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## UNLIVED EXPERIENCE: TRETYAKOV'S LIFE HISTORY WRITING AND DE-VICTIMIZATION\*

While society is responsible for understanding and alleviating suffering caused by structural violence, the act of representing marginalized individuals presents an unavoidable ethical dilemma. This paper addresses this issue by examining the work of Sergei Tretyakov, a Soviet writer who challenged the notion that autobiographies can transparently convey “lived experience.” To counter both the exploitation or victimization of others and the tendency toward mere emotional identification with marginalized groups, Tretyakov developed the new genre of the “bio-interview,” as exemplified by his work *Den Shikhua*.

*Keywords:* Lived Experience, Victimhood, Soviet Literature, China, Sergei Tretyakov.

### Introduction

Throughout history, certain individuals and groups have been disproportionately burdened by suffering resulting from social structures and injustices. The concept of “social suffering” posits that members of a society responsible for producing such suffering must strive to understand the circumstances of victims of structural violence, raise awareness among others, and foster collective consciousness aimed at improvement (Kleinman et al. 1997). However, even when discussing victims of structural violence serves a pro-social purpose, the representation of marginalized individuals is accompanied by a persistent tension, as the act itself can become exploitative. In 1938, after visiting a refugee camp to write an article for *Life* magazine, John Steinbeck wrote that he could not write about his experience, stating, “I simply can't make money on those people. (...) The suffering is too great for me to cash in on it.” (Steinbeck 1975:

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161) This example illustrates the sense of guilt and ethical dilemma inherent in representing marginalized people, as it is impossible to stand alongside them as transparent beings free from the dynamics of perpetrator and victim, and the act of representation may itself constitute exploitation.

Another concern is that we are unable to fully understand the other. Simone de Beauvoir, in the second volume of *The Second Sex* (1949) titled “The Lived Experience (L ‘expérience vecue),” argued that women’s experiences could not be fully understood by men who were not themselves women. The concept “lived experience” has gained increasing prominence beyond the context of feminism, alongside the rise of the concept of identity, as Francis Fukuyama indicated that “The focus on lived experience by identity groups valorizes inner selves experienced emotionally rather than examined rationally.” (Fukuyama 2018: 109)

This paper examines the work of Sergei Tretyakov, a central figure in Soviet cultural policy, who challenged the Soviet official premise that autobiography could directly and unmediatedly convey “lived experience.” By analyzing the “bio-interview,” a genre Tretyakov developed, with particular focus on *Den Shi-khua* (1930), which is based on interviews with his student during his stay in China, this study investigates alternative approaches to representing and understanding others that resist both exploitation and emotional identification.

### **Background: Soviet Victimhood Propaganda and Sergei Tretyakov**

The emphasis on lived experience often centers on negative emotions, particularly suffering. For an extended period, human suffering was interpreted as a trial or punishment from God. Following the secularization of religion in the latter half of the 18th century, there was growing recognition that the suffering of the poor and marginalized resulted from societal structures and that society held responsibility for these conditions. By the latter half of the 19th century, literature increasingly represented socially disadvantaged individuals. Works such as Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Humiliated and Insulted* (1861) and Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862) exemplify how late 19th-century literature began to focus on the powerless, weak, and marginalized.

In its early propaganda, the Soviet Union honored various victims. To begin with, the Soviet Union portrayed the country as a victim of unjust interference by surrounding capitalist nations. The concept of “Capitalist Encirclement” suggests the Soviet concept — or delusion — of being physically and ideologically surrounded by hostile capitalist nations (Vagts 1956). Numerous literary works, films, and other cultural practices focused on the suffering of exploited workers. By highlighting the suffering of poor workers, Soviet propaganda supposedly attempted to emphasize the violence of Capitalism and thus to convey the relevance of communism. For example, in Sergei Eisenstein’s film *Strike* (1925), set during the final years of the Tsarist regime, factory workers stage a factory strike that is ultimately violently suppressed by Imperial Army soldiers. The final scene, where fleeing workers are subjected to a volley of gunfire, is repeatedly

interspersed with brief cuts of cattle being slaughtered and bleeding, emphasizing the inhumane nature of the massacre. The film concludes with a mountain of workers' corpses<sup>1</sup>.

