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NABOKOV'S *LOLITA* IN CHINA:
ITS RECEPTION AND THE RISE OF POPULAR LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* is a world bestseller. It catapulted a hitherto moderately known Russian-born émigré and naturalized U.S. citizen to worldwide fame. By the mid-1980s, his most famous novel had sold about 14 million copies around the world.¹ This financial success allowed its author to retire from his professorial position in the U.S. and to move to Switzerland. Nabokov had the amazing ability to write brilliantly both in Russian and English. The novel still impresses readers today with its extremely nuanced art of expression characterized, for example, by intricate syntax, an immense multilingual vocabulary, as well as countless images, allusions, and puns. However, it took Nabokov much time and considerable efforts to get this masterpiece published in Europe and the U.S. because the publishing companies feared charges of "pornography."

This article studies the connections between the publication history of *Lolita* and the development of popular culture in China. As Gordon Lynch points out, popular culture has "no universally agreed definition."² For the purposes of this essay, we propose the following definition: popular culture here means culture appealing to a large audience, but it does not imply a value

¹ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 387.

² Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 3.

judgment as expressed by the terms “high culture” and “low culture.” We will use “popular culture” and “mass culture” as synonyms because we are concerned with the rapid development of popular culture in post-Mao China that allowed a growing number of Chinese people to enjoy cultural artifacts of different kinds. The special feature of the Chinese development is that the country had to start anew both economically and culturally in the post-Mao era guided by Deng Xiaoping’s pragmatic political ideas.

Since the beginning of this opening policy, China has become a country that is deeply influenced by Western popular culture such as fiction, pop music, movies, for example Hollywood blockbusters, fashion, and even soft drinks and (fast) food. The fact that it is normal to hear loud American rap music, such as Eminem, coming from loudspeakers all over a university campus in Beijing can serve as an illustration of how profound this influence is.

A Chinese translation of Nabokov’s *Lolita* was published in China³ in 1989 and thus belongs to the early phase of this development. This study demonstrates that, in the 1980s, Chinese publishers were working in a comparatively more market-oriented and culturally more liberal environment. They, for instance, used pictures of enticing women on the covers of the first Chinese *Lolita* editions to attract readers. In this new situation, the publishers seized the opportunity to earn money with the translation of a notorious, previously forbidden book. This paper examines a prominent example of *Lolita*’s literary reception in China by looking at the novel *Dongwu Xiongmeng* (*Fierce Animals*, 1991) by Wang Shuo (born in 1958), a writer who publicly touted his strong desire to become rich by writing.⁴ One of the most popular Chinese authors of the 1980s and 1990s, Wang Shuo is regarded as a representative of popular and commercial mass culture on the rise in China since the late 1980s.

As is well known, the first publication of *Lolita* in Europe and the United States in the 1950s proved to be difficult because the work caused great controversy. Supporters such as Graham Greene, who declared he would be ready to go to jail for the publication,⁵ described the novel as a great work of art whereas its opponents in different countries expressed moral outrage and denounced it as “pornography.” Anticipating the dispute, Nabokov acted very carefully and even considered publishing the manuscript, completed in December 1953, anonymously.⁶ Nassim W. Balestrini points out that five American publishing companies rejected Nabokov’s “favorite novel among his own works” [translation of the authors] as “pornographic” in the twelve months after its

3 In this article, the signifier “China” refers to mainland China in order to differentiate the reception histories of *Lolita* in mainland China and Taiwan or Hong Kong.

4 Shuo Wang, “Wo Kan Dazhong Wenhua” (My Views on Popular Culture) (*Tianya* [Frontiers], 2 [2000]), 12.

5 Brian Boyd, *Nabokov*, 373.

6 Brian Boyd, *Nabokov*, 255.

completion and regarded the publication as too risky.⁷ Although Nabokov had the book first published in English by Olympia Press in Paris in 1955, it was also forbidden in France from late 1956 until July 1959.⁸ Only in 1958 could the work be published by G. P. Putnam's Sons in the U.S.⁹ It already appeared in its third printing three days later and reached the top of the American bestseller list the following month.¹⁰

In China, *Lolita* was published at the end of the 1980s in a more open political, social, and cultural climate than the one that prevailed in the 1970s. “The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” from 1966 to 1976 had been instigated by Mao Zedong¹¹ in order to re-consolidate his power. Mao argued that literature serves a revolutionary purpose, namely

to ensure that literature and art fit well in the whole revolutionary machine as a component of war, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.¹²

