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Filthy Fiction: The Writings of Zhu Wen

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By Julia Lovell

Chinese fiction of the 1990s was not short on shock value. If we think of the decade’s cultural tone being set by Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 command to unleash commercial forces, then the years that followed proved rich in works that would have done the old man proud. Quick off the mark was Jia Pingwa, who triumphantly became one of the earliest, most notorious cases of a serious writer surrendering to lurid populism, with his 1993 novel, *The Ruined Capital* (*Feidu*): a best-selling, soft-pornographic tale of a male writer’s travails through the corruption of contemporary China. Things were not looking much more restrained by 1999, when Weihui, in *Shanghai Baby* (*Shanghai baobei*), had her young heroine Coco jettison her dreamy Chinese artist boyfriend for a torrid affair (featuring a hard-to-forget toilet sex scene) with a German accountant called Mark.

Just halfway between these two literary moments came the quiet publication of something genuinely outrageous. In 1996, a 28-year-old thermal engineer-turned-avant-garde novelist called Zhu Wen produced a novella, around 150 pages long, entitled *Didi de yanzou*. Translating the title alone makes me blush, though I will do my best to gloss its subtleties. An unimaginatively literal rendering would make it “My Little Brother’s Performance”, but in Chinese “little brother” (*didi*) happens also to be one of the language’s many slang usages for penis. If I were then to add that it’s set in a university (in east-coast Nanjing) and features a cast of late adolescent, sex-starved male undergraduates, you might reasonably infer that the story is a Chinese first-cousin to the Western teen-sex comedy — *American Pie* and its many sequels and spin-offs. It certainly enjoys a good share of the genre’s gross-out crassness.

Here’s a basic summary. The novella starts as it means to go on, with its unnamed narrator meandering through campus in an ill-fitting suit that he has mortgaged off a random fellow-undergraduate with his penultimate condom, looking for girls in short shorts and aimlessly shouting “copulate!” outside classrooms full of diligent students. Our narrator’s roommates are a similarly disreputable lot. There’s Zhou Jian, whose first contribution to the group is to offer them the sexual services of his older cousin (without mentioning this to her in advance). “She must have been frigid,” reasons the narrator, after she has refused every one of them.[1] In one uplifting scene, they take her out for a graduation dinner in the anticipation of getting her so drunk they can all, one by one, have their way with her. (Unfortunately for the hopefuls, they fail to regulate their own intake, and wind up biliously under the table, while she remains decorously composed.) Then again, there’s the spineless Haimen, as desperate to join the Communist Party as he is to ingratiate himself with his degenerate classmates; or the subnormal Lao Wu, who gets put away for attempted rape in the middle of his academic career. The best of the bunch is probably the narcoleptic Jian Xin, whose sole, lofty ambition is to sleep his way through university.

At one point, the group decides to widen their search for women by riding the local train-routes around Nanjing, on which expeditions the narrator’s job is to treat any female they meet to a complementary Freudian analysis, invariably diagnosing sexual repression curable only by promiscuous sex. And so on they go: groping each other’s girlfriends and occasionally impregnating their own; struggling to make a buck out of human waste products on the nascent free market economy; picking fights with local nouveaux riches; eyeing up nightclub prostitutes, etcetera, etcetera – all the way up to graduation in 1990.

*Didi de yanzou*, in short, makes the short story that in 1994 first dragged Zhu Wen into China’s literary spotlight – *I Love Dollars* (*Wo ai meiyuan*), a tale of a father and son searching for sex in a provincial Chinese city – look like Jane Austen. Reading it today, it seems extraordinary that it should ever have been allowed to emerge into the “spiritual socialist civilisation” that the Communist authorities supposedly began building in 1996. (Its publication, in the way of many of contemporary Chinese literature’s more unpredictable events, was probably as much accidental as anything else. Zhu Wen claims that the editor who saw it into print did so only “because he owed me money.” [2])
So far, so filthy. But I wonder if there's something a touch more interesting, and less provocatively sensationalist about the novella than the summary I've just given might suggest. The novella is rescued, first of all, by Zhu Wen's even-handed toughness on his protagonists. The spermatic journey is a pretty widespread feature of post-Mao Chinese fiction written by men, but authors usually spare their sex-questing males at least a glimmer of sympathy: the *locus classicus* here would be Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian’s all-conquering narrators in *Soul Mountain* and *One Man’s Bible*, but works by Jia Pingwa, Mo Yan and Yan Lianke could also serve to illustrate.