Tretyakov, in line with the officially sanctioned direction of Soviet literature and culture in the 1920s, frequently portrayed the suffering of the exploited. His play *Gas Masks* (1923), inspired by an actual gas leak at a Urals gas plant, was staged by Eisenstein in 1924 at the actual gas plant, shortly before Eisenstein transitioned to film directing. *Gas Masks* dramatizes a real industrial incident in which factory workers demanded that management provide gas masks for safety, but their requests were disregarded as managers misappropriated the gas-mask budget for personal expenses. In the play, a toxic gas leak occurs, prompting workers to collaborate on repairs despite exposure to hazardous conditions. Although the workers succeed in halting the gas leak, one worker dies, and seventy are hospitalized, many in critical condition. The play underscores the injustice workers face, highlighting the consequences of managerial negligence and exploitation.

Early Soviet propaganda depicted victims beyond Soviet workers, frequently representing China as both a victim of Western colonial domination and a comrade nation of the Soviet Union from the early 1920s until the Shanghai Coup of 1927 (Brooks 2001: 33). China was also discussed in relation to Soviet ambitions for influence in the Far East. References to China in the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* were limited in 1920, with only 47 articles, but increased steadily to 380 in 1924, 541 in 1925, 668 in 1926, and 899 in 1927, the year of the Shanghai Coup. Tretyakov, notably, demonstrated a particular interest in China, advocating for its authentic portrayal rather than one shaped by exoticism (Tyerman 2014: 356). Beginning in the summer of 1924, Tretyakov spent a year in China as a Russian language instructor at Peking University, contributing first-hand reports to *Pravda*.

Tretyakov's renowned play *Roar, China!* (1926), published after his return from China, is based on an actual incident in Wanxian, Sichuan Province. After an American merchant drowned following a dispute with Chinese boatmen, the captain of a nearby British ship demanded accountability, resulting in the execution of two innocent Chinese laborers (Третьяков 1930). The play reconstructs these events through the testimonies of numerous witnesses. *Roar, China!* was staged in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan, where it received significant acclaim.

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<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, except for the Soviet Union, suffering had been generally considered as something shameful up until around the 1950s. In 1940s America, Holocaust survivors were often advised it was better to hide their experiences (Wieviorka 2006: 71–73). Immediately after World War II, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) restricted the portrayal of Jews in Hollywood films and elsewhere, stating that Holocaust victims “must not be depicted as weak, victimized, and tormented people.” It insisted that only heroic Jews, such as those in the 1943 Ghetto Uprising, should appear. Consequently, the publication of the English translation, stage adaptation, and film adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* faced many rejections, and they had to make several revisions to trivialize the tragedy of the Holocaust (Gonshak 2015: 85–86).

The play highlights the indifference of British and American characters toward the Chinese, illustrating that despite the protests of the local population regarding the innocence of the two laborers, the British captain's authority and the execution order remain unchallenged. The narrative conveys the powerlessness of the Chinese in the face of colonial oppression through the confusion and resignation of the victims and the anguished cries of their wives. Tretyakov aimed to depict the Chinese as victims in his films, collaborating with Eisenstein. During his time in China, Tretyakov received a research request from the Soviet State Committee (Goskino) concerning film production in China. Likely due to his expertise in Chinese affairs, he was appointed Deputy Chairman of the Artistic Committee at Goskino Studio No. 1, a predecessor of Mosfilm, upon his return.

