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Echoes of Jaspers' concept of 'boundary situation' in two novels

Abstract: Jaspers' concept of 'boundary situations' involves experiences such as struggle, death, suffering, fortune, guilt, etc., all of which are important themes in literature. The artistic processing and literary imagination of these themes have resulted in monumental great works. Taking these works as a mirror to investigate the collective mentality of a certain era or society can provide a reference for human beings to help them overcome the difficulties of existence, even if it might only be a utopia. The two best-selling novels selected for this article are vivid interpretations of 'boundary situations'. Though born from very different backgrounds, in both stories the public political discourse is hidden in the destiny of the individual. This is yet another reminder of Jaspers' dual identity as psychiatrist and public intellectual.

Keywords: Boundary situations, Karl Jaspers, *The Grand Hotel*, *To live*

1 Borders and chances of the concept 'boundary situation'

It is generally accepted that it was Karl Jaspers who first proposed the term 'Grenzsituation', or 'boundary situation' (also translated as 'limiting situation', 'border situation', 'ultimate situation') in *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (1919). 'Boundary situation' was often briefly conceptualised in his other works, such as *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (1931), *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (1946), *Philosophie* (1932), *Von der Wahrheit* (1947), and *Einführung in die Philosophie* (1950). In his earlier works, he explored the issue from a psychological perspective. The description of boundary situations is intended to be a premise for the psychology of mental types (Geistestypen) because "to raise the question of mental types is to raise the question of where human beings find support in the face of boundary situations" (Grieder 2009). In *Allgemeine Psychopathologie*, he repeats that situations are imperative in the present, variable in the future, and can be intentionally created as human situations. However, as long as the ultimate situation exists, it inevitably determines the totality of life (e.g. inescapable death, guilt, struggle), even if this situation is hidden or not per-

ceived in daily issues. What one really is and can be is ultimately derived from the experience, acquisition, and transcendence of the boundary situation.

In the 1956 edition of the second volume of his *Philosophie*, he stated again: As Dasein, we can only avoid boundary situations by closing our eyes to them. In the world we want to maintain our existence by expanding it; we relate to it without question, mastering and enjoying it or suffering from it and succumbing to it; but in the end there is nothing left but to surrender. We therefore react meaningfully to boundary situations not through planning and calculation in order to overcome them, but through a completely different activity, the becoming of the existence possible within us; we become ourselves by entering the boundary situations with an open eye. They become recognizable only externally to knowledge, tangible as reality only for existence. Experiencing boundary situations and existing are the same thing (PhII: 204).

“Jaspers holds that since one cannot escape from death, one should face up to it with dignity, accept it and come to terms with it, instead of living with the fear of it. Facing up to one’s own death and integrating it into one’s existence may lead to the fullness and richness of the experience of life” (Peach 2008: 85).

Jaspers’ concept of ‘boundary situations’ sheds light on the extreme situations of life. It cannot be denied that reflection on such extreme situations of life provides valuable insight into the human condition. However, he should have been aware of the dangers of ‘boundary situations’, and in his publications and speeches after the Second World War, he no longer deliberately developed the concept, but focussed more on solutions. For example, on how to achieve understanding and solidarity among people through open and honest communication, thus promoting understanding and unity among people. It is worth noting that he no longer emphasised the state of emergency and immediacy created by the constraints of the situation. The state of emergency was precisely the keynote of the new objective philosophy that prevailed in the 1920s. In a state of emergency, everything can be unorthodox, all everyday rationality can be suspended and put on ice. In this way, a group, nation, a state of emergency can justify its own initiative with a gesture of self-defence (Eilenberger 2009). Meanwhile, we see the boundary or critical moments of the ‘boundary situation’ itself: when it moves from the individual to the public political sphere.

