Technologies of the Self as Antidotes to Chaos:

A Foucauldian Reading of *White Deer Plain*

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In late 1992 and early 1993 the serialization of the Shaanxi writer Chen Zhongshi's novel *White Deer Plain* (*Bai lu yuan*) in the upscale literary magazine *Dangdai* caused a sensation in the world of serious literature in China, a world considered to be on the decline since the mid-1980s. Reprinted as a book later in 1993 and winning the prestigious Mao Dun Prize for Literature in 1997, the novel continued to be well received by the reading public as time went on. By the end of 2008 more than 1.3 million copies had been printed and sold through official channels, together with an unknown, but certainly large, number of pirated copies. Of course the popularity of the novel can be attributed to the fast-moving, and sometimes risqué, stories about its characters that span the first half of the twentieth century, stories that greatly enhance the novel's readability. What also makes the novel appealing, especially to the intellectuals, is a cultural ideal that lies behind the stories, an ideal that tries to point out a correct way to live amidst the vicissitudes of history. As critics in China note, this cultural ideal basically stems from the Central Shaanxi School (Guanzhong xuepai), an offshoot of Neo-Confucianism that emphasized propriety, moral responsibility and practice of Confucian virtues in daily activities (Che Baoren, "*Bai lu yuan* yu Zhang Zai 'Guanxue'"). Indeed *White Deer Plain* can be read as an ardent endorsement of the reevaluation of Confucianism in the 1980s, in which Confucius was transformed from an incarnation of the evils of feudalism into the great founder of Chinese traditional culture in both academic and official discourses (Song Xianlin

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81-7). Nevertheless, a crucial premise of the novel's cultural ideal, namely its doubt about human beings' inborn moral goodness, does not quite square with a central tenet of Neo-Confucianism. As Siu-chi Huang points out, all the originators of Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming periods accept Mencius' assumption about the goodness of human nature, for the simple reason that human nature is imparted to man by heaven and, since heaven is good, human nature is likewise good (8). It follows that for Neo-Confucians the recovery of the innate goodness in human nature becomes an important task in life, a task through which human beings can learn to be in accord with the Way of Heaven. In contrast, human nature per se is not an important issue in *White Deer Plain*. What is important to the author is not how human beings should look inward for seeds of moral behavior but how human beings should look outward for moral guidance. In view of this discrepancy, I would propose to approach *White Deer Plain* with the help of Michel Foucault's views on the "technologies of the self."

Why should we seek help from Foucault? First of all, we should realize that, as a historian/philosopher known for his studies of the techniques and procedures that govern and guide people's conduct, Foucault offers insights, especially insights on the exercise of power, that could certainly be applied as analytical tools cross-culturally, given the ubiquitous existence of power and power relations in human society. In the last years of his life Foucault pointed out that power, a form of relationship neither good nor evil in itself, could be used not only repressively and detrimentally but also voluntarily and productively, as shown in the technologies of the self the elite in ancient Greece applied to themselves for the sake of living an aesthetic way of life ("Technologies of the Self" 225-34). In Foucault's view the technologies of the self were practices of freedom through which the Greeks constituted themselves according to certain models in their culture. Since citizens who cared for themselves correctly would behave correctly in relation to others and for others, the technologies of the self would contribute to good, stable government. Even though Foucault argued that these ancient practices should not be copied uncritically as models for modern ethics, their inspiration to him was clear.

With regard to the technologies of the self we should note that, focused solely on practice, they emphasized willed human agency and aimed at an ethical enterprise that sought guidance not from humankind's natural desires but from certain rules that regulated these desires. Humankind's spontaneous tendency toward moral goodness, in other words, was cast very much in doubt as human beings were seen as materials to be molded into certain patterns. Furthermore, Foucault's description indicates that he did not believe in the ontological existence of human nature, whether it is good, evil or dualistic. As he made clear in a debate with Noam Chomsky in November 1971, he held the notion of human nature to be just an epistemological indicator that designated certain types of discourse in relation to or in opposition to other types of discourse ("Human Nature: Justice vs. Power" 7). To him the notion clearly did not refer to an entity that was concealed, alienated or imprisoned as a

result of certain historical, social or economic mechanisms. Consequently, instead of trying to unlock these repressive mechanisms to renew man's contact with his roots, Foucault's research remained focused on the constitution of human subjects through a variety of practices, including the technologies of the self.

