

Wang Xiaobo: The Double Temptation of Revolution and Sexual Allurement¹

Yue Ma

The University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

In contrast with an established pattern of narrative that blames the Cultural Revolution for being an era of sexual frustration, Wang Xiaobo fascinates his readers with stories in which his protagonists enjoyed a “sex carnival” during this time of political turbulence. Exploring the complex role played by desire in the construction of the subjectivities of the characters in Wang’s two novellas, this paper argues that Wang Xiaobo’s representation of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution is neither a continuity of the humanist discourse of de-alienation, nor a simple advocacy of sexual freedom. Instead, it is a sophisticated inquiry into the nature of desire itself, a determined querying of the complex relationship between political power and sexual allure-ment, and a persistent exploration of the possibility of individualized writing.

Keywords

Wang Xiaobo (王小波), Wang Xiaobo Phenomenon, Cultural Revolution, narrative, sexuality, desire, politics, power, subjectivity

¹In 1990s China, Wang Xiaobo’s writing career represents a specific form of position-taking by a writer in a changing cultural field. An educated youth, Wang had entered university after the Cultural Revolution and majored in trade and economics. He was nevertheless interested in literature, especially Western modernism. In the early 1980s, Wang went to the United States and obtained his Master’s degree in Asian Studies. After returning to China, Wang taught at Peking University and People’s University before he quit his job and became a freelancer in 1992.

In post-Mao China, sex in art and literature has been regarded as a cultural practice through which intellectuals displace socialist cultural theory. Representations of sexuality in literature have been viewed as a discursive construction that can recap the past in order to move into the future. Wendy Larson identifies two tendencies characterizing this method. The first treats the past as an era of sexual repression that must be overcome for the sake of the healthy development of the individual and society. The second represents the past revolutionary ideology as itself sensual, erotic, and interesting, a form of revolutionary eroticism (423). Larson correctly points out that the first approach—the condemnation of the Cultural Revolution as an ascetic society—is the most prevalent narrative paradigm. In this mode of narrative, the past can only be recouped when a major fictional character challenges boundaries and sociopolitical restraints through a liberated sexuality. Discussing the second approach, Larson identifies several cultural phenomena such as the popularity of the songs of the Cultural Revolution, the appearance of Mao's image as a protective icon, the emergence of films and stories that describe the Cultural Revolution as a liberated time, and so forth. To Larson, these cultural products “eroticize” the Cultural Revolution and Maoist ideology, making cultural Maoism a form of resistance to political Maoism. In both cases, sexuality is represented as an instinctual passion of the individual in rebellion against social and ideological conformity. Consequently, Larson treats the “discursive explosion” of sexually explicit novels, films, and images in China in the 1990s as a “sexual revolution in representation” which builds “productive links between contemporary modernity, the West (particularly the United States), and sexual expression” (433).

Reading sexual representation in contemporary Chinese art and literature as a discursive effect of Western modernity, Larson bases her discussion on cultural theories of human identity and sexuality developed in the West. Tracing the twentieth-century Western debate over human sexuality, she identifies a liberal, “enlightened” view of sexuality that conceptualizes sexual revolution as a direct challenge to the capitalist state (428). Within this context, the promotion of sexual pleasure becomes the basis of all anti-totalitarian freedom. Relying on this understanding of sexuality, Larson finds two approaches of representation that put the Cultural Revolution and sexuality together: though seeming opposites, both give primacy to erotic expression as a force of individual and social liberation.²

² In her study, Larson summarizes various forms of sexual representation “as the opposite of the repression of the Mao era, as postrevolutionary cynicism, as a thirst for knowledge once unavailable, and as a primal urge that was forced into the channel of revolution” (432).

Starting from Larson's discussion, I propose that the forms of sexual expression in Wang Xiaobo's two novellas on the Cultural Revolution are narrative alternatives to both approaches noted by Larson; that is, Wang's works explore the complicated relationship between sexuality and Mao's ideology from alternative perspectives. In the 1990s, Wang Xiaobo's works were controversial for their explicit descriptions of such sexual experiences as liaison, orgasm, and perversion. In contrast with the received pattern of narrative that represents this history as sexually repressive, Wang Xiaobo fascinates Chinese readers with stories in which his protagonists enjoyed sexual freedom and self-indulgence during this period. At the same time, his writings do not always celebrate sexual pleasure as a liberating force to an individual in the formation of his or her subjectivity. Exploring how Wang's works address the complex relationships between and among revolutionary ideology, sexuality and human identity, I therefore take issue with the "Wang Xiaobo Phenomenon" (王小波现象 Wang Xiaobo xianxiang) to consider how Wang's writings were appropriated or "constructed" by the media to legitimize certain value judgments, justify a particular cultural stance, and make social distinctions in 1990s China.

I. Wang Xiaobo's Work in the Cultural Revolution Narrative

Conventionally there are two ways of studying literature: the intrinsic and the extrinsic. The former takes literary texts as subjects of inquiry and investigates the aesthetic and formalistic significance of literature. The latter treats literature works as social documents and examines the sociopolitical context within which literature is produced. In Western scholarship on contemporary Chinese literature, these two trends have been both clearly distinguishable (Link 9-10).

My study of Wang Xiaobo's Cultural Revolution stories aims at understanding how literary narratives on a particular "history" are used to meet the needs of the present. More specifically, my paper studies not only the theme and content of particular literary works, but also the creation and reception of these writings. Since such research involves considerations of both textual and contextual factors, it is not enough to investigate literary works as ahistorical, self-sufficient texts. Nor am I able to reach my stated goal by viewing relevant writings merely as the reflections of some sort of deterministic social structure within which they were produced.

For this reason, my study of Wang Xiaobo's works transgresses the boundary between intrinsic and extrinsic approaches. While my research is based on textual analysis, it also takes into consideration certain contextual factors that contributed to the production and consumption of Wang's writings. On the one hand, I explore how certain established narratives on the Cultural Revolution were confronted in Wang's stories. On the other hand, I examine a specific dimension of cultural practice, namely, the self-positioning of the writer, critics, publishers, and readers in order to understand the active roles they played in the production of relevant works.

