

The Social Construction of a Myth: An Interpretation of Guo Jingming's Parable

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Myth and Culture Industry

The nexus between mass culture production and the creation of myths is one that has very often been underlined by contemporary critics. Edgar Morin, in his early analysis of the culture industry (namely, the complex of commercial institutions producing mass culture in modern capitalist societies), observed how mass culture contributes to the shaping of the imaginary of the people “according to mental relations of projection and identification polarized on symbols, myths and images of culture as well as on the mythic or real personalities who embody those values.”¹ Umberto Eco, treating the Superman comic strip cycle as a myth, analogized the popular American superhero with other heroes of classic and modern mythology. In addition, moving from a comparison between the patterns of production of religious culture in medieval Europe and the mechanisms of cultural production established by the modern American culture industry, he noted that the process of myth creation (“mythicization”) is first and foremost an institutional fact that proceeds from the top down; nevertheless, in order to become actualized, this process must sink its roots into a social body and encounter some mythopoetic tendencies emanating from the bottom that constitute the basis of a common popular sensibility.² In the same essay, Eco also provided an apt definition of the concept of “mythicization,” which according to him would be: “an unconscious symbolization, an identification of the object with a sum of purposes that cannot be always rationalized, a projection in an image of tendencies, aspirations, fears particularly emerging in an individual, a community, a specific historical age.”³

When Guo Jingming 郭敬明 published his first novel, in 2003, a powerful aggregate of symbolic signification was generated in China, originating both from the messages transmitted by the novel and the qualities embodied by the author. Such symbolization can be considered mythical in at least three regards.

First, on the level of form. The novel, *Enchanted City* (*Huan Cheng* 幻城), belonged to the fantasy genre, gaining inspiration from the fantasy story of a Japanese manga, which was inspired, in turn, by ancient Indian mythology.⁴

Second, on a commercial level. The novel immediately sold like hot cakes; it became a sensational bestseller, made its author the second most affluent Chinese

writer: to be precise, according to Forbes, one of the top hundred richest celebrities in China.⁵

Third, on the level of personality. Guo Jingming, who was by then only twenty, used to sign off his internet writings with the nickname Fourth Dimension (*siwei* 四维), was addressed by the media with the appellation Golden Kid (*jintong* 金童), and was worshipped by his fans almost as if he were a religious leader (*jiaozhu* 教主).⁶

It must be remembered, however, that Guo Jingming's myth, although *created* by its author, was *produced* by the Chinese culture industry.

The culture industry, in the PRC (People's Republic of China), has not yet enjoyed a long history. Capitalist mass culture, after having first emerged in the 1980s, only blossomed fully after 1992, when the "socialist market economy" (*shehuizhuyi shichang jingji* 社会主义市场经济) launched by Deng Xiaoping sanctioned once and for all the rise of the market as a "field of cultural choice."⁷ From that time on, many attempts to produce mass culture myths were made. One of the first, and most successful, of these myths is that represented by Guo Jingming.

Thus, the purpose of this essay is to interpret Guo Jingming's mythical parable, describing it within the framework of the main social forces that provoked its emergence. In particular these include the culture industry, which produced and promoted Guo Jingming's myth from the top, and the specific social group that, from the bottom, provided the particular social experience, reworked by Guo Jingming into a myth. In my attempt to investigate the social factors that prompted the construction of Guo Jingming's myth, special attention will be devoted to the observation of the material structures of society which determined both the sensibility manifested by such social group and the ideology conveyed by the Chinese culture industry.

The Myth of the Enchanted City

Enchanted City was originally written by Guo Jingming as a short story, being published for the youth literary journal *Mengya* 萌芽 in the October 2002 issue. Since the response of the readers – as many of them reported in their posts sent to the journal's website – was incredibly positive,⁸ the author decided to rewrite the short story as a novel, which was published a few months later by the publisher *Chunfeng Wenyi* 春风文艺.

Here is the plot. Kasuo is a melancholic prince, descended from the purest lineage of the Men of Ice, destined to become king of the Empire of Enchanted Snow. A tragic memory lingers in his mind: a bloody Holy War, fought and won against the rival Empire of the Men of Fire, which had resulted in the everlasting sorrow of his parents and the death of his five elder siblings. Only his dearly-loved little brother Shi remains alive; both Kasuo and Shi, to escape war and avoid being slaughtered, were sent, when they were still children, to the idyllic Forest of Snow and Mist, where they were raised by a powerful and good-hearted

shaman woman, whom they called Grandma. As they return to the Enchanted City, however, harmony dissipates. Kasuo desires above everything else to be free to contemplate the beauty of things, but instead is compelled to commit to the welfare of the kingdom. Both his lover, and his future wife, are mysteriously assassinated. As for Shi, he is devoured by two overwhelming desires: on the one hand he wants to gain freedom for his beloved elder brother and, on the other hand, he fervently wishes to become king in his place. When Kasuo discovers that the murderer of the two maidens he loved is none other than Shi – who has mastered the arcane and ghastly black magic skills of the Men of Fire – he kills him in a fit of rage. But afterwards, haunted by nostalgia and solitude, he learns that the Enchanted City is just an illusory capital, that he is not a real king, and decides to undertake a dangerous journey to the Sacred Mountains of Enchanted Snow, in order to find Yuanji, a dreadful personification of Fate, and beg her to bring his loved ones back to life. A select crowd of the most faithful and skillful followers escort him, help him to face and overcome a long series of enigmas, schemes and sorceries, and do not hesitate to sacrifice their own lives for him. Finally, thanks to his shining intelligence and to the dedication of his followers, Kasuo finds out that Yuanji is the second wife of the king, his father, and Shi's mother. She has plotted his adventure for the mere purpose of ridiculing him. Yuanji threatens to kill him but finally promises that his darling little brother, together with his two lost lovers, will soon reincarnate. Kasuo returns to the Enchanted City and waits for the reincarnation to take place, but a nostalgic anguish continues to plague him, exacerbated by the memory of the death of almost all his followers. Shi does not come back; the two maidens have incarnated in one another's bodies, causing him even more and ever more painful distress. Eventually, news that the Men of Fire have again declared war on the Men of Ice spreads. Kasuo organizes the defense, but his efforts are in vain: the invincible enemy king marches forward, using his magic to kill whoever tries to block his way. With the city on fire, and the enemy at the door, Kasuo finally decides to take his own life. When about to die, the implacable king of the Men of Fire reaches him, and he ultimately discovers that it is his beloved younger brother Shi, who has come back to return his freedom to him.