If we trace back to the original context of the boundary situation, to Jaspers’ constant concern for the individual’s state of being, then it is evident that the concept is profoundly dialectical and ultimately points to individual positive action. The boundary situation points first and foremost to the individual’s existential experience. By coming to the boundaries of everyday life, one must intentionally or compulsively change one’s way of being, and at the same time stimulate unseen

potentialities. The conscious confrontation of boundary situations can only be courageous and justified in the context of the individual's experience of growth.

To summarise, although Jaspers was not the first in history to focus on the boundary situation, he was the first to treat the combination ('Grenze and Situation') as a fixed pair ('Grenzsituation'), with influences ranging from psychiatry to political philosophy, from the individual soul to the collective spirit. Instead of criticising the situation itself, he was concerned with providing care and guidance to the destined individuals in all situations. It is not difficult to understand that the boundary situation has a natural affinity with literature centred on the little people: it focuses on the individual soul and highlights the problems of the time, but without going into how social problems arise and how they are solved. In such works, the fate of the individual is always metaphorical. In other words, it is usually through these typical figures that we get to know the picture of special times or look back on ourselves. In this typicality lies the author's long-term observation of the Lebenswelt and his or her philosophical reflection on the individual in a boundary situation.

Jaspers' concept of the boundary situation, the limiting experience of struggle, death, suffering, chance, guilt, etc., are precisely the most important motives in literature. If a book can focus on different types of boundary situations in a person, or even a group of people, i. e., if it concentrates these themes strongly on typical characters and does not limit itself to the situation of a single individual, then it is practicing a kind of soul care in a higher sense. The artistic treatment and literary imagination of these themes build an infrastructure in great works that also serve as a mirror for future generations; if these works serve as a mirror for the collective mentality of a certain era and society, they may provide people with a reference point to help in overcoming existential difficulties, even if it may be only a utopian ideal. In these stories, public political discourse is always hidden in the background of personal destiny. This is all the more reminiscent of Jaspers' dual identity as psychiatrist and public intellectual. Through the vivid interpretation of boundary situations in literature, we can perhaps better understand the implicit writing contained in those great works that run through the history of human thought.

2 The acute boundary situations in the "*Grand Hotel*"

In 1929, Vicky Baum was already a bestselling novelist and feature writer in Germany and Austria when she wrote a new metropolitan novel about an 'atypical'

character in a typical environment: Kringelein, who comes from a small-town and tries to end his life at one of the most luxurious hotels in Berlin. The character is based on a person Baum met at the age of 14. She was a harpist at the time, performing a programme with the local choir, when she saw a small, thin man singing the tenor solo (King 1988). Baum couldn't get the lingering memory of the man's sad demeanour out of her mind, and so Otto Kringelein was born. She wrote the story of the ailing Kringelein in her exercise book: he was unhappily married, diagnosed with stomach cancer and soon to die, and then he decided to spend all his savings in the course of a week. Twenty years later, she revived the writing project, cancelled back the story and concentrated on Otto Kringelein's three or four days, shaping *The Grand Hotel* (*Menschen im Hotel*) into Noah's Ark (Gruber 2007).

The "*Grand Hotel*" was immediately brought to the stage and screen in Europe and the United States, and the response was unprecedented. All six characters in the novel were played by major Hollywood stars, a rarity in film history. Baum wrote the sad, middle-aged man into one of her most successful novels to date, but the reception of the novel apparently overlooked the significance of this work, resulting in the novel and its author receiving little attention from the academy thereafter. For most of the decades after its publication, the book was labelled popular fiction, entertainment romance, and Baum herself, despite her emigration to the United States and her Jewish identity, was long disregarded and excluded from literary history. This exemplary work of grouping characters in German novels is a masterful interpretation of such highly popular storytelling themes as money, love, and death. However, critics have neglected the novel's most important characters and ignored the central question of how people fight against nihilism, especially at a critical time when everyone had to find a meaning for their lives amidst the interwar years. Only recently has scholarship pointed out that "*Grand Hotel*" is one of the most important novels of the Weimar Republic (Streitler-Kastberger 2013).