This definition of literature and art as a “weapon” in a war of the people against “the enemy” is opposed to, for example, the “bourgeois” concept of art for art's sake which reflects Nabokov's attitude towards literature more accurately. The contrast to Nabokov's individualism, his rejection of political or social messages in literature, and his contempt for what he regarded as philistinism—as found in certain elements of American popular culture that play a significant role in *Lolita*—could not be greater: “I loathe popular pulp, I loathe go-go gangs [i.e. motorcycle gangs], I loathe jungle music, I loathe science fiction <...> I especially loathe vulgar movies. <...> I mock popular trash.”¹³ Nabokov thus clearly distinguished between “high art” and popular culture, which to him was “trash.” Whether one agrees with Nabokov's judgments in matters of taste or not, it becomes

7 Nassim W. Balestrini, *Vladimir Nabokovs Erzählwerk: Eine Einführung* (München/Berlin: Otto Sagner, 2009), 172.

8 Nassim W. Balestrini, *Erzählwerk*, 172.

9 For a vivid description of the long way to the first publication of *Lolita* in the United States and the book's huge success, see Brian Boyd, *Nabokov*, chapters 12 to 14, 255-317, as well as chapter 16, 356-389.

10 Nassim W. Balestrini, *Erzählwerk*, 172.

11 In the main text of this article, Chinese names are given in the Chinese sequence of providing the monosyllabic family name first, then the first name. In the documentation of sources in the footnotes, the order of names is reversed.

12 Zedong Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Vol. 3 (Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Press, 1975), 84.

13 Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 117. Interestingly, Nabokov here argues against the postmodernist idea of combining cultural phenomena without distinguishing between “low” and “high” art. “Jungle music” must be a dubious derogatory term for music with African-American roots such as the blues, jazz, and Rock'n'Roll, the last of which originated in the U.S. in the decade *Lolita* was written and published, the 1950s. Like numerous Americans from an older and more conservative generation, Nabokov held this kind of music in contempt.

clear that this author does not have any pretense or wish to use literature as a “powerful weapon <...> for uniting and educating the people.”

On the contrary, Nabokov spoke out for non-didactic literature: “I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction and <...> *Lolita* has no moral in tow.”¹⁴ Nabokov rejected two doctrines adamantly: Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis¹⁵ and communist ideology. Nabokov and his family, members of the elite under the Czar, had to flee from Russia because of the revolution in 1917 and lost their enormous wealth. Nabokov always expressed his aversion to the political systems in the Soviet Union and China, where his books were forbidden until twelve years after his death in 1977.¹⁶

PUBLICATION HISTORY

In order to understand the different cultural climate which developed in China after Mao’s passing in 1976, it is necessary to look back at the traumatic historical period before. During the Cultural Revolution, China went through a time of almost total cultural deprivation during which, for example, all Western cultural influences were supposed to be erased, and during which intellectuals, writers, artists, and so-called capitalists were proclaimed enemies of the people. After this era, however, a more liberal period, also in publishing, followed. From 1978 onward, the new policy under Deng Xiaoping with its profound economic reforms brought about a very vigorous development towards a market-oriented system and an amazing economic boom. The economic development led to the rise of popular culture under the influence of Western culture. The deep and fast transformation of Chinese society, which began in those years, is still going on today.

From 1983 to 1989, the Chinese publishing industry also became more market-oriented, at a time when the Xinwen Chuban Zongshu (Central Bureau of Publishing) in Beijing, the central state authority for all publications in China, loosened its control and censorship.¹⁷ The New China Bookstores (Xinhua Shudian), the only places where one could officially buy books, lost their monopoly. In an article dealing with the publication of D. H. Lawrence’s novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) in China, Chen Yi describes the liberalization of the book market in those years:

From late 1983 onward [...], alternative channels for publishing and distribution

14 Vladimir Nabokov, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” in Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, (New York: Vintage, 1991), 311.

15 Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 23-24.

16 Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 113.

17 Yi Chen, “Publishing in the Post-Mao Era: The Case of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*” (*Asian Survey* 32.6 [1992]), 568-69.

emerged. State-owned publishing houses were free to print works on a wider range of topics, and licensed private bookstores and bookstands began to proliferate.¹⁸

In 1985, publishers received fewer subsidies, which forced them or, one could also say, gave them the opportunity to make profits on their own. Local publishing houses in different provinces had to find new sources of revenue because the publication of official political writings no longer yielded sufficient profits. The publication of new translations of western bestsellers proved to be lucrative in this situation.

