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The Global Vision and Chinese Position in Cultural Studies: A Review of Tao Dongfeng's *Traumatic Memories and Literature as Testimony*

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Abstract: Professor Tao Dongfeng has recently released a new work entitled *Traumatic Memory and Literature as Testimony*, which compiles several papers he published after 2010. Centering around the core themes of memory and testimony, these papers closely examine the intricate relationships that emerge between them and literature. They further give rise to several intertwined academic inquiries. On this basis, make innovative interpretations and extensions. Among these, the academic dialogues in the book, where Tao Dongfeng engages with Western theories from a Chinese standpoint, merit particular attention. This approach not only broadens the academic perspective, making the analysis of issues more multi-perspective and self-subjective, but also, the questions raised based on the scholar's own existential circumstances can better highlight their critical spirit and the power of thought. Characterized by its extensive theoretical scope and imbued with a spirit of criticism and introspection, this book not only deepens the academic community's comprehension of memory and testimony issues but also furnishes cultural studies with a research methodology that integrates a global vision and a Chinese position.

Keywords: Cultural Studies; Traumatic memories; Theory of memory; Literature as testimony

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题目：文化研究的世界视野和中国立场——评陶东风《创伤记忆与见证文学》

摘要：陶东风教授的新著《创伤记忆与见证文学》收入了陶东风教授 2010 年后发表的若干论文。这些论文以记忆与见证为核心主题，聚焦了它们与文艺之间所产生的复杂关系，并向外衍生出数个相互交织的学术问题，在此基础上再加以创新性解读与延伸。其中，陶东风在著作中基于中国立场与西方理论发生的学术对话尤其值得关注，这不仅拓宽了学术视野，使对问题的分析变得更加具有多元视角和自我的主体性，而且，以学者自身生存境遇为基本立场所产生的发问，也更加能突显其批判的精神与思想的力量。该书的理论视野广阔，不仅深化了学界对记忆与见证问题的理解，还为文化研究提供了一种兼具世界视野与中国立场的研究方法。

关键词：文化研究；创伤记忆；记忆理论；见证文学

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Introduction

The twentieth century was a period marked by frequent humanitarian disasters. The peculiarity of these disasters did not merely lie in the severity, but more so in the fact that such a rational Western European world had developed such an inhumane tragedy of The Times. Therefore, in the aftermath of this disaster, how should humanities researchers engage with the memories left behind by this tragic event of the era? How should they reflect upon it? How should they bear witness to its occurrence and consequences? These questions have become focal issues that have drawn sustained attention from the Western academic community since the second half of the twentieth century. Since the late twentieth century, the domestic academic community has increasingly introduced and engaged with the theory of memory, gradually producing a series of research outcomes of significant scholarly value.

Professor Tao Dongfeng of Guangzhou University's *Traumatic Memories and Literature as Testimony* (published by Peking University Press in 2025) is a highly distinctive work among these achievements. This book includes several papers published by Professor Tao Dongfeng after 2010, which can be roughly divided into two themes. The first is western memory theory. Tao Dongfeng not only conducts in-depth analyses of the traumatic memories of scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assmann, and Jeffrey Alexander, but also engages in in-depth dialogues with these scholars. From a rich variety of perspectives, he comprehensively sorts out and critically reflects on the problems faced by western memory theory. The second area pertains to research on the literature as testimony in the western context during the 20th century, encompassing both theoretical examinations of issues related to the literature as testimony and critical analyses of the testimonial dimensions and significance of specific literary works. These two thematic dimensions are closely interwoven. The literature as testimony seeks precisely to bear witness to the collective memories of 20th-century and the

profound trauma that these events have inflicted upon individuals. Many of the issues confronting western memory theory are thus subject to deeper reflection within the literature as testimony. This book represents the culmination of Tao Dongfeng's fifteen years of sustained and in-depth reflection on the themes of memory and testimony. It presents a range of perspectives, offers detailed and rigorous analysis, and engages in critical dialogues with various scholars to articulate distinctive insights grounded in Chinese literary experiences—thereby endowing the work with significant theoretical depth and practical relevance.

