

**Modernist Literature in Taiwan Revisited—  
with an Analysis of  
Wang Wenxing's *Backed Against the Sea, Part II***

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**ABSTRACT**

The article is divided into two parts. The first part offers a brief survey of the socio-cultural context, critical reactions, and intellectual presuppositions of Modernist literature in postwar Taiwan. One point being stressed here is that, since writers and critics of Modernist literature are both deeply embroiled in contemporary cultural politics, it would be difficult to properly assess its real contributions without looking back at the Modernist literary project as it was originally conceived. The second part consists of a critical analysis of Wang Wenxing's recently completed sequel to a 1981 novel *Beihai de ren* [Backed against the sea]. In the analysis, Wang's novel is taken to exemplify specific features of Taiwan's Modernist literary project as a high culture quest.

**KEY WORDS**

Wang Wenxing  
Postmodernism

Modernism  
*Backed Against the Seas*



### **Modernism and Postmodernism—"Lacks" and "Excesses" in the Dominant Culture**

For old-timers in Taiwan's intellectual circle, to reminisce about Modernism at a time when the century is drawing to an end may very well evoke a mood of sentimental nostalgia—not something in consonance with the "forever innovate, forever new" Modernist mentality, obviously. Nowadays, to be sure, the progressive image and prophetic halo once belonged to the Modernists is more likely to be donned on those subscribing to a certain strand of the Postmodernist thought. However, keeping in mind the historically specific nature of such "imported intellectual trends" within the context of contemporary Taiwan, one may discern that the Modernist and Postmodernist formations share a great deal in common in terms of their specific trajectories as well as institutional framework. Similarities and differences between the two are thus worth contemplating.

In her article "Critical Texts, Mass Artifacts: The Consumption of Knowledge in Postmodern Japan," Marilyn Ivy gives an interesting analysis of a 1983 incident: a book by a young Japanese scholar, Asada Akira, on poststructuralism and deconstruction unexpectedly became a bestseller.<sup>1</sup> She argues that the key to the book's phenomenal popularity lies in the unconventional image of the young author, which, combined with the book's preface, successfully conveyed a provocative message: "knowledge is 'play'"; it is "a matter of style." And such rhetoric possesses extraordinary emancipatory power for

the book's targeted audience, the "young university test takers, those caught in the tightly programmed Japanese educational system, in which the exigencies of the exam system—the "examination hell"—almost completely determine the chances of knowledge."<sup>2</sup> Ivy then proceeds to use the "Asada Akira phenomenon" to exemplify a prominent aspect of contemporary Japan's "postmodern condition," in which knowledge is transformed into "object of desire," to commodity.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural events created by imported intellectual trends originated in the West, like the one above, have occurred in different forms in non-Western societies with increasing frequency. Roughly beginning in the mid-1980s, the intellectual circle in Taiwan has weathered transitory grips by structuralism, neo-Marxist Critical Theory, deconstruction, postmodernism, postcolonialism, as well as the deeper and more extensive sweep of feminist discourse, of which initial waning signs may have just appeared. And yet, the continual mounting of momentum that surrounds Queer Theory since 1992-1993 has led us to wonder how far, in its capacity as a vital driving force for the "New Social Movement"—a term concurrent with the Theory Boon in Taiwan—it would ultimately take us.

What is illuminating about Ivy's analysis is that she has placed the focus of her analysis almost exclusively on the contextual factors governing the reception, rather than on the actual contents of the intellectual trends. Whereas more generally speaking those contents are significant, and that individual contexts of these phenomena may drastically differ, certain constant variables seem to suggest something more. Namely, the potency of the influence of imported intellectual trends derives primarily from the promise they could offer in helping native intellectuals to reach beyond the limits and constraints of specific dominant conditions, institutional or ideological, in their own society. Such influences may create significant and lasting consequences as to leave indelible marks on the indigenous cultural history; it may also deplete after a short while, or become transformed or diverted in unpredictable ways. And yet the essential dynamism that characterizes the moment of encounter is typically triggered by a

fantasy about the new thought-system's power to redress the inherent inadequacies—the “lacks and excesses”—within the society's own dominant culture. Among the exposed, those who do not (yet) feel deeply implicated in the dominant culture's controlling mechanisms, such as the younger generation or minority intellectuals, are particularly susceptible to such fantasies. Since the types of available intellectual trends at a certain historical moment are more or less pre-given, the nature of their influences is therefore heavily determined by the real or perceived inadequacies of existing cultural conditions.

