FERAL CHILDREN AND PRISONERS OF SEX:  
WANG ANYI'S "LOVE IN A SMALL TOWN" 
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to attempt to prove that the way Wang Anyi approaches sexual love and the insights she finds in the topic in her novella "Love in a Small Town" are unique in the history of Chinese literature.

Chapter One seeks to show that the novella is an extended exploration of raw sexual desire and its consequences in the life of two people with very little education and culture. Thus, sex and its related mysteries have become the sole object of Wang's intellectual exploration in "Love in a Small Town".

To provide a historic background for Wang's literary exploration, Chapter Two tries to demonstrate that the Chinese have an antiquated and unhealthy attitude both toward sexual relations in real life and the depiction of sexual activities in fiction.

Chapter Three deals with the spiritual growth of Wang Anyi in an attempt to account for her peculiar and poignant interest as shown in her literary creation.

The thesis concludes that by making an attempt at a Lawrentian set of terminology for describing sexual activities Wang has bridged in a way one of the gaps made by a narrow-minded literary theory between the May Fourth (1919) and "New Period" (Post-Mao) phases in modern Chinese literature. And, by boldly breaking taboos surrounding the subject of sex, Wang effectively draws public attention to the pernicious vestiges of sexual prudishness in the unconscious mind of the Chinese people.
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INTRODUCTION

1986 was probably an unforgettable year for Wang Anyi.

In that year, with marvellous diligence and efficiency, she completed, among other things, three medium-length novels, each having the same attractive word "Love" in its title. The revision of "Love on a Barren Mountain", the first of the three, was completed on April third, and appeared in the fourth issue of October\(^1\) a literary bimonthly edited in Beijing. Next came "Love in a Small Town", which was composed in May and was published in August by Shanghai literature. Then in September, Wang finished the revision of her third and last novella in the year, "Love in Beauteous Valley" and got it published in Zhong Shan, a Nanjing based literary magazine in January of the next year.

In 1986 Wang put an end to this sudden deviation from her previously beaten track, withdrew herself from the vigorous "mass campaign" of "searching for the roots", waved farewell to her "Xiao Bao Village"\(^2\) and returned to her "native place" -- "Wenwen's world" or "the role of the self-conscious narrator"\(^3\).

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1. "Love on a Barren Mountain" was written in its first form in March, 1980.


Also in 1986, Wang became known to some Chinese readers as an expert in erotic literature. Her name began to be connected with "sexual love -- a newly-opened topic in literature".  

Wang had made her debut upon the literary stage in China a good ten years before, which coincided with the entrance of contemporary Chinese literature into the "New Period" in 1976. A whole decade had passed since the termination of the Cultural Revolution and the downfall of the Gang of Four. Great changes had taken place both in Chinese literature and in Wang during this decade. In the past the entire Chinese population had nothing but eight "model operas" to "entertain" themselves. Now, "sex" and "sexual love", the most sensitive subject and long-time taboo, became something both the writers and critics were interested in. In 1976 a very young Wang could run the gamut of emotions at the sight of a marble ditch. Ten years later, as a mature woman writer, she was able to remain quite serene before the tragedy of an adulterous couple sacrificing their lives for love.

Toward the end of the so-called Cultural Revolution there were in fact no writers in China. Under the unprecedented political persecution and oppression some of them lost their souls, some their lives. The majority were simply deprived of the right to write. But with the advent of the "New Period" in 1976, writers who had survived the Cultural Revolution picked up their pens again and were joined by a large number of talented young people. In November 1986 an international symposium on contemporary Chinese literature was held in this calamity-ridden land. It was the first time for the Chinese writers, whether

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old or young, to take part in an international symposium on this topic in the capacity of hosts rather than that of guests. Many promising young Chinese writers were present at the meeting, among whom was the thirty-two-year-old Wang Anyi. The last, but not least, important thing Wang accomplished in 1986 was to deliver a speech before writers and scholars from various countries at the symposium. Her speech was entitled "Confronting Oneself," and began with the statement: "My speech" will be "filled with extremely idiosyncratic ideology".¹

In this speech, not only did she review what she had experienced since her childhood and her endeavors in literature in the last decade, but she also promulgated her literary credo to the whole world. She said:

Before the world, namely, the various possible calamities and unforeseen events: volcano, glacier, war, plague, famine and disease, an individual could expect a helping hand, and therefore was able to fight back side by side with other human beings. When he is confronting his inner world, however, he finds himself isolated. He has no means to obtain aid from outside, neither can he be enlightened by his forerunners. He has to rely totally on himself to grope and to fight back. Worse still, calamities in the human inner world are just as numerous and frightful: selfishness, inferiority complexes, arrogance, cowardice, cruelty, timidity, ignorance in childhood, uneasiness with puberty, awakening of the erotic impulse, sexual inhibition, and so on and so forth. ... My literature involves an arduous and difficult task. That is to establish liaison and relationship

among the isolated battlefields, provide information for each individual and let him know that he is by no means alone, all mankind is behind him.¹

Wang Anyi based the principal tenets of her "my literature" on a discovery she made, perhaps again, in 1986:

The struggle between a human being and himself means a confrontation with oneself in a deeper and more comprehensive sense of humanity. It embraces deeper problems and more substantial contents ... It always exists on all levels of life from the lowest to the highest, and belongs absolutely to all mankind, but never to a minority of them ...

Not many modern Chinese writers since the May Fourth Movement have carried their literary ideas to such "absolute extremes". Rarer still is the fact that within a very short period, not only did Wang develop such an idiosyncratic literary idea, but she also completed some remarkably unique fictions to expound and advocate it.

In general, writers tend to rely upon their creative productions rather than their literary ideas to get their messages across to the audience. And readers and critics in turn seem more interested in their concrete literary texts than in their abstract ideologies. This is also true in the case of Wang Anyi.

Shortly after the publication of her "three loves", a spate of critical articles appeared in papers and literary journals all over the country and in Taiwan. The majority of the

¹ *Ibid.* Judging from these words, Wang Anyi, as a writer, seems to be more interested in the instinctual appetites and the "animal" passions than the moral, intellectual, and artistic aspects in human nature. She seems to have carried the so-called "humanist theory" (as a fallacy put forward by the landlord class and bourgeoisie) to the extreme.
critics held that these short stories of Wang's, especially, "Love in a Small Town", had brought something new to modern Chinese literature, and therefore merited serious study.

A well-known Chinese critic Chen Danchen pointed out:

The fundamental changes which have taken place in our social life in the past ten years have led to the awakening of self-consciousness in our people. The existence of the human being, the independence of his will, ideas, desire, and feeling began to be acknowledged. People began to view a number of issues including sex in a new and relatively normal light. Social life grew more and more open. The old feudalist ethics and certain uncivilized backward ideas are now being criticized and assaulted. All these combine to indicate that sex has already become a topic that can be discussed and studied in public in our society. Perhaps this is only the very beginning, no more than half a step forward, but, in a society where thoughts and feelings have long been shackled, it cannot develop without some elements opposing asceticism and feudalism. For this reason it is of exceptional importance. As for the artistic depiction of sex by literary works the cause is not far to seek: it reflects or refracts the social life and certain changed ideas in present-day China.¹

He went on to offer an explanatory comment on Wang Anyi's "Love in a Small Town". He said:

(This) is a work about human instincts. It looks like a recording of a trivial tragedy of sexual instincts. But in reality, it mercilessly exposes the fact

that the environment in which the young couple [the protagonists] had been brought up was so bleak, dark and cold. The author's real feelings are deeply concealed. She is filled with a keen sympathy and a plaintive sadness.1

Chen Danchen did not arrive at any direct evaluation of the work. To plead for its legitimacy as a literary reflection of social reality seemed to be his primary motive. Other critics, however, appeared less prepared to stop at this. One critic, for example, gave unstinting praise to Wang's originality in these works:

While many literary works were regarding sexual desire, favorably or unfavorably, solely as an ornament for the criticism and evaluation of social morality, Wang Anyi had emancipated human sexual desire from its cumbersome shell and examined it as a whole, an independent aesthetic object. Her examination was followed by a certain aesthetic contemplation on humanity which proved to be relatively more mature and more profound.2

For all its brevity, this comment effectively brought out the most brilliant achievement Wang had won in her works. And it was not long until the significance of the achievement itself was recognized. Less than six months after the appearance of "Love in a Small Town", another critic pointed out:

1 Ibid.

2 Xiao Ming, "Xiandai yishi dui 'Ren' de toushi," Zuopin yu zhengming 1 (1987): 34

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It portrayed the psychology of the protagonists living under specific circumstances where they suffered sexual hunger and thirst, in so concise and clear-cut a manner that it amounted to presenting a picture of wild excitement of the instincts of life. Among Wang Anyi's entire creative output or even the entire corpus of Chinese fiction, it would be conspicuous because it has made a breakthrough.¹

Another critic went even further, seemingly basing her judgement not only on recent literary experiences in China, but also on the whole history of modern Chinese literature:

Through her 'three loves' Wang Anyi has shown people her courage. To say the least, she is the most daring among the modern and contemporary women writers in mainland China since May Fourth [1919].²

What deserves special attention is that here Wang's daring has been ranked as superior and the time limitation of its superiority has been extended from a decade to half a century. Nevertheless the comparison was made only between Wang and other women writers. What about male writers? Can Wang compare favorably with them? One answer goes as follows:

"Love in a Small Town" at the same time puzzles and enlightens the reader: once the naked sexual desires are picked out of the unsettling and boundless

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universe, and are examined and analyzed thoroughly as an independent identity,... the male and female protagonists, owing to their exceptionally clear-cut characteristics, become unique and seldom seen icons in the temple of literature. It seems that no one has ever been able to expose and depict in such a refined and minute way sexual arousal and sexual uneasiness in the inner world of young men and women. ... One cannot but admire the author's sophistication in her artistic presentation as well as her patience in going into such microscopic details. Beside 'Love in a Small Town', works from Yu Dafu's "Sinking"\(^1\) to Zhang Xianliang's "Half of Man Is Woman"\(^2\) seem to pale in comparison. Now the treatment of sexual themes may well be said to have attained a fresh realm.\(^3\)

According to this answer, there is no reason to think Wang's sex has prevented her from delving boldly into this taboo subject. Yet another critic has reached the opposite conclusion:

In the story of "Love in a Small Town" the author puts aside her pen every time she reaches the crucial moment ... Being a woman writer with a tender heart, she naturally, could not but betray a sort of helplessness on her own part."\(^4\)

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Here the hint dropped by the critic is very clear: Wang Anyi could have achieved more and better results if she were a male writer. Why should the sex of an author be worth noting? There seems no reason at all. Maybe in China it is an age-old custom of regarding women as "lesser beings" who are made to yield to men and put up with their injustice. No Chinese seem to be able to escape this custom, even those living in Taiwan, the most westernized and economically advanced province of China have to suffer the same fate.

Li Ang, a noted woman writer in Taiwan, told some newspaper reporters toward the end of 1987:

...As regards the problem of writing about sex, male and female writers are treated unequally. There are many male writers who also write about sex and their treatment is much less disguised than that in my novel *Killing the Husband.* But I was almost smashed into smithereens because I had depicted a butcher's wife who could not stand her husband's tyranny so she killed him with his knife, while they were never blamed.

Fortunately, the "most daring" Wang Anyi has not been "smashed into smithereens," but she must have found herself in a different but equally embarrassing situation. Although her detractors were of the most diverse kinds, the strong influences they could exert upon the general readership are almost the same. Let's first look at this rather artful criticism:

When somebody else said that "not long ago there were some critical articles saying that the description of sex in Wang Anyi's 'Love in a Small Town' and 'Love on a Barren

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1. Li Ang, "Sha Fu (Killing the Husband)," *Shouhuo* 4 (1986): 105-145.
Mountain' had something to do with naturalism\textsuperscript{1}," A Shanghai critic\textsuperscript{2} cut him short with the statement: "works by Wang Anyi are different from those by Ma Jian\textsuperscript{3} and his like. Consequently, one should avoid any premature conclusions upon Wang's works."\textsuperscript{4}

To sensitive readers, this kind of apparently noncommittal comment is in fact more intriguing than an open and direct attack. For one thing, Wang's works have been tactfully linked with the sensational name of Ma Jian, which, to a contemporary Chinese ear, is considerably more notorious, thus more attractive, than "naturalism", a more or less insipid, pedantic term. For another, the past experiences, especially those during the ten years of chaos, have taught that the "wait-and-see" policy often suggests that something impermissible has happened.

Insinuations, are after all insinuations. Some other critics are more willing to put all their cards on the table. One of them complained:

Once a sexual relationship, no matter how it is depicted, enters a literary text, it should be aesthetical, that is to say, when placed before all kinds of people who constitute possible readership, it should possess a good deal of

\begin{itemize}
  \item Naturalism is a term of opprobrium in Maoist literary criticism in that it is believed to have equated social phenomena to natural existence, literary creation to scientific experiment, and thus have failed to reflect the truth about the class nature.
  \item Zhang Delin, a professor in the Chinese Department in East China Normal University, Shanghai.
  \item Ma Jian, the author of the short story "Liangchu nide shetai huozhe kongkongdangdang" (see \textit{Renmin wensue} Jan. 1987) which reportedly aroused popular indignation and disgust throughout Tibet for its scandalous representation of the sexual behavior of some of the local inhabitants. He became quite well-known when the story and the publishers were publicly and severely criticized.
\end{itemize}
revelation and some sort of meaningful ideas which have transcended the concrete images; besides, it should provide them with more elevated and richer aesthetic treatment. But "Love in a Small Town" seems to be a bit too strong in concrete images, while rather weak in artistic contemplation.1

With a couple of "shoulds" and the word "seem" the complaint sounds quite mild. Among Wang's detractors only a minority have taken this mild attitude. The majority seem to prefer some less tolerant attitudes. For example, a rather sharp criticism can be found in the following remark:

"Love in a Small Town" after all, has over-emphasized the pivotal role of sexual desire in controlling human life and fate. It has exaggerated the idea that sexual desire can dominate human life and fate without the limitation of time and space. For this reason the work is producing a rarefied atmosphere of pan-sexism.2

As a result the critic admonished the author: "Be careful not to fall into the trap of merely exhibiting the natural attributes of human beings."

