

**The Ironic Self: The Intertextual Narrator in Wang Xiaobo's Fiction**

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## **The Ironic Self: The Intertextual Narrator in Wang Xiaobo's Fiction**

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Wang Xiaobo, a writer whose many works earned renown only after his death, was invoked in multiple cultural debates. Some critics argue that Wang's popularity among the urban middle class since the 1990s comes from the fact that his way of thinking and the complexity of narrative satisfy the tastes of urban elites; while others suggest that his eccentricity – in both life and works – is attractive to readers in a newly individualistic generation. This paper tries to examine Wang's searching for the independence of spirit by analyzing his narrative strategy. Wang's intertextual narrator Wang Er, generally considered as the author's alter ego, is granted much authority that allows him to intrude and comment on the stories. As the narrator intrudes the metafictional structure of narrative and plays with the change in his identity, a two-way identification with the narrator and the author is indicated: just like the narrator, in mimicking the writing action of the author, molds his own version of history, the author portrays the narrator as an ideal self that transcends history in a poetic world. In the same way the narrator fails to modify the grand history into his own, the author implies his failure in escaping to the "poetic world." I argue that irony is presented in both the grand narrative of historical totality which tries to erase the individual subject that seeks independence, and the individual tale in which individuality cannot be canceled in the logic of history.

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## 1.0 Introduction: The “Wang Xiaobo Phenomenon”

The year 2017, twenty years after Wang Xiaobo’s death, marks another climax of remembering him. The media again, as they had done a few years back, published a series of articles fervently commenting on the writer’s continuing influence on the current culture in China. But this time, the focus of the commentators had shifted. In the first ten years after Wang’s death – the very beginning of his nationwide fame, people moaned for the early fall of a genius. He was compared with former literary masters and labeled as a “rationalist,” a “liberal,” or even a “cultural hero,” as his nickname indicates: “the master outside the literary circle.”<sup>1</sup> In the second ten years, the humor and wording of Wang were more widely celebrated in popular culture, especially his stylized “lover’s words” from the book *Loving You is like Loving the Life of My Own*<sup>2</sup> in which his widow Li Yinhe compiled the love letters between them. The Wang Xiaobo as a rebel of the literary canon and as the embodiment of liberal spirit has become the Wang Xiaobo as an Internet gagster and a “master of courtship.”

Criticisms of Wang, on the other hand, have never ceased. Those who embrace nationalism, for example, criticized him for his advocacy of western values. Left-wing intellectuals do not like him for his taste for liberalism and his “elitist” way of thinking. In the early years after his death, Wang’s name was often mentioned in the cultural dispute between the New Left and the liberals on topics of ideologies, nationalism, the zeitgeist of the market economy era, etc. Later, he has been idolized for individualism and a pursuit for knowledge, fun, and nonconformism

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<sup>1</sup> i.e. Wentan wai gaoshou 文坛外高手. Wang was not recognized as a famous novel writer when he was alive. And he was not involved in the so-called “literary circle” which consists of important writers officially recognized.

<sup>2</sup> i.e. *Ai ni jiu xiang ai shengming* 《爱你就像爱生命》.



demonstrated in his works. Criticisms thus also come to the “new middle-class” who celebrate such ideas, the Wang Xiaobo fans. The supporters and opponents constantly struggle in deification and iconoclasm of Wang. Either worshiped or criticized, Wang is made into more a cultural symbol than “a writer of serious literature,” as what he would consider of himself.

### 1.1 The Construction of a Myth and the Retrospections

Li Yinhe, Wang Xiaobo’s wife, who is a well-known sociologist and used to be a reporter, has a famous quote: “Wang Xiaobo’s name is like a catchword, by which people can discern whether they are the same kind.”<sup>3</sup> She lists several characteristics of these people reminiscent of Wang in a book: the spirit of freedom and equality, the love for wisdom and beauty, and the taste for humor and irony. However, Li is in fact the initiator of this “catchword.” In April 1997, with Li’s efforts, over a hundred media both in China and overseas reported the death of Wang.<sup>4</sup> Three months after that, when Hua Cheng Press finally released a series of Wang’s fiction which was long delayed, Li Yinhe and Ai Xiaoming published the first book of remembrance about Wang, *The Romantic Knight: Remembering Wang Xiaobo*. In this book, she describes Wang as a “romantic knight, bard, and free thinker.”<sup>5</sup> In 2004, Li published the collection of love letters between Wang and herself. In 2007, ten years after Wang passed away, Li organized a series of

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<sup>3</sup> Li, Yinhe 李银河. *Wang Xiaobo Shinian Ji* 王小波十年祭 [Ten Years in Memory of Wang Xiaobo]. Nanjing: Jiangsu meishu chubanshe 江苏美术出版社 [Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House], 2007. 87.

<sup>4</sup> Fang, Wei 房伟. *Wang Xiaobo Zhuan* 王小波传 [Biography of Wang Xiaobo]. Beijing: Shenghuo shudian chuban youxian gongsi 生活书店出版有限公司 [Life Bookstore Publishing Limited], 2017. 269.

<sup>5</sup> Ai, Xiaoming 艾晓明, and Yinhe Li 李银河. *Langman Qishi: Jiyi Wang Xiaobo* 浪漫骑士——记忆王小波 [The Romantic Knight: Remembering Wang Xiaobo]. Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian 中国青年出版社 [Chinese Youth Press], 1997.

activities, including the tour called “Retaking Xiaobo’s Path”<sup>6</sup> for which Li and other participants went to Yunnan where Wang was in a production team for reeducation during the Cultural Revolution. Additionally, almost every year, Li writes articles about Wang and cooperates with media on interviews and other activities about Wang. The newest one is a video she posted in September 2018 on Weibo, a Chinese Internet social media, in which she reads a reply to the first love letter that Wang wrote her 40 years ago. This video received fifty-three thousand forwards and eighty thousand “likes.”<sup>7</sup>

Besides Li’s efforts, the mass media has also contributed much to canonizing Wang Xiaobo. Almost every year, *Southern Weekly*<sup>8</sup> would have memorial essays or special pages. For the fifth year after Wang’s death, in 2002, the magazine published several articles discussing Wang with “silence and carnivalization” as the theme. The *Life Weekly* magazine,<sup>9</sup> in the same year, published eight articles under a chief title “Wang Xiaobo and the Liberals,” most of which interpreted the liberal thinking of Wang. An explosion of essays appeared on more newspapers in the tenth year and the fifteenth year, and the topics included rethinking Wang’s values and the discussion of the reasons for Wang’s lasting popularity.

In the twentieth year, as mentioned above, the memorial essays tend to relate him with specifically the characteristics of this era. Some call Wang a “self-employed writer” who could have made a large fortune by the new media and say that “as the earliest user and fan of computer

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<sup>6</sup> i.e. Chongzou Xiaobo lu 重走小波路.

<sup>7</sup> Li, Yinhe 李银河. “Li Yinhe Gekong Huixin Wang Xiaobo 李银河隔空回信王小波 [Li Yinhe Replies Wang Xiaobo].” <https://www.weibo.com/1195201334/GB6A9uFIB?type=comment>.

<sup>8</sup> i.e. *Nanfang zhoumo* 南方周末. *Southern Weekly* is considered the most influential liberal newspaper in mainland China.

<sup>9</sup> i.e. *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan* 三联生活周刊. The magazine targets on intellectuals and the well-educated readers.

technology among writers, Wang passed away before the current golden era.”<sup>10</sup> Another article mentions an 2016 popular TV drama *Ode to Joy* in which a conversation is revolved around Wang. The article points out that the “Wang Xiaobo complex” of the characters, some well-educated middle-class young people living in big cities and considering themselves as elites, summarized by a line of one character, is that “the sexiness in the eyes of a pretentious intellectual needs some high-cultural decoration.”<sup>11</sup> This statement, though not directly aiming at Wang Xiaobo, harshly identifies one characteristic of Wang’s fans throughout these years: elitism.

The writer A Yi has a short essay commenting on Wang’s works: “this kind of books make them (college students and young people) easily establish their contempt for the society and lift them to a high status of mind – arrogance.”<sup>12</sup> There is some truth in this summary that, except for all the longing for freedom, wisdom, and beauty, Wang Xiaobo’s way of thinking involves elitist implication. In opposing skitch, moralism, and hypocrisy, he also to some degree manifests the superiority of an intellectual in intellect and knowledge. With the legendary maverick public image built, elitism is one of the essential aspects that draw the young people to the works of Wang.

However, the reason for Wang’s popularity of all these years does not simply turn from pursuing rational thinking and rebellious spirit to intellectual superiority. All of what the readers want from the writer have been tangled together since the beginning. In different times, readers

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<sup>10</sup> Zhang, Feng 张丰. "Jinian Xiezuo Getihu Wang Xiaobo 纪念写作个体户王小波 [Remembering the Self-Employed Writer Wang Xiaobo]." *Xinjingbao wang* 新京报网 [Beijing News], <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/opinion/2017/04/11/439475.html>.

i.e. Chou wenhuaren yanli de xinggan xuyao dian wenhua dianzhu “臭文化人眼里的性感需要点文化点缀。”

<sup>11</sup> Dong, Muzi 董牧孜. "Wang Xiaobo Shishi Ershinian: Cong Fanpan Tiancai Dao Liaomei Gaoshou 王小波逝世二十年：从反叛天才到“撩妹高手” [Twenty Years after Wang Xiaobo Passed Away: From a Rebellious Genius to a Master of Courtship]." *Xinjingbao shuping zhouban* 新京报书评周刊 [The Beijing News Book Reviews], [http://www.sohu.com/a/132987661\\_119350](http://www.sohu.com/a/132987661_119350).

<sup>12</sup> A, Yi 阿乙. "26 Sui Zhihou Buzai Du Wang Xiaobo 26 岁之后不再读王小波 [Do Not Read Wang Xiaobo after You Are 26]." *Renwu* 人物 [Figure], no. 4 (2012): 24.

may emphasize certain strands of this comprehensive whole; but I would say the center of all these that have never been missed is a capitalized “I.”

## 1.2 Wang and His Time

For almost half of the time of the 1980s, when his peer intellectuals untethered from the Cultural Revolution were most active, Wang was washing dishes in a Chinese restaurant in Pittsburgh in order to write an anthropology term paper and driving and traveling around in the United States with Li Yinhe. After returning to China, his magnum opus *The Golden Age* was first published in 1991 in Taiwan; although during 1992 and 1997 his essays were popular in newspapers like the *Southern Weekly*, his fiction series “Time Trilogy” was released in mainland China after his death. Thus, the “Wang Xiaobo phenomenon” only began at the very turn of the century. However, his works should not be isolated in the backdrop of the 1990s.

The vital incident, the Tiananmen crackdown that influenced the whole generation and after, as a political taboo, is unsurprisingly absent in Wang Xiaobo’s and other writers’ works. Similarly, very few studies and biographies could directly set Wang against this background. Li Yinhe mentioned once in an interview that, on the evening of June 4<sup>th</sup>, Wang and she were somewhere in Beijing watching the protesters, “hoping they would succeed where their (Wang and Li) generation had failed.”<sup>13</sup> Sebastian Veg, a scholar of 20<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual history in China, argues that Wang’s most famous essay “The Silent Majority” is closely related to the

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson, Ian. "Sexual Life in Modern China." *The New York Review of Books*, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/10/26/sexual-life-in-modern-china/>.

watershed of 1989, though there is no direct evidence.<sup>14</sup> In this essay, Wang expressed his standpoint as someone who once belonged to “the silent majority,” and he entered what he called “the public sphere of speaking” since 1992, i.e., his works began to be published since then. Wang’s writing, according to Veg, is connected to the spirit of the 1980s as well as breaks with certain aspects of this spirit: he speaks out, yet on the ground not of an intellectual (like the 1980s) but of an individual. The intellectuals, from Confucians of the past to those in the beginning of twentieth century to those in the 1980s, all have been “taking the world under heaven as their responsibility.”<sup>15</sup> To use Wang’s words, what they have been doing is “paying tax to the state.” But Wang felt compelled to speak out after the disillusionment brought by the Tiananmen incident, not for a collective unity which he is responsible for. The purely individual form of Wang, Veg argues, can escape from “the power relationships that inevitably arise from a sense of social responsibility (and the superiority it presupposes).”<sup>16</sup>

Veg seems not to consider that Wang’s promotion of “pleasure of thinking” – also the title of another well-known essay of Wang – is intrinsically elitism in a narcissistic sense in the context of China. Though Wang believes science and rational thinking could be alienated from power, they are not as accessible to all the “silent majority” in this context. It is a dilemma: you speak and fall into the “speaking sphere” of power like those you criticize, or you remain silent like the majority but leave no one to speak for them. In Veg’s view, Wang is explicitly noted as “anti-authoritarian.”<sup>17</sup> He demonstrates the “anti-authoritarian” writer in merely the action of writing

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<sup>14</sup> Veg, Sebastian. "Wang Xiaobo and the No Longer Silent Majority." In *The Impact of China's 1989 Tiananmen Massacre*, 98-106. OX: Routledge, 2010. 86.

