





# **Cultural Translation from Chinese to English**

**A Case Study of the Problems  
in the Translation and Interpretation  
of Selected Contemporary Texts**

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# **Abstract and Statement**

The present thesis argues for an “extended (cross-)cultural approach to literary translation”. It proposes that socio-cultural elements pertaining to a literary text extend beyond the commonly understood scope and depth of literary translation into the macro-contextual sphere, as they arise before and after, as well as during, the actual translating process. These elements include those in the forms of everyday existence of people and their behaviour, reflected through the common human values and shared knowledge that is always structured as part of a historical system, constantly changing and evolving under the impact of social, political and economic events. To achieve the best result possible, it is also contended that seemingly opposing translation strategies (i.e. alienation / foreignization strategy versus adaptation / domestication strategy) should both be made use of and the orientation and emphasis should vary from case to case according to the purpose of the translation project, the needs of the intended reader, the text-type, stylistic profile, lexical and cultural quality of the item to be translated, and last but not least, the strengths of the translator.

The core of the thesis is its four case-study chapters. Each of the four is composed of (1) a translation from Chinese to English of a contemporary Chinese literary work that is thematically concerned with inherent and changing family values, structures and living conditions in urban China from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s; and (2) an exegetical reflection on the translating process and interpretation of the broader socio-cultural context against which the literary work under discussion was originally written. Each of these exegeses is conducted at linguistic, literary and (cross-)cultural levels.

The research has been undertaken within the “Examination Guidelines for Research Degrees in Creative Works” of Victoria University, and thus combines creative practice in literary translation with accompanying exegetical reflections on the translating process and critical interpretation of the selected texts. This thesis, as an integrated project, is considered to comprise 50% creative work and 50% exegesis for the purpose of evaluation. The preferred reading order for each case-study chapter is the translated text first, followed by its exegesis.

# **Declaration**

This thesis contains no material which has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma in this or any other university, and to the best of my knowledge, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where reference has been made in the text of the thesis (please refer to the "Notes on Conventions of the Text" for the referencing format used herein).

Signed:

Aiying Ma

Melbourne, March 2002

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I would like to thank Emeritus Professor Harry Simon from University of Melbourne who was invited into the project at a difficult moment when the revision task loomed large. He helped re-structure the whole thesis with a strategic shift of emphasis. The thesis now stands basically in the structure he proposed.

I extend my sincere gratitude also to my principal supervisor Professor Helen Borland and co-supervisor Professor Barbara Brook, both from VU. At a critical point during the revision, Professor Borland provided timely encouragement and effective supervision. The quality discussion time she spent with me resulted in the thesis' rapid and smooth progress. Her teaching of practical research methods I will continue to benefit from long after this project is completed. Later on Professor Brook joined the team, bringing with her an additional set of expertise and editorial skills. Her common sense and kindness as well as her scholarship and work style will be dearly cherished in my memory. I have learned a great deal from my supervisors within and beyond the research project.

I owe heart-felt gratitude to my (extended-)family for their unfailing love and backup. My parents and siblings always provided moral as well as concrete support. My husband and my daughter make a point to lend me a hand whenever possible and endured my frequent absence from their lives even outside the working days and hours during the ten years when this thesis was in progress. They are all my lifelines.

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# Notes on Conventions of the Text

## Notes on Referencing Conventions

In-text references should be read in relation to the *References* at the end of this thesis. Page numbers are given in an in-text reference when the source is a full-length monograph; but in cases where the source is an article or short essay, the page numbers are not given in the in-text reference as this information is already provided in the *References*. English translations of Chinese book titles are included in both in-text references and/or in the *References* wherever they are readily available, while only major figures and important points for discussion in the thesis are accompanied by their Chinese names or terms.

## Transliteration from Chinese to English

*Pinyin* is used as the primary form of transliteration from Chinese to English. However, in cases where other systems of transliteration (e.g. Wade-Giles) are employed and the thus transliterated terms have become widely known through the scholarship of generations of sinologists prior to the general acceptance of the *pinyin* system, they will be provided in brackets after the *pinyin* transliteration, e.g. Lao Zi (Lao Tze), or retained in quotations.

## Often used acronyms (listed alphabetically)

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
L1	first language (one's mother tongue)
L2	second language (the target language in translation; one's first foreign language)
KMT	National Party (Kuomintang or Guomindang)
PRC	People's Republic of China
RMB	“Renminbi” Chinese monetary unit (literally the people's currency)

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Motivation of the Research

I can recall even now that seeing for the first time a popular Chinese movie *A River of Springtime Waters Flowing off to the East* 一江春水向东流 in the late 1970s when still a teenager, I was much mystified by its title. Since the terms employed are either neutral (like “river” and “flowing off to the east”) or even with positive connotations (such as “springtime”, the season of the awakenings of life and erotic feelings), the title seemed to me a gross mismatch for the anguish-filled content. After a query and some research, I learned that it is a line borrowed from a *ci* 词<sup>1</sup> poem composed according to the tune of “Yumeiren” 虞美人 (Pleasure in the Lovely Woman) by Li Yu 李煜 (937-978, better known as Li Houzhu 李后主), the last king of the Southern Tang (937-975), one of the ten kingdoms during the period of the Five Dynasties (907-960) in Chinese history. He is mainly remembered for his beautifully composed *ci* poems, like this one, which are imbued with intense sorrow and despair (Guo 1981: 12-17).

Flowers in spring, moonlight in fall, When will they ever end? and how much can we know of what is past and gone? Upstairs in my room last night The east wind came again; I cannot bear to turn and look home in the light of the moon.	春花秋月何时了， 往事知多少！ 小楼昨夜又春风， 故国不堪回首月明中。
Its carved railings and marble pavements are, I'm sure, still there--- all that changes is the flush on the face of youth. Tell me then of sorrow---how much can there be? It is exactly like: a whole river of springtime waters flowing off to the east. (Owen trans. 1996: 568) <sup>2</sup>	雕栏画栋应犹在， 只是朱颜改。 问君能有几多愁？ 恰似一江春水向东流。

This poem was written by Li Yu as a prisoner after his kingdom fell to the invading Song troops. A person’s anguish was like a flowing river or could only be carried by its enormous

<sup>1</sup> *Ci* is a form of Chinese poetry. *Ci* poems are composed by observing certain tunes with strict tonal patterns and rhythm schemes, in fixed numbers of lines and words. Each tune carries a beauty and rhythm of its own. This poetic form was originated in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and fully developed in the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The most famous *ci* poets include Li Bai 李白, Li Yu 李煜, Su Shi 苏轼, Li Qingzhao 李清照, Lu You 陆游 and Xin Qiji 辛弃疾.

<sup>2</sup> For various other English translations of the same *ci* poem see Lü, S. and Xu, Y. (1988: 316-318) and Xu, Z. (1986: 20-21).

water volume, then how intense and endless must it have been! The movie that bears as its title the last seven characters of his “*Yumeiren*” was filmed shortly after the War of Resistance Against Japan 1937-1945 (Yang et al. 1984: 70-76). Only after having done the background research and learned the context did it make sense to me; and only thereafter was I able to appreciate the deliberately chosen title with admiration.

That experience throws into relief how significant a role background knowledge can play in the communication process even within a single language; let alone between two different languages involving two different sets of cultural backgrounds<sup>3</sup>. If effective communication is subject to various conditions and difficult to attain intralingually, such communication in terms of poetological and cultural interchange must be even harder when conducted interlingually, and particularly so when it occurs between fundamentally different languages and cultures such as those of the Chinese<sup>4</sup> and the West<sup>5</sup> in the process of translation proper. And that kind of experience is by no means an isolated incident.

Chinese culture and the Chinese language with its pictographic nature pose huge obstacles to outsiders in their attempt to understand them. This is made clear by Nicholas Jose, a China expert and former cultural attaché of the Australian Embassy in Beijing:

A traditional stereotypical image of the Oriental is intrinsically different and very often inscrutable, coupled with the weight of history and bound of tradition. ... The concepts of insider and outsider are fundamental at so many levels of life. The language, script and culture are expressions of this separateness, the manifestations of a society that is self-enclosed, centred on itself, hermetic and needing hermeneutic translation before it can be

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3 Roman Jakobson (1959) distinguishes three types of translation: (1) Intralingual translation, or *rewording* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language). (2) Interlingual translation or *translation proper* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language). (3) Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* (an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems) (as quoted in Bassnett 1991: 14).

4 The word “Chinese,” when referring to the language, is used in its most embracing sense---Modern standard Chinese---without going into the complex differences that exist in it unless the need for clarification arises (in such situations modifiers will be included to specify its meaning, e.g. classical Chinese, Chinese dialect). The Chinese language 中文 (or 汉语, literally the language of the Han people that comprise the majority of China’s population, better known as “Mandarin Chinese” by foreigners) is not the single language of the country. To start with, there are 55 ethnic groups (known as national minorities) in China which are not Han Chinese, and most of them have their own languages. Secondly, there are seven major dialects besides the official version, which are orally incomprehensible to one another although there is a high degree of conformity in writing between them; and finally, even Modern Standard Chinese of the Han Chinese has varied names: “the common speech” 普通话 in mainland China, “national language” 国语 in Taiwan, “Chinese language” 华语 in overseas Chinese communities), and “the language of China” 中国话 by some foreigners. When used to refer to people, its meaning depends on the context in which it is found, i.e. in discussing linguistic and translation issues, the word will include those in the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Chinese nationals in diasporas in other parts of the globe; when discussing socio-cultural experiences, as the selected stories for translation and discussion in this thesis are all originally PRC-based and my cultural framework for discussion was and also mostly is from that perspective, the word refers to situations in the mainland only. “China” will be used in a similarly way with the same differentiations. I am aware of the political issues involved in both words but, for convenience’s purpose, will use them this way in the thesis and will be more specific whenever necessary.

5 The notion of the West as the antithesis of the East is drawn according to the non-geographical but cultural and historical dichotomy of the world.

understood by outsiders. (Jose 1992b)

Notwithstanding, the necessity for international contact and cooperation has never been greater than in our age when globalization now looms as an inevitable tendency of change and development. No culture ever existed that was not the result of cultural development and change, and the most obvious source of change has been the impact of (and inter-penetration with) other cultures. Moreover, as the economic, technical, social and political conditions in any country may change quite quickly, so does the language, which reflects the reality in all those aspects of a certain culture. Therefore, interlingual communication means not only a difficult task, but also a constant challenge. Although a long and arduous process will be needed before barriers to understanding between the East and the West disappear, those obstacles are not insurmountable. Increasing contact and continuing effort should help bring about understanding, if not always acceptance, of the different cultures and ideas of those two worlds in our global village.<sup>6</sup> This is a task neither within the capacity of this thesis nor within the ability of its writer. However, this is its ultimate concern, and the “cultural” translations and exegeses to be carried out in this thesis are envisaged as an attempt to add a few bricks to the bridge between that chasm.

In achieving this cross-cultural understanding, language is a pivotal agent. Nothing is more evident than the fact that people communicate primarily by way of language<sup>7</sup> and, for people of different nations, by way of translation between languages. Translation as a basic interlingual communicative activity, therefore, is an indispensable medium leading to greater intercultural and international understanding.

The majority of meanings in languages, and in different varieties / dialects of a language as well, reflect and respond to the social, economic, technological and theoretical needs of the cultures concerned. As George Steiner writes:

Linguistic patterns determine what the individual perceives in his world and how he thinks about it. ... Every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness. (Steiner 1975: 88-89)

Besides, literature as a language-based discourse operates within a socio-cultural structure as

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to acknowledge that, as Simon (1992: 160) writes, “the humanist vision of translation as peaceful dialogue among equals, as the egalitarian pursuit of mutual comprehension, is only one of a number of paradigms which account for the dynamics of translation. If translation is taking on increased importance today as a way to conceptualize processes of cultural transmission, it is because we recognize that it participates in many different ways in the generation of new forms of knowledge, new textual forms, new relationships to language.”

<sup>7</sup> This is particularly so in a language’s written form. I acknowledge the argument that in oral communication, tones, facial expressions, gestures and so on may play a more decisive role in determining the meaning than the words used.

one of the systems that constitute the “complex ‘system of systems’” known as a culture (see Lefevere 1992: 14) like other forms of discourse, and literary discourse in a specific language is both reflective and constitutive of its respective society and culture. Therefore, the difficulty of literary translation lies not only in the differences between languages and in reproducing the literary sensibilities of the original work, but what’s more, in the differences between the cultures behind the languages and their sensibilities. In actual practice, however, each translator’s understanding and treatment of “cultural elements” in the translating process may differ greatly in respect to its scope and depth, let alone the more recently discussed translators’ cultural orientation 文化定位 and different strategies / methods they choose to fulfil their tasks. Such differences have the potential of influencing the quality, function and reception of a finished translation product as well as the actual translating process, all the way along, well before the actual translating process begins and well after it ends.

Translation has been the subject of many academic writings. A profusion of terms, models, schools and varieties of approaches and issues related to translation has been put forward, as a glance at the collection of books and articles selected from the larger corpus of literature in the field for specific reference in this thesis will confirm (see reference list at the end of the thesis). However, as Hermans (1995) observes, “sustained attention to theoretical or methodological aspects of research into literary translation was [still] rare” by mid-1980s, with Jírí Levý’s *Die literarische Übersetzung* (originally published in Czech in 1963, appeared in a German translation in 1969) and George Steiner’s *After Babel* (came out in 1975, adapted and selectively translated into Chinese by Zhuang 1987) as the only exceptions during the period. And “in studies of translation, the case of Chinese (and other East Asian languages) had traditionally been relegated to the periphery of concern, occasionally with a note of apology about one’s ignorance of this important culture” (Eoyang 1993: xi). As recent as the 1990s, with a few exceptions, the research which is devoted to translation between Chinese and English was either general in its treatment of the issue (i.e. failed to address the specific dynamics / interaction between English and Chinese in the process of translation), or focusing on these but not connecting them adequately with broader socio-cultural aspects.

The in-depth meanings of a socio-cultural as well as linguistic / literary nature that are often contained in literary texts, and the macro-contexts against which such literary texts are created, can be crucial factors affecting the understanding and reception of the texts by the targeted reader of another culture. Yet this is a problem that conventional translation

conceptions and skills cannot always solve without the sacrifice of some kinds, most notably the uninterrupted readability of the translated text or the full conveyance of meaning of the source text.

These factors combine to represent an area in need of further investigation for new principles and strategies / methods in order to address these problems. It is to this need that this thesis hopes to make a modest but significant contribution.

## ***1.2 Research Aim***

The overall aim of this project is to engage in literary translation and to reflect on and investigate what is involved before and after, as well as during, the translating process, particularly in relation to rendering the socio-cultural elements encoded in and about the source text and providing the intended reader with an understanding of the translated text which comprehensively encompasses these socio-cultural meanings, hence the proposition for the “extended (cross-)cultural approach to literary translation.” In realizing the project, it is argued that in order to fully render the cultural implications of literary texts in the source language, it may be necessary, or desirable, in cases where such cultural implications defy “adequate translation” through conventional means, to also study the traditional and current poetics<sup>8</sup> and cultural frame of reference by way of, for example, a cultural exegesis, in order to achieve effective cross-cultural communication. In this context, Wilss (1996: 4) clarifies that the concept of “adequacy” is derived from Itamar Even-Zohar, defined as “a translation which realizes in the target language the textual relationships of a source text with no breach of its own [basic] linguistic system” (Gideon Toury’s translation of Even-Zohar’s Hebrew). The term “adequacy” is given entirely different meanings by different scholars, e.g. by Reiss (1984) and Puurtinen (1992), in the field of translation studies. Despite the frequent misunderstanding, even dismissal, of the term, this thesis deploys it in the sense as “the result of a theoretically possible mode of translation, so comprehensively source-oriented that all relevant textual relations of the source text would be preserved in the target text” (see Hermans 1995).<sup>9</sup>

Each of the cultural exegeses in this thesis incorporates a three-level explanation and analysis

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<sup>8</sup> According to Lefevere (1992: 26), “A Poetics can be said to consist of two components: one is an inventory of literary devices, genres, motifs, prototypical characters and situations, and symbols; the other a concept of what the role of literature is, or should be, in the social system as a whole.”

<sup>9</sup> Please note that this author is aware of the necessity to balance up source-oriented considerations with target-oriented ones as contended by Lambert and Gorp (1985). Please also note that this project does not intend to introduce the (upper-case) Adequate Translation concept as a methodological tool.

of the text, i.e. linguistic, literary, and extended (cross-)cultural. This extra-translational effort should be considered by the translator as an obligation or prerequisite of the translation task even if this cultural exegesis may not eventually accompany the translation itself. Nevertheless, information and knowledge obtained from such research efforts should at least result in adjustments of one's translation strategies to enable the best realization of the anticipated reception of that translation and, at most, create possibilities for the formation of cultural identities and for better cross-cultural understanding.

The proposed extended (cross-)cultural translation approach of this thesis, extending well beyond the literary text itself into its macro-context, which also includes a cultural exegesis (or other demonstrative, descriptive, explanatory, analytic and/or critical forms) operating on the three levels, is obviously not the same as the conventionally acknowledged culture sensitivity which deciphers and transmits cultural connotations while correctly and artistically passing onto the targeted reader the basic information / message / story a literary text carries within itself. It ventures well outside the normally consented boundaries of the “safety zones” overlapping between the three disciplines involved, namely, translation, literary, and cultural studies. By dealing with language materials in literary translation and analysis from a cultural perspective, the explorations of this thesis do not fit easily into any existing category of inquiry such as linguistics, translation, literary, or cultural studies respectively, nor into a single theoretical paradigm of any of those. Rather, all these elements as they arise in the thesis are seen and dealt with as part of an interrelated entity.

The research has been undertaken within the “Examination Guidelines for Research Degrees in Creative Works” of Victoria University, and thus combines creative practice in literary translation with accompanying exegetical reflections on the process of the literary translation and critical interpretation<sup>10</sup> of the selected texts. This thesis, as an integrated project, is considered to comprise 50% creative work and 50% exegesis for the purpose of evaluation. The preferred reading order is each translated text first, followed by the accompanying exegesis.

In the past decade or so, developments in this academic area have been stunningly rapid, especially from the Chinese point of view. As recently as 1993, the field of literary translation between Chinese and English was referred to as “no-man’s-land” (Eoyang 1993:

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<sup>10</sup> The term “interpretation”, juxtaposed to “translation” in the sub-title of this thesis, is used in the sense of bringing out fully the meaning of the translated texts as associated with their macro-contextual situations (i.e. socio-cultural background) in the form of a cultural exegesis as well as their textual and contextual situations (cf. Schulte 1995).

xi). This thesis, mainly a part-time research project, was initiated in early 1991 and, for various reasons, was pursued intermittently over a period of about ten years, during which time the thinking and writing on and about translation of all kinds has exploded in all directions, among them the “cultural turn” in translation studies, first suggested by Bassnett and Lefevere (1995: 1-13), is particularly noticeable, and has been taken much further by many other experts in the field. It is encouraging to observe that what this thesis first proposed in the early 1990s has now become a widely discussed and well published topic and enjoys such excellent company---Eva Hung 孔慧怡, Mary Snell-Hornby, Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere, Lawrence Venuti, Theo Hermans, Jose Lambert, Wolfram Wilss, Itamar Even-Zohar, Toury Gideon, Christiane Nord, Hu Wenzhong 胡文仲 and many more<sup>11</sup>. In view of the changed situation, this thesis hopes to be viewed more as an attempt to demonstrate and explore necessary translation-related methods to achieve effective cross-cultural translation / communication than as one to contribute to theoretical thinking. In other words, the translations and exegeses are meant to be viewed in their own right as well as being regarded as instruments to test and help establish the central arguments of the thesis.

The proposal for the cross-disciplinary approach to literary translation which demands cultural translation in its macro-contextual sense (i.e. providing exegeses on the Poetics and socio-cultural matrix related to the text), as well as in its conventional sense, is a fairly radical step to take and necessarily a tentative one too. Therefore, careful elaboration is crucial to its initial establishment and to its hoped for partial acceptance. However, it is considered to possess a productive potential for initiating a future trend in literary translation practices and it is anticipated that there will be some other implications deriving from this proposed approach which, if adopted, can benefit translation studies as a whole.

### **1.3 Research Approach**

With these aims in mind, Chapter 2 reviews, in a selective manner, the major underpinning theoretical areas involved in order to provide the context for the research program, to identify and justify its research question(s), and to decide on an appropriate method to carry out the task. It starts with brief background surveys of the theory and craft of literary translation in China and the West and of recent Western influence on the Chinese translation field. The following sub-section gives a descriptive discussion on the complicated senses of the term “culture,” the development of cultural studies from Edward Tylor’s classical definition of “culture” through F. R. Leavis’ understanding of cultural studies as related to literary

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<sup>11</sup> Refer to Chapter 2.1.1 below for more detailed discussion about some of them.

criticism, Marxist views of culture spanning from their classical position to that of Raymond Williams' cultural materialism, Edward Said's postcolonial<sup>12</sup> Orientalism, to the varied and rapid advances made in the newly emergent discipline "Cultural Studies" up till the 1990s. A brief account of the Chinese reactions in response to these new developments follows. These discussions initially help formulate and justify the research questions of the thesis (to be developed in 2.2 below), which naturally leads to the discussion on the selection and justification of the research approach, the design of the study method, and the detailed format of that study, using literary translation between Chinese and English as a site of investigation in the cultural communication process<sup>13</sup>.

Taking these considerations as a point of departure, this thesis is designed to explore the propositions by looking into the broad and narrow senses of translation with the proposed extended (cross-)cultural approach to literary translation, first in the actual process of translating four contemporary Chinese literary texts into English---stories with their particular relationship to inherent and changing family values, structures and living conditions in urban China from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, and then reflecting on the translating process and interpretation of the broader socio-cultural context against which the selected literary work was originally created. Therefore, Chapters 3 to 6 each forms an experiment-discussion chapter that comprises a translated text and a literary / cultural exegesis (used as research methods including commentary and reflections on the value of such commentary). Each of these chapters translates and studies a specific literary text, conducting the study at the linguistic, literary, and extended (cross-)cultural levels. These studies relate to and complement each other, but at the same time are independent of one another. This creative-practice-plus-exegesis method is chosen for all these four chapters not only because the proposed approach to literary translation needs repeating to test its applicability to different texts, but also because each of the four selected stories is unique and each reveals aspects of the Chinese society and culture that are new or different to the other. Basing myself on a set of propositions, drawing on my academic background knowledge of Chinese and Western literature and culture and on my first-hand life experience in both (obviously with a much greater degree of familiarity with the Chinese than with the

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<sup>12</sup> Please note that it is not the intention of this thesis to engage with discussions about postcolonial theory and terminology nor to introduce any related concepts such as the exotic, although these terms are occasionally quoted in the thesis.

<sup>13</sup> I acknowledge a translation expert's view (Hung 1999: 15-18) that literary translation comprises only a part of Translation Studies and the "literary bias" 文学偏向 that has formed due to a number of historical factors in the PRC will seriously affect the construction of a holistic discipline by that name in the country if not corrected. She calls for the decentralization of literary translation's dominant position in the country but, paradoxically, due to the power of convention, it is by the very "bias" that she has justified her instrumental use of literature in her research work; and I, mine. This point will be further elaborated on in 2.2 below.

Western), I wish to offer the closeness of an informed insider and the distance of a concerned outsider about translation and literature as art and about literature and culture as life.<sup>14</sup>

Chapter 7 sums up and examines the findings from a synthesis of all the chapters that precede against the research issues formulated in Chapter 2, and draws conclusions as to whether, and to what extent, the central arguments are valid.

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<sup>14</sup> As Snell-Hornby (1995: 100) points out as an experienced translator and theorist, sometimes “the translator has to rely on his general knowledge and intuition” in doing translation. She also observes that “the literary translator gives no indication of his intention, and publishers’ constraints remain unknown: it is a hallmark of the prototypical literary translation that it is assumed to stand as a valid full-scale representative of the original in a foreign culture; with this awesome function a literary translation is bound to have shortcomings and faultfinders somewhere” (1995: 114). With my clearly stated intention as the translator and commentator as well as my various limitations, together with the effort to identify the research question, the aim, the approach and the method of this thesis (in Chapter 2 below), I hope to have achieved fewer of these.

# **Chapter 2 Research Context, Topic and Approach**

The purpose of this chapter is, first of all, to provide the context for the research program by giving a brief review of relevant literature in translation and (cross-)cultural studies. From this background review, the research question of the thesis will be formulated and justified. Consequently, appropriate research approaches will be selected, including the design of the particular case study and the rationale for this specific method provided. And last but not least, this chapter is intended to lay a structural and conceptual basis for the translation practice / exegetical analysis chapters that are to follow.

## ***2.1 Relevant Literature***

The previous introductory chapter identifies the inadequate conveyance of broader cultural information in literary translation from Chinese to English as a problem and suggests that it has become increasingly urgent for this problem to be addressed. This is necessarily a complex task since it involves consideration of ideas and debates from at least three disciplinary areas, namely, translation, literary and cultural studies, but it is a task that will help underpin the philosophy and principles of literary translation practice.

Since without reference to time and the processes of change, any effort to outline the present situation or to define the current trends in any discipline must be inadequate, this section will include a survey of relevant theories in the relevant fields of studies chronologically. As the extent of such works is enormous, to delve into them either comprehensively or in detail is beyond the scope and primary concern of this thesis. Therefore, the review will necessarily be selective, specifically focussing on those development and concepts most relevant to the subsequent translations, enough to locate the relevant study areas in space, time or culture and to provide a research context for the thesis.

### **2.1.1 Translation theory development in China and in relation to the Western influence**

Whether regarded as belonging to the sphere of linguistics, comparative literature, or that of

translation studies<sup>1</sup>, the activity of translation has to do with languages. Conventionally, however, words have been seen as peripheral to human understanding of reality. More recent theories suggest a more profound knowledge of the role languages play in that understanding process. As George Steiner (1975: 82) reasons when discussing issues concerning translation in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, language has the “life-giving, life-determining power.” Humans enter active processes of consciousness, into active cognizance of reality “through the ordering and shaping powers of language”; individuals think and feel as their particular language implies and allows them to do. Therefore, language has the power to relate and at the same time “to alienate”: it can be positive or “adverse to man.”

The history of modern linguistics can be said to start with the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). As David Lodge (1988: x) comments, the emergence of Saussure’s structural linguistics, characterized by the study of language as a system of interrelated elements without regard to their historical development, is a revolution in the conception of linguistics. Saussure proposes that humans’ understanding of reality should actually revolve about the social use of verbal signs. His structural linguistics makes the distinction between *langage* (the faculty of language), *langue* (the code or system of a language), and *parole* (language in context, whether written or spoken), which has a bearing on very important elements of extralinguistic features<sup>2</sup> in sociolinguistics (Saussure 1983, trans. from French by Harris, R.). M. A. K. Halliday (1979: 1) agrees with Saussure that language is “a social fact.” This discussion of Saussure’s theoretical work is relevant here because it contends that the way we conceptualize the world is ultimately dependent on the language we speak. By analogy, the kind of language we speak is ultimately dependent on the culture we inhabit.

Recognizing that the written record of human history is about 7,000 years during which 10,000 to 15,000 tongues have been spoken and about 6,000 of them are still in current use (Clause, as cited in Xu, Y. 1995b), it can be estimated that the act of translation must have been necessary ever since that time or even earlier. Before the late 19th century, most translation in China was of Buddhist Scriptures and, in the West, of classics and Biblical Scriptures. Thereafter, the activity gradually extended to practical texts in such areas as politics, economics, legal affairs, science and technology; and practical communicative

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<sup>1</sup> Conventionally, translation has been attached to either linguistics or comparative literature.

<sup>2</sup> The term “extralinguistic,” in its most general sense, refers to anything in the world (other than language) in relation to which language is used – the “extralinguistic situation.” The term “extralinguistic features” is used both generally, to refer to any properties of such situations, and also specifically, to refer to properties of communication which are not clearly analyzable in linguistic terms, e.g. gestures, tones of voice. Some linguists refer to the former class of features as “metalinguistic”; others refer to the latter class as “paralinguistic (Crystal 1997: 145). This thesis uses both “extralinguistic” and “extralinguistic features” in their general senses.

function as well as literary scholarship made its way to the centre of attention (Gu, X. 1990). After the Second World War, a new world situation took shape. The United Nations (1946) and numerous other international bodies were constituted in quick succession. The “Fédération International des Traducteurs” was established in Paris in 1953, followed by many national organizations of a similar nature. Journals concerned mainly or frequently with matters of translation increased rapidly in number (Zhao and Li 1986). Exchanges in all aspects of life between countries also proliferated, accelerated by the fast advancing mass media technology. An overwhelmingly increasing amount of translation was done around the globe. With this increase, the systematic study of statements about translation over the centuries and the serious consideration for the establishment of *Translation Studies* (or *translatology*) as an independent discipline came into prominence in the realm of translation. As both Chinese and Western scholars have noted (Luo, X. 1983; Bassnett 1991), the scientific approach to translation is only a comparatively recent occurrence since the late 19th century when the field of translation studies was in a situation of utter entanglement and disagreement.

Since ancient times, there had been analyses and pronouncements about translation upon which some principles were set up for the activity in the Chinese context. Only a sketchy line of the synchronical development of Chinese translation theory will be traced here. It is now known that about 1,700 years ago, during the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280) in China (as quoted in Luo, X. 1983: 589), the major aspects in translation, e.g. fidelity to the original, expressiveness, and elegance, were first mentioned by Zhi Qian 支謙 in the last part of his preface to a *sutra*. This discussion on the matter of translation approach did not seem to make a great impact then, and had largely remained unknown until its close resemblance to Yan Fu's 严复 famous three criteria for translation was proved by Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 in the 1970s. According to Ma Zuyi 馬祖毅, Dao An 道安(313-385) “summarized the early experience of Buddhist scriptures translation by pointing out that there were three difficulties which the translators could hardly overcome and five cases in which the Chinese version could not adhere to its Sanskrit original” (Ma Z. 1995: 376). Kumarajiva 超摩羅什(344-413) “was the first one who used the method of free translation” (Ma, Z. 1995: 375) in translating Buddhist Scriptures. Yan Cong 彦琮(557-610) made a further summing up of such experiences and put forth eight requirements for his fellow translators and Xuan Zang 玄奘(602-664) raised five principles of transliteration and mastered such techniques as omission, addition, transposition, substitution, division or combination and restoration of nouns for pronouns (Ma, Z. 1995: 375-376). These seminal studies and pronouncements stemmed directly from the enterprises of translators or organizers of translation activities, and

were of a great pragmatic use. A comparison of their opinions pertaining to *sutra* translation reveals that Dao An gave fidelity his first consideration, insisting that the original be put in its equivalent terms without any changes except for the word order, so as to be as close to the original as possible. Kumarajiva, on the contrary, promoted elegance in expression besides accuracy, thinking that so long as the original meaning was kept, there was no harm in rendering it with embellishment. Obviously, fluent and elegant expression was a major concern to him. From the five principles, raised by Xuan Zang of the Tang Dynasty that stressed transliteration in five circumstances, it seems that he gave priority to faithfulness to the original but readability was not neglected. Xuan Zang's systematization of principles and methods seem to have attained more theoretical characteristics than the others' did (Yang, Z. 1935; Luo, X. 1983; Chen Y. et al. 1989; Liu, M. 1993). Generally speaking, however, during the long span of pre-modern times, little---certainly not enough---was written about translation from a theorized perspective.

Serious, large-scaled and enduring discussion in modern times on the theory of translation in China, strictly speaking, started with Yan Fu's 严复 "Introductory Remarks (1896) on Translating T. H. Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*," in which he succinctly raised three criteria for translation in three Chinese characters: "xin" 信 (faithfulness), "da" 达 (expressiveness), and "ya" 雅 (elegance). The three-character criteria for translation caught almost undivided attention of the translation field in China in the late 19th century and debates between translators and theorists for generations thereafter were mainly centred on them (e.g. their divergence of views over literal versus free translation methods), with each "translation school" being merely its variation (see Zheng, Z. 1921; Lu, X. 1932; Dong, Q. 1950; Cao, J. 1962; Liu, J. 1980; Lao, L. 1987; Shen, S. 1992). During the May Fourth New Culture Movement<sup>3</sup> period in the early 20th century, some scholars argued against "wenyan" 文言 (literally "cultural language") for "baihua" 白话 (literally "plain speech"), and Yan Fu's

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<sup>3</sup> "May Fourth Movement" was an anti-imperialism anti-feudal patriotic movement. The term can be understood in two senses. Narrowly it refers to the "May Fourth Incident," a student demonstration in Beijing on 4 May 1919 to protest against the Chinese government's docility in accepting Japan's special rights in Shandong after World War I, and the following events which involved workers, businessmen as well as intellectuals that resulted in the Chinese government's rejection of the Versailles Treaty which was in favour of Japan. Broadly, it is used to refer to the May Fourth "New Culture Movement," an anti-feudal cultural reform movement that grew out of the May Fourth Movement (Ci Hai 1979: 34). The movement was characteristic of experimentation with a modern vernacular writing style, the negation of tradition of the feudal systems and ideas, an exploration of Western literature and culture, e.g. Democracy and Science, radical critiques of Chinese society, and the spread of Marxism-Leninism in China. Western civilization was considered a source of strength in every aspect of social and cultural changes and struggles. In this thesis, if not otherwise specified, the term "May Fourth Movement" is used in its narrow sense while (May Fourth) "New Culture Movement" is used to refer to the broader meaning.

criterion of elegance, “*ya*”, came under severe attack<sup>4</sup>, with Lu Xun 鲁迅 and Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 at the forefront. They both held that faithfulness to the original rather than expressiveness was important. If it is impossible to get both, adhere to the former and sacrifice the latter (see Qu 1931; Lu, X. 1931 and 1932). Lu compared translation to a trip to foreign land---it should present before its reader’s eyes the exotic state of affairs as it was, part of which could be difficult or even impossible to express in the target language. Thus, at the beginning, literally translated words or sentence patterns might not sound natural to a native ear but would be accepted as such after some time. He considered this method a fast and convenient way to enrich and empower the target language. Lu and Qu also discussed the need of different kinds of prospective readers with their varied levels of education and comprehension ability. Lu asserted that those were factors the translator should take into consideration when determining what principle and method to adopt in doing his/her job. Their opinions on the principles, methods and requirements of translation, together with other scholars’ (e.g. Lin Yutang 林语堂), “were conducive to developing the Chinese theory of translation” (Ma, Z. 1995: 386).

In the early 1950s, while most people were still locked in heated debates over the three criteria, experienced translator Fu Lei 傅雷, who was also a lover of painting and music, compared translation to the art of painting and applied traditional Chinese aesthetic theory on painting to the art of translation. He believed that “closeness of spirit” 神似 rather than “closeness of form” 形似 should be sought after” (Fu, L. 1951: 80-81), and that sometimes untranslatability is caused by cultural differences (Fu, L. 1995: 303-304 [1961]). Fu’s viewpoint successfully diverted people’s attention away from “the three criteria for

<sup>4</sup> As published literature shows (Gao, M. 2000: 30-32), up to the end of the 19th century, the difference between written and oral Chinese was not a matter of style; they were different languages: the literary language and the spoken language. Throughout Chinese history, there were different kinds of literary and spoken languages. For instance, in what is now broadly called the literary language there were the archaic inscriptions on oracle bones, the literary language of the Zhou Dynasty sages, the language of Tang and Song poetry, and the vernacular languages of classical novels as well as modern literature. The so-called spoken language has also evolved greatly and therefore differs not only from one geographical area to another, but also from one period of history to another. The written language consequently does not only refer to the classical literary Chinese based on the prose of the late Zhou and Han periods, but also to the vernacular literary language which first arose during the Tang Dynasty. “*Wenyan*” is the general term referring to this category of literary Chinese. It was the monopoly of the educated, the gentry, and the scholars. It was so detached from the community at large that it eventually became a purely written language, not corresponding to any form of spoken language. Today, one of Yan Fu’s three criteria, “*ya*”, has attained a new aesthetic explanation, yet at the turn of the 20th century, “*ya*” as demonstrated in Yan’s translations meant the literary style of writing characteristic of the usage of the classical “*wenyan*”. Around the beginning of the 20th century, efforts were made to narrow the gap between the official texts written in “*wenyan*” and the language spoken in daily life, “*baihua*”. A plain speech movement started to promote a form of written language as a standard language for the nation which was closer to the spoken language. “By the 1940s the battle was won and the monopoly of *wen yan* over the production of written texts was thus broken” (Gao, M. 2000: 32). As discussed in Chapter 1, there are many different versions of Chinese such as Cantonese and Minnan. However, the differences between the Chinese common vernacular (*Putonghua* 普通话) or Modern Standard Chinese / Mandarin Chinese (*Hanyu* 汉语) and the seven major regional dialects (*fanyan* 方言), which have the same written script, is not the subject of discussion here.

translation” and, together with the introduction of Russian translation theories in the early 1950s (see Guo, J. 1999), caused a science-versus-art debate (i.e. whether translation is a branch of science or a branch of art). Later, Qian Zhongshu 钱鍾书, beginning with a critical study of the etymology of a Chinese character “*hua*” 化 (to transform), explained that all the possible function, unavoidable defect and attainable extent of perfection in translation are all clearly hinted at by 化 with its obtained, extended and transformed forms and manifold meanings from ancient texts---to translate, to allure, to intermediate, and to falsify. Like that of a matchmaker, he argued, the function of translation is to serve as a literary mediator and help establish a relationship between the author and the reader, i.e. the reader of the translated work is attracted to the original work and inspired to learn the foreign language in which the work was first written. However, he shrewdly pointed out, a bad translation will produce exactly the opposite consequences: to reject the reader on behalf of the original. He admitted that even in a good translation, falsity is unavoidable and absolute perfection impossible (Qian, Z. 1979a). “While commenting on a literary work,” he reasoned, “the researcher can do a good job without necessarily understanding each word, phrase, sentence, or even a whole section or chapter of the work; when translating it, however, the translator has no way to justifiably skip one individual word, nor can he/she dodge a single point of difficulty therein” (1979a). Qian used “*huajing*” 化境 (sublimation), a terminology frequently used in the traditional Chinese theory on painting, to describe his “supreme criterion of literary translation” by which, he wrote, “I mean to transfer the language of a work into another language without bearing any trace of awkwardness or far-fetchedness in translation because of the differences of language usage, and at the same time without losing the slightest flavour of the original” (1979a). He compared translation of such high quality to “the transmigration of souls,” which is indeed the highest criterion for literary translation to attain.

Classical aesthetics is a highly developed field of scholarship in China. Qian Zhongshu and Fu Lei both researched into this well-established branch of learning and applied its theory and method to their translation study and practice. “Trans-” means “across”, “-late”, “carry”. To translate means to convey or to change. No matter how expertly done, the translation is a translated piece---changed in form / body definitely, and in spirit / soul to a greater or less degree. Therefore, it seems that Qian’s “sublimation” is the supreme criterion of literary translation while Fu’s “closest similarity” is an attainable standard. From the aesthetic perspective, the two credos about the ideal standard for translation they raised, which marked a substantial broadening of the traditional ways of impressionistic commentary on specific translation cases, and was a big step forward from the debates over the literal versus free

translation methods.

For reasons known to all, PRC was not open to the Western world until late 1970s; therefore most translation theories from outside China began to be introduced into Chinese translation circles from the early 1980s, on an unprecedented scale, including those from the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Israel as well as from the West (Guo, J. 1999), e.g. those of J. C. Catford, George Steiner, Peter Newmark, Eugene A. Nida, Wolgram Wilss, Albrecht Neubert, Georges Mounin, Susan Bassnett, Theo Hermans, James Holmes and so on, which brought about considerable cross influence and new development in the Chinese translation field.

Translation and schools of translation theory in the West demonstrate a huge and diversified field of study. General narrative chronicles of different lengths and depths have been produced by many Western scholars as well as from various perspectives. For instance, Bassnett looks mainly from a historical perspective at the different concepts of translation prevailing at different historical stages, and the function and role of the translator that has accordingly altered (see Bassnett 1991: 39-75; Bassnett and Lefevere 1995: 388-392 [1990]). In contrast, Snell-Hornby's discussion of the development of translation theory in the West rotates around the linguistic and literary orientations in traditional language studies as well as in translation studies with an attempt to develop an integrated approach with a more cultural orientation (see Snell-Hornby 1995: 7-31). Different from either of the above, George Steiner's thoughts are primarily shaped concerning the translation of great works of art (see Steiner 1975). Steiner divides the development of translation theory by mid-1970s into roughly four periods and his provocative statement about the range of theoretical ideas on translation in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* is often quoted:

List Saint Jerome, Luther, Dryden, Holderlin, Novalis, Schleiermarcher, Nietzsche, Ezra Pound, Valery, MacKenna, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Quine---and you have very nearly the sum total of those who have said anything fundamental or new about translation. The range of theoretic ideas, as distinct from the wealth of pragmatic notation, remains very small. (Steiner 1975: 269)

Instead of repeating what has been expertly done on the history of Western translation theory since its inception, this thesis will focus on the more recent theories, selectively those that have been introduced to China and made considerable impact on the theoretical development in the Chinese field of translation studies in the last three decades of the 20th century, especially those pertaining to the “cultural turn” in literary translation.

From the 1960s to early 1980s is a theory-amplifying period for the study of the theory and

practice of translation in the West. The founding of translation studies as an independent discipline at the 1976 conference in Leuven, Belgium, as most Western scholars in the field agreed, marked the start of a new period. The introduction of the newly emerging disciplines (such as computer science, communication theory and information theory) into the study of translation provided new angles and new tools for research work. There were also new achievements in old areas of academic studies such as in psychology, anthropology, sociology, semiotics, lexical statistics, formal rhetoric, and poetics, as well as in different types of linguistics, old and new---general linguistics, applied linguistics, text linguistics, discourse analysis, and socio-semiotics---which have respectively contributed to the development of translation theory. In other words, the study of the theory and practice of translation became a point of contact between established and newly evolving disciplines in an attempt to clarify the act of translation and the process of exchange between languages in a scientific manner. The vision of the connection between language and the extralinguistic phenomena was widened, the most visible reflection of this being the emergence of the “descriptive translation studies” (e.g. of Gideon Toury and James S. Holmes), the “polysystem theory” (e.g. of Itamar Even-Zohar), the communicative approach (e.g. of Newmark), socio-semiotic approach (e.g. of Nida), discourse analysis (e.g. of Halliday), along with the further development of philological approach (e.g. of Steiner) and purely linguistic approach (e.g. of Catford).<sup>5</sup> While in the 1970s, scholars with work of a primarily linguistic and/or applied slant dominated the international scene, in contrast, theoretical or methodological aspects of research into literary translation, apart from a couple of exceptions, was “largely a matter of individuals and small groups working in far-flung places, several of them operating with ideas derived from Russian Formalism: Anton Popovic and Frantisek Miko in Czechoslovakia (as it still was then), James Holmes, Raymond van den Broeck, André Lefevere and José Lambert in the Low Countries, and Itamar Even-Zohar and Toury in Tel Aviv” (Hermans 1995).

Catford, Newmark and Nida were among the first of western linguistic school translation theories introduced in the early 1980s. The linguistic approach to translation involves a series of rules of correspondence, which finds its best account in Catford’s *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (1965). His strictly linguistic translation approach, based on contrastive

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<sup>5</sup> Translation theories in the West by the early 1980s are classified by Waard and Nida (1986) into four types according to their approaches to translation: the philological, the linguistic, the communicative, and the socio-semiotic approaches. However, the lines of division between different “schools” of translation theory are by no means clear-cut and there are always cross-influence and overlapping amongst them. For example, the philological approach in its modern form places the text against the communicative and cultural background in a way similar to the approaches taken by the communicative and socio-semiotic schools.

linguistics, revolves about the differences in linguistic structure between the source and target languages. Although of great use in developing machine translation, this approach is too dependent upon surface structures to be able to adequately deal with the underlying semantic relationship or the communicative aspect of discourse. Precisely because of these limitations, a communication theory of translation was drawn upon as a broader approach to analyze the problems and the process of interlingual exchange. This approach is primarily defined and discussed at length in Newmark's *Approaches to Translation* (1981). In this work, translation problems are treated in two ways: semantical and communicative; and the role of the receptor is highlighted as the target in the process of communication. These assumptions are developed and revised in a later work (Newmark 1988), with the focus of interest shifted to the literal approach and to practical translation problems rather than a "remote" theoretical discussion of the philosophy and the psychology of translation. Newmark's major contribution is in his detailed treatment of semantic versus communicative translating, suggesting that the basic elements of translation be treated in terms of a theory of communication. While semantic translation focuses primarily on the semantic content of the source text, communicative translation lays stress essentially on the comprehension and response of receptors (see Lin, X. 1987; Lin, K. 1992; Liu, S. 1992). Such differentiated approaches are especially relevant when the varied and numerous types of text come into consideration.

As the interchange between theory and practical need continued, the communicative approach to translation began to be seen as lacking in breadth in that it has not provided a sufficient basis for understanding the nature of linguistic signs on all levels of discourse, nor does the communication theory provide adequate insight into the relationship of language to culture. In Nida's socio-semiotics and socio-linguistics based approach, special interest is displayed in the close relationships between social behaviour and language use and their importance in translation, which widens the coverage of a translation theory to include cultural aspects besides linguistic and communicative ones. His work *From One Language to Another* (Waard and Nida 1986) may be seen as a summary of his translation theory. "Functional / dynamic equivalence" is the core of this theory, and the translation process has been defined on the basis that the receptors of a translation should comprehend the translated text to such an extent that they can understand how the original receptors must have understood the original text. The introduction of Nida's "functional / dynamic equivalence" theory in the 1980s revived the previously mentioned science-versus-art as well as the literal versus free translation debate. This debate lasted for a whole decade. It has levelled off but dissenting voices can still be heard now and then. Starting from a scientific-school

standpoint, some attempted to set up a scientific theory that requires the target of the study to be observable and comparable with its counterpart in another language. Strict principles and methodology were borrowed from established disciplines such as linguistics, semiotics, and information theory. Basic methodology related to natural science research---multi-level accuracy, quantitative analysis and objective description---were adopted in an effort to set up a theory of translation. However, such important factors as the author, the translator and the reader, considered to be ambiguous and unreliable variables, were largely ignored by this school (Tan, Z. 1987; Zang 1987; Ke 1988; Lan 1988; Zhang, J. 1993). By contrast, holders of the artistic-school view considered the process of translation not merely one of transformation between linguistic coding system but a process of spiritual exchange between the translator and the author. Thus, the *translator* became a decisive element (Shi, H. 1987; Zheng W. 1988). The introduction of discourse analysis into translation drew another variable element, the *reader*, into the scene as a parameter in determining the reception of a translation product by intended audiences. It was argued that the ultimate purpose of any act of translation is for others to read, without which its value cannot be realized. Therefore, the reader's reaction to the translated text is the authoritative yardstick to the success of a translation product. But as social creatures, the translator's creative individuality and the historical-cultural environment he/she lives in certainly differ from one to another, which in turn will inevitably exert influence on one's work, while those of a reader are even harder to measure or determine in the value evaluation and realization process of a translation. In view of such ontological uncertainty, radical members of the artistic school jumped to the conclusion that there are no set rules for translation, hence a theory of translation is not necessary, if not altogether impossible (Ge, D. 1984; Xu, Y. 1984; Lan 1988; Lin, K. 1992; Wang, K. 1992).