Zhu Wen, by contrast, is serious about his characters’ offensiveness – at no point does he permit a whisper of boys’-own approval to prettify his reprobate anti-heroes. Across his ten-year writing career (he abandoned fiction in 1999 for film-making), Zhu Wen made plain-speaking his speciality. Moving across the bleaker, seeder landscapes of contemporary China (sinking state-owned factories, callous hospitals, cheerless Yangtze passenger boats), his stories take a long, hard stare at the pettiness, greed and indifference of Chinese society. And in *Didi de yanzou*, as elsewhere, Zhu Wen is determined not to let anyone escape his pages with any kind of dignity. In the course of the story, his protagonists’ every deficiency – physical and mental – is hung out to dry: their aimlessness, their uncouthness, their sexual opportunism, their haemorrhoids. Our narrator ends the story the sex-toy of his married, late-thirties boss, the deputy installations manager in the dead-end power plant that the socialist state transfers him to after graduation – a fairly poor kind of advertisement for the life he leads.

Zhu Wen’s harshness has a clear, critical purpose (to shatter the saccharine pieties of socialist realism) that goes beyond a superficial desire to shock. “I deliberately made my characters a bunch of clowns,” Zhu Wen (who was himself at university through the same years) has explained. “That’s how we felt, back then – powerless, ridiculous. And that’s all down to history, of course. Our background was empty – because of the destruction of traditional culture that had been going on since May Fourth, and through the Cultural Revolution.”

It’s this same talent for straight-talking that saves the novella from oppressing the reader with obnoxiousness. The swaggering machismo of the plot is undercut by a relaxed, colloquial narrative voice (another Zhu Wen trademark), that lets the base delusions of the characters speak for themselves, without requiring any omniscient moralising commentary [3]. In their penultimate year, the friends get caught up in the poetry-writing pandemic of late 1980s China, turning out their own samizdat journal – modestly entitled *The Highway to Heaven*. Naturally, the entire venture is just another game-plan for sniffing out attractive females (to whom distribution is free). “We’d made 200 copies, of which 100 were now in the public domain,” the narrator calculates. “Before it ended up being used as toilet paper, each issue would have gone through at least ten readers; each reader would have told at least ten more people about it before consigning all memory of it to oblivion. That meant we had at least 10,000 readers…Bearing in mind the national male-female ratio of 5.6:4.4, in theory 4,400 of these were female. And if you failed to find that exciting, you clearly had a problem.”

(93-94) The poets then retreat to their dormitory, staying up all night anticipating the arrival of thousands of beddable female admirers – who of course never materialise. Our aspiring literati receive one lone anonymous female fan letter (which they all suspect each other of having forged); when they try to hold a poetry discussion meeting in their room, only male students turn up, hoping (likewise) to meet some girls.

Zhu Wen also has a surprisingly serious message to communicate about a very specific moment in the recent Chinese past: almost a fifth of the novella is taken up in describing the student demonstrations of the 1980s. It is, it should be remembered, a very unusual thing for literary works published in mainland China to refer so directly (or indeed at all) to the late-decade spiral of protests. The subject has so far been largely monopolised by writers publishing abroad, beyond the reach of the Communist establishment: by Gao Xingjian, Ma Jian and Ha Jin, for example. Despite its pretensions to create an epic of China’s last four decades, Yu Hua’s *Brothers* (*Xiongdi*) seems to lack as much as a veiled allusion. Zhu Wen, of course, does not write directly about the marches of spring 1989 – even the napping censors of 1996 would probably have woken up to that. Instead, he focuses on the anti-African riots that began in Nanjing on Christmas Day 1988. But his purpose remains to try to express something about the mess of motivations that brought the students out onto the streets. “I wanted to write about 4 June, about the atmosphere surrounding the demonstrations, but I couldn’t,” he has
admitted. "That’s why I ended up writing about the African protests.” (It is, incidentally, unusual for Zhu Wen to write about anything so historically precise: ordinarily, he seems happier rooting his stories at non-specific times and places through the 1990s, searching after a general zeitgeist without pinning himself down to political particulars.)

