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A Free Life Is Made with Words

In early July, Evan Osnos, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, wrote a final entry in his “Letter from China” blog, capping off his time as the magazine’s correspondent in Beijing. Widely respected as a fair observer of China’s breathless transformation, Osnos provided the voice-over to that long delirious moment between the 2008 Olympics and the Edward Snowden affair. The final post, “A Billion Stories,” is a deft and affectionate profile of a street sweeper who moonlights as a poet. The sweeper, whose name is Qi Xiangfu, is not originally from Beijing; he came to the capital from Jiangsu Province “to explore the realm of culture.” He also developed a self-aggrandizing online literary persona, referring to himself in cyberspace as the “Super King of Chinese Couplets.” “In life,” he says, “I must be practical, but when I write, it’s up to me.”

For Osnos, the life of Qi Xiangfu is symbolic of macro-level trends: online identity, urbanization, and the paradoxes of a hugely ambitious society. But the post also works as a neat parable of twenty-first century literary culture: the celebrated journalist and the street-sweeping poet, hawking their respective wares online. After all, nothing in the last decade has had a greater impact on the global literary marketplace than the simultaneous rise of China and the Internet. Entirely new genres have emerged as a result (dissident-blogger reportage, satirical bureaucratise, young adult novels about high school exams, oddball spiritual conversion memoirs). Meanwhile, American letters entered a phase of quiet upheaval. Writers worried publicly about the proliferation of writing programs. Fiction, in its obscurity, was dubbed “the new poetry.” Three beloved prose writers—John Updike, J.D. Salinger, and David Foster Wallace—died within a year of each other.

Above all, the relationship between the public and private seemed more uncertain than ever. In China, some of the most daring new literature was being written online, and authors were at pains to strike a balance between self-expression and self-protection. It

was difficult to imagine Updike, Salinger, or Wallace in this context. None of them had an online presence, but each represented a distinct approach to the perils of the writing life. Put simply, Updike was public, Salinger was private, and Wallace was conflicted. When I brought this up to a Chinese friend, she joked that Americans are spoiled for choice.

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In June, I was in Hong Kong doing research for an essay on Taoism. Each day I walked from a borrowed studio apartment to the Hong Kong Central Library, and on the way I passed through Victoria Park. It happened to be a busy month. On June 4, thousands of people gathered to mark the twenty-fourth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Not long after, students and free speech activists protested the hunt for Edward Snowden. Sometime in mid-June, the Falun Gong, a spiritual group deemed illegal on the mainland, held a silent vigil of sorts near the entrance to the park. And then there was the July 1 march, an annual demonstration organized by pro-democracy activists. Held on the anniversary of the British handover, the march regularly attracts hundreds of thousands of people.

Distracted by these events, I made little progress on my essay. Instead I found myself wondering about the meaning of these protests. In one way or another, each protestor was calling for freedom: the freedom to demonstrate against government atrocities, the freedom to live in an open society, and the freedom to vote for a representative government that was not a proxy for Beijing. The freedom I was seeking through intellectual inquiry seemed tawdry by comparison. What did I want? Well, I wanted to preserve my neurons from an onslaught of information. I wanted to avoid the centripetal force of the twenty-four hour news cycle. I wanted a break from the online world of opinions and exhortations. Desperately, absurdly, I took refuge in the *Zhuangzi*, a book with enough obscure aphorisms to give the illusion of a cure.

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The *Zhuangzi* is the name of the second canonical text of the Taoism, named after its alleged author, who is said to have lived between 350 and 300 B.C.E. One of the most beloved texts of Chinese philosophy, the *Zhuangzi* was also a favorite of many Western writers, from Aldous Huxley to Thomas Merton to Henry David Thoreau. There is something universally appealing about its various cunning modes of resistance. Against Confucian standards of virtue and responsibility, the *Zhuangzi* advises just the opposite: escape from society's relentless pressures and adherence to one's individual path. Both traditions preach self-cultivation, but in the Confucian tradition, the purpose of self-cultivation is to nurture one's spontaneous instincts until they blossom into ethical virtues; the *Zhuangzi* promotes self-cultivation for its own sake. Or at least that's what it seems to promote—the text's coherence and authorship are a matter of scholarly debate.