The above may help us to better comprehend the varied facets of ] the Modernist and Postmodernist intellectual and cultural formations in contemporary Taiwan. Both of them, for instance, caught on at moments when the general historical condition permitted (or even inspired) public expression of formerly suppressed discontent. Modernist trend emerged when Taiwan's postwar-generation intellectuals came of age, at first signs of the society's economic take-off and relaxation of the Nationalist's highly coercive cultural policies. And the burgeoning of the radical cultural trends, trends that may be subsumed under the rubric of Postmodernism, was concurrent with the back-flow of emigrated intellectuals, at the height of Taiwan's social affluence and near-collapse of the government's authoritarian control. The real and perceived “lacks” and “excesses” in either institutional or ideological structures of the society are undoubtedly different at these two historical moments, but affinities and continuities must also exist.

Regardless of how these two thought waves mutually relate to each other in their original, Western contexts, in Taiwan they both have offered alternative cultural visions that posed direct challenges to the dominant cultural ideology, albeit with divergent approaches. The Modernists challenged the excessive neo-traditionalist moralism with iconoclastic individualism. And the perceived lack of “high culture” under the destitute cultural environment of the 1950s and 1960s led to their galvanized quest for professionalism, artistic as well as institutional. Supported by the liberal conception of social stratification, the Modernists are cultural elitists, which distinguishes them

from the Postmodernists, who generally espouse a populist agenda. In a sense, the lack of legitimate radical intellectual forum in Taiwan's post-1949 era is a latent cause for the vibrant surge of cultural and academic activism in the present decade. As liberalism has long enjoyed a mainstream status in Taiwan's intellectual circle, the Post-modern challenge thus partly resides in its endorsement of an opposing ideological orientation.

However, seen from another viewpoint, there is a high degree of family resemblance between the two intellectual trends in terms of agents, institutions, and patterns of their general course of development. Both have come to attract public attention and gained significant momentum after setting footholds on college campuses. And the elitist background of their leading advocates—intellectuals affiliated with prestigious institutions—has undoubtedly contributed to the quick assimilation of the potentially subversive movements by the country's cultural establishment.

### **Critical reactions to Modernist literature—the Nativists, the Localists, and the New Cultural Critics**

Literature in contemporary Taiwan—both in terms of succession of artistic modes and shifting paradigms of criticism—is probably more palpably affected by imported intellectual trends than any other cultural spheres. This seems to be precisely why it has been so difficult to properly assess Taiwan's Modernist literature, as writers and critics alike are deeply embroiled in contemporary cultural politics involving intricate interactions between the dominant, alternative, and oppositional cultural forces. Moreover, as the institutionalization of Taiwanese literary studies is still underway and scholarly treatment of the subject random and limited in scope, the loudest opinions concerning Taiwan's Modernist literature have come largely from writer-turned political activists and media-based cultural critics.

On account of literary Modernism's place of origin—the capitalist West—the Nativist critics of the 1970s, represented by Chen Yingzhen, held the view that it was making inroads on Taiwan's na-

tional well-being. The view has its roots in the long-standing dilemma faced by non-Western societies: whether to modernize according to the socialist or the liberal-capitalist paradigms. Since the 1970s, progressive intellectuals have largely subscribed to the Nativist verdict on Taiwan's Modernist literature, associating it with reactionary qualities as defined in Marxist or neo-Marxist terms.

