

# The Temple and the Market: Controversial Positions in the Literary Field with Chinese Characteristics<sup>†</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> I am grateful to the two anonymous MCLC readers for their valuable suggestions. I am indebted, in particular, to Michel Hockx, Shao Yanjun, and Tao Dongfeng, whose many insights have been a constant point of reference for my article.

“Overnight, the French thinker Pierre Bourdieu has become an illustrious name in China.” Thus does Cao Wenxuan, a writer and professor of Chinese literature at Peking University, open his preface to Shao Yanjun’s (2003: 1) book *The Inclined Literary Field: Marketization of Contemporary Literary Production*. A shade of irony colors his words—or perhaps it is only a sense of resignation to the trend among Chinese scholars to invoke repeatedly the great Western intellectual masters and their theories to help justify and explain their own work—and Shao shows an awareness that bringing Bourdieu’s theory of the literary field to Chinese ground may appear as an easy concession to a current cultural fad. But Shao remains convinced, and rightly so, that such a theory is a precious tool for understanding the changes in literary production in China since the 1990s.

<sup>1</sup> Shao Yanjun, following Hong Zicheng (1999), considers the foundation of the PRC the starting point of contemporary literature (*dangdai wenxue*), and therefore does not take into account the literary field of the Republican era.

Shao Yanjun notes that “according to Bourdieu, the essential element in the formation of the literary field is first of all the establishment of the principle of literary autonomy” (2003: 9). A field of this kind, she argues, did not emerge in contemporary China until the mid-1980s,<sup>1</sup> when the

principle of “art for art’s sake” gained increasing prominence and a new generation of writers and critics began to regard literary purity as the exclusive criterion with which to measure a writer’s symbolic capital. Unfortunately, the development of the market and the rise of consumer culture since the beginning of the 1990s has marginalized (*bianyuanhua*) “pure literature” (*chun wenxue*), threatening its autonomy and therefore seriously undermining the applicability of Bourdieu’s paradigm to the Chinese reality, as the “marketization” (*shichanghua*) of the literary production causes it to waver from the principle of literary autonomy and “incline” to the principle of heteronomy. At a first glance, then, Bourdieu’s standard theoretical framework would appear to apply well to the Chinese literary context of the 1980s, but it fits more problematically into that of the subsequent decade. However, this kind of essentialized adaptation of Bourdieu’s theory leads straight to a paradox: for Bourdieu, in fact, the historical condition enabling the formation of the literary field is precisely the advent of the market, and it is by divorcing from the market that “pure” cultural producers can set up the autonomous pole of the field as an “economic world reversed” (1996: 81). There they play the game of the “loser wins” (Shao 2003: 10–11), whose logic is to reject economic capital—the heteronomous principle of art—in order to gain symbolic capital (recognition within the field)—the real autonomous principle of pure art.

Despite attempts to universalize his theory, the literary field about which Bourdieu writes is indeed specific: it took shape in France in the second half of the nineteenth century as a result of the radical rupture of artists from the bourgeois world. Given the incommensurable differences in the historical conditions that generated the Chinese literary field of the post-Mao era (when, suffice it to say, there was no bourgeois world to be found), a wholesale adoption of Bourdieu’s theory to the Chinese context is hardly feasible or warranted. For the French sociologist, the literary field is autonomous as long as it obeys “its own laws of functioning independent of

<sup>2</sup> It is not within the scope of this article to inquire into the phenomenon of “unofficial” (*fei guanfang*) writing, which, especially during the 1980s, emerged as a result of writers’ widespread efforts to find literary outlets independent of official cultural institutions. The discussion of autonomous literary sphere by Shao Yanjun and other prominent literary critics (whom I introduce in the third section) is limited to the practice of pure literature pursued in the bosom of official literary journals.

those of politics and the economy” (1993: 162), which suggests that cultural producers, besides being able to produce their own autonomous (pure) art, must also be able to produce their own autonomous (independent) literary institutions. But in China in the 1980s, although they were granted a degree of autonomous space to practice their “pure” literary principles, writers continued to depend on the socialist literary system and were therefore subordinated to the policies of the party and state.<sup>2</sup> The autonomy obtained in the 1980s is thus only partial: symbolic, but not material. For this reason, instead of assisting writers in their pursuit of a full literary autonomy, the market reforms of the 1990s threatened the limited autonomy already obtained: under the leadership of the CCP (within the mode of production referred to as “socialism with Chinese characteristics”), the market weakens any control cultural producers might have over existing official institutions (largely converted to commercial production) and hampers them from building their own independent institutions according to the mechanisms of a free market.

Shao Yanjun acknowledges that the contemporary Chinese literary field cannot be entirely reduced to the patterns described in Bourdieu’s analysis: “Owing to the different epochal background,” she explains, “and especially owing to the particular existence in China of a system of ideological supervision, we cannot and we should not analyze actual Chinese problems absolutely according to this theory” (2003: 9). So what should we take from Bourdieu’s theory? How should we apply it to the Chinese context? In my view, we should begin with the assumption that the Chinese literary field has its own empirically observable characteristics. Rather than try to imitate a priori Bourdieu’s model (the product of Bourdieu’s research), we should primarily imitate the observation method (the process) that brought the French sociologist to frame the structure of his particular literary field. Only after having disclosed the main dynamics at play in our specific field, should we try to verify, a posteriori, what kind of interaction occurs between its polarizing principles (autonomy/heteronomy) and the

kind of logic that regulates such interaction. Bourdieu's literary field is conceived as an interactive system of agents competing to achieve their own interests within a "space of possibles."<sup>3</sup> Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang (2004: 11–12), who has analyzed the Taiwanese literary field, drawing from Bourdieu's sociology of culture, confirms that "the central dynamic of any literary field is in the struggle among agents occupying different positions for the power to define and monopolize legitimate literary discourse." Another fundamental property of Bourdieu's field consists in its being in a relation to a general field of power (political and economic) within which it is contained. The degree of independence of the literary field from the field of power determines the extent of the autonomy it possesses.

With regard to the latter, Shao Yanjun (2003: 17) reminds us that "the relation of contemporary Chinese literary field to the fields of politics and economics is particular and complicated." Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang (2004: 40) specifies that in the course of the twentieth century, "the political factor featured much more prominently in Chinese literary development" than the economic forces. Moreover, this "complicated" relationship with the field of politics should not be interpreted only in terms of contraposition, but also in terms of cooperation: not just as top-down pressure from the political sphere, but also as a shared propensity on the part of the writers to use literature as a political means. This fact is well expounded by Michel Hockx, the Western scholar who has most exhaustively applied Bourdieu's theories to an analysis of modern and contemporary Chinese literature.<sup>4</sup> After explaining that the Chinese literary field is not so easily schematized as its French counterpart in terms of "two conflicting principles . . . namely the autonomous, or symbolic principle, and the heteronomous, or economic principle," Hockx (2003a: 225) recognizes "the presence of a third principle, partly but not fully heteronomous, which motivates the Chinese writers to consider, as part of their practice, the well-being of their country and their people." It is what he calls "political principle," a principle according to which "politically correct writers can be upwardly mobile in terms of

<sup>3</sup> For Bourdieu (1996: 232) the literary field is a "space of possibles" inasmuch as it works as a force field constraining the finite universe of the position-takings allowed to the agents involved.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Hockx makes use of Bourdieu's theories in a number of studies, including Hockx 1999a, 1999b, 2003a, and 2003b.

<sup>5</sup> Hockx (2003a: 226) also suggests that such a political principle becomes entirely heteronomous when, rather than for the well-being of the country and the people, it is used “in the service of any political institution,” or in order to pursue “a career in the cultural bureaucracy” (225).

