



■ Kantonsschule Hottingen

Finding the balance between accuracy, descriptiveness and a pleasurable narrative; the delicate art of writing an historical novel

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Abstract

In this paper, we will discuss the difficulties involved in producing an historical novel as a full-time high school student with no degree in History, English Literature, or equivalent experience in those fields. I will explain my motivations as to why I personally chose to embark on a journey through time, ancient chronicles and the depths of my imagination to create my very first work of historical fiction, *Yellow Sky*.

This paper also offers insight into the reality of the Asia-Pacific War of the twentieth century, a subject which, albeit ultimately unrelated to the setting I ultimately chose to address with my writing, I needed to plough through to conclude that it could not make for a better choice in light of the past and present geopolitical ambience surrounding it.

This paper also mentions various literary principles of Western and Asian origin that have helped shape my novel into the internationally accessible work I have wanted it to be.

This paper concludes with a self-evaluation of my performance throughout this project, based on an assessment of my compliance with various self-imposed guidelines, as well as a few thoughts on what I learnt throughout my endeavour to write a book.

1. Beginnings

In this chapter, I will explain what my motivation to produce a book was in the first place, why I chose to write a work of historical fiction and how I came up with an appropriate setting for my story. Simultaneously, we will also discuss the specifics of my modest background in writing and how I would research my chosen subject.

1.1 Why I chose to write a book for my graduation project

David Wechsler, a renowned Romanian-American psychologist of the twentieth century, defined psychological maturity as more than just the ability to behave ‘like an adult’ or to apply decent reasoning and common sense to any given situation. In a journal article he published in the spring of 1950, he further described maturity as the competence to respond to one’s environment being aware of the correct moment and location to produce a certain behaviour, consequently knowing when and when not to act, in accordance with the societal and cultural norms present in one’s community of residence.¹

Conversely, the term immaturity describes the span of time throughout which a developing animal, human or otherwise, experiments with life without the threat of major consequences under the aegis of his parents’ and teachers’ guardianship.² According to another psychologist of the last century, Erik Erikson, this stage of psychosocial development comes to an end when an adolescent emerges as “the person society expects one to become”³, therefore no longer seeing himself reliant on the protection, counsel and assistance of his guardians.

Typically, whether one can be considered mature or not is effectively assessed by judgment other than the one of the individual in question; by their mother’s, father’s, or in a legal context, by a given country’s legislation which almost always ties the concept of maturity to a specific age. In Switzerland for instance, the age of maturity, which determines a person’s capacity to act as an adult, is firmly set at eighteen years.⁴

What is assessed upon a Swiss high school student’s submittal of his graduation paper is not his capacity to consume strong alcohol, drive a car or gamble in a casino, however. From what I could gather, an excellent *Maturitätsarbeit* is supposed to be an emblematic attestation of the author’s qualification for university entrance, dubbed *Hochschulreife* in Swiss educational jargon. That being so, students are expected to select and address a suitable research topic in an objective

¹ Wechsler, D. Intellectual Development and Psychological Maturity.

² Bruner, J. Nature and uses of immaturity.

³ Wright, E. Erikson, identity and religion.

⁴ Art. 14 of the Swiss ZGB, paragraph B.

and factual manner, as they would in higher education.⁵ If they perform successfully on their paper's review and their grades in various other courses are deemed satisfactory upon evaluation, their *Hochschulreife* is then validated by little more than a 'maturity certificate', and upon its reception, the high school graduate may visit a university.

US-American high school students undergo a similar process during graduation; they are made to sit the SAT, an examination that tests their 'scholastic aptitude' and lays the groundwork for colleges to establish their admissions decisions upon.⁶

Personally, I strongly prefer this terminology – 'scholastic aptitude', instead of 'maturity', for, if we make use of David Wechsler's definition of true, psychological maturity, it quickly becomes apparent that scholastic aptitude or even academic performance has very little to do with whether a given individual is actually mature or not.

Ideally, scholastic aptitude comes with some degree of psychological maturity, but that is not necessarily always the case⁷ (to keep this paper as apolitical as possible, I will refrain from using the example of a certain head-of-state to further illustrate my point). Scholastic aptitude is not essential to the definition of psychological maturity, therefore I believe it is something that should be considered separately. In the Swiss education authorities' defence however, I must state that the term 'maturity' as used in the context of a 'maturity certificate' is never defined or stratified as anything other than a legally consequential synonym of *Hochschulreife*. Ergo, one could safely assume that the concept of 'maturity' as outlined by the Swiss government does in no way attempt to contest the legitimacy of the psychological definition of the same term. The way in which the Swiss education system views maturity is not incorrect – just different, and unerringly applicable in its designated context.

Yet, when I deliberated about what to do for my graduation project when I was first introduced to this task, the Swiss concept of 'maturity' did not align with my stance on the matter. I did not seek to prove my scholastic aptitude with a project that entails minimal research, questioning strangers and a healthy dose of quoting and paraphrasing to avoid seeing one's work caught by a plagiarism filter – I wanted to do something an *adult* would. Teenage presumptuousness prompted me to think that I could do better, and so, then-fourteen-year-old Arnaud Koglin, fresh out of secondary school, promised himself that he would do something only a truly mature and intellectual person could – he would write a book.

Today, I am very well aware that neither maturity nor a particularly high intellect are required to write a book, but to my own, retrospective horror, this was one of the many fixed beliefs I held when I entered the cantonal school of Hottingen for the first time. The adventure I would embark upon the moment I started working on this project would certainly disillusion me from my mistaken convictions – too many of them to count or even imagine. Howbeit, the point in writing a book as a testament

⁵ KSH Intranet > Dokumente > Verwaltungsdokumente > 04 – Interne Weisungen > 403_2_Maturitaetsarbeit_Wegleitung_2020.pdf > 1 Grundsätzliches.

