The Subversive "Pleasure of Thinking"

SEBASTIAN VEG

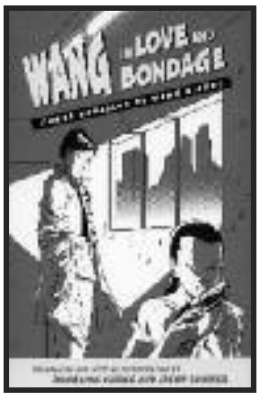
Wang Xiaobo, born in 1952 in Beijing and one of the most widely read writers in China and the Chinese-speaking world today, wrote in his famous essay "The Silent Majority":

> *Most people are subjected to the benefits of speaking once they enter school at seven. In my case, I think it happened even earlier, because ever since I can remember, I was surrounded by people trumpeting at the top of their voice, making a constant din. (...) From what they said, I learned that one mu of land could produce 300 000 catties of grain; that was when we began starving to death. All in all, since I was a child, I have not had much faith in spoken words. The sterner the tone and the louder the voice, the less faith I had; this scepticism derived directly from my aching stomach. Compared with any act of speaking, starvation always represents a deeper form of truth.* (1)

In the world in which Wang grew up, speaking, or "taking a position" in public was what he called a form of tax due the state, which he consistently refused to pay. As in Kundera's novels or Vaclav Havel's plays, language itself seemed to have become absurd by virtue of the system in which it was institutionalised as a political tool. Luckily for his present-day readers, Wang eventually decided to come out of his silence and publish the manuscripts that had accumulated in his drawers, noting that this represented something like "losing (his) virginity." But he immediately added:

> *Opening my mouth to speak did not mean that I had reverted to the feeling that it was my responsibility to pay the tax; if that had been the case, everyone would have seen me producing a huge bin of rubbish. What I felt was a different type of responsibility.* (2)

In a brief period of five years, from the time he published his first and most famous novella *The Golden Age* in the summer of 1992, until his premature death of a heart attack in 1997, Wang Xiaobo achieved a meteoric fame. His fiction and essays swept through campuses in China at a time when most students were disillusioned with the self-righteous social criticism and cultural soul-searching "roots" fiction of the 1980s. (3) He probably remains, ten years after his death, the most widely read and discussed author among students and readers under 35, and has gained recognition even from the initially hostile literary establishment.



Wang Xiaobo,
Wang in Love and Bondage.
Translated and with an introduction by Hongling Zhang and Jason Sommer,
Albany, SUNY Press, 2007, 155 pp.

Hongling Zhang and Jason Sommer's translations of three short stories, the first of Wang's work to be published in English, are therefore to be welcomed, not only because Wang is a very enjoyable author (and he is generally well served by the translation, which emphasises his colloquial style, perhaps occasionally to excess), but also because his writing encapsulates something of the unique spirit of the nineties, and the mixture of jaded street-wiseness, hilarious in its desperation, and down-to-earth sincerity that sets apart the young people who grew up after Tiananmen. Zhang and Sommer have selected the stories from a considerable bulk of work, offering a good first taste of Wang's style. Wang's *Trilogy of the Ages*, his major work, is well represented by "The Golden Age," the title story of the first volume, which deals mainly with life in Maoist and post-Maoist society, and

1. Wang Xiaobo, *Siwei de lequ* (The Pleasure of thinking). Kunming: Yunnan People's Press, 2006, p. 3 (my translation).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
3. For a taste of the enthusiasm aroused by his writings, see the recollections of blogger Michael Anti: "The Ten Years of how I cast off the influence of Wang Xiaobo," http://zonaeuropa.com/20070412_2.html.

"2015" from the second volume, *The Silver Age*, which depicts a totalitarian future. (The third instalment of the trilogy, *The Bronze Age*, consists of three novel-length narratives drawing on historical subject-matter, conceived as China's answer to Braudel's *Civilization and Capitalism*, and was no doubt difficult to fit into a short introductory volume.) Finally, the translators have included the story "East Palace, West Palace," adapted as a film by Zhang Yuan (screened at the Cannes Film Festival in 1997, just weeks after Wang's death), using the film title rather than that of the original novella ("Sentiments Like Water"). The collection, while true to Wang's eclecticism, therefore creates what may be an overly fragmented impression of his writing by taking the three stories out of their immediate context and chronological order.