It is a book of metropolitan experiences and identity crises, hopes and hardships of the fallen aristocrat, the over-excited artist, the injured doctor, the dying accountant, the traveling factory owner, and the poor beauty. Of all these people, the accountant Kringelein is the one who is most alien to the surroundings. He was born in Fredersdorf, an unknown small town, where he spent his entire life. Even when he arrives in Berlin, he still wears his old coat, and the 'hungry' pinch of Nez swallows everything in an instant (Baum 1929/2008). As a cotton company accountant who has lived his whole life at a snail's pace in a small town, mostly scrimping and saving, he is now forced to make ends meet, has become plagued by illnesses, and can no longer even afford a dog. From the moment he steps through the revolving door, he hits a wall at every turn. His clothes,

his words, his walk, his mentality – none of this fits the image of a luxury hotel guest.

Why is he here? To make a spectacle of himself? Or is there something else going on? As it turns out, he has been told by his doctor that his days are numbered, so he has decided to take most of his savings and the fortune he had secretly inherited from his father, and start a new life of a different kind in the most expensive hotel in the capital of the Weimar Republic. Baum later wrote in her autobiography that she deliberately did not mention Kringelein's existence in the small town and only wrote about those last days of his coveted life. Kringelein was an ordinary accountant, unable to recognise the limits of a luxurious life, and his experiences serve as a suggestion of perspective to the reader, for those who want to go on adventures in the world of wealth and high society (Saletta 2005). The desire for a rich and privileged life emphasises the role of money as the driving force of the narrative, which also builds up a distinctive 'Zeitgeist'.

In this story set in a large hotel, everyone below the surface is more or less in a boundary situation, in addition to the similar physical, emotional, and mental states of pain and sorrow that pervade. The exhaustion of a little person who has brought his life savings to wait for death in the most luxurious hotel in a far-away capital, where he has been turned away twice and passed from hotel to hotel, is obvious to us all. His exhaustion and rejection arouse the compassion of Dr. Ottenschlag, who even offers to give him his room. What really makes them friends is that they learn of their respective misfortunes in their conversations. They share pain and sorrow with each other, though they overcome their pain in different ways: Kringelein relieves his pain with baths and pills, Ottenschlag with morphine injections.

Other characters in the novel also unknowingly find themselves in boundary situations. The ballet dancer Grusinskaja tries to commit suicide as her career is at an end. Baron Geigern is a fallen aristocrat with polite and noble disposition, but actually earns his living by stealing from hotel guests and eventually dies in a hotel room, at the scene of a theft. The 19-year-old Flämmchen, beautiful and naive but from a poor background, improves her quality of life by secretly falling in love with various rich men. The "*Grand Hotel*" becomes a condensation and manifestation of various boundary situations.

3 Ottenschlag: man in chronic boundary situations

Had he not known that he was terminally ill, Kringelein would never have taken this step. This is what Jaspers emphasised in his interpretation of the 'boundary situation', the breakthrough from the everyday 'Dasein' to real existence. Only if we see this can we not allow the theme of the novel to be diluted by the love story of a baron and a dancer: It is the story of the rebirth of a miserable little man in a boundary situation. The people involved in shaping his new life are Dr. Ottenschlag, Baron Geigern, and the young secretary Flämmchen. Of these people, Dr. Ottenschlag is the other, who finds himself in chronic 'boundary situations' throughout the story, which he is never able to break through.

Ottenschlag and Kringelein share the same grief with different borders. If Kringelein corresponds to the boundary situation of death, Ottenschlag is more complex: the wars left him with irreparable physical pain and psychological shadows – he had a handsome face, but only half of it is left because the other half was destroyed by a firebomb and turned into a blur of indiscriminate stitches. Meanwhile, the trauma continues to reshape the man so that he always lives in a boundary situation – a doctor who saves and needs to be saved, who lives and dies at the same time. As the loneliest person in the entire story, he keeps witnessing many of the thrilling moments of that era and participates in the lives of others in subtle ways. He waits from beginning to end for someone to take care of him and need him, so it is not as if he actively turns away from people and is withdrawn by nature. His loneliness is not on a metaphysical level, but is a highly visible microcosm of the times.