Studying the actions and relations of and between people in the social practice of literature, my paper invokes Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of art as cultural practice. Bourdieu questions the charismatic theory of the isolated artist and resists the interpretation of pure disinterestedness on the part of both the public and the artists. For him, the production of an artistic work is a strategic action that involves literary producers such as writers, critics, publishers and audience members. Their participation in this process is directed towards the maximizing of material or symbolic profits (*Outline* 183). Recognizing the active roles played by literary producers in the social production of literature, Bourdieu also points out that these "artistic mediators" cannot act as agents with free will, but are bound to act according to the rules of their "artistic habitus" (*Cultural Production* 71).³ Applying Bourdieu's cultural theory, I will examine the rationale behind the activities of literary producers related to the production and consumption of specific works. I will show how literary producers make use of a specific past to meet various individual needs and to serve particular social and cultural functions.

II. Literary Manifestation of Sexuality in Post-Mao China: The Cases of Zhang Xianliang and Wang Anyi

To understand the significance of the sexual expressions in Wang Xiaobo's works, it is necessary to compare his writings with the established narratives on sexuality produced in the post-Mao period. After the Cultural Revolution, many

³ Bourdieu defines *habitus* as a "system of durable, transposable dispositions" (*Outline* 5). More specifically, it is a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions. The *habitus* produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generating principle (*Cultural Production* 5).

Chinese writers touched upon the taboo topic of sexuality in their writings.⁴ Inquiring into the subject matter of sex and desire from various critical viewpoints and gender perspectives, many of them portrayed the Cultural Revolution as a sexually repressive period which caused physical and psychological damage on people. Such a tendency to highlight the destructive force of the Cultural Revolution in the construction of people's sexual and subjective identity makes a clear contrast with the sexual descriptions in Wang's work, which unconventionally present how people enjoyed sex and practiced various forms of sexual adventures.

To investigate how Wang Xiaobo's works distinguish themselves as an alternative to his predecessors, I want to compare them with exemplary writings of Zhang Xianliang (張賢亮) and Wang Anyi (王安憶). This choice is based on two considerations. First, my focus is on how sexuality is depicted in the Cultural Revolution narratives rather than on the literary manifestation of desire in general. Zhang and Wang are two representative writers who took human sexuality as a central theme in their writings.⁵ Second, making the Cultural Revolution the explicit context of their works, Zhang and Wang share a common gesture in using their "sexual expression" to redress an ascetic and repressive past. By comparison, Wang Xiaobo's Cultural Revolution stories in the 1990s emerged as a narrative alternative due to their exploration of the erotic aspect of Maoist ideology.

In the post-Mao era, Zhang Xianliang is the first Chinese writer that addresses sexuality directly in his fictional writing. His famous "Love Trilogy" explores the effect of political persecution on intellectual identity and male sexuality. In *Mimosa* (綠化樹 *Lühua shu*, 1985), the hero receives sympathy, love and material help from a resourceful and illiterate local woman, yet he cannot repay her since he is transferred away and isolated by political pressure. In *Getting Used to Dying* (習慣死亡 *Xiguan siwang*, 1989), the hero's recollection of his sexual indulgence in the United States in the 1980s is mingled with his reflection on his near-death experience in a

⁴ See relevant works by an older generation of writers such as Lin Jinlan (林斤瀾) and Wang Meng (王蒙), and younger authors such as Zhang Xianliang, Wang Anyi, Jia Pingwa (賈平凹), Mo Yan (莫言), Liu Heng (劉恒), Yu Hua (余華), Su Tong (蘇童), Tie Ning (鐵凝), Chen Ran (陳染), and Lin Bai (林白).

⁵ In the post-Mao period there had been various approaches to representing sexuality in relation to historical memories. In some works by avant-garde writers such as Su Tong and Yu Hua, eroticism represents a turning away from the present in stories set in a remote, undefined time frame without concrete historical reference. Some other writers like Wang Shuo (王朔), Wei Hui (衛慧) and Mian Mian (棉棉) saturate their characters with desire and make them live exclusively in the present without the emotional baggage of the past. These approaches will not be discussed in detail since they are not directly related to my topic.

labor camp. In his most controversial and influential work, *Half of Man Is Woman* (男人的一半是女人 *Nanren de yiban shi nüren*, 1985), Zhang describes unabashedly the sexual dysfunction of a persecuted male intellectual and breaks a thematic taboo in literature. This novella associates sex with politics in such a way that the hero, who loses his sexual ability due to long-term political persecution, finally regains his masculine power after a revolutionary act—a night spent fighting a flood.

If Zhang Xianliang develops the theme that Chinese intellectuals have been psychologically emasculated as a result of political persecution,⁶ Wang Anyi explores human sexuality from a feminist perspective in her “Love Trilogy.” The first part of the trilogy, *Love on a Barren Mountain* (荒山之戀 *Huangshan zhi lian*, 1986), describes the extramarital affair of a man and a woman who commit suicide together under family and social pressures. *Love in a Small Town* (小城之戀 *Xiaocheng zhi lian*, 1986) portrays an affair between two teenagers whose sexual relationship has different impacts on their physical and emotional development. In *Love in Splendor Valley* (錦繡谷之戀 *Jinxiugu zhi lian*, 1987), a young woman bored with her routine family life and career seeks to gain a new sense of identity through a short but refreshing reunion with her platonic lover. In these works, Wang’s unusually bold depictions of sexual desire and experience offended conservative critics but were welcomed by others as a sign of the evolution of literary ideas and the progress of society.

Except for Zhang’s *Mimosa* and Wang’s *Love in Splendor Valley*, all the other works mentioned above refer to the Cultural Revolution as the explicit historical background. Identifying sexuality as a neglected or repressed aspect of human life in this past, the sexual representations in these works redeem the sexual desire of individuals after an era of “gender erasure.”⁷ While breaking the thematic taboo against sexuality, however, the two writers diverge in how gender defines desire in relation to politics. While Zhang emphasizes the political overtones of sexuality, Wang treats it as an instinctual and natural force of human life and downplays the sociological implications of desire.