<sup>6</sup> The definition of *wentan* is crucial in this controversy. The term, already used in ancient times to indicate the *literati* community, is composed of the two characters *wen* (literature, culture, civilization) and *tan*, which can be imagined as a sacred space. Nowadays, although the concept commonly refers to the whole literary scene, literary critics sometimes use it to designate the official literary establishment, often in order to fence it off from the external intrusions of the market. Wang Xiaobo, for example, was nicknamed “the master outside the *wentan*” (*wentan wai de gaoshou*) for his choice to abandon state employment and to rely completely on the market as a means of financial independence. To my knowledge, Han Han is the first writer—many years after Wang Shuo—who, from a totally external position denounces such an establishment as a comprehensive conservative institution of cultural power. Since in the connotation given by certain critics this controversial term seems to retain some of the original sacredness, I employ the word “temple” (of literature) as one of its possible translations.

political capital *within* the field” (ibid.).<sup>5</sup> Due to this specificity of the Chinese context, Hockx devises a “neutral” definition of the literary field that has the merit of cutting a theoretical Gordian knot:

The literary field is an interest community of agents and institutions involved in the material and symbolic production of literature, whose activities are governed by at least one autonomous principle that is fully or partially at odds with at least one heteronomous principle. (Hockx 1999a: 9)

I want to make clear here that the economic heteronomy brought about by the advent of the market since the 1990s in China has not just disrupted the logic of a field governed by a “pure” artistic autonomy, but has rather come to overlap with another heteronomous principle already ingrained in the literary field—that of politics—producing with it a novel and complex interaction. In this essay, I explore the configuration assumed by the Chinese literary field since 1992, when, following Deng Xiaoping’s celebrated Southern Tour (*nansun*), “the official ideology finally gave the green light to the market as a field of cultural choice” (Chen 2004: 124). To this end, I analyze a literary controversy that occurred at the beginning of 2006 and has been named after the two protagonists involved: the “battle of Han Han and Bai Ye” (*Han Bai zhi zheng*). The controversy provides an illuminating glimpse into the structure of the literary field during the period in question, inasmuch as the opponents’ respective positions epitomize the struggle between the two opposing sides of the literary field configured in China since the 1990s, within the mode of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Bai Ye, an influential literary critic with strong political capital, assumes a position as a representative of what I call the *wentan*—namely, the humanist literary establishment that has its base in official literary journals.<sup>6</sup> Having gained symbolic recognition in the 1980s thanks to its pursuit of “pure literature,” the *wentan* largely became a conservative institution in the 1990s, when the

expansion of the market contributed to its own marginalization. Han Han, a literary pop star who has experienced huge economic success, assumes the position as a representative of the *market*, or more precisely the culture industry system, which spurred the idea of literature as leisure and created a flourishing book market underpinned by the production of best-sellers (*changxiaoshu*). While Bai Ye designates the practice of pure literature, to be administered by the *wentan*, as the only legitimate source of literary autonomy, Han Han suggests that real legitimacy comes only from a free and private agreement between writer and reader. In their respective positions, we see two different types of *habitus*: a moralistic paternalism, in the case of the former, and a provocative sensationalism, in the case of the latter.<sup>7</sup>

To understand the significance of the two contenders' positions in relation to those they occupy in the current literary space of possibilities, I first provide a brief outline of the controversy. In the second section, I reconstruct Han Han's social trajectory and his transformation, at the hands of the market, into the symbol of an important phenomenon of mass culture. In the third section, I delineate the evolutionary trajectory of the pure literature discourse, embraced as a legitimizing tool by the *wentan* and ambiguously appropriated by Bai Ye. My conclusion is that Bai Ye and Han Han's positions, although defending the principle of literary autonomy, are actually guided by a large amount of heteronomy. What I suggest is that this heteronomy, rather than being an individual property of the two opponents, is to a large extent characteristic of the forces driving the two sides of the field they come to represent, the *wentan* and the market; these forces, moreover, despite their superficial conflict, actually interact with each other and permeate each other. Therefore, the conclusion drawn from the observation of this controversy is that the interplay between two opposing poles of heteronomy—in the contemporary Chinese literary field “with Chinese characteristics”—creates a force field more powerful and constraining than the conflict

<sup>7</sup> The notion of *habitus*, one of the most complex in Bourdieu's theoretical framework, can be summarized as a system of dispositions produced by an agent's social trajectory and related to the position occupied by the agent within the field. Structured by the field, the *habitus* works as a structuring force reproducing, in return, the same field.

between autonomy and heteronomy examined by Bourdieu in the context of nineteenth-century France.

### Fathers and Sons in the New Public (Blogo)sphere

The literary controversy—the most heated of 2006<sup>8</sup>—broke out in February of that year, when Bai Ye, a well-established literary critic,<sup>9</sup> decided to post one of his academic articles, entitled “Present and Future of the *Balinghou*,”<sup>10</sup> on his newly activated Sina.com celebrity blog. The article would appear to be well-meaning and innocuous: it summons the Chinese *wentan* to pay attention to the overwhelming emergence of a new generation of youth writers—called *balinghou* (post-1980, since they were born after 1980)—that by 2004 was already occupying ten percent of the literary market. The reasons for their success, according to Bai Ye, are threefold: (1) the enormous popularity of the literary contest *Xin Gainian* (New Concept) launched by the youth literary journal *Mengya* (Sprouts) that since 1999 has promoted many young writers; (2) the thrust of the publishing market, eager to produce long, easy-to-read novels; and (3) the support of a vast and faithful urban readership of contemporaries with a strong purchasing power, whose moods and needs are resonated with the *balinghou* writers. Bai Ye, for whom the *balinghou* represent an impressive social phenomenon that cannot be ignored, chastises his own colleagues for not paying enough attention to them; then, in order to confirm his genuine interest, he enumerates the *balinghou* books he has read, the forums in which he has taken part, and finally the writers he has enjoyed, who mainly correspond to those he himself seeks to promote. Some works by these writers, according to Bai, are even endowed with a certain degree of “literariness” (*wenxuexing*).

On this point, though, Bai Ye is quite skeptical: “The *balinghou* is mostly a cultural phenomenon; it cannot yet be considered a literary trend or a school with its own literary thought.” He goes on to say, “The *balinghou* have stepped into the market, but not into the *wentan*.” For Bai Ye, the

<sup>8</sup> It is very telling that the paragraph about the “battle of Han and Bai,” listed by Ge Hongbing and Song Hongling (2006) among the “ten hot events of literary criticism of 2006” in an article written for the book review magazine *Zhonghua dushubao*, was deleted when the same article was published, in an updated and extended version, in the establishment literary journal *Dangdai wentan* (Ge/Song 2007).

<sup>9</sup> A list of Bai Ye’s numerous official assignments is provided by the essayist Gu Qingsheng (2006): “Researcher at the Institute of Literary Research of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, deputy editor-in-chief of the *Yearbook of Chinese Literature*, Professor at the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, standing deputy head of the Research Association of Contemporary Chinese Literature, director of the Chinese Association of Literary Theory, recipient of special allocations from the State Council, director of the key organs of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences *Annual Report on Chinese Literature* and *Annual Selection of Chinese Literary Criticism*.”

<sup>10</sup> The article was originally published in the literary journal *Great Wall* (Bai 2005) and it was, as of October 15, 2009, still entirely available at <http://www.bjwl.org.cn/html/news/1945.html>. All the quotations from Bai Ye’s article and Han Han’s blog posts included in this chapter can be found at <http://blog.udn.com/RUTHEA/2720135>.

*balinghou* are only amateurs, would-be writers, their eventual literary maturation being wholly subordinated to the path they decide to follow, either that of the market, leading to commercial “writing” (*xiezu*), or that of “pure literature.” Predictably, the critic sides with the small number of writers walking the pure and solitary path of the latter: for them, “it will be absolutely possible to become the reserve army of mainstream literature,” provided they toss away the tentacles of the market and, most of all, humbly accept the intervention and the guidance of critics. “Recently,” says Bai Ye, urging the *wentan* custodians to open up the gates of the temple, “I have been appealing to literary journals to pay more consideration to the not-very-famous *balinghou*, who mainly write short stories and, because they do not write novels, have more difficulty getting published. But the mainstream literary periodicals ignore them, and this amounts to a reciprocal rejection. Our duty, our responsibility, is at least to not allow them desert the literary journals, because among the *balinghou*, they are the only new forces of literature.” What the mature and respected critic could not foresee is that, by succumbing to the temptation of blogging, he was actually venturing into the tiger’s den.

Han Han, born in 1982, does not even regard himself a full-time writer: his chief occupation, he says, is that of racecar driver. His blog, though—unluckily for Bai Ye—is one of the most popular in China,<sup>11</sup> also by virtue of the flirtatious posts that this impetuous, rebellious, and handsome youth sends to the famous actress and director Xu Jinglei, who herself has the most visited blog in China. Perhaps because he is hurt by the critic’s judgment of his writings (as Bai Ye himself later explains it), or because he is in a bad mood when he reads Bai Ye’s article (as Han Han himself would later state), from the platform of his blog Han Han delivers a brutal attack, filled with obscenities, entitled: “The *Wentan* Is Crap, and You Are Full of Shit” (Han 2006). Besides proclaiming himself annoyed about the plausibility of being pigeonholed as a writer on the basis of age, in that essay he firmly rejects the idea of the absolute opposition of the literary

<sup>11</sup> Han Han’s blog (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/m/twocold>) started in October 2005 and at the end of 2006 had already received more than 50 million visits.



and the commercial: “Some so-called literary critics are real fools—they pretend that best-sellers don’t even exist and think that if something sells well it is not pure literature, as if the readers were all dumb asses” (Han 2006). What makes him lose his temper, more than anything else, is the literary parochialism flaunted by the critic: “Bai Ye insists in believing that only the bunch of people he knows (the dudes he met and had lunch with) write literature . . . his article reveals a petty ‘circle’ (*quanzi*) mentality. *Wentan*, *wentan* . . . you must enter the *wentan*. Come on! . . . It’s like listening to some kids playing house, it seems that you enter the *wentan* only if Bai Ye gives the nod!” Han Han, who considers his works a “rare example of pure literature” because he writes what he wants and does not carry out any promotional activity, promotes a free and equalitarian *wentan*: “Writing a blog is actually enough to enter the *wentan*. . . . Each writer is unique, each novel is art; the *wentan*, the Mao Dun Prize, the pure literature journals are all crap: a hundred people masturbating, a hundred people watching them.”

