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**Wang Meng and Contemporary Chinese Literature:  
the Vicissitudes of a Committed Writer**

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Submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts  
Department of East Asian Studies  
University of Durham  
1998



- 2 NOV 1999

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M.A. 1998

**Wang Meng and Contemporary Chinese Literature:  
The Vicissitudes of a Committed Writer**

**Abstract**

This thesis examines the way Wang Meng has developed as a writer from the 1950s to the 1990s in the context of New China's political and literary background. It looks at the compromises he was forced to make between his political beliefs in the Communist Party and his chosen role as a professional writer. After his disastrous early foray into what was deemed to be unacceptable political criticism with *The Young Newcomer in the Organisation Department* in the 1950s, when the opportunity came to start publishing again in the late 1970s he was boldly innovative in style, helping to transform New Period literature, but conservative in content, sticking to politically acceptable topics. It was only with *Hard Porridge* in 1989 that he ventured again, and very successfully, into political comment. There is no outstanding leading writer in contemporary China, but Wang Meng is a leading contender for the title.

## **DECLARATION**

No Material contained in this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree in this or any other university.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

WMWJ      Wang Meng Wenji

GCR        Great Cultural Revolution

## **ROMANISATION**

Pinyin romanisation is used throughout except where citing other authors or book titles

## **TITLES OF WORKS**

Titles of novels, short stories and articles are given in italics. On first occurrence both a pinyin and English version are given, subsequently the English version only is used. A complete list of the Wang Meng works cited appears in the first section of the bibliography.

## **Acknowledgments**

I should like to express my deep gratitude to my family for their encouragement and support.

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## Introduction

Literature in Modern China has closely reflected developments in Chinese society. It has never been a pure art: it has always had very close relationship with politics. Never has this been more true than in contemporary China, the period from 1949 to the present.

Wang Meng as a writer has experienced every developmental period of contemporary literature, from the 1950s to the 1990s. He has been a professional writer with very strong political affiliations. When he was a teenager, his dream was to become a professional revolutionary. When he was in his twenties he was labeled a “big rightist” because of a short story. For the following twenty years he endured enforced silence, including five years of physical labour and sixteen years exile in Xinjiang. When he was fifty-two he was appointed Minister of Culture. His works regularly shocked the country, from the 1950s *The Young Newcomer in the Organisation Department* to the “stream of consciousness” works of the 1980s and the short story *Hard Porridge* in the 1990s.

Wang Meng is one of the best examples in contemporary Chinese literature of how writers stand between literature and politics. He is also a pioneer in seeking ways to modernize the form of literature by drawing on Western literary theories. However, in his political beliefs he has remained largely conservative, although he left his post as Minister of Culture in 1989.



This study uses the works of Wang Meng which the author believes are most representative as the basis for an analysis of their contribution to development of contemporary Chinese literature and an evaluation of the role of Wang Meng. He has never become a dissident political figure, unlike Liu Binyan, his fellow ‘rightist’ of the 1950s. Yet his devotion to the development of style has made him a literary dissident, a kindred spirit of the “Obscure” (menglong) poets. Western critics like Leo Oufan Lee<sup>1</sup> and Robert Wagner<sup>2</sup> have been rather grudging to Wang Meng. We attempt here to look at how far his claim to be contemporary China’s leading writer can be sustained.

This study begins with a chapter outlining the developments in literary theory over the three periods from 1949 to the present. The second chapter considers his works in the 1950s and his famous early story *The Young Newcomer in the Organisation Department*. The third to sixth chapters discuss New Period works from the late 1970s to the 1990s according to type (stream of consciousness, root-searching, etc.) and are broadly chronological. The seventh chapter attempts to analyse the main features of his stylistic development and offer an evaluation of his contribution in this area. Finally in the conclusion a view is offered on his overall contribution to contemporary Chinese literature.

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. in Lee, “The Politics of Technique: Perspectives of Literary Dissidence in Contemporary Chinese Fiction”

<sup>2</sup> see Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade: Studies in Contemporary Chinese Prose*

# **Chapter I: The Process of Development of Contemporary Chinese Literature**

## **1.1 The Seventeen Years' Literature**

Contemporary Chinese literature can be divided into three periods, according to the prevailing political and social situation. Firstly, from 1949 to 1965, was the initial stage of socialist transformation, called “Shi qi nian wenxue” (Seventeen Years literature), a period which was under the influence of leftist tendencies. The main content of literature at that time was praise for the new socialist society, the new government and the victories in the Anti-Japanese War and the civil war. Secondly, from 1966 to 1976, there was total chaos in the literary world, just like other fields, during the Great Cultural Revolution. In this period ultra-leftists controlled the literary and artistic worlds, and media and publishing organisations; most works became “poisonous weeds”, including the Eastern and the Western literary heritage, modern Chinese literature from the New Culture Movement and new works published after Liberation. The third, from 1976 until the present time, it is called “Xinshiqi wenxue” (New period literature). During this period literature started developing according to its own principles and has made considerable progress. Each period has differed greatly from the others but has also been closely connected with it, with great fluctuations.

During the Seventeen Years literature (1949-1965), contemporary literature oscillated between the many erroneous assumptions of both rightists and leftists. The literature of

this period was very closely connected with the 1930s Zuoyi wenxue (Left-wing literature) and the 1940s Jiefangqu wenxue (Liberated area literature), which maintained that literature and art should serve revolution and politics. The Seventeen Years literature is typified as “praise literature” (ouge wenxue). The critic Liu Zaifu, quoting Lu Xun’s analysis, pointed out that revolutionary literature appeared as ‘angry literature’ (fennu wenxue) before the revolution. After the angry literature had been produced, revolution would soon come, and then, after the revolution had succeeded, praise literature must be produced.<sup>3</sup> That actually happened after liberation in 1949, when praise literature emerged as the major trend obliterating all other types of literary work. “That kind of historical stimulus caused contemporary writers to exhibit a kind of collective hysteria (集体性亢奋).”<sup>4</sup> Writers and critics were excited in the same way as the vast majority of the people, including the highest leadership of the Party. They were all immersed in a festival atmosphere, and could not have clear, objective judgements of the contemporary social situation. The “collective hysteria” resulted in people blindly setting off down wrong paths. Praise literature produced during the Seventeen Years continued to treat literature as a weapon of political struggle and a tool of political control and propaganda. As a result of it, the Seventeen Years literature underwent one criticism movement after another.

### **Literary Criticism Movements**

The main campaigns in the literary area began with criticism of the film *Wu Xun zhuan* (Wu Xun Biography) in May 1951. People praised the film after it was first shown in 1950, but Chairman Mao Zedong’s comment in *Renmin Ribao* (People’s Daily)

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<sup>3</sup> Cui Xilu, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue yanjiu gailun*, p. 10.

criticised the film as “fanatically providing propaganda for feudal culture”.<sup>5</sup> He criticised the many people who had praised the film, which he saw as a sign that the “reactionary bourgeois thought has invaded the battling Communist Party”.<sup>6</sup> Following such comments a national criticism movement started. A discussion of an ordinary film developed into a political movement.

The second criticism movement was that directed at *Hong Lou Meng yanjiu* (Research on the Dream of the Red Chamber) in 1954, after two young writers published some critical essays on the *Hong Lou Meng* expert Yu Pingbo’s views. Mao Zedong launched a movement to criticise bourgeois thought. Mao pointed out: “This is the first serious attack for more than thirty years on the erroneous views of a so-called expert on *Hong Lou Meng*”,<sup>7</sup> “This struggle to oppose the bourgeois idealism of the Hu Shi school, which has been poisoning young people for more than 30 years in the field of classical literature, may perhaps be developed.”<sup>8</sup> As a result the nation-wide criticism movement spread from October 1954.

The third campaign was the huge scale movement of 1955 to criticise Hu Feng’s literary thought. It soon developed into a political battle, attacking the “Hu Feng counterrevolutionary group” (胡风反革命集团). The political criticism movement involved many writers who supported Hu Feng’s literary ideas and some writers who

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> 狂热地宣传封建文化, Hong Zicheng & Li Ping (eds.), *Zhongguo wenxue—dangdai bufen*, p. 7

<sup>6</sup> 资产阶级的反动思想侵入了战斗的共产党, Hong Zicheng & Li Ping (eds.), *Zhongguo wenxue—dangdai bufen*, p. 8

<sup>7</sup> 这是三十多年以来向所谓红楼梦研究权威作家的错误观点的第一次认真的开火。Zhu Zhai (ed.), *Zhonggou dangdai wenxue sichaoshi*, p. 160

<sup>8</sup> 这个反对在古典文学领域毒害青年三十余年的胡适派资产阶级唯心论的斗争, 也许可以展开起来了。 *ibid*

had connections with him, directly involving more than two thousand one hundred people. 92 people were put in prison, with 78 people treated as members of the “Hu Feng counterrevolutionary group”. Hu Feng himself was sentenced 14 years in prison in 1965, changed to life in 1969. This became the biggest post-Liberation “counter-revolutionary case”.<sup>9</sup>

Intellectuals, especially writers, were all intimidated by this. After these political criticism movements, not many people dared to express any divergent opinions, and the atmosphere became very tense. In order to know what people were really thinking, on the 2nd of May 1956 Chairman Mao Zedong raised the new “Two hundreds” policy of “Let a hundred flowers bloom, Let a hundred schools contend”. Just one year after the inauguration of the “Two hundreds” campaign the whole nation was engulfed by the Anti-rightist movement, in which hundreds of thousands people, especially intellectuals, became the targets of criticism. The “Two hundreds” policy has been regarded as both a genuine attempt to encourage criticism and as a cynical ploy to expose opponents, but either way it had the effect of identifying a group of critics and potential critics which could later be labelled as rightists. However, as a result of the “Two hundreds” policy, from 1956 to the first half of 1957, there was a brief golden period for contemporary literature. During the short period when the policy was put into practice, doctrinaire restrictions were overcome, and a new literary atmosphere emerged. Writers produced lively ideas in substantial quantities and dared to break through into hitherto forbidden areas. They raised the slogan “intervene in life” (ganyu shenghuo), and some works appeared which exposed the shortcomings of the

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<sup>9</sup> Chen Qiguang (ed.), *Zhonggou dangdai wenxueshi*, p. 18

administrative system and its corrupt practices. These included Liu Binyan's works *Zai qiaoliang gongdishang* (On the Bridge Site) and *Benbao neibu xiaoxi* (The Newspaper's Internal News), Wang Meng's work *Zuzhibu xinlai de nianqingren* (The Young Newcomer in the Organisation Department). There were also academic essays discussing what kind of topics were proper subjects for writers, including realism, human feelings and human nature, etc. These essays included Qin Zhaoyang's *Xianshizhuyi—guankuo de daolu* (Realism— A Wide Road) and Ba Ren's (Wang Renshu) *Lun Renqing* (On Human Feelings); these works and writers were all attacked as targets of criticism movements. These works pointed out problems which existed in the new socialist China and criticised bureaucracy, subjectivism and doctrinaire approaches.

The fourth campaign was the “Anti-rightist” struggle (*fanyou douzheng*) from June 1957, when the literary world was the main focus of the movement. This ended the brief period when contemporary literature flourished in the wake of the “Two hundreds” policy. Many writers and critics were denounced as rightists including well-known established figures like Ding Ling, Ai Qing, Feng Xuefeng and Xiao Qian, and many younger generation writers, such as Wang Meng, Liu Binyan, Deng Youmei and Gao Xiaosheng. This campaign seriously affected literature and art, strengthened even further the links between literature and politics, and encouraged the development of leftist trends.

The fifth campaign was the criticism of “capitalist authorities” (资产阶级权威) and “revisionist theories of human nature and humanitarianism”

(修正主义的人性论和人道主义) from 1958 to 1960. Hu Feng's theories were brought out and criticised once again, and other writers such as Ba Ren, with his essay *Lun Renqing* (On Human Feelings) and Wang Shuming, with his article *Lun Renqing Yu Renxing* (On Human Feelings and Human Nature),<sup>10</sup> were accused of preaching the “bourgeois theory of human nature”. The questions raised were political ones, far removed from the realm of academic literary theory where they originated.

In 1963, there was a wide scale criticism campaign covering the areas of philosophy, economics, history and literature and art. This movement was the forerunner to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. In the literature and art field it focused on the opera *Hai Rui Baguan* (Hai Rui Dismissed from Office) and a film version of Mao Dun's story *Lin Jia Puzi* (The Lin Family's Shop) and a number of other literary works.

On each occasion, literary criticism became the fuse which set off a major political movement, damaging literature and art itself, and involving many writers and critics. Literature lost its original connotation, it became merely a “weapon” in successive political struggles. This was a disaster for contemporary literature, as movements raised the political temperature higher and higher culminating in the ten years of literature of the Great Cultural Revolution. The Seventeen Years' literature and the ten years literature of the GCR were closely related in the sense that they were both products of guided writing theories.

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<sup>10</sup> Cui Xilu, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue yanjiu gilun*, p. 78



### Three National Literature and Art Congresses

After New China was founded in 1949, the initial stage of socialism was inaugurated by the Chinese Communist Party, ushering in tremendous changes in the political atmosphere and state system. These brought also rapid changes in people's political, economic, and cultural lives. Writers could be divided into two groups: one included those writers who had previously lived in KMT controlled cities, and the other was composed of those writers who had lived in the CCP base area in Yan'an. All of them faced a new life which they had never experienced before of putting into practice the new theories of communism and socialism, which they only knew from books. After the tremendous excitement following liberation, they needed to undergo a process of reorientation to understand what was happening in the country. A young and new generation of writers was growing up but they were in the process of learning. In this initial period there were not many works, and the quality of them was not very good. There appeared some works depicting the new lives of workers, peasants and soldiers. These reflected current political movements and central government efforts, such as the suppression of counterrevolutionaries, the "Three anti and Five anti campaigns" (san fan wu fan), the new Marriage Law, etc. Most works attempted to explain details of government or Party policy, or were war hero and heroine stories; all of them had very strong political bias, obvious propaganda purposes and formulaic structures. For example Zhao Shuli's *Dengji* (Registration) is a story encourage compliance with the Marriage Law.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hong Zicheng & Li Ping (ed.), *Zhongguo wenxue—dangdai bufen*, p. 110-115.

The three National Literary Congresses stressed the same concepts and writing principles. The literary world was treated as a very important adjunct of political power. Chairman Mao Zedong, Premier Minister Zhou Enlai, General Zhu De and other leading figures in the Party organised and attended each of the three national literary congresses, and gave speeches at each one. Thus the literary world was never just simply considered as confined to the sphere of art or culture.<sup>12</sup>

From 2nd July to the 19th July 1949, the First National Literature and Art Workers' Congress was convened in Beijing. Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De and others of the highest Party leaders went to the congress and gave guiding speeches. The Congress' guiding principle was based on the spirit of Mao Zedong's *Speeches at the Yan'an Forum of Literature and Art*,<sup>13</sup> that literature and art should serve politics and serve the worker, the peasant and the soldier. The Congress did not change, but rather confirmed, the relationship between literature and art on the one hand and politics on the other, and drew up guidelines for creating literary works. It reaffirmed the political control methods applied to the original "liberation area" literature.<sup>14</sup> However, it rejected the spirit of modern literature exemplified in the New Culture Movement, which advocated a modern literature and art based on artistic freedom, a critical attitude towards society and inspiration from the world literary heritage, especially modern Western thought and creative methods. The Congress stressed "uniting together with workers, peasants and soldiers" (团结工农兵) and "the literary and art world widely

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<sup>12</sup> Zhu Zhai (ed.), *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue sichaoshi*, p. 12-27, 104-116, 449-455.

<sup>13</sup> See Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 3, p. 69-97

<sup>14</sup> 'Jiefangqu' - Liberated area, such as Yan'an area in Shana'xi Province controlled by the CCP in the 1930s to the 1940s; literature of that period from those areas is called Jiefangqu Wenxue.

uniting together” (文艺界广泛的团结起来).<sup>15</sup> After the Congress, there were some discussions on whether writers could write about the petty bourgeoisie class or not, whether they could be the main characters of works or not and on the relationship between literature and politics. These discussions were carried out very conscientiously, in the belief that theoretical discussions might produce the correct answer. In practice such works became the target of criticism later on. The film *Wu Xun Zhuan* is one famous example.

The Second National Literature and Art Workers' Congress was convened in Beijing from the 23rd September to the 6th October 1953. Again Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De chaired the meetings in person. The Second Congress stressed socialist realism as the highest norm for literary composition and criticism, and raised the issue of how to portray the typical image of the new hero. The Congress pointed out the problems resulting from using crude bureaucratic methods and the limitations this placed on literary and artistic creation, and the fact that many literary works were formulaic and over-generalised. The criticism of formulism and over-generalisation achieved very little under the political situation prevailing at the time.<sup>16</sup>

From May 1957 the scope of the anti-Rightist movement was greatly extended, until by October 1957 there were 550,000 people labelled as rightist throughout the whole country. These including people working in academic research, science, literature, art and many other fields. The government adopted the method of using political movements and public struggles to criticise writers who had divergent opinions; this

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<sup>15</sup> Zhu Zhai (ed.), *Zhonggou dangdai wenxue sichaoshi*, p. 12-27

greatly inhibited creative forces, frustrated initiatives in literary production and research, seriously reduced the number creative works, and set back the development of contemporary literature. From 1959 to 1964, the Party arranged to take off the “rightist hats” from more than 300,000 people, but it did not rehabilitate them completely.<sup>17</sup>

In 1958 the “Great Leap Forward” (Da yuejin) movement was promoted, leading to the appearance of many “fake, big, empty” (jia, da, kong) works. Mao Zedong raised the “Double combination” (Liang jiehe) slogan, meaning that writers should combine revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism. This encouraged a literature of boasting and exaggeration which presented a falsely rosy picture of life, elevating characters and deifying heroes.

The Third National Congress of Literary and Art Workers was convened in Beijing from the 22nd July to the 13th August 1960. Because of the widespread influence of ultra-Leftism at this time, the Congress had little impact in correcting past mistakes. In 1962, the Enlarged Central Working Group (Zhongyang gongzuo kuoda hui) convened in Beijing attended by seven thousands people. The meeting proposed adjustments to literary and art policies. It summarised the “Great Leap” experiences and lessons, mobilised the Party to correct mistakes and demanded that the “Two hundreds” policy be reinstated. Premier Zhou Enlai took the lead in making this judgement himself, saying:

“For several years there has been the practice that, after somebody has

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<sup>16</sup> Zhu Zhai (ed.), Zhonggou dangdai wenxue sichaoshi, p. 104-140

<sup>17</sup> Zhu Zhai (ed.), Zhongguo dangdai wenxue sichaoshi, p. 325-335

spoken out, others will target them (套框子), seize upon their shortcomings (抓辫子), undermine them (挖根子), put hats on them (戴帽子), beat them with sticks (打棍子)”<sup>18</sup>

He pointed out that “Slogans are not literature and art”. This had some beneficial effect in stopping the position of literature deteriorating further but did not solve fundamental problems.

## 1.2 Literary Theories in the Great Cultural Revolution 1966-1975

From May 1966 to October 1976, was the period of Great Cultural Revolution, a time of unprecedented social, political and economic disruption which incurred immeasurable losses, and caused people severe physical and psychological damage. The name of this movement “wenhua da geming 文化大革命” (Great Cultural Revolution) was sardonically transformed into “da ge wenhua ming 大革文化命” (really finish off culture), accurately describing the philistine autocratic literary policy carried out during this period.

During the Cultural Revolution, there were three principal literary concepts promoted and supported by officials up to the highest level. The first one was “the theory of fundamental task” (Genben renwu lun 根本任务论). This lay at the core of the literary theory system of that time, and upholds the principle that portraying heroic figures among the workers, peasants and soldiers is the fundamental socialist literary task.<sup>19</sup> The second concept is the “Three prominences” (三突出). This insists on the

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<sup>18</sup> Jilinsheng wuyuanxiao 吉林省五院校 (ed.), *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi*, p. 236

<sup>19</sup> Zhu Zhai (ed.), *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue sichaoshi*, p. 504

prominence of class struggle, the prominence of the 'correct line' struggle, and the prominence of the anti-capitalist roader struggle. There is a second definition of the "three prominences": "the prominence of positive characters (正面人物) among all the characters, the prominence heroes among positive characters, and the prominence of the main hero among heroes."<sup>20</sup> When the "three prominences" was applied to film it implied focusing on the hero figure, providing an image which is "near, big, bright", while the enemy figures should be "far, small, dark". When applied to the operatic stage, the main character should stay in the middle of the stage and the light should follow the main character as s/he moves around. The third concept is "putting the topic first" (主题先行). This implies that correct ideas precede the creation of the story; a writer should start with a political issue which needs publicising and then develop his/her story around this issue in order to promote the 'correct' line on it.

Literature and art were seriously damaged: this was the darkest period in the history of modern Chinese literature. The literary world became the stage for political struggles. When the "Gang of Four" were in power, they criticised what they referred to as the "Hei ba lun"<sup>21</sup> (Eight black theory) and "Wenyi heixian lun"<sup>22</sup> (Literary black line theory). They rejected the fundamental principles of literature, denied the achievements of literature since the 1930s, encouraged formulaic slogan-filled language instead of

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<sup>20</sup> Zhu Zhai (ed.), *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue sichaoshi*, p. 508, Yu Huiyong 于会咏 Let the Literary and Art Stage Forever Be a Field Propagandise Mao Zedong Thought.

(让文艺舞台永远成为宣传毛泽东思想的阵地), *Wenhuibao*, 23rd May 1968

<sup>21</sup> Eight Black Theory (黑八论): describing the true situation ("写真实"论), the board road of realism ("现实主义广阔的道路"论), the deepening of realism ("现实主义的深化"论), opposing "letting the theme decide the treatment" (反"题材决定"论), middle characters ("中间人物"论), opposing "pyrotechnics" (反"火药味"论), joining with the spirit of the ages ("时代精神汇合"论), departing from the classics and rebel against orthodoxy ("离经判道"论). Zhu Zhai (ed.), *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue sichaoshi*, p. 494

<sup>22</sup> Referring to the combination of bourgeois literary theories, modern revisionist literary theories and combination of 1930s' literature and art. *ibid.*

descriptions of real life. This resulted in works filled with boasting and exaggeration, referred to as “deception and cheating literature” (瞒骗文学), and in thousands of works being based on the same basic theme. The GCR was a disaster for the whole nation, with the literary world suffering particularly badly. Literary workers were subjected to public struggle meetings, personal attacks and public humiliations, and to forcible re-education through physical labour in the countryside in extremely poor living conditions. Many were put in jail and killed, and many others were forced to commit suicide.<sup>23</sup> Writers and critics had humiliating ‘hats’ put on them as they, like other intellectuals, were labelled, “chou lao jiu” (smelly old number nine 臭老九), “fandong wenren” (counter-revolutionary intellectuals 反动文人), “zou zi pai” (capitalist-roaders 走资派), “niu gui she shen” (ox demons and snake spirits 牛鬼蛇神), etc.

As it later emerged, the scale of the destruction for society and for culture, including literature, was huge, and the Cultural Revolution has emerged as one of the biggest disasters in modern Chinese history. Some textbooks on literature for university students just miss out this period completely.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The suicides included such outstanding figures as Lao She, Fu Lei (a famous translator) and his wife. The sufferings of writers were chronicled by almost all the well-known literary figures. Examples included Cong Weixi’s *Daqiang xia de hong yulan* (Blood-Stained Magnolias under the Towering Walls) and *Zou xiang hundun* (Walking into Chaos), and Zhang Xianliang’s *Nanren de yiban shi nüren* (Half of Man is Woman).

<sup>24</sup> e.g.: Zhang Zhong, Hong Zicheng, She Shusen, Zhao Shumo, & Wang Jingshou, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue*, Beijing University textbook.

### 1.3 The New Period Literature 1976-present

In 1976, after the fall of the “Gang of Four”, everything began to change in literature. From 1977 to 1978, *Renmin Ribao* (People’s Daily), *Renmin Wenxue* (People’s Literature) and *Hong Qi* (Red Flag), the three most important government-controlled ideological organs published articles criticising the “Black Line Theory in Literature”. In December 1978, the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee proved to be a favourable turning point for the development of literature and art. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 1979, the Fourth National Congress of Literature and Art Workers convened in Beijing. This was nineteen years after the Third National Congress. Actually, the new starting point for literature began from the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee. There the point had been stressed: “Practice is the only criterion for truth.”<sup>25</sup> At the meeting there had been raised some new ideas about literary theory. These included: 1. Does socialist society have its dark side and tragedies or not? Can writers write about these or not? 2. On the question of praising the good and exposing the bad, can socialist society and the CCP only be praised or not? Can we reveal the existence of problems or not? 3. On the relationship between literature and politics, is it the case that literature can only serve politics as a propaganda tool or does it have an independent existence? 4. In discussions about looking forward and backward, should we simply forget the mistakes of the past or should there be serious self-examination of what went wrong and an attempt to learn from it in order to build a better future for the nation?<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> 实践是检验真理的唯一标准

<sup>26</sup> Chen Qiguang, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi*, p. 392-401



The answers given in these discussions seem very direct and simple by today's standards, but at that time China had been sealed off from the outside world for thirty years, and had suffered from ultra-leftist thought for a long time. These discussions were a healthy sign and although they did not bring the correct answers immediately, these gradually emerged. As a result people could express what they were really thinking, and could abandon the "Shouming wenxue" (Literature by command 受命文学). Since then literary concepts and theories have begun gradually to return to a less political approach; this was the real beginning of the Xin Shiqi Wenxue (New Period Literature).

It was decided that "Literature should serve the people and socialism" instead of "Literature should serve Politics";<sup>27</sup> the former is more moderate than the latter, but there is not much essential difference between them. Literature and politics have had a very close relationship in Chinese literary history, especially in the modern period. The "Literary revolution" started from the New Culture Movement of 1916 or so, and advocated the use of the modern Chinese language so that common people could understand literature and so that it was not only for the elite. Modern literature carried the burden of rebuilding China, rebuilding people's souls, waking people up to join the modern revolution. "Literature to save the nation" was a typical dream for many writers after the May 4<sup>th</sup> movement, of whom Lu Xun is a famous example. He gave up his specialised subject, medicine, after starting his studies in Japan, because he thought that simply to save a person's body was not enough, only rebuilding people's souls

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<sup>27</sup> Cui Xilu, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue yanjiu gailun*, p. 85

could save the country. Zuoyi Wenxue (Left wing literature) in the 1930s was very strongly political, and supported the CCP who were pressing the KMT to establish a united front to fight the Japanese at that time. The “progressive literature” (jinbu wenxue) produced by leftist writers was characterised as consisting of “revolution plus romance” (geming jia langman). This had a great influence on young people, many of whom were thus encouraged to devote themselves to the revolutionary cause. It is part of Chinese tradition that literature has a very important place in politics, and politics in recent Chinese history had generally been in control of the world of literature and art. This became even clearer in contemporary literature after 1949.

