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“Vicious Animals”: Wang Shuo and Negotiated Nostalgia for History

Yibing Huang

While constantly provoking controversies, Wang Shuo has been the darling of the Chinese literary market throughout the 1980s and 90s, the so-called reform era. He is the creator of the brand-new “hooligan literature” (*pizi wenxue*), in the form of “best-sellers” and popular fiction. Born in 1958 and growing up in a military compound in Beijing, Wang Shuo is one generation younger than that of the Red Guards and received his entire education during the Cultural Revolution. He joined the PLA navy in 1976 and worked in a state-owned pharmaceutical company in Beijing in the early 1980s. In 1983 he quit his job, engaged in various shady enterprises with his friends, and went broke. Only then did he determine to sit down and write fiction. Wang Shuo’s own life experiences provided unique material for his autobiographical or semi-autobiographical “hooligan” sagas.

痞子文學

Wang Shuo’s popularity is so self-evident that he dares to make one of his characters in the novel *Playing for Thrills* (*Wande jiushi xintiao*) (1988) say the following: “You must have read his stuff. In China now the only book with a larger print run is *Selected Works of Chairman Mao*” (Wang Shuo 1997: 44-45).¹ Now, this juxtaposition may seem merely a blasphemous joke, since Wang Shuo’s own style is often viewed as frivolous when compared to Mao’s didacticism. But, this joke may actually invoke an important question regarding Wang Shuo’s relationship to the Cultural Revolution and Mao himself. As a

玩的就是心跳

¹ In citations from *Playing for Thrills*, I have used Howard Goldblatt’s translation (1997), which I have occasionally modified in the direction of greater literalism while consulting the Chinese original (Wang 1995). For citations from Wang Shuo’s other fictional works discussed in this article, I have provided my own translations.

玩主 流氓

self-proclaimed “playing master” (*wanzhu*) and “hooligan” (*pizi* or *liumang*), is Wang Shuo purely a subversion of Mao, or a corrupted version of Mao? It is hard to give a yes/no answer to this, particularly since Mao’s own public image has also undergone dramatic (if also quite contradictory) transformations during the last two decades. In particular, in the Western media, Mao has fallen considerably from the great helmsman to not only a cold-blooded tyrant, but also a notorious Casanova, or, simply a hooligan himself.² The transition from Mao to Wang Shuo, from revolution to hooliganism, shows that there is an internal dialectic that bonds these seemingly opposite extremes of China’s course during these last two decades of the reform era. This dialectic is what I propose to investigate in this article.

浮出海面

In Wang Shuo’s novella *Emerging from the Sea* (*Fuchu haimian*) (1985), there is a short exchange between the male and female protagonists when they first meet:

That girl said to me smiling: “Now I know what your vocation is.”

I waited for her words.

“Hooligan.” She joked a bit over-exaggeratedly.

Lao Ji immediately led others to laugh, and laughs continued; I had to follow, smiling too: “No, nothing to do with hooligans; they said that I am a ‘young reformer.’” (Wang Shuo 1995: 93; qtd. from Gao 1993: 217)

This is a typical case of how Wang Shuo and his protagonists play with identity labels. Later in the 1990s Wang Shuo the author himself would even push this play one step further and claim:

All the motivating forces of reform and openness come from hooligans. It is the hooligans who do business, build factories, and open shops. It is their craziness that propels the society. . .

Take a look: all those who have really succeeded, who have already become rich, are all hooligans.

In fact, what has made Wang Shuo’s appearance on the literary scene in China in the 1980s scandalous is this very ambivalence

² This may, at least partially, be due to the publication of Li (1994).

of his origin and the shifting identity between a "hooligan" and a "reformer."

In retrospect, we will find that one of the direct consequences of the Cultural Revolution's denouement is the bankruptcy of the ideological purism of "socialism" and "revolution." "Revolution" itself has largely been replaced by "reform," while socialism is increasingly hollowed out by capitalism. The latter occurs despite the party's official insistence that "reform" is a self-perfection of socialism. That is to say, "reform" itself is a rather ambiguous cover-up and has produced an equally ambivalent present. The pure and monolithic socialist and revolutionary world has now lost its own legitimacy and has been giving in to its opposite: a hybrid capitalist world operating under the name of "reform."

Of course, this capitalist "present" of the "reform" is not fully articulated and correctly named, but remains rather anonymous—as Marx put it, "here the content goes beyond the phrase" (Marx 1978b: 597). Yet precisely due to its anonymity, the emergence of this new "present" only causes even greater anxiety, since it remains unrepresented and unrepresentable. The teleological halo is lost before anybody is able to possess a proper historical awareness of it.

