

## 9 Paradise Reloaded? Wang Meng's Public Private Memories of Soviet Russia or the Art of Composing a Capriccio

**Abstract.** WANG Meng 王蒙 (\*1934), one of the most prominent and prolific writers of Chinese contemporary literature since the founding of the People's Republic, is known for having a "strong Russian complex". This paper examines his lifelong fascination with Russia and the Soviet sphere. In *Sulian ji*, semi-autobiographical encounters between fact and fiction have the potential of being a transferable indicator of the confrontations and entanglements of private memories and public history, of personal fate and national destiny. Literature thus not only provides a key instrument in shaping one's own identity, but turns out to become a catalyst in re-evoking the collective memory of a whole generation and its lost ideals, as additional case studies of fellow writers may also show. By setting up a memorial to the Soviet Union and a greatly underestimated literary masterpiece, WANG Meng transforms Soviet Russia into a Chinese "realm of memory" in its own right.

**Keywords.** Wang Meng, Soviet Union, Russia, Literature, Music.

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## Introduction

In the TV series *The Black Hole*<sup>1</sup> of 2002, the criminal hero, time and again vanishes behind his luxury bureau into a secret room with a Spartan military interior to play a Soviet evergreen on his accordion. The song “Ural Rowan Tree” about a young girl who has to decide between two equally attractive lovers appears to be a metaphor for the inability to choose between two systems, the ultra-left and the market economy. When analyzing modern Chinese literature, could this private hideout for your eyes only, a world between dream and trauma, turn out to be the image of a Soviet Russia in the Chinese mind?

Taking WANG Meng 王蒙 (\*1934) as an example, there are more options to perceive today’s neighboring country, and nobody seems to be more suitable to serve as a case study in terms of quality and quantity. Being able to continuously reinvent himself and at the same time staying true to his origins, this liberal intellectual who would even defend commercial culture<sup>2</sup> is one of the most representative authors of the first writer generations of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).<sup>3</sup> He also shaped cultural politics during the 1980s as the minister of culture from 1986 to 1989, a post he stepped back from in reaction to the bloody Tiananmen events.

Moreover, the author is known for being deeply influenced by Soviet Russian literature,<sup>4</sup> and having a “strong ‘Russian complex’”<sup>5</sup>. Would it therefore suffice to interpret his texts on the topic as a pure expression of “nostalgia”<sup>6</sup> or a “quixotic

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1 Heidong 黑洞 (The Black Hole), 31-part TV serial of 2001, directed by GUAN Hu 管虎 (\*1968), based on the novel by ZHANG Chenggong 张成功, Starring: CHEN Daoming 陈道明.

2 Cf. WU Jin: *The Voices of Revolt. Zhang Chengzhi, Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo*, UMI dissertation, Ann Arbor: University of Oregon 2005, p. 28.

3 For an overview of the PRC’s first six literary generations see Helmut MARTIN: “Wang Mengs Roman *Schwer fällt das Wiedersehen* und die Begegnung mit dem Ausland”. In: Helmut MARTIN: *Chinesische Literatur am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts. Chinabilder II. Neuanfänge in den 80er und 90er Jahren*, Dortmund: Projekt Verlag 1996, pp. 279–291.

4 ZHU Jingyu 朱静宇: *Wang Meng xiaoshuo yu Su-E wenxue* 王蒙小说与苏俄文学 (Wang Meng’s Fiction and Soviet-Russian Literature), Taipei: Wen she zhe chubanshe 2011, p. 3.

5 LIU Haihua 刘海花: *Wang Meng shiye zhong de Su-E xingxiang – yi “Sulian ji” wei lie* 王蒙视野中的苏俄形象 – 以“苏联祭”为列 (The vision of Wang Meng’s images in the Soviet Union – *Soviet Offering* as an example), Master Thesis, Central South University (People’s Republic of China), ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, May 2011, p. ii.

6 Elizabeth MCGUIRE: *Red at Heart. How Chinese Communists Fell in Love with the Russian Revolution*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2017, pp. 366–372, however, quite a few of her arguments in this chapter as well as in chapter 15 (pp. 269–282) and some translations (e.g. p. 269) are questionable.

quest”<sup>7</sup>? By adopting the mode of close reading, I would propose a diversified approach in order to examine the author's image of the Soviet Union and Russia. After reviewing WANG Meng's biography<sup>8</sup> and his early texts, the main focus will pertain to his most relevant *oeuvre* in the present context, *Sulian ji* 苏联祭 (Memorial of the Soviet Union)<sup>9</sup>. It can be considered the most important (post)modern Chinese literary work on Sino-Soviet relations to date. As a third step, the preliminary findings will be reflected on in view of comparable Sino-Russian and other perceptions, before finally drawing a general conclusion.

## Writing in times of turbulence while looking at Russia through a Soviet lens

WANG Meng's life and literary fate have been closely interwoven with Chinese history, aptly reflecting the impact of macro history on personal micro histories: At the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) his family fled to “Beiping”. He would always recall this “childhood occupied by a foreign army”<sup>10</sup> as a time of utter evil and darkness, relieved only by the news of a bright Soviet empire, which, as he learned from his otherwise much despised father, was the “most

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7 Nicolai VOLLAND: *Socialist cosmopolitanism. The Chinese Literary Universe, (1945–1965)*, New York: Columbia University Press 2017, p. 3.

8 For biographical information see e.g.: DUZAN: “Wang Meng” (2019); WANG Meng: “Autobiographical Note”. In: WANG Meng: *Selected Works of Wang Meng*, Vol. I, *The Strain of Meeting*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 1989, pp. 370–381; WANG Meng: “Verbannt nach Sinkiang. Oder vom tierischen Haß auf die Literatur”. In: Helmut MARTIN (ed.): *Bittere Träume. Selbstdarstellungen chinesischer Schriftsteller*, Taipei, Vanguard 1992, pp. 55–63; S. A. TOROPTSEV: “Van Mèn kratkaia biografiia” (Wang Meng. Short Biography). In: S. A. TOROPTSEV (ed.): *Van Mèn v kontekste sovremennoi kitaiskoi literatury* (Wang Meng in the context of contemporary Chinese literature), Moskva: Institut Dal'nego Vostka 2004, pp. 5–8.

9 WANG Meng 王蒙: *Sulian ji* 苏联祭 (Memorial of the Soviet Union), Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe 2006. The title's translation follows: Mark GAMSÄ: *The Reading of Russian Literature in China. A moral example and manual of practice*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010, p. 181.

10 S. A. TOROPTSEV: “Preodelet' granitsy vremeni i prostranstva” (Overcoming the limits of time and space). In: VAN MÈN: *Izbrannoe* (Selected Works), Moskva: RADUGA 1988. Available online: [https://www.e-reading.club/chapter.php/1044452/1/Men\\_-\\_Izbrannoe.html](https://www.e-reading.club/chapter.php/1044452/1/Men_-_Izbrannoe.html) (last access 2019, October 15).

powerful country in the world”.<sup>11</sup> Although his father left his mother and four young children in abject poverty, WANG Meng still managed to become an excellent student. During the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949), he joined the Communist underground and became a party member in 1948. A fellow student introduced him to left-winged ideology and “Katyusha (Katiusha)” (1938), the most popular Russian song of World War II.<sup>12</sup>

Soon after the founding of the PRC (1949) WANG Meng made a decent career as a member of the Chinese Youth League. He was a contemporary of the mass media campaign promoting eternal Sino-Soviet friendship and friendly bilateral relations in a worldwide unprecedented mode when the song “Moscow – Beijing” (1950)<sup>13</sup> was launched – the only song which mentioned a foreign leader (MAO Zedong 毛泽东, 1893–1976) on equal terms to STALIN (1878–1953).<sup>14</sup> Under the influence of the novels of Soviet author Sergey ANTONOV (Sergei ANTONOV, 1915–1995) featuring people on a construction site, WANG Meng applied for studying architectural engineering but was rejected. Literature showed him a way out of his distress as writers were also supposed to fulfill the eminent role of engineers of the new Soviet people.<sup>15</sup> According to WANG, “Soviet literature may have had an even greater impact than the country Soviet Union”.<sup>16</sup> Even more than the literary classics of Chinese modernity such as LU Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), BA Jin 巴金 (1904–2005), or DING Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986), WANG Meng enjoyed the classics of Russian and Soviet literature. There is also evidence that Ilya EHRENBURG’s (Il’ia ÈRENBURG, 1891–1967) theories lured him into writing.<sup>17</sup>

WANG Meng began writing in 1953, a fateful year when he or his Alter Ego in the semiautobiographical *Sulian ji* went ice skating once a week on the frozen Shichahai Lake 什刹海 accompanied by the soundtrack of Soviet mass music through loudspeakers, listening to the Pyatnitsky (Piatnitskiĭ) Russian Folk Choir

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11 WANG Meng 王蒙: *Wang Meng zizhuan di yi bu* 王蒙自传第一部 (Autobiography of Wang Meng, Part 1), Beijing: Beijing lianhe chubanshe 2017a, p. 55.

12 Robert A. ROTHSTEIN: “Homeland, Home Town, and Battlefield: The Popular Song”. In: Richard STITES (ed.): *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1995, p. 78; Richard STITES (ed.): *Russian popular culture. Entertainment and society since 1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992, pp. 77f.

13 Music by the Georgian Vano MURADELI (1908–1970), text by Mikhail VERSHININ (1923–1987).

14 Alexander LUKIN: *The Bear Watches the Dragon. Russia’s Perception of China and the Evolution of Russian-Chinese Relations since the Eighteenth Century*, Armonk, NY, London: M. E. Sharpe 2003, pp. 117f.

15 NG Mau-sang: *The Russian Hero in Modern Chinese Fiction*, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press 1988, p. x.

16 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 178.

17 WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2017a), p. 101.

and songs like “And who does know?”<sup>18</sup>. The scene evokes the happiest times of a Beijing youth in the 1950s and even after that. The 1999 Chinese TV serial *The Place Where Dreams Began*<sup>19</sup> has a similar skating scene on the same lake in the 1970s which the film aficionado may even refer to. From this early time onward writing became his way of literally reenacting the past, and music, especially Soviet and Russian music, was a major vehicle to invoke it.