"The Golden Age" won a major prize in Taiwan and made Wang famous virtually overnight: not without reason, given the combination of sexually explicit scenes and the sensitive subject of "educated youths" sent down to the country during the Cultural Revolution for re-education by the "middle and lower-middle" poor peasants. The narrator, Wang Er [4] is sent down to Yunnan during the Cultural Revolution, just like Wang Xiaobo himself from 1968 to 1970. Entrusted by his production team with tending to the water buffalo, the 21-year-old Wang Er experiences a unique sexual awakening, manifested by an erection of cosmic dimensions, which epitomises his vitality and resistance to authority; at the same time, the exaggeration of the image allows the author to poke fun at the cliché of sensual awakening in the natural habitat of China's remote "minority regions." The narrative is two-tiered, shifting back and forth between the past – in which Wang Er tries to flee into the mountains in the company of a young female doctor, Chen Qingyang – and the present, when the two protagonists meet again by chance 30 years later. Although Chen Qingyang notes at this point that Wang Er has "become civilized" (p. 94), while "reliving (their) great friendship" by making love in a Beijing hotel, they agree that the years in Yunnan represented their "golden age." This raises the central question of Wang Xiaobo's story: how should the Cultural Revolution be remembered 30 years later? [5]

The answer suggested by the story is as provocative as it is singular, in a context in which historians continue to experience major difficulties in conducting and publishing scientific research on this period in China. Idealising the life of the "educated youths" and their withdrawal from society (in the age-old eremitic tradition) is derided by Wang Xiaobo as an illusion, similar to the Maoist vision of a "golden age" of rural collectivism. By equating the Maoist agrarian utopia – for which he shows not the slightest nostalgia – with an age of unfettered, bestial, often fetishistic sex that reduces individuals to their biological functions, Wang Xiaobo suggests that all utopian attempts to break out of the framework of society are a form of regression. Retreating from the human world is impossible, but this is no cause for despair; as Chen Qingyang puts it, "People live in this world to suffer torment until they die. Once you figure this out, you'll be able to bear everything calmly" (pp. 112-113). In a final twist to the story, Chen Qingyang, after spending the night with Wang Er in Beijing and before returning to Shanghai, reveals that in order to put an end to the repeated demands for more self-criticisms by the commissars in Yunnan, she wrote a final confession stating that she had "fallen in love" with Wang Er when he carried her back down the mountain after their retreat into nature. Concluding that sex, even purely biological and devoid of emotions, leads to love, Chen Qingyang symbolically brings both characters back to society. "Return" to an agrarian paradise, whether in its tragic Maoist version or in its ironic depiction of two "educated youths" living naked among the buffalo, is an illusion.

Nonetheless, this unfettered sexuality reveals a deep-set anti-authoritarian form of resistance of which every individual is capable when faced with persecution. Wang Xiaobo, when studying at the University of Pittsburgh from 1984 to 1988, read Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, which was translated into Chinese in the late 1980s and analysed at length by the famous sociologist Li Yinhe, who was also married to Wang. Wang found in Foucault the confirmation that all political conflicts have a sexual dimension, although he resists (unlike many of his commentators) reducing the Cultural Revolution to a form of sado-masochist interaction between the Chinese state and intellectuals. Reading Foucault gave Wang a more general insight: relations of power are never totally asymmetrical, and the "victim" always has some sort of paradoxical leverage over his persecutor. Wang repeatedly portrays victims who are sexually aroused by political humiliation, as Chen Qingyang is during a struggle meeting (p. 110). This revelation informs Wang's view of the self-pitying trait in Chinese intellectuals.

4. His name means "Wang Two"; as noted by Sommer and Zhang (p. ix),Wang Xiaobo would also have been a "Two" in the family count of sons. This autobiographical slant is deceptive, however: there is a Wang Er in almost all of Wang Xiaobo's stories, and they all have slightly different life stories, occupations, love lives, and political or existential convictions.

5. I have discussed this novella at length in "Utopian Fiction and Critical Examination: The Cultural Revolution in Wang Xiaobo's 'The Golden Age,' " *China Perspectives*, no. 2007/4, pp. 75-87.

Of course, Chen Qingyang's sexual excitement should not be read too literally, but her wild lovemaking with Wang Er on the confession table after the struggle meeting allows her to escape the role of a mere victim, and in some measure to regain an active role in history.

In this way, Wang Xiaobo shows how a totalitarian system generates the seeds of the individuals' resistance to it: the profoundly anti-authoritarian addiction to sex liberated by reducing individuals to a form of animal existence can be reinvested with political meaning. Recounting the sessions to "struggle damaged goods" and explaining the fine distinction between "antagonistic" and "non-antagonistic" contradictions, Wang Er ends up deriving a paradoxical form of pleasure from writing confessions, comparable to Chen Qingyang's sexual arousal. He pokes fun at the commissars who avidly devour his latest writings, and ends up mastering the art of "paying tribute" to the vocabulary of public speech. For example, he refers to his relationship with Chen by borrowing the idea of "great friendship" from the classical novel *Outlaws of the Marsh*:

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

By effectively parodying the revolutionary sentimentality of literature under Maoism, Wang Er turns the art of confession against his persecutors, and uses irony and uncompromising wit to enter the "world of speech" without bowing to the demands of politics.