⁶ The Princeton Review. What is the SAT?

⁷ Heath, D. Academic Predictors of Adult Maturity and Competence.

of my psychological maturity had been obvious to me from the start; by catapulting myself into such a difficult and time-consuming undertaking, I could prove to my mother, my father, my teachers and myself that I am fully capable of structuring and delivering my often scattered thoughts on paper, so that someone else could read and enjoy them. I wanted to show to the world that I could make sense of my munificent imagination, and that no prospect of potential failure could ever deter me. It would prove to be a journey of hardship, discovery and introspection; something I would be sure to remember for my entire life, and that was precisely what I wanted.

1.2 Why I chose to write historical fiction

Books have fascinated me ever since I was a little boy. Some of my earliest memories are of my father reading me stories before bed; of fantastical journeys, magic and monsters (as seen in the Wizard of Oz) but also of events that truly transpired, such as Marco Polo's expeditions across Asia or the conquests of Napoléon Bonaparte, who remains the foundation of my national pride as a Frenchman to this day. Hearing of his strategic prowess, his incredible ambitiousness and his amazingly powerful *Grande Armée* made me wish I had been born in an age other than the one of an ever-growing, global shift towards individualism.⁸

From that point onward, I would consume historical novels like an unstoppable firestorm of curiosity, burning through several thousands of pages in search of possibilities to dream away my modern existence and transport myself into a world where skyscrapers, smartphones and political correctness did not yet exist.

It was in the works of obscure GDR authors that I found the greatest solace, among them Kurt David's *Der Schwarze Wolf*⁹ and Ulrich Komm's *Der Admiral der Sieben Provinzen*¹⁰, both marvellous publications that German literary history has forgotten, or possibly never even discovered. The former followed the young Genghis Khan on his rise to power, the latter elaborated on Michiel de Ruyter's battles against the British Crown, subsequently explaining how the United Kingdom came to replace the Netherlands as the world's top naval power. Those books hailed from the dusty collection of my father, who grew up in the German Democratic Republic and for whom books were also his finest escape; in his case, from times of perceived unity and solidarity long gone by.¹¹

My passion for reading and history, paired with my expressive personality, eventually led me down the rabbit hole that is the world of online text-based roleplaying; a hobby I see as an utterly enriching way to explore one's potential for acting and storytelling. It is incredibly accessible; via forums or even via mainstream

⁸ Santos, H., Varnum, M., & Grossmann, I. Global Increases in Individualism.

⁹ Published by Verlag Neues Leben in East Berlin in 1966. Out of print and no longer commercially available; might still be traded as an antique by second-hand resellers. A sequel named *Tenggeri* was published in 1968 – the series was discontinued after that. The author is said to have died in 1994.

¹⁰ Published in East Berlin by Militärverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik in 1977. Out of print and no longer commercially available; can be found online, resold by collectors.

¹¹ Ahbe, T. Ostalgie: Zum Umgang mit der DDR-Vergangenheit in den 1990er Jahren.

social media platforms such as Discord, which boasts over 150,000 servers tagged as role-playing communities in many different languages, including but not limited to English, German, French, Polish, Chinese, Japanese and Brazilian Portuguese.¹²

The inner workings of such platforms are almost always the same; a certain person comes up with an intriguing setting for the roleplay, opens a forum or a server and invites others to create elaborate characters to act as and join in on the fun. The roleplay itself is held on a reactive, post-by-post basis, where a player writes up a message detailing their character's thoughts, speech and actions, and the other player(s) respond in kind, all while respecting the guidelines of the community and carrying themselves in a way that compliments the given platform's atmosphere.

It is through roleplaying online that I found my adoration for good writing, and learnt a lot about sociability, mindfulness and integration. A respectable roleplay server without those values at its core is virtually impossible to achieve, as is a smooth assimilation into a culture different from my original one, such as the Swiss.

The roleplay servers I would enjoy the most were those with historical settings, ranging from the dark ages to the Second World War. Evidently, I then also gathered most of my experience as a writer in those circles as they were packed with other history enthusiasts I could really resonate and create lasting friendships with.

The choice to write an historical novel hence came to me as naturally as breathing; there was hardly anything else I could have ever desired to write, apart from a dystopian novel or some original urban investigation drama, maybe.

I hoped that I would be able to breathe life into my ideas and make them tangible for others who may initially only hold minimal interest in them. One of the feelings I cherish most in life is to be fascinated by something – if I achieved that a single person would feel that way about the setting I chose whilst reading my book, then I would absolutely consider my project a grandiose success.

In a way, my resolve to write historical fiction can be summed up by my desire to prove to myself that I can share my interests with others in a different medium than spoken delivery, in which I frequently speak at such staggering speeds that what I say sometimes cannot be understood or followed as well as I would like. To explore the technicalities of my chosen subject or to produce an account of ultimate truth and flawlessness were not goals I ever sought to reach; as a high school student, devoid of any degree or much experience in life, I have never considered myself to be in a position where I could realistically do so.

Through writing an historical novel, I really wanted to capture my love for the chronicles of mankind, be they Western or Asiatic – alas, another fervent interest of mine would soon sway me to the extreme of the latter direction.

¹² According to statistics from DISBOARD | Public Discord Server List, a third-party service.

1.3 Land of the Rising Controversies

The year was His Imperial Majesty's second, the exact date the twelfth of February.