In this light, Wang Shuo stood uniquely, starting from the 1980s, as one of the very first writers who directly responded to the "present" by introducing the equally ambivalent "hooliganism" in the arena of popular fiction. By definition hooligans live exclusively in the present, willfully blind to the burden of history and the shadow of the Cultural Revolution. They neither reflect nor metaphysicize, but simply act and play, indulging in crooked economic schemes and womanizing. In short, they are adventurers in a new, unknown social territory, acting as an acid, permeating the old world of socialism and creating a moral void. "Who needs history if we have got the present?" We can almost immediately recognize a trade-mark Wang Shuonian sarcastic laughter whenever the word "history" is invoked in Wang Shuo's works.

But while Wang Shuo celebrates the carnival of the forever fluid and rootless socialist-capitalist present of contemporary China, in the same body of his works we also can constantly hear the angel of history's whisper: "Never forget history!"—just

like in the early 1960s when Mao once issued a similarly structured imperative, “Never forget class struggle!” A genealogical investigation will soon reveal the dual identity of the Wang Shuonian “hooligans.” Self-proclaimed as the very vanguard of reform, the Wang Shuonian “hooligans” are actually transformations from the very idealistic generation of “masters of the future” who finished their early education during the Cultural Revolution and have retained and recycled Red Guard mentality in a peculiar way. It is the sudden rupture between the two worlds of socialism and capitalism in the late 1970s that constitutes the very historical moment in which these “masters of the future” find that they are no longer compatible with their previous incarnations. It is also the sudden revelation of this moment that has propelled them to be reinvented as hooligans who have determined to ride the new wave of capitalism and become “masters of the present.” Moreover, this transformation has been a rather traumatic and if only psychologically violent one, much less frivolous and joyful than it may appear.

What comes out in the end, then, is a kind of hybrid history or autobiography which constantly negotiates and creates compromises between the past and the present, between the Cultural Revolution and socialism in the 1960s and 70s on the one hand and economic reform and capitalism in the 1980s and 90s on the other, between “masters of the future” and “masters of the present.” Indeed, this hybrid transformation from revolution to capitalism is what is encoded in the titles of two of Wang Shuo’s novels that we will discuss below—*Playing for Thrills* and *Vicious Animals (Dongwu xiongmeng)* (1991)—and is a manifestation of eclecticism itself (also see Ci 1994). More accurately, what Wang Shuo has created is a new genre: the current success story of capitalism in contemporary China with its uncertainty regarding the present and constant nostalgia for its socialist origins.

動物凶猛

Playing for Thrills: A “Capitalist Manifesto” and the Second Coming of the Cultural Revolution

The narrative of *Playing for Thrills* is a highly engaging and innovative one, which combines farce and suspense, two modes that Wang Shuo has deftly deployed in his previous works. It

starts with the "present" of 1988, which appears orgiastically jubilant and scandalously playful. Fang Yan, the first person narrator and protagonist as well as the alter ego of Wang Shuo himself, indulges in his usual activities of gambling and womanizing. But all of a sudden, in a Kafkaesque scene, he finds himself visited and interrogated by the police. He is suspected of having committed a murder ten years previously (which, according to clues in the novel, ought to be 1978), the year when the post-Cultural Revolution open-door policy was officially adopted and the economic reforms started. In order to prove his own innocence, he has to recount what he did during seven specific days at that time. However, having immersed himself for too long and far too deeply in the instant games of the present played with his gang of "hooligan" friends, Fang Yan finds himself utterly unable to recall the recent past. Here, both the readers and Fang Yan himself begin to realize that the carnivalesque present, which appears to be free of social restriction and historical burden, is actually not as healthy or normal as it appears. It starts to reveal its other side, plagued by social paralysis and historical amnesia. As in the case of the Madman in Lu Xun's "A Madman's Diary" (Kuangren riji), suddenly there is a historical urgency for Fang Yan to re-situate and re-assess his own identity and relationship with the present.

方言

In going back to the origin of Fang Yan's crisis and disillusionment, we arrive ultimately at a moment of rupture and trauma, thirteen days in 1978 in a southern city (most likely Guangzhou). It was a moment charged with a then-nascent awareness of the social and ideological rupture and transformation from socialism to capitalism in the late 1970s.

狂人日記

Facing the street traffic, Fang Yan's friends were fancying a new coup d'état as if playing a game:

"Then the city would be under our martial rule. We'd shoot our way into the municipal government and change it into the commune, where we'd form a revolutionary council and take turns holding the reins of power."

"Right, we can't repeat the mistakes of the Paris Commune," Gao Yang announced with a laugh. "We shall use an iron fist, that's the only way to consolidate power. Burning some books and burying a few Confucians alive, big deal. When we start the killing, there will be rivers of blood. . ."

