

Writing Across Borders: Wu Qin’s “A Letter from a Tehran Prison” as a *Hidden Trans- national-crypt* in Global Resistance

Anonymous

Abstract

In early 2023, a text titled “A Letter from a Tehran Prison” circulated on the Chinese internet as the translated testimony of an Iranian political prisoner. The letter’s uncanny resonance among Chinese readers was later explained when its author, Wu Qin, revealed it as an account of her own detention in Guangzhou, disguised within an Iranian frame. This article argues that the letter operates as a *hidden trans-national-crypt*: a transnational re-scaling of James C. Scott’s concept of *hidden transcript*. Drawing on Scott’s theorization of

infrapolitics, it examines how Wu’s pseudotranslational allegory embeds China-specific micro-codes within a plausible Iranian context to evade censorship and invite oppositional reading. Informed by Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney’s theory of transnational memory, it then analyzes how the letter constructs a feminist counter-narrative and a shared space of entangled resistance, transforming personal testimony into a multidirectional practice of remembering beyond any single national boundary.

In early 2023, an article titled “A Letter from a Tehran Prison” began to circulate on the Chinese internet. It was presented as the translation of a letter written by Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish woman whose arrest by Iran’s morality police and death in September 2022 set the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in motion (“What Happened”). Its vivid descriptions of surveillance, intimidation, and political violence resonated deeply among Chinese readers, evoking an unsettling question: Is this a foreign or domestic story (Fan)? This ambivalent reading experience was later clarified when the author’s true identity was revealed to be Wu Qin, a Chinese writer and activist.¹ Wu was a journalist and editor at *The Paper* (澎湃新闻), a Chinese digital newspaper run by the state-owned Shanghai United Media Group. Being a longtime advocate for civic engagement and artistic freedom, she had been targeted by the police for years and subsequently lost her job in the summer of 2022,² when the government’s zero-Covid policy expanded into a mechanism of repression through cycles of lockdowns, forced PCR tests, and restrictions of mobility. That same autumn, she joined local artists in Guangzhou in small-scale gatherings for solidarity with the Iranian uprisings, sharing resistance literature and art, before being arrested in a cross-provincial operation by state security officers from Beijing on suspicion of involvement in the protests then unfolding across China (Wu 51).

Wu’s choice of an Iranian disguise was not arbitrary, but a deliberate strategy to navigate online censorship. Demonstrated by systematic control over information exchange and public opinion, China has one of the most restrictive media environments in the world. According to a 2013 state report, the government employed around two million workers to monitor and censor online content (Hunt and Xu). These censors review social media posts using keyword searches, a process that has been significantly enhanced in coverage, accuracy, and speed with the application of big data and artificial intelligence in recent years. The so-called ‘Great Firewall’ also blocks domestic access to certain websites, especial-

1 Chinese names in this article follow the original order, with family name preceding given name.

2 The media outlet where Wu had worked for six years illegally terminated her contract under political pressure and refused to compensate her as required by the labor law.

ly foreign ones, based on keyword detection (Xu and Albert). Within this space of intense surveillance, individual expressions are oppressed, yet, simultaneously, grassroots creatives develop tactics to circumvent censorship. Among them is Wu who, through this epistolary pseudotranslation, developed a new narrative strategy to challenge the official account.

This disguise constituted the letter's initial border-crossing on the page before the physical ones, and its journey outward mirrored Wu's own. After being released, Wu fled the country in the spring of 2023. In exile, she authorized two media outlets, Initium Media and Women4China—both operating outside mainland China—to publish the letter with added footnotes and a postscript (Wu 55), disclosing that it was based on her own experience of arrest and detention in Guangzhou in late 2022, though still without attaching her real name. It was only after arriving in Berlin that she felt able to claim authorship and published the annotated version within the Great Firewall, where Chinese readers could access it directly. As expected, the revelation led to the letter's removal from Chinese social media in less than a week (Wu 57). However, this rapid response from online censors—ironically—serves as evidence of how successful Wu had been in initially evading censorship and even deceiving state control. What's more, the letter's transnational life moved beyond this moment of rupture. In August 2025, the letter was republished by *Tofu Stand* in Germany and the Netherlands in Chinese, English, and Persian.³ In this zine, the letter was translated 'back' into Persian by an Iranian-Kurdish activist, Somayeh Rostampour, accomplishing a circuit in which the Chinese story in Iranian disguise was finally recounted with an Iranian voice.