In Zhang’s works where the Cultural Revolution and sexuality form a central part of the narrative, the sexual experience of the main characters is more often than not determined by their social and political situation. In other words, one’s sexual identity is often subordinate to his or her social and political identity. As a result,

⁶ For detailed discussions of male subjectivity as represented in contemporary Chinese literature and films produced in the 1980s, see Xueping Zhong (鍾雪萍).

⁷ For a discussion of the construction of gender images during the Mao years, see Mayfair Yang.

sexuality is not mainly experienced in the personal dimension but is more closely related to the transformation of the social and political situation of the protagonists. In *Half of Man Is Woman*, the sexual dysfunction suffered by the hero is the direct outcome of his awkward situation of being a political outcast. In *Getting Used to Dying*, the physical and spiritual torture undergone by the hero in the labor camp is transformed into valuable symbolic capital after the Cultural Revolution, which makes him such a legendary figure that an American woman wants to become his passionate lover. In these works, human sexuality is given political implications. If political persecution deprived the heroes (particularly male heroes) of their basic physical needs and psychological satisfactions as human beings, only the end of political discrimination and regaining of their political reputation can allow them to resume a normal and enjoyable sex life.

In both works, sexuality becomes a trait by which the heroes define their subjective identities. However, the self-realization of the heroes is not the result of individual resistance, but is preconditioned by political freedom and given to the individuals by an enlightened party leadership. At the discursive level, this mode of narrative participated in the promotion of socialist de-alienation in the early post-Mao era. As Jing Wang points out, the intellectual discourse of socialist de-alienation proliferating in the early 1980s was often constructed on a clear-cut dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed, which identifies the origin of the oppression as a certain external force: the repressive party-state, Mao's voluntarism, a residual feudalism, and so forth (16). In Zhang's stories, the Cultural Revolution itself is represented as the external source of sexual oppression. In other words, the protagonists are exempted from the burden of a self-reflection which would bring in the question of internalized oppression. With the origin of the oppression imposed by a specific sociopolitical circumstance, the repressed libidinal energy can only be revitalized through the restoration of the social order and political de-alienation under the leadership of the party-state. In this sense, sexuality emerges not as a privileged subjective identity empowering personal liberation and ideological subversiveness, but as a subsidiary force of post-Mao socialization under the guidance of state power.

If Zhang Xianliang situates sexuality in the social and political dimension of people's life, Wang Anyi views sex as a part of human nature that deserves special exploration. Treating sexual desire as a powerful physical instinct, Wang makes circumstantial features subsidiary elements in affecting the sexuality of her main characters. Compared with Zhang, Wang's approach has been affirmed by some literary critics as less dogmatic and more "modern." For instance, Chen Sihe (陳思

和) views sexuality in Wang's works as a metaphor of human behavior and relationships in general (593). Helen Chen credits Wang for her description of the constructive role played by sexuality in the formation of human subjectivity, through which desire is intertwined with aesthetic value and becomes a life force that cures wrecked bodies and corrupted souls (95).

Reading Wang's works from a feminist perspective, I would regard her representation of sexuality and desire as a subversive discourse in response to a standardizing discourse which portrays Chinese women as figures of nationalist myth or male suffering. For Wang's heroines, sex and desire are not only agencies for self-fulfillment but also areas in which the women question and reverse the established gender hierarchy. This is not to say that Wang is an advocate of sexual freedom, considering that the sex life experienced by the protagonists in some of her works problematizes, rather than confirms, the liberating power of sexuality.⁸ Wang's works certainly challenge the repression of sexuality, yet her promotion of sexuality is based on a personal moralizing that validates certain functions of sexuality (e.g., reproduction and marital love) while denying other related aspects, for example, libidinous obsession and irrationality.

Compared with Zhang's, Wang's representation of sex seemingly disputes the conventional Chinese combination of eroticism and politics. Privileging erotic power over external historical factors, Wang's stories signal a breakthrough, re-deeming sex as something natural rather than a social and political dimension of human life. Nevertheless, the advocacy of sexuality as part of "human nature" by Wang and some critics creates a discourse that endows it with a transcendent quality. Thus, desire is transformed into a force for the subversion of Mao's revolutionary history. By distancing sexuality from politics, Wang's stories imply the dehumanizing nature of Maoist ideology and participate in the discursive construction of ethics of humanism to smooth out an undesired past.

⁸In Wang's work, "pleasure" itself is not always legitimized as a self-sufficient end of desire. In *Love in a Small Town*, the sexual indulgence that bonds two teenaged dancers together delays their mutual commitment, destroys their longing for marital life, and turns them into fierce enemies. In *Love on a Barren Mountain*, the extramarital relationship between the two main characters is not only censured by society but also blamed by the protagonists themselves, which makes the fulfillment of sexual desire a psychological burden rather than a life-force of self-assurance. Furthermore, Wang's understandings of femininity and gender roles in sexual experience are often conventional in nature. This can be seen when the confused teenage girl who struggles with her own irrational, uncontrollable sexual impulses eventually feels "clean" and finds peace of mind through her motherhood experience (*Love in a Small Town*).

III. Sexing the Cultural Revolution: Two Novellas by Wang Xiaobo

Challenging an established narrative pattern which highlights or implies the repressive effect of Mao's ideology regarding sexuality, Wang Xiaobo's writings provide an alternative perspective for contemplating the relationship between sexuality and politics. In his works the Cultural Revolution releases, rather than represses, the libidinal energy of his protagonists. In *The Golden Age* (黃金時代 Huangjin shidai), the hero Wang Er recalls his days as a "sent-down" (下放 xiafang) youth in Yunnan where he met a female doctor of bad moral repute who later became his lover. This "romance," however, is not purely romantic. In Wang Er's recollection, the heroine Chen Qingyang approaches Wang with the hope that he can help demonstrate that she is not a slut. Wang Er, instead, advises Chen to actually commit adultery since there will be no other way to clear her name. The proposed reasoning of Wang Er is that if one cannot defend one's innocence in an absurd era, the only means of resistance is to make one's supposed guilt a fact. In Chen's case, if being physically attractive becomes a liability in an ascetic social environment, then indulgence in one's carnal desire can be viewed as an effective way to fight against enforced moral and ideological constraints. Later in the story, the hero enjoys a "sex carnival" with the heroine, one which makes them the targets of political accusation. Ironically, the prosecutorial public meetings become a cathartic force for sexual pleasure since these experiences actually stimulate the heroine to demand even more sexual satisfaction from her lover.

