

**Representation of 'Class' in Chinese  
Literature during the Reform Period:  
A Case Study of Wang Shuo's works**

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# Representation of 'Class' in Chinese Literature during the Reform Period

## A Case Study of Wang Shuo's works

### Abstract

The paper looks at some of the representative works of Wang Shuo to see how his works contributed to the contemporary Chinese fiction by mirroring the issues of a newly emerged 'class'. The paper focusses on the narrative techniques that are his own style, i.e. of 'Hooligan Literature' and made an attempt to study how the representation of 'class' has changed from the earlier stance on 'class' from the Mao's period. Lastly, the paper tries to explore the significance of his works, while comparing it with other authors, and whether Wang Shuo's literary activism pushed boundaries of literary creativity.

**Keywords:** Wang Shuo, Hooligan literature, *liumang*, *pizi*, counterculture, humanism, literary activism

## Introduction

In the years following Economic Reforms and Opening up of China, there emerged different socio-economic strata, as Chinese society witnessed multifaceted changes; one among them was an improved living standard of people. The outcome of some of the basic economic strategies initiated by the Deng Xiaoping leadership paved the way for individual benefit and advancement; economy became an overwhelming concern both for politics and for people. With the newly introduced policies of material incentives, which were influential for an overall economic development of China, one's own individual economic advancement became a pressing concern.

As the Economic Reforms progressed on to a deeper level, there emerged visible changes in socio-cultural fabric of Chinese society, as more and more people made efforts to 'get rich first' (先富起来 *xian fu qi lai*)<sup>1</sup> and chased their own individual benefit. There was a visible change in the swelling middle class of China that used every means, moral or immoral, to get rich fast. As many could not become rich and successful, it led to an ever-expanding economic disparity in the society and thereby, the emergence of new socio-economic groupings; some of these phenomena found reflection in the newly emerging cultural formations and trends.

Many writers took to paper and pen to represent these social realities, however, the literary representations of alienation or emergence of different classes have time and again been sneered at as 'bourgeoisie influence', simply to assert that Socialist societies do not experience alienation. Though the debates on alienation and Humanism of early 1980s had a deep impact on the literature and art production in general:

Without the intervention of the alienation school in the Chinese intellectuals and political debates at that historical moment, the issue of Humanism would not have occupied such a prominent place on the national agenda and the liberatory vision would

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<sup>1</sup> In order to open the economy, Deng Xiaoping came up with a creative state policy of 'Let some people get rich first' (让一部分人先富起来 *rang yi bu fen ren xian fu qi lai*) which was almost immediately adapted into real sense and eventually led to emergence of a large wealthy middle-class. Scholars held it in debate who were these people who were going to get rich first over others; the outline or the substance remained ambiguous. See Bao Tong's piece in The New York Times *How Deng Xiaoping Helped Create a Corrupt China*, dated June 3, 2015. Mr. Bao Tong was an advisor to Zhao Ziyang, the General Secretary of the CPC then.

not have been so deeply engraved on the intellectual history of the 1980s. (Wang, 1966: 10)

There were writers that broke the literary stereotypes when the literary representations started to portray these visible changes. The late 1970s and 1980s was a time where active remembrance was an exercise that intellectuals and writers engaged in with unrelenting persistence; for nearly half a decade, confessions or self-introspection not only pervaded literary discourse, but also emerged as one of the dominant expressions in political discourse. Consumerism<sup>2</sup> and commercialization became the new norms of life and literature in the 1990s, and literature reflected amply on this transformation. (Wang, 1966: 9)

The 1980s literature seemed increasingly concerned with humanitarian issues, as intellectuals and writers explored theoretical and abstract issues such as traditional Chinese culture, human nature, alienation, nepotism etc. There were many writers who had dwelled on issues like emergence of different socio-economic groupings or ‘classes’ where economic disparity and social alienation were issues to reckon with. Wang Shuo (王朔), Zhang Chengzhi (张承志) and Wang Xiaobo (王小波) are some of the prominent voices that have been addressing the persistent alienation from the mainstream ideologies of post-Mao period, even though they started writing in late 1970s or early 1980s, they did not receive any official recognition from the authorities;<sup>3</sup> all three of them coincidentally are ‘Writers outside the system’ (体制外作家 *tizhiwai zuojia*).<sup>4</sup> Their writings have characters that are not heroic, and thus, these authors have been called cultural rebels.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The slogan ‘Consumerism is the motivating force for the development of production’ became popular in the wake of Deng Xiaoping’s talks given during his much-publicized Southern Tour in February 1992. See Zhou Guanwu’s “消费是发展生产的动力” (*xiaofei shi fazhan shengchan de dongli* - Consumerism serves as the motivating force for the development of production), *renmin ribao*, 7 June 1992, for details.

<sup>3</sup> Out of them, Zhang Chengzhi is the only one who received literary awards from the authorities for his early works, such as *qishou weishenme gecha muqin* (Why the herdsman sings his mother, 1978), *heijunma* (Black steed, 1982) and *beifang de he* (Northern Rivers, 1984). His later works, such as *xisheng ansha kao* (Investigation on the Assassination in the Western Province, 1985), *jin muchang* (Golden Ranch, 1987) and *xinling shi* (The History of Soul, 1989) did not receive any honours. Also, all three of these writers have different thematic emphasis in their works, they all share a purposeful alienation from the mainstream ideologies of post-Mao China, and most have utilised sexuality as a rebellious gesture in their works.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, all three writers had quit their government jobs willingly, to be Writers outside the establishment or ‘Writers outside the system’. None of the three writers had a clear ideological motive when they quit their comfortable government job, which placed these writers outside the system. While Wang Shuo quit his job at State-run pharmaceutical company to start his own business and later venturing into writing, Zhang Chengzhi wanted to break away from all institutions and Wang Xiaobo just wanted more time to focus on his writing. There

People's changing priorities in the new environment of post-Mao period were reflected in these new cultural formations. Beijing based writer Wang Shuo took to representation of a marginalised section of society, a typical socio-economic grouping, setting a new literary trend that came to be known as Hooligan Literature (流氓文学 *liumang wenxue*). He crafted characters from this grouping, i.e. from lower social stratum or from the fringes of the society, and through his characters he artistically represented the emergence of a new 'class' in China, its sense of belonging, its inside culture and other issues of the 1980s and the 1990s Chinese society.