Bai Ye is flabbergasted, but he manages to reply with balanced detachment. In his response, he refuses, however, to discuss any literary issue, and defining Han Han’s “foul words” as a “humiliation and a personal attack,” he proposes a set of Internet ethics. In his retort, Han Han is as scurrilous as before and his conception of literature just as revolutionary: “Cut it out with this *wentan*. . . . Don’t teach people how to write; something is not literature because you say it is, whereas it’s a school composition because you say it’s not. Literature needs neither approval nor directions from anybody. Today, apart from Xinhua’s communications, anything can be literature.”

Bai Ye is aggravated. Hordes of young fans, for whom the provocations of the racecar driver/writer have the appeal of a battle cry, now litter his Web page with insults, compelling him—like a liberal gentleman smacked by a nihilist son—to make the extreme sacrifice, namely to say good-bye to his reader friends and shut down the blog. In an interview released a

little later, though, he stumbles again: "Now the biggest problems of the *balinghou* are not their literary accomplishments, but their morality and conduct."

"All right, you want to talk about morality? Let's talk about it." So erupts Han Han, who writes a string of posts entitled "See Off the Old and Welcome the New," in which he hurls a set of accusations at Bai, accompanied by "proof" he has collected through Google: "Just check any website and you will find that Bai Ye has promoted novels such as Tie Ning's *Big-Bath Woman* (Dayunü; 2000), Pipi's *For Example Woman* (Biru nüren; 2000), Weihui's *Shanghai Baby* (Shanghai baobei; 1999), *September Eleven*, *Fatal Wedding* (9-11Shengsi hunli; 2002), by the Sino-Canadian writer Bella, and other famous books. Bai Ye is just a dyed-in-the-wool book dealer.<sup>12</sup> A book dealer and project editor who is also a critic is something as damned unbelievable as a candidate that sits in the jury." Han Han also points out that the critic, at the time he was publicizing Bella's novel, had stated to the press that a major American film studio had bought the book's royalties for an astronomical price, news that was later to be proved false. On another occasion he claimed that he knew Cai Xiaofei, a *balinghou* writer whose suicide had been announced on the Internet, although later it would be revealed that Cai Xiaofei was a fictitious character. Once he conferred a literary prize upon a young writer whom he himself had produced. "We can understand," says Han Han, commenting on an enthusiastic review by Bai Ye of *Shanghai Baby*, "that Bai Ye recommends and promotes the books he really likes. But how can we believe him?" If literary criticism is an inevitable evil, he complains, at least it should be fair; but the credibility of much criticism in contemporary China is undermined by the impossibility of distinguishing it from advertising. And thus he points a finger: "Don't think that everybody wants to jump inside the circle that you have marked off, peeing like dogs, so that you can keep inside those you like and throw out those you don't like, speak well of those you know and who pay you and keep in the waiting room those you don't know and who don't pay you."

<sup>12</sup> Han Han accuses Bai Ye of being a book dealer (*shushang*) after the former declared that all *balinghou* have "a commercial instinct" and are "half book dealers." The so-called book dealers, about whom I talk briefly in the third section, are among the most desecrated symbols of the literary "marketization."

Bai Ye shrouds himself in an obstinate silence, sending to hell the Web and its controversy with the sentence: “The garbage must be thrown in the garbage bin.” Meanwhile, strong public curiosity is aroused by the numerous media reports about the case and many voices from the literary world make themselves heard. Some, such as Han Dong and a few *balinghou* writers, take Han Han’s sides; others, such as the critics Li Jingze and Xie Xizhang and the writer Wang Xiaoyu, unconvinced about the literary worth of the *balinghou*, criticize Han Han sharply but do not defend Bai Ye from the charges brought against him. On his blog, the writer Lu Tianming defends the right to critique (though lamenting the absence in China of good criticism), but he reproaches Han Han and his sympathizers, saying that it is time to talk with them not about literature but about behavior: “They remind me a gang of red guards, they confront you brazenly, with the belt in their hands” (Lu 2006a). Han Han, although outnumbered, does not surrender: “This is a controversy about the honesty of the literary critics and the pedantry of the so-called *wentan*, not about the old scolding the young.” As the controversy devolves into a rumble, Lu Tianming remains the only one to give the dispute cultural significance: “Originally I thought that the battle between Han and Bai could have many positive academic and literary implications. In recent years, what the Chinese *wentan* has failed to provide is just a true critique and a true debate; the chronic absence of literary criticism and theory is a fact that grieves everyone. Everybody observes and discusses the literary phenomenon of the young *balinghou* writers in private, but has somebody carried out some serious research on them, or said things of any depth?” (Lu 2006b)

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu describes a social trajectory as “the series of positions successively occupied by the same agent” (1996: 258) in the field, according to the conditions made possible by the field and the agent’s own dispositions.

### **The Racecar Driver/Writer and the *Balinghou* Rebels: How to Brand a Generation**

In order to fully understand the social trajectory<sup>13</sup> that brought Han Han to take these positions—reconstructing at the same time the genesis of the

*balinghou* phenomenon to which this trajectory is related—I go back to the end of 1997, when a critical debate against the national educational apparatus, initially set off by the journal *Beijing wenxue* (Beijing literature), shook the Chinese public sphere, producing an enormous echo in Chinese society. Several humanist intellectuals, blaming the excessive technicality and the rigid dogmatism of the school system, advocated the cultivation of the individual through the study of literature as the principal aim of education (see Kong/Mo/Yu 1999). *Mengya*, a Shanghai journal specializing in youth literature, joined the debate by issuing a series of reports entitled “Education: What Is to Be Done?” (Jiaoyu, zenmeban?) that portrayed the secondary-school system as a cage entrapping the students’ creative personalities through the imposition of stultifying norms and notions. Then, in order to give a concrete boost to its progressive stance, in 1999 the journal set up a literary contest, New Concept, calling for compositions inspired by the triple formula “new ideas, new expression, real experience” (*xin siwei, xin biaoda, zhen tiyan*), with the avowed purpose of eliciting the authentic voice of high school students and discovering new literary talents. The initiative was a success beyond all expectations. The members of the jury, among whom stood such distinguished writers as Wang Meng, Fang Fang, Ye Zhaoyan, and Cao Wenxuan, were struck by the quality of the students’ contributions. The event was given enthusiastic coverage by the media, while the most prestigious university departments of Chinese literature rolled out a red carpet for the young winners, sparing them the burden of facing the dreadful *gaokao* university examination.<sup>14</sup>

That year Han Han was a seventeen-year-old student from the suburbs of Shanghai, who was extremely gifted in literary composition (he boasted a striking mastery of classical Chinese and had already published two essays in some local youth journals) but who was doing very poorly at school all the same. When he won the New Concept prize, his essays impressed the jury with their witty humor and biting critical tone that epitomized the spirit of the New Concept crusade. Ironically, he would later testify

<sup>14</sup> *Mengya*’s sharpest attack targeted the National College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*), a narrow “door” (in Han Han’s words) that gives absolute precedence to scientific skills over humanist knowledge and allows only a fraction of students to attend university, sinking the majority into regret and even desperation. New Concept, promoting originality, unrestrained fantasy, and nonconformism, was actually conceived as a challenge to the *gaokao* composition, so dull and formulaic as to deserve the derogatory label of “new *bagu*” (*bagu* is the “eight-legged” standard composition imposed at the imperial examinations from the Ming Dynasty onward). *Mengya* promoted the contest jointly with seven major national universities, which—eager to bypass the *gaokao* to recruit excellent students—promised to award the winners by considering admitting them into their departments of Chinese literature. The tremendous response to the event—from four thousand participants in 1999 to seventy thousand seven years later (*Mengya* 2007)—is less due to the allure of becoming a writer than to the slender hope of carving an alternative path (a “door”) to access university, especially for those students conversant with literature but weak in other subjects.

