

INTRODUCTION

On April 11, 1997, in his suburban Beijing apartment, Wang Xiaobo died of a sudden heart attack. That May he would have celebrated his forty-fifth birthday and the debut of a three-volume collection of his fiction, which had been rejected in various forms by more than twenty publishers. His death shocked his friends in addition to a growing readership, who had begun to know his name through his satiric essays, models of the revived *zawen* genre, an important vehicle in twentieth-century China for making social commentary and initiating intellectual trends. More than a hundred newspapers and magazines throughout the country reported the loss of an original thinker and literary pioneer and noted the posthumous publication of his novellas. Within months his fame had spread throughout China.

Since then nearly all his work has been published and kept in print. His trilogy, comprising two novella collections and a novel—*The Golden Age*, *The Silver Age*, and *The Bronze Age*—sold eighty thousand copies in its first printing and was selected as one of the ten most influential books of 1997 in China. Two *zawen* collections, *My Spiritual Home* and *The Silent Majority*, published that same year, remain best sellers. To this day the so-called Wang Xiaobo fever hasn't cooled any. He has become a cult figure among university students and a cultural phenomenon at the turn of the new century.

The popularity of his fiction in particular had been slow in coming, though, and the interest he generated on university campuses as a novelist did not mean in China acceptance by the literary establishment, which was located elsewhere. Many of the

most important figures in Chinese letters in the nineties, members of the writers' union, for example, were neither university trained, nor university based. A public—including Wang's contemporary creative writers—might have thought itself well prepared for the fiction by the *zawen*, which tackled almost all issues of significance to the intelligentsia: the collective hysteria in the Cultural Revolution and its variations in the new era, the fate of Chinese intellectuals in the twentieth century and the call for a rational and scientific spirit, the save-the-world complex and fanatical nationalism, the moral and cultural conservatism in China and the cultural relativism in the West, feminism, homosexuality, and environmental protection. However, many who read the fiction because of his *zawen* were disappointed. While they recognized the quirky logic and ironic wit that were the hallmarks of his *zawen*, they felt confused by the ambiguity of the subject matter of his fiction, the frank and unsentimental approach to sexuality, and his innovative style. The literary establishment simply ignored his fiction. Positive critical reception tended to come from scholars who were not necessarily specialists in literature, with the notable exception of Professor Ai Xiaoming of Zhongshan University, who first recognized Wang's avant-garde talent and has written extensively about him. We rely here on *The Romantic Knight*, a collection of materials about Wang, which Ai edited with Wang's widow, Li Yinhe. Beyond Ai Xiaoming and several others, mainstream creative writers and literary critics maintain a relative silence to the present time.

Despite the initial controversy and pockets of continuing indifference, Wang Xiaobo's fame as a novelist has grown steadily over the last nine years, as has the evidence of his influence in literary and cultural circles. On the fifth anniversary of Wang's death in 2002, a group of his admirers, mostly young people, published a collection of fiction in tribute to him that imitates his style, titled *The Running Dogs at Wang Xiaobo's Door*. The internationally renowned director Zhang Yuan collaborated with Wang to make the film *East Palace, West Palace* from Wang's story "Sentiments Like Water," written for the film. (Since story and screenplay were written almost simultaneously, and the film is responsible for what awareness Westerners may have of Wang, we use the film title for the novella included in this book.) Zhang is considering adapting "The Golden Age," another of the stories in this collection, for the screen, as well.

On April 11, 2005, the eighth anniversary of his death, an exhibition celebrating his life and writing was held in Lu Xun Museum, which marks the official recognition of Wang Xiaobo as one of the major literary figures of twentieth-century China.

The museum exhibition, among the other commemorations and publications, not only serves notice of the end of outsider status, but also draws attention to the facts of Wang Xiaobo's life that illuminate that status. The personal background of any writer is an account of influences, and Wang's family history certainly contains elements of obvious significance for his fiction. His father, Wang Fang Ming, was a famous logician. His older brother, Wang Xiaoping, followed his father, studying under the founder of Mathematical and Symbolic Logic in China, Shen Youding, and received his PhD in philosophy in 1988 from Tulane University. (Wang Xiaobo often uses the language of logic for parody.) Wang was the fourth eldest of five children, and would have been, in the traditional methods of ranking sons, an "Er," or number two son, like so many of his fictional protagonists. Wang was born in 1952, the year his father was labeled an alien-class element and purged from the Communist Party. His mother named him Xiaobo—small wave—in hopes that the political tide would be just that. The turning was not to come until 1979. He writes about his family's political danger in *The Silent Majority*, so titled because the situation of his family, their silencing and their peril, was so common among members of his generation.

