Sex and irony in Zhang Dachun's *Bildungsroman Wo Meimei*

Ludovica Ottaviano

Growing up in the *juancun* 眷村 (soldiers' villages) communities of Taiwan during the 1980s, contemporary Taiwanese author Zhang Dachun 张大春 (b. 1957) appears to have embraced the postmodern ideas and techniques, drawing inspiration from writers like Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco in his literary work. Since the publication of his novel *Da Shuohuangjia* 大說謊家 ("The Big Liar," 1989), Zhang Dachun earned the moniker "the big liar," and his novels have been described as metafictional, employing a postmodern approach that playfully utilizes signs and symbols to convey meanings or "lies" (Peng 2009).
In 1993, under the pen name Datou Chun 大头春 ("Big-head Spring"), the author published a semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman* (*qingchun xiaoshuo* 青春小說) titled *Wo Meimei* 我妹妹 ("My Kid Sister"), adopting a sarcastic teenage narrative voice. The novel depicts his own growth, as well as that of his sister, who is eight years younger, within the complex historical and political backdrop of 1980s Taiwan. Throughout the novel, there are numerous references to children's sexual instincts and behaviors, often reinterpreted through a Freudian lens. These references are intertwined with the author's personal experiences rooted in contemporary Taiwan's reality and metafictional discussions on narrative meaning and strategies. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to gather these references and shed light on Zhang Dachun's reception of postmodernism while reconstructing his distinct "poetics of the lie."

Keywords: Zhang Dachun; *Wo Meimei*; lies; sexual consciousness; Taiwan literature

1. Introduction

Following the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwanese literature experienced a vigorous expansion both in terms of quantity and quality. The literary impulses, which had been hidden within a society subjected to Japanese occupation before World War II, Chinese Nationalist Party (*Guomindang* 國民黨, GMD) political authoritarianism, and Taiwan's "non-nation" status, eventually emerged with newfound energy. A multifaceted literary scene began to grow day by day, giving voice to feminist, queer, *juancun* 眷村 (military-compound), nationalist, and aboriginal issues that were previously classified as ideologically forbidden and marginalized. According to Chen (2007), these "marginal"

social groups all arrived simultaneously and were interested in the interrelated issues of recognition, identity, and subjectivity (Chen 2007: 45).

Among these social groups, the *juancun*'s writers struggled to reconstruct their identity while facing an existential crisis due to the specific sociohistorical conditions they lived in. The *juancun* communities accommodated the vast majority of Chinese Nationalist military personnel and their families—the "mainlanders" (*waishengren* 外省人)—after they retreated to Taiwan in the late 1940s at the end of the Chinese Civil War, believing that the GMD would retake the mainland and allow them to return home. At the time, these communities were obsessed with the mainland and felt alienated from Taiwanese society, defining their identity through this sense of alienation. However, as time passed, it became clear that the retaking of the mainland would never happen, and the vast majority of the *juancun* gradually fell into disrepair.

During the early years of post-martial law period,[1] the new generation of mainlanders born in the *juancun*, who were vividly encouraged to believe in the GMD official historical narrative, faced the disruption of the *juancun* and experienced traumatic disillusionment toward the GMD unification ideology. They also started to distrust new nationalist ideologies, which they saw as another form of totalizing narratives. Scholars suggest that "the *juancun*'s younger generation, besides questioning the 'truthiness' of politics, questioned even more the 'truth' of history" (Wang 2012: 49).[2] Consequently, the younger generation of *juancun*'s writers such as Huang Fan 黃凡 (b. 1950), Ping Lu 平路 (b. 1953), Zhu Tianwen 朱天文 (b. 1956), Zhang Dachun 張大春 (b. 1957), and Zhu Tianxin 朱天心 (b. 1958), to name just a few, began embracing the progressive agenda of postmodernism, challenging conventional notions of truth, identity, and authorship. Inspired by foreign models, these authors blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction, incorporated metafictional elements, and adopted a playful and experimental approach to storytelling.[3]

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[1] The term "post-martial law period" typically refers to the period immediately following the lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987. However, it is important to note that the significant social, political, and cultural transformations can be traced back to the early 1980s. During this time, rapid economic growth, the increasing autonomy of the media, and the government's endeavors to promote liberalizing and internationalizing policies converged, leading to the erosion of social norms from the previous era. These developments paved the way for new political, social, and cultural changes in Taiwan. See Chang 2004, 190-201.

