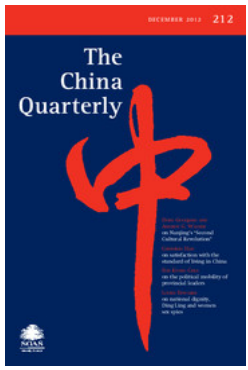

Having One's Porridge and Eating It Too: Wang Meng as Intellectual and Bureaucrat in Late 20th-Century China

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Having One's Porridge and Eating It Too: Wang Meng as Intellectual and Bureaucrat in Late 20th-Century China*

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Abstract

This article examines the "porridge incident," in which the renowned Chinese author, critic and former minister of culture Wang Meng sued a Communist Party literary journal for attacking him and his story "Hard Porridge" ("Jianying de xizhou"). The incident straddled the transitional period between 1989 and 1992 and illuminates the ramifications of structural changes in China's literary sphere. I frame the affair within two contexts: Wang Meng's tortuous career, which challenges dichotomies of bureaucrat vs. dissident, and the transition from a centralized literary sphere to a market-driven one. I argue that Wang's responses to the attack on him stemmed from a political and cultural standing that was the product of a Party-controlled cultural sphere, along with the opportunities offered by expanding reforms. The Deng-era reforms produced a divide between culture, markets and bureaucracy that would preclude cultural figures like Wang from holding such high bureaucratic positions anymore.

Keywords: intellectuals; Wang Meng; 1989; Tiananmen; cultural politics; China

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At the end of the first decade of post-Mao reforms, the renowned writer and critic Wang Meng 王蒙 served as China's minister of culture. In March 1989, two months before mass protests erupted in Tiananmen Square, Wang published a satirical short story titled "Hard Porridge" ("Jianying de xizhou" 坚硬的稀粥) which humorously discusses dilemmas of reform.[1] Nearly two years later, and after Wang had left office, in September 1991, *The Literary Gazette* (*Wenyibao* 文艺报), "the Party's premier publication on the politics of literature," published a letter attacking "Hard Porridge" and its author.[2] Wang responded with an unprecedented lawsuit against the author of the letter and against the journal.

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1 Wang Meng 1989.

2 Link 2000, 27.

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The lawsuit was rejected. However, due to Wang's prominence and his unique responses to the attack, the skirmish between Wang and conservatives in the cultural bureaucracy drew public attention, especially among Chinese intellectuals and Western observers.[3]

The "porridge incident," as some dubbed it, precisely spanned the period of ambiguity between the crackdown of June 1989 and the renewed embrace of market-oriented reforms heralded by Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in February 1992.[4] This article examines the incident, seeking to illuminate the forces that shaped China's cultural politics during this transitional period. The examination unsettles dichotomizing perceptions of courageous dissident intellectuals struggling against a regime of oppressive bureaucrats, and instead highlights the opportunities for expressing dissent offered by China's shift from a state-controlled cultural sphere to a market-driven one. I will argue that the forces that allowed Wang to react as he did – his relationship with the state, the decreasing power of its regulatory power and cultural authority, and the network that supported him – were products of the old, state-controlled literary and cultural system. At the same time, Wang's lawsuit was made possible by the reforms that were dismantling that very system. Indeed, Wang's transition from cultural figure to top bureaucrat was made possible by the unique intersection between the changes in China's cultural and literary spheres and Wang's life trajectory. Wang's personal biography brought him to a position of power that enabled him when responding to attacks to take advantage of new opportunities that reforms made possible at this time.

The "porridge incident" thus marks a shift in the ambiguous cooperation between the Party-state and intellectuals that characterizes the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Despite bouts of hostility, during the 1980s the Party-state and intellectuals mostly cooperated on the project of "reform and opening" (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放).[5] Wang Meng embodied this cooperation, as he went in the course of the decade from being a marginalized figure to a respected writer and top cultural bureaucrat. Yet, the events of 1989 ruptured this alliance between intellectuals and the state, as symbolized by Wang Meng leaving his government position. The renewed commitment to reform in 1992 may have increased personal freedoms but it also drew intellectuals and the state further apart, since the reforms were driven by a market-economy logic that fragments social life into spheres which are conceived as separate – such as politics, economy and art.[6] The incident and Wang's resignation signalled the increasing demarcation of these spheres as distinct from one another. After the incident, Wang resumed his artistic career and subsequent ministers of culture were no longer drawn from the cultural sphere, but rather

3 Keyser 1992, 1.
4 Wang Meng 1996, 281.
5 McGrath 2008, 25–27.
6 Following McGrath 2008, especially 6–13.

from the bureaucracy, consolidating the separation of the political sphere from the cultural.

The "porridge incident" was reported at the time in the Hong Kong press and in several newspapers in the West, and has received some academic treatment. Most of these studies, however, were written shortly after the affair.[7] Furthermore, most studies of the incident employ a binary framework that pits intellectuals against the state. Western studies of intellectuals in China often take intellectuals to be dissenters by definition and romanticize them as courageous individuals who embody liberal democratic ideals.[8] For example, Merle Goldman's authoritative trilogy on PRC intellectuals posits clearly demarcated intellectuals against a no-less-clear bureaucracy.[9] Such views of intellectuals were reinforced by Cold War era perceptions of the Soviet Union.[10]

The most detailed discussion of the "porridge incident" is by Geremie Barmé, as part of a study of the politics of the Chinese culture industry in the 1990s. Drawing upon the work of Hungarian dissident Miklos Harszti, Barmé's basic analytical concept is the "velvet prison." In the velvet prison, market forces replace state coercion, but with similar results. The resulting system allows more individual freedom than under the directly coercive state, but works to the same end of perpetuating the regime's hold on power.[11] Barmé relentlessly lays bare intellectuals' complicity with the state, but the analysis remains binary: an oppressive state opposed by a handful of courageous dissidents. Within this framework, Barmé's discussion of the "porridge incident" focuses on the factional struggles in which Wang Meng is implicated, concluding "This storm in Wang's rice bowl – intriguing though it may have been – was from beginning to end, little more than an example of factional infighting," or as another scholar dubs it, "a tempest in a teapot."[12]

