

Sexuality as Rebellious Gesture in Wang Xiaobo's *The Golden Age Trilogy*

by

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B.A., Yantai University, 2008

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ABSTRACT

Wang Xiaobo is a Post-Mao novelist whose works have prompted tremendous attention from the intellectuals and the public after his death. The straightforward representation of sex in his fiction is often considered as one of the sources that contribute to his “liberal spirit”. This is because many of Wang Xiaobo’s stories full of sexual depictions are set during the Cultural Revolution. But Wang Xiaobo’s ambiguous manipulation of the relationship between sex and the power makes his resistance to authoritarianism a tricky issue. On the one hand, his nonchalant attitude to both sex and politics can be interpreted as a mocking of the Maoist ideology. On the other hand, the author’s detachment from the political background and the protagonist’s sexual carnival in the rural areas can be considered as indifferent to the Cultural Revolution. The engagement with Maoist ideology in the theoretical framework of suppression/revolt cannot give a satisfactory answer to the role of sex in his fiction. This thesis amends this framework by taking other elements than Maoist discourse into consideration.

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In the process of writing this thesis, I have come across two main obstacles. One is to plug the embarrassing gaps in academic training during my undergraduate education. I needed to learn how to engage with certain theories and accustom myself to the practices of the western academic system. The other one is to communicate effectively with my readers in English. However, most of the problems involved in cross-cultural academic communication were not really issues with language: difficult writers are not difficult because of the vocabulary they use. Unlike the writers of fiction, scholars have the responsibility to make their arguments as clear as possible, and eliminate alternative interpretations. Both of my committee members Dr. Richard King and Dr. Michael Bodden have been consistently supportive during my study at the University of Victoria. This thesis would not have been completed without their kind help, and I am grateful for the effort they put into my work.

CHAPTER ONE

Wang Xiaobo and His “The Times Trilogy”

Wang Xiaobo (1952-1997)’s literary accomplishment is a pending issue for Chinese scholars who try to put his fiction in a coherent grand narrative of Chinese modern and contemporary literary history. He rose to fame overnight when he was finally able to find a willing publisher for his *The Golden Age* (1994) in mainland China but Chinese literary circles kept silent about his fiction; he claimed art-for-art’s sake, pure literary aesthetics, but his books have been continuously republished every year after his death for his popularity among readers; he was sent down from Beijing to Yunnan as a *zhiqing*¹ 知青 in 1968 as most of his peers grew up in the Cultural Revolution, but he has only one novella “The Golden Age” set in the countryside of Yunnan as the background and this single work is rarely mentioned as *zhiqing* literature; he went to the United States in 1984 in the first wave of going abroad after the Reform so he could know about foreign writers, but his fiction is not as abstruse as that of the domestic experimental writers who had a chance to read foreign literature during “High Culture Fever”; sex is the most important theme for him, but sexual content in his fiction did not cause the same trouble as other officially banned works for “vulgarity”, “superficiality”, “obscenity”²; he

¹ *Zhiqing*, 知青 literarily meaning the “educated youth”, is a proper name in China to refer to a generation of high school graduates who left their homes in urban areas and were transferred to rural areas to assume peasant lives under Chairman Mao’s call of “Up to the mountains and down to the villages.”

² But Wang Xiaobo did have trouble finding a publisher because of sexual content in his fiction. Based on the unanimous positive reader response after Wang’s fictions were actually published, I maintain that it was just because the sexual content in Wang’s fiction is hard to categorize so the publishers were not willing to take the risk out of self-censorship, not because they regard Wang’s fiction as vulgar or obscene.

adapted the *Tang chuanqi* 唐传奇 recorded in *Taiping guangji*³ 太平广记 to the stories in his *The Bronze Age* but his imaginary narrative makes it hard for Chinese literary critics to treat them as historical fiction⁴; the most prevalent reading of Wang Xiaobo is to treat him as a cultural rebel against Maoist ideology for his satire of the revolutionary hypocrisy and promotion of liberalism, but even the critics following this thread cannot agree on this without discord because of the Taoist detachment in Wang Xiaobo's fiction. To summarize, it is inappropriate, to different extents, to regard Wang Xiaobo as a *tongsu* (popular) writer, *zhiquing* writer, experimentalist writer, body/pornography writer, historical fiction writer, or dystopian literature writer. This difficulty to categorize him makes it hard to choose a critical stance. Interestingly, it should be the reason making his fiction productive to explore, but on the contrary, the difficulty to categorize Wang Xiaobo leaves the critics not sure of which critical stance to follow, so he has been regarded as a dark horse from nowhere. This thesis contributes to explaining *how* and *why* he cannot be simply categorized, and demonstrates that Wang Xiaobo's fictions are an unprecedented collage of his experience in Maoist years, family background, personal philosophy of life, curiosity about sex, and the influence he had from selected foreign literature.

Wang Xiaobo was born in 1952 into an intellectual family in Beijing. He was sent down to Yunnan in 1968 and came back to Beijing in the early 1970s. He studied in

³ *Tang chuanqi* 唐传奇 (Tang Dynasty Legend) is a fictional genre prevalent in Tang Dynasty. Most of the preserved *Tang chuanqi*s are recorded in *Taiping guangji* 太平广记 (Extensive Records of the Taiping Era) compiled by Li Fang 李昉 and other scholars under the order of Song Taizong 宋太宗 in Song Dynasty. This collection of stories is divided into 500 volumes, containing about seven thousand stories that are selected from the books from the Han Dynasty to the early Song Dynasty.

⁴ Chinese critics do not regard Wang Xiaobo's *The Bronze Age* as historical fiction because there is a strong tradition of this genre. But in Lin Qingxin's 林庆新 *Brushing History Against the Grain*, he discusses *The Bronze Age* as "New Historical Fiction" with other works that do not follow this tradition in the section "Sexing Chinese History" (176-181) under the chapter "History, Fiction, and Metafiction".

People's University from 1978 to 1982 and went to the University of Pittsburgh in the United States in 1984. After he received his Master's degree in East Asian Studies he came back to China to teach at Beijing University and People's University. In 1992 he quit his job and became a freelance writer. In the same year his *The Golden Age* was published and awarded the United Daily Literary Award for Novella in Taiwan. In 1997, before his "The Times Trilogy" was published in May, he died of a heart attack in Beijing at the age of forty five. This was followed by a cultural phenomenon called Wang Xiaobo Fever in the later 1990s.

A *Tongsu* (Popular) Writer?

At odds with the fame he had among readers is the weak response from the literary circles. Is that because the sexual content of his fiction was not welcomed by high-brow Chinese scholars? When later generations rewrite the history of Chinese modern literature, will he be another tremendously popular but academically neglected writer like Jin Yong 金庸⁵ or Wang Shuo 王朔? Wang Shuo became popular among readers in the late 1980s, prior to his Beijing peer Wang Xiaobo, for his defiance of official ideology and anti-intellectual stance. Although subversive is the most frequent adjective connected to Wang Shuo, his popularity only reflected the masses' celebration of the official ideology's crumbling, but neither his language nor narrative style had

⁵ This is not so say that there are no influential scholars recognizing Jin Yong and Wang Shuo's literary accomplishments. Jin Yong is the pen name of Louis Cha. His *wuxia* 武侠(martial arts and chivalry) fiction has a great number of followers in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The literary theorist and critic Liu Zaifu 刘再复 acknowledged Jin Yong's status in Chinese modern literature in his "Jinyong xiaoshuo zai nianshiji zhongguowenxueshi shang de diwei." 金庸小说在廿世纪中国文学史上的地位("The Status of JinYong's fiction in the history of Chinese modern literature of twentieth century.") (*Ming Bao* 明报, August 1998)

experimental element in any form⁶, and it seems that Wang Shuo does not intend to challenge Maoist ideology. For example, in an interview published on *Sanlian Life Weekly*, he credited his anti-intellectualist stance to Mao's education. He explained, because Mao degraded the Chinese class of *shi* 士, therefore everyone can be equal in a classless society and do not have to exalt the intellectuals ("Wang Shuo's Way of Self-identification"). Similar to this, Wang Xiaobo also criticized the traditional value of taking intellectuals as the backbone of a nation. However, Wang Xiaobo did not promote populism and attach himself to the masses as Wang Shuo did. In short, Wang Xiaobo insisted on serious literature writing and refused to be a popular literature writer.

An Experimentalist Writer?

If Wang Xiaobo is not a straightforward popular literature writer, is he an abstruse experimentalist writer? When China re-opened its door after the Reform, all of a sudden the major works of almost all laureates of Nobel Prize Literature could be found in China. A group of Wang Xiaobo's peers began to develop new forms of Chinese fiction⁷. But Wang Xiaobo is not one of them. In fact, the popularity of his works can compete with any popular writer. The professor in the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Xiamen University, Ai Xiaoming 艾晓明, and the professor in the Department of

Chinese Language and Literature at Beijing University, Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, were the first

⁶ See the cultural critic Dai Jinhua's 戴锦华 arguments in the chapter "Wang Shuo de wanzhumen" (197-211) 王朔的顽主们(Wang Shuo's Trouble Shooters) in her monograph on contemporary Chinese film, *Wuzhong fengjing: Zhongguo dianyingwenhua 1978-1998* 雾中风景:中国电影文化(Landscape in the Fog: Chinese Cinematic Culture 1978-1998).

⁷ To see a demonstration of this trend among some writers, see Wang Jing's chapter "The Pseudoproposition of 'Chinese Postmodernism: Ge Fei and the Experimentalist Showcase.'" (233-260) in her *High Culture Fever* (1996).

literary critics to notice Wang Xiaobo's fiction. In Ai Xiaoming's words, "when you read the works of modernist Chinese writers, in particular those of several recent experimental writers, they seem involved and abstruse. But "The Golden Age" is not like that" (Ai, "Chongdu," 270). Similar to Ai's opinion, Dai Jinhua commented that the language Wang Xiaobo used to describe sexual scenes was "direct, leisurely, smooth, and exact" as in "all his writings" (Dai, "Zhizhe," 311). However, if compared with the *tongsu* writers such as Wang Shuo, Wang Xiaobo brought a lot more from abroad to modern Chinese fiction. He explicitly admitted the influence he had from the French novelist Marguerite Duras and the Italian novelist Italo Calvino. It seems that Wang Xiaobo was not interested in any theories on modernity or post-modernity but directly learned from his favorite writers' products in his practice. In his essay "Xiaoshuo de yishu" 小说的艺术 (The Art of Fiction), he claimed that one could only appreciate the art of fiction from actual works, and those who only read evaluative reviews can never understand any kind of art (*Wang Xiaobo Quanji* Vol.2, 60-62)⁸. In short, Wang Xiaobo did not mean to be an experimental writer but he did make his texts open to interpretation in the discussion of modernity.

A Zhiqing Writer?

It is undeniable that Wang Xiaobo's experience in Yunnan countryside is an integral part of both his personality and his writings. In his essays, it is a period of experience he repeatedly used to criticize what he called the collective irrationality in the

⁸ All quotes in Chinese are my own translations from *Wang Xiaobo Quanji Vol 1-10* 王小波全集 (Complete Works of Wang Xiaobo), and hereafter WXQ, except Wang Xiaobo's novella "The Golden Age", which is slightly adapted from Zhang Hongling and Jason Sommer's translation *Wang in Love and Bondage* (2007).

Cultural Revolution.⁹ The internalized experience also affects his “The Bronze Age” and “The Silver Age”, but “the Golden Age” is his only novella explicitly using the Yunnan countryside as the spatial background. The *ex-zhiqing*, assistant professor at Whittier College, Cao Zuoya 曹左雅 discussed Wang Xiaobo in her English monograph on *zhiqing* literature, *Out of The Crucible* (2003). But as she nicely put it, “the so-called *zhiqing* literature is not a literary school. Literary works in this category do not share the same artistic pursuit or style. They also do not have a unified system, but are based on shared experience...One commonality is that all the works are related more or less to the authors’ own experiences during the rustication movement.”(20). Wang Xiaobo’s “The Golden Age” is illustrative of this. For Cao, the sexual theme in this novella bears no resemblance to other *zhiqing* literature. So she just simplifies Wang Xiaobo’s alter ego, Wang Er’s, sexual indulgence as a spiritual liberation over political oppression, and “their sexual relations become the only meaningful thing in their otherwise meaningless lives in the countryside” (195). In the literary critic Qin Liyan 秦立彦’s article, “The Sublime and the Profane: A Comparative Analysis of Two Fictional Narratives about Sent-down Youth”(240-265), Qin highlights two influential works by the *ex-zhiqings* Liang Xiaosheng 梁晓声 and Wang Xiaobo. For Qin, Liang Xiaosheng’s *Jinye you baofengxue* 今夜有暴风雪(*Snowstorm Tonight*) published in the 1980s and Wang Xiaobo’s “The Golden Age” in the 1990s stand at the opposite poles of the spectrum. As the title of Qin’s article indicates, on the one extreme is the sublime heroism that Liang promotes, on the other is Wang’s profane attitude to political ideals. The protagonist of Liang’s novel was frozen to death in Northeast China during the rusticated life. It is a tragedy but the author

⁹ See, for example, Wang Xiaobo’s “Chenmo de daduoshu.” 沉默的大多数(The Silent Majority) (*WXQ* Vol.1, 1-12).

extols the spirit of sacrifice of the sent-down youths. But “The Golden Age” serves to dissolve the mentality once commonly shared by the *zhiquing* generation. For both Cao Zuoya and Qin Liyan, Wang Xiaobo’s sexual theme provides an alternative Cultural Revolution narrative to the once typical heroism of *zhiquing* literature.

Dystopian/Liberal Writer?

The most prevalent interpretation of Wang Xiaobo’s sexualized Cultural Revolution narrative by non-literary critics is that it is a response—resistance, criticism, mockery, or counteraction, and so on—to the ascetic Maoist past.¹⁰ Sexual depictions are read as sexual liberation and furthermore individual freedom. Therefore Wang Xiaobo was turned into the cultural icon of a liberal thinker after he died. But this kind of reading is somehow teleological. First, Wang Xiaobo’s contemporary intellectuals pull the “liberal spirit” out of his works because they have the common traumatic memory in the Cultural Revolution. Second, Chinese liberal intellectuals need any author’s works that can be interpreted as liberalism to promote this doctrine in contemporary China.¹¹ Although Wang Xiaobo’s parody of the revolutionary rituals and logic does invite this kind of interpretation, according to Zhu Wei 朱伟, his editor of *Sanlian Life Weekly*, the author hoped readers would not pull any ideology out of it. “Sex is just sex, a story is just a story.” (Zhu 119) For the author, his fictions are not political metaphors, but readers’

¹⁰ See, for example, Wang Xiaobo’s wife and sexologist Li Yinhe’s 李银河 “Wang Xiaobo bi xiade xing.” 王小波笔下的性 (“Sex under Wang Xiaobo’s Pen.”) (373-384).