<sup>15</sup> The “three doors” in question are the examinations to enter middle school, high school, and university.

in a novel that the educational system was truly at odds with literary talent, citing his own example, right around the time of the contest, of failing to pass a grade and later being forced to drop out because of low grades. In the novel *Sanchong men* (Three doors; 2000), Han Han takes personal revenge on the school system by exposing the vicissitudes of an adolescent as he tries to survive its pressures.<sup>15</sup> The semi-autobiographical novel concerns a youth, fond of literature but lacking in his diligence, who manages to enter a key Shanghai high school via the back “door” (*houmen*): his parents compensate for his weak entrance examination score by bribing the headmaster with a “donation” of 30,000 yuan. But the youth, unwilling to adjust to the ruthless logic of the school, is finally punished and expelled. In spite of its simple plot, the narrative is indeed explosive, thanks to the powerful representation of the school environment as a vicious and tyrannical gravitation field, its rules and mechanisms distorting the psychology and behavior of everybody involved. Nobody, not even the first-person narrator/protagonist, is absolved: students are opportunist, cunning, and vain; teachers are ignorant and lifeless; parents are ambitious and unsympathetic. The lowest common denominator unifying everybody’s conduct, as underscored by the political slogans punctuating school life, is hypocrisy.

<sup>16</sup> Obviously, *si parva licet componere magnis*. Commercial hype and press sensationalism also played a conspicuous role in the enthusiastic reception of the novel.

For its humorous cynicism, Han Han’s satire is generously tagged as an “adolescent version” (Liu Ruxi 2000) of classic masterpieces such as Qian Zhongshu’s *Weicheng* (Fortress besieged) and Wu Jingzi’s *Rulin waishi* (The scholars).<sup>16</sup> In a preface to the novel, Cao Wenxuan, astonished by the boy’s maturity and wisdom, praises his corrosive language and lethal insights into “society, the world, life, and everything around him” (Han 2000: 5). *Three Doors* therefore became a “manifesto” of the New Concept campaign, evidence that—for reform supporters—literature can be a means to save the school system but a nuisance for those in charge of perpetuating the system as it is. By the end of the year 2000, the “Han Han phenomenon” (*Han Han xianxiang*) already conquered the media. The novel was number one in the

book charts,<sup>17</sup> owing in part to the huge promotional campaign waged by its publisher (Deng/Fang 2005: 87–93); his *Lingxia yidu* (One degree below zero), a collection of essays published in August, was number two. Teenage magazines crowned Han Han a teen idol and a spokesman for students. Education journals were divided on the issue of whether the Han Hans of China should adapt to the school system or the school system to adapt to them. Han Han's popularity reached a climax in October, when word spread that Shanghai's prestigious Fudan University had graced him with an offer to audit its literature courses. But he had the cheek to refuse, treading on the dreams of every good pupil in China. As the mainstream media got a hold of the case, the focus of the discussion was peremptorily changed from problems in the education system to the teenager's personality.

The cornerstone of this media construction was an episode of the popular CCTV talk show *Duihua* (Conversations), aired on October 25, to which Han Han had been invited as a special guest. The already unruly and self-important youth, although somewhat intimidated by the situation, was treated with benevolent condescension by the hostess but received frequent rebukes from an audience representing largely hostile and paternalistic public opinion. Other guests, albeit expressing sympathy toward his rebelliousness, took a more social perspective and celebrated the whole phenomenon as a positive consequence of contemporary pluralism. The well-known literary critic Chen Xiaoming, for example, affirmed that he likes Han Han because he adds "color" to society, but minimized the importance of his case as just a cultural phenomenon resulting from the development of the market economy and the mass commercial media. Chen Yongming, an education professor at Huadong Normal University, also lavished admiration but suggested *en passant* that Han Han should learn to coexist with his neighbors and control his belligerence so as not to upset social stability (*shehui wending*). Huang Silu, a radiant patriot (she willingly returned from the United States to go to college in China) selected to perform as an antithesis to Han Han and who "plays the piano

<sup>17</sup> According to Zhang Lijun (2006), *Sanchongmen* in 2006 had already sold about 1,300,000 (official) copies.

well, has high marks, is good at writing and is a student monitor" (CCTV 2000), commented that Han Han was little more than a shy boy with a beautiful, bashful smile. The CCTV talk show, thus, officially served to pin Han Han down to two opposing discourses, already circulating in the newspapers: that of "a difficult adolescent" (*wenti shaonian*) displaying certain antisocial elements, and that of "an alternative" (*linglei*) youth, free, rebellious, unconventional, and determined to find his own pathway to success. Needless to say, the two labels were beneficial both for Han Han—for whom media consecration served as a pedestal to secure future achievements—and for the sake of "social stability," because they helped to conceal a very important fact hardly mentioned by the press: Han Han's victorious fight over the school system was just an isolated case in a lottery that turns multitudes of *wenti shaonian* into losers.

In time, as association with *Mengya* and New Concept was no longer needed, the mark of *wenti shaonian* faded away and the *linglei* cover prevailed: Han Han was just a handsome boy struck by luck and courted by publishers and who could leisurely afford to choose what was best for his life. And, since he swore he had always had a passion for speed, he bought a car, then a faster one, and finally in 2003 he started to compete in the National Rally Championship, winning his first on-track race two years later with the Volkswagen 333 Team. Meanwhile, with his fame amplified by his feats on the race track, he continued to manufacture best-sellers during his leisure time: essay collections pedantically reiterating the pose of the angry young man, and two picaresque novels that, regardless of Bai Ye's complete dismissal, managed to sell more than 500,000 copies. Moreover, the "Han Han phenomenon" did not come in vain: it taught the publishing world that youth literature can make a lot of money. In 2002, a biographical novel by the "difficult adolescent" Chun Shu, *Beijing wawa* (Beijing doll), became another controversial case. In 2003, the melancholic winner of the third New Concept competition and author of the fantasy novel *Huancheng* (Imaginary city), Guo Jingming, became the new *enfant*

*prodige*, surpassing even Han Han for the number of devotional fans. By 2004, since the “little emperors”<sup>18</sup> flooding the literary market were already too many to be listed individually, the media did not hesitate to canonize a new cultural phenomenon, assembling a whole group of writers under the same brand: *balinghou*. A significant role, in this process, was played by a report in English appearing in *Time Asia* on January 2004 with the cover title “China’s Youth Finally Dare to Be Different.” There, Chun Shu and Han Han are considered the countercultural avant-garde of a newly born generation, “in a search of personal liberation” (Beech 2004) from the fetters of socialist China. What is most interesting of all is that the journalist Hannah Beech, in order to define a group that reminds her of the American beatniks and hippies, chooses a Chinese word, *linglei*, a word that, after its dip in the English language, travels back to China enriched with a reinvigorated power. Because she concedes that China’s alternative youth is actually made up of a privileged elite that seeks distinction through consumerism rather than by advancing any political claims, Beech responds to at least two demands of the dominant Chinese ideology: first, by glorifying a domestic phenomenon related to the market by placing a globalizing aura around it; second, by constructing an idealized generation that works as an imaginary projection—even for the not-so-*linglei* young masses who cannot afford to be different (but can afford to buy a book).

And for the *wentan*, too. While renowned writers like Mo Yan (Zhang Yueran 2004) and Ma Yuan (Ma 2004) agreed to patronize their favorite *balinghou* writers by writing prefaces to their works, a minority of critics, unafraid of lowering their status by giving credit to these literary brats, provided a generic report diagnosing the most unmistakable features of the “cultural phenomenon” enacted by the youth. Zhang Yiwu (2004a), quoting Hannah Beech’s report, confirms that the *balinghou* are indeed a generation, and that they write in order to give expression “to their private world.” Zhang Lijun (2006), who calls their fiction “new mood writing” (*xin xingqing xiezu*), follows Bai Ye (Bai/Zhang 2004) in defining

<sup>18</sup> “Little emperors” is an epithet used to indicate the children born under the one-child policy started by the government in 1979.



<sup>19</sup> A mistake commonly made by these critics, I suspect, stems from the fact they “read” the authors rather than their works. The alleged celebration of freedom on the part of the *balinghou*, for example, seems completely off the point: the four most successful *balinghou* narratives (Chun 2001; Guo 2003; Han 2000; Zhang 2003) are all stories of defeat, isolation, and even death.

<sup>20</sup> The notion of *zhuxuanlü* (leitmotif, usually translated in English as “main melody”), which I am freely applying in this context, will be better introduced in the next section.

them as *shuaizhen* (candid and true). Since they grew up in the age of the Internet and of a thriving market economy, they are individualistic, worldly, rebellious, and straightforward. Besides, since this age is also one of unprecedented wealth and freedom,<sup>19</sup> they need no longer be concerned with the fate of their country, and their stories are therefore no longer national allegories, but private (*siren*) *petits récits* about their own lives and feelings (Zhang Lijun 2006).