The following account, by contrast, argues that the affair embodied the forces that shaped the Chinese cultural system in this period of transition. Drawing on concepts developed by Pierre Bourdieu, this article seeks explanations for the significance of Wang's actions in social and institutional contexts.[13] Bourdieu rejects the idea of cultural success as stemming from the talents of the uniquely endowed individual or the artistic genius, but suggests the concept of symbolic capital: an accumulation of prestige that rests among other things on disavowing standard forms of economic and political capital. Similarly, my analysis assumes that

7 Alford 1994, Keyser 1992, Barmé 1999 (based on an account Barmé published in Autumn1992), Lin and Galikowski 1999 (based on a discussion published in 1995), Yue 1999.

8 The *Locus Classicus* of intellectuals as obliged to dissent is Benda 1928. A more recent view is Said 1996.

9 Goldman 1967, 1981, 1994.

10 Perry Link notes that Chinese "literary-control methods" were "modeled on Soviet precedents" however cautions that the parallel "is useful only superficially." Link 2000, 5–6, 138.

11 Barmé 1999, 287–296 and passim. See also Wasserstrom 2007.

12 Barmé, 1999, 295; Yue 1999, 379.

13 Bourdieu 1999, 74–76, 165–166 and passim. Bourdieu's approach can be characterized as "radical contextualization." See "Editor's Introduction" ibid, p.9. For application of Bourdieu's work to China see Hockx 1999; 2003.

dissent results from more than the courage and convictions of unique individuals. Rather, it was Wang's symbolic capital which made him an asset to the Party-state as minister of culture, and which made him such a liability when he distanced himself from the state and attacked it. Ironically, due to the rapid changes in the cultural field and the rise of alternatives to the state's cultural institutions, the attempts to censure Wang simply increased his symbolic capital.

Wang's symbolic capital is also key to understanding his ascent of the bureaucracy. Since this capital was a result of Wang's biography and career path, I begin this account with an overview of his career.

Writer and Bureaucrat

Scholars have pointed out that Wang Meng's "generational location" and tortuous career in many ways reflect the changing relations of the state and intellectuals in the PRC.[14] Wang himself has stated, "I think that in my person of course are reflected a number of the changes China has undergone."[15] Wang's literary career is interwoven with bureaucratic office and is emblematic of the relations of intellectuals with the Party-state.

Born in Beijing in 1934, Wang spent most his childhood in his parents' village in Hebei and in Beiping 北平.[16] Rejoicing when the Nationalists took over the city at the end of the war, Wang was soon disappointed with the new government. Swept with patriotic and social idealism, by the age of 12 Wang had contacted the Communist Party and was reading secretly circulated Leftist literature, including works by Zhao Shuli 赵树立, He Jingzhi 贺敬之, Lu Xun 鲁迅, Ba Jin 巴金 and Ding Ling 丁玲, as well as political writings by Mao Zedong and other Marxists. Wang joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in autumn 1948, shortly before its victory.[17] After the founding of the People's Republic, Wang fulfilled different functions in the Party as a Youth League cadre. At the same time, Wang embarked on his writing career: he wrote his first novel in 1953 (though it was published only in 1979). His first actual publication was a short story that appeared in 1955.

"Hard Porridge" was not the first time Wang's fiction embroiled him in political trouble. In September 1956, Wang published "The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department" ("Zuzhibu laile ge nianqing ren" 组织部来了个年轻人), a story describing a young and naive official who attempts to reform waste and corruption within the bureaucracy. The story precipitated a wave of criticism of the Party-state bureaucracy and was much debated during the "Hundred Flowers" movement of spring 1957.[18] When cultural policy reverted that summer

14 For example, Alford 1994, 46. The term "generational location" is taken from the work of sociologist Karl Mannheim and is fruitfully employed in Schwarcz 1986.
15 Wang Meng 1996, 277.
16 The following paragraphs are based on Wang Meng 1993b, 343–400 and on Larson 1989.
17 Wang Meng 1996, 40–45, 277; Wang Meng 1992c, 53.; Zhang and Yi 1999, 21–22.
18 Wang's "Newcomer" is studied in Wagner 1992 and in Goldman 1967.

and the Anti-Rightist campaign was launched, "Newcomer" and its author became subject to harsh criticism. Wang was labelled a Rightist, expelled from the Party and sent to the countryside near Beijing to do manual labour.

In 1961, the Rightist label was removed, and in 1962 Wang published a story in *People's Literature* (*Renmin wenxue* 人民文学) and assumed a teaching position in the Chinese Department of Beijing Normal College. But this was to be a brief respite: the following year Wang was transferred, in effect exiled, to Xinjiang to edit the journal *Xinjiang Literature* (*Xinjiang Wenxue* 新疆文学). In 1964–65, Wang published three essays, but even this meagre output came to an end with the advent of the Cultural Revolution. In 1965, Wang was sent to a commune to labour and serve as the production brigade's vice-commander. In 1971, he was transferred to labour in a May 7th cadre school, from which he returned to the Xinjiang cultural bureau in 1973. Although he did not write during these years, Wang took the time to learn the language and culture of the local Uyghurs, and translated a number of Uyghur stories into Chinese, later describing this period as one of the most precious experiences of his life.[19]

Wang resumed publishing only at the end of 1977, 13 years after his last publication. The following year, Wang published several stories and reportage features, and in February 1979 he was politically rehabilitated. Wang returned to the Party and was posted in Beijing as a professional writer in the Chinese Writers' Association. Wang's literary output grew over the next decade as he published his 1953 novel *Long Live Youth* (*Qingchun wansui* 青春万岁), the novella *Bolshevik Salute* (*Bu li* 布礼), short stories and prose pieces.

