

The Privilege to Play: Nostalgia in the works of Wang Shuo

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Contrary to a conventional view that remembers the Cultural Revolution as a disastrous era in which children were doomed to be ignored, intimidated and left in confusion, Wang Shuo's two semi-autobiographical fictions of the 1990s show fondness and nostalgia toward this history, portraying it as a period of freedom and delight for youngsters. Studying his construction of personal memories in association with their historical referents, this paper explores how "play" functions as a means of both social distinction and social assimilation in the identity formation of adolescents in Wang Shuo's works, and how the reception of these fictions links attitudes in contemporary China to the turbulent era of the Cultural Revolution.

China in nostalgia: the discrepancy between theory and reality

At the outset of the 1990s, the coexistence of an orthodox socialist political system and a booming market economy turned China into a country energized by rapid economic development yet disturbed by the complications emerging from the process of marketization. While history remained ambiguous and the future uncertain, "living in the present" became a prevalent mass mentality in contemporary China. Paradoxically, the "updatedness" of this present often had to be legitimized in a retrospective mode: a forward-looking China entering the last decade of the twentieth century was preoccupied with moods of nostalgia, aimed at recreating and refashioning the "contemporariness" of its past with both collective and personal memories. At varying levels and intensities, this nostalgic mood can be discerned in many historically engaged fictional writings, films and other cultural products, such as popular songs and MTV programs that are particularly situated in the social, cultural and political context of the transition from Maoist social utopia to Deng's market economy.

A study of nostalgia in China requires a critical rethinking of the function of nostalgia in its local context. Some cultural theories and psychological analyses in the West decipher nostalgia as a complication of modernity, a resistance to the problems brought by the global wave of modernization. Identified as a selective longing for things, persons, or situations of an often idealized past, nostalgia is sometimes considered antithetical to modernity, a turning away from what is challenging and a temporary escape to a secure place that offers a sense of community and identity (Aden 1995). Another view attributes the rise of nostalgia to the condition of postmodernity. For instance, Frederic Jameson's (1994) definition of nostalgia is closely bound with the logic of late capitalism and postmodern aesthetics. To Jameson, nostalgia works in conjunction with the concepts of pastiche and simulacrum. As a desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past, nostalgia "colonizes" the present through stylish and aesthetic representation of a lost "reality," and thus provides a sense of "pseudohistorical depth," a perception of a distanced, defamiliarized present rather than an approach to a lost era of innocence (1991:19-21). In Jameson's framework, nostalgia is affiliated with the postmodern condition of the eternal loss of the authenticity of the past. When a history of aesthetic styles displaces a "real" history in artistic

creation, any attempt to associate nostalgic language with genuine historicity is futile (1991:19).

Are nostalgia and its stylistic and aesthetic representations a logical and chronological result of modern Western society or the postmodern condition? Taking into consideration that nostalgia arises in Communist countries and areas such as China and Eastern Europe where capitalism did not develop at the same rate or during the same period as in other parts of the world, nostalgia is by no means a culturally and economically specific product of capitalist society. Moreover, I question the approach of treating nostalgia as a purely aesthetic problem without any ideological connotation. In contemporary China, when multiple modes of nostalgia appear as a cultural trend, they often take various functions in marking social changes and making social distinctions.

Nostalgia as a cultural fashion started in the early 1990s in the form of "Mao Zedong fever." Mao's character and the revolutionary years were constantly retraced in multiple modes of nostalgic reminiscence in the exchanges of various forms of symbolic and economic capital. Suddenly his all-too-familiar images reappeared in China's major cities as decorations in theme restaurants and good luck charms hung in vehicles. In the cultural market, books treating Mao as a commoner and describing his daily life "off the altar" (*zouxia shentan*) hit the best-seller lists. Volumes of revolutionary songs composed during Mao's years were re-edited and released into the market. In 1990, the TV series *Kewang* (*Yearning*) caused a national sensation. Taking Mao's years as its background, the TV melodrama promotes values such as altruism, self-sacrifice and the human will to endure hardships and material disadvantage, most of which were epochal themes setting the tone of Mao's revolutionary agenda. While avant-garde artists took inspiration from canonical revolutionary languages and imageries, keen businessmen also grasped the opportunity to cash in on the commercialization of Mao's revolutionary ideology.

The seemingly bizarre and unexpected nostalgia towards the Mao years bears a specific social, discursive, and aesthetic significance that maps the changed cultural politics of the 1990s. If the "Tiananmen Incident" in 1989 represents the bankruptcy of the discourse of enlightenment and the collective dream of political democracy in the 1980s, China entering the 1990s was characterized by newly-emerging class and generational conflicts between the urban and the rural, the center and the marginal, the young and the old, the winners in the market economy (the "New Rich") and the new social outcasts (the jobless workers, the floating populations, and others). In a social ambience characterized by promising prosperity and a brooding sense of insecurity, nostalgia appeared as a cultural fad reflecting the intricate structure of feeling of Chinese people in the 1990s.

