

Tiananmen Fiction: Literary Insurgencies in the Diasporic Chinese Community

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the literary representation of the 1989 protest of Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China, in three texts that can be ascribed to what Belinda Kong defines as ‘Tiananmen fiction’, that is, works produced by writers in the Chinese diaspora with Tiananmen as a central narrative event. The analyzed novels, Ha Jin’s *The Crazy* (2002), Xialou Guo’s *I Am China* (2014), and Madeleine Thien’s *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016), all written in English, take some distance from other more traditional themes in the literary output of the Asian diasporic community, usually linked to the identity issue, to embrace a clear political and ethical stance. Although produced in distinct geographical areas (the US, Canada, and the UK) and by authors differently ascribed to the Chinese diaspora, the selected texts share an interest in the historical event of Tiananmen Square as an occasion to reflect on questions of human dignity, national history, and the revolutionary role the arts have in totalitarian regimes – all themes that merge in the memory of Tiananmen. The current emergence of such issues in the literary production of the Chinese diaspora offers an opportunity to discuss the representation of Chineseness both at home and abroad, providing a resistant positioning against the official history of the country that has silenced the event, and highlighting the importance of insurgency as a tool for the survival of human dignity.

I can't compare life with death,
truth with imagining,
my palms with the back of my hands.
Tonight, the night that never ends,
a tree grows out of tear, and from the tree
many desperate hands are hanging.
In your dark night
my words fail to form.
Liu Xia, “Dark Night” (1997)¹

1. Tiananmen Square in facts and fiction

The architect Chen Gang posited Beijing’s Tiananmen Square as a ‘zero point’. He used the father of Marxism Friedrich Engels’ words to explain his own vision of Tiananmen: “Zero is a definite point from which measurements are taken along a line, in one direction positively, in the other negatively. Hence the zero point is the location on which all others are dependent, to which they are all related, and *by which they are all determined*. Wherever we come upon zero, it represents something very definite: the limit. Thus it has greater significance than all the real magnitudes by which it is bounded” (as reported in Thien 2016, 297; italics in the

original). This is the role the tragic events of the 1989 popular student uprising in Tiananmen have in Jian's, Kublai's, and Sparrow's lives, the protagonists respectively of Ha Jin's *The Crazy* (2002), Xialou Guo's *I Am China* (2014), and Madeleine Thien's *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016) on which this essay focuses. In these novels, Tiananmen Square is a zero point of sort, a historical event that determines the characters' life as well the novels' positioning in the literary production of the Chinese diaspora. I selected these novels in view of their thought-provoking representation of the Tiananmen uprising: the narrative memory of the protest gives the authors the possibility to explore questions such as political abuse, oppression, and the Chinese Communist Party's power in controlling bodies, deaths, and dreams – a biopower, in fact, which became most visible in 1989, when the People's Liberation Army, contrary to the promise of its name, besieged Beijing with the sadly known deadly results. Despite the centrality of human rights issues in the texts, this article zeroes in on Jin's, Guo's, and Thien's works with the intention to interrogate questions of insurgency and human dignity, showing how Tiananmen is a historical as well as symbolical event that represents the negative limit of the communist biopower, but also a positive point of renewal offering new directions in the characters' lives, in Chinese history and its public memory, and in the development of the so-called Chinese diasporic literature.²

The Tiananmen movement started as a students' protest in April 1989. Differently from more recent examples of popular uprisings, Tiananmen did not emerge out of economic suffering or a clear and direct distrust in the representational sovereignty of the Communist Party, but came from an absence of choice in the life of the citizens, who felt more and more deprived of their human rights. Gathered at Tiananmen Square, students did not directly question the communist ideology, but how the 'permanent revolution' project led to a *de facto* state of exception and violations of human rights – such as the use of torture, the diminution of freedoms, the decimation of cultural life, the nullification of the horizon of possibilities, the constant vulnerability of subjects exposed to the practices of control of the communist regime and, in general, to a drastic reduction of a dignified liveable life. The protest gained momentum in May of the same year. As Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith well summarize in their study on human rights and narrated lives,

[o]n May 14, students [...] declared a hunger strike. On May 16, three hundred thousand students marched. By May 18, more than a million people were demonstrating in and around the Square. By June 4, more than two hundred Chinese journalists and tens of millions of intellectuals, workers, civil servants, peasants, police and soldiers had joined the student demonstrations. Frustrated by inflation and corruption and sympathetically engaged by the students' actions, masses of people rallied in more than three hundred cities in a nationwide demand for reform. (2004, 188)

June 4 is usually considered the final day of the Tiananmen democratic movement: at night, the Army encircled the Square and the surrounding areas, killing "between 1,000 and 3,000 protestors and innocent bystanders," while thousands of others were injured. In Belinda

Kong's words, the intervention of the Army on June 4 "epitomizes the half-century-long genealogy of communism's cannibalist biopolitics" (2012, 16), which is most evident to the West because of the media coverage of Tiananmen, but is not limited to it, as both Thien and Jin show.

