

3 *Screwed by Fate? The Prostitute and the Critique of Liberalism in Backed Against the Sea*

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WANG WENXING'S *BEI hai de ren* 背海的人 (Backed against the sea¹) deals with the personal and social danger of undisciplined desire in the context of a country undergoing capitalist modernization (both industrialization and urbanization). It deals with desire in terms of Buddhism and liberalism. This chapter argues that the novel represents liberalism as a more capacious container for desire than Buddhism, and it offers a not entirely negative sketch of the bourgeois family. Wang Wenxing critiqued the traditional Chinese family, and the family in general, in his first novel, *Jia bian* 家變 (Family catastrophe).² *Backed Against the Sea* shows the reader what fate might have in store for a vulnerable, dissolute person who is so worried about getting tied down (Wang 261) that he never forms a family on Taiwan.

1. The English translation of the novel was by Edward Gunn for the Cornell East Asia Series in 1993. In this article, I cite Gunn's translation of the first volume and Wang Wenxing's original, for instance, "Damn!" (Gunn 1; Wang 1). For the second volume, I supply my own translation. The page numbers for Wang Wenxing's original novel *Bei hai de ren* (Taipei: Hongfan shudian, 2013) are split between two volumes: vol. 1 (originally published in 1981) covers pp. 1-182 and vol. 2 (originally published in 1999) covers pp. 185-371.

2. This novel was translated by Susan Wan Dooling for University of Hawai'i Press in 1995. Wang's original novel *Jia bian* was published in 1973.

The main character Ye, or "Daddy," is a slave to his desire. When the novel opens, Daddy has fled a gambling debt in Taipei to a little fishing village called Deep Pit Harbor and set up a fortune-telling stand; whenever he has any money, he blows his wad at the brothels. The figure of the prostitute represents the dangerous object of desire Daddy finds impossible to resist. The first volume of *Backed Against the Sea* ends with four encounters with prostitutes (five counting a girl he remembers visiting in Taipei): a repulsive girl who repeatedly says "yuck," a girl who looks like the bodhisattva Guanyin, a teahouse girl who turns out to be in mourning, and a healthy, happy hooker. Yet the narrative order is different from the story (i.e., temporal) order.³ Daddy uses his earnings from the fortune-telling stand on his fourth day in Deep Pit Harbor to visit the yuck girl and the teahouse girl on the fourth and fifth days, before a fellow named Zhang Fawu signs him up for a meal ticket at a government bureau called BOCDO (Gunn 71).⁴ Daddy abstains from paid sexual services for two days, then visits the healthy, happy hooker and finally the girl who looks like Guanyin but turns out to be a dominatrix. The significance of the discrepancy between narrative order and story order is that Daddy's indulgence of his desire has left him unable to think straight.

If the first volume is the story of Daddy's satisfaction of his sexual desire, the second volume is about his inability to satisfy his longing for love. He falls hopelessly in love with an indifferent old whore named Red Hair. Rejected by her, Daddy remembers a girl in Taipei named Cai Suzhen, who fell hopelessly in love with him and even broke with her family to be with him. In return, Daddy tried to prostitute her to a gam-

3. See the tables compiled by Hengsyung Jeng and checked by Wang Wenxing, Chapter 8 in this volume.

4. BOCDO is an acronym for Bureau of Compilation, Research, Investigation, Editing, Filing, Classification, and Management of Materials on Regional Speech and Popular Local Customs During the Past Century, Deep Pit Harbor Branch Office. It is charged with researching local customs and dialects, but is "in fact a sanatorium" (Gunn 90; Wang 127), a place where the government sends mentally or physically ill personnel.

bling buddy. He wonders whether she ended up slipping into prostitution after he rejected her (Wang 268).

The second half of volume 2 details the desperation of a man who cannot satisfy even the basic desire for food. Daddy manages to borrow money from a Canadian Catholic missionary but gets passed over for an official position at BOCDO. He spends an evening with a successful capitalist, Dong Yutang, who has disciplined his own desire and the desire of everyone (both producers and consumers) in his rice ball empire, but Daddy does not receive any assistance from him in return. In the end, Daddy lets himself go completely: he tries to mug people and buy visits to the brothel on credit, declaring that he wants to live like “an emperor” (Wang 361), someone who can fulfill his every desire. Unsurprisingly given the absence of police in the village, the locals exact vigilante justice: they break into the bathroom Daddy is living in, beat him to death, and throw him into the ocean. This is the last thing he wanted to happen.

Almost three-tenths of the novel is taken up with Daddy’s serial whoring (Wang 153–82 and again on 361) and his attempt to love a whore and pimp a girl who is in love with him (Wang 185–269). What does it mean?

In a word, Daddy’s problem is screwing—*cao* 操, the very first word of the novel—for screwing is the principal form his desire takes. Through wordplay, Wang links Daddy’s screwing to his demise.⁵ Daddy imagines

5. The term *cao* has several syntactic functions. It is an expletive, like “fuck!” In this sense it is the first word in the novel. Gunn translates it as “Damn” (Gunn 1; Wang 1). It can be used intransitively, as in “I fuck” (Wang 1), which is weird in English, hence Gunn’s idiomatic translation “Fuck it” (Gunn 1). It can take an object, as in “Fuck your mother!” (Wang 1), “Fuck your mother’s cunt!” (Wang 1), or: “Fuck this endless fuckin’ rain Oh, fuck the hills, the gray ocean, the sky; fuck the sunless days of plopping rain, and pitch-black nights, and this whole place, this whole earth, the entire human race and every society in it, every culture, system, economic structure, and money—right, fuck the money, and every one of those rich people, and everyone in the past, everyone in the future, fuck all my ancestors and all my descendants, and, oh, fuck me!” (Gunn 1–2; Wang 1–2). “Fuck ... all my descendants” turns out to be ironic because Daddy never has children. Semantically, Gunn’s “damn” is a religious imprecac-

it may be possible to “screw fate,” while in the end he seems to get screwed by fate.⁶ A more critical reader perceives that it is only because Daddy tries to screw everyone like a punter screws a prostitute that he ends up screwed mostly (though not of course entirely) by himself.

