

Ouyang Yu, *Loose: A Wild History* (Wakefield Press, 2011)

In this third of his trilogy of partly autobiographical novels, Ouyang Yu presents the reader with a ramble through ever-shifting sands between a seemingly factual representation of the author's experiences and one's understanding, based on the book's classification, that one is reading a work of fiction.

Loose is a work that defies definition. Although the first two books of the trilogy, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* and *The English Class* may resemble the author's own life, there is no doubt in the reader's mind that these are works of fiction: *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* is narrated by the 'imaginary protagonist', 'Dao Zhuang',¹ while the protagonist of *The English Class* is 'Jing'. However, it is difficult to read the first two-thirds of *Loose* as other than autobiography. The narrator is named as 'Ouyang Yu', a poet, writer, editor and translator, of the same age as the author, living in Melbourne after migrating from China in 1991. The narration alternates between numbered commentaries on Ouyang's day-to-day events in Melbourne during 2001 and dated extracts from his journal entries during a visit to China during 1999-2000. In the first chapter, the narrator introduces himself thus: 'I am Ouyang Yu. Melbourne is where I am currently based. Suffice to say that I am a poet' (4).

However, in the chapter aptly headed 'The Takeover' (273), the autobiographical narration is high-jacked by Ouyang's alter ego, also named Ouyang Yu, who assumes the role of the author's biographer; in the subsequent chapter titled 'The Third Man' (289), this narrator is in turn replaced by the protagonist of *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, 'Dao Zhuang'. So, this sudden shift to postmodern satire prompts the reader to re-examine their reading of the previous chapters as autobiography. Nevertheless, an astute reader may not have missed the many reminders of the slippery nature of attempted distinctions in literature between 'fact' and fiction: such as, 'Fiction is nothing but a realisation of the imagined reality. It is truer than or as true as the reality' (2) and 'At the moment, this book of nonfiction or fictional nonfiction or nonfictional fiction is a bit of a worry to me as I conjure up the idea' (21).

Throughout *Loose*, Ouyang plumbs his own experience, often in a self-deprecating voice. He cites his and others' fictional and non-fictional work, including many poems, to compare many aspects of Chinese and Western culture and language, and the experience of writing and translating. For example, the narrator records that during an interview Ouyang 'wanted to point out the similarities between Australia and China in that they were not hugely different in cultural and literary matters as people in China would believe. In a curious sort of way, Australia was as conservative as China and even more so than China' (362).

In *Loose* Ouyang shines a spotlight on the literary aspirations and frustrations of the would-be author, posing the question 'Is that what literature is all about, interviewing the dead and gone, holding dialogues with the never present, visiting only what is available in memories, talking about things that you can never find

¹ Ouyang Yu, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* (Blackheath, NSW: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2002) 2.

evidence for, or simply having this ongoing soliloquy until you are bored with yourself' (143).

Loose also opens a window on the literary world, providing commentary on the difficulties of becoming published and being read, while simultaneously critiquing the commodification of art and writing. Bemoaning the difficulty in becoming recognised as an author with cachet in the publishing world, Ouyang comments on the irony that 'When you see an author turn into a bestselling millionaire, you realise that writing is no longer sacred but just another way of making a livelihood, no more or less decent than, say, a cook or a prostitute' (68).

As with *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* and *The English Class*, in *Loose* Ouyang explores the dilemma of the expatriate, the Chinese-Australian, with a particular focus on the transformation required of the migrant, whether actual or merely aspirational, to 'migrate into English ... turn yourself upside down.'² The strategy of locating the narrator in Australia, while remembering, via the journal construct, his time in China, reinforces the tensions and frustrations of life lived in-between, of constantly being required to explain one's identity: 'What is all this shit about identities? ... I am neither Chinese nor Australian' (150).

Ouyang is a master at skilfully weaving commentary on recent Chinese and Australian literary, cultural and political realities into his works of fiction. He employs wry humour to great effect to parody the foibles of language, the writer and the art of writing, especially those involved in cross-cultural translations and interpretations. *Loose* is a slice of one man's imagined history quite unlike any other. In the words of the narrator, the author Ouyang Yu 'decides to follow no one's path but his own, not writing the kind of fiction that has been written for centuries ... but writing his own that refuses to be categorised and liked by the general readership' (365). Whether the novel is considered as fact or fiction will depend on the interpretation of each reader: ultimately such distinction is of no consequence.

It would be remiss not to mention that Ouyang also relates interactions with real identities, many of whom are well known, or whose actual existence can be verified via Google. One of these is his brother, Ouyang Ming, who was imprisoned by Chinese authorities for his persistence in practicing Falun Gong. The inclusion of Ming and book's postscript, which reproduces an extract of an internet account of his death in 2003 from the effects of torture, is a sobering reminder that while China has become more westernised and accessible since Mao's death, life for many in China remains precarious and, ultimately, at the whim of the State.

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² ABC *LinguaFranca*, 'Radio National Summer 2: The English Class', presenter Maria Zijlstra, 1 January 2011 <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/linguafranca/stories/2011/3102145.htm>>