Nabokov's œuvre was first introduced to readers in mainland China in the late 1970s. In 1978, Mei Shaowu first translated one of his English-language works into Chinese, the novel *Pnin* (1957) that Nabokov wrote after finishing *Lolita*. (*Lolita* had, however, already appeared in Chinese in Taiwan as early as 1964.) *Pnin* was published in installments in the journal *Waiguo Wenyi* (Foreign Literature and Art), a leading literary journal presenting foreign literature to Chinese readers.¹⁹ Mei Shaowu explained why he turned down the offer to translate *Lolita*: "This work is regarded as the best novel by Nabokov, but it tells a love story between an old man and a little girl. I think this is not in accordance with our moral standards in China, and I do not like it [the novel]."²⁰ This opinion reveals that the literary representation of a much older man who describes his sexual abuse of a girl was still a taboo to many people in a country that adhered to strict restrictions regarding the depiction of sexuality.²¹

In spite of such rejections based on moral reservations, *Lolita* would soon come into its own. Huang Jianren's first translation for China, however, was only released after an unexpected delay. 1989, a year of tremendous changes in Europe, Russia, and China, can be regarded as a Chinese "*Lolita* year" because five different translations of the novel were published. In the same year, the book also came out in two other communist countries, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Soviet Union. The reception of *Lolita* in China thus started about thirty years after the American publication in 1958.

In January 1989, Huang Jianren's very first translation of *Lolita* into Chinese appeared.

18 Yi Chen, "Publishing in the Post-Mao Era," 569.

19 Yingjian Guo and Wenxia Liu, "Nabokefu Yanjiu Zai Zhongguo" (Nabokov Studies in China), (*Hanyuyan Wenxue Yanjiu* [Chinese Literature Studies], Vol. 1, 2010), 86.

20 Quoted after Ying Zhang and Min Huang, "50 Sui Luolita, 11 Zhang Zhongguo Lian" (The 11 Chinese Faces of the 50-Year-Old *Lolita*), (*Nanfang Zhoumo* [Southern Weekly], March 3, 2006), accessed March 12, 2015, <http://www.southcn.com/weekend/culture/200603160043.htm>

21 Mei Shaowu's judgment is reminiscent of much harsher moral condemnations of the novel in Europe and the United States in the 1950s such as the one of John Gordon, editor of a sensationalist newspaper in Britain, who called *Lolita* "the filthiest book [he had] read" and "[s]heer unrestrained pornography." Quoted after Brian Boyd, *Nabokov*, 295.

Huang says that, when she was still a master student of English at Hunan Normal University, an editor of Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House asked her whether she could find the English version of *Lolita*²² and pointed out that Liu Shuoliang, who was working for Lijiang²³ Publishing House, was planning to publish the Chinese translation.²⁴ A few days later, Huang found an English version of *Lolita* in her university library, borrowed the book and copied it. Translating the book then took her more than a year.²⁵

When, in 1986, Huang was proof-reading the whole draft and was about to send it to Liu Shuoliang, the publication of the Chinese translation of D. H. Lawrence's notorious erotic novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* met difficulties in China. In December 1986, Hunan People's Publishing House wanted to publish the novel following the example of the 1983 People's Literature Publishing House's abridged version of *Jinpingmei Cihua* (Comments on the Poems from *The Plum in the Golden Vase*).²⁶ When the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was brought to the attention of the authorities, the books were confiscated. However, a good amount of the copies had already been sold. The chief editor of Hunan People's Publishing House, Zhu Zheng, who had only been in office since 1986, was then dismissed and received an official reprimand in his record.²⁷ As a consequence, Liu Shuoliang postponed the publication of *Lolita*.

Finally, in January 1989, *Lolita* translated by Huang Jianren was released by Lijiang Publishing House as *Luolita*—which is a Pinyin transcription (the common alphabetic transcription system also used on computers and cellphones to choose the characters) of the name. The publication of the first Chinese translation of *Lolita* in China thus reflects the new, yet unclear rules governing publication in the post-Mao era and shows that some individuals were ready to go beyond what was considered possible.

The covers of the early editions of *Lolita* did not present girls at the age of the female protagonist—that was still out of question—but good-looking young Western women in order to emphasize the erotic content of the novel. Huang Jianren commented in an interview that “the book

22 Ying Zhang and Min Huang, “50 Sui *Luolita*.”

23 The publishing house is named after the Li River in the southern province of Guangxi.

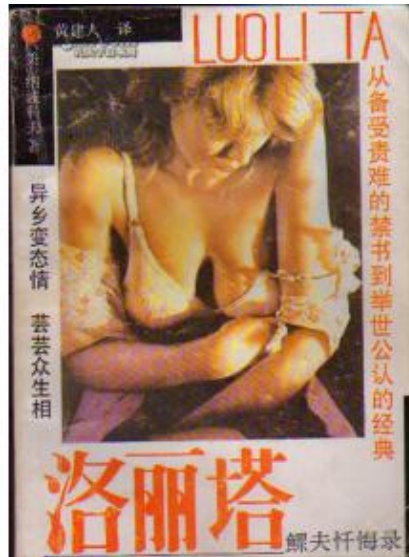
24 Ying Zhang and Min Huang, “50 Sui *Luolita*.”

