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Mourning the Soviet Union

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By Nicolai Volland



Twenty years ago, on 23 August 1991, a grim-looking Boris Yeltsin shoved a sheet of paper in front of Mikhail Gorbachev with the words, "You read this now!" Gorbachev, who had just returned to Moscow after the abortive coup d'état led by KGB generals and hardliners in his own Party, appeared tense and insecure. In front of a stunned international TV audience ([original footage here](#) [at 01:25]), he did as he was told. Gorbachev's decree was the first in a number of documents that led to the ban of the once mighty Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

It had been Yeltsin's bravado, climbing atop a tank at the Russian parliament building and calling on the Moscow population to resist the generals' power grab, that had saved Gorbachev, the Soviet leader. Now Yeltsin used his new-found influence to terminate the Communist Party's 74-year rule over Russia. In the days and weeks after the event, the former republics of the Soviet Union one by one declared their independence. In December 1991, just four months after the coup, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

The shockwaves of the tremor that brought down the Soviet Union were felt across the globe, among populations both friendly and hostile to the first socialist nation on earth. They were felt acutely in China, and especially so in a particular age group: People who grew up in the 1950s, when the young PRC embarked on a path of "learning from the Soviet Union." For this generation, the process of coming-of-age had been intimately tied to images, sights, and sounds of the Soviet Union—Soviet songs, films, and books permeated popular culture and everyday life in 1950s China. Dreams, both personal and collective, were intimately tied to the big socialist neighbor.

Sino-Soviet relations had gone through a rollercoaster ride that had in turn profoundly influenced the lives of the 1950s generation. More than many other groups in China, they were affected by the deterioration of bilateral relations and the split in the early 1960s.

Twenty years later, when relations finally improved, many members of this generation—now mostly in their 50s—had felt great relief. The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, then, came as a shock to them, leaving behind a sense of loss that was arguably more profound even than that of 1960.

One member of this generation is the writer Wang Meng (b. 1934). Wang is known in the West chiefly for his intricate novels published in the first years after the Cultural Revolution, with their deep psychological insights and experiments with stream-of-consciousness technique. He was also the nation's Minister of Culture from 1986 to 1989, a period generally associated with a liberal and widely open cultural climate ("culture fever").

Less well known is Wang Meng's lifelong entanglement with the Soviet Union and its culture. A volume published in 2006, with the title *Mourning the Soviet Union* (*Sulian ji*, Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe) documents Wang's intellectual and emotional relationship with the erstwhile "big brother" on China's northern border. As the title indicates, the Soviet Union is an object of admiration and nostalgia, tied to memories of youth, optimism, and a cosmopolitan outlook that informed hundreds of thousands of Chinese from Wang Meng's generation.

Nostalgia and coping with the impact of the collapse of the Soviet empire is the central theme of the book's first part. Recollecting a brief journey to Moscow in 2004, Wang Meng finds himself trying to understand the changes that have taken place in Russia since 1991, and to come to terms with the end of the Soviet Union. His irritation and annoyance becomes obvious as soon as he boards the plane to Moscow, a Boeing aircraft rather than an Ilyushin. Wang searches the inflight audio menu for Russian folk songs familiar from the 1950s, in vain as it turns out. The clash between his memories of the Soviet Union and modern day Russia surfaces time and again—such as during a visit to Petersburg, a city Wang Meng has known for most of his life as Leningrad.

Wang Meng's journey—what he calls "a spiritual adventure" (*yi ci linghun de maoxian*)—is, of course, not without moments of satisfaction. In Moscow, he visits the Lenin mausoleum in Red Square, bowing in front of Lenin's body in its crystal sarcophagus. Commenting that he has come late by fifty years, Wang Meng admits that the visit is the fulfillment of a lifelong quest. Back in 1953, when he was eighteen, Wang set out to write his first novel—*Long Live the Youth* (*Qingchun wansui*)—dreaming that it might bring him fame enough to be selected as a delegate to the World Youth Festival, to be held in Moscow in August 1953.



Wang Meng in front of Lenin's mausoleum, 2004

As it turns out, Wang Meng's hopes to see the Soviet capital with his own eyes were dashed time and again: First by political troubles—in 1957, Wang was declared a Rightist for his story *The Newcomer* (*Zuzhibu xinlai de nianqingren*)—then by the Sino-Soviet break, and finally by the Cultural Revolution. Thus, Wang was not able to visit the Soviet Union until three decades later. In 1984, shortly after the warming of ties between China and the Soviet Union, he was invited to a film festival in Tashkent, for the screening of the film version of *Long Live the Youth*, which had been just completed. In an ironic twist, Wang's debut novel thus did its intended purpose, albeit with a delay of thirty years.