Although journalistic accounts have framed the letter primarily as a political act that outwitted censorship, no sustained scholarly analysis has investigated its narrative strategy and the memory work it does, since it is also political dissidence expressed as a literary and mnemonic intervention. Li Yawen, writing in *Made in China Journal*, reads the letter through the lens of anticolonial internationalism, the tradition of solidar-

3 I use 'Persian' to refer to the modern language spoken in Iran, commonly known as 'Farsi' (Fārsī) by its speakers. All citations of "A Letter from a Tehran Prison" in this article refer to the *Tofu Stand* edition (2025), which includes Wu Qin's added footnotes, "Postscript I" and "Postscript II," written after she fled China.

ity among oppressed peoples in the Global South that has persisted in Chinese activist culture since the Maoist era, arguing that Wu's Iranian frame exemplifies a revival of this transnational political imagination. While Li's historicist reading illuminates the letter's political genealogy, I instead emphasize its infrapolitical form and multidirectional memory work. To do so, I draw on James C. Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), in which he develops two central concepts: *hidden transcript*, a mode of expression through which subordinates articulate dissent away from the gaze of power; and *infrapolitics*, a realm where dissent takes a disguised form to enter public view, thus "a partly sanitized, ambiguous, and coded version of the hidden transcript" (Scott 19). Wu's letter enacts the reactivity of the infrapolitical *hidden transcript* in its predictable fate of being both targeted and confirmed by censorship, and in its unanticipated circulation across borders. On the surface, it complies with the state's imposed discursive constraints by disguising itself as a translated foreign statement, whereas beneath the façade lies a coded self-expression that transforms personal testimony into collective memory speaking truth of a shared experience. In circulating this double-voiced narrative, Wu tactfully expanded the limits of what could be said in China's tightly monitored public sphere through simultaneous concealment and revelation. Additionally, the letter extends beyond national boundaries through its rhetorical displacement—transplanting one story of suffering to an empathizing context—and creates transnational solidarity by situating Wu's voice within a global continuum of feminist and democratic resistance. Wu's later collaborative work and the subsequent trilingual zine construct a piece of transnational memory, where protestors' shared struggles resonate across movements. Wu's writing thus rejects the "methodological nationalism" (De Cesari and Rigney 2) formerly used by scholars in cultural memory studies, challenging the idea of nations as the sole containers of remembrance, as if collective memory were naturally bounded by territorial, linguistic, or political borders. By conceptualizing Wu's strategy in this way, I extend Scott's framework to account for how political dissents today travel across borders, repositioning the letter as a transnational form of resistance rather than merely a media incident. I argue that Wu Qin's "A Letter from a Tehran Prison"

operates as a *hidden trans-national-crypt*, which is a transnational re-scaling of Scott's *hidden transcript*. As a form of coded writing, the letter not only evades domestic censorship and contests state-controlled narratives, but also forges individual testimony into a dynamic counter-archive of global resistance through displacement, translation, as well as transnational recognition and collaboration.

The article proceeds in two parts. It first revisits James C. Scott's theory of hidden transcript and the infrapolitical realm to show how Wu's pseudotranslational allegory creates a playground for competing narratives activated through readerly decoding. Informed by Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney's theory of transnational memory, it then turns to the letter's transnational dimension to demonstrate how this concealed critique evolves into a space for shared memories and global resistance.

Hidden Transcripts: A Playground for Competing Narratives

Scott defines *public transcript* as the self-portrait made by dominant elites to affirm and naturalize their authority: it is a "highly partisan and partial narrative" sustained by deference rituals and rhetorical concessions, making their rule appear legitimate to the public (18). By contrast, *hidden transcript* is an offstage discourse of the oppressed, in which anger, irony, and critique are expressed unobtrusively (18). Between these two poles, Scott identifies a spectrum of subordinate responses: deferential accommodation, in which the oppressed perform compliance; hidden resistance, in which dissent is expressed only secretly; coded dissent, or *infrapolitics*, "a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name" (19), and open rupture, an overt gesture of defiance.

