

Preface

In this creative retelling, I combined various elements from Yu Hua's *Classical Romance* and Wang Xiaobo's *The Golden Age*.

Beneath the veneer of the traditional formula of romance, à la *Peony Pavilion*, *Classical Romance* has a dark, almost sensual energy that is tightly reigned in and barely unleashed. Instead, Yu Hua chooses to use moments of extreme violence without affective consequence to shock the reader, amidst a placid, apathetic omniscient narration that violates the Maoist discourse of realism and life-affirmation with its barrenness and routine irrationality. Meanwhile, *The Golden Age* subverts the totalitarian regime of thought during the Cultural Revolution by the means of sexual liberation and deadpan humor. The detailed, oddball depictions of sex function not just as protest but as an absurd metaphor for state power and the voluntary, even enthusiastic, collaboration of those subject to it.

Similarly, my piece seeks to subvert the seemingly indomitable and overwhelming control of Maoist ideological thought over sexuality and ethics during the Cultural Revolution. I relocate the plotline of *Classical Romance* to the time of the Cultural Revolution. The first-person narrator becomes an educated Beijing youth sent down to the countryside.

In particular, I am inspired by Wang Xiaobo's negotiation of carnality in a situation of absurdity. In my retelling, the unlikely 'carnival' of sexuality — both externally as well as within the narrator's psyche — reclaims the body from being subsumed under the collective imagination of the Maoist sublime. Instead, the body is used in defiance of party politics and for individual romance. By unleashing this sexual element (previously absent in *Classical Romance*, apart from the almost awkward nocturnal encounter; but ubiquitous in *The Golden Age*) and consecrating the profane or obscene dimensions of romantic desire, I sought to provoke laughter and celebrate, per Mikhail Bakhtin, "a temporary liberation from prevailing truth." The scene where the narrator discovers that it is his lover being chopped becomes almost carnivalesque, and probably the climactic moment of dark comedy in the retelling. As the narrator becomes a participant in this 'carnival,' where the observers are excited at the prospect of illicit romance due to the state of repression, the narrator gains access to an ephemeral freedom and it allows him to see the world anew (however temporarily).

Ultimately, like many other stories in this course, this piece also seeks to ultimately reclaim 'love' and 'romance' back from political discourse, propaganda, and abuse. The narrator's own individual romantic awakening, however, is subverted in the ending with hints of post-revolution farce. Though the seemingly bulwark, unbeatable forces of Maoist authoritarianism have ended, a new force is about to enter: capitalism. A happily-ever-after is still elusive, post-Mao.

Classic Romance 《经典爱情》

I was on the usual route to university, past the boisterous, gossiping aunties selling roasted chestnuts and half-rotting fruits in a molehill of apples, oranges, yellow peppers, greens, and mangosteens, past the old men smoking in clusters and playing mahjong with mynas pecking by their feet, and weaving into one dull hutong and then out to the next.

There was a physics examination at 9am but the sunlight was still gentle on my cheek. School was just recently suspended for the younger ones, but the academic slog still persisted for the university students. Ever since that night two days ago, I had found it hard to focus. All I could think about was Hui's full bosom, thin white legs, a symphonic flood of moans, and that pair of eyes that parsed equations into heat... Her lock of lacquer-black hair pressed in Chairman Mao's book, tuck in the pocket nearest to my little Buddha. Just one night and I was probably in love with her. After two left turns, and a brief stop at the roadside stall for a meat bao, I took a detour. The juicy pork lacquered the roof my mouth, squishing. I took a gulp of soy milk, almost scalding my tongue.

And there it was. The siheyuan that I had wandered into on an aimless stroll the day before yesterday.