After 30 years of ultra-leftist movements and the Great Cultural Revolution, people began to reject the view that literature was an adjunct to politics, and suggested that it had its own status in the ideological field, and should adhere to its own creative principles. The slogan “Literature should serve the people and socialist society” offered literature a wider scope than before. The object of literature, serving the people, could be understood as serving at various different levels and in many different aspects. So literature could develop in many new directions. The 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee raised the new policy of “Jiefang sixiang” (emancipate thought) and “Zunzhong shishi” (respect facts); it also promoted again the “Two hundreds” policy. These guiding theories made the literary world increasingly lively, leading to the appearance of many stories which reflected real life and exposed the darkness of the Great Culture Revolution. New Period Literature occupied a very important position in people’s lives and the country’s political life at this turning point in history. It affected people’s trend of thought as this new wave of literature based on a new tide of literary

theory appeared after dozens of years in which real literature had ceased to exist. This is the reason why, after the new works were published, they caused such shock waves in society, and brought many discussions and debates, which led to further advances in ideological and literary development.

New Period Literature falls into several stages. The initial recovery period from 1976 to 1978 starts from 5<sup>th</sup> April 1976, the date of Qingming when demonstrators went to Tian'anmen to commemorate the death of Zhou Enlai. From this beginning sprang the Tian'anmen poetry movement exemplified in the hundreds of thousands of poems which appeared in Tian'anmen Square. Examples of poems from this period are Li Ying's poem *Yiyue de aisi* (January Grief), Ai Qing's poem *Zai langjian shang* (At the Top of the Wave) and Zong Fuxian's drama *Yu Wu Sheng Chu* (At the Silent Place). These exposed the darkness existing under the control of the "Gang of Four" and celebrated the Tian'anmen resistance movement. Liu Xinwu's short story *Ban Zhuren* (The Form Teacher) and Lu Xinhua's short story *Shanghen* (The Wound) exposed the terrible political movements which for years had destroyed people's lives, especially those of the children, and had left deep scars in people's minds. These works originated in the same issue: thirty years of Leftism and the GCR had seriously damaged people's lives. This was a national wound which could not be concealed by silence; the anger, and the grief had to be brought out. Works of this literary trend were called "Shanghen wenxue" (Scar literature).

Following the implementation of the "emancipating the mind" and "seeking truth from facts" policies, the whole literary world changed. In this second period from 1978 to

1982, there were two main trends: “Fansi wenxue” (introspective literature) and “Gaige wenxue” (reform literature). Introspective literature includes works such as Lu Yanzhou’s story *Tianyunshan chuanqi* (The Legend of Tianyun Mountain), Gao Xiaosheng’s *Li Shunda zao wu* (Li Shunda Builds a House), Wang Meng’s *Hudie* (The Butterfly), and Gu Hua’s *Furong zhen* (Furong Town). Reform literature was represented by works such as Jiang Zilong’s *Qiao Changzhang shangren ji* (Manager Qiao Takes Office), Ke Yunlu’s *Xinxing* (The New Star), Zhang Jie’s *Chenzhong de chibang* (Leaden Wings). During this period there also appeared “menglongshi” (‘obscure’ or ‘misty’ poetry), which brought new debates to contemporary literature. Many new writing styles emerged, such as stream of consciousness, symbolism, the absurd, which were inspired by modern Western styles. In many cases they just imitated the superficial aspects of these, not the deeper content and meaning, with the result that works became Chinese in content but with a Western flavour. Wang Meng’s “stream of consciousness” writing is example of this, but even with its limitations it brought new stimulation to the development of literature, causing a series of discussions and debates, which were necessary to take literature forward at this time.

The period, from 1983-1986, was the heyday of the New Period Literature. Contemporary literature was stimulated by social reforms and developments, as writers sought to approach new fields in a more profound way using multiple perspectives and styles. “Root searching” literature investigated aspects of culture and exposed and criticised the decline of traditional culture, attempting to solve the conundrum of why China had fallen behind other countries. Han Shaogong’s *Ba Ba Ba* (Dad Dad Dad) is an example of this. New Wave stories appeared, some works possessing a deeper grasp

of modernity; the younger generation of writers became the main force behind this. Early representatives of this trend are Liu Suola with her *Ni biewu xuanze* (You Got No Other Choice), and Xu Xing with his *Wu zhuti bianzou* (Variation Without Theme).

From 1987 to the present time, literature has become more diffuse, much less concerned with political issues and much more concerned with economic ones, more concerned with everyday life. Literature no longer plays the most important role in people's cultural life as it did before the 1980s. Life has become faster and more complex. Other types of entertainment now occupy the main position, like TV programmes, films, pop music. These attract huge audiences and take up most of people's spare time. Literature no longer makes waves to the same extent that it did at the end of the 1970s. It has lost its "ability to shock" (轰动效应)<sup>28</sup>, and ceased to act as the most important conduit of popular sentiment. It has to find a new way to survive. One approach is to learn from popular literature (通俗文学), and produce works that are more popular in taste and readily acceptable to a wide audience. Another way is to produce works with profound psychological insights, with high historical and cultural awareness which might be expected to last for generations. The works of this period show much more evidence of modern Western styles, with a strong realistic inclination. New Wave literature has fully developed in this period. As people's lives and interests have changed, literature has discovered the need to compete in the cultural marketplace. For commercial reasons the entertainment factor is much greater than before. Serious literature (严肃文学) will never again be serious like it was before the 1980s: the entertainment function is now much more highly developed.

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<sup>28</sup> WMWJ, Vol. 6, p. 337

The subjects of human nature (人性) and humanitarianism (人道主义) are important issues which caused many disputes after 1949. From the Seventeen Years Literature (1949-1966) to the period of Great Culture Revolution, people who wanted to discuss human nature or humanitarianism found themselves wearing "revisionist" or "bourgeois thought" hats, and were severely criticised. From the political field to literary and artistic fields authorities had denied the validity of theories of human nature (人性论), resulting in inhuman standards in literary works and inhuman treatment of rightists in real life. After the New Period Literature began, there was great interest in this issue with many translations of Western 19th and 20th century works on modern thought by writers such as Nietzsche, Rousseau, Freud, Schopenhauer, etc. These works had a great impact on Chinese attitudes toward human beings and human nature. Over a thirty year period during one movement after another people who were criticised found themselves treated as sub-human. In the post-1976 period people's minds were opened up by modern Western theories on this topic and they naturally demanded a reappraisal of it. Numerous articles were published in newspapers and magazines throughout the country on the relationship between literature and human nature, and how human nature should be depicted in literature.

"Literature is the study of humanity, the core of literature is human beings" (文学是人学, 文学的核心是人); this affirmation struck a new and deeper chord in the hearts of people. Contemporary literature has broken through political restrictions to return to its core concern: the study of human beings. This has been a great leap in the process of cognition as writers have sought to confer dignity and value on human

beings. In the portrayal of characters and their natures, the revelation of their inner worlds is seen to be the true focus of literature. This realisation has prompted stories to transform themselves from their traditional roles of plot narration to describing the psychology of the character, such as in the case of Zhang Jie's *Ai shi buneng wangji de* (Love Cannot Be Forgotten ). For Chinese writers and readers who were cut off from world literary developments for decades, literature of the Western modernist school literature seemed exciting and unusual, even bizarre. Some people commended and praised it, others denounced and attacked it. Western modernism was the common starting point for many different literary schools, including impressionism, existentialism, expressionism, stream of consciousness and absurd schools, etc. These were very influential in literary and artistic circles, and the inevitable result of the promotion of modernism was the modernisation of contemporary Chinese literature.

“Obscure” or “Misty” poetry (*menglongshi*) burst forth and rapidly become popular throughout China. These poets were influenced by Western modernism in all aspects of their work from their expressive methods to their guiding ideology. Leading figures included Bei Dao (北岛) and Gu Cheng (顾城). They grew up during the Cultural Revolution and, when they were young, suffered its effects but also underwent many formative experiences, which became the inspiration for their art. At the same time, modern Western literary and artistic works were also an important influence on them and they adopted the new modernism to express their thoughts. As a result of their background, political issues became a principal focus of their poetry; they criticised political problems, exciting whole country's concern and comments. This too helped to push forward the modernisation of contemporary Chinese literature. Wang Meng's

reputation as a pioneer in the literary field depends on his use of “stream of consciousness” in his writings. Obscure poetry and stream of consciousness drew inspiration from Western models and are a good starting point for the development of New Period literature. Continuing and developing the best of the national literary heritage and at the same time learning from and assimilating the lessons drawn from world literature is the only way to allow contemporary Chinese literature to develop and improve in a modern society. Diverse writing methods, diverse styles and schools, and a generally free atmosphere led to a genuine implementation of the Two hundreds policy. Writers enjoyed real freedom to write, and especially important was the sense of freedom in their minds and the atmosphere of freedom in society. Pioneer novelists and poets struggled with barriers on every side to achieve what they believed in, and as the result of enormous efforts, contemporary Chinese literature flourished.

The introspective literature underwent several stages of “fansi” (introspection). According to the critic Liu Zaifu, introspection has three levels: the humanitarian introspection stage, the cultural-psychological introspection stage, and the multi-faceted exploration stage.<sup>29</sup> Scar literature belongs to the first stage, Introspective literature, Reform literature and Root-searching literature all belong to the second stage, while in the third stage New Wave literature and many other different schools are pursuing a multiplicity of literary approaches leading to a varied and vital artistic atmosphere, with comparatively high political freedom.

Over the course of the New Period Literature (from 1976 to the present), there have

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<sup>29</sup> Cui Xilu, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue yanjiu gailun*, p. 20



been some important changes: the themes of literary works have turned from the political to the social and cultural; the function has changed from the didactic to the entertaining; the environment has gone from restraint to independent creativity; the style has gone from uniformity to multifariousness; the model has gone from Western in form to Western in content; modernity has gone from form to consciousness.

In 1985, the critics Huang Ziping, Chen Pingyuan and Qian Liquan published their famous analysis in Volume 5 of *Wenxue Pinglun: "Lun Ershi Shiji Zhongguo Wenxue"* (On 20th century Chinese literature). They suggested ignoring the traditional divisions in literary history and looking at the whole of 20<sup>th</sup> century as a single entity which needs putting both in the context of two thousand years of Chinese literary history and in the context of the broad sweep of world history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> They tried to take a longer perspective of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese literature, seeing contemporary literature as a part of it, not a separate entity.

During the 1990s literature developed in a much more open, liberal, modern and international environment, willing to stand up as part of the international literary scene, and to be judged according to international criteria, determined to "let Chinese literature walk towards the world".

#### **1.4 Wang Meng's Life**

Wang Meng has experienced all the periods of contemporary Chinese literature, and he

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<sup>30</sup> Cui Xilu, *Zhonggou dangdai wenxue yanjiu gailun*, p. 13-14

has been very much involved in the last forty years of politics in China, a subject that he himself has always been very fond of. He was typical of the young new generation of writers who from his teenage years developed under China's new socialism. He was born in 1934 and became a CCP member when he was fourteen years old. This is an indication of his attitude as an idealist young Bolshevik. When he was 19 years old he started writing his first novel *Qingchun Wansui* (Long Live Youth) while he was working as a Youth League cadre. When he was 22 years old (in 1956) he published the famous story *Zuzhibu Xinlai de Nianqingren* (The Young Newcomer in the Organisation Department) which stimulated a lot of debate and brought much criticism. As a result of that short story, in 1958, when he was 24 years old, he was labelled a rightist. After being labelled a rightist, he was sent for re-education by physical labour in a suburb of Beijing for five years.

In the short flexible period of 1961 to 1962, the tense political atmosphere became more relaxed and Wang Meng was transferred to a position as a teacher in the Department of Chinese Language and Literature of Beijing Normal College (Now called Capital Normal University of China). After starting worked at the University, he began writing again but only published two short stories, neither of which is noteworthy. They were *Yanjing* (The Eye) and *Yeyu* (Night Rain); their topics were carefully selected to cater to the political imperatives of that time. After these two stories, even when his works pandered to the Party's policies, there were no newspapers or magazines throughout the whole country dared to publish his works. His novel *Long Live Youth* had samples printed out several times but could not be published. In the end he realised that he had lost the right to have his works published. There was no

specific document indicating that writers like Wang Meng who had picked up a “rightist hats” could not publish their works, but that was the real situation. Of course Wang Meng felt frustrated by this. In October 1963, Wang Meng made a request of the leader of the Literary Association, asking to go to observe and learn from real life in the toughest countryside, The Xinjiang Writers’ Association accepted him. At that time Wang Meng had two small children and his wife was a middle school teacher. Unlike many other spouses, his wife supported him all along and decided to move to Xinjiang with him. On 28th December, 1963, Wang Meng moved to Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. He wrote a poem the day he arrived Urumqi, saying his blood was not cold, his ambition was still firm no matter what trials he faced, he had no regrets and would to the end sing the praises of spring, and he still wanted contribute his efforts to the frontier region.<sup>31</sup> The poem expresses both his idealism and his determination. In many ways it is very traditional, like many Chinese poets throughout history, displaying the traditional Chinese intellectual’s patriotic spirit and the feeling of concern (youhuan yishi) of such patriotic poets as Lu You.<sup>32</sup>

After Wang Meng arrived in Xinjiang, the Xinjiang Writers’ Association members welcomed him and originally arranged for him to be editor of a literary magazine, but soon afterwards a nation-wide rectification movement began and the political atmosphere became more and more tense. At that time Wang Meng was not yet thirty years old, but he was regarded as a major rightist. In those circumstances the Xinjiang Writers’ Association made very helpful arrangements and sent him to Yili, to the No 2

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<sup>31</sup> 死死生生血未冷，风风雨雨志弥坚，春光唱彻方无憾，犹有微躯献塞边。Xu Jiming & Wu Yihua (ed.), Wang Meng zhuanji, p. 13

<sup>32</sup> Song Dynasty famous poet Lu You and one of his patriotic poems:  
死去原知万事空，但悲不见九州同，王师北定中原日，家祭勿忘告乃翁。

production brigade of Bayandai commune to “observe and learn from real peasant life”. The Yili area had better living conditions than other areas. When Wang Meng had just arrived there, everything was new to him: the place, the customs, the people and the language. He could not understand the Uyghur language and started to learn it immediately. The local Uyghur people were honest and straightforward, and treated him in a very friendly way. His positive attitude and his kindness helped him make friends with Uyghur people and pass the difficult years of the Great Cultural Revolution. In 1971, he was sent to the “May Seventh” cadre school (Wuqi ganxiao) in Urumqi for ideological remoulding and to work as a labourer. He stayed at the cadre school for two years, then he and his family moved back to Urumqi. He worked as a member of the research office staff of the Xinjiang literary bureau. In 1979, his rehabilitation was announced, and finally he and his family moved back to Beijing where he resumed his career as a professional writer and member of the Beijing Writer’s Association.

In 1979 it was more than 20 years after he had been labelled as a rightist, and more than 30 years since he had joined in the Chinese revolution as a CCP member. He had gained many experiences and lessons in life, he was more mature and knew the ways of the world. Commenting on his own experiences, he said:

What I have gained is still more than I have lost; a vast field in which to use my talents, an ability to face the world and brave the storms: twenty years of experience. A land stretching 8,000 li--the distance from Beijing to Xinjiang--and thirty stormy years: that is my point of departure now.....but I will always remember, weep over and laugh at that 8,000 li and thirty years, the true fulcrum of my stories.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Wang Meng, *The Butterfly and Other stories*, p. 18.

After Wang Meng was rehabilitated, he worked hard tried to win back the time had lost and published a series of works, such as *The Bolshevik Salute*, *The Eyes of the Night*, *The Butterfly* and *The Voice of Spring*, etc. He pioneered a new writing method—the “stream of consciousness” which generated a lot of debate.

In 1982, he was chosen as an alternate member of the Party Central Committee. In 1983 he was appointed as the editor in chief of *People's Literature* (Renmin Wenxue) a leading official literary magazine. In 1985, he became a vice-chairman of the Chinese Writer's Association (Zhongguo Zuojia Xiehui) and a member of the Party Central Committee (Zhongyang Weiyuanhui). From 1986 to 1989 he held the post of Minister of Culture, but he resigned from that post in 1989 after the June 4<sup>th</sup> movement. He has continued his writing up to the present time and remains a vice-chairman of the Chinese Writers Association and a member of the Political Consultative Conference.

## Chapter II: Youthful Idealism

---*The Young Newcomer in the Organisation Department*

### Intervening in Life

In 1956, as artists faced serious problems of creativity, the literary and artistic world advocated that literary works should "intervene in life", that writers should not avoid life's conflicts, but should expose and criticise backward and decadent things, and support new things and new ideas. They should not embellish and praise everything, but rather study life deeply, think about and explain life. The leading literary magazine *Renmin Wenxue* (People's Literature) published Liu Binyan's story *On the Bridge Building Site* in April 1956. The *Renmin Wenxue* editor added comments confirming this approach and appealed others, saying: "We have been looking forward a long time to this kind of sharp questioning, to critical and ironic work, and hope that after 'On the Bridge Building Site' has been published, there may be more works like this appear."<sup>34</sup> Liu Binyan soon after published *Internal News of the Newspaper*, and *Wenhuibao* (Wenhui Daily), *Renmin Wenxue* (People's Literature) and *Wenyi Xuexi* (The Study of Literature and Art), and other leading of journals published many articles advocating such an approach. After a short time, this "intervene in life" theory and works reflecting it attracted a lot of attention and became a fashion. Followers of this approach criticised works which avoided the complex issues and sharp struggles which existed in real life. They were not willing to disregard the dark side of socialism and fail to expose negative things, since they felt this might seriously damage society. They

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<sup>34</sup> Hong Zicheng & Li Ping (ed.), *Zhongguo wenxue--dangdai bufen*, p. 75

expected more realistic works reflecting life, and opposed the presentation of a false picture of reality, and of idealised images. These two works of Liu Binyan and Wang Meng's story *The Young Newcomer in the Organisation Department* are excellent representative works of this short-lived trend.

Wang Meng's short story *The Young Newcomer in the Organisation Department* was published in the September 1956 issue of *Renmin Wenxue*. It attracted a great deal of attention and set off heated disputes which spread throughout society. From December 1956, *Wenyi Xuexi* organised a debate on the story, and received more than one thousand three hundred articles discussing it. Twenty four of these were selected and published in the following four issues. Other newspapers and magazines all published articles as part of the debate, including *Renmin Ribao*, *Wenhuibao*, *Guangming Ribao* and *Zhongguo Qingnianbao*, etc.<sup>35</sup> At that time, the focus of the debate concentrated on whether it reflected real life or not. There were two main opposing opinions on it, one was to affirm it was true to life, the other was to deny this. Of course, it revealed real problems which certainly did exist in the working style of the bureaucracy. The story was quite successful in portraying characters like Liu Shiwu, and the writing style and content were quite mature for a young writer like Wang Meng. It was an excellent work for the 1950s and made its mark on the history of contemporary Chinese literature. Now, more than forty years after it was published, when we study it and compare it with the social and political problems of today's China, we find there are so many similarities that studying this story still has contemporary relevance.

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<sup>35</sup> Xu Jiming & Wu Yihua (ed.), *Wang Meng zhuanji*, p. 378

People did not treat it as a literary work. The attitude of “politics first” (zhengzhi diyi) made people question it from political point of view. They asked which District Committee Organisation Department was being described? Who was being portrayed? What did Wang Meng want to achieve? The work did not mention the location of the story, but it did mention *Beijing Ribao* (Beijing Daily) once,

“but just on the question of whether or not Beijing was bureaucratic it provoked a lot of criticism, and it was only when it alarmed Comrade Mao Zedong himself into pronouncing that it subsided (temporarily subsided).”<sup>36</sup>

Therefore at the beginning of 1957, Wang Meng was fortunate to escape censure. However in the end, the story and Wang Meng were both embroiled in the Anti-Rightist movement of 1958, and Wang Meng was expelled from the Party and sent to the countryside as a labourer. So, Wang Meng commented that: “This story ‘promoted’ Wang Meng but also ‘destroyed’ Wang Meng.....”<sup>37</sup>

### **A Typical Bureaucrat**

Liu Shiwu is a typical bureaucrat, he is the main vice-director of the Organisation Department District Committee. His appearance gives others a good impression: he is capable, decisive, and concerned about “the art of leadership” which he constantly seeks to strengthen. He seems able to distinguish the significant from the insignificant. For example, sometimes when he reads a document, he just looks at the title and ending, and signs it; but at other times he takes the whole morning to read over a

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<sup>36</sup> Xu Jiming & Wu Yihua (ed.), *Wang Meng zhuanji*, p. 50

<sup>37</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, Introduction, p.1



document of less than three thousands words, and he annotates it carefully. Another example of his ability and awareness is when Han Changxin (another vice-director) tries to be clever in reporting his work to him, and he seemed inattentive, but then he suddenly picks Han up on something and questions him, making Han “laugh in embarrassment ” and realise he cannot deceive Liu so easily.

Liu Shiwu is fond of literature, and although his table is piled with documents which have not been dealt with, he still eagerly borrows a novel from Lin Zhen and finishes reading it very quickly. Reading novels is a way of escape from the boredom of his everyday life, and he becomes intoxicated with this beautiful world of illusion. On the other hand, it is clear that his idealism has not completely disappeared; there are traces remaining of his past enthusiasm for work. However in everyday life and work, he displays indifference to everything, “That’s how it is” (jiu name hui shi)<sup>38</sup> is his pet phrase. Although he seems correctly to handle many political policies and theories, and knows where problems exist, yet his attitude is conditioned by his “theory that conditions have matured ” (tiaojian chengshu lun)<sup>39</sup> which is a terrible bureaucratic excuse never to change anything. There are problems at the gunnysack factory of which he is clearly aware, like the director of the factory Wang Qingquan playing chess or cards in the office during working time, and not bothering to concern himself with the factory’s production. That situation has gone on for five years, nobody has done anything about it. When Lin Zhen tries to do something, Liu criticises him:

“Young people are very prone to think too highly of themselves, they are

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<sup>38</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 39

<sup>39</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 41

full of ambition, and want fight all the shortcomings as soon as they have arrived in a new post, acting the hero like Nastya. This is commendable and wonderful idea, but it is also a vain hope (xuwang).”<sup>40</sup>

He laughs at Lin's enthusiasm, and regards his own apathy and indifference as a kind of “occupational disease” (zhiye bing). Because he so familiar with everything and feels tired, he lacks enthusiasm and a sense of responsibility towards his work. What he is interested in is reading novels and discussing the endgames of Chinese chess published in the newspaper.

Lin Zhen, who is passionate towards work, having been educated in socialist theory, feels shocked by the situation. Liu Shiwu explains his indifference, saying: “It is said the occupational disease of cooks is to lack a good appetite; they make dishes, and are dealing with food all day. We are Party workers, we have created the new life, as a result, life cannot inspire us”.<sup>41</sup> Wang Meng portrays him as a real person: Liu’s characteristics are displayed as many-sided and complex, his character is fully developed and much more vivid than other well-known characters like Luo Lizheng from Liu Binyan’s *On the Bridge Building Site*. Luo Lizheng's conservative attitude and bureaucratic working style is more distinctive and obvious, but as a real person his portrayal is one-sided and less rounded than Liu Shiwu. In another Liu Binyan short story, *Internal News of the Newspaper*, the general editor Chen Lidong wants to protect his leading position, and studies every word from his superiors to make sure that he does not put a foot wrong, but he is indifferent to the attitude of the people under him, and does not listen to their opinions and suggestions. His character is effectively crafted

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<sup>40</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 43

although it does contain some element of caricature. Of course these two works of Liu Binyan's are both "textie" (reportage) rather than straight fiction as in Wang Meng's case.<sup>42</sup> These three bureaucrats share some common features: when they were young they all tried to pursue their revolutionary ideals and wished to devote themselves to this. However, things have changed, their attitudes have become ones of "zhaoban lingdao zhishi" (following indiscriminately the leaders' instructions), their enthusiasm has disappeared, and they look for an easy and comfortable existence. They become irresponsible, and carry out their work perfunctorily and in a mechanical way. At that time, this was already a serious problem, which merited closer attention by the CCP in order to stop these unhealthy tendencies among leading cadres. What actually happened was just the reverse.

### **The Young Bolshevik**

From the aspect of character portrayal, Lin Zhen's image is not as rounded and successful as that of Liu Shiwu. In 1954, Wang Meng was vice-secretary of the Communist Young League of Dongsu District Committee in Beijing. In May 1956, he was selected as a "Young Socialist Construction Activist of Beijing City".<sup>43</sup> At that time Wang Meng was in his early twenties. He dealt with young people all the time and he understood the psychology of young people. Lin Zhen's inner world and his attitude to work are realistic and believable, and also have suggestions of Wang Meng himself, as he describes his own experiences. He displays Lin Zhen's inner world and feelings

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<sup>41</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 54

<sup>42</sup> Hong Zicheng & Li Ping (ed.), *Zhongguo wenxue—dangdai bufen*, p. 74-81

<sup>43</sup> 北京市青年社会主义建设积极分子. WMWJ, Vol.10, p. 344

toward Zhao Huiwen. They work together in the office, Zhao is slightly older than him, and understands Lin Zhen's motives, disappointments and feelings of frustration. Lin Zhen wrote on the title page of Nikolayeva's story *The Tractor Station Manager and the Chief Agronomist* the inscription: "Live your life as Nastya does!".<sup>44</sup> He worships Nastya's indomitable spirit, and knows: "But that's difficult".<sup>45</sup> Nastya's spirit was totally the opposite to Liu Shiwu's "art of leadership". Lin Zhen struggles in the face of these two choices, and chooses the value system of this hero of the Soviet Union as his ideal.

It is not only Liu Shiwu who laughs at Lin Zhen. Han Changxin has been promoted to vice-director of the Organisation Department. He produces a whitewash report which astounds Lin Zhen. The report glosses over the real problems of the gunnysack factory and the factory director Wei Heming. Han is more superficial and bureaucratic than Liu Shiwu; he floats along through life, acting as a leader rebuking others in a loud voice. Neither Han Changxin nor Liu Shiwu want to know about and resolve problems when they are in post.

The young Bolshevik has his feelings of love too. Zhao Huiwen is the only one who understands him. The fact they have the same opinions and attitudes to these work related things gives rise to a feeling of sympathy between them. Lin Zhen is invited to Zhao Huiwen's home to listen to music, eat water chestnuts and exchange opinions about work. There are suggestions of an emotional relationship developing between them. Zhao Huiwen has a unhappy marriage. She has had more experience of life than

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<sup>44</sup> Wang Meng, *The Butterfly and Other Stories*, p. 234

Lin Zhen and is much more mature. After working in that department for a number of years and not witnessing any changes, she is gradually becoming disillusioned, but finds herself warming to Lin Zhen's enthusiasm. She encourages Lin Zhen to be positive and do something about the problem. He has no experience of romance, and Zhao Huiwen's smile, her dress, her cooking, all generate feelings in Lin Zhen's heart, but nothing happens. Zhao spells it out clearly: "You're a very good friend and I respect you very much, ..... You're just like a brother to me, and I know you want me to be more assertive. People should be friendly and support one another....."<sup>46</sup> He understands what she is saying. The short burst of feeling she expresses for Lin Zhen is presented as something pure and beautiful yet enigmatic. Wang Meng here is being very daring: the suggestion of a young cadre, a member of the moral elite, having an affair, even an unconsummated one, with a married colleague is pushing the story to the boundaries of acceptability in yet another aspect.