I remember having been incredibly exhausted the night before, for I had been writing for several hours on end and had hardly ever stopped to take breaks and reconsider my situation. A concept had enraptured my mind – a concept so bewitching that it was all I could think about. It needed to be committed to paper; its longing for immortalisation was passionate, burning – almost ferocious.

I had just started reading about World War II in the Pacific, drawing a new fascination for the conflict from an excellent book I cannot recommend enough, *Hirohito's War* by Francis Pike. It is acknowledged as the definite narrative of the Pacific War¹³ and received nothing but positive reviews from authoritative sources in military history reporting, such as *The Spectator*, *CHOICE* and *Foreign Affairs*. Reading it prompted me to develop a strong desire to research the actions of the belligerent countries myself, and possibly address it in a book of my own.

A soldier of the Imperial Japanese Army finds himself fighting for his country in the war-torn Asia of the late 1930s. As he witnesses the spectacle of horror that is the *Rape of Nanking*, he questions the purity of the Japanese cause, and is ushered into an identity crisis. If he is a harbinger of liberation from Western colonialism and his nation the guardian of the Pacific¹⁴, why then does he kill in the name of his ruler, the Emperor of the mightiest nation in the Far East? He deserts his division and is later captured by Japanese military police. An unlikely saviour then helps him narrowly avoid execution, and the reader is introduced to one of mankind's most brilliant military minds, the legendary Tiger of Malaya.

That was my initial concept for an historical novel; a story that would explore the issues that still divide Asia to this day, with allegations circulating that the Chinese authorities exaggerate the extent of the massacre for political gain¹⁵, and that the Japanese government tries to whitewash the massacre from public memory, approving textbooks written by ultranationalists to forcibly alter the historical narrative of the matter.¹⁶

Throughout the last few decades, the Nanking Massacre has remained a sensitive subject in Sino-Japanese relations.¹⁷ Although the two nations have made efforts to find a consensus on the matter¹⁸, its scope is still heavily debated, with vehement

¹³ According to Bloomberg, the book's publisher.

¹⁴ Rhodes, A. *Propaganda: The Art of Persuasion: World War II*, pp. 248.

¹⁵ Howard, F. *Everything under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power*.

¹⁶ Masalski, K. *Examining the Japanese Textbook Controversies*.

¹⁷ Warfare History Network. *Crime Against Humanity: China Has Never Forgotten Japan's Bloody Assault on Nanking*.

¹⁸ Foreign Policy. *Nanjing by the Numbers*.

historical revisionists purporting that such atrocities never even occurred.¹⁹ On the more scholarly spectrum, there are some Japanese schools of thought claiming a few thousand were killed at most²⁰ (consequently implying that this ‘incident’ falls into the range of what could be considered an unfortunate accident in a case of total war) and various authors like Iris Chang echoing the Chinese government’s stance and outlining a death toll of 300,000 or more²¹. She collected heaps of criticism from world-renowned authors such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning David M. Kennedy, stating that “accusation and outrage, rather than analysis and understanding, are [her] book's dominant motifs, and although outrage is a morally necessary response to Nanjing, it is an intellectually insufficient one.”²² Sinologist Joshua A. Vogel from York University pointed towards the fact that the death toll determined by the International Military Tribunal of the Far East sat at about 200,000²³, and also added that he believed her work to be “seriously flawed” and “full of misinformation”, further describing its shortcomings as a possible result of her “lack of training as a historian”. He did, however, agree that “we know many details of the Nanjing massacre, Japanese sexual exploitation of ‘comfort women,’ and biological and chemical warfare used in China because of the trailblazing research [of Japanese scholars]”.²⁴ The latter would have been another subject I would have sought to address in my book, had I followed through with the materialisation of my aforementioned concept.

I had intended to also address the gruesome human experimentation conducted by Unit 731 in secret research facilities in Manchuria, and how US-American occupational forces covered it up in exchange for the researchers’ findings after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The unit’s leader, a man by the name of Ishii Shiro, was granted full legal immunity in the court proceedings that were supposed to bring Japanese war criminals to justice, the controversial Tokyo trials.²⁵

The Soviet Union had been adamant on her demand that he and his associates be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, but US-American microbiologists appointed to ‘investigate’ the matter, such as Dr. Edwin Hill, reported the research of Unit 731 as being “absolutely invaluable”, stating that it “could never have been obtained in the United States because of scruples attached to experiments on humans.”²⁶ He and his collaborators therefore opted to purchase the deaths of half a million people²⁷ from their killers.

¹⁹ Gallicchio, M. *The Unpredictability of the Past: Memories of the Asia-Pacific War in U.S.-East Asian relations*, pp. 158.

²⁰ Askew, D. *The Nanjing Incident: Recent Research and Trends*.

²¹ Chang, I. *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*.

²² Kennedy, D. *The Horror: Should the Japanese atrocities in Nanking be equated with the Nazi Holocaust?*

²³ *International Military Tribunal for the Far East. Judgment (English Translation)*.

²⁴ Fogel, J. *Reviewed Works: The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II by Iris Chang*.

²⁵ Harris, S. *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932–1945, and the American Cover-up*, pp. 68.

²⁶ BBC Horizon. *Biology at War: A Plague in the Wind*.

²⁷ The Smithsonian Channel. *The Untold Truth: Unit 731 – Japan’s Notorious Chemical Warfare*.

