The “Wang Shuo Phenomenon” and the Emergent Commercialised Popular Culture in Mainland China during the Late 1980s and Early 1990s

By

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This thesis is the result of my own original work.

All sources used have been acknowledged.

Yongli Su
To my husband Xiaolong and my son Victor
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I started this thesis in 2002 when I moved to Australia for my studies. Along with the progress of the thesis, I have experienced a number of important moments in my life – my marriage in 2003, starting my first full-time job in 2005, settling down in Canberra in 2007 and having my first son in July 2007. It has been a memorable journey and I am pleased to see the accomplishment of the thesis.

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Last, but by no means least, I wish to thank my husband, Xiaolong Ni, who bears my busy hours and is a constant source of encouragement and support. To him and our 11 month old son I dedicate this thesis.
This thesis examines the epochal cultural transformation in mainland China during the late 1980s and early 1990s through an investigation of the “Wang Shuo phenomenon.” Wang Shuo was one of the most popular writers during that period, yet was also very controversial, due to his distinct satirical style and public profile as an entrepreneur. The “Wang Shuo phenomenon” refers to the nation-wide popularity and controversy surrounding the writer and his works.

This thesis argues that the “Wang Shuo phenomenon” encapsulated the dramatic changes in China’s cultural sector that occurred as a result of the changes taking place in China’s economic and political spheres during Deng Xiaoping’s rule of the nation. The turn of the 1990s was a notable period in the history of contemporary China when the rise of the cultural market and cultural consumerism challenged former research approaches that analysed China’s cultural practices mainly “from factional tensions within the higher echelons of the government and the Chinese Communist party (CCP) or alternatively, from the often hostile relationship between official policy and the demands of the ‘masses.’” \(^1\) To view the Chinese cultural arena since the 1980s, one has to acknowledge the role the commercial culture played and especially, the relationship of the rising commercial culture with the other two major cultural forces of official policies and elite intellectuals on literature and art. \(^2\) The “Wang Shuo phenomenon” was just such a cultural phenomenon since it was deeply intertwined in the web of dynamic relations among these cultural forces.

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\(^2\) Here I agree with Kam, Cheung and Tao Dongfeng that the contemporary Chinese cultural arena can be described as “three kingdoms” -- the manifestation of the tension between official culture, elite culture and popular culture. See Kam and Cheung, ibid.
This study aims to discover the interactive relationship among cultural forces lying behind the phenomenon and to contribute to a more dynamic understanding of the intimacy and complexity of the relationship among major players in the Chinese cultural field – cultural entrepreneurs, political authorities and elite intellectuals. To achieve this goal, I draw on Stuart Hall’s thinking on popular culture and treat the cultural phenomenon surrounding Wang Shuo as a site where economic, political and ideological changes were inextricably intertwined. I have thus investigated the commercialisation in Chinese publishing, film and television industries and analysed the intricate relationship between the Wang Shuo-style popular cultural products and the traditions of political authorities and Chinese elite intellectuals in these areas.
The "Wang Shuo Phenomenon" and the Emergent Commercialised Popular Culture in Mainland China during the Late 1980s and Early 1990s

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the epochal cultural transformation in mainland China during the late 1980s and early 1990s through an investigation of the "Wang Shuo phenomenon." The turn of the 1990s was a notable period in the history of contemporary China, when the rise of the cultural market and cultural consumerism challenged former research approaches. Those research approaches analysed China's cultural practices mainly "from factional tensions within the higher echelons of the government and the Chinese Communist party (CCP) or alternatively, from the often hostile relationship between official policy and the demands of the 'masses.'"^ Early in 1983, John Fitzgerald anticipated that the influence and importance of the cultural commercialisation could be compared to another Cultural Revolution.^ Geremie Barme uses the term "terminal turmoil" to describe the existential socio-political crisis that, he suggests, has been caused by the co-existence of the rising market forces and the remaining Party orthodoxy. Shuyu Kong examines China's transition from a socialist society to a consumer-driven state capitalist society through her research on Chinese publishing and television industry. Some other scholars discuss whether the cultural

^ Shuyu Kong's research on Chinese publishing industry, Kong, Consuming Literature: Best Sellers and the Commercialization of Literary Production in Contemporary China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Kong has also conducted extensive research on Chinese television. Her forthcoming book
commercialisation has in fact undermined the Party-state’s monopoly of cultural production and prepared the existence of a “civil society” in China. Indeed, to understand the Chinese cultural arena since the 1980s, one has to acknowledge the role commercial culture played and, especially, the relationship of the rising commercial culture with the other two major cultural forces, elite intellectuals and official policies on literature and art. The “Wang Shuo phenomenon” was just such a cultural phenomenon since it was deeply intertwined in the web of dynamic relations among these cultural forces. Jing Wang has declared that Wang Shuo was “the most conspicuous and articulate epochal marker” of the time.\(^\text{9}\)

Wang Shuo was one of the few noteworthy Chinese artists who rode high on the commercial tide during the transition of the 1980s into the 1990s. Born in 1958, Wang Shuo grew up during the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (1966-1976) but matured in the Deng’s reform era.\(^\text{10}\) He became one of the most popular writers in mainland China at the turn of the 1990s, as indicated by his books’ sales records. In addition, he produced hits in fields of Chinese television and film. Yet Wang Shuo was also controversial for the subject matter of these very books, television series and films. Moreover, Wang Shuo openly challenged the literary, cultural and political norms of the time. He poked fun at the educational and enlightening mission that Chinese writers accrued — a mission at once imposed by the party-state and personally enthusiastically


\(^{8}\) Here I agree with Louie, Cheung and Tao Dongfeng that contemporary Chinese cultural arena can be described as “three kingdoms” -- the manifestation of the tension between official culture, elite culture and popular culture. See Louie and Cheung, “Three Kingdoms: The Chinese Cultural Scene Today,”


\(^{10}\) The information on Wang Shuo’s life basically is drawn from two sources: Wang Shuo’s own narrative, mainly from Wang Shuo Wo shi Wang Shuo (I am Wang Shuo), (Beijing: Guoji wenhua chuban gongsi, 1992), pp.4-28; critics’ description, such as Zuo Shula, “Buru’lu’ zide qile, xiezie Wang Shuo,” Dangdai (Taipei), no. 4, 1989, pp. 129-134; and Barme’s analyses in In the Red, pp. 67-69.
embraced. He also ridiculed the assumed sacredness of Maoist and even Dengist political languages by locating them in politically irreverent contexts.

The numerous articles and books focussing on Wang Shuo and his work provide evidence of his continuing cultural significance. As the discussion below demonstrates, the Wang Shuo phenomenon encapsulated the dramatic changes in China’s cultural sector that occurred as a result of the changes taking place in China’s economic and political spheres during Deng Xiaoping’s rule of the nation. By exploring the Wang Shuo phenomenon we can understand the complexity of the transformations that occurred as cultural products moved from being the currency of ideological influence by the party-state to being a financial currency for business people as well as writers, film and television makers, critics and the state. The anxiety that this shift produced among those closest to the transformations — China’s intellectual producers of cultural products — was extreme. Their close, albeit sometimes fraught and highly politicised, relationship with the party-state had produced privilege in status and appearances of increasing security in lifestyle. These intellectuals feared the invasion of the market as much as they dreaded political interference. In contrast, audiences and the burgeoning commercial sector greeted the market in cultural products with enthusiasm. Audiences sought more diverse cultural products and business people saw new opportunities for wealth creation. Wang Shuo and the phenomenon surrounding his cultural products typified the tensions produced during this period of transition. To some extent, Wang Shuo became a lightening rod for the key debates about culture during the late 1980s and 1990s.
According to Donghui Li, during the late 1980s and into the 1990s three major nationwide debates surrounding Wang Shuo emerged,\(^{11}\) the first in 1989, the second in 1993 and the third in 1995. The first wave of criticism of Wang Shuo occurred around 1989. This debate was initiated by the appearance in 1988 of four movies based on Wang Shuo’s fiction, including two box office hits “The Operators” (*Wanzhu*, directed by Mi Jiashan), and “Samsara” (*Lunhui*, directed by Huang Jianxin).\(^{12}\) Nineteen eighty eight and nineteen eighty nine were years when consumerism accelerated and heterogeneous ideologies developed. Wang Shuo’s stories were determined to be successful because they not only entertained audiences with “strong action, prominent protagonists and humorous dialogue” but also “presented certain heretical ideas.”\(^{13}\) The relatively free political atmosphere also enabled these controversial films to pass through the strict censorship.\(^{14}\)

One of the focuses of the 1989 debate was the special type of heroes presented in Wang Shuo’s works, who differ markedly from the heroes of socialist cultural products and even post-Mao cultural products. As Barme points out, Wang’s heroes are:

not members of the intellectual or political elite who inhabit so many of the works of other modern mainland Chinese writers... Nor do they belong to the fictionalised peasantry or ‘native soil’ genre or to the angst-ridden urbanities of late-1980s ‘new realism;’ even less are they the soldiers and workers that crowd the remnant products of socialist realist literature.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{12}\) The other two films were *Half Flame, Half Brine* (*Yiban shi huoyan, yiban shi haishui*, directed by Xia Gang) and *Out of Breath* (*Da chuanqi*, directed by Ye Daying).

\(^{13}\) Shao Mujun, “‘Wang Shuo dianying re’ yuanhe erqi’ (Why did a Wang Shuo cinema craze occur?).” *Zhongguo dianying hao* (China’s films newspaper) 25 March 1989: p. 2; also in *Zhongguo yinmu* (China Screen), no.4: p.29; the English version of this article was translated by Zhou Tiedong, *Zhongguo yinmu* (China Screen), no. 4 (1989), p. 29.

\(^{14}\) Chapter 5 will discuss in detail the causes of the “Wang Shuo cinema craze.”

\(^{15}\) Barme, *In the Red*, p.85.
Wang Shuo provided portraits of “a new type of character” for the contemporary “Chinese literary gallery”\(^\text{16}\) — a group of urban youths in 1980s or 1990s China. As most critics were concerned about the distinctive characters originating in Wang’s stories, the creative efforts of the film directors were largely ignored.\(^\text{17}\) Even though Wang Shuo did not personally direct or produce the films, in the discussions among most literary critics, “Wang Shuo films” became identified predominantly as Wang Shuo’s products.

Besides the evaluation of Wang Shuo’s characters, the 1989 debate appeared to be a discussion of the aesthetic values, social effectiveness and literary merit in Wang’s writing, rooted in more fundamental concerns of the increasingly decentralised views on the function of literature and the role and responsibility of the writer.\(^\text{18}\) According to the conventional view, writers carry a responsibility to demonstrate “correct” moral and political judgements through literature\(^\text{19}\). The popularity of Wang Shuo’s writing, representing a trend of seeing literature as a type of entertainment and a means of money-making, threatened this view. Nonetheless, as this view was still prevailed at the time, negative evaluations of Wang Shuo’s writing dominated the debate.

The debate around Wang Shuo entered a new phase in 1993, characterised by three facets — the involvement of Wang Meng, the former Minister of Culture, the commercialisation of literary criticism and a continuation of the 1989 debate in terms of how to characterise Wang Shuo’s writing. The 1993 debate occurred after a “Wang Shuo

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\(^{17}\) Huazhi Wang, “Problematizing the Nation,” pp. 28-29. Film critics such as Dai Jinghua and Shao Mujun pay attention to the differences between the films and the original literary works. See Dai Jinghua, “Ideology. Wang Shuo. 1988,” Zhongguo yinmu no. 4 (1989), p. 28; and Shao Mujun, “Wang Shuo dianying re’ yuanhe erqi.”


\(^{19}\) This is reflected in the tradition of wen yi zai dao (literature to convey the Way), which views literature an important means to transmit moral and political messages.
craze” emerged in 1992. With the commercial success of selling his four-volume collected works, *Wang Shuo wenji* in 1992, and the broadcasting of two popular TV series of which he was the key scriptwriter -- *Stories from the Editorial Board* (*Bianjihu de gushi*, 1992) and *I Love You Absolutely* (*Aini mei shangliang*, 1992), Wang Shuo became a successful example of the entrepreneur in the world of letters. According to a poll conducted by *Beijing Youth Daily*, he was listed as one of the most famous individuals in 1992. As such a cultural celebrity, many established critics considered it demeaning to take him seriously as a writer. They either simply disdained commenting on him or dismissed him for his deviance from didactic orthodoxy. It is thus no surprise that Wang Meng’s defence of Wang Shuo in public disturbed the literary circles. In a relatively circumspect statement, Wang Meng praised Wang Shuo’s writing for “deconstructing” the opinions that hinder China’s social development and for its reflection of disillusionment among young people. He also called for the tolerance of diversity. For many critics, Wang Shuo had abandoned the critical tradition of literature. They thus felt upset by the lack of ideals in Wang Meng’s statement. A young critic Wang Binbin blamed Wang Meng for being what he called “too clever by half” (*guoyu congming*) and reproached his approval of commercial culture and his simplistic anti-idealist stance. Further engagement between Wang Meng and Wang Binbin appeared in satirical and rancorous essays in the following years and the

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20 Cited in Donghui Li, “The ‘Phenomenon’ of Wang Shuo,” p. 60. Xiao Yin and Xiao Ming, “Shui shi jiu er danghong renwu” (Who are the most famous people in 1992), *Beijing qingnian bao* (Beijing youth newspaper) 30 Jan. 1993, pp. 4-5.

21 For Wang Meng’s statement, see Wang Meng, “Duobi chonggao” (Shunning sublime), *Dushu* (Reading) no. 1 (1993), pp. 10-17.


discussion on Wang Shuo transformed into the “clash between the two Wangs” (er wang zhi zheng) or the “Wang Meng phenomenon.”

As the second aspect of the 1993 debate, cultural celebrities and literary professionals exploited the Wang Shuo discussion for commercial value. Around 1993, there appeared in the market a great number of books and articles on Wang Shuo and his writing that “pretended to be works of literary criticism, but were in reality a cut-and-paste affair of blatant plagiarism.” The sole purpose of these promotional writing was to share the market the Wang Shuo phenomenon generated and to stir up a controversy to promote the existing “craze” of Wang Shuo.

As a contrast to the second aspect, the third aspect of the debate in 1993 was characterised by professional discussions on the nature of the Wang Shuo’s writing, a continuation from the 1989 debate. While new terms were introduced, such as “postmodern” and “new-realistic,” the debate in 1993 reached no consensus in regard to what type of literature Wang Shuo’s writing represented.

Wang Shuo stopped writing in 1993 and did not publish new fiction until the 1999 novel Looking Beautiful (Kanshangqu hen mei). Nonetheless, Li observes that a third wave of debate concentrating on Wang Shuo lasted from the latter part of 1993 through the end of 1996, with its crescendo in 1995. Central to this debate was the re-examination of the role of Chinese intellectuals in a rapidly changing society. The 1995 debate parallels the discussion of “humanistic spirit,” in which a divide among intellectuals concerning

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25 For more on the “clash between the two Wangs,” see Barme, In the Red, pp. 296-301; and Ding Dong and Sun Min, Shiji zhijiao de chongzhuang (Clash at the turn of the century) (Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe, 1996).
26 Donghui Li, “The ‘Phenomenon’ of Wang Shuo,” p. 64.
27 The discussion came to an abrupt halt in the latter part of 1996 because the government, in its campaign to rebuild “socialist spiritual civilisation,” took action against Wang Shuo. For details, see Donghui Li, “The ‘Phenomenon’ of Wang Shuo,” p. 89.
literature was revealed in their different views on Wang Shuo. Generally speaking, a group of Shanghai intellectuals represented by Wang Xiaoming from Shanghai Huadong Normal University’s Chinese Department and Chen Sihe of Fudan University’s Chinese Department, called for one’s attention to the spiritual crisis among Chinese intellectuals. For them, Wang Shuo should be blamed because his literary performance and his attitude of playing games with everything “serious” had infected society and caused a deadly crisis in the Chinese humanistic spirit. The opposite group supporting Wang Shuo were mainly critics based in Beijing. They held similar ideas to those Wang Meng advocated in his articles “Shunning the Sublime” and “My Thinking on Humanistic Spirit.” They argued that Wang Shuo’s writing contributed to the diversity of literature and that China’s “spiritual home” should be built with tolerance of a variety of types of literature and a multifaceted culture.

The so-called “Wang Shuo phenomenon” with its three peaks of controversy occurred as a result of the anxieties about the role and status of intellectuals and the creative products they produced, policed and critiqued that his cultural products generated. Wang Shuo challenged the well-entrenched connections between writers and their audiences and the status of producers of cultural products in society more generally. He advocated “playing with literature” and derided writers who took literature seriously.

28 The discussion of “humanistic spirit” is known in Chinese as “renwen jingshen da taolun.”
29 Donghui Li, “The ‘Phenomenon’ of Wang Shuo,” pp. 84-86.
30 Wang Meng, “diiohi chonggao” (Shunning the Sublime); Wang Meng, “Renwen jingshen wenti ougan” (My thoughts on the humanistic spirit), Dongfang (Ori ent) no. 5 (1994), p. 47.
31 Wang Shuo popularized the term “wan” (play) in reference to literature in his story Yidian zhengjing meiyou (Nothing serious), a remarkable satire of the Chinese literature world in the late 1980s. Wang Shuo, “Yidian zhengjing meiyou,” Wang Shuo wenji (The collected works of Wang Shuo) (Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 1992) vol.3, pp. 62-144. The story was followed by a number of articles discussing the meaning of “playing literature” and how to judge it. For example, Yi Haiming, “Yizhong xin de wenhua yishi de juexing” (The rise of a new cultural consciousness), Wenyi zhengming (Debates in literature and art) no. 6 (1989); Jin Shen and Chi Yi, “’Wan wenxue’ de shizhi jiyi weihai” (The nature of “playing literature” and its harm), Wenyi lilun yu piping (Literary theory and critiques) no. 6 (1990); and Chen Shu, “Wenxue chengwei youxi xihou” (After literature becomes a game), Wenyi ziyu tan (Free forum of literature) no. 1 (1990).
Conversely, he publicised his money-seeking desire as a foremost motive for writing. Contrary to the then prevalent view that writing was a sacred responsibility for writers to uplift the moral standards of ordinary readers or to assist politicians in managing the state, Wang Shuo claimed that writing was a means for profit-making and stresses its entertainment function. He involved himself in controversial speeches and entrepreneurial behaviours, such as negotiating manuscript payments with publishing houses, writing scripts for TV series and setting up cultural companies, which further made many critics uneasy.

This current study explores the Wang Shuo controversy almost a decade after it occurred with the goal of understanding both the causes and the implications of the phenomenon. In particular I explore the following questions: what motivated people from diverse sectors of society — be they ordinary readers, elite intellectuals and Party officials — to be involved in debates over interpreting Wang Shuo? Was the “Wang Shuo phenomenon” coincidental with the rise of the cultural market or a product of conscious manipulation of popular culture? Was the phenomenon manipulated and if so, by whom? What was the role Wang Shuo played in the development of the commercialised popular culture? What does it indicate in terms of the relationship among popular culture, elite culture and official culture? What are its implications for the cultural development in the commercial society in today’s China? In looking at the Wang Shuo phenomenon as an historical process, this thesis argues that the phenomenon reveals a defining moment in China when the commercialised popular culture was merging with dominant cultural forces.

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33 He states that he prefers writing’s entertaining function to its educational function. Wang Shuo, “Wo de xiaoshuo” (My Fiction), *Renmin wenxue* (People’s literature) no. 3 (1989), p. 108.
The Significance of the Study

This study is of significance for understanding the "Wang Shuo phenomenon" as it is the first attempt to systematically analyse the phenomenon through interdisciplinary investigations of both Wang Shuo’s literary works and films and television series either produced by him or adapted from his works. As shown by the three waves of the Wang Shuo discussion, most researchers on Wang Shuo adopt literary approaches with focused attention on his fictional writing. However, the "Wang Shuo phenomenon" developed inseparably together with his activities in the field of electronic media such as film and TV productions. The "Wang Shuo cinema craze" and the popularity of television series that he produced boosted his fame and initiated the debates in 1989 and 1993. Wang Shuo’s performance encompassed literary writing, writing for television and films and other entrepreneurial activities, and thus requires a cross-disciplinary study.

As well as adopting a cross-disciplinary approach, the current study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the Wang Shuo phenomenon by also incorporating textual and non-textual analyses of social, institutional and ideological changes that occurred simultaneously. In view of the entrepreneurial nature of Wang Shuo’s writing, an investigation of the production, distribution and promotion of his works in the market is conducted in conjunction with textual analysis of these works. I believe that only through using this multifaceted method can the true significance of the Wang Shuo phenomenon be understood.

Exploring the phenomenon as a cultural event, this research is significant in its exploration of the development of literary and cultural studies in mainland China after the cultural market was emerging in the 1980s. As the following pages demonstrate, the
discussion of the Wang Shuo phenomenon so far has largely confined itself to binary schemes: high versus low, the official versus the unofficial, and the popular versus the dominant (the latter is identified with either intellectual elitism or the autocratic [post]socialist regime). Through critical engagement with existing discussions, I suggest that these binaries are deficient for analysing Wang Shuo and the implications of the phenomenon in China’s cultural domain. Represented by the Wang Shuo phenomenon, a new era arose that witnessed increasingly fluid boundaries between high and low, the official and the unofficial, and the dominant and the popular. Cultural products from high and low ends, from the official and the unofficial spheres have all entered the circuit of commodity production. Nor did there exist clear-cut relationship between cultural goods in the market and those promoted by political authorities or elite intellectuals. This study aims to discover the interactive relationship among cultural forces lying behind the phenomenon. It thus contributes to a more dynamic understanding of the intimacy and complexity of the relationship among major players in the Chinese cultural field – elite intellectuals, cultural entrepreneurs and political authorities.

A. The Significance of the “Wang Shuo Phenomenon” and the Deficiency of Old Binaries

The Wang Shuo phenomenon is characterised by controversy, which in addition to Wang Shuo’s love of notoriety also indicates the inadequacy of the interpretative system many critics relied on in exploring the phenomenon. Through the 1989 debate until the one in 1995, no consensus had been reached in regard to how to categorise Wang Shuo’s writing, how to evaluate his characters, his playful attitude towards literature and culture, and the trend of commercial culture that he represented. The difficulty of pinning down the nature of Wang Shuo’s writing is partly due to the fact that he was a
prolific author having written more than two dozen stories and novels in various genres including romances, detective stories and social satire. More importantly, the cultural phenomenon surrounding Wang Shuo, epitomising commodity culture’s integration with the elite tradition of intellectuals and authoritarian power of the state, challenged the old binary schemes in literary analysis: high versus low, and the official versus the unofficial.

Due to the dominance of a dichotomy between high and low literature, it is difficult for many critics to categorise Wang Shuo’s writing since it appears to be an odd hybridization of “serious” and “popular” literature. This is evidenced by a plethora of labels critics created in an effort to pinpoint the nature of his writing, ranging from “crime literature,” “popular literature,” “secular literature,” “realistic literature,” to “experimental hybrid of serious literature and pop literature.” For many, Wang Shuo’s literary work produced in the late 1980s was “crime literature” because its fictional content and themes are often in the detective stories category. These critics consider that Wang Shuo’s stories contain features of “degenerate” popular writings such as “suspense, detective and black curtain (heimu) fiction.” Some others use the term “popular literature” to label his writing, as they note that Wang Shuo uses simple language, provides vivid description of characters and events and is conscious of the

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34 Representative articles are listed in Donghui Li’s thesis, p. 28, fn. 11.
35 Lei Da’s viewpoint in Xiao Ke, “Wang Shuo xiaoshuo de jingshen neihe ji qiantu” (The spiritual core and the possible future development of Wang Shuo’s fiction), Guangming riao, 6 June 1989, p. 3. The so-called “black curtain fiction” or “novels of dark deeds” or “sandal fiction” refers to one of the schools of literature that were popular on the market during the early Republic period, especially between 1915 and 1918. It is generally considered as a continuation and degenerated transformation from the “novels of recrimination” (qianze xiaoshuo) that were popular in the late Qing period and exposed corruption and depravity in officialdom, business, education, journalism and almost every walk of urban life. Nonetheless, “black curtain fiction”, together with other traditional-style fiction of the time, including the “mandarin ducks and butterflies” romance, received severe condemnation from the elite intellectuals for its lack of critical spirit and catering for popular taste. For more information on elite intellectuals’ attitude on traditional style fiction during the 1910s and 1920s, see Liping Feng, “Democracy and Elitism: The May Fourth Ideal of Literature,” Modern China Vol. 22, no. 2 (April 1996), pp. 176-188.
market. Yan Chunjun prefers the term “literature of the everyday” which is close to “hooligan literature” and “ruffian literature.” While “hooligan literature” and “ruffian literature” are suggested by critics with an emphasis of Wang’s fictional characters, “secular literature” is used to highlight the secular aspect of Wang’s writing that is considered to have indulged in worldly satisfaction and lacked higher spiritual pursuits.

However, there are also critics who strongly argue that Wang’s writing can not be simply equated with pop literature. Shuyu Kong asserts that Wang’s fiction has “a much more serious aim that would put many elite literary writers to shame.” For others again, Wang’s fiction is in-between the high and low, and neither “popular” nor “serious.” According to Liebman, Wang Shuo has a unique style of writing, which although marked by many features found in pop literature, has its serious dimensions.

Similarly, in Yan Chunjun’s view, Wang’s work is a “very successful experimental hybrid of serious literature and pop literature.” Chen Yangu considers Wang’s fiction a mixture of pop art, avant-gardism, Qiong Yao style romanticism and western modernism. Geremie Barme and Ji Hongzhen also agree that Wang’s fiction straddled both serious and popular cultural spheres. However, the novels that received textual analyse by Barme and Ji are largely limited to Playing for Thrills (wan de jiushi xintiao),

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37 The terms of hooligan and ruffian will be discussed in the next section. For Yan’s discussion on “secular literature,” see Yan Chunjun, “Wenxue de shisuhua qingxiang” (The tendency toward secularisation in literature), Wenxue pinglun no. 3 (1989), pp. 70-77.
38 Yan Chunjun, ibid., p.77.
41 Yan Chunjun, “Wenxue de shisuhua qingxiang,” p. 73.
43 Barme, In the Red, p. 63; Ji also asserts that Wang’s fiction is situated between serious and popular literature, see Ji Hongzhen, “Jingshen liulangzhe de zhi youx – Wang Shuo Wan de jiushi xintiao suojie” (The intellectual game of the spiritual exile – an interpretation of Wang Shuo’s Playing for Thrills), Beijing wenxue (Beijing literature) no. 7 (1989), p. 38.
No Man’s Land (qianwan hie ba wo dang ren) and I am Your Dad (wo shi ni baba). If one has to pick pieces of Wang Shuo’s fiction to prove his literary merits, these three novels and novellas are the most probable choices. Although many of Wang Shuo’s stories contain popular and attractive elements, these three stories seem to have features that would satisfy “high” or “serious” taste of avant-garde literature.

Only when critics focused on the language used by Wang Shuo and the high-versus-low dichotomy blurred, a sort of consensus was reached among some scholars. For example, many agree that Wang’s writing has enriched Beijing colloquial fiction through this unique use of language.⁴⁴ Wang Shuo’s contemporaries like Deng Youmei and Liu Xinwu also write Beijing colloquial fiction. Wang Gan proposes the term “new Beijing colloquial fiction” to emphasise the idiosyncratic Beijingers’ language in Wang Shuo’s writing,⁴⁵ full of wordplay, cynicism and mockeries. One of the reasons why many agree to use “new Beijing colloquial fiction” to describe Wang’s writing is that the term obscures the distinction between high and low culture as it indicates that Wang’s language is a mixture of written and colloquial expressions, mocking not only the elite and ideological discourse of the Mao and post-Mao era but also the plebeian language of the commercialised commoners. However, Wang Shuo himself rejects this label. He chooses “realistic literature” to characterise his style and claims that he just truthfully writes down his life and the lives of his friends.⁴⁶

The common use of high-versus-low dichotomy along with another binary scheme, the official and the unofficial, further confuses the discussion. For example, in evaluating

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⁴⁴ Beijing colloquial fiction is a loose term to refer to fiction written in Beijing dialect about Beijing life. Lao She is generally considered a representative of the traditional Beijing colloquial fiction whose heyday was during the 1930s and 1940s. See Donghui Li, “The ‘Phenomenon’ of Wang Shuo,” pp. 32-34.


characters in Wang Shuo’s writing, some critics adopt an elite stance provided by the high-versus-low dichotomy to condemn them as “hooligans.” Meanwhile, other critics praise these characters as “modernist” heroes because, advised by the official-versus-unofficial dichotomy, they argue that Wang Shuo’s popular characters subverted the authoritarian power of the official ideology and conventional cultural norms.

The modernist interpretation of Wang Shuo’s characters is typified by Chen Xiaoming and Liu Yun’s views. Chen Xiaoming, a scholar from Beijing University and known as an avant-garde literary critic and postmodern theorist, affirms the “serious” value of Wang’s writing by emphasising the “marginalised” status of his heroes. Chen uses “marginalised people” (bianyuan ren) to describe the major characters of the films adapted from Wang’s stories. But in his discussion, Chen treats these characters simply as Wang’s heroes. Chen argues that Wang’s heroes are unclassifiable into any existing social group and they refuse to be associated with any social group. Therefore, Chen claims that they can be called “marginalised people.” According to Chen, these “marginalised” heroes in Wang’s stories are keen to mock the existing cultural norms and social orders because they consider life itself “incomplete” and the nature of the self (ziwo) “indefinite.” Chen stresses the “marginalised” heroes’ stance of anti-tradition and anti-mainstream cultural norms and argues that the author has thus revealed the ideological crisis of the time.

Liu Yun furthered Chen’s view by emphasising the self-consciousness in Wang’s heroes. The “self” received unprecedented enthusiasm from writers and intellectuals after Mao’s death. Throughout the 1980s, individualistic values were seen by many as

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48 Chen Xiaoming, ibid. p. 166.
the most considerable concepts that the May Fourth enlightenment project had advocated and what should be sought after in the post-Mao era. In fact, intellectuals’ advocacy of individualistic values in the 1980s was a collective effort to confront the collective revolutionary ideology the Party set. Echoing this trend, Liu analyses that the “playful attitudes” of Wang’s heroes, their “dissain of tradition” and “rebellion against any constraints” stem from their “unyielding pursuit of self-respect and self-value.”

Liu compares Wang’s heroes with putative May Four modernist heroes, such as the one in Yu Dafu’s fiction, and the images of “superfluous men” in the nineteenth-century Russian novels. Liu argues that pursuit of the self by Wang’s heroes is triggered by the trend of commercialisation and rebels against traditional norms marked by the “self-depressing, self-disdaining and self-negative” nature.

In the novel Playing for Thrills, Wang Shuo writes a murder mystery. The narrator, Fang Yan is alleged to be the prime suspect of a discovered beheaded body murdered a decade ago. Fang suffers from amnesia and while believing himself to be innocent cannot find sufficient evidence to clear himself of responsibility. In Liu Yun’s modernist interpretation, the story appears to be a record of the protagonist’s attempt to recover his lost memory, which according to Liu, has similarities with the Western modernist queries of “Who am I? Where am I from? Where am I going?” Influenced, more or less, by this type of Chinese modernist reading, critics attached labels such as “hippies” (xipishi), “nihilist” (xwwu zhuyizhe), “the generation of decadence” (tuifei pai), or the Chinese “lost generation” (kuadiao deyidai) to Wang’s characters.

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50 Ibid., p. 223.
51 Ibid., p. 227.
52 This term is seen in Li Xingye, “Bingtai shehui bingtai jinghshen de zhenshi xiczhao” (True representation of diseased spirit of a diseased society), Wenyi lilun yu piping (Theory and criticism of art) no. 4 (1989), pp. 32-33.
Contrary to this type of modernist reading, some other critics, informed more by the high-versus-low dichotomy, would prefer *pizi* or *liumang* (often rendered as ruffian, riffraff, hoodlums or hooligans, or smart-ass) to define Wang’s characters in contempt of their “low” or “vulgar” background. The definition of *pizi* or *liumang* is not clear. Yet, according to Barme, *liumang* is “a word with some of the most negative connotations” in the Chinese language, and *pizi* is a word almost interchangeable with *liumang*. Barme points out that the concept of *liumang* has a history of at least a century and it covers a wide range of meanings “from hooligans to alienated youth and individualists and unscrupulous entrepreneurs.” Nonetheless, in contemporary everyday speech, the word often refers to people who are involved in stealing, swindling, physical violence, and especially, sexual misdemeanours. Therefore, when critics denounced Wang Shuo’s characters as *pizi* and his writing as “*liumang* literature” they were making harsh moral judgements that aided in promoting the controversy surrounding the author and his works.

When commenting on the films based on Wang Shuo’s stories, film critic Shao Mujun delineates four features of the *pizi* characters of the so-called “Wang Shuo films”:

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54 “The generation of decadence” or the “lost generation” is used to characterise the generational features in Wang Shuo’s characters, an attitude synonymous with cynicism and decadence. See Xue Yonghui, “Dangdai wenxue zhong de huise renshenf” (The dark grey shades of life in contemporary literature), *Wenlun yuekan* (Literary criticism monthly) no. 11 (1991), p. 7-8; and Pan Xiangli, “Xinshiqi xiaoshuo qingnian xingxiang xilie” (A series of youth representations in new era fiction), *Xiaoshuo pinglun* (Fictional critiques) no. 3 (1992).


56 Ibid., p. 34.

1). These characters are of low cultural level because of the lack of education when they grew up during the Cultural Revolution. Their sense of cultural inferiority is displayed as mockery and contempt of intellectuals; 2). These characters are unemployed, or they give up their employment in the hunt for staggering profit; 3). They adopt an irresponsible attitude toward life, preferring a hilarious and playful lifestyle; 4). They look down on the established moral principles and ethics of practices: they commit sexual misdemeanours; they are unscrupulous in search of money, even at the risk of breaking the law.

Of these four features, the first emphasises the low cultural level of pizi characters and their antagonistic relationship with intellectuals. The other three features highlight these characters’ commercial and entertainment considerations. Shao even stresses that the pursuit of “staggering profit” is the sole motive of these characters quitting their jobs and there is nothing to do with the pursuit of individual freedom or independence.

Another critic Li Xingye furthers this point of view. Li compares Wang Shuo’s film characters to the “hippies” in the West in the 1960s and 1970s and argues that Wang’s characters are different from the “hippies” mainly because their lives are primarily constituted by pursuit of money and they never try to pursue a social utopia.

Another critic Huang Shixian expresses a similar idea, and agrees that Wang Shuo reveals the rebellious spirit of the then Chinese urban youth that resulted from the collapse of Maoist authoritarian political and moral discourse. However, Huang questions that Wang’s heroes attempt to reconstruct anything of value. Huang thus argues that Wang’s stories remain secular (shisu) cultural works, a representative of the syndrome of ideological fin-de-siecle greyness (yishixingtai shijimo huise zonghezheng).

What did Wang Shuo create: Chinese modernist “antiheroes” or commodity-obsessed “hooligans”? Underneath the conflicting statements regarding Wang’s characters and contradictory attitudes towards them was the critics’ conceptual habit that locks Wang

58 Shao Mujun, “‘Wang Shuo dianying re’ yuanhe erqi.”
Shuo into two binary schemes: high versus low, and the official versus the unofficial. Certainly, each of the suggested labels - “hooligans,” “antiheroes,” “crime literature,” “popular literature” and “serious literature” - discloses some features of Wang Shuo’s characters and his writing. However, using one or more of these terms to label Wang Shuo’s writing can only provide fragmented descriptions and an incoherent image of Wang Shuo. Li describes this problem in a vivid way:

The resultant attempts to pinpoint the basic nature of Wang Shuo’s work were somewhat analogous to the group of blind men in the ancient Indian tale who try to describe the shape of an elephant, each mistaking the part for the whole.  

B. The Involvement of Culture Studies in the Debate and the Deficiency of Popular-versus-Dominant Dichotomy

As can be seen, Wang Shuo provided a unique style of writing that challenged the established methods of literary interpretation adopted by many critics. In addition, parallelling the rise of mass media and the flood of commodity culture, Wang Shuo also represented a cultural phenomenon that questioned the adequacy of the high-versus-low and popular-versus-dominant conceptual schemes prevalent in the Chinese popular cultural studies that developed from the late 1980s.

While the above discussions surrounding Wang Shuo unfolded mainly in the literary field, Wang Shuo was also one of the key figures in the emergent broad cultural discussions in mainland China. Wang Yi attributes the first wave in China of academic interest in popular culture to the broadcasting of the first Chinese soap opera Yearning (Kewang) in 1991, the script of which was written by Wang Shuo and others. In fact, due to Wang Shuo’s debates with critics and his involvement in commercial cultural studies.

61 Donghui Li, “The ‘Phenomenon’ of Wang Shuo,” p. 56
operations, he was often associated with the development of popular culture in China, although few critics included him in their discussions/writings on “cultural studies.” The term “hooligan” or “riffraff,” for example, had been extended from Wang Shuo’s characters to the author himself and even his audiences. Song Chong, the head of the Beijing Film Studio from 1988 to 1989, commented on films based on Wang Shuo’s stories in this way: “[these films] are written by a pizi for pizi; pizi read them to read about pizi; and in the end it has given birth to a whole new class of pizi.”63 Pizi in this context is used in the negative sense, having a similar meaning to “a type of garrulous, wisecracking liumang.”64 This view is echoed by Shao Mujun, who criticises Wang Shuo’s “pizi” characters for being “shallow, vulgar and evil.”65 While Barme’s investigation shows that the word liumang has a root in China’s urban life,66 in the context of the “Wang Shuo phenomenon,” liumang and pizi are often used to stress the “coarse, uncultured, irreverent” features of Wang’s characters and the author himself,67 and more importantly, these features are considered as a result of the rise of a commodity culture in contemporary Chinese urban cities.

Interestingly, while the categorisation of Wang Shuo’s fictional writing was contested, a consensus had been reached among critics that he was a representative of the emergent commodity culture. Critics had good reasons for their judgment: Wang Shuo was one of the first post-Mao Chinese writers to negotiate with publishing houses on payments and ask for royalty payments; he demonstrated considerable advertising savvy and employed media for the enhancement of his popularity; he established the first private organisation of screenplay writing, the Sea Horse Screenplay Writing Centre, and was

64 Ibid.
65 Shao Mujun, “Ren, buneng zheyang huoze” (Human, can not live in this way), Jiefang ribao (Jiefang daily) 12 April 1989, p. 8.
its president; he founded two companies to produce TV and film shows. Indeed, he was a pioneer in many commercial cultural practices.

In the context of the emerging cultural market, both Wang Shuo’s attackers and supporters assumed that he represented a certain cultural form variously called commodity culture (shangye wenhua), or urban culture (shimin wenhua), or secular culture (shisu wenhua). Critics involved in the discussion can be divided into two main groups according to their attitudes towards Wang’s entrepreneurial cultural practices. Many of Wang’s attackers were influenced by the deep-rooted high-versus-low dichotomy and considered that the commercialised popular culture he represented was lower than elite culture, which threatened the quality of cultural work provided to Chinese readers/audiences and thus ruined the cultural development in China.

An attitude of contempt towards Wang Shuo and the commercial culture can be seen from the frequently-used terms: pizi or liumang. Li Xingye claims that the type of pizi characters represents a morbid social phenomenon caused by the rise of a trend that “takes money as the priority” and “blindly admires Western culture and Western life styles.” Here, Li ascribes the rise of cultural consumerism to the influence of Western culture, which is considered as opposite to the socialist civilisation. This view, to a certain extent, was reminiscent of the Party propaganda prevalent in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Wang Shuo’s supporters, however, often viewed the commercialised popular culture as antagonistic towards dominant cultural forces and considered Wang Shuo a rebel against authoritarian political power and elite intellectuals’ modernisation project.

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68 Li Xingye, “Bingtai shehui bingtai jinghshen de zhenshi xiezhao,” p. 35.
Sometimes, the two positions were mixed during discussion. For example, Chen Hong affirmed that Wang Shuo heralded the rise of urban commercial culture and helped "sweep away old [social] orders." In the meantime, while his contempt for the "low and vulgar" urban commodity culture seemed to be "temporary and consumptive," Chen Hong refused to believe that this type of culture could help build any new social order. In the end, as he states, Wang Shuo was only a "clown" in the process of cultural evolution.

In addition, a group of critics who lamented the passing of a so-called "humanistic spirit" in an increasingly commercialised society were contemptuous of Wang Shuo. In mid-1993, as a response to the increasing preoccupation with monetary concerns among Chinese intellectuals, Shanghai-based literary historian Wang Xiaoming initiated a discussion on "humanistic spirit," which was followed by large numbers of leading thinkers and writers around the country for over two years. Wang Xiaoming and others published an article titled "The ruins on the wasteland – the crisis of literature and the humanist spirit" arguing that a crisis was occurring in serious literary journals as they turned to a more popular audience. They believed that new literary works were declining in quality, that discerning readers were shrinking as a proportion of the readership, and that many writers and critics were turning to business. The crisis of literature, and more precisely, the crisis of serious literature, was seen as a signal of the crisis of the "humanistic spirit" in China. In this article and other publications that

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70 Chen Hong, ibid., p. 7.
71 Ibid.
72 For major contributions to this debate, see Wang Xiaoming, ed. Renwen jingshen xunsu lu (Thoughts on humanistic spirit) (Shanghai: wenhui chubanshe, 1996).
73 Wang Xiaoming, et al. "Kuangye shang de feixu – wenxue he renwen jingshen de weiji" (The ruins on the wasteland – the crisis of literature and the humanistic spirit), Shanghai wenxue (Shanghai literature) no. 6 (1993), pp. 63-71.
blamed consumerism for the collapse of the “humanistic spirit,” Wang Shuo and his commercial success was often considered symptomatic of the crisis.

A liberal intellectual stance also arose from the discussion, and it was from this stance that there developed a positive attitude towards Wang Shuo and the commercialised popular culture. The discussion on the humanistic spirit developed into Chinese elite intellectuals’ self-examination of their role in a commercialised society and a re-examination of the function of a cultural market. Seeing cultural market competition as a necessary and positive means for cultural production, cultural critic Wang Xiaobo argues that people like Wang Shuo have helped enrich human spiritual achievements and thus contributed to the development of the “humanistic spirit.” Echoing a refrain from Wang Xiaobo, Wang Meng, the minister of culture from 1986 to 1989, defends Wang Shuo arguing that Wang Shuo’s hooligan characters should not be condemned for dishonouring sacred ideals. Rather, he argues that what was called sacred and sublime had already been polluted. He further suggests that the irreverent spirit of Wang Shuo would help resist political authorities’ arbitrary use of power and writers’ abuse of sacred ideals.

Informing Liu and Wang’s arguments is an optimistic view of commercial culture’s impact upon China’s cultural development. In another of his articles, “My thoughts on the humanistic spirit,” Wang Meng argues that the development of a market economy can help establish a society where fairer principles can be set up and people can obtain

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74 Some critics, like Zhang Yiwu questioned the necessity of this discussion, which was considered as an effort of a class of intellectuals without a meaningful social or political role who tried again to attract social and cultural attention. Zhang Yiwu, “Renwen jingshen, zuihou de shenhua,” Wang Xiaoming, ed., Renwen jingshen xunsi lu, p. 139; Wang Xiaobo also used poignant sarcasm in his essays against the clamour for the humanist spirit and ridiculed the elitists from a perspective of cultural market competition. Wang Xiaobo, “Wo kan wenhua re” (My view on the cultural craze), Chenmo de daduoshu (The silent majority) (Beijing: zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1997), pp. 85-86.


equal opportunities. He considers the market mechanism a progressive replacement of
the socialist economic model, whose nature, he argues, is to “use the utopia of ‘idealised
human’ / ‘human with a capital H’ (daxie de ren) to ignore and obliterate human desires
and needs.” Therefore, he claims that the market economy would make it easier for
people to obtain the so-called humanism – a concern for human beings. Li Zehou, a
leading scholar and philosopher well-known for his advocacy of cultural enlightenment
and reform, further clarifies this idea by claiming that the entertainment nature of
popular culture had the potential to affirm the legitimacy of human desire and hence to
weaken the authoritarian control of the party-state. Li, together with Wang Desheng
calls on intellectuals to ally themselves with the commercial culture so as to dissolve the
power of official ideology and to guide the healthy development of popular culture.

This idea that the market economy can bring about cultural pluralism, which is crucial
for undermining China’s weighty authoritarian traditions, was followed by several
Beijing based intellectuals such as Zhang Yiwu, Chen Xiaoming and Tao Dongfeng.
Tao Dongfeng and Jin Yuanpu clearly state that the commercial culture represented by
Wang Shuo is a double-edged sword that deconstructs both political discourse and the
assumed elite status of Chinese intellectuals.

In addition, Zhang Yiwu, Wang Ning, Chen Xiaoming and several other junior critics
attempt to incorporate the analysis of commodity culture into their vision of the

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77 Wang Meng, “Renwen jingshen wenti ougan,” p. 47
78 Ibid.
79 Li Zehou and Wang Desheng, “Guanyu wenhua xianzhuang yu daode chongjian de duihua” (The dialogue on the current cultural situation and moral reconstruction), Orient, no. 5 (1994), pp. 69-70.
80 Li Zehou and Wang Desheng, “guanyu wenhua xianzhuang yu daode chongjian de duihua” (continued) Orient, no. 6 (1994), pp. 85-86.
82 Tao Dongfeng and Jin Yuanpu, Chanshi zhongguo de jiaoju - zhuanxing shidai de wenhua jiedu (To interpret China’s anxiety – cultural interpretation in the transitional period) (Beijing: Zhongguo guoji guangbo chubanshe, 1999), p.38.
development of postmodern culture in China. For example, in his discussion on
postmodern aspects of contemporary Chinese literature, Wang Ning, a leading scholar in
Chinese postmodern and postcolonial studies, lists three mutations of Euro-American
postmodernism in contemporary Chinese literature, one of which is said to be
“commercial literature” of which Wang Shuo’s writing was taken as a typical
example.\(^{83}\)

By arguing that postmodernity as a cultural phenomenon exists in contemporary China,
Wang Ning and other Chinese postmodernist critics tried to build a platform where they
could have a conversation with the West. However, while postmodernism in the West
especially during the 1960s was in part a populist attack on the elitism of modernism,
the Chinese postmodernism was mixed with the elitism. For example, Chen Xiaoming
clearly states that his using postmodernity discourse was to refuse the compromise
between “elite culture” and “mass culture.”\(^{84}\)

Chinese postmodernism was also juxtaposed with modernism in terms of the
understanding of the relationship between the dominant and popular cultural forces.\(^{85}\)

The postmodernist reading of Wang Shuo’s writing resembles the modernist
interpretation in emphasising its rebellious stance against the dominant cultural forces,
be they the elite tradition of intellectuals or the authoritarian status of political power.\(^{86}\)

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83 Wang Ning, “Zhongguo dangdai wenxue zhong de houxiandai bianti” (The postmodernism varieties in
contemporary Chinese literature), Tianjin shehui kexue (Tianjin social science) no. 1 (1994), pp. 71-76.
84 Chen Xiaoming, “Tianping honggou, huaqing jiejian” (Close the gap, set the border), Wenyi yanjiu
85 Wang Ning asserts that Yuan Kejia is responsible for the mistranslation of the term literary modernism
into Chinese xiandaipai (the modern school), which includes the historical avant-garde, such as Dadaism
and surrealism, and postmodernist currents such as the French nouveau roman and Latin American magic
footnote 9; see also Sheldon Hsiao-Peng Lu’s observation, Lu, “Postmodernity, Popular Culture, and the
86 For this kind of postmodernist reading of Wang Shuo’s stories, see Gao Yan, “Quanwei de xiaojie,
tongku de zengzhang – Wang Shuo chuangaizu de houxianxiazhuyi qingxiang” (The deconstruction of
authority and increasing of sorrow: Wang Shuo’s postmodernism tendency), Beijing dianshi daxue
xuebao - shexue yu shehuitexue (Journal of Radio and Television University - philosophy and social
Compared with Chen Xiaoming and Liu Yun’s modernist interpretation of Wang Shuo’s writing noted earlier, a postmodernist reading by Wang Ning reaffirms that Wang Shuo stands in opposition to dominant forces in post-Mao China. Taking Wang Shuo’s writing as a typical example of the Chinese postmodern culture, Wang Ning argues that Wang Shuo presents a “postmodern lifestyle of carpe diem” among Chinese youth resulting from their failures in confronting dominant social and cultural norms. Whether the playful Wang Shuo-style attitude represents a modernist upsurge of self-consciousness or postmodern carpe diem is the major difference between the modernist and post-modernist readings. Nonetheless, both Chinese modernist and postmodernist critics used the debate over Wang Shuo in an effort to describe a decentred situation in China and the tension between the dominant and the popular.

In addition, the dominant-versus-popular dichotomy appears to be mixed together with a nationalist feeling in postmodernist discussions. Zhang Yiwu, the “postmodern-master” (houzhu) in China, welcomed the commercial culture and argued that the advocacy of postmodernism was an effort to construct a nativist cultural theory to confront the dominant force of the “other” – the West. One of the outstanding advocates of postmodernism in China, Zhang argues that the Chinese modernity initiated to meet the nineteenth-century challenge of the West was a process in which China was strongly “otherised” (tazhehua). He thus hails the coming of commercial culture, which, in his view, has brought about postmodern cultural pluralism that resists the mainstream May Fourth intellectual tradition and Western hegemony. Ironically, it is still through

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borrowing Western knowledge/discourse such as postmodernism and postcolonialism that these critics tried to construct a nativist cultural theory.\textsuperscript{89}

\textbf{Methodology of the Study}

My investigation of the Wang Shuo phenomenon through examining commercialised popular culture’s relations to other cultural forces requires an approach that is able to move across academic research fields of literary, television, film and social studies; to include textual and non-textual analysis; and to take into consideration stances of both the author and his commentators that were under the influence of shifting social, institutional and ideological systems of the time. As shown, earlier research on the Wang Shuo phenomenon tended to focus on Wang Shuo’s literary writing and was, to a certain degree, restricted to the conventional distinction of high and low literature and of the official and the unofficial. Along with the rise of mass media and commodity culture in China, many also located the phenomenon in the domain of the newly emergent discipline of cultural studies. However, an over-simplified dialectic between “dominant” and “popular” cultures hindered further explorations of the complexity of the phenomenon and its significance. Therefore, I adopt an approach that reaches beyond the conventional divisions of aesthetic and social spheres, of high and low, the official and the unofficial, and dominant and popular, in the hope that the study will contribute to a more dynamic understanding of the relations between these assumed opposite poles.

Stuart Hall’s thinking on culture and popular culture offers useful insights into this field. For Hall, culture is understood as “the actual, grounded terrain of practices,

representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society" and popular culture as "a process by which relations of dominance and subordination are articulated."90 As will be discussed in the following pages, these views of Hall are developed from many intellectuals’ effort to break away from elitist prejudices about popular culture and the reductionist tendency evident in versions of Marxism, while at the same time, trying to avoid pitfalls of a culturalist overstatement of popular culture’s significance.

