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**In Light of Concreteness: Wang Anyi and the Bildungsroman of the Cultural Revolutionary Generation**

**Abstract** Based on detailed textual analysis, the article argues that Wang Anyi brings the abstract idealism of the second-generation of PRC into a productive collision with its concrete Other—from its parents’ generation to the resilient national bourgeoisie to quotidian sensuousness embodied by the world of its female counterpart. In so doing, as the author seeks to show, the novel presents a compelling narrative of the self-education, growth, and formation of the generation of the Cultural Revolution without reducing it to ideological stereotypes rampant in China after 1976. While delving into the structure and style of fiction, the article takes as its focus the confrontation between abstraction and concreteness; Self and Other; superstructure and infrastructure, or social consciousness and social existence, at a philosophical level in order to construct a phenomenology of the experience of post-revolutionary Subjectivity.

**Keywords** Bildungsroman, phenomenology of spirit, Enlightenment, idealism (utopianism), abstraction versus concreteness, Wang Anyi, cultural modernity of socialism

**Ideological Discourses on Enlightenment in China after 1976**

On reading *Age of Enlightenment* (*Qimeng shidai*, 2005), one first senses that, compared with Wang’s earlier major work, *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, its conception is even greater and structure more difficult to manage. The time span of *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is considerable, yet it is able to rely upon routine melodrama in its tale of a woman’s romance. The life of a “Shanghai mademoiselle” is divided into two at the year 1949, and the story essentially follows the unfolding of her fate. Fundamentally, such a novel is usually entertaining regardless of the direction in which the writer chooses to take it, for
it meets the expectations and fancies of ordinary readers. Looking at it today, I feel that the best part of *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* is not its narrative development but rather its monumental scenic descriptions and commentaries. These passages are where Wang Anyi issues her own intervention and reveals the underlying color of contemporary, namely post-1949, Chinese experience: for instance, in her perception and grasp of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and even into the 1980s. However, in overall terms the ideological content and narrative structure of *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* do not equal that of *Age of Enlightenment*. With such a work as *Age of Enlightenment*, if the writer did not call upon all the artistry at her disposal and mobilize all levels of her consciousness and unconsciousness, the writing itself would have become unsustainable. Regardless of whether it is on the level of content or form, such a work is a thing that relies on nothing; it is indeed the product of the power of ideas and innermost being. That being the case, the first question that arises pertains to the desire driving Wang Anyi: why should she have wanted to write a work of such monumental proportions in the first place.

The next question is why the title, “*Age of Enlightenment*,” ostensibly salutary for contemporary literary communities and intelligentsia alike, would nonetheless irk them slightly. According to the “official history” of our post-revolutionary era, the brief period of the Cultural Revolution has been redefined as one of a new ignorance and superstition that included political fanaticism, mass movements, the movement “down to the countryside,” its closing of schools and breaking off of even basic education. The “ten-year calamity” required later generations to “bring order out of chaos,” to question whatever kind of cultural or intellectual legacy there had been. In discussing enlightenment, Wang Anyi once revealed in an interview that the original title of her novel was “*Thinker*” before it was later changed to *Age of Enlightenment*. From here we can see how the term “enlightenment” is not the product of a sudden whim or the purposive craft of theater, but is rather the result of long deliberation. In fact, other questions might be: What kind of thought was engendered by that era? What kind of spiritual life? What kind of moral quality, and what kind of human being did that particular spiritual life attain? What kind of spiritual heritage has it bestowed upon us?

In this manner, Wang Anyi’s literary creation touches upon the great questions of our age that pertain even to the collective self-understanding of contemporary China; questions such as: “Who are we? Where are we coming from? Where are we going?” If we wish to seek answers to these questions, we have to reexamine rigorously the Chinese Revolution—including the Cultural Revolution. Such are the implications of “*Thinker*,” and “enlightenment” goes even further: As the fundamental implication of “enlightenment” is the break away from ignorance, superstition, and mindless obedience of external authority, it becomes associated with those who possess self-consciousness, an independence of spirit and
personal direction. Enlightenment is a spiritual rite of passage into adulthood. Since the May Fourth movement, “enlightenment” has become an entirely positive term, appealing to Chinese people—particularly intellectuals—and making them seethe with excitement. Such being the case, what is the intellectual, social, and psychological content of “enlightenment” harbored by this particular group of protagonists during this particular historical moment? What is the concrete experience or historical substance associated with this abstract and yet emotionally loaded and politically contested concept? Who enlightens whom? Who educates whom? What is the social content of this education or formation or Bildung? And, last but not least, whose self-education and maturation become the determining factors of the present collective experience, serving as the main trunk and fundamental content of historical events which is still present in today’s social unconscious? We can proceed to examine closely these questions step by step.

As we read, we begin to see, however, that the concept of “enlightenment” in Age of Enlightenment carries a certain irony, which is to say that there is an inherent critical gap between the noun, the slogan, the concept of enlightenment, on one hand, and its thinking, living substance on the other. The space of narrative and thought in Age of Enlightenment grows out of the fissures of this gap. Despite the title it is not necessarily a simple proponent of enlightenment or of a “Thinker.” That is to say, the definition of “enlightenment” in Wang’s novel cannot be located in the words constantly uttered by the protagonists, but rather must be located someplace else. This is precisely what the author pushes her characters to do; for the experiences, practices, perplexities, sufferings, happiness, thinking, knowledge, etc. of the characters furnish the literary content of a Bildungsroman, just as they supply the content of Wang Anyi’s reflections and thoughts on “enlightenment.” These enlighteners themselves need to be enlightened, and cannot deem themselves as members of the spiritual nobility.

Rather, as the novel unfolds, the reader realizes that the author takes pains to make explicit that enlightenment idealism itself is determined by concrete historical conditions. It desires the examination of concrete, everyday life-worlds, as well as the examination of the antitheses of enlightenment and revolution. The latter, grandiose, concepts, dogmas, and opinionated “master attitudes” or mindset of the privileged all desire to be concretized by experience in the realm of the real—which entails learning, for instance, how to get along with people, how to treat one’s parents, how to meet girls, how to obtain knowledge and shape one’s judgment of oneself. Without the process of substantiation, which is also a process of test and trial, the formation of the new subjectivity could only spin in thin air of abstraction, dogma, and fantasies. Such an “empty,” yet-to-be substantiated and tested notion of enlightenment also bear a self-critical aspect within the novel, which is contained and defined by an even larger, more
fundamental concept of “life.” The contradictory and conflicting concept of “enlightenment” in *Age of Enlightenment* itself embodies both thesis and antithesis, and constitutes the novel’s power of thought. If negative, antithetical factors overwhelm those that are affirmative and positive, then the novel would present a certain kind of straightforward argument or historical narrative; if the writer had chosen otherwise, the underlying historical narrative would be quite different. Given how hostile the “New Enlightenment” (Xinqimeng) position in post-Mao China holds toward any attempt at a sympathetic understanding of the Cultural Revolution and its intellectual legacy, to name a novel on the beginning years of the “Ten Years of Calamity,” “Age of Enlightenment” must be highly perplexing and suspicious, as it implies that the Cultural Revolution constitutes an indispensible moment in the moral constitution and intellectual coming-of-age of the nation. Examining the lives of that era through the lens of the great caption of “enlightenment,” Wang Anyi is assuredly possessed of an ulterior and quite sophisticated motive.

**Portraits of Red Inheritors as Young Men: The Protagonists**

The time span of Wang’s novel is small, just over one year. The characters are portrayed crowd-like, in the fashion of a “gallery of the personages of an epoch,” but with characteristics very particular to Wang Anyi’s writing: each person has an origin, as part of a larger collective history, and a social status embedded in the world of custom or ethical world which defines individual values and behavior in an irreducible way; all bring their respective problems to the story. With regard to the development and evolution of the entire corpus of Wang Anyi’s work, this type of writing possesses both a somewhat summarizing flavor as well as a rather experimental meaning. We can gaze upon these characters to gauge which of them fall within the pre-existing sequence, and which ones separate themselves from that sequence, thus opening up new terrain.