25 Ying Zhang and Min Huang, “50 Sui *Luolita*.”

26 *The Plum in the Golden Vase* is a classic Chinese novel that contains many erotic elements but also political criticism of the aristocracy. It was written around 1600 in the Ming dynasty and considered a pornographic and politically dangerous work. From its emergence until the 1970s, the book was forbidden, but the text always circulated in handwritten and later also printed versions. Today, the work is regarded as a milestone in the development of the novel. It was published under a pseudonym; the author remains unknown to this day. The English translation of his pseudonym is Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng (Scoffing Scholar of Lanling) as “Xiaoxiao” onomatopoeically represents the sound of laughter (“ha-ha”).

27 Ying Zhang and Min Huang, “50 Sui *Luolita*.”

jacket of the first version was very vulgar.”²⁸



The forbidden book cover of the first Chinese translation of *Lolita* in China:

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Luolita*. Huang Jianren trans. Guilin: Lijiang Publishing House, 1989.

The strategy of the publishing house was to attract readers with an erotic photo of a Western woman although *Lolita* with its rather subtle eroticism and non-vulgar language will disappoint readers looking for graphic descriptions of sexuality. The eye-catching photo shows a blonde Western woman wearing a bra. One bra strap has slipped down from her left shoulder so that her breasts in the center of the picture are barely covered. Her face cannot be seen clearly as she is looking down.

On the right side of the book, written in Chinese characters from top to bottom, there is an advertisement slogan: “From much-blamed forbidden book to worldwide acknowledged classic.” The publisher tries to catch the readers’ attention by emphasizing that the book has been forbidden, but, at the same time, the publisher makes clear that it should be regarded as a literary masterpiece, a work of art, and therefore—by definition—*not* as an example of ‘pornography.’ The slogan advertises the special opportunity to appreciate ‘high art’ *and* eroticism at the same time. On the left of the cover, one can find the summary of the novel’s content in a rhymed Chinese sentence that contains the phrase “perverse love” referring to Humbert’s obsession as a form of both perversion and love, which already hints at the constant contradictions in Humbert Humbert’s (H. H.) self-

28 Quoted after Ying Zhang and Min Huang, “50 Sui *Luolita*.”

characterization.²⁹ The publishers thus pursue a double strategy. On the one hand, the cover uses the marketing strategies of popular culture by underlining sexual elements, which are, as already mentioned, not dominant in the novel, in order to appeal to readers who usually do not read literary works but might appreciate the opportunity to read an erotic work. At the same time, the publishers assure the readers that this is not a pornographic text but an already classic work of literature, a message, which also serves to evade censorship.

Especially after the Cultural Revolution during which representations of sexuality formed a taboo, such a book cover hinting at the erotic elements of the work was likely to arouse readers' interest. However, the translator Huang Jianren claims that she was outraged about the cover and called the editor who, according to her, explained that this cover had just been chosen to promote sales.³⁰ Like the first Chinese edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1986, this edition was reported to the authorities. The General Administration of Press and Publication did not ban the book altogether but ordered the publishing house to change the book cover.³¹

Two other editions which appeared in the same year also feature attractive Western women on the covers, but the photos are clearly less explicit than the one of the first, forbidden cover. These later books, however, also use the wording "perverse love" in the one-sentence summary on the cover. The readers' desire to read something different from the previous political writings and the curiosity about erotic descriptions in books by acclaimed foreign writers determined the design of the book covers and promoted the publication. Since the 1989 publication of the first Chinese translation of *Lolita*, many translations and editions have appeared. The following editions illustrate the work's successful publication history in China:

Publication Table:

Selected Chinese-Language Editions of *Lolita* from the 1960s to 2000s³²

Publication Date	Translator(s)	Publishing Press	Title of the Translation (in Pinyin and English)
1964	Zhao Erxin	Huangguan Wenhua Chubanshe (Crown Culture Publishing)	<i>Luo Litai</i>