Standing in contrast to the Neo-Confucian faith in humankind's moral endowment, this disbelieving attitude toward human nature and the ensuing emphasis on the constitutive importance of cultural norms can shed light on a central concern in *White Deer Plain*, namely the practice of self-cultivation. With their belief that all human beings have the same natural endowment and the same natural disposition toward the good, Neo-Confucians regarded quiet self-introspection as an important form of self-cultivation that would clear one's mind of selfish desires and distractions from the outside world and, in so doing, help one experience the heavenly principle innate in humanity (De Bary 25-41). In *White Deer Plain*, however, self-cultivation appears only in the form of learning from external moral examples, especially from Mr. Zhu, the last heir to the Central Shaanxi School and a true Confucian sage in word and deed. For all his clairvoyance, Mr. Zhu is portrayed as a down-to-earth teacher who inspires people with his rectitude, simple lifestyle and practicable advice. To learn from him, however, one has to seek him out and, more importantly, keep making efforts to carry out his advice in life, as shown by the novel's main character Bai Jiaxuan, who consults Mr. Zhu, his brother-in-law, on important issues in life and corrects his mistakes according to Mr. Zhu's instructions, and Heiwa, who, after his experiences as an adulterer, peasant rebel and bandit leader, finally changes his life by becoming Mr. Zhu's student. Flawed but still teachable, these two characters show that it is never too late to start reforming oneself as long as one has the will and, once started, one has to turn self-cultivation into a life-long journey. When, at the end of the novel, Bai Jiaxuan apologizes to his rival Lu Zilin for tricking Lu into trading a piece of blessed land forty years before, he shows that constant practice of self-reform finally enables him to internalize Mr. Zhu's teachings and act virtuously after the death of his moral guide. In the meantime, his own moral behavior has also gained power over those willing to follow his example.

On the other hand, failed attempts to reform people by force also underline the crucial importance of motivation. According to Foucault, force differs from power in that, whereas power always leaves room for resistance, escape, ruse and revolt, force deprives its subjects of the freedom to make their own choices ("Omnes et Singulatim" 324). Obviously force remains unable to transform its subjects from the inside. Consequently, any behavioral change resulting from the use of force will remain temporary, fragile and reversible due to its involuntary nature. In *White Deer Plain* force is shown to be inadequate in the implementation of a "community compact" (xiangyue), a moral guideline Mr. Zhu offers for White Deer Village in response to the socio-political vacuum created by the Republican Revolution of 1911. Excerpted from the first community compact in Chinese history, composed in 1076 by Lü Dajun, a founding member of the Central Shaanxi School, the community

compact in the novel leaves out the last two sections of Lü's compact, sections containing injunctions on the exchange of gifts and mutual help in times of need, thus making it crystal clear that its focus falls solely on encouragement of moral conduct and correction of infractions. As a moral guideline for all regardless of their social status or willingness, it also differs from the community compacts of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which, as Peter Bol points out, were voluntary agreements literati reached to encourage each other's moral behavior and, as such, they were not meant for everyone living in a village (249-50). More importantly, whereas the text of the community compact in the novel highlights moral encouragement and exhortation, with fines as the most severe form of penalty for repeated offenders, its implementation by Bai Jiaxuan as the clan chief largely relies on corporal punishments, including whipping and forcing feces into the mouths of offenders. As Monika Übelhör points out, neither the compact by Lü nor the compact composed later by Zhu Xi provides any drastic measures of enforcement. Shying away from blunt attempts at indoctrination, both Lü's and Zhu's compacts aim at bringing to life the moral potential of the compact members (386). In contrast, the resort to coercion and punishment in enforcing the community compact in *White Deer Plain* clearly shows a lack of faith in the villagers' tendency to reform themselves of their own accord.