And true to his provocative colours, Zhu Wen assembles a picture of the turmoil that demolishes not only the Communist Party’s dream of a “spiritual socialist civilisation”, but also many of the West’s cherished perceptions of some of these events. As the Western media swivelled its cameras onto the demonstrations of spring 1989, China’s rebellious students made highly effective use of the attention, filling international news coverage with pictures of hunger-striking martyrs, the white headbands over their pale foreheads demanding “democracy or death”. And those images, not surprisingly, hold a powerful monopoly on our memories of this time – at least partly, in the interests of providing a back-story worthy of the demonstrations’ tragically horrific finale. Zhu Wen’s protestors, by contrast, are a very different crew: a gang of late adolescent chancers, searching only for an excuse (any excuse) to “let off steam” – gifted to them in the novella by an eruption of racial hatred.

On Christmas Day 1988, we’re told, a wealthy Zairean student in Nanjing invites some female Chinese students to his room on campus. After an elderly caretaker kicks up a fuss, a fight results, leaving the old man badly injured – on the point of death, reports the rumour mill. The student community is instantly incensed: although the narrator and his friends aren’t slow to join the action, they’re too late to enjoy an initial riot in the foreign students’ building. “There was nothing left for us to do,” he sighs. “Everything had been smashed: all the windows, and the bikes parked outside; even some of the doors to the rooms.” (60) Next, one of the narrator’s wastrel roommates, Niu Yue (whose star turn this far has been to eat his own faeces – as a gratuitous publicity stunt – while claiming it’s an outcry against poor quality cafeteria food) reinvents himself as protest leader, exhorting his fellow students to take to the streets, to fill campus with angry banners: “Punish the murderers, give our people back their national dignity” – that kind of thing….We were used to seeing Chinese people done over by Westerners,” muses the narrator. “Our prettiest female comrades would faint the moment they saw a white man. Or a dollar…Some of them would consider it a tremendous honour to be screwed by such individuals, hoping that after the deed was done, they’d get taken back to America to be screwed again…All this, we were well used to – we were adjusted. But now blacks were trying the same trick – this was too much. That’s why the locals were lining the streets, clapping and cheering us on. What reason did we have for giving up? Even if we had all long wearied of a movement that was growing vaguer, more directionless by the day.” (65-68)

Behind the high-flown rhetoric, though, the students seem interested only in the pleasures of anarchy: “Now we all had sticks, we could do whatever we liked, it seemed. There was no stopping us.” (61) At every opportunity, Zhu Wen robs the protests of any suspicion of political idealism: “Why not?” thinks the narrator, when asked to confront the college’s Students’ Association about their failure to get involved. “It’ll give me an appetite for lunch.” (64) Others join in just for a break from routine. Within a day or two, a strike is called – classes and exams are cancelled, and students sleep happily through the cacophonous dawn broadcasts summoning them to freezing, open-air physical jerks. Jian Xin uses the disruption to “set a new personal best: three days without even getting out of bed. Though no-one doubted his proud sense of national dignity, of course.” (68) The narrator throws himself into the marches to distract himself from breaking up with his girlfriend – and in the hope of bumping into her somewhere around the city – while another of his roommates secures himself a girlfriend from among the random females he rubs up against while out on the streets.

