

A Case of Pandemic Narrative and the End of Post-Cold War

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Yongbing Jin and Penghan Zhang

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Abstract: The topical book *Wuhan Diary*, authored by the Chinese writer Fang Fang during the COVID-19 lockdown of Wuhan, is not so much a diary as a "becoming-diary," given its performative practices. *Wuhan Diary's* emphasis on the individual or private nature of its writing activity is attributable to its characteristic realistic conception of authenticity, which resulted historically from the humanist trend within Chinese literature in the 1980s as a significant element of post-socialist realism. Insofar as *Wuhan Diary* claims an overarching authorship that does not cohere with—or is, indeed, utterly subverted by—its textual complexities, it can be interpreted as a dual allegory of neoliberalism. In 2020, when the established pattern of globalization was in crisis and the post-Cold War state of affairs seemed unprecedentedly unstable, the post-socialist realism implicit in *Wuhan Diary* proved ineffective in representing the epidemic, as well as in justifying, by its (mis)representation, the conditions that have contributed to the general crisis.

Yongbing JIN and Penghan ZHANG

A Case of Pandemic Narrative and the End of Post-Cold War

COVID-19 and the consequent global pandemic have spotlighted the current crises within the world system, thereby clearing the way for a surveying or mapping of a string of ongoing structural changes in the process of globalization since the financial crisis of 2008. Emerging at first as a mere emergency, the pandemic has evolved into a liminal space where a slew of symptoms on both global and local levels keep surfacing and continuously gaining in immediacy. These include extensive structural adjustments and even delinkings, varying in degrees and forms, in the flowing of elements of production (capital, technology, labor, raw materials, etc.) among major economies; imbalance caused by direct interventions from national powers in the global distribution of important medical supplies (masks, medical equipment, and especially vaccines); frequent announcements of lockdowns, quarantines, or states of emergency on provincial and national scales; biopolitical government ("governmentality," to use Foucault's term) through big-data technologies and information terminals, including cell phones and temperature measurement stations; and limitations on the scale of all kinds of group activities and their shifts to online platforms, which are subtly reshaping people's bodily or aesthetic understanding of being-in-the-world.

One may identify no new tales in this historically fraught world; old trends simply subsist, continue, and develop. But they have gained a new purchase, a higher degree of legitimacy by seizing upon this critical point to break through all the barriers, and to thus overwhelm their alternatives. The pandemic, the end of which still hardly in sight, therefore promises a momentous "before-and-after"—that is, a "Pandemic Era" and, presumably, a "Post-Pandemic Era."

This essay discusses a group of online postings written by the Chinese author Fang Fang during the two months of the initial lockdown of the city of Wuhan at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Originally presented as individual posts purporting to document the author's thoughts and feelings regarding the epidemic and the Wuhan lockdown, the postings commanded vast public attention and was collectively referred to by their readers as "Fang Fang's Diary." Despite its failure to achieve publication in collected form in Chinese, the "Diary" was quickly published abroad as a collection in English and German.

A Diary or a Becoming-diary?

In what sense can a look at a diary written at the very outset and epicenter of the epidemic outbreak in China give us an overall picture of the "before-after"? Or, to be more precise, how is it possible that a reading of this localized diary, authored by someone virtually confined to her dwelling, which sets down what she sees and how she feels on a daily basis, can offer, teleologically or allegorically, some essential idea if not foresight regarding the global story about a new era? Such questions can be ascribed to the well-established interpretative approach of "Text and History". However, that is not supposed to be the way we initiate our investigations. Rather, we would focus above all on the more specific issue of the very history of this certain text in itself. The question we begin with is a much simpler one: What kind of diary is *Wuhan Diary*? Or rather, how does it *become* a diary?

It may be as well to offer our answer to the question in advance, which is a simple one: *Wuhan Diary* is not a diary. Or rather, it contains a number of elements that do not fit in with conventional understandings of how a diary should work. By applying this misnomer, we certainly do not mean to defend all those well-worn platitudes about the diary as a genre, but rather to give an idea of the prerequisites for proceeding with our survey, including, for example, the need to examine the textual characteristics of *Wuhan Diary* in light of a number of normative features of the genre. This essay demonstrates that what we call a "becoming-diary" as a text (as we will see, the singular form of "a text" is little more than a makeshift) is a composite of residual elements drawn from different historical formations that are illustrative of different systems of periodization. What follows is therefore a demonstration of the formal character of *Wuhan Diary* as a becoming-diary by exploring inconsistencies concerning two intersecting and mutually reinforcing aspects.