In many respects, the Localist trend of the 1980s was heavily indebted to the Nativist literary movement of the preceding decade, but Localists of different factions adhered to the socialist ideology with varying degrees of ingenuousness. As their political contestation was primarily targeted at the Sinocentric cultural narrative of the mainlander-controlled Nationalist government, Modernism's alleged capitalist affiliation was no longer a critical issue. Yet, artistic products of the Modernists—especially those of the mainlander writers—were invariably slighted, if not completely excluded, in the Localist efforts to reconstruct a Taiwan-centered literary genealogy. The situation only begins to change as new political circumstances created needs to co-op the Modernists writers with modified interpretive schemes.<sup>4</sup>

Towards the end of the 1980s, riding the high tide of a vital dynamism generated by the lifting of martial law, the newly liberalized media began to vigorously explore an intellectual market that was reaching maturity after decades of gradual development.<sup>5</sup> This gave birth to a new breed of cultural critics, with the print media as the major forum. Coming largely from the post-baby-boom generation, many of these cultural critics have adopted a revisionist approach to Taiwan's postwar literary history.<sup>6</sup> The new approach, however, is very much conditioned by the overpowering media logic, which stipulates that knowledge is produced primarily for public consumption. Journalistic orientation and topical concerns have thus led to insightful but highly selective treatment of Modernist literature, and viewpoints conceived within the immediate context of contemporary cultural discourse.

### The Modernist “high culture” quest

A properly conducted contextual study of Taiwan’s Modernist literature must necessarily attend to its profound political implications, but it should not be subordinate to dogmatic ideological doctrines or shifting political agenda. Nor should the examination of the Modernist project, brought into existence by specific historical conditions of some two decades earlier, be limited to those aspects immediately illuminative of current intellectual and public concerns. Rather, we ought to take a closer look at the enterprise as the Modernists themselves have conceived it, without being condescending (backed by the vague assumption that the Postmodernist has somehow already “deconstructed” Modernism).

As the Modernists set out to emulate the Western high art, they simultaneously subscribed to the matrix of philosophical ideas that underpinned the Modernist aesthetics. Behind formal experimentalism were notions of epistemological incertitude, of the arbitrary referentiality of linguistic signs, and the avant-gardist impetus to subvert social praxis. And the Modernist writers’ inward search was prompted by the Existentialist assertion of life’s fundamental absurdity, Freudian skepticism of socially sanctioned ethical norms, and a rationalist conception of moral relativism. Seen from today’s vantage-point, the claim of universal validity for Western cultural concepts is of course problematic, as it has historically served to rationalize—or become camouflage for—the West’s imperialist project. Such, however, should not prevent us from examining the historical roles these concepts played in generating significant artistic trends in non-Western modern societies. To do so, one must first try to understand the enabling historical condition that set off their journey leading to the status of viable alternative cultural visions.

At the heat of the Nativist literary debate, the Modernist was stigmatized as the “cultural comprador”—a derogatory image defined against the idealized socialist-nationalist artist envisioned by the Chinese and Taiwanese leftist intellectuals. More realistically speaking, however, under the political circumstances of the 1950s and 1960s,

the leftist vision was hardly an available option. What actually inspired the Modernist literary project was the broadly-defined liberal ideology that, thanks to the cold war, was tolerated by the Nationalist government—albeit with many restrictions. In a cultural landscape that was profoundly lacking, stagnant as well as over-saturated with political propaganda, the liberal visions were understandably emancipatory. Predicating on a rationalist interpretation of the progress from “traditional” to “modern” civilizations, it offered refreshing alternatives to the government-endorsed, conservative, traditionalist cultural narrative. But unlike their counterparts in the cultural and political spheres who threatened the government with overt dissension—notably those associated with the *Ziyou Zhongguo* [Free China review] and *Wenxing* [Literary star] magazines—the Modernist writers were more interested in the seemingly innocuous aesthetics issues. While the principle of artistic autonomy was often blamed for having fostered socially disengaged literature (branded as “art’s for art’s sake” ivory-towerism), it also served as effective anti-dose to prevailing cultural constraints largely responsible for stagnancy and mediocrity. And the Modernists’ penchant for craftsmanship, professional artistry, and anti-romantic themes can perhaps be best understood by what they were consciously reacting to. These include amateurism in literary profession, the overly exalted traditionalist style and the May Fourth legacy of lyrical sentimentalism, and the politically conceived notion of “human nature” (supposedly part of the anti-Communist cultural strategy).