In her inspiring essay "*Xiangxiang de huaijiu*" ("Imagined Nostalgia"), Jinhua Dai (1997) discusses the cultural need for nostalgia as a fashion in the popular culture of contemporary China. To Dai, nostalgia appears as a symptom of cultural commercialism, a sign of progress and development consumed with feverish joy in the 1990s. Ban Wang (2002), however, notices how the rise of

nostalgia as a mass mentality is a commentary on both China's current reality and its prehistory. Studying nostalgia as a topic of highbrow literature, Wang argues that nostalgia serves the two functions of challenging an unsatisfied present *and* filling the gap between the past and the present (2002:669). Identifying with Chinese intellectuals who are caught in between—realizing both the request for material progress and the problem of modernization—Wang argues that nostalgia can be constructed not only as an alternative to the homogenous narrative of capitalist globalization, but also as resistance to the lineal current of the socialist revolution (2002:671).

According to Dai and Wang, if consumerist nostalgia caters to a growing longing for material culture, nostalgia as an intellectual discourse constructed in literary presentations can serve as a critical commentary on both the revolutionary past and the problematic present. In short, nostalgia can be harnessed for either oppressive or liberatory aims when it participates in the construction of a specific personal and communal subjectivity. Taking Dai and Wang's arguments as my starting point, I will study the "Cultural Revolution nostalgia" manifested in two historical coming-of-age tales by the popular author Wang Shuo. Identifying nostalgia as *a strategy of self-positioning*, I argue that the production and reception of Wang Shuo's two stories are indicative of the roles played by personal memories in the formation of specific individual and generational identities in 1990s China.

Decoding "hooliganism": different understandings of the nature and functions of "play"

Born in 1958, Wang Shuo started publishing fictional works as a freelance writer in the mid-1980s. Given his age, family background and personal experiences, Wang Shuo did not experience the "rustication movement," nor did he belong to the Red Guard generation. Growing up in a military compound and encountering the high tide of the Cultural Revolution in his primary school years, Wang Shuo was among the privileged few who came of age during the Cultural Revolution, yet he was exempted from the accompanying political disturbance. After graduating from middle school, Wang served in the Navy, worked as a salesman, and eventually quit his state-assigned job to pursue a writing career.

In the history of the PRC, Wang Shuo is the first self-employed writer. Actively participating in the production of fiction, TV drama and movie scripts, Wang Shuo swiftly earned fame and made a fortune, thus establishing himself as an epochal marker for the transition of the 1980s into the 1990s. Self-promoting a "best-seller consciousness" (*changxiao yishi*), Wang successfully marketed his novels by creating a group of characters referred to as "playing masters"—a cult of pleasure-seeking hooligans who took advantage of the high-profile social transition from Mao's social utopia to Deng's consumer society. They found their space in the new consumer age by living an unproductive, decadent and "cool" lifestyle. Living in the moment, these urban loafers refused to burden themselves with the task of retrospective contemplation. In their daily lives, traces of the past, if ever referred to, were only topics satirized in jokes or shows enacted for fun.

Like many other critics, Jing Wang (1996) and Yibing Huang (2001) identify the hooliganism in Wang Shuo's works as a gesture of anti-intellectual cynicism. Underlining this as one of the trademarks of Wang's works, they offer very different understandings of the philosophy of hooliganism. To Huang, hooligans in Wang Shuo's works represent a decadent version of Mao's Red Guards, a sarcastic and delusional group of young people who lost their innocence and turned out to be cynical in the violent transitions from Mao's utopia to Deng's market (2001:138). In Huang's words, the social and ideological transformation from the late 1970s to the 1980s constituted a violent, unpredictable and traumatic experience for the Chinese youth who had been raised in the idealized spiritual utopia of Maoism (2001:149). Living their playful, impious and quirky lifestyle, the hooligans' mischievous behavior demonstrates their emotional resistance to a present severed from its immediate past.

Whereas Huang attributes the vulgarization of culture in Wang Shuo's "hooligan literature" to the loss of innocence after the socialism-consumerism rupture, Jing Wang (1996) discerns the historical connection between the present and the past by tracing the roots of the real-life and fictional hooligans back to the Cultural Revolution, a turbulent period during which the lawless teenagers had the opportunity to break from the orderliness of school and daily life. To Wang, the adult hooligans in Wang Shuo's works are just contemporary variations of uncontrolled teenagers coming of age during the ten-year period of historical turbulence. Entering into the troubled water of the consumer age, the formerly unruly youths grasped the chance to recreate their childhood playground in everyday life by living on the edge of the law and social conventions. Growing up in a historical period when destructive practices, authoritative personalities, iconoclastic manners, and playful attitudes were ideologically promoted and officially supported, the formerly restless kids swiftly changed their causes to conveniently fit into the new game of cashing in when the law of "play" transformed from the political to the economic.