Despite its coverage in the West due to the presence in Beijing of thousands of Western journalists to follow President Gorbachev's visit, Tiananmen has gone underground in the official memory of the PRC and its literature. Because of its historical failure as a movement, which forced many of its actors to actual or existential displacement, and the homeland ban on the memory of the event,³ Tiananmen has emerged productively only far away from its place of origin and mainly in English, the "major linguistic platform for the global discourse on Tiananmen in almost all genres" (Kong 2012, 31), from poetry to drama to fiction.⁴ Although Tiananmen was "first and foremost a national event [...], its representational afterlife has been catapulted beyond the nation," so much so that writing about Tiananmen "constitutes a preeminently diasporic enterprise" (Kong 2012, 2), and is therefore defined by the linguistic practices of the Chinese diasporic community.⁵ Despite its national facticity, and because of the Chinese veto on its memory, the Tiananmen protest now exists mainly as a textual occasion in the transnational fiction of the Asian-American community in the West, of the Chinese-born exiled, and for western readers with access to English.⁶

While the leaders of the students' movement did produce first-hand accounts in the years immediately following 1989,⁷ Tiananmen as a literary theme has had a late flourishing, with fictional recreations that started to be written only at the turn of the millennium. Kong has defined this group of texts as 'Tiananmen fiction', that is, literary works written in Chinese or English and published as original texts or in translation, which deal with the memory of the 1989 democratic movement.⁸ Taking some distance from more traditional themes in the literary output of the Asian diasporic community (such as the clash between consent and descent, immigration, the feeling of nostalgia for lost traditions, etc.), Tiananmen fiction introduces a clear political stance that differentiates Asian-western literature produced recently from its antecedents.⁹ However, differently from the flourishing of life narratives, such as memoirs and autobiographies, the novels I interrogate are not linked to life-based experiences of Tiananmen. They are works of imagination that, nevertheless, give the historical events of Tiananmen central relevance for both the reconstruction of Chinese history and the investigation of other issues such as human dignity, democracy, and, in the specific interest of this essay, the role of the arts in totalitarian regimes. They help the reader to make sense of both Chinese history and the history of insurgencies, following the well-known idea by Alison Landsberg of a prosthetic memory as an ethical choice that goes beyond biological claims. Tiananmen fiction is thus understood as a cogent tool to frame a historical – and narrative – memory, useful to complicate the literary tradition of the Chinese diaspora and to adjust the image of China in the world, remembering a different history and positioning the question of human rights as a

central one, in contrast to a neutral vision of the PRC due to its successful role in the global economy. In this sense, recalling the beginning of this article, Tiananmen can be considered a ‘zero point’, a historical event from which to measure both the Chinese past and its projection in the neo-capitalist order of the present. How these texts circulate and relate to one another, creating a virtual dialogue on Tiananmen, can be read as a minor act of late insurgency, which doubles the narrative examples of active resistance analyzed in what follows.

2. Ha Jin and Xialou Guo: the arts as resistance?

Beside participating in the literary representation of the 1989 democratic protest, Jin, Guo, and Thien share a reflection on the role of art in occasions of public dissent. In their novels, literature and music have a clear political dimension, understood as privileged sites for addressing questions of freedom and suffering that merge in the memory of Tiananmen. Literature is, in their case, a form of entertainment as well as of resistance, a tool through which to give voice to silenced victims of Chinese biopower – despite the fictional success or failure of the history they tell. In their reconstruction of the private lives of Sparrow, Kublai Jian, and Jian, and how their human dignity collides with the communist state authority, the authors relate a story of protest, its premises and aftereffects. By doing so, they posit Tiananmen as a defining moment for both Chinese history and the personal history of the main characters, who experience a sort of new beginning (or its impossibility, as in Guo’s *I Am China*) as a consequence of their first-hand or mediated involvement in Tiananmen.