All of this happened while the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, General Douglas MacArthur, had the Tiger of Malaya, General Tomoyuki Yamashita, executed for baseless allegations of responsibility for war crimes committed by troops under his command. This was founded on little more than hearsay evidence according to Justice William Murphy of the US Supreme Court. Justice Murphy further criticised the prosecuting officers' lack of professional conduct, and suggested that several procedural issues jeopardised the legitimacy of the trial.²⁸

He and his other dissenting colleague later designated the trial and execution of General Tomoyuki Yamashita (view Fig. 1) as a “butchery of justice, an exercise in vengeance and a denial of human rights”, as potentially tide-turning evidence that Yamashita never carried command responsibility of the miscreant soldiers was blatantly ignored by the court.²⁹ This double standard, now forever embedded in international jurisprudence as the ‘Yamashita Standard’³⁰, is something I wanted to conclude my initial storyline with, because it teaches an important lesson – in a global war, the winner gets it all, and the loser can, in General Yamashita’s own words, be executed for the sole crime of seeing himself defeated.³¹

Howbeit, after discussing my plans with my Japanese and Taiwanese friends, I soon realised that this was not a great idea.

As I have just demonstrated with the above examples, the Pacific War is an issue that is still extremely delicate in Asian geopolitical discourse as well as in the Western world, where the truth of the matter is still in the process of being admitted.³²

Writing a novel that could be perceived as bashing Japan for her misdeeds and criticising the Allies for their hypocrisy would not have been conducive to a more agreeable climate between (and within) my Asian and Western social circles, which would be sure to read my book in its entirety and discuss it for hours on end. It would also hardly have been an attestation of my maturity; fuelling conflict, purposefully or inadvertently, is not something a responsible adult should do.



Figure 1: General Tomoyuki Yamashita of the Imperial Japanese Army. Photo taken by an unknown military photographer. This image is now in the public domain, internationally.

²⁸ United States Supreme Court. Application of Yamashita.

²⁹ Ryan, A. Yamashita's Ghost - War Crimes, MacArthur's Justice, and Command Accountability.

³⁰ TIME. "Lawbreakers at War: How Responsible Are They?"

³¹ Warren, A. Britain's Greatest Defeat: Singapore.

³² Fox News, Betz B. California to apologize for state's role in internment of Japanese Americans during WWII.

1.4 Why I chose to write about the fall of the Han Dynasty

The cause for this choice was far simpler than the reasons behind the decisions already discussed in this paper; the Three Kingdoms Era was a period I knew any readership, Asian, Western or otherwise, could easily get into and enjoy, if presented and explained well. This was something I believed myself to be capable of; all I needed to do was to ensure that readers unfamiliar with the setting (such as most of my Swiss, German and French compatriots) would receive a decent introduction, and be given an accurate feeling of the era and its deliciously convoluted intricacies.

The Three Kingdoms period and its commencement is a topic we do not specifically address in regular history courses in Switzerland³³, for it is not incremental to our understanding of Western history and the associated geopolitical predicaments.

Yet, I find it to be utterly intriguing for various reasons; it features dozens of powerful actors vying for power, plenty of intrigue and knavery, and even more distrust, scheming and betrayal. This is precisely what we are used to from modern-day politics. The only difference I can make out is that the fall of the Han is set too far back in time to be considered ‘political’ and ‘polarising’ by the world of today, which has come to view something as universal as a global health crisis as just that, most notoriously so in the United States of America.³⁴ There is little controversy and dispute about this age of peasants and noblemen; all that is really left to argue about is to what extent the author who popularised it with his acclaimed *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Luo Guanzhong, deviated from historicity for narrative effect,³⁵ and whether the main villain in his novel was truly evil in real life, or simply a witty opportunist like most of their opponents.³⁶

I did, however, find people who were arguing online about other things than that nonetheless; they were discussing the role of women during the Three Kingdoms era, a debate sparked by a decision of the producers of a popular video game, who opted to integrate a female marauder into the game’s cast of primarily male characters.

1.5 Choosing my protagonist

The popular consensus appeared to be that Creative Assembly, the game’s makers, included this character (dubbed “Zheng Jiang”) in their *Total War: Three Kingdoms* title to diversify the cast of primarily main warriors³⁷, but research I have made leads me to believe that there was a little more to it than just that. Upon a three-hour-long dive into the labyrinth that is Chinese historical documentation, I found an interesting passage.

³³ [Berufsberatung.ch](https://www.berufsberatung.ch) > Aus- und Weiterbildung > Hochschulen > Studiengebiete > Historische und Kulturwissenschaften > Studienrichtung Geschichte.

³⁴ CBS News, Mark Hudspeth. Why did COVID-19 become partisan?

³⁵ Moody J, P. The Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Popular Chinese Thought.

³⁶ De Crespigny, R. Imperial Warlord: A biography of Cao Cao. Overview.

³⁷ Various forum discussions, linked under ‘Broadcasts and Other’ in this paper’s bibliography.

后东平刘楨梦蛇四足，穴居冢中，使宣占之，宣曰“此为国梦，非君家之事也。当杀女子而作贼者”顷之，女贼郑、姜遂俱夷讨，以蛇女子之祥，足非蛇之所宜故也³⁸。

This passage, which can be found as a part of the memoirs of a certain Zhou Xuan in the twenty-ninth book of Wei, describes how a man by the name of Liu Zhen from Dongping has a dream of a four-legged snake, and asks the former to explain what the nature of this dream could mean. Zhou Xuan then tells him that this dream is not a matter of his person, but of the state – it symbolises thieving women, two of which, named Zheng and Jiang, are then promptly executed the next day.