Comparing these two readings of Wang Shuo's hooligan literature, we find opposing explanations of the mentality of the "playing masters." To Huang, the playing masters symbolize a mode of subjective development. More specifically, the lifestyle of the playing masters represents an attempt to tame and dominate "contemporariness" by disrupting the present (2001:138-139). Tracing the chronicles of both fictional and real-life hooligans, however, Jing Wang questions the blasphemous lifestyle of the "playing masters" in Wang Shuo's work as a form of self-representation. In Jing Wang's words, hooligans do not live as improvising individuals but as a collective, set apart by their "species consciousness," a collaborative memory, and a clan-centered lifestyle based on mutual identification and group activity (1996:272). In this sense, Jing Wang argues that the fictional hooligans are not real rebels, given that there is no purpose to their rebellion. Wang Shuo's novels evoke nothing more than "a narcissistic posture that appeared deceptively seditious" (1996:271). Wholeheartedly saturated with the sensation of the present without possessing any kind of historical reflexivity, the "playing masters" are the logical and spiritual inheritors of the Cultural Revolution.

Wang Shuo: the privilege to play

Are Wang Shuo's fictional hooligans the historical orphans of the Cultural Revolution, defining themselves in a playful lifestyle that rebels against an undesirable present? Or, are they the epochal masters of the market economy whose playful nature has been well nourished in the past historical chaos? The divergences in the views of Huang and Jing Wang lie less in their different understandings of the relationship between the past and the present than in their explanations of the nature and function of "play" represented in Wang Shuo's works. Is play a disguised form of self-representation or simply a narcissistic show? Is it a cynical gesture of anti-socialization or a mischievous attitude of "play for play's sake?" In other words, when "play" becomes such an essential theme in Wang Shuo's writings, in what sense does it participate in the formation of the subjective identity of his characters?

A close analysis of Wang Shuo's two most recent works, in which descriptions of "play" constitute a considerable part of the narrations, demonstrates their appeal specifically to young people. Among Wang's works, *Dongwu xiong-meng* (*Vicious Animals*, 1995) is the first to set its background in the past. Describing the lives of a group of adolescents that became involved in gang riots and juvenile adventures towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, this work personalizes that era, making it a phase of individual development rather than a collective past.

In *Vicious Animals*, two basic traits emerge that characterize Wang's adult "playing masters." First, the friendship of these unruly teenagers was built upon a strong pledge of mutual identification and group loyalty. Second, the group identity of these teenagers was constructed upon the transgression of social conventions and the disruption of the orderliness of everyday life in their behaviors and thinking. In this sense, it is easy to read this novella as an extension of Wang's former "hooligan literature." Paying special attention to the function of "play" in the cohort grouping and identity formation of the adolescents, however, I argue that *Vicious Animals* does more than trace the historical roots of the hooligan mentality.

The novella, in essence, is the story of "I," a fifteen-year-old middle school student who serves both as the hero and the narrator of the story. From the beginning of the novella, "I" declaims "my" fond memories towards the Cultural Revolution, which differentiate this writing from conventional narratives emphasizing the disastrous nature of this history.

I appreciate that era in which I grew up. In that era students acquired liberation (they) never had before. They did not have to learn useless knowledge that was doomed to be forgotten later. ... I wasn't worried about my own future at all. This future had been pre-determined: after graduating from the middle school I would be enrolled in the army. In the army, I would serve as a four-pocket platoon leader. This was my whole dream. I had never expected to be promoted to a senior position. Because at that time "I" believed that those elders who occupied the senior positions would be immortal.

Nothing had to be strived for. All I was supposed to do was to wait till I was eighteen, then it would naturally be my turn. (1995:149-50)

Here, the Cultural Revolution is a period during which the teenagers got the chance to explore the world without the bondage of formal schooling. Moreover, it ensures a privileged group of teenagers a bright future, thus enabling them to live a promising and worry-free life.

Not only viewing the Cultural Revolution as an era with the virtue of liberating children from social institutions of authority, "I" also describes how the freedom "I" enjoyed created a personal problem: how "my" sexual fantasies of an elder girl named Mi Lan overweighed "my" concern about the outside world.

That year international communist movements achieved remarkable victory, first in the Southeast Asia, then on the global scale. The Vietnamese Communist Party, which had always been aided by our country, captured Saigon, and then swept away the whole Indochina with irresistible force. ... The United States suffered a disgraceful defeat.

