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CONCEPTION

by

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INTRODUCTION

The eastern side of Tiananmen Square in Beijing is flanked by the National Museum of China, claimed by Chinese officials to be the world’s largest museum under one roof. Within this two-million-square foot museum with its multiple permanent and rotating exhibitions is one entitled “The Road of Rejuvenation” (Johnson 2011). This exhibit, which is one of many meant to display the glory of Chinese history, culture, and art, tells the story of Chinese history from the Opium War of 1840 to the present day. Its name refers to the “rejuvenation” achieved after China recovered from the abyss of imperialism and feudalism, and when its people chose the Communist Party of China as their leaders (“The Road of Rejuvenation”). This massive exhibit winds for what seems like miles through the museum, full of illustrated history lessons and flashy dioramas. However, the Cultural Revolution, which lasted for the ten years between 1966 and 1976, receives only one tucked-away, above eye-level photograph and short caption. This period in history, which, if one does the math, should receive one-seventeenth of the exhibit’s floor space, instead is relegated to a forgotten corner (see Plate 1).

The caption states: “The Cultural Revolution of May 1966 to October 1976 was erroneously mobilized by leaders and exploited by counterrevolutionary groups. It brought the Party, the country, and individual citizens grave and catastrophic civil strife. This picture from the Cultural Revolution shows the inspection of the Red Guards and the civilian masses in Tiananmen Square.” The image itself depicts only a faceless, unidentifiable mass of people, gathering in Tiananmen Square. Presumably, Chairman Mao stands in front of the building in the background, the main gate to the Forbidden City, but in this photograph, no specific leader is shown. In the foreground, the faceless mass holds up banners declaring “Long Live The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” amongst other signs and red flags. This picture is a flat, emotionless depiction, giving no indication of personal suffering, or the upheaval of society that took place during this time period. From solely viewing this image, readers would assume that the entirety of the Chinese public was behind the high-level decisions being made during the Cultural Revolution. The image illustrates only the nationalistic spirit and glorified gatherings of the Cultural Revolution. During those years, Mao Zedong invited masses of Red Guards from around the country to Beijing, where he would receive them in Tiananmen Square. These events gave young people a chance to see their nation’s capital and interact with other young revolutionaries. Although these meetings could be taken as a waste of resources and were merely used as a means of spreading propaganda, they were far from the worst actions taken against the Chinese public during the Cultural Revolution. The caption makes no mention of Mao Zedong’s role in these gatherings, distancing his name from these ten years of history. Present day Chinese citizens, upon encountering this image in the museum (assuming they make the effort to look up far enough), might view
the Cultural Revolution as a confusing time in which the public was mobilized towards a common, wholesome cause, but during which a few corrupt individuals took advantage of the public’s devotion to their country. They would be unlikely to draw the conclusion that the corrupt individuals who took advantage of the societal upheaval and those leaders standing at the gates of the Forbidden City, mobilizing the Chinese masses, were one and the same. This brief mention in the otherwise comprehensive exhibit at the National Museum of China leads one to question how the Cultural Revolution is remembered, both officially and privately, in Chinese society.

The Cultural Revolution wrecked havoc on Chinese society in the ten years between 1966 and 1976, and, as with most large-scale tragedies, it left physical and emotional scars on the bodies of its survivors. However, in the period directly following the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese authorities silenced the lamentations and anger of the Chinese public. The social memories of the preceding ten years were bulldozed by the official “public transcript”—an authorized version of the events of the Cultural Revolution (Kleinman and Kleinman 1994). This Party-sanctioned version of the events during that time period places all of the blame on the Ultra-Leftists, specifically, the Gang of Four, while clearing the Party’s name and that of any of its state and local officials. Because of this, the individual memories of the Cultural Revolution were suppressed, leading Chinese citizens to believe this streamlined version of the past ten years of their lives. Personal memories and grievances occasionally manifested themselves as physical illnesses or bodily pain, but few individuals were able or willing

1 The term “ultra-Leftists” refers to those Chinese leaders who, throughout the history of the Chinese Communist Party, had political leanings even further left than the Party’s goals. Directly following the Cultural Revolution, the Gang of Four was categorized as being ultra-Leftist.
to give a verbal account of their personal experiences (Kleinman and Kleinman 1994). As a result, the Cultural Revolution became a rare topic in modern China, one that receives only an obscured photograph in an exhibit on the past one hundred and fifty years of Chinese history at the National Museum of China. The government would prefer if those ten years could be forgotten or remembered according to their prescribed “public transcript,” and individual citizens have not resisted the opportunity to let those painful memories slip away.

The social theorist Paul Connerton has postulated that societies contrive three ways of remembering their common experiences—through cultural texts, commemorative rituals, and incorporation into the human body. The example of the National Museum demonstrates the first, that of cultural texts, monuments, or stories to be consumed by all members of a population. Following the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government was particularly effective at creating these cultural texts, therefore forming the stories that would become the “public transcript” of the Cultural Revolution. However, the government was unable to silence all of the individual memories of the time, and these manifested themselves in human solidarity. James Scott refers to the joy in sharing memories of the “hidden transcript,” that is, the understood commonalities of tragedy survivors, or the bond that links together members of a certain society (Kleinman and Kleinman 1994). Although Chinese citizens may not have composed an official transcript of their common sufferings, this hidden link became an ever-present undercurrent in the rhetoric of the decades following the Cultural Revolution. In many cases, this hidden transcript was publicized through the creation of works that demonstrated the public’s views towards those ten years. In this way, the hidden
transcript became an integral part of the first mode of remembering, becoming the theme and plotline of countless stories, novels, movies, and memoirs.

The Cultural Revolution propelled a movement of reflective literature, characterized by the stories of students “reeducated” by peasants in the countryside. The Scar Literature movement, epitomized by Lu Xinhua’s “The Scar,” added poignancy to the genre, as its authors were unafraid of graphically depicting the emotional and physical scars inflicted by the Cultural Revolution. These memoirs became widely popular among young Chinese in the 1980s, as many members of the “lost generation” came of age in circumstances similar to those of the memoirs’ protagonists. English editions of Cultural Revolution memoirs have become popular among Western readers as well: to many American middle school students, Jiang Ji-Li’s Red Scarf Girl is to the Cultural Revolution as Anne Frank’s The Diary of a Young Girl is to the Holocaust. Although these memoirs do a great service to readers in describing the daily trials and tribulations of Chinese youths in the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, the majority of them fall flat when it comes to analyzing of the philosophical ramifications of these experiences. Sebastian Veg notes that the Scar Literature genre was eventually criticized as “aesthetically unsatisfying and historically limited to the lamentation of individual suffering” (Veg 2009, 75). As the aftershocks of the Cultural Revolution subsided in the 1990s, Chinese authors began to branch out in their depictions of that tumultuous decade. Wang Xiaobo’s darkly humorous prose about his time as a sent-down youth in Yunnan stands out in its ability both to defy the self-pitying rut that many memoirists fall into, and to tell stories that instead transcend the typical memoir motif, making the Cultural Revolution a background character in an otherwise richly humanistic plot.
To Western readers, Wang Xiaobo’s writing style is easily accessible and enjoyable, albeit a bit quirky. However, before Wang Xiaobo’s essays and short stories became more popular, his style of black humor and playful prose were foreign to most Chinese literary circles. His unconventional style has led the critic Yang Jian to state, “It is difficult to imagine that someone like Wang Xiaobo could appear from inside Chinese culture” (Larson 2007). Where other memoirists, such as Anchee Min, Gao Yuan, or Yang Rae, painstakingly describe every detail of their time working the fields or tempestuously persecuting their teachers, Wang turns his experiences into relatable stories, making them stand for more than just a young person’s troubles. For example, in the short story “Love in an Age of Revolution,” he turns the story of a young man chastised for doodling dirty cartoons into a sexually charged power struggle between him and his revolutionary cadre leader. Because Wang is unafraid to identify the irrationality of his time in Yunnan during the Cultural Revolution, he is able to add a layer of titillating rhetoric to both his fictional and nonfictional works.

Beyond the storylines of Wang’s most popular short stories, his shorter essays about the Cultural Revolution also give a fresh, more worldly perspective. Rather than just recite the facts of his life in Yunnan, he instead chooses to fixate on a minute detail of that time in his life, and from that detail projects his themes through a much broader lens, making them accessible to citizens of the world, not just those who experienced the Cultural Revolution themselves. For example, in “An Idiosyncratic Pig,” a maverick pig holds the place of the protagonist, and through the descriptions of his behavior, the reader understands what traits Wang holds dear to heart and how much they are in contrast with his contemporaries’ views of what is virtuous. Some of his essays, such as “Coconut
Trees and Equality,” begin with a reference to the fact that he was in Yunnan, but an uninformed reader would never guess that his reason for being there was to be reeducated through hard farm labor. These essays come across more as reflections on the musings and philosophies he came up with during his time in southern China, not as flashbacks to the rough time he had on the farm. If anything, Wang Xiaobo’s essays show that the Cultural Revolution’s aim to purge young students of their intellectual leanings had little effect on him.

Wang’s works present more than just clever and entertaining ways to remember the events that occurred in his youth. Beyond being a good read, they also give readers from any national or class background a chance to connect with the events of the Cultural Revolution on a deeper level. Instead of putting these events into a black box only fully comprehensible to those Chinese people who had lived through them, Wang is able to put his experiences into the broader context of human truths and moralities. In doing so, he makes the characters of his youth, and even the oppressive political situation, seem less foreign and barbaric to unfamiliar readers. His readers, instead of judging or blaming Wang and his contemporaries’ decisions, can relate to their character flaws and the societal pressures under which they were placed. In this sense, he is able to universalize the events of the Cultural Revolution, making it an incident that has clear parallels to past large-scale tragedies and one that could have happened in many different eras and countries.

The term “universal” can be defined in several different ways, but in the context of Wang’s writing, the themes he presents are universal in that they are “comprehensively broad and versatile” and “affirming or denying something of all members of a class [in
“this case, humankind]” (Merriam-Webster 2011). One could argue that Wang’s works are actually biased towards Western values, therefore discounting their universality.

However, while no author is able or attempts to write without a specific value system or bias, some, such as Wang, are able to draw attention to the facets of human existence that resonate more easily with people from diverse backgrounds. For example, Wang focuses on the emotional, minute details of what it means to be human—getting a bloated ego after repeatedly being given high titles, feeling sick after equating internal organs to food, or caving into the peer pressure to speak in a certain way. While some writers focusing on the Cultural Revolution gloss over the reality that despite such profound upheaval in their lives, their characters still experience day-to-day weaknesses, quirks, and pet peeves, Wang reminds his readers that humanity has universal traits, even when placed in dismal situations such as the Cultural Revolution. Because of this, more so than most English memoirs or especially Scar Literature, Wang’s works present an emotionally resonant conception of the Cultural Revolution.

Because of these characteristics of Wang’s writing, it follows that Western readers would embrace both his fiction and nonfictional works, if given the chance. Unfortunately, there is currently only one officially published translation of Wang’s works, compiled under the title Wang in Love and Bondage, translated by Jason Sommer and Hongling Zhang. It is my hope that my translations of these twelve essays related to the Cultural Revolution by Wang Xiaobo will broaden the Western world’s perspectives on Cultural Revolution memoirs and Chinese literature in general. I chose these twelve essays specifically because in Wang’s two essay collections (The Joy of Thinking and My Spiritual Home), they are the most relevant to his attitudes and experiences from the
Cultural Revolution. From an English-speaking reader’s perspective, the scope of Cultural Revolution literature available is somewhat limited. Despite the fact that there have been many survivor memoirs written with Western audiences in mind, most English speakers expect them to fit into the same mold—that is, tales of how survivors endured and escaped from their childhood in Communist China. Wang’s works should help to broaden readers’ perspective on this topic.

In choosing an author and genre to translate, I immediately was drawn to Cultural Revolution texts, since my experience with this genre was somewhat limited. In American high schools’ history curriculums, the topic of the Cultural Revolution is glossed over as being the result of the oppressive reign of Mao Zedong and his Communist Party. There is little mention of the Gang of Four or the political power struggles going on at the time. Only from reading the literature meant for Chinese-speaking audiences did I learn Chinese perspectives on this matter. While both the Western and Chinese views of the Cultural Revolution are innately biased, analysis of both sides of the issue can help a reader to begin to see a clearer picture of the true events. Wang’s work is particularly poignant in that it easily appeals to both Chinese and Western audiences. He is skilled at presenting human characteristics in a non-biased, universal way that helps to bridge this ideological gap between Eastern and Western viewpoints. In addition to his careful character sketches, he also has a delightfully dark sense of humor that can make any reader better relate to his thoughts and themes. It is my hope that these translations will help to spread the sharp wit and wisdom of Wang Xiaobo to many other English-speaking readers.
The following chapters should help to frame the argument that Wang Xiaobo’s writing is exceptionally universal, as compared to other pertinent works. “Chapter 1: The Life and Works of Wang Xiaobo” explains how Wang’s biography has influenced his works, both fictional and nonfictional. It also includes an overview of what Wang Xiaobo has written, including his novels, novellas, and zawen essays, many of which are unrelated to the Cultural Revolution. “Chapter 2: Remembering the Cultural Revolution” presents how other writers’ and filmmakers’ have presented their memories of the Cultural Revolution, starting with the Scar Literature movement, hooligan literature, and extending into the present day with its edgy Westernized survivor memoirs, such as Liu Sola’s Chaos and All That. This chapter addresses the question of how Wang’s works represent a divide from his literary predecessors. “Chapter 3: Wang’s Universal Conception of the Cultural Revolution” explains why Wang’s work is especially far-reaching and compares his ways of remembering to those of other authors and filmmakers. After the conclusion are the twelve translated essays: “A Belly Full of War,” “An Idiosyncratic Pig,” “Appreciation of the Classics,” “Coconut Trees and Equality,” “Experiencing Life,” “My Experience with the College Entrance Exam,” “My Views on Lao san jie,” “On Loftiness,” “Rejecting Flattery,” “Su Dongpo and Dongpo Pork,” “The Pastures of Holland and the Folks Back Home,” and “Thoughts and Shame.” I hope that these translations and analysis offer a fresh perspective on the different modes of remembering the Cultural Revolution.
CHAPTER 1: THE LIFE AND WORKS OF WANG XIAOBO

Wang Xiaobo lived a short life, lasting from only 1952 to 1997, but his writing has lived on, immortalizing his social commentary and twisted sense of humor. Before the heart attack that ended his life, Wang was unable to appreciate the lasting power and influence his writing would have on China’s literary culture as it entered the twenty-first century. At the time of his death, his non-fictional essays, in the style of zawen, had been gaining in popularity, but his fictional novellas and novels had not been as successful. They were dismissed as being too irreverent and sexual, and his zawen fans dismissed the lack of clear-cut commentaries on social and political issues. However, in the past fifteen years, university students and Chinese intelligentsia have embraced the black sense of humor and hyperbolic plot lines of Wang’s fiction. Recently, a translation of three of his sexually charged novellas, “The Golden Age,” “East Palace West Palace,” and “2015” has also paved the way for English speakers’ appreciation of his fiction (Zhang and Sommer 2007).

Wang was born in 1952, just a few years after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, and he and his country experienced the instability of growing pains together. He grew up in an intellectual family, but his childhood was cut short at the age of sixteen, when he was sent down to work at a communal farm in Yunnan as part of the reeducation movement of middle and high school graduates. He remained in Yunnan for three years, then was transferred to Shandong, in the north, before relocating to Beijing in the early 1970s to work in a factory (Veg 2009). After the Cultural Revolution ended, he took the national college entrance exam and tested into The People’s University (Renmin

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2 Zawen (杂文) refers to a prose genre popular among Chinese intellectuals. It is usually in the form of short essays relating to social issues.
Daxue) in 1978, where he studied commerce and trade for four years and lectured for two
(Larson 2009). From 1984 to 1988, he studied abroad at the University of Pittsburgh,
where he received a master’s degree from the Department of East Asian Studies, focusing
on comparative literature (Zhang and Sommer 2007; Larson 2009). He then moved back
to Beijing and lectured in the Department of Sociology at the Peking University until
1991, at which point he quit to become a freelance writer (Larson 2009). Because of his
work on The Golden Age, he received the prestigious Taiwan United Daily prize in 1993
(Veg 2009). He remained a freelance writer until his death in 1997 (Zhang and Sommer
2007).

In 1980, at the age of twenty-eight, Wang married Li Yinhe, a well-known
sociologist (Zhang and Sommer 2007). Throughout their courtship and marriage, Wang
would often write Li romantic and whimsical letters, on subjects ranging from his love
for her, to his analysis of what “sappiness” means. Although his original intent in writing
these letters was not to share them with his readers, they have now been collected and
included in the compilations of his works. Wang might have been embarrassed to know
that his personal feelings are on display to the general public, but to readers familiar with
his black sense of humor and irreverence, it is refreshing to experience the deep sense of
respect and love he felt for his wife. For example, in a letter he wrote when the couple
was in the midst of a temporary split, he wrote, “Could I not love you? Not love you?
Impossible. Loving you is like loving life” (Wang 2006). Although this complete
devotion could be misconstrued as maudlin, he keeps his letters fresh with his constant
acknowledgement that she might find him cheesy and his insecurities about the
weaknesses in his writing. Wang’s letters are a window into the passionate and respectful
relationship he shared with Li Yinhe, while the rest of his fictional and nonfictional works reveal more about his feelings towards his country and society.

In all, his published works comprise two collections of essays (*The Joy of Thinking* and *My Spiritual Home*), as well as a collection of novels and novellas combined posthumously as *The Trilogy of Our Times*, which includes *The Bronze Age*—three novels (*The Temple of Longevity, Hongfu’s Nightly Elopement*, and *Looking for Wushuang*) that meld together Tang romances and modern day society, *The Golden Age*—novellas situated in the recent revolutionary past (“The Golden Age,” “Established at Thirty,” “Years Like Flowing Water,” “Love in an Age of Revolution,” and “The Yin Yang Spheres of My Life”), and *The Silver Age*—novellas situated in an Orwellian future society (“The Silver Age,” “Future World,” and “2010”). Not included in this trilogy are his novella “East Palace West Palace,” and a collection of short stories (Lin 2005; Wang 2006; Huang 2007). Although his non-fictional essays are more obviously his personal opinions on China’s social and political situation in the latter half of the twentieth century, many of his fictional works also weave in and out of his experiences as a young man living in a politically unstable environment. Most of his protagonists are named Wang Er, a nickname given to the second eldest child in a family, a position that Wang Xiaobo held himself (Zhang and Sommer 2007). Several of his stories follow the tribulations of young men as they move from cities to rural areas to be “reeducated,” or back to the cities again, as they try to find their place in a society that has moved on without them. Since Wang was sent down the countryside and did not return to his native Beijing until after Mao Zedong’s death in 1976, this theme is one to which he could relate. Beyond the concrete references to the persecution of artists and intellectuals that
Wang witnessed while growing up during the Cultural Revolution, his stories also touch upon the dystopian nature of the political situation of the time. The idea of an “Art Reeducation Institute,” where people who think too creatively are sent to do hard labor (as is seen in “2015”) may seem like something out of George Orwell’s 1984, but artists in Cultural Revolution-ridden China experienced fates not far from Wang’s descriptions. Unfamiliar readers may find his storylines too hyperbolic or far-fetched, but it is important to note that the period in China between Wang’s birth and death was one of the most unstable, riotous, and dynamic eras in recent history.

The novels in the trilogy The Bronze Age are some of Wang’s most twisted and difficult to follow. In The Temple of Longevity, Hongfu’s Nightly Elopement, and Looking for Wushuang, the story flips back and forth between a narrator’s (who also serves as the protagonist) troubles in the present day and ancient stories from the Tang romances. For example, Wang Er, in The Temple of Longevity is an amnesiac who, in the process of trying to remember his old life, gets his memories muddled up with those of Xue Song, a character in a Tang romance novel he was writing before his amnesia hit. The protagonist of Looking for Wushuang, Wang Xianke, is on a quest to find his cousin, but her neighbors only confuse him by diverging into stories of a Tang poetess. All of the stories in this series represent Wang’s longest works, but also the most confusing, as they blend past, present, reality, and fiction (Lin 2005).

Wang’s most well known novella, “Golden Age,” the first in The Golden Age compilation, follows the story of a sent-down youth, Wang Er, and his love affair with a medic in a neighboring work team, Chen Qingyang. The couple lives in a carefully regulated dystopian society (clearly modeled after Wang’s own experiences as a sent-
down youth in Yunnan during the Cultural Revolution); however, the focal point of the story is not their efforts to undermine or overthrow the authority, but their mischievous, steamy love affair. Unlike the protagonists in some other dystopian novels such as *1984*, Wang Er and Chen Qingyang do not scheme and brood over their constricted lifestyles. They merely take the new policies as they come and deal with them with flattened affects and irreverent attitudes. For example, in this period in China, people who were suspected of crimes against the state (however big, small, or seemingly irrelevant) were expected to write confessions and submit them to their local leaders. Wang Er realized that the confession readers must enjoy sorting through the risqué confessions, so he purposefully wrote detailed, erotic description of his sexual escapades with Chen Qingyang, to win the readers’ favor. Another example of how lightly the couple takes these political structures is their experience with struggle meetings. Meant to guilt and scare a suspected class or state enemy into making a public confession, struggle meetings required the person in question to stand in front of a crowd and receive criticism and sometimes violence until he or she gave in. Rather than having the desired effect on Chen Qingyang, struggle meetings instead acted as an aphrodisiac. By placing the political movements of his youth into the terms of this cheeky couple, Wang Xiaobo effectively demonstrates that black humor and irreverence can sometimes be more effective than classic depictions of suffering in representing the stories of those ravaged by the Cultural Revolution.

The rest of the stories in *The Golden Age* compilation follow the character Wang Er as he grows older and more melancholy. In “Established at Thirty,” Wang Er has reached his thirties or forties and is reflecting back on his twenties, when he sees himself as at the peak of his power and glory. “Years Like Flowing Water” is a more broad
reflection on the beginning of Wang Er’s life. He reminisces about his time being reeducated in Yunnan, then as a worker in a factory in Beijing, and finally on his education in Beijing and abroad. This character is strikingly similar to Wang Xiaobo himself, and this story plays with the idea of revisiting the history of the Cultural Revolution in order to grow up as an individual. By the time “Love in an Age of Revolution” takes place, Wang Er is in his late forties, reflecting on his time as a factory worker and on the very beginning of the Cultural Revolution when factional struggles broke out throughout the city. Like “The Golden Age,” this story is also rife with sexual power dynamics that undermine the sublime spirit of the revolution (Huang 2007).