Ending in the death of the protagonist, which is foreshadowed from the beginning, the novel seems a typical tragedy, affirming the power of fate over human life.⁷ But of course, it is only Daddy’s tragedy, not the reader’s. The reader’s fate, after all, is undecided. In the character of Daddy, Wang Wenxing offers the reader an object lesson in the dangers of desire, showing how damaging desire can be, and not just to Daddy. The desire of men like Daddy has drawn women from around the island of Taiwan into prostitution. But the novel does not stop at showing how damaging desire is for both self and society, it also hints at provisional

tion, whereas *cao* is explicitly sexual. *Cao* implies manipulation, similar to the English “screw.” At a public talk Wang Wenxing gave on *Backed Against the Sea*, he asked a young woman to read a passage containing the phrase “screw your mother.” The young woman, consciously or not, just skipped over: the word *cao* remains viscerally powerful in Mandarin today. Wang’s use of the word in his novel is realistic, because veterans of the Chinese civil war used to “drop the c-bomb.” It also allows Wang to immediately establish Daddy’s attitude toward the world.

6. Christopher Lupke has drawn attention to the phrase “screw fate” (Gunn 53) in his “Divi-Nation: Modern Literary Representations of the Chinese Imagined Community,” in *The Magnitude of Ming* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005), 311, in reference to Wang 74.

7. Wang Wenxing foreshadows Daddy’s tragic fate with leitmotifs such as dog-killing, drowning, and circling birds of prey. As Yvonne Chang puts it, Daddy is “a prey of fate” (“The Meaning of Modernism,” in *Writing Taiwan: A New Literary History*, edited by David Der-Wei Wang and Carlos Rojas [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007], 174). Seeing that “tragedy” is etymologically “goat song” (*tragos* “goat” + *oide* “song”), we might call *Backed Against the Sea* a “dog song.” In one interpretation of tragedy, a bearer of sins, a scapegoat, is ousted from the community to assert the integrity of community identity (see Adrian Poole, *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 51–55). Daddy is a scapedog. Yvonne Chang interprets his tragic end in terms of ethnic politics: Daddy, a mainlander, is murdered by local people, in whose homeland he is an interloper (“The Meaning of Modernism,” 174).

solutions to the problem of desire, ways to bring it under control and channel it. The novel offers two philosophical contexts for desire: Buddhism and liberalism.⁸ The central claim in this article is that a Buddhist interpretation of the novel is contained within a liberal one. I argue that the family is a liberal institution, and in *Backed Against the Sea* the variable that decides survival for veterans of the Chinese civil war like Daddy is not whether they have mastered Buddhist philosophy but whether they have managed to rein in desire by forming a family in Taiwan. I consider an objection to the argument that the novel represents the family in a positive light, namely, that Wang Wenxing parodies the literary forms that typically serve as vehicles for the virtue of liberal sympathy, particularly the love story and the sob story. In response, I note that Daddy participates in the parody, and for a fallible narrator such as Daddy to parody a literary form does not undermine its central value. In other words, a parody of a love story is not in itself a denial of love, though it certainly problematizes “love.” Finally, I argue that the character Fu Shaokang embodies the bourgeois ideal in the novel.

Daddy as Buddhist

Daddy attempts a Buddhist solution to the problem of desire. After he visits the first prostitute, he takes a vow of abstinence. Six days later, he “[breaks] the vow of abstinence” (Gunn 115; Wang 163). Literally, he “breaks sexual discipline.” “Discipline” here is the Buddhist term *jie* 戒.⁹

8. In this chapter, artistic creation as a solution to the problem of desire receives short shrift. The obvious theory to invoke would be Sigmund Freud’s sublimation, where desire is sublimated into art (in some sense in the way that a solid sublimates into a gas). Freud is mentioned in Daddy’s monologue (Gunn 114; Wang 162); perhaps Daddy has even heard of the theory of sublimation. Daddy’s own theory is that composing poetry is like “sexual desire” (Gunn 68; Wang 98). He also says that love should be a work of art (Wang 269). In any form of art—be it the art of poetry, sex, or love—one exercises freedom while imposing restraint. A truly free work of art would not be a work of art at all: it would be formless.

9. In a kind of cultural translation, Daddy generalizes the Buddhist term by

In breaking discipline, Daddy returns to the brothels and spends all of his money. The need for discipline comes up again in the second volume—in the context of smoking this time—(Wang 289)—by which time it is too late: the vigilantes are already waiting outside the bathroom door. After visiting the first prostitute (in the first volume), Daddy says he is filled with “this overwhelming sense of regret” (Gunn 114; Wang 162) about spending so much money on an activity that brings him no lasting satisfaction. Yet when it comes to desire, Daddy has no self-discipline. Desire, of course, is a key term in Buddhist philosophy: according to the Buddha, desire is the cause of suffering. As Daddy puts it, the “**pursuit of pleasure**” is actually a “search for suffering” (Gunn 115; Wang 163). He also realizes that desire is, as the Buddhists say, empty: it is not that one has a certain amount of sexual desire that is depleted with satisfaction, but that satisfying desire increases desire.¹⁰ Insofar as *Backed Against the Sea* offers a Buddhist treatment of desire, it resembles traditional Chinese “cautionary tales of overconsumption and lack of self-control”¹¹ like the *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (The golden lotus), in which sexual desire is deadly.

There is another, deeper level of Buddhist philosophy in *Backed Against the Sea*. Daddy quotes the *Platform Sutra*:

Bodhi originally has no tree
 The mirror also has no stand
 From the beginning not a thing is
 Where is there room for dust? (Gunn 65)

In other words, all “things” are illusory. We only desire certain things because we do not realize we are not separate from them, that there is ultimately no distinction between self and other, between subject and object of desire. To use the idealist imagery of the *Platform Sutra*, there

applying it to the Catholic priest who, Daddy is shocked to learn, has taken a vow abstaining from the pleasures of female flesh (Wang 321–22).