While cultural policy oscillated between conservative and liberal trends during the 1980s, Wang consolidated his position as a prominent cultural figure. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Wang experimented with long interior monologues, drawing criticism from conservatives yet praise from critics and readers. Described by one scholar as "the pioneer of the Chinese narrative mode of stream of consciousness," Wang's work became central to the emerging debate about modernism.[20] Wang's writings were translated into foreign languages and he received many literary prizes both in China and abroad. By the mid-1980s, Wang was a popular and successful author, even described as "the most important writer living in China today," with the political image of a liberal reformist, albeit one loyal to the Party.[21]

While publishing prolifically, Wang also ascended the Party's cultural bureaucracy. In 1982, Wang was elected as an alternate member of the CCP central committee, and in 1983 he became chief editor of *People's Literature.* In January 1985, he became standing vice-chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association, followed in September by his election as a full member of the Central Committee. In July 1986, under liberal Party Secretary Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦, Wang was

19 Zhu 1994. See also Wang Meng 1992c, 57.
20 Wang, Jing 1996, 189. See also Hagenaar 1992, 123–160,169; Link 2000, 26; Larson 1989; Gunn 1991.
21 Zhu 1994, 1.

appointed minister of culture – the highest position in the cultural bureaucracy. Wang's personal history enhanced his appeal as a writer and his public stature; it was this stature that made him an asset to the state when serving in office and a liability after he stepped down.

After June 1989, Wang stood out as the sole minister who failed to pay his respects to the troops who occupied Beijing. Wang subsequently resigned from office in September, but continued serving as vice-chairman of the Writers' Association.[22] Although in the 14th Plenum meeting in October 1992 he was not re-elected to the central committee, in 1993 Wang joined the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. All the while Wang continued writing and publishing, even adding translations (from English) to his repertoire.

Having sketched his career till the end of the "porridge incident," I will now examine more closely Wang's ascent to the top of the cultural bureaucracy and his tenure.

Ascending the Bureaucracy

In the summer of 1986, as a liberal atmosphere prevailed, Wang had several advantages as a candidate for minister of culture. Due to his literary achievements he was well respected by his peers, as attested by his election to the position of vice-chairman of the Writers' Association; and he was popular among the reading public. Wang, therefore, could bring to office popular support, and his reputation as a liberal could help harness the literary community to the support of the regime. In addition, Wang's work was being translated into foreign languages (such as Hungarian, Spanish, Korean, Japanese and English) and he travelled abroad relatively frequently (including Europe, Japan and Australia), making him an excellent international representative of China.[23] Due to these advantages, Wang was offered the position as early as 1985, though he declined at the time.[24]

From Wang's point of view, the position's advantages must have included personal security and stability. But we should also take into consideration a sense of social responsibility, which led Wang, like many other intellectuals of his generation, to support the Communist regime.[25] In addition, accepting the position offered the possibility of shaping the cultural sphere, particularly the literary system, according to Wang's ideals and interests. The position could elevate Wang's prestige and enable him to cultivate and construct new networks of influence, which could benefit him when he would resume full-time writing. This was especially significant, since despite reforms the state still shaped the literary

22 Alford 1994, 69.
23 Wang Meng 1993b, 343–347.
24 Wang Meng 1996, 264.
25 In a letter to the author dated 12 February 1997, Wang Meng characterizes intellectuals of his generation as having a sense of idealism and of social responsibility. See also Link 2000, 104–105, 139–140, 142–143; Link, 1992.

market through its control of publishing houses, paper supplies and distribution outlets.[26] Therefore, as minister Wang could ensure smooth publication and marketing of his work during his time in office and in the future as well.

Finally, the position could bring with it direct material benefits. As one of a relatively small number of writers who were formally recognized as professional writers, Wang already enjoyed a fair salary from the Beijing Writers' Association in addition to better manuscript payments and various perks. Yet the increasing liberalization of the economy was gradually eroding the relative value of fixed state incomes. Structurally, even though Wang's works sold well, "… from 1966 until the 1990s, when commercial publishing of entertainment fiction fully returned, it was impossible to make a reliable living on manuscript fees,"[27] due to low payments and the risk of being refused publication. Thus, while Wang stood to benefit from a restructuring of the literary market according to commercial considerations, a position as minister could enhance his position in the marketplace, as well as within the literary sphere.

Despite these benefits, in retrospect Wang claimed ambivalence about accepting office, for this had drawbacks as well: it could mark Wang politically, supply ammunition for artistic and political critics, and distract him from writing.[28] In later interviews, seeking to distance himself from the unpopular government, Wang portrayed himself as first and foremost a writer, saying "I believe that being a writer suits me best," and claimed that he wasn't an ideal minister of culture, because he "didn't want to hold this position of minister."[29] These doubts notwithstanding, in July 1986 Wang accepted the position.

Hard Porridge

The years of Wang's tenure are considered one of the most liberal and diverse periods since the founding of the People's Republic. And although he seems to have had no role in major policy decisions, Wang has even been described as China's most outstanding minister of culture.[30] This was an especially open time, when intellectuals debated the nature of Chinese culture and the prospects for modernization. One prominent product of these probings was the controversial 1988 television series *River Elegy* (*He shang* 河殇), which suggested that in order to return to its former glory China must Westernize and modernize, following the lead of its intellectuals.[31]

26 Link 2000, 81–96.
27 Link 2000, 134–35.
28 Wang Meng 1996, 264.
29 Wang Meng 1996, 268, 273, 282, 284.
30 Barmé 1999, 288, 344; Wang Meng 1996, 281. Wang mentions as accomplishments of his tenure opening dance halls, reforms regarding performance troupes, and events like the tour of tenors Luciano Pavarotti and Placido Domingo. Wang Meng 1996, 280–281; Yang and Qi 1988 2. Translated in *FBIS-CHI-88-013*, 21 January 1988, pp.13–14.
31 Wang, Jing 1996, 118–136.