A. On Culture and Popular Culture

Hall formulates his thinking on culture and popular culture in the context of the cultural debate interrogating the high/low categories and those of the base/superstructure, occurring mainly within British cultural studies or the so-called Birmingham School (named for its founding University of Birmingham (UK) Centre for Cultural Studies). During the 1950s and the 1960s, founding scholars of the British cultural studies such as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson engaged in critical dialogue with both Leavisist “culture and civilisation” tradition (the American version includes aspects drawn from the analysis of the Frankfurt School) and “mechanistic and economistic versions of Marxism.”91 For instance, in his “The Analysis of Culture,” Williams discusses three ways of thinking about culture.

There is, first, the “ideal,” in which culture is a state or process of human perfection, in terms of certain absolute or universal values. Second, there is the “documentary,” in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded. Finally, third, there is the “social definition of culture, in which culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour."92

In his analysis of the “ideal” definition, Williams clearly states that he finds it difficult to identify the process of human perfection with the discovery of “absolute” values. Rather, he believes that the “absolute values” are normally an extension of the values of a particular tradition or society. Preferring “human evolution” to “human perfection,” he refuses to define culture as the supposed aesthetic excellence, or in Arnold’s words, “the best that has been thought and said in the world.”

For Williams, even the most refined of descriptions offered in works of literature are “part of the general process which created conventions and institutions, through which the meanings that are valued by the community are shared and made active.” According to Hall, Williams’ understanding of culture, in this special sense, is rather “ordinary.”

Having rejected the “civilised” definition of culture, Williams also argues against “idealist” definition of culture which tends to equate “culture” to “ideas.” He finds the “documentary” definition of culture incomplete as it sees culture only in the written and painted records. In addition, Williams’ analysis of the “social” definition reveals his questioning of treating “either the general process or the body of art and learning as a mere by-product, a passive reflection of the real interests of the society.” He engages in a critical dialogue with Karl Marx and his immediate followers who ascribe art and culture to the domain of ideas and of meanings of the “superstructures,” themselves conceived as merely reflective of and determined in some simple fashion by “the base,” without a social effectivity of their own. In Marx’s writing, art and culture belong to “social consciousness,” the definite forms of which rise as a “superstructure” upon the base.
“real foundation” of the productive relations. Whereas Marx does require the analyst to rigorously confront the question of determinations, he asserts “the determination of the economic level in the last instance.” For Williams, this “structure and superstructure” metaphor is unsatisfactory. He argues that little more than a stress upon the importance of the economic structure in understanding culture is discussed, which is “still an emphasis rather than a substantial theory.” E. P. Thompson clarifies the point by saying:

> the [Marxist] tradition inherits a dialectic that is right, but the particular mechanical metaphor through which it is expressed is wrong. This metaphor from constructional engineering ... must in any case be inadequate to describe the flux of conflict, the dialectic of a changing social process... All the metaphors which are commonly offered have a tendency to lead the mind into schematic modes and away from the interaction of being-consciousness.

Despite many significant differences, both Williams and Thompson argue against “the base/superstructure metaphor and a reductionist or ‘economistic’ definition of determinacy” and “conceptualise culture as interwoven with all social practices.”

Williams insists on the need to replace the formula of base and superstructure “with the more active idea of a field of mutually if also unevenly determining forces.” He thus attempts to develop a theory of social totality to see the study of culture as the study of relations between elements in a whole way of life. “If the art is part of society, there is no solid whole, outside it, to which, by the form of our question, we concede priority. The art is there, as an activity, with the production, the trading, the politics, the raising of families.” With his focused interest in class relations, popular struggle and class cultures in their historical particularity diverging from Williams, Thompson also tends

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99 Marx, 1859 Preface
100 Ibid.
102 Hall, “Cultural Studies,” p. 60.
104 Ibid. Williams continuously revises his understanding of culture in recognition of Lucian Goldmann, Georg Lukacs and others’ work, which began to appear in English translation in the mid-1960s.
105 Ibid.
to conceive culture as “practice,” as “the active process – which is at the same time the process through which men make their history.”

In this sense, Hall considers the thinking of both Williams and Thompson as representatives of “culturalism,” one of the dominant early paradigms in cultural studies. “Culturalism” has considerable impact on Hall’s thinking. In fact, many consider Hall himself a spokesman of culturalism. Nonetheless, Hall treats culturalism critically and thus develops his own thinking with reference to it and others’ work. Hall appreciates “culturalist” thinking, especially that of Williams and Thompson for their critiques of the Leavisist dismissal of “ordinary culture” and “working-class culture.” He also affirms their attempt to modify the problematic base/superstructure categories so as to avoid “culture” being absorbed into the “economic.”

However, he criticizes “culturalism” for its lack of “an adequate way of establishing this specificity theoretically.” Through comparing “culturalist” works with those by Levi-Strauss and Althusser, Hall argues that the “culturalist” mode of conceptualising the culture tends to see people as active agents in the making of their own history, while neglecting the fact that, “in capitalist relations, men and women are placed and positioned in relations which constituted them as agents.” “Culturalists” constantly insist on the culture’s inseparable relationship with society, on human activity, on the

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107 Hall uses the term “culturalist stand” or “culturalism” to describe what had been the dominant early paradigm in cultural studies, which is put forward against the reduction to the economic in part by attending to the specificity of particular practices. See Hall, “Cultural Studies,” ibid.
108 See John Storey, Cultural Theory and Popular Culture.
110 Ibid., pp. 66-67.
“totality.” Nonetheless, lacking an adequate theoretical conceptualisation, they tend to fall back on versions of the reduction to the mode of production or to class.\(^{111}\)

In his own writing, Hall first uses various terms such as “productive matrix” and “combination of relations,” and eventually “articulation” to theorise the “elements of a social formation and the relations that constitute it not simply as relations of correspondence (that is, as reductionist and essentialist) but also as relations of non-correspondence and contradiction, and how these relations constitute unities that instantiate relations of dominance and subordination.”\(^{112}\) Jennifer Slack’s research shows that by drawing on Marxist theorists, including Althusser, Gramsci and Ernesto Laclau, Hall contributed to the development of articulation and his uses of articulation in cultural studies helps him resist the temptation of reduction to class, mode of production, structure, as well as to culturalism’s tendency to reduce culture to “experience.”\(^{113}\)

It is in this context that Hall states that culture is “a special kind of map by means of which the nature of the changes can be explored,”\(^{114}\) and develops the definition of “popular culture” as “forms and activities which have their roots in the social and material conditions of particular classes” in any particular period.\(^{115}\) In addition, from Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and Laclau’s elaboration on articulation in relation to hegemony, Hall develops the idea that “what is essential to the definition of popular is


\(^{113}\) Slack, ibid., pp. 116 - 122.

\(^{114}\) Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” p. 57.

\(^{115}\) Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” p. 449.
the relations which define ‘popular culture’ in a continuing tension (relationship, influence and antagonism) to the dominant culture.”

For Hall, the meaning of a cultural symbol is not inscribed inside its form; rather, it is given in part by the social field into which it is incorporated, the practices with which it articulates and is made to resonate. He insists on the specificity of practices in different kinds of relations to discourse and recognises that almost all cultural forms are contradictory, composed of antagonistic and unstable elements. He thus holds that the study of “popular culture” needs to look at the relations which constantly structure this field into dominant and subordinate formations. In so doing, according to Slack, Hall has found a way to theorise the elements of a social formation and the relations that constitute it not simply as relations of correspondence (that is as reductionist and essentialist) but also as relations of non-correspondence and contradiction, and how these relations constitute unities that instantiate relations of dominance and subordination.

B. Hall’s Thinking and the Wang Shuo Phenomenon

As indicated, Hall’s thinking on the definition of culture and popular culture is the result of a critical engagement with Leavisist elite tradition, the more recent “culturalist” strand of cultural studies, and the “reductionist” tendency in classical Marxist theory. As

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116 Ibid. Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was an Italian philosopher, but foremost he was a socialist politician. Therefore, the starting point for his theory is, as that of the genesis of Marx’s conception, the concern for the development and operation of the capitalist society, composed by the contradictory duality between dominant class and subordinate class, between possessors and the poor, the capitalists and the proletariat. Gramsci also added to the Marxist philosophy the concept of “hegemony” which later becomes a key notion in cultural studies. For Gramsci, through hegemony, the dominant class expresses (or co-ordinates) the interests of social groups so that those groups actively “consent” to their subordinated status. See Antonio Gramsci, Selection from Prison Notebooks (trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith) (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), pp. 181-182. Laclau links the concept of hegemony to articulation by saying: “a class is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized.” Laclau, Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 161.

117 Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular.’”

demonstrated in the proceeding sections, a divide between “elitist” and “culturalist” strands of criticism also existed in the discussion of the “Wang Shuo phenomenon” and appeared to be inadequate for examining the phenomenon. Meanwhile, my exploration of this cultural phenomenon against the backdrop of social, institutional and ideological changes in mainland China during the 1980s and 1990s demands a non-reductionist methodology that can take into account social and material conditions. Hall’s thinking on culture and popular culture is productive in this regard.

Hall intentionally avoids the assumed correspondence between economic, political and ideological dimensions and develops the view of culture as “the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society.” This approach enables me to treat the cultural phenomenon surrounding Wang Shuo as a site where economic, political and ideological changes are inextricably intertwined, while at the same time avoid an economic reductionism. This research will thus move from textual analysis of Wang Shuo’s work to an investigation of the production, distribution and consumption of his work.

Significantly, Hall’s understanding of popular culture, developed from Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, facilitates examining the Wang Shuo phenomenon through an analysis of commercialised popular culture’s intricate relations with the then prevalent cultural forces. Even though the categories of dominant bourgeois class and suppressed working class do not applicable to the Wang Shuo phenomenon, the broad use of Marxist cultural theories in the areas of gender, race and sub-culture indicates the possibilities of approaching the Wang Shuo phenomenon through Hall’s ideas on culture and popular culture. As we will see below, in the 1980s, Chinese elite intellectuals and political officials occupied dominant positions in the cultural field.
while the emergent commercialised popular culture functioned as a subordinate cultural force. I would then place the Wang Shuo phenomenon in this field of forces where relations of cultural power and domination unfolded.

This thesis is not a simple application of Hall’s ideas to a cultural phenomenon in the context of contemporary China. Rather, Hall’s formulation of the concept of culture offers a non-reductive and counter-elitism/culturalism way to observe and examine the phenomenon. Class struggle and the working class’s fate are central to Hall’s interest and definitely influence the way he develops his ideas, but these aspects are not applicable to the “Wang Shuo phenomenon.” Nonetheless, I believe that his thinking can provide a dynamic historical framework in which to analyse the phenomenon.

Structure of thesis

In the next chapter, “Emergent and Dominant Cultures” I elaborate on some important terminology used throughout this thesis. I first explain what is considered as popular culture, elite culture and official culture in the Chinese context and their relationship in the 1980s immediately before the emergence of the “Wang Shuo phenomenon.” Although this thesis argues that the boundaries between popular and dominant cultures are always changing, for the convenience of discussion, I first provide a simplified version of the definitions, while in later discussions I blur the boundaries. In providing a picture of the emerging cultural market in China in the 1980s, Chapter 2 argues that there was a moment during this period when the emergent commercialised popular culture strongly confronted dominant cultures. Popular cultural products mainly from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Western countries that were circulating in the rising mainland cultural market contain distinct features from dominant cultural forms. This background picture sets off the significance of the Wang Shuo phenomenon which reveals the
changed and more intricate relationship between the cultural market and dominant cultural forces.

To explore the social and ideological causes of the Wang Shuo phenomenon, Chapter 3, “Wang Shuo and the Playful Generation,” discusses the major generational characteristics of Wang Shuo and his contemporaries. Compared with the previous “Cultural Revolution generation” and the “new generation” living in the reform era, Wang Shuo’s generation is presented as a transitional generation influenced by two major historic events: the Cultural Revolution and the Deng’s reform. They were born in the Mao’s era of class struggles but grew up in Deng’s reform period. The great transition from the Maoist era into Deng’s reform period brought about notable ideological characteristics of this generation that is encapsulated by the notion “play.” As this generation was the active player in the “Wang Shuo phenomenon” during the late 1980s and early 1990s, their complex generational characteristic linking with both socialist revolutionary ideology and emergent commodity values explains the intricate relationship between the Wang Shuo-style popular cultural products and the traditions of Chinese elite intellectual and political authorities.

Chapter 4, “Wang Shuo and A New Type of Professional Writing,” and Chapter 5, “Wang Shuo and Literature’s ‘Tie-in’ with Visual Media,” analyse this intricate relationship by exploring the rise of a new breed of Chinese writers that Wang Shuo represented. These writers broke away from socialist literary system and their writing was guided largely by market principles. Nonetheless, their commercial writing was influenced by the tradition of elite intellectuals and the official establishment. Chapter 4 locates the formation of this new type of Chinese writers within the transitional process
of the Chinese publishing industry, while Chapter 5 emphasises the influence of the transition process on Chinese film and TV industries.

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 move the focus to Wang Shuo’s writing including literary texts and television scripts to further demonstrate the blurred boundaries of popular culture, elite culture and official culture. Chapter 6, “Wang Shuo: In Between Popular and Elite Cultures” explores the impact of Chinese intellectuals’ elite tradition upon Wang Shuo through close reading of some of his stories. Through comparing Wang Shuo’s depiction of romance with Taiwanese romance writer Qiong Yao’s work, I demonstrate Wang Shuo’s affiliation with elite tradition of Chinese intellectuals, which is also found in the television soap Yearning (Kewang). I argue that in the guise of an anti-intellectual popular writer, Wang Shuo inherits the elite tradition of Chinese intellectuals. Notably, it is from this point on that he exerts a more direct challenge to the elite tradition and reveals its transformation in the commercialised society.

Chapter 7, “Wang Shuo: In Between Popular and Political Cultures” examines the ambiguous attitude towards political power in Wang Shuo’s writing. Against the optimistic view of cultural market’s undermining of state-hegemony, I argue that the cultural goods produced by entrepreneurial Chinese artists failed to subvert the official sector that itself had been commodified and popularised. By demonstrating Wang Shuo’s reconciliation with political authority in the assumed most rebellious writing of his and the most popular writing - the television script he wrote for Stories from the Editorial Board (Bianjibu de gushi), I suggest that along with the commercialisation of state cultural institutes, the newly emergent cultural entrepreneurs who had broken away from Maoist socialist establishment, were incorporated as members of cultural enterprises that directly or indirectly linked to the state in the post-Mao period.
In the concluding chapter, Chapter 8, I reiterate the significance of the Wang Shuo phenomenon and the significance of this study. Comparing Wang Shuo with later popular figures in the Chinese cultural scene, including writer Yu Qiuyu and film director Feng Xiaogang, I emphasise that Wang Shuo is a typical figure embodying China’s transition from a revolutionary to consumerist society during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In addition to understanding the fundamental transformation in China, I also demonstrate that this study contributes to reflections on issues that extend beyond that specific timeframe and China’s borders.
CHAPTER 2
DOMINANT AND EMERGENT CULTURES

This chapter elaborates some important terminology used throughout this thesis and provides background to the emergence of the Wang Shuo phenomenon. The Wang Shuo phenomenon arose with the deregulation of a cultural market in mainland China in which the dominant state-sanctioned culture began to be weakened by various causes including external cultural influences. The significance of the commercialisation of culture in China, its impact on various sectors of society and its dynamic relationships with the previously dominant cultural forces are noteworthy and have drawn much academic attention. One of the viewpoints that was held by many scholars both in and outside of China was to consider commercialised popular culture as a challenge to elite and political cultures.\(^\text{119}\) I believe that the boundaries between popular and dominant cultures are always changing and argue that the significance of the Wang Shuo phenomenon is that it reveals the dynamic and intricate relationship between the cultural market and dominant cultural forces. Nonetheless, for the convenience of this discussion, I first provide a simplified version of the definitions of these terms. This chapter thus focuses on a moment in the 1980s when the emergent commercialised popular culture strongly confronted the dominant culture.

The first section focuses on the conflict between official and popular cultures. I argue that in the early reform years the gap between official and popular cultures widened. As a result of the Party’s lack of a systematic blueprint for the emerging cultural market and its ambiguous cultural policies, “keynote” official cultural works gradually lost credibility and appeal for the public. Meanwhile, commercialised popular culture (either

\(^{119}\) See chapter 1.
imported from Hong Kong, Taiwan and western countries, or revived from traditional culture) flourished in the mainland cultural sphere, bringing about alternative cultural forms to propagated official culture. During this time, popular cultural works exhilarated mainland Chinese audiences and were particularly welcomed by the young, since they were perceived as a means of rebellion against authoritarian control.

The second section analyses the confrontation between the revitalised elite tradition of intellectuals in the early post-Mao years and the emergence of popular culture. Among all the new trends developing in the Chinese cultural scene immediately after the death of Mao, a split between “high” and “popular” cultures was emerging. As an outcome of the development of urban society, the notions of “high” and “popular” cultures do not conform to the previously dominant Maoist distinction between a “bourgeois” high culture and a “mass” culture for the peasants. The social trends that foreshadowed the emergence of these new divisions of culture were the restored elite status of intellectuals, and an increase in ordinary people’s demand for a variety of cultural goods.

The Widening Gap between Official and Popular Cultures

A. The Emergence of Popular Culture as an Opponent of Official Culture

Generally speaking, official culture is the embodiment of the official ideology of the state, that is, a culture which is supported, rewarded and praised by the state, through which official cultural policies and directives are observed. In China, official culture is also known as “keynote culture” (zhuxuanliu wenhua), a term indicating the mainstream status of official culture in Chinese social and cultural spheres. The term

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"keynote culture" was first used by some cultural elites in the late 1980s in an effort to reaffirm the dominant status of official culture, which had been threatened by the rise of commercialised popular culture.

After the December 1978 Third Plenum of the Communist Party’s Eleventh Central Committee, the Party gradually turned away from Mao’s ideology of class struggle in favour of economic reform, while, at the same time, “Mao Zedong Thought” nominally remained the state ideology, and was listed as one of the Four Cardinal Principles of the People’s Republic of China. In order to maintain political control during the reform period, the new leadership found it necessary to draw an ideological baseline. Therefore, the Four Cardinal Principles (also known popularly in China as the “Four Insists”) devised by Deng, called on China to adhere to (1) the socialist road, (2) the dictatorship of the proletariat, (3) the leadership of the Communist Party, and (4) Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Zedong-Thought. Even though the market reforms had undertaken apparently similar commercial processes to western “capitalist” countries, the Communist Party conceptualised these in terms of socialism, to be more precise, “market socialism.” Among various consequences of this contradictory situation, was an increasing popular awareness that a gap between official and popular cultures was emerging.

To legitimate its leadership, the new regime under Deng Xiaoping repudiated many Maoist policies, but it had never intended to loosen its ideological control over literary and cultural activities. Although at the 1979 Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists, Deng had made a promise to end official interference in artistic creation, this promise was stripped of credibility during the 1980s as Deng was thought by many to be

122 The term “keynote” was first used in the field of film, raised in the meeting among film directors cross the country in March 1989, see Tao Dongfeng, Shehui zhuangxingqi shenmei weithua yanjiit (Studies on aesthetic culture in the transitional society) (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2002), pp. 71-74.
personally responsible for various campaigns launched to intervene in literary and cultural activities.\textsuperscript{123} While literature and art were no longer “subordinate to politics” they were continuously required to “reflect socialism, give expression to communist ideals and the spirit of the socialist age, reveal the main contradictions in the socialist era, depict the new socialist man, fill people with enthusiasm and create unity among the masses.”\textsuperscript{124} Such works, also known as “keynote” cultural works, were supported, rewarded and praised by the state, through which official cultural policies and directives were presented.

Through the so-called “keynote” cultural works created by established intellectuals or other Party image-makers, the Party persisted in propagating communist and collectivistic values such as “serving the people.”\textsuperscript{125} It promoted new heroic images to propagate communist and collectivistic values. Immediately after the death of Mao, Deng Xiaoping set up an alliance with the intellectuals who had been purged during the Cultural Revolution or even pre-Cultural Revolution campaigns, and urged them to create literature and art works to serve the socialist construction. The various heroic images elite writers created rekindled a temporary interest among ordinary people. However, as discussed in the next section, intellectuals’ self-centred interest and their failure to keep pace with the fast-changing new socio-economic reality also caused public indifference to their works.


\textsuperscript{124} He Jingzhi, “Zhengqu minzude shehuizhuyide geju yishude xin fanrong,” \textit{Renmin ribao}, 6 December 1990. He was the acting minister of culture in 1990.

Besides intellectual works, the Party advocated its ideology through promoting role models as had been the practice during the Maoist era. Lei Feng, a well-known role model of “a never rusting screw” established in March 1983, was revived during the reform period.\(^{126}\) The party-state carried three main campaigns of “learning Lei Feng” in 1977, 1983 and 1990 and minor campaigns every March. As Geist demonstrates, even though new political and moral values were added to the Lei Feng image to fit the new circumstances of the reform era, such as individuality and even interests of material wealth, public reaction was mainly negative or indifferent.\(^{127}\)

Conflicts and confusion within the political establishment contributed to the loss of credibility of Lei Feng and other role models the Party promoted in the 1980s. The leaders of Deng’s regime continued to invoke communist and collectivistic values such as “serving the people.” Meanwhile, the new socio-economic reality, as a result of the reforms induced by the party, encouraged individuals to pursue their own interest in competition with others.

The party-state had attempted to reconcile these conflicting values. For example, it linked Lei Feng’s “screw spirit” with individuality and other values needed for the reform. The Party propagandists argued that Lei Feng’s readiness to be a screw did not entail that he did not have “independent consciousness” or could not think independently. Rather, they stressed that Lei Feng became a soldier, sacrificing himself

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\(^{126}\) In the 1960s, Lei Feng was promoted as an ordinary and at the same time a red soldier. The so-called Lei Feng’s “screw spirit” refers to the willingness to serve the state wherever needed and the utter devotion to others without any thought for personal interests. Beate Geist, “Lei Feng and the ‘Lei Fongs of the Eighties’ – Models and Modelling in China,” Papers on Far Eastern History, vol. 42, (September 1990), pp. 102-103.

\(^{127}\) Geist, *ibid.*, pp. 102-108.
as a part of the socialist machine because he wished to. "He realised his personal values as well as making a contribution to society."\textsuperscript{128}

The belief that the Lei Feng spirit was valid in the reform period was a reflection of the faith that communist values could exist in harmony with market values. Competition in the socialist market was not regarded as contradictory to collective interest, because its ultimate aim was the common wealth. As a result, in the 1980s, the Lei Feng spirit incorporated the pursuit of individual needs, especially material needs, which, it was stressed should also benefit both the collective and the state.

By advocating these so-called "two civilisations,"\textsuperscript{129} the Party tried to combine material profit and lofty ideals. This, however, only generated an ironic mismatch. Take the changing image of Lei Feng as an example. During the Maoist era, through Lei Feng, the moral injunction to "serve the people" was manifested by self-denial in terms of dress, diet and others. Ironically, in the reform era when material needs were highlighted and propagated with positive attributes, so that even Lei Feng had woollen trousers and a Swiss Omega watch.

The ironic contrast only resulted in a loss of credibility of Lei Feng and other "Lei Feng type" models promoted in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{130} Among ordinary people, there circulated such comments as "When the political climate changes, the Lei Feng spirit changes." People no longer took Lei Feng seriously and rumours spread that he was a mere propaganda tool of the Party. There were also rumours that Xu Liang, the soldier model from the

\textsuperscript{128} Renmin ribao, 6 March 1988, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{129} The two civilisations are the material civilisation and spiritual civilisation. The material civilisation encourages pursuit of material needs and the spiritual civilisation encourages pursuit of communist and collective values.
\textsuperscript{130} Other "Lei Feng type" models promoted in the 1980s and 1990s included PLA soldier model Zhu Boru, Zhang Hua, a model of knowledge and altruism, Zhang Haidi, a disabled young lady who conducted self-study diligently, and some others. See Geist, "Lei Feng and the 'Lei Fengs of the Eighties' - Models and Modelling in China," pp. 109-110.
frontier war with Vietnam was “a false hero,” or “was a traitor on the battlefield and was already sentenced to death.” Far from being respected, model workers or those who were praised or awarded by the state were often mocked, isolated or attacked. Party-promoted cultural works became less and less appealing to the broad mass of the people.

Owing to its ambiguous conceptualisation of the situation, the party-state failed to provide the public with credible moral codes. Indifferent to the “keynote culture,” the public turned to unofficial cultural works and indulged themselves in their own “unofficial counter-models.” Knights-errant of kungfu novels, urban youth in romance stories, Rambo from American film and rebellious young people in the then cultural works, became models for many Chinese.

To a realm largely ignored by the state image-makers, there emerged the first wave of popular culture in post-Mao China, a revival of traditional popular culture and an introduction of foreign popular culture. Early in 1981, some mainland publishers reprinted traditional mystery and historical stories (gong’an xiaoshuo), such as Seven Bravos and Five Knights (Qixia wuyi), A Judge Shi Mystery (Shigong an) and A Judge Peng Mystery (Penggong an). The sales of this type of literature soon reached millions of copies. In the deprived cultural environment immediately after the Cultural Revolution, a revival of traditional popular culture was possibly the most convenient and quick way to satisfy a disillusioned reading audience.

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131 Ibid., p. 99, and fn. 2.
132 Ibid., p. 113.
133 See Wu Xusheng, Da Hongdong – zhongwai changxiaoshu jiemi (Sensation – disclose the secret of Chinese and foreign bestsellers) (Guangzhou, guangzhou chubanshe, 1993), pp. 29-30; also Barme discusses the rise of traditional knight-errant culture in Barme, In the Red, pp. 82-84.
Around the same time, cultural products imported from Hong Kong, Taiwan and western countries thrived in the newly rising market. Popular cultural goods, such as *kungfu* fiction, love stories, popular music, jeans and sun glasses had become much accepted cultural norms for people in industrialised countries. However, in the Chinese context, their emergence during the early reform era broke the domination of state advocated cultural works and caused a great sensation among many Chinese people.

Songs of the Taiwan based popular singer Deng Lijun, for instance, were among the first wave of *Gang-Tai* (Hong Kong and Taiwan) popular cultural goods imported to the mainland. The unprecedented impact of her sweet and sentimental singing on Chinese listeners is revealed by the experience of Jia Ding, one of the foremost songwriters in the 1980s, as he recalled:

> The first time I heard Deng Lijun’s songs was in 1978. I just stood there listening for a whole afternoon. I never knew before that the world had such good music. I felt such pain. I cried. I was really very excited and touched, and suddenly realized that my work in the past had no emotional force.  

Most other songwriters, students, intellectuals and ordinary people felt similar sentiments. Liu Xiaobo, a young philosopher and leader of the Democracy Movement in 1989 known for his radical critique of Chinese culture during the 1980s, also provided a vivid description of his feeling when he first heard Deng Lijun’s songs as a college student in the late 1970s:

> The words and soliloquies in this type of singing, the tunes that express the private, sorrowful, sentimental, and small feelings of life, stirred the depths of my soul. We grew up in a kind of earth-shaking revolutionary slogan, music and song. In the orthodox communist education we received, we knew nothing but revolution, selfless dedication in the spirit of “fear not hardship, fear not death,” the concepts and culture of cold class struggle that lacked any sense of humanity, hatred to others, and the language of violence. We

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Although Deng Lijun was also popular in Hong Kong, Taiwan and other Chinese speaking communities, her success there was largely driven by the already established entertainment industries in these areas. However, in mainland China during the early reform years, her feminine melodies aroused genuinely sensational appeal. The pleasure of this type of music, as Barthes has argued, is “essentially erotic;” one responds to the materiality of sound, to the “grain of the voice,” before interpreting the significance of a song’s lyrics. People on the mainland had for thirty years only been awakened by the martial strains of “The East is Red” being blared over the village or work unit loudspeakers, which aimed to uplift people’s revolutionary spirit and socialist awareness. Hence, Deng Lijun’s sweet and feminine voice deeply impressed Chinese people, subverting not only the martial strains but also the underlying ideology of either class struggle or “serving the people.” For this reason, soft popular ballads produced by modern machinery of the Gang-Tai entertainment industry emerged as an erotic challenge to the state-controlled propaganda system.

Literary works written by Taiwan-based female writers such as Qiong Yao, San Mao (1943-1991) and many others also received a warm reception from mainland readers. To a certain extent, their love stories delivered similar messages to those of Deng Lijun’s songs. Compared to Gang-Tai popular writers who dealt with individual desires and private sensation in their writing, mainstream writers in mainland China were more

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137 San Mao is the penname of Chen Ping, whose petit-bourgeois romantic style became popular in Hong Kong and Taiwan from the mid-1970s. For more detail about her, see Miriam Lang’s PhD thesis “San Mao and the Known World,” The Australian National University, 1999. Even though San Mao, Qiong Yao and other writers are known for quite different types of writing, they have often been discussed together as a wave from Hong Kong and Taiwan, which was different from mainland writing.
interested in social problems and political issues. For example, Zhang Jie, the author of a well-known story “Love Should Not Be Forgotten”, says of her work that “it is not a love story, but one that investigates a sociological problem.” In fact, in most love stories published in early reform years, the authors advocated the ideal of falling in love “because of a shared commitment to socialism.” By contrast, Taiwanese romances, such as stories written by Qiong Yao, aim to indulge the readers in private and sentimental feelings. Although being ignored or despised by the state and intellectuals, Gang-Tai love stories were enthusiastically welcomed by ordinary people. As an example of the mass appeal of these female writers, in 1986 and 1987, two mainland presses published poetry anthologies of Xi Murong (Hsi Muren, 1943- ), which caught readers’ hearts and were reprinted nine times. With a total print run of 600,000 copies, Xi created a record for individual poetry collections in mainland China at that time.

Besides literary works by female Gang-Tai writers, kungfu literature, films, and television series from Hong Kong swarmed the mainland cultural market and were soon emulated by local producers. Jin Yong, a Hong Kong-based journalist and a master of kungfu fiction, “became the most popular writer on the mainland and arguably the most widely read living Chinese novelist” in the 1980s.

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141 Wu Xusheng, *Da hongdong – zhongwai changxiaoshu jiem*í, p. 37.  
142 Jin Yong is penname for Zha Liangyong, or known as Louis Cha (1924 - ). He moved to Hong Kong in 1948 and started writing kungfu stories from 1955. In 1959, he became the co-founder of the Hong Kong daily *Ming Bao* and its first editor-in-chief, and held this position until 1993. Many of his kungfu stories were serialised in *Ming Bao*. His famous kungfu stories include *The Book and the Sword* (Shujian enchoulu) (first published on *The New Evening Post* in 1955), *Legend of the Condor Heroes* (Shediao yingxiong zhujuan) (first published on *Hong Kong Commercial Daily* in 1957) and *Heaven Sword and Dragon Sabre* (Yitian tulongji) (first published on *Ming Pao* in 1961). He is considered the most popular novelist of the Chinese language. For details of his career, see John Minford, translator’s introduction to “The Deer and the Cauldron – The Adventures of a Chinese Trickster,” *East Asian History* 5 (June 1993), pp. 1-14.  
143 Barme, *In the Red*, p. 83.
The overwhelming popularity of *kungfu* literature and films, romance stories, pop music, cartoon books, tabloids, and so on brought about a cultural diversity, that shattered the hegemony of the "keynote culture." Although the content of these popular cultural works could be characterised as light entertainment, they provided Chinese people with alternative cultural products to the Party propaganda. The growing cynicism regarding role models set up by the Party was a marked contrast to people's indulgence in stories of chivalrous heroes or romantic beauties. For this reason, the entertaining nature of popular cultural commodities provided many Chinese with not only an opiate but also an alternative symbol with which to resist official culture.\(^\text{144}\)

Popular cultural products became a means for Chinese, especially the young, to develop alternative life-styles and value systems against what the Party advocated. During the early 1980s, it became a fashion for rebellious youth to wear sunglasses and jeans and to carry a portable cassette recorder playing Deng Lijun or other *Gong-Tai* popular singers' tunes.\(^\text{145}\) Rather than state-promoted role models such as Lei Feng and Zhuang Haidi, fantasy characters of popular culture, various pop-stars and actors became idols among many Chinese, particularly the young.

**B. Popular or Poisonous Culture?**

The potential threat posed by popular culture to the domination of state sanctioned culture was evidenced by its being a direct and indirect target of constant state campaigns during the 1980s. In fact, during the two decades after the reform, the state's attitude towards popular culture was inherently contradictory and ambiguous. This is reflected by its "two fors" (literature and art is for the people and for the socialist construction) and "two hundreds" (let one hundred flowers bloom and one hundred

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\(^{144}\) Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, p. 143.  
schools of thought contend) cultural policies, which not only implies an encouragement of the development of popular culture to diversify the cultural arena, but also indicates the government’s caution in preventing the development of any culture away from the direction of “serving” the people and the socialist construction. In the early reform years, this ambiguous situation accelerated the rise of commercial and popular cultures and further explained why the public lost their interest and trust in state authority.

The reasons for the swing of government policy towards popular culture are manifold. First of all, in the 1980s the state devolved decision-making authority in a number of fields. Through this process, much of the financial burden of the central government was alleviated and territorial-level regulators were allowed to “play to their inherent capabilities” and to better meet the needs of local consumers. The consequences of this devolution were diverse. With regard to the development of popular culture, it generated a contradiction between the centre and local areas and among various cultural fields. For example, articles that could not be published in Beijing under the watchful eyes of the central Party authorities might find a place in publications in Guangdong with the protection of more liberal provincial Party authorities. Similarly, some critical ideas brought to public attention through the effort of publishing houses were prohibited from being shown on film or television screen.

It was also ironic to observe that various official organs, which were deeply involved in the market, participated in activities that were attacked by the government. For instance,

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148 Examples of this kind are many. For instance, Wang Shuo’s novel I am You Dad (Wo shi ni baba) was published in 1991 in the literary magazine Harvest (Shouhuo) and again in 1992 in The Collected Works of Wang Shuo, which was banned when being adapted into a film in 1996.
while publishing translations of foreign popular fiction was still restricted, some government organisations became the first to profit from this kind of translation owing to their political privileges and access to foreign information. The Masses Publishing House (Qunzhong chubanshe), run by the Ministry of Public Security, introduced Chinese readers to foreign crime novels, spy fiction, politicians’ memoirs, and even some borderline pornography, with the noble excuse that it would help the Chinese people stay alert to “the enemy.” Similarly, while tabloids came under Party attack during the “anti-spiritual pollution” campaign in 1984-1985, it was observed that they were mainly published by a range of “government departments and institutions, including legal departments, public security bureaus, courts, local people’s political consultative conferences, research institutes, and professional associations.”

The situation was further complicated when the development of popular culture was involved in factional infighting among established authorities. For example, reformist elites like Wang Meng embraced the commercialised popular culture as a means to undermine the Party bureaucracy and, by association, the position of their foes in the arts establishment. Consequently, when the “other side” had a chance to take their revenge, they fought back under the name of anti-bourgeois liberalism. Due to its association with the notions like “Western” and “bourgeois,” the commercialised popular culture often came under attack.

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149 Kong provides detailed discussion on the translation of foreign literature in the 1990s. Kong, Consuming Literature, pp. 120-143.
151 Yuezhi Zhao, Media, Market and Democracy in China, p. 132.
152 This so-called Wang Meng “faction” (bang) included novelists Liu Xinwu, Zhang Jie, Shen Rong and Wang Anyi and critics like Liu Zaifu and Li Tuo. They were mainly younger and controversial figures. See Barmé, In the Red, p. 22-23, and p. 299.
153 Barmé listed He Jingzhi, Lin Mohan, Wei Wei, Yao Xueyin, Liu Baiyu and Ouyang Shan as the major figures of this group. They were mainly older devotees of the official socialist realist canon. Barmé, In the Red, pp. 22-23, n. 14.
Compared with dissident culture like the ideological controversies and student demonstrations that arose in the 1980s, popular culture was a relatively neutral factor.\(^{154}\) In many cases, the denunciation of the commercialised popular culture was the extension of the intensified conflicts among political establishment. For instance, the 1983-1984 anti-spiritual pollution campaign was essentially a signal of the disintegration of political alliances, a result of central politicians' reluctance for further change.\(^{155}\) In the process of reducing the power of cultural reformers and their alliance in bureaucracy, the campaign was extended to the popular cultural sphere. Deng Xiaoping warned the Party about the corrupting influences of the West (an alternative term for the commoditisation of spiritual products) in undermining Party leadership and social cohesion.\(^{156}\) Resonating Deng’s ideas, conservative views on various forms of popular culture soon spread widely. In an effort to eliminate the “pollution,” the police in Beijing forbade men and women to swim together in public swimming pools. Even young people’s use of cosmetics, their pursuit of fashionable dress or hairstyles attracted criticism and prohibition in some areas.\(^{157}\) As observed by Wang Ruoshui, fearing the return of another Cultural Revolution, many people once again felt puzzled

\(^{154}\) Ibid., p. 136.

\(^{155}\) This point will be discussed in detail in the next section.

\(^{156}\) Deng’s talk at the Second Plenary Session of the Twelfth Congress of the Party in Oct, 1983. See Deng Xiaoping, “Dang zai zuzhi zhanxian he sixiang zhanxian shang de poqie renwu,” (The Party’s task in the frontiers of administration and thought) Deng Xiaoping wenxue (The collected works of Deng Xiaoping) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), vol.3, p.36. The question of borrowing from the West has been debated vigorously by Chinese political leaders since the early nineteenth century.

\(^{157}\) Wang Ruoshui (1926-2002) was a seminal liberal intellectual in the post-Mao period. He was raised in the Maoist system and became a deputy editor-in-chief in People’s Daily from 1978 to 1987. During this time, he edited and wrote articles that expressed liberal and critical opinions of the regime. He also systematically wrote essays about Marxist humanism and alienation. He was expelled from the Communist Party in 1987, deprived of his position as deputy editor-in-chief and also of his right to publish. But as a famous philosopher, he was appointed as the vice president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1988, and also became a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in that year. His observation of the 1983-1984 anti-spiritual pollution campaign is extracted from one of his articles written in 1992. Wang Ruoshui, “Ren de nanchan - rendaozhuyi zai zhongguo de mingyitn he ‘qinwu’ yundong” (The dystocia of human – the fate of humanism in China and the “anti-spiritual pollution campaign), Wang Ruoshui webpage: http://www.wangruoshui.net/CHINESE/NANCHAN.HTM. accessed 3 June 2005.
about whether it was appropriate to listen to Beethoven's music or to read romance fiction.\textsuperscript{158}

Similarly, campaigns in 1987 and 1989 were initiated primarily in response to student demonstration and protest movements, but they also had an effect on the popular culture.\textsuperscript{159} Although light and entertaining popular culture appeared to be less threatening than student demonstrations or protest movements, what concerned the Party was its association with Western values. To emphasise the importance of adhering to the Four Cardinal Principles, the 1987 campaign denounced popular culture as a "fifth column" for Western "peaceful evolutionists."\textsuperscript{160}

Political conflicts and divergences resulted in the fluctuation of cultural policies, which, as a result, on many occasions, were unable to guide or restrict cultural practices. The resolution of individual cases tested the tolerance of the party-state. In 1979, \textit{Translations (Yilin)}, a literary quarterly attached to Jiangsu People’s Publishing House (\textit{Jiangsu renmin chubanhe}) brought Chinese readers Agatha Christie’s \textit{Death on the Nile} in its very first issue.\textsuperscript{161} The issue was thus extremely popular in the market but incurred criticism from scholars. Feng Zhi, a well-known poet from the May Fourth movement and a scholar and translator of German literature with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences of the time, even wrote a letter to Hu Qiaomu, then in charge of the Propaganda Department to rebuke \textit{Yilin} for publishing such “decadent” works.\textsuperscript{162} None

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\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{159} Barme, \textit{In the Red}, p. 136.
\textsuperscript{160} Other major campaigns include the 1987 anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign, started after student demonstrations in late 1986 and the fall of Hu Yaobang, and the 1989 campaign after the student-led protest movement on 4 June. Nonetheless, with the reform program remained as the Party’s overwhelming concern, these campaigns were carried out within certain limits. For example, Hu Yaobang published an article “\textit{Wuran yao qingchu, shenghuo yao meihua}” (Pollution is to be cleaned, life is to be beautified) in \textit{Zhongguo qingnian bao} (China’s Youth) at 17 November, reminding people that the economic reform was still to be carried out.
\textsuperscript{161} For a full-detailed analysis of the event and more commercial practice of the magazine \textit{Yilin}, please see Kong, \textit{Consuming Literature}, pp. 127-142.
\textsuperscript{162} Kong, \textit{ibid.}, pp. 127-142.
of the cultural policies of the time explicated whether such a popular story should be acknowledged as socialist cultural works or not. In fact, the supreme “two fors” and “two hundreds” cultural principles, as suggested above, were double-edged. The decision then, all depended on the attitude of the government. At the Conference of Literary Journals in May 1980, Wang Renzhong, Chief of the Propaganda Department, declared that *Yilin* accorded with the open-door policy and that *Death on the Nile* contained no socially harmful content. With the government’s backing, a wide range of foreign literature was thus encouraged to be published in the 1980s and 1990s.\(^{163}\)

Sometimes, even though an explicit cultural policy was regulated, exceptions were made under the influence of central government or certain political forces. In 1988, as a major effort the state made to regulate the chaotic situation in publishing, the Central Bureau of Publishing passed a *Temporary Regulation on Defining Obscene and Pornographic Publications*.\(^{164}\) The Regulation included the definition of the “obscene” and indicated that publications with “pornographic” content but with literary or scientific merit should not be categorised as obscene or pornographic material and should not be banned. It even recommended that the Bureau set up a special evaluation committee to give expert evidence in determining the nature of individual publications. Barely a month after the formulation of the regulation, the translated novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, was confiscated,\(^{165}\) even though it was acknowledged to have literary merit. It is said that one of the reasons the Bureau dismissed the newly-passed 1988 regulation was the personal influence of the propaganda minister.\(^{166}\)

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\(^{163}\) However publishers still had to be careful to avoid publishing “dangerous” materials, as the government sometimes felt compelled to take administrative measures to control the numbers of popular fiction books being sold. Link, *The Uses of Literature*, p. 180.

\(^{164}\) *Guanyu rendin yinhui ji seqing chubanwu de zhanxin guiding* (Temporary regulation on how to identify pornographic and obscene publications), December 7, 1988, published in *Renmin ribao* (People’s daily), January 31, 1989.


Due to the inherent contradictions of the reform agenda, its policy regarding the development of popular culture lacked sufficient accuracy and coherence for implementation. Deeply intertwined with the commercialisation of official organs and factional infighting, the process through which the party-state implemented its cultural policy was contradictory and unreliable. This intensified the widespread disillusionment among the public. They thus moved further away from the official culture and turned to embrace the popular culture that had begun to assert itself vigorously in a social context. From the mid-1980s, people’s preference for cultural works was distinctly different from the didactic state prescriptions. “The urban educated elites were engrossed in works of Western authors such as Freud, Jung, Maslow, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, while average urban youths were going after knight-errant tales or murder mysteries.”

Confrontation between Popular and Elite Cultures

A. The Restoration of the Elite Tradition of Chinese Intellectuals and Their Heroic Self-Representations

Mao Zedong’s death in 1976 and the new reformist regime’s ascendancy presented Chinese intellectuals with a crucial opportunity to rehabilitate their social and cultural status. The new regime under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership made an effort to re-build links with intellectuals so as to co-opt them into modernising China. Intellectuals who were labelled as the “stinking ninth category” (chou laojiu) during the Cultural Revolution were reclassified as members of the working class. By 1982, 90 per cent of those intellectuals previously categorised as “rightists” had these labels removed by the

\[167\] Ibid., p. 573.

*168* Intellectuals, including academics, writers, artists, doctors, scientists, engineers, lawyers, economists and journalists, were not necessarily bureaucrats of the Party and government, but they worked in the institutions that were controlled by the government.
new regime. Accompanying the attack against the “gang of four” and the promotion of the “four modernisations,” posthumous rehabilitation was also conferred on those who were persecuted. Many intellectuals who had been purged during the Cultural Revolution or even pre-Cultural Revolution campaigns became high-level officials and returned to positions in the official establishment.

Although the new regime presented new cultural policies in relation to the status of intellectuals, the Maoist cultural structures and institutions remained largely intact until around the start of the 1990s. Until the early 1990s the impact of the new economic policies was yet to alter the workings of the core cultural institutions. In fact the restoration and revitalisation of various state-guided cultural institutes immediately after Mao’s death, to a certain extent, revived the Maoist cultural mechanisms of the pre-Cultural Revolution period. The Writers’ Association, for example, resumed its operations and many younger writers and artists managed to win positions within the state cultural system. The removal of rightist labels of intellectuals and the rehabilitation of their position enabled the system to operate again.


170 Ibid.

171 After this point economic reforms fundamentally undermined the socialist operations of producing and disseminating cultural products, and an alternative funding from global capital flow became available.

172 With the Communist revolution in 1949, the state had the means as well as the will to establish and develop a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideological framework to impose its authority over virtually all areas of intellectual and professional life. This framework, characterised by a hierarchical propaganda network and a mass co-opting system was to ensure that the ideological sphere was under direct and absolute control of the Party. For the detail of the operation of Maoist propaganda system, see Julian Chang, “The Mechanics of State Propaganda: The People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union in the 1950s,” Timothy Cheek and Tony Saich, eds., *New Perspectives on State Socialism of China* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), pp. 76-124. The same book also provides an insightful analysis of the complex relationship between the state and intellectuals. Also, Su Shaozhi provides a clear picture of the structure of the socialist propaganda system, Su, “The Control of Ideology,” *Marxism and Reform in China* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1993), pp. 137-150. However, the intensive class struggle during the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957-1958) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) greatly damaged and hampered the efficiency of this cultural mechanism. Over half of the 2,000 intellectuals in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, for example, were involved in political trouble, which led to a stagnancy of the institute. See Lynn T. White III, “Thought Workers in Deng’s Time,” *China’s Intellectuals and the State*, p. 255.
Through the re-vitalisation of the pre-Cultural Revolution cultural institutions, most intellectuals who were deposed during the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution resumed their privilege or high official positions. Not only did older artists, such as Zhou Yang, Ding Ling, He Jingzhi and Zang Kejia, who established high reputations and official positions early in the Yan’an era in the 1940s, resumed reputations or high posts, many middle-age artists who were purged as rightists for dissent during the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1957, including Wang Meng, Liu Baiyu, Liu Binyan, Liu Shaotang, Bai Hua and Gong Liu, were also rehabilitated and even promoted in their official careers.\(^{173}\) In addition, younger artists, such as Liu Xinwu, like their predecessors in the 1950s and 1960s, were co-opted into the socialist cultural hierarchy. The national and local branches of various professional associations, such as the Writers’ Association, the Chinese Dramatists’ Association, together with the affiliated cultural organizations at lower levels, helped to co-opt Chinese writers and artists into a state-centred ideology and transformed them into state employees.\(^ {174}\)

At the Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists held in Beijing in 1979, Deng Xiaoping promised an end to direct political interference in artistic creation and indeed during his period of rule.\(^ {175}\) The arts moved in different directions from those typified by the Maoist era. However, the intertwined relationship between intellectuals and the political establishment entrenched by the inherited cultural machinery determined the resurfacing of the intellectual tradition developed in the pre-Cultural Revolution era. In a single-
party system with its incumbent monopolistic ideological framework, opinions without official acquiescence had few outlets for expression.

Like the policies of 1956-1957 that promoted a less-regulated approach to literary and art workers, some reforms that were introduced in the Deng era provided “increased incomes, encouragement of spare-time work, slight budgetary improvements for educational institutions, awards, titles, and the airing of complaints about intellectuals’ bad living conditions.”¹⁷⁶ However, as indicated by the problematic policy of “free job market,”¹⁷⁷ and the various campaigns during the 1980s, the status of intellectuals was still largely responsive to fluctuations in political trends. Although intellectuals had more leeway than at any other time since 1949, and were even allowed some degree of professional autonomy,¹⁷⁸ the extent of the autonomy and whether it could be implemented were largely decided by the Party. For example, the elections held during the 4ᵗʰ Congress of the Chinese Writers Association in December 1984-January 1985, were the first in which intellectuals could elect a different set of leaders to those presented for approval by the Party.¹⁷⁹ This deviation from party-recommended candidates would not have been possible in earlier years. However, while the process of election by secret ballot of the Writers’ Association generated demands for freedom in other areas, such as the press, the same process was not permitted in other professional associations.

¹⁷⁷ The “free job market” policy was introduced in the early 1980s. In 1981, the national CCP newspaper allowed that people could search for jobs themselves. However, for intellectuals, there were restrictions on this policy and pervasive conflicts between intellectuals and Party cadres increased. In addition, this policy contradicted another trend of the early 1980s – an emphasis on official job allocation for intellectuals. For detailed discussion, see White III, ibid., pp. 262-263.
¹⁷⁹ In this meeting, writers held a contested election by secret ballot. Liu Binyan, although not supported by the Party, received the second-highest number of voters and because one of the leaders of the Association. Merle Goldman with Timothy Cheek and Carol Lee Hamrin ed., China’s Intellectuals and the State: In Search of a New Relationship (Cambridge and London: The Council on East Asian Studies/ Harvard University, 1987), pp. 16-17. For more about the status of Chinese intellectuals after the Cultural Revolution, see Merle Goldman and Timothy Cheek, “Uncertain Change,” China’s Intellectuals and the State, pp. 1-20.
Therefore, like their predecessors in the Maoist era, post-Mao Chinese intellectuals still frequently allied themselves with factions in the establishment so that they could canvas divergent ideas. In addition, as the revitalised cultural machinery provided most intellectuals jobs within the political-intellectual hierarchy, intellectual activities were intertwined with the competition for power and influence among intellectuals.¹⁰⁰ For many intellectuals, the preference of different ideals and the alliances with different political factions were often entangled with ambitions of their own career to flourish.

The elevation in the status of intellectuals was reflected in the post-Mao artistic works, especially literature. Works with heroic images of intellectuals, including academics, writers, artists, doctors, scientists, engineers, lawyers, economists and journalists overflowed in post-Mao literature, television series and films for almost a decade. This was in stark contrast with literature with positive heroes as either peasants or cadres, which, following literary policies codified by Mao Zedong during his Yan’an Talks of 1942, had dominated the literary sphere during the three subsequent Maoist decades until 1976.

However, it is important to note that apart from divergence in subject matters and techniques, Chinese intellectuals, especially those who obtained posts under the new regime, had, in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution carried within them remnants of the past: the use of literary or ideological debates to influence policy and the practice of allying themselves with political factions in order to raise divergent ideas. These were all major characteristics of intellectual engagement with political forces in the early 1960s and early 1970s.

The politicisation of intellectual activities rendered intellectuals’ advocacy of individualism futile. The central themes in the intellectuals’ program in the post-Mao era were “recovery” and “return”: “a recovery of once-denounced humanist values and a return to the May Fourth enlightenment projects.” The terms “individual” (geren) and “individualism” (geren zhuyi), complete with the extensive controversy around their precise meanings, were seen by many intellectuals as the most important concepts advocated during the May Fourth “enlightenment” period. Yu Dafu, a prominent writer in the May Fourth Movement, claimed that, “the greatest success of the May Fourth movement should be considered the discovery of the ‘individual’ (geren).” Individualistic values were in opposition to the collective revolutionary ideology, which required the individual to subordinate the self to the collective goals of the masses. Consequently, since revolutionary ideology was established as a leading principle after Mao Zedong gave his “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” at 1942, the expressions of the individual self had been suppressed for some forty years.