Ottenschlag is the only critical voice in the novel. He seems indifferent to everything in the Grand Hotel, oblivious to the drama of life in the revolving doors; in fact, he is disgusted by the superficial bustle of the world but sympathetic to the underdog in his predicament. On the edge of nihilism, he is cynical and believes that all people have no faces, referring to the personalities and hearts underneath the faces. However, he is the only one in the whole story who does not have a whole face. At night he dreams of a family, wife, and child. But when the child cries out in fear at the sight of his non-existent half-face, when firebombs spread to his bed, the beautiful dream instantly turns into a nightmare. There are no clues to the age, origin or background of this lonely forgotten doctor, on whom time has left not the marks of natural aging, but the devastating consequences of an act of war. He returns from the battlefield, waiting in vain for official compensation or relief, although he has not even been given honour or recognition.

He never unpacks his suitcase when he arrives in his hotel room, ready to set off again, with no destination in mind.

Ottenschlag is the one who has the most intention and the ability to save people, the saviour that people need most in the boundary situation, even though he too is waiting to be rescued. His painkillers, the words he says to soothe Kringelein during his attack, contrast with his previous indifference. Jaspers' coping mechanism of the 'boundary situation' does not ask about the permanence of the action, because the situation cannot promise this. The temporary and the eternal are often parallelised in this story. For the dying Kringelein, painkillers are temporary as watching boxing matches, motor races, and a life of high society extravagance, even the last embrace of a beautiful woman. For Ottenschlag, the meaningless spinning of the revolving door is timeless, the fruitless waiting is timeless, the drifting and loneliness is timeless. Aside from the visible half of his face and the after-effects of diphtheria bacillus he contracted on the battlefield, these dictate that his body will not live much longer either.

The historical and social issues invoked in the novel are also taken up in the brief conversations. Baron Geigern asserts that he enjoys life, though at the cost of forgetting the past. The scars on his head from the war will never fade. It is not only a souvenir of World War I, but also a hand-stitched creation by Dr. Ottenschlag. That memory alludes to the Battle of Fromelles. And the Battle of Fromelles, as part of the Battle of Verdun, ranks as one of the worst battles in the history of the First World War. The meeting between the Doctor and the Baron in the hospital was inevitable and coincidental. Up to this point, the Doctor has mentioned three battles – the 1914 battle in southern Belgium between the Germans and the British, French and Belgian allies, the 1916 battle of Verdun in north-east France, and the battle of Namibia in south-west Africa.

Historicity (the past), death (as a witness), suffering (physical and mental), struggling (endless waiting), all these important aspects of the boundary situation apply to Ottenschlag without exception. He is the most sober of the hotel guests, a wise man who looks at the emptiness beneath the glamour and observes it in all its manifestations. He is also a man who lives on the edge of nihilism. The dying Kringelein gives him strength and hope for a time, as the dying man relies on him to see his worth. But it is precisely this realistic and metaphorical figure that is missing in the 1959 version of the Franco-German co-production. The character himself has a critical undertone, he is a victim of the war and a series of state policies, but again, the author does not go into any more detail.

Because of the novel's subtle dissection of the modern elements of the Grand Hotel and the incisive portrayal of its typical characters, the contemporary philosopher Sloterdijk quotes excerpts from the novel in a special 'Exkurs' in his philosophical monograph *"Kritik der zynischen Vernunft"*, in particular the

portrayal of Ottenschlag: In Vicky Baum's successful novel *"Menschen im Hotel"*, Ottenschlag is a man destroyed by life, who believes that he knows that 'real life' is always future for us, past and beyond, that 'real life' can never be grasped, and ultimately will dissolve because of all the waiting. His eyes are not deceived by the magic of the Grand Hotel, especially at a time when business is dead and the whole world is pursuing its own vices and businesses (Sloterdijk 1983).

