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MY STORY OF US

A Comparative Analysis of Alberto Prunetti and Fan Yusu's Working-Class Life Writing

Federico Picerni

On 1 September 2017, Alberto Prunetti, already an established author in Italy, wrote a programmatic article about his notion of “working-class writing.” In the piece, among the others, he cited Fan Yusu 范雨素 and her memoir, published only a few months earlier:

It is the story of a female migrant worker arrived in Beijing from the countryside, reported by (the Italian magazine) *Internazionale* on 12 May 2017. It is a short, beautiful tale, a memoir that brings together questions of class and gender[.] The prism of class juxtaposes to that of gender and ethnicity, which in turn do not erase the questions of class but rather polarise them, clarify and further delineate their contours. Fan Yusu's story is an extraordinary example of working-class writing (Prunetti 2017).¹

The memoir, “Wo shi Fan Yusu” 我是范雨素 (I Am Fan Yusu), was published online on 25 April 2017. The powerful (self-)representation of Fan's real-life story as a rural-to-urban migrant worker, particularly the oppression she suffered as a woman breaking tight gender conventions, and the vivid description of class inequalities rampant in Chinese society, rapidly intercepted a broad reading public. It went viral on the Chinese Internet and obtained considerable visibility abroad as well. It is notably the only Asian reference in Prunetti's article, otherwise replete with citations of working-class writers from Europe and the American continent. While China today presents a vast reality of literature produced by the new mobile labouring class that came into being following the economic reforms in the 1980s, only recently has it begun to transgress the boundaries of academic scholarship in the world's western hemisphere.

Fan's sudden popularity and Prunetti's remarks can be ascribed to this growing interest. Two years later, Prunetti's attention was somewhat reciprocated. On 9 November 2019, during my fieldwork in Beijing, I gave a talk on Prunetti's work at the night reading class of the Picun Literature Group, a

community of worker writers named after the Beijing peripheral neighbourhood where it is based. It was the first time that Fan, a member of the group, learned of Prunetti's interest in her. Although the two have never met, and have actually read very little of each other, they have had a sort of brief intellectual dialogue. This fact, however trivial it may appear, actually encourages to unpack the points of commonality that can be identified in their writings, and to frame this effort in the pressing questions of global working-class literature(s). More specifically, their life writing can be scrutinised in an effort to grasp the articulation of working-class identities today.

For the purposes of this study, I will refer to *working-class life writing* as a specific body of works produced by individuals who are or have been part of the working class themselves, individually or through their family background, focused on their own or their family members' life experience as part of such class. *Working class* is also a problematic term, and its usage here may arguably raise some eyebrows. In China, the tremendous social changes brought about by four decades of economic reform have significantly transformed the role and composition of the labouring population, not to mention the apparent gulf that divides the highly subjectivised proletariat of the last century and the generally depoliticised cohort of migrant workers today. However, a classic Marxian postulate may be the best way out of the quandary: being not a class-for-itself, i.e. aware of their common class-based sociopolitical interests, does not prevent individuals from being objectively parts of a class-in-itself, i.e. brought together by their relation to the means of production. Such material condition is inevitably spotted by critical analysis of workers' writings, too. Far from suggesting that anything written by marginal(ised) groups has to be mechanically allegorical, I contend that the life writings under scrutiny explicitly or objectively address broader social questions beyond their individualities, bridging their personal stories with historical conditions of existence experienced by groups of individuals according to their position in society, and they do so with a global, transnational breadth.

In fact, comparing Prunetti and Fan is also helpful to connect the discussion here with broader questions of global working-class literature(s) – and the fundamental question about what is *global* about it at all. At its most basic, working-class literature is the “representation of working-class life[,] always historically and geographically situated” (Lennon and Nilsson 2017: 40). It predates the international workers' movement as an organised force, and, in a way, survives its setbacks in the late 20th century. The absence of international affiliations like those of the early 20th century – the Comintern above all (at least before it become an instrument of Moscow's foreign policy) – does not undermine its global connections. Scholars today, whether they consider national borders overcome (Perera 2014) or stress the continued relevance of national comparisons (Lennon and Nilsson 2017), almost unanimously acknowledge the centrality of a global perspective able to capture mutually influencing factors, shared concerns of style, form and subject-matter, resonances in the representation of the reality of globalised labour, and so forth.