In the third infrapolitical realm, the disguised and/or anonymous *hidden transcript* allows dissident voices to surface in public through double meanings or coded messages which can be found in folktales, songs, rumors, jokes, or allegories. Wu's letter falls into the category of allegories, depicting Chinese authoritarianism in the guise of an Iranian prison narrative. Moreover, it employs an original mode of allegorical writing featuring pseudotranslation: a text that, according to

translation studies scholar Gideon Toury, is presented, circulated, and received as a translation, even though no corresponding source text in another language actually exists or could be verified (29). For Toury, pseudotranslation functions in exactly the same way as translations proper once it activates, what he calls, the “Source-Text Postulate: i.e., the tacit agreement that for every assumed translation, a corresponding text in another language/culture must have existed” (47).⁴ In this case, especially before the revelation of the author’s identity, I would argue that the letter invites a dual mode of reading structured by productive uncertainty. The imagined Persian ‘original’ refers back to the unspeakable Chinese story. As literary scholar Brigitte Rath suggests, such texts encourage readers to move back and forth between treating the work as an autonomous original and as a translation that gestures toward a presumed source text (230). Within the Great Firewall, this oscillation enables Wu’s readers to perceive both the foreign surface and the domestic reality the letter veils. The pseudotranslational frame thus transforms the act of translation itself into a shield for political expression.

Another distinctive feature of Wu’s letter is its sense of simultaneity. The fact that the waves of Iranian and Chinese protests unfolded at the same time in the latter half of 2022 shaped her choice of setting. In Iran, the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody ignited the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, a nationwide uprising led by women and youth against gendered violence and repression. Meanwhile, in China, the government’s prolonged zero-Covid policy had turned everyday life into a site of surveillance and coercion, culminating in widespread frustration and discontent. Defiant acts from the lone banner protest on Beijing’s Sitong Bridge (Tan) to the ‘white paper’ protests across the country broke the enforced silence (Guan et al.).⁵ In the postscript,

4 ‘Translations proper’ here refers to interlingual translation: the rendering of verbal signs from one language into another.

5 On 13 October 2022, the eve of the Twentieth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, a lone protester mounted Sitong Bridge in Beijing, unfurling banners calling for an end to zero-Covid. See Tan. The ‘white paper,’ or ‘A4’ protests erupted across Chinese cities in late November 2022 following a deadly fire in Ürümqi, Xinjiang, which many attributed to Covid lockdown restrictions. Demonstrators held blank sheets of paper as a symbol of censorship. See Guan et al.

Wu recalls how the Iranian uprising in 2022 became an inspiration for Chinese activists to create resistant artworks that draw implicit parallels between the two nations' struggles (51). Through this transnational identification, Wu transforms empathy into strategy, framing her text as a timely and authentic response, making it all the more resonant. In so doing, the coded personal account moves into Scott's infrapolitical sphere, a playground for competing narratives.

For Scott, infrapolitical practices form the "cultural and structural underpinning" of overt political movements, sustaining a constant, low-profile negotiation of power (184). The infrapolitical realm captures the exact dynamic present at the first stage in readings of "A Letter from a Tehran Prison" before Wu Qin revealed her authorship. On the surface, as a composition of Iranian locations and Persian names, it appears like a story from another land. However, Wu deliberately sows Chinese-specific cues in the letter for readers to decode. Among them, the most obvious one is—as the reason for the narrator's detention—"picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (Wu 29), the exact wording of a People's Republic of China criminal article used routinely to detain/arrest writers and activists (Luo). Dropping it verbatim functions as a cipher key rather than just stating bureaucratic language. To Chinese readers it shouts: "this is home." A few pages into the letter, the digital vernacular of censorship turns emotions into code: "Those '404NotFound' images on social media make you unable to remember what happened just the day before yesterday, much less the day before that" (Wu 7). '404' is a Chinese online meme for censorship, which domestic readers would instantly understand and relate to. It is the same with the fear of screenshotting because "every word, every pixel, might someday become evidence" (9), and the compulsion to "activate auto-delete on messaging apps [...] reluctantly watching those warm, human messages vanish—after 10 seconds, 30 seconds, or an hour" (8-9). Though these details remain plausible in Iran, the insecurity around screenshots and chat histories mirrors more of Chinese citizens' self-censorship habits and extreme digital hygiene, paradoxically coexisting with an urgency to preserve sensitive content before censors wipe it. Iranian authorities have repeatedly responded to mass