Indeed the threat of corporal punishments eradicates theft, gambling and street fighting from White Deer Village for a while and results in a seemingly golden moment, the only one in the novel, as civility reigns in the village. Unsupported by voluntary self-reform on the part of the villagers, the golden moment, however, soon gives way to vices amidst historical turbulences and Bai Jiaxuan remains unable to restore moral order even with all the severe punishments he metes out to the offenders. The inefficacy of force is shown most poignantly in the fall of Bai Xiaowen, Bai Jiaxuan's eldest son and presumptive future clan chief before Tian Xiao'e, a promiscuous woman, seduces him at Lu Zilin's direction to disgrace Bai Jiaxuan. When the affair between the two is exposed, Bai Jiaxuan has Xiaowen mercilessly whipped in public, just the way he treats other wrongdoers. Xiaowen, however, only becomes more brazen in depravity, indulging in fornication and smoking opium before turning himself into a shameless beggar. At first glance this story seems to bear out Confucius' preference of moral guidance over penal law as an instrument of good government, as shown in the following statement in the *Analects*: "Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishment, and the common people will stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves" (63). However, a closer look shows that, given the handy examples and instructions of his father and his uncle Mr. Zhu, Xiaowen's depravity should be attributed not to a lack of moral guidance but to his lack of motivation. After he is whipped for adultery, Mr. Zhu writes down for him the Confucian motto "Be watchful over yourself when you are alone" (shendu) on a scroll. It turns out that it is precisely the failure in self-vigilance that repeatedly leads Xiaowen astray in life.

Of course self-vigilance needs to be directed by the knowledge of right and wrong, which, as an ensemble of normative principles, is acquired by the moral subject from sources other than him/herself. It goes without saying that a character like Heiwa, with his unruly personality, has to surrender himself to Mr. Zhu before he can truly transform himself. Even Bai Jiaxuan proves the necessity of external moral guidance with the mistakes he makes in his younger days, including growing opium on his farm and coming to blows with Lu Zilin over a contract dispute. Certainly not immune to errors, he is saved by his readiness to mend his ways once Mr. Zhu tries to correct him. Eventually he develops his moral sensibility to the extent that he can exert mastery over himself and refuse to compromise even under perilous circumstances. In contrast, his rival Lu Zilin is consistently portrayed as lacking in this moral readiness. Sordid in his actions, Lu uses every opportunity to satisfy his appetites for political power and sex, as seen, for example, in the way he forces Tian Xiao'e to have a sexual relationship with him when Tian approaches him for help to save herself and her lover Heiwa from retaliation after the peasant revolution in 1927. Marked by a total lack of qualms, Lu becomes an irredeemable character in the novel, sinking lower than Heiwa, who still stands in awe of Bai Jiaxuan's rectitude even in his bandit days. Significantly, Lu never consults Mr. Zhu for anything and shows no interest in orienting himself toward a right way of conducting himself. In short, his moral descent demonstrates what happens if someone is left to his own devices in self-indulgence.

To free oneself from bondage to undisciplined living one needs to take self-vigilance not merely as a private, cerebral experience but as a tensile mental state that constantly manifests itself in action. As noted before, the attraction of *White Deer Plain* largely lies in its focus on fast-moving stories, a result of the author's intentional response to an increasingly commercialized book market swayed by readers' desire for entertainment (Chen Zhongshi, *Xunzhao shuyu ziji de juzi* 56-8). On the other hand, the focus on action-filled stories also demonstrates a distrust of psychological experiences as unreliable predictors of what would transpire in their wake. What is revealed, in other words, is a gap that could exist between what is thought and what is done. To give an example, I will quote a passage from *White Deer Plain* that describes the thoughts Bai Xiaowen has as he leaves White Deer Village after he turns over a new leaf in life and is allowed by his father to make a homecoming trip to pay respects to his ancestors:

> Try to live as best you can! And remember the most difficult moment in life, the most miserable, despairing moment, is not the last moment in life. Once one endures the moment an important turning point will appear that will mark the beginning of a new, glorious journey. If one weakens in spirit and gives up he will die and everything will be over. Having learned a profound lesson about life, Bai Xiaowen now looks forward to his future life, his mind full of boundless enthusiasm and hope (507-8).