29 Brian Boyd, *Nabokov*, 227, who points out "the tension," the contradictions in H. H.'s story.

30 Ying Zhang and Min Huang, "50 Sui *Luolita*."

31 Ying Zhang and Min Huang, "50 Sui *Luolita*."

32 Based on Ying Zhang and Min Huang, "50 Sui *Luolita*."

		Company), Taiwan	
Jan. 1989	Huang Jianren	Lijiang Chubanshe (Lijiang Publishing House)	<i>Luolita: A Widower's Confession</i>
1993 (reprint)		Linyu Chuban Gongsi (Linyu Publishing Company), Taiwan	<i>Luolita</i>
Feb. 1989	Hua Ming, Ren Shengming	Hebei Renmin Chubanshe (Hebei People's Publishing House)	<i>Luolita</i>
May 1989	Mai Sui	Haitian Chubanshe (Haitian Publishing House)	<i>Luolita</i>
June 1989	Yu Xiaodan	Jiangsu Wenyi Chubanshe (Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House)	<i>Luolita</i>
1997 (reprint)	Yu Xiaodan, added name: Liao Shiqi	Shidai Wenyi Chubanshe (Time, Literature and Art Publishing House)	
1999 (reprint)	Yu Xiaodan	Shenyang Chubanshe (Shenyang Publishing House)	
2000 (reprint)		Yilin Chubanshe (Yilin Publishing House)	
Aug. 1989	Peng Xiaofeng, Kong Xiaojiong	Zhejiang Wenyi Chubanshe (Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House)	<i>Luolita</i>
1994	Liu Lizhi	Neimengu Wenhua Chubanshe (Inner Mongolia Culture Publishing House)	<i>Luolita: A Widower's Confession</i>
1995	Ning Geliang	Zhongyuan Nongmin	<i>Luolita</i>

		Chubanshe (Central China Farmers' Publishing House)	
2000	Huang Xiuhui	Xianjue Chubanshe (Xianjue Publishing House, Taipei)	<i>Luolita</i>
2000	Wu Yujun	Dunhuang Wenyi Chubanshe (Dunhuang Literature and Art Publishing House)	<i>Luolita: Pear Blossoms on Chinese Crabapple</i> ³³
2002	Zhang Xiang	Name of the publishing house not indicated	<i>Luolita</i>
2002	Qin Yajun	Neimenggu Renmin Chubanshe (Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House)	<i>Luolita</i>
2003	Zhu Xiaoli	Shidai Wenyi Chubanshe (Time, Literature and Art Publishing House)	<i>Luolita</i>
2005	Wang Jianglin	Jinli Daxue Chubanshe (Jinli University Press)	<i>Luolita</i>
2005	Zhu Wan	Shanghai Yiwu Chubanshe (Shanghai Culture and Translation Publishing House)	<i>Luolita</i>

33 This subtitle comes from a verse in a well-known poem which was supposedly written by Su Dongpo (1037–1101) to make fun of his good friend, Zhang Xian, another famous Chinese poet of that time. At the age of eighty, Zhang married an eighteen-year-old woman. White “pear blossoms” symbolize old men who have gray or white hair, whereas “crabapples” are red and represent beautiful young women. The verse from the poem thus refers to an old man with a very young female lover. When the film *Lolita* (1997) by Adrian Lyne was first shown in Taiwan in 1997, the name of the film was translated as *Pear Blossoms on Chinese Crabapple* although Humbert Humbert is a middle-aged man. Cf. Aizhai Zan, “*Luolita* de ‘Yiwai’ Fengmo” (The “Unexpected” Popularity of *Lolita*), (*Zhongguo Shehui Daokan* [China Society Periodical] 6 [2002]), 63.

This list of 19 *Lolita* editions in China shows that the work has been very popular since its first publication more than a quarter century ago, that the Pinyin transcription “Luo Litai” instead of “Luolita” is also used, and that there is another subtitle beside “White Pear Blossoms on Red Crabapple,” namely “A Widower’s Tale,” which must be derived from the fictitious foreword of the novel in which H. H.’s story is called “Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male.”³⁴ The Shanghai annotated edition from 2005 is the edition usually used in China today. It was published on the occasion of the fifty-year anniversary of the first publication by Olympia Press in Paris and makes clear that the book no longer causes controversy in contemporary China. This indicates a much more liberal attitude towards the representation of eroticism and sexuality compared to 1989. In the meantime, China has witnessed the publication or distribution of numerous much more explicit foreign and Chinese books and films, and the covers of Chinese fashion magazines are often at least as graphic as the forbidden cover of the first *Lolita* edition in 1989. The movie *Lolita* (1997) by Adrian Lyne, which is based on the novel, was not shown in Chinese cinemas because of its representation of sexuality, but unauthorized copies were sold and it is available for Chinese internet users today. So far, no Chinese official film adaptation of *Lolita* has been made, which shows that there are still more restrictions with regard to certain subject matter represented in audiovisual media.

EARLY LITERARY RECEPTION

As we know from his writings, *Lolita* influenced a renowned Chinese writer who was very popular in the 1980s and in the 1990s, especially among young readers. His works were often adapted into the popular media of films or TV series and therefore reached a huge audience. The general liberalization policy of the 1980s is thus also reflected in the publication and literary fields, in which writers acquired more freedom of expression. According to Helmut Martin, “the Chinese public was inundated with mass culture products” at that time.³⁵ The literary influence of Nabokov’s works on Chinese writers will be illustrated here by analyzing texts that Wang Shuo published not long after the first publication of *Lolita* in China.