Zhu Wen’s determination to deny the demonstrations even a whiff of heroism holds to their climax: a mass student march on the train station, where the African students may – or may not – be waiting to get on a train to Beijing, and a stand-off with riot police. “Now he was painfully aware of Being Someone,” the narrator snipes, “Niu Yue held himself with a special kind of stiff dignity – as if permanently at the ready to strike a pose for the cover of Time Magazine.” (73) Later on in the march, Zhu Wen heartlessly has Niu Yue’s envoy to the riot police wet himself with fear, sending him back and forth between the two negotiating groups “his trousers dripping with urine”. But Zhu Wen can also reach beyond cheap mockery to evoke crowd dynamics with a claustrophobic surrealism faintly reminiscent of Lu Xun’s mob horror. “My eyes – fixed ahead – were burning, my head a screaming blank,” recalls our narrator, waiting for the final march to begin.
As dusk fell, the sodium street lamps slowly brightened. The assembled crowd kept looking up at the lights, buzzing through the twilight, then back down again – waiting. All these faces, I suddenly felt, were floating, spinning before me, in and out of shadow – I seemed to know them, then not at all. I no longer knew what I was seeing. All I wanted was to breathe in and out, in great, thirsty exhalations, as if I were gasping for life itself. At this moment of standstill, an invisible hand suddenly seized my heart, fast. I wanted to cry out: and perhaps my mouth was open to do so, but no sound was emerging. I fell out of line, desperate to get out of the group, to draw breath. Then the whistle sounded, and our untidy column began to straggle down the street...When we got to Zhonglou Square, I got cramp in my calf. I fell out of line again, trying to kick the pain out against the tarmac. No joy; I tried again. I knew that I had now become an object of considerable interest to my fellow marchers: Look at him, they were saying to each other, kicking the tarmac....But my performance had to go on, because the cramp was getting worse. The column moved round the square, and on towards the train station. I'd now been at it so long that I was starting to feel foolish, embarrassed, but still I had to continue...The longer I spent doing it, the worse my mood, and the pain got. At last, someone came over – a broad, well-built type – and told me to sit down. I was more than happy to obey. My only hope at that moment was that someone should stand up and tell me exactly what to do. So I sat down, both hands flat on the ground. I looked up at him, as he towered opposite me. What was he going to do for me? Why wasn't he getting on with it? At this juncture, an anxious voice called out to him, and without another word he turned and melted back into the crowd. I never saw him again. So there I was: alone, on the tarmac, looking about me...I waved at one of my spectators. He nervously approached, stopping at a safe distance. Do me a favour, I said. Kick me. Whether he heard me or not, I'll never know; he just stared then ran off. (73-76)

The whole thing ends as anti-heroically as it begins. The stand-off with the police peters out; the authorities gift the students a slap-up New Year’s feed; the students happily guzzle it down. ("Fuck," complained Niu Yue. ‘These bastards have all dipped their sense of national dignity in vinegar and swallowed it.’ Though his keen sense of betrayal didn’t seem to be affecting his own appetite.) Niu Yue – the true leader – escapes unscathed and sets about pursuing one of the girls romantically linked to the African students, while the luckless chairman of the student association ( hectored by Niu Yue into taking part) takes the full wrath of the establishment. The roommates drift into their final year.

(79) Zhu Wen’s apparent dedication to puncturing established, noble images of the late 1980s has succeeded in enraging literary veterans of the political and cultural turbulence that reached such an awful climax in early June 1989. At a festival in London in May 2008, he was asked about his views on the events of 1989. He was in bed, asleep, he responded. Ten days later, a member of the audience, the dissident author Ma Jian – whose own epic novel of the demonstrations, Beijing Coma, has won him much literary acclaim in the West over the past year – published an article in the London Times that spat with indignation. Zhu Wen, he fumed, was "a savvy young Chinese writer...with a self-satisfied smirk...There is a word in Chinese that describes this attitude: Xiaosa. It means imperturbable, detached, nonchalant. This carefree denial of the meaningful role of an artist in society is a blight that infects great numbers of China’s unofficial cultural elite." [4] It’s easy to see how Zhu Wen’s public manner – full of a bantering self-confidence that could be read as complacent swagger – might provoke. At a recent talk in Britain, he observed that he had only two conditions for success unscathed and sets about pursuing one of the girls romantically linked to the African students, while the luckless chairman of the student association ( hectored by Niu Yue into taking part) takes the full wrath of the establishment. The roommates drift into their final year.