Life writing becomes particularly poignant here in its ability to connect the micro-stories of individuals to the grand issues – or narratives – of the working class today. Furthermore, life writing is a type of self-representation that turn authors from passive objects of inquiry or narration into actively speaking subjects.

A Story of Two Lives: Prunetti and Fan Yusu

Born in 1973 into a working-class family from a heavily industrialised area in Italy's central Tuscany region, Alberto Prunetti belongs to a generation grown up with the general abandonment of class politics on the part of traditional labour organisations and the liberalisation of employment contracts, but with great access to higher education and to jobs outside the factory, however precarious. This background is always explicit in Prunetti's "working-class trilogy." The first book, *Amianto (Asbestos)* (2014), is dedicated to his father, Renato Prunetti, who spent a lifetime as a factory worker; after retirement, he got lung cancer for his continued exposure to asbestos, eventually dying of it. The book alternates episodes from Renato's life as a worker, Alberto's memories of his childhood and his ailing father, and their family's struggle for justice. The generational shift already palpable in *Asbestos* becomes central in *108 metri (108 Meters)* (2018), which narrows down on Alberto's own life. Contrary to his father's industrial story, Alberto was part of the transnational precariat, migrated to Britain to pick up several menial jobs as a kitchen assistant, toilet-cleaner and handy-boy, and finally returned home to work as a translator. This second book is replete with conscious reflections on the changing and transnational composition of labour, intergenerational dynamics in working-class families, deindustrialisation and precarity. While these two books are dominated by Prunetti's relation with his father, the last novel, *Nel girone dei bestemmiatori (In the Circle of Blasphemers)* (2020), is addressed to his daughter, Elettra. A skilful parody of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, the pre-eminent classic of Italian literature, the story playfully summons episodes from Dante's *Inferno*, ancient mythology and pop references to represent the hidden class struggle that goes on in Hell mirroring that in the real world, supplemented by real-life anecdotes from Prunetti's family.

As observed by Baghetti, Prunetti's working-class trilogy successfully elaborates a counternarrative that reaffirms the social divide between exploiters and exploited, and proclaims the pride of belonging to the latter (Baghetti 2020: 99). The trilogy combines several genres, from (auto)biography to social inquiry, from archival reportage to fiction, moving more and more from the nonfictive of *Asbestos* to the increasingly imaginative, experimental and polyphonic of *108 Meters* and *In the Circle of Blasphemers*. In this combination of divergent forms, narration invariably maintains a direct relation with the author's lived experience, in a constant but productive tension between his life as an individual (and his working-class family), and the intention to thematise elements that make it part of the larger (hi)story of the working class.

Fan Yusu was also born in 1973, the same year as Prunetti. She comes from a poor rural area in China's central Hubei province, born into a peasant family. Although she could not complete formal education, she developed an ardent love for reading and writing since childhood, avidly going through literary magazines and masterpieces of Chinese as well as foreign literature. She moved to Beijing in the early nineties, joining the 90 million (today the number has risen to 290 million) migrant workers who left the countryside to look for work in the cities. She carried her two daughters along, and soon afterwards she left her abusive and alcoholic husband, becoming a single mother. She did several self-employed, low-income and precarious jobs, finally becoming a nanny for upper-class families. She resumed her writing passion as she got in touch with a mutual assistance group run by migrant workers in the neighbourhood of Picun, called Migrant Workers Home, and she was among the starters of the aforementioned Picun Literature Group in 2014. Since then, she has published some short works of prose and poetry in the group's self-run outlets. She has mostly written nonfiction, documenting the lives of other precarious laborers she crossed after moving to Beijing in "Beipiao'men de rizi" 北漂们的日子 (Days of "Northern Floaters"), or concentrating on the ordeals of children who either follow their migrating parents or are left behind without proper care in poems such as "Yi ge nongmingong muqin de zibai" 一个农民工母亲的自白 (Confessions of a Migrant Mother), with a strong sensitivity towards gender imbalance and the weight of tradition, particularly elaborated in her short essay "Mingzi" 名字 (Names).

