Sexual Life in Modern China

Ian Johnson

Mark Leong

Wang Xiaobo, Beijing, 1996; photograph by Mark Leong

Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, Chinese writers grappled with the traumas of the Mao period, seeking to make sense of their suffering. As in the imperial era, most had been servants of the state, loyalists who might criticize but never seek to overthrow the system. And yet they had been persecuted by Mao, forced to labor in the fields or shovel manure for offering even the most timid opinions.

Many wrote what came to be known as scar literature, recounting the tribulations of educated people like themselves. A few wrote sex-fueled accounts of coming of age in the vast reaches of Inner Mongolia or the imagined romanticism of Tibet. Almost all of them were self-pitying and insipid, produced by people who were aggrieved by but not reflective about having served a system that killed millions.

Then, in 1992, an unknown writer published a strange novella that told the hilarious and absurd story of two young lovers exiled to a remote part of China near the Burmese border during the Cultural Revolution. There they have an extramarital affair, are caught by officials and forced to write endless confessions, tour the countryside in a minstrel show reenacting their sinful behavior, escape to the mountains, and return for more punishment, until one day they are released, unrepentant and slightly confused.

The novella was immediately popular for its sex, which is omnipresent and farcical. But it isn't described as something liberating during a period of oppression or as a force of nature unleashed by living in Chinese borderlands. Instead, sex is something the Communist Party wants to control—the apparatchiks want the couple to write endless self-criticism so they can drool over the purple prose—but the narrator and his lover still manage to imbue it with a deeper meaning that they understand only later, at the end of the story.

After the sex, what was most shocking about the novella was how intellectuals are portrayed. They are almost as bad as the party hacks who control them. The novel's hero cons his lover into the sack, picks fights with locals, dawdles at work, and is as tricky as his tormentors. The novella's title added to the sense of the absurd. It was called *The Golden Age*, leaving many to wonder how this could have been anyone's or any country's best years.

And who was Wang Xiaobo, the author? He was not part of the state writers' association and hadn't published fiction before. But after its publication in Taiwan, *The Golden Age* was soon published in China and became an immediate success. Wang followed it with a torrent of novellas and essays. He was especially popular with college students, who admired his cynicism, irony, humor—and of course the sex.

Just five years later, in 1997, Wang died of a heart attack at the age of forty-four. Few remarked on his passing. Most in China's literary scene saw him as little more than an untrained writer who had become famous thanks to bawdy, coarse works. Abroad, almost none of his writing had been translated. He seemed destined to be little more than one of the many writers whose works are reduced to fodder for doctoral students researching an era's zeitgeist.

In the twenty years since Wang's death, however, something remarkable has happened. In the West he remains virtually unknown; a single volume of his novellas has been translated into English. But Chinese readers and critics around the world now widely regard Wang as one of the most important modern Chinese authors. Two new collections of his works have been published in China. Internet forums honor his life and writings. A café has opened in his name. He is now included in every major anthology of recent Chinese fiction, and his essays are considered crucial to understanding China's recent past.

He was also an early user of the Internet and spoke up online for disadvantaged groups—then an unusual position but now common among public figures such as the filmmaker Jia Zhangke, the writer Liao Yiwu, and the novelist Yan Lianke. In a less overtly activist way he resembles the recently deceased Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo: an interloper who pushed for change outside the state literary and intellectual apparatus.

Wang Xiaobo was born in Beijing in 1952, the fourth of five children; his father, the logician Wang Fangming, was a university professor. That year, the elder Wang had been labeled a class enemy and purged from the Communist Party. The newborn's name, Xiaobo, or "small wave," reflected the family's hope that their political trouble would be minor. It wasn't, and people like Wang Fangming were rehabilitated only after Mao died in 1976.

In his memoirs, Wang's elder brother, Wang Xiaoping, said their mother was so distraught at her husband's political problems that she spent her pregnancy weeping. She was unable to breastfeed, and Wang Xiaobo grew up with rickets. He had a slightly bulging skull and a barrel chest, as well as bones so soft that he would entertain his four siblings by yanking his legs behind his head and pulling himself along the floor on his stomach like a crab. His one privilege was sweetened calcium pills, which he ate by the handful while his siblings watched enviously.

Despite the family's misfortunes, Wang grew up intellectually privileged. His father had a wide collection of foreign literature in translation. In school, Wang would stare at the wall and ignore his teachers, but at home he devoured works by Shakespeare, Ovid, Boccaccio, and especially Mark Twain. His brother estimated that Xiaobo could read one hundred pages an hour, even of difficult works by Marx, Hegel, or classical Chinese writers.