What needed to happen to a society for some of its women to become brutal bandits? What were their crimes, and for how long had they lived outside of the law? Did they have a cause or a reason for their actions? Those questions fascinated me, and so, I decided that the protagonist of my novel would be one of the two criminals described in the passage above. I decided on Zheng, and as her real first name remains unknown, I chose to name her Xiaoling, in honour of the Taiwanese girl who had helped me understand the quote in which she is mentioned; my Chinese is in no way good enough to read and understand such texts alone, so her assistance was invaluable to the production of this work. She would later go on to help me comprehend many more lines of ancient Chinese scriptures.

1.6 Research & Analysis

Discussing every possible aspect of what it means to do research for an historical novel would not only burst the titular scope of this paper, but also make for an entirely separate graduation project in and of itself. Therefore, I will attempt to elaborate on the research process for my book by presenting my systematic approach to a situation like the one above, where I would need to figure out a small, yet crucial detail for my setting. Without establishing a strategy like the one I am about to explain, I highly doubt that I would have managed to complete my novel in time. The subsequent list of steps shows how I would go about solving a problem, using the naming of my protagonist as an example.



Figure 2: Bandit Queen "Zheng Jiang", as designed by the makers of the strategy game *Total War: Three Kingdoms*. © Creative Assembly, all rights reserved.

³⁸Wang, C., others. Book of Wei, Volume 29.

Step One: The first step always consisted of researching the problem in Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Luo Guanzhong's novel. Even though one of my goals had always been to maintain historicity throughout my delivery, I decided to set the inconsistencies in Romance of the Three Kingdoms as the standard for the most extreme kind of non-interpretative deviations from history I was allowed to make. Nonetheless, I would constantly question what I found in that novel, and try to double-check with other sources to avoid inadequacy as much as reasonably possible. The next step proved indispensable to that practice. In the case of figuring out whether Zheng and Jiang were actually two different women, this was not helpful at all and made for nothing but a waste of time.

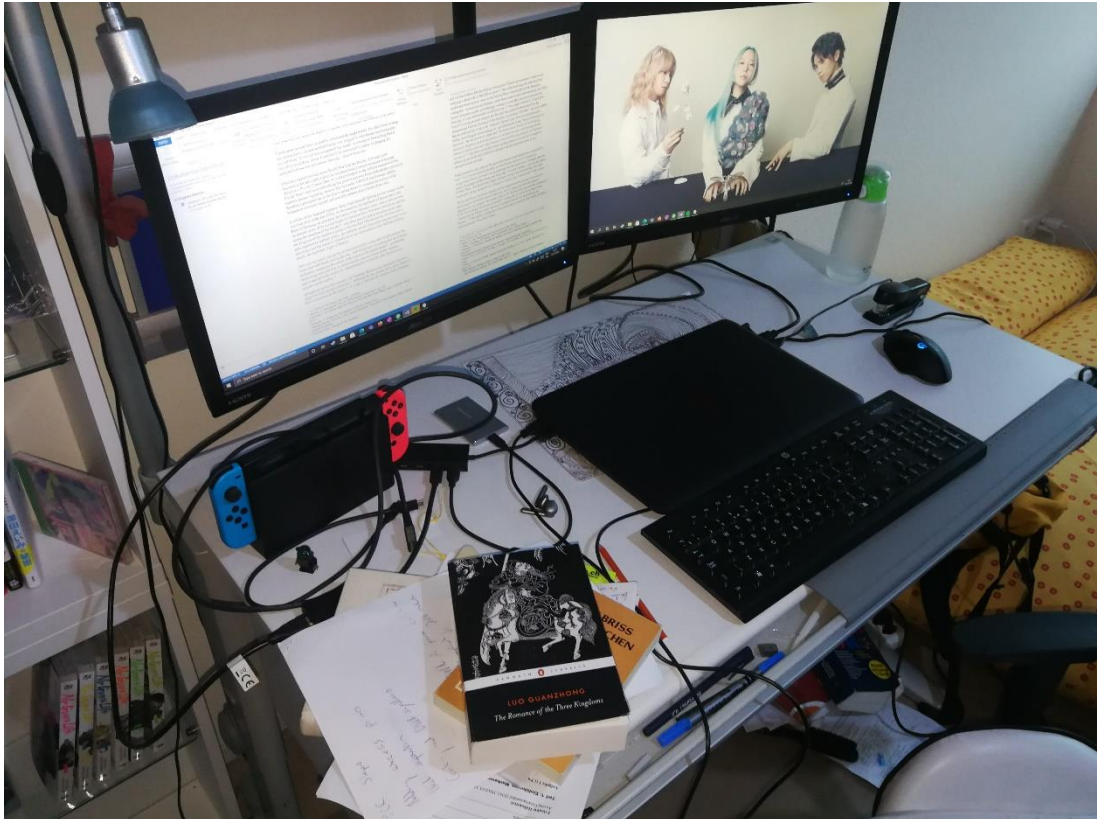


Figure 3: My workspace set-up, featuring an elaborate dual-screen rig mounted to the framework of my desk, and Luo Guanzhong's "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" in the bottom right corner, sat above another GDR antique, "Ein Kurzer Abriss der Chinesischen Geschichte". I took this picture in a way that truthfully captures the way my desk looked throughout most of this project; cluttered and full of inspiration. ©Arnaud Koglin

Step Two: The second step was to look into English-language books and papers published by reputed Sinologists such as Rafe of Crespigny. More often than not, these proved to be the most helpful and reliable sources, for they were all written in a language I knew and were already academic and objective in their composition. I did not find anything about Zheng and Jiang here either, so I moved on to **Step Three** in that specific scenario.