The three famous novels of early Socialist realism belonged to WANG Meng's favorites:<sup>20</sup> *How the steel was tempered* by OSTROVSKY (OSTROVSKIĪ, 1832–1886), *The Iron Stream* by SERAFIMOVICH (1863–1949), and *Cement* by GLADKOV (1883–1958). His first novel *Long live Youth!* (*Qingchun wansui* 青春万岁) followed the model of *How the steel was tempered*. WANG's short story “The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department” (*Zuzhi bu xinlai de qingnian ren* 组织部新来的青年人)<sup>21</sup>, published in 1956 was an immediate success. This early short story already shows a typical pattern in the author's perspective of the Soviet Union. He designed it after the novel *The Tractor Station Manager and the Chief Agronomist* (1954) by Galina NIKOLAYEVA (Galina NIKOLAEVA, 1911–1963) which was recommended by the Youth League. The overzealous heroine Nastya KOVSHOVA (Nastīa KOVSHOVA) serves as a role model for his main character.<sup>22</sup> NIKOLAYEVA's novel provides a veritable *vademecum* to the protagonist while his superior, on the other hand, used to read SHOLOKHOV's (1905–1984) *Virgin Soil* as well as *And Quiet Flows the Don* or TURGENEV's (1818–1883) *A Nest of Gentlefolk*. A tender love story between the protagonist and his unhappily married colleague unfolds toward the story's open end, symbolized by a new painting of “Moscow in spring” with the Soviet capital as a place of longing. Both enthuse over Pyotr TCHAIKOVSKY's (Pëtr CHAIKOVSKIĪ, 1840–1893) *Capriccio Italien* aired by Radio Beijing.

After years of waiting, WANG Meng's first novel *Long Live Youth!* was partly published, albeit with disastrous consequences. The young author became a victim of the subsequent purge of rightists and was sent to the countryside for compulsory

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18 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 21.

19 *Meng kaishi de difang* 梦开始的地方 (The Place Where Dreams Began), 20-part TV serial (1999), directed by YE Jing 叶京.

20 WANG Meng: “Wonach ich suche”. In: *Akzente. Zeitschrift für Literatur*, 32. Jg., Heft 2 (April 1985), p. 116.

21 WANG Meng: “Der Neuling in der Organisationsabteilung”. In: Wolfgang KUBIN (ed.): *Hundert Blumen. Moderne chinesische Erzählungen 1949–1979*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1980, pp. 83–149; WANG Meng: “The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department”. In: WANG Meng: *The Butterfly and Other Stories*, Beijing: Panda Books 1983, pp. 186–239.

22 Douwe Wessel FOKKEMA: *Literary Doctrine in China and Soviet Influence 1956–1960*, The Hague: Mouton & Co. 1965, p. 100.

labor although MAO Zedong personally put in a good word for him in supporting the novel's criticism of bureaucratic and corrupt tendencies. As an irony of fate, the successful publication originally was thought to serve as the entrance ticket to the Moscow World Youth Festival in August 1953.<sup>23</sup> The author had never imagined that it would take more than two decades for the final publication. (Three more decades later, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the PRC in 2019, the novel was chosen one of seventy novel classics.)

After a short rehabilitation in the early 1960s he went into more or less voluntary exile in the province of Xinjiang which in retrospect proved to be a blessing in disguise, as he was saved from the most atrocious purges of the Cultural Revolution. He felt lucky to live in an area where the Soviet Russian influence was relatively strong.<sup>24</sup> He also got astonishingly well along with the Uighur population of the borderlands and learnt their language to the extent of being able to translate local literature.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, however, the Soviet Union "turned from paradise to hell, from friend to enemy",<sup>26</sup> and one of his I-narrators recounts: "In the 1960s my youth ended – and at the same time the popularity of Soviet songs"<sup>27</sup>.

The death of MAO Zedong (1976) meant a "second liberation"<sup>28</sup>. After his rehabilitation in 1979, WANG Meng had a spectacular comeback in DENG Xiaoping's 邓小平 (1904–1997) new era of reform during the 1980s, a decade which brought an enormous boom of Western, as well as Russian and Soviet publications to the Chinese book market.<sup>29</sup> As a pioneer of avant-garde literature he soon became a well-received guest in international literary circles. The long time he spent as a political outcast proved to be a valuable asset: "I gained twenty years of intense life experiences. My starting point would be now a country of 8,000 miles and thirty years of political turbulences"<sup>30</sup>. The author caused controversies with new short novels like "Bolshevik Salute" ("Buli" 布礼).<sup>31</sup> Being a representative of the

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23 DUZAN: "Wang Meng" (2019).

24 ZHU Jingyu: *Wang Meng xiaoshuo* (2011), p. 4.

25 See the review of Lutz BIEG: "Anekdoten vom Abteilungsleiter Maimaiti". In: *Die Horen. Zeitschrift für Literatur, Kunst und Kritik*, Bd. 155 (3 / 1989), pp. 224–230.

26 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 251.

27 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 214.

28 WANG Meng: "Verbannt nach Sinkiang" (1992), p. 60.

29 B. L. RIFTIN: "Ideologija, estetika, kul'tura. Tian'tssinskie vstrechi 1981". In: *Voprosy literatury* (Literary issues) 1, 1984, pp. 96–129.

30 WANG Meng: "Verbannt nach Sinkiang" (1992), p. 61.

31 Cf. the articles of William TAY: "Modernism and Socialist Reform: The Case of Wang Meng", *World Literature Today*, Vol. 65, No. 3, *Contemporary Literature* (summer, 1991), pp. 411–413; William TAY: "Wang Mengs modernistische Erzählweise", *Die Horen. Zeitschrift für Literatur, Kunst und Kritik*, Bd. 155 (3 / 1989), pp. 233–237.

so called “literature of introspection”<sup>32</sup>, he first had to face harsh criticism for a writing style considered westernized and modernist, too difficult to understand, and even lacking “Chineseness”.<sup>33</sup>

Similar to “Buli”, many of WANG Meng’s novels start with the “golden era”<sup>34</sup> of the 1950s. He applies the same pattern in his “Seasons” (“*jijie* 季节”) tetralogy and its follow-up novel *Qinghu* 青狐 (*Blue Fox*), where he returns time and again to certain motives of Sino-Soviet relations in the required historical context. The famous start of *A Tale of Two Cities*<sup>35</sup> as well as the family chronicle *Seasons of the Year*, published in 1953 by Vera PANOVA may have inspired not only his novel cycle.<sup>36</sup> PANOVA is repeatedly referred to in different texts of WANG Meng.<sup>37</sup> Her *Sentimental Novel* (1958), an autobiographical recollection of her youth, uses literary techniques similar to WANG and her photo appears among those of his favorite writers in *Sulian ji*: Maksim GORKY (Maksim GOR’KIĬ, 1868–1936), Aleksandr FADEEV (1901–1956), Vladimir MAYAKOVSKY (Vladimir MAĪAKOVSKIĬ, 1893–1930), and Yevgeny YEVTUSHENKO (Evgeniĭ EVTUSHENKO, 1932–2017).

WANG Meng visited the Soviet Union and later Russia at least four times. His first visit in 1984 came by chance as the film version of his fatal novel *Long Live Youth!*, *Qingchun wansui* (English title *Forever Young*) by director HUANG Shuqin 黄蜀芹 (\*1939) was chosen to be shown at the International Tashkent Film Festival. The second visit, twenty years later (in 2004),<sup>38</sup> was on the occasion of being granted an honorary doctorate by the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow.<sup>39</sup> His first visit must have already caused a

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32 The term is explained in Helwig SCHMIDT-GLINTZER: *Geschichte der chinesischen Literatur. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, München: C. H. Beck 1999, p. 570.

33 Leo Ou-fan LEE: “Erzähltechnik und Dissens. Zu Wang Mengs neueren Erzählungen”. In: Wolfgang KUBIN (ed.): *Moderne chinesische Literatur*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1985, p. 415.

34 WANG Meng: “Andante Cantabile”. In: WANG Meng: *Ein Schmetterlingstraum. Erzählungen*, Berlin, Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag 1988, p. 182.

35 Charles DICKENS: *A Tale of Two Cities*, Beijing: Oxford University Press, Foreign Language and Teaching Press 1994, p. 1.

36 On PANOVA see Johannes HOLTHUSEN: *Russische Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert*, München: A. Francke 1978, pp. 188–190.

37 E.g. in *Huodong bian renxing* 活动变人形 (*The Movable Parts*) (1987), for a translation by Ulrich KAUTZ see WANG Meng: *Rare Gabe Torheit*, Frauenfeld: Verlag Im Waldgut 1994, p. 432.

38 He visited Russia once more in 2007 attending a book fair and with his second wife in 2016 to attend the St. Petersburg International Cultural Forum. (Thanks to A. A. RODIONOV who pointed the latest visit out to me.)

39 WANG Meng 王蒙: *Wang Meng zizhuan di-san bu* 王蒙自传第三部 (*Autobiography of Wang Meng, Part 3*), Beijing: Beijing lianhe chubanshe 2017b, p. 327.

certain disillusion: “In June I set out for a visit to the Soviet Union – a place that enchanted me, yet made me feel lost and hurt and disappointed.”<sup>40</sup>

Russian music always was of particular relevance to WANG Meng. A telling example would be the medium-length novel “Andante Cantabile”<sup>41</sup> (1981), where the Soviet impact is felt almost everywhere, beginning with the name of the I-narrator ZHOU Ke 周克, whose given name stems from the last syllable in “Bolshevik”. The protagonist admires the professional revolutionary DZERZHINSKY (DZERZHINSKIĪ, 1877–1926), the founder of Lenin’s Cheka. The funny poem on the commune by MAYAKOVSKY is cited only to state that in China even toothbrushes might be shared.<sup>42</sup> Even classic Russian poetry like Aleksandr PUSHKIN’s (1799–1837) poem “If life deceives you...” (1825) seems to fit better for serving as a comfort to people than Tang poetry. On an old Japanese gramophone (WANG Meng himself possessed one), the youth are listening to Soviet songs like “LENIN Hills” sung by lyrical tenor Vladimir NECHAEV. But an absolute highlight to the protagonist is the second movement of TCHAIKOVSKY’s string quartet No. 1, *Andante Cantabile*. When listening to it, he meets the love of his life. She is wearing a white blouse and a dress in the style of the quasi sanctified heroine Zoya KOSMODEMYANSKAYA (Zoia KOSMODEM’IĀNSKAĪA) in the “Stalinist fairy tale”<sup>43</sup> *Zoya* (Zoia, 1944). “Andante Cantabile” is the symbol of the young couple’s common dreams. Similar to the love story later embedded in *Sulian ji*, a boat trip on a lake in Beijing is part of the amorous setting. However, due to the childish arrogance of the protagonist, who stylizes himself as a second Pavel KORCHAGIN trying to teach his friend Tonia TUMANOVA (Tonĭa TUMANOVA) like in the movie adaptation of OSTROVSKY’s novel<sup>44</sup>, the lovers are separated for decades. After many twists and turns being reunited, they try in vain to recall their former enthusiasm for TCHAIKOVSKY’s string quartet and finally come to the conclusion that it is simply outdated. Yet, as they assure each other, this is not due to the new recording by the Columbia Orchestra and has nothing to do with the “‘superficial’ Americans and their history of merely two hundred years”, as “The problem is that we are no longer the same as before”.<sup>45</sup> Likewise WANG Meng was no more the same when he visited the Soviet Union: “Life is but one huge jet-lag. Most things of what one is yearning

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40 WANG Meng: “Autobiographical Note” (1989), p. 380.