In the first place, we examine inconsistencies in genre coherence. While this becoming-diary was still updated in the form of postings (from January 25th to March 24th, 2020), all the relevant discussions and debates in China and beyond termed it a "diary" or "Fang Fang's diary;" once finished, the crystalized text was accepted for publication under the general title of "Wuhan Diary." Nevertheless, the earliest postings were not intended as a "diary" in the first place, but as a preparatory work for further writings. As Fang Fang puts it, "I was not writing a diary or an essay. I was simply documenting what I

saw and heard during the epidemic, so I wrote rather casually and did not intend to do so every day; for example, I didn't write in the second day of Chinese New Year, while in the third day, I wrote two entries" (Fang Fang "Words up Front"). When she called it a diary later, she was simply following the nomenclature of her enthusiastic readers who voluntarily gathered these fragmented writings into a collection. In other words, the naming of the text as a diary is nothing but the fruit of readers' responses; if Fang Fang might acknowledge the naming, it would be only because it was written on a daily basis.

The process by which her "daily recordings" became *Wuhan Diary* is both one in which these texts became a diary, and one in which they became a *diary*. Some of the earliest entries, as Fang Fang herself admits, were written "rather casually," with elements of blogs or microblogs such as the using of emojis, which were deleted in the published English version. A closer look at the published English translation of *Wuhan Diary* in light of Fang Fang's original writings helps to highlight revision strategies that have contributed to conferring generic coherence upon *Wuhan Diary*. For example, the original phrase "封城记" ("notes from a quarantined city") in the entry of the first day (January 25) becomes "'Wuhan Diary' or 'Notes from a Quarantined City'". By the same token, "封城记录" ("recordings of a quarantined city") in the second day's entry is modified into "Wuhan Diary" in translation. For the entries of the first four days, the lunar dates originally marked in the first paragraphs are removed in *Wuhan Diary*, playing down the fact that the second and third articles were both completed on the third day. Moreover, the English version, by correcting misstatements of facts or by striking out controversial expressions (Yu, Zheng, and Shao, 9–12), has blue-penciled phrases from the original posts that sparked extensive debates in China. As a result, some of the complexities in these discussions around her work have been obscured from public view.

In the second place are inconsistencies in textual composition; to put it another way, inconsistencies regarding textuality or the accompanying texts (Zhao).¹ A traditional act of diary reading usually presupposes throughout the text a personal nature, a promise of authenticity as well as a self-consistent voice. In the case of *Wuhan Diary*, however, it is not that a writer confined to her dwelling for an epidemic outburst opened her thick notebook every night, jotted down her experiences of the day, and closed the diary after a while and went to sleep; indeed, it is anything but a diary "kept in a drawer" (Fang Fang "Words up Front"). In the translator's Afterword of the English version, Michael Berry states that the *Diary* is a virtual open book, the contents of which were initially scattered in various forms and on various platforms along with "remarks, criticisms, links to articles, photos, and embedded videos" in the comments section of Weibo and Wechat² (Berry). An open book, however, is not simply a book opened. It is not so much that the interactions between Fang Fang (and her supporters) and critics were increasingly woven into the given narrative—as Berry suggests—as that the public nature of these interactions in question configured the "diary" as a performative narrative.

It is worth noting that the diary at issue is performative from the very beginning. Technically, the text can be seen as anything but a private diary with no intended or implied reader other than the (future) writer him-/herself. Its constant awareness of its non-privacy is already implicit in the bitter gibe at online censorship in the first entry: "Weibo develops a technique that makes the user believe his or her post was successfully updated when it actually remains invisible to other users." (Fang Fang "Technology"). The author also mentions in a later entry that she is "glad to report facts" (Fang Fang "We"). One of the most obvious manifestations of the performativity is that the becoming-diary itself, as a practical genre, engaged in public discussions and debates—most of the entries in the last third part of *Wuhan Diary* are full of defenses, polemics, or fulminations. In this sense, one could say that *Wuhan Diary* is not supposed to be read as a self-addressing monologue, and that it must be taken rather as a dialogue heavily charged with social concerns. Even the plain accounts of daily life (shopping for necessities, cooking, updates of the health status of family members and her dog, and so forth) at the beginning of the entries play a vital role within the overall framework of *Wuhan Diary*, insofar as they lend credibility to the text in general, including its socially polemical parts.