Of the three authors, Chinese-born Ha Jin is the only one who can claim a direct memory of the event. A Chinese university student in the United States at the time of Tiananmen Square, he was shocked by the violence perpetrated by the People’s Liberation Army, of which he was a former member, and decided not to go back to China and to stay on in the US.¹⁰ As happened in Jin’s real life, the violence of the Army’s intervention is what most shocks Jian, the protagonist of *The Crazy*: “I couldn’t imagine that the government would dare to unleash military force on the citizens and students, especially with so many foreign reporters still in Beijing, who had gone there for the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s visit about two weeks before” (Jin 2002, 256). In general, *The Crazy* channels a certain malaise at the unspeakable past through the words of the ‘crazed’ Professor Yang, whom Jian is forced to assist. Exposed to the mental and physical collapse caused in the professor by the violations of the Cultural Revolution, the restrictions of the pre-Tiananmen government, and absence of truth and impossibility of aspiring to it, Jian grows more and more sceptical about his future career as a PhD in Beijing. Despite being a-political throughout most of the novel, the progressive realization of his own vulnerability, that is, his exposition to the abuse of his university superiors and of a rotten state system, eventually transforms the young man into an activist who gets involved in the protest of the Square. This event changes his destiny forever: after witnessing the deaths of innocents, he becomes fully aware that his position, as well as the one of his fellow citizens,

cannot but continue to be vulnerable within the Chinese regime. Jian's final act is radical: he crosses the border and leaves China under a new identity.

Even literature, something Jian initially and naively perceives as a pure form of beauty, truth, and freedom, shows its subjection to the central power: as the 'crazed' Professor Yang wonders, "Who is an intellectual in China? Ridiculous, anyone with a college education is called an intellectual. The truth is that all people in the humanities are clerks and all people in the sciences are technicians. Tell me, who is a really independent intellectual, has original ideas and speaks the truth? None that I know of. We're all dumb labourers kept by the state – a retrograde species" (Jin 2002, 153). Although the Tiananmen movement ends tragically, as Jian's faith in literature, the richness of a person's dreams and sorrows do function as a social practice of resistance, which advances individual agency as a sign of residual of human dignity, in spite of the homogenization required by the Chinese government. However, art maintains its dignifying potential only as long as it goes underground or, as in Jin's biographical example, abroad.

The role of art as a tool of political resistance and protest, besides being a site of freedom, is central in *I Am China* by Xialou Guo, one of the prominent contemporary Asian global writers. Born in China in 1973, the British-based Guo belongs to a younger generation of Chinese expatriates, too young to participate in the protest. As is biographically true for the author, her protagonists belong to that generation too young to fully participate in the students' demonstration, but who is too old to avoid its memory and the inevitable comparison between the possibilities manifested in 1989 and the consequences of hope destroyed.

The bulk of *I Am China* deals with the spiritual (alongside the corporeal) death of the generation after Tiananmen. Through the letters and diaries Iona translates from Chinese into English, the book narrates the love between the punk musician Kublai Jian and poetess Mu, alongside their ongoing dialogue on the role of art, politics, and revolution in China. Whereas to Mu art should go beyond the political in order to escape ideologies (Guo 2014, 83), to Kublai "[t]here is no art without political commitment. All art is political expression" (Guo 2014, 14). Living according to these words, punk and rock 'n' roll function as Kublai Jian's activism after the defeat of the democratic movement of 1989. Nostalgic of the political and cultural excitement of the Tiananmen period, Kublai Jian uses his fame as a punk musician to distribute his political and artistic manifesto during his most successful concert. The document is the cause of his fall to ashes and expulsion from his homeland and forced dislocation in the West. There, Kublai passes from activist to non-person: his personal and political struggle is meaningless, unheard, and forgotten. His humanness, together with his voice, progressively fades away. Forced to wander from one immigration centre to the other across Western Europe, he finally commits suicide in Crete. His fiancé Mu takes an opposite direction: after the collapse of her life with Kublai Jian, she negotiates a new position in neo-capitalist China and accepts a job in the London-based branch of a Chinese company.

As the title of the novel announces, the individual life of the protagonist Kublai Jian is an invitation to read the personal in a political way, even more so when we discover, in the second half of the novel, that Kublai Jian is the son of the fictive Chinese Prime Minister Hu Shulai (Guo 2014, 250). Kublai is the one asserting “I Am China” in his manifesto, which exposes the shortcomings of the communist revolution and considers the role of art. Music, in his case punk, is a form of rebellion: it is his attempt at living a good life in a context that is, in reality, limited by the restrictions of the Chinese regime. In Kublai Jian’s vision, music is the artistic substitution of the failed Tiananmen protest and his way of atoning for his absence from the Square on June 4. As he tells Mu, “On 3 June, after spending two hours in the square and raising banners and flags, I have to confess, a weariness overcame me. Mu, did I ever talk about this weariness? I returned to the campus alone. I should have stayed. It should really have been my event. It’s like my defining moment happened without me” (Guo 2014, 5).

