From Subjects to Bodies: Ah Cheng’s *The King of Children* and Wang Gang’s *Ying-ge-li-shi*

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1 What is a subject? What is a body? Does the fictional representation of a human body necessarily imply subjectivity? This study will argue that a comparison between Ah Cheng’s *The King of Children* and Wang Gang’s *Ying-ge-li-shi*, a phonetic transliteration for “English”, is useful to understand that the notions of “subjects” and “bodies” do not coincide.

2 It would appear that these two novels have so many narrative details in common, the reader cannot avoid the impression that when Wang Gang wrote his novel, he might as well have been relying on *The King of Children* to underscore the radical and dramatic changes that had occurred during the previous twenty years. Both stories are set during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in remote areas of China, they are both coming-of-age novels that describe the ways in which a group of students relate to their teachers and parents, and both represent the ways in which the younger generation is affected by adults and by a dictionary. The earlier work, in line with the intellectual ferment of the “High culture fever” movement, describes the birth of a subject willing to emancipate himself from the Chinese Communist Party’s modalities of apprehending and producing knowledge. It therefore celebrates the birth of what we may define as a “new epistemic subject”. Wang Gang’s novel, on the other hand, does not ascribe any value to epistemology, but rather focuses on the ways in which a young group of students challenges the authoritarian powers of both institutions and adults in order to claim control over their own bodies and lives. In fact, the *Bildung* of the young protagonists in *Ying-ge-li-shi* is described in terms of experiential knowledge which is apprehended only at the level of the body and not at that of the mind. In other words, this novel celebrates the birth of a middle class *habitus* and lifestyle which gives rise to new concepts of privacy.
The King of Children is a novella that describes the feats of a young and inexperienced “educated youth” / 知青 named Lao Gan 老杆. He is sent to Yunnan to teach a class of young students. When he sees that the textbook that he is forced to adopt contains nothing but political propaganda, he abandons it, and instead teaches his students how to write free compositions relying only on their personal experiences.

One way to tackle this novel is to consider it as Ah Cheng’s attempt to deploy a discourse on subjectivity, because, as Rey Chow observes,

[if we understand subjectivity] in terms of the material relationships among human beings as participants in a society — relationships that are in turn mediated by the collective cultural activities of speaking, reading and writing — then it is an issue that is forcefully present in modern Chinese literature and culture as it is in the West, even if it’s not named as such.1

What is at stake in Ah Cheng’s novel is Lao Gan’s attempt at constructing a world centered around the production of written texts that can represent a diegetic space very distant and different from the one offered by narratives coercively imposed by cultural and political institutions.

At the beginning of the novella, the inexperienced teacher puts himself in a subaltern condition:

Are there any rules for teaching this class? I can see you can’t really make it up as you go along. Since the National Textbook Unification reform, textbooks for each subject have been the same throughout the whole country, but there should be also a unified standard for teaching or people won’t know if they are teaching properly. For example, how many sections should a text be divided into? What is the main idea of each section? What is the overall theme? What is the composition method? I might interpret these things one way, but another school might teach it another way. Language isn’t like math — one plus one makes two wherever you are in the world. Language courses should have rules so that we can be on firm ground.2

This complex and ambivalent passage raises some questions: does the opacity of language threaten the stability of mechanisms of power? Is there a unitary hermeneutic approach to propaganda? This emphasis on the lack of alternative discursive possibilities becomes a sort of obsession for the teacher, who gradually discovers the importance and usefulness of the dictionary which provides readers with etymological and epistemological grounds. The dictionary can transform his students from passive recipients of knowledge into writing subjects endowed with agency and capable of transcending the narrow boundaries imposed by Maoist rhetoric. After discovering its almost magical power, the formerly subaltern teacher polemically complains:

The teaching material is unified all right, I can’t even tell the difference between the Chinese lessons and the political lessons. My class is learning Chinese — what are they going to do when they return to their teams? Become party secretaries?3

From Subjects to Bodies: Ah Cheng’s The King of Children and Wang Gang’s Ying...
Wang Fu, the most diligent student of the class, is completely captivated by the dictionary. He tries first to obtain it by cheating Lao Gan, then he decides to copy it. In this regard, Rey Chow observes:

Wang Fu’s persistence in copying the dictionary and his eventual “success” in producing a system of coherent writing are the symptoms of a child who has been properly “interpellated” into the system of learning — to use the term from Althusser. Wang Fu’s perseverance, seriousness and ability to work hard are all part of the process by which the school as an apparatus of ideology solicits the voluntary cooperation of the participants.4