41 WANG Meng: “Ru ge de xing ban” 如歌的行板 (Andante Cantabile). In: WANG Meng: *Wang Meng wencun* 9 (2003), pp. 173–237; WANG Meng: “Andante Cantabile” (1988), pp. 109–204.

42 WANG Meng: “Ru ge de xing ban” (2003), p. 178.

43 Directed by Leo ARNSHTAM, cf. STITES: *Russian popular culture* (1992), pp. 114f.

44 *Kak zakalialas’ stal’* (1942), directed by Mark DONSKOĪ.

45 WANG Meng: “Andante Cantabile” (1988), p. 203; WANG Meng: “Ru ge de xing ban” (2003), pp. 236f.

for are unachievable. [...] When I most longed to go to the Soviet Union was in the 1950s, thirty years later my dream finally came true, but after three decades external circumstances and inner attitudes have completely changed. The Soviet Union was not the Soviet Union of my dreams, Sino-Russian relations were even less the relations of thirty years before.”<sup>46</sup>

While his early works show a Russia through the Soviet lens, can one expect a considerable change in his later perception similar to the “Andante Cantabile” story? An answer can be found when turning to *Sulian ji*, featuring the pitfalls of love in a transcultural setting.

## In the Mood for Love – *Sulian ji* as a Memorial of Transcultural Entanglements

Triggered by two journeys lying two decades apart, *Sulian ji* sets out on a reminiscent “spiritual adventure” and a part time sentimental journey through time and space to the dreamscape of his adolescence, the motherland of Socialism. In a note to the reader, WANG Meng presents his main leitmotifs: “If I had to paraphrase my youth in four keywords, it would be: revolution, love, literature and Soviet Union.”<sup>47</sup> In many of his texts, WANG Meng tries to evoke the enthusiastic feelings of his adolescence, albeit always from the position of someone who has overcome the fancies and teething problems of his youth.

At first glance *Sulian ji* with its “glossy” illustrations may merely look like a concealed culturally-toned attempt to propagate a rather stereotyped image of Soviet Russia. It presents a collage of essays, diary notes, travelogues, autobiographical memoirs, documentaries, fiction, excerpts of poems and song texts as well as more than 200 black and white illustrations. The author himself poses in several photos, subtitled as a rule with excerpts of the main text: “This is a journey about reanimating an old dream, but also a journey about bidding farewell to an old dream.”<sup>48</sup> This sentence may be considered the author’s hidden concept of the book. The few Western analyses to date tend to only pay attention to its dream dimension. A polyphonic diversity and multiplicity of voices still combine astonishingly well in one whole ensemble which even could be regarded as a “novel”

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46 WANG Meng 王蒙: *Wang Meng zizhuan di-er bu* 王蒙自传第二部 (Autobiography of Wang Meng, Part 2), Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe 2007, p. 201.

47 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 8.

48 Ibid., p. 17.

(*xiaoshuo* 小说), as the author calls it on several occasions when trying to distance himself from the I-narrator.<sup>49</sup> The influence of Doris LESSING's (1919–2013) *The Golden Notebook* which combines different genres while leaving behind a linear narrative structure, should not be dismissed, as WANG Meng was personally acquainted with the British author since 1988.<sup>50</sup>

Whereas the first part of *Sulian ji* mainly consists of older text segments dating back to WANG's first trip to the USSR in 1984, the second part is dominated by texts of the 1990s and later while step by step discreetly exposing weaknesses of the Soviet system or hinting at controversial topics of Sovietology. The author quotes the disputed memoirs of Dmitrii SHOSTAKOVICH (Dmitriï SHOSTAKOVICH, 1906–1975), which mentions the Zhdanovshchina (1946–1948), or the inhuman role of Pyotr PAVLENKO (Pëtr PAVLÉNKO, 1899–1951) toward Osip MANDELSTAM (1891–1938) during the Stalinist terror, although he voices unbroken admiration for PAVLENKO's prose. He describes the Soviet cult of monuments and the increasing emergence of LENIN statues after De-Stalinization "in order to fill the vacuum"<sup>51</sup>. From Lenin he comes to MARX who must feel "lonely" in comparison to Lenin with his many statues. On the other hand, he observes the role of monuments as a part of Soviet lifestyle and seems truly impressed by the custom of newlyweds laying flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. As in more or less veiled cases before, he turns to his homeland and suggests: "Wouldn't it be a good idea, if young Chinese bridal couples laid down a wreath as well at the Monument of the People's Heroes?"<sup>52</sup> Thus in all subtleness he alludes to the neglected memory of those killed during the Tiananmen incident in 1989.

As chapters of the second part of *Sulian ji* become increasingly shorter, they lead to the highly visible last and disproportionately longest chapter of the book. Picking up once more on the leitmotifs of the previous text, this chapter contains the key messages. WANG Meng's "sentimental journey" not only morphs into a time travel into his own past, but into fictionalized transcultural flashbacks of a whole generation where Soviet Russia becomes the personified beautiful girl with the graceful, seductive figure of a ballerina. The narrator describes a guest performance of *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* by the Moscow Ballet shortly before the founding of the People's Republic, on the occasion of the first Soviet friendship delegation to China in 1949: "When watching the ballet, I was determined to marry a Russian

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49 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), pp. 220, 242; WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2017b), pp. 363f.

50 WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2007), p. 312.

51 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 65.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

girl, a Katyusha or a Natasha, a Lyubova (Liubova) or a Svetlana. I absolutely wanted to marry the Soviet Union, no matter what.”<sup>53</sup>

Like the postmodern movie *In the Mood for Love* (2000) by WONG Kar-wai 王家衛 (\*1958), WANG Meng's novels are inspired by moving soundtracks, displaying an “ever-present fusion between East and West” and a permeating “tension between past and present” linked to memory and desire.<sup>54</sup> Oscillating between time and space, his narrative imperceptibly moves back to a past overshadowed by unspoken taboos and tunes into a gripping Sino-Soviet romance, the I-narrator's personal affair, which at times may be even read as the author's own intimate *éducation sentimentale*, thereby slowly unveiling traces of an ominous love story, more possibly even the end of an affair before it began, between a young Chinese official named Wang and the Russian expert Katya SMIRNOVA (Katia SMIRNOVA), one of the ca. 18,000 Russian specialists working in China between 1954 and 1958,<sup>55</sup> according to *Sulian ji*. Allusions to unfulfilled passions may be found throughout the whole text: On their stopover in the Hotel Rossiya (Rossiia), WANG's delegation makes the acquaintance of KURIHARA Komaki 栗原小卷 (\*1945),<sup>56</sup> once the most famous Japanese actress in Russia, who starred in the first joint Soviet-Japanese film drama *Moscow, My Love*<sup>57</sup> (1974) in the role of a girl born in Hiroshima, fulfilling her dream to become a prima-ballerina at the Bolshoi by performing TCHAIKOVSKY's *Giselle* and falling in love with a Russian sculptor before dying of leukemia. The author does not go into these details because they are directly linked to his hidden subtext as other scenes, for example, the mute eye contact between the author and an unknown Russian woman in a rainy park of Tashkent.<sup>58</sup> We are also introduced to Ivan KRAMSKOY's (Ivan KRAMSKOĪ, 1837–1887) provocative “Portrait of an Unknown Woman” (1883), a personification of Russia's so-called “Soul”. The painting which by the way also embellished the poster of an exhibition entitled *Russia's Soul*<sup>59</sup> illustrates a single page in *Sulian ji*, featuring the recurring subject of a “sad beauty”<sup>60</sup> dressed in luxurious outfits with the subtitle: “Why do her eyes look so distressed?” and culminating in

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53 Ibid., p. 224.

54 In WONG's movie see the filmography of Elizabeth WRIGHT: “Wong Kar-wai”, May 2002, Available online: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/wong/> (last access 2019, October 15).

55 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 226.

56 Ibid., p. 97.

57 *Moskva, liubov' moia*, directed by Aleksandr MITTA and YOSHIDA Kenji 吉田健二.

58 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 126.

59 Exhibition of the Bonner Bundeskunsthalle in 2007: *Russlands Seele. Ikonen, Gemälde und Zeichnungen aus der Tretjakov Galerie*.