10. Daddy’s formula for this insight is $1 - 1 = 2$ (Gunn 119; Wang 169).

11. Martin Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narration in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 110.

is ultimately no distinction between mind as mirror of the world and the world itself. The mind perceives things in the world, not realizing they are all in the mind. This is part of the significance of the parable Daddy cites to explain his own whoring. In the parable, an ignorant fellow sees the moon in a pool of smelly water and jumps into it in the hope of becoming one with the moon. He does this over and over again, knowing full well it is not the real moon (Gunn 114; Wang 162). In Buddhist terms, he is wrong not because he jumps at a reflection of the moon instead of the real thing but because he jumps at all.

A Buddhist interpretation of the novel finds extratextual support. After a talk in July 2014, Wang Wenxing described Daddy as a “crazy monk,” explaining that Daddy is modeled on the crazy monks of Chinese tradition. One thinks of the crazy monks in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, and of Jia Baoyu leaving the human realm to join them at the end of the novel. Daddy ends up backed against the sea instead of deliberately turning his back on the social order: in the end, he fails as a crazy monk in that he is unable to truly let himself go in the Buddhist sense (i.e., he never manages to let his self go).

There is a place for Buddhist discipline and philosophy in an interpretation of *Backed Against the Sea*. Daddy’s insights into the nature of desire might inform a theory of consumer psychology: he suffers from a serious case of buyer’s remorse after repeatedly handing over money for a service he does not really need. However, I argue that a Buddhist interpretation of the problem of desire has to be embedded within a liberal interpretation, and in Fu Shaokang the novel represents a transcendence (or sublimation) of desire in the liberal institution of the bourgeois family.

Daddy as Liberal

Classical liberalism is a commitment to the greatest possible individual freedom in the personal, social, political, and economic spheres.¹² Eco-

12. For this four-part analysis of society, see Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

nomie liberalism declares the greed of small producers to be good. We expect our dinner “not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker ... but from their regard to their own interest.”¹³ According to Adam Smith, rational self-interest was socially beneficial. However, Smith, like the Buddha, realized that desire is a strange thing, for some desires are unlimited: “The desire of food is limited in every man by the narrow capacity of the human stomach; but the desire of the conveniences [*sic*] and ornaments of building, dress, equipage, and household furniture, seems to have no limit or certain boundary.”¹⁴ This is a problem because our means are limited. The liberal solution is that the satisfaction of the desire for conveniences via the market is a means, not an end. One possible end of life from a liberal perspective is a convenient—that is, comfortable—family life. Seventeen years before publishing *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith published *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* about the virtue that animates family life: sympathy. Smith writes of the “pleasure” of a visit to a family “where freedom and fondness, mutual raillery and mutual kindness, show that no opposition of interest divides” the family members.¹⁵ “Kindness” in this passage is a synonym for sympathy; sympathy, not self-interest, was the logic of the family. The family was theoretically separate from the market, as a place of consumption rather than production or exchange.¹⁶ Moreover, the virtue of sympathy, cultivated at home, in theory would humanize the market, based on the Enlightenment-era idea that human beings should not be bought and

13. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations: Books I–III* (1776; rpt. New York: Penguin Classics, 1982), 41.

14. *Ibid.*, 269. Economists discuss the nature of desire in terms of the elasticity of demand. The demand for food is highly inelastic, because although we can’t eat an infinite amount of food, we do need to eat and would pay any price if we were starving; the demand for sex and conveniences is by contrast relatively elastic because we don’t really need them.

15. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759; rpt. New York: Penguin Classics, 2010), 35.

16. See, for instance, Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 43–50.

sold like commodities, as they still were in Taiwan in 1962, the year in which *Backed Against the Sea* is set. The persistence of human trafficking, which requires a total abnegation of sympathy for strangers, is a reminder of the practical problems of liberalism. The persistence of gross flaws—from a liberal perspective—in individuals requires social institutions like the family and the state, charged with such functions as justice and education. The acceptance of the need for such institutions distinguishes liberalism from individualism, libertarianism, or anarchism. Social institutions, of course, are themselves flawed, deserving of critique—which is where a writer like Wang Wenxing comes in—but amenable to improvement.

In *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance*, Yvonne Chang describes liberalism as the basic intellectual stance of Taiwan's modernist writers. She notes the irony of the fact that while many European modernists were antirationalists, nationalists, even fascists, or, at the opposite extreme, radical leftists, Taiwan's modernists were liberals. European modernist writers criticized modernity; Taiwan's modernists embraced it (p. 23 *et passim*). Taiwan's modernists subscribed to Matthew Arnold's "positivist vision" of culture as the Good Thing that would save society from anarchy.¹⁷ In the early 1960s, Taiwan's liberal modernist writers were college students eager to assert artistic autonomy under martial law. Their artistic autonomy had a political edge. They "preceded the socialistically inclined Nativists in challenging the ideological constraints of the hegemonic culture in Taiwan's post-1949 era."¹⁸ But in the 1970s, after the rise of literary nativism, the liberal modernists were more supportive of the Chinese Nationalist regime's project of modernization. Chang notes that in a speech in 1978, at the height of the nativist literary debate, while Wang Wenxing was in the midst of writing the first volume of *Backed Against the Sea*, Wang even defended capitalism.¹⁹

17. Yvonne Chang, *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 9.

18. *Ibid.*, 185.

19. *Ibid.*, 20. Wang still affirms "economic liberalism" today, or at least he said so when I asked him in July 2014.

Still, to judge from his fiction, Wang is hardly starry-eyed about the liberal project. His liberalism is pessimistic, in the style of Lionel Trilling, for whom liberalism was "a political position which affirmed the value of individual existence in all its variousness, complexity, and difficulty."²⁰

Backed Against the Sea has not been discussed in terms of Wang's liberalism. Chang describes Wang as a liberal but does not invoke liberalism in any of her discussions of *Backed Against the Sea*. She has instead approached the novel in terms of Wang's humanism, his rationalism, and his modernism.²¹ To be sure, she is dealing with similar issues, as liberals are humanists, rationalists, and sometimes even literary modernists.²² These terms do occur in *Backed Against the Sea*, making them "emic" terms, text-internal terms, and thus easily justifiable approaches.²³ First, Daddy claims to be a "humanitarian" (Gunn 122; Wang 173) by screwing tea girls properly so that they get something out of the experience. Second, he claims his decision to take a half-day holiday has to do with the "modern employment system" (Wang 331). Third, Daddy realizes that in ascribing significance to the lifeline on his palm, he runs "contrary to reason" (Gunn 36; Wang 50).²⁴ By contrast, the term *ziyou* appears *et passim*.