The Golden Age deviates from a prevalent mode of representation. Staying away from the Cultural Revolution's negative effect on sexuality, the novella shows that the political persecution and social discrimination inflicted on the protagonists fail to deprive them of their sexual impulses. By actively "committing the crime" and carelessly facing persecution, Wang Er and Chen Qingyang are fully engaged in "illicit" sexual activities with each other. Compared with these two main characters, who find direct enjoyment in sex, the revolutionary cadres and masses who persecute them can only ease their sexual desire in indirect or perverted ways. They can only view the protagonists' sexual acts voyeuristically or derive sadistic pleasure by pressing them to confess the details of their sexual relationship. In other words, when political power fails to control people's sex life, the Cultural Revolution becomes a fair game played by two opponents rather than a violent ca-

tastrophe leading to the indisputable victimization of the innocent and the absolute dictatorship of the evil.

If the sexual expression in *The Golden Age* subverts the power hierarchy of the persecutor and the persecuted, another story by Wang complicates the relationship between sexuality and revolution when a political occasion is ultimately transformed into sexual scenes. In *Love in the Revolutionary Era* (革命時期的愛情 Geming shiqi de aiqing), Wang addresses the libidinal tension and sexual implications as embedded in the “revolutionary” circumstance of heroism and asceticism. The hero Wang Er, a politically “backward” young worker, faces the fabricated accusation of an “indecent act” and is forced to receive “help and education” (幫教 bangjiao) from X Haiying, the secretary of his factory’s branch of the Communist Youth League. Ironically, the girl is physically attracted to Wang Er and ends up having sex with him. Political enthusiasm is thus replaced by an abrupt eruption of carnal passion.

The sexual relationship described in *Love in the Revolutionary Era* is controversial and uncommon in several senses. First, whereas some previous works dealt with love that transgresses cultural and social status, this novella is the first one to eroticize the Cultural Revolution in its description of sexual relationships which violate political boundaries dividing “good” and “bad.” In addition, it distinguishes itself in the way it releases, once sex finds its stimulant in the revolutionary imaginary, the inherent tension between sexual desire and revolutionary passion.

IV. Sexual Description as the Promotion of Sexual Liberation and Individual Freedom: A Prevalent Reading of Wang Xiaobo

If Western cultural theories define sexuality as a core element of modernity because it produces an individualization of the desiring subject as an independent agent in the social world (Larson 427), then in 1990s China, sexual expression became a free-floating signifier endowed with various, sometimes contradictory, connotations in the competition between discursive and practical powers. In Wang’s case, while the mainstream literary critics were still reluctant to consecrate Wang’s literary achievement, partly due to the controversy provoked by the boldness of the sexuality in his works, his admirers praised Wang as a literary genius due to his original language style, creative imagination, free spirit and rational thinking, as

well as his choice to live a “liberal” lifestyle as a freelance writer. Therefore Wang himself and his sexual representations were appropriated by the media to legitimize certain value judgments, justify particular cultural stances, and make specific social distinctions.

In the two novellas mentioned above, Wang Xiaobo’s direct descriptions of sex caused much controversy and received various responses from his publishers, literary critics and readers. While the mainstream literary critics commented on Wang’s works with a cautious silence, Wang’s admirers circulated his works among themselves and created websites devoted to Wang. Some even went so far as to identify themselves as the “running dogs” (走狗 zougou) of the writer (Xiang Zi [橡子]).

Among those who commended Wang’s sexual descriptions were his publishers, who initially interpreted the “sex carnival” in Wang’s works as a force that promoted individual freedom and political subversion. For instance, Zhu Wei (朱偉), the editor of one of Wang’s journal columns, claims that *The Golden Age* transmits a yearning for human freedom through its description of sexual indulgence enjoyed in a repressive era. This view is shared by the editor of *The Golden Age*, who emphasizes the overwhelming liberating power of sexuality by introducing the sexual indulgence expressed in Wang’s stories as something capable of delivering people from the “shadow” of history.⁹ Taking sexuality as a site of political resistance and personal freedom, this mode of interpretation highlights the invigorating power of sexuality. It considers sex to be a powerful channel of personal expression and an effective form of political rebellion. Emphasizing the politically subversive nature of sexuality, this interpretation can be understood as more a marketing strategy than a compassionate endorsement of an unconventional piece of writing. Emphasizing the sexual theme in Wang’s works, the interpretations by the author’s editors highlight the “controversial” aspect of his writing, knowing this will attract readers. At the discursive level, this interpretation ascribes Wang’s sexual representations to a received narrative pattern that denounces the Cultural Revolution as a repressive era, and treats sexuality as a “natural” desire antagonistic to political coercion. In this way, the editors’ interpretations protect Wang’s unusual sexual explicitness from being officially blamed as a representation of “vulgar interest and bad taste” (低級趣味 *diji quwei*). Moreover, this interpretation implicitly invokes certain Western cultural theories that affirm the constructive force of sexual liberation as it works for personal change and social

⁹ See “Capsule Summary” in *The Golden Age* 5.

progress.¹⁰ Sexual explicitness thus becomes a facet of modernity legitimized in the process of modernization, and inscribes itself in a global imagination.

This “pro-sex” understanding of Wang’s works is based on an emphasis on the positive effect of sexuality in the creation of people’s subjectivity. Yet I find such an interpretation questionable. Wang’s writings sometimes problematize rather than celebrate the role played by desire in the formation of human identity. In the following two sections, I analyze Wang’s two novellas from the perspectives of desire and perversion respectively. I argue that although sexual indulgence in these stories forms a striking contrast to the ascetic background of the Cultural Revolution, it is not enough, and sometimes it is even misleading, to understand sexual expression as a gesture of political resistance. Moreover, it may be too simplistic to explain Wang’s sexual explicitness as an unconditional advocacy of sexual freedom as a means of self-affirmation and individuation. Rather than politicizing sexuality or polarizing sex and politics as mutually exclusive, Wang’s works inquire into the complex relationship between political power, human desire and the formation of people’s identities.

