

# Imagining the Digitalisation of Politics

A Conversation with  
Wang Lixiong

Zeng Jinyan

translated by Christian Sorace

**Wang Lixiong is an author whose topics cover political fables, Tibet and Xinjiang issues, and the practice of grassroots democracy. His representative works include *Yellow Peril* (*huang huo*) published in 1991. In December 2017, he published a new novella about the digitalisation of Chinese politics titled *The Ceremony* (*da dian*).**

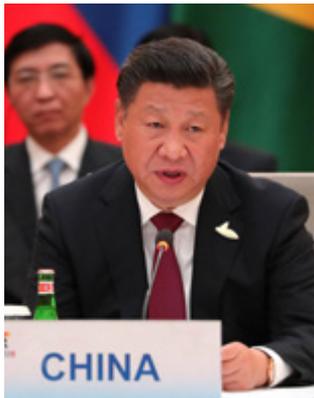
Zeng Jinyan: From *Yellow Peril* to *The Ceremony*, your work abounds with rich layers of thought and analysis. When I am reading your writing, I receive so much insight. If my understanding is not biased, the plot of your new novella revolves around an unfolding conflict between dictatorship in the digital age (*shuzihuashidai de ducaizhe*) and the functioning of bureaucratic groups (*guanliao jituan*). The fundamental activities of bureaucratic groups are commercialisation and the pursuit of their own interests above all else—a situation which has caused the autocratic system to internally defend itself, engage in a power struggle, and collapse. Finally, the players in this game of chess use a strategy of ‘moving toward democracy’ as the first step of the next round of autocratic power struggle. My question is: from the Mao era to the period from Deng Xiaoping until Hu-Wen, and now in the Xi Jinping era, what has changed in the activities of bureaucratic groups?

Wang Lixiong: To put it simply, Mao was a god and a dictator, he had a *large charisma*; Xi is heading in the direction of dictator and manufacturing a god-like status, but he has a *small charisma*. The degree of resemblance between them will become increasingly high—the difference is that Xi is unable to obtain the kind of sincere worship that society gave to Mao. Further, more than Mao, Xi has at his disposal high-tech methods of surveillance and a big data system. During the Mao era, bureaucratic groups could use to their advantage a special trait of dictatorship, which is the inability of the ‘few to govern the many’ (*shao zhi duo*). They were able to find loopholes and leave in place the appearance of authority while pursuing their own interests. In the end, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in the hope that he could master the thoughts of millions of masses to implement [the principle of] ‘many governing the few’ (*duo zhi shao*) over bureaucratic groups. This resulted in ‘everything under heaven being in chaos’ (*tianxia daluan*) and ‘ten years of turmoil’ (*shi nian haojie*). High tech has given Xi the ability to implement the method of the ‘few governing the many’ (*shao zhi duo*) and thus resolve the historical problem of dictatorship. Xi has manufactured a terrifying deterrence by removing any place of escape; as a result, he is able to strictly exercise control over bureaucratic groups.

Mao’s status as a god enabled him to reverse the direction of authority and change its rules and regulations, so much so that he was able to smash and rebuild its machinery. As a representative of the bureaucratic groups and a person who suffered gravely from the Cultural Revolution, after Mao



Wang Lixiong. PC: Thinkerworks.



Xi Jinping in 2017. PC: Wikimedia Commons

passed away, Deng Xiaoping resolved to put restrictions on the leadership as the Party rebuilt itself in order to preclude another Cultural Revolution. To prevent the reappearance of another Mao Zedong who would be above the Party and harm the bureaucratic groups, Deng promoted ‘Party construction’ (*dang de jianshe*) and ‘intra-Party democracy’ (*dangnei minzhu*).

Deng’s promotion of intra-Party democracy can be likened to a ‘machinisation of power’ (*quanli jiqihua*). As opposed to power revolving around the will of an individual leader, the ‘machinisation’ of power does not have a ‘leader’ in any genuine sense of the term. All members of the bureaucratic group are part of the machine, and they mutually conform and restrict each other in accordance with the rigidity of the structure. The highest authority is only a position— it is not important who fills it. That person must not violate the rules of the machinery and further still, must not destroy the machine itself.