Yet all these glorious triumphs could not make me feel excited anymore. I was now facing personal, extremely urgent problems that needed to be dealt with. (1995:155)

Due to lack of respect for parental authority, "I" turns to "my" peers—a group of young boys as children of "revolutionary" cadres and military officers—to seek recognition, comfort and advice. To these privileged adolescents, the Cultural Revolution made them feel an unprecedented liberty and confidence when they became the "hosts" of Beijing—a city largely depopulated of adult authority figures and elder students sent down to the countryside. Spending "our" time having fun together, "I" and "my" "brothers" (*gemen'r*) occasionally get involved in gangster riots and sexual adventures. Living in a world of irresponsibility, "play" becomes the central content of "our" everyday life.

As one of the representative works of Wang, *Vicious Animals* draws much attention from literary critics. Some of them identify this work as a nostalgic invocation of the past, which serves as an emotional tribute to a memorable yet traumatic youth (Cai 1997; Liu 1995). In their explanation, remembering is understood as a process of myth-making rather than a reliable source of historical reference. In opposition to this kind of explanation, I treat nostalgic remembering as *factual* representation with a concrete social and historical praxis. Based on this, I explore how narratives of youthful plays and childhood games, with their substantial social, cultural, and material references, are used to evoke certain generational memories and to construct specific individual and group identities.

Describing the playful and fun-seeking lifestyle of these teenaged boys, Wang Shuo devotes considerable space in *Vicious Animals* to tracing the cultural resources and fashion trends characterizing the epochal atmosphere toward the end of the Cultural Revolution. In the story, "I" recollects the books, songs, jokes, images, items of clothing, games, slang, and conversational habits that characterize both the "aura" of that specific era and "my" own childhood experiences. Saturated with tangible imageries, personal remembering creates both an emotional tie with and a worldly attachment to this past. For instance, "I" remembers how certain books influenced "my" way of thinking:

[...] yet my first revolutionary romanticism and longing for a dangerous and restless life was indeed inspired by them...while what fascinated me most were those episodes of romance between these revolutionaries and the bourgeois women. When Paul finally lost Tonya, I felt a deep sorrow for him. When Tonya appeared again with her bourgeois husband, I felt a heartbroken pain. Ever since then I have been searching for a compromise between revolution and romantic love. (1995:161)

Here, reading is not merely a form of entertainment, but a significant step in the process of identity formation. Clothing, among other things, also becomes an important indicator of social status, through which a particular subjectivity is encoded. “I” mentions in several places that the army uniform was the most popular dress worn by teenagers during the Cultural Revolution. It is noteworthy that the popularity of army uniforms is specifically considered here not only for its designation of political correctness and revolutionary spirit, but also for its *materialness* in terms of fabric, color, style, and quality, since it was the only dress that showed difference and diversity in an era when people generally wore blue cotton uniforms. In this sense, wearing an “authentic” army uniform was not only a manifestation of political status, but also a fashion statement, a restricted form of fashion consumption, and an effective means of making and maintaining social distinction.

In *Vicious Animals*, the “material” aspects of the past become the chief objects for reader identification, not only as historical markers, but also as carriers of particular generational memories. My recognition of the material aspect of personal memories, however, does not indicate a naïve assumption that the nostalgic retrospections in the story are all based on “real” events that actually happened in the past, given the fact that Wang Shuo himself admits that his memories of the Cultural Revolution have more to do with subjective imagination than with objective reality (Wang 2000). Yet, my concern here is less the “objectivity” and “faithfulness” of historical narratives as recollections of true happenings. Instead, I view relevant memories as “authentic” and “historical,” since they are indicative of a specific cultural climate and fashion codes representing the culture of youth towards the end of the Cultural Revolution.

When personal memories are evoked to describe the fun-seeking lifestyle of the teenaged protagonists, “play” becomes the central theme of representation. In *Vicious Animals*, “play” is not equated with any rebellious acts or active social disturbance. It has been shown clearly that only certain acts and behaviors are accepted, admired and emulated by these teenagers. Material resources are also prerequisite for participation in the game. These are teenagers who wear authentic army uniforms, live in garden-like military compounds, eat luxurious ice creams with stolen money, read restricted publications, and hold birthday parties in the expensive Moscow Restaurant. In a word, it requires certain qualifications to be able to enjoy the excitement of play. Social class, family background, career ranking of the parents, one’s financial situation, personal talent, and physical attraction are all crucial factors in ensuring membership in the group and defining the rules of the game played. The social and material advantages enjoyed by these teenagers nourish them with a complex nature that

combines worldly-wise mischievousness with romantic naivety. In their daily life, play becomes a skill, a taste and a manifestation of social superiority, as well as a mark of being “elite.”

Since there is not much for the teenagers to worry about, play becomes almost the only means for them to exhibit themselves to gain recognition from their peers. Some critics notice the violent side of play in this story, viewing the scenes of gangster fights as traumatic “coming of age events” and arguing that the hero is forced to go through these moments as rites of passage into adulthood (Cai 1997:370; Liu 1995:126-27). What the critics have ignored is the function of play as an effective means of producing distinction, which can then be used by the participants to exceed their peers in a game-like competition.