At Goskino, Tretyakov initiated three film projects set in China with Eisenstein, and together they completed screenplays for “The Yellow Peril,” “The Blue Express,” and “The Pearl River.” Each screenplay was based on real incidents in which Chinese individuals were killed by the ruling classes of Western powers (Tyerman 2022: 159–168). “The Yellow Peril” can be regarded as a film adaptation of *Roar, China!*, “The Blue Express” drew from the Lincheng Outrage (1923), which involved bandits attacking a train, kidnapping 300 passengers — including British and Americans — and the subsequent execution of the bandit leader. “Pearl River” was inspired by the Canton–Hong Kong Strike (1925) in the Pearl River basin of Guangdong Province, where British and French soldiers shot and killed Chinese demonstrators.

Although all three films focused on real Chinese victims, Tretyakov's screenplay trilogy also depicted members of the Chinese bourgeoisie and explored internal class struggle, a theme rarely addressed in Soviet propaganda about China. Although the project advanced to the verge of production, the aftermath of the Anti-Fengtian War (1925–1926), during which the National Army supported by the Soviet Union was defeated, prevented Goskino from establishing a bank account in China. Of these three works, only “The Blue Express” was ultimately adapted into a film in 1929, directed not by Eisenstein but by Ilya Trauberg, who revised Tretyakov's screenplay.

### **Bio-interview *Den Shi-kha***

After *Roar, China!*, Tretyakov published *Chzhungo* (1927), a collection of articles and photographs from his time in China, then he published *Den Shi-khua* (English translation entitled *A Chinese Testament: The Autobiography of Tan Shi-hua*), partially in 1929, full version in 1930, expanded in 1932, and revised in 1935. Around the time the film project was shelved, between 1926 and 1927, Tretyakov frequently invited Gao Shi-khua — a former student from Peking University studying in Moscow at the time — to his home 26 times. According to Tretyakov, he dictated and compiled a detailed account of Shi-khua's life sto-

ry, interviewing him almost daily over six months, though it's not clear how they communicated without an interpreter.

Den Shi-khua, structured as an autobiography, provides a detailed account of Shi-khua's life from his birth in a Sichuan town to his development into a young man, highlighting his personal struggles and conflicts, including those with his parents, and situating his experiences within the broader political context of China. The work includes numerous photographs montaged by Aleksandr Rodchenko. *Den Shi-khua* consists of two parts, each comprising 28 chapters: Part 1 covers Shi-khua's birth into a well-to-do Chinese family and his relationship with his father, a newly conscious revolutionary; Part 2 follows Shi-khua's experiences as a student at Peking University until his decision to move to Moscow. Evidence suggests that Den Shi-khua was based on a real Chinese individual; although his family name was changed from Gao for security reasons, his first name remained unchanged, and the book features multiple photographs of those involved. The English edition published in London even included a frontispiece photographic portrait of Shi-khua, although the source of this image remains unclear.

Although *Den Shi-khua* is presented as a first-person narrative, Tretyakov explicitly states in the foreword that he reconstructed, modified, and revised the story. Tretyakov notes, "Den Shi-khua provided the raw material. I put it into shape. [...] He generously placed the depth of his wonderful recollections at my disposal. I dug into them like a miner. I was, at various times, his examining judge, father confessor, interviewer, companion, and psycho-analyst<sup>2</sup>." (Tretyakov 1934a: 7). He further explains, "(t)o see one's own life in detail, and to tell its story, requires great skill. Den Shi-khua did not possess this skill<sup>3</sup>" (Tretyakov 1934a: 7), which necessitated Tretyakov's active involvement in shaping the narrative. Tretyakov also characterizes the work as a "bio-interview," stating, "(a)s this interview embraces more than twenty-six years of a man's life, it might be called a 'bio-interview'." (Tretyakov 1934a: 7). He defines the "bio-interview" as a new literary genre that is based on an oral interview about an individual's life, written in the first-person point of view, yet incorporating the interviewer's perspective.