I divide the numerous characters into four sets. The first set is that of the protagonists, namely, the male protagonists, among whom these four stand out: Chen Zhuoran, Nanchang, Xiao Laoda, and Ah Ming. The next level includes Xiao Tuzi, Qi Yue, and so on, who are peripheral minor characters and function to advance the narrative. Through this group of marginal, peripheral characters functioning as mediation, the central figures are capable of approaching girls, hanging out at someone’s house, becoming acquainted, and so on. Among the four protagonists, the central male is Nanchang, because Nanchang is the most troublesome among them. His problems are greatest, his identity or self-identity is the least fixed; he maintains strained relationships with everyone because he himself is extremely tense, uncomfortable. Given this, Nanchang is also the most...
“self-conscious” as he ponders these problems of existence and growth, struggling with his own moral and social identity day in and day out. When he cannot figure them out, he gets stuck inside them and cannot extricate himself. Furthermore, the way he speaks and conducts himself is often stiff, rash, lacking in forethought, and carries a suggestion of breaking away. Chen Zhuoran, on the other hand, is older than Nanchang by several years, thus he seems more self-composed and self-confident. His social status and ideological self-positioning are extremely clear-cut. Having grown up in an old-time liberated area, he went from being a child of the countryside to a resident of Shanghai, thus his political and social status is a cut above others. At school he always stood out from the others, appearing more capable than they; after that, he rather quickly entered into a spiritual state of self-discipline and self-cultivation. Finally he transformed completely into a reading machine, reading everything he could get his hands on, reading even what he could not understand in a manner very reminiscent of the method known as lao san jie, the so-called “last three classes of normal high school education”: lacking formal training but always hungry for knowledge, whatever he picked up he would swallow whole. In her interview with this author, Chen Zhuoran is dubbed “Academy of Social Sciences,” a nickname for another character appearing in Wang Anyi’s opus.

Unlike Chen Zhuoran, Nanchang’s identity crisis arises first from his troubled relationship with his father; crisis arises next from his relationship with several girls; and then from his relationship to the civil society of Shanghai and to its everyday life as a whole, i.e., his relationship to the urban petty bourgeoisie. Of course, this is no longer the story of an individual, but rather it has become in this manner a collective allegory of the second generation of Chinese Revolution: how it descends from the conceptual realm to the realm of life and finds its own substance—from state to society, from thought to historical and political movement, from book to reality, from an opinionated self-centeredness to an understanding of the organic and complicated relations of the world. Within every relationship, Nanchang fails to arrange his position favorably, while everything is a constant and painful exploration; thus, he finds it extremely difficult to do anything. But his energy and sense of arrogance make him unable to backpedal; he can only go forward, striving to resolve his own problems. He lacks room to maneuver yet cannot remain where he is. Although he has the magnificent sentences of The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte to sustain him mentally, they are of no assistance in his solitude. This is an image of inner turmoil in the extreme. Wang Anyi organizes the entire novel to capture such a personage. If the novel were a vortex, the eye of the vortex would be Nanchang.

Xiao Laoda is perhaps the most memorable character in Age of Enlightenment. There is also Ah Ming, of course. These two emerge in the narrative as
Nanchang’s interlocutors; at times they appear to be adversaries, other times they are each other’s antitheses. Yet, like Don Quixote and Sancho, they are a narrative couple—an antithetical couplet. They mutually fulfill one another, sometimes punching, sometimes squabbling, and thus forging an air of play. Xiao Laoda and Ah Ming come from diverging directions to buttress Nanchang’s hollow and violent spiritual and existential condition. This kind of support is at times nourishing, at times challenging. Xiao Laoda for the most part shares the generation of Nanchang and the others, though he is several years older and his experience slightly different. Although Chen Zhuoran is also older, Chen has merely attained maturity early, and has not yet formed a distinctive intellectual pedigree. Xiao Laoda, on the contrary, not only possesses a distinctive intellectual pedigree, his family tree is similarly unique. His mother is an actress in a theatrical troupe before 1949, who, as a character, should be connected with the “Shanghai mademoiselle” Wang Qiyao, female protagonist of *Song of Everlasting Sorrows*, whose existence is so precarious it actually borders on the world of prostitution. Differing from Wang Qiyao, Xiao Laoda’s mother ultimately marries a high-ranking cadre of the New Fourth Army right after the Liberation, and only because of this marriage is she boosted into the “new society.” Thus two disparate genealogies supply the background of Xiao Laoda’s lot, which is not commonly found among the children of PLA officials and cadres. Nanchang and Chen Zhuoran, quite arrogant within their own circle, are dumbfounded upon encountering Xiao Laoda, owing to his knowledge, experience, and resourcefulness. Indeed, Xiao Laoda possesses something very strange. First, he is clearly an invalid, and in this sense does not accord with convention; but the source of his glamour nonetheless lies with his knowledge and experience.

Wang Anyi gives experience, vision, and wisdom to this character, who leads a reclusive life. Xiao Laoda’s worldliness “supplements” Nanchang’s troublesomeness, which is too “normal and upright.” There is nothing twisty, oblique in it. There is no experience of city life, none of the obstinacy, filth, or gloominess that life brings—nothing of real authenticity. In Wang Anyi’s own words: “when the water is too clear, the fish will not appear.” The world of Nanchang, so speculative, so pure, is not really coherent to the world of human sensibility, and therefore is dogmatic and empty. Such is the emptiness of the day-to-day of revolutionary nobility; but it yields, in turn, a certain desire and impetus driving Nanchang’s search for the truth of life. From her own position, Wang Anyi has stated that, naturally, she would not have used ferocious or brutal language to “rewrite” history, and so chose instead to write from the angle of young people’s “enlightenment.” This kind of critique maintains within itself a forgiving and sympathetic understanding. Had she chosen an adult, a revolutionary cadre to write about, the work would undoubtedly have been more
critical and satirical than her own *My Uncle’s Story (Shushu de gushi)*, even surpassing it to approach a denunciation of that era.

Xiao Laoda, in his abnormal situation, is not at all a regular sort of person; yet his abnormality makes an assault upon, and fills up, normalcy; so much so, that one could say his abnormality, compared to the “norm” of the early tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution, is a vision of calm and equanimity. Xiao Laoda’s living room parlor is inauthentic, or rather it has a surreal flavor; but if Nanchang and the other young people are held in thrall by Xiao Laoda’s parlor, then the reality outside the parlor window instead becomes unreal, dreamlike.

Nanchang and the others are the progeny of conquerors: they wear army clothes and belts, whizzing through the streets of Shanghai on bicycles. Although Xiao Laoda is also the child of a high-ranking soldier, he is beset by sullenness. He can only wrap himself in a blanket, sit on his balcony, and gaze outward. His balcony resembles a viewing platform, an inspection stand, which is very interesting—he is an observer. He does not participate, but from this he obtains an intellectual perspective, a kind of detachment. His intellectual pedigree is emphatically not school-taught: the many words he speaks—such as, “People are fungus,” “Life is decay,” “Dying young is a price to pay for being clean,” “Lin Daiyu is weed”—are all rather peculiar but fascinating nonetheless. Everyone always goes to his place to chat, and in his room they always find someone inexplicable: a young ballerina, a diplomat’s daughter just returned from abroad and still struggling with her oral expressions in mandarin Chinese, and so forth. There is no clue as to where they come from, but they bring with them an atmosphere of “the far corners of the world.” The immediacy of the scene strikes a dubious note; yet in reality, Beijing and Shanghai were both this way during the Cultural Revolution and immediately after. But this scene was not found at schools or playgrounds, in the classrooms, or on the streets. That is to say, under the orthodox appearance of people’s lives, a variety of similarly clandestine groups were always moving about, replenishing themselves, overturning themselves, enriching the era. This atmosphere formed a very delicate relation to the era’s dogmatism and lofty emptiness.