Wuhan Diary also contains both active responses to various types of accompanying texts and non-responsive parts, including a substantial number of quotations from Weibo posts, interviews, messages

¹ Zhao Yiheng classifies accompanying texts into para-texts (framing factors), type-texts (type factors), pre-texts (quotation factors), meta-texts (commentary factors), hypertexts (linking factors), and secondary texts (sequel factors). These categories help to grasp the complexity and heterogeneity of *Wuhan Diary* in terms of textual composition.

² Weibo, or Sina Weibo, is the dominant microblogging website in China. Wechat is a Chinese instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment application.

from friends, notes from relatives, and the like. It can be therefore gathered that the narrator is far from the original information source in a substantial number of cases, where she simply does the work of a compiler. The author not only documents her personal thoughts and feelings, but also those of others. One may say that there is nothing unusual about it, for it is often the case that modern people access information by means of communication technologies. The point, however, is that the distinction between directly experienced reality and mediated information is blurred in this process, both of which are told in a unified first-person voice. This obscurity is not only discernible on narratological levels, but is symptomized in the "meta-diary" claim that the text is little more than a personalized articulation of personal experiences, with the implication that the multiple voices herein are misunderstood (rather than represented) as one single voice.

Bao Hongwei has referred to some of the implications of the mixing of diary/non-diary features within *Wuhan Diary*, but his quick examination gives short shrift to a problem of substantial significance. The literary genre of the diary, he says, conventionally has the aura of authenticity, and it seems that "a diary does not have to be objective, comprehensive, or even factual. It is a different genre from journalism. In fact, its great charm lies in its subjective and intimate nature, which can effectively satisfy readers' voyeuristic pleasure" (Bao). However, even though the genre convention has prescribed to some degree the reading expectations regarding *Wuhan Diary*, or established a general guideline for a normative reading, one must admit that the authenticity and even factuality of the *Diary's* accounts constituted one of the major battlefields of online debates and criticisms in China.³ For a further discussion on *Wuhan Diary* in terms of authenticity, we must first take a detour to revisit the historical and theoretical formations *Wuhan Diary* is predicated upon.

The 'Dust' and 'Mountain' of Critical Realism: A Return to the Nineteenth Century, or a Post-Socialist Realism?⁴

The most frequently quoted phrase from *Wuhan Diary*—"A speck of dust of the era is a mountain when it falls upon an individual" (时代的一粒灰，落在个人头上就是一座山)—is not only an epigram designating a way of experiencing and imagining the epidemic, but a metaphorical statement for a methodology of literary creation. As has been mentioned in *Wuhan Diary*, the phrase is not derived directly from the experience of the epidemic, but a wisdom the author repeatedly returned to in varied contexts, only to gain new relevance in the face of the many sufferings and deaths caused by COVID-19: "When I said these words before, I did not know them well. It was at this time that they were truly engraved in my heart" (Fang Fang "A Speck of Dust"). In other words, the epigram illustrates a presupposition that is constitutive of the author's distinctive way of seeing and experiencing the epidemic in Wuhan. Suspend for the moment the susceptibility to specific affects and the demand for specific subject matters, and we will get a clearer picture of the particular configuration of the relations between experiential individuality and social totality.

What really matters here is how the semantic transcoding from the "mountain" for the individual to the "dust" for the era (the order cannot be otherwise) is accomplished, or how an act of writing about personal experiences points to an imagination of some structure of totality. Admittedly, *Wuhan Diary* comprises social-media posts that are supposed to be a more practical or non-fictional form than fictional works, but it is still worthwhile for us to facilitate our understanding of the works of Fang Fang, a self-alleged realist writer, by revisiting the history of a few issues of Chinese realist literature. This is because what interests us is not about factuality or empirical facts, but about authenticity, which must be the prime concern for any narrative, be it fictional or non-fictional, that aspires to represent what it believes to be reality in relation to broader social structures.

What follows is two excerpts from Fang Fang's essay symptomatically titled "It's Just My Individual Expression" (《这只是我的个人表达》):

Over time, I have been increasingly fond of the term "neo-realism." I realize that it is actually a step forward for realistic fiction, a "critical realism" according to my understanding.

³ The issue of factuality is beyond our scope here. What we are concerned with is the issue of authenticity, which involves judgments, representations, and evaluations of more general situations and conjunctures, rather than specific facts.

⁴ As for the naming of a literary style or literary methodology, we are not concerned with whether it signifies associated works appropriately, but rather with the cognitions, sentiments, and attitudes that accompany the naming (and self-naming) in particular historical contexts.