¹¹ The liberal scholar, the professor in History Department at Shanghai University, Zhu Xueqin 朱学勤 is a typical example. In his “Yijiujuba: Ziyoushuyixue de yanshuo.” 一九九八：自由主义学理的言说 (The Year Nineteen Ninety Eight, The Articulation of Liberalism), when he refers to Wang Xiaobo, Zhu proposes that Wang presented liberalism in the form of literary works (*Xueshuo zhongguo* 学说中国).

interpretations are out of his control. Critics who interpret Wang Xiaobo as a dystopian or liberal writer are not in agreement. Most critics praise Wang Xiaobo's "liberal spirit" without reservations, but there are second opinions.

For example, a professor in the History Department at Tsinghua University, Qin Hui 秦晖 and the associate professor in the Department of Dramatic Chinese at the Central Academy of Drama, Yang Jian 杨健, both affirm Wang Xiaobo's "liberal" spirit but point out his "shortcomings". For Qin Hui (321-335), the social conditions that Wang Xiaobo criticized had already passed. In a comparative analysis of Wang's works with Russian dystopian literature, Qin points out the special situation of Chinese dystopian literature. When Russian novelist Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* was finished in 1921, it was only four years after the success of Bolshevik Revolution. When everyone pinned his hope on this new regime, Zamyatin called attention to the potential danger of the loss of individual freedom. In China, however, it is after Mao's death when a Chinese version of dystopian literature emerged.¹² As the Chinese Communist Party was no more an ultra-left party after Mao, in Qin's opinion, Wang Xiaobo's reflection on a past regime lacks the sense of criticism. For Yang Jian, Wang Xiaobo's alter ego Wang Er gradually lost his rebellious spirit when he becomes older (446-449). In Yang's monograph *The History of Zhiqing Literature*, he evaluates *The Golden Age* as "the voice of liberalism", but he later commented that the mediocre middle-aged Wang Er in *Sishuiliunian* 似水流年 (*Years Like Flowing Water*) and *Sanshierli* 三十而立 (Standing up at Thirty) is in stark contrast to the young Wang Er full of rebellious spirit. In fact, it is the simplistic reading of eroticism as a resistance to political repression that leads to contradictory comments. This

¹² For example Bei Dao's 北岛 poem "Taiyangcheng zhaji." 太阳城札记 (Notes from the City of the Sun) and Su Xiaokang's 苏晓康 reportage literature *Wu tuobang ji* 乌托邦祭 (Sacrifice to Utopia).

is because the sexual theme can be regarded as a gesture of resistance under totalitarianism, but at the same time, the sexual theme is not producing direct dialogues between the protagonists and power. Instead, it is through pornography in the form of confession that the conversation between the repressed and power is established.

All the above literature reviews more or less lead to a similar conclusion—to categorize Wang Xiaobo and the eroticism in his fiction is a difficult issue. I argue that the simplistic reading of the relationship between sex and politics is a major reason. But the author unintentionally leads the critics into this theoretical model of revolt and repression by his parody of revolutionary discourse. Wang Xiaobo's texts are haunted by Maoist ideology. That is the reason why critics do not compare Wang Xiaobo's sexualized stories with works such as Liu Heng 刘恒's *Fuxi fuxi*, 伏羲伏羲 in which sex is almost free of political implications, or more prone to ethical interpretation.

The following two chapters answer two questions: In what way is the author different? Why is the author different? To be specific, the way sex and politics are associated is different. Therefore chapter two briefly outlines how sex is associated with politics in works from the May Fourth period to the early Post-Mao era, and demonstrates how Wang Xiaobo's texts are different from these patterns. Yu Dafu 郁达夫's short story "Chenlun"(Sinking) (1921), Yang Mo 杨沫's *Qingchunzhige* 青春之歌(*The Song of Youth*) (1958) and Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮's *Nanren de yiban shi nüren* 男人的一半是女人(*Half of Man is Woman*) are chosen as key works for their times. What distinguishes Wang Xiaobo is his use of parody as a linkage between sex and politics, including the parody of "the great friendship between lover comrades", the "confession", the "denunciation meeting", "thought reform", the revolutionary logic of beauty, and so on.

But parody is not the only distinguishing thing. Another reason that theoretical models of revolt and repression disappoint in understanding Wang Xiaobo's fiction is the non-factuality of Wang Er's sexual adventure. Since Wang Xiaobo uses fantasy to blur the line between history and imagination, the Cultural Revolution is not a solid temporal background that everyone shares. By looking at Wang Xiaobo's texts with other sources such as the influence he had from the French novelist Marguerite Duras and the Italian novelist Italo Calvino, this thesis demonstrates that *The Golden Age* functions more than just a resistance to the Maoist ideology and a reflection on the Cultural Revolution.

Therefore, instead of engaging with the theoretical framework of revolt/repression, I argue that Wang Xiaobo's fiction should be discussed in the context of avant-garde literature in China since mid-1980s. Just like exploring the relationship between Mo Yan 莫言 and García Márquez, Yu Hua 余华 and Franz Kafka, Ma Yuan 马原 and Jorge Luis Borges, the influence that Wang Xiaobo had from Marguerite Duras and Italo Calvino is inevitable in exploring Wang Xiaobo's fiction. Although haunted by the Maoist ideology, by employing totally different devices in the form and content, Wang Xiaobo has proposed an alternative narrative of the Cultural Revolution.

CHAPTER TWO

Pornography against History

Chinese writers' reflection on the Cultural Revolution started from the late 1970s as the fictional genre "scar literature" emerged and flourished. With the publication of Lu Xinhua's 卢新华 "The Scar" in 1978, Chinese intellectuals began to examine what happened to them between 1966 and 1976. These examinations, however, turn into accusations of the national turmoil caused by "the Gang of Four" in many authors' cases. Focusing on the individual suffering of the intellectuals, lacking the analysis of various actors in the Cultural Revolution, the genre of "scar literature" shows its historical limitation though daring in many aspects. Writing on traumatic history did not end with the decline of scar literature, and the Cultural Revolution became a constant source for many writers, including the *zhiqing* and other intellectual victims of the political persecutions. They chose different approaches to the "historical legacy", and their styles ranged from condemnation to mockery. The 1990s witnessed the publication of more and more provocative fiction and films devoted to the political campaigns of Maoist era. By the time Wang Xiaobo finally found a publisher for his "The Golden Age Trilogy" in 1994, the cultural revolt against Maoist ideology in the fictional works was no more a taboo. The publication of his fiction was delayed because of its sexual content. In the postscript of "The Golden Age Trilogy", Wang Xiaobo writes, "Since the publication of this book is much harder than the writing of it, if there is anything good about this book, we should appreciate all friends who have helped publish and distribute it" (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 337). Strangely, sexual themes had already been touched on in the post-Mao era by other

writers, such in Zhang Xianliang's *Half of Man is Woman* (1985), Wang Anyi's 王安忆 "Love Trilogy" (1986-1987), Liu Heng's 刘恒 *Fuxi fuxi* (1988), and Jia Pingwa's 贾平凹 *The Abandoned Capital* (1993), but "The Golden Age Trilogy" still incurred enormous public attention, especially after the author's abrupt death of a heart attack in 1997. The literary critic Bai Ye 白烨 commented on Wang Xiaobo's sexual description in a seminar about *The Golden Age* that, "as soon as Wang Xiaobo's novels came out they totally wiped out the other novels that were written about sex" (Li, "Wang," 390). One of the tasks of this thesis is to elucidate why Wang Xiaobo's erotic recounting of a *zhiqing* story in the countryside is so attractive to the Chinese readers after the outburst of sexual themes and images in post-Mao poetry, fiction and film. What is special about his sexualization of the Cultural Revolution?

Wendy Larson is a Freudian cultural critic who noticed the post-Mao sexual explosion in China. As indicated in the title of her critique of the Chinese-American author Anchee Min's *Red Azalea* (1994), the booming of the various cultural forms full of sexual depiction represents the post-Mao intellectuals' project of "Sexing the Cultural Revolution". In this cultural movement, Larson identifies two approaches, "The first establishes the past as an era of sexual repression that must be overcome in order for one to move into the future. The second reinterprets past revolutionary ideology, recasting it as sensual, erotic, and interesting as revolutionary eroticism" (Larson, "Never," 423). Both approaches "give primacy to the expression of sexuality as a way to understand the past, the present, and the future and to situate Chinese culture within an already established global context." In her critique, Larson juxtaposed the novels written specifically for Western audiences such as Anchee Min's *Red Azalea* and *Katherine*

(1995) to discuss how these chosen works situate the sexualized post-Mao cultures in the established global context, or how these works relate the Maoist past to a future intimately entwined with the West. In Anchee Min's descriptions, Larson noticed a western initiative to reconstruct the Cultural Revolution as a sexually repressive era and to project a utopian and modernized future of sexual freedom. According to Larson's reading of *Red Azalea*, the protagonist's departure from China to the United States represents the realization of sexual modernization. Her argument is based on the hypothesis that "[t]he model for this kind of modern person comes from the industrialized West and includes the concept of sexual liberation as far-reaching and significant beyond the individual and anti-state resistance as being its fundamental basis" ("Never," 425). In other words, Anchee Min's vision of a sexualized modern person is based on the idea of human identity privileging sexuality formulated by theorists such as Sigmund Freud in the West. Anchee Min was, in the light of this argument, just one of many post-Mao writers who represented Maoism as an obstacle to Chinese sexual modernization. To Larson, fiction writers and film makers began to use the erotic as the force of liberation to overcome this setback. The case of *Red Azalea* is even more apparent since the protagonist flees from China to the United States in order to embrace sexual emancipation. The case of Zhang Xianliang's *Xiguan siwang* 习惯死亡 (*Getting Used to Dying*) is also cited because the protagonist expresses himself by having sexual relationships with non-Chinese women. So, as a graduate student who studied in the United States in the 1980s, what is Wang Xiaobo's attitude to this western notion of sexual modernity? What did Wang Xiaobo use eroticism for? Is he also one of these

fiction writers and film makers who regard sexuality as the formerly repressed force of the individual to fight against Maoist ideology?

It is tempting to read Wang Xiaobo's texts as another example of making sexuality a base from which the Maoist past can be criticized and modernized. But I argue that Wang Xiaobo shocked his contemporary Chinese cultural critics because his recounting of the Maoist past goes beyond Chinese literary critics' expectations, and also does not fit into the two approaches summarized by Larson. Certainly Wang Xiaobo regarded sex as a natural and basic force within human nature. Different from the implicit attitude to sexuality in his fiction, Wang Xiaobo explicitly emphasized this point in many of his essays. To Wang Xiaobo, sexual desire is "part of human nature" and the Maoist past is a "desexualized era" (*WXQ* Vol 2, 63). Wang Xiaobo's comments, however, are not enough to fathom his perspective on the Freudian model of sexual modernity. It is even more problematic to establish a direct connection between Wang's primacy of sexuality and the Western notion of a sexually embodied person who can actively fight against state control.

To establish a relationship between Anchee Min's sexuality and the western sexual modernity, Larson briefly outlines the western debates over human sexuality and its influx into China since the May Fourth period. Since I am engaging with Larson, in this chapter of my thesis, I am going to follow the same thread from the May Fourth period to demonstrate why Wang Xiaobo cannot be simply categorized according to the two approaches mentioned before. Then I will go further to explain why Wang Xiaobo's sexualized history goes beyond Chinese intellectuals' expectations. Most social and cultural critics in China do not engage with western theories about modernity in the

reading of Wang Xiaobo. Therefore to clarify why Wang Xiaobo surprised Chinese critics in the specific Chinese context is also an important part of this chapter. In the scholar of Chinese intellectual history Xu Jilin's 许纪霖 words, "it is difficult to imagine that someone like Wang Xiaobo could appear from inside Chinese culture" (574). A methodology of comparative reading is employed to discuss why Chinese critics consider Wang Xiaobo as a master outside the literary circles 文坛外高手. Zhang Xianliang's *Half of Man is Woman* is chosen here for the following reasons. First, Zhang Xianliang's writing is best known for breaking the sexual taboos in the 1980s. Wang Xiaobo astounded Chinese readers also with his sexual descriptions in the early 1990s. What are the differences between them? Second, this chapter explores the relationship between post-Mao eroticism and Maoist ideology. The background of *Half a Man is Woman* is the Cultural Revolution and Zhang Xianliang clearly associated sex with politics in such a way that the protagonist, who becomes impotent after long-term political persecution, finally regains his masculine power after a revolutionary act of fighting against a flood. In Wang Xiaobo's case, the image of a young man writing pornographic confessions to cater to the voyeurism of the political cadres is how he associates sex to politics. Third, both Zhang Xianliang and Wang Xiaobo were born into intellectual families and both worked as teachers in post-secondary institutions. Zhang Xianliang's fiction highlights physical and psychological damage from the political persecution of Chinese intellectuals. Interestingly, Wang Xiaobo also thinks he assumes responsibility as an intellectual, but he does not try to speak for a generation of intellectuals. In his own words, he comes from the Silent Majority 沉默的大多数(WXQ Vol.1, 1-12). But Wang Xiaobo received great

honor in the popular media after he died.¹³ This implies the shift of the expected intellectual's social role from the 1980s to later 1990s and this shift partially explains the Wang Xiaobo Fever. By engaging with the revolutionary eroticism from the May Fourth and a comparative reading, this chapter explains why Wang Xiaobo cannot fit into the established paradigm anticipated by both western and Chinese critics on a theoretical and empirical level.

2.1. From May Fourth to the Cultural Revolution

In her discussion of Chinese intellectuals' project of "Sexing the Cultural Revolution" in a global context, Larson briefly outlines the twentieth-century Western debate over human sexuality and its influx to China from the May Fourth period. Although, as she points out, the story is neither unified nor consistent, it is necessary for me to follow the same thread to show how Wang Xiaobo differs from the traditional revolutionary eroticism in light of the theory of sexual modernity from the West. At the same time, this genealogy of the theme of revolution plus love in modern Chinese literature can provide the history against which Wang Xiaobo unfolds his narrative. By the term revolutionary eroticism borrowed from Larson, I not only refer to the use of eroticism entwined with Maoist ideology in the post-Mao era, but also extend it to the entanglement of eroticism and politics in the revolutionary culture from the May Fourth to the Cultural Revolution.