In China the worst literary criticism tends to include two most dangerous elements: personal attack and political name-calling. During the ten years of turmoil this was a common and repetitive occurrence. Few people willingly follow suit nowadays. But for some unknown reason, some people seem unable to get out of their bad habits. In their critical articles one can still find a trace of those dangerous elements. The following

quotations may well illustrate this point. On January twenty-fourth, 1987, *Literary Gazette* carried an article which says:

Indeed, "Love in a Small Town" and "Love on a Barren Mountain", which have recently aroused much controversy, have shown the young woman writer has a refined artistic sensibility and talents in depiction. But on the other hand, they may lead a man to feel that there is not much social content therein, and to suspect that she has simply over-exhibited sexual psychology and even sexual physiology. The former gives a graphic rendering of a sort of instinctive arousal and impulse occasioned by frequent contact of bodies. The latter is about a distasteful extramarital love affair born of 'mutual interest in good looks'. It is very difficult for such works to carry any profound ideological contents or any social significance. ... It is likely that some of our writers who engage in serious literature have a subjective desire to expose and criticize certain unwholesome and immoral sexual relations. But when they come to concrete artistic descriptions, they sometimes cannot restrain themselves and by heightening the joyous atmosphere of the scenes, betray some not so fine ideologies and aesthetic tastes on the part of the writers themselves.¹

Another article published in *Social Science* (Shanghai) in September 1987 states:

"Three loves", especially, "Love in a Small Town" give quite a lot of description of sexual psychology and sexual physiology, which can also be

found occasionally in other works. This, in fact, can never arouse any sense of beauty from the reader, instead, it makes him feel sick."  

The article further asserted:

Of course, this does not mean literature and art cannot expose the dark side of marriage and love in our country. Yet the exposure should be calling a spade a spade, rather than a confusion of right and wrong or a mix-up of black and white. We must not regard the rational restrictions on sexual love by the socialist reality as something repulsive and heap curses on them; neither should we take the absolute freedom of anarchic sex for something most glorious and pronounce a eulogy on it.

This survey of critical articles on Wang Anyi's "three loves" may come to an end now. This is not to say that the time to choose sides has come. Without a close study and a careful analysis of the original texts (which I will carry out in the next two chapters), I think, it is not proper to pass any judgement however superficial. The brief survey we have just made, however, suffices to lead us safely to the following general conclusion: Wang Anyi's "Love in a Small Town" and the other two "Loves" are an unusual phenomenon in contemporary Chinese literature.

In recent years serious literature in China was having a hard time. The modernization drive, which is mainly embodied in economic reforms, has actually rendered it unimportant, or even useless. Of its former readers more and more have turned to TV and popular literature. The circulation of first-rate literary magazines keeps dwindling all

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the time.\textsuperscript{1} Even in such an unfavorable situation, however, Wang's "three loves" were able to arouse considerable interest as well as much controversy, and even attract a readership in Hong Kong and Taiwan. It was nearly a miracle. As far as I know, about two dozen journals and newspapers have published reviews or critical articles on her "loves." As for these journals and newspapers, I think, there are at least two facts about them worth observing. First, they are wide-spread geographically, from northeast to southwest, almost throughout the whole country; and second, they are vastly differentiated in cultural and intellectual levels: some are purely academic journals and some are leading popular newspapers. These two facts alike indicate that the "three loves" have attracted intense public curiosity in China. True, while scrambling for a copy of her work, each individual possesses a different motive. Some can be attracted to it simply because of the rumor that it is a sexual stimulant; some are even drawn by the pretty young writer herself.

But fact is fact. Beside her several award-winners, her "three loves", especially the much-talked about "Love in a Small Town" had at one time occasioned a great controversy in China. No wonder one Chinese critic said that "Wang Anyi is a miracle in the contemporary literary world."\textsuperscript{2}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{1}{See "Wang Meng chen dalu wenyi mianlin xinkaoyan", Renmin ribao, Overseas ed. 30 Dec. 1988: 2. Toward the end of 1987 a heated discussion was ignited in Shanghai by an essay by a news reporter, who pointed out: "The sale of pure literature books published all over the country have been seriously diminished for quite a long time. Last year it suffered the greatest loss for many years past. Now numerous leading provincial literary journals have such a small circulation that the writers, too, feel frightened. The circulation of some journals has fallen from hundreds of thousands to dozens of thousands." See Xu Chunfa, "Cun wenxue zuopin weihe zhiyin reshao (Why Readers of Pure Literature Dwindles Increasingly)?" Wenhui bao 4 Dec. 1987: 1}

\footnote{2}{Chen Mo and Wang Ye, "Aide beiju yu rende mingyun", Dangdai wentan 6 (1987): 21.}
\end{footnotes}
Unable to Love: The Sad Fate of Two Feral Children

Despite the fact that each of the three novelettes Wang completed in 1986 has the word "love [lian]"\(^1\) in its title, none of them is a conventional love story. To be more

1 Roughly, the Chinese term "lian" can be interpreted in two ways: either as "love" or as "longing." Judging from the contents of Wang's three novelettes, only "love" can be accepted here as the key word in the titles. However, "lian" as "love" has quite a few synonyms in Chinese, for example, "qing," which means "affection," "sentiment," or "passion;" "yu," that is "desire," or "lust;" and "ai," which is perhaps the nearest Chinese equivalent to the English "love." But except "yu," all the others are often used in titles of literary works. Then, "ai" sounds quite plain and direct; "qing" is a bit too vague and general. In fact, as far as the content is concerned, the best choice for the story "Love in a Small Town" is "yu" rather than "lian." The trouble with the word "yu" is that Chinese rarely use it in noticeable contexts such as a title of a fiction. This phenomenon will be explained in the next chapter. For more information, please refer to C. T. Hsia, The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968) 263-265.
accurate, the sort of romantic passion which is often sighed over by poets is virtually absent in the stories as the titles seemingly suggest.

In November 1987 Wang Anyi declared: "The motive and theme of my creation has always remained the same, that is the exploration of what exactly composes a human being, what exactly composes love."

To give her due, in both "Love on a Barren Mountain" and "Love in Beauteous Valley" Wang did do some patient exploration of a couple of (by Chinese standard) unusual forms of love affair: both are extramarital, the former has a very tragic ending; the latter seems more like a fantasy than a real encounter. But in "Love in a Small Town", what Wang is concerned with seems entirely different: the primary motive and the dominant theme is no longer the exploration of love and even less romantic love. Instead something new, something fresh, something never thus approached by serious or "first class writers" in modern Chinese literary history. In fact this is exactly what makes it widely different from the other two "loves" and the very reason why "Love in a Small Town" has given rise to multiple interpretations and lively intellectual debate.

The first and foremost concern of Wang's "Love in a Small Town" is purely sex and its related mysteries. Sex, the biological source of love, rather than love itself, this time has become the sole object of the intellectual exploration by Wang Anyi, a serious thinker and an experimental writer.

There is reason to think that the literary exploration of sex is not an easy job. One should not expect it to be completed within a few works and by a few writers. As for Wang, in the end she might have achieved little result with much effort, or bothered her head simply for nothing, or even got herself into trouble for heading in a mistaken direction from the very beginning. However, the most important thing is that this bold new exploration has already begun; Wang has taken a significant first step.

In order to achieve her purpose, to guarantee a success in her first case study of raw sexuality, the plot of the story had to be worked out with extraordinary meticulousness and
ingenuity. There are at least three prerequisites that Wang had to meet before she set herself to the task:

Firstly, she had to choose a specific historical period of time and a specific geographical area in which human sexual love could justifiably parry the complicated interferences from outside. That is to say, the social influences traceable to families, schools, working units or neighborhood etc could be almost totally ignored in this specific period and area.

Secondly, she had to portray two protagonists whose relationship, from start to finish, would be dominated by sexual cravings rather than by any non-sexual desires such as a need for intimate friendship or pity evoked by an accident, or some romantic sentiments born of unrealistic dreams, or an acute sense of business interest etc. In short, Wang had to create a completely sex-oriented couple and make her reader believe in their possible existence.

Thirdly, in attempting to reveal the mysterious power which determines the protagonists' entire sexual behavior, Wang had to turn to the instinctive elements and something else\(^1\) in their sex relations for help. In the meantime, while she is demonstrating a detailed causal efficacy, she has to be very careful not to arouse suspicion from her readers about the authenticity of the characters in the story.

Now, let's see how Wang Anyi tackled these problems.

The whole story of "Love in a Small Town" covers at least twelve years, the first half of which, perhaps, falls within the ten year period of the Cultural Revolution. At the beginning of the story there is no mention of any particular year, the reader can only get a vague idea of its historical setting from a few terms only used during that "Revolution":

\(^1\) This factor will be discussed in Chapter Two.
"propaganda teams at school" (1), "The Red Detachment of Women" (1) and "On the Yi Meng Mountains" (2). Later on, at nearly the first third of the story, the author devotes a few short lines, which make an independent paragraph, to assure the reader of the exact year:

And sure enough, just after Chinese New Year the news comes that Premier Zhou Enlai has passed away. ...
And then General Zhu De, Commander-in-Chief of the People's Liberation Army, also passes away;
And then comes the earthquake in Tangshan;
And then the country's leader Chairman Mao passes away;
And then,
Comes the fall of the Gang of Four. (44)

Apparently this is 1976, in which the heroine is eighteen, while the hero twenty-two. Therefore the time when the heroine and the hero joined the performing arts troupe before the age of twelve and sixteen respectively can be calculated as earlier than 1970.

This historical background is essential to the story. Without it, a good deal of the sexual behavior of the protagonists would become unconceivable. For example, "When she [the heroine] came as a young student to the ballet troupe she only had three years of schooling behind her, and couldn't even write a proper letter to her parents in a neighboring province [according the original text this should be 'county']" (81). Before and after the Cultural Revolution, in many parts of China young children were also enrolled in art and

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1 The English version of "Xiaocheng zhi lian (Love in a Small Town)" used in this paper is taken from Wang Anyi, Love in a Small Town, trans. Eva Hung, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1988). Page number given in parentheses.
sport institutions for special training. But while being taught professional skills, they had to keep up with the standard curriculum followed in the public schools. It could only happen during the most absurd and dark years of the Cultural Revolution, when slogans like "The more learned one becomes, the more reactionary he is" ran rampant everywhere, that young actors or actresses would actually be trained while illiterate and thus turned into virtual savages like the heroine in this story:

[When aware of her pregnancy] She ties pieces of cloth around her belly so that the others will not detect anything wrong. She has absolutely no common sense and thinks that if she does so the thing will disappear of its own accord. ... [But in the end] the leader of the troupe summons her. At first she denies it, and when she realizes that her denials are in vain she admits it. But she refuses to reveal who the man is and keeps repeating that it is hers alone. This is of course absurd. The troupe leader mentions his name since everyone has seen what has been going on, but she shakes her head in fear: "No, no, no, it's mine, mine alone." (98-99)

Such laughable ignorance rarely occur except in some most absurd era.

Let us next look at the story's geographic background. As the title says, it is a small town:

This is a small town bounded by three or four rivers, with a very narrow road leading to the railway. ... Most streets in town are paved with stone slabs, polished by the feet of pedestrians, baked warm in the sun. ... On some walls the white-wash has peeled off, leaving bare the grey bricks underneath. Big posters are pasted on these walls, billing films shown in the cinema and plays put on the theatre. A cinema ticket costs ten cents, a
theatre ticket thirty cents. ... At night, when all the pedlars are gone and all the shops are shut, the street is pitch black; only the stones shine in the crystal-clear moonlight. Doors are shut, then windows are shut, and then even the lights are extinguished. Children begin to dream about the days when they will be grown-ups; old timers sit thinking, or relive the memories of their younger days. Those who are neither old nor young have another kind of pleasure, moving in the dark, planting the seeds of life. This time next year, the town will hear the wailing of new inhabitants (4-6).

It is a town to be sure, the centre of the county, whose governmental and cultural institutions are all located here. See, there is a middle school, where a strange couple from another part of the country lived, who "actually wear pants with stripes and floral patterns" (12), and, to the natives' greater disgust, they "keep their door shut even in this burning weather" (28). Besides, there is a public bathhouse:

Since the theatrical troupe enjoys a special status in town, on Saturday mornings, before the villagers come into town, the public bath is open to the troupe for two hours so the actors and actresses can have their wash first. ... When they [the actresses] are done, they walk out with their hair wet and hanging down, their faces glowing, and their dirty clothes in the basins which they balance on one hip much as the renowned ancient beauty Xishi did after she finished washing silk by the river. At the door of the public bathhouse the villagers are queuing, their faces dirty, their eyes gluey and their bodies shivering. They look at the girls in wonder and admiration, trying hard to imagine what a blessed, royal life they lead (10-11).
But the town is perhaps too small, for people here have never used running water, cassette-recorders or "foreign umbrellas which can be folded up in three sections" (94). What is more, they have never known "huge crabs with four [a mistake in the original text and in the translation] pincers and eight legs" (94) can be eaten as food or "a leech which ... once... bites into your leg it never lets go" (43). Needless to say, neither have they ever seen "little bags women put on their breasts and underpants the size of fists" (94).

Also, owing to its smallness, the town has nearly twenty "quiet spots .... where they [the young lovers] could be alone and put all inhibitions aside and do those most shameless things they revel in (78). Some are in the city along the grassy river banks, some are in the outskirts among the peasants' haystacks."

From the standpoint of ordinary Chinese readers, the county seat depicted here looks only too familiar, thus too commonplace. In present-day China where the modern meets the ancient, small towns that are half urban and half rural, or, to put it more harshly, neither civilized nor barbarian, are legion in 1970s and 80s. Then why does Wang Anyi choose one of them as the background for her exciting literary exploration?