Finally there is Ah Ming (He Xiangming). Ah Ming is a crucial character because he is not the child of a party cadre but in the frame of the novel should be regarded as a member of the urban-dwelling lower-class. In reality, he carries no lofty illusions; he relies on craftsmanship; he relies on his own skills to earn a living; he is the opposite of Nanchang, Chen Zhuoran and the like. Within the specific environment of Shanghai, the two types mutually complement each other. If Ah Ming is not painting, if he had not been using his own craftsmanship to paint big rebel propaganda posters and thus gain a new perspective from which to evaluate events, then by nature he would not have felt a kinship to boys of diverging class and [social] awareness, such as Chen Zhuoran or Nanchang. But
art allows him to engage with revolutionary ideas; he likes painting great spectacles of the revolutionary masses. This aesthetic allows him to experience a yearning to transcend the mediocrity and dullness of daily routine in lower-class quarters of Shanghai. Yet he engages with the actually existing medium of “spirit” and “thought.” He paints for varying rebel organizations, but it is painting merely; he lacks his own theory as well as his own dream. Nonetheless, the era takes hold of Ah Ming and those like him; and thus he undergoes the test of the age of enlightenment.

Although considerable ink is laid down on this set of protagonists, it is very difficult to analyze them. The reason is that the characters, in terms of their spiritual substance, all remain essentially abstract, unformed, and vague (with the exception of Ah Ming, though Ah Ming possesses his own dubious quality). Their substance has to be grasped in light of other sets of characters. We shall return to them when we move on to the end, for only upon looking backward can we see them clearly.

Age of Enlightenment is said to be a Bildungsroman, a novel of youth, a novel of education—elements that interconnect; but I believe that Bildungsroman is the most appropriate. The principal characters are all male: this is an issue worth discussing. Why are the protagonists who participate in thought all schoolboys, whereas girls do not enter the sphere of thought, and hence are not treated as the subject of enlightenment? It would seem that boys are the only ones who are ultimately enlightened, who have spiritual life, who realize the Hegelian notion of self-consciousness and a personal history of self-consciousness. Does Wang Anyi feel that girls fundamentally lack spiritual life? That they are the outsiders of this turbulent era? Most likely not. As we have seen, in setting up her narrative, Wang Anyi requires the antithesis of “enlightenment.” This antithesis is not post-1980s “anti-radicalism,” but rather a kind of positive supplement and “negation.” Therefore, the girls of Age of Enlightenment belong a priori to a “natural” state, to that which belongs to everyday life, a physiological and emotional state of nature that is ethical life as the real foundation and point of departure of revolution and enlightenment.

Although the female characters tend to be passive, often mocked by the boys as being “urban petty bourgeoisie,” their existence reveals the boys’ ignorance of social affairs and human sensibility—regardless of the great philosophical principles that fall out of their mouths. Ideas various and sundry move about freely in the boys’ brains, yet their emotional life remains a blank slate; they have not yet learned the ABC about ethical life. Such a state of affairs is connected to the question raised earlier concerning who enlightens whom. On the surface, Wang Anyi’s position appears ambiguous, but in fact she is very clear: these few male protagonists are in dire need. They need to wrest themselves from out of a blurred, abstract, specious existence into something unequivocal, carefully
constructed, staunch; only among the girls are they able to determine their moral and social values. This is not to say that, in the end, the girls enlighten the boys, but rather to say that the girls are external to the boys’ state of “spiritual life” from which the self-conscious (male) Self must win recognition, even affection, from the Other, in order to become a Subject in actual and not merely fantastic sense. The girls are precisely positioned to roast them over the fire, to allow them frequent display of just how dim, pallid, clumsy, excessively impetuous, and lacking in real breeding they are.

In brief, the boys have quite a long way to go on the path towards growing up. Mao Zedong’s sense of “enlightenment” had demanded that the intellectuals receive re-education by the people; these boys are not intellectuals per se but rather high-school students, yet they desire to think, they deem themselves thinkers—or, whether intentionally or not, they desire a spiritual life with social significance. In this sense they are of the enlightenment. But in the realm of everyday life, these “thinkers” more often than not fail to grasp human sensibility; they are ignorant; they have no experience; they do not understand matters between men and women, nor, for that matter, between fathers and sons; between different social classes. To the real and self-appointed inheritors of the Chinese Revolution, the historical conditions and social ethical foundations of socialist modernity are completely obscure, so much so that the unconscious, often futile, struggle to search for the historical substance of their yet-to-be-formed identity constitutes the actual content of an enlightenment—from abstracation, dogma, and moral and ideological purity. In *Age of Enlightenment*, the most intimate relationship to be found is that between boys. This is not a homosexual or even homoerotic relation, but is indeed a same-sex feeling of intense closeness. Because they strive for thought, they share an intimacy at a spiritual level somewhat consistent with Plato’s definition of love: love has no choice but to exist among those of the same sex, for in ancient Greece or ancient China, women usually could not receive education. But here, the meaning of enlightenment is comparatively more complex. As we will see, *Age of Enlightenment* maintains an affirmative attitude toward the symbol of “enlightenment” and all the high-minded values that it represents. Rather than being overturned in narrative irony and disintegration, this positive aspect is given prominence and definition in the novel. It is also embodied in the figures of the male protagonists.

Of Alienation and Rebellion: Father-Son Relationship in the Early PRC

The second set of characters is that of the parents’ generation: Chen Zhuoran’s parents, Nanchang’s parents, Xiao Laoda’s parents, Ah Ming’s parents, as well as
Chen Zhuoran’s aunt and Nanchang’s older sister—although one is “auntie” and the other “big sis,” in customary terms they belong to the older generation. But here the most crucial relation is that between father and son, which perhaps should be mentioned independently, as it invokes the problematic of the legacy of the Chinese Revolution. Within the specific context of Chinese Revolution, “enlightenment” refers to the sense of carrying on the revolutionary legacy belonging to the generation of the mother and father—carrying the torch, so to speak. But what did the generation of Nanchang’s parents pass on, in fact? This is a tremendous question. In this novel, Wang Anyi is most definitely not satisfied with the spiritual legacy of the parents’ generation. At times she seems to say that they did not, in fact, give their children anything upon which to rely, anything that could withstand, through and through, the test of time. Were it otherwise, the latter would have no need to fumble about afresh in the dead of night. Chen Zhuoran, Nanchang, and these other post-revolutionary types enjoy certain privileges; they have unduly high opinions of themselves; they have grown up in such a metropolis as Shanghai; but they must enter a vacuum of thought and sociality in order to seek themselves, to establish their own genealogies of knowledge and power. Although literally speaking there is a clear family tree, this genealogy is collapsing upon itself, negating itself, and compelling a new generation to search anew for its own resources of thought and culture in order to build afresh its own moral and social foundation. The legacy of the parents’ generation is not enough to sustain their self-cultivation and self-discovery, nor can it provide the discipline and guidance which their adolescent tumult requires.