Lastly, “The Yin Yang Spheres of My Life” tells the story of another Wang Er (same name, different character), who is impotent and ostracized from his society. Only through the help of a doctor (another sexually–charged relationship) does he conquer the psychological causes of his impotence and reenter society (Lin 2005).

The futuristic stories depicted in The Silver Age are told from the perspective of a narrator writing in 2020, looking back on the past few decades of his and his uncle’s lives. “The Silver Age,” the first story in the series, tells of the more recent past of the narrator, who is the employee of a “writing factory,” which churns out cookie-cutter novels. His assignment is an erotic novel centered on a chemistry student and his professor. “Future World” tells the stories of the narrator and his uncle, the former in his quest to be the historian of his uncles tales, and the latter in his affairs with an inmate cum spy and later with his prison guard at the “Art Reeducation Institute,” where he is sent because he stubbornly refuses to explain the deeper meaning behind his abstract paintings. Of course, the power in this relationship is unbalanced, as he must obey the
orders of his guard, which leads her to use and abuse him, under the pretense of “reeducation.” “2010” tells an equally twisted tale, in which his uncle is the manager of a diesel engine production team. He reaches that high of a level in his career merely because the other leaders had been “innumerated,” and only the former artists still had their math skills intact. The story reaches the point of a sexual carnival when all of the artists begin to have affairs and orgies with the wives of the former leaders (Zhao 2003).

Henry Zhao argues that Wang’s depiction of the present (as seen in *The Golden Age*) and the futuristic society of *The Silver Age* differ in that in the stories of *The Golden Age*, sex is used as a way to subvert authority and bring joy to the individual, while in the future, sex itself becomes a violent act that must be endured. For example, in “The Golden Age,” Wang Er and Chen Qianying engage in shameless sex, while the authority figures attempt to humiliate them for doing so. This power dynamic leads the revolutionary leaders to appear weak and powerless. However, in Wang’s futuristic stories, despite the prevalence of sex, sex for pleasure’s sake is viewed as a shameful offense that deserves punishment. The example of the uncle and his prison guard in “Future World” shows that sex is used as punishment, and that it becomes an act controlled purely by those in power (Zhao 2003). It seems that Wang uses the sexual atmosphere of a time period as a gauge to measure the level of control of the authority figures. His stories that take place in the present time of the Cultural Revolution still allow for sexual freedom, which in turn belittles and pokes fun at the leader figures. However, his projection of a future world, in which the authoritarian powers take the reigns of sexual freedom into their own hands, is a much more severe and bleak environment. By relating sexual freedom to the level of totalitarianism in a society, Wang
identifies sex as a universal right of humanity. This expands the focus of his fictional works from the Chinese Cultural Revolution to any society in which universal freedoms are under attack. In all of Wang’s writing relating to these past, present, and future worlds, he is able to explore the dynamics of imbalance of power that went on during the Cultural Revolution, his fictionalized futuristic societies, or other historical instances of power struggles, by paralleling them to these accounts of “love and bondage.”

At first glance, these sorts of fictional works may seem far-fetched and of little scholarly value, yet Wang’s writing, both fictional and non-fictional, shows how stepping back from the hard facts of reality can facilitate analysis of past traumatizing events. Wendy Larson writes that Wang “so thoroughly complicates the logic of revolutionary consciousness that its integrity is challenged” (Larson 2009, 136). Through his gentle mocking of revolutionary events and the focus on the individual, rather than on society’s problems as a whole, Wang rewrites the history and perspectives of the Cultural Revolution. According to Chen Xiaoming, “Wang Xiaobo’s novels go from the individual to history, and revolution becomes a background” (Larson 2003, 132). Until the late 1980s, the stories and history of the Cultural Revolution were seen in simple terms as a fight between good and bad, but the student movements of 1989 and the subsequent popularity of writers with more flexible world views, such as Wang Xiaobo, have made the good/bad mentality’s grip on the Cultural Revolution begin to loosen (Qin 2006).

Although the majority of Wang’s fiction focuses on dystopian, revolutionary societies, his novella “East Palace West Palace” highlights a more underground issue that is rarely discussed in contemporary China—homosexuality. In 1994, the Chinese
Psychosis Association reported that homosexuality is a mental perversion, similar to drug addiction or smoking, that should be purged from their society. It is therefore unsurprising that homosexuality has become an underground subculture in China, little known to the sociological or literary world until the mid-90s (Shi 2003). However, in 1995 Wang and his wife took interest in this segment of society and published their own comprehensive research on homosexuality in China, entitled “A World of Their Own,” the first report of its kind. Wang himself became the harbinger of homosexual literature in China, with the publication of “East Palace West Palace” in 1994. This novella tells the story of a young police officer and the gay man whom he repeatedly punishes for his displays of public lewdness. Although it is common for police officers to arrest prisoners for this offence, this young officer goes beyond the normal procedures and gives special attention and punishment to this man, a practice that they both clandestinely enjoy. As he spends more time with the gay man, he begins to appreciate and respect his sexual identity and even discovers that he shares similar feelings. The idea of an apparently heterosexual man looking deeper into his sexuality to discover that he himself is attracted to men shatters the demarcation and bias that Chinese society had put up against homosexuality. In this novella, Wang paved the way for a new perspective on homosexuality in China (Shi 2003).

The messages of Wang’s fiction can clearly be read on a much deeper level than as just entertaining romance novels, yet it is his zawen that more directly expresses his attitudes towards Chinese society and its recent past. Until shortly before his death, Wang was resistant to the idea of publishing the essays that he had been privately writing ever since he was sent down to Yunnan at the age of sixteen. He was more comfortable
maintaining his status as a “master outside of the literary forum” (wentan wai gaoshou), since he hated discursive forums. However, he finally conceded to have an essay collection published, which came out shortly after his death. On the day of his death, he wrote an email to a friend, explaining his position:

I’m just about to publish a collection of essays, titled The Silent Majority. Its intention can be roughly put like this: as we grew up, all that we had seen was totally inverted. Underneath a noisy discursive forum, there has always been a silent majority...But from now on we will start to speak out, and all that has been said before will no longer be relevant to us—in short, we’ll make a clean breakoff (Huang 2007).

In this aforementioned collection, which was eventually compiled into a broader collection of his essays, entitled The Joy of Thinking, he shares his musings on the roles and responsibilities of intellectuals in China, as well as his views on the Chinese national culture, scientific thinking, and his reflections on the writing of several other scholars, amongst a hodgepodge of other topics. His other essay collection, My Spiritual Home, shares his reflections on modern issues in China, as well as his personal experiences with literature and art. For example, he expresses his opinions on the effect television, foreign movies, the Internet, and karaoke have had on Chinese culture, as well as musings on homosexuality and feminism in China (Wang 2006).

Wang’s family life and his parents’ political status during his childhood played a large role in his choices in subject matter for his zawen essays. In the year Wang was born, his father, a prominent logic professor, faced expulsion from the Communist Party and characterization as an alien class element. Despite the pitfalls of being a member of a
family with a “bad” class background, Wang benefited from their intellectualism by having the opportunity to explore the literature and scholarship of intellectuals from around the world in their book collection, a dangerous luxury in Communist China. His family’s scholarship and interest in foreign ways of life most likely were factors in his father’s political exile, so Wang’s open-mindedness came at a high price (Qin 2006). The influences of his international awareness and intellectual sophistication are clearly displayed in his zawen—he is unafraid to make references from Bill Cosby’s comedy routines to social structures in Ancient Greece, despite the fact that he wrote on topics specific to Chinese history and culture. Rather than keep his references strictly confined to a perspective that stays within the borders of China, he instead broadens his lens to the experiences of humanity around the globe. For example, in discussing the connection between suffering and becoming a genius in one’s field in “My Views on Lao san jie,” he mentions the examples of Dostoyevsky, Beethoven, Van Gogh, and the Grand Historian (Sima Qian, a Han dynasty writer and author or China’s first comprehensive history). He would have had plenty of examples just from China to choose from, but he instead used the figures that exemplified the greatest artists in the world, not just in his home country.

Wang’s use of international references has many effects on the way his writing can be interpreted and utilized. On the most basic level, it gives his works a universality that is hard to achieve when writing about one’s recollections of one specific event that occurred in one specific place. To a non-Chinese reader, a straightforward memoir about the Cultural Revolution does not resonate with any of his or her own personal experiences. A well-written memoir may elicit sympathy, but empathy is harder to achieve. However, Wang comes as close as possible to this response in his readers, no
matter what their nationality, by relating his experiences to universal themes and truths of humanity. In his essay “Thoughts and Shame,” he explains the rationale behind the mentality of Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution that they must use political catchphrases or quotations from Mao’s Little Red Book as much as possible in their speeches and conversations. He writes that doing so gave the impression that the speaker had “thoughts.” This notion is confusing to a nonnative Chinese speaker, but to aide the reader in comprehension, he gives the example that in Poland, people always used to greet each other by saying “The Holy Mother is admirable!” but did not expect a response. They said this merely because they wanted the people around them to think that they had good thoughts. Of course, readers from around the world may have been able to understand why the politics of the time made people more likely to speak in cookie-cutter phrases, but they still may assume that this phenomenon is unique to the politically restricted atmosphere in China during that time. His referencing a similar custom from another culture helps to make the reader better understand how seemingly unintelligible habits such as those may develop.

Another hallmark of his writing style is his logic puns and mention of logical theories. As he makes clear in many of his essays, Bertrand Russell was one of his idols. This interest in logic comes from his family life as well, as he had a well-known logician for a father. His essays are riddled with pokes at logical if/then situations gone awry. The essay “Su Dongpo and Dongpo Pork” is based around the notion that Wang only enjoyed certain subjects in school if he found the famous people and breakthroughs in that field intriguing. For example, he did not like computer science because he could not empathize with the most famous figure in the field, Alan Turing, since he himself was not gay or
suicidal. The essay ends with an anecdote about an ancient scholar who worshipped the poet Su Dongpo merely because he enjoyed his namesake dish, Su Dongpo pork. Wang is able to relate this flawed logic to the worshipping of Mao Zedong that occurred during the Cultural Revolution—many Chinese people became enamored with the figure, to the point that they lost track of the overarching ideals he represented. In the same essay, he employs another example of flawed logic by stating that he plans to marry a girl in his class merely because her sense of humor was similar to that of Sir James George Frazer, then decides against it when he realizes that she is too chubby and had body odor. It is this ability to shed light on the absurdity of anything from Mao Zedong to the reasons for marriage proposals that sets Wang apart from many of his contemporaries.

Wang has a talent for using black humor to its fullest advantage. In describing the most twisted, disturbing scenes, many authors may rely on emotional openness and melodrama to make the reader sympathize with their protagonist, but for Wang, these scenes are an excuse to let his darkest humor shine through. In describing a scene in which he witnesses a friend of his undergoing an appendectomy while fully conscious, he likens his jumbled intestines to a memory from his youth in which he watched a butcher cleaning out a pig’s abdomen. He also writes that his friend became “impatient” and decided to join in the search for his appendix himself. In reality, his friend was in unimaginable pain and was probably doing all he could to save his own life, but Wang’s description makes it seem as though he was merely becoming bored with the whole affair. This passage manages to be funny and disturbing at the same time.

He uses humor and parallel imagery as tools for eliciting poignant memories in his readers. Another story, “Experiencing Life” tells of his time down on the countryside
when his squadron leaders insisted that he and his comrades eat a meal of “bitter memory soup” together. This literally required them to eat a bowl full of the most disgusting things the chef could find, resulting in serious stomachaches that immobilized the group by the bathrooms for the night. Bathroom humor like this may seem like a cheap laugh, but the larger political theme—a sadistic leader forcing consumption of inedible matter for the mere sake of causing misery—is clear. In remembering his experiences, Wang does not put on a pair of rose-colored glasses, but instead shaves off the veneer of political correctness and commonality found in many of his contemporaries’ works.

Sommer and Zhang explain the effect of Wang’s flippant style in the introduction to their translation:

Outside of China, the general association between contemporary Chinese literature and suffering, particularly with the many recent portrayals of the Cultural Revolution, may be at risk of becoming automatic. Wang Xiaobo understood this. He offers in his fiction an alternative vision: stylistically innovative and wickedly funny, which ought to disrupt any stereotypes-in-the-making (Zhang and Sommer 2007, xiii-xiv).

Zhang and Sommer reference only his fiction when discussing his “alternative vision,” but his zawen essays also illustrate Wang’s unique perspective on a reality he himself experienced. One of Wang’s most famous essays, “An Idiosyncratic Pig” yet again tells the story of a controlled society, but this time, from the perspective of a pig, reminiscent of George Orwell’s Animal Farm. After describing the forced roles that humans give their pigs (breeders or feeders), he writes, “this arrangement gave pigs unbearable misery.
But, they still accepted it—pigs, after all, are pigs” (Wang, Joy 2006, 129). In an insensitive way, one could argue that Wang is comparing the politically dutiful masses of China during this time period to the pigs that he tended to in the countryside. When he goes on to describe the idiosyncratic pig who goes against the grain to mate with whomever he chooses, he refers to him almost as a brother, as someone (or animal) to whom he can relate and respect. Although he does not make this parallel himself, it is fair to say that Wang sees much of himself in the pig. By using the technique of personification of animals, Wang can both express his ideas clearly and easily use sharp humor, adding even more comedic value to the style he is unafraid to apply to human subjects as well.

Wang’s unique take on common subjects in Chinese literature make him a target of both praise and criticism. A critic of Wang Xiaobo, Wang Xiaodong, argues that Wang’s works are anti-patriotic and place the “blame” for China’s problems on its own society, while it really lies in the international bias against the country. Wang Xiaodong sees China’s conflicts before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution as results of the West’s negative, imperialistic treatment of China. He worries that Wang Xiaobo’s works will give Westerners and Chinese people alike an excuse for criticizing China’s culture and values, when in reality, Wang is merely projecting a biased perspective on China’s recent conflicts. Wang Xiaodong feels that by belittling, degrading, and mocking the leaders of the Cultural Revolution, Wang Xiaobo is making China appear foolish to the outside world and its more impressionable citizens (Wang 2009). While many conservative readers dismiss his style as too abstract and irreverent, younger generations of Chinese students have already embraced his irreverent sensibilities. Wang Xiaobo’s
followers see him as a “cultural martyr”—here is a man who quit two prestigious teaching jobs to dedicate his life to the promotion of freedom of thinking and pure literature in a commercialized society (Ma 2005). Other Chinese critics view Wang as a “liberalist.” Beyond the more concrete political ideals of liberalism, Wang also promotes the basic, universal ideals of freedom—freedom to have sex, freedom to choose one’s own address, freedom to be cynical, and freedom to be innovative and creative. His characters and reflections on his experiences during the Cultural Revolution illustrate what is lost when this freedom is taken away. With Wang’s ability to write on topics so universally resonant, his work is likely to draw increasing international attention as more translations appear. Unfortunately, his untimely death limited the full impact his works may have had on literary circles in and out of China. Although Wang’s writing covers more topics than just the Cultural Revolution, it is his representation of his autobiographical depictions of this time period as an “absurd farce” (Qin 2006) that sets him apart from many of his contemporary writers. A comparison between Wang’s works and most other post-Cultural Revolution literary movements, be it scar literature, educated-youth literature, or experimental fiction (Huang 2007), makes clear the distinction between his style of remembrance and the growing trend.
CHAPTER 2: REMEMBERING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

The Cultural Revolution spurred on a literary movement led by those most poignantly affected by its turmoil. From those forced to spend years of their lives being reeducated on the countryside and those unfairly imprisoned, to those who cut ties with their family members for political reasons, everyone who lived through those ten years has a story to tell. In the period directly following the Cultural Revolution, the first writers to broach the subject of the trauma they lived through wrote melodramatic tales that criminalized the Gang of Four, forming the Scar Literature movement. A decade later, a new method of remembering emerged, one that looked at the Cultural Revolution less formulaically. Wang Shuo’s “hooligan literature” characterizes the beginning of this shift. Another group of survivors, particularly those who had left China, wrote memoirs in English or directed films funded by foreign companies, in an effort to tell their tales to an international audience. More recently, Wang Xiaobo’s perspective on the Cultural Revolution ushered in the most contemporary era of Cultural Revolution literature, encouraging other writers like Yu Qiuyu to be more honest and clear in their memoirs.

Scar Literature, epitomized by Lu Xinhua’s “The Scar” and Liu Xinwu’s “The Class Teacher,” was embraced by Chinese readers in the late 1970s, for it was the first time that anyone had openly portrayed the ten years of turmoil that the country had endured. In November of 1977, the journal People’s Literature (renmin wenxue), China’s premier literary magazine, which is controlled by the Chinese Writers’ Association (“People's Literature” 2008), published its first series of stories devoted to remembering the Cultural Revolution. The main theme that runs throughout these stories is the condemnation of the Gang of Four and China’s moral and spiritual impoverishment.
during the most recent decade. Although these stories blatantly criticize the ultra-Leftists and their uncontrolled, unchecked authority, while also reaffirming the value of individual morals and responsibility, they say nothing against the ideology behind the revolution or the subservience of the people in following the directions of authority figures. Another characteristic of most Scar Literature stories is their “bright tail” ending. Each story ends on an optimistic and hopeful note, denoting excitement for a fresh start, specifically under the new leadership. Despite the fact that these authors still remained under the tight grip of political propaganda, they had the courage to expose the injustice and corruption present in the past leadership, something that had not been seen since the critical realism of the May Fourth movements. This had been unheard of before the death of Mao Zedong, as his Yan’an Talks of 1942 made it clear that all literature should serve the goals of the current political movement, giving little room for criticism or opposition (Knight 2003).

Lu Xinhua’s “The Scar,” from which this literary movement derives its name, tells the tale of Xiaohua, a girl going home to reconcile with her mother after cutting ties with her nine years prior. Because a member of the Gang of Four labels her mother as a renegade to the state, Xiaohua’s reputation is also soiled, so she sees no choice but to abandon her mother and volunteer herself to labor in the countryside. While there, she meets and falls in love with Su Xiaolin, but upon learning that his political situation has been endangered because of his relationship with her, she reluctantly chooses to leave him as well. In the end, her mother writes to say that her status has been rehabilitated (following the incarceration of the Gang of Four), but that her health is swiftly deteriorating. Xiaohua takes the train home to Shanghai, but she arrives soon after her
mother’s death. The ending of the story is bittersweet, however, as she is reunited with her lover, Su Xiaolin, and the two of them look toward the future together, with plans to support the Party in its next endeavors (Lu 1978).

“The Class Teacher” discusses the damage inflicted by the Gang of Four in more abstract terms. Liu Xinwu’s short story describes the dynamics in a classroom shortly after the Cultural Revolution has ended. The teacher, Mr. Zhang, agrees to enroll a delinquent young man in their class. Mr. Zhang is a well-respected, introspective teacher, who sees the damage inflicted by the Gang of Four, not merely towards young adults like Song Baoqi, the delinquent, but also towards Xie Huimin, the well-meaning Youth League Branch Secretary in his class. Song Baoqi represents a student who fell through the cracks of the controlling society of the Cultural Revolution and lost his way, while Xie Huimin dutifully rode the waves of political reform, only to lose any sense of individuality or freedom of thought. Mr. Zhang regrets that an entire generation of young people has been so thoroughly affected by the political movements that were ever present in their childhood. However, although both Xie Huimin and Song Baoqi are seen as victims, the reader sympathizes more easily with Xiu Huimin’s character, as she better supports the overarching tenets that the revolution represented (Liu 1977).

In both “The Class Teacher” and “The Scar,” the main action and reflection occurs in the period directly following the downfall of the Gang of Four. In the case of “The Scar,” Xiaohua is recalling her past nine years of experiences while on the train home to reconcile with her ailing mother, while the school portrayed in “The Class Teacher” is celebrating the end of the Gang of Four’s regime. While this specific historical setting gives the protagonists a chance to reflect on their experiences at a
remove from the immediate chaos of the Cultural Revolution, it also has the effect of allowing for a margin of error in the recollection of memories. At the time when these stories were written, and also at the time when the main characters are reflecting on their most recent experiences, China had just recovered from a period of turmoil. The citizens were unsure of which leaders could be trusted and which had been purged, while the safest option was to continue to follow the official directives of the new regime. Because of this political atmosphere, individual memories were overpowered by the new official rhetoric of the Party. The government heavily endorsed these two Scar Literature stories, as they provided the public with a tidy way to explain the wrongs inflicted by the Cultural Revolution. Instead of allowing for the freedom to reflect and remember individually, these stories cemented the societal memory of the previous ten years—a memory that allowed for little wiggle room in placing the Gang of Four in the wrong and the overarching goals of the Party in the right. If the characters in these stories had been directly telling their story as it had happened, it would have been harder for them to skim over the moments that complicated the morals and ethics of the movement as a whole. These authors used the perspective of remembrance to better fit in with the new regime’s perspective on the preceding era.