Perhaps no place can serve her purpose better than a small town. Wang's intention is to make an all-round study of various aspects of the sexual desires commencing in man and woman at puberty. She cannot think of a more suitable place for her man and woman to live and "love", and the reason is clear enough: in large cities like the "southern seaside city " (28) it is possible for young lovers to build a "quiet spot", so to speak, for dating, albeit it is definitely not among "the bundles of straw" (80). One can hardly meet a lad or a lass in modern cities who could have no concept of "bras" or "panties". But in the most remote and desolate mountain villages, there is ample chance to discover some fairly innocent or ignorant boys and girls. The trouble then would be that there is no "theatrical troupe" in their neighborhood, so how can they come and live together at a very early age?
Talking about the theatrical troupe, I should point out that it is actually the real and specific geographic setting for the story. The protagonists have spent almost all their time in it:

They had been together since they were very young, dancing in the same ballet troupe. ... she was in the "Dance of the Little Soldiers" and he in the "Dance of the Children's Brigade" (1). ... Though neither of them is a principal dancer, they both work hard. In the early mornings and late evenings they are the only people in the studio. Even in cold weather they strip down to flimsy practice clothes, and they don't have to come near to smell each other's sweat and odor, at once sweet and repellent (2-3).

It is obvious that only in this particular part of the small town could two single persons of opposite sex be in each other's company so closely and constantly throughout childhood, adolescence, teenage years and adulthood. So this concrete environment is very important. Without it the author's meaningful exploration would seem groundless and the whole tragedy would be utterly far-fetched.

One thing should be mentioned here: people do not tend to associate song and dance with tragedies, even less did they during the Cultural Revolution. There was a special reason: during those turbulent years, children from average families in the cities usually faced rather doubtful prospects upon graduation from high schools. If a child could be assigned a job in the vicinity, whether white collar or blue collar, the whole family would feel greatly relieved. In contrast, those who had no way out but to live and work in a production team in the countryside were generally deemed the most unfortunate and miserable. Then the whole family would leave no stone unturned to change the child's fate. This means they would try at all costs to shorten the rustication period of their child. Therefore, many average parents would be more than willing to have their children,
however young, be picked and taken away by any institutions (for example, PLA, sports schools or performing arts troupes) except those in the countryside or "the vast world." So we have good reason to believe that when the protagonists were first enrolled into the troupe both their parents and themselves must have felt very happy and greatly honored. They could never have thought that this move was in fact tantamount to throwing this pair of innocents back into the Garden of Eden and putting them at the disposal of the sinister snake of carnal lust.

The troupe could not compare with Eden. Worse still, as soon as the gate closed behind the children's backs, the massive influence of family and school, two primary sources of protection, care and education, especially sex education, for modern Chinese children, was locked out for ever. Now that the troupe was the only one who could take over the responsibilities shared normally by family and school, we can take it for granted that the leadership and the adults in the troupe would look after the physical, mental and intellectual growth of the young students. But during those frantic years what could be expected of a county theatrical troupe? The author hasn't given any explicit answer, instead she provides the reader with some revealing facts:

A teacher from the Dance Department of the Provincial Performing Arts School has come to conduct a day's class with the troupe, and in just one day's time has found out that they have destroyed their physiques through incorrect training. They don't have muscles, just flesh with neither flexibility nor strength. ...[The girl] has thick legs, thick arms, a thick waist and very broad hips. Her breasts are twice the normal size, protruding like small hills, hardly like a fourteen-year-old's. ... [As for the boy,] something must have gone wrong with his body; he has just stopped growing, and though he is eighteen, he still looks very much a child. (2)
Among the things a performing arts troupe could offer its young students the best thing should be professional training. But, to our great surprise, this turned out to be something totally unscientific and downright harmful, and it played a key role in deforming their physical beings. In view of this deplorable fact, we do not doubt that the care and education the protagonists had received in that troupe must be among the worst of the day.

The following incident can perhaps give us more of an idea about the cold reality in the troupe. Once the hero was asked to play a role as a little Red Soldier in the pas de deux "Hard Times." He had some difficulty in getting onto the "old soldier's" back and in finding someone to help him practise. When the heroine learned of this, she offered him her back. Then once again there were only two of them in the studio:

... It is now late into the night, and someone roars at the studio, cursing them for disturbing his sleep. Someone else opens and shuts a window with a loud bang. But they are oblivious to all these noises. The music envelops their world... Finally someone turns off the electricity mains. The light suddenly goes off and the music stops; around them all is dark. The lights in the courtyard are turned off too, and there is no moon in the sky. It is pitch black, like the bottom of an abyss. He was on her back when their movements stopped with the music, frozen. Thirty seconds pass before he lands on the floor. Without uttering a single word, they run away in fear (34-35).

Did they deserve this sort of rudeness and humiliation? Were they doomed to remain always in the dark? Sympathetically, Wang Anyi summarized their problems in this specific place and time in the following words: "They live in a time of bleak ignorance; there is no forerunner to help them see the light ..." (49)
A question arises here: These two young people were not the only students in the troupe, so why do the other boys and girls, unlike them, survive the unfavorable environment, while they fail so miserably? Were there any particular determinants, like personalities, in their tragedy? The answer should be an affirmative one. They were distinguished from the other young people because "the two of them are just children, simple and lowly" (50), who had in themselves some marked weaknesses.

Firstly, they both suffered from a lamentable physical disadvantage. Contrary to the conventional stereotype of professional dancers, neither of them had a well-proportioned figure. "She is not well-proportioned; every part of her body is exaggerated or distorted, like the creation of a cartoonist. The curves thrust in and out without restraint" (21). Besides, her roommates discovered in her a strong body odor, something like B.O. Thus they all "refuse to sleep in the bed next to hers" (3). As in the boy's case, in addition to his underdeveloped shape which looked "like a fifteen-year-old's" (40), he was terribly thin and covered all over his face and body with pimples. "He... is losing weight. You can see his bones sticking out of his skin, which is covered in scars because acne inflames his every pore. He looks exactly like a little chick with all its feathers plucked" (37). And curiously enough, in spite of his small and thin body, "he became as heavy as lead, and has grown more ponderous and clumsy by the day so that no one can manage to dance under his weight. For some strange reason he has lost whatever adroitness he had ..." (35)

Their bodily defects led first to a fear that they might be disqualified as dancers. So neither of them dared to treat their body training perfunctorily. On the contrary, they put more time and energy into it and stayed in the studio longer than anyone else in the troupe: "They never stop practising; they can't even if they want to. If they stopped, she would get even fatter and thicker, and he, because his body has refused to grow even one centimetre taller cannot afford to gain the slightest weight as that would make him look even shorter" (6). This, of course, had greatly increased their opportunities to meet each other. Their bodily defects then led to a degrading of their social status in the troupe and of their morale
as enterprising young man and woman: "she eats a lot, never stopping until she is too full to take any more. At the same time she becomes lazy about practising. ... he doesn't practise much either. The studio looks forlorn" (37-38).

When the girl was eighteen and the boy twenty-two, they finally gave up their profession: "[Now] they are back-stage, she taking care of the costumes, he of the props, and when there is nothing to do they watch the performance from the wings where the set pieces are lined up" (38). For this reason, they remained in each other's company in much the same way as before, the place changed from the studio to back-stage. As everyone knows, the former was open, bright and spacious, while the latter concealed, dark and quite conducive to sexual activity. Thus it came as no surprise that the hero took the plunge here.

Secondly, apart from their horrible want of self-understanding and practical knowledge of sexual matters, they possessed some mental and moral defects: the girl had a puny intelligence and the boy lacked will-power and a sense of responsibility. These defects could, perhaps, largely account for their sexual misconduct:

As she grows more and more like a woman, her childishness and clumsiness become more apparent (13). ... Words do not serve her well; what she says is always weak and stupid (68). ... She never thinks before she speaks and so her words always seem incoherent or out of place. Her intelligent companions all call her Big Soppy (29).

On the other hand, although "he is a more complicated person, more intelligent and rational than her" (86), the hero was apparently unable to control his powerful sexual impulse:

He, ... understands perfectly that this [fornication] is an unforgivable crime.
Yet it gives so much enjoyment that it is irresistible. When their bodies
touch and they become one, all these ideas of crime, sin, right and wrong no longer exist; there is only joy -- the joy of excitement, of pain, and of fear (41).

We can hardly imagine what a frightful and bizarre picture these two would make once they tasted the forbidden fruit. Under Wang Anyi's hand, they bear little resemblance to other people living in China of the nineteen-seventies, but rather looked like two primitive human beings from remote antiquity. Intentionally or unintentionally, Wang has depicted them as sex-oriented man and woman, or, to be more accurate, as a pair of "skin-starved" or "flesh-driven" human beings. The last two phrases may sound rather odd, yet after reading the following excerpts from the novelette, I believe, you will be well able to appreciate them.

After they made their first sexual commitment back-stage, they became completely preoccupied with sex. They could not taste their food and paid no attention to their appearance:

When no one else is around, they are inseparable, as if glued together (40).

... Every day at nightfall the two of them disappear, leaving the dark studio behind. Then as the polar star sinks in the west and morning mist whitens the pitch black night, they appear in the courtyard, one after the other, like ghosts, their hair tousled, their clothes untidy and their eyes shining in the dark (41).

When they left the small town and went on an extended performance tour with the troupe, "they do their utmost to look for chances to be alone together" (64). Their dating places were many and varied: a river bank in a foggy night; the projection room in a theatre in which, for each time, they had only "ten minutes on their own," so "there is a tight
schedule for everything" (64), and a darkened bedroom on a sultry summer night where "the mosquitos' earth-shaking humming is like a thousand violins, all played with loosened strings" (73).

Naturally, such shoddy and disappointing sex could only bring despair in time. Thus, every time "when the fervor subsides, they feel completely despondent, so much so that they want to hit their heads against the wall until they bleed" (65). That was because they had become aware of a "shame and remorse" (74). So, "she starts sobbing, tears streaming down her face. Though he does not cry, he is thoroughly dejected and is crying in his heart" (74). "But when the next day comes, their burning desire drives any sense of shame away" (65).

The strangest thing that happened to their relationship was that whenever circumstances became too restrictive, their sexual passions would take a most unconventional form: fighting fiercely with each other:

Their agitation is real, and as they berate each other their anger mounts, and they start hitting and beating each other, their bodies entangled. While his physical strength seems enormous, her spirit is so roused that she can stand up to anything (46-47). Little wonder that, in the observer's eyes, they are like two copulating dogs (69). Then, at the end of this contest their anger gradually subsides, but their feelings are still excited. They cannot tell whether they are hitting or caressing each other, or maybe they are hitting and caressing at the same time. At this moment it seems that earth and sky and everything else have vanished, only an indescribable feverish urge remains. From deep inside their bodies a strange sense of joy rises; the joy that has been lost to them, that they have yearned for and waited for in desperation, comes back to them unexpectedly, at a time when they are totally unprepared. At last they are exhausted from the physical contest, and
lie down completely limp. But they have not felt such a deep sense of satisfaction for a long time. Gradually they quieten down and take a look at each other there is no hatred in that look, only love and intimacy (47). What seemed even more strange was that she longs fervently to touch his body, to rub against it, even if it means being tortured by him (95).

In light of this strangeness, both sexual and behavioral, in this couple's relationship, one cannot resist the temptation to conclude that the primary motivation on the part of either of them was a kind of lust for flesh, for skin-to-skin contact, which is perhaps the most basic and rudimental form of human sexual desire.

Since the physical, mental and moral weaknesses discussed above do not necessarily breed unusual sexual behavior, there must be some other factor or factors which had contributed to the formation of their strange sexual pattern. So here we have to go back to look at the beginning of their sexual relationship again. What at first made their abnormal sexual relationship possible?

Wang Anyi had solved this problem perhaps before she started writing the story. She wisely put the two protagonists into the dancing profession, which, indeed, played the role of catalyst and synthesizer in the creation of their sexual relationship.

There has been a widespread and deep-rooted assumption in China at physical contact between male and female grown-ups (save spouses) would bring out wicked and sinful results. So the majority of the Chinese people, throughout their adolescence, have few opportunities to touch the skin or hair or any other part of the body of the opposite sex. During ten years of the Cultural Revolution sexual love was either deemed a decadent bourgeois sentiment, or crowned with "profound class feelings" (as represented in certain "model dramas", like The White-haired Girl) An infinitely more rigid sex segregation was enforced all over the country. Ordinary young people had to live exclusively with their own
sex. The only exception might be dancers in "propaganda teams" and "performing arts troupes." Let's now take the protagonists in "Love in a Small Town" as a case in point.

Before they reached puberty, they had already been familiar with each other's bodies. In their daily training and performances they were quite used to all kinds of physical contact including the most intimate ones. For example, "he stands on one leg with his back against the wall and, stiffening the other leg, asks her to push it towards his head. She pushes hard, her face against the curve of his calf" (4). Later, when "her body is so rotund that it's impossible for it to grow anymore" (12), owing to many factors, she failed to feel the urges of sexual awakening. Therefore, "she still asks him to help her turn out her legs and loosen her joints, just as she used to when she was young. Though this task has become more and more difficult for him, he can't turn her down, and it has become a torture for him" (13).

As time passed, the intimate contact of their bodies gradually took on new meanings. For the hero, the female body "is dear to him, quenching the thirst of his flesh and soul" (34). As for the heroine, although looking like a typical case of sexual ignorance, she was belatedly aware of an unaccountable desire seizing her body: "She does not know what she is yearning for, but feels that her body has been neglected, that she is surrounded by a desert of loneliness" (37).

As a result, while other boys and girls were attracted to each other probably only by appearances or something more romantic, they were simply interested in each other's flesh; while other children were busy conjuring up fantasies, they already had access to the "real thing." They distinguished themselves from their whole age group by their constant preoccupations with the sensual features of the opposite sex. In spite of the fact that "they were such innocent children," (71), their minds were haunted by the shadow of the snake of sexual desire from the very beginning.