Literature is human studies. Critical realistic fiction or neo-realistic fiction concerns the most ordinary people in real society. [...] It upholds the spirit of humanity, full of compassion and pity for the ordinary people in our life. At the same time, it also upholds a non-cooperative and non-complicit attitude toward the status quo. ("Individual Expression" 210)

A speck of dust of the era may become a mountain when it falls upon an individual. And we live in an era of swirling dust. (213)

Examining the underpinning viewpoint and the terminology employed, one may find that Fang Fang's views on literary creation and criticism (at least since her 1987 short story "Fengjing") bear the imprint of the continued controversies over literary realism in the history of contemporary Chinese literature, while her attitudes and dispositions regarding theory are basically echoes of the systematic rewriting of pre-1980s literary history in the 1980s. The nature of the debates in question can be tactically encapsulated as the conflict between socialist realism and critical realism, and that between typicality and authenticity (Liu "Debates").⁵ According to the prevailing Marxist narrative of literary history in the socialist bloc, critical realism is for the most part an *ex post facto* construct and is meant to fill in the pre-history of socialist realism. That is to say, insofar as a body of correlated epistemological commitments (historical materialism, class analysis, Marxized politico-economic approach, teleological Utopianism, etc.) and a mostly utilitarian taste for literature given to the education of the masses have been established as conscious guiding principles for literary creation and criticism in general, works that are critical of the bourgeois society despite a lack of historical materialist vision are identified with critical realism (the most brilliant gems of which belong to the 'long nineteenth century'). It is only by perceiving the absence of Marxist analysis from critical realism that one can truly make sense of the term "critical realism" as it is defined by Lenin in his view of "Leo Tolstoy as the mirror of the Russian Revolution," by which he does not mean that the masterpieces of critical realism have made exemplary representations of history, but that the mere acts of representation can be seen as a cultural symptom conducive to a more complete knowledge of history.

While, from the 1950s to the early 1980s, socialist realism (in its multiple variants) in China was prescribed as the master principle of literary creation and the most desirable literary style, critics and scholars went to great lengths to draw diverse discursive resources from the literary practices and treatises of critical realism in a bid to question, revise, and perfect certain formulations of socialist-realist theory. The first to address the issue of whether "literature is about humanity" in the history of contemporary Chinese literature was Qian Gurong in his 1957 article "On 'Literature Is about Humanity,'" where he suggested humanism as a necessary and fundamental—if not sufficient or even highest—principle for literary creation and criticism, and that "socialist humanism" should be an integral part of socialist realism (Qian). It is worth noting that the debates over realistic literature from 1956 to 1957 were part of a wider social controversy during the same period, relating to China's (partial) shift from the Soviet model as an attempt to maintain China's autonomy of its own institution-building and to pioneer a more localized path of socialism. As the debates came to be stifled at the end of 1957, the orthodox discourse of socialist realism was reaffirmed. Nevertheless, this abrupt halt was not so much prompted by an arbitrary decision on the part of a coherent authoritative will or even an orchestrated maneuver against potential dissidents, so much as by a reaction overdetermined by a string of factors operative in the Cold War conjuncture at the time.⁶ One can say that the discussions on literary realism and the representation of reality, the cultural resources mobilized by the different parts, and the intensity of the competition for discursive ascendancy were from the outset scarcely a corollary of the independent evolution of domestic cultural politics, but a local effect of the changing relations in the world system.

Despite being stifled, ideas and phraseology with reference to the humanist discourse still formed a continued tradition (to some degree underground though) revived at intervals from the late 1950s to the late 1970s. After 1978 (the so-called New Period), the discourse began to gather momentum and at length swept China's cultural world. Harking back to the cultural climate in the first years of that period, Li Zehou observed that

⁵ Liu Ning's overview of the "conflict between socialist realism and critical realism" provides a framework for understanding the debates on "authenticity" in the history of contemporary Chinese literature, but we may take the article's description and evaluation of the practice of socialist realism with a grain of salt.

⁶ For example, the 20th Congress of the CPSU, incidents in Polish and Hungary, cessation of Soviet investment in China, and the joint declaration by Japanese and Taiwanese authorities on "retaking the Chinese mainland."