Because autocratic power needs the bureaucratic system for its implementation, bureaucrats have methods for concretely manipulating those policy decisions from above that damage their corporate interests, such as foot-dragging, distorting facts, and settling matters by leaving them unresolved. Through these means, they hollow out these policy decisions, making their implementation basically impossible. This kind of ‘bureaucratic group autonomy’ (*guanliao jituan de zizhuxing*) is the foundation for the machinisation of power. From ancient times until today, ‘bureaucratic group autonomy’ has existed extensively—it is not embodied in formal institutions and procedures, but is an evolving set of tacit understandings and unwritten rules. Although bureaucrats compete over concrete issues, as a whole they actually combine to form a community that is adept at plotting together, pursuing shared interests, and using readily available connections within the bureaucratic system to conspire and form a protection network. For the central state’s power to be implemented, it needs to comply with ‘bureaucratic group autonomy’ and satisfy (or at least not offend) bureaucratic interests—only then can the hand accomplish what the heart desires rather than become an adversary that pays lip service to power and opposes it in secret. Even with Mao’s authority, it was difficult to launch a movement that touched bureaucratic power; e.g., it was even hard for Mao to publish a single article in Beijing about it. Ultimately, Mao circumvented the bureaucratic groups by directly appealing to the masses to revolt and demolish the bureaucracy. But in the end, even Mao could not escape the bureaucracy—after one smashes the old, new bureaucrats will, as they have always done, form their own interest groups. As soon as Mao died, his



Mao Zedong in 1963. PC: Wikimedia Commons

wife put in prison, and his inner circle captured in one net, power was comprehensively restored to the factions who were previously accused of ‘taking the capitalist road’.

Autocratic systems of government have never been good at resolving the problem of transferring power. In the past, the Communist Party’s methods for appointing a successor caused continuous turmoil. In his later years, Deng learned this lesson and appointed two generations of successors. Every ten years, power was to be handed over to the next generation. Perhaps Deng only planned ahead for the steady transfer of the next two generations of leaders, but their simultaneous co-existence took the shape of a limiting condition. The first generation, because they needed to hand over power, did not dare to boost their ego in a way that betrayed Deng; the second generation also relied on Deng’s legitimacy in order to guarantee that power would be transferred to them in a timely manner. As a result, both sides viewed Deng as a ‘guiding principle’: Deng used his personal authority to guarantee that these arrangements became a common understanding internal to the Party. Even after Deng died, the previous generation that wielded political power needed to hand over power on time to the successive generation. It was the first smooth transfer of power in Communist Party history.

Generally speaking, internal Party factions are harmful to the Party to the extent of miring it in life and death factional struggles; at the same time, a Party without internal factions is also harmful, as it can become a unified total Party dictatorship which governs by producing clouds with one turn of the hand and rain with another—i.e. through the exercise of arbitrary power. This also endangers the Party and subjects the process of succession to turmoil. ‘Every other generation appoints its successor’ (*gedai zhiding jiebanren*) at one stroke solves both of these problems. Every other generation demarcates two factions—‘N Faction’ and ‘N+1 Faction’ (‘N’ changes in accordance with the algebra of succession) which naturally form two ‘mountain strongholds’ (*shantou*). However, one faction will always be stronger than the other; they will never be momentarily evenly matched. In this way, a life and death struggle can be avoided. The successor in waiting will never actively challenge [power]; as long as they guarantee that there are no mishaps, they will assume their position when the scheduled time arrives. The faction in power will avoid excessively repressing the weaker faction because the balance of power will inevitably change. The faction in power wants to avoid retaliation once the weaker one takes office and becomes the stronger one. When one is strong, restraint must be exercised.



*The Ceremony (Da Dian)*, Wang Lixiong, 2017

After the succession and transfer of the relationship between strong and weak, the side that became strong still does not dare to excessively expand its power. Apart from the remaining strength of the predecessor, one must worry about the fact that the predecessor appointed the next generation of successor who naturally belongs to the opposing faction. This means that one must take into consideration that at the end of one's term in office, power will be handed over, and one will once again be in the position of being weak. These regulations restrain and protect both sides. In this kind of internal party allocation, there are no differences in ideology or political line and no different concepts of governance, to the extent of there being no differences in strategy. There is no need for competition between both sides. They simply need to follow the programmed rise and fall of the curtain, and climb on stage when it is time to sing. Not only would this resolve the difficult problem of how to transmit autocratic power, but it would even be more stable than the transfer of power between parties in a democracy.