After Mao’s death, the concept of the autonomous “self” again received unprecedented enthusiasm among writers and intellectuals. They were said to have struggled for self-

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affirmation, self-liberation and self-realisation.\textsuperscript{185} Titles of literary works, such as “I Am I, Myself” and \textit{Human, Ah Human}, indicated writers’ passionate espousal of individualism.\textsuperscript{186} However, a genuine discovery of the “self” did not come into being until the mid-1980s, when the “root-searching” (\textit{xungen}) school and the young experimentalists conducted a much more sophisticated cultural and aesthetic experiment.\textsuperscript{187} In the early 1980s, socialist-humanist “subjectivity” underlay most of the literary production, complete with its characteristic moral virtues, especially patriotism and the assumed obligation to speak for “the ruled.” During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the introduction of new subject matter and experimentation with new Western techniques, though subverting Mao’s literary policies, were in accordance with the new regime’s political line. In fact, Deng Xiaoping, at the 1979 Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists, stated that: “Writers and artists must have freedom to choose subject matter and methods of presentation. … in this respect, no outside interference by the leadership will be permitted.”\textsuperscript{188}

As part of the effort to bring the “self” back to literature, writers broke the Maoist taboo of love. The story “The Position of Love” (1978) earned its author Liu Xinwu a position in the history of contemporary Chinese literature since it was the first love story in post-Mao era. However, this effort of breaking a taboo of the Cultural Revolution cannot be separated from politics and implied legitimation of the new regime. By denouncing the

\textsuperscript{185} Liu Zaiifu, \textit{Xinge zuhe lun} (Theory of the Composite Character; Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1986), p. 29.

\textsuperscript{186} “I am I, myself” is the title of an article by Liu Xinwu “Wo shi wo ziji,” published in \textit{Renmin ribao}, 24 January 1986, overseas edition. \textit{Human, Ah Human (Ren, ah ren)} is a novel by Dai Houying, which was published in 1980 by Guangdong people’s publishing house. The celebration of human values and creative subjectivity can be traced from underground works circulated in the mid-1970s, for example, Wu Meng’s underground collection of \textit{Ganyu geyin dongdi ai} (Daring to sing songs that move the earth to sorrow), which was published by \textit{Qishi niandai Biweekly} in Kowloon. An underground poetry magazine, \textit{Jintian} (Today), was also notable in talking about the celebration of human values. See Leo Lee, “The Politics of Technique: Perspectives of Literary Dissidence in Contemporary Chinese Fiction,” in \textit{After Mao: Chinese Literature and Society}, ed., Jeffrey C Kinkley (Cambridge: The Council on East Asian Studies of Harvard University, 1985), p. 183.

\textsuperscript{187} Jing Wang, \textit{High Culture Fever}, p. 33.

Cultural Revolution as the cause of social problems and by aiding the new leadership in offering advice to young readers about love, “The Place of Love” accorded with the official line of Deng’s leadership.\textsuperscript{189} In fact, this story and many other stories published in the late 1970s provided a prescribed definition of love that should be built on a common revolutionary goal and purpose.\textsuperscript{190} This was not dramatically different from what the authorities had advocated ever since 1942.

In 1979, Wang Meng published “Bolshevik Salute,” which was seen as one of the early “modernist” works to use “stream-of-consciousness” as a literary technique.\textsuperscript{191} However, as Feuerwerker points out, Wang Meng was not experimenting with Western “stream-of-consciousness,” but rather with “a technique analogous to the montage in film” which juxtaposes memories of past and present. Rather than portraying the free flow of the character’s mental processes, Wang Meng “artfully arranged and contrived” the order of events. This experimentation generated a symbolic protagonist rather than an individualistic one.\textsuperscript{192} Rather than discovering the “self,” the story is a collective history of Chinese intellectuals who at different times were defined as “positive, zealous Party members,” “capitalist rightists,” “enemy of the Party”, or a “counterrevolutionary revisionist,” who, as indicated in the last segment, on the day of rehabilitation would jointly say “Bolshevik Salute” to the new leadership.

In addition, various ideological debates in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution cannot be separated from intellectuals’ ambiguous relation with the political

\textsuperscript{189} As Kam Louie points out, official publications, such as books and numerous columns in newspapers and magazines also started to advise young people how to deal with love. Louie, Between Fact and Fiction: Essays on Post-Mao Chinese Literature and Society, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., pp. 51-52.
establishment. The discussion of “humanism” and the “theory of socialist alienation” was a chief point of contention among intellectuals that came to the fore in the early 1980s. As David Kelly points out, the proposal of the theory of socialist humanism and the critique of socialist alienation, although appearing on the philosophical front, were political movements from the outset.¹³¹ Wang Ruoshui’s views on Marxist humanism enunciated in 1979-1980 coincided with the movement for intellectual emancipation of the time.¹³² The writing of Wang Ruoshui and others was an attempt to reinterpret Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Zedong-Thought to offer an explanation for the disasters of the radical periods of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution and the potential for evil in the present.¹³³ These works, on the one hand, addressed intellectuals’ own questions at a time of crisis of authority;¹³⁴ on the other hand, they helped shift support to the new leadership of Deng Xiaoping.

To legitimate their hold on power, the top leaders of the new regime, Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang, would acquiesce in the reinterpretation of Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Zedong-Thought for new forms of consensus to be achieved, deviating from the thinking of Hua Guodeng and other remnants of the radical era who obediently followed

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¹³¹ As Kelly suggests, the “humanity” advocated in Wang Ruoshui and others’ writing was above all the moral conscience of the leadership. What they attempt to achieve was the ethical consensus with political authorities which was the basis for eventual institutional reform, not a new mode of system. David A. Kelly, “The Emergence of Humanism: Wang Ruoshui and the Critique of Socialist Alienation,” *China’s Intellectuals and the State*, p. 181; see also Carol Lee Hamrin, “Conclusion: New Trends,” *China’s Intellectuals and the State*, p. 279. For detailed discussion on the state-intellectuals relations, see Merle Goldman, *China’s Intellectuals*; Merle Goldman with Timothy Cheek and Carol Lee Hamrin, eds. *China’s Intellectuals and the State*. For more on the discussion on “humanism” and the “theory of socialist alienation,” see David A Kelly, “The Emergence of Humanism: Wang Ruoshui and the Critique of Socialist Alienation,” *China’s Intellectuals and the State*, pp. 159-182; Jing Wang, “Who Am I?: Questions of Voluntarism in the Paradigm of Socialist Alienation,” *High Culture Fever*, pp. 9-37.

¹³² Other major intellectuals supporting Wang’s views at that time included Zhou Yang and Ru Xin, both held high positions. Zhou Yang was the Chairman of the All-China Federation of Literature and Art Circles and a Vice-President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (1978-1988); Deputy Director of the Propaganda Department (1980-1982). Ru Xin was a Vice-President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. But, he was unable to hold the line against criticism during the Spiritual Pollution Movement in 1983. Wang Ruoshui was a deputy editor of *People’s Daily* of the time, and held high positions, including membership in the Central Committee for Discipline and Inspection (1978-1982), and as delegate to the 5th National People’s Congress.


¹³⁴ Hamrin, “Conclusion,” *China’s Intellectuals and the State*, p. 287.
Mao. However, the deepening of the discussion gave rise to questioning of the existing political system, which diverged from the ideals espoused by political authorities. The party thus launched The Campaign against Spiritual Pollution to stop further discussion in 1983.

As a reflection of Wang Ruoshui’s view on alienation in literary practice, Bai Hua’s controversial screenplay, *Unrequited Love* (1979) reveals the discrepancy between intellectuals’ feeling about the nation/people on the one hand and government on the other. *Unrequited Love* is a story about a patriotic artist who returns to China from the United States after the Communist victory to help his country, only to be hounded to death by radical officials. In the story, the careful use of *zuguo* (ancestral land) and *guojia* (country) indicate that feelings towards the Chinese people/homeland and the government/political party are clearly distinguished. Echoing Wang Ruoshui’s theory, Bai Hua’s story implies that one can love one’s nation while being alienated from one’s government. When adapted into a motion picture for a mass audience, the story became the direct target of the Campaign against Bourgeois Liberalism in 1981. Although the author Bai Hua became the victim of the Campaign, being accused of opposing the Party, as Kraus pointed out, he was not a liberal writer avoiding the entanglement of power and culture, but a representative of an alliance of artists and cultural officials, who allied with reform-minded central politicians to maximise their power to influence the making of policies. The fact that Bai Hua emerged as a target for criticism was a result of the disintegration of this alliance, a result of the limited extent of central politicians’ willingness to reform, and the reluctance of cultural reformers to stop pressing for further change.

With allies in the political establishment, many intellectuals resumed their role as the intermediary between the top ruler(s) and ordinary people. Assuming themselves educators of the "masses" of readers and spectators of the latest government line, post-Mao intellectuals implicitly placed themselves at a higher moral status and more significant than ordinary people. Moreover, the majority of the then literature and art work, rather than exploring the needs of ordinary people, focused on the lives and ideals of intellectuals themselves. Prevalent in the majority of the literary works in the early post-Mao years were the heroic images of intellectuals, including educated cadres, managers, scholars and technicians. These stories emphasised the increased importance of intellectuals and the insufficiency of reward or attention that the state and society paid to them.

A large number of heroic images of intellectuals were created during this time. For example, the teacher in "The Class Teacher" (Banzhuren, 1977) the surgeon Lu Wenting in At Middle Age (Rendao zhongnian, 1980), the herdsman Xu Lingjun in "Flesh and Soul" (Ling yu rou, 1980), the cart-driver Luo Qun in The Legend of Tianyun Mountain (Tianyunshan chuanqi, 1979), and the company manager Qiao Guanpu in "Manager Qiao Assumes Office" (Qiaochuangzhang shangrenji, 1979).

Such intellectual class protagonists also featured in many works of "literature of the

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201 In some cases, "serving the people" stands opposite to "serving politics." See Kraus, "Bai Hua: The Political Authority of a Writer," China's Establishment Intellectuals, p. 198.
205 Shen Rong's "At Middle Age" was first published in 1980 at the first issue of the literary journal Shouhuo.
206 Zhang Xianliang's "Flesh and Soul," was first published in Shuofang, no. 9 (1980).
207 Lu Yanzhou's The Legend of Tianyun Mountain was first published in the initial volume of the literary magazine Qingming in 1979.
208 Jiang Zilong's "Manager Qiao Assumes Office" (Qiaochuangzhang shangrenji) was first published in Renmin wenxue, July 1979.
wounded” and “literature of reform” genres. After being awarded official prizes or being adapted into films, many of these works became well-known in society. One of the unmistakable characteristics of these stories is their intellectual protagonists who firmly hold moral virtues. The class teacher in Liu Xinwu’s story is depicted as a conscientious “soul-maker” who is concerned about the influence of the Cultural Revolution on younger generation and works to eliminate its negative effects. Lu Wenting in *At Middle Age* is a skilful eye surgeon. Regardless of the low financial rewards of her position, she remains dedicated to her work to the extent that she collapses from exhaustion and goes into a coma. Xu Lingjun in “Flesh and Soul” refuses his father’s request to go abroad to inherit a fortune. Xu Lingjun has a rich father, who abandons him when he is eleven. He is nonetheless labelled a Rightist during the era when “blood line” theory is prevalent. Regardless of the wrongdoing he receives, he develops love for the homeland and people and therefore, refuses to follow his father abroad.

Luo Qun in *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* is also a victim of the anti-Rightist movement in 1957. Unlike Xu Lingjun, even after the fall the Cultural Revolution, Luo

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209 Liu Xinwu’s “The Class Teacher” won first prize in the national short story competition for 1978. His “Wake Up, Brother” was published in the second issue of journal *China Youth* in 1978. “The Class Teacher,” together with other stories, including “Wake Up, Brother” and “The Place of Love,” made the author an important figure of the so-called “Wounded Literature” trend, which was popular from 1977 till 1979. Shen Rong’s “At Middle Age” won first prize in the first National Novella Competition for 1977-1980 organised by the Writers’ Association. The film adapted from the novella won Jinji (Golden Roster) Film Award and Excellent Film Award offered by Ministry of Culture and Hundred Flower Film Award in the following years. Lu Yanzhou’s story *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* won first prize in the national novella competition from 1977 to 1980. The director Xie Jin made it into a movie in 1980, taking the first place in five categories at the first annual Jinji Film Award ceremony, sharing first-place honours in the fourth annual Hundred Flowers film competition sponsored by *Dazhong dianying* (Popular cinema) magazine in 1981. Paul G. Pickowicz, “Popular Cinema and Political Thought,” *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People’s Republic China* (Boulder, San Francisco and London: Westview Press, 1989), p. 41. Zhang Xianliang’s “Flesh and Soul” won first prize in the national short story competition for 1980 and was made into the film, *The Herdsman’s Story*. The film was favourably received, winning first prize in the sixth Hundred Flower film competition in 1982 and received Excellent Film Award offered by Ministry of Culture in 1982. Jiang Zilong’s “Manager Qiao Assumes Office” received the first prize in the national short story competition for 1979, organised by *Renmin wenxue* and won the first prize in the short story competition for 1979. It was also frequently reprinted, made into a TV feature, and received much attention of a mass audience. Rudolf Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade Studies in Contemporary Prose* (Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992), pp. 379-380. “Manager Qiao Assumes Office” was commonly considered the first novella heralding the so-called “reform literature.”
Qun is still burdened by the Rightist label. However, the suffering and unfair treatment he experiences never shakes Luo Qun’s belief in the Party and his determination to work for the nation. He spends twenty years writing a report on how to improve the situation in the area of Tianyun Mountain. Similarly, the protagonist Qiao Guangpu in the story “Manager Qiao Assumes Office” suffers maltreatment during the “gang of four” period but, once rehabilitated at the end of the Cultural Revolution, he willingly returns to a troubled electrical machinery plant and is determined to improve the situation of the plant.

Apart from their moral virtues, the intellectual protagonists in many of these stories are depicted as fully supportive of new Party policies. Lu Wenting, Xu Lingjun and Qiao Guangpu all support the modernisation project the state advocates and believe that the new leadership is the hope of the nation. In addition, the protagonists speak as Party and government-appointed educators, trying to convince the reader about the right path. In addition, through their superior moral status, they attempt to win over the reader to the post-1976 political line.\textsuperscript{210} Being a class teacher and a party member, Zhang Junshi in the story, “Class Teacher,” is placed at a higher level than the addressees – his pupils. Through his effort in convincing his pupils that they should accept one of the members of the “lost generation” of Cultural Revolution youths and that they should reconsider their attitude towards books banned during the Cultural Revolution, Zhang Junshi tries to convince the young generation to rectify the wrongs of the Cultural Revolution.

Addressing the problem of the stagnation of the industry and the difficulties of economic reform, “Manager Qiao Assumes Office” and TV series The New Star (1986) reflected the anxiety surrounding “Chinese modernisation” which was commonplace at

\textsuperscript{210} This idea is drawn from Wagner’s analyse of Liu Xinwu’s stories, see Wagner, “Writer, State and Society,” China’s Intellectuals and the State, p. 211.
Qiao in “Manager Qiao Assumes Office” implements a series of bold and authoritarian management measures. He is depicted more like a “feudal patriarch” or honest official (qingguan) having the ability to help set and achieve goals for ordinary people. Addressing similar problems of economic reform, Li Xiangnan in TV series *The New Star* is glorified as a fighter for democracy and a guardian of ordinary people’s rights.

In analysing science fiction at the turn of the 1980s, Wagner hypothesises that scientists had used science fiction to lobby for their own narrow interests. The uniform creation of the morally heroic images of intellectuals, the highlighting of their hard-working spirit, patriotism, solid belief in the national modernisation project, can also be seen as a collective effort of the intellectual stratum to not only set a model for the mass readership, but to demonstrate a willingness to compromise with the authorities. This type of compromise allowed them latitude to address broader concerns. Many of these literary works carefully critique bureaucratism, and the unsatisfactory working and living conditions of intellectuals, hoping that these problems might be given attention and solved by the authorities.

Consequently, the literature and culture of the time created by elite intellectuals were deeply characterised by a grand narrative of the national modernisation project and as a celebration of highbrow culture and cerebralism. As a reflection of the dominance of elite culture, even television, usually the very medium that would be directly identified

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212 Ibid.
214 The decade after the Cultural Revolution, the so-called new era (1979-1989) was described by Jing Wang as “a decade that celebrated highbrow culture and cerebralism.” see Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*, p.113.
as a producer of popular culture, became an area where ordinary people were exposed to cerebral debates. In 1988 a six-part documentary series, *River Elegy*, was broadcast on China’s Central Television (CCTV). It introduced to a mass audience such weighty titles as “Searching for Dreams,” “Destiny,” “Inspiration,” “The New Era,” “Anxiety,” and “The Colour Blue,” language which used to be typically restricted to intellectual circles. Through television, a modern technology of mass media, Chinese elite intellectuals showed the masses what they believed to be important subjects. Nonetheless, while the series meditated on the historical origins of the state of Chinese culture in the 1980s, it aroused great sensation among viewers as it unintentionally corresponded to the intensifying crisis consciousness of the Chinese audience. As Jing Wang points out, 1988 was the year of dragon and “evoked the superstitious Chinese fear of epochal disasters.” This folk belief, together with the sense of uncertainty brought about by the urban reform generated a widespread apocalyptic anxiety among Chinese, whose attention was then attracted by *River Elegy*’s condemnation of the totem symbol of the dragon and the thousand-year-old “yellow culture.”

B. The Emergence of Popular Culture as an Opponent of Elite Discourse

Yet, a paradox in the Chinese cultural scene by the late 1980s is that the “cultural fever” created by elite intellectuals failed to arouse interest among ordinary people. Intellectuals, in their creation of cultural works, ignored the interests of the large bulk of the population. Most well-known writers and literary publishing houses in the late

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215 *River Elegy* was formatted as a documentary, featuring interviews with historical scholars, reformers and dissident intellectuals. One of the most notable messages that the series delivered was that China had failed to develop into a modern civilization precisely because of its traditional inward-directed and land-based worldview (as symbolized by the Great Wall, dragon, the Yellow River and agrarian culture). The only way for China to develop into a modern state and society, the series suggested, would be to abandon tradition and adopt western culture (as symbolised by the blue ocean). For more description and analyse on the series, see Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*, pp. 118 – 136; and Barme, *In the Red*, pp. 23-25.


217 Some elite works, such as such as *River Elegy*, might have attracted great public attention. Nonetheless, as I have argued, rather than being interested in the elite discourses, the mass audience found some elite works a channel to voice their own concerns and anxiety.
1980s faced a problem of declining readership. "The Chinese literary world is experiencing a difficult period. Few published works have stirred society, and many readers no longer care about what is going on in the contemporary literary world," said critic Li Bian in 1991. Under the pseudonym of Yang Yu, Wang Meng, the then Minister of Culture, published an article “Literature: After the Sensational Impact” in the Literary Gazette (Wenyi bao). This article shocked the literary world by publicly announcing the disappearance of the nationwide enthusiasm for literature.

The anxiety of the literary establishment was shared by the whole elite cultural scene. Chinese film directors also considered themselves as guardians of China’s spiritual civilization and “dignified figures of a solitary spokesperson for society.” The major films produced during the 1980s, such as The One and the Eight (Yige he bage, 1984) directed by Zhang Junzhao, and Black Cannon Incident (Heipao shijian, 1985) directed by Huang Jianxin, were largely derived from elite directors’ sociopolitical consciousness known as “anxiety consciousness” (youchuan yishi: a sense of facing adversity and bearing responsible for the situation). Many of these films were highly praised by the critics and even welcomed by the West, but received little response from ordinary audiences. Zhang Junzhao’s The One and the Eight, for example, was hailed as an outstanding work among the “fifth generation” and was shown by SBS in Australia in 1991. However, it was described by ordinary domestic audiences as one of the “worst films” they had seen.

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220 Jing Wang High Culture Fever, p.115.
In stark contrast to the declining readership and audience for cultural artefacts created by elite intellectuals, popular cultural products from Hong Kong, Taiwan and western countries were enthusiastically welcomed by a mass audience. As previously mentioned, the Taiwan-based singer Deng Lijun was among the first to bring Gang-Tai popular culture to mainland China. Totally different from the elite discourse, in Deng’s songs there are no intellectual heroes, no sufferings of the Cultural Revolution and nor any mention of national modernisation projects. The rapid and broad spread of Deng’s songs indicates their appeal to ordinary people. Pirated tapes with her songs were circulating privately among university students as early as 1977. During the 1980s, people created the rhyme, “Old Deng (Deng Xiaoping) rules by day, little Deng (Deng Lijun) rules by night.” Ironically, this juxtaposition of a popular singer with the top leader Deng Xiaoping implies that it was the reform and open-door policy Deng advocated that brought about an increased demand for more options of cultural goods.

In the search for the reasons for elite literature’s loss of readers, Wang Meng states that the reforms and open door policy made Chinese people more calm and mature, and therefore “no matter what one writes now, it could not cause a sensation.” Yet, contradicting this assertion, romance and kungfu novels actually created a sensation, conquering the hearts of millions. In 1985 the Hong Kong kungfu writer, Jin Yong, released his first novel in simplified characters through a publisher in Tianjin and the first printing alone reached half a million copies. Around the same time, at least 20 publishers hurried to publish love stories by the Taiwanese writer Qiong Yao. While

223 The impact Deng Lijun caused in political and cultural realms was considerable. For more discussions in this respect, see “Deng Lijun xianxiang de zhengzhi, wenhua he meiti fansi” (Political, cultural and media reflections on the Deng Lijun phenomenon), Mingbao yuekan, no. 6 (1995), pp. 46-63.
some elite literary journals complained about the declining readership, some local periodicals, with the majority of the content being popular short stories, attracted a large number of readers.\textsuperscript{226} According to a 1993 survey of ordinary Beijingers' recognition and familiarity with writers from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, conducted by Liu Xiaobo and the \textit{China Times Weekly}, Qiong Yao topped the list, with 85.5 per cent of people recognising her name, and 47.6 per cent approving of her work. Jin Yong was the fourth well known, with 64.3 per cent of people recognising his name and 37.7 per cent liking his work.\textsuperscript{227}

Remarkably, Wang Meng and other established intellectuals ignored the apparent sensation aroused by popular literature. When Wang Meng declared, "literature has lost its sensational impact," he did not mention the sensation caused by \textit{kungfu} novels and romantic novels. As Wang Yi explained, "He (Wang Meng) did not ignore this intentionally; he just did not count popular literature as a part of literature."\textsuperscript{228} During the 1980s, few mainland critics paid much attention to the emergence of these newly available cultural products welcomed by ordinary people. "References to popular culture were rare."\textsuperscript{229} Chinese intellectuals played an extraordinarily active role in the cultural stage in the 1980s and generated various "fevers:" the fever about \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude} in 1985, the fever for root-searching and new methodologies in 1985 and Culture Fever in 1986. Yet popular culture - popular music, popular fiction, popular


\textsuperscript{226} Starting publication in the mid-1980s, the local literary periodicals in Guangdong province, such as \textit{Zhanjiang wenxue}, \textit{Lifeng} and \textit{Nantianzhai /Nanye} distributed at least 200,000 copies per issue respectively. \textit{Zhongguo dangdai qikan zonglan} (Manual of current periodical of China), (Ha'erbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 1987) pp.875-876.


\textsuperscript{229} \textit{Ibid.}, p.43.
films, décor and fashion -- remained distant from elite intellectuals’ professional consciousness.

While intellectuals were largely involved in cultural discussions at an abstract level, the social reality of China was undergoing dramatic changes: the emergence of the market economy, increased communication between domestic Chinese and people overseas and changes in cultural and ideological spheres. Although intellectuals regarded themselves as spokespeople for the masses, the revalorised intellectual elitism of the post-Mao era was accompanied by disdain for the populace. Meanwhile, the ongoing material process of modernisation quickly grew beyond the scope of intellectuals’ abstract cultural formulations. Contrary to elite intellectuals’ obsession with the national project, ordinary Chinese people seemed to have lost their enthusiasm for the grand narrative of “improvement of the national soul.” Instead, they were interested in works that engaged with their personal needs and recreational demands.

In this sense, contrary to the views of some Chinese critics who, referred to the Frankfurt School’s ideas to critique that the culture industry ensured the creation and satisfaction of false needs and the suppression of true needs, the flourishing of popular cultural products in mainland China in the 1980s provided the mass audience with a multiplicity of choices in cultural goods, thereby breaking the dominance of elite discourse. The variety of cultural goods explained well the deviation of interests of ordinary people from the mainstream literature and culture, with intellectuals as protagonists. Meeting ordinary people’s recreational demands, popular cultural products

230 As Chen Pingyuan claimed, see Huang Ziping, Chen Pingyuan and Qian Liqun, ershi shiji zhongguo wenxue sanren tan (Three persons’ talk on 20th century Chinese literature) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1988), p. 11.
in the Chinese context at the initial stage of development, rather than restricting individualist creativity and productivity, helped individualism to flourish.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced some important terminologies used in this thesis – popular culture, official culture and elite culture. In order to discuss the intricate and always changing relationship between them, I provided a rather simplified description of these cultures. With a focus on the initial stage of the reforms around late 1970s and early 1980s, this chapter showed that official and elite cultures lost their dominant position and the emerging popular cultural works provided Chinese people an alternative to the cultural works provided by political and cultural elites. Later chapters, through the case study of Wang Shuo, will explore influences from conventional cultural forces in the popular cultural market and the incorporation of popular culture into political and elite cultural traditions.
CHAPTER 3

WANG SHUO AND THE "PLAYFUL" VANGUARDS

This chapter provides an analysis of the intricate relationship Wang Shuo’s works constructed with both the elite tradition of Chinese intellectuals and the political establishment. To achieve this goal, it explores the key generational characteristics of Wang Shuo and his contemporaries. I argue that the very notion of “play” (wan’r) characterises the attitude of Wang Shuo and many of his contemporaries. I suggest that the facetious rhetoric of “play” is the product of the great transition from Maoist China to Deng’s reform era, and of a shift in focus from socialist revolutionary ideology to the emergence of commercialised values. My argument is informed by Karl Mannheim’s 1928 definition of generation in combination with the notions of a “Cultural Revolution generation” and “self generation” deployed in the 1988 book The Fourth Generation (Disidai ren).232

Why use a generational analysis

In his classic essay, “The Problem of Generation” (1928), German sociologist Karl Mannheim argues that a generation consists of people of the same age confronted with some powerful historic or cultural events. Not all members of a generation see the event in the same way, but what holds them together is their common experience – the “stratification of experience” (Erlebnisschichtung) of the event.233 As a consequence of series of specific social and political movements in China, “generation” has been widely used in Chinese studies, for example, in relation to film studies, intellectual studies,

cultural and socio-political studies, although the division of generations has rarely been agreed upon. A popular conception of generational division appeared in the 1988 book *The Fourth Generation*, a sociological work published in Beijing. Working from Mannheim’s definition, although without explicit explanation, the book divides the people living in the 1980s in China into four generations, focusing on the influences of different historic events in forming the common consciousness of each generation and their role during the 1980s.

According to the book *The Fourth Generation*, the first generation grew up during the early decades of the 20th century. They were the creators of the People’s Republic. They had firm beliefs and staunch willpower. The second generation was educated and socialized between 1949 and 1966, and were heavily influenced by the first generation. Collectivism was the core of the value system of the second generation--they were willing to sacrifice their personal preferences for the collective good. They devoted themselves to the Party and were prepared to be the “dustless screws of the revolutionary machine.”

The third generation consisted of the Red Guards and the later “educated youth” sent to the countryside. They were socialised and matured during the tumultuous years of the

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235 Zhang and Cheng, *Disidai ren*. Xiaofeng Liu’s division of intellectuals into four generations shares some common ideas with this book.

236 Zhang and Cheng, *Disidai ren*, p. 79.
Cultural Revolution (1966-76). As the book emphasises, the common experience of the Cultural Revolution shaped the third generation in distinct ways. They experienced fanaticism then disillusionment, the hardship of rural life and the difficulties of readjusting to urban lives. Some of them became college students after many years of delay and actively took part in the Democracy Wall movement (minzhu qiang yundong) in the late 1970s and the trend of intellectual cultural reflection (wenhua fansi) in the 1980s.

In contrast to these first three generations that were the products of the “political era,” The Fourth Generation stresses that the following generation was formed by the “economic era.” As the book states, the fourth generation developed a strong self-consciousness mainly influenced by Deng’s economic reform and opening door to the world. Contrary to the preceding generations whose value systems derived from revolutionary altruism and devotion to Party authority, “self” (ziwo) appeared to be the centre of the fourth generation’s world outlook. They were thus called the “self generation” (ziwo de yidai).

The discussion of the third and fourth generations, which constitutes the youth of the 1980s, is relevant to this thesis. I agree with Zhang Yongjie and Cheng Yuanzhong on the categorisation and connotation of the “Cultural Revolution generation,” however, my delineation of the “self generation” is slightly different from theirs. I agree that Deng’s economic reforms were the prime historic events that “impinged upon a similarly ‘stratified’ consciousness” in the mind of the “self generation.” However, while the book The Fourth Generation groups the people born in the 1960s into the “self generation,” my understanding of the “self generation” consists of people who were born in and after the 1970s and thus received their education mainly after the
period of the Red Guard Movement. Education plays an important role in giving rise to a collective experience of people of similar age and therefore receiving education in the reform era should be considered a necessary criterion in a generational analysis. In ignoring this criterion, Zhang and Cheng’s analysis of the “self generation” is weakened. They categorise people who mainly received their primary and secondary education during the Cultural Revolution into “self generation,” such as university students and their larger cohort in the society in the 1980s. Therefore, their observation that this group of people were influenced heavily by the Cultural Revolution fails to support their argument that Deng’s economic reforms played defining role in shaping major characteristics of this group.

Nonetheless, the analysis in The Fourth Generation is valuable for demonstrating that major socio-political events occurring gave rise to distinct characteristics of different generations. I thus adopt the terms of the “Cultural Revolution generation” and “self generation” in my discussion. However, it is important to note that Wang Shuo and his contemporaries do not fit easily in either of these generations. They mainly received their primary and secondary education during the Cultural Revolution but matured in the reform era. A clear-cut generational division is impossible and Wang Shuo and his contemporaries appear to be both the last generation of Maoist era and the vanguards of the reform era. Comparing them with both the “Cultural Revolution generation” and the “self generation” is helpful in disclosing the unique characteristics of this group of people.

In analysing Wang Shuo we gain an insight into the characteristics of this group of people. By comparing the “Cultural Revolution generation” with the “self generation,” I argue that, although Wang Shuo appears to have much in common with the former
generation, in terms of his age and experience of the Cultural Revolution, he has in fact much more in common with the latter generation. The Cultural Revolution did not suppress the individual freedom of Wang Shuo as much as it did for the “Cultural Revolution generation” more generally; moreover, it gave him the opportunity for fearless adventure during the forthcoming reform era. Living in a period of extreme social transition where conflicting values and ideologies co-existed, “playing” appeared to be his main concern. He was thus a “playful” vanguard in the reforms.

In fact, a considerable portion of people active in China’s cultural scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s belonged to the group of which Wang Shuo was a leading representative. Many artists, especially directors, TV producers and actors, who were around the same age of Wang Shuo and later cooperated with him, had more or less similar experiences. The notion of “play” defines the main features of this group of people living in a transitional period, while carrying messages of the memories of the Cultural Revolution and Maoist militarism.

It is helpful to conduct a generational analysis on the Wang Shuo phenomenon because through examining the “playful” vanguards represented by Wang Shuo, it enables one to explore the impact upon the formation of the Wang Shuo phenomenon of both Maoist ideology and the emergent market values. In fact the two forces are mingled in forming the phenomenon. It is the transitional period where ideological systems and values were in a state of extreme flux that “impinges upon a similarly ‘stratified’ consciousness” of the vanguards.

A generational analysis on the Wang Shuo phenomenon is also helpful for clarifying the confusion among criticism on the phenomenon. As mentioned in Chapter 1, few critics
were able to agree on the importance or significance of Wang Shuo and the Wang Shuo phenomenon. One popular idea is to categorise Wang Shuo as a member of the new generation forged by the forces of the reform era. For example, Dai Jinhua asserts that Wang Shuo is a ‘tide-rider’ in the wake of post-Mao China’s consumerism, representing a type of “contemporary hero.”\footnote{Dai Jinhua, “Ideology, Wang Shuo, 1988,” China Screen} no. 4 (1989), p. 28. Wei Xiaolin views Wang Shuo and his fictional characters as the “economic people” (jingji ren).\footnote{Wei Xiaolin, “Bianyuanren: yizhong xin de yinmu zhurengong xingxiang” (Marginalised people: a new group of characters on screen), Yishu guangjiao (Wide-angle on Art) no. 2 (1990), p. 71.} A more pessimistic opinion was made by the film critic Zhong Chengxiang, who, in an official seminar on the film Samsara (1989) adapted from Wang Shuo’s novella “Rising to the Surface of the Ocean,” despises publicly all the films adapted from Wang Shuo’s stories as “[film] written by a riff-raff (pizi) for riff-raff; riff-raff read them to read about riff-raff; and in the end it has given birth to a whole new class of riff-raff.”\footnote{In an official seminar on Samsara (1989), a movie adapted from Wang Shuo’s novella Fuchu haimian. See Dianying yishu cankao ziliao, no. 1 (1989), p. 13.} In short, no matter whether the commentary was positive or negative in its appraisal, it focused primarily on the influences of the economic reforms on Wang Shuo and his cohort.

Meanwhile, a few critics have noted the impact of the Cultural Revolution and Maoist revolutionary ideology on Wang Shuo. For example, Wang Binbin states that Wang Shuo has been affected greatly by the “cadre culture” (dayuan wenhua), a special cultural product of the Cultural Revolution.\footnote{See Wang Binbin, “Zhongguo liumang wenhua zhi Wang Shuo zhengzhuan” (The true story of Wang Shuo: the inheritor of Chinese hooligan culture), Wang zhoukan website, http://www.anewfocus.com/yhf/yhf3-9-10.htm, visited on 1 April 2004.} Nonetheless, Wang Shuo does not belong to the “Cultural Revolution generation.” Barmé remarks on the subtle differences between the “Cultural Revolution generation” and people of Wang Shuo’s age. He classifies Wang Shuo and Zuo Shula, a famous journalist who wrote about Wang Shuo, as the “other Cultural Revolution generation” – “younger brothers and sisters [of Red Guards] who witnessed it all but grew up not disillusioned but dismissive, young people
who had never believed the strident rhetoric.” Yet, the focus of Barme’s analysis -- the “liumang” featured in Wang Shuo’s fiction that represents the uniqueness of China’s urban life around the 1990s – does not entail a generational analysis of Wang Shuo especially in relation to the following “self generation.” The term “other Cultural Revolution generation” is insightful and worth further discussion. By locating the Wang Shuo phenomenon in the comparison between the “Cultural Revolution generation” and the “self generation,” I suggest that the great controversy surrounding Wang Shuo and his works can be seen as the reflection of the transition.

The “Cultural Revolution Generation” and the “Self Generation”

In this section, I contextualise Wang Shuo and his contemporaries in an overview of the “Cultural Revolution generation” and the “self generation.” Adhering to Mannheim’s definition on generation, I focus on how common historic experiences gave birth to the main features of these two generations.

A. The “Cultural Revolution Generation”

As illustrated in the book The Fourth Generation, the “Cultural Revolution generation” (wenge yidai) consist of the Red Guards and the later “Educated Youth” sent to the countryside.242 “Red Guards” (hong weibing) and “Educated Youth” (zhishi qingnian) are also common labels for them. Following the call of Mao to mobilise young people to participate in class struggles, middle school students and university students constituted the main body of Red Guards. The subsequent “up to the mountains and down to the villages” (shangshan xiaxiang) movement brought about a huge resettlement of around 17 million urban youth in the countryside, with those aged eighteen dominating the

242 Zhang and Cheng, Disidai ren, pp. 94-108.
The majority of the people born between the 1940s and the 1950s were directly involved in the Cultural Revolution and constituted the main of the “Cultural Revolution generation.”

Scholars have long considered this particular cohort as a discrete generation because of their unique experience during the Cultural Revolution, such as the participation in the Red Guard Movement and the Rustication Movement. As the sheer volume of events in this generation makes it impossible to attempt a comprehensive survey within the scope of one section, I single out only the main features of this generation influenced by the historic event of the Cultural Revolution.

The “Cultural Revolution generation” was the first generation in China to grow up under socialism. The main characteristics of this generation derived from its close association with politics. The majority of this generation was born when the Chinese Communist ideal was established as supreme rule. Therefore, since the early years of their education, they were inculcated with the ideas that Chairman Mao and the Party represented the directors for their personal path, and that actually, they should dedicate themselves to the construction of socialism. Their enthusiasm toward the country and the future was inspired by Mao’s words, “The world is yours.... You young people, full

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243 Chang-tu Hu et al., China: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture (New Haven: HRAF Press, 1960), p.419. As Hu points out, eighteen is the common age of graduation from senior and vocational middle schools in China. Youth turning eighteen years old were mainly born around the late 1940s and early 1950s.

244 This generation has received much critical attention and has been the topic of several book-length studies. To name just a few: Thomas P. Bernstein, Up to the Mountains and down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Anita Chan, Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985); Ziping Luo, A Lost Generation: China under the Cultural Revolution (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990); Laifong Leung, Morning Sun: Interview with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994). I refer the reader to these critics’ insightful discussion for details.
of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you.”

When they became teenagers or were in their twenties, their enthusiasm for the nation and their admiration for Mao were exploited by political leaders for youth mobilisation. With the advent of the Cultural Revolution, Mao assigned them with the vanguard role and extensive political power. Although the motives of the young people who joined the Red Guards varied, the majority of them were convinced by the slogan “to rebel is justified” (zaofan youli). They took violence as an expression of revolution.

They roamed the whole country carrying out the so-called Mass exchange of Revolutionary Experiences (da chuanlian). They destroyed the “Four Olds” (sijiu – old ideology, old culture, old habits, and old customs); raided the homes of the “enemies of the people”; humiliated, beat, and even killed “counter-revolutionaries” including their teachers and parents.

Ignorant of the power struggles in their hierarchical ranks, the majority of Red Guards were manipulated by a few to further their own political aims.

From the late 1960s, as a way to quickly ameliorate severe social problems caused by the Red Guard movement, such as unemployment and factional fighting, but also to disperse remnant factions that derived from the movement, the Party started sending young people to the countryside. During the following decade 17 million young people – nearly an entire generation of urban youths – were sent to rural areas for a period of time ranging from one or two years to a lifetime. Sending urban educated youth to work temporarily or permanently in the countryside had been practiced in

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245 That was what Mao said to a group of Chinese students studying in Moscow on 17 November 1957, see Mao, “Zai Mosike huijian woguo liuxuesheng he shixisheng shi de tanhua” (A talk to Chinese students and trainees in Moscow), collected in Maozhu xi zai sulan de yanlim (Chairman Mao’s words and activities in the Soviet Union) (Beijing: Renmin ribao chubanshe, 1957), pp. 14-15.

246 The interviews conducted by Laifong Leung display the varying movies behind student participation in the Cultural Revolution. While some joined the Red Guards in response to Mao’s call to overthrow the corrupt bureaucratic class, some just joined for free travel. See Laifong Leung, Morning Sun: Interview with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation.

247 Laifong Leung, ibid., p.xxviii.

248 ibid., p.xxii.

China before 1949, in colonial areas such as Hong Kong and many other countries including Cambodia and Vietnam.²⁵⁰ However, the so-called “Rustication Movement” during the Cultural Revolution was remarkable in its unprecedented scale and manipulative nature. After Mao issued his directive on 23 December 1968 in the People’s Daily (Renmin Ribao), propagandistic slogans such as “show your red heart by going to the villages” and “the countryside is a vast area, where one can be of great use” became widely used in various media. Many young people were encouraged to believe that there was nothing more revolutionary than going to “establish roots” in the countryside, to transform the countryside and to remold their worldview.²⁵¹

The impact of this rural settlement on Red Guards was profound. Whether they pleaded to go or were forced to be settled in the rural areas, urban educated youth were soon shocked by the poor and harsh life in the countryside in both physical and psychological terms. As a spokesperson for the Shanghai Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) disclosed, rural life for most educated youth meant hard physical labour, spartan living conditions, very low wages and personal success or failure being dependent on the whims of the cadres.²⁵² Not infrequently, no matter how hard they worked, educated youth could not have survived without support from their families in the city. The corruption of local cadres, lack of leisure activities, suppression of desires and desexualisation were also severe. Moreover, their relations with the peasants or local cadres were tense.

²⁵⁰ Some were unwilling but were ruthlessly forced by local cadres to go. See Lynn T. White III, “The Road to Urumchi: Approved Institutions in Search of Attainable Goals during the Pre-1968 Rustication from Shanghai”, The China Quarterly 79 (September 1979), p. 481 and p.485.
²⁵¹ Laifong Leung, Morning Sun: Interview with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation, p. xxiii.
Without further instruction from the central government, many of the “rusticated youth” began to feel like they had been betrayed and as a result their revolutionary ideals declined through the later stages of the Cultural Revolution. The feeling of being abandoned by the leaders spread among those subjected to “rustication.” As Liang Xiaosheng states,

From the beginning, we had thought that Chairman Mao was always concerned about us. We even heard a rumor that Chairman Mao wanted to introduce a rotational system under which the zhiqing [rusticated educated youth] would be replaced every few years. However, this did not materialize. More and more zhiqing were being sent there, but very few could leave. Those who left were the children of high-ranking cadres and those with connections. Everybody felt discouraged and abandoned.\(^{253}\)

The feeling of betrayal was intensified by increasing dissatisfaction with the fact that children of high-ranking cadres were able to return to cities, especially when central policies swung after Lin Biao’s death. Many former Red Guards began to question the true purpose of the Cultural Revolution and their role in it. The disillusionment toward the communist ideal and revolutionary heroism was strengthened by the deterioration of their own morale when they scrambled to get back to the cities.\(^{254}\) Some youth with senior middle school or college degrees were allowed to return home during the later years of the Cultural Revolution.\(^{255}\) Many others started looking for ways to escape through “pulling strings” if they had connections, trying bribery to get medical excuses from the doctors, or ingratiating themselves with the cadres for exit permits.\(^{256}\)

The change of leadership after Mao’s death brought about a re-evaluation of the past decade. However, for the “rusticated youth” abandoned by Mao, the post-Mao reality was still severe. In 1981, the Deng regime officially reversed the verdict on the Cultural

\(^{253}\) Leifong Leung, Morning Sun: Interview with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation, p. xxviii.
\(^{255}\) Ibid., p.xxxiv.
\(^{256}\) Thomas B. Gold, “Back to the City: the Return of Shanghai’s Educated Youth,” p. 761.
Revolution, denouncing it as "an appalling catastrophe suffered by all our people" that was responsible for the "most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state and the people."\textsuperscript{257} Many party cadres and intellectuals that had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution resumed their positions. However, the problems of educated youth, to a large extent, remained unresolved. It was such a crucial event that the majority of the high-ranking political leaders attended the "National Working Conference on Educated Youth Who Went Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside" held in Beijing from 31 October to 10 December 1978. However, the conclusion of the conference, instead of criticising, reaffirmed the Rustication Movement as a means of contributing to the socialist construction.\textsuperscript{258} The conference acknowledged certain problems in the programme,\textsuperscript{259} which were attributed to the "Gang of Four." While suggesting that the main solutions to these problems could be achieved by setting up collective enterprises in the countryside to assimilate unemployed youth, the party left most of the details to the localities to work out.\textsuperscript{260}

However, local authorities struggled to handle the severe situation worsen by the fact that a new cohort were graduating from middle school and stepping into the society.

Responding to Mao's call, nearly a whole generation was sent to the countryside. A decade later, they were told that the political campaign for which they sacrificed their youth and forfeited their futures had been a mistake. In addition, little redress could be

\textsuperscript{257} See "Guanyi jianggao yilai dang de ruogan lishiwenti de jiery" (Resolution on certain questions in the history of our Party since the founding of the People's Republic of China), which was passed through during the Sixth Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP held in from 27-29 June 1981. For the report on this in English, see, "Quarterly Chronicle and Documentation (April-June 1981)", The China Quarterly 87 (September 1981), pp. 547-549; for detailed analysis, see David S. G. Goodman, "The Sixth Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP: Look Back in Anger?" The China Quarterly 87 (September 1981), pp. 518-527.

\textsuperscript{258} The Rustication Movement was seen as a means to increase agricultural productivity, raise educational standards in rural areas and at the same time alleviate consumption pressures in the city. See Thomas B. Gold, "Back to the City: the Return of Shanghai’s Educated Youth," p. 756.

\textsuperscript{259} Such as the unsystematic way in implementing policy, which led to manpower imbalances, increased burden on the peasantry and blocked employment and educational opportunities for "rusticated youth."

\textsuperscript{260} Thomas B. Gold, "Back to the City: the Return of Shanghai’s Educated Youth," p. 756.
expected from the new regime, which set its priority on rapid modernisation. The majority of the “rusticated youth” tried every possible means to return to the city. However, even after they came back to the city, many found it difficult and unrewarding to re-adapt to urban life.

Many educated youth found their new lives back in city no better than their lives in the Cultural Revolution. The modernisation project of the new regime required personnel with technical competence. However, among the “rusticated youth,” except for the older ones who had graduated from middle school or universities before the Cultural Revolution, most missed out on obtaining a higher education during their ten years wasted in rural areas. With few technical skills, and being at an age considered too old to be retrained, they largely became unskilled or semi-skilled workers. However, with hundreds of thousands of youth returning to the city, even jobs in factories were not easy to find. In addition, a large number of younger people graduating from middle school were also waiting for job assignments. As revealed in an “internal” report by Hu Yaobang not intended for publication, that there were some 14 million unemployed youth in urban China in 1982 and that the number would probably increase in the foreseeable future. Apart from difficulties in obtaining jobs and consequent financial dependence on families, more than often, “rusticated youth” faced with problems including marriage, health care and housing.

Their disillusionment and the depth of their grievances made some of the rusticated youth re-think the nature of the socialist regime. From late November 1978, many “rusticated youth” joined the Democracy Wall Movement to voice their concerns and

262 Beverley Hooper, “The Youth Problem,” Graham Young ed., China: Dilemmas of Modernisation (London: Croomhelm, 1985), p.211. As Hooper states, it was said that Hu gave the report to the Party’s Central Committee Secretariat. For the detail of the report, see Issues and Studies, February 1983, pp.78-85.
many became the main force of this movement. By this time, many were in their thirties and no longer young. Their experiences in the countryside and the difficulties they experienced in returning to the city convinced them that they had been used and then discarded. Disillusioned and alienated, they took the 1978-79 thaw as an opportunity to air their grievances. They disclosed the suffering caused by the Cultural Revolution, protested the policy of sending youth to the countryside and criticised the privileges of the cadres. Moreover, they began to reflect on the nature of the Cultural Revolution, their role in it, and more importantly, the legal system within the state and the party through which these injustices took place and such ill-founded policies were implemented. As shown by the posters attached to the wall in Xidan district of Beijing, and articles published in circulated journals, the demonstrators analysed and criticised Maoist policy and called for a more democratic government. They also called for legal reforms that would protect human rights.

The above account briefly outlines the experience of the “Cultural Revolution generation” and the direct influences on this generation from the unique political movement -- the Cultural Revolution -- in China’s history. Psychologically, they variously experienced fanaticism and idealism, and then moved to disillusionment, discontent and even cynicism. Precipitating these psychological shifts were the grim reality of their experience of the hardship of rural life, the difficulties of returning to the city and finally the challenge to adjust to Deng’s era of economic reforms. Their experience during the Cultural Revolution remained as the cause of many of the

264 The Democracy Movement demanded democracy and individual rights and therefore endangered the legitimacy of the new leadership and was soon clamped down by Deng Xiaoping. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping announced that the democracy movement was disrupting the stability and unity of the country and clamped down on it.
concerns of this generation even after the Cultural Revolution. For example, experience during the Cultural Revolution was the main subject matter of the “scar literature” (shanghen wenxue), the “literature of educated youth” (zhi qing wenxue) and literary works in the “cultural reflection” (wenhua fansi) in the 1970s and 1980s, which attracted great attention and received large response among the generation.

B. The “Self Generation”

A more forward-looking and active social force emerged from within the generation molded by Deng’s economic era. Contrary to the “Cultural Revolution generation” which was strongly associated with the “political era,” the “self generation” was formed by the “economic era.” While the majority of the “Cultural Revolution generation” were already in their thirties and forties in the 1980s, the “self generation” constituted the main body of youth in the 1980s and 1990s. The reform process concentrated on the expansion of the free market within China and it is this process that had most influence on the formation of the values held by the “self generation.” Instead of patriotic, collectivist and Communist values, a strong self-consciousness became rooted in their heart, “self” (ziwo) was the centre of their world outlook and the starting point of their values. I will illustrate this point through a discussion of the “Shekou Storm” (Shekou fengbao) in the context of general observations about changes in values held by youth in the 1980s and 1990s.

Situated in Shenzhen during 1988, the “Shekou Storm” represents the new trends in thinking among youths influenced by the economic reforms. The Storm initiated from an incident in Shekou, an industrial district in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone.

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265 Zhang and Cheng, Disidai ren, pp. 36-59 and pp. 189-198.
266 Ibid., pp.189-274.
(SEZ) of Guangdong province, an immediate outcome and symbol of the urban economic reform initiated by Deng Xiaoping’s regime.\footnote{268} During the 1980s, young people were the driving force in the development of the southern Special Economic Zones (SEZ). They were attracted to the SEZs by its image of adventure and independence. In 1988 of around 26,000 employees working in the Shenzhen district, 80 per cent of them were young workers.\footnote{269}

The “Shekou Storm” incident was primarily a conflict between the official ideological educators who adhered to socialist ideologies and altruism, and the “self-generation” whose value system was centred on “self.” It happened at a symposium where about 70 Shekou youths were organised by the local branch of the Communist Youth League (CYL) to communicate with three youth educators from Beijing-based China Research Centre for the Ideological Education of Youth.\footnote{270} Rather than passive listeners to be educated, youths in Shekou actively engaged in conversation and discussion with ideological educators. Different understandings of the term “gold diggers” (taojinzhe) induced heated debates. The phrase “gold diggers” was used by youth educators to refer to those who “had come to Shenzhen with the sole objective of tapping the wealth created by others.”\footnote{271} According to them, “gold diggers” were absolutely inferior to “socialist builders”: the former were capitalist speculators and self-seeking pioneers, making use of reforms and the special policies of SEZs to take the wealth created by others; the latter were socialist contributors under the new official policy of economic reforms, with the intention to contribute a large portion of their incomes to the state to

\footnote{268}{The proposal of setting up the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone was approved on the 13th meeting of China’s National People’s Congress on August 26, 1980.}

\footnote{269}{Luo Xu, “The ‘Shekou Storm’: Changes in the Mentality of Chinese Youth Prior to Tiananmen.”}


\footnote{271}{Luo Xu, “The ‘Shekou Storm’: Changes in the Mentality of Chinese Youth Prior to Tiananmen,” p.542.}
be spent on public welfare. It is obvious that the mode of their thinking follows the dichotomies of collectivist and individualist, socialist and capitalist, altruist and egoist upon which state political ideology had revolved around.