<sup>15</sup> i.e. Yi tianxia wei ji ren 以天下为己任.

<sup>16</sup> Veg, "Wang Xiaobo and the No Longer Silent Majority." 91.

<sup>17</sup> See Veg, Sebastian. "Commemorating an Anti-Authoritarian Provocateur: Reflections on Wang Xiaobo " <http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/chinablog/commemorating-anti-authoritarian-provocateur-reflections-wang-xiaobo/>. And "The Subversive “Pleasure of Thinking”." *China Perspectives* 2008, no. 2008/1 (2008): 109-13.

itself; and, as Wang expressed, writing for him is to elevate himself rather than to enlighten others. Thus, this gesture of an individual eschews the sense of social responsibility and speaks directly to every reader personally. But this attitude of “minding the business of oneself” also limits the readership to those people who already understand; and they probably are not many in the silent majority.

And then I also suddenly realized that I was part of the largest of these ‘weak groups,’ and one that has always existed: the silent majority. The reasons why these people choose to keep silent are varied and many: some don’t have the ability, or the opportunity, to speak out; others have some private feelings they prefer not to speak about; others yet, for all sorts of reasons, dislike the whole world of speaking. I belong to the latter category. But as someone of this kind, I still have a duty to talk about what I have seen and what I have heard.<sup>18</sup>

Then, who are the silent majority and the “speaking circle” after all? In Wang’s time, there were the authority who has always been speaking and the intellectuals who did speak in the 1980s. But the latter also gradually got “hammered” – the word Wang uses in *The Golden Age* for a castration metaphor – into docility. In the 1990s, the rupture between intellectual discussions and daily facts was manifesting: though the government still dominated the mainstream ideology and the discursive power, the socialist ideology is no longer the most crucial framework for analyzing the Chinese society. The legitimacy of the Communist Party has largely relied on economic growth and social stability: the authoritarian power entangles tightly with the market. Therefore, it is invalid to simplify the contradictions then as the rivalry between the government and the public, because the motivation of the society and life in the 1990s was not the confrontation among ideologies, but the new social and power relations produced by the market economy. And such

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<sup>18</sup> Wang, Xiaobo 王小波. "Chenmo De Daduoshu 沉默的大多数 [The Silent Majority]." In *Siwei De Lequ 思维的乐趣 [Pleasure of Thinking]*. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 11. The translation is cited from Veg, "Wang Xiaobo and the No Longer Silent Majority." 91. Except this, the translations of Wang’s works in this thesis are all mine.

market economy was in the hand of the state.<sup>19</sup> On one hand, the government and the embryonic middle class formed a factual ally; on the other hand, the multiple debates about ideologies and thoughts exposed the enmity between the two. Thus, rather than a coherent juggernaut, the “speaking circle” is a multi-centered space where conflicts and cooperation take place for power grabbing; while the silent majority stay in the shadow.

Wang calls the speaking circle a “notorious madhouse” and claims that he decides to enter it because either it becomes normal or he is now mad. In this ironic manner, Wang tends to justify neither the speaking circle nor himself. With such mocking, he gets involved in the power play of speaking which he says he once gave up, but he also separates himself from it and remains his independence; one evidence for that is his nickname “the master outside the literary circle.” This independence has been constantly drawing the readers to identify with him.

### 1.3 The Labyrinth of Narrative

Despite the fact that Wang has become a cultural phenomenon, discussions and studies have been so concentrated on the thinking and ideas of Wang’s works that some researchers consider Wang’s essays better than his fiction. A major reason is that it is easy to bypass Wang’s complex narrative play and to address the explicit reasoning in the essays. On the contrary, I would argue that it is necessary to restore Wang as a writer of serious literature. “It is the form, rather than the content, that possesses historicity.”<sup>20</sup> In this study I will try to bring together the narrative

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<sup>19</sup> Zhang, Xudong. *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century*. Duke University Press, 2008. 31.

<sup>20</sup> Zhao, Yiheng 赵毅衡. *Kunao De Xushuzhe: Zhongguo Xiaoshuo De Xushi Xingshi Yu Zhongguo Wenxue* 苦恼的叙述者：中国小说的叙事形式与中国文学 [*The Troubled Narrator: The Narrative Form of Chinese Fictions and*

form and the thinking of Wang, hoping this would shed some light on the understanding of the writer.

The most famous narrator in Wang's work is named Wang Er, which to some extent refers to the author himself.<sup>21</sup> The name is used in almost all his most popular novels and novellas, whose narrators either are the same person or share similar personal characteristics. Therefore, I define all these narrators as intertextual. The Wang Er as a first-person narrator usually cuts in the narration and makes his voice dominating over the process of the story. Some studies criticize Wang for such a style that the voice of the narrator is so desultory that it makes no distinction between the fiction and the essays he wrote for columns. Indeed, Wang Er carries much of Wang's writing style and constantly distracts readers' attention from the story to his thinking. In other words, the author does not hide in the shadow of the text to let readers interpret; he is extraordinarily active in sharing ideas in front of the readers' eyes.

This narrator also constructs complex structures of narrative in the novels. Some of them carry multiple narrative levels, and some of them consist of different branches for the same plots. The narrator goes back and forth on the various layers of this metafiction labyrinth he builds and gradually weaves the narration into a metaphor of history. In these stories, Wang Er as a narrating subject, by his action of narrating, is mimicking the interaction between historicity and individuality. The ambition of the writer is not to portray the empirical reality throughout certain historical periods which he sets as the background of his stories, but to point out a long-lasting pattern that transcends temporality by which an individual rejects the totalizing power of the grand historical narrative.

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*Chinese Culture*. Beijing: Shiyue wenyi chubanshe 十月文艺出版社 [October Literature and Art Publishing House], 1994. 283.

<sup>21</sup> Wang Xiaobo is the second son among the five children of his parents. "Er" means "the second."



This chapter has introduced current studies about Wang Xiaobo and the cultural phenomenon of his popularity. In the next chapter, I will discuss the inspiration of Wang Xiaobo and the image of the intertextual narrator Wang Er, as well as the interrelation that connects the writer and his narrator. In the third chapter, certain narrative strategies and structures of the Wang Er stories will be addressed. In the fourth chapter, I will give analysis respectively to the individuality manifested in Wang Er and the historicity that he transgresses, followed by the conclusion.

## 2.0 The Author and the Narrator

Hans Anderson wrote *The Thorny Road of Honor*, in which he compared the literary career to a thorny bush on fire, and the Wiseman walks in the fire... but I see this road like this: the road is between two bamboo fences. Purple morning glories bloom all over the fences, and on each flower stands a blue dragonfly.

Wang Xiaobo<sup>22</sup>

## 2.1 Becoming Wang Xiaobo

Wang Xiaobo is mostly a product of Western values and writing techniques. According to the statistics, more Western writers, thinkers, and scholars than Chinese ones are cited and positively discussed in his works.<sup>23</sup> Wang's philosophy is empiricism and utilitarianism, which is considered partly a result of his experience studying in the United States.<sup>24</sup> Because of his focus on the limitation of individual experiences, Wang rejects the Hegelian narrative of history and absolute truth, and sets his ground on individualism. The socialist ideal was once the spiritual banner of Wang's generation who grew up in Maoist era. They were educated and inspired by socialist utopianism which drove them to strive for the revolutionary ambition – to “go up the

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<sup>22</sup> Wang, Xiaobo 王小波. "Wo De Jingshen Jiayuan 我的精神家园 [My Spiritual Homeland]." In *Wo De Jingshen Jiayuan 我的精神家园 [My Spiritual Homeland]*. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 224.

<sup>23</sup> Jiang, Zhiquan 江志全. *Bijiao Wenxue Shiyu Zhong De Wang Xiaobo Zhognxi Ziyuan Yu Taidu Xuanze 比较文学视域中的王小波中西资源与态度选择 [Wang Xiaobo's Resources and Attitudes in the Sight of Comparative Literature]*. Beijing: Renmin ribao chubanshe 人民日报出版社 [People's daily Publishing House], 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Xu, Jilin 许纪霖. "Ta Si Gu Ta Zai: Wang Xiaobo De Sixiang Shijie 他思故他在——王小波的思想世界 [He Thinks Therefore He Is: Wang Xiaobo's World of Thinking]." In *Buzai Chenmo: Renwen Xuezhe Lun Wang Xiaobo 不再沉默：人文学者论王小波 [No Longer Silent: Scholars of Humanities on Wang Xiaobo]*, edited by Wang Yi 王毅. Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe 光明日报出版社 [Guangming Daily Publishing House], 1997. 39.

mountains and down to the countryside”<sup>25</sup> during the Cultural Revolution, for example. When this era ended and the revolutionary passion faded, the generation split up. Some abandoned the sacred utopian ideal with an earthly, practical or even cynical attitude; some tried to maintain the idealism with spiritual struggles more or less in a tragic manner. The intellectuals tended to review Mao’s era in the 1980s, when literary trends such as Scar Literature and Reformative Literature flourished. Wang Xiaobo, as discussed in last section, kept silent until almost the mid-1990s, when he attacked the moral pursuit of responsibility which has been deeply rooted in Chinese intellectual tradition and the grand narrative of history. He did not only state his objection to the reflection on the time of socialism, but also doubt the rationality of the current time.

Wang attempts to separate knowledge/Reason from morality/social responsibility. He expresses it clearly that “as an intellectual, it is more important to be an elite of intellect than to be an elite of morality.”<sup>26</sup> The passion for social responsibility, Wang considers, is the prime cause for intellectuals to throw themselves blindly into the existing moral structure of utopianism. And the toxin of this utopianism is to make the choice of values for other individuals. Therefore, he consciously takes the stance of negative liberty, i.e., that individual freedom lies in the absence of others’ interference, and calls for “knowledge for knowledge’s sake.” As for the way of how to maintain his own freedom in making choices, he manifests his pursuit in his fiction. Though rejecting the moral utopia, Wang is interested in building a personal imaginary world through his fiction. The “Time Trilogy,” including *The Golden Age* series, *The Silver Age* series, and *The*

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<sup>25</sup> It was a movement started by Mao Zedong. He encouraged the educated youths in cities, usually the Red Guards, to go to the countryside to live and work with villagers. It was claimed to have the city youths “re-educated” by farm works. But one of the real reasons was that the Red Guard movement in cities were too chaotic that it was difficult to stop.

<sup>26</sup> Wang, Xiaobo 王小波. "Siwei De Lequ 思维的乐趣 [Pleasure of Thinking]." In *Siwei De Lequ 思维的乐趣 [Pleasure of Thinking]*. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 20.

*Bronze Age* series, tell the stories of the present, the future, and the ancient time, respectively. With highly stylized language, he skims over the history within the stories but shifts the focus on the psyche and experiences of a specific individual – Wang Er. Though many factors had shaped Wang Xiaobo’s writing, only two are discussed here to address the sources of his inspiration. One is the image of his father; the other is Italian writer Italo Calvino.

### 2.1.1 The Father

Wang Xiaobo was born into an intellectual family in 1952. His father Wang Fangming was a scholar of logics, who was trapped in the conflict between academic research and political ideology in his whole career. In Maoist time, he was once criticized by another scholar that his advocacy of formal logics was intrinsically the immaterialism of Capitalism and an offense to the dialectics of Marxism.<sup>27</sup> But such academic “minority” like him caught the interest of Mao Zedong, who had a meeting with a group of scholars of philosophy in 1957, including Wang Fangming. Due to this experience, the Wang family had survived the Cultural Revolution, which was an extremely unfriendly time for most intellectuals. Though compared with his counterparts, Wang Fangming’s methodology was more independent of the political influence back then, his academic principle was still inseparable from the narrative of the revolutionary era. Wang Xiaobo describes his father in one essay that: “Whenever he was trying to make an argument, he had to find his position in the total official theoretical system, just like an old hen looking for a corner to hatch in a chaotic compound.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fang, *Biography of Wang Xiaobo*. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Wang, Xiaobo 王小波. "Siwei De Lequ 思维的乐趣 [Pleasure of Thinking]." 14.

