

(NARRATING) TIME(S) EAST AND WEST:  
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO  
WANG XIAOBO'S *TIME TRILOGY*

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*Abstract: This article explores how the fictional work of a modern Chinese writer (Wang Xiaobo, 1952-1997), specifically some of the novellas and novels in his collection *The Time Trilogy*, can be interpreted as a literary meditation on the complex relationship between time and memory. The temporal dimension of Wang's work is presented, discussed, and analyzed through a comparative reading of Western, Indian, and Chinese philosophical, religious, and literary traditions, both ancient and contemporary. It is shown that Wang's writing problematizes some crucial aspects of Chinese history by juxtaposing private memories and institutionalized narratives. In addition, it is argued that his work, while reframing and adapting in parodic terms different notions of temporality, can be regarded as a sui generis appropriation of Heidegger's distinction between "authentic time" (Zeitlichkeit) and inauthentic time (Geschichtlichkeit).*

I. General Purpose: *The Time Trilogy* in Context

Taking as its starting point the relationship between time and memory in some novellas included in *The Time Trilogy* (时代三部曲) by Wang Xiaobo (1952-1997), this article offers a tentative, comparative analysis of how different notions of time, Western, Indian, and Chinese, both traditional and modern, as well as religious and secularized, may be fruitfully brought to bear in the understanding of the literary representation of time. While Wang's stories have been published in different versions and collected under different titles, the most popular edition was published in the late nineties of the last century and included three volumes: *The Golden Age* (黄金时代); *The Silver Age* (白银时代); and *The Bronze Age* (青铜时代). The iconic covers of these three volumes – with reproductions from Greek mythological or epic repertoires, were particularly striking and likely to arouse the interest of a range of readers. The first two volumes mentioned above include a novella bearing a title referring to the mythological ages (golden and silver). On the other hand, the last volume includes various novels whose common ground is their setting: The ancient, mock-heroic past of the Tang dynasty (618-907 C.E.). Besides, after Wang Xiaobo passed away, his relatives found in his computer some stories in various stages of completion that were eventually published in a collection entitled *The Black Iron Age* (黑铁时代).

Various scholars, both in China, such as Chen Xiaoming (陈晓明), and in the West, such as Wendy Larson, maintain that Wang Xiaobo's uniqueness in terms

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of his fictional representation of time is predicated on his refusal of a “linear” narrative so to speak, i.e., of a discourse that subsumes the free-flowing of time to social and economic priorities. While this view is both compelling and stimulating, it is the author of this paper’s contention that Wang’s literary reworking of time can be regarded as a form of retrieval, which is possible to explain also in terms of what Paul Ricoeur says in his seminal work on time and narrative:

(...) between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity. To put it another way, *time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.*<sup>1</sup>

The titles of various parts of the trilogy echo three of the classical Greek mythical epochs – The Golden Age, The Silver Age, and The Bronze Age – they do not include any “Heroic” age but do include an unfinished Age of Iron series. Furthermore, an additional (parodic) link with the temporal sequence of Hesiod’s *Theogony* (Θεογονία) is given by the reference to a *sui generis* metamorphosis of Wang Er, the narrator and/or main character of most of the novels and novellas included in the trilogy.

As famously argued by Bakhtin’s “the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.” (Bakhtin, 1981, 85) In Wang’s work, narrating such an image and the process of re-membling and re-imagining human experience appears to be based on an aesthetic and ethical stance in which the emphasis on the fragmented nature of memory lends itself to be read as an aporetic questioning of the official, homogenizing, developmental, forward-looking, hegemonic narrative. Interestingly, such narrative framing overlaps somewhat with that identified by Paul Ricoeur who argues that while historiography, literary criticism, and phenomenology should engage in a triangular conversation in order to explore the structure and meaning of the dialectical relationship between “temps et récit” (time and narrative), “une phénoménologie pure du temps” (a pure phenomenology of time) is impossible to demonstrate. (Ricoeur, 1990, Vol. I, 83) Also, Ricoeur agrees with Kant’s view and states that “time cannot be directly observed.” (Ibid., 84-87)

## II. *Years Fleeting as Water: Between A la recherche and Confucius*

The first novella in *The Age of Gold* is arguably the most famous and representative part of the trilogy. It bears the title that was eventually extended to the first part of the trilogy. The two other novellas are *Standing Firm at Thirty* (三

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. I, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, p. 52. One of the most important objections raised against Ricoeur’s study is that it is essentially centered on a particular narrative or narratological tradition (the Aristotelian one) and that, therefore, the whole logic of his argument would be somehow limited, if not flawed, as it does not take into due consideration other narrative forms and genres. See Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory- History, Time and Space in Postwar Writing*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000, p. 56, pp. 68-69.