A letter from workers of the gunnysack factory was published in *Beijing Ribao* (Beijing Daily), and problems which had existed for five years were solved in just over a week. Wang Qingquan was disciplined and discharged from his post. The leaders of the Organisation Department were clearly negligent in their duties. When Lin Zhen criticises Liu and Han during the District Committee meeting, they refuse to acknowledge that they have made mistakes and do not accept responsibility for the situation; they do not feel they have lessons to learn and have no desire to improve their work. On the contrary they use this opportunity to ask their superiors to make a record of their "achievements". Lin Zhen is astonished at this situation and is deeply aware of

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

his impotence. There is a great disparity in power between him and them: Nastya's example cannot be transferred to real life. Lin Zhen realises the most important thing is to try to gain support and guidance from the higher level leader Zhou Runxiang, the Secretary of the District Committee.

### **Exposing Problems**

This story criticises the bureaucratic working style, and at the same time poses many incisive questions. It reveals a serious problem in the Party's leadership structure. People can only realistically hope for a very limited number of outstanding higher leaders, whom they can expect to make the right decisions. If some leading cadres lack a sense of responsibility, and higher leaders lack judgement, there is no hope for social development, national construction, and improving the lives of every individual in society. The same kind of problem still exists in today's China.

Apart from these problems, there is another aspect to the slack working situation in leadership organisations. There are twenty-four people in that Organisation Department but three are on loan, one is preparing for university examinations, one is on maternity leave, and director Li Zongqing's health is not very good, and anyway he is too busy to manage the department. Therefore there are six people holding posts, 25 per cent of the total, who do not actually work in the department. It is this situation which gives Liu Shiwu the opportunity for his behaviour; his superiors are too busy to bother. There are clearly problems in the management system. The cadres of the district committee are

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<sup>46</sup> Wang Meng, *The Butterfly and Other Stories*, p. 237

slack in their work, they chat and read newspapers during work time and openly joke about some subjects which Lin Zhen regards as serious issues. They often hold meetings and spend a long time without any result, procrastinating and indulging in a lax work style.

The story also reveals some serious problems in the structure of the CCP, including how new Party members are recruited. In the recruitment of new Party members fixed guidelines should be abided by; every work unit has a limit on the number they can recruit but the criteria are interpreted subjectively by people. The number of new Party members recruited and the quality of those new Party members are two completely different matters. The number of new members was increasing fast while the Party supervisory system was being ignored. Instead of responding to criticisms, the supervisory system suppresses divergent opinions and retaliates against people who have criticised it.

This 1950s' story clearly points out problems in the Party at an early stage in China's New Socialism. At that time the writer certainly could not predict how serious these problems would become later on, as bureaucracy and corruption spread throughout government organisations. The Party and the government have mobilised anti-corruption and anti-bureaucracy campaigns many times, and have instituted many rules and regulations, but all of them have achieved little. This story reveals these problems at an early stage from the inside when they were not widely realised. It also reveals the human nature aspect of the problem.

The thought content of *The Young Newcomer in the Organisation Department* is much more profound than Wang Meng's other stories in his early creative period. Compared with *Little Bean*, *Spring Festival*, *Winter Rain* and the novel *Long Live Youth* the writing technique is much mature. The story is not simply a monotonous criticism of bureaucracy, it narrates the story in a witty and gentle manner, portraying several lively characters and their psychology and inner world. For example, Zhao Huiwen comments on the flowers, saying: "Can you smell the scholartree? Just ordinary little white flowers, yet they are more elegant than the peony and more fragrant than peaches or plums."<sup>47</sup> Her comments on the flower are irrelevant to the theme of exposing bureaucratic attitudes, but help bring her to life as a character and create empathy with the reader. When Lin Zhen comes to visit, she dresses in a dark red cheong-sam, the traditional dress for Chinese women, and listens to the music of the Russian composer Tchaikovsky. These details portray her disposition as a sensitive, feminine, elegant and cultured woman.

There are minor sub-plots to make the story more lively. For example, one evening after the meeting criticising Wang Qingquan, Lin Zhen and Liu Shiwu go out to eat wonton in a small restaurant. Outside it has begun raining, a boy, drenched to the skin, runs into the restaurant seeking shelter from the rain, water dripping from his hair. This incident seems to have no connection with the main plot of the story, but it adds flavour and increases the story's realistic atmosphere. Another interesting bit of local colour is when Lin Zhen is leaving Zhao Huiwen's home, as he is standing outside the

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<sup>47</sup> Wang Meng, *The Butterfly and Other Stories*, p. 238



door, an old vendor cries out: "Meatballs! Nice hot meatballs."<sup>48</sup> This gives a vivid picture of everyday life in Beijing. Aside from the serious issue of exposing the bureaucracy and other problems, there is a sense of enjoyment and pleasure in the story, a feeling of fun which is very difficult to find in 1950s stories. This adds greatly to the value of the story. It is a mature story both in political and artistic terms, and has become a model for the short story in the history of contemporary Chinese literature. It also marks a milestone in Wang Meng's writing career.

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<sup>48</sup> Wang Meng, *The Butterfly and Other Stories*, p. 222

## Chapter III: Experimentation in the New Period

### 3.1 Wang Meng at the Beginning of the New Period Literature

After more than twenty years of tribulations, Wang Meng had a rich fund of experience to draw upon, a wider perspective and deeper insights; he was a very different person to twenty years before. Nevertheless, his fundamental beliefs had not changed, he said: "I am still loyal and devoted to youth, to love, to life, and to the principles and ideals of revolution."<sup>49</sup> Although he had suffered from the political mistakes of the CCP, like most similar people his fundamental beliefs remained intact at the end of 1970s. This was especially true of Wang Meng, a Party member since he was teenager, a typical young Bolshevik. From 1978, he started again publishing short stories, which included *Zui baogui de* (The Most Precious), *Youyou cuncao xin* (The Loyal Heart), *Fengzheng piaodai* (Kites), *Chun zhi sheng* (The Voice of Spring ), and the novel *Hudie* (The Butterfly). These stories won national awards,<sup>50</sup> and of course the contents of these stories were in accord with the political criteria of that time. They can be regarded as partially at any rate fulfilling a propaganda function. Writing style and methodology were never regarded as being of the same political significance as the issues involved and the slant of the story.

After his rehabilitation, several of his early works basically continued the traditional writing mode, but the novel *Bu li* (The Bolshevik Salute ) is one which most obviously adopted a new structure and writing style. He was criticized, and attracted a lot of

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<sup>49</sup> Wang Meng, *The Butterfly and Other Stories*, p. 18.

attention, for his use of new writing methods, but style was one of his constant preoccupations, hence he attempted to draw lessons from modern Western schools. He tried to focus his stories on the characters, he wanted to move away from the traditional Chinese narrative style to a more psychological analysis based approach. He wrote several stories in this vein: *The Eyes of the Night*, *Kites*, *The Butterfly*, *The Voice of Spring* and *The Dream of the Sea*, all of which adopted his “stream of consciousness” technique. Together with *The Bolshevik Salute*, these stories are called “ji shu shouliudan” (a bunch of hand grenades) by the critic Wang Gan.<sup>51</sup> This series of works by Wang Meng epitomize his new style of writing, and were compared in the literary world of that time to detonating a bomb. Wang Meng often tried to explain what his writing theories were and published many essays on literary theory and thought. He was inspired by the expressive techniques of modern Western schools, and placed more emphasis on describing a character's feelings, psychological activity, mood and thought, rather than the character's behaviour. Focusing on the characters as the core of the story, he did not spend much time writing about their environment. These works were called “xinli paoxi xiaoshuo” (psychological analysis stories).<sup>52</sup> But they were not same as Western “stream of consciousness” works; they had no “decadent” sentiments, they were not melancholic, nor absurd. The support for socialism contained in these stories was warmly welcomed by the government as what they expected from a loyal Party member; these stories still have a certain didactic and propaganda function built into them. Hence, there were no negative comments about the content when the debate raged over the “stream of consciousness”. China had been cut off from the West for

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<sup>50</sup> Xu Jiming & Wu Yihua (eds.), Wang Meng zhuanji, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> WMWJ, Vol.8, p. 547

<sup>52</sup> Xu Jiming & Wu Yihua (eds.), Wang Meng zhuanji, p. 7

thirty years, during which time the Western capitalist system and many other things Western, including literature, were targets for criticism. At the beginning of the New Period literature, Wang Meng's new writing style was perceived to be a Western style, and just for this reason it became an audacious thing for contemporary literature. The question of whether or not it was appropriate to use a Western writing style was not immediately resolved, and led to considerable debate resulting in an acceptance that New Period Literature was in fact proceeding in the right direction. These "stream of consciousness" stories gave great impetus to efforts to evolve a modern writing style, and, in this respect, were more valuable than the stories merited in themselves.

Wang Meng broke through some old concepts of what a story should be, especially the supremacy of the plot at the expense of developing the psychology of the characters. During the Seventeen Years Literature and the GCR, the ultra-left literary policy "put the main issue first" (zhuti xianxing), produced stories and characters totally divorced from reality. New Period Literature encouraged writers to pursue facts, portray realistic stories and reflect real life and real people. Wang Meng created a structure to his stories based on people's real inner worlds, breaking through artistic constraints which had been in place in China for a long time. At that time, contemporary Chinese literature was separated from world literature and from the achievements of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement. That was why the focus on "consciousness"—the Western writing style used by Wang Meng which had appeared in May 4<sup>th</sup> literature in the 1920s to 1930s--- was shocking to the 1980s Chinese literary world. Wang Meng's efforts had great value, marking a stage in the development process of New Period Literature. From his unique perspective Wang Meng opened up a new field for readers, writers and critics,

caused a reappraisal of writing methodology and style. This gradually developed to include modernization of the contents of stories, leading to more and more substantial Western influence on content. Writers demanded an atmosphere of freedom to think, write and publish, eventually leading to a complete regeneration of contemporary Chinese literature.

### 3.2 Eastern “Stream of Consciousness” Stories

According to the critic Liu Mengxi, *The Bolshevik Salute* is a key to understanding Wang Meng's “stream of consciousness” works.<sup>53</sup> In *The Bolshevik Salute* it is very clear that Wang Meng was attempting to use a new way of writing and to create a new structure; it is also clear that this new way of writing was still not mature. It condenses thirty years of his experiences, sufferings, feelings and ideas, and, as such, has the flavor of an autobiography. At the beginning, it was written in time sequence, recalling and narrating the main character Zhong Yicheng's life over thirty years. It is written in a straightforward matter of fact manner like “a note form account”. Later, he decided to adopt a psychological structure to write it, and not rigidly adhere to a time and space continuum, but reflect objective reality from the character's subjective perspective. This psychological approach mimics the reality of a mind flitting from one topic to another, as time goes forward and backward, jumping from one point to another over the thirty year period from January 1949 to January 1979. It describes how Zhong Yicheng feels in his heart a sense of hurt and devastation from the sufferings induced by twenty years of carrying out the ultra-leftist class struggle line. The story proceeds in

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<sup>53</sup> Xu Jiming & Wu Yihua (eds.), *Wang Meng zhuanji*, p. 219

the order in which the main character recalls events, going backwards and forwards, following the meanderings of the character's mind. The way of writing caused wide repercussions across the country, and in this sense the story generated a lot of interest under the special circumstances of the time.

Throughout the whole story, Wang Meng omits mention of the character's appearance, characteristics, historical background, circumstances or behaviour. Wang Meng concentrates on describing Zhong Yicheng's feelings, moods, changes in his mental state, and the suffering and conflicts in his heart. This kind of portrayal is very different from traditional Chinese narrative stories. In Wang Meng's earlier works he had already paid particular attention to his characters' inner worlds. For example in *The Young Newcomer in the Organisation Department*, there are some descriptions of the psychological activity of Lin Zhen and Zhao Huiwen. After twenty years he attempts once again a new mode of expression, but when he is criticized he still stands firm:

“It is precisely man, and not other things, it is the individual, each with his own given name and surname, a unique, irreplaceable living person not an abstract, representative group (class, stratum, group.....) which is first and foremost the object of literature. It is precisely people's souls, characters and fate which can attract the reader's heart and move the reader's soul.”<sup>54</sup>

This concept of writing reflected debates about the theory of human nature and humanitarianism which circulated around the country after 1978. This is not a new principle for the creative artist, but for the literary world at the end of 1970s, a fettered literary world unused for a long time to consider the principles of writing, it is a revolutionary principle.

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<sup>54</sup> WMWJ, Vol.6, p. 46

*The Eyes of the Night* is “one of the best illustrations of this refined technique<sup>55</sup> among Wang Meng’s “stream of consciousness” stories. It describes the protagonist unused to the modern city after twenty years living in the remote countryside. This is especially true at night when there are all kinds of lights, traffic, and crowds talking about modern topics of life like democracy, just like people talk about legs of lamb in remote towns.<sup>56</sup> The noise of pop music and classical music coming together, young people’s decadent lifestyle and official corruption all leave the protagonist feeling bewildered. The story basically describes Wang Meng’s own experiences and thoughts in the initial period after he returned to Beijing from Xinjiang. *The Eyes of the Night* is a very short story of a few pages with no strong political slant, but a profusion of words which concentrate on describing the protagonist’s subtle feelings.

*The Butterfly* portrays an old rehabilitated high official (vice director of a government department), Zhang Siyuan, recalling the experiences of several different periods in his life, including his regret over mistreating his first wife Haiyun. Zhang Siyuan went back and visited the village where he was sent to “seek his soul”. “Losing one’s soul” and “seeking one’s soul” are the main theme throughout the whole story. As far as the content of the story is concerned, it can be viewed as old-fashioned spiritual sustenance for high officials who would be encouraged by this to understand that their responsibilities were to the people they were supposed to be looking after. The same kind of message can be seen in other stories of this period: *The Loyal Heart* and *The*

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<sup>55</sup> Leo Ou-Fan Lee, *The Politics of Technique: Perspectives of Literary Dissidence in Contemporary Chinese Fiction*. Jeffrey C. Kinkley (ed.) *After Mao Chinese Literature and Society 1978-1981*, p.165.

<sup>56</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 236

*Most Precious* both belong to the same “qingguan” (upright official) pattern. This can be seen as a type of character going back to models like Hai Rui,<sup>57</sup> something absolutely traditional which sets out to reinforce existing values, provide example figures for officials and raise the morale of ordinary people. Lots of contemporary Chinese stories inherited this old-fashioned political aspiration, encouraging the view that good officials could solve all problems. Such stories included *Xinxing* (The New Star) by Ke Yunlu, and *Qiao Changzhang shangren ji* (Manager Qiao Takes Office) by Jiang Zilong. The authors present getting people of the right character and motivation as the answer to society’s problems rather than changes to the social, political or legal system.

Looking at the writing style, *The Butterfly* uses even more interior monologue, imagination and symbolism. It ignores the limitations of time and space, jumping about from the past, to the future and to the present. The skill here is considerably superior to the earlier story *The Bolshevik Salute*. The switches of time and location are much smoother and do not involve separate plots. Another “stream-of-consciousness” story is *The Dream of the Sea* which uses essentially the same style but with a different plot. *The Voice of Spring* is slightly different from these stories in writing style: its style is much closer to that of *The Eyes of the Night*. It narrates the experience of seeing a new life through the eyes of the protagonist, concentrating on the bizarre nature of the present rather than using flashbacks. Wang Meng shows his talent in expression, in the story *The Voice of Spring* he uses a series of symbols to underline the main issue that spring is the new start of life. These include the sound of foreign songs coming from

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<sup>57</sup> The story of Hai Rui describes a typical ideal high official (yingtian xunfu) in Ming dynasty.



the tape recorder of a woman holding a baby, the woman learning a foreign language, the narrator imagining his north-west home town, imagining the activities of his youth, and being very glad to see the young generation studying hard to build a new future for the nation. The same kind of hope and encouragement to young people is displayed in another story *Kites*. The narrator describes a young couple, looking at modern city life from their perspective. This is a break with the pattern of last five stories, which all used a male narrator to describe in a monologue his feelings about the past twenty years, and what attitude to adopt to the present situation. These protagonists are very much like Wang Meng himself in their spiritual experiences: they are of the same age group as Wang Meng and like him are educated intellectuals and cadres. There are few characters in these stories. *The Bolshevik Salute* has three characters: the protagonist and his wife, and a very kind boss; *The Eyes of the Night* has two characters: the protagonist and the son of a corrupt official. *The Voice of Spring* has only one, the narrator-protagonist. The format of these stories is the protagonist recalling the past twenty years, his experiences of life, love and political criticism, contrasted with his present life. In *The Dream of the Sea* are his youthful dreams; his hopes of contributing his efforts to the great enterprise; his feeling of new life, with everything changing for the better and his excitement at the future prospects. All these end with a vision of a brighter future, the protagonist encouraging himself to work hard, put all his energies into his work, and regain the lost time. *Kites* is the story of two young people learning a foreign language in spite of very poor living and work conditions, an encouragement to the younger generation to equip themselves with knowledge for the bright future.

From the contents, ideas and main themes of these stories, we can see a very conservative attitude. He does not comment on and criticize the past: the emphasis is on describing new developments, new good things in life and images of a bright future. This basically it is not a realistic style but an idealistic style; most characters are not well portrayed, there is no development of the characters; the protagonists enjoy interior monologues with themselves, the narrative is subjective and from a single perspective. This style of writing has its own shortcomings and is not a mature form in the hands of Wang Meng, but it clearly did represent a major break with the literary theories and products of the previous thirty years. Those theories demanded a complete plot, the story was structured around the progression of the plot, the inner worlds of the characters merited little attention, characters were treated as adjuncts to the plots, not as individuals with their own views of reality. Human feelings and humanity were missing. These new stories later encouraged a debate over humanity, but this aspect was much less immediately obvious than the writing style—the “stream of consciousness”. However, in the long run it did have a positive influence on the development of the role of human nature and human feelings in literature, leading the way back to the “literature is the study of humanity” ideal.

These stories of Wang Meng are at the core of evaluating his “stream of consciousness” writings. There are two views. One considers that his works describe the individual’s real interior world: by using monologues, images and symbolism his new way of writing placed him at the forefront of contemporary novelists. “Wang Meng’s explorations have achieved great merit, his stories may very possibly initiate a

new literary school in China, a part of the main stream of Chinese socialist literature”.<sup>58</sup> Some people expressed particular approval, such as the young writer Liu Xinwu in his articles “*Ta zai chi woniu*” (He Is Eating Snails)<sup>59</sup> and “*Fudiao Xiaoshuo*” he “*Guaiwei Xiaoshuo*” (“Polyphonic Stories” and “Unusual Flavored Stories”).<sup>60</sup> The opposite reaction was that Wang Meng's stories, in language, style and ideas cause certain “disappointment”. This view is expressed in a reader's letter published as *Wo shiwang le* (I Am Disappointed),<sup>61</sup> and in an article *Buyao beili qunzhong* (Do not turn your back on the masses) which said: “exploring things purely from the perspective of artistic style, writing just in order to display some kind of style, it is to take a wrong turning.”<sup>62</sup> These articles expressed some people's initial doubts and negative attitudes to his works. Comments both for and against were published in many newspapers and magazines, but the approach proceeded in a positive atmosphere, and most of the critics discussed this new “stream of consciousness” style from an academic or literary angle not from a political one.

The concept of fiction was changing at the beginning of the 1980s. People's attitude towards human nature was undergoing a fundamental change. For the past thirty years “human” had meant “class”. “Class struggle” and “political standpoint” had been saddled with a distorted sociological sense, but following the revival of humanitarianism, the value of human beings was rediscovered, as people appreciated once again the age-old truth that “literature is the study of humanity.” The novel structure of *The Bolshevik Salute* attracted a lot of concern and debate. Although it was

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<sup>58</sup> Xu Jiming & Wuyihua (ed.), Wang Meng zhuanji, p. 408.

<sup>59</sup> *Beijing wanbao*, 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1980.

<sup>60</sup> *Beijing wanbao*, 12<sup>th</sup> July, 1980.

<sup>61</sup> Chen Junfeng, *Beijing wanbao*, 17<sup>th</sup> July, 1980.

not one of the best of the “stream of consciousness” works, it was one of the most influential. Initially the debate centred around the mode of expression, and then gradually spread to the thought and content. At the beginning of the 1980s the “stream of consciousness” style had a widespread influence on contemporary literature, and describing the personal inner world of characters became a common literary phenomenon. Other examples include Chen Rong’s novel *At Middle Age* which features descriptions of the psychological state of the main character Lu Wenting; Zhang Jie’s story *Love Cannot Be Forgotten* which explores the mental world of the leading character. New Period Literature was developing in tandem with society, people gradually realized that true life and true characters were worthy topics for literature, which had to be realistic in its portrayal of them. The first stage in the study of Xinchao (New Wave) literature concentrates almost exclusively on these “stream of consciousness” works by Wang Meng.<sup>63</sup>

### **3.2 Reminiscences of Exile**

#### **Hard Choice: Life in Xinjiang**

Going to Xinjiang was hard but turned out to have been a fortunate choice for Wang Meng. He repeatedly stressed after his return that he chose to go to Xinjiang, and was not forced to go there. This choice helped him avoid many disasters which occurred to other individuals and their families, such as public struggle sessions, personal attacks, violence, imprisonment, etc. This was the fate of other young writers like Liu Binyan,

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<sup>62</sup> Cui Xilu, *Zhonggou dangdai wenxue yanjiu gailun*, p. 277

Cong Weixi, Deng Youmei and Zhang Xianliang. In Xinjiang Wang Meng suffered none of this; on the contrary, the Uygur people treated him very cordially and accepted him as one of their own. He received a real “re-education” from the Yili Uygur peasants. Wang Meng developed and matured in Xinjiang. Everyday life there became a part of his mentality and this surfaces in many of his works, such as the story *Yinggu* (Eagle Valley), the short story *Linjie de chuang* (The Window Overlooking the Street), and the series of reminiscences entitled *Zai Yili* (In Yili). Wang Meng spent sixteen of his golden years (from the age of 29 to 45) in Xinjiang, including eight years in Yili. The influence of his Xinjiang experiences on his life and his works was huge.

When Wang Meng arrived at Urumqi, members of the Xinjiang Writers’ Association looked after him, and arranged for him to be editor of a literary magazine. Soon afterwards the situation changed, and in 1965 the “Wenyi zhengfeng” movement (literary rectification movement) spread up throughout the whole country. The political atmosphere was rather tense, and even though he was only just over thirty he was still regarded as a “big rightist”. The Xinjiang Writers’ Association was obliged to send him to the Yili countryside to “observe life”, and when the situation worsened this could be called “remoulding”. Wang Meng went to the Yili countryside to work with peasants but he was still paid a government salary. The Yili Bayandai commune where he went enjoyed a reasonable standard of living and production conditions compared favourably with other places in Xinjiang.<sup>64</sup> Even though that period was hard for Wang Meng, he had many fond memories and few complaints or criticisms about life in Xinjiang.

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<sup>63</sup> Cui Xilu, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue yanjiu gailun*, p. 277-281

Another advantage for Wang Meng was the fact that his wife Cui Ruifang fully supported him, which was a great source of comfort to him. When he was twenty-four he was labelled a “rightist”, and Cui Ruifang, a middle school teacher, married him and supported him through five years physical labour. She also gave her full support over his decision to go to Xinjiang. This made an enormous difference to Wang Meng’s state of mind as he saw many other marriages break down as a result of political movements. Wang Meng’s story *The Bolshevik Salute* can be seen as including a testament to his wife. The main character Zhong Yicheng has a wonderful woman, Ling Xue, to support him as she firmly resolves to marry him and stick with him through all the difficult years. This plot is very close to Wang Meng’s own experiences. The support of his family and other factors in Xinjiang helped Wang Meng retain an optimistic attitude towards life throughout his trials.

Although the twenty years were hard for Wang Meng, his life was much easier than that of many other writers, and he had no problems keeping his faith in socialism after he was rehabilitated. Wang Meng was aware of the paradox and explained his change in writing philosophy:

“It’s true that the forty-six year old author is much more sophisticated than the twenty-one year old, and although I now exhibit an acrimonious and lacerating contempt in satirising all of these negative events, I have also come to understand that ‘the real is the rational’.<sup>65</sup> I have come to understand and stress fair play, forgiveness, tolerance and patience, to stress stability and unity. In the acrimony there is warmth, in the fierce sarcasm, understanding, and behind the bitterness, a fervent expectation.

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<sup>64</sup> Xu Jiming & Wu Yihua (eds.), Wang Meng zhuanji, p. 3-29

<sup>65</sup> Hegel: “The real is the rational and the rational is the real.”

I have come to understand that people must have ideals and that ideals cannot be realised overnight. I know too that using literature to influence life is easier than solid, hard work. That is why my writing now lays stress on stimulating my readers, on encouraging and consoling them, rather than on just exposing contradictions and forcing resolutions of social and political issues.”<sup>66</sup>

The article written in 1980 draws attention to his attitude in his newer works now that he was more versed in the ways of the world. He was taking a kind of “rushì” (official career) attitude, something that had been the highest ideal of traditional Chinese intellectual: “zouru shìtu”—become as high a government official as possible in order to save the people from misery. In history many of the leading poets were appointed government officials, men such as Wang Anshi or Su Shi. Wang Meng was walking the same path as his literary predecessors. This official success may well have inclined him to a more conservative stance and muted his previous trenchant criticism.

Wang Meng basically avoided addressing the bad and the black side of his experiences in Xinjiang, these did not figure in his writings. In the series *In Yili* he uses a chronicle style to describe his 16 years in Xinjiang, especially in Yili. He adopted a positive attitude without criticism or complaint, and was well treated by local Uygur people. All the characters are based on real persons. He describes the very different Uygur people’s characters and customs, something which contrasts sharply with the Han Chinese. The people of the village where he stayed are presented as lovely in spite of their shortcomings, although his portrayal of some of the characters is rather flat.

Wang Meng expressed his frustrations in Xinjiang: “I also have my secret pain, which

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<sup>66</sup> Wang Meng, *The Butterfly and Other Stories*, p. 18-19

has grabbed hold of my pen, taking away my right to sing out; there is no pain greater than this.”<sup>67</sup> He took a very positive interest in Uygur culture, something which distinguished him from many Han visitors to Xinjiang, and set about learning the Uygur language. After a year he could communicate with local people, and soon he could read Uygur stories.<sup>68</sup> He was able to develop a good relationship with the local people, and often acted as interpreter for them in meetings. He even translated Uygur stories into Chinese, for example *Benteng zai Yili heshang* (Running on the Yili River). After Wang Meng’s “stream of consciousness” writing provoked a lot of adverse comment, he turned back and wrote the series of stories entitled *In Yili*, apparently as a conscious decision to return to familiar solid ground and avoid any further controversy over his adoption of way-out writing styles.