If "The Golden Age" is a parody of the "scar fiction" that appeared in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, and the self-pitying nostalgia of the former "educated youths," "2015" is a confident pastiche of the labour camp literature of the 1980s. This novella, published along with two others set in "the future," deals with the role of the artist in an increasingly totalitarian twenty-first century. The first-person narrator tells the story of his uncle, another Wang Er, a painter who is sent for re-education, first to the "Art Re-education Institute" (situated at a "classified" location in Western Beijing) and then to a labour camp, because his paintings are deemed incomprehensible and make people who look at them dizzy: "The leader lectured him: A good piece of work should make people feel happy, not dizzy. My young uncle talked back, saying, Then, is a suppository a good piece of work?" (p. 15) The re-education the uncle undergoes is designed to make his painting more "true to reality," using various sorts of shock treatment and a particularly sadistic "IQ testing machine." Yet the uncle resists all forms of coercion: the machine (reminiscent of the one in Kafka's *Penal Colony*) only succeeds in provoking another monumental "anti-authoritarian" erection, and he sprays it full of semen, to the dismay of his guards and fellow inmates. Retreating to his ward, he escapes from the institution by substituting pork meat for what the wardens take to be his dead body. After being rearrested and sent to work in an alkali field "near the Bohai Sea" (the narrator comments, "It's a hard job, but fortunately there are people who commit errors and need to be re-educated, so the work is left to them," p. 37), he seduces his female guard, who ends up marrying him.

Once again, sex appears as the weapon of the weak against the strong, in what may well be a direct parody of the redemption through love in a labour camp that cures the narrator of his impotence in Zhang Xianliang's novel *The Other Half of Man is Woman*.[6] Eventually, Wang's narrator succeeds in having his uncle liberated from the prison camp by disproving the charge that his paintings are "unfathomable." While surfing the internet for games, he finds a formula derived from a mathematical model called the "Mandelbrot sets" which is able to create images similar to his uncle's paintings. Swiftly recognizing that the uncle's "art" is in fact akin to images generated by a mathematical formula, and therefore no longer subversive, the authorities immediately release him: "My young aunt and uncle left the alkali field, got married, and lived their life; everything became ordinary and predictable" (p. 59), and the aunt transfers to a public relations company. While the uncle never bows to political repression, his work somehow ends up losing its subversive appeal once it no longer poses a direct threat to the state. Wang Xiaobo probably had in mind some artists of the 1980s when he wrote, "The truth was that my uncle's reputation had declined – he'd fallen a little out of fashion." (p. 55)

6. Indeed, all of Wang Xiaobo's writings, and their insistence on the protagonist's exuberant masculinity, can probably be construed as a rebuttal of Zhang Xianliang's political and aesthetic worldview, in particular his depiction of Chinese intellectuals as symbolically "emasculated" by the Party and its campaigns of repression.

To the narrator, however, art is more important than sex – even though it is the uncle's paintings and the dizziness they induce that seduce the "young aunt." The narrator is accused of similar errors as his uncle when the authorities criticise the uncertain relationship between his writing and reality:

> *As you know, I'm a professional writer. Once I wrote a story about my elder uncle, saying that he was a novelist and mathematician who had all kinds of fantastic experiences. That story got me into trouble. Somebody checked my census register*[7] *and discovered that I had only one uncle. This uncle attended elementary school at seven and middle school at thirteen, graduated from the oil painting department of an art school, and now was an idler with no profession. They also checked his grades from elementary school through middle school; the best grade he got in math was a "C". If he had become a mathematician, it would have definitely stained the reputation of our country's mathematical circles. For that reason, the leader had a talk with me, assigning me a plot along the following lines: when my uncles were born they were twins. Because my grandparents were poor and couldn't afford to raise them, the older one was sent to another family. The older one had a talent for math and could make up stories and write, too, very different from my young uncle. So he and my young uncle had to be twins from different eggs. The plot also offered an explanation for this: my deceased grandmother was a native of Laixi in Shandong Province, where the water has a special ingredient that makes women produce lots of eggs. So, just because my grandmother was from Laixi, she turned into a female yellow croaker fish. (pp. 5-6)*

But, just like his uncle, the narrator refuses to bow to this request, ostensibly out of respect for his deceased grandmother, and the story the reader holds in his hands is the best proof of this indomitable spirit of satirical, "unrealistic" writing. Even more than in "The Golden Age" (in which the narrator derives the force of his "confessions" from their proximity to reality), "2015" asserts its preference for the forceful grotesque of fantasy fiction over the painstakingly recorded and sifted memories of political persecution. It is the "unfathomable" character of art that makes it so resistant to politics, just like the "fictional" corpse made of pork meat that allows the uncle to escape from the institution.

