Rudolf Wagner's Work on the Politics of Modern Chinese Literature

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What links the barber and the doctor? Readers of Rudolf Wagner's work on the politics of modern Chinese fiction will know the answer: both professions come into contact with the highest and lowest levels of society, thereby gaining a full picture of it. As such, both figures were employed by Chinese writers to reflect upon their own role in society. Wagner's work on modern Chinese literature may be less well known than his three-volume study of Wang Bi's reading of the *Daodejing* 道德经 (2000, 2003, 2003),[1] or his research on the origins of the Chinese press,[2] but this work invites us into a fascinating world of political battles fought through literature during the first three decades of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It also provides an impressive methodological toolkit for how to decode literature, which can be broadly applied and remains relevant to the present day.

Rather than focus on periods that have commanded much of the attention of Chinese literary studies, such as the apogee of the Hundred Flowers Campaign (百花齐放) in 1956−1957, Wagner chose more ambiguous time-periods when the power balance in China was unclear and no one faction was able to force its ideological interpretations onto everyone else. Such ambiguity resulted in the opening of space for contention, which meant that these times produced some of the most interesting works of Chinese literature. Wagner's field of inquiry focused mainly on three such periods: the early days of the Hundred Flowers (1956); the Great Leap years (1958−1961) and the power struggle in the first half of the 1960s that lead into the Cultural Revolution; and the early post-Mao period when the outcome of the rivalry between Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 and Hua Guofeng 华国锋 was not quite as clear as it now appears in hindsight (1979).

A deliberate focus on the fringe informs all of Wagner's work. He chose to study the literary reportage (*texie* 特写)—the Chinese translation of the

1 Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the* Laozi (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000); Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark* (Xuanxue) (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003; Wagner, *A Chinese Reading of the* Daodejing*: Wang Bi's Commentary on the* Laozi *with Critical Text and Translation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003).

2 Rudolf G. Wagner, ed., *Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870−1910* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

Russian *ocherk*, "a bastard genre in a neatly ordered literary universe"[3]—to see what this fringe genre might tell us about broader literary struggles.[4] Similarly, he chose to avoid the most famous historical drama, Wu Han's 吴晗 *Hai Rui baguan* 海瑞罢官 (Hai Rui is dismissed from office) (1961), in favor of less well-known texts. While the latter choice made his analysis more manageable, it also helped limit the "misinformation, falsification, and suppression of information"[5] that tend to collect around works at the center of particularly heated debates.

Wagner's analysis of this literature is mainly contained in two books: *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies* (1990) and *Inside a Service Trade: Studies in Contemporary Chinese Prose* (1992). Both are hermeneutic exercises in the tradition of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, meant to enable readers who are removed from a literary text "in terms of both time and cultural location" to approach it as informed contemporaries of the work would have done, by restoring the context in which it was produced and reconstructing the "horizon of understanding" the latter would have possessed.[6]

Under Wagner's analysis, this hermeneutic exercise meant reading each statement of the literary work against another. For example, Wagner highlighted minute details that a present-day reader would most likely miss, but that would have been obvious to any contemporaneous reader familiar with the general rules governing literature in the broader socialist camp or the rules of the respective genres. Wagner's approach also used any "entrance into the subtext" that might help reconstruct hidden meanings;[7] this could be a change made to an original text, the breaking of a literary convention, or even the use of uncommon sources such as agricultural statistics or cartoons published decades earlier.[8]

In both abovementioned books, Wagner challenged the established national and disciplinary categories for academic inquiry, decades before such a transcultural and transdisciplinary approach became more common. "Scholars," he wrote, "have been constrained by a tradition of nineteenth-

3 Rudolf G. Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade: Studies in Contemporary Chinese Prose* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 274.

4 Rudolf G. Wagner, "Liu Binyan and the *Texie*," *Modern Chinese Literature* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 63–98; 63.

5 Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), x.

6 Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, ix.

7 Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, ix.