"I Am Fan Yusu," her famous memoir, retraces Fan's life from early childhood to the present. A considerable part is devoted to her family, her upbringing in the dire conditions of the countryside, and her mother's centrality in the family's life. In sections following Fan's transfer to Beijing, the story dwells on the conditions of the peripheric neighbourhoods where migrants tend to concentrate, with a focus on migrant children, often left alone by their working parents and without proper education, since they cannot access official public schools due to the lack of an urban household registration. Fan worries that they will be denied emancipation from a destiny that apparently dooms them to the assembly line. By contrast, she exposes the inequality of the city's social world by describing what she sees on her job at the house of a tycoon's "concubine." The story is pervaded by a lingering sense of fatalism, although Fan finds some hope in new affective networks of solidarity forged in the city among the downtrodden.

Both lives share a context characterised by the extreme fragmentation of labour and individualisation of laborers. The generational change from a "traditional" organisation of factory labour coupled with an awareness of class belonging to migrant, deregulated jobs is lucidly depicted in Prunetti's trilogy. Strikingly mirroring this situation, Fan embodies the post-1970s reality of rural-to-urban migrant workers in China – or "new workers," as activists call themselves (Lü 2013). They are generally found doing menial, low-regulated or even

informal jobs in key sectors of China's labour-intensive industrial and service sectors. What makes Chinese "new workers" different from the "old" is the lack of a strong political subjectivity on the one hand and the absence of state welfare provisions on the other. Incidentally, Prunetti also prefers using the English word for *working class*, instead of the Italian equivalent, *classe operaia*, to acknowledge that the mass of exploited laborers has become immensely diversified also beyond the typical industrial assembly line.²

Inserted in this context, Fan and Prunetti both appear committed to finding adequate forms of representation for telling their own life story, and its link to their larger social groups. Such a common effort forms the ground for comparative considerations. The point here is not to compare elements of their lives as they emerge from the narratives; rather, a global approach is fruitful and thought-provoking when applied to the modes of representation, to the way they connect (or disconnect) individual lives and social collectives, and the aesthetic challenges that emerge in so doing, capturing both local specificities and global articulations.

The Fictionality of Nonfiction

Real-life experience is central in life stories in general, but it acquires particular discursive relevance in working-class life writing. It is a common assumption that stories written directly by members of the working class tend to reflect reality and convey the genuine voices of individuals whose social existence would otherwise remain invisible. Such authenticity is often understood as coming at the expense of fictionality. While writers from other social backgrounds can easily write about working-class themes, that remains *fiction*, or investigative reportage at most. Stories written by workers themselves are supposed to be mimetic, reflecting reality as it is, and nonfictional as a consequence. However, nonfictional rigidity does not necessarily have to be the price for a life narrative's authenticity. On the contrary, life writing can be supplemented by elements of non-referential fiction for several reasons, be them stressing certain points that need the fictional creation of situations, characters and events, evading pure mimesis, acquiring more literary legitimacy, and so on. Prunetti is straightforward about his use of fiction since the very first lines of *Asbestos*:

I would have wished this story had never happened for real. How do they say? A product of the author's fantasy. Instead, it was reality that came knocking at the door of these pages. Imagination filled the holes [of memory] like low-quality plaster and redrew some episodes to reproduce in a better way the story of a life and a death. Of a worker's biography.