protests—also during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising—with internet shutdowns (“Iran”). In that context, the dominant anxiety often manifests through total disconnection rather than the meticulous management of chat histories. Equally revealing is the letter’s description of bureaucratic procedures. The narrator’s discoveries that, on the interrogation sheet, the box “No” for whether she needed to contact her own lawyer had already been ticked, and the interrogation regulations handbook was presented only after her statement was signed, together exhibit a familiar formalistic legal theater (Wu 21). Still, Wu keeps the phrase “secret police” (3) unspecific, along with ambiguous tropes of “foreign conspiracy” (39) and “labor law” (5) compensation, opening up ambivalent spaces for both literal and metaphorical reading in the infrapolitical zone. Even the letter’s most ordinary details anchor the narrator in the texture of Chinese urban life. The remark about having “placed an order for a bundle of old vinyl records” and “added a nice blender to my online cart” (3) evokes the rhythms of platform-based shopping familiar to users of *Taobao* or *Xianyu*. It humanizes and localizes a Chinese urban worker under the camouflage of global modern precarity.

The existing infrapolitical micro-codes have made reading the letter become a decoding game: the dominant reading sees Iran, whereas the embedded reading recognizes China. The *hidden transcript* continuously surfaces in shared keywords, procedures, and habits, but only for readers equipped with certain experiential background. This conditioned recognition makes the strategy effective to generate solidarity among those who share the experience. Thus, it becomes a common playground where compliance and resistance coexist, with different narratives competing and negotiating through the process of participatory, interpretative meaning-making.

When Wu later claimed authorship and made the disguise of the *hidden transcript* explicit, the letter moved into open rupture, the fourth realm of political discourse. For Scott, such exposures “provoke either a swift stroke of repression or, if unanswered, often lead to further words and acts of daring” (19). In her postscript written after fleeing China, Wu reflects on both possibilities and their costs. She acknowledges the

limits of coded dissent: the indirection that once protected her voice yet now confines it, because the very disguise that enabled the narrative's circulation also prevented genuine testimony. "If I continued to write only through metaphor," she writes, "my wounds would never close" (57). She recognizes that, although truth can only be conveyed through disguise while under total surveillance, disguise alone is no longer enough. However, once the letter was decoded and reposted, it was swiftly '404-ed' into silence, having only briefly achieved what Scott calls a rupture. Wu's pseudotranslational allegory shows how the coded *hidden transcript* functions infrapolitically as a decoding game, where dissent circulates beneath an Iranian surface through strategic ambiguity and micro-codes. Once this concealed critique moves beyond the Great Firewall, however, its meaning shifts.

Transnational Resistance: A Space for Shared Memories

If "A Letter from a Tehran Prison" began as a *hidden transcript* coded within the limits of China's digital censorship, its later re-circulation—with Wu's authorship revealed and various translations published—transforms it into a site of transnational resistance. Digital media further amplifies this transnational dynamic. The circulation of the letter online and its eventual reverse translation into Persian illustrate how *hidden transcripts* can traverse borders to create solidarity. Wu's letter refuses to remain within the nation-state borders, and instead foregrounds "the multi-layered, multi-sited, and multi-directional dynamic" of remembrance (De Cesari and Rigney 4). Through this lens of remembrance across borders, the letter does not simply expose the shared mechanisms of authoritarian regimes, but weaves together memories of the oppressed across two different geopolitical contexts within a single narrative.

Serving as a disguise for Wu's story, Iran is not merely instrumental as a backdrop. The setting is simultaneously a medium for remembering state-led violence against Iranians and a bridge of transnational empathy. From the first address, "Mama, it is my second day at the Qarchak Detention Centre. This winter in Tehran is bitterly cold" (1), Wu anchors herself in Iranian carceral geography (Qarchak Prison, Evin Pris-

on) bearing real historical weight. The setting also allows her to express vulnerability. For instance, she writes about being dragged to prison, still wearing the same clothes from “the beginning of September,” and asking her mother, “Have you watered my plants? [...] Has my lemon tree borne any fruit yet?” (Wu 1). This juxtaposition of state violence and personal attachments emphasizes the traumatic loss of ordinary life. The letter also employs a mode of self-representation that resists heroic scripting. The narrator describes herself as “a fragile petty-bourgeois intellectual” (3), admits that she doubted if she “truly deserved all that happened to [her]” (5), and confesses her betrayal of having divulged some comrades’ nicknames during the interrogation (37). These confessions of fear, guilt, and self-doubt allow readers to first encounter the narrator as a fragile individual under oppression before recognizing her national identity, to empathize with her as a person before realizing that this empathy also extends to China.