A sense of perpetual defeat for that crucial absence, but also of constant preservation of the hope of that revolution, accompanies Kublai throughout his life. Memories of those days recur in his letters to his younger fiancé, who was not in Beijing in 1989:

I remember the night after the massacre. I went alone to Tiananmen Square. It was midnight. The troops of the People’s Liberation Army had washed the blood off the pavement. The hunger strikers’ tents had been pulled down and the square was. [...] I stood there and thought: this is our most glorious square. For hundreds of years people have celebrated, fought and marched on it. Every day hundreds of thousands of bicycles roll over it; hundreds of thousands of people walk on it. But now the people are defeated. I wish my blood was soaking into the earth between those stones: that would have been a worthy death. That would have been a worthy youth. (Guo 2014, 3-4)

Kublai Jian’s missing from the Square on June 4 appears to be also the force that urges him to participate in China’s ‘Jasmine Revolution’ in 2011, a form of protest that has its genesis in the Jasmine Revolution of Tunisia.¹¹ The reference to the Tunisian Revolution links China to recent global insurgencies, suggesting a more cosmopolitan political consciousness that is however prevented from developing in China, at least officially: “It’s ridiculous!” Mu laments, “The press aren’t allowed to mention a word of what’s going on in the Arab world right now. It’s going mad in Tunisia and Egypt and we’re not supposed to know” (Guo 2014, 183). News from the contemporary world are blocked, as well as the memory of Tiananmen. The prohibition of the memory of 1989 has an obstructive result even in people’s action, afraid of mentioning the missing ones for the risk of being reported or the pain the scar still produces (Guo 2014, 62). This is not the case with Kublai Jian, described as one of the organizers of China’s Jasmine Revolution, alternatively called the “Strolling Revolution,” a form of protest whose aim is to confuse the police and prevent the arrest of the actors of the demonstration, prohibited in China by the law (Guo 2014, 183-184).¹² As was the case with the Tiananmen insurgency, the government intervenes to stop the action and hits the symbol of the transnational democratic movement, the jasmine: “From today the government is banning the selling of jasmine flowers. All the window displays in hotels, restaurants and shops with

jasmine flowers have been stripped bare. Most flowers shops in Beijing will be closed indefinitely” (Guo 2014, 184). As this very recent suppression indicates, even if “[t]he youth of Tiananmen Square realized the impossible for hundreds of years,” as Kublai writes in his manifesto, “it did not last. The impossible vision faded into concrete reality and China became a state again” (Guo 2014, 362): a state of exception in which ‘revolution’ is a double-edged word, connected to the hope of change and the perpetual cycle that returns to its communist beginning.

3. Human dignity in Madeleine Thien’s *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*

Of the same generation as Guo, Madeleine Thien is a Canadian author of Chinese-Malaysian heritage and is therefore considered, differently from Jin and Guo, a second-generation Asian Canadian. As a writer, she had already proved her interest in matters of human rights in her previous work, *Dogs at the Perimeter* (2011), about the Khmer-Rouge regime in Cambodia. With the Man Booker Prize finalist *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* she returns to issues of personal and national injustice, devoting pages and pages to what comes before the events of 1989, but extending also to the afterlife of the protest and representing in this sense a link between Jin’s and Guo’s novels. In this family saga that spans three generations, official and private history mingles, reproducing the continuities between the Asian and the diasporic Chinese community. In her telling of different cycles of ‘revolutions’, Thien imaginatively illustrates the penetration of politics into private lives, the silences left after repression, but also what the characters do to resist.

The novel opens in Vancouver in 1990, where Marie’s mother welcomes and gives refuge to Ai-ming, a Chinese girl from Beijing. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen protest, Ai-ming gets to Canada illegally in the attempt to cross the border to the United States and take advantage of an amnesty for Chinese students arrived there after the Tiananmen demonstrations (Thien 2016, 51; 143). As the book unravels the story of Marie’s and Ai-ming’s families, we discover the two girls are the daughters of platonic lovers Jiang Kai (Marie’s father, who left for Canada) and Sparrow (Ai-ming’s father, who stayed in China). In contrast to the father she has known, thanks to Ai-ming Marie discovers Kai was a talented concert pianist in China before migrating to Canada; however, “haunted by people and events” of his past, Kai forces himself to silence in the New World (Thien 2016, 364). Similarly, Ai-ming’s father Sparrow was a talented composer at the Shanghai Conservatory and Kai’s teacher.