What Chow fails to mention, however, is that the person who teaches Wang Fu to produce a system of coherent writing is also the one who has deliberately alienated himself from the school system by refusing to adopt the textbook. Furthermore, the teacher is eventually compelled to leave the school. Yet he has not only successfully performed his duty, he has also left an important trace. By the end of the novel, his student Wang Fu eventually writes a very moving free composition in which he declares that he is determined to speak out loud on behalf of his own mute and bullied father:

My father is one of the strongest men in the world. No one on our team can beat him at carrying sacks of rice. My father also eats more than anyone in the world. My mother lets him eat all the food we have. This is right, because my father has to work, and his wages support our whole family. But my father says: “I am not as strong as Wang Fu, because Wang Fu can read and write.” My father isn’t able to talk but I understand what he means. I know that people in the team bully him. Therefore, I want to study and learn how to speak for him... (p. 176)

The Luxunian outcry to save the children at the end of his most famous short story, “A Madman’s Diary” / 狂人日记 (1918), is overturned. While in the modern story the author denounces the cannibalistic nature of Chinese society and urges his adult readers to spare the future generations of children from being cannibalized, Ah Cheng describes a devout son who wants to rescue his mute father from being bullied. The King of Children assesses the ethical mission of the filial son, who needs to fulfill his role in order not only to save his father from a cruel and senseless society, but also to “plant the seeds” of a fairer and more brilliant future. It is no accident that Lao Gan leaves the precious dictionary to Wang Fu, who will hopefully be able to emancipate himself from the dull rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party’s political propaganda by transforming himself into a subject capable of producing new meanings.

Written twenty years later, in 2005, Ying-ge-li-shi also describes the complex relationships between students, teachers and parents. This coming-of age novel describes Love Liu’s growth into adulthood. He is forced to cope with a dysfunctional family — indeed, his father and mother are far from exemplary in their conduct. While being successful in his career as an architect, his father is subservient to all forms of authority, and is cruel and despondent toward his own son and all people who occupy a lower social status. His mother, also an architect, betrays her husband with the school principal. Furthermore, instead of showering him with affection and
love, she constantly monitors and controls the politically correctness of his behavior. His classmates, Garbage Li 李垃圾 and Sunrise Huang 黄旭升, are extremely evil. Garbage Li is outrageously violent and cruel. Sunrise Huang first accuses their English teacher of sexual harassment just because she discovers that he loves another woman, then persuades Garbage Li to kill his mother’s lover, and finally kills Garbage Li (though this is by accident). The political authorities, Director Fan 范主任 and Commander Shen 申总, are cruel impostors and sexual harassers, determined to reify the bodies of the women onto whom they wish to discharge their libidinal energies. The only characters endowed with gentleness or humanity are the English teacher, Second Prize Wang 王亚军, and the Uyghur teacher 阿吉太. Their role is underscored right at the beginning of the novel:

We had stopped learning Russian the year before, and from that day we would not be learning Uyghur. We weren't really interested in languages. We were interested only in women like Ahjitai. She might have been a teacher, but the curve of her neck and her tears were things I yearned for at dawn much more than the sun.¹

¹(p. 1-2)

Anyone familiar with Wang Gang’s narrative technique well knows that he frequently relies on what Gérard Genette calls prolepses (anticipation of an event that will occur later in the story)⁸ and can thereby easily foresee the ending of the novel: that Love Liu will make love to Ahjitai.

While both novels are set during the Cultural Revolution, the social space created by Wang Gang is completely different from the one created by Ah Cheng. It is clearly a hybrid and very unstable space where different ethnic groups and very different habitus meet (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term). This notion which, among other things, include personal or social classes’ affective dispositions and dispositions of perceptions in relation to the urban space, is very helpful here because it allows us to grasp the intimate and emotional bond between the protagonist Love Liu and the urban space in which he lives. It is not a coincidence that both his mother and father are architects, and that his father in particular has created the very space in which his coming-of-age experience occurs: the school.

This is Wang Gang’s quite telling description of Love Liu’s “learning environment”:

Our yellow school building, with its three-gabled roof, was also my father’s work. I still have the colored architectural drawings he made of it all these years ago. The steep, Russian-style roof was covered in green metal, making the building look like a man wearing a yellow overcoat and a green hat. In Chinese “wearing a green hat” means to be cuckolded, and our school stood there proudly, seemingly unaware that its wife was sleeping with someone else, as the sounds of our songs and laughter — and of course of students reciting — reverberated out of the windows where its eyes would be. (p. 14)
The school, a public space created by Love Liu’s father, is rhetorically transformed into something reminiscent of a “physical body” exposed to public ridicule. The laughter and songs of students completely indifferent to the disempowerment of previously recognizable forms of authority suggests that the school can no longer be read as a site for self-construction.

