

Pleasure of Thinking

Wang Xiaobo. London: Penguin Classics, 2023. 224 pp. £14.99 (pbk). ISBN 9780241648520

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The publication in English of a selection of essays by the iconic writer Wang Xiaobo (1952–1997) is welcome news for students of Chinese intellectuals and more generally of China in the 1990s. The volume published by Penguin offers a selection of pieces taken from Wang Xiaobo's two essay collections, *The Pleasure of Thinking* (*Siwei de Lequ*), first published in November 1996, and *My Spiritual Home* (*Wo de jingshen jiayuan*), first published in May 1997, just weeks after Wang's untimely death of a heart attack on 11 April. The volume contains eight pieces from *The Pleasure of Thinking* (out of a total of 59) and 27 pieces from *My Spiritual Home* (out of a total of 81), representing a quarter of Wang's published essays.

All the translations are by Yan Yan, except for that of the last essay, perhaps Wang's most well-known single piece, "The Silent Majority," which is a reprint of Eric Braahmsen's translation, with minor modifications and the addition of a few original passages that had been omitted earlier. The Penguin edition is identical with the hardcover published simultaneously by Astra (except for the short biographies of the author and the translator that don't appear in the Penguin version). Yan Yan, a US-based freelance translator, has also translated a companion volume of Wang Xiaobo's fiction (*The Golden Age*, Astra/Penguin, 2022). It should also be noted that *Contemporary Chinese Thought* had previously published a selection of 19 essays from *The Pleasure of Thinking* in a special issue on Wang Xiaobo (vol. 30:3, 1999, edited by Carine Defoort), as well as two essays by Wang in a special issue of texts selected from the famous monthly *Orient* on the topic of intellectuals (vol. 29:2, 1997).

The Penguin selection represents a good introduction to Wang Xiaobo's eclectic range of themes. It contains some of his classic essays in a self-reflective vein, often incorporating humorous memories of his time as a rusticated youth in Yunnan ("My Spiritual Garden," "The Pleasure of Thinking," "The Maverick Pig," "What Kind of Feminist Am I?" and "The Silent Majority"). A good selection of pieces deal with Wang's collaboration with his wife Li Yinhe in the area of sociology of sexuality and his commitment to value neutrality ("Interrogating Sociology," "On the Question of Homosexuality," "Overcoming the Puerile condition"). Another series deals with his experience as a graduate student in the US in the 1980s ("Odd Jobs," "Tales from Abroad," "Visiting the Home of an American Leftist"). A few essays discuss his views on writing fiction ("Why I Write"). Wang's incisive critiques of Chinese intellectuals and Confucian moralizing are represented by a single but evocative essay, "Culture Wars."

It is somewhat regrettable that more effort has not been made to explain how the essays were selected, and to situate and contextualize them for the general reader. The essays are not dated, and they do not appear in chronological order (by contrast, in most Chinese editions, the original source and publication date are provided at the end of the essay). Many of these essays are significant not only in and of themselves, but because they first appeared in the pioneering commercial media of the 1990s, in magazines like *Orient* (*Dongfang*), which was shut down by censorship in 1996, *Sanlian Life Weekly* or *Southern Weekend*, as well as in more traditional outlets like *Dushu*, which all contributed to Wang's fame. Beyond a few lines on the inside flap of the Penguin edition, there is no introduction or postface to provide any further context about Wang Xiaobo and the environment in which he operated.



While the essays generally read smoothly, there are some typos, as well as a few errors and infelicitous translations. For example, in “My spiritual garden” *suren* should probably be rendered as *philistines* or some similarly derogatory word, rather than *amateurs*, which makes the passage hard to understand (p. 4). Similarly, “doubtless years” for *bu huo zhi nian* is somewhat clumsy, referring to the age of 40, when one is supposed to be “free from doubts” or “delusions” (“The Pleasure of Thinking,” p. 15). The classical saying *putian zhi xia, mofei wang tu; shuaitu zhi bin, mofei wang chen* is construed as “Under all of heaven, not all land belongs to the king; between the water’s margins, not all land belongs to the duke” (“The Feeling of Domestic Product and Cultural Relativism,” p. 86), which is disputable. The context suggests it should be rendered more literally as “Under the heavens, all land is the king’s; within its shores, all are the king’s servants.” The expression “intellectual youth” is used throughout by Yan Yan to translate *zhishi qingnian*, but not further explained (Abrahamsen uses “sent-down youth” in “The Silent Majority” and an explanatory footnote finally appears on p. 206). Li Yinhe, despite being repeatedly mentioned in the essays, is never explicitly identified either as a prominent sociologist of sexuality and gender, or as Wang Xiaobo’s spouse.

Despite these minor shortcomings, the volume is a welcome addition to the available translations of Wang Xiaobo’s works and a valuable contribution to the understanding of how critical thinking developed in the 1990s. Wang’s black humour, his incisive critique of officials and self-proclaimed professors of morality, his reflections on the Mao era and on rethinking social sciences in the global post-Cold War environment all shine through the selected essays and are certain to withstand the test of time.

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