In a slightly later stage, many of Taiwan’s Modernists further received influence from the radical expression of humanist ideals in the American counter-cultural movement of the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Individualism and humanism, seen by the Nativist critics as undesirable products of the capitalist Western society, have nonetheless been employed as effective tools by certain Modernist fiction writers in their critique of Taiwan’s dominant culture. It is no accident that two representative works of Taiwan’s Modernist literature in its mature stage, *Jiabian* [Family catastrophe] and *Niezi* [Crystal boys], both featured father-son relationship as a central theme, reflecting the Chinese males’ per-



petual struggle with traditionally prescribed ethical relationships. Consciously reacting to the romanticized humanitarianism of the leftist strand of the New Literature tradition, several Modernist fiction writers have further treated poverty, human suffering, and human capacity for compassion from a rationalist/humanist stance, thus successfully carving a unique image for themselves in modern Chinese/Taiwanese literary history.<sup>8</sup>

In a nutshell, seen from the critical frame of neo-Marxist theories, it is readily observable that while the Modernists acted primarily in the artistic realm, they were simultaneously reacting to limits and constraints imposed by a politically constructed dominant culture. And the alternative cultural visions they espoused were largely defined against the particular “lacks” and “excesses” within specific historical context. Whether individual participants of the Modernist quest have been deemed as successful or not by contemporary critics, the significance of this quest resides in the concrete vision of a “high culture” art it has brought to the cultural horizon. Since the 1970s, Modernist aesthetic conceptions have served as lofty models for many writers and would-be writers in Taiwan, profoundly affecting the *fukan*-based mainstream literature of the baby-boomers. The amphibious character of their writings, which occupy a half-way position in-between “high” and “popular” categories, is an interesting topic beyond the scope of the present study, but can be used as foil for us to better comprehend the extraordinariness of the Modernists’ vocational vision. Whereas market-domination in the 1990s has compelled writers of the baby-boom generation to adopt new strategies to win back the readers,<sup>9</sup> such Modernists as Wang Wenxing and Li Yongping have steadfastly adhered to ideals of a literary project that on many accounts has become obsolete in today’s cultural landscape.

In 1998, Li Yongping published the sequel to his 941-page long novel *Haidong Qing* (1992);<sup>10</sup> and the second part of Wang Wenxing’s *Backed Against the Sea* (1981) is scheduled to appear in book form in the summer of 1999 after being serialized in *Lianho wenxue* [Unitas, a literary monthly].<sup>11</sup> Adding both parts together, it has taken Wang Wenxing a total of twenty-two years to complete the novel

*Backed Against the Sea*. That these writers have been arduously pursuing a Modernist project on its original terms in defiance of the drastically transformed cultural climate may be pointing to a frequently debated issue, one concerning the fluid, disjunctive nature of "modernity" in non-Western societies.<sup>12</sup> But the complex relationship between "modernity," "modernization," and "modernism" is a question that I am not prepared to explore here. Rather, I am more particularly concerned with issues concerning categories of "high" and "popular" arts, as the distinction between the two—or the problematization of this distinction—pertains to a major division between Modernist and Postmodernist cultural perceptions. The following discussion of the second part of the novel *Backed Against the Sea*, taken to exemplify specific features of the Modernist literary project as a high culture quest, is intended to provide some basis for future exploration of this topic.

## II

### *Wang Wenxing's Backed Against the Sea, Part II*

Part II of *Backed Against the Sea* carries on the main story-line from Part I with closely paralleled structure and narrative mode. Formally speaking, it consists of a long monologue of the novel's protagonist, the anti-hero *Ye*, during a sleepless night on February 21, 1962, forty days after *a similar occasion on which Ye delivered self-addressed speeches that comprise the first part of the novel*. What happened between the two utterance events—that *Ye* had been further reduced to utter destitution—apparently account for the critically meaningful changes that we discern in style, mood, and thematic presentation in the novel's sequel.