In an important study entitled Masculinity Besieged, Zhong Xueping has observed how male protagonists of post-Maoist narratives often underwent a process of demasculinization, or in other terms a loss of manhood, that eventually entailed their sexual impotence. The group of narratives produced by the group of writers belonging to the “Late-born generation” / 晚生代 or “Rupture movement” / 断裂, which deal with the same issues and themes as Wang Gang, ridicules and demystifies everything and everyone that was formerly considered as an authority.

In a third important prolepsis, which as we shall see at the end of this study foreshadows the conclusion of the novel, the Chinese author broadens his scope of analysis and links Love Liu’s father to the political leaders of Urumchi. Represented in the act of painting Chairman Mao’s profile, Love Liu’s father is first ridiculed and then attacked by Director Fan and Commander Shen for having (correctly) portrayed Chairman Mao’s profile with “only” one ear. Love Liu’s father tries in vain to explain the law of perspective to the political leaders. Yet since nobody, including his own son, is willing to listen to him, Love Liu’s father ends up betraying the law of perspective and adding a second ear to Chairman Mao’s profile. He ultimately has no alternative other than to abide by the political leaders’ orders and add an ear. What is at stake here is an expedient to address the ways the body of the most important Chinese leader, Chairman Mao, is transformed into a mere icon or, to use Baudrillard’s term, a simulacrum.

The English teacher, Second Prize Wang, is the character that ushers Love Liu into a new sensual and sensory world. He seems to be the only counterpart to his own already disempowered father. The importance of bodily senses in this novel becomes evident in the description of Love Liu’s first meeting with his English teacher, which occurs in a bathroom. The first thing the young boy notices about him is his teacher’s long penis:

> I couldn’t help peering over. I cringed in shock — it was enormous. I’d never seen a big one. When I was small I went with father to the bathhouse, and I saw that every man had one. The world is amazing, I thought. The image of those comfortably warmed symbols of manhood flopping about in the misty bathhouse became deeply engrained in my memory. (p. 17)

This depiction, which undeniably bears some sort of Proustian flavor, stands in sharp contrast with those familiar Freudian narratives that celebrate the castration complex. Its Proustian flavor is suggested by an all-too-clear reference to the non-temporal nature of the unconscious as well as to the movement of the unconscious from the past to the present, and then once again to the past.

As Peter Brooks reminds us in his Body Work, “the castration complex brings an end to the Œdipal stage by instituting the law with the superego as its representative.” In
Ying-ge-li-shi, the figure of the destitute father is in no position to stand for either the law or for any form of authority. On the contrary, the English teacher and his long penis become the very foundation upon which Love Liu relies to construct his own self.

In fact, the reference to the penis may be interpreted as an expedient to address Love Liu’s formation of self according the Lacanian tripartite schema of language (the real, the imaginary and the symbolic). Love Liu’s contemplation of penises allows the creation of a symbolic order which refers to the ways in which the self, its Other and the socio-historical world are configured and structured by the social and linguistic realm of law. By reading the penis as a sign, Love Liu is thus able to gain access to the “imaginary” which, as Lacan suggests, is the foundation of the subject’s relation to itself. The clear metonymical link as well as the comparison between the father’s and the English teacher’s penises may also be read as a way to configure a new social order.

It should be clear by now that Ying-ge-li-shi focuses neither on subjectivity nor on epistemology. Love Liu’s coming-of-age experience is nothing but the Bildung of what we may define as “embodied consciousness”, or alternatively, a form of knowledge which relies on bodily perceptions (scopophilia and epistemophilia) rather than on the mind.