The Chinese artistic school's view in the PRC is obviously biased. It is wrong to deny the existence of basic rules and the necessity of a theory in translation because the original text's essential meaning cannot be arbitrarily changed or wilfully explained. Similarly, the scientific school's theory is also partial. Whereas the language system, the language levels and units can often be rigidly described, the actual verbal communication, which is a mental process involving often inexplicit and utterly intricate extralinguistic, cultural elements (e.g. psychological, historical, social), cannot be treated in the same manner (Chen, T. 1981: 14-15). Therefore, some scholars tried to take a middle path. Liu Zhongde, for instance, argued that "literary translation has a double nature. ... On the one hand, it is a science with its own laws and methods and, on the other, it is an art" (Liu, Z. 1991). Bearing in mind that the ultimate purpose of a theory of translation is to reveal principles governing the translating

process, to provide practicable guidance to translating practice and to evaluate the translated product (Lan 1988), it is manifest that neither the scientific school nor the artistic can alone fully fulfil the three tasks demanded of a translation theory. Despite their respective drawbacks, however, the scientific versus artistic debate was an inner driving force for the improvement of translation theory and the combination of the two would be closer to an ideal model.

The once essential concept of Nida's "equivalence" has gradually been marginalized and eventually disintegrated, taken over by other scholars<sup>6</sup> though, as Snell-Hornby (1995: 22) admits, "for a long time much of their work was virtually inaccessible, as it existed in the form of mimeographed manuscripts, unpublished doctoral dissertations, conference proceedings or local publications with only a limited circulation." This un-availability explains why some of them, outside their local sphere(s), were inadvertently overlooked or unwillingly excluded from the table of contents by most researchers in the field with a time-lag.

Itamar Even-Zohar first launched the polysystem hypothesis in his paper "The Function of the Literary Polysystem in the History of Literature" at a symposium in 1970, which has been further developed by a growing number of scholars, e.g. Gideon Toury, José Lambert, André Lefevere and others as well as by himself (Even-Zohar 1978; 1979 and 1987). The polysystem theory holds that "semiotic phenomena, i.e., sign-governed human patterns of communication (e.g. culture, language, literature, society) should be regarded as systems rather than conglomerates of disparate elements," thus, the positivistic collection of data ... has been replaced by a *functional* approach based on the analysis of *relations*." And that any semiotic polysystem "is just a component of a larger PS---that of 'culture' to which it is, semiotically speaking, both subjugated and iso-morphic" (see Even-Zohar 1979). In a similar vein, the target-oriented descriptive translation theory was raised in the early 1970s, when Translation Studies was marked by extreme source-orientedness, by James S. Holmes in his paper "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" (1972) and carried out by Bassnett (1991 [1980]), Snell-Hornby (1995 [1988]), Lefevere (1992), Toury (1982; 1985; 1995) and

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Toury (1985) declares that his "notion of equivalence ... differs from current concepts of translation equivalence in that it is not one single target-source relationship established on the basis of this or that invariant, but another *functional-relational* concept, namely, that relationship (or set of ordered relationships) which, by definition, distinguishes between translation and non-translation in certain specific socio-cultural circumstances of the target language," and that the notion of equivalence "has little importance in itself and, at any rate, should not be regarded as all-inclusive, in DTS [descriptive translation studies] or the theory that underlies it." Lambert and Gorp (1985), Baker (1993: 236) and Wilss (1996: 3-4) express similar ideas. In Baker's own words, "... we now have a massive amount of literature which attempts to classify the notion of equivalence in a multitude of ways, and the question is no longer how equivalence might be achieved but, increasingly, what kind of equivalence can be achieved, and in what contexts."

so on, as well as by Holmes himself (1978 and 1988), with Toury's *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (1995) being the most comprehensive and systematic of all by far (see He, Y. And Wei, Z. 1998). Toury (1995: 11-12) maintains that sufficient attention must be paid to the relationships between function, product and process (between the translator and the targeted reader, between the translation product and the target-language culture, not merely faithfulness to the original). Their relations are summarized in the following figure (Toury 1995: 13):

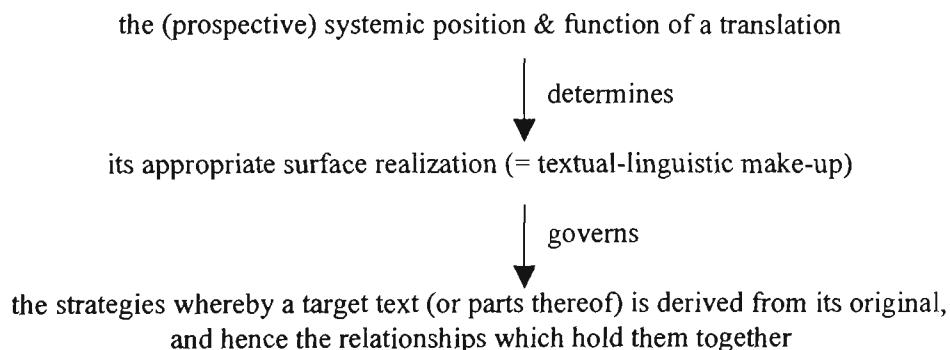


Figure 2.1 The relations between function, product and process in translation

Toury (1995: 24) proposes that the translator should regard translations “as facts of the culture which hosts them, with the concomitant assumption that whatever their function and identity, these are constituted within that same culture and reflect its own constellation” and accordingly determine his/her cultural orientation. Toury (1995: 29) asserts, “**t**ranslations are facts of target cultures; on occasion facts of a special status, sometimes even constituting identifiable (sub)systems of their own, but of the target culture in any event” (Toury’s own emphasis). In an attempt to achieve the objectives of a theoretical system (i.e. a system of principles and parameters, to describe particular phenomena in the world of our experience and to establish general principles by means of which they can be explained and predicted), Toury (1995: 9) reasons that experimental methods (descriptive rather than prescriptive) are to be adopted. It is not difficult to see the similarities between the ideas of the polysystem and descriptive theory.

Even-Zohar’s concept of literary polysystem also forms the basis of the approach of yet another new trend in translation studies that appeared in the mid-1980s, i.e. the Manipulation School, which gained its designation from the anthology entitled *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation* (1985), edited by Theo Hermans. Key researchers of this school are Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere, José Lambert, Theo Hermans, and Gideon Toury. This school regards translation studies as indissolubly connected to history and literature (cf. schools in earlier periods that regarded translation studies as a branch of linguistics or comparative literature). Some of its members even argue that “Translation

Studies should be seen as the discipline within which comparative literature might be located, rather than the other way round” (Bassnett 1998: viii).

Vermeer’s *Skopostheorie* (or scopos theory), first put forward in the mid-1980s and carried on by Nord (1991), stresses that the (intended) scopos (i.e. purpose) or function of the target text is the most important criterion for the translator’s decisions as it determines the whole translation process; and the demand for fidelity between the source text and the target text “will always be subordinate to the scopos rule (i.e. human interaction (including translation as its subcategory) is determined by its purpose, and therefore is a function of its purpose ... The purpose can be described as a function of the recipient)” (Vermeer as quoted in Nord 1991). In the same vein, Lefevere (1992: 8-9) considers translation as one form of “rewriting” of an original text among other forms such as historiography, anthologization, criticism, and editing, which all adapt and manipulate the originals to some extent, “usually to make them fit in with the dominant, or one of the dominant ideological and poetological currents of their time.” He contends:

... the process resulting in the acceptance or rejection, canonization or non-canonicalization of literary works is dominated not by vague [sic.], but by very concrete factors that are relatively easy to discern as soon as one decides to look for them, that is as soon as one eschews interpretation as the core of literary studies and begins to address issues such as power, ideology, institution, and manipulation. As soon as one does this, one also realizes that rewriting in all its forms occupies a dominant position among the concrete factors just referred to. (Lefevere 1992: 2)

Furthermore, he and other Manipulation School members regard literary translation as a primary rather than secondary tool of “larger social institutions to ‘manipulate’ a given society in order to ‘construct’ the kind of ‘culture’ they desired” (Gentzler 1998). This shift from viewing the translated text as a reproduction of another text to an integral part of the receptor culture is fundamentally meaningful to translation studies because it results in a further “shift of emphasis from the translation *process* and the problems underlying it to the *result*, i.e. the translated text as a historical fact.

A quick study of the developments in the western literary theory of the past century shows that the “shift of emphasis from the translation *process* and the problems underlying it to the *result*” in literary translation theory is accompanied by two shifts of emphasis in the western literary theory. The first is the shift of literary study and literary criticism from author-centred to text-centred (which means that the translated text is viewed as a reproduction of another text, the principle of faithfulness to the author’s intention is replaced by faithfulness to the source text; that the relationship between the author and the translator is no longer that between the master and the servant). The second is the shift from text-centred method to

reader-centred (which means that the translated text is viewed as an integral part of the receptor culture, the reader's reaction is the yardstick to test the acceptability and adequacy of the translated product; and that the reader is no longer a passive receiver of the translated text but an active participant in the creation of meaning, therefore, the text is no longer a fixed object but a historic fact, open to endless possibilities of its understanding and reception, even with the power to construct cultures) (cf. Lü, J. 1997; Lefevere and Bassnett 1998).

Given those newly acquired roles of translation, the translator must, first of all, study the priorities and the dominant cultural schemata from and within communication systems, and then select translation strategies that will best serve the purpose of a specific translation project. This pre-translation selection will inevitably lead to more concrete questions relating to priorities and strategies at different levels of both systems and from different points of view, during the translating process and after the translation is produced.

Two opposing translation strategies are available for the translator to consider: the source-culture-oriented translation strategy (known in Chinese as “*yihua*” 异化 alienation or foreignization strategy) over the receptor-culture-oriented strategy (known in Chinese as “*guihua*” 归化 adaptation or domestication strategy). And there are strong advocates for either of the two strategies. Lawrence Venuti is an advocate for the source-culture-oriented translation strategy. He stresses the importance of the translator bringing out the cultural difference of the source culture from the target culture and argues that “resistant translation” has to be used as a strategy so that the intended reader can realize the existence of such difference in people's “cultural schema” and understand it through the process of reading the translated text (see Venuti 1992: 12-13). Nida, on the contrary, upholds the receptor-culture-oriented strategy. His “functional equivalence” concept suggests that it is the translator's responsibility to make the source-cultural information in the source text understandable to the targeted reader in the target-cultural context, and he puts forth the “functional isomorphs” as a solution (see Nida 1964a: 159 and 1993: 121). As Snell-Hornby notes:

This means that the writings of the “Manipulation School” concentrate on describing and analyzing translations (Lefevere 1984), comparing different translations of the same work (though again descriptively rather than on an evaluative basis), on investigating the conception of translations (Vanderauwera 1985), and on tracing broad historical surveys (Lambert et al. 1985; Toury 1986). (Snell-Hornby 1995: 24-25)

Snell-Hornby sees this split in opinions as a modern version of the repetitive mode of “dichotomy” thinking that has been kept alive for centuries (e.g. word versus sense, form versus content, literal translation 直译 versus free translation 意译, and now source-oriented versus target-oriented) and challenges this new dichotomy by suggesting “an integrated

approach that considers translation in its entirety, and not only certain forms of it.”

The impact made by the concept of the “cultural turn” for translation studies, which looks toward work of cultural studies scholars to inform translation studies, is another significant development in translation studies. The concept was first put forward by Bassnett and Lefevere in 1990. As Gentzler (1998) remarks, it has triggered “an explosion of events”<sup>7</sup> in the field of translation studies, powerfully pushing the boundaries of translation studies towards the cultural studies direction where cultural interaction rather than just translations themselves is the major object of study. Bassnett and Lefevere’s jointly published new book *Constructing Cultures* (1998) comprises a variety of essays that “address the most recent developments in theory, in cultural studies, in translation research and in teaching translation. In “Where are we in Translation Studies?” (pp. 1-11), they propose a new theoretical concept, “multiple models,” for translation, based on what they selected from the past models as useful for studying translations, i.e. the Horatian model (in which the translator tends to be faithful to his/her customers, i.e. the target audience), the Jerome model (in which the translator tends to be faithful to the source text, in this case the *Bible*), and the Schleiermacher model (which emphasizes preservation of the alterity of the source text for the target reader). Along with these theoretical concepts which are helpful for studying translations in different cultures during different periods, they also provide critical tools such as “textual grids,” i.e. “the collection of acceptable literary forms and genres in which texts can be expressed” which help translators and critics “better produce and/or analyze translations” (Gentzler 1998). In “Acculturating Bertolt Brecht,” Lefevere (Bassnett and Lefevere 1998: 109-122) goes beyond the previously argued-for view that the social and literary norms of the receptor culture, as well as “patrons”, impose considerable restraints on the translations, by investigating and revealing how translators and critics as active participants can independently act or collectively “collude” to “contribute to particular cultural constructions.” In the last essay of the collection, “The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies,” Bassnett (Bassnett and Lefevere 1998: 123-140) calls for the move of the study of translations “from the margins of critical investigations to centre stage”: translation studies has taken the cultural turn; now “cultural studies should take the translation turn.” The “new interdisciplinary phase” that Bassnett and Lefevere announced a few years ago seems to be materializing and to have started “constructing cultures” already. Some recent research

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<sup>7</sup> These events include the publication by major publishing firms of books on translation; the appearance of new journals on translation studies such as *The Translator* and *Target*; increased conference activities all over the world; new publishing companies’ entering into the market; compiling of encyclopedias of translation studies in many countries; and acceptance of translation studies into academia with new MA and PhD programs starting at universities (cited from Gentzler in Bassnett 1998: xi).

outcomes in China, for instance, can be seen as supporting evidence.

Well introduced translation theories cover wide areas such as linguistics, communication, cultural studies, socio-semiotics, but as Guo Jian-zhong (1999) observes, generally speaking, the introducing work is done in a quite haphazard manner without intellectual thoroughness. Besides, English is a language of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family while Chinese belongs to the Tibetan-Chinese family of languages, so there are great disparities between them in morphology, syntax and rhetoric. Some Western models of translation theory do not readily apply to the translation practice between English and Chinese. Therefore, it is not always a matter of simply “taking over and making use of it” (Liu, M. 1989b).

Inspired by Western theories, Chinese scholars soon started to put forth their own theories and assumptions that discuss problems with specific reference to the Chinese situation and to translation between Chinese and English. An enormous amount of thinking and writing are done and a glance at the publication titles clearly indicates this and the development of the trend of thoughts. As an article (Guo J. 1999) reveals, from the early 1980s to 1998, over 140,000 *papers*, nearly 500 *monograph works* and more than 20 *collections of essays* on translation studies had been published in China. The most significant developments will be selectively outlined here.

First, it is noticeable that some Chinese scholars endeavoured to address translation issues and made contributions mainly by following and developing traditional Chinese trends of thinking on translation. For instance, Liu Zhongde's 刘重德 (1991) research on literary translation is obviously a direct expansion on Yan Fu's classical principles. In reference to systematic thinking about literary translation between Chinese and English, he argues that “literary translation has a double nature” (see 2.1.1 above). On the basis of Yan Fu's traditional three-character principles “*xin*”, “*da*”, and “*ya*”, Liu Zhongde puts forward his own for translation: “*xin*” 信, “*da*” 达, and “*qie*” 切 (closeness), with the change only to the third criterion. The definition he gives to his own principles is as follows: “*xin*”---to be faithful to the content of the original; “*da*”---to be as expressive as the original; and “*qie*”---to be as close to the original style as possible. Obviously, his effort is intended to avoid the weak point in Yan Fu's diction which invited much misinterpretation and criticism. Against the strong power of tradition, however, Liu's new three-character criteria are only accepted by some.

Other scholars raised their own new concepts by combining Western research methodology

with Chinese aesthetic theory, e.g. Liu Miqing 刘宓庆. Based on a close analysis of the Chinese language and a comparison with English and French, Liu, M. (1989b, 1990 and 1995a) points out that Western translation paradigms are not readily applicable to the Chinese, and have their intrinsic limitations too. Applying the principles of well-developed Chinese aesthetics in art to translation studies, to literary translation in particular, along the line of Chinese thinking as represented by Fu Lei and Qian Zhongshu, Liu provides an angle of viewing the translation matter which is neither Western nor Chinese and designs a Chinese aesthetic translation model (Liu 1990 and 1995a; Lei 1993). He argues that while general principles of translation are necessarily target-oriented, a model of translation theory has to be firmly based on the specific languages in question. Considering the particular grammatical feature of the Chinese language---that the constituents of its semantic structure are combined with its grammatical function with an almost total absence of grammatical inflection---he concludes that a model of Chinese translation theory has to be a semantic and function based descriptive model, and a translation theory applicable between Chinese and a Western language should describe principles and provide linguistic analyses rather than build a set of exclusive prescriptions. He consequently confirms that it is impossible to find or set up a model into which translation between all the languages or between any text types will fit; that apart from general principles, there are no universally applicable specific rules (Liu, M. 1989a; 1989b; 1990).

Numerous other new approaches from the West were borrowed by Chinese scholars to tackle the task of translation from various perspectives, such as socio-semiotics (e.g. Luo, J. 1988; Zheng, W. 1988; Li, X. 1989), philosophy (e.g. Dong, S. 1988; Yan, D. 1989, 1992), systematic translation studies (e.g. Shen 1992; Yan 1994), cultural studies (e.g. Cai, Y. And Yu, J. 1989; Li, T. 1988; Ke 1988; Wang, C. 1988; Zhang, Y. 1988; Lü, J. 1992; Mu, L. 1990; Wang F. and Wu 1994) and so on. They all in a way contribute to the completion of a holistic “cubic puzzle picture” named translation theory; each of them reflects a certain side / part from a particular angle or at a certain level. A complete theoretical system of translation studies as an independent discipline, however, seems yet to be reached in China. Nevertheless, the Chinese field of translation studies today is a dynamic, productive ground. When asked in an interview to give a brief account of the latest developments in translation studies and practice, Nida (1998) observes that “some of the most creative solutions to issues of multilingualism and culture change” are produced in Hong Kong, which is “undoubtedly the world’s most remarkable melting pot of linguistic and cultural differences.” A browse of the major journals or a visit to the relevant sites on the internet reveals that conferences have been held in the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan, exchange / cooperative academic

programs are being carried out, and the regular flow of publications are not only becoming stronger but also with noticeable improvement in quality.

As Western scholars in translation and translation studies place the cultural issue in an increasingly prominent position, certain Chinese scholars are not far behind in recognizing and studying this involved element. As Yang Ruodong (1997) reports, cross-cultural communication studies was first introduced into the PRC in the early 1980s by Hu Wenzhong and have gained rapid progress and increasing attention (especially in foreign language teaching) (see Hu, W. 1994; Hu, W. and Gao 1997). Many are intensely concerned about *How to Help Foreigners Know China* (e.g. Duan, L. 1993), others are more concerned about how the Chinese are being presented to outsiders (e.g. Eoyang 1995), still others provide 中西文化交流导论 *Cultural Choice: An Anguished Path* (Cao, X. 1992). According to Hu Wenzhong's (1998) investigation, within just three years (1995 to 1997), six books on cross-cultural communication and translation are published in China (see Guan 1995; Lin, D. 1996; Wang, H. 1996; Hu, W. and Gao 1997; Jia 1997; Jin, H. 1997), not to mention a considerable number of articles in the same area of research. The most recent examples are embodied in works such as Xie Tianzhen's *Yijiesue* 译介学 (*Medio-Translatology*, 1999) and Eva Hung's *Fanyi • Wenxue • Wenhua* 翻译 • 文学 • 文化 (*Translation • Literature • Culture*, 1999). Sustained by solid scholarly research into related issues big and small---from the rendering of particular Chinese words like “*lao*” 老 (old) and “*xiao*” 小 (small, little, young) to the investigation and analysis of pseudo-translation cases in history---Hung emphasizes the importance of an encompassing study and grasp of the dominant social, cultural, even economic forces in the receptor culture and their circumscribing power over the functioning and reception of the translated text. Information and knowledge obtained from the study should accordingly result in adjustments made on one's translation strategies and approaches to enable the best plan and realization of the anticipated result(s) of the translation, since the circumscribing influence of which no translated text can hope to escape (Hung 1999: 8-12). Their researches are representative of the most recent development at the foremost front in the Chinese field of translation studies.

To sum up, translation studies in the last two decades of the 20th century has experienced two major shifts of emphasis. The first occurs in translation theory under the influence of communication theory; the second, in translation as an activity under the impact of cultural studies. The two shifts join to create the general understanding that translation is an inter-cultural communication activity (refer to Guo 1998 for more discussion of this). As a result, translation is no longer regarded as the switch of linguistic signs but rather a form of cultural

exchange<sup>8</sup>. Specifically from the viewpoint of literary translation, study of the translation process and the problems underlying it has now been overtaken by research into the *result*.

In developing my thesis over a decade, the context of translation studies has changed remarkably within China as well as in the West. Rather than contradicting some content with translation studies, the creative component---my translation of the four stories---now has many synergies with that field.

### 2.1.2 Cultural factors in literary translation (Chinese to English)

Preceding discussions have clearly demonstrated how crucial the concept of “culture” is in translation studies. Before moving further, it seems important to clarify what “culture” means, and to consider further why cultural factors are essential in discussing literary translation at various levels. This brief review will then be used to lead to the identification and justification of the research question and research approach of this thesis.

By most standards, “culture” is a term in English which can be defined in a variety of often conflicting ways depending on the context of use. Williams (1963: 16 [1959]), for instance, identified four kinds of meaning that attach to the word “culture”: “an individual habit of mind; the intellectual development of a whole society; the arts; and the whole way of life of a group of people.” According to Williams (1981), whilst originally meaning “the practice of rearing animals or growing crops,” and dating back to about the 15th century in several European languages, “culture” was later expanded to indicate “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development.” As a further expansion, the word was used in the plural. In the late 18th century, “culture” was used to designate “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group.”

The Chinese term for culture is “*wenhua*” 文化. “*Wen*” 文, as a noun, can have such diverse meanings as writing, script, language, or civilian and so on; and “*hua*” 化, as a verb, can mean to transform, influence, melt or digest. The etymology does not seem to be of much help in understanding 文化. According to Cao Xiren (1992), a scholar of traditional Chinese culture, it is in the Jin Dynasty (265-420) that the two characters were first found used as one word. Referring to either the civil way of government and education or to a whole set of rites, institutions, decrees and regulations, the concept of 文化 was quite different from that of its

<sup>8</sup> Some scholars even create and use new terms like “acculturation” 文化交融 and “transculturation” 跨文化交际 (e.g. Lefevere 1992; Lefevere and Bassnett 1998; cf. Guo, J. 1998) to replace the all too familiar term “translation.”

English translation “culture.” The adoption of its modern sense (as related to anthropology) occurred in China only around the turn of the 20th century, and not surprisingly coincided with the increasing introduction of Western culture into China. In contemporary Chinese social sciences and humanities, the term is generally understood as embracing all the belief and knowledge the nation has accumulated including moral codes, law, religion, customs and habits, literature and arts, science and technology (Cao, X. 1992: 3).

“Culture” seems to be a term that has a long and varied history, defies easy definition, and has become less and less explicit but more and more encompassing. It can be added that the difficulty in grasping its sociological / humanist meanings is further complicated by a number of factors. First, a culture as “a whole way of life” in the ethnographic sense, is not a static entity. It is constantly changing and evolving under the impact of events, and as a result of contact with other cultures. Secondly, culture is generally understood to be shared knowledge (i.e. what people need to know in order to act appropriately within a given culture), but the knowledge is always structured as part of a historical system which provides the fundamental codes of a culture. Every culture has its own logic, its own integrity, and it is difficult to get out of the confinement of this structure through which the world is seen. Finally, it is not possible to bring a culture as a whole to the consciousness of any one person. As individuals, every person interprets the culture of the group to which he/she belongs in their own particular way. Class, age, sex, education, and geographical area are all variables which affect the interpretation and expression of, and conformation and reaction to that culture. As Jean Brick (1991) asserts, no individual can be regarded as the embodiment of the “average member” of a culture. What an individual is conscious of and what he/she believes to be the whole culture is, in fact, never such. When we try to understand different cultures, especially cultures so drastically different as those of the West and the Chinese, we are brought into a more complex labyrinth.

In comparison with the term “culture”, the field that has become known as “cultural studies,” which deals with the discourse about “culture”, is much less varied in terms of meaning; nor is it as lengthy in terms of history. However, both “culture” and “cultural studies” are closely related to the history of literature. While literature has been perceived as a vehicle of a particular, highly valued mode of cultural expression, cultural studies is a field that brings a new perspective on more diverse discourses of a culture, including literature. In Andrew Milner’s (1996: 11) words, cultural studies is “concerned in principle with all kinds of culture.” Traditionally, Chinese literature was regarded as an elite domain (it was intended to be “vehicles of the Way”) which only the best cultivated could handle. Therefore, it can be

said that in China as well as in the West, “culture” in the sense of the development of “the arts” of a whole society has a particularly close connection with literature.

In terms of western developments in the concept of “culture”, it is useful to look at some key figures. Edward B. Tylor’s (1970 [1873]: 1) definition of culture is still frequently quoted and referred to as classical: “CULTURE or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” In comparison, Matthew Arnold’s (whose *Culture and Anarchy* (1994 [1869])) is often cited as one of the founding inspirations for English literature) perspective to culture---“the best that has been thought and said in the world”---is in the same vein as Tylor’s in that both have as their primary concerns the individual and the perfection at which that individual could aim; but Arnold’s appears to be more elitist than Tylor’s. Not surprisingly, in the modernist period, their assumptions were challenged by T. S. Eliot (1962: 21-22 [1948]) who argues that there are “three senses of culture”: the improvement of the human mind and spirit of an *individual*, of a *group* or *class*, or of a *whole society*, and observed that most men of letters and moralists, like Tylor, “discussed culture in the first two senses, and specially the first, without relation to the third, and all together overlooked the relationship of the three senses” of the word. Taking account of the meaning of “culture” as referring to the attainment of people with refinement of manners, of learning, of philosophy or of art, Eliot points out that no perfection in any one of them, to the exclusion of the others, can confer culture on anybody.

Objecting to Karl Mannheim’s (1940) view that “a sociological investigation of culture in liberal society must begin with the life of those who create culture, i.e. the intelligentsia and their position within society as a whole,” Eliot further declares that “a ‘culture’ is conceived as the creation of the society as a whole; being, from another aspect, that which makes it a society. It is not the creation of any one part of that society” (Eliot 1962: 37 [1948]). In this respect, Eliot prefigures some of the directions of cultural studies. Despite the dissenting voices, certain aspects of the British cultural tradition were developed in the theory and practice of F. R. Leavis and the Leavisites in an attempt to re-disseminate what is now commonly called “cultural capital” (During 1993: 2). In speaking of the absence of any theoretical sophistication comparable to the German hermeneutic tradition in English literature, Milner comments (1996: 31), “F. R. Leavis firmly resisted such attempts at systematic theorization. ... Leavisite criticism had defined English literature precisely in terms of its opposition to contemporary popular culture. ... The techniques of analysis are

those of sociology and social history rather than literary criticism.” Like Arnold, the Leavisites believed that “culture has always been a minority keeping.” However, Q. D. Leavis (1978: 187) also noted that even though concerns with culture in the Arnoldian sense of the best that has been thought or written might still remain with some, “the problem, however, is that the cultured minority can no longer command deference for their values and their judgements.”

Cultural studies as an academic field began to develop during the 1960s. As a significant branch of the European theory of culture, mainstream Marxism made a great impact on the development of cultural studies. The Marxist approach to culture is above all concerned with the analysis of the texts and practices of culture within their historical conditions of production (and in some versions, the changing conditions of their consumption and reception), in order to establish the contradictions and possibilities of a particular society. As Storey (1996) maintains, when cultural studies is grounded in Marxism, it is affected in two fundamental ways. First, to understand the meaning(s) of a cultural text or practice, we must analyze it in its social and historical conditions of production and consumption, but insisting that culture’s importance derives from the fact that it helps constitute the structure and shape the history rather than serves as a mere reflection of this structure and history:

Cultural texts … do not simply reflect history, they make history and are part of its processes and practices and should, therefore, be studied for the (ideological) work that they do, rather than for the (ideological) work (always happening elsewhere) that they reflect. (Storey 1996: 3)

Secondly, he continues (1996: 3-4), Marxist cultural studies contends that capitalist industrial societies are societies divided unequally along, for example, ethnic, gender, generation and class lines; and that culture is one of the principal sites where this division is established and contested: culture is a terrain on which there takes place a continual struggle over meaning, in which subordinate groups attempt to resist the imposition of meanings which bear the interests of dominant groups.

Raymond Williams is an influential figure in the field of cultural studies from the late 1950s up to the early 1970s, whose study of culture follows a historical approach and is clearly influenced by Marxism. His essay “The Analysis of Culture” in *The Long Revolution* (1961) is considered the founding text of culturalism<sup>9</sup>. As mentioned at the beginning of 2.1.2,

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<sup>9</sup> Culturalism is an approach which insists that by analyzing the culture of a society, the textual forms and documented practices of a culture, it is possible to reconstitute the patterned behaviour and constellations of ideas shared by the men and women who produce and consume the texts and practices of that society. It is an approach that stresses “human agency,” the active production of culture, rather than its passive consumption (Storey 1994: 47).

Williams first identified four senses of the term “culture”, and pressed for a democratic account of culture: “culture as a particular way of life.” He envisaged the restructuring of the cultural institutions of education and the mass media in order to promote the evolution of a common culture, believing that a common culture, as the basis for effective communication between all members of society, would be intimately related to the elimination of class divisions in that society. In the late 1960s, he discarded the question of cultural change as the central consideration in his work in order to examine culture within a framework of social control or domination. Through this shift in focus, Williams turned to the task of exploring the possibilities of a Marxist cultural theory. From the early 1970s, many writers analyzed culture through the concept of “hegemony”—a word derived from the work by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist of the 1920s and 1930s. The traditional definition of “hegemony” is political rule or domination, especially in relations between states. Marxism extended the definition of rule or domination to relations between social classes, and especially to definitions of a *ruling class*. The concept of hegemony in relation to culture was significantly extended in Raymond Williams’ discussion about it in his work *Marxism and Literature*:

“Hegemony” is a concept which at once includes and goes beyond two powerful earlier concepts: that of “culture” as a “whole social process” in which men define and shape their whole lives; and that of “ideology”, in any of its Marxist senses, in which a system of meanings and values is the expression or projection of a particular class interest. (Williams 1977: 108)

As Johnson observes when talking about the evolution of Williams’ views on culture,

The concept of hegemony ... acquired special significance in his inquiry into the way in which culture was an aspect of the process of domination of one class over another, just as much as the basis of communication within a social group. (Johnson 1979: 203)

According to Williams, one of the advantages of the extended concept of hegemony is that

there is a whole different way of seeing cultural activity, both as tradition and as practice. Cultural work and activity are not now, in any ordinary sense, a superstructure: not only because of the depth and thoroughness at which any cultural hegemony is lived, but because cultural tradition and practice are seen as much more than superstructural expressions—reflections, mediations, or typifications—of a formed social and economic structure. On the contrary, they are among the basic processes of the formation itself and, further, related to a much wider area of reality than the abstractions of “social” and “economic” experience. (Williams 1977: 111-114)

He continues (1977: 114), “A lived hegemony is always a process. ... The finite but significant openness of many works of art, as signifying forms making possible but also requiring persistent and variable signifying responses, is then especially relevant.” With the growth of mass communication (film, television, journalism, paperback, pop music, etc.) by the early 1980s, the confusion over the term “culture” had also grown as all art-forms began to overlap and thus blurred the boundaries between the old pyramidal structure of high-,

middle- and low-brows, between the mass- and minority-art, and consequently between its audiences (Fowler 1987: 52). In response to the growth of mass communication, Williams (1976: 90) uses the term “culture” to refer to “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.” But his analysis is different from that of Leavisism. He continues to maintain that there is no special place for art or literature---they are seen as a cultural practice like any other.

Williams (1981: 10-12) later distinguishes two main senses of the term “culture” as a result of the convergence of those earlier usages and developments of the word. The first is “an emphasis on the *“informing spirit”* of a whole way of life, which is manifest over the whole range of social activities but is most evident in ‘specially cultural’ activities---a language, styles of art, kinds of intellectual work.” In other words, the text itself brings into being a new social order. Williams’ second sense of culture is on “*“a whole social order”* within which a specifiable culture, in styles of art and kinds of intellectual work, is seen as the direct or indirect product of an order primarily constituted by other social activities.” The first explanation is classified by Williams as *idealist*, and the second as *materialist* which is commonly reserved to the other, “primary”, activities, of course now differently based and not primary but secondary.

Williams remarks that the term “has continued to designate a whole and distinctive way of life” ever since the late 18th century, taking the view that the individual is formed by the bigger *culture*, rejecting in his writings on culture any suggestion of a hierarchical vision of society and proposing a concept of common culture. Through this cultural materialist concept he hoped to provide a basis for the promotion of excellence in society and to institute this quest as the preserve of everyone, not just a selected group in society. In that sense, culture is everything that has been thought, spoken or written by anyone (i.e. all symbolizing practices in a society); culture is equated to society as a whole. His study of culture supplements and extends the conceptual terrain of the topic. It is in the context of this broader sense of culture that the contemporary translation studies in which this thesis is included has developed.

For Andrew Milner (1996: 25), Williams’ work was definitive “for it was Williams more than any other individual who drafted the initial intellectual prospectus for a cultural studies that would include literary studies.” Williams’ following argument directed at Leavisite literary criticism and Marxism is of particular significance to this thesis:

It was certainly an error to suppose that values of art-works could be adequately studied without reference to the particular society within which they were expressed.... It is equally an error to suppose that the social explanation is determining, or that the values and works

are mere by-products. (Williams 1961: 61)

When discussing the translation of culture, in this broad sense, Edward Said is too important a figure to be overlooked. In his work *Orientalism* (1978), he found a rewarding subject for his approach in “Marxist and Foucauldian analyses of literature and culture as sites of political and ideological struggle” (Lodge 1988: 294).

Whereas structuralists focus on how the system of language “determines” the nature of linguistic and cultural expression, post-structuralists like Foucault (1979: 27) are more concerned with how language is used and how language-use is always articulated by other social and cultural practices:

Foucault rejects notions of universal and timeless truth. He takes from Friedrich Nietzsche the view that knowledge works as a weapon of power. Foucault’s aim is to discover “how men govern (themselves and others) by the production of truth (... the establishment of domains in which the practice of true and false can be made at once ordered and pertinent)”. He continually demonstrates how power operates through discourse and how discourses are always rooted in power: “power produces knowledge ... power and knowledge directly imply one another ... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.” (Storey 1993: 92)

Said (1978: 58) took from Foucault the claim that the “truth” of a discourse depends less on what is said and more on who is saying it and when and where it is said. He went on to investigate the way in which the Orient, from the Eastern Mediterranean to South-East Asia, “became known in the West as its great complementary opposite.” Said (1978: 1-3) argued that “the Orient was a European invention,” and he discussed Orientalism and analyzed it as “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient---dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient,” as a hegemonic Western discourse dependent on “a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, historical, and philosophical texts” (1978: 120). Combining political passion with wide-ranging scholarship comprising texts covering a wide scope of research areas---literary, topographical, anthropological, historical, sociological---Said concentrated his attention on writing about the discourse of the West about the East, showing how such a discourse has constructed a “knowledge” of the East and a body of “power-knowledge” relations, articulated in the interests of the “power” of the West. He emphasized the fact that Orientalist texts were exterior to what they described:

Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West. He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says. What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written, is meant to indicate

that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact. The principal product of this exteriority is, of course, representation. (Said 1978: 20)

As is always the case in ideological and cultural fields, there have been many dissenting voices. Dennis Porter, for instance, questioned Said's approach. He took Williams' view on hegemony, which we have just summarized above, as a contrasting example against Said's:

Raymond Williams defined it as a form of practical consciousness that concerns not only 'the articulate upper levels of ideology' but also 'a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of our living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world'. ... It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own." (Porter 1982)

In Porter's words again, "Such a sense of hegemony as process in concrete historical conjunctures, as an evolving sphere of superstructural conflict in which power relations are continually reasserted, challenged, modified, is absent from Said's book" (Porter 1982). Porter considered the presence of a sense of historical development in Williams' theory as compared with Said's adds considerable value and convincing force to Williams' arguments.

While Said's idea holds a major element of truth, there are blind spots in his work. Among the components which he missed was the fact that he failed to account for China. Considering that Said's theory is mainly about the Third World, the Orient and a revolution in culture, and that China is the biggest Third World nation, is an Oriental country, and has been through its own revolutions of culture in the 20th century, China must surely have an important role to play in any discussion about Orientalism.

In the past two decades or so, new cultural convergences must have, to a greater or less degree, occurred in different countries around the world, if we follow Williams' line of argument. Accordingly, Cultural Studies has been constantly reconstructing itself in the light of changing historical projects and intellectual resources (Grossberg 1994). More than ever before, "culture" in cultural studies (as a field of study rather than a discipline) appears to have been defined politically rather than aesthetically in a quite specific sense---as a terrain of conflict and contestation, as a terrain of incorporation and resistance, and as a major site of ideological struggle where hegemony is to be won or lost (cf. Storey 1996: 4).

For instance, working within the framework of Gramsci's concept of "hegemony," Stuart Hall (1985) developed a theory of "articulation" to explain the processes of this ideological struggle. He argues that cultural texts and practices are not inscribed with meaning, guaranteed once and for all by the intentions of production; meaning is always the result of an act of "articulation" (an active process of "production in use"). The process is called "articulation" because meaning has to be expressed, but is always expressed in a specific

context, a specific historical moment, within a specific discourse(s). Thus expression is always connected to and conditioned by context. Hall's position, like Porter's, emphasizes change and a more complex set of shifting power relations, in contrast to Said's.

When Said's *Orientalism* was first introduced to China in 1993, his approach was adopted by some in criticizing films directed by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige for their intentional magnifying of the Oriental folkways in order to please Occidental audiences (Shao, J. 1996). Later another American / Arabic scholar Samuel Huntington's books were translated into Chinese. He took the view that cultural conflicts between the Orient and the Occident, besides cultural conflicts of other kinds, had become the major conflicts after the Cold War, and that the Chinese Confucianist culture and Arabic Islamic culture had been set up as the main opponents to Western culture. His view duly caught the attention of some young Chinese intellectuals (Song, Q. et al. 1996) who, following this train of thought similar to Said's, felt a strong sense of crisis. Believing that the U.S. attempt to curb China's development was a threat to China and the world, they loudly voiced their protest. And as Wang Meng (1996a) stated, a number of young Chinese intellectuals readily followed Said's method of cultural analysis and literary criticism, accused as "western tools" some other intellectuals who criticized problems occurring within China, equating Saidian postcolonialism with an anti-West attitude. But as Han (1996) revealed, there are still other intellectuals who raised questions about the feasibility of the postcolonial approach of these young scholars and about the applicability of Said's anti-western analysis to China. In view of the new situations emerging in China in the 1990s--the reclassification of social strata, growing differences between urban and rural areas, district conflicts--these intellectuals felt that the major contradiction was not that between "an agricultural China" and "a modern West," but rather the entanglements of power-relations and contradictions within the Chinese cultural geography and a history of which colonialism was only one part. What is important is not only to study how Orientalist discourses manage to invade and control China but also to investigate how Chinese scholars interpret and control those discourses, to establish an "Occidentalism" "with the West as the object of examination by using the Chinese way of analysis" (Han 1996). A nation-wide discussion on related issues intensified in 1994 and 1995 and continued afterwards in China.

From these brief reviews of translation and cultural issues, the understanding can be reached that both translation studies and cultural studies have always been marked by debate, disagreement, and intervention. Culture has been an unfolding topic as well as an ever-developing entity, with intense contentions for articulation and hegemony in the field of

cultural studies---with the most recent cultural contentions in the field of translation being the so-called *translation turn in cultural studies* (which highlights the importance and centrality of the translation process) and the *cultural turn in translation studies* (which addresses the urgent need for translation studies to take into consideration the mainstream socio-cultural situations and the needs of the receptor culture) (see 2.1.1 above).

These brief reviews on translation and cultural studies are believed to have paved the way for the thesis to move forward to identify and justify its research question and approach.

## **2.2 *Research Question and Approach to Research***

### **2.2.1 Major research question**

Deducing from the above preliminary work around the broad interpretation of ‘culture’ and the contemporary concerns of cultural studies, and reading in the disciplinary areas concerned, the *major research question* of the thesis can be expressed as: How can a translator, aiming at effective cross-cultural communication, translate the cultural elements of a literary text not only at the linguistic level (which will always remain the core of any translation activity) but also interpret tiers of meaning at literary and socio-cultural levels? This infers that the task of translation necessarily extends beyond the normally defined translating process itself to also include in-depth research into both the literary norms and cultural conventions in both source and receptor cultures both prior to and following the actual translating process. At the pre-translation stage, suitable material for translation is selected and its role and reception in the receptor culture are projected and justified. At the post-translation stage, broader literary and socio-cultural contexts pertaining to the source text but defying adequate conveyance through the conventional translating means need to be dealt with. Obviously, such contexts differ from the cultural connotations found in the source text proper, therefore, a different form or method in meaning rendering is required. This thesis proposes, among other possible solutions, the provision of a cultural exegesis.

Drawing on the background review in 2.1, we are able to follow up certain lines of argument to justify this research question and argue for the general approach to this research project, supported by examples from the preliminary work attempted so far.

First, *translation* is an indispensable element of this thesis. It can be seen that in the field of

cultural and translation studies, in China as well as in the West, any theory / school of thought is born in critical dialogue with opposing voices and develops as a result of that dialogue, responding to changing historical conditions. The cultural field, in particular, is a fiercely contested site full of different discourses, and cultural exchange is and will be a constant necessity. To achieve better cross-cultural communication, products from the “interior” as termed by Said<sup>10</sup> (see 2.1.2 above) and different perspectives from which to interpret them are needed. Due to the cross-cultural nature of such activities, to which category this thesis belongs, the *translation* process, which is fundamental to the whole research project, necessarily involves not only translation from one language to another, but also from one culture to another.

Secondly, of all types of translations, *literary translation* is appropriately instrumental to the thesis as a form of creative practice, upon the products of which cultural exegeses are to be based. A western tradition from the more elitist Arnoldian and Leavisist cultural positions through Eliot to the broader perspectives of Williams and contemporary cultural studies distinguishes literary texts (being both the intellectual production of individuals and cultural capital) as appropriate materials for translation and analysis. In the previous section 2.1.2, it was established that the arts and their relationship to society were central to the concept of culture in the Western tradition, which holds that culture is the best that has been thought and said in the world, with “high literature” as one particular kind of culture. In China, literature has also been traditionally regarded as highbrow and its mastery the very indicator of a person’s level of cultivation. It is understood that nowadays literature has become one of the mass media, enjoying a much wider range and larger number of readers than it had before and thus, is less captive of such an elitist cultural perspective. Therefore, literary texts designed to appeal to a broad readership can be justifiably chosen as raw material for, and the object of examination of, this thesis. This point of discussion regarding literature and the previous point regarding translation together seem to verify that *literary translation* can properly be the central topic of a cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural research project like this thesis.<sup>11</sup>

Thirdly, *cultural exegesis* becomes desirable and important to this thesis both as an indispensable research part of the translation project and as an independent piece of reflection

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<sup>10</sup> I find it imperative to make clear that in this context, though Said’s line of thought on Orientalism is made use of in an effort to generate a research question, this thesis does not aim at confrontation or domination between literatures or cultures but rather at better understanding, communication, and cooperation between them.

<sup>11</sup> I choose literature (which often embraces social life as a whole) as my research vehicle for the reasons stated above as well as due to the composition of my knowledge structure and personal experience, without the slightest intention of devaluing other forms of intellectual work which probably will function even better when employed by other people. I acknowledge some scholars’ (Hung 1999) view that using literature as the conveying tool for cultural communication may be detrimental to both culture and literature.

on the translating process and interpretation of the broader socio-cultural context against which the literary work under discussion was originally written. Marxist cultural analysis tells us that the meaning of a cultural text or practice must first be analyzed in its social and historical conditions of production and consumption; and then it is to be understood as constituting the structure and shaping the history rather than merely reflecting that structure and history (see 2.1.2 above). Descriptive translation theory, the literary polysystem, the Manipulation School, and the *Skopostheorie* (or scopus theory) all echo in a way with this Marxist “cultural materialist” concept of Williams. Furthermore, Eliot’s “three-sense” approach to culture (see 2.1.2 above) enables the broadening of the chosen texts’ sociological as well as anthropological significance since the study of these individual cases will reveal the culture of a group or class, or of a whole society. In a macro-structural way, a cultural exegesis constructed thus should contribute to the cross-cultural communication and enable the translated literary text to fulfil its mission. In a micro-structural way, it will allow the space for explanation and discussion of linguistic patterns of various types, literary codes as well as social, political, moral, religious, economic and other socio-cultural / cross-cultural issues.

Therefore, it is argued that the thesis should adopt the particular approach of creation and investigation through *literary translation* from Chinese to English and through *cultural exegesis* of the translated texts. Selected Chinese literary texts will be translated and this translation practice is to serve two purposes in the thesis: (1) to provide the writer of the thesis an opportunity of experimenting with cultural translation approaches to literary translation as a creative activity; (2) to provide raw materials for cultural exegeses to be undertaken in order to examine and establish the position this thesis argues for.

Now a translation strategy and a specific research method are to be selected to demonstrate how the translating and exegetical tasks will be carried out. And the thesis’ secondary research issue, which is related to its translation strategy, will be identified.

## **2.2.2 Translation strategy and secondary research issue**

A literary translator’s first order of business is to translate, i.e. to convey the culturally and socially motivated meaning of literature faithfully and adequately from one language to another. Therefore, we will first look at what is actually involved in the process of literary translation itself before making a decision about the appropriate strategy.

To start with, because translating is a process that operates between two languages, many linguists have tried to find explanations for and solutions to all the phenomena and related problems in translation within the pair of linguistic systems involved. However, ample examples have proved that linguistic solutions alone are incapable of solving all the problems that may arise in the translation process.

The principal branches of linguistics are conventionally recognized to be phonetics, morphology, syntax, etymology, semantics, and stylistics (or the linguistic study of literature) (Cuddon 1979: 364). Within conventional linguistics, translation theory is often regarded as an aspect of semantics, in which the objects of study, i.e. words and their meaning, are traditionally considered in an isolated environment rather than in a communicative context. However, the semantic field of a given culture is a dynamic, socially motivated construct as “a language is not just a dictionary of words, sounds and syntax. It is a different way of interpreting reality, refined by the generations that developed that language” (Fellini 1986). In other words, the resources of meaning involve not merely knowledge of the linguistic code but also extralinguistic knowledge (i.e. historical-cultural and lived experiential). Such knowledge is partly acquired in what M.A.K. Halliday (1979: 66) called “the countless microsemiotic encounters of daily life,” which are, however, normally denied the outsider.

For example, at the lexical level, if one were translating word-for-word, a turtle is certainly not a rat, red is not green, nor can yellow be rendered as blue. But in translating the following collocations from Chinese to English, “a turtle in a jar” becomes “a rat in a hole”; “a red-eyed monster” becomes “green-eyed”; and “yellow films” in Chinese have to become “blue films” in English to make the collocation understood by an English reader.