However, Wang Anyi does not mean to imply that her protagonists had nothing in common with other young men and women of the day, even less that their relationship
involved no care or emotion at all, like that between male and female animals. Rather, she also call our attention to the complexity of the whole affair. The following are but a couple of convenient examples. When the hero heard the heroine complaining about the poor condition of the bathroom, he, on his own initiative, "bought her an apple-green plastic bucket" (9) to help solve her problem in taking a comfortable bath. Shortly after their first sexual encounter, "all of a sudden they are intimate and inseparable even in front of other people, and no one was prepared for this. ... They group their meal tickets together to buy their meals, which they share. She washes all his clothes, while he takes over her share of work on the stage, mounting and dismantling the scenes. She is not any weaker than he, but he will not let her do it, so she just hangs around eating carrots with green skin" (42). Later on, "he has to give her something everyday: cologne, ice-cream, a handkerchief, hairpins, face powder ... She goes to the market for some eggs and fresh meat, then cooks for him on a borrowed stove. She puts in too little oil, and there's no salt, but he still eats it all up with gratitude" (65).

All these are undoubtedly, clear indications of care and fond feelings existing between ordinary young lovers. Although Wang states at one place that "they don't really know what love is; they only know that they cannot suppress their need for each other" (40-41), I think, we can still detect some faint traces of romantic feeling existing, at least, in the hero's mind. For instance, since the heroine decided to drown herself in the river, she failed to come to their usual rendezvous.

He cries so hard that he rolls about on the ground, and the stones and withered branches cut into him, but he does not even feel them, and remains sad and tearful. He does not know how he is going to bear the days to come; life is like an endless dark night, and he cannot see the light of dawn. How can she be so heartless! They should suffer together; they must suffer together; what else can they do? (91).
Likewise, his behavior after marriage to another woman also seems quite revealing: "Life after marriage is not at all blissful for them. Every time his wife comes for a visit, she leaves before the planned date. If others ask her what is the hurry, she says tearfully that she cannot take it anymore. But she never tells anyone what it is that she cannot take, just wipes her tears and walks away. He never asks her to stay, just smiles gloomily" (102). Was he still thinking of his first woman? There is no telling.

But one thing is very clear, namely, if there was any romantic element ever existing between this young couple (the two protagonists), it was only of an insignificant amount, so insignificant as to be almost negligible. What played the dominant role in their sexual relationship was, as I pointed out before, the most basic and rudimentary form of human sexual desire, which, in effect, is nothing but animal instinct.

Originally, you would have thought this was a social impossibility, for, how could a sexual relationship like this appear in modern China? Now, having seen how Wang solves the three problems raised at the beginning of this chapter, you will probably believe in the existence of this strange couple as well as their sexual experience.

And now, only now rather than earlier, do I feel it safe to say, with the help of "Love in a Small Town", a novelette written in 1986, Wang Anyi has brought two fresh and distinctive figures into the art gallery of Chinese literature. Although neither of them has got a name, they will most likely live in Chinese literary history as two memorable fictional characters. I quite agree with some perceptive critic when he proposes that "[they] become some unique and seldom seen icons in the temple of literature." Yet I feel sorry for him for being unable to bring out their singularities as typical meaningful personages in Chinese literature. Here I would like to offer my tentative suggestions:

The uniqueness embodied by the protagonists in "Love in a Small Town" is twofold:
Firstly, if we judge them on their own merits, we can see that, sex-oriented as they were, they were by no means sexually exploitative. To be sure, they both "can't extricate themselves" from the "dark, filthy abyss" (71), but, taking their sexual practices as a whole, no one can deny that all their sexual potentiality and expressions were within the normal human range. Nothing beastly was involved. So, unlike Ximen Qing\footnote{Ximen Qing the hero of *Jin Ping Mei*, is an infamous Chinese "Don Juan", who lives a loose life and takes pleasure in seducing and preying on women.}, the hero was not a satyr. He had never thought of ravishing his female partner. By the same token, unlike Pan Jinlian\footnote{Pan Jinlian is Ximen Qing's wife. In *Jin Ping Mei* she is depicted as a temptress who hankers after men and commits adultery with her son-in-law and some other males.}, the heroine was not a vamp. She had never tried to seduce her male partner. Rather, they were genuinely committed to each other, sexually as well as emotionally. The only trouble is neither of them had ever experienced the deep feelings of love.

Secondly, then, why was love absent in their "love affair"? Was it possible that they dare not, or need not, or would not like to love? My speculation is that they were unable to love. Probably, love, human sexual love, is different from human sexual instinct on the following two counts: on the one hand, it is not something that comes naturally, instead, it is a learned phenomenon; on the other, like some basic skills that will ensure a person eventually to be able to cope as a member of the human race, such as walking on two feet, speaking, etc, the notion and skill of love have to be acquired at a specific stage in one's life. If one passes this precious stage wasted or misused, he, like the well-known "feral children", will never be able to make up the missed lessons.

Here, owing largely to their misfortunes rather than their mistakes, the two protagonists began their adolescences by living with the "wolf" -- fleshly lust. Before they came to know love or any kind of romantic feelings, they have already become familiar
with sexual stimulations and thrills through their bodily contact; while their young and unprotected minds were still weak and feeble, carnal lust, like a bolt of lightning nearly struck them dead. Therefor, later on, even when they, so to speak, returned to the human world, they were utterly unable to shrug off their "wolfish" upbringing. So, as far as human sexual love was concerned, they were two wretched "wolf children". They had lost once and for all their ability to love each other or any one else of the opposite sex.

In contrast with the ruined young couple in Zhang Xian's short story "A Corner Forsaken by Love," this pair of "wolf children" seem even more miserable. The former suffered a lot: the boy was jailed; the girl committed suicide. But their suffering was after all either temporary or instantaneous. Love, that once forsook them would return with fresh hope and new meaning as long as they could survive the dark years of the Cultural revolution. (Unfortunately, the girl failed. But the torture of death she suffered when she drowned herself must have been quite brief.) As for the latter, they did survived those horrible years, nevertheless, no matter how hard they tried they could not catch up with others. In the story we saw them imitating the young lovers among their fellow students in the theatrical troupe: exchanging gifts, unbosoming themselves to each other, and so on and so forth. Let us examine this dialogue which was held between the protagonists when they were having a date in a rather romantic setting on a pleasant moonlit night:

He just feels relaxed and happy, so he says, as if to himself:

"What a fine day!"

An unexpected answer comes from the other side:

---

"Yes, indeed."

So he follows with this:

"The stars have come out."

And the other side answers:

"Yes, indeed."

Then he says:

"The moon is going to come out too."

The other side answers:

"Yes, indeed."

"It's been really hot these few days," he says to her...

"I don't mind the heat," she says. (60-61)

Please note that this dialogue, which took place long after their first date, is the only one recorded in the whole story. Whether it is the most or least romantic example of their private talk, I don't know. The author just tells us it was followed by another round of sexual intercourse. So, perhaps, it could be regarded as a part of their sexual foreplay. I guess, even if they could use more endearing and encouraging expressions on such occasions, it still could not dispel our suspicion that their copulation was merely a mechanical, loveless routine.

Further, at the end of the story, the heroine finally became the mother of twins. She then gave all her tender feelings to them and never got married. The hero, on the other hand, married in the end, but he was apparently unhappy. In fact, neither he nor she could be happy for the rest of their life. The reason, I think, is self-evident: Their ability to learn the ABC of human sexual love had long since been forestalled. Therefore, it was impossible for them to understand what love meant, even less to know who to love and how to love. They could continue to live in human society, but in a sense, they could never assume an erect stature.
To put it in a nutshell: Wang Anyi has provided two new images for Chinese literature, which have no parallels in the recent past. In terms of sex, they are never wolves, but humans, albeit they seem to have an undisciplined appetite for it. In terms of love, they are wolf children, the notion and practice of human love are always beyond their ken and reach, and they can never change this, do what they may.

It is easy to see the links between the creation of characters like these and the ultimate task Wang had wholeheartedly thrown herself into. It is a long-standing problem that little serious and original exploration of sex has been made in Chinese literature. This, of course, is due to many reasons. One important reason is, as Xiao Ming has pointed out, sex is often wrapped in the "cumbersome shell" of "social morality." My feeling is that, perhaps, there is another reason which is no less important: sex is often confused with love.

Sex is the source of love but not love itself. In contrast to animals, human beings have sex for three different purposes: sex for pleasure, for love and for procreation. Clearly, love should be the direct product of the love-oriented element of human sex. Yet in real life, the three elements can hardly be separated. Thus love cannot avoid being influenced by the other two elements of human sex.

"What literature concerns most is human emotions."1 Nevertheless, in the final analysis, literary works featuring love, "the eternal theme", must have something to do with sex, not only with its love-oriented element, but also with either or both of the other two elements. By the same token, writers who have devoted themselves to the same theme must be, consciously or unconsciously, affected by their preferences for or preoccupations with the different sex-elements.

In "Love in a Small Town", Wang Anyi, aided by her "wolf children", has not only reduced love to a minimum and thrown a spotlight into the darkened corner of sex, but also

tried to consciously examine sex from a new perspective as compared with the traditional Chinese one. What is this new perspective and what is the result of her examination will be the chief topic of next chapter.
CHAPTER TWO

Prisoners of Sex: A Country, A Small Town

What is the new perspective in which Wang Anyi, as a serious writer, examines sex? Before one can answer this question, I think, he should first solve another question: What is the old perspective prevailing in China?

To find an answer to this more urgent question, I will once again quote from Chen Danchen:

China is a very strange country. On the one hand, it has long been submerged in Confucian feudal ideas: sex has always been deemed as a great scourge, hence so-called "lechery is the gravest evil." The presentations of sexual subjects in all literary texts have been, without exception, considered obscene or salacious, which may poison and harm the younger generation. Zhu Xi, an eminent Confucian in the Song dynasty, went so far as to advocate "wiping out human desire." An old teaching "males and females ought to be strictly kept apart" has been followed for more than 2000 years. But on the other hand, throughout the history of
Chinese literature and art, descriptions of sexual love appear continually. The earliest endeavor could be traced to *The Book of Songs*, "Guan Ju", the very first poem in it, registers a kind of sexual deprivation. In addition, a good many poems in *The Book of Songs* are on topics like lovers' rendezvous and courtships. Later on, direct and thinly veiled descriptions and exaggerations of the sex act found their way into *Jin Ping Mei*, a book generally held as a rarity for the undisguised depiction of sexual matters, and other excellent pieces of drama, fiction, poetry and folksong like *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, *The Peony Pavilion*, *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Liaozhai Zhiyi*. The fact that these two mutually exclusive phenomena could exist simultaneously in ancient Chinese society offers much food for thought and merits serious study.¹

From these words, I think, we can learn at least two facts: First, the general assumption that sex is nasty and wicked has an extremely long history and is widespread and deep-rooted in China. Secondly, the whole of Chinese literary history is frequently punctuated by works which have, more or less, something to do with sex (hereafter I will call it "sex-related" or "sexual love" literature). In other words, there is an apparent sexual love tradition in Chinese literature.

Here a curious complication comes in: how did those sex-related works or their authors view sex? What kind of perspective has this sexual love tradition gained? Professor Zhang Delin suggests: "Let's evade our own tradition because it is very difficult for Chinese themselves to work out their tradition: Chinese on the one hand are totally immersed in the feudalist traditional ideology, ethics and morality, but on the other hand, in

¹ Chen Danchen, 2.
descriptions of sex, they are next to none."¹ Perhaps he is right in that lookers-on can see most of the game. In 1987 Tsujida Masao, a Japanese scholar and literary critic said:

Lacking a concept of the functional senses, the traditional Chinese 'sex literature' is invariably connected with techniques of sexual intercourse and lauding physiological pleasure.²

Here, by "sex literature", Tsujida Masao refers mainly to a part of the works mentioned by Chen Danchen, namely, "the grotesque pornography"³ such as The Prayer Mat of Flesh and Jin Ping Mei.⁴ As everyone knows, this sort of writing is full of "pornography spiced with cruelty, coarse humor and buffoonery, broad literary burlesque, and pseudo-religious piety masking a desire for gain"⁵; and their authors ordinarily assume

1. Zhang Delin and Cai Renhua, 44.
4. Lu Xun’s comment on these books merits attention: "...Chin Ping Mei is so superbly written that, setting aside its pornographic descriptions, this is a remarkable novel in many ways, whereas later writer of this school laid stress on sex alone and dealt with such abnormal behaviour that their characters seem to be sex-maniacs. The Human Hassock, which judging by its style may be the work of Li Yu, is comparatively good. But inferior works of this sort are pure pornography with no pretensions to the name of literature." Brief Hístory of Chinese Fiction (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1959) 239.
5. Hsia, 85.
a "playful attitude" and write with a "tantalizing and provocative" tone. So I feel quite safe to say that traditional Chinese "sex literature" is, in the final analyses, a product of the pleasure-oriented element of human sex. In the unconscious mind of the writers concerned, most likely, the same notion prevails: sex is mainly for pleasure.

However, what forms the staple of the sexual love literature in China is not pornography like *Jin Ping Mei* but the romances peopled with so called "gifted scholars and beautiful ladies." (In a broader sense, *The Romance of the Western Chamber, The Peony Pavilion* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* belong to this category too.) Then, how do matters stand with the romances and their authors? While lauding romantic love rather than physiological pleasure the romances are obviously traceable to the love-oriented element of human sex. Nevertheless, both the works and the authors are unable to ward off the influence of the aforementioned notion. Lu Xun seems to be in favor of such a view: "Most of the old romances libel the sovereign or his ministers, slander men's wives and daughters, or give accounts of lewdness and cruelty. ...Then there are works about talented scholars and beauties, all written according to one pattern, which usually include erotic descriptions." Although it is rash to attribute this notion to all sex-related works in traditional Chinese literature, it is nevertheless difficult to resist the conclusion that, consciously or unconsciously, most Chinese writers are affected to a certain degree by their preferences for, or preoccupations with the pleasure-oriented element of sex.

Thus, in front of us appears such a strange and startling picture: "The doctrines of Confucianism and Mencianism live at peace with licentiousness. The essays of the Tong Cheng school coexist with *Haishanghua Lei Zhan* and flourish happily together." As

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3 Han Ziyun (Han Pang-ch'ing), *Haishanghua liezhuan* (Taipei: Guangya chubanshe, 1984)
for the ruling literati, while "never feeling too ashamed to take concubines and patronize prostitutes", they never stop "busying themselves in composing essays extolling humanity, justice and virtue."  