十而立) and *Years Fleeting as Water* (似水流年). The protagonist and narrator of the novellas and the whole trilogy are named Wang Er (王二). The various Wang Ers present similar personalities. All the narratives involving Wang Er(s) are characterized by unflinching black humor and constant shifting in narrative voices and temporal perspectives.

In *Years Fleeting as Water*, the last novella included in *The Golden Age*, the narrator states that the title of Proust's masterpiece "A la recherche du temps perdu" has not been well translated into Chinese: "追忆似水年华". In his view, because "追忆" implies the idea of commemorating a deceased individual, which, arguably, involves the attempt at chasing after the memory of the years that have flown away like the water of a river, rather than trying to reconstitute a lived experience of time:<sup>2</sup> In his discussion on Wang Xiaobo's reference to Proust, Shuangyi Li points out a few issues about Wang's reading or translating of Proust (Li, 2017), most of which the author explores in a forthcoming publication. Here the author would like to take a cue from Li's remark on Wang's reappropriation of Proust's fictional temporality and develop a tentative, comparative analysis of the notion of time. Li maintains that Wang's use of the water image in his new translation of *A la recherche*, however surprising it might be to western readers of that masterpiece of French literature, is in fact rooted in what he defines as the "recurrent association between time and water/river found in classical Chinese literary texts." Li further elaborates on this point claiming that "in classical Chinese thought the perception of the movement of water/river sometimes is the definition of 'time'". Further, he observes that in the *Analects*, there is a reference to Confucius (孔子), who is described as "standing by the river" and commenting, "what passes away is, perhaps, like this. Day and night, it never lets up."<sup>3</sup> (Ibid., 89-90) Focusing on how Wang redefines this traditional image of time, Li concludes that "on the conceptual level, it is also interesting to see how Wang's narrator's imagist perception of time and water/river itself signals an ontological repositioning from the classical Confucian teaching of time." (Ibid., 90)

As a matter of fact, the association between water/river and time is not necessarily very striking to Western readers in general, who might be familiar with the famous aphorism ascribed by Plato to Heraclitus, "Everything flows" (πάντα ῥεῖ) and Wang Xiaobo was keenly aware of this tradition. While a comparative study of the different ways in which the idea of time has been conceptualized in the West and China is beyond the scope of the present work, it

<sup>2</sup> "在似水流年里，有件事叫我日夜不安。在此之前首先要解释一下什么叫似水流年。普鲁斯特写了一本书，谈到自己身上发生过的事。这些事看起来就如一个人中了邪躺在河底，眼看潺潺流水，粼粼流光，落叶，浮木，空玻璃瓶，一样一样从身上流过去。这个书名怎么译，翻译家大费周章。最近的译法事追忆似水年华，听上去普鲁斯特写书时已经死了多时，又诈了户。而且这不好念。照我看普鲁斯特的书，译作似水流年就对了。这是个好名字。现在这名字主，我先要了，将来普鲁斯特来要，我再还给他，我尊敬死掉的老前辈。似水流年是一个人所有的一切只有这个东西，才真正归你所有。" (Wang, 1999, 145)

<sup>3</sup> The excerpt is taken from *The Analects-The Saying of Confucius*, trans. D.C. Lau, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000. The original (9.17), reads: "子在川上曰：逝者如斯夫，不舍昼夜".

is evident that a general understanding of the way different literary traditions frame and define it is essential and is briefly discussed in the next section.

### III. Time: Philosophical Perspectives (I)

As clearly and cogently explained by an Italian existentialist philosopher, there are three main traditions through which Western thought has conceptualized time. (Abbagnano, 1998, 1075) The first one is according to which time is the measurable movement order. This tradition began with Aristotle and was then developed by Kant, Leibniz, Locke, Newton, and Berkeley. After the post-Newtonian turn, this approach was problematized by scientists and philosophers as different as Popper, Prigogine, and Van Frassen, to the extent that the very existence of time was questioned. (Ibid., 1076-1080) The second tradition is that in which time is considered like “intuition of movement” or “intuited becoming” (Hegel), the most ancient proponents of this tradition being Plotinus and Augustine. (Ibid., 1080-1081) In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, two major thinkers, among others, developed their thought along these lines: Bergson and Husserl. (Id.) Augustine (354-430 C.E.) is identified by Abbagnano as the main proponent of this tradition, as this Christian philosopher identifies time with the very life of the soul. (Ibid., 1080) In his *Confessions* (Confessions), Augustine argues that the soul can extend itself towards the past or the future (*extension* and *distensio animi*). In this view, time cannot be subdivided into past, present, and future because there is only one present: The presence of the past, that of the present, and that of the future. These three presents are basically the consequences of three postures or functions of the soul: remembering (the past), paying attention (to the present), and waiting for (the future). On the other hand, true time is only God’s time, i.e., eternity. (Id.) The third tradition, whose main representative is Heidegger, is that time is but the structure of possibility. (Ibid., 1081.)