Honestly, barely forty-eight hours had passed but the memory of that night beyond those flashing moments of white flesh and temperature eluded me. My impression immediately after the event itself had been hazy. Thinking back now, there were a few disjointed scraps: I was drawn to her gilded door like one of those romantic scholars in misty Jiangnan rain, on a dark moonless night, except that this was Beijing. Usually, I wouldn't have had taken that route home, but that day I found myself wandering down a path that ran along the perimeter of the grey walls

of an aristocratic, aged estate. After a curve, just as the wall had seemed to disappear, there was an open side gate. It had beckoned with the sound of a running stream, the gilded glimpse of curving eaves amidst foliage, and the muffled murmurs of girlish laughter drifting over the vermilion wall side door left ajar. Recollecting now, I could only grasp at a montage-like sequence of vignettes: a sultry silhouette by the silkscreen window, Hui's face peering out, blushing first in shock and then curiosity, a gathering storm, a flickering light, my jagged breath on her lips, and a tide of moans that ebbed and flowed. The thought made me almost abashed, yet even now — as I fumbled my way back to the place of encounter — it was like a solitary lamp in a dark room, what I remembered most clearly: my little Buddha found his way into Hui.

Today, I was here to see Hui.

“Leave soon, but return soon,” she had whispered hotly into my ear.

Every now and then I could hear dogs barking in the distance or some chirping bird. But, everything on the other side of the wall was silent. Here was a siheyuan that seemed robbed of the sounds of life. There was not even the sound of running water. The side door was now firmly bolted. It was like I had dreamed it all up. I followed the tiled path around the perimeters to the front gate, guarded by what should have been two stone lions, except that one had its head smashed. Battered and scarred, they looked less like guardians and more like victims.

At the center was a pure white poster against the bright red. Its black, bold characters read: LONG LIVE THE PROLETARIAN REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT OF REBELLION! BOMBARD THE BOURGEOIS DICTATORSHIP!

I stared, mesmerized. I had fucked the bourgeoisie!

When I was nineteen, a year and three months after I was no longer a virgin, I was sent down to

Yunnan.

In Yunnan everyone had plenty of time to nap, but not much to eat. The team leader told us to learn from the locals. We shouted slogans about that.

“Good country people,” he said.

Then, in my second year there, the good country people started accusing us city students of taking their chickens and stealing their dogs. We said, That’s bullshit! We haven’t tasted meat in months! They screamed back at us, Neither have we! It got worse as the winter wore on.

It felt like anything could happen. On my way to the farm on a very cold day, I saw a man crushed under a tree, very badly in fact and almost cut into two. There were a couple of people huddled over, whispering, and after a rustle, a consensus seemed to be reached. A little boy crouched down and was licking the prostrate arm like a dog. As I continued my way, I heard from behind me the “ka-cha” sound of an ax bearing down on bone. The last sight over my shoulder was of two people rapidly slicing apart the body before handing the limbs one by one to the other observers standing at the periphery. I wanted to run back and say something but then again, the man was already dead and I really couldn’t quite be sure if they were doing what I think they were doing.

I told the team leader but he said I was slandering the good country people, so I learned to keep my mouth shut.

When spring came, I walked on the highway to Jingkan. There was a restaurant there that had brown sugar buns (really the only kind of food sold) and I had some yuan left over to afford it as a treat. The yellow highway winded between earthy, barren fields. Strewn sparsely on both sides were remnants of bamboo fences, now twisted out of shape, and the dilapidated remains of thatched roofs. Bits of thatch shuddered with the onslaught of a sudden wind. Ahead of me, there

were a few pairs of footprints embedded in the dust, but none from livestock.

The spring scenery was as desolate as winter. Several withered tree trunks I passed by had yellow teeth sticking out of the bark, teeth that had been embedded there when people had gnawed too greedily into the bark. I saw a man sitting on the ground, gnawing on something, his fingers red with frost. He glanced at me hungrily before turning back to chewing.

When I got to the restaurant in Jingkan that day, it was already afternoon, and since it wasn't a market day, there was just a deserted dirt road and a few deserted state-run stores. Inside the restaurant, a swarm of flies circled around a few plates of white boiled meat on the counter. It was quite remarkable. My moist tongue touched my chapped lips. I hadn't seen freshly cooked meat (there were some homemade smoked meat and sausages that one of the good country people would sneak out for me back in the summer after our frolic in the grass) for so long that I felt saliva sloshing in my mouth.