When Wang Xiaobo was fourteen, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution, hoping to purge the Party of his enemies and return the revolution to a purer state. After that quickly descended into chaos, Mao ordered young people to go down to the countryside to learn from the peasants. Even though weak, Wang volunteered to go to Yunnan, spurred by romantic fantasies of the border region. He was fifteen when he arrived, and he wrote endlessly while there. He would get up in the middle of the night to scribble with a blue pen on a mirror, cleaning it and then writing again. He dreamed of being a writer and rehearsed his stories over and over again.

When he returned to Beijing in 1972 he kept writing but didn't publish. He worked in a factory for six years, and when universities reopened he got a degree and taught in a high school. All along he stayed silent until one day he couldn't.

I have met Wang's widow, Li Yinhe, several times over the past twenty-five years.[1] Until recently I thought of her mainly as China's foremost expert on sex and interviewed her about Chinese people's sexual liberation in the reform era (a typical clichéd idea written up by foreign journalists; how often have we read stories about Chinese people's sexual liberation?).

It took me awhile to realize that she was actually a leading chronicler of something more profound: the return of the private sphere in the lives of ordinary people. She had researched and written about China's gay and lesbian movement, and in recent years has stood up for transgender and bisexual citizens as well, but the bigger picture was the government's retreat from people's daily lives.

This past spring I talked with her about her late husband. She said that they had had a similar upbringing. Both came from educated families, and both had secretly read novels like *The Catcher in the Rye*. While in the United States in the 1980s, Wang had read Michel Foucault and his ideas about the human body, but she felt he was more influenced by Bertrand Russell and ideas of personal freedom. "The person he liked to cite the most was Russell, the most basic and earliest kind of liberalism," she said. "I think he had started reading these books in his childhood."

The two met in 1979 and married the next year. Li was part of a new generation of sociologists trained after the ban on the discipline had been lifted. In the Mao era, sociology had been seen as superfluous because Marxism was supposed to be able to explain all social phenomena. Supported by China's pioneering sociologist Fei Xiaotong, Li studied at the University of Pittsburgh from 1982 to 1988. Wang accompanied her for the final four years and studied with the Chinese-American historian Cho-yun Hsu.

Now retired, Hsu told me that he was initially flummoxed by Wang. Although not formally a novelist, the young man wanted to write. And although he was living in the United States he spoke very little English. "I realized that I was training not a historian or sociologist but a Chinese novelist who needed to understand history," he said. "He was writing a form of trauma literature." Hsu put Wang on a course of independent study, mostly systematic reading in the Chinese classics and recent Chinese history, which had been lacking in his Communist-era education. Wang received a master's degree in East Asian Studies but spent most of his time writing—for the desk drawer. "He wasn't ready to publish," Hsu said. "And I respected that. My goal was to help him develop."

After Li received her Ph.D., the couple returned to China and collaborated on a groundbreaking study, *Their World: A Study of the Male Homosexual Community in China*. Li eventually took a position at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and Wang taught history and sociology at Renmin and Peking universities.

The 1989 student movement came and went, ending on June 4 with the

[1] See my interview with her, "Sex in China," *NYR Daily*, September 9, 2014.

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Tiananmen massacre. Still, Wang did not publish. "On the night of June 4, we were actually in Xidan [the intersection in Beijing near the worst killings]," Li said. The couple watched the protesters, hoping they would succeed where their generation had failed. "Wang Xiaobo hid behind a concrete traffic island at a corner of the street to take photos," she told me. "We thought at the time that we should just let the young people do it."

Staying silent became the theme of Wang's most famous essay, "The Silent Majority." He describes how during the Mao era people were silenced by the ubiquity of the great leader: his thoughts, his ideas, and his words rained down on people day and night. Later, that left a scar, which for Wang meant that he "could not trust those who belonged to the societies of speech." The struggle to find a voice became a personal quest and an allegory for the whole nation's trauma during the Mao era.

This is what drew Wang to homosexuals in China. Disadvantaged groups were silent groups. They had been deprived of a voice, and society ignored them, sometimes even denying their existence. Then Wang had an epiphany—that all of Chinese society was voiceless:

> Later, I had another sudden realization: that I belonged to the greatest disadvantaged group in history, the silent majority. These people keep silent for any number of reasons, some because they lack the ability or the opportunity to speak, others because they are hiding something, and still others because they feel, for whatever reason, a certain distaste for the world of speech. I am one of these last groups and, as one of them, I have a duty to speak of what I have seen and heard.

Wang's most prominent chronicler in the West, Sebastian Veg at the School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences in Paris, believes that he was shocked by the 1989 massacre and his own failure to support the protesters. At the same time, he was searching for a new way for people to change society that went beyond protests and marches. Finally, he had something that needed to be said. In 1992 Wang finished *The Golden Age*, which he had been working on since returning from Yunnan in 1972. Unsure how to publish it, he sent a copy to Professor Hsu in Pittsburgh. Hsu sent it to *United Daily News*, a prominent Chinese-language newspaper in Taiwan that sponsored a literary prize. Wang won and entered what he called a "yammering madhouse"—the world of speech.