60 On the topic of “sad beautiful girls” see LIU Haihua: *Wang Meng shiye* (2011), pp. 22–25.

the bilingual greeting: “Zdravstvuj (Zdravstvui) – Hello Sadness!”<sup>61</sup> as if it were citing the bestseller *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954) by the 18-year-old Françoise SAGAN (1935–2004). The leitmotif of love drama pops up again in the chapter “Suliko”,<sup>62</sup> a Georgian song and favorite of STALIN, mourning a late lover. The author himself hints at the love theme in connection with the name and the song “Katyusha”, which becomes evident in the chapter “Pirog pies and Katyusha”<sup>63</sup>. Katyusha, the narrator tells us “was my first love”.<sup>64</sup> But more important, already in the very first chapter under the heading of “Love in the Time of Turbulences”<sup>65</sup> – maybe a reference to the 1985 bestseller of Gabriel García MÁRQUEZ (1927–2014), *Amor en los Tiempos de Colera* (*Love in the Time of Cholera*) – there is a Sino-Russian love story mentioned and documented by photos, the story of the late “old G”. A “Latvian”<sup>66</sup> poetess, the former lover of this scholar and translator of Soviet literature, addresses WANG Meng during a literature reading. WANG seems to be shocked to hear their story which both kept secret to the day. The alias “G”, we are told, is not his initial,<sup>67</sup> but the description would perfectly fit to GE Baoquan 戈宝权 (1913–2000), famous translator of Russian literature, journalist and diplomat. In fact, GE’s full name is randomly mentioned and a few lines of his translation of PUSHKIN’s elegiac poem “A Winter Evening” are cited, on the occasion of an evening in the Russian restaurant Baikal near the Russian embassy in Beijing 1998, where during the performance of a Russian vocal ensemble, the I-narrator all of a sudden imagines the female singer being his great love of the 1950s, beautiful Katerina SMIRNOVA with chestnut hair. Later, he imagines her being the daughter of SMIRNOVA.

The first name Ekaterina or Katerina and its diminutive variations like Katya (Katiā) or Katyusha as well as the song “Katyusha” appear as an ever-pervasive leitmotif. Already in “Bolshevik Salute” the song “Katyusha” was sung by the young couple on their wedding night – evoking memories of the year 1946.<sup>68</sup> (Songs representing pertaining years would replace their diary.<sup>69</sup>) The leitmotif

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61 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 153.

62 Ibid., pp. 144–153.

63 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), pp. 138–143.

64 Ibid., p. 212.

65 Ibid., pp. 30f.

66 As H. DEMIDO pointed out in S. A. TOROPTSEV (ed.): *Okno. Rossiā i Kitaī smotriāt drug na druga: Rasskazy, ocherki, ésse* (Window: Russia and China look at each other. Short stories, Features, Essays), Moskva: Akademkniga 2007, p. 13, the Russian speaking poetess has actually Armenian roots, but why should Wang not make use of his artistic freedom as in the case of old “G”?

67 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 31.

68 WANG Meng: “Mit bolschewistischem Gruß” (1988), p. 68.

69 Ibid., pp. 79f.

becomes more obvious when the author ponders on the name of his host's and translator's daughter ("Was she really called Katyusha?"<sup>70</sup>). Toward the end of *Sulian ji*, where the notation and song text of "Katyusha" illustrate one page,<sup>71</sup> followed a few pages later by the dancing scenes from TCHAIKOVSKY'S *Swan Lake*<sup>72</sup>, the secret love story lingering in permanent suspense is unveiled amidst a confusing fusion of fact and fiction. While the narrative constantly alternates between past and present, action and reflection, between today's Baikal restaurant in Beijing and the memoirs of a youth, the love story takes shape. In 1955, the 21-year-old I-narrator is transferred to the Party Secretary post of the Youth League in a textile factory where he meets Ekaterina SMIRNOVA, the vice head of technical production, responsible for quality management as a member of the Soviet expert group from a Leningrad partner enterprise. It is attraction at first sight as he merely concentrates on her words translated by the interpreter nicknamed "Leatherball". Despite his Russian being as bad as her Chinese, they soon get closer during a Sino-Soviet dancing event: "Never again did I dance as happily with a woman – not even with my more than ten years-younger wife after the Cultural Revolution."<sup>73</sup> The statements sound almost like a disclaimer to "pacify" WANG Meng's own wife CUI Ruifang 崔瑞芳 (1933–2012), being one year older, whom he married before the Cultural Revolution. However, an earlier edition of WANG Meng's autobiography includes an uncommented photo of a boat trip with his newly wed wife – in the background on the same boat sits a foreign lady with an unusually ample décolleté.<sup>74</sup>

Already in her thirties, the seductively beautiful "comrade Katya" with melancholic eyes and a sad smile is the only single person among the Russian experts. The interpreter tells him about the tragic fate of SMIRNOVA in the wake of World War II, but also spreads rumors about an illegitimate daughter and an affair with her superior. The gradually invoked personification of a tragic Russian beauty blends at least here with the person of foreign expert Katya, an opaque lady with a past. Her best years are over as the Sino-Soviet friendship is doomed to end, and the narrator feels the foreboding: "Every official document would give me the premonition that the Chinese-Soviet honeymoon was but a short dream of spring."<sup>75</sup> A boat trip with Katya seems to be their first and only rather intimate meeting before parting, caught in the photo of a fellow expert.

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70 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 142.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 219.

72 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 225.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 233.

74 WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2006), p. 152.

75 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 229.

After more than two decades, during the narrator's visit to Moscow, he receives Katya's phone call and at once recognizes her aged brittle voice singing "Fangzhi guniang" 纺织姑娘 ("Spin, oh my spinner") and stammering "Moscow – Beijing! STALIN – MAO Zedong!" in broken Chinese.<sup>76</sup> He meets her twice, but never alone "to avoid misunderstandings". She must be 64 by now ("Russians age more quickly than Asians"<sup>77</sup>), having a plumper but still attractive figure. She tells him that was the most beautiful time in her life she spent in China. She is accompanied by the author of the song text "Moskva – Pekin", which had never been sung since the Sino-Soviet split. An indication of the unusual mixture of fiction and life is WANG Meng's account toward the end of his autobiography, where strikingly large passages of the alleged fictive Sino-Russian affair are *in extenso* and verbatim excerpted from *Sulian ji*.<sup>78</sup> When it comes to the farewell of the two former lovers, WANG Meng admits that he actually wrote "in complete disregard of policy and diplomacy"<sup>79</sup>:

I noticed her beautiful eyes – maybe not so beautiful anymore, noticed even more her aged appearance [...] "If we could stay friends forever, everything will be fine", she murmured. All of a sudden, she broke into tears. Afraid of not being able to restrain myself, I hurriedly turned away. Trying to cover my embarrassment I said: "Comrade Katya, you should know better than we do your Oscar-winning movie *Moscow does not believe in tears*"<sup>80</sup>. "Then you also do not believe in my tears?" She asked her eyes wide open. Suddenly tears were flowing down my face as well.<sup>81</sup>

What may partly sound like involuntary comedy, would be just another of many more allusions, as the movie mentioned starts in 1958 and ends in the 1970s, almost covering the same time lag the Sino-Soviet amorous couple experienced, and its heroine Katya (sic) has a child out of wedlock.

In the aftermath of the highly emotional rendezvous, the narrator also recalls the "somewhat hurtful" circumstances, the Soviet side and even Katya herself noting virtually everything down in a small booklet. Yet, he himself wasn't better, he admits, bringing along his whole delegation. The reunion of the former lovers is

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76 *Ibid.*, p. 254.

77 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 254.

78 The chapter is entitled "Bi zou yanyun" 笔走烟云 (Mists and Clouds Follow the Writing Brush). In: WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2017b), pp. 351ff.

79 WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2017b), pp. 363f.

80 *Moskva slezam ne verit* (*Moscow does not Believe in Tears*), Soviet movie of 1980, director Vladimir MEN'SHOV (\*1939), written by Valentin CHERNYKH (1935–2012), 1981 Oscar for the best foreign film.

81 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 156; cf. WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2017b), pp. 363f.

being formally staged in public. After three decades of separation not only “Wang” and “Katya” come together, but China and Russia; and what makes things worse: the whole world is watching, in a sense alluding to the historical meeting between DENG Xiaoping and Mikhail GORBACHEV (\*1931) in the midst of the Tiananmen protest movement (1989). The only person not taking notes was the author of “Moscow – Beijing”, the narrator recalls. Amazingly enough, the song’s famous first line “Russians and Chinese, brothers forever”, is not cited, quite on the contrary, the narrator remarks that the text wasn’t very impressive after all.<sup>82</sup>

Toward the end of *Sulian ji*, the author admits losing control over his narrative by all of a sudden introducing a second song “equally important” as “Katyusha”, a signature tune which SMIRNOVA sang on the phone: The Ukrainian folksong “Spin, oh my spinner” – “Pryadi, moya pryakha (Priadi, moia priakha)” – does not belong to the early Soviet songs he learned, as it was only introduced to the PRC in the winter of 1956, after the death of STALIN and right after the events in Hungary and Poland when the Sino-Soviet friendship had passed its zenith.<sup>83</sup> “Spin, oh my Spinner” is also the central section of the second movement in TCHAIKOVSKY’s Symphony No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 17 (1872), subtitle “Little Russia”, the bridal march for the unpublished opera *Undine*. Here again there is a hint on the author’s intention: “What must she have gone through? ... Sad Russia! Oh, Russia!”<sup>84</sup> And after the “Hello Sadness” passage quoted twice, a highly ambivalent, though unconditional declaration of eternal love follows:

I think I will always love this country and this people, no matter how many people STALIN killed, no matter whether KHRUSHCHEV talked nonsense, no matter whether the author of *Young Guard* committed suicide with his pistol, no matter, whether the Western countries wished her to hell, no matter whether the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) doesn’t acknowledge her anymore, whether the CCP follows her or doesn’t give a damn about it, no matter whether her entire so called advanced technology was only scrap. But her songs are just so wonderful. ... Even her deficiencies, her ugly products do hurt me, hurt as much as the heart of the spinner girl hurts.<sup>85</sup>

Initially striking is the unusual disparate formal appearance of *Sulian ji*, reminding of a *bricolage*<sup>86</sup>. Being an author with an unmistakable penchant for experiments, WANG Meng is obviously attracted to the rare literary form which is known as “caprice” or “capriccio”, in analogy to its musical counterpart. His book even

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82 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), pp. 253f.