Wang Fangming is considered to have significant influence on Wang Xiaobo's writing. He used to demand his children to study "useful" science and technology instead of humanities and social sciences in college. From Wang Xiaobo's detailed description of engineering and mathematics in his fiction to his use of logical reasoning to create dramatic effects in writing, Wang Fangming's influence was ingrained in the knowledge system of his son. More importantly, the father's frustrating academic career and his painstaking effort in situating research in ideology prompted Wang Xiaobo to question the fate of Chinese intellectuals. These intellectuals of Maoist era, especially those in social sciences and humanities, were used to adjusting all the arguments, expressions, and results to properly fit in the "truth" of the official ideology. In the post-Mao time, this phenomenon in a more implicit manner has never come to an end. Instead of "looking for a corner to hatch in a chaotic compound," Wang intentionally deviates from his father's way of to promote the idea of thinking independently. His reasoning is mostly empirical and based on commonsense, always assuming various possibilities better than a single "truth."

He imbued his thinking into his fiction. His father's experience inspired his discussion of intellectuals, manifesting the changing attitude between two generations of intellectuals. In *Love in the Time of Revolution*, the father of the narrator Wang Er mirrors the author's father: he is a professor, being struggled against during the Cultural Revolution but only once; he is criticized for academic views and nearly condemned as a "rightist" during the anti-rightist campaign, but repeatedly applies to join the Communist Party. The father in the novel beats his son often since he attributes his misfortune to "the sin of having such an ugly son with a hairy face."<sup>29</sup> But the father-son relationship is not manifested as a mere binary conflict of the old and the new. The

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<sup>29</sup> Wang, Xiaobo 王小波. "Geming Shiqi De Aiqing 革命时期的爱情 [*Love in the Time of Revolution*]." In *Zhongpian Xiaoshuo 中篇小说 [Novellas]*. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 207.

father of Wang Er is not the representative of the tyrannical force in the era of extreme chaos; on the contrary, he is the struggling victim of the Red Guards. Therefore, the father, as a symbol, is not an entity of oppressive power which needs to be overthrown in a revolutionary narrative, but both a victim and a victimizer trapped in the psyche to fit in the totality. That is the reason Wang Er decides not to hate his father but only “got bored with him,” even though he beats him all the time.

The demand from the father is arbitrary: Wang Er gets beaten because he is ill, hurt, or he smiles at his father when seeing him struggled. The intellectuals of the earlier generation, on the one hand, has a sense of responsibility to regulate and enlighten the public, in whom the future generation is included. But on the other hand, they have often been disciplined by the political power. They do not necessarily have an intention to cooperate with authoritarianism: the father “put the posters of 1958 propaganda in the restroom as toilet paper for us.”<sup>30</sup> So that from this father image emerges a collective portrait of naïve and dedicated intellectuals who are just determined to be on the side of righteousness in order to carry on the responsibility to “criticize others.”<sup>31</sup>

It is an image that Wang Xiaobo has a complex attitude towards: he disagrees with how the father acts, but he also pities the struggle and inner conflict of the father. There should have been a danger that the son will continue the loop of being a victim and victimizer; but Wang Er not only breaks away from the influence of the father, but also leaves behind the whole historical environment shaped by what has disciplined his father, which will be discussed in the following

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 172.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 208.

section. By such a position, Wang Er does not need a spiritual patricide to end or continue the loop, but only focuses on his personal aesthetics to avoid getting involved.

### 2.1.2 Italo Calvino

The novel *Love in the Time of Revolution* begins with Wang Er working in a tofu factory. Someone draws a naked woman in the male restroom at the factory and writes “Lao Lu” beside it, which is the name of a fat middle-aged woman. Wang Er is the only one known there to have a talent of painting, so that Lao Lu is furious and wants to catch and beat him every time he passes by. The author elaborates in pages how Wang Er escapes Lao Lu to the tower top where he works on and she cannot climb. The scene is implied as a parody of Italo Calvino’s story *The Baron in the Trees*,<sup>32</sup> which Wang deems to be the embodiment of Calvino’s concept of “lightness” in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.<sup>33</sup>

Another more explicit scene as a tribute to *The Baron in the Trees* in this novel is that the teenager Wang Er is sitting on a tree while watching faction fights among the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. A person is dying under the tree, but all he is thinking is a dance described in an ancient book. Compared with the cruelty he witnesses during the fights, he gives more details to the technology of making a catapult and his job as a weapon designer in the fights. The machine, however, is anything but lightness:

“it has an anemoscope to measure winds, a tensiometer to measure force, and a telemeter for distance... Ten people are needed to operate the catapult: some report the wind force, some weigh the stones, and some measure the direction and the distance. With the data

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 71.

<sup>33</sup> Wang, Xiaobo 王小波. "Kaerweinuo Yu Weilai De Yiqiannian 卡尔维诺与未来的一千年 [Calvino and the Next Millennium]." In *Wo De Jingshen Jiayuan 我的精神家园 [My Spiritual Homeland]*. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 72.

collected, I will calculate the trajectory. It never misses a target within five hundred meters.”<sup>34</sup>

He also mentions that he detests firearms, the far more modern and portable weapons which later takes the place of his catapult in faction fights. Wang Er’s preference towards the machine is seemingly opposing Calvino’s favor of lightness in the progress of heaviness developing into lightness in his discussion of the industrial history:

“The second industrial revolution doesn’t present us, as the first did, with overwhelming images of rolling mills or molten steel, but rather with bits of information that flow, as electrical impulses, through circuits. We still have machines made of steel, but they now obey bits that are weightless.”<sup>35</sup>

Wang Er brings the antiquity of a catapult into Beijing of the 1960s and 70s, into the campus of a university where students, instead of studying and enjoying their time of being young, fight each other to death. But the heaviness of deaths, though diluted in the description, echoes continuously in the background; while the elaborate details of the antique catapult contain a “thoughtful lightness,”<sup>36</sup> a lightness that contains a displaced temporality that spills out of the deadly campus.

Wang deliberately reverses the old/heavy and the modern/light of materials as the reference to the absurdity of history. His indifference towards the brutal killings is not due to the lack of sympathy; by this attitude, he also rejects the historical reason of the fights, the idea of competing to be the orthodox of Red Guards, which is not even mentioned in the story. The role Wang Er plays in the history of Cultural Revolution serves only the interest to design a catapult, regardless of who are hit or, according to the story, that sometimes the catapult is absurdly used to open a bottle of drink. His care for this machine concentrates only on its very existence – it is a well-designed catapult and works perfectly to manifest its inventor’s talent, nothing more. The lightness

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 246-47.

<sup>35</sup> Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 12.



of the catapult lies in the detachment from its practical function and the era it belongs to. The material heaviness, therefore, is canceled with its displacement in the situation of the fights – it does not belong to the campus in Beijing in the 1960s. Wang Er also intentionally distances himself by sitting on the tree, physically and mentally, from everything that takes place under the tree and at present:

“I read Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* when I was young, and then I wanted to be an ancient man... Back then people could invent any machine as they wish – I don’t remember Archimedes got beaten by his father because of inventing a waterwheel. This explains why I should not have been born in the modern time. I am an ancient man of the present time. I am Archimedes. I am Michelangelo. I have nothing to do with all of these in front of me.”<sup>37</sup>

The displacement of time in Wang’s novels always associates with imagination, which in Calvino’s expression is the ultimate lightness.<sup>38</sup> It is also the central idea that Wang extracts from Calvino’s *The Invisible Cities*, and he projects it most explicitly in his *Wanshou Temple*: “The art of fiction is to have infinite possibilities.”<sup>39</sup> He considers that every city described by Marco Polo in *The Invisible Cities* is a symbol, and the multiple branches of plots and possibilities of storytelling in *Wanshou Temple* parallel the infiniteness of the cities:

“He does not tell stories but just lists new cities one after another... I generally understand what Calvino wants to do. As a writer, he wants to possess all good literary characteristics: the complete lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency.”<sup>40</sup>

This is rather the ambition of Wang inspired by Calvino than Wang’s understanding of Calvino’s idea. Therefore, *Wanshou Temple* turns out to be an experiment on the possibilities that he intends to achieve, in which there are also outlandish machines and ideas. Such machines and ideas, likewise, manifest or result in the inventor’s being-out-of-place in his situation. This

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<sup>37</sup> Wang, *Love in the Time of Revolution*. 216.

<sup>38</sup> Calvino, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Wang, "Calvino and the Next Millennium." 72.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

thrownness, the sense of not belonging, explains why that the characters have to search for alternatives for the reality; and in order to enter another state of being, they have to acquire the lightness to “fly like Perseus into some other space.”<sup>41</sup>

## 2.2 The Narrator Wang Er

The narrator Wang Er appears in nine novellas and novels of Wang Xiaobo. Though being different characters in separate stories and having different experiences, the Wang Ers share similar characteristics. They are coherent in their tones, witty and humorous, full of imagination, but never serious.

The Wang Er in the novellas *The Golden Age*, *Standing up at the Age of Thirty*, and *Time like the Flowing Water* is the first one created by the author. He sees the persecutions around him during Cultural Revolution when he was young (*Time like the Flowing Water*) and is sent to a production team in Yunnan as a *Zhiqing* (educated youth), based on the author’s real experience. There he has a relationship with Chen Qingyang, a married woman. Because of this, they are struggled with and demanded to write confessions, in which he manifests his literary talent (*The Golden Age*). After the Revolution, he becomes a lecturer in a university. He cannot understand the reason why he has to pursue a successful life. In his middle age, he decides to do only one thing worth doing, that is to keep writing down and spreading the experiences of his generation till his death, no matter how tragic or offensive they are (*Standing up at the Age of Thirty*). This wish could be interpreted as the author’s implied claim of ambition for himself.

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<sup>41</sup> Calvino, 8.

The Wang Er in *Love in the Time of Revolution* wants to be a painter when he was young, but it turns out that he is color blind and is refused by the college. During the Cultural Revolution, he invents interesting weapons for the faction fights among Red Guards. He considers “daydreaming” and “searching for fantasy” his way to put up with life. He is once in love with a college girl, who, like him, is an outlier of the faction fights, but he dares not to elope with her. He begins his tedious life working in a tofu factory, where he receives “education” from the League Branch Secretary X Haiying. Their sexual relationship is the result of the girl’s fantasy of being a revolutionary hero raped by the enemy.

Another Wang Er, the narrator of *My Two Worlds of Yin and Yang* and *Searching for Wushuang*, is an isolated man living in the basement of a hospital. He is “impotent” at the night of his wedding and gets divorced. He gets mocked and ignored by the colleagues in the hospital, but he does not care. He likes to write fiction, though the submissions are often rejected. He also translates a Victorian underground novel *The Story of O*, a piece of erotic literature, knowing it is not to be published. Then a doctor named Xiao Sun “cured” and marries him, but he feels uncomfortable having a “normal” life.

Wang Er, the narrator of *Hongfu Eloping at Night*, also spends some time in a production team in Yunnan and later lives in a university. He works in the department of mathematics and tries hard to prove the Fermat’s Last Theorem.<sup>42</sup> He does not get along with his hypocrite colleagues, and one of them steals his achievement of proving the theorem. He is also busy writing a novel adapted from the Tang Dynasty legend “Hongfu Eloping at Night.” He adds various of metaphors and implications to the ancient story, with grotesque scenes of imagination and modern

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<sup>42</sup> The novel was written before 1994 when Andrew Wiles proved the theorem. Before the publication, Wang humorously wrote in the preface of the novel that “Wang Er in this book proved the theorem before Wiles.”

elements embedded in. He creates a funny world in fiction because he believes the reality he lives in is boring.

The Wang Er of *Wanshou Temple* loses his memory at the very beginning of the book, indicating a tribute to *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* of Patrick Modiano. In recovering his memory, he finds that he works in a history research institute. But his interest is in writing novels. He finds some disjointed scripts he wrote, a story adapted from the Tang legend “Hongxian Stealing the Box.” The story creates a world of fantasy compared with the dullness of where he works. The institute is set in Wanshou Temple, where the drainage is plugged and wastewater is everywhere. He cannot stand it and asks the boss to demote him to be a plumber because he has been good at fixing machines, while other scholars just pretend as if the wastewater does not exist and mock him. As his memory recovered, the mediocre reality overwhelms the world in his fiction.