As the novel makes clear, Tiananmen is only the most recent protest in China,¹³ a country whose modern history is battered by a series of ‘revolutions’ and their violence, starting from the most effective one, the Communist Revolution which led Chairman Mao to power, to the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s and its dramatic consequences, passing through a number of abusive moments such as the Land Reform Campaign (1947-1952), the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956-1957),¹⁴ and the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962).¹⁵ In its

use of the word ‘revolution’, deployed alternatively by the communist government to name repressive crusades or by protesters in Tiananmen invoking a possibility of change, the novel shows the complicated history of the concept and its articulation over time.¹⁶ In *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, ‘revolution’ is not an innocent appeal to change. Contrary to Kublai Jian’s invocation of a ‘perpetual revolution’ as “the revolution that even revolutionizes itself. Perpetual revolution is complete freedom. And love is complete freedom” (Guo 2014, 363), in Thien’s novel the idea of a ‘perpetual revolution’, paraded by the communist regime, is shown as a deleterious attempt that transforms Chinese subjects into internal enemies. It starts a vicious cycle, which in the end revolves against its own principles of change and call for freedom.

A negative employment of the term, at least from the point of view of those 750,000 who fell victims of its merciless coercion, is the Cultural Revolution, whose restriction of personal freedom catches Sparrow and Kai in their juvenile years. After Sparrow’s dear cousin and Kai’s sweetheart Zhuli commits suicide because she is unable to resist the burden of unjust accusations, the two men follow different strategies to survive the repression and pain for a disintegrated youth. In his attempt at finding a liveable life that enables him to continue playing music, Kai sides with the Red Guards, finds the favour of the Party and, eventually, a way out of China. On the contrary, Sparrow is one of the random targets of the militia’s abuse of power:

That night, enforcers from the Shanghai revolutionary committee had surprised the neighborhood. They had pulled everyone from their rooms and ordered a renewed search for counter-revolutionary materials. Numbly, he [Sparrow] had fed his books and music into the bonfires [...] Sparrow had even burned the papers he had hidden up in the trusses of the roof. His beautiful Symphony No. 2, the still unfinished No. 3 – they went into the flames. Nothing remained. (Thien 2016, 289)

With the closure of the Conservatory in 1966, its five hundred pianos destroyed, and the destruction of both his music and family, a paralyzed Sparrow decides for non-action and accepts rehabilitation and its connected musical silence: he “was sent to a camp in Heilongjiang Province, in the frozen borderlands of the Northeast” (Thien 2016, 300) for six years and then to the South, where he “worked in a factory making wooden crates, then wire, and then radios, for two decades” (Thien 2016, 35), oblivious of his past as one of China’s most brilliant musicians. Unable to domesticate the power of his music to please a regime that has decimated his family, Sparrow prefers to become speechless, that is, music-less. Even his name symbolically changes from Sparrow to Bird of Quiet.

Tiananmen provides the occasion for a resurrection of both Kai’s and Sparrow’s past as musicians and their hope of meeting again after a twenty-year-long separation. The book recovers the events of Tiananmen in detail, from April 22, 1989, when the three students kneeled before the Great Hall of the People (Thien 2016, 298; 353) until June 4, the day the Army violently cleared the square. Fiction intermingles with historical reconstruction, which Thien accomplishes with care, even including archival photos in the book (2016, 298). Tiananmen is shown as a growing occasion of revolt, which gets bigger day by day, eventually

involving the whole city of Beijing, its inhabitants, students as well as factory workers, but also expanding to other parts of China. Although it ends in failure, not achieving its goal of reformation, the author portrays Tiananmen as a living revolution, which changes people and the perception of their civil existence.

Sparrow's involvement in Tiananmen comes thanks to his daughter Ai-ming who, as a future university student, participates in the demonstration:

She told me about days and nights when more than a million people had come to the Square. Students had begun a hunger strike that lasted seven days and Ai-ming herself had spent nights on the concrete, sleeping beside her best friend, Yiwen. They sat in the open, with almost nothing to shelter them from the sun or rain. (Thien 2016, 52)

In this episode, the distinction between private and public life is suspended. Similar to what happened in more recent examples of popular revolutions, sleeping on public ground is a way to claim the public space and de-legitimize the state by foregrounding the bodies, persistent in the face of their precariousness (Butler 2017, 156-157). If, during the Cultural Revolution, political incursions into the character's lives established a neglecting continuum between public and private lives, the students' life in the Square is a form of claiming agency instead of subjectivity. Their living the public space in a private manner becomes, therefore, positive and assertive (Butler 2017, 117). Each member of Sparrow's family, despite their different relation to the Square, reclaims their position in the public sphere by the mere fact of their physical occupation of the city. The reader moves with them from the private locale to the public city; they live both places simultaneously, with no clear daily life routine. There is an extra-ordinary plurality of public and visual movement. Even before being a linguistic claiming, as Judith Butler explains in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), her book about the alliance of bodies and contemporary forms of protest, Sparrow's, Ai-ming's, and the other citizens' bodily appearance in the public space talks of a rejection of a reduced human and living dignity (2017, 249). The alliance of the students' bodies gathered in the Square gives a visual demonstration of these people's refusal of their human precariousness.¹⁷

