From Intelligentsia to Cultural Entrepreneurs – The Wang Shuo Phenomenon & China’s Changing Values

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LITERATURE REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Geremie Barme, one of the most well-known scholars of Wang Shuo’s books, calls him the “most important publishing phenomenon since Mao”. After all, Wang is the only Chinese writer after the Great Helmsman to launch a four-volume *Selected Works*, which went on to become China’s first bestseller. Wang Shuo’s career is thus decorated with a series of *firsts* – the first “wenhua getihu” (cultural entrepreneur) in China’s literary world, the first to embark on rampant self-promotion, and the first to receive royalties for his books. He famously said, “I want to be famous till I’m dizzy, without worrying about the consequences. Let the fame come, come to the point when people detest me!” He is one prone to such narcissistic declarations, daring to peg his future works to the most-esteemed of Chinese classics, *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

But more critically, Wang Shuo became a “phenomenon” because of the larger social context. The 80s saw the emergence of two trends in Chinese society. One was the declining influence of intellectuals. The other was growing consumerism and materialism. Wang Shuo’s story overlapped both trends. As such, he is often studied as an indicator of China’s rapid social and cultural transition into a commercial and consumer society in the early 90s.

The research reviewed here covers two layers of relationships: Between the “elite intellectuals” and the “cultural entrepreneurs”; and between the writer and an increasingly consumerist society. These studies help explain why Wang Shuo singularly inspired such heated debate in academia, and within society at that time. More importantly, they shed light on the vaulted place of literature and how it changed as a cultural institution as the publishing industry, societal values, and people’s lifestyles changed irrevocably.

This review is divided into four “chapters”. The chapters on the Wang Shuo phenomenon and the *xiahai* craze explore the commercialisation of culture and how it hit the relationship
between traditional intellectuals and the emerging cultural elites. First, I draw on studies and books to explain the Wang Shuo phenomenon, and how it came about in the context of China’s economic and societal changes. The second chapter deals with commercialisation of the publishing industry, and the livelihood of writers. Anecdotal evidence from Wang Shuo himself is delivered by some authors. The last two chapters focus on the humanist debate centred on Wang Shuo’s “hedonistic literature”, and observations on how values and “spiritual life” have changed in Chinese society.

I] THE WANG SHUO PHENOMENON: A SIGN OF THE TIMES

Jing Wang’s (1996) book High Culture Fever devotes an entire chapter to the Wang Shuo phenomenon, and explains why he came to be an iconoclast of the 90s. She points out that Wang Shuo is "the most conspicuous and articulate epochal maker for the transition of the 80s to the 90s" – from a decade “reigned over by intellectuals” to an era of commercialism that "vaunts the new cult of pleasure-seeking and foul play" (p. 262). In the 90s, mass entertainment had arrived, and the “educational and instructive function of the arts” had finally bit the dust (p. 266). She posits that “only those who are extremely naïve would keep insisting that cultural fast food can never replace pure literature” (p. 266). In her book, Wang Shuo became a phenomenon because he was the embodiment of all this about 1990s China.

Similarly, Zha Jianying (1995) adroitly describes the national mood of the early 90s as one of “News Lite. Culture Lite. Communism Lite” (p. 108). For the intellectuals, Tiananmen had come and passed. Zha quotes a young director of a serious periodical: “Don’t talk to me about Tiananmen; it gives me a headache. Those elites have done a good job enlightening us. They have taught us a lesson. But their time is over. … one thing is certain about the future of China: it belongs to smart people.” (pp. 107-108) As Zha observes, people in the culture
industry had to be adaptable to survive. Wang Shuo was one of the most adaptable and opportunistic. Zha credits Wang Shuo for his knack of “turning culture into a commodity” (p. 109). He had a role in creating three of China’s most talked-about television series in the 90s, churned out a string of bestsellers, and became China’s first celebrity-writer.

The key question raised by these authors is: Have writers like Wang Shuo sold out under commercial pressures, catering to the appalling base denominator of “ditan wenxue” (literature for the sidewalk stalls)? This was exactly the contention of Wang Shuo’s detractors, who were scandalised by the “vulgarisation” and “secularisation” brought on by the commodification of culture in the market economy (McGrath, 2008, p. 32). Zha suggests that Wang is a divisive personality because people are passionately divided over what the Wang Shuo phenomenon was about. Did he represent an alarming sign of nihilism among the young, or does he represent the emergence of a truly independent spirit that cares about ordinary readers, while being refreshingly candid about matters like money and success (Zha, 1995, pp. 109-111)?