The Wang Ers described above are the most well-known characters/narrators in Wang Xiaobo’s works. What they want to do can be summarized as creative works: scientists, inventors, artists, and writers. The science and technology that Wang Er deals with are pure, abstract mathematics and the machines full of creativeness. None of these are profit-making or practical. Through the uncommon things they do, they search for what are not to be found in reality. They are the marginalized ones who do not fight back against what mistreats them. The humor they practice, a lightness which “casts doubt on self” and “on the world” according to Calvino,<sup>43</sup> poses a non-cooperative attitude to reality.

As for their style of storytelling, the first-person narratives often employ dramatically long description and commentary paragraphs. When there have to be conversations, the conversations

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<sup>43</sup> Calvino, 23.

are often notably short and demonstrated by direct speech without quotation marks. In their voices, the author intends to create a strong subjectivity and individual stance of themselves.

Thus far, this chapter has discussed the intrinsic and intended coherence between the author Wang Xiaobo and his intertextual narrator/character and alter ego Wang Er. The author Wang Xiaobo expresses his doubt for the reality and projects his pursuit of an alternative onto the character Wang Er. But the character always fails to gain the alternative at the end of each story. The next chapter will dive deeper into the structure of Wang's narrative to explain the reason behind the destined failure of Wang Ers.

### 3.0 The Narrative Structure

I realize that I am writing fiction, and I am not limited. I can be in anytime, I can be anywhere, and I can be anyone. I can also refuse any time, any location, or anyone. If it isn't so, why would I write novels?<sup>44</sup>

Now you see how this story ends: I converge with me of the past and become one person. The woman in white converges with the girl of the past and becomes one person. Then I converge with her, and we become fewer. The so-called reality is such irreversible vulgarity. Though my memory has recovered, I have now a story of my own. But I want to go back to Chang'an... One must not only have this life but also have a poetic world.<sup>45</sup>

Wang Xiaobo

According to Wang's criteria of how to write fiction and the feedbacks from twenty years of popularity, his narrative art speaks most for his distinguished style. The language of Wang, besides being entertainingly laughable and unreasonable, forms "macro-metaphors" which congruously contribute to manifesting the hidden meaning through the tension between tenor and vehicle and also implying the psyche in experiencing and understanding the former.<sup>46</sup> With the Greismas Square and Tetralemma, Zhao Yiheng proves that the driving force behind the narrativity of *The Golden Age* is a constant negativity, which provides the possibility to penetrate the text and reaches the traces of history.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Wang, Xiaobo. *Wanshou Si* 万寿寺 [*Wanshou Temple*]. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 180.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 206.

<sup>46</sup> Chen, Yaya 陈亚亚. "Wang Xiaobo Zuopin Zhong De Yinyu Yishu 王小波作品中的隐喻艺术 [the Art of Metaphors in Wang Xiaobo's Fiction]." *Xiuci xuexi* 修辞学习 [*Rhetoric Studies*], no. 2 (2001): 37-38.

<sup>47</sup> Zhao, Yiheng 赵毅衡. "Xushu Zai Fouding Zhong Zhankai: Sijupo, Fuhao Fangzheng, Huangjin Shidai 叙述在否定中展开——四句破, 符号方阵, 《黄金时代》 [The Narrative Unfolding in Negativity: Tealtreuna, Semiorie Square, *The Golden Age*]." *Zhongguo bijiao wenxue* 中国比较文学 [*Chinese Comparative Literature*], no. 1 (2008): 54-64.

Wang's technique is often placed under the category of postmodernism, and plenty of researches focus on analyzing Wang's works as postmodernist texts. Discussing the language, Han Yanbin analyzed the various levels of engagement of metafiction characteristics in Wang's texts, e.g., narrator's exposure.<sup>48</sup> For the structure, *Wanshou Temple* is usually brought to exemplify Wang's bizarre and carnivalized postmodern logic in the game of arbitrariness.<sup>49</sup> Commenting on Wang's more concentration on narrativity than on story, most researches mention the resistance against political suppression and elaborate on the conversation between the text and history; but there are also researchers who restrict their purview in the pleasure of the narrative game, emphasizing on the more personal aspects of the author.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, Wang's personality is as important as his intention in writing what he calls "serious literature."

There are, however, disagreements on the "postmodern-ness" of Wang. On the one hand Wang's marginalized insight and deconstruction of the sublime do not mean rejection of profoundness; on the other hand, the dark comedy and carnivalized language do not necessarily lead to decentralization.<sup>51</sup> This is essential: whatever extravagant techniques of deconstruction are

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<sup>48</sup> Han, Yanbin 韩彦斌. "Lun Wang Xiaobo Chuangzuo De Yuanxiaoshuo Tezheng 论王小波创作的元小说特征 [On the Metafictional Characteristics in Wang Xiaobo's Works]." *Neimenggu shifan daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 内蒙古师范大学学报 (哲学社会科学版) [*Journal of Inner Mongolia Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*] 34, no. 3 (2005): 85-90.

<sup>49</sup> Zhang, Bocun 张伯存. "Yige Houxiandaizhuyi Wenben De Jiedu: Ping Wang Xiaobo Wanshou Si 一个后现代主义文本的解读——评王小波《万寿寺》 [Interpreting a Postmodern Text: On Wang Xiaobo's Wanshou Temple]." *Dangdai Wentan* 当代文坛 4 (1998): 23-25; Zhang, Yihong 张懿红. "Wang Xiaobo Xiaoshuo Yishu De Yuanyuan Yu Chuanghua 王小波小说艺术的渊源与创化 [The Origin and Development of Wang Xiaobo's Art of Fiction]." *Zhongguo bijiao wenxue* 中国比较文学 [*Chinese Comparative Literature*] 4 (2004): 128-41; Zhao, Ning 赵凝. "Lun Wanshou Si Duochongcuozhi De Xushi Xingshi 论《万寿寺》多重错置的叙事形式 [On the Multi-Layered Narrative Form of Wanshou Temple]." *Qunwen tiandi* 群文天地, no. 3 (2012): 239-40.

<sup>50</sup> Xiong, Jinhua 熊锦华. "Xushi Shijian Yu Yishu Leque: Cong Huangjin Shidai Kan Wang Xiaobo Dui Xiaoshuo Yishu De Tansuo 叙事时间与艺术乐趣——从《黄金时代》看王小波对小说艺术的探索 [Narrative Time and Pleasure of Art: Wang Xiaobo's Search for Art of Fiction in the Golden Age]." *Zhongshan daxue xuebao luncong* 中山大学学报论丛 [*Journal of Sun Yat-sen University*] 24, no. 6 (2004): 29-35.

<sup>51</sup> Huang, Chao 黄超. "Wang Xiaobo Xiaoshuo De Xushuxue Jiedu 王小波小说的叙述学解读 [A Narratological Interpretation of Wang Xiaobo's Fiction]." *Tianjin shifan daxue* 天津师范大学 [*Tianjin Normal University*], 2012.

applied, he never lacks an implication of central signals for intended readers, one of which is the intertextual narrator. Lu Yixin and Fang Wei describe Wang's narrator with strong subjectivity as "regressive" against the background of the contemporary trend of dividing narrator from authorial consciousness. He is neither an ideological propagandist nor a traditional all-knowing authorial intruder, but an inventive voice of a truth seeker.<sup>52</sup> But they are obscure on how it is inventive; and Wang Er, rather than actively seeking "truth," is seeking an alternative for reality, as last chapter has discussed. The narrator with strong subjectivity speaks through the play of narrativity to the individuality in history.

### 3.1 Narratorial Intrusion

Wang Ers are most well-known for their narratorial intrusion, a strategy that provides the narrator-subject a chance of self-expression in the story. There are two indirect ways for the narrator to build an intentional context which helps receivers of the information reconstruct the intention of the sender: self-characterization and narratorial intrusion.<sup>53</sup> Wang Er embodies both of the methods. Originally, Wayne Booth names the strategy "authorial intrusion."<sup>54</sup> Since the author is unable to get involved in the narrative directly and can only speak through the narrator,

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<sup>52</sup> Lu, Yixin 吕逸新, and Wei Fang 房伟. "Ziyouzhuyi De Zhuti Kuanghuan: Lun Wang Xiaobo Xiaoshuo Xushu Shijiao De Fugu Yu Chuangxin "自由主义"的主体狂欢——论王小波小说叙述视角的“复古”与“创新” [The Carnivalization of 'Liberal' Subject: On the 'Regression' and 'Innovation' of Narrative Point of Views in Wang Xiaobo's Fiction]." *Lanzhou xuekan* 兰州学刊 [*Lanzhou Journal*], no. 7 (2008): 193-96.

<sup>53</sup> Zhao, Yiheng. *The Troubled Narrator: The Narrative Form of Chinese Fictions and Chinese Culture*. 50.

<sup>54</sup> Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983. 42.



I prefer to use “narratorial intrusion,” a term suggested by Zhao Yiheng.<sup>55</sup> The narrator can directly add personal comments and supplement into the narration. Most intrusions traditionally explain the plots, usually seen in the classic fiction of pre-modern times. But for Wang, they often work in other fashions.

Example 1: (In the story written by the narrator) “That year was not a good time for both pigs and officers in the Luoyang city, just like the year 1957 was not a good time for clever Chinese people.”<sup>56</sup>

Example 2: (The narrator was witnessing a factional fight during the Cultural Revolution and saw a person pierced by a spear.) “That wretch was spinning on the ground, and I was trapped in the tree. He rotated and rotated, making sounds like ‘eh-eh.’ It was in summer, but I felt cold. I thought: look, he can only pronounce vowels but not consonants anymore. Then I thought: *Tai Ping Guang Ji* records, An Lushan could dance like swirling; this must be the same. The book said, An Lushan danced with a copper pot in his hand; though this person had no pot, he had a spear in him just like that he had four arms. That was similarly spectacular.”<sup>57</sup>

Example 1 contains a cut-in of modern time event into a fictional ancient story, while example 2 is the opposite. Example 1 is in the story of “Hongfu Eloping at Night” written by Wang Er in the novel of the same name. The year 1957 was the beginning of Anti-Rightist Campaign in mainland China. An indication of this event is mixed in the plot that, in Sui Dynasty, the officers behead pigs in various absurd ways as the rehearsal for testing a beheading machine, because a lot of them would be executed if they do not catch Li Jing the protagonist. In example 2, being discussed along with an ancient dance, the cruelty of factional fights in history is seemingly canceled in the narrator’s indifferent tone. Such examples can be found in almost all the stories: irrelevant comparisons are made to generate humorous sarcasm for certain phenomena and to

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<sup>55</sup> Zhao, Yiheng 赵毅衡. *Dang Shuoze Bei Shuo De Shihou: Bijiao Xushuxue Daolun* 当说者被说的时候: 比较叙述学导论 [When the Narrator Is Narrated: Introduction to Comparative Narratology]. Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe 中国人民大学出版社 [China Renmin University Press], 1998. 35.

<sup>56</sup> Wang, Xiaobo. *Hongfu Yeben* 红拂夜奔 [Hongfu Eloping at Night]. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 93.

<sup>57</sup> Wang, *Love in the Time of Revolution*. 205.

indicate the opinion of the narrator, drawing the attention from readers and intentionally estranging them from the main story. But such intrusions do not last too long to lead readers astray or make them forget about the plots. They appear as Easter Eggs and generate an unspoken mutual understanding between the author and readers, inviting the readers into an implied transhistorical reflexivity.

Another type of intrusion exposes more of the narrator. It is exerted widely in *The Bronze Age* series, the stories in which Wang Ers write fiction based on Tang dynasty legends, to remind the readers of the existence of the narrator: “As you know, I write novels;” “There is another possible opening of the story;” “There are other supplements for this issue;” etc. Critics find that such “tough landing” impedes the fluidity of narrative structure, and it is so arbitrary that it destroys “the art of fiction.”<sup>58</sup> But such exposure of the narrative voice not only leads the readers back to the authority of the narrator like the discursive comments of example 1 and 2 do, but also intentionally destroys the sense of presence, preventing the readers from having emotional investment into the story. It is an intentional action to demonstrate the writing behavior, which is supposed to be on the backstage, on the foreground. And it generates the effect of metafiction. The exposure is commonly used with an omniscient narrator, like the classic Chinese novels in which the storytellers jump out and say that “dear audience, do you know that?” to draw attention or “if you want to know what happened next, please listen to my story next time” to indicate the change between chapters.<sup>59</sup> But this type of intrusion, for readers or audience, mostly serves just a highly-conventionalized framework of stories. What Wang Er intrudes is a novel within another novel. In

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<sup>58</sup> See Jiang, Zhiquan, *Wang Xiaobo's Resources and Attitudes in the Sight of Comparative Literature*. And Du, Juan 杜娟. "Lun Wang Xiaobo Xiaoshuo Chuangzuo De Yiyi Yu Queshi 论王小波小说创作的意义与缺失 [on Meaning and Lack in Wang Xiaobo's Writing]." Beijing yuyan daxue 北京语言大学 [Beijing Language and Culture University], 2008.