“What if the rest of us joined forces to kill you?” Xu Xun laughed. “Because by then we’d all have fiefdoms and troops under our command.”

“Then we’ll launch a ‘Cultural Revolution,’” Gao Yang replied. “You’ll be criticized and ostracized and trampled under ten thousand feet.”

Everybody laughed and loved every minute of it. (Wang Shuo 1997: 306-08)

Beneath this seemingly naive and joking facade, again, a real and serious message has been conveyed: the form of the Cultural Revolution has gained its permanent currency in the consciousness of Fang Yan or Wang Shuo’s generation, and it can be recuperated as a vehicle carrying the paradoxical or mixed contents of the upcoming new era. In other words, even if the void of definite ideological content is incarnated only as a game, the transformation from socialism into capitalism is going to be just as violent, unpredictable and traumatic (if only psychologically) as the most recent Cultural Revolution. In this sense, we are once again reminded that “playing” itself is indeed “for thrills” and cannot be overlooked as purely frivolous and harmless.

It is along this direction, replete with a catastrophic imagination, that we are led to the very first day of the thirteen days, which appears near the ending of the novel yet is really the beginning of the original story. It is at this point that the first person narrative almost unnoticeably changes into a third person narrative: “I” has become “Fang Yan.” And the scene is set in the big city square where Fang Yan and his army friends just arrived after they were newly discharged from the navy: “‘I like it here,’ Fang Yan said happily as he took in the view around the square. ‘I really take to the sun-drenched southern cities. I enjoy seeing elegant homes and handsome, well-dressed people’” (Wang Shuo 1997: 320). Yet his friend Gao Yang immediately put him and others down by saying, “if you plan to stick around here, you’d better either make a lot of money or learn to do without.” This provoked others to fight back:

“Why should we do without?” Xu Xun said with his eyes wide open. “Who are we, anyway? We’ve always been the cream of

the crop. We're people who eat meat while others drink soup, and this is no time to change."

"I don't believe it," Wang Ruohai protested loudly. "How could a great place like this not hold anything for us? Who are the masters of the nation? I'll send my troops to level the place."

...

"Right, don't lump us together with those people. Let those fuckheads make their fortune, then when they've got enough, we come at them with a one-hit-and-three-anti's campaign, and confiscate everything." Fang Yan said. "Why do we need money? We can manage as well without money as other people can with it. Don't they know where they are? Whose world is this? Don't tell me it's capitalism now." (Wang Shuo 1997: 321-22)

It is here again that Gao Yang spoke almost solemnly, in the tone of a new prophet:

"Ignore them," Gao Yang said to Gao Jin. "They are still in their dreams. Give them a few days here, and just watch them change. What good is money? Lots of good. There are two kinds of people who don't know the value of money: those who are born with it and those who have never tasted the joy it brings. Don't fucking pretend to be high-principled nobility! Where will you find China's nobility? They're in power now, but back thirty years ago they were all just a bunch of cowherds. Close down the national treasury, and they'll all be out on the streets begging." (Wang Shuo 1997: 322)

What immediately follows this prophecy is a highly allegorical scene with Gao Yang further providing its background voice:

Just then a building on the edge of the square caught fire. . . half the building was engaged, flames burning through the roof and leaping into the bright sky, now painted red. Clouds of black smoke billowed upward to foul the vast blue sky. Speeding fire engines dragged siren wails behind them as they converged on the square and rushed to the building in flames.

"I am utterly tired of all those people who have no capital but act like they're members of the nobility, the upper class. The task of this epoch is to bury people like that, eliminate their kind

from the face of the earth before they spawn the second generation,” Gao Yang said ferociously. “Their demise won’t even match that of the descendants of the Manchu dynasty, who at least left behind treasures that could be pawned for cash. All these people have at home is ugly government-issue furniture.”

The high-rise was now a towering inferno, as bright as an enormous pine torch. In the radiant sunlight the flames were the reddest of red. . .flames leaped into the red and black sky, burning fiercely, a wanton display of might high up; rooftops, some flat, others tapered, were bathed in serenely stupefying sunbeams. (Wang Shuo 1997: 322-23)

The fire broke out on the square under the blue sky and in the radiant sunlight, against a strangely serene backdrop as if it already had been accepted as part of everyday reality. This is indeed an apocalyptic scene and endows Gao Yang’s pronouncement with an ever obvious historical urgency which, however, could not yet be fully discerned and absorbed by other people such as Fang Yan himself who, as Gao Yang put it, were “still in their dreams.” What Gao Yang is pronouncing is almost a *Capitalist Manifesto* (in the mode of Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*) that foresees an even greater disruptive historical force immediately following the Cultural Revolution. In other words, ironically, what is to come is neither a restoration (of the social order and power structure before the Cultural Revolution) nor just a reform, but something far beyond most people’s scope of understanding back then. It is going to be a totally new experience, and in fact a new revolution.