Step Three: In a third step, I would dive into the Records of the Three Kingdoms and try to see what I could find there. Some parts of this chronicle of events had been accurately translated into English, others much less so. This meant that I sometimes had to dive into Japanese translations (ironically enough), for they were often much more appropriate, and try and see if I could comprehend something there with my

limited understanding of the language. This step was optional; in certain cases, I would move on directly from **Step Two** to **Step Five**. In Zheng and Jiang's naming controversy, it was here that I found my first lead. As the Japanese translation was a little rocky however, I moved on to **Step Four** to be safe.

Step Four: In this optional fourth step, I moved on to find the required passage in the original Chinese text in an attempt to isolate what could be the information I needed (this entailed a lot of guessing when it came to spotting the right ideographic characters in the text), and send it to Xiaoling or other friends of mine who could read Chinese, so that I could get feedback on my hypotheses. Xiaoling was the one who ultimately assisted me in my quest to figure out whether my chosen protagonist truly existed, and whether Creative Assembly's "Zheng Jiang" was an embodiment of two separate individuals or not.

Step Five: In a fifth step, I would review all of the information I gathered and weigh out which piece was the most reliable and useful to my storyboarding process. I would then write notes about how exactly I sought to use that information. Finally, I would proceed to implement it the way I wanted, and occasionally ask a friend if it made sense to them and fit in well with the setting, so that it would seem smooth and natural. This was especially important in instances where I would try and integrate ideas that were not all that historically accurate, but more on that later.

2. Literary Principles

In this chapter, I will primarily discuss the various literary principles I tried to incorporate into my writing, and provide examples of how I did so throughout the story of my novel, *Yellow Sky*. I elected to integrate these in an attempt to generate recognisable similarities with the novels Western and Asian readerships have grown to know and love, so that my book would appear more accessible and inviting to either. That being said, I tried to select an equal amount of typically Western and traditionally Asian principles in a bid to represent both schools of literature equally. As I realised that my initial idea to supply this part as an appendix to my paper (which is what I wrote in the contract of my graduation paper) violated my school's guidelines, I have summarised and included the core content of my notes on the aforementioned practices in this section, instead of adding them as attachments.

2.1 Show, Don't Tell

'Show, don't tell' is a writing technique that aims to allow the reader to experience the setting's atmosphere and the characters' personalities by merely describing the scenes, dialogues and actions occurring throughout the plot, rather than summarising them or narrating them as though one were a news reporter.³⁹ Ideally, this would then cause the reader to become more involved with the author's writing, and develop an analytical autonomy which would allow him to interpret and visualise the matters described as he pleases. My English teacher, who is also this project's reviewer, introduced me to this principle after class once. This theory is most famously attributed to the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, who wrote the following words in a letter to his brother: "In descriptions of Nature one must seize on small details, grouping them so that when the reader closes his eyes he gets a picture. For instance, you'll have a moonlit night if you write that on the mill dam a piece of glass from a broken bottle glittered like a bright little star, and that the black shadow of a dog or a wolf rolled past like a ball."⁴⁰ In *Yellow Sky*, I attempted to honour this principle by only ever 'reporting' on matters that were required for the basic understanding of the storyline, such as historical facts about the Xiognu people, the relationships between various actors at the imperial court and the past conflict with the Yellow Turbans. When Xuegong reunites with Dong Zhuo and his old comrades from page 106 onwards however, I say nothing of the notion that Guo Si and Li Jue may be a pack of overly testosterone-driven misogynists. That becomes evident through the dialogue.

³⁹ Wells, G. *How To Write Non-Fiction Books*, pp. 65.

⁴⁰ Yarmolinsky, A. *The Unknown Chekhov: Stories and Other Writings Hitherto Untranslated by Anton Chekhov*, pp. 14.

2.2 Ernest Hemingway's Brevity in Dialogue

This is essentially an extension of the first principle mentioned in this section, but specifically applied to dialogue between two or more characters. When the famous Ernest Hemingway writes, he omits nearly all superfluous dialogue tags – those being in-dialogue narration of the vocal delivery, actions and thoughts of characters within a given scene, consequently interrupting the flow of conversation – this is clearly visible in his bestselling novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.⁴¹ This allows for the nature of a scene to come out much more strongly, and for the reader to feel drawn into the atmosphere as though he himself was there to witness it. Since my writing style is extremely descriptive and this principle opposes it completely, I applied it in moderation, most specifically so in scenes of high tension. One example of this would be Li Song's final meeting with Jian Shuo starting on page 101, where next to all additional commentary is omitted in the ensuing dialogue.

2.3 Murakami's Surrealism

Haruki Murakami, a world-renowned Japanese author, is most famously known for his ability to blend whimsical and magical narrative components⁴² with a storyline that would otherwise liken non-fiction or contemporary, slice-of-life writing. As the plot thickens, characters are often lead to question their sanity (like Aomame in 1Q84, when all of a sudden, the environment of this highly observant woman changes so that it seems as though she had missed three years' worth of news⁴³), and the reader gets to experience their introspection alongside them. In the early stages of his novels, he often does so in a way in which both the reader and the characters might doubt whether what they are seeing is truly real. I have applied this principle throughout the Empress's character progression from a masterful manipulator to a ruthless, murderous demon. After being hit in the head by a palace guard, Li Song begins hallucinating, seeing her with traits of a savage beast – or so he believes. Whether she actually was a demon and only the eunuch could see her as such or not, nobody will ever know.