83 Ibid., p. 220. Photos of textile workers, text and notation of the song, see p. 139.

84 Ibid., p. 221.

85 Ibid., p. 221.

86 Within the meaning of Claude LÉVI-STRAUSS: *La pensée sauvage*, Paris: Plon 1962, p. 26.

seems to be based on a musical structure, as the author reveals: “While reading this novel, the reader will perhaps be able to hear the sound of TCHAIKOVSKY’s music”.<sup>87</sup> To TCHAIKOVSKY whose compositions were a source of inspiration since his youth,<sup>88</sup> a whole chapter under the heading “Andante Cantabile” (“Xing ban ru ge” 行板如歌) is dedicated.<sup>89</sup> No wonder that *Sulian ji*’s structure goes astonishingly well with one of TCHAIKOVSKY’s most famous musical pieces, the fantasy for orchestra *Capriccio Italien* (1880) which already played a role in WANG Meng’s early short story “The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department”.

The *Capriccio* runs as a subtext through *Sulian ji*’s entire narrative arrangement. Even the very first sentences seem to imitate the brief bugle call opening the musical fantasy: “Nothing – Still nothing – What, if I don’t find it in the end?”<sup>90</sup> Its leitmotif is the eternal love of two young people inevitably doomed to failure. When browsing through the inflight program on his way to Moscow, the enumeration gives a hint of what WANG Meng (or his I-narrator) is looking for as he begins his search with Italian operas. Another common feature of WANG Meng’s prose and TCHAIKOVSKY’s music is the incorporation of folksongs. *Capriccio* incorporates Italian street music, especially a popular love song about two lovers who should not find each other because of their parents. In *Sulian ji*, WANG Meng uses Soviet Russian mass songs and folksongs as eye-catching recurring motifs, some even occurring in chapter headings: “Pirog Pies and Katyusha”,<sup>91</sup> “Suliko”,<sup>92</sup> “Kalinka”,<sup>93</sup> and “Tomorrow we set out into the sea”<sup>94</sup> – a line of the song “Evening at Anchor” – “Vecher na reyde (Vecher na reïde)” by Vasily SOLOVYOV-SEDOI (Vasilii SOLOV’EV-SEDOI 1907–1979). They constitute the middle part of the book, followed by the chapter on TCHAIKOVSKY and four chapters dealing with the gloomy sides of the Soviet system. The ultrashort chapter acting as a kind of transition tunes in on a “romantic mood”<sup>95</sup> before the title of the last one repeats the musical theme, stemming from the Chinese text version of “Katyusha”: “Sound of singing like an enchanting spring scenery”<sup>96</sup>.

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87 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 173.

88 Cf. the chapter in ZHU Jingyu: *Wang Meng xiaoshuo* (2011), pp. 170ff.

89 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), pp. 168–173. For a translation by DEMIDO see TO-ROPTSEV: *Okno* (2007), pp. 14–18.

90 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 15.

91 *Ibid.*, pp. 138–143.

92 *Ibid.*, pp. 144–153.

93 *Ibid.*, pp. 164–167. Music and lyrics of 1860 originate from Ivan LARIONOV (1830–1889).

94 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), pp. 156–163.

95 *Ibid.*, pp. 208–211.

96 *Ibid.*, pp. 212–277. The chapter which appeared as an independent medium length novel before was translated by A. N. ZHELOKHOVTSEV in Van MĒN: “Pesniã laskova, kak solnechnyi svet vesnoi” (Sound of singing like an enchanting spring scenery). In:

In correspondence to the first and longer part of WANG Meng's earlier novelette "Andante Cantabile", *Sulian ji* consists of 17 chapters and the last chapter consists of 17 subchapters – figuring as a fictional story in the story. As WANG Meng always had a special liking for figures,<sup>97</sup> the numerical duplication can hardly be a coincidence. Of course, the number 17 first of all refers to the birth date of the Soviet Union. Adding to this, WANG Meng's exposure to Soviet influence lasts about 17 years before joining the workforce in Xinjiang and a long compulsive literary break. The recurring number seven could also allude to the mythological love story of "Cowherd and weaver maiden" (*niulang zhinü* 牛郎织女), two stars which might only meet once a year on the 7th day of the 7th month, the official Chinese Valentine's day. This in turn could be a direct link to the folk tune "Spin, oh my spinner" and the textile factory, the stage of the Sino-Russian romance in *Sulian ji*. Not unlike his "spinner girl", the author himself as a tireless master of the loom is interweaving one tiny detail after the other in this highly illusive imaginative texture. Therefore, at least one more cross-cultural parallel regarding numbers could have played a role: *Seventeen Moments of Spring*<sup>98</sup> is the title of a popular 12-part Soviet war drama serial of 1973, aired in China at the end of the 1980s, when WANG was minister of culture. The story, in which music plays a crucial role as well in the rare moments of romance, is about a Soviet agent embedded in the Gestapo under the pseudonym of von STIERLITZ toward the end of WW II in order to prevent a separate peace agreement of Nazi Germany with the Western allies. One main protagonist is the pregnant Kathe or Katherin KINN, another suffering Russian beauty in disguise, her clear name is Katya.

*Sulian ji* thereby presents another leitmotif, the code of mutual distrust. In the last chapter, the first-person narrator is confronted with suspicion of espionage. Sino-Soviet relations and the status of mixed Chinese-Russian couples disintegrate into dangerous liaisons. First, we hear how he runs into trouble after the last Soviet experts have left the country due to the testimonies of "Leatherball". She reports to his superiors about a photo taken of his boat trip, showing Katya almost naked and accuses her of being a Soviet spy.<sup>99</sup> After decades of preparing for his very first trip to the Soviet Union, another rumor is spread warning his delegation to watch out for a KGB trap, a female spy alias "White Swan" (sic) who has already lured a number of comrades into defection.

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*Sovremennaia kitaiskaia proza* (Chinese contemporary prose literature. Life is like a vibrating chord), Moskva: AST; Sankt-Peterburg: Astrel'-SPb 2007, pp. 7–100.

97 WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2017a), p. 43.

98 *Semnađsat' mgnovenii vesny*, 12-part TV series (1973) based on the novel by Īulian SEMĖNOV (1931–1993), directed by Tat'iana LIOZNOVA (1924–2011), starring Viacheslav TIKHONOV (1928–2009).

99 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 247.

Although the author deplores the failure of the Socialist experiment, he does not take the stance of teaching lessons like political think tanks or a documentary series (for internal use only) tend to do<sup>100</sup> which appeared in the same year as *Sulian ji* – well in time to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the Soviet Union’s disintegration. According to its cover and foreword, *Sulian ji* takes a basically positive stance as it officially commemorates the first major historical triumph of socialism from the angle of a China determined to continue the Socialist tradition: “This book is dedicated to the Soviet Union, abbreviated CCCP in Russian and USSR in English, in commemoration of the ninetieth anniversary of the October Socialist Revolution in the year 2007.”<sup>101</sup> Finally he concludes with a consolation or an appeal to his own country: “The Soviet Union is the Soviet Union, and China is China. Unnecessary to overly care about their affairs; the crucial point is that China takes good care of its own matters.”<sup>102</sup>

## Window on Russia and on China, and Other Windows of Perception

On his third visit to Russia on the occasion of the “Year of China in Russia” (2007)<sup>103</sup>, being addressed for the first time as an “old friend of Russia”<sup>104</sup> WANG Meng attended a Russian book fair where his works appeared in three

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100 *Ju an si wei – Su gong wang dang de lishi jiaoxun* 据安思危。苏工亡党的历史教训 (Alert to danger while dwelling in safety – The historical lesson of the perishing of the Soviet Communist Party): Beijing: Zhongyang jiwei Zhongguo fangzheng chubanshe, Jilin chuban jituan 2006. For an ample discussion see Gotelind MÜLLER: *Documentary, World History, and National Power in the PRC. Global Rise in Chinese Eyes*, London and New York: Routledge 2013, pp. 133–176. For a short analysis of the topic see Neil MUNRO: “Aufgeschobene Demokratie. Chinesische Lektionen aus dem Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion”. In: *China aktuell* No. 4 / 2008, Vol. XXXVII, pp. 32–61.

101 This might be another allusion (albeit omitting “Great”) to a book by Viacheslav MOLTOV (1890–1986) under the title *The 28th Anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution* (published in 1945) which was part of a reading list the Russians recommended to their Chinese counterparts: Austin JERSILD: *The Sino-Soviet Alliance. An International History*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press 2014, p. 64.

102 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), pp. 175f.

103 The gradual Sino-Russian rapprochement and the conclusion of the Treaty of Friendship in 2001 involved a number of bilateral activities as e.g. the “Year of Russia” in China (2006) and in 2007 the “Year of China” in Russia, as well as “Beijing days” in Moscow (27.–30.6.) and “Shanghai days” in St. Petersburg (9.–18.6.).

104 WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2017b), p. 296.

publications.<sup>105</sup> Of special interest for our topic is the already mentioned volume entitled *Okno*<sup>106</sup> (*Window*) edited by Sergey TOROPTSEV (Sergeĭ A. TOROPTSEV, \*1940)<sup>107</sup>. According to the editor, *Okno* pursues two different approaches: Part One (“Window on Russia”) contains translations of Chinese texts, four<sup>108</sup> excerpts of *Sulian ji*<sup>109</sup> and one chapter of the travelogue *Listen to Russia*<sup>110</sup> by FENG Jicai 冯冀才 (\*1942). Part Two (“Window on China”) consists of twenty texts on China from the pen of TOROPTSEV. This second part, a view “from within” seen through the lens of a “*rossianin*”, is intended to create the illusion of a genuine Chinese creation. It is further split into two chapters, “View of an essayist” in seven essay-travelogues and “View of an author” in thirteen stories or tales about traditional China. “Twenty years before”, TOROPTSEV stresses in his preface that the era of “great” and “small brother” is over and quotes from PUSHKIN: a window opened “in the Wall of far-off China”<sup>111</sup>. The sinologist seeks to reanimate the spirit of a China “seen much more through his heart” than through his eyes, thereby following in the steps, as he suggests, of Sergey TRET'YAKOV (Sergeĭ TRET'IAKOV, 1892–1937)<sup>112</sup> or of Pearl S. BUCK (1892–1973). It would be, however, not justified to claim another version of “Orientalism”. Perhaps it also served as a publishing survival strategy, as Russian sinology, a world leader until the 1960s / 1970s, faced notorious underfunding after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As FENG Jicai noted in his travelogue, citing firsthand information of renowned sinologists, Russian research on China might be eight years behind the current leading French

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105 The two other volumes were the translated long novel *Huodong bian renxing* 活动变人形 (*The Movable Parts*), and a prose volume including texts of Wang Meng translated by Dmitriĭ VOSKRESENSKIĬ.