[2] Besides the excerpts from *Wo Meimei*, that are taken from Michael Berry's translation (Zhang 2000), all other translations in this work are my own.

[3] The advent of postmodernism in Taiwan was first announced by Luo Qing 羅青 in 1985, who observed that a postmodernist cultural tendency had already been emerging in Taiwanese society during the 1980s. Since then, various literary critics have attempted to apply the term postmodernism to discussions of contemporary Taiwanese literature, to the extent that the

In particular, Zhang Dachun developed philosophical doubts about conventional truths and dismissed the utilitarian dimension of literature since the mid-late 1980s. He abandoned the use of a "target language" and even denied its existence. As Peng (2009) states, the author questioned whether language is "a useful mean to convey meanings" and believed that language or narrative is "a signifier of an external referent [that] is put into question" (Peng 2009: 377-378). Zhang Dachun embraced the postmodern approach to the use of signs, similar to Umberto Eco's perspective, considering them merely shells that convey meanings while dismissing the referent, essentially just "lies."

Zhang Dachun's exploration of the "poetics of the lie" expanded even further with his novel *Da Shuohuangjia* 大說謊家 ("The Big Liar," 1989), which he referred to as a "spontaneous news novel." It combined elements of detective fiction, political satire, facts, and lies. Since then, Zhang Dachun often came to be known as "the big liar," as he claimed that "the first commandment of a liar is never to believe oneself" (Zhang 1989: 70) and argued that "lies exist in a symbiotic relationship with each other, mutually feeding and assisting one another" ((Zhang 1989: 37). Umberto Eco observed that lies about lies are meta-lies, something that cannot be used to tell a lie and, conversely, cannot be used to tell the truth either. In fact, they cannot be used "to tell" at all (Eco 1976: 9). However, according to Ng (2007), Zhang's philosophy of the lie neglects the truth of the lie itself, namely the truth of poetry, reducing it to mere performative posturing or literary acrobatics.

In the early 1990s, continuing his journey of experimentation, Zhang Dachun created a sort of literary *alter ego* named Datou Chun 大頭春 ("Big Head Spring"), who served as the first-person narrator of a trilogy of *Bildungsroman* (*qingchun xiaoshuo* 青春小說).[4] The three volumes are "autobiographic" to a certain extent, but differed in contents and style. The second volume, titled *Wo Meimei* 我妹妹 ("My Kid Sister") and published in 1993, represented a reinvention of Datou Chun. In this novel, he abandoned the sarcastic teenage voice and, with a retrospective approach in adulthood, reinterpreted the psychological and moral growth of both his little sister and himself in the context of the *juancun* during the 1980s.

conventional periodization of Taiwan literature now categorizes the post-martial law era under the general framework of postmodernism. However, it is important to note that the concept of postmodernism itself did not originate within Taiwanese society but was primarily imported from the West. Consequently, many scholars have criticized the application of the label "postmodernism" to the specific Taiwanese context. See Liao (1997), Liao (2000) and Chen (2007).

[4] The other two novels in the trilogy are *Shaonian Datou Chun de Shenghuo Zhouji* 少年大頭春的生活周記 ("The Weekly Journal of Young Big Head Spring," 1992) and *Ye Haizi* 野孩子 ("Wild Child," 1996). The latter was translated by Michael Berry and published alongside "My Kid Sister" in the volume titled "Wild kids" (Zhang 2000).

The novel intricately weaves together the stories of Datou Chun and his sister, incorporating references to the children's psychosexual development and sexual behavior during the transition to adulthood. These references, often interpreted through a Freudian lens, play a prominent role. Craftily created as pretexts, they serve to discuss political-historical narratives, fictional narrative techniques, and aesthetics, all in a perpetual tension of searching for meaning. In other words, through the loss of innocence and conflicts faced by the two children, Zhang Dachun fabricates his lies, intending to undermine the utilitarian dimension of language and literature. Instead, he embraces the notion of fiction as a "minor art" and the importance of the trivial, prioritizing its entertaining function (Ng 2007, 261). By examining these lies, this paper aims to investigate Zhang Dachun's reception of postmodern strategies and their influence on the construction of the "poetics of the lie" in *Wo Meimei*.

