

Utopian Fiction and Critical Examination

The Cultural Revolution in Wang Xiaobo's "The Golden Age"

SEBASTIAN VEG

The first novella in Wang Xiaobo's *Trilogy of the Ages* has in recent years become a genuine cult-work, in particular among Chinese students. The popularity of a text that links the sending-down of "educated youths" to the country with a golden age of sexual liberation in nature can certainly be explained in part by its scandalous aspects. However, it also conceals a sharply ironic discourse directed against the agrarian utopia of Maoism, which is associated with a regression to animal existence. From this perspective, Wang Xiaobo appears as an advocate of critical reflection, encouraging intellectuals to renounce political utopias and engage with society. His often polemical tone, when he refuses to regard past suffering as sacred, has in this way opened a precious space for discussion of the Cultural Revolution, a space that has so far proved elusive outside the area of fiction.

While a serious examination of the Cultural Revolution remains impossible in Chinese historiography,⁽²⁾ literature has presented, since the late 1970s, the only public venue for reflection on the significance of the events of 1966-1976. Writers were the first to question the necessity and even the rationality of the persecutions to which almost all of them had been subjected, and to call for a public form of commemoration. Ba Jin (1904-2005) addressed this subject in many of his essays in *Random Thoughts* (*Sui xiang lu*), one of which called for "A Museum of the Cultural Revolution" (1986), openly referring to the example of the Auschwitz memorial. Two accounts by Yang Jiang (born in 1911) of her experience in a May 7th cadre school, *Six Stories from a Cadre School* (1981)⁽³⁾ and *Chronicle of the Bingwu and Dingwei Years* (1987), use the same detached irony as Ba Jin to underline the irrationality of the cycle of historical events in which she was caught up. The fictional genre of "scar literature" emerged around the same time with the publication of "The Scar" (*Shanghen*) by Lu Xinhua in 1978 and "The Class Teacher" (*Ban zhuren*, 1977) by Liu Xinwu, and flourished in the first half of the 1980s.⁽⁴⁾ This genre, though initially daring, came to be seen as aesthetically unsatisfying and historically limited to the lamentation of individual suffering, lacking both a reflection on the responsibilities of various actors in the Cultural Revolution, and a sharper analysis of its collective, institutional dimension and historical significance.⁽⁵⁾

The decline of this genre at the end of the 1980s did not, interestingly, mark an end to writing on the Cultural Revolu-

tion. Indeed, interest in the era was rekindled as the survivors among the cadres who had been the first victims of persecutions in 1966 neared the end of their lives, and as the Red Guard generation reached the highest level of political responsibility. The 1990s thus saw the publication of what might be considered the most reflective and provocative fictional works devoted to the Cultural Revolution: Wang Xiaobo's *The Golden Age* (*Huangjin shidai*, 1992) and Gao Xingjian's *One Man's Bible* (*Yige ren de shengjing*, 1998).⁽⁶⁾ Interestingly, Gao Xingjian, born in

1. A first version of this paper was presented at the symposium "The Individual and Society in Modern Chinese Literature", Macau, Ricci Institute, 29 November 2007. I would like to thank the organizers for their invitation, and the audience for their remarks and questions, as well as Michel Bonnin for his comments and suggestions.
2. History writing continues to be subject to the "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our Party since the foundation of the People's Republic" (*Guanyu jian'guo yilai dang de ruogan wenti de jueyi*), adopted on 27 June 1981 at the 6th plenum of the 11th Central Committee. See Guo Jian, Yongyi Song, Yuan Zhou, *Historical Dictionary of the Cultural Revolution*, Lanham, Scarecrow Press, 2006, p. 245.
3. This was translated by Howard Goldblatt under the title *Six Chapters from My Life "Downunder"*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1984.
4. I benefited considerably from reading Zhang Yesong's paper, "Dakai shanghen wenxue de lijie kongjian" (Opening up a space for the understanding of scar literature), symposium "The Individual and Society."
5. There are of course exceptions in the 1980s, such as Yu Hua's story *Nineteen-eighty-six* (1987).
6. Other works of the 1990s could be quoted, such as Wang Shuo's "The Cruelty of Animals" (*Dongwu xiangmeng*, 1993), famously adapted by Jiang Wen as *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, 1994); Su Tong's "Tattoo Age" (*Ciqing shidai*, 1993); Ge Fei's "Poem to a Fool" (*Shagua de shipian*, 2000). But none of these works enjoy the cult status of Wang Xiaobo's novella.



Wang Xiaobo's works met with considerable success in the 1990s.

1940, is one of the youngest members of the generation of cadres persecuted and sent to May 7th schools, while Wang Xiaobo (1952-1997) belonged to the subsequent generation of “educated youths” (*zhiqing*), and spent three years (1968-1970) on a collective farm in Yunnan. He was then transferred to Shandong and eventually returned to Beijing in 1972, where he worked for six years as a factory worker. Gao Xingjian’s writing, published only in Hong Kong and Taiwan may be less relevant to understanding the way in which the Cultural Revolution is remembered today in China.⁽⁷⁾ Conversely, Wang Xiaobo’s novella (first published in 1992) and the subsequent *Trilogy of the Ages* into which it was incorporated became cult-works read by intellectuals and students on campuses all over China – so much so, in fact, that after receiving the Taiwan United Daily News (*Lianhebao*) prize in 1993,⁽⁸⁾ Wang Xiaobo was able to retire from university teaching and become a full-time professional writer (although remaining virtually unknown in the West) until his unexpected death from a heart attack in 1997.⁽⁹⁾

To the otherwise jaded Chinese students and intellectuals of the 1990s, Wang Xiaobo’s works were daring both for their reflections on Chinese politics (the Cultural Revolution in *The Golden Age*, the work unit, the manipulation of opin-

ion and art) and for their sexual content. By drawing a paradoxical and ironic connection between the sending-down of “educated youths” to the countryside and a “Golden Age” of sexual liberation in the lap of nature, the opening story in the homonymous collection certainly owes part of its success in China to its scandalous aspects. Yet, moving beyond scandal and the personal myth which followed the writer’s untimely death, Chinese readers certainly were and are drawn to Wang’s ambitious confrontation of the Cultural Revolution. Its history is not so much narrated to the reader in a succession of reconstructed events as it is summed up in a utopian, almost fantastic space and time, and conversely contextualized within a much broader evolution that Wang portrays in his “Trilogy of the Ages.” The Cultural Revolution, which coincides with the “Golden Age,” finds its place between the “Bronze Age” of Tang-style *chuanqi* stories ex-