The Scar Literature movement also influenced films of the period, as illustrated by director Xie Jin’s two films, *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980) and *Hibiscustown* (1986). Xie Jin has been criticized as being too politically orthodox and willing to bow down to the Party’s prerogatives. While his films relating to the Cultural Revolution may not dispel that notion, they are poignant enough to appeal to the Chinese public on an emotional level. These films effectively capture the transition of power from the Gang of
Four to the new regime—an abrupt shift during which individual ambition went from profane to sublime and ultra-Leftists went from gods to devils (Hayford 2003). The *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* tells the story of Song Wei, who was sent to work on Tianyun Mountain during the reeducation movement and subsequently falls in love with her work team leader, Luo Qun. When he is accused of being a Rightist, she is pressured to break off ties with him. She eventually is coerced into marrying the Party Secretary responsible for implicating Luo Qun. Twenty years after her love affair with Luo Qun, she is finally able to help in clearing his name, but the film ends bitter sweetly, with his devoted wife’s death. This wife, who was Song Wei’s best friend during their reeducation, represents the ideal revolutionary lover—one who stayed with Luo Qun despite his political troubles. Song Wei suffers because she was too selfish in her political striving. In *Hibiscustown*, a hardworking bean curd seller, Hu Yuyin, is implicated for being a capitalist, since she has earned enough money to buy herself a new house, and has $1500 saved. Her husband loses his life in the political turmoil, and she eventually is demoted to being a poor street sweeper, along with “Crazy Qin” who had been accused of being a rightist. The two street sweepers fall in love and have a baby, but the work-team leader does not approve of their secret affair and sends Qin away to a labor camp. In the end, he returns after ten years and meets his son for the first time. While *Legend of Tianyuan Mountain* has a bittersweet ending (Luo Qun is rehabilitated but alone), *Hibiscustown* ends optimistically, with the implication that things will improve now that the Gang of Four has lost power. Despite the optimism of the main characters in the end of *Hibiscustown*, the audience is reminded of the past crimes of the ultra-Leftists when a seemingly insane past work team leader parades down the street shouting, “another
movement!” Xie Jin drives the message home that those ultra-Leftists who used the revolution as an excuse for personal gain will not be easily forgiven. From the storylines of these movies, one can see that although Xie Jin added to the dialogue of remembering the Cultural Revolution, like his Scar Literature contemporaries, he did so only under the carefully regulated auspices of the new regime (Xie 1981; Xie 1986).

The Scar Literature movement paved the way for reflective literature relating to the Cultural Revolution, but the extent to which it encouraged freedom of ideas in China was somewhat limited. Most of the stories constructed in this movement told sweeping, melodramatic tales of lost love, family separations, or financial ruin. In addition to the stories mentioned above, some others include Zheng Yi’s “Maple,” about two lovers on opposite factions of the Red Guard, Chen Guokai’s “What Should I Do,” about the disappearance of a woman’s husband, and Kong Jiesheng’s “On The Other Side of The Stream,” about siblings who are separated at a young age, then who ignorantly fall in love upon meeting (Knight 2003). Most of the works written during this time period are purely fictional, which gives the authors more freedom in reconstructing their memories and the events of the Cultural Revolution. From a political standpoint, one of the goals of this literary movement was to recognize the evildoers of the period as the Gang of Four while ushering in a new regime peacefully. These dutiful authors and filmmakers only helped in this transition by putting the Party’s ideologies in a positive light while bashing the ultra-Leftists. In reality, it is unlikely that siblings would have been separated due to the turmoil caused by the Gang of Four, then reunited only to fall in love, or that a young women would find her lost love and eloquently express her devotion to the Party soon after learning that her mother has died. By reworking the realities of the Cultural
Revolution, either by making them more dramatically heart-wrenching or glossing over those travesties caused by powers beyond those of the Gang of Four, the writers of Scar Literature were able to put the events of those ten years into a framework that complemented the way the political leadership wanted the period to be remembered.

Wang Meng, who lived through the Cultural Revolution in his thirties, is an important author who helped to push the Scar Literature movement out of its formulaic rut. At the outset of the Cultural Revolution, he was criticized for the elegance and Western nature of his writing style, forcing him into exile in Xinjiang, where he learned the Uighur language. In 1978, he was rehabilitated and asked to join the Central Committee, going on to be the Minister of Culture from 1986 to 1989. His writing style and ideologies emphasize the complexity of human nature, something that cannot be categorized into the good versus evil stories of Scar Literature. He has been strongly influenced by the Western literary movement in the 1960s of stream of consciousness writing (Pisciotta 2004). His work, “Most Precious,” follows a similar format to those of many other Scar Literature stories, but shows key differences as well. This is the heart-wrenching tale of a father who finds out that his son is responsible for the imprisonment of his close friend. The majority of the story is a dialogue between the father and son, which forces both of them to reflect back on their experiences during the Cultural Revolution and analyze where the blame lay. The son argues that at the time, he was both naïve and brainwashed. The father remains unforgiving until the son leaves, at which point he reflects upon who the guilty party really was. In the end, the father decides to be more forgiving towards his son and places the blame on the strict control of the Gang of Four. This aspect of the story is enough to classify Wang Meng’s writing as Scar
Literature, but it is important to note that this father did not come to this conclusion as easily as many of his contemporary characters. Also, unlike previously discussed stories, this one takes place within one day, or possibly within one hour. Instead of a sweeping narrative, the reader is brought inside a single conversation between a father and son. The end of the story is especially poignant, as the father wrestles with the absurdity of what recently happened to his son and his friend. Instead of ending on a triumphant note that trumpets the coming of a new era for the Party, it ends with confusion and uncertainty.

After the uncertainty directly following the Cultural Revolution died down, authors felt less pressure to conform to the Party’s promoted literary model. By the late 1980s and 1990s, authors began to focus on other aspects of life during the Cultural Revolution, beyond just the damage done by the Gang of Four. Wang Shuo’s book, *Wild Beasts* and the film adaptation by Jiang Wen, *In The Heat of The Sun*, offer a quirkier view of the events of the Cultural Revolution. Wang Shuo, as opposed to the first writers to reflect on the heroism and sublime nature of the Cultural Revolution’s protagonists, is known for his irreverent and profit-driven perspective on China’s most recent history. His style of writing has been labeled as “hooligan literature” for its forays into the underbelly of Chinese society. Instead of focusing on the military leaders or self-sacrificing Red Guards, he tells the stories of delinquents, sugar daddies, and smugglers, with whom he identifies. Since he wrote mainly in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he was unafraid to mock the political jargon and rhetoric that was so highly respected during the Cultural Revolution (Noble 2003). Zuo Shula writes: “Wang Shuo doesn’t care what other people might say about him. To be quite honest, which of those leaders, famous men, or “scholars,” including the people of his father’s generation, have led completely blameless
lives?” (Barme 1999, 79). *Wild Beasts* deals with the generation of students living through this era who were too young to be sent to the countryside to be reeducated. To these kids, Beijing becomes a limitless playground. Their parents are preoccupied with political movements and/or the emotional trauma accompanied with the turmoil, so they are free to roam as they wish. The boys in this story experience love triangles, fistfights, and the joys of summer, making the audience forget that the Cultural Revolution is going on in the streets and villages surrounding them. A theme throughout this novel and subsequent movie is that memories cannot be seamlessly reconstructed. The movie pauses during a particularly bloody scene for the narrator to rewind the story and explain that this memory was incorrectly added to the story, saying, “My emotions changed my memories, which have in turn played with me and betrayed me. It got me all mixed up to the point where I can’t distinguish between true and false...I started telling the story wishing to be sincere, yet my determined efforts have turned to lying.” The movie opens with the narrator explaining: “Beijing has changed so fast. In twenty years, it has changed into a modern city, and I can find almost nothing the way I remember it. Actually, the change has already wrecked my memories, so that I can’t tell the imagined from the real” (Braester 2003). Wang Shuo’s notion of emotions changing memories is inherent in all recollections of Cultural Revolution-era China. Despite a narrator’s best intentions of truthfulness and the retelling of history, the charged emotions and rushing hormones of this time have blurred even the most well-intentioned historians.

The directors of the Fifth Generation film movement also participated in the collective memories used to piece together the Cultural Revolution’s history in the 1990s; however, their recollections of the Cultural Revolution are often directed towards a
foreign audience. Since Western or Japanese movie corporations funded most of their films, they were made to appeal to foreign audiences and were often even banned in China. The director Chen Kaige insists that his film *Farewell My Concubine* is the retelling of personal struggles and histories, pieced on top of the larger framework of several decades of Beijing history. *Farewell* tells the story of two well-known Peking opera actors. Although the majority of the story focuses on their private relationship, the end of the story takes place during the Cultural Revolution, during which artists were persecuted and opera stars were expected to act in only those plays approved by the government. The two friends end up denouncing each other, in a dramatic scene in which a shouting crowd harasses the opera troupe. Although the main focus of the movie is not the Cultural Revolution, but a progression through these men’s lives, Chen’s depiction of that tumultuous time period gives a vivid depiction of what many went through. By bringing the two actors to a public space, in which they accuse each other of wrong-doings, Chen changes the perspective of events past from private to public, or from memories to history. This movie focuses on the idea of memories changing and being cherished through objects or urban spaces, in this case, in the landmarks of Beijing, which he takes care to present in their pre-Liberation state, even towards the end of the film. This film, produced in 1993, represents the struggle between preservation of the memories of the past, and the efforts of many modern Chinese people to push the painful memories away (Braester 2003).

The film *To Live*, based on Yu Hua’s novel of the same name and directed by another Fifth Generation filmmaker, Zhang Yimou, is intimately tied to the memories of the Cultural Revolution. *To Live*, similarly to *Farewell*, shows the dichotomy between
public and private memories of the era, as the viewer witnesses a family’s struggles from pre-Liberation to post-Cultural Revolution China. The audience follows the story of one couple, through the husband’s gambling addiction and time serendipitously fighting for both sides during the civil war, then the death of their son from an accident at a labor site in which he was much too young to be working. Their deaf-mute daughter finds a kind man to marry, a leader of the Red Guards, but she dies in labor, as the hospital is understaffed since the experienced doctors had been imprisoned. Although their story is overly depressing, it is important to note that it does not depict the horrors of the Cultural Revolution as directly as many of the Scar Movement films do. Both of the children die from causes associated with the political turmoil of the period, which places emphasis on the bizarre nature of this time period, during which young boys were coerced into smelting metal and women died in labor because the experienced doctors were on the brink of starvation. Instead of remembering the Cultural Revolution as a time of melodrama and individual trauma, it is instead remembered as a time of confusion, chaos, violence, and bloodshed, during which unfortunate accidents occurred. Also, instead of focusing on the heart-wrenching qualities of the story, Zhang includes black humor during many scenes that one would expect to be somber. For example, when the daughter is dying in the hospital, an experienced doctor is deemed worthless because was on the brink of starvation and stuffs himself with too many of the buns the couple gives him. To Live places the blame for the unnecessary deaths and imprisonments not specifically on the Gang of Four, but more broadly on the chaos and irrationality of all of the leaders during the Cultural Revolution (Clark 2005). By doing so, the Gang of Four loses its place as the scapegoat of the Cultural Revolution, and Zhang leaves the door open for
placing the blame on the other leadership during the period. This exposes the reason behind the insistence in the Scar Literature movement on blaming only the Gang of Four—without just targeting them, the Party as a whole, and specifically the Great Leader, Chairman Mao, would be at fault. From this perspective, it makes sense that *To Live* was initially banned in China and that only foreign audiences would be allowed to see the Cultural Revolution from this perspective.

Like the movies of Chen and Zhang, there were many other memoirs written to fulfill the expectations of Western readers and intended only for foreign, English-speaking readers. Liu Sola’s *Chaos and All That*, although originally written in Chinese, is one of the most Westernized and irreverent novels written about the Cultural Revolution. This memoir cuts between the memories of the protagonist during her childhood in Cultural Revolution-era China and her young adulthood in London. The story is unabashedly graphic and sexual. The protagonist, rather than giving off the aura of helplessness and victimization, seems to look back on her childhood as a hyperbolic farce. It becomes clear that she has been emotionally altered by her experienced, but not victimized. With a blasé air, she tells her stories of learning to cuss in order to become a member of the Red Guards and hoarding feces that was “worth its weight in gold” during her time on the countryside. She is unafraid to stomp on China’s image to the Western world, and to its own people (Carolan 1994). However, she also seems nostalgic about her childhood in China, saying that she missed the coarse toilet paper and the ebb and flow of the cities, describing London as too bland. In a way, her relocation has served to blur her experiences as a child, making her look back on the Cultural Revolution as an enjoyable roller coaster ride of emotions (Yue 2005; Liu 1994).
Similarly to Liu Sola, Min Anchee wrote her memoir, *Red Azalea*, from the vantage point of a displaced Chinese citizen. She tells an artfully constructed tale of a young woman’s time being reeducated on “Red Fire Farm.” The reader first learns of this girl’s childhood, during which she had to precociously act as guardian to her younger siblings. Although she describes her time on the countryside in great detail, the reader’s attention is redirected to the subdued, secretive love affair she has with her “Commander.” The two women use the exploration of their sexualities as a way to further express their pent-up revolutionary spirits, in a way that makes revolutionary passion and sexual emotions work in tandem. Towards the ending of her story, Min Anchee is selected to attend a program for aspiring opera stars, run by Jiang Qing, Chairman Mao’s wife. During this time, she again has a steamy love affair, this time with her male Supervisor, a close confidant of Jiang Qing (Min 1994). The erotic nature of this memoir is, writes Dai Jinhua, “sexually romanticizing the remembrance of revolution and individualizing the writing of history” (Larson 2009, 158). Another interpretation of *Red Azalea*, provided by Yue Ma, is that Min views her time during the Cultural Revolution as being a period of personal fulfillment and satisfaction. A common phenomenon of trauma survivors is the viewing of that period as “the good old days.” Even though Min and her compatriots know that they experienced and participated in awful events, the overall perspective on that era is that of excitement and nostalgia (Yue 2005). Through both of these interpretations, it can be seen that individual perspectives can blur or alter the way that historic events are remembered and recorded.

Outside of these examples, there are many more straightforward, clear-cut ways that Chinese survivors of the Cultural Revolution presented their struggles to the Western
world. Jiang Ji-li’s *Red Scarf Girl* may be the most well known Cultural Revolution memoir written with a foreign audience in mind. It is unique in that it is told from the perspective of a child, albeit her adult self, remembering her experiences growing up in this tumultuous era. Similar to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the reader receives a delicate rendition of these troubled times, from a naïve perspective. For example, Jiang is torn between dedication to her parents and her peers when she is chosen to join a prestigious arts academy, but is dissuaded by her parents because they feared further political investigation. To a young girl, this was a heart-wrenching dilemma—she had grown up viewing her parents as her idols, but the political climate of the time made her question their authority and trustworthiness. This book is written in a solemn and honest tone, with the narrator (Jiang Ji-li herself) unafraid to explain her every emotion. Since her ordeal, Jiang has happily settled in California and has devoted her life to facilitating mutual understanding between Chinese and American cultures, as shown through her establishment of the East West Exchange, Inc (“Ji-li Jiang” 2005). However well intentioned she may be, the overall effect of her book is one that fits too easily into Western readers’ expectations of what a Cultural Revolution memoir should be. This memoir reinforces the Western misconception that Chinese people who lived through Cultural Revolution are miserable until they are fortunate enough to escape to America or Europe.

In a similar vein, Gao Yuan’s *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution* tells a different story, one of a young man actively involved in the movement of the Red Guards throughout China. Unlike Jiang Ji-li, Gao Yuan was on the side of the struggle that was doing the torturing, criticizing, and looting. In his previously scholarly school,
the young men essentially had no choice but to join the movement. This meant holding struggle meetings against their teachers, tearing down cultural relics, terrorizing the local village, and scheming ways to maintain power. Gao Yuan is caught in the middle of this struggle. Although he does not agree with all of the actions of his classmates, he is excited by the idea of traveling around the country to meet with fellow Red Guards. He describes his experience as such, “I felt the same kind of excitement I had felt playing spy games in primary school” (Gao 1987, 57). This quotation shows that these young men were too inexperienced and naïve to realize the damage that they were causing. This memoir is unafraid to be more graphic than Red Scarf Girl, and Gao Yuan is more careful to explain the background political situation as it fit with his personal memoir (Gao 1987).

A similarly straightforward memoir is Nien Cheng’s Life and Death in Shanghai. Nien Cheng, now comfortably relocated to the United States, recalls the six years of her life during which she was imprisoned in Shanghai. In addition to narrating the time leading up to, during, and after her imprisonment, she does a thorough job of describing the basic historical facts of the Cultural Revolution to potentially ignorant foreign readers. This memoir reads as a stereotypical survivor’s tale: she endures imprisonment, isolation, the death of loved ones, and torture, but in the end she survives, her image is rehabilitated, and she finds a new life for herself across the globe. Nien Cheng herself insists that her memoir represents a truthful depiction of the events in her life, “just as they occurred” (Wong 1996). Although the events she describes may be accurate and truthful, she describes them within the context of paternalistic Western ideologies, making sure that her Western readers can sympathize with her plight, to the seemingly
better society in America, and understand her feelings towards her homeland’s seemingly backwards government. If she were writing to Chinese readers, they would have a deeper understanding of the politics of the time, albeit biased, so she would have been able to leave out her explanations of the changing leadership and Chinese attitudes towards foreigners, for example (Cheng 1987).

As the variability in these examples of memoirs written to a foreign audience suggests, there are many factors that go into a Chinese author’s decisions and motives for presenting his or her survival story to the Western world. Although it may seem like a simple progression—survival of a tortured past, starting anew in America, then denouncing the society that treated one poorly—many of these authors had ties to and nostalgia for their homeland, which could have affected the way they portray it to their Western audience. Fan Shen, author of *Gang of One: Memoirs of A Red Guard*, a novel similar to Gao Yuan’s in that it tells the story of a young man on the more criminalized side of the struggle, explains this dichotomy in the introduction to his memoir, stating, “It took me a long time to make up my mind about whether to write this book and to divulge the secrets that I had harbored in my heart for many years. The decision was agonizing because the book will almost certainly upset my parents” (Shen 2004, ix). For Shen, telling these secrets of his past only works to stir up painful memories for him and his family members. Despite these reasons to stay quiet, he finds it necessary to write down his troubled past, as a way both to help future generations learn from his mistakes and to move on with his own life. He, like many of the memoirists writing for a foreign audience, uses remembering as a way to cope with his troubled, and often misunderstood past.
Each of these writers and directors shared a similar goal in creating their works: remembering the Cultural Revolution. However, each did so with a different motive—from Xie Jin’s devotion to spread his leaders’ political propaganda, to Wang Shuo’s desire to reveal the underbelly of Chinese society, and Jiang Ji-li’s hope that Westerners could better understand China’s recent history. Each of these perspectives changes the way the authors represent their respective memories of the Cultural Revolution, making a wholly accurate depiction of the era a futile dream. In more recent years, Chinese authors who write with a domestic audience in mind have been freed from the constraints of form-based stories and essays and have looked to their more internationally minded peers as models. The increasing popularity of Wang Xiaobo’s short stories and essays following his death in 1997 has heralded on this new writing style. Although Wang Xiaobo’s writing comes with its own distinct bias, his overarching goal was not to depict the Cultural Revolution with precise historical accuracy, but to use his experiences in it as a way to better understand universal truths about human nature. This argument can be explained by analyzing his zawen essays specific to the Cultural Revolution.
CHAPTER 3: WANG XIAOBO’S UNIVERSAL CONCEPTION OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Unlike most of the aforementioned methods of remembering the Cultural Revolution, Wang Xiaobo’s zawen essays use this time period as a jumping off point to lead into his explorations of broader themes. For example, his take on the Eight Model Plays leads to a discussion of a diplomat’s repetitive exposure to *Swan Lake*. To a certain extent, he uses unrelated examples to better explain the trials and tribulations of the Cultural Revolution, but more profoundly, these logical branches are a way for him to relate his experiences during this troubled time to universal themes of humanity. In his twelve essays that refer to the Cultural Revolution, there are several themes that crop up repeatedly. Each one is clearly manifested or suppressed during his experiences.

One of the most disturbing themes that emerges from Wang’s analysis of the Cultural Revolution is the idea that if people are left to their own devices, they will live their lives without thinking about the consequences of their actions or the reasons behind why they engage in certain activities. The “surgeons” mutilating Wang’s friend’s internal organs in “A Belly Full of War” illustrate this point the most clearly. These untrained medics were wrapped up in the glory of serving the Party by working in the country hospital, or of being able to perform a new surgery without any prior education. Some of these surgeons had previously only operated on military animals, and those who were the least experienced were given first dibs on cutting, resulting in hours of unfruitful surgeries and countless complications due to human error. Wang argues that these surgeons, especially the one in charge, knew perfectly well that they were putting someone’s life in danger. He writes, “When it comes to the preposterousness of people,
even though the entire social environment is a reason, it is not the primary one. The main reason is: that person who is messing stuff up is using drink as his excuse for craziness. Which is to say, he very well knows he is being preposterous, but he still continues to mess things up, primarily because messing things up is fun” (Wang, *Joy* 2006, 128). Viewing the situation from this perspective, it becomes difficult to ignore individual responsibility in the tragedies that occurred during the Cultural Revolution. Wang’s perspective on the matter is that these surgeons viewed this time period as a fun game, one in which there was no longer a rational leadership, giving them the freedom to toy with the organs, and lives, of their patients. This experience can be further applied to many morally objectionable situations. It is all too easy to forgive individual error and instead place the blame on a more abstract party, such as the Gang of Four, or political fervor, but sometimes individual actions cannot be forgotten, as the perpetrator may just be taking advantage of the current situation to carry out his previously socially unacceptable desires.

“Appreciation of the Classics” also touches upon the idea of people forgetting to think when faced with incomprehensible situations, but rather than life and death situations, it is about the mind-numbing repetition of the entertainment industry during the Cultural Revolution. This essay explains that during Wang’s time down on the countryside, the only operas, plays, or ballets they could enjoy were those approved by Jiang Qing as the Eight Model Works. As a result, he and his comrades lost their ability to determine objectively the merit behind these works. He writes that they would sing or dance along with their favorite characters whenever they were broadcast over the loudspeakers, all along assuming that these were good works of art, primarily because
they were told to believe so. He compares this experience to that of an American ambassador stationed in the Moscow who, because of social conventions, had to watch hundreds of performances of *Swan Lake*. Both Wang and the diplomat lose track of what constitutes good art and instead mindlessly approve of the performances that are put in front of them. Although this situation is not dangerous or harmful, it still represents the loss of individual opinion and the inability to distinguish between good and bad.