In this sense we can see that the weakness, dejection, and frustration of the parents’ generation is so extreme as to seem slightly absurd, inspiring as it does an urgent need in the children to seek elsewhere the resources of thought that will bring about their own enlightenment. In *Age of Enlightenment*, this need is nearly physiological. Wang Anyi’s book itself is a work of nearly pure thought; yet through her writing she imbues this need with such corporeality that it takes on a physiological aspect, equivalent to the nourishment a person requires to grow. These young people need thought, ideas, concepts, symbols, and theories as temporary but necessary substitute, even preparation, for real and concrete social experiences. Their parents have not afforded them an unequivocal and reliable framework of spiritual and daily life, in which a solid concept of the real can be established along with the formation of the new, collective Self. In actuality, the parents’ failure of passing on a legacy must be seen as one of the reasons why the younger generation is inspired by the notion of “permanent revolution,” why they are impatient to “smash the old world and establish the new” even within the socialist state and society, and to devote themselves to the Cultural Revolution in one way or another. Viewed thus from the angle of the shortcomings of the older
The “Eternal Feminine” as “Petit Urbanites”: Encountering the Other

The third set of characters is the young female characters, the portrayal of which is Wang Anyi’s particular specialty. But in *Age of Enlightenment*, a slight problem occurs. This book is not at all “pretty.” It seems to stumble, to procrastinate; at times it reads very slowly. It maintains no average standard of readability, but requires an additional motivating force or curiosity to impel one to read. Yet these female characters are written the most effortlessly, with the know-how and ease of the writer in her element. The observations of Shanghai longtang, or alleyways, composing the background of the girls’ lives, the tussles among them, the hazy feelings and ambiguous relationships they share with the boys, are all those of a seasoned writer. Yet precisely because it is handled with such ease, the experience these girls represent becomes an index, a typological display or, even more, a series of symbolic codes. The interiors of these “types” are quite splendid, but perhaps Wang Anyi wrote too many of them; within *Age of Enlightenment* they are presented a bit too impatiently. Whereas, in her other works such characters unfold with exquisite minuteness, through writing technique that perhaps demonstrates an even higher degree of brilliance, it seems that, in the background of a “drama of ideas,” a few words hurriedly scribbled suffice. It is akin to reading a compilation and index of Shanghai female experience and its types, which in itself is indeed of extreme interest, and thus expands the scope and complexity of this book.

In my interview with Wang Anyi, I ask her pointedly why she ultimately has Nanchang engage in sexual relations with Jiabao, and not with Zhuzhu or Shula. Wang Anyi’s answer took me aback, but upon careful consideration it is very persuasive: She said that such a character as Nanchang could dare to lay hands on only Jiabao because Jiabao is from the capitalist class; due to this class background, she has been overthrown, trampled underfoot. “Even if I forced you, you would not dare tell anyone.” This is Wang Anyi’s personal observation of the naïve romanticism that is imbedded in the “story of the Red Guards’ youthful cruelty” during the Cultural Revolution. Nanchang, no matter how sexually deprived, knows that he must find a safe outlet; he will positively not look for a girlfriend from another family of high-ranking Communist Party cadres because it would be akin to finding someone of the same socio-political standing. Should a fortuitous turn of events takes place, he has to take responsibility; but a petty bourgeois girl changes things entirely. Jiabao is extremely sensual, robust,
substantial—the substantiality of her body attracts the emptiness of Nanchang’s spirit, which is another intriguing point. And she leads us to another stratum of urban girls, that of Ding Yinan, neat and tidy as though life left no traces upon her body. The Ding family is all-female—the grandmother, mother, Ding Yinan. This kind of living background holds no appeal for Nanchang. So, despite the fact that Ding Yinan is very feminine, she is not what Nanchang wants. He wants physicality, substantiality; not refined, placid, pale things. Minmin is an amusing girl, a diplomat’s daughter. Hers is the figure relatively new to Wang’s series of young female characters. Other figures we have seen before; with them we have already been acquainted. Wang Anyi is somewhat careless in her writing at times, but she portrays the character of Minmin attentively. Minmin wears rustic clothing because she simply can not keep up with Shanghai’s fashion trends. Without knowing how, she always says the wrong thing; her Chinese really is not that great; but everyone likes her nonetheless. She and the Shanghai girls together pose a bizarre ratio, which is something new in the novel. Yet Nanchang will never go with Minmin because she is too closely related; they both belong to the families of revolutionary cadres.

The basic structure of *Age of Enlightenment* is that of a conceptual drama or drama of thought. On some level, it is precisely the reliance on a spiritual genealogy that allows the narrative structure in all its density to come to completion. The synthesis of breeding, family history, intellectual genealogy, the history of reading, and the ritual norms of daily life contains a built-in catalogue and typology, which gives it a textual density and a sense of structure. Each part is not developed fully, but offers merely a type that is woven into a larger tableau. When we look at these girls, they seem very familiar to us, for they are reminiscent of Fu Ping, Mei Tou, Wang Qiyao, Wang Qiyao’s daughter; yet when we look at the boys, the types that emerge are not so distinct. This brings some difficulty to reading, or at the very least brings some unevenness to the experience of reading. But this feeling of unevenness and intermingling provides the novel with a quality that I particularly like.

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**Forgotten Genealogies: The Revenge of the Repressed**

The final set of characters could be tentatively dubbed that of the interlocutors. It is equally important, as much of the foreshadowing at the beginning ends up converging in this last series of characters, which serves as the climax of the unfolding of the work of thought.

The first interlocutor—I am not pushing a certain sequence here but rather a ranking of dramatic levels—is Jiabao’s grandfather, an old fogey of the national capitalists. Nanchang and the others, as the Red Guards, have huge authority,
kicking their way into wherever they wish, searching and confiscating the property of whomever, doing whatever they want. Then one day, out of boredom or curiosity, they go out at midnight wearing masks [so that no one can recognize them]. Surrupptitiously, they enter Jiabao’s home in order to chat with her grandfather. In fact, they are interested in talking with this man from old times and in listening to his stories; but they pretentiously assume the appearance of deputy interrogators: “Justify your bourgeois capitalist thought, your exploitation, your surplus value! We are giving you a lecture.” In actuality they wish to talk with Old Gu in order to gain knowledge of some matters they do not understand. The most bizarre part of this dialogue is that the slippery fellow, Old Gu, is unexpectedly moved to emotion and becomes sentimental while looking back on his life with a group of young boys of whom he knows nothing. When it is time to go, the old man is filled with a sense of loss. This scene raises a problematic concerning the protagonists’ temperaments—Chen Zhuoran and the others of Age of Enlightenment. On the one hand, they have nothing; that is to say, although they are positioned at the center of revolution, in the seat of the enlighteners, yet the meaning of their enlightenment has yet to be enlightened by someone else, by something actually existing. In this sense, which is also Hegelian-Marxist, the content of real thought, of genuine reflection, can only come from reality; it cannot come from thought. That which thought contains can only come from the age to which it corresponds. Philosophy is its own times comprehended in thought—these are Hegel’s words, which Marx later borrows. Hence, these characters reckon that they possess thought, yet the era has not been grasped by them—they do not understand the age of Mao Zedong; they do not know the history of the generation of their grandfathers—in this sense their thought lacks content. Naturally they wish to seek out Old Gu for a chat. What is amusing is that Old Gu is also keen to speak with them. He begins in an unctuous manner, addressing the boys as “young generals;” they address each other intermittently as “young general” or “mister,” each dodging the other’s identity while nonetheless maintaining his own dignity—Wang Anyi weaves these minute and exquisite details extraordinarily well.

The second interlocutor is Dr. Gao. After getting Jiabao pregnant, a terrified Nanchang seeks out Xiao Laoda, who scribbles a line for him before running off to Pudong in search of Dr. Gao. Dr. Gao has her own story, as she has graduated from a Christian medical school and remains a spinster. Within this novel, everyone possesses his or her own genealogy. Dr. Gao possesses a doctor’s compassion towards this world and wishes to rescue it; she wishes to help Nanchang upon meeting him, but also tells him of many matters that he does not understand. Her character does not remain on the stage for very long, yet leaves a deep impression.