Wu further borrows from Iran a revolutionary lexicon to frame her own persecution as part of a collective feminist uprising. As Iranian feminist scholars Nayerreh Tohidi and Manijeh Daneshpour argue, the Islamic Republic’s obsessive regulation of women’s bodies—most visibly through compulsory hijab laws—is not simply a religious mandate but a mechanism of political control that reduces women to instruments of state ideology, making female bodies the primary terrain on which authoritarianism is inscribed (3-4). Wu’s letter therefore shows feminist solidarity by situating her Chinese experience within a transnational history of women resisting states that discipline and punish through the female body.

This connection is established in the letter from the arrest scene, in which the narrator is at home “adding tomatoes and chickpeas to dizi,” an Iranian stew (Wu 9). When the police officers arrive, she notices their accent of “Tehrani Persian,” and reflects that “as a Kurd I have always been a foreigner” (11). The linguistic and ethnic hierarchy between Tehran and Kurdistan presented here mirrors the center-periphery structure of Beijing and other provinces. Wu’s added footnote makes it explicit: “Sanandaj [...] referred [*sic*] to Guangzhou,” and “the Tehrani Persian accent [...] is a metaphor for Beijing Mandarin” (41; 43). Significantly,

Wu's choice of a Kurdish narrator is not incidental. According to Tohidi and Daneshpour, Mahsa Amini's Kurdish identity carried specific weight in the Iranian uprising, "tying the movement to a history of ethnic resistance as well as collective demands for liberation" (3). By inhabiting this doubly marginalized subject position—Kurdish woman under Tehrani authority—Wu stages the arrest to display a layered domination: "the full weight of theocratic authority, the cold machinery of the state, the arrogance of dominant ethnonationalism, and the sneer of patriarchy" are all elicited when Tehrani security forces ambush Kurdish activists and shout, "Mahsa, don't you recognize your own countryman's accent?" (11).

Wu's writing diverges sharply from much of Chinese dissent literature by revealing how female bodies are disciplined and how their solidarity is manipulated by state power. As the narrator observes, "at the moment of being deemed guilty, even wanting to avoid a stranger's gaze at your most private actions is somehow improper" (Wu 15).⁶ In custody, a woman's everyday acts such as using the toilet or menstruating are under surveillance and become sites of punishment and degradation. The letter develops this argument through the diversity of women it portrays in detention, each subjected to a distinct mode of violence that together maps the range of techniques through which the state targets women. Noor, a young and inexperienced fellow detainee, is targeted by the police through sexualized manipulation. A male interrogator says, "I've never been this gentle with my wife," deploying flirtation and false tenderness to break her resolve (15). Sepideh, by contrast, is subject to psychological gaslighting by a female officer, who reframes her political dissent as a product of low self-esteem and male seduction. Hedieh, another detainee, is emotionally crushed through threats to her family. As for the narrator, the male interrogator alternates between threats ("[h]ow many years do you want to be locked up?") and false tenderness ("expressing sympathy for defenders of freedom and the plight of Iranian women") (21). Across these scenes, the law enforcers' language repeatedly weaponizes misogyny and sexual stigma—from calling women "whores" (17) to spreading homophobic slurs about gay activists (21). Employing the

6 In the original Chinese version, Wu specified "a strange male officer's gaze."

Iranian frame thus enables Wu to articulate a feminist counter-narrative of shared vulnerability, fear, and suffering. These techniques of intimidation, gaslighting, and sexualized pressure speak across borders to readers who inhabit different but resonant experiences of the body under state control.

Crucially, the Iranian setting situates Wu's personal fear within a transnational collective of political prisoners. Wu binds individual trauma to a collective 'we' that addresses many comrades: Farah, who was imprisoned while doing fieldwork in Balochistan and whose novel written from prison was torn apart;⁷ Amin, who refused to plead guilty, declaring "I'm willing to give up my freedom to defend what I've done" (5); Mina, who used her legal knowledge to help arrested activists and was herself arrested more than once; and Yalda Aghafazli, who was arrested and held at Qarchak Detention Centre, allegedly having ended her own life after her release ("Yalda Aghafazli"). The letter ends with her last words, "[n]one of the accused expressed remorse" (39). Among these comrades are Wu's friends in China and activists in Iran whom she has never met but deeply empathizes with. By weaving figures from both countries, Wu constructs a literary archive of ongoing, entangled, global struggles.