Liberal as they may seem, these acknowledgments are implicitly negative. Treating the *balinghou* as a compact generational group naively expressing their inner world, these critics tacitly purport that their writing cannot contain an “adult” capacity to mediate consciously the gap between their contingent experiences and the outer world, which means that their significance cannot trespass the narrow circle of teenage peers who share with them a “structure of feelings” (Williams 1977). They are also blind to the fact that individual writers can create literary value—perhaps only in a single work—by means of reflecting or even opposing the social process in which their generational and individual experiences are produced—as in the case of Han Han’s *Three Doors*. Emphasizing their association with the market, finally, they imply that *balinghou* writing (*xiezuò*) cannot be (pure) literature (*wenxue*), because the market can produce only (mass) culture (*dazhong wenhua*). In this way, they manage to displace the psychological trauma of accepting that true literature may exist outside the *wentan*.

Certainly, the sworn enemy of the *wentan* is the market. But the *wentan* custodians, rather than analyzing the market, prefer to exorcise it. For example, they prefer to condemn the *balinghou* because they have chosen the market, but they are reluctant to see that in fact the market chose them, selecting and tailoring their voices in order to fine-tune them with its own leitmotifs.<sup>20</sup> The reason why the *wentan* critics have not attempted a real analysis of the *balinghou* and have preferred to exorcise them by throwing them into a generational ghetto is well explained by Zhang Yiwu, the literary critic who, more than any other, has rejected the

pure literature creed and embraced consumer mass culture as the new herald of the people (see, for example, Zhang Yiwu 2004b): “What (the *balinghou*) have shaken are not the mechanisms of readership and criticism, but the publishing mechanisms upon which the literary world based its survival” (2007: 39). One of the functions of literary criticism is to create a threshold in order to protect the status of the cultural elite and shield their power of speech. But why should Han Han need the critics: though the market has branded him a pop star, it has assuredly given him the opportunity to speak with his own voice?

### **Ebb and Flow of the Pure Literature Discourse**

Far from proposing an overview of the *balinghou*'s hypothetical poetics and structure of feelings, what the previous section describes is the functioning of a combination of forces, powerful in manipulating and subduing the “popular” voices of literature, that can appropriately be called “the market” (with Chinese characteristics). Such a description, incidentally, has also drawn attention to a discursive practice that, bestowing legitimacy on the *habitués* of the Chinese *wentan*, has so far exerted just as powerful a force on literary production, although of an opposite sign: that of pure literature. In order to analyze the recent evolution of this concept, I go back to a debate, started in 2001 by Li Tuo, who at that time was urging the literary world to reexamine the concept critically.<sup>21</sup>

The discourse of pure literature started to circulate at the beginning of the 1980s, as a consequence of the movement for the “emancipation of thought” (*sixiang jiefang*), promoted by the CCP at the end of the 1970s. At that time, Kantian aesthetics, with its emphasis on the autonomy of art—“purposiveness without purpose,” detached from the world of praxis—was appropriated as a way of encouraging artists to overcome the dogmatic tenets of socialist realism; similarly, the notion of literary subjectivity, conferring a transcendent ontological essence on the idea of

<sup>21</sup> See Li (2001). The debate took place mainly in the pages of *Shanghai wenxue* (nos. 3, 4, 6, 7 [2001]), and it drew on the contributions, among some others, of Nan Fan, Xue Yi, Ge Hongbing, Han Shaogong, Wu Xuan, Wang Guangdong, and Luo Gang (Shao Yanjun 2003: 14).

"literariness" (*wenxuexing*), encouraged writers to return to the properties of the text, or "literature-in-itself" (Liu Zaifu 2000: 7), thereby breaking free from the transient political objectives that had constrained their creativity. For Li Tuo, though, it was only in 1987 that this process of "purification" reached its completion, when an "elite literary group" (Shao 2003: 10) of "avant-garde" writers, critics, and journal editors, all with a strong background in contemporary Western theory, made a clean break with any residual "sociological criticism" (Liu Zaifu 2000: 9) and theorized that the distinctive "purposiveness" of literature should be "how to write" (*zenme xie*) instead of "what to write" (*xie shenme*), thus setting the standards of pure literature. Both Liu Zaifu and Li Tuo remarked, however, that such a resolute denial of the political praxis, intent on resisting political interference and subverting the principle of ideological instrumentalism (*gongjulun*), was indeed a radically political gesture.

Li Tuo lamented that pure literature writers, although successful in their attack on the dominant ideology, were not yet capable of replacing that ideology with something; when the "sudden changes of history" (2001: 6) sweeping China between the 1980s and the 1990s destroyed the social conditions that gave rise to their literary innovations, they therefore found themselves increasingly marginalized. As mass culture decimated their readership, many of them, lured by the market, abandoned serious literature for commercial writing or left the field altogether for more profitable ventures. For those not willing to surrender, pure literature became "an amulet, a support, a desert island, a moral and spiritual buttress legitimizing their resistance" (Li Tuo 2001: 6). But over the years this support failed to prove "a very positive one" (4). Although it helped the *wentan* defenders withstand the market, it deepened the hiatus between literature and reality, preventing writers from understanding society and finding effective ways to describe it and criticize it. Pure literature thus became a tyrannical and self-evident truth removed from its historicity, a stylistic game espoused by the majority of writers content

with their seclusion in an ivory tower. While the few authors trying to tackle the changing social reality received little attention from most critics, a new trend in pure literature, widely published by most literary journals and gaining wide support among the critics, became hegemonic: the so-called “individualized” (*gerenhua*) or “private” (*sirenhua*) writing.<sup>22</sup> Utterly depoliticized and only concerned with private spaces and desires, this literary trend has further widened the gulf between literature and society. For these reasons, Li Tuo recommended his colleagues in the humanities to abandon the principle of pure literature, to find inspiration in other literary experiences, and to cultivate a new readership in order to carve out a new social role for serious literature to rescue it from its grim isolation.

Insightful as it is, Li Tuo’s call to arms smacked of voluntarism; it merely appealed to the literary establishment to intervene to pull Chinese literature out of its cul-de-sac. Li Songyue and Tao Dongfeng (2002), who disapproved of most Chinese literary scholars for their disregard for the sociohistorical background that enabled the genesis of literary autonomy in China, proposed instead to analyze the issue from a sociological perspective. While they confirm that literary autonomy is an outstanding achievement of the 1980s, they also remind us that it could be attained only with the aid of external forces operating within the structural changes of the whole of Chinese society: “Precisely, it was the social transformations revolving around the (policies of) Emancipation of Thought and Reform and Opening-up, as well as the support by a part of the political elite . . . that provided it an institutional and public endorsement” (Li/Tao 2002: 200). In the 1980s, the two conflicting realms of art and politics were united by a common agenda: repudiation of the Cultural Revolution (and Maoism). The search for artistic autonomy, then, did not stem from the desire to pursue a purposeless and disengaged purity, but from the humanists’ yearning to acquire an independent stage from which to express their political fervor. Moreover, it should be acknowledged that

<sup>22</sup> This literary trend received strong support from critics such as Bai Ye and Zhang Yiwu.

the favor granted to the *wentan* in the 1980s by the political leadership is linked to the CCP's need to co-opt humanist intellectuals in its effort to launch the country's modernization and "moving toward the world" (*zouxiang shijie*). Li and Tao, making abundant use of Bourdieu's sociological notions, also reminded Chinese literary scholars that literary autonomy was generated in the West through its detachment from institutions in the course of a long historical process that allowed the literary field to free itself from political and economic domains, a process that in contemporary China has not yet occurred.

For these reasons, the unprecedented freedom of the 1980s was actually very fragile and constantly threatened by political campaigns that culminated, in the wake of the Tiananmen Square crackdown, with the relegation of the humanist intellectuals to the margins of the field of power. But the literary field, or what Perry Link calls "the socialist Chinese literary system" (Link 2000: 4), remained in place until the end of the 1980s. Through that decade, Chinese writers were, for the most part, still organized by the Writers' Association, whose function was not just to "monitor and control creative writing" (Link 2000: 119), but also to provide its members—at least those with a professional status—with a salary, favorable welfare benefits, and the social prestige owed to "cultural workers" (*wenhua gongzuozhe*). State-funded literary journals, which formed the core of the system since the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and constituted the main official publication outlet of the literary producers, were "enjoying a renaissance" (Kong 2004: 146). Undoubtedly, they still conveyed the ideology of the party and state, but in the new climate, thanks to political liberalization and the partial convergence between official ideology and intellectual values, both editors and writers were granted considerably more latitude for exploration and experimentation. The book market at the time was still negligible, hardly lucrative, and mainly supplying popular culture products stigmatized by their vulgarity; so that, even if they wanted to,

writers could not expect to make profit out of the public success of their works. In this environment, writers could “basically, as long as they do not commit political mistakes, conform to the autonomous logic of the field in which the ‘loser wins’” (Shao 2003: 10-11).