2. Sexual references and lies

In this paragraph, we will focus on three key references in the novel regarding the child's psychosexual development and sexual behavior:

1. the infantile sexual instinct;
2. the sexual act; and
3. a reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex.

Furthermore, we will explore how these references are connected to political-historical allusions and/or narrative strategies.

2.1. The infantile sexual instinct

In the second chapter of the novel *Wo Meimei*, titled "Nausea" (*Outu* 嘔吐), the first-person narrator Datou Chun mentions Freud and his theories that had entered his home when he was a child. Specifically, he references the Oedipus complex (which will be discussed further) and narrates an episode of particular interest: his little sister once ate her own feces. Datou Chun uses this episode to fabricate a story that demonstrates a conscious use of postmodern strategies. One part of the story involves the father's reaction to the incident. He becomes estranged from the surrounding environment and refers to psychoanalytic theories that were popular at that time. He exclaims, "Freud was right on the money! She is going through the oral pleasure receptor to rediscover the enjoyment of her anal pleasure receptor" (Zhang 2000: 23). By directly mentioning Freud's name in this manner, Zhang Dachun seems to evoke Umberto Eco's definition of the "postmodern attitude." According to

Eco, revisiting the past and reiterating what has already been said can achieve two successful results: conveying the same message and engaging in a conscious and pleasurable game of irony (Eco 1994a: 67-8).

Additionally, this story contains a memory that functions as a platform for discussing a crucial political-historical matter in 1980s Taiwan and the power of narratives. The memory revolves around a letter that Datou Chun wrote to his sister while serving in the military and the consequences of the letter being inspected by a security officer. In the letter, he teases his sister with the following words:

> That very moment when the shit entered your mouth, the heavens collapsed and the earth was shattered. The wind rushed and the clouds rolled. The demons wailed and the gods howled. In the next day's paper came the news of Chiang Kai-shek's death. Oh, what sorrow! (Zhang 2000: 23).

By juxtaposing his sister's disgusting episode with Chiang Kai-shek's death in the same paragraph, Datou Chun intends to evoke laughter from his sister and any reader, including the security officer. However, this specific reader does not find it funny but instead takes it seriously, threatening Datou Chun with court-martial and the death penalty for defiling the former president of the Republic of China. Only through kneeling and begging for forgiveness, an "ethical rite" to deceive the guard or an act of his cowardice, does Datou Chun manage to spare his life.

As Zhang Dachun theorizes in a later work on narrative thoughts, the *Xiaoshuo Bailei* 小說稗類 ("Fiction of Miscellaneous Kinds"), he seeks the comic effect of language, as narratives can have two coexisting levels of signification. Readers can become engrossed in the emotional aspects of the work or detect its satirical aspects (Zhang [1998] 2004: 81). This dualistic model echoes Umberto Eco's concept of the "referential fallacy," wherein language becomes a device to convey lies. Lies in fiction can provoke two different responses in the reader's mind: fear or laughter (Eco 1976: 64). In *Wo Meimei*'s context, the security officer represents a scared reader who trusts language, likely influenced by the persistent political propaganda and hegemonic historical accounts that he is accustomed to believing in.

Even if the reader is unwilling to perceive the irony and still retains some doubts, Datou Chun further emphasizes the ironic content of his memory by asserting, "I'm not making this up—that is exactly what the scene was like on that day" (Zhang 2000: 23). This statement deals with the truth of the story and winks at the reader, attempting to demonstrate that there is no absolute truth and that meaning is not fixed. Zhang Dachun appears to embrace the idea that there is nothing outside language and that language itself cannot fully capture the external "real" referent, which is a common theme in postmodernism. In *Image Music Text*, Barthes (1977) explicates this notion provocatively, stating:

> Narrative does not show, does not imitate [...] 'What takes place' in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally *nothing*; 'what happens' is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming (Barthes 1977: 124).

The concept of the "nothing" as the absence of reality corresponds to what Eco terms the "referential fallacy." The sign-function does not necessarily have to align with the actual states of the world, so whenever there is a sign-function, there is the potential for lying, and vice versa (Eco 1976: 58). Once the referential fallacy is acknowledged, the distinction between lies and truths becomes irrelevant.