In this sense, Gao Yang happened to be the real mouth-piece of Wang Shuo the author in 1988. He gave a deadly blow to the whole “master mentality” nourished by the Red Guard generation during the Cultural Revolution, a mentality which had enabled Fang Yan and his other friends to view themselves as the natural inheritors and future masters of the nation. He was also correct in predicting that Fang Yan and the others would soon change from residual naive and idealistic “future masters” of the nation into cynical and pragmatic “playing masters” of the present. Seen from this view, the idealistic education or “Bildung” of the young generation that culminated during the Cultural Revolution has now gone bankrupt altogether.

But—and here is the key—what turns out to be most ironic and unsettling about Gao Yang's pronouncement is that, if we examine it carefully, we shall discover that Gao Yang's prophecy of the apocalyptic coming of capitalism is screened through the very lens of the Cultural Revolution itself. That is to say, Gao Yang was, in a backhanded fashion, almost predicting the second coming of the Cultural Revolution itself, only this time as a radical revolution swept against the whole socialist past of China over the last thirty years. Even more clearly, the pronouncement that "[t]he task of our epoch is to bury. . ." reminds one of the very style of another of the most famous and frequently quoted of Mao's dictums and the Red Guards' mottoes during the Cultural Revolution: "Our generation of youths will participate in the battle to bury imperialism with our own hands. The task is heavy and the road is long, and yet the Chinese youths with great determination must fight with all our lives to accomplish our great historical mission" (Yang 1993: 51). The difference is that now Gao Yang (and later Fang Yan and the others too) has recuperated and recycled the whole Cultural Revolution along with its radicalism, only, ironically, to serve a totally reversed goal: to embrace capitalism and become its vanguard.

Accordingly, while admitting the bankruptcy of the old "master mentality," neither Gao Yang nor Fang Yan is willing to let it go completely. One thing remains unchanged: they were educated to believe that they are the future masters of the nation; now, facing the danger of losing this privileged position, they want to ride the new tide and regain it. If they can no longer be the masters of a socialist nation, then they will try to be the playing masters of a new capitalist present. Idealism has degenerated into cynicism and opportunism but the "master mentality" has managed to survive through hooliganism and invented "game playing," with history itself becoming just a vessel, a form or genre that can be parodied and played with. And this is the real journey that Fang Yan and his friends have embarked upon during the past decade of the era of reform: to re-invent another "Cultural Revolution." And it is exactly in this sense that we shall see that Gao Yang's recuperative "Red Guards"-like "capitalist manifesto" is not just an anachronism, but indeed has its own historical urgency and legitimacy.

Back in 1988, Wang Shuo was probably the only writer in China who had given an alternative vision of the past ten years of “reform” in the fashion of a recharged “Cultural Revolution.” Wang Shuo may also have been more accurate than many other Chinese fiction writers in locating the genealogy of that liminal moment of crisis and showing us that the legacy of the Cultural Revolution did not expire entirely, but, like a beast in the jungle, has prevailed through the whole 1980s and has constantly haunted and invaded the contemporary Chinese social imagination. If in his early “hooligan” saga Wang Shuo had expressed sentimental feelings over the sudden rupture between the past and the present at the dawn of the era of reform, then in *Playing for Thrills* he shows that actually the rupture between the past/ the revolution and the present/ the reform can be re-bridged by viewing the latter as a recuperation and re-invention of the former in a new capitalist mode, along with all its vehemence and violence.

The story of *Playing for Thrills* concludes with a meta-fictional open-ending:

I am sitting beside a window aboard a rumbling train, reading a book, it seems. . . The protagonist of my book is a compulsive gambler who never does an honest day's work. One day he finds himself suspected of murder. Forced to delve into his memories by calling on old friends, he produces a book of life that is missing seven of its pages. I read how he takes extraordinary measures to ferret out old ghosts, all the way back to his youth, but to no avail. How stupid he is, running back and forth without a clue as to how anything might turn out. . . The author appears reluctant to lay down his pen, wanting to keep at his copious excesses and take this fellow all the way back to his mother's womb. I don't feel like reading any more, since I figure he'll end up a chubby little darling with laughing eyes who waves his hands and sucks on a baby bottle as he is pushed around town in his stroller, rocking back and forth, loved by all who see him.