Nonetheless, the “sudden changes of history” (Li Tuo 2001), which had become apparent after Deng Xiaoping’s tour of southern China in 1992, were already in full play by the mid-1980s. Ironically, just as the avant-garde writers began their assault on the most prestigious literary journals, troops of readers became enthralled with a literary parvenu named Wang Shuo, whose popularity foretold both the *wentan’s* imminent demise and the crumbling of the socialist literary mode of production. In 1984, the CCP had passed a resolution that transformed all publishing units from simple production units into units of production and management, forcing them to implement a “responsibility system” (*zeren zhi*) meant to increase their productivity (Shao 2003: 4). Subsidies for literary journals were reduced and the expectation was that they would, over time, become financially independent (*zifu yingkui*). In the annus terribilis of 1999, many of them lost their state funding altogether. Some journals closed down, while those that survived had to go through a tortuous transformation that took them far from pure literature and well into the market.<sup>23</sup>

But as the product of the CCP’s own policies of economic reform, the market was anything but free. After 1992, the political buzzword “socialism with Chinese characteristics” was complemented by the explanation that the priority was to develop a “socialist market economy” (*shehuizhuyi shichang jingji*), an economy that was at once regulated according to the rules of the market and subordinated to the construction of socialism and of a “socialist spiritual civilization” (*shehuizhuyi jingshen wenming*). This blend of socialism and capitalism was particularly evident in cultural production units, forced to compete in the marketplace but bound to remain under the ownership of the State and the supervision of the CCP, which developed in the 1990s a subtle “ruling technology” (Wang

<sup>23</sup> A very emblematic case of this cosmetic process is that of *Mengya* (Shao 2003: 58-62), whose circulation dropped from a peak of 360,000 in the 1980s to an average of 10,000 in the mid-1990s. In order to curb this loss, the journal first tried to change its look by becoming more teen-friendly; then, still ignored by its target readers, *Mengya* developed the New Concept campaign, thanks to which in 2003 it reached a new circulation peak of 260,000. The strategy can be considered a masterpiece of postsocialist marketing: what *Mengya* really did was to advertise itself through the New Concept brand, gaining economic capital from the sale of its political and symbolic capital (credit and personal ties [*guanxi*] in the literary and educational field), which led to the initiative being lent support by many prestigious writers and universities. Generally speaking, it was also because of the market that many journals and critics opened up to “individualized writing,” as this kind of literature, appealing mainly to urban “middle class” readers, is probably the most lucrative.

<sup>24</sup> This ruling technology comprises *guanxi* sewing invisibly together the field of power and that of literary production, allotment of state funding, issue of ISBNs, institution of mainstream awards such as the Five Ones Project Prize, and the like; it is meant to provide the media with guidelines for cultural production (see Shao 2003: 191–196; Kong 2004: 42).

<sup>25</sup> Leitmotif works are not manufactured by the central propaganda. They are commercial productions (chiefly novels, films, and TV series) offering particular narrations within the setting of broader ideological frameworks, such as economic reform, anticorruption issues, revolutionary history, and so on. Those productions that manage to gain a favorable response from the audience are normally awarded with official prizes and receive extensive coverage in the media, while their authors are rewarded with considerable economic capital and public recognition.

2001: 6) meant to enforce discreet but effective control over all cultural production.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps it is the concept of leitmotif (*zhuxuanlü*), that best captures how, in the newly sanctioned mode of production, political power gained the capacity to incorporate into its own hegemonic voice the various narratives emerging in an increasingly pluralized society. The concept refers to the ideological leading themes that the CCP's propaganda aims to infuse in commercial cultural works, so as to convey in a soft and seductive manner what it regards as the most important political directions of the day.<sup>25</sup> Production of "social benefit" (*shehui xiaoyi*) was the core task assigned to the arts by the party and state; the most remarkable innovation, though, lies in the state's realization that in the new social reality cultural products cannot produce "social benefit" unless they also produce "economic benefit" (*jingji xiaoyi*). Cultural works in the "leitmotif" mode, in other words, could be ideologically effective only if they were popular and profitable in the market (Shao 2003: 194–195). It is in this sense that we should read the governmental slogan "promote the leitmotifs, advocate diversification" (*hongyang zhuxuanlü, tichang duoyanghua*) raised by Jiang Zemin in 1994: mainstream cultural products should be uplifting and pedagogical (*zhuxuanlü*), but also rich in variety and entertaining (*duoyanghua*), and therefore fit for commercialization.

Another striking example of the interaction between a socialist and a capitalist mode of production occurred in the book publishing industry. While literary journals faced a relentless decline, the book market expanded, thanks in part to the significant contribution of the "book dealers" (*shushang*), private entrepreneurs who made up for the inefficiencies of the state-owned book publishers by establishing an unofficial "second channel" (*er qudao*) of book production and distribution. These agents, although repeatedly persecuted by the government for their semilegal activities and often despised by literary producers (interestingly, Bai Ye and Han Han accuse each other of being "book dealers"), have actually enriched the Chinese book market with

their innovative business practices and by eroding the restrictions imposed by the government (Kong 2004: 5). It must be acknowledged, though, that the urgency to make a profit, both among the official publishers and the book dealers, and the persistent ideological supervision of the political sphere, oriented the literary book market decisively toward the production of highly conservative best-sellers,<sup>26</sup> frequently appealing to the tastes and values of the “emerging middle class,” the new class of consumers supported by the government as the backbone of its political consensus.

Surely, these transformations occurring in the literary field were not as negative as many, nostalgic for the *wentan*, would claim. The process of social pluralization set in motion by the market was an opportunity for those writers who did not want to cling to the ideal of pure literature and were willing to bridge the gap between elite literature and popular culture (and between symbolic and economic capital): it motivated them to engage with a range of increasingly diversified narrative styles and themes in order to cater to the tastes of a likewise diversifying horizon of readers. A number of writers broke away from the socialist literary establishment, choosing a freelance writing career (*ziyou zuojia*) instead of a salaried position within the Writers’ Association, as was the case with Yu Hua and Wang Xiaobo (Kong 2004: 34–35). Following this fashion, a more articulated “declaration of independence” (McGrath 2008: 74) came at the end of the 1990s, when two Nanjing-based writers, Han Dong and Zhu Wen, famous in the past for their unofficial literary activities, presented a whole body of grievances from more than fifty freelance writers to the “literary order” (*wenxue zhixu*), which, according to Han Dong, “refers not only to the various aspects of the literary field represented by the Writers’ Association, but also to any form of imperious monopoly of authority that tries to manipulate people’s literary pursuits and aesthetic choices.”<sup>27</sup> During the same period, the Internet began to offer an alternative platform for militant intellectuals and amateur

<sup>26</sup> It seems to be more than a coincidence that best-sellers consist normally of long novels and that in the second half of the 1990s the CCP propaganda explicitly lent its support to the production of long novels (*changpian xiaoshuo*, see Shao 2003: 121). It goes without saying that promoting long novels had the side effect of damaging the literary journals, whose format is more fitted to the production of short stories and novelettes.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Kong (2004: 34). Han Dong and Zhu Wen called their initiative Rupture (*Duanlie*), defining it as an “action.” The results of the questionnaires submitted to the various writers were published in 1998 in the official literary journal *Shanghai wenxue*.



<sup>28</sup> It has to be recognized that by 2004, although the Internet had become “a major venue for China’s political, ideological, and intellectual debates” (Liu Kang 2004: 148), it had not yet become a significant source of literary innovation, since its role was mostly limited to providing amateur writers with a space of self-expression and to offering aspiring professional writers a showcase for commercial promotion (Kong 2004: 180–182).

writers alike, giving them the opportunity to express their voice and build new readership—as well as self-advertise.<sup>28</sup>

These, in a nutshell, are the most salient structural changes that occurred in the Chinese literary field from the 1990s to the controversial exchange between Bai Ye and Han Han. The establishment of a cultural market led to the proliferation of mass-culture consumer products that were either didactic and patriotic or hedonistic and utterly depoliticized, leaving very little room for serious literary practice. No wonder, then, that serious writers felt themselves to be under siege. At the same time, the market orientation led to the formation of new spaces, however restricted, in which to experiment with innovative pacts between writers and readers, beyond the boundaries of the “pure literature” fences. The complaints of many writers, in fact, targeted not simply the market, but rather the hegemony of the *wentan*. The upholders of the *wentan*, though, preferred to attack the market indiscriminately, uncritically defend the principle of pure literature, and completely refuse to acknowledge that the market released some positive and liberating effects on literary production. What is the reason of this behavior? An answer, already been suggested at the end of the previous section, is that the socialist market’s new hybrid mode of production eroded and disaggregated the humanist field at large, to a large extent depriving “cultural workers” of their financial security, publishing outlets, and readers. “To a very large degree,” Li and Tao (2002: 203) comment, “the so-called crisis of pure literature is the survival crisis of pure literature writers, whereas the so-called predicament of pure literature is inseparable from the survival predicament of those writers who do not want or are not able to merge with the market.” This is why the pure literature discourse reemerged imperiously at the end of the 1990s: it was the swan song of an old establishment, an establishment that, transforming a discursive practice from an aesthetic cutting edge into an ethical armor, blunted its original avant-gardism and became conservative.