1. Transcending Dualistic Thinking: A Constructivist-Based Memory Theory

In Tao Dongfeng's book *Traumatic Memories and Literature as Testimony*, Halbwachs' theory of collective memory occupies a central position. This theory marks a pivotal shift in memory studies, that is, "from an individual to a collective perspective, and from physiological and psychological approaches toward sociological and cultural perspectives." (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p.146) Tao's work offers a critical reflection on the psychological paradigm in memory research and its emphasis on an individualistic perspective. It argues that an exclusive focus on the physiological and psychological mechanisms of memory fails to account for memory's inherently social dimensions. Specifically, the activation of individual memory often presupposes the influence and stimulation of others' memories. Thus, it becomes essential to examine the intricate relationships between individuals and their social environments, as well as between individuals and cultural contexts. This relational framework is what Halbwachs conceptualizes as "collective memory" or "the social framework of memory". Tao further defined it precisely as: "The memory of each individual possesses a collective dimension—that is, a sociocultural dimension. Whether an individual can recall past experiences, and how those experiences are recalled and expressed, largely depends on this framework." (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p.150) This implies that an individual's memory is inherently shaped by social and cultural contexts, thereby establishing the foundational premise for analyzing memory through a constructivist lens. Starting from the definition of collective memory, Tao Dongfeng further addresses the relationship between collective and individual memory. Specifically, although collective memory cannot serve as the subject of remembering, the interpretation and understanding of individual memory are invariably influenced by the social frameworks of memory.

The relationship between collective and individual memory lies at the heart of academic debates surrounding Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory. Tao's work not only affirms the significance of Halbwachs' concept of "collective memory" but also critically engages with the controversies it has generated within the scholarly community. It highlights that the academic debates surrounding Halbwachs' theory of collective memory are widely regarded as a reflection of the persistent dualistic framework that opposes the individual to the collective. Tao Dongfeng argues that memory studies must move beyond this binary logic and avoid treating individual memory as isolated from collective memory. While traditional psychological and physiological approaches to memory have indeed neglected its social and cultural dimensions, it would be equally problematic to overemphasize the dominance of social or cultural forces at the expense of individual initiative. Such an approach risks overlooking the heterogeneity and resistance

inherent in individual memory. Instead, individual and collective memory should be understood as mutually constitutive and dynamically intertwined.

Tao Dongfeng elaborates on the transcendence of the dualism between the individual and the collective from two perspectives. First, he identifies the fundamental mechanism underlying memory actualization. By examining the relationships between memory and language, as well as memory and narrative, he highlights how social and cultural contexts shape and constrain individual memory through the representational norms inherent in collective frameworks. In other words, the self cannot be disentangled from the societal and historical context in which it is situated. “A person’s own life history is always incorporated into the history of the collective from which he obtains self-identity. He is born with the past.” (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p.184) Tao’s work offers a profound reflection on the “modern autobiographical project”, which restricts an individual’s past to the temporal span of their lived experience in the world. It situates writing and narration within broader social and cultural contexts. While recognizing the constraining influence of social and cultural history on individual agency, it also emphasizes that individuals possess the capacity to actively shape their own historical narratives. This potential for individual initiative in constructing personal history is closely tied to the second dimension of the relationship between the individual and the collective.