7. See S. Veg, “Fuite sans fin et exil impossible : *Le Livre d'un homme seul* de Gao Xingjian,” Conference “Exiles in France in the 20th century,” Cerisy-la-Salle, 14-21 August 2006.
8. This prize also attests to Wang’s considerable success and influence in Taiwan, although his writing is closely related to issues of PRC history and politics.
9. I have summarized the biographical elements in the catalogue of the exhibition organized by the Lu Xun Museum in 2005: Li Yinhe, Zheng Hongxia (eds), *Yige teli duxing de ren*, Beijing, Dazhong wenyi, 2005.

ploring the sexual and political mores of classical China, and the dystopian “Silver Age” of the “world to come,” in which individuals are controlled in increasingly effective and imperceptible ways by the state. In this way, what could be seen as an historical anomaly (and is at the same time portrayed without playing down the violence or absurdity of this segment of history) finds a place—albeit a largely ironic and critical one—within a larger historical pattern in which the individual is repeatedly a victim of power structures in various hues.

The most common interpretation of this surprising fictional construction is that all forms of social organization are intrinsically repressive in ways that change over the ages; during the Cultural Revolution, however, by virtue of a trick of history, the “return to nature” of the educated youths liberates a kind of primeval force, represented by sexuality, from the constraints of society. In this reading, the sheer sexual power of Wang Er, the protagonist of “The Golden Age,” is intrinsically anti-authoritarian and therefore defines a form of resistance to the oppressive and all-encompassing (Maoist) state. The critic Ding Dong, in particular, has propounded the view that in Wang Xiaobo’s writing “sex is the ultimate defence of the individual against the outside world,”⁽¹⁰⁾ going so far as to say that the “ugliness” of Wang Er’s “little Buddha”⁽¹¹⁾ represents the symmetrical pendant of the lies propagated by politics. This interpretation appears somewhat problematic, insofar as Wang Er’s rebellion cannot be both a revelation of the anti-authoritarian potential of unfettered sexuality and the expression of an individual revolt against a political system: Wang Er’s sexuality, while freed from all constraints, is also utterly unreflective; it is simply a given, over which Wang Er himself seems to have little control.

Wang Xiaobo’s writing develops both of these diverging tendencies: individual critical spirit and irony on the one hand, and, on the other, regression into a utopian state of nature in which humans live as the buffalo in Yunnan would if were not castrated by the production team leader. This tension is perhaps more generally inherent in the idea of “Golden Age,” which can be understood as a mythical era preceding all history and social organization, or conversely as a biting ironic depiction of the misery of “Love in the time of revolution,” a title that echoes the unleashing of sexual passions in another extreme social situation in the novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In this sense, the Golden Age depicted by Wang Xiaobo, while invested with the utopian dimension of a sexuality liberated from social conventions, also resonates in a sharply ironic manner with Mao’s promise of an agrarian utopia that was to be brought about by sending intellec-

tuals to the fields. The kind of life Wang Er and Chen Qingyang end up living in Yunnan almost certainly differs from Mao’s idea of a “Golden Age,” yet incorporates the radical defiance of all structures of power that some people perceived in his theories. As a result, Wang Xiaobo’s stories remain ambiguous, giving few hints to the reader as to whether the Golden Age of Wang Er’s twenty-first birthday should be understood as an ironic indictment of a vision of mankind finding fulfilment only in renouncing humanity, or as a celebration of the liberation from masochistic submission to politics paradoxically brought about by the rebellious politics of Maoist totalitarianism. This paper attempts to examine and clarify Wang Xiaobo’s understanding of how the individual can be emancipated from the stifling pressure of politics and society, and whether the Cultural Revolution may be seen as having provided a paradoxical opportunity for the individual to escape such oppression.

Liberation in nature, castration by society

“The Golden Age” undoubtedly contains a discourse presenting Wang Er’s life in nature as a sent-down “educated youth” in terms of a paradoxical liberation from the constraints of socialisation. This is, to a degree, a classic theme in *zhiqing* literature.⁽¹²⁾ Many *zhiqing*, removed from the control of their parents and teachers, placed in an often promiscuous rural environment, experienced a paradoxical form of freedom, insofar as the Maoist rigourism that dominated in urban areas was less tightly enforced or observed by the peasants among whom they lived. Yet, whereas this theme usually appears in a sentimental vein linking it to tender memories of adolescence or post-adolescence, Wang Xiaobo reworks it in a distinctly unsentimental and sexually explicit form.

The first justification for the title “The Golden Age” is linked with the twenty-first birthday of the main character Wang Er, and the extraordinary physical vitality he experiences on this occasion, manifested by an erection of monumental dimensions that opens the text:

10. Quoted by Wendy Larson, in “Okay, Whatever: Intellectuals, Sex and Time in Wang Xiaobo’s *The Golden Years*,” *The China Review*, vol. 3, n° 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 29-56.
11. Here and in the entire article, I quote translations from *Wang in Love and Bondage*, trans. by Hongling Zhang and Jason Sommer, Albany, SUNY Press, 2007 (hereafter *WLB*). I have sometimes modified them in accordance with Wang Xiaobo, *Huangjin shidai*, Guangzhou, Huacheng, 1997.
12. See for example Michel Bonnin, *Génération perdue*, Paris, Presses de l’EHESS, p. 22-23 and Michel Bonnin’s preface “L’Âge d’or du petit bonze” to Wang Xiaobo, *L’Âge d’or*, trans. Jacques Seurre, Versailles, éd. du Sorgho, 2001, p. 18.

Wang Xiaobo at the University of Pittsburgh,
in the 1980s (All rights reserved).