At this point, some of the *habituses* of the supporters of *wentan*, which persisted up to the time of Bai Ye's declarations in 2005, should be clear. First, they still considered their own institutions as the only legitimate source of literature. Even Li Tuo, one of the most autonomous and innovative Chinese critics, who called on the literary world to abandon its elitism and confront the new social reality, seemed blind to the fact that outside the old establishment a group of writers was already working within the rules of the market, experimenting in new literary modes, and striving to build a new readership without losing their seriousness. Li Tuo's comrade-in-arms, whom he addressed using the collective pronoun "we," are actually the "humanist intellectuals" (2001: 8); it is to them that he bestows the mission to devise new tasks for literature. Li Tuo's example suggests that inventing new social functions for literature was something inextricably intertwined with the task of recentralizing the old social function of a marginalized literary elite.<sup>29</sup> Second, they internalized a view that literature is a formal game rather than a means of social critique—the better to avoid "political mistakes." Third, they were prone to brandishing the amulet of morality in order to exorcise any intruder defying the rules of their field, as Bai Ye's anathema demonstrates. These *habituses*, in my opinion, reveal the large extent of heteronomy infiltrating the literary output endorsed by the so-called *wentan*, inasmuch as this establishment behaves *politically* as an enclave that claims the right and duty to prescribe the literary rules to its members and to stigmatize those who produce literature according to different mechanisms. Moreover, as suggested by Bai Ye's ambiguous relationship with the market, even the staunchest of the *wentan's* adepts, in order to survive materially in China's "socialist market economy," were forced, at least once in a while, to stain their ideals of moral purity by foraging into the filth of the culture industry.

<sup>29</sup> It is also interesting to note that in Hong Zicheng's *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature* (1999) there are only a few fleeting mentions of Wang Shuo, the *wentan's* archenemy.

### Orthodox and Heretic in the Inclined Literary Field

It would be tempting, by way of summing up, to consider the development of the Chinese literary field in terms of what Raymond Williams calls “dominant, residual, and emergent” (Williams 1977): a dominant field, the *wentan*, becomes residual; an emergent field, that of the market, becomes dominant. Bai Ye’s appropriation of the pure literature discourse, five years after Li Tuo’s call for its reexamination, shows that such discursive practice still holds a legitimizing power; the struggle between the *wentan* and the market has not ceased, because the material conditions regulating the literary production from the early 1990s up to the middle of the present decade have not gone through a systematic process of change. Chinese political reform has stalled, and so has the metamorphosis of the literary field. Actually, because such reform is engineered by the party and state, it can hardly be an evolutionary transition leading to something radically different; rather, “socialism with Chinese characteristics” has itself become a system, albeit a hybrid and a split one. It is a system in which two different modes of production, although at odds with each other, are forced to coexist: a socialist one sustained by the state, and a capitalist one led by the market. We can hear in the voices of Bai Ye and Han Han that the old mode of production and the new one are waging war on each other, as the two extremes of the field seeking dominance.

The cultural journalist Wei Yingjie makes this comment about the debate between Han Han and Bai Ye:

The duel between Han Han and Bai Ye in substance is a conflict between a new and an old conception of literature. Bai Ye, for example, in his article denies that the *balinghou* are consummate writers for the fact that they mainly enter the market directly through commercial channels and publish their works very rarely in the traditional literary journals: for this reason the “*wentan*” does not know them. In other words, Bai Ye believes that only the works obtaining the “recognition” of the traditional literary circle can be considered literature. Han Han instead maintains that

there is no threshold at all: even blogs can be called literature. We therefore see how distant their visions of literature are from each other. In this regard, Han Han's definition of literature is no doubt too extended, while Bai Ye's conception appears a little backward. (Wei 2006)

Bai Ye's and Han Han's definitions of literature do not mean to put forward any literary theory, but to draw a perimeter around the field that is convenient for their own interests. The literary field as explained by Bourdieu (1996: 214) is "a universe obeying its own laws of functioning and transformation, meaning the structure of objective relations between positions occupied by individuals and groups placed in a situation of competition for legitimacy." The goal of these individuals is to gain symbolic capital—namely, a specific kind of social recognition corresponding to a specific position occupied within the field. Bai Ye, placing the purity of literature inside the *wentan* boundaries, takes a conservative position; whereas Han Han, who pulls down those very same boundaries, advocates a messianic purity of freedom and openness and stands on the innovative side. The pivot of their contention is the market, source of all evil for the "old" critic, whereas for the "young" writer it has no conditioning power at all. Bourdieu explains this situation in the following terms: "Internal struggles, notably those setting the proponents of 'pure art' against the proponents of 'bourgeois art' or 'commercial art' and leading the former to refuse to regard the latter as writers, inevitably take the form of conflicts over *definition*, in the proper sense of the term. Each is trying to impose the *boundaries* of the field most favorable to its interests or—which amounts to the same thing—the best definition of conditions of true membership of the field" (1996: 223). For Bourdieu, those who try to impose the boundaries are the orthodox; the new entrants contesting these boundaries are the heretics.

But in China "the individuals and groups placed in a situation of competition for legitimacy" must take account of these "laws of functioning

and transformation”: both sides of the literary field are under the surveillance of the field of power, and, in spite of their alleged conflict, to a large degree their positions overlap or are complementary, and they are even eager to exploit each other. As a result of these laws, to take a “pure” position can be extremely difficult. Take for instance Bai Ye. He professes his “orthodoxy” by virtue of the important appointments he holds in official literary institutions, and yet, as Wei Yingjie ironically comments, while “he guards the *wentan* gates, he also sells the entrance tickets” (2006). More precisely, while he squeezes out the most from the system he claims to support—prestige, authority, *guanxi*, and emoluments—he contributes to dismantling it by exploiting its credit as a legitimizing (advertising) tool, to the advantage of the market. Giving an academic guise to his commercial promotions, Bai Ye sits simultaneously on two chairs: he declares allegiance to the old master, the socialist *wentan*, from which he draws symbolic and political capital; and he serves the new capitalist system, to which he sells this capital in exchange for economic capital. For this reason, his idea of an authoritative—and at times even authoritarian—*wentan* is a privilege that encounters the opposition of many serious writers. It is hardly by chance that one of these is Han Dong, who, in a post sent to Han Han’s blog, objects: “Pure, serious, or even less mainstream literature doesn’t exist. Only ‘orthodox literature’ (*zhengtong wenxue*) exists. Do you want to know what the hell ‘orthodox literature’ is? Just take a look at the blabbering of the orthodox critics” (in Anon. 2006). And Ge Hongbing: “The only temple is made by the readers, the only valid response is theirs” (in Xu 2006).

Or take instead Han Han. He affirms that even a blog is pure literature, but he omits to acknowledge that *his* blog has millions of readers because it features his sports exploits or the sweet messages sent to the actress Xu Jinglei. The power of his speech, in other words, is propped up by the extraliterary publicity deriving from his high exposure in the media. The racecar driver/writer, for whom the *wentan* is “crap,” also forgets that he has been baptized by an official literary journal and awarded by a jury

whose president was the former minister of culture, Wang Meng. But the socialist and progressive *Mengya* has liberated Han Han from the cage of education and raised him as one of its “sprouts” only to sell him quickly to the market, thus turning him into a celebrity, neutralizing his critical voice, and entrapping him in another cage—the *linglei* brand. Bai Ye knows this very well, but he finds it better to keep silent, since he is actually one of the promoters of this *linglei* culture. The same is true of the *balinghou* writers, whose potential to represent the voice of their generation has been stymied both by the publishing market and by the guardians of the *wentan*. The writer Chen Cun captures this dilemma well: “The *balinghou* are beneficiaries and at the same time victims of this commercial era. As for literary criticism, outside the market it has already collapsed and lost credit, although it survives in form. Now there is the illusion that these old folks are still calling the tune; that’s why some people have raised the issue of the ‘duel.’ What duel? Today, faced with the new rules of commerce, everybody is empty-handed” (in Anon. 2006).

