

## Alternative Remembrances of the Cultural Revolution in *Spider Eaters* and *Six Chapters of Life at a Cadre School*

The traumatic realist project is not an attempt to reflect the traumatic events mimetically, but *to produce* it as an object of knowledge, and *to transform* its readers so that they are forced to acknowledge their relationship to post-traumatic culture.

—MICHAEL ROTHBERG<sup>1</sup>



To grasp the complexities, pluralities, and contradictions of meanings in the Cultural Revolution, a sociopolitical campaign involving many social forces and affecting extensive aspects of human life, a critical reader must apply a comparative approach by reading a diversity of writings, such as those by authors from different social classes and educational backgrounds, from different perspectives, and in different periods. The gaps in dissimilar life stories and stories told differently, in fact, may lead to a greater level of truth than those told coherently and in a unified rhetorical manner.

This chapter is devoted to two memoirs that demonstrate completely different approaches to the common practice of memory making, illustrated in the Red Guard memoirs discussed in Chapter 1. The first is Rae Yang's plainly written yet intense memoir, *Spider Eaters*, which offers a contrast to the largely unified themes, modes of narration, and narrative strategies presented in most memoirs of her generation. Rae Yang provides an exceptionally rich text in which the factual details are understood and reconstructed in a narrative that serves as an inquiry into both "the kind of understanding the victims brought to their experiences and . . . the kind of actions they took on behalf of this understanding," to borrow from James Young in his study of the Holocaust. "The purpose of this particular inquiry," writes Young, "is [rather] to explore

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1 Michael Rothberg, "Between the Extreme and the Everyday: Ruth Klüger's Traumatic Realism," in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, ed. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 67.

the implications and consequences of these principles for our understanding of the Holocaust as it represented in ‘narrative testimony.’”<sup>2</sup> The second text examined in this chapter, *Six Chapters of Life at a Cadre School*, by the Chinese essayist Yang Jiang, is about her experience at a “cadre school”<sup>3</sup> during the Cultural Revolution. Yang’s memoir, which is subtle, understated, and unsentimental, shows a distinctive manner of memoir writing, one in which an author negotiates, constructs, and, in the end, makes public a continual process of self-reflection and rediscovery in responding to the historical event through intertextuality.

### Multiple Voices, Split Personality, and Unreliable Memory in *Spider Eaters*

To break the constraints of the “autobiographical self,” Annette Kuhn proposes the use of “revisionist autobiography” to combat the tendency to produce a traditional autobiographical narrative, which is inseparable from self-referentiality. Revisionist autobiography does not dwell on the seemingly transparent and coherent “autobiographical self”; instead, it has “roots in a critical interest in a variant of autobiographic writing” in which “the narrative ‘I’ is in consequence fragmented, dispersed across different discourse.”<sup>4</sup> In Kuhn’s view, revisionist autobiography is essentially self-reflective life writing that provides critical insights into the nature of memory making as subject to circumstances and being self-serving because of the unreliability of both memory and writing. It thus challenges the autobiographical ego, which

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2 See James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 10.

3 The cadre schools, also commonly known as *ganxiao*, or *wu-qi ganxiao* 五.七干校 [May Seventh Cadre School], were first termed in a missive composed by Mao Zedong to the then-Secretary of Defense Lin Biao (1907–71) on May 7, 1966, authorizing the People’s Liberation Army to take control of key government sectors, research institutions and universities. *Ganxiao* were located in rural areas or the countryside and, the enrollees were forced to leave their families behind to take on physically demanding manual labor despite the senior age and frail health that many of them had. In the following couple of years, cadre school became the center of reeducation-through-labor for millions of intellectuals and government cadres who were suspended from their routine duties as the army took control of the cities. The hardships of manual labor and lack of adequate medical facilities in the rural areas frequently caused the death of enrollees in the Cadre Schools.

4 For Annette Kuhn’s discussion about “revisionist autobiography,” see her “A Journey through Memory,” in *Memory and Methodology*, ed. Susannah Radstone (Oxford: BERG, 2000), 179–182.