2.2. The sexual act

In the seventh chapter of *Wo Meimei* entitled "All That Remains Is Our Shell of Flesh" (*Women Shengxia Quqiao* 我們剩下軀殼), Datou Chun delves into his sentimental and sexual life as a teenager and young adult who dated many girls. In this chapter, Datou Chun honestly describes his feelings and experiences in love, emphasizing that he never felt a genuine connection with any of his girlfriends. He expresses this by referring to them as "chicks" (*mazi* 馬子), "babies" (*xiao mazi* 小馬子), or "old ladies" (*lao mazi* 老馬子),[5] and he truly means what he says. Upon meeting them, he relies on his intuition to determine if he can pursue a sexual relationship with them. Subsequently, he gets to know them to some extent, solely to estimate how quickly they would engage in sexual activities (Zhang 2000: 81).

Datou Chun demonstrates no interest in establishing sentimental relationships with his partners. He is focused on pursuing sex, which he describes as "too simple, too easy, too commonplace. It was like nothing" (Zhang 2000: 81). This concept of "nothing" resonates with Barthes' perspective. Love, in Datou Chun's view, is reduced to a mere physical expression, resembling "a kind of orthodox ritual" (Zhang 2000: 82) that can be experimented with. Bodies, in turn, are nothing more than vessels of flesh. Since individual body parts cannot be altered, the diversity lies in the overall composition. This is why Datou Chun had "a series of women, all with completely different features" (Zhang 2000: 83). Toward the end of the chapter, he confesses:

[5] The use of the sexist term "*mazi* 馬子" (chick) modified by the adjectives "*xiao* 小" (little) and "*lao* 老" (old) may potentially offend female readers. However, the subtle irony behind this choice can be easily explained. It is the little sister who, having gone through a feminist phase and previously unearthed hidden ideological issues in Datou Chun's writings (Zhang 2000: 29), grants authorization to the "evils" of male language simply by employing her signature phrase: "What's the point? [...] Moreover, I like to say whatever is on my mind" (Zhang 2000: 35).

> If I had died during the time I was a tiny feverish ant, I probably never would have become a guy who only knew how to carry out *ceremonies of the game of the flesh* (*quti youxi yishi* 軀體遊戲儀式) (Zhang 2008: 143).[6] Or maybe a part of me really did perish in the flames of my high fever, and the part left only knew how to seek out shells of flesh of the same nature as my own—shells of flesh that don't even like themselves (Zhang 2000: 84).

These shells of flesh, engaging in the "ceremonies of the game of flash," are analogous to the empty shells of words devoid of meaning—lies—that Datou Chun employs to celebrate other ceremonies, those of language and narrative. Interestingly, Datou Chun, the protagonist of *Wo Meimei*, is a professional writer and bears a striking resemblance to Zhang Dachun himself. In the chapter "On Treatment" (*Guanyu Zhiliao* 關於治療), Datou Chun reveals the titles of his published short-stories: the winning-prize story *Touming Ren* 透明人 ("The Invisible Man;" Zhang 2000: 66) and *Jiangjun bei* 將軍碑 (The General's Monument;" Zhang 2000: 69)—which actually two works by Zhang Dachun published respectively in the literary supplement of the *Zhongguo Shibao* 中國時報·人間副刊 ("China Times") on the 13th-14th of April 1986, and on the 3rd-4th of October 1986.

This transition from fiction to nonfiction blurs the distinction between the two and allows readers to question the fictional nature of Datou Chun, even entertaining the possibility that he serves as Zhang Dachun's *alter ego*. Notably, Zhang Dachun's literary journey underwent extensive experimentation, much like Datou Chun's sexual experience. He explored various literary genres, styles, and narrative techniques, employing lies and other devices in an attempt to revive the fundamental entertainment function of fiction.[7]

In this way, Zhang Dachun enhances the dual layers of meaning and postmodern irony in the novel. Readers can choose between two possible interpretations: one may entrust the content of the novel and believe the autobiographical references, or one may engage with its ironic elements and appreciate the absurdity to celebrate, as Barthes puts it, the adventure of language.

[6] The text highlighted in italic is my own translation. Berry translated it as "a redundant ceremony of flesh," which, in my opinion, misleads the reader regarding the playful linguistic game crafted by the author.