The third story, "East Palace, West Palace," also illustrates Wang Xiaobo's reflections on how art relates to reality. This story draws on a sociological study of male homosexuality in China, based on interviews conducted over several years, and published by Wang Xiaobo and Li Yinhe under the title *Their World* in 1992.[8] The story is about a policeman in a "small town in the South" who, in the course of a night of interrogation, gradually feels a bewildering attraction for Ah-Lan, a celebrity of the local "scene" whom he has arrested in a park. Again, Wang Xiaobo plays with the idea of power as a two-sided relationship in which the humiliated victim gradually reverses the balance in his favour. He also, once again, resorts to the notion that writing literature can somehow contribute to this reversal in favour of the weak, as it is the policeman's reaction upon receiving the book written by Ah-Lan that reveals his feelings for his former prisoner.

In "The Silent Majority," Wang Xiaobo speaks of a revelation he experienced, which connects this story to the rest of his writing:

> *A few years ago, I took part in some sociological research, and so came into contact with some "weak groups," the most unique of which were homosexuals. After carrying out this research, I suddenly realized that all "weak groups" are made up of people who do not speak out about certain things. (...) And then I also suddenly realized that I was part of the largest of these "weak groups," and one that has always existed: the silent majority. The reasons why these people choose to keep silent are varied and many: some don't have the ability, or the opportunity, to speak out; others have some private feelings they prefer not to speak about; others yet, for all sorts of reasons, dislike the whole world of speaking. I belong to the latter category. But as someone of this kind, I still have a responsibility to talk about what I have seen and what I have heard.*[9]

Rather than remaining in silence or nursing old wounds, whether they are related to history, to politics, or to social

7. The Chinese text in fact refers to the "residence permit register." By translating *hukou*, the residence permit used by the Chinese government to prevent internal migration and other population movement, as "census," the translators have perhaps gone too far in "explaining away" a "Chinese specificity" that has not disappeared in Wang's imagined – or indeed in our actual – twenty-first century.
8. Li Yinhe has continued research on this and related subjects and continues to shock the Chinese public with her advocacy of extramarital sex (a blog posting on this subject made headlines in 2007) and proposal of legislation on gay marriage to the CPPCC (as noted by the translators in their introduction, p. x).
9. Wang Xiaobo, *Siwei de lequ*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

discrimination, Wang Xiaobo, although he is wary of how speech can be manipulated, ultimately chooses to speak out, preferably in a manner that is so shocking and unconventional as to be irreclaimable by any type of political discourse. Chinese commentators tend to view Wang Xiaobo as a critic of the passive role of Chinese intellectuals and their readiness to bow to their responsibilities vis-à-vis the state. Some believe that Wang construes political oppression as a form of sado-masochist play between perverted rulers and consenting victims.[10] This suggests an overly simplified understanding of Foucault. Wang remains first and foremost an anti-authoritarian writer; he was interested in sex because it was shocking and illustrated Foucault's understanding of power relationships as "never entirely asymmetrical," not because he saw it as the ultimate truth of all social relations.[11] From this point of view, it seems naïve for the translators to insist that the "real crime" depicted in "The Golden Age" and "East Palace, West Palace" is the love that ultimately develops out of the sexual relationships (p. xii). Wang is preoccupied with the intertwining of "love" and "sex," or to put it differently, between the submission to power and the attraction to the sphere of power. In this regard, the two stories should probably be distinguished: Is the totalitarian domination described in "The Golden Age" really of the same nature as the bureaucratic oppression endured by Ah-Lan at the hands of an ordinary policeman in post-Maoist China? This is a question often discussed in relation to Foucault, and one that Wang does not answer, but which shows how closely his works are related to the politics of our own societies. By eschewing a straightforward answer, Wang ultimately suggests his anti-authoritarian view of writing itself. He was not interested in "enlightening" others and "elevating their soul," which in his eyes was part of the "tax" the civic-minded Chinese unflinchingly paid:

> *According to him [a friend Wang Xiaobo had given his first book to], writing must allow you to educate the people, to elevate their soul. These are truly golden words. But among the inhabitants of this world, the one I would most like to elevate is myself. This is a very base, very egoistic conception, but it is a very frank one.*[12]

Rather than its moral or political "meaning," Wang Xiaobo is concerned with the subversive nature of art, which is expressed in the very exuberance of his fictional constructions. The pleasure derived from this type of fiction may be purely egoistic for the writer, but it is highly contagious, and for this reason alone represents an irrepressible threat to authority. •

10. For example Ding Dong and Dai Jinhua. See Wendy Larson, "Okay, Whatever: Intellectuals, Sex, and Time in Wang Xiaobo's *The Golden Years*," *The China Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 29–56.
11. This dualistic vision of power in Wang's writings can probably be traced back beyond Foucault to Hegel's dialectics.
12. Wang Xiaobo, *Siwei de lequ*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.