<sup>59</sup> i.e. 看官有所不知 and 预知后事如何，且听下回分解。

the former, which I will refer to as the sub-text, he is the omniscient narrator who is intruding the story; while in the latter he is not omniscient, as he is the first-person narrator of his own life. By intruding the sub-text, such exposed writing behavior of Wang Er suggests the existence and thinking of the author behind Wang Er.

Either way, the intrusions discussed above are conducted on the level of discourse of the narrator rather than directly intervening the flow of story. But Wang also likes to exert an intentional confusion of language to deprive the story of its autonomy, which is a modernist technique learned from the western literature. In discussing the “denarration” in Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy*, Brian Richardson asserts that the narrator’s denial of earlier narrative, used widely in modernist fiction, problematizes the separation between story and discourse, i.e. a confusion of the “fact” in the story.<sup>60</sup> But practically the readers will always try to distinguish the story (what really “happened”) from the discourse (what the narrator says) when a confusion happens. The readers would assume the existence of a concrete fact known by the author, the very intention of the author, which is disguised in the narrator’s voice. Though the story’s details are indeterminable, readers still tend to construct a concrete fact of the story out of the unstable narrative, the “general, undifferentiated conglomerate of past events”<sup>61</sup> that the narrator constantly invalidates. In Wang’s *Wanshou Temple*, for example, readers do so even more because of narrative levels and metalepsis applied in the narrative structure.

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<sup>60</sup> Richardson, Brian. "Denarration in Fiction: Erasing the Story in Beckett and Others." *Narrative* 9, no. 2 (2001): 173.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3.2 Narrative Levels and Metalepsis

According to Gerard Genette’s definition, the stratification of narrative levels happens when there is a change of narrator,<sup>62</sup> and metalepsis is the transgression among narrators on different levels, including narratorial intrusion, which is a descending transgression.<sup>63</sup> The difference among levels is defined that “any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed.”<sup>64</sup> And he classifies three narrative levels: the extradiegetic level, the diegetic level, and the metadiegetic level, i.e. the higher level, the middle level, and the lower level. The following table provides four examples of the stratification of narrative levels in Wang Xiaobo’s novels.

**Table 1 Narrative Levels in Wang’s Novels**

|   | Fiction                              | Narrative Level | Narrator | Object of Narrative                      |
|---|--------------------------------------|-----------------|----------|--|
| 1 | <i>The Green-Hair Water Monster</i>  | Extradiegetic   | Wang     | Conversation of Wang and Chen            |
|   |                                      | Diegetic        | Chen     | Chen and Yao Yao’s story                 |
|   |                                      | Metadiegetic    | Yao Yao  | Yao Yao’s story                          |
| 2 | <i>My Two Worlds of Yin and Yang</i> | Diegetic        | Wang Er  | Wang Er and Xiao Sun’s story             |
|   | <i>Searching for Wushuang</i>        |                 |          | Sub-text   Wang Xianke’s story           |
| 3 | <i>Hongfu Fleeing at Night</i>       | Extradiegetic   | Unnamed  | Comments on Wang Er                      |
|   |                                      | Diegetic        | Wang Er  | Wang Er and Xiao Sun’s story             |
|   |                                      |                 |          | Sub-text   Li Jing and Hongfu’s story    |
| 4 | <i>Wanshou Temple</i>                | Diegetic        | Wang Er  | Wang Er and the woman in white’s story   |
|   |                                      |                 |          | Sub-text   Xue Song and Hongxian’s story |

<sup>62</sup> Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. NY: Cornell University Press, 1983. 228.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 234.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 228.

|  |  |              |   |  |                       |
|--|--|--------------|---|--|-----------------------|
|  |  | Metadiegetic | The girl in the tower/Xue Song/The cousin |  | The story in Chang'an |
|--|--|--------------|---|--|-----------------------|

In his early work *The Green-Hair Water Monster*, the narrative levels are a loyal imitation of a typical leveled structure in which the narrative of the lower level (diegetic/metadiegetic) is a story told by one narrator to another narrator of the higher narrative (extradiegetic/diegetic). In later works, the narrative levels grow more various and complicated. For example, the story of *Searching for Wushuang* is the sub-text<sup>65</sup> of the first-person narrator Wang Er in *My Two Worlds of Yin and Yang*; and intertextually, he cuts in this Tang dynasty story with discussions of his life with Xiao Sun in the other novel. An unnamed extradiegetic narrator in *Hongfu Fleeing at Night* appears often in the beginning of certain chapters to point out some facts about the writing. For example, though it is technically Wang Er who is writing about the Tang Dynasty character Qiu Ran Gong's metamorphosis, the unnamed narrator, acting as a critic, comes out saying "this chapter is influenced by *The Metamorphosis*, the work of master Kafka who shares the same personality with the author."<sup>66</sup> Though it is debatable whether this extradiegetic narrator should be Wang Xiaobo in history because he also appears in the preface, his behavior manifests his closeness to the historical author.

Similarly, all the events in Wang Er's manuscript, the sub-text, in *Wanshou Temple* that are open to myriad "other possibilities" and counter one another are confined by a boundary set by the intrusion sentences like "the story could also go like this." The boundary points to a relatively

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<sup>65</sup> The sub-text refers to the Tang Dynasty stories written by Wang Er the narrator. Since strictly speaking the narrator is not changed, the sub-text is set within the same narrative level. But narratorial intrusion could still happen because of the existence of a fictitious text. Such text indicates the identity change of the limited first-person narrator into an omniscient third-person narrator, thus it enlarges the narratorial power or even the (mimic) authorial power.

<sup>66</sup> Wang, *Hongfu Eloping at Night*. 151.

concrete story of Wang Er in comparison with the unstable story of Xue Song, the protagonist of Wang Er's writing. Therefore, the parallel between Wang Er and Xue Song pushes the readers into the narrative labyrinth to seek a "truth" in Xue Song that supposedly can be supported by the concreteness of Wang Er's life.

In other words, readers would find themselves trying to lift the character from the sub-texts/metadiegetic level to upper levels to approach the historical author. But in the unstableness of Xue Song, same as that they seek attachment to the story but are impeded by the intrusion discussed in last section, readers would find it difficult to get support in seeking concreteness at first by the chaotic multiple branches of the story. However, *Wanshou Temple* can be observed as the meta-text of Wang Xiaobo's novels: the intertextuality of multiple branches of plots within *Wanshou Temple* parallels the intertextuality among all the Wang Er stories. Xue Song's story does not have an end until it finally cuts off all the possibilities and mingles with Wang Er's reality: "when everything turns irreversibly to reality, my story is going to end."<sup>67</sup> And the different Wang Ers end their stories by similar tones, indicating a same pattern of Wang Ers' life:

*Wanshou Temple*: ...I lie down in the mess and stare at the darkness with despair. Because tomorrow morning I am going on the unreturnable path to the Phoenix Village in Xiangxi. Xue Song is going to meet Hong Xian there, and I am going to Wanshou Temple to meet the woman in white. Everything in the Chang'an city has ended. Everything is irreversibly turning to mediocrity.<sup>68</sup>

*Hongfu Fleeing at Night*: ...Till now, there is nothing to convince me that I am right in saying that life is interesting. The past is interesting; we desire to be interesting, and we are intrinsically interesting but just pretend not to be. There is also nothing to convince me that I am wrong, that life is boring. Both the past and the present are boring, and we do not like being interesting at all. So that until now, I can only live in this world bearing despair.<sup>69</sup>

*Searching for Wushuang*: ...Wang Xianke left Xuanyang Fang and went on searching for Wushuang... Though his IQ was 185, it was hard to sneak into the palace of the emperor.

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<sup>67</sup> Wang, Xiaobo. *Wanshou Temple*. 206.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 207.

<sup>69</sup> Wang, *Hongfu Eloping at Night*. 212.

At least Wushuang's safety was guaranteed there, but this was the only advantage. Moreover, the world is so chaotic, and whatever we do is beset with difficulties. So, I assume that he can never find Wushuang.<sup>70</sup>

*Love in the Time of Revolution*: ...I seem to be both very old and very young; the time of revolution seems to have passed yet have not begun. Love seems to have ended yet have not come; I seem to have already stricken the jackpot, but it seems that the day of the draw has not even come. Everything seems to have ended, and everything seems to just begin.<sup>71</sup>

Wang Xiaobo has an ambition of leading readers through the possibilities in his imagination how Wang Ers search for an alternative for the dullness of reality. But in the end, he abandons the possibilities brought by the unstableness that he deems to be “interesting” and puts in the concreteness to attach Xue Song to Wang Er. He also gives up the possibilities of Wang Ers and throws them into the middle of nowhere, putting up with life. All the humorous and absurd random-talk style narration is gone at the end of the stories; instead, he overtly expresses a pessimism by words like “despair,” “mediocrity,” “irreversibly,” or “he can never find Wushuang.”

Paola Iovene mentions a “strange loop” in the discussion of metalepsis in Ge Fei's *Brocade Zither*. In the loop, experiences of the past, the present, and the future mediate with one another, and each protagonist in the four sections is in the tale/dream told by another. Thus, these characters of the same name depend on each other to exist; and the chronological displacement of the poem *Brocade Zither* indicates history's subordination to fictional framing.<sup>72</sup> The loop of Ge Fei is a tightly formed circle that history has no entry into it. But for Wang Xiaobo, the metalepsis is a line of characters from Xue Song (or Li Jing, Wang Xianke) to Wang Er to the unnamed narrator, a

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<sup>70</sup> Wang, Xiaobo. *Xunzhao Wushuang • Donggong • Xigong* 寻找无双 • 东宫 • 西宫 [Searching for Wushuang & East Palace • West Palace]. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 139.

<sup>71</sup> Wang, *Love in the Time of Revolution*. 287.

<sup>72</sup> Iovene, Paola. *Tales of Futures Past: Anticipation and the Ends of Literature in Contemporary China*. Stanford University Press, 2014. 129.

transcendence between the textual world and history. Xue Song and Li Jing's mingling with the upper narrative level, i.e., that their stories mingle with Wang Ers' story, points to a metaphorical "extra"-extradiegetic level higher than that of Wang Er or the unnamed narrator – the history that Wang Xiaobo the author is in. In the next section I will discuss that, by the transgression among these subjects on multiple narrative levels, how Wang demonstrates the tension between the two ends of this line.



## 4.0 Individuality and Historicity

I read G. Orwell's *1984* when I was in college in 1980, and it was an unforgettable experience... For me it is not dystopian fiction but history. The former resembles reality in its form, while the latter has already been repeated over time. Here Orwell's nightmare has already come true, because someone believes that life is unreasonable, asexual, and uninteresting... I have seen a world of the unreasonable, the asexual, and the uninteresting, but I also see in chaos exist the reasonable, the sexual, and the interesting. What I need to do is to bring them out.

Wang Xiaobo<sup>73</sup>

### 4.1 The Construction of the Self in Narration

"I love my poem because I know it has true beauty and undeniable brilliance. I also love the 'self' I created in the poem, and I am satisfied with him."<sup>74</sup> In an early short story *I Greet the Morning on a Desert Island*, Wang Xiaobo created a ragman poet who rescues several students on the sea and almost dies alone on a desert island. The next morning on that island, the "I" watches the sunrise and composes his most satisfying poem. What "I" wrote was not only a text considered as a poem according to literary genres but also a conscious creation of an ideal "self" residing in the text. It is a claim of Wang that he is intentionally creating a "better" subject out of the writing and refusing "creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Wang, Xiaobo. "Huaiyi Sanbuqu Xu 怀疑三部曲序 [the Preface of Suspicion Trilogy]." In *Wo De Jingshen Jiayuan 我的精神家园 [My Spiritual Homeland]*. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 69-70.

<sup>74</sup> Wang, Xiaobo. "Wo Zai Huangdao Shang Yingjie Liming 我在荒岛上迎接黎明 [I Greet the Morning on a Desert Island]." In *Duanpian Xiaoshuo 短篇小说 [Short Stories]*. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 87.

<sup>75</sup> Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?". In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 101-20. NY: Pantheon Books, 1984. 102.