The revolution plus love theme dates back to the May Fourth era and notably, the "revolutionary literature" of the 1920s. In the so-called Chinese Enlightenment, for their

¹³ In 2004, Wang Xiaobo was selected by Nanfang Daily as one of the six deceased "honorable public intellectuals", along with Yin Haiguang 殷海光, Gu Zhun 顾准, Wang Ruoshui 王若水, Yang Xiaokai 杨小凯, and Huang Wanli 黄万里.

collective goal of modernizing China, Chinese intellectuals who concerned themselves with the national salvation developed great interest in what constitutes modern sexuality. Under the influence of the West, sexual liberation became an important task for cultural and social reformers. The traditional values of female chastity and the Confucian views on sexual relations were under attack. Both male and female writers provoked conservatives with their representation of sexual revolution and individual emancipation. The narratives during this time focused on personal experiences, subjective sentiments, and the representation of the human libido. The increasing emphasis on the self along with strong subjectivity and sexuality features in May Fourth literature. The protagonist of Ding Ling's *The Diary of Miss Sophia* (1928) came to represent a typical sexualized modern woman rebelling against the social mores. But not all writers' subjectivity can be simply interpreted as the promotion of individualism. Under the background of national crisis, sexual desire was associated with nationalism and became more complicated than in Western cultural theory. For example, in his famous short story "Sinking" (1921), Yu Dafu had already portrayed a previously unexplored psychological world full of sexual frustration, shame, depression, and mental instability. Yu Dafu also defied the conventional social mores by describing sexual practices such as masturbation. But his emphasis on private and personal feelings was not merely self-indulgent but combined with nationalism and patriotism during the time of transformation in China. Beneath the need for sexual gratification lies a more profound metaphorical need. The protagonist of "Sinking" is a Chinese student in Japan, just as the author himself. He had a crush on a Japanese girl but was afraid to tell her out of a sense of inferiority. His sexual impotence is a metaphor for Chinese weakness after the fall of Qing Dynasty. As the title of the story

indicates, the protagonist shows his concerns about the sinking of the nation and finally commits suicide. At the end of the story, the protagonist cries out, “O China, my China, you are the cause of my death! ...I wish you could become rich and strong soon! ... Many, many of your children are still suffering.” Thus, self-consciousness as an impotent male from a backward nation makes a strong connection between subjectivity and nationalism, love and revolution, sex and politics.

This linking of sex and politics, at first glance, appears similar to the revolutionary eroticism during Maoist years, when sexual desire and behaviour were channelled into collective, statist goals. Many writers were still struggling between individual love and national revolution during the Yan’an period but national asceticism was established with the Chinese Communist Party’s takeover in 1949. Before the Cultural Revolution, it was already very hard to retain much private space in Chinese writers’ novels. In Yang Mo’s best-known work *The Song of Youth* (1958), she described the sexual relationship between heroine Lin Daojing and her comrade lover Jiang Hua in terms of “comradeship”.

The Cultural Revolution marked the peak of revolutionary passion. Since the Chinese Communist Party’s doctrine treated matters of love and sex as a manifestation of bourgeois individualism, sexual references were eliminated from the cultural forms. Even such vague descriptions of sexual relationships between comradely lovers as appeared in *The Song of Youth* were erased. If sexual liberation is the most important part in sexual modernity, the Cultural Revolution did not leave any space for Chinese intellectuals to linger on this aspect of modern consciousness. At roughly the same time, the West was also experiencing a series of social movements aiming for sexual liberation. Contrary to

this modernity-producing tendency, China was regarded as far behind the Western model of “progress” by the Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s.

2.2 Sexual Modernity in Post-Mao Period

Since Freud identified sexual desire as fundamental to human identity and a force for social change and progress, the image of a sexualized modern person was gradually created in the West. This idea was reinforced by the sexual revolution from the 1960s into the 1970s. As one of the theoretical sources for sexual revolution, Marcuse defined the body as an active and independent agent to fight against its appropriation by capitalism (Larson, “Never,” 428). The underlying hypothesis of Marcuse is that liberation of sexual relationships will lead to liberation of the compulsive, self-restrained capitalist relationship of production. “This aspect of sexual liberation has been integral to ideas of liberation, anti-authority rebellion, and personal pleasure that have informed culture in the United States” (“Never,” 427). But later on sexual promiscuity and rise of hedonism in youth turned the 1960s into a so-called “permissive” time. For western conservatives, hedonism has become the scapegoat to blame many contemporary social problems such as the spread of AIDS, marriage breakdown, single parent families, and so on. For Chinese conservatives these sexual representations are regarded as “spiritual pollution” that comes from western countries such as the United States. In this global context, Chinese intellectuals in the early 1980s began to touch on such taboo subjects as sex and love in keeping with their desire for social responsibility in offering a critique of the Maoist past.¹⁴

¹⁴ Avant-garde and experimental writers who were influenced by the western modern writers also touched on sexual subjects, but they were less concerned about their social responsibilities of their works therefore excluded from my discussion.

Zhang Xianliang's *Half of Man is Woman* and Wang Xiaobo's "The Golden Age Trilogy" are both key examples. Above all, the elimination of sexual themes in the past made the mention of the subject alone a gesture of rebellion. Second, Zhang Xianliang situated sexuality in the social dimension to make a clear connection between sex and politics. To be specific, *Half of Man is Woman* was groundbreaking for its centering of sexuality. It touched on the subjects of sexual desire, the image of a woman's body, and male impotency, which shocked Chinese readers and critics when it was first published in 1985. The novella immediately caused a debate and became an overnight scandal. Regarding sexual content in the story, there were two kinds of critique generally. As Zhou Kefeng summarized (34), some critics praised it for breaking the taboo against the subject of sexuality, and others felt insulted by its vulgar descriptions.¹⁵ Wang Xiaobo caused a sensation by his straightforward sexual descriptions about ten years later in the mid-1990s. But "The Golden Age Trilogy" (1994) did not initiate another round of "highbrow/lowbrow taste" debate among Chinese social and literary critics. Is that because Chinese were getting used to the commodification of sexual pleasure in all kinds of pornography splashing across the television screens and the pirate book market in the age of commercialism? The answer is negative. Merely one year earlier (1993), Jia Pingwa's *The Abandoned Capital* could still trigger the debate surrounding the moral quality of a fiction, or in Chinese words, "品格". Jia Pingwa's novel was even banned for its explicit sexual content by the State Publishing Administration immediately following its publication. That is to say, Chinese critics were still concerned about whether a sex story is obscene or not in the mid-1990s.¹⁶ Since both were startling for erotic theme and

¹⁵ See, for example, Wei Junyi's 韦君宜 "Yiben changxiaoshu yinqi de sikao." 一本畅销书引起的思考 (Thoughts Caused by a Bestselling Book) Literature and Art 文艺报. [Beijing] 28 Dec. 1985

¹⁶ Even in the late 1990s, Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* (1999) was banned for its sexual content.

criticism on a sexually repressive Maoist past, why did Wang Xiaobo and Zhang Xianliang's narratives incur such different reader responses? Why did not Wang Xiaobo cause the same controversy? How can their fictional alter egos Wang Er and Zhang Yonglin fit into the image of a sexualized modern man? In this section I will compare the two writers to answer these questions.

Zhang Xianliang was a victim of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, as is his protagonist Zhang Yonglin in *Half of Man is Woman*. Born in 1936 in Nanjing into an intellectual family, Zhang Xianliang began to write poems from childhood. The frequent references to a wide range of Western and Chinese classics, though off-topic and intrusive most of the time, show the literary education he has received. After his father was arrested and later died in prison, Zhang Xianliang as a young man moved to Ningxia, Gansu Province, to work on a farm. In the Anti-Rightist Campaign launched in 1957, Zhang Xianliang was accused of being a rightist for his poem "Song of the Great Wind" and sent to a labor camp. Before he was officially rehabilitated in 1979, Zhang Xianliang was imprisoned several times. These labor camp experiences were later described in his autobiographical "Love Trilogy", *Lùhuashu (Mimosa)* (1984), *Nanren de yiban shi nüren (Half of Man is Woman)* (1985), and *Xiguan siwang (Getting Used to Dying)* (1989).

In *Half of Man is Woman*, the protagonist Zhang Yonglin is a victim of CCP's Anti-Rightist campaign just as the author himself was. When he is imprisoned in a series of labour camps, he fantasizes about women at nights. Accidentally, he comes across a pretty woman Huang Xiangjiu bathing by a reed pond in the labor camp. Eight years later he encounters the same woman in a State Farm and gets married to her. But he finds on

the wedding night that he cannot consummate the marriage. According to Zhang Yonglin's explanation to his wife:

I think this [impotency] is probably because of long term repression...In the labor reform team, you know, at nights the fellow prisoners have nothing to talk about other than this kind of thing. But I just hold back and try not to think about it, or think about something else; in the single dorm, the situation is the same. When every one was talking about something dirty, I muffled my ears to read books or think over some issues. The repression goes on for such a long time so I lose this ability. (102-103)

In Zhou Kefen's reading of *Half of Man is Woman*, this novella reveals "the chain of events that lead him from political oppression, to the suppression of male sexuality, to the eventual loss of male potency" (2). This is to say, the political oppression throughout the continuous political movements from the late 1950s to the late 1970s results in his impotency. Furthermore, it is a metaphor of the physical and psychological damage done to all Chinese male intellectuals. In this sense, sexuality becomes an important strategy for Zhang Xianliang to criticize the Maoist past and fight against a totalitarian state. He portrayed the Cultural Revolution as a destructive force in the construction of one's sexual and subjective identity. Underlying Zhou Kefen's critique is the premise that sexuality is a transformative political device capable of liberating people. This is the same ideology spread during sexual liberation in the West, especially in the United States.

Revolutionary discourse and Chinese traditional intellectual culture made sexual expressions in early post-Mao period more complicated. Sexual freedom is less associated with a freedom-producing modernity by Chinese intellectuals. There are a very

limited number of Chinese writers who use sexualized stories to embrace western sexual modernity, as is clearly demonstrated in Larson's reading of *Red Azalea*. In Zhang Yonglin's case, his relationship with the past is ambivalent and complex. Although Zhang Yonglin is emasculated by the long-term political movements, he does not dispute the legitimacy of China's political situation. On the contrary, political persecution is taken by Zhang Yonglin as a necessary trial or long ordeal to remould him to finally become a true Marxist (Zhou 3). While condemning long term imprisonment for its physical and psychological damage, Zhang Yonglin is infatuated with the physical labor at the same time. "Labor creates man, so man's primitive nature inclines to physical labor; intense physical labor can activate man's nature that was long submerged by civilization in the subconscious" (3). His seemingly critical but actually adulatory attitude to politics is more clearly shown when he finds his wife is having an affair with a local party leader. I read it as the author's indication of the party's exploitation of Chinese intellectuals. Instead of challenging this exploitation, Zhang Yonglin is more enthusiastic to become part of the political system, because in his view political power provides more chances to have sexual relationships with women. At the end of the story, the protagonist divorces his wife because she cannot understand his political pursuit. "A woman is the most lovable thing on earth, but there is something that is more important. Women will never possess the men they have created" (208). For Zhang Yonglin, political power is something more important and one's sexual identity is subordinate to one's social and political identity. When he encounters political failures, "sex may function as a means for them to show off their manhood, or it becomes a symbol of lost male power...women become the means for them [Chinese intellectuals] to regain power or to compensate for

the loss of actual political power” (Zhou 18). In summary, for Zhang Yonglin and his creator, sexuality is determined by political position—sexual and subjective identity can be damaged by political failure, and also can be regained by political advancement.

Different from Zhang Yonglin’s instrumental use of sex, Wang Er’s sexual intercourse exists for his own benefit. It seems to Chinese readers that unlike Zhang Xianliang’s obsession with Marxist and Confucian intellectual culture, Wang Xiaobo’s sexual descriptions do not engage with any ideology or culture. Both the temporal (the Cultural Revolution) and spatial (Yunnan countryside) dimension appears more as just background, or an open theatre for Wang Xiaobo to exhibit his sexual adventure. Under his pen, the countryside during the political turbulence is turned into a utopia where Wang Er indulges himself in a sexual carnival. Compared to Zhang Yonglin, the image of Wang Er is much closer to the modern construction of human identity during the Western sexual revolution, which put pure, personal sexual pleasure in the center. Then, does Wang Xiaobo embrace this kind of modernity? If Zhang Xianliang’s attitude to sex and woman can be attributed to the traditional Chinese culture,¹⁷ what about Wang Xiaobo?

Certainly Wang Xiaobo and his contemporary intellectuals, including members of the previous generation such as Zhang Xianliang, share the collective memory of a desexualized past. They agree that the Cultural Revolution has had a negative influence on one’s construction of sexual identity, but they differ over sexual morality, ethics, and so on. For Wang Xiaobo, sexual desire is natural, and it is an indispensable part of human nature. In an essay elucidating this point, he said,

¹⁷ For more discussion on how Zhang Xianliang’s attitude to woman is influenced by Chinese traditional culture, see Zhou Kefeng’s Master’s thesis, “Unspoken Desire: Zhang Xianliang’s Autobiographical Trilogy and the Contemporary Chinese Intellectual.”