However, Shekou youth saw nothing wrong with “gold diggers” who tried to get rich through hard work and legal channels. They insisted that people had the right to enjoy the money they earned through hard work and should not be obliged to give the money away, even to the nation. Instead of subscribing to collectivism and devotion to the state, they stressed the importance of individuality and defended individuals’ right to enjoy their private life. From this point of view, they refused to differentiate between “capitalist gold diggers” and “socialist builders” and displayed their strong dislike of the discrimination against “gold diggers.” Some Shekou youth identified themselves as “gold diggers” by stating that they came to Shekou with the explicit motivation of making money. Nonetheless, as they stated, their “egoistic” activities indirectly contributed to the building of Shekou and the nation. They inquired why people could not work with the explicit motivation of making money, which could potentially bring about altruistic consequences.272

Due to the nation’s economic reforms and the swift pace of its social change, young people gradually abandoned “the socialist man” ethos in favour of notions of “economic man.”273 Material concerns and individual preference were emphasised to replace socialist collectivistic requirements. Shekou youth frankly and directly expressed their dislike of the educators’ hollow propaganda speech and refuted their “superficial” mode of thinking following the dichotomies of collectivist and individualist, traditional and

modern. They disclosed a trend of being less interested in ideological issues. As one young person said in the symposium, “There is definitely no market for your people to come here to propagandise. Workers in the foreign-invested or jointly-invested enterprises will never listen to what you have to say. We are here to make money. There are no such things as ideals and making contributions to the state! Propaganda work in the newspaper carries little truth.”

As the Shekou incident reveals, the youth in the late 1980s, with their major concerns shifted to the “self,” were largely already out of the shadow of the Cultural Revolution. The trend of material appreciation and individual-oriented values emerged and has prevailed among the “self generation” since the late 1980s. Self-consciousness was the major cause of what Stanley Rosen defined as the “decollectivization of morality” among youth. Later, when these issues were discussed in the national domain, even those not supportive of “gold diggers,” were unwilling to criticise people for doing so, considering such behavior a private matter. With the “self” as the centre of their mentality, these young people became increasingly alienated from dictatorial discourses with which the party-state tried to indoctrinate them. As observed by Ann Ping Chin in relation to youth in the 1989 movement:

In 1989, the yearning for self-liberation was still burning in the hearts of the young Chinese, but a supreme authority figure was missing, and the students in the streets of Beijing had no desire to surrender themselves to anyone or anything to save a total abandonment to freedom...

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As China maintained its policy of economic reforms and accelerated the pace of marketisation, young people in the following decade retained major characteristics of the “self generation,” with material appropriation and self-development at the centre of their lives. In addition, the new market-driven competition made them increasingly concerned about self-development so as to secure opportunities. The free market mechanisms provided young people more free choices and pressured them to adjust themselves to the rules of the new game. Their further disenchantment from the Maoist collectivist and revolutionary values are revealed by their lack of interest in challenging the authoritarian power. Nor were they interested in criticising the emerging system operated by market mechanisms. Rather, preferring the sense of autonomy and choice the new system offered, they were willing to change themselves to adapt to competitive pressures.

Wang Shuo and the “Playful” Vanguards

A brief account of the “Cultural Revolution generation” and “self generation” reveals that the historical events of the Cultural Revolution and Deng’s economic reforms did indeed play a decisive role in shaping the two generations. However, a certain number of youth in the 1980s and 1990s experienced the Cultural Revolution as children but were socialised and matured primarily in Deng’s era. They were mainly younger siblings of the Red Guards and the educated youth sent to the countryside. Their experiences were a combination of the two generations and their mental characteristics extensive research and provides insight on this topic in her book. see Chan, Children of Mao (London: The MacMillan Press; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985).

appeared to have been influenced by the social transition from Maoist era to Deng’s reforms.

Within this group of people, some appeared to have more resemblance to the “Cultural Revolution generation” in terms of their experience in psychological shifts – from fanaticism and idealism to disillusionment, discontent and even cynicism. A typical example is shown in a letter from Pan Xiao, a pseudonym of two youths, to the editors of *China Youth*. The letter appeared in the May issue of the journal and initiated a great discussion on the meanings of life from May 1980 to March 1981. David Ownby has provided insightful discussion on the letter and the changes in values of Chinese youth before and after the Cultural Revolution. What I want to point out here is that, as represented by “Pan Xiao,” some youths in the 1980s, although not directly involved in the Red Guard and Rustication movements, did follow a psychological trajectory from socialist idealism and revolutionary fanaticism to ideological disillusionment and alienation. Influenced by Maoist ideological education in their earlier years, they were obsessed with finding a purpose that would give meaning to their lives. Their suffering arose mainly from the contradiction between their Maoist idealism and the post-Mao reality.

Some other members of this group appeared to bear a resemblance to the “Cultural Revolution generation” in term of their age and experience in the historical event, but developed stronger links to the “self generation.” Wang Shuo was a typical example of this group and I use him and others to illustrate that they developed strong sense of the “self” and were playful vanguards in the economic reforms. Although only a few years younger than the Red Guards, the influence of the Cultural Revolution on Wang Shuo

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and his cohorts was considerably different from that on the “Cultural Revolution generation.” These people were also taught to be “good students of Chairman Mao,” loyal “children” of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), hardworking builders of socialism, and devoted believers in communism in their earlier years. However, in the turbulent and, sometimes, ridiculous reality of the Cultural Revolution, these words often sounded hollow. The fanaticism observed in the behaviour of the Red Guards had rarely penetrated in the minds of their younger sisters and brothers, who while singing the “Internationale,” could live for kicks and sex. They rarely believed the strident rhetoric.

For this younger group, the chaotic experience of the Cultural Revolution, however, meant less suppression. Their personae of ironic play, fearless adventure and independent pursuit prospered in the chaos. This is reflected in the artistic works of Wang Shuo and others who claimed that these works truthfully depict their personal experiences. For example, in Wang Shuo’s novella Looking Beautiful, the slogans, politics and heroism that the “Cultural Revolution generation” admired are farcically twisted by their younger siblings. One episode of the book describes how a primary school’s principal and teachers are communicating Mao’s launch of the Cultural Revolution to the students. For Red Guards this could be a crucial moment in their lives as it represents the call from Chairman Mao for their participation in a significant revolution. In contrast, the students, the people of Wang Shuo’s age, described in the book, either chatted or took a nap. The protagonist Fang Qiangqiang is awakened by the principal’s suddenly raised voice calling on all students to swear an oath. Unaware of

260 Laifong Leung, Morning Sun: Interview with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation, p. xviii.
282 As mentioned in Chapter 1, Wang Shuo chooses “realistic literature” to characterise his writing style and claims that he truthfully writes down his life and the lives of his friends in his stories.
what is happening, he follows all the others shouting a long sentence: “we must carry out the great proletarian Cultural Revolution launched by Chairman Mao to the end, even at the expense of our blood and lives” (women yiding yao ba Mao zhuxi qinshou fadong de, weidai de wuchanjieji wuchan jiejie wenhua da gemin shisi jinxing daodi). However, for primary school students the slogan was too long and too complicated, with too many unfamiliar phrases. The vow was thus transformed into incoherent, chaotic and childish babble: “we must, make Chairman Mao started by ourselves, the great, the proletarian, the cultural revolution, to carry out at the expense of our lives, never give up without achieving the end” (Women yiding yao, ba Maozhuxi qinshou fadong, de weida, de wuchanjiejie, wenhua da gemin, shishi jinxing daodi, buda mudi, shibu baxiu). Pandemonium resulted when thousands of students tried to shout it out together. Most of them, like the boy Fang Qiangqiang, did not understand the meaning at all and just screamed along with the others. Furthermore, the boy felt the urge to urinate and rushed to the toilet. All the sloganeering and passion thus ended in profanity.283

There are other artistic works, such as the movie, In the Heat of the Sun directed by Jiang Wen, that provide a distinct picture of the Cultural Revolution.284 In these works, the Cultural Revolution is often described as a frolic, in the mischievous and idiosyncratic memories of the “playful” younger sisters and brothers of the Red Guards. This is in great contrast with the “scar literature” (shanghen wenxue) genre, “rusticated youth literature” (zhiqing wenxue), films and TV serials adapted from these literary

284 The movie was adapted from Wang Shuo’s novellas, Wild Beasts (Dongwu xiong meng). Jiang Wen, born in 1963, is one of the most popular Chinese actors and directors in the 1980s and 1990s.
works, in which the “Cultural Revolution generation” artists described events in terms of personal suffering and a national ordeal.

Wang Shuo and Jiang Wen are outstanding representatives of this group since they grew up during the Cultural Revolution but can not be categorised as the “Cultural Revolution generation.” Although they were only a few years younger, Wang Shuo and Jiang Wen did not experience the direct shock felt by the “Cultural Revolution generation” as a result of the so called “one-hundred-eighty-degree shift” of Mao’s policy. They did not share the rupture felt by the “Cultural Revolution generation” as the latter moved in an instant from being highly valued to being totally abandoned. This different experience makes it possible for Wang Shuo, Jiang Wen and their cohorts to make fun of their past and China’s immediate history in an irreverent manner. In contrast, the “Cultural Revolution generation” performed a serious, critical re-examination of their past against the background of the Chinese Communist system. Although many of the “Cultural Revolution generation” had become cynical about the revolution, they could not simply dismiss politics the way that many of their younger brothers and sisters did.

Clearly, Wang and his cohort cannot be categorised in the “Cultural Revolution generation.” Yet, can they belong to the “self generation” formed by Deng’s economic reforms? Socialised mainly in an era when Deng’s economic reforms were unfolding, this group of people did develop attributes in common with the “self generation,” such as the pursuit of materiality and a strong consciousness of the “self.” To a certain degree, they had more similarities with the “self generation” than with the “Cultural Revolution generation. However, the “self” consciousness they developed was engendered mainly

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285 Such as the TV serial *Idle times* (*Cuotuo suiyue*) (1982). The novel *Cuotuo suiyue* written by Ye Xin was published by Zhongguo qinnian chubanshe in 1982, and then was adapted into a four part TV serial by China Central Television.
by chaotic surroundings and lack of restriction rather than by market mechanisms with their associated rules and disciplines. They were the bearers of the Maoist tradition even as they participated in the business world, they were aware of the contrast between the social reality and the past Maoist era. A striking feature of the post-Mao reform era is its distortion of the socialist ideology that was imposed on Wang Shuo and his contemporaries during the Maoist period. As the protagonist Fang Yan in “Playing for Thrills” (Wan de jiu shi xintiao) (1989) asks: “Whose world is this? (Shui de tianxia),” and answers himself, “Capitalism has been established (Ziben zhuyi cheng le).”\(^{286}\) The line is a joke, as China remains a socialist society, but like much of Wang Shuo’s humour, it carries a serious undercurrent. The thirst for money and material entertainment is in contrast to the revolutionary disdain of capitalism; the pursuit of the self and individuality parodies the communist notion of “serving others with heart and soul” (Quanxin quanyi wei renmin fuwu). Living in this chaotic period in which mass social psychology was in transition, Wang Shuo and many of his contemporaries chose laughter and satire to express their feelings. This resonated with the feelings of a wide range of Chinese youth and contributed to the popularity of Wang Shuo and others’ works.

The difference between the playful vanguards and the “Cultural Revolution generation” and the “self generation” is shown by their different approaches to employment. During the time when the private-sector economy was first permitted to develop, Wang Shuo and his cohort with cadre family background quickly embraced it while the “Cultural Revolution generation” remained hesitant. Yet at the same time, Wang Shuo’s group is different from the majority of the “self generation” due to their adventures during the

period when the Maoist employment system collapsed and the new system was still in the experimental stage.

As mentioned briefly earlier, unemployment was a severe problem for the “Cultural Revolution generation” after the death of Mao, which also confronted their younger siblings. From 1977 to 1980, an average of about 7 million young people reached job age each year. Among them, only 8 per cent (560,000) went to institutions of higher education and technical or vocational schools. Exclusive to those who joined the army or went to the countryside, there were still about 3 to 5 million young people waiting for the state to assign them jobs every year. Due to the then labour management system, no institutions or enterprises were permitted to recruit workers or staff members directly; and people out of jobs were not allowed to seek employment on their own. Many of them had to wait for the state to assign them jobs. Meanwhile, the urban economy in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution was in straitened circumstances and already suffered from overstaffing. From the late 1970s and into the 1980s unemployment was thus a severe social problem and the proportion of youths awaiting job allocation was considerable. Having no legally permitted outlets to earn money but with plenty of time on their hands, youths during this period became a burden on their parents and further, threatened social order. Some turned to crime as a way to get consumer goods they desired, such as new clothes, tape recorders, and other commodities appearing on store shelves.

Partly as a solution to solve various social problems including unemployment, the state permitted the development of the “urban non-agricultural private-sector economy.” New policies were implemented to legitimate private business in an officially socialist society. To become wealthy or to pursue materialistic goals was no longer reprehensible. Nonetheless, due to the long-standing ambivalence toward private business, former Red Guards were loath to join individual operators. However, young people, and especially young people from cadre families who were closer to the political stage, mocked the emptiness and hypocrisy of socialism. In addition, their privileged status enabled them to anticipate policy changes in the early stage of the economic era and to embrace the money-making ideology. As Dorothy Solinger observes, there emerged a stratum of people exclusively pursuing business who were inextricably entangled with cadredom. An official stratum, including PLA soldiers and the higher ranks of the Party, was increasingly drawn into commercialism.

Wang Shuo’s experience further illustrates how these playful vanguards took advantage of their official background for profit. From the early 1980s, Wang Shuo and his childhood friends with similar cadre background engaged in business activities. The cadre background and working experience with the PLA enabled Wang Shuo and his cohort to discard revolutionary ideology more easily than the “Cultural Revolution

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291 Actions against private-sector activity took place since its appearance in the cities after 1980, such as the anti-spiritual pollution campaign carried out through 1983 into 1984, and the campaign against bourgeois liberalization at the end of the 1987.

292 According to Gold, in 1980, the proportion of former Red Guards and school-leavers together only constituted 4.3 per cent of individual operators. The bulk of individual operator were, however, retirees and socially idle persons including people released from prison and reform-through-labor and education programs, the disabled, workers laid-off from their jobs, and peasants who had entered the cities over the years and never left. However, in a couple of years, opening a business became more and more attractive to job-waiting youth. Thomas B. Gold, “Urban private Business and Social Change,” pp. 171-2.


"generation" and the majority of ordinary Chinese, and they embraced the market more willingly and adventurously. Graduating from middle school by the end of the Cultural Revolution, Wang Shuo followed the usual road for young people from cadre families and joined the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). After three-month intensive training stationed in Shandong, he chose to join the media corps (yihu bing) and was sent to Qingdao with the North Sea Fleet. During this time, Wang Shuo had his first story Deng dai (Waiting) (1978) published in People’s Liberation Army Literature and Art and he was given a position on the magazine. He then used his position to join his friends to engage in illegal trading. Together with his childhood friends, he started the “black marketeer” (daoye) profession. They traveled to south China to purchase electronic equipment such as radios and TV sets, and then resold them in the north for a profit.295

Taking risks in the initial stage of reforms, Wang Shuo’s personal experience after demobilisation parallels major steps of the development of urban reforms – the smashing of the “iron rice bowl” (tiefanwan) and the rise of self-employed householders (getihu). The “iron rice bowl” referred to jobs in state enterprises in China, since they were considered to symbolise stability and security. Wang Shuo received an “iron rice bowl” in 1980 when he was tired of waiting for promotion and left the army. As a demobbed soldier, he was allocated a position in a state-owned pharmacy in Beijing. In 1984, Wang Shuo resigned from this job, thus throwing away the “security of a government position.” At that time, working in state enterprises meant workers had permanent positions and guaranteed inexpensive housing and food, free medical services, and public education. At the same time, however, the “iron rice bowl” also represented the unchanging, heavy hopelessness that many felt about the chances of improving their living and working conditions. While the “iron rice bowl” stood for

295 This experience is reflected in Wang Shuo’s novella Xiangpi ren (Rubber Man) (1986).
equality within Chinese society, it became more and more apparent that this meant an "equality of poverty."206

As recalled by Wang Shuo, the unskilled work in the pharmacy store was boring. He had little to do and was paid poorly. He thus spent most of his time lolling around, reading newspapers, chasing women and engaging in personal business. In 1982, when a number of his friends were arrested in a crackdown on economic criminals, he was involved and fined 1,000 yuan. Without money to pay the fine, he was ordered to submit 30 yuan every month from his salary of 36 yuan. He thus quit his job. During the early stages of economic reform, with the expanding job market and "privatisation" values emerging, smashing the "iron rice bowl" became possible and soon turned into a trend. Wang Shuo embraced the emerging market, engaged in private entrepreneurial activities, and became part of the first group of self-employed householders.

These vanguards of the market reform era had many similarities with the "self generation" in terms of material appreciation, but they lacked the desire of the "self generation" to adapt themselves to the requirements of the market and to develop professional skills. In fact, in the early stage of China’s economic reform, the market was deficient in legal restrictions and rules. Even the boundaries between a legal businessman and an illegal "back marketeers" (daoye) were often blurred. Wang Shuo pointed this out directly through one of his literary figures:

Many private entrepreneurs amassed their great fortune during the chaotic economic situation in the 1980s. When new economic regulations were issued [in the 1990s], these entrepreneurs immediately announced that they would abide by them. Thereupon, their enterprises became legal.207

207 Ai ni mei shangliang (Loving You Absolutely) (Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 1992), p. 93. The story is the literary script on which the TV serial was produced.
While the self generation relied more on their business abilities, Wang Shuo and the "playful" vanguards were more inclined to take risks and to test the limit of Party policies.

The Notion "Play"

Following the analysis of the relationship of Wang Shuo and his contemporaries to the "Cultural Revolution generation" and the "self generation," this section focuses on the notion "play" to further explore the group's major characteristics. As Barme observes, the expression "play" was a catchword in the late 1980s in nearly every activity "from dabbling in philosophy to speculating on the stock market." It was the transition from a planned economy to a market economy and from authoritarian rule of revolutionary ideology to post-Maoist ideological turmoil that presented opportunities for expression of this playful sense of boredom. During this transitional period, revolutionary ideals and beliefs were overthrown while new market mechanisms and norms were not yet well established. It was this chaotic transition that functioned as the formative force in shaping the collective characteristics of Wang Shuo and many of his contemporaries.

The popularity of the expression "play" during the late 1980s and early 1990s indicates a frivolous attitude toward life prevailing among many people. There is no doubt that Wang Shuo was one of the outstanding artists who grasped this sentiment and expressed it through his writing and public behaviour. He was one of the first writers in contemporary China whose writing dallied with the fad of "play." This can be seen even by a glance of the titles of his stories, such as "Playing for thrills" (Wan de jiushi xintiao) and "Play highly, die fast" (Guo ba yin jiu si).

288 Barme, In the Red, p. 76.
299 Jing Wang, High Culture Fever, p. 44.
This playful attitude characterising Wang Shuo and many of his contemporaries is an expression of their dual relationship with the Mao era – rebellion and reliance. On the one hand, as represented by many artistic works created by this group of people including political pop (also known as zhengzhi bopu) and Wang Shuo’s writing, social and cultural conventions prevalent during the Maoist era were treated in a flippant and irreverent way. For example, political pop usually combined images of Mao and contemporary consumerism and Wang Shuo was known for his mischievous mockeries of socialist revolutionary language. To a large extent, some critics thus considered Wang Shuo and other artists as rebels against Maoist tradition. On the other hand, however, due to their collective memories of the Cultural Revolution and the Red China led by Mao, these alleged rebels had actually been influenced and restricted by Maoist traditions in many ways. For instance, Wang Shuo and many political pop artists mocked Maoist ideologies through drawing heavily on Maoist language and icons.

Being the last generation to bear strong links with the Maoist era, they were a group of half-hearted rebels. To a certain degree they questioned the revolutionary ideology and Maoist conventions. However, they were too weak to resist these conventions completely due to the lack of an alternative system. In this regard they were not “rebels,” but rather “mischief makers” (wanzhu, also known as the title of one of Wang Shuo’s stories).

The development of the commodity economy provided fertile conditions for the notion of “play” to emerge in Wang Shuo and his contemporaries. Their outwardly rebellious posture hides their intimate relationship with Deng’s regime. Although dramatically changing the course of the revolution set by Mao, the new leadership under Deng...
Xiaoping did not abandon socialism, but rather they modified it, and importantly, they retained the dominant role of the Communist Party. Therefore, the mischief makers’ mockery and satire of socialist ideology appeared on the surface to be “rebellious.” However, it was the nascent marketplace advocated by Deng that became the platform for these young people to take their complete shape. An outstanding aspect of the playful attitude of Wang Shuo and many of his contemporaries was their undisguised pursuit of wealth, which complimented well Deng’s slogan: “to be wealthy is glorious.” While Wang Shuo and many other mischief makers claimed that they did not care about anything, they actually took monetary concerns very seriously. In fact, in a country that was just stepping out of desperate poverty, their public declaration of material desires echoed the concerns of many ordinary people. This feature is the key to understanding the appeal of these playful vanguards’ to ordinary people. This pursuit of materialism, shared by both the Party and the playful masters, functioned as a link between the two. Even though the mischief makers often mocked the regime, equally they often made compromises with it in order that their common interests would not be threatened.

Many people regarded Deng’s reform agenda as individualism replacing collectivism and so legitimising their pursuit of individual material well-being. However, their consciousness was “unrestrained selfishness rather than the regulated selfishness characteristic of individualism.”

As noted above, the individual concerns featuring the notion “play” were different from the concerns of the “self generation”—the latter were more motivated by a need to develop the self and to adjust the self to the market. Conversely, the self-consciousness of the mischief makers was bred by the disruption of the Cultural Revolution and flourished in the chaotic period when the emerging market required regulation.

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Notably, it was the failure of the collective project more than the growth of individual power itself that brought the realisation of individualism to the fore.\textsuperscript{303} Consequently, the notion of “play” entails an emphasis on the self as an antagonist of the state’s collective project. For example, in Wang Shuo’s writing, mischief makers try to justify their pursuits of material well-being by poking fun at Maoist doctrine, holding that any concerns about self were purely selfish (or called “bourgeois egoism”) and should be repressed. Some critics even shared with Wang Shuo this idealised anticipation on individualism, and considered individualism the key to the national reform and modernisation project. In this idealised anticipation, Jiwei Ci finds the old utopianism developed in the Maoist era -- “the old habit of expecting quick and spectacular results.”\textsuperscript{304}

\textbf{Conclusion}

This chapter analysed the formation and the major characteristics of a group of people living in between the Maoist era and Deng’s reform period, of whom Wang Shuo was an outstanding representative. Through comparing this group of people with the “Red Guard generation” and the “self generation” and locating them in the transitional period from Maoist era into the reform period, this chapter demonstrates complex influences from both significant historical events that impinge upon a “playful consciousness” on their mind. Embracing consumerism and parodying revolutionary ideology and socialist norms, these playful masters served an important role in the emerging cultural market of post-Mao China. Meanwhile, being influenced by the Maoist era, they also carried revolutionary cultural traditions on to the new cultural stage. They thus were able to

\textsuperscript{303} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 201.  
\textsuperscript{304} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 200.
show the intimate relationship between the emerging culture and the dominant cultures of the state and elites.

This chapter explores the emergence of a new type of professional writing—entrepreneurial writing—during the late 1980s and early 1990s, through the example of Wang Shuo. The notion of “professional” is useful in exploring the historical changes in the literary model of production and writers’ relationships to such changes. Magal Sarfati Larson points out that the “professionalization” coincides with “the rise of industrial capitalism ... and ... with the evolution of capitalism toward its corporate form.” In the Chinese context, the emergence of the commercially professional writing and its being an alternative to the state literary establishment reflects historical changes in the literary field and people’s attitudes towards writing and commerce.

In pre-reform China, the term “professional writer” (zuozhe zuoye) often referred to writers “whose exclusive patron and employer was the Communist Party and the vocational state,” and thus denoted the existence of a largely state-sponsored and controlled literary system. In the post-Mao cultural market after the 1980s, a new breed of professional writers, who referred to as “entrepreneur writers” (qianjin zuoji) or “profession writers” (zuozhe zuoye) appeared, who through their writing, were able to survive and even thrive in the cultural market and that broke away from the state literary establishment. Wang Shuo was one of the first and outstanding examples of these newly emerging commercially professional writers. He ventured out of the

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CHAPTER 4

WANG SHUO AND A NEW TYPE OF PROFESSIONAL WRITING

This chapter explores the emergence of a new type of professional writing—entrepreneurial writing—during the late 1980s and early 1990s, through the example of Wang Shuo. The notion of "profession" is useful in exploring the historical changes in the literary mode of production and writers' relationships to such changes.\(^{305}\) Magali Sarfatti Larson points out that the "professionalisation" coincides with "the rise of industrial capitalism ... and ... with the evolution of capitalism toward its corporate form."\(^{306}\) In the Chinese context, the emergence of the commercially professional writing and its being an alternative to the state literary establishment reflects historical changes in the literary field and people's attitudes toward writing and commerce.

In pre-reform China, the term "professional writer" (zhuanye zuijia) often referred to writers "whose exclusive patron and employer was the Communist Party and the socialist state."\(^{307}\) and thus indicated the existence of a largely state-sponsored and controlled literary system. In the post-Mao cultural market after the 1980s, a new breed of professional writer, also referred to as "entrepreneur writer" (xiezuo getihu) or "freelance writer" (ziyou zuojia) appeared, who, through their writing, were able to survive and even thrive in the cultural market and thus broke away from the state literary establishment. Wang Shuo was one of the first and outstanding examples of these newly emergent commercially professional writers. He ventured out of the

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restrictive protection of socialist literary system and advocated entrepreneurial writing in a provocative way. An examination of his activities and how his works became bestsellers reveals significant trends in Chinese publishing.

The first section of the chapter portrays the socialist literary system that was on the verge of collapse in the 1980s. Against this backdrop, the second section centres on the writer, Wang Shuo, through whom the overwhelming trend of commercialisation in the Chinese literary field and the deeply rooted traditions of elite intellectuals and the political establishment in the new era are explored. The mixed influences of both the market and conventional cultural forces are investigated through Wang Shuo’s provocative way of advocating commercially oriented professional writing. The third section moves the focus from the writer to the Huayi publishing house that was responsible for most of Wang Shuo’s works and the other publishers who shared the market Wang Shuo’s controversial works generated. Influences from both market mechanisms and conventional cultural forces are again observed in the transition of Chinese publishing towards commercialisation.

The Socialist Literary System on the Verge of Collapse

In the Maoist era, the socialist literary system was mainly founded on the operation of various literary institutions, such as the Chinese Writers Association (Zhongguo zuojia xiehui), through which the Communist Party and the socialist state sustained their monopoly over writers through financial support and sponsorship. This situation changed in the 1980s. As the state’s interest shifted from building socialist revolution to economic pragmatism, the government began to reduce much of its financial support for cultural infrastructure. To reduce its budget deficit, “the government slashed subsidies
to media organs and allowed the introduction of market forces, including financial autonomy, management decentralisation, deregulation and diversification.\textsuperscript{308}

In the field of literary production, the reduction in financial allocations to the Writers Association and other literary institutions was striking.\textsuperscript{309} Considering the various costs of the Association at both national and local levels, such as producing literary publications, organising literary conferences and seminars, and paying the salaries of its numerous office and editorial staff as well as a large number of professional salaried writers, the pressure on the Association as a result of the reduced funding was significant. As a result, some, especially local Writers Associations could hardly maintain their operation. Zhang Yigong, the president of Henan Writers Association, once complained that the association could no longer support its literary journal or theoretical studies because of cuts in government subsidies and had to search for entrepreneurs to donate money to cover operational costs.\textsuperscript{310} In fact, ever since 1986, the Association had made an effort to look for other sources of support. The establishment of The Chinese Literature Foundation (Zhongghua wenxue jijin hui), an unofficial charity to raise money through various means including business ventures, was one of its initiatives.\textsuperscript{311}

Other cultural institutions such as book publishers and literary journals also faced similar problems. In the early 1980s, the government began cutting funds for publishing houses and taxed 55 per cent of their profits.\textsuperscript{312} Further deregulatory policies were


\textsuperscript{309} Kong’s book gives a detailed survey of the various problems facing the Writers Association other literary institutions and my brief account here is mainly based on the result of her fieldwork and studies.


\textsuperscript{311} Kong, \textit{Consuming Literature}, fn 6, p. 190.

\textsuperscript{312} Minxin Pei, \textit{From Reform to Revolution}, p. 158; see also Yi Chen, “Publishing in China in the Post-Mao Era: The Case of Lady Chatterley’s Lover,” \textit{Asian Survey} vol. 32 (June 1992), pp. 569-570.
introduced to encourage state-owned publishers to function as enterprises. For example, in 1988 the government introduced a responsibility management system in the publishing sector so that publishers could be expected to be financially independent of the government.\(^{313}\) Regarding literary journals, the government announced in 1984 that, except for a handful of prominent journals, most literary journals would no longer receive state subsidies and would have to make efforts to become financially independent.\(^{314}\) Consequently, most publishing houses and literary journals were pushed by the government to seek survival in the market.\(^{315}\)

The fundamental operation of the socialist literary system was further threatened by the rise of private sector publishing. During the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the government began to propagate the idea that to “get rich is glorious,” and, as a way to solve the problems of urban unemployment, permitted the development of the private business. Among various kinds of private business, there emerged private book retail and distribution in the form of street stalls, newstands, private bookstores, and later, wholesale operations.\(^{316}\) As the private book sector mainly operated outside the Xinhua

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\(^{313}\) The responsibility management system had been trialled extensively in rural and urban economic reforms, by which salaries and bonuses would be linked to employees’ performance. For the detail of the implementation of this policy, see Zhou Yanwen, *Dui Fengkuang de yindao* (Guiding the Mess) (Beijing: Zhongguo jingji chubanshe, 1991), pp. 45-64. Zhou worked in the Bureau of News and Publishing (xinwen chubanshui) in 1988.

\(^{314}\) “*Guanyu dui qikan chuban shixing zifuyingkai de tongzhi*” (The notice for journal publications to start independent operation,” in Gao Jiangbo, *Qikan qiiisuolii* (Records on the struggles of journal publications) (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 1998), pp. 15-18. Also, according to Kong’s interview with Li Jingze and Zhang Dening, by the end of 1990s many journals had lost their funding completely, and others, such as *People’s Literature* and *Beijing Literature*, were able to cover only one-fifth of their expenses through government funding. See Kong, *Consuming Literature*, p. 149.

\(^{315}\) The well-known journal, *Reading* (Dushu), which was affiliated with the Sanlian publisher, complained about the financial difficulty the journal experienced. See the editor’s postscript of the Journal, *Dushu*, (June 1988), p. 160.

\(^{316}\) Kong, *Consuming Literature*, p.71. In December 1980, the state Publishing Administration (guojia chuban ju) issued a notice, “Suggestions on Steadily Developing Collective and Individually Owned Bookstores, Booths, Stalls, and Book Dealer Operations” (Jianyi you jihua you buzhou de fazhan jiti suoyouzhi he geti suoyouzhi de shuidian shuting shutan he shufan); in June 1982, The Ministry of Culture convened a symposium on the reform of book distribution and later issued a formal decision to supplement the former monopoly of Xinhua bookstore with a book distribution system using multiple channels of distribution and multiple ownership. See Zhang Hongwei, “*Xinzhongguo wushinian chuban dashi ji,*” (Chronicle of publishing events in the 50th year of the People’s Republic of China), *Chuban guangjiao* 10 (1999), p.14. From 1983 the government allowed the development of licensed private
bookstore system (the so-called “first” or “main” channel) of the time, it was often referred to as the “second channel.”

Because the players in the “second channel” in the 1980s were mainly urban unemployed people lacking in formal education, the “second channel” was notorious for its undisguised drive for profit, and was considered to be responsible for most illegal operations and the dissemination of censored books and even pirated materials. However, it was also well-known for its efficiency in selling books and its acute understanding of the market. Compared to the bureaucratic Xinhua distribution channel, the ability of the “second channel” to sell books through their networks – mainly street vendors and private bookstore and distributors -- was quite considerable. The “second channel” could easily have hundreds of thousands of books sold within a fortnight.

It did not take long for the “second channel” also to be involved in editing and printing sectors of publishing. Here too it performed outstandingly. It was said that while it took a state publisher around 200 days to getting a book printed in 1987, the record for the “second-channel” was just ten or even seven days. The huge increase in Chinese private sector publishing is obvious from the following numbers:

... in 1979, state-owned Xinhua bookstores controlled 95 per cent of the book retail market; by 1988, private and collective stores gained control of nearly two-thirds of that market. The government-controlled postal system’s monopoly on the distribution of newspapers and magazines fell to 42per cent by 1988 as private newsstands gained market dominance.
To compete in the mass-market guided by demand and supply, book dealers in the “second channel” developed their ability to ascertain and satisfy the needs of readers. In fact, for most of the popular literature for the last two decades, the “second-channel” was a major driving force. Book dealers were often precise in discerning whether a book would be appealing to ordinary readers and able to make a profit by getting the book distributed and sold in a considerable quantity quickly through their channel.

Once a book was in demand, they often raised the book price – sometimes, twice or three times the original price – and printed more copies through pirating the original book to gain extra money. As a result, on the one hand, people complained that book dealers were responsible for circulating books with crude format and content and irregular prices; on the other hand, however, the rise and the prosperity of “second-channel” undoubtedly met a mass aspiration for light entertainment that had been ignored by state publishing system.

Popular literature, after a three-decade absence, was thus revived in mainland China in the 1980s. The first sign of the resuscitation of popular literature was the reprinting of traditional popular novels and historical tales (lishi yanyi) including The Plum in the Golden Vase (Jinpingmei) and Seven Knights-Errant and Five Sworn Brothers (Qixia wuyi) and translation of classic foreign entertainments such as Agatha Christie’s Hercules Poirot mysteries and Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes detective stories. Taiwan and Hong Kong popular literature also contributed to the mainland

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322 Kong, Consuming Literature, p. 87.
323 From my interview with a former book merchant, who worked with state publishers during the time of interview on 4 February 2002.
324 For the blooming of popular literature in the 1980s, see Marja Kaikkonen “From Knights to Nudes: Chinese Popular Literature since Mao,” The Stockholm Journal of East Asian Studies no. 5 (1995), pp.85-110, and her “Stories and Legends: China’s largest contemporary popular literature journals,” in Michael Hockx ed., The Literary Field of Twentieth Century China (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), pp.134-60; also see Wu Xusheng, Da Hongdong: zhong wai changxiaoshu jiem (Sensation: revealing the secrets of Chinese and foreign best sellers) (Guangzhou: guangzhou chubanshe), 1993, pp.32-44.
book market. As noted in Chapter 2, writings from Taiwanese female writers such as Qiong Yao, San Mao and Xi Murong were introduced to mainland Chinese readers during the early 1980s and enjoyed widespread popularity. Meanwhile, the “craze” for kungfu fiction was accelerated by the Hong Kong writers Jin Yong and Liang Yusheng, and the Taiwanese writer Gu Long.

Observing the mass appeal of literary entertainment that could easily sell millions of copies, many state-run publishers were eager to be involved in this burgeoning book market. They would be able to make a profit as well as solving their financial difficulties and maintaining the ability to subsidise more serious or academic works. For example, literary journals such as October (Shiyue) and Selection of Chinese Literature (Zhonghua wenxue xuanlan), which were once known as “elite” journals, struggled from the lack of government funding and started to publish articles aiming to attract popular attention. Facing a financial loss of 300,000 to 400,000 yuan per year, Selection of Chinese Literature began to publish previews and reviews of popular television series. October also published film and television series scripts to appeal to readers.

While these literary journals were forced to follow popular demands to survive in the market, their practices were criticised by elite intellectuals as a “suicide of literature.” Government officials even intervened to prevent such practices of marketisation. For

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325 “Yangchun baixue” duo wulai, tingguo sandong jian guangming – zhonghua wenxue xuanlan zhubian Gao Xianjun fangtanlu” (Interview with Gao Xianjun, the chief editor of Selection of Chinese Literature), Beijing Qingnianbao (Beijing youth news), 11 October 2000.

326 One of the film scripts October published is Wang Shuo’s Youchun wuhui (No regret for youth) and one of the television scripts it published is Manhadun de zhongguo niiren (Chinese woman in Manhattan) based on a best-selling novel in 1992. In fact, even though Wang Shuo was questioned as a writer, most of his stories were published in well established literary journals. For example, his “Fuchu haimian” (Rising to the Surface of the Ocean) was first published in Dangdai (Contemporary) in 1985, “Xiangpi ren” (Rubber man) was published in Qingnian wenxue (Youth literature) in 1986 and “Wanzhu” (The operators) in Shouhuo (Harvest) in 1987.

327 Gao Jiangbo, Qikan qiusuolu, p. 23.
instance, in 1984, the editors of a Sichuan literary magazine, *Bashan Literature (Bashan wenxue)*, arranged a special issue entitled “People and the Law” (*Ren yu fa*), under the guise of the sober title which was actually a collection of racy crime stories in tabloid format. The enormous profit potential of popular market was evident from 12 million copies’ advance orders from private distributors alone. Afraid of the “negative influence” it might have on readers, local government blocked the publication of this issue.

Despite constant restraint from the state and elite intellectual groups, the commercialisation of the Chinese cultural market accelerated and the competition between state publishing and the “second channel” intensified. Consequently, more and more state publishers began to “establish various profitable, if unorthodox, alliances [with the “second channel”] that would allow them to avoid losses.” This cooperation was furthered by the new policy allowing collaborative publishing. Collaborative publishing first appeared as a means to solve the problem that scholarly works faced in getting published in 1984. But in practice, collaborative publications largely exceeded the constraint of the original policy and in many cases, the exchange of “book numbers” became a common way benefiting both state publishers and book merchants. For book dealers, collaborative publishing enabled them to bring underground activities into the open. Mainly through buying book numbers, they were able to

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328 The two editors are Tian Yanning and Tan Li, who are also the main players in the “Xue Mili phenomenon,” as discussed below.
331 The Chinese government launched the book number system as a means to enforce a state monopoly since 1956, which included the unified book number (*tongyi shuhao*) and standard book number (*biaozliun shuhao*). On 1 January 1987, National Standard Bureau introduced China Standard Book Number, which became the standard book number system nationwide since 1 January 1988. The China Standard Book Number consists of two parts: Standard Book Number (ISBN) and Chinese Library Classification Numbers. Theoretically, only the Central Bureau of publishing has the authority to issue a national book number and a number is issued only after a book is approved. Publishing without a number is illegal.
entitled to publish books that would have only circulated in black market. For state publishers, “collaborating” with book merchants meant easy money to either solve their financial difficulties or to make a profit. Selling a book number would earn a state publisher at least thousands of yuan, no matter whether the publication turned out to be popular or not. As a result, Zhou Yanwen observes, the “collaborative publications” amounted to as much as 64.6 per cent of some publishers’ total publications and during the first half of 1988, most state publishers around the country undertook “collaborative publishing.”

The above brief account shows the unprecedented trend of commercialisation in Chinese publishing. In great contrast to the socialist literary system, where literary production and distribution were merely an integral part of the state plan, a literary market that responded to market demand and supply was burgeoning. These changes had considerable impact on the majority of Chinese writers who had been unified to work under the previous system for decades.

The institutional changes of the Writers Association and other literary institutions forced previous socialist professional writers to change their ways in order to survive. To maintain its operation in the new financial situation, from the mid-1980s, some branches of the Writers Association had discarded the tenure system and began paying writers on short-term contracts. This undoubtedly shook the secure and privileged status of writers who hitherto had been able to eat from an “iron rice bowl.”

The financial difficulty of many literary institutions of the time also brought about the low manuscript fees and the difficulty many serious writers encountered in having their

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works published either in journals or as books. The attractiveness of the huge profit from the popular cultural market further encouraged writers to change their way of writing. The case of “Xue Mili” illustrates how state-employed writers moved to the market.

Experiences of Tian Yanning and Tan Li, the major writers responsible for the “Xue Mili” series, were typical of writers who tried to join the literary mainstream by ascending the hierarchy provided by the socialist literary system and then turned to the market for an alternative. “Xue Mili” was a pen name for a series of pulp fiction titles in the late 1980s, such as Female Couriers (Nü daijia), Female Boss (Nü laoban), Female Secret Police (Nü tejing) and Female Tribal Chief (Nü qüizhang). Most of these stories sold very quickly and created high record of sales. For example, the total print run of Female Couriers amounted to over one million.

While the name “Xue Mili” suggests of a young urban female writer, it was actually the pseudonym for two middle-aged male writers, Tan Li and Tian Yanning, from Sichuan province. Tan and Tian lived in Da county (Daxian), a remote area of China. Considering writing as a career path, they worked hard to publish literary works. They became members of the Sichuan Branch of the Chinese Writers Association first and then members of the national Chinese Writers Association in 1985 due to their achievement in publishing works in local and national literary journals and winning literary prizes. According to Tan and Tian’s accounts, their further wish was to become full-time state-employed “professional writers” in Chengdu, the capital city in Sichuan province. However, they discovered that the Writers Association, like other bureaucratic

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333 Shi Lu and Xue Mili, “Xue Mili fangtan lu” (On interview with Xue Mili), Wenxue ziyou tan (Free talks on literature) no. 4 (1990), pp. 146-147.
organisations in China, was the place where not only literary talent, but connections and the rule of “seniority first” (lunzi paibei) were all taken into account for professional promotion.\(^{335}\) The other obstacle to Tan and Tian’s path to become full-time “professional writers” was from the institutional changes going on in the literary system. Owing to the decrease in government subsidies already mentioned, the Association was not able to provide new posts for full-time employed writers any more.

Meanwhile, compared with the potential opportunities available in the emerging market, the editorial or administrative positions the Association provided appeared to be less attractive. An alternative way of success arose in the market. Tan and Tian, together with some other writers, began to work with book dealers and produced the “Xue Mili” series, for which they made a profit but lost their reputation. After they were discovered as the true authors of the series, Tan and Tian was bitterly attacked by Chinese writers and critics for their betrayal of the “noble literary endeavour” and for losing their sense of morality in seeking profit. A “literary crusade” occurred against Tan, Tian and other writers involved, with numerous articles and discussions appearing in “various prestigious newspapers and journals.”\(^{336}\) Influenced also by the anti-pornography and illicit publishing campaign in 1989-1990, for a couple of years “Xue Mili’s” works were turned away by virtually all publishing houses.

Many Chinese writers in the 1980s and 1990s actually faced similar dilemmas to those of Tan and Tian. An article entitled “Records on Writers Who Waded into the Ocean” (Wenren xiahai chenfu lu) lists a number of writers, including authors, journal editors, and university lecturers, who either hesitated linking writing with consumerism or

\(^{335}\) Tian and Tan, Tanbai: Xue Mili zhenxiang jiemi, pp. 220 – 224.

\(^{336}\) Kong, Consuming Literature, p. 18.
actively engaged in the market. Nonetheless, as the covert way Tan and Tian conducted commercial writing indicated, the lingering power of literary convention that deprecated consumerism existed. That’s why many adopted pennames when engaging in commercial writing.

To a certain degree, “Xue Mili” became a scapegoat for many writers to express their deep bitterness and resentment towards commercialism. But a growing process of commercialisation necessitated that market mechanisms would eventually play a significant role in literary production. There were the circumstances in which the writer Wang Shuo came to prominence, a writer who not only practiced but also advocated commercial writing and challenged the mainstream writers group, as discussed in the next section.

Wang Shuo and a New Type of Professional Writing

According to Perry Link, written Chinese language was rooted in a cultural tradition that saw narrative text as being strongly associated with moral instruction. Chinese writers, from traditional Confucian scholar-officials, modernisers in the early twentieth century, Maoist cultural workers to post-Mao writers in the 1980s, despite having different or even opposing views on various matters, “agreed almost unanimously in the assumption that literature is relevant, or even essential, to morality, social life, and politics.” Link’s observation identifies an elite tradition among Chinese writers, which prevailed even in the 1980s when mainstream Chinese writers successfully shamed “Xue Mili” in public.

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337 Xu Lie and Lin Wei, “Wenren xiahai chenfu lu” (On men and women of letters who waded into the business ocean), Zhongguo qingnian bao (China’s Youth), 13 September 1992, p. 2.
338 Ibid.
339 Ibid.
341 Link, ibid., p.5.
Nonetheless, while asserting the higher mission of writing, there is no doubt that writers also pursued personal goals, including wealth and fame, through writing. Once the rise of the market in the reform era provided them with opportunities, many writers also profited from commercial writing. The trend of commercialisation in China was overwhelming and its influence in the literary field threatened the canonical status of the elite tradition. Wang Shuo was one of the notable writers who publicised the monetary motivations of his writing, bringing the undercurrent of commercial writing to public attention. The following pages show how Wang Shuo’s advocacy of the commercially professional writing made him seemingly dissident of elite intellectual group. I then argue that the elite tradition of intellectuals and political establishment also influenced his provocative self-promotion.

A. Wang Shuo: a Provocative Promoter of Commercially Motivated Writing

Wang Shuo’s provocative self-promotion and pursuit of money compelled society to confront the entrepreneurial writing that appeared to threaten the elitism of Chinese writers. In the book, *I am Wang Shuo* (Wo shi Wang Shuo, 1992), he publicly linked writing with money and said “money is more important than anything else for me.”342 In addition, he publicly advocated that writing was above all a profession, a way of making a living. He wrote that, “working with words is a profession. We ought to treat it with a professional attitude.”343 He also stated in the book, *I am Wang Shuo* that only after many failures in the business world did he turn to writing as an alternative.344

By highlighting that there was little difference between writing and other professions, including commerce, Wang Shuo diverged from the position expressed by mainstream Chinese intellectuals. The latter had often promoted writing as a sacred responsibility either to uplift the moral standards of ordinary readers, or to assist politicians in managing the state. In fact, Wang Shuo exaggerated his difference from mainstream intellectuals by claiming that he worked frantically like a writing machine to make money. As he recalls, he wrote at a frantic speed in the early 1990s, averaging between 5000 and 8000 characters per day. Provocatively, he claimed that he did not even have time to correct the spelling mistakes, nor did he mind any alterations by editors.

To buttress his self-created radical image in the literary field, Wang Shuo surprised many by linking writing directly with cash. He stated that the 25 yuan manuscript fee he earned from one of his early stories, Waiting (Dengdai, 1978) gave him the impression that writing was an easy way to earn money and motivated him to become a writer. He also associated another popular novella of his, Rising to the Surface of the Ocean (Fuchu haimian, 1985), with financial concerns, saying that it was published under his and his wife’s names to avoid paying high taxes, and that it eventually earned them 1,000 yuan. He made it known to the public that after the publication of another famous novella, Half Flame, Half Brine (Yiban shi haishui, yiban shi huoyan, 1986), his life became financially secure and stable. Apart from disclosing how much he earned from his publications, he was also well-known for negotiating with publishers for higher manuscript fees and for asking for royalty payments for the publication of his works.

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345 Ibid., p.54.
346 Ibid.
347 Ibid., p.17.
348 Ibid., pp.17-19.
349 Ibid., pp.20-21 and p.25.
350 The Chinese government declared the abolition of royalty payments in 1960. In the post-Mao era, Wang Shuo was one of the first writers to be paid royalties. In publishing the Wang Shuo wenji, Wang Shuo asked for the royalty payment and the Huayi Publishing House agreed to pay him at a rate of 10 percent.
Material reward concerned virtually all writers and artists. Nonetheless, many writers called for better treatment through highlighting the sacrifice they made for the nation and people and emphasising that better material conditions leads to enhanced intellectual creativity and production. For example, the well-established writer Shen Rong’s novella *At Middle Age* (*Rendao zhongnian, 1980*) highlights the plight of middle-aged intellectuals in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and portrays a virtuous intellectual image of Lu Wenting enduring suffering. The story won first prize in the National Novella Competition for 1977-1980 and was made into a successful film.

In contrast, Wang Shuo advocated commercial writing by stressing its marketable aspects. To direct people’s attention to the entrepreneurial aspect of his writing, he also described his strategy of locating readers as a business ability, claiming that, “having money is better than anything else....My business experience gives me a merchant’s insight. I am aware of what is saleable.” It is also true that he was adept at following the fickle taste of the public and was able to attract a large buying readership. Creating the title, “Air Hostess,” for one of his novellas is an example of his ability to grasp editors’ and readers’ interests. The title in Chinese incorporates two expressions “in the air” (kongzhong) and “Miss” (xiaojie). The phrase “in the air” would attract most Chinese including editors and readers in the late 1980s because it aroused their desire to travel by air, their curiosity about the modern lifestyle and even their envy of rich businesspeople who travelled by air. During Mao’s time Chinese airliners were a non-profit service exclusively for the privileged, and “commoners” had few chances to travel by air. Later in Deng’s era, traveling by air became possible for many, although passengers were mostly successful businesspeople. Therefore, the phrase “in the air” in

the 1980s was fashionable. The last word “Miss” was a pejorative term in the Maoist era because of its suggestiveness of physical attraction and thus moral decadence. However, in the commercial society in the 1980s, this word regained charm and appeal.\(^{352}\)

The attractive title helped the publication of the story and demonstrated Wang Shuo’s sensitivity to emerging social trends. Nonetheless, his self-advertisement and emphasis on his entrepreneurial shrewdness set up an anti-elite image. Because many intellectuals at the time still claimed it contemptuous to equate writing with a means to earn profit, it came as little surprise that Wang Shuo became a controversial writer. Some established critics frowned at his entrepreneurial behaviour, claiming that he was simply a businessman and it would be demeaning to take him seriously as a writer.\(^{353}\)

However, the late 1980s was a period when materialism and consumerism became an obsession for many Chinese, and even intellectuals’ desire for joining the fray for monetary gains was aroused. As the “Xue Mili phenomenon” indicated, many writers had already started to sell literature and culture in a covert way. In the early 1990s, it became a trend for men and women of letters to wade into the business ocean, thereby confirming the axiom that: “Those who possess technical skill, sell technical skills; those who are versed in culture, sell culture.”\(^{354}\) In this frantic situation, some writers lamented the downfall of the supposed moral integrity of the past, and due to his outstanding status in the trend of commercial writing, Wang Shuo was picked as a scapegoat for causing this loss of “humanistic spirit” and for contaminating the moral integrity of intellectuals more generally.


\(^{353}\) From my interview with some intellectuals in China during January 2004.