How should we account for this puzzling paradox?  

I feel that in search of the answer, we can gain a good deal of enlightenment from Bertrand Russell's ideas: the traditional Chinese sexual mores of society were established and conducted on the basis of the above-mentioned notion in the unconscious mind. For, on the one hand, "fierce morality is generally a reaction against lustful emotions."  

If we say Chinese have a very rigid sexual morality, that is perhaps because that they have a very feverish bodily desire. On the other hand, precisely like the desire for food and drink human sexual desire "is enormously stimulated by prohibition" and "enhanced by abstinence." The more Zhu Xi and his followers advocated asceticism, the stronger the general interest in sexual topics became. (Chronologically, Jin Ping Mei looks like the result of the exhortation to "wipe out human desires." )

The seemingly paradoxical phenomena in Chinese tradition, therefore, can be believed to stem from the same origin: an overmastering obsession with the pleasure-oriented element of human sex. Be he a sound moralist or an audacious explorer in sexual love literature, the Chinese writers cannot think in their conscious or unconscious mind cleanly and wholesomely on sexual matters Worse still, throughout the long history of thousands of years, few of them have ever realized this cold fact. Even the outstanding

1 See Xu Zidong, Yu Dafu xinlun (Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1984) 174
3 Ibid.196.
4 Ibid.
May Fourth intellectuals failed to go beyond the limitations of "taste, knowledge, and morality" as sexual problems were discussed. Thanks to the relaxed political climate, growing democracy and the open-door policy carried out by the leadership of the CCP in the 1980s, the overall situation in China's intellectual world, including the literary circles has been vastly improved.

Ru Zhijuan, one of the best-known women writers in present-day China, said in her speech delivered at the 1986 international symposium:

Our fiction start to ponder over the rationality of our nation's traditional concepts, which exist in a deeper layer than in those where the political and moral issues usually arise ... Writers of the "New Period" could no longer feel satisfied to linger at the political and moral layer when they engage in studying and depicting human nature. They begin to probe with their pens a layer where the Chinese cultural mentality belongs, the hidden frame of mind and the collective unconscious of the Chinese people, as well as the historical and cultural backgrounds against which all these took shape.

Ru claimed that in order to lead the readers in evaluating critically China's cultural tradition, "the young and middle-aged writers" had turned to many new subject matters rarely touched before such as "the savageness of primal cravings, and conflict between sensual desires and rational restraints ..."

1 See Zhou Zuoren, "Shanghai qi," 114.
2 Ru Zhijuan, "Xiaoshuo de chensi," Papers from the International Conference on Contemporary Chinese Literature (2), Shanghai November 1986:2
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
Then, who are the representatives of this group of "young and middle-aged writers"? Ru Zhijuan offered a dozen writers who are all very active recently: "Wang Meng, Wang Zengqi, Deng Youmei, Lu Wenfu, Zhang Chengzhi, Ah Cheng, Han Shaogong, Wang Anyi, Jia Pingwa, Chen Jiangong, Li Hangyu, and Zheng Wanlong."\(^1\)

What strikes us as unusual is that there is only one woman writer in this list and she is no one but Ru's own daughter Wang Anyi.

According to an old Chinese moral convention: "Avoid arousing suspicion" -- the last person one should praise in public is someone to whom one is intimately related -- Ru should not cite here in this list her own daughter. But, curiously enough, in China there is another piece of ancient admonition, which in effect teaches the opposite line: "Be bold to recommend one's kinfolk however close he is", so one could recommend one's own relatives or even family members without hesitation, provided that he (or she) is well qualified. Probably, Ru Zhijuan wittingly acted in accord with the latter teaching -- She chose the most solemn occasion to recommend her daughter, among other writers, to the readership all over the world.

Wang Anyi deserves her mother's high recommendation. She is unique among the contemporary Chinese writers because of her unique literary exploration. One of her remarkable achievements is her challenge to the sexual love tradition in Chinese literature, which is rather evident in "Love in a Small Town".

I mentioned before (in Chapter One) that the entire sexual behavior of the protagonists in "Love in a Small Town" was determined by some mysterious power, which Wang Anyi would later prove to be "the instinctive elements and something else in their sex relations." It is now time to examine this "something else". First, let us look at these passages from the novelette:

\(^1\) *Ibid.*
After the excitement of petting and rubbing against each other's body they feel blissfully exhausted and proudly languid. Their lover's touch seems to have seeped into their pores and mixed with their blood, which flows along their veins singing a happy tune. This feeling of blissfulness almost makes them sigh. They would like to tell everyone, to make everyone envious. But they must lock their bliss in their hearts, not allowing the smallest trace to leak out, because this is a sin. Although she is an ignorant girl she knows that she has transgressed. She does not know what is right, but she knows very well what is wrong. (41)

On most following occasions, a similar fear seems to linger in their minds: "They fling themselves into each other's arms feverishly, and yet in the split second when they touch, they turn cold. ... There is no joy in it; they have only made themselves filthy and they will never become innocent again" (45).

When did this strange and familiar notion "sex is something one should not do for it is sinful and filthy" enter their minds, no one can tell. Wang Anyi's narrative leaves us such an impression that her protagonists had always lived under this unconquerable obsession. Therefore, the mysterious power which had profoundly controlled their sexual behavior turned out to be a blend of two factors: the primitive instincts and the socially constituted superego.

Furthermore, Wang seems to have assigned different roles to these two factors: the former to be the source of delight, bliss, ecstasy, gratification ... all the positive sexual feelings, the latter to be the breeding ground of everything negative -- fear, agony, despair, confusion ... etc.

In the story, Wang Anyi repeatedly and explicitly tells us that since the protagonists' first sexual encounter, the primitive instincts and a guilty conscience had faithfully been present on each occasion of their rendezvous. The two factors had
alternatively, and with equal strength, exerted an enduring influence on them, driving, steering, manipulating, and controlling the ignorant young couple all the time. If their loveless "love affair" has finally aroused a sort of repugnance in some readers, it can be because the negative "breeding ground" has played no smaller part than the positive "source."

Now that we have entered the protagonists' inner world and are able to trace all their sexual activities and psychologies to the two sources, there is no longer any mystery. If there is any problem which still looks somewhat like a "mystery", it must be Wang's deliberation, which is meant to evoke deeper contemplation on the part of the reader. We certainly remember a quite puzzling comment made by Wang on her female protagonist: "She does not know what is right, but she knows very well what is wrong." How could this be possible?

Depicted as a typical case of puny intelligence, is it not a mystery how she, having spent her formative years in an environment where both the scientific knowledge provided by school and parental guidance obtained from family were practically nonexistent, could look so knowledgeable and so decisive on this special issue? Let us go a step further, according to Wang Anyi's description, her female protagonist was gravely deformed both in person and in mind. Nicknamed as "Big Soppy", she could be different in a thousand ways from her fellow Chinese, lagging behind them by thousands of miles in intelligence. How could she share exactly to the same extent, both in quality and quantity, the judgement about "rights" and "wrongs" in sexual matters of her compatriots? Could it be that her and every other Chinese's sexual unconscious or sexual misconceptions, like their sexual instincts, are something innate? Of course not. Then, where do they come from?

In all of her "three loves" Wang Anyi gives neither the female nor the male protagonist a name. Her intention is quite clear: she wants to call the readers' attention to the symbolic meaning of her case study; the two simple pronouns "He" and "She" are, in certain sense, standing for the whole contemporary Chinese men and women. In other
words, what Wang has done in these three stories is a work resembling the biologists' daily practice -- dissecting a specimen.

In biological exploration the quality of the specimen matters a lot. It is true for literary exploration as well. Roughly speaking, there are two aspects of "Love in a Small Town", which are both the results of Wang's successful characterization of the two "feral children", setting it apart from the other two "loves." The first of these is by reducing love - the most capricious and complicated human emotion -- to a minimum, the story concentrates on the relatively simple and stable elements in a sex relation. Thus Wang's finding in this case study is nearest to the general truth in the existing social conditions. In this sense, I would like to suggest that what puzzles the protagonists in "Love in a Small Town" is precisely what is bewildering the whole Chinese nation, and the literary image of "Big Soppy" has actually epitomized the inner-world of a nation as far as sexual nescience is concerned.

The second aspect is by shedding a flood of light on a deeper layer where sexual instincts and misconceptions dwell, Wang Anyi is by no means exhibiting "sexual psychology", even less "sexual physiology". Rather, she is eagerly probing "the Chinese cultural mentality", "the socially constituted superego of the Chinese people", and the related "historical and cultural background".

In 1988, nearly two years after the appearance of her "three loves", Wang Anyi and Chen Sihe, a well-established literary critic in Shanghai, who happen to be the same age, had a very informative article published in the March issue of Shanghai Literature. The article, which is entitled "The Impromptu Dialogue Between Two 1969 Junior High School Graduates", devotes its second half mainly to a discussion on "Love in a Small Town." As it contains the author's self-assessment or self-defence, this part of the article deserves extensive quotation:
Chen; ..."Love in a Small Town" has laid great stress on a long neglected perspective in literature, namely, the perspective from which one regards human beings as biological phenomena and reveals their existence, evolution and development of these life-carriers. This work will certainly involve various types of human desires, both physiological and psychological. The reason human beings have sex is that they are life-carriers, not because of their being social phenomena. Of course, there are some other parts for a human being that cannot be separated from the society, such as his struggle, communication and expectations, etc. But sex is something entirely "private", and never belongs to the society. ...In the past, human sexual desires were studied from a social standpoint, and therefore were always regarded as something very dirty. In the history of Western literature, sex was generally considered dirty too, except in the period of the Renaissance during which it was enthusiastically exalted. ...Your "Love in a Small Town" looks at sex completely from hereditary point of view, therefore sex is no longer nasty, instead, it is precisely an important phase between the emergence and continuation of life. It is indispensable for human beings, so it is a natural and occasionally glorious phenomenon. ... Throughout the history of Chinese literature there is almost no one who has ever presented sex from this aesthetic standpoint.

Wang: This perhaps has something to do with Chinese cultural tradition, in which, there is no such thing as a fine set of "sexual terminology". ... Even in Dream of the Red Chamber the language concerning sexual matters sounds like something used in dallying with prostitutes. That, probably, is because the Chinese feudal culture developed
prematurely and sex was given a utilitarian interpretation too early. Just like what Lu Xun noted: the sight of an arm would bring forth by way of "hop, step and jump" a vision of an illegitimate child. Consequently, it was impossible for the traditional Chinese culture to cultivate an aesthetical attitude toward "sex."

Chen: If, in view of language alone, there were some works in classic Chinese literature, which furnished the sex theme quite sophisticatedly, *The Romance of the Western Chamber* is an apt illustration. But the key point is whether there is a wholesome cultural psychology behind the language. There is for sure in Chinese cultural tradition a language available for sexual expressions, but never a fair insight. Hence, sex is treated as the lewd and wicked element in human nature. ...For Chinese, food and drink are aesthetical and not utilitarian, whereas sex is for procreation, and thereby it is utilitarian. ...Looking back at our history, in Chinese mythological tradition, there was no proper description of sex either. In contrast to the Greeks, the Chinese lacked a correct understanding of the human body. The Confucian culture in China put very heavy pressure on the human physical body. It was generally held that one got his body and hair from his parents, he was not in a position to hurt or damage them. In order to show one's filial piety, he even had to

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1 In Chinese, especially colloquial Chinese, utilitarianism is often used as a synonym for philistinism. Later in the "Dialogue," Wang mentioned that in certain parts of China sex has been "eulogized" and "idolized." So when she says "sex was given a utilitarian interpretation" here, I think, she most likely has in her mind the idea of its being "debased" or "vulgarised" in contrast to the two commendatory terms used later.
keep his hair intact. This is entirely different from the custom in ancient Greece where healthy and strong bodies were adored.

Wang: ... In our nation's heart of hearts "sex" can never be wholesome, bright and holy. ... Why can't Chinese talk about sex without feeling its being dirty? ... Why is sex as plain as dining and walking to Westerners? The difference between these mentalities have obvious social meanings. For this reason, human nature can not be separated from human society. In my opinion, sex is extremely personal and at the same time not so personal, for it has been imbued with social intent. In the past we overemphasized the decisive influence of society on human nature and neglected the decisive influence the other way round."1

The first thing I would like to draw your attention to in this article is its form: a "Dialogue." Perhaps a real dialogue had actually happened between Wang and Chen. This is but a transcription. Perhaps they have never had a "dialogue" at all, but just wanted to try a new form and a new style: while sounding more casual and familiar, their argument would be more attractive and appealing to ordinary readers. Or, it is possible that both Wang and Chen needed support from outside for their literary and theoretical explorations and they happened to find an appreciative audience in each other. But my speculation is that the reason why the article took the form of a dialogue might be twofold: on the one hand, neither Wang nor Chen thought they had done any scholarly and systematic research on their topic, so it was wiser to choose a less formal way to present their views; but on the other hand, the writer and the critic alike had felt an urgent need for helping to disperse the fog enveloping the controversial work "Love in a Small Town", and they could not wait until a well-grounded theory became available.

I based my speculation on a sort of roughness or hastiness in their argumentation one can feel while reading this dialogue, which, unfortunately, leads to two types of apparent flaws: the first of these is either Wang or Chen has been self-contradictory somewhere in the article. For example, Chen praises "Love in a Small Town" for it "looks at sex completely from hereditary point of view, therefore sex is no longer nasty;" but before long he complains that "(for Chinese) sex is for procreation thereby it is utilitarian (the synonym of "lewd and wicked" according to him and Wang)." How far is a "hereditary point of view" from a view based on "procreation"? In Chen's contexts they look like just the same thing. Then, why does he admire the former and accuse the latter? As for Wang Anyi, in her conclusive statement she maintains that it is unfair "to over-emphasize the decisive influence of society on human nature and neglect the decisive influence the other way round." But before this, when she tries to ascertain the root cause of the lack of " a fine set of 'sexual terminology'" in China, she thinks merely in the line of "decisive influence of society", taking no account of what she supposes should not be neglected at all.

