Among contemporary Chinese artists Mu Xin is special on two accounts. First, he is arguably the most learned in both Chinese and Western literature and philosophy, and he fuses this knowledge with his writing and painting with equal mastery. In this regard he can be compared with Gao Xingjian, the most recent winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, who is also a dedicated painter. But in my view Mu Xin surpasses Gao in terms of both the stylistic subtlety of his painting and the thematic richness of his writing.

Second, Mu Xin is the most elusive writer and painter I know. I call him elusive not simply because he has remained virtually unknown in China, where he spent his first fifty-five years, or because he has continued to lead the life of a recluse during his past nineteen years in America. Nor is he elusive (though this is not entirely irrelevant) merely because he has assumed a long line of pseudonyms (Mu Xin being the most recent one) and few people even know his real name, Sun Pu. Rather, he has perfected an aesthetics of invisibility that crystallizes his existence as a writer and painter. In this aesthetics, his personal experiences are meaningless unless they are transformed into artistic experiences, and his artistic experiences cannot excel unless they transcend any conventional historical or biographical framework. His books and drawings are everything about himself that he wants to show to the outside world, but these works conceal, not reveal, his historical specificity.

After he left China in 1982 Mu Xin began to publish his writings for the first time. His essays and short stories suddenly flooded Taiwan's literary journals and newspapers, and his readers felt that they were encountering a literary genius out of nowhere. Thus when the Taipei magazine UNITAS (Lianhe wenxue) interviewed him in 1984, the interviewer started the conversation with a question that was on everyone's mind: "Who are you? Who is Mu Xin?" The question failed to provoke an autobiographical account, however, as Mu Xin responded quietly by quoting Flaubert: "Reveal art; conceal the artist." Answering another question about his favorite writers, he said that instead of having a "personal love" for individual authors he had only a "universal love" for literature.

This attitude is consistent with his own literary work, in which he denies affiliations to recognizable schools and styles, but freely associates himself with numerous literary figures in both the East and the West. He rarely, if at all, writes about his imprisonment in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and his exile afterwards—not because he is disinterested in the past, but because the kind of past he is interested in always bypasses those recent, painful, and personal moments. So instead of describing his suffering in an abandoned underground air-raid shelter flooded with dirty water, his favorite topics include his fictional journeys to ancient metropolises and exotic lands, as well as his imaginary conversations with among others, Petronius of ancient Rome, Yu Liang and Xi Xiu of medieval China, and Tolstoy of nineteenth-century Russia. He recounts these conversations with the conviction of a prophet or spirit-medium. His vision of himself is therefore necessarily abhistorical but highly individualistic, a man unrestricted to any particular time and place, rather who only belongs to an abstract humankind of an eternal present.

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In this way, Mu Xin also denies a historical analysis of himself: What is the point of analysis that casts him in a position he is determined to escape? Here I am not suggesting that he and his work should not be studied historically; what I am suggesting is that such treatment only reflects the historian’s point of view, not Mu Xin’s. Of course he can be identified as a quintessential “exile writer-artist,” whose every essay or painting attests to his self-contained marginality. Of course he carries on the ancient Chinese tradition of “remnant subjects” of fallen dynasties (yimin), whose brushes were the only tools with which to make their uprooted lives meaningful. There is no doubt that we can learn much about Mu Xin by associating him with these large historical patterns and categories, but at the same time we run the risk of alienating the artist and his art, because such contextualization and historicization inevitably destroys his carefully constructed fictionality about himself, and cancels the kind of delicate ambiguity that animates his work. Contrary to a historian’s penchant for reconstructing the bygone past, Mu Xin’s writing and painting always purposefully decontextualize him and transcend reality.