Here the character speaks to himself in his own voice and, banal as they might appear, there is nothing inherently wrong with these thoughts. Besides, in his presentation

the author casts no doubt on the character's sincerity at this moment. Nonetheless, heart-felt as it is, this fleeting epiphany does not have the staying power to change the character's behavior once and for all, as borne out by the treacherous acts he commits later, including getting Heiwa executed on trumped-up charges shortly after the Communist takeover. To live a good life he has to do more than just communicate with himself once in a while in his mind.

Obviously the ethical journeys taken by the characters in *White Deer Plain* depend not on their consciousness but on the ethical choices they make in life. To Foucault ethics is "a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself" (*The Use of Pleasure* 28). In *White Deer Plain* Bai Jiaxuan clearly exemplifies this voluntary process. A farmer with only five years of elementary traditional education under his belt, Bai is certainly not well versed in the rich history of Confucian moral philosophy. But he is willing to transform his own mode of being according to the rudimentary rules of conduct he has learned and keeps learning. As a result, his life consists of a series of acts of self-development, self-fulfillment and self-transcendence rather than strict conformity to a set of clearly codified moral principles. From a Foucauldian perspective we might call his life a form of "subjectivation," a process with its emphasis on the exercises by which the ethical subject makes of himself an object to be known (*The Use of Pleasure* 30). Though gradual and never-ending, the impact of this process can be profound and enduring for the ethical subject and those around him. In Bai Jiaxuan's case his efforts to mold his own character against temptations and dangers result in his becoming a man known for his "straight back." As he remains unyielding in his ethical choices, the image stays even after a bandit physically breaks his back to make him less intimidating to Heiwa. When Heiwa remorsefully surrenders to Bai's authority in the end it becomes clear who has won the moral battle.

Given the unmistakable influence of the Central Shaanxi School, why does Chen Zhongshi ignore the Neo-Confucian belief in the inborn goodness of humanity and emphasize the importance of moral example and voluntary self-reform in the government of the self? The answer to this question, in my view, is closely related to his perception of the impact of the modern Chinese revolution on human behavior. Roughly framed between the Republican Revolution of 1911 and the Communist takeover in 1949, *White Deer Plain* is concerned as much with the events in the revolution as with the personal experiences of its characters. The revolution, to begin with, is not a result of the innate evil in human nature, since genuine revolutionaries in *White Deer Plain* are all portrayed as innocents fired by their ideals, even though some of them end up being betrayed by the cause they embrace, as shown in the example of Bai Jianxuan's daughter Bai Ling, a dedicated revolutionary who in the end is buried alive as an enemy agent. Having little to do with human nature per se,

the revolution, however, does disrupt social order, incite human tendency toward destruction and cause violent reactions, thus creating a chaotic environment hardly conducive to moral growth. No wonder Mr. Zhu, when confronted with the tortures and decapitations in the peasant revolution of 1927, asks himself whether he could still accept past historians' glowing assessment of the local people's moral quality. As indicated by the tortures and decapitations, during the revolution human behavior is channeled in a direction marked by intolerance and cruelty. Preoccupied with violence, the revolutionaries (the Communists) and the counterrevolutionaries (the Nationalists) in effect join forces with the bandits in turning *White Deer Plain* into a "cooking plate" (aozi) that causes tremendous pain and suffering to local residents, as Mr. Zhu's memorable metaphor notes.