I close the book after getting through about a third of it; the pages I've already read and those I'll never get to are as different as: black and white. (Wang Shuo 1997: 324-25)

This ending is fully parodic and ironic. On the one hand, we as the actual readers may have already come to the actual end of the novel and accept the thirteen days in reverse order as the ultimate origin of all the disillusionment and crisis that Fang Yan has suffered. Yet on the other hand, we are told that this quest is far from closed, and that in fact it could have been continually traced back to an even earlier age and through all the years of Fang Yan's growing up. Thus, it is only reasonable to say that *Playing for Thrills* itself is far from being a finished version of the genealogical search for the origin of the present, along with all its crises; instead, it awaits its sequel.

This urgency in the continual genealogical search for the origin of the crisis of the present is further enhanced by one of the crucial facts about the 1990s. That is, the grand march of new capitalist revolution in China has not been stopped or slowed down; on the very contrary, its pace has been accelerated and its logic has been made more than ever apparent. Accordingly, this new capitalist revolution has more than ever revealed its own duality regarding its linkage with the legacy of the Cultural Revolution.

Vicious Animals: Degenerated Revolution and Refashioned History

Therefore, it is not entirely strange or sudden for Wang Shuo, as he entered the 1990s, to finally re-open the history of the Cultural Revolution and to refresh or re-fashion the collective cultural memory of it. *Yearning (Kewang)*, a TV drama series that was mainly scripted by him, became an instant national hit by representing in a melodramatic mode ordinary people's lives throughout the Cultural Revolution (see Zha 1995). In the meantime, *Vicious Animals*, a semi-autobiographical novel about a group of Beijing adolescents' coming of age during the later period of the Cultural Revolution, was immediately hailed as a pioneering work in having offered an alternative vision of the connection between his generation's coming of age and the Cultural Revolution.

Vicious Animals should be viewed as the sequel of *Playing for Thrills*. It continues the retrospective search for individual identity and a personal history, or the genealogy of the present,

渴望

that was initiated by Fang Yan but was not finished at the end of *Playing for Thrills*. The story appears to be a summary and remembrance of the first person protagonist's adolescent initiation during the later period of Cultural Revolution. Retrospectively, it serves as an intriguing fictional illustration of urban Beijing life in the 1970s that had already been succinctly represented by the famous Misty poet Duoduo in his underground poetry. While Duoduo's poetry from the 1970s had by the 1990s become historical, *Vicious Animals* was a work from the 1990s attempting to recreate and refashion the contemporaneity of the Cultural Revolution through history (cf. Huang 2001).

多多

Partly owing to the generation gap, what differentiates *Vicious Animals* from most works of the previous "scar literature" (*shanghen wenxue*) or "educated-youth literature" (*zhìqīng wenxue*) from the early 1980s is that it reveals another world in which the experience of adolescent initiation is described as rather "pre-conscious" (or "pre-historical") and enveloped by a moral ambiguity and relativity. This is also to say that it appears as rather phenomenological, instead of overtly ideological. As represented in the story, there is the presence of an adult world associated with social and educational institutions, such as schools, teachers and parents. Yet at the same time, during the later period of the Cultural Revolution, these educational institutions had apparently already lost considerable authority over their young subjects, and had actually receded to the background. Instead, foregrounded in the story are the protagonist's running-wild experiences and adventures in the company of his teen friends from similar family backgrounds as a group of junior "playing masters." In particular, the story focuses upon the young protagonist's sexual awakening and initiation, eventually effected through both psychological and physical violence, such as the protagonist's final conquest of his erotic object, Milan, the female protagonist, and his defeat of a fellow member of this youth gang, after having endured a series of frustrations and humiliations. Later, Wang Shuo the author would designate such an unguided coming-of-age experience, one marked by emotional brutality and violence, as "cruel youth" (*canku qingchun*) (see Wang Shuo et al 1992: 57).

傷痕文學
知青文學

米蘭

殘酷青春

All these may invite a quick association of these young "playing masters" with the so-called "rebels without a cause" that we are familiar with in the already stereotyped Western version of "youth culture" (as found in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*). But what makes *Vicious Animals* ultimately distinctive is that it reveals the existence of a hybridization of an orthodox socialist revolutionary culture that has been the major content of early education during the Culture Revolution, allowing the unorthodox seeds to germinate and emerge from the cracks of this education. This education has not led to the emergence of legitimate successors of the revolutionary cause as the protagonist's PLA officer father has wished, but to the awakening of the beast instinct and desire inside the young subjects' selves, blurring the distinction between right and wrong. Hence the novel's title, "Vicious Animals." That is also to say, Wang Shuo has represented and probed into an unnamed psychological gray area and revealed the ambiguity of the education of the Cultural Revolution itself.

We shall see the ambiguity and nuances of this initiation experience in the following examples from the novel.