2.4 Mishima's Standard for the Beautiful

Yukio Mishima, a Japanese existential novelist of the twentieth century, famously spoke the following words: "The beautiful should die young, and everyone else should live as long as possible. Unfortunately, 95 percent of people get it backwards, with gorgeous people lingering into their eighties and hideous fools dropping dead at 21. Life never goes as planned; and we, the living, are cast into its comedy." He is remembered as a man of controversial and eccentric political stances; he often spoke

⁴¹ Hemingway, E. *For Whom The Bell Tolls*.

⁴² Bartleby Research: Surrealism in Haruki Murakami's Surrealism on the Reading Experience.

⁴³ Murakami, H. 1Q84.

of reconciling life and death in his writing, and exploring the beauty of either; a practice which, in his opinion, could most perfectly be completed with an honourable suicide. On the 25th of November 1970, he attempted to stage a coup by hijacking a military base, chanting that he wanted to restore power to the Emperor. He took his own life that day, leaving behind a unique legacy with his various works.⁴⁴

I attempted to adapt this principle to my novel when I made sure that the phases in which my protagonist would experience joy were much shorter than the moments in which she would experience sadness and anger. This was done so that the few truly beautiful moments in the book, such as when she witnesses an unconditionally loving couple in Taiyuan on page 70, can be clearly distinguished and better appreciated. Mishima's Standard for the Beautiful also works as a vehicle for the build-up of her internal corruption and moral downfall, something that may be followed up upon in a sequel to *Yellow Sky*.

2.5 Chekhov's Gun

Chekhov's Gun is the final principle I will address on this list, and it is also the one that has followed me the most throughout this project. It was also first conceptualised by Anton Chekhov, and its basic teaching goes as follows: "If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there."⁴⁵ All that is irrelevant to the advancement of the story must be omitted, and every detail specifically mentioned must play a role in the future of one's plot. This is especially important when adding surplus detail; if one were to specifically describe Chekhov's Gun as a Type 99 Arisaka chambered in 7.7 Japanese, that technical detail must absolutely be accorded some kind of relevance when the gun is shot (for example, one might mention how the fact that 7.7 projectiles have a high lead content in the back causes them to produce extremely grave wounds⁴⁶). Otherwise, the story will seem dull and uninteresting – like a disrespect of the reader's time, and a substantial disregard for the art of captivating narrative design.

I have profusely implemented Chekhov's Gun in my writing. The Xiognu raiders, first mentioned on page 12, are later found in Dong Zhuo's army towards the end of the story. Dong Zhuo himself is first mentioned in an argument between Cheng and Xuegong when they are on their way to Taiyuan, then later seen at the celebration he hosts before his march on Luoyang. Xiaoling has an encounter with remnants of the Yellow Turban Rebellion in Chapter 7, whereas they were first introduced to the reader in Chapter 2 already. It should not have come as too much of a surprise when Xiaoling's mother is killed in a flood; from the very first lines onwards, its waters as ominously racing each other under a thick cover of clouds. If there is one principle I believe gives my book its character, then that is bound to be Chekhov's Gun.

⁴⁴ BBC. Yukio Mishima: The strange tale of Japan's infamous Novelist

⁴⁵ Valentine T. Chekhov: The Silent Voice of Freedom

⁴⁶ Ballisticstudies.com. 7.7x5.8 Japanese.

3. Self-Evaluation and Conclusion

In this final section, I will self-evaluate my performance as an unlikely historical novelist according to two distinct criteria; whether I remained true to my goals of writing an historically accurate (defined as a sufficiently high measure of accuracy on the scale of what a high school student writing a book in half a year could realistically achieve) work of fiction, incorporating all of the above literary principles in the process, and whether I succeeded in staying true to my motivations.

3.1 Historical Accuracy and Adherence to Literary Principles

The former is fairly difficult for me to evaluate as I am neither a professional reviewer, a literary connoisseur nor an historian, yet, I believe I can pinpoint quite well when I purposefully deviated from historicity for plot-related reasons.

The first time was when I introduced the reader to the village of Wanzhen – I doubt it existed the way I made it out to be, or held the attributes I fabricated for it to have. The purpose of this intentional inexactitude was to create an environment for Xiaoling to grow up in which would be radically different to the world outside. Whereas Wanzhen was a safe, familiar utopia, what the girl saw of the remainder of China seemed like hell. This was done so that she would lose all faith in both the values of the supposed Han loyalists (embodied by her uncle) and those of the Yellow Turbans (embodied by her father and his associates) once Wanzhen was destroyed – causing her to run away and start a new life as a bandit.

Another instance in which I fabricated something for the purpose of advancing the story was the barbican scene in the third chapter. I could not find out whether the Chinese actually possessed a widespread network of bridge fortifications, so I assumed they did as a mere conjecture from circumstantial evidence and educated guessing. I was also uncertain of particular details about court culture in Luoyang – the daily life I describe the Empress and the eunuchs to live was based around little more than interpretation and mental gymnastics – a patchwork of fact and imagination, of sorts.

When it comes to adhering to my literary principles, I think I managed. All of the theories listed have been applied in various ways throughout the storyline, and I had made a conscious effort to comply with them all along. There is one thing I am dissatisfied with, however; I did not succeed in resolving the ultimate Chekhov's Gun, which would have been a revisiting of the Prologue scene once Xiaoling became a true, irreversibly rotten criminal. The way things stand at the end of the book, the conclusion of this cycle of abuse and suffering is heavily implied, but I do not accompany the reader all the way to its climactic unravelling.