Riding high on the trend of commercialisation, instead of being silenced, Wang Shuo responded to such criticism by hurling insults at the elite intellectuals. Many of his stories exposed the assumed morality of intellectuals as a sham that served simply to heighten their status in society.\textsuperscript{355} In his public speeches, he directly affronted the morality of Chinese writers and their elite traditions:

I simply can’t stand their [writers’] sense of superiority and nobility. They think that common folks are all benighted fools and only they themselves are the conscience of the society. Isn’t this aggravating? There’s no so-called conscience in this society. Who needs them to fabricate it? ...\textsuperscript{356}

While his words targeted the smug moral superiority of Chinese intellectuals, Wang Shuo did not intend seriously reflect upon this cultural issue. Rather, he posed as a critical outsider, adopting an offensive attitude that irritated many Chinese intellectuals: he derided the presumed responsibilities of Chinese writers and intellectuals as “superfluous” and “aggravating.” He even mockingly described them as a “fourth mountain” which suppressed him:

In the past we often said that Chinese people had been oppressed by ‘three mountains’ – imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism. Chinese women were also oppressed by the fourth mountain – men. In my case, the fourth mountain is Chinese intellectuals ...\textsuperscript{357}

More than occasionally, Wang Shuo was determined to arouse controversy and in order to attract attention. In an interview, he confidently predicted that in the future his work would “at least be comparable with Gone with the Wind, and with a bit of luck it might turn into A Dream of Red Mansions (Honglou meng).”\textsuperscript{358} While Gone with the Wind was one of the most popular foreign novels of the time, A Dream of Red Mansions had long been considered the greatest piece of literary work in the history of Chinese

\textsuperscript{355} Chapter 6 discusses in detail this aspect of Wang Shuo’s writing.
\textsuperscript{357} Ibid., p. 13.
\textsuperscript{358} Ibid., p. 99.
literature. For a young writer to compare his unfinished writing with such well-known and famous literary works was blatantly insolent and unashamedly arrogant.

Wang Shuo’s provocative speeches became the best advertisement for his works. A book, which was said to be as good as Gone with the Wind or A Dream of Red Mansions, aroused great curiosity among ordinary readers, and a writer who openly challenged the moral superiority of Chinese elite intellectuals caused further excitement. Wang Shuo’s blatant self-promotion was rewarded in the market and the sales of his books increased. It was estimated that sales of the Selected Works of Wang Shuo (Wang Shuo wenji, 1992) had exceeded one million copies by 2003, if the pirate market was included.\(^{359}\) Looking Beautiful (Kanshangqu henmei, 1999) was another best-selling book in the Chinese market and in the late 1990s Wang Shuo was on the list of the top richest Chinese writers.\(^{360}\)

B. Influence of Cultural Conventions in the Market

The popularity of Wang Shuo’s writing indicated that the rise of the commercially professional writing challenged the monopoly status of the socialist “professional” writers who relied on the state literary system and considered themselves as either state artists or moral educators. Notably, Wang Shuo advocated this type of commercially motivated writing in a distinctively provocative way. It may seem surprising, but indeed the way he publicised himself was not only a product of the market, but also an outcome of influences from the political establishment and the elite tradition of Chinese intellectuals.


Primarily, Wang Shuo’s financial motivation fitted in with the government’s “to get rich is glorious” mantra. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the new regime abandoned Maoist militant egalitarianism and class politics in favor of economic development. The political establishment initiated and encouraged the overt pursuit of wealth as Deng told his people: “Black cat, white cat – it’s a good cat if it catches mice.” In this light, Wang Shuo and other entrepreneurial writers were representatives of the people who responded to the government’s call.

During the 1980s, the new entrepreneurs consisted of mainly the unemployed youth or those who had not benefited from the previous social structure and were therefore more inclined to embrace the new policies. Similarly, in the literary field writers from the younger generation and with less established status tended to welcome commercially motivated writing as a career option. As mentioned, the commercialisation in the Writers Association and other literary institutions had a great effect on writers, especially young writers. While the well-established writers might retain their full-time employment with various literary institutions, the newly introduced short-term contracts and piecemeal contracts were commonly applied to young writers. Consequently, as shown by the case of “Xue Mili,” young writers struggling in the state literary system sought alternative and in doing so, turned to the commercial writing.

Ironically, although the trend of commercialisation contradicted communist tradition, it can be argued that the development of “cultural workers” during the Maoist era provided the foundation for the rise of commercial writer in the post-Mao era. During the Maoist era, writers were no longer considered to be moral guardians, the status they

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361 With these words, Deng Xiaoping applied pragmatic, market-based economic reforms to China’s planned economy.

were entitled to in the Confucian tradition. Through “thought reform” or indoctrination in Maoist ideology, writers were supposed to be the same as other people working for socialist construction. In post-Mao China, this led to the blurring of existing borders between writing, business and other professions, and therefore made the rise of commercial writing possible. In fact, besides Wang Shuo, many writers in the post-Mao era expressed a similar idea of treating writing as a practical profession. For example, Ah Cheng, a former “rusticated youth” and a prominent advocate of “seeking roots” literature in the mid-1980s, once disclosed that the pure motivation for his renowned novel, Chess King (Qi wang), was merely the manuscript payment. In introducing himself, Ah Cheng compared the status of writers with that of carpenters, and stated that writing was just “a financial deal to cover family expenses.”

Wang Shuo’s provocative behaviour and his willingness to depart from the perceived image of elite intellectuals are also reminiscent of how the Maoist political establishment legitimated its own existence four decades earlier. Mao endeavoured to detach China from its Confucian past and to regroup the Chinese people under a new ideology and identity derived from the teachings of Marx and Lenin. Similarly, the Deng leadership implemented the reforms policy and cast off its immediate past. Both regimes also relied on mass propaganda to publicise their policies and often exploited inflammatory slogans to mobilise the people. For example, during the Great Leap Forward of 1958, the desire to rapidly industrialise China’s peasant economy was promoted by the aggressive slogan: “Struggle hard for three years. Catch up with Britain and catch up with America.” The Party congress in March ratified the 14.6 per cent

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363 “Yu Ah Cheng dongla xiche” (Chatting about this and that with Ah Cheng), Jushi niandai (The Nineties) no. 1 (1986), p.68.
364 Ibid.
366 According to Nigel Harris, the slogan was first formulated as “Catch up and surpass Britain in the output of major industrial goods within fifteen years.” Shortly afterwards, Mao reckoned this slogan was
target for overall industrial output and raised it to 33 per cent. To meet these unrealistic goals, the country was mobilised in a radical fashion. As Nigel Harris states,

The provincial party secretaries competed to outdo each other. Some promised to meet 1967’s targets in 1958. By the end of 1958, some half a million “small factories and workshops” had been set up in Hupeh province. By October, 600,000 small blast furnaces, many in rural areas, were at work. Management in urban industry was pushed into the background in order that cadres could press workers to “exceed all records”. The safety, rest and recreation of workers were inevitable casualties. Quality collapsed as output rose – the mines met their impossible targets by loading rubble.\(^\text{367}\)

The failure of the Great Leap Forward was well known. But the Maoist tradition of exploiting inflammatory slogans to mobilise the people continued. Deng’s slogans such as “To get rich is glorious” also contains radicalism and has in fact given rise to the ambiguity of official policies and severe social problems caused by the growing gap between rich and poor. Indeed, while Deng’s regime differentiated itself from the Maoist leadership by adopting different policies, it carried the radical and inflammatory tradition of Chinese Communist Party. Growing up in the transitional period from Maoist era to Deng’s reform, the writer Wang Shuo also developed a distinctively radical and provocative style in publicising himself.

In addition, the origin of the radicalism characteristic of Wang Shuo’s advocacy of commercial writing can be traced from the elite tradition of modern Chinese intellectuals. The May Fourth period is generally considered as the time when modern Chinese intellectuals, including most writers and artists, came into being. As noted by conservative as he said “With eleven million tons of steel next year, and seventeen million the year after, the world will be shaken. If we can reach forty million tons in five years, we may possibly catch up with Great Britain in seven years.” Mao’s Speech. 8th Party Congress, 2nd session, 18 May 1958, Miscellany of Mao Tse-tung Thought, 1949-68. Vol. I. Joint publications Research Service, Arlingto Virgina, n.d. (mimeo). p.122. Quoted in Harris, The Mandate of Heaven: Marx and Mao in Modern China (London: Quartet Books, 1978).p. 49. Finally, as ambition soared, the slogan was popularised among the public as “Struggle hard for three years. Catch up with Britain and catch up with America.”

Leo Ou-Fan Lee and Merle Goldman, a radical push to replace old morality and scholarship with Western-derived concepts of modernity was prevalent among most intellectuals at the time. Vera Schwarcz’s discussion shows that it was the political demand for “national survival” that pushed Chinese intellectuals to sacrifice their capacity for critical reflection to the idea of “total change” or “revolution.” Notably, the sense of urgency intellectuals felt about the nation originated from their self-imposed elite position in society and their self-appointed role in China’s salvation. Ironically, while Wang Shuo attacked intellectuals for their self-appointed superiority, he nevertheless unconsciously inherited their tradition of demanding radical change.

Whether they were conscious of this elite tradition or not, members of the younger generation of Chinese writers, mainly the entrepreneurial writers, endeavoured to break away from the state literary establishment in a radical way. With the development of the cultural market, “a whole new breed of writers” was able to support themselves through selling their writing rather than being employed by the state. In addition, some of them were determined to publicise their hostility toward the establishment and demonstrate their resolution to break away from convention. In 1998, representatives of a group of “freelance writers” in Nanjing, Zhu Wen and Han Dong designed a questionnaire to distribute among seventy-three young writers. Both the content and results of the survey were controversial. The survey’s title is “Duanlie” (breaking away) and Han Dong explains its meaning in this way: “[we] break away not only in the dimension of time, but also in space: we must break away from the established literary 

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370 Kong, Consuming Literature, p. 34. For more discussion on this group of writer, see Kong, op.cit., pp. 33-36.
371 Han Dong, “Beiwang: youguan duanlie xingwei de wenti huida” (Memorandum: answers for the act of breaking away), Beijing wenxue no. 10 (1998).
order... the established literary order refers not only to various aspects of the official literary field represented by the Writers Association, but also to any form of imperious monopoly or authority that tries to manipulate people’s literary pursuits and aesthetic choices.”

The thirteen questions in the survey focused on key issues in contemporary Chinese literature, especially the role of state literary institutions such as the Writers Association and the Mao Dun Literary Award. In the end, fifty-five writers responded and the results demonstrated a common feeling of contempt among writers of many aspects of the literary establishment. The radical stance of these young writers to break away from the literary tradition was notable and was thus labeled by some critics as an act of “collective patricide” (jiti shifu xingdong).

Huayi Publishing House and the Publication of Wang Shuo Works

Wang Shuo and other writers greatly increased their popularity through making challenging speeches in public. Nonetheless, they could not have achieved their commercial success without the support from publishing houses. For Wang Shuo, a nation-wide debate which greatly increased his popularity was triggered by Huayi Publishing House’s publication of Selected Works of Wang Shuo (Wang Shuo wenji; WSWJ) in 1992 and was sustained by a range of publications about/by him in 1992 and 1993. Through examining the marketing practices of Huayi and other publishing houses in producing WSWJ, this section argues that the trend of commercialisation in Chinese publishing houses was also entangled with conventional cultural forces. While the survival of publishers relied more and more on their business ability rather than state interventions, publishers sought to follow readers’ interests while at the same time working carefully with the state. Publishers’ exploitation of controversial subjects such as Wang Shuo’s books reveals how they negotiated the often conflicting needs of the

372 Ibid., p. 40.
373 See a special report on the controversy in Nanfang zhounuo (South China Weekend), August 21, 1998.
state and the market. Some conventional strategies literary institutions adopted in the pre-form period, such as affiliating with political or literary establishment and initiating public debates were observed in the reform era.

In 1992, the issuing of WSWJ caused a sensation in the publishing field. In the cultural context of China, publishing selected works (wenji) of writers had long been considered as the embodiment of canonical significance. Most existing wenji by the early 1990s were works by writers with canonical status in political or literary fields, such as Selected Works of Karl Marx, Selected Works of Mao Zedong, or Selected Works of Lu Xun. Furthermore, only well-established publishing houses had the right to publish wenji. Therefore, when Huayi, a minor publishing house, published works of Wang Shuo, a young and controversial writer, using the title “wenji,” disagreements arose. Why did Huayi confront the cultural norm and publish the book?

The answer, firstly, lies in the increasingly commercialised circumstances in Chinese publishing and the development of a marketing consciousness in Huayi. The year 1992 was important in the development of Chinese reforms and the process of commercialisation. In early 1992, Deng Xiaoping toured southern China and urged the country to speed up its reforms. After a decade’s fluctuation of political polices, once again the call for reform outweighed conservative concerns. As noted while the state pushed publishing to the market from the early 1980s onwards, whereas it re-affirmed that the fundamental raison d’être of socialist publishers was to serve the interests of the state in preserving the socialist state ideology. In practice, however, market demands

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374 During my interview conducted in February 2004, Jin Lihong, the executive of the Huayi at that time, recalled the great pressure she felt. Also see Han Lin “Huayi, zai changxiao lushang cihou zhe” (Huayi: marching on the road of selling bestsellers), China Post (Weekend Edition) 207 (7 September 2001). China Post website http://www.chinapositnews.com.cn/207/jct01.htm: visited on 3 July 2006.

and state interests often appeared to be in conflict rather than in harmony. For example, in the 1980s, private bookstores, bookstands, and private or joint book distribution channels were permitted to develop and boosted the book market.\(^{376}\) Driven by market rules, this private publishing sector tended to transgress state rules.\(^{377}\) In 1989, more than 80 percent of private bookstands in Beijing sold books that were censored by the government or under strict restrictions,\(^{378}\) and more than 50 percent of private bookstands, some state or joint bookstores and distribution units engaged in illegal business.\(^{379}\) To maintain its authority, the government thus carried out campaigns,\(^{380}\) in the name of removing unhealthy materials opposed to socialist state ideology.\(^{381}\)

Nonetheless, with the reforms as its foremost goal, the regime placed more emphasis on developing the market notwithstanding constant campaigns in cracking down on the so-called “unhealthy publications.” After the large-scale campaign waged in 1989 as a way to shift people’s attention from the “Tiananmen Incident,”\(^{382}\) the state further accelerated the pace of economic reforms and commercialisation. In the book market, the difference between the situation in the 1980s and that of the 1990s can be expressed in the following terms: in the 1980s illegal operations or operations “deviating from the official lines” dominated the market, while in the 1990s state publishers launched systematic policies and practices that moved toward commercialisation.

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377 The state claimed that a large section of private publishing in the 1980s conducted irregular and even illegal operations. “Wenhuaju guanyu zazhi chuban zengkan deng wenti de guiding” (Regulations by the Ministry of Culture on issues of magazine supplements), *Zhongguo chuban nianjian 1986* (Beijing: Shangwu yishuguan, 1987), pp.7-8.


380 The major campaigns were against bourgeois liberalisation in 1983, against spiritual pollution in 1987 and against capitalist obscene publications in 1989. The one in 1989 was of the biggest scale. See Ren Ke, *Ibid.*


State policy to further the reforms in the early 1990s touched off a period of unprecedented economic growth in China, and Huayi was one of the state publishers that took the lead in this trend. As noted, the economic reforms pushed Chinese publishing into the cultural market as a financially profitable industry and most state publishers had to compete for market shares with each other and with private book merchants. Huayi, originally a publisher affiliated with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) General Political Department, found it hard to compete with large state publishers, such as the People’s Literature Press (Renmin wenxue chubanshe) or the Higher Education Press (Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe) because they had long-term cooperative relationships with existing distribution channels such as libraries, nationwide networks of the New China Bookstores (Xinhua shudian) and stable subscriptions to periodicals in official institutions.\(^{383}\) Jin Lihong, who joined Huayi as the deputy manager in the late 1980s, claimed that, “the foremost problem for Huayi at that time was survival.”\(^{384}\)

With less capital and resources, Huayi turned to the market for salvation. To survive in the market, Huayi knew it was critical to meet and attract readers’ demands. Its decision to publish WSWJ was a result of an acknowledgment of Wang Shuo’s market potential. Before publishing WSWJ, Huayi published an anthology of Wang Shuo’s five novellas, *Play Highly, Die Fast* (Guo ba yin jiu si) as part of the series – *New Works of Famous Contemporary Chinese Writers* (Zhongguo dangdai zhuming zuojia xinzuo daxi). Compared with other works of the series, Wang Shuo’s popularity was considerable. While the novella, *Poems on Utopia* (Wutuohang shupian) by the well-regarded writer, Min Ren, “Huayi: cehua yinjia,” *ibid*. It was also proved by my interview with Jin Lihong in January 2004. The turning point for Huayi was Jin Lihong’s joining as the deputy manager in the late 1980s.\(^{384}\) *Ibid.*
Wang Anyi only had 10,000 copies printed, Wang Shuo’s book reached 75,000 copies in its first print run and was then re-printed several times. The total sales soon reached 300,000 copies. As Jin Lihong recalled, book merchants who wanted more quotas to distribute the book even “stayed in the backyard of Huayi and did not leave.” The anticipated profit from the popularity of Wang Shuo enticed Huayi to publish a collection of his works.

However, Huayi was aware that it would be sensational at that time to publish a selected work (wenji) for a young and controversial writer. Facing the dilemma, it turned to Wang Meng, the then Minister of Culture, for advice. Wang Meng’s attitude, as clearly reflected in the article “Escaping from the Sublime” (Duobi chonggao), confirmed Huayi’s decision to publish WSWJ. As the Minister of Culture, Wang Meng’s encouragement implied the state’s tolerance of cultural diversification and commercialisation.

So although monetary concerns drove Huayi to publish WSWJ, it did not resolve to publish the book until it obtained support from high-level intellectuals/politicians. It is well-known that in the pre-modern and Maoist periods, Chinese intellectuals supported and acted as spokespersons for political leaders in factional and ideological battles. During the modern era, intellectuals occupied positions in literary journals and other

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386 Han Lin, “Huayi, zai changxiaolu shang cihou zhe.”


388 Information gained through my interview with Jin Lihong in January 2004. Wang Meng (1934- ) served as Minister of Culture in mainland China from 1986 to 1989 and continued to play the role of cultural leader during the 1990s.

389 The article was published in Dushu (Reading) no. 1 (1993).
media. Therefore the media were often involved in the political conflicts and sought to affiliate itself with certain authorities in the political establishment. Conflicts and coalitions between intellectuals and Party leaders continued in the 1980s, with some similar patterns as in the previous era. In the case of Huayi, although there was no clear factional battle, the underlying concern was how far the reform could go and to what extent the commercialisation was allowed. Party policies of the time swung between the more conservative force of Deng’s Long March allies, and the more reformative force of younger generations. The reform process had thus been interrupted by constant “campaigns,” which dictated what could and could not be published. In such an unstable situation, publishing houses sought to gain the support of the political establishment so as to avoid unnecessary risks. Only with support from political establishment did Huayi risk publishing WSWJ.

Nonetheless, as the political atmosphere changed, the government altered its attitude and decided to ban WSWJ in 1996, three years after its peak in popularity. The editors responsible for the publication of WSWJ also endured internal recriminations even though they brought profit to the publisher and increased its status in the publishing field. The case of WSWJ indicated that although the prevailing trend in the publishing industry was commercialisation, publishers still had to accommodate both the state and the market and thus contend with the mindset inherited from the socialist cultural system.


From my interview with Jin Lihong in January 2004.
Interestingly, when state ideological control weakened, controversial topics usually became appealing. In the book market in 1993, the year of the 100th anniversary of Mao Zedong’s birth, alongside the official documentaries and hagiographies dedicated to Mao, there appeared unofficial titles detailing his secret life and an affair with the young movie queen Liu Xiaoqing, as well as other titles such as *Chronicles of Mao Zedong’s life* (*Maozedong shengping jishi*), *Mao Zedong’s Humour* (*Mao Zedong de youmo*), *Mao Zedong’s Sons and Daughters* (*Mao Zedong de ernümen*). Publications that were claimed to have “deviated from the official lines” or were linked with censorship became extremely popular. Similarly, in late 1986 Hunan People’s Press re-issued Rao Shuyi’s translation of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and was soon notified by the Centre Bureau of Publishing that it contained “unhealthy” themes. The banning of the book, however, excited wider interest in the novel: “Bookstalls were putting up big boards advertising *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, and rumors of an imminent raid accelerated sales.” While the Hunan People’s Press was punished for issuing such an “unhealthy” book, its great popularity sharply raised the book’s price on the black market. “Pirated versions of the Hunan edition began to flood the market and became generally available at five times the original price behind the counters of privately owned bookstalls or stores.”

The controversial act of publishing WSWJ was also rewarded by the market. The four-volume book soon became a bestseller. The first print run of WSWJ was 20,000

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395 Rao Shuyi translated the unexpurgated version of D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, which was first published in 1936 in Peking and Shanghai. For detailed discussion of publication of the translated *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, see Yi Chen, “Publishing in China in the Post-Mao Era: The Case of Lady Chatterley’s Lover.”
copies, which was impressive in Chinese publishing at that time. By comparison, Deng Xiaoping’s 1990 book, *The Architect of the New Period*, had only 7,500 copies printed. Since Deng Xiaoping was the political leader, the distribution of this canonical work entailed a large portion of compulsory purchases by official and educational institutions. Even so, the sales record was much lower than that of *WSWJ*, whose total sales up to 2003 reached 100,000 copies. Seeing the great popularity of this four-volume collection, people even jokingly called it “sijuan,” a word once used for Mao Zedong’s famous four-volume collection. A revolutionary symbol was ironically juxtaposed with a representative of consumerism. The high sales record of *WSWJ* also brought Huayi remarkable profits. As Jin Lihong recalled, the first Audi automobile owned by the publisher was the direct outcome of these successful sales. Together with some other successful publications, Huayi’s status as a producer of bestsellers was established.

Huayi’s promotional strategies for its publications further proved its understanding of not only market principles but also of cultural conventions. Huayi astutely created a publicity bandwagon to promote its publications and its operations progressed from supplying public demand to creating and stimulating it. For example, it organised a launch campaign for the release of the book in Beijing. Posters with words such as “[I will] let you have a good look at me” (Rang ni yici kan ge gou) were easily available on streets. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Huayi successfully targeted other forms of media to promote its authors as pop stars. Although the campaign for Wang Shuo

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398 Sheryl Wu Dunn argues that, “Chinese publishers often run small printings, partly to slip by the censors and partly to avoid large financial losses if the books do not sell.” Sheryl Wu Dunn, *ibid.*, p.23.


400 It is also the first time for Chinese writer in post-Mao China to be paid royalties. Wang Shuo asked for the royalty payment and the Huayi Publishing House agreed to pay him at a rate of 10 percent.

401 It was even entitled the “dream factory” for bestsellers. You Yun, “Jin Lihong: wan de jiushi mingren.”
was held on a rainy day, thousands of Wang Shuo’s fans came to see him and buy the book with the author’s autograph.\footnote{From my interview with Jin Lihong in January 2004.}

Huayi was particularly aware of the role of public debates in increasing the publicity of its publications. While Mao was adept at initiating public debates for ideological education and political infighting, post-Mao cultural institutions inherited this tradition to compete in the market. To increase the popularity and controversy of WSWJ, one of its main editors, Ni Bo appeared live on CCTV to debate another commentator about whether it was appropriate to publish a “selected work” (wenji) for Wang Shuo. Seeing the national controversy surrounding Wang Shuo as an opportunity, Huayi soon published another book on Wang Shuo, *Wang Shuo in the Eyes of Celebrities (Mingren yanzhong de Wang Shuo, 1993)*, a compilation of celebrities’ views on Wang Shuo. Aware that celebrities are the focus of public attention the collection of their opinions on the controversial writer is undoubtedly appealing for readers.

Other publishers and newspapers were also aware of the significance of controversy in enhancing publicity and engaged in the market to exploit the controversy and popularity WSWJ had brought about. As recorded by Donghui Li, at least two newspapers, *China Youth Daily* and *Beijing Youth Daily* started discussions of Wang Shuo and his works in January 1993. At the same time, the journal, *Controversial Literature and Arts*, organised a symposium on Wang Shuo’s works; *Critiques of Contemporary Writers* and published a special section “Collected Critical Writings on Wang Shuo” in March 1993. Within one year, at least seven books on Wang Shuo were published.\footnote{These books include: Zhang Dexiang and Jin Huimin, *Wang Shuo pipan (Critique on Wang Shuo)* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1993); Zhang Yi, ed., *Kan kan Wang Shuo (Smart-ass remarks about Wang Shuo)* (Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 1993); Xiao Sheng, *Wang Shuo pipan - wo shi liumang wo pa shui (Critique of Wang Shuo - I am a hooligan, whom do I fear)* (Hunan: Shuhai chubanshe, 1993); Gao Bo, ed., *Wang Shuo: dashi haishi pizi (Wang Shuo: A Master or a ruffian?)*}
discussion as an opportunity, some other anthologies of Wang Shuo’s works, such as *No Regret for Youth* (*Qing chun wu hui*) were soon put on the market.  

Besides the fact that many cultural issues raised by Wang Shuo warranted public discussion, many publications within this nation-wide debate were motivated by commercial concerns. Many works were produced for the mere purpose of stirring up *(chaozuo)* controversy and increasing market share. It helped boost Wang Shuo’s fame which then helped increase profit for other writers and publishers. Wang Shuo became a topic that directly concerned publishers, just as his stress on the business world directly affected most readers at that time. The writing contained in many articles and books in this nation-wide debate aimed to appeal to the public’s attention rather than serious academic discussion. As Donghui Li observes, many articles were authored by dubious pen names and were characterised by non-academic and colloquial aspects:

... the language revealed that the authors had not been formally schooled in critical writing; they contained many distortions of fact, inflammatory quotations, and intentional twists of meaning for achieving certain effects; the terms used strongly smacked of demagoguery; and the rhetoric was an echo of Wang Shuo’s, full of “tiaokan,” irony, sarcasm, humor, profanity, with a premium on Beijing colloquialism rather than standard Mandarin. Not to be omitted is the evidence of plagiarism, as passages after passages were found to be freely borrowed from other publications.

Such publications contributed to a so-called “Wang Shuo fever” (*Wang Shuo re*), which was a good example of the commercialisation in the Chinese publishing industry. Huayi represented the majority of the publishing houses of the time that experienced the transition from being mainly subsidised by government funds to surviving in the market.

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404 It is a collection of his works that were adapted into screen. *No Regret for Youth: Selected Works of Wang Shuo’s Film and Television Writing* (*Qingchun wuhui: Wang Shuo yingshi zuopin ji*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1993).


Conclusion

The transformation of the Chinese publishing industry impelled the development of commercially professional writing. As a result, a type of professional writing that was characterised by commercial concerns unfolded swiftly in the reform era and challenged the monopoly status of the socialist literary system. The popularity of Wang Shuo among readers signalled the advent of an era when a marginal outcast of commercial writing became a cultural celebrity.

Meanwhile, commercially-oriented writing was deeply influenced by the tradition of elite intellectuals and the official establishment. My discussion reveals conventional cultural habits behind both writers’ provocative self-promotion, and publishing houses’ marketing strategies in producing bestsellers. The intricate relationship between popular cultural products and the traditions of Chinese elite intellectual and political authorities is further discussed in the following chapter, with a focus on transition process on Chinese film and TV industries.
This thesis argues that as a representative of the new professional writers Wang Shuo embodies conflicts and concord between the newly emergent market force and influences from the conventional cultural establishment. Chapter 4 focused on the literary field while this chapter considers the emergence of film and television industries as the new professional writers ventured out of the restrictive protection of socialism and into the electronic media marketplace. As mediums, such as television and film, developed into key elements in the nascent Chinese cultural market, these writers took them as a new platform for commercial writing.

The linking of literature with other media was not new in China. Chinese literature has a long history of being linked with other types of art. Traditional Chinese fiction has been popularised largely through its integration with a diverse range of other art forms such as local opera, story-telling, comics, calendars and street parades. The integration of literature with other media ensures that even illiterate people are familiar with the story lines of significant literary works.

More recently, the availability of new technologies and new communication methods, such as television and film, enables a more sophisticated linking of products. Particularly during the era when a centralised state bureaucracy was established and systematic institutional networks developed, a highly intensified linkage among different areas came into being. As Joseph Esherick observes, the growth of state authority is not only reflected in the economy, where planning, rationing, price controls and industrial conversion are commonplace, but also in culture, the media and in the
mobilisation of civilians. During and after the civil war (1945-1949), within its controlled areas, the Guomindang government put effort into consolidating the media, which were later transformed and taken over by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Through its control of diverse media, the CCP was able to impart certain messages to the populace in a more efficient way. A typical example was the theatre/film/book propaganda of the story “White-haired Girl” in socialist China. Originally a magical tale about a white-haired goddess who can bring justice to ordinary people by punishing local oppressors, “White-haired Girl” was used by socialist cultural workers and altered to propagate the idea that “old society reduced humans to ghosts and new (socialist) society transformed ghosts into humans.” First transformed into an opera-drama (gewu ju) by artists in the Lu Xun Academy in Yan’an around 1946, “White-haired Girl” reappeared in book form in 1949, as a movie in 1950, and was converted into spoken plays, Peking opera and various regional operas during the 1950s. It was awarded a Stalin Prize in 1951 further adding to the political plaudits this multidimensional product had already earned.

The linkage among the various versions of multimedia products is manifest. However, causes of the multidimensionality of these works are diverse and worth exploring. State authority and political power as well as artists’ multidimensional interests can all facilitate the linkage. To understand why writers in the late 1980s and early 1990s actively participated in television and film industries, it is necessary to consider not only

408 Ibid., p. 13
409 “White-haired Girl” was originally a story about a white-haired goddess who can bring justice to ordinary people through punishing local oppressors, circulating as a magical tale during the 1940s in the countryside in northern China. Around 1946, artists in the Lu Xun Academy in Yan’an transformed it into an opera-drama (gewu ju). Realistic and revolutionary elements replaced original superstitious story line and a theme that “old society oppressed humans into ghosts and new society transformed ghosts into humans” was emphasised.
410 Bonnie S. McDougall and Kam Louie, The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century, ibid., p. 319
influences from the newly emergent market, but also the elite cultural and political establishment.

I borrow the concept “tie-in” from English scholar John Sutherland, who raised it in his pioneering academic research on bestselling fiction. By using “tie-in,” Sutherland located his research subject, bestsellers in the United State during the 1970s, within an essentially market-driven network crossing various industries. When LP records and myriad wall posters, comics, drinks, drink vessels, toy laser guns, models, board games all appeared around the same time and supported each other in the market, Sutherland called this phenomenon reciprocal “tie-in,” because alternative media versions of the original work or patented idea “support[ed] each other in creating a publicity bandwagon and a universal sales mania.”

“Tie-in” provided an inter-disciplinary perspective, through which Sutherland saw, for example, *Star Wars* as a logo created by “a whole thematic industry.” In the early 1980s, while film critics were severe with *Star Wars* and literary critics ignored it, the viewpoint of the tie-in relationship of various media versions assisted Sutherland to explore the dynamic productivity and marketing apparatus of the then book trade and cultural market.

The concept of “tie-in” is useful in discussing the “Wang Shuo phenomenon” not only because Wang Shuo’s works appear as film/television/book multimedia products but also because it elucidates the radical transformation within Chinese publishing, television and film industries that is argued to have led to the rise of “Wang Shuo fever.” In addition, I expand Sutherland’s discussion of “tie-in” by arguing that rather
than mere marketing incentives, in the Chinese case the combined influences from both the market and cultural and political establishment should be investigated in exploring the characteristics of “tie-in” phenomena. In the case of Wang Shuo, I find that the commercial “tie-in” business carries elements of the elite tradition of intellectuals and officials. The following discussion thus demonstrates my overall argument that Wang Shuo embodied the moment when established cultures and commercial culture merged with each other and thus typifies the ethos of China around the turn of the 1990s.

This chapter first delineates the transition of the Chinese cultural system from a state-controlled to more market-driven system. As the focus on economic reform gradually replaced the ideology of militant socialism, from the mid 1980s the government began to withdraw much of its support from various media, leading to the drastic transition of cultural institutions, such as film and television industries. Here I agree with Sutherland that the market forces are indispensable element for “tie-ins.” In the Chinese context, the commercialisation of these cultural institutions gave rise to their marketing incentives and thus the platform for the rise of “tie-in” business strategies.

The second part of the chapter centres on Wang Shuo, whose commercial success and great popularity was largely generated by the film and television “tie-ins” of his fiction. On the one hand, the commercialisation of various cultural institutions provided him with the platform to conduct his “tie-in” business strategy. On the other hand, Wang Shuo was among the first writers in post-Mao China to develop an advertising consciousness and intentionally exploit various media including newspaper, magazine, film, television, and even computer and internet technologies to stir up mass mania and

Sutherland argues that there are three main characteristics of the “tie-in,” namely, the linkage among various versions of a particular story; marketing incentives to encourage diversified versions of product; and incorporated operation of a diverse range of media outlets.
promote himself. The multidimensional products of Wang Shuo’s works were typical examples of “tie-in” business in the Chinese context of the 1980s and 1990s.

The third section of the chapter discusses another important aspect of the “tie-in” concept put forward by Sutherland: the incorporated operation of a diverse range of media outlets. While examining the operation of “tie-in” business in the American cultural market in the 1970s, Sutherland observed that the rise of “tie-ins” there correlated with the emergence of diversified giants at that time. In the Chinese context, inspired by the success of Wang Shuo, many writers and artists of the 1990s increasingly involved themselves in television and film industries to promote a synergy of books and television/film products. However, the immense size of the Western incorporated operation mainly controlled by conglomerate business organisations was still a rarity in the Chinese cultural market in the 1990s. The monopolistic state organisations went bankrupt as the market arose, while small business organisations were still immature to establish conglomerate operations. The commercialised official cultural institutions had some potential to form conglomerates, but the conflicting interests of the state and the market and the unpredictable policy shifts of the time often prevented them from establishing synergies.
Market forces are an indispensable element of "tie-ins." In the Chinese cultural context, the emergence of "tie-in" business took place in the broader development of a cultural market. This section centres on the major transition of Chinese culture from socialist to commercialised, which engendered the rise of a cultural market. I first argue that in the socialist era, the Communist Party’s monopolistic control over various official media outlets produced multimedia propaganda. I then move on to discuss the commercialisation in Chinese film and television industries and the rise of a cultural market. It was within this market that "tie-in" business developed.

A. Socialist Multimedia Propaganda

The socialist phase of Chinese cultural history grounded in the 1930s and lasted until the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. The Communist Party stressed the political and ideological use of culture and saw culture as another weapon for social engineering, nation-building and even in the arena of class struggle. With its control extended over various media, the Party strengthened its propaganda efficiency through linking various media. Especially after 1949, when the Party became the country’s only cultural authority and held monopolistic control over all official media outlets, the extent of this linkage reached its peak:

For nearly three years after 1949, newspapers, journals, magazines, periodicals, books, paintings, television, and radio broadcasting were all used as the mouthpiece of the government, inculcating and reinforcing loyalty to the party-state, indoctrinating socialist ideals in the masses, and mobilizing them for various political movements.

In addition, during the socialist period, the Party managed to monitor and control artists by establishing the official cultural organisations such as the Chinese Writers

Association (Zhongguo zuojia xiehui), the Chinese Film Workers Association (Zhongguo dianying gongzuozhe xiehui) and the Chinese Dramatists Association (Zhongguo xijujia xiehui). According to Perry Link’s research, the Chinese Writers Association provided Chinese writers with opportunities for employment and career advancement not only because of the various administrative positions it entailed but also because of its direct management over various literary newspapers and journals. It also organised various cultural activities to encourage writers to follow certain aesthetic and moral standards. Furthermore, it created a plethora of literary prizes at all levels and exerted indirect control over writers through a hierarchical system of patronage.\footnote{Link gives a comprehensive and detailed account of various aspects of socialist Chinese literary system. See Link, \textit{The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System} (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).}

Extending from Link’s observation, Shuyu Kong points out that, far more than a professional association that its title indicates, the Writers Association actually functioned as an official cultural bureaucracy mediating between the Communist Party’s Department of Propaganda and writers, and built a literary system that supported its own socialist ideals and fostered and trained a whole new generation of socialist writers.\footnote{Kong, \textit{Consuming Literature: Best Sellers and the Commercialization of Literary Production in Contemporary China} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 11-12.}

The function of the Film Workers Association, Dramatists Association and other cultural organisations was similar to that of the Writers Association. Together with the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (known in Chinese as Zhongguo wenxue yishujie lianhe hui or “Wenlian”), these associations formed an immense network for Chinese writers and artists. In this way, the Party for several decades created and sustained its monopoly over the patronage of writers and artists. These associations, to a certain degree, served as the exclusive “work unit” of the vast majority of Chinese writers and artists. In other words, most Chinese writers and artists were transformed...
into state-controlled “cultural workers” (wenhua gongzuozhe) whose exclusive patron and employer was the Communist Party and the socialist state.

The term “cultural workers” was used to refer to anyone working in cultural fields in socialist China. It implied the blurring of the disciplines as writers and artists from different areas were supposed to work collectively to transmit certain party message to the masses. As shown in the case of the various versions of the story “White-haired Girl,” Chinese “cultural workers” in different areas were brought closer to each other than ever before. The term precisely defines social function of most artists in the cultural system manipulated by the state. This does not mean that all socialist artists were willing to accord with Party lines. Rather, what I am suggesting is that the Party enforced its cultural system to prohibit alternative voices and to ensure ideological conformity.

The compulsory nature of this propaganda “tie-in” is notable. Very often, the audience’s attendance at the performance of either the opera, drama or film version of such a story was obligatory. In urban areas, tickets for performances and films were allocated to factories, schools and various cultural institutions that were responsible for organising workers and students to come to receive education. In the countryside, it was local governors’ responsibility to organise peasants to attend such performances to receive political education. Moreover, socialist China until the late 1970s was largely isolated from the outside world, with the exception of a few socialist countries. Hence ordinary Chinese had little exposure to different ideologies or diverse entertainment forms. All they did hear and see, over and over again, was the prescribed messages of the Party.
The Party established a highly centralised and politicised cultural system through which the potential media exposure in mobilising the populace and in imparting Party prescribed information was realised. Due to its authority over various media, the Party was able to exploit various means and technologies, such as radio broadcasts, gramophone records, and posters and so on to highlight the importance of its prescribed works. As McDougall and Louie note, as the ideological struggle became the social focus during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the exploitation of media exposure also became intense:

Further publicity was given to the model works by television and radio broadcasts, gramophone records, posters, paintings and sculptures. Book publication and performances were prefaced with quotations from Mao Zedong’s works and, especially after repeated performances of the same work, the ancient ritualistic role of the theatre was re-invoked.\(^4\)

As a result of being raised to the status of a model (yangban), the long-established multimedia story “While-haired Girl” received further publicity during this era. One of the outcomes of this massive media exposure was that some dramatic stage lines with strong political flavour, such as “the old society reduced humans to ghosts and the new society transformed ghosts into humans” from “While-haired Girl” were incorporated into people’s daily life. They were frequently quoted in public speeches, news reports on radio, story lines of theatre characters and even evolved into a style of personal behaviour practised in family talks or recorded in one’s diary. To a certain extent, the boundaries between real life and propaganda were blurred through this massive exploitation of mass media.

The Party continued as the dominant political force in post-Mao China, and its control over the various media was maintained. However, when the emerging market forces started affecting various cultural institutions, the requirement of economic reform

gradually replaced the socialist ideology. From the mid 1980s, the state’s political and ideological interests were no longer the sole emphasis of multimedia cultural works. “Tie-in” businesses as defined by Sutherland – where marketing incentives encourage the emergence of diversified versions of a product – developed to a remarkable degree. Multidimensional literary products became prevalent, that is, a single piece of writing could be repackaged and adapted to appeal to numerous different markets through a variety of media outlets. Although the multidimensional form of these products in many ways resembled those of multimedia socialist propaganda, as a result of the reforms, marketing incentives became the main impetus of “tie-in” business. An investigation into the marketing incentives reveals a strong trend towards commercialisation of various Chinese cultural institutions and the great changes in Chinese artists’ attitudes towards culture and commerce. As the previous chapter discussed the transition within Chinese publishing, here I focus on commercialisation in Chinese film and television industries.

B. Commercialisation of the Chinese Film Industry and the Emergent “Tie-in” Business between Literature and Film

When the Communist Party assumed power in China, film’s main function was a “tool for ideological indoctrination.” 419 The number of films to be produced each year was allocated by the Ministry of Culture and film topics were prescribed. In 1979, fifty-two films were made nationally. This number was based on Chairman Mao’s reported wish for one new feature film each week. At the meeting of nation-wide directors, this number was confirmed and the topics of the fifty-two films were fixed at two-thirds on revolutionary or contemporary themes, with the remainder to be adapted from well-

known literary works.\textsuperscript{420} This state allocation of the number and topics of films to be produced annually undoubtedly guaranteed the efficient operation of the multimedia propaganda discussed above.

During the post-Mao era of the late 1970s, film studios were still funded by the government and were directed to make movies that could mobilise the masses for socialist modernisation and arouse patriotism. A whole genre of reform films, for example, was produced to promote the implementation of reform policies. In China, this type of film was called “keynote films” (zhuxuanlü yingpian), emphasising the propaganda function of cinema, and was mainly produced in line with state policies. Besides the “keynote films,” the other two notable types of films were “art films” (yishupian), also called “exploratory films” (tansuopian), and “entertainment films” (tongsupian). An analysis of the shifted interest from “keynote films” and “art films” to “entertainment films” illustrate the transformation of the film industry.

By the mid-1980s, “art films” (yishupian) developed as notably as “keynote films.” As mentioned earlier, the 1980s was a period when elite intellectuals gained relative freedom and lofty discourse dominated the cultural scene. Partially as a result, “art films,” which were mainly produced by elite directors and targeted at small groups of highbrow audiences, became popular. The mainstream film directors and critics of the time drew much attention to the aesthetic and artistic aspects of films. Within this trend, movies made by Xie Jin, which to a degree followed conventional morality and suited both refined and popular tastes, were criticised as catering to a mass audience while neglecting artistic exploration.\textsuperscript{421} The pursuit of lofty idealism achieved a peak when the


director Wu Tianming said: “I’d rather a film not sell a single copy, just so long as the quality is good.”\(^4\) Another well-known director, Tian Zhuangzhuang, announced that he shot his movie for audiences of the next century to watch.\(^5\) The exploratory movie, Horse Thief, made by Tian Zhuangzhuang only sold seven copies in China.\(^6\) Obviously, the critical spirit and aesthetic aspects of art films were believed by elite directors to be opposed to the common audience’s wish to be entertained.

However, as the economic reforms proceeded, government financial support of film studios dropped steadily. Film studios were expected to operate as other economic units and pay attention to profitable production. Film producers received a direct push from the government to operate in the market. As government subsidies decreased, satisfying audience demands suddenly became important for film studios to survive. Directors and film studios were forced to seriously consider common audiences’ recreational desires. In addition, the emergence of popular music, popular fiction and the modern life style gradually affected people’s understanding and their expectations from movies.

However, neither the “keynote films” nor “art films” being produced were able to meet audiences’ demands. Partially as a consequence, between 1979 and 1991, movie attendance dropped by about half, from 29.3 billion to 14.4 billion.\(^7\) In 1986 only 20 per cent of movies returned their investment.\(^8\) The Chinese film industry faced a crisis.

As confessed by managers of five studios, the main task for studios at that time was to


\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Chris Berry, “Market Forces: China’s ‘Fifth Generation’ Faces the Bottom Line,” p.118.

\(^7\) Ni Zhen, Gaie yue zhongguo dianying (Reform and Chinese movies) (Beijing: China Cinema Press, 1994), p. 50. There are also other reasons for the decreased cinema attendance, for example, the availability of other form of entertainment. See Chris Berry, “Out of the West --- The rise of the Xi’an Film Studio,” China Screen (Beijing) 4 (1986), p. 34

\(^8\) “Dianying tizhi gaige chengwei jinpo keli” (The reform of the Film system has become an urgent issue), Wenhui news (shanghai), 23 November 1987.
attract audiences and get investment returned.\textsuperscript{427} Entertainment films (\textit{Yule pian}) thus regained film producers’ attention as the way to attract audiences back to cinemas.

The term entertainment films was formally adopted by a group of film critics in October 1986.\textsuperscript{428} It referred mainly to movies produced to satisfy audience entertainment demands and to win box-office success. To avoid adverse criticism aroused from conventional distaste of commerce, Li Tuo suggested the term “entertainment films” instead of “commercial films,” although it was agreed that commercialism was an inseparable and important element in entertainment film production.

The discussion of entertainment films in the theoretical field was a reflection of the rise and boom of entertainment films in practice. From the mid-1980s, \textit{kung fu (gongfu)} films, detective films and other forms of entertainment-oriented films flooded mainland Chinese cinema. In 1988 around 80 “entertainment film” were produced, totalling 60% of all movies produced in that year.\textsuperscript{429} It was said that the “fever” for exploratory films of the earlier few years was giving way to “entertainment films fever.”\textsuperscript{430}

Shooting entertainment films was further supported by the government. In late 1988 Chen Haosu, the vice-minister in the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television in charge of the film industry stated, “the prospect for Chinese cinema in the next decade or so is to emphasise the following aspects: social significance, artistic quality and

\textsuperscript{427} “Dianying changzhang rushi shuo” (Managers of film studios said so), \textit{Dazhong dianying} no. 3 (1989), pp. 4 -5.
\textsuperscript{430} Chris Berry, “Market Forces: China’s ‘Fifth Generation’ Faces the Bottom Line,” p. 121.
entertainment value. The third should be the priority when approaching the first two.''

A few months later Teng Jinxian, the head of the Ministry’s Film Bureau, acknowledged that, of the three categories of films Chen identified as the focus of the film industry, the first and second would require continued government subsidy. Only the third broad category of films, entertainment films, would be about to survive in the market.

The increased interest in entertainment films demanded suitable scripts. It was in this context that the film “tie-ins” of Wang Shuo’s stories prospered. Four of Wang Shuo’s novellas were developed for the screen by four directors in the year 1988. As Dai Jinhua observes, all the four directors were “elite intellectuals.” Why then did these four elite directors choose Wang Shuo’s popular stories to develop into movies? One of the reasons lies in the fact that Wang Shuo’s stories enabled them to pursue aesthetic goals while at the same time accommodating the demands of common audiences.

Wang Shuo’s stories were popular among readers at the time. Mi Jiashan, the director from the E Mei Film Studio explained the reasons why he decided to direct The Operators (Wanzhu, also known as The Trouble Shooters in English). Besides his personal appreciation of Wang Shuo’s works, “simply put, box office” was the main concern he chose Wang Shuo’s story. “Wang’s subject matter revolved around young urbanites and their travails; as it happens, in China, the largest segment of filmgoers

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433 The four movies are Half Flame, Half Brine (Yiban shi huoyan, yihan shi haishui), based on Wang Shuo’s story with the same title and directed by Xia Gang’s; Samsara (Lunhui), based on Wang’s story “Rising to the Surface of Ocean” and directed by Huang Jianxin; Deep Breath (Da chuanqi), based on Wang’s story “Rubber man” and directed Ye Daying; and The Operators (Wanzhu), also known as The Troubleshooter, based on Wang’s story with the same title and directed by Mi Jiashan.
According to audience feedback, Wang Shuo’s stories met their expectation. In a forum on “Wang Shuo films” attended by staff from several factories in Shanghai, a worker from a textile factory reported that only Wang Shuo films could motivate all his colleagues to attend the movie sessions sponsored by the factory.

Nevertheless, Wang Shuo’s stories allowed the directors to explore the deeper feelings of characters and pursue aesthetic goals. As a viewer said, Wang Shuo’s films seemed to be different from other popular films that depended on violence or sexual scenes to attract audiences. Rather than “vulgar” violent or sexual scenes, the urban life in Wang Shuo’s stories could be interpreted as symbols for the drastic social and ideological transformations. The characters thus enabled directors to explore the complicated psychology of young urbanites and social issues. In fact, the director Mi Jiashan sees the story, The Operators as “a deep criticism of Chinese society.” His anticipation that this film would help viewers to develop a rebellious consciousness toward tradition was obviously an elite discourse. The award presentation ceremony in the movie, for example, can be interpreted as a reflection of the hotchpotch nature of contemporary Chinese society. Similarly, the added ending of the movie “Samsara” -- the hero’s suicide (adapted from the story “Rising to the Surface of the Ocean” by Huang Jianxin) -- shows director Huang’s pessimism regarding young entrepreneur’s fate in the commercialised society. Being able to fulfil directors’ dual pursuit for both elite and economic purposes, Wang Shuo’s urban stories became popular.


Guanyu “Wang Shuo dianying’ de taolun” (Discussions on “Wang Shuo films”), Wenhui bao (Wenhui news), 3 Apr. 1990, p.4. Traditionally, Chinese viewed movie industry a part of superstructure. Movie theatres were places where ideological messages were transmitted through the medium of motion pictures. Therefore, factories often organised film sessions for workers to have spiritual education. For more on the status of Chinese movies, see Paul Clark, Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987).


In fact, while Wang Shuo’s urban stories contributed to a new type of writing depicting the Chinese society in transition,⁴³⁹ the success of their film “tie-ins” reflected the rise of a new type of urban films. Many other films produced around the same time had a focus on describing urban lives, such as Rock’n Roll Youth (Yaogun qingnian, 1987), Add some Sugar to the Coffee (Gei kafei jia dian tang, 1987) and The Price of Being Crazy (Fengkuang de daijia, 1988). Even the titles of these films suggest different themes to the films produced in Maoist China that boasted titles such as Steel Soldier (Gangtie zhanshi, 1950), Youth in Flames of War (Zhanhuo zhong de qingchun, 1959), and Heroic Sons and Daughters (Yingxiong ernü, 1964) and so on. These different titles demonstrate that the emphasis of films changed from patriotism and heroism to urban themes. Stories or films with a theme of urban life satisfied many Chinese who experienced the unprecedented process of commercialisation and urbanisation in the 1980s and 1990s.

C. Commercialisation of the Chinese Television Industry and the Emergent “Tie-in” Business between Literature and Television

In comparison to the film industry, Chinese television production played a far more active role in encouraging Chinese cultural commercialisation. Generally speaking, no other medium is so closely identified with production of popular culture as television, with its operation directly under the impact of the commodity economy in the cultural market. Anne Cranny-Francis notes that, “as a cultural practice, ... television is so immediately associated with popular culture, more so even than cinema and definitely more than music and literature.”⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁹ See Chapter 1.
In China, television was introduced no earlier than the late 1950s. Ideologically, since its arrival, Chinese television had been considered a propaganda instrument of the Party. Similar to the broadcast radio and film industry, it was a type of cultural technology through which the Party attempted to consolidate its hegemony. Consequently, the programs produced by Chinese television stations mainly disseminated Party-prescribed information. In 1970, despite China having 30 urban television stations, broadcasting consisted largely of news bulletins and model Beijing operas.\(^{441}\) During the 1980s, the prevailing television programs were still official news and information, educational programs and a little politically "correct" entertainment.