### **Wang Shuo: Family Background and Education**

Wang Shuo was born on 23 August 1958 in Nanjing and later shifted to Beijing with his parents at the age of 5. He grew up on an army residential compound as his father was an instructor at the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA; 人民解放军 *renmin jiefang jun*) Political Institute and his mother was a physician. During the Cultural Revolution, his parents had to leave him and his brother behind in Beijing, as they were away on duty. Like many children of this time, Wang Shuo spent a lot of time with children whose parents were sent to countryside for labour. Typical of those from this background, Wang spent his childhood days in State-run nurseries and was of a rebelling nature in his growing up years as a teenager.

During the 1970s, Wang Shuo had faced disciplinary action twice, once for being in a gang fight and on another occasion for snatching a policeman's cap during the Tian'anmen square protest of 1976; he was jailed both the times. After he graduated from middle school, his father made him join the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) as a sailor where he was stationed at Qingdao with the North Sea Fleet. Finding the hierarchy and corruption in the Navy unbearable, Wang would often waste his time womanising or lazing about on the beach. He was discharged in 1980 and assigned a post of a medical assistant in a State-run pharmaceutical company in Beijing for almost four years. He left that State job to venture into business in 1983 and started buying clothes from Shenzhen and Hong Kong and sold it elsewhere (买卖 *maimai*:

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are other terms for 'Writers outside the system' such as 文坛外高手 (Outside the Literary world) or 独立作家 (independent writers).

<sup>5</sup> The concept of cultural rebel is understood as different from that of political dissident; Cultural rebels criticise, confront, satire and mock the system or its official ideology, but do not publicly defy the legitimacy of the Communist Party.

Business); his business made him accustomed to the market and public taste, which at the same time became a financial source for his stint as a freelance writer.

Wang Shuo was used to a so-called aristocratic family background, which came with its privileges, and had a sense of superiority as well as an insider's view of the privileged stratum. A lot of his experiences, especially the regimented childhood and rebellious teenage years, have made it to his semi-autobiographical works like *Playing for Thrills* (玩的就是心跳 *wan de jiu shi xin tiao*), *Animal Ferocity* (动物凶猛 *dongwu xiongmeng*), and *It Looks Beautiful* (看上去很美 *kan shangqu hen mei*) etc.

Even though Wang Shuo started writing in the late 1970s, it is only his writings of the 1980s that brought Wang Shuo popularity as well as some controversy. In 1990s, apart from being an author, Wang turned to be a film producer and a script writer as well for TV sitcoms. His literary works, films and sitcoms have had a mass appeal because they criticised Chinese traditional values, political ideology or the political establishment. The Hooligan characters (流氓 *liumang*) in his literary works or films, also known as 'pizi' (痞子 riff raff), represented a specific social grouping in Chinese society.

Wang's Hooligan Literature is a genre of literature that reflects on the issues of new middleclass, a by-product of repercussions of the new Chinese social and economic policies both in countryside and in the cities, that are engaged in prostitution rings and drug trade. This grouping usually consists of small-time thieves, smugglers, petty criminals etc. These smalltime criminals challenged political establishment, indulged in petty crimes, swindling and tall tales, seduced women and used street slangs. His Hooligan characters that were considered largely negative or exerting bad influence on the young generation, their way of life in itself is a way to criticise the society, their orthodox culture or even the political ideology especially its most commonly used Mao's rhetorics.



## Wang Shuo's Literary Journey: Assessment of his famous works

In the relaxed environment of the 1980s, the Literary and Art circles were buzzing with many activities.<sup>5</sup> There were many in literary and art circles that tried to highlight the fast-losing legitimacy of the ruling ideology and the chaos that had silenced their older generations because of the Cultural Revolution.

Wang Shuo began his journey in a somewhat similar way. With his first story *Waiting* (等待 *dengdai*) that was published in People's Liberation Army Literature and Art (解放军文艺 *jiefangjun wenyi*) in 1978, Wang made a mark on the editors of the magazine; he was given a job with the magazine subsequently. The story is set in the concluding years of the Cultural Revolution and portrays lives thereafter; it narrates the story of a defiant young woman who is desperate for foreign literature, ideas and individual freedom, and her parents turns her quests down. Disappointed by her fainthearted parents, the author makes a point to 'save the parents'<sup>6</sup> instead.

Other than contributing to the story, he made no other significant mark at the journal but very soon become a PLA 'profiteer' (倒爷 *daoye*: a term for Bureaucratic profiteering)<sup>7</sup> when he started a smuggling operation in the south China with his childhood friends. (Barme, 1992: 26) In 1980, when he worked for the State-run pharmaceutical company in Beijing, but got involved in illegal trade once again in 1983, was caught and fined by the police.

Wang's life experiences became the basis of two of his stories in mid 1980s, i.e. *Air Hostess* (空中小姐 *kongzhong xiaojie*, 1984) and *Floating above the Sea* (浮出海面 *fuchu haimian*,

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<sup>5</sup> A rampant trend of criticising the highly politicised society was in vogue, and many such as Wei Jingsheng (魏京生) and Bei Dao (北岛), took to criticism of political party by writing articles or poetry. Also, Rock artist Cui Jian (崔健) used his composition and rock music to critique the society.

<sup>6</sup> In comparison to Liu Xinwu's work *The Class Teacher* (班主任 *ban zhuren*) which ends with a message of 'saving the children', Wang proposes to 'save the parents' instead. Still a work that denounces the Cultural Revolution in literature, it takes a different stance than most works of this time, eg. Scar Literature etc., and highlights how parents suffered psychological wounds during the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>7</sup> Scholar Geremie Barme makes a reference to Wang Shuo's *Selected Fiction* (小说选刊 *xiaoshuo xuankan*), vol.1, 1987, pp. 5-49; But in the lack of the original source, it is cited from Geremie Barme, "Wang Shuo and Liurang ('Hooligan') Culture", *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no.28, July 1992, p.26.

1985). Having employed the theme of love, he portrays the ‘cool’ young hooligans who not

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only undermine the liberating potential of love but also ridicule love, for their vulnerability to pure genuine love makes them uncool and emotionally weak.

It was only in 1986 that Wang Shuo began publishing fiction regularly; Wang’s works can’t be easily classified into specific rigid categories, but the more prominent ones are sentimental love stories, gangster stories, rebellious *liumang* stories. The period between 1986-1992 remains Wang Shuo’s most significant and productive period. Stories written during this period such as *The Troubleshooters*, *Playing for Thrills*, *Please Don’t Call Me Human*, *Not Serious at all* etc., were all ‘*tiaokan*’ (调侃 mockery) stories and brought him both fame and controversy.