When leaders direct power, it is possible to break through the status quo. Hitler's war and Mao's Cultural Revolution are two examples, but it may even be possible to include positive instances, such as Chiang Ching-kuo's lifting of the ban on political parties in Taiwan and Gorbachev's political transformation in the Soviet Union. Internal power struggles, however, are also likely to bring about collapse. But after power is machinised, a leader is only the spokesperson for the interests of their power group. There will be no breakthroughs, only N series of alternations between each side acting together to safeguard this type of mechanism. From the perspective of maintaining the Communist Party's own stability, it can be said that the machinisation of power which 'does not toss from side to side' and 'silently makes a fortune' is the most optimal mode.

If Xi followed these arrangements, then after ten years and two Party Congresses, he would hand over power to Hu Jintao's appointed successor Hu Chunhua, and appoint a successor for the next generation. In this way, the mechanism would become further regularised and continue into the future. But instead, he has changed a mechanism that it has taken over 20 years to cultivate, and returned to Mao's methods. At present, it is still too early to tell if he will use dictatorial power to step over the bureaucratic groups in order to do something different. But what he has done is increased the possibility of unpredictability in the system and collapse. From a certain perspective, this is not necessarily a bad thing.

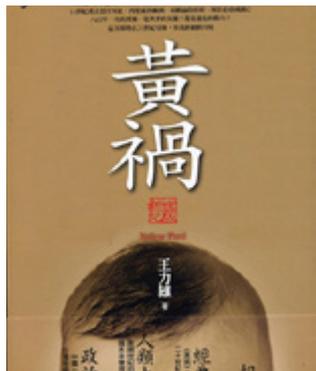
ZJ: On the basis of your research and experience dealing with grassroots-level police engaged in stability maintenance, in the Xi Jinping era, are there any new characteristics in the psychologies and work techniques of government employees at the high, middle, and lowest rungs of the political and legal system? What are the reasons for the changes?

WL: The officials of this generation lack capital in any respect. As long as they have power in their hands, they can overstep other people; in all situations, they use power. In the past, power was embedded with other things, such as ideology, united front work, international image, and media constraints but now power basically relies on violence. This generation of government officials lack faith and ideology, they just attain their goals by any means necessary and put their individual interests above everything else. On the one hand, they inhumanely carry out orders and maintain the machinery of power; on the other hand, if one day the overall trends shift course, it can be imagined that ‘not one real man’ (*jing wu yi ren shi nan'er*) will be found [translator’s note: Wang is referring to a speech Xi Jinping gave to Guangdong officials in January 2013 during which he allegedly warned that the Soviet Union rapidly collapsed due to the fact ‘there was not one real man’ there to stop it].

ZJ: Although your novel includes the figures of Zhao Gui, a bureaucrat engaged in business (*guanshang*) and Boss Xie [translator’s note: xie means ‘shoe’], a private entrepreneur, the writing mainly focusses on the struggle internal to bureaucratic groups and does not portray the possible prospect of an authoritarian state’s putting to use the digitalisation of commerce. What do you think about the recent intensity of resistance and criticism of Facebook’s collection and abuse of big data, including leading users toward commercial totalitarian control? Is it possible to describe the prospects for the digitalisation of totalitarianism from the perspective of the market?

WL: Human society confronts the autocracy of power and also confronts the autocracy of capital. In the connected world, the optimistic hopes brought about by the decentralisation of the 2.0 age have been smashed by today’s Internet capitalist monopolies. In China, the alliance between state power and capital is even more prominent, which places the Internet under a dual autocracy. Capital uses its monopoly over science and technology to serve the autocratic power of the state; as a result, political power amply avails itself of the methods of modern science and technology—what I call ‘techno-scientific autocracy’ *keji zhuanzhi*—enabling autocracy to attain unprecedented heights.