V. The Different Functions of Desire: *The Golden Age*

The Golden Age is one of the most influential and controversial works by Wang Xiaobo. In this novella, one pressing question is that of the changing nature of desire. At the beginning of the story, the sexual relationship between the educated youth Wang Er and the “sent-down” doctor Chen Qingyang is not idealized as something purely natural, based on mutual attraction. On the contrary, the author deprives his protagonists of any chance to begin their romance as romantic lovers. At the outset, Chen and Wang diverge from each other in their understanding of the function of sexuality. Wang Er’s initial reason for seducing Chen is purely physical:

I tried to seduce Chen Qingyang on the night of my twenty-first birthday because Chen Qingyang was my friend, and also, (her) breasts

¹⁰ A genealogical survey of the development of these theories would be too complex to conduct here and beyond the scope of my research. Referring to Larson’s brief outline, I designate these cultural theories in terms of their discursive function that relates sexuality to ideas of liberation, anti-authority rebellion, and personal pleasure. See Larson 427-28.

were full and well shaped, (her) waist was slim, (her) bottom was round. Besides, her neck was upright and slender; (her) face was very pretty too. I wanted to have sex with her, and believed that she should not disagree. Supposing she wanted to borrow my body to practice dissection, I would surely go for it; for this reason, there should be no problem if I wanted to borrow her body for a use. The only problem was that she was a woman, and women were always a little bit narrow-minded. So I had to enlighten her. As a result, I started to explain what “loyalty to one’s friend” meant. (9)

Through Wang Er’s self-revelation, we know that it is corporeal desire that drives him to approach Chen Qingyang. Chen, on the contrary, loathes physical intimacy but accepts Wang because she is moved by his offer of “great friendship” (偉大友誼 *weida youyi*) and “personal loyalty” (義氣 *yiqi*).

I would like to borrow a point made by Judith Butler in order to illuminate the different roles played by desire in the construction of Wang’s and Chang’s subjectivities. In her discussion of desire, Butler refers to a distinction between two kinds of desire initially defined by Spinoza and later developed by Nietzsche. One is a self-acquisitive desire, a sign of selfishness; the other is a self-preservative desire, functioning as a sign of life-affirmation (378). This clarification is useful in identifying the initial desires of Wang Er and Chen Qingyang. To Wang, desire is the bodily instinct of an adult male like himself. To Chen, desire leads to not only a physical bond but also a symbolic, intimate link between two people. If Wang needs sex to make up for a physical “unfulfillment” of himself, Chen offers sex to confirm her faith in human interaction. Moreover, Chen’s “spiritual crisis,” a long-felt sensation of loneliness that is the basic living condition of humankind, compels her to commit herself to Wang’s “friendship.” In this respect, sex fulfills Wang’s physical desire but bears spiritual significance to Chen.

Their different understandings of desire also determine the two characters’ attitudes toward sexuality and each other. Experiencing sex in a more intuitive, sensuous way, Wang Er tries various body positions to satisfy his sexual fantasies and especially enjoys an “entertaining” style of lovemaking. Affiliating sex with “great friendship,” Chen restrains her sensory pleasure during sex to convince herself that her intimacy with Wang is for the fulfillment of her promise of personal loyalty. Since sex bears a symbolic meaning for Chen, she feels guilty about having an orgasm, yet insists on her “innocence” and runs away with Wang to show her loyalty when Wang faces possible political persecution. Wang and Chen’s re-

lationship is exposed and criticized as a typical case of refusing “thought reform” due to their “decadent thinking.” The two undergo a trial marked by questioning and public humiliation. Eventually, a confession written by Chen sets them free, yet Chen refuses to tell Wang the content of her confession and thereafter drifts apart from Wang.

With the unfolding of the plot, it is surprising to see how the nature of the desire associated with Chen changes when she, rather than Wang, becomes the initiator and the one who enjoys sex. The public humiliation experienced by Wang and Chen seems to affirm the “innocence” and “loyalty” of the heroine at the beginning, who believes that her sexual relationship with Wang asserts her personal belief in unconditional friendship. However, at the end of the story, Chen finally tells Wang during their reunion twenty years later that in her last confession she admitted that she had gradually fallen in love with Wang and started to physically enjoy their sex. This self-revelation shattered Chen’s sense of self-identity. The moment she admitted her emotional and bodily attachment to Wang she forwent her original belief in the transcendental nature of her desire. When pleasure itself became the end of sex, it destabilized the base upon which Chen had constructed her subjectivity. It was this self-discovery that made Chen feel confused and “sinful,” eventually severing her relationship with Wang.

Reading the story from the perspective of desire, it seems problematic to view sexual indulgence in *The Golden Age* as an unambiguous advocacy of sexual pleasure and as a means of self-realization. Instead of constructing a desiring subject, the erotic lure of desire becomes a destructive force that undermines the subjectivity of Chen, reverses her motivation and confuses her self-identity. In this respect, *The Golden Age* satirizes the idealized association of sexual expression with the freedom of modernity since sexuality loses its generally liberating meanings when desire is restored to the level of mere individual pleasure.

VI. Sexual Lure and Political Passion: *Love in the Revolutionary Era*

Like *The Golden Age*, *Love in the Revolutionary Era* deals with sexuality against the background of the Cultural Revolution. In this novella, the relationship between sex, human subjectivity and politics is further complicated when sexual

desire is directly associated with the revolutionary passion enacted in a sado-masochistic game.

In modern Chinese literature, “revolution plus love” (革命加戀愛 *geming jia lianai*) is a classical theme that always relates sexuality to politics.¹¹ In the literary works of the May Fourth period, the sexual anxiety suffered by individuals was usually regarded as a reflection of the weakness of the country and the “sickness of the society,” which made the resolution of national and social problems a precondition of individual freedom. In the late 1920s, the popularization of “revolutionary romanticism” first established “revolution plus love” as a narrative model. In his study of revolutionary romanticism, Kuang Xinnian (曠新年) provides a structuralist analysis of the relationship between love and revolution represented in this mode of writing. In his view, this narrative model gives revolution a hegemonic position over love since revolution always ends up as the highest signifier that displaces the function of love as the initiating signifier (97).