The Response to the Novel

It was with a collective and liberating burst of tears that Kasuo's sacrifice was received by the readers, who for the most part were adolescents attending middle and high schools. Guo Jingming, for them, was a solitary star, an elder brother, a wounded boy, capable of endowing their dreams with a comfortable sense of warmth, in spite of the glacial atmosphere he evoked in the novel. As to what these dreams were about, it is explained to us by Zhang Yueran 张悦然, a female writer of around the same age as Guo Jingming, who, like him, was also a well-acclaimed literary star among young people. They were the dream of freedom, a distant sky shining brightly above the Enchanted City, the dream of solitude, a silent wind whipping

its dwellers and parting them from one another, and the dream of melancholy, an enclosing wall trapping the characters and elevating them to a state of nobility. According to Zhang Yueran, love was the bond that consumed and excruciated the characters of the novel, making them fragile and long-suffering.⁹ And, as a matter of fact, what enthralled the readers the most was the foregrounding of feelings such as candidness, abnegation, and an unquenchable thirst for affection. In contrast with the real world that they perceived as being impure, corrupt and cynical, readers saw in *Enchanted City* “hard-to-find sentiments such as loyalty, pure friendship devoid of opportunism, brotherly affection between kins.”¹⁰ Some found in the novel a fountain of hope, some “a common embrace in an oppressing society,”¹¹ some drew from it consolation: “Guo Jingming’s pen stroked us, depicting for those like us who live within the school walls an innocent solitude and a quiet aloofness.”¹² Everybody agreed that *Enchanted City* articulated the heart of an entire generation,¹³ a generation, by any account, which was indeed quite peculiar, being the first to have appeared in China since the implementation of the “one-child” policy.

As to what this generational sensibility would actually consist of, neither the media nor the critics seemed to devote too much attention. While the former focused immediately on the construction of Guo Jingming’s myth, mainly in the commercial and personal dimension, the latter preferred to commit themselves to praising the stylistic purity and exceptional fantasy of the novel, defined by writer Cao Wenxuan as “graceful, romantic and unrestrained.”¹⁴ Few were the analyses attempting to bring forth the generational features exhibited by Guo Jingming and his contemporaries, who were dubbed, both by the media and the critics, with the collective label of *balinghou* (Post-Eighty 80后) simply for the fact that they were born after 1980.¹⁵ Hence, while *balinghou* writing was generically tagged as being “new emotional writing” (*xin xingqing xiezu* 新性情写作),¹⁶ Guo Jingming was described as a “wounded angel” who voiced the “self-pitying” narcissism (*zilian zilianshide shanggan* 自怜自恋式的伤感) typical of his own generation.¹⁷ According to this view, since the *balinghou* constituted the first generation born and brought up within the market economy, they enjoyed an unprecedented material well-being and lived in a “multifarious condition of freedom.”¹⁸ The *balinghou* were the pampered offspring (*chong'er* 宠儿) of Chinese society; they were therefore individualists, and wrote only to liberate their emotions and express their own selves. Meanwhile, they were also subjected to the growing pressure of modern society, which burdened their daily life and limited their freedom, so that they constantly sought refuge in their own inner world and in their dreams, where they could find consolation and an “emotional” release.

Guo Jingming and the *Balinghou* Generation

The analysis is certainly correct, albeit too sketchy; and yet it is incomplete. Even in the scenario where we decide to agree that “self-pitying” narcissism is truly the generational “structure of feeling”¹⁹ manifested in Guo Jingming’s writing, it remains that such an analysis proves defective inasmuch as it omits to examine the specific social conditions that tend to produce this type of structure. What were the concrete pressures endured by the *balinghou*? Why did they take refuge in dreams and, above all, what did these dreams mean?

In order to answer these questions, it will be necessary to go back to the origins of Guo Jingming’s writing and provide a cursory summary of the parable that led to the more general phenomenon of *balinghou* writing.²⁰

Such a parable started at the end of 1997, when the growing social centrality of the first generation of “only children,” who were by that time adolescents, and the enormous pressure that they exerted against the overcrowded gates leading to university,²¹ triggered the emergence of an articulated public sphere that set up a huge critical debate against the national educational apparatus.²² Participants in the debate described the Chinese school as a pyramid disciplined by an inexorable examination system, which killed students’ personalities, imposing on them exorbitant technical skills and a dogmatic conformism. Humanist intellectuals, in particular, attacked education’s excessive politicization and utilitarianism, and advocated in its place an aesthetic education centered on the teaching of literature and aiming at the cultivation of the individual. Following this debate, a well-known youth literary journal, *Mengya*, launched a literary composition contest in 1999, *Xin Gainian* (New Concept 新概念), with the purpose of eliciting from high school students the narration of their own “real experience.” The initiative earned instant popularity.²³ The compositions penned by the contest’s winners disclosed in a surprising manner the sensibility of the only children’s generation, while the novel written a year later by one of them, Han Han 韩寒, immediately became a literary sensation and a bestseller.²⁴

Balinghou writing was suddenly at the center of the literary market, and publishing houses began to vie with each other in trying to hunt down the most profitable Post-Eighty talents. Guo Jingming was one of them. Born in 1983, an only son, he was amazingly gifted in writing. When he won *Xin Gainian*, both in 2001 and 2002, he had already achieved a certain degree of fame as he had already been publishing prose essays and short stories in the most renowned Chinese literary website, *Rongshuxia* 榕树下, for two years. The topics he would write about were obviously typical teenage experiences: encounters with peers, love and hate, desires, frustrations, reviews of films and music bands, memories, and fantastic inventions. It was the school system, though, which became the gravitational centre around which this galaxy of experiences revolved: school life seemed to exact from Guo Jingming and his companions a deadly sacrifice, and to inflict upon them an ineluctable mutilation of their personality.²⁵ For Guo Jingming, therefore, writing

acquired the function of a compensatory fantasy. It was with his thoughtful sadness, his fanciful style, his whimsical sentimentalism, that this “kid” won the hearts of his internet readers, who, bewitched already by the magic of his softly caressing words, could be rightfully called *fans*.

The *Balinghou* and the Educational System

Hence, there appear to be two distinctive conditions determining the experiences of the *balinghou* group and constituting their sensibility: their status as single children, and their life in the school environment. With no siblings at home, and spending the predominant portion of their existence in the classroom, the educational walls were the almost exclusive perimeter of their adolescent experiences, and the setting in which the majority of their encounters with the “other” occurred.

But the educational system can be defined, according to Louis Althusser, as an ideological state apparatus (to be precise, the ideological apparatus *par excellence*) whose function is to (re)produce the productive forces, and to subject them to the dominant ideology.²⁶ This function is clearly stated by the Chinese Communist Party, which, at the end of the 1990s, thus summarized the basic goal of education in contemporary China:

“In today’s world, science and technology are surging forward, knowledge economy has already become noticeable, national competition is growing increasingly fierce. Education holds a fundamental role in forming the overall force of the nation, whose strength is more and more determined by the workers’ quality.”²⁷

