

**To Serve the People or the Party:
Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* and the Dilemma of Chinese Writers at the Time of Coronavirus¹**

In an [article](#) published online a few weeks ago, Yan Lianke 阎连科 lamented that Chinese literature, in the face of the raging epidemic and given its incapacity to bring material comfort to those in need, has already become powerless and marginal. What he really meant, was precisely the opposite: in these tragic events, literature can definitely play a certain role, if only Chinese writers decided to finally speak out, “to write about those who are afflicted or alienated” or bear witness to the “absurdity” of the ongoing historical circumstance. But Chinese writers, bounded as they are by the “choices of political correctness,” “fragile and weak like penguins at the South Pole,” and comfortable, after all, in their warm “padded jackets,” are, according to Yan Lianke, mostly turning a deaf ear, and in some cases are even taking part in the ritual of collective celebration singing their “hymns of praise” and “applauding” their own very impotence.

When he was writing these words, however, Yan Lianke was also well aware of the existence of a few contrary cases—in particular, that of a Chinese writer who, in the midst of the prevailing conformity, raised her voice loud and clear, showing that Chinese writers also can, upon the advent of a national calamity, prove to be of some relevance, and that even Chinese literature, if only it tried to, could exert a certain power. Obviously, we are referring here to Fang Fang 方方, the sixty-five year-old author from Wuhan who beginning January 25 of this year documented the state of Wuhan’s quarantine every day for two months, “giving voice with her pen,” as [Yan Lianke had said](#), to her “memory and experience” and to those of the citizens of Wuhan in the days of their long and painful reclusion.

Fang Fang’s diary is written with disarming simplicity, so much so that at first sight it does not even look much like literature, especially for those who expect, from a piece of literary writing, beauty of form or uplifting inspiration. But in fact, if we read them attentively, the pages of the diary are so scrupulously woven, so carefully laden with human feelings in their naked sobriety, that only a writer—especially a writer who has always been appreciated in China for her minute realism and keen descriptions about the trivialities of daily life—could have ever composed it. For instance, Fang Fang always begins her lean daily page with some fleeting, and yet vaguely poetic, reference, to the weather of Wuhan: the clear and icy sky of late January, the gloomy rainy days of February, the variable and warmer days of March. The weather, in this way, easily lends itself as a metaphor, one that correlates to the anxieties and the expectations of those who are locked into their houses, and are intent on observing, fretfully, the evolution of the outbreak as it unfolds slowly from the despair of winter to the redemption of spring. Moreover, with this simple device, Fang Fang brings the readers into her home, showing them the ordeal of Wuhan from her window, from an internal perspective, pointing to the experience of those who are living it.

But the diary’s aim is far from poetic, and after a quick sketch about the weather Fang Fang moves immediately to do something else. Usually the account of the day begins with a review of the news—the good and the bad, news picked up from the internet or received first-hand, referring to her neighbors and friends as well as to the national affairs—providing a sort of humanized bulletin in which the writer reconstructs briefly, in colloquial terms, a snapshot of the situation. Often the first news to come around are the most painful ones, such as that regarding fatalities, but then Fang Fang also talks about the suffering of those hit by the tragedy of the virus—family members of the ill, children who lost their parents, workers who lost their jobs, those who didn’t make it to the hospital, citizens of Wuhan barred from returning home, or Hubei migrants discriminated by those from other

¹ This essay is based on an essay I originally wrote in Italian and published at [Sinosfere](#).

provinces—occasionally supplemented by more cheerful and soothing pieces of news, with which the writer tries to bring some hope and solace.

Fang Fang also provides a large amount of practical information, examining statements of the experts, discussing government measures, acquiring opinions of her specialist friends, providing updates about the evolution of the epidemic, and thus seeking, in this way, to offer useful advice and guidance to citizens uncertain about how to react in dealing with the emergency. By doing so, however, she does not simply act as a mouthpiece for governmental policies; she also shows a stubborn commitment to questioning the authorities about their handling of the crisis, denouncing the mistakes of the officials and criticizing their self-centeredness, demanding corrections to government measures to better take into account the needs of the population, and, most important, insistently claiming truth and justice on behalf of Wuhan citizens against propaganda manipulations.