Tretyakov's conception of this genre was closely linked to the practice of ideological education through autobiographical writing in the Soviet Union. Autobiographical writing was often required for university admission, and collections of workers' autobiographies were regularly published in factories and other workplaces. These autobiographies typically adhered to an ideologically prescribed narrative: the subject was born into poverty, began with limited class consciousness, and, through Soviet education, gradually transformed into an ide-

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<sup>2</sup> In original: «Книга Дэн Ши-хуа сделана двумя. Сам Дэн Ши-хуа был сырьевщиком фактов, я — формовщиком их...» (Третьяков 1930: 3–4).

<sup>3</sup> In original: «Разглядеть подробно свою жизнь — уменье высокой марки. [...] У Дэн Ши-хуа не было этого уменья» (Третьяков 1930: 3).

al communist. In this context, writing an autobiography served a function analogous to confession in Christianity (Zaretskiy 2017: 1027–47). Although *Den Shi-khua* includes descriptions of Shi-khua’s developing class consciousness, he never fully becomes a Communist. As a result, *Den Shi-khua* does not conform to the official Soviet narrative structure for autobiographies, which was criticized by the Russian Proletarian Writers’ Union

*Den Shi-khua* was also attacked for its lack of internal psychological portrayal of Shi-khua (Tyerman 2022: 198). This omission appears to have been intentional on Tretyakov’s part. Tretyakov sought to immerse readers in Shi-khua’s environment rather than in Shi-khua’s emotions. By discouraging emotional identification, *Den Shi-khua* allows readers to closely observe daily life in China from an internal perspective.

In 1928, looking down from an airplane, Tretyakov wrote: “Height erases all personal differences. Human existence becomes like a species of termite<sup>4</sup>.” (Третьяков 1929: 232) According to Tretyakov, in the view from an airplane, “there are no characters whatsoever. Only processes appear. From here, scenes of jealousy, quarrels, or embraces cannot be seen, and villages become indistinguishable, like the leaves of a single shrub<sup>5</sup>.” (Третьяков 1929: 232–233) Therefore, to understand a different culture, one must observe not from a bird’s-eye view but from an internal perspective that allows one to notice “personal differences.” This is supposedly why *Den Shi-khua* was a hefty 400 pages, providing detailed descriptions of diverse local customs, including the appearance of dwellings, family life, villagers’ daily routines, school experiences, food, songs, and clothing.

Tretyakov observed that “(w)hen a person is facing you on the earth, then the person’s figure can easily cover one eighth of the horizon, and it can cut down twenty percent of the sky<sup>6</sup>.” (Третьяков 1929: 232–230) This statement serves as a metaphor for the immersive experience of readers, audience, or spectators who identify with the protagonist’s emotions. When such identification occurs, the protagonist’s emotions become overwhelming, much like a nearby figure appears immense compared to one at a distance.

Additionally, in 1929, when Tretyakov was preparing to publish *Den Shi-khua*, he criticized that in many novels protagonist’s emotions celebrate “an absolute and insolent victory over the intellect<sup>7</sup>.” (Третьяков 2006: 60) Tretyakov advocated that literary works should not focus on a protagonist’s emotion but

<sup>4</sup> «Все индивидуальные различия загашены высотой» (Третьяков 1929а: 232).

<sup>5</sup> In original: «Нет действующих лиц. Есть действующие процессы. Сцены ревности, драки и объятия отсюда не видны, а деревни однотипны, как листья кустарника одного вида» (Третьяков 1929а: 232–233).

<sup>6</sup> In original: «Если на земле один человек, ставший против вас, способен своей фигурой заслонить добрую восьмушку горизонта да отхватить градусов 20 неба» (Третьяков 1929а: 230).