The first main difference, when compared to the two other traditions, is that Heidegger’s notion of time stresses the importance of the future over the two other dimensions (which, on the other hand, emphasize the primacy of the present). The most important aspect of Heidegger’s philosophy of time for our present discussion is that of his distinction between what he calls “authentic time” (*Zeitlichkeit*), which is real or authentic, insofar as it is original and pertains to the existence of death, and what he calls inauthentic time (*Geschichtlichkeit*), which is that of everyday, banal existence, made of an infinite sequence of instants. (Id.) Abbagnano’s general description of the philosophical conceptualization of time in the Western tradition can be effectively complemented by what Ricoeur describes as the three aporias haunting our perception of time. The first one is given by the contradiction between cosmological/cosmogonic time and phenomenological time (private, subjective time, experiential time.) Ricoeur sharply observes that while Heidegger’s solution, i.e., being for death, differs from Augustine’s Christian redemption, both struggle with the conundrum mentioned above (Ricoeur, 1990, 244-249). The second aporia is generated by the dissociation of the three ek-stases of time (future, past, and present). (Ibid., 249-261) Finally, the third aporia consists of: “the inscrutability of time and the limits of narrative.” (Ibid., 261-274)

## IV. Time: Philosophical Perspectives (II)

In what follows, the author argues that, contrary to what might be assumed, there exist important similarities between ancient, Western, pre-Christian tradition and Eastern views on the flowing nature of Time. In fact, one can draw fruitful parallels between the second tradition delineated by Abbagnano and some aspects of the Chinese tradition.<sup>4</sup> Let us tackle this issue by focusing on how the Buddhist philosopher Sengzhao (僧肇) (384-414 C.E.) reinterprets Confucius in Buddhist terms.<sup>5</sup> Sengzhao starts from the assumption that: “What other people mean by motion is that because things of the past (have gone away) and do not reach the present, therefore they are said to have moved and are not at rest (continue to exist). What the author means by rest is that, similarly, because things of the past do not reach the present, therefore they may be said to be at rest and have not moved. [Other people believe] things move but are not at rest because [past things] have not come down (continue to exist) to the present. [I believe] things are at rest and do not move because [past things] have not gone anywhere” (Chan, 1963, 346)<sup>6</sup> Also, “They already know that past things come [to the present] but still maintain that present things can go (pass on). As past things cannot come [to the present], where do present things go? Why? If we look for past things in the past, we find that they are never nonexistent in the past, but if we search for past things in the present, we find that they are never existent there.” (Id.)<sup>7</sup> And, linking this to a Taoist version of an episode in the life of Confucius, Sengzhao adds: “This is why Confucius said: “Hui, [every day] I see something new. [Although you and I have been associated with each other for a long time], in a single moment you are no longer the same as before.” (Id.)<sup>8</sup>

Sengzhao, gives an original interpretation of the following sentence ascribed to Confucius:

Man’s life passes away quickly, more quickly than the stream current.” (Ibid., 347) as he comments: (...) when the sage said that things go, he did not mean

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<sup>4</sup> Regarding this, one might also mention that in his last years, Heidegger became interested in the Buddhist tradition and that new research paths have been opened in that direction.

<sup>5</sup> One should also consider the original contribution provided to the discussion of time, even in terms of contemporary physics, provided by the Chinese logician tradition. Consider, for instance, the following pithy dictum by Hui Shi (惠施): “When the sun is at noon, it is setting; when there is life, there is death” (日方中方睨, 物方生方死), Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, translated and compiled by the author, Princeton, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1963, p. 232. Alternatively, this koan-like one: “One goes to the state of Yue today and arrives there yesterday” (日适越而昔来), Id.