A discussion of Mu Xin (or any writer or artist like him) must therefore pose a methodological problem: Should this discussion demystify his ahistorical self-image and subject him to historical probing, or should it instead retain this self-image and focus on the construction of its interiority? I once tried the first strategy but eventually gave it up. This essay follows the second direction, of exploring Mu Xin’s literary and artistic persona. In other words, my goal is not to distinguish fact from fiction in his life or to uncover the “real” Mu Xin. Rather, I take whatever he says and writes about himself to be real, because these are all components of a self that he has invented for himself and
for his readers; my task is to trace the thread that connects these fragmentary components into an imaginary whole.

* * *

A central theme in Mu Xin's occasional reminiscences on his past is the repeated loss of a great literary corpus. Whether taking the shape of a private library or a multi-volume manuscript, such a corpus stands for his self-identity as an author, and hence its destruction poses the danger of losing this identity at a particular moment in his life. Also, according to Mu Xin, he has never tried to reclaim or reconstruct a lost corpus in its original form, but has only ventured to create a new one to take its place. The significance of these cyclical losses and re-creations is not difficult to grasp: they constitute a narrative of a series of deaths and rebirths that Mu Xin has experienced in his capacity as a writer.

This constructed narrative starts from a definable point: a long-lost library that Mu Xin frequented when he was a boy. The sacred site of his initiation into the art of literature, this library occupies the central stage in one of his rare memoirs, entitled "The Reading Spot under a Pagoda" (Taxia dushuchu). The "pagoda" referred to a historical relic in Mu Xin's home village of Wuzhen, located not far from the scenic city Hangzhou in southeastern China. A local legend relates that under this pagoda, Prince Zhaoming of the Liang dynasty compiled his massive anthology Selections of Refined Writings (Wen xuan) in the early sixth century, presumably in the Buddhist monastery that the pagoda formed a part of. One and a half millennia later the pagoda had fallen into ruin and no trace of the monastery could be found. In the 1930s and 1940s, the most illustrious literary figure in Wuzhen was Shen Yanbing, better known by his pseudonym, Mao Dun. A celebrated modern Chinese novelist and playwright, Mao Dun was a distant relative of Mu Xin on his mother's side. During the Sino-Japanese War, Wuzhen was occupied by Japanese troops and Mao Dun stayed away from home, entrusting the family's compound to an old friend, Mr. Huang. It was then that Mu Xin discovered the library:

The Shen family mansion was an old and ordinary looking house. With only one level, the front hall was dark and gloomy. The floor was paved with thick bricks, and the long and narrow windows were set in carved wooden frames. Passing the front hall, however, the space suddenly became spacious and bright, as I entered an open and comfortable Western-style room, painted entirely light gray. This was the "Mao Dun Library," as I have come to call it, but Mao Dun himself probably never promoted it as such. It housed an exceedingly rich collection of books. This place became my secret haven when I was a teenager living in an isolated and remote village. There I enjoyed reading all of the masterpieces of world literature, when war and chaos ruled outside. Mu Xin found a precious intimacy with literature in this place: as the library's only user he saw himself as its de facto owner. In the memoir he describes how he went through the books systematically, starting from classical Western philosophy and literature and gradually moving down to twentieth-century Chinese novels and plays. He found volumes autographed by Gorky and Babisai, gifts that these authors had presented to Mao Dun. He also discovered Mao Dun's own handwritten comments on many traditional Chinese texts, and for this reason read these texts again. Gradually, he acquired an interest in a book's physical form as well, comparing different versions and repairing torn pages whenever he found them. Unknowingly, without formal initiation he had grown into a book connoisseur. After the war, Mu Xin left Wuzhen to study painting in Shanghai. He bade farewell to the library and never saw it again. The memoir ends with a lamentation: the library was later destroyed, and all the books he read and repaired vanished without a trace.

But to Mu Xin, these books had become part of himself; he had internalized the library. The consequence of this experience was fundamental to him: he could never depart from his self-perception as a man of letters. Not coincidentally, in another place he dates the beginning of his literary career to 1941, when he was fourteen—the year he started to compose Western-style poems in secret after laboring over his daily homework of traditional-style writing. It was during this time he was feverishly reading the library's holdings, including much Western-style poetry.