The story started with the protagonist's junior high school life in Beijing in the mid-1970s, during the late Cultural Revolution, when "there were not many young people around in the city, since they all went to the countryside or to the military," and the school could barely maintain its normal educational order and function. It was against this background that the protagonist had his fantasies about life:

At that time I went to classes only because I did not want to lose face. I did not worry about my future at all, which was already pre-determined: after graduation from school I would join the military and become a junior officer with a four-pocket uniform. This was my entire dream. . .

In my fantasy there was only a Sino-Soviet war. I longed so much for a world war. I never doubted that the iron fist of the PLA would crash the war machines of the Soviet Unions and the United States, while I myself would emerge as a war hero looked up to by the entire world. I only shouldered clear responsibility for the liberation of the whole world. (Wang Shuo 1995a: 251)

But school life forced him to live in a more banal and boring reality, and this contrast in turn provoked a reaction in him: "While one was forced into a banal and boring life that conflicted with one's own will and interests, one would seek a base habit as a gesture or a symbol, instead of staying passively bored and sick" (Wang Shuo 1995a: 252). So, he frequently deserted school and slipped into strangers' apartments. One day, by accident, he was struck by the beauty of a girl's portrait photo in one of the apartments that he slipped into; he had his erotic awakening and developed an emotional obsession from that point on. Now, revolution and war started to lose their appeal in the face of this new obsession:

That year international communist movements had gained impressive triumphs worldwide and particularly in Southeast Asia. The Vietcong, which had always been supported by our country, took Saigon and then swept over the whole of Indochina. . . The United States suffered a face-losing defeat. Yet all these glorious triumphs no longer excited me. I was now facing urgent individual frustrations that needed to be dealt with. (Wang Shuo 1995a: 256)

And he sought emotional comfort and guidance from the revolutionary *bildungsromans* that were then circulated in private, such as *The Song of the Youth*, *How the Steel Was Tempered*, and *The Gadfly*, while admitting that

my first revolutionary romanticism and longing for a dangerous life on the edge was indeed inspired by them. What fascinated me the most were those episodes of romance between these revolutionaries and bourgeois women. When Pavel finally lost Tonya, I felt the deep sorrow for him; when Tonya and her bourgeois husband appeared again, I felt a deep pain of being torn. Ever since then I have been trying to seek a compromise between revolution and romantic love. (Wang Shuo 1995a: 261)³

The last sentence is a key to the protagonist's subject formation during that period. As a result of the compromise, the

³ Both Pavel and Tonya are characters in the popular Soviet Russian novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* by Nikolay Ostrovsky.

longing for a revolution eventually degenerated into a longing for "a dangerous life on the edge," and the romance between the revolutionaries and bourgeois women inspired him to desire a compromise between revolution and personal love (or a quest for bourgeois life). This kind of eclecticism and conformism later proved to be a crucial mental exercise and preparation for the very transition from the Cultural Revolution to the rapid embrace of capitalism in the post-Cultural Revolution era.

Via this logic, the conflict between desire and revolution is eventually resolved and turned into a transition from the latter to the former, and the emergence of "hooligans" and "playing masters" is one of the most natural consequences of this transition. Apparently there are no available alternatives to help the protagonist survive this *weltschmerz* (or world-agony) except his self-acquired animal instinct, which eventually led to his violent possession of Milan and his cynical world-view. The story ends with his quasi-existentialist reflection on the surrounding world and his desperate effort to hold on to something solid and not to drown in the swimming-pool when one of his former victims took revenge on him. This last scene can actually be read as a metaphorization of the protagonist's existential condition during his adolescence and the later period of the Cultural Revolution. The stable and old world collapsed around him, yet he could not find a firm place to stand:

I was rolling and crawling through the clear and transparent water of the swimming pool, moving my limbs in fear, trying to touch bottom and standing upon something solid and firm, yet whatever my limbs touched was just soft emptiness. I could feel its heavy and pliable existence, yet it was shapeless; whenever I tried to grasp it, I saw it slipping away between my fingers. . . I started to cry, sobbing in despair while swimming. (Wang Shuo 1995a: 331-32)

But this ending is an ironic one. While the protagonist in the narrative at that particular historical moment was suffering from adolescent confusion and despair, the narrator is obviously narrating it with a self-awareness and a strong sense of nostalgia. This nostalgia, if we may put it more boldly, actually comes from the perspective of a successor in a new reality—

namely, a quasi-capitalist reality—and he belongs to a new emerging elitist class: the new “masters” of the present and the world. This perspective is indicated by the narrator and protagonist’s confession at the beginning of the story: “After thirty, I finally lived a decent life that I had longed for for so long. All my efforts had paid off” (Wang Shuo 1995a: 248). That is to say, the life of a successful, self-made middle class individual in contemporary China.⁴