<sup>6</sup> “夫人之所谓动者。以昔物不至今。故曰动而非静。我之所谓静者。亦以昔物不至今。故曰静而非动。动而非静。以其不来。静而非动。以其不去。”

<sup>7</sup> “既知往物而不来。而谓今物而可往。往物既不来。今物何所往。何则。求向物于向。于向未尝无。责向物于今。于今未尝有。”

<sup>8</sup> “故仲尼曰。回也见新交臂非故。”

that they really go; he merely wanted to prevent ordinary thoughts, and when he said that things remain in the same state, he did not mean that they really remain; he merely wanted to discard what ordinary people call the passing (impermanence) of things. (Id.)<sup>9</sup>

Now, commenting on the sentence by Confucius quoted above by Shuangyi Li,<sup>10</sup> Sengzhao claims that there exists a similarity in terms of how Zhuangzi (庄子) and Confucius in terms of how they conceptualize, or, better yet, metaphorize, time as he states that, “When Chuang Tzu said that [it is impossible to] hide a mountain [in a lake for at midnight a strongman may come and carry it away on his back]” a fable narrated in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of that work, “and when Confucius stood by the stream [and said], ‘It passes on like this, never ceasing day or night’, both expressed the feeling that what is gone cannot be retained” but did not say that “things can cast aside the present” and pass on.” (Ibid. 348)<sup>11</sup> Sengzhao then adds that, therefore, when Confucius “talks about truth, he speaks in terms of [things being] immutable. However, when he wants to lead the ordinary folks, he talks in terms of things moving like a current.” (Id.)<sup>12</sup> The following are other relevant excerpts:

Both the past and the present exist permanently because they do not move. To say that [things] go does not necessarily mean that they really go, for the past cannot be reached from the present, since [the past] does not come to the present. (...) “People seek the past in the present. [Since it is not found in the present], they say that it does not remain. I seek the present in the past. [Since it is not in the past], I know that it does not go anywhere. If the present passes on to the past, there should be the present in the past. If the past reaches to the present, then there should be the past in the present. (Ibid., 349)<sup>13</sup>

However, Sengzhao concludes that since none of these possibilities is given, “Everything according to its nature, remains for only a period of time. What thing is there to come and go?” (Id.)<sup>14</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan comments: “This is the central issue of the problem, for motion and rest imply time. Throughout the essay, Sengchao follows closely the logic of Nagarjuna. According to him, time is unreal. For example, the present cannot be either in the past or not in the past. If it is in the past, it is obviously not present, and if it is not in the past, there would be nothing to cause its present existence. Since it is neither in the past nor not in the past, it is unreal.” (Id.) In other words, as pointed out by Giuseppe Tucci, in the Indian Buddhist tradition, including the Nagarjuna (龙树菩萨) tradition followed by Sengzhao, the present time is conceptualized as a simple “point-instant,

<sup>9</sup> “是以言去不必去。闲人之常想。称往不必往。释人之所谓往耳。”

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 3.

<sup>11</sup> “然则庄生之所以藏山。仲尼之所以临川。斯皆感往者之难留。”

<sup>12</sup> “故谈真有不迁之称。导俗有流动之说。”

<sup>13</sup> “故今常存。以其不动。称去不必去。谓不从今至古。以其不来。(.....)人则求古于今。谓其不住。吾则求今于古。知其不去。今若至古。古应有今。古若至今。今应有古。”

<sup>14</sup> “事各性住于一世。有何物而可去来。”

imperceptible between a past and a future”<sup>15</sup> as Buddhists argue that “in the sequence we observe only two moments, which are imagined but not perceived, i.e., what has already been and what will be.” (Tucci, 2005, 356)<sup>16</sup> More specifically, in Indian Buddhism, time is not regarded as a category or as a substance; rather it “is inferred by the sequence of dharmas, or, better yet, by the sequence of moments through which their uninterrupted passing takes place: birth, duration, and death.” (Ibid., 361)<sup>17</sup> In fact, “in general, the Buddhists maintained that the notion of time is determined by the new qualities taken on by dharmas, which in the current usage are indicated through the words ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future.’” (Id.)<sup>18</sup> In other words, to the Buddhists time is just a “sequence” (“successione”) as “continuity is but an illusion” «la continuità è un’illusione» and “we do not perceive the present time because it does not last and is just a point-instant (...) a construction of our thought.” (Id.)<sup>19</sup> Countering the argument propounded by the Naiyayikas (纳亚卡), the Buddhists argue that “the memory of the past is not the past, the future foresight is not the future.” (Ibid., 362)<sup>20</sup> On the same philosophical ground, i.e., the Nagarjuna position on the nature of time, “By arguing that time is impossible, Sengzhao, concludes that motion is illusory, since motion depends on time.” (Chan, 1963, 351)

It is interesting to observe that this view presents striking resemblances to the skeptical aspect in Augustine’s discussion of time:

The skeptical argument is well-known: time has no being since the future is not yet, the past is no longer, and the present does not remain. And yet we do speak of time as having being. We say that things to come *will be*, that things past *were*, and that things present *are passing away*. Even passing away is not nothing. It is remarkable that it is language usage that provisionally provides the resistance to the thesis of nonbeing. (Ricoeur, 1990, 7)

Another commonality between the Western, pre-Christian notion of time, eventually reworked in the phenomenological tradition, and the Indian, pre-Buddhist tradition has to do with the distinction between a quantifiable, empirical time and an eternal, absolute, notion of time. As pointed out by Tucci, “myth begged the question of such duplicity but did not provide a solution” (Tucci, 2005, 354).<sup>21</sup> However, the problems involved in such duplicity were eventually tackled by the rich historical-philosophical tradition that developed in India and, with the

<sup>15</sup> «Punto istante, impercibile fra un passato ed un futuro». All translations from the Italian are mine.