As a cultural industry, television developed mainly after Deng's reforms. As shown by James Lull and Michael Kean,\(^{442}\) the Chinese television industry was of paramount significance in discussing cultural commercialisation in Deng's era. Television was one of the earliest industries in the broadcasting field to undertake a process of commercialisation and marketisation. Soon after the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee at which Deng Xiaoping declared that the primary task of the party should shift to economic development, Chinese television was opened to private investment. On 28 January 1979 the first advertisement was broadcast on Shanghai Television.\(^{443}\) The first advertisement for a foreign product appeared two months later. By November 1979 the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee had sanctioned media advertising.

The ratification of advertising and the opening to private investment of Chinese television were obviously driven by Deng’s reforms. The issuing of the 1983 “four-tier policy” (siji ban) was a watershed event further pushing Chinese television towards commercialisation. The policy specified four levels of development -- national, provincial, prefectural and county -- and, in the words of Wu Lengxi, the then minister of Chinese Broadcasting, aimed to attract local investors to the industry and to expand the reach of television. In order to reduce state funding, the government was keen to get various social groups and local authorities involved in the broadcasting field with their own financial resources. As Huang noted, “for the first time, economic performance became a necessary condition of entry into the broadcasting field; in other words, it is financial power that is now given sanction to run the service.”

With the financial support of the central government drying up, private investment became more and more important for television stations and studios. In addition, securing the attention of audiences became important, as this actually determined whether television producers could obtain the support of investors and attract advertising. Consequently, the audience changed from being the target of television producers’ education campaigns to consumers.

Partly because of their ability to attract audiences, foreign programs blossomed. The proportion of foreign programs screened by major television stations rose sharply after 1980, and business concerns were the main momentum behind this. As elsewhere, importation of foreign programs was a substitution for domestic programming, since it

445 While at the same time states continued to provide technological investment and funding for infrastructure. Keane, ibid.
usually costs less than producing one's own programs. For China, it was an especially efficient way to fill up channels because at that time Chinese television stations generally had low capacity to produce their own programs.

The importation of foreign television programs also indicated a shift in the direction of central cultural policies. The protectionist and self-reliant cultural policies prevailing in China before the mid-1960s resulted in very limited television imports. This limited number dwindled further during the Cultural Revolution when China was virtually cut off from the outside world. Prior to the 1980s most foreign programs originated from other socialist countries and were mainly educational programs. However, from the 1980s China started to import television programs from the United States, East Asia (e.g., Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong), and Western Europe (e.g., U.K., West Germany). Since the 1980s entertainment programs multiplied. For the first time, through television technology, Chinese viewers could have access to foreign soap dramas, cartoons, movies, sports and other entertainment genres.

Both viewers and Chinese television officials agreed that foreign television programs were “more entertaining,” “more relaxing,” “more varied,” and “better produced.” Compared to foreign-produced television series, the domestic serial dramas were viewed as “tedious tales of party officials and social injustices.” Similar to the film industry where the “keynote films” and “art films” dominated before the influx of entertainment films, domestic Chinese television series could mainly be classified into two groups: the “realist series” (xianshijiu) or “keynote series,” and the “historical series” (lishijiu). As indicated by the title, the “historical series” “dealt with epic

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448 Joseph Man Chan, “Media Internationalisation in China,” p.73.
449 Wang Yunman, “Gang-Tai he dalu tongsu lianxu ju bijiao” (A Comparison of Mainland and “Gang-Tai” television serial dramas), Yishijia (Artists), no.6 (1990), pp. 86-87.
450 Keane, “Television, the Market, and State Management of Culture in Urban China,” p.216.
themes and the lives of great leaders and patriots.” According to You Xiaogang, the “historical series” needed to adhere to CCP historiography. Similarly, the “realist series” or the so-called “keynote series” were expected to carry the weight of China’s social reform agenda. Generally speaking, the government had more direct influence over the subject matter of these two types than audience preferences. Not surprisingly, they were less capable of attracting audiences than foreign entertainment programs such as soap operas.

In response to the challenges posed by foreign programs and, more significantly, to attract private investment through increasing the rate of television viewing, Chinese television had to transform its programming. The great popularity and very low production costs of some foreign soap operas encouraged Chinese television producers to make native Chinese television series. From the mid-1980s there was a major increase in locally produced television series - the number rose from 2000 episodes in 1985 to almost 8000 in 1997.

The growth in demand for television series by the late 1980s and early 1990s led to a serious shortage of qualified script and screenplay writers and thus promoted literature’s “tie-in” with television. One solution was to adapt classic Chinese novels. Audiences

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452 Foreign soap operas were received enthusiastically by Chinese audiences in the 1980s, and were regarded to as popular television series (tongsu dianshiju). The first encounter of Chinese viewers with popular television series occurred when the Japanese drama series A Doubtful Blood Type (Xueyi) was broadcast in 1980. Later on, there came Hong Kong kungfu series, including Huo Yuanjia, broadcast in 1982. It was said that these popular television dramas created a rush among viewers to purchase television sets. Later on, Latin American television series such as Isaura the Slave (Nűnu) (1984) from Brazil, and The Rich Also Cry (Kanke) (1986) from Mexico, as well as Taiwanese series such as Stars Know My Heart (Xingxing zhi woxin) (1988) were all welcomed by Chinese viewers. See also James Lull, China Turned on: Television, Reform and Resistance; and Jianying Zha, “China’s Popular Culture in the 1990s,” William Joseph ed., China Briefing, the Contradictions of Change (Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe, 1997).

453 Yang Weiguang, “Qiandiao jingpin yish ,ba tigao dianshiju zhliang fang zai shouwei” (Strengthen the awareness of high-quality products, put the quality of television drama on a higher priority), Dianshi yishu, no.5 (1995), p. 9.
welcomed adaptations of novels such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng*, 1987) and *Journey to the West* (*Xiyu ji*, 1988).

The other source for television scripts came from contemporary literature. For example, the historical novel *Yongzheng Huangdi* (*The Emperor Yongzheng*, 1991), written Ling Jiefang (better known by his pen name Eryuehe), was adapted into the series *Yongzheng wangchao* (*Yongzheng Dynasty*). While the book did not attract much attention in the first place, the series was said to have been watched by 100.8 million people and greatly promoted the sales of the book. As a result, two other novels in Eryuehe’s Qing Emperor trilogy were adapted for television and were followed by many other historical dramas.

Moreover, many literature writers were involved in writing for television. They contributed greatly to the development of Chinese popular television series at this stage in its development. Wang Shuo is an outstanding example of this phenomenon. He was the script-writer for several television series of this time, including *Yearning* (*Kewang*, 1989), the first Chinese soap opera, and *Stories from an Editorial Board* (*Bianjihu de gushi*, 1991), the first Chinese sitcom.

*Yearning* was hailed by many as a “watershed event in Chinese television.” The success of this series indicated the coming of a new era in television writing. This fifty-episode serial was conceived by a group of writers and the script was accomplished by teamwork. As Jianying Zha reports, the script was based on several intense “script talk sessions,” involving a team of authors that included novelists Wang Shuo and Zheng Wanlong, script editor Li Xiaoming, director Zheng Xiaolong and Beijing Television.


Arts Centre (BTAC) director Chen Changben. This group gathered in a hotel suite and designed a story intended to appeal to a large audience.\footnote{Zha, \textit{ibid.}, pp.118-119.} The results of their discussions were then compiled by Li Xiaoming and polished by two unknown writers. It was said that this was the first time in the post-Mao era that a mass production method was used to generate a television series script.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p.122.}

This teamwork method can be seen as Chinese writers’ collective efforts in experimenting with a new type of television writing. Notably, this experimental effort embodies influences from tradition. One interesting point that largely escaped Zha’s analysis is the similarity of this teamwork method to the “collective creation” (ji
ti chuangzuo) that was popular during the Maoist era. Although now applied to post-Mao television drama writing for the first time, teamwork was nothing new for Chinese writers and artists. Interestingly, “collective creation,” the strategy created in Maoist China to nullify individual creativity and to ensure unity along the Party line, was now voluntarily employed by writers and artists in the post-Mao era to maximise profit.

Nonetheless, while adopting “collective creation” as a means of television writing, the newly emergent professional artists departed from the Maoist “cultural workers” (wenyi gongzuozi) as most of them discarded their moral mission and considered themselves producers of cultural commodities. Lu Xiaowei, the director of \textit{Yearning}, understood television series simply as a form of entertainment and all he was concerned about was to produce something that “can put bums on seats.”\footnote{Zhong Yibin and Huang Wangnan, eds., \textit{Zhongguo dianshi yishu fazhan shi} (The history of the development of Chinese television arts) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1994), p.370.}
The efficiency of teamwork in television production was demonstrated by the success of *Yearning*. It was said that the number of viewers of this series reached approximately 900 million and when it was broadcast very few people could be seen on the streets.\(^{459}\) This was the first homegrown television serial that stopped a nation. Consequently, teamwork soon became a common practice in the Chinese television industry.

The practice of teamwork in television production accelerated the commercialisation of literature and its tie-in with television. A new relationship based on common interests in attracting audiences and gaining profits was thus established between television and literature. Well-known writers such as Wang Shuo, who were seen as capable of making popular television series, were sought after by many television producers and investors. The marketability of Wang Shuo was reflected by CCTV’s unprecedented purchasing of the exclusive rights to the series *I Love You Absolutely (Aini meishangliang, 1992)*, for which Wang Shuo was the principal script writer, for 3.5 million yuan.\(^{460}\)

The commercial trend of Chinese television strengthened along with the increased popularity of television series in society. Investment in television production by private enterprise rose. While popular television series became increasingly useful as a means for private enterprise to attract customers, investors’ sponsorship and advertising revenue also helped television stations filled the gap left by the reduced state subsides. Market forces became a major impetus for the development of the Chinese television industry. Even the timing of broadcasts became a criterion for setting prices for the series “commodity,” since it had direct bearing on the likely size of audiences. Accordingly, the concept of primetime (*huangjin shiduan*, known as golden time in

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\(^{460}\) Zhang Xiaomei, “Huashuo Zhongguo dianshiju” (Talking about Chinese television drama), interview with Deputy-director of Central Television Drama Production Unit, Chen Hanyuan, *Dianshi yuekan (Television Monthly)*, no. 10 (1993), p. 4.
Chinese, usually from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m.) was introduced. In 1995 CCTV’s adverting schedule for primetime series was 27,000 yuan (US$ 3,175) per 30 seconds.  

**Wang Shuo: the Tide-Rider of “Tie-in” Business**

As demonstrated above, with the commercialisation of Chinese cultural institutions, a common interest in profit replaced the revolutionary socialism in linking various media. According to Sutherland’s definition of “tie-in,” in which market forces are the indispensable element, the foundation for a “tie-in” relationship between literature and other media occurred in China. However, was the “tie-in” phenomenon a product of pure profit motive or the embodiment of mixed influences from both the emergent market and the remnant cultural tradition? Some artists’ innovative exploitation of electronic mass media advanced the development of “tie-in” business in China and at the same time revealed commercial culture’s incorporation with elite cultural traditions in the marketplace.

Wang Shuo was one of the first and most outstanding Chinese writers to benefit greatly from the huge new markets and promotional potential of new media. Early in 1988, he was only considered to be a popular writer of several novellas, who received little attention from literary critics. Overnight, he became a “star” after four of his novels and novellas were simultaneously put on screen. As a result, some media critics dubbed 1988 the “Wang Shuo year” (Wang Shuo nian). Even elitist critics could not ignore him, as they had done with most other popular writers. They began a heated debate over whether Wang Shuo’s works could be called literature, and whether he was truly a writer or simply a hooligan. Apart from the controversy surrounding his works and

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461 He Shuiming, “Yingshi jie zhulu huangjing shiduan” (The cinematic and television pursue the golden time), Zhongguo shanghao (China business news), October 1995.
462 For example, the term appears in Dai’s article. See Dai Jinhua, “Ideology, Wang Shuo, 1988.”
463 See chapter 1 for a detailed description and analysis of the debate.
personality, Wang Shuo became one of the most popular figures of the 1988 Chinese cultural scene.

Although, as I have argued in the preceding section, the commercialisation of the Chinese film industry and the similarities of Wang Shuo and the four directors’ aesthetic preferences contributed to the formation of the so-called “Wang Shuo year,” these movie “tie-ins” demonstrated to Wang Shuo the significance of media publicity in attracting audiences and readers, and inspired his own willingness to use film, television and other electronic mediums. While many Chinese writers were involved in “tie-in” business to a certain extent in the 1980s and 1990s, Wang Shuo was a notable pioneer as he deliberately exploited media for promoting his works including film, television, computer software and website and even setting up a business for writing.

Starting in 1989, Wang Shuo enthusiastically involved himself in the emerging industry of television series production. In 1989 he was one of the script writers of the first Chinese soap opera produced by the Beijing Centre for Televisual Art (BCTA), *Yearning*, which created extraordinary enthusiasm among Chinese audiences. He then teamed up with Feng Xiaogang and worked on the 1991 satirical series *Stories from the Editorial Board*. These two television series made “Wang Shuo” a household name.

Other major television series that he participated in writing included *Sea Horse Dance Hall (Haima gewuting, 1993)* and *I Love You Absolutely*, both produced by the Sea Horse Creative Studio for Film and Television Production (*Haima yingshi chuangzuoshi*) established by Wang Shuo.464

464 Besides these series that were written directly for television, some of Wang Shuo’s other works were continuously adapted into television and movies. For example, his love story *Live Fast, Die Happily (Guo ba yin jiusti)* was adapted into a popular television series *Play Highly (Guo ba yin)* (1994). Even in 2002, the experimental director Li Shaohong was still interested in the story and adapted it into a movie entitled, *I Love You (Wo ai ni)*. A 1994 film, *Gone forever with my love (Yongshi wo ai)* directed by Feng Xiaogang combines the plots of two of Wang Shuo’s novellas, *The Air Hostess (Kong zhong xiaojie)* and
Film and television were the major and most successful media that Wang Shuo exploited for “tie-ins.” But his entrepreneurialism was not limited to the film/television industry. After over six years’ break from writing, he made a comeback with a novel, Looking Beautiful (Kan shangqu hen mei) in 1999. Although the novel was said to have disappointed most readers, a unique promotional campaign tied-in with computer technology, together with his previous high reputation, guaranteed large print runs. Apart from obligatory advertisements in major newspapers, the promotional campaign for Looking Beautiful by Huayi Publishing House included unique packaging with an attached CD-ROM. Through transforming his self-selected works from unmoving printed texts in books into flickering computer screens, Wang Shuo acknowledged and exploited the popularization of computers in China. In cooperation with director Ye Daying, he also established the website “Culture in China” (Wenhua zai zhongguo) in 2000. He regularly logged on to the website and chatted with on-line surfers.

In short, as examined, Wang Shuo was outstanding among Chinese writers for his exploitation of new media with the clear intention of benefiting his career and profits. He successfully laid a trail that demonstrated to all writers the power of new media for promoting their works. He “show[ed] a way that promised not only survival but also a measure of prosperity, and in 1990s China the intelligentsia...increasingly overcame their reluctance and jumped on the Wang Shuo band wagon.”

Gone forever with my love. It was said that Wang Shuo also tried to shoot films as a director. With the assistance of Feng Xiaogang in early 1996, he developed his novel I am Your Dad (Wo shi ni baba) for the screen. The film was banned by Chinese government but was awarded the top prize, the Golden Leopard, in the 53rd Locarno Film Festival in 2000. In the past few years, the film has been available in the Chinese market, with the revised title The hostiles, father and son (Yuanjia fiizi) The first run of each of the three books being 200,000 copies.

465 The first run of each of the three books being 200,000 copies.
466 Around the same time when his cultural criticism collections The Ignorant Fear Nothing (Wuzhizhe wuwei) and She Put Me to Sleep with a Potion (Meiren zengwo menghanyao) were published, some of his articles in the collections were circulating broadly on internet.
467 Barmé, In the Red, p.97
Wang Shuo challenged the elitist traditions of modern Chinese intellectuals not just because he engaged with the film and television industries, but also because he provocatively emphasised the profitable aspects of mass electronic media. He intended to draw people’s attention to his engagement in electronic media production. For example, talking about the four films that were all adapted from his stories in 1989, Wang Shuo overstated his marketing consciousness by asserting that “the “Wang Shuo dianying nian” (Wang Shuo Film Year) was completely a result of conscious promotion: “At that time, I had already been aware of the necessity to make use of mass media.” He also announced that he simply considered television as a means of advertisement and thus engaged in television writing: “I realised the power of mass media very early. I didn’t have the money to advertise my books (on television or in newspapers). So I decided to make myself into a celebrity, and then the mass media would advertise me for free!”

In an exaggerated way, he underlined the link between money-making and media writing. As he himself puts it, after completing several literary works, he felt like his brain was exhausted and was not sure when he would regain the inspiration for writing. He then told himself that the most urgent matter for the moment was to sell those completed works at a good price. He then considered film and television writing as a means to subsidise manuscript payments. Ignoring the cultural issues involved, Wang Shuo attributed the remarkable increase in the sales of his books to his publicity in various tabloids and to his involvement in television writing. He even drew attention to his chubby face as a symbol of his success.

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468 Wang Shuo, Wo si Wang Shuo. p.44.
469 Wang Shuo, Wuzhizhe wuwei, p. 18.
471 Ibid. pp. 18-19.
More provocatively, Wang Shuo confronted many elite intellectuals by exposing the self-proclaimed morality of intellectual groups as a sham. He mocked moral sayings like “Gentlemen see things in terms of righteousness and base people selfishness” (*junzi xiao yu yi, xiaoren xiao yu li*), arguing that the so-called “righteousness”cherished by “gentlemen” only served as shackles for young people. He blamed some older writers who, in his eyes, criticised young people’s commercial activities as a way of maintaining their own status in society as they no long could catch up with the new commercial trend.472

While the above demonstrates that Wang Shuo challenged the elitist tradition of Chinese intellectuals, I argue that he also inherited many aspects of the tradition of Chinese cultural and political elites while exploiting electronic media in the market. In other words, Wang Shuo was not merely in pursuit of profit -- he also embodied the cultural trend that saw elite cultural traditions incorporate commercial cultural elements.

First of all, as discussed in the previous chapter, Wang Shuo’s pursuit of profit followed the reform policy Deng’s government inaugurated. His use of the commercial potential of mass media also paralleled the trend of commercialisation of various Chinese cultural institutes that I delineated in the preceding section. Against this historical background, during the 1980s and 1990s the attitude of some writers towards electronic media such as film and television became ambiguous. Although they were afraid of “getting electrocuted,”473 many of them were attracted by the higher profit and greater popularity electronic media entailed. As indicated by the then popular expression “chudian” (getting electrocuted), the relationship between the vast majority of Chinese writer and

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472 Ibid. p. 17.
473 Liang Xiaosheng, *Zhongguo shehui ge jiuceng fengxi*, p. 290. “Getting electrocuted” (*chudian*) refers to writing for movies or television as “electricity” (*dian*) is part of the Chinese words for television (*dianshi*) and movies (*dianying*). See also Kong Shuyu’s analysis. Kong, *Consuming Literature*, p.173.
film/television industry was not very harmonious. However, after the mid-1980s, the transition of the socialist cultural system pulled the relationship between literature and electronic media closer. While directors and producers were seeking appropriate literary works to make into movies or television, some writers also utilised mass media for self-promotion and higher profits. Wang Shuo belonged to this trend among Chinese writers, and heralded it in a provocative way.

Secondly, as already noted in chapter 4, Wang Shuo was influenced by the radicalism characterising the traditions of Chinese political and cultural elites. The previous analysis shows that again he was determined to depart from the perceived image of elite intellectuals and highlighted film and television writing as a rebellious act in the Chinese intellectual world. This radicalism, together with an intense desire to attract attention, drove Wang Shuo to develop the personality of a “stirrer”. In this context, to “stir-up” (chaozuo) publicity means creating a distinctive public image, regardless of whether it is positive or negative. Being a controversial figure could often draw criticism but also earn quick popularity. This “stirring-up” promotion provided the model for many other cultural celebrities over the next few years to promote their fame even by negative media comment.

In addition, in legitimating film and television writing, Wang Shuo revealed a historical consciousness that characterised Chinese cultural and political elites. To defend his involvement in television and film industries, Wang Shuo asserted that, “writing is not the only form to express thoughts and feelings, other forms, such as audio and visual forms, are also very effective ... Every epoch has its leading media forms and the

leading media forms of the present epoch are film and television." Unmistakably, here the "present epoch" indicates a "new" era radically different from past periods, bringing "new tides" that cannot be resisted. The use of "epoch demands" in legitimating commercial writing reveals the influence on Wang Shuo’s thinking from a characteristic historical consciousness developed among modern Chinese intellectuals. In search of modernity, modern Chinese intellectuals departed from their predecessors and developed a new conception of time and history that "focused on the present as a dynamic flow of progressive change." For them, the "present time" or "our time" was always associated "with the implication that it is a time of breathlessly rapid changes and incessant innovation." 

In the reform era of the 1980s, the notion "epoch," like other notions such as "new" and "modern," was still prevalent among the Chinese educated elite. For example, the term "new epoch" (xin shiqi, also known as "new era") was a political concept officials used to refer to the period after the death of Mao, a period when Deng Xiaoping established his legitimacy by his "promise to embrace a rational, progressive and affluent world." Echoing this official embrace of the "new epoch," Chinese intellectuals took up as their historical mission the program of modernisation. This historical consciousness characterising Chinese cultural and political elites influenced Wang Shuo’s thinking.

Furthermore, Wang Shuo’s exploitation of electronic media inherited the tradition of Chinese political and cultural elites who were "preoccupied with more practical uses of

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475 Bai Hua, et. al., “Xuanze de ziyou yu wenhua taishi” (The freedom of choice and cultural situation), Shanghai wenxue, no. 4 (1994), pp.69-70.
literature” and art. Seeing electronic media as the “new tides” representing the spirit of the “epoch,” Wang Shuo engaged in film and television writing mainly in pursuit of publicity, fame and wealth rather than as a means of exploring the artistic nature of these media. While he differentiated himself from intellectual orthodoxy by making public his material and careerist concerns, his use of mass media as tools for achieving various goals parallels the mainstream Chinese literary tradition where writers, critics, officials and readers emphasised practical aspects of literature and art. While making a joke by imitating the Maoist language in describing the new electronic media as “powerful weapons” to “attack the enemy, destroy the enemy, unite the people and educate the people,” Wang Shuo inherited such pragmatism in the fields of literature and art.

To summarise, while the commercial writing that Wang Shuo advocated contained certain confronting elements that challenged Chinese intellectuals and the political establishment, the methods he used to promote commercial writing and the reasons that he presented to legitimate it owed a lot to the elite cultural and political tradition of communist China.

“Tie-in” Conglomerates and the Implications of “Tie-in” Business for Chinese Writers

According to Sutherland’s analysis, fiction’s “tie-in” with film, television and other entertainment industries resulted from the penetration of marketing forces into these various areas. Market power gave rise to the multi-media conglomerate business organisations and “tie-ins” were largely carried out or influenced by conglomerates.

479 Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature*, p. 323.
480 Link analysed major uses of literature by various parties in socialist China, *ibid.*, pp. 284-332.
482 Sutherland, *Bestsellers*, p.32.
In the entertainment industry, some conglomerates could simultaneously own publishing houses, television networks, recording companies and films studios. The conglomerate Gulf & Western, for example, owned Simon & Schuster, Pocket Books and Paramount in the early 1980s. This made it easier for Judith Rossner's *Looking for Mr Goodbar* to be published as a hardback by Simon & Schuster, as a paperback by Pocket Books, and produced as a film by Paramount. In a word, under the arrangement of conglomerates, thematic industries are often established and "vertical" or "synergistic" sequences can became common. A typical product of such conglomerate "tie-in" business was *Star Wars*. As a film product of Twentieth Century Fox, it also reached audiences with a range of book, pictorial and print items from the Ballantine and Random House division of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) conglomerate.\(^4\)

As evidenced from the example of Wang Shuo, the common interests of profit sought by the writer, film, television and publishing industries collectively led to the rise of the "tie-in" business in China. But did Chinese "tie-ins" also result from conglomerate business organisations? Have "conglomerate" business organisations become prevalent in the Chinese cultural scene? The following analysis shows that while the power of market forces engendered active interaction between literature and the film/television industry, the conditions for the advent of cultural conglomerates in China had not matured.

The case of Wang Shuo indicated that rather than the assistance of agents or planning by conglomerate organisations, individual writers' merchandising distinct and innovative experiments often played an important role in giving rise to multi-media...

“tie-ins” in China. Around the late 1980s, the Chinese cultural industry was at the beginning of the “new Long March” and lacked systematic operation. For example, in the new field of film and television writing, there were few measures to protect copyright and ensure proper payment of writers.\(^{484}\) The first Chinese Copyright Law (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhuzuoquan fa) was promulgated late in 1990, but in practice it was often ignored. According to the writer Liang Xiaosheng’s account, when his novella *Tonight, There is A Storm* (Jinye you baofengxue, 1983), which focused on the lives of educated youth, was adapted into a well-known television series in 1984, he received no payment. The same novella was again adapted into a movie. This time, he was paid a mere 700 yuan for the script writing.\(^{485}\)

It was individual writers’ initiatives that propelled the establishment of new regulations to adjust writers to the new situation. For example, Wang Shuo was one of the first writers who bargained with his writing and requested regulations to ensure the market value of his literary property. He was the first to call for the splitting of profits among all parties involved in the production according to fixed percentages.\(^{486}\) He also proposed the use of “market prices” (yijia) for scripts and screenplays based on the demand for and reputation of different writers.\(^{487}\) These initiatives represented a demand among writers for setting new standards of script fees to reflect the true commercial value of their literary works.

The strengthened relationship between literature, film and television was reflected by a flood of private and state-owned cultural institutions or film/television production

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\(^{484}\) Kong, *Consuming Literature*, p. 29.

\(^{485}\) Liang Xiaosheng, *Zhongguo shehui ge jieceng fengxi*, pp. 281-282.

\(^{486}\) See Zhou Yan, “Beijing wentian shachu yipi yijia zuojia” (Writers Asking for Market Prices Appear in Beijing), *Wenxue bao*, 16 July, 1992. According to this report, Wang Shuo himself, one of the hottest writers, was able to negotiate the enormous fee of ten thousand yuan for each television series episode that he wrote.

\(^{487}\) Kong, *Consuming literature*, p. 28.
companies in China since the early 1990s. The most successful of these cultural institutions or companies in the early 1990s was the Beijing Television Art Center (BTAC). As a subsidiary of the Beijing Broadcasting Enterprise Bureau, BTAC financed and produced television dramas and syndicated them for big profits to all national and local television stations. These institutions or companies sought to develop multi-dimensional cultural products to maximise their profits and to create alliances with other institutions and companies to smooth the process of adaptation and commercial exploitation. The establishment of “tie-in” conglomerates in mainland China thus became possible.

Nonetheless, the entertainment television and film industries were just emerging in China and even professional writers had not mastered the formula of creating hits in this area. For example, Wang Shuo, the producer of several hits in film and television industries, felt confused about what audiences really wanted when his television series *I Love You Absolutely*, into which he had put so much effort, failed to become a hit.

Cultural institutions or companies, even the most well-known ones, were not successful in finding the formula of conglomerate operation in the early stage of the Chinese cultural industry. One of the best-known cultural companies in the 1990s was Seahorse Creative Studio for Film and TV Production, which was funded by private businessmen and of which Wang Shuo was the manager. The Sea Horse Creative Studio attracted many famous writers including Wei Ren, Mo Yan, Su Tong, Liu Yiran and Liu Heng and produced the television sitcom *Sea Horse Dance Hall* and two movies *Leading A...*
The company’s blueprint was to establish a monopoly for film/television scripts around the country. To achieve the goal, the company planned to secure the rights to adapt literary works of all appropriate Chinese writers and to set up a streamline team that could produce scripts according to different formulas. The plan reflected the realisation of Chinese cultural entrepreneurs of the possibility for a mode of conglomerate management. Signing contracts with famous writers to obtain the right to adapt their works was undoubtedly effective as a way of monopolising the market for script writing. Employing streamline writing teams for adaptation also suited the formulaic aspect of popular culture.

However, The Sea Horse Creative Studio was a flop. The reasons for its failure are various, including the difficulty of attracting large-scale investment to dominate the script writing market. One factor contributing to its failure, which demonstrates the immaturity of Chinese “tie-in” conglomerate business, is an inability to set up formulaic writing teams. Formulaic writing is a useful method for pulp fiction and sitcoms as proved by the Harlequin bestsellers, “Xue Mili” series fiction and the many popular soap operas, such as Neighbours in Australia and Yearning in China. The success of formula writing in the “Xue Mili” series and Yearning demonstrates the possibility of setting up streamline production for script or screenplay writing. However, as a cultural company, The Sea Horse Creative Studio did not work out successful formulas and thus failed to instruct young writers in the way that the leading writer of “Xue Mili Writing... Both the two movies were banned. In 2000, four years later after the movie “Guo zhe langheibukan de shenghuo” was banned, Feng Xiaogang revised it and renamed it “Yisheng tianxi” (A sigh) which was shown in 2000. Wang Shuo, Wuzhizhe wuwei, pp. 25-30. In 1995, together with Ye Daying, Wang Shuo set up another company Shishi wenhua zixun gongsi (Current Affairs Cultural Consultancy).
While mainland Chinese artists were feeling their way in the burgeoning cultural market, numerous Hong Kong, Taiwan and even foreign cultural companies attempted to exploit the potential of this huge market. From the late 1990s, Qiong Yao brought her “tie-in” business to the mainland to reach broader viewers. In 1998, she organised a team integrating Taiwan and mainland actors, actresses and producers for the costume series *Princess Huanzhu* (*Huanzhu gege*, 1998). The serial was a blockbuster on Chinese television, receiving unprecedented popularity among Chinese viewers in mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities. Second and third sequels of the story followed and the fad of “princess television” emerged. The serial helped its actors and actresses to become fashionable stars.

In 2004, a new organization was formed in Shanghai -- the Zhongjie Cultural Communication Company. It evolved from the earlier production team organised by Qiong Yao for television production. The company’s executive He Qiong, Qiong Yao’s daughter-in-law, stated that the company was intended to continue shooting Qiong Yao television serials as well as creating new media stars. It also set up an art institute to train actors and actresses.

In Taiwan, early in 1968, with the assistance of the *Huangguan* publishing company that published most of her fiction, Qiong Yao set up the Phoenix (*Huomiao*) film studio to develop the potential tie-in business of her stories. In the 1980s, owing to her solid connections with various industries, Qiong Yao had successfully established herself as a profitable trademark, with various incarnations of her works ranging from publishers to film studios, recording companies, television stations and stars. Having established her own film and television studios, Qiong Yao managed to get most of her fiction adapted into movies and television series. Meanwhile, she also achieved the reverse process and through her close relationship with *Huangguan* turned successful television series scripts into best selling novels. See Zhu Yu, “Qiong Yao: wo shi yige biaozhun de mengxiangjia” (Qiong Yao: I am a dreamer), *Sina* website, http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/2001-09-11/56910.html visited on 4 Sep 2004.


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492 In Taiwan, early in 1968, with the assistance of the *Huangguan* publishing company that published most of her fiction, Qiong Yao set up the Phoenix (*Huomiao*) film studio to develop the potential tie-in business of her stories. In the 1980s, owing to her solid connections with various industries, Qiong Yao had successfully established herself as a profitable trademark, with various incarnations of her works ranging from publishers to film studios, recording companies, television stations and stars. Having established her own film and television studios, Qiong Yao managed to get most of her fiction adapted into movies and television series. Meanwhile, she also achieved the reverse process and through her close relationship with *Huangguan* turned successful television series scripts into best selling novels. See Zhu Yu, “Qiong Yao: wo shi yige biaozhun de mengxiangjia” (Qiong Yao: I am a dreamer), *Sina* website, http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/2001-09-11/56910.html visited on 4 Sep 2004.

As shown by these trendsetters, the future of establishing “tie-in” conglomerates in mainland China was promising. However, as noted above, obstacles still existed for the process of conglomeration. For example, although the commercialisation of various media in China was unmistakable, most cultural institutions, such as publishing houses, remained the property of the state and could not be purchased or easily integrated with private organisations.

In addition, while commercial tendencies existed, state censorship remained intact. Television/film production was not by any means a simple commercial venture separated from politics. For example, because of its occasional controversial reflections on contemporary Chinese society and its humorous satire of the political establishment, several works produced by the Sea Horse Creative Studio were banned. To lessen the risk, cultural companies often hesitated to combine to promote a cultural product in diverse genres at the same time. They would not use “tie-in” business to exploit a certain cultural product until it was shown to be both popular and acceptable to the state.

Moreover, pirated products impaired copyright and impeded the development of “tie-in” business. For example, the great success of the serial Princess Huanzhu encouraged Qiong Yao to turn it into a novel. She made a deal with the mainland Huacheng publisher; however, pirates in the mainland book market forced her to switch back to Huangguan in Taiwan.494

Conclusion

The transformation of Chinese publishing, film and television industries gave rise to

“tie-in” business. This provided some individual writers with opportunities to experiment commercial writing. The majority of Chinese writers/artists and reader/viewers would also have to adjust their attitudes toward what literature is and what is its relationship with other media and commerce. While the process of commercialisation was prevalent, as shown by the case of Wang Shuo and the obstacles for establishing Chinese “tie-in” conglomerates, traditions of cultural and political elites persisted and were merged with the new trend.
CHAPTER 6

WANG SHUO: BETWEEN POPULAR AND ELITE CULTURES

During the Maoist era, culture as a commercial commodity was marginalised and relegated to the background; after Mao’s death, however, it gradually became one of the norms of Chinese society. Indeed, the force of the emerging commercial culture led to a reconfiguration of the cultural structure in China. Wang Shuo, one of the key literary figures to contribute to the rise of commercial culture in publishing, film and television industries, provides apt illustrations of the dynamic and interactive relationship among various cultural forces in this ideological and institutional transition. Chapters 4 and 5 explored the transition through the production and distribution of Wang Shuo’s works. The following two chapters, 6 and 7, further investigate the intimate relationship among various cultural forces by analysing the works of Wang Shuo.

This chapter focuses on the blurred boundaries between elite and commercial cultures in Wang Shuo’s writing. As noted in chapter 2, during the decade after Mao’s death, the commercialised popular culture developed in parallel to the elite discourse. While the emergent cultural market amazed many ordinary Chinese, intellectuals were mainly obsessed with highbrow culture, cerebralism and the national modernisation project. Nonetheless, along with the process of the commercialisation, these two lines of development converged and crossed each other. This was not only evidenced by elite writers and artists’ engagement with the market but also in the juxtaposition of both elite and popular elements in the works produced by individual Chinese artists. Wang Shuo was one of the first and most notable figures who stood at the intersection of these lines. On the one hand, he embraced the market and considered urban youth instead of the highly educated, culturally refined readers as his target audience. On the other hand,
his writing could not be easily dismissed by elite critics as mere cultural commodities because it was clearly influenced by the elite intellectual tradition.

In the following pages, I examine the blurring of the boundaries between elite and popular cultures in three types of Wang Shuo’s writing: stories about urban youth, love stories and his television writing. The first section analyses the representation of intellectuals and urban youth in his writing. In his stories, Wang Shuo contrasts the image of “villain” intellectuals and “heroic” self-employed business people. Because of this type of writing, Wang Shuo attracted harsh criticism from intellectuals and in response he cultivated an image of a “rebel” against the intellectual group. Nonetheless, I argue that the villain image of intellectuals in fact reflects the fragmentation of the elite tradition of Chinese intellectuals in the reform era. The creation of the “villain” image of intellectuals actually reveals Wang Shuo’s concern about the elite tradition of intellectuals in a commercialised society. In addition, by creating the “heroic” entrepreneurs as the opposite to the “villain” intellectuals, he suggested a transformation of Chinese intellectuals by legitimating the desires of cultural entrepreneurs.

The second section examines the influence from the realist tradition of Chinese intellectuals upon Wang Shuo’s love stories. By comparing Wang Shuo’s “Rising to the Surface of the Ocean” (Fuchu haimian, 1985), with Qiong Yao’s Tranquil Dream (yilian youmeng, 1990), I show that although writing a love story for readers’ entertainment, Wang Shuo followed the elite tradition and persisted with realist writing. Furthermore, his use of writing as a way to express his literary views and to engage in the debates with others is consistent with the discursive tradition of Chinese intellectuals.

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495 Wang Shuo, “Fuchu haimian” (Rising to the surface of the ocean), Dangdai (Contemporary), no. 6 (1985). The story is also collected in Wang Shuo wenji (The collected works of Wang Shuo) (Beijing: Huayi chubanshe, 1992) vol.1.
496 Qiong Yao, Yilian youmeng (Tranquil dream) (Taipei, Huaguan chubanshe, 1990).
The third section examines influences of the elite tradition on Wang Shuo when he engaged in television script writing. In the latter stage of his career, Wang Shuo established himself as a popular writer not only in the literary field but also in the electronic media, especially television. Nonetheless, his secure status and the residual elitism led him overlook audience’s needs and despise popular cultural works.

Villains versus Heroes

One of Wang Shuo’s contributions to contemporary Chinese literature is that he provided portraits of the self-employed businessman, such as Shi Ba in his story “Rising to the Surface of Ocean,” Zhang Ming in “Half Flame, Half Brine” (Yiban shi huoyan, yiban shi haishui, 1986) and Yang Zhong, Yu Guan and Ma Qing, the three male heroes in “The Operators” (Wanzhu, 1987). Self-employed businessmen were the constituent part of the newly emergent social category, urban entrepreneurs, in the 1980s. As a member of this social stratum himself, Wang Shuo was among the first writers to depict the lives and feelings of these self-employed business people. Undoubtedly, this type of writing helped establish his fame as a writer, and young people especially welcomed Wang Shuo because in his writing they found a world familiar to them.

The rise of commercialisation and the emergence of the market provided new opportunities for Chinese from all walks of life to improve their economic situation and social status. In his writing, Wang Shuo voiced a desire of the newly emerging entrepreneurial class for a re-configuration of the social order and a re-distribution of


\footnote{See chapter 3’s discussion.}
power. Notably, his legitimisation of the activities of young business people went together with his criticism of intellectuals. In many of his stories, Wang Shuo contrasts the image of “heroic” young entrepreneurs with “villainous” intellectuals. For example, in the story, “The Operators,” Wang Shuo juxtaposes the images of honest and diligent self-employed urban youth with hypocritical intellectual characters.

“The Operators” is a story about three Beijing youths, Yang Zhong, Yu Guan and Ma Qing, who run a problem-solving enterprise called Three T Company. “Three T” (san ti), in Chinese, stands for the three purposes of the company, that is, to solve troubles for others, to relieve tedium for others and to take the blame on other’s behalf. Wang Shuo’s re-definition of elites and villains unfolds through these three young men’s encounters with several intellectuals who present themselves as customers. One of the intellectual customers is the writer Bao Kang, who complains that although he is a good writer, he has not been recognised and thus asks Three T to organise a ceremony and award him a prize. As the story proceeds, it becomes clear that while he claims to be a good writer, Bao writes little more than stories that appear in quasi-pornographic journals. The tedious speech Bao makes at the ceremony further proves his poor literary talent, excessive conceit and indifference to his audience. On the other side, through showing how the Three T “masters” work hard to organise the ceremony and their sincerity in serving others, the story indicates the author’s preference for the young entrepreneurs.

When the story was adapted into a film by Mi Jiashan, an added episode is notable for its stark contrast between the “villainous” intellectuals and “heroic” entrepreneurs. An intellectual customer comes to Three T for assistance in looking after his dying mother.

499 Wang Jing’s translation, Wang Jing, High Culture Fever, p.274.
in the hospital. While he claims he is a filial son, this intellectual transfers his responsibility to take care of his mother to the Three T operators for a very low fee. The film shows how Yang Zhong, Yu Guan and Ma Qing take shifts to nurse the old lady all day and all night, while the intellectual seldom comes to the hospital. In addition, after the old lady commits suicide due to her unbearable pain and the trouble she causes for others, the intellectual blames her death on the “carelessness” of the young businessmen. Using this as a pretext, he demands a large amount of compensation from Three T.

While highlighting the “heroic” images of young entrepreneurs and urban youth, Wang Shuo provides a negative vision of intellectual characters. Even in his love story, “Gone Forever with My Love” (Yong shi wo ai, 1989), an ordinary urban youth He Lei is morally superior to an editor. In one scene of the story, He Lei rushes into a burning building to save those trapped in it while the editor (and intellectual) is shown to be concerned only with saving himself. In addition, the editor takes He Lei’s self-sacrifice for granted and urges him to save documents from the fire when he himself runs away. Through the scene, Wang Shuo highlights the editor’s disregard for others and places knowledge (the symbol of the elite culture) in an opposition to human life (the values of ordinary people). The story thus expresses the author’s criticism of Chinese elite intellectuals’ indifference to ordinary life. While the image of intellectuals is besmirched, the urban youth character is turned into a hero with the spirit of sacrifice.

The appearance of the negative vision of intellectual characters reveals a decline in the social prestige of the elite discourse. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the heroic image of intellectuals prevailed in mainstream literature and other media, as intellectuals themselves dominated cultural outlets of the time. However, the rise of the market promoted a multitude of cultural choices and an alternative version of the
I agree with scholars who view the popularity of these negative intellectual images as a display of ordinary people’s distrust of intellectuals. In addition, I suggest that it was the cultural entrepreneurs, the writers and producers of these images, who expressed and helped to legitimise this popular sentiment. Their creation of the villainous intellectual images was not only inspired by the popular sentiment, but also influenced by the intellectual elite tradition itself.

Wang Shuo (also an important script writer for *Yearning*) played an outstanding role in challenging the established reputation of intellectuals. He publicly debated the intelligentsia by provocatively advocating commercialisation of writing and deriding the self-assumed social responsibilities of the intellectual group. In addition, in his fiction, he continued to call into question the integrity of Chinese intellectuals by portraying them as villains. Another outstanding example is found in his story, “Nothing Serious” (*Yidian’er zheng meiyou*, 1989), a sequel to “The Operators,” in which a young couple has the following exchange:

> An Jia: Let me ask you, if a person has no advantage -- no wealth, no power, no morality and no attractive physical features -- how can this person become rich or successful overnight?

> Narrator: by stealing, robbing, dealing in national treasure or marrying someone rich.

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501 For example, Wang Yi points out, the popular TV series *Yearning* reveals tensions between intellectuals and ordinary people, and indicates the conflict between the so-called “popular” and “elite” cultures. Wang Yi, *ibid.*
An Jia: He does not have the guts to steal or rob, nor does he have the skills to become a wheeler-dealer. And he is impotent.

Narrator: Is he shameless? Is he evil?  

An Jia: He is so shameless …… He is so evil ……

Narrator: Let him be a writer. He is born to be a writer.

This dialogue formulates the equation that writers are inferior hooligans and is often cited as evidence of Wang Shuo’s anti-elitism.

Nonetheless, I argue that the critical stance that Wang Shuo adopted toward his intellectual contemporaries is very much part of the tradition that modern Chinese intellectuals inherited. Wang Shuo expressed the tradition’s critical spirit and was keen to denounce intellectuals guilty of hypocrisy and impropriety. This is the sort of intellectuals he ridiculed and parodied in his writing. As noted earlier, the writer Bao Kang produces trash literature but proclaims himself an important writer. Another intellectual character, the teacher Zhao Yaoshun in “The Operators,” takes it as his responsibility to help young people establish “ideals,” while his own life is depicted as morally degenerate. He “teaches” the young people about higher pursuits in life, but when alone, he pursues an affair with an unknown woman and often makes anonymous calls abusing others.

One of the salient characteristics of modern intellectuals is their distrust of tradition and of authority, which, according to Shils, is nurtured by traditions such as scientism.

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502 In the original story in Chinese, the author uses “pi hou” (thick face) to refer to a person who is shameless and “hei xin” (black heart) to refer to a person who is immoral, cruel and very unpleasant. “Hou” and “hei” have long been used by Chinese to describe people who are unpleasant. For example, in the early years of the twentieth century, the writer Li Zongwu (1879-1944) entitled his book “hou hei xue” (The study of thick and black) to satire the then official circles. See Li Zongwu, Kou hei xue quanji (The collected works of the study of thick and black, Beijing: Jiuzhou chubanshe, 2006).

romanticism, apocalypse, populism and anti-intellectualism. This rebelliousness drives intellectuals even to be critical of their own role in society. In the Chinese context, a remarkable example is Lu Xun (1881-1936), perhaps the best-known modern Chinese writer, who was fiercely critical of traditional Chinese culture, the authoritarian control of the Guomindang government, and the dark side of contemporary society. In particular, he exposed the hypocrisy of the educated elite. In his short story, “Soap” (Feizao, 1924), he mocked Confucian moralists “paying lip service to traditional virtues.” Another story of his, “Kong Yiji” (Kong Yiji, 1919) portrays a scholar who is very poor and often gets beaten up for stealing writing equipment. Yet he is too proud to stoop to make a living from manual work and wastes his entire life trying to pass the Imperial Examinations to become an official.

In his essay, “Hermit” (Yinshi, 1935), Lu Xun criticised many known eremitic intellectuals in history for their hypocrisy and use of virtuous eremitism to attract attention. In fact, according to Zhidong Hao, intellectuals, including those who remain aloof from politics, often face conflicts between the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of ultimate ends, between Dao (morality and values) and Shi (power). Consequently, many intellectuals developed dual or split personalities and subsequently became the focus of constant discussion and critiques.

In addition, Wang Shuo resembles earlier generations of modern Chinese intellectuals in the way that he exposed the flaws of the establishment intellectuals in order that they be

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505 C.T. Hsia, p. 42.
507 Hao, pp 50-72.
508 For discussion on the dual personalities on intellectuals, see also Xu Jilin, Zhizhe de zunyan: Zhishifenzi yi Jindai wenhua (The dignity of the wise: intellectuals and modern culture, Shanghai: Xuelin Press, 1991); Xu, Jingshen de lianyu (The mental hell, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1992).
replaced by a superior group. In searching for ways to save the nation, a group of new writers in the May Fourth era emerged as iconoclasts of the Chinese tradition. Nonetheless, as McDougall and Louie point out, they were still descendants of the scholar-gentry class and inherited the expectation of higher status in society. Many of them embraced and advocated evolutionism to justify their attacks on the traditional scholar-literati and their attempt to establish for themselves a leading role in society.

Similarly, in the reform era, Wang Shuo, a representative of cultural entrepreneurs as a newly emerging social group, waged war on established intellectuals. He proclaimed the legitimacy of his group by highlighting the “heroic” image of business people. By emphasising that the business people are morally superior to “villainous” intellectuals and that their material pursuits harmonise with moral virtues, Wang Shuo attempted to justify his attacks on the elite status of intellectuals and establish for his own group (cultural entrepreneurs) an elevated role in society.

Furthermore, echoing Lu Xun and other intellectuals, Wang Shuo’s focused attack on the hypocrisy of intellectuals reveals his deep concern about the intelligentsia, especially the dilemma of many Chinese intellectuals facing the wave of consumerism. While his depiction of the “shameless” and “evil” writers was satirical, he touched on the very problem that concerned all Chinese intellectuals: whether intellectuals should engage in the market. The wave of commercialism affected virtually all sectors of Chinese society. Consequently, on the one hand, many intellectuals’ desire to join in the trend to pursue financial gain was ignited. On the other hand, however, they still wanted to preserve their traditional elite role as the moral and spiritual leaders of society. As Perry Link observed, even in the post-Mao era, many Chinese intellectuals still

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presumed themselves to be “higher than ordinary people” and “paternalistic authority figures for citizens.” In this situation, the concerns of many who resisted the commercialised culture, disdaining it as “vulgar” and “low,” were not purely moral. The critic Wang Lixiong, the author of Yellow Peril, argued:

they put up resistance for quite some time and attempted to attain a sense of equanimity by stressing their own moral superiority and by pouring scorn on the means employed by the ruffians. They negated the fruits of the ruffians’ successes, and relegated them to the category of untouchables. However, such resistance was, to a large extent, an instinctive reaction born of perplexity and envy rather than the outcome of any real desire for morality.

In this context, Wang Shuo’s portrait of hypocritical intellectuals can be seen as a reflection of the real predicament of the elite tradition.

Indeed, Wang Shuo’s writing and the controversy it aroused provided a forum for open discussion on the role of intellectual in an increasingly commercialised society. Partly as a reaction to the challenge Wang Shuo and other entrepreneurial writers posed in the cultural arena in 1993, a so-called “humanistic spirit discussion” commenced among leading thinkers and writers all over the country, and lasted for over two years. A notable viewpoint emerging from the discussion was that consumerism had ruined the elite tradition of intellectuals. Shanghai-based literary historian Wang Xiaoming remarked that the significance of being an intellectual was the “humanistic spirit,” which however, was ruined by consumerism and was in urgent need of restoration.

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512 As for what the “humanistic spirit” was and how to restore it, there emerged considerable disagreement among cultural elites. Some critics, like Zhang Yiwu even questioned the necessity of this discussion, which was considered as an effort of those intellectuals who lost meaningful social or political roles to try again to attract social and cultural attention. For major contributions to this debate, see Wang Xiaoming, ed., Renwen jingshen xunsi lu (Shanghai: wenhui chubanshe, 1996). Also see Barme In the Red, pp. 284-285; and Xu Jilin, “Cong teshu zouxiang pubian: zhuanyehua shidai de gonggong zhishifenzi ruhe ke neng?” (From special to general: how can public intellectuals become possible in the era of professionalisation), Zhishifenzi luncong (Discussion on intellectuals) vol.1 gonggong xing yu gonggong zhishifenzi (Jiangsu: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2003), pp. 2-8.
513 Wang Xiaoming, ibid.
The writer Zhang Chengzhi, who had been hailed as an idealist in the literary field since the mid eighties, was one of the notable figures who was enraged by the commercial trend in literature and fiercely attacked the “corrupted” literary field, as he said:

It is too ironic and sad that such a group of people have become the cultural mainstream and are violating a mother-like civilization that has been developed for several thousand years. I don’t recognize these people as writers. They are in nature only some fellows after fame and gain. They cannot resist the temptation of money and fame because they do not have any desire and demand to resist. Some of them do not even have the basic sense of glory and shame or the basic view of right and wrong. As long as they can gain some interest for themselves, they would not care even if the nation is invaded or the motherland is dissected. Now such a culture without any principle or integrity has not only taken over the literary field, but also hooked up through various channels with TV and newspapers and become a “force” that dominates the cultural realm and controls atmosphere of this great nation of one billion people. Could there be anything more absurd and terrible than this?514

Zhang considered the elite tradition as the “mother-like civilisation” intellectuals should protect and sustain, regarded the trend of commercialisation a great threat to the nation, and criticised those who followed the commercial trend of lacking “principle or integrity.” For Zhang Chengzhi and his supporters, the elite tradition of Chinese intellectuals faced a crisis as a considerable number of its members were ruined by consumerism.515 For them, Wang Shuo was a typical example of the “secularised” and “kitsch” writers who had lost the “humanistic spirit” and kowtowed to the market.