The same kind of problems can be observed at the grammatical level as well. For example, without an immediate textual context or a situational context, even such straightforward words as “go” and “fall” may be untranslatable in sentences like “He’s gone.” and “The fall came earlier than expected.” It is simply because we can neither tell whether “gone,” means “He has left” or “He is dead”; nor “fall” refers to “autumn” or “downfall”, despite the fact that the structure of the sentences remains exactly the same. Obviously, structural analysis must be complemented by textual / contextual analysis in order to fully understand the meaning of a text.

In the case of a word with a wide range of linguistic and/or cultural associative meanings the difficulty level increases. The Chinese character “*liu*” 柳 (willow), for example, has a much larger associative file than its dictionary equivalent “willow” in English. It is phonetically

identical with “*liu*” 留 (to stay or to retain) in Chinese, so the mentioning of a willow branch reminds an educated Chinese of a series of ancient poems on the theme, creates a scene of difficult departure, usually at a pavilion on a roadside, and arouses a feeling of sincere friendship and a sense of powerlessness over fate. In ancient China it was customary to give someone who was going away a twig broken from a willow tree. The waist of a beautiful young woman is compared to the willow, her eyebrows to the curve of willow leaves. The willow is also the symbol of spring. As spring is the season of erotic awakenings, the phrase “*xunhua wenliu*” 寻花问柳 (looking for flowers and asking for willows) is a term for visiting a prostitute. To make clear any of these implied meanings of the word “willow” in different contexts to readers who are unfamiliar with their implied cultural connotations, this character clearly needs a rather lengthy explanatory note in each case.

There are often elements in a literary work that simply defy direct linguistic translation if the desired effect is to be achieved, and these can often only be explicated by employing lengthy notes. That is why we so often see accompanying prefaces, postscripts and introductions as well as note-filled pages in a translated work. One may argue that these annexes are often helpful for the reader to gain insights in a translation. One may also argue that certain aspects of meaning in a piece of literature can be conveyed in a straightforward manner and certain others can be dealt with by employing the standard techniques such as addition, omission, paraphrasing, footnotes, etc. As shown earlier in this chapter, there have been countless discussions ranging from theoretical approaches to specific techniques regarding almost all aspects of translation, and their value and contribution to the establishment and development of translation studies as a branch of science or art cannot be overestimated. Yet despite the fact that lengthy notes are an eye-sore and interrupt the process of appreciation of a translated work, to date it is still the most commonly used, and is believed to be the most effective, method for dealing with these kinds of linguistic or extralinguistic problems in translating. It is interesting to read also debates (Xiao, L. 1992) over translated literary work with criticism leveled against the translator for the detailed and lengthy footnotes he/she gave which caused “clarification” of the source text and thus robbed its readers of the otherwise challenging task and enjoyment of decoding the meaning for themselves.

Even in cases where there is a shared core language, whether English, Chinese or other, and even when the forms in the source language match those in the target language (in terms of word stem and grammatical structure, for instance), a semantic equivalence is not guaranteed, and a miscommunication can result. Due to cultural-historical variances and the geographical distance, even the same English word can have quite different meanings in British English

and American English, for instance, one billion, public school. The situation is similarly complex if not more so when the Chinese language is concerned. Mandarin and Cantonese are mutually incomprehensible in their spoken forms. While the official written version of Chinese used in both mainland and Taiwan (where it is referred to as “*Guoyu*” 国语 national language) is largely the same, due to special and temporal differences, it is reported that 80 percent of the terminology used in computer science has diverse names, despite the general conformity between “*Putonghua*” and “*Guoyu*” (Xu, Y. 1995a).

Halliday's linguistic research offers a useful insight. In their earlier works, Halliday and Hasan (1976) study the cohesion that arises from semantic relations between sentences, and elaborate in great detail on ellipsis as one of the five means of cohesion in English. Their focus on the study of ellipsis deals with “sentences, clauses etc. whose structure is such as to presuppose some preceding item, which then serves as the source of the missing information” (1976: 143). This kind of ellipsis is called “contextual default” 语境缺省 (see Wang D. 1997) because “the presupposed missing information” in an elliptical item can be retrieved from its sentence structure and its immediate textual context. Yet, there are many other kinds of “missing information” besides linguistic ones. What this thesis terms as “extended / cross-cultural level translation approach,” for example, has to do with what Wang calls “cultural default” 文化缺省, which is the same in nature as “ellipsis” just discussed, but differs from it in that the presupposed missing information can only be retrieved from the reader's “prior-knowledge” through their “long-term memory or semantic memory”, as Wang quotes from Matlin (1989:191; 132). In their later work, Halliday and Hasan (1985) expand their vision beyond linguistics. In their conception, “context” includes not only the well-established linguistic concept of (direct) “context of situation” as developed by Malinowski, Firth, Hymes (see Halliday and Hasan 1976: 21-22), but also (indirect) “context of culture.”

Sometimes the context involves historical as well as cultural dimensions and both direct and indirect contexts are needed in order to understand the meaning of a language unit. The difficulty in conveying meaning is a developing process, responding to changing historical, social and political conditions and always marked by changes touched off by “parole” (see discussion on Saussure in 2.1.1 above) in the context of use (situational or cultural). Therefore, a sense of historical development is also essential in understanding and interpreting meaning. For instance, the Chinese term “*furen*” 夫人 (Mrs, Madame, Lady) has gone through a long process of evolution. In ancient times, the term was mainly used to refer to a married woman with a title of nobility. In the Zhou Dynasty (11c.-221 B.C.), both the concubine of the Emperor and the wife of a man with the rank of nobility could be awarded

the title “*furen*.” During the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) through other major dynasties in China’s imperial history including Tang, Song, and Ming to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the title was gradually extended to the wives of officials of lower ranks. Therefore, when coming across the word in reading or in speech, it may indicate quite different ranks and social status. In its current usage, it can be used widely as an honorific in addressing any woman in reference to her husband, from Jiang Zemin’s wife to the wife of an ordinary person (*Ci Hai*, 1979). While the term “*furen*” experienced a drop in value, certain others have gained value dramatically. Nowadays hairdressing is a profitable business, and public performance, with the fame and glamour that go hand in hand with it, is a much sought after profession by most young people. But in traditional China, and even in the minds of the older generations in China today, to engage in such undertakings was considered an indication of the lowest social status. Soldiers, actors, and barbers used to be disparagingly grouped together as “*qiuba, xizi, titoude*” 丘八、戏子、剃头的. Without a historical awareness that these were occupations positioned at the bottom of the social ladder, some scenes in Chinese books and on the stage or screen would be incomprehensible---Why should poverty-stricken parents be so deeply grieved when their child followed one of these pursuits?

Besides factors related to the historical dimension, which can greatly affect the understanding of meaning, the semantic and syntactic differences can be further multiplied in the socio-cultural sphere. The translator must dig out the (often implied rather than explicitly stated) meaning / significance of any element in a discourse against the socio-cultural structure of the language users, and adequately convey the tension of words against text and/or context in the translation as a coherent and organic whole, which is what the following four case studies of translation and cultural exegesis demonstrate.

Precisely because of the extraordinary nature and position of the two linguistic systems involved in the translation process, each within a cultural framework of reference specifically its own, such problems cannot find solutions from within the linguistic systems purely and simply. When attempting to render the full meaning of the original as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, literary translators must concern themselves with the particular use of words in the overall textual and cultural contexts in which they occur as well as in a sentence itself, and in a structural relation of that sentence to other sentences---ranging from simple words to involved “events”. Not surprisingly, literary translation was viewed by some as the translator’s spiritual retrieval and digestion of the original author’s line of thought more than as the transference of the original text itself. This Western hermeneutic approach is in the same vein as that of the followers of the Chinese

artistic school (see 2.1.1 above) who assert that the process of translation is not merely one of transformation between linguistic coding systems, but a process of spiritual exchange between the translator and the author, a process of artistic recreation.

It is clear now that meaning is shared within a coded culture as well as a coded linguistic system; and that the process of translating from one language to another involves all the language-, literature- and culture-related factors in both the source and the receptor cultures. Therefore, the process of translation is no longer viewed as translating between two sets of linguistic signs but between two cultures.

While the basic operations of translating literary and non-literary texts are the same, it is the literary type which seems to have received more discussion in terms of its need for a cultural approach in translation, particularly so in China in the 20th century. This greater focus on a cultural approach can be attributed to the higher aesthetic connotation such texts possess, hence greater attention is paid to them (see Hung 1999 in Chapter 1 above). However, it is also at least partly due to the Chinese social and cultural preferences in the past hundred years or so. Aesthetic issues, nevertheless, are not the only concern: since “culture” is an element permeating all aspects of human life in society and, pertaining to this thesis, cultural elements exist at all levels and stages of the literary translation process, each and all of these, must be dealt with seriously.

It follows that the cultural approach to literary translation applied only at the linguistic and literary / aesthetic levels during the actual translating process is no longer adequate. It needs extending to reach the social, political, economic levels that a literary text relates with---well beyond the linguistic and literary sphere; and well beyond the actual translating process.

Literary translation and cultural exegesis activities are closely knitted together. Differences between the translating of literature and the cultural analysis of the translated literature are a matter of degree rather than kind. A translator of literary works has to be creative. That creativity depends not only on his/her ability to grasp the spirit of a literary text and put it in the target language, but also on his/her studies of the literary work to be translated and all the related issues around the translation project. When the translator translates, he/she becomes an expert on the author, literary genre, and historical and/or fictional period, and the translation itself will become a carrier of culture. In other words, the process involves both artistic creation and scholarship. The interaction between the two is actually inseparable from the very beginning to the very end in the translating process. Above all, the process of translating is perhaps one that involves the most intimate analysis of a text.

From this preliminary work, keeping in mind that the desired function of a translated product is to achieve better understanding between the two cultures, the writer of this thesis assumes as its secondary research issue that generally speaking (with the rare exception of some Sinologists and China experts), a literary translator, if equipped with the necessary “source” background knowledge in both language and culture, is in a better position to fulfil his/her task in translating from the source culture into the receptor culture because that translator’s comparatively higher level of understanding of the source text and greater intimacy with its macro-context as an insider can ensure a fuller understanding and conveyance of culturally related insights and issues into the receptor culture. Closely related to the selection of the source-culture-oriented translation strategy (or foreignization strategy / alienation strategy) over the receptor-culture-oriented strategy (or domestication strategy / adaptation strategy) is the question whether a literary translator can do a better job translating from his/her mother tongue (L1), to the target language (L2; in the case of this thesis English is my L2). It has been a silent consent as well as a general practice that translators translate into their mother tongue rather than out of it, as it is obvious that no matter how good a person’s second language acquisition might become, his/her proficiency level does not exceed that of one’s mother tongue. For a literary translator whose strength lies in his/her L1 proficiency level and source culture familiarity level, and for the purpose of achieving cross-cultural understanding, the “alienation” translation strategy (an approach based on the source culture) should be preferred to the “adaptation” translation strategy (an approach based on the receptor culture). Making no attempt to conceal the truth, this is believed to be where my strength as a translator lies in comparison with some of my peers in the PRC since I am studying and living in an English-speaking country, but was born and raised in the PRC.

I am fully aware that I am swimming against the tide, even running a great risk, by translating out of my mother tongue. As many scholars admit (e.g. Wang, N. 1998; Hung 1999: 188), of native Chinese speaking translators, the number of English-to-Chinese translators is much higher as compared with that of Chinese-to-English ones, particularly so in literary translation; and even fewer of those who do so can do full justice to the task. However, this thesis would like to put the above intuitive conviction to test by venturing in the opposite direction, i.e. translation from my L1 into my L2, in order to find out to what extent the L1 related advantages can balance up the L2 related disadvantages for a translator working from L1 to L2. Through my own translations and other examples, this thesis will endeavour to demonstrate how L1-to-L2 translation can make a difference. An L1-to-L2 translator may be inferior to an L2-to-L1 translator in terms of expressive capacity in the target language and the level of cultural awareness of the receptor culture; however, he/she knows the source

culture in greater depth and detail, and is in a better position to bring out the nuances and give explanation to such cultural contents. This position can perhaps draw support from Nida's comment that "cultures are far more complex than languages. One can ... learn a language in five years of arduous study and proper language exposure, but it takes at least 20 years to become adequately acquainted with a culture" (Nida 1998). Hung (1999: 31-67), through detailed comparison and analysis of the appearance descriptions of certain women character types in their original English stories and in their Chinese translations done in the late Qing Dynasty, convincingly shows how the outer appearance of a woman is meant to reveal her inner character in the original story, yet that connection was either misleadingly translated or completely ignored in the translated text due to the L2-to-L1 translators' lack of knowledge of the ethnographic features of the language-culture they translate from. There would not be problems as such for an L1-to-L2 translator. Related to this, it needs to be acknowledged that the translator's position involves a whole range of other issues (e.g. identity issues, including gender; translator behaviour), which have been much researched (e.g. Venuti 1995; Simon 1996; Wilss 1996; Tian 2000). This thesis will deal with certain aspects of the translator's position from personal experience rather than from a theoretical perspective.

### **2.2.3 Form of research**

To answer the research question using the chosen research approach, four contemporary Chinese literary texts are to be translated, their contents examined and their (macro-)contexts scrutinized. While the actual translation is creative work, the text examination and (macro-)context scrutiny are both reflective works in nature. Therefore, case-based presentations seem to be the most useful form of research for this project. The whole project is multi-disciplinary with several components and concerns. It is helpful in this context to consider Stake's (1994: 237) differentiation of three types of case study (instrumental, intrinsic, and collective) to illustrate the intended functions of these in this thesis. First, from the perspective of translation studies, each of the four literary objects of study is supposed to serve as an instrumental case study because each case is designed to provide insight into the hypothetical research issue of this thesis and help establish the position that this thesis is to argue for pertaining to translation theory and practice. Secondly, from the perspective of cultural exegesis, each of these stories is also intended to be regarded as an intrinsic case study because each is of intrinsic interest itself in all its particularity as well as its ordinariness, and helps advance our understanding of the Chinese socio-cultural context. Thirdly, the four cases considered together have been chosen to be looked at in depth to form a collective case study.

The instrumental study is extended to several cases in order to inquire into a general condition more holistic than a single case would allow and to optimize understanding and knowledge.

For a case study based research project like this thesis, after a conceptual grid has been shaped to highlight what the major argument and approach of the thesis is, perhaps nothing else is more important than making a proper selection of cases to study. Four contemporary Chinese short stories and novellas are selected for translating and studying:

1. *Father* 父亲 by Liang Xiaosheng 梁晓声, originally published in *People's Literature* 人民文学, November 1984 (Liang, X. 1984).
2. *Apart from Love* 不谈爱情 by Chi Li 池莉, originally published in *Shanghai Literature* 上海文学, January 1989 (Chi 1989).
3. *Hard Porridge* 坚硬的稀粥 by Wang Meng 王蒙, originally published in *Chinese Writers* 中国作家, February 1989 (Wang, M. 1989).
4. *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* —地鸡毛 by Liu Zhenyun 刘震云, published in *Zhongpian Xiaoshuo Xuankan* 中篇小说选刊, No. 2, 1991<sup>12</sup> (Liu, Z. 1991a).

Three of my four existing English translations of these literary works have been published during the course of this project by Chinese Literature Press in Beijing, with the only exception being *Hard Porridge*. Before my translation of this story by Wang Meng could gain publication, a number of other translations had been published outside mainland China, including *The Stubborn Porridge* by Zhu Hong (in the U.S. in 1994) and *Thick Congee* by Joyce Nip (in Hong Kong in 1995).

The main criteria for selection of cases are set out as follows:

(1) The cases are genre-specific: fiction; to be more exact, short stories (“duanpian xiaoshuo” 短篇小说) and novellas (“zhongpian xiaoshuo” 中篇小说) by Chinese writers. Fiction rather than other literary genres has been chosen because, as a more widely read genre, fiction has replaced drama as the type of literary work most loved by the common Chinese people. Through this kind of popularity, fiction has achieved a place in Chinese national life, even though its once great “hongdong xiaoying” 轰动效应 (furore-creating effect) has been diminishing since the mid-1980s. Besides, fiction gives the reader a stronger sense of humans

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<sup>12</sup> First published in *Xiaoshuojia* 小说家, No.1, 1991.

existing in continuous time, locates them in their physical world more specifically than most other genres do, and reveals essential socio-cultural reality through the depiction of the social events and daily life of its ordinary people, which form a panorama of the human condition in China as well as the cultural mentality of its people in a rapidly changing society still heavily loaded with traditions old and new.

(2) All four selected literary works have their settings in the family. While family is universally the basic element in society, the Chinese people's sense of affiliation to family is perhaps one of the strongest among all nations, owing to its Confucian<sup>13</sup> tradition. While a person's virtue was believed to be the basis of a good Confucian society, and the moral cultivation of the individual was considered by the philosophers to be of great importance in the formation of that virtue, it was the patriarchal family that was the basic unit of Confucian social order and control. The Chinese term for country is "guo jia" 国家: "guo" means country and "jia," family. It may be said that in China the family is the epitome of the country or the national culture. By choosing these four literary pieces, in each of which the family setting and activities are central, this thesis can examine how a focus on the family provides a means to examine traditional Chinese cultural assumptions that still exert strong social influence on the nation, and to examine the changes taking place in that regard in present-day China. These cultural assumptions and changes take place in the family settings, as indicated in the four translated stories, but are seen in this thesis as being related to China's wider social structure and its official and unofficial ideologies, which owe as much to traditional Confucianism and Daoism<sup>14</sup> as to Marxism-Maoism, Deng Xiaoping's reform and open policy, and the more recent influence from the West. To provide sufficient descriptive narrative which can canvas as wide a picture of family and social life in contemporary China as possible, stories dealing with different family types---traditionally styled as well as modern families, core families of young couples with and without children, real-life families as well as symbolic ones, that reflect on the nation as a whole---are chosen. Considering the life experience and knowledge scope of the writer of this thesis, literary texts with urban rather than countryside family settings have been selected.

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<sup>13</sup> The Confucian school, or Confucianism, is a school of thought in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770-221 B.C.).

<sup>14</sup> Rising and developing in about the same time as Confucianism (see Footnote 10, Chapter 2) in China was Daoism, a religious system. It was founded by a legendary figure Lao Zi 老子 (or Lao Tze, c. 4th B.C.), who tried to explain the structure of things natural as well as social in his five-thousand-character  *道德经 (*The Book of Way and Virtue*), holding that in everything within and around us there is always a form of energy that is composed of two opposing forces: "yin" 阴 (standing for femininity, cold, passivity, earth, moon, death, etc.) and "yang" 阳 (standing for masculinity, heat, sun, sky, action, etc.). These forces are seen as interrelated and reciprocally transformed. Daoism taught its believers to seek "Dao" 道, the Way of living in harmony with Nature by "wu wei" 无为 (non-action), rather than get involved in the man-created society. Later it was further developed by Zhuang Zi 庄子 (369-286 B.C.).*

(3) All the four stories and novellas were created between mid-1980s and early 1990s, spanning a period of time that was the most recent past when this research project was first proposed. This is a period when China was going through dramatic and rapid social change, ideological transformation and economic reform, when all those factors---the conventional tradition, the recent Maoist legacy, and the government's new policy for a model of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and strong Western influence---contended with each other and made their impact on people's lives. These texts are chosen because they differ from each other in terms of the social environment in which they are set, and in the aspects of present-day life in China they reflect; therefore it is hoped that they are of greater interest to readers outside the PRC. Even for those who may not be interested in Chinese literature, in particular, but in China, in general, and have not had the opportunity to live in the cultural environment, the translations can provide valuable objects of study.

(4) These literary texts are selected primarily for their intrinsic merits as pieces of literature, as well as for the variety they can offer across the attributes of relevance in terms of theme, style, family type and so on. Most of them are prize-winning stories. Their authors are all nation-wide famous writers. Efforts are made to strike a balance in sampling and to enable the optimum opportunity to learn. A survey of them would provide a rough guide to the stages of Chinese literary practice during that given period. And they each possess an individual character and reveal different aspects of the socio-cultural context in question.

As Stake points out (1994: 245), "The utility of case research to practitioners and policy makers is in its extension of experience. The methods of qualitative case study are largely the methods of disciplining personal and particularized experience." Therefore, while drawing on relevant theoretical assumptions in translation, literary and cultural studies as established parts of intellectual discourse, the theoretical analysis will be mainly based on the personal study of the seminal texts that give rise to it. The existence of translational, literary, and cultural theories will not be ignored or suppressed but they will not be employed to limit or undermine the creative practice and the exegetical study of these significant literary texts.

## **2.2.4 Format of the exegeses**

To tackle the research question and related issues using the above justified approach and form of research, each of the following four case study chapters comprises an English translation of a selected contemporary literary work and a cultural exegesis. Apart from being the fundamental "creative practice" component of the thesis, the translations also serve as the

evidential base for the exegeses. Other works by the same authors (in both their original form and translated form) are used to shed light on my own translations and the exegeses on them. These cultural exegeses are formatted in such a way as to allow a close and detailed examination of the selected literary texts from three perspectives or at three levels, i.e. linguistic, literary, and socio-cultural. These case studies demonstrate the kind of cultural awareness required of the translator in order to convey the full meaning of the original text and background information in the source language and culture to that in the target language and receptor culture.

As Maugham (1955: 8) affirmed about half a century ago, whatever an author writes “is the expression of his personality and it is the manifestation of his innate instincts, his feelings, and his experience.” The kind of literature possible from the pen of an author depends on what kind of person he/she is, so knowledge about the author and the period in which the literature was created is believed to be important to the reader in understanding the writings and the ideas guiding that writer’s literary creation. For this reason, a brief introduction of the author and his/her literary creation is given at the beginning of each exegesis.

From the linguistic perspective, the actual process of translating from Chinese to English will be studied and examples will be drawn from the selected translations to illustrate the different factors at work in an effort to explicate the best translation strategy or approach to literary translation. People now generally accept the point that complete bilingualism must include a broad cultural dimension. These examples demonstrate how these translations as creative work would differ if done without adopting the proposed extended cross-cultural approach to literary translation. Besides, they are provided to help demonstrate whether the conventional translation means are able to adequately convey all the connotations of the original texts.

The exegeses will go on to consider the literary attributes of the texts and reflect on the content of the creative work as both literary and cultural products since, as discussed earlier in 2.1.2, literary evidence should be regarded as part of society’s material production formed by the culture matrix in the concrete socio-political-economic conjunctures of that society in a given period of time. At the literary level, the specific literary character (e.g. their thematic structures and styles of the discourse) of individual texts will be discussed. If this in turn necessitates a brief account of the related theoretical trend of development in the Chinese literary field during the particular period concerned, it will be duly provided. And then the wider socio-cultural implications contained in the literary text will be examined. This part of each exegesis, carried out from literary and socio-cultural perspectives, has some similarities

to a literary criticism but is designed to play a separate, more expanded role in the thesis---to assist in the establishment (or negation, if so proven by the case study), of the argument as stated in discussion of the research question. Whilst the position this thesis argues for will surely leave much room for development, what it is trying to do is give that position an initial shape, i.e. “*pao zhuan yin yü*” 抛砖引玉 (to cast a brick to attract jade), to put it in a Chinese idiom.

# Chapter 3 Families in Society (1): *Father* by Liang Xiaosheng

## 3.1 Translation 1 *Father*

### Father

By Liang Xiaosheng

I want to set down on paper this piece of factual writing about my father---a worker, originally of peasant stock---to glorify him in a permanent way and to preserve in a son's memory something that he can offer to his own son in the future ...

#### 1

When I was very young, Father was, in my eyes, the severe master of our household, the unquestionable authority of the family, my supporter through his manual labour, my benefactor, and the source of my fear.

If Father put on a stern expression, my mother and the four of us sons would feel uneasy, like birds sensing an impending thunderstorm.

Very seldom did Father feel happy or look cheerful.

At that time my younger sister was not yet born and my grandfather still alive. He lay in bed coughing away the whole day long, too old to move a step by himself but still keeping up a good appetite. The big family of seven with their efficient digestive systems was all catered for by the sweat of the brow of Father, a third-grade plasterer<sup>1</sup>. In Mother's words, the whole family was "eating" Father every day.

Father was an unyielding man from Shandong Province<sup>2</sup>. He never complained about life nor sighed in despair. With a stern face, he let us freely "eat" him. His motto in life was "in everything rely on no one but yourself." Our neighbours observed that our family "has a doorway on the roof and a well within the room"---that we provided for ourselves without bothering any other around us.

<sup>1</sup> The normal wages of a third-grade plasterer was about 50 *yuan* per month at the time when the story happened, roughly equal to US\$6 according to the current (year 2001) exchange rate but the actual buying power of the Chinese currency RMB then was greater. For instance, a box of matches was only 2 cents; the monthly rent for a small apartment was just a few *yuan*. *Yuan* is the basic unit of RMB. In denomination, one *yuan* is equal to one dollar. 1 *yuan* = 10 *jiao* = 100 *fen*.

<sup>2</sup> Shandong Province is located in the east coast of China, on the lower reach of the Yellow River.

I used to pray that Father would grumble over something or sigh a little now and then. Once I heard an old woman in the neighbourhood who knew about fortune-telling say: “Everyone has a breath of *qi*<sup>3</sup> in his chest.” Naively I believed that Father would flare up less if he sighed more.

But Father just would not sigh.

It had been decided by his fate, I guessed. What a misfortune! I felt sorry for Father and for the whole family, too. Whenever Father lost his temper I felt it was easy to understand him, even to sympathize with him. A man could not do anything about his own *fate*, neither could others do anything about it. What was more, we were “eating” Father day after day. Couldn’t we tolerate such a man occasionally losing his temper with his “eaters”?

The first time Father lost his temper with me left me with a lifelong impression. A big boy who was fond of bullying his inferiors had ripped two slits at the back of my brand-new jacket with a broken piece of glass. Without giving me a chance to explain, Father slapped me hard in the face. I did not cry for I did not dare to, but I felt terribly wronged. For the next three days I was silent. However, family life did not appear unusual in the slightest just because one of the four children said nothing for three days. No one in the family even noticed.

On the fourth day, in class, my teacher called me to stand up and read aloud a text. The text was very familiar, as I had read it aloud time and time again. I did not open my mouth for a long time after I had stood up. The teacher became anxious, so did my classmates. They all fixed their eyes on me as a row of seven or eight teachers from another school were sitting in the back of the classroom, watching.

It was not because I did not want to read the text nor that I intended to make my class lose face, but simply because I could not find my voice. I was just unable to utter the very first character of the text. I was even more anxious than either my teacher or my classmates.

“What’s wrong with you? Why don’t you start reading?” The teacher flushed with anger.

I burst out crying.

From then onwards, the “teacher’s pet,” the best text-reader of Class Three, Grade Two at the primary school disappeared; in his place emerged a “stammerer”. From then onwards, my self-esteem was painfully lost ...

My stammer lasted until after I went to high school when I corrected it myself. Nevertheless, I became a man slow of speech. Because of this, some assumed I was very “mature”, others “shrewd” or “subtle”. However, when it was necessary for me to argue strongly on just grounds, I often stammered or fell silent, as if I was lost for words because reason was not on my side. Father never offered me an apology for he never dreamed of associating that slap of his with my stammer...

Grandfather was also extremely irascible. When Father lost his temper, we would count ourselves fortunate if Grandfather did not follow suit.

But those occasions were few and far between.

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<sup>3</sup> One of the literal meanings of “*qi*” is “breath” or “air”. In traditional Chinese medicine, the meaning is broadened to refer to a person’s vital energy (“*yuan qi*”), which includes, but is not limited to, the air one breathes in.

Mother was born in the year of the sheep. She was as docile as a lamb, absolutely ruled by Father. Had their positions been the other way round, I believe it might have been more beneficial for us children. The daughter of a private village-school teacher, Mother was fairly literate.

The women of poor families in China, their adaptability and their endurance to straitened circumstances in life were much to be admired. By instinct they cherished hopes for a bright future, though those hopes were obscure, unrealistic, and tinged with romantic notions. The expectation that their young children had the latent potential to become successful adults served as a breeding ground for those hopes. My mother's consciousness and confidence in that respect was, I think, stronger than most other mothers'.

With regard to our latent potential for future success, Father had his own understanding.

One day during a meal, I was about to help myself to a second bowl of corn gruel when I noticed Father staring at me. Discouraged, I stopped before the gruel pot hesitantly, not daring to take more.

But Father encouraged me: "Go on! Have another one!"

Seeing that I only ladled in half a bowl, he added: "Fill it up!" Then pointing at my elder brother and two younger brothers with his chopsticks, Father continued with an unusual solemnity: "You should all be able to eat a lot. It's only in this way that you will gain physical strength. At present you are living off my muscles, but in the future you'll have to depend on your own strength!"

For the first time, I perceived in his face a look of sincere kindness, of heart-felt joy, of ardent expectations, radiance and love.

I gobbled up that brimming bowl of gruel and forced down half a piece of steamed corn bread as well in order to repay Father for that rare flash of kindness and nobility he had shown us. Although my stomach was fit to burst, I felt happy. For the first time I had experienced paternal love. My heart was deeply touched by that precious experience.

With a schoolchild's comprehension, I looked to those words of Father's for guidance: an overwhelming principle, an unquestionable piece of advice, with himself as a convincing example. I made sense of his advice and reverently followed his guidance. From that day onwards, my appetite increased and so did my strength, it seemed. I felt as if I was getting more and more muscular by the day.

"Each of those kids of the Liang family looks like a wolf cub. Just look at the way they gobble up the corn bread, corn gruel and pickles at each meal. It makes your mouth water!" That was the only thing our neighbours envied us for. Father was proud of us.

When I was ten, Father went away to the Northwest with a construction company to assist in the development of that region. Shortly after his departure, my grandfather died. Not long after that, my younger sister was born. Then Mother fell ill. Because of her illness, she was unable to breast-feed Younger Sister. Elder Brother, already a high school student, prepared medicinal herbs for Mother each day and organized the rest of the family members to keep things going. Every day I fetched milk for Younger Sister and bottle-fed her under Mother's instructions.

I wished I had an elder sister. Mother had given birth to a girl before me, but I do not know what she looked like for she died when she was not yet three. Bad luck caused her to die young. Father did

not believe in Western medicine so he would not allow Mother to take the sick child to a hospital for treatment. When Mother succeeded in doing so without Father's knowledge, the doctor said it was too late. Mother collapsed after Elder Sister's death. Yet Father never thought he was in any way responsible. In his opinion, Elder Sister had definitely been poisoned by those two tablets of Western medicine.

"Western medicine, that's for treating foreigners. Their inner constitution is different from that of us Chinese. How can we count on Western medicine for the cure of a Chinese person's disease? If Western medicine could do it, what did our ancestors invent Chinese medicine for!?" he roared at Mother.

"It was the traditional Chinese medicine doctor who told me to take the kid to a doctor trained in Western medicine," retorted Mother.

"Whoever said that is certainly not a good doctor of Chinese medicine!" Father was even more vexed.

Mother could do nothing but shed silent tears.

The old woman in our neighbourhood who knew about fortune-telling said *yang*<sup>4</sup> was much stronger than *yin* in our family so girl children could not possibly survive in it. Because Father was too strong and rigid by nature, few girls would dare to be born into our family. According to her, Elder Sister had been pressed away by the masculine *yang* in our family and would be reborn in another.

One evening I saw with my own eyes that Father stealthily put a pack of medicinal herbs into the stove. The room was soon filled with their bitter and astringent smell. Father stood woodenly in front of the stove. The fire radiated through the crevice between the stove-covers, casting flickering light on his face. He looked so grave that a trace of grief could be sensed in him.

As a young child, I believed in fortune-telling. I reasoned, why had Younger Sister been born after Father's departure and Grandfather's death, not before? I looked after her whole-heartedly, hoping that she would be a brave girl and that Father would stay away from home for three years. I was afraid that she too would be "pressed" away to another family as Elder Sister had been. To a certain extent, Younger Sister's arrival was a compensation that satisfied my longing for an elder sister.

As I had hoped, Father did not return to visit us for three years, not for fear that he might press Younger Sister away but because he wanted to save up some money.

Although far away from home, Father tried to control his family with his principle in life: in everything rely on no one but yourself.

"Be thrifty. Count every *fen*<sup>5</sup> and make every *fen* count. Whatever you do, don't borrow money here or ask for a loan there ..." In every letter home which he asked others to write for him, Father never forgot to earnestly exhort Mother against borrowing. The sum of money he sent home monthly was not enough to cover the essential expenses of the family and Mother totally betrayed Father's

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<sup>4</sup> In China's Taoist philosophy and traditional Chinese medicine, *yin* is the feminine or negative principle in nature and humankind while *yang* is the masculine or positive principle.

<sup>5</sup> One *fen* is equal to one cent in denomination in the Chinese monetary system (see Footnote 1 on p. 52).

principle. Our family's "self-reliance" phase sadly came to an end. Poverty even deprived us of our psychological pride ...

Father's first visit home was just before one Chinese New Year. He had saved up over 300 *yuan*<sup>6</sup>. Little more than 100 was left after paying the debts raised by Mother.

"How have you been handling the finances? Huh? I urged you over and over again in my letters and in spite of all that you still borrowed so much. How can I possibly support you all if you lead such a life?" Father roared at Mother in our presence. He sat on the edge of the *kang*<sup>7</sup>, hitting it with his large callused hand.

Mother just listened in silence.

"Dad, scold us instead if you want to. But we haven't spent one *fen* unnecessarily." Elder Brother indignantly tried to defend Mother.

Holding my schoolbag I went over to Father and emptied out its contents onto the *kang*. Among them were exercise-books fully used on both sides and a few pencil stubs about the length of a finger. Staring at Father, I silently declared that we really had not spent one *fen* extravagantly.

"What are you doing? How can you behave toward your father like that?" Mother rebuked us sternly.

Turning his face away, Father dropped his head and stopped roaring. A long moment passed before he heaved a deep sigh. It sounded like the sigh from the heart of a discouraged man bearing a heavy burden.

That was the first time I had ever heard Father sigh.

All at once, I felt a kind of pity for him.

The next day, Father took us all to a department store. He bought clothes for each of us and a velvet jacket for Mother as well ...

Father's second home-leave was during China's three-year period of "natural calamity"<sup>8</sup> in the 1960s.

"I was wrong! I was totally wrong! ..." Father examined his children one by one, whose faces were the colour of famine and terribly swollen from eating wild herbs.

"What do you mean you were wrong?" Mother asked cautiously.

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<sup>6</sup> Refer back to Footnote 1 on p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> A "*kang*" is a kind of bed common in the northern part of China where winter is severe. Normally it is connected with a cooking stove in order to make good use of the heat; a separate fire can be lit inside the *kang* as well.

<sup>8</sup> This refers to the widespread famine across China from 1959 to 1961, mainly caused by the so-called Great Leap Forward(1958-59), a major campaign launched by Mao and his government at the second session of the Eighth Party Congress in 1958. The direct consequences of the Great Leap Forward were a terrible drain of manpower and the already scarce national financial and material resources (particularly in the form of agricultural product losses and useless homemade iron). These consequences were intensified by very poor harvests in the following three consecutive years, and the abrupt withdrawal of support and the forced settlement of earlier debts by the former Soviet Union (because the debts were to be paid mainly in the form of farm produce and non-staple food, despite the already desperate food shortage problem China was facing at the time) due to a political rift between the two communist parties. Millions of people died as a result. It is therefore a tragedy at least not entirely caused by a "natural calamity." Nevertheless, the term, coined by Mao's government to cover up its error, became common in use in China.

Father rumbled in reply, "Maybe I shouldn't have made that journey to the Northeast to eke out an existence when I was twelve ... Maybe it's easier to live in my native place than in a city? If we have to live on wild herbs, we might as well try where there are more of those ..."

Father wanted to go and visit his native village. Should life be really easier there than in the city, he would take Mother and us five children back to the countryside. He would abandon his present job as a construction worker and become a farmer again.

The idea made us children excited, filling our hearts with hope. We were not infatuated with the city. Where there were safe things to fill up our stomachs, whether wild herbs or leaves, that would be home. Father's words kindled our longing for the hometown we had never been to.

Mother objected though. But once Father had decided to do something, he would insist on doing it. It was impossible to dissuade him.

Mother had never succeeded in changing Father's mind, not even over his most ridiculous ideas. She did not possess any such feminine skills and she knew it. So she started to make preparations for the trip.

Father decided that he would take one son with him.

That decision set the four of us quarrelling. In the end, Father clinched the matter.

Solemnly, he announced, "Second Son, I will take you to Shandong with me."

That visit to Father's native village left a sad impression on me: it completely shattered my hopes. To Father, it was a psychological and emotional blow. He no longer had any kin there but nevertheless that was where his old home had been. The locals greatly admired Father for his wages in cash, whereas the children greatly admired me for being a city boy and for the pair of brand-new rubber-soled shoes I wore. The wild herbs there were hardly enough to fill up their stomachs. In their eyes, the steamed bread left over from our journey was high-quality pastry. Affected by the atmosphere of hunger in the village, Father and I just pretended we had made good.

Of the 300 *yuan* or so Father had scraped up for his second leave at home, almost nothing was left after the trip. Besides our fares, most of the money was given away in small sums to the villagers. Father and I left there with a small pack of shelled peanuts and some dried sweet-potato slices presented by the villagers ...

On our arrival home, the first thing Father said to Mother was, "My woman, I've squandered all our savings! Don't be upset. I'll save up again! ..."

That was the first time I heard Father speak to Mother in such a tone.

Mother smiled lightly: "Why should I? Ever since you left your native village, you never went back to pay a visit. It goes without saying that's what you ought to have done." She sounded as if she did not mind at all that over 300 *yuan* had been used up.

But I knew she in fact did. When she turned away, I saw tears spill over from the corners of her eyes and wet her jacket.

That night, Father tossed and turned in bed sighing endlessly.

Two days later, Father returned to the Northwest earlier than planned. Working during a holiday was double paid ...

Father scrupulously abided by the unalterable rule he had laid down for himself till his retirement: visit home once every three years. Father was good at saving while Mother was good at making ends meet by borrowing. Our family needed exactly the combination of such a father and such a mother.

In the photographic plate of my memory, Father became an increasingly blurred figure, the negative of which was developed only once every three years. For me, he became more and more a benefactor whom I wanted to repay, yet was unable to.

In a father-son relationship, the sense of indebtedness is, in essence, a dilutant that thins the thickest of feelings between flesh and blood. It quietly twists the most normal of human feelings and the best justified moral principles into the most absurd sense of indebtedness. Poverty is a curse because it results in debts that are spiritual and emotional as well as material.

The year of Father's third visit home fell in the same year that Elder Brother was to take the university entrance examination. As head of the family, Father strongly opposed Elder Brother's desire to go to university.

"I can't afford to send you to university!" His words made Mother and Elder Brother feel there was no room for discussion.

A sympathetic neighbour found a temporary job for Elder Brother to earn a small amount of money: selling vegetables in a market. Every ten *jin*<sup>9</sup> of vegetable sold would earn him five *fen*. Father forced Elder Brother to earn this tiny sum of money. Elder Brother would leave home early and return late, hiding a textbook underneath his clothes. Back home, he would hand Father five *jiao*<sup>10</sup> that Mother had secretly given him earlier. Actually he had been to a park or the bank of the Songhua River to review his lessons. In the end the whole pretence was exposed. Father flew into a rage at the "schemes and intrigues" and smashed our mirror with a glass.

Father was so angry that he decided to go back to the Northwest that very day. Elder Brother and I went to see him off at the station.

Just before the train was due to leave, Father leaned out of the carriage window and said to Elder Brother, "Eldest Son, do follow my advice. Don't go to university. In our family of seven, it's only me who is earning a living. I'm already over 50 and getting infirm with age. It's time you shouldered part of the load for me! ..." One could sense his immeasurable pain and the piteous imploring in his voice.

When the train began to pull out, Father shed tears. One drop hung on the black bristles on his unshaven cheek. I felt miserable, unable to tell whether it was for Father or for Elder Brother. I knew that Elder Brother had taken the entrance examination without Father's knowledge. Mother had deceived Father once more; so had Elder Brother. I, who was in the know but had helped to conceal the fact from Father, had also deceived him. I felt terribly guilty. I realized that, to a great extent, I was miserable for myself ...

<sup>9</sup> *Jin* is the old basic unit of weight used in China until late 1980s when the internationally accepted metric system was introduced to replace the traditional *jin* system.

<sup>10</sup> Refer back to Footnote 1 on p. 52.

A few days later, Elder Brother received an admission notice from a university. Mother smiled a gratified smile but Elder Brother cried over it. ...

I accompanied Elder Brother to the station, but he would not let me see him off at the platform.

“Spare the five *fēn* for a platform ticket,” said he.

At the ticket barrier, Elder Brother spoke to me again, “Second Brother, I trust you to help support the family in the future! Please don’t tell Father that I’m going to university.”

Standing woodenly outside the entrance, I watched him follow the stream of people into the station. He kept looking back, a roll of bedding in his left hand and a string bag in the right.

Slowly I walked home, grasping tight the spared five-*fēn* coin. I said to myself: The whole family should save every coin and make it go even further, for Elder Brother, for the first university student of our family for generations ...

There was no way to hold back from Father for long the fact that Elder Brother had gone to university. I had to reveal the truth in a letter to him.

Elder Brother was sent back home in his first vacation.

He was unable to continue studying.

He was later taken to a mental hospital---a free kingdom in the spiritual world; a lifelong home for the psychologically weak; a clear and definite end for him.

Looking through Elder Brother’s diary, I found in between the pages a letter from Father, a letter in which more than half of the characters were wrongly written, revealing his very rudimentary education gained in a literacy class<sup>11</sup>: “Eldest Son! You are too selfish! You don’t have your parents in your heart! Nor your brothers and sister! All you think of is yourself! Go ahead for a bright prospect whole-heartedly! As if I’ve brought you up for nothing! As if you are no longer my son! Even if you become an engineer one day I will not take you for my son again!”

Every sentence was followed by an exclamation mark. It seemed that even those failed to fully express Father’s wrath over Elder Brother. Reflecting on it now, the incident was devastating for both Father and Elder Brother.

I went to the Great Northern Wilderness<sup>12</sup> before Father’s fourth visit home. I did not see him for another seven years. I could not, as I wished, visit home at the same time as Father.

In my seventh year there, I was admitted to Fudan University in Shanghai.

Before the admission notice reached me, I was laden with anxiety. After several sleepless nights, I wrote Father a letter, asking him for a remittance of 200 *yuan*. I also told him in the letter that it was

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<sup>11</sup> Thousands upon thousands of “saomang ban” (扫盲班 literacy classes) appeared in villages, factories and urban neighbourhoods across China in the early 1950s. It was a national campaign launched by the Chinese government with the aim to eliminate illiteracy among the majority of the country’s population.

<sup>12</sup> The Great Northern Wilderness is in northeast China (formally Manchuria), known as China’s equivalent of Siberia because of its harsh climate and sparse population. Many “rightists” were sent there to be reformed through hard labour during the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957). During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), thousands of educated urban youth across the country were recruited to reclaim wasteland there; many intellectual and political elite were exiled to the labour camps over there too.

my last chance to go to university because I was already 25.<sup>13</sup> As soon as the letter was dropped into the postbox I regretted it. But it was too late. I guessed that Father would either simply not reply or write to give me a vigorous scolding. In all events, it would be more ruthlessly written than the one to Elder Brother.

To my surprise, Father immediately remitted the sum, exactly 200 *yuan*. By telegraphic transfer. Under Remitter's Message on the money order were a few wrong characters written in a very poor hand: "Not enuf, let me kno."

I collected the remittance on that same day. It was drizzling that evening. I placed the bank notes separately in two pockets, 100 in each, and put both hands in my pockets too, tightly grasping the two wads till they felt damp.

I walked in the drizzle, slowly. A voice full of sympathy sounded in my ear: "It is really hard for Old Master Liang to support such a big family all by himself! He is very, very thrifty. A single cube of preserved bean curd is divided up to last for three meals. He even begrudges a dish of stir-fry ... " Those were the words spoken to Mother by one of Father's fellow workers when he called on us. I was a little boy then. Many things were forgotten as I grew up, but those words stayed fast in my memory. I felt the two wads of notes become heavy in my pockets as if they were two huge pieces of lead.

I strolled far away from our encampment. Hiding myself in between two piles of timber, I wept uncontrollably. I wept for myself and for Father too. Why hadn't he written to abuse me?!

The next day we carried logs. I insisted on swapping from the third lever to the second, a position with the heaviest load. When eight men, led by one of us chanting the work song, heaved up the huge ten-ton log, in my heart I echoed a different song: No, Dad! I won't! ...

That dark drizzling night will remain in my memory for ever ...

### 3

During the three years I spent in university, to save the money on a half-price student concession train ticket from Shanghai to Harbin, I did not go home even once to visit my family. I hoped that every month Father would have one cube of preserved beancurd less and one dish of stir-fry more.

I did not return to visit them until I had worked a full year after graduation. I had not set eyes on Father for ten whole years. He retired earlier than expected. Once he fell off a scaffolding and suffered internal injuries. Besides, he was getting old, no longer capable of doing heavy physical work.

Arriving home, I saw Third Brother lying in bed with one leg in splints and suspended in the air. Younger Sister told me that he was going to get married. The bridal chamber was a lean-to built against the wall of the house. The house itself was low and the lean-to was not much higher than a neighbour's coal bunker.

I took a look inside the "bridal chamber" and returned to ask Third Brother, "Why have you done such a lousy job of it?"

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<sup>13</sup> The cut-off age for tertiary admission was generally 25. Prospective students older than 25 could only choose less prestigious universities, and in addition, provided that they were able to distinguish themselves as being particularly talented and/or experienced in their chosen field of study.

Turning his head aside on the pillow, he replied after a while, "No money. Considering our circumstances, what we've managed isn't too bad really."

"How did you hurt your leg?" I asked again.

This time he kept his mouth shut.

Younger Sister answered for him: "The planks on the roof are rotten. As he was spreading asphalt felt over the roof, one plank gave way to his weight and he fell through."

Looking at Third Brother, I felt dreadful. I would not have completed my three-year studies but for his monthly *ten-yuan* remittance to me from the Great Northern Wilderness.

After supper, I said to Father, "Dad, I'd like to discuss something with you."

Giving me a look, Father quietly waited for me to continue. His look made me feel as if we were strangers. Was it because we had been separated for a good ten years? Or because I had become a university graduate? I could not tell. He looked at me as an old horse would look at a deer it had brought up.

Stretching my hand out I continued: "Dad, why not use the money you've saved up these years to build a house for Third Brother?"

Giving me another strange look, Father lowered his head. It was a long time before he spoke again, in a low voice, "I... I have given it to him, haven't I? ..."

"Dad, you've given him only 250 *yuan*! Do you think that's enough for building a house!"

"I... I don't have any more..." his voice was even lower.

"That's not true, Dad! You do! I know you do! You have more than 3,000 *yuan*!" I retorted loudly.

Father rose to his feet, his face turned a dark red. "You!... What nonsense! When did I ever have 3,000 *yuan*!?" he roared at me.

Third Brother remarked from the bed: "Second Brother, why force Dad in my favour! He's been saving up money all his life and at the long last he has achieved something. How could he bear to part with his savings to build me a house?" his tone revealed a son's heartfelt resentment.

I became angry and raised my voice: "Dad, that's wrong! How can Third Brother get married in that shabby, coal-bunker like room? It is your grand-son or grand-daughter who will be born there! You'll feel ashamed before your descendants!" Instantly, a feeling of disgust rose in my heart.