4 A utopia beyond the borders of death

What does it take to rise above the everyday conditions of survival? In this story, more than good fortune, it comes from people supporting and fraternising with each other in boundary situations. Kringelein is newly appreciated socially because he shows the poor 19-year-old girl her worth as a human being with his compliments (and more importantly, he is a rich man). His generosity, forgiveness, and later restraint in dealing with her is inherited from Baron Geigern's kindness to him. The terminal illness pushes him to gain the courage to be reborn, and is more than anything else the trigger that turns many critical moments. What could have been the next target of the Baron's thieves turns out to be the ultimate unfulfilled goal. Baron Geigern's sympathy for a dying man puts an end to the theft in progress and indirectly brings him into the room that causes his death. All of this is possible because of the existential listening and talking that takes place between the two.

Listening, clarifying and openness in communication are recurring themes in Jaspers' later work, especially in his postwar public speeches and university lectures, and in his shift from philosophy to political and public issues. His interpretations of the boundary situation at different times vary slightly in emphasis and may even give the impression of inconsistency. I think this is mainly due to his consistent honesty. Because there is no law that applies absolutely, and even if a concept deals with a series of eternal topics such as death, suffering, and guilt, it has to be experienced by an individual in a specific situation. Therefore, what is more valuable about the boundary situation is that it stimulates the existential consciousness and the questioning of values. That is, how one can survive desperation and consciously live towards death. It inspires people to reflect on the boundaries of existence in different situations. Being aware of one's limitations is not the same as being in a boundary situation; a boundary situation is a higher kind of demand on one to consciously face one's boundaries, or death.

For Jaspers, death is the ultimate boundary condition, which may become the unique boundary experience of existence. The persistence of one's future death is part of the inherent human condition that confronts one with the inescapable fact

that one must die. This certainty of one's finitude may lead to existential anxiety (Angst), which can be described as the fear of sinking into nothingness. Although one can never experience one's own death, the existential anxiety of 'non-being' in the face of death can be a powerful boundary experience. For the average person, most such moments occur under acute boundary situations. With sudden awareness of one's own finitude a person may be empowered. Subsequently, the individual may find the courage to face death with dignity and accept it. (A striking example: in the Taiwanese movie *"The Pig, the Snake, and the Pigeon"*, released in March 2024, the main character, Chen Guilin, thinks he is dying of cancer and does something amazing, and turns death into a kind of life education. Because when this man knows he is going to die, he raises the question of the value of 'leaving a name behind after death'. When a mafia hitman who has been on the run for four years realises that he is only number three on the most wanted list, he experiences an existential crisis, an awakening. He decides to eliminate the first two and turn himself in.)

In *"The Grand Hotel"*, Kringelein's fear of death triggers an adventure, accompanied by fresh excitement, friendship, and sympathy, although the great support behind all this is money. In this case, moments gain the meaning of eternity. Dr. Ottenschlag's hovering in a boundary situation eventually turns into a stoicism and endurance, a witness of the past disaster and the coming crisis. It is conceivable that he would have continued to give a helping hand to those who needed it until the last moments of his life, even if he would have to go through more suffering. Thus we find a utopian literary story that resonates with the philosophy of existence, and which teaches how to live with dignity and face suffering.

5 *"To Live"*, a book full of suffering and deaths

Suffering is another specific boundary situation that we cannot ignore; suffering can happen without us taking any action and it can affect our lives in different forms. Suffering can be physical or mental, and each of us may have experienced both at some point in our lives to varying degrees. Whatever form it takes, suffering is clearly a distressing and limiting condition of existence. For Jaspers, the boundary situation of suffering is important because it helps people to recognise themselves, it awakens one's 'Existenz', one's existential consciousness. Since suffering is an unavoidable part of human existence, the best way to cope with it is to accept it and face it, not to run away from it.