8 Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, 5; Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 498−504.

century scholarship which read literature as co-determinate with national boundaries."[9] While these boundaries were already unhelpful and distorting in the nineteenth century, they completely failed to account for the realities of the twentieth. Wagner also rejected what he called the "academic division of labor," which, he claims, has prevented scholars from exploring connections between topics that are clearly related but separated by disciplinary boundaries.[10]

The prose texts of the early Hundred Flowers and the Soviet link

A contemporaneous Chinese reader would have brought expectations shaped by the Chinese literary conventions of socialist realism, which had "radicalized the most extreme Soviet positions into a general line for literature" fundamentally requiring that literature serve politics.[11] This meant that in China the then established literary genres offered little space to explore alternative ideas or values. For instance, it would have been inconceivable for an intelligentsia-hero to appear in a literary work. However, by leveraging the authority of post-Stalinist Thaw literature in the Soviet Union, Chinese authors under the protective umbrella of the Communist Youth League under Hu Yaobang's 胡耀邦 leadership managed to do just that.

In the first two parts of *Inside a Service Trade*, Wagner reconstructs how—by appealing to Soviet authority and introducing a new genre that lived in between strictly defined established categories—Chinese authors were able to make a case against "bureaucratism" and briefly establish a more daring and innovative type of Party member as a new kind of hero—all at a time when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was tracking down "hidden counterrevolutionaries" and the political climate in China was anything but favorable for people sticking their heads out.[12]

As explored by Wagner, the history of *texie* in China is an early example of transcultural studies. It explicitly treats Soviet texts as Chinese, in the sense that they formed an important part of literary debates at the time and were used for specific purposes within China itself.[13] The *texie* genre was first introduced in the midst of the campaign against Hu Feng for his views opposing official literary policy, which was followed by a purge of other supposed counterrevolutionaries during the Sufan Campaign (肃反运动, lit. Campaign to Eradicate [Hidden] Counterrevolutionaries). In 1954, Valentin

9 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 388.

10 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 18.

11 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 14.

12 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 34.

13 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 259.

Ovechkin, the most famous *ocherkist* in the Soviet Union, visited China to speak about his genre of choice. His talk was translated into Chinese by the journalist and author Liu Binyan 刘宾雁, who was a friend of Ovechkin's and would soon become China's foremost author-cum-advocate of *texie*. A translation of Ovechkin's *Raionnye budni* (Days in the Rayon) followed,[14] but at the time, no Chinese author was yet in a position to produce a similar work: "The only way to publish broader views on literature that were in line with the emerging thaw in the socialist camp after Stalin's death was to stay under Big Brother's umbrella."[15] *Texie* by Chinese authors only became possible once the climate in the literary scene warmed again, this time in late 1955.[16]

Under the "protective umbrella" of the Youth League and with the explicit encouragement of the editor of the literary journal *People's Literature* (人民文学), Liu Binyan began to publish a series of *texie* that challenged established conventions about the principal problems facing Chinese society and the proper personality type required to solve them: his heroes were young intellectuals who dared to make decisions and take responsibility, while his villains were cautious bureaucrats. It is also the villains who were made to repeat charges commonly heard in the ongoing Sufan Campaign (e.g., claims about counterrevolutionaries lacking discipline or being anti-Party), instantly marking such accusations as false.

As Liu Binyan's work followed the Youth League's ongoing campaign to promote these new heroic figures, he was not alone in populating stories with this new type of Party personality. But his *texie* went further than most in pushing back against established norms, if one takes comparable novels by Galina Nikolayeva in the Soviet Union and Wang Meng in China as a measure. Mirroring Ovechkin, Liu broke another important convention by ending his reportages either on a pessimistic note or leaving issues unresolved—a risky move in 1950s China when literature was supposed to serve, not criticize, politics, and the press did not report until a problem had been officially solved and victory declared. By contrast, in Liu's *Zai qiaoliang gongdi shang* 在桥梁工地上 (At the building site) (1956), the cautious bureaucrat manages to demote the younger, more daring hero,[17] and in *Benbao neibu xiaoxi* 本报内部消息 (Inside news of our paper) (1956), changes are discussed, but none are made.[18]

14 Hualunding Aoweiqijin (Valentin Ovechkin) 华伦丁・奥维奇金, "Quli de richang shenghuo" 区里的日常生活 [Days in the rayon], *Yiwen* 5 (1954): 1–38.