A scene of street fighting in the story provides a good example of how play itself can be strategically “performed” and deceptively evaluated. After some street kids beat up a boy in “my” group, an incident threatening the dignity of “our” whole community, the agitated teenagers rush to seek revenge, equipping themselves with various weapons according to their ranking in the group. The leader acquires a Japanese bayonet—the most envied fighting utensil for gangster riots and a sign of status and authority. The followers find knives, steel chains, hammers and awls, or whatever they can use as tools for battle. During the fight, “I” finds out that the kid chased and beaten up is “my” former classmate and an old friend. However, “Without saying a word, I used the red brick in my hand to hit him. I wouldn’t stop although all the other kids had run away. Finally, after crushing a bloody red brick vertically on the back of his head, I ran away from the scene” (Wang 1995:179).

In this fight scene, the brutality and excessiveness of the hero are described more as a strenuous performance than as a reflection of his brutal personality, demonstrated later by “my” confession of how “I” was haunted by the bloody images of his victims after the fight. Nevertheless, his “performance” is widely recognized and highly praised by the elder boys in the group as demonstrative of his loyalty to the group in “cold-blooded” actions, a necessary quality in defining a young “player.” The success of the “performance” also encourages the hero to pursue other adventures, giving “I” the courage to approach Mi Lan, an older and more physically mature girl.

Privileged and unfettered, there are no specific constraints causing these children to revolt. Breaking social conventions in play is not really a gesture of rebellion, but a demonstration of one’s ability to master one’s environment. Being good at play shows a capacity to fit in and control rather than being alienated and controlled. Arguably, one is supposed to follow the “rules” and play fairly to earn respect and win trust. Yet it is the effect of the performance that enhances “I”’s reputation, not the performance itself. By concealing the fact that he was so intimidated after he was arrested that he burst into tears, the hero saved face and kept his membership in the group. His performance is contrasted by another boy who was isolated and expelled from the group after his surrender to the authorities was discovered, teaching “I” that play is not a fair game. In this sense, the days of being wild recalled by Wang Shuo are not a heartfelt celebration of

freedom and decadence, but a claim of the “survival of the fittest” within specific social and historical praxes.

Play for the sake of making difference

Describing the coming-of-age experience during the Cultural Revolution, *Vicious Animals* provides a highly privatized and idiosyncratic portrait of this history. My concern here is not whether Wang’s nostalgic memories of the Cultural Revolution “reflect” this history faithfully, but rather how the subjective, cognitive-emotional set of nostalgia in the narrative makes an appeal to general public.

Judging by the huge commercial success of the novella, the appeal of the story is due in part to its iconoclastic view of the Cultural Revolution. As Liu Xinwu (1995) notes, Wang’s novella makes a formerly ignored “world” emerge from the horizon of history. This particular world is not full of the struggles of the persecutors and the persecuted, but is a world of “irresponsibility” that imbues one’s mind with both freedom and crisis (Liu 1995:125-26). In this emerging world, “the children from the military compound” (*dayuan li de haizimen*) are concerned about their own needs more than the grandiose events happening outside. In a certain sense, they are “victims” of this history since they are torn between a moralized ideological edification and a chaotic social reality; however, they view this discrepancy between education and reality as an excuse to indulge rather than a reason to complain. In this respect, the story gained particular recognition among a younger generation of readers who were formerly underrepresented as youth and marginal groups in the Cultural Revolution.

Recollecting childhood experiences during the Cultural Revolution in a nostalgic mode is not the only reason that *Vicious Animals* is popular: the story also makes use of specific personal memories to respond to the needs of the present. In the novella, personal memories are associated with concrete material referents and cultural codes that mark social distinctions. In this sense, the story is not only a general remembrance of a lived past, but also a retracing of a specific aspect of this past — like the fashion trends that distinguished one group of teenagers as the privileged few. In this previously ignored world, the lives of the adolescents were regulated by complicated rules of the “game,” not by the dominant modes of that period. As youth without material possessions, they turned to the different political, economic and cultural capital they possessed to establish strict hierarchies among themselves, which made certain lifestyle, behavior, and consumption habits determinative factors in the construction of specific individual and group identities. In this sense, the nostalgic reconstruction of “our” adolescent years in Wang’s novella is more than a private reminiscence of the “happy old days,” but also a fashion statement of the past, an identification with a particular lifestyle enjoyed by the privileged members of the society.

