

5 Wang Xiaobo and the no longer silent majority

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Wang Xiaobo, born in 1952, was an atypical member of the educated youth generation. Having returned to Beijing quite early (in 1972, at 20), and after a further six years as a factory worker, he enrolled in a university at the almost normal age of 26, in 1978. Like many others who shared his experience, it seems that he soon began writing about his life on a military farm in Yunnan, his appraisal of the ideology-driven totalitarian Maoist state, and his understanding of the intellectual's role in the new, de-Maoized context of the 1980s. However, unlike almost all of his contemporaries, he did not publish a single piece of writing during the decade of 'cultural fever' that culminated in the student movement. Having taught two years of secondary school after graduation, he left for the United States in 1984 and obtained a Master's degree in East Asian Studies from the University of Pittsburgh in 1988. Upon his return to China, he took up a position as assistant professor in the Sociology Department of Peking University, where he remained for three years, throughout the student protests and subsequent repression of 1989. It was only after leaving Beida for People's University that, in the summer of 1992, he finally decided to publish a novella he had been working on for almost twenty years: 'The Golden Age'. In the five following years, before his death of a heart attack on 4 November 1997, he rose to meteoric fame in China and even, to an extent, in Taiwan, where he won several prizes, and began frenetically publishing novels, short stories and essays, some of which had been accumulating in his drawers, others freshly composed.

Why did Wang Xiaobo suddenly decide to enter the public sphere in this way? What was it in his writings that struck such a chord with the young and disillusioned Chinese readers of the 1990s? This paper argues that, although there is no direct connection between Wang and the 1989 student movement, his decision to 'speak out' as he put it in his most famous essay, 'The Silent Majority' (April 1996) is related to the watershed of 1989: because his writing is both connected with the spirit of the 1980s, and at the same time represents a break with certain notable aspects of this spirit, in particular a revision of its views on dealing with history and politics, on Enlightenment and on the role of the intellectual; it

lent words to the feeling among young intellectuals that they had to invent a new mode of thinking and of public action. This paper will mainly draw on his essays published in the years between 1995 and 1997 in several influential intellectual journals, such as *Southern Weekend* (Nanfang Zhoumo), *Dushu*, *Dongfang* magazine, and others, and collected under the title *The Pleasure of Thinking* (Siwei de Lequ). It will attempt to give a glimpse of the originality of Wang's ideas in several key areas, to illustrate how Chinese intellectuals sought to reinvent their role in the 1990s.

The totalitarian past and the world of power

In the opening essay of the collection 'The Silent Majority', Wang Xiaobo begins by writing about the necessity of keeping silent. In a totalitarian environment, language itself is invested with a dynamics that makes it into a tool of oppression: 'When the "cultural revolution" began, I was fourteen and in the first year of junior high school. One day, a frightening change occurred: part of my classmates suddenly became members of the five red categories, and the other part became members of the five black categories' (4).¹ In this example, Wang finds a confirmation of what he has read in Foucault's essays in the 1980s: that language is power, and using categories of language is a way of imposing, or even creating, domination. In this context, using language will necessarily make the writer into one of Stalin's 'engineers of the soul', and the only solution is to keep silent. If you speak out in the public sphere, you enter what Wang Xiaobo calls the world of *yang*, the world of power relations, of politics, and of oppression. When you speak the language of power, you are almost certainly lying, just like the propaganda slogans praising the unequalled happiness of the Chinese people that Wang remembers in conjunction with the famine of the Great Leap Forwards.

For all these reasons, Wang Xiaobo explains, he has chosen silence: 'we can always make a choice between two types of culture: silence and language' (8). Silence belongs to the world of *yin*, and it is in this world that the values of humanity have somehow been preserved even during the Cultural Revolution. The evidence is tenuous, but Wang underlines that, on one occasion, after a fight breaks out in the lavatories of a dorm and two of his young colleagues bite at each other's ears, the missing pieces of ear are later found on the floor: there has been no cannibalism, and human nature has prevailed. On another occasion, he himself is carried to hospital by one of his companions over a dangerous river ford. He concludes:

Because of these acts, I do not think we were bad people, we do not necessarily believe in 'youth without regrets', or think we should have stayed in the villages and not come back; nor do I think we should follow some of the hints encouraging us to commit collective suicide, to open up some positions for the

young people of today. However, for the aspects of our morality that can be saved, we should be thankful for the education of silence.