As clearly enunciated in this statement, students in the PRC are fundamentally conceived as productive forces to be placed at the service of the economic growth of the nation; to that end, they must be trained hard in order to acquire the qualities²⁸ necessary for them to emerge within the national competition context, and for China to emerge within the international arena. Given the absolute priority assigned by Deng Xiaoping to the development of the country, and due to the scarcity of the national educational resources in relation to the superabundance of the Chinese population, the Chinese educational system came to be configured, from the 1990s onward, as a hyper-competitive and hyper-selective pyramid structure, regulated by an inflexible examination system, which admitted at its top a minority of qualified people, while discarding the majority of the non-qualified. In addition, since ideological conformity was also a fundamental prerequisite of the educational qualification,²⁹ another important function performed by the examination system was to include in the productive elite those whose personalities conformed and to exclude those who did not conform. It is for this reason that senior high school, separated from university entrance by the merciless barrier of the *gaokao* 高考 examination, was perceived (and still is) by students, families, teachers and intellectuals alike as a frenzied and dehumanizing environment, which castrates

individual personality and inhibits human feelings, thereby making the process of socialization with the “other” immensely arduous. It is not by chance that the repression of subjectivity and difficulty in human relationships, at the hand of the tyrannical school system, represented a theme which is nearly always omnipresent in *Xin Gainian's* writings,³⁰ in Han Han's satire, and in the first essays composed by Guo Jingming, who, as a matter of fact, confessed that he engaged in the creation of the short story *Enchanted City* primarily in order to escape from the pressure of *gaokao* preparation.³¹

“Structures of Feeling” in the “Socialist Market Economy”

Now that the concrete social conditions that gave rise to the *balinghou* experience and writing have been elucidated, it is possible to attempt an allegorical interpretation of *Enchanted City*, aimed at grasping, behind the symbolic curtain of the mythical narration, the specific aspects of the *balinghou* experience captured in such a narration. Myths, as mythologist Marina Warner observes (making reference to Roland Barthes), are historical compounds that beneath their apparent fixity conceal the contingency of their meanings.³² Mythical narratives evolve, following the flux of historical changes; incessantly re-created, re-written and re-read,³³ they reflect social identities and contribute towards shaping them, becoming firmly entrenched in the unconscious. Their interpretation, for this reason, provides a valuable key to an exploration of the deep structures of the psyche. It is not by chance that psychoanalysts often so eagerly devote themselves to the exegesis of myths, equating their symbolic logic to that unfolded in the language of dreams.

However, while both the notions of the unconscious as proposed respectively by Freud and Jung (repository of repressed individual instincts for the former, universal structure of archetypes for the latter) are of scant relevance in this context, the theories developed by the Frankfurt School, and specifically by Erich Fromm, who describes the unconscious within the scope of its social dimension, clearly have relevance to this issue. Fromm, defining the “social character” as the “character matrix common to a group, which determines effectively the actions and thoughts of its members,”³⁴ affirms that this character is a “particular structure of psychic energy” formed in the “practice of life as it is constituted by the mode of production and the resulting social stratification.”³⁵ Within this framework the unconscious is regarded as the “inner reality which is common to large groups”³⁶ and which society represses and conceals in order to subordinate the individuals to the necessities of its productive mechanisms.

So now we can finally take a look at what aspects of the *balinghou's* “structures of feeling” (i.e. that part of the “social character”³⁷ which is formed, as already noted, in the practice of life organized by the educational apparatus), is reflected allegorically in the myth of *Enchanted City*. First of all, we will do this by highlighting what is clearly the dominant theme conveyed by the novel.

Guo Jingming, borrowing from the Japanese manga *Rg Veda*, drew inspiration mainly from the figure of Ashura, an androgynous boy attracted by an unshakable feeling of love towards the warrior Yasha, who has sworn to protect and look after him. Ashura is endowed with extraordinary magic powers, and possesses an implacable destructive force that is bound to destroy the entire universe. Therefore, in order to save his beloved Yasha from his devastating fury, he decides to sacrifice himself by taking his own life.

From its source of inspiration *Enchanted city* thus imports the leitmotiv of the love bond between two characters, maintaining as the driving dynamic of the story the dialectic tension between two irreconcilable forces. Both aspects, however, are condensed by Guo Jingming in the relationship between Kasuo and Shi: the novel's fundamental motif thus lies precisely in the conflicting affective bond between the two brothers.

It is still important to state that we are informed about such an affective relationship only from the viewpoint of the narrator, Kasuo, who is the character with whom Guo Jingming identifies and the hero with whom the reader is supposed to sympathize. Kasuo is a star, and around him gravitate all the characters and events of the story: he is destined to become king, he is pure, beautiful, kind-hearted and adored by his subjects, who are likewise pure, beautiful, kind-hearted, albeit that they are unmistakably inferior. Shi, as a result, appears to be a reflection of Kasuo's interiority; he is the object of his desire and fantasy, and represents, at a first level of analysis, the projection of a desire apparently common to both the author and his readers: that of having a sibling, symbol of an "other," who is absent and thus ardently longed for.

The presence of the other in fact corresponds with an idealized state of interior wholeness and harmony with the external world. At the beginning of the story, the idyllic bond between Kasuo and Shi evokes the integrity of family affections, located during the felicitous age of childhood. But, as the first responsibilities begin to emerge, this presence, however desirable, becomes nonetheless an object of fear, so that after the return to the *Enchanted City* the relationship with Shi becomes fraught with ambiguities: Kasuo loves Shi, but at the same time fears him; Shi loves Kasuo, but at the same time threatens him. The cause of this contradiction, as revealed by Shi to his brother, is that the inexorable law of competition decrees that for every winner there must be a loser:

“ ‘To the victorious the kingdom, to the defeated disgrace; don't be sad, brother: it is the logic of the Sky.’ Then he would lean close, and kiss my forehead.”³⁸

Thus, in spite of their attractive bond, Kasuo and Shi are compelled to be driven apart insofar as they are rivals. Their personalities become split between two polarities: on the one hand Kasuo embodies the aspiration to pursue love and freedom, on the other hand Shi embodies the ambition to exert power. Such dualism is, in turn, ambiguous as Kasuo, although desiring love and freedom above

everything else, does not relinquish the privilege of becoming king, while Shi, although desiring above everything else to be king, does not give up his love for Kasuo. The conflict with his rival causes Kasuo to kill Shi, but, from the very moment the sibling dies, his subjectivity becomes mutilated: he is able to exert power as king, but his affective dimension is crushed. Consequently, he tries to reconstitute his original wholeness, but to no avail; the loss appears without remedy since as soon as he realizes that Shi is alive, he dies at the hands of Shi. The existence of the one excludes the existence of the other: this seems to be, in a nutshell, the message of the story.

Actually, the fact that the brother figure is cast as a reflection of the protagonist's (and Guo Jingming's) interiority, and is someone who already harbors in himself the intimate perception of the ambivalent tension between the above-mentioned polarities (love/freedom versus ambition in relation to power), brings us to regard this tension more as an interior conflict between two opposing psychological forces than an actual conflict between the self and the other. In other words, if the figure of Shi seems to be created by Guo Jingming as an object of a conscious desire, in the course of the novel it develops into a conflicting element of his own unconscious. The Kasuo/Shi duality, at a secondary level of analysis, comes to symbolize a traumatic splitting of the ego, recalling, very suggestively, that particular literary topic which has been referred to by psychoanalytic criticism as the "theme of the double."