<sup>7</sup> In original: «эмоция торжествовать такую абсолютную и наглую победу» (Третьяков 1929b: 68).

should shed light on the protagonist's social environment, by saying, "emotion should find its proper place and should not be felt as a private experience. Here we learn the social heaviness of emotion by considering its effect on the object being made<sup>8</sup>." (Tret'iakov 2006: 61)

During the late 1920s, Soviet official culture encouraged the production of novels portraying young Chinese men who learned about communism from Soviet instructors, joined revolutionary movements, and ultimately sacrificed their lives for the cause. At first, *Den Shi-khua* appears to conform to this genre, as Shi-khua, influenced by Russian language teachers such as Tret'yakov, becomes conscious of class disparities. However, the narrative ultimately diverges from this model. Instead of sacrificing his life, Shi-khua returns to China without informing Tret'yakov, thereby departing from the ideological and spiritual authority of the Soviet Union.

Shi-khua was initially a typical middle-class figure who held discriminatory views toward the poor. In a scene recounting a day from his childhood, he describes coolies as follows: "I have on a long robe, slippers embroidered with flowers, and white socks. One must not go barefoot – people would laugh at you. Only coolies went barefoot. The word *ku* means loas, the word *li* means strength. Collies were low people – dirty, rude, ragged coachmen, boatmen, porters, wandering reapers – in a word, all those who were willing to sell their big, brown muscles, hardened by labor and fights, for copper pennies, I was a little afraid of coolies<sup>9</sup>". (Tret'yakov 1934b: 11)

Following his father's arrest for political reasons, Shi-khua was placed in the monastery as a servant. Through unfamiliar experiences, including agricultural labor and the observation of the unequal treatment of coolies, he developed a heightened sense of class consciousness.

He reflected, "stretching out my tired legs in the evening, I came to the conclusion that a situation where the poor man has to serve the rich is not quite right<sup>10</sup>"(Tret'yakov 1934b: 154)and "I had not known before what hard labor the work of a peasant was<sup>11</sup>"(Tret'yakov 1934b: 154) Shortly after returning to school from the monastery, Shi-khua witnessed the public execution of bandits. That night, he asked himself: "Perhaps they were unjustly condemned. Perhaps they

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<sup>8</sup> English translation is partially modified. In original: «В "биографии вещи" эмоция становится на подобающее ей место и ощущается не как личное переживание. Здесь мы узнаем социальную весомость эмоции, судя по тому, как ее возникновение отражается на делаемой вещи.» (Третьяков 1929b: 69).

<sup>9</sup> In original: «На мне халатик и вышитые цветами туфли поверх белых носков. Босиком ходить нельзя, засмеют. Босиком ходят только кули. Кули — это низшие люди, мазанные, грубые, ободранные, извошники, бурлаки, носильщики, бродячие жнецы, словом, все, кто за медные чохи с квадратной дыркой посередке продают свои огромные, коричневые, трудом и дракой налитые клубки мускулов. Я побаиваюсь кули» (Третьяков 1930: 18).

<sup>10</sup> In original: «А здесь к вечеру, вытягивая в постели ноющие от бега ноги, а решаю, что обслуживание бедными богатых – не особенно справедливо» (Третьяков 1930: 168).

<sup>11</sup> In Original: «Разве раньше я знал, что за каторга крестьянский труд» (Третьяков 1930: 169).

became bandits because they had nothing to eat and nobody to help them. There are so many hungry people everywhere. What difference does it make where one dies? In a hut of starvation or in a public square by a bullet<sup>12</sup>?” (Tretyakov 1934b: 170)

Shi-khua gradually aligned himself with communist ideology, choosing to study Russian at Peking University before pursuing further education in Moscow. Despite this progression, he remained ideologically ambivalent and did not fully commit to revolutionary movements, aside from participating in student demonstrations. As a result, he did not become a dramatic martyr for the cause, which was a common narrative in other China-themed books published in the Soviet Union during that period.