(Chenmo de daduoshu, 8)

Humanism, Wang Xiaobo infers, did not disappear during the Cultural Revolution, but it survived in silence. Silence, and the private world of *yin* thus serve not only as a refuge, but also as a bulwark against violence and against the lies of rosy propaganda. For this reason, Wang never joined the chorus of the ‘scar’ writers, who bemoaned their travails and oppression; he took the stance that silence was not a constraint but an ethical choice, the choice of the world of *yin* and of the side of the oppressed against the power holders. Therefore, while he of course refuses the idea of ‘youth without regrets’, he symmetrically avoids portraying the educated youth as victims.² It is most probably for this reason that Wang Xiaobo himself chose to remain silent throughout the 1980s and delayed publishing his own fictional account of life on his military farm in Yunnan.

The position of the intellectual

However, the connection between speech and power exists not only in a totalitarian context. The world of *yang* in Wang’s view also encompasses the figure of the intellectual, with all its Chinese variants, ranging from Confucian, via May Fourth to the Cultural Fever of the 1980s. The traditional idea of ‘Taking the world under heaven as their responsibility’ (*yi tianxia wei ji ren*) is, for Wang Xiaobo, part and parcel of the oppressive power structure of the world of speaking out. Playing with the characters *shuo* and *shui*, he writes: ‘Educated Chinese people have a very strong sense of responsibility to society: they must pay their taxes, be a good taxpayer – this is the unpleasant way to say it. The nicer-sounding way is “taking the world under the heavens as your responsibility”’ (Chenmo de daduoshu, 10). Taking a position on social issues is therefore exactly like paying a tax to the state, paying tribute to the necessity of entering the world of power struggles.

Wang Xiaobo implicitly lumps together the traditional Confucian stance and its Enlightenment variant, in which the intellectual takes on the role of a moral authority. ‘Think no evil’, wrote Confucius on the *Book of Songs*, to which Wang Xiaobo replies: ‘The people who make this kind of suggestion are themselves without evil, or without selfishness, of course they do not know what evil is, therefore this recommendation simply means: I don’t want others to have what I don’t have’ (Siwei de lequ, 19). Underlining the continuity between Confucian and Maoist moralism (he describes the anti-Rightist movement as mainly preoccupied with investigating women Rightists’ family mores, p. 56), Wang Xiaobo criticizes Chinese intellectuals, including those of the 1980s, for talking too much about people and not enough about ideas: ‘In our country, when intellectuals discuss social problems, what they always repeat is that people are too ignorant.

[...] I do not believe this is a criticism of society, it is rather personal criticism' (23–24). Whether they base their claims on morality and ethics (in a Confucian manner), or on superior knowledge, intellectuals must abandon this moral high ground:

Some say that they should 'worry before all others and rejoice after all others under heaven' (are they pessimists?), some say they should 'take responsibility for the world under heaven' (are they internationalists?), I think this is not the most classic formulation. That would be that they believe in their own superior morality (a scholar is versed in all trades), their dominating position (the most important of the four estates), and their qualification to educate others (educate the people). [...] When we talk about social problems, we should use 'hard reasoning': either we know what is being discussed and others don't, or we can clarify a complex problem that others can't.

(26)

If they cannot demonstrate their understanding of the problem, intellectuals, just like ordinary people, have nothing to contribute, and should remain silent.