When love is politicized and incorporated into the cause of a revolution, people’s sexual preference becomes an indicator of their political consciousness, and one’s choice of a lover and sexual partner manifests his or her political stand. It is noteworthy that some literary works on the Cultural Revolution written in the post-Mao era break this cliché by describing the love between two people belonging to “opposite” classes. For instance, Liu Xinwu’s (劉心武) *Wishes Fulfilled* (如意 Ruyi, 1980) portrays a love affair between an old man from the lower class and an old woman of imperial lineage. However, since the woman is depicted as a sympathizer with the poor from an early age and a rebel against her own “parasitic” family, she is not portrayed as a member of the exploitative class but as someone who shares the same values and consciousness with the old man from the lower class. Thus, *Wishes Fulfilled* is not about love winning over politics but a story that redefines love in relation to politics. Moreover, the narrative in *Wishes Fulfilled* downplays the significance of sexuality in this relationship since the “transgressive” love between the two protagonists becomes purely platonic when their marriage plan is put off under huge social pressures and eventually becomes an unfulfilled wish caused by the tragic death of the heroine.

Wishes Fulfilled shows the difficulty of representing love and sexuality beyond political boundaries. In the conventional narrative model of “revolution plus love,” if the representation of emotional attachment between two people from dif-

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the thematic articulations of the “revolution plus love” stories from the 1930s to the 1970s in Chinese literature, see Jianmei Liu.

ferent classes is rare, then a sexual relationship between a “revolutionary” and his or her political opposite becomes a thematic taboo. Thus, the sexual representation in *Love in the Revolutionary Era* is politically offensive since it describes not only a sexual relationship that defies the ascetic social environment of the Cultural Revolution, but also the erotic allure that attracts a “revolutionary activist” who is supposedly capable of resisting the “corrupting” temptation of physical desire. This narrative is made possible partly by a changed perception of the nature of the Cultural Revolution itself. Since the Cultural Revolution has been publicly repudiated as “ten years of chaos” (十年浩劫 *shinian haojie*), it is no longer officially regarded as a real “revolution.” For this reason, the transgressive sexual love represented in the story is less blasphemous than it first appears to be. Yet instead of regarding Wang’s alternative narrative of sexuality and revolution as a parody of the absurdity of a specific historical period, I prefer to view this work as a “psychoanalytic” text that probes into the erotic dimension of revolution.

When love is associated with politics, sexuality becomes more than a natural, primitive, physical concern. Contextualized in a specific revolutionary era, the libidinous energy of sexuality might be channeled into mass emotion and political passion.¹² However, as sensuous and bodily desire, sexuality has a tendency to become a counterforce of revolution. That is, while revolution as a collective cause demands the total dedication of an individual, sex tends to be experienced as an individual pleasure. Whereas a revolution justifies the sacrifice of one’s own individuality for the common good of the people, sex usually calls for personal attachment and prohibits the intrusion of public opinion. This may explain why sexual expression is always excluded from classical revolutionary narratives, and people’s “sexual misbehavior” often costs them their political prospects.

Seen from this perspective, *Love in the Revolutionary Era* is more than another narrative in the established mode of expression that makes love subordinate to political needs. Besides prioritizing sexual urges over “revolutionary consciousness,” Wang’s story highlights the “staged” and “sodomasochistic” nature of both sex and revolution when X Haiying intentionally structures her sexual feelings in revolutionary images related to violence. For instance, during their sexual encounters, X Haiying always pictures Wang Er as a “cruel-hearted Japanese” while identifying herself as an innocent Chinese girl raped by him. In other sexual scenes, X Haiying imagines herself as a faithful revolutionary woman who is undergoing

¹²In his study of the aesthetic dimension of political life during the Cultural Revolution, Ban Wang discusses how the revolutionary films produced during this period redirect libidinal intensity into revolutionary passion. See Wang 136.

torture by her enemy. For instance, she especially likes to see her nipples clamped by Wang Er because this image reminds her of a scene of torture suffered by a female communist interrogated by the Japanese (305). What also draws attention to the “staged” nature of sex and revolution is how sex subverts the power relations between the two protagonists, relations defined by political hierarchies in reality. Wang Er, who has been constantly satirized and roughly treated by X Haiying on different occasions, is given the chance to “abuse” and victimize his “educator” in various sex scenes.

Taking account of the ascetic social atmosphere in the Cultural Revolution, it is understandable that people like X Haiying would regard sex as a dangerous temptation or a sign of defilement. If enjoying sex as a form of individual pleasure means a corruption of one’s revolutionary spirit, “suffering” sex as a form of persecution imposed on one by a “class enemy” releases the tension between sexuality and revolution. This may explain why X Haiying needs to display her red panties whenever she has sex with Wang. To X Haiying, red symbolizes chasteness and victory. Putting on her red panties right after sex means the inevitable “defeat” of the class enemy and the incorruptible “triumph” of the revolutionary.

In this story, it is particularly interesting to see how specific physical features and body positions during sexual acts are encoded with revolutionary meanings. In X Haiying’s sexual theater, for instance, the “political backwardness” of Wang Er, his “fierce” look and heavy body hair all make him an ideal candidate to play the role of the bad guy—in X’s characterization, the Japanese “rapist,” the “class enemy,” the embodiment of the counterrevolutionary force. What structures X Haiying’s particular sexual feelings, which view sex as a form of torture, is the same reasoning that justifies the repression of sexual desire in the name of revolution.

If *Love in the Revolutionary Era* gives us a form of sexual theater performed against the background of the Cultural Revolution, what makes revolution a source, a reservoir of sexual energy? Why did the author choose revolutionary imagery symbolizing the strong will of the communists, the suffering of interrogation and enduring of torture, as sexual metaphors? The story of Wang Er and X Haiying suggests the possibility that revolution is simultaneously a repressive force and a constructive power of sexual creativity. Yet in what sense does revolution become sexy? A clue may lie in the fundamental nature of revolutions and sexuality; that is, in their praxis, both make distinctions and produce strategic relations relying on systems of power. Just as sexual practice involves two seemingly opposite states, servitude and control, so revolution as a power struggle generates constant battles

between two contrary forces, the dominated and the dominant. In Wang Er and X Haiying's "staged" sexual experience, sex enslaves a human subject as a conquered object just as revolution brings violence upon an individual. What is interesting about this narrative is not that sex appropriates the rhetoric of politics, for it is common that political phrases were used to explain people's motivation and behavior in daily life during the Cultural Revolution. What is unusual about Wang's sexual expression is how a common feature—the endurance of pain and the accompanying delight—makes a sadomasochistic sexual play an occasion for acting out revolutionary ideology.