Nonetheless, Wang Shuo debated these writers. Rather than trying to restore the perceived elite tradition, he asserted that elitism that had given rise to “tyrannical rule of

515 When Chinese critics later reflected on this debate, Zhang Yiwu analyses that the rage of these elite intellectuals was engendered by their feeling that they had lost their power as the defender of Chinese culture and they were offended by the popularity of popular culture. Zhang yiwu and Liu Xinwu, “Jiushi niandai wentan de fansi yu huigu” (Look back to the literary circles in the 1990s), Xinhua wenzhai (New China Literary Digest), no.7, 1996, p.111. See also Wang Yi, “From Revolution Culture to Popular Culture: Literature and Television Drama in China, 1987-1991,” PhD thesis, Murdoch University, 1997, p.254
China for thousands of years” and it should come to an end. Instead, he advocated commercial writing and emphasised that writers who earn money by providing readers with recreation should be accepted and respected. His biting response irritated many but received support from Wang Meng, the former Minister of Culture. Wang Meng defended Wang Shuo by calling for an evaluation of the function of literature as a form of entertainment and the significance of market-driven cultural diversity. Many other writers, although not overtly in support of Wang Shuo, critically examined the implications of the market and possible roles of intellectuals as professionals and thinkers.

In fact, the discussion of “humanistic spirit” developed into Chinese elite intellectuals’ self-examination of their role in the commercialised society. The divisions among intellectuals themselves were displayed and their elite position called into question. The market compelled many intellectuals to adjust their views of consumerism and to rethink their role from spiritual leaders to practical professional writers and artists. With the introduction of western studies, the dual roles of intellectuals as professionals and thinkers were clarified. The reorganisation and acceptance of their role as professionals accelerated the destruction of the elite myth of Chinese intellectuals, while at the same time, helped them to re-think and re-establish an identity in commercial society.

Love Stories: Wang Shuo and Qiong Yao

Apart from his stories directly dealing with intellectual issues, other types of writing Wang Shuo produced, such as love stories, also reveal the influence of the elite tradition. It is possible that Wang Shuo observed the popularity of romances written by Taiwanese writer Qiong Yao and others, and began to manipulate this popular formula.

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516 Wang Jing, High Culture Fever, p. 162.
517 Wang Meng, “Duobi chonggao” (Shunning the sublime), Dushu (Reading), 1993 (1), pp. 10-17.
However, a comparison of Wang Shuo’s love stories and Qiong Yao’s demonstrates Wang Shuo’s preference for realist writing, which undermines the close relationship between his fiction and contemporary Chinese society.

For many Chinese intellectuals, popular cultural works, such as Jin Yong’s martial art novels and Qiong Yao’s romance stories (and the various films and television series adapted from their works) were a type of low-brow culture. This perception emerged from the sense that popular culture was commercial, imitative, escapist and lacked artistic creativity and realistic criticism. Surprisingly, despite being a foremost contributor to the commercialised popular culture in China, Wang Shuo concurred with elite intellectuals in many of their critiques. This is illustrated by his articles “My View on Jin Yong” and “My View on Gang Tai Culture,” where he expresses his dislike and even disdain for popular culture imported from Hong Kong and Taiwan. In particular, he frowns on the imitative and escapist nature of popular culture.

One of the major reasons for Wang Shuo’s dislike of the escapist literature is his insistence on realist writing. He himself chose “realism” to characterise his style. When there was confusion among critics over how to categorise his writing, he stressed that his writing was only a “mirror” truthfully reflecting the reality of China in the 1980s. In addition to his self-characterisation, the following comparison of the two

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518 This is typically represented by He Manzi’s critique on Qiong Yao’s romances. See He Manzi, “Wei jiujwenhua xiimin de yanqing xiaoshuo yu wuxia xiaoshuo” (Romances and kungfu stories: an continuity of old culture), Guangming ribao (Guangming daily), 12 August 1999; He Manzi, “Jiu yanqing, wuxia xiaoshuo zai xiang shehui jinyan” (Romances and kungfu stories: my second advice to society), Guangming ribao, 28 October 1999.

519 Wang Shuo, “Wo kan Jin Yong” (My View on Jin Yong), “Wo kan dazhong wenhua gangtai wenhua ji qita” (My View on popular culture, gangtai culture and others), Wuizizhe wuwei, pp. 73-79 and pp. 2-46. The article “Wo kan Jin Yong” is first published in China Youth Daily, 1 November, 1999.


521 Ibid.
female heroines in his and Qiong Yao’s love stories demonstrate that he wrote love
stories to reflect on social issues rather than providing readers with a fantasy world.

Both Wang Shuo’s “Rising to the Surface of the Ocean” and Qiong Yao’s Tranquil
Dream deal with love and marriage, and the heroines in both stories are dancers.
However, the images of the heroine in these two stories are distinct. Tranquil
Dream provides a fantasy image of its heroine. It opens on a party where Lü Ping, Qiong Yao’s
heroine, wears a dreamy dress and dances like a princess. She is apparently the centre of
the party, surrounded by admirers and friends. The author creates a spectacular image of
the heroine by endowing her with bewitching qualities: beauty, youth and intelligence,
and by placing her in a setting with elegant furniture, a wealthy and caring family, and a
loving, handsome boyfriend. However, as the story develops, the author introduces a
dramatic change in the heroine’s fate. Her boyfriend betrays her and falls in love with
her sister. An accident results in the amputation of one of her legs. Due to compassion,
her boyfriend marries her but never stops missing her sister. She loses her grace and
beauty and becomes impatient and malicious, cursing everyone around her. Towards the
end of the story, the plot has another twist. The author arranges a reunion of Lü Ping,
her husband and her sister. After intense exchange among the characters, Lü Ping
decides to divorce and go to the US to continue her studies. It is shown that she is about
to pursue a new life.

Resembling other love stories by Qiong Yao, Tranquil Dream contains attributes that
are marketable: poetic language, dramatic development of the plot, a fantasy image of
heroines who often experience exceptional love. Like romance fiction elsewhere in the
global market, such as those published in the Japanese popular magazine Ladies’
Comics and Harlequin Romances circulated in the US and Europe, Qiong Yao’s love stories provide a fantasy world where readers, especially female readers, can indulge themselves and escape their mundane life. Despite cultural differences, the common elements in the formula of these romances are luxurious and even exotic settings for romance and love, trappings of wealth such as fashionable clothing and palace-like houses, attractive features in central characters and their extraordinary love stories. Needless to say, popular romance remains unencumbered by any obligation to reflect reality. It is above all a form of escapist entertainment. Besides Qiong Yao’s romances, Jin Yong’s kungfu stories, Bruce Lee’s films, many cartoons and Hollywood films are characterised by fantasy where viewers can escape from reality.

In stark contrast, the heroine Yu Jing in Wang Shuo’s “Rising to the Surface of the Ocean,” far from being a fantasy figure, is representative of ordinary urban young women living in the transitional China. Like many young people in China during the 1980s, after graduating from school, Yu Jing is assigned to work in a state-owned work unit. She lives in the dormitory apartment allocated by the unit, where she shares a room with another girl. Her complaint about the unit represents the problem of numerous state-owned units at that time. The dilemma she faces of whether to stay in the state-owned unit or to work with a group of popular singers for higher payment is again a reflection of a common dilemma perplexing many Chinese at that time.

What makes Yu Jing a popular heroine is her desire for a free life-style and her decision to marry Shi Ba. Shi Ba, a self-employed bagman, quits his job in a state unit and is eager to engage the world of commerce. In the story, Shi Ba expresses clearly that his

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decision to become a self-employed businessman is an effort to escape the prescribed path in the socialist system:

We've had the state worry too much about us since the day we were born. The state has managed everything for us, from finding a job to getting married. This is like a grown-up child still living in his parents' house. Even if the state is loving and caring enough to keep us, we ourselves feel uncomfortable.\(^{523}\)

Rather than the desire for material gain, it is his determination to break away from the state-prescribed routine life and his desperate search for the self that attract Yu Jing. In fact, like most young entrepreneurial characters in Wang Shuo's stories, Shi Ba is far from being rich. In one scene of the story, he does not even have enough money for breakfast due to a failed business deal. To break social constraints and to pursue a free life style is always a common yearning among youth. In the 1980s in China, when consumerism was just emerging, many young people contemplated quitting their state-owned job and engaging in the business world as a way to realise this dream. The image of Shi Ba reflects and affirms this desire among young people. Yu Jing represents the majority of youth of the time, who, while desiring to break social norms, are not courageous enough and remain working within the state-prescribed system. Nonetheless, her marriage to the entrepreneurial hero implies an inseparable link with the entrepreneur, a symbol for freedom in an ideological sense at that time.

By comparison, while the social background in *Tranquil Dream* is ambiguous, the transitional Chinese society of the 1980s is imprinted in “Rising to the Surface of Ocean.” While Qiong Yao provides a fantasy world to entertain readers and allow them to escape daily life, Wang Shuo offers comments on social issues in China in the 1980s and mirrors the feelings of many young people, especially urban youths.

Wang Shuo’s commitment to realist fiction was a result of the influence from the elite tradition of Chinese intellectuals. It was not until the May Fourth New Culture Movement that the term realism (xianshi zhuyi) began to impose a decisive influence on modern Chinese literature and culture. Among the vast quantity of new ideas imported from the West, realism was chosen by modern Chinese intellectuals “to carry the profoundest burden of hope for cultural transformation.”

Realism generated the largest body of literature of the time, shaped modern drama (huaju) and influenced the development of modern poetry and other artistic forms. Chinese critics and scholars in the West such as C.T. Hsia and Jaroslev Prušek have recognized realist literature as the highest achievement in the history of twentieth-century Chinese literature.

Critical realism as the elite tradition of intellectuals was interrupted by the development of socialist realism in Mao’s era. Nonetheless, critical realism was rehabilitated and again functioned as an outstanding aspect of the elite discourse in the liberalised atmosphere in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. At the Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists held in 1979, in seeking to provide guidelines for the literary production in the 1980s, prestigious writers such as Bai Hua, Liu Binyan and Liu Shaotang stressed the importance of reflecting the voices and conditions of the people through literary works. Writers were encouraged to reactivate realist writing to expose social contradictions, bureaucratism, and political inequity and injustice.

The influence of the realist tradition of Chinese intellectuals on Wang Shuo is evident not only from his preference for realist fiction, but also the fact that he uses the fiction

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524 Marston Anderson The Limits of Realism, p.3.
525 Ibid.
527 Yee Lee, ibid., p. 8; McDougall and Louie, The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century, p. 334.
as an avenue for airing ideological debates. Chinese realism is more a political/ideological notion than a set of literary techniques. As Anderson and David Der-wei remind us, while realism has an epistemological foundation in the West, which involves testing the capacity of language to capture and communicate the "real," it had been adopted in China as a crucial part of the cultural-intellectual approach to national crises. To some major figures in the May Fourth movement, such as Chen Duxiu and Mo Dun, realism was equated with science and democracy, and believed to be the hope of a new society. The establishment of realism as the dominant tradition for modern intellectuals centred around their assumption that realism would provide a source from which China could find the strength to free itself from the shackles of tradition and establish a new cultural order thereby.

Wang Shuo did not turn away from this realist tradition. Moreover his realist fiction served as a conduit for his view that writers should not preach to the reader. Through his writing, he engaged with his contemporaries, challenging the mainstream literary view that literature is a tool to educate or guide the reader. Eschewing overt moral judgements in his writing, he focused on the complex nature of characters. His writing deals with ideas and thus triggered heated debates among critics with different views. Some praised Wang Shuo for depicting reality without preaching to his readers, arguing that literature should serve as a simple reflection of reality. Some others, however,

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529 Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, pp.27-34.

insisted that literature should not only reflect reality but also fulfill a moral and historical mission. It is writer’s responsibility to provide readers with moral guidance and elevate their political awareness. In the view of such critics, Wang Shuo failed as a writer. His writing was blamed as not able to uplift readers, but acted instead as a textbook teaching readers how to commit crime.\footnote{Zheng Chengjun, “Xing fanzui de jiaokeshu – ping ‘yiban shi huoyan, yiban shi haishui.” (Textbook for sex crime – on half flame, half brine). Wenyi zhengming (Debates in literature and art), no. 4 (1987), p. 21.}

Aiming as they do to reflect the complexity of the life, many stories of Wang Shuo can be appreciated on many levels. For example, “Rising to the Surface of Ocean” was read as a popular story in the late 1980s and early 1990s owing to its reflection of urban youth’s situation and their feelings. But, the story can also be read as a modernist work that explores confusion over anachronistic residues of morality running up against the blind quest for material goals. For instance, for the entrepreneurial character Shi Ba, material pursuit is meaningful at the ideological level. But as he observes immoral deals, such as Lu Hualing’s marriage with a foreign old man for her share of inheritance, Shi Ba develops conflicting feelings towards the pursuit of wealth. At the end of the story, the image of him being drowned and rising to the surface of the ocean symbolise his confusion and his longing to be saved.\footnote{In 2003, a well-known avant-garde film director Zhang Yuan chose the story and adapted it to a modernist film that explores the meaning of love.}

Television Writing and Elitism

Being involved in television production was a crucial phase of Wang Shuo’s career as a professional writer. Being the driving force for the production of Yearning and Stories from the Editorial Board, the two television series acclaimed as “watershed events” in
Chinese television, Wang Shuo demonstrated his ability to write for television and showed to all writers in China the power of television in promoting their works. The success of these two series attracted many more writers to engage in the television industry as it illustrated that television writing promised not only survival but also a measure of prosperity. In fact, in the 1990s television writing became a notable area that accelerated the professionalisation of writers and the growth of cultural entrepreneurs.

However, as shown by the other two television series in which Wang Shuo was the key writer, I argue that the more he secured his position as a popular writer, the more his elite stance became obvious. After *Yearning* and *Stories from the Editorial Board* received nation-wide popularity, people queued up to employ Wang Shuo in the hope that he could continue to produce popular television series. He signed up with Beijing Audio-Visual Cultural Publishing Centre (*Beijing wenhua yishu yinxiang chubanshe*) to write the script for a forty-one episode sentimental series *I Love You Absolutely* (*Aini meishangliang*, 1992). Around the same time, the Seahorse Creative Studio for Movie and TV Production employed him and a number of other writers to write for the forty episode domestic situation comedy *Sea Horse Dance Hall* (*Haima gewuting*, 1993). Wang Shuo’s attitudes towards these two series reveal a rise of elitism in his later career which led him to neglect the needs of the mass audience.

After *Stories from the Editorial Board*, *Sea Horse Dance Hall* was another “indoor series” (*shinei ju*) as all the forty episodes were shot in the same setting – a dance hall. Similar to *Stories*, *Sea Horse Dance Hall* does not have a serial plot linking its episodes

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534 Beijing Audio-Visual Cultural Publishing Centre invested 2 million Chinese yuan in producing the series and as mentioned in Chapter 5, CCTV purchased the exclusive right to broadcast the series at a price of 3.5 million yuan. See Zhang Xiaomei, “Huashuo Zhongguo dianshiju” (Talking about Chinese television drama), interview with the vice-director of China Central Television Drama Production Unit, Chen Hanyuan, *Dianshi yuekan* (Television Monthly), 1993, no. 10, pp. 4-5.
together. Rather, through the dance hall, a variety of characters and events unfold and audiences are exposed to various topics, such as current events, family relations and marriages, and so on. Starring many of the popular actors and actresses of the time, including Liang Tian, Ge You and Xu Fan, Sea Horse Dance Hall was anticipated to be a ratings winner. However the series was regarded by audiences as the least popular of the year.\(^{535}\)

Wang Shuo claimed that he disliked Sea Horse Dance Hall because he thought it “imitated” Stories from the Editorial Board and “lacked concrete reflection on social issues.”\(^{536}\) These two criticisms on Sea Horse Dance Hall from Wang Shuo reveal the influence of elite tradition on him and that he failed to analyse television dramas according to their particular merits. While elite intellectuals tend to despise derivative cultural works for their lack of originality, in reality, these works are often highly popular and commercially successful. Moreover, for television dramas, being derivative does not necessarily result in the lack of creativity. For instance, during the 1990s in mainland China there was a wave of so-called Qing Gong Xi -- television dramas with a focus on the Qing dynasty. While many of these Qing dynasty dramas tended to imitate each other in some aspects,\(^{537}\) they were still full of originality and enthusiastically welcomed by the audience. Narrowing his view by a focus on “authenticity,” Wang Shuo failed to recognise that the imitation in these popular television dramas reflected a


\(^{536}\) Wang Shuo, Wuzhi zhe wuwei, p. 20.

\(^{537}\) For example, almost all of the following dramas including Xishuo Qianlong (Joking stories about emperor Qianlong, 1991), Zaixiang Liu Luoguo (Prime minister Liu Luoguo, 1996), Yongzheng Wangchao (Yongzheng dynasty, 1999) and Hanwu dadi (The great emperor Wu of Han, 2005), highlight the humanitarian image of the emperor characters.
new trend in television at the time and resonated the “humanitarian” discussion in literary and film since the 1980s.538

Wang Shuo gave as his second reason for detesting Sea Horse Dance Hall that it lacked “concrete reflection on social issues.” This, again, proves that he was a follower of the realist tradition of Chinese intellectuals, as discussed in the previous section. While he attacked elite intellectuals for their using literature as an educational tool, he criticised the television series for not adequately reflecting society. Wang Shuo resembles other elite intellectuals in the way that he regarded literary works and television dramas a means of social commentary.

In fact, what caused the low ratings of Sea Horse Dance Hall is not its imitation of Stories from the Editorial Board, but its failure to learn from Stories. Stories was appealing to millions of ordinary Chinese for its humorous dialogues, interesting characters and its discussion of topics that concerned most people of the time. In Sea Horse Dance Hall, however, characters indulge in inanity. It can thus be argued that Wang Shuo and other writers of the series were more interested in showing off their rhetorical skills than figuring out what would be of real interest to the public.

While in the literary field, elitism had not prevented Wang Shuo from producing popular works for readers, it became an obstacle for him when it came to appreciating the entertainment value of television dramas. Other artists, however, began to realise the potential of sitcoms and seized the opportunity. Inspired by Stories from the Editorial Board and Sea Horse Dance Hall, the director and actor Ying Da became active in

producing Chinese indoor situation comedies. After his successful direction of the 120 episode series, *I Love My Family* (*Wo ai wo jia*, 1994), Ying Da produced at least seven other sitcoms, including *Number 100 Broadway* (*Bailao hui 100 hao*, 1996), *The Hall* (*Hou che dating*, 1998) and *Idle Sister Ma* series (*Xianren madajie*, 2001-2002). For around a decade, he was one of the few directors in mainland China who took situation comedy seriously. He has been one of the major contributors to this type of popular TV, which considers ordinary audiences’ laughter as its major goal.

By contrast, Wang Shuo’s concern for artistic creativity and realism gave rise to his hostility towards imitative and escapist works, even at the risk of losing his audience. In fact, he was aware of the conflict between pure art and popular culture and between the artistic and entertainment functions of art. At an earlier stage, he was more interested in appealing to the audience and providing them with entertainment. Now his attitude towards the audience changed. As he secured his position as a popular writer, he became more interested in literary experiment and artistic exploration. This is also evident in his writing for the television soap, *I Love You Absolutely*.

As he himself disclosed, when writing *I Love You Absolutely*, he was more obsessed by personal aesthetic exploration than by any consideration of audience interests. Like *Yearning*, the first Chinese soap opera, which successfully created the heroine Liu Huifang and her romance story, *I Love You Absolutely* also revolves around its heroine, Zhou Hua and her love stories. Zhou Hua is a theatre actress, who, at the beginning of the series, is at the peak time of her career and about to marry a dramatist. Both her career and marriage are affected by her sudden deterioration in health due to nephritis.

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When she is sick, she encounters a taxi driver, Gao Qiang. They fall in love with each other and after many setbacks, finally get married.

Wang Shuo stated that he had dedicated himself to the script writing and considered the story one of the best television series he had written. However, after the series was broadcast, it was said to have disappointed at least half a billion Chinese television viewers. Many viewers turned to *Walls of the Capital* (*Huangcheng gen*, 1992), another serial broadcast at the same time by Beijing Television Station. CCTV’s investment thus fell short of its target.

Such a gap between Wang Shuo’s expectation and audience reception seems to suggest that Wang Shuo lost touch with the public’s taste. *I Love You Absolutely*, with a perennial theme of a couple who endure some of the toughest circumstances to get married, could be interesting. Nonetheless, its writers, under the influence of Wang Shuo’s elitism, neglected audience expectations and thus contributed to the low rating of the series.

Due to his increased obsession with intellectual issues, Wang Shuo ignored ordinary Chinese people’s lives and feelings in the series. To a certain degree, *I Love You Absolutely* resembles *Yearning* in its sharp distinction between the intellectual group and ordinary people. In *Yearning*, this contrast is personalised by the tension between Wang Husheng (and his intellectual class family) and Liu Huifang (and her working class family); in *I Love You Absolutely*, it is indicated by the relationship between the

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542 He Shuiming, “Yingshi jie zhulu huangjing shiduan” (The cinematic and television pursue the golden time), *Zhongguo shangbao* (China business news), October 1995.
heroine Zhou Hua (and her friends) and the taxi driver Gao Qiang. However, unlike Yearning, I Love You Absolutely fails to emphasise the values held by ordinary people. Yearning successfully creates the heroin, Liu Huifang, who endures many sufferings, same of which are caused by the shortcomings of intellectuals, while maintaining the traditional virtues of women. The symbol of ordinary people and their values in I Love You Absolutely is a taxi driver, Gao Qiong, who, however, is far less appealing than Liu Huifang. Gao Qiong, as characterised in the series, often feels inferior to the intellectual group. Viewers can hardly find in this character the “heroic” features Wang Shuo gave to his other entrepreneurial characters.

The focus of the series, however, lies in Zhou Hua, her fiancé (a dramatist) and their colleagues living in the dormitory building of a drama troupe (gewu tuan). They represent the intellectual stratum of society. This is shown by an alien relationship between them and Gao Qiang. In the first episode, Xu Tongtong, Zhou Hua’s best friend, is shown to be impatient with Gao Qiang, saying: “it’s useless to tell you about this (how a drama performer can obtain a prize), you won’t understand.” In one scene of episode three, Gao Qiang tries to join Zhou Hua and others in a conversation, but only finds himself excluded. While the series criticises the intellectual group -- for example, Zhou Hua often exposes the selfishness, shallowness and hypocrisy of people in the drama troupe, and finally turns away from them by marrying Gao Qiang -- its focus is still intellectual characters, their lives and feelings.

Conclusion

In addition, the characterisation of the heroine shows how Wang Shuo’s indulgence in artistic exploration risked losing his audience. Zhou Hua character is more suited to portrayal in literature than on television screen, and the series seemed to emphasise psychological characteristics of the heroine but failed to provide her with enough to act
on television. For example, in the first episode, through other character’s words, Zhou Hua is presented as a talented actress whose goals lie beyond mere prize winning. Nonetheless, aside from this stated indifference toward the prize, viewers see little evidence of her talent or ambition. Similarly, her rejection of her fiancé and her falling in love with Gao Qiang coincide with profound psychological changes. The series tries to anticipate this by having her make eyes at Gao Qiang in earlier episodes, but it is far from convincing. Consequently, it is no wonder that viewers complained that the series had few exciting scenes and was too mundane and boring to watch.543

Although Wang Shuo once created hits for Chinese television, he was unable to remain in touch with the ever-changing tastes of his audiences. His elitism distanced him from ordinary Chinese. In addition, as mentioned, in many of his popular works, he advocated an equation of individualism and profit-seeking. This idea was popular among many Chinese during the early reform years because it expressed their utopian expectation of the forthcoming commercialisation of society. However, as the economic reforms progressed ordinary people soon discovered that consumerism does not necessarily mean individualism or freedom. Unable to keep up with changing needs and desires, Wang Shuo’s writing, which appealed to people in the days of the remaining communal era, lost its attraction in the thoroughly commercialised world of the late 1990s and beyond.

Conclusion

The commercialised popular culture advocated by Wang Shuo continued important elements of the elite tradition of Chinese intellectuals. It thus deviated from the mainstream popular culture flooding China from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the global

cultural market. His courtship of mass readership and his blurring of the division between popular and elite culture transcended the generic limitations of popular culture and thereby challenged the conventional binary paradigm of the elite and the popular.

The union of popular and elite culture is not confined to the work of Wang Shuo; later, the concept of the cultural market took root in various other sectors of elite culture. One example is that highbrow experiments in modern theatre were greeted with great fanfare. In 1999, the avant-garde drama *Bootleg Faust (Daoban Fushide)* directed by Meng Jinghui was performed 33 times in succession and each time played to completely full houses. But as Wang Shuo was among the first writers who appeared to resist the elite tradition and advocate the rise of commercial popular culture, his activities questioned the nature of mainland Chinese popular culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The existence of this type of hybrid culture indicates that the postmodernist mixture of elite and popular has become a necessity that not only manifests writers’ exploratory spirit but also demonstrates that in an age of economic and ideological pluralism, literature and other media can both entertain and enlighten audiences.

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Chapter 6 demonstrated the blurring of the boundaries between elite and popular cultures in Wang Shuo’s writing. This chapter explores the changing relations between official and popular cultures through an examination of Wang Shuo and others’ works. In Chapter 1, I argued that underlying many elitist Chinese critics’ views of Wang Shuo was a state-versus-market dichotomy. This type of thinking was rooted in the social and cultural situation of the early reform years when the gap between official and popular cultures deepened. Indeed, as I observed in chapter 2, popular cultural products during the early reform years, mainly imported from outside China, exhilarated mainland Chinese audiences and were particularly welcomed by youth, since they were perceived as a means of rebellion against authoritarian control.

Nonetheless, the relationship between the state and the cultural market was much more complex and dynamic than my earlier account suggested. The first section of this chapter demonstrates that the process of cultural commercialisation helped reduce the rift between official and popular cultures. I argue that although mainland writers and artists mounted stronger attacks on the government than did the imported popular cultural commodities, they compromised with political authority. Their reconciliation was rooted in their self-identification as cultural entrepreneurs. At the same time, the authoritarian power, far from being ossified, learnt to manipulate the styles of popular culture for its own ends.

The second section suggests that the popular culture in China failed to subvert an official sector that had itself been commodified and popularised. Along with the
commercialisation of state cultural institutes, many cultural entrepreneurs who had 
broken away from the previous socialist establishment were incorporated as members of 
cultural enterprises that were directly or indirectly linked to the state. The once 
“rebellious” popular culture was co-opted to create “a more inclusive official 
culture.” In effect, boundaries between official and popular cultures were blurred.

The Reduced Gap between Popular and Official Cultures

A. Semi-Rebels

During the early years of the reform period, popular cultural forms from outside China – 
Taiwan, Hong Kong and the West – together with the revival of traditional forms, 
essentially constituted the popular cultural market on the mainland. It did not take long 
for indigenous mainland writers and artists to take a share of the market. Around the late 
1980s, documentary literature (jishi wenxue) generated a “craze” in the publishing 
world thanks to its direct concern with domestic historical events and contemporary 
issues. In music, styles such as “airs of the northwest” (xibeifeng), “jail songs” (qiuge) 
and Chinese rock music gained widespread popularity. There also emerged the so-
called “political pop” (zhengzhi bopu), and art works typified by one of Yu Youhan’s 
paintings juxtaposing Chairman Mao with Whitney Houston.

546 Barme, In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 
p. 12.
547 Documentary literature is a kind of literature mixed with documentary and fictional writing. It can be 
compared with the Insider Stories (neimu xiaoshuo) which were popular during the late Qing dynasty or 
New Journalism developed in US from the 1960s. In 1986, Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe (Jiangsu Art 
Publishing House) published a “reporting literature series,” with a print run of 100,000 copies for almost 
each book. See Wu Xusheng, Dahongdong: zhongwai changxiaoshu jiemi (Sensation: revealing the 
secrets of Chinese and foreign best sellers) (Guangzhou: guangzhou chubanshe), 1993, p. 41. Around the 
late 1980s and early 1990s, there were also a “fad” of classics, a Mao Zedong “cult” and many other 
popular market trends in Chinese publishing.
548 Andrew F. Jones, Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music (New 
549 Li Xianting, “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in Valerie C. Doran, 
ed., China’s New Art, Post-1989 (Hong Kong: Hanarti TZ Gallery, 1993), pp. x-xxii; Barme, “CCP™ and 
Owing to the commercial trend of the reform, domestic writers and artists such as Wang Shuo and Cui Jian, began to contribute to various popular and commercially successful "crazes." Following the trend of Gang-Tai and western popular culture, their works undoubtedly diversified the Chinese cultural scene and provided the public with new cultural choices. Many of these works focused on the expression of individual feelings. Furthermore, by appropriating state resources (Party language, symbols and so on) many of these mainland popular cultural producers mounted more powerful attacks on the political authority. As mentioned in chapter 1, some critics thus tended to highlight the subversiveness of these works and placed hope on their capacity to undermine political authority. As I argued in chapter 2, the emergence of popular culture contributed to a greatly diversified cultural market and to a certain degree released some Chinese from the strict control of the official ideology. However, what I suggest here is that, even the most subversive of these popular cultural works had a conciliatory attitude towards authority. The following pages focus on these compromising elements of domestic commercialised cultural works, especially those in Wang Shuo’s writing.

Wang Shuo was one of the most conspicuous mainland writers who rode high on the trend of popular culture and produced controversial works. Distinctive from others who produced light entertaining works, Wang Shuo was famous for his "[playing] with Party language to an extent unprecedented in Chinese literature."550 Maoism and elements of Deng-state-advocated ideology was the butt of his jokes. While there is no doubt about the biting political satire in his writing, one should also note that Wang Shuo was, above all a professionalised writer or a cultural entrepreneur rather than a political or cultural dissenter.

As players in the cultural market, most mainland popular writers and artists were essentially motivated by commercial concerns. That was certainly true of Wang Shuo. In his apologia, “My Fiction,” he declares that “I hope my works will have influence and readers. I do not want to discover anything. It is of course all right for some writers to feel that they do not need readers. But I do as far as I am concerned.”

As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, Wang Shuo’s writing was dictated by the wish for a large audience and a good profit.

In this sense, the subversive style of his writing emphasised by many critics can also be seen as his skill in grasping popular taste. After all, rebellious fantasy figures like Zorro and Rambo had become idols for Chinese audiences, especially among the youth, before Wang Shuo started writing. Early in 1983, Liu Sijia, the rebellious worker in the film “All Colours” had been adopted as an unofficial counter-model by youth. As Wang Shuo intentionally targeted urban youths as his main audience, it is reasonable to assume that creating satirical and nihilistic works would be one of his strategies to attract young readers. Being a “rebellious” writer would enhance the likelihood of being popular, as long as that “rebellion” remained within the limits of government tolerance.

While writing satirically, Wang Shuo was cautious not to take political risks. Presenting himself as a mere entertainer is one of the strategies he used to avoid trouble. The political satire of his writing interested many critics, however Wang Shuo declared that it was not his aim, but rather a by-product of his wish to provide light entertainment for readers. In “My Fiction,” he makes his stance quite clear:

553 Geist, ibid., p. 113 and fn. 145. The film is known in Chinese as “Chi cheng huang liu qing lan zi,” adapted from Jiang Zilong’s story.
I feel that literature should perform two functions, one purely artistic function and one popular function ... if you happen to discover anything profound in what I do, that’s your business (whether there was anything of depth in the first place is another matter). If the profundity escapes you, at least I can promise you a good time.

Following his instinct for self-protection, Wang Shuo was more concerned with social and cultural issues than political reform.\(^{554}\) This public statement defining himself as an entertainer rather than a serious writer declares that if readers make politically risky interpretations of his works, it is not the author’s fault.

According to some critics, Wang Shuo’s writing undermined political authority by his use of official language, especially Maoist language, out of context. For example, in his story “Playing for Thrills,” a group of young people mock China’s Communist party by referring to their group of friends as the “party” (dang). However, far from being initiated by Wang Shuo, the increasing estrangement, rejection, alienation and distortion of the Party language was already prevalent among both educated artists and ordinary people during the 1980s.

As a reflection of the public’s disillusionment with Communist idealism, Mao Zedong’s well-known seven-character poem, “March” was transformed by ordinary Chinese into farcical doggerel about official corruption, starting with the line: “Officials are not afraid of the difficulty of drinking.”\(^{555}\) In another “cross-talk” (xiangsheng) performance by artists Jiang Kun and Tang Jiezhong, the state-sanctioned Lei Feng spirit of altruism was also used for fun.\(^{556}\) This kind of humour was wide-spread among ordinary people.

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\(^{555}\) See People’s daily website, http://www.renminbao.eom/rmb/articles/2001/12/28/17980.htm, visited on 14 October, 2006; Other examples can be found in James J. Wang, Outrageous Chinese A Guide to Chinese Street Language (China Books & Periodicals, Inc., 1994), which provide an excellent introduction to the Chinese “street slang.”

\(^{556}\) In the cross-talk Random Thoughts at the Tiger’s Mouth (hukou tuoxian), one of the characters in the story falls into a tiger cage in a zoo and yells for help from people above in a way that satires Lei Feng spirit: “If you truly have the Lei Feng spirit, you come down.... You (save me) by feeding yourself to the
revealing the paradoxes inherent in the conflicting ideology of residual Communism and the emergent commercialism. Wang Shuo was one of the artists who accurately grasped this feeling and reflected it in his works.

In the literary field, many writers had consciously been searching for ways to break away from the official discourse since the early 1980s. Experimental poets such as Bei Dao and Gu Cheng broke radically with the standard themes and linguistic clichés of the “Mao-genre.” “Root-seeking” writers represented by Ah Cheng and Han Shaogong created unorthodox imagery and presented a complicated vision of the Chinese past. Other novelists, including Liu Zhenyun, turned to the vernacular of people from lower social status.

Compared with these writers, Wang Shuo failed to subvert the official language by creating his own counter-discourse. He could not challenge the Maoist discourse on which he depended so much. His simulation and distortion of the Maoist language, to a certain extent, echoed the wisdom of ordinary Chinese who made up doggerel and jokes. Despite his reliance on the historical resource, as a representative of the “other Cultural Revolution generation,” especially the majority of the under-educated urban youth, Wang Shuo’s writing expressed in full the irony of Maoist ideology twisted in the transformed social context.

Consequently, while being able to grasp the public feeling, many of Wang Shuo’s works failed to challenge readers with innovative concepts or ideas. While Wang Shuo tiger, that’s called altruism, that’s called a worthy death, that’s heavier than the Tai Mountain. Your photos will be published in newspapers. Your relatives would be glad to see that.” The cross-talk was performed in the 1987 Spring Festival Show in CCTV.


558 Helen Chen, “From Sentimental Trilogy to Gangster Trilogy,” p. 82.
played with the Maoist language, in most of his stories with youthful entrepreneurs as heros, he embraced the supreme project of Deng’s state – the economic reforms. Most of Wang Shuo’s entrepreneurial protagonists undoubtedly believed in Deng’s declaration that “to get rich is glorious.” They even endowed Deng’s call with a new sense of individualism.

In contrast with his attitude towards elite intellectuals, Wang Shuo’s challenge to political authority softened. As discussed in chapter 6, in many of his stories, Wang Shuo highlighted the “sincerity” and “honesty” of his young hooligan characters in contrast with “hypocritical” and “self-conceited” elite intellectuals. In this way, he legitimated the way that the new entrepreneurial social group and culture replaced or, at least, challenged the elite discourse. Regarding political authority, while he made his characters merciless critics of their official language, their attitude towards authority appears to be ambiguous and artificial.

In most cases, his youthful protagonists only dare to make fun of the official communist language in the absence of authority figures. Once a representative of political authority arrives, such as the police, they usually quieten down. In the story, “Playing for Thrills,” for example, “party” (dang), a term referring to China’s Communist Party is played with by the young characters. Two episodes in this story have been frequently quoted as examples of the apparent “subversiveness” of Wang Shuo’s language. In one episode, the protagonist, Fang Yan, returns to his apartment and finds his friends playing cards.


They ask where he has been and joke that they are going to cancel his membership of their “party” because he has shown no loyalty towards the party. In another episode, when a female character comes in, the mockery of the party accelerates as the humour becomes a mixture of sexual imagery and communist rhetoric.

What has not been stressed is that these youths dare to engage in such mockery only when they are safe from punishment. In another episode in the same story, when two policemen come to Fang Yan’s place, in contrast to their oral “rebellion,” none of the young characters risk disobeying the policemen’s directions. Their attitude becomes surprisingly respectful and shamelessly compliant. If these protagonists represent resistance to political authority, it is a very hypocritical and fickle sort of resistance.

Even in the story “No Man’s Land,” his most pointed political lampoon, Wang Shuo is concerned more with the cultural issue of “national character” (guominxing) than political reform. “No Man’s Land” is a story replete with political satire, in which Wang Shuo “parodied party language to an unprecedented degree.” The major theme of the story revolves around the castration of the hero, Tang Yuanbao. With “national character” the dominant concern, Wang Shuo depicts Yuanbao not as the victim of based on the recommendation of the, not only the influence of the, but also the influence of the. For more detailed discussion on the Ah Q discourse, see Paul B. Foster, “Ah Q Genealogy: Ah Q, Miss Ah Q, national character and the construction of the Ah Q discourse,” Asian Studies Review, vol. 28, no.3 (Sep 2004), pp. 243-266.
political authority but as its accomplice, responsible for the tragedy of himself and the nation. Yuanbao is shown willing to be subservient to the Central Competition Committee (zhongsaiwei) organised by a group of urban ruffians and collaborate with it to transform himself. When he is first inducted into the Committee, Yuanbao is asked to take an oath that requires him to “obey the organisation and sacrifice the self,” which can be seen as a parody of the ceremony to join the Party. Yuanbao is described as content with the oath and, with a step further, he dehumanises himself, as he says, “From now on, I’m no longer human ... I’m not an ordinary person.”

Yuanbao’s willingness to de-emphasise the self is further shown in the following episode where he submits to manipulation by Bai Du and Liu Shunming, two members of the Committee secretariat bickering over selfish concerns. Yuanbao does not show any inclination to oppose the Committee no matter how he is treated. Although there are opportunities for him to leave the Committee, he prefers not to. In the factional infighting, Bai Du privately allows Yuanbao to escape from the Committee and says: “you can do whatever you want to do.” However, Yuanbao passively replies that, “What do I want to do? What can I do? I don’t want to do anything – tell me what you want me to do? .... I have nowhere to go.” Even when Yuanbao is informed of the danger of being castrated and is offered help to escape, he appears to be indifferent, as he says: “I’m not leaving. ... please don’t feel sorry for that, I’m essentially not a human.”

In addition, Yuanbao’s mother and neighbours are also depicted as being blindly submissive to political authority. In the story, the only time that they challenge the

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566 The Committee can be seen as a farcical mixture of the Central Advisory Commission of party elders (zhongguwei), the Politburo of the Communist party itself, local party committee dummies, and a chaotic Chinese company board of directors, Barme, In the Red, p. 91.
569 Ibid., p. 416.
legitimacy of the Committee is when they learn that Yuanbao is castrated and has lost his martial art skill. It is told in the story that “they are like revolting masses banishing former officials and aristocrats fallen from power.” However, they soon turn to a “big guy,” the deified figure with higher political authority, for justice. The force with potential to defy authority thus compromises with it. These aspects undermine the power of the story as criticism of political authority. Rather, the story reveals the masses’ own deficiencies, the so-called diseased “national character” that is responsible for their situation.

Furthermore, in his writing Wang Shuo often includes ambiguous messages regarding his attitudes toward the Party. By doing this, he reflects the sorts of ambiguities ordinary people feel about the Party and their relationship with authority. It is also likely that due to his need for self-protection, Wang Shuo intentionally has his characters make ironic statements open to mutually exclusive interpretations. Mockery of the Party is mixed with half-hearted defense of it. For example, in one episode of “No Man’s Land,” the interrogation of Tang Guotao, Yuanbao’s father, is a satire on the absurdity of political procedure and the Party’s abuse of history. In the following episode, in a conversation between several minor characters discussing feasible political solutions for China, the conclusion is reached that history has shown that the Communist Party was the only real choice since other alternatives, such as constitutional monarchy, imperial reform and republicanism, all failed.

While Wang Shuo describes young business people in his stories as being morally superior to elite intellectuals, he fails to depict these characters as a challenge to the core of Chinese political authority. The story “Rubber Man” recounts the narrator’s

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570 Ibid., p. 438.
572 Ibid., pp. 347-348.
experience of trafficking in a southern border city. Like many of Wang Shuo’s stories, the main characters in “Rubber Man” are urban youths roaming around China seeking business opportunities. However, in contrast to characters such as Shi Ba in “Rising to the Surface of the Ocean” who quit his job in a state-owned work-unit motivated by idealistic individualism, the heroes in “Rubber Man” are degenerate criminals. For these characters, individualism is no more than the unprincipled pursuit of wealth. In direct contrast to these self-centred youths, the police are described as immune to the temptations of materialism. Ultimately social order is upheld within the story when the police punish the delinquents.

The positive portrayal of the police also softens the story’s political criticism. The story has elements of political satire, which are mainly encapsulated in the characters Lao Jiang and Lao Qiu, representatives of the corrupt officials in local government. The story is set at a time when cars and colour TVs are difficult to purchase due to a supply shortage. Lao Jiang and Lao Qiu make use of this scarcity to engage in illegal deals with criminals. The grinding poverty of the local area is in startling contrast with the modern surroundings in hotels where local officials stay and enjoy themselves. However, despite the author’s criticism of Lao Jiang and Lao Qiu’s corruption, the story fails to make a thoroughgoing rebuke of CCP political authority. The upright image of the police and their ability to punish the corrupt local officials make Lao Jiang and Lao Qiu representative only of a contaminated “part” of the government. In the eyes of the narrator, although the police have shortcomings, their authority is unquestionable and legitimate. This is especially the case with the policeman Ma Hanyu who is portrayed as an incarnation of calmness, resolution, justice and authority, with full awareness of the bureaucratic nature of the police system.
Every time the narrator encounters Ma Hanyu, he is impressed by Ma’s intelligence. Although the narrator tries to elude Hanyu and other policemen, he has no intention of challenging their authority. He even senses that the power of the police will eventually bring him to justice. By the end of the story, the narrator, “torn between a corrupted soul and residual moral conscience,” even comes to regard Hanyu as a symbol of idealism. Only after he fails to talk to Hanyu does he fall into a total despair and becomes a “rubber man” – a symbol of a lifeless creature that is made of rubber.

As portrayed by the anguish and confusion of these young people in Wang Shuo’s stories, individualism is shown to be ruined by materialism and greed, and thus does not really challenge CCP political authority. The police, the tool of the government, are depicted as invulnerable and unchallengeable. Political authority is even able to eliminate its own corrupt parts as the postscript of the story clearly states that most delinquents, together with Lao Qiu, are either sentenced or castigated. In fact, in such “law and order” narratives, this resolution of crime and corruption accords with the official discourse – the limited and containable extent of corruption and the promise that social order will be restored under the government’s leadership.

If in this story individualism appears to be put at risk by consumerism, in another story, “I’m Your Dad,” democracy based on individualism is shown to be unfeasible in the Chinese situation. “I’m Your Dad” revolves around a complex and comic relationship between the father Ma Linsheng, a divorcee, and his rebellious teenage son Ma Rui. Ma Linsheng is described at one time as “a blustering tyrant who wants to force his son” but elsewhere, he is said to be “at pains to be on an equal footing with the boy, [to] practice in-house [domestic] democracy.” On the other side, Ma Rui, with the unmistakable

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574 Barme, In the Red, p.95.
psychological aspects of a mischievous teenager, is depicted as having learnt the art of hypocrisy. The relationship between the father and the son becomes tense when Ma Linsheng experiments with democracy in the family. Ultimately, the father’s trial to reduce his power and to introduce equity only leads to hubris. By the end of the story, the hierarchical relationship between father and son is resumed and reaffirmed, and the son observes with adolescent wisdom: “Look dad, you’re my dad, and I’m your son, and nothing else is going to work. So from now on let neither of us force the other to be something he’s not, okay?”

In the Confucian tradition the connection between family and the state is strong. The parallelism in the Confucian hierarchy of power is prescribed in the three cardinal relationships: emperor/subject, father/son and husband/wife. The notion that the state or ruler is father to the people who are like dependent children continues to exist in post-Mao China. Even during the “Tiananmen Student Incident” in 1989, student representatives kneeled down before political leaders to plead for reform. The use of the family paradigm when discussing political issues is also common in the literary field. Wang Meng’s short story, “Hard Porridge” is an example, in which changes in eating habits of an extended family provide the theme of the story. It is a political allegory that mocks the ossification of conservative Party cadres, and prompted heated discussions on the democratic experiment in China. Even though on a literal level the story is around familial issues, its political concerns are axiomatic.

575 See the documentary film The Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tian’annmen), produced and directed by Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton (Canberra: Ronin Films, 1996).
576 Wang Meng, “Jianying de xizhou” (Hard porridge), first published in Zhongguo zuojia (Chinese writers) 2 (March 1989). The story was also collected in the anthology of Wang Meng’s stories, Jianying de xizhou (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu youxiangongsi, 1992), pp. 95-116; for relevant articles on the story, see pp. 117-146.
Within this cultural ambience, the father-son relationship in “I’m Your Dad” can be read as a reflection of Wang Shuo’s own view of the testy accommodation between the Communist Party and its subjects in the 1980s and early 1990s. From this perspective, the story is considered by some critics as Wang Shuo’s conciliatory gesture to the government. Even though the father is still a target of mockery, Wang Shuo deals with this character with compassion and understanding. Unlike most of Wang Shuo’s writing, this story proceeds from the perspective of the father, not the youth. The pains and dilemmas of the father relating to the family, together with his dreams and utopian ideals, unfold throughout the story. For example, while Ma Linsheng is described as using violence to impose authority, his remorse and tenderness is also highlighted, together with his helplessness. His reflection on a vow he made long ago, “If I have a kid in the future, I will never beat him,” further reveals the complexity of his feelings. Eventually, Linsheng finds a chance to apologise to his son and proposes to experiment with an equal relationship between father and son, like that “in families in foreign countries.”

However, a western-style of equal relationship among family members appears to be impractical for this Chinese family. Both the father and the son are shown to be responsible for the negative outcome of the experiment as they fail to show each other mutual respect. While the father attributes any improvement in the relationship to his own efforts and flatters himself, the son abuses his newly bestowed rights. Individual freedom is often considered as the ultimate goal the oppressed fight for, and what the authorities fail to grant. However, while Lingsheng is willing to grant his son autonomy, the son fails to exercise his freedom appropriately.

577 Barmé, In the Red, p. 96.
579 Ibid., p. 199.
The democratic experiment fails and a restoration of the patriarchal authority is rationalised. In association with the real situation in the 1980s and early 1990s, this can be read as an apologia for the inherent incoherence of the Party’s reform project and its ensuring restoration of authoritarian control. Above all, the helplessness of the father and the son facing the immutable pattern of their life together is emphasised.

B. To Popularise Propaganda

While popular cultural works contained elements of compromise with political authority, the Party attempted to strengthen its ideological control through a series of new experiments. At Deng Xiaoping’s talk with martial law officers in Beijing in June 1989, it was clear that despite the many economic reforms of the years immediately preceding the demonstrations, the CCP had never abandoned the notion that the party-state should retain ideological control over the masses. Besides various campaigns, banning and confiscating “poisonous” cultural works, the government also experimented with new ways of re-exerting its control. Indeed, many seemingly paradoxical cultural phenomena emerging during the 1980s and 1990s reflected a modified version of state propaganda, in the style of commercialised popular culture.

The experimental nature of the reforms was vividly reflected in Deng’s well-known declaration that the reformers needed to “cross the river by groping for stepping stones.” Cultural policy makers were also experimenting with new methods of promoting the image of the state. At the beach-side resort favoured by the CCP leadership, Beidaihe, in the summer of 1993, top CCP leaders reached a consensus of

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opinion that while building the market economic structure, they must adopt new management methods to tighten ideological control.\textsuperscript{583} In fact, ever since the early 1980s, a tendency of the Party to update the style of its propaganda had been evident.\textsuperscript{584} Among its experiments, endowing Maoist role models with new reformist ideology and manipulating the style of popular culture to propagate state ideology seemed feasible.

Harnessing the cultural forms familiar to the broad masses so as to influence them was not new to the Party. During the Maoist era, to elevate the class consciousness of the masses, the Party exploited various means, including the creation of new symbols and new forms familiar to the ordinary people. Liu Shaoqi, one of the Party’s leading theoreticians, pointed out that the class consciousness of the masses could not be elevated merely through high-sounding theories or glittering slogans. The party propagandists should “heighten[ing] their[the mass’] consciousness and self-confidence” through “demonstrative examples” and “living personalities” with experiences familiar to the people.\textsuperscript{585} Models (dianxing or hangyang), personifying and embodying moral norms and ideological values were thus promoted. Models were said to have a strong power of appeal and persuasion for ordinary people to imitate.\textsuperscript{586}

Though turning away from Mao’s ideology of class struggle, Deng’s regime inherited Mao’s tradition of exploiting cultural forms familiar to the broad mass of the people. Big character posters (dazi bao), the tool commonly used in the class struggle during the Cultural Revolution, were also manipulated by Deng to pursue supreme leadership over the Communist Party. Immediately after the death of Mao, Deng strategically

\textsuperscript{584} Barme, In the Red, p. 116.
\textsuperscript{585} Frederick T.C. Yu, Mass Persuasion in Communist China (N.Y., Praeger, 1964; Praeger publications in Russian history and world communism no.145), p. 18.
\textsuperscript{586} For more discussion on the model theory, see Geist, “Lei Feng and the ‘Lei Fengs of the Eighties’ – Models and Modelling in China,” pp. 99-102, fn. 9 and fn. 10.
encouraged people wounded by the Cultural Revolution to express their grievances by placing posters on the Democracy Wall, located in Beijing’s busy Xidan commercial district.\(^{587}\)

The reconfigured use of Maoist role models such as Lei Feng was evidence of the Party’s shrewdness in utilising familiar cultural forms to influence the public. Nonetheless, treated as passive recipients and tired of self-contradictory messages carried by Party-promoted models, audiences became more and more indifferent to what the Party advocated.\(^{588}\) They turned to alternative cultural forms in the growing marketplace where consumerism aroused in them a sense of individual identity.\(^{589}\)

The Party now faced a problem of finding new strategies that would attract the public. The style of *Gang-Tai* popular culture was duly appropriated. While continuing to prohibit some *Gang-Tai* soft popular ballads, “sexual songs, nihilistic songs, morbid songs, or violent songs,” the government sponsored the so-called “popular music” (*tongsu yinyue*), imitating the style of *Gang-Tai* popular ballads while limiting their content to “healthy” topics such as patriotism, stability, normalcy, praise for the CCP and occasional love themes. In this way, the party-state tried to control the development of popular culture, to co-opt popular artists and to reclaim the attention of the public.

The Spring Festival Entertainment Show (*chunjie lianhuan wanhui*) held in February 1984 was one of the early experiments by the party-state to popularise its propaganda.