This book [“The Golden Age Trilogy”] talks a lot about sex. This kind of fiction can easily arouse opposition, and also carries the suspicion of appealing to the readers... But as I recall, I wrote in this way not to seek popularity, nor to appeal to the readers. Instead, it was my reflection on the past. As everyone knows, the 1960s and 1970s in China is a desexualized era. Only in a desexualized era, sex could become the theme of life, just like the same way that food becomes the theme of life in the age of famine. In the ancient philosopher’s words: 食色，性也。¹⁸ Longing for food and love are part of human nature. If they are unattainable, the human nature would be frustrated by these obstacles. (*WXQ* Vol. 2, 63-64)

This point of view appears similar to but much simpler than Freudian sexual theory about the subconscious, repression, defense, sublimation, and so on. It would be rash to establish a direct relationship between Freudian psychology and Wang Xiaobo’s attitude to sex. As is shown in this passage, the resource for Wang Xiaobo to articulate human sexual identity is an ancient Chinese philosopher. It would be ridiculous to conclude that sexual modernity in China emerged thousands of years ago. There is no connection between Wang Xiaobo’s sexuality and western sexual modernity. This simple and natural view on sex is consistent in his fiction. The language he uses to describe sex organ, women’s bodies and sexual activities are always direct and non-emotional, producing a sense of objectivity and honesty. This kind of candor per se is interpreted as a satire of revolutionary hypocrisy. But besides the plain language, another device the author uses is the physical location. Often referring to animals and plants, Wang Xiaobo

¹⁸ This quote is often mistakenly contributed to Mencius. In fact, the quote is from Mencius’ contemporary Gao Zi 告子. It is recorded in “孟子·告子上”. (*Mencius. Gaozi I*). *Chinese Text Project*. Web. 20 Jun. 2011. <<http://ctext.org/mengzi/gaozi-i/zh>>.

takes full advantage of the countryside. As Li Yinhe pointed out (376), almost all sexual scenes in “The Golden Age” take place in natural surroundings. For example:

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. (Perhaps the buffalo had eaten the leaves.) The sunshine in the subtropical dry season had burned my entire body red, leaving me in an agony of burning and itching. My little monk pointed to the sky like an arrow, bigger than ever. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 6)

When I made love to Chen Qingyang, a lizard crawled out of a crack in the wall and crossed the ground in the middle of the room, moving intermittently. Then suddenly startled, it fled quickly, disappearing into the sunshine outside the door. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 16)

Chen Qingyang rode my body, up and down; behind her back was a broad expanse of white fog. It didn't feel that cold anymore, and the sound of buffalo bells floated all around. Since Thai people here didn't pen their buffaloes, they would ramble at daybreak. Hung with wooden bells, the buffaloes would make clunking sounds as they walked. A hulk suddenly turned up beside us, with dewdrops dangling from a hairy ear. It was a white buffalo who turned its head and stared at us with one of its eyes. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 31)

The most frequent adjectives that critics use to assess Wang Xiaobo's sexual descriptions are "pure", "clean", and "natural"¹⁹. But a monograph on the subject of physiological hygiene can be as clean. What really distinguishes Wang Xiaobo from other post-Mao writers who focus on sexual topics is his detachment from any established paradigm, philosophy, or ideology in writing about the Maoist past.²⁰ First, sexual intercourse under Wang Xiaobo's pen is non-instrumental. Second, he did not engage with the revolutionary discourse to write against Maoist ideology. But how can one hide in his sex carnival and at the same time revolt against the political system that he escapes from? The key to the question is parody.

2.3. Parody of Revolutionary Paradigms

Wang Xiaobo's stories about the Cultural Revolution make readers laugh, which is a lost quality for a long time in Chinese modern literature. In his essay "Cong *Huangjin shidai* tan xiaoshuo yishu." 从《黄金时代》谈小说艺术(Talking about the Art of Fiction Through *The Golden Age*), he writes,

black humor is part of my disposition, it is inborn. The characters in my fiction always laugh and never cry. I think it is more interesting. The readers who like my fiction told me they laugh from the first page to the end...Of course some authors think crying is more touching, the characters under their pens never laugh, and always cry. (WXQ Vol. 2, 64)

¹⁹ See, for example, Wang Xiaobo's wife and sexologist Li Yinhe's 李银河 "Wang Xiaobo bi xiade xing." 王小波笔下的性("Sex under Wang Xiaobo's Pen.")(373-384).

²⁰ In post-Mao era, especially in 1990s, a writer who still engages with ideology such as Maoism, Marxism, or Confucianism in his fiction would probably appear much more heterodox. Before "The Golden Age", Jia Pingwa's *The Abandoned Capital* already showed how erotic desire can project some kind of escapism and cynicism without referring to ideologies such as Maoism and Marxism. After Wang Xiaobo, the sensual stories of body writers such as Wei Hui have nothing to do with the Maoist revolutionary discourse in the age of commercialism, therefore they are not discussed here.

It is true that the irregular deaths, homicides or suicides, in the Cultural Revolution offer Wang Xiaobo extraordinary materials to exert his talent for black humor. In *Love in the Time of Revolution*, the sixteen-year old Wang Er sits in a tree to watch fights between different factions of Red Guards in the fall of 1967. He witnesses a student pierced by a spear from front to back, and the student lies on the ground in excruciating pain. Wang Er's response confounds the readers' expectation:

He rotates on the ground, round and round, crying in "er..er.." I begin to feel cold in such a hot summer. I am willing to help him but there is nothing I can do. So I just think: "Look, he already can't pronounce the consonant now, only the vowel." Later I recalled that according to the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*, [the Tang Dynasty rebel leader] An Lushan 安禄山 can do the barbarian whirl dance²¹, it probably looked like this. The book said, An Lushan can do the barbarian whirl dance holding two bronze pots. Although the person in front of me doesn't have any pots in his hands, he does have a spear stuck through his body, so it looks like he has four hands, which can compare with An Lushan in its value as spectacle. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 205)

Another example is in his novella *Years Like Flowing Water*²². In 1966, the middle school student Wang Er witnessed the intellectual Mr. He's jumping from a building out of despair. Wang Er describe Mr. He's scene of death as something spectacular: "his head hit the cement ground, the brains are everywhere. The landing point of his head as the center, within five meters there are something like fresh pig lungs all over." Because he

²¹ Barbarian whirl dance *Huxuanwu* 胡旋 is a kind of ethnic minority's dance imported to Tang Dynasty through the Silk Road.

²² *Sishui liunian* 似水流年 in *Wang Xiaobo QuANJI diliujuan* Vol. 6. Kunming: Yunnan People's Press.

died in such a spectacular way that everyone in the city came to watch the scene, “no matter what other people say about him (and other counter-revolutionary academic authorities and Guomindang bureaucrats), my respect for him can never be shaken” (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 106).

However, black humour is not enough to summarize why Wang Xiaobo makes readers laugh. The author not only makes fun of the taboo of death, but also of the revolutionary taboo, including various Maoist paradigms and revolutionary rituals. Without these established paradigms, Wang Xiaobo cannot accomplish his satire of Maoist ideology through parody. In other words, parody connects Maoist ideology with his satire. The following excerpt from “Love in the Time of Revolution” is a typical example showing how Wang Xiaobo turns historical violence into a historical farce:

In the spring of 1967...everyone was attacking each other...At the beginning those university students fought like primitives, at that time my conclusion was that the solution to world affairs was fists, so I need to improve my fighting skills; then they started to pick up stones [to throw at each other]. By the fall, I thought the level of their weapons could reach that of the Ancient Rome period: there were armour, sword, spear, catapult, fortification and military tower. It was at that time that I joined their fights as an engineer, because I saw that the military level of one faction was too low. Their armour was just two three-ply boards on each side of their bodies with posters of Chairman Mao on them. When they fought, they looked like a crowd of turtle men on their feet. The spears in their hands were even worse, they were just some iron pipes obliquely cut

by the handsaws on one ends...but I only helped for two months because in the winter their fights were upgraded to the firearms age...when it was getting close to the end of winter the authorities stopped them because they proceeded too fast. If not stopped, they would be throwing atomic bombs at each other very soon. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 203-204)

In the remaining part of chapter two, I am going to demonstrate how Wang Xiaobo uses parody to satirize Maoist paradigms and revolutionary rituals such as the revolutionary terms “the great friendship between comrade lovers”, “the communist future”, the “confession”, the “denunciation meeting”, the “recall one’s sufferings in the bad old society meeting”, the “thought reform”, and the revolutionary logic of beauty.

2.3.1. The “Great Friendship” in the “Golden Age”

The title at first glance is invested with a utopian dimension. In their prime at 21 and 26, Wang Er and Chen Qingyang are indeed in their golden ages, just as the young regime. But the very idea of “The Golden Age” is just another revolutionary hypocrisy. The founding of a new regime in 1949 did not fulfill its promise of a brave new world. Instead, in Maoist China further millions of people died of unrelenting political campaigns and famines. Mockery of the noble ideal is in stark contrast with revolutionary heroism. Qin Liyan juxtaposes Liang Xiaosheng’s *Snowstorm Tonight* and Wang Xiaobo’s “The Golden Age” to highlight Wang Xiaobo’s heterodoxy. As a former *zhiqing* himself, Liang insists that although having to endure all kinds of hardships in the best time of their age, *zhiqings* should not be regretful because they devoted their youths to a noble goal for the whole nation. Wang Xiaobo’s recounting of the private sexual memory

of the Cultural Revolution is an alternative narrative in the 1990s in the sense that he defied the idea of the Golden Age. Making it as a title, Wang Xiaobo creates a utopian sexual idealization to escape from the political movements.

The so-called great friendship is also a parody of Maoist ideology. At the very beginning, Wang Er was sent down to Yunnan to be “re-educated”, and then he met the doctor Chen Qingyang who was also from Beijing. Wang Er had a chance to know Chen Qingyang because Chen was concerned about the rumor that she is damaged goods, a married woman sleeping with some other man. Behaving like a hooligan, Wang Er suggested having sexual intercourse to her to fulfill the rumor so that she would not be bothered by the rumor any more. Therefore the sexual theme is quickly established from the beginning of the story. As the story developed, Wang Er successfully fulfills his purpose under the cloak of the “great friendship”. This idea of “great friendship” and the common belief of communism between the revolutionaries were promoted as the very basis of the marriage in Maoist ideology.

2.3.2. “Confession” and “Denunciation Meeting”

In “The Golden Age”, after the two protagonists Wang Er and Chen Qingyang are caught for their “illegal sexual intercourse”, they go through all the “denunciation meetings” and were requested to write their “confessions” to the authorities. In this process, Wang Er turned his “crimes” into a series of pornographic stories to cater to the officials’ voyeurism. “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 that I would only write about how bad we were.”(34) It is important to

note that there were strict patterns in all revolutionary texts in the Maoist years, such as the confession, self-criticism, party membership application, big character poster, and so on. Wang Er did not follow the pattern but filled his confession with sexual details. It turns out that the cadres in the Public Security Office are satisfied and request more and more details. Wang Er was assigned to a small hotel to do nothing but write sexual confessions “like a professional writer” (19). Thus the relationship between the official and the criminal becomes the reader and the writer. The officials are so pleased to read these pornographic works until they read the other female protagonist Chen Qingyang’s “confession”. In her confession, she just admits that she fell in love with Wang Er, and that is why they have sex. This “confession” ends all the interrogation because it is no longer funny to the officials.

The denunciation meeting is another place where he exhibits his political circus. Under his pen, the cruel denunciation meeting often becomes theatrical performance, or a political show to the political leaders and local people. The so-called denunciation meeting is in fact a public humiliation of the people on the stage. When Chen Qingyang was on the stage, the physical torture sexually arouses the men and becomes a source of pleasure:

The denunciation trips got started like this: The traditional entertainment in the area was denouncing damaged goods. In the busy season for farming, everyone was exhausted. And the team leader would say, Let’s have some entertainment tonight—denouncing damaged goods. But how they entertained, I never got the chance to see. When they denounced damaged goods, they always kicked the bachelors out. Besides, those

damaged goods usually had faces as dark as the bottom of a wok and baggy breasts that drooped way down. I didn't want to see them anyway... I wanted to escape to the mountains right away, but Chen Qingyang didn't want to come with me. She said she was obviously the most beautiful of the damaged goods denounced locally. When she was denounced, people came to see her from several production teams nearby, which made her very proud. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 37)

The rope that bound her was like a straitjacket. Now the curves of her body were completely on display. She noticed all the jutting out at the crotches of the men at the meeting. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 38)

These scenes highlight the absurdity of the whole idea of “denunciation meeting” in the Yunnan countryside. Wang Er and Chen Qingyang were in fact not supposed to go to these so-called errands, but the Public Security Group could not find enough people for the political show so they just throw Wang and Chen into a tractor at will with other people branded as criminals. Criticizing the so-called corrupted lifestyle thus becomes part of the political circus. But Wang Er and Chen Qingyang undermine these public humiliations by showing no repentance in either confessions or denunciation meetings.

2.3.3. “Recall one’s Sufferings in the Bad Old Days”

Recalling one’s sufferings in the bad old days, or, *yikufan*, 忆苦饭 is another revolutionary ritual with a strict format. These reports start with how miserable it was for the poor people to live in the old society and end with how great it is for us now because we can have food to eat. But in *Love in the Time of Revolution*, Wang Er heard an

extraordinary report on the “bad old days”. To summarize, one New Year’s Eve (this kind of story always happens in a heavily snowy weather), there was no food at home so a boy and his sister went out to beg for food. When her sister saw a frozen sweet potato on the ground, she picked it up and swallowed it in a rush. It turns out to be body waste looking like sweet potato. This is not the end of the story. To follow the typical process of this kind of story, the political instructor of Wang Er, X Haiying, showed her “political progressiveness” by concluding that the feces must have been excreted by an evil landlord to persecute the hungry peasants. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 274) In this way, the author retells a serious revolutionary ritual as a farce.

2.3.4. “Thought Reform” and Revolutionary Logic of Beauty

The so-called thought reform is also an indispensable part of Maoist ideology. In *Love in the Time of Revolution*, when Wang Er worked in a tofu factory in 1973, he was suspected of having drawn obscene graffiti in public toilet. Therefore he is interrogated by a young female Youth League cadre, X Haiying. In the interrogation, Wang Er is coerced into a sexual relationship with her and to satisfy X Haiying’s sexual fantasy of being raped by a “Japanese devil”. For Wang Er, during the time of revolution, there was a complete revolutionary logic of having food referring to dichotomy of old/new society, and it was similar with ideas of erotic love and beauty. There were only two types of erotic love, the revolutionary one and non-revolutionary one. The revolutionary love originates from the great friendship between comrades, and the non-revolutionary erotic love must be the result of class enemies and the bourgeois corruption. Since neither was the case for X Haiying and Wang Er, the only way to have sexual intercourse, as far as X

Haiying concerned, was to imagine herself as a heroine caught by Japanese soldiers and Wang Er as a cruel Japanese devil, just like in the films.²³ This kind of sexual intercourse must involve sexual abuse and torture, which is sexually arousing to X Haiying. In this way, X Haiying turned the so-called thought reform into a sadomasochist activity. She ordered Wang Er to bind her to the bed with ropes and pinch her nipples so she could imagine being tortured (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 278). When they had the role play, X Haiying always closed her eye and inhaled loudly, as if she was ready to endure the pain (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 286). Even as a child, after she saw the revolutionary soldiers caught and tortured by the enemies in the film, she would order the boy in the neighbourhood to tie her in a tree. She would imagine the situation she was caught and shouted in fortitude: Beat me! Rape me! Kill me as you want! But I will never surrender!” (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 278-9) Because of the revolutionary logic of eating and having erotic love, Wang Er enjoyed neither activity during the time of revolution.