Meanwhile, her daily page is enriched by frequent mentions of the little episodes of her daily life, from the phone calls to her daughter and her two elder brothers to the problems of going to the hospital to get anti-diabetes medicines or finding food for her old dog, together with all the trifling activities taken up during the day to slog through the long hours of seclusion. In this way, Fang Fang's diary performs a series of functions. First, she brings back within the horizon of collective consciousness the multiple hardships of the common people who suffered with dignity through the scourge that hit Wuhan, yet who were the first ones to be forgotten in the national propaganda and its effort to rewrite sacrifice and pain as acts of heroism and self-abnegation in the great epic poem of national patriotism. Not by chance, among the various proposals of commemoration advanced by Fang Fang, one was to establish a "wailing wall" through an internet website, allowing the relatives of victims to post online their thoughts and pictures in order to remember their loved ones.

The diary then cements a sense of collective commonality not just arousing the compassion of one's fellow countrymen toward the misfortunes that struck the people of Wuhan, but also recording with painstaking diligence, starting from her personal routine, all the little deprivations, the swinging emotions, the everyday problems of those who are confined, like the author herself, in their own apartments and can only wait for things to turn better. The diary, we could thus say, comes to perform a therapeutic function; as if by soothing readers' discomfort and calming their anxieties, it also helps them, in the end, to generate a sense of constructive awareness and deal with the constraints imposed by the new circumstances. With her pages of daily life, in short, Fang Fang transmits to her readers the feeling that "everyone is on the same boat," thus giving meaning and substance to a slogan used by the government to kindle sentiments of national solidarity.

But Fang Fang does not just aim to give emotional support to her readers; she also makes an effort to provide a useful public service, taking advantage of her connections with Wuhan doctors, professors, and intellectuals, as well as the prestige and trust she enjoys among her readers, to offer reliable information so as to help her readers better orientate themselves in their daily behaviors. In this sense we can say that with her diary Fang Fang comes to operate as a "transmission belt" between the rulers and the people. First, she contributes to "popularizing" Party directives, spreading them from above and educating citizens in how to handle the outbreak with a "responsible" and "scientific" attitude. But she is committed to the task of transmitting to leaders above the voices of the people below, reporting their afflictions and reminding of their needs, exposing the cases of injustice and chastising the arrogance of power, laying bear the faults of the "national character" and calling for actions to reform it. What Fang Fang tries to do, in brief, is to exercise a role of democratic supervision. These are all functions, if we think about it, that make up the typical "responsibilities" of modern Chinese intellectuals, who, by virtue of their superior knowledge but also their "worrying mentality" (忧患意识), have both the burden and the honor to serve as guides and a spokesmen of the people in the name of national progress. Or, we could also say, by offering this kind of service, Fang Fang takes up the

task that intellectuals were assigned a long time ago, at least in theory, by the Party itself: that of serving the people. It is because Fang Fang interpreted this role with coherence and dedication that her diary gained a massive following of readers, faithfully read every day by millions of people.