Ziyou 自由, the liberal part of liberalism *ziyou zhuyi* 自由主義, is a key word in *Backed Against the Sea*. In traditional Chinese, *ziyou* was a reflexive pronoun *zi* 自 and a verb *you* 由, to self-follow. In modern Chinese, *ziyou* is a compound word used to translate either liberty or freedom. It actually translates as either free-dom or free, because *ziyou* is

20. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Scribner's, 1976), viii.

21. "The Meaning of Modernism," 175.

22. There were liberal modernists, namely, E.M. Forster, who became for Trilling the prototypical liberal.

23. In anthropological research, an emic term is a culture-internal term, whereas an etic term is a concept the anthropologist brings to a culture he or she is studying.

24. Clearly, Daddy references these newfangled Western notions facetiously, but the reader can use them to think about Daddy's situation and the kind of society he lives in.

both a noun and an adjective. One might simply interpret *ziyou* in terms of freedom and fate. One of Daddy's questions for the Canadian Catholic priest is whether individuals are really free: "We people, is everything about us, in the end, **Heaven's Dispensation**, or, is there, individual, **free dom**?" (Wang 319). The context is religious; there is no need to invoke liberalism.²⁵ As a reader of the Chinese original, I could not help associating *ziyou* and *ziyou zhuyi*, freedom and liberalism, especially since there are also copious references to the personal, social, political, and economic philosophy of liberalism, which the ideal of freedom has inspired.

Clearly interested in key liberal tenets, Daddy wrangles with them in the classic liberal manner, in which the individual reflects on the practical complexities of his or her ideals. He mentions the "freedom of speech" (Gunn 30; Wang 41), the freedom of occupation (he refers to his fortune-telling as a "**free occupation**" [Gunn 37; Wang 51]), religious freedom (in Daddy's words, "'spiritual' freedom" [Gunn 30]), and the "**freedom of the individual**" (Gunn 70). Daddy asserts that food and sex, the basic needs of life according to the traditional formula *yinshi nannü*, are basic rights in terms of Western-style liberal democracy: "Food and sex are the most genuine and straightforward pursuits of happiness in terms of democratic principles of '**People's Civil Rights**'" (Gunn 14; Wang 18).²⁶ Here Edward Gunn has overtranslated *minzhu* (democracy) into "demo-

25. The relationship between Christianity and liberalism is complex but has to be alluded to because of Wang Wenxing's conversion to Catholicism in 1986, while he was still writing the second volume of *Backed Against the Sea*. Liberalism inherits the notion of freedom from "free will"; in liberalism, the individual is free to act in his or her own self-interest, whereas in Christianity he or she is free to sin, for otherwise nobody could be held accountable. Liberalism seems to turn the Christian doctrine of freedom on its head, except that, as I have emphasized, liberalism also inherits the Christian virtue of sympathetic love, which is supposed to humanize the market. There are many examples of Christian liberals, such as Matthew Arnold.

26. The challenging style of *Backed Against the Sea*, which tests the limits of the writer's freedom and the reader's tolerance, has been discussed by Edward Gunn in "The Process of Wang Wen-hsing's Art," *Modern Chinese Literature* 1.1 (1984): 29-41.

cratic principles of ‘**People’s Civil Rights**,’” and even added the pursuit of happiness from the U.S. Declaration of Independence. This is not to say Gunn has gone against the spirit of the original, for in this same section Wang Wenxing is reminding the reader of U.S. hegemony. Daddy goes on to tell us what U.S. liberalism means in practice. The main freedom is the freedom to consume: it is, Daddy says, “as if they live their entire lives solely just to get these [modern conveniences]” (Gunn 23; Wang 30), not because conveniences make life more convenient, but as a form of “status-seeking” (Gunn 31; Wang 41). Daddy initially claims that he transcends U.S.-style consumerism, but then realizes he wants the same thing as the North Americans. He finds a “**contradiction**” (Gunn 23; Wang 31) in himself between infinite desire (for Adam Smith’s conveniences) and finite resources. He describes his insight as follows: “freedom actually amounts to an even greater ‘bondage’” (Gunn 31; Wang 41). A liberal would add: freedom is bondage only if one is unable to properly use one’s freedom.

This is not to say that Daddy has anything like a coherent philosophy, let alone that his philosophy is liberalism. He contemplates Buddhism, as explained already, and conservatism (Wang 214), and the Nietzschean will to power. He even brings *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with him to Deep Pit Harbor (Gunn 22; Wang 29). As a philosopher, he is intellectually catholic. He invokes liberal concepts facetiously. For instance, he disparages the freedom of speech which Wang Wenxing is implicitly exercising or asserting in publishing *Backed Against the Sea*. Daddy has no deep understanding of liberal concepts. He has little structural understanding of society. For instance, he sees no need for the police. One of the reasons he is so happy to have his freedom in Deep Pit Harbor is because there aren’t any “cops” there (Gunn 12; Wang 16). Police are clearly necessary because of people like Daddy, who disrespect the freedom of others: He says, “I can do *whatever* I feel like doing,” including swindling and even mugging people (Gunn 30; Wang 40–41). Daddy completely misses the idea in liberalism of responsibilities that balance rights. He does not state a central claim of economic liberalism, namely, that self-interest in the economic sphere will lift all boats, so to speak. He has no sense of participation in an organic economy, where he

provides services to others and receives services in return, to everyone's benefit. His brief stint as a fortune-teller aside, Daddy is lumpenproletariat, without capital and outside of production. As such, he has not succeeded in harnessing his desire for any personal or social purpose. Instead, he indulges his desire, which in *Backed Against the Sea* is symbolized by the figure of the prostitute.