The passage’s explicit references to “comfortably warmed symbols of manhood” compels readers to move away from the Lacanian notion of law (father’s law) to the laws of the phenomenological social world. Martin P. Jay, who in his Downcast Eyes has studied the sense of sight after the advent of positivism, has clearly shown that with advent of phenomenologists and existentialists such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre among others, there has been an increasing discomfort with ocularcentric perspectives (perspectives that privilege sight over the other perceptions). While on the one hand the sight of the size of his penis confirms in a very matter-of-fact way Second Prize Wang’s authoritative position as well as his prestige, on the other, it is also undeniable that the English teacher is connected to the sense of sight only when the author needs to deal with the themes of scopophilia and epistemophilia. In one of Love Liu’s many descriptions of his English teacher, as well as in the passage that describes Love Liu’s father in the process of painting Mao’s icon, we understand that this novel also “fights” against ocularcentrism. This “fight” is configured by associating Second Prize Wang with the senses of sound and smell:

He smells so nice, I concluded, because he wants to attract girls like Sunrise Huang, girls who would never use Chinese characters as phonetic crutches. His scent must be irresistible to those girls, and just like little scraps of paper get caught up in the wind, they will end up in his room. The sound of English, again wafted from Second Prize Wang’s room. The corridor was quiet. Strange English words followed me as I walked. They were traces of Sunrise Huang. I don’t know why, but I started to miss even more the days when Ajjītīāi taught us Uyghur. (p. 27)

王亚军身上为什么那么香，结论是他是为了吸引女生，像黄旭升这样的，从来没有用汉语为英语注音的女生闻到了那种香气，就会像风中的纸片儿一样地被吸进他的宿舍。

英语再次从宿舍传来， 过这里很安静， 我听着一个个陌生的单词从身后飘过来， 那是黄旭升的气息……

不知为什么， 我更加怀念阿吉太给我们教过维语的日子。 (p. 32-33)

Passages like this enable as to understand why Wang Gang has chosen Ying-ge-li-shi as a title for his novel. Ying-ge-li-shi, unlike English, is only a phonetic transliteration that carries no counterpart meaning; as Walter Benjamin observed in his essay “The Mimetic Faculty”, what distinguishes the spoken from the written language is its

Le corps dans les littératures modernes d'Asie orientale : discours, représentation, intermédialité
sensuous quality. Here the references to sound and smell suggest that the English teacher appeals to the students’ bodily senses rather than to their minds. Unlike in Ah Cheng’s novella, the reader has no clue about the content of Second Prize Wang’s lesson. The only thing he knows is that he resorts to Linguaphone English as a strategy to teach it and that he demands that students never use Chinese as phonetic crutches.

“Linguaphone English” and the “French eau de cologne” should then be read as a portmanteau to represent what Bourdieu would define as the *habitus*. As Don Slater explains:

> The *habitus* is a structure of dispositions, schemes of classification, rules, expectations and so on which predispose the individual to certain choices and actions [...]. *Habitus* is unconscious but in a practical rather than a psychoanalytic sense. For example it is both learned and acted out through sensory and bodily experiences, the subtexts of encounters rather than explicit statements. Above all the *habitus* is embodied and learned and acted out at the level of the body.

Second Prize Wang proposes not only a very sensual and attractive lifestyle to his students, a lifestyle and *habitus* which was unknown to the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution, but also an alternative approach to knowledge, an approach which is exemplified through the English dictionary. While in Ah Cheng’s novel the dictionary provided students with an alternative access to knowledge, the English dictionary is here a diegetic element which semantically connects and decodes this new sensual world and the alien *habitus* into which Second Prize Wang is trying to usher his students:

[Second Prize Wang] guessed what I was drawn to. “Do you know that word? Dictionary?” “English dictionary?” I asked. He nodded. “Is it a comprehensive dictionary?” I asked. “When you know all the words in the dictionary, you will be able to live like a real English gentleman. You can even have a better life than ordinary folks in England because you will be educated.” “What does a gentleman look like?” I asked.

He thought for a moment and then said: “Like your father.”

His answer disappointed me. Like my father? What kind of man is my father? I thought of the glasses he wore and the frightened expression that was always on his face. Still I had to ask, “Do you know my father?” “[...] I chatted with your father when we were in line at the canteen. He was very polite and did not push and squeeze like the others.” (p. 47)

Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* is here evoked in two specific ways: in terms of style, taste and social class as well as in terms of lifestyles and manners, two aspects that Wang Gang’s narrative deploys in a meticulous way. Far from being depicted as a political colonial power, England becomes rather the site where narratives of privacy can be
developed and cultivated. In fact, Peter Brooks, who links the increasing popularity of the novel in Europe to the upper middle class's need for leisure, clearly shows the close interconnection between the increasing importance of private life (which is the object of the novel's concern) and the process of privatization of the body. In other words, both the English teacher and the English dictionary teach and show these young students a very different world from the one to which the Chinese were accustomed during the Cultural Revolution. There is no longer a collective body, but personal and individual behaviors. The English teacher's emphasis on middle class lifestyle, manners and *habitus* as well as the English dictionary's reference to the term “masturbation” end up deploying a complex discourse about bodily perceptions and bodily behaviors.