Wang did not write in the mainstream literary trends of that time, and instead explored new styles. He is the first author to have established ‘*tiaokan*’ as the dominating literary style in his works while he continued to write about the Hooligans. Li Donghui explains *tiaokan* as:

Originally meant telling jokes or tall tales for amusement among men or for teasing and flirting between men and women. It is also a rhetorical device commonly used in *xiangsheng* (相声 comic talk shows), a popular folk art form in Beijing. (Li, 1998: 33)

Wang Shuo through his hooligan characters portrays that common people of China are capable of *tiaokan* and, in his works, they are the creators of it. Common people, whose education level is not high, see through the fraud and deception, speak scornfully, and can satirize the elegant language of the authority.

### Gangster Stories: The Rebellious *liumang*

Wang’s heterogeneous hooliganism is uncertain in realms of love, but he has not completely abandoned the ‘sentimentality’ or its constraints in his characters. His hooligan characters, even though self-proclaimed, consider love or sentiments as a hindrance in their pursuit along the path of hooliganism.

With his novella *The Rubber Man* (橡皮人 *xiangpi ren*, 1986) Wang Shuo shifted away from themes of sentimental love stories gradually paving way for the Hooligan gangster grand narratives. *The Rubber Man* is one of his first hooligan sagas where the male protagonist is tired of having no job and killing his time in bars. Desperate to establish his confidence and superiority over others, a pursuit for fame and money becomes his prime concern. The protagonist, a northerner from Beijing, goes to south for establishing some trade liaisons where he gets involved in a business deal that includes smuggling of goods. His business idea of smuggling exposes him to the true face of people; even his love interest in the story betrays him. The story takes the protagonist through the big bad world of business which exposes him to its dark side when he experiences fraud, greed, betrayal and violence through this journey. The story deals with issues (of the newly emerged middle class) such as partial knowledge of one's own origins leading to false sense of superiority, inability to adjust to the urban crowd, delusions of self-importance, negotiations over one's identity etc. The story, through the protagonist, makes a point about being calculative of everything, not wasting one's feeling on anything that one deems unnecessary – typical traits of a hooligan; additionally, it also teaches him that the game of money only rewards those that pursue it (money) with no residue of any idealism.

Wang Shuo's *The Troubleshooters* (顽主 *wanzhu*, 1987), which is a part of “Playing Masters series” (顽主系列 *wanzhu xilie*)<sup>8</sup>, is a story of cynical young Chinese men who look for unique ways of making a living in the new socio-economic milieu brought about by the Chinese Economic Reforms. Three self-employed *wanzhu* (herein understood as trouble-shooters) form a company, called Three T company (三 T 公司, to be understood as 三替公司), that troubleshoots all kinds of problems of their clients. They sell their services as proxies ‘to get people out of difficulty, to help people amuse themselves, to take the place of people in trouble’

(替人解难、替人解闷、替人受过 *tiren jienan, tiren jiemen, tiren shouguo*) quite literally representing or replacing their clients in any situation in life.

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<sup>8</sup> “Playing Masters series” (顽主系列 *wanzhu xilie*) includes Wang Shuo's works from 1987 to 1992, such as *The Troubleshooters* (顽主 *wanzhu*, 1987), *Playing for Thrills* (玩的就是心跳 *wande jiushi xin tiao*, 1989), *Please Don't Call me Human* (千万别把我当人 *qianwan bie ba wo dang ren*, 1989), *Not Serious at all* (一点正经都没有 *yidian zhengjing ye mei you*, 1989), *Animal Ferocity* (动物凶猛 *dongwu xiongmeng*, 1991) and *Boss Xu* (许爷 *xu ye*, 1992).

Wang's next work *Playing for Thrills* (玩的就是心跳 *wande jiushi xin tiao*, 1989), is one of the most famous works of him. The narrator, Fang Yan, finds himself to be a suspect in a murder case of one his acquaintances from ten years ago. During interrogation, he cannot account for a 

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 week's time in between, and so he starts to look for all old friends who can help him rediscover his identity. There are shocks, mysteries and many revelations that come along as the story unfolds. The friend who hatched a game of death happens to be the one who died, and not the one that Fang Yan has been thinking all along.

On the death game, the story reveals that the young lads wanted to do something that will make them famous and so they will be remembered in the history. In *Playing for Thrills*, during the interrogation by the police, Fang Yan is reckless in cooperating about a crime as grave as a murder. The protagonist Fang Yan says:

“想不起来了”，我说，“实在想不起来了。我那会儿心情不好，怀才不遇，经常不欠上班，哪儿也不去，满大街溜达，所谓踟躅街头”。 (Wang, 1990: 15)

“Can't recall”, I said. “I actually can't recall anything. I felt pretty bad at that time, like a frustrated talent, I would miss work often, didn't go out pretty much anywhere. I would just walk around, or 'wander about' the city, as they say.”<sup>9</sup>

Wang's usage of 怀才不遇 (*huai cai bu yu*), translated as 'frustrated talent' for himself is an insinuation to the traditional scholars whose wisdom was ahead of their times, and thus not valued rightly by many. While the sarcastic use of the phrase hints at the weakening of the authority that classical literary style considers as the hallmark, it also indicates, on the other hand, Wang Shuo's access and knowledge of classical Chinese language. Wang's usage of 'as they say' or the 'so-called' throughout his texts is another effective method of subverting the authority of traditional literary terms or phraseology. In that, Wang establishes himself as the master of 'playing at literature' with new rules. The following lines is perhaps another signifier of a new cultural change:

“叫什么我还真说不上，你管她叫什么？人名还不就是穿戴高兴怎么换就怎么换，耳屎还叫耳聃呢，咱说的就是这事。” (Wang, 1990: 118)

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<sup>9</sup> English translation by the scholar.

