with all the horrors of modern warfare, but also to the so-called second Musha Incident in which—possibly instigated by the Japanese—other indigenous tribes further decimated Mona Rudao’s Atayal clan. When the “I” arrives among the few surviving Atayal in the 90s, he finds them in exile, relocated from Musha to Chuanzhongdao. While the protagonist’s interest is captured by historical violence, what intrigues him even more are various resistances to history. For one, the Musha Incident defies historiography’s reenactment of assimilation and ideological unification. Despite Mona Rudao’s official glorification as a hero of

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14 See its key text, *Writing Culture* edited by Clifford and Marcus.
15 The contestation of Han-Centrism throughout much of Wuhe’s work could be compared to “Searching for Roots” tendencies and has been read as a new version of Taiwanese Nativism (*xiangtu wenxue*). However, especially in combination with his experimental style, the reference to primitivism—albeit as a self-reflexive and self-critical primitivism or meta-primitivism—seems more illuminating.
16 The Musha Incident has elicited so many scholarly, literary, and artistic renditions because the reconstruction of the historical facts has proven particularly difficult. For excellent analyses of versions and recreations of the Musha Incident, see chapter 4 in Ching and chapter 1 in Berry.
anti-Japanese resistance, the massacre cannot be neatly integrated into the narrative of Taiwan’s national history, not least because of the many possible explanations of such a belated act of resistance. Some of the residents of Chuanzhongdao whom Wuhe’s protagonist interviews rewrite the official version of anti-Japanese resistance into a resistance to assimilation itself, to the violent imposition of a “civilizing mission” whose agents happened to be the Japanese at that time—a process that continued unabated during Guomindang rule. In a similar vein, the Musha Incident troubles clear-cut categories, such as the political versus the ritual, civilization versus the “primitive,” and history versus “prehistory.” Even if we read the Musha Incident as resistance, it takes the form of the indigenous ritual of headhunting, one of the most sensationalized symbols of primitivism. This is not only true for the first incident, but also for the second one in which Japanese empire-building and history-making instrumentalize so-called primitive energies.

Throughout, the protagonist clearly shares a primitivist fantasy, in his voyeuristic fixation on Atayal women’s breasts, his imaginary reenactment of headhunting, or his nostalgic accounts of the suppression of eroticism and corporeality in the course of cultural assimilation—albeit always from a self-critical perspective. From the Girl he learns a different approach to Atayal culture’s “authenticity.” On their hike to retrace the way the ancestor spirits travel from the old Atayal homeland to their people’s place of exilic existence, the Girl constantly interrupts the protagonist’s primitivist tendencies. Whereas he is set to convert this trip into a spiritual pilgrimage, a mystic journey, the Girl integrates the mystical and the everyday, claiming the ancestor spirits’ penchant for good cheer. Finally, the novel thus resists a climactic moment of spiritual return in favor of the everyday. Here, another type of resistance to history is at work in the form of a resistance to nostalgia. It highlights, as does the novel’s title, survival.

But how does one write about survival without converting it into a mere supplement to history? How does one write history beyond a constant rehearsal of death, pain, and trauma? How does writing become biographesis, a celebration of life, not thanatographesis, a death script through the erasure of individual life experiences in the grand narrative of history? As Wuhe states in his preface to the collection of stories Collecting Bones, texts can be compared to memorials (see Collecting Bones 275). Fictional texts commemorate historical events as well as the atmosphere of a decade, but always as closely connected to individual experiences.

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17 The neologisms of “thanatographesis” and “biographesis” (but not “biography”) are inspired by Foucault’s term of “biopolities” and Agamben’s rewriting of Foucault’s concept as “thanatopolitics” in Remnants of Auschwitz.
The author’s textual memorials are primarily personal, only secondarily historical ones. A similar dynamics is at play in *The Remains of Life*. As David Wang describes, for Wuhe’s persona, the Musha Incident becomes a way of exploring personal trauma: “the Musha Incident is treated by Wushe [sic] as both a historical site and a psychological coordinate where historical violence and personal trauma, however disparate in appearance, are made to elucidate each other’s meaning” (*Monster* 37).