The assembly of bodies in Tiananmen insists on claiming their right to live a life of dignity: their revolution is not meant to revolutionize things (that is, to completely change them), but to oppose the government's power. Tiananmen has indeed played this role also in antecedent moments of Chinese history, as Sparrow recalls: "In 1976, after Premier Zhou Enlai died, similar events had taken place. Beijingers had come to the Square and mourned openly, provocatively; his death had allowed people to demonstrate loyalty to the disappeared" (Thien 2016, 360).¹⁸ Because it is perceived as the center of the people's resistance to disappearance (real and from the public space), "[d]uring those six weeks of demonstrations, [Ai-ming] had felt at home in China; she had understood, for the first time, what it felt like to look at her country through her own eyes and her own history, to come awake alongside millions of others" (Thien 2016, 52). Together with those "millions of others" Sparrow also awakes:

The previous night, while his wife and daughter slept, he'd written a wall poster to bring to the Square. [...] By the time Sparrow reached Tiananmen Square, it was twilight; thousands of others like him had come to feel the breeze of the open air. Walking across the Square's infinite greyness, he felt as if he had been exiled to some distant moon. (Thien 2016, 360)

This feeling of internal exile, which coincides with his rehabilitation as a factory worker, comes to an end; his resistance to the nullification of such a displacement combines with a rebirth of sort, a new existence consecrated by music and the acceptance of that ancient love for Kai that comes back. In his personal demand for a liveable life that is not just mere physical survival, "the Square came into Sparrow's thoughts like a continuous sound" (359), which resuscitates his initial love for music: he finally starts to compose again, and "[h]is sonata for piano and violin, the first piece of music he had written in twenty-three years" (Thien 2016, 413) sees the light with the title "*The Sun Shines on the People's Square*, a title that echoed Ding Ling's novel of revolutionary China, *The Sun Shines over Sanggam River*" (Thien 2016, 393).¹⁹ He even starts a new epistolary correspondence with Kai, dreaming of a future meeting. To him, Tiananmen becomes "a gate, the passageway to a square with no walls, no obstacles, just the wind and space to breathe, and even a call to abandon oneself" (Thien 2016, 374).

A 'percolating revolution' in Chinese people's and in Sparrow's life, the protest has a meaning well beyond the national borders. As Marie recalls, upon hearing the news of Tiananmen, Kai flies back from Canada to Hong Kong, exactly

at the same time as momentous events occurring in China, events which my mother watched obsessively on CNN. I asked who these protesters were, and she said they were students and everyday people. I asked if my father was there, and she said, "No, it's Tiananmen Square in Beijing." The demonstrations, bringing over a million Chinese citizens into the streets, had begun in April, when my father still lived with us, and continued after he disappeared to Hong Kong. Then, on June 4th, and in the days and weeks following the massacre, my mother wept. (Thien 2016, 4-5)

Tiananmen, however, proves a failure, and both Sparrow and Kai find death together with the other students and civilians protesting in the Square. Sparrow disappears in the protest; his wife and daughter are supplied with his ashes, the particulars of his death unknown. Unable to meet Sparrow in Hong Kong, as the two men had agreed, Kai commits suicide.

Despite the historical and diegetic failure of the protest, forms of survival – and hence, of success – do appear in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* thanks to the arts. This is the case of the Book of Records and *The Sun Shines on the People's Square*, the literary and musical relics that survive the abrogative violence of the Chinese regime and arrive in Marie's hands to testify the struggle to remain human of her elective family. With a name that recalls the *Book of Songs*, one of the most ancient poetical Chinese texts, in Thien's own words the Book of Records is "a book with no beginning, no middle and no end, in which the characters are seeing an alternative China where they recognise mirrors of themselves and which they write themselves into" (Armitstead 2016, n.p.). As a matter of fact, the Book of Records is a novel

that circulates among people in handwritten form and in separate chapters; the book admits openness (there is no fixed and definite plot) and space for private lives. Although relating the love between May Fourth and Da-wei, it also functions as an alternative virtual site to record the crimes of the regime and remember the lost ones. Wen the Dreamer, Sparrow's uncle and a victim of the repression of the Cultural Revolution, is symbolically one of the guardians and co-authors of the book, able to dream beyond the restrictions of the regime but also denouncing its deeds:

He [Wen the Dreamer] showed me his suitcase. Written on the inside of the lining were the names of the men who had died, and the dates of their falling. It is, I believe, the only accurate record that exists. He told me that he had a plan to do something more. He would take the names of the dead and hide them, one by one, in the Book of Records, alongside May Fourth and Da-wei. He would populate this fictional world with true names and true deeds. They would live on, as dangerous as revolutionaries but as intangible as ghosts. (Thien 2016, 180)