The third is Principal Wang, a rather fascinating interlocutor. Wang Anyi is
extremely attentive in her structural composition, producing here a contrapuntal
effect. As a character, Ah Ming is created for the purpose of complementing
Nanchang with the specificity of urban civil life, but he is unable to rescue
Nanchang purely because the specificity of the civil life which Ah Ming
represents cannot be sublimated; it is unable to rise to the heights of
enlightenment idealism. He can only remain an honest child with his life in the
alleyways. Furthermore, even his resistance is contained within the space of
urban civil society; he cannot leap from the substantiality of his daily life. Thus,
although Ah Ming offers Nanchang and the others an enlightenment of the
eyeryday, he also needs to be enlightened by someone else—by Principal Wang,
perhaps. Principal Wang is a teacher of mathematics, and carries the fervor,
intelligence, tenacity, and slight pedantry of the modern Chinese intelligentsia.
The charm of his personality comes from his approach to knowledge, specifically
from a mathematical, universalist, value-neutral search for knowledge, which is a
very different thing from that found in political or urban daily life.

The fourth is Xiao Laoda, a character that slightly overlaps the categories of
protagonist and interlocutor. He is a young “old fellow” carrying with him an
abnormal wisdom; he is an Eclectic School-like figure and understands a great
deal unsystematically. In fact, he suggests to Nanchang, “You ought to have a
girlfriend; you ought to understand the matters between men and women,” such
that Nanchang makes several blunders, the first being his seeking out of Xiao
Laoda. These, then, are the four sets of characters, with the other protagonists
including Xiao Tuzi and Qi Yue, who function as chemical adherents setting up
the narrative account.

The group of characters I am treating as interlocutors of the “enlightenment” is
far removed from the protagonists Chen Zhuoran, Nanchang, and Xiao Laoda.
Compared with the series of parents, this set is the most individualistic, as their
individual experiences are more complete and their spiritual physiognomy more
distinct—they are mathematicians, high school principals, female doctors trained
by Christian missionary schools, entrepreneurial capitalists of the grandfather’s
generation. Their common characteristics have all been swept onto the fringes of
society by the torrents of Cultural Revolution; on varying levels, they constitute
the remnants of the tenaciousness of an old era, they cross swords with, and are
in constructive dialogue with, those “new men” of the new era. They are also
somewhat carried along by this dialogue; they are asked to “explain themselves.”
Compared with the series of girls, this group of characters stands not in the
spotlight but rather backstage. They are not within real life; the adolescent girls
are arranged before the eyes of the male protagonists; but the characters of
interlocutors are like invisible figures that appear and disappear intermittently.
However, the similarity of the two sets is that they both share a typological
quality. If it were noted that these girls, generally speaking, constituted the
antithesis of the idea of “enlightenment”—representing the body, the natural state of psychic existence—then the interlocutors would represent the natural state of social customs and values. Compared to the highly artificial, conceptually constructed “new era,” they conform to the more natural or more sensible knowledge, reason, and traditional norms of everyday values. Thus, this set simultaneously allows Nanchang to represent the inner life of the children of the “revolutionary nobility” as well as the lack that seeks substance, a meaningful antithesis. I sense that Wang Anyi writes this part painstakingly, since she seeks an antidote for “enlightenment”; grabbing at this and that, she laboriously tries to find ways to cure these various illnesses of hollowness, boredom, dogmatism, and idealism. This boredom has little in common with the decadence of the petty bourgeoisie of Paris, but rather is the emptiness and boredom of the children of the revolutionary nobility; it ultimately comes from the insubstantiality of the social and cultural experiences of socialist modernity. It is too new, too conceptual, too voluntaristic, too lacking in the rich accumulation of traditional life, social norms, and cultivation. And it does not possess the materialism of the domain of urban bourgeois life and cultural abundance. This is the peculiar phenomenon of socialist modernity, which is then a kind of allegory. It has to be addressed when we deal with socialist experience on the plane of thought and enlightenment. Socialism and revolution can be raised up to accord one a sense of advancement and idealism; on a conceptual level they have already surpassed capitalism. But with regard to material and cultural wealth and the construction of social and political order, they remain very weak and fragile.

**Enlightenment: The Self-Overcoming of Chinese Socialism as an Abstraction**

Yet, reasonably speaking, “enlightenment” cannot ultimately leap from an emptiness of ignorance and superstition to an emptiness of idealism. It requires rational, experiential actuality. At its core it demands a new life form. If these young people wish to become subjects of history, to become their own masters, they need to obtain many things, to possess them; they need to absorb the alien into its own formation; they must withstand the test of reality. Thus Wang Anyi first tests them in confrontation with the girls, then with the parents, and then with the “interlocutors.” Passing through these small series of tests, we are able to perceive more clearly what they have, what they lack; what kind of potentiality they carry with them, what shortcomings they must overcome. The significance of these interlocutors on the one hand lies with the historical experience they represent; on the other hand it lies in the individuality, temperament, wisdom, and so forth, with which they mould these particular
experiences and personal histories. Compared with the notions and slogans of Nanchang et al., what these characters represent is the world of particularities. This concrete world finds no way to compete with the conceptual, theoretical world, for the latter occupies the commanding vantage bestowed by revolutionary power, and therefore has legitimacy beyond dispute. But this-world concreteness also refuses to submit obediently to their withdrawal from the stage of history and from the life-world, precisely because it is a concrete, actual thing. Behind it there lies no shortage of theories on which to expound; only its theoretical sustenance has been overpowered by the momentum and dynamics of Mao’s China. This is not a prevailing order that is achieved once and for all, but rather it is a temporary overpowering; in the future, that concrete life-world will stage a comeback along with a political climate change—and this is truly the fundamental contradiction of twentieth-century China.

Thus perceived, *Age of Enlightenment* is drawn into the core of the ideological struggle of our era. In reality, Wang Anyi is mobilizing a writer’s resources and capacity to cope with a problematic that the entire Chinese intellectual community has to confront. She ponders the historical substance of “enlightenment,” its objective form, and its genealogy. If these few issues are not clarified, Nanchang will never grow into maturity; he will always suffer, will never find love, will never reconcile with his father, and will never be able to engage in the substantive connection with children of the urban classes such as Ah Ming; in other words, he will repeat the stymied path of the “thinker” or “enlightener” in a life of solitude. The enlightenment of *Age of Enlightenment* is not that to which we used to refer as “bourgeois enlightenment” or “petty-bourgeois enlightenment,” but is rather the enlightenment of the socialist revolution and cultural revolution. Thus, Nanchang’s maturation of necessity entails also the overcoming and surpassing of his own selfhood. In this sense, the spiritual quality of Wang Anyi’s work belongs to the paradigmatic model of revolutionary and realist literature. This is what she means by such effacing remarks as: “I am simply myself,” “Zhang Ailing did not leave a significant influence on our generation,” “I am not the inheritor of the Shanghai School of literature.”

Upon clarifying the four character-sets of *Age of Enlightenment*, the novel’s structure and narrative development begin to cohere. The reader first encounters the dejection of adolescence, which becomes the first layer of narrative impetus, driving the characters’ behavior, expressions, and inner life. At first they are speaking within themselves; then they are speaking with girls; then they seek out a few interlocutors; and finally they return, beyond themselves, to the generation of their fathers. One might sense the relative slowness, even sluggishness, of the novel’s third section.