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All the same, Ma Jian’s response strikes me as a little unfair. For Zhu Wen is a serious author masquerading as a joker; just as Didi de yanzou is a serious novella masquerading as a scurrilous burlesque.[5] He is, in short, a novelist suffering from an advanced case of bipolar disorder. In public, Zhu Wen plays down the idea of a literary vocation (he only drifted into writing, he claims, because his friends suggested he might be good at it), studiously subverting the melodramatic May Fourth vision of literature as a kind of moral mission. But beneath its irony and slapstick, Zhu Wen’s fiction – the very opposite of carefree, or imperturbable – expresses a thoughtfully, provocatively dismal view of the China that surrounds him. “Writing is a way of intervening in life,” he has commented – a turn of
phrase that recalls Maoist diktats to bourgeois authors to make their work relevant to the masses. “That’s what I wanted to do when I began. Whether you like Didi de yanzou or hate it, you have some kind of a response. That’s a good thing, I think.” In Zhu Wen’s hands, levity serves to accentuate the sobriety of his subject matter – not to ridicule it. It’s the intriguing contrast between his stories’ lightness of tone and grimness of content that succeeds in underscoring, without portentous overemphasis, the harshness of life in China today; that grabs readers’ attention and holds their interest. And with Didi de yanzou, grotesque farce is Zhu Wen’s vehicle for explaining the extraordinary tumult of the 1980s.

I wanted to find a way, a mode in which to write about this particular period – a period of over-excitement. I chose a kind of adolescent carnivalesque. And once I’d settled on this, all my characters had to fit in with it. They had to be symbolic, in some way – larger than life. So I turned them into cartoons. I felt that if I wanted to capture something of that period on paper, I had to write them like this. I wrote about sex so much because I felt that it said something about the characters. When you’re young, you think there are no limitations to anything, including sex. Their obsession with it was part of the whole fever, the delusion of youth – a delusion that the students could win against the government. Of course it was a tragedy – people lost their lives. But it was also a hallucination. I left the specific question of politics out of it because I thought the whole thing was more about rebelliousness, in general – a spirit of rebellion.

For Zhu Wen, then, hormones – as much as politics or economics – are the key to understanding the decade. (Though not necessarily, it should be remembered, to unravelling the specifics of spring 1989; the censors have so far kept him quiet on that particular, enormously complex sequence of events.) “Everything, everyone was over-excited,” the novella begins, “society, the economy, science, culture, sports, even politics...It was a catastrophe: the whole world seemed to be complaining its underpants were too tight. Everywhere you went, you heard disappointed sighs of premature ejaculation. Every single dream – the dream of becoming rich, or successful, the American, French, Japanese, even Turkish dreams – ended in premature ejaculation. Until eventually, pulling on clean underpants, we found ourselves in the 1990s.” (2)

What we’re left with, then, is a paradox: a novella whose apparently slapdash crudeness is part of a careful literary design; whose surface sensationalism overlies an audacious desire to probe difficult historical questions. For Zhu Wen, no subject is sacred: neither the establishment fantasy of a wholesome socialist civilisation, nor defiant student idealism. There are plenty of works of Chinese fiction written in the 1980s that seem rooted in the feverish cultural atmosphere of that decade; there are plenty of works written in the post-1989 period that are steeped in the crass materialism of the 1990s. There aren’t many that look back at the late 1980s from the subdued perspective of the 1990s, trying to make sense – within the censorial limits imposed by the Chinese government – of a period that the authorities would prefer to pretend never happened. For the time being, Didi de yanzou is one of the few that are available to us.

Then again, though, Zhu Wen would probably tell me not to take the whole thing so seriously. “It’s not a documentary. It’s only fiction, remember,” he reminded me when we last spoke.

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[2]Unless otherwise specified, all direct quotations from Zhu Wen in this article are taken from an interview by the author on 23 June 2009.


[5] In this respect, Zhu Wen could be seen as following the example of the godfather of post-Mao cultural hooliganism, Wang Shuo. See, for example, Geremie Barmé’s discussion of Wang in *In the Red* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 62-98.

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