This second dimension requires a deeper exploration of the concept of “collective”, particularly by understanding collective memory as dynamic and pluralistic. Tao argues that Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory highlights the role of time: although the sociocultural framework of memory possesses a certain degree of stability and universality—thereby imparting these qualities to associated representations—the framework itself does not become static. On the contrary, it undergoes continuous, gradual transformation, with some elements gradually fading out while new ones are incorporated. Tao argues that this constitutes a “dialectic of stability and mobility—changing within stability while maintaining stability amidst change” (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p.188), which precisely captures the essence of collective memory. In addition, Tao’s work highlights that Halbwachs recognized the plurality of collective memory, a perspective further elaborated by Jan Assmann. Individuals simultaneously belong to multiple distinct collectives, and each individual “accommodates the collective memories from different groups” (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p.189). Consequently, “individual memory is often associated with a variety of different collective frameworks” (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p.189). Individual initiative emerges precisely within the interstices of these dynamic and pluralistic collective memories. First, the framework of collective memory is subject to gradual transformation, thereby enabling heterogeneous interpretations and alternative narratives of the same memory. A static collective memory framework would preclude the emergence of new narratives. Second, once heterogeneous narrations of the same memory arise, diverse—and even conflicting—narrative patterns can develop. Tao Dongfeng cites the memory narratives of educated youth writers about going to the mountains and the countryside as an example. In recounting this period, two opposing yet highly representative narrative modes emerge: “no regrets in youth” and “give back my youth”, each corresponding to distinct collective frameworks that shape individual memory writing. Individuals can not only choose among these diverse frameworks of collective memory, but may also transcend the two established modes of memory-writing to explore new narrative

possibilities. In doing so, they exercise individual initiative by actively constructing their own histories within the constraints of collective memory.

The constructivist analytical paradigm emphasized by Tao Dongfeng is also evident in the analysis of traumatic memory. “Trauma” constitutes a central concept in psychoanalysis, where research has traditionally focused on individual and employed predominantly psychological methodologies. Tao’s work centers on Jeffrey Alexander’s analytical framework of trauma, known as “cultural trauma”, a constructivist-based trauma theory. This perspective emphasizes that “the social process of representation plays a fundamental role in the construction of trauma”. (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p.127) In other words, the construction of meaning is a prerequisite for the emergence of trauma. If the symbolic interpretation of a catastrophic event obscures its traumatic significance to the extent that the event is entirely rationalized through symbolism, the formation of cultural trauma will fail. This demonstrates that whether examining collective memory or traumatic memory, constructivist analytical paradigms play a central role in Tao’s work. However, establishing the research paradigm of memory theory is insufficient. Against the backdrop of numerous catastrophic events in the 20th century, the study of memory theory carries profound social responsibility. While investigating the mechanisms of collective and traumatic memory is highly significant, a more pressing question arises: how can these forms of memory contribute to repairing a human world profoundly damaged by catastrophe? Research guided by this question holds substantial value. To address it, we must recognize that both collective and traumatic memory fundamentally involve the issue of “testimony”. Witnessing memories associated with catastrophic events not only preserves the historical truth and prompts reflection on humanity distorted by disasters, but more importantly, it breaks through the loneliness and isolation inherent in individual memories. Through dialogue with others, individuals can reclaim the hope and confidence needed to confront disasters collectively. In this sense, Tao Dongfeng’s organization of the book into the two themes— “Memory” and “Testimony”—effectively underscores their deeply intertwined relationship.

2.The Paradox of Testimony: On the Complex Relationship between Literature, Art, and Acts of Testimony

“The Literature as Testimony” is a crucial mode of “testimony” and constitutes a central theme in Tao’s work. It seeks to bear witness to traumatic memories that resist linguistic and symbolic representation. As a result, literature and art engage in complex, often seemingly paradoxical relationships with the act of testimony. Tao’s work offers a detailed and compelling analysis of these intricate dynamics, significantly advancing the scope and depth of scholarly inquiry into literature as testimony in the 20th century.

Firstly, the intricate relationship between art, literature, and witnessing emerges as a “paradox” rooted in the tension between the impossibility of fully testifying to catastrophic events and the moral imperative to bear witness. Tao Dongfeng categorizes witnesses into three groups: victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, emphasizing that “what distinguishes them is not primarily what they directly observed, but rather what they failed to see, and the reasons behind that failure—that is, why testimony breaks down”. (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p. 297) Consider the Holocaust as an illustrative example. Jewish victims were largely unaware of the

implications of being deported to concentration camps. The Nazi officials, who served as perpetrators, deliberately concealed and destroyed evidence of the atrocities. Even if the evidence was not destroyed, because each phase of the Holocaust was carried out by different Nazi agencies, many officers involved in its implementation were unaware of the full significance of their actions. Other non-Jewish bystanders did not dare to confront the atrocities directly; instead, they engaged in voyeuristic observation. They lack the awareness of being witnesses and remain oblivious to the fact that they have become complicit in the atrocities.