Having abjured all scholarly commitments myself, I chose to read the *Zhuangzi* as an eloquent, coy, and resounding defense of the life of the independent writer. According to this reading, one assumes that the term translated as “virtuosity” (a key concept throughout) refers to the artist's creative impulse—an innate power more precious than mere knowledge or expertise—and that “actionless action” (another key concept, often compared to the Kantian principle of “disinterestedness”) refers to something like the purity of the work. The role of the true writer is to remain distant and obscure: “He does not involve himself in anxious calculations when dealing with the world.” That an accomplished Taoist might have little need for “writing” has not dissuaded centuries of writers from scouring the work for *ars poetica*. One can imagine J.D. Salinger tacking this up on his wall:

to bow and crouch for Rituals and Music, and smirk and
simper over Humaneness and Rightness, in order to soothe
the hearts of the world, is to lose the constant in you.

This theme of constancy is central to another strain of the Taoist tradition: the “Primitivist” vision of an ideal society. The Primitivists harken back to an age when people lived in selfless harmony with one another and the world, a time when the “Way” and the “Inner

Power” were fully realized. The Confucian sage-rulers, who first established cultural norms and then forced people to think about how to attain them, destroyed this harmony and made it more difficult for anyone to attain a “simple and unhearn” state of mind. Against the Confucian “rectification of names,” a Primitivist might quote the *Daodejing*: “The Tao that can be talked about is not the true Tao.” According to this much-cited nugget, knowledge only serves to obscure the one true path.

In a later chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, an old fisherman tells Confucius that the art of self-cultivation lies in “guarding the genuine within you.” The perfect man has no self; the spiritual man has no merit; the holy man has no fame. This reminded me of the controversy over Mo Yan’s Nobel Prize for Literature. Is the argument against him that he was “seeking after fame,” and therefore diverged from his true self, or that he is a “genuine” writer on the wrong side of history? I don’t have the answer. But I do know that what causes people to write books is often more mysterious than our discourse is able to fathom. When another Chinese novelist, Yu Hua, was asked about the origins of his novel *To Live*, which follows the life of a rural peasant through the hardship and chaos of twentieth century China, he said he was inspired by an American folk song about an elderly slave named “Old Black Joe.”

One of the most convincing arguments put forth in the *Zhuangzi* is that each of us finds a different way to abuse our innate natures. We ignore the universe in order to “fulfill the duties of a single office,” we chase after fame, we compromise ourselves for praise. We are all like Yen Hui, a character in one section who says of his service to the Prince of Wei: “I will retain my inner integrity, but outwardly be deceptive. Bowing and scraping, paying obeisance, this is what all ministers do. As this is what everyone does, no one will hold it against me.” American Transcendentalists were keenly aware of this dilemma, especially with regard to the role of artists and intellectuals. After all, “Self Reliance” is about self-expression as much as anything else:

Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost—and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets

of the Last Judgement. . . . In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.

It is tempting to think of Zhuangzi and Emerson as near-kindred spirits: they are both enemies of bureaucrats and petty officials, and they despise anything that seeks to enslave human spontaneity. When Emerson tells us to trust ourselves, he seems to be advocating ‘the Tao’:

Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded? What is the nature and power of that science-baffling star, without parallax, without calculable elements, which shoots a ray of beauty even into trivial and impure actions, if the least mark of independence appear? The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions.

Spontaneity, Instinct, Intuition – I can remember mulling over these words the first time I read them. Which does Emerson mean? There are other curious moments. The problem with committing oneself to a cause, for Emerson, is that it’s too easy to compromise one’s sacred originality—that “unaffected, unbiased, unaffrighted innocence.” Suddenly I wasn’t sure about this. There are plenty of delusional activists out there, but wouldn’t we take an insincere Abolitionist over a straight-talking slave-owner any day? In any case, the conceit of innocence has not always served America well. Nor has the conceit of freedom, for that matter, as Jonathan Franzen tried to show with his most recent novel, in which the phrase “personal liberties” is employed with sad irony.

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In Beijing, I once met a woman who was a fan of Virginia Woolf, and we read her essays together as part of a makeshift book club. One of our favorites was “Street Haunting,” in which Woolf

narrates a walk around London that begins with the pretext of buying a pencil:

Is the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves? Circumstances compel unity; for convenience sake a man must be a whole. The good citizen when he opens his door in the evening must be a banker, golfer, husband, father; not a nomad wandering the desert, a mystic staring at the sky, a debauchee in the slums of San Francisco, a soldier heading a revolution, a pariah howling with skepticism and solitude. When he opens his door, he must run his fingers through his hair and put his umbrella in the stand like the rest.