"Shut up!" Father raised a fist. But instead of falling on me, it dropped heavily to his side.

Mother, Fourth Brother and Younger Sister all hurried out of the inner room and tried to drag me in there.

"You!... You haven't seen me for ten years and you attack me the moment you see me again! What a son! Is this the sort of example you want to set for your younger brothers and sister? You are a university graduate at last! Get out of here!" Father's face twitched. Fury blazed in his eyes. In his fierce and brutal voice, there were signs of the grief and misery of a bitterly disappointed man. Pointing a finger at me, he howled "get out!" again but after that was unable to utter one more word.

I struggled free from Mother and Fourth Brother's hands and announced loudly, "Dad, I'll never come back again! ..." With that, I dashed out of the door.

I walked to the station without stopping and bought a ticket for a train due to leave for Beijing three hours later. Then I sat on a bench in the waiting-hall smoking, one cigarette after another.

I did not know how much time had passed when I heard someone calling me softly. Looking up, I saw Mother and Fourth Brother in front of me.

Fourth Brother said to me, "Second Brother, let's go home!"

"Come on. I beg you!" added Mother.

"No." I shook my head resolutely.

Mother spoke again: "How could you quarrel with your father like that? It's true that he hasn't saved up that much money. He has given almost all his savings to your third brother, and your elder brother's hospital expenses will be due early next month ... "

A few curious men and women gathered around us, eyeing me suspiciously.

I heard an elderly woman sigh as she walked away, "All parents' tender love for children is pitiful!"

I was obviously viewed as a disobedient son.

I cut Mother short: "Mum, don't try to defend him! When I was at university, you wrote to tell me that he had saved up 3,000 *yuan*. How can he be that stingy with his own son?"

Mother was apparently stunned by my words. She then said, "Silly child! But it's my fault. I lied to you in the hope that you would be able to concentrate on your studies without worrying about us at home!"

On hearing that, I looked blankly at Mother's wrinkled face for a long time, unable to utter one word.

"Do be a good boy and come home with me. Come home and say sorry to your father..." Mother pulled at my arm.

I dropped my head and wept.

I followed Mother and Fourth Brother home and apologized to Father. He did not show any sign of forgiveness.

By then Younger Sister had been at home for two years since graduating from high school, awaiting a job assignment that never came. Mother had obsequiously sought the director of our neighbourhood committee<sup>14</sup> several times for help and she got an equivocal reply at last, "Well, next time when we are allotted quotas, I'll do what I can for you."

Mother told Father what the director had said. "For the sake of our child, we'll have to offer a gift of sorts," she suggested.

Father opened a drawer and took out a paper wallet. Without looking up, he handed it over to Mother and said, "Inside is all that is left of my pension this month. I've just paid for Eldest Son's hospital expenses."

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<sup>14</sup> The institutional term "Neighbourhood Committee" is the name of a nation-wide mass organization of residents in China's cities, normally composed of unemployed housewives and old people. Supervised by the Community Administrative Office (the basic organ of political power), the Neighbourhood Committees, set up in every residential quarter, are in charge of the residents' welfare (including occasional opportunities for job allotment, often of the least desirable jobs). The committees reflect the residents' opinions and needs, mobilize them to answer calls of the government and to observe government policies and laws, lead the work of public safety and defence, and mediate between residents in disputes.

There were only two ten-yuan notes in the wallet and some small change. Mother hesitated for a while before she gave one of the two notes to Younger Sister who bought something not really presentable and took the gift to the director's place "as a token of our appreciation." Later she brought back home the gift, untouched.

Mother asked in astonishment, "Why do you bring it back?"

Younger Sister replied dejectedly, "She won't accept it."

Mother asked again, "Because it's too small?"

"She said that we have been close neighbours for many years, so it would be awkward if she accepted a gift from us. If we insist on showing our appreciation, she said, we may help haul back a ton of high-quality coal they've just bought ..." Nervously, Younger Sister cast a sidelong glance at Father.

Father never looked up all this time. On hearing Younger Sister's words, he bowed his head even lower. He said after a long while, "Your Fourth Brother and I will go and do it for her ... "

Just at that moment Fourth Brother returned home. Having been told about the situation, he said to Father with embarrassment, "Dad, the Youth League members of our factory have something on tomorrow. As Branch Secretary, I can't be absent."

From the inner room I heard everything. I came out and said to Younger Sister, "I'll go with Dad tomorrow."

Quite unaccountably, Father flared up: "I don't need any of you! I'll do it all by myself. I'm not yet too old to be of any use. I still have some strength left!"

. . . . .

It started to rain heavily that evening. By the next morning, the rain had become even heavier. In spite of the rain, Father and I borrowed a handcart and set off. The coal was far away in a big coal yard close to a railway, some 30 *li*<sup>15</sup> from our district. We made three trips with the handcart to haul back that one ton of coal. It was already dark when we finally brought back the third load. During the third trip, one of the wheels got stuck in a gap in the rails. No matter how hard Father and I tried, the wheel was stuck there as if it were welded to the rail. I first pushed together with Father, then pulled with him, and then pushed as Father was pulling and vice versa. We tried all means but to no avail. Our bodies were covered with mud and our hands with cuts and bruises. In the rain I could hear Father puffing and blowing like an ox.

Wiping off the rain on my face with one hand, I called out to Father, "Dad, you stay here. I'll go and get help from the railway maintenance squad."

"Where has all your strength gone?" Father shoved me aside and bent over to move the cart, using his shoulder of withered muscles.

The rumbling of a train could be heard in the distance. A train was approaching! A flash of lightning, for an instant, revealed the flaccid muscles lashed ruthlessly by the heavy rain. It was the back of an old man who had lost his physical strength.

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<sup>15</sup> A Chinese unit of length, equal to half a kilometre.

From a distance the headlight of a locomotive projected a beam in our direction. Father was still making futile efforts to shift the cart. I immediately started to run as hard as I could towards the squad station. The worker on duty put out an emergency stop signal. The train pulled up. The worker and I ran to the handcart. Father was still trying to move it. It was as if he simply had not noticed that a train was approaching.

“Are you damned well playing with your life?” the worker swore at him ferociously. The beam of light from the locomotive shone directly on the cart. Father’s shoulder at last moved away from it. Slowly he raised his head. I could see clearly his desperate face, a face criss-crossed with wrinkles. Each wrinkle seemed to be an exclamation mark and there were more of them on his face than in the letter he had written to Elder Brother ...

Rain was dripping down his old face. I knew it was not just rain water. His wide-open, hollow eyes, his twitching cheeks and his trembling lips told me ...

That downpour reminded me of another wet evening several years before, the evening I hid myself in between two piles of timber near our team’s encampment and wept aloud ...

#### 4

One day in April this year, I received a telegram. It read: FATHER GOING TO BEIJING TODAY BY TRAIN NO.18. MEET AT STATION.

It was quite a few years since I had last visited home and had not seen Father since then. At the age of 35, I was already middle-aged. The telegram aroused in me the kind of feelings a middle-aged man would feel towards his aged father. They were not very strong but provoked one’s recollections of the past. The photographic plate of a man’s recollections changes focus as he ages just as a photo changes colour with the passage of time. Recalling the past, I felt less censorious towards Father than to myself. After all, I had not given him much of a son’s love!

The telegram was not handed to me on the day it was delivered. Somebody stuck it under my office door. That night I had stayed up late so the next morning I went to work late. Looking at my watch, I found there was still an hour and a quarter before the train was due to arrive. If I got going right away, there would still be enough time to meet Father at the station. With the telegram in hand, I called a taxi. We kept starting and stopping at red lights all the way. When we finally got to the station, it was already late.

I opened the door and was about to jump out when the taxi driver caught me with one hand, “Fare!” I reached into my pocket for my wallet only to find that I had not brought it with me. I tried to explain to the driver with a flattering smile, telling him that I had come to meet someone and would pay afterwards, those and lots of other fine words. He would not let me go until I had left my I.D. card as security.

I searched in and around the station but Father was nowhere to be seen.

Despondently I returned to the taxi and pleaded with the driver to take me home and allow me to pay him for the two trips together.

The driver started the car with a snort of discontent. Seeing that we were going in the wrong direction, I smiled at his rudeness and asked, "Where are you taking me?"

"The main taxi station," the driver answered coldly. "I'm hungry. I'm going for lunch. You can get another taxi there."

I knew that I was in the wrong so I said no more.

I waited for over an hour before finally getting another taxi. The way back was smooth and fast, but I was really taken aback by the fare: 23 *yuan*!

I could not help asking, "How can it be this much?"

Glaring at me the driver said, "Including the fare from the train station to the taxi station!"

"You even charge for that section?!"

"You must be joking! You don't think you can ride a taxi for free, do you?"

When I got home, I saw Father had already arrived.

"Dad, why didn't you wait a bit longer at the station? I made a trip there for nothing!" I complained.

"I waited for a while. I didn't see you so I thought you wouldn't come to meet me there..."

"But you sent me a telegram. How could I not meet you there? The idea!"

"I thought maybe you were too busy with your work to get away..."

"Dad, give me 23 *yuan* first!" I demanded.

Surprised at my asking for money the moment I set eyes on him, Father stared at me, puzzled.

"I called a taxi to meet you at the station," I explained. "The driver is waiting for the fare. I've forgotten my wallet in my office."

As if to prove what I had said, the taxi tooted several times.

Father looked as if I had hired a spaceship to meet him. He slowly unbuttoned his coat, took out the stitches from a piece of cloth sewn into the lining, twisted out three ten-*yuan* bills with two fingers and handed them to me silently. From his eyes I could read the words in his mind: "You didn't have to make such a show."

"Dad, I'll give the money back to you..." Taking the notes from him, I hurried downstairs.

Getting back, I found Father with a very sombre countenance. He did not look toward me but kept his head low, smoking away.

I realized that I had said a very stupid thing ...

Father was no longer the sturdy father I had once known, nor the bright-eyed father, hale and hearty even at the age of retirement. He had become old, really old. Life had changed him into an old man. He had lost nearly all his thick black hair; what remained had turned grey. Yet his beard was superb: checkered with silvery-grey and light-yellow, it fell gracefully to about the second button of his coat. That thick beard was the only thing that bestowed on him some dignity. The hardships of life he had

experienced were written on his wrinkled face; still detectable was a trace of long-cherished yet unfulfilled wishes.

Life, after all, has a firm and powerful hold on humans.

At that time, my family lived in a dormitory building. We had just one room of 13 square metres. We used the corridor as a kitchen.

On the first day of his arrival, Father sized up our “territory” in the corridor and emotionally remarked: “Second Son, you are lucky! You’ve been allocated a room after only a few years of employment! The corridor is so wide that it can be used for a kitchen... You... you’ve done better than me ... ” Father’s words with a faint hint of inferiority made me feel very bad. He had worked all his life as a construction worker and had built countless buildings, yet he was envious of my 13 square metres in a dormitory building. He was among those who were supposedly to be regarded as the respectful masters of this country.

My editorial department temporarily allotted me an office where Father and I slept at night while my wife and child stayed at home.

Every day, Father would take our child to a nursery and get him back, mop the floor, fetch hot water, do shopping,, cook meals, and even help with such chores as washing clothes, washing quilts and changing gas cylinders when they were empty. He took on as much of the housework as possible.

I did not want Father, my aged father, to be reduced to my handyman. Once I told him: “Dad, don’t do all these chores for us. We’ve become lazy since you arrived!”

Father answered gloomily, “I’m not too tired to do this bit more. I’m content that I can stay here... After your younger sister got married, it becomes really crowded at home. No other way out, I’ve come to trouble you ... ”

Father’s temperament had also changed. He had become a reasonable, good-tempered, forbearing old man, in or out of the home, at all times.

Besides the household chores, Father often cleaned the public corridors, stairs, toilets and washbasins. Very soon, he won praise and respect from all the residents in the building. When Father first arrived, people would asked me, “Is that old man with a big beard your father?” Later the question became, “Are you the son of that old man with a big beard?” As far as I was conscious of it, Father’s existence there was based on mine; but in many people’s eyes, I started to depend on Father for existence. Now workers who had never visited us before came to my place. It had seemed that we would never come into contact with them. This enabled me closer contacts with those people’s lives more common than mine.

To my surprise, I discovered that Father could openly gain admission to our factory bathhouse on days when family dependants of the employees were not allowed to use it. He could easily get into our factory auditorium to watch a film without a ticket. And what’s more, everyone treated him politely and amiably. I myself had never enjoyed such “privileges”. In his own way, Father had finally established an independent existence parallel with mine. I no longer tried to stop him from doing public chores. I understood how necessary and how important it was to Father now that people noticed him and admitted his independent existence! It was the only thing that gave dignity to an old man, who

had not had the chance to receive an education and had lost his strong physique and physical strength. It was a means by which an old man could maintain a psychological balance in the presence of his son, who had graduated from university and had won some reputation. I warned myself that I should treasure those achievements of Father's as valuable objects.

The greatest change in Father was that he now showed a sincere reverence for intellectuals. In the past, he had called every kind of intellectual a "pen-pusher". He used to look down upon those "pen-pushers" who, in his opinion, made an easy living by their pens rather than by their physical strength. The stream of visitors I had every day now were, nine out of ten, pure "pen-pushers". When I introduced them to Father, he would awkwardly maneuver his body into an unaccustomed pose: slightly bowing with his arms hanging by his side and his waist stooped. A respectful, nervous smile would appear on his face. Afterwards, he would make tea and light cigarettes for them on my behalf. While my guests and I chatted away, he would quietly sit in a corner and listen intently, gazing now at me and then at the guests. If we mentioned that it was time for a meal, Father would quietly get up to prepare it for us. Should I sometimes totally forget the time, he would walk in and ask me in a low voice, "The meal is ready. Do you want to have it now or in a while?" After the meal, he would, as usual, grab the job of washing up.

Once, after I had seen some guests off, I said to Father, "Dad, you don't need to be excessively respectful or attentive. Most of them are my colleagues or friends. It's not necessary to bother too much."

"Have I... overdone it? ..." Father asked slowly, as if I was criticizing him.

Several days later, I got a letter from a friend. It reads, "I went to visit you yesterday but you happened to be out. I had a chat with your father for over two hours. He really is a good father, a fine old man. I sensed that he was lonely. He told me that he had no opportunity to talk with you at all, not even for just a few minutes. Are you really that busy? ... "

The letter made me feel extremely ashamed. I sharply reproved myself. It was true. I had hardly conversed with Father since his arrival, not even a casual half-hour chat between father and son. Father had been no more than an old servant of mine who did all the domestic chores for me, diligently, conscientiously, silently and unstintingly.

While I myself had been either writing endlessly or chatting with my visitors day after day...

## 5

At dusk one day, a girl came to my home, a stranger from another part of the country. She claimed that she had read some of my works and hoped to discuss them with me.

I took her to my office.

She was very pretty with a beautiful figure, tall and graceful. She looked dignified and elegant with a pale oval-shaped face. Her rather large eyes flashed with the light of a prolific imagination. Her pitch-black hair, neatly cut short, set off her charming face like green leaves setting off a lotus. She wore a colourful jacket with three unusual buttons which seemed to be made of bone and cut in the shape of a crescent moon. Beneath the half-open jacket was a crimson woollen sweater. The lower part

of her clothing was a pair of jeans edged with metallic gold thread at the creases and bottoms of the trouser legs and a pair of high-heeled creamy yellow shoes. She sat up straight in the sofa, her slender arms slightly outstretched and her hands clasping her knees with a habitual ease. Her bearing was gentle and refined.

My son was ill with a high temperature. When I left home, my wife was trying to pour medicine down his throat while Father was washing my clothes. I made an effort to get rid of these disturbing thoughts and to focus my attention on the conversation as best I could. I guessed she would first of all raise some questions. But she did not. Instead, she started telling me about herself in a pleasant voice.

She had been away from home for over a month, she said, travelling to big cities all the way from the South to the North and visiting well-known young writers. Then she gave a list of their names. Some I knew in person, others I had not yet met. She continued to tell me that she adored a certain writer and his writings, could not tolerate another, appreciated so-and-so's writings but did not like the writer as a person. She was frank and open.

I enjoy talking with frank people.

"Are you on a business trip?" I asked.

"Oh no," she shook her head and again smiled winningly. "This trip is just for fun and relaxation."

"And your work unit has agreed to give you such a long leave?"

"I'm under no work unit's control now---I'm a free citizen!"

I looked at her, much puzzled.

Her hands unfolded from her knees. Stretching her body comfortably against the sofa, she gave a quick look around my office and observed, "Your office is big enough for five couples to dance in."

"Maybe it is. I don't know how to dance," I responded.

This time, it was she who looked puzzled. Skeptically, she gazed at me in order to see whether I meant what I said.

I smiled a shameful smile.

Her eyes moved away from me onto my writing desk. "Bought in a free market?" she asked.

"Yes," I nodded.

"The style is very old-fashioned."

"Yes. It's rather vulgar, but very cheap."

Her eyes fixed on my face again. She looked as if I had admitted that I was a vulgar oaf.

"Please go on," I said. "I still can't quite make sense of what you said about yourself just now."

"Really?" Doubtful expression, doubtful tone. Then she heaved a soft sigh and said flatly: "I took the entrance examinations for admission to a film institute and then a conservatory of music but failed in both. I worked in a foreign trade bureau for three months, then in a tourism bureau for half a year. Both units failed to attract me to stay longer. I drifted along in the provincial library for a year. It was the books that tied me there for that long. Later I got bored with reading so I resigned... Perhaps I'll go to the provincial television station when I get back from this tour. It all depends on how I feel ... "

I understood at last. She was from another world.

"Will your parents get anxious that you are away from home for so long?"

"They have nothing to get anxious about. In each city there are my father's old comrades-in-arms from the past. I can stay in their homes or in first-class hotels ... "

Feeling it unnecessary to ask any more questions, I just waited for her to continue.

She was reticent for a while before speaking again. "I'm sure you can't understand me. In our childhood, my elder sister and I felt we had tasted all the delicacies in the whole world so we mixed up salt and sugar and sprinkled some chilli oil on top of it. Now the state of my mind is like when I was a little girl. I feel lost. I'm fed up with everything. I've lost enthusiasm for life just as I lost my sense of taste for food in childhood ... "

Looking at her charming face, I felt sympathetic. My feeling was similar to what I might have for a tiny insect about to drown in honey.

Seeing that I was listening attentively, she went on: "I meant to get away from home in order to relieve the boredom but only find myself in a worse and worse mood. Each city is full of people---everywhere, crowds of ignorant, illiterate, muddle-headed people who are engaged, every day, in talking about housing problems, unemployment problems ... "

"Can't you put up with those people?" I calmly asked her.

"Can *you* put up with them?" She sat up straight and stared at me again. Her expression showed that she was disappointed at my apathy.

I did not answer her question right away.

I recalled the wet night when I had hidden myself in between two piles of timber and cried bitterly as well as the stormy night when Father and I had hauled coal for the director of the neighbourhood committee in order to help Younger Sister get a job. Drizzle or rainstorm, they were both rainy nights.

The moments that stay fast in my memory, why did they all befall on rainy nights?

I had managed to drag through those two rainy nights. Supported by my poor Father, an uneducated man with narrow peasant concepts, I had braved life's hardships step by step and grown up year by year ...

"Ancient country, old nation; living in such an atmosphere, everyone will be suffocated to death!..."

The pleasant voice of the girl made it difficult for me to divert my attention from her for long.

"Let's talk about literature!" I suggested.

"Literature? ..." she pouted slightly. Then, she affirmed loud and clear: "At present it is not possible to have literature in China! China's practical problem is its overpopulation. If two thirds of it could be cut down, the situation would be totally different!"

"What a good idea! Of course the people who should be eliminated are the ones who are illiterate, muddle-headed and keep talking about housing and unemployment problems?" I said in a cold voice.

The change of my mood did not arouse her attention. Frowning, she commented in such a tone as to show her concerns about the country and the people, "Just today, just at the gate of your Beijing Film Studio, I saw a grey-bearded old man holding a foolish-looking child. They were there looking at a foreign car. I felt extremely sad at the sight! I will write a psychological story to express the sort of sorrow I felt! ..." She looked so lugubrious, as if she was about to cry; or rather, as if trying to move me to tears. However, I was not in the least moved. I could no longer be so easily carried away by

emotion as before. I was thinking her heart must be tiny, engendering such trifling sorrows. I no longer felt any sympathy for her.

I told her that that old man with the grey beard was probably my father and that foolish-looking child in his arms, my son.

"Is he... your father? ..." she flushed slightly showing some sign of embarrassment. "Please excuse me! I... thought you were..." she said haltingly.

"There's no point asking for excuses! Therefore I needn't give you any. I don't deny that my father is illiterate. The characters he learned in a literacy class are no more than the flowers on your colourful jacket! He is also ignorant. Because of his ignorance, because of his narrow peasant concepts, our family suffered great misfortunes! My elder sister died young because he believed in a fortune-teller rather than a doctor. My elder brother became a mental patient because he upheld physical strength and despised education. I've forgiven him but I can't forget those happenings. I loathe ignorance more intensely than you do! I understand what education means to a country or a nation better than you do! I curse all the factors that bring about this condition of illiterate backwardness!" I rose to my feet. My voice was very loud. I felt excited as if I was not just speaking to the girl in front of me but was addressing crowds of people from all walks of life.

I felt like telling her it was all right if she did not have feelings for our people; it was also all right if, elitist that she was, she chose to pity their ignorance and illiteracy, like those aristocratic ladies she had read about in Western novels, which would undoubtedly hold some glamour and charm to girls like her. However, she had no right to despise them! She had no right to scorn them! It is just those people, thousands upon thousands of them who could not get the chance to enjoy education in the course of history but had been making Civilization all the time, that formed the solid foundation of our country and our nation, just as strata of aqueous rocks amassed and solidified through the years all over our 9,600,000 square kilometres territory! What was more, it was on their strength and sweat that the Chinese nation relied to promote and accomplish all the causes! It was not their fault that they were ignorant or illiterate. It was the fault of history! It was the shame of each of those who lacked enthusiasm and a sense of responsibility in the vigorous development of our country and in the vitalization of our nation!

I felt like telling her that, as for herself, she was nothing but a small flower in a small patch of rich soil enjoying adequate rain and dew. She was beautiful and delicate but had no fragrance. Her roots were thin and short so she could not reach the strata of aqueous rocks as a tree could. What she scorned was exactly what she depended on for existence. She treated with indifference, or even held up to mockery, those people's most immediate worries, yet her own depression, deriving from the fact that she had nothing to worry about, and her own paltry, refined sorrow in that empty heart, in essence, were not worthy of discussion as compared with all the sorrow they had experienced.

I still felt like telling her that ...

I did not feel like saying any more to her.

I thought of my sick son with a high temperature. I thought I should go back to him right away.

"I'm very sorry but I can't go on talking with you!" Walking to the office door, I pushed it open--- just outside the door stood Father, dumbstruck and motionless like a block of wood, a thermos flask in one hand and an ink bottle in another.

He had come to bring hot water for us.

Obviously he had overheard something I had said so loudly a moment before.

The girl turned to look at me as she went downstairs. She could never have imagined that I would treat her like that.

Father put down the flask and walked to his bed without saying a word.

We did not say anything to each other until bedtime. The light was out. Lying there quietly, I could not go to sleep. Neither could father. I knew it.

I really wanted to get out of bed and go to Father, kneel down beside him, lay my head on his chest and say to him, "Dad, forgive me for those careless words which hurt you. Please forgive me...."

Two days later, I visited a friend and went back home late in the evening. Upon my return, my wife told me Father had gone.

"Gone? Where? ..."

"Back to Harbin!"

"You... why didn't you stop him?!"

"I tried to but I couldn't."

My son, who had just recovered from his illness, was crying, "Grandpa, I want Grandpa! I'll go and look for Grandpa!..."

"Did Father say anything before he left?" I asked.

"Nothing," answered my wife.

I shot out of the door.

At the station, I hurriedly bought a platform ticket.

The train for Harbin had just started when I dashed onto the platform. I ran after the train. I wanted to call out "Dad!..." but could not find my voice.

The train pulled out of the station.

All the people who had come to say goodbye left. I was left standing all alone on the platform. Watching the railway signal lights in the distance, I said to myself, "Dad, Dad, I love you! I will never forget I am your son, never feel ashamed to be your son! Dad, Dad, I'll make sure to bring you back to Beijing!"

The signal lights in the distance had changed from red to green ...

## **3.2 Study 1 In a Traditional Chinese Household: Strains and Love between a Working-class Father and His Family**

### **3.2.1 The author and his literary creation**

The short story *Father* 父亲 is a candid memoir of the author's own father. Through the portrayal of its protagonist's life roughly from the 1930s (within the Republican period under the rule of the KMT) to the mid-1980s (under the regime of the CCP), it presents the reader with a glimpse of the general living circumstances of common working-class families in urban China during that period. Its author, Liang Xiaosheng, is one of China's outstanding writers and critics of the younger generation.

Born into a worker's family in Harbin<sup>16</sup> in the northeast of China in 1949, the year the PRC was founded, Liang Xiaosheng spent his primary and junior high school years in hardship. He went to work in a military farm in the Great Northern Wilderness in 1968, as hundreds of thousands of other educated urban youth or urban school-leavers 知识青年 (知青 for short) across the country did during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Most of those educated youth, like Liang Xiaosheng himself, had been former Red Guards in the late 1960s before rusticated to desolate rural communes and the wastelands of northern China. He worked in the Great Northern Wilderness as a farm labourer, a primary school teacher, a tractor driver, and a lumberman until 1974, when he was recommended for studying creative writing in the Chinese Department of Fudan University in Shanghai, a very rare chance for only a small minority of the educated urban youth.

After graduation from the university in 1977, Liang Xiaosheng worked as an editor and playwright at the Beijing Film Studio, and later transferred to the China Youth Film Studio (Liang 1994: 1-18). He is known as “the voice of the down-and-out, the urban poor” and sees the great pain caused by the reforms for the victimized low-wage earners and laid-off workers where others see “restructuring.” He “scorns euphemisms like instituting ‘workers’ shareholding’ to cover up the ugly realities being brought about by the reformation of state enterprises.” Generally believed to be a representative of “a new brand of leftist,” however, he “doesn’t lament the past and concedes that the market reforms that are causing so much pain are an unavoidable necessity” (Gharemani and Stanmeyer 1999). The rampant corruption and hypocrisy of the transition period galvanized him into writing and his pen has

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<sup>16</sup> Harbin is the capital of Heilongjiang Province, the northern-most province of China on the Soviet border.

touched on many aspects of life and society in contemporary China, but his fame started from two types of his earlier writing: fiction about the educated youth 知青小说 and self-revelation fiction 自白体小说, although later swift social changes in China have prompted Liang Xiaosheng to write many other works which may not be comfortably classified as either of these two types.

His stories of the first type are about the life and fate of the educated youth, firmly based on his personal experience in the Great Northern Wilderness as an educated youth himself. *This Is a Miraculous Land* 这是一片神奇的土地, which describes the hardships endured during the Cultural Revolution by a group of “educated urban youths” in China’s bleak northwest, is the first story to bring him fame. Others on the same subject include *There Is a Snowstorm Tonight* 今夜有暴风雪, the short story *For the Harvest* 为了收获, and the novel *Snow Town* 雪城. Unlike some other writers’ works on similar subjects, his stories not only describe the hardships, the distorted humanity, and the unfortunate, even tragic, consequences suffered by many of these young people, but also describe their heroic spirit and their value as individuals. They not only offer a highly critical account of the absurdity of the movement which sent millions of urban youth to the countryside and mountain areas, but also remind the reader of the significance of the young people’s pioneering work and the contribution they made to the country.

*Father* can be classified as the second type of story for which Liang Xiaosheng is well-known---self-revelation fiction. This fiction can be understood as a branch of reportage 纪实文学, which is based directly on events which happened to or were observed by the author. For that reason, perhaps we can call it “fact-ion” in contrast to “fiction”. As Liang explains in his article “My Pursuit” 我的追求:

In the past, when I wrote stories, I constantly analyzed, appraised, criticized or praised the characters under my pen, but myself was never placed in that position, as if I was a “god” who could judge anyone; as if I had the right to peel others’ souls like peeling fruit but to keep my own in a safe. Now I often have a strong desire to analyze myself and to appraise myself. So what I want to pursue in story writing for the moment is “self-revelation” [自白性]. (Liang, X. 1986; my translation)

His “self-revelation fiction,” with truthful recordings or depictions of events directly dealing with his life and those of his family and friends, won popular acclaim across China. *Father* 父亲, published in *People’s Literature* 人民文学 in November 1984, is the first of his series of “self-revelation fiction.”

### 3.2.2 Linguistic and cultural issues in translating *Father*

On the surface, the short story *Father* is written in a simple style, thus not seeming to present much of a problem either for the translator or for its Western readers to decode. However, this simplicity raises certain issues related to translation no less fundamental than a sophisticated literary text would, and thereby throws into relief these issues. For example, there is an ordinary proverb used in the story “*fāng ding kāi mén, wú dì dǎ jǐng*” 房顶开门，屋地打井, which literally means “have a doorway on the roof and a well within the room.” It has nothing to do with the house design of the Liang’s, but rather is used by the neighbours to refer to the household’s principle or attitude in socializing and dealing with others. Therefore the paraphrasing text “that we provided for ourselves without bothering any others around us” is added to the literary translation of the Chinese proverb in order to make its implied meaning clear to the English reader. Similarly, taking the same domestic perspective is the word “*kang*” 炕. It is transliterated and given a brief footnote: “A kind of bed common in the northern part of China where winter is severe. Normally it is connected with a cooking stove in order to make good use of the heat; a separate fire can be lit inside the *kang* as well.” While the transliteration is intended to keep the distinctive local colour of the original, the brief footnote provides the necessary cultural information for the English reader.

If there is a chance for the meaning of these terms to be sensed from their context by the English reader, there are others that are more problematic, and additional information has to be explicitly provided. The character 气 (*qi*) means “vital energy” or “spirit” in traditional Chinese medical theory and philosophy, and that is the sense in which the fortune-teller in the story was using it. Without pointing out that one of the character’s senses for everyday use is “breath” or “to be enraged,” the English reader might feel at a loss as to the amusing connection the young son made between *qi* and his father’s (lack of) sighs and his frequent tantrums. Therefore, a detailed note listing the relevant definitions of the word is necessary.

There are other seemingly straightforward terms that appear not to require any further explanation other than being literally rendered, but that may turn out to be inadequate, even misleading. For example, Father being a “*san ji mo hui gong*” 三级抹灰工, if simply translated into “a third-grade plasterer,” though linguistically perfect, may mean almost next to nothing to the targeted reader apart from its revelation of Father’s occupation. Without knowing the underlying layers of meaning of “a third-grade plasterer,” the reader would be inhibited from a full understanding of the many details related to the small sums of money

mentioned in the story. These small sums of money, however, reflect the extreme degree of financial difficulty and go a long way to help explain many other details of the story, including some of the main character's irrational behaviour. Most English readers would be at a loss as to what significance that occupational designation might hold. In fact, it is profoundly meaningful in more ways than one. First, by showing that Father was a building worker, it indicates his social and political status and that of his family as being working class in terms of the recognized Chinese class composition of the time, when a class line was drawn between "revolutionary masses" and "class enemies." Belonging to one of the "five red categories"<sup>17</sup> was of great significance to a Chinese citizen at that time. However, while politically a "red" (good) status was very desirable, financially it did not necessarily bring any advantages, and socially, opinions regarding its status differed (as one can sense from the story). In the conventional concept, the job of a low-level plasterer was not desirable---hard and dirty with pitiful payment---though in the "new concept" such belief was considered "backward" since great efforts were made by the government to convince people that all professions and trades, whether acting as a high-ranking cadre (bureaucrat) or being a street cleaner, were equal in the sense that they were all "serving the people," and therefore equally important. That propaganda did noticeably affect many people's concepts, though the falsity of this doctrine was constantly exposed in the story: nobody actually considered they were equally important or desirable jobs. Secondly, the nature of a plasterer's job in those days meant a great deal of inevitable mobility to other regions, which explains Father's constant absence from home before his retirement. Thirdly, a "third-grade" plasterer's income back then was around 50 *yuan* per month. With the family of seven mouths to feed, the wages translate to about US\$1 (current value) per head per month for the family. The story shows how low income affected the living quality of the family and spotlights the sacrifices made by manual workers.

The extent of the explanation indicates two points of issue: (1) the problem of relying purely on footnotes as supplements; and (2) the benefits of having the space necessary for adequate

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<sup>17</sup> After the Communist take-over in 1949, much of the populace in China was divided into different "class status," according to one's profession or economic status. During the Cultural Revolution, the popular usage of the *five red categories* was not uniform. Generally, they were industrial workers, poor peasants, lower-middle peasants, revolutionary cadres (those who had joined a communist organization by 1947), and revolutionary soldiers. There was never an authoritative definition of these categories. The situation with the "black (bad) categories" was more confusing. The "*four black categories*" usually referred to former landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries (including spies, former KMT people, and "rightists") and "bad elements," meaning common criminals. The term "*five black categories*" referred to the same people, but counted counter-revolutionaries and rightists as two groups. "Seven black categories" added two more: capitalists and "capitalist-roaders." Since one's category was inherited, the children of red families were purely red, and those of black categories unalterably black. Later, intellectuals other than those modified as being "revolutionary" were added as the ninth black category (see Link 1984:340).

background information as can be provided by an exegesis. In the translation, however, I feel only a footnote (that is not out of proportion to the original in length) can be justified; other aspects that do not seem as directly relevant in the immediate context have to be left out from the footnote.

The kind of danger resulting from inadequate translation is never greater than in a political context. In such cases the meaning can be even more implicit and a literal rendering of meaning may prove to be not only inadequate but misleading, because this may be viewed as implying a particular political perspective of the translator as well as the writer. How to fully translate the phrase “*zai san nian ziran zaihai qijian*” 在三年自然灾害期间, for instance, is such an issue, and bigger than those discussed earlier. When I first translated this phrase, it was literally rendered as “during China’s three-year natural calamity period in the 60’s”, with an in-text addition of the time indicator “in the 1960’s”. This nevertheless gave the wrong impression that it was a pure description of a historic event or period, and a critic astutely pointed out that the term was actually coined by Mao’s government to cover up the fact that the wide spread famine during the three years around early 1960’s was actually caused by the so-called Great Leap Forward (1958-59), which led to millions of deaths throughout China. It was considered that to translate the term literally at the word level would indicate the translator was either unaware of the totalitarian regime’s manipulation of language and the barriers it posed for cross-cultural communication, or that the translator is engaged in the propagation of this network of political euphemism. Clearly, it was considered grossly inadequate for a translator to translate just in a literal manner. Indeed, a translator cannot afford to be oblivious to such elements or to underestimate the barriers they pose for cross-cultural communication.

What my first translation overlooked is that the Chinese term carries for its readers multi-tiered connotations that the English term, when literally translated, does not (an example of situational default). The translation was partial, and must be extended. The Great Leap Forward (see Hsü 1990: 655, 751-771 [1961]; Grasso et al. 1991: 174) was a radical program announced at the National People’s Congress in early February 1958 for the next three years, with the goal to catch up with or even to surpass the British industrial capacity in 15 years. And along with this frenzied drive for industrialization, the government took a further step toward socialist transformation by the creation of People’s Communes. Born of Maoist idealism, its outcome was quite contrary to what his government had expected, e.g. terrible dislocations in national economy and famine that ravaged the vast land of China. By playing with words, they tried to heap blame onto the natural calamity and play down the seriousness

of human error in order to evade or, at least, lessen their due responsibilities, though it is true that other factors that ensued also played a role in the appalling consequences of the Great Leap Forward---the three years of poor harvests (1959-61) across the country; and the forced settlement of earlier debts by the former Soviet Union due to a political rift between the two communist parties at the time.

It is interesting to note that if the propaganda was successful, it was more so among intellectuals than among the “broad masses.” Most Chinese writers on the mainland used to use the term “三年自然灾害 (literally “three years of natural calamity”) when referring to this tragic period in contemporary Chinese history, even though all the time they were fully aware of the truth behind the events. The term has in a sense become a fixed “signifier” of the “signified” meaning with internally shared knowledge of its full implications, which are denied the outsider, i.e. the Chinese signifier has a different and much broader significance than its literal English translation. Without giving it a second thought, these writers used this term as readily as they would have used “table” or “room”. Unwittingly they helped perpetuate the political discourse through the power of language. By contrast, people in the street would simply say “*liuling nian*” 六零年 (the year 1960, when the famine was at its worst) and its connotation with crowded memories of the balderdash about “doing in one day what had taken the West 20 years” and of the large number of deaths as well as the untold widespread sufferings by the nation in the period etc. are all suggested and well understood. It is noticeable that more and more writers have started to use in their writings such matter-of-fact terms as “*sannian kunnan shiqi*” 三年困难时期 (the three-year period of difficulty) (e.g. in Wang, M. 1994c: 467), “*da jihuang*” 大饥荒 (the great famine) (e.g. in Chi 1998: 362) instead of “three years of natural calamity.” The different ways the tragic event has been referred to may be read not only as a reflection of the power of inertia in language use but also an indication of the political climate in which the writers found themselves. It goes a long way to suggest the atmosphere highly charged with political struggle and the strict censorship the writings had to go through in those days. Be they euphemistic, critical, or neutral, these wordings in Chinese, therefore, require at least an explanatory note when translated.

This type of difficulty is huge for the translator, and can hardly be accommodated adequately just by footnotes. Besides, this example raises another very fundamental question in translation that has been debated about for centuries, i.e. the criterion for faithfulness in translation and the degree of freedom a translator can enjoy. Being faithful to the original is indisputably the very basic requirement for translations of any kind. The implied meaning

should be made explicit by other means, such as in-text paraphrasing, footnotes or exegeses so that the reader in the target language who is not familiar with the background situation can have a full and correct appreciation of the translated text. In-text paraphrasing does not always work. For instance, we cannot translate “*zai san nian ziran zaihai qijian*” simply as “during China’s three-year period of man-made disasters around the early 1960s even though we know that natural calamity was neither the only nor the major cause of these disasters; nor can we translate “Great Leap Forward” into “Great Leap Backward” even though we are fully aware that it was truly a backward movement for the national economy. Besides, in doing so, the translator would have robbed the reader of access to the authentic discourse which carries meaning more profound than an explicit in-text paraphrase would convey. So the act of translating a phrase all of a sudden becomes a task to decode a Chinese event and the issue s related to it.

While footnotes remain the most common resort for bringing out the underlying meaning and directing the reader to further information of related interest, this resort is, unfortunately, not only much abused and often clumsy, but also not capable of such meaning-conveying tasks in many cases. We have seen translated texts overwhelmed with footnotes and I am not alone in experiencing the annoyance of the constant interruption of the reading process by lengthy notes, referred to as “a cause of coitus interruptus” by Joseph Lau (1995) in his amusing article about notes of different shapes and sizes. What is more, lengthy as they are, restricted by the annotator’s concern about their lengthiness, they cannot always be as adequate as should be. In such cases, an exegesis (e.g. in the form of a cultural commentary or literary criticism) on a translated text may be of great value. The permeating power of meaning, even at a low lexical level, is so challenging that it necessitates exegetic annotation from the translator, so it goes without saying that the need is even greater for meaning explanation at higher linguistic levels and literary and socio-cultural levels.

“*Saomang ban*” 扫盲班 (literacy classes) is another example of a connotation-rich term that puts a translator to the test. Like “three years of natural calamity,” this term carries meanings that are not carried by the corresponding English if literally translated, therefore it cannot be understood as the words literally suggest. For an informed insider, the term points directly to the national campaign launched by the Chinese government in the early 1950s with the aim of eliminating illiteracy among the vast majority of the country’s population. It carries much greater significance than the words “literacy classes” suggest, and the signifier is essential in understanding Father’s mentality in the story. The reason behind this campaign was political and economic as well as cultural. It was the labourers at the grass-root level (workers,

peasants, soldiers and so on) who comprised the majority of Chinese society. They were the main supporters of the CCP and of the government newly founded in 1949. People of those classes had generally been ruled like straw-dogs<sup>18</sup>, and their low social status and sufferings were seen partly as the consequence of their illiteracy. Now that they had been told they were the masters of the new republic as well as its builders, they had to become educated in order to qualify themselves for such new roles. Education, the traditionally much craved for privilege only available to a small portion of the population in China's long history before this point of time, was now provided to those whose families had for generations not dreamed of even entering a classroom. It was not only a dream coming true, but also a mighty lift of their social status. Although the “academic” results of the students from these classes varied greatly, with most only managing an elementary knowledge of reading and arithmetic, the message this campaign sent across the country went far beyond its practical significance. It helped to drive home the Party’s policy that the working people, the mainstay of the new republic, were truly to be trusted and relied upon. Never before in China’s long history had they been respected as “masters of the country.” That helps explain why the father in Liang Xiaosheng’s story, though leading a hard and impoverished life, and after having sacrificed so much of his life to the building of the country for so little gain for himself and his family, would still remain emotionally close to the Party and the government. These facts, and more, are all useful, even vital, information for the reader but it is obviously too awkward and clumsy to say all that in a footnote as lengthy as written above. It needs to appear in the form of an exegesis or commentary instead.

In literary translation, the way names are treated can be crucial in the understanding and appreciation of the underlying meaning by the targeted reader. For example, in *Father* we have come across the director of the Neighbourhood Committee (*jiedao zhuren* 街道主任; “street director” if translated word-for-word), for whom Father and the writer hauled back one ton of coal from a coal-yard 15 kilometres away using a handcart, in three trips, on a stormy day. This minor character must have nonetheless left a deep impression on the reader. The term in its full form is “*jiedao / jumin weiyuanhui zhuren*” 街道/居民委员会主任, therefore also known as “*ju-wei-hui zhuren*” 居委会主任 for short. Being the name of a common nation-wide organisation, every Chinese knows what the institutional term “*jiedao / jumin weiyuanhui*” 街道/居民委员会 (Neighbourhood Committee) means. It is a mass organisation of residents in China’s cities, normally composed of unemployed housewives,

<sup>18</sup> Common people were likened to straw-dogs (*chu gou* 尖狗) as far back as about the fourth century B.C. in *The Book of Way and Virtue* by Lao Zi. On the altar as sacrifice to Heavenly God, straw-dogs were most valuable; once off the altar, however, they were worthless (see Yuan 1999: 106).

and old or retired people. Supervised by the Community Administrative Office (the basic organ of political power), Neighbourhood Committees, set up in every residential quarter, are in charge of the residents' welfare (including occasional opportunities for job allotment, often of the least desirable jobs in the 1970s and 1980s). The committees reflect the residents' opinions and needs and mobilize them to answer calls of the government and observe policies and laws, leading the work of public safety and defence and mediating between residents who have disputes. Although there are similar organizations in the West, their functions are very different from their Chinese counterparts. An English reader would find it difficult to understand what such a committee actually did, even less how powerful its director could be to deserve the elderly man's service of that kind.

"Father" and "son" are very straightforward terms to translate: it would be ridiculous if a footnote is given to either. But the images the terms create are so different in their cultural connotations that they deserve further elaboration. In Western culture, a father's obligation to support his son ends when the child reaches adulthood. How close the father-son relationship stretches beyond this point remains primarily a personal choice of the parties involved. It must be equally baffling to English readers about the demand for money by the Second Son (the author) for his Third-Brother who was about to get married. Why should this grown-up child still so forcefully rely on his already aged and retired father like that? The readers may also find it hard to understand why a short letter from the father could have driven another son insane. Could it be that it is fabricated as part of the plot, a fictional technique that is not uncommon in story-writing? The fact is that it actually happened and was truly recorded---factually true, not fictionally true (see 3.2.3 below). The son happened to be the eldest son of the family, which in Chinese culture does not merely indicate seniority to his siblings but also a special identity and an unshakable responsibility for them, particularly so when the father was away. The power of the father's letter over the son came from the binding force of the ethical codes of a well-established cultural tradition that both of them had inherited.

This type of cultural background information cannot be conveyed by the normal tactics and devices of translation. To achieve the ultimate purpose of this type of cross-cultural communication, an exegesis is a recommendable option.

### **3.2.3 Literary attributes of the story**

The story *Father* tells of the life of a common urban family, particularly that of the father---"a worker, originally of peasant stock"---during a period all adult Chinese contemporaries

have experienced. Liang Xiaosheng gives a very good picture of what the life of the working class was like by the end of 1984 when the story was written. He essentially deploys the realist method to formulate Father's character in this story.

Realism 现实主义 (with naturalism sometimes used loosely as its synonym) is an exceptionally elastic critical term. Even though encompassing a broad variety of work, in literature realism is fundamentally the observation of life with objectivity and the portrayal of life with fidelity and precision, concerned with the here and now, with everyday events, with the writer's own environment and with the movements (political, social etc.) of his/her own time (see *Ci Hai*, 1979: 1206; Cuddon 1977: 552-554).

As a method or spirit in literary creation, realism has a long tradition in China, representative works of which include some pieces in *The Book of Songs* 诗经, composed during the 11th c. and 6th c. B.C), Du Fu's 杜甫 (712-770) poems, Guan Hanqing's 关汉卿 (c1213-c1297) plays, and Cao Xueqin's 曹雪芹 (c.1715-1763) novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* 红楼梦. As a literary trend, however, realism appeared only after the May Fourth New Culture Movement as a result of the introduction and assimilation of new literary trends from outside China, i.e. the 19th century European "critical realism" introduced in the 1920s and the Soviet "socialist realism" introduced in the 1930s and 1940s (see Wen, R. 1988: 2-3), which were assimilated and naturalized into domestic literary theories and practices (see Hsia, C. T. 1999: 126, 472-473 [1961]; Leung 1981; Luo, H. 1997: 95-106). In his May 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," Mao Zedong (1967b) summed up the prolonged polemical debates that preceded it, drew on the theories of Qu Qiubai and Zhou Yang<sup>19</sup> formulated in the 1930s, stressing the exigent tasks faced by writers and artists during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945), and set forth the notion that mobilizing the masses had to take priority. He established "socialist realism" as a new orthodoxy on literature and the arts, and raised two criteria for them: first, political criterion and second, artistic criterion. With the coming to power of the CCP in 1949, the "Talks at the Yan'an Forum" became official policy and those criteria and a later version of orthodoxy, i.e. combining "revolutionary realism" and "revolutionary romanticism" (Hsia, C. T.: 521), were to become oft-repeated themes of the leftist literary theory in China (Anderson, M. 1990: 1-

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<sup>19</sup> Qu Qiubai was one of the early leaders of the CCP. He visited the former Soviet Union in 1920 after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia (1917) and later, in the 1930s, joined Lu Xun in leading the New Culture Movement in Shanghai. They both issued forth with numerous brilliantly written polemics which were devoted predominantly to promoting writing for a mass audience through more popular themes and writing styles and adhering to the Party's notion of "proletarian revolution". Zhou Yang was the Communist theoretician who was later to become the most powerful figure in the Party's administration of literature and the arts. He introduced the Soviet term "Socialist realism" in 1933 (Huters 1994; Wen 1988).