Seen as the highest goal, the loftiest cause, revolution justifies bloodshed and sacrifice for it has to be won at all costs; this makes violence a necessary price. For instance, due to its limited financial and military resources, the victory of the Chinese Communist Party came from extravagant effort, understood as a heroic repression of individuals' worldly desires; it was accomplished through the unconditional self-sacrifice of the revolutionaries.

In Wang's story, X Haiying's sexual relationship with Wang Er is an imaginary recreation of the revolutionary experience of self-sacrifice, especially the endurance of physical torment caused by the "class enemy." This savage experience is more or less "staged" since Wang Er is not allowed to physically hurt his sexual partner in the way he wants, and his acting out of a "rapist" is an involuntary and passive response to X Haiying's body language of "heroic" resistance. Since it is up to X Haiying, the one who holds political power in reality, to initiate the relationship, determine the roles, and control the way the "game" is played, this sexual play illuminates an underlying link between political and sexual power. When the "perpetrator" is forced to impose "violence" on the "victim" in order to fulfill the revolutionary fantasy of the latter, the sadomasochistic game of dominance and resistance becomes an act that reinforces revolutionary ideology and perpetuates revolutionary morality.

In twentieth-century Western cultural theory, sexual liberation has been treated as a powerful force that grants personal fulfillment and subjective independence to a desiring individual (Larson 426-30). Taking issue with the institution of power in modern society, Michel Foucault develops a theory that relates patterns of power established within "sexuality" to patterns of power throughout social bodies. In Foucault's theory, radical forms of erotic transgression like sadomasochism, which forms an interchangeable relation between the master and the slave in the pursuit of extreme sensations of bodily pleasure, is regarded as a creative enterprise, a way for an individual to escape discursive subjugation, and a

means of personal resistance to ideological and cultural normalization.¹³ If putting on a master-slave sexual show means a daring declaration of individuality in the Foucauldian view, X Haiying's sexual adventure, acted out in a perverse form, differs from what sadomasochism is supposed to mean in Foucault's explanation. If sadomasochism is understood as a staged sexual experience that makes sex a "taste"—that is, purely sexual, purely individual, severed from love and personhood—then the staged sadomasochism directed by X Haiying is a betrayal of pure sexual pleasure since it is a re-enactment of revolutionary images and a rehearsal of revolutionary ideology. When revolutionary discourse enters the unconscious of a desiring human subject and controls the structuring of his or her sexual feelings, sexuality becomes a physical affirmation of political socialization, a gesture of ideological assertion rather than a self-conscious choice of personal resistance.

As a sadomasochistic recreation of the revolutionary experience, the sexual relationship between Wang Er and X Haiying redefines the meaning of sexuality contextualized in a "revolutionary" environment. In Wang's story, sexual pleasure is acquired together with political power, justified as a torture, and enjoyed as a form of hatred. What is highlighted in the work is the power of a utopian, revolutionary morality in the construction of human subjectivity. X Haiying's particular kind of sexual fantasy may seem odd when evaluated in terms of Foucault's theoretical model since it replaces physical pleasure with revolutionary morality as the motivating force to construct her subjective identity. However, it is viewed as natural and consequential in a society in which the *revolutionary sincerity* and *moral purity* of people are valued as forces to overcome physical drawbacks, mental weaknesses, environmental hardships and material disadvantages. When revolution not only justifies bloodshed and sacrifice but also embellishes the torment born in its name, then physical suffering can be a real pleasure, now explained in pathological terms. This is the reason Mao identifies peasants and workers as "cleaner" than intellectuals although the formers do hard labor and have dirty hands and cow dung on their feet (808). What underlies this statement is the distinction between body and mind, a specific "body dialectic" that relates physical appearance and sensation to spiritual and political consciousness. In other words, one's spontaneous physical experience has to be measured in terms of its moral significance and revo-

¹³ In Foucault's view, sadomasochism as a sexual game is a way of experimenting with the nature of power. Sexuality, when acted out in the S/M game, is about pure pleasure. Since sexuality always relies on systems of power, the concept of play in the S/M game provides the sexual agents a way to act outside of power structures and to step outside the scientific discourse of sexuality. See Halperin 87.

lutionary nature in the formation of his or her subjective identity. Following this logic, the sexual experience of X Haiying is a “genuine” subjective construction in the context of revolution rather than a perverted form of self-alienation according to Western theories of sexuality.

VII. The “Wang Xiaobo Phenomenon”

In 1997, Wang’s writing career came to an abrupt end when he died of a heart attack just before the long-delayed publication of a selection of his stories. His sudden death, however, made him the focus of the media and attracted a large number of readers to his writings.¹⁴ Wang and his works became “hot,” and China experienced a “Wang Xiaobo Phenomenon.”

The “Wang Xiaobo Phenomenon” was manifested not only in the popularity of his works but also in a series of memorial articles and activities organized five years after his death; in them Wang Xiaobo was labeled as a “cultural martyr” who sacrificed his life for his belief in the “freedom of thinking.”¹⁵ His overseas education, his decision to quit his teaching jobs at two of China’s most prestigious universities, his dedication to “pure literature” in an increasingly commercialized society, his research into homosexuality, his interest in sexual representation—all these features came together to create a specific cultural image of Wang, which made him a cultural icon and symbol of liberal values in 1990s China.

The construction of Wang as a cultural icon of “freedom” provides an illuminating example to look into the regulative force of the cultural market when it

¹⁴ In 1997, Wang’s wife Li Yinhe (李銀河) and his friend Ai Xiaoming (艾曉明) edited a book that included articles in memory of Wang Xiaobo. In this book, Wang was idolized as a “romantic knight” (浪漫騎士 langman qishi), a “wandering lyric poet,” (行吟詩人 xingyin shiren), and a “liberal thinker” (自由思想者 ziyou sixiangzhe) (189).