This mind-numbing affect that the Cultural Revolution created seems to be the most worrisome and damaging issue that Wang brings up in his essays. Snippets of this theme come up in almost all of these essays: “Coconut Trees and Equality” ends by stating, “Another method is to say that the stupid person always makes more sense when smart people and stupid people have a disagreement. After a while, the smart people will also become stupid. This method is commonly used today” (Wang, *Joy* 2006, 134). “My Experiences with the College Entrance Exam” centers on students honing their rote memorization skills rather than their critical thinking abilities. He portrays this nationally supported ban on thinking as the root cause of the vast majority of injustices and hardships created during the Cultural Revolution. Wang is able to express this national atmosphere in a way that shows instead of tells—the reader becomes aware of his points only by connecting the dots on his or her own. However, Wang also refrains from hammering home the point that the Cultural Revolution was a uniquely twisted era. With each of his examples of mindlessness or hypocrisy, he cleverly connects the story to something that occurred an ocean away or in a distant past. This trait makes his essays not just historical analyses, but philosophical reflections, something that artists remembering the Cultural Revolution before Wang’s time were far from achieving.
Another universal theme touched upon in Wang’s essays is that of hypocrisy and insincerity. His essay “Thoughts and Shame” explains the political atmosphere during the Cultural Revolution that required all leaders and those giving directives to preface their speeches with political catchphrases. Wang takes a liking to his squadron leader, a local farmer who is unable to spit out these meaningless phrases and instead ends up swearing coarsely. During the Cultural Revolution, one was supposed to recite these catchphrases to prove that he or she had “thoughts,” or that he or she understood and supported the revolutionary cause. However, those like his squadron leader who found it fulsome to force oneself to utter the phrases were criticized, despite their internal devotion to the Party. This may seem like a situation unique to the Cultural Revolution, but by the use of common examples, Wang demonstrates that this sort of insincerity is a universally understood phenomenon. For example, in defense of his squadron leader, he explains how some people prefer not to repeatedly say, “I love you” to their loved ones, but instead show their love through actions. Although the atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution is Wang’s primary example to express his point of insincerity, he is able to put it in the context of other situations, therefore piecing this period into the patchwork of global society.

“Rejecting Flattery” also relates to hypocrisy by describing the insincere flattery that was bestowed upon undeserving individuals throughout China’s recent history. Because of the important titles that anyone from adolescents to peasant farmers received, their egos bloated, causing them to make rash decisions due to power trips. For example, the “little generals” of the revolution harassed and humiliated their teachers, causing shame, and in some cases, suicide. Wang also shares the example of the peasants
assigned to be the leaders of his educated youth work team who treated the students as small children, while they themselves were naïve and unsophisticated. Wang is careful not to blame the peasants themselves, but instead is upset at the situation that led these farmers to become so proud. These examples from the Cultural Revolution show that the environment of the time fostered a sort of insincere flattery, but Wang includes other examples that further explain the situation of the Cultural Revolution while also reminding the reader that situations such as these are possible in any time or place. The essay actually opens with a retelling of the comedy sketch by Bill Cosby, in which the young Bill mistakes himself for Jesus Christ, since his mother always exclaims the Lord’s name when she encounters the messes he made. He then assumes that every Sunday in church, the congregation has gathered just to praise him. Although this example does not show Bill or his mother’s insincerity, but instead an honest mistake, it serves as a humorous parallel to the bloated egos of the Cultural Revolution, making them seem both sillier and more easily relatable.

Another theme elucidates the struggle between individual necessities and the importance of respecting the goals of one’s society as a whole. This issue is one that is at the heart of differing viewpoints between Chinese and Western mentalities. Wang’s essays help the reader to consider the effects of too strongly sympathizing with one or the other way of thinking. In the essay “On Loftiness,” an educated youth dies a martyr by attempting to save a sinking electricity pole. After sharing this anecdote, Wang writes: “Our value is definitely greater than that of a log. Replacing us with a log is not constructive. However, everyone told me that state-owned property is where righteousness lies, so if you see it being flushed away, without thinking twice, you should
go in the water to salvage it. Beyond just wood, even for a piece of straw, you still need to jump in the water” (Wang, *Joy* 2006, 147). Wang presents this attitude during the Cultural Revolution of an individual’s life being less important than state property in a hyperbolic way, giving the most extreme example of people encouraging others to risk their lives for a piece of straw. One is not often faced with decisions such as these, but the conflict between self and community is one of which each culture has varying viewpoints. By sharing this extreme, albeit realistic example, Wang makes clear his attitude towards the Chinese viewpoint on this issue, especially on that during the Cultural Revolution.

In the essay “A Belly Full of War,” Wang makes a friend in the understaffed hospital where he is holed up being treated for hepatitis. This friend requires an appendectomy, a surgery that the staff of the hospital was not qualified to perform. However, during this time, Mao Zedong’s idea of “during war, study war” had permeated into all facets of society, and it was expected that the inexperienced staff members should get a chance to practice this surgery on whichever patients were available, despite their ignorance. In the end, his friend ends up with a fistula and a wound that will never heal. The closing line of this essay states: “This brother is a very brave and generous person. If he weren’t, he wouldn’t have given up his organs to the study of war” (Wang, *Joy* 2006, 128). Of course, the decision to sacrifice his internal organs was not his own, and Wang makes this remark mockingly, but either way, his friend became self-sacrificial in order to better the larger community of medical providers. During the Cultural Revolution, individuals did not have a say in the matters of how much of themselves they wanted to give to the communal cause—the politics of the time demanded that it be as much as
possible. By highlighting this extreme case of self-sacrifice, Wang not only shines light on the inhumane practices of the Cultural Revolution, but also exposes the incomprehensibility of extreme selflessness in general. His facetious closing remark drives home the point that some things should remain as personal property, namely, one’s internal organs.

The essay “An Idiosyncratic Pig” is a story that glorifies the brave souls willing to think of themselves before their comrades and challenge the status quo. Wang uses the conditions of the farm animals he cared for during his time on the countryside as a parallel to the regulated lives of various human societies. He uses the social system in Sparta as his example, but one can assume that he feels the same way about his own society during this time period. However, by only hinting at this connection, Wang moves this essay out of the constricted sphere of Chinese society and makes it relevant to any of the world’s populations. He makes it clear that he respects and supports those willing to make their own decisions and escape from the grid of their society’s conventions. The pig in this story is unsatisfied with his life as a breeding pig, so he defies his masters and mates with the free ranging village pigs. He also plays games with the workers by imitating their alert bell and disturbing their daily schedule, getting himself in trouble with the authorities. Wang makes it clear that he is proud of this pig, respecting him as a brother, rather than a farm animal. He writes, “I am already forty years old, but except for that pig, I have never met anyone so daring as to ignore life’s constraints. On the contrary, I have met a lot of people who want to make constraints for other people’s lives, and people who bear life’s arrangements with equanimity. For this reason, I will always cherish the memory of that idiosyncratic pig” (Wang, Joy 2006,
131). By sharing these examples, Wang makes his viewpoint on this issue quite clear: despite strong societal pressure, individuals need not be afraid to pursue their own needs, so long as doing so does not have dire consequences.

Along the same lines as individuals rebelling against their societies is a theme ever-present in Wang’s essays: the supposedly well-planned schemes of bureaucracy often have unanticipated consequences. During the Cultural Revolution, these consequences often manifested themselves as inefficiencies, or, more seriously, as threats to human safety. The previous example of “An Idiosyncratic Pig” ties together the ideas of unconventionality and the tedium of bureaucratic systems. The humans in Wang’s community inflicted such a painfully monotonous schedule on the farm animals that the breeding pigs were more willing to be castrated than to mate repeatedly with the worn out sows. Wang not-so-delicately compares these sows to the women of Sparta, who were expected to pop out as many children as possible, and to their lovers, who were encouraged by the political leadership to give their lives in battle. Pigs and Spartans (and, one can assume, Chinese citizens living through the Cultural Revolution) could have led much more productive and fulfilling lives, had they not been constrained by political powers. Wang, by broadening his subject matter beyond just his experiences as a sent-down youth, is able to demonstrate that the constrictive power of bureaucracy is a universal problem, not just one that he personally experienced.

Another example of bureaucracy’s negative effects can be seen in “The Pastures of Holland and The Folks Back Home,” a commentary that compares the clever planning of Holland’s irrigation system to the irrational system for spreading manure that Wang was subjugated to during his time on the countryside. While the Dutch were able to turn
marshland into an orderly, irrigated pasture, the farming systems during the Cultural Revolution were disorderly and wasteful. Wang tells of his early mornings pushing a wheelbarrow, in which he would pick up mounds of dirt (oftentimes lacking the essential pig manure) and climb up a steep mountain, requiring the help of people stationed at the peak of the hill, all for the sake of keeping up appearances for their work team’s productivity levels. This system wasted time, energy, and materials, but they did it because the Party had instated an agricultural policy akin to “keeping up with the Joneses,” instead entitled “in agriculture, learn from Dazhai.” This backwards method of governing only hindered the abilities of individuals and communities to succeed, something that goes against a cardinal rule of bureaucracy. In this case, Wang tries to express how uniquely backwards the Chinese political system was—instead of giving examples of similarly nonsensical situations, he compares his experiences with a well organized, effective system. This, in its own way, gives the reader a chance to universalize his experiences into the broader scope of global awareness. One sees that bureaucracy is not always necessarily counterproductive, but the Cultural Revolution is one example of when it produced primarily negative results.

Wang’s experience with taking the college entrance exam after his time on the countryside is another example of a bureaucratic system gone awry. The Chinese college entrance exam is still a dreaded obstacle for all aspiring college students, but for Wang’s generation, it was even more intimidating, since they had taken a forced break from schooling to labor on the countryside for several years. In the essay “My Experience with the College Entrance Exam,” Wang explains the trials he faced in attempting to memorize seemingly useless facts such as who was on what side of the “ten political
struggles.” Wang compares these struggles to those between Jesus and devils. He argues that no good Christian could rattle off the name of devils as easily as they could their Savior, so why should he be expected to remember who the bad guys were? Since Wang does not possess a gift for memorizing names and places, he struggled through his courses, which, as is standard in the Chinese system, focus primarily on rote, mindless memorization. This system is so absurd that an entire class of students received scores of zero on their mathematics exam because they learned the problems only by memorizing their teacher’s solutions, while he himself had received a zero on his entrance exam. This system ends up favoring only those who are able to blindly memorize, resulting in a society that discourages thinking and encourages irrational bureaucratic programs. From the carefully planned schedules of breeding pigs, to the system for determining who will receive a higher education, there are many examples of where bureaucratic plans can go wrong. Wang’s essays highlight the specific and senseless ways by which the leaders of his youth hijacked the political system to the point of irrationality. By comparing these systems to those used around the world, he allows his stories to resonate more deeply with any reader, not just those who understand China’s most recent history.

“My Experience with the College Entrance Exam” also fits into the theme of educational and experiential learning, a topic Wang fixates on when writing about the Cultural Revolution. As an “educated youth,” he missed out on many of the educational opportunities provided to the generations directly before and after his own, so it is natural that he devotes his energies to fleshing through his own educational growth, or lack thereof. “Su Dongpo and Dongpo Pork” discusses Wang’s academic interests and the reasons behind them. He writes, “I am interested in how knowledge is discovered and in
the researchers themselves, but I am not interested in the knowledge itself.” By this, he is implying that there is more to attract someone to a specific field than the field itself. For example, he became interested in mathematical logic because he found Bertrand Russell and James George Frazer to be hilarious, but disliked computer science because he could not relate to Turing. Wang shares all of these anecdotes facetiously, as the overarching point of this essay is to express the irrationality in hero worship. Just as Chinese people worshipped Mao Zedong as their idol during the Cultural Revolution and therefore blindly accepted all that he stood for, many people choose their academic interests merely based on the charisma of the field’s leaders. In this essay, Wang uses the universally understood concept of education to make a point specific to the Cultural Revolution.

The essays “My Views on Lao san jie” and “Experiencing Life,” however, share his experiences specific to the Cultural Revolution, and from those expand outwards to principles surrounding experiential learning that are applicable to any individual. The essay “Experiencing Life” disputes the idea that one must endure pain and hardship in order to have really “lived.” He shares the story of his mess officer on the countryside who insisted on their creating a “bitter memory soup” in order to give his comrades a chance to experience life to its full potential. He and his comrades had to swallow spoonfuls of the most unappealing stew, both texturally and aromatically, merely so that they would be able to look back on that time and remember its pain. He, understandably, finds this notion ridiculous, writing, “if people want to endure hardships, it’s really very easy. At home, you can bang your head into a doorframe. Since pain is so simple and easy to find, it seems there’s no need to go out of your way just to experience it” (Wang, Joy 2006, 140). By giving other examples of pain, Wang is able to separate this specific
experience from the context of the Cultural Revolution and makes it about human experience in a general sense. Although few have been so directly encouraged to experience pain in this way, the general idea of painful experiences making one’s life more full is one to which anyone can relate.

“My Views on *Lao san jie*” explains Wang’s attitude toward the value, or lack thereof, of being in the generation of the lost youth. Some might argue that this extraordinary circumstance was, in a way, fortunate for these people, since they could go on to become successful writers, using the fount of stories they accumulated during that time. However, Wang follows that logic to its extreme point, by stating, “people who want to become authors should frequently hang themselves. People who want to become historians should copy the Grand Historian and castrate themselves. People who want to become musicians should buy a jackhammer, bring it home and deafen themselves, so that they can be like Beethoven. People who want to be painters should cut off their own ears, to pass themselves off as Van Gogh. People who want to be anything need to get rid of everything and turn themselves into sticks.” Wang is unwilling to pity himself for losing ten of his golden years, and he also will not accept the attitude of those who see the experience in a positive light. By referencing those international superstars, Wang is able to explain his attitude towards *lao san jie* in a universalized context. *Lao san jie* should not be given special treatment in Chinese society, and subsequently, anyone with an unlucky fate should not be seen through the lens of his or her disability.

As demonstrated by “My Views on *Lao san jie*,” the themes of fairness and fate are also discussed throughout Wang’s Cultural Revolution *zawen*. Wang explains that in his youth, he found his fate to be entirely unlucky, claiming to have thoughts such as this:
“Fuck! People older than us got to go to college, while we have to work the earth? It’s really not fair!” (Wang, *Spiritual* 2006, 14). However, he grew up to have a different attitude towards fate and equality, stating, “In my opinion, good is just good. Bad is just bad. This logic is useful enough. People living in this world will run into some good things and some bad things. I can bear good things, and I can also bear bad things. In this magnanimous way, being an ordinary person is actually not bad.” Wang, as someone who experienced his fair share of bad luck, is able to impart his wisdom to the reader. In this way, this essay goes beyond the narrow scope of a Cultural Revolution memoir to make broader claims about the human condition.

As can be evidenced by its title, “Coconut Trees and Equality” is similarly centered on the themes of equality and luck. It gives one explanation behind why the coconut trees of Yunnan, the province in which Wang received his reeducation, are now extinct. In its essence, the theory is that the military leader, Zhuge Liang thought that it was unfair that the people of Yunnan could reap the benefits of their native coconut trees, while the rest of China had to go without. He therefore ordered his men to cut them all down. This essay is only tangentially applicable to the Cultural Revolution, as Wang mostly tells a story that took place in the Three Kingdoms period of China’s history, with only brief mention of his time in Yunnan to put the stories in context. The theme of the essay is something applicable to any era and situation—namely, that life is not fair and no perfect solution exists to equalize the inequities. He ends the essay by writing, “some people’s happiness capabilities are superior. This type of superiority is what most often provokes people to be jealous. One way of eliminating this superiority is to bludgeon the heads of the smart people, hitting them until they are stupider. However, hitting them
lightly would be ineffective, and hitting them strongly would make their brains come out. This is not our real intention” (Wang, Joy, 2006, 134). This comment brings his subject back to the current day, in turn broadening this theme’s applicability to ancient times, the Cultural Revolution, and modern society. This ability to universalize his subject matter was a novel trait as compared to the Cultural Revolution works that came before Wang.

As compared to the authors of the Scar Literature movement, Wang appears to be a radical thinker, and one at risk of political endangerment at that. However, it is important to remember the political and historical context from which these works arose. To the writers of Scar Literature, their stories were a way to help themselves and their country to begin the healing process in the years directly following the Cultural Revolution. More importantly, writing these stories provided a way for them to stay within the good graces of the new regime. Each story had to fit into a formulaic pattern: heartbreak, separation, redemption, anger at the Gang of Four, and finally, a promise to support the new regime. For Wang, writing almost twenty years later, there was no need to stay within the confines of the politically correct format. The young people most affected by the Down to the Countryside Movement or their participation in the Red Guards were, when Wang was writing, almost forty and jaded. People no longer walked on eggshells if discussing a foreign novel, and no one was afraid to admit that they were wealthy. However, that is not to say that Wang’s works stayed completely within the confines of his time’s social rules, as the Scar Literature works did. For example, he is afraid to include jibes at Mao’s ideologies and star-power, something still sensitive in Chinese society, but pioneered by the wild works of Wang Shuo. Also, he unabashedly chides those who did not take individual responsibility for their actions during the
Cultural Revolution. As he was writing these essays, Chinese people still loathed the mention of the words “Cultural Revolution” and were hesitant to discuss their experiences during those ten years. He was willing to go outside of his society’s comfort zone to uncover the reality of what actually happened during that time, unlike those writing directly after the Cultural Revolution’s conclusion who were afraid to offend or upset their readers. This honesty is universally appealing. Foreign readers may get the wrong impression of the Cultural Revolution from Scar Literature works that depict this time period with rigidity and impersonality, but the earnest stories of Wang give the reader a truthful depiction of this period with which they may be unfamiliar.

Wang and the Scar Literature authors also had differing opinions on the depiction of reality in their stories. Wang’s essays are nonfictional reflections, so he had more of a responsibility to remain truthful, but the Scar Literature fictional works were so idealized that a reader receives an inaccurate representation of that era’s events. If one compares the main character of Wang’s works, namely, his depictions of himself as a youth, with Xiaohua, the politically minded youth in Lu Xinhua’s “The Scar,” it becomes evident that here are two politically-engaged youths who share little to nothing in common. Wang honestly tells the reader of his mistakes, weaknesses, and crimes—one learns of his failure to study math, his petty thefts in Yunnan, and his explosive diarrhea. On the other hand, Xiaohua’s story is much more epic than that of Wang. She travels across the country to escape from her politically damaged mother then breaks off a romance to save her true love’s reputation. We only hear of her sweeping emotional decisions and heart-wrenching drama, things that most people will never experience in their lives. Wang’s depiction of his Cultural Revolution becomes much more relatable and universal. The
reader sees his story as a believable, common tale of a young man growing up in a confusing time. The Cultural Revolution becomes less of an abstract concept and more of a background setting.

Even compared to the stories of writers working a decade after the Cultural Revolution, such as Wang Shuo, Wang Xiaobo’s essays come across as much more reflective and philosophical. In the eighties, writers had begun to abandon the reverent, sublime characterization of the survivors of the Cultural Revolution, a shift that Wang Xiaobo continued to apply in his essays. However, to take Wang Shuo’s *Wild Beasts* as an example, this story lacks the cultural and global depth of Wang’s essays. The kids in Wang Shuo’s stories are also idealized, but in a way that makes them appear completely blasé and apathetic, as opposed to the heroic heroes of Scar Literature. Instead of the two extremes of hooligan good-for-nothings or budding political leaders, Wang Xiaobo’s characters have a realistic blend of devotion to the Party and skepticism over the events of the Cultural Revolution. For example, his work team leader in “Thoughts and Shame” had devoted his life to the Party’s cause, but he did not see the value in constantly shouting political jargon. Similarly, Wang himself demonstrates many characteristics of a dutiful revolutionary—one who cheerfully sang along with the Eight Model Operas and helped to make “bitter memory soup”—but he expresses skepticism when his countrymen applaud the young people who give their lives to save state property, and he laughs at his brother’s classmate who idolized Chairman Mao. The multifaceted characters of Wang Xiaobo’s works add another layer of universality to his essays. Wang Shuo was forward enough to expose the underbelly of the Cultural Revolution, while Wang Xiaobo went one step further, blurring the boundaries between good and bad.
Another telling comparison to Wang Xiaobo is that of the literature and movies created with a foreign audience in mind. One might expect that these works should exhibit the most sensitivity to the difference between Chinese and Western ideologies, since their goal is to make a uniquely Chinese experience accessible to the whole world. However, in doing so, many of these writers became even more pigeonholed into a specific frame of mind. For example, both Nien Cheng and Jiang Ji-li end up telling classic survivor tales that placate the Western perspective on the black-and-white horrors of the Cultural Revolution and the categorization of good versus bad characters in this tragedy. This severely limits what the reader can get out of these books, since these pigeonholed memoirs have not much philosophically deeper than the idea that they were persecuted at the time, but then went on to lead happy, productive lives elsewhere. These women go little deeper than to deem this period in their lives as dark and counterproductive, or to explain to the Western world the political atmosphere of the time. To those ignorant to the Cultural Revolution, this may seem like enough, but their viewpoints are inherently biased towards viewing the Communists as the bad guys and the Western capitalists as the rational saviors. Wang’s works, however, do no such thing. For each irrational, illogical story that he mentions, he places the blame on individuals or on overarching downfalls of humanity, and he does his best to counter each of these examples with a similar story from the Western world. In this way, Western readers would view his characters and their society with less disdain and more empathy. Because Wang universalizes his memories of the Cultural Revolution, readers are given their own freedom to pass judgment on the morals of Chinese society.
Even as compared to Wang’s own fictional works, his zawen essays stand out as a new model for reflecting on the Cultural Revolution. A key trait is that his zawen essays are non-fictional, but they are read as stories. One could argue that from the perspective of form and function, Wang’s fiction is more similar to the works of the Scar Literature movement than it is to his own non-fictional essays. Both his novels and novellas about the Cultural Revolution and those of Scar Literature present fictionalized, romanticized versions of what went on during those ten turbulent years—Wang’s being more irreverent and profane, and Scar Literature’s erring on the side of fulsome and sublime. Of course, the themes that Wang presents in his fiction have little overlap with those portrayed in previous Cultural Revolution stories, but the method of presentation is similar. However, his zawen essays break the mold of the fictionalized dramas or dry nonfictional essays. They instead show hints of fitting into the memoir genre. They are based on the nonfictional accounts of his own life, but he presents only the useful or entertaining bits, which would appeal to readers. However, unlike memoirs, his essays are not cohesive and include a greater proportion of philosophical musings, as opposed to simple story telling. He is able to tell of his past in a way reminiscent of his descriptions of his characters in his novellas, but the primary distinctions are that the characters in his zawen truly existed, and he is able to include more analysis and philosophies in his essays.