15 Wagner, "Liu Binyan and the *Texie*," 71.

16 Wagner, "Liu Binyan and the *Texie*," 71.

17 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 161.

18 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 190.

Wagner carefully shows that while mirroring the Soviet Union could indeed "mean the imposition of Stalinist rule," it could also "open the option for a Thaw where all local conditions are against it."[19] As such, the history of *ocherk* in China is also a tale of agency in the face of adversity. Re-reading the Hundred Flowers Campaign through the lens of *texie* suggests that authors did not wait until they were given permission to speak out by Zhou Enlai 周恩来 and Mao Zedong 毛泽东. Rather, they took substantial risks—made possible, if not safe, by appealing to the authority of the Soviet Union—to create the conditions that were necessary to advance their new heroes. As we know, they paid a heavy price for doing this.

Power struggles on stage: Reading the years between the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution through historical drama

Between 1958 and 1963, friction inside the fragmented leadership of the PRC was heating up. Following the Anti-Rightist Campaign (反右运动) of 1957–1958, authors of the Hundred Flowers period were silenced and banished to China's countryside and frontier regions, and more obscure textual forms were required to convey political messages. This was a time when criticism became more difficult, but, unlike a few years later, the hammer had not yet been brought down, and remonstrance was not wholly impossible. It was in this time that the historical drama turned into one of the few outlets through which political altercations could still be fought out. This genre gained renown when three such plays were attacked (most famously *Hai Rui baguan*), an attack that became what many consider the opening shot of the Cultural Revolution.[20]

However, the turn to historical themes was not an attempt to escape the attention of the country's leadership by hiding behind the obscure. To the contrary, party leaders up to the highest levels of power, including Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, followed these plays closely and on occasion even became involved in the creative process. Many of the individuals who wrote these plays were reasonably powerful in their own right, including the deputy mayor of Beijing, Wu Han, and the playwright Tian Han 田汉, who was both the Head and Party Secretary of the Dramatists' Association. Historical dramas were intended to send political messages, and they were received as such by China's leadership.

Wagner chose two texts for in-depth analysis: the spoken drama *Guan Hanqing* 关汉卿 (1958) and the Peking opera *Xie Yaohuan* 谢瑶环 (1961), both written by Tian Han. In addition, he picked a play that, while not a historical drama per se, lent itself to analysis because it presented the opposite

19 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 317.

20 Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, 236.

side of the debate—that is to say, a defense of the Maoist line—through its various versions as well as literary and filmic formats: *Sun Wukong sanda Baigujing* 孙悟空三打白骨精 (Sun Wukong three times subdues the white-bone demon). To this list one might also add the in-depth study of Zhou Xinfang's 周信芳 *Hai Rui shangshu* 海瑞上疏 (Hai Rui submits his memorial) (1959), discussed in detail in a separate article.[21] All of these texts (with the exception of *Sun Wukong sanda Baigujing*) were attacked by name during the Cultural Revolution, but none attracted the same attention as *Hai Rui baguan*. Hence, the record on the genesis and theatrical life of these "fringe" plays is less likely to have been distorted.