Formerly, autocracies relied on control over the military and police, and a monopoly of weapons to stay in power. Although these methods were formidable, all along they had one soft



*Yellow Peril* (Huanghuo),  
Wang Lixiong, 1991

under belly—the few were unable to govern the many. No matter how much governance machines expanded, the rulers would always be few in relation to the people they governed. Inevitably, there would always be places that the eye could not see and the hand could not reach, places that are overlooked and neglected, in which the force of revolt could grow, an ant hole could cave in, or germinations of instability could be produced, and ultimately lead to the collapse of autocracy. It is like the Western saying:

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost,  
 For the want of a shoe, the horse was lost,  
 For the want of a horse, the rider was lost,  
 For the want of a rider, the battle was lost,  
 For the want of a battler, the kingdom was lost.

The main problem of autocracy in the past is that it was impossible to dispatch soldiers to watch over and give each horseshoe a nail. As a result, it was impossible to put an end to the chain that led from the missing nail in the horseshoe to the destruction of the country.

However, *The Ceremony* describes a network of shoes, in which each horseshoe is given a SID (Shoe ID) allowing any sign of fracture to be discovered in advance—the ID registers if the shoe is replaced, or the horse stops running, or the rider changes. As a result, the chain from the missing nail to the destroyed country will never happen again. The Shoe ID network described in *The Ceremony* has not yet become reality, but it would not be technologically difficult. In the age of computers and the Internet, people have been integrated into a digital situation and become bits of data; as a result, autocrats can use digital technology to implement the ‘rule of the few over the many’. Big data can capture all traces, and algorithms can detect all suspicious situations. Although autocratic power is the rule of the few, the power of computers exponentially exceeds the power of humans. Autocratic power is equipped with the strongest science and technology and can now accomplish what it was not able to in the past; conversely, what rebels might have achieved in the past is impossible today. Science and technology not only provides autocracy with new methods of control but also provides it with a material foundation—as modern science and technology ensures that there will never again be famine and helps the people maintain ‘moderate prosperity’ (*xiaokang*), the most historically powerful motivation for revolution recedes from the stage. What is left to challenge autocracy? In line with the development of Artificial Intelligence, autocratic power will not only be able to forecast crises before they happen and detect threats but will also establish absolutely obedient and

super-strength robotic police and military. When autocracy reaches this step, what change remains possible? At the time when all threats and crises can be eliminated, forever becomes the horizon, and the ‘absolute power that corrupts absolutely’ will absolutely remain the same. If you look at the reality of the world today, autocratic regimes are becoming more autocratic and democratic societies are retreating into autocracy—among the reasons for this is techno-scientific autocracy that enables those in power to rule by the few over the many.

And yet—although autocracy has tighter control than it did in the past due to techno-scientific autocracy and seems to completely lack the possibility of collapse, and although in *The Ceremony* there are no ruthless characters that appear, no conspiratorial factions, no military turncoats, and no indications that the entire edifice will collapse—all that is needed is a bureaucrat who desires to protect himself, an ambitious businessman, a young border police officer, and an engineer who does not show the slightest interest in politics, in order to make the enormous autocratic machinery fall apart, without even the semblance of a reaction.

The reason why I wrote in this way is that I wanted to display the Achilles’ heel of techno-scientific autocracy—i.e. the fact that autocratic power is necessarily dependent on rapid technological progress, but autocrats are unable on their own to control and manipulate science and technology and are forced to rely on experts and entrust operations to their subordinates. It is the people placed at the nodal points integrating science and technology with the autocratic machine who are the ones that hold the keys to it and control its power. The methods of autocracies to control their internal personnel are ineffective because autocrats are ignorant about its internal operations and cannot see which nodal points might produce threats, to the extent of not even knowing where the nodal points are. Consequently, it is beyond their capability to set up defences against attacks evolving from within. Even if they mend the pen, the sheep are long gone. Along with the continuous development of science and technology, there will always be sheep who escape before the old fences can be mended.

In the past, power’s strength was linear—the strength or weakness of the army was directly proportional to the amount of soldiers and weapons it had. To overthrow power also required a linear equation of strength and costs over the same period of time; to defend against being overthrown only required controlling this kind of linear increase. But the strength of science and technology is non-linear—to topple the autocratic machine from within, sometimes all that is needed is command over a single nodal point—and with zero cost, this process can

be limitlessly replicated and disseminated. By manipulating the format, it is possible to return everything there is to blank space and reboot the system.