The challenges associated with testimony are even more profound than commonly perceived. Tao Dongfeng categorizes testimony into two types: “testimony from within” and “testimony from without”. “Testimony from within” refers to testimonies given by individuals who experienced the horrors of concentration camps, the Holocaust, and the mass extermination of Jews firsthand. In contrast, “testimony from without” pertains to those who did not directly endure these atrocities. Notably, “testimony from within” presents a paradox: people who are in the midst of a catastrophic event are unable to think beyond the framework of totalitarian ideology. The Jews in the concentration camps were systematically deceived by the Schutzstaffel, who instructed them that entering the gas chambers was part of a routine showering process. Even among survivors, many have remained reluctant to speak about the Nazis’ atrocities. Totalitarian ideology enabled the perpetrators’ cognitive frameworks and value systems to permeate the consciousness of the victims, thereby losing the reflexive dimension of testimony. Tao’s work highlights that the notion of “witnessing” already carries the significance of critically examining and reflecting upon totalitarian ideology from an external standpoint. Thus, merely possessing personal experiences and factual knowledge is insufficient.

More importantly, “testimony from within” entails entering the inner world of the other—specifically, the victim. Neither experiences, language, nor environment can be fully accessed or replicated by those outside the catastrophic event, who are thus unable to assume the position or role of the victims. Even among victims themselves, the overwhelming presence of suffering and death renders these experiences fundamentally incomprehensible and unimaginable. Within the Holocaust, consider the truth about the crematoria: those who were most directly affected and best positioned to testify have long since perished, leaving no possibility for their voices to reach the living world.

Therefore, it is not possible to directly testify the inside of a catastrophic event. Yet, the imperative to testify remains urgent. As Tao Dongfeng observes, “The necessity of testimony precisely arises from the crisis of testimony itself—and even from its impossibility”. (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p. 302) Taking the documentary *Shoah* as a case in point, Tao Dongfeng examines how film as a medium enables testimony and transcends the limitations inherent in written language. Film represents a journey from the external to the internal, requiring the overcoming of various ideological barriers imposed by totalitarian systems in order to reveal truths and integrate them into global understanding. Film represents a new visual possibility, one that enables witnesses to revisit the original scenes of atrocity, empowering silent survivors to speak out and bear testimony once more. It is precisely in this moment that witnesses emerge from their numbness toward the trauma. Film thus reflects the inherent impossibility of testimony; yet it does not remain passive. Instead, it persistently

endeavors to penetrate the interior of catastrophic events from an external vantage point. The film reinserts living witnesses and the key sites of atrocities into the field of vision of testimony. It does not progress by means of the “paradox” inherent in opposing testimony, but directly confronts the “paradox” of testimony itself. By persistently returning to the original scenes of violence, the film conveys the voices of survivors to the world amid ongoing conflict and tension.

Secondly, a “paradox” emerges between the ineffability of traumatic memories and the act of testimony. The trauma inflicted by catastrophic events is so overwhelming for witnesses that it strikes suddenly, exceeding their psychological capacity and expectations. Consequently, such experiences are neither clearly nor fully remembered, much less comprehended. Traumatic memory thus manifests a profound resistance to testimony. As a result, testimony initially takes the form of testimony composed of fragmented and disordered recollections, creating an insurmountable gap between the testimony and the original events themselves. Tao Dongfeng pointed out: “If trauma is something that resists or even refuses to be witnessed, it inevitably intensifies the crisis of testimony.” (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p. 249) As a Holocaust survivor, Paul Celan’s poetic practice confronted the profound challenge of bearing witness to traumatic experiences that resist articulation. This challenge ultimately reflects a fundamental crisis of language. On one hand, Celan remained committed to writing in his mother tongue—German; on the other, German was the language of the Nazis, the perpetrators of the genocide. The act of using the oppressor’s language to testify to atrocity thus becomes an agonistic engagement with language itself. Consequently, Celan’s poetry is marked by radical transformations in German’s semantics and syntax, giving rise to a uniquely personal poetic idiom. The reborn German language, shaped by Celan’s poetic testimony, seeks to purge the toxins of totalitarianism. As Tao argues, this reconstituted linguistic form “must inherently embody testimony: through its myriad wounds, fragmented syntax, grotesque imagery, and incomplete words, it mirrors the cultural fragmentation and the distortion of human nature characteristic of this era.” (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p. 252). The syntactic ruptures, fragments, inversions, and deliberate inexpressiveness in Celan’s poetry constitute a direct manifestation of trauma. Tao Dongfeng identifies in Celan’s work a resolution to the profound paradox between the unrepresentability of traumatic memory and the imperative to bear witness: namely, the presentation of language as trauma. This approach functions as a “representation of anti-representation—revealing the ineffable truth by dismantling conventional, aestheticized modes of expression.” (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p. 254). Only by dismantling the inherited structures of language can the unspeakable dimensions of traumatic experience be approached with authenticity.