The Spring Festival is, for most Chinese, a special occasion for family reunion. Traditionally, people have engaged in numerous different entertaining activities at this

\(^{587}\) The Democracy wall was a long brick wall which became the focus for democratic dissent in 1978. It was shut down in December 1979 when the Party leadership was criticised along with past mistakes and leaders. Deng formulated regulations to ban character posters immediately after his political triumph.


\(^{589}\) Barme, “CCP™ and ADCULT PRC,” p. 2.
time involving both family and community. The existence of expressions like “may the state be prosperous and people peaceful” (guotai min’an) in Spring Festival couplets implies the penetration of official ideology into the private (family/community) realm. But it was not until the era when television became widespread that entertainment carrying strong political messages eventually managed to permeate deeply within the family (private) festival. Starting from the early 1980s, thanks to television, China Central Television (CCTV) turned the spring festival entertainment program into a live show of five hours. The great success of the 1984 Spring Festival Entertainment Show, in turn, spurred the sale of television sets because of people’s desire to watch the program. That attracted hundreds of millions of viewers and continued to be popular for a decade. As a national broadcast network, CCTV was under the direct control of the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television, and was therefore part of the state bureaucracy. The programs of CCTV were thus usually saturated with official ideology.

It would thus at first appear as a paradox that while the government carried out the counter-spiritual pollution campaign in October 1983, in which many Gang-Tai popular singers and authors were prohibited, the official CCTV invited popular singers and entertainers from Hong Kong and Taiwan to perform on the Spring Festival Entertainment Show in February 1984. Watching Gang-Tai style performance through the official CCTV excited Chinese audiences and immediately turned the singers from Hong Kong and Taiwan, such as Zhang Mingmin and Xi Xiulan, into huge stars. To many viewers, the invitation of Gang-Tai performers to Beijing was a sign of the

party’s changed attitude towards popular culture and a chance to bring the underground popular culture to the surface. These state-invited Gang-Tai performers seemed to bring fresh air to Chinese culture.

However, this freshness was manipulated by the Party for its own end. The fight against “spiritual pollution” was no longer something that could only be defeated by conventional political campaigns. Henceforth popular entertainment would also be manipulated to popularise political propaganda.\footnote{Barmé calls them “politico-tainment” or “Partymercials,” in Barmé, “CCP\textsuperscript{TM} and ADCULT PRC,” pp. 2-4.} In the cultural market in Hong Kong, songs of Zhang Mingmin and Xi Xiulan were treated like those of Deng Lijun, though Deng Lijun was apparently more popular. During the 1980s in the mainland, however, they were treated very differently. While Deng Lijun’s songs were considered as a threat to political authority and were banned by the government, Zhang Mingmin and Xi Xiulan were promoted. A close look at the content of the songs promoted by the Party reveals how the Party appropriated popular cultural forms for its own purpose.

Zhang Mingmin was famous for singing “My Chinese Heart” (Wo de zhongguo xin). In Hong Kong, the lyrics of “My Chinese Heart” were composed during the time when widespread protests against the revision of Japanese history textbooks in 1982 were held in Hong Kong.\footnote{See “Zhang Mingmin lishi: zhongguo xin guxiang qing” (Zhang Mingmin: the spirit of China and the love for hometown), available on China Overseas Friendship Association website, http://www.cofa.org.cn/rwzx/lsfc/8020409070057.htm} On the mainland, however, when Zhang Mingmin sang it on the CCTV stage, it was appropriated as a means of propagating the Party’s policy of unification (tongyi) with Hong Kong. Similarly, by singing “Girls from Ali Mountain” (Ali shan de guniang), Xi Xiulan became a household name. In Hong Kong or in overseas Chinese communities, the Taiwanese folk-song “Girls from Ali Mountain” was performed simply as a folk ballad. Invited to sing on the CCTV Spring Festival
Entertainment Show, the singer Xi Xiulan consciously or unconsciously delivered the message that the people of Taiwan were celebrating the festival together with mainland Chinese, and thus Taiwan and mainland China were to become one.

Deng Xiaoping’s blueprint for unification with Hong Kong and Taiwan was what inspired the director of the show and the major reason why inviting Gang-Tai performers was permitted. Possibly no other methods would have been more persuasive than songs such as “My Chinese Heart” performed by Gang-Tai singers in publicising Deng’s vision of a “united” China. Rather than showing the potential of popular culture to subvert government policy, this event illustrated that the government, sensing popular culture’s attraction for the ordinary people and its consequent potential for influencing them, did its best to manipulate it.

The Blurred Boundaries between Popular and Official Cultures

The melding of official socialist ideology and new commercial and entertainment practices that began in the 1980s was furthered in the 1990s. This propagandist/commercial model, as it was described by Yuezhi Zhao, became prevalent in virtually every sector of mainstream culture in the 1990s. The Communist Party embraced the “socialist market economy” theory at the 1992 Fourteenth Party Congress to continue extending the reform, while at the same time attempting to exert firm leadership over it. This further intensified the fundamental contradiction of an “ideologically restricted market.” Restrictive campaigns, such as the 1993 crackdown on heterodox thought-work continued. Meanwhile, as this section will demonstrate, the

\[593\] Deng Xiaoping announced this blueprint in a speech entitled “Maqian de xingshi yu renwu” (Current situation and tasks) in January 1980. See Deng Xiaoping wenxuan (The selected works of Deng Xiaoping), vol. 2, p. 239. Also available online: http://www.ccyl.org.cn/zuzhi/theory/dspws/page2/jiejue.htm.

\[594\] Zhao puts forward this term in his research of Chinese journalism. See Zhao Media, Market and Democracy in China (Urbana and Chicago: University Of Illinois Press, 1998), pp. 151-164.

\[595\] Shuyu Kong suggests this term, see Kong, Consuming Literature, p. 9.
commercialised cultural sector expanded party propaganda to include elements of previously non-official culture. By examining the practices of the central Party leadership, various cultural institutions and the incorporation of popular cultural producers into the official system, the following pages show that the boundaries between popular and official cultures started to blur in the mainstream cultural sphere. One-time subversive or dissenting aspects of popular culture gradually merged with state-sanctioned cultural forms.

While developing the economy, the bureaucracy had learned to live comfortably with the market by sponsoring and directing off the profits. In the cultural sphere, the use of commercial formats and content now appeared to be compatible with the Party’s political orientation. As well as enforcing intermittent restrictions such as bans and confiscations, the Party fought back the challenges exerted by commercialised popular culture by co-opting it. From the late 1980s, the image of Mao Zedong, classic revolutionary ditties, revolutionary model operas and what previously would have been regarded as quintessential “official culture” turned out to be “hot” in the consumer market. The profit motive was one of the significant forces behind the phenomenon, stimulating private dealers, cultural companies as well as official cultural institutes to exploit revolutionary discourse. In addition, the Party encouraged such consumption of revolutionary discourse so as to “guide the market.”

596 Barme, In the Red, p. 117.
597 For a discussion of the repackaging of the socialist “revolutionary classics” (hongse jingdian) in the consumer market, see Meng Fanhua, Zhongshen kuanghuan: shijie zhijiao de zhongguo wenhua xianxiang (The carnival of the gods: Chinese cultural phenomena at the turn of the century) (Beijing: zhongyang bianji chubanshe, 2003), pp. 51-70. Barme and Schell’s research has a focused interest on the commoditisation of the image of Mao Zedong, see Barme, Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1996) and Schell, Mandate of Heaven: A New Generation of Entrepreneurs, Dissidents, Bohemians and Technocrats Lays Claim to China’s Future (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).
In line with its “socialist market economy” theory, the Party linked the commercialised popular culture with the growth of the market economy and cultural industrialisation, adopting the strategy of “laying emphasis on, promoting and guiding” the market and the development of popular culture.\(^{598}\) As clear evidence of the implementation of this strategy, the top leaders in the Politburo and the Party’s Central Department of Propaganda promoted socialist ideology through the market.

One example was the use of Karaoke for propaganda. Karaoke, which originated from Japan, was introduced into mainland China during the late 1980s. As a new entertainment industry, mainland Karaoke was influenced greatly by its Gang-Tai counterpart. By 1991, more than 80 per cent of the six hundred most popular songs used in mainland Karaoke machines were from Taiwan and Hong Kong, which was condemned by officials as “unhealthy or insufficiently healthy, and some [containing] serious political errors.”\(^{599}\) Nonetheless, the sheer volume of Karaoke singers/consumers caused the Party to consider this entertainment an efficient instrument of promotion and propaganda. A few months before the celebrations of the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party on 1 July 1991, the Party’s Central Department of Propaganda re-packaged classic revolutionary ditties for karaoke customers.\(^{600}\) It was Li Ruihuan, the Politburo’s cultural chief, who named the collection of party karaoke favourites “Everybody Sing Along: China Karaoke Song Treasury.” By the end of 1991, the Party had collected one thousand songs and made them available on tape, video, CD and in printed form. It was observed that, for a time

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\(^{598}\) Xu Weicheng, “Wei jianli shehui zhuyi shichang jingji de mihuixing xinxi fuwu” (To provide information services for the construction of socialist market economy) (Xinwen chubanbao) (News and publication report), 12 February 1993, cited from Chen Pingyuan, “Jin hainian zhongguo jingying wenhua de shiliid” (The decline of Chinese elite culture in the last century), Ershiyi shiji (Twentieth-first century) 17 (June 1993): pp.11-22.

\(^{599}\) Dong Qing, “Niannei tuichu 1000 shou dalu kala OK xinzuo,” (The year’s 1000 most popular karaoke songs in the mainland), Beijings qingnian bao, 26 March 1991.

\(^{600}\) “Zhonghua dajia chang (kala OK) kuku zai Jing shoufa” (The launch of Everybody Sing Along: China Karaoke Song Treasury in Beijing), Zhongguo wenhua bao, 5 June 1991.
in October 1991, a song from the “Treasury” was screened on TV every night and taught to viewers.\(^{601}\)

By manipulating the format of this entertainment industry, the Party revived the great revolutionaries of the past in order to reconfirm its authority. In combating commercialised popular culture, the Party eventually incorporated styles of popular culture into its own ideological propaganda. By updating its style of ideological engagement, the Party fused the political rhetoric of “the people” with “the customer” in the market.\(^{602}\) While the audience was entertained by its Canto-pop-style theme-song, the TV series “On the Road: A Century of Marxism” managed to deliver its political message.\(^{603}\) The Party’s most important slogan “to serve the broad masses of the people” was legitimated in a consumerist discourse. Aspects of Wang Shuo and other artists’ political mockery – such as the dislocation of socialist language or the juxtaposition of revolutionary and commercial symbols – became part of everyday reality for ordinary Chinese.

So the boundaries between official and popular cultures were blurred. This became a trend in the mainstream cultural sphere when the propagandist/commercial model developed by the top leadership began to be applied routinely in various cultural sectors. Numerous official cultural institutions had been encouraged – even required -- to undergo commercial transformation so as to alleviate the central government’s financial burden as well as to compete with burgeoning independent cultural organisations and dealers, and foreign companies. There is no doubt that this commercialisation process established a pluralistic cultural market in China, with some commercial outlets even

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\(^{601}\) Barme, *In the Red*, p. 117.


\(^{603}\) For more about the series, see Barme, “CCP™ and ADCULT PRC”, pp. 14-15.
challenging the ideological control of the Party. Still, the government firmly maintained ownership and continued to exercise tight control over many cultural institutions. Even though the official line was being continuously probed and tested, much of the commercialisation in fact resulted from attempts by reformers inside the state system “to increase popularity, to enhance audience appeal and to make ideological work more effective.”

Although states worldwide since the nineteenth century have sought to manage communications flows to maintain the existing political order, the degree of control exercised varied considerably. What existed in China during the Maoist period (1949-76) and into the 1980s and 1990s was a “propaganda state,” where official information and interpretations of reality overwhelmed its citizens. In the post-Mao reform years, the effectiveness of this “propaganda state” crumbled dramatically; however, the new market economy had not introduced a liberal model, but rather a propaganda/commercial mixture.

This was evident in the news media, which were still perceived by the Party as its mouthpiece. Hu Yaobang, considered the most liberal post-Mao leader, in a widely publicised speech in 1985 reaffirmed the mouthpiece theory of journalism established in the Maoist period, stating that “the Party’s journalism is the Party’s mouthpiece,” and that this included both Party and non-Party news outlets. Consequently, even though various news media underwent remarkable steps to commercialise, much of the commercialisation essentially was part of the overriding top-down reform project. For

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604 Yuezhi Zhao, Media, Market and Democracy in China, p. 159.
607 Some went so far as resort to corruption. For a discussion of the corruption in journalism, see Yuezhi Zhao, Media, Market and Democracy in China, pp. 72 - 93.
example, Guangdong People’s Radio was one of the earliest radio stations to adopt popular commercial broadcast formats and content, yet this was primarily a propagandist manoeuvre to improve its performance and regain the audience lost to Hong Kong commercial stations. Similarly, the introduction of commercial operations by CCTV’s News Commentary Department was a deliberate reform initiative put forward by the CCTV administration with the approval and close supervision of high-level authorities. *Beijing Youth News*, an official organ of the Beijing Communist Youth League, emerged as a popular tabloid among urban youth by using sensationalist reporting to convey propaganda messages.  

Compared to journalists who spoke strictly on behalf of the Party, professional artists in other areas, such as literature or entertainment industries, were relatively free to choose subjects and develop themes in accordance with “purely comradely suggestions and advice” from the Party. Nonetheless, survival in the Chinese market did not depend completely on the ability to compete. Whether completely or only partially dependent on commercial revenue, virtually all media in China had institutional affiliations with the Party. The Administrative powers of the Party and government bodies often influenced sales, personnel and other matters of affiliated cultural organisations. Even popular singers found that the opportunity to participate in televised singing contests (a significant means to enhance the popularity of their music) was usually “less a matter of how much audiences like [them] or how talented [they] are, than the connections [they] have, the patronage of officials and songwriters.”

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609 Hu Yaobang, “Dang de xinwen gongzuo.”
611 Han and Jones, interview with Zhao Li and Wo Peng. The same point was reiterated in interviews with Jing Gangshan and Hu Yue. Andrew F. Jones, *Like A Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1992), p. 81.
Under such circumstances, meeting official propagandists’ expectations was often not so much incompatible with profitability as a precondition for it. In the reform era, the party/state often used administrative orders, in conjunction with material incentives to influence affiliated cultural organisations. For example, some Party newspapers offered free advertising and the publication of favourable news and feature items in exchange for a work-unit’s subscriptions.\textsuperscript{612} Similarly, artists were often guaranteed unrivalled publicity if they were commissioned by the Party.\textsuperscript{613} In 1990, as part of the Party’s massive propaganda campaign to mobilise popular support for the 11th Asian Games, popular songs such as “The Valiant Spirit of Asia” (\textit{Yazhou xiongfeng}) were played routinely over public address systems on trains.\textsuperscript{614}

As a result, in addition to the Party’s control of companies, professional artists began to exercise self-censorship in order to maintain their popularity and profitability. The incorporation of professionalised artists into the new party machine of the “culture industry” further helped dismantle the boundaries between popular and official cultures. Many professional artists, once producers of subversive or oppositional literary or artistic works, turned to producing pro-official cultural works.

Wang Shuo was a typical example of this phenomenon. Famous for his controversial writing, including political satire, Wang Shuo turned to television where he gained greater fame and profit. In this medium his reconciliation with political authority was more evident. Television is considered by many communications scholars as the medium with the greatest social impact because of its capacity to transmit both image and sound. In China, television audiences grew from 78 million in 1978 to 800 million

\textsuperscript{612} Yuezhi Zhao, \textit{Media, Market and Democracy in China}, p. 89.
\textsuperscript{613} Andrew F. Jones, \textit{Like A Knife}, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{614} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 52.
by 1992, about 70 percent of the population. Television’s sheer audience size made it far and away the most important mass media, and as such it remained the key outlet for Party propaganda.

Involving himself in TV series production, Wang Shuo consciously embraced official expectations as his own standard of production in order to avoid financial and political insecurity. As noted, *Yearning* (1990) and *Stories from the Editorial Board* (1992) were the first Chinese soap opera and sitcom respectively, both winning great popularity among viewers. In the case of *Yearning*, its producers and script-writers’ indifference to the political situation was obvious. Written and produced mainly during 1989, the story contains not even the slightest allusion to the democracy movement. Through its ideal female character Huifang, the series calls for a revitalisation of traditional moral virtues – obedience, hard-work and altruism. Unsurprisingly, it was welcomed by top political leaders. After it was broadcast in 1992, Li Ruihuan, the Politburo’s cultural chief, together with some top political leaders came to visit the production crew and praised their work. The series was also awarded the official “Flying to Heaven” (*feitian*) prize and “Golden Eagle” (*jinying*) prize in the following years.

Immediately after the success of *Yearning*, Beijing Television Arts Centre started to produce *Stories from the Editorial Board*. Wang Shuo, together with his regular collaborators Feng Xiaogang and Li Xiaoming, were responsible for script-writing. *Stories from the Editorial Board* has a more complex relationship to political authority

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616 Barmé, *In the Red*, p.119.
618 Feng Xiaogang was one of the most notable mainland Chinese directors, especially considering his contribution to Chinese comedy film. For some, Feng continued to develop Wang Shuo’s humour and wit on the movie screen.
than *Yearning*, as it touches directly upon the key issue in contemporary Chinese society – the process of commercialisation.

This twenty-five-part sitcom chooses as its main theme the trend of commercialisation. The leading theme of *Stories from the Editorial Board* concerns the circulation problems of the magazine *Guide for Living (Renjian zhinan)* and its editorial staff’s efforts to address these problems by commercialising and revamping the magazine. In the story, people from all walks of society come to the magazine for various reasons and as a result the editorial board becomes an area where contemporary social problems are displayed.\(^619\)

Because the story deals with issues concerning potentially large audiences and has a satirical and playful tone, the script once was criticised and had the risk of being censored.\(^620\) Characterised by “humorous, tongue-in-cheek crosstalk, with young people as the leading characters,” \(^621\) *Stories from the Editorial Board* is in the distinctive style of Wang Shuo. Prevalent throughout the series is Wang Shuo’s style of playing with official language, including the relocation of many revolutionary expressions including “comrade” (tongzhi), “troop” (duiwu) and “long march” (changzheng) to totally irrelevant situations. The famous Maoist saying “Revolution is not a dinner party,” for example, is converted to “Revolution is a dinner party.” Another famous saying of the series, “Money isn’t everything, but without money you can’t do anything at all,” became a standard joke throughout China. The series not only makes

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\(^619\) Rather than providing solutions, it seems that the series is more interested in merely illustrating problems. This is due to Wang Shuo’s anti-elite position in writing. In opposition to elite Chinese intellectuals who considered writing as a means to educate the masses, Wang Shuo announced that he was not keen to disclose the so-called truth or solution. See Chapter 4 for detailed discussion on Wang’s anti-elite position.

\(^620\) Feng Xiaogang, *Wo ba qingchu xian gei ni (I give you my youth)* (Beijing: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2003), p. 139.

fun of political clichés, but also hit the nerve of many Chinese people experiencing commercialisation in their daily lives.

The title of the magazine in the story, *Guide for Living*, appears to be ironic too. *Guide for Living* is supposed to be a responsible publication that provides readers with solutions to everyday problems, a common function of most socialist publications during the Maoist era. Lacking funds in the wake of the reforms, the magazine has to seek ways to support itself in the market. But if the magazine itself is struggling to survive, how can it offer guidance to its readers? Audiences readily recognised the irony because it was a reflection of the dilemma many cultural institutions faced at the time.

After modification, *Stories from the Editorial Board* was permitted to proceed to shooting. After it was broadcast in 1992, it was even praised by Li Ruihuan, the Politburo’s cultural chief, and awarded the official “Flying to Heaven” prize and “Golden Eagle” prize in the following years. Popular with high officials and ordinary audiences, the series succeeded in both the commercial and political spheres. This demonstrated the absorption of popular culture into the mainstream. Otherwise how could this TV series achieve such a dual success? There can be little doubt that its script writers intentionally limited the exposure of social problems and political satire to what would be acceptable to political authorities.

It may further be argued that one overriding message of *Stories from the Editorial Board* is the affirmation that only the Party can and should keep firm leadership over the process of reforms. This message is manifested in the character Old Chen (Lao Chen), the general editor of the board, and his relationship with five other editors. The six editors are the main characters of the series. Li Dongbao and Ge Ling are
representatives of the younger generation who prefer individualistic expression, material well-being and innovation over worn-out Maoist ideology. Yu Deli, a middle-age entrepreneur who is responsible for advertising the magazine and attracting the funds necessary to run it, is depicted as pragmatic and world-wise. Sister Niu (Niu dajie) and Liu Shuyou are both elderly office-workers. Sister Niu, a Party member in her fifties, always uses official language and values, sometimes for her own purpose, while Liu Shuyou watches his step over every tiny issue.

The director of the board is Old Chen (Lao Chen), who though sharing with Sister Niu and Liu Shuyou the revolutionary experiences and hardships of the Cultural Revolution, is portrayed as being more flexible, more willing to accommodate new ideas of youth, and generally able to run the magazine better. Old Chen is different from stubborn followers of Party ideology, such as Sister Niu and Liu Shuyou, and is depicted as a capable and approachable leader. To a certain extent, the image of Old Chen is that of a model political leader from the reform era. He firmly believes in the Party, but at the same time adapts to the changing situation brought about by economic reform. On a few occasions in the series, his authority is challenged by the younger generation, but more emphasis is placed on his accommodating attitude, respectable status, and generally irreplaceable role.

The relationship between Old Chen and the other editors is shown in detail during the first few episodes of the series, focusing on the crisis the editorial board faces and how it works to transform itself. These episodes set the tone for the whole series. At the beginning of the series, the magazine is shown to be declining in the market. Old Chen therefore announces his willingness to resign, hoping that someone else from the board can be elected to run the magazine better. His announcement stirs up the ambitions of
Yu Deli believes that he is the most qualified for the position of leader because he is able to attract investment to the magazine and considers financial matters the most important. On the day of the election, Deli further declares that one of the major reasons for the failure of *Guide for Living* is the “lack of funds” due mainly to the cut in government subsidies. This was the actual situation of many Chinese cultural institutes at the time. Notably, the series acknowledges this point while expressing full support for the Party’s leadership. Deli compares the state to parents, saying, “Whose mum and dad do not care about their children? If they are rich, how can they not give money to the children?! But our country is a bit tight at the moment and we will need to find our own way out.” Through an entrepreneurial character, the series speaks up for the leadership.

In the story, Deli is criticised by Sister Niu, who says that he only “looks out for money” (*yiqie xiangqian kan*). For Sister Niu, the key to running the magazine well is not funding, but ideological guidance. “No matter what difficulty we face, we shall firmly follow the directives and guides of the party. … the fundamental reason for the failure of our magazine is an incorrect style of work. Therefore, we must urgently rectify this style!”

Chinese viewers of the series could easily recognise in Sister Niu’s words the noise of political bureaucracy. Hence when other younger editors laugh at Sister Niu, the series echoes the public’s dislike of the ossification of the bureaucracy. Dongbao expresses this feeling in a farcical way: “if we followed your idea, we should change *Guide for

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622 “Looking at money” is of the same sound with a Maoist saying “Looking forward” (*yiqie xiangqian kan*), but totally distinct meaning. “Looking at money” is a reflection of the flood of commercial trend in society during the 1980s and 1990s.
Living into *Guide for Revolution, Guide for Political Theory* and so on! ... Do you consider our broad readership the object of revolutionary battles? Following your idea, how could *Guild for Living* become the reader’s best friend?"

Dongbao has worked with another young female editor Ge Ling. They have investigated a range of popular magazines and worked out a list of the most well-liked columns. They propose to re-structure *Guild for Living*, emulating these columns and accentuating a friendly style by producing medium-sized, easy-reading and close-to-life articles of interest to a mass readership.

The different and sometimes conflicting views put forward by these editors, to a certain extent, reflect the confused state of contemporary reality. Comic dialogues between elder and younger members of the editorial board mildly criticise elder Party members’ dogmatism and blindness. Nonetheless, the younger generations are depicted as identifying with political authority, and it is highlighted that older and younger editors alike are facing the magazine’s crisis and have to resolve it together.

Old Chen emerges as the key figure since he is able to reconcile the disparate and often apparently contradictory ideas. According to Old Chen, the chief task for the editorial board is to revitalise the magazine, which he believes is in line with Party’s direction. He is willing to accommodate younger editors’ ideas, including Deli’s material concern of attracting investors to advertise in the magazine. In his pragmatism, Chen’s attitude is reminiscent of Deng’s famous saying, “no matter whether it is a white cat or a black cat, if it can catch the mouse it is a good cat.” He thus gains respect from the younger as well as the older editors. Although he proposes to resign at the start of the story, his calmness and confidence (as reflected in his way of playing Tai Chi) suggests that it is
just a strategy to arouse his colleagues’ fighting spirit and ideas. After all, through this incident, Old Chen reaffirms his leadership in the board. Under his renewed leadership, all members of the board regain their confidence to reform the magazine and willingness to work together.

In addition, the embracement of official expectations in this popular TV series is evident from its content and resolution to various issues. For example, episodes six and seven tell a story that editors of *Guide for Living* are trapped to violate the proprietary right of enterprise name of an influential magazine *The Life of the Masses* (*Dazhong shenghuo*). A cheater pretending to be the chief editor of *The Life of the Masses* approaches *Guide for Living* and offers an opportunity to jointly organise an entertainment show for the Children’s Festival. Blinded by petty benefits and compliments and ignorant of legal protection of the name and reputation of enterprises, editors of *Guide for Living* fix the company seal to the contracts examining their contents. It turns out that the contract contains unreasonable provisions such as a guarantee that an article of one thousand words will be published in both magazines for any company willing to provide one thousand yuan in sponsorship of the show; an article of ten thousand words will be published in both magazines for any company willing to provide ten thousand yuan in sponsorship of the show. Such a contact has a negative effect on the reputation of *Life of the Masses* and its real chief editor is determined to sue *Guide for Living* and ask for compensation. Despite being the plaintiff, *Guide for Living* loses the case in the court.

At the end of the story, through the words of Old Chen, the moral of the story is: it is important to know and abide by law. This is also the message the political authorities of China were publicising in the early 1990s. It was recognised by the Party and the Chinese people that the legal system in China had to be improved. There were flaws in
the system and some people used the law for their own benefit. Only through equipping themselves with the knowledge of law, could people better protect their rights.

In short, *Stories from the Editorial Board* affirms the rationality of the reforms and the Party's ability to keep firm leadership over the reforms. The tone of the series is light and cheerful, implying an optimistic spirit through the reforms. Instead of challenging the official ideology, the jokes and satires used in the series reflect the inherent contradictions of the reform policy, which have been recognised and accepted by the political establishment.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the blurring of popular and official cultures. Through the example of Wang Shuo, I demonstrated that even the most subversive popular cultural works had a conciliatory attitude toward authority. Identifying themselves as cultural entrepreneurs, many once "rebellious" Chinese artists were incorporated as members of cultural enterprises that were linked to the state.

Still, their works reflected the conflicting ideology of residual communism and the emergent commercialism. In fact, as the Party leant to promoted socialist ideology throught the market, the boundaries between popular and official cultures was further blurred. The propaganda/commercial culture became prevalent in the mainstream cultural sphere in the 1990s.
CONCLUSION

Past and Present: The Decline of the “Wang Shuo Craze”

As previous chapters have shown, Wang Shuo’s cultural output was deeply embedded in the tensions that characterised the transitional period in China from a revolutionary to a consumerist society. Perhaps because of this, it was difficult for him to continue adapting. In any event, the rapidly changing circumstances in China soon made his writing somewhat anachronistic. After the mid-1990s residual elitism led him to conduct cultural critiques rather than produce popular hits in literary or film/television areas.

After more than half a decade of writer’s block, Wang Shuo published a new novel Looking Beautiful (Kanshangqu henmei) in 1999 and two books of cultural critique, The Fearless Ignoramus (Wuzhizhe wuwei) and A Beauty Presents Me With Knock-out Drops (Meiren zengwo menghanyao) in 2000. The healthy sales of these books indicate a continuing popularity of Wang Shuo among certain sections of the public. However, his popularity was eclipsed by that of many other best sellers of the time, such as Yu Qiuyu’s Frosted Long River (Shuangleng Changhe), which sold 380,000 copies during 1999, and Pizi Cai’s internet novel, First Intimate Encounter (Diyici de qinmi jiechu), which sold over 30,000 copies within three days. Compared with the new hits in the publishing and other cultural areas, Wang Shuo was no longer a centre of attention and

623 The first print run of The Fearless Ignorant and A Beauty Presents Me with Knock-out Drops were 200,000 copies each. See the copyright page of these two books. The Fearless Ignorant (Wuzhizhe wuwei, Liaoning: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe), 2000; A Beauty Presents Me with Knock-out Drops (Meiren zengwo menghanyao, Hubei: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2000).

624 Pizi Cai is the penname of Cai Zhiheng (1969- ), who is a Taiwan based internet writer. His Diyici qinmi jiechu was first published on line in 1998. In 1999 the story was published in a simplified Chinese version and became one of the most popular books on the mainland.

controversy. Ordinary readers and cultural critics, who had formerly engaged enthusiastically in the debates surrounding Wang Shuo, had turned their attention to newly emerging cultural phenomena, including women’s “private writing” (yinsi wenxue) during the middle of 1990s, the prominence and promotion of teen writers, and Chinese cinema and transnational cultural politics. In fact, in the rapidly changing world of Chinese cinema, Wang Shuo’s once famous films have already acquired the status of classics; academic researchers rather than crowds in search of topical entertainment are their main audience.

Writers or artists who set out to use the most contemporary issues/trends in their creation are doomed to be overtaken by events if they are unable to keep up with the speed of change. The following pages draw together several factors demonstrating the depth of Wang Shuo’s entanglement with the trends of China’s transition during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and that show how he has failed to keep up with the changes of the new millennium.

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626 For details of the women’s “privacy writing,” see Kong, “The Economics of Privacy: Publishing Women’s Writing,” Consuming Literature, pp. 95-119.
628 Since around mid-1980s, Chinese films, especially those produced by the so-called Fifth Generation directors started to attract international attention. The “Fifth Generation” is a loose term for directors who are mostly graduates from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982. Most notable among them are Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang. Following the international success of Yellow Earth (1984), many films produced by the Fifth Generation filmmakers managed to sustain public attention by taking many top prizes awarded by prestigious international film festivals, such as Zhang Yimou’s Red Sorghum (1987), which won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival and Ju Dou (1989), which won Best Film at the Chicago Film Festival and garnered an Academy Award nomination. See Klaus Eder and Deac Rossell, ed., New Chinese Cinema (London: National Film Theater, 1993), p. 8. This phenomenon aroused heated discussions on national cinema in the era of globalization. The number of books and articles published in this regard is considerable. To name just a few, there are Rey Chow’s Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Xudong Zhang’s Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reform (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), part 2, pp.201-389; Yingjin Zhang’s Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, 2002), pp. 51-114; and Chris Berry’s “If China Can Say No, Can China Make Movies? Or Do Movies Make China? Rethinking National Cinema and National Agency,” Boundary 2, vol. 25, no. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 129–150.
First, the very essence of Wang Shuo's language that juxtaposes Mao's revolutionary idealism and the individualism triggered by the commodity economy has become obscure and largely irrelevant for younger generations. According to a report in Huaxia wenzhai (HXWZ) magazine, among 123 primary school students in grade four in the mid-1990s, all of them knew who Hong Kong pop singer Andy Lau (Liu Dehua) was, one third of them did not know who Mao Zedong was and only one child could recite the lyrics of Chinese national anthem correctly. As HXWZ did not provide the details of the survey, the news item can not be regarded as offering much in the way of solid evidence for academic argument. Nonetheless, it can be regarded as a symptom or hint of how remote Maoist history and ideology have become from Chinese younger generations. Such children are likely to be the main body of consumers in the cultural market at the turn of the century. Yet, they know or care little about Party issues (if not for practical purposes) and could hardly appreciate the humour of Wang Shuo's writing which arises from the juxtaposition of colloquial expressions and the mock-serious revolutionary jargon. Certainly, the later generations would have opportunities to learn the lyrics of their national anthem and Maoist slogans from their history textbook. However, their sense of the revolutionary history would be rather remote. Wang Shuo's cohorts were the last generation that, sometimes rebellious and sometimes compliant, had strong connection with the revolutionary collectivist culture. An irony felt by them and articulated in Wang Shuo's language became remote for the younger generation.

Second, Wang Shuo aroused heated debates during the late 1980s and early 1990s because he hit the nerve of the time, raising many substantial issues that concerned most of his contemporaries, including the function of literature, the role and responsibility of the writer, the relationship between high and low cultures, and between official and non-official media.
non-official cultures. Now that cultural commercialisation has become a norm in Chinese society, while some of these issues continue to draw public attention, they could hardly be expected to continue to generate the intense controversy that surrounded Wang Shuo a decade or more earlier. For example, during the late 1990s, the dual status of Yu Qiuyu as a scholar and a cultural celebrity demonstrated the continuous interaction between elite and popular cultures. Yu Qiuyu, a scholar specializing in Chinese drama theory, won himself great reputation as a culture critic after publishing several books discussing cultural issues in prose works, including *Pilgrimage to Ancient Cultural Sites* (*Wenhua kulu*, 1992) and *Frosted Long River* (1999). Yu further promoted himself by frequently appearing on television programs and building a close relationship with readers via the internet. Whereas Yu was criticized by some of his intellectual peers, many others considered his activities acceptable. Xu Jinling’s viewpoint that most Chinese intellectuals can be categorized into two groups, specialist intellectuals (*zhuanye zhishifenzi*) and media intellectuals (*meiti zhishifenzi*), had become widely accepted among critics and ordinary people. Hence many simply classified Yu among the latter and tended to discuss the value of his writing rather than attack him personally.

A brief comparison of Wang Shuo and Feng Xiaogang further demonstrates that the significance of Wang’s writing is attributable to the way it reflected the transformation of China from a revolutionary to a commercialised society, while other artists, such as Feng, managed to keep in touch with new trends/issues emerging in the new society. It is thus of no surprise to see that from the mid-1990s, the popularity of Wang Shuo was

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631 For example, Zhu Dake criticised him for the vulgarization of culture. See Zhu Dake, *Shi zuojia pipan shu* (Critiques on ten writers) (Xi’an: Shannxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 1999).
632 For the discussion on the categorization of Chinese intellectuals, see Xu Jiling, *Zhongguo zhishifenzi shitan* (Ten arguments on Chinese intellectuals), (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshi, 2003).
eclipsed by that of others who were able to contribute in new ways to the diversified cultural scene.

Feng Xiaogang, a former friend of Wang Shuo, bears many similarities with Wang in both life experience and artistic style. Born in 1958, Feng was the same age as Wang. Like Wang, Feng grew up in a cadre family and experienced ups and downs during the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. After being demobilised in 1984, Feng first worked in a civil development company and then became an art designer in the Beijing Television Art Centre, where he worked together with a group of friends from the first generation of Chinese entrepreneurial artists, including Wang Shuo.

Working closely with Wang Shuo, Feng Xiaogang actively engaged in the commercialisation of Chinese film and television. Around 1994, together with Wang, he worked in one of the earliest Chinese culture companies, the Good Dream Film and Television Production Company (Haomeng yingshi zhizuo gongsi). As mentioned in chapter 5, Feng teamed with Wang in writing for the first situation comedy in China, *Stories from the Editorial Board* (1991) and producing *Sea Horse Dance Hall* (1992), the first Chinese television series that used “soft advertising” to draw financial sponsorship. Feng also directed *Beijinger in New York* (1993), which became phenomenally successful in the mid-1990s. *Beijinger in New York* was one of the first Chinese soap operas whose production was funded by a loan its producers got from mortgaging the program to the bank.635

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635 The series was produced by BTAC who mortgaged itself to the Bank of China to get the loan to film it. The producers used the loan to take the entire production crew to U.S.A, where the whole series was shot. The series turned to be a great success when broadcast in China and indicated a new era where market mechanisms became the principle of television production.
Feng appreciated the Wang Shuo style of language and humour; he publicly stated that he liked Wang’s writing and turned many of Wang’s stories into film.\textsuperscript{636} For example, Wang’s novella \textit{You Are Not An Ordinary Person} (\textit{Ni bushi yige suren}, 1992) inspired Feng to shoot the film \textit{Part A Part B} (\textit{Jiafang yifang}, 1997), the founding work of a series of “New Year films” (\textit{he sui pian}) that made Feng the hottest commercial film director in China.\textsuperscript{637} \textit{Part A Part B} tells the story of a service company called For One Day Dreams Come True, which helps its clients realise “at times bizarre fantasies by offering staged realities.”\textsuperscript{638} The story line is obviously influenced by one of Wang Shuo’s best-known stories, \textit{The Operators}, in which a group of unemployed youth run the Three T Company to solve the problems of others, to relieve their tedium and to take blame on their behalf.

Distinctions between Feng’s New Year films and Wang’s writing are also notable. Firstly, as discussed earlier, Wang’s writing is well-known for its biting political satire and mockery of elitism. By contrast, Feng’s New Year films are characterised by light-hearted humour. Clever dialogue is nonetheless a trademark of Feng’s New Year films.\textsuperscript{639} But the sharp or satirical quality of Beijing dialect that characterises Wang’s writing becomes much softer and less biting in Feng’s New Year films. The absence of social critique in Feng’s New Year films, as pointed out by Ying Zhu,\textsuperscript{640} is noteworthy. At the same time, it should be noted that as China had moved from a revolutionary to a

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{636} Feng Xiaogang, \textit{ibid.}, pp. 41-95.
\textsuperscript{637} Since 1997, many of Feng’s New Year Films set box office records, which included \textit{Be There or Be Square} (\textit{Buijan bushan}, 1998), \textit{Sorry Babe} (\textit{Meiwan meiliao}, 1999), \textit{A Sigh} (\textit{Yisheng tanxi}, 2000), \textit{Cell Phone} (\textit{Shouji}, 2003), and \textit{A World Without Thieves} (\textit{Tianxia wuzi}, 2005). For more discussion on Feng and his New Year films, see Ying Zhu, “Feng Xiaogang and Chinese New Year Films.” \textit{Asian Cinema} 18, no. 1 (2007): pp. 43-64; and Shuyu Kong, “Big Shot from Beijing: Feng Xiaogang’s \textit{He Shui Pian} and Contemporary Chinese Commercial Film,” \textit{Asian Cinema} 14, no. 1 (2003): pp. 75-87.
\textsuperscript{638} Ying Zhu, “Feng Xiaogang and Chinese New Year Films,” p. 48.
\textsuperscript{639} Kong, “Big Shot from Beijing: Feng Xiaogang’s \textit{He Shui Pian} and Contemporary Chinese Commercial Film.”
\textsuperscript{640} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 53.
\end{footnotesize}
commercialised society, the socialist past and debates over elitism no longer aroused public interest. Aiming for box office records, Feng’s films were produced to please the public and the censor. A comic perspective on contemporary life, rather than a satirical one, certainly made this easier.

Secondly, as discussed in Chapter 6, Wang Shuo emphasised the conflicts between self-employed urban youth and hypocritical intellectuals in many of his stories. Feng’s New Year films show little interest in this issue. In fact, Feng stepped away from the influence of Wang Shuo as he became increasingly adept at discerning new trends in China during a time of increasing commercialisation and globalisation, and was able to portray them on the screen. The most noteworthy aspect of contemporary China at this time was the rapid pace of consumerisation. This is reflected in most of Feng’s New Year films and particularly Big Shot’s Funeral (Dawan, 2001), which is a farcical comedy about rampant commercialism. The most disturbing aspects of contemporary China were generally considered to be the division between poor and rich and the collapse of social morality. These concerns are expressed in Sorry Baby and A World without Thieves. In addition, Cell Phone taps into a widespread obsession with mobile phones across the country as well as national concern over philandering husbands. Through these films, Feng touched on significant issues in contemporary Chinese society. By contrast, Wang Shuo remained preoccupied with issues characteristic of the transitional period and was hindered from adjusting to the times by his renewed elite consciousness from the mid 1990s.
The Significance of the Wang Shuo Phenomenon in the Chinese Context

The above discussion briefly outlined the trajectory of Wang Shuo’s popularity from the late 1980s to the late 1990s. The cooling of the so-called “Wang Shuo craze,” however, does not imply a decrease of the significance of the phenomenon. Rather, the trajectory of Wang Shuo’s popularity reaffirms the necessity of using a research framework that locates the phenomenon in its historical context; it also reinforces my argument that the phenomenon encapsulates fundamental changes in China’s society and culture during this period.

The Wang Shuo phenomenon is significant as it was an expression of the fundamental transformations China experienced during the late 1980s and early 1990s. First, the phenomenon illustrated the extreme transition of China from a revolutionary to a commercialised society. Chapter 3 analyses the unique “playful” attitude that many Chinese developed toward life in the 1980s and 1990s, which was particularly expressed by the youth of the time and was represented by Wang Shuo and his cohorts. This “playful” characteristic featuring Wang Shuo and many of his contemporaries reveals the extreme social transition in a time when conflicting values and ideologies co-existed. Being “playful” indicates their intimate relationship with both the Maoist past and Deng’s reforms: they parodied revolutionary ideology and socialist norms while at the same time embraced consumerism and deference to authority. The chaotic situation of the time caused by the collapse of Maoist ideologies, the rapid rise of consumerism, and the lack of regulation and direction for the reform project, was the social and historical cause for this “playful consciousness.”

Second, the Wang Shuo phenomenon reflected institutional changes in the Chinese cultural sector. Wang Shuo was a vanguard cultural entrepreneur, who not only...
advocated commercial writing, but also engaged in various industries, such as television and film, to promote “tie-in” business. It was the reform within the cultural sector that provided the condition for Wang Shuo to conduct entrepreneurial practices. As noted in Chapters 4 and 5, the popularity of *The Collected Works of Wang Shuo* and the so-called “Wang Shuo films” occurred in the context of commercialisation of Chinese publishing, film and television industries. Simultaneously however, it is notable that, as a tide-rider of the commercial trend, Wang Shuo’s controversial but innovative behaviours offered a model and encouraged many others to engage in the emergent market. In this sense, as a representative of the first group of entrepreneurial artists, Wang Shuo contributed to the development of Chinese cultural market.

Third, the Wang Shuo phenomenon played a crucial role by shaping and mirroring the social sentiments of that particular period of time. As noted in Chapter 1, three major nationwide debates surrounding Wang Shuo took place during the late 1980s and 1990s. Ordinary readers/viewers, writers and artists, literary and cultural critics, and cultural officials were involved in these debates, which discussed not only the aesthetic values, social effectiveness and literary merit in Wang Shuo’s writing, but also the changing role of the writer and the function of literature and culture.

Indeed, Wang Shuo’s provocative speeches and unconventional literary creations pushed the undercurrent of commercialisation into the centre of the Chinese cultural stage and compelled many to confront these issues. The Wang Shuo phenomenon provided a platform for many Chinese to discuss these issues and accordingly adjust themselves to the changing national circumstances. They could voice their own concern and anxiety by participating in the discussion over interpreting Wang Shuo. Divergent opinions emerging from the debates reflected people’s different understanding and
feeling regarding these issues. For intellectuals and artists in particular, they introduced the terms “post-modernism” and “humanistic spirit” into the discussion, which, in turn, helped them to define and articulate a clear conception of the “postmodernism” and the “humanistic spirit”.

The Significance of the Wang Shuo Phenomenon in the Context of Cultural Studies

This study has also sought to offer insight for issues that extend beyond that specific timeframe and China’s borders. Primarily, the Wang Shuo phenomenon forces us to reconsider the assumptions underlying the way we think about culture and the forces underlying cultural change. This study leads to the conclusion that to understand society and history it is not enough to regard only the highest achievements of human beings as “culture” and worthy of scholarly attention. Fifty or a hundred years ago, nowhere in the conventional university curriculum, in either China or the West, was there a place for the study of pop music, entertainment and football games. Popular cultural phenomena are often considered ephemeral and worthless. For many elite Chinese intellectuals and their western counterparts, culture involves such everlasting and abstract characteristics as “beauty,” “intelligence” and “perfection.” Because this type of thinking dominated the cultural scene in China during the 1980s, Wang Shuo received little academic attention, and even nowadays there are still scholars who consider Wang Shuo a best-seller producer rather than a serious writer.

Nonetheless, researchers both in the West and in China have called into question the conventions of their disciplines and rebelled against traditional modes and objects of research. In the West, as a result of the changing politics of academic life since the 1960s, Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. with an introduction by J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p. 6. My interview with scholars in Beijing Universities conducted in January 2003.
1960s, “anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and literary scholars have mounted impressive intellectual challenges to basic assumptions in their own fields, which had previously barred close attention to popular forms.”

Contrary to the elite view of culture, Raymond Williams argued that culture is not just the “best that has been thought and said,” but rather that “culture is ordinary.” Rooted in the anti-elitist tendencies of the intellectual movement in the West in the 1960s, popular culture studies developed in the West and much attention has since been drawn to people’s daily life.

In post-Mao China anti-elitist sentiments arose in the form of anti-establishment expressions, which in literature and the arts were manifested above all by Wang Shuo. In addition, newly emergent social and cultural phenomena in the rapidly growing consumerist society challenged conventional research approaches and called for the establishment of new modes and objects of research. In this context, the heterogeneous sets of frameworks and methodologies in British and American cultural studies, which arrived in China in the 1980s and 1990s, gained instant popularity in academia and helped promote the studies of popular culture in the mainland.

Drawing on these works, the current study has aimed to contribute to an enlarged understanding of culture by an examination of the case of Wang Shuo. Raymond Williams refers to culture as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” and suggests three broad definitions: “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development;” “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group;” and “the works and practices of intellectual and especially

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artistic activity."^645 Through this thesis, the second and third of these definitions has
been used. Therefore, in analysing Wang Shuo’s writing, I have compared it with not
only literary works written by the established writers but also popular romances and
kungfu stories produced in the market. In addition, I have incorporated textual analysis
of his literary, film and television writing with the discussion on the production and
distribution of his works. Furthermore, I have located Wang Shuo, a prominent popular
cultural figure attracting broad attention of the time, in the context of the rise of Chinese
popular culture studies.

The rise of popular culture studies contributes to our understandings of culture in the
humanities by questioning “the often arbitrary and ideological distinctions between
popular, mass and elite culture” and turning our attention to “the ordinary.”^646 With the
development of popular culture studies, critics have re-investigated the relationship
between “high,” or elite, culture and “low,” popular, culture. In breaking down the rigid
conceptual barrier between the two, scholars have come to realise how much high
culture and popular culture have in common; how much the traditional division has
been a political division rather than a defensible intellectual or aesthetic distinction, and
the mutual influence of high and popular culture.

Influenced by these works, my study of the case of Wang Shuo has scrutinized the
previously established high-low and official-unofficial dichotomies and focused on the
blurred boundaries between elite, official and popular cultures in China in the 1980s and
1990s. The focus of this study is not to determine what the differences are between the
high and the low, and the official and the unofficial, but to examine the intricate and
symbiotic relationships between these cultural forces and the dynamic interaction

^645 Raymond Williams, Keywords (London: Fontana, 1983), p. 87.
^646 Ibid., p.2 and p.3.
among them. In particular, this study has aimed to explore the mutual influence of elite, popular and official cultures, and how popular culture is intertwined with power relations, functioning as a terrain for political and social conflict.

This study of the Wang Shuo phenomenon shows that even though popular trends are sometimes ephemeral, they are deeply intertwined with issues that are of central interest of the public. The creativity of popular writing, as represented by Wang Shuo, challenged literary conventions and state taboos and was actively engaged in the negotiation and confrontation with cultural forces in the elite and official realms. The merging of the elite, state and popular cultures in China, as demonstrated by the Wang Shuo phenomenon, calls for new research approaches that avoid high-low and official-unofficial dichotomies.

In developing an appropriate research method for analysing the Wang Shuo phenomenon, this study has provided insight into the methodologies of popular culture studies. The establishment of contemporary popular culture studies was characterised by a populist trend, which challenged conventional disciplines by emphasising “the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people.” In doing so, pioneering popular cultural critics, such as Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson expanded the boundary of culture studies to the “study of relations between elements in a whole way of life.” Arguing against “the base/superstructure metaphor and a reductionist or ‘economistic’ definition of determinacy,” Thompson claims to “conceptualise culture as interwoven with all social practices.” Nonetheless, as both Jim McGuigan and Hall

point out, this kind of thinking leads to an uncritical populism and lacks sufficient examination of political economy.\(^{650}\)

As a result of a critical dialogue with Leavisist elite tradition, the “reductionist” tendency in classical Marxist theory and the “populist” strand of cultural studies, Hall develops a definition of “popular culture” as “forms and activities which have their roots in the social and material conditions of particular classes” in any particular period.\(^{651}\) Furthermore, he intentionally avoids the assumed correspondence between economic, political and ideological dimensions and develops the idea that “what is essential to the definition of popular is the relations which define “popular culture” in a continuing tension (relationship, influence and antagonism) with the dominant culture.”\(^{652}\)

Drawing on the work of Hall and others, this study has argued that it is impossible to understand the Wang Shuo phenomenon except in its full socio-historical context. My exploration of the cultural phenomenon has been conducted against the backdrop of social and historical transformations in China. Primarily, it was the structural changes occurring in the social, political and ideological domains that brought about confrontation and negotiation among various cultural powers. Seeing culture as “the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society,”\(^{653}\) I have treated the Wang Shuo phenomenon as a site where economic, political and ideological changes were inextricably intertwined.

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\(^{651}\) Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” *ibid.*, p. 449.

\(^{652}\) *Ibid.*

Finally, this study indicates that to conceptualise change one needs to analyse the relationship between residual and emergent forces. My study of the Wang Shuo phenomenon has demonstrated that, in the Chinese context, the tradition of elite intellectuals and political establishment persisted into the era of commercialisation and globalisation. Wang Shuo represented the rise of a commercial trend on the mainland and introduced many cultural innovations, including “stirring-up” promotion and literary “tie-ins” with other media. However, while his entrepreneurial behaviour certainly challenged conventional cultural forces, my study has shown that he was also heir to some aspects of the Chinese elite tradition. His anti-elite behaviour corresponded with some elite intellectuals’ own reflection on their tradition, their rethinking of what culture is, and their search for new modes and objects of research in a changing society. For this reason, Wang Shuo’s impact and cultural significance have to be considered in relation to the history of Mao’s revolution, the continuing influence of the Confucian tradition, the quest for legitimacy on the part of modern intellectuals and their links to the political establishment.

The tradition of the Chinese cultural and political establishment has also been notable since China stepped onto the global stage. Local Chinese intellectuals’ active engagement in the “postmodern” dialogue with international academia, as discussed in chapter 1, has demonstrated the continuing strong influence of elitism, which can be traced back to the modernisation project Chinese intellectuals collectively carried out in the nineteenth century when facing the challenge of the West. The global connection has also forced the political establishment in China to accept and to accommodate themselves to the forces of global capitalism. Nonetheless, while the Chinese government has, to a certain extent, been capitalised, it has retained many of its own traditions and has learnt to manipulate the market for its own purposes. As Tsing

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reminds us, global encounters across difference reveal many messy and surprising features. To study such features, one has to be alert to the interaction between residual and emergent forces.

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