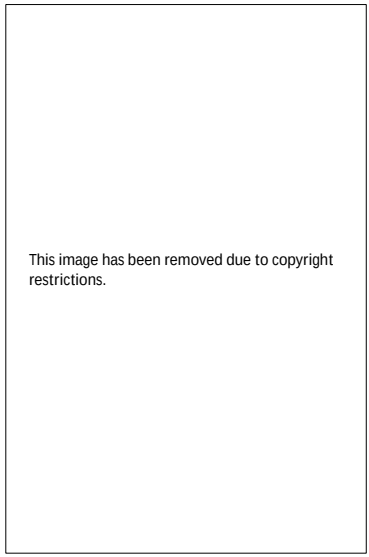
Ouyang Yu: *Loose. A Wild History*. Kenttown: Wakefield Press, 2012. 413 pp. ISBN 978-1-86254-828-2. AUD 32.95.
Reviewed by Juliane Lochner, Leipzig.



Ouyang Yu, a national Chinese who was awarded a scholarship in Australia back in 1991 and granted Australian citizenship in 1998, calls himself an "Australian poet". He is the prolific author of a vast oeuvre comprising poetry, novels, criticism, and translations from English to Chinese and vice-versa.

In his "documentary novel" (411) Ouyang Yu recalls two closely spaced episodes from his past: a three-month-journey for a work-stay in China and its post-processing in Melbourne, his place of residence.

Numerous meticulously dated diary entries unleash a torrent of memories and associations for the first-person narrator, who is clearly identifiable as the author himself. The details very soon tend to jumble the chronology of the story being told. The narrator gets increasingly bogged down in details and mental leaps, the outcome of his narrative becoming a patchwork quilt consisting of memos, dialogues, poems, aphoristic reflections on language, political and artistic freedom and constraints, sex, civilization, the literary scene and identity.

The narrator makes a virtue of necessity: He makes the role of retrospection, of imagination, and of the immediate present in the writing process a subject of contemplation. For him all those aspects are inevitably merged in his narrative process: "Life keeps interrupting the normal process of writing and I have no intention of taking that life away from writing" (127).

No wonder the book has an impressive scope of more than 400 pages. It is divided and subdivided into two main chapters and quite a few subchapters and paragraphs which become even more com-

plex towards the end. Trying to make sense of the paragraph numbering system would be pointless, though. And the narrator confesses that omissions in paragraph numbers are due to the deletion of certain text segments, because they were "culturally insensitive, gender biased, literature-wise vulgar, descriptively obscene, extremely offensive to elegance-loving people, low-brow, instigating hatred, although they can all be found in the original manuscript, to be auctioned only after the author's death, 100 years from the time of writing" (378). Aren't these words a broad hint at the unrecognized genius's vain aspirations for eternal fame? Are these words aspirations of an artist who doesn't give a damn about success? "Success is just like having a good shit" (214). Still, he evidently enjoys "the absolute power of producing truthful knowledge and falsehood, even memory" (217).

We make the acquaintance of a facetious and endearingly self-obsessed narrator who is far from currying favour with the public's need for entertainment including that of the "postmodern consumer socialism" (300) in China and whatever hidden or open censorship may furthermore exist: "Praise, always praise is what O has never learnt, which is part of his tragedy" (355).

The author-narrator observes the country of his origin and the one of his residence with their diametrically opposed political systems and cultural idiosyncrasies (and, by the way, he savours a good deal of culinary and sexual treats on both sides) which prompts abundant deductions in political and human understanding, such as: "Nationalities do not matter. At heart they are the same when it comes to meat" (88). He maintains an incorruptible brittle sense of detachment towards both sides, yet as a matter of course the reader is aware of Ouyang Yu having turned his back on China long ago and not without reason. Some years ago he had to stand by and watch from afar as his brother Ming died as a result of torture in China because he would not renounce his being a member of the forbidden and persecuted Falun Gong sect. These facts belong to the bitter experience of Ouyang Yu's life so far.