In fact, as Andrew Bennet suggests in his article “Language and the Body”, “self-touching, [according to Derrida’s *On touching* is] a dream of the reflexive or specular autonomy of the language of self-presence or self-consciousness”. The interdependence between self-eroticism and eroticism is articulated in this narrative via the English dictionary that Love Liu finds in Ahjitai’s room:

> It was the dictionary I couldn’t find the night I broke into Second Prize Wang’s dormitory. I felt sad and a bit angry. Why did I break my leg? Because of that dictionary. Why did my parents hate me? Why did I want to run away from home? Because of that dictionary... (p. 227)

> 我在王亚军的宿舍里没有偷上的这本词典。它竟在这里，我的心里有些难过，也有些生气、我的腿是怎么样断的？因为这本词典。我的母亲为什么恨我？我为什么要离家出走？就是因为这本词典。不要以为，在那时我会对词典仇视，没有，恰恰相反，我的内心对它充满了温情。以至于我忘了阿吉太的存在，忘记了她是一个世界上最美丽的女人。就好像我没有在她的房间，而是在无人之境，那里金光闪闪，有一个聚宝盆。

> 我超词典走过去，抓起它来，一翻开，竟又看到自慰这个词。不知道为什么，我当是特别想哭，如果不是意识到阿吉太正在奇怪地看我，可能我真的会哭起来。

> 阿吉太说：《你在词典里里看到了什么？》

> 我的眼睛里包含着“自慰”却说不出话来。是呀，我在词典里看到了什么？这的的确确是个问题。

> 我把词典抱在怀里，就好像它是我的一只宠物，我来回地摸索它，他是一个失而复得的东西......我从梦幻里走出来，头脑渐渐清楚了。现在是在阿吉太的房子里，他就站在我身边，我的皮肤能够感到她的气息。 (p. 285-286)

It is not the first time that Chinese readers run into “masturbation” as a theme. The most famous case is Yu Dafu’s 郁达夫 (1896-1945) [*“Sinking”/* 沉沦*](1921), in which the protagonist watches his beloved while taking a shower, gets excited and then masturbates. Interestingly enough, in the modern novella “masturbation” gets a negative connotation as it is associated with the concept of sin. As Robin Visser shows...
in another case, in Liu Heng’s (1955-) novel *Black Snow / 黑的雪* (1988) masturbation is associated with the protagonist’s sense of alienation from society, as well as with his inability to win his beloved’s affection. Here, as well as in other passages, it is clear that masturbation is Love Liu’s way to claim possession of his own body.

This passage becomes clearer if we consider Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “chiasmus” according to which the subject’s touching of his or her own body is the necessary condition for perceiving his or her own self as a living being. Furthermore, touching, unlike seeing, is always a reversible process because through “chiasm” one can simultaneously touch and be touched. Love Liu’s frequent visits to the public bathhouse, where Ahjitai was taking a bath, could be taken as Wang Gang’s deliberate attempt to emphasize the disjuncture between the quandries of the Chinese self in the past and the present. Masturbation, scopophilia and epistemophilia are all different expressions of compulsive physiological urges which need to be satisfied. Ahjitai’s absence at the beginning of the above-mentioned passage becomes a matter-of-fact presence as soon as Love Liu is done with his mental masturbation.

In this novel, where multiple processes of signification coexist, there are distinct, gendered languages of desire. While Love Liu is consistently portrayed as a “sentient character”, his classmate and counterpart Sunrise Huang is definitely what we may call a “performative character”. She is the one who always takes the initiative. This becomes even clearer when comparing Love Liu’s and Sunrise Huang’s different relationships with Second Prize Wang.

While Love Liu wants to learn the idioms of desire and style, Sunrise Wang wants to learn English and she secretly expects that he will reciprocate her love for him. To their utmost disappointment, both Love Liu and Sunrise Huang accidentally witness Second Prize Wang’s declaration of love to Ahjitai and the Uyighur teacher’s prompt and violent rebuttal. What was supposed to be a private affair becomes a nightmarish accident that foregrounds the demise of Second Prize Wang. Sunrise Huang’s decision to accuse her English teacher of sexually harassing her goes far beyond a mere act of jealousy.

Second Prize Wang came out in his muddy clothes. He did not look in our direction. Like a wise old man he just looked at the sky, as if something up there had caught his attention.