On my twenty-first birthday, I was herding buffalo at the riverside. In the afternoon I fell asleep on the grass. I remembered covering myself with a few banana leaves before I fell asleep, but by the time I woke up, I found nothing on my body. [...] The sunshine in the subtropical dry season had burned my entire body red, leaving me in an agony of burning and itching. My little Buddha pointed to the sky like an arrow, bigger than ever. [...] I'd experienced numerous erections in my life, but none as vigorous and magnificent as that time. Perhaps it was because of the location, so isolated from the villages that not even a soul could be seen." (WLB, 65)

This is a highly symbolic passage, chronologically situated on the day of Wang Er's coming of age, and geographically in a sort of rural utopia, in which the main character lives among animals, wearing only banana leaves. His body responds to a stimulation that is cosmic in nature, represented by the rays of the sun and the caresses of the wind, and his erection accordingly reaches cosmic dimensions. He justifies this by remarking that has never before been so far removed from human presence. Sexual desire therefore appears as natural and innate, indissociable from a man's coming of age, but usually repressed by the presence of others and the discourses and practices of social conformity.

In the course of the story, sex is repeatedly linked with a cosmic dimension, a sort of communion between Wang Er's body and the elements. In symmetry with the incident in the sun, the first time Wang Er has sex with Chen Qingyang, the scene is bathed in moonlight.

Until my twenty-first birthday I was a virgin, but that night I lured Chen Qingyang up the mountain with me. At first there was moonlight, then the moon set and a sky full of stars came out, as numerous as dewdrops in the morning. There was no wind that night either; the mountain was very still. Having made love to Chen Qingyang, I was no longer a virgin. (WLB, 72)

Here also, it is biological necessity (coming of age) and the cosmic surroundings, rather than love or sentimentalism, that provide justification for the loss of Wang Er's virginity. The scenario can be repeated indefinitely: for example in chapter 7, in which Wang Er and Chen Qingyang have sex among the mists of dawn with a white buffalo looking on (WLB, 97), on a patch of earth so fertile that it is squirm-

ing with worms, and onto which Wang Er ejaculates, prompting Chen Qingyang to ask, "Will a little Wang Er grow out of the land?" (WLB, 101).

This liberation of the body in nature contrasts with an image of castration and repression by social structures. The bulls Wang Er is supposed to be herding when he falls asleep have been castrated into docility by the production team leader:

Ordinary bulls could just be cut with a knife. But for extremely wild ones, you have to employ the art of hammer-smashing, which is to cut open their scrotums, take out their balls, and then use a wooden hammer to pulverize them. From then on, these altered bulls know nothing but grazing and working. No need to tie them down if you wanted to kill them. Our team leader, the one who always wielded the hammer, had no doubts that surgery of this kind would also work on humans. He would shout at us all the time: You young bulls! You need a good hammering to make you behave! In his way of thinking, this red, stiff, foot-long thing on my body was the incarnation of evil. (WLB, 66)

This passage serves to establish a profound relationship between vitality, the force and will to live, and the unfettered, biological expression of sexuality. The bulls' will to live is irretrievably broken when the production team leader symbolically smashes their testicles with a hammer (a gesture unrelated to medical necessity). Wang Er's irrepressible sexual desire, by contrast, represents a rebellious energy defying any form of control.

Condoms are another symbol of the way social pressure stifles the forces of nature in a more gradual way. Chen Qingyang, who initially represents a type of social conformity, resists Wang Er's advances on the first night by trying to get him to wear a condom ("I was at the height of my excitement and the tone of her voice upset me a little. But I put on the condom anyway and crawled on top of her. Heart

racing and out of breath, I fumbled for quite a while and couldn't get it right." *WLB*, 71). The only exception to this rule are the condoms made of "100 percent natural rubber" that Wang and Chen use during their rural idyll in Grandpa Liu's mill, which, although disliked by the locals because they "block exchange between yin and yang and gradually weaken people," are nonetheless "better than any other ones I used later" (*WLB*, 88). But once Chen Qingyang becomes truly involved in the two characters' retreat into nature, she herself no longer wants to use condoms:

She wanted me to do it again, telling me not to wear the rubber thing. She was going to have a brood of babies with me. Let them hang down to here in a few years. [...] But I didn't like the idea that her breasts would droop and said, Let's think of a way to keep them from drooping. That's why I continued to wear the rubber thing. After that, she lost interest in making love with me. (WLB, 91)⁽¹³⁾

This stage marks a form of radical departure from social conventions, prompting Chen Qingyang's transformation into a "koala bear" that clings to Wang Er (*WLB*, 90). Wang Xiaobo also uses the cliché of "minority" regions, where sexual customs are rumoured to be more "liberated," as suggested by the image of Chen Qingyang "going native" by wearing a Dai "sheaf skirt," and Wang Er's musings about marrying into an Achang family, in which both he and Chen would contribute to collective procreative activities with "Achang big sister" and "Achang big brother" (*WLB*, 103). Nonetheless, as Wang Xiaobo would have known, this idea of sexual promiscuity is nothing more than a cliché of "internal orientalism" (D. Gladney),⁽¹⁴⁾ while Wang Er and Chen Qingyang in fact remain far removed from true local society. How then should the reader interpret this seemingly dysfunctional relationship between the individual and socio-political structures? Many of Wang Xiaobo's first commentators situate his works in the vein of Foucault or Marcuse, the individual being subjected to an ever changing form of symbolic castration by society in general. The natural utopia of "The Golden Age" appears to them as a unique moment in which, under exceptional historical circumstances, the individual may cast away the masochistic form of bondage by which he is bound to the social structures in which he lives, and choose to live according to his instincts, mainly revolving around sexuality. While it is not clear whether Wang had actually read any of Foucault's works in translation, one may surmise that he had at least some knowledge of *The History*

of Sexuality following his studies in the United States (1984-1988).⁽¹⁵⁾

This interpretation, however, while tying in with some of Wang Xiaobo's readings and theoretical stances, does not really do justice to the structure of the work. Wang Er indeed breaks away from society, first by being sent down to Yunnan as an educated youth, and subsequently retreating fully into nature to live a hermit's life in the mountains after leaving his production team on two occasions, once after being "struggled" and hit over the back with a stool at a "criticism and struggle meeting" (*pidouhui*), and a second time after being "criticized" by the army deputy who advises immediate "thought reeducation." He then buys a double-barrelled hunting rifle and disappears with Chen Qingyang into the mountains near the Burmese border for six months (chap. 3-4 and chap. 5 and 8). But while this life in nature can be seen as a radical form of escape from social constraints, it is in no way idealized. Sexuality itself may appear as a form of resistance against revolutionary politics, even as the ultimate defence of an individual against invading politics, but it is nonetheless the most basic, inarticulate and uncritical form of resistance: when Chen and Wang Er have sex in the mountains among the mists of dawn, with the white buffalo looking on, it is not out of pleasure or to mark their freedom from Maoist prudery (as on the first occasion they meet on the mountain), but for sheer survival:

We woke up frozen after an hour. The three layers of blankets were all soaked and the dung fire had died

13. Similar discussions of the castrating nature of condoms can also be found in "Sanshi er li," *Huangjin shidai*, *op. cit.*, p. 98; "Sishui liunan," *ibid.*, p. 153, especially in the latter passage.
14. See Dru C. Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, no. 1 (Feb., 1994), pp. 92-123.
15. After obtaining an MA from the University of Pittsburgh, Wang Xiaobo returned to China as a professor of sociology at Beijing University in 1988. The three volumes of Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité* were published in French between 1976 and 1984. One of the first Chinese translations of Foucault was volume 1 of this work, translated in 1988-1989: Mixie'er Fuke, *Xingshi*, trans. Huang Yongmin, Yu Baofa, Shanghai, Wenhua, 1988, 132 pp. (part 1); and trans. Zhang Tingshen, Shanghai, Kexue jishu wenxian, 1989, 429 pp. (part 2). Wang Xiaobo's widow, Li Yinhe, has published a commentary under the title *Foucault and Sexuality* which is also quite influential in China: *Fuke yu xing: jiedu Fuke "Xing shi"* Jinan, Shandong renmin, 2001. Li Yinhe also frequently quotes the influence of ethologist Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956), author of the "Kinsey reports" on sexual behaviour and initiator of sexology, on both her own and Wang Xiaobo's writing.

out too. [...] So she sat up and said, Enough. Both of us will get sick this way. Hurry, we have to do the thing. (WLB, 97)

Whereas in other works linking the Cultural Revolution and an exacerbated sexuality (Zhang Xianliang's *The Other Half of Man is Woman*, Gao Xingjian's *One Man's Bible* and, most recently, Yan Lianke's *Serve the People*), sex appears as form of transgression that ultimately allows the individual a minimal space of resistance against the events of history, Wang Xiaobo portrays it in this passage as a form of regression to animal existence, a pure necessity of biological survival by keeping warm, entirely devoid of sentimentalism or the human or humanistic feelings of "wound literature" (as, for example, in Zhang Xianliang's novel). Far from idealizing this life, the narrator dwells at length on the various forms of hardship (the use of cattle dung) they must endure. Wang Er insists on the fact that Chen finds him "uncivilized," and that "because of these things, she didn't love me at all, she didn't even like me" (WLB, 95). For all these reasons, it may be argued that it is important to read this text in terms not limited to a Foucauldian liberation from the masochistic submission of the individual to the puritanical or sadistic conventions of society, unwittingly brought about by Maoism. The idea of a "Golden Age" should not be taken at face value, but rather understood within the historical context of the Cultural Revolution and Maoist and post-Maoist society more generally.

The Golden Age of Utopian Politics

Commentators have often overlooked the highly ironic dimension of the whole idea of "Golden Age," which can in itself be seen as a parody of Maoist utopia and its promise to bring about a Golden Age of communism by a regression into a rural and agriculture-based society. Wang Xiaobo disrespectfully trivializes this whole notion by transforming it into an opportunity for cosmic sex in the lap of nature. In this respect, Wang Er's escape from his production team serves within the structure of the story as a kind of ironic duplication of his imposed (officially "voluntary") escape from urban society.

The realities of the Cultural Revolution, in the form of a continual series of humiliations (feeding the pigs) and acts of violence, are in no way absent from Wang Xiaobo's writing.¹⁶ Wang Er has been sent to an agricultural production team in Yunnan in order to undergo re-education by the

"lower and middle-lower" poor peasants. He experiences the reassertion of military control over the farm by a "military deputy," who subsequently announces the transformation of the state farm into a Military Land Reclamation Corps or *jun ken bingtuan* (WLB, 86), followed by the arrival of a large number of military cadres (WLB, 108). Control and denunciation are widespread, coordinated by the Office of Public Security (*Ren bao zu*). Almost immediately after the idyllic scene of Wang Er's monumental erection by the river, a violent fight breaks out between educated youths and country boys, resulting in the convocation of a "struggle meeting" (*douzheng hui*) by the team leader, during which the mother of a local youth beats Wang Er over the back with a stool, temporarily paralyzing him. In chapter 9, they go on "struggle excursion" (*chu douzheng chai*) to the Burmese border area:

Our tractor was loaded with historical anti-revolutionaries, thieves, protocapitalists, damaged goods and so on, comprising both class enemies and strayed members of the masses. We finished our job and accepted a round of denouncement on the borderline, so that the border's political safety could be guaranteed. (WLB, 106)

The narrator highlights the multi-tiered absurdity of the whole expedition: a motley crew of individuals arbitrarily branded as criminals and painstakingly separated into the two Maoist categories of class enemies and "internal contradictions," are thrown onto a tractor to put on a show in form of a "struggle performance" (*douzheng yi tai*) for the Burmese guards on the other side of the border (and possibly the nationalist spies who have supposedly infiltrated them),¹⁷ justified by the supremely absurd label of "political safety of the border." Luckily, it turns out that Chen and Wang are "contradictions within the people" ("non-antagonistic contradictions"; WLB, 108), which does not, however, preserve them from the "anger of the masses." Similarly, in chapter 6 Wang and Chen are "strongly encouraged" to take part in a "criticism and struggle meeting" (*pidouhui*) held for the benefit of the same improbable group:

They told us that public denouncing had an impact on a person's mind, which could prevent us from commit-

16. Similarly, Mr He's suicide plays a central part in "Years Gone By" (*Sishui liu nian*) in the same collection.

17. See M. Bonnin, "L'Âge d'or du petit bonze", art. cit., p. 10.



Wang Xiaobo as an “educated youth” in Yunnan in 1970 (All rights reserved).

ting errors in the future. Since there was such an advantage, how could we miss the opportunity? [...] It turned out that we were loose in morals and corrupted in lifestyle, and what was more, in order to evade thought reform, we had fled into the mountains. Only under the influence of our party’s policy did we come down the mountain to abandon darkness for sunlight.” (WLB, 92)