Next, Wang Er bewilders the readers with his seemingly stringent deduction again. In the time of revolution, it was prohibited to talk about beautiful girls in the public, so the boys invented a lot of slang. For example, if a girl's face is beautiful, then she is *pan liang* 盘亮 (pretty face). When Wang Er is asked by X Haiying whether she is beautiful, he falters very hard, because according to the revolutionary logic of beauty, the answer to this question can lead to very complicated ethical issues.

²³ The name of the film is not mentioned in the fiction. But I suspect the heroine X Haiying imagined is the national heroine presented in the film *Zhao Yiman* 赵一曼 (1950). Zhao Yiman (1905-1936) was a mid-rank political commissar in the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army during the anti-Japanese War. She was caught by Japanese forces in 1935 and tortured. She successfully escaped when she was sent to hospital but was captured again and executed in 1936. Her story was adapted by Sha Meng 沙蒙 in the film *Zhao Yiman* by as propaganda.

1. Suppose that we are on the revolutionary side and our opponent is on the counter-revolutionary side, then no matter how she looks in actuality, we cannot admit that she is beautiful, or we are corrupted.
2. Suppose that we are on the counter-revolutionary side and our opponent is on the revolutionary side, then if she is beautiful, we should admit it in order to rape her. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 231)

Based on this logic, Wang Er has no idea how to answer X Haiying's question.

In this chapter, I have enumerated established paradigms of the interplay between love and revolution fostered in the revolutionary discourse since the May Fourth literature till the early post-Mao literature. All the authors I have chosen to compare with Wang Xiaobo—Yu Dafu, Ding Ling, Yang Mo, Liang Xiaosheng, Zhang Xianliang—are considerably influenced by their social-political backgrounds. Their works have very specific relationships with their times. But this is not to say that all works produced in a certain time are the same. Every above-mentioned author has their unique way of dealing with texts, and the same is true of Wang Xiaobo. Among all the artists who challenge the Maoist ideology in the post-Mao era, Wang Xiaobo's tactics are distinct from his contemporaries. In chapter three, I will discuss these distinctions beyond the Maoist ideology.

CHAPTER THREE

Pornography Transcending History

Wang Xiaobo's "The Golden Age Trilogy" is seen to be devoted to the history of Cultural Revolution. The first and the most recognized story, "The Golden Age", is set in the early years of the Cultural Revolution, though it is told by an older narrator after the event. The title of the second story "Love in the Time of Revolution" also establishes the temporal dimension of its background, and again it is told by an older Wang Er, who is forty-two years old as he narrates. In the last novella, "My Yin and Yang Spheres", the narrator lives in the Beijing of the 1990s, when the major part of the story happens, but Wang Er still takes some time to recall what happened from 1973 to 1974. The temporal background of "The Golden Age Trilogy" attracts critiques exploring Wang Xiaobo's deviation from Maoist ideology. For example, Wendy Larson, Huang Yibing²⁴黄亦兵 and Wu Jin²⁵ all put Wang Xiaobo with other writers in the context of deviation from Maoist ideology. Larson compares Wang Xiaobo with Mang Ke²⁶ with regard to their non-revolutionary sense of countryside life: "The two main characters of these novels—Maodi²⁷ in Mangke's *Yeshi* 野事 (Wild Things), and Wang Er in *The Golden Age*—are each a kind of anti-Lei Feng. Both stories challenge the revolutionary discourse of the countryside, not only in ideology and theme, but also as it is experienced subjectively"

²⁴Huang Yibing, literary critic, associate professor in East Asian Languages and Cultures department, Connecticut College. *Contemporary Chinese Literature: From the Cultural Revolution to the Future*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

²⁵ Wu Jin received his PhD in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Oregon with his dissertation *The Voices of Revolt: Zhang Chengzhi, Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo*, University of Oregon, 2005.

²⁶ Mang Ke 芒克, one of the Misty Poets, co-founder of the underground literary journal *Today*. He published the novel *Yeshi* 野事 (Wild Things), Hunan Literature and Art Press, 1994.

²⁷ The protagonist of *Yeshi*.

(119). Huang Yibing put Wang Xiaobo with three other “Bastards of the Cultural Revolution”: “The four authors whom I study in this book each stand as a mixture of ‘new man,’ ‘orphan of history,’ and ‘cultural bastard’: Duo Duo, an underground seer-poet; Wang Shuo, a ‘hooligan’ writer; Zhang Chengzhi, an old Red Guard and new cultural heretic; and Wang Xiaobo, a defiant yet melancholy chronicler of a dystopian modern world.” (17) Wu Jin draws upon the theoretical model of suppression/revolt to explore Wang Xiaobo with two other authors: “Although Zhang Chengzhi, Wang Shuo, and Wang Xiaobo have different thematic emphases and writing styles, they share a stance of purposeful alienation from the mainstream ideologies of post-Mao China” (1). The suppression/revolt model causes contradictory comments from the critics—some praise Wang Xiaobo’s disobedience to totalitarian government while others denounce his castrated rebellious spirit. To explain, Wang Xiaobo’s detachment is regarded as a compromise to political oppression and an escape from reality. Yang Jian’s comment is typical in this kind of view,

the first half of the novel is brilliant while the second half is eclipsed. In the part of Yunnan countryside...the erotic love between Wang Er and Chen Qingyang is the resistance to a time of totalitarianism. In the part in the city, Wang Er and Chen Qingyang turn into ordinary people...the novel does not explain why the protagonists become so mediocre...One might say that Wang Xiaobo is always wavering between valiant social engagement and cynical detachment. (447-448)

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, the author’s parody makes either praise or criticism plausible. Wang Er’s pornographic confessions, his masochistic

submission to youth league secretary X Haiying, and the public's sexual arousal by Chen Qingyang's physical tortures on the stage ridicule the seemingly authoritative "confession", "thought reform" and "denunciation meeting", but it can also be interpreted as submission to power. After all, when Wang Er and Chen Qingyang meet twenty years later in Beijing, Wang Er is still a hooligan on the street without a job, and Chen Qingyang has a better-off life as a doctor without changing any political institutions. Both protagonists more or less try to play by the rules and accept what time and the state have done to them. We do not find the fervor and anger prevalent in the stories of violence in the early 1980s scar literature, nor do we find the eager political engagement of Zhang Xianliang's protagonist. Likewise, the title of the novella can be either interpreted as mocking the whole idea of Maoist Golden Age, or as a regression and escape to an agrarian society to enjoy primitive sexual desire. For critics like Yang Jian, who does not tolerate compromises of any kind and seeks a true fight against a totalitarian regime, sexual themes and parody are not effective or serious enough.

But the shortcoming of this critical approach is to treat the Cultural Revolution in Wang Xiaobo's fiction merely as a temporal background. In fact, it is not enough to read "The Golden Age" as an erotic story that happened in the Cultural Revolution. The temporal dimension in Wang Xiaobo's historical fiction is more complicated with regard to its relation to history. To be specific, Wang Xiaobo would rather play his own games with his texts than reflect, rectify, or project history. Therefore, I argue that history in "The Golden Age Trilogy" is not the popular history that Chinese readers try to revisit in their memories. Just as in the future world in Wang Xiaobo's *The Silver Age* and the Tang Dynasty in his *The Bronze Age*, he creates his own temporal background in "The Golden

Age Trilogy”. Therefore Wang Xiaobo’s texts are not only limited to the discussion of how to compose (for writers) or criticize (for critics) the historical fiction the right way in relation to history. What really fascinates Wang Xiaobo is not resistance of any kind but reflection on the conditions of existence under that power, which gives Wang Xiaobo’s historical fiction a transcendent quality. For Wang Xiaobo, sex is something natural rather than a social and political dimension of human life, and his stories centralize the question “what is sex in an ascetic society” instead of “how repressive was Maoist ideology regarding sex”. Therefore, other than Maoist ideology, Wang Xiaobo’s family background, his attitude to the intellectuals, the influence he had from the foreign literature, and his personal vision of life are all very important to understand his fiction.

Wang Xiaobo’s father Wang Fangming was a well-known logician who once worked in national Ministry of Education in the early 1950s. But Wang Fangming was deprived of Communist Party membership and labelled as political dissident for his criticism on the reshuffle of higher institutions in 1952.²⁸ According to Wang Xiaobo’s mother Song Hua, the name Xiaobo, meaning “little wave”, was given to her son in memory of this incident (Ai, “Chengzhang,” 162-194). Wang Fangming was not rehabilitated until 1979. The family background and Wang Xiaobo’s experience in the countryside as a *zhiquing* are important for him to share a common historical view with his contemporaries among the intellectuals. It was a time of history when knowledge and intellectuals suffered; however, in his fictional works Wang Xiaobo does not speak for a generation of intellectuals. He takes a very different approach than other *zhiquing* writers who grew up in a revolutionary culture. The *zhiquing* image he represents has very little in

²⁸ For more details on Wang Fangming Incident, see the chapter “My Good Friend Wang Fangming” in Li Xin’s 李新 memoir, *Liushi de suiyue: Li Xin huiyilu* 流逝的岁月：李新回忆录 (*The Past Time: Li Xin’s Memoir*). Shanxi People’s Press. 2008.

common with the prevalent one. In a horrible political circumstance, Wang Er cares most about sex. His behavioural code and logic is strange for his time. He neither supports the CCP's policy nor engages himself with social reform or political pursuits. In summary, Wang Er is an image that is not supposed to be there according to his time and circumstance. This *zhiquing* image is constant from the very beginning of Wang Xiaobo's writing career. In the short story "Ma Danding",²⁹ one of the earliest works he wrote in the 1970s, although the writing skills are much simpler than his 1990s works, the anti-hero approach is consistent. The protagonist Ma Danding is a good-for-nothing young man who pretends to be diligent only in front of the local peasants. For the sent-down youth Ma Danding, the time in the countryside is boring. "Why is he not happy? Because there is nothing cheerful waiting for him: not today, not tomorrow, and maybe not forever" (47). The only fun that Ma Danding can think of is to tell lies to the local peasants, not doing any good or harm to them. In reality, of course, there were young men with passion and sincere political belief who went to the countryside to be "re-educated by the poor and lower-middle peasants", and there were other young men who were unwillingly sent down and desperately wanted to go back to cities. But in the 1970s or even later in the 1980s, no other *zhiquing* writer would present a lazy young man to show his "political backwardness". More popular is the political adherence and innocence we find in Liang Xiaosheng's "no regrets for our youth" theme³⁰. In this sense, Wang Xiaobo himself is, like his protagonists, someone who does not care about his times and social environment. He would rather write for himself than on behalf of the intellectuals or the people and nation as it was in the Cultural Revolution and the 1980s. This is what Dai

²⁹ The title is added to the original manuscript by the editor when it is first published until 1998.

³⁰ A prevalent interpretation of Liang Xiaosheng's "Jinye you baofengxue", as pointed out by Qin Liyan, is that the author promotes *zhiquing*'s heroism during the Cultural Revolution. His theme is summarized in the phrase "qingchun wuhui" 青春无悔 (no regrets for youth).

Jinhua means by “anti-populism” in her comment on Wang Xiaobo’s attitude in fiction writing (Dai 288). For Wang Xiaobo, writing is a highly individual choice. He bluntly declares that he writes for the few who can understand his fiction, rather than to enlighten the masses or make himself popular in a more commercialized popular culture market. In his essay “Cong *Huangjinshidai* tan xiaoshuo yishu.” 从《黄金时代》谈小说艺术 (Talking about Art of Fiction Through *The Golden Age*), he identifies his fiction as “serious literature”:

Nowadays the size of the audience for serious literature is becoming smaller...[Since fiction] is becoming a high-brow art, it will lose some readers, including those who want to be morally educated, those who seek political metaphor, those who are sexually repressed and thus seek a release...Only the genuine readers will stay. Fiction will also lose some authors. Some will go to do business, or write scripts for TV series. Only the genuine authors will stay. I think that is a good thing. (*WXQ* Vol.6 63)

But strangely, he is remembered by the public as a liberal thinker and a public intellectual in China. How can his erotic Cultural Revolution narrative be anti-populist and at the same time speak to a generation of intellectuals and the reading public? How does his attitude to the intellectual’s social responsibility to the public influence his fiction? Why does his narrative on a period of traumatic history speak to the young generation born in the post-Mao period? The first section of this chapter is going to address these questions.

Writing non-populist historical fiction, Wang Xiaobo does not write against the history of Cultural Revolution like other authors who use the first person narrative. To most authors who have experienced Maoism, the past serves as a solid historical

background which cannot and should not be fabricated. Therefore most authors take the realistic, or more specifically, critical realistic approach in composing historical fiction. But Wang Xiaobo takes an approach standing between realism and experimentalism in relation to history. In the one extreme of realism, writers such as Zhang Xianliang and Yu Luojin³¹ 遇罗锦 are keen to tell the readers with their fiction what really happened to “I”, how “I” was badly and unfairly treated.³² In the other extreme of experimentalism, writers such as Ma Yuan explicitly use “Fabrication” (虚构) as one of his fiction’s title, to convince the readers not to believe his story. In the beginning of this short story, Ma Yuan writes, “My underlying meaning is probably that I am a good writer, or I am the only good writer who writes in Chinese. This makes me sound over-confident. Conceited? Who knows!” “Of course I write about the life and death of the people of my kind, write about some ways to live and die. Of course I use my own way to fabricate all these things. I probably do this to prove that I am an extraordinary writer, who knows?” (344-345) In the preface he writes for Gao Xingjian’s Cultural Revolution narrative *One Man’s Bible* (1999), Liu Zaifu expresses his concern for both realist and experimentalist approaches:

The shortcoming of realism is that it is always floating in the surface of reality and cannot enter reality’s deeper layers, cannot get away from such

³¹ The author of *Yige dongtian de Tonghua* 一个冬天的童话 (A Chinese Winter’s Tale). This autobiography recounts the author’s marriage and her brother’s death during the Cultural Revolution.