An understanding of the traditional role of literature will help explain such tensions. Su Yongli’s paper (2004) presents a good overview of the role of writers from imperial times to the Mao era. During Mao’s time, writers were “wenhua gongzuozhe” (cultural workers) who served as “screws” within the socialist machine. Su details the changes since then that have given rise to the contemporary “entrepreneurial writer”. He draws a superb comparison between Mario Puzo (author of The Godfather) in 1969 America, and Wang Shuo in 1992 China. Both writers were known for their blatant proclamation of profit-seeking. Yet as Su points out, when Wang equated literature with profit and said “having money is better than anything else”, it was “undoubtedly offensive and provoking”; whereas Puzo raised fewer
literary eyebrows in US as it was already a country with advanced industrialisation and consumerism. The social context in US and China were vastly different then.

II] CHASING THE WRITING DOLLAR: XIA HAI & CHU DIAN

It is also necessary to understand the actual process and level of commercialisation in China during the Wang Shuo years. As observed by Melinda Pirazzoli (1996), the 90s witnessed not only drastic changes in the economic and social fields, but also a “revolution in the production of fiction” that has been “completely overlooked by contemporary sinologists” (p. 2). Indeed, there are relatively few books on the commercialisation of culture in China. Jason McGrath’s Postsocialist Modernity provides a rare, detailed insight into China’s publishing industry that helps puts this sea change into perspective. He notes that as early as the mid 80s, the literature industry had followed other sectors in undergoing market-based reforms. It started in 1984 when the government signalled that state-funded journals should become more self-sustaining, and in 1992, the industry had to face market forces squarely (McGrath, 2008, p. 60). Wang Shuo is often touted as a trailblazer in this new arena. For instance, he became the first writer to be compensated through royalties instead of a one-time fee for his collected works.

Lin Wang’s thesis (2006) on the other hand, frames her research against a detailed personal background of Wang Shuo, chronicling how he went from college reject, to selling 10 million books in the early 90s by being “the first person in the literary world of the PRC to pay serious attention to the demands of the market” (p. 33). She is the only author to provide concrete figures of how writers can become millionaires during those times. She cites the example of Shi Tiesheng to show how writers can sell short stories at auctions to the tune of 8000rmb (in the early 90s), and calculates that Wang Shuo’s takings for the novel It Looks
Beautiful made him a Chinese millionaire – by looking at sales volume, selling price, and royalty takings (Wang, 2006, pp. 251-254).

Jing Wang’s book (1996) is also useful in understanding China’s xiahai craze among intellectuals, including writers. She notes that the craze “enlisted some of China’s most unlikely recruits, including the PLA and university professors. She provides useful background on how commercialisation had created a “parody of the pragmatism of the once ideologically pure”. She brings up fascinating examples of professors opening bicycle shops, or selling tea eggs by the streets. Famed writer Zhang Xianliang is also cited as one of the first few to abandon literature to become an entrepreneur (p. 264).

But it is Zha Jianying’s book China Pop that stands as the best (and most often-quoted) publication detailing the new zeitgeist. Hers is an insider’s view, since it was written not long after Tiananmen when sensitivities were still raw. Hence, persuading these cultural elites to talk was surely a matter of good guanxi. Zha eloquently describes stories of her friends caught in a bind – graduates of China’s most prestigious universities now at the mercy of thuggish private book distributors who have never been to college. Yet, they alone control the market because they know what kind of books will sell (Zha, 1995, pp. 46-47). Unlike in the past, profits now matter.

In Zha’s book, the chapter directly related to Wang Shuo is the opening one titled Yearnings. For non-mainlanders like myself, this was a revelatory chapter (and indeed, the reason why I decided to pursue this topic). It came as something of a shock to discover that the “bad boy” of contemporary Chinese literature had a hand in China’s first studio-based soap opera! Zha chronicles the audience’s obsession with the show, how the CCP leadership was quick to praise it publicly, as well as Wang Shuo’s role as one of two writers involved directly in the plot. The most revealing “insider information” was how the team was audience-oriented from
the start. It was, as Zha surmises, a matter of “please the audience or perish” (Zha, 1995, p. 37). This was the new rule of the game. Likewise, Lin Wang’s paper (2006) touches on the phrase “chu dian” (to touch electricity) – or the new willingness of writers to become involved with films and TV serials to gain fame, and much better pay. Her research shows that a writer can be paid more 10 000rmb per episode. Not a shabby sum at all. And as observed in Yao Yusheng’s article (2004), Wang Shuo is not averse to being a TV scribe because the success in television helps him sell more books. Wang Shuo is in this sense, a champion manipulator of the growing market for popular culture. He has few qualms about this “primitive accumulation with Chinese characteristics”. Zha’s book goes on to chronicle how Wang Shuo – after the heady success of Yearnings – gleefully informs her that he was planning a series of popular romances. He’d hire “hacks” to churn out sequels if they proved successful. According to him, brainpower was not really needed in such an endeavour – “all you really need is wrist-power” (Zha, 1995, p. 52). Such intimate stories are extremely useful in constructing the behind-the-scenes realities of the times.