Daddy as Punter

Since the nineteenth century, there have been broadly speaking two ideological representations of prostitution: Marxist and liberal. In Marxist literature, the prostitute is a figure of exploited labor under capitalism. Under capitalism, prostitution becomes "industrialized," with standardization of service and fee.²⁷ The pimp would be the capitalist or industrialist, the prostitute the means of production. A major liberal prostitution narrative was the story about the hooker with the heart of gold and her paramour. Such stories dealt with the liberal separation between market and family. Men fell in love with courtesans, and either followed through on their true emotions, turning the whore into a wife by bringing her into the home, or turned their backs on love, choosing bourgeois respectability instead.²⁸

Backed Against the Sea draws on both narratives to investigate the two sides of the coin of the problem of desire—the social and the individual. As Taiwan modernizes and urbanizes, young women from around the country are sold into fleshly bondage in big cities like Taipei. Daddy notes, "Women with any sex appeal at all are packed up and shipped off to Taipei, the whole lot of them sold off to Taipei" (Gunn 12; Wang 15).

27. Khalid Kishtainy, *The Prostitute in Progressive Literature* (London: Allison and Busby, 1982), 61.

28. Pierre L. Horn and Mary Beth Pringle accuse male writers who write about prostitutes of instilling their stories with "patriarchal values." (*The Image of the Prostitute in Modern Literature* [New York: Fredrick Ungar, 1984], 2). This accusation is unfair if leveled at critical writers. Wang Wenxing has not instilled *Backed Against the Sea* with patriarchal values, even if Daddy is a male sexist pig.

Chang quotes this passage and writes of the “blood” of the countryside “being sucked by the unremitting process of urban expansion.”²⁹ Daddy is indifferent to the process or his part in it, but we can assume an ironic distance between what he says and what the author or the text means. At any rate, Daddy hints at a macroeconomic perspective on desire, the perspective of a political economist. A related perspective on the desire targeted by prostitution is governmental. Foxy the Vamp, a prostitute who visits BOCDO, brings out this response more clearly than anyone in the novel. Tang Lin, one of the officials at BOCDO, is “like some well-to-do pillar of the community about to leap upon her” (Gunn 79; Wang 112). The director worries in this regard that “**public morality is declining daily**” (Gunn 82; Wang 116). Prostitution is a threat to the community. Prostitution in the novel is also an issue of public space. Daddy remarks on the names of the teahouses and the brothels: “House of Spring Fragrance, Garden of Spring Delights, Little Miss Peach, ... Rainbows” (Gunn 14; Wang 18). These advertisements are designed to pique and profit from desire by false representation, meaning that prostitution is also a personal issue.

Prostitution is a problem for the individual in *Backed Against the Sea*. Daddy himself is concerned about diseases spread by prostitutes and takes notice of ads placed in the newspapers by quacks promising to cure such maladies (Gunn 113; Wang 161).³⁰ But the thought of a visit to the brothel proves irresistible, because it is an easy way to exercise what Daddy calls the “**freedom of pleasure**” (Gunn 30; Wang 40), consisting of “casual sex, wild, crazy sex, sex, sex, sex” (Gunn 30; Wang 40), enjoyed by “human boomerangs³¹ beyond the force of gravity up in outer space,³²

29. “The Meaning of Modernism,” 163.

30. Prostitution is also a public health issue, but the novel does not take the perspective of a public health official.

31. Gunn’s image of the boomerang goes against the idea of transcendence of gravity, because a boomerang returns to where it is thrown. There is no boomerang in the original.

32. Chang argues that the year in which the novel was set, 1962, is significant because it was at the beginning of Taiwan’s economic modernization (“The Meaning of Modernism,” 163), but it may also be significant because of the be-

with nothing to hold them back or tell them which way is up or down, enjoying a freedom that truly deserves to be called 'freedom'" (Gunn 30; Wang 40). Daddy knows this is impossible, however attractive the idea of infinite decadence might seem. He knows that a person's freedom of pleasure must sometimes be restricted for his own good. Should someone with consumption ever be allowed to gamble and go whoring? "Absolutely not! He shouldn't!" (Gunn 93; Wang 132), answers Daddy, obviously not considering himself to belong to the category of people with consumption, that is, people whose personal freedom ought to be restricted.

Daddy does not restrict his own freedom, with calamitous effects. As noted already, his vow of Buddhist discipline fails him, as does his aesthetic revulsion from what he is doing—which he tries to cultivate in himself with the parable of the guy who keeps jumping in a pool of smelly water—and he ends up visiting the brothels and teahouses a second time. Daddy's series of visits to brothels and teahouses illustrates the danger of the industrialization of desire for the undisciplined individual. There is a mass-produced seriality to these episodes, reflected in the form of the novel, one erotic experience after another. From the capitalist's point of view, this seriality is the ideal form of consumer behavior: capitalists want consumers to keep consuming, over and over again, in a compulsively regular or even regulated fashion. Daddy has a certain number of minutes to spend with the girl. He can only come once. He tries to bargain with her for a second time for 40 percent off (Gunn 113; Wang 160), but the market price is already fixed, supposedly by the market mechanism (but in practice partly by consensus).³³ Each experience he has in the brothel is different, but to Daddy it seems he is purchasing a single commodity: "I know perfectly well that every broad is actually

ginning of manned space flight, which supplies Daddy with his imagery in the passage above. The day of Daddy's death, February 20, 1962, was the first day a human being orbited the Earth in space.

33. An example of a consensus that interferes with the supposedly free operation of the market mechanism is that no prostitute will kiss Daddy (Gunn 110; Wang 156). Ideally you could bargain for this or there would be a specific price for the service. In reality, some practices are not "marketed."

alike, just the same" (Gunn 114; Wang 162). Power enters into what is supposed to be an economic exchange. The Guanyin prostitute is a dominatrix, and Daddy forces the girl in mourning to satisfy him by using her hand on him. Daddy is also abusive toward the girl in the teahouse in Taipei: "I viciously drove home my assault on her" (Gunn 121; Wang 171), he says. One prostitute sells Daddy the experience of abjection, another illusion of power.