It was during this period that Wang Meng wrote "Hard Porridge." While *River Elegy* spoke in bombastic tones of the sweep of Chinese history and the need for reform, Wang penned a satirical parable that modestly focused on one family's attempts to change its household governance and diet. Wang's thoughts on the subject were triggered by a visit to Tibet shortly after his appointment as minister. Wang noticed that his secretary regularly ate a breakfast of thin, watery porridge (*zhou* 粥), pickled vegetables and steamed bread (*mantou* 馒头), refusing both Western and Tibetan style alternatives. Joking with the secretary on the subject led Wang to consider the cultural importance of diet and the role of habit and tradition, alongside nutrition, in determining it. Wang wrote a first draft of the story during a vacation at Beidaihe 北戴河, but feeling it was too coarse he laid it aside.[32] Back in Beijing, Wang polished the story and submitted it in December 1988.

"Hard Porridge" tells of a four-generation household that tries to modernize its governance, lifestyle and, most notably, its dietary habits. The household is headed by the octogenarian grandfather who presides over "all issues, big and small." Under grandfather's leadership, the family "… lived together, peaceably and united as one … strifes and contentions, overflowing rhetoric, and closed-doors conspiracies were absolutely unheard of."[33] Yet, the idyllic routine and amiable relations deteriorate after grandfather proposes that the family "change from a Monarchy to a Cabinet system."[34] The family's most enthusiastic harbinger of modernity is the 16-year-old son of the narrator, who attempts to modernize the family overnight by changing its diet, particularly the breakfast of rice porridge, pickled vegetables and steamed bread. In a fiery diatribe typical of the story's farcical style, the youth alleges that the traditional family meal is unfit for "modern middle-income urban residents of China in the 1980s of the twentieth century"; indeed, it is at the root of China's troubles in the past century and a half:

> Porridge and pickles–perfect symbols of the Sickman of the Orient … porridge is the source of the decline of Chinese civilization! … If we had not eaten porridge and pickles for breakfast but rather had eaten butter and bread, in the opium war of 1840 would England have won? Would the empress dowager have fled to Chengde in the face of the 1900 invasion of the eight united Allied Armies? Would the Japanese Army have dared to incite the September 18 incident in 1931? …If in 1949 our leadership had outlawed all porridge and pickles and ordered the nation to shift to bread and butter and ham and sausage and eggs and yogurt and cheese and honey and jam and chocolate thrown in, wouldn't we have achieved a leading place in the world community long, long ago in term of national growth rate, science and technology, art, sports, housing, education, and number of cars per capita? …thoroughly eliminate porridge and pickles![35]

The family consequently changes to a breakfast of bread, butter, eggs, milk and coffee. As a result, within three days they all fall ill and exhaust the monthly household food budget. The family attempts various reforms in household

32 Wang Meng 1993a, 133–35.
33 Wang Meng 1992a, 274; Wang Meng 1994, 8–9.
34 Wang Meng 1994, 12.
35 Wang Meng 1992a, 279; Wang Meng 1994, 16–17.

governance and diet, all of which ultimately fail. Finally, the family returns to the old scheme whereby the grandfather presides over their traditional diet. The story ends as a friend from England visits and insists on eating traditional Chinese food, enthusiastically praising his serving of porridge and pickles.

Former Minister

"Hard Porridge," published in March 1989, was one of several pieces by Wang published that month, and it aroused little attention at the time. The military crackdown that quashed the mass protest movement was shortly followed by a purge of cultural and intellectual institutions, in which many of Wang's appointees and allies were replaced. Wang himself resigned in September, ostensibly due to health problems and his desire to focus on creative writing. Wang has also claimed that he wished to serve as minister for only three years, and had submitted a letter expressing his wish to retire as early as October 1988.[36] Yet, conspicuously, Wang was also the only minister who did not visit the troops who repressed the demonstrations, and his resignation is seen as related to this absence.

Wang was replaced by He Jingzhi, who had been the deputy-director of the propaganda department. Wang's senior by ten years, He was a conservative poet and playwright mainly famous for writing *The White-haired Girl* – one of the few model-operas officially sanctioned during the Cultural Revolution and, ironically, one the revolutionary works which had influenced Wang Meng in his youth.[37] Yet ever since the 1940s and 1950s, he had served mainly as a bureaucrat; by 1989, he could not compare with Wang. It was perhaps for this reason that, despite his political qualifications, he was only nominated as acting minister of culture, never receiving the full formal title.[38]

After stepping down, Wang was often criticized for writing about subjects which eroded the people's spirit and contributed to the mass demonstrations of that spring.[39] As one interviewer confronted Wang in 1995, "We've heard that at that time the top priority of the ministry [of culture] was to criticize you."[40] Careful not to point fingers, Wang admitted that there was certainly an atmosphere of criticism directed at him, yet conceded that such criticisms were not as harsh as they could have been: "To tell the truth, at that time the highest leadership certainly did not have an intention of really punishing me." The language used to describe his resignation, said Wang, was "appropriate," his books were not barred from sale and he could travel freely both domestically and internationally – "basically, I wasn't subjected to any sort of obstruction."[41] Wang returned to full-time creative writing, and took up translation (from English) as well, writing numerous essays and book reviews. Wang was not censored, although his

36 Wang Meng 1996, 264; Goldman 1994, 329–337; Barmé 1999, 20–22, 288.
37 Hu and Yang 1994,103–104.
38 Wang Meng 1996, 267; Barmé 1999, 24.
39 Goldman 1994, 332.
40 Wang Meng 1996, 283.
41 *Ibid*, 283.