Wang Xiaobo intentionally avoids depicting and elaborating the empirical reality. He admires the works of Marguerite Duras and other Nouveau Roman writers.<sup>76</sup> Besides the apparent similarity between Wang's structure in *The Golden Age* and the structure of Duras' *The Lover*, Wang is influenced by the idea that novels need a renovation of expression.<sup>77</sup> As the narratorial intrusion and stratification of narrative levels implied, he affirms the artificial nature of narrative and exposes the hidden rules of how narration is operated. In Wang Er's revelation of how he wrote the story of Li Jing in *Hongfu Eloping at Night*, for example, Wang Xiaobo implies the importance of the parallel between Wang Er and Li Jing and how Wang Er purposely puts implications of his life into Li Jing's. Though not all the stories written by the narrator are manifested as part of the story, all Wang Ers are noted to be writing or orally speaking something (e.g., Wang Er in *The Golden Age* writes confession materials which are not part of the story but only described to readers; Wang Er in *Love in the Time of Revolution* confesses to X Haiying during the "education" about the "evil" he has done, which overlaps with the flashbacks). In writing Wang Er's writing, Wang Xiaobo imitates not the empirical existence but the action of narrating; the subject embedded in the narration is thus a subject who narrates but not necessarily acts – a narratorial or linguistic subject that does not exist prior to language.

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<sup>76</sup> Wang, Xiaobo. "Gaici De Jinshenyi 盖茨的紧身衣 [the Straitjacket of Gates]." In *Wo De Jingshen Jiayuan 我的精神家园 [My Spiritual Homeland]*. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 75

<sup>77</sup> Jin, Wenhao. "Sexuality as Rebellious Gesture in Wang Xiaobo's the Golden Age Trilogy." University of Victoria. 2012.

#### 4.1.1 The Intrusion of the Self in *Love in the Time of Revolution*

How, then, could this narratorial subject be created as a more satisfiable “self”? Scholars have been referring to Wang Er as Wang Xiaobo’s alter ego, the character who presents the ideas of the author and shares similarities in behavior, speech, and psychology with the author.<sup>78</sup> But how does Wang Er’s searching for such a “self” exemplify Wang Xiaobo’s searching? In this case, the exchange between a first-person narrator and a third-person narrator at the beginning of *The Love in the Time of Revolution* makes a good example.

The first chapter of this novel is divided into nine sections, in which the first, third, and fifth sections are narrated by a third-person narrator, and the other sections are narrated by the “I.” The third-person sections tell the story of Wang Er working in a tofu factory in the 1970s during the Cultural Revolution, and the sections between them tell the childhood memory of “I” about backyard steel furnaces in the 1950s during the Great Leap Forward period. The “I” wants to be an artist in his childhood and is fascinated by a dazzling scene in his memory which actually turns out to be the steelmaking in the Great Leap Forward:

I was on the playground in 1958 and walked among some strange buildings. Some grotesque yellow chimneys were pouring out purple smoke on these buildings. The smoke mingled with the purple color of the sky. This scene gives me a surrealist idea that the sky rose from the chimneys. But I am not Dali, and I cannot draw the sky on canvas... Later the scene disappeared when I went to the playground again, except the empty flattened ground. It makes me rejoice because the scene must be my dream thus belong only to me... Such joy is exactly the same as what Dali puts on his canvas. When I realized that others also have experienced the steelmaking, I was extremely disappointed.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See Liu, Jianmei. *Revolution Plus Love: Literary History, Women's Bodies, and Thematic Repetition in Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction*. HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2003. 208; Rea, Christopher, ed. *China's Literary Cosmopolitans: Qian Zhongshu, Yang Jiang, and the World of Letters*. Boston: Brill Academic Pub, 2015. 151; Wu, Jin. "The Voices of Revolt: Zhang Chengzhi, Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo." University of Oregon, 2005.

<sup>79</sup> Wang, *Love in the Time of Revolution*. 163-64.

The expression of a child's memory and the relation of this scene with his dreams and Salvador Dali's surrealist paintings intentionally alienate the "I" from being a witness of the historical steelmaking.

The same is with the third-person section: in order not to be caught by Lao Lu who misunderstood him, Wang Er uses many strange ways to escape to the tower top in the factory on which Lao Lu could not climb. It is an intentional parody of Italo Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees*, as mentioned in the story.<sup>80</sup> The physical distance from the top of the tower to the ground illustrates the metaphorical distance between Wang Er and the world he is in. In the fifth section, when Wang Er stops running from Lao Lu, the "I" narrator stands out to point out that this story belongs to him. Later the "I" and Wang Er converge as one:

At the beginning of this novel, I called myself Wang Er and began the story with calm. When I reached someplace, I could not help but switch to the first-person point of view. There was one thing that made me change. When I was young, I saw a patch of purple sky on the playground; I could have narrated this in the third-person point of view, but my arm was injured. The third-person narrative consists of fictional elements, but I have a scar on my arm even now. When I reach the part of hurting my arm, the fictional part ends.<sup>81</sup>

It is a moment of reentering the history: the baron on the tower and the child in his fascination have to come out of their private plots and "become" Wang Er. The scar made by the iron pieces on the playground is the place where the Great Leap Forward enters the Dalian surrealist dream and cuts into his arm to reveal some "white and sticky thing" in his body (the fascia in his arm) which he relates to a "wet bed sheet" (which refers to his nocturnal emission). In revealing such Freudian metaphor and "my essence in my body – a wet sheet," he claims that "my life began to be pessimistic."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 71.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 218.

This indicates the collapse of distance between the grotesquery of reality/history and Wang Er's "poetic world," a phrase comes from *Wanshou Temple* which refers to an ideal fictional world where he can have all the imagination and interesting characters. The collapse goes on as a theme throughout the story: Wang Er wants to be an artist, but the "surrealist" styled translucent cold blue carrot painted by him points out the fact that he is a color blind; he wants to do "scientific" innovations like designing armors and war machines, but what he has joined to fulfill his value is the deadly factional fights during the Cultural Revolution; and he is incapable of having sex with the college girl he loves because he is thinking of the steel furnaces back on the playground which burst the bubble of his surrealist dream. But, after all, this "poetic world" is a purposive choice to defend the break-in of history:

"I endured and suffered till I was fourteen. There was no way for me to bear all these to death, so I decided to find a way out, which was daydreaming. In the wonderland, Alice said that everything is becoming more fantastic. And my daydreaming is to find fantasy."<sup>83</sup>

Thus, in the daydreaming, of forming the imaginary world for himself, the subject narrates himself into a stance of irony that he observes his life as an outsider in the third-person point of view, to "throw out the heavy historical burden."<sup>84</sup> But with the scar on his arm which leads to the converge of points of view, he implies the situation that the daydreaming cannot overcome.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>84</sup> Huang, Ping 黄平. *Fanfengzhe Shuo: Dangdai Wenxue De Bianyuan Zuoqia Yu Fanfeng Chuantong* 反讽者说: 当代文学的边缘作家与反讽传统 [*The Ironist Speaks: Marginal Writers and the Tradition of Irony in Contemporary Literature*]. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe 上海文艺出版社 [Shanghai Literature and Art Pressing], 2017. 126.

#### 4.1.2 The Transgression of History in *Wanshou Temple*

The same logic is manifested in the change of narrators in *Wanshou Temple*. In this novel, Wang Er loses his memory; he reads and modifies a Tang Dynasty fiction written by him about a person named Xue Song throughout the story. In the meantime, he is gradually getting his memory back. In the later progress of Wang Er's memory recovery, contrary to the former use of "the story has another possibility" to separate the reality of Wang Er from Xue Song's story, Xue Song's story slips in Wang Er's life little by little. There are roughly four phases of Xue Song's story: 1. The part located in Xiangxi written before his loss of memory, 2. The part located in Xiangxi modified during memory recovery, 3. The part located in Chang'an written during memory recovery. As for the first phase, Wang Er reads what he wrote before losing memory, and his narration of the plots is confined by the intrusion. He also comments on his former writing and disapproves most of his former thoughts. In the second phase which he begins to get immersed when he modifies the story, certain feeling flashes, and "I unconsciously think that I am Hong Xian." In the third phase, a girl in the golden tower, Xue Song, and Xue Song's cousin take turns to be first-person narrator to tell the story. Towards the end of the story, the consciousness of the characters in Chang'an becomes mingled with that of Wang Er. "Sometimes I am Xue Song, sometimes I am his lover, and then I become his cousin. This seems not right. Later I realized that I am writing fiction, and I am not limited."<sup>85</sup> The identities of characters flow and are blurred, and finally set down on the Wang Er who regains his memory.

The confusion of narrators thus implies a struggle of Wang Er trying to keep and strengthen the story that happened in his imaginary Chang'an city, the poetic world that contradicts the

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<sup>85</sup> Wang, *Wanshou Temple*. 180.

mediocrity of the Beijing in reality. The mingled voices of narrators thus become the successor of various possibilities in the previous narration and involve the poetic others into Wang Er's combat against reality:

When he was speaking to me, my boss did not notice that I was not one person but a small universe: there was Hongxian, Xue Song, the young prostitute, the old prostitute, and many others... Besides, I was a broad expanse of time and space. If he found out that he was doing 'ideological persuasion' towards time and space, he must think he has cast pearls before swine. Except for time and space, there was also poetics – damn, how could he understand what poetics is?<sup>86</sup>

As time goes by, history gradually sneaks in along with memory; and accordingly, the poetic world rises to defend itself against the invasion as Wang Er involves these characters into himself. From the possibilities of narration to the possibilities of narrating subjects, the narrator has created a swirl of signifiers as a trap that the concreteness of history would be lost in it. Though it seems that the narration jumps randomly between reality and the imaginary Chang'an city, readers can easily discern the stable dichotomy made by the narrator. But the multiple poetic subjects finally converge as one, and history would eventually get out of the trap, only because of Wang Er's inevitable recovery of memory. The loss of the memory, the micro-history of an individual, leads Wang Er to a dream of possibilities, a lightness discarding the burden of time. But it is not gone forever. Wang Er still works in the history research institute which locates in Wanshou Temple, a place cursed by history: the temple was built for the empress dowager Cixi. Wang Er associates her with what he calls "the umbilical cord of history," the phallus of the emperor. History that haunts in the background cooperates with the people around him. The boss does not get his sense of humor in the paper named *The Study of Sexual Organs of Chinese Men* and tries to make him normal. His colleagues are old-school scholars who pretend not to be

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 166.

working in wastewater flowing in the yard, ignoring the real problem. When Wang Er tries to fix this problem prior to doing his research, these people think he has lost his mind. The time that Wang Er's personal history comes back is the time that he has no choice but to go back to this reality.

Yang Xiaobin, regarding the Chinese avant-garde literature, points out that exposing the quandary of the subject's inability to transcend is the only way of transcendentalism and rejecting the utopian totality.<sup>87</sup> But the narrating subject of Wang Xiaobo goes further. This Wang Er understands the contingency of history as eternally illogical and unintelligible, thus inescapable. The narrator manipulates the narrative rules and manifests to the readers how he makes his subject an "Other" and how history comes in to disillusion this poetic self. But with history dispels the validity of all the signifiers that Wang Er uses to refer to the ideal self, there is still one historical "I." The outsider is compelled to go back to the historical individual, to the scar that is still on the arm.

#### **4.2 Historical Irony and *Hongfu Eloping at Night***

Irony, being one of the most elaborated and interpreted concepts in western literary and philosophical tradition, is adapted as a way of explicating the world. As a rhetoric, irony aims at the tension between the signifier/literal meaning and the signified/actual meaning; the New Criticism gives the widest definition ever of irony that it is any implication and indirectness. Wayne Booth, who claims to believe in "the principle of cosmic irony," defines irony as the essence of the world.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Yang, Xiaobin. *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-Garde Fiction*. MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002. 246.

<sup>88</sup> Booth, Wayne C. "The Empire of Irony." *The Georgia Review* 37, no. 4 (1983): 732.