But the Party, needless to say, has always had different views about how the Chinese writers should serve the people; during Xi Jinping's "new era," the emphasis has been placed on the need for cultural workers to put themselves in the service of the Party and its propaganda goals. Thus, the entries in Fang Fang's diary, initially published as posts of [her blog on Weibo](#), soon became an easy target of internet censors and, deleted one after the other from her personal account, could survive and circulate online only thanks to their timely re-posting by other websites (for example Caixin) and the copy-and-pastes of many readers who disseminated them on the web before the internet police could make them entirely disappear. Obviously, the Party did not do anything to condemn these pieces or to officially rebuke Fang Fang: too big was the diary's popularity among the readership and too palpable the mumbling of the middle class against the government's malfeasance to simply get rid of Fang Fang as it has done with other intellectuals or citizen journalists. At some point, however, Fang Fang became the target of a multitude of fierce personal attacks, which, though not claimed or supported by the Party, were conducted in the name of the orthodox principles proclaimed by the latter, resonating with its ideological views and psychological attitudes; hence, because I think the discursive forms taken by these attacks have something to tell us about the literary visions dominating the practice of the Chinese writers today, as well as the concrete ways in which censorship works in its control over the public discourse of the latter, it is worth taking a quick look at these attacks to gain some insight about what they said and how.

It is not by chance, first of all, that these attacks, though they had started in early February, began to intensify in March when the overall pandemic situation was improving considerably. By this time, the Party, after granting in the first few weeks of the crisis some space for grassroots expressions of dissatisfaction, eventually began to suppress the alternative voices, submerging them within a triumphalist campaign celebrating the Party and its resolute leader that climaxed with the grotesque demand to impart "gratitude education" (感恩教育) to the citizens of Wuhan. Indignant about this outrageous inversion of reality, on March 7, Fang Fang published the words that will probably prove the most daring of all the diary, because they expressed a criticism that did not just address the criticizable behavior of local officials, but targeted the Party leadership as a whole. What she wrote that day was that she found "strange," since it is the government's task to serve the people and not the other way round, that Wuhan leaders expected the people to thank the State and the Party; it was the government, she suggested, that should show its gratitude to the Chinese people for the effort made by all, each doing their own part, to fight against the virus. At the same time, since the outbreak had already been partly curbed and it was less urgent to bring to the attention of the public the misfortunes that had hit the populace in the chaos of the first weeks, Fang Fang also stressed with increasing emphasis the need to investigate, once the emergency was over, those responsible for the crisis, so as to seek justice for the people of Wuhan.

A very harsh [attack](#) then broke out immediately thereafter, by a Ph.D. student from Beijing University who had already targeted her three years earlier when he accused her of having undermined official historiography of the PRC with her novel *Soft Burial* (软埋)² and incriminating her for subversion of state power. This time the Ph.D. student, named Wang Cheng 王诚, branded Fang Fang a representative of an alleged "vanguard" of enemies seeking to promote a "colored revolution," (颜色革命) whose personal mission was to "spread the virus of thought (思想病毒), sabotage the war of the people against the virus and 'bury softly' nine million Wuhanese." A chain of attacks against

Commentato [DK1]: "a Ph.D." is ambiguous; is this a "Ph. D. student at Beijing University" or "someone with a Ph.D. from Beijing University"?

² The novel, originally published in 2016, was subsequently banned for its controversial treatment of the historical events of land reform.

Fang Fang would begin to proliferate on several fronts (on March 11, for example, the website *Hubei Today*, run by the Hubei Association of Press Workers, published more than 200 messages of personal invectives against Fang Fang). But the most significant attack was probably the [letter](#) written by an alleged “high school student” and published online on March 18: the letter received widespread attention among the internet readership, and it incorporates and articulates in a very significant way several ideological views and patterns of thinking supported by the Party in the Xi Jinping era, at the same time showing very clearly its debts to the revolutionary literary theories and practices developed in China since the 1920s and later coalesced in the Maoist dogma of the Yan’an Talks.