I, too, once asked Wang Anyi why this is. Her answer was very straightforward:
she said she had not been able to decide where to move her chess pieces. She had not been able to figure out which female character would indeed suit Nanchang best, and her writing process slowed accordingly. Wang Anyi had truly wanted to give Nanchang a girlfriend, had searched everywhere for one, but found none suitable. In the course of writing, good writers, in fact, follow laws of probability—there are certain things that simply cannot happen, that are unbelievable, that will appear very artificial. Only when she had introduced Jiabao’s entry onto the scene did Wang Anyi feel that she could allow Nanchang to pair off. Nanchang’s sexual enlightenment, on the level of symbolic meaning, constitutes the novel’s turning point.

I wish to speak once again on the complexity contained within this title, “age of enlightenment.” We ought to ask, what is the substance of enlightenment? In what sense does it introduce something entirely new—for instance, a completely new world view, a new value of life—that brings about a new subject of consciousness? And in what sense is it possible to establish this subject on the foundations of traditions, customs, the forms of daily life, and various cultural mentalities—allowing it to move from a conceptual castle in the air to a real historical social force? Traversing through our analysis of the structure of the novel’s characters, we can see that the implication of the first level of “enlightenment” is practically a physiological sense of growing up; this is its most fundamental level. The bodies of the boys gradually develop, growing from boys to adults; in this transitional period it is a very natural that the body caught in its youth, in the deep sleep of innocence and ignorance, should desire to regain consciousness. What is most evident is their changed attitude towards the girls; next is the enlarged range of their activities; following that is the ability to come into contact with new ideas, new thinking; the ability to think independently, to participate in public debate, to rebel against teachers and parents. It can be seen thus how the specific background of “cultural revolution” constitutes the external conditions of “enlightenment.” All of the male protagonists’ inner movements in *Age of Enlightenment* possess a very strong physicality and corporeality. Conversely, the awakening of the human body itself demands thought as well. It might be said that this is the distinguishing feature of the era; the thought and desire of an era of abstinence are always especially, and stubbornly, inseparable. Participating in this rebellion faction or in that battle brigade, expressing opinions out from under a big crowd, swallowing whole *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trying to work out within one’s brain several colossal and extremely abstract ideas, such as class, world history, revolution, etc. In today’s era of consumerism and commercialized culture, “enlightenment” is not unfolding to a similar degree.

The second layer of the meaning of enlightenment is education and self-education, the reading of every kind of books including “society as a grand
book.” *Age of Enlightenment* frequently introduces us to what these young male characters are reading. Today they are reading this, tomorrow that; of course we understand that they do not understand what they are reading, but no matter. Playing with big words or discourses itself gives them a special pleasure. The next step is precisely the reading of society; they emerge from the books; from the indoors they venture outdoors before returning back inside—there are many things that revolve in circles. Thus these few fundamental themes, such as “education,” “growing up,” “awakening,” “enlightenment,” are all linked together from beginning to end, intermingled. Within a “hermeneutic circle” of this kind, it is possible to enter into a character’s inner world from anywhere; but Wang Anyi chooses to enter from the direction of revolution and enlightenment in a strict sense. The circle is descending, however, and the substance of the problem changes, displacing the original assumption. Replacing it is consciousness, awakening, and growing up in a more concrete, more pressing sense. This already bears the hint of a dream, not the idea of enlightenment in a pure conceptual sense. After another round of the descending spiral, the problem of regaining consciousness and maturation changes into that of growing up in an actual, physiological sense. Compared with this, “maturation” is still too generalized, too abstract. Furthermore, it is constantly stunted. In one year, everyone grows up, and they grow up quickly; this is a characteristic of adolescence. Everything grows so quickly, and nothing remains stable. Growing up thus brings another problem along with it—that of nature. Any life-form that grows up possesses laws: everything requires fixed objective conditions, adequate nutrition, sun and rain, and so forth. If we assume that the social and intellectual environment of the revolutionary period is completely abominable, then the very least we can ask is this: What is upholding the growth and development of this generation of youth? If we look carefully at this “crop” growth of Nanchang, Chen Zhuoran, He Xiangming, we can comprehend the climate, soil, farming technology, organization of social production, and price quotes of that historical generation. The barrenness and abundance of these characters, their capabilities and limitations all carry historical implications in this manner.

Because the preconditions for a treatment of this subject-matter in the realm of ideas have not yet been made available, *Age of Enlightenment*’s grasp of “enlightenment” brings something akin to the flavor of “natural history.” Nanchang, Chen Zhuoran and the others deserve to be saved, as even when trapped in the most unnatural, artificial, dogmatic, abstract, and generalized mind-set, they nevertheless embody a natural vitality, which is to say that “enlightenment” moves little by little from abstraction and conceptualization to something concrete, to something that is not completely abstract. I feel that Wang Anyi grasps this general tendency extremely well; I do not know if she does this
intentionally or whether, objectively speaking, it just so happens to come about this way. I am constantly taken aback while reading. This novel requires reading through to the end before it can be fully experienced. It resembles a movie filmed in one continuous shot, from sunrise to sunset, all the changing rays meticulously recorded. Yet “natural” is still not the ultimate perceptual concreteness that Wang Anyi leaves with us. Because, in Wang Anyi’s terms, “natural” is still too abstract, too conceptual, and it still requires a separate explanatory circle in order to restore its even more concrete and fundamental aspects. What the novel ultimately leaves with us, I feel, is a concept of the human, the social, and the everyday. It is an integral, ordinary, humanistic kind of life, one that is at the same time rich in idealism. In the end, the blurriness or multiple interpretations of the ultimate thinking of this novel stem from our understanding of the forms of everyday life that pursue this honest, simple, and pursuing spirit.

**Toward the Light: Cultural Revolution as Reconstruction of the Real**

To a certain degree, if *Age of Enlightenment* were treated simply as a drama of thought, composed of several boys and girls shoved from the realm of intense emptiness and pallid inner being into the life of ordinary human beings, it would then be very easy to categorize as a work that has followed the trends of “philistine philosophy” in the era of market economy. Far removed from idealism, the latter emphasizes daily life; it battles utopia, opposes Lu Xun, upholds Zhang Ailing, and so on. It would appear that the fundamental orbit of twentieth-century China is that which moves from “Call to Arms” (*Nahan*) to “Gossip” (*Liuyan*)—only by negating enlightenment, revolution, idealism, and collective praxis can we return to the world of humans and individuals; only then do we have perpetual, genuine history, genuine “modernity” and so forth. But Wang Anyi clearly does not perceive the matter in this way. Her return to so-called normal, prosaic, human, worldly life, to getting along slowly but surely, does not reject history in any sense, does not reject enlightenment or idealism, but rather maintains a critical nostalgia or a nostalgic critique of the passion surrounding enlightenment. Thus, after the cycle of daily life, her final coda returns to something poetic; to romantic, hymnal tones. With regard to a person of extreme individuality, “enlightenment” signifies a long “growing up,” a “pain of spiritual transformation.” The general feeling of Wang Anyi’s writing resembles that of the portrayals of personal experience in matters of love by the ancient Greek poet Sappho (including homosexual experience of the spiritual exchange of friendship). It is a bittersweet kind of experience. Thus, even though the male protagonists of *Age of Enlightenment* grow up in a cultural environment “without
a penny to its name,” stuck more often than not at an impasse, their inner lives are rich and their sufferings “joyous”; to use Wang Anyi’s words, “this is joy in disguise, the essence of which is purity.”