Sunrise Huang’s face immediately turned ashen. She ignored me and stared at her English teacher: “He is darker,” she murmured like a concerned mother. “And he’s slouching a little.” (p. 161)
This is the beginning of Second Prize Wang’s demise and the beginning of these teenagers’ growth into adulthood. As is clear from Ying-ge-li-shi, Sunrise Huang’s confession that she has unfairly accused her teacher of a crime is not merely the product of her sense of guilt. It is rather an important step towards the beginning of the demystification of the imaginary and a first, albeit incomplete, step towards the “real”, the adult world. Her second murder, committed only by accident, leads her to a long period of detention during which, without any support from teachers or adults, she will prove herself able to master not only English but also her own life.

However, the reader cannot but remark that Love Liu is far from being unsuccessful, since by eventually making love to Ahjitai, he will find his own sense of the meaning of his own name: “Love”. From the beginning of the novel, he constantly displays an obsessive curiosity about the real meaning of this term. Second Prize Wang is the first one willing to explain its meaning:

“Why are you called Love Liu?” “Cause my mother wished I was a girl.” “But it’s not necessarily a girl’s name.” “Yes, it is.” “Do you know what ‘love’ means?” “It means when boys and girls... No I don’t know.” “No, not any of that. It means compassion.”

“What is ‘compassion’?” “It’s... it’s... how should I put it...? It means you can feel pain when you see others suffer.” “That’s impossible.” (p. 49)

Love clearly works as an ambivalent signifier and Love Liu stubbornly continues acting according to his personal interpretation of his name’s meaning. His refusal to acknowledge and accept Second Prize Wang’s alternative reading is also an important prolepsis which consistently accounts for Love Liu’s seemingly paradoxical behavior. If Second Prize Wang and his elegant manners still embody a world where ethics and aesthetics are reciprocally interdependent, it is up to Love Liu and his generation to break up such a linkage. In fact, it is Love Liu who convinces Second Prize Wang to go to the public bathhouse to contemplate Ahjitai’s naked body. Furthermore, Love Liu’s “indecent” proposal is bestowed as if it were Love Liu’s personal gift, the compensation for which would be his temporary possession of the English dictionary, which all his classmates longed for. There is a clear overturning of the teacher’s and student’s roles here: Second Prize Wang, blinded and fooled by his own unfulfilled desire, finds himself docilely following Love Liu. When they are both accused of indecent behavior, he behaves in the same way as he had behaved after Sunrise Huang’s charges, as an exceedingly responsible teacher, taking all the blame, and so he goes to prison.

There is certainly a “nihilist” component in this novel — a component which, as many Sinologists have shown, is one of the principal characteristics of texts by the “late-born generation”.

Yet this nihilism is a strategy to show that the world full of ethical values to which the former generation of Chinese had aspired is pathetic and meaningless. In a
world where everything is a spectacle deprived of meaningful ethical values, there are only two “values” that are worth pursuing: worldly success (achieved by Sunrise Huang) and sexual pleasure (achieved by Love Liu).

37 The air raid shelter in which Love Liu’s and Ahjitai’s lovemaking occurs is far from meaningless: it is not only the “masterpiece” of Love Liu’s mother, it is also a place of confinement for Ahjitai, who is “condemned” to work there as a form of punishment for refusing to comply with Director Fan’s offers of love. Ahjitai accepts to concede her body and her love — though only a short while, simply because she is afraid of dying there, as the shelter is on the verge of falling down. Love Liu’s lovemaking to Ahjitai transforms him into a winner. In fact, he has succeeded where his former exemplars of power and of value, Director Fan and Second Prize Wang respectively, had failed. The collapse of the air-raid shelter, which soon enough becomes a “blissful trap”, allows Love Liu to emancipate himself from his parents, to become an adult and to fulfill his dreams of love.

38 The novel’s ending is, not surprisingly, the opposite of that in Ah Cheng’s: Second Prize Wang demands that Love Liu give him back the dictionary. This again confirms not only the impossibility of creating a world in which ethics and aesthetics are intrinsically linked, but also the disavowal of all residual forms of authority. Wang Gang’s novel is one of the first attempts in Chinese literature to describe the death of the epistemic subject and the birth of a new one which trespasses ethnic and cultural boundaries. Knowledge, here, cannot be anything but mere lived-through experience. This novel can therefore be considered as the first, necessary step toward the birth and evolution of a new way of representing the body.

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NOTES


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