No readers truly believed that the letter was written by a real student—it was just too fluent in Party propaganda rhetoric and too familiar with the practice of making up fictional characters to convey some orthodox political views in the guise of apparently spontaneous popular feelings. The choice to write in the identity of a high school student is an ingenious ploy that not only disguises the true identity of the writer, but also serves the purpose of establishing a “naïve” point of view from which to wage a radical attack, but without claiming any responsibility, against the author of the diary. In his attack, the “student” pretends he is a sixteen-year-old adolescent asking for answers to his own doubts; he addresses Fang Fang because she is a writer, an “engineer of the soul” as Party rhetoric puts it, to rhetorically interrogate her about what the proper attitude of a writer in the circumstances of the “people’s war against the virus” should be. When asking his questions, however, the author explicitly embraces the official point of view of the education system—citing as correct the views of his teachers—and uses this normative point of view to attack Fang Fang’s reasons for writing the diary, disparaging her for having forgotten even the most elementary principles of commonsense.

After opening his letter with the suggestion that Fang Fang was taking advantage of the tragedy and writing her diary for personal gain (a strategy typical of the diary’s detractors, who often accuse Fang Fang of having become rich or wishing to become rich from of her literary writing), the student launches into his theoretical attack. He first says that since he is a science student and doesn’t know the meaning of literature, he searched Baidu for what it means to be a writer, and he found two definitions: “one saying that writers are persons with a sense of mission, who use their excellent works to inspire and encourage people, the other saying that a writer is someone who exalts the leitmotifs of one’s age and spreads positive energy.” From the beginning, then, the author aligns himself with the official tenets of Party propaganda, which underlines that writers should propagate the grand historical narratives sanctioned by the Party (“exalt the leitmotifs of one’s age”) and write works conveying exemplary messages capable of inspiring and motivating people (“spread positive energy”). Quite predictably, according to the student, Fang Fang’s diary does just the opposite. As the author of the letter insistently suggests, Fang Fang merely indulges in description of a “sickly” Wuhan, only able to see the difficulties and bewilderments, whereas she is not able to see, by contrast, the thousands of “warriors” who rushed to the city to rescue it. In doing so, she does not instill courage and confidence in the citizens of Wuhan and Hubei, as a writer should do, but rather makes them sink into despair and dejection. To be fair, the author concedes that Fang Fang has probably been writing the truth (although he also suggests that she might have not), reminding that for this reason she has gained the admiration of many readers who saw her as a “contemporary Lu Xun” because of her outspokenness. But he goes on to explain, resorting to images that go back a long way in the history of the Party’s visions of literature, that the age of Lu Xun was an age dominated by “darkness,” in which “resistance and struggle” against oppression and servitude were the mainstream and constituted the writers’ historical mission; today’s age, by contrast, is an age of “brightness,” when writers “should use all their energies mainly to invigorate the spirit of the nation,” and not to “blindly focus on its faults, continually exposing and questioning.” At the same time, the author also admits that each member of society, and not just writers, should have the right and duty to oversee society; however, “if someone only sees the faults of the Party and the State, their consideration ends up straying from the intent to benefit the country.” Moreover, while taking note that Fang Fang is

probably writing the truth, he also reminds us that truth can be expressed only if appropriate to the circumstances. Therefore, he writes that, as his mother taught him, “domestic shames should not be aired outside”; Fang Fang instead broadcast “these shameful matters out in the street” “waving in front of the world the truth of Wuhan in all of its sickness.”

The ultimate argument put forward to justify the suppression of unpleasant truths is the necessity to protect China from the hostile gaze of Western countries, which “are bashing us every day and insulting us and calling us sick-men.” But the author does not only allude to a subtle complicity between Fang Fang and the “brutes” of the Western world; the second half of the letter aims to stigmatize the writer, accusing her of holding some anti-social attitudes or of acting like a traitor. In this sense, the point of view assumed by the author, presenting himself as an inexperienced youth respectfully addressing elders and seeking their guidance (the student childishly calls Fang Fang “auntie”), and recalling the teachings and care received from his parents, ultimately reaffirms the principle of submission to Party authority based on a logic of filial respect. This becomes clear, for example, when the author explains he learned the meaning of the word “gratitude” when he watched a video telling the story of an ungrateful boy who used to rage furiously against his parents even though they gave him everything and who, in the end, became a beggar after he left home: “Aunt Fang Fang, I must confess that video really made me shudder. My parents treat me well every day, but I don’t realize it and instead I keep ranting against them and complaining about everything: I really am worth less than a beast! What do you say: should I remember or not the meals and clothes that I received from my parents?” Then he alludes more explicitly to Fang Fang’s lack of gratitude and responsibility toward the country, suggesting that even though she is an elderly and supposedly mature woman she forgot that “she was born in new China, raised under the red flag, eating the grain of Wuhan and drinking the water of the Yangzi river.” Finally, the “student” accuses Fang Fang of having forgotten her “original heart”—namely, of having abandoned the genuine ideals upheld by the Party that the servants of the homeland, in Xi Jinping’s era, are called to faithfully revive.

