

Symphony of Sex, Power, and the Absurdity of Existence: On the Power Mechanism and State of Existence in "The Golden Age"

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Abstract: This paper delves into the intricate dynamics of power and existence as portrayed in Wang Xiaobo's seminal work "The Golden Age," set against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution. It scrutinizes the novel's parody and deconstruction of the power mechanisms that characterized this tumultuous era, shedding light on the existential dilemmas faced by individuals within the context of an absurd society. By examining the narrative's subversion of the status quo and its depiction of human nature under duress, the paper underscores the pervasive impact of power on individual autonomy and the essence of personal identity. The study reveals how "The Golden Age" transcends its historical setting to offer a timeless meditation on the human condition, particularly in relation to the quest for authenticity and freedom amidst societal absurdity. Wang Xiaobo's work is not merely a historical account but a profound philosophical inquiry into the nature of power and its capacity to warp human experience. Through a close analysis of the text, this paper aims to demonstrate the author's unwavering commitment to the ideals of personal liberty and the inherent dignity of human beings, as well as his relentless pursuit of spiritual emancipation in the face of life's absurdities.

Keywords: "The Golden Age", Power Mechanism, State of Existence, Sexual Description, Existence.

1. Introduction

Wang Xiaobo's *The Golden Age* breaks away from the long-standing tradition of Soviet socialist realism in Chinese novels, which reflects real life in an ideological manner. While accurately depicting specific life details of the "Cultural Revolution" period, it transcends the reproduction of social life during that era, revealing the state of existence of people.

The "Cultural Revolution" period in the novel's text is not merely the backdrop of the story but also the "exposure field" of the power mechanism carefully selected by the author, an "ordinary" example where the operation of power is exposed due to its extremity.[1] Thus, the novel surpasses the era it depicts, showcasing the universal state of existence of people in the cycle of power and exploring the patterns of change in human history, expressing Wang Xiaobo's mockery and contemplation of the distortion of human nature by power.

2. Sexual Description - Parody and Challenge of the Power Mechanism

In many articles recalling the Cultural Revolution period, the era is described as one of asceticism, where sex only existed in the reproductive function serving the operation of the state machinery. However, *The Golden Age* is replete with explicit and candid descriptions of "sex" and scenes and images related to "sex." There is a glaring rift between "non-sexual sex" and the sexual love in the text.

The love story between Wang Er and Chen Qingyang in *The Golden Age* is not based on the author's real experiences during the period of being sent down to the countryside, but is fictional, as there was no in-depth interaction between men and women in real life, and the character of Chen Qingyang does not exist. Someone once interviewed at the farm in Yunnan where Wang Xiaobo was sent down and found that "the educated youth from Beijing did not talk to each other... The love between Wang Er and Chen Qingyang in *The Golden Age* showed no signs or possibilities of sprouting in Xiaobo's time of being sent down." [2] Wang Xiaobo explained in *Talking about the Art of the Novel from 'The Golden Age'* that his intention to write about "sex" was "In a non-sexual era, sex becomes the theme of life, just as eating becomes the theme of life in an era of hunger." [3] Combining Freud's "repression-substitution" mechanism, when an instinctive impulse (such as sexual desire) is suppressed by social norms and morality, this impulse does not disappear but manifests in other forms or is transformed into other psychological and behavioral issues. Therefore, the carnivalesque sexual writing in the novel's text is not baseless imagination but becomes a window to observe the state of human existence.

2.1. The Creation of "Great Friendship": Parodying the Operation of the Power Mechanism

The character of Chen Qingyang embodies the complexity of multiple identities. On the one hand, she is a microcosm of the ordinary people of that era, submitting to the judgment and bullying of the power system. Because everyone called her a "broken shoe," she tried every means to prove herself, "soul not in the body, almost not knowing who she was." On the other hand, she possesses the temperament of an intellectual elite, with inner pride and high education, as Wang Er said: "She thinks it doesn't matter what she wears or not wearing anything. This is the confidence cultivated since childhood." After the end of the Cultural Revolution, she had a good job in the hospital and was promoted by the leaders. When they met again, from inside to outside, "she was a fragrant lady."

Wang Er and Chen Qingyang were in the same weak position on the farm, but he had different cognitive thinking from Chen Qingyang. Chen Qingyang's "self-proof of being a broken shoe" indicated that she believed others' cognition determined her existence, while Wang Er always clearly knew that his own cognition determined his existence. When the team leader maliciously accused him of shooting a female dog, he immediately pointed out that he could not change others' evaluations, "In fact, I can't prove anything except those things that don't need proof." When Wang Er lay on the grass and indulged his sexual desire, he believed that "this thing is extremely important, just like my own existence itself," and it was his real sexual desire that determined his existence. Understanding the differences in the cognitive methods of the two allows a clearer perception of the metaphor of their sexual relationship to power relations and the state of existence.