Wang was the second son in his family, or *er*—number two—a name he gave most of his heroes: Wang Er. In *The Golden Age*, Wang Er is a twenty-one-year-old sent to Yunnan, where he meets Chen Qingyang, a twenty-six-year-old doctor whose husband has been in prison for a year. Gossips accuse Chen of being "damaged goods"—of having cheated on her husband with Wang—and she asks him to vouch for the fact that they haven't slept together. Parodying the logical formulas of Wang Xiaobo's father, Wang Er tells Chen:

> We would have to prove two things first before our innocence could be established:
>
> 1. Chen Qingyang was a virgin;
> 2. Castrated at birth, I was unable to have sex.
>
> These two things would be hard to prove, so we couldn't prove our innocence. I preferred to prove our guilt.

Eventually the couple have an affair and retreat to the mountains. They are later rounded up and "struggled against"—put on a stage and forced to reenact their sins. But instead of humiliation, Chen feels only that this is an acting challenge. And when they are forced to confess their sins in writing, both tell the most absurd stories of their sexploits, seeing the punishment as a literary exercise. When freed of this state bullying, the couple make love in their room—a true emotional act that the party couldn't control.

Wang Xiaobo and Li Yinhe, Beijing, 1996

Mark Leong

The experience makes Wang Er realize that society is nothing more than a series of power relationships. In the village, he notes, locals didn't just castrate bulls, they also hammered their testicles into a pulp to make sure the bulls got the message. After that, he says, even the feistiest bull was a docile beast of burden.

> 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.

This message of control is reflected in Wang's other fictional works. As part of *The Trilogy of the Ages*, *The Golden Age* is a novella sandwiched between *The Bronze Age*, a series of curious stories set in the Tang dynasty (one of which has been recently translated by Eric Abrahamsen as "Mister Lover") and *The Silver Age*, a series of futuristic dystopian stories in which social control is nearly perfected. This makes the Cultural Revolution merely a variation of the suffering that humans have endured in societies throughout the ages. Wang also set down his ideas in two collections of essays published in his lifetime: *My Spiritual Homeland* and *The Silent Majority*. Many of the pieces originally appeared in the edgy magazines and newspapers that used to exist in southern China and which over the past decade or so have been hammered into docility.

I met Wang in 1996 because of a piece he had published in *Orient*, a magazine that had devoted a special edition to the thirtieth anniversary of the start of the Cultural Revolution. Wang's essay analyzed periods of unreason in history and the thinkers who resisted: Galileo challenging the doctrines of Rome; the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig opposing the Nazis; and the Chinese writer Lao She opposing Maoist excesses. But Wang didn't stop there. He also pointed out parallels to the China of the 1990s (and, in effect, today) by writing about the rise of nationalism.

At our first meeting, in a hotel near his apartment, he showed up disheveled, wearing a Hawaiian shirt that made him look like a Hong Kong businessman on a weekend fling. He had a big sideways grin and a mop of hair combed over rakishly. He talked garrulously for a couple of hours, and later we went home to meet his wife and play with his computer.

One of his biggest complaints then was a book called *China Can Say No*, a collection of polemical essays by a half-dozen young writers fed up with the United States and its perceived bullying of China. The writers ranted against Hollywood, Boeing jets, and other reminders that China was inextricably bound to the outside world. Wang thought the book was rubbish, written by opportunists. "People of my age had miserable experiences. We have seen the dark side of things," he told me. "But today's young people may not be aware of it. [The writers] are sentimental and unreasonable, and that is why I dislike them."

Those young authors and most of their intellectual contemporaries committed what for Wang was a cardinal sin: they aspired to lead society rather than remain outside of it as independent critics. Wang said: "The maladies of Chinese society are mainly from autocracy and centralization of state power. In the Chinese cultural tradition, there is no sense of the people."

About six months after we talked, Wang died. His friend the literary critic Ai Xiaoming[2] carried out what she thought of as his last wish. *The Trilogy of the Ages* had been published just days earlier, which he hadn't lived to see. She placed it on his body before it entered the crematorium's furnace.

As the scope of Wang Xiaobo's publications in those five frenetic years became apparent, Chinese critics became more appreciative. On the fifth anniversary of his death, the former culture minister Wang Meng wrote an article about Wang Xiaobo saying he had "lived a life of clarity." The strong sales of his books didn't hurt either. The Shanghai-based critic and literature professor Huang Ping told me that Wang now rivals the World War II–era Hong Kong writer Zhang Ailing (better known abroad as Eileen Chang) as the most popular modern Chinese author.