75; Huters 1994: 155-159). The previous diversity of literary approaches was gradually replaced with one unified policy that required writers to join the life of the masses, and defined literature and the arts as tools subservient to politics. In the early years of the PRC, a few dissenting voices were heard, holding out for a subjective, personal viewpoint. Hu Feng, a rival literary critic to Zhou Yang in the League of Left-wing Writers since the 1930s, was such a voice. After the campaign against the “Hu Feng Anti-Party Clique” (see Wu, Z. 1992), socialist realism became the only approved concept. Hero figures became indispensable in various forms of literary work and were idealized through the over-simplification of characters<sup>20</sup> along class lines in a plot revolving on the conflict of public and private interests. Subject matter increasingly concentrated on documenting successive political movements to the detriment of aesthetic quality. When the country fell under the control of the ultra-Leftists during the Cultural Revolution, realism, with fixed formulae, was reduced to no more than a tool to serve immediate political purposes. The post-Mao era first witnessed the thorough discrediting of the ultra-Leftist literary line in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping came into power, followed by the ideological renewal of Chinese literature and critical theory. Around the mid-1980s when the story *Father* was written, the Chinese literary arena was dynamic, with continued transformation. Through the earlier stages of development (e.g. “Wound Literature,” “Introspection Literature,” and “Misty Poetry”), a momentum of change had gathered (see Liu, Z. 1988: 263-277; Wu, Y. and Ji 1990). Writers were seeking to speak out for the people. Literature was breaking faster and further away from its earlier role of being a political tool and from earlier guidelines for literary creation. The story *Father* runs directly counter to the earlier literary rut. It is not only truthful in depicting the main character Father (the author’s own father) and the social environment in which he found himself, but is also strongly critical and judgmental of the narrator (the author himself) as well as of the young woman visitor. All the characters are a far cry from the stereotypical heroes and villains common in Chinese literature in the first 30 years after 1949. Liang Xiaosheng does not whitewash life, nor does he idealize his characters. He presents his characters as individuals with all their merits and demerits, their simplicity and complexity, their orthodoxy and heterodoxy, the way they are in real life, which demonstrates his generally realist method in literary creation as well as his effort to promote intrinsic humanitarianism and social justice.

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<sup>20</sup> Guiding principles of literary creation during the Cultural Revolution included the “three-prominence” (*san tuchu* 三突出) principle and “noble-great-perfect” (*gao da quan* 高大全) characterization (see Wu and Ji 1994:45-54; Tang Y. 1995: 6-7).

The realism displayed in this story by Liang Xiaosheng seems to have gone further than normally understood. The story begins by announcing that it is a “piece of factual writing about my father.” This may very well be taken as one of the long established literary conventions--to make a story appear authentic. In story-writing, the presentation of fictional reality as factual truth is a standard literary device, to be sure. In the particular case of the story under discussion, however, it happens to be factually true. After the story won the National Prize for Short Stories of the Year 1984, Liang Xiaosheng wrote in an article “Addenda to *Father*” 关于《父亲》的遗补:

I never expected that this story would win the prize.

I wrote it for my father as well as for myself. It had been a constant desire of mine to write a story based purely on facts and *Father* is the first one written out of such a desire. *It does not consist of any made-up composition in it* [my emphasis]. Perhaps it is because it's a true story, because I wrote about my own father truthfully, and because I wrote about myself the same way as I did about my father in it, I have partiality for it. However, I did not expect my readers would too. Perhaps it is exactly because I did not expect they would when I wrote it that it did touch them somehow. (Liang, X. 1985; my translation)

It follows that Liang Xiaosheng can be counted as a realist writer in its truest sense. As he himself announced in the “Preface” to the collection of his translated works, *The Black Button* 黑纽扣 (trans. 1992), his first-hand experience of the reality of life in China had formed the basis of his writing.

For a mature novelist, reality is more than what is happening in the present or what is going to happen in the future. Reality also represents, I believe, the bedrock as well as the evolution of a culture or period of history, and is a prelude to the future. ... Pacifism, humanism, people and reality---these have been my guidelines in my life as a writer. I will not bend in the face of harsh criticism from those who follow certain modern trends. (Liang, X. 1992: 7-8)

The fact that the readers voted for this piece of memoir fiction for the national literary prize over many other more artistically sophisticated stories is itself a rather revealing message from the reading public. What is it about *Father* that fascinated and moved its readers in the mid-1980s? Is it the raw drama of human conflicts within and outside this family? Or is there a gnawing sense of something deeper? Besides the author's sincere and courageous “self-revelation”, it seems that its bold dealing with sensitive social issues as well as its articulation of the Chinese people's longing for the return of honest voices in literature and the return of intrinsic humanitarian values in human relationship (the needs of society) are also major reasons for its popularity. Its success can be seen as an indication of people's general feeling after the distortion of humanity by the string of political movements since the 1950s, and as a response to the situation where economic concerns were gradually becoming the primary factor over anything else in social life since China's economic reform around early 1980s.

A reader's recognition of or, in certain circumstances, even identification with character(s) in a story is indeed the foundation of realism. This kind of realism, with "the critical edge and humanistic thrust," as appraised by Duke (1984: 3) when discussing certain contemporary Chinese literature, is "characteristic of the finest products of traditional Chinese literature and the most individualistic humanitarianism of predominantly nineteenth-century European literature."

More can be said about the success of the story. It shows that so-called objective "facts" can be no less moving than subjective imagining (although the author also shows very direct subjective feelings in telling the story). Cuddon points out that in philosophy two basic concepts concerning reality are distinguished--the correspondence theory and the coherence theory:

The correspondence theory suggests that the external world is knowable by scientific inquiry, by the accumulation of data, by documentation, by definition. The coherence theory suggests that the external world is knowable (or perhaps can be understood) by intuitive perception, by insight. Thus, correspondence will require referential language; coherence, emotive language. The former will imply an objective point of view; the latter a subjective. But, as language interpenetrates, no absolute divisions are possible. (Cuddon 1979: 552)

After it is made clear that this story is not pure fiction, however, it must also be noted that it is in a sense not a pure biography, either. Instead of providing a photographic reproduction of life, Liang Xiaosheng seeks to give his reader, as the realist Maupassant expected a realist writer to, "a vision of it that is fuller, more vivid, and more compellingly truthful than reality itself" (see Shipley 1970: 267). Shipley goes on to clarify the point that selection and subjectivity are essential in understanding as well as in realist creation of literature by citing James Branch Cabell (*Beyond Life*, 1919: 268):

The serious artist will not attempt to present the facts about his contemporaries as these facts really are, since that is precisely the one indiscretion life never perpetrates ... In living, no fact or happening reveals itself directly to man's intelligence, but is apprehended as an emotion, which the sustainer's prejudices color with some freedom. [...] All the important happenings of life, indeed, present themselves as emotions that are prodigally conformed by what our desires are willing to admit ... In life no fact is received as truth until the recipient has conformed and colored it to suit his preferences: and in this also literature should be true to life.

Reality in literature is always something we perceive in certain ways, as it always involves selection and point of view. McLaren carries the subjectivity notion further by clarifying the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in the process of both literary creation and reception,

Any work of literature exists both subjectively and objectively. The author constructs it from his own time as an expression or projection of his subjectivity into the void of time. It then exists as an objective fact, outside time. As we read it, we both appreciate it in our own time and distance it from ourselves and from the author. (McLaren 1990: 23)

Therefore, Liang Xiaosheng's story is a piece of reality presented through his subjective view with aesthetic appeal. Although the story is closely based on facts, it is a piece of created reality. Although the story owes its success mainly to its truthfulness about everything involved in it, subjectively as well as objectively, it is the author's skilful deployment of stock literary devices---character portrayal, plotting and first person narrative, for example---that gives the related events and actions an artistic texture and his true feelings and opinions a coherent structure. Factual truth rather than fictional verisimilitude and aesthetic experience rather than a plain account of everything overlap, intermingle, and combine so well in the story that what the author claims to be a candid memoir has been acclaimed as one of the best stories of that year.

The story has all the features of a literary work. Without its literary merits, the values of all the truthfulness / facts would have been blurred or lost in the infinity of his memories.

- Character portrayal

Father's image is drawn mainly through the illustration of the ebb and flow of the incidents around him. A dramatic unity is given to the narrative of events pertaining to Father by the elimination of everything that is not essential. It is very seldom that real life provides an author with a ready-made story. Facts may often, indeed, be very tiresome. Attuning his mind to introspection, in working out the plot of the story, Liang Xiaosheng must have been assailed by many reflections and impressions. To collect all these thoughts that for so long had floated haphazardly at the various levels of his consciousness, the writer had to sort out his thoughts on the subjects that had chiefly interested and touched him during the course of his life. The early memories of a child may be incomplete, but those that remain are invariably the most vivid. (This point will be further discussed in this sub-section.)

- Non-realist literary creation method

To be purely something is often not so desirable as to be inclusive: a sea would not be as boundless and powerful if it did not draw from many rivers. It can be observed that certain ways in the deployment of literary devices in this realist story create an impressionistic effect. For instance, few details are given to the physical appearance of the central character Father, except for his "stern face" and strong physique when young, and "a face criss-crossed with wrinkles" with "a big beard" and "flaccid muscles" on his back when old. Many events are related in a matter-of-fact manner with their deeper level meaning suggested rather than expressed. As Qian Zhongshu, a highly respected and famous Chinese scholar of both Chinese and Western culture, literature and art, comments (Qian, Z. 1990: 13-14), an

impressionistic piece of work “gives the reader increasingly more to do,” stimulates him/her to “participate in the creation” and helps conjure up in our minds “the inarticulate and unexpressed.” By throwing the object into a kind of shade, it “leaves some work for the imagination” and “nothing more powerfully excites any affection than to conceal some part of its object.”

In an essay on Classical Chinese poetry and painting, Qian (1979b) agrees with a certain sinologist’s view that classical Chinese literature and art, poetry and painting in particular, are characteristic of being “*konglin*” 空灵 (intangible), “*qingdan*” 轻淡 (light) and “*hanxu*” 含蓄 (suggestive), which can be taken as one set of the Chinese literary tradition principles. The story *Father* is an exemplary piece of work as such, which skilfully combines the power of realism in writing with that of the impressionist method in painting. These two elements may be described by two Chinese characters in traditional Chinese literary and art criticism: “*xu*” 虚 (void/silence, abstract) and “*shi*” 实 (substantial, tangible). Another traditional Chinese principle in literature and art has particular regard for “*hongyun-tuoyue*” 烘云托月 (to paint clouds to set off the moon: to provide a foil for a character or incident in a literary work). The young, fashionable daughter of a high-ranking cadre depicted toward the end of the story can be seen as such a foil to Father, an anti-hero.

- Point of view

From the point of view of literary criticism, the story is masterly. The first person viewpoint best serves the author’s purpose of writing “a story based purely on facts.” Although this denies the author full access to his main characters’ thoughts and feelings, it gives the strong realist touch to the story. With the forced exclusion of psychological depiction as an effective part of the narrative, the task of character drawing (of all characters except that of the narrator) has to be left to the narrative of events as they occur in the plot. With the diverse events related and arranged in their time-sequence, the story allows the reader to experience chronologically the impoverished life and significant incidents in the family through the eyes of a single person, the author himself, who is Father’s second son and, therefore, also a character in the story.

- Language and structure / plot

In the same way that Liang Xiaosheng’s language is natural and simple and at the same time terse and powerful, which aligns him with realism and contemporary China, his fictional structure is also simple, but tightly and organically knit, invested with a special significance. First, it allows events and actions to take place in a logical manner, and allows the plot to

function so as to lead readers to the given values of Chinese culture in each of the periods covered by the plot. Secondly, the plot will be seen to function as an unfolding history of the protagonist's character, which gradually grows into a multi-dimensional figure with a rich texture and manifold colours. Thirdly, the plot subverts its traditional moralizing function of rewarding good and punishing evil. In these senses, the structure itself can be regarded as an important statement of the story.

There is rich explicit and implicit causality among episodes in the plot of *Father*. For example, the nature of Father's job as an itinerant building labourer kept him away from the family scene most of the time. There is a causal link between this factor and a series of happenings caused by it in a direct or indirect way. The story shows the blood tie between Father and his family was considerably weakened, and his control over the household affairs in his identity as "the severe master of our household, the unquestionable authority of the family" was as a matter of fact often ignored due to his absence. This causal fact gives rise to the possibility of the eldest son's going to university without the father's consent, which in turn leads to the irreversible mental derangement of the son, a chilling family tragedy.

The same unfortunate causal fact about Father's itinerant job means that, according to the housing policy at that time, he was not qualified for the allotment of a fixed dwelling house for his family, at least over a considerable period. At that time, most urban housing estates including the land were owned by the state and controlled by "work units." This difficulty eventually brought Father to his second son's place, which fortunately enabled the weakened and continually weakening blood tie between the two of them to be strengthened during Father's stay in Beijing. Without this episode, the noticeable changes in him during this period would be absent from the picture. Without those changes, Father's image would have, as the author writes in the story, become "an increasingly blurred figure," far from being as full and interesting as it is now in the story.

The fact that Father was in Beijing with his son gives rise to the insulting comment by the young woman visitor. If this causal link had been missing, the comment that triggered the conflict between the author and the young woman, which unexpectedly caused the misunderstanding between Father and Son, possibly would not have been made. It brought the story to an end with Father's abrupt departure without warning. The departure, the misunderstanding, and the conflict are all immediate causes for the writing up of this story.

The time sequence is preserved in the story, but the sense of causality overshadows it. This form of plot is capable of high development. That sense of causality runs through the story

and accounts for the events that are narrated as well as the events that are omitted. It suspends the time sequence, and it moves as far away from the story as its limitations allow. In other words, this immediate causality within the story implies a further causality beyond it, in the social and political structures of its time. The literary success of the story is partly due to the conveying of this kind of wider causality, in using an apparently normal and factual sequence of events as a critique of those who manipulate the system or profit from it. The literary devices the author deploys greatly contribute in achieving this effect.

A good writer who writes from his experience must first be a good and wise man so that he can base his writing on the strength of his own character as well as on the universality of his knowledge. Being a well-known member of the elite circle at that time, Liang Xiaosheng still felt proud of his Father, instead of setting himself high above the people of lower social strata. This reminds us of the 16th U.S. President Abraham Lincoln who, when ridiculed by his political enemies about his family background (his father was a shoemaker), showed his pride, rather than feeling ashamed, about his father.

For the readers of the original story, they share the language, therefore the assumption. The reality Liang Xiaosheng presents was recognized by many of the unprivileged as of their own, hence real to that extent at least. For the reader of the original text, this “reality” was and is read against the “reality” of the official doctrine and actual living situation; for the reader of its translated text, it may be said that the story has features that are unfamiliar not only to readers in Western countries like Australia, but also unfamiliar probably to many Chinese readers in Taiwan or Hong Kong. We have noted that those features range from the choice of words to the description of certain particular events, and from personal inclination to political standpoint. Some of these differences may be very substantial, even acutely opposing. This is where difficulties in understanding are most likely to occur. Thus, the necessary background information is needed for the reader to make full sense of the “reality” in the text.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Raymond Williams holds that literature and art create a material reality. Within this reality the conflicts of wider society can be analyzed and, possibly, resolved. By analogy, translated literary work does the same, so has it been declared by translation studies scholars (e.g. Nord 1991; Toury 1984; Bassnett and Lefevere 1998). But readers who are accustomed to literary work which follows certain established practices in their own tradition may only understand in very general terms literary work created in another tradition. They are naturally and conveniently prone to interpret the meaning the

original literary work carries, from their own life experience and knowledge structure that is constructed within their own historical and value systems, which in turn provide the fundamental codes of a culture with its own logic, its own integrity, and its own criteria. For instance, a historian may focus on the major historical events behind the story in the past few decades and their influences on common people's lives like that of Father; a writer may be interested by the character-types and plot development in the story; a politically sensitive reader may be preoccupied by the issues the young woman character brought with her into the story and the dissenting voice from the author. While the piece of reality created in a literary work may appear the same in words to all its readers, the understanding of the meaning of the same work can be different, sometimes dramatically so. In that sense, every reader also generates meaning and creates reality as he/she reads the work, but will generally do so from within the confinement of his/her own culture. It is very difficult for him/her to get out of this confinement. To become aware of interpretations that are unfamiliar to most Western readers but are real for a considerable proportion of the people in the original setting of the story should prove to be not only interesting, but a matter of considerable significance. For this very reason, this thesis argues that a translator's job is not completed when the actual translating process is over. Further "interpretation" related to cultural background of the translated work (as the title of this thesis suggests) is necessary.

### **3.2.4 Literary and cultural issues in interpreting *Father***

#### ***Father as a complex character forged by cultural tradition and economic circumstances***

The story *Father* is imbued with both a sense of the rhythm of the times and the special characteristics of the Chinese rhetoric, and the success of its characterization lies in the complexity and development of its principal character Father. It is hard to say certain characteristics of the father are meritorious or otherwise. As a son, Liang Xiaosheng writes about his father, and the father's like-minded, similar-fated fellow countrymen as a generation, with respect and understanding. The father's traditional virtues and old way of life as well as the mode of production familiar to him obviously fell behind the pace of history, but the author makes it clear that it is neither possible nor fair to expect that generation to possess the characteristics of the new age, nor is it fair to judge them by using the new age criteria. As a writer, however, he does not defend those limitations, through which he subtly as well as bluntly reveals and criticizes the nature of certain given values of Chinese culture and the way in which these values bring about social cohesion in the first

place; the economic and political mismanagement of the government which was partly responsible for the prolonged poverty and backwardness suffered by the nation; and at the same time, he shows understanding that the nation was making efforts to catch up after having lagged behind since the late Qing Dynasty. As Wang Furen (1993: 5) reasons, the moral evaluation of a literary character needs to be clearly separated from a historical evaluation of it.

From the author's childhood memory, Father is "the severe master of our household, the unquestionable authority of the family, my supporter through his manual labour, my benefactor, and the source of my fear." Finding himself with a chronically ill parent, a wife and a large young family to support, the hot-tempered Father is understandably prone to anger and austerity. Taking into account his peasant background and his needy situation, he cannot be expected to demonstrate the trait of being easy-going and financially unconcerned for the future. If Father's temperament is part of his individual personality, the impoverished condition of this working-class family is a feature of Chinese society in the early 1950's and beyond.

The Chinese people frequently sing the praises of virtues such as industry and frugality. Are these forced traits or cultivated virtues? Father in the story hated to be in debt; but as we can read most of his life during the decades since the mid-1950s onwards was packed with poverty and misfortune. One of the story-lines is formed around the family's constant financial adversity and around the few small sums of money Father had managed to save up, or the 3,000 *yuan* he supposedly had but never actually saved up. It can be said that nearly all the major events in the story are related to or influenced to a greater or less degree by the family's financial difficulties. "Eating" is the very first money-related strife of the family described in the story: the grim reality of Father's low wages verses the seven mouths to feed. "In Mother's words, the whole family was 'eating' Father every day."

The big size of the family can also be read as one of the indicators of the specific social circumstances. Over-population has been a serious problem in China for a long time. Traditionally, Chinese men were expected always to maximize achievement, to glorify their ancestors and to accumulate wealth for their descendants. Eking out a livelihood by working as a "third-grade plasterer" with a financial remuneration far from satisfactory, Father nevertheless tried hard to save up from his already meager income, even robbing himself of basic nutrition to achieve that goal. He also put unrealistic limits on the daily expenses of his household, which forced the mother to borrow from neighbours to make ends meet. He was a

failure so far as his role as the breadwinner of the family is concerned. His very humble life-time goal of possessing a small saving resulted in little success. Towards the end of the story, he was still poor. But Father's failure was not entirely personal.

It had been declared that the Party, as well as the government and the army under its leadership, all worked for the interests of the great majority of the people of China. Their sole purpose was to "wholeheartedly serve the people": the armed revolution was meant to liberate the nation and its people from the oppression and exploitation of the "three mountains" (i.e. imperialism, feudalism and official capitalism); and the socialist construction was to enable the country to become independent, prosperous, strong and rich and the people to lead a happy life in a stabilized social order. While the armed revolution was supposedly appreciated by "the majority of the people," the socialist re-construction did not fully achieve its aims because it was time and again misled or hindered by either erroneous policies (such as the Great Leap Forward) or by inner struggles for power at the top (such as the Cultural Revolution).

Father in the story emerges as a clear picture of a man in every way worthy to be regarded as the man of quality that his circumstances had enabled him to be. The tension between the quality of Father's life in the story and the official ideal to free people from poverty and suffering through revolution indicates that private ownership may have changed, but material circumstances had neither changed sufficiently, nor quickly enough for the enjoyment of the people.

As the story suggests, people like Father enthusiastically responded to the government's call for the socialist construction. Many regarded the Party as their savior. They trusted the government as working heart and soul for their best interests. They believed that they were masters of the country now and what they were doing was for the protection and building up of a new happy life for themselves. Despite the hardship they were enduring, they willingly cooperated without complaints.<sup>21</sup>

The latter part of the story shows that by the time the story was written (end of 1984), some people's living conditions, like that of the author in comparison with his father's, had somewhat improved, but new social inequalities had been generated and conflicts of interests

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<sup>21</sup> Most of those who first criticized the Party were intellectuals, encouraged to speak out by Mao's call to "let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend" in 1957. Soon after, dissident opinions were not tolerated and a purge began in the Anti-Rightist Campaign of the same year. Up to the Cultural Revolution, Mao became a man-made god riding high above the party, the government, the army, and the people, and his words were regarded as "universally applicable truth."

intensified. Although some people became rich as a result of the new policies under the Deng Xiaoping government (such as Lu Zhilao in *Apart from Love* and “Li Bai Jr.” in *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*), most were still at the losing end to the few who were privileged (such as the young woman character). Power had remained in the hands of the privileged few, rather than of the supposed “masters of the country,” the working people. Most of the material benefits that power could bring had fallen into the pockets of the few and spilled into those of their kin and some of their close followers. The story is structured by the tension between the facts it presents and the ideology which is implied as underlying and contrasting to

these facts. It is that tension which intensifies its literary as well as social significance.

Father’s hot-temper was truly a “source of fear” to his children. Coupled with his “unquestionable authority” as “the severe master of the household,” he unwittingly created tragedy after tragedy in his own home. Most of these are again related, at least partly, to his concerns for money. Therefore, Father’s failure and unhappiness may partly be seen as a personalized account of the mistakes and failures of certain government policies and their lingering effect during the period. For the two slits at the back of his second son’s new jacket ripped by another kid, Father handicapped his ten-year old son by slapping him hard in the face, without even allowing him a chance to explain. The author tells his reader the jacket was “brand-new.” Besides other possible concerns, Father must have been counting the loss of the damage in terms of dollars. His terrible act may appear less unreasonable and shocking when one considers the fact that Father sacrificed the enjoyment of being with his family by choosing to visit home only once in every three years (a trip home in every third year was subsidized by the state) in order to save up some money, and that, furthermore, Father practiced his preaching of thrifty and self-reliance to the extent that “a single cube of preserved bean curd (the size of a match-box) is divided up to last for three meals. He even begrudges a dish of stir-fry...,” as one of Father’s fellow workers revealed in the story. Finally, we need to consider the fact that a new jacket in those days involved not only a substantial amount of money for a meager family budget like Father’s, but also scarce raw cotton and cloth coupons under the government’s ration system (including nearly all daily necessities ranging from grain to soap). For children then to have a new jacket was comparable to having a new motorcycle for some in China today. Neither Father’s detestable attitude nor the handicap his rash act caused his son can be justified by these facts, but the author has counted on his readers in the source language to pick up these bits and pieces of implied information. For Western readers, to interpret Father’s behaviour with accuracy, the

implied background information needs to be made explicit to them. Father did not realize the serious consequence his almost criminal act had caused his son until towards the very end of the story, when he overheard it by accident. This happening also goes some way towards explaining the obviously estranged relationship of the son with his father, besides the latter's constant physical absence from the former's life since childhood, which is an important factor, too.

Overtly, Father's strong opposition to his eldest son's receiving higher education derives also from his monetary concerns. The reason he announced is clear and not open to argument: "I can't afford to send you to university!" After finding out that he was isolated in the family regarding this matter and his will had been defied on the sly, he flew into a rage yet almost pleaded with his son, with "immeasurable pain and the piteous imploring in his voice": "Eldest Son, do follow my advice. Don't go to university. In our family of seven, it's only me who is earning a living. I'm already over 50 and getting infirm with age. It's time you shouldered part of the load for me!" When the son did end up in a university, he wrote a letter to declare his will to sever the father-son relationship. That pressure proved too much for the son and the whole matter resulted in the mental derangement of this promising young lad for life---a catastrophe for the whole family and society.

Yet Father's given reason for his initial opposition and later over reaction in the matter is not the whole story. To understand Father's unusual attitude towards his eldest son's wish to pursue higher education, one has to look at the general cultural schema. There are covert reasons that can be sensed and pieced together to reveal the deep structures of his as well as his eldest son's inner psyche which combined to create this tragedy. These covert reasons are closely related to a Chinese cultural tradition formed mainly by Confucian teachings, a tradition that had been challenged by the new morals of the twentieth century again and again, yet remained deep and fast in people's minds.

Father's attitude to his eldest son in the matter is representative of a certain type of working-class people who had for generations been denied the chance to receive formal education. This attitude is a sharp contrast to the orthodox ideas in China. The mainstream Chinese culture holds mental labour above manual labour and reveres education, implying a certain contempt for mere physical courage and strength. The traditional Chinese way of thinking bore no nonsense about social equality. The dominant social class of pre-modern China was the so-called "*shenshi*" 紳士 (gentry)---a group formally defined as holders of official degrees earned by passing the prestigious civil-service examinations. Since the Han Dynasty

in Chinese history, the examination system had provided the major means of bureaucratic nobility and the primary avenue to wealth and power in China until the latter part of the nineteenth century (cf. Smith, 1994: 60).

On the one hand, these working-class people must have sometimes in a way admired the educated literati as Father did later in the story; on the other hand, they had long despised them as men who could “neither toil with their four limbs nor tell the five cereals apart.” Even Confucius was once ridiculed by a farmer as being such (*The Analects of Confucius*<sup>22</sup>). This trend of thought was greatly reinforced after 1949 when intellectuals other than the revolutionary ones were classified as being socially and politically inferior to the “five red categories.” They were told that they must integrate with the masses of workers and peasants, the main “masters” of the new republic. Father, from a poor peasant family background, was understandably prone to accepting these new ideas and values, which must have in turn influenced his behaviour.

Culture is never homogeneous, nor is it static. It constantly undergoes transformations in response to new stimuli. Ideas, values, and customs change, as do institutions, laws and rituals, yet such changes take place only within the framework of traditional views that often prove to be remarkably resilient. While some “workers and peasants” like Father chose to disrespectfully regard intellectuals as “pen-pushers” at certain stages in the course of their lives, others continued to admire them. Later in the story, a change of Father’s attitude in this regard is noted while he lived in Beijing with the narrator---his second son, now an intellectual---whom Father considered to have done better than himself. As the author writes,

The greatest change in Father was that he now showed a sincere reverence for intellectuals. In the past, he had called every kind of intellectual a “pen-pusher.” ... Now ... when I introduced them to Father, he would awkwardly maneuver his body into an unaccustomed pose: slightly bowing with his arms hanging by his side and his waist stooped. And a respectful nervous smile would appear on his face.

People’s general respect for the literati has been an outstanding characteristic of Chinese Civilization and deep-rooted in people’s heart and mind. Even at the time when the conflict between the old concept and the new policies occurred (as reflected in the domestic affairs in the story from mid- to late 1960s, by inference), university graduates were normally offered the best jobs and were usually the envy of their peers. Obviously the eldest son and Mother, who was the daughter of a village-school teacher, was influenced by the orthodox tradition and formed the opposing elements against Father in the earlier part of the story. Even up to

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<sup>22</sup> This book records the sayings and deeds of the great Chinese thinker and educator Confucius, compiled by followers after their master’s death.

the mid-1980s (the time the story was written) when China's economic reform had made tremendous impact on traditional conceptions and many other roads to success were also open, universities in China were still considered the most prestigious, a possible bridge leading to a successful career and a promising future for youngsters as the image of the narrator in the story indicates.

Besides Father's earlier views regarding intellectuals in general, there is a second and equally persuasive set of concepts which can be seen to have supported Father's opinions and actions regarding the matter of his eldest son's going to university. As Sun Longji, an overseas Chinese writer and scholar points out,

A Chinese fulfils himself within the network of inter-personal relationships. A Chinese is the totality of his social roles. Strip him of his relationships, and there is nothing left. He is not an independent unit. His existence has to be defined by his acquaintance. (Sun, L. 1989: 163)

This concept of man is best exemplified by the primary Confucian concept of "ren" 仁 which may be roughly translated as humanity or benevolence, and the definition given by Confucius is "love of man" (*The Analects of Confucius*). Although love of man includes self-respect, one's "humanity" can only be displayed in the presence of another person. "Ren" signifies supreme moral achievement and excellence in character in accord with the ritual norm "li" 礼, a set of generally accepted social values and norms of behaviour. And at the heart of the Confucian value system of "li" lay the Three Cardinal Guides ("san gang" 三纲) and the Five Human Relationships ("wu lun" 五伦).<sup>23</sup> The moral persuasion for fixed order in families with filial piety and obedience, in society with the obligation of loyalty and reciprocity indicates that Confucius identified personal culture with public good (Gernet 1982: 88). The Confucian ultimate aim of a stable society was achieved by educating its people with the concept of "li". The entire Confucian social and moral order was thus based on the Three Cardinal Guides, with their assumptions of inequality, subordination, and service. Smith (1994: 141) aptly observes, "Filial piety (*xiao*) and its corollary, fraternal submission (*di*) lay at the very heart of Confucianism. Mencius tells us that devotion to one's parents is the greatest service and the foundation of all other services."

It naturally follows that the overall interest of a social unit (such as that of the family, the work unit or the state) prevails over the rights of the individual in China. Co-operation is an

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<sup>23</sup> "The Three Cardinal Guides" are: ruler guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife. "The Five Human Relationships" are those between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brothers, and friends) (*Ci Hai*, 1979: 15; Sun 1989: 163).

essential part of being a member of a unit. Private interests are vested in the group. The individual therefore is considered to have no legitimate private interests separate from those of the group to which one belongs. Any attempt to set up individual interests in opposition to those of the group merely demonstrates a selfish refusal to recognize the necessity of family / social relationships and a reluctance to carry out corresponding responsibilities. Besides, a family member (especially a son, and the eldest one in particular) is expected to contribute to the family welfare rather than just strive for his/her personal interest. True self-fulfilment for the individual lies in fulfilling the required responsibilities to the greatest extent possible. Unless thus related, any individual achievement is meaningless.

The Chinese value system is based on duties rather than on rights. Therefore, it is from the

traditional moral norm of “*li*” that Father in the story demanded that his eldest son sacrifice his personal interest for the larger interest of the family. Likewise, it is from the moral norm of “*li*” that Father’s verbal brutality drew its devastating power. The tragedy resulted as much from the father’s extreme and impulsive condemnation as from the son’s psychological frailty. Father’s brutality against his eldest son’s attending university without his consent, which he took as disrespectful “deceiving” and disobeying him, as a challenge to his authority in the family, also has to do with the notion of hierarchical differences. This notion again derives from the norms of “*li*”.

The shaping force of those assumptions can be clearly observed in the tradition-bound Chinese family in the story where the Father not surprisingly was “the severe master of our household, the unquestionable authority” and the breadwinner of the family, where the mother was supposed to be benign, virtuous and obedient, and the children to show unconditional filial piety and obedience. In all cases, subjection of the self to those in authority, the elderly or the “superior” sex is demanded. The superior side in the relationship (such as that of Father with his son in the story) tends to be stern, demanding, and sometimes wilfully inconsiderate. Parents generally play an important role in shaping and directing a child’s life, especially in the child’s choice of a career. It is particularly so in China. Father’s bossy, rude attitude toward his wife and children reflects this hierarchical, patriarchal nature of old Chinese familial and societal order. The eldest son defied the hierarchical system and failed to withstand the pressure from a commonly held traditional moral demand and, though with the support of his mother, consequently broke down. Both father and son are victims of the old and new moral concepts as well as of their dire financial circumstances. Thus, the

family tragedy has its deep-rooted cultural and social reasons as well as the economic one on the surface.

The same can be said about yet another family tragedy, the unnecessary early death of the eldest daughter, due to Father's stubborn and unreasonable refusal to the treatment of his sick daughter by doctors trained in Western medicine. In this case it has to do with a different characteristic of traditional Chinese culture. Because of the *Central Kingdom*'s physical environment and its people's achievement of civilization at certain stages in its long dynastic history, the Chinese people were prone to isolationism, conservatism, and blind pride which made them tend to scorn things foreign or "barbarian". Added to such pride at a later stage were feelings of bitterness and hostility caused by China's forced and humiliating contacts with foreigners, especially in the form of wars, in its modern history, e.g. the Opium War (1840-1842), the War of Resistance Against Japan (1937-1945), and the Korean War (1950-1953), the second and the third of which Father had personally lived through. There is a small section in the original text (which was deleted by the publisher when the story was translated) in which more details about Father's early life are revealed: at six years of age, he started to work as a cow carer for a landlord; at twelve he braved the journey to the Northeast of China to eke out an existence under the ruling of KMT; later he was pressganged by invading Japanese troops to do forced labour and would have died if he had not been rescued by the anti-Japanese army in the Northeast. All these had a part to play in the formation of his ideological consciousness and way of thinking. Unfortunately, Father's mentality of superiority was no longer grounded on concrete material and spiritual strength, but on his ignorance and narrow-mindedness as a result of the complacent, conservative, and exclusive attributes of the traditional and new beliefs. "Yet Father never thought he was in any way responsible," the author tells his reader. "In his opinion, Elder Sister had definitely been poisoned by those two tablets of Western medicine."

Father would not openly admit this or any other of his mistakes, be it for the terrible mental and physical impairment of his two sons or for the early death of his eldest daughter, let alone for the minor hurts his foul temper and peasant mentality had inflicted upon the family as a whole. He was not totally unaware of those mistakes all the time, though. The author relates in the story that after this first daughter's death,

One evening I saw with my own eyes that Father stealthily put a pack of medicinal herbs into the stove. The room was soon filled with their bitter and astringent smell. Father stood woodenly in front of the stove. The fire radiated through the crevice between the stove-covers, casting flickering light on his face. He looked so grave that a trace of grief could be sensed in him.

If this scene does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that Father was remorseful over the part he played in the tragedy, the other act undoubtedly does. His unexpected, unconditional moral and financial support to his second son's desire to go to university was a sharp contrast to his earlier excessive hostility against his eldest son's effort of exactly the same kind. We can see this as an indication of his remorse and as an act to atone for the "crime" he committed unwittingly. The inability to openly admit mistakes is a sad but common trait. In some cases, this inability can lead to worse errors: lying, boasting, even malicious slandering, as if by making others appear to be wrong, or by forcing others to make mistakes will enable one's own mistake appear less serious.

The mood of the story is coloured from the beginning to the end by the grim living circumstances in the family and the tragic-ridden string of events that happened to its members. It is not just the tragedies that are closely related to their impoverished situation, though. Father's love for his family, rarely shown in verbal terms, is demonstrated against the background of poverty and powerfully set off by it as well. The reader can pick these messages up without difficulty. We have read in the story that the narrator's tender memory of his first experience of paternal love relates to a bowl of corn gruel and Father's vision of his sons' future (which was envisaged by him as depending on their physical strength). Father was consistent in his belief and his love was genuine, despite the irony that he failed in the end to turn into reality his vision that his sons would live off their muscles as he did---the eldest son ended up in a mental hospital, the second (the author) became a well-known writer, and the third, though working in a factory, was not entirely a manual worker but a "cadre" of some sort, "the branch secretary of the Youth League."

A similar scene of love and care can be observed in the story when the normally stingy Father, at his second son's request from the Great Northern Wilderness, promptly remitted 200 *yuan* by telegraphic transfer to help him start higher education.

I walked in the drizzle, slowly. A voice full of sympathy sounded in my ear, "It is really hard for Old Master Liang to support such a big family all by himself! He is very, very thrifty. A single cube of preserved bean curd is divided up to last for three meals. ..." Those were the words spoken to Mother by one of Father's fellow workers when he called on us.

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I strolled far away from our encampment. Hiding myself in between two piles of timber, I wept uncontrollably.

Even their rare moments of love were tinged with sadness under the shadow of poverty. In the end, the son did not use the sum of money as intended. Nonetheless, he had reason to be grateful.

Indeed, he had reason to be grateful to his father in more ways than one. From the specific

events recited in the story, it can be inferred that the son was admitted to university during the Cultural Revolution when the university students were recruited at grass-root levels, largely through “recommendations” by the authorities (e.g. the authorities of a factory, a village, an army unit) rather than academically examined for admission. The candidates’ family background as well as their general “behaviour” was the main “recommendation criteria.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the father’s “red” class status must have been an indispensable prerequisite for his being recommended for university attendance. There was a prevalent saying during the Cultural Revolution: “The poorer, the more glorious.” It sounds absurd today but the underlying message it carries was profoundly true and real in those days. Liang Xiaosheng does not specify this tier of meaning because it is self-explanatory to the Chinese reader once the approximate period of the occurrence has been indicated in the story. The mere indication of a time period, however, not only reveals a specific fact but also provides an undertone, which is perhaps of even greater significance than the obvious meaning and should be fully conveyed to the reader in translation as well.

Our understanding of what we read is based to a great extent on our personal experience. The bowl of corn gruel the youngster was urged to eat by his father, or the 200 *yuan* (roughly worth US\$25 at the present exchange rate) the father sent to his second son, may appear to hold next to no significance to Western readers, and possibly not to the younger generations of urban dwellers in China today. At that time, however, 200 *yuan* was a considerable sum (and worth much more than it is now), especially so if we keep in mind that it equals half a year of Father’s salary and was saved from each of Father’s meals while doing heavy manual labour. But anyway the true love and care brimming in the bowl of gruel and borne by the money-notes, carry a meaning that should in no way be only taken at its apparent face value. The misunderstanding and squabble between Father, Mother, and their sons over the imaginary 3,000-*yuan* savings carries the same bittersweet substance that deeply touches one’s heart.

### ***Father as a character developing with age and the new culture of the 1980s***

In the story, Father gives the reader an insider’s view of some of the basic characteristics that traditional Chinese culture inscribed on a traditional working-class member. It illustrates the moulding influence of the cultural tradition on human beings and the way in which human

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<sup>24</sup> The system of tertiary entrance examination was not restored until after Deng Xiaoping came into power in the late 1970s. The year 1977 saw the first group of university students who earned their admission through academic examinations after the ten-year Cultural Revolution. 1977 was also the year in which Liang graduated from Fudan University, as mentioned at the beginning of this Chapter.

nature can be deformed by hard living circumstances. Through the portrayal of a complex, vivid, and truthful character, Father, the embodiment of an old style Chinese family man of the working class, “originally of peasant stock” “from Shandong Province,”<sup>25</sup> becomes alive: hot-tempered and full of vigour, industrious and thrifty, strongly self-reliant and self-denying, unyielding to all sorts of unbearable hardships and misfortunes in life. At the same time, however, he was ignorant, tyrannical, conservative and narrow-minded, blinded by outdated beliefs and deformed by the pressure of poverty. He was a backward peasant in an urban scene, his ability falling short of his ambition.

Father is an individual in the process of development, not a created character of a fixed type. The author’s lifelike portrayal successfully shows the subtle changes of his protagonist’s

temperament and conceptions through depicting the changes in his attitudes and actions. The way in which Father’s attitude towards his two sons’ going to university changed from absolute opposition to strong support is soul touching not only because of the backdrop of the tragic happening related to the eldest son or the financial significance regarding the sum of hard saved money, but, more importantly, because of a deeper layer of meaning underlying the surface reasons. It is hinted in the story that the money was for the purpose of presenting gifts to people who had the control over the limited recommendation quota, a prevalent practice of the time. Therefore to give the required money meant a painful effort on Father’s part to bend his principle of life as an upright and strongly self-reliant man. It may be understood that he yielded because his sense of guilt and the demand of circumstances were too great for this normally unyielding man to bear. But it is more likely that he did so out of love for his son. He would not have done it if it had been for himself. A mixed trace of loving-sadness and rage, and the feeling that he had no alternative but to yield to reality can be strongly sensed.

If this range of feelings is not spelt out and can only be guessed at by the reader, then the tearful grief of the aged, overwrought Father when transporting coal from afar in the rain, using a primitive handcart, for the head of the neighbourhood committee is only too obvious.

The story goes:

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25 “Shandong men” are known for their tall and sturdy build, forthrightness, and strong sense of justice, representative of “northern men” in China. In comparison, most of China’s gallant scholars are from the South, and are characterized as being refined and tasteful in behaviour and untrammelled in spirit, normally short and slight of stature.

I could see clearly his desperate face, a face criss-crossed with wrinkles. Each wrinkle seemed to be an exclamation mark and there were more of them on his face than in the letter he had written to Elder Brother ...

Rain was dripping down his old face.

I knew it was not just rainwater. His wide-open, hollow eyes, his twitching cheeks and his trembling lips told me ...

Then the author relates this deeply engrained sad moment with a previous one: "That downpour reminded me of another wet evening several years before, the evening I hid myself in between two piles of timber near our team's encampment and wept aloud." In order to help his younger daughter secure a job opportunity, Father was not only forced to bend his principle, gone with that principle was his life-long belief in physical strength upon which this principle on life had rested, and his self-respect as well. Hence the depth of his grief and pain.

Towards the end of the story, the older Father went to stay with his second son in Beijing because "after your younger sister got married, it became really crowded at home. As a last resort, I've come to trouble you ..." At this point, Father was remarkably different from what he had been when young. As mentioned earlier, he stopped looking down upon intellectuals who, he used to believe, made an easy living by pushing their pens rather than by using their physical strength. He now "showed a sincere reverence" for them. "He became reasonable, good-tempered, and forbearing, in or out of the home, at all times." He "took on as much of the housework as possible" and established a close tie with his grandson. He developed (or is it possible that he merely showed what he had not shown before?) an amiability of disposition that enabled him in a short time to make friends with people all around him. This sociable gift, coupled with his caring acts for the neighbourhood, won him high respect in the form of verbal praise as well as tangible advantages he enjoyed in the community.

These facts powerfully set off not only the limitations of the son but also the inner strength of the father. The son was supposed to take a protective filial role at that point of time. Interesting enough, we see a physically weak old father seeking a reaffirmation of his independent identity under the shadow of his son's success as a celebrity writer. In this role-reversal, however, Father did not relinquish all of his parental authority. He tried hard to keep his dignity, integrity, and self-esteem as he grew older, and with remarkable success. Meanwhile, he developed such gentle traits as sensitivity, modesty and prudence. Yet at the very end of the story we see the Father of the same firm character as at the very beginning. Is this a father to be loved and thanked for all his efforts and sacrifices for the family, or a villain to be hated and cursed for all the hideous things he did to the family with agonizing consequences?

### *Father as an image of one social polarity set off by a different socio-cultural type*

Father is so authentically presented that many of Liang Xiaosheng's readers would be able to identify certain things which correspond to those of older members of their own families. In a sense he is no longer just the father of the author, but rather an image of a cultural type, of a class, and of an age. Liang presents an incomplete yet quintessential biography of his father, setting it firmly against the family as well as the larger cultural and social background which serve as the breeding ground that largely explains the formation of Father's character. Straitened circumstances may have severely impaired Liang Xiaosheng's characters' ability to cope, having saddled them with perplexity, apprehension and depression; nonetheless, their stoicism, adaptability and fortitude, their endurance in dire circumstances, and their optimistic trust in a brighter future are there all the time. Dignity constantly peaks through the screen of their disadvantaged, even blighted, lives. We find among them an unambiguous sense of morality, a clear concept of self-respect, balanced by kindness and compassion for others and a willing hand of service to the community and society.

This they achieve despite the hardships they faced, despite a rapidly changing society that all too often left them staggering and floundering in its wake while corruption and other social problems compounded their hardships. The lives they led may have been little touched by modern influences, humble and rough yet sincere, and from a humanistic point of view, no less grand and noble to some of their contemporaries, particularly their descendants on a higher rung of the social ladder. The author implies in the story that if one cannot truly understand Chinese working-class people, one cannot truly understand Chinese culture:

It is just those people, thousands upon thousands of them who could not get the chance to enjoy education in the course of history but had been making Civilization all the time, that formed the solid foundation of our country and our nation, just as strata of aqueous rocks amassed and solidified through the years all over our 9,600,000 square kilometres territory!

Imperfect and plain as they are, these people are the very citizens upon whom the Chinese nation has largely been and will be founded. In Father, we find a celebration of this type of Chinese. The author sees his protagonist, as well as his Father's generation, as part of a deep-rooted Chinese tradition that is unlikely to disappear with their passing. Lin Yutang's (1939: 16) insight about common people is that of a shrewd and informed insider: "Individually they are naught, but taken in the aggregate they influence to a very large measure the course of national events."

Viewed from a Marxist point of view, Liang Xiaosheng's familial, socio-cultural setting of human relationships is conditioned by his characters' externally-imposed poverty and lack of power as well as the internal, inherited pressing concepts of tradition. The two family

tragedies are glaring examples of the deforming force of these factors. This fact formed an irony: Father was supposed to be in the class the revolution was supposedly to free from the fate of being disadvantaged or victimized members of natural and social circumstances, but it was the narrator who had found a degree of freedom from that fate by escaping from that class. This implicit irony is for a Chinese reader to dig in and find out, but missing for a non-Chinese reader without an intimate knowledge of 20th century Chinese history. Later in the story, this issue is complicated by the introduction of the girl visitor, a member from the opposite social polarity.

The extravagant yet pitiable life of the privileged few, like the girl visitor in Liang's story is used to achieve the artistic effect of prominence for Father, through contrast. It will be remembered that throughout the story so far the reader has been led into the worry-ridden and impoverished life of Father, an obscure, ordinary labourer, as common as a leaf in a forest. To enable his daughter to have a better chance of getting a job opportunity he stretched himself to the extreme, psychologically as well as physically, by slaving in his old age for the "official" of the lowest possible rank in China. He was forced to live humbly in his married children's places, after having worked all his life as a construction worker and after having built "countless buildings."

By contrast, the young woman "had tasted all the delicacies in the world" and as a result lost her sense of taste, so she "mixed up salt and sugar and sprinkled some chilli oil on top of it" in her effort to find her sense of taste again. She could travel to big cities and visit well-known young writers "just for fun," staying in the homes of her father's old comrades-in-arms from the past or in first-class hotels "all the way from the South to the North." She could choose to work or not to, and decide what sort of work to do, just as she would like. In her own words, "I'm a free citizen!... It all depends on how I feel..." In an imperfect world, all these were pointing to a perfect life. But unfortunately, perfection has one defect: it is apt to be dull. Her days were deeply depressing due to suffocating boredom. The depression was not caused by any immediate concerns of survival but by her callous insouciance and refined sorrow caused precisely by "the fact that she had nothing to worry about," similar to the situation in which "a tiny insect" is "about to drown in honey."

Not only pleasure and power, but also fame becomes her pursuit. She talked as though the affairs of the whole country were her private business, but her very act of seeking to meet young celebrities proves that she was herself actually of small account. All she was enjoying was merely her father's fortune and power. On the one hand, she showed her apathy to the

primary living problems of the common people, and on the other hand she stated with emotion some high-flown protestations and solutions to these problems, but refused to deal with any serious topics, be it about literature or about life.