“I don’t recall; besides, does it make a difference what her name was? A person’s name is like clothing, you can change it at your will. Call it whatever you want, cerumen is still earwax. That’s what I am talking about.”<sup>10</sup>

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The lines above depicts that Wang also tried to tamper with sacrosanct Confucian authority wherein names carry the essence in them, of what they signify. Naming a person is a tedious and much involved process, that Wang’s characters doesn’t seem to pay much attention to. In fact, it seemed to be a direct critique of the orthodoxy when Wang comes up with names like Local Dialect (方言 *fang yan*), Pudgy girl (胖姑娘 *pang guniang*), Black Leather Coat (黑皮大衣 *heipi dayi*), Fox Fairy (狐仙 *hu xian*), Fat Man Wu (吴胖子 *wu pangzi*) etc. wherein they do not reflect any glorious virtue of the character of the person but are reduced to the mere appearance or traits of a person.

There is a similar example of Wang Shuo using classical or official rhetoric to evoke a sense of humor or sarcasm; Wang’s usage of Confucian adages is his way of mocking the traditional culture and undermining their importance. Gao Jin, a friend of the protagonist Fang Yan in *Playing for Thrills*, in order to explain how he adapted to the new changes along the wave of Capitalist reform and became a sophisticated professional, he uses a Confucian saying:

丹之所藏着赤 乌之所藏着黑

That which is stored in the cinnabar will redden; that which is stored in the lampblack will blacken. (Hakkenberg, 2008: 37)

In their next dialogue, Gao Jin puts forward the elaboration in colloquial Chinese, the meaning of the Confucian saying, in a casual chat with his friends:

我一直就是这个样子，好比这杯透明，无色的清水靠近红的东西就是呈现红色靠近黑色就发黑。(Wang, 1990: 28)

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<sup>10</sup> The translation has been inspired from Howard Goldblatt’s *Playing for Thrills*, p. 155 but has been improvised by the scholar.

This is how I've always been, consistently, like this transparent water here: Put something next to it and it turns crimson red, put something black against it, and it turns dark.<sup>11</sup>

The subaltern narrative of *liumang* was based on their supposed ubiquity in Chinese society; Wang Shuo seem to be addressing the issues of alienation through *liumang*'s cynical and rude

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ridicule of the Party or its former political heroes such as Mao Zedong. Consider the following lines:

“咱们当年真不讲理对吗？国家已经宣布不打仗了，共促共荣了，咱们还是当兵的脾气，见着资产阶级就压不住火儿，不打不舒坦。” (Wang, 1990: 104)

“So we were wrong, is that it? The government said we were no longer at war, that we were supposed to coexist, but we couldn't stop being soldiers and beating up every member of the bourgeoisie we saw”.<sup>13</sup>

Or to compare his carefree life with Lin Biao's term 'continuing revolution', Wang once again 'plays' with the literature or the political language, when his protagonist Fang Yan says:

“我是要写回忆录，没听报上见天叹息，老同志死一个少一个，要抓紧帮助他们把自己的经历整理出来，他们的生活是和我整个革命斗争史密不可分的，对教育青年人帮助他们认识历史有不可代替的作用。” (Wang, 1990: 59)

“I am planning to write some memoirs. Haven't you noticed all the hand wringing in the papers these days, how the old comrades are dropping like flies? If we don't hurry up and help them write down their experiences, it'll be too late. Their lives are at the core of the revolutionary experience, and recording them for posterity will be invaluable in instructing the younger generation in our nation's history.

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<sup>11</sup> The quote is also mentioned in Christopher Hakkenberg's *Rearticulating Literary Dissent: An Analysis of Wang Shuo's Playing for Thrills*, (Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller, 2008), p. 37. Translation by the scholar.

As far as his language is concerned, he has retained elements of ‘elite’ language, but it’s over and above the language of the *liumang*. There is a lot of usage of internal monologue, multiple references to the character’s psychic reality and also references to his external surroundings such as events during their growing up, youth and adult life. These have helped tremendously in the development of the character and the plot to which they are players.

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<sup>13</sup> The English translation has been taken from Howard Goldblatt’s *Playing for Thrills*, p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> The English translation has been taken from Howard Goldblatt’s *Playing for Thrills*, p. 75.

### Aristocratic youth as the *liumang*

Geremie Barme and few other scholars regard Wang Shuo as a contemporary writer of ‘common man’ (平民 *ping min*) fiction for his portrayal of a group of marginalized or ‘working-class’ characters in contemporary Chinese society. Wang flaunts himself and his hooligan characters as ‘spiritual proletariat’ (精神无产阶级 *jingshen wuchan jieji*) but his claims on being proletariat must be looked at in the light of unique historical conditions from which these ‘common men’ emerged as ‘proletariat’. The hooligan characters of Wang Shuo’s stories are children of political elite, who were also called the ‘aristocratic youth’, that emerged during the Cultural Revolution and became marginalized and alienated in an increasingly commercial society in the Deng’s Reform period.

In the Deng era, these former aristocratic youth had no access to political power or its accompanying prestige and material benefits as the children of the exclusive power elite, and were also labelled ‘*taizi dang*’ (太子党- prince’s party). This youth also did not have the college diplomas that were needed to join the emerging middle class of professionals or technocrats. Therefore, in this transition from a politically-oriented to a commercially-oriented society, this social grouping lost the privileges of the political elite that they were earlier entitled to just by virtue of birth. The earlier aristocratic youth had now become the alienated street-smart Hooligans, who, in seeking other means to seek status, power and freedom, drove an alternate youth ‘counterculture’.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The term Counterculture here is understood as, a culture whose values and lifestyle is in contrast to that of the established mainstream culture. For example, the American Counterculture, roughly from 1964-1972, stood for the new interpretation of the culture where the old norms of the 1950s were rejected by the youth. Hippies, the largest

Not satisfied with their commoner status, this social grouping tried to relive and renegotiate their lost status and existence in this new environment by adopting a daredevil and playful attitude towards life. Added to this was the pungent vernacular speech based on Beijing dialect

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and slangs which brought them a sense of superiority. This speech and careless attitude enabled them to defy and challenge all kind of authorities, subvert a dominant discourse and resist any kind of social pressure, yet enjoy life while making a statement about themselves that they are in no way a ‘commoner’.<sup>13</sup>

As a result of the Communist Revolution, ‘the big compound culture’ came up as a new scenario in Beijing’s cultural life. The cultural environment of the old Beijing was distinct from these big compounds with residence quarters for employees of government and military institutions, which formed a geocultural area of their own. In these big compounds dwelled the families of the most prestigious category of the new elite in Mao’s China; most family heads served in military with good revolutionary credentials.