The irony is no less biting for being particularly sparing of authorial comment. Speaking of the “advantage” and the “opportunity” represented by the *pidouhui* and the “sunlight” of the party’s policy, which has finally allowed the two sinners to come down from the mountain, is a scathingly ironic quotation from official discourse that serves entirely to subvert it. In fact, the whole procedure of endless struggle meetings is characterized as a kind of theatre performance, and is mockingly described in terms used for anthropological observation of “minority” festivals:

There was a traditional form of entertainment in the area: struggling damaged goods. In the busy season after farming, everyone was exhausted, and the team leader would say, Let’s have some entertainment tonight—struggling damaged goods. [...] Later on, a large number of military cadres came to take over our farm and ordered the struggling of damaged goods to stop, since the custom didn’t conform to party policy. But during the soldier-civilian border-building period, they gave a counterorder allowing the struggling of damaged goods. (WLB, 108)⁽¹⁸⁾

Criticizing “lifestyle problems” (*zuofeng wenti*) or “damaged goods” (literally “worn-out shoes” or *poxie*) thus becomes an element of a political circus in which decisions are issued and recalled at will. The theatrical performance itself is of course a precisely planned and calibrated form of public humiliation, and the narrator’s affirmed distance and ironic stance demonstrate his refusal to be humiliated by the public exposure of his supposed lack of morality. Indeed, by asserting that these public humiliations sexually arouse Chen Qingyang, and describing the subsequent sexual scenes in the hotel room, he underscores both characters’ complete lack of repentance despite their confessions and self-criticisms. More surprising yet, Chen Qingyang herself ends up consciously performing in this ritualized form of theatre:

[...] she didn’t understand anything. Yet she was happy because she did all that people wanted her to do. The rest had nothing to do with her. That was the way she played the role of damaged goods on stage. (WLB, 109)

Rather than bemoan the suffering induced by the minutely described violence taking place during these events, the narrator accentuates the paradoxical consciousness of detachment from reality that Chen Qingyang attains by transforming the political accusation against her into a theatrical role and an artistic challenge. This re-appropriation of the humil-

18. I have slightly modified the translation in this passage, substituting “struggle” for “denounce” throughout.

iations and sufferings of history by affirming that—at least in their literary reconfiguration—they can be a source of pleasure and individual identity certainly represented a watershed in Cultural Revolution writing, to which readers of the 1990s responded enthusiastically.

From Confession to Fiction

Revolutionary hypocrisy takes many forms. The narrator first parodies it when he plays with the idea of a “great friendship” (*weida youyi*), inspired by the famous novel *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shuihuzhuan*), and which Wang Er proposes to Chen Qingyang:

In my opinion, brotherhood was the kind of great friendship that existed only among the outlaws of the forest. [...] That night, I offered my great friendship to Chen Qingyang and she was immediately moved to tears. She accepted my friendship right away, and, what was more, even expressed her wish to reward me with a greater friendship [...]. Relieved by her words, naturally I told her what was really on my mind: I'm twenty-one, but I've never experienced what happens between a man and a woman. (WLB, 68-69)

More than a rhetorical ploy or an author's trope, this is in fact outright mockery of Maoist hypocrisy in matters of sexuality, effectively parodying the revolutionary sentimentality of scores of films and novels, in which the “great love” between a man and a woman is simply a metaphor for or, at best, an adjuvant of the great love that every member of the masses feels for the party and its reddest sun. In passing, Wang Xiaobo plays with the imagery from *Shuihuzhuan*, attributing the “great friendship” to the outlaws of the marsh, and saps the regime of its political legitimacy by implicitly equating Maoist rebellion with Song Jiang's banditry.¹⁹

Hypocritical euphemism is compounded when the commissars show their avid interest in the lewd details behind Wang Er's references to “strengthening the great friendship” in his confession: “What does ‘strengthening the great friendship’ mean? What is strengthening it from the back? And what is strengthening it from the front?” (*WLB*, 101). The high ideals of revolutionary politics are thus reduced to a means of satisfying voyeuristic inclinations: the leaders of the Public Security Office, while insisting that Wang Er requires “thought reform,” are themselves only interested in the sexual details of his offences. Initially, they tell Wang Er that it doesn't really matter what he confesses: “Anyway, you have

to confess something. As far as what specific problem you want to confess, that's up to you. If you confess nothing, we won't release you.” (*WLB*, 90) The whole political system thus seems designed to be kept running purely through the production of a form of fiction. Indeed, the leaders enjoy the description of the love affair so much that even after the struggle meeting, they continue to demand more: “But we still had to write confessions because the leaders wanted to read them.” (*WLB*, 92) For these reasons, the reader ends up wondering whether Wang Er has not actually introduced the notion of “great friendship” into his confession to secretly mock the leaders who have made him write it. In fact, one wonders to what extent Wang Xiaobo intended the commissars' curiosity to also serve as a symbol for the voyeurism of subsequent readers who, captivated by the scandalous aspect of his text, might miss the political criticism it contains.

Wang Er is indeed very conscious of engaging in a form of literary, if not fictional, activity, as demonstrated by his subsequent circulation of the manuscript to a graduate in American literature, who in turn appraises it on the basis of its literary merits.²⁰ For this reason, although he concedes that “things that really happen have incomparable charm” (*WLB*, 103), he carefully selects the events he includes to best respond to the leaders' requirements:

We had committed many errors, and deserved execution. But the leaders decided to save us, making me write confessions. How forgiving of them! So I made up my mind I would write only about how bad we were. (WLB, 104)

The narrator's technique is in this instance one of complete detachment, a point at which the fictional self-criticism written by Wang Er converges with the actual text that the reader holds in his hands. The narrator takes all political recommendations at face value, pushing them to extremes of absurdity and self-contradiction. His use of logical fallacies (Wang Xiaobo's father was a famous logician, as underlined by the English translators in their preface) is particularly satirical, for example the invocation of a heap of used condoms as “ironclad evidence” of their “crime” in Grandpa Liu's mill (*WLB*, 88). As he is asked to confess “bad” actions, that is precisely what he will do, just as, when asked

19. This point deserves further discussion, as Mao apparently defended Song Jiang against accusations of “capitulationism” during the Cultural Revolution.