Wang had no sense of this in his lifetime, according to Li Yinhe. "There weren't too many literature reviews of his works in the mainstream," she said. "People just began to pay attention to his works and essays. We had no idea of his sales."

Huang has a slightly contrarian explanation of Wang's popularity. While government critics see him as a libertarian, he can also be read as someone whose irony and sarcasm exonerates middle-class Chinese from responsibility for social problems. Huang said that "instead of explaining how to overcome the issues, [Wang] tells you by his ironic tone that the issues have nothing to do with you."

This could be one reason why Wang's works are in print in China—their humor and sarcasm can be seen as putting distance between then and now, in essence absolving today's Communist Party for its sins of half a century earlier. And yet his books don't read as if he were a practitioner of what Perry Link calls "daft hilarity"—a use of humor to avoid social criticism. In his fiction, the system and the officials are clearly misguided. His essays are also sharply critical of issues like nationalism. His support for marginalized members of society is now common among Chinese intellectuals in the post-Tiananmen era. People like Ai Xiaoming turned to filmmaking, along with independent filmmakers like Hu Jie and Wu Wenguang, to document victims of the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution. And Li Yinhe became an advocate for the LGBT movement, eventually coming out herself as having a transgender partner.

It's abroad that Wang is little known. Only three short works, including *The Golden Age* and the story "2015" from *The Silver Age*, are in print in English, published in one volume with the silly title *Wang in Love and Bondage*.[3] The

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[2]Interviewed in "The People in Retreat," *NYR Daily*, September 8, 2016.

[3]Translated and with an introduction by Hongling Zhang and Jason Sommer (SUNY Press, 2007).

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cover is a disaster, showing a drawing, reminiscent of a 1940s American crime novel, of a man and woman in a cheap hotel room after a tryst. Two other essays are available online, but about 90 percent of his work is untranslated—a strange oversight when publishers are often searching (seemingly desperately, given what sometimes gets translated) to find Chinese voices to explain the country's rise.

David Der-wei Wang, a professor of Chinese literature at Harvard University, said the lack of translation can't be due to Wang's work being difficult to read. Besides including Wang Xiaobo in his *New Literary History of Modern China* (2017), Professor Wang regularly teaches Wang Xiaobo in literature classes to non–China specialists. "They really like it—the style, the story, the laughter and the melancholia, even though they didn't know who this person was or what the Cultural Revolution was all about," Wang told me. "These are issues that speak to a worldwide audience."

On the anniversary of Wang Xiaobo's death this past April, some of China's best-known literary critics met to discuss his works, while his widow and a half-dozen of his fans made a pilgrimage to his grave on the outskirts of Beijing. There they spilled a bottle of his favorite grain alcohol in his honor and read poems. The group had made commemorative T-shirts for the day, with Wang's face and the dates 1952–1997 on the front. "To me, it was never easy to encounter a romantic love," Li said as she walked up the steep path. "He was the trigger to it. It felt great."

Following Li was Zhang Linlin, a thirty-year-old high school history teacher. Zhang regularly introduces his students to Wang Xiaobo. He said they are drawn to Wang's works for the sex but stay for the ideas and the social criticism. For Zhang, Wang has become something more important than a favorite author—a guidepost, his principled and thoughtful life an inspiration for his own. "When Nietzsche was in trouble, he'd find a portrait of Schopenhauer and shout, 'Save me, Schopenhauer,'" Zhang said. "I hold a portrait of Wang Xiaobo and think about what he would do. He shows me the direction. He is a perfect person." ☐

SALMON

How salmon love
sex enough to fight uphill in waters blasting
brilliant, some
one hundred mph (fact-checkers,
forget it, I'm close.) How we stood, old inkling
of such exhausting *omg*
Darwin would have . . . (the difference, the same-
thingness, animal hungers and fury and persistence,
the belief, some amazing *something next*)
exploded!—his head
on a pillow most afternoons in the parlor, wrapped
in her quiet concern. Emma
the perfect nurse, they say, who married the perfect patient,
Victorian fable, velvet-striped wallpaper even
on the ceiling would be my guess.
Because that trip he took in youth is
everlasting youth, island of
huge tortoises and the tiny cactus finch
plus that other
green spot in the sea, its DNA trace
of the grand extinct Dodo
too trusting to run from sailors with their clubs, too weird,
and bigger, certainly more
feathered and blank-eyed than one impossible
irreplaceable Great Uncle Cedric
I heard of, just wanting a little honest-to-god
barbeque at the wedding.
The forces of life
are mysterious. But thrilling
and painful, August in Alaska near
Seward, gone up in a firestorm during
the quake, 1964, any year in a fade next to our
stunned standing at the salmon weir,
a patch of woods, sunlit river
raging, those bright muscle-creatures blown back
at it at it leaping, failing spectacular
upstarts all over again
human. What it means to
love is speechless.

—Marianne Boruch

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