In conclusion, my reconstruction of the “battle of Han and Bai” has contributed to showing a very strong dynamic at work in the literary field with Chinese characteristics. Despite the rigid contraposition between the two sides of the field and the fierce antagonism between a symbolic capital attached to the discourse of pure literature (to which Han Han himself is not immune) and an economic capital distributed as a benefit of the market, the interaction between the *wentan* and the market, where both sides seek to gain symbolic capital, is actually the most diffuse and effective praxis. The struggle seems to exist only on the surface, and when we dig a little deeper we find a dissimulated process of attraction and mutual exploitation between a literary establishment trying to preserve the power of its official institutions and a culture industry wishing to transform literature into harmless commercialized entertainment. Bai Ye’s duplicity is a mirror to the behavior of those critics trying to balance the old literary standards and new consumer demands. *Mengya’s* reconfiguration

<sup>30</sup> It is indeed not by chance that the most poignant comments about the controversy came from these writers. Chen Cun is an ex-avant-garde writer who chose the web as the principal medium to disseminate independent literature. Ge Hongbing is an academic who became a freelance writer. Han Dong has been the promoter of several unofficial literary journals. Their endeavors are among the most autonomous experiences in the contemporary Chinese literary scene, because their search for literary autonomy is primarily conducted through the creation of new autonomous literary spaces and a new independent readership. Unlike most Chinese writers, they accepted the challenge coming from the transformation of the modes of literary production and, without indiscriminately rejecting the market, tried to carry out their literary experimentations within its space.

strategy is but one example among the many cases of literary journals trying to retain the appearance of humanist “purposelessness” while becoming substantially commercial. Han Han’s trajectory reflects the typical incorporation of a literary talent—initially expressing themes of emancipation dear to “humanist intellectuals”—into the ideology of the market. All these examples are just pieces of the general process by which an oppositional pure literature has little by little given up its hegemony to a disengaged, individualized, or *linglei* literature. During this process, most cultural producers have never ceased to wave the flag of purity because it is thanks to this purity that they gain symbolic capital—a purity that is muddled by the trade of symbolic capital in exchange for political and economic capital, in a game whose main effect is that of cementing together the heteronomous forces already operating in both the *wentan* and the market. This is not to deny that a central part of the field is striving to defend its autonomy against the conditioning power of the *wentan* and the market, as seen in the endeavors of writers such as Chen Cun, Ge Hongbing, or Han Dong.<sup>30</sup> Rather, as Chen Cun’s pessimism seems to confirm, it implies that this striving is an arduous one, because the two sides of the field, which are constantly “inclining” toward the central ground, threaten to suffocate it. We can conclude that in the contemporary Chinese literary field the interplay between two opposing and yet converging poles of heteronomy is a dynamic more powerful and constraining than the struggle between autonomy and heteronomy theorized by Bourdieu, and that the ambiguous interaction between political and economic capital can be considered the main logic governing the literary field “with Chinese characteristics.”

### Postscript

Of course, my account of the “battle of Han and Bai” has to a large extent overlooked an important fact: it took place almost entirely on the Internet. More precisely, it was fought in the brand-new mediasphere of the blog.

In this specific case, however, although the new medium did significantly affect the practice of literary debate, it did not contribute to opening more space for discussion of intrinsic literary matters. Rather, after having ignited the outbreak of the controversy, the blog also caused its premature end by minimizing the literary issues of their contention and amplifying spectacular aspects such as personal abuse and narcissistic chitchat, thereby producing a lot of extraliterary fluff. Bai Ye did not enter the blogosphere as a “blogger,” but rather as a scholar wishing to give wider publicity to his academic work; as the controversy became too heated and the audience too vociferous, he preferred to exit hastily the virtual public arena and retreat at once into the protected haven of the *wentan*. Bai Ye’s retreat seems to suggest that as late as 2006 the traditional establishment was still reluctant to move beyond its consecrated fence in order to engage with an emerging public sphere, however much it offered a broader audience. Further evidence of this conservatism is that, after all the fuss died down, no literary critic really tried to analyze the complex issues that the controversy had brought to the fore.

By contrast, after the battle subsided, Han Han managed to bring his blogging activity to its full potential. He has continued to delight his readers with boisterous attacks on the *wentan*, getting once again on the establishment’s nerves when he declared that Ba Jin and Bing Xin’s writing style is poor (Han 2008). He has also continued to entertain readers with chronicles of his races. But he also started to write more and more on sensitive public issues, declaring that “as a citizen, I think I have the right to express my opinions and views about a few social problems” (in Zhang Ying 2007). In 2008, for instance, he wrote about the Tibetan riots, took a critical stance against the self-proclaimed patriots proposing to boycott Carrefour, and was among the first to mobilize after the Sichuan earthquake, documenting his journey to ravaged areas and his subsequent fundraising initiatives. For such commitment, he won the 2008 Citizen Responsibility Award (*Gongmin zerenjiang*), conferred by an independent



<sup>31</sup> The NGO's name is Gongmeng, or Open Constitution. See its English-language Web page, [http://www.gongmeng.cn/en/com\\_1.php](http://www.gongmeng.cn/en/com_1.php). The organization was closed down in July 2009, allegedly for tax violations.

NGO founded by a group of Beijing professors for the purpose of “building a modernized China and promoting human rights, democracy and rule of law in China.”<sup>31</sup> Because of his blogging, he also gained the attention of well-known English language websites about contemporary Chinese society, such as Danwei and China Digital Times. Han Han's symbolic capital, it could be said, originally denied by the *wentan* literary critics on account of his successful commercial writing (and implicitly for his celebrity status), has finally been returned to him because of his successful independent blogging (made possible in the first place by his celebrity status).

One year after the controversy, by the way, a strange uproar shook the *wentan*. Several *balinghou* writers, including the commercial literary stars Guo Jingming and Zhang Yueran, applied for admission to the Writers' Association. To gain approval, each had to secure the support of two sponsors; their godfathers were none other than Bai Ye, Chen Xiaoming, and Wang Meng. Han Han did not apply; instead, he sneered at the association, swearing he would never join it because it manipulates writers (Zhang Ying 2007). Some members began to grumble at the prospect of *balinghou* writers' joining. Lu Tianming, for instance, thought that admitting Guo Jingming—convicted of plagiarism for a book he published in 2003—amounted to a sheer humiliation for the venerable Writers' Association (Xu 2007). Bai Ye, at any rate, finally proclaimed that the procedure for admitting new members was “OK” (in Cao 2007). The media lavished extraordinary attention on the Writers' Association. But what happened, really? Did the *balinghou* try to join spontaneously, or were they rather co-opted? Was their admission recognition of their literary value, a marketing ploy, or a means to place these young writers under control? It is not easy to read between the lines; what appears for certain, however, is that whatever these signs suggest, they are far from the signs of pure literary practice.

## Glossary

Bai Ye	白烨
balinghou	80后
bianyuanhua	边缘化
Cai Xiaofei	蔡小飞
Cao Wenxuan	曹文轩
changpian xiaoshuo	长篇小说
changxiaoshu	畅销书
chun wenxue	纯文学
dangdai wenxue	当代文学
dazhong wenhua	大众文化
Fang Fang	方方
fei guanfang	非官方
gaokao	高考
gerenhua	个人化
Gongjulun	工具论
Han Bai zhi zheng	韩白之争
Han Han	韩寒
Han Han xianxiang	韩寒现象
Hongyang zhuxuanlü,	弘扬主旋律,
tichang duoyanghua	提倡多样化
<i>Jiaoyu zenmeban</i>	教育怎么办
Li Jingze	李敬泽
linglei	另类
<i>Mengya</i>	萌芽
nanxun	南巡
<i>Sanchongmen</i>	三重门
shehui wending	社会稳定
shichanghua	市场化
shuaizhen	率真
shushang	书商
sirenhua	私人化
sixiang jiefang	思想解放
Wang Meng	王蒙
wenhua gongzuozhe	文化工作者
wentan	文坛
wentan wai de gaoshou	文坛外的高手
wenti shaonian	问题少年
wenxuejie	文学界
wenxuexing	文学性
xie shenme	写什么
Xie Xizhang	解玺彰

xiezu	写作
Xin Gainian	新概念
xin siwei, xin biaoda, zhen tiyan	新思维,新表达,真体验
xin xingqing xiezu	新性情写作
Ye Zhaoyan	叶兆言
you Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi	有中国特色社会主义
zenme xie	怎么写
zeren zhi	责任制
zhengtong wenxue	正统文学
Zifuyingkuai	自负盈亏
ziyou zuojia	自由作家
zouxiang shijie	走向世界

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