He has knowingly compromised and lives at peace with his adopted country in spite of its shortcomings. "I feel unwanted by this country, in this country and for this country. It's a constant feeling if you want to know. Perhaps it's the cost of freedom. Perhaps it's better than being wanted. Being wanted means being controlled" (342).

One of the habits he easily and fittingly adopted after switching sides is "the Western notion and practice of keeping a diary" (286) – in fact how could we otherwise share in the author's clever and self-mocking observations of our confusing and vexing world?

On the positive side of the balance sheet the author-narrator luxuriates in the advantages of bilingualism, which bestow upon him and the reader delightful and stunning discoveries. Having at his disposal the Chinese as well as the English language proves to be an inexhaustible well of undiluted joy. "It's like two mistresses I have (…) If you have two languages you have two kinds of self-awareness" (394). Detecting the pictorial composition of Chinese syllables constituting words, translating them into English and browsing through dictionaries on the scent of interesting expressions is like "mindsex" (394) for the narrator who delights in toying with the language. He obviously relishes puns and wordplay and blatantly shares his joy with the reader, unafraid of any taboos. "Writing should be a pleasure, as well as reading" (104). – Mind you, the reader plays an ambivalent roll: "Hateful, lovely readers. Whenever I think of them, my writing stops. They are my devils. They kill me. Honesty. No imagination" (111).

Regardless of this disrespect for mainstream taste, he is anything but isolated from the daily life of common people, be it in China or Australia. "While others move to the edge he is moving inside towards the centre, the centre of the crowd" (346). Indeed, this inclination ranks among the virtues of this opinionated and edgy narrator who declaredly does not want to please. Positioning and repositioning himself continuously and relentlessly on the basis of talks with the ordinary man in the street as well as with high-brow intellectual is one of his most notable features. Thanks to his readiness to let other individuals speak, their utterances keep trickling in and being processed by the narrator's open mind, which brings special pleasure to the reader.

The book's subtitle is derived from the Chinese word for "fiction" and "refers to small officials in ancient times who specialize in telling anecdotes and gossip to the kings and emperors" (n.p.), as the author tells us in the forward of the book. Needless to say, it alludes to the way Ouyang Yu presents his own unclassified utterances ranging from petty chinwag to abrasive complaints and accusations addressed to the modern societies of China and Australia. His idio-

syncratic working process itself becomes the subject of scrupulous analysis. The author declaredly leaves the last word to those readers who have the patience to wrestle through his erratic book. They can judge the importance and weight of the narrator's flow of words and have the final say.

Due to the author's maverick way of cobbling up his scribbling, the book's artistic quality is not perceivable at first sight, but it is soon highlighted by witty and compelling comments on everybody and his mother. The narrative, which holds the reader's attention at times more, at other times less, unexpectedly takes a sweeping turn when a fictional biographer is introduced (276) who disengages himself from the narrator "O"as his own exuberant imagination is unwilling to be restrained by the scattered mundane facts that the narrator "O" is offering. Now he can give it free rein.

Thus this fictional biographer is yet another character pulling the strings on the mingling genres of "nonfiction or fictional nonfiction or nonfictonal fiction" (21). This unstoppable process of eroding literary forms brings in its wake this insight: "This thing, the so-called documentary novel, is getting way beyond my control, too long, too loose, too lethargic, too wild" (411). "O" as well as the "biographer"– are getting more and more involved with the topic of identity.

However uneasy "O" and the biographer may feel as a neglected Australian or an unwanted Chinese (both approaches being called a kind of censorship), "the two big rivers" of the English and the Chinese language (246) definitely help them to tackle the problem of being caught between two stools.

One should think as long as "Two big rivers are running in my body, an English river and a Chinese river" (245), the author won't stop rebelling "against the tradition, the ideology, the art, but, more importantly, (…) against the language" (246) which will grant him the freedom to do what he likes and enjoy it, a quality which he is afraid "is totally lost in the West and China" (324) – as far as Ouyang Yu is concerned, don't worry.