It is understood among the Chinese scholars that Wang Shuo had acquired a sense of ‘class’ and hierarchy as early as kindergarten, owing to the class-based policy in Mao’s China that favored the elite children in education and employment. The favorable treatment that they received started much earlier and continued even during the Cultural Revolution. Wang Shuo and all his childhood friends, who later formed a youth gang during the Cultural Revolution, went to the same kindergarten and elementary school meant to be exclusively for the children from the big

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Countercultural grouping, rejected conventional social norms of the 1950s (one amongst them was the American youth rejecting cultural standards of their parents, such as their views on racial segregation and their support for the Vietnam war). They later broadened this concept to include a rejection of materialism (i.e. materialist interpretation of the American Dream), or traditional modes of authority. A similar kind of alternative culture was brewing in China in the form of ‘youth gangs’, which later influenced the literature, or its publication of unpopular themes or issues brought up by this counterculture of ‘youth gangs’. Encouraged and attracted by the breakdown of the law and order, these youth gangs had started to mushroom everywhere in China during the Cultural Revolution, giving this Hooligan culture a stronger foothold and they still remained somewhat intact once the Cultural Revolution ended. In China, this counterculture was based on a subaltern identity that has been the source of denial, debate and contention among the Communist Party’s higher officials. See works of Yao Yusheng, Wang Binbin and Geremie Barne for more details on these youth gangs.

<sup>13</sup> Wang Binbin in *A Biography of Wang Shuo of the Chinese Hooligan Culture* also rejects the view that Wang Shuo is a writer of the common people and regards him as an inheritor of ‘the big compound culture’. Wang Binbin discusses the inside patterns of that big compound culture, such as strong practice of hierarchy, drive to move upward in life and a sense of fear to fall downward, as Wang Shuo lived in it for a dozen years or so. Discontented with commoner status, Wang Shuo and his friends share this sense of fear and drive to make it big in life.



compounds.<sup>14</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, intense class bias and struggle further enhanced their status and confidence as children of one of the most admired gentry: Revolutionary Army personnel (革命军人 *geming junren*). The older children assumed a privileged status dictated by Mao's policy that organized the 'Red Guards' in the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. More commonly known as the 'Old Red Guards' (老红卫兵 *lao hongweibing*), this exclusive elite group was different from the Red Guards which was later formed on a more inclusive basis.

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The aristocratic Red Guards are best remembered for their violent actions during the Cultural Revolution. They propagated the destruction of 'Four Olds' (四旧 *sijiu*) and took violent stance against 'the Five Black categories' (黑五类 *hei wulei*) to purify the Chinese society<sup>15</sup>, but were left demoralized when their parents also became the targets of the Cultural Revolution.

Dejected and isolated, they formed up gangs, indulged in violence and sexual experimentation. The forming up of gangs gave birth to a new counterculture of hooligans.<sup>16</sup> (Yao: 2004, 431469) Encouraged by the breakdown of the law and order, these youth gangs started to mushroom everywhere in China during the Cultural Revolution, giving this Hooligan counterculture a stronger foothold.

Unlike the stereotypical Hooligans of the past who were looked down upon as urban lower class, these Hooligans came from the 'aristocratic' background. They were children of the political elite and used to flaunt their aristocratic lifestyle and status. In the Cultural Revolution years, which was the time of total political dominance, cultural impoverishment and material shortage, this social grouping still represented status, freedom and power that most youth desired but lacked.

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<sup>14</sup> Wang Shuo, in *It Looks Very Beautiful*, describes the elementary school as a school that was set up by his residential compound, No.29 Army Corp of Communications and the students that enrolled, were children of three compounds. There was hardly an exception, except the son of a manager of a milk company and the daughter of a Party Secretary of Qiuwei road shopping mall. He assures that no sons and daughters of commoners attended this school. (See pages 60-63 and 112)

<sup>15</sup> The 'Four Olds' mentioned here refers to old culture, thought, norms and habits (旧思想、旧文化、旧风俗、旧习惯) and the 'Five Black categories' of people, namely landlords, rich farmers, counter-revolutionaries, bad-influencers and rightists (地主、富农、反革命、坏分子、右派) were at the receiving end of their (Red Guards') violence. The violent actions included humiliation, struggle-sessions, persecution or reeducation and reforms sometimes.

<sup>16</sup> Yao Yusheng writes about himself witnessing that time in the history and feels perhaps victimization of their parents was the reason for transformation of the Red Guards. The Old Red Guards organized the Capital United Action Committee (联动 *liandong*) but it was quickly suppressed as counterrevolutionary. The dangers of political involvement encouraged the less politically oriented to become hooligans. Yao witnessed this phenomenon and admired several hooligans himself for their short-lived actions.

Their experience of teenage years, in particular experiences of Wang Shuo, are captured in *Animal Ferocity* (动物凶猛 *dongwu xiongmeng*, 1991) where Wang portrays the political culture and insecurities of an urban youth gang of the 1970s. Wang Shuo recounts his nostalgia in *Animal Ferocity* how he and other gang members sought status and freedom in the struggle against traditions, parental or school authorities as well as social restrictions of Chinese society. His description of how the generation wrestled with anxieties and conflicts that come along adolescent sexuality was warmly received by Wang Shuo's generation.<sup>17</sup> (Yao: 2004, 466) As a

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matter of fact, unlike most Chinese people, Wang's idiosyncrasies allowed him to laud the Cultural Revolution for the emergence of this new kind of counterculture of youth gangs. He feels that the underlying cause of this Hooligan culture was the Cultural Revolution which weakened the authority of schools or parents, and gave youngsters an exceptional sense of freedom and opportunities to rebel which was never seen before in China:

No matter how bad the Cultural revolution was made out to be, it disrupted the orderliness of everyday life and offered opportunities for individual development and freed the children from the bonds of the old and decaying education system. In the phase of so-called accumulating knowledge, the children were active in society and the things taught at school were meaningless compared with this experience. If you want to take the exams and go to college, then you have to be subdued. If that had been the case, I might have become another kind of person, such as Ph.D. of some sort. [Wang Shuo, 1992: 34] (Yao: 2004, 438)

Wang's comment above highlights that the discipline valve was let off with changes in education. Earlier it used to be the competitive examination to enter middle school or work that could be used effectively to discipline the children of the political Elite class. The conventional methods of social upward mobility, career etc had suddenly disappeared, bringing them major relief from the pressures and provided them with unprecedented opportunities to rebel.