20. Similarly, a human resource employee at Wang Er's university subsequently compares his confessions to literary writing (*WLB*, 83).

by Chen Qingyang why she is called “damaged goods,” he sets out to prove to her throughout the course of the story that the allegation is true. In this way, fiction ends up producing reality, insofar as political categories and slogans are turned into events by virtue of writing self-criticisms. As the narrator adds in a characteristic *aparté* (often in parentheses): “Actually, the great friendship was neither true nor false, like everything else in the world. It was true if you believed it, and false if you didn’t.” (WLB, 69)

This attitude of questioning the interplay of fact and fiction, and of how political utopias can be turned into historical facts, is not a form of aesthetic posturing on Wang Xiaobo’s part. It does not detract in any way from his biting denunciation of the Cultural Revolution, but rather introduces a form of amazement and detachment. On one level, it serves to show how the political utopia of a “Golden Age” has created a world that qualifies as fictional in its detachment from the rules of logic and causality. As the narrator remarks when Chen Qingyang is on stage being struggled: “Then she would think, This is a really strange world.” (WLB, p. 109)⁽²¹⁾ More profoundly, the narrator is not interested in bemoaning “scars”; even in his confession itself, he still bitingly mocks the leaders, precisely by re-appropriating their categories and their ways of thinking; just like Chen Qingyang, he is putting on a show for the leaders, while at the same time allowing the present-day readers of the 1990s, reading, as it were, over the commissar’s shoulder, to share the fun that Wang Er (and the author) are poking at him.

From this perspective, the Golden Age of unfettered sexuality is not so much a form of liberation from the constraints of society by virtue of the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution as it is a way of re-appropriating the experience of being persecuted. Chen Qingyang’s technique of transforming the “struggle meeting” into a theatrical performance is mirrored by Wang Er when he rewrites the experience of being re-educated in Yunnan according to Maoist ideology into a “Golden Age” of sexual liberation. The self-criticism written by both characters serves to mirror, within the story itself, this reappropriation of experience through an extreme form of fictional invention:

Everyone loved to read the confessions I wrote. When I first started writing those things, I was dead set against it. But as I wrote more, I became obsessed, clearly because the things I wrote all happened. (WLB, 103)

While their escape from the collective farm into the pristine nature of Yunnan is initially triggered by a pure survival in-

stinct, it is progressively reappropriated under the discourse of a “Golden Age,” which in this passage Wang Er literally admits to “re-inventing” through a complex blend of confession and fictionalization. The reader should therefore not overlook the setting in which the discourse is produced, and its relation to the explicitly literary or even fictional nature of Wang Er’s self-criticism.⁽²²⁾

By asserting the playful fictionality of his writing, Wang Er to an extent reclaims the active posture of a subject of history, rather than the role of a helpless “victim” whose “scars” are recorded in tearful recollections of the violence of Maoism. Although Wang Xiaobo’s attitude towards the “Golden Age” remains characteristically ambiguous, it should not be reduced to a Foucauldian discourse in which all forms of power the individual must endure are somehow equivalent. In line with this thinking, the final section of this paper attempts to replace the specificities of the Cultural Revolution within Wang Xiaobo’s more general discourse on the “three ages” and the dysfunctional relationship between the individual and society.

Renouncing the world or entering the world

While the individual’s regression to the utopia of life in nature turns out to be coerced and fraught with suffering, its subsequent fictionalization allows the individual to reaffirm his subjectivity. What kind of social position does this minimal form of preservation of the subject’s autonomy entail? To what extent is this conflict an inherent part of the human condition, and how far is it determined by the specific context of the Cultural Revolution? Wang Er seems to infuse the metaphor of bull castration with a larger existential meaning when he remarks, “Only much later did I realize that life is a slow process of being hammered. People grow old day after day, their desire disappears little by little, and finally they become like those hammered bulls.” (WLB, 66)

21. Cf. also: “Even though she had lived forty years, the world before her eyes still appeared miraculous and new” (WLB, 112).

22. Furthermore, the two characters’ accounts do not coincide, as a crucial episode is omitted by Wang Er (who has kept the carbon copies of his confession) but given decisive importance by Chen Qingyang (who has recovered her original file from Yunnan). This episode is the smack given by Wang Er to Chen Qingyang’s bottom when he is carrying her on Mount Qingfeng. Chen Qingyang writes, in the confession to end all requests for confessions, that this is the moment “she fell in love with [Wang], and that would never change” (WLB, 117). This, then, raises the question why Wang Er omits this episode: while he in his confession depicts the “Golden Age” as that of an awakening sexuality liberated from all social responsibilities, Chen Qingyang on the other hand invests this “Golden Age” with a very different, “cultural” meaning, and thus brings it back within the boundaries of social codes and conventions (“falling in love,” “forever”). Of course, this discrepancy opens myriad interpretations of the novella.



Propaganda posters extolling the People's communes and the reeducation of intellectuals through manual labour.

The theme returns at the conclusion of the story when Wang Er, in the hotel room with Chen Qingyang 30 years later, finds he still has sexual desires: "So I concluded: back then they'd wanted to hammer us, but failed. I was still as hard as ever." (*WLB*, 111) Is this form of self-preservation that Wang Er attains the result of his technique of withdrawal from the world?

Wendy Larson, in a recent article, has proposed to interpret the story as an illustration and at the same time a critique of Chinese intellectuals' relation to power, which in her eyes is infused with Taoism. For her, Wang Er's implied world view is that the individual, in order to circumvent the inevitable "hammering" induced by politics and the passing of time, should withdraw from the world, or at least never confront it directly. Noting that Wang Er's anti-authoritarian tendencies are overridden by a deeper sense of melancholia that stems from the passing of time and the wearing down of the physical and sexual vitality of youth, Wendy Larson contextualizes this stance within a more general attitude of complicity with political power, submissiveness, and pursuit of personal (in this case physical) satisfaction. She goes on to ask herself whether this attitude is specifically Chinese, quoting Dai

Jinhua's analysis of the "masochism" of Chinese intellectuals, inspired by Foucault.⁽²³⁾