³² In this thesis, I am using the word realism in its broad and narrow sense. The broad sense of realism emerges from the classic Ancient Greek art, meaning the imitation or the literal copy of the world. Thus, it requires art to represent the society and nature as objective and true as possible, without always realizing the conflict between the representation and the fact. For the cases of Zhang Xianliang and Yu Luojin, I am using this sense. The narrow sense of realism is a concept opposed to the literary romanticism in French literature. It breaks with the romantic exaltation and the emphasis on imagination. Balzac and Tolstoy’s fiction are considered as the peak of realism. I will use this sense when discussing Wang Xiaobo. For more clarifications on realism, see “the Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship” in Rene Wellek’s *Concepts of Criticism* (222-255).

writing modes as accusation, exposure, and complaining. This writing approach was very popular in the early 1980s in mainland China. In the late 1980s and 1990s, mainland writers were not satisfied with this approach and many avant-garde writers began to redefine history and rewrite historical stories. These writers got rid of the mediocrity of ‘reflecting reality’ and experimentalist writers showed their talents. However, “History” under their pens gives people a sense of ‘fabrication’. This ‘fabrication’ afterwards leads to hollowness in their works, thus avoiding the world of reality, and lacking profound reflection and criticism of reality. Correspondingly, their fiction lacks sufficient reflection and revelation of human nature. It seems that Gao Xingjian must have realized the shortcomings of the two aforementioned approaches, therefore he finds a way of his own.

Wang Xiaobo follows a similar path in the sense that he has replaced seriousness with his absurd logic and black humor, yet his Cultural Revolution narratives do not go as far as other avant-garde fiction. Then, what kind of approach does Wang Xiaobo take to fulfill his realist or non-realist historical fiction? What are his writing resources? These are questions I am going to explore in the second section in this chapter.

As mentioned earlier, critics have already detected Wang Xiaobo’s distancing himself from political conflict. Larson has even taken a step further to identify two strategies that Wang Xiaobo uses—recounting the story from a detached point in the future and the aging of the characters (119). Wang Xiaobo admitted the influence he had from Marguerite Duras’s *The Lover* (1984), which is a story also told by an aging narrator

looking back. With the help of his essays, I am going to speculate on Wang Xiaobo's writing sources and find evidence in his fiction. What's more, the final section of this chapter is going to demonstrate how Wang Xiaobo's personal vision on the body and life influence his historical fiction.

3.1. Wang Er: A Good-for-Nothing Image

Wang Er is a good-for-nothing *zhiqing*. In "The Golden Age", he seduces Chen Qingyang into an affair under the cloak of the great friendship; in *Love in the Time of Revolution*, he is a "politically backward" young man who need to be re-educated by the youth league secretary; in *My Yin and Yang Spheres*, he works and lives in the basement of a hospital in Beijing, suffering from impotence. Readers do not see in Wang Er the elitism of Zhang Xianliang's alter ego Zhang Yonglin. For Zhang Yonglin, intellectuals should be respected because they are the backbone of the nation, which is consistent with Confucian intellectual culture. Chinese intellectuals were eager to be used by the state so they could retain their privileged status as ideological legislators for society. In Wang Xiaobo's view, it is the traditional intellectual culture that results in their misfortune in Maoist years, since any ideology or belief can be abused by the state to persecute its dissidents, including those who produce this ideology. Wang Xiaobo's comment on intellectuals' narcissism, at first glance, is similar to the anti-intellectualism that Wang Shuo promotes. Wang Shuo admits that he cannot tolerate the intellectuals' monopolization of ideology and culture. In an interview, Wang Shuo directly borrowed language from Maoist anti-intellectual discourse to attack the intellectuals:

The theme of my works...is to represent that ‘the lowly are most intelligent; the elite are most ignorant.’ Because I have not studied in any university, and did not walk on the romantic road of revolution, I have had enough of the intellectuals. I cannot bear this. A vulgar person like me is always under the intellectuals. Their all-pervasive superiority, their control of the value system of the whole society, and the insistence on their sense of values as the criterion, all these make it very difficult for “vulgar people” like us to assert ourselves. Only by overthrowing them can we have a new life. (1993, 65)

We can imagine that Zhang Xianliang would definitely be Wang Shuo’s target. Then, what kind of intellectual would be Wang Xiaobo’s target? Opposing the intellectuals’ identifying themselves as spokesmen for the state, Wang Xiaobo writes in “Zhishifenzi de boxing.” 知识分子的不幸 (the Misfortune of Intellectuals) that “Chinese humanistic intellectuals oblige themselves to take responsibility for the nation, and always want to make up something for the mass to believe in. The peculiarity of this kind of notion is that, they want to play the role of priests, theologists, and even God (in Chinese parlance, Sage)” (31).

But this is not to say that Wang Xiaobo promotes anti-intellectualism as Wang Shuo does. In fact, his criticism of the intellectuals has nothing to do with the once prevalent notion in Maoist China that physical labor is sacred and mental work is inferior. On the contrary, Wang Xiaobo overtly promotes intelligence over stupidity in his essays. In his fiction, it is important to note that Wang Xiaobo does represent one kind of intellectual image—the counter-revolutionary academic authority. The fate of this kind of

intellectual is usually miserable, such as Mr. He and Old Mr. Liu in his *Years Like Flowing Water*,³³ and Mr. Li in *My Ying and Yang World*. Mr. He committed suicide by jumping from a building; Old Mr. Liu was physically abused by the Red Guards; Mr. Li burned up all the Tangut script rubbings he kept and developed Alzheimer's in his fifties. These intellectuals are depicted as only interested in knowledge itself rather than becoming moral elites. For example, Mr. Li in *My Ying and Yang World* was trained to be a Russian language expert in the early 1950s for the national need. But with the Sino-Soviet diplomatic relationship getting worse and worse in the late 1950s, Mr. Li lost his job and could only translate documents to make a living. Apart from knowing Russian, Mr. Li recognized any language that looked like Chinese characters, including Tangut, Khitan script, and Jurchen script. The Cultural Revolution made Mr. Li's situation worse but he enjoyed reading Tangut language in his spare time. He did not think about what he can do with it at all, nor did he think about publishing his achievements after he understood it. The reason that he wanted to read Tangut language is because no one else could understand it. So if he could, he would be very happy. Wang Er could not understand Mr. Li's words when he was young. He again tried to convince Mr. Li with his absurd logic:

There are a lot of Russians, French and Chinese people who tried to understand this [Tangut language] but failed. He [Mr. Li] thinks it proves that he is smarter than anybody else, but I think it proves that there is something wrong with him. I proved this point with the following arguments: Mr. Li has accomplished something that no one could, this is not a problem. It proves that he is different from anyone else, this is also

³³ *Sishui liunian* 似水流年 in *Wang Xiaobo Quanjī Vol. 6*. Kunming: Yunnan People's Press.

not a problem. But whether this kind of difference is intelligence or idiocy cannot be decided yet. In this case, the minority should be subordinate to the majority. If everyone says you are smart, you are smart, if everyone says you are an idiot, you are an idiot. Apparently, people who think he is an idiot will be the majority. After listening to my arguments, Mr. Li couldn't respond. Later he did not argue with me. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 311)

But when Wang Er becomes impotent in his forties, he begins to empathize with Mr. Li. For Wang Er, both of them are disempowered in a certain way and enter the world of Yin. Translating the French erotic fiction *The Story of O*³⁴ in his spare time, he finally understands why Mr. Li gave up his job for the Tangut language. He translates the story with great care, refines on the wording again and again because he “believes the author of that fiction has extraordinary talent, and also because this book cannot be published [in China]. If a book can be published, then ‘they’ [the translators in the Yang World] will also try to translate it, and fight with each other to do this thing for payment. But if the translating cannot pay the translator, nor can it be published, if we don't do it, who else will?” (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 322) After Wang Er's wife Xiao Sun reads his manuscript, she applauds Wang Er's literary talents yet is confused at the same time: “why do you choose this book to translate? Even a gynecologist like me feels ashamed to read this. Who can possibly publish it?” Wang Er responds later, “regarding a book, you only need to say if it is written or translated well. What do you need to feel ashamed of?” (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 323)

It becomes clearer to the readers that Wang Xiaobo's criticism of the intellectuals is totally different from that of Wang Shuo. Wang Shuo does not distinguish different

³⁴ *The Story of O* (*Histoire d'O*) was an erotic novel by French author Anne Desclos under the pen name Pauline Réage. Writing about sexual dominance and submission as its theme, the book caused controversy and speculation on the real author. The English edition was published by The Random House Publishing Group in 1965.

types of intellectuals and target them as a whole, while Wang Xiaobo shows awe for human knowledge and the true intellectuals in his mind. In his essay “Wo weishenme yao xiezu.” 我为什么要写作 (Why I Write), Wang Xiaobo maintains that most people would seek advantage and avoid disadvantage for their own interests. But there are always people who do not follow the mass. He further concludes that the development of human civilization is exactly for these people who do not follow the mass. He deems that he has the talent to write fiction so he would not change his career (*WXQ* Vol. 2, 51-54).

In another essay “Wo de jingshenjiayuan.” 我的精神家园 (My Spiritual Garden), he reiterates this idea by citing Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Thorny Road of Honour*: “The career of the humanities is a path of burning thorns, and all kinds of sages have been walking on it” (*WXQ* Vol. 2, 223). This quote also indicates that Wang Xiaobo differs from Wang Shuo over populism. Calling himself vulgar, Wang Shuo integrates himself into the mass to be more confident when he attacks the intellectuals. In contrast, Wang Xiaobo identifies his fiction as non-popular literature. Responding to criticism of the erotic content in his fiction, he has to state again and again in his essays that artists are not supposed to assume the social responsibility of moralizing to the mass, because in that case, writers will have to avoid all possible bad influences to meet the needs of all readers, or even give up their intelligence to cater for the mass. In short, what Wang Xiaobo opposes is rather moral preaching than intellectualism, stupidity than populism.

However, if Wang Xiaobo does not attach himself to the masses when he satirizes the ideological or moral spokesmen, why is he remembered by the popular media as a public intellectual after he died? My answer is that Wang Xiaobo serves the expected role of public intellectual in the late 1990s. The popularization of Wang Xiaobo’s works

involves explanations about the changing role of the intellectual in China. After the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the idea of the modern, independent intellectual was imported to China. Similar to the situation of sexual modernity, the development of intellectual modernity in China was interrupted by the communist takeover and has fluctuated since Mao's death. In the early 1980s, intellectuals were still proud to pursue political goals, either influenced by Confucian intellectual culture or the relationship with the state formed in Maoist era. For the typical example Zhang Xianliang, to be an intellectual means to have political power.³⁵ Moreover, it was still common for the authors to write on behalf of the intellectual, the people and the nation, but in the later 1980s, avant-garde writers such as Liu Sola also began to portray the history of Cultural Revolution as absurd, and abandoned the traditional duty as an intellectual. When Jia Pingwa's *Feidu* was published in 1993, apart from the controversy it aroused for its erotic descriptions, another criticism came from intellectuals such as Wang Lixiong 王力雄, who condemned the intellectuals' collective degeneration after the Tiananmen Incident (1993).³⁶ For Wang Lixiong, the intellectuals are not concerned with the future of the nation anymore because of their failure in the Tiananmen Incident. He criticised the tendency of intellectual degeneration in Jia Pingwa's *Feidu* and the hooligans in Wang Shuo's works. It is in this social background in the late 1990s that social critics unanimously praise Wang Xiaobo's liberal spirit after his death. Chinese pro-liberalist media and intellectuals have been looking for an example of an independent intellectual and Wang Xiaobo was the best choice: he resigned from two prestigious universities to be a freelancer; he was affiliated

³⁵ For more discussion on the traditional relationship between the state and intellectuals, see Zhou Kefan's MA thesis.

³⁶ "Kewangduoluo: tan dangdai zhongguo zhishifenzi de pizihua" 渴望堕落：谈当代中国知识分子的痞子化 (Yearning for Deterioration: Chinese Contemporary Intellectuals' Hooliganization) *Dong Fang* 东方 1993.

to neither academic nor political institution; his fiction reflects on the Cultural Revolution but is not limited to Maoist ideology; he assumes social responsibility as an intellectual to criticize the Maoist past in his essays. All of these contribute to his posthumous fame.

3.2 Realistic or Non-realistic Approaches?

In the beginning of this chapter, I have pointed out the shortcoming of treating Wang Xiaobo's Cultural Revolution narrative as the historical story in its traditional sense, because the author deals with history in a special way. To be specific, Wang Xiaobo *intentionally* blurs the boundary between history and imagination. Without noticing this, it is pointless to discuss whether Wang Er's sexuality is resistance or submission to a specific political power. If the Cultural Revolution of the fiction is not the popular history that all readers share, but just a spatio-temporal configuration that the author concocts, to what extent do we need to talk about how it challenges the Maoist past? Therefore, I propose to distinguish Wang Xiaobo from other authors with regard to his management of reality and history in his fiction. This section is going to demonstrate how he blurs the line between reality and imagination in his historical fiction.

Perhaps Wang Xiaobo's essays provide insights on the inspirations for his fiction writing. In his "Xiaoshuo de yishu."小说的艺术(The Art of Fiction), he takes the opportunity of discussing Milan Kundera to declare his own view on the fiction: "To write fiction, one needs to fully comprehend the beauty of fabricating, also needs the capability of making something out of nothing" or, *wu zhong sheng you* 无中生有 (WXQ Vol. 2, 61). In "Wo dui xiaoshuo de kanfa."我对小说的看法(My Views on Fiction), Wang Xiaobo admits the influence he had from Duras' *The Lover* and the French new

novel (nouveau roman): “My view on modernist fiction was defined by *The Lover*. The masterpiece of modernist fiction...is extremely elegant, which makes the readers ravished and makes anyone who plans to write fiction fearful” (*WXQ* Vol.2, 58). He further draws a contrast with classic realist writers to show how he appreciates modernist writers: “In a time when video technology is so developed, without the modernist fiction, Tolstoy’s [classic realistic] fiction cannot sustain my reading habit” (59). The French new novel, or the nouveau roman, was an avant-garde literary phenomenon in France that originated in the 1950s. This experimental genre rejects what it considered the outdated realist fiction represented by the classical works of Balzac. Unlike most of his contemporaries, it seems that Wang Xiaobo is not interested in those names with absolute authority in Chinese literary (translating) history.³⁷ When official classic Chinese and foreign writers still enjoyed their legitimacy in the 1980s, Wang Xiaobo already started to look for writing sources from the newly-translated foreign literature. In the preface of “The Bronze Age Trilogy”, Wang Xiaobo admits that he followed a “rarely known” literary path, which is the translated works of former poets such as Mu Dan 穆旦 and Wang Daoqian 王道乾: “if there is anything commendable in the modern Chinese literature, its roots lie in those passed-away translators. When we were young, it was well-known that we needed to read the translated works to find the best language, because the best writers were doing translation” (*WXQ* Vol.3, 3)—they could not continue their writing career for political reasons. For Wang Xiaobo, these translators with their sensitive, keen, and accurate sense

³⁷ It is important to note that in the Maoist past, the Chinese Communist Party not only monopolized Chinese history and Chinese literary history, but also the translating of foreign literature, which made some foreign writers’ works much more popular in China than in their home countries. For example, the pro-revolutionary works such as Ethel Lilian Voynich’s *Gadfly* and Nikolai Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel Was Tempered* were very popular among young people during the Maoist years.

of language are the keys to both the most beautiful Chinese language and the best foreign literature.