(Prunetti 2018: 15)

Although he makes an explicit mention of biography, assumed to be based on pure facts, the author also claims to have made fair use of fictional elements. With technical vocabulary that comes directly from the world of factory (we

find low-quality plaster there, but similar metaphors are used frequently throughout the text), fiction is presented as a viable solution to memory holes, but also a valuable tool to re-elaborate some parts of the real story and make them more meaningful or more coherent with the economy of narration. Other techniques include mixing up several real-life characters into one composite character by fusing their personal traits and stories. For these reasons, biography, although openly evoked, is not the most rigorous definition here. Prunetti considers the traditional novel form outdated and bourgeois, and concentrates his aesthetic effort in producing a “hybrid writing” between fiction and nonfiction, able to bridge real-life experience, sociological inquiry and political utterance. In a 2019 interview, Prunetti acknowledged an interest in biofiction. Riccardo Castellana, refuting to subdue the genre under the postmodernist postulate that fact is fiction (Lackey 2014: 2), uses it to describe works that deal with a real person distinct from the author, where the fictional element is both thematic (the author does not have to observe full documentary fidelity) and formal (by adopting resources that are typical of fiction). In fact, Prunetti’s later works tend to adapt more to the modes of autofiction, where the productive mixture of factuality and invention is maintained, but with the merging of author, narrator and protagonist. In contrast with the truthfulness guaranteed by the autobiographical pact, but in line with the biofictional approach, the reading of autofiction is also governed “not [by] the frame of actuality, but [by] that of relevance” (Srikanth 2019: 347). In short, Prunetti makes creative use of the possibilities offered by fiction to supplement an otherwise nonfictional account. His participatory and often intradiegetic narration aims at maintaining the factual accuracy of real-life experience, but refuses to be handtied by absolute fidelity to it when needed to further increase the politicisation of his writing.

Fan, on her part, has never produced such an extensive metadiscourse. Her memoir, however, must be placed in the discursive context of the “golden age” of China’s nonfiction (*feixugou*). As a genre, nonfiction has become highly fashionable in China since the early 2000s, in part as an offspring of the previous tradition of reportage literature, expurgated of its political sensitivity to leave only social inquiry (Laughlin 2002). According to Li Yunlei, contemporary nonfiction heals the rift between literature and society created in the 1980s and 1990s, and relies on the author’s private experience and personal investment (Li 2014: 208), organised as an “active effort to enter [and] to understand” the social world (2014: 204). As a result, “I Am Fan Yusu” concentrates exclusively on factual events and individuals, showing no interest in fictional integrations to the narration of real life. And yet, Fan, too, displays an attempt to evade the dullness of a plain recollection of facts:

My life is a book too hard to read, so clumsily has fate bound me.

I come from Xiangyang, Hubei province. At 12, I started doing private teaching at the village school. Had I not left my hometown and continued teaching, I would have become a proper teacher.

But I could not stand those dry days spent like the frog looking at the sky from the bottom of the well. So I came to Beijing. I wanted to see the world. I was 20 back then.

The lines above form the memoir's incipit. The retrospective gaze and the biographical information invite the reader to expect a piece of nonfiction, and do not contain any metatextual musing on the story's genre. Likewise lacking is any programmatic proclamation of the author's social identity as a migrant-/new worker (as opposed to Prunetti's subtle generalisation of his father's story through the line "Of a worker's biography"). Instead, it conveys a strong sense of unique individuality, stemming from the claim of agency that underpins Fan's motivation to leave the countryside "to see the world." At the same time, the images of the book and fate are summoned. The choice of "a book too hard to read" as a depiction of her life not only anticipates the manifold hardships that Fan has had to go through, but does so by announcing her passion for literature. References to her fondness for reading recur throughout the memoir. Later on, she uses the same image again: "A book never read by anyone is sad to see, like a person who has never lived decently." Implicitly, this statement also becomes an invitation to read her story, the "book too hard to read," highlighting the power of life narrative to bring out the existence of social realities otherwise marginalised or silenced. Fate, the mysterious force that has "so clumsily [...] bound" the book of Fan's life, appears then as the (de)materialisation of structural features (inequality, exploitation, bureaucratic exclusion) at the root of her ordeals.