There is some confusion in these readings of Wang Xiaobo. Wendy Larson argues that the story is an indictment of the escapist attitude of Chinese intellectuals, insofar as Wang Er flees confrontation and disappears into the mountains rather than defying the powerful, while at the same time, she seems to suggest that his attitude represents a break with masochism by refusing to abandon pleasure in spite of a lucid understanding of history. In this sense, Larson seems to believe that sexuality in the story represents a quest for intellectual modernity, breaking free from Chinese intellectuals' masochistic submissiveness to the state in favour of an aesthetic dimension represented by unfettered sexuality developing freely in the midst of pristine nature. But she immediately adds that sexuality, although invested with existential meaning, is not so much a real alternative to everyday life as the image of a utopian existence on the margins of normal

23. See W. Larson, *art. cit.*, who quotes Dai Jinhua, "Zhizhe xixue - yuedu Wang Xiaobo" (Banter of the cognoscenti—reading Wang Xiaobo), available on <http://www.chineseman.net/detail.asp?c=bc&id=647> (19/11/07).

life. The reader wonders, at this point, whether he should see Wang Er as a masochist in the tradition of Chinese intellectuals, or as the “masochist who puts an end to masochism.” More profoundly, reducing this novella to a sexual metaphor, while reflecting the intellectual debate around Foucault in China in the 1990s, underestimates the importance of history and politics in the narrowest (not in the sexual) sense for Wang Xiaobo.

Wang Xiaobo certainly uses the theme of sexuality in his critique of power to show that, in Foucault’s words, power is never an entirely asymmetrical relationship, as illustrated by Chen Qingyang’s sexual arousal when she is “struggled” in chapter 9: she is a consenting victim to the extent that she lets herself be tied up and her hair pulled, and enjoys her submissiveness: “Yet she was happy because she did all that people wanted her to do.” (WLB, 110) Being transported back to the hotel room tied up completes her sexual arousal:

By this time, Chen Qingyang’s face would have a drunken flush and she’d say, Can we strengthen our great friendship now? I can’t wait a second longer. Chen Qingyang said she felt like a gift at that moment, waiting to be unwrapped. (WLB, 110)

A ritualized scene of violent sex then takes place on the desk used by Wang Er and Chen to write their self-criticisms, with the window open, bombarding peeping passers-by with stone-hard pears. This whole scene is in fact staged as a repetition and the natural outcome of the voyeurism of the struggle meeting, during which Chen Qingyang has already noticed “the jutting out at the crotches of the men” (WLB, 109); it suggests the erotic dimension (rather than the erotic nature) of power and persecution, and the bizarre relationship it may induce with the victim. Wang Xiaobo certainly plays with the double nature of Maoism, both its transgressive and repressive dimensions. But is the reader really to believe that the Cultural Revolution and Maoist ideology can be reduced to a variant of sado-masochism in which Chinese intellectuals play the role of consenting victims or, at best, assert their subjectivity through an opportunistic form of individual pleasure they salvage by renouncing any form of direct political confrontation?

The debate on retreating from the world, although never formulated in Taoist terms, structures the story to some extent and gives meaning to the utopia of life in nature previously illustrated. In the case of Wang Er, it is formulated as the question of his own existence, initially when he flees into the mountains after his injury in chapter 3:

She knew that any of those paths would take her to me. There was no doubt about it. But the more certain something was, the more doubtful it became. Maybe the path didn’t lead anywhere; maybe Wang Er was not in the mountains; maybe Wang Er didn’t exist at all. (WLB, 75)

This discussion shows that Wang Er’s repeated escapes into the mountains should not simply be seen as an episode in the story: they represent the possibility of a much more radical retreat from existence. While the team leader and, more generally, the administrative system do not recognize what they can no longer see (“Wang Er? Who’s Wang Er? Never heard of him”; WLB, 77), the narrator for his part believes that this form of non-existence is itself illusory:

It seemed many people didn’t believe Wang Er so much as existed. That’s what confused people. What everyone thinks exists must not exist, because everything before our eyes is illusion; what everyone doesn’t think exists must exist, like Wang Er. (WLB, 76)

This contradictory passage alludes to the Buddhist commonplace of non-reality of reality, using it to construct an inextricable series of paradoxes, echoed at other times by further logical fallacies (“Others believed that Chen Qingyang had slept with me and that proved my existence”; WLB, 78). But at the heart of this discussion is the realization that although an individual may “disappear” for all practical purposes from society, as the educated youths did when they were sent to the country, it is impossible to choose to cease existing in the sense of retreating entirely from the phenomenal (and consequently also the political) world. Although Wang Er may desire to leave society, for example after his silent quarrel with the military deputy, he eventually comes to the realization that such a departure is impossible. Similarly, Chen Qingyang wants to dissolve in nature at certain moments, such as the first time she goes to visit Wang Er in the mountain, “her heart [...] full of extravagant hope”:

The sky was so blue, the sunshine so bright, and there were pigeons flying around in the sky. The whistling of those pigeons you would remember for the rest of your life. She wanted to talk to me at that moment, just as she longed to merge with the outside world, to dissolve into the sky and the earth. (WLB, 113-114)

At this point in the story, when Chen Qingyang sets out to look for Wang Er in the mountains, she also briefly caresses

the idea of renouncing all worldly preoccupations for a kind of fusion with nature. But, when she enters the hut and sees the “ugliness” of his “Little Buddha,” she also comes to the sudden realization that there is no escape from the relations of power that structure society: “She cried out then and abandoned all hope.” (WLB, 113) Sex itself is therefore not only an object of pure natural beauty and a kind of utopia, but also a form of submission and alienation for Chen Qingyang (as shown by the discrepancy between his and her versions of the episode on Mount Qingfeng).⁽²⁴⁾ At this point she no longer wants to renounce worldly existence:

This is the so called truth. The truth is that you can't wake up. That was the moment she finally figured out what the world was made of; and the next moment she made up her mind: she stepped forward to accept the torment. She felt unusually happy. (WLB, 114)

This passage echoes another justification for the end of Wang Er and Chen's life on the mountain:

But it's no fun doing the same things over and over. That was why she still wanted to come down the mountain, to put up with the torment of human society. (WLB, 102)

Of course, the real reason to renounce rural utopia is not simply its repetitiveness, but, as in the first passage, its logical impossibility and empirical inexistence. Both characters come to see and accept the “torment” of the world (*renshi de cuican* 人世的摧殘, *jieshou cuican* 接受摧殘)⁽²⁵⁾ as simply an equivalent of the human condition. There is no alternative to life in the world, and however fictional and illogical the events of the Cultural Revolution may appear, they are the only reality available.