In fact, within the narrative itself, the first person narrator constantly invokes analogies between the young “playing masters” back at that time and the ones from the present, and draws a scandalous lesson about the Cultural Revolution:

I am grateful to the era in which I lived, when students gained unprecedented liberation, not having to learn useless knowledge that was doomed to be forgotten. I feel a great sympathy for today’s students, because they can do nothing even if they have realized that they are wasting their youth. Even till today I still insist that people force young people to study and tempt them with bright futures, only in order not to give them the chance to make trouble on the streets. (Wang Shuo 1995a: 251)

But this claim clearly reveals that it is a calculated claim, based on the after-fact that the narrator “I” now is already a successor in the current social order. Thus, this claim is also a strategic move to help the narrator further solidify his newly acquired social status as a successful middle-class individual. The following analogies make this intention even more obvious:

We looked up to and envied those gangsters and hooligans who dominated different parts of the city just like people adoring the popular music stars of today. (Wang Shuo 1995a: 263)

⁴ Here obviously one needs to further elaborate on the “successful middle class.” The Cultural Revolution is a preparation school and laboratory for the future “playing masters” in the capitalist era (see Ci 1994). For a discussion on the contemporary phenomenon of “successful individuals” (*chenggong renshi*), also see Wang Xiaoming *et al* (1999: 71-80).

At that time the chicness and classiness of military uniforms were well above those of today's name-brand fashion clothing. . . . These boys and girls, wearing old military uniforms from the army, the navy and the air force looked very striking on the dim streets back more than ten years ago, and all of them felt very good about themselves, holding respect for each other and looking down on the others, the same way that stars, dressed glamorously, gather together to give awards to each other in movie circles today. (Wang Shuo 1995a: 271)

By a sleight of hand, Wang Shuo now collapses the division between the past and the present and re-connects them by drawing a comparison between the young playing masters during the Cultural Revolution and the new social symbols of success in the present—the pop music and movie stars. In doing so, he suggests that these two eras can actually be rejoined, in the way that those old "young playing masters" could very easily have re-invented themselves as the new "playing masters" of the reform and capitalist era (or, conversely, the "playing masters" now can re-package and showcase their Cultural Revolution past in terms of the images of the new capitalist era). All this testifies to and legitimizes the success achieved by a selective and negotiated combination of rebellion and compromise. In this respect, Wang Shuo's protagonist and alter ego appears to be a faithful illustration of Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic golden rule for the reform era: "It doesn't matter whether they are white cats or black cats, as long as they catch mice." The Red Guards and the hooligans are remodeled and reunited in their new incarnation: the "playing masters" of the new market era.

However, this kind of successful transition and transformation may have been achieved through the exclusion of the parts of history that may testify to the opposite. That is to say, history needs to be refashioned in order to conform to the agenda of the present. Seen from this perspective, indeed, the whole story of *Vicious Animals* may not be a faithful historical account of the latter period of the Cultural Revolution, as it claims to be. Ultimately, it is no less a (meta-)fiction of the reality of China in the 1990s than *Playing for Thrills* is of the "present" reality in the 1980s. That is why, about two-third of the way through the story, the narrator suddenly jumps in and confesses:

Now my mind is as lucid as the bright moon, and I find that I am making things up again. At the beginning I once swore that I would honestly tell this story and restore the truth. . . Yet this story that began with a sincere narrative effort has already become lies on paper, in spite of my enormous exertions. I no longer dare to confirm which were true and indeed happened, and which were false and were borrowed and mixed in, or entirely fabricated. (Wang Shuo 1995a: 321-23)

While originally meant to be a genealogical search going back to the Cultural Revolution, this search finds its ultimate roots in the floating and versatile present, not in the past. In the end, this genealogy proves to be a constant interplay and oscillation between the never-fixed present and the ever re-accommodated past. Gradually, the Cultural Revolution itself has evolved into a new cultural signifier in the 1990s, to be re-encoded and re-decoded according to various cultural and ideological, as well as public and personal, agendas. The nostalgic recuperation of the Cultural Revolution thus serves as an emotional tribute to the residual history of the past, an ideological legitimization of the newly emerging social order and hierarchy, as well as the new cultural logic of a mushrooming Chinese capitalism in the 1990s.