The dialectic of suffering and acceptance is supremely reflected in a widely known novel in contemporary Chinese literature. It is a bestseller, has been translated into many languages, and was quickly adapted into a film that won the

Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1994. Although called "*To Live*", it is based on the life of a single character stringing together more than half a century of Chinese history in segments, each segment of which ends with the death of a family member of the protagonist, along with the end of an era. Remarkably, there is very little mourning in this novel, nor is there any detail about the pain of sorrow. As the protagonist's world is constantly being destroyed, there is no trace of psychological problems, nor is there any intentional use of religious or metaphysical means of self-healing. Boundary situations come one after another, and the protagonist has no time to release his emotions and reflect on cause and effect, but simply continues to live, yet not at the cost of forgetting (the story is based on his selected memories). The entire narrative condenses the history of suffering experienced by the Chinese people during most of the 20th century.

This is not a psychological novel, but rather a life story that overlaps family history with social history, and personal growth experiences with social history changes. The novel is based on the memories of an old farmer, starting from China's civil war after 1945, and contains symbols of the time such as the founding of the People's Republic, land reform, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution (the Four Olds, the Class Struggle, and the Red Guards), and natural disasters. Because it touches on politics and historical issues that have not yet been fully discussed by the public, the film adaptation has not yet been able to be fully released in China, even though the novel has been a bestseller for over thirty years and is one of the few contemporary novels that has long been discussed in academic and public intellectual circles. From the point of view of narrative characterisation, the protagonist, as narrator, must compress his psychological activities to a minimum so that his narrative does not become too subjective and detrimental to the plot. Thus, the boundary situations in this novel are to a certain extent twofold, in a sense, with the personal and family on the one hand, and the social and contemporary on the other. The characters in the novel are always adapting to the times in one way or another, making no attempt to initiate change, but simply striving to live.

Fugui (meaning good fortune and wealth) is the son of a landowner's family, and he is addicted to eating, drinking, whoring and gambling. When his wife becomes pregnant and while she is about to give birth to their second child, he spends his days indulging at the gambling table and eventually loses his ancestral home, and his father dies of anger and grief. Fugui is accidentally conscripted and dragged to the battlefield of the civil war. After many years away from home, through defeat, capture and release, he returns home, only to learn that his wife has had to care for their son and daughter all alone after taking care of his mother in her final days. Life is miserable, but the family is happy when

they are reunited. Life has not substantially changed after liberation, and poverty and hunger have even increased. In *Fugui's* narrative, it is more about the family's misery and joy until the next death. In less than 200 pages, *Fugui's* father dies out of anger and sorrow, his mother dies of depression and sorrow, his comrade Lao Quan (meaning entirety) dies in battle, his son Youqing (meaning celebration) is drained of blood and dies in the hospital, his daughter Fengxia (meaning phoenix in the twilight) dies of post-partum haemorrhage, his son-in-law Erxi (meaning double happiness) dies a horrible death in a work-related injury, and his grandson Kugen (meaning bitter root) dies from eating bad steamed bread. Behind the frequent deaths are more absurd tragedies of the time – hunger has not yet been conquered, and humanity and human nature have not evolved with the times. *Fugui* is a participant and a narrator in this story. As a first-person narrator, he does not complain or criticise his life's encounters, but extends time and space in an idyllic picture.