But, if, punning on one of Wuhe’s most famous short stories, “Collecting Bones,” which describes the Southern Taiwanese ritual of exhuming a dead body and ritually laying its bones to rest again, we can call the author “a caretaker of the relics of a bygone age,” (Wang, *Monster* 37) his 1999 novel shows a subtle shift in perspective. Granted, the text’s protagonist is still very much enthralled by a traumatic past and works at reconstructing that past through the research for and writing of a novel (*The Remains of Life*). And yet, his labor of producing a memorandum consists also in a reflection on the kind of remembrance of the past represented by the memorial. Throughout, the protagonist is confronted with two memorials: one erected by the state in order to commemorate Mona Rudao’s heroic act of resistance; the second one a much more intimate memorial dedicated by the Atayal community itself to survival. It is the second monument—that has nothing of the monumental—that attracts the protagonist’s attention, embodied in the two characters “survival” (餘生 yusheng): “我並非偶然到川中島來，但純粹因為「餘生」兩個字讓我居留下來，我想真實體會「劫後餘生」而「事件」只是必須觸及的因緣。” (185) [“My coming to Chuangzongdao was by no means a coincidence, it was simply because the word ‘survival’ made me stay, I wanted to truly experience “survival after the massacre,” and the “Incident” was only one of the *raisons d’être* that I had to touch upon.”]

The first monument functions according to the memory of the memorial as Lyotard describes it in *Heidegger and the Jews.* It represents a streamlined memory marked by and based on forgetting in order to forge national history:

But as far as forgetting is concerned, this memory of the memorial is intensely selective; it requires the forgetting of that which may question the community and its legitimacy. This is not to say that memory does not address this problem, quite the contrary. It represents, may and must represent, tyranny, discord, civil war, the mutual sharing of shame, and conflicts born of rage and hate. It can and must represent war and *stasis* . . . in a discourse (taken here in the larger
sense, i.e., it might be a monument) that, because of the single representation it makes of them, “surmounts” them. (7)

Mona Rudao’s monument glorifies his heroic contribution to the national endeavor in which the resistance against occupation (one supported by the official discourse which erases another occupation by the Guomindang) plays a major role. Of course, it can also be appropriated by the Atayal as a token of pride, in the rewriting of the Musha Incident as a fight to regain their suppressed ethnic identity. And yet, both readings of the memorial subscribe to the logic of sacrifice. In both cases, death and suffering are reintegrated into the “greater good.”

The protagonist’s work—a fictional text that juggles a multiplicity of genres—draws on, but ultimately differs from both ethnography and historiography. Not the moment of historical trauma (the event), but its aftermath becomes the focus of attention. And not in a derivative way either: survival is not merely the relic of trauma that cannot but refer back to it incessantly. Of course, survival cannot be disconnected from trauma either. As David Wang remarks in his preface to the novel, the writing of survival is closely related to a re-inscription of trauma: “無非重覆銘刻、探測那再難治癒的創口” (“Bone Collector Wuhe” 8) [“it is nothing less than re-inscribing and probing the wound that will not heal easily”]. And yet, there is something besides and beyond the reopening of the wound and the repetition of trauma.

In this context, the “I’s” focus on survival needs a different historical logic, present in nuce in his emphasis on experience, not so much in terms of intellectual understanding, but almost as a corporeal empathy. Throughout, the protagonist aims not at the structured account of historical records, but at experiencing the past as presence—he refers frequently to the “活生生的事件” (67) [“the living Incident”]. Wuhe’s reference to the living past cannot be of the order of reconstructing “how it really was”—this would just perpetuate the referential naivety of some historiographical tendencies. As the village’s intellectual states, there is no return to the scene of history: “沒有人可以回到歷史的現場” (189) [“nobody can return to the scene of history”]. The past cannot be relived in retrospect; it can only be lived differently in the present. Hence, the text insists on co(n)temporality (當代) in its different meanings. Co(n)temporality is not merely, not even primarily, the contemporary in terms of new historiographical methods. Nor does it signify in terms of a contemporary perspective, as a self-conscious scrutiny of the past from
the vantage point of the present. Rather, co(n)temporality is highlighted as the contemporaneity of past and present.¹⁸

Co(n)temporality in this sense contests the very logic of history. Whenever we talk about the impossibility of returning to the scene of history, we already operate within the linear logic of an irreversible flow of time. And yet, this is precisely the type of temporality that history, as the Lyotardian memory of the memorial, constructs. There is no scene of history prior to its historiographic documentation that can only function through the compulsory oblivion of its constructed character.¹⁹