This position is related to Wang Xiaobo's particular understanding of the nature and the use of science. For him, knowledge or science is not situated within a relationship of power, it is much rather a universal type of reasoning that is valid because it can be reproduced by everyone, and requires no position of authority to find acceptance; it is democratic in its method. For this reason, Wang derides both Zhu Xi and the '2000-year old chewing gum' of 'national studies' (82), and Plato's ideal of the philosopher-king: 'conclusions in philosophy are very different [from science]: there are some that you might never agree with at any cost, because they have neither proof nor reasoning, the philosopher-king himself is the proof, and what is more the conclusion itself is quite often very serious. [...] As for myself, I have always hoped that the principles of existence, the foundations of ethics could be self-explanatory ideas. And if there are unclear aspects, I welcome the valuable views of scholars, provided that they convince people using reason, just like the scientists of earlier generations, or that like Socrates, they engage in an equal dialogue with us' (94). Wang's position is that, contrary to the Confucian definition of wisdom as 'knowing the commandments of heaven' or Mao's 'spiritual atomic bomb', an intellectual never has any answers: his knowledge is based only on the fact that, like Socrates, he knows that he knows nothing (87).

In an article entitled 'Moral conservatism and other problems', Wang Xiaobo insists on the axiological neutrality that social science must bring to intellectual debates. Recalling a conference in which a colleague wore a T-shirt inscribed with the sentence, 'Ok, let's pee', Wang distinguishes between people who think that encouragement is always good, whatever the goal, and people who prefer to think about the goal rather than encourage others to do things. Therefore, he underlines

that, although he has agreed to write the ‘social ethics’ column in *Oriental Magazine*, with the recommendation to ‘raise the level of social morals’, he himself is not interested in encouraging people to do things they do not want to do. ‘Ok let’s pee’ is not an appropriate slogan for a gathering of adults – it is widely accepted that after a certain age, everyone can decide for him- or herself when it is time to pee. Therefore Wang Xiaobo announces that he will devote his column only to the construction of moral standards, not on how to enforce them. Therefore, ‘ethics and morals are just the same as all other areas of research, you first need to understand the related facts before you draw any conclusions’ (63), and moral conservatism is the same thing as disregarding the content of the facts you are judging. For this reason, in Wang Xiaobo’s view, there is no real difference between placing your faith in a moral or religious canon (and, for example, persecuting or discriminating against homosexuals) and placing your faith in a little red book: in both cases you are devoted to encouraging other people to pee. This shift towards social science and axiological neutrality, and the subsequent distrust of the educational role of the intellectual it implies, both mark a break with the understanding of Enlightenment that dominated in the 1980s.

‘Coming out’ of silence and taking the position of the powerless

It has probably become clear by now that some of Wang Xiaobo’s ideas are inspired by his reading of Foucault, in particular his obsessive analysis of power as the fundamental phenomenon in human interaction, of which political power appears to be only one variant. In one particularly facetious text that echoes his fiction writing, Wang plays with this metaphor to describe the rituals of power in both late-Qing and Maoist China as a sado-masochistic game of humiliation. Describing a ‘sadist bisexual foreign devil’ who visits the court of the Qing emperor, Wang writes: ‘When he heard that a vassal must salute the emperor by kneeling three times and kowtowing nine times, he immediately had an emperor dream: playing such an amusing sexual game every day would be worth dying for. Overall, in his eyes, the Chinese political system of the time was a delicious sexual game and sexual ceremony, unfortunately he was a foreign devil and could only watch, not play’ (78). In Maoism, he adds, things have not changed very much: ordinary people dream of being a screw or a brick, emblems of their masochist alienation, while the sadistic center of power is described as the ‘reddest sun’ in their hearts (79), making the entire country into a ‘secret chamber’.³

While this characterization is certainly conceived in a humorous mindset, it highlights what Wang Xiaobo sees as a defining trait of Chinese society: the fact that everyone belongs to what he calls an ‘underprivileged’ or ‘weak’ group (*ruoshi qunti*).

A few years ago, I took part in some sociological research, and so came into contact with some ‘weak groups,’ the most unique of which were

homosexuals. After carrying out this research, I suddenly realized that all ‘weak groups’ are made up of people who do not speak out about certain things. [...] And then I also suddenly realized that I was part of the largest of these ‘weak groups,’ and one that has always existed: the silent majority. The reasons why these people choose to keep silent are varied and many: some don’t have the ability, or the opportunity, to speak out; others have some private feelings they prefer not to speak about; others yet, for all sorts of reasons, dislike the whole world of speaking. I belong to the latter category. But as someone of this kind, I still have a duty to talk about what I have seen and what I have heard.