Such a representation of a privileged past is, of course, highly subjective. In his inspiring inquiry on the meanings of nostalgia, Fred Davis (1979) claims that nostalgia occurs when certain aspects of the past make a clear contrast with those of the present. More often than not, in a nostalgic retrospection the past is viewed as “better” than the present. Nevertheless, “it is not contrast *per se*

but rather *certain kinds* of subjective contrasts that engender the stuff of nostalgia” (1979:11-12). In the case of Wang Shuo, however, a nostalgic feeling towards the Cultural Revolution is not infused with negative sentiments towards the present. In *Vicious Animals*, it is clear from the beginning that the current life “I” is living is both professionally respectable and materially satisfying. In this respect, the nostalgic mood represented in the story is related to a subjective reconfiguration of a specific past that functions as the prehistory of a happy present. Going even further, what matters in this mode of nostalgia is not the “actuality” of the happiness of the past and the pleasantness of the present. What makes this past connect with the present and this present refer to its past are certain patterns of lifestyle and cultural consumption preconditioned by social hierarchies and functioning to reproduce social distinctions.

If in the Cultural Revolution these distinctions were encoded in youth culture as represented in Wang’s story, in contemporary China social differences created through cultural consumptions would re-stratify the society in every aspect of social life. Through this process, the social classes are redivided, the people are regrouped, and the social hierarchies are re-established. In this process, one does not have to be experienced in order to be immersed in a nostalgic mood. It has become trendy to look back, to cast a narcissistic gaze toward the past as the surviving “fittest” of the present. In a more recent article, Wang Shuo expresses the view that his biggest contribution to contemporary Chinese literature is the configuration of a group of “socialist new men” (*shehui zhuyi xinren*) (Wang 2002:171). Through *Vicious Animals*, Wang and his admirers make it clear that one has to be successful, or at least be inspired by what “success” means now, to enjoy a sense of nostalgia. Being able to “play” is always a privilege, no matter if it is in a historical turbulence like the Cultural Revolution or in the present-day commotion of the market economy.

A different function of play: play for the sake of conformity

If in *Vicious Animals* the Cultural Revolution is remembered with fondness as years of being privileged, in *Kanshangqu henmei* (*Looking Very Beautiful*, 1999), the recognition and identity construction of the pre-adolescents are built exclusively on childhood games and imitative enacting of the adult world. Published in 1999, this novel appeared after a seven-year silence from Wang, who had suffered a “mental crisis” and had been struggling with the thought of giving up writing.

In the preface of this novel, Wang Shuo recalls in detail the occurrence of his career crisis in 1992, after he had gained both fame and wealth as a veteran writer. After writing over one million words in novels, screenplays and TV drama scripts in the previous year, Wang describes that he suffered a “mental breakdown” and became tired of his past ways of writing. More specifically, Wang claims to have felt that his finished works were failures since they “distort life” and simplify reality by turning it into a mere comedy. This effect deviates from his initial motivation to write, which was to “restore the life as it is” (“*huanyuan shenghuo*”) (Wang 2000:116).

For this reason, Wang states that his new novel is the beginning of a project of restoration, a matter-of-fact revelation of the *real appearance of life* as he knew and experienced it. Paradoxically, Wang continues to explain that it is impossible to rely on one's memory to provide a faithful representation of the past. In the process of writing, Wang admits, his memory had to follow the lead of fabrication, so what can be found in his novel is nothing more than a "false reality." Since there is no way to rely on one's memory to restore the reality as actual occurrences, writing a good novel becomes a means of "manipulating words, nourishing sentiments, rectifying taste, purifying thinking, and giving the readers a happy surprise," rather than a channel of self-expression and self-idolization (Wang 2000:8).

Reading Wang's statement, one is struck by his changed tone with regard to the function of literature. In the 1980s, Wang was (in)famous for his proclamation that writing for him is just a way of "putting up words to earn money" ("*mazi zhengqian*"). Using literature as a profitable channel to gain fame and wealth, Wang despised any noble causes associated with writing and willfully rejected literary responsibility for historical reflection and social edification. To Wang, literature was just a "rice bowl" ("*fanwan*")—a means of making a living—and a form of play. In this sense, Wang's new definition of the novel comes as quite a surprise. Yet there is one thing that remains the same: to Wang, a successful work must sell well and cater to the taste of the readers. The modification of Wang's agenda for literature is indicative of a wider transition of the readers' expectations and their taste of consumption, which was closely affiliated with the transformation of mass imagination and collective memory in the 1990s.

Looking Very Beautiful is a semi-autobiographical work based on Wang's personal experiences. It recalls the kindergarten and primary school years of Fang Qiangqiang, a boy who is the childhood prototype of Fang Yan, one of the main "playing masters" in Wang's previous works. Like the protagonists in *Vicious Animals*, Fang lives in a military compound in Beijing. The story begins in 1961 when Fang is an ignorant toddler, and ends in 1966 when Fang is a first-grade primary school student at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Unlike *Vicious Animals*, in which the adult hero is pushed back to his past memories through an accidental encounter with a girl he knew in his adolescence, *Looking Very Beautiful* starts directly from the past itself. Divided into twenty chapters, the novel devotes twelve chapters to recording Fang's daily life in kindergarten in all its triviality and particularity. The last five chapters deal specifically with the first year of the Cultural Revolution, a year full of drama and excitement that highlights Fang's childhood memories.