Jaspers described four boundary situations: struggle (*Kampf*), death (*Tod*), chance (*Zufall*) and guilt (*Schuld*). In the trenches, *Fugui* experienced all four of these situations in almost no time at all. He was taken prisoner and dragged to the front lines of the civil war. He became involved in combat while having neither experience with fighting nor the will to fight. He was fortunate not to actually engage the enemy, but witnessed many life-and-death moments, sustaining food, friendship and optimism by scavenging from the belongings of dead soldiers with his comrades. The protagonist often talked about shedding tears, and all emotional expression stopped there. His comrade Lao Quan's dying sentence "I don't even know where I'm going to die", and *Fugui's* reflection on his mother not knowing where her son is until she died, form a wonderful resonance. The Chinese are very particular about returning to one's roots and resting in the ground, and have an obsession with space. Although knowing where one dies is not directly related to death itself, it is the last comfort of a person in a critical situation, a simple wish similar to religious conversion.

The people in the novel are not given a choice; their fates seem to have been predetermined, and there are no other possibilities. To live is the minimum requirement and the highest wish. Among the many moments of death, the most heartbreaking is the death of *Fugui's* son, Youqing. This death is the most unexpected in the whole story. Youqing had to walk a long way to school, as if he were running a long-distance race. One day, at the call of the school teacher, the students all ran to the hospital to donate blood to the governor's wife who was hemorrhaging after giving birth. Youqing was the first to run to the hospital and his blood type was a match. At last he was drained of blood and died. There is both inevitability and absurdity: 1. the life of a child was exchanged for the life of a woman in labour, and the hospital did not save a life but killed instead; 2. the

woman in labour was the governor's wife, who was a privileged person; and 3. the governor turned out to be Chunsheng (meaning born in the spring), a battle companion of Fugui's, complicating what should have been a father's revenge for his son. This outcome points to the ignorance of people and the wickedness of the system in that particular era, but these are suppressed in the film – the boy's death in the film results from the governor reversing his car and crashing into the courtyard wall, while the child takes a nap at the base of the wall and is crushed to death by the wall bricks. This change is already a weakening of the original plot, though it largely respects the spirit of the original in two ways: firstly, it emphasises the governor's own lack of evil intent, and secondly, it emphasises the governor's privilege.

The novel does not criticise a system. After this death, the protagonist puts his sadness in a natural description: "I looked at the path that curved towards the downtown, and I couldn't hear the sound of my son's barefoot running, and the moonlight shone on the path like salt" (Yu 2017). The light and salt in this sentence make a very vivid picture that implies hope and expresses sadness. It is even more moving without the excerpt of the bible context. I prefer to believe that it is a coincidence that it corresponds to 'the salt of the earth and the light of the world' in the Gospel according to Matthew. In that moment of grief, a father who lost his son suddenly made that road a special presence between heaven and earth. It seemed that fear, sadness, anxiety, and helplessness were all healed in an instant.

6 From writing about violence to celebrating life

What is most representative of the protagonist, however, is that in his recollections he has no moments of active reflection or awakening of consciousness, even after suffering various accidents and deaths. His patience and optimism are representative of many Chinese readers. Because the Chinese have no universal religious system, they beg for a different sense of community. Communism has served as such an alternative for some time in the past. All the unexpected deaths in the novel are related to the ideologies in different societies. Individuals are sacrificed in a variety of huge social systems. The only thing that remains constant is the belief that one has to live.

YU Hua is a contemporary Chinese novelist known for his writing about death and violence. This more or less has to do with his experience of witnessing his father's surgeries as a child and seeing the moment of death too early, but it is not enough to explain the consistent coldness in his narrative. It must be admitted that *"To Live"*, despite its series of deaths, is not cold. It constantly creates boundary situations through several deaths, but the protagonist does not become disil-

lusioned, vain, or escapist as a result. In his preface to the first Chinese edition (he later wrote five for the Taiwanese traditional version), Yu talked about this change in writing. He admitted that the tension with reality – though he did not explain what kind of reality – forced him to write and compromise, which made him an angry and indifferent writer for a long time. Later he realised that the mission of a writer is not to vent, not to accuse or expose, but to show people nobility. The nobility here was not that of mere beauty, but the transcendence that came from understanding all things, treating good and evil equally, and looking at the world with compassion. At the same time, he heard an American ballad, “The Old Black Man,” and was deeply touched by it. In the lyrics, the old Black Man has suffered all his life and his family has left him, but he still treats the world kindly, without a word of complaint. Both saying goodbye to cynicism and encountering an American folk song contributed to the writing of this book.