Following up on this purity of essence, the characters and story of *Age of Enlightenment* are not merely woven to create the moral genealogy of morality of one generation, but are created furthermore for the sake of “fabricating” a concrete space of phenomenology-of-spirit for the spiritual history of the Chinese Revolution. The fountainhead of the Chinese Revolution lies within its own prehistory; but its reality, its spiritual substance must be established and concretized in the life-world created by the Revolution itself. This process of establishment includes that of the maturation of the revolutionary “second generation” under the terms of “continuing revolution” (even “cultural revolution”). In the first half of China’s twentieth century, the notion of enlightenment passed through revolution to become political movement and social reality; but only amidst the individual practice of the new “establishment of humans” (Lu Xun) would revolution be able to obtain the determinateness of its own value-world. This is also to say that, although the new round of revolution once served as the opening of the space of abstract concepts, yet it has also gone a step further toward the accomplishment of a new individual as the unity of new life and new culture. Without this synthesis of life and spirit, there will be no way to understand and penetrate the “joy” residing in the midst of suffering within the novel. It is precisely this notion of the completely new individual, this new exploration of self-consciousness by way of “upright reflection” (Wang Anyi), which takes itself as a new origin pointing in the direction of the future. Regardless of whether this new source is, at the beginning, a tiny stream; no matter how barren and empty is the content of its spirit; it is nonetheless the entire moral core of the subjectivity of contemporary China, and defines the historical substance of this subjectivity.

Today’s readers should ponder whether or not this painful experience of joy or joyful experience of pain, this purity of essence, is bound to the historical substance and moral foundation of PRC. It is at this moment that the form of the city of Shanghai, including its spatial form and the form of its daily life, is finally determined in the novel. This city “possesses a kind of law of its own, grows on its own.” But the status of being-in-itself of this modern metropolis has had to “withstand the baptism of the great revolution” before obtaining a spiritual form or an aesthetic meaning, and becoming itself an aesthetic object. It is the reality-being illuminated by the light of inner being, which is the ultimate meaning of enlightenment—as it grows up, it also becomes aware; as it is external, it is also internal. Whoever has passed his youth and maturation amid such spiritual intensity might say that the hour that is poorest, the most painful, dubious, uncertain, and helpless is also precisely “the glorious hour of coming of
age.” This state of “not knowing which course to take, while the heart is full of light” corresponds to a transcendental attitude towards life. Another, even more concrete, image appears at the very end of the novel, where Nanchang sees Shula running: “A child of her age always wants to run about in that way, as though toward a goal set in the future.” This posture of all-out running implies movement toward a goal that is yet uncertain; as with sculpture, you make an abstract notion beautiful, and the manner of perception becomes fixed. This kind of inner light and running posture, in the history of contemporary Chinese consciousness or collective psyche is indicative of an apex rather than a nadir, a highlight rather than a blemish. They represent a pure interiority, an unadulterated historical and moral possibility. Without understanding these points, the coda that the novel approaches would seem inconceivable: In growing up there are indeed some glorious moments, following upon even more enduring periods of blindness, of deep accumulations and meager issuances. In simple terms, this resembles the infant in the mother’s womb, drawing nourishment from within a dim sleep. The moment of birth suddenly arises, bringing with it a precipitous light. As you gradually adapt to the light, it returns to dusk; the awakening is transformed once again into sleep, into drawing nourishment and awaiting the light. This light will surpass the one previous in its magnificence and illumination; but you will grow accustomed to it, too; and as it turns dim again you will anticipate the light yet to follow. Thus from the significance of one light you will enter into another, followed by the third, the fourth, the fifth, and countless others. The brilliance of those lights has no limit or end, and all depends on whether or not you have enough passion to grow up. Oh, joy! …In this moment they have forgotten the era’s equivocations, the ambiguities of the future. They know not what course to take, yet their hearts are filled with light. The downtown streets lined with lanterns are radiating light; soon afterwards they will once again sink into shadows ever deeper. Plane trees [platanes] are still, forming the arch of shadows; two leaf-like boats of lights pass underneath.¹

We may as well draw this portrayal into a comparison with Hegel’s famous passage from the preface to Phenomenology of Spirit, which implicitly refers to the French Revolution. Hegel writes:

It is not difficult to see that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era. Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past, and in the labor of its own transformation. Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward. But just as the first breath drawn by a child after its long,

¹ Wang Anyi, 2007, 269.
quiet nourishment breaks the gradualness of merely quantitative growth—there is a qualitative leap, and the child is born—so likewise the Spirit in its formation matures slowly and quietly into its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms. The frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change. The graduate crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world.  

In the “epoch of birth-time and transition” of twentieth-century China, the spirit of every forward motion is accompanied by the departure from the life and world-view of the old. The apparent authenticity of the rise of China is like the image of a new world revealed by a flash of lightning. However, the building of a new life-world and spiritual world on the foundations of the toppled old world is emphatically not accomplished all in one breath or in one qualitative leap. In reality, following every revolution and every grand social movement, we can hardly miss hearing the belabored gasps of new life. In the midst of this series of instinctive struggles to resist suffocation—rather than in the total image of new life itself—we can perhaps more clearly catch sight of a history of Bildung, namely education and formation in one, and give it a fair evaluation. Just as the fetal life receives the nourishment of the mother’s body, the form and ideology of new life are also circumscribed by the old social environment of her womb. In Age of Enlightenment, Nanchang and Chen Zhuoran are in the barren cultural world just as Xiao Laoda, with his congenital physical shortcomings, carries the “carelessness and boredom” of the new world established by their parents’ generation. Because of this, when revolution follows its own logic toward “cultural revolution,” the “enlightenment” to which the second generation of revolution devotes itself is not only that which throws off and smashes the old world (including the state, social order, and moral sense established by the parents’ generation), but also, in a natural sense, it is that which seeks out and absorbs all the nutrients essential to survival and growth. This exertion is also an instinctive struggle to overcome scarcity. This scarcity is not only that of philosophy on the part of their political fathers, but also the cultural poverty of historical motherhood. Amid the course of their growth, this poverty is first experienced as the “poverty of life.” In Wang Anyi’s Age of Enlightenment, there appears in this manner a particular “dialectic of enlightenment” determined by the still-unfinished historical experience of the Chinese Revolution: That attempt to set up a new “qualitative leap” of world-spirit not only, like the sunrise, “suspects” the life-world; it also, on the level of the concreteness of individual  

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experience, is the continuous striving to rebuild the life-world. Here, spirit is also the antithesis of reality that seeks the overcoming and transcendence of reality. At the same time, this process of overcoming and surpassing seeks and defines its own actuality. The search is overcome and surpassed by reality; it transcends itself amid the understanding and grasp of reality. This process of the negation and re-negation of the dialectic of the self is that which constitutes the light entering dimness, transitioning again to an ever-higher level of the light of “enlightenment.”

This process of self-negation, brimming with tension, constitutes the particular force of Age of Enlightenment as a drama of thought. The “political unconscious” of Age of Enlightenment lies in its representation of the transitional nature, uncertainty and contradiction of our own age by means of the “fabrication” of the spiritual tensions and contradictions of the revolutionary generation’s collective history of growth. If the novel did not conclude in this manner, its narrative would perhaps allow one to feel too oriented toward everyday life, too reluctant to depart from the “water-like moonlight of troubled times.” The tendency towards urban life and urban civil values would then be too strong. Wang Anyi herself has considered the possibility that she has overrated the revolutionary generation of Nanchang, Chen Zhuoran, and others; that it was very possibly the children of the urban classes such as Ah Ming who could reliably shoulder the heavy responsibility of “enlightenment” and “thought.” Yet, Wang Anyi’s novel does not conclude in this manner; rather, it affirms idealism, in hopes that idealism will find its own path in concrete reality; an honest, steady, and refined form of life. We see at the end of the novel:

Nanchang went out the door, down the stairs, unlocked his bicycle and mounted it. It was the intersection of 1968 and 1969. The buttonwood trees had lost their leaves, exposing their sturdy branches and the patterns of their trunks. The direct sunlight dazzled his eyes. It seemed there were fewer and fewer people on the streets. He did not know whether it was because the young people were departing in succession, but he felt that the city’s tranquility made it dignified. He recalled Chen Zhuoran’s views on the “urban petty bourgeoisie,” his acknowledgement that this city possessed its own thinking, which was not profound but rather in hiding. Amid the false romanticism of the wall adornments, the building structures, the delicate handling of the winding street-corners, amid their style of frivolous magnificence flowed incorruptible thoughts.  