Of course, Mu Xin went on to read many more books after leaving Wuzhen, but the lost "Mao Dun Library" retained a special significance that was only revealed by later holocausts of his own literary work. Mu Xin's first piece of serious writing was a book-length treatise entitled A General Discourse on Hamlet (Hanmulaite fanlun), which he completed in 1949, when he was twenty-two. This treatise, as well as the numerous essays, novels, short stories, and poems he wrote in the 1950s and 1960s,
remained unpublished and were confiscated and destroyed at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Fewer than ten people read these handwritten manuscripts bound in twenty thick volumes. A surviving list of these vanished writings reflects their author’s appetite for all-inclusiveness:

**Criticism:**
- A General Discourse on Hamlet
- Notes on Icarus
- The Subtle Meaning of Orpheus
- Jiaamikelis Brothers (a series of nine essays)

**Fiction:**
- A Window above the Street
- Wedding Vacation
- The Pardon of Xiadi
- Dangerous Houses
- A Stone Buddha
- Journey to the Crimea
- The Singer van Aire’s Recital
- Luo-er and Luo-a
- A Small House on a Raft

**Essay:**
- No. 15 Fanlin Street (a collection of 100 essays)

**Poetry:**
- Like Smoke (a long poem)
- Sonnets, in a Non-Sonata Style
- (a collection of 100 poems)
- On Protein (a collection of short poems)
- Half of the Cross (a collection of short poems)
- Leftover Manuscripts from the Studio of Jade Mountain in Cold Air (a large collection of traditional poetry and prose-poetry)

**Play:**
- Come In, Hero

Both the vast quantity of this anthology and the broad range of literary genres are impressive; and indeed the anthology seems to have mirrored the destroyed “Mao Dun Library” in its miniaturized comprehensiveness. Also like the library, the destruction of this collection of writings was brutal and total, a massacre which left no trace of the victim. To overcome this destruction, Mu Xin had to start all over again, and this time he started in an unlikely place, an air-raid-shelter-turned-prison in which he was put in solitary confinement during the Cultural Revolution. The surviving 132 pages of the so-called Prison Notes he produced during this period from 1971 to 1972 is evidence of a life-and-death struggle to maintain his self-identity as an author. Mu Xin covered these fragile sheets of paper recto and verso with some 650,000 characters (see “A Dialogue with Mu Xin” in this catalogue); the script is so tiny that the texts are nearly incomprehensible. To me, only the most committed determination “to execute the creative obligation of a writer” can explain the creation of these illegible writings, which had no actual use but could have brought him severe punishment. To Mu Xin, he “was fulfilling a providential task of guarding and caring for grapevines,” according to the Biblical pronouncement: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away, and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit” (John 15:1–2).

Thus, without any implication of a potential readership, in these notes he continued to discuss painting, music, world literature, and philosophy. All the sources for this discussion existed only in his head—the knowledge he had started to accumulate in the days he was reading in the Wuzhen library, a literary legacy that no one could take away from him. Ironically, this method of writing did not change after he left prison and even after he immigrated to America, as he told an interviewer in 1984:

Now in America I don’t have any books. All my knowledge comes from my memories. Sometimes I look around, feeling myself like a “Robinson Crusoe of literature” on a desert island. When I was young, I found in my village this home of a world-famous writer, which was filled with Western classics. I devoured them and suffered from indigestion. But what I read then became what later I entirely depended upon.