What allows for the co(n)temporality of the non-cotemporaneous? How can we conceive of difference and simultaneity beyond a mere wishful thinking that leaves the sequence of past, present, and future intact? The effect of co(n)temporality in the novel is enhanced through the protagonist’s “research” tools. Unlike your normal fieldworker, he does not tape the interviews, nor does he take notes during the conversations. Rather, when he sits down to write after a day of listening and observing, his personal impressions are inextricably mixed with the voices and opinions he “records.” When he listens to his interviewees, Wuhe’s protagonist, as a listener, experiences an uncanny binding of the self to the speaker and his or her words:

我傾聽到了沒有我的境地，傾聽便融入對方的話語，每一句話在這融入中無聲的被吸收，我們沉默了一會，說話和傾聽都需要個逗點，逗點是一個空的間隙，純然的止靜，並不為過去而思考也不為未來而準備，(187)

[I listened until my own condition ceased to exist, as I listened I merged into my vis-à-vis’s speech, each sentence was absorbed without a sound into this process of merging, we fell silent for a while, speaking and listening both need a pause, this pause is an empty interstice, a pure moment of peace, not thought of the past nor preparation for the future. . . .]

¹⁸ See also Wang, “The Native as Stranger,” and Huang Jinshu 424.
¹⁹ I thank my anonymous reviewer for pointing me to the work of Chen Chun-yen whose take on simultaneity in Wuhe’s The Remains of Life, for instance in her dissertation Impossible Difference (see especially 174-77), echoes my reading of “co(n)temporality.”
However, this fusion is not one of the order of assimilation, of a unification that would force one of the parts to submit to the other in order to form a “greater” whole. Rather, both parties come together in the interstices, the gaps in between words, the tiny moments when conversation comes to a temporary halt, when both speaking and listening cease without being absent. In Wuhe’s *The Remains of Life*, the interstice signifies as a temporal pause that opens up a tiny lapse of time where sequential temporality becomes suspended. It is pure present, disconnected, for an instant, from both past and future.

Like the interstice, survival is a force that both sutures and destabilizes history’s streamlined narrative. It is both meaningless and at the very basis of meaning even as it interrupts the flow of signification. Survival [餘生 yusheng] can be read both as history’s rest and as in excess of history. This double signification is anchored in the ambivalence of the *yu* [餘] of *yusheng* [餘生]—both excess and remainder (see Wang, “Bone Collector” 8). Survival, in the figure of the survivors of historical trauma, is history’s supplement: both central to and excluded from its movement in time. Survival testifies to the past in the present and thereby becomes the instrument of history. At the same time, however, survival, precisely because of its compulsory orientation towards the past—as obsessive remembrance in order to fight oblivion—is excluded from history; it is life after and beyond history.

Survival is what trauma creates as remainder—projected into the future: the figure of the survivor (“superstes”) and the witness (“testimone”), that become almost interchangeable in Giorgio Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz*. What remains of Auschwitz are its survivors, testifying to the fact “that it is not truly possible to destroy the human, that something always remains. The witness is this remnant” (133-34). Even though this “rest” or “remainder” can be read positively as a resistant excess that the deadly system of mass-murder was not able to annihilate, there is also a more negative ring to the term that complicates and questions the possibility to testify: “Yet here the value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that divests the survivors of authority. The “true” witnesses, the “complete witnesses,” are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness” (34). In many accounts of trauma, especially reflections on the Holocaust, the real witnesses are represented as precisely those who are not real witnesses. While such a pessimistic perspective on the powers of testimony captures the indescribable pain and loss of trauma, it also plays, paradoxically, into the hands of history as thanatographesis. In this logic of testimonial insufficiency, in the split of logos (as readable testimony) and bios (as the bare life of the “real” witnesses, those who did not survive), the
witnesses of trauma are always called upon to testify to something they are not able to give an account of. This very lack keeps them inevitably imprisoned in the past, instead of liberating them, reorienting them toward survival in the present.

Wuhe’s *The Remains of Life* complicates the question of survival, since the survivors of the Musha Incident—unlike the Jews after the Holocaust—are not mere victims: they are also the descendents of the perpetrators of violence. The novel presents a precarious solution to the dilemma of testimony and survival. The protagonist’s writing is a remainder of historiography and ethnography and in excess of both grand narratives under the sign of assimilation. Even his alternative “research” methods and his self-reflexive fascination with the cultural other remain, in the end futile:20

[I had read historical material, before coming to live at the site of survival, Chuanzhongdao, walking the site of survival, seeing the survivors, I, too, had been to the mouth of the creek where the “Incident” took place, I was meditating at the site of survival, while “survival” needs no meditation, it is alive before our eyes, every afternoon’s children’s laughter and pranks at the end of the school day, what I meditated upon was the “Incident,” it was already gradually entering rigor mortis, as if turned to stone, I scooped it up again from the wounds of history and placed it on my desk in front of the window, scrutinizing it meticulously, even though I know clearly that this meditation at the site of survival is unrealistic, still “meditation” has its own inner force. . . .]