Part I took place ten days after *Ye* arrived at the fishing village, Shengkeng'ao—as a haven of refuge and a place to eke out an existence after every door had been closed to him in the city of Taipei. Although it turned out to be not the right season for fishing, there was still hope; and, more importantly, *Ye* was in a jolly, explorative mood.

The monologue in Part I contains a great deal of random thoughts in the "stream-of-consciousness" style, and many of the recollected episodes involve people whom *Ye* had recently met in the village.

A discharged air force captain with one bad eye, and a vagabond of sorts, *Ye* is nonetheless a man with vital life force and some degree of education and native intelligence. Amidst his quasi-intellectual comments and self-entertaining juggling of words and aphorisms are sparkles of insights, revelatory of the paradoxical relationship between "truths," "half-truths," and ways of perceiving reality that are taken for granted by members of society. And *Ye's* taking considerable delight in the misfortunes encountered by his new acquaintances, despite of its appalling lack of empathy, is nonetheless in accord with common human behavior and does not necessarily reflect on the vile-ness of his own character.

Part II differs visibly from Part I in that plots and external actions in the sequel are presented in a more straightforward, bare-bone manner, with a marked decrease in convoluted verbal exercises. The focus of the episodes has shifted largely to the narrator's own experiences, which include some wrongdoing of a morally dubious nature; and the general mood is considerably grimmer. Intoxicated playfulness that dominates the first part of the novel is here replaced by latent anxiety, accompanied by a suppressed fear that turns out to be not groundless. At the very end of the novel, the narrator's train of thoughts was abruptly cut off by a gang of local folks who broke in, murdered him, and threw him into the sea—ostensibly as punishment for the minor criminal offenses *Ye* had recently committed in the region.

Most of the major themes found in Part I are revisited in Part II, but often cast in a different light, as is the case with the "anti-romanticism" theme. Nearly half of the sequel is devoted to two separate, but equally pathetic, love affairs *Ye* had had, and the more recent one was with an old, hideous-looking, and extremely unfriendly local prostitute, the Red Hair. Unreasonably infatuated, *Ye* composed lengthy and passionate love letters, begging for a rendezvous when

they could "be together in private and talk about their hearts' feelings." Red Hair's utter incomprehension and relentless scorn were not enough to dispel *Ye's* passion, and the "affair" only came to an end with the former's sudden departure as a result of the whorehouse's declining business. *Ye* then went on to recount another romantic encounter he had in Taipei some time back. Cai Suzhen, a homely girl with a low-paid menial job, became unexplainably attached to *Ye* after a bicycle accident involving the two. This time the role was reversed. *Ye* treated the girl like dirt, even attempted to sell her out as sex prey to a gamble-swindling partner.

Parodying popular fiction, this section exemplifies the anti-romantic motif that has been a prominent element in Taiwan's Modernist fiction writers. The narrator even explicitly commented on how ludicrous it was that fictional representation always made the boy and girl crashing into each other's arms in bicycle accidents. The glaring gap between the stuff that makes up pulp literature—which shapes our imagination about romantic love—and the convincingly portrayed crudeness of real-life experiences has always been a favorite subject for Wang's fiction. In addition, having shifted away from the vagaries of the narrator's inner consciousness depicted in Part I, these more naturalistically presented incidents begin to direct the reader's attention to *Ye's* awkward social position. Evidently, *Ye's* semi-educated background has made him a misfit among the real "proletarians" in the fishing village. The kind of "spiritual" relationship he projected onto Red Hair reveals the incredible chasm between the psychic make-up of *Ye* and that of people surrounding him. While justifying his distaste for Cai Suzhen, *Ye* suggested that an ideal mate for him should be a "primary school teacher"—someone who could match his status as an "intellectual." Such "class mentality" is undoubtedly derived from the specific socio-ideological group (the new mainlander settlers) to which *Ye* belongs, which partly explains his alienated condition, and the tragedies befallen on him. Here Wang Wenxing is obviously dealing with a subject with sensitive implications (the fate of mal-adjusted mainlanders in Taiwan), but his treatment goes beyond the politically prescribed narratives, an issue that will be ad-

dressed a while later.