At the same time, in these episodes there is seemingly a yearning for something more than the satisfaction of crude sexual desire or the will to power. Daddy longs for the Guanyin dominatrix because "she [has] a face on her remarkably gentle and benevolent, the kind that's 'pure and saintly' that kind, the kind of young woman, the newlywed, the young wifely sort that prays to Kuan Yin [Guanyin] for a son" (Gunn 41; Wang 58). What Daddy longs for is a wife to love and sympathize with in the separate space of the home. One prostitute in the novel sells the "girlfriend experience," the illusion of love and sympathy. The tea girl in Taipei asks Daddy if he has a "girlfriend" (Gunn 120; Wang 170) and goes on to tell him a sob story about her construction worker father, to which Daddy responds: "I'd never been so moved ... Why does a girl like her have to suffer like this? ... When faced with another's pain, what can you do?" What he does is pay her twice as much as he owes her, having "sympathized" with her (Gunn 121-22; Wang 172-73). He also promises her a free gift of money, \$30,000, no strings attached. He assures her, "You don't have to marry me" (Gunn 122; Wang 174). Daddy never delivers the gift, but the episode demonstrates his desire for something more than sex. He does not even have sex with the healthy, happy hooker. With her, Daddy experiences a kind of vapid companionship. They laugh and cry and sing for sheer joy (Gunn 127; Wang 181). It is companionship Daddy wants, and he has to pay a 71 percent premium for it whenever he visits a teahouse instead of a brothel (Gunn 115; Wang 163). What he wants most of all from Red Hair is communication. Red Hair is willing to have sex with Daddy in exchange for a fee but not talk to him (Wang 199). Daddy writes her letters expressing his feelings and trying to arrange a rendezvous, but it turns out Red Hair is illiterate (Wang 202).

Daddy as Lover

In the second volume, Daddy theorizes his longings in terms of "love." He has a lot of pretty ideas about love. That love should not be possession but rather mutual enjoyment (Wang 212). As noted in note 8, that love should be a work of art (Wang 269). To be sure, he also disparages sympathetic love. He says he favors traditional polygamy (Wang 214), having described love in Buddhist terms as beginning "in ignorance" and resembling a vat of smelly water (Wang 189). It seems to me that Daddy protests too much, and what he really wants is a life of monogamous bourgeois bliss based on a bond of sympathetic love.

The logic of sympathetic love in the novel is gift exchange. Once the only form of exchange in tribal society, gift exchange was in the liberal order largely (though not entirely, given the phenomenon of modern charity) confined to the intimate sphere of family and friends.³⁴ Daddy mentions an ancient formula of gift exchange in reference to Dong Yutang's visit: one gives a peach, and the other reciprocates with a plum (Wang 187). Similarly, Dong Yutang gives Daddy his business card, and Daddy describes giving water to Dong and lighting a candle for him as acts of great goodness (Wang 345). But Daddy also tries to apply the same principle in his dealings with women. He offered a gift to Mei-chu in Taipei then fails to give it (Wang 172–73). He gives Red Hair what she does not want. He will freely give his time (Wang 190). Daddy pawns his watch and wastes the money on an expensive gift, a bag, for Red Hair, which she stomps on (Wang 221). These efforts to start what could be called a gift economy—that is, a systematic series of reciprocal gift exchanges—fail; Red Hair does not want anything from Daddy besides his money. In a perversion of the gift economy, at least from a liberal perspective (in which gift exchange is between two spouses who have freely

34. For the anthropological tradition and modern philosophical uses of the idea of gift exchange, see the essays in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, edited by Alan Schrift (London: Routledge, 1997). Communication can also be theorized in terms of gift exchange.

chosen each other), Daddy tries to give Cai Suzhen to a gambling buddy to reinforce their fraternal relationship (Wang 243).

There is an obvious objection to the notion that bourgeois existence, specifically sentimental love in a nuclear family, is presented in a positive light in *Backed Against the Sea*. As scholars have argued, Wang Wenxing is sending up literary clichés, particularly the love story but also the sob story. Chang argues that Daddy's failure to deliver a gift of money to Mei-chu parodies stories about nice guys saving prostitutes with hearts of gold who have been forced into the business by economic necessity, stories like Chen Yingzhen's "A Race of Generals."³⁵ To Chang, the healthy, happy hooker is a "positive, but no less caricaturized character."³⁶ Since the healthy happy hooker does not reappear in the second volume, in retrospect she seems a parody of the Earth Mother prostitute in Huang Chunming's classic nativist story "Days of Watching the Sea," set in Nanfang'ao, where Wang Wenxing did four months of military service and on which Deep Pit Harbor (Shenkeng'ao) is based. Liao Ping-hui asserts that the love story about Daddy and Red Hair is a grotesque parody of the traditional talented scholar: lovely lady stories and the mandarin ducks and butterflies stories of the early twentieth century. By reading a love story with grotesque characters, the reader loses his or her appetite for romance.³⁷ For Liao Binghui (also known as Liao Ping-hui), the Red Hair romance is an example of Wang Wenxing's modernist aesthetics—in other words, his unsentimental realism.³⁸ Finally, the episode that follows Daddy's failure with Red Hair, the Cai Suzhen

35. *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance*, 136.

36. Yvonne Chang, "Language, Narrator, and Stream-of-Consciousness: The Two Novels of Wang Wenxing," *Modern Chinese Literature* 1.1 (1984): 54.

37. Liao Binghui 廖炳惠, "Wang Wenxing yu tade piaobo shidai—Ye de huoban" 王文興與他的漂泊世代—爺的夥伴 (Wang Wenxing and his diasporic generation—Ye's companions) in *Xuanxiao yu fennu: Bei hai de ren zhuanlun* 喧囂與憤怒：《背海的人》專論 (Sound and fury: critical essays on *Backed Against the Sea*), edited by Kang Laixin 康來新 and Huang Shuning 黃恕寧 (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2013), 141–51.