Here the patent criticism of the revolution for its brutal excesses reminds us of Foucault's distrust of the general notion of liberation. Using a colonial people's fight for freedom as an example, Foucault argues that liberation itself is not sufficient to establish the practices of liberty necessary for people to decide upon acceptable forms of their existence or political society ("The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom" 282-3). To obtain true freedom safeguards need to be installed and limits need to be set in the exercise of freedom so that one's freedom does not infringe the freedom of others. A putschist political revolution simply makes it impossible to reach this goal. Instead, as it weakens political and social authority it makes it easier for people to abandon cultural norms and give rein to their desires and passions. Take, for example, what happens to the community compact in *White Deer Plain*. As noted before, the compact fails to produce a lasting influence in White Deer Village largely because of the villagers' lack of motivation for self-reform. However, we should not overlook the harmful impact of the revolution. First, the term "xiangyue" is turned into an official position by the Republican county government in 1911. With the compact's moral content thus emptied out, the position creates opportunities for the self-serving Lu Zilin to empower himself with little concern for the well-being of those in his charge, as shown in the collection of land and poll taxes from the villagers, his very first act in office (and the very first act of the new Republican government, accompanied with the threat of revolutionary penal law). Secondly and more importantly, at the height of the peasant revolution in 1927 Heiwa and his comrades smash the stone inscription of the compact in the clan hall, thus throwing the compact's moral authority to the winds. With the moral texture of the society in tatters, the individuals end up living in a state of anomie, deprived of their security and freedom. The devastations of the revolution carry a clear message: authority is indispensable for society and freedom only becomes possible when individuals are rooted in a system of social and moral constraints. When a putschist political revolution shatters these constraints in the name of liberty, the result, ironically, can only be anarchy.

Interestingly, in his portrayal of the revolution Chen Zhongshi draws inspiration not only from modern Chinese history but also from *The Kingdom of This World*,

a short novel he read as he prepared to write *White Deer Plain* in the wake of the vogue of magical realism in China, a craze sparked by the 1984 publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in Chinese translation (*Xunzhao shuyu ziji de juzi* 9-11). Written in 1949 by the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World*, a foundational work of magical realism, taught Chen how to merge magical elements, most notably the mythic image of a white deer, into the real as parts of observable and credible reality. It also prompted him to employ a "scenic" technique to organize the stories in his novel. But most crucially its sustained literary rendering of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) in all its oppressiveness directed Chen's attention to the ironies and paradoxes of revolution. From a slave's perspective Carpentier shows that the net result of the Haitian Revolution is nothing but the replacement of one kind of tyranny by another, a pointless, and ultimately hopeless, experience that does not radically change the basic conditions of those living at the bottom of society, since what transpires after the revolution continues the pattern of minority rule imposed on the majority through threat and violence. After all the robberies, rapes, tortures, mutilations and killings the slaves win emancipation only in name but not in reality.

From a standpoint reminiscent of Foucault's Carpentier shows his disapproval of the Haitian Revolution by highlighting its senselessness and, above all, its tremendous human cost. Through Mr. Zhu's mouth Chen Zhongshi faults the modern Chinese revolution for similar reasons. Primarily concerned about people's well-being, Mr. Zhu criticizes the disregard for the value of life shown in the revolution and dismisses the political differences between the revolutionaries and the counter-revolutionaries as unimportant. During the 1911 Revolution Governor Zhang of the newly established Republican government asks Mr. Zhu to dissuade Governor Fang of the Qing from retaking Xi'an by force. Instead of leaning toward one side or the other, Mr. Zhu only asks Governor Fang to consider the consequences of his decision on the city's population. This humanitarian concern also prompts him to point out, in a conversation with his former student the Communist Lu Zhaopeng, that what the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party fight for with so much bloodshed is political monopoly rather than the realization of their identical collectivist goals embodied in the Three Principles of the People and Communism. When Lu asks him for advice for the future, he remarks that all he wishes for is a soaking rain that would relieve the drought ravaging White Deer Plain at the time. To him anything that would directly benefit the human community in the present is clearly much better and more meaningful than any plan for the future.