106 TOROPTSEV (ed.): *Okno* (2007).

107 On his extensive research on WANG Meng see e.g.: TOROPTSEV: *Van Mèn v kontekste* (2004); Van MÈN: “‘CHuvstvuiŭ, chto popal k starym druž'iam’, Zapis' besedy i vstuplenie S. Toroptseva” (“‘A feeling as if I've come to old friends’: Record from a Conversation and Introduction by S. Toroptsev”). In: *ZHurnal'nyĭ zal. Inostrannaĭa literatura* (Literary Saloon. Foreign Literature) No. 4, 2005, Available online: <http://magazines.russ.ru/inostran/2005/4/m12.html> (last access 2019, October 15).

108 Cf. the description in A. A. RODIONOV: “O perevodakh noveššeĭ kitaĭskoĭ prozy na russkiĭ ĭazyk posle raspada SSSR” (Latest translations of Chinese prose after the collapse of the USSR). In: *Vestnik SPbGU* (Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University) No. 13, 2 (2010), p. 149.

109 Russian title: *K altariŭ Sovetskogo Soĭuza* (To the Altar of the Soviet Union).

110 FENG Jicai 冯冀才: “Qingting Eluosi” 倾听俄罗斯 (*Listen to Russia*). In: *Feng Jicai fenlei wenji* 冯冀才分类文集 (Classified Collected Works of Feng Jicai), Vol. 12, Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe 2005.

111 See the translation in LUKIN: *The Bear Watches the Dragon* (2003), p. 15.

112 Sergej TRETJAKOV: *Den Shi-chua. Ein junger Chinese erzählt sein Leben*, Kiel: Neuer Malik Verlag 1988.

sinology.<sup>113</sup> Anyway, while TOROPTSEV literally goes about the window in the Great Wall and adopts a Chinese identity to enhance understanding, this would be an unthinkable act for WANG Meng and most probably for FENG Jicai as well, as they incorporate Soviet culture from the onset without the need of conscious or subconscious transition into a foreign identity.

Despite being sufficiently representative, the chapters of *Sulian ji* in *Okno* have been selected without a traceable effort of contextualization. There is no explanation given as to why from all the texts in *Sulian ji*, the choice fell on TCHAIKOVSKY, on the cultural minister and music erudite Aleksandr SOKOLOV (\*1949), and on the TOROPTSEV family. It should also be noted that the publisher is introduced as “essayist and writer” whereas the two famous Chinese authors are merely mentioned as “essayists”. The whole set-up could be interpreted as if the Russian perspective of China would be more authenticable than the other way round. Moreover, the translation of WANG Meng’s account of the visit to the TOROPTSEV family contains a seemingly minor but crucial error as the last sentence critical for his leitmotif and love story has been changed in a significant way: Whereas the author (or I narrator) wishes “all houses harboring a Katyusha” well (of course and primarily including his own Katya), the translation only refers to the translator’s own daughter and family.<sup>114</sup>

Judging by his epilogue to *Sulian ji*, WANG Meng’s translator compares the author’s gaze on Russia to a personal utopian dreamscape, almost irrelevant for Russian eyes. He reflects on the author’s person, but not on the subject of his gaze. At least one more seemingly minor error does occur as the popular song “Kalinka” is not a main key word of *Sulian ji*, but “Katyusha” in all its dimensions. Not unlike other Western colleagues,<sup>115</sup> TOROPTSEV obviously failed to realize the complex texture of the whole narrative, a meticulous labyrinth of memories revealing a secret Sino-Soviet love story. Instead, he patronizingly comforts the author:

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113 FENG Jicai: “Qingting Eluosi” (2005), p. 128. The judgment seems to be in accordance with the official Chinese in a volume collecting articles of ten Russian and ten Chinese authors: WEN Zhexian 温哲仙: “Tuozhan Zhong-E wenxue jiaoliu hezuo duice yanjiu” 拓展中俄文学交流合作对策研究 (Study on Measures to Expand the Cooperation in Sino-Russian Literary Exchange). In: WANG Qi 王奇 (ed.): *Zhong-E zhanlüe huoban duihua. Xianzhuang, wenti, jianyi* 中俄战略伙伴对话: 现状, 问题, 建议 (Strategic cooperative dialogue between China and Russia: Actual situation, problems, and proposals), Beijing: Zhongyang bianyi chubanshe 2014, p. 521.

114 TOROPTSEV (ed.): *Okno* (2007), p. 22.

115 At least MCGUIRE: *Red at Heart* (2017); VOLLAND: *Socialist cosmopolitanism* (2017).

What a pity, the real “Peach blossom utopia”<sup>116</sup> has nothing in common with the imagined idealistic paradise of his youth. But this is of course not his fault. As we understand our way of life in this country, the song “Kalinka” (sic) does not belong to our daily necessities [...] “Kalinka” has nothing to do with the Soviet Union nor with modern Russia. The memoirs written by Wang Meng reflect his own inner mindset [...]. He does not need to seek paradise for a second time, he has never left it, always kept it in his heart.<sup>117</sup>

WANG Meng, whose works have recently become rare in trendy bookstores, seems to have foreseen this disinterest in *Sulian ji* by an international public and realized that his new book would:

most probably only find readers outside of China in Vietnam because Russians tend to repress their more than seventy-year-old history of the Union of Soviet Republics. Whereas in the West, there is rarely anyone willing to hold a memorial ceremony to commemorate the dead. When on a banquet in Vietnam I announced my publication there was at once keen interest. They especially appreciated my wording and were touched: The Soviet Union was my first love, I have to publish a book in her commemoration.<sup>118</sup>

What about the second Chinese author FENG Jicai whose reminiscences of his first visit to Russia in 2002<sup>119</sup> were partly included in *Okno* along with WANG Meng's texts? Although having been widely received in Russian publications, in particular by the sinologist Boris RIFTIN (1932–2012), FENG Jicai was not as lucky as WANG Meng in visiting the late “Soviet Union” (he usually writes the name in quotation marks). One reason for having been included in *Okno* may be that his publications from the very beginning had been extensively translated into Russian. His short novel “The Street-Facing Window”,<sup>120</sup> could even have inspired the concept and

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116 He applies the traditional Chinese notion for “utopia” or “paradise”, based on the novel by TAO Yuanming 陶渊明 (365?–427) “Story of the Peach Blossom Spring” (*Taohuayuan ji* 桃花源记).

117 Sergey TOROPTSEV: “Wang Meng xinli yongcun de Taoyuan” 王蒙心里永存的桃园 (The Eternal Peach Blossom Utopia in Wang Meng's Heart). In: WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), pp. 278–279.

118 WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2017b), p. 295.

119 FENG Jicai: “Qingting Eluosi” (2005), pp. 11–151. On FENG Jicai's biography and work see e.g. Monika GÄNSSBAUER: *Trauma der Vergangenheit: die Rezeption der Kulturrevolution und der Schriftsteller Feng Jicai*, Dortmund: Projekt-Verlag 1996, pp. 31–115.

120 FENG Jicai 冯骥才: “Linjie de chuang” 临街的窗 (The Street-Facing Window). In: FENG Jicai 冯骥才, *Ganshang gushi* 感伤故事 (Sentimental Tales), Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe 2015, pp. 138–162; FENG Jicai, “Das Fenster zur Straße”. In: *Nach den Wirren. Erzählungen und Gedichte aus der Volksrepublik China nach der Kulturrevolution*, Dortmund: RWAG Dienste und Verlag GmbH 1988, pp. 12–30.

title of TOROPTSEV's *Okno*. The absurd story reminding of a mixture of GOGOL' and CHEKHOV, takes place in a China of the late Cultural Revolution. It is about the member of a construction team who makes friend with the strange resident of a windowless apartment. Instead of waiting for the workmen to open the wall for a window, the guy paints his own fantastically realistic looking window on the wall and sends the team away. (Adding to this, a real window would have had the disadvantage of being in view of the opposite Red Guard Headquarters.) Overwhelmed by this artistic skill, the I-narrator drops in every now and then every time to find another window scenery reflecting the mood of its resident. Finally, the painter is dead, the neighborhood and the remaining fresco released for demolition. FENG Jicai's magic window on the outside world, always separated by a wall and only reflecting one's own interior, thus proves to be a true document of troubled times and a perfect allegory of human perception – just in line with the mysterious verse at the onset of the story:

You have your window.  
I have my window.  
He has his window.  
There is still another window.<sup>121</sup>

Despite all personal and artistic differences, WANG and FENG both share a number of common predilections, for example, their writing against forgetting (FENG exposes the traumatic experiences of the Cultural Revolution), as well as music, in particular TCHAIKOVSKY (WANG Meng beat him in snatching the title of “Andante Cantabile”) and Russian literature, in particular PUSHKIN. As a longtime companion and close friend, FENG Jicai was cited at the end of WANG Meng's voluminous autobiography with a great compliment: “You have attained the ultimate in every respect!”<sup>122</sup> Unlike WANG he learnt Russian in senior high school and used to have a female Russian pen friend.<sup>123</sup> Whereas WANG Meng is interested in the Soviet Union, FENG Jicai, on the other hand, mainly writes about Russia. Another difference is his artistic focus, as FENG is not only a writer but also a successful painter. The above-mentioned *Listen to Russia* is amply illustrated, albeit in a more sophisticated way than *Sulian ji*, featuring elaborate, expensive color images and art reproductions. The first picture shows a popular painting and poster motif advertising the Russian capital in English (“I love Moscow”); the second one the photo

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121 FENG Jicai: “Das Fenster zur Straße”. In: *Nach den Wirren. Erzählungen und Gedichte aus der Volksrepublik China nach der Kulturrevolution*, Dortmund: RWAG Dienste und Verlag GmbH 1988, p. 12.