Lastly, the intricate relationship between literature, art, and testimony is prominently reflected in the interplay between authenticity and fictionality within the literature as testimony. A central question that arises is whether literature can adequately represent the Holocaust? There are various opinions in the academic circle on this issue. The most iconic contribution to this discourse is Theodor Adorno’s assertion that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”, a statement that has sparked enduring controversy. On the one hand, some scholars emphasize the imperative of authenticity in the literature as testimony, advocating for the minimal use of fictional elements and literary embellishment, and insisting that authors rely exclusively on firsthand

experiences. On the other hand, some argue that all forms of writing inherently contain elements of fiction, making the existence of strictly objective non-fiction questionable. This in fact suspends the question of distinguishing between fiction and non-fiction in the literature as testimony. Tao Dongfeng argues that the latter's position does not imply an endorsement of fabricating or denying the facts of catastrophic events. Rather, what is advocated is that "the literary representation of the Holocaust must adopt a mode of expression distinct from historical documentation." (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p. 341) The distinction between the literature as testimony and historical accounts resides in the interweaving of fact and fiction, evident in two key aspects. Firstly, when witnesses recount traumatic experiences, their firsthand memories often merge with information acquired indirectly, blurring the boundary between direct and secondhand experience. Tao Dongfeng observes this phenomenon and draws on Alison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory" to elucidate it. Although such memories are not formed through personal experience but rather through engagement with images and texts associated with the event, they nonetheless feel vivid and authentic, frequently intertwining with lived memories to the extent that differentiation becomes difficult. Secondly, it is manifested in the influence of personalized subjective psychological reality on narration. When an unimaginable event occurs, the witness undergoes a profound emotional shock. The subjective truth arising from this experience outweighs objective details such as quantity, color, or even factual presence. The distortion of facts captures the atmospheric and emotional truth of an event. While such accounts may contain apparent inaccuracies in detail, they faithfully convey the intensity and immediacy of the moment as experienced by witnesses. The literature as testimony relies on the infusion of emotion and the expressive power of literary language to vividly convey historical experiences to a broader audience, enabling readers to feel as though they are present at the scene and to grasp the profound shock and horror accompanying catastrophic events.

There are indeed various "paradoxes" between literature, art, and testimony. A humanitarian catastrophe such as the Holocaust is so overwhelming and terrifying from the victims' perspective that it becomes utterly incomprehensible and impossible to fully recount. Yet, the existence of this "paradox" does not justify avoiding testimony; rather, it calls for acknowledging the fundamental gap between literature, art and direct witness, and striving to approach the catastrophic moment through the unique capacities of art itself. Provided those historical facts are neither distorted nor denied, the literature as testimony—compared to the mere presentation of historical data—possesses greater linguistic power and can more closely capture the authenticity of atmosphere and emotion. Neglecting either of the two will have a significantly adverse impact on the observation process.

3. Exploring Issues of Memory, Testimony, and Literature and Art through the Lens of Chinese Experience

Among the numerous papers included in *Traumatic Memories and Literature as Testimony*, rigorous analyses of memory, Testimony, and literary-artistic issues are presented from diverse perspectives and grounded in a broad range of scholarly knowledge. Two particularly prominent features emerge: one is sustained theoretical dialogue; the other is the academic practice of mutual learning between China and the West.