It is this theme of the "double" that finds its archetypal model in the myth of Narcissus, and that has been investigated, in psychoanalysis, as a symptom of the "narcissistic attitude."³⁹ Not by coincidence, this is exactly the attitude that both the Chinese media and literary critics detected as one of the distinctive features of the *balinghou* generation.⁴⁰

The link between the allegory presented by *Enchanted city* and the "self-pitying" narcissism exhibited by the *balinghou* becomes thus more explicit; even more explicit if we keep in mind the specific social conditions within which the novel and its "attitude" were formed. *Enchanted city*, in the final analysis, allegorizes the common social process experienced by the members of the group in question. This can be summarized in the following terms: the "only children" of the urban middle stratum, due to their strategic importance to the future of the nation, are catapulted into the 1990s at the very center of Chinese society; the state wants to cultivate their talents in order to transform them into "quality" workers, their families "pamper" them as an investment in their development and well-being, the market cajoles them as they represent a category of consumers with great purchasing power. For these reasons they are encouraged, from the earliest years of their lives, to develop a narcissistic subjectivity, fostered in the cradle of familial affection in which they are immersed. It should be remembered, however, that such narcissism is part of a "social character" based on a specific mode of production, which imposes the *subjection* of the *balinghou* to their function as productive forces, demanding the

formation of a *subjectivity* conformed to the fulfillment of this function. Narcissism, in this perspective, proves to be a psychological disposition useful as a means of increasing their quality in the professional field, since it helps them to internalize the necessity of competition, initially in school, and later in the labor market.⁴¹ But competition, at a certain point, triggers an unbearable oppression: the *gaokao* examination, the last obstacle in the strenuous climb toward the summit of the educational pyramid, appears as a door which opens up for a few and remains closed for many. Therefore, the concrete risk of failure, along with the threat of social exclusion, provokes a widespread feeling of anxiety, impotence, and even despair. The need for freedom, the desire for the other and the urge for affection are therefore met with an acute frustration, while the narcissistic self-perception is shadowed by the fear of failure. Kasuo's parable reveals the impossible task of maintaining as a harmonious whole the love for the self, the affection for the other and the commitment to social achievement; it is for this reason that the novel ends with the sacrifice of the protagonist, at the hands of his ambitious younger brother. The only way to face up to the *gaokao*, suggests Guo Jingming – a response that is also suggested by many other *balinghou* authors – is to repress the affective sphere in order to devote all one's energies to the effort of competition. This produces a sense of mutilation, from which self-pity is aroused. Self-pity, as a consequence, is much more than a physiological adolescent "mood" as the Chinese critics have suggested: it is rather a reaction to the trauma of subjection imposed on the "only children" by the mode of production.

It would not be inappropriate to remind ourselves, at this point, that the policy of Reform and Opening up (*Gaige Kaifang* 改革开放) is an authoritarian project that has required the establishment of a particular mode of production, and the setting up of an ambitious program of social engineering in order to push forward the country's modernization agenda. The primary purpose of the reform policy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – as Deng Xiaoping affirmed in the course of his famous "Southern Inspection" (*Nanxun* 南巡) – is to liberate the productive forces so as to achieve the rapid and steady economic development of the country.⁴² The "socialist market economy" – a hybrid mode of production characterized by a pragmatic blend of both socialist and capitalist elements – has fulfilled, since the beginning of the 1990s, the double objective of creating wealth, thanks to the mechanisms of production and consumption regulated by the market (capitalism), and maintaining stability in relation to the Chinese society, thanks to the unchallenged leadership of the CCP (socialism). The political forces have in this way managed both to preserve the status quo and also to subordinate the Chinese people to a set of national production needs, persuading them, also by means of an effective combination of ideological values, to enter into a harsh struggle for wealth accumulation ("to get rich is glorious"), that has demanded the acceptance of huge social sacrifices, such as those, for example, caused by the birth control policy.

The thick cloak of necessity which clouds Kasuo's parable, intensifying the mythical tone of the story, proves just how effective this ideology is. The

protagonist's fate has its origins in a framework that seems to allegorize the traumatic genesis of the Reform Era, and of the one-child policy. It is as a result of a tremendous "holy war," which has caused the death of all his elder siblings, that Kasuo is forced to become king: a war that recalls, in metaphorical terms, the fratricidal struggles of the Cultural Revolution. But the future king, however traumatized by the past events and distressed by the new responsibilities awaiting him, still avoids any debate as to his destiny and the unfathomable order weighing down on the Enchanted City. Authority, a distant expression of the adult world, appears inscrutable, incontrovertible, often even sardonic. Kasuo is endowed with excellent "qualities," but his incomparable brightness does not help him to understand his own lot, even less to change it. Hence, the allegory set in *Enchanted City* appears to reflect a social order, and Kasuo's parable symbolizes the necessity of self-repression in order to conform to its demands, but Guo Jingming neither questions this order nor opposes such necessity; the tenets of dominant ideology, here corresponding to the command to sacrifice one's freedom and affective sphere (in the present) in order to devote oneself exclusively to competition (with the market promising to return, in the future, this freedom, but only to those who prove victorious in the competitive struggle), are internalized as natural and universal constraints that can by no means be ignored. The instinct to abandon competition, the aspiration to achieve a less constraining world order, the desire to fully satisfy one's own affective life, are unutterable feelings,⁴³ perhaps even unthinkable, and they tend to be repressed and dispelled within the unconscious. Guo Jingming, reworking such feelings in a mythical form, offers to his readers a compensatory fantasy; the tears provoked by the novel, although being shed in response to Kasuo's sacrifice, provide a degree of consolation in relation to the suffering associated with their own condition. This emotional release ultimately induces a catharsis which, in turn, stimulates an enhanced tolerance toward the ineluctable task to which they are called. Benefiting from this release, the readers of the novel⁴⁴ are in fact more ready to embark on preparations for the *gaokao* exam, just as Guo Jingming was when he wrote his short story *Enchanted City*. Eventually, after the perilous plunge into the *gaokao* sea, some will re-emerge to find themselves in a safe haven inside the university gates, others will begin their voyage across the troubled waters of the Chinese labor market.

The Chinese Culture Industry

Guo Jingming gathered together the experiential matter of the group to which he belonged and, thanks to his mythopoetic skills, shaped it into a narrative form, thus contributing to the creation of its particular sensibilities. "Self-pitying" narcissism, however, is far from being the only "structure of feeling" to be found within the *balinghou* group. Han Han, the other prominent representative of the group, exemplified, in comparison with his melancholic counterpart, a similar and yet opposed attitude: although narcissism was certainly a dominant trait of his

personality, his reaction to the practice of subjection was on the contrary that of rebellion. While Guo Jingming looked inward to his intimate feelings and dreams, Han Han opened a window onto the social reality; while Guo Jingming embraced a mythical fantasy, Han Han tended to confront the tradition of critical realism.

The model more frequently replicated, however, was the one established by Guo Jingming. He had more imitators, enjoyed more kudos from the media and boasted more enraptured fans.

This fact stems undoubtedly from the very nature of his fiction; this nature, nonetheless, reflects in turn the character of the Chinese culture industry, which by its own constitution is prone to producing, above all others, authors such as Guo Jingming.