In remembering the Cultural Revolution, Wang does not forget the rest of the world or the broader concepts that influence people’s individual and group decisions. His contextualization of this time period within the framework of broader themes helps to provide perspective on his experiences as a youth. Instead of remembering the Cultural Revolution for the sake of remembering, he remembers to help his readers better
understand what went on in those ten turbulent years. Anyone from any continent or era could pick up these essays, knowing nothing about the Cultural Revolution, and relate them to their everyday lives. Even if they finish reading them still having minimal understanding of what actually went on between 1966 and 1976 in China, at least they will have connected with what he went through on a deeper level than just political propaganda from either the Chinese Maoist or Western democratic camps. His works have resonated with the current crop of young people in China, most likely because he is able to capture the mentality of a clever young person, regardless of during what time period he or she comes of age. More importantly, his works should resonate with the wider world, as he in no way limits his potential readership to those familiar with Chinese history and culture. Wang’s writing opened the floodgates for Chinese writers to be unafraid of looking deeper into that time period than just the telling of their personal tales.
CONCLUSION

Wang Xiaobo innovatively found a way to illuminate the broader perspective on the stories of the Cultural Revolution, while also captivating readers with his wit and sharp tongue. In this way, readers both ignorant about the Cultural Revolution and those who experienced it firsthand can empathize with his characters’ stories and better understand the societal and interpersonal pressures placed on those living through this time period. In addition to his ability to universalize the events and decisions made during the Cultural Revolution, he is also able to do so in a satirical tone, bringing humor to this dark period.

Both the timing and circumstances surrounding Wang’s young life contributed to his ability to depict the Cultural Revolution from such a fresh perspective. Unlike many of his contemporary authors, he grew up in a home that valued Western scholarship and freethinking. Also, the age during which he lived through his time on the countryside was young enough to have deprived him of his education, but old enough to prevent his complete indoctrination to the Party rhetoric of the time. This perfect balance created the sharp perceptiveness and no frills approach with which Wang approaches his memories of the Cultural Revolution. Unlike his peers and predecessors, Wang is able to present his way of remembering the Cultural Revolution in a spirit that would resonate with any reader. The authors of Scar Literature were only hoping to appeal to the shell-shocked Chinese populace and what its government wanted for them, while Chinese immigrants to Western countries aimed mainly to inspire sympathy from their English-speaking readership. Wang, however, strives to explain the humanistic rationale behind the traumatic events of the Cultural Revolution, making his writing accessible to any group.
By breaking the walls that divided Chinese and Western styles of remembering and being courageous enough to include truthful anecdotes from his own experiences when writing to the Chinese public, Wang led the way for future authors. His writing made it acceptable to treat the Cultural Revolution as a chance for personal, political, philosophical reflection, therefore making the “hidden transcript” of the Cultural Revolution a force to interact with the “public transcript” (Kleinman and Kleinman 1994) created by the central government, a trend that was picked up by modern Chinese writers, such as Yu Qiuyu.

The works of Yu Qiuyu, one of the most well-known modern Chinese authors, represent the trend taken up by the current generation of writers in China, a group unafraid of using Western writing styles, such as stream of consciousness, personal memoirs, or inconsistent chronologies. His memoir (a novel form of writing in China), *A Life Borrowed*, published in 2004, tells the story of his experiences as a twenty-something living through the Cultural Revolution. His father was accused of insufficiently criticizing a rightist, and Yu feels his first pangs of responsibility in his efforts to clear his father’s name. This story, unlike those of the Scar Literature movement, does not take place in the form of memories or flashbacks. Instead of framing the story in the time directly after the Gang of Four was convicted, Yu instead tells the story first-hand. *A Life Borrowed* is also much more detailed and lengthy than the short stories of Scar Literature. Rather than tell a melodramatic tale of star-crossed lovers or dissolved families, he tells his own poignant story. Although his life is not as
breathtaking as some of the protagonists’ in Scar Literature, he presents it in a way that is more down-to-earth and relatable to the Chinese public\(^3\) (Yu 2004).

Yu’s other relevant work, “Lao san jie” is a short essay that describes his feelings towards the generation of high school and middle school students who were pulled from their academic careers to be reeducated in the countryside. He writes that these students, referred to as lao san jie, were pulled from their normal lives before their knowledge level had peaked, then forced to watch their lives degenerate as they labored for years in the countryside. After this period was over, they had to grit their teeth and return to the cities to find new work, but the years they had spent laboring made it difficult to integrate back into their past lives. He notes that many lao san jie found work in government, silently toiling in the background to make the country a better place than what they had grown up with. This essay, in sharp contrast with his memoir, is not one of memory, but one of analysis. What he states about the logistics of the lives of lao san jie is indisputably true, but his analysis of their current value in society is his own perspective on the matter. In this way, he is not remembering his own or his society’s past, but adding

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\(^3\) Despite these strong points, some critics have cited this memoir by Yu Qiuyu as controversial, primarily because he leaves out the fact that he participated in a special “writing group,” organizations of writers who were handpicked by the Leftist regime to write criticisms of fellow artists and befallen comrades. After the Cultural Revolution was over, many of these writers were criticized for their willingness to turn against friends and for the role they played in the imprisonment of many innocent victims. This begs the question of the responsibility of the writer when telling his or her own story. In Yu Qiuyu’s memory of the Cultural Revolution, perhaps he has blotted out this dark spot, as it shames and haunts him. Does he not have a right to alter his personal memories? In his defense, he was a recent college graduate at the time, one naïve and willing to follow the orders of his leaders—is it not acceptable for his wiser, older self to eliminate these hurtful memories from his story? Whether or not one feels that it is the memoirist’s responsibility to tell the whole truth, this example goes to show that memories can be influenced by the changing times and moral codes in which they exist (Shen and Xu 2007).
his input to the officially accepted view of history (Yu 1994). Both Yu’s memoir and his essay show clear parallels to Wang Xiaobo’s works. His memoir reads like an extension of one of Wang’s short essays—pieced together fragments of his strongest memories from his time living through the Cultural Revolution. In addition to story telling, Yu injects analyses of the political climate of the time, bridging the gap between personal narrative and public remembrance.

Wang’s unfortunate early death cut short the possibilities for his furthering the illumination of the “hidden transcripts” of the Cultural Revolution, but one can argue that his works have made it more acceptable for authors, such as Yu Qiuyu, to tell their version of the truth behind the Cultural Revolution, giving their readers more choice in the rhetoric they choose to believe, whether it be the suppressed version presented by the central government, or the philosophically stimulating rendition of personal stories by authors brave enough to share them. In the coming years, it seems likely that more Chinese authors will join the trend started by Wang, and will begin to broaden their mindset when discussing the Cultural Revolution. Once a large amount of written works accumulate to counterbalance the stifling reports of the government, the Chinese public and the international community will be able to form a more well-informed, unbiased view of the years between 1966 and 1976 in Chinese history. The measly picture on the wall of the National Museum of China will be overruled by honest depictions of the events during the Cultural Revolution, helping personal stories to join the memories contrived through the public transcript. More needs to be done to remember the Cultural Revolution and to prevent it from slipping away into a haze of repression and denial.
A Belly Full of War

When I was younger, I once got sick and was admitted to the hospital. At the time, the hospital did not have any doctors, just proletarian medics. The real doctors had all been sent down to the countryside to be reeducated by the peasants. Be that as it may, if you can’t call a person wearing a white coat “doctor,” what are you supposed to call him? On my first day in the hospital, the doctor on rounds saw my list of lab results. He took out his stethoscope and listened to me up and down. He finally opened his mouth and asked: what is your illness? It turns out that he did not understand the list of lab results. Actually, without the results, you could still see what disease I had: from head to toe, I was the color of day-old tea water. I had jaundice. I told him: according to my assessment, I probably have hepatitis. This all happened more than twenty years ago. At the time, people had not heard of hepatitis B, let alone hepatitis C, hepatitis D, or hepatitis E. There was just one type of epidemic hepatitis. It has been said that hepatitis originally did not affect China. It arose from an overconsumption of Iraq’s candied jujube during the Three Bitter Years. They were called jujube, but they were actually dates. Even though I hadn’t eaten any dates, I still got hepatitis. The doctor asked me what we should do. I said, “You should give me some vitamins.” My sickness was gone just like that. To be honest, being in the hospital did not help me at all, but I still think that

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The “Three Bitter Years” period, also referred to in the West as the “Great Chinese Famine,” lasted from 1958-1961. It was caused by Mao Zedong’s attempts to organize the country into communes, to make the ideological leap from socialism to communism, in the campaign “The Great Leap Forward.” The height of the famine was in the spring of 1960, and its causes were disorganization on the agricultural communes and flooding, which led to crop failures. An estimated 20 million people died during this period (Thaxton, 2008, 1-2; Slavicek, 2010, 29-34).
entering the hospital was a good choice. If I had stayed with my team, I could have infected other people.

The hospital did not offer any diversions besides watching the doctors cut people open. Their knives were always headed towards patients’ appendixes. You could say that they were self-aware of their inability to do any other surgeries. When I said that I watched them cut people open, I was absolutely not drivel ing. The place regularly lost power, and when it did have electricity, it was incredibly unpredictable. The operating room’s four walls were entirely made of glass. At two in the afternoon, the sunlight was best, so they operated then. All of the patients in the hospital watched from outside, betting on how many hours it would take them to find the appendix. Years later, I told this story to my friends who studied medicine. None believed me, saying, “How many hours could an appendectomy take?” No matter whether or not you believe it, in the several surgeries that I saw, there was not one in which that they found the appendix within an hour. The doctors performing the surgeries all said that people’s appendixes are too hard to find. Amongst them were a few who had worked as military horse and mule medics. They had participated in military horses’ surgeries. Horse appendixes are very big, while mules’ are not too small either—both are bigger than people’s. Even after considering the organs of a human body relative to its build, the appendix is still much smaller. When I spoke with them, I said to them, “You are unfamiliar with people’s entrails, so you shouldn’t cut into them.” Can you guess what they said? “The less you are familiar with something, the more you should do it. During war, study war!” Young people today might not know that that last sentence was a quotation of Chairman Mao. People’s intestines and war are not one and the same, but no one ever brought this up. I
think that this custom was their most repulsive: each time that they did a surgery, they
would make a novice come lead it, in order to give everyone a chance to study war. As a
result, they never found the appendix. The size and location of the incision depended
completely on the person’s whim. But, I must say one thing good about them: even
though some incisions slanted to the left and some slanted to the right, others were
opened in the middle, all of the incisions were made on the belly. This fact proves to be
remarkable.

In the hospital, I made a friend. He was sick with appendicitis. The doctors told
him that he should get an operation. I begged him to do anything but have that operation.
If he must have one, I demanded that he let me cut. Even though I also had not studied
medicine, I had repaired an alarm clock, and I had even repaired an old-fashioned rotary
telephone for my work team. Even based on just those two things, I was better than the
doctors in the hospital. But, he still let them cut, primarily because they wanted to study
war during war. How could he not agree? As his luck would have it, after his stomach
was opened, the doctor searched for three hours and still could not find the appendix. The
attending surgeon took out all of his intestines. Everything was mashed and jumbled.
When I was young, there was a small food stand near my house that sold fried liver and
braised intestines. In the early mornings, the cook would stand outside of the door
washing pigs’ large intestines. It looked just like that image. The sky was quickly
becoming darker and darker. Other people came to help find it. The scene was a bit
chaotic. My friend became impatient while the others were searching, so he pulled up the
white curtain and joined in the search as well. Finally, before sunset, they found it. As
soon as they removed it, the sky went dark. If it had gone any further, they sky would
have been so dark that you couldn’t see. They would have had to leave his cavity open overnight. I used to especially love eating pigs’ large intestines, but ever since witnessing that surgery, I have not once wanted to eat them again.

Thirty years have gone by. Suddenly, I remember the time when I saw those surgeries. What strikes me most is the muddleheadedness of the people at that time. They were practically crazy. Who knows, perhaps in another thirty years, we will again contemplate today’s people and actions, and we’ll also find out that there were some people who had gone crazy. From this we can see that our rationality has a great leap every thirty years. But, I suspect this understanding is incorrect. Saying that rationality can leap like this is tantamount to saying that the people of the old society\(^5\) had absolutely no sense. Let’s go back thirty years to when that attending surgeon used his big, dark hands to pinch a living person’s organs, and shift them around. Even though he said he was studying war, I don’t believe that he didn’t know he was just messing up. From this I have reached a conclusion: when it comes to the preposterousness of people, the entire social environment is a factor, but it is not the primary one. The main reason is that the person who is messing stuff up uses drink as his excuse for insanity. Which is to say that he very well knows he is being preposterous, but he still continues to mess things up, primarily because messing things up is fun.

We can make yet another conclusion based on this: no matter what society is like, individuals should take responsibility for their own actions. However, as the essay writer, for me to record these inferences is too direct and frank. Therefore, I will stop here. I still

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\(^5\) China’s official state view of the “old society” is the time before Liberation and the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949. The time after 1949 is referred to as the “new society” (Hershatter, 2011, 24).
have not written down everything that happened while I was living in the hospital: I lived in the hospital, my hepatitis did not get any better, and my face got more and more yellow. My friend had the surgery, but the wound never healed, and he got skinnier and skinnier. In the end, we returned to Beijing together to see a doctor. I was cured right away. My friend, however, entered the hospital and was operated on again. The Beijing doctors said that last time, even though they had gotten rid of the appendix, his intestines had not been stitched up. They had stuck to the wound to become a fistula. The contents of his intestines were oozing out of the wound, so it would never heal. The doctors also said that its oozing to the outside was actually very lucky. If it had gone into the stomach, he would have been finished. My friend did not think he was lucky at all. He just said: See, that’s why I never get full. Everything just leaks through. This brother is a very brave and generous person. If he weren’t, he wouldn’t have given up his organs to the study of war.

An Idiosyncratic Pig

When I was living in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, I fed pigs and grazed cattle. If no one came to manage them, these two animals would still know completely how they ought to live their lives. They would stroll freely, eat when hungry and drink when thirsty, and as soon as spring came, they would even fall in love. In this type of situation, their way of life would be more primitive, with nothing of substance to report. After people came, they created schedules for the animals’ lives: every cow and every pig then had a role to play. For the majority of the animals, the roles were miserable: one was to work, and the other was to get fat. I don’t think that this is anything to complain about, since my life at the time was not any better in terms of variety. Except
for the Eight Model Plays,\(^6\) I did not have any pastimes. There was an extremely small number of pigs and cows whose lives had an alternative schedule. The breeding pigs, for example, had something else to do besides just eating. From what I could see, they were also unhappy with this arrangement. The breeding pigs’ responsibility was copulation; in other words, our policies made them playboys. However, exhausted breeding pigs would often act like meat pigs (meat pigs were castrated). They would assume the air of upright gentlemen: they were not willing to jump on the back of any sow, whatsoever. The sow’s responsibility was to have piglets, but some sows would rather eat their piglets. In short, this arrangement gave pigs unbearable misery. But, they still accepted it—pigs, after all, are pigs.

To make a variety of arrangements for all aspects of life is the unique nature of humankind. Not just to make arrangements for animals, but also to make arrangements for people. We know that in ancient Greece there was a city named Sparta. Life there was arranged so much that it was not at all interesting. The goal was merely to make men into fearless soldiers and women into breeding machines—the former resembling fighting cocks, and the latter resembling sows. These two animals are special, but I suspect that they do not like their own lives at all. But if you don’t like it, what is there to do?

Whether it be humans or animals, neither finds it easy to change its own destiny.

Here I will discuss a pig that was not like the others. When I began feeding the pigs, he was already four or five. Nominally, he was a meat pig. But he was both black

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\(^6\) The Eight Model Plays or Eight Model Works were the most popular of the less than twenty-four officially sanctioned performances during the Cultural Revolution. They were regulated by Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong’s wife. Five of the works were operas, two were ballets, and one was a symphonic suite. All of these works were attempts at political propaganda, which glorified the Red Army, peasants, and workers (Slavicek 2010, 90-91).
and thin, with two shiny, clear eyes. This chap was as nimble as a goat: he could jump a meter-high fence in one go, and he could climb to the top of the pig pen. In this respect, he resembled a cat. Because of this, he always strutted around everywhere, never staying in the pen. All of the educated youth who fed the pigs treated him like a pet. So, he also was my pet. Since he treated educated youth well, he allowed us to walk within three meters of him. If it were anyone else, he would have run away sooner. He was male and therefore originally should have been neutered. But, if you merely went to try (even if you were hiding the neutering knife behind your back), he could still smell it, and he would glare at you with a howl. I always fed him refined bran porridge. I’d wait until he was done eating, and only then would I put the husks in the weeds to feed the other pigs. The other pigs got jealous and howled together. When this happened, the whole pig pen sounded like it was full of crying ghosts and howling wolves, but the pig and I did not care. After he was full, he would climb up to the roof to enjoy the sunshine or to mimic all sorts of sounds. He could mimic the sound of a car and the sound of a tractor. He had studied them both very well. Sometimes I did not see a trace of him all day. I imagine he went to a nearby village to look for sows. There were also sows where we were, all kept in the pig pen. They had all reared too many children, so much so that they had lost their figures. They were dirty, and they stunk. He had no interest in them, but the sows in the village were a bit better looking. He did a lot of splendid deeds, but since I only spent a short period of time feeding the pigs, my knowledge is limited, so I might as well not

7 The term “educated youth” refers to the 12 million urban youth who volunteered themselves or were coerced into moving down to the countryside between the years of 1969-1976, in order to be “reeducated” by the peasants and farm laborers. Ironically, many of them lost the opportunity to attend secondary school or college because of this compulsory “education” (Slavicek 2010, 106-109).
write about them. In short, all of the educated youth who fed the pigs liked him and his unconventional style, and they said that he lived life with aplomb and poise. However, the locals were not as romantic and instead found him to be indecent. The local leader actually loathed him. I will come back to this point later. I more than just liked the pig—I respected him. Often, despite the fact that I was his elder by several years, I called him “Brother Pig.” As I mentioned before, Brother Pig could imitate any kind of noise. I wish that he had learned to talk like a person, but he never did. If he had, we could have had heart-to-hearts. But you cannot blame him; people and pigs’ timbres are far too different.

Later, Brother Pig learned to imitate a whistle’s call. This skill brought him a lot of trouble. In the countryside, we had a sugar factory. At noon, they blasted the whistle once, to make the workers switch shifts. When my team was in the fields, we came back from work as soon as we heard the sound of the whistle. Every day at ten in the morning, my Brother Pig jumped to the top of the pen and mimicked the whistle. The people in the field heard his call and returned. It was earlier than the sugar factory’s call by an hour and a half. Honestly, you cannot completely blame Brother Pig. He, after all, is not a boiler—his call and a whistle still have some differences. The locals, however, firmly insisted that they could not hear the difference. The leaders heard this and held a meeting, labeling him as a bad element⁸ who sabotaged the spring plowing, and they sentenced him to death. I already knew the gist of the meeting, but I was not worried about him. If the instruments of tyranny were rope and butcher knife, then they had no chance at all. Past

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⁸ The term “bad element” refers to a political classification given to families or individuals seen as local criminals, rent collectors, toughs, or any other undesirable figures. Those labeled as “bad elements,” as well as those classified in other undesirable categories, such as landlords, capitalists, or rich peasants, were forced to endure public humiliation campaigns and often physical violence (Tanner 2010, 198).
leaders had also tried, but even a hundred people could not catch him. Dogs were also useless: Brother Pig runs like a torpedo and can throw dogs ten meters into the air. Who would have thought this time they were for real? The political instructor brought twenty-odd people carrying Type 54 pistols. The vice political instructor brought a dozen people, hands carrying rusty shotguns. They split into two lines outside of the pig pen and cornered him. This put me in a predicament—considering his and my friendship, I thought I should whip out two butcher knives and start fighting, battling shoulder to shoulder with him. But, I also thought that doing so would be too dumbfounding—after all, he is a pig. There is another justification: I was not willing to fight my leader. I suspect this was the real problem. In short, I watched from the sidelines. Brother Pig’s sense of calm was quite admirable. He serenely ducked between the lines of pistols and shotguns. No matter how much people shouted or dogs bit, he did not leave that line. That way, if the people with pistols opened fire, they would shoot the people holding shotguns, and vice versa. If the two groups opened fire at the same time, they would all get shot to death. As for him, because he was a small target, he basically had no problem, and just like that, he did a few laps, found an opening, and went out with a bang, running cool as can be. Afterwards, I met him once more in the sugarcane field. He had grown a pair of tusks. He still recognized me but did not allow me to approach him. This cold treatment broke my heart, but I support his decision to keep a distance from backstabbers.

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9 Political instructor is a term borrowed from the leadership of the Chinese Army, since the communes organized during the Cultural Revolution often took the form of military units. The political instructor’s duty is to encourage political indoctrination and loyalty, as well as to keep up the morale of the troops (Blasko 2006, 37).

10 The Type 54 Pistol was the standard pistol used in the Chinese Army. It is a direct replica of the Soviet 7.62 mm Tokarev TT33 pistol (China 1989).
I am already forty years old, but except for that pig, I have never met anyone so
daring as to ignore life’s constraints. On the contrary, I have met a lot of people who
want to make constraints for other people’s lives, and people who bear life’s
arrangements with equanimity. For this reason, I will always cherish the memory of that
idiosyncratic pig.