As opposed to other nonfictional accounts by the Picun Literature Group, Fan's elaboration of her own peculiar imagery reveals her intention to break out of frigid factography in order to be taken seriously also in strictly literary terms. Another point in this direction is her freedom from strict adherence to linear plot development, displaced by a progression based on the thematic relevance assigned to certain matters (her family of origin, Picun, her job, her daughters' lives as migrant children). This effort can be further understood by keeping into consideration the fact that a large portion of scholarship and critique in China approaches the prose and poetry written by migrant workers only as a form of social commentary, ethnographically interesting but artistically invalid (Sun 2012: 1005; van Crevel 2018: 275).

Class Memory through Parental Figures

Under such circumstances, another parallel can be drawn regarding the role played by parental figures in Prunetti and Fan's lives, and in particular the narrative functions they take up in their life stories. Approaching it as a constant narrative element in Italy's "labour literature," Baghetti points out that "the death of the father" metaphorically symbolises the crisis of the values held by the older generation of workers following the setbacks of the organised

labor movement, the erasure of many of its accomplishments, and the “crisis of ideologies” (Baghetti 2019: 20–21). This outline resonates especially with Prunetti. His father is a constant presence in his stories: in addition to *Asbestos*, focused on his life, he is a constant presence in *108 Meters*, somewhat mixing up with the author’s hometown, now a deindustrialised barren land, the man and the land both epitomes of a barely recognisable personal and collective past (*In the Circle of Blasphemers* has him performing the role of the poet Virgil, Dante’s spiritual guide through Hell and Purgatory in the *Divine Comedy*). Baghetti wonders about the legacy passed by the father onto the son, and links the objects left to Prunetti by his dying father, listed in detailed in *Asbestos*, to a faded political past (the three-volume history of the Italian Communist Party by Paolo Spriano, an Italian-Russian dictionary), a lost condition of material wellbeing (a car), and mass culture (music records and comic strips). However, Prunetti also receives the tools and utensils from his father’s jobs, as material symbols of class history and, as further elaborated in *108 Meters*, class loyalty. In fact, *108 Meters*, where the aspect of intergenerational relations is particularly stressed in all its sociopolitical implications, features a dialogue between the author and his father, with the latter saying:

Dunno. You can always leave. I stay and drink red wine to the health of those who leave, because they all leave, to go to London or Berlin or Barcelona or Paris, and I say, fine, take your trains and flee, go abroad, away from this Italy that is falling apart. But I also say: remember that as you go, tu-tum, tu-tum, tu-tum, at every 108 meters of your escape you’ll step on a rail built by workers of the Piombino steelworks, the best rail smelters in the world, and if you now can flee on these bloody super-fast trains that’s only because your dads threw minerals and coke into the blast furnace with the right dose of oxygen and technical gas and molded the steel and polished it by the book, and let’s hope that these rails that are now carrying you away will bring you back home one day, and that you’ll find us still alive to hug you back. Can you smell billets and wire rods on our skin? Can you? Iron has pierced through our pores. We’ve been the rails that let you run a lifetime, when you were kids. At least, may the fruit of our labor take you away from this dull sky.

(Prunetti 2018: 122–123)

The injunction to remain faithful to social origins and to eventually return to them is part of the legacy left by Prunetti’s father. In a way, the very practice of life writing to salvage a particular working-class story from oblivion in order to speak of the “universal” (hi)story of the working class is a way to heed the call. *In the Circle of Blasphemers* and the effort to pass the awareness of social origins and class history onto the next generation, incarnated by Prunetti’s daughter, is a prosecution of this effort in anticipation of another generational shift. In passing, the technical vocabulary and the language of iron and steel

widely employed by Prunetti in his oeuvre, which emerge clearly from the passage cited above, are similarly used by many contemporary worker authors in China.