Let us briefly explore why this is the case. As we have already seen, the *balinghou* social group originally acquired a “voice” thanks to the *Xin Gainian* contest, launched by the literary journal *Mengya* in the wake of a large debate criticizing the national educational system. The contest was created with the declared purpose of discovering the “real experience” of high school students, liberating their creativity which was being stifled by the stultifying examination system. It is quite obvious in hindsight that the first hero of the contest would be a youth who fully incarnated this critical spirit, the rebel Han Han.⁴⁵ After the initiative had secured success and prestige, however, the organizers subsequently significantly downsized their attack on the educational system, and the critical drive of the initiative became exhausted within a relatively short space of time. The editorial board of the contest pointed out that *Xin Gainian* did not wish to overthrow the examination system, but simply wished to compensate for its obvious flaws.⁴⁶ Zhao Zhangtian, director of *Mengya* and deputy chairman of the Shanghai branch of the Writers’ Association, was later to suggest, on other occasions, that he did not even approve very much of Han Han’s iconoclasm.⁴⁷

The reason for this retreat is clearly to be found in the nature of the Chinese culture industry, whose distinct peculiarity actually consists of its merging of the capitalistic urge to generate profit with the socialist demand to guarantee social stability. Publishing houses in China are included in the mode of production of the “socialist market,” which means that, although in the course of the Reform Era they saw most of their subsidies removed and were forced to become profitable in the marketplace, they continued, nonetheless, to be state-owned and to be ideologically disciplined by the CCP.⁴⁸ *Mengya*’s behavior, in this regard, is emblematic. In the 1990s, the literary journal lost much of its funding and readership, and was obliged, in order to survive, to find both readers and income by competing in the marketplace. At a practical level, then, the *Xin Gainian* contest was born out of a strategy of commercialization; and it must be acknowledged that such a strategy was undoubtedly a masterful stroke as it helped *Mengya* to advertize the journal, to attract a group of young and innovative writers (the *Xin Gainian* winners), and to gain an expanded pool of readers, especially among those students who aspired to participate in the contest.⁴⁹ With regard to the critical stance that originally paved

the way for the contest, since the magazine was state-owned (*Mengya* is published by the Shanghai branch of the Writers' Association), and disciplined by the political sphere (Zhao Zhanqian is a high-level officer of the socialist cultural field), it is not surprising that it did not possess the autonomy necessary to challenge the system on which it depended, at least beyond a certain point. *Xin Gainian's* humanist ideals and polemic strength, were thus, once success had been secured, conveniently placed in the background. What was to sustain *Mengya's* further recognition was its transformation from a serious journal with humanist concerns into a commercial brand, specialized in the promotion of young literary stars.

And this is the route by which Guo Jingming entered the game. While it is indeed true that chance had been a major constituent of Han Han's emergence, in Guo Jingming's appearance there certainly was a much higher degree of manipulation. Guo Jingming did not take part in the *Xin Gainian* initiative because he hoped to gain admission into a prestigious university in this way; rather, he did so because he wished to be noted as a writer.⁵⁰ His first novel was a project of *Chunfeng Wenyi*, a publishing house widely renowned for its bold editorial strategies and pioneering commercial instincts.⁵¹ After the success of the *The Three Doors* (*Sanchong men* 三重门) project, states the editor of *Enchanted City*, *Chunfeng Wenyi* decided to approach the youth literary market in order to discover the "new Han Han," with the result that Guo Jingming had been put on the list of suitable candidates and, when he made the proposal to turn his successful short story into a novel, he was immediately signed, as the publisher sensed the huge commercial potential of the operation: "It was a story about family affection, feelings between siblings, something this generation is quite missing, it could sell well."⁵² It was precisely because of its compensatory effects, and cathartic sentimentality, that Guo Jingming's literary talent was picked up and put on sale. As noted by Shao Yanjun, *Xin Gainian* exhibited from the beginning two tendencies, that of rebellion and that of fantasy: "Rebellion attacked the order of the real, fantasy created a world where to escape."⁵³ Clearly, Han Han was the emblem of the first tendency, Guo Jingming was the symbol of the second. But it was the second tendency, as was to be expected, that became predominant, inasmuch as it was politically neutral and universally acceptable. Guo Jingming gave his readers consolation, brought profit to his publisher and justified the dominant social order: he was the ideal author to satisfy all the demands of the Chinese culture industry.

The "New Ideology" and the Myth of the Successful Gentleman

Hence, if the myth of *Enchanted City* reflected a particular generational experience constituted within a specific ideological state apparatus (the education system), it was another apparatus, the culture industry, that spread and consolidated such an experience, contributing to a further construction of the sensibility of the *balinghou* readers by selecting their representatives (such as Guo Jingming) and manipulating the contents of their voices.

Guo Jingming, shortly after having published a bestseller which would sell more than 1,300,000 copies in the space of three years, reached an agreement with the same publisher to commence the writing of a new novel, while at the same time engaging in the study of film and television at Shanghai University.⁵⁴

But what kind of sensibilities could he express, now that the traumatic school experience that had given birth to his first myth had already been happily resolved and overcome?

Never-flowers in never-dream (*Mengli hualuo zhi duoshao* 梦里花落知多少) – published in December 2003 with an initial circulation of 300,000 – narrates the life of those who have already leapt over the *gaokao*, attend university and are about to enter the job market. The main characters are a group of university students drifting between Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen in search of some satisfactory professional placement. A melancholic sentimentalism à la Guo Jingming once again reigns supreme: the young protagonists, too sensitive, as usual, not to be suffering and vulnerable, go through a series of events as dramatic as they are unbelievable, that while straining their fragile nerves, can in no way shake their indestructible friendship.

The novel perfectly portrays the life of the white collar workers (*bailing* 白领), namely that category of “quality” middle-class professionals that most of the youth who climb to the top of the school pyramid dream of becoming.⁵⁵ *Never-flowers in never-dream* expresses their aspirations, and celebrates values such as talent, an enterprising spirit, work effort and material well-being: if larger-than-life feelings are again meant to provide consolation, they can no longer be utilized in order to ease the pain of educational frustration, but rather to relieve the disappointment caused by the workplace. And yet, the real novelty of the story is in another sphere: the emergence, beside the already encountered sentiment of “self-pity,” of a euphoric self-satisfaction for the unconstrained life available to the protagonists within the glamorous scenarios of the new Chinese metropolises. Behind the white collar workers’ silhouettes, in truth, Guo Jingming sketches out the traits of another social class, that of the “new rich” (*xin furen* 新富人); precisely, the restricted elite that had received the utmost benefits from the “socialist market” economy and that had come to monopolize the greater amount of national economic resources.