This unfortunate inconvenience happened because a few weeks before the deadline for this project, I realised that packing all the dozens of chapters' worth of character

development I had planned for Xiaoling into another forty pages or so would be a total waste. There were so many more tales to tell, so many more fights to be had, and so much more change for her and China to experience – I determined that it would have been a terrible shame to crop things off for the purpose of handing in a ‘well-rounded’, self-containing work; an open ending implicit of the conflicts to come would do. That was my decision, and perhaps, a worthwhile one.

3.2 Conclusion

To write a book is not an easy task, and to write a book that must, at least in theory, try to align with a factual state of affairs in history, is even more daunting. The matter complicates itself further when one decides to incorporate well-known literary principles of fundamentally differing cultures into his writing – effectively attempting to bring two rich and unique worlds together, armed with nothing but a constantly overheating computer, the unexpected ability to remain awake for seventy-two hours on end and half a year’s worth of time to get it done.

Throughout the course of this project, I was faced with challenges I at first did not know how to overcome. How do I visualise a country I have never visited as it existed almost two thousand years in the past? How do I create a cast characters that is not only profound and diverse, but whose members do not violate the true reality of life under the Han dynasty? How do I write of wise scholars, scheming bureaucrats and fearless military officers, when I am nought but seventeen winters of age and have not experienced a single day in either of those professions?

All of these questions and more have made this project what I have come to know and view it as. A great exercise in modesty, and an opportunity to feel helpless, indecisive and disoriented for once, so that I could bounce back from my insecurities and make the best out of the limited time and resources that were made available to me. This has been both cleansing and refreshing – I underwent a complete catharsis, and in an age where it is so simple to see one’s mind corrupted by senseless preconceptions and static, immovable beliefs, this was not only a welcome, but a much-needed experience for an adolescent narrating his way into adulthood.

Declaration

Erklärung

„Ich erkläre, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbstständig verfasst und keine anderen als die angegebenen Hilfsmittel verwendet habe.

Alle wörtlichen und sinngemässen Übernahmen aus andern Werken habe ich als solche kenntlich gemacht.

Ich nehme ausserdem zur Kenntnis, dass meine Arbeit zur Überprüfung der korrekten und vollständigen Angabe der Quellen mit Hilfe einer Software (Plagiaterkennungstool) geprüft wird.“

Datum

Unterschrift

Project Diary

Date	Action
From 06.05.2020 onward	My reviewer contacted me, asking to know where my progress on my project stood, for I had previously mentioned that I sought to ask him if he were interested in overseeing it. I was caught a little off-guard for I had just switched away from my original setting and was about to scrap all of the drafting and storyboarding I had done so far. I had, however, already found what would be the actual premise of my book – in the precedent days, I had focused strongly on researching the fall of the Han, and designing prospective characters for my story.
From 11.05.2020 onward	I sent a writing sample to my reviewer as I finalised my initial story draft. I also started writing up early leads for the individual chapters of my book, so that I could return to them and resume my writing later. On the 14 th of May, I sent my reviewer an introduction to what I thought my project would ultimately be, outlining my best possible guesses as to how things would shape up in the process of being written.
From 27.05.2020 onward	I had my first video meeting with my reviewer and discussed my character and plot ideas with him. I told him that I was somewhat anxious about writing a story in which my protagonist would turn out to be a villain, and advised me to look into a documentary discussing the existence of two female buccaneers, similar to Zheng and Jiang, This proved to be truly helpful, as I now had a firm vision as to how my protagonist's development would play out.
From 05.06.2020 onward	I mapped out the entirety of Zheng's character progression and chose to omit Jiang from the story for now. I also found names for Xiaoling's uncle, father and mother, and made up the fictional village of Wanzhen with all of its peculiarities. I also looked into conceptualising Luoyang, and decided to offer two perspectives in my book; one being Xiaoling's, the other the one of Li Song, a eunuch at the imperial court. Subsequently, I did some research on court culture at the time and discovered Empress He and her half-brother.

Date	Action
From 16.06.2020 onwards	I sent my maturity paper contract to my reviewer and discussed the terms of our agreement with him. We signed it on the 22 nd of June.
From the 23.06.2020 onwards	I sent a revised version of my writing sample to my reviewer, following his advice to make a few alterations to my writing style to ensure better readability and workflow.
Summer holidays and return to school	I spent most of my summer holidays at my grandparents' place in Berlin, essentially ushering myself into a high-intensity writing phase in which I experienced writer's block more than just once. It was difficult to find constant motivation to keep writing, especially after several weeks of basically doing nothing but that. I did not advance as much as I had wanted to, but it was a learning experience – I would have to learn how to source my motivation from now on, a skill I believe I am getting better at. It's incredibly helpful to be able to do so – I imagine that this is not the last time I will face a situation like this one, anyway. When I returned to school, I submitted the draft of my first chapter to my reviewer. I then overworked and modified it so that it would be cleared from its largest flaws
From 09.11.2020 onward	I submitted the draft of my book's first part to my reviewer, and immediately started working on finalising the second. Time was running out, and I was beginning to feel the stress of prolonged unproductivity due to a heavy period of examinations at school.
From the 6.12.2020 onward	I began properly working on my maturity paper and finished my book. One of my father's employees then kindly designed a cover for me, and we sent the book off to be printed in the Italian Republic. Whilst waiting for the printing process to be completed, I sought advice from my reviewer, determined the structure of my paper and began thinking of a way as to how I could sum up all of my scribbles and notes into a format the school's guidelines would permit. I settled for a dynamic content integration, trying to weave everything into my paper like fine silk.
From 13.12.2020 onward	In what was likely the most demanding one-nighter of my entire life, I finished my maturity paper and printed it all in my father's offices. I submitted my paper on the 14 th of December 2020.

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