[e]verything was reminiscent of the May Fourth era. The enlightenment of human, the awakening of human, humanism, the restoration of humanity [...]. All revolved around the theme that the sensual individual of flesh and blood demanded its liberation from the state of being trampled by the god of alienated rationality. The yell of "O human, human!" vibrated through every field, every domain. (Li 265)

The extent of the change and the consensus on the late 1970s as a watershed for periodization, however, do not point to an absolute rupture or reversal. Indeed, as Wang Hui has commented, none of the typical "theses of the 1980s," including those concerning humanism and alienation, would fail to find its origin in the socialist history from the 1950s to 1970s (Preface 1). In the 1980s, the diverse variants of humanism in the socialist bloc were still able to legitimize themselves by drawing on discourses closely related to Marxism (e.g. humanist Marxism in philosophy and "socialism with a human face" in institution). In China, the discourse of humanism departed in many respects from its Marxist framing. By recasting the conception of the Single Modernity⁷, as Wang Hui notes, it can be seen to have drawn "an allegorical critique of Chinese socialism as feudal tradition", thereby avoiding "discussing the modern content of this historical experience" ("Contemporary Chinese Thought" 20), thus disguising the promise of Chinese socialism as an alternative or anti-modern modernity. Li Zehou, bolstering his argument about "Double Variation on Enlightenment and National Salvation," regards the revolutionary and socialist practices in China as a prolonged interruption to the progress of Chinese modernity in both cultural and political terms. Fang Fang gives a similar account: the development of Chinese realistic fictions, which came to mature in the 1930s, was interrupted by "fierce war, civil unrest, and violent social turbulence"; after the founding of the People's Republic of China, "the forcible intervention of political ideas" and "the severe restrictions on the mind" led "the whole body of fiction writings to a different course", and it was not until the 1980s that "there came to be a real breakthrough" ("Individual Expression" 208-09).

It should be noted that both what Li Zehou calls "enlightenment" and what Fang Fang terms "realistic fiction" in the early decades of the twentieth century are mainly referring to the western thoughts and works belonging to the "long nineteenth century," from which they have drawn their major discursive resources. In the transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era, the revalorization of the cultural-political significance of nineteenth-century literature (critical realism included) in China was part of the more general changes of attitudes toward humanist discourse in the socialist bloc. Dai states that in China "from 1949 to 1979, the critical edge of European Enlightenment culture was employed to support the anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist discourse of democratic revolution, to highlight the absence of class exploitation and oppression in the socialist system, and to enhance the prospects of communism with humanist dreams" (31). Soon after, however,

the European culture of the nineteenth century became a major instrument for the antagonistic culture of the 1980s in China, whose actual intention is to truly bid a "farewell to revolution": supplanting the reign of Soviet-Russian literature (socialist realism) with the well-established mainstreams of European culture, and the banner of class theory with that of Enlightenment and humanist discourse. (28)

In terms of the theoretical practice within the socialist bloc in the Cold War, this revalorization of nineteenth-century realistic literature as a cultural symbol can also be considered as an extension, or even a misappropriation, of the tradition arguing for a "broader realism" that is distinct from the orthodox tenets about socialist realism. Following this line of thought and provided that Fang Fang's views on realism are coherent, we can take the preference for a broader realism as a point of reference, and appreciate the significance of the slogan "return to the nineteenth century" in relation to her expectations for critical realism, thereby characterizing some of the key features of Fang Fang's realism. For example, if it is the case that existing prescriptions of socialist realism would lead to the dogmatization of literary creation, Qian Gurong suggests, in his argument that "literature is about the human," to seize the right to interpret "humanism" from bourgeois discourse (by, say, investing it with the principle of class analysis). Qian seeks to subsume humanism under a certain affect theory guided by "the principle of peoplehood and of realism," aiming to better inspire the writers to "consciously use literature as a weapon for class struggle" (38). By contrast, Fang Fang's conception of realism deliberately excludes not only the idea of class analysis but any self-conscious imagination of the collective, and thereby retranslates the slogan "literature is about the human" as "rejecting any narrative that is distant from life experience" (Chen 188), giving priority to "personal experience, personal

⁷ The concept of Single Modernity here means that Western capitalist modernity is the only sort of modernity and its alternatives are nothing more than backward premodern counterfeits.

narration, personal reading" (201). This is, however, not the whole story. While she emphasizes in the title of her essay on literary creation that "this is just my individual expression," Fang Fang's rejection of any "self-conscious imagination of the collective" does not mean that her conception of literary realism has been free from the idea of totality. The distinctive feature of her realism vis-à-vis the general commitments of neo-realism lies in the mere belief that "individual experience" and the imagination of the total both corroborate and are contingent upon each other:

Speaking of fiction, I used to say that literature is a kind of individual expression, but when a multitude of individual expressions come together, we will get the expression of a nation; when the expressions of a multitude of nations come together, we have the expression of an entire era. By the same token, insignificant and insufficient to represent the whole picture as a single individual's record may seem, as long as the records of countless individuals come together, the truth will emerge in all its aspects. ("This is Our Life")

Given that, for Fang Fang, there is no totality prior to individual expressions or experiences, "the expression of an entire era" and "the truth in all its aspects" correspond therefore not to an act of "writing totality" but to a secondary "total writing." Moreover, given the multivalence of the phrase "come together," a question that remains to be answered (if not one that is entirely unanswerable) is whether the aggregation of individual views is simply an accumulation, or whether it involves some process of reduction, negotiation, conflicting, downplaying, and exclusion. Furthermore, will the "expression of an entire era" take on a homogenized form so as to arrive at Truth? Rather, as we can see, the total here is nothing but an instrument for the self-confirmation of the individual prior to the total, and the sole function of the "whole picture" and Truth is to illustrate the absolute soundness of individual expressions as basic units of the narrative. Even if the individual experience in question takes the form of the minutiae of everyday life as well as lives and deaths in a slow-moving banality as is presented by neo-realism, which implies that it is merely the *smallest* units of truth, it is nonetheless the smallest unit of *truth*.

As one of the many neo-realistic writers (among which are Chi Li, Liu Heng, and Liu Zhenyun) who came to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Fang Fang predicated the authenticity of realism upon the soundness of individual experience. In an outright rejection of socialist realism and grand narratives (those of Marxism), her purported critical realism gives short shrift to the efforts to see the present as a dialectical step from the past to the future in any socio-economic analytical approach, whatever the sense in which this approach is teleological or deterministic. Fang Fang's critical realism is therefore certain to overlook the anti-modern modernity of Chinese socialist practice, of which all the strivings for modernity are informed with a criticism of and guardedness about the prevailing model of modernity, and the socialist-realistic representation of this anti-modern modernity—one of its tasks is to underscore the position of the future in the present—would naturally be dismissed, in Fang Fang's thinking, as a violation of the principle of "authenticity" in general. As is the case with the aggregation of countless atomic *homines economici* which is postulated in classical economics to conceive the functioning of society, Fang Fang's conception of critical realism, by suspending the imagination of the collective, can only bring about works concerned with little more than a microeconomics of individual woes—for all its promise that countless individual experiences and angles will emerge as the irreducible units of the entire era. With her works mostly addressing the history of China since the twentieth century, Fang Fang's conception of realism is nonetheless the product of a general disapproval for the artistic practices and cultural logic of the revolutionary "short twentieth century" around the end of the Cold War. In this sense, one can call it a post-socialist realism⁸.

A Dual Allegory and the End of Post-Cold War

To identify Fang Fang's conception and practice of realism with a post-socialist realism is to take a step closer to a better appreciation of what a becoming-diary is all about. *Wuhan Diary* is from the outset a discursive practice highly open to the public, embracing in a montage/collage-like fashion a motley assortment of social texts through real-time interactions and exchanges of views. So heterogeneous a text, however, purports to be a traditional diary made up of purely individual experiences and feelings for all its gradual adjustments of stylistic elements and approaches, its self-identification in the meta-diary claims, and even revisions and omissions in translation. As she puts it, "I record a few facts every

⁸ By "post-socialist realism" we mean a conception of realism that came into being at the end of the Cold War to challenge socialist realism, in the sense that it is *post*-socialist realism rather than *post-socialist* realism. It is worth noting that, according to Zhang Xudong, the emergence of post-socialism does not necessarily indicate the end of socialism (Zhang, 30).

day, and add a few thoughts and emotions at the same time, which I find interesting. It's a purely individual record, in a diary style" ("As for Early Spring"). The self-alignment with the diary genre, the repeated emphasis on its contents as personal experience (and even on its limitations in cognition), and the overt rejection of grand narratives ("It is never meant to be a grand narrative") all contribute to a production of the effect of authenticity by resorting to the characteristic ideological-aesthetic construction of "farewell to revolution" in post-Cold War China.