Furthermore, in the letter's ending, Wu writes, "I was taken straight to Qarchak Detention Centre in southern Tehran to await final sentencing. I wasn't even given the time to go home and see you" (39). Although this scene is not factually accurate since Wu ultimately fled the country, it operates on a mnemonic level. In cultural memory studies, the mnemonic is understood not as faithful records of what happened, but as meaning-making acts that shape how a shared past is felt, preserved, and passed on. As Astrid Erll argues, literature is a powerful mnemonic medium because of its fictional privileges: the ability to integrate unproved or counterfactual elements and imagine alternative realities in ways that historiography cannot (150). The imagined return to prison stages a past that could have happened and thus preserves the lived uncertainty surrounding Wu's fate at the moment of writing. Before leaving China,

7 Farah refers to Chinese scholar Feng Siyu, who was sentenced to 15 years in 2018 due to her anthropological research on Uyghur culture in Xinjiang (Human Rights in China).

Wu asked her friends to publish the text with footnotes and a statement revealing her identity if she were to be arrested at the border (Wu 53). Through the fictional staging of what could have happened, the letter transforms personal contingency into collective testimony, preserving a shared memory for whom the imagined imprisonment was real.

Faced with the urgency of truth-speaking and preserving memory, Wu builds with words a space that borders and censors have tried to make impossible. In the postscript, she reflects with unease on how her text now lives beyond her control. She acknowledges that once it was translated into English, she began to worry about the risks of appropriation and misrecognition, and that her strategy might “diminish or overshadow the [Iranian] revolution” (Wu 59). However, Wu also notes that some readers have begun to use the Iranian setting to write their own version of “A Letter from a Tehran Prison,” noting that one said, “Iran, for its courage, has become everyone’s Iran” (57). As Aleida Assmann has observed, “‘Trans’ stands of course for ‘transit’, [...] but it also stands for ‘translations’, the cultural work of reconfiguring established national themes, references, representations, images and concepts” (547). Wu’s letter exemplifies this dual movement: it travels geographically while also being culturally retranslated, as readers reconfigure the Iranian frame to articulate their own struggles. Thus, the Iranian setting, far from being a narrative façade, becomes a space of ethical witnessing, which sustains remembrance across linguistic, cultural, and political borders. What emerges here is not a universalized or hegemonic narrative of suffering, but a multidirectional memory practice in which the expression of local trauma becomes a shared affective language, without erasing difference. As the memory studies scholar Michael Rothberg suggests, we should not understand collective memory as competitive but multidirectional, “as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative” (3). Therefore, the letter is neither Chinese nor Iranian in its essence, and the two readings are not conflicting but collaborative, forming a “new mnemonic arena,” where memories are (re)mediated, contested, and shared beyond the nations through new media and diasporic networks (De Cesari and Rigney 3). The letter’s afterlife of circulation around social media, translation projects, and activist groups

materially exemplifies “the possibilities for reproducing, adapting, accessing, and transmitting images and narratives on the part of non-state actors” in the digital age (De Cesari and Rigney 12). These participatory practices turn allegory into transcultural solidarity. What began as a *hidden transcript* thus comes to sustain a form of transnational resistance, opening a space for shared memories beyond the nation-state.

Conclusion

What does it mean to tell the truth under a regime that does not allow it in the first place? Wu Qin’s “A Letter from a Tehran Prison” offers one answer: speak it in someone else’s voice, from someone else’s prison, until the walls between different stories become permeable. As this article has argued, the letter functions as a *hidden trans-national-cript*: a coded infrapolitical narrative that simultaneously evades domestic censorship and articulates personal trauma as collective memory across borders. By disguising a Chinese experience within an Iranian frame, Wu extends the *hidden transcript* beyond the nation-state, revealing how dissent today is increasingly written, read, and remembered in transnational spaces shaped by mediation and cross-border activist networks. The afterlife of the letter, its decoding, removal, translation, and reverse translation transform it into a multidirectional practice of remembering in which meanings are continually (re)negotiated by readers, translators, and activists. In this process, the text resists the containment of political testimony within a single geopolitical frame. Instead, it produces a shared mnemonic arena where vulnerability, gendered violence, and prolonged oppression are recognized across distinct yet resonant struggles. Wu phrases her writing mode as being a ‘non non-fiction’ between fact and fiction. Her experiment offers not only a new literary strategy of survival to oppressed and censored revolutionaries, but also the ethical possibilities of global solidarity that confronts forbidden memories and unspeakable truths.