The aspiring white collar workers portrayed in *Never-flowers in never-dream*, in fact, are, at a closer look, the children of local bureaucrats and entrepreneurs; as such, they obtain desirable jobs, hang out in luxurious circles, and disentangle themselves from numerous difficult situations thanks to the intervention of their influential relatives. For them to gain admittance in a prestigious university is not a fundamental matter: to be introduced, via the “back door,” into the privileged social environment, *guanxi* 关系 are sufficient enough.⁵⁶

Thus, although superficially describing the world of the white collar workers, Guo Jingming in his new novel reflects more deeply the point of view of the new rich. This is probably because it is Guo Jingming himself who has become a member of this group: his meteoric success, apparently, has made him forget the

sense of mortification experienced by those who strive to gain access to university and find a desirable position in the labor market, making him embrace instead the triumphant, self-satisfied perspective of those who have already entered the circle of the Chinese elite.

But there is also something else. In *Enchanted City*, as we have seen, Guo Jingming proved to have assimilated, however traumatically, the necessary order of the dominant ideology. It is easy to comprehend, then, that as soon as he becomes an effective member of the dominant class, he turns into an active promoter of its own values. Guo Jingming's voice, captured and incorporated by the culture industry, became a mouthpiece reproducing and disseminating the ideology of the latter.

This ideology was referred to by Wang Xiaoming as the “new ideology” (*xin yishixingtai* 新意识形态), in order to distinguish it from the “old” official ideology of the CCP. According to him, this ideology asserts that “human beings must primarily satisfy material interests,”⁵⁷ and assumes that the market is the venue naturally delegated to creating and distributing wealth. The messages of such an ideology, delivered and spread by all kinds of media, “from commercial advertisements to television programs and academic debates,”⁵⁸ indicate to everybody the possibility of attaining a state of freedom *in* the market and *through* competition.

It is a state analogous to the “multifarious condition of freedom” attributed to the *balinghou* by Chinese critics (see note 18), who seem themselves to adhere to, and sometimes even to promote, the illusions of the dominant ideology; illusions, because the freedom they ascribe to such a generation is not a real given, but rather a virtual projection. It is not a condition concretely found in a whole social group, but a prerogative flaunted by a minority of individuals, such as Guo Jingming and Han Han, who have reached the goal of fame and wealth, and therefore transmit, in compliance with the gospel of the “new ideology,” the optimistic vision of the world that belongs to those who have triumphed thanks to the market.⁵⁹ The real state of affairs, though, is quite different: while on the one hand students and white collar workers need, in order to be satisfy their interests, to make enormous sacrifices and constant compromises,⁶⁰ the Chinese market on the other hand is for the most part dominated by the new rich, who administer its resources according to the principles of a corporative capitalism ruled by the combination of “power plus capital.”⁶¹

Thus, by mingling into one single portrait the physiognomy of the white collar workers and the features of the new rich, Guo Jingming has blurred the boundary separating the two social strata and gratified the would-be white collar workers reading his novel with an embellished image of their own condition. It is a new mythical projection: a hologram enlarging the dream of freedom offered by the market while minimizing the reality that largely restricts the attainment of this freedom (with tears contributing to spread a veil over these contradictions).

It is Guo Jingming himself, actually, who enacts such a myth within his own person. By becoming a celebrity, he indeed acquired the role of that particular kind of hero that Wang Xiaoming refers to as the “successful gentleman” (*chenggong renshi* 成

功人士); namely, the archetypal figure of the “new rich,”⁶² ubiquitous from the mid-1990s onwards in the most diverse cultural products. Appearing as “a forerunner of the middle class and a prototype of the ‘white collar workers’ culture,”⁶³ this myth functions as a projection of the future and a model especially for those who have not yet become rich.

At the peak of his fame, Guo Jingming was celebrated by the media more as an entrepreneur than as a writer. And this was not just because Forbes every year provided an estimate of the millions that were pouring into his pockets, but also because to the young gentleman, being a writer was simply not enough. So he created two literary magazines, established a company of cultural dissemination (proud of being its CEO),⁶⁴ and promoted an entrepreneurial ethics which proclaimed that if you wanted to be successful in the market you needed to work very hard.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, he kept flooding the internet with pictures where he posed like a Hong Kong movie star, covered from head to toe with clothes designed by the most famous transnational fashion houses. Obviously, his symbolic capital as a writer was not favorably affected: as early as 2004 he had already lost a lawsuit for plagiarism,⁶⁶ and, when in 2007 he was admitted to the Writers’ Association, somebody went as far as declaring himself to be “humiliated.”⁶⁷ Nothing of this however touched him, nor in the slightest degree diminished his fame. Controversies, on the contrary, contributed to positively fuel his marketing success. In fact, the task Guo Jingming had been assigned by the culture industry was not to produce good literature, but rather to sell popular cultural products⁶⁸ by which means they could meet the need to provide entertainment and consolation. All of the novels, magazines and, in general, any declaration of the “Golden Kid,” continued therefore to successfully combine melancholy and euphoria, self-pity and self-satisfaction, fostering in this way the two opposing, albeit complementary, features of the myth that Guo Jingming, as a “successful gentleman,” continued to spread: that of the “socialist market economy.” If on the one hand euphoria exalts the liberating aspects that the Chinese socialist market promises to many, but grants only to a few, it is tears that reconcile themselves with the oppressive conditions that most have to suffer in the hope of enjoying these promises.

Notes

- ¹ Edgar Morin, *L'esprit du temps: essai sur la culture de masse*, 12 (translation by the author).
- ² Umberto Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati: comunicazioni di massa e teorie della cultura di massa*, 219–220 (translation by the author).
- ³ *Ibid.*, 219.
- ⁴ It was Guo Jingming himself who declared that he had employed a mythical framework to tell a story about human feelings; see Chen Xiangjiao, and Ou Ya, “Guo Jingming: qingchun xiezuo goujian huancheng” (Guo Jingming: youth writing has erected an imaginary city). The manga inspiring Guo Jingming’s novel is *RG Veda* by the CLAMP group, whose title explicitly refers to the fourth book of the Vedas, sacred texts of the Hindu tradition.