¹⁵ Such a tendency can be clearly seen in a series of articles published in *Sanlian Life Weekly* in 2002. Five years after Wang’s death, this journal, which identifies urban “white collar” youth and the formative “middle class” as its targeted reader group, organized a special column in memory of the controversial writer under the title of “Wang Xiaobo and the ‘Liberals’” (王小波和自由份子們 Wang Xiaobo he ziyou fenzimen). In these articles, Wang was respectfully referred to as a “liberalist” (自由主義者 ziyou zhuyi zhe) (Shu), a “freelance intellectual” (自由職業的知識份子 ziyou zhiye de zhishi fenzi), “a free man” (自由份子 ziyou fenzi) (Miao), and so forth. Although the meanings of these terms remain ambiguous and undefined, they project a “liberal” image of Wang from different perspectives. In these memorial articles, Wang Xiaobo becomes a cultural hero who sacrificed his life to defend his beliefs in the value of “freedom.”

turns a form of individualized writing into a collectively consumed cultural fashion. With the development of the cultural market, it was common for the media to associate specific literary resources with various cultural imaginations to legitimize certain value judgments and guide a consumer's orientation. In Wang's case, writing as a freelancer is romanticized as a courageous individual choice, a resistant¹⁶ gesture of anti-institutionalism and a symbol of absolute individual freedom. When those memorial articles praise Wang for his courage to quit his teaching job and work independently as a freelance writer, they ignore the objective factors that accounted for his choice. When Wang's young admirers enthusiastically promote the "liberal" values held by Wang, they often lack insights to identify the derivable roots of his liberal stance (such as Wang's reflection on the failure of Mao's utopia and the absurdity of the Cultural Revolution) and the specific intellectual inheritance on which his liberal stance is grounded (e.g., Russell, the tradition of Western liberalism, and so forth). When the publishers endorse the value of Wang's "alternative" writings, they avoid admitting the fact that Wang's writings are not the final products of a free-willed agent since their production and reception are still subject to the regulation of the cultural market and the operational logic of the literary field.

For me, Wang Xiaobo must be understood as a liberal thinker fighting against any form of cultural conformity. In his essays, Wang emphasizes the significance of common sense, the value of scientific and rational thinking, and the importance of freedom in individual and social development. At the same time, he is against using any ideas and value systems, even his own beliefs, to confine other people's thinking. Discussing the value of freedom, Wang argues that "freedom" brings independence to an individual and diversity to a society (*The Delight of Thinking* 4). It is ideas like this that show Wang's liberal stance and differentiate him from those writers who value certain ideological and political viewpoints while silencing others.

To construct Wang as a cultural icon, however, Wang's personal "liberal" stance, grounded on specific historical, theoretical and intellectual contexts, is misrepresented as an abstract and ambiguous emblem of "freedom," and incorporated into the promotion of being "alternative" as a fashionable subculture of the urban youth. Appreciating Wang's works thus has become a mark of personal character distinguishing the "liberal" from the "conservative," the "idealistic" from the "snob-bish," the "alternative" from the "conventional," and the "trendy" from the "out-moded." In this sense, the "Wang Xiaobo Phenomenon" illuminates from a specific perspective how a particular discursive situation leads to a certain encoding and

¹⁶ In some cases, Wang is regarded as a "spiritual mentor" and a role model for some young people who seek to live a free and "alternative" lifestyle. In other occasions, reading and identifying with Wang becomes a claim of "difference," a personal trademark of taste, a cultural fashion, and a distinctive feature dividing a specific consumer group from the others (Li and Xing).

decoding of a literary text, and how alternative narratives on the Cultural Revolution can be appropriated in a specific form of discursive construction that prioritizes a certain lifestyle, value system or cultural agenda of the present.

VIII. Conclusion

In the essay collection *The Delight of Thinking* (思維的樂趣 Siwei de lequ), Wang Xiaobo points out that during the Cultural Revolution people's sexuality psychology was abnormal (91). Many critics believe that Wang carried out his criticism of a sexually repressive past in his fiction writing through his direct and sensational descriptions of human desire. Although Wang himself claimed that the theme of his fiction reflects simply "life itself" (37), his eroticization of the Cultural Revolution has been regarded as a gesture of political resistance, a promotion of the discourse of sexual liberation, and an endorsement of individual freedom (Jin).

Based on my readings of the two novellas by Wang, I want to argue that Wang Xiaobo, though he treats sexuality as an important part of human identity, does not simply highlight the positive effects of erotic desire. In his works, there is a close relation between revolution and sexuality: the two may be mostly enemies, but sometimes they are close allies. Revolution does not simply "displace" or "suppress" sexuality, and sexuality never simply emerges as a liberating force that grants individuals the power to fight against the revolution. If eroticism is valued for its revolutionary spirit in bringing about individual freedom, social progress and political liberation in Western cultural theories, Wang's sexual representation reveals the complicated relationship between human sexuality and revolutionary ideology in a specific sociopolitical context. Thus, Wang Xiaobo's eroticization of the Cultural Revolution at times problematizes rather than participates in a modernity based on a privileging of the liberating power of sexuality in the formation of the subjective identity of a modern man and woman.

For this reason, Wang Xiaobo's representation of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution is neither a continuation of the humanist discourse of de-alienation nor a simple advocacy of sexual freedom. Instead, it is a sophisticated inquiry into the nature of desire itself, a determined querying of the complex relationship between political power and sexual allurements, a persistent exploration of the possibility of individualized writing that is simultaneously subversive of the established cultural norms and readily prone to appropriations by the cultural market.

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About the Author

Yue Ma (馬越) was born in Beijing, China. She received her Master of Arts degree from Peking University. Her master's thesis, *A Short History of the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Peking University*, was published by Peking University Press in June 1998. In December 2004, she received her Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin. Her dissertation, *The Catastrophe Remembered by the Non-Traumatic: Counternarratives on the Cultural Revolution in Chinese Literature of the 1990s* was completed under two university fellowships. Her special areas of interest are modern and contemporary Chinese literature, film and culture. Her paper “The Privilege to Play: Wang Shuo in Nostalgia” has been accepted for publication by *Text, Practice and Performance*.

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