**Coconut Trees and Equality**

More than twenty years ago, I was in Yunnan being reeducated. The climate there
is blisteringly hot. This produces all types of tropical fruits, except for the coconut. Not a
single place in Yunnan grows coconuts. According to popular legend, there is a reason
for this. It is said that before the Three Kingdoms period, there were coconuts all over
Yunnan, and happy ethnic minorities lived beneath the coconut trees. As everyone
knows, coconuts have a lot of uses. Dried coconut can be food, and coconut oil is edible
as well. The fibers in the leaves of coconut trees can be woven into coarse clothing. The
coconut tree can be used as wood. This type of tree can satisfy the majority of people’s
needs; therefore, the local people did not need to engage in farming. They lived leisurely
lives. Suddenly one day, Zhuge Liang\(^\text{11}\) arrived there on an expedition. He wanted to
reform the local people to abide by the Han lifestyle: do Han work, wear Han clothing,
and obey the Han system. At first, this did not have much success. The local people did
not see any advantages in this lifestyle. Firstly, fall harvesting and spring planting was
tiring work. At the very least, it was more tiring than picking coconuts. Secondly, Han

\(^{11}\) Zhuge Liang (181-234) was a military leader during the Three Kingdoms period. He is
labeled as a strategist-general, but one who ruled with a Confucian sensibility. Zhuge
Liang is often cited in literature as being a wise and powerful leader. He was the advisor
to Liu Bei, a member of the imperial clan, when Cao Cao was attempting to overthrow
the emperor (Raphals 1992, 133-135).
clothing was not compatible with the area. To take Mr. Zhuge for example, even though
the material of his robe was very nice, wearing it helped with nothing else besides
covering up sweat and sweat rash. As for that hat, it neither shielded him from the sun
nor warded off the rain, instead provoking hornets to enter and build a nest. In that hot
place, it was best to pick two coconut leaves and use them to cover your private parts. As
for the political system of the Han Dynasty, according to the indigenous people, it was
too convoluted. Mr. Zhuge talked until he was blue in the face in praise of Confucius and
Mencius, but no one listened. He did not think that his principles were incorrect, so he
instead vented his frustration on the coconut trees: he gave an order, and in one night, all
of the coconut trees in Yunnan were cut down to the ground, so as to prevent these
barbarian people from turning a deaf ear to the principles of the sages. Without the trees,
when he spoke, people would listen. In that vein, I will explain that when Zhuge Liang
went on his expedition to the south, he was not alone. He also brought a lot of soldiers.
The hatchets that they used to chop down the trees could also be used to chop down
people. Cutting down the trees demonstrated that the manpower under his leadership was
sufficient and that the hatchets were up to snuff. The local people got his message and
became afraid of Mr. Zhuge. You may not completely agree with my viewpoint. I know
that you will say that Zhuge Liang was an ancient sage who would not nakedly use
military force to threaten other people. So, I do not insist on this point of view.

The popular legends explain this event as such: amongst the barbarians, there
were some valuable things that made the people lackadaisical. They dared to look down
on the great state of the Heavenly Empire. If they did not have these valuable things, they
would have been obedient and docile. This is to say that at the time, the problem with
frivolity amongst the people of Yunnan was a type of moral defect. Mr. Zhuge cut down the trees in order to correct this defect. It was for their own good. I have always thought that this saying was too lurid. The people had a few good things going for them. Comparatively, they had a good life and a good mood, which then caused frivolity. You have to ruin these good things and destroy their mood to get what is called “non-frivolity.” I think this is the opinion of the authors of the popular legends, not of Mr. Zhuge.

Although we cannot take these popular legends seriously, Yunnan today actually has no coconuts, while in the past it did. So, Zhuge Liang could have chopped down the coconut trees. If he were not acting barbarically, there must be a more righteous explanation. I think that when Zhuge Liang cut down the coconut trees, he might have been thinking: All people should be born into equality, but this here is not equal. Sichuan does not have any coconut trees. People there need to farm in order to survive. Yunnan is full of coconut trees. People here live very comfortably. Filling Sichuan with coconut trees would be one method of achieving equality, but doing so would be limited by natural conditions and would be very hard to accomplish. So, it is necessary to cut down all of Yunnan’s coconut trees. This would be fair. If there is an inequality, there are two methods for leveling it out. One is to pull things up to the level of the better situation. This is the best option, but implementing it is difficult. For example, there are some people who are born with four healthy limbs, and there are some people who are born handicapped. One way of achieving equality is to heal the handicapped people and make them normal, but this is not easy to do. The other way is to push things down to the level of the worse situation. Turning normal people into handicapped people is very easy. With
just one hit of an iron rod and one scream, they can be changed. Mr. Zhuge went the way of pushing things down to level of the worse situation. As a result, he made it so that I could not eat coconuts. When I was in Yunnan, whenever my mouth was vapid, I would nibble on a few papayas. Papayas are mild and lack flavor. If they were not completely ripe, my whole mouth would become numb after nibbling on them. But, I did not complain about the papaya trees. This type of tree also does not grow in the interior. If their fruit were too tasty, Mr. Zhuge would have chopped them down also.

The topic of this essay is coconuts, while its substance is about problems of equality. My intent is to hang a sheep’s head but sell dog’s meat. Everyone ought to be born into equality. No one disagrees with this point. But in reality, things are not equal, and the biggest inequality is not that some people have coconut trees and others do not. According to Bertrand Russell, the biggest inequality is discrepancies in intellect. Some people are smart and some are stupid. This is a real problem. The meaning of knowledge or smartness here is broad. It not only includes scientific knowledge, but also civility, artistic tastes, and such. These coconut trees growing in people’s minds not only give them materialistic well being, but also give them spiritual happiness. I would refer to the latter discrepancy as the difference in the capacity to be happy. There are works that some people can appreciate which others cannot understand. This is to say that some people’s happiness capabilities are superior. This type of superiority is what most often provokes people to be jealous. One way of eliminating this superiority is to bludgeon the heads of the smart people, hitting them until they are stupider. However, hitting them lightly would be ineffective, and hitting them strongly would make their brains come out. This is not our real intention. Another method is to say that the stupid person always
makes more sense when smart people and stupid people have a disagreement. After a while, the smart people will also become stupid. This method is commonly used today.

Thoughts and Shame

When I was young, I was sent to Yunnan to be reeducated. Only ten decades before that, the area was still a foreign barbarian state. For this reason, in addition to beautiful scenery, it also had the goodness of unsophisticated folk customs. When I was there, the elders of the village did not just work the land, but also toiled at strenuous tasks in order to show that they had thoughts. During that time period, saying a catchphrase before giving a speech also showed that you had thoughts. We were able to do this extremely easily, but it was hard for the villagers. For example, our squadron leader once wanted to suggest something about our work in the fields. To him, this was not at all difficult. He was a farmer! He wanted to begin his speech with a political catchphrase, but this was extremely difficult for him. It was apparent from his trembling lips that he wanted to say something short like “fight selfishness, repudiate revisionism.” That’s not hard to say! But, that is my opinion. For him, it was definitely not that easy. You could see the rising blush on his face, the ceaseless stammering, and the rolling barrels of sweat beads, but in the end, he still could not force out the phrase. What he said was, “Cocks! That is exactly the fucking way to plant the fields!” Upon hearing these clever words, we immediately stood up and gave him a warm applause. I like simple people and think that

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12 The term “reeducation” refers to the “Down to the Countryside Movement” that coerced 12 million urban youth into moving to the countryside between the years of 1969-1976, in order to be “reeducated” by the peasants and farm laborers. Ironically, many of them lost the opportunity to attend secondary school or college because of this compulsory “education” (Slavicek 2010, 106-109).
there is no problem with talk like this. However, he had higher demands for himself. He always wanted to make his speeches full of ideas.

It is said that in the past in Poland, when peasant women encountered one another in the street, the first thing they said was, “The Holy Mother is admirable!” Outsiders were unable to figure out their meaning and said, “She is! She is admirable! Let us praise her!” They did not understand their counterpart’s implication. The speaker did not want to praise the Holy Mother, but instead wanted to show that she herself had a good mind. In Yunnan, before we spoke, we first said the phrase, “The highest directive.” This also had the same intention. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Lin Daiyu and Shi Xiangyun\(^{13}\) are in the garden chatting, when some verse appears in praise of the sages. The author probably thought that even though Lin and Shi are girls in the inner chamber, it would only make sense if their words contain some ideas. As for our squadron leader, he also thought like this, but he did not have the eloquence of sister Lin. I do not know why, but catchphrases would also make him abnormally shy. Even if his life depended on it, he could not say them. What he said always contained some F-bombs. This made all of the male youths love him. Each time before he gave a speech at a meeting, we all held our breath and quietly waited. Once he began to speak, we applauded and cheered. This made his problem more and more severe.

Once, our team and another team had a basketball game. He led our team. You might not believe it, but our squad leader could play basketball. His was not very skilled,

\(^{13}\) Lin Daiyu and Shi Xiangyun are both young, female members of the noble Jia family in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. These young ladies, as well as their peers living within the walls of the estate, often occupied their time with playful poetry contests in the garden, in which they each added a verse to the stanza and were judged by the number and creativity of their words (Cao, 1978).
but he always injured our opponents. Once, someone’s blood accumulated in his thoracic cavity, and another time there was a testicular hematoma. Although he was no midfielder, our team counted on his bravery to win games. The two teams stood on the basketball court. The opposing team’s leader read an excerpt from Chairman Mao’s speeches. When it was his turn, he started speaking unexpectedly smoothly, without indecencies. This disappointed those of us who had planned to applaud. Who would have thought that the political instructor referee would fiercely whistle at him, and reprimanded him, saying, “The highest directives are the highest directives. The slogan of the revolution is the slogan of the revolution. Do not speak indiscriminately!” He was then taken off of the court and sat by the side with an ashen face. He had just said, “The highest directive: long live Chairman Mao!” The political instructor thought that he spoke incorrectly. The highest directive is Chairman Mao’s speech. Mao himself never said, “long live Chairman Mao,” so saying that is incorrect. However, I always have thought that you should not take simple people too seriously. If they have some ideas, that is enough. Ever after that whistle was blown, our squad leader did not dare speak any words, be they indecent or decent. He practically became mute.

During those years, these phrases represented an idea, which was that of being loyal and obedient to authority. This was not a secret. In that era, it was advocated that loyalty is of primary importance. They were all the same phrases, but when some people said them they were ashamed, and while others said them, they were not. This is a bit abstruse. The bashful people were not necessarily disloyal and disobedient. As for our squadron leader, he actually was an especially loyal and obedient person, but the loyalty and obedience were buried deep in his inner emotions. This is actually a feminine
attitude. Not only with loyalty and obedience, but also with love, he was unwilling to express these feelings directly in public without fear of triteness. The loyalty and obedience of our squadron leader was manifested through his work and his good farming. But, making him say these things in a crowded public place pushed him too far. To take love as an example, there are some men who use their actions to show their love. They do not like spewing “I love you” from their mouths. Our squadron leader had this type of attitude. Another type of person who does not have this attitude would not feel fulsome in saying these words, but, their inner feelings of obedience and loyalty are not necessarily greater. There are some playboys who constantly gush “I love you,” but the sincerity of this love is hard to discern.

As is mentioned before, the place where I was reeducated had unsophisticated folk customs. The local people felt that being submissive in public was embarrassing. As a result, the term “have thoughts” became synonymous with “ashamed.” It was not only our squadron leader who felt this way, but the majority of people. My own personal experience is evidence for this happening. Once, I was buying things in a market. I bought a jackfruit from an old Dai woman. I must explain that the locals thought that the educated youth were all rich. If they were selling one item, they would sell it to us for three times as much. As a result, our method of buying things was to take advantage of when the seller was not paying attention, throw the appropriate amount of change at them, take the thing we wanted to buy, and run. Some people call this method stealing, but I don’t think it was. Of course, I no longer buy things like that. That day, I had not brought enough money with me. The money that I put down was not sufficient. The old Dai lady (called a “bamboo stick” in the local dialect) made a fuss as she came after me.
She shouted loudly towards me, “Not okay! Have thoughts! Fight selfishness, repudiate revisionism!” Then, taking advantage of my soft waist and trembling legs, she took that jackfruit (also called a cow stomach fruit), and snatched it back. As you now know, when this bamboo pole said these things containing the word, “thought,” her meaning was, “Are you not ashamed?!” That word was effective. To this day, when I think of this event, I still feel ashamed. Just for a cow’s stomach fruit, she had to bring up “thoughts,” which is extremely shameful.

**Experiencing Life**

I write for a living. People sometimes say to me, “Writing as you do is not feasible. You have no life!” At first I thought they meant to say that I was a dead person, which made me furious. Then I thought, the word “life” has another meaning. There are some authors who go to live for stretches of time in remote, onerous places. This type of journey is called “experiencing life.” Looking at those words, they seem to imply dead people coming back to life, but in reality, they do not. This is a good way for authors to get a better understanding of a hard life and to write better pieces. The “life” to which people sometimes refer belongs to this latter usage and does not imply that I have died. Thinking of this, I stop being upset and start to smile. Even though I was reeducated in an impoverished area, there is still much more for me to experience. But I always think that a better term would be “experiencing difficult life.” Leaving out the middle word implies that in life, one should regularly be in pain. This leads to seeing life from a

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14 The term “reeducation” refers to the “Down to the Countryside Movement” that coerced 12 million urban youth into moving to the countryside between the years of 1969-1976, in order to be “reeducated” by the peasants and farm laborers. Ironically, many of them lost the opportunity to attend secondary school or college because of this compulsory “education” (Slavicek 2010, 106-109).
negative viewpoint. My contemporaries have all had the experience of recalling the bitterness of the past while savoring the joys of the present. They hear the stories of the bitter past and eat the food of the bitter past, and so on. This is different from experiencing life, but the meaning is pretty close. It is a well-known fact that the poor of the old society\textsuperscript{15} lived lives worse than cows and horses. They ate husks and swallowed plants. Not vegetables. Grass. So-called bitter memory soup just mimics old society’s poor’s food.

The bitter memory soup I want to mention is that which I ate while being reeducated in Yunnan. Under that political climate, an order came down that every work team had to eat at least one meal of bitter memory soup in order to meet the requirements. At the time, I was sick, so I didn’t often go out to the fields. I worked in the logistics section, helping our mess officer. I participated in making the soup. Of course, I was just the assistant. The real chef was our mess officer. This elder man was down-to-earth and plain spoken. Ever since he had become mess officer, our team’s food became awful. At every meal, we would eat rotten vegetable leaves because he said, “This food is too old. If we don’t eat it, it will go bad.” There were always some vegetables in the garden that were past their prime. When we finished eating the old ones, the new ones had already become old, so we were never able to eat tender vegetables. I thought that the mess officer would be the expert on bitter memory soup, but he still went to seek the input of the group. He asked everyone what kinds of things they had eaten in the old society.

Some people said they’d eaten the hearts of plantain trees. Others said they had eaten taro

\textsuperscript{15} China’s official state view of the “old society” is the time before Liberation and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The time after 1949 is referred to as the “new society” (Hershatter, 2011, 24).
flowers and pumpkin flowers. In short, nothing was too hard to stomach, especially the taro flowers—they are especially good vegetables. After you boil them, the aroma is really nice. I suspect that there might have been people who had eaten even grosser things but did not dare tell him. Honestly, he did not have the skills to make food taste good; however, he did have the skills to make it taste bad. The more you taught, the worse he got. Let’s take plantain tree hearts as an example. You really should peel off the thin, white middle layer for eating. However, he called on me to cut down a plantain tree, chop the whole thing into pieces, and boil it in a pot. The pot’s water quickly turned yellowish-green, emitting bubbles. It was like a pot of soapy water, dispensing a nauseatingly bitter smell.

As I mentioned, this meal should have had some taro flowers. However, taro does not like to bloom, so we boiled taro stalks instead. Furthermore, these were old stalks, left over after the taro had been dug up. It’s possible that the stalks originally had a numbing flavor, but it’s also possible that there was a chemical reaction with the plantains. In short, after these things were dropped into the pot, its contents emitted a vile, numbing scent. You could probably guess by now that we did not boil pumpkin flowers. We boiled pumpkin vine. After the vine was smashed to bits, they looked like caterpillars that would not soften. Finally, we put in some husks. On this point the mess officer and I had a serious dispute. I thought that only the rice crop’s inner membranes were called husks. We had this kind of thing. We fed them to the pigs. As for the rice crop’s shell, it was not a husk. Even the pigs did not eat it. We could only burn it. The mess officer did not object to my definition, but he said, “In any event, it’s bitter memory soup, so we should not be so picky. We will still save the husks to feed to the pigs.” So, he added a basket of
smashed rice shells to the pot. After it was mixed evenly, I really didn’t know what was
in the pot. When its contents were cooked thoroughly, the mess officer happily blew a
whistle, but my spirits were not as high. To be honest, in my entire life, I have not been
afraid of anything, and I was not afraid then, I was just a little flustered. I had fed the pigs
before. I knew that trying to feed this soup to the pigs would make them all want to bite
me to death. If pigs would be like that, what about people?

What happened next proved that I was unnecessarily worrying. We ate the bitter
memory soup that night. First, the political instructor first led the team in singing “The
Heavens are Filled with Stars,” then we started to eat. In this atmosphere, when my
classmates saw the food, they didn’t rip me apart. There were just some rash young boys
who glowered at me, occasionally roaring, “You fucking eat too!” As a result, I ate a lot.
The first bite was the worst. After eating a few bites, my whole mouth was numb, so I
could hardly tell how bad it tasted. It was just those smashed bits of rice shells that were
like shards of knives. They were very hard to gulp down. Repeatedly swallowing made
my mouth start to bleed. Whatever happened, I had already prepared to sacrifice myself
for the cause, so there was nothing that I couldn’t overcome at that moment. However,
other people were secretly retching. After we had finished eating, the political instructor
said closing remarks. From the look of it, he was not in good condition, so he did not say
very much. Afterwards, everyone returned to sleep. But of course, the ordeal was not
over. At about eleven at night, I felt my intestines churning in pain. When I got up, I

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16 The Party promoted Songs such as “The Heavens Filled with Stars” as a propaganda
mechanism to further the spread of political rhetoric. They emphasized the best and
brightest aspects of Mao Zedong, the Party, and communist ideals. One of the most
famous examples is “The East is Red,” which presents Mao as a savior figure,
comparable to the rising sun (Lu 2004, 100-106).
discovered my several roommates all on the ground groping for shoes. They grabbed and
groped, but no one found them. Everyone ran out together with bare feet and headed to
the bathroom. Under the bright and clear moonlight of the Tropic of Cancer, you could
see the long line forming at the bathroom door.

There is one thing I need to explain. There are some uncivilized people who are
accustomed to defecating in the wild. We did not have that habit. Because stool has value
as fertilizer, we could not casually throw it away. But, that night was not the same
because there were no empty stalls in the bathroom. The majority of this valuable
material was sprinkled beside the small river behind the bathroom. After completing this
inelegant act, we normally would have gone back to sleep, but we could not walk more
than a few steps without needing to return, so we simply stayed on the small bridge,
talking and being bitten by mosquitoes. Intermittently, we would go in the grass thickets,
straight until our stomachs were completely clear. By the next day, our team members’
faces were all a little green, our jaws were a little pointy, and our walks were a little
wobbly. In this condition, we of course could not work the fields. The only option was to
rest for a day. This story should have a moral, but I still have not thought of it. In any
event, I don’t think that this was an education. I just think that it was torture. Although,
that is also a type of life. In summary, if people want to endure hardships, it’s really very
easy. At home, you can bang your head into a doorframe. Since pain is so simple and
easy to find, it seems there’s no need to go out of your way just to experience it.

Rejecting Flattery

When I was in America, I often watched the programs of the comedian Bill Cosby.
He once told this joke: When Bill was little, he thought that he was Jesus Christ. Each
time he was home alone, he always acted like a little demon and turned the house into a big mess. When his mom came home, she stood in the door and saw that the house looked like it had been flooded. It was hard to avoid being dumbstruck. From the corner of her mouth escaped, “Oh my Jesus Christ!” He thought that she was talking about him. This happened so often that the misunderstanding became more and more solidified. It went so far that, when he went to church and heard everyone passionately admiring Jesus, he always thought they were praising him. He couldn’t help but feel tingly inside. He shook his head and his mind dazzled, feeling great about himself. When other people loudly called, “Praise Jesus, our Savior,” he could not help but to respond. Later on, when his mom and dad discovered that their little demon’s mind was acting abnormally, they slapped him twice and took him to a psychiatrist. In the end, he finally came to the extremely painful realization that he was not Jesus nor was he the Savior after all. Of course, telling the story all the way to this point is not at all comedic. I added the latter half.

When I was young, I often went to the neighbor’s house to play. There was a child there who was several years younger than me and who often was home alone. He did not like to play raucously. He always quietly sat on a square stool, listening to a box set on top of a chest of drawers. We later broke open the thing and discovered four lights inside with a raucous speaker made of an armature spring. It was basically a piece of junk. It emitted unintelligible words, but he held his breath to listen. When the essay was finally over and the broadcaster’s upright voice said seriously, “Comrades of the revolution, comrades-in-arms of the proletariat revolutionary faction...” this child immediately responded sharply in two calls and jumped to the ground with a dust-raising dance. In
reality, the box was not calling for him. He was barely out of diapers and far from being a comrade or comrade-in-arms. However, you could not hinder his happiness. He thought that in addition to being just another Zhang, Li, or Cosby, he finally had a dignified title. Whether this name is comrade, comrade-in-arms, or the Savior is unimportant. What I am talking about is the crazed attitude of people who mistakenly think they have a proper title. This was only the prologue to what I want to discuss.

When you actually possess a dignified reputation, the time to show off will come. There was a time when the box was always praising the “little generals” of the revolution. It said that they were the rebellion’s most audacious and energetic figures. All of them were quite young. Those who received the title of “little general” wanted to do something in addition to feeling good about themselves, so they gathered round their schools to attack their teachers. In our school, the young generals did not only attack a teacher; they also attacked the teacher’s parents. This was extremely humiliating for the older couple, and they hung themselves. The attack on the teacher had nothing to do with me, but I thought that it was very shameful. The participating classmates agreed with me afterwards, but it was hard for them to understand why they blindly indulged in the frivolousness, as though they were eating honey. Foreign documentation of these events has a particular slant. They say that at the time, the adolescent young men and women who wore old military clothes to go into the street to wave leather straps were expressing their sexuality. I think that this understanding is incorrect. My peers were unlikely to go so far as to consider problems from a sexual standpoint.