The effect, however, is nothing more than an effect. The rejection of grand narratives in itself hardly demonstrates the irreducible authenticity of this post-socialist realistic writing characterized by a piling-up of individual experiences, even if it is a non-fictional one. This is not a problem of "lying," "spreading disinformation," or "overgeneralization," but one of which Althusser's criticism of empirical epistemology may serve as an example. Fredric Jameson, in his pithy discussion on cognitive mapping, warns us that in certain cases, the mere authenticity of individual experience does not necessarily add up to truth, and that a cognitive or scientific model for truth is all too often beyond the scope of individual experience:

Too rapidly we can say that, while in older societies and perhaps even in the early stages of market capital, the immediate and limited experience of individuals is still able to encompass and coincide with the true economic and social form that governs that experience, in the next moment these two levels drift ever further apart and really begin to constitute themselves into that opposition the classical dialectic describes as *Wesen* and *Erscheinung*, essence and appearance, structure and lived experience. (349)

In light of this expanding chasm between authenticity and truth, Dai Jinhua's conclusive judgment about Fang Fang's realism takes on a new significance: "In a sense, Fang Fang is more like a troubadour of the industrial age nurtured by the culture of the nineteenth century." (333) One may hardly expect a realism that keeps looking back on its counterpart in the nineteenth century (or the period before the revolutionary "short twentieth century") to rival its predecessor in representing reality. In the post-Cold War era where financial capital increasingly dominates the allocation of industrial capital on a global scale, individual engagement in internet-based information gathering and use of online social platforms is of little service when it comes to grappling with the difficulty of getting to truth by way of phenomenological individual experience. The discussions on internet platforms are always subject to the mediation of operative logics and server-push algorithms that regulate the dissemination of information one way or another. For major online social platforms, public debates are largely a means to multiplex online traffic within information cocoons (the presence and absence of censorship are usually nothing but different types of traffic catalysts). Still more of interest, perhaps, are the ideological containment strategies that holds individuals back from getting insights alternative to some particular ideologies, and the reaffirmation and reproduction of the containment in the individuals' reception of information.⁹

The quasi-epistemology of humanism or individualism shared and modified by post-socialist realism from the New Enlightenment of the 1980s imagines the "concrete man" in terms of an abstract subjectivity, responding to the demand for ideological lubrication in the transition from aesthetic liberation to commercial rationality. After the market economy was officially established in mainland China in 1992, the New Enlightenment Movement in China became increasingly reduced to a moral stance that, while still maintaining a critical posture, was only able to take issue with national socio-political matters—especially behaviors of the state that could be readily identified and personified—and was hard-pressed to compass the renewed economic relations or to diagnose problems with the Chinese society in its process of modernization, which had been already involved in the global capitalist market. Accordingly, it must be the very incapability of cognitively mapping the totality of society, such as in the case of post-socialist realism, that is accountable for the thematic continuity in cultural representation, extending from the post-Cold War era in cultural-ideological terms into the well-acknowledged one in politico-economic terms.

In this light, the post-socialist realism of *Wuhan Diary* as a becoming-diary can be said to contain a number of cultural symptoms of neoliberalism. To adopt Wayne Booth's classic term in narratology, in *Wuhan Diary* the narrator is an unreliable one, who falsely identifies the many forms of discursive practice in the public sphere as records of individual thoughts and feelings. The misidentification is about representing what Kevin Robins identifies as "a kind of hybrid between a compiler and a conductor"

⁹ Take this for an example of how a particular ideological containment strategy works on Fang Fang: the entry of Feb. 26 in *Wuhan Diary* excerpts and praises views from Prof. Wang Liming, a biologist. In one of the quoted paragraphs, the biologist points out that scientific knowledge is increasingly out of keeping with common sense. It seems that the citer Fang Fang fails to perceive the echo with Jameson's warning.

without an authorial point of view from above (73) as a controlling individual author who is in command of the whole narrative. By virtue of the "meta-diary" voice that originates" from it, the unreliable narrator seeks to prescribe the nature of the text and thus subsume other voices into a text that they do not originate from. This narrator, therefore, is not so much speaking as an individual as speaking through individualization.¹⁰

In this way, we can read *Wuhan Diary* as a dual allegory of neoliberal subjectivity. In the first place, the cognitive activity in realistic literary representation is parallel to the productive processes in the free market in personal terms: private experiences, perspectives, properties, and forms of organization are perceived to be more authentic, creative, flexible, and productive than public projects, constraints, norms, and controls. Secondly, claims about a controlling authorship and the shaping of textual coherence are parallel to the privatization of the public or the common in terms of exclusive rights: in a common space of cooperation, negotiation, and conflicts, a private enclosure is demarcated in which the individual declares his or her pure autonomy and supreme right to interpret or dispose of whatever within the enclosure. The collector becomes the creator, while the organizer becomes the owner.