work, which previously enjoyed popular venues such as *People's Daily*, was now side-lined to literary journals.[42]

The relatively light treatment Wang received was due, among other things, to conflicting approaches within the cultural bureaucracy. Although older hard-liners like Deng Liqun 邓立群, Hu Qiaomu 胡乔木 and new minister of culture He Jingzhi rose in prominence, the newly appointed chief cultural official was Li Ruihuan 李瑞环, the Politburo standing-committee member responsible for propaganda.[43] Under Li, the atmosphere after mid-1990 gradually relaxed. It was this relaxation that prompted hard-liners to launch a new wave of attacks against liberals, including Wang, beginning in January 1991.[44]

Therefore, when in May 1991 the Tianjin-based *Fiction Monthly* (*Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小说月报) awarded Wang's "Hard Porridge" a prize in its fourth annual Hundred Flowers literary competition, this seemed a deliberate statement, especially since the award was laden with political symbolism: the prizes were awarded on May fourth, the competition was named "Hundred Flowers," and the prize was awarded to Wang Meng – whose work had a role in instigating criticism of the Party during the 1956 hundred flowers movement.[45] These allusions would have been clear to readers and thus added to the political import of the prize. The essay that reported on the awards characterized the story as a realist parable that depicts many contradictions found in contemporary China: "the clash of Eastern and Western cultures," the generational gap and gender conflicts. The essay argued that readers could read the story as conveying different messages such as criticism of "wholesale Westernizers," sympathy for conservatives, and worries over the difficulties in China's current transformations.[46]

Although the essay encouraged different readings of the story, awarding it a prize irked conservatives. On 14 September, the *Literary Gazette* published a "Reader's letter" that criticized *Chinese Author* for publishing "Hard Porridge" at the sensitive time of March 1989, and attacked *Fiction Monthly* for awarding the story a prize. The letter charged "Hard Porridge" with attacking the Communist Party under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, and with provoking doubt and demoralization regarding reform: "In fact, according to the moral of this story, not only is 'China's transformation difficult' [as Wang Gan wrote], but China's reforms simply have no hope; even the 'porridge and pickled vegetables' of breakfast cannot be reformed …Thus, this kind of 'reform' is absolutely not worth caring about."[47] The letter was signed with the pseudonym "Shen Ping" 慎平 but rumour attributed it to the conservative editor of the

42 Wang Meng 1993b, 390–92.
43 Li replaced Hu Qili who was associated with reformers Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. Li supported reform but had also quelled student demonstrations in Tianjin in 1986. Barmé 1999, 29; Goldman 1994, 206–207.
44 Barmé 1999, 20–37, 288–89.
45 *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 1991, 6.
46 Wang, Gan 1991, 107.
47 Reproduced in Wang Meng 1993a.

Literary Gazette, Zheng Bonong 郑伯农, and the acting minister of culture, He Jingzhi.

Responses

Wang replied the following day with a sharp letter to *The Literary Gazette* which accused Shen Ping's letter of being a baseless political frame-up intended to besmirch him. Invoking the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, Wang compared the letter to Yao Wenyuan 姚文元's attack on Wu Han 吴晗 in 1965. Furthermore, Wang alleged that since the only person named in the letter was Deng Xiaoping, it was in fact the letter that sullied Deng. Wang concluded that he had no choice but to seek redress for his grievances with the CCP central committee, the law and public opinion.

True to his word, Wang enlisted the services of two lawyers and on 1 October submitted an indictment against Shen Ping and the *Literary Gazette*. The indictment accused the journal and Shen Ping of libellously harming Wang's right to a good reputation by means of a contrived political trap that bore no connection to Wang's story. The Chaoyang District Court refused the indictment, and Wang filed the complaint with the Beijing Intermediate People's Court. The Intermediate Court accepted the indictment but rejected it without even a hearing, ruling that Shen Ping's accusations fell within the boundaries of normal criticism. Wang appealed to a higher-level court, which rejected the case as well.[48]

In the media arena, however, Wang triumphed. Despite a rumoured ban on reporting the case in the state media, and the likelihood of displeasing conservative bureaucrats, news of the lawsuit circulated and was published. To begin with, there were, of course, informal rumours. Then the liberal Shanghai paper *Reader's Weekly* (*Wenhui dushu zhoubao* 文汇读书周报) carried an item on the case in mid-October. Most notable was the publication of essays concerning the affair by Wang himself, which testified to the support for him among cultural producers. In November, *Peasant's Daily* (*Nongmin ribao* 农民日报) published a follow-up essay by Wang titled "I love eating porridge" ("Wo ai he xizhou" 我爱河稀粥), which extolled the virtues of rice porridge and declared that even though the author was exposed to many nutritious and exotic dishes, the earthy, popular porridge remained a favourite of his. By expressing his identification with the story's characters who ultimately return to the basic porridge, Wang signalled his own folkish authenticity, in contrast to charges of kowtowing to foreign fashion.[49] In December, Wang published an article in the prestigious journal *Reading* (*Du shu* 读书) that rejected allegations of the article's subversivesness and offered an alternative interpretation of the story. Wang described the story

48 Relevant court documents – "Minshi qisu zhuang" ("Civil Lawsuit") and "Beijingshi zhongji renmin fayuan minshi caiding shu" ("Beijing Intermediate People's Court Ruling") – appear in Wang Meng 1993a, 126–130, 131–32; Also see Alford 1994, 48.