- ⁵ As to the commercial myth created by Guo Jingming, see *Zhonghua Dushubao*, “Qingchun wenxue de xingui: chubanjie de shenhua ‘Huancheng’” (The nouveaux riches of youth literature: *Imaginary city*, a myth of the publishing world). Concerning Forbes’ estimates, see Di Ruihong, “2009 Fubusi Zhongguo mingren bang: Guo Jingming liuci shangbang zao zhongren pi” (Forbes 2009 Chinese celebrity list: Guo Jingming’s sixth time in the chart is contested by many.)”
- ⁶ For reference to the appellation of Golden Kid, see Shao Yanjun, “Zhang Yueran: shengle guaikou de ‘yunü zuojia’” (Zhang Yueran: a cool and cruel “jade woman” writer), 104. The person who defined Guo Jingming as the founder of a sect is Zhang Yueran: see her “Dang Guo Jingming chengwei jiaozhu” (When Guo Jingming became a patriarch), 10–11.
- ⁷ Chen Pingyuan, “Scholarship, Ideas, Politics,” 124.
- ⁸ Ding Chenxin, and Sun Ran, “Weishenme shi Guo Jingming” (Why Guo Jingming), 25.
- ⁹ See Zhang Yueran’s preface to *Enchanted City*, “He chuntian zhongnian bu yu” (Spring will never come), 1–3.
- ¹⁰ Jiang Xue’ou, “Yi shou ziyou, gudu, youyu de beige: du Guo Jingming de ‘Huancheng’” (An elegy of freedom, solitude and melancholy: a reading of Guo Jingming’s *Enchanted City*), 74.
- ¹¹ Ge Jiaqi, “‘Huancheng’ yougan: ling yi fen gandong” (Impressions on *Enchanted City*: a different kind of feeling), 77.
- ¹² Zhu Yixi, “‘Huancheng’ he na ge youshang de haizi” (*Enchanted city* and that melancholic kid), 28.
- ¹³ See Zhuzi, *Chuanyue Guo Jingming: duyidai de xiangxiang senlin* (Beyond Guo Jingming: the imaginary forest of the solitary generation), 46.
- ¹⁴ Preface by Cao Wenxuan to *Enchanted City*, 2.
- ¹⁵ Although the term *balinghou* is normally used by the media and the critics to refer to the whole generation born in China during the 1980s, it actually identifies, more accurately, a number of very young authors born at the beginning of the 1980s and the social group within which their readers are located, mainly composed of students of the same age coming from one-child families in the urban middle stratum.
- ¹⁶ Zhang Weimin, “Guanyu ‘Xin xingqing xiezuo’” (On “New emotional writing”), 477–497.
- ¹⁷ Qiao Huanjiang, “Guo jingming lun” (Guo Jingming), 525–28.
- ¹⁸ Zhang Weimin, “Guanyu ‘Xin xingqing xiezuo,’” 494.
- ¹⁹ In relation to the concept of “structure of feeling,” reference is obviously made to Raymond Williams; specifically, see his *The Long Revolution*, 57–88.
- ²⁰ The *balinghou* writing phenomenon, which grabbed public attention around the year 2000, reached its climax in 2004, when the fictional texts published by the *balinghou* authors represented as much as 10 % of the literary market.
- ²¹ It is useful to remind ourselves that access to the highest levels of education is a problem that predominantly concerns the urban middle stratum families.
- ²² Participants in the debate included teachers, parents, students and intellectuals. A comprehensive collection of the main contributions to the debate is found in the volume edited by Kong Qingdong, Mo Luo and Yu Jie, *Shenshi zhongxue yuwen jiaoyu* (A survey of literary education in the secondary school).
- ²³ *Mengya* launched, in particular, a crusade against the *gaokao* composition (*gaokao* is the notorious National University Entrance Examination), under attack because of its dogmatism, that was said to completely suffocate the students’ creativity. The *Xin Gainian* composition, in fact, was conceived in opposition to the composition of the *gaokao* examination: the former was supposed to emphasize the student’s unfettered creativity in contrast to the latter, which was deemed to be unbearably rigid and stultifying. The contest enjoyed enormous success, especially among those students good at literature but poor in other subjects, because

- it promised its winners admission to the Chinese departments of the top national universities without requiring them to take the *gaokao* examination.
- ²⁴ The novel, titled *The Three Doors* (*Sanchong men* 三重门), is a polemical satire narrating the failure of a student incapable of adapting to the school system, portrayed as a cage dominated by frantic competition and absurd hypocrisy. On Han Han, see my “The Temple and the Market: Struggles for Recognition in the Literary Field with Chinese Characteristics.”
- ²⁵ See the essays that first appeared online and were then published in the collection *Ai yu tong de bianyuan* (The margins of love and pain).
- ²⁶ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 127–186.
- ²⁷ “Zhonggong Zhongyang Guowuyuan guanyu shenhua jiaoyu gaige quanmian tuijin suzhi jiaoyu de jue ding” (A Resolution of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council Regarding the Deepening of Educational Reform and Pushing forward Quality Education).
- ²⁸ As to the centrality of the discourse of “quality” (*suzhi* 素质) in the contemporary political propaganda, promoted by the Chinese Communist Party since the early 1980s in parallel with the birth control policy, see Andrew Kipnis, “Suzhi: a Keyword Approach.”
- ²⁹ Things do not seem to have changed substantially in recent years. On the ideological effects produced by the Chinese educational apparatus, see in particular Mo Luo, Yu Jie and Qian Liqun’s preface to the volume edited by Kong Qingdong, Mo Luo and Yu Jie, *Shenshi zhongxue yuwen jiaoyu* (A survey of literary education in the secondary school), 1–22.
- ³⁰ See the anthology of the winning compositions of the first edition of the contest, *Shoujie quanguo Xin Gainian zuowen dasai huojiang zuopin xuan A - B juan* (A selection of the award-winning works from the Great Composition Contest, Xin Gainian, first national edition, vol. 1 and 2).
- ³¹ Ding Chenxin, and Sun Ran, “Weishenme shi Guo Jingming,” 25.
- ³² Marina Warner, *Six Myths of Our Times: The 1994 BBC Reith Lectures*, and Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*.
- ³³ *Enchanted city*, for example, rewrote rather freely some of the themes featured in the manga authored by the CLAMP, that in turn had imported some mythical features drawn from other sources. What interests me here, though, are not the common aspects shared by *Enchanted city* and its antecedents, but rather the specific traits of Guo Jingming’s narration.
- ³⁴ Erich Fromm, “The Application of Humanist Psychoanalysis to Marx’s Theory,” 231.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.
- ³⁷ It is necessary to state that neither the “social character” nor the “structures of feelings” are to be considered elements universally existent in a given class; they are, rather, tendencies recurring with significant statistical relevance within a certain social group. It has also to be remembered that the two notions (the first developed by Fromm, the second by Williams), although partially overlapping, remain conceptually distinguished. While the “social character,” as clarified by Williams, is an abstract system of behaviors and attitudes, a “structure of feelings” is, in contrast, the “actual experience through which [such a character is] lived” (*The Long Revolution*, 64). Therefore, a “structure of feeling” appears to be in fact the particular *reaction* of a certain group to the organization of a given mode of production: every generation, according to Williams, has its own structure of feeling and “responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting” (65).
- ³⁸ Guo Jingming, *Enchanted City*, 2.
- ³⁹ Psychoanalyst Otto Rank elaborated his notions on the theme of the “double” in his study *The Double: a Psychoanalytic Study*, where he investigated a *topos* recurring among various 18th Century writers (such as Fëdor Dostoevskij, E.T.W. Hoffmann, Guy de Maupassant and

Edgar Allan Poe). Such *topos* consisted in the sudden materialization of a mysterious character, completely identical to the (male) protagonist, who persecuted him until causing his death. Rank considers this *topos* as a symptom of the authors' narcissistic disorder.