Indeed, a significant change has occurred between the pre-1989 Wang Shuo and the post-1989 Wang Shuo. If in the former we see more a blasphemous Wang Shuo who understands “play” and “game” in terms of a recuperated residual ideology of “revolution,” for the latter this “revolution” has gradually degenerated or been refashioned as the object of a conservative “nostalgia” for consumption in the mass imagination and collective memory. In other words, a secret anarchist passion is finally spent and is repackaged as a cultural commodity. Ironically, having admitted to the failure of his “coup d’etat” as a “playing master” in *Playing for Thrills*, Wang Shuo has finally succeeded in remodeling himself as the “master” of the market in *Vicious Animals*—through packaging and consuming a past “revolutionary age.”

Nostalgia and the Success Story of Capitalism

That is also to say, by making reference to the Cultural Revolution in his TV melodramas and bestsellers, Wang Shuo

has actually admitted his inability to fully comprehend the history of the Cultural Revolution or to further historicize it. What he does, instead, is to represent the Cultural Revolution in a new-historicist fashion that Fredric Jameson has discussed in relation to nostalgia (see Jameson 1992a, 1992b). In this sense, nostalgia is a deliberately selective and subjective mechanism of memory, or rather an indicator of the tenacity of the Chinese capitalism flourishing in the 1990s, after the decade of reform in the 1980s. From this perspective, the Cultural Revolution has indeed made its successful come-back, if only under an unspoken agreement that its history be purposefully suspended or represented for the sake of the present. And this can even be seen as a Faustian pact between the nascent successful bourgeois middle class and the still self-entitled "socialist" state in contemporary China. Via such "play," Wang Shuo has accomplished his coup d'état of regaining his "master" status—he is now the star author of best-sellers, the darling of the media, and the cultural idol and "godfather" for an entire new generation of ambitious Rastignacs—young writers and promoters of "urban new man" (*chengshi xinrenlei*). If the Fang Yan in *Playing for Thrills* found himself broke, the Fang Yan in *Vicious Animals* (just like Wang Shuo the author) has become a symbol of success.⁵

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⁵ In fact, this sleight of hand is also clearly shown in his *The Playing Masters (Wanzhu)* trilogy: "The Playing Masters" (*Wanzhu*) (1987), "Nothing Real or Serious" (*Yidian zhengjing meiyou*) (1989) and "You Are Not a Vulgar Person" (*Ni bushi yige suren*) (1992) (see Wang Shuo 1995e; 1995f; 1995c). While most critics of Wang Shuo have emphasized the political or ideological subversiveness and blasphemy underlying those carnivalesque stories, few of them have pointed out that those stories also serve as allegories of the rapid progress of a market economy in China. In this light, the seemingly totally mischievous schemes should not be viewed as purely satirical and parodic, but rather as serious and ambitious business attempts by the "playing masters" to ride the tide of the nascent yet already triumphant market economy. If in the 1980s the "playing masters" still lingered at the periphery of society, in the 1990s they have gradually moved to the center, claiming their own legitimacy and even superiority by becoming skillful and successful cultural dealers.

But the price for this success or seizure of power remains high. What accompanies it is the eternal loss of the authenticity of the past (alongside that of the individual), which in turn reveals the futility of any attempt to re-capture an objective history of the Cultural Revolution through fiction. This is not purely an aesthetic or stylistic problem, but an ideological one as well. It proves again what Marx has predicted in the *Communist Manifesto*, that "all that is solid melts into air" (Marx 1978a: 476) during the rapid progress of capitalization in China. Accordingly, within a few years, the once provocative and subversive Wang Shuonian popular literature in the 1980s has assumed a new role and become much more conservative or conformist in the 1990s. Socialism and capitalism have made their negotiated peace through a marriage. Revolution itself has finally been refashioned into a cultural commodity or souvenir. More than ever before, individual development is re-designated and measured against the standard success story of the individual in the capitalist market economy. The idealistic development of revolutionary youth is only a prelude to this success story of capitalism. Herein lies the real moral behind Wang Shuo's mode of cultural nostalgia and individual development in the 1990s.

Yet, Wang Shuo should also be viewed as one of the very few contemporary Chinese writers who have most pointedly represented the locality and hybridity of the "present" of China. He lucidly demonstrates that "history" is always rooted in the "present" and is ideologically charged as well. Hence no "pure" history exists, just as there is no "pure" present; rather, it is a product of compromises and negotiations between various forces and positions, for instance, between the past of the Cultural Revolution and the present of the undetermined progress of capitalization. While Wang Shuo has chosen to popularize the Cultural Revolution to serve his own aesthetic and pragmatic causes, through revealing and exposing the artificiality of this popularization, he has deftly shown the crisis-charged nature and the full complexities of this transformation from socialism to capitalism in contemporary China. In the end, with all his sleights of hand or maneuvers, Wang Shuo proves to be a truly cunning "playing master" of the era of reform, in all its ambivalent and ironic senses.

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