In theory, it is possible to guard against this kind of danger by ensuring the absolute loyalty of all internal members. The problem is that the most reliable form of loyalty—‘faith’ (*xinyang*)—is what is missing from today’s autocratic machinery, which operates only on the basis of interest and fear. Yet autocratic power is inevitably unfair; apart from injuring the governed, it cannot avoid to some extent injuring its own members. When interests are no longer maintained by the system, the only mode of restriction left is fear. The origins of fear are the punishment suffered in case of defeat—if there was a 100 percent assurance of success, fear would have nothing to hold onto. The special characteristic of science and technology is its fatal precision—an attack can happen at any time and from any unexpected place within the internal machinery of autocracy launched by anyone who controls one of the nodal points of the technological apparatus. From this perspective, techno-scientific autocracy provides autocrats with unprecedented power but at the same time exposes them to imperceptible dangers that are difficult to take precautions against. Science and technology can both make autocracy invulnerable to attack and collapse suddenly. The uncertainty confronted by techno-scientific autocracy is not at all less than that confronted by traditional forms of autocracy. The story told in *The Ceremony* is simply an explanation of this principle.

The story told in *The Ceremony* has not yet happened today mainly because techno-scientific autocracy is the next phase after the digital age. At present, we are at the beginning of this epochal shift, the changing characteristics of which are becoming increasingly visible. According to my logic, the age of techno-scientific autocracy will internally collapse similar to the pattern described in *The Ceremony*, and in most cases, it will happen unexpectedly and abruptly. After it collapses, the characteristics of autocracy will probably remain the same. As I described in *The Ceremony*, even if people wave the banner of democratisation, new authorities will continue the tradition of the few governing many. The street names can be changed without ever stepping foot off the path of autocracy. Traditional democracies lack the essential factor of science and technology—universal suffrage, multi-party democracy, and freedom of speech, etc.—do not have the ability to handle techno-scientific autocracy, and in fact, are extremely susceptible to being manipulated by it. The way out of this situation is to replace techno-scientific autocracy with techno-scientific democracy.

Another possibility of collapse is the fragmentation of power into multiple groups mutually at war with each other. This situation usually follows the emergence of mobs of people, social upheaval, and a succession of uncontrollable catastrophes as everything slides into collapse. I did not describe this kind of prospect in *The Ceremony* because I already outlined it in *Yellow Peril*. Looking ahead to what will happen after *The Ceremony*, to this day, I still think that *Yellow Peril* is the most likely scenario.

ZJ: Since its publication in 1991 until today, *Yellow Peril* has influenced many people to imagine China's future. This book depicts the future of the world flooded by Chinese refugees due to World War III, which was triggered by China's civil war. Ai Weiwei has referred to himself as a 'refugee' (*nanmin*), and many other independent thinkers in and outside of China are conscious of their state as refugees. During World War II, Hannah Arendt along with a group of intellectuals from Europe became refugees during their exile in America. In the context of today's global refugee crisis, does current global refugee flow make you re-imagine or add anything to your ideas in *Yellow Peril*?

WL: It has been 27 years since *Yellow Peril* was published and China has moved seemingly in the opposite direction of the vision described in the book. Not only has China not collapsed but it has emerged as a great power. But 27 years in the long river of history is only a glimmer on the water—a minor undulation or ripple that could pass by without being noticed. To this day, the root causes of the crisis described in *Yellow Peril* still exist and are even graver now than they were when I wrote it. In this age of prosperity, I often sense that the disaster in *Yellow Peril* is not far away, but cannot say for sure exactly when it will thunderously descend into reality. I previously wrote an essay called 'A Discussion on *Yellow Peril* Ten Years Later' and the following passage is still what I believe today:

*In China today ... the only power that can hold together China as a whole is political power. In these circumstances, the unprecedented stability of Chinese society is not at all strange, because apart from political power nothing exists anymore which is strong enough to make society cohesive and guide the people ... to visualise this situation, imagine political power as a bucket containing over 1.3 billion people represented by scattered sand [translator's note: the analogy of the people to 'scattered sand' was first used by Sun Yat-sen emphasising the need for political and national cohesion]. Within the scattered sand, there are lively and disorderly activities of different groups. But because of a loss of faith, the bucket has become brittle and is less effective at containing—what used to be iron in the Mao era is now made out of glass. But even if the bucket is glass, no matter what happens,*

*the scattered sand inside will never challenge it. This is the reason why people outside of China perceive it as a place of stability and prosperity.*

*But this stability should not be celebrated as a good omen but is more accurately understood as containing enormous danger. The danger, of course, is what if the vibrations from a single accident cause the glass to break? The only thing holding China together would be gone and society would spin out of control—at that time, what would become of China, what could anyone do? All of the crises will erupt together, and the scattered sand will fly upward and fill the entire sky, without any way to put it back in order . . . China will free fall and shatter into pieces and shards, and even those fragments will disintegrate into powder. It is very likely that this disaster would be destructive. In human history, many large civilizations have perished and there is no reason why we should blindly believe that the Chinese people will never become extinct.*

ZJ: I also noticed that there are two main female characters in *The Ceremony*: a prostitute from the countryside named Lü Mei and a high-class intellectual named Yi Hao. These two female characters mainly appear as passive sexual objects. Lü Mei is the sexual bribe given to Li Bo, a National Security Council Technology official. This ‘gift’ is supposed to help the politically unfeeling ‘technology male’ (*jishu nan*) recover his physiological sexual ability and self-confidence, and at the same time indicates that Li Bo came from a rural background, and is still sentimentally attached to his rural origins. When Li Bo encounters difficulties and flees, the simple and guileless Lü Mei spares no effort to help him and bring food to his cave hide-out. The book also simply mentions how Lü Mei was subject to domestic abuse from her brother and husband, and in the same village was brutally tied up and gang raped by a father and his six sons who seized the power of controlling the village through violence.

As an expert at the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), on the one hand, Yi Hao is manipulated through a ‘dream creator’ (*mengzao yi*)—a machine that creates rays which generate sexual excitement—by undercover National Security officer Liu Gang. On the other hand, it is when she is entirely unconscious of what she is doing as a result of the machine-induced state that she helps her husband Li Bo overcome his inferiority complex. Again, for Li Bo, successful intercourse gives him vital energy and helps him recover his self-confidence. From Li Bo’s perspective, this sexual encounter overcomes the estrangement between him and his wife and is the beginning of a beautiful future life together. It could even be said that Yi Hao’s role in the novel is to depict Li Bo’s ‘humanity’ (*renxing*): because of her, we see Li Bo’s sense of responsibility and love for his family; his sexual energy and capability make him become a ‘human’ and not simply a numb technological machine. In your conceptualisation, do the images of a ‘sexual abuse’ and ‘manipulated’ women who are unable to act independently serve as metaphors for the actual situation of Chinese women today? Do women have a way out?

WL: All of the women in my parent’s family and in my family have their own careers and incomes, and at the same time are cherished and doted on by the men. For this reason, I did not

intend for the characters of the ‘sexually abused’ and ‘controlled’ to become metaphors of Chinese women’s actual situation. The situation naturally arose following the logical development of the story, and was not the result of a prior understanding of the realities of Chinese women. Today, even though women may be pampered by men, it is often in exchange for using their sexual appeal to satisfy male desire. This reflects women’s subordinate status and loss of self-esteem.

In regards to women having a path forward, I describe my vision of an ideal state (*lixiangguo*) in an unfinished work called ‘There is a Utopia’ [*you tuobang*; translator’s note: Wang Lixiong is playing on the Chinese word for utopia *wutuobang* in which the first character *wu* is a homonym for ‘without’; in this title Wang switches the *wu* with *you* meaning ‘to have’ or ‘there is’]. In this piece, I imagine a society in which women and children are provided for; housing is provided; and women are the core of the family. I think that if we were able to take this step, it would resolve the social problems that women face today.