The proprietor beamed and gestured for me to sit. I sat beside a man who was drinking and I chatted awhile with him.

"What is it that you'd like?" The proprietor asked.

We both replied in a chorus, "MEAT!"

The man beside added in a drunken slur, "I want mine fresh!"

I nodded in fervor. Goodbye, my brown sugar buns. Even if it bankrupted me, I was going to taste freshly cooked meat today.

"Coming right up," the proprietor said with a smile.

So saying, he walked into an adjacent room. Barely minutes later, a horrific, gut-wrenching scream sliced the air—a protracted sound coming from the room that the proprietor had just disappeared into. I widened my eyes. It was an indisputably human cry.

“Hey, you hear that?” I whispered furiously to the man next to me.

Even in his drunken stupor, he looked at me as though I was the idiot. And then his watery eyes turned almost patronizing.

He enunciated like he was onstage, “Been happening all winter, you NEW here from the CITY?”

I reminded myself that he was drunk and repressed the urge to let him know how new my fists were.

The scream continued punching its way through the walls and into the room, like an entire life being expelled in one breath. Then, the sound died down abruptly. In the fraction of silence in between, I heard the squeak of an ax being wrenched from bone. I thought of that man cut into half by a tree during winter, and then dismembered further by working hands.

Now, the minced cries continued with the loud, rhythmic sounds of the ax bearing down. The sound of the ax and the sound of the screams rose and fell in unison, filling in each other's gaps.

“But does it conform to party policy?” I asked, worried.

The man beside me continued muttering, “Wine barrels burst if from time to time we do not open them and let in some air,” CHOP, “we are all sensible people,” CHOP.

I barely had the attention to make sense of what he was saying because the screams began to taper into a feminine moan and it reminded me so much of the sounds from that night I had first experienced what happened between a man and a woman, those magic sounds from Hui, that I felt absolutely struck by the sense that it had to be her. Incredibly, my little Buddha was standing up.

I stood up, the stool screeching behind me.

At the door to the adjacent room, a strange stench filled my nose. The proprietor had disappeared into what seemed to be the kitchen and there was only a woman prone on the floor, her hair in disarray like in the aftermath of making love. One of her legs was gone. Blood and flesh blurred together into an indistinct mass where the leg had been chopped away. I went to her side, kneeled down, and brushed a lock of hair away from her face.

It was Hui! I hadn't seen her in three years, but I was sure it was her. A man always remembered the first one he had in his life.

She had yet to breathe her last. Though her moans began to subside, her face was distorted in terrible pain and her fluttering eyes had no glimpse of recognition in them despite my loud cries.

I was desperate for her to remember me. In my helplessness and sorrow, I started recounting any detail I could remember from that night.

I started with the siheyuan and then the rain and then...

"And then I buried it deep within you..." I said anxiously. She finally blinked.

A sound came from the door. It was the proprietor and the drinker. They both stared at us, eyes glittering and faces full of absorption. I felt exposed, like I was onstage.

"Go on," the drinker said, licking his lips.

But I ignored him because suddenly Hui's hand started groping towards me, stroking the air. I clasped her outstretched hand. Her eyes grew soft and luminous with tears. I knew then that I probably loved her although I had barely thought of her in the past three years (because too many things had happened). In the moment when she recognized me, it seemed that all the other baffling things ceased to matter; I no longer needed to figure out why we were here, whether I needed to write a confession for what I had just recounted in detail, whether I was being a class

enemy, and so forth. When she stared at me through the pain and the blood and the years, I felt like I was willing to go through anything for her, even denouncement.

“Get me my leg,” she begged me, “and then finish me off.”

I understood the first part, but not the second. In her distress, she might have wanted to die. It was all very dramatic. I turned to look at the proprietor.

I asked him, “How much do I have to pay you?”

I ended up giving him all the money I had, which was two hundred yuan. It was very procapitalist of the proprietor, but he told me I would be a thief if I just took her away. They, the two onlookers to our reunion, seemed simultaneously fascinated and scandalized.