<sup>16</sup> «Nella successione notiamo solo due momenti, immaginati ma non percepiti, quel che è già stato e quel che sarà».

<sup>17</sup> «Viene inferito dal succedersi dei dharmas, per meglio dire dal succedersi dei momenti traverso i quali si svolge il loro ininterrotto trapassare: nascita, durata e morte».

<sup>18</sup> «Generalmente i Buddhisti opinarono che la nozione di tempo è determinata dall’assunzione di nuove qualità da parte dei dharmas, qualità che l’uso esprime con le parole passato, presente e futuro».

<sup>19</sup> «Noi non percepiamo il presente perché il presente non dura, è solo un punto istante (...) una costruzione del nostro pensiero».

<sup>20</sup> «Il ricordo del passato non è il passato e l’anticipazione del futuro non è il futuro».

<sup>21</sup> «Il mito poneva questa duplicità e non la risolveva.»

ejection of Buddhism, continued in other Asian countries and reached new speculative heights in China. In fact, as observed by Tucci:

Philosophical systems take the problem of time away from myth and try to make sense out of it in different ways. In any case, the two times, i.e., the astronomic time, which is measurable, and the extratemporal one, which is eternal, run side by side. (Ibid., 355) <sup>22</sup>

Most importantly, “there are cases in which one can leave the measurable time and enter in the atemporal time, a situation that takes place during the meditative process when the meditating subject attains the eternal levels of the Absolute and identifies with them.” (Id.) <sup>23</sup> Tucci points out that in the Jainistic (耆那教) tradition, time is defined by two different, complementary terms, namely “kāla” (काल) (卡拉) and “samaya” (समय) (萨玛亚). While kāla, which means both time, destiny, and death “is imagined as a continuum consisting of infinite particles for ever separated from each other” (Ibid., 356) <sup>24</sup> and is “eternal, non-created and indestructible,” (Id.) <sup>25</sup> on the other hand, samaya is “the measurable time of everyday experience, that has a beginning and is subject to limitations, and is subdivided in years, months and days.” (Id.) <sup>26</sup> In other words, “samaya is kāla’s way of manifesting itself; its unit of measure is the time-instant that it takes for an atom to move from one point to another.” (Id.) <sup>27</sup>

Another interesting point of comparison between the Western and the Indian tradition, which, through Buddhism, although in different terms, got sinicized, has to do with the difference between time as a quantifiable entity, i.e., Chronos (χρόνος), in the Greek mythological tradition, or kāla, in the Indian tradition, and time as a qualitative notion, i.e., kairos (καιρός), in Greek, and *ṛtu* (ऋतु), literally “season” in Sanskrit (from a word related to “the same root ‘R’ ‘to go.’” (Venkataraman, 1972, 1). What is particularly relevant here is that the qualitative connotation inscribed in kairos/ṛtu is that of the right moment for a particular human (religious) action or natural phenomenon to take place and, in the case of *ṛtu*, “the form in which Nature expressed itself in an orderly sequence in particular, specific and patent form, in short, the Seasons” (Id.), i.e., a special time or moment that can be *ritually* lifted out of the events surrounding ordinary life. The iconographic representations of Chronos emphasize the destructive and mortal feature of time (an old bearded man carrying a scythe and an hour-glass), while that of kairos involves that of a running youth whose hair is hanging in

<sup>22</sup> «I sistemi filosofici sottraggono il problema del tempo al mito e in vario modo cercano di rendersene conto. Ad ogni modo i due tempi, il tempo astronomico, misurabile e il tempo extratemporale, l’eterno, corrono paralleli».

<sup>23</sup> «Si danno casi in cui si può uscire dal tempo misurabile e inserirsi nell’atemporale come accade nel processo meditativo quando il meditante raggiunge i piani eterni dell’assoluto e con essi si identifica».

<sup>24</sup> «Viene immaginato come un continuum consistente di particelle infinite che restano sempre separate fra di loro».

<sup>25</sup> «Eterno, non creato ed indistruttibile».