Using Butler's reasoning in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, telling and listening to/reading a story is a way to take possession of one's life. Being able to pronounce and record a name may be an acknowledgment, especially for those victims of reeducation and camp labor whose life has been deprived of the relational network sustaining their humanity (2017, 320). How the Book of Records circulates and the open and welcoming story it tells display that human dignity is a relational responsibility; more than being simply linked to questions of rights, it persists in the relationship and mutual recognition of human beings.²⁰ Its words try to tell a different history, filtered through the power of the imagination, as opposed to the communist ideology's materialism and pragmatism. As the musical composition Sparrow creates during the protests of Tiananmen, the Book of Records is what survives the repression and is smuggled to Canada. Together, these two unique memories of an alternative history and of the will to create artistically as a way to remain a full human being constitutes a third space of negotiation and reconstruction, where one may start again.

Differently from Jin's novel, in Guo's and Thien's texts, art, be it literature or music, proves to have a discursive power that is both political and personal at the same time; it is an anchor to a dream of humanness fulfilled, a way to contravene the dumbness of a life that is not quite liveable, and a manner to claim certain rights. It has a role in the definition of the memory of the nation, as is the case for the Book of Records, but also its future, if we enlarge the perspective and consider these novels as part of a dialogue on what China is today.

As with other examples of recent literature of protest and, particularly, forms of writing connected to the Arab spring (see Cariello, and Covi & Marchi, in the present issue), "these narratives begin to form official and unofficial forms of history" (Colla 2013), challenging in their specific ways "authoritarianism and the communist regime's discursive monopoly on Chinese-ness" (Kong 2012, 6). As such, Tiananmen fiction plays an enthralling role in the diasporic Chinese republic of letters, because of its "capacity [...] to serve as a third, transformative

space” (Kong 2012, 6) in the production of the historical record of the Chinese collective memory, which is now much more fluid than in the past. In this attempt at calling into question a monolithic discourse on Chineseness, the memory of Tiananmen emerges as a symbolic civil space, which mingles history and imagination for the transformation of the memorial horizon and to discuss issues of the globalized present. Kong cogently asserts that “[d]iaspora literature on Tiananmen hence performs a double function: on the one hand, it reinforces global perceptions of the PRC as a totalitarian regime by focusing on one of the most violently repressive acts in twentieth-century history” (2010, 146). It carries out, in other words, a denouncing role with respect to giving voice to the question of abused human rights in China. On the other hand, “it compels an alternative perception of China as a diverse and contested space by focusing on Tiananmen as an episode of mass protest and competing political discourses within the PRC itself” (Kong 2010, 146). Above all, in this essay’s reading, these narratives achieve the always crucial role of making history and its violence known, offering an unofficial locale to discuss the importance of and the controversy about popular uprisings and to remember that a liveable life was, but still is, an emergency spontaneously understood despite the vulnerability of its subjects and although politics tries to suppress such an instinct.

Notes

¹ See <http://aaww.org/poems-liu-xia-liao-yiwu/>. All websites were accessed on June 6, 2017.

² On the very complex cultural dynamics of the Chinese diaspora and the contested boundaries of terms such as Asian American literature, Asian global literature, Chinese diasporic literature, transnational Chinese literature, etc., see Sau-ling 1995; Lim 1997; Lim et al. 2006; Ty 2002; Ong and Nonini 1996; Chuh and Shimakawa 2001; Goh and Wong 2004; Kong 2010; Teng 2005; Okamura 2003; Tu 1994.

³ The government has always downplayed the importance of Tiananmen calling the event “turmoil,” “riot” and an example of “counter-revolution” (Kong 2010, 145), using the same words employed during the Cultural Revolution to address the enemies of the regime accused of introducing western and capitalist thoughts in China. However, the fact that June 4 is a patrolled date in Chinese cities provides evidence of the significance of the memory of Tiananmen even in China and despite the state’s effort at belittling the movement.

⁴ This is even true for first-hand accounts of the event, as in the case of Wei Jingsheng’s letters from prison. As Schaffer and Smith write, these kinds of literary documents are often banned in China and find publishers in other countries (2004, 1), especially in English-speaking countries such as the US or the UK, because of a richer publishing market, a readership interested in questions of human rights, and the obvious predominance of English in the marketplace.

⁵ Such texts, therefore, provide an interesting case of the intermingling of literature and human rights from a double perspective: one diegetic, as they narrate the sad episodes of a human tragedy, and one extra-diegetic, because of their production mechanism that compels them to be produced only abroad, outside China. In fact, the publication of these novels in Western countries talks of the absence of freedom of speech and writing in China, which has compelled its diasporic community to take on the responsibility of an otherwise silenced memory of the nation.