In addition to Fang Fang herself, a large number of readers rebutted these accusations, many pretending to be the relatives or classmates of the “student” to more effectively refute him on his own grounds. In the meantime, however, a massive new wave of attacks would again deluge the author, among which I cite only those mentioned by the author herself in her diary. The first is an article by a man called [Qi Jianhua](#) 齐建华 published in the patriotic portal of political discussion Chawang 察网,³ who vilifies Fang Fang as an “old woman” who spreads hearsay and slander, whose purpose is to describe Wuhan as a “hell on earth,” blaming the government for everything. Then comes the attack of Zhang Yiwu 张颐武, a well-known professor of literature at Beijing University, chides Fang Fang for spreading falsehood in order to stir the moods of her “fans” and for defaming all those who dissent from her point of view. Finally, Fang Fang mentions that she has also a target of the Diba group, a popular online forum of nationalist trolls famous for their “expeditions” against alleged enemies who hurt the pride of China and who listed in the pages of their Weibo account a series of terms according to which Fang Fang should be treated.

In spite of this barrage of intimidation, Fang Fang did not retreat and actually focuses in the last pages of the diary on warding off and refuting the criticisms she received, armed with the support of numerous readers who backed her up in this battle. Declaring that “she is not scared,” she condemns her opponents, accusing them of being “leftist extremists” (极左分子) who wish to bring the country back to the Cultural Revolution, but she also suggests in a roundabout way that all the expressions of

Commentato [DK2]: Do you have a source for this like you do for the other attacks?

Commentato [DK3]: This is not clear; maybe you need to elaborate a bit what you mean by “terms”

³ The website, opened in 2014, is the same that in 2017 hosted the attack of the original “Ph.D.” against Fang Fang’s *Soft Burial*. The aims of the website, as they are listed in the page “about”, are: “to disseminate the Party and government’s directives and policies, to defend national interests, protect state security, aggregate patriotic energy, strengthen the patriotic front, exalt the national spirit and spread national culture”.

criticism she received, although apparently spontaneous, might be to some extent orchestrated, and probably enjoy the implicit support of some circles of cadres (the author notes, for example, how none of the posts of her assaulters was ever censored). Thus, defining these extremists as a “virus” that threatens to infect all Chinese society, she underlines repeatedly that “their existence is the ruin of the country” and the major obstacle blocking the progress of China’s “reform and opening-up.” In the last entry of her diary she declares that she will carry on in the effort to seek truth and justice for Wuhan, because “if we give up in pursuing responsibilities, if we forget this days [...], then, what I want to say is that you, people of Wuhan, have not suffered a tragedy, but a humiliation.” Nevertheless, despite this resolution, Fang Fang eventually seems in part to surrender: although she had originally planned to continue her diary until the expected reopening of the city, she decides instead to terminate it on March 24, sixty days after she started to write the first entry. Two weeks later, word spread that the diary would soon be published in English and German, and many of the diary detractors will find in this news the final proof of the dishonesty of her original motivations—namely, that she wrote it for money or because she has some devious relations with the West. The [Global Times](#) strongly endorsed these views, evidence, if any more were needed, of the ongoing intersection between the official views of state propaganda and the popular rantings by Fang Fang’s critics. Fang Fang, as the paper says, with her “biased” diary offered “a handy tool for the West to sabotage Chinese people’s efforts to fight the COVID-19 outbreak,” and for this reason even her most affectionate readers, who had, by the end of March, already doubted the authenticity of her stories, now have started to turn their back on her.