[7] A different interpretation of Datou Chun's lies on sex and his literary experimentation is offered by Wu Chiu Feng, who perceives them as a means of evading the irreparable injustices he has witnessed. These include the disintegration of his family, his father's role in driving his mother to madness, and the patriarchal structure of the society in which he lives. This perspective aligns with Ng's viewpoint, as he believes that beneath Zhang Dachun's writing strategy lies a single voice that holds disdain for everything. See Wu (2017: 124-127) and Ng (2007: 275).

2.3. The Oedipus complex

The Oedipus complex, which was mentioned in "Nausea," resurfaces in the eighth chapter, "The Awakening of Laughter" (*Xiao de Suxing* 笑的甦醒), where Datou Chun reformulates it. The little sister, having learned about it in school during her sophomore year, discusses it:

> Man's invention of the multitude of differing mythologies is a result of their jealousy of their fathers having possession of their mothers. In these myths, the hero slays an evildoer or monster and saves the kingdom. The saved kingdom is also another symbol for a kind of father. After the hero rescues the kingdom, the readers (naturally that includes the inventors of these myths) feel that they have repaid the debt owed to their fathers for raising them. Thus, with their consciences perfectly clear and their actions justified, they sever all relations with their fathers. The other meaning of ending relations with their father is that they can feel justified when, on a spiritual level, they possess their mothers (Zhang 2000: 101).

The little sister's words recall theories popular in Taiwan during the 1990s, particularly the "power complex" (*lian quan qingjie* 戀權情結). Coined by Zhu Yongxin 朱永新 in 1993, it reinterprets the Oedipus complex (*lian mu qingjie* 戀母情結) from a non-sexual perspective, considerating the Chinese family structure, value systems, and social order.

However, Datou Chun brings the discussion back to Freud's theories on the incest wish and confesses that, although he "never had the ability to go head-to-head with Freud on anything" (Zhang 2000: 102), he grew up with a constant fear of harboring a hidden monster within him capable of killing his father and raping his mother. After speaking with his sister, he "dreamed of her riding on a statue of a strange monster" and realized she was astride him. Thus, the Oedipus complex is reformulated, displacing mother-son incest with sister-brother incest. Horrified by this thought, Datou Chun admits to himself, "Actually, you can fall in love with your sister," confirming an accusation made by one of his girlfriends. Though the sexual desire for a blood relative frightens him, "all that was left of [his] grimace were two slightly upturned edges of the mouth. It looked like a smile" (Zhang 2000: 103).

In Freudian terms, admitting and accepting his sexual drive for his sister implies that the castration threat, which inhibits primitive desires, failed to work, and thus, these primal desires were not repressed. Consequently, the second stage of the Oedipus complex, the identification with the father, could not occur. In other words, Datou Chun did not internalize the parental authority in his psyche, resulting in the absence of a super-ego (Freud 1964: 66-67). Moreover, if we consider that the "father" can be seen as the representation of national or cultural identity, it can be concluded that Datou Chun did not identify himself with his father and did not desire to be like him. One could argue that this attitude is closely tied to Zhang Dachun's personal experience as is a second-generation

mainlander, a writer who experienced a "representation crisis" during the post-martial law era, consequently struggling to identify with the Taiwanese experience.

Yet, we must bear in mind that Datou Chun's reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex and its acceptance, regardless of its frightfulness, are resolved with a smile. This resolution extends to language and narrative as well. Once again, readers are presented with a choice: they can either immerse themselves in the emotional aspects of the authenticity of language and narrative, or they can detect the ironic elements stemming from their inherent propensity for falsehood. With the smile that concludes the chapter, Datou Chun suggests following the second path.

3. The "death" of the lying author

The references to the child's psychosexual development and sexual behavior play a crucial role in *Wo Meimei*, leading to the reconstruction of Zhang Dachun's poetics of the lie with its ironic aspects. However, further discussion on the ambiguity of half-fictional and half-factual Datou Chun is needed to demonstrate the referential fallacy of those lies. While the readers are encouraged not to trust the novel's "referential" content due to the lying essence of language and narrative, they may also be justified in suspecting that the numerous references to the real Zhang Dachun's literary and personal experiences are "real" after all. This ambiguity can be resolved by trusting the author when, in *Wo Meimei*'s preface to the 2008 edition, he reveals, "that I almost wasn't a real I" (*nage wo, sihu bushi zhen wo* 那個我，似乎不是真我) (Zhang 2008: 8). Alternatively, we can look at the entire structure of the novel, including its paratext, in search of an answer.