Zhao Yiheng applies “ironism,” the term coined by Richard Rorty, to describe the belief of those who never trust the stability of language and to demonstrate the spirit in “the age of irony.”<sup>89</sup> In the contemporary world where consumption is the basis of culture, it is difficult to construct the consciousness of community in all the unceasing conflicts caused by the consumerist culture. Huang Ping also describes the contemporary China as an age of irony, not from the rhetoric sense, but from an infinite negativity which emerged from Bei Dao<sup>90</sup> to the whole next generation of the reform era. He argues that these young people have the spiritual undertone of “individualism, irony, nihilism, and comedy” and that they are themselves natural ironists.<sup>91</sup> They are trapped in a crisis of participation in which they are deprived of the historical sublime but carrying the historical burden. So that irony is exerted as an aesthetic method of escaping. Though he does not use the word “postmodernity,” Huang’s description of the situation echoes with Yang Xiaobin’s expression of the postmodern that “is to be understood as the modern (the splendid idea fraught with bloody disasters) reactivated as a traumatic memory trace, as a massive psychic burden that has been carried over.”<sup>92</sup> Therefore, for the “ironist” generation, irony as a way of life reveals the discrepancies of oneself that cannot be repaired and, through the discrepancies, the denial for a both socio-political and cultural totality.

As for the way irony works, Linda Hutcheon, for example, analyzes irony only as “a discursive practice or strategy” rather than “a way of life” or the concept of Romantic tradition. The reception of irony for the interpreter, according to her, is a process of producing which has to

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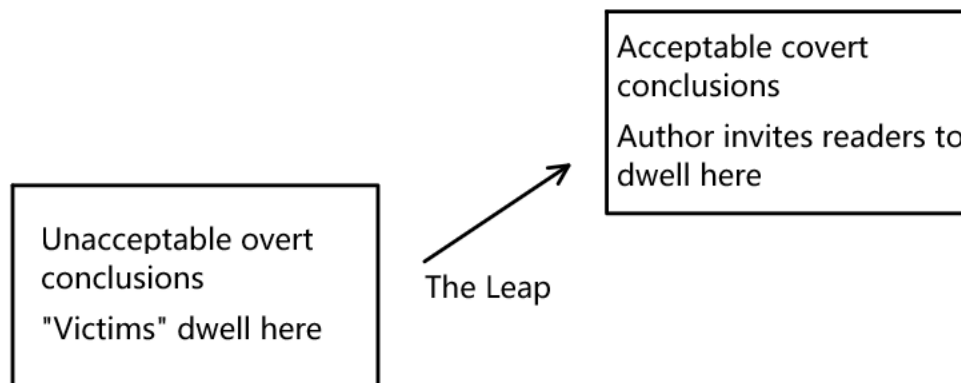
<sup>89</sup> Zhao, Yiheng 赵毅衡. *The Age of Irony Formalism and Cultural Criticism* 反讽时代：形式论与文化批评. Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe 复旦大学出版社 [Fudan University Press], 2011. 14.

<sup>90</sup> Bei Dao (1949- ) is among the most influential contemporary poets of mainland China. He left the mainland and lived in the United States and Europe for 20 years after playing an important role supporting the students during 1989 Tiananmen incident.

<sup>91</sup> Huang, *The Ironist Speaks*. 318.

<sup>92</sup> Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern*. 231.

do with the discursive community and context. Though she spends most of the book questioning the “happening” of an irony, she has still discussed the functions of markers or signals which frame up ironies, indicating the settling down of a context.<sup>93</sup> Wayne Booth, admitting the instability of some ironies, spends most of his efforts on the stable ironies that he believes to be “reconstructable” for the readers.<sup>94</sup> In his theory, in each stable irony there is a literal, unacceptable overt conclusion and an acceptable conclusion covered by the former; between the two is an intellectual leap.<sup>95</sup> The readers are even invited to make more leaps to conjecture deeper judgment about the author; thus, the pleasure of mutual understanding between the author and the reader is established.



**Figure 1 The Intellectual Leap of Irony**

I turn to Booth’s interpretation of irony’s mechanism because there is a similar psyche in Wang Xiaobo’s philosophy of writing. Wang in his essays explicitly expresses his expectation of

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<sup>93</sup> Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. Routledge, 2003. 148-52.

<sup>94</sup> Booth, A *Rhetoric of Irony*. IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974. 3.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

certain “real readers,”<sup>96</sup> hoping for what Booth calls the “full identification of two minds.”<sup>97</sup> Wang would probably agree with Booth in saying that irony enables communications to be, firstly, more efficient because of fewer words and more meaning, and secondly more effective because “the little intellectual dance we must perform to understand it brings us into a tight bonding with the ironist: the ironist has built an intricate structure and we have reconstructed it, following that lead.”<sup>98</sup> The individuality that lies under the language of Wang Er constantly lures the readers to do so.

#### 4.2.1 Self-Reference

In the preface of *Love in the Time of Revolution*, it is noted that “in the works of the author, Wang Er has many brothers of the same name. The author was named ‘Wang Er’ when he was young, so this Wang Er is the author’s brother of the same name.”<sup>99</sup> In the preface of *Hongfu Eloping at Night*, it is again pointed out that this narrator “is another brother of the same name of the author” and that “this book is as unreliable as him (Wang Er), but it contains utmost realness also.”<sup>100</sup> The first invitation of an intellectual game of recognizing the irony is set right at the beginning. How would the readers make coherency for a book both unreliable and real?

Usually, when the omniscient first-person narrator who is not involved in the story makes an intrusion and comment on a character or a plot, the purpose is to establish credibility among

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<sup>96</sup> Wang, Xiaobo. "Cong Huangjin Shidai Tan Xiaoshuo Yishu 从《黄金时代》谈小说艺术 [On the Art of Fiction in the Golden Age]." In *Wo De Jingshen Jiayuan 我的精神家园 [My Spiritual Homeland]*. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 64.

<sup>97</sup> Booth, "The Empire of Irony." 729.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Wang, *Love in the Time of Revolution*. 64.

<sup>100</sup> Wang, *Hongfu Eloping at Night*. 2.

readers so that the readers would, to some extent, unconsciously interpret the content as a realistic portrayal. But the author, or the unnamed narrator (see table 1), admitting the connection between Wang Er and himself, utters the unreliability of both Wang Er and the book. It could be another strategy of deconstruction that exposes the rules of narrative, just like the intrusion. But the author seems hesitant in doing so thoroughly: the narrator is his “brother” rather than himself, and the name is not exactly the same. In avant-garde literature, half decade earlier than Wang beginning to publish his works, self-reference and the author’s exposure of self were more obvious. For example, Yang Xiaobin credits the initiation of “the structurally self-engulfing narrative that undermines subjective supremacy” to Ma Yuan.<sup>101</sup> In a novel of him, a character speaks to the readers that the author/narrator Ma Yuan dishonors his personality, and he denies the whole story’s legitimacy. But Wang Er never makes any upwards transgression to accuse the author of his authority. On the contrary, the unnamed narrator in *Hongfu Eloping at Night* shows his power over Wang Er by manifesting himself in the beginning of almost every chapter to give his opinion on the story. Even in the beginning of the preface, he states clearly that “this book is going to talk about ‘being interesting.’”<sup>102</sup>

Then why would “the author” do such thing to his narrator? Or it might be worth asking that who is being unreliable? As it is analyzed in previous sections, the narrator is a linguistic subject that mimics the historical behavior of writing; in writing himself into the “poetic world,” he still cannot modify the concreteness of history for himself. On the other hand, the author implies in every way that he parallels himself with Wang Er. In other words, it is “the author” that is being unreliable about the narrator’s reliability. In the reversal of “the author’s” and the narrator’s

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<sup>101</sup> Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern*. 162.

<sup>102</sup> Wang, *Hongfu Eloping at Night*. 1.

reliability, Wang suggests the irony for history's uncertainty and unaccountability. In fact, there is a mutual identification between the author and the narrator in a *mise en abyme*: the author's failure in bypassing the historical totality leads to his writing about Wang Er who writes himself into a "poetic world;" when Wang Er fails in escaping his reality, he writes about the characters like Xue Song and Li Jing whose searching eventually fails too. There is no way for either a narrating subject or an empirical subject to quest an outlet; they could delve deeper into narration, but history always intervenes at last.

#### 4.2.2 Braudel and Wang's Tale of Two Cities

The speaker in the preface of *Hongfu Eloping at Night* also declares that the writing style is influenced by French historian Fernand Braudel's *Civilization and Capitalism, 15<sup>th</sup>—18<sup>th</sup> Century*, so that this novel "is more like a history book than a novel."<sup>103</sup> Braudel considers that history is variously leveled and is subject to different temporalities. He values the first level of time *la longue durée*, which is measured by long periods of time, over the exceptional historical events. In *la longue durée*, he highlights the "structure" that forms and stabilizes the long duration of societies. In the first book of *Civilization and Capitalism*, for example, Braudel writes about the daily routines of material life as the underlying structures of societies, the "history from below."

The story of Li Jing is structured around two cities: Luoyang, the capital of the Sui Dynasty, and Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty. According to the original legend that Wang Xiaobo bases his story on, when Li Jing was in Luoyang, his talent and ability were not recognized. Only Hongfu, a maidservant of a Sui official, saw him as a hero of potential and eloped with him. They

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 2.

joined the rebels' army, which later overthrew Sui, and Li Jing became one of the founding heroes of Tang. In this novel, little description is given to how Li Jing helps the Tang army to win the war; Wang Er's focus is on their early lives in Luoyang, how they escape Luoyang, Li Jing's design of the city of Chang'an, and how they end up in Chang'an. In other words, the turning of history in the original legend is manifested in Wang's novel by the space of two cities instead of the time flow from one dynasty to another. The city as a placeholder of long history appears at even the beginning of the story. Wang Er describes that the city walls of Luoyang are made of soil and the excrement of some children, and "ten thousand years after, the city will turn black and stand forever; this is due to the use of the old poo."<sup>104</sup> He cuts out space as the cross section of time as the stage of his narrative.

The description of life in both Luoyang and Chang'an is confusing in temporality and filled with absurdity. In Luoyang, for example, Li Jing, as both a hooligan and an intellectual, works out Fermat's Theorem and hides his mathematics in pornography; Hongfu, a courtesan<sup>105</sup> in an official's "art collection," wears Moroccan leather and has no other job than growing her hair till it is ten meters long. The streets in Luoyang are filled with muddy water so deep that pedestrians have to walk on stilts, and Li Jing is followed by a hundred and twenty-eight officers wherever he goes in case he causes trouble. The confusing and absurd temporality of material and culture suspends the story where the historical reality of both Sui/Tang Dynasties and the contemporary era do not easily reach. The story never means to talk about the ancient dynasties, while the

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>105</sup> The job Hongfu does, described in the novel, is to act as a living piece of art in the official's private collection by her physical characteristic of her long hair. Others like her have extremely long nails or slim waist. The word used in the novel is *geji* 歌妓 (singing girl, a courtesan of arts rather than prostitution), not a *jinu* 妓女 (prostitute girl).

political ironies hidden between lines are redirecting the attention of readers to the grotesquery of the textual world by the absurdity and the borrowing of ancient time.

When Li Jing, as “the cleverest” minister of the Tang emperor, is required to design the capital Chang’an, he has three plans: a wind-powered Chang’an, a water-powered Chang’an, and a manpower Chang’an. The first and second, designed to be built by the sea and on a mountain, are described like the romantic imagination in Calvino’s *The Invisible Cities* but rejected by the emperor; while the third one built by mud and soil is favored by the emperor that “it is human-powered, the same as any other cities in Chinese history. And it will use every method to prevent its residents from daydreaming.”<sup>106</sup> Everything in the city is built smooth and square and of the color either grey or yellow. The city is neat and in good order, and there is no water, plant, or even wind. Li Jing also designs the regulations to keep everything in its place, from women’s underwear to the establishment of committees of noble ladies. But Li Jing does not stop “daydreaming” about his former plans and sets up three experiments by models of the three cities and ants as residents. He concludes that the ants in the wind-powered Chang’an are most intelligent, the ants in the water-powered one are strongest, and the ants in the “ant-powered” model are most obedient.