So once again, Mu Xin returned to the destroyed library when undertaking to complete a new corpus of treatises, essays, fictions, and poems. This time, however, he could actually publish his work, a new reality that brought about a heightened sense of urgency. He derived most of his inspiration and materials directly from his “mental library,” and wasted no time between one composition and another. In his small Jamaica Plain apartment in New York, he wrote 7,000 to 10,000 characters every day till midnight. Eight volumes of his new writings were published before 1992, the tenth anniversary of his immigration to America. But these only constituted a small portion of the encyclopedic corpus that he planned to complete. The last time I talked to him, in the early 1990s, he told me that he had been working on two monumental compilations for some years. The first, called Babylonian Linguistics (Babilun yuyanxue), would be a massive collection of writings in different genres; its length would exceed “millions of characters.” He envisioned the second work, called Memories of the Porcelain Kingdom (Cigu
transhistorical or suprahistorical experiences elevate art and literature to “the second level of significance.” He declares: “It follows that when the first level of significance associated with things fades away, their second level of significance may possibly emerge. The second level of significance is usually more profound and closer to the essence of things.”

We can thus understand Mu Xin’s reluctance to facilitate interpretation and appreciation of the *Prison Notes* based on the manuscript’s historical context and on his experience during the Cultural Revolution. To any Western viewer of this manuscript, it immediately evokes the image of Mu Xin as a political prisoner, suffering in a dark dungeon filled with filthy water while struggling to write down his thoughts under the dim light of a kerosene lamp. The tragic heroism embodied by this image is, in our historical perception, inextricably tied to the notion of political catastrophes such as the Holocaust and the Cultural Revolution, and has provided the basis for numerous heroes and heroines in novels, plays and films. Interviewing Mu Xin about the *Prison Notes*, therefore, Toming Jun Liu naturally starts from, and constantly returns to, this frame of reference. Mu Xin, on the other hand, remains determined to refute this mode of inquiry, because although the historical reality may be reconstructed, the reconstruction itself would inevitably produce a historical melodrama:

Sir, perhaps you expect the author to give a romantic and realistic narrative in this dialogue on the manuscript. But I naturally prefer to describe my attitude in terms of cinematic stills and fade-outs... But, didn’t we agree at the outset to “de-emphasize certain temporal-spatial factors”? You cannot expect the author of the Notes to make too much of a confession.

In a more profound sense, Mu Xin is refusing to view and interpret the *Prison Notes* — and by extension himself — as a site of ruination. As many scholars have pointed out, ruins not only constitute an important subject of romantic poetry and art, but also typify any aesthetic experience embodying a retrospective perspective. The very concept of the ruin implies a backward gaze toward a lost totality; images of ruins in art and literature necessarily point to the passage of time, effacement, and memory. “The master figure there is synecdoche,” writes Stephen Owen, “the part that leads to the whole, some enduring fragment from which we try to reconstruct the lost totality.”

Mu Xin is not interested, to say the least, in this type of romantic imagination, so at this point he divorces himself from most of his admirers and interpreters. To the audience of the *Prison Notes*, the manuscript inevitably appears as a historical relic and as evidence for its creator’s suffering and struggle during a political catastrophe — circumstances and experiences that a viewer can easily reconstruct in his or her mind based on a consensual narrative of modern Chinese history. But Mu Xin rather advises us to treat the manuscript as no more than an “independent existence in the nameless, constant realm of the conceptual.” He does not wish to see the manuscript, once having been resurrected from the past, “identified with any kind of ideology.” He does not want to have the text sorted out and published, because it belongs to the past and has lost its meaning (so he says): “That the meaning of words may be lost is nothing to be feared;
indeed, it may even call for congratulations." 17) Then what does this manuscript mean to him? "This manuscript — what we're calling the Prison Notes," he answers, "is not unequivocally a literary work. It is not calligraphy, or painting, or a semiotic system of divination. Although a creative work is generally classified according to 'what it is,' this manuscript is distinguished by 'what it is not.'" 18 These words advocate a negation of the qualification of the Prison Notes as prison notes: whatever this manuscript is, it is not what it seems to be.