### **Eight Sad Stories**

In the series of eight stories that make up *In Yili*, the main character of each story suffers some tragic fate, a fact which provokes Wang Meng’s sympathy. Wang Meng describes characters who suffered pain, as a way of expressing his own suffering throughout the whole series, Wang Meng does not once mention directly his own suffering, yet it underlies all the stories.

The first story is called *Oh, Muhamode Amaide*, and features a young Uygur man with good Chinese who was educated at a meteorology college. He was passionately fond of literature and art. He would recite the classical Uygur poems he loved, and worshipped

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<sup>67</sup> Xu Jiming & Wu Yihua (ed.), Wang Meng zhuanji, p. 13



the imaginative world of poetry. However his bright future was taken away and he was a victim of the poverty existing in the countryside. The lack of economic development which characterised those times destroyed the lives of people like him. Wang Meng openly sympathised with the young man who had been blighted by the political turbulence.

*Danhui de yanzhu* (Pale Grey Eyes) portrays a man called Maerker. He is a skilled carpenter who roamed about before he arrived in the village. The most beautiful woman in the village with pale grey eyes accepted him and they lived together. Other people called him a “stupid guy”, but he could make exquisite furniture, and insisted on arguing with people who wanted to prevent him going to Yijing City to sell his goods. His love for his wife Aliya was constant, and when she fell ill he sold the house and spent all his money trying to cure her illness, but all in vain. After his wife died he remained faithful to her and even when a young girl wanted to marry him, he was not moved by that but continued to respect the memory of his wife and stuck to his difficult solitary life. In the end people showed their respect to him and called him “Afanti” (sir). The tragic character is the young girl Ailiman who fell in love with Maerker and waited for him for a long time, under pressure from parents and public opinion, hoping to marry him. After she was ignored time after time by Maerker, she eventually became so angry that she rushed off and married an old tailor who had been divorced several times from young wives. She becomes the real tragic figure by the end of the story.

Yisimaer is the main character of the third story *Hao hanzi Yisimaer* (A Good Man

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<sup>68</sup> Xu Jiming & Wu Yihua (ed.), *Wang Meng zhuanji*, p. 22

Yisimaer). He has many shortcomings: he is greedy, boastful and as a leader likes to use trickery to cheat people. Wang Meng finds Yisimaer to have some good points too, for example his organisational ability and his creativity, both of which are fully displayed at the irrigation works building site. He does not believe in hospitals and medicine and ends up dying in his fifties from some minor illness. His tragedy is to lose his life through lack of basic medical knowledge.

The fourth and the fifth stories describe the old couple Mumin and his wife Ayimuhan who were Wang Meng's landlord and with whom he lived for six years. These were the two local people that Wang Meng was most familiar with. These two stories: *Xuyan de tuwu xiaoyuan* (The Hut with the Half-open Gate) and *Putao de jingling* (The Spirit of the Grape) are filled with Wang Meng's own emotions. When he thought about them, they meant a lot to him:

“There was a kind of inexpressible love, sense of responsibility, feeling of dependability and straight-forwardness.....They were not greedy, nor lazy, nor jealous, nor slack, nor impetuous either, neither caustic nor feeble, neither concealing their feelings nor brash.”<sup>69</sup>

The old man Mumin had not even had a basic education, his life and his perspective were very restricted like a typical Chinese peasant. On the other hand, he had his own philosophy and wisdom, and could see through things; he was honest, kind and reserved, and, as he grew older, he believed more and more in his Muslim religion. Wang Meng had deep discussions with him on many subjects, such as the nature of a country, the current world political situation, modern technology, like radio, trains etc.

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<sup>69</sup> WMWJ, Vol. 1, p. 441

He commented that countries should not be without kings, ministers and poets, asked what plastic looked like, what a train looked like and firmly resolved to buy a radio to find out about the outside world. Mumin knew how to use grapes to make wine without adding any chemicals to it; the wine contained with the spirit of nature. The wine was also blended with the wisdom and spirit of Mumin.

The old man Mumin's words and behaviour had a kind of power, which provided Wang Meng with enlightenment. When he thought about it, Wang Meng often felt he got some "inspiration, power and comfort". "I feel they gave me too much, more than I could ever use in all my life. I feel that if I say I made some progress over twenty years, the credit should firstly go to them."<sup>70</sup> The old couple had a great influence on Wang Meng and he had enormous respect for them. During these difficult years the old couple treated him like their own son and looked after him. For Wang Meng the most important thing was the enlightenment he received from them; he came to understand more about people and life.

The sixth story *Aimila guniang de aiqing* (Aimila's Love) describes the sad love story of a girl called Aimila who marries for love. Practical life and economic reality destroy her dream of love, she becomes unhappy with her dishevelled hair and dirty face. The joy of love disappears so quickly as her youth and beauty are taken away. Wang Meng saw Aimila repeatedly pay the price for her love, and not receive the reward he felt was her due. He was very sympathetic to the girl, and said: "I did not know about other things, but could taste the happiness she got from the price she paid...If she paid this

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

price, one could imagine her joy. She has to be admired. I pray she is happy forever.”<sup>71</sup>

The seventh story *Xiaoyao you* (Peregrinations) describes Wang Meng’s eight years in Yili from 1965 to 1973 and his complex feelings towards the place. He describes a small courtyard in Yili City where he and his family lived two years. He went back home at weekends from the village where he worked. He describes the Uyгур landlady, a young neighbouring couple, and the events which occurred in the courtyard. When people of Xinjiang talked about Yili, no matter where they came from, they always praised Yili. Even in Urumqi’s “Five-seven” cadre school, they talked about how wonderful Yili was, and wanted to go back to Yili after they had finished their “retraining” course. They used to comfort themselves with this thought. Once when Wang Meng was drunk he uttered his true feelings: “No, what I am thinking is not to go back to Yili”<sup>72</sup> These words surprised everybody including himself. After finishing “cadre school” only one person went back Yili. The others who spent all their time saying how bad Urumqi was and how wonderful Yili was, all stayed in Urumqi. The differences between the capital city of a province and a remote city were enormous, even with Yili’s beautiful scenery. Wang Meng described truthfully his conflicting feelings. That was the reality for everybody, he was not willing to fool himself or others. He saw a bird in a cage, wanted to buy it and let it fly away free, and used this familiar image as a symbol for himself, indicating the sorrow in his heart.<sup>73</sup>

The eighth story is called *Biancheng huacai* (The Colourful Remote City), and includes

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<sup>71</sup> WMWJ, Vol.1, p. 469

<sup>72</sup> WMWJ, Vol.1, p. 472

<sup>73</sup> WMWJ, Vol.1, p. 509

five anecdotes. For example, one episode describes how they get to see a film “Bingshan shang de laike” (Visitor to Ice Mountain). The feeling and atmosphere of these stories is basically melancholic; most of the time Wang Meng was obliged to control his emotions and not show his feelings in front of others. When he was watching the film “Visitor to Ice Mountain” in a small theatre in Yili, a film he had watched several times in Beijing with his wife before going to Xinjiang, he could not help but cry out as his depression and sadness got the better of him. But Wang Meng does not indulge in elaborate descriptions of his state of mind, he rather creates an atmosphere with these short anecdotes with symbols like the caged bird.

Wang Meng does not attempt the use of any new creative writing techniques like in his “stream of consciousness” works. Here he writes in a traditional story-telling style, straightforward, attempting to explain himself completely in every case. He clearly did not want to leave any possibility of misunderstanding. He had seen how a small slip could develop into a calamity, like the way the short story *The Young Newcomer of Organisation Department* had made him a big rightist. He avoided comment on political issues and stuck to specifics. Nevertheless these stories can be seen as Wang Meng’s contribution to the prevalent “Shanghen wenxue” (Scar Literature) as many portray lives blighted by the economic conditions and ultra-leftist ideas of the Gang of Four period.

## Chapter IV: Cultural Re-evaluation

### --China and the West

#### 4.1 *Movable Parts*

##### Background

After 1976, New Period Literature flourished with over 1,000 new novels published between 1977 and 1985. This was six times greater than the total of novels published between 1949 and 1960.<sup>74</sup> The quantity was high but this was not necessarily an indication of the quality; in fact good, or reasonably good, works only amounted to about ten percent or so. With the rapid changes in life, the mortality rate for new fiction was high, so many works were soon forgotten. Those which survived are still facing the test of time, but *Huodong bian renxing* (Movable Parts) is one of the survivors, and from its depth of cultural content there is every indication that it will continue to be read.

*Movable Parts* was written in 1985. It is permeated with Wang Meng's considered views on Chinese history and culture. At the time he had already experienced three major changes in his life and suffered the resulting frustrations. He was much more experienced and had a much better understanding of human nature and society than in the 1950s. It is one of his most significant works and also a milestone in contemporary Chinese literature. Wang Meng started his writing career with fiction; he began writing his maiden work, the novel *Long Live Youth* in 1953 when he was nineteen. In the mid-

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<sup>74</sup> Cui Xilu, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue yanjiu gailun*, p. 306-308

1980s, in the Chinese literary world there was a “novel craze” (changpian xiaoshuo re), when many writers felt that the success of a novel was much more significant than that of a short story. Novels seemed weightier to readers and able to make a bigger mark in the history of literature. There were some good quality novels in the mid-1980s, such as Zhang Chengzhi’s *Jin muchang* (Golden Farm), Zhang Wei’s *Guchuan* (Old Boat), Mo Yan’s series of novels *Honggaoliang jiazou* (Red Sorghum Family), Zhang Xianliang’s *Nanren de yiban shi nüren* (Half of Man is Woman) and so on. Writing a novel takes a long period of gestation. Some writers aiming for quick results rushed out two or three novels in a year but these were very poor in quality. *Movable Parts* is one of the most important novels of this period and only Wang Meng’s second novel in over thirty years. Most of his works are short stories and novelettes; he is very accomplished in these, but he particularly wanted to produce a full-length novel, and said: “The novel is my life, my flesh and blood.”<sup>75</sup> After Wang Meng resigned as Minister of Culture he made a long term plan for his writing, and said: “Now I am proceeding to write a series of novels, from the year before last (1990) I started planning to write a novel every two years, in a ten year period, to complete five novels.”<sup>76</sup> His first novel in the Season series was published in 1992, called *Lian’ai jijie* (Love Season), and describes the love lives and revolutionary work experiences of young people in the 1950s.

*Movable Parts* is a work of the “root-searching” school, which attempts to expose deficiencies in traditional Chinese culture. In the mid-1980s, when the “root-searching” school sprang up, many writers joined in this trend. “Scar literature” had exposed what

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<sup>75</sup> WMWJ, Vol.8, p. 587

happened in the Great Cultural Revolution, and how people had been badly wounded by it. This went on to develop to the stage of questioning why the nation went down such an arduous road, stimulating the “introspection” (fansi) literature which ended up facing the question of what was the problem that lay at the bottom of Chinese culture. “Root-Searching” literature was a development of “introspection” literature. At the very beginning of the “root-searching” movement was the writer Han Shaogong who published an article called “*Wenxue de ‘gen’*” (The ‘Root’ of Literature) in *Zuojia* (Writer) in April 1984. Another writer, Zheng Wanlong, published an article “*Wo de ‘gen’*” (My ‘Roots’) in *Shanghai Wenxue* (Shanghai Literature) in May 1985. This was followed by the young writer A Cheng with an article “*Wenhua zhiyue zhe renlei*” (Culturally Limited Human Being) published in *Wenyibao* (Literary Daily). After that *Wenyibao* started up a special column to discuss the issue of “root searching”. It was seen as an aspect of creative writing which rapidly became enshrined in theory, which in turn influenced writing.<sup>77</sup> Some early works of this movement include A Cheng’s series of three stories *Qiwang* (The King of Chess), *Haiziwang* (The King of Children), *Shuwang* (The King of Trees), Han Shaogong’s story *Ba ba ba* (Dad Dad Dad) and *Gui qu lai* (Return, Go, Come), and Zheng Wanlong’s *Huang yan* (Yellow Smoke). The works of the “root-searching” school focused on the cultural phenomena of remote areas, describing the early stages of human culture. The movement criticised traditional Chinese culture for being isolationist, stagnant and ultra-conservative. It called for a national cultural rejuvenation, and advocated rebuilding Chinese spirit with a modern sense of awareness. Wang Meng was influenced by the “root-searching” school and *Movable Parts* is one of his major “root-searching” works.

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<sup>76</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 679



*Movable Parts* describes the Ni family's miserable and painful story. It deals with the themes of human nature and Chinese traditional culture, and criticises the traditional morality which destroyed ordinary people's lives. Wang Meng adopted the 1980s' modern, realistic style to take a critical look at the decline of an old fashioned family. There are many famous works which analyse and condemn the old social system by describing a traditional family. Among classical Chinese literary works, for example, there is Cao Xueqin's novel *Hong Lou Meng* (The Dream of the Red Chamber). This is one of the best of such stories, describing the colourful life of a traditional illustrious family, including the complex relationships between relatives, their degenerate lifestyle and the way that arranged marriage destroys pure love, as in the case of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu. Among modern literary works, Ba Jin's novel *Jia* (Family) exposes the way the patriarchal clan system of a traditional aristocratic family perverts human nature, and how an idealistic young man rebels against it. Cao Yu's modern plays *Leiyu* (Thunder) and *Beijingren* (Pekinese) criticise the hypocrisy of the old fashioned family, and the decline in traditional values. *Family*, *Thunder* and *Pekinese* all describe illustrious but declining urban families with luxurious living habits.

In the mid-1980s, several stories on the family theme appeared on the contemporary Chinese literary scene. Readers reacted very favourably to novels such as Mo Yan's *Honggaoliang* (Red Sorghum) and Su Tong's *Qiqie chengqun* (Crowd of Wives and Concubines, filmed as *Da hong denglong gaogao gua*--Raise Up the Red Lantern), but these were both fictional accounts, or at least based on the lives of other families.

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<sup>77</sup> Cao Wenxuan, *Zhongguo bashiniandai wenxue xianxiang yanjiu*, p. 234

Wang Meng's was based on his own family and involved him in real personal pain. *Movable Parts* can, to a certain extent, be regarded as a kind of autobiography. It is significant that these 1980s' works described families of the 1930s to 1940s. Writers did not choose the period from the 1950s to 1980s to locate their stories, a period they were much more familiar with. We may surmise that this is because the cultural content in the 1930s to 1940s was more diverse, the way the traditional patriarchal clan destroyed people's lives was much clearer than in later periods, and that was the time when there was the sharpest conflict between Western concepts of modern life and Chinese traditional ethics. The existence of a 40-50 year time gap also lends a certain distance increasing the atmosphere and perhaps making the stories more attractive.

Another main theme of the novel is the lives and attitudes of Chinese intellectuals who are shown as living in mental anguish and confusion. Lu Xun's story *Kong Yiji*, portrays a traditional intellectual Kong Yiji who is unable to pass the imperial examinations and degenerates to thieving. Nevertheless, he always acts the old-fashioned intellectual; since he was educated he was superior to common people who were not. Lu Xun criticised the traditional imperial examination system and the old-fashioned intellectual pedants it produced. Qian Zhongshu's novel *Weicheng* (Besieged City) describes a group of young intellectuals who have received a modern Western education. When they are faced with real life they feel confused and unable to cope. They have their intellectual shortcomings: they are hypocritical, weak and selfish. They rush to a city and then want to get out and rush to another city. They wander round in a besieged city of the mind. Chinese intellectuals suffer more mental anguish than uneducated peasants. The peasants that inhabit the Chinese countryside are backward,

cut off, uneducated, poor, and follow traditional ethics. Most intellectuals originated in the countryside and had a close relationship with peasants and the countryside. When Chinese intellectuals moved from the countryside to the city and faced the very different modern city life they suffered a painful period of transition..

When the critic Wang Gan asked Wang Meng whether *Movable Parts* had some autobiographical elements, Wang Meng said: “(It) certainly contains experiences which are engraved on my bones and in my heart.”<sup>78</sup> Wang Meng uses his trenchant pen mercilessly to interrogate the innermost souls of Ni Wucheng, Jingyi and Jingzhen. He exposes their vicious natures and their abnormal behaviour. If we compare Wang Meng’s other novel *Long Live Youth*, which was written in 1950s when he was nineteen, with *Movable Parts* written in the mid-1980s when he was in his fifties, the content, ideas and writing skill show much more maturity. *Long Live Youth* offers lively descriptions of teenage girls full of vigour and enthusiasm, who pursue truth, goodness, beauty, who sing the praises of the new life and are prepared contribute all their efforts to building up the country. From its own perspective it draws a vivid picture of 1950s’ Chinese society: the language style is pure and fresh, filled with the ardent young people’s beautiful dreams and hopes. *Long Live Youth* was in tune with the government propaganda of the time but because Wang Meng was labelled a “rightist” the work languished for twenty six years until it was finally published in 1979.<sup>79</sup> It was warmly received then and revised for production as a film of the same name.<sup>80</sup> Thirty years after he was first writing *Long Live Youth*, when Wang Meng had

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<sup>78</sup> 当然 有自己非常刻骨铭心的经验。WMWJ, Vol.8, p. 572

<sup>79</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 687

<sup>80</sup> It was selected as one of the ten most favorite books of national middle school students in 1981, and won the *Renmin wenxue* publisher’s award in 1986. WMWJ, Vol.10, p. 345

experienced many unpleasant times, he started a self-examination, thinking about human nature, reality, ugliness, truth, life, Eastern and Western culture, etc. *Movable Parts* reveals the falseness, evil and ugliness he saw, and coldly and ruthlessly condemns the traditional morality which controlled people's minds and led them to tragic ends. These two novels show how sharp is the contrast between the Wang Meng of the 1950s and that of the 1980s.

### **A Typical Old-fashioned Chinese intellectual**

Ni Wucheng was a typical old-fashioned Chinese intellectual; he experienced cultural conflict between Chinese and Western culture, he was puzzled by the reality of life and could not find the correct path. Wang Meng's attitude towards him is a complex mix, both critical and sympathetic. Since it was based on his own family, he is deeply and personally involved throughout the novel. The character Ni Wucheng is based on his father, and, when exposing the character's torment, Wang Meng found it enormously distressing. He said: "I can say this is the most painful work I wrote. When was writing sometimes I was going mad."<sup>81</sup> In a Chinese context particularly, it takes a certain courage to portray the negative side of human nature, especially when it is based on one's own family members.

The Ni family's hometown was in a poor remote area, with primitive customs and living habits. In the 1930s, the family was in serious decline. They were a typical small landlord family. Ni Wucheng's father was an opium addict and died when he was

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<sup>81</sup> WMWJ, Vol.8, p. 573

young. Ni Wucheng went to a modern school when he was nine years old. He was attracted by the articles of famous modern scholars like Liang Qichao (梁起超), Zhang Taiyan (章太炎) and Wang Guowei (王国维). Influenced by their thoughts on “reforming the political system, and saving the nation”, he announced his opposition to foot-binding and his support for “the land to the tiller” concept--very progressive ideas at that time. When he was still young he spent sleepless nights pondering the meaning of life. Displaying a strong spirit of rebelliousness, he threatened to smash the ancestors’ memorial tablets.<sup>82</sup> As befitted a modern man, his concept of marriage was to choose ones spouse freely rather than submit to a traditional arranged marriage. All these views were a threat to his family, especially his mother, so she quickly found ways of shackling him.

In order to blunt his spirit and maintain her control, she had her son learn to smoke opium, and had his cousin teach him masturbation. After smoking opium he became ill and nearly died. This determined Ni Wucheng to give up opium, go to a modern school, and receive a modern education. He was gradually becoming estranged from his rural life and his landlord family. His mother was so worried that she arranged a marriage to re-establish control over him. He accepted the family’s arranged marriage to please his old widowed mother, although he was marrying without love. After marriage, with a subsidy from his parents-in-law, he went Europe to study for two years.

After his return from Europe, Ni Wucheng took his wife Jingyi with him to the big

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<sup>82</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 50-51

modern city of Beijing where he became a university lecturer. Ni Wucheng worshipped Western civilisation, and wanted his wife to do the same, but Jingyi fought against him having the right to tell her what to do, so their house became a battle-field. He often did not return home at night, idling away his time and spending all their money on pleasure-seeking. His wife had to pawn things in order to get money to feed their children. His Western education was just a smattering of random knowledge; he had no specialised knowledge of any subject, could not solve any practical problems in life. Ni Wucheng was never able to escape from his origins in the remote and backward countryside. Traditional ideas and habits dominated his behaviour. Although he talked about Western things all the time, his mentality was that of a decadent old-fashioned intellectual. When provoked, his instinct was to revert to the coarse peasant behaviour he saw around him in his childhood. Once he was arguing with the three women of the family, Jingyi, Jingzhen and his mother-in-law. He felt exhausted and unable to win the argument so he used a traditional hometown trick of dealing with women: he shouted that he would take his trousers off. The three women rushed out at this threat, and he felt delighted at the success of his barbarity. On another occasion, he had been away from home for several days. Jingyi was furious because life was so difficult and the children did not have enough food, so she locked Ni Wucheng out when he tried to come back in. He was drunk and when he found out he could not get in, he became enraged and pulled the door-frame out. Everybody was shocked by that display of violence and brutality. Apart from endless empty talk about modern Western civilisation and modern thought, he had no practical contribution to life. His behaviour was no different from old fashioned Chinese intellectuals.

## **A Failure in Life**

However, when he was ill and penniless, his wife Jingyi displayed the traditional virtues expected of a Chinese wife. In a spirit of tolerance and magnanimity, she accepted him back, looked after him and pawned her own valuables to buy medicine for him and pay off his debts. For a short period (about four months) they enjoyed a quiet life without arguments, his illness was gradually cured, his loud-mouthed talk was replaced by a more conciliatory tone. He was encouraged by a German sinologist Shi Fugang to start doing some translation, and his worship of European civilisation was revived. Then, he was stopped by Jingyi scraping patches of mud off the floor, because she thought they were indicators of good fortune (yuanbao-money). He immediately despaired and felt the marriage was destined to end. Helped by friends he found a new lecturing job at a university. In spite of his wife's pregnancy he went to consult three solicitors for advice on divorce. The solicitors all felt his behaviour was outrageous. All his fine words about Western civilisation were clearly a sham, he had no spirit of humanity. After Jingyi denounced him at a restaurant in front of his friends, he lost face and tried to commit suicide but did not succeed. He abandoned his wife and children and left home, his Western dreams and espousal of a modern life style in tatters.

Ni Wucheng reveres modern science, but again in a quite impractical way. He takes his son to a friend's home, and borrows some money, and invites his son to go to a restaurant and have a good meal. This makes the son feel ashamed of him and refuse to go when the wife has such a struggle to find food for the family. In the end he uses the

borrowed money to buy a thermometer, but this is a completely useless thing for a poor family without food. (For him it is a symbol of modern science). He also has a strange enthusiasm for baths and brushing teeth, for him indicators of a high standard of civilisation. When he has left home, after several years without contact, he suddenly writes a letter, particularly stressing many times that the children should brush their teeth everyday, and not forget to take a bath, and pay attention to nutrition.<sup>83</sup> However he is not concerned about their poverty at all.

Ni Wucheng had abandoned traditional Chinese virtues but kept all the vices; he had espoused Western values, but only at the superficial level of talking about them. As a contrast to Ni in the novel, Wang Meng provides the doctor, Zhao Shangtong. He appears as a perfect Chinese intellectual, just the opposite in behaviour to Ni Wucheng. Dr Zhao has been educated abroad and has the degree of Master of Medicine. He has his own clinic and he is proficient at his job. He makes a good living running his clinic and has an excellent reputation. In spite of their arranged marriage, he sincerely loves his wife. In everything there is a marked contrast with Ni Wucheng. Zhao has much more academic and practical ability than Ni, he respects the old and the young, helps the poor and sick, including Jingyi's family when they are in dire straits. Epitomising the virtues of the old-fashioned Chinese intellectual, Zhao is a "perfect" example of the best of Chinese and Western culture. Lu Xun had commented on this type of person: "Learns foreign skills, retains old Chinese customs. Skills should be new, thought should be old."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 294

<sup>84</sup> 学了外国本领，保存中国旧习。本领要新，思想要旧。Quoted from: Zeng Zhennan, Wang Meng lun, p. 181



In the 1940s, Ni Wucheng is unemployed, wanders round for a time then suddenly goes to Yan'an, the CCP base area, although at that time he has no great revolutionary convictions. In the 1960s he is labelled a rightist but adopts an attitude of expediency, blindly following the current trend. In the 1970s he was included in the government policy for intellectuals and treated as an "old retired cadre". When he is nearly seventy, he asks himself: "When was your golden age?" His answer surprises everybody: "My golden age has not started yet."<sup>85</sup> This was his ultimate self-deception. He had wasted all his life and achieved nothing, nevertheless his answer still suggests:

"tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, next year or the year after next he might secure some major achievement.....This is neither negative nor positive, worthy of neither sympathy nor comfort. It is ultra flippant, like a charlatan whose head had fallen off, but he does not know how it has fallen off."<sup>86</sup>

Ni Wucheng's life was a real tragedy.

"He pursued glory throughout his life but he only brought humiliation to himself and others. He pursued happiness in his life but he only brought pain to himself and others. He pursued love throughout his life but he only brought enmity on himself and others."<sup>87</sup>

He is not kind to people even when they are dead. When he hears that Jingzhen had died, his comment is "one evil less". Taking over the rhetoric of the leftists, his "hatred was stronger than death."<sup>88</sup> When he hears that Jiang Zhaoshi (former mother-in-law) has died through being forced to drink dirty water by the Red Guards, he says: "That is

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<sup>85</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 318

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*

just the way to treat landlord class women like Jiang Zhaoshi.”<sup>89</sup> His inhumanity is hard to believe. He is not kind to children either. When his son is just a teenager, he complains about everything, placing a huge burden on the child’s shoulders. He never stops complaining. He leaves home before his third daughter is born; when she grows up she forgives him, and goes to see him, but even then he cannot stop his endless complaints. The third daughter is extremely disappointed and decides not to see him again; the same is true of another daughter.

When Jingyi (his ex-wife) hears he has died, she says that: “one pest eliminated for society.”<sup>90</sup> Ni Wucheng was a typical useless and superfluous person, who existed only for himself. The only good thing he did in his life was to ensure no one was distressed by his death.