In addition to his meticulous decoding of messages, Wagner's study proceeds from the assumption that the most effective way to read a text is to understand the counter-text it argues against or alters. Sometimes, this counter-text was a literary convention, and sometimes it was a change in the historical record, such as when the censor Xu Yougong 徐有功 in Tian Han's *Xie Yaohuan* "had to be compressed into Zhou Enlai's shape" by making his character less principled than the version found in the historical record.[22] And sometimes, the counter-text was a "silent dialogue" between plays or sets of plays. For instance, the political pitch might rise between plays, including more and more direct attacks on the person of the emperor, who, per socialist literary convention, had to be read as referring to the highest leader of the country, that is, Mao Zedong. Whereas in *Guan Hanqing* the emperor remained entirely off-stage,[23] in *Xie Yaohuan* the leader appears in the form of Empress Wu Zetian 武则天, albeit still as a relatively benign character who is, ultimately, interested in learning the truth. In *Hai Rui shangshu*, by contrast, Hai Rui brings a coffin on stage when confronting the emperor—signaling to the audience that the leader does not accept criticism and has all critics killed[24]—and when Hai Rui is imprisoned, he can only be saved after the emperor's death.[25] A year later, in *Sun An dongben* 孙安动本 (Sun An pushes memorials) (1960), the hero brings three coffins (one for himself and two for his wife and son), while the emperor is now chased around the stage with a hammer.[26]

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21 Rudolf G. Wagner, "'In Guise of a Congratulation': Political Symbolism in Zhou Xinfang's Play *Hai Rui Submits His Memorial*," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 26 (1991): 99−142.

22 Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, 120.

23 Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, 55.

24 A detail that leading actor Zhou Xinfang decided to omit, as he considered it "too provocative" when the play was performed in front of Mao Zedong. Wagner, "'In Guise of a Congratulation,'" 139.

25 Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, 272.

26 Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, 278−280.

Sun Wukong sanda Baigujing, by contrast, is a forceful rejection of the line taken in plays that criticized Great Leap policies and Chairman Mao Zedong. Here, Mao appears on stage as Sun Wukong, loyally defending the Party (personified by Tang Seng 唐僧) against the vicious attacks of the White-bone Demon, which symbolizes the true dangers of "Soviet revisionism."[27] Sun Wukong / Mao Zedong may attack others, but he is always right and only does so to protect Tang (the Party) against the new deadly enemy (Khrushchev) and those trying to take his side in China. Elsewhere, the author Guo Moruo 郭沫若 emerges as one of the main defenders of the paramount leader against the increasingly high-pitched attacks mounted through the historical dramas featuring Hai Rui, with his play *Wu Zetian* 武则天 (1960) forming the counter-text to Tian Han's *Xie Yaohuan*, both set in the same period.[28] This interaction between different factions through different plays is skillfully reconstructed in Wagner's analysis.

As Wagner shows us, these texts can aid our understanding of a period in the history of the PRC about which information is still not easily obtained, namely the Great Leap and the years preceding the Cultural Revolution. Or, to put it in Wagner's own words: "My intention in this study is to make the voice of the play and its author better heard, and to introduce an additional voice into the few that tell us about this cataclysmic time."[29] Although more is known about both periods now than when *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama* was first published in 1990, these plays still constitute a unique source that can help us to assess how the politics of the Great Leap Forward, the Sino-Soviet split, and the divisions inside the Chinese Communist Party leadership were understood within elite circles years before these conflicts spilled out into the open.

Again, this is a story of agency. Even though the focus is explicitly on the works themselves and on correctly decoding them through the restoration of contemporaneous understandings, the authors of these works occasionally slip into view. These authors were not obscure intellectuals, but people close to the center of power with powerful political patrons (such as the mayor of Beijing, Peng Zhen 彭真, even people as high up as Premier Zhou Enlai), who offered them a certain level of protection. Just like the younger Hundred Flowers authors, or arguably more so, these authors were aware of the political significance of what they were doing, even if they could not anticipate the full consequences of their actions.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the practice of reading precise political analogies into these plays was condemned as a dirty tactic of the Cultural

27 Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, 152.

28 Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, 282–289.

29 Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, 138.

Revolution. Since then, the tendency has also been to leave literature and literary motives to writers, and politics and political motives to Party leadership. Consequently, political readings of these historical dramas—and ascribing political intent to the playwrights in particular—has caused some discomfort in the academic community,[30] not least because such readings might be seen to confirm the accusations launched at playwrights during the Cultural Revolution. In the words of one reviewer, "much of Wagner's interpretation and evaluation, although made with much sympathy for those playwrights who suffered because of their writing during the Cultural Revolution (1966−1976), ironically confirms and justifies the false accusations against these playwrights by the government at the time."[31] However, it is important to note that accurately decoding the plays does not in any way justify the attacks made during the Cultural Revolution. Rather, it returns agency to the authors who were forced to disavow them under extreme duress as the political temperature rose.