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<sup>17</sup> Scholar Yao Yusheng mentions Jiang wen, a well-known actor that directed the film version of this novel shared a similar experience. The film version of this novel was made in 1993 and was called 《阳光灿烂的日子》 (The Dazzling Sunny Days - *yangguang canlan de rizi*). Wang Shuo acted in the film as a Hooligan and the film, apart from winning best actor award at Venice film festival in 1994, was the top grossing film of 1995 in China.

Another factor contributing to the emergence of this counterculture was Mao's class-based policy; this Hooligan counterculture was the very embodiment of the former privileged class of aristocrats or their children. Since the revolution intended to uproot the visible representation of 'elite class' to form a classless society, the emergence of this 'former aristocratic youth' social grouping showed how the revolution defeated its own revolutionary goals established by Mao.

Wang Shuo through his stories explain how the aristocratic youth benefited from their class background, as it protected them from any serious consequences, and thus, they were more likely to rebel against authorities. This social grouping was spared from going down to the countryside after graduation because better alternatives were made possible for them. Wang explains the arrangements and privileges of the narrator of *Animal Ferocity*:

At that time, I went to school only to avoid losing too much face. I had not the slightest worry about my future. This future has been arranged: I would join military after graduation from middle school and become a low ranking officer. This was my whole dream.

I did not have to strive for any of this. The only thing I had to do was to wait. When I reached the age of eighteen, it was automatically my turn. [Wang Shuo, 1995: 251] (Yao: 2004, 439)

The aristocratic youth had the best offers, in terms of career and life, all throughout the years of the Cultural Revolution. They could join the military and enjoy better life than other youth of their age that toiled in the fields in the countryside. After a few years of service and promotions, they could always be demobilized and return to city for other good jobs.

Wang Shuo had brought up the issues of this 'class' in almost all his stories, every now and then, as a statement on behalf of other urban Chinese youth that lived through this era of discrimination. This newly emerged 'class' of former aristocratic youth was something that many could not reckon with. Wang Shuo's works, notwithstanding the parameters of any literary establishment, were heavily criticized and even banned, yet copies of his works sold in millions and he became

a youth icon especially among the Beijing youth. His works were labeled rebellious and his playful language considered subversive; Wang Shuo still became a household name when in 1988 four of his novels were adapted into films and 1988 was declared as ‘Wang Shuo year of the Chinese Cinema’.<sup>18</sup> Wang has tried to highlight the inner contradictions of Chinese society that there can be no bigger irony than Mao’s Cultural Revolution, that aimed at eliminating the hereditary privileged class, actually reinforced and

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intensified class differences further, and strengthened self-perpetuation of class bias.<sup>19</sup> He has presented a contrast between the conformist majority of law-abiding people and the defiant aristocratic youth that could skip the exhausting political parades which were very frequent even during the harsh weathers:

The afternoon’s street was filled with contingents of workers and students on their way back from the parade, crestfallen, with their banners lowered and drums muffled. Under the hot sun, the dense crowd was silent and endless.

About a dozen of the gang members were all in army uniform, lazy-man shoes, sitting poised on the rack of their bicycles. They gathered at the crossing in front of the traffic police podium, with a cigarette either on their fingers or at their lips, inhaling and exhaling, talking exultantly. They were very eye-catching, with an extraordinary air of lording it over the street and daring anyone to challenge them.

When students of their age were passing by, their eyes filled with coldness and contempt, making their law-abiding peers feel rather ashamed and uneasy. Teachers, however, pretended that they did not see them.

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<sup>18</sup> The four films that came out in 1988 were 1. *Half is Fire, Half is Seawater* (一半是火焰, 一半是海水 *yi ban shi huoyan, yi ban shi haishui*) also known as Hot and Cold, Measure by Measure, 2. *The Trouleshooters* (顽主 *wanzhu*) also known as The Operators or Playing Masters based on the works of the same titles, 3. *Samsara* (轮回 *lunhui*) also known as Reincarnation, based on *Floating above the Sea* (浮出海面 *fuchu hai mian*) and 4. *Big Breath* (大喘气 *da chuanqi*) based on *The Rubber Man* (橡皮人 *xiangpi ren*). These four books of Wang Shuo also became best-sellers of the year 1992 when ‘Wang Shuo Fever’ (王朔热 *wang shuo re*) was at its peak. These were called as ‘four-volumes’ (四卷 *sijuan*), a pun on Mao Zedong’s four-volumes of masterwork (四卷 或雄文四卷 *sijuan* or *xiong wen sijuan*) that formed the core of Communist ideology during his time.

<sup>19</sup> A rather positive example of this biased policy is that when colleges reopened in 1971, the aristocratic youth of privileged backgrounds tried to take advantage of the ‘recommendation system’ where genuine recommendations for the ‘worker-peasant-soldier’ students were given based on their contribution they have made in the countryside. The privileged youth of the ‘former political elite’ tried to manipulate this policy, through back-door loopholes, to get into colleges. Some managed to get such recommendations and got into colleges without having fulfilled desired criterion. The leadership tried to curb the situation of the ‘back-door entry’ of such youth vs. the genuine students that worked hard in the countryside and ran a brief campaign ‘to resist the deviant mind’ after a conscious-stricken student confessed to his illegal backdoor entry, in Nanjing university.

They were my friends, former schoolmates, the group with whom my parents had forbidden me to be in further contact. [Wang Shuo, 1995: 258] (Yao, 2004: 440)

Wang Shuo points out the smallest and biggest privileges that these youth had over a ‘commoner’; even when discipline was restored by the Propaganda team of the People’s Liberation Army in schools, it was only the aristocratic youth, easily identifiable by their clothing and mannerism, that could afford to defy their orders and lived lives with no fear of consequences.

Despite their parent’s intervention, what this groups of Hooligans represent or flaunt proves irresistible to themselves. Being a part of this class (of aristocratic youth) had its own perks and

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one of them was gaining an instantaneous sense of superiority.<sup>20</sup> The narrator of *Animal Ferocity*, just like any other aristocratic youth back in those times, was often present at the strategic center of the crossroads. The aristocratic youth showing off their sophisticated gear, high-class status and freedom were indeed displaying a parade of their own, i.e. display of their power to command. The ‘strategic center’ here is a juncture where their unlimited sense of superiority and authority shows off, whilst their teachers and parents, the old forms of authority, were reminded of their neutralized authority.