If the post-Cold War period is characterized by a reconfiguration of the politico-economic landscape, it seems that this period is coming to an end. The world-economic system previously dominated by financial capitalism has been gradually incorporating countries and regions hitherto outside the system, as well as reappropriating and redistributing the factors of production (technology, labor, and raw materials for example) from these countries and regions through neoliberal measures. The ideological counterpart of this economic process is the belief in a single modernity and the announcement of the "end of history." What we have seen in the 2013–20 crisis in the Chinese economy, as is reported by Wen Tiejun, are the very tensions evolving from within the post-Cold War conjuncture. He says that the ongoing process is "more a reconfiguration than a disintegration of globalization," which he terms a process of "global regionalization" (409). Since 2016, the sharp social divisions, due to the hollowing out in major global-currency-issuing countries and the counteractive attempts to revive manufacturing industries, have escalated into populist domestic and foreign policies and the consequent trend toward counter-globalization. The relevant political actions have during this period served to dismantle the institutions of neoliberalism as well as to dispel its myths. As the "short twentieth century" ended around 1990, the days of the "long twentieth century," marked by a reckless desire for modernization, seem now to be numbered for both China and the rest of the world (402).

The major problem with post-socialist realism in the face of the crises provoked by the pandemic is that it not only fails to represent effectively the grounds and conditions from which the current epidemic situation emerged, but that it also fails to misrepresent it—that is, to cloak and strengthen the social mechanisms that contributed to the crises in question while making personalized humanist moral criticisms. In the case of *Wuhan Diary*, the problem is hardly with the mass of factual errors in its demand and argument for accountability, but rather with its framework for interpreting events, with the depoliticizing dichotomy between a daily-life, civic, active, and economic space and an irregular, intervening, rigid, and political space, which is obviously exemplified in Fang Fang's understanding these two spaces as opposite grounds for principles of practice: "They base their common sense on political concepts, while we base ours on life experience." (Fang Fang, "If Someone") The discursive strategy by which these two spaces are delineated can be in a sense attributed to the end of the short twentieth century and the advent of the post-Cold War period. Given that the revolutionary period that the strategy is meant for no longer exists and that the unfolding of post-Cold War logic has reached the point of its own internal crises, it will certainly fail to account for the fact that the COVID-19 epidemic broke out not only in the so-called "politically principled" (讲政治的) system that it most readily finds fault with, but also (with even greater intensity) in the core of the world-system, nor can it acclimate to the new reality that the neoliberal crisis has created. The massive political efforts to reconfigure global economic relations in the process of counter-globalization or global regionalization only indicates that the economic "normality" before the crisis was merely a symptom of a historical conjuncture overdetermined by multiple factors including political ones.

In conclusion, in its effort to represent the early stage of the world-sweeping COVID-19 pandemic, *Wuhan Diary* involves as a work of post-socialist realism numerous elements that have been historically formed. Whether it aims to impute what it deplors to the revolutionary short twentieth century and to reject it as a whole, or to respond to the process of globalization founded on a single modernity through

¹⁰ Another example of this kind of individualization in the context of the pandemic is the continued efforts to determine the origin of COVID-19. The extreme form of such efforts is to regard particular countries, regions, ethnic groups, or institutions as personified agents whose acts are to be held accountable for the ongoing sufferings.

a humanist imagination of the subject that derives from the Cold War period but serves, implicitly or explicitly, the post-Cold War era, the elements have appeared to be increasingly inappropriate for this age. If the post-Cold War era means the reproduction of the "center/semi-periphery/periphery" system on a larger scale and to a fuller extent, by virtue of the illusion of a single modernity and the global ascendancy of financial capital over other factors of production, then the current global regionalization causes a critical disruption of this linear process. The reconfiguration of this globalization may therefore entail the end of the post-Cold War period. One can say that post-socialist realism's rejection of grand narratives is in fact a rejection of a specific type of them (one informed by the Marxist discourse), so that it could imagine the "end of history" in the eternal "normality," which Fang Fang referred to when clarifying her idea about "dust" and "mountain": "This is not a prophecy, it is simply a fact, a fact that exists in all times." (Fang Fang "Remember") It is therefore no wonder that this post-socialist realism has failed to imagine the end of the "end of history." Yet while we have seen the failure of this realistic narrative due to changes in the current economic period, the same failure may herald a new beginning. It may not inform us of the relevance of the present to the future, but it does serve to encourage a prudence about any future forms of cultural representation with aspiration to grasp their own contemporary states of affairs. The key, as Marx comments on his own analytic method and is often invoked by Althusser, is to "not proceed from *man* but from a given economic period of society" (Marx 547).

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