Published in 1999, *Looking Very Beautiful* was an immediate market hit. In just one month after its release, the novel had been reprinted three times and reached a record of 330,000 copies. However, the market success of the novel is mainly attributed to the sale strategy launched by the publisher, with partial thanks to Wang's established appeal based on the past works with which he feels "unsatisfied." After its release, Wang's new novel did not receive enthusiastic responses from his expectant audience. Not only did literary critics pay little at-

tention to this work, but common readers—the majority of whom are the faithful followers of Wang's writings—expressed their disappointment and disillusion. Wang himself, however, insists that he does not care about the negative comments since he primarily wrote the book for himself. Taking into consideration the substantial amount of royalties Wang received from this book, it is understandable why the discouraging responses did not bother him very much.

Still, questions arise when we contrast the different receptions of the two fictional works written by Wang in the 1990s, as they share many similarities. Thematically, both stories deal with their main characters' experiences during their adolescence. In terms of content, both stories are mainly set in Beijing and the significant events happen in locations such as the military compound, school, and the streets. In both works, the narratives downplay many principle epochal themes and primarily focus on the daily lives and the psychological activities of the heroes. More importantly, the two works share a nostalgic mode in their retrospections of the Cultural Revolution. Underscoring the unreliability of personal memory to reconstruct a "real" reality, both works make an effort to recapture the "aura" of the past by associating memories with concrete material references in the form of fashion, game and play.

Beyond all these apparent resemblances, a divergence can be found in how specific cultural codes affiliated with play influence the protagonists in the process of their identity formation. If in *Vicious Animals*, play and fashion are underscored as distinctive faculties that separate certain groups of adolescents from their peers to form a superiority complex, in *Looking Very Beautiful*, game and fashion are emphasized as a reflection of the mainstream culture of the era. This theme is particularly emphasized when the story enters the phase of the Cultural Revolution. In the last five chapters of *Looking Very Beautiful*, Wang Shuo devotes substantial space to describing the cultural resources characterizing Fang's childhood play during the first year of the Cultural Revolution. The cultural resources include dress codes, language habits, games, and various forms of entertainment. Rather than making social distinctions, play functions to homogenize the children, making them fit into the social environment complicit with the dominant ideologies of the era.

Certain examples illuminate this homogenization. In the opening paragraphs of chapter 16, Wang presents a sketch portrait of his hero narrated from a first-person perspective. As a seven-year-old, Fang Qiangqiang has become a model student of Mao:

I am a member of the Youth Pioneers, the class banner carrier, the study representative, the assistant leader of the Youth Pioneer Squadron, and the 'third king' (among the boys). My academic performance is excellent.

I do not love my parents, barely have any idea of family, and am used to living a collective life. I wash my face, brush my teeth and fight for food by myself. You might say that I am very independent, very good at guessing other people's thoughts through their words and facial expressions, and calculating for my own benefits.

I believe in communism. That thing is very concrete. It should be a mansion like a big shopping mall, which holds various restaurants, supermarkets and entertainment places. (1999:222)

In this self-revelation, Fang Qiangqiang was already a well-socialized child at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. In the first fifteen chapters, he grows up from an ignorant, naughty toddler to a kid who knows how to live a collective life. Upon entering the primary school, Fang is convinced that

nobody can exist independently. Everyone has to be dependent and rely on a more powerful person. It is indisputably correct that people have to be disciplined and follow the order level upon level, there is no exception for children.... It is a fortune to have someone who disciplines you, which shows that you belong to this society. (1999:182)

Based on this conviction, Fang enjoys his first school year as a willing student. When the Cultural Revolution begins, the first-grader Fang wears old, patched cotton clothes as all the other people do. Smart and “worldly-wise,” Fang is actively involved in school activities and occupied by all forms of play. In the novel, Wang devotes a whole chapter to detail Fang’s childhood games. Poker cards, cigarette boxes, glass balls, and slingshots are all stakes in fierce competitions. Hide-and-seek, swimming, film watching, name-calling, and wrestling provide various forms of entertainment. In the novel, game and play incarnate specific generational memories since they are related to concrete historical and social referents. For instance, Fang and his fellows use particular military terms and imitate film dialogues in their daily conversation. Yet in Fang’s case, play is no longer an active appropriation of the cultural resources and an aggressive means of identity construction since it does not function to define a chosen lifestyle or an entrenched habit of consumption. If in *Vicious Animals* the teenagers identify with certain rules, performances and codes associated with play in their efforts to build up their specific adolescent subjectivities, in *Looking Very Beautiful* the children become involved in play mainly for fun and social assimilation, with a dim sense of individuality.