122 WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2007), p. 393.

123 FENG Jicai: “Qingting Eluosi” (2005), p. 30.

of a woman in a park presenting an American flag, subtitled with the question: “A new generation worshipping America?”<sup>124</sup> The eighth and longest chapter of the fourteen chapters of FENG’s travelogue (“Another pen of the literary grandmasters”<sup>125</sup>) was translated for *Okno*. It may be considered representative as it features FENG’s own setting of priorities – an emphasis on painting and his deep interest in Russian painters and authors who were as adept in painting as he is. The second longest chapter is about his favorite poet: “Why did Pushkin duel to his death?”<sup>126</sup> Suicide was always an important literary topic for FENG Jicai – another difference to WANG Meng. FENG seems mainly interested in TCHAIKOVSKY’s *Sixth Symphony* because of the suicide theory although this has long been refuted.<sup>127</sup> FENG observes daily life (one chapter is devoted to “Oleg and his rural dacha”<sup>128</sup>) and takes an avid interest in painting and literature (including translations), in landscapes and nature, as well as in paintings of landscapes. He is especially keen on Russian folklore and popular culture, admiring the lifework of the Russian sinologist Vasily ALEKSEYEV (Vasilii ALEKSEEV, 1881–1951), he himself being a famous promoter of Chinese popular culture. His skepticism about the Soviet system is easily transferable to skepticism about his own system, having experienced the most traumatic times during his adolescence. As a rule, FENG Jicai sympathizes with the victims as he and his family were victims of fanatic ultra-leftism. Citing PUSHKIN’s poem “If life deceives you...”<sup>129</sup>, he succeeded in giving a desperate woman new hope to face her life during the Cultural Revolution. It may be no more than a detail, but it is certainly not a chance that the impressive menu card of the newly (in March 2019) opened Pushkin Literature Restaurant in Beijing has this poem on the front page and mentions its translator GE Baoquan. Like WANG Meng, FENG Jicai reflects on the Soviet cults of sacrifice and on the high value placed on war victims in the daily lives of young people, a custom he misses in China. Being granted a maximum of 15 minutes, FENG Jicai stayed much longer in Lenin’s Mausoleum than WANG, visually recording each tiny detail.

FENG confines himself to a documentary, nonfictional report without noteworthy leaps in time or space, framed by accounts of a friendly personal relationship with his Russian hosts: The very first chapter introduces translations of his works in Russian, and he describes his meeting with Russian China experts. FENG Jicai’s encounters with his Russian translators seem to be more relaxed than the first

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124 Ibid.: “Qingting Eluosi” (2005), pp. 12, 18.

125 Ibid.: “Qingting Eluosi” (2005), pp. 84–106.

126 FENG Jicai: “Qingting Eluosi” (2005), pp. 107–122.

127 On the symphony see Dorothea REDEPENNING: *Peter Tschaikowsky*, München: C. H. Beck 2016, pp. 116ff.

128 FENG Jicai: “Qingting Eluosi” (2005), pp. 48–60.

129 Ibid., pp. 30f.

meeting between WANG Meng and TOROPTSEV. Although WANG seems less interested in the status of Russian sinology and details of academia than FENG, his meeting with the sinologists V. F. SOROKIN, Lev EYDLIN (Lev ĖIDLIN), and in Moscow 1984, after returning from Tashkent, sounds much more at ease. When SOROKIN introduced WANG to a chanson of Soviet poet Bulat OKUDZHAVA (1924–1997), he was impressed by his casual, natural singing and signaled his profound admiration of the refrain “As they breathe, so they write // Not trying to please”, comparing writing and a free expression of opinion to breathing.<sup>130</sup>

Another longtime companion is mentioned in the foreword to *Sulian ji* when WANG Meng extends his thanks to an anonymous female “colleague” – most likely the author TIE Ning 铁凝 (\*1957) – for encouraging him in his writing project. TIE Ning, president of the Chinese Writers Association (since 2006) wrote the welcome address to a collection of contemporary Chinese novels<sup>131</sup> translated into Russian and co-financed by the Association whose authors were selected by the Association. The volume starts precisely with WANG Meng’s key chapter of *Sulian ji* “Sound of singing...”. TIE Ning herself wrote another quite remarkable short story shedding her own auctorial light on Sino-Soviet relations from a completely other angle under the title “An Delie’s (or Andrey’s) Night”<sup>132</sup>. The strange name of the protagonist, sounding like a Russian first name is due to the main protagonist being born in the era of Sino-Soviet friendship and working in one of the factories built by the “dear big brother Soviet Union” (*Sulian lao da ge* 苏联老大哥)<sup>133</sup> along with Soviet-style apartment blocks occupying half of the urban area. Two widely spaced Chinese characters for “Dancing Hall” on top of the former Worker’s Club look like a pair of lonely dancers eternally separated from each other. Nothing else than this unspectacular reminder of the era serves as a clue to interpretation.

Like in *Sulian ji*, unfulfilled desires and the concept of a missed moment linger in the center of the story. The latent, never expressed affection of two factory workers, both married, becomes a metaphor for the former bilateral relationship of China and the Soviet Union. Only when the factory is close to being shut down and a separation is inevitable do they realize their looming loss. However, the only chance for a first and last rendezvous is wasted. The sadly grotesque scene when

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130 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 119. According to the line cited, it is the song “I’m writing a historical novel”.

131 *Sovremennaia kitaïskaia proza* (2007).

132 TIE Ning 铁凝: “An Delie de wanshang 安德烈的晚上” (An Delie’s Night). In: SUN Ke 孙颙 (ed.): *Gaige kaifang 30 nian. Duanpian xiaoshuo xuan* 改革开放 30 年. 短篇小说选 (30 Years of Reform and Opening. Selection of Short Stories), Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe 2008. A German translation by the author of this article is in preparation.

133 TIE Ning: “An Delie de wanshang” (2008), p. 286.

“Andrey” loses his way on a terrain known to him since early childhood, his disorientation when searching for the well-known address of an old friend who gave him the key to his apartment for the intimate meeting, is paradigmatic of the disorientation of a generation which has not found its place, neither in the old Soviet world, nor in the new modern one. The hopeless search and getting lost in a spacious uniform residential area might have a kind of inverse parallel in Soviet comedy TV film *The Irony of Fate, Or Enjoy Your Bath!* (1975).<sup>134</sup> Similar to the completely drunk Russian protagonist played by Andrey (sic) MYAGKOV (Andrei MIAGKOV, \*1938), the utterly sober and serious Chinese “Andrey” opens the wrong apartment door with his borrowed key and has to face the coarse insults addressed to burglars and even worse – making public what should have been kept secret. The “1950s keys” belong to the past without having ever been used. “Andrey’s” only souvenir of the common time with his unspoken love remains her lunch box, her dumplings finally falling to the ground – prefiguring the coming end of Socialist “iron rice bowls”.

Apart from all the differences in their literary styles and focusing only on a purely factual level, the travelogues of FENG and WANG show some striking similarities. The same is true with the East German writer Christa WOLF (1929–2011), who visited the Soviet Union ten times from 1957, describing her impressions in her *Moscow Diary* in a similar chord as WANG Meng in “Fang Su riji” 访苏日记 (Visit to the Soviet Union), the fourth chapter of *Sulian ji*. As a convinced Socialist like WANG Meng, WOLF’s early accounts sound very similar to his enthusiastic fantasies: “Once you were in Moscow, you’ll always long to be back, especially in spring”<sup>135</sup> (1959). Like WANG Meng, she becomes soon disillusioned. In 1966, she resents the unfriendly attitudes of service personnel and gradually gets the impression that the historical role the Soviet Union may have to play in the future has become increasingly less supported by the will of its inhabitants.<sup>136</sup> While her main impression in 1981 was that individuals were not of much value, finally in 1989 the country seems to be disintegrating in the East, having “glasnost but nothing to eat”.<sup>137</sup>

The sensation of infinite width and dissolution which WANG Meng amusingly cites as an expression of excessive Russian self-esteem, is the subject of the Polish novel *The East*.<sup>138</sup> In a tremendous epical monologue on his way from Poland to

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134 *Ironiia sud'by, ili S lęgkim parom!*, Mosfilm.

135 Own translation from: Christa WOLF: *Moskauer Tagebücher. Wer wir sind und wer wir waren, Reisetagebücher, Texte, Briefe, Dokumente 1957–1989*, Berlin: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch 2015, p. 38.

136 WOLF: *Moskauer Tagebücher* (2015), pp. 61, 86.

137 *Ibid.*, pp. 198, 213.

138 Andrzej STASIUK: *Der Osten*, Berlin: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch 2017.

China, the author Andrzej STASIUK (\*1960) takes up the trial of a seemingly infinite Post-Soviet space and a (Soviet) Russia he never cared about in his youth. His longing for a dreamscape and the dwelling in a melancholy of knowing that this will never be attained, could at times be a reminder of WANG Meng in a nostalgic mood. Yet the beginning and the end of his journey into the depths of Post-Soviet space and into his own mind and past are very different, with one main exception – Russian music: The songs, they are “singing deep into the night [...] for which they are loved all over the world.”<sup>139</sup> Arriving at the glitzy, hypermodern Manzhouli at the Chinese border, rising like a mirage out of the Russian grassland his outlook remains disenchanting and like that of WANG Meng, albeit sounding more blunt: “Russia, you don’t have a chance.”<sup>140</sup>

In a similar way WANG Meng abandons the realm of courtesy prescribed by paying one’s respects to a memorial in his autobiography. An example of this would be his participation in a conference on civil society and public space in Bellagio (Italy) in 1993 when he met with Russian scholars:

While discussing the notions of Asia and the East, the two Russian participants emphasized that their country was European as well as Asian, covering an area of so and so many million square miles of which so and so many million square miles were situated in Asia. Their argumentation reminded me of the Sino-Soviet dispute during the era of KHRUSHCHEV about whether the Soviet Union should attend the Asian-Africa-Conference. [...] Circumstances have completely changed with the passage of time as well as the nature of the discourse, but their discursive strategies remained the same. The Russian way of argumentation resembles their blueprint of reform. It’s meant to prove that their model of reform is of transcontinental significance, to demonstrate that with their model of reform, even without generating positive results for the time being, they will still have the last laugh. [...] Why does one have to insist so stubbornly on the universal transferability of one’s own way? Without further ado, China calls its method “Socialism with Chinese characteristics”.<sup>141</sup>

## Conclusion: Paradise Lost – Memories Regained

Coming back to the movie scene mentioned at the beginning: Did WANG Meng open a similar secret room in *Sulian ji* only to proclaim that it belongs to somebody

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139 STASIUK: *Der Osten* (2017), p. 138.