In Wang Xiaobo's case, through his family, that common fate had some compensations. Growing up, he had the privilege of reading the world's classic literature in translation while others had to recite Chairman Mao's little red book. In his famous essay "My Spiritual Home," he reminisces about how, in his childhood, he and his brother often got into trouble by stealing books from their father's locked bookcases. Among the volumes under lock and key were Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Shakespeare's plays, and even Boccaccio's *Decameron*. This reading may well have helped keep his judgment intact even during the most absurd period in modern China. One telling detail in his familiarity with the Western tradition is his particular fondness for Mark Twain.

Like most of his contemporaries, Wang was sent down to the countryside to accept "peasants' reeducation" and went to university only after Mao's death in 1976. Wang studied in the

United States from 1984 to 1988, earning an MA in comparative literature from the University of Pittsburgh. He married the noted sociologist Li Yinhe in 1980. Their collaboration in the groundbreaking work, *Their World: A Study of the Male Homosexual Community in China*, supplied the basis for Wang's "East Palace, West Palace." Li Yinhe also wrote extensively about Foucault and sexuality. In 2004, she drafted a proposal on same-sex marriage and tried unsuccessfully to get the National People's Congress to pass it. Wang taught at university after his return in 1988 and then resigned to become one of the few freelance writers in China until his death.

Most of Wang Xiaobo's protagonists bear the same name, Wang Er, literally Wang Number Two. They are either city students who were sent down to the countryside for rustication during the Cultural Revolution and then returned to the city to work various factory jobs (*The Golden Age*), or artists of various sorts at various times. One lives in a dysfunctional future and needs a license to practice painting ("2015" in *The Silver Age*); another lives in the ancient Tang dynasty ("Hongfu Elopes at Midnight" in *The Iron Age*). These multiple Wang Ers, when faced with a nightmarish Orwellian world, find no traditional system sufficient to cope with reality. Both worldly Confucianism and reclusive Taoism fall short. As in Orwell's *1984*, in Wang's fictional world sex becomes an expression of rebellion against oppressive authority and of the cost of that rebellion for the individual.

These two subjects, power and sexuality, emerge as the most notable themes in Wang's fiction. It might be natural for us to assume that one—power—would be clearly dominant. Wang makes it hard to tell what is in the ascendant by approaching his subject matter with lightness, even playfulness, yet the barbs directed at the current social and political order are not blunted in any way. In his award-winning novella *The Golden Age*, a young, beautiful doctor, Chen Qingyang, has a problem with sex that threatens to place her in political jeopardy. She is haunted by a baseless rumor that, in her imprisoned husband's absence, she is promiscuous—"damaged goods" as we have translated it—an accusation that could bring down the force of the authorities, could turn her into an "object of proletarian dictatorship," and put her under "the revolutionary mass's surveillance." Having committed neither the "criminal act" nor possessing the motive

to do so, Chen Qingyang feels it necessary to defend her innocence, like Joseph K in *The Trial* or the Land-Surveyor K in *The Castle*. Only the bureaucratic institutions that Kafka's protagonists deal with have given place to a tacit collusion between the voyeuristic totalitarian authority and the proletarian masses. Thinking that Wang Er, like herself sent down from Beijing, might be able to understand her plight, she goes to him for help in proving her innocence. Wang Er might have offered her sympathy easily enough—he can prove logically that Chen Qingyang is not damaged goods, but he purposely disappoints her by suggesting she become real damaged goods. Soon the story of the insulted and the injured becomes the story of a woman who actively seeks to live up to her fictitious crime—one of Wang's legacies is his refusal to portray the intellectuals who suffered in the Cultural Revolution as tragic heroes.

The logic here is quirky and Kafkaesque, not because of the mysterious and unmerited accusation but rather in the charge taken on by the protagonist to live up to and substantiate the accusation. It is what Kundera points out when defining *the Kafkan* in his essay "Somewhere Behind" in *The Art of the Novel*: first the offense seeks the punishment, then the punishment seeks the offense, and finally the punishment finds the offense. Kundera further points out that the nature of the Kafkan is not tragedy, but comedy of the absurd kind, black comedy. Wang is obviously a skilled practitioner of this genre. His insight into human absurdity, his ability to provoke laughter from horror, along with his gift of handling weighty subjects in the lightest tone, not only make him a brilliant literary pioneer in China, but also put him in the company of such masters of black comedy as George Orwell, Joseph Heller, Anthony Burgess, Kurt Vonnegut, or postmodernists such as Italo Calvino, or Donald Barthelme.