⁶ Occasionally it also travels back to China, as in the case of Chinese Ma Jian’s *Beijing Coma* (2008): written in Chinese but published first in its English translation, the book is currently banned in China, where it has been smuggled via Hong Kong in the form of a Chinese translation of the English translation.

⁷ Personal stories and memoirs, written by leaders of the students’ demonstration, started to circulate immediately after the events (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 192). Among these early examples, I would like to mention the anthologies *Children of the Dragon: The Story of Tiananmen Square* (1990) and *New Ghosts, Old Dreams* (1992), with an explicit human rights focus, Li Lu’s *Moving the Mountain* (1990), Liu Binyan and Ming Ruan’s *Tell the World: What Happened in China and Why* (1989), Shen Tong’s *Almost a Revolution* (1990), written with Marianne Yen, Zhang Boli’s *Escape from China: The Long*

Journey from Tiananmen to Freedom (1998), Xiaokang Su's *A Memoir of Misfortune* (2001), and Ian Buruma's *Bad Elements* (2001).

⁸ Tiananmen fiction includes texts such as Hong Ying's autobiographical novel *Summer of Betrayal* (1997), Annie Wang's *Lili* (2002), Diane Wei Liang's *Lake with No Name: A True Story of Love and Conflict in Modern China* (2004), and Terrence Cheng's *Sons of Heaven: A Novel* (2007).

⁹ This is true of literature produced in the US, as the work of Ha Jin demonstrates, but also in Canada (see the global perspective of Thien), and in the UK (Kong 2010, 145-147). This trend can be traced also in other examples of Chinese literature produced in western languages, as Kong briefly traces for the francophone and Dutch world (2012, 7).

¹⁰ Jin's decision to stay abroad is similar to the choice of voluntary exile of other Chinese intellectuals, such as Gao Xingjian, Hong Ying, Yang Lian, Bei Dao, Duo Duo, and Liu Binyan (Kong 2010, 145).

¹¹ The Tunisian Revolution of 2010-2011, improperly known as the 'Jasmine Revolution', is one of the best known insurgencies of the so-called Arab Spring. The protests took place in Tunis and other Tunisian cities and were caused by a diffused popular dissatisfaction with the growth of prices, the extensive unemployment, and ubiquitous corruption.

¹² As Mu explains, "[y]esterday I saw the police begin to arrest the strollers – but they could not tell who were the protesters and who were normal people out walking, since the secret protesters have conducted their 'strolling' in the park and on local streets" (Guo 2014, 183).

¹³ Thien does not consider the Strolling Revolution of 2011, whose global and national impact is however much inferior to the role Tiananmen has had in Chinese and worldwide history.

¹⁴ While in the rehabilitation camp, Sparrow's aunt Swirl meets Lady Dostoyevsky, a victim of the Hundred Flowers Campaign: "It was during the Hundred Flowers Campaign. They told us to criticize the Party, the university, each other, even the quality of our lunches and the functioning of the toilets. [...] So I, the idiot, stepped forward and said that my request for permission to travel to Leningrad had been denied fourteen times, and that a scholar of my standing must engage with her contemporaries" (Thien 2016, 104).

¹⁵ As Sparrow's aunt Swirl recalls, the year she met her future husband Wen the Dreamer "there was famine everywhere. In 1958, during the Great Leap Forward, the true face of our Revolution was revealed. [...] We had to become only what they proclaimed us to be, we existed to be forged and re-forged by the Party. [...] In six months, half the people starved, first the children and the old, and then the rest" (Thien 2016, 173).

¹⁶ On the historical evolution of the idea of revolution, see Hannah Arendt's study *On Revolution* (1963). Despite the differences of each moment, the invocation of a 'revolution' has always been sustained, as Elliott Colla maintains, "by people insisting on living lives of dignity" (2013, n.p.).

¹⁷ I use the concept of human precariousness/precarity and vulnerability as employed by Judith Butler (see *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* for a definition and analysis).

¹⁸ The centrality of Tiananmen Square in Chinese insurgencies is cyclical: besides 1989 and 1976, the Square was also the stage of the 1919 May Fourth student movement, a telling precedent to the students' democratic demonstrations of 1989, and of the antigovernment protests of 1925 and 1926.

¹⁹ The use of music during protests is a documented fact. In Tiananmen, for example, Bob Dylan's ballads and Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* were played to rally the students (Mitchell 2013; Jian 2014).

²⁰ In line with Emmanuel Levinas, Butler affirms that freedom is not a personal attribute (I am free), but can exist only in the relation between human beings. When talking about a liveable life, therefore, we are not simply addressing issues of personal human dignity, but we should consider the human as foremost a relational being whose action and dignity depend on the principle of equality (2017, 142-143).

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