20 In “Bone Collector Wuhe,” as well as in “The Native as Stranger,” David Wang emphasizes both the double meaning of “yu” and the self-styled “uselessness” of the author Wuhe and his fictional personae.
The “I’s” pondering, not merely in terms of reflection, but also, I would claim, as openness to impressions without predetermined expectations or logical structure, is in excess of its object. Survival does not need meditating. It does not need historical documentation either. And yet, meditating is one of the means of bringing something to presence, albeit precariously. In this sense, meditating is an extension of, a different way of expressing the protagonist’s non-orthodox “research” methods that allow for his emotional and experiential co-presence with history through its survivors. The resistant power of survival, even though it cannot be adequately represented, since its resistance is one against representation, has to be invoked in order to counter history’s instrumentalization of survival.

Against history’s national endeavor and its glorification of sacrifice, Wuhe pits an aesthetics of an interstitial co(n)temporality. The novelist makes his survivors testify differently: to survival itself, and only secondarily to trauma. While this does not erase history’s violence and its painful consequences, it does not remain tied to a fetish of thanatographesis either. Rather, Wuhe attempts a biographesis in which history’s remains as well as excess is an affirmation of life:

也許有一天從痛苦的間隙感覺到有一種小小的喜悅，無所依傍的生明的喜悅，餘生就在這內在的小小的喜悅中過. . . . (244)

[Maybe one day out of the interstice of pain we can feel that there exists a kind of tiny happiness, an unreliable, raw happiness, it is in this inner tiny happiness that we pass what remains of life. . . .]

Conclusion

Even though both Gao Xingjian and Wuhe explore historical trauma with and through signifiers of prehistory such as nature or so-called primitive cultures, both authors’ aims lie, ultimately, in a critique of history’s temporal patterns as such. While Gao Xingjian and Wuhe seem to break the pattern of trauma through the return to an unmarked past, they actually critically investigate some of the logical patterns of historical temporality itself. Each author achieves this in different ways: In Soul Mountain, Gao Xingjian formulates a history beyond signification, as cryptohistory. His text puts up resistance to meaning, negating history as a structure conducive to deciphering. As cryptohistory, an alternative type of testimony, in the form of the individual’s interpretation of history, is necessary. And yet, in order to keep its creative potential alive, history has to remain cryptic, and thus, in spite of
its various possible readings, ultimately untouched in its sovereign construction. Such a theory of testimony is the necessary other side of the coin to the dilemma presented by the inevitable insufficiency of witnessing. In contrast, Wuhe’s *The Remains of Life* departs from this pattern in order to rewrite witnessing in the present as a bearing testimony to survival itself, every day anew. The novel tries to reach beyond signification by sketching a history beyond thanatopolitics: to highlight the survivors of history, beyond their role as witnesses, to challenge history’s meaning-making process by underlining life in, but also beyond history. The text attacks testimony’s temporal logic itself. Nevertheless, in Wuhe’s text, in the figure of the protagonist, the resistance to testimony still needs, paradoxically, a champion that testifies to testimony’s end.

Even though both texts challenge concepts of history, trauma, and witnessing, their solutions—a highlighting of individual creative agency by Gao, a return to life as an ineffable power by Wuhe—are parasitic upon history. Even as the novels suggest a practice of biographesis instead of history’s thanatographesis, both authors’ depiction of the remains of history do not dare to compromise history’s value as a reminder, even as they dare to underline the remains of and beyond history: as a sign and site of collective agency that is neither exhaustively captured by pure individuality nor simply equivalent to pure life.

**Works Cited**


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21 This is Giorgio Agamben’s term in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. It draws on Michel Foucault’s formulation of a biopolitics, highlighting, however, the death drive of most of the so-called biopolitics. According to Agamben, the political regulation of life is closely connected to the sovereignty of taking away life—both in terms of human life and in terms of bare life.


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