The girl visitor can be recognized as a representative of some younger members of the so-called “privileged stratum,” i.e. children of some senior bureaucrats, who adopted the stance of their elders. By introducing the anti-hero who was the subject of common public disapproval, if not yet of stern condemnation, in 1984 when the story was written, Liang Xiaosheng was actually killing two birds with one stone. As mentioned above, this new character made the protagonist appear so much more respectable and estimable. At the same time, an anti-hero in that image effectively helps the story enlarge the scope of its subject matter and considerably amplify its social meaning as well as its artistic power. Underlying the juxtaposition of the two characters is his awareness of the general discontent among urban citizens in the 1980s. This discontent grew into a sense of acute grievance due to newly emerging social inequalities and the prevalent malpractice of official nepotism and corruption in the government and in its business sector.

Neither pleasure hunting and fame seeking nor her luxurious and carefree life is to be cursed, to be sure. What Liang Xiaosheng shows and condemns is her contempt for the common people who happened not to have her luck. Like Father, she is a tragic figure, if not more so, only that the roots of her tragedy are differently based. And, make no mistake about it, what rankled the author most is that she insulted his own Father and his own son, though inadvertently. Liang Xiaosheng’s denunciation of her is forceful and bitter in the story, but the reader knows he did not say it all to her face on the spot.

Indeed the young woman had no right to show contempt for people like Father. Ignorant and illiterate as they were, it was their very sweat, even tears and blood, that watered and nurtured the “small flowers in small patches of rich soil” like her. Stripped of all the external things such as fame and gain, especially when those are inherited rather than earned, such people would be worth very little. Their relative positions to the masses can be likened to that of a grass on the top of a mountain and those of tall trees at the bottom of a valley---the grass is in a higher position only because it is lucky.

Why the author did not rebuke the young woman there and then is an interesting enigma to be solved. Is it because he was too angry to find his voice? He has told his readers earlier in the story that even after he had corrected his stammer acquired in his childhood, “when it was necessary for me to ‘argue strongly on just grounds’, I often stammered or fell silent, as

if I was lost for words because reason was not on my side.” Was it because she was a young woman? As an old Chinese saying goes, “A good man does not quarrel with a woman.” Could it be that he was so sickened with her that he did not want to spend a minute longer with her? Lu Xun once remarked that the highest degree of contempt for a person was to ignore him, without even turning one’s eyes in that person’s direction. Or could it be possible that he failed to pursue an argument for fear of offending the young woman and her powerful relations? If this was the case, he must have found his courage later. This event and the father’s sudden departure shortly after he overheard their conversation go some way towards explaining the existence of the story for us to read and interpret now.

Liang Xiaosheng’s picture of the young woman is not entirely one-sided. As a reader, my impression of her drawn from the story is that she is attractive and frank, though naive and biased. She showed her true inner-self to a new acquaintance, and writer too, despite the fact that she at first assumed as a matter of course that this well-known writer was from a prestige family background similar to her own. She was young anyway. Age and living experience related factors do contribute to the way a person thinks and acts. It would be the case that just as Father’s backward concepts were excusable to the son, had he not been so angry at the moment then, Liang might have found the young woman’s fallacious views easier to forgive. Father’s views are either seriously limited or completely blocked by the way he had to live as well as by the cultural tradition into which he had been born. By the same token, the young woman’s views are also moulded by the social circumstances in which she found herself. The way she lived at the top of the social scale, surrounded by families of high-level party leaders and government officials, clearly did not offer an opportunity to examine the lives of those at the bottom of society, let alone to personally experience life at those lower levels. Due to the huge class difference, the small savings Father had tried so hard to make in the better part of his life would have been mere pocket money to her. Father’s curiosity over the foreign-made car provoked her contempt for she might well have had a better car at her disposal. She noticed the size of the author’s office and instantly associated it with dancing, while for Father and Son the space only meant a temporary bedroom for them at night. She made “horizontal” comparisons between other Chinese outside her living circles and herself as well as between China and advanced Western countries, and felt dissatisfied, while Father made “vertical” comparisons between his sufferings in childhood and the life he was currently leading, and felt it was better anyway.

Calling for understanding between people of all kinds may be understood as one of the themes of this story. Understanding between people (between individuals, groups,

generations...) and between nations, cultures... is an old, yet constantly new topic. We do not look down upon others just as we respect ourselves; we do not regard others as being noble just as we consider ourselves common members in society. It is only with such an attitude, i.e. with a mutually genuine and well-intentioned desire to understand each other and from a common standpoint of equality, that any true understanding can be achieved. This aspect of the story actually points to the ultimate purpose of translation of any kind--adequate understanding for effective communication.

At the end of the story a much changed Father appears again as the unbending Father he had been at the beginning, and he leaves without saying good-bye to his son. It has a chilling effect on the reader---this is the second time in the story that he intended to sever the father-son relationship: the first time declared in writing to his eldest son; the second time done in action to his second son. With a deeply hurt heart, he was travelling away in a direction that he must have felt to be the only way left open to him, while the second son was determined to bring him back. To achieve this, a mutual understanding between the two of them has to be reached. The story ends with a straggle of dots rather than a full stop.

# Chapter 4 Families in Society (2): *Apart from Love* by Chi Li

## 4.1 Translation 2 *Apart from Love*

### Apart from Love

By Chi Li

Besides a scalpel, what fascinates Zhuang Jianfei most is sports. Although he is always a loser no matter what ball game he plays, he is a great spectator, an expert in fact, so much so that he can correct the misjudgment of a first-rate international referee and point out the inexperience of a coach.

He has been watching sports events ever since he was in his mother's womb. Back then it was merely her courtesy towards his father; nevertheless, it seems that he has benefited from this antenatal education. The past 30 years have convinced him that he has developed an unusual sense of attachment to sports. A sports field is invariably the scene of bustling activity filled with vigour and vitality. It is free from polished deception or affection but full of the beauty of strength and of competition. On display here is a distilled form of life without its usual commonplaces. Highlighted here is the finest wisdom of fighting. How can a man be truly called a man if he is not fascinated by sports!?

Before today, therefore, it was beyond Zhuang Jianfei's wildest imagination that he would miss the TV coverage of the Uber Cup women's badminton final and the Thomas Cup men's final. He simply has to watch an international-level final when a Chinese team is involved. First the whole Surgical Department, and then the entire hospital, has learned this passion of his over the past six years of his working there. The Head of Department does not put him on night shift if there is an important sports event on the evening, as a matter of course; nor has he for tonight, as usual.

Dr Zeng is a doctor-in-charge, known as the second scalpel in the Surgical Department. He is in his early fifties, with clear fair skin and good taste in clothes. In recent years, his heart has been playing up so he has given up watching sports games. To satisfy his habitual craving, he relies on listening to match descriptions and final results. In his opinion, China's sports commentator Song Shixiong is too passionate, his voice too sharp, and his wording often inappropriate. Therefore, Zhuang Jianfei becomes his ideal commentator. It so happens that Zhuang loves to ponder over a match with someone afterwards. Therefore, the young and the old have formed a perfect pair. Before leaving work today, Dr

Zeng waited for Zhuang at the bottom of the stairs. "See you tomorrow, Dr Zhuang," he said. Zhuang Jianfei replied with their mutual understanding, "Yes. Tomorrow."

If it had not been for the Uber Cup final this evening, they would not have bothered to say anything like that. As colleagues seeing each other every day, they might at most have said "Hi."

As usual, Zhuang Jianfei's wife Ji Ling had their dinner ready when he got home today. What was different was that, instead of pacing around the dinner table while rolling up his sleeves and complimenting, "Hey, wonderful dishes!" he kept looking at the clock.

Before the meal was over, the game began. Zhuang Jianfei immediately put down his bowl and went to sit in front of the TV in the lounge.

The final was between China and Korea. As everyone knew, this small country Korea, in just a few years, had sprung into the sports world like a hungry tiger down from a mountain, threatening to swallow the whole world. This game would be a bloody battle.

The first women's singles player for the Chinese team was Li Lingwei. She looked somewhat sluggish. The commentator explained that this queen of the world badminton circles had just suffered several days of high fever. Hitting the back of his chair, Zhuang Jianfei instantly broke into a sweat. Sure enough, Li Lingwei lost the first set. "Oh, damn!" Zhuang Jianfei shouted at the screen. He guessed the team doctor must have sneaked into his position through a back door, a fellow only interested in going abroad and in gaining foreign currency. How could he fail to cure just a high fever? He should have given her an infusion of sylvite. Otherwise, how could she gain strength in the circumstance?

Fortunately, Li Lingwei kept up appearances by winning the second and third sets, and gained one precious point for China.

Zhuang Jianfei wiped his sweat with one hand and, with warm applause, welcomed the second women's singles player Han Aiping. He sensed a redoubled feeling of empathy towards players from Hubei Province as if he was related by blood to them all. Great! Han Aiping was tough and well seasoned. She beat a small young Korean girl with a sure hand in almost no time. Since she had won the first and the second sets, there was no need to play the third.

China's third women's singles player was the new talent Gu Jiaming. A little girl from Hubei again. Zhuang Jianfei could not help feeling excited.

Before Gu Jiaming entered the court, Zhuang Jianfei's wife Ji Ling, without any warning, stepped squarely in front of the screen.

"I bet you Gu Jiaming will win!"

She did not move aside.

"What's the matter with you?" Zhuang Jianfei had not noticed, until that moment, his wife looked extremely serious. He hoped nothing would go wrong, not then in particular. With a hopeful smile to head off a disaster, he said, "Come on! Sit here and watch the game with me. My mother always does with my father."

"I'm not your mother," said Ji Ling.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Isn’t it true? I am not your mother.”

Zhuang Jianfei found it impossible to go on smiling. “All right then. The third round has started.”

Turning her head away, Ji Ling stood there firm and erect.

“Please step aside,” Zhuang Jianfei demanded.

Ji Ling just turned her head to another direction.

“Ji Ling, I request that you step aside!”

“Great!” behind Ji Ling the commentator exclaimed in high excitement.

Ji Ling smiled. With a slight sway of her body, the TV went off with a crackle.

“What are you doing!” up jumped Zhuang Jianfei.

“Turning off the TV.”

“Who asked you to?”

“No need for me to ask anybody for approval.”

“You really are being unreasonable!”

“Who is unreasonable? With little effort, you should be able to recall that you have looked at nothing but the clock ever since you entered the door. I said nothing. I worked inside the kitchen all that time. I’ve been waiting for you to ask me.”

“Ask you what?” Zhuang Jianfei quickly searched his memory but could not think of anything. Everything was normal. “I don’t remember anything that needs discussion. If there is, please remind me. Now turn the TV on, quickly,” he said.

Shaking her head sadly, Ji Ling closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they were brimming with tears. “No! I won’t!” she shouted at him, her voice full of grievance.

Seizing her arm, Zhuang Jianfei tried to drag her aside while Ji Ling struggled to hold her ground, kicking him.

The TV was now turned on. Gu Jiaming smashed a beautiful killing smash. The commentator exclaimed again: “Wonderful!”

Ji Ling rushed at the TV and pressed the button with all her strength; Zhuang Jianfei followed and clasped her around the chest. Ji Ling scratched her husband with her sharp, varnished nails. In an instant she succeeded in taking possession of the TV set, her hair dishevelled like that of a lion. “Well! You’ve come to blows! You’ve hit me!” she was crying. “Zhuang Jianfei, you son of a whore!”

Staggering back a few steps in astonishment, Zhuang Jianfei stared at his wife as if she were a wonder. This was certainly not the Ji Ling he had been in love with for two years and married to for half a year. His Ji Ling was the studious, pure sweetheart from whose mouth no dirty words were ever heard. At this awkward moment, he even felt like laughing. This magical change in his wife made him feel cheated. But who could ever cheat him? Who had ever succeeded in cheating him before?

Beating her chest, Ji Ling continued to yell tearfully: “Hit me! Hit me here if you have the guts! Come on and beat me to death! You are a damned cowardly bastard if you don’t dare!”

Zhuang Jianfei gripped a cup in his hand.

This cup was one of a high-quality imported coffee set, jade green in colour and with an exotic design. It brought the past clearly into view---it was just before their wedding day and the two of them, braving heavy rain, ran around all over the three towns of Wuhan in search of a coffee set to their liking. Disappointed and tired, they dragged their way into a store to take a breather. It was a newly opened wholesale store and, up there on the display shelf, this translucent jade green coffee set sparkled with lustre. Spontaneously they reached out for each other with a happy exclamation and said, "That's it!" They bought it. Each cup cost them 8.99 *yuan*. Neither of them hesitated over the high price. The moment that linked their hearts in common beat was an invaluable thing that no money could buy. Ever since then the coffee set had been highly cherished in their home.

Now Zhuang Jianfei raised the cup and smashed it against the floor. Amidst the sound of breaking to his great satisfaction, he heard Ji Ling shrieking, her voice sharper than the broken glass: "Ah! You son of a bitch!"

The Bank of China is a lofty Western-style building made of huge blocks of granite. Zhuang Jianfei climbs to the top of its stairs and sits down there on this June evening, finishing five ice-lollies at one go. After having re-assessed his marriage, he cool-headedly realized the basic reason why he had wanted to get married: sex.

Zhuang Jianfei was born into an intellectual family. His father is an expert in critical interpretation of ancient Chinese texts and his mother a professor of contemporary literature in a Chinese department. Both of his parents are career-oriented. When Zhuang Jianfei was still a little boy they had both made considerable contributions in their respective fields. Growing up amid "seas of knowledge and mountains of books," as a Chinese saying goes, he was gifted, intelligent, and fond of book learning too. He was always at the top of his class and grade all the way from primary school to university. His shortcoming was well concealed: he was always trying to do something beyond the bounds of propriety, hiding away from the eyes of others.

As early as in his infancy, Zhuang Jianfei experienced a special kind of pleasure from his genitals. Nobody prompted him. He learned it all by himself. Just before graduating from primary school, he learned from *A Handbook for Barefoot Doctors* that there was a disgusting name for this thing: wanking. For a while he stopped his underground activities. However, puberty overwhelmed him with the momentum of an avalanche. Late at night, shutting himself in his small room, he visualized to his heart's content the pretty girls whom he would not deign to look at during the day, and satisfied himself wantonly. In the daytime he was the son of a professor, a good student, followed with interest and praised everywhere. He found favour in the eyes of many a girl student yet treated them indifferently, one and all. He did not allow them to visit him at home in order to gain his parents' trust. His mother would definitely prefer to die should she get to know it all.

Zhuang Jianfei's way of doing things was foolproof, and foolproof for many long years. Anyone who thinks that all masturbating men look effeminate or have narrowing lecherous eyes would be definitely fooled. The difference between a gentleman and a lout is just that the former hopes to get

married after masturbation while the latter develops into rape or promiscuity. Zhuang Jianfei was a gentleman. He intended to get married.

In theory, getting married does not simply mean securing a sleeping partner. Zhuang Jianfei was clear about this of course. Marriage means setting up a family, finding a lifelong companion and creating a stable social unit. Based on such sensible considerations, Zhuang Jianfei restrained his yearning for the other sex, suffering hunger and thirst, until the age of 29 and a half when he married Ji Ling. It seems to him now that attaining such a mature age does not guarantee reliable judgment in dealing with such a matter. The problem is that he was in that hungry state in which a person ceases to be choosy about his food. Why did he have to do it by stealth? Why should he suffer the hunger and the thirst? He felt a grudge but did not know against whom.

Sitting on the top step of the Bank of China, eating ice-lollies, Zhuang Jianfei stares at the street below in a trance. With mixed feelings, his thought turns to Mei Ying.

Mei Ying is a surgeon in another Wuhan hospital. She is the type of woman with a full figure and graceful bearing. Her body sends out the message of being within sight but not within reach. At an ordinary small-scaled academic meeting, Zhuang Jianfei and Mei Ying sat next to each other. For the whole afternoon, Zhuang Jianfei was conscious of an indistinct whiff of savoury milk that came from underneath the flimsy summer wear of the seat next to him. Usually she should have smelt of disinfectant. When taking notes, she would put on a pair of gold-rimmed glasses; otherwise she took them off and placed them on the folding table. In the middle of the meeting, Mei Ying accidentally knocked her glasses off the table but Zhuang Jianfei did not let the glasses land on the floor. He caught them nimbly as if fishing out the moon from the bottom of the sea.

Only then did Mei Ying cast her eyes at Zhuang Jianfei. "Thanks," said she. "Reading glasses," she added.

On hearing "reading glasses," Zhuang Jianfei could not help smiling. He joked, "Must be a souvenir from your grandmother."

Mei Ying smiled too.

After a while, Mei Ying said in a low voice, "My name is Mei Ying."

"My name is Zhuang Jianfei."

They laughed together, finding it funny to introduce themselves in such a formal way.

The meeting was over and everyone else dispersed; but they both hesitated to go. They had conversed congenially and would like to go on. Therefore, they went together to a restaurant for dinner.

Although it had been over three years now, Zhuang Jianfei could still accurately recall the details of that meal.

Walking ahead of him, Mei Ying led the way directly into a private room on the second floor of a Sichuan-styled restaurant, the Lotus Restaurant. In a poised and easy manner she took a seat and briskly yet courteously gave her orders to the waiter, as the mistress of the house would to her servant: "Just some ordinary dishes---diced chicken with red chilli, saute pork liver, shredded beef with special hot sauce and a bowl of vegetable soup."

Zhuang Jianfei inwardly gasped in admiration and felt ashamed of his inferiority. Before, he had prided himself for having had a good upbringing. Now it dawned upon him that he was totally ignorant about food. He was captivated by Mei Ying's demeanour.

After the dinner, their hearts as well as their stomachs became hot. As they strolled along a narrow path in an unknown park, Mei Ying showed Zhuang Jianfei a way forward in his career.

"You shouldn't be doing abdominal cavity surgery. In Wuhan that's Qiu Fazu's territory. He once studied in Germany and has a German wife to back him up. No matter how beautifully you are able to flourish a scalpel, you'll never outstrip him in reputation. Kept down by him for a decade or two and you'll be a loser for life. Do what you can at once and transfer to thoracic cavity surgery. There are famous experts in this area too, but you are young and full of energy, your eyes are sharp, your hands quick, and your wrist strong. There's no doubt you can do better than them. I sense you have the potential to take advantage of rapidly developing new techniques; and thoracic cavity surgery is particularly popular right now. You will get a good head start in this field."

Thinking of all the experts all over the country in this branch of the profession, Zhuang Jianfei, green as he was, naturally felt skeptical. "Can I do it?"

"Yes!" Mei Ying gently thumped his solid arm with a fist. "I'm sure about my prediction. You are ... one in a million."

Later Zhuang Jianfei gave serious thoughts to Mei Ying's suggestion and decided to accept it. Shortly after the change of academic field, he was unexpectedly involved in a rather complicated surgery for ductus arteriosus. Still more unexpectedly, the operation turned out to be a miraculous success. It aroused a sensation throughout the hospital and many people looked at him with new eyes.

Zhuang Jianfei went secretly to Mei Ying's home. In her homely nightgown, her hair tied up high, Mei Ying was radiant with happiness. On the table was a celebratory meal. As soon as the door was closed behind him, Zhuang Jianfei embraced her feverishly. Nestling close to him, Mei Ying caressed his newly shaven bluish stubble and asked what he would like to drink, wine or spirits.

Zhuang Jianfei answered, "I'll just drink you!"

When Mei Ying's body was laid in front of him, however, he was shy and clumsy---it was his first.

Mei Ying laughed. "I am more than willing to help you. I mean it!" she said.

Zhuang Jianfei had always been a brilliant pupil. Within that single short night, he not only completed his apprenticeship, but even demonstrated his possibility of surpassing his master. At dawn, Mei Ying surrendered. She shed tears in the dim light behind the dark curtains.

"Why were you not there when I was young?"

Zhuang Jianfei came the next night. No words this time; just action. The battlefield extended well beyond the bed to the floor, the chairs, ... everywhere. He declared before leaving, "I'll marry you!"

Mei Ying looked down.

"My son is doing an M.A. in the U.S., and my husband is lecturing there. They'll be back in just six months."

"I don't care. I will marry you!"

"I'm already 45, old enough to be your mother."

“I don’t care about your age!”

“But I ... long for their return every day.”

“Is that true?” Zhuang Jianfei felt as if prickles were running down his spine.

“Yes.”

“If that’s the case, why did you...? It’s because I don’t have enough strength, isn’t it?” Zhuang Jianfei said in a strangled voice. “Not strong enough to separate you, right?”

“Wrong. I also long for a grandchild day and night. That you can’t possibly give me.”

Gazing at him, Mei Ying started again: “It’s my fault. Don’t come any more.” She walked over to him, bringing with her that savoury milk smell. “You will understand one day, child.”

Child! That was what she called him. Her manner and tone were like those of an old granny who has experienced many of life’s vicissitudes.

But Ji Ling. She was born and bred in “*Hualoujie*,” Flowery House Street<sup>1</sup> in Wuhan. In her own words when arguing with a customer: “You’re right. I’m a real petty-minded Hankou girl.”

Every Wuhanese knows Hankou’s Flowery House Street. The street once witnessed women in heavy make-up and the joy of “spring”<sup>2</sup> in songs and dances. In the past, it was the sign of Hankou’s prosperity. Now the vermillion railings are faded and the young women have aged. Moss grows everywhere in the deep narrow lanes between the tile-roofed houses. In all seasons, wet or dry, a shabby atmosphere pervades the street, shamelessly betraying its coquettishness.

Yet Ji Ling’s mother has said over and again to her five daughters, “I’ve never been a whore.”

Ji Ling’s mother is a sloppy woman, old and fat. She is fond of playing cards all alone in the central room with its door wide open, a cigarette dangling from the side of her flabby lips and the ash dropping bit by bit down the greasy front of her clothes. She does not care. However, the moment a situation arises, she can swiftly change her appearance into one that is astute, capable, and spotless. She knows well the ways of the world so she has equipped herself with several different appearances. Of her five daughters, it is Ji Ling that she dotes on most. For it is Ji Ling, she feels, who takes after her most.

“Nonsense!” Ji Ling used to deny the assertion, much annoyed. Her mother would just chuckle.

The ancestors of Ji Ling’s father lived in Flowery House Street for generations. How anyone else may regard the street is their business; her father takes it as an honour. He often puts on airs, indiscriminately kicks aside farmers’ vegetable baskets that sit in the way, and says in a derogatory tone, “You yokels.” Even many Central Government leaders have bucolic origins, but Ji Ling’s father is proudly a city dweller. All his ancestors lived in this big city. At the age of 13 he started working as an apprentice in the Fragrant Teashop. The tea has given him a pale greenish look and thin weak fingers as well as an artful mouth. It is artful in two ways: in sampling tea and in chatting. He is

<sup>1</sup> Metaphorically, “hua” 花(flower) in Chinese can be used to imply a prostitute, e.g. “Sleeping among flowers and reposing beneath willows” means visiting a brothel while “yanhua” 烟花(“smoke-flower”) is unmistakably a prostitute, whose life, like smoke, is dissipated in the brothel. Therefore, “Hualou” (flowery house) is a euphemistic way to speak of a brothel as a legacy from the past, and “Hualoujie.” (Flowery House Street) is functionally equal to the “red-light district” in English.

<sup>2</sup> Here it implies “lust.” (See also Footnote 1 on p. 1.)

incredibly loquacious with whoever comes his way. All his five daughters were disgusted with him. They openly refer to him as “Sticky Insect” though not directly addressing him so. Quite a few of his daughters’ boyfriends broke away because the father glued himself to them, endlessly lecturing on anecdotes of Flowery House Street and the art of savouring tea. The mother often led four of her daughters in verbal battles against the father; Ji Ling was never involved. She would just give her father a disappointed glance, yet more than anyone else in the family, she made her father nervous.

Ji Ling is a fine woman.

She did well in her studies at school, but at the university entrance examination she suffered setbacks---she failed twice. Her mother had tried to force her father to retire so that Ji Ling could take his job, but Ji Ling said, “No. I’ll try and find a job on my own.” For this reason the father felt deeply grateful to his youngest daughter.

Unlike other girls from Flowery House Street, Ji Ling’s style in dressing was simple but tasteful. She did not perm her hair or wear eye-shadow. At most she would slightly touch up her eyebrows and wear pale pink lipstick. In her light-coloured blouse and dark skirt, she looked just like a quiet, pretty university student.

Soon after, she started to make friends in society and got a job as an assistant in a wholesale wine and spirits store. A few months later, she transferred to an office as a typist. It was a tiring job. Six months later, a friend’s uncle arranged for her to work downtown in a large Xinhua Bookstore.

A Xinhua Bookstore was a civilized and clean place, filled with knowledge, and a government institution too. To obtain this position was not easy and Ji Ling was content with this job. All by herself, she had changed jobs several times. She was very proud that all these changes were achieved without her paying any substantial costs or arousing any slanderous gossip. Her parents were proud too, and so were the neighbours in Flowery House Street.

“Look at the Jis’ youngest daughter. She is from our Flowery House Street,” they would say.

Ji Ling’s social status rose considerably.

With a job secured, the next step was to look for a partner in marriage.

Ji Ling’s four elder sisters had all tried to do it on their own; two of them had even become pregnant as a result. Despite tears and quarrels, none succeeded. In the end, all their matches were made through go-betweens. Of the four brothers-in-law, the first was a shoe-shop assistant, the second a worker in a soy-sauce factory, the third a railway signalman and the fourth a self-employed labourer who was forever losing money in business---what business it was Ji Ling did not know. With a flick-knife on the belt, he looked like a frightened stray cur. Ji Ling would not so much as look at them. Seeing that her mother and elder sisters were prepared to interfere with her marriage, she warned, “Mind your own business. I’ll do it myself.”

“The other four used to talk the same farting nonsense!” said her mother.

“I’m not them.”

“Then let’s wait and see.” Shuffling her playing cards noisily, her mother continued: “My dear, as I told you before, you are a girl from Flowery House Street. However smart, a toad can never jump

higher than its natural ability. It's all my fault, but I was taken in. I didn't know I'd married into Flowery House Street until the red veil was lifted from my head<sup>3</sup>."

Raising his eyebrows, the father took a sip of tea. "Well then. I'll have to reason it out with you. You say you were taken in, but the go-between ..."

"Not again! Nobody will take you as dumb if you don't quarrel!" Ji Ling shouted at them.

Fourth Sister happened to be there and cut in, "Oh my dear, when did this household of a whore produce a responsible young woman?"

"My fourth girl, let me tell you, your mother has never been a whore!"

The family was just like that! How shameful!

Ji Ling had got to break away from this family, at all costs! Her own home would be a modern, civilized one, beautiful, neat, and clean, like those in foreign movies. She was determined to strive hard to reach the goal.

After eliminating six boyfriends, Ji Ling more or less decided on Guo Jin.

Guo Jin's father was a cadre in the municipal Party committee office; his mother was a doctor. Their native place was in Zhejiang. From south China, Guo Jin was fair-skinned, good at cooking, and did not flaunt his masculinity. He worked in the electronic band of the municipal song and dance troupe. His drawback was his height, only 1.63 metres, the same as Ji Ling's. Since Ji Ling usually wore high-heels, he was shorter than her most of the time. Thinking that she would have to wear flat-heeled shoes for ever once she agreed to bind herself to Guo Jin in marriage, Ji Ling felt it would be a life-long regret.

It is remarkable that opportunity always beckons to you unawares at a crucial moment. On the last of the three days she had asked Guo Jin to wait for her formal answer to his proposal, Ji Ling bumped into Zhuang Jianfei. Under the oriental cherry tree at Wuhan University, her little handbag fell to the ground and out dropped *The Girl Dora's Story*<sup>4</sup> by Freud. Other things that fell onto the book included cherry blossoms wrapped in a handkerchief, some loose coins, and a tube of "Fragrant Sea" brand perfume. The "Fragrant Sea" broke and the smell enveloped Ji Ling and Zhuang Jianfei for a long time.

Like many sensitive girls, Ji Ling possessed the instinct to grab an opportunity even before she knew it to be one. As Zhuang Jianfei was retrieving the book and the handkerchief, Ji Ling felt sure that, simply from the look of his hands, this was the best pick she could possibly make in her life. She had always been mindful of people's hands. From her observation of the hands of her family members, of her classmates and friends, of her customers, and of traders in the markets, she drew a conclusion---the hands of those from wealthy families were plump and fair with small fingers often turned up; the hands of those from intellectual families who were intellectuals themselves had slender fingers and a beautiful shape; the hands of all other people of different kinds and professions looked rough, short,

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<sup>3</sup> In a traditional Chinese wedding, the bride's head is completely covered with a red veil. It is to be lifted by the bridegroom when the newlyweds are sent to their wedding chamber after the marriage ceremony.

<sup>4</sup> This is a back translation of the book title from the original text in Chinese. The English title is most likely Freud's *Dora: an analysis of a case of hysteria*.

sturdy or stupid, with an infinite variety of peculiarities. Zhuang Jianfei's hands were typical of an intellectual from an intellectual family. Her instinct later proved to be correct.

That boy named Guo Jin was heartbroken. He had been pretty sure that she would say 'yes.'

Zhuang Jianfei wanted to buy a set of books by Freud that was not available on the market: Ji Ling got them for him. After that, they continued to keep in touch. Out of courtesy and self-respect, Zhuang Jianfei did not inquire about Ji Ling's family background or home address, not until long afterwards. Ji Ling counted herself lucky. Almost all her previous boyfriends asked her the first time they met: "Where do you live?" Ji Ling would randomly name a street. When she had to give an explanation later she would slyly argue: "It was because I didn't want you to go and visit me at home after we get to know each other for just a short time. It might give rise to gossip."

Ji Ling did not need to play this trick on Zhuang Jianfei. He placed the initiative in her hand and she tried her best to play it safe. She did not lay her cards on the table until a year later when their friendship had deepened.

It was the spring of the following year. On the green lawn in the depth of the Eastern Lake Park, Ji Ling said to Zhuang Jianfei all of a sudden, "Jianfei, let's stop seeing each other."

Her sorrow was totally out of harmony with the view of green hills and blue water around them on that warm and sunny day.

"What are you joking for?"

"Why do you think I'm joking?" Ji Ling clasped her knees, looking as pitiable as the little match girl in Andersen's fairy tale. "I live in Flowery House Street in Hankou. My mother is a housewife, my father a petty official, and all my four elder sisters and their husbands are very ordinary people."

The surgeon who frequently wielded a scalpel on people managed to maintained his composure, but inwardly he was truly agitated. He had guessed at Ji Ling's family origin and concluded that at least it could not be as low as common townsfolk. Judging her from all aspects, he told himself that her origin was probably far above the ordinary, which explained why she had kept completely silent about it all this time. Only a true princess would tightly conceal her genealogy. He had deliberately allowed her to play this game. In due time he would enjoy a delightful surprise. But now, he found it impossible to sense any delight at all.

"What makes you think my family origin is different from yours?"

As soon as he uttered these words, Zhuang Jianfei felt that he had hurt Ji Ling's self-esteem. What this girl needed now was warmth, promises, and a solemn pledge of love. If it had not been Ji Ling but Wang Luo who worked in the same hospital as he did, or any of the other girls, they would have undoubtedly stood up, given him a sideways look and walked off.

Ji Ling did not walk away. She sat on the lawn in the same position and answered readily: "Your hands. They tell me that you are from an intellectual family." Raising her small hands, Ji Ling moved them around a couple of times like a pop song star. "My hands are not so good as yours. I have always had a sense of inferiority about my family. They are poor, vulgar, lacking in knowledge and education. Besides, Flowery House Street is notorious. I don't want to be looked down upon."

Zhuang Jianfei was impressed by her lack of sophistication and purity. Comparing his hands with hers, he could not help laughing. "You are like a little witch."

"Then let me tell your fortune by your hand."

Her fingers scrawled in his palm, her face was right under his nose. This face was glowing and plump, suffused with a layer of golden fine hair in the sunlight. Zhuang Jianfei decided that he would choose her regardless of her family background.

Zhuang Jianfei made a comparison between Ji Ling and Wang Luo. Wang Luo was from a highly educated family. She had been trained in piano and dance and could recite parts of *Romeo and Juliet*. It was really funny recalling his affair with her. Working in the same hospital, they could see each other every day, but each day she would write him several letters. In one of them she lamented that he had not accepted the hint she had dropped when they were in the lift, which was conveyed in the expression in her eyes. Another time she phoned him and all she said was: "Waiting for you." Later she blamed Zhuang Jianfei for making her wait in vain for 40 minutes by a flower terrace. Wang Luo disdained to talk about household matters or daily necessities such as fuel, rice, oil, and salt. What she liked to discuss were music, poetry, current affairs and major social issues. However, she did not have the courage to face reality. Because she had many freckles on her face, she resented people mentioning the word. One cold day, Zhuang Jianfei accompanied her to a department store to buy moisturiser. "Get a box of *Baiqueling*<sup>5</sup>," suggested he. Wang Luo immediately lost heart. The next moment, she was running away. Chasing her along the street, Zhuang Jianfei felt like a fool.

In comparison, Zhuang Jianfei felt Ji Ling was more natural and lovable. What was more, Ji Ling was much plumper. That was very important.

One morning, in mid-spring, Zhuang Jianfei suddenly appeared at the gate of Ji Ling's home.

It was a Sunday, the only day of the week on which Ji Ling's mother gave up playing cards. She had her daughters, sons-in-law and grandchildren visiting her on that day, so she washed herself, did her hair and dressed in clean clothes. It was a fine day. For the first time in the family history, the daughters, prompted by a sudden impulse, had decided to give the place a general cleaning. A new, semi-automatic washing machine was carried out to the lane and attached to the tap outside the gate. Ji Ling's father had a special interest in new commodities. He went so far as to put aside his teacup and stay beside the washing machine to study its various functions.

That was a good day in the life of the Jis. Zhuang Jianfei happened to come along on that day, picking his way through the small lanes on his motorbike.

For a moment Ji Ling was dumbstruck. Her face flushed and she became all flustered.

Her discomposure was unnecessary, however. Her mother and elder sisters were all slick and smooth. From Ji Ling and Zhuang Jianfei's expressions, they understood what was going on. They also

<sup>5</sup> "*Baiqueling*" 百雀灵 is the well-established and popular brand-name of a moisturiser made in Shanghai. "*Que*" 雀 in the cosmetic brand-name literally means "sparrow," so the cosmetic brand-name may be translated as "Hundred-Bird Moisturiser." A word with multiple meanings, "*que*" is also suggestive of "freckles" since it can be used in combination with another Chinese character "*ban*" 斑 (spot, mark) to mean "freckles" ("*queban*" 雀斑).

worked out to which class Zhuang Jianfei belonged without talking to him. Dirty words and fierce gestures disappeared instantly. In a soft voice they invited the guest to be seated, offered him tea, rushed out to buy food and wine, and instructed their young children to call him "Uncle".

Ji Ling's mother was all kindness and smiles. She addressed all her sons-in-law "my child". She did not talk much to Zhuang Jianfei, nor did she leave him out in the cold. She treated him in an unusually warm way and made sure that he felt at home.

The way Ji Ling's father behaved surprised everyone in the family. Completely out of character, he did not grab hold of the guest and indiscriminately relate anecdotes about Flowery House Street. Instead, he pretended to be engrossed in the washing machine, just saying in the end, "Young Zhuang, look. How can they call this automatic if you have to wring out the wet clothes by hand before spin-drying them in it?"

Zhuang Jianfei felt the little old man was rather amusing.

Lunch was typical Flowery House Street fare: plentiful, strong in taste, rich in oil, and bright in colour. One course after the other arrived on the table. Even serving chopsticks were used at the feast. The way they used them was so natural and skilful that it seemed the family's good habits of hygiene were long-standing. Everyone helped Zhuang Jianfei with the serving chopsticks and he was inundated in a huge pile of delicacies.

Afterwards the mother questioned Ji Ling. She told her all about Zhuang Jianfei and of course about his family too---his home was in a storeyed-building on the Luojia Hill<sup>6</sup> by the East Lake, with wooden floors and heating facilities. His parents were both senior intellectuals. He had a younger sister who had graduated from university and was working in a scientific research institute.

"That's to say he is the only son of the family. Excellent!" Drawing deeply on her cigarette and slowly breathing out the smoke, her mother continued: "An eligible match. Perfect beyond words. Be sure he doesn't get away!"

Zhuang Jianfei was already ensnared. He had prepared for the worst when he paid his visit to Ji Ling's family, but everything turned out to be just the opposite of what he had imagined? Surely Ji Ling had been too pessimistic about her family.

Above all was the strong human touch that made up for the regret hidden deep in his heart--- his own mother was a rigid woman. He had never lacked any material necessities, but what he did lack was his mother's laughter, the kind of expression in Ji Ling's mother's eyes, her deep concern that he ate well. He thought a mother's love should be a spoiling, doting, unreasonable one, but his own mother would never be unreasonable. Zhuang Jianfei came to a realization: a woman is better not be too knowledgeable, clear-headed or methodical. Being just like a cloud, hazy and soft, is good enough. He suddenly understood why capable businesswomen, female postgraduates, and the like were not preferred as partners in marriage, while pretty, gentle, virtuous girls were in short supply. Indulging in his theory, Zhuang Jianfei felt extremely cheerful. From his expression Ji Ling drew a definite conclusion---he was bound to marry her.

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<sup>6</sup> The Luojia Hill is situated in the scenic district on the East Lake in Wuchang, close to Wuhan University.

Ji Ling won. She had succeeded in another significant step in life. All she needed to do now was to wait for Zhuang Jianfei's invitation to meet his parents.

Ji Ling waited patiently. She did not appear to be over-anxious. When she was together with Zhuang Jianfei again, her dress became increasingly informal, sometimes exposing a lot of her body.

They had gone beyond the limits of embracing, kissing and caressing. But she resolutely refused his further demand: "No. It's not time yet. No!"

After suffering several times, Zhuang Jianfei said to Ji Ling one day: "My family has invited you to visit us this Sunday."

The day came at last.

Ji Ling's whole family had already had a few rounds of discussion about it. Should she take along a present? How should she address Zhuang Jianfei's parents? What should she wear? What should she say? Should she volunteer to wash up after the meal? What would be the right amount to eat? No one in the family had ever visited a professor's home and, out of self-respect, Ji Ling did not ask Jianfei for advice.

Never mind whether Ji Ling was ready or not, Sunday duly arrived.

She put on a brownish-red wool dress. The design was unique and it was beautifully made. It had been hastily made by their neighbours, the Bais, a couple of old tailors at Ji Ling's mother's request. The couple were so old that they looked like a pair of dried shrimps. They had been master tailors at the former Number One clothes shop that only made bespoke clothes for the foreign madams and young ladies living in the concession area. After having stopped trading years before, they made an exception for Ji Ling for this important event in her life. Ji Ling's hair was done by another neighbour who came to offer help of his own accord. He was the youngest yet the most popular hairdresser at the Hong Kong Hairdresser's. Earlier, he had asked someone to go to Ji Ling's home as a matchmaker for him. Now he had relinquished his resentment to the refusal and his virtue won people's general praise. Almost the whole of Flowery House Street busied itself for Ji Ling.

The problem of what present to take along remained unsolved. Although Zhuang Jianfei had come empty-handed on his first visit, it was excusable, for he had done so without his parents' knowledge. Since Ji Ling had been invited by his parents, she would be accused of being ill-bred if she did the same. But if she gave a present that was worth too much, they might get the impression that the girl was of humble birth and eagerly manipulating to her advantage.

The sound of Zhuang Jianfei's motorcycle came closer and closer. Ji Ling was still trying to work out a solution. Her mother puffed anxiously at her cigarette.

"In my opinion, just take a tin of good tea." Ji Ling's father suddenly spoke up from a dark corner, and handed over a carved bamboo box of Daughter Tea<sup>7</sup>. Undoubtedly, the wisdom he displayed

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<sup>7</sup> The very first tea buds of *Longjing Tea*, normally picked by unmarried young girls; hence the name. While *Longjing Tea*, produced in Hangzhou, is globally renowned as the best of all teas in China, "Daughter Tea" is the best of the best which is very precious and hard to obtain due to the small quantity of its natural produce.

concerning Ji Ling's marriage affairs was the peak of his whole existence. It was estimable that a man could know and correct his shortcomings as he grew old.

Ji Ling's mother laughed, "You old bastard! The sun has risen in the west."

In the new dress, holding the treasured tea, Ji Ling sat on the back of Zhuang Jianfei's motorcycle. She put her arm around his waist, her cheeks aglow, her black, sweet-smelling hair looking like a sail of victory.

The two young people floated in high spirits all the way.

However, they soon met with a setback.

Zhuang Jianfei's family gave Ji Ling a tepid reception. During her four hours' visit, she spent half the time alone on the sofa in the lounge leafing through magazines, and the other half at the dinner table where no one spoke to her. Zhuang Jianfei was generally not good at talking. To ease the embarrassing situation, he briefly talked with Ji Ling about popular books on social sciences, with a faint smile, and could find no more to say. Zhuang Jianfei's mother uttered only a few single words: "Help yourself. Don't stand on ceremony." "Take a seat." "What to drink?" His father hemmed and hawed without expressing any substantive meaning, but every now and then he fixed his eyes on Ji Ling from behind his spectacles. The question of washing up was non-existent for all the chores in the kitchen were done by a middle-aged servant in complete silence. Even she took no notice of Ji Ling. The tin of Daughter Tea was put aside. No one thanked Ji Ling's parents for it. After the meal they moved to the lounge. Ji Ling thought at least they would chat with her for a while and ask about her age, education, work and so forth. But they showed no intention of doing so. It was time for a nap. They made it clear that they were ready to see their guest off.

Tears sprang up in Ji Ling's eyes as soon as she stepped out of the small building.

Zhuang Jianfei patted Ji Ling on the shoulder apologetically. "You must not take it to heart. They're like that all the time."

Zhuang Jianfei saw Ji Ling off down the hill. Looking back at the building surrounded by green pines, she felt a deep hatred taking root in her heart. She did not pour her grievances out to him, not a single word. But the seeds of revenge were planted inside her.

It made Zhuang Jianfei's heart ache to see Ji Ling's pitiful look. He would have felt indignant even if Ji Ling were nobody to him. He went back home in a rage and flung his helmet onto the lounge floor. The noise woke his mother from her nap.

"What's the matter with you?" she frowned.

Upon hearing this insincere inquiry, Zhuang Jianfei kicked the helmet across the room and knocked over a small ornament. That brought out the whole family.

His mother was forced to state her view: "She is not the right person for you. Her knowledge structure is too poor. Her prim and vulgar manner obviously betrays her low-class origin."

Zhuang Jianya asked her brother to calm down. "Brother, you know that we are not good at entertaining guests, not even when a central government leader comes to visit us. As intellectual, we are aloof from such things."

“But Ji Ling is a member of our family, not a guest.”

“When did this become a fact?” his mother questioned him.

“Now. Soon.”

“Brother, Mum’s right. She never does anything unreasonable, you know. Ji Ling is indeed a bit too low-class. Judging by her clothes and appearance, she’s obviously no intellectual.”

Zhuang Jianfei retorted, “You understand nothing but intellectuals.” He turned to his father.

“This is a purely personal matter. I will not have a hand in it,” announced his father.

“But she will become your daughter-in-law.”

His father looked distracted for a moment. “Quite honestly, I don’t think she’s as good as Wang Luo.”

Zhuang Jianfei paced the room and smiled bitterly. “Strange. No one gives a thought as to what’s best for me. Put it bluntly, you’re all just thinking about yourselves and cannot accept a girl of a low family status.”

“Nonsense!” His mother looked livid. She slammed her book shut.

Zhuang Jianfei aimed a violent kick at his helmet, which struck Jianya’s instep and made it bleed.

For the first time, noise of destruction swept through the Zhuang household. It was followed by a three-to-one sharp dispute.

Ji Ling was sobbing. “Jianfei, I feel terrible about it. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not you who should be sorry.”

“Let’s break off our relationship.”

“Break off? Why?”

“For you. For me. And for our parents too. It’s all right if I am not happy. My origin is humble anyway. But I cannot bear to see you unhappy. You should enjoy everything.”

“Ji Ling! You’re so kind!”

Oh, Ji Ling, girl from Flowery House Street. You were expected to hate those who stood in your way, to curse them, to swear at them. But you acted just like a young noblewoman. Who could despise you!

Ji Ling seemed to know every turn of Zhuang Jianfei’s mind. “How can I hate your parents? It’s them who gave birth to you and brought you up.”

Zhuang Jianfei’s eyes were brimming with tears.

“I’ve got to go now. Let’s leave it at that. Let’s part, never meet again.”

Ji Ling unfastened her pearl necklace and placed it in the palm of Zhuang Jianfei’s hand. He held her together with the necklace closely in his arms and vowed: “We’ll get married right now! No one can stop us!”

However, getting married was even harder.

Before Zhuang Jianfei even had a steady girl friend, his parents had decided that their son's wedding chamber would be the biggest room in their house. Now that he was so obsessed with marrying Ji Ling, it went without saying that he lost this privilege.

Fortunately, the hospital authorities valued their qualified personnel, encouraged freedom in choosing one's spouse, and rewarded those who got married at a mature age, so a dormitory room was allocated to him. While decorating the tiny matchbox-like room, Zhuang Jianfei and Ji Ling looked at each other in silence, feeling miserable.

Then they heard that a doctor in the surgical department was leaving for Canada. Zhuang Jianfei went to the hospital director's home that very night to recount his difficulties. Luckily he obtained that doctor's one bedroom flat with a lounge.

To get married, they needed money. According to common practice in Wuhan, about 10,000 *yuan* was the absolute minimum. But their joint savings came to only less than 2,000. Under the covetous glares of the four elder daughters, Ji Ling's parents declared that they would be fair---Ji Ling would get the same dowry as the others. Nevertheless, they secretly sewed another 800 *yuan* inside the soft silk quilt made for her and sent a message to Zhuang Jianfei that if his side held a big wedding, they would not let people laugh at them, either. Zhuang Jianfei's parents remained silent.

Hua Rufen, the head of the hospital director's office, much appreciated Zhuang Jianfei. She had been a prize student of Zhuang Jianfei's mother and they had kept in touch after her graduation. Seeing him in such a predicament, she naturally sympathized with him. After Hua Rufen's mediation, Jianya brought over a deposit slip of just 1,000 *yuan*. Zhuang Jianfei had an impulse to tear up the receipt in his sister's face, his needy situation however did not enable him to. He was choked with hatred against God-knows-whom, and his face, even his neck, flushed crimson.

Alternate bouts of joys and sufferings within that half a year made both Zhuang Jianfei and Ji Ling thinner to a varying degree. When they finally lay down legally in the same bed, they could not refrain from caressing the other's prominent cheekbones and then, in tears, threw themselves into each other's arms.

After all those trials and hardships, family life had been calm for six months until just now when the calmness was suddenly ruptured again. This time the conflict is between the couple themselves, something that bears many new implications. After pondering for several hours on the steps outside the Bank of China, Zhuang Jianfei realizes that there is nothing unusual in his marriage. Once you uncover all the layers of wrappings, a marriage reveals itself to be a produce of sexual desire plus human manipulation. He believes that this is also the case with many others around him.

What he can console himself with is that he has not been muddle-headed or irresponsible. He is moulded by the times in which he lives. There is no escape.

His marriage is not that bad anyway. In every respect Ji Ling is a rather good wife. She looks after him with meticulous care. She is fascinated by his talents and his successes in his career.

Knowing that Ji Ling is a girl from Flowery House Street, one should not wonder where her dirty words come from. When Zhuang Jianfei left home several hours ago, he was a naive, impetuous lad; by

the time he returns home again, he has grown into a mature man. Pushing the bedroom door open, he calls kindly, bearing no grudge: "Hello! Is my little baby still angry?"

