The Subversive “Pleasure of Thinking”

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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 to 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.

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

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 (5), 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 arouses 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 reinvited 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 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 Qingyang, another Wang Er, a 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. 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 criticize 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 fan-
tastic experiences. That story got me into trouble.
Somebody checked my census register(7) and discov-
ered that I had only one uncle. This uncle attended
primary 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 profes-
sion. 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 mathe-
matician, 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 grand-
mother, 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 resis-
tant 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 some-
how 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 revela-
tion 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 exist-
ed: 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;
others have some private feelings they prefer not
to speak about; others yet, for all sorts of reasons, dis-
like the whole world of speaking. I belong to the lat-
ter 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).

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.

11. This dualistic vision of power in Wang’s writings can probably be traced back beyond Foucault to Hegel’s dialectics.