We may find explanations for such adamant refusal of a painful, personal past in psychoanalytical theories. In particular, the study of trauma and its legacy through time prompts us to rethink the relationship between narrative and self. It has been recognized that experiences of torture, violence, and abuse can lead a person to "escape" the traumatic memory. Many theories have been developed to explain this phenomenon. For example, the theory of repression claims that when memories are laden with intensely painful feelings, they may be warded off over long periods of time, while the theory of dissociation accounts for the narrowing or splitting of consciousness so that some memories may be put aside. Dissociation seems especially relevant to Mu Xin because it represents an adaptive response to an overwhelming and inescapable threat, even though this threat was posed in the past. Most significantly, this type of adaptive response often underlies the effort of traumatic survivors to generate narratives about their own lives, and these individual narratives always depart from consensual or collective narratives about a past event. Laurence J. Kirmayer explains in his article "Landscape of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation":

The fragmented nature of dissociative narrative comes from the focusing of attention in the traumatic moment and from the subsequent absence of consensual social factors to help weave together the dispersed parts. Dissociation is a rupture in narrative, but it is also maintained by narrative because the shape of narrative around the dissociation protects (reveals and conceals) the gap. Dimensions of narrative relevant to processes of dissociation include coherence, voice, and time: that is, the extent to which the narrative of self is integrated or fragmented, univocal or polyvocal, and whether the flow of narrative time is progressive, regressive, or static. 19 To a creative writer or artist, the formation of an individualized "dissociative narrative" amounts to a concealment of traumatic experiences in a unique literary or artistic self-expression. To understand this expression one cannot simply integrate it into a shared historical framework. Rather, this expression has to be analyzed and appreciated from within, regardless whether it omits or enhances certain "facts" and whether it agrees or disagrees with our common-sense view of the past.

Although Mu Xin opposes the resurrection of the Prison Notes, some have been translated and are published in this catalogue. I would like to quote one passage to end this essay, not only because it resonates with many themes discussed in this essay, but also because it supports Mu Xin's appeal to dissociate the text from the circumstances in which it was written.

"I have not yet loved you in the way as it is expressed in music" — suddenly I remember these words. Now that I am in prison, I cannot possibly find Wagner's original text, although I believe that is more or less what he said. Music is a form of art constituted by its own vanishings. In its essence and depth music is thus closest to "death." Before I turn forty I have no plan for writing memoirs, although I am quite impressed by Rousseau in his later work Reveries of the Solitary Walker. Turgenev's Literary Memoir is so thin a book that I once thought that it was not a must read. But it turned out to be an engaging book. As for myself, I still follow Flaubert's advice: "Reveal art; conceal the artist." 20 Simply put, Mu Xin did not write this passage to respond to reality; he wrote it to erase reality.
Notes

1 The pseudonyms that Mu Xin used between 1941 and 1984 include: Ji Guang, Gao Sha, Fei Ding, Ma Han, Sang Fu, Lin Si, Sima Buqian, Zhao Yuanshen, Yang Rui, and Mu Xin.


3 This was an article entitled “Mu Xin: meng yin” (Mu Xin: dream and reclusion), which I wrote in 1984 after mounting an exhibition of Mu Xin’s paintings at Harvard University. Mu Xin told me that a Hong Kong journal planned to publish an introduction to his art and invited me to write it. In that article I connected him to a “hermit culture” in traditional China and compared his landscape images to the “dream visions” imagined by some historical recluses. He disliked all these comparisons, so I never published the article.


5 Ibid., p. 10.

6 “Mu Xin dakewen,” p. 50.

7 Toming Jun Liu, “A Dialogue with Mu Xin,” in this volume, p. 141.

8 “Mu Xin dakewen,” p. 51.

9 Ibid., p. 51.

10 Mu Xin also described these two projects in “Mu Xin dakewen,” p. 57.


12 Ibid., p. 140.

13 Ibid., p. 142.


16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., p. 139.

18 Ibid.


20 Mu Xin, Prison Notes, excerpt translated by Toming Jun Liu in this volume, p. 137.