Consequently his actions in *White Deer Plain*, whether it is teaching, charitable work, offering counsel for those seeking him out, compiling county annals or volunteering to go to the battlefield to fight the Japanese, are all concrete actions taken in the present in the service of the human community. Keeping the present firmly in view, his advice for everyone willing to listen—"learn to be a good person"—is both easy and difficult at the same time, easy in the sense that it adopts a gradualist approach to what can be done here and now and difficult in the sense that it requires

the moral agent to live virtuously all the time and at all costs in a world that is anything but reasonable. Mr. Zhu himself is fully aware how difficult it is to be a good person, as can be seen in the inscription "It is hard for a good person to live" he gives to a decent county magistrate shortly before the magistrate runs away from his job because he does not want to serve as warlord soldiers' cat's paw. Yet, as Mr. Zhu's own example and the examples of Bai Jiaxuan and Heiwa demonstrate, it is not impossible to be or, at least, try to be a good person as long as one follows certain basic rules in life. As a "good person" par excellence, Mr. Zhu always conducts himself on the level of reason and manages to reach a state of wisdom and inner peace by ridding himself of excessive desires and prejudices. On the other hand, he is also capable of taking passionate actions when his community is threatened, whether by opium, famine or the Japanese invasion. As he maintains the equilibrium between wisdom and passion, he sets a perfect example for his community.

Mr. Zhu's sagehood, we should note, is the result of his constant practice of virtue more than anything else. Distilled into a few simple aphorisms, his wisdom is easy to understand and remember for everyone but hard to practice, yet practice is precisely what sets Mr. Zhu apart from ordinary people. To convey this message Chen Zhongshi offers the following philosophical statement in *White Deer Plain*: "Ordinary people have absolutely no doubt about sages' sacred teachings, but they do not truly want to carry them out. This is not a tragedy for sages but the reason why ordinary people will never become sages" (26). On the other hand, difficult as it is, persistence in the practice of virtue is highly rewarding for an ordinary person in that it gives rise to a settled disposition that enables the ordinary person in question to mold his life with certainty, undaunted by what might or does befall him, as the case of Bai Jiaxuan shows. As an ordinary person living in turbulent times, Bai is certainly not in a position to change history on a big scale or even alter his own fate, yet, thanks to his settled moral disposition, he is able to react to unforeseen events readily and reasonably. Meanwhile, his persistent attempts at self-transformation connect him to the normative principles in Confucian culture and highlight the importance of Confucian virtues in a time when norms of behavior are disappearing.

Chen Zhongshi's attention to the constancy of moral disposition, the kind we see in Mr. Zhu and Bai Jiaxuan, came as a result of what was considered a new approach to characterization in the early 1980s, an approach that emphasized the lasting effect of the character's "cultural-psychological structure" rather than its essentially class-based "typicality," which had been held up as a cornerstone of socialist realism for decades (Chen Zhongshi, *Xunzhao shuyu ziji de juzi* 40-1). The stimulation for this approach in turn came from "A Reevaluation of Confucius," an article the philosopher Li Zehou published in 1980 in which Li called attention to the stability and continuity of the cultural-psychological structure created by Confucius. An early attempt at rehabilitating Confucius, Li's article noted, besides Confucius' enduring influence on Chinese culture, the strengths of Confucianism, including its positive attitude to life, rationalism, pragmatism, focus on the human world and on harmonious social

relationships. It also pointed out the importance Confucianism gave to emotional balance, avoidance of blind faith and, last but not least, to the transcendence of class boundaries in social interactions (27-9). All these strengths are consistently reflected in Mr. Zhu and, to a lesser degree, in Bai Jiaxuan. Take, for example, Bai's relationship with his longtime farmhand Lu San, one of the most moving relationships in the novel. Treating Lu not as a servant but as a brother, he pays for the education of Heiwa, Lu's son, asks Lu to be his daughter Bai Ling's godfather, feeds the idled Lu during a famine and takes care of Lu after Lu's wife dies in a plague, remaining all the while indifferent to the status differences between them. As an exemplary person (junzi), he exhibits his virtue in action by recognizing and respecting Lu's humanity and dignity.