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17 Zhang and Li are two of the most common surnames in China.
The age of little generals ended quickly. Following it was the period of the “working class leading all.” There were workers placed in my school. These team leaders and past workers were not very similar. They were all a bit giddy and confused. Even though they were not as crazy as the revolution’s little generals, they were still far from being normal. Then there was the “Three Supports, Two Militaries” period.\(^{18}\) There were representatives from the army everywhere. During that time, there must have been some clear-headed, prudent military representatives, but I never encountered one. In the end, young people were all dispatched to the countryside to receive a peasant’s reeducation, to study the latter’s superior qualities. Before going to the countryside, we first labored in a rural area of a Beijing suburb as a rehearsal. The villagers we saw there were also a little abnormal. Normal people would not spread their legs so widely when they walk, giving a small car space to push through the center. They also would not walk with their head in the clouds. Only a wooden stool would have that appearance if it learned how to walk. In the rustling fall wind, we crouched on the ground and observed the peasants’ evening report. The report’s words were the following, “The most respected and loved great leader: Chairman Mao. Our [read “Mu-en”\(^ {19}\)] farm work this afternoon is to lead the elementary school students in collecting sesame. Over and out.” I, on one hand, was extremely offended that after growing to this tall height, I was all the sudden still an

\(^{18}\)The “Three Supports, Two Militaries” (三支两军) period lasted from 1967 to 1972. This directive enlisted help from the military to support the Left, workers and peasants. They were put in charge of both military training and supervision of the civilians. During this time, the People’s Liberation Army took over the control of work units, which had recently stopped functioning. Soldiers were dispatched to civilian industrial and agricultural units, and the military also had control of the transportation and broadcasting centers of the country. In all, 2.8 million soldiers partook (Leese 2011).

\(^{19}\)“Our” is pronounced “women” in the Beijing accent, but these villagers had an accent, garbling the pronunciation to “nu-en.”
elementary school student who was being led in collecting sesame. On the other hand, I
was paying close attention to the meeting’s excited atmosphere. Some people were even
unable to wipe the clear snot from their cold noses. They blew bubbles from their
nostrils. I mention these things now not at all because these simple people were doing
something wrong, but to try to explain that people are unable to resist flattery. The more
naïve and sincere a person is, the more that person will let loose their hysteria and lose
track of east verses west and north verses south upon hearing a saying that is
complimentary to himself, or which suggests that he is of superior quality, and belongs to
humanity’s superior segment. I predict that it is those people whose lives lack fun and
who have little hope whose ears perk up most to hear this favorable language. This is
likely because becoming hysterical is more fun than living their normal lives. In saying
my point, the essay is nearing its end.

In the early eighties, I was a student at Renmin University. I once was stuck in an
auditorium listening to a presentation. The presenter was an educator on youth morality. I
said that I was stuck there because I did not want to hear this presentation at all, but if I
had been absent, it would have been marked as a cut class. If I missed class too many
times, I would not be able to graduate. This gentleman started his presentation by
flattering the audience. When he presented at Qinghua University, he said, “This is
Qinghua University, the country’s greatest educational establishment.” At Peking
University, he said, “This school is rooted in the traditions of the May Fourth
Movement.” At Renmin University, he said, “This school has revolutionary traditions.”
In short, in the end he always said that presenting at [insert institution] makes him
extremely honored and humbled. When I heard him say “extremely honored and
humbled,” my tongue could not resist twisting. I coughed up a sentence of first-rate vulgar language. As a side note: no matter where I go, I first want to learn all of the local curse words. This is to guard myself from people cursing at me without my knowing. Even though I myself never curse, I am essentially an expert on curse words. For that man’s presentation, I made an exception to swear just once because I did not want to accept his flattery. To be more fair, flattering people’s schools is a part of having good manners. Contrastingly, putting together unrealistic statements about people’s ethnicity, culture, social status, or even gender, is just vicious abetment since the intent is to incite the spreading of mass hysteria in order to profit. If people say one sentence of flattery to me, I will curse because I know deep down that I too am unable to resist flattery.

On Loftiness

In the seventies, a river flooded and flushed away a public electricity pole. An educated youth\textsuperscript{20} went into the water to salvage it. The electricity pole was not recovered, and he drowned. The educated youth was honored, becoming a martyr for the revolution. The affair caused some perplexity amongst educated youths. Are our lives actually equal to the value of a log? These perplexed youths were criticized. To be honest, I was also amongst the perplexed, so this event remains fresh in my memory. As I see it, we must eat many calories worth of food in order to grow that old. Just based on that, our value is definitely greater than that of a log. Replacing us with a log is not constructive. However, everyone told me that state-owned property is where righteousness lies, so if you see it

\textsuperscript{20} The term “educated youth” refers to the 12 million urban youth who volunteered themselves or were coerced into moving down to the countryside between the years of 1969-1976, in order to be “reeducated” by the peasants and farm laborers. Ironically, many of them lost the opportunity to attend secondary school or college because of this compulsory “education” (Slavicek 2010).
being flushed away, without thinking twice, you should go in the water to salvage it.

Beyond just wood, even for a piece of straw, you still need to jump in the water. They also said that my views of whether or not something is worthwhile are retrogressive. It is fortunate that they did not accuse me of being reactionary.

Actually, when I was young, I was a typical, brash youth, and I was a good swimmer. If I had seen the flood flush away the log, I would have been the first one ready to jump into the water. If the water’s force were too great, I might also have drowned and become a martyr. I am not a duck, after all. This does not imply that I lack a noble temperament, just that I will not speak loftily. Twenty years after the fact, I have now read many books. From the wisdom of these books and my personal experiences, I have reached this conclusion: since the time of Confucius and Mencius until now, there have only been two types of people in our society. One writes life’s scripts, while the other acts them out. The ancient sages and the political cadre of the seventies fall in former category. The latter includes the common people of the ancient times and the educated youths of modern times. This is probably what is meant by such phrases as “wisdom on top and stupidity on bottom,” or “those who work their minds control others, and those who work their bodies are controlled by others.” In terms of temperament, I am only suitable for being an actor, not for writing the plays. But, if I notice that the scripts are

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21 These two phrases are common Chinese idioms which I have translated quite literally. The original Chinese is, respectively, 上智下愚 (shang zhi xia yu) and 劳心者治人劳力者治于人 (laoxinzhe zhi ren, laolizhe zhi yu ren).
poorly written, I cannot help but say something. I am then treated like a backward element. After so many years, I have gotten used to it.

In civilized societies, people are always making sacrifices. When an ego is sacrificed, a super-ego is formed. This type of sacrifice is lofty behavior. I have never refused to act in this type of play, but I also wish that the plot were more rational—not an unreasonable request. For example, when a flood is washing away public property, we young people are responsible for rescuing it. There is no question in that. However, we should also be able to ask what is being rescued. Retrieving a log is rational, but rescuing straw is excessive. This opinion actually speaks against loftiness. People today would agree that I should not be blamed. The script was really subpar. From this, you can deduce that loftiness is not always necessarily correct, and that the lowly position also makes sense sometimes. Realistically, if people who speak loftily were to encounter straw being washed away, they would not jump into the water. However, this does not hinder them from talking as though they would. In reality, the hypocrisy of some loftiness is publicly acknowledged, which is even worse than moral degeneration.

People have the right to reject false loftiness, just as they have the right to refuse to go in the water to rescue a piece of straw. If this logic is correct, it places higher demands on the people who construct or promote societal ethics. They cannot only focus on stirring up romantic emotions—they also need to leave leeway. In other words, it is not enough merely to promote loftiness and not promote reason. For example, Mencius

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22 “Backward element” was a political categorization more vague than “capitalist” or “rightist.” There were no specific means of becoming classified as such, and therefore no simple way to avoid being labeled as one. One could be deemed to be a backward element by not fulfilling a production quota, leading an extraordinary life, or simply by having a bad attitude (Law 2003).
invented an ethical principle, that said that being close to one’s parents and respecting one’s elders is an innate moral sense. Showing filial respect to one’s parents and being loyal and devoted to one’s country are virtuous causes. Therefore, subjects must give everything to their monarch. This is loftiness. Mencius’s essay is very moving. It makes me feel ashamed. If this gentleman had agreed to be a poet, he would be China’s George Byron. It is unfortunate, however, that he did not possess reason. After the subjects gave up everything, what would they live on? As another example, in the seventies, people thought that putting the common good above all else with no regard for self-interest was righteous. To move one step forward and die for the common good was, they said, better than taking a step backward for one’s own self interest. This does not make sense. If we all die, who would live to work? While such sensational ethical principles were circulating, publicly known hypocrisy was ubiquitous. If living life as recommended by this lofty rhetoric, one would die either from exhaustion or starvation. Only when the lofty rhetoric itself is hypocritical can this constitute a plausible life style. We know from history that the schools of thought of the Song and Ming dynasties had lofty doctrines. The more a school of thought flourishes, the more hypocritical people become. We know from our own experiences that the prevailing tone in the seventies was the loftiest. Educated youths would do anything in order to go to college or return to the city. There are some types of hypocrisy that we should not condemn, since they exist for survival. Today, there once again are people who vigorously promote the pursuit of loftiness. I do not know if they do this to promote rationality or to provoke sensational sentiment. If it is the latter, it is a recurrence of the old plague.
To contrast this, in England there has emerged a type of ethical thought not meant to rile up any emotion. Let me first discuss the circumstances of this contrast. Bertrand Russell criticizes utilitarian ethicists as such: While their morals appear to be base, they actually care about the well-being of their compatriots. Therefore, it is impossible to be fussy about the character of the ethicists themselves. Let’s say, on the other hand, that the integrity of these people promotes the opposing ethical principle. Our assessment of them should then also be the opposite. Even though their doctrines are lofty, they disregard the welfare of the majority of the people. In the seventies, this bias was actually rewarded by government officials: you could be promoted for speaking loftily even if the nature of your moral character was hard to define. I have always thought that when those with the temperament to stir up emotions speak loftily, they are wasting their own talents. They should try writing poetry instead. Based on what I’ve seen, the political cadres in the seventies all had the temperaments of poets. They should give the job of constructing an ethical society to those people with rationality. This would not be a bad thing for the common good or the individual!

**The Pastures of Holland and the Folks Back Home**

When I was on a trip to Holland, I saw a canal with a windmill next to it. There was a pasture under the windmill. I stood there gazing for a while, then was astonished. The pasture was in a low-lying area. It was lower than the canal’s water level. There were some dairy cows grazing on the cushy, green grass. At first glance, it looked like nothing more than an image from the countryside. Upon closer inspection, you discovered something else. The center of the grassland was bulging. All the way around it, there was a ring of shallow gutter. The whole area was undulating like corrugated iron. The lower
hollow area merged with the gutter. The shallow gutter led to a deep ditch. The deep
ditch then led to an irrigation channel. All of the irrigation channels went into the
windmill. This way, even if heavy rain fell, the pasture would not have standing water.
The water all flowed into the ditches and channels, then waited for the windmill to whip
it into the canal. Without this elaborate drainage system, the area could not have been a
pasture. It would just have been a marshland. Standing by the side of the canal, they eye
could only see an orderly pasture. Of course, this type of land did not come about
naturally. It was the result of utmost care in construction. It would be one thing if the
field had stemmed from the hands of modern engineers and technical staff. However, the
canal, windmill, and pasture were actually all the work of the seventeenth century Dutch
people. At the age of seventeen, I was sent to the countryside to be reeducated.23 I was
relocated to the south and the north, but I never saw this kind of land.

I was sent to Shandong, my ancestral homeland, for two years. I did all sorts of
work. This was between the spring and summer of ’74. The sky was never yet brightened
when I heard the sounds of whining and shouting in the loud speakers. This whining
noise woke us up every morning, reminding us that it was already the era of electricity. I
then tightened my waistband, grabbed my wheelbarrow, and set off to deliver manure to
the field. The wheelbarrow made it hard for me to remember that it was the era of
electricity. This proverb says it well, “Farming without manure is just fooling around.”
The people of my homeland all believe in this principle. The advantages of the

23 The term “reeducation” refers to the “Down to the Countryside Movement” that coerced 12 million urban youth into moving to the countryside between the years of 1969-1976, in order to be “reeducated” by the peasants and farm laborers. Ironically, many of them lost the opportunity to attend secondary school or college because of this compulsory “education” (Slavicek 2010).
wheelbarrow were that it could go on all sorts of awful roads and bypass all kinds of ruts
and rocks. The disadvantages were that it was very hard to control, and it was very easy
for the person and the wheelbarrow both to fall over. The people from my homeland
spared no effort in improving their skills in pushing a wheelbarrow. As a result, they
reached the level of acrobats. For example, there were some people who could push a
wheelbarrow over a doorstep. Others could push it up a flight of steps. But no matter how
high your skill level, it was still inevitable that you would suffer a setback that resulted in
a bloody nose and a swollen face. I now think that rather than painstakingly working to
improve their skill, it would make for sense for them to repair the roads. When I was
traveling through Europe, I discovered that the rural roads there are extremely nice. But
no one is concerned with this since it is not just the roads in the fields but also the roads
in the villages that are awful. You cannot tell if they are roads or potholes.

My homeland is in the mountains. When I was sent there to work, I brought a few
pairs of cloth shoes. All of them were destroyed from being worn while I transported
manure. All of the pairs still looked new, but the backs were split open. My ankle often
crammed up. Now when I dream about pushing manure up the mountain, I still get
cramps. What’s more, it was not even respectable manure. It was actually the dirt that
cushioned the pigpen. In the time of “in agriculture, learn from Dazhai,”24 we
exaggerated our output. Oftentimes, we scooped out the dirt just after it was laid down.

24 “In agriculture, learn from Dazhai” was a movement started by Mao Zedong in 1970.
In the 1960s, the agricultural area of Dazhai was able to keep up its production levels
while remaining self-sufficient, despite the flooding conditions. This area of eighty
homes set up their own system of terraced fields, a feat that impressed the Minister of
Agriculture, Liao Luyan, and spurred on this movement. However, this policy, which
included the goal of mechanizing agriculture within five years time, was unrealistic for
other areas, and many work teams struggled to match the model of Dazhai (Li 1995).
The pigs had not yet had enough time to empty their bowels into it. When I went into the pigpen, the pigs always looked at me, flabbergasted. If they could speak, they definitely would ask me, “Are you crazy?” Sometimes I got embarrassed and hit them. Having pigs think that you are an idiot is unbearable.

Honestly, there was no way I myself could push the manure up the mountain. The slope was too steep. Even climbing empty-handed made me pant. Actually, there were helpers on the side of the mountain. When a small wheelbarrow pushed to the top of an incline, the helpers harnessed it with ropes and pulled at its front. With the power of two people, the barrow could finally reach the top of the mountain. This saved my energy, but from another perspective, it was even more foolish. Here is the logic: the wheelbarrow with manure was one hundred kilograms. Adding me to the cycle gives another one hundred kilograms. In order to deliver one hundred kilograms of manure, throwing in my one hundred kilograms was already stupid. Now, we added yet another person. This made much more than one hundred kilograms. Even ignoring the fundamental forces, the non-fundamental forces were merely hauling up some dirt. Its fertilizer content was barely discernable. Luckily, those foolish pigs could not see all of this. If they could, I do not know what they would have thought. The dirt only contained trace amounts of their dung, and people were scrambling to haul it up mountains. If they knew this, they would become egomaniacs, even to the extent that they would pose the question of who should be eating whom.

In a lot of ways, the job of carting manure was not more valuable than that of moving water from low-lying land. We should give this kind of job to wind power instead of making the mistake of wasting the precious energy of living human organisms.
I have always thought that if a few Dutch people from the seventeenth century lived in my hometown, there would definitely be cable cars and ropeways all over the mountains. They were that type of people: engineering masters, economists, skilled craftsmen. As for the people from my hometown, they were all hardworking and simple people who lacked cleverness. It is hard to dispute that the lifestyle of the former type of person is more comfortable.

Now I will discuss which type of person I am. When I was in my hometown, compared to my countrymen, I was definitely even more hardworking and simple, and even less clever. That year, all I was thinking was, “I need to give off the appearance of someone who can endure bitterness, to make the poor villagers think that I am a good person and recommend that I go to college, in order to escape this living hell.” Just to clarify something, even though I had these base thoughts, I did not get my way. I managed to test into college by my own hard work. Since they did not recommend me for college, I can now speak the truth without this counting as taking advantage of them in addition to showing off my cleverness. The work in the village made people’s waists and legs hurt. The worst was pulling wheat. Pulling made my hands hurt incessantly. There simply was no difference between that and torture. The ten fingers are directly linked to the heart. Why on earth would you use them to do this sort of tormenting work? That year, I pretended to be enjoying the work, saying that my body was being tormented, but my mindset was getting better. It all went against my good conscience. To speak the truth, as my body got tormented, my thoughts got worse. They became more sinister, more devious. When I was sent to my hometown to get reeducated that year, I had a total of two choices: the simple choice was to endure the pain and in the future become a
venerable elder countryman. The crafty idea was to get out of the village without becoming a venerable elder myself, but instead singing their praises. Even though this praise would have been nice to hear, it would have been a bit hypocritical. Standing in front of the pasture in Holland, I discovered that there was yet another option. For a single person, this option does not exist, but for a group of people, it not only exists, but is also the correct path.

My Experience with The College Entrance Exam

In 1978, I took the college entrance exam. Prior to this, I only had a year of middle school, and that was twelve years before. It is unlikely that I had studied the material from middle school, and if I had, I had completely forgotten it. My family members advised me, saying, “You lack the basics. It would be best to try for the humanities so that you won’t fail the exams.” But I just did not listen. I went for the sciences and got in. My family members continued saying, “You have a good memory. Going for humanities would have been more certain.” My memory is quite good. After reading a thick book, I can remember its every detail, but I cannot remember almost any of the book’s names of people, places, or dates.

I am more interested in the practical aspect of things. If you talk about a situation, I can understand at once under what type of circumstance it took place. If you talk about a process, I also can understand at once based on what you said. If it starts one way, it will end the same. As well as understanding, I can also remember. As a result, math, physics, and chemistry are relatively easy for me to comprehend. The things that kill me the most are the questions about how to define things and how to categorize them into a system. Or, how do you name them? As everyone knows, names and definitions always
have to be memorized. That is what I’m afraid of. The humanities’ earliest ancestor, Master Confucius said, “Names must be correct.” I also know that names are important, but I think that fully understanding something is always more important. I am afraid that when a name is given, words will go along with it, and the thing will be completed. But, in the end it will not be clear exactly what kind of thing was completed. My cognitive level is low, so it fits that I should study science.

Of course, to study science, you also need to take a test that involves memorization. This almost killed me. I remember that year I prepared for one exam question. It was called the “ten political struggles.” It was an absolute nightmare. Every time there was a struggle, there was always a right side and a wrong side. The right side was easy to remember, but you had to memorize who the wrong side’s representative was. If you go and ask a Christian, “Who is your Savior?” He immediately could respond, “He is my Lord Jesus!” If I were like that, it would show that I am a good person. If you ask, “Please list the ten famous great devils,” Christians might not all be able to answer. What would good people be doing remembering devils’ names? I also could not remember the names of the wrong side’s representatives. This is because I did not want to make the same political mistakes as the wrong side. But, since I wanted to go to college, I had to remember these names. “The ten political struggles” was made even harder because every time there was a struggle, it was always divided into anti-leftist or anti-rightist. Needing to remember the struggles clearly one-by-one gave me a huge headache. To be honest, one day just before the test, I spent all day with my two hands raised, reading silently to my ten fingers. In the end, I could remember all of the lefts and rights. However, I concentrated so much on the lefts and rights of the memory questions
that I forgot my real left from right. After this, I could never get them straight. Years later when I was driving in America, my wife sat by my side saying, “Turn left, turn right.” I immediately thought of Chen Duxiu or Wang Ming. The wheel did not turn enough, and I drove the car into a fork in the road, damaging the bumper. Afterwards, she switched to pinching the ear of which side she meant, and the situation had a turn for the better. The bumper did not get damaged any further. What upsets me most is that this question did not appear on the test. If only one subject could drive me to this state, and if every exam was like this, they definitely could have tested me to the point where I forgot who I was. Reflecting on this now, it is lucky that I did not try to test into the humanities. It is lucky that I still know myself. If I had taken that test, either I would have either not gotten in, or it would have made a fool of me. Amongst my study buddies that year, the ones who aspired to study the humanities were exceptional in their ability to memorize things. There was a dear friend of mine who prepared his work as such: in the coldest months of the year, he wore a small cotton jacket, bundled his hands in both sleeves, and strolled while bowing his waist and chattering aloud. If you were to see him, you would think he looked like an old shaman woman. If you passed by his side and shouted to him, “Come here, I’ll test you!” he would draw out his arms from his sleeves. His sleeves contained college entrance exam review materials. He would pass these things to you. No matter which question you asked him, he would first tell you which page the answer was on and in which paragraph. Then, easy as pie, he would recite it by heart. When the

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25 Chen Duxiu (1878-1942) was a leader of China’s political revolution and one of the founders of the Communist Party. He was the Party’s first chairman, serving from 1921 to 1927 (“Ch'en Tu-hsiu (1879-1942)” 1998). Wang Ming (1904-1974), also known as Chen Shaoyu, was a leader of the “Internationalist” group in the Party, which was in conflict with Mao Zedong’s “nationalist” leanings. He was a major opponent of Mao in the 1930s (“Wang Ming” 1998).
sentence cut off, he would tell you if there was a comma or a period. Of course, every character that he memorized was correct, and even the punctuation would have no mistakes. In the end, this dear friend got into a famous humanities college with an exceptionally good score. I earnestly envy his memorization skills. As for myself, as soon as I start memorizing things, I become sleepy. The feeling is not that different from being poisoned by gas. Running outside and enduring the cold would help to prevent sleepiness, but once my clear snot begins running, it is like opening floodgates. It looks extremely unbecoming. I figured that chewing on math questions would go a bit better.

Speaking of math, however, that was the subject that I was least sure about, since I had never studied it. I had actually never studied any aspect of that subject. I was reliant on my blind pondering. Physics and chemistry were okay to think over, but in math you could not randomly guess. I assumed that I would definitely fail math. Who would have thought that I actually passed the test? I heard that a strange thing happened that year: in the Beijing district, even though a certain middle school’s graduating class had a math teacher, the students’ test scores were all round goose eggs. There was not even a score of 0.5. Further examination of the test papers showed that all of the answers were filled in. They were not blank papers. The students said that much of this class was incomprehensible. The teacher made them learn by rote memorization. Because of this, the scores should not all be zero. Afterwards it was discovered that their math teacher also took the college entrance exam, and his math score was also zero. People who heard about this all said, “The memorization skills of the students in this class are really amazing.” Not to brag, but if I were in that class, I would definitely not have gotten a zero. If teachers make me memorize things, I invariably am incapable of doing so. Since I
would not have been able to memorize what that math teacher told me to, I at least would have ended up with a couple of points.