Wang Anyi wishes to show the stateliness—even the sublime quality—of Shanghai, its integrity, its sense of form and idealism. This is the basic interest underlying her literary representation of Shanghai. The character Nanchang should also be understood in this sense.

But regardless of the words uttered by such young people as Nanchang and

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Chen Zhuoran, Wang Anyi does not evade the fact that Shanghai’s splendor is also extremely superficial, incredibly frivolous, a false romanticism. According to the offspring of the revolutionaries, Shanghai has the air of petty households—yet it possesses integrity of thought, as well. On the other hand, the lives that revolution swept to the margins—including the girls, the historical memory, Old Gu, Dr. Gao, Principal Wang—have now returned. They provide the very possibility of “incorruptible thoughts” for those empty souls at the center of the world historical stage. This is once again the synthesis that follows upon a negation. The ultimate synthesis that Wang Anyi proposes is a reconciliation, which means that the class and the ideology that militarily and politically conquered this city have finally sought to make peace with the concreteness of the everyday life, and even with the historical concreteness of the city *culturally*, that is, to treat the latter as its own education and formation. By reconciliation, I do not intend the vulgar sense of reconciliation that entails living together without quarreling, but rather the sense of reconciliation that is the negation of the negation: I want to see my own historicity within your everyday life; I want to catch sight of a substantial content within my hollow spirit. Once I have obtained a spirit of reconciliation, the empty ideal will no longer be empty but rather will possess the glamour of having grown to maturity. This glamour, as the beginning of the novel seems to imply, would appear to be the natural purview solely of young men; but the end of the novel does not proceed thus. Of course, Nanchang must still continue to probe his own identity and struggle with a sense of crisis, an aspect which shares many of the concerns of nineteenth-century Russian literature: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where do we wish to go? What are we doing? What is this world all about? What is justice? What is truth? What is love? It is very moving that these gigantic questions should be pondered so earnestly by extraordinarily concrete boys and girls in abnormal situations.

In sum, *Age of Enlightenment* presents by and large a positive discussion of enlightenment, of an enlightenment era. Wang Anyi is not renouncing enlightenment in a direct sense but rather tries to supplement it in various ways. In the end, something originally antagonistic might acquire a synthesis within a new dialectic. It is only natural that the *Bildungsroman* should provide a felicitous form for probing this synthesis. Under the designations of “enlightenment” and “cultivation,” we can carefully observe the interaction of “rites” and “unruliness” in the new society, which thereby finds a deeper foundation for a moral character and social order that are sustainable, modern, rational, and critical—all the while according with traditional custom. The “rites” that regulate “unruliness” no doubt function as “enlightenment” in the sense of “cultivation”; but there are times when an “unruliness” renews the substance of “rites.” Why would “cultural revolution,” then, not be deemed “enlightenment” as well? *Age of Enlightenment* as a literary work does not, of course, provide
answers to this series of theoretical questions, but it does describe for us the
features of an archetype of spiritual physiognomy, as well as the ethos—the
personality—of an “enlightenment era.” The possibility of that synthesis is raised
in literary and aesthetic domains by Wang Anyi; but it seems that our conceptual
reflection at present is not yet ready. We have not yet prepared ourselves to
comprehend our own past, which is also to say that upon facing such questions as
“Who am I? Where do we come from? Where are we going?” we are obliged to
maintain an evasive attitude of open-endedness. Hence it is possible to infer that
we are also lacking in thought about what lies in store for ourselves.

Coda: Notes on Shanghai as the Modern Chinese City

Finally, I wish to say more about Shanghai beyond the context of Age of
Enlightenment. The children of the middle classes of Shanghai, people who have
customs well established yet lack transcendence—they cannot sublimate, to use
Wang Anyi’s words. These conventional life forms have a natural anti-theoretical
tendency. When young boys and girls go to their classmates’ houses, shoving
open the doors, they discover that they have not entered another home but rather
another era: you simply did not expect this era to be here still. The child does not
yet comprehend it but can smell something amiss. More often than not you do
not know upon opening a door which era, which class, which class’s social space
resides in the “private life” behind the heavy curtains. The complexity of the
interior space of Shanghai’s everyday life, like an air-bubble inside a rock,
possesses a great many cavities; although revolutionary and cultural-revolutionary
movements convulse the earth’s crust, these cavities exist nonetheless. In
Anecdotes from the Cultural Revolution (Wenge yishi), Wang Anyi presents a
splendid description of this. Ever since the late Qing period, the inheritance of
the familial and cultural wealth of Shanghai has been relatively continuous and
consistent; for instance, Old Gu’s capitalist lineage, Xiao Laoda’s mother’s and
grandmother’s lineage, Principal Wang and Dr. Gao’s so-called modern,
Western-style education, the genealogy of modern science—all are very distinct
and clear. In this respect, different genealogies coexist side-by-side in the new
era; all are “subtexts,” “unspoken words”; they do not interfere with one another,
and none could eliminate the others. Regardless of which wind sways the
superstructural realm, the topology of the domain of daily life persists.

If we realize the thoroughgoing nature of the socialist transformation of China,
we can infer that bourgeois lifestyle and ideology are quite tenacious in Shanghai.
Roughly speaking, the several thousand years’ worth of feudalistic social
foundation that constituted China was swept away in one stroke. The landlord
class alone, having accumulated over several thousand years, was dismantled by
the Land Reforms. But the most recent bourgeois class of Shanghai, along with
their accumulation in this semi-colonial city, somehow could not be toppled. It carries some flavor of the “prairie fires that would not be extinguished, as the spring breeze sustains them.” Naturally, this is related to the international environment, as well; nonetheless, this “orphan island” of Shanghai indeed possesses all manner of specificity. In this respect, reading Shanghai is reading a great text of class struggle. Shanghai poses the optimal site for a fieldwork investigation of the history of class, cultural construction, and thought, because it is the intersection of contradiction as well as the frontline of struggle. It is a silent battlefield.

The “content” of Wang Anyi’s work is intertwined with the complexity and intrinsic tension of the geological formation of history. The sentimental, mannerist works about Shanghai—such as those of the “wind, flower, snow, and moon” genre, literary instances both superficial and sloppy—are unable to grasp this complexity and tension; they relate merely to Shanghai’s fashion-consciousness, its trendiness, and its temporary inclusion in the global colonial and imperialist system of capital. The fashionable, superfluous academic studies or criticism on Shanghai, meanwhile, are also fundamentally unable to interpret this complexity and tension. For several years I have followed Wang Anyi’s writing with great interest, sensing that a historical complexity emerges from within her literary experience. This complexity is oriented toward still-unresolved historical contradictions; and these contradictions, which are presently underway, all possess real social objectivity and life-forms specific to living individuals and their everyday behaviors and value judgments. The various classes in modern China, the various class standpoints and ideological expressions, as well as the ceremonies of daily life all have developed fully in Shanghai. Not only have the bourgeois and proletarian ideologies developed abundantly there, but also, up until the 1960s, Shanghai has served as the center for industrial workers’ politics, and hence, for radicalism in modern-day China. This is so much the case that, within Shanghai, every trade or industry has developed its own set of guild regulations and standard of living, even its particular value judgment and world views. Other places in China either have not seen this or can only see a form of it that is not fully developed. In this specific sense, Shanghai is indeed China’s most modern city. And in this sense, contemporary Chinese literary production still lacks an authentic notion of “urban literature” or “metropolitan form,” which is indeed a great pity.

References