The second flaw of their cooperation is that Wang and Chen disagree with each other on some very important issues, such as whether sex is completely "private" or "personal and not personal at the same time"; and whether "the filthiness of sex" is a universal feeling or a purely Chinese one. Here, originally, the divergence of views might not be taken as flaws if the writer and the critic can elaborate on their ideas a bit. Yet, to our disappointment, they failed to do so.

The reason why this dialogue is so useful is that is has set forth a very important argument: sexual conditioning in present-day China is still lingering in the Dark Ages; so, Chinese need a new and enlightened sexual outlook, or a Renaissance in their sexual culture.

As I mentioned just now, the whole dialogue is by no means flawless, yet this argument is clear-cut and forceful. It is obviously too simple to form a theory, but as the
first hurrah to awaken the deaf it is fairly powerful. In China everyone considers it beneath him to talk about sex in public. Intellectuals are no exception. So articles like this dialogue, which contains a more general and comprehensive contemplation of human sex are very rare. Rarer still is that the most inspiring argument in the dialogue is shared between two young intellectuals, of whom one is a daring experimental writer.

There is no need to stress that the dialogue between Wang and Chen was occasioned by "Love in a Small Town", but it is necessary to point out that the essence of their contemplation of sex is in fact already present in the novelette. Perhaps, because the author's key was too low, her ideas too obscure (most likely a result of the verbosity of her narrative), or because some criticism of her work had been very impressive but quite misleading, Wang had to make an explanation about her original thoughts two years after the publication of the novelette. For both the author and the critics this is something lamentable indeed.

Now I think it is high time to solve the question raised in the foregoing part in this chapter: Where do they (sexual misconceptions of the protagonists) come from? The answer can be found here and there in the story, sometimes explicitly stated, but on most occasions merely hinted at by the author.

The small town, especially the performing arts troupe, is the principal geographical setting in which these two young people spent their adolescent and teenage years, and received their initiatory sexual conditioning. Relatively cut-off from the outside world, the troupe, as an "official" "propaganda team", was supposed to be saturated with ascetic "revolutionary" thoughts. But in fact everyday life here was as plain and vulgar as everywhere else: "A group of girls goes on and on teasing a boy in the yard, and finally gets him to say: 'At night my dad bites my mum's mouth'"(12). All the listeners except "Big Soppy" "laugh to themselves but pretend not to have heard and change the subject"(13). Yet, would they stop teasing the boy before they achieve their purpose?
When on the tour, the troupe spend the night in the theatre for financial reasons. "Married men find it difficult to adjust to this first night away from their wives; they toss and turn, and try to raise their spirits with the aid of memory and imagination. In the silence of the theatre voices reverberate loudly, and it is always dirty jokes; every single word travels to the projection room through the windows. The women pretend not to have heard, but they fine it difficult to suppress their urge to laugh. They try hard, and they dare not look into each other's eyes for even the exchange of a single glance would lift the curtain between them" (58). So things like "dirty jokes" had become a part of the daily life here. Every one -- girls, men and women -- have their share, just some have a "curtain" to hide behind. But jokes are after all jokes, they could fall flat completely before slow wits like "Big Soppy." When on some special occasions, such as when someone was using "the vilest words and dropping the most obvious hints" (68) to fight with someone else, "stupid as she was, she understood them" (68).

But in reality, the troupe could not be completely separated from the other parts of the world. Outsiders would intrude from time to time, bringing with them interesting things like watermelons as well as "stories" about the melon fields: "These are all scandalous stories, such as the one about a farmer catching a couple fornicating while he was keeping watch in the melon fields, or a young girl who wet her pants from eating too many melons" (27). On the other hand, no one could stop the young students from going outside, either in daytime or at night. When the protagonists go to the river bank after the show, they find that it is no so quiet there. People come and go, and there are also tractors, with rude and foul-mouthed country folks sitting on top. A man and a woman walking together is enough to provoke their shameless dirty jokes and sneers. (63)

It is clear that all these dirty jokes, stories, sneers, vile words and hints have invaded both the conscious and unconscious mind of any one who is brought up in this
small town. It is just as clear that a traditional sexual culture represented by this vulgarism has, profoundly but imperceptibly, influenced the sexual conditioning of the protagonists. The author did not give any details of this vulgarism, or the details of the culture, but judging from the last incident mentioned above, we can decide that something depicted in Shen Congwen's short story and in the Ming dynasty's Kunqu opera "Shiwuguan (Fifteen Strings of Cash)" happened again in this small town, only with a slight difference in form: "A man and a woman", when being alone, could incur groundless suspicion, or gratuitous insults, or even cruel punishment.

This seems to reveal a fact that in Chinese minds whether ancient or modern, human sex can never be the manifestation of life, or the force of creation, or the inexhaustible source of love, but something degrading and perverted that is constantly associated with impermissible behaviors and indecent acts. In other words, the notion that sex is purely pleasure-oriented, and thereby nasty and wicked has become the basis of the age-old Chinese sexual culture; or perhaps we can say that a conscious obsession with the

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1 Shen Congwen, "Fufu (The Couple)," Shen Congwen wenji vol. 8 (Hong Kong: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian and Huacheng chubanshe, 1984) 384-393. In the story a young man and his wife travelled passing a valley, where, fascinated by the picturesque scenery, fragrant flowers and twitters of lovely birds, they "did something that young people should do." Some local villagers found them and had them tied up, humiliated and punished.

2 Kunqu opera is a local opera in China, which originated in Kunshan, Jiangsu Province, in the Ming Dynasty (about 600 years ago).

3 See Zhu Suchen, Shiwuguan ed. Chen Si, (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1956). At the beginning of the opera, the father was murdered without the knowledge of his daughter, who happened to have left home for a relative of hers. She was chased and arrested halfway on her journey, together with an innocent young man, a total stranger to her. One of the reasons given by the local authority why they both should be under arrest was that "they were going the same way." (22)
pleasure-oriented element of human sex has been an inherited tendency in the Chinese nation.

Having been brain-washed generation after generation by their sexual culture and sexual socialization, Chinese have become somewhat oversensitive about sexual or even non-sexual topics. Wang Anyi has shown us some quite revealing examples among the residents in the small town. At the sight of the closed door of "the couple at the middle school", the "stream of consciousness" in a local mind runs as follows:

Why ... keep their door shut even in this burning weather. It would be understandable if it were only at night, but is it necessary to keep the door shut in the middle of the day too? Not unless they can't hold out until nightfall; imagine doing that when the sun is high, it must be excruciatingly hot! And yet though they are at it day and night, there is never any sign of them having a baby. ... (28)

What Lu Xun called "hop, step and jump" not only remains alive but becomes more robust. Following the same train of thought, we can well understand the meaning of the laconic comment about the female protagonist by some of her colleagues: "She looks like a woman,' the girls say behind her back. And then a married woman says decisively: 'She is a woman'" (73). At the moment their conscious and unconscious minds, perhaps, are working in a much more voluble way: She is a woman, she has lost her virginity. At such a young age she is already so daring and unchaste, how will she end up? With dozen bastards who don't know who their fathers are ...

In like manner, we can easily work out the unspoken words the melon pedlar says to himself: "There's no reason why people living on the main street should suffer so -- crowding together under this heat, ... But the girls in town are really nice, with such fair complexions and soft skin; the men in town are fortunate indeed" (27-28). ...

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It is easy to understand the melon pedlar's thought, because few Chinese think differently as they emerge from the same sexual culture. In this sense, the whole China is a small town, the entire Chinese people are prisoners of the pleasure-oriented element of human sex.

It is worth mentioning that Wang Anyi has consciously shown her preference for the other element of human sex in the novelette. The best evidence is that in her narrative she not only does not avoid intimate sexual scenes between the young lovers, but more especially is willing to present the natural life of the body and the senses with meticulous care. The following quotations are all taken from the first half of the story before her protagonists plunge into "the filthy abyss":

She lies before him, her legs bent in front of her chest, and slowly parts them to either side. He can't control the turmoil in his heart. He is panting loudly, almost suffocating with the effort to suppress himself. Sweat pours down from his head, his face, his shoulders, his back and from the inside of his thighs. As though to compensate for his child-like body, he has matured mentally with unusual speed, and he feels like a completely adult man. When he helps her to loosen up an evil thought takes hold of him; he wants to hurt her, so he pushes hard ... (13)

With a quick push she sits up, but his hands are already under her arms, and before she can steady herself he has pushed her up to a standing position. She wobbles, but his hands grip her armpits like iron wrenches and force her to stand steadily. With his hands still under her arms, she feels the burning heat there, while other parts of her body have cooled down. The heat from these two places is overwhelming. She doesn't feel hot anymore, and the sweat flows down pleasantly, like a song. When she
is firmly on her feet he takes his hands away and lowers them until they reach his thighs. His palms and wrists are all wet from the sweat in her armpits, and the warmth of her armpits envelops his hands. ...

As he climbs on her back once again he smells the heavy odor of sweat; he feels the firmness of her back on his chest, exposed by the low-cut leotard, naked, warm and wet. His equally warm wet chest rubs against her back, making a noise, and the friction hurts a little. He can feel the strong movements of her waist with his knees and her rounded muscular shoulders and thick neck with his hands. As she pants, her neck alternately tenses up and relaxes. Her hair, soaked in sweat, is plaited and fixed to the back of her head with hairpins. The tip of her plait brushes against his nose, and he can smell the strong odor of oil and sweat while a cool hairpin pricks his cheek. All his senses are aroused, freed from the dance techniques, ...

Indeed, in Chinese literature, we rarely see erotic scenes presented like these, which, while depicted in fine detail, are not obscene at all by current Chinese moral standard. 1 Although, strictly speaking, these cannot be regarded as "sexual scenes" in the

1 According to D. H. Lawrence: "Nobody knows what it [the word 'obscene'] means. Suppose it were derived from obscena: that which might not be represented on the stage; how much further are you? None! What is obscene to Tom is not obscene to Lucy or Joe ..." See D. H. Lawrence, Pornography and Obscenity (New York: The Lincoln Press, 1948) 5.
usual sense: there is no description of any kind of conscious sexual conduct by either the male or female partner; neither sexual attacks nor responses are registered here; even hardly any references to the erogenous zones on the human body are made on all these occasions. But, these descriptions are still very erotic in that the author has not only made great effort to bring out the hidden sexual awareness of the young couple from behind their bodily contact, but she has also shown an evident intention of developing a set of "sexual terminology" in Chinese literature. Thus, it comes as no surprise that quite a few critics would like to praise Wang and her boldness. They say:

[In "Love in a Small Town"] we have seen that human life can be so fascinating and soul-stirring. Being one of the sources of human life, sexual desire carries both madness, infatuation, coarseness and purity, vigor, and elegance at the same time. It is so pleasing when it exhibits the warm, colorful and charming vitality, by arousing the internal energy in the young couple and enriching the originally simple and dull layer in their personalities.¹

It seems that no one has ever been able to expose and depict in such a refined and minute way sexual arousal and sexual uneasiness in the inner world of young men and women.²

But some other critics think that Wang's boldness is rather limited. They complain: "[The second half of] the story tells of many rendezvous, but none of them is related in detail."³ I am quite in agreement with these critics in thinking that the second half of the

¹ Xiao Ming, 35.
² Xu Chengsen, 27.
³ Li Jie, 2.
story "fails to make an incisive and thorough exposure of sexual desire, which had almost reached the saturation point here."¹ But I am not in agreement with them as to attributing Wang's failure solely to her lack of "self-confidence and guts."²

In fact her failure in the second half of the story derives from the same source that brings the success to its first half, that is the characterization of her protagonists. Before their relationship involves full sexual activities, it is hardly deviant. Although lacking a lyric feeling, they share most of the same early sexual experiences with other adolescents. Thus the author's meticulous depiction of the vitality in their sexual contacts strikes us as natural and compelling. But later, when they become obsessed by fleshly lust, despite the fact that they are not uncommunicative and insensitive toward each other, their sexual practices have virtually nothing in common with the fundamental and moving facts of human experience in that they are unable to love each other and have no idea about being in love. Rather, to them, sex itself becomes the most important pleasure in life.

Any detailed dramatizing of the intimate sexual scenes between "two copulating dogs" is doomed to make many Chinese readers very queasy. Wang Anyi did not make such mistakes. Most likely she is saved by her intuition.³ I do not think she is conscious of

² Ibid.
³ One of Wang's friends and colleagues, a Shanghai writer, Chen Cun warmly praised her intuition: "She has many strong points. What I am envious of are, first, she has got a wonderful intuition. I once suggested she should celebrate it by inviting us to dinner ..." See Chen Cun, "You yige Wang Anyi," Zoujia 6 (1985): 32. On the other hand, Wang herself seems to think very highly of her intuition too. Toward the end of 1983 shortly after she came back from the United States, she sensed "a strangeness" in her life and found it difficult to put down her pen. She wrote: "I wish I could write in an effortless manner as usual with the help of my 'intuition' which has been praised by everybody. But I could not this time." See Wang Anyi, "Guiquaixi," Wenyi yanjiu 1 (1985): 76
this danger, for twice she seems to forget to make a difference between human passion and animal instinct. First she piles words of praise to admire the mysterious physical changes taking place in the protagonists after their first few matings, as if loveless sex can do the same magic as romantic love. Then, at the end of the story, by painting a sort of halo around the head of the female protagonist, Wang attempts to install her into the "sacred" mothering figure, so that the new sexual outlook could be finally highlighted. But this is a futile attempt, for the fact that "after the baptism of lust she is cleaner and purer than at any time before, ... no one wants to marry her, and she does not complain, but just looks after the children and works diligently every day" (103) appears to be unrealistic. Even if it is

1 Eva Hung tells us: "Both 'Love in a Small Town' and 'Love on a Barren Mountain' are based on real life stories Wang Anyi witnessed in Anhui (I think this should be Jiangsu) performing arts troupe. (See Hung, "Preface" viii.) So the denouement of Love in a Small Town can be a truthful record of life. Or, of course, it can be an out-and-out fabrication conjured up by the author. In either case, however, Wang seems unwilling to conceal her pro-female bias in terms of human life and human nature. She wrote in May 1986: "Life takes place and matures inside a woman's body. It exchanges blood, pulses in the same rhythm and shares breath and nutriment with the woman. ...So she for sure understands much better what life is." [See Wang Anyi, "Nanren he nuren, nuren he chengshi," Dangdai zuojia pinglun 5 (1986): 65.