The sexual relationship between Chen Qingyang and Wang Er originated from Wang Er's "great friendship." Wang Er tried to use "great friendship" to persuade Chen Qingyang to be "loyal" to him and satisfy his need for sex. When Chen Qingyang first heard of "great friendship," she was deeply moved and promised to repay Wang Er with an even greater friendship, even if he was a despicable person. However, when Wang Er proposed to "study the structure of the body," she realized that "great friendship" might just be a scam, but out of the need for an alliance, she chose to continue believing and dedicating herself to Wang Er. Twenty years later, when they met again, she still

doubted the authenticity of "great friendship," but admitted that those words had a magic for her, and even if everything was illusory, she did not regret it.

"Great friendship" in the novel's text is a floating signifier, which can be understood as a cover made by Wang Er to deceive Chen Qingyang into having sex with him, or it can be seen as a special power mechanism derived by Wang Er from revolutionary discourse. The two are not contradictory but complementary. Sexual relationships have both natural and social dual relationships, and it can be said that Wang Er used Chen Qingyang's psychology of easily falling into this "vacuum" of belief to bring her into the alliance belief he wove, successfully achieving the goal of making her willing to dedicate herself.

The above argument shows that the creation of "great friendship" has a certain isomorphism with the implementation of revolutionary discourse. In the red narrative, women's choice of the road and obedience to revolutionary discourse are shown together with the worship of men representing the authority of revolutionary discourse.[4] Just like in *Song of Youth*, Lin Daojing decided to escape the petty bourgeois warm family and go to the revolution under the influence of her spiritual knight Lu Jiachuan, and then completed the revolutionary task under the guidance of the revolutionary veteran Jiang Hua, realizing the transformation from a petty bourgeois to a revolutionary soldier. The key nodes of Lin Daojing's revolutionary road are filled with worship of men with revolutionary authority. Chen Qingyang's recognition that "great friendship" fascinated her like a spell, even realizing the falsity of "great friendship" and still choosing to believe, reflects the author's understanding of the power operation mechanism during the revolutionary period.

Wang Er constructed an alliance form through "great friendship," and there must be enemies with alliances. This is essentially a parody of the "binary opposition" mode in revolutionary narrative. This power mode not only exists in the "two-line struggle" during the Cultural Revolution period but also runs through the development of human society. From the ancient "dual deity religion" to the "proletarian dictatorship and the reactionary rule of the Kuomintang" during the New Democratic Revolution period, the binary opposition mode runs through the power operation, changing people's psychological structure to a large extent, making them willingly stay in the binary mode of "sadism and masochism," "allies and enemies," distorting their own value judgment.

At the same time, the physical relationship in sexual relationships is also closely related to the "body politics" required by revolutionary discourse. In the structure of revolutionary discourse, the holy and transcendent belief flag must be verified through the body, such as "dedication" being regarded as "abandoning the body and self-tempering." [1] Chen Qingyang's dedication to "great friendship" can also be seen as a parody of "body politics" in the operation of power. She needed an ally when all around were enemies, and this psychology was similar to her initial hope that Wang Er would prove that she was not a "broken shoe." "She did not want to miss the opportunity and let me become an enemy," so she followed the requirements of "great friendship" and dedicated herself to Wang Er.

Wang Er's answer to the authenticity of "great friendship" also conveys the author's attitude towards the power operation mechanism. "In fact, great friendship is neither true nor false, just like everything in the world, if you believe it is true, it will be true. If you doubt it is false, it will be false." With a non-true non-false mocking attitude, the authority endowed by power is dissolved.

2.2. Collective Voyeurism Ritual: Deconstruction of the Repression Structure

In addition to the frank sexual descriptions between Wang Er and Chen Qingyang, the novel also exposes the perverted sexual psychology and state of existence of people under the ascetic power system through collective sexual voyeurism such as cadres reading confession materials and the masses participating in the "struggle against broken shoes" ceremony. In *On Style*, Wang Xiaobo discusses the psychological perversion reflected behind this collective and orgiastic form of sexual

deviance. Normal sexual psychology regards sex as an important aspect of life, but not the entirety of it. Abnormal psychology, on the other hand, either denies its existence or is preoccupied with it to the exclusion of all else. If the sexual psychology of a society is abnormal, it will exhibit both tendencies.[5]

The text repeatedly mentions that leading cadres determined that Wang Er and Chen Qingyang were openly "having an affair," elevating this behavior to "committing a crime," and requiring Wang Er to write confession materials. According to this logic of politicizing all personal life, writing confession materials should be a serious political act. However, in Wang Er's narration, the confession materials transformed from repenting for mistakes to writing erotic literature. The text repeatedly mentions the attitude of leading cadres towards the confession materials written by Wang Er. "He said the biggest advantage of being a personnel cadre is being able to see the confession materials written by others." "The confession materials I wrote are loved by everyone." When Wang Er and Chen Qingyang faced the extremely serious charge of betraying their country, the comrades of the Public Security Group did not ask Wang Er to explain the issue of betraying their country but asked him to continue to confess about his relationships with women. Leading cadres are not interested in political issues, only in Wang Er's story-like erotic writing. Thus, personal life is politicized, and political issues are personalized, entirely at the discretion of the leaders. The authority of the interrogation is dissolved, and the writing and review of confession materials have become a way for higher-level cadres to pry into sexuality.