49 Wang Meng 1991a.

as a humorous satire that pokes fun at shortcomings among the people. The story, said Wang, ridicules the household, above all the juvenile, blindly Westernizing son and the conservative elder housekeeper. Wang noted in particular that the grandfather, who Shen Ping alleged represented Deng Xiaoping, is portrayed as kind, generous and open minded. Wang repeatedly stated that the story contains no veiled criticisms, and that the story's clear and unavoidable message is a call for a constructive, healthy attitude.[50] Wang's essays thus vigorously rejected allegations that he was unpatriotic, elitist and critical of the Party.

The ban on publicizing the affair was even less effective when it came to the foreign press. In Hong Kong, the monthly *Contention* (*Zhengming* 爭鳴) reported on the affair in November and December, as did *Common People* (*Baixing banyue kan* 百姓半月刊) and the dissident *Democratic China* (*Minzhu Zhongguo* 民主中國), and *Ming Pao Monthly* 明報月刊 in December. The latter not only reported on the affair, but actually reproduced photocopies of the indictment and the rejection by the Beijing Intermediate Court, as well as Wang's "Speaking of this bowl of 'porridge'," concurrently with its publication in *Reading*. News of the incident spread further still when *Reuters* reported on the affair in October, and then *The New York Times* in November.[51]

Meanwhile, attacks on Wang continued in magazines associated with the ministry of culture, and acting minister He Jingzhi took a more visible role in the attacks on Wang.[52] Wang, for example, was lumped together with Su Xiaokang 苏晓康 – a co-creator of the controversial *River Elegy* – and accused of aiming undue criticism at the elder generation of revolutionary leaders.[53] Nonetheless, the intensity of the attacks on Wang was diminishing. In December, the conservative *Literature and Contention* reprinted Shen Ping's letter, along with Wang's story. Although the ostensible intention was to bear Shen Ping's criticism out, this obviously had the effect of drawing more attention to the story and the affair in general.[54] During a visit to Australia in late 1991, Wang confirmed rumours that there had been a campaign against him, but also said that it had been stopped by the Politburo.

Wang's strategy succeeded in spreading word of the affair and in rallying public support for him, especially among the intelligentsia. In December 1991, *Contention* reported that in artistic and literary circles there were many who wished to defend Wang from what was seen as an injustice. Many in these spheres were unsatisfied with the appointment of He Jingzhi as acting minister to begin with, and following the "porridge incident" they increased their opposition to him. In September and October, over ten organizations and individuals had written to Li Ruihuan demanding that the ministry of culture be reorganized and He

50 Wang Meng 1991b.
51 Li 1991; Alford 1994, 65–66.
52 Luo 1991, 11.
53 Chun 1993.
54 Reprinting the object of attack was "in sharp contrast to the traditional style of Party literary denunciations which … never actually provided readers with the offensive originals." Barmé 1999, 292.

Jingzhi recalled from his post as minister, some blaming him for obstructing reform and acting for his own political gain. *Contention*'s journalist reported "Ever since the 'Wang Meng affair' occurred, in the cultural circles that I've encountered and among the artistic figures, all stand beside Wang. Not one is of 'He Jingzhi's faction'."[55] The lawsuit became widely known in cultural circles, and the prevalent feeling was that regardless of the actual legal outcome, "in the court of justice Wang Meng has won his case."[56]

Similar reactions to the affair appeared overseas. In a 1995 interview in Vancouver, interviewer Ding Guo confided to Wang: "When after you left office an article singled you out for criticism and then the 'porridge incident' took place, upon seeing the reports that you were taking the case to court overseas-Chinese all held their breath with anxiety for your sake."[57]

The attack on Wang was turning out to be counter-productive: it further weakened the conservative position among intellectuals, while uniting them behind Wang, and even garnering support for him overseas. Furthermore, Wang's lawsuit encouraged other individuals who sued Party organs, such as journalist Dai Qing 戴晴 and philosopher Guo Luoji 郭罗基.[58] These cases and the public support further emboldened Wang. Although legally he had failed, Wang and other liberals emerged even richer than before in terms of symbolic capital.

Enabling Environment

What enabled Wang Meng to challenge Party conservatives with an unprecedented lawsuit and media taunts?

We might start with the legal context. Post-Mao legal reforms were meant to ameliorate China's economy and bolster the regime's legitimacy by encouraging foreign investment. Yet the new measures and institutions could also be wielded against the regime. As William Alford observes, "… the regime has not only through its law provided a legal, moral and political vocabulary with which those who wish to take it to task might articulate their concerns, but also, by developing its court system, has proffered these individuals a singular platform from which their concerns may be broadcast."[59] The new legal instruments and institutions could therefore be employed to challenge the state. Indeed, Wang's lawsuit was preceded by the poet Yi Lei 伊蕾's lawsuit against the *Literary Gazette*, and one of Wang's lawyers had already defended reformist activist Wang Juntao王军涛 earlier that year.[60]

55 Luo 1991, 12–13.
56 Luo 1991, 13.
57 Wang Meng 1996, 281.
58 Alford 1994.
59 Alford 1994, 61–62. Wang's lawyers relied on the General Principles of the Civil Law, which were adopted in 1986. Ibid, 48.
60 Alford 1994, 48, 55–57; Goldman 1994, 338–360.

Not only did legal mechanisms to challenge the state now exist, but also the political and social consequences of doing so were becoming more bearable. After June 1989, many demonstrators were arrested and brought to trial, and an extensive purge was carried out in the bureaucracy. Yet compared with the fate that awaited such protesters in past decades, the treatment of intellectuals and students was moderate. As Merle Goldman notes: "Although the student and intellectual leaders were interrogated, subjected to arrest, deprived of their jobs, and put under surveillance, they were not executed, as were scores of workers who had participated in the demonstration. Nor were they ostracized and sent away for labor reform, as they had been in the Mao era."[61] Wang was well aware that he was allowed to retire from office quietly, while retaining his positions in the Central Committee and in the Writers' Association, and suffering no restrictions whatsoever.[62]

In addition, despite the purges in the cultural bureaucracy and the initial return to a hard line, it became clear fairly early that the leadership was divided on the question of how to proceed, and that reformist elements within it were willing to accommodate a lax ideological stance.[63] As early as January 1990, the moderate Li Ruihuan began encouraging a new cultural flowering while opposing the "ossification" (*jianghua* 僵化) of culture. Although Li was consequently attacked by hardliners like He Jingzhi and Deng Liqun, he gradually gained the upper hand in the factional struggles and by November 1991 had the support of Jiang Zemin.[64] These ideological differences within the leadership gradually became clear, especially to someone as well connected as Wang.