This bias, perhaps, accounts for the degeneration in the male and saintly motherhood in the female in the story. In my opinion, Wang may not have thought of traditional Chinese belief: licentiousness could lead to dissipation of the male vitality (qi) or worse. For this more or less Taoist teaching is not very popular in Mainland China after 1949. Besides, if she wittingly or unwittingly follows this line, she would make herself look rather inconsistent in that the keynote of the story is praising the natural life of the body and the senses. As a matter of fact, according to Wang's narration, the male protagonist's degeneration (as far as his professional skills are concerned) begins at an earlier date than his full sexual commitment and licentiousness.
real, then it is totally inhuman. In China a stereotype of the devoted mother is a completely self-denying female. Sexual inhibition seems always be a big problem for her. Why would Wang Anyi like to subject another woman to this inhuman suffering? Besides, from the image of a "female animal" to that of a "parent animal", the improvement is actually next to nothing.

As for boldness, I do not think Wang is as bold as she could be. For one thing, "Wang Anyi's 'three loves' get increasingly veiled one by one."¹ In addition, two years after she wrote "three loves", with the publication of another novelette "The Sorrowful Place"², "Wang's observing eye left the sexual-love topic which she has constantly paid close attention to."³ From these two simple facts, can we sense something in her like "being good at protecting oneself"?⁴ But on the whole, I think, Wang Anyi's literary exploration of human sex in "Love in a Small Town" is considerably fruitful and meaningful.

¹ Ogino, Tsujida and Xia Gang, 37.
³ "Bianzhe de hua(Editorial)," Shanghai wenxue 11 (1988).
⁴ In September 1986, before she got her last "love" published and received any emphatic response to her first two "loves," Wang criticized some of her colleagues rather sharply: "Many writers like to gloss over what they are writing. By 'gloss over,' I not only mean their whitewashing reality, but also their excessive self-respect and their act of beautifying themselves. This is really awful. Some writer is good at protecting himself. He gingerly keeps his reputation from being affected by what he is writing. ..." (See Wang Anyi, "Wo 'aishi zhenchengde, 134.) But shortly after the publication of her "three loves," Wang found herself in an embarrassing situation, and realized that in someone's eyes she had become an author of erotic literature. (See Wang and Chen, 77.) For her, then, among various ways of righting the "wrong" and of exercising self-protection, the most effective and sensible one was perhaps to stop writing about sex for a period of time, if not for good and all.

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CHAPTER THREE

Literary Exploration: The Role of Loneliness

In the preface to the English translation of "Love in a Small Town" there is such a statement: "Actually the three novelettes are, as Wang Anyi has repeatedly pointed out, about human nature, not sex." In fact "human nature" is a much broader conception, which should include "sex." Anyway, the fact that Wang has a concentrated interest in themes about "human nature" is indisputable. The publication of "three loves", moreover, has accentuated this fact in no small way.

This chapter is devoted to tracing the spiritual growth of this woman writer in an attempt to account for her peculiar and poignant interest as shown in her literary creation.

To begin with, let us examine what Wang Anyi said about herself:

The motive of my writing "three loves" dates back to the earliest goal of my creative writing. My experience, character and makeup determine that the outside world can never be my first and foremost theme. My first and foremost theme must be self-expression. I do not have any clear idea about other people, but I know myself unmistakably well.¹

These words lead us to believe that an acquaintance with her personal experience and a little more knowledge of her individual "makings" would be very beneficial to our understanding of her literary creation. So we might do well to follow her advice.

Born in Fujian Province in the year 1954, Wang Anyi is the second child of Ru Zhijuan. It was in 1958 that Ru, with the success of her short story "The Lily [Baihe hua]", rose into the stardom in Chinese literary world. In her childhood Ru and her grandmother depended on each other for survival. Short of money, she had no way to attend school until the age of eleven. Ru was thirteen when her grandmother passed away. Later she was taken into an orphanage run by a Christian church in Shanghai. Her formal education lasted less than four years. However she was fond of learning and studied diligently in her early years. By various means, she gained access to a good many works of classic Chinese fictions. She read Dream of the Red Chamber as many as nine times, so she could recite many poems from the novel. These books brought some delightful coloring to her solitary life as well as a seed of love for literature to her heart.²

Driven by a love for literature and aided with remarkable diligence, her mother fought from the very bottom of the society all the way to the peak of it. How could the daughter remain unmoved by this heroic, legendary life? Ru's tenacity, her perseverance

1 Wang and Chen, 78.

and her diligence alone must have exerted an enduring and profound influence upon Wang Anyi even if the hereditary factors are not taken for granted.

Yet Wang Anyi did not received any favoritism from her parents. Both her elder sister and her younger brother shared equally the parental love and care. (It is not difficult for most well-educated parents in China to treat their children on an equal basis.) Nevertheless Wang had a somewhat extraordinary childhood, which she summarized in 1986: "My childhood was tranquil and harmonious, but filled with solitary days when I was left alone."\(^1\)

In 1955, one year after Wang Anyi's birth, Ru was transferred from the PLA to Shanghai Writers' Association. As an editor of *Literature and Art Monthly* ([Wenyi yuekan](#)) she joined the Chinese Writers' Association in the same year. In a very poor country like China, a job in the "superstructure" and a membership in a highly-esteemed national organization for the parent, generally meant not only a comfortable life but also good upbringing for the children, hence "the tranquil and harmonious childhood," Wang added, "during which I seemed to have too much idleness and luxury."\(^2\)

But "tranquility" often goes hand in hand with "solitude" or "loneliness." Wang's childhood solitude was, I assume, due in the main to three causes: the first being Ru's profession which needed a relatively quieter environment and less interference from outside. So as the family was inactive in social intercourse, the children could have much less contact with outside world than average children in the city. The second cause was the concrete living condition. Because of Ru's social position her family could obtain living quarters which were practically separated from others. Compared with the average family in Shanghai, which had no way of escaping problems like overcrowding, Ru's was very fortunate. But the negative side of this was that her children could always be shielded from

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their peers. The third cause for Wang's solitary childhood was a habit cultivated among the
elite circles in Shanghai, where people intentionally kept a respectful distance from each
other. (This phenomenon is vividly represented in Wang's short story "Qiangji"1.) This
reserved and dignified, if not snobbish, manner must have deprived Wang of a good many
opportunities of communicating with people beyond her small world.

As she grew up, a new factor emerged, which added much to her heart-felt solitude
even without her knowledge -- her father Wang Xiaoping was labeled a "Rightist." One
critic described this period in some detail:

In order to prevent her children's minds from being scarred, Ru buried all
her pains and bitterness deep in her heart and tried her utmost to keep the
children unaware of the dark cloud over their heads. Preoccupied as she
was by editorial work and literary creation, the mother was still busier in
coping with the trying situation and the unspeakable difficulties. As a result,
communication between mother and daughter became less natural and
straightforward, so Wang's solitude became even greater. The day she came
to know her father's trouble her heart became heavy right away, there even
was a bit of sadness in it.2

When the Cultural Revolution broke out, Wang, as a "Rightist's" daughter, was
naturally discriminated against by the radical element in her school. When Wang Anyi was

1  Wang, "Qiangji (The Wall Footing)", Wang Anyi Zhongduanpian xiaoshuoji (Beijing: Zhongguo
    qingnian chubanshe, 1983) 50-88, translated as "the Base of the Wall" in Lapse of Time, trans.
    Daniel Bryant, (San Francisco: China Books and Periodicals, 1988) 81-114.
2  Liu Junguang, "yong minglang de yanguang qu kandai shenghuo -- Wang Anyi shenghuo,
twelve, classes were suspended. Ru did not allow Wang and her brother to go out for fear that they, being so young, would get into trouble. Instead Ru bought a used accordion for her. Therefore Wang spent all the time practising the instrument, without doing much of anything else. "Being bored to death, she began to read books."¹ Owing mainly to her family background, she remained an outsider of the turbulent storm. What became her constant companion, however, was not her accordion or books, but boredom: "At that time I felt that life in Shanghai was too boring, morbidly boring."² So in spite of her mother's opposition, she insisted on leaving Shanghai for the countryside to settle down as a member of an agricultural production brigade, making a tearful scene at home. Ru had to give in, for she knew Wang could be very stubborn sometimes. However, the new environment in northern Anhui Province Wang entered in 1970 did not bring much change to her inner life. She wrote: "During those difficult and lonely days in the countryside my books and diary appeared doubly endearing to me and became a part of my life."³

In 1972 Wang was picked by the local performing arts troupe on account of her performance on the accordion. She recalled:

For the first couple of years, I lived a leisurely life, with a feeling that I had found a home and could take a rest. But the idle and carefree life in the troupe left to my heart a sensible void, which I did not know how to fill. Gradually depression crept into my mind again. ... Day after day, month after month, life became more and more boring and insipid, and I got more

² Wang and Chen, 77.
and more depressed. ... Under the increasing solitude and depression, I felt
an urge to find a way out.¹

Consequently, her diary writing was soon replaced by literary creation. In 1976 she
started to get her writings published in literary journals². But not until 1980, two years
after she returned to Shanghai, did she attract much critical attention. Back in her native
place, "life was peaceful and comfortable, yet Anyi felt as if she had lost something. Both
Shanghai and her family looked a bit unfamiliar to her. Sometimes she had a feeling that
she was a guest at home. ... She was overwhelmed by a nameless solitude and
loneliness."³ By the end of 1988 Wang had published three novels and six collections of
short stories. She summarized her literary career: "If there is a front in social life, I have
never been living at the main front." ⁴

Instead of probing the various events happening on the "main front," she managed
to penetrate a labyrinthian world -- human nature. She confessed: "When something quite
unforeseen has happened to me, I am extremely short of action to resist outside pressure.
Instead, I ponder over it more intensely. The battle in my mind is fiercer and grimmer than
that in the external world."⁵ From this personal experience she even deduced such a
generalization: "For a human being there are always various irreconcilable conflicts in his
mind, and these mental conflicts become sharper when he is feeling more lonely."⁶

¹ Ibid. 102-103.
piece of writing, an essay entitled "Xiangqian jin (March Forward)" in Jiangsu wenyi.
³ Liu Junguang, 64.
⁵ Wang, "Miandui ziji" 1.
⁶ Ying Hong, 3.
Sometimes she viewed the subtle relationship between loneliness and human nature from a very strange perspective:

Women are born to suffer and to be lonely, patient and humble. Glory always belongs to men; magnanimity is a male attribute. Would you believe me if I told you that through their endurance of loneliness and hardships, women have long surpassed men in terms of human nature?¹

Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Wang's feeling toward loneliness is markedly ambivalent: on the one hand, she appears to fear this inner bleakness, for it is one of the agonies of life; but on the other hand, she seems to take pride in it, since loneliness has enabled her to look more deeply into herself and forced her to feel the bite of truth.

Qian Zhongshu mentioned an interesting fact in his book Ye Shi Ji: Nietzsche compared poets' composing poems to hens' laying eggs, both through agony ("Der Schmerz macht Huhner und Dichter gackern.") This figure of speech happens to coincide with a popular belief in traditional Chinese literary theory: Agony more than bliss can give rise to true literature. (For example, Sima Qian once made a comment on Zhou Yi and The Three Hundred Poems: "Almost all these works are by sages who suffered a lot and thus worked with great energy. ... They show that all human beings have some pent-up feeling of oppression in their mind.")² Here in Wang Anyi's case, I am tempted to suggest that in her literary exploration of human nature she has benefited considerably from her loneliness, a chronic agony she has suffered since her childhood.

¹ Wang, Love in a Small Town, viii.
² See Qian Zhongshu, Yeshiji (Hong Kong: Guangjiaojing chubanshe, 1984) 2.
It must be noted, however, that as a young and experimental writer and a member of "the post-Mao 'thinking generation'" Wang has drawn on her loneliness in another sense. Ten years of the Cultural Revolution put an end to any kind of charismatic thought in China. Every thoughtful Chinese had to turn to himself for values that would ultimately humanize him. As Chen Sihe wrote:

Resistance, nihilism and loneliness have become the major features of the modern combative consciousness in contemporary [Chinese] literature. Resistance is the attitude toward the world of yesterday; nihilility is the starting point of resistance; loneliness is the psychological characteristic of the rebels.2

I think that Wang's "psychological characteristic" seems to derive from her rebellious temper, which is possibly something inherent: As a young girl of sixteen she determinedly left her native place for an unknown countryside; as a writer she did not hesitate to break sex taboos and issue a kind of challenge to the sexual love tradition in Chinese literature. But in turn, the loneliness she feels keenly in the "woe-stricken world" and the "ever-lasting war"3 of life, could most likely help her to develop a genuinely rebellious spirit.

This is, of course, a wild guess. But I have based my speculation on the fact that Wang Anyi views her literary creation as a sort of "soliloquy"4:

2 Chen Sihe, Zhongguo xin wenxue zhengtiguan (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1987) 159.
3 Wang, "Miandui ziji" 2.
In a fine morning, when I sit at the desk with a pen in my hand before the blank sheets, I feel that I am facing a vacant auditorium. There is not a single person in the auditorium while in the rostrum stand I by myself. I pour out my heart freely, frankly, unrestrainedly and unreservedly. ... I have to force myself to believe that there is not a single person in the auditorium. Only when I believe this can I be free, frank, honest and unrestrained, and write without any affected and ingratiating claptrap.¹

Living in a world full of falsehood and hypocrisy, a writer who hankers after "sincere communication"² with his readers has to keep a rebellious spirit at the bottom of his heart. Little wonder that we hear Wang Anyi heave a sigh: "Those who attain a lofty realm of thought will sometimes feel a bit lonely."³

¹ Ibid.
² Ibid.
³ Wang and Chen, 76.
CONCLUSION

In 1986 Xia Gang, a noted young Chinese critic published an article in the second issue of *Wenxue ziyoutan*. At the end of this seminal article he revealed an interesting fact: "Recently Wang Meng has raised up his voice and urged people to watch out for the explosion of sexual love description." When Wang Meng had hardly finished speaking, Wang Anyi's "three loves" exploded like three blockbusters, among which, "Love in a Small Town" produced the loudest sound and the brightest light.