The post-Mao legacy

In late 1978, once Hu Yaobang was rehabilitated and took over the Central Propaganda Department, the writers who had been purged in 1957 reemerged and brought back with them their old heroes and bureaucrat villains. In the third and final part of *Inside a Service Trade*, Wagner looks at some of the literature that was produced during the early post-Mao years, which carried on the Hundred Flowers legacy.

In addition to showing how themes from the Hundred Flowers period were picked up again when once exiled-authors had been rehabilitated, Wagner's exploration of early post-Maoist literature also lends itself to writing a multi-layered exploration of today's CCP ideology—one that could explain such things as science optimism, elitism, and other phenomena that showed up in these texts and are still reflected in the Party's outlook on the world today.

During these early post-Mao years, the "manager novel"—an inversion of the worker novel long established in the shared literature of the socialist camp—entered the Chinese literary scene. As with *texie*, the emergence of this genre in China had a Soviet influence. Some Soviet texts of the manager novel genre were translated and circulated as negative teaching materials (*fanmian jiaocai* 反面教材) during the late years of the Cultural Revolution, and "there is some oral testimony that many people read these … as a truthful depiction of their industrial manager-heroes, and read the leftist analyses … as the true

30 See, for example, Constantine Tung, review of *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies*, by Rudolf G. Wagner, *Asian Theatre Journal* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 129−133; 132.

31 Haiping Yan, review of *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies*, by Rudolf G. Wagner, *Theatre Journal* 44, no. 4 (1992): 550−552; 551.

fanmian jiaocai."[32] The manager-hero derives his legitimacy from enacting the "objective laws of the economy" as he battles incompetent workers and villainous bureaucrats.[33] Consequently, the manager novel analyzed in *Inside a Service Trade*, Jiang Zilong's 蒋子龙 *Qiao changzhang shangren ji* 乔厂长上任记 (Director Qiao takes over) (1979), does not cast the Cultural Revolution as the greatest obstacle to progress, but bestows this position to the new bureaucrats who gained power under Hua Guofeng.

The entrenched bureaucrat villain and the new type of hero are what link Jiang's text to the remaining two pieces that Wagner analyzed—Gao Xiaosheng's 高晓声 *Li Shunda zaowu* 李顺大造屋 (Li Shunda builds a house) (1979) and Wang Meng's 王蒙 *Youyou cuncaoxin* 悠悠寸草心 (The loyal heart) (1979). Of the two, Gao's work is more radical. Here he introduces a rural peddler (the "black core of the 'capitalist sprouts'")[34] as his hero, and measures the progress of PRC history by a single criterion: whether his hero can fulfill the modest yet seemingly impossible goal of building a house.[35] By contrast, Wang's hero, a barber, is a literary self-insertion, building on the trope introduced in the Hundred Flowers era of the barber as a well-informed critic who helps the Party stay in shape by trimming away its problems or occasionally masking them.[36]

Still, Wagner's verdict on Wang Meng's story, which coined the titular "service trade" of his book, is harsh: "True to the traditional self-perception of the Chinese writer in this century, 'Loyal Heart' shows an overpowering self-righteousness in the barber's voice … there is little wisdom in this text."[37]

Much more could be said, and anyone familiar with this subset of Wagner's body of work will know that what has been presented here is merely a snippet of a much more complex and detailed enterprise of decoding PRC literature to uncover its many layers of meaning and connections. Nonetheless, I hope that this brief article might inspire some to (re)read these texts and perhaps experiment with parts of the expansive methodological toolkit they offer.

32 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 390.

33 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 388.

34 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 450.

35 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 460.

36 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 497−505.

37 Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade*, 531.