Wang Shuo: *Fierce Animals*

³⁴ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 3.

³⁵ Helmut Martin, “China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan During the 1980s and the 1990s and the Periphery,” in *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, edited by Victor H. Mair (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 759.

Wang Shuo is a pioneer of popular culture in China who, after giving up his job as a businessman, earned a fortune by writing commercial novels.³⁶ According to Wang Shuo, literature

should have two functions: the pure art function and the popularity function. And I always want to find a way in the middle... If one of them must be sacrificed, I would rather sacrifice the first one, and choose the latter one.³⁷

Fierce Animals (1991) certainly fulfilled the popularity function: Jiang Wen (born in 1963), one of the most famous Chinese directors today, wrote a script based on the best-selling novel together with Wang Shuo and turned it into the successful movie *Yangguang Canlan de Rizi* (In the Heat of the Sun, 1994), the first one he directed. The author of the book played a small role in the movie. It received prizes at the Venice Film Festival and in Taiwan and was shown in a censored version in Chinese cinemas.

In order to appeal to a mass readership, Wang Shuo created a special type of novel belonging to ‘pizi wenxue’ (‘riffraff literature’).³⁸ This term refers to a certain kind of characters that Wang Shuo repeatedly describes in his novels in the 1980s and 1990s, namely anti-heroes from the lower class who are rebellious and ‘good for nothing.’ Wang Shuo, however, does not portray them negatively but affectionately. During the Cultural Revolution, literary characters always appeared as types so that good and evil could be distinguished easily. Wang Shuo’s numerous novels from the post-Mao period soon gained a large readership of young people and the author came to be considered as “the youth’s idol of rebellion”³⁹ against a traditional and strict code of behavior. In his article about Chinese literature in the 1980s and 1990s, Helmut Martin writes that Wang Shuo’s “writings were a riotous revelation for China’s youth for several years.”⁴⁰ Howard Goldblatt (Chinese name: Ge Haowen), an American sinologist and a literary translator of many Chinese works, has introduced numerous contemporary Chinese writers, including 2012 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Mo Yan (born in 1955), and Wang Shuo, to English-speaking readers. Goldblatt appreciates the works of Wang Shuo for their directness and honesty.⁴¹

36 Shuo Wang, “Wo Kan Dazhong Wenhua,” 11-12, 19.

37 Shuo Wang, “Wo de Xiaoshuo” (My Novels), (*Renmin Wenxue* (People’s Literature), 3 (1989)), p. 108.

38 Yusheng Yao, “The Elite Class Background of Wang Shuo and His Hooligan Characters,” (*Modern China*, [Oct. 2004]), 433.

39 Guan Yu, “Yidian Zhengjing Meiyou” (Not An Iota of Seriousness), in Zhifeng Liu, *Pizi Yingxiong: Wang Shuo Zai Pipan* (Reconsideration of Wang Shuo: The Riffraff Hero), (Beijing: Zhonghua Gongshang Lianhe Chubanshe [China Industry and Business Federation Publishing House], 2000), 102.

40 Helmut Martin, “China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan During the 1980s and the 1990s and the Periphery,” 759.

41 Haowen Ge (Howard Goldblatt), “Ge Haowen Tan Zhongguo Wenxue” (Howard Goldblatt Talks about Chinese Literature), interview by Ge Fu and Ying Zhang, (*Nanfang Zhoumo* [Southern Weekly], March 27, 2008), accessed

While directness cannot be regarded as a feature of Nabokov's often challenging, highly elaborate style filled with countless subtle allusions, Wang Shuo claims to have been influenced by the Russian-American author. He expresses his admiration for *Lolita* that he regards as a non-political book: "I like *Lolita* because there is no social upheaval in it. Everything is his own. He writes about a spiritual world of his own. And I like it."⁴² Works like *Lolita*, which were considered not overtly political but rather artistically erotic as well as entertaining in their representation of a "spiritual world," appealed to readers.

Wang Shuo's novel *Fierce Animals*, which depicts entangled love relationships in a group of teenage friends attending "middle school" in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution, shows traces of *Lolita*, that appeared in China only two years earlier. *Fierce Animals* is told retrospectively from the viewpoint of a thirty-plus man who remembers his experiences as a fifteen-year-old boy. *Lolita* must have come right on cue for a "generation [which] wrote about sexual matters with unprecedented openness" but used a rather subtle way.⁴³

The depiction of the female protagonists in this novel includes features associated with Western culture, particularly regarding the characteristics of school-age girls as described in Nabokov's novel. The eighteen-year-old Yu Beibei is described as unruly and rebellious while the nineteen-year-old Mi Lan appears as sexy and enchanting. Both are as seductive to the first-person narrator and other young men in the group as *Lolita* is to H. H., but in Wang Shuo's text, the young men and women are of the same generation rather than of disparate ages. The young women's names have a Western sound in Chinese: Beibei suggests the English word "baby," an endearing but also infantilizing term for a woman as well as a hint at the fact that Yu Beibei is only a teenager. The name Mi Lan has the same Chinese characters as the Italian city Milan, which also contributes to the Western touch of the novel.