The wardrobe is wide open, and so are the drawers. The bed is a mess. All Ji Ling's clothes and cosmetics have disappeared.

Before, she had threatened of going back to her parents' each time she felt wronged. Zhuang Jianfei did not hold out a white flag and she did not dare to act rashly. This time he has behaved differently with the intention of becoming reconciled with her, yet she does go away.

At lunch time the next day, Dr Zeng found Zhuang Jianfei in the canteen.

"How was it?" he asks expectantly.

"Let's put it off until after lunch."

Zhuang Jianfei grimaces as if suffering from toothache. He is conscious that too many people are around. Normally, though, he does not care anything when it comes to sports events.

Zhuang Jianfei quickly finishes his lunch. Followed by Dr Zeng, he makes his way for the on-duty office. Reclining on the edge of the bed, he does not say anything for a long time. He does not want to get his family farce mixed up with his work, but he does not want to tell a lie, either. It is really difficult for him to think up a lie anyway,. Who will believe that he did not watch the sports event because of a headache?

"Is the result an unexpected one? Seeing that Zhuang Jianfei does not look his usual self, Dr Zeng gets excited himself. "It must be an unexpected result! Did Korea win? Oh, they must have! Was Li Lingwei defeated? But she is the queen of the badminton court!" He quickly stroked the grey hair at his temple and then, with a shaky hand, pours out some water and washes down a few tablets, pressing the other hand against his heart. He babbles on. Fortunately he did not watched the match last night; otherwise he would certainly have died in front of the TV. He purposely left his transistor radio behind when he went to practice shadow-boxing this morning to avoid listening to the news, for he was afraid bad news would make him faint by the lake in the park. Man has premonitions, he asserts, and his premonition has saved his life. But how can the Chinese team have possibly lost?

Dr Zeng talks rapidly, not allowing the other to put in a word. Finally he turns to Zhuang Jianfei: "It's got to be admitted that this will go down history as a regrettable event. However, Dr Zhuang, nothing like that is worth harming your health for. You didn't eat much at lunch."

Zhuang Jianfei cannot keep silent any longer. "I didn't watch the game," he confessed.

Dr Zeng looks wooden for a minute; then his face turns red. "That's impossible!"

"It's true. I didn't watch the whole way through." Looking at Dr Zeng's questioning, sorrowful eyes, Zhuang Jianfei feel he has to tell him the truth. "My wife quarrelled with me last night. She turned off the TV."

"Just because of that!" Dr Zeng heaves a long sigh. "It's you who have ruined the Uber Cup final. Is there any hope for tonight's Thomas Cup?"

"Not much," Zhuang Jianfei answers honestly.

"Why not?"

Because his wife has run away! But Zhuang Jianfei replies instead, "She's gone to her parents' place."

"Run away?"

No matter how hard you try to save your face, the truth is laid bare with one remark. Zhuang Jianfei forces a smile. "I have to go there and see her."

"You should have gone to see her last night if you want to watch tonight's Thomas Cup. Dr Zhuang, you've made a mess of things. It's not unusual for a young couple to quarrel, but you've got to make sure that it only occurs in bed."

With his broad experience, Dr Zeng tries to help the despondent Zhuang Jianfei through the aftermath. "Take this afternoon off to sort things out. You've got a major operation tomorrow. Don't let emotional upsets come too close to any operation. You ought to watch the Thomas Cup tonight anyway. Don't let a trifling quarrel between husband and wife affect your watching an international game."

"I have no excuse to take time off."

"You don't need an excuse. Hasn't the immense loss caused a toothache?"

Zhuang Jianfei does feel some pain, but it is not in the teeth. "Dr Zeng, please keep it ..."

"A secret. Hurry up. You can't yet tell me anything I haven't heard before."

"Thanks."

I should have asked for advice earlier, Zhuang Jianfei thinks to himself. It seems that many people have similar experiences. Dr Zeng, for example, is in perfect harmony with his wife. By analogy, Zhuang Jianfei feels that his difficulties will soon be solved.

The Jis' gate is wide open. Ji Ling's mother lies slumped on a rattan chair that looks close to the point of collapse. The fat woman is dozing off, her hair dishevelled, the cigarette ash falling bit by bit onto the greasy front of her garment and finally, following a complicated route, down onto the ground.

It is the first time Zhuang Jianfei realizes that his mother-in-law is so ugly. He even feels embarrassed. Hesitating for a minute, he decides not to disturb her and heads for the attic. Before getting married, Ji Ling lived up there. Her little bed is still kept for her after she got married.

"She's not here."

Zhuang Jianfei is startled. He turns round. His mother-in-law has opened her blood-shot eyes.

"Where is she? Her work unit said she asked for sick leave."

"Who are you talking to? You should say 'Hi' even when calling at a dog."

After struggling with himself for quite a while, Zhuang Jianfei grits his teeth and says, "Mum, I'm looking for Ji Ling."

"Didn't I marry her off to you?"

His mother-in-law spits out her cigarette butt with a "pft". Hands pressed against her hips, she stands up unsteadily, fetches another cigarette and lights it up. A little girl in the neighbourhood heard them and has come over to watch Zhuang Jianfei. As his mother-in-law stands up, her playing cards slide down from the chair. The little girl hurries over, picks them up agilely from a half kneeling

position, puts them back onto the chair, and then returns to the doorway, from where she watches Zhuang Jianfei with intense interest.

“Didn’t I marry my daughter to you?”

Those who suit their actions to the time of day are wise, Zhuang Jianfei says to himself. “Sorry. We just had a bit of a quarrel and she left home. I’ve come to get her back.”

“Sorry? What sort of creature are you with all those airs and graces? Don’t be priggish in front of your old lady. My daughter suffered all sorts of bullying and humiliation in her husband’s family and now the bastard has beaten her out!”

“I didn’t beat her. We only pulled each other about a bit.”

“Of course you won’t admit beating her because it’s against the law. But doesn’t dragging somebody about mean beating?”

The little girl giggles. His mother-in-law does not care, but Zhuang Jianfei does not want to debate matters concerning his wife and himself in front of others.

“I’d like to see Ji Ling. I want her to go back with me.”

His mother-in-law laughs sarcastically, which makes her fat quiver all over. “You really live up to your intellectual family status, with those strange and refined words of yours. They make me feel embarrassed to refuse. As it is, you can only blame our family who never bother about what others hope for.” She laughs again.

Zhuang Jianfei feels agitated and hot all over. Not long ago she kept calling him “my child,” inquiring after his well-being and showing warm concern that he was taken good care of and not bullied by her daughter. How can she change so readily? A loving mother does not always love—Zhuang Jianfei is taught this common truth by this particularly awkward situation. He falls silent with misery.

“You want Ji Ling back? OK. But on one condition.”

“I’m listening.”

“Let me first ask you. How has Ji Ling behaved in your home?”

Just mind your own business, you good-for-nothing!---it will give him great satisfaction to answer back this way but the consequences will be disastrous. Instead Zhuang Jianfei replies: “She’s good.”

His mother-in-law repeatedly slaps her thigh, making a loud noise.

“You’ve said it. She’s good. She gets your meals ready. She warms up the quilt for you. She has never ever given you a cold look, debased her sister-in-law or cursed her parents-in-law. Nor has she committed adultery or given birth to an illegitimate child! Go and ask whether there is another daughter-in-law in the whole of Flowery House Street more virtuous than my daughter. Your parents are so damned snobbish, sending her away with a mere 1,000 *yuan*. Up till now they’ve taken no notice of us, the parents of their daughter-in-law. You are even worse, beating her and smashing cups all over the place, not giving her any thought. Let’s put it to the neighbours and see who’s in the right. I warn you. If you want this case settled, get your parents round here. We’ll sort it out in the presence of all parties. Since ancient times, people have raised their heads to marry off a daughter and bowed their

heads to welcome a new daughter-in-law. What evil did I do in my previous existence that such a good daughter of mine should be made suffer like this!"

She wants his parents to come here! If his mother were present to see her son's mother-in-law with her own eyes, Zhuang Jianfei has no doubt that her blood pressure would shoot up. The whole thing has turned into a farce. He does not know how to cope.

He calls up to the attic: "Ji Ling, can't you come downstairs for a while?"

He calls once more, really angry by now. "What are you doing this for?" he shouted.

Up in the attic is perfect silence.

The little girl has collected a crowd of children of assorted ages. They are all watching him with great interest.

His mother-in-law suddenly stops talking. She starts to doze off again. Having achieved her goal, she is now showing him the door. She is no fool. In fact she is rather astute. Although she appears to be sleeping, the deterrent force is there in her. If Zhuang Jianfei tries to go up to the attic, the earth will shake; no doubt about it.

Brought up on a university campus, it is only now that Zhuang Jianfei realizes that Flowery House Street really deserves its reputation. In this place nothing is impossible, nothing surprising. Once he understands this, Zhuang Jianfei has no alternative but to sullenly call off the battle.

To sleep alone in a double bed for the first time, Zhuang Jianfei is sure that he will feel lonely. So before going to bed, he makes an exception by drinking two small glasses of wine and finds a dull hypnotizing book on some specialized theory. One person in a double bed turns out to be incredibly comfortable. He is not drunk and he does not read the book for neither of these is necessary. Spreading out his arms and legs and relaxing his whole body on the bed, he is so comfortable that he even feels it is a little unfair on Ji Ling.

Things get complicated the next morning.

The moment he opens his eyes, a problem arises---what to eat? Everything has been done by his mother or childminder when he was a child, by the canteen and friends when a bachelor, and by Ji Ling after marriage. Ji Ling's breakfasts have always been well prepared and appetizing.

Doctors hate restaurants. Disease finds its way in through the mouths; and the restaurant is the source of evil that keeps the doctor busy day and night. In his temporarily wifeless state, Zhuang Jianfei is forced to a restaurant he absolutely loathes. After standing in a long queue for some time, his turn comes. But he cannot find any food coupons in his pockets. He asks, blushing: "Can I manage without food coupons?"

The assistant says scornfully, "We're state-run. Go to a privately owned one. Next!"

Zhuang Jianfei is squeezed out right away, and so is his appetite.

The whole morning, everyone is busy with shift relief and ward rounds. In a superior manner, Dr Zeng treats Zhuang Jianfei as a mere junior doctor. No one mentions his problems with his wife. Zhuang Jianfei rests assured that all are well here. He gradually settles down to his work and starts to feel better. Just before going into the operating theatre when he is scrubbing his hands with

disinfectant, sleeves rolled up, Dr Zeng asks, “Can you do it?” A most irritating question when directed to a confident young surgeon with high ambitions.

“It’s not that serious,” replies Zhuang Jianfei.

With sterilized arms raised in the air, Dr Zeng stares at Zhuang Jianfei from over the large gauze mask over his mouth and nose. He looks like a robot from outer space that does not have any trust in humankind.

Zhuang Jianfei does not want to confront him in such a way, so he adds, “I slept very well last night, never better.”

The operation has lasted five hours. They estimated that it would need three hours at most; yet Zhuang Jianfei has used five hours. It is normal for an operation to last longer. Besides, Dr Zeng has been assisting at the table and he knows clearly that the operation does require this amount of time. Nevertheless, Zhuang Jianfei has an uneasy feeling. Quickness and dexterity has been his reputation. How will others think of this operation? He cannot let a trifling family affair ruin his professional reputation!

Once these distracting thoughts arise, his hands become less steady. The suture towards the end is not nearly as neat and nice as those he did before. The others probably cannot tell the difference, but Dr Zeng has sharp discerning eyes.

His vest and shorts are wet with sweat by the time the operation is over. He feels exceptionally tired. In the presence of the crew, Dr Zeng declares that Zhuang Jianfei has accumulated three days of leave and suggests to him: “It’s time you took it.” Zhuang Jianfei feels a sting in his words.

The canteen has forgotten to retain food for the operating staff. Bowls of hard cold rice and some preserved gherkins are all that is left.

It is already twilight when Zhuang Jianfei gets back home after a ten-minute motorbike ride. With a rumbling stomach, he searches high and low for something to eat but only finds a handful of crumbs in the biscuit tin. They usually buy small quantities of biscuits in order to have them fresh; so they are finished soon. It goes without saying that shopping is Ji Ling’s responsibility. She enjoys shopping, and is experienced in doing it too.

There are some noodles but not enough for even one serve. There is a big container of rice but no vegetables. Zhuang Jianfei is surprised to see a square cotton bag in the rice. Opening it, he finds Chinese prickly ash inside. He learned from reading *A Hundred Thousand Whys* in his early youth that prickly ash prevents rice from getting weevils. While he laid aside this knowledge, Ji Ling has put it into practice. She is using all she knows to run the household. How can any one complain about such a wife?

He eats two bowls of dumpling soup at a privately run place. The dumplings are mostly pastry with little meat stuffing. After taking a shower, he feels even more tired but he has to force himself to do some washing before going to bed. Turning on the light, he notices a layer of dust has gathered over all the furniture. He rummages through drawers and chests but fails to find any food coupons. What will he eat tomorrow morning? It is true that without a wife a home is not like a home.

Hua Rufen comes. She explains that she needs to see him urgently but, at this crucial and sensitive moment, she feels it inappropriate to contact him at the hospital. Her words make Zhuang Jianfei wonder what unusual situation the hospital is facing at this particular moment.

Hua Rufen speaks in a low voice: "The quota for visiting the U.S. has just been granted!"

Long ago, the hospital authorities briefed the surgical department on the possibility of sending a few staff to the U.S. to observe and study heart transplant operations. The news caused excitement in the department for quite a while but was gradually forgot. Now the issue is brought up again. "There will be bumps and bruises among the contending members of the Surgical Department staff."

"Exactly," Hua Rufen agrees. "Many intellectuals are philistines. They don't really care about learning advanced skills. For some, the U.S. means an Ali Baba's cave."

"There was a doctor of the Acupuncture Department of the hospital who was generally disparaged. He later went to the U.S. and earned 50,000 *yuan* in a year. It does sound like Ali Baba's cave."

"How come you also see it that way?"

Hua Rufen wears her hair short in an old-fashioned style. She sits on one corner of the sofa with her knees pressed together, holding a worn black bag in her arms. Both her hairstyle and her rigorous posture puts Zhuang Jianfei in mind of his mother.

"Do you also plan to get a fridge and a colour TV?"

"More than anything else, I want to observe a heart transplant operation."

"That's good. You are the most promising member of the Surgical Department. By the way, I heard that you are having problems with your wife?"

"Does that matter?"

"Certainly. Unmarried people and those who do not have good relations with their spouses will not be considered."

"Why?"

"Because it's a concern that such people won't return if allowed out."

"What a joke!"

"No, it's not a joke. There're precedent cases. Are you having difficulties with each other?"

"Yes. She's run away to her parents' place."

Only now does Hua Rufen raise her eyes to look around the room. "Have you told anyone?" she asks.

"Yes, Dr Zeng."

"How naive you are! Anyone will stab another in the back out of self-interest. Dr Zeng, he ... You are so naive!"

"Will Dr Zeng stab me in the back?"

"You'd better make it up with your wife as soon as possible. Within three days you two must show up, together and smiling, in the hospital. A few minutes will do."

"But her mother's terms are too harsh."

"Agree to them all."

"But it ..."

“A great person should be magnanimous. Bear them all. Do as I say!”

So saying, Hua Rufen gets up to take her leave. She is concerned that someone she knows might see her here. Before opening the door, she urges Zhuang Jianfei again to get things done within three days. She considers the chance simply too important for him to miss. To inspect heart transplant operations was simply the chance of a lifetime. Zhuang Jianfei’s future success will hang on it. “We should do things with a clear conscience and let those who are really good go abroad, for the sake of the country and the people as well as the career of the individual.”

Zhuang Jianfei tosses about in bed the whole night, finding it impossible to fall asleep. His life without a wife has just lasted for two days and everything is already in a muddle.

In the Patient Record Room, Zhuang Jianfei met Wang Luo. The white work gown fits her beautifully; positioned just above her eyebrows, the white hat sets off her graceful nose and freckles very well. She flashes a smile at Zhuang Jianfei as if she is bestowing a reward on him.

She sensed that Zhuang Jianfei was about to break off with her and, before he made this intention clear, she quickly showed she intended to do so. Zhuang Jianfei did not lay bare her trick, so their affair came to an end but they shared the secret with a tacit understanding. When coming across each other they still nod at each other like ordinary colleagues and greet each other on holidays.

There are rows of tall bookcases in the inner part of the record room. Standing there, gravely dignified, Wang Luo asks in a tone like that of Goddess of Mercy<sup>8</sup>: “Dr Zhuang, do you need me to go and talk your wife round?”

Zhuang Jianfei gasps: “How do you know?”

“Many people know and so do I. The news has travelled from the Surgical Department to the Internal Medicine Department.”

“Who did such a thing?”

“Don’t behave like a fussy woman and try to find out who did it.” Wang Luo hits the nail on the head: “Everyone has the right to compete for the opportunity of going to the U.S.”

“It’s truly contemptible!”

Wang Luo chuckles. “In the age of competition, that’s by no means a derogatory term. Contemptible means are perhaps employed to achieve a noble goal.”

This kind of abstruse philosophical conversation is a game Wang Luo is very good at. She has always disdained to talk about trivial things but takes delight in issues like this. Zhuang Jianfei, however, is in no mood to listen. He hastily gives up the search for a particular medical record and takes his leave, pretending he has located and read it through.

“Thank you for reminding me.”

“Don’t worry. I just want to help you talk your wife round.”

“That’s not necessary. She has just gone back to her mother’s place to take a few days’ rest.”

“A woman understands a woman best.”

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<sup>8</sup> The Goddess refers to Bodhisattva Avalokitasvara in Buddhism, who is believed to help the needy and relieve the distressed.

"That's enough, Wang Luo."

"It's better to address a colleague as Dr So-and-so." she continues in a soft voice behind Zhuang Jianfei: "I want to tell your wife that watching an international badminton game is a quite refined kind of recreation. I also want to let her know this proverb: 'The wolf wins when the shepherds quarrel'."

The record room supervisor, who sits like a statue at her desk fiddling with cards every day, year after year, has been bending behind a bookshelf in the front row to eavesdrop on their conversation. Zhuang Jianfei hurries out and bumps into her. The haggard-looking woman, having failed to dash back in time to her desk, panics. She knocks against a shelf. Bags of records fall to the floor with a crash and the dust accumulated on them over the years instantly fouls the air.

"I'm sorry," Zhuang Jianfei says, without turning round.

"He's certainly gentlemanly!" Wang Luo remarks to the woman caustically.

Hua Rufen is right: someone is stabbing him in the back. He is a man and will not allow himself to be so easily butchered!

Ji Ling is hidden by her parents at home like a princess. Severe morning sickness makes her wan and sallow. The more she suffers, the more she hates Zhuang Jianfei. Confined to bed for days, she has brooded over the whole matter and has decided to seize on this opportunity to make Jianfei and his parents understand what she is like.

Common sense is no secret knowledge and Ji Ling is actually very good at using customary formulae in an argument. But at the moment it is no time to pretend to be compliant or accommodating, nor to stress love only. She is still young. She has over half her life ahead of her. Since she has married into the Zhuang family, first, the Zhuangs must accept her and take her seriously; second, Zhuang Jianfei must take her seriously.

At present the situation is just the opposite: the Zhuangs have neither accepted her nor taken her seriously. They just gave her 1,000 *yuan* for her marrying into their family, a disgrace of a lifetime for her. Yet Zhuang Jianfei was reluctant to tear the bank receipt up. If it were her, she would have torn it into pieces without the slightest hesitation. Money is not vulgar. Sometimes it is the expression of a person's value. Her fourth sister married beneath her to a self-employed labourer who always lost money in business, but her husband's family had given her 10,000 *yuan*. Three years ago ten grand was a large sum. The mother-in-law wrapped the receipt in red paper and personally pressed it into her fourth sister's palm. This detail is still talked about with general approval in Flowery House Street.

What is even more unbearable was that, up till now, the Zhuangs has not paid a visit to their daughter-in-law's parents. Ji Ling knows that her mother is losing face while the neighbours are following with interest the development of the situation, making wild guesses. Everyone tries to win credit for oneself, don't they? While it can be said that to ignore their daughter-in-law is their right, they have no right to despise her elders.

Zhuang Jianfei has not taken her seriously, either. In the past six months of their married life, she has seen clearly all that is between them. He does not ignore her or look down on her. He simply does not understand what a husband's duties are; nor does he know how to love and care for his wife.

Only six months and they already have a daily routine.

After getting up in the morning, Ji Ling hurries to make breakfast. They both eat in haste. After breakfast they go their separate ways to work.

“I’m going.”

“Is the door locked?”

“Yes.”

They both spend their lunch time at their respective work units.

After work Ji Ling goes directly to the market. Back home, she hurries to prepare dinner. When dinner is ready, she busies herself cleaning the room and so on. Upon his returning home, Zhuang Jianfei says “I’m starving,” and they eat dinner together. Now and then he makes an appreciating comment, “It’s absolutely delicious.”

In the evening, if there is a sports programme on TV, Zhuang Jianfei is engrossed in watching it. If not, Ji Ling watches alone, knitting at the same time, while Zhuang Jianfei reads in the bedroom.

When it is past ten, one of them says “it’s bedtime,” and they go to bed.

They have sexual intercourse every other day, accurate as a clock. Zhuang Jianfei has formed the pattern without asking Ji Ling. He showed a great variety of skills in bed. Whenever Ji Ling failed to understand tacitly, he would remark that he had thought girls from Flowery House Street were good at *having fun*, but it turned out that they did not deserve its reputation. Then he would give a strange laugh. If Ji Ling responded, “But I’m not a whore,” he would laugh even louder.

Ji Ling is not totally unworthy of her origin. She is not the type of insincere prig pretending that they loathe affairs in bed; nor does she lack imagination and creativity. But still she could not keep up with Zhuang Jianfei. It made her suspicious. She has a colleague Ms Zhang, who is nearly 40 years old. They are best friends despite their difference in age. Ji Ling once confided her misgivings to Ms Zhang.

Ms Zhang enlightened Ji Ling: “Don’t you understand? Your husband has slept with a dissolute older woman.”

Many times in the middle of their enjoyment of a beautiful night, Ji Ling would cross-examine Zhuang Jianfei. Each time he was evasive. Later, when Ji Ling was together with him again, she felt estranged.

They do not take any serious contraceptive measures after getting married. Every month Ji Ling pays close attention to her menstruation. Before they got married, Zhuang Jianfei used to be rather attentive. He would call as soon as it was the date.

“Has it come yet?”

“Yes, it has.” Ji Ling would answer in the presence of many others in public.

If her answer was “No,” Zhuang Jianfei would become highly sensitive and nervous, “Why not?” And he would urge her, “Keep watching!” At these words Ji Ling could not hold back the smile surging from the bottom of her heart.

Since getting married, however, Zhuang Jianfei’s interest has obviously waned. It was ten days past the normal date for this month but he did not have the slightest awareness. Another ten days passed and Ji Ling was almost sure that she was pregnant.

The early morning of the day on which they quarrelled, Ji Ling was in a good mood. She wanted to give Zhuang Jianfei a happy surprise. She had kept some morning urine to take to the hospital for a test and deliberately placed the small bottle near the toilet paper. Being a physician as well as a surgeon, Zhuang Jianfei would understand. He was in the toilet for quite a while. When he came out, he said beaming, "It's a lucky day today. I'll enjoy myself this evening when I get back."

As soon as he got home that evening he looked at the clock and said, "Live transmission starts at 6:50."

So he had been over the moon from morning till night just because of the women's badminton game for the Uber Cup. How could Ji Ling vent her spleen if not swearing at him? Zhuang Jianfei has never uttered a dirty word. The Zhuang family all use cultured language. It makes Ji Ling's swearing take on another function, that is, of revenge. Anyway, according to the law, Ji Ling is now a member of the Zhuang family. The Zhuangs, therefore, are no longer so refined and elegant.

All those matters are far, far away from what Ji Ling projected for her life.

She planned to get a job to her liking, to work well, to be agreeable to her boss and colleagues and to get more bonuses.

She planned to find a husband of high social status, to give and receive love, to have a son and lead a conjugal life.

She planned to take turns visiting their parents on holidays and Sundays, to get on well with them and to enjoy family happiness.

That was all! Simple and practical. To achieve her ambition, she was willing to take on the full load of housework. She has in fact done so. But Zhuang Jianfei does not take her seriously.

This time, if he does not act in accordance with her terms, she will divorce him. On hearing the word divorce, her mother turns on her.

"Nonsense, damned girl. Divorce is not a thing to be mentioned casually!"

Ji Ling does not regard divorce as seriously as her mother does. Why not separate if two people cannot get along? They can start looking for gratifying partners while still young. No matter what other people say, no matter how hard they try to persuade her, she will not change her mind. She cannot cherish a man who does not take her seriously, be he royalty or a foreign millionaire. As a girl growing up in Flowery House Street, she has never gained nice food and clothing without making efforts on her own. She has listened to former prostitutes talking about the past, to elder brothers and sisters talking about the Cultural Revolution and their experiences working in the countryside; she has seen all kinds of movies, ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign; she has observed the latest fashions and new ideas. She has a prolific knowledge about the ways of life!

Her mother is tough and experienced in coping with Zhuang Jianfei. Behind his back, however, she puts in innumerable good words for him and tries to persuade her daughter to go back to her own home. She argues that by marrying Zhuang Jianfei, Ji Ling has indeed climbed up the social ladder. "One should be content with one's lot. It's wrong to crave the crown of a foreign empire once you've

become Emperor of China. There's an old saying that goes 'a good woman does not marry twice,'" she admonishes.

Ms Zhang is the only person Ji Ling can consult and trust in. She is not only Ji Ling's bosom friend but also Chairperson of the Trade Union Branch and Women's Representative of the Xinhua Bookstore. She has handled many disputes between couples and always believes that wherever men are concerned, an ace should be kept in hand. So they have kept Ji Ling's pregnancy a secret in order to deal the Zhuangs a heavy blow at a critical moment.

It is decided that next time Zhuang Jianfei comes, Ji Ling will see him in person. If his behaviour is not acceptable, Ms Zhang will accompany Ji Ling to see the authorities at Zhuang Jianfei's hospital and ask for a divorce in the name of the organization. Ms Zhang will prepare a letter of introduction.

Now Ji Ling is waiting for Zhuang Jianfei to come.

Zhuang Jianfei comes again. This time both his parents-in-law are in the central room. His mother-in-law, in the same greasy outfit, is playing cards, a cigarette dangling from her lips. His father-in-law is huddled up like a shrimp in a small bamboo chair, holding his teacup in both hands, looking drunk.

"You are both home," Zhuang Jianfei greets them.

Nobody responds.

"I've come to see Ji Ling."

Nobody responds.

"If Ji Ling doesn't come out today, I will stay."

His mother-in-law opens her mouth: "You know the conditions for Ji Ling's return."

"I still think it better that affairs between husband and wife do not affect their parents."

"We are already affected," his father-in-law cuts in. "Frankly, your parents think too highly of themselves. Look around Flowery House Street. It has the biggest and oldest jeweller's in the whole municipal city, the customs clock-tower, the concession area, Wang Yuxia Food Store, the Four-Seasons Steamed Dumpling Restaurant that is well-known home and abroad, ..."

He is cut short by Ji Ling's appearance.

She stands on the dark, narrow stairs, wearing a knitted sleeping gown and a pair of bright red shiny slippers, her hair touching her shoulders. Zhuang Jianfei feels as if he is looking at a star.

Ji Ling coldly addresses him, "Come up."

As soon as he is upstairs, Zhuang Jianfei tries to embrace her, but she dodges away. "You've come to solve the problem," she says to him.

"That's correct," Zhuang Jianfei affirms with a double-edged remark. "I have many problems."

He catches hold of her. Without much ado, he kisses her several times and falls with her in his arms onto the bed. He fervently whispers, "Let me solve this problem quickly."

Ji Ling does not want to end all the troubles this way. What's more, Zhuang Jianfei is being too fierce and she is afraid that the foetus cannot stand it.

"I'm sick!" she protests.

She shouts a few more times as she grapples and struggles with him. But he won't listen. He is burning hot as if running a high fever and is pressing her so hard that she feels dizzy. She has to give him a butt with her knee. Nevertheless, the gentle blow makes Zhuang Jianfei shrivel up and roll to one side, covering the sore spot with his hands. He moans, silently, gritting his teeth as he endures the shooting pain. He is just about able to tolerate the pain in his lower regions when the pain in his heart expands immensely. No one has ever refused him. Moreover he is her husband. He has the right. How can she treat him like this? Not allowing him to watch TV! Cursing him! Running away from him! Forcing him to come again and again to beg for pity! And insulting him in such a way!

Ji Ling sits on the wooden chest in front of the window, not showing the slightest trace of apology.

Straightening up, Zhuang Jianfei roars in a strangled voice: "Come back home with me!"

"I didn't do it on purpose."

But she did. Zhuang Jianfei is in the position to know the nature of such an act. It is deliberate and malicious. "You come back home with me!"

"It's not the right time for us to discuss this matter."

"It has nothing to do with the time, be it right or wrong. You are my wife and you should come back to my home."

"Your home, huh?"

"It's your home too."

"My parents have told you the conditions. I'll do as they wish."

"I repeat. This is our private affair."

"But I am your parents' daughter-in-law."

"Impossible! I tell you, it's impossible for my parents to come here."

Ji Ling's face looks even colder. "Then go away."

"I give you two days to come back home. Otherwise you'll regret it!"

"Then let's wait and see," Ji Ling replies resolutely.

Zhuang Jianfei rides along aimlessly. He did not expect things would end up in such a mess. They had quarrelled before. As long as he took the initiative to be intimate, especially in bed, all their problems were readily solved. He does not understand why this time his old method does not work.

He feels a strong urge to visit a friend, have a drink, and talk the matter over to find out what others have to say.

Who should he visit? He had many classmates when he was at university and a gang of bachelor friends when he was single. As time flies by, they have all got married. After marriage, friends automatically drift apart. It is as if each has formed a unit or a cell with a woman, so friends became redundant. You have voluntarily discarded them, now when you are in need, who can you turn to?

He passes by a grey residential area that, he remembered, is called "Oasis". One of his university classmates lives there. He clearly remembers the building because he noticed some graffiti when attending the classmate's wedding two years ago. There was a concrete electricity pole just opposite the

balcony of the wedding chamber on the third floor and exactly at that height were the shocking words in flaming-red paint---So-and-so raped So-and-so.

Pausing on his motorbike beneath the row of characters, he looks at the balcony on the third floor. He remembers everything except the person's name. Grinning ironically, he is about to leave when suddenly someone calls from above: "Isn't that Zhuang Jianfei?"

The moment he hears his name called, he remembers his former classmate's.

"Lu Zhilao," he waves.

Because of his father-in-law's power of influence, Lu Zhilao has a two-bedroom flat. His father-in-law is in charge of supplies and marketing at a large steel plant. The position is not high but with plenty of potential.

The rooms are wallpapered and decorated like those in a upper-medium rated hotel. Lu Zhilao wears sideburns and a shirt in a bold floral pattern. The ends of the shirt are tied together to expose his chest with curly hair, which is less than a foreigner's but more than that of most Chinese. There is a gold chain around his neck and a gold ring on his finger. The cigarette he offers Zhuang Jianfei is an American "Hilton". Zhuang Jianfei is welcomed with exceptional warmth. They used to attack each other viciously in their university days to show that they were on good terms.

"Have you given up medicine for business?" asks Zhuang Jianfei.

"No. I do business in my spare time."

"It looks like you've made a fortune."

"A fortune is out of the question. I can afford meat for each meal. How about you?"

"Still poor as a scholar is. How can I be mentioned in the same breath as this golden image of yours?"

Laughing magnanimously, Lu Zhilao says, "It is not a bad thing to have lots of money. Let me introduce a deal for you. Profits guaranteed. As a former classmate, I'd like to see you become rich too."

"I'm afraid ..."

"Don't be evasive. I'm easygoing. I'll only charge an information fee."

But for the moment Zhuang Jianfei's anxieties are his domestic problems. What he needs most, stability and unity. Lu Zhilao chatters on about promoting the sale of Japanese infrared alarms, talking in the most fantastic terms as if banknotes can float down like snowflakes from the sky. "All you have to do is open your purse to catch the money."

Zhuang Jianfei is not interested in this illusion of getting rich quick. He has come to discuss practical domestic matters and the husband-wife relationship.

"Is your wife fine?"

Lu Zhilao looks lost at the sudden change of topic and gives a stiff nod.

Zhuang Jianfei explains, "I mean is your relationship good?"

"Have you heard something?"

"No, I'm just asking."

"What a question! Everything is fine with me."

“Have you got a child?”

“Good Heavens! you’re like a woman now. Why have children? I’ll leave it until after I’ve earned enough money and enjoyed myself when still young. Don’t you realize how poor we Chinese are?”

“I do. But I’m fond of children.”

“I’m not interested yet.” Lu Zhilao cuts the topic short. He picks up a full carton of “Hilton” and throws it to Zhuang Jianfei, announcing that the Japanese infrared alarms business has already begun. Zhuang Jianfei cannot work out why his former classmate treats him so generously. Then Lu Zhilao says to him, “I have a little favour to ask you.”

“Hope I’m able to help.”

Zhuang Jianfei has taken flight from his parent-in-law’s place and is trying to get help from his friends; instead he is being asked to help others.

“For you, it’s as easy as lifting a finger.” Lu Zhilao snaps his fingers and out comes a young girl from the inner room. Obviously this is not the mistress of the house.

“Thanks!” the girl smiles at Zhuang Jianfei.

Zhuang Jianfei is embarrassed.

“Help this girl get rid of her problem secretly. Three months already.” Lu Zhilao sounds happy and relaxed.

Zhuang Jianfei does not want to do such a thing, nor does he have the energy to arrange for an underground deal like this. But he has given his promise.

Seeing Zhuang Jianfei off downstairs, Lu Zhilao tells him that Sun Zheng lives in the building right opposite his.

Sun Zheng is another former university classmate and roommate of Zhuang Jianfei’s. He shared a bunk bed below Zhuang Jianfei for five years. Sun Zheng is the sort of person who wears glasses and always properly buttons up his shirt collar and cuffs, earnest in everything he does.

Zhuang Jianfei has an impulse to drop in on him. Sun Zheng will not grab him and ask him to do an abortion for a stranger.

As expected, Sun Zheng behaves dutifully. His wife is at work and he is staying at home to look after their child while revising an article to contribute to a journal. His daughter is just two years old and clings to him like a snake. After being frightened of Zhuang Jianfei for a minute, the baby girl starts pestering him. She makes him repeatedly throw her up in the air. Only then can Sun Zheng get a chance to talk to Zhuang Jianfei. He talks seriously about his living and working conditions.

He tells Zhuang Jianfei that he shares a two-room flat with another family. His room is 13.5 square metres and the other, 14, which he thinks is absolutely unfair, especially when the other has a better aspect. “If you get a better aspect, you should get a smaller room. How can one person grab all the advantages?” But there is nothing he can do about it. Lots were drawn when these rooms were distributed, so it only proved that his *lot* is no good.

The lounge is shared by the two families. Sun Zheng says, “Zhuang Jianfei, normally we should be talking in the lounge. It’s strange that neither family receives guests there. So now it’s piled up with

coal briquettes and odds and ends. The wife of the other family is a shrew and the husband a miser who is always trying to use more electricity and water but to pay less for both. What's worse is their ten year-old son, who acts like a hooligan. He's always taking peeks at our daughter when she wees. Whenever there is a chance, the boy lures her outside. "It's really ironic that people call families living together like this 'united households'. If anyone says to me when they come in: 'oh, you're living in a united-household flat,' I'm sure to fly into a rage!" He continues, "Jianfei, after all you understand me. You didn't say such a thing to me!"

Before Zhuang Jianfei can say anything, Sun Zheng starts again, telling him that all are skunks in the medical magazine office where he works. Except him, none of the staff members knows about medical science. Before transferring there, they were accountants, kindergarten teachers, warehousemen, and the like. However they have the impudence to try to push him out. As he watches other didactic, exhortatory magazines in the medical field appear one after another, he feels deeply ashamed.

Then he talks about the rising prices, the tight family budget, how tiresome it is to bring up a child before three, how difficult to find a nursery after three, and so on.

"How is your relationship with your wife?" Zhuang Jianfei seizes a pause and cuts in.

"That's a question well worth discussing," Sun Zheng replies. "Social scientists hold different views on this." He then expounds some social scientists' theories. Like a student who is diligent but has put his finger on the wrong spot, Sun Zheng gives a long reply without coming to the point.

"What about your own marriage?" Zhuang Jianfei tries once more.

Sun Zheng gives a hollow laugh. "Why ask about mine? My marriage is not bad."

Zhuang Jianfei says: "My marriage isn't bad, either ..."

"That's good." Obviously, Sun Zheng has started to just go through the motions of talking to him. His little daughter Beibei wants a drink so he goes to get some water for her. His seriousness makes the simple matter of pouring out some water an excessively long and slow process. First he sterilizes a glass with hot water, and then a spoon in the same way. He goes outside to tip out the used water. He sets the glass down firmly in the centre of the table lest it be knocked off. He searches out the Essence of Honeysuckle amongst a row of medicine bottles ... all the while Beibei is staring at him with anxious eyes, greedily smacking her lips.

All of a sudden, Zhuang Jianfei notices that Sun Zheng has become a little old man. With lots of wrinkles on his forehead, he looks pale, thin and weak. He sensibly decides to take his leave. While bustling about, Sun Zheng suddenly asks: "What brings you here?"

The serious man has totally reversed the order of things. He has been worn down by being meticulous.

Friends, my friends! Riding along the asphalt road in a melancholy mood, Zhuang Jianfei feels bitterly disappointed about his peers.

Just before dinner time, Zhuang Jianfei rushes into Mei Ying's home. She is cooking in the kitchen. Seeing him, she nearly drops the slice in her hand.

"I was just passing by and struck by a sudden urge to ask your advice on a small professional problem."

Mei Ying's husband laughs loudly: "You're welcome. I like unexpected visitors." This is a big man with an open manner. He is chopping some spring onions, garlic, and the like.

Their son is in the lounge teaching a delicate, pretty girl to play piano. It appears that they are sweethearts. The old couple are cooking for the young couple. Everyone look happy and the place is permeated with an atmosphere of good cheer.

The girl carries over a drink for Zhuang Jianfei and asks him for his comments on the hands of a pianist and those of a surgeon. He says that a pianist's hands are constructive and a surgeon's, destructive. His words set the whole household laughing.

Mei Ying's husband takes the slice over from her so that she can talk with Zhuang Jianfei. Zhuang Jianfei apologizes to him from the bottom of his heart, "I'm sorry!"

Mei Ying understands its implications but she does not betray anything.

In the small study, Zhuang Jianfei tells her about his predicament in one breath. Mei Ying comes up with three essential suggestions almost immediately:

First, observing heart transplant operations in the U.S. is a high step in his career in thoracic cavity surgery. He has got to climb it, whatever the cost.

Second, sex is not the only connection between male and female. A husband and wife have many other duties between them, of which Zhuang Jianfei undoubtedly does not have an adequate understanding. Ji Ling must have hidden reasons. Zhuang Jianfei should try to move her with love.

Third, Zhuang Jianfei's parents have got to personally intervene to settle the matter. People are all equal. If you despise others, then some day you will surely get into trouble.

Zhuang Jianfei feels enlightened. That is what Mei Ying is like, mature and rich in experience. Several years have passed and only now does Zhuang Jianfei really understand why she, though madly infatuated with him for his body, refused to marry him. Her husband, her son, and her daughter-in-law are all outstanding persons. In the ocean of people, outstanding individuals are scarce, yet Mei Ying has got three. She will never abandon them. Life involves far, far more than sex between male and female--she is absolutely right! A wise woman indeed! With an impulse to kiss her surging inside him, Zhuang Jianfei just holds out his hand to her as a friend. Mei Ying shakes it and gives him an understanding smile. During a short mutual gaze, they together cross dangerous rapids. Zhuang Jianfei has grown mature. What he needs now is not a lover but a good teacher and an obliging friend. In whatever terms, Mei Ying deserves to be regarded as both.

After another long sleepless night, smoking and pacing around, Zhuang Jianfei finally makes up his mind to go and see his parents. Meanwhile, Ji Ling starts to take resolute action.

Accompanied by Ms Zhang, Ji Ling sets off for Zhuang Jianfei's workplace. They head straightaway for the president's office. Experienced Ms Zhang has planned this move. If they go to an office at a lower level, their visit will not likely to make as much of an impact when people there try to restrain them or to mediate.

Hua Rufen receives them. Her face lights up with pleasure the moment she sees Ji Ling. "Good! Good that you've come. I knew you would but didn't expect it so soon. Excellent!"

Both Ji Ling and Ms Zhang are so confused that for a while neither of them seems to know how to respond. Hua Rufen continues in a jocular tone, "You young couple should stroll around the hospital hand in hand."

While Hua Rufen is pouring out some water for them, Ms Zhang whispers in Ji Ling's ear: "The guilty party has filed the suit. You'd better complain and cry. With tears."

Hua Rufen hands Ji Ling a glass of water. "Have you seen Young Zhuang?" she asks.

"No," Ji Ling answers.

"Then let me call the Surgical Department and ask him to come and see you."

"That's not necessary," says Ji Ling. Sooner or later, they will have to face each other in person; for now she needs to talk to Hua Rufen separately.

Hua Rufen senses something odd in the atmosphere. "Is anything the matter?"

Ji Ling gives her pale lips a lick and Ms Zhang holds her by the shoulder.

"I have come to seek help from the hospital authorities. I want to divorce Zhuang Jianfei."

Ms Zhang presents a letter of introduction to Hua Rufen: "I am here on behalf of Ji Ling's work unit. We did an investigation and found that she has been maltreated at home, mainly emotionally. We expect your cooperation with us."

Hua Rufen can hardly believe her ears. "You want a divorce?" she asks in disbelief.

Although mentally prepared, all his preparations amount merely to a fight on paper. Zhuang Jianfei cannot hold back the strong feeling of humiliation the moment he enters his parents' home. The tribulations he has suffered before and after marriage vividly appears before his mind's eye. Ji Ling's parents are unpresentable, yet their home is their daughter's rear base, her sanctuary. They are ready at all times to spread their wings to protect their child. Zhuang Jianfei envies Ji Ling for that. His own parents are highly educated and well cultivated. It follows that their feelings are much richer than those of common people. For whatever reason, however, these erudite people of humanities are further estranged from humans.

Zhuang Jianfei has tried the best he can to show his parents that his marriage is a happy one. Unfortunately, just six months later, he is forced to come back here and ask them for help, since everyone else thinks this is the only way to solve the problem. On the way he has cited many examples in modern and ancient times to convince himself that a true man must learn to compromise for the greater good. For instance, Han Xin of the Western Han Dynasty stooped to accept the humiliation of going under someone's legs; Gou Jian of the Spring and Autumn Period slept on brushwood and tasted gall after being defeated, and so on. All these sound childish. But he knows he is dead serious and he has to put these old teachings to practice.

Zhuang Jianfei realizes, from his bitter experiences, that marriage does temper a man.

From his early youth through to his university days, he had tried to work out, in vain, why many middle-aged men were so smooth and sly when socially conducting themselves, and why they were

able to endure humiliations. Now he understands. Marriage has played a big role. Very rarely is a noted personage a bachelor. On the contrary, many outstanding figures have experienced more than one marriage. Viewed from a certain angle, marriage can be regarded as a school of life. Mei Ying is an excellent graduate. She has repeatedly stressed that sex is not the only relation between male and female partners. Those words are really worth their weight in gold.

Unexpectedly, Zhuang Jianfei's parents set their work aside and emerge from their study to meet their son in the lounge. Zhuang Jianfei feels somewhat encouraged. It seems that his parents have begun to treat their married son as an adult, instead of ignoring him as they did before.

"Ji Ling has left home," he tells them.

His parents and younger sister are all shocked to a varying degree. They stare at him, waiting for more revelations. Zhuang Jianfei notices that in a twinkling his mother looks composed again and that composure is quickly followed by a faint expression of sneer. He does not feel like saying any more but his mother waves a finger at him, "Go on."

Zhuang Jianfei gives a sketchy account of what has happened, keeping back the condition for Ji Ling's return home. He'd like to see first how they react.

His sister Jianya's attitude is the fiercest. "That's just what you'd expect of those awful little towngirls in Hankou. They run away to their parents' homes at the slightest of home disputes. Ji Ling has simply benefited from your marrying her! Just ignore her for a few days and she'll quietly come back home."

"Jianya, you talk like a little child."

"Brother, how come you become so weak-willed? After all, what is Ji Ling---nothing more than a girl from Flowery House Street."

"Don't speak of her like that. She is your sister-in-law!"

"But ... but she has betrayed you!"

Her words make Zhuang Jianfei smile. Ji Ling has not betrayed him. She has just run away from home.

His father's brow is furrowed by deep anxiety. "Your wife, has she run away?"

"Yes."

"For what substantial reason?"

"It seems there is no substantial reason."

"Why doesn't she listen to reason?"

"I don't know."

"She should understand that you are married of your own free will."

Zhuang Jianfei has to nod his head.

"It's outrageous that she should have done this to you!"

"It is somewhat."

"Which body is in charge of matters of this kind? What about the law?"

Zhuang Jianfei does not know whether to laugh or to cry. "There seems to be no law pertaining to such a matter, Dad."

"All right, all right." His mother, who has been silent so far, opens her mouth. "Jianfei, how shall I put it. The fact has proved that it's you who was wrong in the first place, not us."

Zhuang Jianfei feels that, at these words, the tip of his heart quivers a little, which makes him exceptionally uneasy.

His mother modulates her tone when speaking, putting on a demeanour she knows is attractive to students. Looking her son in the eye, she asserts, "I know your disposition very well. Ever since you were a child you have tried to keep everything to yourself. I thought you'd pretend to be happy even though you are not. So what surprises me is not Ji Ling's running away but your coming back home to tell us about your troubles. Perhaps your purpose is not just to vent your grievances or to get sympathy from your father and sister. Their bookish sympathy can't satisfy your needs ..." Her words become more and more caustic. "If you want us to do anything for you, you'd better come straight to the point."

"No! I don't want you to do anything for me," responds Zhuang Jianfei.

In fact, so long as he and Ji Ling are husband and wife, his parents are relatives of Ji Ling's parents. His parents should go and visit their relatives. Even some of the emperors had lowly relatives. Zhuang Jianfei feels that the faint quivering at the tip of his heart has turned to a clear pain.

"Dad, I'm going." Then he turns to Jianya and waves to her.

His mother says, "We are not saying we won't help you."

Courteously, Zhuang Jianfei inclines himself slightly towards her: "Thanks. But that's unnecessary."

The telephone rings. Jianya says to him, "Hang on, Brother. Perhaps this call is for you."

Zhuang Jianfei also has a strong premonition---the call has something to do with him.

Jianya looks shocked when answering the phone and hurriedly calls her mother over.

The call seems endless. Just as Zhuang Jianfei is about to leave, his mother hangs up.

"She wants to get divorced," she tells Zhuang Jianfei.

"Ji Ling?"

"Who else could it be but her?" Jianya cuts in. "The call is from Aunt Hua. They are all set to take action."

His mother asks his father to call his institute for a car. Then she says to Zhuang Jianfei's back: "I hope you can go to study in the U.S. Don't be swayed by personal feelings. Don't try to save a little only to lose a lot. No matter how strong your vanity is, I will help you all the same."