When the novel was published in 1993, the author's name that appeared on the front cover and spine of the book was Datou Chun's, while Zhang Dachun's name faded into the background and was only shown on the back cover. Consequently, Datou Chun is not only the narrator and the writer of the short-stories mentioned in the novel but is also purportedly the "author" of Wo Meimei. Drawing on Eco's terminology, Datou Chun appears to be the "empirical author" of both the stories described in the novel and the novel itself. As an empirical author, he discusses story-telling and fictional writing, asserting his rights over his texts. With its focus on the process of fictional authorship and composition, *Wo Meimei* can be considered a metafictional novel that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to raise questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. This approach aligns with Waugh's characterization of metafiction, which highlights the novel's deliberate intention to explore the intricate connections between fiction and reality (Waugh 2003: 2).

On the other hand, the little sister, who behaves like the first reader of the brother's published stories, can be regarded as the "empirical reader." She analyzes Datou Chun's stories by comparing their contents with the experiences of the brother, showcasing her ability to perceive the profound intricacies of language manipulation (Zhang 2000: 65). She even accuses the brother of concealing real people within the characters of his short-stories, including individuals from their own family. For example, she finds references to their mother in "The Invisible Man" (Zhang 2000: 68) and to their grandfather, with a bit of their mother and their father, in "The General's Monument" (Zhang 2000: 69-70). In Eco's terms, she "use[s] the text as a container for [her] own passions" and "superimpose[s] [her] own expectations" (Eco 1994b: 8, 10).

In response, the empirical author Datou Chun cannot help but confirm her hypotheses and confess his textual strategies in composing fiction:

> All I do is take those little details of life that are lacking and add a little of something else; I take D that occurred during A time at B place to C person, and rewrite it in E time at F place to G person. Then I add a bit of material H or remove a tad of K—did I forget I and J? Oh, I'm saving them so critics and readers will have space to exercise their imagination. In that space, the critics and readers will believe that enclosing a living person in an eleven-square-foot cement coffin is a stroke of originality, full of symbolism and hidden meaning (Zhang 2000: 64).

However, the relationship between the brother and the sister—the empirical author and the empirical reader—appears to be imbalanced. They engage in debates about the composition and meaning of fiction, with each of them advocating their own opinions, and Datou Chun asserting his rights. As noted by David Wang in 1993, this relationship is not even clear in the title itself, as *wo* 我 ("I")—the first-person narrator Datou Chun—and *meimei* 妹妹 ("little sister") are the two components of the novel's title and its linguistic construction allows for three different interpretations based on the suitable grammatical relations of the Chinese language. *Wo* can be read as a possessive adjective (*wo de* 我的), as Michael Berry interpreted it in his English translation of the title "My Kid Sister." However, there are two other possibilities: one is the juxtaposition of *wo* and *meimei*, which may indicate an equivalence, i.e. *wo yu meimei* 我與妹妹 ("My sister and I"); the other is the apposition of the two terms, meaning that one describes or defines the other, i.e. *wo·meimei* 我·妹妹 ("I, my sister;" Wang [1993] 2001: 28).

Wang's observations, as remarked in the title of his article "Wo Meimei VS. Meimei Wo" 我妹妹 VS.妹妹我 ("I sister VS. Sister I"), can serve as a valuable resource for exploring the relationship between the empirical author and the empirical reader. They can also aid in resolving the ambiguity

surrounding the connection between Datou Chun and Zhang Dachun, thereby uncovering Zhang Dachun's ideas about the interplay between fiction and reality.

The first interpretation—"my kid sister"—highlights the supremacy of *wo* over *meimei* and, consequently, the dominance of the author Datou Chun over the reader, the kid sister. This emphasizes the author's function, enabling Datou Chun to provide his subjective viewpoint and "impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes 1977: 147). The author's "person" remains of paramount importance and continues to reign.

In contrast, the other two interpretations emphasize the "birth of the reader," but in different ways. According to the first one, where *wo* and *meimei* are placed on the same level as "my sister and I," it implies that the functions of the author and the reader are also on equal footing. They can cooperate or even engage in arguments while seeking meaning, leading to the pursuit of a final signified. This is the game Datou Chun and the little sister play in the novel. It can be observed that the "persons" of the author and the reader still remain the main focus, and thus, "the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic" (Barthes 1977: 147).