The delegation to Tashkent was routed through Moscow, where Wang commented on the long queues outside the Lenin mausoleum. The brief stopover left no time to join the two- or three-hour wait. In Central Asia, however, Wang Meng came upon another chapter of his drawn-out encounter with the Soviet Union. Whereas the erstwhile leader of the socialist world faded from the consciousness of most Chinese after 1960, Wang Meng's personal trajectory had followed a more complicated route. Under the cloud of his Rightist label, Wang was sent to Xinjiang in 1963, where he stayed for the next sixteen years. Interestingly, his banishment to China's far west added another layer to his feelings towards the Soviet Union. The cultural affinity of Xinjiang with the Soviet republics just across the border, as well as the constant stream of anti-Chinese propaganda that Wang Meng could receive on his short-wave radio throughout the years of the Cultural Revolution, all made the Soviet Union a continuing presence, at least in China's far west. Drinking and singing with his Uzbek hosts in 1984, Wang Meng cannot help a sense of *déjà vu*.

Returning to Moscow twenty years later—now the capital of Russia, no longer that of the Soviet Union—Wang Meng resumes his search for traces of his youth, and for the loss of this gilded age. Orientation in the city is not at all a problem: Names of streets, buildings, bridges, the Moskva river, Moscow University are all utterly familiar from films and novels. Russian literature, both classical and modern, serves as Wang's guidebook through the city. For Wang and his generation, the attachment to the Soviet Union was primarily cultural and personal, with the political dimension coming in a distant second. Wang's intellectual upbringing was steeped in imported high culture—Russian literature, music, ballet—that profoundly shaped his world outlook. Personal encounters, however, could matter just as much.

Towards the end of his 2004 essay, Wang Meng recalls an unexpected encounter in Moscow: He meets a Russian poet, a woman who turns out to be the erstwhile lover of a reputed Chinese translator (Wang Meng refers to him as "Old G"). Back in the 1950s, the young Chinese man, then a student in Moscow, had fallen in love with his Russian classmate, but regulations of both countries strictly prohibited such affairs. After the souring of Sino-Soviet relations, "Old G" had to return to Beijing, where he eventually married a Chinese woman. Half a century later, the failed romance still leaves a bitter-sweet aftertaste (though apparently, the ban on romantic relationships seems to have been enforced unequally. In 1984, Wang Meng met several Chinese women at an embassy function in Moscow who had married Russian men in the 1950s and settled in the Soviet Union). The encounter hints at the human dimension of both the Sino-Soviet alliance and its disintegration after 1960.

In fact, Wang Meng makes clear that he reads more into this encounter than a brief affair of two curious young people. Instead, he cuts back to the main theme of his essay: "What else remains to be said? Love and hatred intertwining, severed yet still connected. Neighbors, members of the Third International, shared ideals, unbreakable and for eternity... Born from the same roots—is this History? Destiny? Fate? You will never be able to look at, to talk about this 'foreign country,' in a completely rational or calm or objective manner. You have invested too much love and disappointment in her, too much hope and despair, dreams and rude awakening, joy, sorrow, and fear... This has preoccupied the lifetimes of our generation, as well as the generation above us—especially the old revolutionary intellectuals. And then, wrong, all wrong, all in vain; all that remains is unspoken pain and sorrow. You're old, you're gone, and she's old too" (31).

Mourning the Soviet Union is a collection that, apart from the impressions of Wang's 2004 journey to Moscow, contains a range of earlier writings, such as his 1984 travel diaries and other essays. Covering a total of two decades, these works—at least one of them semi-fictional—allow for a fairly comprehensive picture of Wang Meng's entanglement with the Soviet Union. The common theme that binds them together is nostalgia, the remembrance of youth, love, and a take on life inspired by an hope and optimism. Decades later, all that Wang Meng's traumatized and alienated generation can do is mourn their lost innocence, missed chances, and shattered dreams. On his travels, both physical and fictional, Wang Meng tries to recover fragments of his past. Soviet literature and film serve are tools in this quest, but the most important by far is songs.



Wang Meng in Red Square, 1984

Soviet songs permeate all of the essays in *Mourning the Soviet Union*. Wang Meng sings with his hosts in Tashkent, with professors and writers in Moscow, and he visits Russian restaurants in Beijing not so much for their food but for the live performances, which invariably feature songs popular in the 1950s. He remembers hundreds of them; at one point joking that he knows enough songs praising Stalin to fill an evening program. Songs like *Katyusha* or *The Weaving Girl* are associated with stages of his life, such as his first love, and searching for them in private Russian homes (or on the plane to Moscow) is an effort to re-enact parts of his own past. The last text in *Mourning the Soviet Union* in particular, a semi-fictional allegory in which a transnational romantic affair becomes interchangeable with the failed romance of the two nations, is held together by Soviet songs and the associations they evoke decades later.

