

unconditional sacrifice, loyalty and collectivity—of the Cultural Revolution. By contrast, *Golden Age*, by focusing on a marginalized figure eager to go beyond the sociopolitical margins, deconstructs the good-versus-evil binary that the Cultural Revolution rhetoric employed so often. Both writers began publishing in the early 1980s. When Liang was trumpeting heroism and idealism, Wang was already turning his eyes away from politics to personal and private life. Wang's earliest published work, *Auld Lange Syne*, already showed such features as the absence of political ideals, loose structure, and a polite distance from mainstream politics, as well as a rudimentary sense of black humor. Newly emergent from the Cultural Revolution, the two writers were treading on different literary paths. Later, although Liang Xiaosheng seemed to drift away from Cultural Revolution ideals as well, he could never go as far as Wang, and his drifting was marked by ambivalence and confusion.

Aside from such factors as personal temperament and educational background, some important reasons that account for the two writers' different attitudes toward the Cultural Revolution are to be found in their different experiences in the Cultural Revolution itself. These factors shaped their commitment to, and investment in, the idealistic causes of sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution, and subsequently influenced how soon and how far each would go in post-Mao years to break away from the Cultural Revolution rhetoric.

One such shaping factor is family background. Due to different family origins, one writer was located in the mainstream, while the other landed on the margins during the Cultural Revolution. With both parents illiterate, Liang was one of the few writers of the sent-down generation who came from a "good" family. By contrast, born of intellectual parents, it would have been difficult for Wang to become a mainstream political activist during the Cultural Revolution, even if he wanted to. Wang's father, a famous philosopher of logic, was labeled a "class alien" (*jiejī yiji fenzī*) and expelled from the party in 1952, the year of Wang Xiaobo's birth. The incident was a disaster for the family.²⁹ Fortunately, in April 1957, Wang's father was summoned to discuss issues of logic with Mao Zedong. The two even had lunch together. Perhaps protected by this royal patronage, the senior Wang did not suffer much during the Cultural Revolution. Yet his children were still marginalized. Wang Xiaobo's elder brother later complained that as the child of a "class alien," he could never hope to join the red guards.³⁰

Liang Xiaosheng had the class credentials to become a red guard. An “enthusiastic supporter of Mao’s rustication program,” he went to Heilongjiang Province as early as June 1968, six months before Mao’s directive officially initiated the movement.³¹ Strictly speaking, Liang was not sent down, but went down by himself, like many others at that time. Wang, however, likened the experience of being sent down to being packed on to a train like luggage.³² Their experiences during the Cultural Revolution were different as well. Liang said later, not without pride, that as a sent-down youth, he was always the keynote speaker in struggle meetings or eulogy meetings, and that his writing career began with writing “struggle drafts” (*pipan gao*) or “experience drafts” (*jiangyong gao*).³³ Liang was recommended to go to Fudan University as early as 1974 as a worker-peasant-soldier (*gong nong bing*) student, showing that by the political and moral standards of the time, he was a “good” sent-down youth. Wang, however, did not enter university until he passed the national examination in 1977.

The family background of the two writers further affected the places to which they were assigned. Heilongjiang and Yunnan meant very different things to sent-down youth. Heilongjiang, on the border with the Soviet Union, was deemed a highly strategic and romantic place, typically assigned only to students from “reliable” family backgrounds. Zhu Lin, a writer of the same generation, said that “places such as Heilongjiang required higher political standards. Even if you wanted to go there, you might not get permission.”³⁴ In fact, thanks to the efforts of such sent-down authors as Liang Xiaosheng, the dry name Heilongjiang was almost replaced in the 1980s and 1990s by the highly suggestive and emotionally charged name “Wild North.” To go to the Wild North was evidence of political recognition, and the pride of actually being there reinforced the commitment of youth. Yunnan, although also a border province and a romantic place, had far less military and strategic importance. To use Wang Xiaobo’s own words, in less than a month after the sent-down youths arrived there, their revolutionary fervor dampened.³⁵ Instead, the wild mountains and ethnic minority groups provided space and inspiration for Wang’s imagination. Moreover, sent-down youth in Heilongjiang lived in highly militarized regiments, while official discipline in Yunnan was far less effective. That Wang-er in *Golden Age* could live in the mountains for half a year, and return without punishment, is evidence of this lax discipline, which left more room for individual freedom.

Age also played an important role. Perhaps unlike most other generations of writers, even a minor difference in age was crucial to these sent-down writers, because age determined their likely emotional investment in Cultural Revolution idealism, and the extent to which this idealism would shape their most formative years. Liang was born in 1949, and Wang in 1952. Both became sent-down youth in 1968, when Liang was a senior high school graduate, and Wang only a junior high school graduate. Commenting on the difference between herself and such writers as Liang Xiaosheng, Wang Anyi, another important writer from the sent-down generation, stressed the importance of age: "If I were only two years older, I might have had different experiences."³⁶ Liang Xiaosheng was so steeped in Cultural Revolution education and propaganda during his formative period that it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, for him to break entirely away from its ideology. Wang, only sixteen when he went to the countryside, could at least remain partly indifferent and "unscathed."³⁷

These personal histories are helpful in explaining some of the differences between Liang and Wang, and hence between *Snowstorm Tonight* and *Golden Age*. Some perhaps more important reasons for the differences between the two novellas and their receptions lie in the respective periods in which they were written and published. It was impossible for *Golden Age*, an "obscene" book with a hooligan as its hero, to get published in the early 1980s, let alone to be recognized as a literary feat. Similarly, it was also hard to imagine a novella like *Snowstorm Tonight* appearing in the late 1990s. It is true that *Golden Age* was not written specifically for the market, and that it became the focus of mass media largely through "mistake and misreading."³⁸ Yet it surely is not a sheer coincidence that readers in the late 1990s began to appreciate Wang. Written between 1984 and 1988, *Golden Age* can be said to have anticipated sentiments that became widespread only later.

Wang Meng's praise of both novellas shows that the differences between the two cannot be attributed only to personal styles. In 1983, responding quickly to *Snowstorm Tonight*, Wang Meng penned a eulogy titled "A Courageous and Sublime Monument to Sent-down Youth." Reading the novella with "profound respect," he commented that Liang Xiaosheng, "more than any professional novelist, commands our veneration and admiration."³⁹ Sixteen years later, Wang Meng, joining the chorus eulogizing Wang Xiaobo, concluded that Wang Xiaobo was first of all "a person of reason," in other words, a person with sober common sense who never gave himself to fanati-