Three episodes comprise the middle section of Part II: a flu that prompted *Ye's* thoughts on the physical condition of human existence; another glimpse into the buffoonery in the madhouse of the Dialect Bureau; and *Ye's* dialogues with the Canadian Catholic father. While recapitulating such existentialist themes as life's absurd fragility, human ignobleness, and rationalist religious quest, these episodes are somewhat lackluster and less dramatically presented than their counterparts in Part I. In Part I, the flamboyant imagination and high-spirited pseudo-intellectual inquiries often succeed in bringing together contradictions, paradoxes, and real insights into an interesting confluence. By contract, Part II is more bogged down by pragmatism, subjugated by the stark logic of reality. Depicted without a vision of the sociological causes of their despicable existence, the characters in the Dialect Bureau appear downright contemptible. And one begins to miss the kind of surrealist, carnivalesque gaiety found in Part I, when the Bureau was virtually transformed into a circus, reigned by lunacy. The rationalist questions on theology that *Ye* posed to the Canadian Father were stated in such plain discursive form—without the titillating presence of an unknown "Fate," as found in Part I's fortune-telling episode—that they fail to be imaginatively provocative. But these may be justified; as *Ye's* curiosity about the metaphysical issues was only conveniently enlisted to help him borrow money from the Father.

One may thus regard the strain imposed on the content and style of these episodes as corresponding to "the pressure of reality," which becomes progressively overwhelming as the story moves along. And such correspondence between form and content is even more pronounced in the last quarter of Part II, after the narrator was suddenly alarmed by a noise from the darkness outside: "Could it be that his pursuers already found his whereabouts?" Fear began to seep in. The remaining part of the novel is alternately underscored with anxiety, despair, and cruelty, climaxing in the dog-killing scene, when violence was externalized and ominously foreboding *Ye's* own death in a surprise ambush shortly after.

The last section of the novel begins with an account of *Ye's* failed attempt at landing a government job in the Dialect Bureau. The position, however, was awarded to the relative of a staff who brought in an illegal income for the Director. Infuriated by the unfair decision, *Ye* made a scene at the Bureau like an ordinary scoundrel. This then resulted in his meal-plan with the Bureau being suspended.

At the end of his rope, an unexpected visitor, Dong Yutang, came to share *Ye's* lodging that very night. The life story of Dong, someone with a similar background as *Ye* but had become a millionaire with his rice-ball business, is apparently used by the author to issue some harsh comments on Taiwan's economic take-off, which was to a considerable extent supported by flexible, family-run factories and hardheaded entrepreneurs. Here, more concretely than in Part I, where *Ye* randomly remarked on the arbitrary commodity prices, and how the "blood" of rural regions was drained to nourish urban growth, the underside of Taiwan's capitalist transformation is exposed with caustic realism. Dong's dehumanizing military-style management of his two "grand systems" of Manufacture and Distribution lends itself well to a classic Marxist analysis of labor exploitation. And it further reveals *Ye's* unfitness for the modern city that he had escaped from (but even Shenkeng'ao was about to be encroached upon by people like Dong, who had come in search for opportunities to expand his business). For *Ye's* own preoccupation still revolved around the roles played by "chance" and "luck" in one's life, even after Dong personally gave him a no-nonsense lecture on what it really takes to get rich—in the modern way.

Perhaps not coincidentally, it is within this immediate context that the reader is invited to make a moral judgement on *Ye's* debased behavior in the next few days, when he tried to steal, rob—but somewhat clumsily failed in all attempts—and rascally "bought" his groceries and whore-house visits "on credit." But something more is still in store for us. The final episode, in which *Ye* joined members of the Cao family in trapping and killing a strayed military wolfhound in their vegetable garden, makes it evident that it is not just an ordinary left-wing criticism that is being intended here.