The remark “you can't wake up” alludes to a previous episode in which a grain of sand lodged in her eye caused Chen Qingyang such pain that all she could do was hope to wake up from a dream:

This was an old habit born with her, deeply rooted, that we are wailing our way from one dream into another—this was the extravagant hope that we all have. (WLB, 113)

Nevertheless, while it is natural to nurture this kind of “extravagant hope,” especially in the face of such massive polit-

ical adversity as experienced by the characters of the story, it eventually recedes in face of an unshakeable fact:

Chen Qingyang said, People live in this world to suffer torment until they die. Once you figure this out, you'll be able to bear everything calmly. (WLB, 112-113)

Suffering is an inescapable element of the human condition. For this reason, one should be wary of interpreting Wang Xiaobo's writing as the evocation of a rural utopia. While he plays with the transgressive dimension of Maoism, which he mocks and trivializes as unfettered sex, the story is structured in such a way as to bring the characters to the realization that there is no escape from the realities of the human condition. Taking this logic even further, one might argue that the Cultural Revolution is simply a manifestation of the timeless suffering of humanity that comes in all shapes and hues in different times and places.

However, coming to terms with human suffering is not a negative experience under Wang Xiaobo's pen. He does not encourage a Taoist retreat from the world, grounded in the desperation of many intellectuals and a renewed experience of helplessness and resignation (what Dai Jinhua would call their “masochism”), nor does he condone the *laissez-faire* described by Wendy Larson as a feeling of ultimately being worn down by the passing of time. On the contrary, Wang pleads for an active engagement with the world, for renouncing all forms of utopia (political, natural, sexual or otherwise), and ultimately, for reclaiming a shaping role in history, exemplified by Wang Er's active narrative reappropriation of his own experience. The critic Chen Xiaoming, in connection with another story, similarly describes Wang's preoccupation with bringing his characters “back to culture.”⁽²⁶⁾ In this sense, contextualisation is not used to qualify or diminish the critique of the Cultural Revolution. Rather, it serves to denounce the understanding of Maoism in terms of a utopian Golden Age as a tragic misunderstanding.

24. See note 22 above.

25. The word *cuican* has some interesting connotations: it is apparently used to refer to the suffering induced by natural catastrophes, and became quite common in referring to the cultural revolution. As suggested by a listener to whom I am indebted, it may also be a quotation from Wang Daoqian's translation of Marguerite Duras' novel *L'Amant*.

26. “Wang Xiaobo's questioning of individual existence is entirely naked. People usually give credit to his writing for the sex it contains, but Wang reduces it to its purest configuration. Foucault writes that sex and power are the two sides of one coin. In *My Two Worlds of Yin and Yang (Wode yinyang liangjie)*, Xiao Sun is a representative of culture who delves deep into Wang Er's hidden aspects in order to cure him. But after curing his impotence and making him a real man, she at the same time brings him back into culture.” See Ai Xiaoming, Li Yinhe (eds), *Langman qishi*, Beijing, Zhongguo qingnian, 1997, p. 262.

ing that has further delayed analysis and critique. Wang Xiaobo's tone of unrelenting irony and detached humour are designed to dispel the mirage of utopia and encourage rational engagement of individuals in society without renouncing their critical faculties.

Wang Xiaobo builds on a cliché from the “educated youth” literature that portrays the sentimental awakening of young people in the country. While investing it with an explicitly sexual dimension, he at the same time takes it to previously unattained levels of philosophical and political significance. Although there is certainly a psychologically liberating element in the historical episode he portrays, its presentation as a “Golden Age” is above all highly ironic, unmasking it as a euphemism for a political configuration in which fiction dominates reality, and the quest for revolutionary purity is simply a ploy to humiliate others and procure satisfaction for the political commissars. These reflections culminate in the realization that a neo-Taoist retreat from the Maoist world of politics is an illusion: both Chen and Wang, at the outcome of the story, seek to return to society and reenter the “world of torment.” Does this mean they have indeed been slowly “castrated” by society and cowed into accepting suffering as a given of human existence? One might argue that accepting the existence of suffering as an anthropological constant does not mean condoning its causes in a particular political context. Rather, choosing to enter the “world of torment” instead of seeking political utopia outside of it is probably a step away from the dysfunctional political constellation that has characterized so much of modern Chinese politics.

What, then, has made this brief story so incomparably appealing to Chinese readers? Moving beyond the scandal and also beyond the intellectual trends of post-modernity and a portrayal of all political struggles in sexual terms (no doubt inspired by superficial readings of Foucault), Wang Xiaobo marks a radical break, not so much with a “tradition” of submissive or “masochistic” Chinese intellectuals, but rather with the inertia of civil society, which in the face of Maoism could only portray itself in terms of victimization or, at best, of reinventing a private space by withdrawing from the world. Wang Xiaobo's indomitable hero on the one hand demystifies the persecutions of the Cultural Revolution through humour, in a similar vein to Imre Kertész's hero in *Fateless* or Günter Grass's Oskar, while on the other embodying a renewed faith in writing, which not only serves to record crimes and salvage a niche for subjectivity, but also, through fiction, recreates collective meaning.

I would therefore argue, in conclusion, that the incomparable success of Wang's writing in the 1990s is bound up with

the liberating experience of utter disrespect, not only for the musty ideals of Maoism (already discredited by the “hooligan” or *liumang* writers of the 1980s), but more importantly for the sacralization of victims of the Cultural Revolution. This generation, by this time nearing old age, consistently (though with notable individual exceptions) used its (legitimate) rejection of Maoism to preach uncritical acceptance of the Deng Xiaoping compromise, especially after 1989.⁽²⁷⁾ The success of Wang Xiaobo attests to a growing resistance to the idea that the present must be accepted because the past was worse. Historians of the Cultural Revolution may find Wang Xiaobo's stance overly daring and iconoclastic in a context in which basic historiography is still not stabilized (in the case of the Holocaust, for example, criticism of the victims only became possible after the facts of history had been established beyond any doubt); it represents, however, a provocation that opens a welcome and much-needed space for the discussion of recent history in China. •

27. Scar literature, and films such as Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite* (1993), are arguably some examples of the way in which sacralization of the victims' experience can be used to impede political change. This use highlights the ambiguity inherent in the postulate of the incommensurability of individual suffering (“later generations will never understand”) that underpins scar literature.