More specifically, the description of the narrator first looking at a photo of Mi Lan is strongly reminiscent of H. H.'s description of his first glance at *Lolita*. In *Fierce Animals*, the nameless male protagonist gains entry to Mi Lan's apartment illegally, sneaks into her bedroom and looks at a photo that suddenly triggers his desire for her:

I do not remember if there was really a kind of enchanting fragrance in the room, but in my memory, there was. She [Mi Lan] gazed at me smilingly through the silver plexiglass frame of the photo, and the fragrance emanated from her direction. She was in

August 7, 2015, <http://www.infzm.com/content/6903>.

42 Shuo Wang, *Wo Shi Wang Shuo* (I Am Wang Shuo), (Beijing: Guoji Wenhua Chubans Gongsi [International Culture Publishing House], 1992), 98-99.

43 Helmut Martin, "China, Hong Kong," 766.

the midst of bright colors; although I knew that there were no flowers, I still have the lingering feeling of looking into a bunch of flowers. In my impression, it was clear that she wore a swimsuit. But she denied it afterward and said that what she wore was just a common cotton dress with a flower pattern, which was confirmed when I got that photo, but I still could not erase my first impression. Why did I have such a deep feeling about her shoulders, thighs, and the smoothness of her skin? Such an intense eye-catching, contrasting, and high-definition effect would only be possible in the sunshine of a beach on a summer day, wouldn't it?

Looking back, her pose at that time was not natural, but rather phony and flirting, just like those that young film stars often assumed on tabloids.

But at that time, I regarded this kind of shallowness and tawdriness as beauty! And I was infatuated, intoxicated with, attracted to and ecstatic over the poorest flirtation!⁴⁴

This passage bears striking resemblances with the description of H. H. first catching sight of Dolores Haze, Charlotte Haze's twelve-year-old daughter, whom he later calls "Lolita."⁴⁵ According to his own story, H. H., also a first-person narrator, sees the girl at the very moment in which he is determined to find out when the next train will leave town, but the sight of Lolita makes him change his mind immediately. He classifies her as a "nymphet," the kind of girl he desires, and is reminded of his sexually unfulfilled childhood love Annabel. H. H. detects the same features in Lolita as in Annabel and enumerates them, using an asyndeton and alliterations: "the same frail, **honey-hued** shoulders, the same **silky supple bare back**, the same chestnut **head of hair** [authors' emphasis]."⁴⁶ H. H. also raves over her "juvenile breasts," "indrawn abdomen," and "those puerile hips"; he perceives "every detail of her bright beauty" eagerly.⁴⁷ Likewise, the nameless narrator in *Fierce Animals* has a "deep feeling about [Mi Lan's] shoulders, thighs, and the smoothness of her skin."

Another parallel to *Lolita* is that the narrator characterizes Mi Lan's "pose" as "phony and flirting" comparing it to the poses of film stars in tabloids. What later seems "shallow and tawdry" to him appears beautiful at that moment. On the one hand, Humbert idealizes and glorifies the child

44 Shuo Wang, *Dongwu Xiongmeng (Fierce Animals)* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe [People's Literature Publishing House], 2006), 8.

45 Nabokov, *Lolita*, 39-40.

46 Nabokov, *Lolita*, 39. The terms "greenery," "honey-hued," "chestnut," and "dark" used in just one sentence on this page hint at Nabokov's special gift to describe colors in nuanced ways.

47 Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 17.

Lolita and tries to bribe her with presents in order to make her comply with his sexual demands. On the other hand, the more time they spend together, the older she grows and the more she expresses her contempt for him, the more he describes her as hard, vulgar, shallow, not willing to learn anything, and completely absorbed in superficial American pop culture, such as films and film stars—without considering that her behavior results from the cruel confinement and constant control he imposes upon her. Thus, her beauty and her alleged vulgarity also exist side by side in H. H.'s characterization.