Following those French New Novelists that he admires, Wang Xiaobo discards the traditional realistic approach employed in his early works such as “Ma Danding”. As I have discussed earlier, the protagonist of “Ma Danding” as Wang Xiaobo’s alter ego is similar with Wang Er in the sense that they are both anti-heroic and politically incorrect *zhiqing* images. But the short story, written in the 1970s, is a totally realist work. In other words, the content of “Ma Danding” and “The Golden Age” is consistent regarding the author’s rebellious attitude to the dominant ideology, but their forms are completely different. Before Wang Xiaobo had the chance to read modernist fiction in 1980s, he did not realize the possibility of telling the same story in a new form. In his “Kaerweinuo yu weilai yiqiannian.” 卡尔维诺与未来一千年 (Calvino and the Next Millennium), he writes, “I cannot convince everyone to love every single book by him [Calvino], but I think we must love his idea that the art of fiction has infinite possibilities” (*WXQ* Vol. 2, 72-73). When I explore how Wang Xiaobo fulfilled fiction’s “infinite possibilities” after he was inspired by Marguerite Duras and Italo Calvino, I am finding that his Cultural Revolution narrative is not only unorthodox in the political sense but also innovative in the artistic accomplishment. To be specific, he challenges almost all aspects from the theme to the narrative skills, from Maoist ideology to Maoist *wenti* (Maoist writing style), from the content to the form. His “The Golden Age Trilogy” treats History as his playground with a series of unconventional methods³⁸, including the purposeful infusion

³⁸ To demonstrate Wang Xiaobo’s unconventionalities, it is important to clarify the conventionalities that he writes against. In this section, I only limit the historical fiction to the fiction of Revolutionary History written in the post-Mao era. The historical fiction such as epic, myth, and historical *yanyi* with a strong and stable traditional narrative style are all excluded. The debate on the distinction between historiography and historical fiction is also excluded.

of imagination to History, the negation of the linear temporal logic, and the replacement of seriousness with black humour. All of these interrogate the truth telling effects created by the realist mode of writing by dissolving the difference between fiction and history.

3.2.1. The Interplay of Fact and Fiction

It is evident that Wang Xiaobo appreciates Calvino very much, but what is the most attractive aspect for him? One of the most innovative inspirations he had from Calvino is the wild imagination Calvino infused into his fairytale-like story. In “Love in the Time of Revolution”, when the narrator Wang Er describes the situation in which he climbed up the tower to escape capture by Old Lu in 1973, he recalled Calvino’s *The Baron in the Trees*. The story of *The Baron in the Trees* begins on the 15th of June in 1767. The twelve year old Baron Cosimo Piavosco di Rondo refuses to eat what he was served at table in a family dinner. In a rebellious fit, Cosimo climbs up a tree and never comes down to touch the solid ground again for the rest of his life. With great aplomb, Cosimo studies, hunts, eats, bathes himself, falls in love, battles and corresponds, and finally dies in his own arboreal kingdom at the age of sixty five. Though it sounds like a fairytale, as the son of two botanists, Calvino fleshes out Cosimo’s life in the trees into one of the most believable stories with confidence and amazing details. Everything about his arboreal life sounds natural, logical, and convincing. Take how Cosimo bathes himself on the tree as an example:

He went to the fountain, for he had a hanging fountain of his own, invented by himself, or rather made with the help of nature. There was a stream which at a certain place dropped sheer in a cascade, and nearby

grew an oak, with very high branches. Cosimo, with a piece of scooped-out a couple of yards long, had made a kind of gutter which brought the water from the cascade to the branches of the oak tree, where he could drink and wash. (71)

If the 18th century's heavily forested Riviera Beach by the Ligurian Sea near his hometown San Remo is the spatial-temporal configuration that Calvino uses to carry out his fantasy, Beijing at the peak of fights between different factions of Red Guards is where Wang Xiaobo releases his imagination. In "Love in the Time of Revolution", when the Cultural Revolution started at 1966, Wang Er was a sixteen year old boy. In his narrative, the violent fights through the eyes of a middle school student appear strangely interesting to the readers, especially the scene that he hand made "the most perfect mangonel in the world" for a faction of Red Guards called "to pick up pen as swords and spears" and how they use it in a stronghold made out from an apartment block to fight against other factions:

In the fall of 1967, the fights in the campus where I lived were very serious. All factions went to occupy the apartment block, drove away the residents in that building, broke down the walls between neighbourhoods, blocked the windows with wood boards, and installed a big slingshot in the rifts between the boards to shoot out bricks. It was a projectile mechanism of some sort, just like the ballista on the city walls of Ancient Rome and the catapult on the top of city walls of Ancient Greek city-states. I am obsessed with this kind of thing, and all ancient sages I admire—Euclid, Archimedes, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci—have made this

thing. But the slingshots those university students produced were too bad, not even enough to call it ‘produce’, they were just some turned over stools with bicycle inner tubes tied on their legs, the shooting distance is not even as far as throwing by hand. This is so disgraceful. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 209)

For this reason, the sixteen years old Wang Er decides to stay to help these Red Guards who occupy the apartment block he lived in. He puts on a carpenter’s leather apron, wears a red-blue pencil behind his ear, and commands a dozen university students to make a highly complicated mangonel with the furniture in his home. He carefully examines the quality of wood with his nails and smells the wood to check if it is dry. What’s more, with all kinds of apparatus, including an anemoscope, a tensometer, and a mekometer³⁹ stolen from places such as the weather station, he makes “the most precise mechanism of its kind in the world”. The operation of this mangonel needs at least ten persons—someone needs to report the wind speed, someone to weigh the stone with scales, someone to measure the distance and locate the target. With all the collected data, Wang Er finally calculates the trajectory with a ruler. With a one hundred percent of hit rate within five hundred meters, he becomes the king of his own bastion. He even lays the rail track in the building so he and his mangonel can get to anywhere as soon as possible. Besides, he plans to make his mangonel electro-driven, shooting twelve stones per minute. Developing in this way, no one would be able to drive them away from this building. But the saddest thing for Wang Er finally happens in the winter of 1967—the weaponry of the Red Guards is updated from the Iron Age to the firearm level. For Wang

³⁹ An anemoscope, tensometer, and mekometer are apparatus to measure wind speed, pulling force, and distance respectively.

Er, nothing afterwards would be interesting any more, because he is “in absolute agreement with Don Quixote regarding firearms: the inventors of firearms must be devils and should be killed by a thousand cuts. They learn neither trigonometry nor calculus. Pointing at people with a stupid barrel, only by a move of the forefinger they can bring people down” (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 247). In Wang Er’s view, to fight with swords, spears, and catapult apparently requires more courage. He is so sad that he leaves his bastion in tears, saying: “One should only use the weapon he made for himself to fight, or else he is an asshole. The soldiers of Ancient Rome always used their own weapons, so did the Ancient Greeks. If people at those times found a German Mauser on the ground, they would definitely throw it into a ditch, because they are the real heroes” (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 241).

In Wang Xiaobo’s opinion, Calvino’s fiction is full of imagination like fairy tale. Calvino himself is a fan of fairy tales. He once compiled and published a collection of Italian folktales. *The Baron in the Trees* is a fairy tale of some sort. Inspired by Calvino, Wang Xiaobo put the same kind of wild imagination into practice in his *Love in the Time of Revolution* and creates a logically self-consistent world for his protagonist Wang Er. The influence that Wang had from Calvino is far more than this. Like Calvino, Wang Xiaobo pays a lot of attention to the language itself. In the next section, I will present how Wang Xiaobo is influenced by Calvino and other authors in producing rhythm through language and narrative.

3.2.2. Obscured Chronologies and Repetitive Narrative

When exploring Wang Xiaobo's innovations on the form of his novel, we should not omit the fundamental form of any textual art—the language itself. Wang Xiaobo's high praise of the translator Wang Daoqian shows his particular care to the language. For him, the best translation is from the poets, since they found the rhythm of modern Chinese language:

As the forerunners of French New Novel pointed out, fiction is changing towards poetry; Milan Kundera said, fiction should sound like music; an Italian friend of mine told me that reading Calvino's fiction is pleasing to the ear. It sounds like pearls dropping to the ground. I don't know French or Italian, but I can hear the rhythm of their fiction for the legacy of these poet translators. (*WXQ* Vol. 3, 3)

In the process of fulfilling his understanding of fiction's rhythm, Wang Xiaobo employs a repetitive narrative to replay the important scenes in his fiction from differing perspectives in different occasions throughout his story. For example, the story of his mangonel mentioned in the previous section is told by the narrators in different chapters many times; in "The Golden Age", the scene about Chen Qingyang's second sexual intercourse with Wang Er on the mountain was told over and over in different parts throughout the story. In fact, Wang Xiaobo's stories do not follow chronological order but always flash back and forth between the past and present. "The Golden Age" flashes between the time in Yunnan and the meeting between Chen Qingyang and Wang Er twenty years later in Beijing; *Love in the Time of Revolution* flashes between the Red Guards fights in 1967, Wang Er's meeting with the communist youth league secretary X Haiying in 1973, and the present; *My Yin and Yang Spheres* flashes between Old Liu's

terrible life during the Cultural Revolution and Wang Er's impotent life in the 1990s. In this way, the author obscures the linear, irreversible chronological order of story-telling. Without exception, the repetitive narratives are told by an older Wang Er. The seemingly random repetitions, according to him, are very carefully arranged. Taking the chance to argue against the opinion that Duras's *The Lover* is written casually, Wang Xiaobo writes in his essay "Yong yisheng lai xuexi yishu." 用一生来学习艺术(Using a Whole Life to Learn about Art):

contrary to this opinion, I think the arrangement of every paragraph in this novel is extremely carefully designed...From the first sentence, 'one day, I was already old', bringing the sense of vicissitude, to the last sentence, 'that he'd love her until his death', bring the sense of sadness to the readers, the variation of emotions is under the exact control of the author. The narrative does not follow the chronological order but some other logic. This other logic, I call it art.(*WXQ* Vol.2, 55-57)

The Lover, as Wang Xiaobo admits, greatly influences his fiction writing. *The Lover* is an autobiographical story about a scandalous love affair between a fifteen year old girl and a twenty seven year old Chinese man in colonial French Indochina in the late 1920s. The female protagonist's mother is a woman with high self-esteem who carefully planned for her children's future, though she is impoverished throughout her life. The male protagonist is the son of a rich patriarchal Chinese family. Both are forbidden by their families from engaging in this affair. The location of the story and the social background of French Indochina, though extremely important to the development of the plot, are downplayed in comparison with the author's focus on her own psychological

world. With stunning similarity, in “The Golden Age”, Wang Xiaobo pushes the political and social environment into the background. As Larson nicely puts it, “the countryside is even less of an actor in its own right... or as a site where meaning seemingly disconnected to its existence can be produced” (118). This is, of course, not to say the location is insignificant to the story. Only in a place far away from the political center can Wang Er and Chen Qingyang escape from the production team to the uninhabited mountains to have sex in a secluded, natural environment, and also impersonate local minorities to go across the border and exchange daily supplies. But this spatial management does help the author avoid explicit political and class struggle and thus make his narrative less passionate. But the temporal management of *The Lover* is a much more important tool that Wang Xiaobo learns from Duras to distance himself from the passionate historical events. Duras was already seventy years old when she wrote her story about an adolescent girl. Fifteen years old is a dangerous age. In this age of puberty, the female protagonist’s emotion can be as passionate and intense as it could be. She desperately longs for love and intimacy; her relationship with the Chinese man is hopeless from the very beginning; she has a mother full of rage, a tyrannical older brother, and a younger brother she likes but who dies very early. In short, her family is also hopeless; she has a strong drive towards self-destruction. However, all these passion are counterbalanced by an old narrator from the first paragraph:

One day, I was already old, in the entrance of a public place a man came up to me. He introduced himself and said, “I’ve known you for years.

Everyone says you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell

you I think you're more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged. (3)

By telling the story from the viewpoint of an aged narrator, Duras gives the readers what Wang Xiaobo called “the sense of vicissitude”, or *cangsanggan* 沧桑感. Similarly, in “The Golden Age”, the author immediately reminds the readers that he is telling story that happened twenty years ago in the fifth paragraph: “Imagine the scene twenty years ago, when Chen Qingyang and I discussed the damaged goods issue...” (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 4) What's more, during the story telling the author fuses the personal vision of life that he gained in his later life into his recollection, which counterbalances the rebellious spirit and youthful energy:

That day I was twenty-one, and in the golden age of my life. I had so many desires; I wanted to love, to eat, and to be turned in a flash into the half-bright and half-dark cloud in the sky. 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. However, that idea never crossed my mind on my twenty-first birthday. I thought I would always be lively and strong, and that nothing could beat me. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 6)

More importantly, since both stories are told from a detached point, both narrators finally know everything that happened to their protagonists. Therefore the stories often flash back and forward and the stories are cut up and interrupted by seemingly unrelated descriptions, but the author always loops back to the important scenes later, which makes their recounting lyrical and elusive. In *The Lover*, the first meeting between the

protagonists on the Mekong ferry and her first sexual experience in the man's apartment are the two most important scenes. Take their first meeting as an example:

So, I'm fifteen and half. It's on a ferry crossing the Mekong River. The image lasts all the way across. (5)

I'm fifteen and half. Crossing the river. Going back to Saigon I feel I'm going on a journey... (9)

It's not the shoes, though, that make the girl look so strangely, so weirdly dressed. No, it's the fact that she's wearing a man's flat-brimmed hat, a brownish-pink fedora with a broad black ribbon. (12)

On the ferry, look, I've still got my hair. Fifteen and a half. I'm using make-up already. (16)

On the ferry, beside the bus, there's a big black limousine with a chauffeur in white cotton livery. Yes, it's the big funeral car that's in my books. (17)

Fifteen and a half. The body is thin, undersized almost, childish breasts still, red and pale-pink make-up. And then the clothes, the clothes that might make people laugh, but don't. (20)

The elegant man has got out of limousine and is smoking an English cigarette. He looks at the girl in the man's fedora and the gold shoes. He slowly comes over to her. (32)

...