Yet differentiating the function of play between the two novels does not serve the purpose of negotiating and evaluating the level of socialization of Wang’s fictional characters. It is noticeable that the hero in *Vicious Animals* also unconditionally believes in certain political propaganda and is inspired by the revolutionary ideal of “liberating the whole world.” My concern leading to this discussion has less to do with a comment on the political identities and the self-images of Wang’s pre-adult heroes, or the various aspects of the “reality” of the past. Rather, my interest focuses on how different presentations of the coming-of-age experiences in this past interact with the present or, more specifically, with contemporary readers in relation to a prevalent cultural trend of nostalgic retrospection.

In the earlier discussion, I argued that *Vicious Animals* was well received and acclaimed as a text encoded with a sense of narcissism and social superiority sustained through generational memories and substantiated by concrete historical and cultural references. In the story, the Cultural Revolution is remembered as an exciting period for teenagers to show off themselves in play. For these teenagers, being cool and trendy in the material aspects of social life is achieved

through their active appropriation of limited economic and cultural resources. In this sense, *Vicious Animals* is a genealogical trace of the mental archives of the present-day pursuit of fashion, a reconstruction of the prehistory of the contemporary hip-hop culture in China. Being marginal during that period of historical turbulence thus represents a self-centered disinterestedness made possible by an advantaged social, class and familial background rather than a rebellious gesture of anti-socialization. Compared with *Vicious Animals*, *Looking Very Beautiful* is a matter-of-fact story that records history from the perspective of children. In this novel, when childhood games and various cultural resources are retraced from personal memories, they merely indicate the “aura” of a specific era and the assimilative force of a totalizing society. As a result, the detailed descriptions of Fang’s childhood play lose their appeal when presented as residues of the past severed from any connection to the present.

The functions of nostalgia in contemplation

Distanced from his previous works by storylines exclusively focusing on the past, the two fictional works written by Wang Shuo in the 1990s carry us back to a specific period. Both works express a nostalgic feeling toward pre-adulthood, a period during which children enjoy the privilege to play. In these narratives, the Cultural Revolution is portrayed as a big playground for the underage. While the grown-ups are occupied with political activities, the children are having fun at play. Making play the central event happening around the young characters during this time, Wang’s two works appear as counternarratives to a prevalent discourse that portrays the Cultural Revolution as a repressive and disorienting period for children.

Incorporating the different functions of play discussed in earlier sections, I would avoid immediately concluding that Wang’s nostalgic reconstruction of this history serves as a counterdiscourse challenging an officially endorsed portrait of the Cultural Revolution. We must be reminded that the popularity of Wang’s *Vicious Animals* chronologically followed the “Mao Zedong fever”—the commercialization of Mao in mass consumption. In this novella, the Cultural Revolution is romanticized when certain aspects of youth culture in this period are nostalgically traced. The excavation of specific generational memories not only caters to the social need of some young people to establish their generational identity, but also facilitates the formation of a mass imagination that views play as a privilege in a pragmatic society.

An investigation of the function of play in *Vicious Animals* shows that generational consciousness can be established upon identification with specific material and consumptive aspects of youth culture. If mutual recognition among adolescents is historically based on being in the same social class, and having similar family backgrounds and communal experiences, a reader’s endorsement of specific generational memories at present can be achieved through a common identification with particular cultural codes and a shared desire for being fashionable and cool. It isn’t necessary to belong to the privileged few to be able to cast a nostalgic gaze towards the “good old days,” to discern a particular cultural

trend, develop a taste for it, and learn to appreciate what has been viewed as the “trendy.” When a generation immerses itself in a nostalgic mood to recall a not-necessarily-existent past, when members identify with an “imagined” personal history as the privileged few, what comes into view is not a desire to relive one’s childhood, but a will to reshape one’s adulthood according to the rules of the game of the present.

In this sense the nostalgic narratives on the Cultural Revolution in Wang’s *Vicious Animals* serve less as a tribute to the past than as a sample of fashion statements catering to needs of the present. Nostalgia thus becomes a longing for the things “yet to come,” a symptom of mass consumption and a means of identity formation. In the case of *Looking Very Beautiful*, however, Wang’s nostalgic recollections do not make a similar appeal to his young readers. When play does not function to present personal “differences,” it becomes a prosaic cultural archive of the past, interesting yet out of date.

In conclusion, the nostalgic representation of the Cultural Revolution in historical coming-of-age stories by Wang Shuo are part of a wider cultural trend in which the cultural resources of a specific past are appropriated to shape the social and cultural landscape of the present. Rather than being an undesired burden, history finds a niche to fit into the life of the youth today. Even a traumatic history such as the Cultural Revolution can be marketed in the production of a cultural fashion. Of course, what makes this specific history “trendy” is not its historicity, but a strategic appropriation of the “stylistic” qualities of a past in its literary manifestation.

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