An essay of Wang Xiaobo, “A Braudelian Study on Chinese Culture,” can make a side note for the comparison among the three designs of Chang’an. In the history of China, domestic animals and natural forces like wind and water were utilized far less than those in Western Europe. In a village where Wang went to stay during the Cultural Revolution, in order to guarantee people have enough work to do, the village abandoned the use of donkeys in transporting fertilizer, not to mention wind and water forces in production. He humorously describes this situation of involution

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<sup>106</sup> Wang, *Hongfu Eloping at Night*. 136.

as the survival competition of human versus animals and human versus natural forces.<sup>107</sup> He observes that, the material life in China is not human utilizing domestic animals and natural forces in production but replacing them, which requires endurance and obligation from the people. In the emperor choosing the third Chang'an plan, he implies the pursuit of power behind the requirement: it is the best way to keep everything in place, the best way to build a city which has been enforced throughout the history. With Braudel's method, he tries to observe the rules of material life that dominated Chinese history for long and has lasted even till the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

He also omits the vital event which caused a rupture in history, the change from Sui to Tang Dynasty. For Braudel, it is the *longue durée* rather than exceptional events that form the underlying structures of human life. Wang intentionally weakens this vital turning point of history and stresses the characters' daily life in both the end of Luoyang era and the beginning of Chang'an era. This Chang'an is intrinsically homogeneous with Luoyang. Both cities are composed of the color of yellow mud, and both governments are despotic. When Li Jing and Hongfu are young, as a hooligan and a courtesan, they are driven out from Luoyang by the dullness of the city; when they grow old, they are trapped in Chang'an, forced to play the roles of a minister and a lady. That is when Hongfu "suddenly finds that she has never escaped Luoyang, because everything is just the same as before, with only the change on the surface."<sup>108</sup> She tries to persuade Li Jing to escape with her again from Chang'an, but both of them know that they can only stay since they are already old. Replacing one dynasty with another does not bring forth the "interesting" that is sought. The

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<sup>107</sup> Wang, Xiaobo. "Dui Zhongguo Wenhua De Buluodaishi Kaozheng 对中国文化的布罗代尔式考证 [a Braudelian Study on Chinese Culture]." In *Siwei De Lequ* 思维的乐趣 [*Pleasure of Thinking*]. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 109.

<sup>108</sup> Wang, *Hongfu Eloping at Night*. 188.



underlying structures of history “act as limitations from which man and his experiences can never escape.”<sup>109</sup>

The homogeneity between the imaginary Sui and Tang Dynasties is not unauthentic among the changing dynasties in the Chinese history of two thousand years. The reflection on the imperial eras dominated by Confucianism and traditional way of production was one of the themes for the school of enlightenment in the 1980s, who were influenced by the ultrastable structure theory and produced the documentary *River Elegy (Heshang)*. Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng wrote in their studies that the deep-lying structure of forming Chinese society has not changed from the first unified dynasty Qin, which is the integration of ideology and social organization.<sup>110</sup> Such integration of Confucian ideology and socio-political organization in imperial societies formed an old structure in which the new elements (e.g. the sprouting of capitalism) could not prosper. The old structure would automatically rebuild itself after a massive destruction, i.e., the change of dynasties, and thus the development of Chinese society was a strange dynamic static state, which is named the ultrastable structure. It brought about a long history of splendor, but its periodic destruction took away the potential of renewal. Jin Guantao is also a consultant of *River Elegy*, a later banned documentary that criticizes the “yellow soil culture” and “Yellow River culture” of China and promotes the ocean civilization of the West. In *River Elegy*, for example, the Great Wall, instead of being the symbol of national glory of long history and culture, is interpreted as oppression and enclosure that prevent the country from material development and cultural

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<sup>109</sup> Braudel, Fernand. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. CA: University of California Press, 1995. 18.

<sup>110</sup> Jin, Guantao 金觀濤, and Qingfeng 刘青峰 Liu. *Kaifang Zhong De Bianqian: Zailun Zhongguo Shehui Chaowending Jiegou* 开放中的变迁: 再论中国社会超稳定结构 [*The Transformation of Chinese Society (1840-1956): The Fate of Its Ultrastable Structure in Modern Times*]. Falu chubanshe 法律出版社 [Law Press China], 1994.

enlightenment. Though no evidence suggests that Wang Xiaobo was directly influenced by the school of enlightenment, his essays indicate that he had not been far from the debates in the 1980s. With implicit political ironies, Wang even extends the change from Sui to Tang to the change from the Nationalist regime to the Communist regime,<sup>111</sup> implying that the modern societies are no more than new wine in an old bottle. Like what Dai Jinhua points out, what he writes and parodies is not a specific period of history, but the “history” itself.<sup>112</sup>

But what Wang deviates from Braudel is that, the perspective of Li Jing/Wang Er is the perspective of an intellectual, somewhere between the political macro-history and the material micro-history; and what he deviates from the intellectuals of his time, like the enlightenment school, is that his individuality surpasses his “Chinese intellectual-ness,” the self-awareness of responsibility for the society. In studying Franz Kafka’s short story *The Great Wall of China*, Sebastian Veg points out that, the building of the Great Wall is the genealogy of power in which the transition from the ancient imperial system to the modern *Führerschaft* (Leadership) does not exist. There is only the overlapping of the two political images of the emperor and the leadership.<sup>113</sup> The word “leadership” also appears repeatedly in the Luoyang chapters of *Hongfu Eloping at Night*. The “leadership” decides to have 128 officers following Li Jing and to have them executed if they lose him. The identity change of Li Jing from Sui to Tang is that he joins the leadership of Tang. Li Jing breaks out of Luoyang as a bird escapes a cage, but he is chosen to design Chang’an, where no one is to “daydream” and to break the rules, because he is good at daydreaming and

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<sup>111</sup> For example, in discussing the ladies of Tang who have fought the war with their husbands, the author says that they are kidnapped from a noble girls’ school by the commanders of Tang army. It is suspiciously according to an anecdote of the communist army. The original lyrics of the tune of *The East Is Red* (东方红 a song that praises Mao) go like this: “After we take down Yulin city, hu-er-hai-yo, each of us gets a girl student.”

<sup>112</sup> Dai, Jinhua 戴锦华. "Zhizhe Xixue 智者戏谑 [Wiseman's Banter]." *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 [Contemporary Writers Reviews] 2 (1998): 27.

<sup>113</sup> Veg, Sebastian. *Fictions du Pouvoir Chinois: Littérature, Modernisme et Démocratie au Début du XXe Siècle*. Paris: Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), 2009. 106-7.

breaking the rules. He is clever enough to figure out the underlying pattern of history that works to stop “daydreaming,” but he is not allowed to change it by the production forces of water or wind, or say his daydreaming and imagination, yet only to maintain it.

The relationship with the political power has always been an awkward dilemma of Chinese intellectuals. In the fate of Li Jing, Wang implies that “intellectuals are most afraid of living in an unreasonable era”<sup>114</sup> – Li Jing has to fake madness in the end so that the emperor would leave him alone. The intellectual, by his knowledge, helps to build the integrated system to rule out other possibilities to reach perfection. The intellectuals attach themselves to the narrative of grand history, whether in imperial eras, the socialist era, or the reform era, with the sacrifice of their own aesthetic pursuit and daydream. The changing of dynasties, or the fast changing of political systems in China of the past century, does not necessarily mean the destruction of institutions or the secluded social structure. On the contrary, they revive and adapt to the contemporary time through current systems.<sup>115</sup> In such an “ultrastable” structure, the historical individuals like Li Jing-Wang Er, as outliers of the totality, cannot bring forth a new Chang’an out of Luoyang. The narrating individual Wang Er has realized it, but he tries to create it anyway (the “poetic world” of Chang’an in *Wanshou Temple* and the unfulfilled wind-Chang’an and water-Chang’an in *Hongfu Eloping at Night*). The creation of this poetic world in narration is like the *flugblatt* (leaflet) of revolution in Kafka’s *The Great Wall of China*. Both of them imply to readers a possible outlet of history. But the possibility brought by the *flugblatt* is dismissed by the authority of the narrator,<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Wang, Xiaobo. "Zhishifenzi De Buxing 知识分子的不幸 [the Unfortunate Intellectuals]." In *Siwei De Lequ* 思维的乐趣 [*Pleasure of Thinking*]. Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe 云南大学出版社 [Yunnan University Press], 2006. 27.

<sup>115</sup> Veg, *Fictions du Pouvoir Chinois*. 131.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* 103.

while that brought by the poetic world of Wang Er is dismissed by the authority which overwhelms the will of the narrating subject.

## 5.0 Conclusion

History is a theme and a clue that repeatedly appears in Wang Xiaobo's texts: not only the specific time periods like the Cultural Revolution, but also the general pattern by which Chinese history works. In his writing, it is a history that has no new possibility for a breakout from the same pattern. His narrative structure is an experimental method in this pattern by which he tries to make a breakout. Involving in his reflection of the fate of Chinese intellectuals, his narrator Wang Er and Wang Er's protagonists are more or less images of intellectuals. In their experiences, they encounter the dilemma of the intellectuals in history when they interact with political power. But they possess very distinct personalities that make them variables or outliers of the historical pattern. Under the pressure of the power, what they seek is neither a revolutionary discourse of revolt, nor the tradition of enlightenment of intellectuals from May Fourth period to the 1980s, but a poetic world; not in a utopian sense, but in a personal sense. This study has proved that, the narrative structure is built from Wang Xiaobo to his narrator Wang Er to Wang Er's protagonists—it is constantly moving towards the inner world. The pursuit of this poetic world is a process of building the subject, an ideal of the individual. And the way of constructing the subject is to narrate. It is his narration, or fiction, rather than empirical being or action, that offers the possibilities outside the totality of history. And only in the poetic possibilities can the subject or the individual reach true independence. So that the narrative strategies like narrators' identity change, stratification of narrative levels, and the narrator's intrusion are important, not only because these techniques are applied to make the novels more readable and more interesting, as Wang's standard for good fiction, but also because these strategies are building the structure which makes possible the poetic world and the ideal individual.

Going back to the question in the very beginning: why would the readers in a later generation identify with Wang Xiaobo and celebrate his works to a level that it becomes a cultural phenomenon? How does Wang Er's narrative attract them in a specific way as literary texts? Susan Lanser points out a readers' behavior that:

“Readers may ignore the technical boundaries of fictional voice, in effect doubling the ‘I’ so that the narrator’s words sometimes belong to the author as well as to the narrating character and sometimes do not. This doubling occurs through a split between the text’s narrative and nonnarrative textual elements, so that narrative elements are relegated purely to the fictional narrator-character, while nonnarrative elements may be tied to the author as well as to the narrator-character.”<sup>117</sup>

Wang's novels are especially tempting for readers to ignore the boundary because of the narrator's intrusion that sounds just like the tone in the author's column essays. Thus, this doubling effect becomes a bridge for these readers: they agree with Wang's promotion of idiosyncrasy in nonnarrative texts and attach Wang Er's experiences directly to Wang Xiaobo as the example for such promotion. For readers who could not care less about the theoretical boundary, it is easier to search for a certainty in the historical Wang Xiaobo rather than his textual alter ego. Thus, in readers' cognition, the mutual identification of Wang Er and Wang Xiaobo is completed in their search.

But the *mise en abyme* of Wang and the textual characters is so deep into the mere writing behavior that it focuses on the individuality of Wang Er/Wang Xiaobo. The certainty that readers find is constructed on this individuality, which brings about a sense of uniqueness. The uniqueness to some extent serves to quench the crisis of participation of contemporary readers who desire to locate themselves in history or take a position that transcends history. But in the age of

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<sup>117</sup> Lanser, Susan S. "The "I" of the Beholder: Equivocal Attachments and the Limits of Structuralist Narratology." In *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by Peter J. Rabinowitz James Phelan, 206-19. MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005. 216.

consumerism, the desire turns into a pursuit of aesthetics of being different and interesting. In celebrating Wang as the cultural hero, it is the possession of idiosyncrasy that enables one to be distinguished from others that is desired. Also, the intense use of irony as rhetoric creates an illusion of hierarchy. Readers engaged in meaning interpretation tend to classify themselves into the inner circle of Li Yinhe's "catchword" by the elitist function of irony.

Somehow Wang Xiaobo is invoked in the generation of individualism that embrace his historical irony. In identifying with Wang Xiaobo/Wang Er, the readers are engaged in the tension created between the narrative of Wang Er and the grand narrative of historical totality. While the subjective supremacy of the state, which creates totality not only through ideology in the socialist era but also through the reform utopia, tries to dismiss the voice of individuals, the readers sit on the tree with Wang Er, detached yet trapped. The use of metafiction sets up the structural irony which prevents the narrative from becoming stable. Metaphorically, it is associated with the uncertainty of searching for an alternative in narrating and the inescapability of individual. Confronting history, Wang Xiaobo points out the unreasonable aspect of history that the individual cannot overcome. Besides, the "Wang Xiaobo phenomenon" itself is made the biggest irony that readers lionize Wang for escaping the mainstream aesthetics; but on the contrary the popularity of Wang turns him into a symbol of kitsch being consumed as the cultural hero. When the narrator speaks about Wang Er and the book's unreliability, he also gives his opinion about history. He points out that the presentation of history in this book, being more like a history book than a novel, "is the intention of the author. If this book presents absurdity, it is not what the author wants, but the truth of history."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Wang, *Hongfu Fleeing at Night*. 2.

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