**APPENDIX B: My Spiritual Home**

**My Views on Lao san jie**\(^{26}\)

I myself am a *lao san jie*. I was at an age for studying, but I was instead sent to Yunnan to dig pits. This was harmful to me, but more importantly, it even provoked concern in my parents. People have said that the parents of educated youth all had shorter lives because of their children. My family’s situation was no different. In being a parent, the overall goal is to shelter dependent children and to act on their behalf. During the Cultural Revolution, unable to shelter, they substituted concern. As a son, I felt a pang of guilt because of this. This was especially true after my father died. Of course, after a little thought, I know that it was not my fault, but one can hardly control his own feelings.

In the midst of the Down to the Countryside Movement, the fates of the twenty million educated youth were not all the same. Some people fared a little better, while others fared a little worse. When discussing the entirety of the *lao san jie* phenomenon, one must cast aside the feelings of individuals and have a *pingchang xin*.\(^ {27}\) The *lao san jie* themselves will lack a *pingchang xin*. This is understandable. Looking from a

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\(^{26}\) The term *lao san jie* (老三届), literally “old three classes,” refers to the generation of students who graduated from middle school or high school in the first three years of the Cultural Revolution, namely 1966, 1967, and 1968. Most of these students shared the similar experiences of joining the Red Guards and being relocated to the countryside to be reeducated. In recent years, there has been an increase in the attention paid to lao san jie in films and books, and many lao san jie now hold prominent government positions (Lin and Galikowski 1999).

\(^{27}\) *Pingchang xin* (平常心) is a term originating from Zen Buddhism that literally means “ordinary mind.” This concept implies that one’s mind is free from the fetters of delusional or enlightened fantasies and has been able to move past its own condition (Magrid 2001).
historical perspective, this affair was quite extraordinary. Why did it happen to us? It really was bad luck. Once cannot decide into which country he is born and in what era. Therefore, when all is said and done, this manifestation was still just Mother Nature messing with people.

The Down to the Countryside Movement was a large-scale calamity. To all of us lao san jie, it was an unexpected blow. Of course, there may have been some individuals who benefitted from the unexpected blow. For example, these exceptional experiences might have benefitted a writer’s works. But, you cannot obscure the nature of the whole occurrence because of this. We know that there are some blind people whose eyes are not damaged, but who have problems in their brain. If their skull were to get banged, their eyesight might be restored. Suppose such a blind person was supporting himself with a cane to climb up stairs when a vile teenager, in order to satisfy his mundane sense of humor, kicks him down. As a result, the blind person regains his sight. However, it was still excruciatingly painful for the blind person to roll down stairs. Obviously, the person who kicked the blind person down the stairs without question is a lowly bastard. We certainly cannot think of him as a good person just because the blind person regained his sight. This is simple logic. The main point is that bad things are bad things, and good things are good things. Let us stop here. The question of whether or not bad things can turn into good things is a different matter.

I have a teacher who was born handicapped. From birth, his palms faced downwards, and his soles faced upwards. No matter how hard he tried, he still could not change the posture of his hands and feet. He later went to America. He underwent a major operation in which he was disassembled and put back together again. With some
difficulty he learned to walk, but there were a lot of other medical repercussions. He candidly said to me that he had never had a *pingchang xin* when it came to his disability, “When I was in my mother’s womb, I did not do any bad things. How was I born like this?” Afterwards, a doctor told him that this illness had a one in six million chance of occurring. In other words, he had won a lottery with one in six million odds. My teacher thereupon recovered his *pingchang xin*. He said, “Mother Nature’s messing with people is merely that and nothing more. I accept the result of this lottery.” This gentleman achieved great things academically. One can impartially say that it had a little bit to do with his handicap: when other people could play, he was always working hard. But, I never heard him say, “Thank heavens! I have this sickness!” In short, in this situation, he truly had a *pingchang xin*. To mention something in passing: he never sat in a wheelchair, went on stage and performed a *jiangyong*.\(^{28}\) I think that this is good. The biggest respect to a handicapped person is not to see them as a handicapped person.

Honestly, as a *lao san jie*, even I have had times when I did not keep a *pingchang xin*. They were during my years digging pits in Yunnan. At the time, my mind was thinking, “Fuck! People older than us got to go to college, while we have to work the earth? It’s really not fair!” This was one way to think of it. This line of thought later evolved into, “People younger than us went directly to college, while we had to dig pits first before going to school. Really fucking unfair.” An alternative way to think of it was, “In the future, I want to be a writer. Maybe enduring some pain will have been a big help.

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\(^{28}\) *Jiangyong* (讲用), or “sharing experience in applying Mao’s teachings,” were meetings organized to spread the practice of using Mao’s teachings in one’s everyday life. At these meetings, a handpicked role model would tell a story of how he or she benefitted from applying Mao’s teachings to a day-to-day situation. The meetings were said to have originated with Lei Feng, who was promoted as a national hero for his good deeds based on his following of Mao’s teachings (Lu 2004).
Even Dostoyevsky was up in the gallows.” This line of thought later evolved into,
“Today’s young people have not endured pain, so they can’t be writers.” Mixing these
two lines of thought together would make people thoroughly confused. As of now, I’ve
published several books, but I still think that the latter way of thinking makes no sense.
Supposing that it does make sense, people who want to become authors should frequently
hang themselves. People who want to become historians should copy the Grand
Historian and castrate themselves. People who want to become musicians should buy a
jackhammer, bring it home and deafen themselves, so that they can be like Beethoven.
People who want to be painters should cut off their own ears, to pass themselves off as
Van Gogh. People who want to be anything need to get rid of everything and turn
themselves into sticks. This does not seem right. In short, any theory about lao san jie’s
superiority is not of a pingchang xin. Of course, I also oppose any statement about lao
san jie’s vileness. Lao san jie were at the prime of life. Our ears and our manhood were
fully intact. What makes us inferior to other people? In being a lao san jie, I also
achieved pingchang xin. All I lost was ten years of studies. What’s the big deal? I also
accept the result of this lottery. I am now only forty years old and can still work hard.

Now I’ll discuss the conjecture that bad things can become good things and good
things can become bad things. It came from a great person. In the mind of that great
person it was good, but in entering the minds of common people it did not maintain its
usefulness. Sometimes it messed with people up to the point where they did not know the
different between good and bad, aromatic and stinky. In my opinion, good is just good.

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29 Sima Qian (145-90 B.C.E.), or “The Grand Historian of China,” was in charge of all
imperial documents and archives. He, along with his father, compiled the first systemic
history of China (“Ssu-ma Ch’ien” 1998).
Bad is just bad. This logic is useful enough. People living in this world will run into some good things and some bad things. I can bear good things, and I can also bear bad things. In this magnanimous way, being an ordinary person is actually not bad.

This essay is a response to Mr. Peng Siqing’s essay in the fourth volume of the journal *Study of China’s Youth*. Honestly, I am not happy with Mr. Peng’s essay. At first, it was because he said bad things about lao san jie. In my experience, the lao san jie phenomenon and the lao san jie complex were caused by our crop of people not having a pingchang xin. Since people are not machines, they occasionally lose their balance. This should be forgivable. However, upon closer examination, one finds that the Cultural Revolution happened almost twenty years ago. People cannot always not have a pingchang xin. The conceited speech of some lao san jie scholars makes me sick when I see it. Let me first make this point: I agree with all of Mr. Peng’s examples of lao san jie being disgusting.

Now, let me discuss my unhappiness with Mr. Peng. Mr. Peng’s opinion of lao san jie is negative. I do not want to dispute this. What I want to dispute is his reasoning. He says that lao san jie had an exceptional misfortune, so they are exceptional people: exceptional people who are not smart. This is a really terrible viewpoint. On the other hand, saying that these exceptional people are especially good is equally awful. This theory appears to belong to science, but it actually belongs to ethics. It is a source for all fascists and paranoia. When my teacher was born, the soles of his feet faced upwards, but if we talk about his wisdom instead of his body, we could not say that he is exceptional. The misfortune of lao san jie is special, but I still see them as ordinary people. One should see black people, minorities, and women like this as well. Bertrand Russell once
said that real ethical doctrines treat all people the same. I think that this doctrine argues that when you speak to another person, you should first think of him as an ordinary person, then discuss his good, bad, right or wrong. This is not just respectful to him; it is respectful to “that person.” In a deeper sense, it is more like respecting yourself. After all, all people fit into the same species. We should not use a person’s exceptionality to understand his accomplishments, faults, virtues, and bad habits. The saying, “you are special” should just be saved for loved ones. If not, then it is fulsome.

**Su Dongpo and Dongpo Pork**

My father is a logic professor. My older brother has a Ph.D. in logic. I am also interested in logic. This interest developed from my interest in logicians. In the beginning of this century, Bertrand Russell discovered the paradox that is named after him. He immediately wrote a letter to tell Sir James George Frazer. He mentioned in passing that the discovery of this paradox uncovered a hole in the system Frazer had spent half of his life developing. Frazer considered this for a while, wrote back and said, “If I knew what the right conclusion was, that would be nice.” I think Frazer was very funny. If he had a daughter, I would definitely want to marry her to make him my father-in-law. Actually, even if Frazer had had a daughter, it would be much more appropriate for her to be my grandmother rather than my wife. That way, Frazer would not be my father-in-law, but my great-grandfather. When I was studying in America, I ran into an analogous situation.

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30 Su Dongpo (苏东坡), also known as Su Shi (1037-1101) was a poet, calligrapher, painter, and politician during the Song Dynasty. He had a witty sense of humor and was exiled twice for his disrespect towards the ruling party (Ebrey 1999). He is said to have especially enjoyed eating pork, so the dish Su Dongpo pork has been named in his honor. It is a moist, fatty cut of pork belly, best prepared when soaked in wine, soy sauce and ginger (Leong 2006).
Once in class, there was a chubby girl who was dozing off when the teacher suddenly called on her. Pitifully, she did not hear the question, so how could she answer? In America, not only teachers can ask students questions—students can ask teachers questions as well. If a teacher is asked a question and does not know the answer, he would just say, “That is a good question.” He would not answer the question and instead continue to teach class. My classmate was a bit bewildered and slowly said, “That is a good question.” This practically made everyone’s stomachs burst with laughter. After class, I sized her up for a good part of the day and concluded that she was too fat and had body odor. This finally dispelled any impure intentions I had toward her, even though she was as funny as Frazer. To get back to my point, another interesting logician is Wittgenstein. Bertrand Russell invited him to go to England to discuss the publication of a book. Wittgenstein could not pay the travel fare and was not willing to borrow from Russell. Russell ended up buying some of the old furniture that Wittgenstein had in Cambridge. I think that the two of them are both very funny. Encouraged by this meager sense of humor, I studied mathematical logic. When I first started, it was interesting, but later on, I was unable to grasp the more difficult concepts.

I also used to be interested in math. This interest stemmed from my interest in mathematical equations. People have known for a while now that the quadratic equation has a formulaic solution, but what about equations for things higher than quadratic? Before the nineteenth century, people did not know. In the seventeenth century, there was an Italian mathematician and professor who gained some insight into the method of solving cubic equations. One afternoon, it was raining, and he was in his classroom presenting a lesson to his students about this discovery. He suddenly very loudly heard,
“Kaboom!” Lightning had struck the ground. It skimmed the classroom wall and struck the garden. Green light shone through the narrow stone shutters. The stone glowed deathly pale. The professor covered his heart with his hand, turned to his students and said, “Gentlemen, we have touched upon God’s secret.” When I read this story, I almost laughed until my intestines burst. What, the cubic equation is worthy of thunder? The professor must have thought God was petty. I studied math for some time. After a while, I lost interest and gave it up. As for all of these liberal arts like physics and chemistry, I was very interested in them at first, but later lost interest. I do not necessarily remember much anymore.

In short, I am interested in how knowledge is discovered and in the researchers themselves, but I am not interested in the knowledge itself. I approached all of my studies as such, but my grades were always perfect. There was only one subject that seemed to be different: computer programming. When I should have been studying, I threaded tape through the drive. It was utterly boring. This subject does not have any anecdotes about famous people, besides the fact that the founder of the science, Mr. Turing, was gay and killed himself after being exposed. Since I am not gay and do not want to kill myself, I was not interested in computer programming, so all of my grades were barely passing. However, I often use it now, so I bought books to read in order to keep up with the latest developments and avoid making a fool of myself. I compile my own software for writing my essays. Since I am unaccustomed to software that other people have compiled, I have not adjusted to them, nor do I trust them. Because of this small reason, I have accomplished a fair amount in compiling computer programs. From this you can see that
having interest in researching a subject and having interest in the subject itself can be two completely different things.

This essay was supposed to be about my own growth, but another person’s story keeps coming to mind, so I decided to write about it as well. In the middle of the Cultural Revolution, my older brother went to visit a high school classmate whom he had not seen for years. Upon entering the house, my brother was stunned. An entire wall of the house was covered in a giant world map. His classmate was wearing a blue cloth robe and on his feet were black cloth shoes. He was holding a red and blue pencil in his hand. He was pacing across the room and turned a blind eye to my brother. According to my brother, at the time his classmate parted his hair down the middle. If he were not holding the red and blue pen, but instead an umbrella, then he would have looked like a carbon copy of that painting of the Great Leader going to Anyuan.31 My older brother patiently waited for a while, and finally asked quietly, “May I ask...What are you doing?” He paid no attention to my brother, turned around twice, placed his hand on his mouth, and said, “Shhh, I was thinking about the a strategy for world revolution.” My brother then went home and told me about it with a straight face. The two of us burst out laughing. We laughed until our stomachs almost exploded.

Russell and Frazer researched logic and were interested in logic itself. They wanted to solve problems in the sphere of logic, just as Chairman Mao was interested in the revolution itself when he devoted himself to the revolutionary cause. He wanted to fix

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31 This oil painting, created by Lin Chunhua in 1921, was deemed to be a model for revolutionary art in 1967. Following this label, it was reprinted in the People’s Daily, and citizens hosted parades in its honor. By 1968, it had been institutionalized as model art and could be found on badges, posters, and mirrors. It is estimated that 900 million copies circulated during the Cultural Revolution (King et al. 2010).
the problems of Chinese society. In the process of solving these problems, these pioneers naturally accomplished great things that interested people. If you remove interest in the problem itself and only pursue the accomplishments, you would seem to be straying from the correct path. Because of this, mature people are interested in the things that famous people are interested in and moreover will succeed in those respects. They are not merely interested in the famous people.

In ancient times, there was a scholar who called himself a worshipper of Su Dongpo. Someone asked him, “Do you like Su Dongpo’s verse, or do you like his calligraphy?” The scholar responded, “Neither. I like to eat Dongpo pork.” Dongpo pork is stewed to be very tender and despite the fat, it is not too oily. It is really very tasty. But Dongpo pork is really not enough justification for worshipping Su Dongpo.

Appreciation of the Classics

There was an American diplomat who lived in Moscow for ten years in the twenties and thirties. In his memoir, he wrote that he saw Swan Lake three hundred times. Even though Swan Lake is indisputably one of ballet’s classics, seeing it three hundred times is still excessive. But, as a diplomat, there are some social niceties that you cannot push away, so he had to watch this performance over and over again. By the end, seeing it was hard to endure. I would guess that after seeing Swan Lake only ten times, this American heard the elegant music of Tchaikovsky and saw the elegant performances of the former Soviet Union’s artists. He genuinely appreciated it, and from time to time, warmly applauded. After seeing it one hundred times, his impressions were not the same. At this point, he just heard that some instruments were making sounds and saw that some people were on stage running around. He also became imbecilic. After seeing it two
hundred times, his impressions changed again. As soon as the music started and the curtains were pulled open, a white void formed before his eyes. The show hypnotized him. At this point, his eyes stared blankly; a dull smirk hung on his face. He looked like a hibernating crocodile. His slackening muscles could no longer support his jaw, his mouth fell open, and drip after drip of saliva tumbled from the corner of his mouth, falling on his knees like little vessels landing on a beach. He acted just as foolishly and drunkenly straight until the performance was over. When the performers’ curtain calls had finished and there were people on stage pulling down the electric switches, his eyes finally readjusted. At this time, he hurriedly woke himself up with a big slap and returned home. Later on, when he received transfer orders to leave the Soviet Union, he said as if lightening a heavy load, “This is fortuitous. I may not have to see Swan Lake again.”

As you know, the aforementioned reactions of the diplomat watching Swan Lake were all my conjectures. Realistically, he would not have written about his flowing saliva in his memoirs. But I think that in repeatedly appreciating a work of art, you will run into these three stages. In the first stage, you hear music and you see dance. Simply put, you are enjoying art. In the second stage, you hear sounds and see objects moving about. You perceive a familiar physical course of events. In the third stage, you have ascended to a philosophical level. In the end, you realize that ballet and the world are one and the same. It is merely the material form of existence. From art to science to philosophy: this is the process of returning to a natural state. Ordinary people’s appreciation always ends at the first stage, but some people can reach the second stage. For example, in the movie
Farewell My Concubine, the theatre aficionado, played by Ge You\textsuperscript{32} criticized an actor as such, “When other people play the king, he always walks six steps when he goes on stage. Why are you walking four steps?” In a laboratory, a physicist would also confusedly ask an object, “When other things fall in a vacuum, the acceleration is always g. Why are you falling at two g’s?” In the laboratory, physical processes must be repeatable. Otherwise, they do not constitute science. So, there cannot be an object that falls at two g’s. Classic artistic works also need to be repeatable. For example, the content of Swan Lake cannot be changed. This is to make sure that future people appreciate the best things that their predecessors created. It can be performed over and over again only if following the original way.

Classic works are good, but you cannot watch them too many times. If you watch them too many times, you cannot appreciate the art. For example, Dream of the Red Chamber\textsuperscript{33} states about tea-drinking, “One cup to taste, two cups to quench thirst, three cups to water a donkey.” Of course, whether it be to taste or to water a donkey, it is still just a form of material existence. In this respect, there is no difference in the end.

In the Cultural Revolution, we could only watch the Eight Model Plays.\textsuperscript{34} If you were to turn on the radio, you only found the Eight Model Plays, and if you were to

\textsuperscript{32} Ge You (b. 1957) is a prominent Chinese film star, who is best known for his performance in To Live (Coonan 2010). In Farewell My Concubine, his character, Yuan Shiqing is a theater aficionado who takes an interest in Dieyi, the effeminate Beijing opera star.

\textsuperscript{33} Dream of the Red Chamber, by Cao Xueqin (1718-1763) and completed by Gao E, tells the story of a noble Chinese family living in the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} centuries (Cao, 1978).

\textsuperscript{34} The Eight Model Plays or Eight Model Works were the most popular of the less than twenty-four officially sanctioned performances during the Cultural Revolution. They were regulated by Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong’s wife. Five of the works were operas, two were ballets, and one was a symphonic suite. All of these works were attempts at political propaganda, which glorified the Red Army, peasants, and workers (Slavicek 2010).
watch a movie, it was also inevitably an Eight Model Play. When I lived in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, upon hearing just one sound from the music in the loud speaker, be it Granny Sha or Li Tiemei, we opened our mouths wide to sing. If it were Wu Qinghua or Hong Changqing,\(^{35}\) we lifted our legs and danced. The water buffalo on the side of the road at the edge of the field saw us making these movements and felt endangered. They even hurriedly lifted their tails to run away. If someone said that I did not sing or dance well enough, it was hard for me to accept. This was our life. In other words, it was my form of existence. I was merely shouting sounds and jumping high—what was there to be good or not? To give an example, when the water buffalo that plowed the fields got angry and ran away quickly, it always raised its tail like a little flag. From a person’s perspective, this was a bit indecent, but it was the only way he knew how to run. Whenever I was at the edge of the field, I exercised my bones and muscles. I did a backwards kick. This was the only way I knew how to kick. I did not know other kicking styles. But when I kicked as such, people criticized me: Would I rather kick the bucket? Reflecting on this situation, I think that my appreciation for the Eight Model Plays reached the third level a while ago. We appreciated them from the high level of philosophy, but what was the artistic success of these plays? I indeed do not know. What

\(^{35}\) Granny Sha is a character from the Eight Model Play, \textit{Shajiabang}. She is a dutiful member of a village who supports the Chinese Army as they fight the Japanese. Li Tiemei is a character from the Eight Model Play, \textit{The Red Lantern}. She is a seventeen-year old girl who helps her father and grandmother in supporting the revolutionary cause. Upon their death, she goes out on her own to support the revolution (Roberts 2010). Wu Qinghua and Hong Changqing are both characters from \textit{The Red Detachment of Women}, a ballet and opera included in the Eight Model Works. Wu Qinghua is a slave girl who escapes from the evil tyrant to join the Women’s Company of the Communist cause. Hong Changqing is the male Party representative of the Women’s Company. He is eventually killed in his efforts to overthrow the tyrant, and Wu Qinghua takes his place (Roberts 2010).
was the artistic level of the Moscow singing and dancing group that performed *Swan Lake*? That American diplomat also does not know. If you were to ask him that question, he would just foolishly chuckle. If you said it was good, he would also say it was good. If you said it was bad, he would also say it was bad.

During the golden age of our lives, we did not appreciate other things. We just saw eight plays. Today, there are people who say that those plays are all great works and that they should be included on the lists of classics to be passed down through the ages. This comforted me. As I mentioned before, I do not know how good these plays are at all. Whatever you say, I would believe, but I am also a little suspicious. How is it that everything I encounter is a classic? Take *Red Detachment of Women* for example. The composer, Mr. Du Mingxin is clearly outstanding, but he is not Tchaikovsky, after all. I do not understand ballet or Beijing opera, but I do understand probability. In one lifetime, the chances of coming across eight plays in which two are ballets and each of them is a classic should make anyone suspicious. According to my life’s experiences, if you come across a surprising conjecture that is excessively favorable to yourself, it is definitely not accurate. You are propagating a lie to yourself. Of course, if you want to say that they are all classics, I am in no place to object. I lost my ability to judge them a while ago.

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*Red Detachment of Women* is one of the Eight Model Works, both in ballet and opera form. It takes place during the Second Revolutionary War (1927-1937). It documents the struggles of a Women’s Company of the Communist Party in their efforts to overthrow the tyrant. As their representative is killed in this struggle, an ex-slave girl is able to take his place, becoming a glorified leader because of her fierce devotion to the cause (Roberts 2010).
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