The world of *yin*, although it survives in the shadows, is therefore not only the place where the values of humanity are preserved in difficult times, but can also be estimated to make up a large part of Chinese society. To borrow a concept from a similar context, but which was originally coined with a very different meaning, Wang Xiaobo here defines his own version of the ‘power of the powerless’.

Needless to say, this manifesto, which is linked to Wang’s interest in Foucault, and also in Braudel’s ‘everyday history’, triggered a wide enthusiasm among Chinese intellectuals for marginal groups and the underprivileged. In the context of what he has written about traditional attitudes, it is clear that for Wang intellectuals cannot speak *for* these *ruoshi qunti*, but can only speak by adopting their position, or their perspective, within the framework of axiological neutrality. This, once again, represents both a form of continuity and also a break with the attitude of the 1980s. While Wang mentions a ‘duty’ (*yiwu*) to ‘talk about’ what he has seen and heard, be it in Yunnan with the peasants and educated youth or during his sociological investigations, this duty is not of the same nature as the ‘responsibility for the world under heaven’. It is a purely individual form of responsibility to oneself, and as such, it can escape from the power relationships that inevitably arise from a sense of social responsibility (and the superiority it presupposes).

This different individual form of responsibility is nonetheless capable of providing a new impetus to the ‘powerless’ silent majority, because it is closely associated with pleasure. For Wang Xiaobo, disinterested, individual desire for knowledge is invested with the highest degree of pleasure, which is capable of overcoming all forms of social obstacles. While his father, a famous logician of the 1950s, never experienced the pleasure of knowledge, living in constant terror that his findings might be found to be counter-revolutionary, Wang writes that the brain is the ‘organ with which we perceive the greatest pleasure’ (16). Wang denounces the Chinese tradition in which, in his view, knowledge is always utilitarian: ‘Zhu Xi recognized that his view to obtaining knowledge through the “investigation of things” was motivated by his wish to govern the country and pacify the world’ (70). Rejecting any utilitarian approach to knowledge, Wang writes: ‘I prefer the

donkey's approach: knowledge itself is good. One day we will all die, but others will pursue the road to seeking knowledge. I will not see what happens after my death. But thinking about this fact while I am alive makes me very happy' (86).

Taking issue with an article by Wang Lixiong regretting the alleged moral decay among intellectuals after 1989, Wang Xiaobo replies that an intellectual's duty is only towards science, and that science holds nothing sacred. Intellectuals have no need to feel shame ('it is always better to live without shame', p. 52), on the contrary they should free themselves from all fetters in seeking knowledge. Comparing Wang Shuo's writings with those of Marguerite Duras and Milan Kundera, Wang Xiaobo concludes that Wang Shuo does not lack shame, but experience of the wider world. Similarly to Wolfgang Kubin's recent criticism of contemporary Chinese writers, Wang believes that Chinese writers need to read more, learn more, understand more about the world, in order to have more interesting things to say, and refuses to criticize them on moral grounds.

The force of the pleasure it procures is, however, also Wang's ultimate argument in favor of literature. Parting with Foucault and the mainstream of cultural studies, Wang asserts a specific role for literature as a 'foothold to attack the circle of language, to attack the entire world of *yang*' (11). Literature differs from ideology and the world of *yang* in that it does not have all the answers, it is disinterested, purely individual, and it touches others not through constraint but through pleasure. Wang concludes 'The Silent Majority' with what can only be seen as a provocation against the views of literature propounded both by the official side and by many writers of the 1980s:

According to him [a friend Wang Xiaobo had given his first book to], writing must allow you to educate the people, to elevate their soul. These are truly golden words. But among the inhabitants of this world, the one I would most like to elevate is myself. This is a very base, very egoistic conception, but it is a very frank one.