ZJ: As a female reader, I think that your novel does not offer enough space to allow your readers to understand the stories of these two female characters. To put it differently, these are not stories told by the women about themselves; instead, these two women appear only as psychological projections in the stories of other men. For example, in the novel, after Li Bo has sex with his unconscious wife and scribbles down a brief note before he leaves saying ‘secret mission’, we have no idea what Yi Hao is thinking—is it a rape? What does she think about the fact that her husband had sex with her while she was unconscious, especially considering that they have not had sex for such a long time, and the sex happened when she was trapped in a stupor as a result of the Dream Creator manipulated by the national security agent Liu Gang? You do not write about it from her perspective. Yi Hao’s life is primarily elaborated through Li Bo’s perspective. How do you think about and understand women—mainly as spiritual resources? Do you think this discrepancy between author and reader is due to a generation gap?

WL: I am not a ‘pure’ writer—I often write novels only to express an idea and use literature as a means of attracting readers. The truth that concerns me is mainly the political aspect of life, I am not willing to part with too much ink to explore human nature. One of the weaknesses in my writing is that I am not good at portraying women. All of my previous writing is like that—*Ceremony* is not an exception. To a certain extent, I am limited by my own gender. I have never had the experience of being a woman, and do not dare to put myself in a woman’s shoes and try to write from a female perspective. You are entirely correct—like you said, I write women from the perspective of a man, and do not really give them an independent character. To overcome this would require a conscious practice—perhaps if I ever decide to fully immerse myself in literary creation, I will have to take a class in this.

ZJ: I notice that in the first two chapters of the book, there are lots of descriptions of sex. One of the threads in the book is Li Bo's sexual impotence and the recovery of his sexual self-confidence by having two different encounters and types of sex. The most crucial factor in building Li Bo's ego-identity is the power of sex. Although he is an indispensable IT functionary in an autocratic regime, he is also a component of the autocratic machinery that must follow the prescribed rules. Li Bo's only activity with any hint of autonomy is related to his sexual ability, self-confidence, and arousal. China is considered to be a sexually active country but also one that never achieved sexual liberation. Are you able to systemically introduce to the readers the ways in which you understand sex?

WL: In all societies, sex is an important part of human life. Especially in the hormonal phase of exuberant drives, sex can influence and even determine the rest of one's fate. The protagonist Li Bo's fate reflects the influence of this aspect. However, in the novel, I do not describe sex for the sake of describing sex, but as a necessary plot device, and as it is representative of the dream engineering in the 'dream creator'. Liu Gang's possession of the 'dream creator' represents his power to control other people through sex. Li Bo resists by taking the power to fabricate dreams back into his own hands.

ZJ: One last question that is not related to your novel, but that is closely related to your long-term thinking on China's way forward. On 13 July 2017, Liu Xiaobo passed away. So many people were stunned. Can you describe a bit about your relationship with Liu Xiaobo and his wife Liu Xia? How do you understand the circumstances leading up to and after Liu Xiaobo's death? What do you think is Liu Xiaobo's spiritual wealth and political legacy? What kind of influence will Xiaobo's death have on social movements and dissident movements in China?

WL: For many years, I lived in a neighbourhood adjacent to where Liu Xiaobo and his wife lived. We were intimate friends, and our families would frequently visit each other. Here, I am only talking about my understanding of Liu Xiaobo's request to leave the country before his death—I think it was to obtain freedom for Liu Xia and her younger brother. He stood fast in China his entire life and repeatedly declined opportunities to move abroad. When I suggested to him that he should emigrate, for the reason of providing Liu Xia with a free and safe life, he would not consider it, and probably thought he was better able to protect her. He was determined to sacrifice his life in prison for his cause, but in his last moments he asked to leave the country—in my understanding, this was a sacrifice for love, he used the last of his life to plan for his wife's future.

As an outsider who was not involved in Liu Xiaobo's negotiation with the authorities for his wife's freedom, I could see that China's authorities would not honour his sacrifice and accept his request, but instead, would make his entire life's

commitment to standing fast in China lose its final moment of ‘completeness’ (*wanzhengxing*). But I still commend this decision, because it is precisely this incompleteness that expresses his love for his wife. People around the world might not be able to understand what a huge sacrifice this was for him, but so long as it was able to allow his long suffering wife to have one final feeling of love, its significance absolutely exceeds whatever importance people might invest in the concept of ‘completeness’. ■