38. *Ibid.*, 142–44.

story, begins with a bicycle collision, another cliché of romance fiction.³⁹ Wang Wenxing destroys the sentimental effect by setting the wrong tone aesthetically in noting the carnage of the incident: Cai Suzhen's hand is all bloodied (Wang 249). (Though perhaps Daddy's mention of blood makes the scene all the more romantic, in that their respective injuries allow an "exchange of blood" [Wang 249]).

Certainly if a literary genre is a shallow misrepresentation of reality, Wang Wenxing is right to parody it, as he does when he has Daddy declare, "But I love her!" (Wang 227). In this way, "love" becomes ridiculous. But the object of parody here is fake sentimentality, a superficial discourse of love that might be exploited for mercenary purposes. It is important to note that Daddy participates in the parody, that he himself is a sophisticated reader of love stories. He self-consciously retells his story in terms of the romantic formula of love in sentimental fiction: A loves B, B loves C, C loves A (Wang 234). Daddy notes that Cai Suzhen is so taken with him because she has been reading too many sentimental novels, that her existence has been "popular fiction alized" (Wang 248). By simply noting the presence of parody and seeing through the tropes of sentimental fiction, the reader has only made the same move as Daddy. To be a better reader than Daddy, the reader of *Backed Against the Sea* must perceive the impulse of sympathy that the love story is about in a superficial way.

One perceives this impulse very occasionally in *Backed Against the Sea*. Daddy falls in love with Red Hair because she reminds him of his long-lost elder sister on the mainland (Wang 216). This detail is ambiguous, because he mentions the resemblance between Red Hair and his sister to Little Flower Face, his go-between during his attempted love affair with Red Hair, perhaps to elicit sympathy. He could be making it up as he goes along. But there seems to be something authentic in it, even to a reader on guard against sentimentality. When Daddy's heart is moved to pity by the daughter of the Cao family, a lame girl, his sentiment is paternal. His assurance that the little girl has a bright future is

39. Chang, "The Meaning of Modernism," 171.

poignant (Wang 363).⁴⁰ Even Daddy's name, which connotes arrogance (as in "who's your daddy?"), also reminds the reader of how alone he is, with only fictive family members to keep him company: his nicknames for his various ailments are the terms for children in a Chinese family (Gunn 9; Wang 12). The reader must not be so sophisticated as to repress the impulse of sympathy in him- or herself.

These examples are all familial, and in the introduction I mentioned that the key to survival or success for the middle-aged mainlander men in the novel seems to be not mastery of Buddhist philosophy but success in forming a family. There are no renunciates in the novel to compare Daddy with (besides the Catholic missionary), although there are a number of married men. This assertion has to be qualified. One middle-aged married mainlander's fate has been spectacularly bad: Yu Shiliang, who had the bad luck to choose a mentally ill wife. Yet it is hard to sympathize with him because he is so spineless that he takes up an offer to waste time and money on a game of mahjong when he should be taking care of his wife and family.⁴¹ Still, Yu Shiliang's fate is infinitely better than Daddy's. Then there is Dong Yutang, the most conventionally successful of anyone in *Backed Against the Sea*. Dong Yutang married a much younger woman after he got rich (Wang 349). He now has a young daughter. Yet Dong Yutang is a horrible person, an indictment of capitalism in his rule over his rice ball empire. He tells Daddy about a grandmother who produced substandard rice balls and was kicked out of the production team. She dragged her two grandchildren to see Dong Yutang, knelt down before him, and told him a sob story. Dong Yutang asks Daddy a rhetorical question: "How could I ... be moved by her?" (Wang 354). Dong Yutang illustrates a failure of familial sympathy to humanize the market. He also illustrates the failure of the state to regulate the market. He is in Deep Pit Harbor with official cooperation: he has bor-

40. Daddy narrates his meeting with the Cao family, a family of settlers, at the end of volume 2, right before he is murdered by vigilantes.

41. As Chang notes, Yu Shiliang likely purchased his bride, even if the marriage was conceptualized as a gift exchange of a woman in exchange for a betrothal gift (*Modernism and the Nativist Resistance*, 135).

rowed a car from a local police station. Instead of ameliorating social contradictions, the state is abetting exploitation.⁴² There is at least one character who does seem to embody the bourgeois ideal—the ideal family man, not the ideal consumer—who has not been discussed in the critical literature in English despite being the most decent character in the book: Fu Shaokang.

Fu Shaokang is the secretary at BOCDO. Fu Shaokang is first introduced as being impressed with the sign Daddy has written to be hung over the bathroom: “Close Door When Entering or Leaving” (Gunn 89; Wang 126). Daddy comments that “the way Fu Shao-k’ang [Fu Shaokang] acted when he saw [the characters of the sign] was something like this, I believe, he stood right in front of the door to the bathroom, he had his pants pulled down still, he’d forgotten to pull them back up, and simply stood there in place with his mouth open hollering on and on you know about how great they looked” (Gunn 89; Wang 126). Caught with his pants down, Fu Shaokang seems to be an unlikely ideal. Daddy mocks him mercilessly. However, he turns out to be Daddy’s best friend in Deep Pit Harbor. He listens to Daddy’s completely fabricated sob story: Daddy claims he was in the export business in Taipei with a partner and did the honorable thing when his partner went bankrupt by forgiving his partner’s debt. Fu Shaokang responds in the right way, from a liberal perspective, “out of a sympathy,” Daddy says, “he felt for what my life had been like and the situation I’m in” (Gunn 89; Wang 126).⁴³ Is Fu Shaokang stupid to believe the story? Perhaps we can imagine him seeing through Daddy’s yarn but feeling sympathetic anyway, because as a fellow mainlander and fellow human being, Daddy deserves sympathy. Fu Shaokang would turn out to be an ideal reader, responding

42. If Wang Wenxing is actually an economic liberal, a proponent of the free market, he might endorse men like Dong Yutang, who bring down the cost of food production and distribution. If Dong Yutang had succeeded in selling his rice balls in Deep Pit Harbor earlier, Daddy might have had affordable food to eat.