“You better bring her back to CIVILIZATION! Enjoy her while you can!” The drinker garbled with a twitch in his eye (perhaps, a wink) on our way out.

Hui was losing a lot of blood and snapped out of consciousness after she saw me recover her leg. There was a rare serenity on her face and at times, I was suddenly convinced that she had to be dead but then I would feel her pulse and she would still be breathing. I cradled her in my arms, with her severed leg lying unsteadily perched over my arm, out of the restaurant, down the street in Jingkan, along the yellow highway, and all the way to the only doctor I knew — a woman in the fifteenth team at the foot of the mountain, who had graduated from Beijing Medical School. By the time I reached the doctor, I was half-dead. I knew I looked like I had just returned from the frontlines of battle but then again, everyone knew there was no war and no one to fight. At least eleven people saw us, but I was too tired to care.

At first, I was certain that Hui wouldn’t die. If my revolutionary spirit didn’t, my newly discovered love would save her. The doctor in the fifteenth team treated the wound to the best that she could and then Hui was sent on an ox cart to the hospital at the farm headquarters.

I became confused whether she survived because after a while, she didn't come back and it seemed as though she never existed. When I asked the doctor, she suggested that maybe Hui was sent in for medical treatment at a bigger hospital far away. After a year, I realized that she had probably died, far away from me. If not, she would have had come looking for me, wouldn't she?

Several years later, I found myself down the full expanse of the yellow highway, all the way past Jingkan, beyond the farm headquarters, and back to Beijing. The journey back to real civilization was through a lovely spring landscape of thriving trees with leafy canopies and willows flourishing between the mulberry and hemp fields. Out of all my trips down the yellow highway, all I could remember was the one I took with Hui dying in my arms and only desolation all around us. The memory lingered like a shadow on the present prosperity.

About a year after I was back in the city, I found myself walking past the boisterous, gossiping aunties selling roasted chestnuts and half-rotting fruits in a molehill of apples, oranges, yellow peppers, greens, and mangosteens, past the old men smoking in clusters and playing mahjong with mynas pecking by their feet, and weaving into one dull hutong and then out to the next.

Unthinkingly, I found myself making two left turns and before I knew it, I was in front of a siheyuan's red gates, guarded by two fierce stone lions — no heads missing and no white poster in sight. I wandered in through the same side door, still left ajar, but before I could retrace the steps I took more than a decade ago, a brown dog chased me out and almost bit me on my buttocks.

I returned to the siheyuan again a few days later. The brown dog stood guard by the side

door. Undeterred or driven by some dogged impulse, I followed the tiled path around the perimeters to the front gate.

A woman stood there, in a long, robe-like beige coat all the way to her ankles, with her back facing me. She was rather fashionable. Five years ago, this outfit would have landed her in the trouble of writing a confession. Before I could complete that thought, she turned around and *that* threw me into an utter state of bewilderment.

It was Hui! Darker, more lines on her face, breasts sagging (from what I could see), but definitely her nonetheless.

But could it be? She was standing upright and then walking towards me. I noticed a slight hobble in her steps.

“I thought maybe I would bump into you here,” she said, as tears began to fall.

I took the rest of the steps towards her.

I couldn’t refrain from asking, “Are you human? Or a ghost?”

“Believe in Marx and money, not ghosts and spirits,” she said, laughing through her mist of tears. I clasped her in an embrace and there was no doubt left that she was as real and solid as I was.

“I never had the chance to tell you. I did return soon, as you told me to. But, by then—”

“Shush,” she said, putting a finger to my lips.

I stared deeply into her eyes and continued, “Now, we can finally be together with nothing holding us back.”

Her lashes fluttered, and she looked at me ruefully.

“This is my last day,” she said slowly, as she watched anguish overcome me, “in this country.”

“Oh,” I said, the anguish draining from my face. Confusion took over. She showed me the plane ticket in her hand. The handwritten destination on blue and white slip said: AMERICA.