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(CounterReading: A History of the Body in  
Revolutionary Times),

Taipei, Unitas Publishing Co., 2008, 416 pp.

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- 1 Charles Wright Mills indicated in his classic book *The Sociological Imagination* that one of sociology's assignments is to distinguish "personal troubles" from "public issues" (1959, Chapter 1). This distinction is an essential tool of the sociological imagination, which is a term that Mills invented, and a feature of all classic work in social science. People might consider their lives traps that they cannot escape; for example, people in China who have experienced "the decade of turmoil" (referring to the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976) will never forget the chaotic years and trauma they went through. For most of them, their reflection on the pain they suffered remains personal, at least no more than a family topic. But for Zhu Yong, a scholar in literature who was born in the late 1960s and who happened to witness the last years of the cultural revolution and the changes in the post-revolutionary People's Republic, personal memory is exactly the



trigger for his book *CounterReading: A History of the Body in Revolutionary Times* and also, as he seeks to demonstrate, a sample of Chinese collective memory. Thus people who have been through that decade will easily find resonance in this book. Zhu Yong uses the imagination of social science and his extraordinary literary talent to show us how collective memory can become personal. He successfully achieves an understanding of people at the intersection of their own lives (their biographies) and of the larger social and historical context.

- 2 How to write a history of the body? To find a proper answer to this question, we first need to understand what role the body plays in history and what the connection is between body and history. From Nietzsche to Foucault, philosophers have never stopped their critiques of genealogy, which was originally a historical technique and then became a philosophical concept about looking beyond the ideologies in question, as well as a method to understand the relation between body and history. The body, according to Foucault, is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, edited by D. F. Bouchard, Cornell University Press, 1980). As a writer and also an art critic, Zhu Yong constructed in his book a genealogy of literary and artistic works during revolutionary times, which can also be considered as a virtual museum of all kinds of bodies shaped by revolutionary practices. For instance, Zhu Yong notes the social function of setting exercises to radio music: a symbolic expression of body discipline, because it makes every movement of the body, even its frequency and time of appearance, restrained and controlled by the rhythm of the theme song. This sounds similar to what Foucault demonstrated about how external forces define the rhythm of collective activities (Zhu Yong, p. 53).
- 3 In his book, Zhu Yong chooses ten core concepts related to the body: posture, hunger, pain, horror, labour, sex, disease, dream, fight, and death. They also correspond to the titles of each of the ten chapters of the book. Zhu Yong defines the body as a historical element in revolutionary times, and tries to present its political functions.
- 4 The body's first political function could be regarded as a means of official ideological propaganda. Take a look at the images of heroes in art and literary works during the Cultural Revolution; we can easily summarise their appearance: tall, strong, and resolute (for a specific example, consider Mao's classic figure). Revolutionary heroes always look serious and gloriously radiant, which means you will never see any shadows or darkness around them. And of course their sexual features are intentionally obscured, which accords with the asceticism of revolutionary times. Propaganda successfully planted the image of a heroic body in the public mind and made it a model for society (p. 137).
- 5 The body's second political function can be called "discipline." Zhu Yong shows a pattern according to which physical suffering is sublimated as the only path to achieving the lofty revolutionary ideal, i.e., the endogenic connection between bleeding and revolutionary loyalty. He chooses the famous novel *Red Crag* (published in 1961 by Luo Guangbin and Yang Yiyan, who were former inmates in a Kuomintang prison in Sichuan) as an example. It is surprising to find a popular revolutionary novel of that

time so full of gory scenes, details of abuse, and descriptions of broken human flesh, in a word, extremely violent. However, the extreme violence makes the spirit of the main characters (Jiang Jie and her comrades) become extraordinary. In this paradoxical work, extreme evil and extreme heroism exist at the same time and become part of each other. Only extreme torture can prove the extremely loyal soul, an illusion that can be summarised as “no bleeding, no revolution.” All the violence of the Cultural Revolution seems to find its ideological root in this point of view (pp. 89-111).

- 6 The body's third political function can be seen as a reflection of collective repression. For instance, it represents the taboo topic of sex. Take the ballet *Red Detachment of Women*, for example: it is obviously a propagandistic work, but Zhu Yong also noticed the public's reaction to “long, white, naked legs running around in front of men's eyes” (p. 209). Ballet, as a kind of classic art, would gain an erotic connotation only in a society where asceticism controls private life. The examples above give a general idea of so-called “CounterReading.” As Zhu Yong argues, “CounterReading” denies the regular way of understanding a text; it eliminates the control of text and finds a transition toward a new meaning to reveal hidden content that we cannot see in a regular way. I further believe that “CounterReading” can help us understand how a collective memory of suffering was constructed in an authoritarian state.
- 7 In the context of revolutionary times, the suffering of the individual is not just an independent event, but rather a tragedy of time and society. One of the major contributions Zhu Yong has made in this work is to combine memory fragments, which used to be very personal and blurry, into a complete history of revolutionary times using the body as a thread. On the body we can trace the conflicts between the state and the individual, and we can also learn how these individual experiences converge into a historical tide.
- 8 Zhu Yong is obviously good at using his writing talent to describe a vivid world in his book. Yet he also insists on precision of logic and demonstration. A historical nostalgia among the words and between the lines may be one of the characteristic features of Zhu Yong's writing. We find the same humanistic concern as in *CounterReading* when Zhu writes about the Forbidden City (*The Old Palace*, 2009), Tibetan culture (*Tibet: A Distant Spiritual Plateau*, 2010), and the traditions of the regions south of the Yangtze River (*China South: the Unsinkable Boat*, 2009). At the same time, the value of *CounterReading* is far more than as literary criticism, although all the texts he analyses in this book are taken from the field of art and literature. In fact, this book begins with literature and art but ends up in daily life.
- 9 Almost 40 years have passed since the end of the Cultural Revolution, yet this subject is still unfortunately on the shelf in mainland China. The attitude of the authorities is ambiguous: they do not completely forbid the topic, but they do not encourage it, either. Since the rise of “scar literature” in the 1970s, many memoirs and collections of oral history have been published. Those works are filled with painful memories, desperate screams, and unforgettable trauma, but analysis under a social-political framework is missing. Although *CounterReading* could not be published in mainland China, it is still a major contribution, not only to the history of literature and art in revolutionary times but also to the sociology of the body.
- 10 For Chinese who have experienced and suffered from the Cultural Revolution, this book may help them understand what affected their minds and how it succeeded. Their anxiety is placed against the background of society and history, and thus their mental

suffering can find some relief. In spite of all the difficulties, Zhu Yong believes that ultimately time will make everything right. As in the foreword he wrote for the book *The Cock Doesn't Crow at Midnight* (Meng Lingqian, *Ban ye ji bu jiao*, 2011): "...the monopoly of time could be regarded as the most powerful hegemony, but it will never succeed; instead, its failure will prove the absolute authority of time." We have good reason to believe that this book is one of the first cornerstones on a long road, and a beginning for Chinese to face up to their history of suffering.

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