The parental figure is a symbol of class continuity for Prunetti. The opposite is true in Fan's case. Her mother, a central figure in "I Am Fan Yusu," represents class change. Growing up and "joining society" (as the Chinese phrase goes) before the high tides of rural-urban migration of the 1980s and 1990s, Fan's mother never had any industrial or urban job, spending her whole lifetime doing farm work. Her vigorous character and strong personality and the respect she enjoys among townsfolk are frequently highlighted throughout the text, and regarded as elements that underpin her role as the family's pillar. In the substantial absence of her husband, Fan's mother is introduced as the one who always looked after her five children, unperturbably taking care of their health problems despite the financial burden, or stepping in to help their lack of social performativity, like when her oldest son is mocked by the village because of his delusion about becoming a writer and struggles to find a wife. Notably, Fan's mother is also the only family member to back her up after she is scorned by the rest of the family for venturing out to the city on her own and coming back after leaving her abusive husband. Similar to the historical significance acquired by the role of Prunetti's father, the example of Fan's mother assumes social power when the same characteristics of solidarity and mutual help, considered key aspects of the rural tradition as opposed to the anomie and atomisation experienced in urban contexts, are reemployed in the city as well. After an invective about inequality in the city, the plight of migrant workers and their children, and the narration of her own life's hardships, Fan goes back to her admiration for her mother, who, despite being in her eighties, still takes the lead in a protest to defend the village's land from being grabbed to make room for a high-speed railway. In the closing lines of "I Am Fan Yusu," the creation of interpersonal relations based on empathy and mutual help as a viable form of solidarity among the subalterns of the city is presented as the spiritual heritage passed on by Fan's mother, as well as Fan's way to reciprocate her love:

What can I do for my mother? [...] I would think: is it not that people bully those weaker than them so they can get psychological pleasure? Or does it have perhaps to do with gene reproduction? From that moment on, I have had an idea: every time I meet a person weaker than me, I will pass love and respect onto them.

One can always do a little something when living, right? I am incompetent and so terribly poor, but there's still something I can do!

On the streets of Beijing, I hug every deformed wandered, every sufferer from mental illnesses. I use my hugs to pass on motherly love, to return motherly love.

Although arguably more akin to a humanist ethos than class politics, this approach can also be interpreted as promoting practices of mutual aid to fill

severe state welfare insufficiencies and build solidarity. Such solidarity appears based on individual action, although, outside of the text, Fan's commitment to the Picun Literature Group and the group's inclusion in the activity of the Migrant Workers Home reveal the importance of collective practice. Furthermore, solidarity appears directed not only at migrant workers specifically, but to the poor in general, identified as a loose social group in which Fan frames her own life story. The difference with the exchange between the Prunetti father and son is evident. Here, the translation of an ostensibly "rural" morality, passed on by a peasant mother, into the social space of a migrant worker in the city is also motivated by the fact that migrant workers of today are generally born to peasant families, and while many of their parents may have migrated to cities themselves for work during the 1980s and 1990s, their goal was to eventually return home. Many would still consider themselves peasants, not urban workers (Huang 2015). In addition, migrant workers' rural origin still separates them from "traditional" workers of state-owned factories, and, most importantly, from the historical memory of the working class. While working in the factory sometimes brings migrant workers to identify with the history of the "older" working class, this identification is way less immediate for a domestic like Fan. Hers is also the transition from a peasant background into an urban working-class environment.