Similar to *The Lover*, there are usually several indistinct threads in "The Golden Age" that the narrative deviates from and goes back to, including the reunion of the protagonists after twenty years, different parts of the protagonists' "confessions", and the

moment Chen Qingyang sees Wang Er's erect penis when she reaches his thatched hut on the mountain. Just take their reunion in the hut as example (in fact, this scene is significant to understand the author's vision of life. I will explain it in the final section):

Chen Qingyang said that when she decided to head up the mountain to search for me, she didn't have anything on under her white smock.

Dressed like this, she crossed a stretch of hills behind the fifteenth team...

Chen Qingyang came riding on a white wind to look for me. The wind got under her clothes and flowed all over her body, like caresses and lips.

(*WXQ* Vol. 6, 14).

Chen Qingyang arrived at my thatched hut precisely at that moment and caught sight of me sitting naked on the bamboo bed. My penis was like a skinned rabbit, red, shiny, and a foot long, frankly erect. Panicked, Chen Qingyang immediately screamed. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 15)

Later Chen Qingyang said she just couldn't believe everything she had experienced was real, because something real needs to have a cause. Yet at the time she just took off her clothes, sat beside me, and stared at my little monk, thinking it was the color of a burn scar. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 16)

Two weeks after I went into the mountains, she went up the mountains to look for me. It was only two o'clock in the afternoon, but she took off her underwear, like women who sneak out for sex at midnight, and wore only a white smock, walking barefoot in the mountains... as she entered the hut and saw Wang Er sitting on the bed, his little monk stiff, she was frightened into screaming. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 15-16)

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. To explain how she came to this realization, we need to go all the way back to the time I returned from the hospital and left for the mountains from her place. I asked her to come to see me and she hesitated for a long time. When she finally decided and walked through the hot noon air to my thatched hut, many beautiful images went through her mind during those moments. Then she entered the thatched hut and saw my little monk sticking up like an ugly instrument of torture. She cried out then and abandoned all hope. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 40)

Chen Qingyang said, when she went to my little thatched hut, she thought about everything except my little monk. That thing was too ugly to appear in her dream. Chen Qingyang wanted to wail then, but she couldn't cry out, as if someone were choking her. 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. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 41)

It is clear from these paragraphs that Wang Xiaobo's management of temporal dimension is learned from Duras. In *The Lover*, Duras creates a distinctive narrative style. She revisits certain important scenes again and again in a circular pattern that conveys a psychological rhythm. For example, by bringing the audience back to the protagonists' first meeting on the ferry retrospectively, the author creates a psychological

rhythm of that experience. These scenes are not exact repetition. Everytime the author brings the audience back to that ferry, the scene are retold in a different perspective, as if a detective revisits the same place to record different witness' testimonies. The intertextuality prevents any scene from becoming a clear-cut version. Also, Duras often changes from the first person to the third person perspective. The whole story is mostly narrated in the first person. "I am fifteen and half"(5); "I've still got my hair"(16). But all of a sudden, the story is told by an all-knowing narrator: "He looks at the girl in the man's fedora"(32). To make the situation more complicated, the author from time to time suggests the readers that the narrator is the French novelist Marguerite Duras. "Yes, it's the big funeral car that's in my books" (17). The change of perspective, the re-telling of the same story with modifications, and the discarding of linear chronology, all these make echings of the sense of realism and produce a dream-like déjà vu without set boundaries of time and place.

In *The Golden Age*, Wang Xiaobo employs a series of similar devices. To take Chen Qingyang and Wang Er's reunion as an example, this important scene is retold from different perspectives with modifications again and again. Just as *The Lover*, the story is narrated largely in the first person, and the author brings the audience back to the moment Chen Qingyang saw Wang Er's penis in different ways. Almost all scenes are reported by an older Wang Er in this story. For example, "Later Chen Qingyang said she just couldn't believe everything she had experienced was real"; "Chen Qingyang said, people live in this world to suffer torment until they die". But the narrator also travels back and forth from the past to the present by changing to an omniscient perspective from time to time, as if the readers are there with him, creating a psychological tension between distance and

intimacy to that event. The influence from Duras is clear from this scene. In the next section, I am going to talk about why Wang Xiaobo choose this specific scene when Chen Qingyang saw Wang Er's "little monk" and what kind of symbolic meaning the male sexual organ carries in his fiction.

3.3. "Little monk" and Impotence

Imitating the narrative style in *The Lover*, the story of the Cultural Revolution was recounted from a detached point in the future by an experienced story teller in order to give a sense of vicissitude. The energetic sexual desire and passionate rebellious spirit are counterbalanced by the sense of time. In this way, the author highlights what time, instead of the political movements, has done to the protagonists. For Wang Xiaobo, one is doomed to be gradually castrated by time. In his alter ego Wang Er's words, "Only much later did I realize that life is a slow process of being castrated. People grow old day after day, their desire disappears little by little, and finally they become like those castrated bulls" (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 6). This highly symbolic image of castrated bull indicates the author's personal vision of life. It is important to note the tendency that the older Wang Er gets, the less rebellious he becomes. All novellas in "The Golden Age Trilogy" are told by an older Wang Er but the ratio of the Cultural Revolution recollection is gradually descending from "The Golden Age", "Love in the Time of Revolution", to "My Yin and Yang Spheres". When Wang Er talks about his city life in the 1990s in Beijing, he is no more the oversexed young man like a non-hammered bull in the "The Golden Age". In "Love in the Time of Revolution", when Wang Er travelled in Europe, he was already thirty-six. Under the Eiffel Tower, he saw a lot of young people, and he contrasted

himself with these young people: “These young guys are all strong, and girls are all beautiful...some of them even have Che Guevara and Trotsky’s books in their pockets, as if there should be someone leading them to build the catapult and armour, take over the building with spears, or else it is a kind of waste. But this leader is not me, I’m already old (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 267)”. In “My Yin and Yang Spheres”, the forty-year old Wang Er even becomes sexually impotent. In other words, Wang Er becomes a docile bull tamed by the hammer of time.

As shown above, Wang Xiaobo’s personal vision of life influences his fiction writing and makes his texts highly symbolic. In this final section, I am finding the code of his binary and his symbolic use of it in his fiction. Although there is no explicit dichotomy of good/evil, us/enemy in his fiction, Wang Xiaobo does have his own understanding of Yin/Yang binary. It is much clearer in “My Yin and Yang Spheres” when Wang Er says,

According to Mr. Toynbee⁴⁰, there are two states in human history, Yin and Yang. In Yin state, people scatter in all over the world, only eat and sleep, living in a state of ignorance. Later people move to valleys and plains to live in groups. It was the start of the civilization, and all bothers start hence. Similar to this, my life can also be divided into two states just as Yin and Yang. When I went limp and recalled how hard I was, I just couldn’t believe that one day I would go limp like this. (*WXQ* Vol. 6, 314)

It is undeniable that for everyone, the body is a fundamental part of physical sense of self, and the sexual organ is an important part for body. The male sexual organ under

⁴⁰ Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975) is a British historian. His monumental work *A Study of History*, compares the historical patterns of over twenty civilizations. In the chapter “Challenge and Response”, he uses the analogy of Yin and Yang as his main expository principle to synthesize conclusions he reached on the rise and decline of civilizations.

many male writers' pens has symbolic meanings. Borrowing from the classic Chinese erotic fiction *Dengcao heshang*⁴¹, Wang Er often refers to his erect penis as "little monk". The "little monk" plays an important role in the author's Yin and Yang polarities. I have pointed out the descending tendency of the primitive sexual power in three novellas of "The Golden Age Trilogy". In fact, when Wang Er's "little monk" is gradually hammered by the hammer of time, the conflict between Yin and Yang is getting less and less intense, and finally disappears.

In "The Golden Age", there are explicit conflicts between Wang Er and the military deputy. The young Wang Er, full of desires, "wanted to love, to eat" and therefore he had severe conflicts with the power represented by the military deputy. Out of anger, he "hacked up everything in the place with a machete, found a piece of charcoal, and wrote, 'XXX (the military deputy's name), fuck your mother!' on the wall" (21). Then he headed up the mountain, the Yin sphere, where he enjoyed his sexual carnival. He lived with Chen Qingyang in his hut on the mountain in the state of barbarism, or "the state of ignorance". In this Garden of Eden, Wang Er and Chen Qingyang lived in a primitive way, staying far away from the human civilization, the Yang sphere. The "little monk" practices its sexual power unbridledly until Chen Qingyang decides to go down the mountain back to the production team, back to Yang sphere, to endure "the human world's ravage" 人世的摧残 (32). Everything starts from

⁴¹灯草和尚(Rush Monk) is a Chinese erotic fiction. It is considered as the work of Gao Zecheng 高则诚 in Yuan Dynasty. In the beginning of the erotic fiction, the Yangzhou 扬州 local judge (zhixian)知县 Yang Guaner 杨官儿 left for another town Suzhou 苏州 for a visit, leaving his thirty two years old wife Wangshi 汪氏 and sixteen years old daughter Changgu 长姑 at home. One day an old lady showed up in front of their house and offered to perform a magic trick. In their bedroom, she conjured a three-cun monk out of a lamp rush. The rush monk can go into women's vagina to satisfy their carnality. Most content of this fiction is about the little rush monk's promiscuous relationship with Wangshi, Changgu, and the servant maid Nuanyu 暖玉. This erotic fiction is overall a celebration of the sexual indulgence and rejection of the sexual mores.

the moment she saw Wang Er's "little monk" in the hut, the repetitive scene in the previous section. After Wang Er escaped, Chen Qingyang decided to leave the Yang sphere for Wang Er's thatched hut, having all kinds of beautiful images in her mind, but she did not expect to see such an ugly thing like Wang Er's "little monk". It was like a "angry cobra standing there" (11), a red, shiny "skinned rabbit", a burn scar, and an ugly "instrument of torment". For Chen Qingyang, this thing should not appear in the Garden of Eden. It was in this moment that Chen Qingyang figured out "people live in this world to suffer torment until they die", so she "abandoned all hope" and "stepped forward to accept the torment." The "little monk" in this scene symbolizes all the tortures one has to endure in his life, including the hammer of time. The author states his own philosophy of life with the help of Chen Qingyang—there is no Garden of Eden and one can never escape from the torture in Yang sphere. Therefore, Wang Er began to adapt himself to hide in Yang sphere. In "Love in the Time of Revolution", Wang Er ridiculed the revolutionary logic by his sadomasochistic relationship with X Haiying, but he had no choice but to cater to her. In "My Yin and Yang Spheres", Wang Xiaobo chooses a peculiar way for Wang Er to live in the city in the 1990s. Wang Er lives in solitude in a dark basement of a hospital, sexually impotent. His wife divorced him because of his failure to achieve an erection on the wedding night. His colleagues in the hospital take him as a weirdo. But he does not care about these at all. He writes and translates novels but he does not bother to publish them. He enjoys staying in silence and the Yang sphere does not attract him very much. In this way, he hides himself to avoid any conflicts between Yin and Yang:

Everyone relates a man's big head with his small head⁴², if his small head does not work, the same is true of his big head—this is a preconceived idea. But I have no interest in correcting this idea. Since it is already preconceived, it can't be corrected. I just do whatever I want, stay in my basement. It can save me a lot of troubles, because everyone thinks I am an idiot, so they won't tell me to have all kinds of meetings with them...to have a meeting like this, you must have a hard dick, a limp one does no good. (298)

This is to say, impotence is the symbolic dividing line between Yin and Yang spheres in his fiction. For Wang Er, those who have the power of discourse are in Yang sphere and the silent majority in Yin sphere. Ever since he can remember, the people who have the power of discourse only produced notorious knowledge, such as “home-made furnace can make steel”, or “an acre of land can produce 300, 000 *jin* of food”. But he dares not to speak out. As the protagonist of “My Yin and Yang Spheres”, Wang Er is not interested to be part of the Yang sphere at all. Because he maintains that if one enters that sphere, one will need to use that kind of language to speak, even to use that language to think. Wang Er chooses to keep silent because based upon his life experiences, that circle is a notorious madhouse.

⁴² The glans is called *guitou* 龟头 in Chinese and it contains a character meaning head.

CONCLUSION

As noted in the introduction to Wang Xiaobo on the website of Paper-Republic, though he is “fiercely loved by readers and writers alike, the canon, if there is such a thing, does not know how to make room for him.”⁴³ The difficulty to categorize his texts is the primary reason. The revolt and repression model became a prevalent theoretical framework for the critics because his heterodoxy from the revolutionary discourse does invite this kind of interpretation. But the critics engaging with this model are not in agreement because the validity of parody as the weapon to fight against totalitarianism is a pending issue. For some critics, it mitigates the rebellious spirit.

The way sex is associated with politics, not the sexual theme itself, is what distinguishes Wang Xiaobo from other authors touching on sexual topic. In Chapter Two, I have outlined the history of the interplay of revolution and erotic love in Chinese modern literature history to highlight Wang Xiaobo’s use of parody as the linkage. Then I enumerated the established paradigms fostered in the revolutionary discourse to show the author’s deviance from them. But this interpretation of Wang as a rebel overlooks other elements than Maoist ideology that influenced the author’s fictions. Based on the premise that the Cultural Revolution in Wang Xiaobo’s *The Golden Age* trilogy is not a solid social-political background that everyone shares, in Chapter Three I have tried to amend the prevalent model by looking at Wang Xiaobo’s fiction with other resources. Wang Xiaobo is not only writing against the History but transcending the History. Put it another way, Wang Xiaobo is not writing typical historical fiction. Instead, he blurs the line

⁴³ Paper-Republic is a website translating Chinese writers’ works to English and introducing Chinese authors abroad. The introduction of Wang Xiaobo can be found at: <http://paper-republic.org/authors/wang-xiaobo/>

between history and fiction under the influence from Italo Calvino and Marguerite Duras. To be specific, Wang Xiaobo infuses imagination into his historical fiction and creates a logically self-sufficient world in which Wang Er makes an invincible medieval catapult to fight against other Red Guards. The bloody scenes are turned into farce by the author's black humor. Another device Wang Xiaobo uses to bewilder readers is his management of time. By discarding the traditional linear chronology, Wang Xiaobo takes a circular pattern in story telling to produce a psychological rhythm. The whole story is told by an older Wang Er to stress the vicissitudes that he experienced as the time went by. Although haunted by the Maoist ideology, Wang Xiaobo has proposed an alternative narrative of the History.

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