The decentralization and deregulation of the literary market allowed Wang to deploy domestic and foreign media as he did, and enabled the writing and publishing of support for Wang. In addition to a new legal infrastructure and political divisions, which he exploited, Wang made skilful use of his social networks.

Personnel Politics

Wang's challenge to the Party was facilitated by the social networks he had constructed over the previous decade. Wang understood the power of networks and patronage, for he himself had benefited from such relationships. Wang's rise in popularity and status during the course of the 1980s was aided by the support he received from high-level patrons during this period, most notably secretary-general Hu Yaobang and senior conservative ideologue Hu Qiaomu, who was to be especially influential during the "porridge affair." Wang befriended the elderly theorist in late 1981, as policies turned conservative once more. Nonetheless, Hu told Wang that while ill he had enjoyed a few of his stories.

61 Goldman 1994, 336–37.
62 Wang Meng 1996, 283.
63 Barmé 1999, 29–30.
64 Luo 1991, 13.

Reminiscing after Hu's death, Wang said that even in the midst of debates on modernism, and denunciations of experimental writers such as Wang, Hu expressed his hope that the criticisms were not affecting him.[65] In autumn 1989, Wang was aware that, along with critical intellectuals Liu Zaifu 刘再复 and Li Zehou 李泽厚, he had suffered only limited criticism, thanks to Hu Qiaomu and others.[66] Relations with patrons such as Hu allowed Wang to ascend the rungs of the cultural bureaucracy and in turn to cultivate his own networks of support.

Once appointed minister, the post itself required cultivating social networks and managing inter-personal relationships within the literary sphere, crucial functions in a milieu shaped by the state. As Wang complained:

> … there were times when I would be forced into getting bogged in arguments between literary people… Writers are the most difficult to bring together and unify … for example, Tolstoy completely denied Shakespeare, of course they were not of the same epoch, and were not members of the same writers' association so they couldn't go at each other; Chekhov didn't like Tolstoy … and let's not speak of China … to be honest, I put a lot of effort into thinking of unconventional ways [to resolve] these conflicts, but the conflicts could always find their way into your head, honestly, there was no escape. … He writes poetry, I write stories, how can I manage him?[67]

Despite the frustration with personnel politics expressed here, once in office Wang appointed a coterie of writers and artistic figures to various positions. For example, Wang, who had edited the prestigious *People's Literature*, had the position taken over by his friend and associate Liu Xinwu 刘心武.[68] Wang thus created a faction (dubbed the "Wang Meng gang" [*bang* 帮]), which included writers and critics like Liu Xinwu, Zhang Jie 张洁, Shen Rong 谌容, Wang Anyi 王安忆, Liu Zaifu and Li Tuo 李陀.[69] Such appointments, together with the increasing role of market mechanisms in determining cultural affairs, encouraged the emergence of "alternative elites" – artists and writers who were to some extent critical of the regime, or who experimented with artistic forms. At the same time, this led to the marginalization of pro-Maoist literary figures, most of whom were of an older generation, and thereby to a general change of the guard in the cultural sphere.[70] Thus, the conservative Malaqinfu 玛拉沁夫 wrote to Wang in April 1989, praising him and asking to be considered for a job.[71]

After Wang resigned, the networks he had cultivated became especially significant in deflecting or responding to attacks; Barmé even claims that once Wang stepped down, his close associates constituted a "shadow ministry of culture."[72] Following Shen Ping's attack, a wave of letters and essays in the press expressed support for Wang in direct and indirect ways. One ministry of culture official

65 Wang Meng 1996, 222.
66 Barmé 1999, 288.
67 Wang Meng 1996, 282–83.
68 Link 2000, 33; Goldman 1994, 220–21.
69 Barmé 1999, 22, 289.
70 Barmé 1999, 22, 283.
71 Wang Meng 1992b, 92–93; Barmé 1999, 294–95.
72 Barmé 1999, 22, 289.

accused Shen Ping of slandering Wang Meng and his story, and serving "counter-revolutionary forces."[73] Wang's friend, novelist Zhang Jie satirically presented thoughts through a fictional character who refers to Wang as "the former minister of culture who left office in 1989 [and] had promoted the noxious mood of modernism."[74] Wang also received letters expressing respect and support, which he later published. These letters came from cultural figures such as veteran writers Xia Yan 夏衍 and Bing Xin 冰心, the poet, critic and former editor of the *Literary Gazette*, Zhang Guangnian 张光年, and former head of the institute for literary research at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Xu Juemin 许觉民.[75] Others expressed support for Wang with their own essays on porridge, resulting in a small barrage of "porridge literature," to the point where some even suggested calling 1991 the "Year of Porridge."[76]

Wang's support network initially helped shape his responses to the attacks. In a 1992 interview, Wang attributed the idea of suing the *Literary Gazette* to a friend: "Before me the Tianjin poetess Yi Lei also sued *Literary Gazette* since it had attacked her. So I joke that Yi Lei is my teacher."[77] Similarly, Shanghai critic Wu Liang 吴亮 inspired Wang to photocopy multiple copies of his reply to the *Gazette*, the lawsuit and the other relevant essays.[78]

Wang's political taunting certainly required daring. Yet in light of the above, it seems that in filing and publicizing his lawsuit Wang did not take great risks. Asked in 1995 whether he was extremely nervous at the time of the "porridge affair," Wang replied that he "had an estimation, a forecast, that 1991 would not be too similar to 1961 or 1966," since it would now be very difficult for the readers, for intellectuals, and for the leadership to accept the elevation of criticism to such an extreme as in earlier decades.[79] The changed structure of the literary field together with the legal reforms and a leadership divided on questions of ideology and reform in general, and on cultural policy in particular, created an environment that allowed Wang and his supporters to audaciously challenge conservatives. Wang's political skills enabled him to make the most of these circumstances and mobilize the cultural world in his support.