Lastly, the most suggestive interpretation brings a change of perspective that aligns with the loss of identities. Through the interpersonal identification between *wo* and *meimei* "I, my sister"—the author coincides with the reader, and both become "subjects" rather than "persons." As Barthes asserts, "linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*" (Barthes 1977: 145), and the same applies to the reader. By creating the idea of the reader, the reader also becomes a narrative construction. In Eco's terms, *wo* represents the model author, while *meimei* represents the model reader. This defined model reader is genetically imprinted in the text, and "[s]ince the intention of the text is basically to produce a model reader able to make conjectures about it, the initiative of the model reader consists in figuring out a model author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text" (Eco 1992: 64). In this way, the empirical author Zhang Dachun, through the model reader *meimei* and the model author Datou Chun, emphasize the genetically imprinted fictional significance of narrative.

Drawing on Barthes's concept, this marks the "death of the author," which reveals that "writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (Barthes 1977: 142). It is through this perspective that we can potentially resolve the ambiguity in the relationship between Datou Chun and Zhang Dachun, declaring the "death of the lying author" and embracing the plurality of the text and, ultimately, the entertaining function of fiction.

4. Conclusion

As illustrated, Zhang Dachun appears to have been strongly influenced by postmodern techniques and aesthetics. Specifically, he seems to have embraced Eco's and Barthes's ideas regarding the inherent deceitful nature of language and the negation of the author's and the writing's identities. In *Wo Meimei*, the exploration of sexual instincts and experiences of two adolescent children is intentionally fabricated to lose their referentiality and convey deeper meanings. Freudian theories are reinterpreted, personal experiences are given a political twist, and even the role and function of the author, the reader, and the text itself are examined, all with the intention of eliciting a smile from the reader.

However, it is important to note that Zhang Dachun's reception of postmodernism is localized to a Taiwanese perspective. By emphasizing the personal experience during the military service, the author's "representation crisis," the reinterpretation of the Oedipus complex, and the creative process of writing, Zhang Dachun's lies do not reflect the broader Taiwanese postmodern condition but rather represent the experiences of some writers within the *juancun* literary movement. The outcomes of these lies may have both tragic and comic outcomes: they can entangle readers in the existential dilemmas of a particular group of Taiwanese writers or reveal the ironic underpinnings of *Wo Meimei*'s fabrications.

Moreover, the metafictional discussion on the roles of the writer and the reader, which highlights the self-reflexivity of the story, prompts us to delve into their function and significance. David Wang's intriguing interpretation of the title as an equivalence—"I, my sister"—can be expanded to proclaim the "death of the lying author" and interpret the text in Barthes's lens as a writing where plurality thrives. Post-martial law Taiwan can be aptly described as a place of multiplicity and hybridity, as emphasized by a political scientist who stated, "There is practically no place like Taiwan—great tradition, small island; conservative state, drastic change; cultural imperialism, committed Nationalism; localist sentiment, cosmopolitan sophistication" (Winckler 1994: 22). This quote captures the unique characteristics and complexities of Taiwan, where diverse elements coexist and intertwine, creating a distinct socio-cultural landscape.

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Ludovica Ottaviano received her PhD in Science of Interpretation from the University of Catania, with a research focus on the reception of Umberto Eco's works in China and Taiwan. Her scholarly contributions include: "Il nome della rosa's translations in the Chinese language." *Signs and Media* 2 (2022): 1-20; "Lies and fiction in Zhang Dachun's Xiaoshuo bailei." In: 異口同「聲」—探索臺灣現代文學創作的多元發展 [Exploring Sinophone Polyphony – Voices of Modern Literature in Taiwan], edited by Christian Soffel 蘇費翔 and Chien Juo-ping 簡若玶, 211-238. Taipei: Xiuwei zixun: 2022.

She has taught Chinese language and philology at the University of Catania and enriched her academic background by attending courses at various universities in China, including BFSU (Beijing), Wuhan University (Wuhan), and Sichuan University (Chengdu). Currently, she is a postdoctoral researcher for the ERC project "INSCRIBE: Invention of Scripts and their Beginnings" at the University of Bologna, where her research interests span the invention of Chinese writing and cognitive approaches to the development of ancient Chinese scripts.

Ludovica can be reached at: ludovica.ottaviano@unibo.it