Thus, for the moment, ends the saga of Fang Fang’s diary, now an object in a new Cold War between China and the West. Recounting the unauthorized story of Wuhan irked the Party propaganda machine, which does not tolerate a “story of China” told in ways that call into question its triumphalist narrative. The case of the *Wuhan Diary* has exposed the methods with which those who expose unwelcome truths and demand checks on political power, who choose to serve the people rather than the Party, run the risk of being pilloried and subject to the ire of new people’s tribunals. This also explains a little bit better why, as Yan Lianke observed, in the face of the cataclysmic events that struck China first and then the rest of the world, many Chinese writers thought that it was probably wise to keep quiet. Yet Fang Fang has never been a “dissident” writer and, as a matter of fact, for about ten years from 2007 up to 2018 when she belligerently resigned, she had served as the chair of the Hubei Writers’ Association. As a fiction writer, Fang Fang had always distinguished herself for her capacity to describe minutely the life of small characters in the urban milieu where she always lived, Wuhan, avoiding to touch directly on the big themes of History and Politics in most of her works. This time, however, Big History itself invaded her city. Fang Fang had once written that “a speck of history becomes a mountain on the head of individuals,” so when the virus hit it was perhaps inevitable that she would weave the themes more familiar to her into those of Big Chinese Politics. The latter however reacted by censoring her attempts to bring to the surface the experiences of the city predicated on the “commonsense” of the people (常识, a word she often uses in her diary). In the end, the censorship only further politicized the diary; in its effort to salvage commonsense from the demands of propaganda, it became, despite its original intentions, an unexpected instrument of dissidence. The diary, or more precisely the treatments it received, became an emblem of how the political control of literature and culture in general works in Xi Jinping’s China, and to what length it can go. As Fang Fang herself suggested in one of the last entries of her diary, the contents of the criticism are the tangible sign of the regressions in literary freedom in Xi Jinping’s era:

I recall that many years ago, when I was a university student, we had a literary association, where we often happened to discuss some issues, without ever being able to come to any agreement. In the end, I became a little fed up, and in secret I gave these discussions the name “three venerable articles” (老三篇). The three issues were: should we celebrate or expose, should we write comedies or tragedies, should we write about brightness or darkness? In fact,

what we continuously discussed was whether literature should only celebrate, whether it was only allowed to write comedies or treat the bright side of reality, and whether to expose the problems of society, describe human tragedies, or write about the dark side of society meant to be a reactionary writer. This was happening between 1978 and 1979. As we came to no conclusion, for no obvious reason, we quit talking about it. Then our grade organized a big debate to discuss whether it was true or not that “literature is a tool of class struggle.” But such a debate as far as I remember also led nowhere. Then the time slowly passed by, I graduated and began to work as a professional writer, until I found out, one day, that the entire Chinese literary world, and not just us students, had already come to a common understanding: you could write in both ways. The key was whether you wrote it well or not. For this reason, in my talks sometimes I say that certain issues do not need to be discussed, as time will provide the answer.

This time, though, I realized I was wrong. Even though forty-two years have passed, time in this case hasn’t yet provided an answer. Our literature, or so it seems, has again returned to those issues. All those people who assaulted me with their verbal abuse, didn’t just do it because through the course of this disaster, I was not celebrating, I was not writing comedies, I did not write about the brightness? As I think about it, this cycle of ebbs and flows really is somewhat arcane.

Commentato [DK4]: You have a question mark at the end of this sentence, but it is not phrased in the form of a question.
Fix