### **Victims of Traditional Chinese Ethics**

In the battle with Ni Wucheng, Jingyi, Jingzhen and their mother Jiang Zhaoshi, three traditional women, formed an alliance, with even the two children, Ni Zao and Ni Ping, joining in. The problem was:

“The alliance was also an alliance against all civilisation and progress coming from outside, against happiness and against hope. It is also a unit which blockaded itself in, devastated itself, destroyed itself.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 302

<sup>88</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 328

<sup>89</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 324

<sup>90</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 302

<sup>91</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 237

The three women were victims of traditional Chinese ethics: they hated new things, stubbornly stuck to their values and old-fashioned beliefs, maltreating themselves and others. Jingzhen was Ni Wucheng's sister-in-law, and married when she was nineteen years old. A year later her husband died and, according to traditional Chinese ethics she could not remarry during her lifetime. She had to maintain her chastity for her dead husband and build a memorial archway like other young widows. She felt proud of it because nobody could pick fault with her and criticise her, but she failed to see how these traditional ethics destroyed her sense of humanity, wrecked her life and left her a depressed and bitter person.

Jingzhen forces herself to “preserve her chastity” (shoujie), which she herself calls: “keeping to my ambition” (shouzhi). This leaves her miserable for the rest of her life. Jingzhen is an intelligent, resolute and steadfast woman with great vitality, she has maternal instincts and a gentle and soft side just like other women. She took care of Ni Zao, was his first teacher of literature and as such had a great influence on his subsequent career as vice-professor of language. She recites old poems full of feelings, always borrowing many books, including both classic novels and the works of contemporary writers like Hu Shi, Xu Zhimo and Bing Xin. She is full of literary imagination. As an old-fashioned “chaste” woman, people sympathise with her situation and asked why an intelligent woman had such a sad life. On the other hand she had a kind of shocking viciousness which she uses to fight vigorously with people who wanted hurt her family and herself. When a cousin wanted to take over their family property after her father died, she fought him tooth and nail, and as the elders of the clan try to cheat them, she shows her intelligence and courage. In the end the three

'helpless' women win the battle. She was the most important one of the alliance of three women, and occupied a decisive role.

Jingzhen was always suspicious of the motives of others. When they lived in Peking, their neighbour Rehu (a nickname - 'Heater') came over and gave them a bowl of wonton when they really needed it. However Jingzhen suspected she was a spy and when the neighbour went back she started cursing and shouting, and jumping up and down. After the event, she could sit and laugh about it. Jingzhen hallucinated about her dead husband, going over and over all the events of their short life together until the present became more and more pointless. Every morning she was irritated by the unanswerable question: "What am I going to do today?" The pain she bore was "heavy as a mountain, invisible as smoke, boundless like the sky."<sup>92</sup> After she dies Ni Zao asks: "Why are there people who spend their lives like this?"<sup>93</sup> Jingzhen is portrayed as a typical victim of traditional Chinese ethics, She as a woman who was full of vitality and talent but never got to use these. Traditional ethics wreaked untold harm but they were so strongly rooted in society that their victims became proud of their pointless sacrifice.

Jingyi is another tragic type of woman. Jingyi, as Ni Wucheng's wife, maintains the age old concept of "marry once in lifetime".<sup>94</sup> She lives in poverty because of her irresponsible husband. She spends all her time worrying about nourishment for the stomach and is not able to consider nourishment for the spirit. All she wants is to keep

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<sup>92</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 209

<sup>93</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 327

<sup>94</sup> 从一而终, 嫁鸡随鸡, 嫁狗随狗.

her marriage going no matter how awful it is, no matter what her husband Ni Wucheng does outside. She always maintains her traditional duties to her husband; the only demand of him is that he should provide the house keeping money for the family, what Jingyi calls: “taking care of the family” (gujia). When Ni Wucheng is ill, she looks after him. Ni Wucheng endlessly bombards his wife with irrelevant things: Europe, modern love, etc., topics which drives her mad. She has a sharp tongue and quarrels bitterly with him, turning the home into a constant battleground. They have completely different educational backgrounds, beliefs, psychology and value systems. Jingyi rejects everything he says, especially about the West. Despite his behaviour then, and subsequently when he twice abandons her for years on end in total penury, her traditional attitude towards marriage does not allow her to consider divorce. After Liberation in 1949, the children persuade Jingyi to agree to divorce. The irony is that Ni Wucheng asks to take commemorative pictures of the divorce. At that time he is so gentle and considerate Jingyi thinks he must have changed his mind. Until the end she wants to stay in that terrible marriage.

Her tenacity both gave her the strength to continue and trapped her in her situation. She stuck to country superstitions, believing that mud on the floor shaped like yuanbao (old-fashioned money) was lucky. Her arguments with her husband were in part just a battle of wills, such as when they argued where was better, Europe or Mengguantun (their backward, remote home village). Jingyi wanted to be bright, lovely and gentle with Ni Wucheng, but in everything she was just opposite. Accepting the support and encouragement of the “paragon” Zhao Shangtong, she invites friends to a restaurant (a surprisingly modern act) where she amazes them all with her eloquence in a vehement

attack on her husband. She never tries to find another man after he left, even after the divorce, and as a result shares the same kind of tragic fate as her sister Jingzhen.

Their lovely children are affected by the terrible marriage as they live under the shadow of constant arguments. Ni Ping, their older daughter is extremely antagonistic to her father, refuses to listen to him and his endless complaints and will not even agree to walk along the street with him. Ni Zao, their son, has a bored and lonely childhood. He likes to read books, something seen as “no real childhood” by Ni Wucheng. Ni Zao is the only person in the family who can bear to listen to his father. The youngest daughter Ni He, born after Ni Wucheng left home, is so disappointed in him she does not want see him ever again, even before he dies. He leaves his children feeling deeply hurt. Ni Wucheng was neither a good husband nor a good father, he was useless for his family, society and even for himself.

### **Mature Writing Skill and Style**

Apart from the profound content of the story, it exemplifies his mature writing skill in its style.

#### **(1) The Significance of the Title**

Ni Wucheng did something unforgettable. He brought a Japanese children’s book called “Movable Parts”, for his son. In the book people are divided into three parts: head, body, and legs. Every part is interchangeable so that people of all different shapes can be made. This becomes a metaphor, which Wang Meng uses as the title of the

novel. It seems to say that people's fate is controlled by some invisible power, they all have their different characters and lives, nobody knows how things will turn out. As a boy, Ni Zao plays with this book and is fascinated by it. Both the thermometer and the children's book represent modern Western culture and technology in the 1930s to 1940s. They indicate that Ni Wucheng wants his children to be influenced by modern Western culture and technology. Ni Wucheng shows some love to his children through these things he brings for them, though in a very limited way. The novel's title echoes Wang Meng's complex feelings and reflects the theme of the story: the conflict between Western and Chinese culture. The strange title is not immediately understandable to most people; it defies the rules of Chinese grammar, and sounds like 1930s' language with some classical influence. At the same time the title looks quite modern, like a name from a 1980s cartoon film, or like the 1980s popular toys called "bianxing jingang" (变形金刚--transformers) also capable of being transformed into many different shapes. The title manages to convey the classical and the modern at the same time.

## (2) Using characters' own language style to portray them

Wang Meng portrays different character by using different language styles to display their individual personalities and interior worlds. For example, Jingzhen was born into a local doctor's family and was educated with classical books and poetry. She is portrayed with a distinctive language style: when she talks to herself she uses a half classical and half modern language,<sup>95</sup> something which was a very common language phenomenon after the May 4<sup>th</sup> period. She recites Tang poems and her own poetry, and

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<sup>95</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 31, second paragraph

sings local opera; Wang Meng quotes her in this, creating a distinctive language atmosphere for the character which helps to show her personality and her characteristics.<sup>96</sup> When describing the argument between Ni Wucheng and Jingyi, Wang Meng dispenses with quotation marks,<sup>97</sup> making the words of Jingyi appear as if she is pouring out her heart to the readers. This technique is very effective in creating a rapport between the reader and the character, making the reader more sympathetic to the character.

Wang Meng uses the same method to portray Ni Wucheng and Jingzhen. When the narrator becomes the first person, the character's interior world emerges, and the reasons for their behaviour become very clear. In the case of Ni Wucheng, from his own point of view he was full of modern Western ideas. For example, he challenges old-fashioned concepts on female beauty, in his own language style:

“China has some special concepts, even considering a morbid state as beautiful, and considering depression, gloom and destruction as beautiful. Therefore Chinese like foot-binding. They like twisted plum trees in pots. They like Lin Daiyu<sup>98</sup> who had third stage tuberculosis and Du Liniang<sup>99</sup> who had mental illness. Could Chinese girls ever have the physique and appearance of the athletes?”<sup>100</sup>

These comments show how Ni Wucheng used modern Western ideas he had absorbed to criticise traditional Chinese ethical education. This sounds modern but is not

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<sup>96</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 25-33

<sup>97</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 67, second paragraph

<sup>98</sup> Lin Daiyu is the famous girl character in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.

<sup>99</sup> Du Liniang (original name: Du Shiniang) is a famous tragic figure in a traditional Ming Dynasty story *Du Shiniang nutou baibaoxiang* (*Du Shiniang Angrily Throws Away the Jewellery Box*) in Feng Menglong's *Jingshi tongyan* (*警世通言 Comprehensive words to Admonish The World*) volume 32. She is a high-level prostitute, whom a young man plans to marry. They are on a boat on the way home, when the young man cannot resist the temptation of selling Du Shiniang to a rich man for money. Du Shiniang is so angry that she throws all her boxes of precious jewellery into the river and then jumps in herself.



necessary correct, as, for example, his comments on Lin Daiyu and Du Liniang.

### (3) Repetition of words to make a point

Wang Meng sometime repeats words to impress upon the reader what he is trying to say. For example, when Ni Wucheng is in bad mood, he looks at a copy of the calligraphy of the poet Deng Bianqiao (Qing dynasty) with the famous sentence: “Stupidity is difficult.” (nan de hutu). It is said that the poet, like others working as officials in government, had to pretend to be stupid. Sometimes that was very difficult, even more difficult than trying to be clever. Wang Meng quotes the sentence from the calligraphy as if it epitomises the whole situation. He repeats this motif using the word “hulihutu” (stupid) thirteen times to express his feelings, his complex love and hate for the character Ni Wucheng.

“It’s not easy to be stupid! Stupidly born, stupidly dies, stupidly marries, stupidly produces children, stupidly loves, stupidly hates, stupidly hurts others, stupidly hurt by others..... What kind of life is this, what kind of philosophy, what kind of culture, what kind of history! Why should I stupidly come like this, stupidly live, stupidly leave? If I had known earlier it was so stupid, why would I have bothered being born, stupidly going through all this!”<sup>101</sup>

Repeating thirteen times the word “stupid” indicates Ni Wucheng’s confused mind and the stupidity of his whole life.

### (4) Use of homophony

Wang Meng uses homophony to suggest different meanings to the obvious one in a

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<sup>100</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 117

<sup>101</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 116

witty manner that provides clues to the reader. For example, the family surname is Ni (倪, second tone); this is very near to the pronunciation of the character ni (拟, third tone) meaning “to imitate” suggesting that this family’s story was one typical example of millions of Chinese families. Another example is Ni Wucheng’s given name Wucheng (吾 third tone , 诚 second tone), appearing to mean “my sincerity”, but with its homophone suggesting wucheng (无 second tone, 成 second tone) “without accomplishments”, a clear comment on Ni Wucheng’s whole life.

#### (5) Changes in mood and pace

The structure of the novel is well arranged with a good pace. The story develops from tension, anger, and arguments to a relaxed, happy atmosphere, then back to tension and stress. A good example of Wang Meng’s ability to vary the tension is when Ni Wucheng does not return for several days, and Jingyi and the rest of the family calm down and get on with life. In the midst of the calm Ni Wucheng returns and the atmosphere turns tense again, with the three women preparing to fight him. Then Ni Wucheng is ill and after that he quietly living at home for several months. His relations with Jingyi appear to have greatly improved, and everybody is happy about it. And then she becomes pregnant again, Ni Wucheng finds another job, and it is like a bomb exploding as she finds out Ni Wucheng wants to divorce her.

#### (6) Cultural References and Local Colour

The novel includes formal quotations in more than twenty places. Nearly half of these are references to Hebei province—home town folk songs, some of them often sung by Jingzhen, and some local folk songs deeply embedded in Ni Wucheng’s mind. There

are classical poems taught to Ni Zao by Jingzhen. Firstly such quotations add interest, filling the story with different sounds and music and increasing its entertainment value. Some are recitations and singing by Jingzhen, comforting her in her hard life. Secondly, these folk songs and slogans provide a real context in time and space, giving readers a structure to use their imagination on. Thirdly, these quotations are rich in cultural content. They include a local folk song:

“Sheep shit, rub your feet with it, you are my younger brother, I am your old brother. Get a pot of wine, let’s drink together. When you’ve got drunk, beat the wife, if you beat the wife and she dies, how can you live? People with money, can find another, if you have no money, stick the drum on your back, and sing a folk song.”<sup>102</sup>

This folk song reflects local attitudes to marriage. These are the circumstances in which Ni Wucheng grew up, local attitudes exemplified in folk songs were imperceptible influences on his mind.

#### (7) Use of nicknames to make the story more lively

As part of his efforts to increase expressiveness, Wang Meng often uses nicknames to help express the personality of his characters. Some characters even have no formal name and only appear under their nicknames. For example there is “Rehu” (‘Heater’- indicating warm-hearted), a woman who is the Ni’s next door neighbour from their home town. The paragon Dr Zhao Shangtong who helps Jingyi and her family, is called “Huangyou” (‘Stagger’ - from his gait). Jingyi meets two women in the financial office of the university when she goes to collect Ni Wucheng’s salary. She calls one “Huaping” (‘Vase’ - she is facing a mirror making herself up) and the other “Zhenyan”

(‘Sty’ - because the woman has one in her eye). They call a butcher “Duanbizi” (Short nose). They feel it is not very convenient to use directly Ni Wucheng’s name when he or the neighbours are around, so the women of the family give him the nickname “Lao Sun” (Old Monkey) because his character (excitable and changeable) resembles the protagonist of the classic story *The Journey to the West*.<sup>103</sup> Giving the characters nicknames in addition to their formal names makes the story more interesting and humorous. It reflects real life and gives the story atmosphere.

#### (8) Use of local dialect

Wang Meng has a good memory and linguistic ability; he has remembered the Hebei dialect and pronunciation. He uses dialect words and follows them with notes to give the reader the correct pronunciation. For example: when a visitor “ke” (客) comes, Wang Meng notes: it should be pronounced “qie”; (读切)<sup>104</sup> they thought Kunqu (昆曲 Kunqu opera) was not as good as their local opera (Hebei opera), and said: “哪如”(naru, ‘not as good as’); Wang Meng notes that “ru” should be pronounced “yu” (读予, 去声).<sup>105</sup> Wang Meng stresses these words’ local pronunciation, emphasising that the language which characters use portrays their status, background and attitude. Another language phenomenon Wang Meng uses is keeping the dialect version of a word and putting the standard version after it. Thus, Ni Ping had “middle ear infection (otitis media)”, where “nao erduo dizi” (闹耳朵底子) is the dialect term and “zhongeryan”(中耳炎) follows it.<sup>106</sup> Other examples include “mianfei” (面肥)

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<sup>102</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 46

<sup>103</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 101. Sun Wukong (Monkey) is the main character in the classic novel *Xiyouji* (The Journey to the West).

<sup>104</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 102

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> WMWJ, Vol.2, p. 125

followed by “mianxiao” (面酵 - leaven), “fentuan”(粉团) followed by “dianfen” (淀粉 - starch). Wang Meng prefers to retain the dialect words, using them to portray the character’s language style and characteristics.

The above are Wang Meng’s main “language devices” in this novel. His use of language here is much more developed than in some other stories. This reflects the seriousness he attaches to this novel. The interest he creates through his use of languages adds greatly to the impact of the works and complements the content. Without the use of the above examples of writing skill, the novel would be much plainer and less stylish. In both language skill and style, and in thought content this novel marks a great improvement in the evolution of Wang Meng’s writing compared with the other novel *Long Live Youth*, and works written in the early 1980s. Of course these improvements are connected closely with the development of contemporary Chinese literature, including the “Root-searching” movement and the New Wave. Wang Meng was trying to walk in front and be a pioneer of the literary world.

## 4.2 New Continental People

*New Continental People* is a series of five stories, like the *In Yili* series. Here the writing style consciously strives to be more modern. He describes the way that in the 1980s mainland Chinese regard America as a new continent offering freedom, democracy, material comforts, in all the American Dream. Many people had all kinds of adventures, made great discoveries, had shocks and surprises, pleasant and sad experiences. For many Chinese their own discovery of America is no less significant

than Columbus' discovery of the new continent in 1492. These five stories from different angles tell us about Chinese who arrive in America and do not intend to go back to China. The five stories are created in different language atmospheres, and writing styles, but their common feature is the way the Chinese all think of America as a new continent. There are detailed descriptions of what they had experienced in China before going to America, the conflict between China and Western countries in culture and social and political systems, and the way this affects people's attitudes. This series of stories is a continuation of the theme of *Xiangjianshi nan* (The Strain of Meeting) and *Movable Parts*. They all focus on the same important issue for contemporary China: Chinese and Western cultural conflict, and how this results in rejection, merger and mutual influence.

The first story is *Lunxia* (Under the Wheel), which describes the true story of Wang Meng's old friend. The time constantly jumps back to the 1950s and 1970s, with Wang Meng recalling, in a very personal and emotional way, what he thought of the friend. His friend's wife, J, helped the friend survive many difficulties in the past twenty years, she dedicated her life to him, but he changed his affections to another woman, Z, who went off to America. In order to go abroad, he gave a guarantee to his wife that he would never divorce her. However, after he arrives in America, he lives with Z, and asks for a divorce, making some threats. His wife will not agree to a divorce and frustrates his plans. He is suddenly killed in a traffic accident and dies in America. His wife J has lost all her love for him, and says contemptuously: "I have not shed a single tear. He was too cruel to me, it was retribution."<sup>107</sup> These things happened to an old

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<sup>107</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 51

friend whom he knew well, and possibly being too close to the subject clouded his judgement. One critic commented sharply that the story is “a deeply-felt elegy to women who are ill-treated, who maltreat themselves and tyrannise others”.<sup>108</sup>

Wang Meng shows great sympathy to J, and criticises his old friend, as most people would. But J also arguably used their marriage certificate to deprive him of happiness with no benefit to herself. She would not agree to a divorce under any circumstances. Wang Meng agrees: “It was retribution.”<sup>109</sup> But the tragedy left many questions unanswered. It is considered “rather vulgar” by the critic He Long.<sup>110</sup> He takes the view that there is little that is fresh in the story, the concept and consciousness are pedantic and conservative.<sup>111</sup> In the China of the 1980s divorce cases went up and up, and it became common for women to become marriage victims like J, women who had contributed to the marriage over many years of hardship only to find themselves abandoned and left with nothing. It is especially cruel to women with young children who often get no financial protection from Chinese law. They do not even get the house since it usually belongs to the man’s unit. The man pays nothing and suffers no punishment, the woman is in a very weak position and is likely to suffer the greatest losses. In this situation the interpretation of the wife J, and of Wang Meng was: “It was retribution.” This Buddhist theory offers people an explanation and a comfort. The word “retribution” repeatedly appears in the story. Wang Meng stresses and believes in “retribution”, a word which also appears repeatedly in another impressive novel *Movable Parts*. Buddhist theory holds that people get retribution for what they do,

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<sup>108</sup> He Long, *Zhuizong wenxue xinchao*, p. 40

<sup>109</sup> *WMWJ*, Vol.5, p. 25

<sup>110</sup> He Long, *Zhuizong wenxue xinchao*, p. 40

<sup>111</sup> *ibid*

everything has its cause and effect. Wang Meng himself believes that: “The word ‘retribution’ is the most crucial and maybe also fairest word in the world.”<sup>112</sup>

The issue of the sorrows of love for women features in many other of Wang Meng’s stories. For example, *Shenyuan* (Abyss) describes a young girl who falls madly in love with a playwright, a rightist sent to a small town. She ruins her health, refuses to continue with her studies, and in spite of parental rejection, the pressure of public opinion, and the writer’s relationships with other women, she gives him everything. She lives in a fantasy world, the man goes off to meet other women and in the end she is abandoned.

Second story of the series is *Haiou* (Seagull). The main theme of the story is the protagonist’s experiences before he went abroad. The protagonist Hou Xiaoyun switches sides eleven times between two opposite political groups over two years during the Great Cultural Revolution. The GCR makes him behave like an “activist”. Every time he abandons one political group, he does his best to expose them and help another group in the fight with them. In the end he is imprisoned for nine years. Hou Xiaoyun graduates from a foreign language college with good English, he is sent to work at a Tourist Bureau, makes friends with an American guest, acts as interpreter for him and translates his book. The book is very successful and as a result he gains the chance to go to America where he visits many cities giving lectures. He meets a black girlfriend and wants marry her. He says he loves his motherland but cannot go back now. The story describes how different Hou’s fate was during the GCR and after the

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<sup>112</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 51



“open door” policy. His behaviour was very odd during the political movements. He succeeds in his profession after the political and economical reforms began. It is a vivid story focusing on the reasons why he stays in America and does not want to go back to China. The story is narrated in a humorous atmosphere, the protagonist’s experiences are slightly exaggerated, but the atmosphere is much more objective than the first story, and Wang Meng uses satire and irony.

The third story of the series is called *Kapuqinmuo* (Cappuccino), a kind of Italian coffee which is described as “bitter but refreshing.”<sup>113</sup> There are several short episodes very much like essays describing Wang Meng’s travels in America. He briefly describes the situations of several Chinese, concentrating on their mental anguish. They miss China and feel shame over China’s backwardness. Some adult students feel that life in America is harsh, but when asked why they do not go back to China, they express their dissatisfaction with work in China: “What could I do if I went back? Everyday go to work, drink tea, knit sweaters, complain, making two or three phone calls. And then after work back to my nine square metre room.”<sup>114</sup> Such practical things made many overseas Chinese feel there was no easy, ideal and perfect life on offer. Life for them is “bitter but refreshing” just like cappuccino coffee.

They discover that America is not the heaven they expected; their hopes are just like the foam on cappuccino which quickly disappears, leaving a bitter taste like their bitter lives. However, even if their situation is not very good, they still do not want go back to China; they love and hate their motherland, with a mixture of complex feelings. “We

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<sup>113</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 88

hate those who look down on Chinese, no matter who they are. But we weep to ourselves.....How wonderful China's rivers and mountains are, how could she have become as backward as this!"<sup>115</sup> These are real causes of pain for overseas Chinese.

The fourth story of the series is called *Huajia "Shate" shihua* (Painter Shate's Story). It features a strange and interesting character nicknamed Shate, who worked with Wang Meng during the GCR. The story vividly portrays Shate's experiences during the political years, stressing his fantastic appearance, odd nickname, and the strange things he did. There are very detailed descriptions of his suffering during the political movements, but he continued with his bohemian lifestyle. After many years they meet in America where he had a small shop selling paintings, which he thinks are not art. He also teaches and paints for a living. He does not feel happy staying in America but does not want to go back to China.

The fifth story *Wenrou* (Gentle and Soft) portrays a middle-aged woman, Xue Yufeng, who has a soft voice, and is gentle and kind. She was very cautious during the political movement years, agreeing with and supporting every government policy. After 1980 when the political situation changes, she seemed a totally different person. She starts to criticise social problems in a way completely out of character. She suddenly receives a letter from her brother in America, a brother she has never mentioned to anyone before. In fact her brother had gone to Taiwan with the KMT, and had become for her a "cancer cell". This is the real reason why she had felt threatened and kept her distance from others. She visits her brother in America and does not return. The story describes

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<sup>114</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 87

the protagonist as living a life of pretence for dozens of years, making clear the reason she has not gone back to China, without bothering to describe her life in America. She has become a new continental person.

Four of the five stories in this *New Continental People* focus on describing details of the protagonists, how they spent the Great Cultural Revolution, and their strange behaviour and abnormal psychology under political pressure. This is the main reason they want to stay in America. *Cappuccino* describes the harsh life of overseas Chinese in America. Wang Meng explores this social phenomenon—the “America craze” very early. This series of stories reflects real situations in the period before the mid-1980s. Lots of youngsters have an American dream, most of them thinking that America is a new continent with freedom, where people can enjoy modern, comfortable, easy and glamorous lives. The characters in this series are all middle aged people with much experience of life; when they have to decide where they will live, they consider everything much more carefully than young people. They compare the present with life they had before they chose to stay in America. People are products of their history, this is not their fault, they have the right to choose where and how they want to live. Wang Meng approaches the important issue of the conflict between Chinese culture and Western culture. Mainland Chinese had lived for dozens of years under a socialist system, with different beliefs, morality and values, lifestyles, customs, and so on. Mainland Chinese faced difficult choices.

These stories, written in 1986, display Wang Meng’s more mature writing skills. The

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<sup>115</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 84

contents of the stories demonstrate his deep concern with social problems, and his progressive way of thinking. The stories do not indicate any hidden agenda or propaganda intention. The style shows considerable improvement over his “stream of consciousness” stories. Wang Meng’s language is here stylish and contemporary, making the stories more interesting, and a key element in their success.

## Chapter V: Journey to the Absurd

### 5.1 Two Experimental Stories

#### Language Games 1--*Exhilaration*

*Zhi Ailisi* (For Alice) and *Lai Jing* (Exhilaration) are two short stories which go much further than anything earlier in their experimental language techniques. They break away from the normal sequence of time and space, abandon language rules, challenge sentence structure and the usual narrative, to attempt a different way of expression, and try to find new meaning from fractured and jumbled up sentences and words. These stories have a narrator but no real characters and plot; things have no beginning and no end. Wang Meng felt very pleased with these two stories, he said: “superficially it looks like playing with words, but expressing understanding of the world is very difficult; the world all of a sudden revolves, all of a sudden comes alive.”<sup>116</sup> Wang Meng adopted a way of playing with and abusing language, smashing it into pieces to explore latent meaning, inserting different cultural content inside language after reversing its traditional order.

*Exhilaration* attracted widespread attention. There were many comments published discussing this new writing phenomenon, giving rise to a debate in which “the words of the articles analysing it exceed those of the original story by many hundreds of times.”<sup>117</sup>

In *Exhilaration*, the method of narration is so odd that most readers cannot understand the story when they read it. The language is bizarre, humorous, and incomprehensible.

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<sup>116</sup> WMWJ, Vol.8, p. 594

The words and sentences in the story reflect the specific time and cultural context. They are all fashionable phrases which often appeared on TV and radio, in advertisements, magazines and newspapers. One can also often hear people use them on buses, in taxis, offices, meeting rooms, waiting rooms, restaurants, and hospitals, etc. They represent a new life with many social problems. Instead of having a plot, *Exhilaration* transcends normal thought patterns, seeking to connect directly with the mind. The intention of this short story is to communicate directly its cultural and social content. The descriptive method is anti-story, anti-plot and anti-character. Jumbled sentences and words try to convey the idea of a human brain where old and new information are gathered together. The writer directly enumerates things which reflect the many superficial phenomena of society, and attempts a new creative way of writing.