Indulging in Victory

By late 1991, Wang's victory over cultural establishment conservatives was clear. Emerging from the tussle unscathed, Wang must have felt even more confident for he now took one more jab at his rivals. In February 1992, coinciding with Deng Xiaoping's southern tour, Wang published in Hong Kong a volume titled

73 "Bu xunchang de duzhe, bu xunchang de laixin, bu xunchang de dongzuo" ("An unusual reader, unsual letter, and unusual action") unpublished document, cited in Keyser 1992, 6.
74 Cited in Barmé 1999, 290.
75 Wang Meng 1993a, 143–46.
76 Zhu 1994, 6; Barmé 1999, 293.
77 Wang Meng 1996, 262.
78 Barmé 1999, 460.
79 Wang Meng 1996c, 283–284.

Hard Porridge which contained, alongside an unrelated story, "Hard Porridge" and materials related to the "porridge incident."[80] The off-shore publication of such a volume was again an unprecedented step for someone who had until recently been a top official.

Just as in the fall of 1991 the "porridge incident" enhanced Wang's symbolic capital, so could the present publication contribute to his prestige. Furthermore, at this point Wang may well have had a financial incentive, for, as Barmé notes, dissent had by now become something of a commodity: since the "porridge affair" had received much media coverage there was sure to be a market for such a volume, both in China and overseas. Thus, when in July a Japanese journalist informed Wang that he was one of the ten best-selling authors in Japan for the month of June due to the success of "Hard Porridge," Wang observed wryly: "That 'Hard Porridge' has received such a warm welcome in Japan can only be due to two reasons: one is that my work is maybe fairly well written, the other is that the *Literary Gazette* has helped me in promotional work."[81]

As cultural policy eased, official organs began to feature Wang once again. In July 1992, under the auspices of Xinhua News Agency, Wang granted Japanese journalists his first interview for a foreign publication since he had left office.[82] In September, Wang was a prominent speaker at a literary conference at Peking University.[83] That month, the Changjiang publishing house was confident enough of Wang's standing to publish a collection of his stories and essays bearing the conspicuous title *Hard Porridge.*[84] The following year, Wang affirmed his cultural standing with the publication of his ten-volume collected works.

As the 1990s wore on, Wang expressed support for a marketized economy and cultural sphere.[85] These views were in line with the Party's policies but earned Wang new critics, although of a different ideological bent and often of a younger generation.[86] As a popular author Wang could benefit from a deregulated literary market, yet he was reluctant to denounce the political system that had brought him much trouble but in which he was now well established. Asked if he would rather be seen as an author or a political figure, Wang replied that since currently in China the two were inextricable, he desired to keep a foothold in both literature and politics.[87]

Conclusion

Commentators like Geremie Barmé have argued that the porridge affair "may have been the last example of a traditional Party-style literary incident

80 Wang Meng 1993a.
81 Wang Meng 1996, 263.
82 Wang Meng 1996, 262.
83 Barmé 1999, 295.
84 Wang Meng 1992a.
85 See for example Wang Meng 1996; *China Daily* 2000.
86 Barmé 1999, 295–315; Gao 1995, 3, 46.
87 Wang Meng 1996, 284–85.

… involving factions of arts bureaucrats."[88] I wish to argue that this results from the demise of a particular political type: the intellectual-bureaucrat. Wang was the last intellectual-bureaucrat of his kind, and the "porridge incident" marks a shift in the relations of intellectuals and state service.

As market forces gradually replaced direct state control, writers were less dependent than ever on the Party bureaucracy for publication and success – a shift which increasingly separated intellectuals from bureaucrats.[89] Wang's successor, He Jingzhi, had been a cultural figure in the distant past, yet by the 1990s his authority stemmed from his political patrons rather than from his art. Succeeding ministers have been Party bureaucrats: in 1993, He was succeeded by Liu Zhongde 刘忠德 – an engineer by training and bureaucrat by experience. Liu was succeeded in 1998 by Sun Jiazheng 孙家正, a career bureaucrat, and Sun was replaced in 2008 by Cai Wu 蔡武, a law professor and career bureaucrat.

Although Wang served at the pinnacle of the cultural bureaucracy, it was becoming increasingly clear that the role of this bureaucracy in China's cultural world was diminishing. While in the 1980s a writer like Wang could increase his symbolic capital by assuming the position of minister, by the 1990s, with the opening of alternative venues for advancement, such a position would not necessarily enhance one's stature; it could even detract from an intellectual's stature in some circles. In contrast to previous cultural icons-turned-bureaucrats such as Guo Moruo 郭沫若 and Mao Dun 茅盾, the environment of the 1990s allowed Wang to retreat from bureaucratic service and resume a full-time creative career.

Wang's successful management of the "porridge incident" was a result of the power he had accumulated under the previous centralized and politicized cultural system, and the key cultural and bureaucratic positions he held as new opportunities became available. Just as Wang's earlier career reflected the vicissitudes of Party policy toward intellectuals, so did his fortunes toward the end of the century reflect the changing institutional environment that generated new templates for the relationship of intellectuals and the state.

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88 Barmé 1999, 295; Yue 1999, 379.

89 Wang Hui 1998, 10–11.

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