Wang's stories display many of the characteristics associated with postmodern fiction: the flattened emotional affect; the narrative reflexivity—complete with interruptions by both the author and narrators; the "anti-style" resistance to eloquence, except for the purpose of deflation, and reliance on repetition of commonplace phrases; the frank, often antic, treatment of sexuality. However, the nihilism, the failure to find value in anything, charged to so much postmodern work cannot be found at the

heart of Wang's writing. Rather, as some critics point out, his deconstruction of prevailing values always points in a constructive direction. One of the themes of *The Golden Age* is love, illustrated with his peculiar logic in the following:

I still keep the duplicates of my confessions from back then. Once, I showed them to a friend who majored in English and American literature. He said they were all very good, with the charm of Victorian underground novels. As for the details I had cut out, he said it was a good idea to cut them out, because those details destroyed the unity of the story. My friend is really erudite. I was very young when I wrote the confessions and didn't have any learning (I still don't have much learning), or any idea what Victorian underground novels were. What I had in my mind was that I shouldn't be an instigator. Many people would read my confessions. If after reading them they couldn't help screwing damaged goods, that wasn't so bad; but if they learned the other thing, that would be really bad.

Readers must wonder about "the other thing" that is even worse than "screwing damaged goods." We soon learn that it is nothing other than love.

Chen Qingyang said that by her true sin she meant the incident on Mount Qingping. She was being carried on my shoulder then, wearing the Thai skirt that bound her legs tightly together, and her hair hung down to my waist. The white cloud in the sky hurried on its journey, and there were only two of us in the midst of mountains. I had just smacked her bottom; I spanked her really hard. The burning feeling was fading. After that I cared about nothing else but continuing to climb the mountain. Chen Qingyang said that moment she felt limp all over, so she let go of herself, hanging over my shoulder. That moment she felt like a spring vine entangling a tree, or a young bird clinging to its master. She no longer cared about anything else, and at that moment she had forgotten everything. At that moment she fell in love with me, and that would never change.

Well, it *is* love that is the true sin, the thing that ultimately makes the authorities aghast, which leads us to conclude, following the trail of the irony, that what the authorities most fear, noted so clearly by the narrator, the author most values.

But of course it is not an unproblematic love represented here and elsewhere in these novellas. (We will not be giving much away, if we suggest that it does not lead to bliss for the characters in this—or any—of his stories.) In this case of Chen Qingyang and Wang Er, there are the distinct overtones, in themselves ironic surely, of the every-woman-loves-a-fascist kind of domination in the slap on the behind that is the blow that leads to love. It's worth noting, too, that generally Wang Xiaobo's women are the masterful parties in relationships. However, this moment on the mountain certainly seems to be a parody of the traditional, not to say even outmoded, dance of dominance and submission. And the play of dominance and submission is a key area of contact between Wang Xiabao's view of the personal life and the life of the nation around him.

Dominance and submission are very much in evidence in "2015," a novella from his dystopian *The Silver Age*. In this work another Wang Er, after being put into a labor camp for the reason that people find his abstract paintings "unfathomable," falls into the hands of a sadistic policewoman; "East Palace, West Palace" presents a more clearly sadomasochistic love story, with a self-consciously masochist gay writer, Ah Lan, on one side and a handsome policeman, Xiao Shi, unaware of his homosexual and sadistic tendencies, on the other. Again, the sadistic and masochistic roles of the characters intertwine with their social roles: sadist/police versus masochist/artist. As Professor Dai Jinghua of Beijing University insightfully points out, the key to Wang's work is not Freud, but Foucault. The sadomasochistic element in his work functions not as a space for rebellion, but as a metaphor for state power and the voluntary and even enthusiastic collaboration of its subjects. According to Dai, this underscoring of the collaborative nature of the mechanism of oppression subverts the role, of suffering tragic hero, in which Chinese intellectuals love to see themselves.

Outside of China, the general association between contemporary Chinese literature and suffering, particularly with the

many recent portrayals of the Cultural Revolution, may be at risk of becoming automatic. Wang Xiaobo understood this. He offers in his fiction an alternative vision: stylistically innovative and wickedly funny, which ought to disrupt any stereotypes-in-the-making, if we have done his work anything like justice in our translation. And if we have done well, what we have done well was assisted greatly by a number of people. We owe special thanks to Li Yinhe for her trust and support. Professor Ai Xiaoming, of Zhong Shan University, and Wang Xiaoping, Wang Xiaobo's brother, both of whom were generous with their time and insights into the work. We profited from the guidance of professors Howard Goldblatt and Robert Hegel. Zhang Jing and Professor Michael Berry are due our gratitude for their sound advice. Lin Ling, Zhang Jie, Tom Lavalley, Jiang Yansheng, Yang Xia, and Chen Ping helped with the finer points of language. We also want to thank the two anonymous readers, provided by State University of New York Press, for their careful reading and useful commentary.

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