(12)

Literature, just like knowledge, has only one finality: procuring pleasure, both for the writer and for the reader. It is this ultimately anti-authoritarian, utterly individualistic conception which guards it against misuse by propaganda or ideology and places it entirely outside the 'meshes of power' defining all social and political relationships. It rejects any form of enlightenment that incorporates the indoctrination of others: 'When I was sent down to the country as an educated youth, I absolutely wanted to liberate the entire human race, I never thought in the least of myself. At the same time I must admit that I was very ignorant [...] wanting to educate others with your own ignorance is the greatest sin that good-hearted people can commit' (17–18). The fact that knowledge can be acquired by everyone is the strongest argument against the need for the liberation of others.

Wang Xiaobo therefore defines a paradoxical form of responsibility, an individual duty to oneself that derives from being a member of the 'silent majority', part of the world of *yin*, from occupying a position on the margins of society. But although there is no obligation to come out of the world of silence and into the dangers of the world of power and language, we may surmise that his own decision to do so has a sort of exemplary value, in demonstrating the anti-authoritarian force of speaking out.

Conclusion

Why, then, did Wang Xiaobo finally come out of his silence three years after the repression of the student movement in Tian'anmen? This paper has tried to argue that his conviction that it was only by virtue of occupying a marginal, non-representative position in society that a writer or an intellectual could possibly enter the world of public speech and politics, is somehow related to the failure of a movement that, for all its ideological complexity, grew out of a very different matrix of values and beliefs, one that was much more closely related to May Fourth, to the traditional role of intellectuals and indeed to the role the Communist Party sought to assign to them. Wang Xiaobo no doubt felt compelled to speak out, not to criticize the convictions or actions of others, but in order to address what he thought was the most urgent problem of Chinese society: the exacerbation and superposition of power relationships of various types (political, but also increasingly economic, cultural, intellectual) and the fracturing of Chinese society into 'underprivileged groups' that did not form a monolithic block capable of opposing state power.

It is worth pointing out that this stance that espouses the viewpoint of the underprivileged has been largely adopted by intellectuals of the post-Tian'anmen generation. Documentary filmmakers began in the late 1990s, using hand-held digital video technology, to film all sorts of social and political problems: socially excluded groups, like migrant workers or prostitutes, testimony of witnesses of political campaigns like the Cultural Revolution, the Anti-Rightist movement, or the Collectivization campaigns of the 1950s. Writers like Yan Lianke or Liao Yiwu turned to the most vulnerable or illness-stricken members of society and adopted their perspective. Jia Zhangke never fails to mention Wang Xiaobo as the writer who inspired him to consider the value of the individual and the necessity to turn away from collective narratives. Sociologists and other academics, in particular Wang's widow, Li Yinhe, have turned to studying specific social questions in the non-axiological manner he advocated, while a more general academic trend is emerging in favor of cultural studies (Wang Xiaoming). Local activists have focused on environmental issues, heritage destruction and housing evictions rather than on institutional change. To various degrees, these trends are all related to what Wang Xiaobo was calling for and was engaged in. Whether and in what way all these

movements can be seen as harbingers of deeper and more radical intellectual and, eventually, political change remains to be seen; however the influence wielded by Wang Xiaobo in five short years of intense publishing will certainly stand as an important phenomenon in its own right, and will no doubt be increasingly seen as defining for the mindset of the post-Tian'anmen generation.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise specified, all quotations are from Wang Xiaobo, *Siwei de Lequ* (Quanji, vol. 1), Kunming, Yunnan Chuban jituan/ Yunnan Renmin chubanshe, 2006. The red categories were revolutionary cadres, martyrs, workers, soldiers and peasants; the black ones were landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, criminals and rightists.
- 2 There are similar elements in 'The Golden Age', when the main character, Wang Er, initially refuses to confess because he will not adopt the language of the commissars, and finally only agrees to write a confession as a form of fictional writing which he uses to mock them.
- 3 More generally, Wang Xiaobo seems to regard politics, and in particular totalitarian politics, as deeply irrational. In an essay on the 'poisonous propaganda of narrow nationalism,' he compares Hitler's charisma with the power of the literary figure of the Russian madman and Yao Wenyan's eery smile.