Undoubtedly, the emergence of the "three loves" and the flourish of sexual love literature in China were the results of liberalized literary policies carried out by the CCP in mid-1980s. The editor of *Lianhe wenxue* (Unitas) made a comment which I think was quite illuminating:

In 1984 the "relaxed" atmosphere created to cooperate with the so called 'economic' reforms enabled writers, in both 1985 and 1986, to make a step forward and boldly break into the 'Sexual Forbidden Zone' by availing

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1 Xia Gang, "Dengdai shenru kaituo de tudi -- Guanyu xing ai ticai de meixue yu guanchai," *Wenxue ziyoutan* 2 (1986): 49

2 Wang Meng is the current Minister of Culture in PRC.
themselves of this "Early Spring" in which after suddenly getting warmer, the weather would turn cold again.¹

But there were some other factors which might have affected Wang Anyi when she made up her mind to break sex taboos and which finally impelled her to complete the "three loves." Of course, just as I have mentioned, her talent, experience, makeup, personality, and especially her concentrated interest in exploring human nature must be taken into consideration. Yet there was another very important source that cannot be neglected, since at that time few "young and middle-aged writers" were able to exploit it in the same way as Wang did. That source was "foreign ideas." Lin Yü-sheng tells us: "[More than half a century ago] many foreign ideas influenced Chinese intellectuals; indeed, their avid absorption of Western ideas had caused a drastic change in their intellectual outlook."² Michael Duke gives us a relatively more detailed description of the affair in literary circles:

The modern Chinese literary intelligentsia, mostly of bourgeois or gentry background, were determined to use literature as an iconoclastic weapon to destroy the moribund values and customs of China's feudal past and to introduce what they believed to be (sometimes with little real understanding) dynamically new and better values such as those of Western science, democracy, ...³

³ Duke, Blooming and Contending, 183-184.
History tends to repeat itself. In the 1980s "through many channels of cultural contact, more and more different international ideological trends are being consciously followed and assimilated by the contemporary [Chinese] writers who have an active mind."

In September 1983 Wang Anyi and her mother Ru Zhijuan were directly involved in one of those "cultural contacts" -- being invited by Hua-ling Nieh Engle to join the "International Writing Program" at the University of Iowa. Wang stayed in the United States for four months, during which she was exposed to an entirely new culture and amazed to find so many strange ideas. On October 29, 1983 she wrote in her diary:

... In the afternoon we watched some video tapes at Hualing's home. One was "On Golden Pond," the other a film adapted from the novel "Women in Love" by Lawrence, who was a famous English writer at the turn of the century. This is a film that well represents Lawrence's philosophy. He thinks human beings are a part of nature. Every human act has its reason, traceable to its nature. All activities resulting from human nature are fine and should be respected and protected. ...²

This accidental encounter with a classic work by D. H. Lawrence seemed to leave a deep and lasting impression on Wang Anyi. Four years later a Taiwan writer told us in the "Preface" to the Taiwan edition of Xiaocheng zhi lian (Love in a Small Town): "In an interview, Wang Anyi mentioned that she had seen a foreign film entitled 'Women in Love', and felt it was fascinating, for there was a set of 'terminology' for describing sexual activities. That set makes one feel that sexual love is natural and unashamed."³

¹ Cheng Depei and Wu Liang, Tansuo Xiaoshuoji (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1986) 639.
² Ru Zhijuan and Wang Anyi, Munü manyou meilijian (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1986) 279.
³ Chen Xinyuan, "Xing'ai yu xungen --Xiezai Xiaocheng zhi lian qianmian", Xiaocheng zhi lian (Taipei: Linbai chubanshe, 1987) 9.
It is evident that as Wang set out to explore human sex from a new perspective she owed much of her inspiration to an alien source -- D. H. Lawrence's "philosophy." But if this "philosophy" is interpreted as an approval of the primitive and natural passions of human beings or an appreciation of the instinctive forces in man that might bring happiness, as Wang wrote in the "Dialogue", then these "foreign ideas" are actually not new to Chinese literary circles. As early as the 1920s some ardent literary reformers had already tried hard to introduce a similar theory into China. Mao Dun was an outstanding example. He wrote in 1922:

They [western naturalist authors] also describe sexual desire, but they treat it almost like filial piety and magnanimous acts undertaken for the public

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1 It is certain that Wang feels herself influenced by D. H. Lawrence. Judging from the introductory comment before his name in her diary, he seemed to her a stranger in 1983. When she was back in China again, she did stop writing and do a lot of reading for quite a few months. But she could not have read D. H. Lawrence, especially his major works.


Furthermore, Wang, is not able to read English literature in the original. So her knowledge about this voluminous English writer must be rather limited. When she employed some pompous words like "philosophy" to define certain ideas she learnt from D. H. Lawrence, she most likely used the word in a facetious way. This "talking big" custom can be seen in other Chinese phrases such as "huoming zhexue (the philosophy of survival)", "benben zhuyi (book-ism)" etc.

Anyway, in "Love in a Small Town" Wang shows an attempt to build up a Chinese version, however rudimentary, of a Lawrentian set of sexual terminology.
good. They never think it obscene or involved in frivolity. This is one of the characteristics of naturalism. For [Chinese] readers who have been immersed in the old literary ideas and cannot extricate themselves, it is a very delicate stimulant.¹

It should be noted that by "naturalism" Mao Dun meant mainly Zola's theory. Yet on the topic of human sexuality, the ideas he borrowed from the West bear great resemblance to Wang's inspiration drawn from "Women in Love."

It is, in reality, a lamentable fact that Chinese writers have to bring in similar "foreign ideas" twice within sixty some years, in that it indicates not only a terrible waste of time and energy, but a long stagnancy in modern Chinese literary history. But to our great relief, many contemporary writers have consciously devoted themselves in time to the "reintroductions, or rediscoveries from the pre-communist era of modern Chinese literature as well as from western fiction."² Wang Anyi can be regarded as a typical representative of a whole group. She told us: "Coming back after four months' tour on the other shore of the [Pacific] Ocean, and having undergone six subsequent months of grave anxiety, I started writing. ... Whether there is any direct connection between the writing and the anxiety, or between the anxiety and the tour, I am not sure, and I find it difficult to decide."³

After she returned to China she suddenly had a fancy for history. So, with a fiery zeal, she read works by ancient Chinese scholars, The Book of Songs as well as writings

about local history of Shanghai and Xuzhou where she spent her "troupe" years. The result of her study of history during this period can be found in her works of fiction written after 1984, and also in the dialogue we discussed in Chapter Two.

During the 1920s, Mao Dun criticized some writers because they intended to write fictions about society but did not make any serious study of social problems. Instead they depended solely on their poor "intuitions." Certainly, Wang Anyi does not belong to this category. But as a "first class writer" exploring eros, has she made enough study? Is her "philosophy" sound enough?

I mentioned in Chapter One that the intellectual exploration of sex in China cannot be completed within a few works or by a few writers. So any weakness in Wang's thinking at the present time would exert an unfavorable influence on her future literary creation, and possibly on her colleagues'. For this reason, a discussion on Wang's ideas about Chinese sexual culture should not be superfluous.


Mao Dun, 48.

Wang Anyi said: "I think two types of writers are now writing about love. What the writers of the third and fourth classes are composing are 'mandarin-duck-and-butterfly' love stories. The second class writers do not write about love, for they know they cannot avoid being entrapped into cheap romance. So they simply keep a good distance. The first class writers are writing about love too. This is because when one genuinely engages oneself in depicting human nature, he is unable to shun love. Love must include sexual love. I believe that without probing into human sexuality, it is impossible to fully present human nature, or to get to the essence of human being. If you are a serious writer with some deep insight, you will find the problem of sex inevitable." (See Wang and Cheng, 78.) It seems to me her discussion of the "first class writers" is tantamount to, so to speak, a self-portrait.
What is the root cause of Chinese sexual morbidity?

Wang Anyi was not right when she said that only Chinese see dirt in sex, while Westerners take sex for something like walking or dining. Even though we discount the exaggeration of the Western attitude, we still find the statement does not quite hold water. The idea that "sex is dirty" is an almost universal phenomenon. Its origin perhaps can be traced back to the anatomical aspect of human body: both the male and female genitals are in close proximity to excretory organs. So it is natural for human beings of whatever race to develop unreal biases and aversions to sex. The reasonable conclusion, therefore, is that originally sex did not look dirtier to Chinese than to any other people in the world. But there is no denying that nowadays, unlike Westerners, the majority of Chinese "can't talk about sex without feeling its being dirty." Yet, in my opinion, the origin of this sexual morbidity does not lie in what Wang holds to be the very source of it, namely, "(in China) sex was utilized too early."

Some other ancient civilizations had also undergone a specific period in which men and women were strongly motivated to have sex for more or better offspring. In Sparta a middle-aged man would willingly lend his wife to a friend of his when he found a better appearance or character in him; there was even a law which required any couple consisting of an elderly husband and young wife to bring a young man home to help breed a healthier child¹. The sexual mores of the Spartan people seem to prove two facts: First, Chinese are not the only people in the world who "utilized" sex in remote antiquity; second, even an extreme utilitarian attitude toward sex did not necessarily lead to a morbid sexual outlook.

Actually Wang Anyi has already touched the target but not hit home when she linked the root cause with the fact that "the Chinese feudal culture developed prematurely." I quite agree with her on searching the feudal culture for the origin of Chinese sexual

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morbidity. But I think it is the "stability" rather than the "prematurity" of this culture that should be held responsible.

For a quite long historical period Chinese sexual mores had hardly undergone any essential change. So, as the result of a long string of inbreeding, some most absurd forms of sexual practice could take place in China. When criticizing barriers to romantic love, Bertrand Russell remarks:

Take at the one extreme the Chinese system: in this system a man never meets any respectable woman except his own wife, ... his wife is chosen for him and is probably unknown to him until the wedding day; consequently all his sex relations are entirely divorced from love in the romantic sense, and he never has occasion for those efforts of courtship which give rise to love poetry.

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1 R. H. Van Gulik points out: "Contemporary literary evidence shows that prudery was practically non-existent before and during the T'ang Dynasty (618-907). Its beginning must be sought in the Sung period (960-1279) when, during a re-examination of the ancient Confucianist Classics, some archaic taboos relative to the separation of the sexes were misinterpreted by narrow-minded scholars (See R. H. Van Gulik, Erotic Colour Prints of The Ming Period with An Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ch'ing Dynasty, B.C. 206-A.D.1644 Tokyo: Privately Published in Fifty Copies, 1951. IV.)

If traced back to the Sung period, sexual taboos have been existing for more than six hundred years in China. in view of the cultural and intellectual currents spread in the West during the same historical period, I think, almost no essential changes had happened until Man Fourth to help to form a modern Chinese mind.

2 Bertrand Russell, 50.
By the same token, the stability of feudal culture led to another morbid aberration: the most nonsensical sexual ideology, which was best represented in Zhu Xi's advocacy of "wiping out human desires", namely, putting aside natural passions and thoughts in order to perform the duty as the subjects of a feudal ruler.

What is more, because of this "stability", this extremely unreasonable ideology and practice had exerted such a subtle influence on the superego of the whole Chinese nation that in the end almost each and every Chinese has become totally preoccupied by the sexual misconception and the pleasure-oriented element of human sex. In other words, an age-old and ingrained sexual conditioning has made the Chinese people unable to think of sex without feeling its being dirty.

By the end of 1986, not without a rebellious spirit, Wang Anyi probed into the Chinese sexual morbidity as part of a higher mission of exploration of human nature which she assumed of her own accord and offered us "Love in a Small Town" and other stories as the result of her literary probing. This is a memorable event of no small import both in literary history and sexual culture in China.

On the one hand, by making an attempt at a Lawrentian set of terminology for describing sexual activities she has bridged in a way one of the gaps made by a narrow-minded literary theory between the May Fourth (1919) and "New Period" (Post-Mao) phases in modern Chinese literature. On the other hand, by boldly breaking taboos surrounding the subject of sex, she effectively draws public attention to the pernicious vestiges of sexual prudishness in the unconscious mind of the Chinese people.

In recent years significant changes have taken place among Chinese writers. They have not only abandoned some of their old modes of thinking, but also initiated new lines of thought. They seem to have a clearer vision and a deeper insight now than before, and are gaining, relatively speaking, a right and natural perspective on China's thought and history. As one of the last-minute products of the current intellectual movement, Wang Anyi's "Love in a Small Town" truly reflects this historical trend, which, as a campaign to
emancipate Chinese people's thinking and give the Chinese nation a new spirit, is certainly irresistible, but at the same time, will unavoidably suffer repeated setbacks.

Because of various historical, social, political and ideological factors, the literary exploration of human sexuality, especially the instilling of a liberal and open-minded sexual outlook will be particularly difficult in China. Any writer who is determined to search for truth in this specific field should have a deeper understanding of the over-all situation in China and be better prepared before taking the plunge.

It seems to me Wang Anyi did not stand in full battle array. When she met with some unexpected problems in real life (for example, during the anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign of 1987 she was criticized without being mentioned by name for having degenerated into writing about sex¹), she felt quite discouraged:

Relatively speaking I am quite cool and passive, ... Facing unreasonable occurrences I am pessimistic too. But as for life, it is absolutely normal. With the old troubles gone, the new troubles come. We can simply do nothing about it.²

One year after she said these words she gave up her literary exploration of sexual love and human sexuality. For these words and her action, I feel very sorry for her. Today in the East, Japanese literature "has already penetrated into the physiological level;"³ and literature in the West has already "fully explored sensual experience: daytime, nighttime, normal, abnormal."⁴ If Chinese literature is to rank among the most meaningful and

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¹ See Eva Hung, "Preface," Love in a Small Town viii.
³ Ogino, Tsujida, and Xia Gang, 27.
prestigious in the modern world, it should go a step further and Wang Anyi should continue her meaningful exploration.
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