There is something vaguely Confucian about the sentiment described here, which Woolf neither endorses nor fully undermines. “Have your flights of imagination, but don’t be late to the office” might be one way of putting it. For Confucians, the world is ineluctably social, and so to avoid politics because it annoys you is fundamentally selfish. It also assumes that one should discipline the imagination to do good in the world, not squander it by writing modernist novels. This argument is compelling if one accepts that being an independent writer means being essentially irresponsible. Still, it doesn’t account for that seed of dissatisfaction many of us feel—dissatisfaction with merciless commerce, mindless ambition, and a nagging sense of oblivion. (As Don DeLillo once said, “We’re all one beat away from being elevator music.”) The *Zhuangzi* addresses this dissatisfaction. It suggests that if we withdraw from the world we are more likely to experience life.

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When Thomas Merton’s *The Way of the Chuang Tzu* was published in March 2010, a few Chinese bloggers dismissed it as a naïve

Western fantasy of Eastern metaphysics. Merton was a Christian monk with a taste for Zen Buddhism, but I've always thought of him as a writer. In the introduction, Merton anticipates the likely suspicion of his readers: he says his book is not a work "in which Christian rabbits will suddenly appear by magic out of a Taoist hat." Then he makes the case for solidarity across the ages: "Nevertheless, there is a monastic outlook which is common to all those who have elected to question the value of a life submitted entirely to arbitrary secular presuppositions, dictated by social convention, and dedicated to the pursuit of temporal satisfactions which are perhaps only a mirage." What Merton shares with the originators of Taoism is a taste for simplicity, humility, self-effacement, silence, and "a refusal to take seriously the aggressiveness and ambition and self-importance which one must display in order to get along in society." He also shares this with countless Chinese and American students of literature—but not only students of literature. In Hong Kong, I was always surprised by how many well-dressed people there were hanging around the poetry section of the massive Taiwanese bookstore. One night, on my way home from the library, I stopped to check out the latest arrivals. I selected one by Ouyang Jianghe, a poet I'd never read before, and took my awkward seat on a stool. In a poem called "The Burning Kite," he writes: "It's true, a free life is / made with words."

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American writers have always disagreed on the nature of a "free" life. Jack Kerouac apparently thought all forms of revision were oppressive; one imagines that if he were writing today, *On the Road* would be a blog. John Updike worried about the shabbiness of memoir ("Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face.") J.D. Salinger's obsession with phoniness, Thomas Pynchon's paranoia, William Gaddis' sprawling novels about deeply fraudulent institutions—each of these authors chose self-exile in one form or another. Saul Bellow includes a revealing passage in his early novel *Dangling Man*:

The quest, I am beginning to think, whether it be for money, for notoriety, reputation, increase of pride, whether it leads us to thievery, slaughter, sacrifice, the quest is one and

the same. All the striving is for one end. I do not entirely understand this impulse. But it seems to me that its final end is the desire for pure freedom. We are all drawn toward the same craters of the spirit—to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace. And, if the quest is the same, the differences in our personal histories, which hitherto meant so much to us, become of minor importance.

Not everyone who desires freedom would agree that the point is to “know what we are.” But it’s useful to consider this impulse as a phenomenon in line with the quest for meaning. In Yu Hua’s recent book *China in Ten Words*, there is an evocative sentence in which he compares the impulse to write slogans during the Cultural Revolution to the impulse of a blogger: “in one respect the two genres are much the same: writing big-character posters during the Cultural Revolution and keeping a blog today are both designed to assert the value of one’s own existence.” Making good use of this need to express oneself is not as easy as it may seem—especially when it comes to “creative” writing. As Ben Okri puts it in *A Way of Being Free*: “Humility is the watchword at creativity’s gate.”

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Just as I was leaving Hong Kong, China’s Central Propaganda Department announced that it had assembled a list of one hundred officially approved books. The purpose of the list, it said, was

to deeply and thoroughly realize the spirit of the Party’s 18th National Congress, to strongly promote the national spirit and the spirit of the age among the youth, and to encourage all youth to fight to realize the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Messages heaping scorn on the list came streaming into my inbox. Literary bloggers relished the moment. Soon I found myself exchanging emails with old friends from Beijing. I shared my reaction to Perry Link’s book on Chinese political rhetoric (or “New

China Newspeak,” as scholars sometimes refer to it), Anna Sun’s book about Confucianism as an anomaly for religious studies, and, of course, the Snowden affair. At the Hong Kong airport, I overheard a pair of global MBA-types discuss the latest TED talk, which made me fantasize about giving my own. It occurred to me that if serious literature is no longer valued, if the new Cold War is going to be more about cybersecurity than Solzhenitsyn, then someone will have to rebrand literature as “innovative” and “sustainable.” Because otherwise we’ll just take it for granted, as Jean-Paul Sartre worried we might: “the book does not serve my freedom; it requires it.”