*Den Shi-khua* diverges from Tretyakov’s earlier works, which can be classified as victimhood propaganda. Instead, it more closely aligns with his essayistic writings from the 1930s, such as *A Month in the Village* (1931), which documents his experiences on collective farms. After 1930, Tretyakov frequently visited collective farms and occasionally participated as a member of a kolkhoz, engaging in activities such as publishing newspapers and establishing nurseries. He depicted the challenges within the kolkhozes from an insider’s perspective. In most of these works, Tretyakov employs a first-person narrative to recount his experiences and interactions with local people, providing detailed descriptions of the everyday lives of ordinary kolkhoz residents. These lives are characterized by the absence of dramatic events, sensationalism, or victimhood. *Den Shi-khua*, at the same time, distinguishes itself from these collective farm works, too, by deliberately subverting the legitimacy of the first-person narrative. Ultimately, it reveals Shi-khua’s account as untrustworthy and challenges the notion of an unmediated account of “lived experience.”

### Against “Lived Experience”

Of the sixty-six chapters, two are marked with the note “Narrated by Tretyakov<sup>13</sup>” (Третьяков 1930: 344), presenting Tretyakov’s first-person account<sup>14</sup>. In Chapter 28 of Part II, Tretyakov recounts, from his perspective as a teacher interacting with Shi-khua, the scene when students staged a demonstration in front of the British Embassy, and then Tretyakov includes his frustration at Shi-khua’s refusal to make everything clear therein: “He hadn’t finished telling me about his life. Instead of giving me a day-to-day picture, he had skipped from one date to another. And still there was so much untold. / Very well. Let Tan remain silent;

<sup>12</sup> In original: «— А, может быть, их неправильно обвинили? Может быть, судья постановил несправедливый приговор? — А, может быть, они в разбойники ушли от бедности, когда нечего есть и никто не подает. Поневоле полезешь рукой в чужой карман. Теперь ведь голод всюду. — А не все ли равно, где умирать от медленного голода, в мазанке, или от быстрой пули на площади?» (Третьяков 1930: 185–186).

<sup>13</sup> «Рассказанная не студентом Дэн Ши-хуа».

<sup>14</sup> Regarding Part II, Chapter 29, the 1930 edition does not explicitly state that it is not narrated by Shi-khua.

Te-Ki-Ko shall try to speak for him<sup>15</sup>.” (Tretyakov 1934a: 350) Tretyakov, serving as the second narrator, is presented as “Professor Te-Ki-Ko,” a nickname assigned to him by Chinese students.

The challenge of representing “lived experience” is similarly present in Tretyakov’s other bio-interview, “Nine Girls” (1935). This work features an interview with Pasha Angelina, a prominent female tractor driver recognized as a Stakhanovite. In the narrative, Pasha describes in the first person her experiences overcoming sexism from childhood, her journey to becoming a tractor driver, and ultimately leading her team to surpass production quotas. Toward the conclusion, the narrative shifts to the third person, portraying Pasha as she travels to the Stakhanovite worker award ceremony in Moscow in 1935. The final passage depicts Pasha beginning her speech at the ceremony: “Pasha shouted and gathered her breath before a leap, ‘ten women’s brigades. I will sacrifice my girls to other brigades, take new ones for myself, and give per tractor’- here there was no pause, this figure was noted and marked down long ago — ‘sixteen-hundred hectares!’ And then she fell silent. She wiped her brow with her hand and, leaning to the side, said quietly, like a little girl: ‘Working is easier than talking...’<sup>16</sup>” (Geldern et al 227)

The scene in which Pasha falls silent mid-speech, similar to the episode in Den Shi-khua, illustrates the inherent challenges faced by subjects attempting to articulate their own perspectives. Additionally, the narrative’s conclusion, which coincides with Pasha’s initiation of her speech, implies a future in which she will express herself independently of Tretyakov’s mediation. This narrative structure parallels the ending of Den Shi-khua, where Shi-khua abruptly returns to China and subsequently loses all contact with Tretyakov. The reasons for his sudden departure and his subsequent whereabouts remain undisclosed. Thus, Shi-khua embarks on a self-determined path without notifying Tretyakov: “One day Shi-khua failed to visit me, A week passed and he did not show up. It became clear that he had left<sup>17</sup>.” (Tretyakov 1934b: 316)

Following Shi-kha’s departure from Moscow, a conversation with a student, Tin Yuin-pin, who was a friend of Shi-kha’s. Yet the portrait of Shi-khua narrated by Tin at the end of the book stands in stark contrast to the image of Shi-khua depicted thus far.