### **Intensive Narration**

The grammar is fractured; the contents of sentences are self-contradictory and confused; it is impossible connect them together into a clear-cut plot, and to find their subject. For example, in *Exhilaration*, the main character is unclear, but appears to be a group of people whose name is pronounced is Xiang Ming. For this Wang Meng uses thirteen different pairs of Chinese characters to produce the sound “Xiang Ming”. He continues: “I’ll use these as examples to start with” (以此类推), indicating that not even this is the limit. The name Xiang Ming could actually represent a very large number of people. Grammar, logic, and links in content are fragmented, words of opposite meaning are put together, many sentences can be separated into two or three

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<sup>117</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, Introduction, p. 1

phrases which have different or opposite meanings.

The first paragraph of the story describes many people named Xiang Ming, who, at some time (time is not specified), could be said to have had some kind of illness. Other people take a different attitude towards it. “Xiang Ming’s” illness may be real and it may be illusory; illness can suddenly change too. This also produces great social problems. The story uses this abstraction to suggest the phenomenon that many people often pretend to be ill when they are not. They are able to get a doctor’s certificate through connections when they want. They can claim any kind of illness they want, and get time off work without losing any benefits. Other people react according to their relationship, sympathising or criticising. He epitomises this odd social phenomenon with the ironic use of exaggeration and jumbled words and sentences. The critic He Long said: “Wang Meng often uses this kind of language thinner, to dissolve society’s coating of pretence, and to explore the strangeness of the deep-level reality.”<sup>118</sup>

The second paragraph starts with a series of actions without any subject; these actions have no apparent connection with each other, and describe many different kinds of transportation experiences. There are super luxury cars running along the motorway; there is calling a taxi and worrying about being cheated, an ox-cart, a horse, a flight on a plane, a train journey and so on. It is “Xiang Ming” who carries out all the actions:

“Xiang Ming goes away on official business, travels, transfers to another post, purchases, sells goods, visits relatives, views, learns, learns from others’ experiences, takes part in a meeting of P.E.N., takes part in an exhibition and sale, gets an award, spends a holiday at a summer resort,

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<sup>118</sup> He Long, *Zhuizong wenxue xinchao*, p. 42

a winter rest, connects crosswise, views and emulates, competes, visits old friends or places, meditates on the past, makes private visits, avoids capture, walks around casually.....”<sup>119</sup>

This gives all kinds of possibilities for going out and doing things. These actions are not possible by one person at the same time; there are no conjunctions between the verbs, they are all independent and separate from each other. It is a collection of external actions. The sentence continues:

“live at a hotel, live at a hostel, live in a primary school classroom, live in a people’s air-raid shelter, live in an underground hall, live at a public baths, live in a waiting room, live under a bridge, live in a house of detention, live in a cage.”<sup>120</sup>

“Xiang Ming” could go out and do twenty-one kinds of things, and could live at ten kinds of places, Wang Meng gives as many examples as he can. The subject also changes to “she” and back to “he” in mid-sentence: “Then she arrived, found, misunderstood, lost the way, dropped, missed the place where he wanted go.”<sup>121</sup> These sentences originally have no commas. This is a kind of “intensive narration” (集约式叙述),<sup>122</sup> expressing a medley of knowledge and experiences of life.

These sentences, made by brief phrases or words, show many facets of ordinary people’s lives, with serious topics, jokes and criticisms all mixed up together. “People all say he is a reformer, an exploring kind of entrepreneur, an economic criminal, is inquiring for people, is the king of boasting, is supported at the top, is nominated.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 140

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.* No commas in original, added here for comprehension

<sup>121</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 140, no commas in original, added here for comprehension.

<sup>122</sup> He Long, *Zhuizong wenxue xinchao*, p.42

<sup>123</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 140, no commas in original, added here for comprehension.



This sentence expresses approval of reformers, criticism of some bad phenomena and the appearance of new difficulties after the economic reforms were embarked on. The story mentions many things popular in China since the 1980s, such as: “Do not feel backward at all, there is not only a ‘calligraphy craze’, but also a ‘symphony craze’, and there is hexiangzhuang (a kind of qigong), and rhythmic gymnastics, lion rolling balls, water ballet, thrown into confusion, and a little girl preparing to set up an international joint stock company trading in bomber aircraft.”<sup>124</sup> It tells us what is going on in society. Wang Meng seems to take an attitude of welcoming and accepting everything. Later on it seems that Chinese characters are insufficient to express his meaning, and, like Lu Xun with Ah Q, he uses the romanised version Xiang Ming instead of characters. Wang Meng in the name of Xiang Ming asks forty four questions, one after another, in one paragraph, indicating his serious concern for society. Questions like: “Can time which has passed be made up?”<sup>125</sup> which expresses Wang Meng’s concern over the amount of time which had been wasted, and whether it was possible to regain it or not. “Siheyuan (quadrangle-traditional housing) or skyscraper, which is more modern?” This is questioning people’s preferences and asking which is more suitable for modern life. “Art or money, which is more beautiful?” This is a criticism of the way more and more people worship money over everything else. “When people wake up does it mean they are not dreaming?” This sentence, which echoes Zhuangzi’s famous story, has lots of potential meanings, and can be explained in many different ways. There are many people with daydreams, and many people who seems too clever and too practical to have any dreams at all.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 141, no commas in original, added here for comprehension.

<sup>125</sup> Including several quotations below. WMWJ, Vol.5, p.142-143

<sup>126</sup> These questions have echoes of the paradoxes of the Logicians cited in Chapter 33 of the Zhuangzi. They attempt to explore the logic of language and meaning through absurdity.

These forty-four questions include all sorts of things. The whole story invokes so many pictures and is filled with so much content. Presented in a normal style of writing in five pages totalling four thousand words, it would otherwise be impossible for it to contain so much meaning. It is like the fashionable term “Xinxi shidai” (information age), with so many things and so much news and information going on around us everyday, people’s heads are full of all of this news. Xiang Ming is an abstract symbol, it could be he, she or it. Thus Xiang Ming can not only represent the common people as he or she, but can also be a thing, a kind of power of nature which cannot be controlled by people. It could be “time”, “history”, “society”, a machine or a computer and so on. The content here is substantially modern in consciousness as well as the method of writing.

“Play language” is one part of the language style, and a kind of individualistic language. All the descriptions are fragmentary, scattered, upside down and disordered, none of the possibilities are affirmed or denied, things may have happened and may not have happened, may exist and may not exist. As when the story gives ten kinds of place to stay when you go to travelling, if there is one you have not experienced you may have experienced others. The critic He Long comments on Wang Meng’s way of describing things by quoting a poem from the Qing novel *Hong lou meng* (The Dream of the Red Chamber) : “Something seems fake but it is real, something seems real but it is fake, something seems not to exist but does, something seems to exist but does not.”<sup>127</sup> This poem in the preface of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* forms part of a

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<sup>127</sup> 假作真来真亦假，无为有处有还无

famous introduction with the writer's comments on the story. Citing this in reference to Wang Meng's story is a very appropriate comment on its narrative technique and the meaning.

### **Language games 2—*For Alice***

*Zhi Ailisi* (For Alice) is the title of the whole story, with the main part of the story appearing under the subsidiary title *Lüse de taiyang* (The Green Sun). The story starts by describing family members, beginning with: "I woke up the whole family in the middle of the night." This unlikely starting point, mixes up the real and the imaginary, and then every family member says something from their own point of view. Son says: "if he could go abroad he would marry a woman older than him who played the huqin (two-stringed fiddle)." Daughter says: "she wants to buy and sell Toyota cars, she wants to learn by distance learning, evening college, or open university and get a certificate, and submit all the tuition fee costs, of over a thousand yuan, to the unit."<sup>128</sup> The family is an epitome of society: everyone in the family wants different things from life, reflecting the different age groups and the different desires people have. It also reflects several of the most fashionable things in society: the craze to go abroad, the craze to do business, the craze to get certificates. Every one in the family plays a different part in society and they are abstract images of society. The kind of writing method which he attempts in this story is later used very successfully in the short story *Jianying de Xizhou* (Hard Porridge).

The second paragraph describes many bizarre social phenomena, such as "Having

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<sup>128</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 17

worked there for a month I was mad that the unit leadership had not issued me with a suit, table lamp, sofa, mosquito exterminator, art diary, sheepskin jacket, so I resigned to write stories and put myself in the pit of hell, taking part in writers' meetings, living in hotels."<sup>129</sup> Things are juxtaposed with no connection. They reflect the reality that people want work as little as possible and get as much as possible. The third paragraph looks ironically at strange economic phenomena. Many illegal economic things go on. The sentences cannot be called sentences, they are just collections of words, words used in business circles. These include: hotel manager, law, computer, media, restaurant, tax, and so on. Using these words, Wang Meng can easily touch upon many fields. Each of these words can symbolise a particular field, can be imbued with a certain meaning, and ironically suggest problems in that area.

Later there are visits to "my first teacher", and "my second teacher", and then "my brother". "I" meet the three people all busy doing strange things. When "I" go to see "my brother", I find even he is two-faced to me, so what help can "I" expect from others? "I" am disappointed, with my family, with work, with the economic situation. Strange and stupid things are going on. "I" am criticised for being too conservative. "I" am not happy about these things. What should "I" do?

The last paragraph is framed like an announcement. Wang Meng uses nine sentences starting with "I want..." ( wo yao 我要) to express his desire to do many things to change society and make it better, but these hopes are too extravagant and some frankly impossible, such as:

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<sup>129</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 18, no commas in original, added here for comprehension.

“I want people love each other and cook good braised bean with diced meat with chilli and have dinner together...I want to set up a publisher specially to publish that new poetry which poets are crying that they cannot find publishers to publish...I want to give primary and secondary school teachers and staff of shops dragonfly tickets go on a trip to Paris including life insurance...I want to make all laws become boats become street lamps become cakes with sugar-coated haws.....”<sup>130</sup>

This all expresses Wang Meng’s hopes and dreams in a jocular, satirical way.

At the beginning of the story it cites the name of a “long haired young man”, saying the story was written by that young man. He complains that when “I” play with language the story still can be published and even win an award. If these stories had his name on, they would not be published. It may well be that publishers, if faced with stories like *For Alice* or *Exhilaration* written by a name which was not well known, would have rejected these stories as too strange to be published. In *For Alice* the narrator changes from the “author” who introduces the main story to the supposed writer of the story, a young long-haired man that “I” helped to get the story published. At the end of the story the two authors merge into a single person, and it ends: “...I do not know the fate of this work, I quietly pray for Alice.”<sup>131</sup> The story then finishes. This merging of the two people at the end suggest that the “long-haired young man” may just be a figment of the writer’s (“I”) imagination.

Both structure and writing style of *For Alice* are very similar to *Exhilaration*. The two stories both adopt the “intensive narrative” style, with changes of subject, abstract

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<sup>130</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 20

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*



figures as symbolic types, the latest fashionable words reflecting social and economic problems, and the use of heavily parallel sentences expressing wishes or questioning strange social phenomena in a sardonic manner. These stories demonstrate a much more modern style, with many unique creative expressions, evidence that Wang Meng was trying to find new ways to structure language. Wang Meng bravely took the risk of using a brand new writing style in these two stories, something which really deserves Liu Xinwu's comment: "He is eating snails".<sup>132</sup> Wang Meng as a well-known writer has the chance to publish these odd stories with strange language and structure, and he has the ability and the desire to attempt something new. It cannot be said that these two stories are very successful. They have their drawbacks: the language is difficult to understand, and the stories are very confusing; two stories like that is enough. After people have read a few sentences and are confused and not able to understand, most will put the story down and read others which are easier to get to grips with. Stories which lose most of their readers are not successful stories; there is no point writing if the result is only appreciated by a few critics. Some of the techniques used here like "intensive narration" and unlimited parallel sentences were adopted in other stories which otherwise followed normal grammar rules. These stories inspired other writers, and marked an important step in Wang Meng's writing career and in contemporary Chinese literature.

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<sup>132</sup> Liu Xinwu, "He is eating snails". *Beijing Wanbao*, 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1980

## 5.2 Examining the Ugly

Since the mid-1980s, Wang Meng has written absurd style stories, reflecting modern life and changes in attitude. During this period there have been enormous changes in the culture market. Following the “open door” policy, American, Hong Kong and Taiwanese popular literary works, commercial films, pop music, romantic novels, martial arts fiction and other kinds of entertainment have flooded on to the Chinese market, with the result that serious literature has lost much of its readership. Traditional serious literary works are no longer attractive. Modern serious literature has tried to meet the challenge of winning back audiences and survive. Seeking change and creating new content and new style seems to be the answer. Wang Meng has distinguished himself as one serious writer who has kept thinking and trying, attempting to keep up with a fast developing society.

Wang Meng made such an effort with stories like *Fengxi langzhi* (The Wind Ceases and the Waves Stop), *Moxuyou shijian* (The Fabricated Event), *Dongtian de huati* (A Winter's Topic), *Zhizhu* (Spider), *Qiuxing qiyuji* (The Football Star's Fortuitous Encounter), *Xia zhi bo* (Waves of Summer), *Xuanzhe de licheng* (The Process of Choice), *Audili zhoudian* (Austrian Porridge Restaurant). For these stories he adopts a fable style, includes exaggerated and ridiculous events and figures, and uses symbolism to satirize ugly and erroneous things. Wang Meng's writing style turned from 1950s idealism to 1980s symbolism, with the sense of abstractness growing stronger and stronger. When Wang Meng talked to the critic Wang Gan, he explained why he wrote in the absurd style. He said:

“The fact that I write of the absurd is nothing to do with the fact that I think the world is absurd. Firstly, my writing absurd things is a result my quest for humour, for comedy, since, if we exaggerate humour to an extreme degree, it becomes absurd, it becomes something impossible. Secondly, using the absurd is a particularly effective way of being sarcastic, of mocking things; it can be very penetrating... Thirdly, only by making things absurd can I avoid being suspected by anyone; this is the main reason for writing absurd works.....”<sup>133</sup>

The superiority of the absurd is the way it turns real life into an abstraction by exaggerating it, so it is no longer confined to one specific situation, one person or one country, it transcends the limits of time, space and culture, and the stories may become almost like fables.

These absurd stories include several main themes. The first is exposing the ugly side of human life, the complex relationships between people, people’s habit of spreading rumours, slanders, and making groundless accusations. Wang Meng stands high above ordinary life and views the social evils existing in society, and the shortcomings in human nature. These include vices like greed and jealousy, the inability to resist the temptations of material things, fame and status and the way envy has a terrible effect on people’s behaviour when others are promoted, as in *The Wind Ceases and the Waves Stop* and *A Winter’s Topic*. The second issue is the ups and downs of people's fate. Life is full of frustrations, characters are persecuted or promoted for ridiculous reasons, people cannot control their fate, and even a little success may lead to a person being destroyed. The third point is the way Wang Meng takes a strongly moral attitude towards the world. When he exposes the evils of society and individuals, he ensures

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<sup>133</sup> WMWJ, Vol.8, p. 592



that the wicked suffer retribution and the good reap blessings on the principle that: “Good results in good, and bad in bad”. He condemns hideous things and wicked people, and praises good things and kind people.

There is great disparity between people's fate. Different people face different fates, and they use completely different ways to deal with it and meet with different outcomes. In the story *The Football Star's Fortuitous Encounter*, Ente originally cannot play football but suddenly he becomes a football star, chairman of the football association and a member of parliament. Then he saves the life of a talented young football player. Some people use despicable tricks in order to climb up the ladder. Zhu Yingzhe in the story *Spider* was poor and very low in status. He plots and schemes to gain the hand of the company chairman's daughter, then he himself becomes the main chairman of that big company, abrogates all power to himself, behaves very badly and in the end receives his punishment. Although the topic of human nature and good and evil is a new departure for Wang Meng, he addresses it with confidence and produces persuasive stories.

### **Absurd Stories**

*The Fabricated Event*, *A Winter's Topic*, and *Waves of Summer* satirise the absurd things which occur during the process of economic and political reform in China, Wang Meng satirises the administration and the problems which exist in the social system, and exposes the ugly, evil things in society, blaming many of the difficulties as emanating from the ugly side of human nature.

*The Fabricated Event* describes an ambitious peasant, Wang Dazhuang, who unscrupulously deceives some famous doctors and health officials of the county, and arranges an odd “Joint Group for Beriberi and Toothache Treatment Research and Training” which recruits several hundred students. It not only makes money but also builds up his own reputation, and he unexpectedly is able to achieve everything he wants through such improper means. Dr Zhou realises his trickery and tries to expose and stop him. Wang Dazhuang goes round invoking the names of famous doctors and local officials to persuade others to join in his schemes and he develops a network of intrigue utilizing people’s credulity to achieve his aims. This is a typical example of how people go round “making relationships”, something which, with the current economic reforms, has become a very common phenomenon in many areas of society. Using money, fame and status as weapons, many illegal businessmen are able to get what they want. When Dr Zhou tries to take a responsible attitude, she ends up damaging her own reputation and status. The subsidiary title of the story *Huangtang de youxi* “The Absurd Game”, is not just something which happens in medical circles; such things can happen anywhere.

*A Winter’s Topic* describes complex relationships between people, involving national consciousness, long-standing malpractice, and individuals who cannot easily get out of an awkward position. The whole thing starts strangely. A young man publishes a short essay in an odd corner of an evening paper, saying that in foreign countries people bathe in the morning, but a famous old “bathing expert” has maintained for years that one should bathe in the evening. An “academic” debate turns into personal attacks,

even shaking the local government departments and others. It develops into a question of the country's fate and safety, the nation's future, reaching the level of a struggle over the correct political line, something which is plainly ridiculous. Wang Meng analyses the psychological illness of society, exaggerates familiar things in life until they take on strange forms. It seems humorous on the surface but it has its serious side. Wang Meng states clearly his intention in this story:

“It is said that Western countries have had a ‘sexual explosion’ and an ‘information explosion’; our country has a ‘relationship (guanxi) explosion’ and a ‘name list explosion’; these can certainly compete with them! Chinese novelists instead of writing about love, life and death, adventures, detectives.....would be better writing about personal relationships, writing about one person with another; and in most cases it is good people that intrigue against each other.”<sup>134</sup>

Another example of this is the story *The Wind Ceases and the Waves Stop*. It describes problems in government propaganda work and the complex relationships which exist between government high officials. As a young girl's position goes up and down, the people around her cannot accept her changes in status and react in extreme ways. There is a happy ending, as the waves calm down and the wind stops. But will the same kind of story and conflicts not happen again and again?

Exposing the bad side of human nature comes into many of the problems of reform featured in the story *Waves of Summer*. As reform develops through its various stages certain characters emerge as typical examples of the flawed psychological types which developed under the socialist system. Features like the “daguofan” (big pot of food - equal pay regardless of performance in work), were reflected in the difficulties of

reform and people's actual state of mind during the reform. In reform more attention was paid to form than substance. Although people's living standards had improved, there were still problems of egalitarianism and low efficiency, because factories were still under public ownership and it was impossible to dismiss lazy and disruptive staff, who continued to enjoy the same benefits as everyone else, even expecting to be rehoused. The story portrays five figures from the public ownership system.

Xiao Zhang, Xiao Liu, Lao Zhang, Lao Zhao and Lao Dong, are five types who, in their behaviour and psychology are typical of the public ownership system. As the practical steps of reform are implemented nobody can do anything about these people. Difficulties in carrying out reforms come from the negative side of human nature: selfishness, laziness, expecting salary and other benefits without working, relying on "guanxi" connections and obstructiveness, and so on. Following reform of the employment system, still nothing has really changed, all other reform efforts will fail too.

The stories which Wang Meng actually locates in a foreign setting, such as *The Football Star's Fortuitous Encounter* and *Spider*, tend to emphasize the bizarre side of life and the quirks of fate. The language style is even more orientated towards entertainment, and towards providing readers with surprise and amazement.

*The Football Star's Fortuitous Encounter* adopts a popular narrative style, with the emphasis on narrating a fascinating story rather than portraying serious characters. The

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<sup>134</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 607

protagonist Ente was unemployed and looking for a low-paid job, when he suddenly becomes a successful footballer without any previous training. His ambitious wife's scheming results in greater and greater accomplishments. He even becomes Chairman of the Football Association, and looks set to become a senator in the country's parliament. Wang Meng plays language games and makes the story as amazing and as ridiculous as possible. As a writer of serious literature, Wang Meng tries out different styles and literary techniques. These include the structure of his stories, the language style, the topic and the treatment. Here he is describing modern life rather than portraying characters. He is attempting something more entertaining in style rather than exploring profound issues.

With twenty years of economic reform in China, commercialism is becoming stronger and stronger, as more and more people are influenced by Western countries, their life styles, morality and value systems, worship of money and materialism, and general hedonism. By locating this story in a Western capitalist society, Wang Meng is able to suspend the disbelief which would arise if it were located in China. He can also make the story less serious, more amusing, and, in its satirical approach, both entertaining and cautionary for Chinese readers. The story was written in 1988, at a time when Wang Meng had visited many Western countries. These included a five month spell in America in 1980 under the "Iowa International Writer Scheme". He had also been to Britain, Germany, France, and so on. He was extremely interested in learning, understanding and accepting new things from other cultures. These experiences opened his eyes as he gained real first-hand knowledge about Western culture and the capitalist system. This all helped Wang Meng to attempt modern absurd fiction based on his

knowledge of these Western countries.

*Spider* is located in a Taiwanese background, another extremely commercial social system. The story describes how a poor man, Zhu Yingzhe, climbs up the ladder to achieve power and wealth. He uses trickery and deception, behaves badly after he gets everything he wants, but in his growing megalomania he becomes unhinged, sealing his fate.

This story is a comment on modern commercial society. People like Zhu Yingzhe use every unscrupulous trick to fight for their own advantage, presenting an ugly picture of naked ambition. Although it is not based on mainland China, the message is that the same kind of thing could happen there. Under the materialistic value system, people are stimulated by the power of money and material things. This extreme ambition for money and power results in a distorted psychological state. Wang Meng is criticizing the evil acquisitive part of human nature, but at the same time the entertaining style language is pervaded by a sense of absurdity.

### **Characteristics**

These narrative style fictional stories, *The Football Star's Fortuitous Encounter*, *Spider* and *Austrian Porridge Restaurant* are structured like commercial Hollywood films. Wang Meng indulges in language games in a quite amazing way. He strings together written language, oral language, sayings, proverbs, and uses many synonyms and antonyms. Wang Meng expresses his talent and energy through the language in

these stories. He jokes with the characters' name and titles. For example in *The Football Star's Fortuitous Encounter*, Ente's wife Jiumitang ('wine, honey, sweet') addresses him in many different ways: using the classical style titles "fuzi", "fujun" (husband, scholar), the Western style title "qinaide" (darling), and the Cantonese style title "laogong" (husband), mixing up traditional and modern, Chinese and Western, increasing the comic effect. In the story *Spider*, Wang Meng describes the way spiders talk to Zhu Yinzhe, using a single sound repeated: "the first spider answers: 'chi chi chi chi chi.....' (Keep going!), the second spider answers: 'ji ji ji ji ji.....' (Wait for the chance!) the third spider answers: "sheng sheng sheng sheng sheng....." (You will succeed!).<sup>135</sup> What the spiders say are like words from heaven suggesting to Zhu Yingzhe what to do to ensure success. This language style resembles cartoon films, where animals talk to people and try to help them. The reader can imagine the scene immediately: the spiders talking to Zhu Yingzhe as he wonders what to do, with the language they use creating an atmosphere of mystery.

Most of these stories have old fashioned endings based on the premise that goodness is rewarded, and evil brings retribution. Retribution appears many times in other stories, and endings like these certainly reflect Wang Meng's conservative attitude. The concept of retribution is part of traditional Chinese beliefs and appears in many traditional stories. It is of course a basic belief of Buddhism, and from society's perspective it is a valuable principle encouraging people to behave in socially acceptable ways. However, in the real world often goodness is not rewarded and evil does not result in punishment. Thus the endings of these stories are idealistic rather

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<sup>135</sup> WMWJ, Vol.3, p. 801

than realistic. These are important examples of Wang Meng's modern stories, and include some of his most inventive use of language, but their "happy" endings lack the aesthetic appeal, and veracity, of tragic ones.

Popular literature has developed like popular music in China, as something suitable for ordinary people's everyday lives. Serious literature and writers are no longer enjoy in practice the high esteem they are due in theory; they have been forced to come down from the temple to mix with the common people. Writers used to be called "the engineers of men's souls", but now they are viewed as just ordinary people, not special, not heroes or heroines. The young writer Wang Shuo's works are called "pizi wenxue" (hooligan literature); he is famous specifically for writing about urban hooligan culture. He depicts city life using mockery, satire and humour. He has challenged the old concept of literature and the role of the writer. Wang Meng published a new story *Zhengzhong de gushi* (A Story of Earnestness) in *Dangdai* (Vol. 6, 1995), in which he continues to use the absurd, in a popular style, to describes the inner world of intellectuals.

In these modern absurd style stories, Wang Meng portrays particularly the vicissitudes of fate; these characters' lives often change very suddenly. Most changes follow the same pattern: from poverty and low status a person suddenly jumps up to a very high position, often the highest position possible in their given metier. This is true of Ente (*The Football Star Fortuitous Encounter*), Zhu Yingzhe (*Spider*), Jin Xiumei (*The Wind Ceases and Waves Stop*) and Liang Youzhi in *Mingyi Liang Youzhi chuanqi* (The Legend of the Famous Doctor Liang Youzhi). The latter taught himself traditional



Chinese medicine in his spare time. Without any form of medical education, he was suddenly appointed president of a provincial medical college, and in the end vice-chairman of the provincial Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. The possibility of his reaching such a high post could never have been predicted. Like the character Song Chaoyi in *Gaoyuan de feng* (The Wind on the Plateau), a middle school teacher who has spent dozens of years working hard with nobody noticing him, living in a poor and crowded place, suddenly finds himself with many prestigious titles, such as deputy to the National People's Congress. He is given a spacious new house to live in, and every difficulty suddenly becomes easy. This same pattern of wild swings describes characters' psychological changes after they have taken over high positions. This is not necessarily a good thing. It is often difficult to cope with the change and some people fail to do so, develop delusions over their true importance and end up failures. This is the case with the writer Ma Wenheng in the story *Huangyang shugen zhi si* (The Death of the Poplar).

Wang Meng had much personal experience of the route from the bottom to the top, so he was familiar with the psychological effects. He was suddenly appointed as an alternate member of the Central Committee of the Party in 1982 without being notified before the announcement. When he saw his name on the list he thought that it must be somebody else of the same name.<sup>136</sup> Since the Central Committee of the Party is the highest authority in China it is easy to understand how surprised he was. As in the case of his appointment of Minister of Culture from 1986-9, he experienced some pleasant surprises, as well as some unpleasant ones. The unpredictability of the fate of his

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<sup>136</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 674

characters was a fact of life for Wang Meng in his real life. His fiction was based on his own experiences.