But what I found missing in all this literature was an analysis on why Wang Shuo himself is so money-obsessed. In this, Lin Wang’s well-researched paper (2006) proves most instructive. Her analysis of China’s Beatnik generation (垮掉的一代) helps explain why the pursuit of fame and money can becoming all-consuming for Wang Shuo’s generation. It throws light on the importance of the writer’s motivation for writing. While Lu Xun “looked to literature and art to transform the national spirit”, and Wang Meng believed that “revolution is literature's guide, its soul and its source” (pp. 47-48), Wang Shuo had no such pretensions. Wang Shuo’s works such as Playing For Thrills and Rubber Man were filled with characters who mixed greed, lawlessness and a general dissatisfaction with society. They are prompted to get rich in order to pursue social mobility in a system dominated by the
bureaucracy (pp. 85-88). In this sense, both the writer and his characters have very different values from the likes of Lu Xun and Wang Meng.

**III] THE HUMANIST DEBATE: TWO WANGS VERSUS TWO ZHANGS**

This brings us to the big cultural debate of the 90s. McGrath (2008) provides the best overview and contextualisation of the “humanist debate” that preoccupied Chinese intellectuals for the better half of the 1990s. And Wang Shuo was at the centre of the storm – for having the audacity to profit from culture.

McGrath’s book provides a vivid detailing of the “broad and complex” debate between the two camps. Essentially, a perceived crisis in literature was extended to the arts in general, and finally to the very spiritual life of the Chinese people (p. 29). It pitted Wang Shuo and Wang Meng against Zhang Chengzhi and Zhang Wei. Lin Wang (2006) points out that the Zhangs represented the “rescue camp” (拯救派) who believed intellectuals had lost their humanity in the face of money. The Wangs represented the “capitulationist camp” (投降派) who disapproved the existing restraints and concepts of literature and history.

McGrath (2008) provides useful historical background for understanding why literature and writers were placed at the centre of the debate. It is interesting to note that this “alarmist cry” over the nation’s spiritual malaise was not new. As far back as the Ming dynasty, the link between commerce and “cultural vulgarisation” in literature was already a matter of deep concern for the literati (pp. 44-45). I find Lin Yutang’s book *My Country and My People* particularly thought-provoking here, even though it was written in 1934, decades before China’s rampant commercialisation. As the title suggests, the book is the internationally-renowned writer and humanist’s take on the Chinese character – perhaps one of the best ever written. Lin is of course, also a humourist. And in the chapter on Chinese scholarship, he
blithely calls the literati “that mass of educated men who feed on the people, moralize a lot and create nothing” (Lin, 2001, p. 222). It suggests that the “disconnect” between the elites and the “commoners” happened a long time ago. But Lin also points out that China is a country where the “worship of scholarship has taken the form of a popular superstition” (p. 222). Hence, the scholars prove unwilling to cede their societal role.

In a paper exploring new professionalised writing and the commercialisation of culture between the late 80s and early 90s, Su Yongli (2004) cites Perry Link who drew the link between Confucian scholar-officials, modernisers in the early 20th century, Maoist cultural workers and post-Mao writers of the 80s. Despite different or even opposing views on various matters, these intellectuals agreed almost unanimously in the assumption that literature is relevant, or even essential, to morality, social life, and politics (p. 9). In this context, Wang Shuo rankled because he was unapologetically against such self-appointed “missions”. He is well-known for his anti-intellectual stance and proud to be a “spurner of elite culture”. He even claims that his hooligan characters “invigorates an atrophied society suffering from an excessive exercise of the intellect” (Wang, 1996, p. 269), and mocks the intellectuals as the “fourth mountain” that oppressed him.

McGrath (2008) also notes that post 1992, elite intellectuals began to lament their marginalisation in the rapidly-commercialising society. Their “enlightenment project” had been usurped unceremoniously by free market reforms, and to their chagrin, the “common consumer” seemed to “value entertainment and sensory stimulation over enlightenment” (p. 27). In the article by Sheldon Lu (1996), it was also observed that even as the enlightenment elites engaged in “ponderous, solemn historic-cultural reflections”, they soon came to realise that tastes in art, literature, and culture were no longer dictated by them. Worse, their “arch-rivals”, the fashioners of popular culture who operated according to the
economic principles of the cultural market, were stripping away their share of followers formerly possessed by high culture (p. 147).