“Shi-khua wasn’t interested in politics. He loved the arts. He started a dance club and was quite skilled at dancing.”

<sup>15</sup> English translation is partially modified by the author. In original: «А жизнь еще не рассказана. И интервью, которое я у него беру, вместо кропотливого разглядывания вещей и дней готово скакать огромными прыжками исторических дат и годов. <...> Ладно. Пусть помолчит сам Дэн и пусть про Дэн расскажет профессор Тэ Ки-ко» (Третьяков 1930: 344).

<sup>16</sup> In original: «— Я сама берусь организовать за год, <...> десять женских бригад. <...> А потом замолчала. Отерла ладонью лоб и, повернувшись в сторону, тихо-тихо, как уставшая девчурка: — А работать легче, чем говорить...» (Третьяков 1960: 316)

<sup>17</sup> English translation is partially modified. In original: «Однажды Ши-хуа не пришел. Ни завтра, ни послезавтра. Ни через неделю. Мне стало понятно — он уехал» (Третьяков 1930: 390).

“He danced? Really? (...) But why didn’t he ever tell me about that?”

“He probably thought it was a frivolous hobby and felt embarrassed. After all, he was talking about becoming a revolutionary, yet he liked dancing...”<sup>18</sup> (Третьяков 1930: 391)

In Chapter 11 of Part II of *Den Shi-khua*, Shi-khua describes himself as someone unconnected to romance, having divorced after an unwanted marriage in his hometown village and living alone as a student in Moscow. However, Tin states, “He has a fiancée, his second cousin... an artist... a wealthy woman... in Beijing... She even stayed at his dormitory, and when she did, he wouldn’t open the door right away when you knocked<sup>19</sup>.” (Третьяков 1930: 391) Tretyakov wrote that he was astonished by the many facts he had never known.

Tretyakov’s intentional subversion of his earlier narrative, which discredits Shi-khua’s account and questions the value of lived experience, raises important interpretive issues. When Shi-khua returns to China, several inaccuracies in his narrative are revealed. This progression indicates that Tretyakov deliberately challenges the legitimacy of lived experience. Therefore, the unconventional narrative structure in *Den Shi-khua* may be understood as representing what can be described as “unlived” experience. The intentional undermining of authenticity drew considerable criticism at the time and is reportedly the reason the ending was omitted in translations.

This narrative feature is comparable to Bertolt Brecht’s “Life Story of the Boxer Samson-Körner,” published in 1926. Given the friendship between Tretyakov and Brecht, it is plausible that both writers contributed to the development of the “bio-interview” concept<sup>20</sup> (Brecht 1998). At the outset, the narrator, the boxer himself, asserts that every situation has two sides. He initially claims to have been born in America, then provides an alternative account of being born in Germany. Although the boxer was actually born in Germany, his false claim of American birth functions as a narrative device that parallels *Den Shi-Khua*.

*Den Shi-Khua* illustrates how Shi-Khua ultimately fails to continue talking about his own ideal past, namely, fails to sustain a “politically correct” memory. This work can be interpreted as the story of a young man attempting to reconcile his personal history with the officially sanctioned narrative of the Soviet Union, or more broadly, of communism, and ultimately, he finds himself unable to bear its falsehoods. Thus it is reasonable to consider that Tretyakov challenges con-

<sup>18</sup> In Original: «— Его не интересовала политика. Он любил искусство. Он создал танцевальный кружок и хорошо танцевал сам.

— Сам танцевал? А что именно? <...> Но почему он мне ни слова не сказал об этом?

— Ему стыдно было признаваться в таких пустяках: революционер, и вдруг — танцы» (Третьяков 1930: 391).