Wang Shuo’s works have been often termed as ‘popular culture’, which is an antithesis of mainstream serious culture. Some scholars feel that he owes his overpowering popularity to ‘paradoxically’ mixing popular and serious, and his total aversion of traditional ‘Elite’ style. As Helen Chen says:

As a sophisticated writer teetering on the line between popular and serious fiction, Wang Shuo’s complexity derives not so much from the “marriage” of popular and serious fiction as from the cultural formations that underlie and construct the “marriage” and make a creative paradox out of the seemingly improbable union. (Chen, 2001: 66)

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<sup>20</sup> The rise of Hooligan gangs, irrespective of their class background and their popularity during the Cultural Revolution, was indicative of the failure of ‘Revolutionary Education’ propagated by Mao. The ‘Revolutionary Education’ demanded the youth to make small sacrifices like comfort etc and rather seek and look up to values like discipline, self-sacrifice and abstinence; all these values clashed with the pleasures and freedom that they enjoyed so much. In much similar ways, they did not look up to revolutionary heroes, as their heroes were the Hooligans that were best-known for their violence and sexual prowess.

Wang Shuo's generation was either born at the inception of the Cultural Revolution or was still in primary school as children, spent their childhood in the times which were chaotic and came of age in the materialistic 1980s. Wang's representation of this socio-economic grouping, its marginalization, and alienation has led to some government figures branding him as a literary modernist or by some other critics as a 'literary genius';<sup>21</sup> (Mu, 1991: 152) his works have been recognized as the 'aristocratic genre written within the mental configuration of plebian culture' by some.

### Summing up:

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Any significant account of post-Mao literature cannot overlook the rise of the challenging debates on 'Humanism' in the early 1980s. While the early variety of exposé literature that promoted the value and dignity of human beings in simple confessional realism, it is the relationship of literature with the post-revolutionary politics of 'Humanism' that accounted for a quick popularity of post-Mao literature.

In the wake of defeat of radical left politics of Chinese Communist leadership, what deserved restoration was not simply the individual victims of the Revolution but also Marx.<sup>22</sup> This need for restoration 'fever' in post-Cultural Revolution China was another high-intensity fever as that of the fever of class-struggle during the Mao period. The disillusioned Party members and intellectuals were now beginning to see the possibility of reinventing Chinese Marxism. Wang Ruoshui and Zhou Yang's debates, at the turn of the 1980s, are worth reading, as they challenge Mao's understanding of Marxism and provided theoretical critique of Cultural Revolution by touching upon 'Socialist alienation'. Zhou claimed that exploitation is not the only manifestation of the alienation, given that alienation still existed in Socialist society.

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<sup>21</sup> Also see the chapter, Wang Shuo: "Pop Goes the Culture?" in Wang, Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, attributing 'Alienation' to the birth of private property, Marx talks about the three kinds of alienation, i.e. humans are alienated from their work (alienated from productive activity), from the product (alienated from material world) and from other human beings (species alienation). He proposed that for total liberation of human beings, private property should be completely abolished.

The discussions on alienation and Humanism multiplied very soon; between 1980 and 1983, more than 400 articles were published on Humanism. The discussions brought up how revisionism is not the main danger in Socialist countries, but the alienation of the Party, i.e. when the Party becomes divorced from the people it had served.

The views of Hu Qiaomu (胡乔木), president of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (中国社会科学院 *zhongguo shehui kexue yuan*) is worth mentioning as he held views fundamentally different from Zhou Yang's. Hu rejected any notion that proposed that man is the starting point of Marxism and held that it is an example of confusing Marxist humanism with bourgeois humanism. He, on the other hand, claimed that only society can be the starting point of Marxism.

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Hu Qiaomu believed that Humanism and Marxism were fundamentally opposite concepts and criticized 'Marxist humanism' as being self-contradictory. On Socialist alienation, Hu was of view that in the transition from Capitalism to Socialism, some comrades regard the mistakes and follies which were caused by a lack of experience and ignorance of the objective laws, as alienation in the economic sphere.

With debates on 'Humanism', asymmetrical representation of an increasingly unstable selfidentity of the Chinese people had started to emerge in literature, and writers of this period seemed preoccupied with representations of various socio-economic groupings, as part of their exploration of human rights. Dai Houying's works typically have represented 'soul-searching' of Chinese intellectuals. Dai wrote an trilogy on fate of intellectuals in China, *Death of a Poet, Man, Oh Man*, and *Footsteps in the Void*; especially popular amongst them was *Man, Oh Man* (人啊人), published in 1980s, which brought her fame and some controversy for her advocacy of Marxist Humanism.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Marxist Humanism is a body of thought that investigates and explores what human nature consists of and what kind of society would be most conducive to human thriving. Dai's story is set in the period of after the fall of Gang of Four and invokes regrets and flashbacks into the turbulent past of repressive political movements, and how their consequences affect the interpersonal relations. It confronts cynicism of the past but also invokes dreams and seeks the possibility of forgiveness and idealism.

It is with these debates on Humanism and alienation that Chinese literature of the 1980s had started to delve into all aspects of Chinese living. Before this, Chinese literature had not seen the ‘fringe elements’ (边缘人物 *bianyuan renwu*) of society as the central figures of literary works, the thugs and *Liumang* etc had been seen in the larger backdrop of a city’s landscape. Wang Shuo’s representation of this ‘class’ is more colourful, fragmented and nuanced and was a clear departure from the typical black and white portrayal of ‘class’ during Mao’s time.

As Economic Reform deepened in China, literature became a melting pot of various genres and themes related to the realities of the contemporary Chinese life. It witnessed and accepted more mature themes, and this also definitely highlighted maturing of the readership and broadening space of literary activism. Wang Shuo’s thriving career and the controversy surrounding his works have confirmed the following about the gradually evolving Chinese society and its literary creative space:

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- Writers like Wang Shuo made forays into new unexplored territories, many a times controversial and uncomfortable ones. There is a deliberate renegotiation of the established literary style and norms; his eccentricities and narrative innovations made his literary works unique.
  - The literature in the 1980s and 1990s basically observed two large trends that dominated the intellectual and cultural world, i.e. the rise of intellectual enlightenment in 1980s and pragmatist commercialism of 1990s. While the enlightenment movement of 1980s was perceived as elite and ideal with a definite political consciousness, consumerist popular culture of 1990s was seen as materialistic and apolitical. The rise of Wang Shuo, representing anti-intellectual wave of popular consumerism, indicates China’s social and cultural transition into a highly commercial consumerist society of 1990s. By refusing to conform to the dictates of the existing literary traditions, Wang Shuo has not only rejected the authority of the Socialist Realism but had also pushed literary boundaries to define a new Modernism in literature.
  - The State-sponsored activism of Mao period used literature to create typical black and white portrayal of ‘Capitalist-Proletarian binary’. In other words, the whole political discourse as framed by the Party was in absolute black or white terms, where a person



was either a true Communist (i.e. a hero) or a decadent bourgeois (i.e. a villain). In Deng period, there was a gradual moving away from this earlier understanding of 'class' in black and white terms, and we see literature embracing all shades of 'grey' in crafting real characters of day-to-day life. Wang Shuo's characters are representations and manifestations of such development in literary standards in the Deng period and they amply reflect on the 'class' contradictions of contemporary Chinese reality.

