

Takrim and Mudhakhirât, the Two Faces of Living Memory: Books of Memoirs, Memory-Related Social Events and the Staging of Capital in the Self-Narratives of Lebanese Elites (1950-2020)

Pierre France
(Research Associate, Orient-Institut Beirut)

Beyond the many literary aspects of the biographical form in the Middle East, memoirs or 'mudhakhirât' are also one of the privileged sources for the writing of history from the nineteenth century to the present day. However, compared to the books of writers and intellectuals, those of politicians or senior government officials are not the subject of any methodological or literary studies; they are most often used, quoted in a footnote. Little is known about their writing context and the modalities of their creation. This observation is all the more intriguing given the notable multiplication of these books, to the point that Beirut bookstores often have an extremely well-stocked shelf of 'biographies'.

Over the years, and without having planned it at the outset on a research whose subjects (the civil war and the history of the Lebanese bureaucracy) and methodology (archives and interviews) are apparently far from a literary dimension, the multiplication of mudhakhirâts has become an aspect gradually taken into account. Going back and forth between the content of the text, the book itself as a thing, and the social situations in which it is used, I focus on three main aspects of this encounter: the biographical interview and the recited biography; mudhakhirâts in place: analyzing the takrim; the social conditions of public writing.

Because the memoirs may have been read beforehand and used to prepare for the interview, they are a potential asset on the interviewer's side, as much as, on the contrary, they offer the respondent a touchstone for several things such as avoiding questions, arguing that the answers are in the book to shorten the interview, or even escaping the interview, by only receiving the person to sign the book and exchange courtesies for a few minutes. The course of the fieldwork led us to encounter several situations where the book and the interview respond to each other: a book already written and almost recited, a book in the process of being written, an interview desired or requested by the respondent because it could become a book, etc.

Beyond the interview situation, these memories result as much as they are at the base of specific social events - between people from a certain generation, who have occupied similar public positions. Each one pushes the others to write their own memoirs, in a form of social competition, while they also create their own social event, the *takrim*. This generic word designates a ceremony where speeches of praise by political figures or colleagues follow one another, often followed by the signing of a book or the awarding of a medal. The book is then almost a "souvenir book" of the ceremony rather than a literary object, rarely opened afterwards, even if they are left visible in the offices - the researcher may more often than not be the first to try to read these objects, which are also instrumental in showing a certain social position through the language they used.

Finally, the fact remains that despite their multiplication not everyone writes memoirs - the main Lebanese politicians have never written their memoirs or have never published them, instead, it is often their lieutenants and second-in-command who write. Even more behind them, other absences or near absences question: that of the memoirs of Muslim actors or even more testimonies coming from women. As such it is a certain part of Lebanon whose books are piling up in the book stores, certain experiences that are written down, whose limits need to be clearly addressed.

Short Biography: Pierre France is a Research Associate at the Orient Institut Beirut. Through his project "Fictio Statis. Unreliable numbers, Private Statistics and Economists' careers in Lebanon (1950-1990)" he aims at unfolding the question of statistics in Lebanon, from the mandate to the contemporary period. A PhD candidate (defence in waiting) in Political Science at Paris 1 Sorbonne University, his doctoral research focused on the process of the Lebanese state's survival throughout the Lebanese war (1975-1990). Aside of his PhD, Pierre co-wrote a book with Prof. Antoine Vauchez on the phenomenon of top french civil servants becoming lawyers, a contribution to the study of the blurring lines between public and private social spheres in contemporary France (Cornell, 2021) which he now extends to the Lebanese case through a prosopographic study of the top civil servants and the minister's advisors.