<sup>19</sup> In Original: «У него есть невеста, его троюродная сестра... художница... богатая... в Пекине... Она бывала у него в комнате, и в эти разы на стук он двери отпирал не сразу» (Третьяков 1930: 391).

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Hiroko Masumoto for providing information about Brecht’s “Life Story of the Boxer Samson-Körner.” “Life Story of the Boxer Samson-Körner” is an unfinished work that adopts the perspective of the famous boxer reflecting on his youth.

ventional expectations by depicting Shi-khua as neither a victim nor easily manipulated, and by concluding the narrative with doubts regarding its earlier veracity.

This approach stands in direct opposition to the dominant Soviet propaganda discourse with which Tretyakov was associated. The ending of *Den Shi-khua* supposedly demonstrates that when someone who has remained silent until now begins to speak, they do not necessarily offer convenient, pleasant-sounding stories. Inconvenient facts, absent from narratives mediated by the other, may come to light. “Bio-interview” supposedly suggest that there is no transparent narration that conveys others’ lived experience without any distortion.

### Conclusion

“Bio-interview” is about the problem of remembering.

Since the 1980s, a global trend has emerged that prioritizes lived experience, which is, in general, remembering the past by the very person who experienced the suffering. This orientation has significantly influenced movements led by minorities and oppressed groups seeking rights and equality. On the other hand, several scholars contend that this trend may also foster the depiction of other societal members as incapable of understanding and, consequently, as hostile or irrelevant “others” (ex. Fukuyama 2018). Additionally, as Paul Bloom argued in *Against Empathy* (2016), emotional identification with victims or marginalized individuals can hinder the critical evaluation of the social suffering caused by their environments and may introduce bias into the distribution of aid.

Identification with a protagonist’s suffering can produce positive outcomes, but it may also result in interpreting that suffering as a purely personal emotion, disconnected from its specific social or historical context. This interpretation risks trivializing the depicted events and diminishing their broader significance. Such emotional identification does not necessitate reconsideration of established concepts of legitimacy or morality; instead, it can foster mere emotional identification that leaves prevailing standards unchallenged and generates only a superficial sense of connection, resulting in a feel-good emotional response toward the other.

I argue that Tretyakov questioned the primacy of lived experience and empathetic engagement as early as the 1930s. In *Den Shi-khua*, he exposed the inherent limitations and potential for deception in emotional identification with another person’s lived experience by transforming it into what can be called “unlived” experience. *Den Shi-khua* presents its protagonist not as a pure victim but as a complex figure who is completely resistant. In doing so, *Den Shi-khua* de-victimizes its protagonist and avoids exploiting the conventional image of the young Chinese aspiring revolutionary, thereby diverging from the dominant policy of the period.

Tretyakov’s approach could regain relevance as social divisions have intensified and now pose tangible global threats. The method of replacing lived exper-

rience with “unlived” experience may offer a means to prevent a negative feedback loop, in which opposing sides of societal divides perceive their suffering as incomprehensible to those without similar lived experience, thereby exacerbating social fragmentation.

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НЕДОЖИВЉЕНО ИСКУСТВО:  
ТРЕТЈАКОВЉЕВО ПИСАЊЕ ЖИВОТНЕ ИСТОРИЈЕ И ДЕВИКТИМИЗАЦИЈА

Резиме

Иако је друштво сносило одговорност да разуме и ублажи патњу узроковану структурним насиљем, неизбежно је постојала етичка дилема око чина представљања маргинализованих људи. Рад покушава да испита ово питање, фокусирајући се на Сергеја Третјакова, совјетског писца који је доводио у питање идеју да аутобиографија може транспарентно пренети „животно искуство“. Да би се супротставио експлоатацији или виктимизацији другог, као и пукој емоционалној идентификацији са маргинализованим људима, Третјаков је створио нови жанр „био-интервју“, чији је пример његово дело *Ден Ши-хуа*.

*Кључне речи:* социјална патња, жртва, совјетска култура, пропаганда, представа о Кини.