The first sentence of the quotation from Wang Shuo's novel uses the term "zhaomi" (enchanted)—"enchanted" is an important word in *Lolita*. After his new wife has been killed by a car, H. H. takes advantage of the "fortunate" situation, picks up Lolita at the summer camp and takes her to a hotel called "The Enchanted Hunters"⁴⁸ which Lolita later remembers in a conversation with H. H. as "the hotel where you raped me."⁴⁹ In this hotel, he first abuses *Lolita*; "enchanted" reflects the special elation he and Quilty, the other hidden "hunter," feel when they desire a girl or when they fulfill this desire, and the "hunt" evokes their patient and determined chase of the girl as well as the violence they inflict on their victim. However, later, during the stay at Beardsley School, Lolita is supposed to play a role in a drama also called "The Enchanted Hunters" which was, however, as becomes clear, intentionally named after the hotel by the author of this play, Quilty,⁵⁰ who, like a shadow, "hunts" both H. H. and Lolita on their long journey through the United States. Lolita makes the remark about rape above when she pretends that she realizes for the first time that the name of the hotel in which they stayed is identical with the name of the drama.

The I-narrator in *Fierce Animals* remembers that, when he first looked at Mi Lan's photo in her room, he saw her amid flowers (although he knows there were no flowers) and with a swimsuit (although he knows she wore a dress) and thought that only a photo of her at a beach on a summer day could have been as intense as his recollection of this photo. Intruding into someone else's room in their absence is something forbidden just as Humbert's desire for Lolita is something secret and illicit.

H. H. turns out to be a highly unreliable narrator. The narrator of *Fierce Animals* points out his faulty memory and thus demonstrates how he idealized Mi Lan at the beginning of his infatuation with her. As in the protagonist's rendering of how he perceived Mi Lan's photograph, H.H. first sees Lolita in a green garden on a sunny day; she is not wearing a swimsuit but rather

48 The place is first mentioned as the "pale palace of The Enchanted Hunters" (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 117).

49 Nabokov, *Lolita*, 202.

50 Alfred Appel calls Quilty the author of the play. Nabokov, *Lolita*, 402.

improvised skimpy beach wear. Lolita looks at H. H. over sun glasses “from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees” and wearing only a “polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest.”⁵¹ Similar to the first-person narrator in Wang Shuo’s novel who feels that Mi Lan, who is not present, “gazed” at him from the picture, H.H. perceives his “Riviera love” in flesh-and-blood Dolores Haze. Humbert thus refers to his sad childhood love for thirteen-year-old Annabel, who, according to his story, was passionately in love with him too, and died only four months after their encounter at the Riviera where H. H.’s father used to have a hotel. The Chinese novel evokes the sunny coast by referring to the “swim suit” and “the sunshine of a beach on a summer day,” whereas Lolita seems to be bathing in a non-aquatic, metaphorical “pool” of light. More importantly, both passages foreground the perceptions of the male protagonist of a love interest—perceptions in which past and present overlap, and perceptions that indicate the transformative and manipulative power of projecting one’s desires on others.

CONCLUSION

The reception of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* as an officially allowed book in China began in 1989, about thirty years after its first publication in the United States and three years after the publication of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, and must be regarded as an element in the rise of popular culture in China, which was strongly influenced by the West. As in Europe and the United States in the 1950s, the publication of *Lolita* in China resulted from a more liberal attitude in matters of sexuality but also from the increased interest in foreign literature in the wake of the intellectual deprivation during the Cultural Revolution. However, these developments resulted from the opening policy under Deng Xiaoping, which also affected the publishing sector, especially in the years 1983 to 1989.

The first Chinese edition advertised *Lolita* with a clever double message: the promise of eroticism and “high art” at the same time. During this period, publishers dared to test the limits. Their hopes for commercial success were fulfilled because *Lolita* did sell well in China—the novel went through many editions. Lolita’s literary impact—sometimes even in details—can, for example, be detected in the prose texts of an important young writer of the 1980s and 1990s as the discussion of Wang Shuo’s novel *Fierce Animals* illustrates. The parallels in the wording, in the narrative perspective, in the imagery, and in the character constellations as well as character descriptions point to the fact that *Lolita*, which is set against the background of European and American cultures,

51 Nabokov, *Lolita*, 39.

appealed to popular Chinese fiction writers. The successful film adaptation of the text by Jiang Wen popularized Wang Shuo's works further and supported his public image as a major writer of that period.

As a work of world literature that does not promote any ideological message, *Lolita* transcends cultural boundaries by combining an unreliable narrator's highly artistic representations of love, desire, suffering, hatred and cruelty, self-knowledge and self-concealment, fear and elation, humor and tragedy. The fact that the reader of Humbert's tale must choose between different perceptions and judgments may lead to frustration—or add to the special aesthetic pleasure that a great number of Chinese readers and writers must have also enjoyed when reading this internationally successful novel. The reception in China was delayed for a long time but finally had a profound impact, not only in literature. Without judging today's dominance of popular culture in China, one can conclude that the reception of *Lolita* serves as a significant illustration of the general rise and the large-scale Westernization of popular culture that has strongly shaped this country in the past decades.

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