Contrary to characters like Lu Zilin, enslaved by their desires, exemplary characters in *White Deer Plain* are moral agents who successfully keep their desires within certain boundaries. For them freedom means self-mastery rather than self-indulgence. What we should note here is how different this practice is from the Marxist view of freedom, a view that inspired the Communist-led revolution in China, including its excesses. In "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" Marx argues that "free conscious activity is the species-characteristic of man" (139). Seeing freedom as the essence of human nature as well as the fundamental condition for the full realization of humankind's natural powers and capacities, Marx condemned capitalism for curtailing man's freedom with its dehumanizing division of labor and envisioned communism as a state in which human beings, freed from all kinds of alienation, would bring all their potentialities into full play. As David McLellan points out, Marx's artistic model of human activity, with its vision of emancipated, all-around man, was inspired by the romantic poets Heine and Herwegh and, especially, by Schiller (121-2). Focused on moral, rather than productive, activities, Chen Zhongshi's model of human life can also be seen as an artistic one. It is, however, an artistic model that emphasizes the regulatory importance of the rules human subjects have to follow in their efforts to shape their lives. Whereas Marx, as a philosopher, conceived freedom as an absolute moral good that should not be subjected to any restraint, Chen Zhongshi, as a writer confronted with the traumatic reality of history, sees moral restraint as necessary for the proper functioning of freedom and, in addition, weighs freedom against other moral goods (such as security, prosperity and virtue) that are not necessarily coextensive with freedom. As he demonstrates the conflicts between freedom and other moral values, Chen makes it clear that freedom should be exercised responsibly and judiciously so that it does not cause too much damage to itself or to humankind's other cherished goals.

The focus on self-mastery as freedom does not mean Chen is an ascetic who advocates abstinence from sensual pleasures and material wealth as a means to reach the spiritual goal of salvation or liberation. Instead, he recognizes the legitimacy of human desires and, at the same time, calls for their proper management. Take sex as an example. *White Deer Plain* starts with a striking sentence, "Later in his life Bai

Jiaxuan feels proud that he has had seven wives," before it goes on to describe Bai's first six marriages in its first chapter. To continue the family line, as demanded by his parents, Bai gets a new wife soon after the death of the previous one. With his sexual drive no less strong than Lu Zilin's, he is not in the least ashamed of his sexual prowess. However, unlike Lu's affairs, his sexual experiences all take place within the confines of marriage. Thus regulated, they add color to his life without detracting from his moral character.

On the other hand, uncontrolled sexual gratification is depicted as lust that harms both the individual and the society, as shown by both Lu Zilin and Tian Xiao'e. The portrayal of Tian is especially interesting in that, unlike Lu, whose sexual indulgence can be easily judged and criticized as a moral failure, Tian's sexual transgression raises thorny socio-cultural questions and forces the author to make hard choices to reiterate the importance of restraint in moral conduct. As Chen Zhongshi informs us, the thought of creating a defiant female character came to him as a reaction to the endless entries on chaste widows in the annals of Lantian he read in preparation for his novel, entries that told him how much these women had suffered (*Xunzhao shuyu ziji de juzi* 12-4). Thus intended as a victim-turned rebel, Tian reminds us of those sympathy-worthy female fighters against oppression we often see in modern Chinese literature. The revolt she stages as an incarnation of nature in opposition to cultural restrictions, however, creates a peril-fraught situation, since in claiming her right to live uninhibitedly she also breaks away from her assigned role and, in so doing, jeopardizes the moral order of society. Confronted with this problem, Chen opts to gradually replace sympathy with condemnation in his depiction of the female rebel. Whereas he initially describes Tian's seduction of Heiwa as a concubine's natural rebellion against subjugation he later portrays Tian as a loose woman unable to resist coercion or the joy of illicit sex, calling her, in his authorial voice, the "most lascivious woman" on White Deer Plain (*Bai lu yuan* 352). To make things worse, after Lu San kills her for leading both Heiwa and Bai Xiaowen to their downfalls her ghost causes a plague in revenge that devastates the whole community, including those who have done no harm to her. No longer just an impropriety, her rebellion degenerates into a grave danger. To eradicate this danger, Bai Jiaxuan, instead of agreeing to build a temple dedicated to her to allay the plague, as implored by the worried villagers, proposes to have her body burned and her ashes scattered into a river. More tellingly, Mr. Zhu not only supports this proposal with enthusiasm but also suggests that Tian's ashes should be sealed in an urn and buried under a pagoda, so that neither her ashes would pollute the world nor her ghost would ever see the light of day again. In the meantime, as he describes these harsh measures with obvious approval the author completely yields the moral high ground to the disciplinarians.