140 Ibid., p. 144.

141 WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2017b), p. 108.

else? In contrast to *Black Hole*, this is not a nostalgic re-enactment leading to nowhere. On the contrary – this does not at all remind us of another version of disorientation, where the protagonist hides in a secret retreat playing “Ural Rowan Tree”. The Soviet song is mentioned several times in *Sulian ji* as well, first of all in the Hotel Cosmos in Moscow, later in the Restaurant Baikal in Beijing.<sup>142</sup> But WANG Meng, who certainly likes the song and who must know the blockbuster series widely discussed by intellectuals, obviously avoids a direct connection to his thematic spectrum. He does not need to choose between two systems. According to ZHA Jianying 查建英 (\*1959), WANG Meng cited a line from BEI Dao's 北岛 (\*1949)<sup>143</sup> famous poem in a TV interview: “I do not believe!” – Only to solemnly make the statement: “I can say this about my generation: We believe!”<sup>144</sup> Not without humor, the implicit author ponders on his credibility: “Would outsiders understand if I told them that I spent the best time of my life with the Soviet Union? They would take me for a Stalinist or even worse [...]. At least some Hong Kong readers would find it unbearable.”<sup>145</sup> However, his political convictions tend to be rather pragmatic when it comes to historical evaluations: “Blaming China's problems on MAO is simplistic [...] And I think he did two great things. The first was leaving Hong Kong alone in 1949 even though he could have taken it over with a brigade at the time. The second was breaking up with the Soviet Union, thus leaving a window open to the West and getting China out of the big Socialist family.”<sup>146</sup>

Although there are more than enough accounts of WANG Meng's many visits to other countries and continents,<sup>147</sup> in *Sulian ji* the “window on the West” is a comparably small one. However, the author's cross-cultural gaze never disappears. Trying to avoid treating the “West” as one amorphous cultural entity, he differs as a rule between individual European countries and the U.S. Yet, none of these countries may compare to the country of his youth: “This of course is a result of the

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142 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), pp. 19, 213.

143 For a German translation see Wolfgang KUBIN (ed.): *Nachrichten von der Hauptstadt der Sonne. Moderne chinesische Lyrik 1919–1984*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1985, pp. 184f.

144 ZHA Jianying: “Servant of the State. Is China's most eminent writer a reformer or an apologist?”, 2010, November 1. Available online: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/08/servant-of-the-state> (last access 2019, October 15).

145 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 156, cf. WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2017b), p. 363.

146 ZHA Jianying: “Servant of the State” (2010).

147 See a few examples in WANG Meng 王蒙: *Wang Meng wencun* 王蒙文存 (Wang Meng Archive), Vol. 15, *Fengge Lundun* 风格伦敦 (London Style), Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe 2003.

exclusive orientation toward the Soviet Russia (*Su-E* 苏俄) during the 50s.”<sup>148</sup> In the 1982 novelette “It’s Hard for Us to Meet”<sup>149</sup> the title of which could be a heading to WANG Meng’s Sino-Russian story as well, the author describes the complicated interpersonal relationships between a mainland Chinese man and an American overseas Chinese woman, bearing certain autobiographical features.<sup>150</sup> Its plot of two lovers being prevented from coming together in the wake of unfortunate circumstances seems to be a recurring theme in his work.

Sometimes foreign representatives play the role of testimonies of the author’s own impressions; or they share observations he had not thought about, as in one case, when an American visitor to the Soviet Union states that the Soviets have no sense of humor. In another passage of the text we hear that WANG himself would lose all his humor as soon as the Soviet Union was involved:

Humor is a wisdom of adults. [...] But not in the case of the Soviet Union. When I longed to go there, this was a long, long time before my wisdom developed. As for the Soviet Union, it seems to me my sense of humor will not be sufficient. During the 22 days when I visited the SU, I had problems with my humor.<sup>151</sup>

Two decades later, however, his humor had matured. After a visit to the Crimea, the backdrop of Anton CHEKHOV’s (1860–1904) short story “The Lady with the little Dog”, he observes that the seaside promenade and the waves of the Black Sea may not have changed, but “I only saw old ladies with big dogs”.<sup>152</sup>

Memory turns out to be somewhat untamable, being even all but politically correct. In his childhood imagination, the Hong Kong author LEUNG Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞 (1949–2013) associated Great Britain with “a country on a distant continent, with a sparkling grey aluminum tooth mug and ominous, tasteless old meat”.<sup>153</sup> Time and again WANG Meng seems to disclose fragments of his autobiography. However, when disclosing the nonfictional background of one puzzling detail, another mystery pops up, as in the case of the mysterious black Russian noodles sent

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148 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 169.

149 “Xiangjian shi nan” 相见是难, cf. the translations WANG Meng: “The Strain of Meeting”. In: WANG Meng, *Selected Works of Wang Meng*, Vol. I, *The Strain of Meeting*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 1989, pp. 83–248; WANG Meng: “It’s Hard for Us to Meet”. In: WANG Meng: *Alienation*. *Yihua* 異化, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (H.K.) Co. 1993, pp. 103–281.

150 For a critical comparison with two similar texts (one of FENG Jicai) see MARTIN: “Wang Mengs Roman *Schwer fällt das Wiedersehen*” (1996), pp. 279–291.

151 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 54.

152 WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2017b), p. 295.

153 LEUNG Ping-kwan: “Die Insel und das Festland”. In: Marc HERMANN (ed.): *Stumme Städte. Neue Großstadtliteratur aus China*. In: *Orientierungen. Zeitschrift zur Kultur Asiens*, Themenheft 2006, p. 143.

from Moscow (with love?). In doing so, he leaves us with a series of metaphors of how we humans will never truly understand each other, be it Russians and Chinese, be it Chinese and Chinese, or any other people.

Despite WANG Meng's openness to foreign countries and cultures all over the world, this does not touch upon his special relationship toward Russia, as the happiest time of his youth after an unbearable childhood was the direct outcome of Sino-Soviet friendship, whereas traumatic events like the "Great Leap Forward" and the "Cultural Revolution" coincided with the Sino-Soviet split. According to him "from 1949 to 1957 China was a free kingdom of love"<sup>154</sup>. One of his novels is even entitled *Season of love*<sup>155</sup>. In *Sulian ji* we are told: "The Soviet Union, this is me at the age of 19, this is my first love, the beginning of my life as a writer."<sup>156</sup> Therefore, the author's first idealized or sexualized love might well have been a Russian "devushka", no matter whether real or imagined. Taking this into account, the approach to compare the "relationship between the Russian and Chinese revolutions" to a "romance"<sup>157</sup> would prove perfectly correct in the case of WANG Meng. However, this becomes obvious only when reading the whole *oeuvre* in question in order to recognize the semi-fictitious love story and the artistic finesse behind it. Therefore, it is also a lack of understanding or interest which perpetuates the tragedy of this publicly private love in a very special way. As the romance is destined to remain a secret from the very beginning and without a common future, this not only conforms to the encapsulated literary necessity connecting the narrative to the world of famous tragic love stories, but also ensures the overall consistency of a Sino-Soviet partnership which was doomed to failure.

When figuring out how to characterize WANG Meng's actual view of the Soviet Union, we have to distinguish between different levels of perception: When looking at the cover and leafing through the booklet, one might easily get the impression of a politically correct publication for the sake of Sino-Soviet friendship. However, when going into detail and looking behind the numerous hints and remarks, this will lead quite to the opposite result. *Sulian ji* does not merely show a Russia through a Soviet lens or the Soviet Union through a modern Chinese liberal socialist's lens, but by constantly changing perspectives it is zooming in and zooming out of space and time, switching between a great diversity of sometimes contradicting constellations. After all, these variations show the contours of a Soviet Union in the Chinese mind, an intangible Soviet Russian cultural heritage being

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154 WANG Meng: *Wang Meng zizhuan* (2017a), p. 103.

155 WANG Meng 王蒙: *Lian'ai de jijie* 恋爱的季节 (Season of Love), Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe 2001.

156 WANG Meng, *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 21.

157 Elizabeth MCGUIRE: "Sino-Soviet Romance: An Emotional History of Revolutionary Geopolitics". In: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 52 (4), 2017, pp. 853–873.

remembered as part of the Chinese collective memory. *Sulian ji* closes with an open question about the value of memories: “Would it be better to constantly revive my fading memories and to refresh them, as soon as I remember, or wouldn’t it be better to put them aside, solemnly and with extreme caution, so as to bury them for good ...”<sup>158</sup> The question remains unanswered, but isn’t the book itself the answer, enfolding a kind of Proustian *In Search of Lost Time* with Chinese characteristics?

*Sulian ji* argues for an unforgettable love, be it for the dream girl of one’s youth, be it for the country of one’s youthful dreams, be it even for the dream of a whole generation or be it most likely for both as these different dreams are already inseparably intertwined. By setting up a memorial to Soviet Russia and a literary masterpiece in its own right, WANG Meng turns out to be a chronicler of the Chinese “political subconscious”<sup>159</sup>. He makes a passionate plea for addressing the present and remembering the past in its entire depth and diversity, no matter how difficult or painful it may be. By applying all the literary refinements of his repertoire, WANG Meng transforms “his” Soviet Russia into a “realm of memory”, a *lieu de mémoire*<sup>160</sup> of today’s China. *Sulian ji* may therefore be considered a Chinese *musée imaginaire* of the Soviet era.<sup>161</sup> At the same time it can serve as a perfect example to show that contemporary Chinese literature can be read as world literature.

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158 WANG Meng: *Sulian ji* (2006), p. 277.

159 On this term see Peter VON MATT: “Die Inszenierung des politischen Unbewussten in der Schweiz”. In: Peter VON MATT, *Die tintenblauen Eidgenossen. Über die literarische und politische Schweiz*, München: Carl Hanser 2001, pp. 96–112.

160 Cf. Pierre NORA (ed.): *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris: Gallimard 1984–1994.

161 Following a notion of Karl SCHLÖGEL: *Das sowjetische Jahrhundert. Archäologie einer untergegangenen Welt*, München: C. H. Beck 2017, pp. 833ff.