A notable feature of these absurd style stories is the way he combines surrealism and real living events. In *Yiti Qianjiao* (一嚏千娇 Even A Sneeze is Beautiful), which includes the fictitious characters Lao Pen and Lao Kan, although the story is fiction, it makes some comments on real contemporary Chinese writers, like Zhang Xinxin, Feng Jikai and Zu Wei.<sup>137</sup> Actual events blend with a surrealist story, straddling the boundary between realism and surrealism, between reportage and fiction, leaving doubts in the mind of the reader over whether the story and characters are real or not.

A second feature is the way Wang Meng includes a mass of information on different subjects obscuring the main issue. He amasses information over many fields such as politics, economics, science, art, sport and so on, which “dilute” the main issue of the story. The critic Wang Gan said to Wang Meng:

“You no longer pursue a certain issue, and do not seek to take a certain judgment towards things, but use a multi-directional, self-contradictory, self-conflicting pattern to organize stories. I think the absence of a main issue in stories is a kind of progress. In previous stories it is usually the main issue which decides the nature of the characters; the nature of the characters decides the plot of the story; a story with hundreds of thousands words can be summarised in one sentence. This is because the story is there to portray the characters, and the characters are the embodiment of the issue.”<sup>138</sup>

The third feature is the fragmentation of the story line leaving a very confused structure

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<sup>137</sup> WMWJ, Vol.3, p. 706

<sup>138</sup> WMWJ, Vol.8, p. 599

in which it is difficult to make out the connections between all the plots and easily understand the whole meaning of the story. Examples are: *Shizijia shang* (On the Cross), *Zujie* (Connected) and *Yiti qianjiao* (Even a Sneeze is Beautiful). The plots of these stories have been fractured into pieces, so that many ordinary readers would find it difficult to keep reading to the end of the story. In the case of *Zujie* (Connected), it is divided into four sections each given strange names like ‘head’, ‘waist’, ‘feet’, and ‘ending’. Every section is further divided into many smaller sections. Some critics call these “playing card stories” (*pukepai xiaoshuo*), in the belief that Wang Meng may have been inspired by the French “New Story School”.<sup>139</sup> These are all Wang Meng’s brave attempts since the 1980s to try something new.

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<sup>139</sup> WMWJ, Vol.8, p. 601

## Chapter VI: Political Re-engagement

### Hard Porridge-A Political Allegory

After 'Newcomer' in 1956 and its disastrous consequences, Wang Meng avoided further political comment until the publication of *Jianying de xizhou* (Hard Porridge) in 1989. It was published in Volume 2 of the literary magazine *Zhongguo Zuoji* "Chinese Writer" in April 1989. In 1991, it won a prestigious national award, the 1989-1990 National Hundred Flowers Short Story Prize. It attracted a great deal of discussion and caused waves throughout the literary and political worlds of the time. One critic commented: "a bowl of porridge has produced a huge billowing wave, a few pickles have taken on the role of a promotion ladder".<sup>140</sup> There were many critical articles and comments on this short story which made it very famous and influential, causing the author to express the view that it had "marched into the world".<sup>141</sup> It was reprinted in the Taiwanese magazine *Zhongguo Dalu* "Mainland China" in April 1990, and was translated into Japanese<sup>142</sup> and English.

This short story describes a family of four generations which had maintained the traditional Chinese custom of living together.<sup>143</sup> The question of breakfast reform caused many waves, with "meal reform and modernization" being viewed as a vehicle

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<sup>140</sup> 一碗稀粥竟掀起滔天之巨浪，数茎之咸菜权充作晋升之阶梯。WMWJ, Vol. 5, Introduction, p.1.

<sup>141</sup> 走向了世界, *ibid*

<sup>142</sup> A Japanese journalist told Wang Meng that according to the figures given by one Japanese magazine he was, as a result of this story, one of the ten best selling authors in Japan. WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 669.

<sup>143</sup> Critics referred to this family as a *Sishi tongtang* 四世同堂, echoing the title of Lao She's famous story, but here signifying an old-fashioned family surviving into modern times.

for reforming the whole family management system. In this big old fashioned family, breakfast was usually rice porridge and pickles, lunch was usually noodles with fried bean sauce, and dinner was fried vegetables with sliced or shredded meat and soup. The story plots the attempts of family members to reform a meal system which had stood them in good stead for forty years. It is an obvious reference to attempts in China to introduce political and institutional reform; it shows how complex the issues are, even when people approach the matter in a spirit of open-minded cooperation.

When Wang Meng wrote *Hard Porridge* he was fifty-five years old, and had considerable experience of life. Apart from his sixteen years in Xinjiang, since 1980 he had been invited to America for five months, was constantly going abroad to Western countries such as Germany, Britain and France, and to eastern European countries like the former Soviet Union, Poland and Hungary, etc. Essays on his tours recorded that he had met lots of foreign friends and repeatedly been influenced by Western living customs and culture, such as food and drink (drinking coffee) and clothing (wearing a suit) etc. To a certain extent he accepted and appreciated such new things. At the same time his stories were translated into many different languages, including English, Japanese, Italian, German and Russian, etc. He had become a well known contemporary Chinese writer. When he was writing *Hard Porridge* he had already been Minister of Culture for more than two years, so had inside knowledge of how the highest officials viewed reforms.

Having absorbed modern Western political terminology, Wang Meng describes family

reform in a unique way and achieves a very striking effect. The story's humour and comic style lies in the way Wang Meng dresses up a minor issue, like changing an ordinary family's eating habits, in grand modern political vocabulary. The metaphorical meaning was that China's reforms faced a very tortuous path. Deng Xiaoping had a famous saying "cross the river feeling for each stone" (摸着石头过河). This suggests we don't know what will happen at each step but we have to try going forward, that reform can only proceed little by little, one step following on another, and that it is not possible jump over a step to arrive faster at the right destination just because people are impatient. Wang Meng used Western political words to very good artistic effect, and the trivial things of a family's existence became a metaphor for a country's political life. The style of language of this story had great impact, and its contents gave readers much food for thought.

The plot of this story had quite obvious political implications. The process of meal reform was fascinating from the initial suggestion to the final result of nothing changing. Although it did not succeed it presented a lively picture of different generations facing reform, and their different attitudes, psychology, behaviour and language. The porridge and food habits were not the main issue, which was that democracy and freedom should be part of family life. The reforms failed each time as the results were far from what people hoped for, causing them to start feeling that what they had already was not all bad and should not all be got rid of. Because the reforms had not brought directly the good things which people expected, but had brought negative things in their wake, many people thought how wonderful life had been before the reforms. In spite of the improvement in living standards there were still continual

complaints, criticisms and problems. This was a feature of Chinese reform.

### **Going to Court**

What they were going to eat in their daily meals seemed the most important thing for this four generation family. The story is highly metaphorical and appears like a psychological study or fable, but in fact it is quite realistic. It focuses on serious social questions, like generation gap problems, the conflict between Chinese and Western culture, and the way in which traditional customs pass on to the younger generation. Wang Meng criticizes conventionality and following the beaten path, but shows a sympathy with tradition; he advocates learning from the West, but disagrees with the shallow view that everything Western is worth copying. The progress of China's reforms in the political, economic and other fields is very difficult and, just like the reform of Chinese eating customs, is full of twists and turns. Wang Gan, a young and respected critic, in commenting on this short story, said:

“From *Hard Porridge*, different readers can form different judgments, they can see the view which criticizes creeping westernisation, can see understanding shown towards people who follow the old paths, and can see concern about the difficulty of reform in China.”<sup>144</sup>

However, there were also opposing comments which were extremely critical, especially from the political point of view. A reader of *Wenyibao* complained that the story was “ridiculing and attacking by innuendo socialist reform of our country; this

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<sup>144</sup> Wang Gan, “Many Kind of Possibilities of Realistic Writing--Comments on the 4th Hundred Flower Award Stories”, Vol. 7, 1991, *Xiaoshuo yuebao*.

obviously cannot be politically acceptable.”<sup>145</sup> In his letter he quoted from the Taiwan magazine *Zhongguo Dalu* (Mainland China), which had republished the story and added the editor’s words claiming: “This story uses a metaphorical way of writing to criticize the CCP system lead by Deng Xiaoping.” Another commentator said:

“To say that *Hard Porridge* is a typical, out and out ‘illustrated guide to politics’ (tujie zhengzhi) and furthermore a guide to actual political life, would not be in any way excessive.”<sup>146</sup>

It points out that during the 1989 student movement one target was the “older generation of proletarian revolutionaries”; with cries of

“‘get rid of superfluous old politicians’ ‘the great housekeeper should retire’.....This short story was very clearly used as a stalking horse aimed at our older generation of proletarian revolutionaries .....Perhaps just for that reason, this bowl of porridge was selected as a second anniversary ‘sacrificial offering’ taken to the ‘sacrificial altar’”<sup>147</sup>

Ultra-leftism still enjoyed enormous influence over people’s minds. However, such comments may not only have emanated from disaffected leftists: these may not simply have been personal views, but indicated a concerted, politically motivated attack. Such comments could affect a writer’s political status, social reputation, even everyday life. Wang Meng suffered more than twenty years of silence after 1958: political criticism could have an enormous impact on a writer’s life in China. Wang Meng had learnt his lessons; he realised he could suffer heavy attacks by commentators if he did not handle the situation sensitively. At that time it was the second year after he resigned as Minister of Culture, but he still occupied the post of vice-chairman of the Chinese

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<sup>145</sup> Shen Ping 慎平, Reader’s Letter, *Wenyibao* “Literary Gazette”, 14, 9, 1991.

<sup>146</sup> Chun Yushui 淳于水: Weishenme xizhou hai hui jianying 为什么稀粥还会坚硬? “How can porridge



Writers' Association. In the 1990s the political atmosphere was much more democratic and free than the 1950s and 1960s. There were many cases where writers went to court to sue publishers, newspapers or magazines in order to protect their legal rights, something unimaginable in the 1950s. Wang Meng himself employed the law to protect himself. On October 9th 1991 he tried to summons *Wenyibao* and Shen Ping to appear at Beijing City Middle Court and at the national Supreme Court charged with damaging his political reputation. However, Beijing City Middle Court and the Supreme Court for some reason refused to issue his summons.<sup>148</sup> Nevertheless, there was considerable publicity generated by the case and after his legal action such unreasonable political criticism did not reappear. *Wenyibao* was the official organ of the Chinese Writers' Association and Wang Meng was vice-chairman of the association, so he was in the position of being attacked by his own organisation's newspaper, a bizarre situation.<sup>149</sup>

### **Meal Reform—An Important Issue**

Wang Meng's home town is Hebei Province, a place where people eat porridge every day, something which is a common custom for Chinese throughout the northern part of the country.<sup>150</sup> Porridge and pickles are digestible and delicious as far as most Chinese are concerned. Usually porridge is made of rice; rice and flour are staples for Chinese, vegetables are non-staples, and dishes contain just a small amount of meat. Since China

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be hard", *Zhongliu* "Mainstream", Vol. 10, 1991.

<sup>147</sup> *ibid*

<sup>148</sup> WMWJ, Vol.10, p. 349

<sup>149</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 669

<sup>150</sup> Wang Meng is very fond of porridge himself: see "I like eating porridge" WMWJ, Vol. 9, p. 476.

has pursued her reform and opening up policies, the common people's living standard has greatly improved. Many kind of nutritious food are now available in large quantities, like meat, eggs, milk and tonics, etc. Many young people have been influenced by Western habits, including Western eating habits. Food is one of the most important topics for China and the Chinese. Wang Meng here has chosen a very sensitive issue, since starvation has been a major disaster in modern Chinese history throughout the 20th century. Even after Liberation in 1949, some Western people predicted that China would not be able to solve the food problem by itself. From the beginning of the 20th century to the 1940's, there was continuous warfare, food and eating was a perennial concern. There is an old Chinese saying: "People see food as god" (民以食为天), something which will always be true for a China with upwards of 1.3 billion inhabitants.

Wang Meng makes eating habits a family reform issue, and uses it as a metaphor for reform of the Chinese political system, the economic system, etc. Reform is as difficult as changing people's eating habits. People have absorbed Western democratic thought and political systems and want to put them into practice, but it is not as simple as they think in theory, and not easy as they claim in practice. There are always many difficulties. In the beginning it was felt that there should be a complete change. This resulted from an uncritical acceptance of westernisation, but was something which, after it fell into trouble, turned into total repudiation. In the story, the family members all participate in the meals reform, and try many different ways. Thus, when Grandpa gives his power to Dad, it can be called "delegating power to the lower levels" (下放权力); when the Son become the leader and manages the food, it can be called

“leadership rejuvenation” (干部年轻化); family leadership selection becomes a “democratic election” (民主选举), when Grandpa becomes the family leader once again, this time as a result of democratic election, then the family is said have changed from the “patriarchal system” (家长制) to the “election system” (选举制). Having done their best to try to push forward the progress of reform, and having run into much resistance and unresolvable questions, they turn full circle and come back to the place where they started from. After several different kinds of vote, Grandpa, who is eighty-eight, still remains in charge of the family and nothing has changed. Wang Meng hints at an important issue: people can be given an open-door policy, be given democracy and human rights, but how should they be used? People are used to living in a conservative and patriarchal society, the concept of democracy cannot change overnight the old family structure and people’s traditional ideas, nor can people instantly understand how to operate democratically.

### **The Eight Reform Attempts**

The whole story’s atmosphere is relaxed and low-key with the serious political issue presented in a humorous and accessible manner. The story is just like an abstract picture, with a very simple plot, twelve characters (eleven family members and a housekeeper) who exist as representative types rather than fully formed whole people. Their characters do not undergo any development or changes, they are more like symbols than real people. The structure is simple and polished with eight reform attempts briefly narrated.

At the very beginning of the story this four generation family has enjoyed a very peaceful, happy and harmonious existence for many years, even under what they refer to as a “patriarchal” household management. Of course that situation existed before the “open door policy”, when there was no knowledge of the world scene and no sense of inferiority in comparison with advanced countries in the West. Then reform becomes a fashion and everybody seems to have lots of new ideas and wants to tell other people what they should do, and tell the government what is right what is wrong. This story vividly depicts this kind of phenomenon. Father, Sister Xu, Son and Brother-in-law are all lucky enough to get the chance to act as the new leader, able to carry out their own version of family management reform. For different reasons none of them succeeds, but the most important thing is they all get the chance to have a try. Each time the situation seems to be very encouraging, but they have not done enough careful research before putting their ideas into practice, something that would be disastrous in the case of a nation-wide policy in a real reform process.

The story's structure is fresh and lively, as the four generational family have eight different attempts at reform. The reforms follow each other in order and advance stage by stage. The first stage sees a new atmosphere as new trends emerge in society. Grandpa is an enlightened person who approves of Son's suggestion to buy a recorder. After the novelty wears off in a few days, people realise that “the use of new technology and new things is extremely limited, and much less important than family harmony and order”.<sup>151</sup> The result is that the recorder is felt to be no better than the traditional old radio. They are slightly disappointed that an item of new technology like

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<sup>151</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 646.

the tape recorder has not miraculously transformed their lives.

The second stage is the year work units cancel the noon snooze and provide a free lunch. People all grow very excited at the beginning in the face of this great Western style innovation. Initially people cannot get used to forgoing their noon snooze because they have become accustomed to this custom over many years. Furthermore, they are not even happy about the free lunch since it is full of meat and oil, and too much for them. They all become sick, and decide they prefer noodles with soy sauce, so in the end everyone turns back to their old favourite. Before such a reform, most people think that in a small thing like the noon snooze and lunch it would be very easy to change over to the Western style. This would probably save time, and a meal with more meat should be good for health after so many years of meat shortage. However, this was not necessarily the way things worked out. When reforms are begun people embark on them without thinking through all the implications, and after they fail people do not appreciate the reason for it. It is rather a question of the failure to adapt to change, and the resentment that follows from this.

At the third stage Grandpa first mentions that they should change from a “head of state system” to a “cabinet system”, under which Grandpa can nominate somebody as head of the family. This decision is to be ratified by a meeting of the whole family, and family members can take power in turn. Firstly, Father is entrusted with taking charge of routine family matters. However, Father insists on asking Grandpa everything and wanting him to make the decision before Father will do anything. Others feel that he is relying on Grandpa’s prestige as the oldest and most respected member of the family

whom nobody likes to go directly against. Father is trying not to put a foot wrong and appears to wish to put himself under Grandpa's protection, leaving Grandpa still in charge of the family. Grandpa has been in power for too long to allow his son, Father, to develop his own management ability and when the latter is suddenly given the job he finds he lacks the ability to do it. Father realises he is being criticized by others and passes over power to the housekeeper, Sister Xu (徐姐), absolving himself of all responsibility for her future actions. Thus reform from a "head of the state system" to a "cabinet system" is not successful.

The story goes into its fourth stage. Sister Xu, who has worked in the family for dozens of years,<sup>152</sup> begins to arrange routine family matters, and also relies on Grandpa's prestige. Family members mock her because she is old and not well educated and could not possibly bring any modern influence to bear, Son complains:

"Our dishes have been the same for forty years, they are practically historical relics..... Our family's life is typical of one which has fallen behind the times."<sup>153</sup>

Some people think that Sister Xu has saved money by buying cheap food in order to use that money buy tonic for Grandpa, so earning Grandpa's gratitude in spite of the fact that she produces pathetic meals for the rest of the family. Sister Xu pays great attention to, and spends much money on, looking after Grandpa. Son criticizes her and makes the comment:

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<sup>152</sup> This is clearly no ordinary family, it must at least be a high level official family in order to be allowed to have a nanny for so many years. There were no rich families under the communist system, only high officials were able to employ a nanny or housekeeper in China before the 1980s.

<sup>153</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 648

“Power is corruption, one percent power is one percent corruption, one hundred percent power is one hundred percent corruption.”<sup>154</sup>

Sister Xu is quite enjoying doing the job and does not realise the opposition she has aroused. This approach is also a failure.

At the fifth stage, Son volunteers to be manager of the household and is accepted, so he gets the chance to plan the menus for the whole family. He is young, full of enthusiasm and is influenced by Western thought. His opinion is that:

“porridge and pickles are a symbol of the East Asian sick man ..... porridge and pickles are the cause of the decay of Chinese civilisation ..... unless porridge and pickles are abolished, there is no hope for China.”<sup>155</sup>

He organizes Western food: butter, bread, eggs, milk, meat and coffee. After three days the whole family is in shock, most family members are seriously sick, some are hospitalised and require urgent surgery. In these three days, the food allowance for a whole month is used up. Son is removed from his post and family life returns to normal. Western dishes are part of Western culture, something worshipped by Son's generation, who believe that Western food is one of the reasons why Western countries have advanced further than China; it is a symbol of modernity. This failure really is an unexpected shock for both young and old. Both accept that the foray into Western style eating is a total failure.

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<sup>154</sup> *ibid*

<sup>155</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 649

Although the reforms have not succeeded, the attempts to find a new way continue. Stage six is for the four generations to divide into five groups and each group cook for themselves. This plan cannot keep going beyond the first two days: there is just one gas cooker, every group has to cook one by one, this wastes a lot of time and people cannot get to work on time. Furthermore, it uses up the whole month's gas allowance, which is no longer provided free at that time. So this idea fails the practical test.

The seventh stage is developing a more democratic style of working and holding elections. Grandpa still wins the election. Through the election process, although Grandpa is still head of the family, but this time the significance of his title is completely different. "This was no longer, and absolutely could not be, feudal patriarchal ideology, but was rather modern democratic ideology."<sup>156</sup> This is a wonderfully ironic election result: Grandpa regains his position through the ballot box, as the candidate for stability and no change. Although he only receives a minority of the total votes, he is supported by the older members for whom he is the tried and trusted candidate.

Grandpa is a bright and generous man, and does not approve of the result, which is quite a surprise to some of the others. He indicates several times that he does not want to stick to the post of head of the family. He really wants to hand over to somebody else, but the result of the election means he cannot easily escape from this leadership position. For the eighth stage Grandpa suggests changing the basis of the election: they

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<sup>156</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 657



should not be choosing a leader but a cook. The key criterion for a cook is that of skill: they should not think in terms of a leader, but should test each person's culinary skills. Each person cooks the agreed dishes and is given marks by the other family members. Much to everyone's surprise Grandpa and Grandma emerge together as top grade in the first class, with the others in descending order corresponding to their age.

### **The Order is Always the Same**

No matter which different way is used to elect a leader for this family of old people, Grandpa is always the leader supported by the old "masses". This is really a reflection of a complicated situation which has its historical, cultural and social background. These factors have existed in people's mind over many years, and, in spite of all the new words, new fashions and new technology, the concept of social or family order which exists deep in their minds is not easily changed. This is summed up in the comment: "Theories, names, and methods are often renewed, but order lasts forever".<sup>157</sup> This attracted political criticism over its underlying meaning, but it sums up beautifully the eight stages of reform. The sentence came to epitomise the whole story.

Wang Meng wrote an essay "Talking about this bowl of Porridge"<sup>158</sup> explaining where his idea came from and why he wrote this. As a result of his story, porridge became a source of great social concern and argument; people were more interested in the story's underlying political meaning, making it appear more like an allegory than a short story.

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<sup>157</sup> 理论名称方法常新，而秩序是永恒的。WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 660

The influence of the story and the debate surrounding its contents far exceeded the writer's expectations. The Four Generation family can be viewed as epitomising China, itself a big family. The story is presented as fable, as seen through the eyes of the first person narrator, a member of the third generation. This "I" is the grandson of Grandpa, the son of Father, the father of Son. Characters in the story, such as Grandpa, Father, Brother-in-law, Son, are all representatives of different age groups, characters and personalities. These characters take on the role of abstract symbols, with no change or development of their characters from the beginning of the story to the end. Precisely because they are abstract symbols they have infinitely broad applicability. Wang Meng thinks the story displays "ridiculous shortcomings and weaknesses among people." The main criticism is that Son, who is totally westernized, pursues the latest fashion blindly and childishly, and brags shamelessly. Sister Xu is biased towards conservatism, Father dares not hold responsibility, Brother-in-law talks extravagantly about democracy but is divorced from reality.<sup>159</sup> Most critics pointed out the fact that the family management system reforms, which revolve around the issue of meals, are very much like the political reform process in China in the difficult situations which arise. The writer uses lots of the latest political vocabulary, employing the rhetorical device of dressing up a minor topic in grandiose words, creating a humorous and relaxed atmosphere. Yet, at the same time we can still feel the writer's concern over the direction of the country's development and its influence on the lives of the common people.

At the beginning of the story Wang Meng gives a good introduction to the family members: Grandpa aged 88, Son aged 16, the narrator is of the third generation and

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<sup>158</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 664-666

nearly 40 years old. There are ten family members are older than 40 out of the total of eleven, only Son is under twenty. 6 members are older than 60 or nearly 60, so it is clearly an older family or an old people's society in microcosm. Every younger person accepts the older one's suggestions, including what kind of tea should be drunk, which brand of soap should be used. The family has kept to this custom for decades, and before the reform phase nobody has seemed bothered about this and no one has had different ideas. This is good preamble to the story. The ending is also interesting. After trying different ways of reform, the result is the same as before. After Son, Sister and Brother-in-law, Aunt and Uncle leave this big family, they miss the porridge and pickles when they have the freedom to choose their food. The narrator wants to tell Son how a British friend, a person with a Ph.D., praised rice porridge, "How simple, how gentle and soft, how pleasant, how elegant.....only the ancient East has this kind of mysterious food."<sup>160</sup> It has a philosophical and a gentle ending which made people ponder over its deeper significance. Wang Meng tries to tell people that in learning from the West one should take a scientific attitude to judge what should be accepted and what should be rejected. It does not mean that learning from the West involves abandoning traditional Chinese culture and customs, which are part of the national psyche. It exposes the error of total westernisation.

### **Colourful Language**

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<sup>159</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 664

<sup>160</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 662.

The story's language uses a humorous, allegorical style; it is very lively and varied with serious political expressions and jocular phrases mixed together. Examples are: "flaunt a banner" (拉大旗) a phrase from the language of the Cultural Revolution, "usurping an imperial decree" (假传圣旨) language from the traditional classical novel, changing from a "head of the state system" (元首制) to a "cabinet system" (内阁制), both Western political terms. When Son comments on Sister Xu's work, he says she: "follows the beaten path, sticks to conventions, has become rigid and ossified, and does not want to make progress." (因循守旧, 墨守陈规, 凝固僵化, 不思进取). This is clearly a case of "big words for a small matter" (大词小用). This skill of Wang Meng's in using language conveys the greater issues underlying the story. When a comment like: "Power is corruption, one percent power is one percent corruption, one hundred percent power is one hundred percent corruption" is used as a judgment on Sister Xu's housework, the reader is left in no doubt that the phrase has much wider currency. Proverbs, sayings, colloquial language, fashionable new words and folk sayings are mixed together to produce a very vivid and colourful language style. Words with very different flavor and meaning are mixed together very smoothly and naturally, a testament to Wang Meng's outstanding linguistic skill. Another surprising feature is that when he wrote this story Wang Meng was in his fifties yet he had absorbed many fashionable words and produces a very up to date style to express the story. This is a thing many other Chinese writers of his age had difficulty achieving. For example, Liu Shaotang was a person of the same generation as Wang Meng and a writer who enjoyed a reputation as a young genius in the 1950s. However, in the 1980s his works still consisted of a narrow and undeveloped concern with Jingxi's (western suburbs of

Beijing) canal countryside area, with no real new content or meaning, and no improvement in his writing style. Wang Meng has consistently shown the ability to move forward and modernise his writing in both content and style.

When Wang Meng describes the old generation's rejection of Western food, his description of the situation is hilarious. Sister Xu and Grandma do not like coffee and milk. Uncle makes the suggestion of frying spring onion (葱花) plus pepper tree prickly ash (花椒), cassia bark (桂皮), fennel (茴香), raw ginger bark (生姜皮), pepper (胡椒), seaweed (紫菜) and dried chilli (干辣椒), heating them in the wok until they smoke then adding Cantonese soy sauce--shrimp-roe soy sauce (广东老抽 - 虾子酱), then adding the liquor to milky coffee in order to drown out the foreign flavour and stench of milky coffee.<sup>161</sup> This ridiculous, completely over the top suggestion testifies to Wang Meng's vivid imagination and is a highly effective way of mocking the chaotic mixture of Chinese and Western things that has emerged in many cases in China. The two cultures are completely different, a random, ill thought out mixture of both, just as in the case of food, will only produce a mess. The two need scientifically and intelligently putting together. This example is very humorous in context, but at the same time conveys a serious point to the reader. Through this trifling example we can understand how difficult it is for old people to understand and accept new things, especially Western things, life-styles, eating habits, and so on. For Wang Meng this is not a joke to amuse the readers. He uses this allegory to show his concern and anxiety about implementing social and political reform.

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<sup>161</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 650

His use of colloquial language includes such sentences as: “Brother-in-law was the only one in family who had drunk foreign ink.” where “drunk foreign ink” (喝过洋水) is a very colloquial way of expressing the idea that he had studied abroad. Another example is calling a radio a “speaking box” (话匣子), a really old-fashioned popular word which had been commonly used from the 1950s to the 1970s. This word had such a cosy, folksy image it made people who had experienced that time feel very nostalgic.