**IV] COMMERCIALISATION, VALUES AND MODERNITY: AIR HOSTESSES AND HOOLIGANS**

Indeed, there was no denying that the times were a-changing, along with values and inclinations. As Su (2004) points out, Wang Shuo first gained prominence by writing about “adventurers and tide-riders of the economic reforms, who drive Cadillacs and drink X.O. whisky.” (p. 12) In part, his stories were popular because they fired people’s imagination of a material and consumerist world. His very first novella, *Air Hostess* (published in 1984), tapped into curiosity about the modern lifestyle, as well as jealousy towards those rich businessmen travelling by air. It was a time when commercialisation had began to affect the Chinese in an unprecedented way, and Wang Shuo was spot-on in profiling the national psyche. More interestingly, while Wang Shuo was never an “establishment intellectual” or dissident, his ideas coincided with the social transition toward commercialisation advocated by the government. Despite his anti-establishment stance, Wang Shuo was in a way, “complicit” with the state and the very embodiment of the slogan, 向钱看 (look towards money!). Here, Lin Wang’s overview of the different cultural schools of thought is useful in understanding how mass culture was being boosted by market reforms, and subsequently appropriated by the state to become the new “opiate of the masses” (Wang, 2006, pp. 19-21).

Geremie Barme (1992) observes that as a member of what the state calls “socially idle people”, Wang Shuo himself finds writing material not by making an effort to go on research trips to “engage in life”, *he just lives*. Indeed, Yao’s article (2004) notes that college students in Shanghai had chosen Wang Shuo as the writer with the most “21st century consciousness”.
Wang Shuo’s anti-heroes appeal to readers because his philosophy of “hedonistic individualism” reflected the needs of an emerging commercial society to “legitimize carnal and materialistic desires”. (p 463) They represented the spirit of the 90s.

In her article on the free market economy and Chinese literature, Melinda Pirazzoli (1996) notes that the creation of an urban middle class produces needs and demands for commodities. And after they are satiated with electronic consumables, the Chinese began importing “sins of capitalistic societies”: drugs and prostitution. She singles out Wang Shuo for being the first to deal with the phenomenon of drug-dealing, the mafia and prostitution. But interestingly, Lin Wang’s paper shows that just as Wang Shuo glorifies the new excessive consumerist lifestyles, he also mocks the corrupt lifestyles of business leaders, and the excesses of the money craze. The underlying message is that evils and disasters in the new commercial age can get out of hand, just as the politics craze had in the decades of the political age (Wang, 2006, p. 111).

This leads to a pertinent point raised by McGrath (2008). He highlights the fact that the humanist debate was not confined to esoteric academic discourse. In his concluding chapter, he notes the widespread media attention given to the debate and its “intense social impact”. As the first large-scale debate centred on the marketisation of culture, it brought the topic of global capitalism to China’s critical consciousness (pp. 56-58). There were those who felt the loss of social bonds and values in a society that “equalizes all people before money”. This reflected an inevitable trade with modernity. But ironically, the widespread attention given to this debate also threatened to “vulgarize” it. McGrath notes how the catchphrase “humanist spirit” even made its way into commercial advertisements (p. 56). This was a literary case célèbre gone mass (and probably a little mad)! And perhaps, it was another crazy demonstration of a “market with Chinese characteristics".
CONCLUSION

Lin Wang’s paper (2006) notes that Wang Shuo’s attitude had changed perceptibly by the time he published his last book in 1999. Shockingly, money was no longer paramount to the writer. In talking about his new purpose in writing, he said, “Not for money, not for beliefs, not for readers, not for the needs of society. If I write again, I will just write for the only reader I am concerned with – myself.” (p. 130) Lin Wang suggests that Wang Shuo was changing his image from that of a “marginal person” to that of a mainstream one finding a central place in the commercialised literary world, and in society. She ominously predicts the passing of his relevance in society.

But for the better part of the 90s, the Wang Shuo phenomenon had crisply captured the drama of the tsunami-like changes that hit China in the decade. As a cultural institution, literature and writers have always had a special place in Chinese society. But by the second half of the 90s, the phrase “wenren xiahai” had become a slang (Wang, 1996, p. 264). This review throws up all the incongruities of Chinese society as it navigated between the late 80s and the early 90s – namely, the tension between elite culture and commercialisation of culture, juxtaposed against the tension between rampant consumerism and the decline of societal values and morals.

Two decades on, younger writers have emerged to appeal to the more diverse tastes of young readers. Wang Shuo himself has recognised that his popularity among the younger generation is waning. Yet his place as a self-anointed “cultural hero” born out of China’s commercialisation movement is a special one. It leaves us to ponder upon this question – even as we live in a market economy, do we want to live in a market society?
REFERENCES