<sup>26</sup> «Il tempo misurabile dell’esperienza quotidiana che ha un principio ed è soggetto a limiti, il tempo diviso in anni, mesi e giorni».

<sup>27</sup> «Il samaya è il modo di apparire del kāla e la sua unità di misura è l’istante di tempo che un atomo impiega per passare da un punto ad un altro».



front of his head (for those who can grab him at the right moment), but who is bald in the back (as nobody will be able to take hold of the right moment once it will be passed in front of them).

#### V. Time in *The Golden Age*

In what follows, the author would like to consider some of the temporal notions briefly discussed above and argue that they might be creatively adapted to some key moments in Wang's time trilogy. As one might recall, the incipit of *The Golden Age* describes how the mature Wang Er recalls how and why he first met the woman with whom he eventually established a pact of "great friendship" and who eventually became his lover:

At twenty-one, I was placed in a production team for reeducation in Yunnan. That year Chen Qingyang was twenty-six and a doctor who happened to work where I did (Wang, 2007, trans. Hongling Zhang and Jason Sommer, 61)<sup>28</sup>

A few pages later, elaborating on his age at that time, Wang Er/the narrator recollects:

On my twenty-first birthday, I was herding buffalo at the riverside. In the afternoon, I fell asleep on the grass. I remembered covering myself with a few banana leaves before I fell asleep, but by the time I woke up I found nothing on my body. (Perhaps the buffalo had eaten the leaves.) The sunshine in the subtropical dry season had burned my entire body red, leaving me in agony of burning and itching." (Ibid., 65)<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, a natural and yet surprising consequence recalled and magnified by the narrator is that besides getting sunburnt, when he woke up, he found himself sexually aroused. The narrator concludes that this was how he spent his birthday.<sup>30</sup> Obviously, the choice to highlight that unforgettable moment in terms of what happened during his 21st birthday emphasizes the personal-histological and biological understanding of the self versus the representation of a linear, progressive development of a politically and ideologically contextualized History. Besides, the mature Wang Er re-members or re-collects how he found himself mysteriously "thrown" into an alien space-time dimension as a young man. However, what is more relevant is that the measurable notion of time is focused on Wang Er's number of years (his 21st anniversary) and not on the historical context (the Cultural Revolution); furthermore, what happens to his body (getting sunburnt and sexually aroused) takes place unbeknownst to him, in the non-measurable time of the dream, so akin to death and the atemporal condition of the

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<sup>28</sup> “我二十一岁时，正在云南插队。陈清扬当时二十六岁，就在我插队的地方当医生。” (Wang, 1999, 3)

<sup>29</sup> “我过二十一岁生日那天，正在河边放牛。下午我躺在草地上睡着了。我睡去时，身上盖了几片芭蕉叶子，醒来时身上已经一无所有（叶子可能被牛吃了）。亚热带旱季的阳光把我晒得浑身赤红，痛痒难当” (Ibid., 6-7)

<sup>30</sup> “这就是我过生日时的情形。” (Ibid., 7)

meditative process (despite the latter being the consequence of a conscious effort aimed at detaching oneself from desire).

Another critical moment in *The Golden Age*, in terms of how it presents the conflict between a progress-oriented, quantifiable notion of time and a static version of it is offered in the description of how Wang Er and Chen Qingyang (陈清扬) live their lives after escaping from the farm and settling down in a secluded area primarily inhabited by local ethnic minorities. While they both love their new life, almost frozen in time (six months which looks like a portion of happy eternity), they eventually decide to go back to the farm for various reasons. Undeniably, the life they spend there is apparently akin to an Edenic, prelapsarian condition. However, one may also argue that the strange world discovered by the couple echoes that of the Peach Blossom Spring (桃花源) described in the famous work by Tao Yuanming (陶渊明); or the primeval, pre-historical innocence of the small community (小国寡民) described in the Laozi (老子). However, what triggers the couple's decision to leave that safe, timeless haven is Wang Er's refusal to take Chen Qingyang's hint at her desire to have a baby, i.e., at acknowledging the inevitable passing of time and the law of the biological reproductive call.

Lastly, one should observe that another aspect problematized in *The Golden Age* is the refusal to accept the logic implicit in the slogan "no regrets for youth" (青春无悔). While acknowledging that the time spent far away from home devoting oneself to meaningless or useless tasks does coincide with their "golden age," both Wang Er and Chen Qingyang are keenly aware that Chronos took it all. At the same time, Kairos just offered them the bald side of the back of his head. Such a distinction represents perhaps a more or less conscious inspiration for Heidegger's distinction mentioned above between authentic time, "the time for which Being plans its privileged possibility (the time that has already been, so that its choices are choices of the already chosen, i.e., of the impossibility of choosing" (Abbagnano, 1998, 1081),<sup>31</sup> and inauthentic time, i.e., "the time of banal existence, in which time becomes an infinite sequence of instants. (Id.)"<sup>32</sup>

In the next two sections, this complex and fascinating distinction will be explored in the light of two other works by Wang Xiaobo.