- ⁴⁰ The theme of the double also appears in another representative *balinghou* novel, *Cherry trees in the distance* (*Yingtiao zhi yuan*) by Zhang Yueran, where the female protagonist Duan Xiaomo, persecuted by her alter ego Du Wanwan, sacrifices herself by committing suicide in order to ensure the happy survival of her antagonist. Here, too, as in *Enchanted City*, a melodramatic sentimentalism constitutes the overarching mood of the story.
- ⁴¹ Of course, it should not be overlooked that narcissism is also fostered by market advertisers in an attempt to engage them as consumers.
- ⁴² Deng Xiaoping conducted his much-celebrated Southern Inspection in 1992, in order to move out of the political impasse following the Tian'anmen crisis and to revitalize the economic reform agenda. The talks delivered in the course of the inspection tour, the perfect compendium of the CCP's ideology for the years to come, are summarized in the text "Zai Wuchang, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shanghai dengdi de tanhua yaodian" (Main points from the talks held in Wuchang, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shanghai and other places).
- ⁴³ It is also because of such unutterability that the *Xin Gainian* initiative enjoyed great success and gained strong prestige: the contest had undoubtedly the merit of bringing to the attention of Chinese society the subjectivity of a large group of urban adolescents, whose expression until that moment had been suffocated by the mechanisms of the educational system.
- ⁴⁴ Of course, I am not referring to all the readers of the novel, but to those "model" readers, some of whom I have quoted in this essay, who developed a relationship of deep identification with the novel.
- ⁴⁵ Han Han took his critical attitude to the extreme by dropping out of school and refusing to attend university (although he was invited by prestigious Fudan University to become a student); see Fumian, "The Temple and the Market: Struggles for Recognition in the Literary Field with Chinese Characteristics," 139.
- ⁴⁶ *Mengya*, "Xin Gainian zuowen dasai' changyishu" (Written Proposal of the 'Great Composition Contest, Xin Gainian'), 4–9.
- ⁴⁷ See, for example, Peng Ji, "Mengya zhubian huigu Xin Gainian: Han Han Guo Jingming chaju tai da" (Mengya's editor-in-chief recollects Xin Gainian: the enormous difference between Han Han and Guo Jingming).
- ⁴⁸ Shao Yanjun, *Qingxie de wenyuechang: dangdai wenyue shengchan jizhi de shichanghua zhuanxing* (The inclined literary field: the marketization of contemporary literary production), 192–196.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 58–62.
- ⁵⁰ See Ding Chenxin, and Sun Ran, "Weishenme shi Guo Jingming," 26–27.
- ⁵¹ See Kong Shuyu, *Consuming Literature: Best Sellers and the Commercialisation of Literary Production in Contemporary China*, 54–64.
- ⁵² Ding Chenxin, and Sun Ran, "Weishenme shi Guo Jingming," 25.
- ⁵³ Shao Yanjun, "Zhang Yueran: shengleng guaiku de 'yunü zuojia'," 104.
- ⁵⁴ *Chunfeng Wenyi* put Guo Jingming under contract ensuring the payment of all his university fees until his graduation, while in return the author was expected to publish at least one more novel for the same publisher. Ding Chenxin, and Sun Ran, "Weishenme shi Guo Jingming," p. 26.
- ⁵⁵ White collar workers, identified as a group endowed with both "purchasing power and intellectual curiosity" (see Kong Shuyu, 58), became, in the course of the 1990s, the privileged target of the culture industry; it is quite easy to guess, then, why Guo Jingming decided to address this group with his writings.
- ⁵⁶ The protagonist of the novel, who has a fervent desire to become a white collar worker and

- aspires, in particular, to be a graphic designer, thus comments during a job interview for which she had been recommended by an influential “uncle:” “These days all universities look just the same: you smoke, you drink and you flirt; above all, you cut class and sleep. I just don’t believe that sleeping at Beida makes you more intelligent” (68). In Guo Jingming’s new novel there is also an insistent celebration of consumerist culture and an exaltation of hedonistic and individualistic values: the author sometimes seems to reproduce the ethos of Zhou Weihui’s novel *Shanghai Baby*, (not) by coincidence also published by *Chunfeng Wenyi*.
- ⁵⁷ Wang Xiaoming, “Xin yishixingtai yu Zhongguo dangdai wenhua: Wang Xiaoming jiaoshou zai Shantou Daxue de yanjiang” (New ideology and contemporary Chinese culture: Professor Wang Xiaoming’s speech at Shantou University), 20.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ⁵⁹ It is useful to remember that the first and most representative *balinghou* novels all narrated stories of oppression and defeat. Han Han, for example, in his first novel wrote about the failure of a student, which replicated his own personal experience as a school dropout. Thanks to the novel’s success, though, Han Han was incorporated by the culture industry, and transformed into an example of a successful individual.
- ⁶⁰ According to Wang Xiaoming, contrary to the fact that white collar workers are considered by the media and the advertisers to be “symbols of Chinese modernization and examples of its newly acquired enormous purchasing power,” they are in truth “young or middle-aged men and women worn out” because of work. See Wang Xiaoming’s introduction to the volume *Zai xin yishixingtai de longzhao xia: 90 niandai de wenhua he wenxue fenxi* (Under the shroud of the New Ideology: cultural and literary analysis of the 1990s), 4.
- ⁶¹ Wang Xiaoming, “Xin yishixingtai yu Zhongguo dangdai wenhua: Wang Xiaoming jiaoshou zai Shantou Daxue de yanjiang,” 18.
- ⁶² For Wang Xiaoming the “successful gentleman” is a myth inasmuch as he shows just one side of reality, and hides the rest: flaunting only the positive and “clean” aspects of his fortune, he masks the murky, unequal circumstances through which this fortune in real circumstances originated; see Wang Xiaoming’s essay “Ban zhang lian de shenhua” (The ‘one half of the face’ myth), 29–36.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 31.
- ⁶⁴ Lieri, “Wenhua shangren Guo Jingming” (Guo Jingming the cultural trader), 8.
- ⁶⁵ Sun Ran, “Guo Jingming: chengzhang xiang poying yiyang, hen tong” (Guo Jingming: growing up hurts, like breaking a cocoon), 29.
- ⁶⁶ In 2004 Zhuang Yu, a little-known author from Beijing, sued Guo Jingming, accusing him of having plagiarized, in his novel *Never-flowers in never-dream*, “the idea, story, main plot, major characters and language” of her novel *In and Out of the Circle* (*Quanli Quanwai*). Having won the case, she obtained compensation of 200,000 *yuan*. See “Popular young writer loses plagiarism lawsuit” from the Xinhua website.
- ⁶⁷ Xu Ying, “Lu Tianming fandui ru Zuoxie: Zuoxie bu neng shi xiaotou de tianxia” (Lu Tianming is against Guo Jingming’s entry to the Writers’ Association: the Writers’ Association cannot be a world of thieves.)
- ⁶⁸ In an article where he promoted a literary contest for young writers designed as a *reality show* – and in which he was endowed with the appellation Boss Guo (Guo laoban) – the writer illustrated his own views about writing in the following terms: “All books are commodities, all have their own price, you don’t need to raise them to a literary stature or a spiritual plane to analyze them;” see Guo Xiaohan, and Wang Kun, “Guo Jingming: qingchun shi yi men hao shengyi” (Guo Jingming: youth is a good business).

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