Firstly, Tao's theoretical framework organizes dialogues along two axes: a vertical axis across time and a horizontal axis across thematic concerns. The essays compiled in this volume span a considerable period, enabling a discernible dialogue between earlier and later works. For instance, the 2011 introduction proposes constructing a research paradigm centered on "literature, art, and memory", which is interpreted "not as a mere aggregation of these elements, but as an integrative framework that fosters mutual understanding and interpretive reciprocity." (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p.3). This conceptualization is subsequently developed in later essays through analyses of Holocaust narrative structures, the psychological and ethical demands of trauma testimony, and critical reflections on the notion of "collective memory". The central thread of Tao's work is rooted in literary and artistic works, through which a constructivist research paradigm on memory is established. When the discussion extends from memory to testimony, Tao's focus remains firmly situated within the domain of literature and art, which are positioned as the vanguard for overcoming the "paradox" of testimony. In this way, Tao's scholarship achieves a diachronic dialogue between earlier and later writings. By interweaving literature and art, memory, and testimony through reciprocal interpretation, the framework connects dispersed issues akin to a "constellation", enabling both comprehensive analysis and coherent theoretical development.

Moreover, the horizontal axis dialogue within the problem dimension of Tao's work is particularly distinctive. First, it establishes an interactive dialogue among theories of trauma, memory, and testimony. For instance, the discussion of Sigmund Freud traces back to the foundational origins of trauma theory. Furthermore, the analysis of Cathy Caruth's trauma literary criticism not only enriches the theoretical background but also introduces a deconstructive perspective that contributes to the construction of trauma memory theory. Secondly, a critical dialogue emerges across Tao Dongfeng's elaborations on these themes. For instance, Caruth's deconstructive trauma theory posits that traumatic experiences are so sudden and overwhelming that victims momentarily lose the capacity to comprehend or recall them, resulting in a deferred articulation of trauma. Tao builds on this idea by emphasizing: "We should not only focus on what the author has already said, but more importantly, trace those hidden, suppressed, unspoken, or indirectly implied elements behind the expression—in short, the absent." (Tao Dongfeng, 2025, p. 108) This interpretive framework is consistently applied in Tao's analysis of testimonial literature, where he identifies a central "paradox": the inherent inexpressibility of traumatic memory versus the ethical imperative to bear witness. At the same time, he underscores how this very "paradox" imbues the literature as testimony with a significance that transcends language—namely, the necessity of conveying "absent things" to the public through literary and artistic forms. The scarcity of language not only highlights but also conveys atmospheres and emotions that transcend conventional literary expression, thereby endowing testimony with a form of power distinct from historical narration—one that is no less significant than factual accuracy. In confronting humanitarian disasters directly, both historical accounts and narrative storytelling prove indispensable. Thus, it can be observed that Tao's work not only maintains temporal coherence along the central thematic thread and fosters dialogues with established theorists, but also follows a consistent mode of argumentation across papers on diverse themes. Through distinct methodological pathways, both longstanding and emerging issues converge

toward similar theoretical conclusions, thereby contributing to a harmonious framework for theoretical development.

When viewed through the lens of academic ideals, emphasizing the dialogical relationship between Western theories and Chinese experiences is not merely an approach grounded in academic rigor and comprehensive analysis, but also a meaningful scholarly practice that advances key academic principles such as “telling the truth” (Tao Dongfeng, 2014, p. 314) and “responding to one’s fundamental existential situation” (Tao Dongfeng, 2018, pp. 133–144). This form of scholarly engagement prioritizes addressing pressing issues arising from lived realities and brings these concerns into public discourse. Because these issues originate in real-life contexts, the practice preserves critical reflection and intellectual vitality. It not only embodies the social responsibility of intellectuals but also has the potential to guide young scholars toward an academic trajectory centered on confronting and reflecting upon significant challenges in their own lived experiences.

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