#### VI. Authentic and Inauthentic Time in *The Silver Age*

In this metafictional work, the narrator has a position at a dystopic writing center: he is in charge of assessing, and invariably censoring and failing, the "creative" works of a group of "writers." In turn, his attempt at re-writing his only best-seller, i.e., at adding fictional truth to it, is invariably censored by his own supervisors. Interestingly, excerpts from the various versions of the same novel overlap with the events of the narrator's life, at his work unit and private dimension, and seem to erase the distance between the fictional and the real. At the end of the story, the narrator offers an ironically and sadly final view of the nature of fiction. Starting from the assumption that "fabrication" (虚构) is

<sup>31</sup> «Quello per cui l'Esserci progetta la propria possibilità privilegiata (quello che è già stato, sicché le sue scelte sono scelte del già scelto cioè dell'impossibilità di scegliere).»

<sup>32</sup> «Quello dell'esistenza banale, in cui il tempo diventa una successione infinita di istanti»

allowed in fiction, he observes that it can be subdivided into the kind of work you “really feel you must write” and the fiction “you do not want to write” and that even though “at times you are really writing fiction, yet, more often you are simply living a certain kind of life” like, for instance, at his office where people “are not actually writing fiction because they are busy living their lives writing” (Wang, 1997, 53)<sup>33</sup> The narrator knows that the not-so-secret precondition for successful fiction writing, the understanding of which keeps eluding the most obtuse member of his team, is that one should stay away from what is generally regarded as life, “必须从所谓的生活里逃开”– which is exactly the opposite of what is institutionally prompted in that dystopic world, i.e., “experience” another life. (Id.) It is why “过写作生活,” i.e., “living life writing” (Id.) or, to put this in Socratic terms, living an unexamined life, cannot lead to the creation of real fiction. In fact, what the narrator defines as the “flatness and insipidity” (索然无味) (Ibid., 54) of such living has just the taste and heaviness of what Heidegger calls ‘inauthentic’ time:

Da-sein plunges out of itself into itself, into the groundless and nothingness of inauthentic everydayness. But this plunge remains concealed from it by the way things have been publicly interpreted so that it is interpreted as “getting ahead” and “living concretely.” (Heidegger, 1996, 167)<sup>34</sup>

#### VII. Authentic and Inauthentic Time in *Longevity Temple*

As every reader of Wang’s fiction knows, the traumatic experiences of the 1950s and 1960s haunt the trilogy’s main characters through space and time (present and future). In fact, traces of trauma also characterize the *personae* and fictional characters of Wang Er, the writer/protagonist of *Longevity Temple* (万寿寺), the first novel in *The Age of Bronze*. In this novel, a story within the story is set in a remote area in the era of the historical Tang Dynasty. The most striking aspect of this novel is the whole idea of remembering (in the sense of putting together the scattered pieces of) the present by creating a fictional past. Wang Er lives in the late 1990s and, after an accident, experiences severe memory loss. The whole reminiscing tone is set in intertextual terms by a proleptic reference to the fact that the narrator owns a copy of Modiano’s *Rue des boutiques obscures* (1980) (translated as *Missing Person* in English and 暗店街 in Chinese), a novel that describes how Guy Roland, a detective who experienced a traumatic loss of memory, tries to retrieve his past through various threads, people and places in what looks like a detective story about who “stole” or “killed” his past. On the

<sup>33</sup> “你真正要写的小说和你不想写的小说 (...) 有时候你真正在写小说, 但更多的时候你是在过着某种生活” (...) “不是在写小说, 而是在过写作生活。”

<sup>34</sup> Heidegger also observes: “Accordingly, the irresoluteness of inauthentic existence temporalizes itself in the mode of a making present that does not awaits but forgets. The irresolute person understands himself in terms of the events and accidents nearest by that are encountered in such making present and urge themselves upon him in changing ways. Busily losing *himself* in what is taken care of, the irresolute person *loses his time* in them, too.” (Heidegger, 1996, 377) This is, in another words, the main, negative, connotation of what the narrator in this novella defines as “living life writing.”

other hand, Wang Er, after struggling his way back to his office, finds on the table a manuscript that describes the story of a soldier of fortune, his tattered army, as well as his loves and humorous failures. Little by little, Wang Er's sense of self or memory is eventually restored, but another sense of loss creeps in.