In the preface of the Korean version (1996: 10) three years later, the author wrote again: in our Chinese language, the word for the title “*To Live*” is full of power, and its power does not come from shouting or attacking, but from enduring, from enduring the responsibilities that life gives us, enduring the happiness and suffering, the boredom and mediocrity that it brings us. As a work, “*To Live*” tells of a friendship between a man and his destiny, the most touching friendship of all, for they appreciated each other and hated each other at the same time; neither of them could abandon the other and at the same time neither of them had any reason to complain about the other. They walked together on the dusty road when they were alive, and turned into rain and mud together when they died. At the same time, “*To Live*” is also about how people go through great suffering ... and about the fact that a man lives for the sake of living itself, not for the sake of anything other than living. Of course, “*To Live*” is also about how we Chinese have survived these decades (Yu 2017).

The author once said that an Italian high school student asked him a question: “Why did you make your novel about living rather than surviving in such an extreme environment? Where is the slight divide between living and surviving?” He replied: “In China, for people living at the bottom of society, life and survival are two sides of the same coin, and the slight division between them lies in the difference in direction. For *To Live*, life is how one feels about one’s own experience, while surviving is often a bystander’s view of someone else’s experience” (Yu 2017). In the preface of the English version (2002: 4), he talked again about the similarities between the old Black man and Fugui, thus talking about what people have in common and about boundaries. He argued that human experience, desire, imagination, and understanding cancel out all the different boundaries and allow a person to feel their own destiny from the experience of others.

Distances and boundaries between people are not determined by space and language. The reception of *“To Live”* in Taiwan, however, can prove that a good work can cross the limits of history and politics and produce lasting resonance. In an era when cultural exchanges are subject to many restrictions, the fact that a mainland novel can be a bestseller for several years in a row is phenomenal. The stoicism and open-mindedness it conveys is a kind of life wisdom. It may not be easy to discern a philosophy of survival or a boundary situation here, but if you go deeper into the text, you will find that Fugui has a kind of unbending toughness, which grows naturally along with the ups and downs of his life. He never resorts to metaphysical power or makes temporary preparations, but is completely rooted in the reality of life. He does not ask about karma or reincarnation, which the Chinese often use in mourning to heal themselves, but leaves his last kindness to an ox that is about to die of old age, a companion that urges forward while calling out for his dead relatives to help urge the ox on.

7 Conclusion

The two novels discussed above are both extremely different from each other in terms of their origins and narratives, and of the genius loci and the fate of the characters, but they also imply certain intrinsic connections, and the ‘boundary situation’ is an important link. The *“Grand Hotel”* portrays a lonely and sick man who walks from the shadow of death into the bright lobby of a luxury hotel, and walks out with hope and love; it also portrays a man who waits for hope at the same place, even though his life has been destroyed. *“To Live”* tells the story of an old man who never thinks of changing or running away from his place, and who continues to live on in the memories of his family members who all passed away. The former takes the initiative to change his life and try out new possibilities; the latter passively accepts the existing life without thinking of changing, but lives a life that is not depressing and empty.

These are two vivid literary echoes of Jaspers. At this point, I would like to go back a little further, to the ‘boundary situation’ that Jaspers experienced in his early years. The fact that he began his academic career in medicine and psychiatry was closely related to his health problems. Early on, it was estimated that he would not live past the age of 23, and under the care of his family he was able to revise this assessment: Jaspers lived to be 86. And so we realise that Fugui was almost never sick, never had a moment of despair caused by physical defects or health problems. So both stories somehow form a utopia, the former a utopia of regaining one’s own existence, the latter a utopia of never falling ill.

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