43. Sympathy and the Chinese term *tongqing* 同情 are similar morphologically and semantically. Sympathy means “same feeling” (usually a negative feeling), and *tongqing* 同情 is “same sentiment” or “same situation.”

with sympathy to people like Daddy, who seem unworthy of sympathy. The reader, of course, is free to turn away from Daddy and the other flawed characters in Deep Pit Harbor and from the unsympathetic people in their own lives, but doing so would be an illiberal failure to sympathize universally.⁴⁴

Fu Shaokang also acts on his sympathy. In the first volume, he mentions to Daddy the possibility of a position at BOCD0 and, in the second volume, helps him make arrangements, loaning him money for fabric for a suit, a gift for the director. When the director assigns the position to someone else, Daddy makes a scene and loses his meal ticket. It is unclear whether Daddy might have received some assistance from Fu Shaokang if he had held his tongue. Fu Shaokang might have forgiven him his debt, the way Daddy forgave his fictitious partner's debt.

At any rate, it turns out that Fu Shaokang is married, and in his own small way embodies the bourgeois ideal, cultivating sympathy at home and spreading it beyond. He lives in a new "heaven and earth" behind BOCD0, a staff dormitory, a place for eating and happiness (Wang 332). When he sees Daddy there, he invites him into his home for a visit, and introduces his wife and children, two middle school-aged sons and a daughter. The Fus live a life of petty bourgeois bliss; *Backed Against the Sea* would have been a much less interesting novel had it been about Fu Shaokang. Perhaps in reading about Daddy, the reader can indulge in his or her desire to be decadent. But the other thing reading about Daddy brings home to the reader is that one cannot live like Daddy.

44. The entirety of *Backed Against the Sea* can be read as a gigantic sob story, an attempt to keep the reader's attention and elicit sympathy. *Backed Against the Sea*—as-sob story is ground for a comparison with Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, one of the books Daddy brings with him to Deep Pit Harbor (Gunn 22; Wang 29). Both novels contain prostitutes with hearts of gold telling sob stories to vicious customers who become a little less vicious when the stories move them to pity. In both novels, a fallible narrator sees through the love story and the sob story while using them to keep the reader's attention. Both novels thereby force the reader into a self-consciousness of the narrative forms through which we understand the world and the values they transmit. The novels cultivate and question cynicism in the reader.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that *Backed Against the Sea* deals with the social and personal aspects of the problem of desire, considers two solutions—Buddhist and liberal—and privileges the latter: the Buddhist solution has to be considered part of the liberal one. A modern consumer can clearly benefit from a Buddhist perspective on desire, but the effects of desire in the world—both the real world and the world of *Backed Against the Sea*—are too complex to understand without the structural concept of society invented by men like Adam Smith, the perspective of political economy. Karl Marx inherited this perspective, but *Backed Against the Sea* can still be read as a liberal work that offers a liberal solution to the problem of desire: regulation by individuals, social institutions like marriage, and the state, combined with sympathy in the human realm that reduces market conflicts. *Backed Against the Sea* is clearly a critique of the logic of state-abetted capitalism, as represented by Dong Yutang, but obviously the reader can imagine a society in which freedom reigns in a more rational way. The novel also critiques capitalism from the perspective of the individual. Daddy's personal story illustrates the central contradiction of economic liberalism: that it is in the interests of sellers for customers to buy what they don't need beyond their means, often at great personal cost. Of course, we can blame Daddy for being the author of his own fate, which would be paradoxically more liberal than to say that his fate was externally decided; it would be even more liberal to notice that in a sense Daddy is typical. As behavioral economists have been arguing for several decades, people are not very good at judging their own interests and managing their own desires. No human being is a *Homo economicus*, the rational consumer of economic theory.⁴⁵ People are flawed. Readers familiar with Wang Wenxing's fiction will recognize the importance of flaws, personal and institutional, in *Backed Against the Sea*. The novel

45. See, for instance, Daniel L. McFadden, "The New Science of Pleasure," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 18687, available at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18687.pdf>.

offers the naive reader an education in how people and institutions operate in the real world. But one plank in the liberal program is, I have argued, positively represented here: the institution of the bourgeois family and the value of sympathy on which the family is founded, whereby individual desire is transcended or sublimated into bourgeois bliss. The figure of the prostitute was useful to Wang Wenxing in his cutting critique of capitalism and his modest defense of the family for three reasons: because she is an instance of the danger of the unfettered liberal market, she is a dangerous temptation for the dissolute individual, and she betrays Daddy's blurring of the separation between the private sphere of the market and the intimate sphere of the home.

Now that most people in Taiwan have entered the middle class, it is possible for almost anyone to maintain the boundary between the private sector (the market) and private life (the home). Poor Taiwanese parents do not sell their children anymore, a practice that erased the boundary between home and market. The women who are forced into prostitution tend to be from poorer countries. But desire is, to put it crudely, still a problem. Today the problem is of a surplus economy, outsourced production, and ceaseless attempts to promote consumption, which is presented as the only way to maintain economic growth (which in turn is an unquestioned desideratum). In 1962, the advertising of objects of desire was limited to the titillating names of the brothels in Deep Pit Harbor. Today the attempt to produce desire by marketing fills the space of everyday life. Though Taiwan may now be a democracy, willpower in private and public to face such problems as environmental degradation remains lacking, partly because people are too busy satisfying the desire to consume.⁴⁶ The counsel in *Backed Against the Sea* against

46. Like some developing countries today, Taiwan was drowning in trash in 1962. (Sometimes it still seems to be now.) Writing from the mid-1970s to the 1990s, Wang invests *Backed Against the Sea* with an environmental consciousness. He writes, "The closer you get to the ocean here, the more trash you find—I was at some seaside places once along the shore north of Taipei—Chin Shan, Pa-li, Fu-lung and the like—to take in the grand sights of nature. Well, was I in

indulgence is as relevant today as it was then, and Wang Wenxing's sadder and wiser liberal project continues.

for a jolt, whew! Everywhere I looked the entire seashore was buried in a mindless orgy of trash, trash, and more trash" (Gunn 14; Wang 19). This is not so much antiromantic—Daddy is not saying nature is not as beautiful as we think—as it is brutally honest about the way modern people trash nature.