What is retrieved is the banality of existence or, to put it in Heideggerian terms, the inauthentic (sense) of time. Moreover, what is lost is a different form of the total Bergsonian past as creation and duration.<sup>35</sup> Such temporal orientation is perhaps made even more explicit towards the novel's end. In fact, Chapter 8 begins with a lyrical description of Chang'an (长安), of its walls, external and internal. The city is compared to a maze, and its snowy landscape is described in lyrical terms. (Wang, 1999, 223) However, the narrator sadly remembers he once lived in a grey and soulless metropolis – Beijing – which is a city of names (as opposed to Chang'an, that famous city where names were contingent or unimportant) (Ibid., 228)<sup>36</sup> What follows is a description of how, after his grandmother's passing, he and his younger cousin barely made a living in a dark era, where, the narrator observes quoting Nabokov, everything was in black and white. The narrator concludes this section of the first part of the chapter by quoting half of the *Missing Person* leitmotif again (Ibid., 231).<sup>37</sup> The narrator remembers the Chinese translation of a sentence from a poem by Mayakovsky<sup>38</sup> and then is very surprised to remember the identity of this Soviet poet and his tragic fate. (Ibid., 232)<sup>39</sup> Another relevant parallel between Mayakovsky's poetry and Wang Xiaobo's fiction has to do with how the latter's resists against the greyness of the present and conceptualize a world of possibilities and a different temporality. Regarding the importance of these aspects in Mayakovsky's poetry, M.D. Steinberg states:

Mayakovsky's poetry visualized both the oppressive darkness of the lived present and a world of possibility greater than the normativized reality of his own time. He offered a counterreality of "Vladimir Mayakovsky" as utopian antithesis to the merely factual reality of the present. He explored the conventional linear temporality of the world as given and the possibility of an explosive leap into the future. Time was particularly important for Mayakovsky's poetic thought and is a central theme in all utopian thought. Like Kollontai and Trotsky, Mayakovsky's utopian impulse collided with the stubbornness of the present, with the tenacious force of necessity (...) This utopian impulse was central to the experience of the Russian revolution for so many. We must recognize their utopian "leap" even as we acknowledge the dystopian and catastrophic landing." (Steinberg, 2018, 83)

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<sup>35</sup> Bergson, whose philosophy deeply influenced Marcel Proust, theorized time as duration (*durée*). In Abbagnano's view, the main features of duration would be the following: 1) time is always renewing itself as a continuous process of creation; 2) time is preserved as a whole; nothing is lost: it snowballs as it heads into the future. While focusing on the notion of experience rather than memory (as Bergson did), Husserl also highlighted that while any given experience has a beginning and an end, everything is preserved in the flowing of experience in a kind of eternal present. See: Abbagnano, 1998, 1080.

<sup>36</sup> “但我又曾生活在灰色的北京里。这里充满了名字。”

<sup>37</sup> “我的过去一片朦胧... ..现在我正期待着新的名字出现... ..”

<sup>38</sup> “一张张燃烧的纸牌” - the fourth verse of the poem entitled “Night”(Ночь).

<sup>39</sup> “他是一个苏俄诗人。他的命运非常悲惨。”

It goes without saying that in Wang Xiaobo's post-dystopic future, a different world of (private/individual possibilities) replaces the socialized version hoped for by Mayakovsky.

The narrator concludes that he has recovered his memory and owns a story that truly belongs to him, but he yearns to go back to Chang'an because living in this world is not enough, and a person also needs to have a world with poetry. (Wang, 1999, 246).<sup>40</sup> However, eventually, "everything irreversibly moves towards crass mediocrity" (Ibid., 247)<sup>41</sup>

With Heidegger, one might conclude that the conflation of different temporal time structures and narratives in this experimental piece by Wang Xiaobo hints at the fact that authentic and inauthentic times "are both sudden happening to Being, i.e., to man, of what the planned possibility shows; therefore, this is a *self-presenting* from the future of what has already been in the past."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> "虽然记忆已经恢复，我有了一个属于自己的故事，但我还想回到长安城里——这已经成为一种积习。一个人只拥有此生此世是不够的，他还应该拥有诗意的世界。对我来说，这个世界在长安城里。"

<sup>41</sup> "一切都在无可挽回地走向庸俗。"

<sup>42</sup> «... sono entrambi il sopravvenire all'esserci (cioè all'uomo) di ciò che la possibilità progettata gli prospetta; e perciò è un *presentarsi*, dal futuro, di ciò che è già stato nel passato » Abbagnano, *Dizionario di Filosofia – Terza edizione aggiornata e ampliata da Giovanni Fornero*, Op. Cit., 1081.

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