The Gains and Limits of Realism

Finally, the enormous transformations occurred in the composition and nature of the working class find a reflection in the narrative choices employed by the authors under survey here. Both, either explicitly or implicitly, are more or less outside of the conventional styles of literary representations of the working class, chiefly realism. On several occasions, Prunetti has openly lambasted plain realism, and he stated in the aforementioned interview that "Mimesis makes one blind" (Baghetti 2019: 295). As already said, he has never claimed any exclusive commitment to nonfiction. However, he also created highly unreal or even absurd situations to convey the emotions and psychology of his characters, including himself. *In the Circle of Blasphemers* is obviously built on imagination, but there are other, more ambiguous instances. *108 Meters*, a fairly realist novel, brings in supernatural elements like the ghost of Margaret Thatcher, constantly haunting the protagonist, and Lovecraftian horrors: Prunetti locates the elusive manager in a mysterious villa on top of a hill, Cthul Manor, and he makes only a brief, ghastly appearance towards the end of the novel as "the silhouette of a strange figure, perhaps with an octopus-like head" (Prunetti 2018: 101), clearly remindful of Cthulhu. The result is not a divorce from reality. Instead, it is an experiment that originates from the acknowledgement that psychology and emotions, like fear and incredulity, are also real and have material consequences. Emotional accuracy is a crucial component of Prunetti's life writing, and unreal elements appear more fitting to convey how the reality of oppression is experienced on the level of feelings, and therefore felt as absurd, nightmarish, and even hallucinatory.

"I Am Fan Yusu" does not step out of the domain of realism. While it is undeniable that realism still holds considerable symbolic authority in creative writing that purports to describe social life in China, it is also evidently considered a reasonable means to do so, possibly also as a reaction to so-called "pure literature." Despite this commitment to a faithful representation of reality, Fan comments that "art originates from life, and life today is absurd." This declaration cannot be entirely assimilable to a realist standpoint, because it naturally compels to admit that art cannot be entirely logical and rational if it wants to represent the absurdity of life. On the whole, however, Fan does not really follow up on this. She creates an "absurd" depiction of the extravagant way of life of the new urban bourgeoisie, comparing it to living in a historical drama set "in the golden age of the Tang or Qing dynasty, rather than in socialist New China," and linguistically resorting to terms and phrases from premodern China to describe episodes and individuals. While poignant in its social critique, however, it does not govern the narration overall. The style remains mainly realist, although coupled with a propensity to formal hybridisation.³

Conclusion

In conclusion, the main point emerging from the analysis above consists in the validity of an approach that considers life writing by subaltern or marginalised groups not just a body of personal memories, but also collective accounts. Life narratives reveal stories otherwise buried, invisible in the mainstream discourse, or stereotyped in other forms of storytelling done by authors with different backgrounds. Yet, life writing should not be addressed as purely ethnographic material. On the contrary, it should be taken in full literary terms, considered not just as a faithful account of reality, but above all as a discourse on that reality. Analysing the non-mimetic and non-referential in life narratives is therefore key to unpacking their potentiality in providing alternative perspectives on presents, pasts and possibly futures, rather than just "views from below." Both aspects – the referential and the non-referential – are there, and only keeping them both into account will give a complete picture of why life writing is socially and culturally meaningful. Political commitment is one of the foremost differences in Prunetti and Fan's stories: while it is unequivocal and operative in the former, guiding aesthetic choices as well as the metanarrative, it is absent or only consequential in the latter, where oppression is experienced more as personal misfortune than a system, or clouded behind an adverse fate. Having clear political purposes in mind makes Prunetti more spot-on in his critique, while Fan is more focused on factual immediacy, which does not prevent her from making important remarks about general issues. In both cases, however, life writing is counter-hegemonic, exploring the shadow cones of history and present, and advancing narratives alternative to the dominant or mainstream.

Notes

- 1 All English translations from Chinese and Italian sources have been made by the author of this chapter.
- 2 Even more than *new workers*, though, the English word *working class* to supplement the supposedly outdated meaning of the Italian term carries the risk to obscure the fact that the enormous changes in the nature and composition of the working class, also acknowledged by this chapter, have not changed its fundamental position within capitalist production relations, nor its centrality in the generation of wealth in the form of surplus value, which also unchangeably makes it the historical subject better positioned to effect societal change.
- 3 Unfortunately, it eludes the scopes of this contribution to explore not only the different degrees of symbolic authority enjoyed by realism in Chinese and Italian literatures, but also the different roles played by the avantgardes with respect to social commitment and working-class representations in both literary traditions.

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