Fashionable words may originate from English or may come from the local dialect, like Beijing street language. Examples of Western style words are when he is describing what kind of family election they should hold. Wang Meng says the “election” should be “made totally open, transparent, standardised, codified, legalised, procedurised, scientificised, systematised” (一律公开化, 透明化, 规范化, 条文化, 法律化, 程序化, 科学化, 制度化).<sup>162</sup> This use of eight westernised professional political words creates a very humorous impression on the reader.

Most of the language reforms attempted in his works have been accepted and welcomed as reflecting the changes in society and people’s social life. At the same time these innovations in Wang Meng’s style have helped re-fashion the language of contemporary fiction in China. The same kind of linguistic transformation is apparent in other writers’ works, such as Wang Shuo, Su Tong, etc.. However, most of these are new generation writers. It is to Wang Meng’s credit that he has been able to remain at the forefront of literary trends over his long career. In this story Wang Meng’s language is rich and colourful, varied and full of originality; the story shows off well his

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<sup>162</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 654

linguistic skills, which contribute greatly to the literary success of the story.

## Chapter VII: The Quest for Professional Excellence

### Experiments in Style

The reform of contemporary Chinese literature began with writing technique rather than content or theme. A major reason for this is that there is nothing inherently political in the language and style in which something is written,<sup>163</sup> whereas the subject matter and its treatment are clearly potentially contentious areas. This is one reason why “stream of consciousness” writing became the focus of a heated debate in the early 1980s. From the beginning in 1949, contemporary Chinese literature was in shackles for the next thirty years. Leftist politicians criticised modern Chinese works since the New Culture Movement, criticised Western works and literary theory, and pushed leftist literary theories, such as “revolutionary realism combined with revolutionary romanticism” (the “two combinations”),<sup>164</sup> and “the prominence of positive characters, the hero and the central hero” (the “three prominences”).<sup>165</sup> China had imported modern Western literary theories earlier in the century and these appeared in works after 1916 New Culture Movement. However, during the decades of isolation this communal memory was largely lost, and the late 1970s was almost a new beginning. As a result modern Western theories and techniques seemed outlandish and unacceptable to both readers and critics.

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<sup>163</sup> There had been arguments over form stretching back to the ‘national forms’ debate of the 1930s (See Goldman, p. 15-16, *passim*; Pickowicz, p. 231-2) but relatively speaking form was much less contentious than content.

<sup>164</sup> Zhu Zhai, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue sichaoshi*, p. 348-359

<sup>165</sup> Zhu Zhai, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue sichaoshi*, p. 504-515



Wang Meng published a letter *Guanyu 'Chun zhi sheng' de tongxin* (A Letter about 'The Voice of Spring') in August 1980, and pointed out "I do not deny I got inspiration from some modernist stories, including stream of consciousness stories."<sup>166</sup> His definition of "stream of consciousness" is different from the Western version, as he went on to explain in the letter. He asked: "Why do we spin a cocoon around ourselves, and let some regulations and restrictions tie up the pursuit of artistic forms and creative methods?"<sup>167</sup> It showed his determination to pursue his own ideas in his writing. Instead of using the traditional way of writing a story from the beginning of the time sequence to the end. Wang Meng rearranged the structures of his stories so that they no longer followed 'real time' but instead used psychological time, with flashbacks and flashforwards describing the protagonist's interior feelings. *The Bolshevik Salute* is a typical example of this. The same method was also used in other stories written in same period. These "stream of consciousness" stories were the stirrings of independent thinking after a long period of restrictions. They were not mature stories but their appearance encouraged others to criticise, think and try for themselves. They attracted attention and sparked off a debate of huge social impact, something much more significant than the artistic value of these stories.

This group of Wang Meng's "stream of consciousness" stories is mainly concerned with the psychology of intellectuals. There are three psychological types in New Period literature: the peasant, the citizen and the intellectual. Protagonists such as Chen Mou in *The Eyes of the Night*, Miao Keyan in *The Dream of the Sea*, Yue Zhifeng in *The*

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<sup>166</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 600

*Voice of Spring*, are all intellectuals, and as such are the type most familiar to Wang Meng. These protagonists' experiences and status were very close to Wang Meng's. Their psychological states had much in common with Wang Meng's own. The image he used to portray them reflected the psychological state of certain traditional Chinese intellectuals. The three stories above all start with the protagonists going somewhere far away from home. In *The Eyes of the Night* it is on an official trip to the big city; in *The Dream of the Sea* it is on a holiday to the seaside; in *The Voice of Spring* it is on a train back to the home town. There are further examples: in *Butterfly* Zhang Siyuan goes back as a high official to the remote countryside where he worked; in *Movable Parts*, Ni Zao sets out on his trip to Europe; *Multi-Coloured* describes Cao Qianli riding a horse on his own, away from home, going to collect some statistics. Wang Meng said: "I very much like having my stories start on trains."<sup>168</sup> He actually likes his stories to take place on a journey,<sup>169</sup> something which unconsciously echoes the traditional Chinese intellectuals' lifestyle. Where intellectuals were frustrated in their political ambitions, they often went far away from home (sometimes they were obliged to) over mountains and rivers. In this way they produced lots of literary works expressing their feelings. Examples are the famous poets Li Bai and Su Shi. This unconscious pattern of writing shows how deeply influenced Wang Meng is by traditional Chinese culture.

One feature that emerges in these "stream of consciousness" stories is the "young Bolshevik spirit" (shaogong jingshen). The protagonists of these stories have

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<sup>167</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 601

<sup>168</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 167

<sup>169</sup> Wang Peiyuan, "Yigeren yuanyou" Wang Meng xiaoshuo de yige moshi, Dangdai zuojia pinglun, 6, 1995

experienced disasters and their own years of hardship; now there was a new government and new policies, they were determined work hard and get back the wasted time, radiating the “vigour of youth”. The reportage *Fang Su xinzhao* (Emotions on Visiting the Soviet Union) written in 1984 won the National Reportage Award 1984-1985,<sup>170</sup> and reflected Wang Meng’s very strong “young Bolshevik emotions” (shaogong qingjie). He said:

“I dreamed of going to the Soviet Union from the age of about fifteen, ... at that time Soviet Union was not only a beautiful dream, but also an ideal I pursued for which I would not have hesitated to sacrifice my life..... Travelling around Soviet Union is a satisfying inner experience. It is far more than a case of travel broadening the mind; its whole beauty gave me sorrow and comfort, its whole non-beauty gave me comfort and sorrow. This was a journey which revived an old dream.”<sup>171</sup>

These were the kind of feelings he expressed in most of his stories, especially early 1980s “stream of consciousness” stories. The “young Bolshevik emotion” was become a limitation on his thought and his works,<sup>172</sup> always stayed right side of the line of authority. Wang Meng retains a conservative attitude which restricts his ability to express any creative or revolutionary thought. This is a disadvantage to him in his quest to become a great writer, although he has made remarkable contributions to the reform of writing structure and language style.

Wang Meng not only wrote as a writer, but also as a critic and leading literary figure. He paid great attention to the development of literary theory, participated in discussions about his works and published critical articles on other writers, both leading and

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<sup>170</sup> WMWJ, Vol.10, p. 346

<sup>171</sup> WMWJ, Vol.9, p. 292-293

following new literary trends. These include the theoretical article: *Zai tansuo de daolu shang* “On the Path of Exploration”; a letter *Guanyu ‘yishiliu’ de tongxin* “A Letter on ‘Stream of Consciousness’”; *Re ‘ai yu liaojie* “Love and Understanding”—a speech at the national minority literary writing association; comments on other writer’s work: *Qieshuo “Qiwang”* “Talking about ‘King of the Chess’”, *Wang Shuo de tiaozhan* “The Challenge of Wang Shuo”; forewords for books: *Huashuo youmo* “Talking about Humour”.<sup>173</sup> He tried to develop a clear vision of the way forward for contemporary Chinese literature.

### **Experiments in Language**

There are many reasons for Wang Meng attempting to find a new language for his literary works. Firstly, he is very sensitive to language and the New Period literature was looking for change. Secondly, thirty years of leftist influences had left the language of literature stereotyped and stale after being endlessly repeated without change. Literature as a propaganda tool was less and less attractive and the language of some stories had reached a very low level. These factors depressed writers and readers, and became the motive for Wang Meng and other writers to seek a new language style. Thirdly, the language was outmoded and left behind by changes in the developing society and the competitive cultural market-place. An amusing language style could attract more readers and have a wider influence on society.

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<sup>172</sup> Zhang Zhong, *Dangdai zhongguo dalu wenxue liubian*, P. 35-47

<sup>173</sup> WMWJ, Vol.6 & Vol.9

Experimenting with language has been a significant part of Wang Meng's stories since the 1980s. He was amused by language, tried different ways of expression, and was surprised at the effect they had. He formulated his own language style to suit his characters. His language was lively and unpredictable. He mixed in classical Chinese and Western style language, including directly using English, and using popular dialects like Beijing dialect and Hebei rural dialect. In his quotations sometimes he slightly changes familiar Chinese sayings, breaking the rules of traditional Chinese rhetoric, grammar and logic. He seeks for amusement, humour and mockery. Wang Meng's meticulously ornate and extravagant language was considered an intellectual genre, and his language style was often compared with Gao Xiaosheng's rural language style. The critic Leo Ou-Fan Lee thought: "...they were among the first writers to pay utmost attention to literary technique as a way to break away from the orthodoxy of politicised and formulaic writing."<sup>174</sup> Wang Meng was considered a "technically inventive" writer.

Wang Meng wrote an article *Tansuo duanxiang* "Judgement on Explorations", expressing his proposals on rhetoric and how to put his new language ideas into practice. He said:

"The first is increasing the full stops. When I wrote *The Butterfly* the full stop predominated. The second is reducing quotation marks. By changing dialogue into someone's innermost thoughts and feelings, one can avoid using quotation marks. The third is that the concept of the metaphor has also greatly changed. Usually we use things which people know very well as a metaphor for things with which people are not familiar, or which they find it hard to imagine. But metaphor is not all

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<sup>174</sup> Leo Ou-Fan Lee, "The Politics of Technique" in *After Mao—Chinese Literature & Society 1978-1981*, Jeffrey C. Kimkley (ed.), p. 181

like this. One can use antonym metaphors (fanyu). Fourthly, in *The Voice of Spring* there is a long paragraph which has only nouns, only subjects with no predicates. Fifthly, in parallelism we usually use words with a similar meaning, but I often use words with the opposite meaning.”<sup>175</sup>

Wang Meng uses single nouns as sentences, and arranges words in columns to reflect people’s complex feelings over changes in life. This accords with what he said in the fourth item above. In the story *The Voice of Spring* there is :

“Free market. Department store. Hong Kong electric clock. Yu opera *Juanxitong*. Mutton dipped cake, Fermented glutinous rice egg. Brogue leather shoes. Three tiles hat. Contract Production. Purchasing big spring onions. Chinese medicine cures cancer. Proportional election. Marriage feast.....in these gentle digressions.”<sup>176</sup>

These are nouns, with no predicate, which, separately mean nothing. Wang Meng assembles them to create a picture. The protagonist of the story, Yue Zhifeng, has just came back to China from abroad; society and life in China have changed so fast. The appearance of all these things reflects the way people seem to be living in a society with a new economy and culture, one which is developing very fast. This style represents the mind of the protagonist who was excited, surprised and happy about them.

Language skill can create the mood and atmosphere for a story, sometime with very surprising effects. In the story *Ling de shan* (The Ringing Bell) appears:

“I learned that if I wanted to take the phone call then I should take it, if I

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<sup>175</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 120

<sup>176</sup> WMWJ, Vol.4, p. 293

didn't want to take the phone call, then I shouldn't take it; or I would want to take it, but didn't, or wouldn't want to take it but did. In the end I took all the phone calls.....and then chose to ring back those I should ring back or those which were interesting; and chose those I didn't have to ring back, or didn't want ring back, or it was boring to ring back and did not ring back."<sup>177</sup>

These are quite long sentences composed of phrases with no commas, describing his bemused feelings about telephone calls. When the telephone was not as common as it is today, it was a special symbol of status and power in China. Ordinary people could not have a phone, only officials. That situation continued into the late 1980s. The story portrays the protagonist's complex feelings about phone calls. These two long sentences consist of clauses using all the same words but with the order of the words changed producing a different meaning. There are several words repeated many times in each long sentence, such as "take"(jie), "ring back" (hui). The novel structure of the sentences does provide a fresh feeling about language, and through his language play Wang Meng graphically describes how the protagonist feels embarrassed by all these phone calls.

We see a similar use of language in the story *Yaozi 8679 hao* (Code No.8679) where Wang Meng uses 'backing' (houtai) six times in each of two consecutive sentences to get across his message.<sup>178</sup> We have noted a similar use of 'stupid' (huli hutu) in *Movable Parts*.<sup>179</sup> This new rhetoric, new sentence structure, and new artistic technique influenced the younger generation of writers, such as Wang Shuo and Mo Yan.

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<sup>177</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 13-14, no commas in original, added here for comprehension.

<sup>178</sup> WMWJ, Vol.5, p. 184

<sup>179</sup> see: Chapter Six, *Movable Parts*, 'Colourful Language'.

Around the mid-1980s in the literary world there appeared many different styles of language. These included such as Gao Xiaosheng's natural, simple, humorous language style, Jia Pingwa's rustic, simple, honest language style, Deng Youmei's old Beijing dialect, Zhang Xianliang's psychological discursive style, etc. The Great Cultural Revolution had an extremely strong influence on all contemporary Chinese writers, not only on the themes, ideas and content, but also on the language. Zhang Xianliang made a speech during a visit to the United States in May 1985, with the following frank comments on the lack of linguistic artistry in contemporary Chinese literature:

“When it comes to linguistic artistry, the great majority of contemporary Chinese literary works neglect a most important law of the use of language: economy. Our language is short on ambiguity, subtle hints and multiple meanings. It is short on understatement and humour. Writers try to write down everything that is in their minds...and do not encourage readers to put their own creativity into enjoying a piece of writing.....few of us can yet claim to have reached maturity.”<sup>180</sup>

From the mid-1980s, Wang Meng put a lot of effort into language and form, attempting to build up his linguistic artistry in his fiction. The language of his stories is much more modern, amusing and enjoyable. Examples are: *A Winter's Topic*, *The Football Star's Fortuitous Encounter*, and two short stories where language is the dominant feature: *For Alice* and *Exhilaration*<sup>181</sup>.

Wang Meng's language is dazzling and florid, displaying to the full his linguistic talents. It is also sometimes self-indulgent, extravagant, repetitive. There are many paragraphs full of monologue, with lyric commentary, and formal parallelism. The

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<sup>180</sup> Duke, Michael S., *The Problematic Nature of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Fiction in English Translation, Worlds Apart—Recent Chinese Writing and Its Audiences*, Goldblatt, Howard (ed.), p. 203-



feeling of tidewater streaming out has been called by some critics the “language pool phenomenon” (yuyan pubu xianxiang). The critic Wang Gan describes his language as extremely inflated and his language habit as being: “just like a child playing chess, or piling up toy bricks, arranging them in rows this way then that, providing infinite pleasure and enjoyment.”<sup>182</sup>

In fact Wang Meng was rather serious in “playing” his language games as he sought novel effects. He put together nouns, verbs and adjectives overlapping each other, criss-crossing, with long and short sentences, exclamatory sentences, introspective monologues, comic dialogues. These express feelings, mood and criticism all mixed together; they express people’s complex lives and interior worlds, just “like juggling with language”.<sup>183</sup> Wang Meng had said “If you do research on my works, you’ll be able to write an article just on punctuation.”<sup>184</sup> Although meant as a joke, still it shows clearly Wang Meng’s confidence in his deliberate reform of language, and his pride in the results.

### **Political Concerns**

Wang Meng has a deep sense of political commitment. A sense of historical mission and “feeling of concern” (youhuan yishi) are a traditional feature of the Chinese intellectual. Wang Meng’s highest ambition was to become a professional

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<sup>181</sup> See chapter five.

<sup>182</sup> WMWJ, Vol.8, p. 605

<sup>183</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> Yan Gang, Zhu Zhai, Gu Xiang, He Xilai & Wang Yu, *Xinshiqi xiaoshuolun—pinglunjia shiritan*, p. 178

revolutionary when he was a teenager.<sup>185</sup> Even after being condemned as a rightist and suffering twenty years of bitter experiences, Wang Meng still claimed:

“I have always believed that literature and revolution are inherently indivisible....Literature is the pulse of revolution, its signal, its conscience. And revolution is literature’s guide, its soul and its source.”<sup>186</sup>

These beliefs are very visible in his works written at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s.

In the mid-1980s, after several literary trends had passed, like “Scar” (shanghen) literature, “Introspective” (fanshi) literature and “Reform” (gaige) literature, New Wave Fiction (xinchao xiaoshuo) emerged. This came from young writers such as Liu Suola, Xu Xing, Ma Yuan and Can Xue. They were independent in their thinking. The content and themes have much more modern consciousness. They developed the theme of individualism and were largely indifferent to politics. Unlike the older generation of writers, they were not seeking to carry out any “historical mission” (lishi shiming). The famous critic Liu Zaifu pointed out their central concern:

“They no longer appeal to society, nor do they try to prove their values. They are now their own masters, seeking their own positions. Thus literature has passed from the stage of reflection to the stage of pluralistic search.”<sup>187</sup>

Wang Meng was influenced by the New Wave Fiction too. He wrote some stories

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<sup>185</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 651

<sup>186</sup> Wang Meng, *The Butterfly and Other Stories*, p. 14

<sup>187</sup> Zhao, Henry (ed.), *The Lost Boat, Introduction—The New Waves in Recent Chinese Fiction*, p. 11

without any political content, such as *Exhilaration* and *Spider*, and turned his concern to culture and traditional ethics, such as in the novel *Movable Parts*. Wang Meng tried to de-emphasise his political themes, but if we look at all of his works we discover that most of his stories still have very strong political connotations. Given his background as a professional politician this is not surprising. This applies to stories like *The Fabricated Event* and *The Wind Ceases and the Waves Stop*. The short story *Hard Porridge*, published in 1989, is considered a very successful political story.

Usually it is very easy for works on political themes to become dry and dull, but Wang Meng handles political themes with a smooth, light touch, adroitly, proficiently and with a strong sense of humour. He was particularly successful in describing political themes in an everyday life context. He wrote political stories in allegory form as in *Hard Porridge*. Here he humorously uses family meal reform as a metaphor for national political reform, boldly exaggerating, satirising traditional customs and old concepts, and criticising westernization. His distortions and exaggerations result in absurdity, making the story profound in meaning yet full of amusement.

## **Humour**

Humour is one of the most important characteristics of Wang Meng's works. Wang Meng has very strong opinions on the subject. He said:

“Humour is necessary, I definitely do not think our country's literary works have too much humour, or that my humour lacks sincerity, although there may be some places where it lacks control. This is perhaps a characteristic of this locality: Beijing writers are almost all

influenced by xiangsheng (comic dialogues). Ding Ling said some paragraphs of my works are like xiangsheng. However I am a Beijingsese; Beijingsese are pretty garrulous, and after going to Xinjiang I added Afanti's<sup>188</sup> humour too."<sup>189</sup>

In the middle of 1980s, people and society were starting to recover from the Great Cultural Revolution. New Period literature had a function in the healing process. "Scar" literature and "Introspective" literature were very helpful in allowing people to vent their feelings of anger, frustration and sorrow. The social atmosphere was calmer. China advanced to a period of economic development. The political requirement was "anding tuanjie" (stability and unity). Literature ceased to be a propaganda tool or an educational tool; it resumed its function of entertainment. Readers needed more enjoyable, cheerful and entertaining stories, and humour is a significant aspect of this. The fast developing cultural market with competition from popular literature (tongsu wenxue) forced reform on serious literature (yansu wenxue). This included increasing the entertainment aspect and creating an enjoyable atmosphere.

Wang Meng's humour is natural and spontaneous humour; it is also the conscious humour of the educated intellectual. He drew inspiration from comic dialogues (xiangsheng), caricature and farce.<sup>190</sup> His humour is always combined with satire, with sharp-eyed mockery of the absurd things in society. However, his attitude is not unkind. When he makes fun of absurd things like the complexities of relationships and when he displays the ugly side of human nature, his attitude is always gentle and light, not sombre and threatening. Wang Meng greatly appreciates the value of humour, he

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<sup>188</sup> In Uygur it means sir, Mr., here means Uygur people.

<sup>189</sup> WMWJ, Vol.8, p. 586

<sup>190</sup> Cao Wenxuan, *Zhongguo bashiniandai wenxue xianxiang yanjiu*, p. 270

says:

“Because humour is wisdom, it is a superior form of intelligence... Humour has also a kind of confidence, a kind of calmness, a kind of healthy attitude to life, a kind of proper criticism, generous without losing its principles, a kind of rationality.”<sup>191</sup>

Wang Meng’s language technique kept improving from the end of 1970s to the mid-1980s, from the old fashioned language style to the “stream of consciousness” style and on to the modern humorous, entertaining style. His style develops from the stiffness of early stories to a more mature and skilled language, one which reflects society and people’s lives. The critic Zeng Zhennan divided Wang Meng’s humorous stories into three types:

“The first is mockery of the absurd spectacle of the Great Cultural Revolution; the second is the old habits of the Cultural Revolution as seen in ridiculous social dramas, the third is descriptions in a new *Rulin waishi* (The Scholars) style of odd corners of the present literary scene.”<sup>192</sup>

Stories like *The Football Star’s Fortuitous Encounter* and *Spider* can be seen as a fourth type, which feature abstract, exaggerated descriptions of modern social life’s absurd phenomena.

Wang Meng is a idealist who keeps a positive attitude; he adopts the comic form to depict tragedy, a striking contrast with other writers like Cong Weixi who use the tragic form to depict tragedy.

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<sup>191</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 543-544

<sup>192</sup> Zeng Zhennan, Wang Meng lun, p. 144

## The Role of Music

Wang Meng is fond of music. Many of his stories have music in the background. He pursues a kind of musical melody. The stories are brimming with a lively musical atmosphere, and a melodious feeling. The songs he mentions are famous classical Western songs, Chinese folk songs, Soviet Union songs, etc. This feeling for music goes through all his writing periods, from the very beginning in the 1950s until the 1990s. Not surprisingly music plays an important part in his life:

“...I also like to listen to music. This includes Western music, Chinese folk music, some local opera, dagushu<sup>193</sup> and Western opera. When I was young I liked singing, but not now.”<sup>194</sup>

In the short story *The Young Newcomer in the Organisation Department* which made him famous, he describes the great composer Tchaikovsky's *Italian Capriccio* being broadcast on the radio as a background to the meeting of the protagonist Lin Zhen with Zhao Huiwen at her home. Both of them are cultured people. In the novel *Long Live Youth*, also written in the 1950s, music appears many times representing the inauguration of socialist China, and songs which were popular at the time and which reflected people's spiritual state and political attitude play a special part in the novel. There are many songs sung by teenage girls in camps, such as the famous folk song “Lan huahua” (The Blue Flower), the Soviet song “Hongmei huar kai” (Red Plum Blooming), and some revolutionary songs of that time.

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<sup>193</sup> Versified story sung to the accompaniment of a small drum and other instruments.

<sup>194</sup> WMWJ, Vol.7, p. 656

Wang Meng uses pieces of famous classical Western music as the titles of his stories, such as Strauss's waltz "The Voice of Spring" (*Chun zhi sheng*), and Tchaikovsky's "Andante Song" (*Ruge de xingban*). He portrays musicians such as Cao Qianli, the protagonist of *Zase* (Multi-coloured); *Geshen* (Divine Singer) describes the minority singer Ailanmuke; *Shenniao* (Divine Bird) describes a young conductor Meng Di, intoxicated as he conducts the orchestra. *Tingyuan shenshen* (Deep in the Courtyard) describes the professors and lecturers of a music institute, and the protagonist who is a lyrics writer. Many stories mention and describe music. The characters often have strong connections with music, such as in *The Football Star's Fortuitous Encounter*, where the protagonist Ente's wife Jiumitang is a pop star. Music is a part of life and Wang Meng chooses to use it as a good way of reflecting life and characters, adding to the atmosphere of his works.

## Conclusion

Looking back over the past fifty years, the most prominent feature of contemporary Chinese literature has been its very close links with politics. For the first thirty years it developed separately from world literature, but in the past twenty years, like the Chinese economy, it has begun to “march towards the world” (zouxiang shijie).

Wang Meng’s writing experiences, his stylistic achievements and his conservative attitudes reflect contemporary Chinese literature. His writing originates in the Yan’an literary spirit.<sup>195</sup> In spite of this essentially conservative background he has consistently sought in a professional way to perfect his art. In the early 1980s this was confined to stylistic innovations based on reabsorbing the main trends of world literature. In *Hard Porridge* he has shown again the ability to make a contribution to the political debate but in a successful literary format.

Contemporary Chinese literature has suffered two big losses. In the 1980s, because of political differences, many excellent poets and writers became “dissidents” and were exiled abroad. These include younger generation poets like Bei Dao and Yang Lian, and older generation writers like Liu Binyan and Bai Hua. Their later works are in some cases not available in China, and some exiled writers have not been able to continue writing effectively, so their influence in China has been limited.

The second loss has been that under the economic reforms, many writers have

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<sup>195</sup> Zhang Zhong, *Dangdai zhongguo dalu wenxue liubian*, p. 35-47



published a few stories then gone into business ventures. In the past writing, although a politically precarious occupation, was prestigious and financially secure. Now there are fewer political problems, but it is financially precarious and much less prestigious in competition with commercial work. Business and economics are so exciting and attractive that many artists, painters, musicians, opera singers and writers have gone to “swim in the sea” (xiahai youyong). In the business sea, they set up restaurants, companies and beauty saloons. Writing does not offer a good income and a comfortable life, but doing business, although it provides wide experience, takes a lot of energy. Many people have not been able to continue producing work of quality, and the literary world is facing a loss of talent.

Contemporary literature has had to face the challenge of competition in the fast changing cultural market. This includes popular literature (tongsu wenxue), and other forms of modern entertainment, like TV, pop music, and foreign films. A major question is how to attract readers at the present time, especially the younger generation.

Under the difficult circumstances of recent years, Wang Meng has been most consistent in his pursuit of excellence as a professional writer. Up to the present time, there has not emerged in contemporary Chinese literature a great figure with the status of Lu Xun in modern Chinese literature. A number of writers like Zhang Xianliang and A Cheng have produced very influential individual works but they have not overall been as significant as Wang Meng. He has many strong points in his creative writing, and works like *Movable Parts* and *Hard Porridge* are likely to

endure in the future. If he could overcome the limitations of his political ideology, he would be a leading candidate for the title of the greatest contemporary Chinese writer.

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