Why does Chen Zhongshi transform Tian from a rebel against female oppression into a villain that rightly deserves the harshest punishments in *White Deer Plain*? From the very beginning Tian's pursuit of freedom, carried out in bodily practices by a sexually abused and deprived concubine, is infused with an explosive force and, at

the same time, a lack of moral discrimination. As she pursues pleasure in her seduction of Heiwa, she violates ethical norms that are held as sacrosanct by Lu San and Bai Jiaxuan. Moreover, energized by a passion for revenge, her transgression becomes increasingly more active than reactive, as shown in her partnership with Lu Zilin in trapping Bai Xiaowen and, especially, in her ghost's indiscriminate, unrelenting revenge on the residents on White Deer Plain. In the end the excesses in her behavior prove that without self-reflection, self-control or self-direction the pursuit of freedom would lead to one's ever-deepening enslavement by appetites and passions rather than to a proper way of life.

To a certain degree Chen Zhongshi's portrayal of Tian Xiao'e was driven by commercial considerations, since explicit sexual descriptions would certainly make his novel popular with readers more interested in thrills than in edification. It is, however, also clear that he intended to use Tian as an example to emphasize the harm a human agent can cause to him/herself and others if in his/her self-constitution the human agent does not follow certain models provided by his/her culture. As we have seen so far, Chen goes to considerable lengths to portray the anarchy in the practices of both sex and the revolution to illustrate the dangers one faces if one does not rein in one's desires and passions with the assistance of rectitude, reason and restraint. Interestingly, his candid descriptions of sex and the revolution earned him criticism from the editorial board of *Dangdai* in 1992 and, again, from the screening committee of the Mao Dun Prize for Literature in 1997. Concerned about the social impact of *White Deer Plain*, the former deleted a large number of what it regarded as "pornographic, seductive and vulgar" details of sexual activities as it serialized the novel in 1992 and 1993 (Xu Yan 5-6). Restored in an edition of the novel that came out in a book form later in 1993, these sexual descriptions (and Mr. Zhu's "cooking plate" metaphor) also raised concern from the latter as it considered whether to award its prize to the novel. Before it made its final decision it suggested to Chen that he should "clarify" Mr. Zhu's metaphor and remove or change "those explicit sexual descriptions unrelated to the novel's central theme." Following the suggestions, Chen toned down Mr. Zhu's criticism of the Communist Party and eliminated numerous depictions of heterosexual and homosexual activities in a cleaned-up version of his novel, which then won the Mao Dun Prize in December 1997 (Che Baoren, "*Bai lu yuan* xiudingban yu yuanban shangai bijiao yanjiu" 7-11). Chen's apparent capitulation proved how difficult it was for a writer to hold on to his moral convictions in the face of external authorities intent on bending writers to their political and artistic standards. Fortunately, the unrevised version of *White Deer Plain* has continued to be published and widely read, provoking its readers to think about how they should shape their lives in a time when cultural norms are once again threatened by rapid social changes.

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