Literature is another prominent channel of remembrance, and one of particular significance for a writer like Wang Meng. He cites Ilya Ehrenburg and Yuri Nagibin as important inspirations for his own writing. Figures like Sholokhov, Ovechkin, and Pavlenko were on the must-read lists of Chinese authors, made accessible to a Chinese reading audience through journals like *Translations*(*Yiwen*). Just as important, however, is the older generation of Russian writers, critical realists like Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol, and Gorki who portrayed a deep-seated humanism and taught aspiring writers like Wang a caring concern for detail and sympathy for the common people.

Soviet literature deeply permeated Chinese intellectual life in the 1950s, and it continues to inform political and literary discourse decades later. In a remarkable 1995 piece included in this volume, Wang Meng lashes out against the Soviet ideologist Zhdanov's savage 1946 attack against the satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko and the poet Anna Akhmatova.

The *Pravda* article containing Zhdanov's devastating assault was entitled "The Lofty Task of Soviet Literature" ("Sulian wenxue de chonggao renwu"). In 1993, Wang Meng came to the defense of "hooligan" writer Wang Shuo, with a widely-discussed essay called "Shunning Loftiness" ("Duobi chonggao"). Wang Meng admits that his unexpected defense of Wang Shuo was a direct reference to Zhdanov, and thus a clear warning to Chinese leftist critics.

Wang Meng's denunciation of Zhdanov, represented in two essays in *Mourning the Soviet Union*, however, remains problematic, for it points to a white spot in Wang's memoirs, a space that may have been left unfilled deliberately. What he fails to mention is that Zhdanov's attacks were, of course, supported by Stalin and were part of the larger Stalinist culture of the day—a culture that directly influenced the PRC of Wang's youth. Wang readily admits to knowing numerous Stalin songs (and includes an essay entitled "Suliko," purportedly Stalin's favorite song), and he references films praising Stalin during his visit to Leningrad; he continues to hold the notorious author Fadeev (who, as head of the Soviet writers union, presided over the persecution of numerous intellectuals and famously declared Stalin "the greatest humanist the world has ever known") in high esteem.

Can we call Wang Meng a Stalinist? No concrete answer emerges from *Mourning the Soviet Union*, if it is possible to answer such a question at all. Stalin is mentioned only in passing references, so fleetingly in fact as to raise the question why Wang Meng avoids a clear position, instead choosing ambiguity: In one of the clearest references to Stalin, Wang Meng comments in his 1984 journal on the numerous Lenin statues in Soviet cities, whereas there are no statues of Stalin. The only Stalin statue at that time was said to stand in the leader's birth town in Georgia. Visiting Tiflis, Wang Meng regrets that the hosts haven't arranged a visit to Stalin's birth place, which is just twenty kilometers away.

Wang Meng's glossing over the historical role of Stalin may be the most problematic aspect of *Mourning the Soviet Union*, and it points to a fundamental problem with nostalgia: Its selectiveness, distorted not only by a time gap that can stretch decades, but also by perceptions shaped by factors such as youth, excitement, love. Stalin and his personality cult were fundamental parts of the political culture of the 1950s, but it seems to be most difficult to reconcile images of the Great Leader with the accusations that had been first made public by Khrushchev's in 1956 (but which were only partially circulated in China) and even more so after the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. Rather than offering solutions or inspiring debate, nostalgia neatly avoids contradictions and gaps in memory.

Another conspicuous absence from *Mourning the Soviet Union*, and one related to the first, is the Chinese counterpart to the images Wang Meng projects of the Soviet Union: Mao, the Chinese Communist Party, and the countless songs praising them (Wang Meng's ambiguity towards Mao and the PRC's own turbulent history has been discussed by Zha Jianying in a sensitive and nuanced [article in the New Yorker](#)). There is, of course, no dearth of nostalgic references to Mao in present-day China. Chongqing Party secretary Bo Xilai—about the same age today that Wang Meng was when the latter wrote *Mourning*—has promoted revolutionary song galas, instant message campaigns featuring quotations from Chairman Mao, and other propagandistic ventures that have culminated in the nationwide "Red song" contest that swept the country on the eve of the CCP's 90th anniversary.

Bo Xilai, of course, enjoys the luxury of a powerful position to transform his personal nostalgia into a national pastime. More importantly, the PRC—in contrast to the Soviet Union—still exists, and while Mao's public role has been significantly scaled back, he continues to enjoy public legitimacy. In contrast, Wang Meng's Soviet Union can be mourned only in private. His romantic recollections are mixed with the piercing sense of loss, the loss not just of an era, but a world that has gone forever. The power of nostalgia, however, is undiminished—*Katyusha* keeps on singing.

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