Works Cited

- Assmann, Aleida.** "Transnational Memories." *European Review*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2014, pp. 546–56.
- De Cesari, Chiara, and Ann Rigney, editors.** *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales*. De Gruyter, 2014.
- Erll, Astrid.** *Memory in Culture*. Translated by Sara B. Young. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Fan, Wenxin.** "How One Woman Duped China's Censorship Machine." *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 Mar. 2024, www.wsj.com/world/china/how-one-woman-duped-chinas-censorship-machine-1f3924de. Accessed 27 Feb. 2026.
- Guan, Yue, et al.** "The Rally Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the White Paper Movement in China." *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 34, no. 151, May 2024, pp. 117–28, doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2356863.
- Human Rights in China.** "Young Chinese Scholar Missing Since 2018 After Conducting Research on Uyghur Culture." *Human Rights in China*, 22 Aug. 2025, hrichina.substack.com/p/young-chinese-scholar-missing-since. Accessed 27 Feb. 2026.
- Hunt, Katie, and CY Xu.** "China 'Employs 2 Million to Police Internet.'" *CNN*, 7 Oct. 2013, www.edition.cnn.com/2013/10/07/world/asia/china-internet-monitors. Accessed 27 Feb. 2026.
- "Iran: Internet Shutdown Hides Violations in Escalating Deadly Crackdown on Protesters."** *Amnesty International*, 9 Jan. 2026, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/01/internet-shutdown-in-iran-hides-violations-in-escalating-protests. Accessed 27 Feb. 2026.
- Li, Yawen.** "Spectres of Anticolonial Internationalism in Contemporary China." *Made in China Journal*, 29 Aug. 2024, www.madeinchinajournal.com/2024/06/12/spectres-of-anticolonial-internationalism-in-contemporary-china. Accessed 27 Feb. 2026.
- Luo, Jianjun.** "Picking Quarrels and Provoking Trouble." *China Media Project*, 9 Nov. 2023, www.chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/picking-quarrels-and-provoking-trouble. Accessed 27 Feb. 2026.
- Rath, Brigitte.** "Pseudotranslation." *Futures of Comparative Literature: ACLA State of the Discipline Report*, edited by Ursula K. Heise, et al., Routledge, 2017, pp. 230–233.
- Rothberg, Michael.** *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford UP, 2009.
- Scott, James C.** *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Yale UP, 2008.
- Tan, Yvette.** "China Protest: Mystery Beijing Demonstrator Sparks Online Hunt and Tributes." *BBC News*, 14 Oct. 2022, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-63252559. Accessed 27 Feb. 2026.
- Tohidi, Nayereh, and Manijeh Daneshpour.** "Will the Women's Movement in Iran Grow Into a National Liberation Movement?" *Social Sciences*, vol. 14, no. 5, Apr. 2025, p. 272. doi.org/10.3390/socsci14050272.
- Toury, Gideon.** *Descriptive Translation Studies— and beyond*. Rev. ed., John Benjamins Pub. Co., 2012.
- "What Happened to Mahsa/Zhina Amini?"** Amnesty International, 15 Sept. 2023, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/09/what-happened-to-mahsa-zhina-amini. Accessed 27 Feb. 2026.
- Wu, Qin.** *A Letter from a Tehran Prison*. English translated by Aaris WOO and Yixi, Persian translated by Somayeh Rostampour, *Tofu Stand*, Berlin, 2025.
- Xu, Beina, and Eleanor Albert.** "Media Censorship in China." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 17 Feb. 2017, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/media-censorship-china#chapter-title-0-8. Accessed 27 Feb. 2026.
- "Yalda Aghafazli."** *NCRI Women Committee*, 10 Nov. 2024, www.wncri.org/2024/11/10/yalda-aghafazli. Accessed 27 Feb. 2026.

Biography

This article belongs to those who cannot write in their own name because of what they are writing against.