This particular episode is beyond any doubt a superlative piece of literary art. The crude experience of violence is depicted with breath-taking vividness and a compelling sense of immediacy. The eerie atmosphere soon becomes genuinely terrifying, for the dog-hunters, equipped with wooden sticks and kitchen knives and with their faces and throats wrapped in ragged cloths, appeared to be seriously risking their lives in front of the fierce counterattacks of the trapped animal. Ironically, it was the aged mistress and the family's youngest, seventeen-years-old son who, at the horrible moments of life-threatening danger to their loved ones, succeeded in striking the fatal blows on the wolfhound. The ferocious animal "stood up like a man" before launching its desperate attacks, which symbolically made those who later on ate the dog as part of the New Year's Eve Feast "cannibals." Everyone at the banquet table generously praised the dog's heroic performance and "guts" with utmost admiration.

The entire macabre incident is at once absurd and compellingly real, intimately touching in a grotesque manner. On the one hand, its absurdity comes from the ill match between the mundane nature of the motive for killing (greed for luxurious food), and the excessive cruelty (to the prey) and danger (to the hunters). On the other hand, it also derives from the acquiescent attitude of every participant of the deadly mission—no one had any qualm about the necessity, and legitimacy, of the drastic action. Yet what seems to be under-signifying on one plane of reality often over-signifies on another. If the killing is insufficiently justified in a practical sense, it is abundantly meaningful at the symbolic level as a ritual act. The cohesiveness of the community (the Cao family here) is reaffirmed through subjugation and disposal of an intruder, whereas bloodshed and heroism are required to complete the ceremony. (The Cao family speaks a quaint dialect that is unintelligible to the narrator, and worships some exotic deities. And they cooperated in the dog-hunt as a team of soldiers in tribal wars). That the dog is to be eaten at a family meal at an important festival appears to be such an appropriate cause for the undertaking that it requires no justification—for what other occasion provides a better link between sacrificial signification and everyday life prac-

tice?

That *Ye* is likened to the wolfhound as a prey of Fate (symbolized by the vulture which suddenly reappeared on the day before *Ye's* death) seems apparent enough. But what is he a sacrifice for? The Red Hair incident, in retrospect, more than anything else has marked out *Ye* as an intruder whose presence on the local scene invites suspicion. His reckless behavior at the Dialect Bureau upon losing the anticipated job offer further cut him off from his mainland connection which could have offered some kind of shelter. Practically speaking, what have immediately caused the lynching were only such minor crimes as stealing, blackmailing, and attempted robbery, crimes that could have been handled by less harsh means. But if the drastic measure taken by the local people is unjustified at a commonsensical level, it could be understood as a ritual act that preys on misfit outsiders, an act whose latent motive is to safeguard and reaffirm cohesiveness of a community and, ultimately, its members' sense of identity.

This, however, is not quite the entire story. Themes contained in literary works produce results by acting on the reader's faculty of intellect. But there is yet another important dimension to the Modernist aesthetic project: the highly conscious manipulation of the faculty of senses to achieve specific psychic effects. The elaborate imagery, symbolic structure, and rhetoric devices are not just components of a maze that cryptically hides the "meaning" that can be otherwise clearly formulated. They are supposed to act on the senses that govern the semi-conscious reading process in a mesmerizing manner. Wang Wenxing's seemingly idiosyncratic approach to this aesthetic project focuses on the fiction's discourse level, in particular the narrative voice.

One common criticism of Wang Wenxing's novels that paradoxically sheds light on the nature of his artistic project is the derogatory remark: "They are not written in 'good Chinese.'" Somewhat like faulting an abstract painting for being not realistic enough, the remark nonetheless reveals the point of divergence between the received wisdom about literary language and the Modernist aesthetic



project. A “good” Chinese writing style is by definition saturated with time-honored conventions from a rich literati tradition—and the evaluation of it rests in the writer’s ability to master, or to innovate upon, these conventions—which are often very removed from the crude reality of ordinary acts of speech. The aesthetic project Wang pursues in writing the novel *Backed Against the Sea*, however, aims to imitate the “speech” in a heightened manner. The particular tasks involved include inventing a psycho-acoustic system of signifying symbols, done through systematic variations of the writing script, such as different typesets and underscores. The system is designed to simulate the tone, the modulation of voice, and other emotive qualities of the speech of specific individuals, whose speaking habits are in turn overdetermined by such complex realities as class, gender, ethnic and professional background. In fact, the numerous aphorisms, set-phrases that appear in *Ye*’s monologue are often parodies of the excessive remnants of the literati style in modern Chinese language, which arguably characterizes the mainlander socio-ideological community of which *Ye* was a member.