- Many of his works portray a group of marginalized people, youngsters, going to south of China, to take part in the 'gold rush' as the economy developed fast in Hong Kong and Guangdong province as a result of the Open-Door policy. Behind the façade of materially-driven and pleasure-seeking young generation, Wang is trying to portray a life of these hooligans that constantly swings between extremities of depression, excitement and chaos. In his representation of the youth, the so-called lost generation, he brings in the element of sexual tension or physical desire so as to highlight that this generation that grew up in an environment of endless propaganda and campaigns for the Cultural Revolution, lost their idealism and confidence in political leadership and also lost human trust; all that appear real is their physical desires and only people they can trust are themselves.
- It is through works of Wang Shuo that terms like *liumang* and *pizi* have reached a common man's understanding. This is also to assert that common people did not see *liumang* as a natural social phenomenon of society that is embracing Capitalist ethics. In a rapidly changing society, this new 'class' was only looked at as criminals or social outlaws. With Wang Shuo's works, this social grouping found a new addressal as isolated youth, rebels, loners, unprincipled entrepreneurs etc. Wang's depiction of this new 'class' helps one reach an empathetic understanding of this so-called unpleasant 'uncultured' strata of society.
- The emergence of Wang Shuo as a cultural rebel, apart from deeply reflecting the changing political experience of post-Mao period, also hints at a new historical framework in which his cultural rebellion served as a meaningful narrative strategy. Given the typical traits of Hooligan literature, Wang Shuo's works, with their implicit and explicit content, can be seen as anything from a social commentary to a political rebellion, or a strong critique of the so called classless 'egalitarian' society.

- His unique representations of the hooligan characters, shows how differently ‘class’ or its social power is perceived in Chinese society. In his works especially in *Playing for Thrills*, all youngsters are seen chasing a grand heroic dream. Wang’s works perhaps hints at the excessive hero-making in the Communist propaganda when the Communist leadership took charge of the cultural production.
- In comparison with other works of Modern period and how Wang Shuo’s works moved away from earlier representations on ‘class’, Wang Shiwei’s *The Wild Lily* (1942) deserves a mention. His work reflected on the hardships that common masses faced owing to the revolution; Wang expected the leaders to not speak of ‘indulging’ or ‘according to one’s value’. On the contrary, Wang Shiwei felt that leaders should share the lifestyles of lower-level comrades in order to inculcate a national virtue and create an ironclad unity, a mark of true egalitarianism. Far from the reality, he was disappointed and felt the need to expose the “darkness” in Yan’an; he hoped that the Party leadership will wake up to the reality and take notice of this situation which was reminiscent of the old feudal society. He used quotes of Mao to question the attitude of high-level cadres, criticized the leaders of being lenient, of not doing enough to discourage “darkness” that has led to “indirectly encouraging darkness, and even manufacture it directly”. Wang Shiwei’s *The Wild Lily* was meted out the harshest treatment by the Party for its portrayal of lavish life of leaders and thereby, highlighting the ‘class’ issue through increasing divide between the rich and the poor. Thus, it can be seen that even during the Mao period, there was discontentment and disappointment that emanated from the ‘class’ differences, elimination of which was the goal of revolution, in the Chinese society. The non-achievement of egalitarianism was seen by writers like Wang Shiwei as abandoning the principle of building a ‘classless’ Chinese society.
- In post-Mao period, Wang Shuo took to the representation of the much-nuanced socioeconomic class that formed the large chunk of Chinese society. Other authors of the same time like Wang Anyi viewed ‘class’ differently and treated ‘class’ in her works differently too. Wang Anyi rejects ‘sex politics’ in her works; she not only unraveled the commonplace trade between political power and sex, but also portrayed how women belonging to different ‘class’ faced exploitation. Women faced discrimination and exploitation based on their gender as well by anyone who wielded more political power than them, i.e. anyone who is in the higher echelons of the political elites. Through this

interface of class and gender, she makes a point about how this interface reveals the further alienation of women, first, on grounds of class and then on the ground of gender. Interestingly, Wang Anyi also depicts 'class' in the context of cultural elites, i.e. the intellectuals, and reserves special sympathy for this culturally elite intellectual 'class' in her works, but she makes no case for the political elites. Wang Shuo on the other hand has no special regard for this culturally elite 'class' of intellectuals; even worse, Wang Shuo do not have any regard whatsoever for politically elite 'class' either, but he mocks this group and much of his sarcasm is on old political leaders or political jargons. Wang Shuo's understanding on 'class' is to be materially well-off, i.e. a social elite, to be able to exert certain social power through money and fame.

- From the perspective of literary activism, Wang Shuo's works belong to a phase which is seen as the second 'May Fourth' period or a second phase of 'Enlightenment'. At Deng Xiaoping's time, China has already been under a centralised consolidated Communist government from which Chinese people should have benefitted in terms of better living standards and overall well-being. It also was a time where Chinese writers were not faced with challenges, internally or externally, like old feudal-patriarchal structures or foreign imperialist forces, as was the case during the May Fourth Period. Wang Shuo's works are a strong critique of the so called classless 'egalitarian' goals of the Chinese society, used as a measure against which progress could be evaluated.
- Wang Shuo did not produce politics-oriented works acknowledged by the Party-state and his works were, therefore, symbolic of his own focus on the 'individual' rather than a 'collective' agency. This phase witnessed a lot of opening up of thought; the bottom up approach of carrying out a popular critique put the power in the hands of the people, thereby creating new spaces of literary creativity.

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