The "struggle session" in the novel is a voyeuristic ritual for the whole people, which completely dissolves the seriousness of the struggle in a thoroughly entertaining form. In this grand ceremony, both the person being struggled against and the struggler are fully engaged in this carnival. The propaganda team leader tied Chen Qingyang into a shape that people like to see, with curves fully exposed. Chen Qingyang, like a real actor, cooperated with the performance and felt proud that people came to see her. The people present obtained the sexual stimulation they wanted, with women commenting on her and men's "crotches bulging."

The collective voyeuristic ritual is a projection of everyone's desires. In an era where desires are not allowed, "indulging desires" is considered wrong, and "suppressing desires" is considered right. People who are suppressed by this power discourse cannot satisfy their desires through themselves, but desires do not disappear, so people project their desires onto others. On the surface, the struggler is the side that abuses, and the person being struggled against is the side that is abused. In reality, the struggler behaves indecently and cannot control himself in the ceremony, while the person being struggled against is proud and throws a pitying smile at the people who endure hardship. The novel's narration of this scene has obviously reversed the status relationship between the two in reality. Through the ritual of prying, the identities of the abuser and the abused are transformed, and the structure of repression is deconstructed.

3. Emphasis on the "Existence" Issue - The State of Individual Existence in an Absurd World

The novel's text repeatedly mentions topics related to "existence," and this arrangement is by no means accidental. While reproducing and deconstructing the power operation mechanism during the Cultural Revolution, the novel raises a more complex issue - how individuals cope in an absurd world. The novel does not provide a standard answer but provides multiple possibilities through the portrayal of the protagonists Chen Qingyang and Wang Er.

As mentioned above, Wang Er realized earlier than Chen Qingyang the absurdity of the real world's power operation rules, letting go of the obsession with his own existence in others' words, and clearly knowing that his own cognition determines his own existence. He cleverly disguised himself with a cynical mask, facing the orders of the team leader and the comrades of the Public

Security Group, choosing to be in a position of being abused and following orders. But behind this apparent obedience is a huge mental pressure. He tried to get a little revenge by shooting the right eye of the team leader's mother dog, to vent his desires and relieve loneliness by going to the mountains for convalescence and openly "promoting revolutionary friendship" with Chen Qingyang, and even carried out a complete revenge at the home of the military representative. But he still realized at some moments the deep powerlessness of fighting alone against an absurd society, "I didn't care about those leeches. It was only when I got ashore that I pulled them off one by one and burned them to death. They became soft and bubbly when burned. Suddenly, I felt very annoyed and tired, not like a 21-year-old. I thought, if this goes on, I will age quickly." Even a free-spirited person like Wang Er felt his own decline in the endless confession materials, "I thought, the rest of my life will be spent in confessions." Behind Wang Er's black humor is still endless desolation, which also reveals the great impact of absurd power rules on people. Conscious people cannot even save themselves, let alone ordinary people?

Compared with Wang Er, who chose to let fate take its course and no longer resist in the confession materials after the second descent, Chen Qingyang did something different in that she firmly determined in the last confession material that she was in love with Wang Er. Admitting love is admitting to publicly and comprehensively deny the ideology of this era and admit all sins. Through this admission of herself, she successfully freed herself from the position of "being abused" and moved towards the true self. As mentioned at the beginning, this novel is not a work that depicts real reality but is more like a spiritual spectrum. In reality, "Chen Qingyang" is likely to face the disaster of being killed after the confession materials, but precisely because of this, her admission is more precious. On the spiritual level, Chen Qingyang completed the complete subversion of power discourse in this "suicidal" form and moved towards true liberation. This is the liberation of Chen Qingyang and also the liberation of that era.

In an absurd society, all rational and common-sense logic becomes invalid. People are forced to believe in this absurd and unreasonable strong power logic and lose their own value judgment. Here, individuals do not exist in the objective material world but only in discourse, and the discourse of others determines the existence or non-existence of individuals. In the narration of Wang Er and Chen Qingyang's different choices, the author seems to respond to the existential philosophical question of Camus: Is Sisyphus, who is punished by the gods to push the stone up the mountain day after day, happy? The answer is no, at least in the human world. Wang Er's experience confirms this negative answer. Accepting punishment will only bring one's own decline, "finally becoming like a beaten ox," only a thorough resistance can get rid of the nothingness brought by absurdity.

4. Conclusion

Wang Xiaobo in *The Golden Age* uses direct and indirect sexual descriptions to parody and deconstruct the operation of power during the revolutionary period. Furthermore, the novel deeply considers how individuals survive in an absurd society through the portrayal of Wang Er and Chen Qingyang's submersion, struggle, and resistance in an absurd world. While "recreating" the historical scene, the novel transcends the historical scene and becomes a "spiritual freedom declaration" with cross-era significance.

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