Since Wayne Booth, rhetorical devices of narrative fiction have been seen as crucially instrumental in controlling the distance between the reader and the characters, and in determining the degree of empathy and identification to be expected from the reader. In the same vein, I would like to argue that the psycho-acoustic effects that Wang strives so hard to achieve in *Backed Against the Sea* are intended ultimately to serve an overriding theme that integrates both parts of the novel, that of moral relativism.

“Poverty is sin.” When poverty appears as a cause for the misfortune in lives of characters surrounding the narrator it also prompts a basic moral question: Is human compassion ultimately possible, if the answer suggested by the narrator’s all-too-human, but flagrantly callous responses is a resounding “no”? (The narrator said he was turned off by Cai Suzhen for the “air of poverty” that naturally exuded from her.) The dubious character of the narrator, most unflatteringly portrayed in Part II, further puts the reader squarely to the test: Should the abject behavior of the narrator, before and after he was

caught in truly stringent conditions, simply condemned as moral depravity? To what extent are we capable of empathizing and reflecting upon the human condition in a rationalist fashion? Would the intersubjective communion between reader and character, an effect of the painstakingly simulated narrative voice, help to free us from the romanticized public discourses on morality that are frequently a disguise for something much more complex? A rationally affirmed moral relativism, such as that subscribed by the Modernist, can be powerfully radical. In a sense, it is also a fundamental logic underlying some currently ongoing social movements pursued under the auspices of "Postmodernism." But what definitively distinguishes a Modernist fiction writer like Wang Wenxing is probably his intellectual elitism. Wang is presumptuous enough to attempt to modify his readers' outlook on morality, while knowing full well that many of them would not even take up the challenge.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In *Postmodernism and Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989) 26-33.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> "The new Japanese discourse on knowledge wants to go beyond the use value, the functional role of knowledge, in order to liberate desire (in relation to knowledge) as play and constitute a new notion of knowledge both beyond use value and knowledge for knowledge's sake. . . . [T]his 'going beyond' use value is precisely 'exchange value,' which is valorized in the commodity form as the object (and mirror) of desire." *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> See Chen Fangming's discussion of Bai Xianyong in his article "Taiwan wenxueshi fenqi de yige jiantao" [A reexamination of the periodization of Taiwanese literary history], in *Taiwan wenxue fazhan xianxiang: wushi nian lai Taiwan wenxue yantao hui lunwen ji* (II) [Literary developments in Taiwan: proceedings of the Conference on Taiwan Literature in the Last Fifty Years] (Taipei: Wenjianhui, 1996) 13-34.

<sup>5</sup> The appearance of well-received book review sections in major newspapers, such as *Kaijuan zhoubao* of *China Times*, was a good example of this process.

<sup>6</sup> Yang Zhao, for instance, once made the connection between the Modernist aesthetics of alienation with the psychic needs of displaced mainlanders in the early post-1949 years.

<sup>7</sup> Evidences abound in works by such well-known writers of the postwar generation and older babyboomers, such as Bai Xianyong, Chen Yingzhen, Wang Wenxing, and Li Ang.

<sup>8</sup> This theme features prominently in such representative Modernist works as "Jiazhuang yi niuche" [An oxcart for dowry], *Beihai de ren* [Backed against the sea], and *Crystal Boys*.

<sup>9</sup> The best examples are Li Ang and Zhang Dachun.

<sup>10</sup> The sequel has a different title, *Zhu Ling manyou xianjing* [Zhu Ling in wonderland] (Taipei: Lianhe wenxue, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> It is scheduled to be published by Hongfan Publishing Co. later this year (1999). I would like to specially thank Mr. Wang Wenxing for allowing me to read the manuscript before the book actually appears in print.

<sup>12</sup> Scholars in recent years have coined such terms as "colonial modernity," "alternative modernity," and "translated modernity" to designate such hitherto insufficiently theorized cultural process.