The incident started like this: husband and wife had a quarrel over a trifling matter, and then it expanded like a snowball, involving Zhuang Jianfei's colleagues, Ji Ling's family members, Ms Zhang, Hua Rufen, Wang Luo, Dr Zeng, his parents, his work unit and Ji Ling's. It is like tangled warfare.

Marriage is not private. It belongs to all those around you. You cannot possibly act independently and take initiative into your own hands. You cannot afford to be negligent. Even if you do not interfere in other people's affairs, they will interfere in yours. Marriage does not mean only sex, it is far from being only that. A wife is not merely a partner for sex, either; she is a partner for life. To lead a smooth life, you have to shoulder responsibilities as a husband, pay attention to your wife's changing moods,

show her loving care, accommodate yourself to her and be prepared to bear the scrutiny of others. You should stumble along with her to your destiny, each supporting the other.

Of all those people around him, Zhuang Jianfei considers Mei Ying the wisest. She once said, "You will understand one day, child." Now he understands.

The conflict arose suddenly and is resolved in the same way.

Zhuang Jianfei's parents hurry to Flowery House Street by car. They stop over at Wang Yuxia Food Store on their way there and get a colourful pack of cakes. They hand the present to Ji Ling's parents as soon as they see them. "We were so busy before and had to postpone our visit until this late moment." Naturally, these words are said by Zhuang Jianfei's mother to Ji Ling's mother, who is surrounded by neighbours who have gathered to watch the event. The words more than adequately save her face, so she smiles cordially and receives her guests with immense zeal. She gives instructions right away that the table be set with wine and a meal prepared, drawing on her personal savings hidden in her inner pocket to entertain her daughter's parents-in-law.

Ji Ling's mother has experienced various aspects of life through a couple of dynastic changes and is expert at adapting herself to changing situations. She was notified of the visit when the car stopped to ask the way. Slipping inside her room, in the twinkling of an eye she put on an entirely new look. Zhuang Jianfei's mother has never expected that a Flowery House Street housewife can look so neat and creditable. She feels somehow consoled.

Ms Zhang was discussing the divorce with Ji Ling's mother. Seeing that the wind has changed, she would naturally like to assume the good role of bringing the couple together. She leads Zhuang Jianfei to a corner of the lane and has a long talk with him, scolding Ji Ling for getting into a temper over trifling things and Zhuang Jianfei for his being too careless with her.

Upon hearing of Ji Ling's pregnancy, Zhuang Jianfei experiences a surge of emotion within him. He manages to stay throughout the dinner with his parents. As soon as they get into the car, he gets on his motorbike and, at a fantastic speed, flies to Ms Zhang's place.

Ji Ling cries the moment she sees Zhuang Jianfei. Ms Zhang has told her everything. Ji Ling is full of regret. As she is almost dehydrated from constant vomiting, it is inappropriate for her to see her parents-in-law, so she has been lying in Ms Zhang's home, waiting for her husband.

"What did you eat the past few days?" asks Ji Ling.

"Just made do with snacks." Zhuang Jianfei answers.

Ji Ling howls with sorrow again. Gently pressing his hand on Ji Ling's belly, Zhuang Jianfei apologizes to the new life, "My son, your father begs your pardon."

"It's a daughter." Ji Ling smiles through tears.

They lean against each another and, at great length, put the respective parts together to bring out the complete story. One moment they blame each other ; the next moment, they contend to examine their own faults. Tears, laughter, jealousy, future---they are carried away by every kind of emotion.

It is getting late before they know it. Ms Zhang has done some shopping and invites them to stay for dinner. They decline. "Let's go home," Zhuang Jianfei suggests.

"Let's," Ji Ling agrees.

Divorce becomes a joking word to them. Zhuang Jianfei has finally solved all the problems satisfactorily. He believes that he is experienced from now onwards.

Only Jianya still takes the divorce incident to heart and treats Ji Ling tepidly. She writes in her diary: "Brother's wife does not love him. He is so pitiable." She herself, however, already over 30, is still searching for a husband after her heart. In her opinion, there are no true men in contemporary China; but contemporary China does not tolerate single women. "I am also very pitiable," she adds in her diary.

## **4.2 Study 2 Inside and Outside the New Household of a Young Couple: Drama of a Lower-Middle Class Wife and her Upper-Middle Class Doctor Husband**

Like the story *Father* which focuses on the relationship in a common working-class family between parent and children from the 1930s to the mid-1980s in urban China, the novella *Apart from Love* 不谈爱情 takes the urban family in the late 1980s as its setting. However, it differs from *Father* in that it involves an intellectual family and a petty urban family as well as a new type of combination-family of these two types. Its family relationship subject is also treated in a different light by focusing from the third-person omniscient perspective on the entanglements between a young couple before and after their marriage. Therefore, it provides an interesting contrast to the autobiographical treatment in “Father” of traditional family relationships and living conditions. As both stories are responsive to and representative of their times, we can also perceive the great changes that had taken place during those 50 years or so---changes in the conceptions of the Chinese urban dwellers, and changes in their living environments inside and outside their families.

### **4.2.1 The author and her literary creation**

*Apart from Love* is written by Chi Li 池莉, one of the gifted young women writers who have become increasingly popular with Chinese and overseas readers. Although eight years younger than Liang Xiaosheng (she was born in the city of Xiantao, Hubei<sup>9</sup> in 1957), Chi Li has a life experience similar to his. She went to the countryside of Hubei as an educated youth in 1974 and worked as a village teacher there before being selected two years later to study in a medical college subsidiary to the metallurgical industry in Hubei. Upon graduation in 1980, she was assigned to work as a nurse in a hospital affiliated to a big steel factory in Wuhan<sup>10</sup>. Well before taking up writing as a full-time occupation, she tried her hand at literary creation, starting to publish as early as 1978. Before 1980, her writings appeared mainly in the form of poetry and articles. After that, she concentrated on fiction. She passed the 1983 national tertiary-entrance examination and was consequently admitted to the Chinese Department of Wuhan University. In 1987, she took up an editing job for a Wuhan-based literary magazine *Fragrant Grass* 芳草.

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<sup>9</sup> Hubei is a province on the middle reach of the Changjiang (Yangtze) River to the north of the Dongting Lake.

<sup>10</sup> Wuhan is the capital city of Hubei Province situated where the Changjiang River and the Han River meet. It is composed of three towns (Wuchang, Hankou and Hanyang) and is an important hub for land and water transportation in central China. It is also one of the three summer “furnaces” of the country with the other two being Nanjing in Jiangsu Province and Chongqing in Sichuan Province.

Although *Fine Moon* 月儿好 (1987) was the first of her stories to receive praise both domestically and abroad, Chi Li first established her fame in China as one of the founding writers of “Neo-realist fiction” 新写实小说 through her novella *Trials and Tribulations* 烦恼人生 (1987). Being one of the first Chinese neo-realist stories, it was a trend-setting piece of work and won immediate nationwide attention. Other major works by her include *Apart from Love* (1989) and *Sunrise* 太阳出世 (1990) which, though independent of one another, are normally considered together with *Trials and Tribulations* as a Trilogy of Life 人生三部曲 (Yu, K. 1990), as they cover the three important stages of an average life: courtship, marriage and the bringing-up of children.

Chi Li's earlier fiction, written in the 1980s, is mainly about how young people dealt with their love, marriage, and problems in everyday life at that time. Later on, historical, cultural, and socio-political themes also found their way into her writings<sup>11</sup>. As a woman writer, however, her work has never wandered far from women, family, and their life in general, either in the present or in the past. She has gained considerable popularity in China.

#### 4.2.2 Linguistic and cultural issues in translating *Apart from Love*

There is a scene Chi Li depicts in *Apart from Love*, in which the male protagonist Zhuang Jianfei favourably compares his new girlfriend Ji Ling, who comes from a low-class family and social background, against his former steady girlfriend Wang Luo, who was born and bred in a family of senior intellectuals and is herself well-educated, but affected, immature, and rather removed from reality. Zhuang Jianfei recalled the funny behaviour of Wang Luo when they were going steady:

One cold day, Zhuang Jianfei accompanied her to a department store to buy moisturiser. “Get a box of the *Baiqueling*,” suggested he. Wang Luo immediately lost heart. The next moment, she was running away. Chasing her along the street, Zhuang Jianfei felt like a fool.

Why should the brand-name of a moisturiser make Wang Luo overreact like that? People unaware of the various meanings of the Chinese character “que” 雀 (sparrow) in the brand-name “*Baiqueling*” 百雀灵<sup>12</sup> (Hundred-bird moisturiser), which was a very popular brand of cosmetic product in China, can hardly make sense of the quoted text or hit upon the “black humour” it carries. The Chinese character 雀 is probably used in the brand name as a

<sup>11</sup> Other popular titles include stories *Hot or Cold, It's Good to Be Alive* 冷也好热也好活着就好 (1991), *You Are a River* 你是一条河 (1991), *A Tale of Unpredictability* 白云苍狗谣 (1992), *Premeditated Murder* 预谋杀人 (1992), novella *Rustling About* 来来往往 (1997), novel *A Black Dove* 黑鸽子 (1997), *Good Morning, Miss* 小姐你早 (1998). Six volumes of *Collected Works of Chi Li 1-6* 池莉文集 were published by the Jiangsu Literature and Art Press in 1998.

<sup>12</sup> *Baiqueling*” 百雀灵 should read “百雀羚”.

homophone to “*que*” 雀 (magpie), since there is a pleasant print of colourful flying birds, not exactly sparrows, on the moisturiser’s container lid. It can be used after another character “*xi*” 喜 (happiness) to form a collocation “*xique*” 喜雀, which refers to the same object as the monosyllabic “*que*” does. In traditional Chinese culture, a magpie is the symbol of a messenger of good news. Therefore, by the sound of it, the brand name may be interpreted by Chinese consumers as “Hundred-happiness,” hence a well-chosen and popular name. Being a word with multiple meanings, 雀 is also suggestive of “freckles” since, when it is used in combination with another Chinese character 斑 (*ban*, spot, mark), they together mean “freckles”. Therefore, Wang Luo made a connection between the “sparrows” in the brand-name and the “freckles” on her face, an association that Zhuang Jianfei obviously did not mean at all. An annotation on the multiple senses of the word must be included in the translation to reveal Wang Luo’s over-sensitivity and make understandable to the reader her consequent over-reaction to the effect of Zhuang Jianfei’s unintended pun as well as Zhuang Jianfei’s puzzlement. In such cases, the mere transliteration of proper names is clearly inadequate.

Standard Chinese or Mandarin contains more than 400 syllable morphemes, resulting in a great number of homophones. Even with the use of four separate tones as a means of differentiation, there are still many characters with precisely the same pronunciation and tone. While the Chinese language can express virtually any idea with full clarity, some utterances can potentially be quite ambiguous, particularly so if taken out of context. But as we can see from the above-mentioned example of “freckles”, the sources of such ambiguity and difficulty one may have in grasping the accurate meaning of a considerable part of the Chinese vocabulary rest not only on homonyms. The remarkably large variety in meaning of the individual words is another major source of comprehension problems in interpreting a text. In different connections, a word can appear with such divergence of sense that it is hardly recognizable as the same word, e.g. “*qing*” 青 (young; black; blue or green). Some may argue that there is nothing exceptional in this phenomenon as parallels can be found in all languages. But in Chinese this is carried to astounding lengths, so much so that very often it is only with the help of the context that one can guess which of the many sense varieties of a word is intended. Usually, the commoner the word, the more ambiguous the sense. Instead of providing reliable points of support in the unravelling of a sentence, these common words may cause an embarrassing state of uncertainty. Following the previous example, “*qing bu*” 青布 is “black cloth,” “*qing tian*” 青天 is “blue sky” or “a just judge”, “*qing chun*” 青春 is “youth”.

Other possibilities arise from the use of these already ambiguous syllable morphemes in combination with other morphemes (in compound words or in set phrases), from the ellipsis of otherwise simple components in some words or phrases for compounds, as well as from the symbolic use of words. Despite all its drawbacks, however, this ambiguity is much prized as one of the major sources for artistic embellishment as well as for the quality of terseness it gives to the language (see Karlgren 1990: 72 [1962]; Eberhard 1986: 9).

All names, whether of a personal or non-personal nature, carry socio-cultural and historical information in them. One might think that in regard to a person's proper name, strictly ascribed to that person as a verbal sign to be spoken of or referred to, it is fair enough to translate by means of transliteration and there should be nothing more to say about it. Actually, the given names of most Chinese people are much more interesting and complicated than those in the western countries where people generally choose one of the existing names such as David, Peter, Anna, Jill and so on for their children. Although these originally held clear meanings, now they are simply names to differentiate one person from another. Most Chinese given names do have specific connotations about the name bearers, their families, their birthplaces or the time they were born or lived in. For example, before the establishment of the PRC in 1949, such given names as "Fugui" (riches and honour), "Genxi" (root and blessing) were very common, reflecting the blessing, joy and hope of the elders. After 1949, "Jiefang" (liberation) and "Jianguo" (establish or build the country) became popular, indicating the celebration of the historical occasion or the ardent desire of the people for a better country. During the Cultural Revolution, many "Hongbing" (Red Guard), "Weidong" (defend Mao Zedong) appeared across China, showing the sweeping political fad of "revolution-making." If they are just transliterated, such information will be lost.

Having said that, these personal names can be transliterated when any information they may contain is peripheral to the text (for instance the protagonists' names Zhuang Jianfei and Ji Ling), or when the names are of outstanding figures like Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen), Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek), Mao Zedong, of renowned historical figures like Lao Zi (Lao Tze), or of famous places like Beijing (Peking). They are probably too well-known in most languages to require re-translation.

However, there are cases where the connotation of a name is too rich or too significant to be simply transliterated. The name of a certain kind of tea, "*nü'er cha*" 女儿茶 (girl tea or daughter tea) in *Apart from Love* is a case in point. We have read that the tea was carefully chosen, after much ado, as a present by the family of the woman protagonist Ji Ling, when

she was to pay the first visit to her prospective parents-in-law. It is no ordinary present, as it was heavily laden with meaning. The name it bears is specifically suitable for the occasion. The present was used to serve as a medium to get across the positive message from the female side to the other side regarding the proposed marriage---Ji Ling was willing to be their daughter-in-law. Likewise, the calculated indifference of Zhuang Jianfei's parents to the present helped send across an equally clear but negative message in that regard. Obviously, merely transliterating the name of the tea into "*nü'er cha*," a normal way to treat similar terms in translation, would have failed to enable an English reader to understand this important tier of meaning. Therefore, to start with, it should be semantically translated as "Daughter Tea".

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the "Daughter Tea" is made from the very first tea buds of "Longjing Tea" and normally picked by unmarried young girls; hence the name. If "Longjing Tea," produced in Hangzhou, is globally renowned as the best of all teas in China, then "Daughter Tea" is simply the best of the best which is very expensive, precious, and hard to obtain due to the small quantity of its natural produce. Having worked in a teashop since the age of 13, Ji Ling's father did know his business. This and the fact that the whole family and neighbourhood had contributed to the occasion in a quite painstaking manner intensified the force of the blow on Ji Ling inflicted by the Zhuangs' contemptuous treatment of her and her presents---it was an insult not only to Ji Ling, a person of a younger generation, but also one to her parents and all those on her side. It explains why Ji Ling, after an unbearably cold reception at the Zhuangs', should feel "a deep hatred taking root in her heart." Therefore, even semantic translation of the name of the tea is not good enough. To bring out all the significance the tea carried with it, as Snell-Hornby (1995: 79-80) elaborates, the translator needs to (1) recognize this even deeper tier of meaning (relying entirely on his/her general knowledge and intuition); (2) distinguish the target language variant; and 3) render the source language original accordingly. And the following three levels or dimensions of meaning are to be considered: (1) linguistic coding (words) and grammatical category (grammatical forms and communicative functions); (2) text analysis / text-assimilation (scenes or meaningful situations); and (3) cultural association (macro-context / background related to the reader's experience and response). One can do this by presenting an in-text explanation within the text, as a footnote to the page, to the chapter / paper or to the thesis / book, as an attachment such as a glossary, or if the explanation / annotation becomes too lengthy or involved, a "study" form should be used. Considering the important role these implied tiers of meaning play in the development of the plot of the novella and the reader's understanding of the characters' behaviour, it is well worth a translator's effort as such.

Wang Luo's question directed at Zhuang Jianfei, after learning of the running away of his wife Ji Ling: "Wang Luo asked in a tone like that of Goddess of Mercy, 'Dr Zhuang, do you need me to go and talk your wife round?'" should be treated in a similar manner. Needless to say, as a factually "discarded" former lover of Zhuang Jianfei's, the question reveals her gloating over his trouble with his wife, Wang's rival, and is meant to further upset, to astonish or even to threaten him. There is definitely much more to the question than meets the eye, including the "tone" as well, of course. As the "Bodhisattva (Avalokitasvara)" 观音菩萨 ("Guanyin pusa") here refers to Buddhist Goddess of Mercy who helps the needy and relieves the distressed, it might be all right if the cultural implications are considered unimportant and the phrase translated as "in a merciful tone," which may appear more concise and easier for the Western reader. However, it will result in a loss of cultural elements contained in the original phrase at the three levels of translation all at once: linguistically, the word "Bodhisattva" loses its corresponding part in the English version; in literary terms, the original phrase is robbed of its vivid image in the translated text; and culturally, the religious reference is wiped out, which actually carries a very useful piece of information for intended readers who live in a largely Christian world. This is a good example how the three levels or dimensions of meaning (linguistic, literary and cultural) seep into one another in the source-language original---what Mary Snell-Hornby (1995: 31-32) terms as "prototypes"---and each of the three must be adequately dealt with by the translator.

Other illustrative examples of this kind are the place names "*Hualoujie*" 花樓街 (Flowery House Street) and "*Luojiashan*" 罗珈山 (the Luojia Hill). These names are pregnant with social, economic, and cultural connotations, of great importance to the full understanding of the novella's theme, plot, its varied characters from different social and family backgrounds, and their behaviour bearing hallmarks of such backgrounds. "*Hualou*" 花樓 (flowery house / storeyed-building) is a euphemistic way to speak of a brothel, and a Chinese "flowery house street" is functionally equal to a "red-light district" in English. In cities bigger or smaller throughout China, you will come across similar place names such as "*Huajie*" 花街 (Flower Street) or "*Liuxiang*" 柳巷 (Willow Lane). As explained in Chapter 2.2 above, flowers and willows imply prostitutes and there are many set phrases using these words to allude to eroticism. While "*mianhua suliu*" 眠花宿柳 (sleeping among flowers and reposing beneath willows) means visiting a brothel, "*yanhua*" 烟花 (smoke-flower) is a prostitute for whom life, like smoke, is dissipated in the brothel. "*Luojiashan*" 罗珈山 is not just a place name, either. Close to Wuhan University, the Luojia Hill is situated in the scenic district on the East Lake in Wuchang, one of the three ancient towns constituting Wuhan, the capital city of

Hubei Province. Just as Flowery House Street carries with it a low social status, the Luojia Hill makes it clear that it is a privileged residential area for well-off and respectable people.

The information conveyed by the two contrasting place names serves to explain the Zhuangs' strong disapproval of their son marrying Ji Ling before they got to know her personally or to know anything else about her, except that she was a girl from Flowery House Street. The Luojia Hill and Flowery House Street do not match. So it was out of the question for them that a promising doctor from this prestigious scenic area should marry a girl from such a notorious district. From the beginning to the end of the novella, Zhuang Jianfei's younger sister Zhuang Jianya referred to her brother's wife not as "Sister-in-law," nor even as "Ji Ling," but contemptuously as "a girl from Flowery House Street." By marrying Zhuang Jianfei, Ji Ling was considered to have indeed climbed up the social ladder. Before the marriage, Ji Ling's own mother had warned against Ji Ling's ambitious goal of an ideal partner:

My dear, as I did tell you before, you are a girl from Flowery House Street. However smart, a toad can never jump higher than its natural ability. It is I who have done this harm to you all. I was taken in. I didn't know I'd married into Flowery House Street until the red veil was lifted from my head.

She did not even mention the bridegroom, but said she had married to the street! Her strong sense of inferiority about the place she had come to live best reveals the low and disreputable status of the street. Elsewhere in the novella we read that she had also repeatedly declared to her five daughters: "I've never been a whore." If the reader does not know the connotations that underlie the street name, how can he/she not feel puzzled about those unusual remarks?

In fact, it is the unbalanced nature of the marriage that is the deep-seated reason for the "internal war" between the major characters. The conflicts that initially occurred within their own household led to other conflicts and problems that spilled into their parents' families, and eventually into their respective work units. Without the awareness of the reason indicated by these two place names, readers might not be able to appreciate with a knowing smile the disgusting behaviour of the Jis, nor the arrogant attitude of the Zhuangs; they might not be able to fully fathom the inner-world of the woman protagonist Ji Ling depicted in the novella--her psychology and ambitions, even her language, which are all shaped by her experience in her family and her social surroundings and stamped by her inferior origin; nor would they be able to grasp the significant impact the marriage had on both sides. That grasp, however, is vital in the overall reading of the story. In other words, the two place names in the story do not only indicate the geographical locations, but also the different social levels of the people

who lived there. In cases like these, the need for further explanation in the translation is more compelling.

#### 4.2.3 Literary attributes of the novella

Toward the end of the 1980s, “neo-realist fiction” engaged the attention of the critics and the reading public in China after an array of earlier explorations and experiments in new literary forms, some of which were borrowed from the West. In tune with the tide of theoretical and methodological developments then in the literary arena, Chi Li’s works produced during that period bear marks of the time.

As mentioned earlier, Chi Li, is considered a major representative of the neo-realist group of writers. Although she is so labelled by many Chinese critics, I believe the neo-realism label is a convenient generalization of the writings by Chi Li during those few years before the end of the 1980s rather than an appraisal based on a careful examination of each of the individual pieces. While that generalization applies to *Trials and Tribulations* and some other stories, it is a little far-fetched for *Apart from Love*. This novella is conventional in its use of literary devices. It has a dramatic plot with a beginning, a climax, and a somewhat unexpected ending. It has characterization, flashbacks, a third person point of view, and a narration interspersed with comments in which the narrator gives voice to many of her personal views. The author moves in and out of the story sure-footedly, sometimes commenting directly on her characters and events, sometimes only offering lists of facts to explain her characters’ motivations, actions and their consequences. It bombards the reader with “realism,” arranging a welter of fragments into a seedy “tragi-comedy” that is coherent, poignant, revealing and imagination provoking. The story seems characteristic of classical Marxist realism with typical characters in typical circumstances and with the truth of details. The characters who populate the story are common people encased in vulnerable flesh and blood. Life is depicted in terms of the everyday, the common, and the pragmatic rather than the extraordinary or the moral (certainly not the political). As Yu Kexun, a Chinese literary critic, writes in the “Preface” to *Apart from Love*, a collection (in English) of Chi Li’s works,

If it were to happen that the dozen or so protagonists should walk off these pages and appear in daily life, the Chinese reader would find them intimately familiar and be enthralled by the authenticity of their Chinese style and temperament. Such Chinese style and temperament find expression in the ideas, interests, attitudes and lifestyle of all Chi Li’s heroes and heroines. (Yu, K. 1994)

Yet underlying those commonplace people and life are significant themes that transcend them all. These things may not be confined to Chinese culture but may extend to other Asian cultures as they pass through the process of modernization.

Although we have no evidence that Chi Li was directly influenced by Liu Zaifu's<sup>13</sup> literary theories on literary ontology, and on character-contrast and complex character-composition, Chi Li's *Apart from Love* would certainly have supported these two theories in its humanistic approach in looking at human affairs and its complex characters. Through her skilful use of an omniscient narrator, the author explores both of its major characters' innermost worlds of feelings equally deeply rather than just that of the first person narrator as in the story *Father*. The result is a more sensitive and more comprehensive account of the events, the true motivations of the characters behind these events, and the psychological processes that lead to the development of the plot. Consequently, the story appears in a framework with pluralistic story lines. Such a structure in turn considerably enlarges the space for psychological description and enables a detached projection of the whole story by the author without the necessity of providing a judgment of her own. When compared with *Father* with its single story line and the direct condemnation of the young woman visitor by the author through the "I" narrator, this characteristic of *Apart from Love* is all the more marked.

Chi Li's writing style is exquisite and her story full of aftertaste. Some literary works read like thunder on a summer's day, which strike the reader with great force; but once the reading is done, it is over. By contrast; some others read like flute solos on a quiet night, which require the listener to re-hear them again and again and still feel that there is something in the air the ear seems to have missed. Certain writings of Chi Li possess a lingering charm of the second kind. This charm is partly due to her careful composition of her stories with delicate details that make it possible for a reader not only to enjoy the story, but also to ponder over afterwards. For instance, we read that the drama of the "internal war" between Zhuang Jianfei and Ji Ling was triggered by their quarrel over a trifling matter, which was actually only its cause on the surface. Their first battle ended with Zhuang Jianfei smashing a cup of a coffee set "against the floor with brute force," and with Ji Ling's resolute departure from home. Before this point of time, she had repeatedly brought herself to make peace with her husband

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<sup>13</sup> Liu Zaifu was a high official in the literary wing of the Academy of Social Sciences and one of the most discussed Chinese literary theorists and critics in the 1980s. As Huters (1994: 159) sums up, Liu "sought to revive the notion of authorial subjectivity that had been anathema to Party literary policy for over 40 years." His theory on authorial subjectivity 文学主体理论 (Liu 1985) emphasizes an old thesis in literary studies---literature is about people 文学是人学, i.e. the writer, the characters, and the reader. He holds that people are free-willed individuals with a complicity beyond enumeration or prediction; therefore it is against the basic principle of literary creation to ascribe the role of the writer as a handmaiden of politics, that of the reader as a passive receptor to be educated, and consequently to fabricate literary characters to prove certain political concepts or schemes. Following this line of argument, he raises another theory on literary characterization---character contrast and complex-composition of character 性格对照组合论 (Liu 1988: 45-79; Zhang Z. 1986: 268-278). Those theories were seen as a challenge to the earlier orthodox Leftist literary theories, such as "literature and arts as Party's tools" 工具论, "creating heroic worker-peasant-soldier characters as the basic task" "根本任务" 论, "predominating of the theme" "主题先行" 论, and the "three-prominence" principle "三突出" 原则 in literary creation and criticism (Wu and Ji 1994: 52-53).

after their quarrels. The story includes several paragraphs of detailed description of the lovely coffee set and an account of its sentimental value to the couple as a symbol of their marriage. They had both specifically invested their psychology in that meaning. Intentionally or unintentionally, Jianfei's act was symbolically an expression of his "breaking-up" the marriage, which was surely interpreted by Ji Ling as such. A family dispute over a trivial matter was thus greatly intensified and led the dispute to the definite outbreak of the "war." Just as Jose (1992b) observes, "Chinese culture pays little heed to material objects in themselves, but reverences the non-material concepts that lie behind." Both the "coffee set" and the earlier mentioned "Daughter Tea" are such material objects with non-material concepts behind them. Even if their symbolic meanings are isolated cases with a limited applicability only to the story, there are many other similar emblems in traditional Chinese culture whose metaphorical meanings have become sanctioned by popular usage. This symbolic quality of the Chinese language exists in the whole process of communication among the people. It invests the language with a second form, or as Wolfram Eberhard (1986: 9) puts it, "a second-tier communication level, of greater potency than ordinary language, richer in nuances and shades of meaning." If not adequately rendered in translation, the implied meaning can only be sensed from the context by a very careful reader; at worst, it will be lost altogether. And yet a piece of literary work often depends heavily on these metaphors. In literary translation, therefore, the implicit cultural meaning of objects must not be overlooked.

Although the story has a number of parallel sub-themes, the major story line revolves around the marriage of Zhuang Jianfei and Ji Ling as they endeavour to exert some control over their marriage and life in general, to resist the pressure from within their immediate families and to cope with the competition in the broader world of the workplace. The title of the novella makes it clear from the beginning that the story is not about "love". As the Chinese saying goes, 不谈爱情，只谈婚姻。 (No talking about love, only about marriage.) Therefore the title can be seen to signify "about marriage and life."

Sexual attraction and carnal desire, often related to either love or marriage, has been a frequent subject matter of literature. The first poem of *The Book of Songs* 诗经, 11th c. and 6th c. B.C.) is about love; and poetry is perhaps the most suitable of all literary forms for people to place their dreams unable to be realized in reality. A separation of love from marriage is frequently seen in classic dramas and popular novels, particularly evident in the pornographic literature of the late Ming Dynasty during the 16th and 17th centuries. Before then, the orthodox ethics had attempted over and again to suppress this natural human desire.

Adultery was said to be “the sin of all sins” and strongly condemned by Confucian and Communist culture alike. Seductive women were frequently portrayed as “fox spirits” in literature. They were not only seen as morally harmful, physically dangerous, but also potentially threatening to the political and social stability of a dynasty or state. In the early 1950s after the communist takeover, sex and romantic love again became taboo topics in literature and art as well as in daily life. The facts of life were regarded as being “dirty” and were kept a secret from the young. The popular saying “marriage first, love afterwards” best sums up the prevalent situation at that time. People even avoided uttering words referring to “marriage” and matters related to it---a cleansed term was invented to replace them: individual matter 个人问题. Heroes and heroines in literary and artistic works were invariably single, without a spouse or a lover, as if there were no such relationships between men and women. All that was left was either a relationship between comrades or that between a revolutionary and a class enemy. Though the parent-child relationship seems to have always been close in Chinese families, Chinese parents seldom disclosed anything about their personal or sexual lives to their children, not even with their adult offspring. As a result, the young in general remained ignorant and were bewildered about sexuality and love.

The poem *To an Oak* 致橡树, written by a “misty poet” Shu Ting in 1977<sup>14</sup>, can be seen as the first bold announcement of equal status in marriage by women in China after the Cultural Revolution. In this poem, the woman poet uses the images of the oak and the kapok to indicate her understanding of man and woman in love or marriage: they have their “gender” characteristics but they are two trees (equal in that sense), thus independent from each other. These images contrast sharply with the traditional ones which allude the man as a big tree while the woman a wisteria twining round the tree. Yet even by the early 1980s, when some western writers seemed unable to stay off the subject of sex, their Chinese counterparts, though with the suppressed consciousness about it, generally felt reticent in this respect. The story that broke the taboo on love as a theme of literature is believed to be a short story *Love Must Not Be Forgotten* 爱，是不能忘记的 written by a female writer Zhang Jie in 1979, which explores the wide-spread problem of the loveless marriage and the debated point of true morality---a marriage based on love or one that merely maintains socially required appearances. Even in this highly controversial story, the description of love is purely mental and spiritual. The woman protagonist had a lifelong love for a man whom she hardly knew. As the narrator, the heroine’s daughter, said, “In fact they spent no more than 24 hours

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<sup>14</sup> The poem was first published in *Poetry Journal* 诗刊 in 1979, No. 4 and later collected in *A Boat with Two Masts* 双桅船 (1982: 16-17). For its English translation, see Shu (1994: 24-25).

together in all.” They had no physical contact at all, not even a handshake, till the day of the heroine’s death. This deliberate or subconscious avoidance of sexuality indicates that such depiction was still deemed improper to both writers and readers, and thus transferred to expressions with sexless properties through objects like the “twenty-seven-volume 1950-55 edition of Chekhov’s fiction.”

It so often happens that things turn into their opposites when taken to extremes. After being banned for a long time, romantic love burgeoned faster in popular literature perhaps than any other theme after the early 1980s. Even stories with quite different themes include the love-story sub-theme with open discussions and bold descriptions of sex. Later, love and sex were used as indispensable “spices” in popular literary and artistic works even when the plot did not require them.

In this new recognition of love and sex as literary themes, very few contemporary Chinese writers questioned the possibility of perfect love or probed deep into the meaning of sex and marriage. Chi Li did in her story *Apart from Love*. With cool, penetrating eyes and the sensitive but tolerant heart of a woman, the author hints to her readers why “love” was not her chosen topic as the title indicates. It can be said that the way she dealt with marriage and sexuality as common feelings without idealizing love moves her story beyond romantic fiction. By denying the conventionally accepted love models as such, let alone the normal practice of idealizing love in literature, the author leads her readers to see what “love” is like in real life and what marriage and life have in stock for us. In other words, what most of us take for romantic love is not there in real life. Marriage is only a part of life; life itself is much larger and more complicated.

#### **4.2.4 Literary and cultural issues in interpreting *Apart from Love***

##### ***Decoding the love myth---sex, marriage and family life that follows***

Ernest Hemingway once said that only three things were worth writing about: war, love, and money. There is no doubt that “love” (“aiqing” 爱情 in Chinese) has been a popular, actually one of the eternal themes of literature. But Chi Li chose to differ. She unmistakably declared her story to be “apart from love.” The title (literally “not talking about love”) is translated into “apart from love” because it is actually a more appropriate rendering of the original text and can accommodate all the nuances. It is important to note that while “love”, like one of its Chinese equivalents “ai” 爱, can mean warm and kind feelings, fondness, affectionate and tender devotion, etc. in general, the word “love” here refers to a particular kind of love---

“*aiqing*” 爱情 (the strong feeling of fondness between people of the opposite sex), and it will be used in this sense hereafter in this section if not specified otherwise.

In *Apart from Love*, the author subtly suggests to her reader that “love,” founded on sexual attraction, which has enticed countless generations of people into unremitting search for it, is actually something that exists only in literature. In real life, one had better talk about marriage and the family life afterwards, not “love”.

There are several conventional types of “ideal love” or “perfect matches.” The most dreamed of type is perhaps that which is instilled into young minds by popular literature, Western as well as Chinese, such as the fairy tales about a chance encounter of a prince on a white horse and a Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella, which after twists and turns leads to a happy marriage; or it might be the daughter of a dragon king falling in love at first sight with a poor but good-natured, handsome and diligent young man and eventually succeeding in marrying him against the objection of her powerful parent. While princes-on-white-horses and daughters-of-dragon-kings are almost unattainable for common people, the “chance-encounter” effect nevertheless has profoundly influenced their psyche. Zhuang Jianfei and Ji Ling’s marriage in *Apart from Love* brings the situation up-to-date. At a time when Zhuang Jianfei had “restrained his yearning for the other sex, suffering hunger and thirst” at the age of 29 and had “ceased to be choosy about his food,” and when Ji Ling had eliminated six boyfriends and was on the last of the three days she had asked her seventh to wait for her formal answer to his proposal, she “bumped into Zhuang Jianfei” under the oriental cherry trees at Wuhan University. As the author writes, “It is remarkable that opportunity always beckons you unawares at a crucial moment.” Two strangers’ roads crossed at that moment and it so happened too that they were both searching for the other half. This has to be a wonderful coincidence not possible by human calculation. It is certainly inexplicable that it should have fallen exactly on that spot at that moment on that certain date. As a consequence, they followed what may have been a “Heavenly plan” and got married.

This “falling in love at first sight” 一见钟情 can be classified as the fairy-tale type. The hardest thing to obtain in life is what one has set his/her heart on. Reading the up-to-date version of this conventional type of love in *Apart from Love*, we can see the basic fabric remains unchanged. Meeting Zhuang Jianfei by mere chance, Ji Ling instinctively sensed “an opportunity” at her first sight of Zhuang Jianfei’s hands which she believed to be those “of an intellectual from an intellectual family. ... Ji Ling felt sure that, simply from the look of his hands, this was the best choice she could possibly make in her life.” This detail is deeply

meaningful. Ji Ling fell in love with Zhuang Jianfei at first sight because of his hands (rather than a crown or a white horse as in a fairy tale) because they nevertheless revealed the similar kinds of personal information about him, including his occupation, his family background, the related socio-economic situation, and perhaps his intellectual makings in general.

Therefore, their “falling in love at first sight” is somewhat based on another conventional belief in “a good marriage of a brilliant young scholar and a beautiful woman” 郎才女貌. Perhaps because physical beauty, dependent largely on youth, is only skin-deep and so easy to lose, the author does not offer us a detailed description. However, the few sentences to this effect do reveal the tremendously important part this element plays in an affair of this kind:

[Ji Ling’s] face was right under his nose. This face was glowing and plump, suffused with a layer of golden fine hair in the sunlight. Zhuang Jianfei decided that he would choose her regardless of her family background. [...] In comparison, Zhuang Jianfei felt Ji Ling was more natural and lovable. What was more, Ji Ling was much plumper. That was very important.

Ji Ling’s “glowing and plump” face, when compared with Wang Luo’s freckle-covered one, evidently excludes the latter from this round of the competition. The repeatedly used word “plump”, with rich associative meaning pointing to youth and sex, suggests Zhuang Jianfei’s full awareness and his attraction to it. Different people may hold different opinions about Zhuang Jianfei’s personal inclination and taste for “beauty” or “attraction” of the opposite sex. Sometimes the heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of. None of the existing theories can explain some of the most ordinary phenomena around us, including “falling in love at first sight.”

Another type of commonly admired marriage, besides the fairy-tale one, is of “a fine couple from two families which are well matched in social and economic status 门当户对. According to this standard, Wang Luo was far superior to Ji Ling, not only in terms of her family background but also her professional accomplishments. However, Ji Ling, though in her own words, “a real petty-minded Hankou girl” with a humble origin, could out-compete the elitist Wang Luo who “disdained to talk about household matters or the main daily necessities such as fuel, rice, oil and salt,” because married life, and life in general indeed, all has to do with such matters, unavoidably and constantly too. As another woman character in the story Mei Ying says, “Sex is not the only connection between males and females. A husband and wife have many other duties between them” Furthermore, all things in this world supplement and complement each other, and man and woman are no exception. Whatever is lacking in one will be most eagerly sought in the other. Gender roles still differ nowadays, and unfortunately what Zhuang Jianfei lacked, Wang Luo did not possess, either.

“Fairy-tale love” and sex are important but not sufficient for marriage and they contrast with pragmatic considerations of all kinds. Then what can be counted as being true and full “love”? If Zhuang Jianfei’s marriage, after such long, careful, even painful waiting and weighing, still proved problematic, could there be any possibility for a perfect marriage at all? Zhuang Jianfei’s pre-marital affair with Mei Ying seems to provide an answer of a sort. The first sexual experience Zhuang Jianfei had was with Mei Ying, “a surgeon in another Wuhan hospital.” The author allows Mei Ying to bear all the desirable qualities Zhuang Jianfei could possibly have hoped for in an ideal partner for marriage. They met by mere chance “at an ordinary small-scaled academic meeting” in which Zhuang Jianfei and Mei Ying happened to sit next to each other. “She was the type of woman with a full figure and graceful bearing. Her body sent out messages that she was within sight but not within reach.” Her demeanour and sure-handed handling of daily-life matters “captivated” Zhuang Jianfei, so that he “inwardly gasped in admiration and felt ashamed of his inferiority.” Even in the area of medicine in which Zhuang Jianfei excelled, she showed greater foresight and pointed out a better way forward in his career, which led him to a sensational new start and promised further advances toward a brilliant future. Mei Ying was also Zhuang Jianfei’s first teacher in matters of sex. . . . She was a skilful and passionate lover, an interesting and capable partner in daily life, a mature and wise teacher in career matters, and an elegant and resourceful friend in life in general. Not surprisingly, Zhuang Jianfei insisted, “I will marry you!”

Mei Ying was “madly infatuated with Zhuang Jianfei for his body” but would not marry him. She boldly accepted the carnal pleasure when it came her way, but firmly placed her distinguished husband and their distinguished son and daughter-in-law above all. His strongest appeal to her lay in his romantic quality, but she was wise enough to know that romance can be the enemy of marriage. Zhuang Jianfei was excellent as a lover for her, but not as a husband. She might tenderly cherish the happy memory of him in her heart forever, but would never travel with him into marriage. Mei Ying enlightened Jianfei later: “Life involves far, far more than sex between male and female. . . . You will understand one day, child.”

“Child”? On another occasion, when Mei Ying was enjoying Zhuang Jianfei’s company, she lamented with tears in her eyes: “Why were you not here when I was young?” This must be a question that has been asked by many but can be answered by none. There appears to be another deep-lying tier of reasons for her refusal of the marriage proposal from the young man whose body she loved so intensely. The author seems to be telling her reader that a perfect marriage is impossible because of the “Heavenly plan.” In another novella *Water*

*Flows On* 绿水长流, assuming the role of its narrator-protagonist, she makes these remarks which can be regarded as annotations to *Apart from Love*:

What is the most important thing for a woman? It is the fact that she has a period of puberty when her body is radiant but her head is muddled. ... When a woman is fully-grown as a ripe peach, man is still young and inexperienced; by the time man has developed a great stature, woman has begun to wither. ... The principle of Heaven is no perfection for anybody or anything. For a woman in the bloom of her youth to get a man exactly to her heart who will love her wrinkles too when old, or for a man when crowned with success in his career to be gratified with a beautiful wife---these mean perfection; yet perfection is a gross violation of the Heavenly principle. All things in this world can only be 99 per cent perfect, not 100 per cent." (Chi 1995; my translation)

That was the author's answer to the question about a perfect marriage.

Then what about the other question about "love"? In Chi Li's opinion, love is actually a fabrication of humans in an attempt to perpetuate the blissful moments brought about by the mutual pleasure between man and woman:

There is one way by which the pleasure between man and woman can be ever-lasting and unchanging, that is, by making their pleasure forever imperfect, by making it impossible for them to be together, or by keeping them out of touch with each other all the time. Even when they can see one another face to face, their hearts must be kept separate far apart in remotest places from which they may call and miss each other in agony forever. I believe only this kind of feeling can be suitably called love. (Chi 1995; my translation)

So only platonic love, purely spiritual, like that of Zhong Yu's in Zhang Jie's story *Love Must Not Be Forgotten*, could be defined as "love". Yet the physiological basis for "love" between a normal man and a normal woman, as earlier mentioned, is no other than "sex" and to get married or simply to enjoy each other's company is the end aim of all such "love". It means that the kind of platonic love defined by Chi Li co-exists with marriage / sex but could never be found in them. Paradoxically, love is tantamount to people's inability to love. Thus Chi Li lays bare a disappointing and painful truth about the love myth---that people's search for everlasting and unchanging "ideal love" in their partners for marriage is in vain because it does not seem to exist in marriage. The bifurcation of love's platonic and philistine nature forms a contradictory duality that seems to leave no room for compromise between them in reality. If *Apart from Love* only covertly hints at this layer of meaning, *Water Flows On* overtly tears open the sacred wrappings around "love" by relating an extraordinary sequence of coincidences and events that occur between two strangers in the historically romantic site of the Lushan Mountain, against either the hackneyed story-plot of a happy union or otherwise a soul-stirring beautiful tragedy, or the worn-out theme of pure and noble love in ideal heaven versus foul and vulgar marriage on degenerated earth. Her understanding of love, going against the mainstream belief, is fresh and stunning but practically true and penetratingly wise. Surely, a total negation of the existence of love like this sounds all too

pessimistic. I think she is just demonstrating in an emphatic manner how love, when confronted with reality, always comes second best---the numerous tales and anecdotes of the present day as well as in history are the supporting evidence of her deconstructive way in decoding the love myth. I think she is also addressing a certain side of in-built human nature. Like the fisherman and his wife in the well-known fable “The Fisherman and the Goldfish,” some of us humans never rest content with anything for long.

As fairy tales have tried to assure the reader, in the good old times wishes often came true. But more often than not, stories of love and/or tragedy end either with a wedding and “they lived happily ever after” (e.g. *The Sleeping Beauty*) or with a death that made a marriage or married life together out of the question (e.g. *Romeo and Juliet*). Shrouded in great mystery, there is no further account, in either of the cases, of the hero’s and heroine’s married life together beyond that point of time. In clear terms, *Apart from Love* shows the reader that the decisive yet the most unpredictable, uncontrollable elements remain in what she called “the will of Heaven” 天意---whether the two persons can get the chance to meet in the first place and whether they can get along all right afterwards---things that more often than not defy human explanation. It also effectively identifies the concept of ideal love as existing only in the splendid world of imagination: in literature where immortal lovers’ could lead a free and unrestrained life without any worldly worries. In real life, sexual pleasure, practical calculations, various duties and inextricable problems of the common herd related to marriage---responsibilities, possessions, grievance, jealousy, indignation, even hatred and revenge, “fuel, rice, oil and salt” and so on, are often witnessed instead of “perfect love.” Although sex is the physiological basis for marriage, we all know it is more than physical to us: it is intimately entwined with our emotions, our relationships, our self-esteem---and our everyday lives. What is left to be cool-headedly considered in regard to the choice of partners for marriage seems to be the person’s character, disposition, talent, appearance, and family background. There exists a vast gap between ideal and reality, love and marriage.

The story portrays Dr Zhuang Jianfei as a brilliant student, and not just in medicine. The reader sees him grow mature through mistakes as well as achievements and, towards the end of the story, he graduates from the school of love and marriage with distinctive results. It deserves at least passing mention that his former classmates Lu Zhilao and Sun Zheng are not as good and can be seen as his foils. As for the women students of the school of love, it seems that the better educated (in its normal sense) they are, the more disappointment and pain they experience; the further away from “fuel, rice, oil and salt,” the more intense their loneliness and wretchedness is. Wang Luo’s socially acclaimed high-brow achievements are scored low

by an intellectual male colleague as against Ji Ling, a much inferior woman in that regard. Zhuang Jianfei's younger sister Jianya "who had graduated from university and was working in a scientific research institute" also fails to even find a worthy partner, like Wang Luo.

### ***Women's changing status inside and outside the family***

The life of women, and their efforts for recognition and equality both inside and outside their homes, form a significant sub-theme of *Apart from Love*. The Chinese view of the superiority of men over women stems from a Daoist tradition which holds that "the world is created by the interaction of two basic elements: the "yin" (female) and the "yang" (male). The female principle stands for the negative and inferior and the male principle for the positive and superior" (Yang, S. 1997). The Confucian philosophy also provides a theory of woman's inferiority that is an ideological justification of her lower status in the society and family.

As with most of other realms of culture, women's social status in history varies from region to region, time to time, and class to class. Generally speaking, however, Chinese women have lived under the long shadow of the tyranny of their historical tradition. The consolidation of neo-Confucianism by the end of the Song Dynasty reinforced the rigid, patriarchy-fortifying standards of feminine behaviour (e.g. Eastman 1988). Confined to the inner space of the home, women were generally regarded as inferior to men. They could even be bought and sold like pieces of commodity as child-bearing tools, slaves, or playthings for men, as the practice of concubinage indicates. The strong social pressure on widows not to remarry as a matter of Confucian propriety caused a great deal of pain and sacrifice for many. If the purpose of marriage and child-bearing was to invest against old age and to perpetuate life for the continuation of a family line, eroticism and passion were not important in the relationship between husband and wife. When marriage was considered as an opportunity to form an alliance between two different families, individual choice and mutual affection was not a big concern. In a socio-cultural tradition like this, family interests overrode individual feelings and sexuality was repressed.

The founding of the PRC in 1949 saw the status of women improved in both society and the family. The Marriage Law was the first law to be enacted in the new republic in 1950. This law bestowed on women equality to men economically, politically and legally. It allowed them freedom of marriage and divorce, the right to keep their maiden name after marriage, and to gain custody of children after divorce, the right to inherit and own property, to have equal educational opportunities with men, and the right to vote. Polygamy, prostitution and trade of women were legally prohibited. *The Constitution of the People's Republic of China*

(1954) reinforced women's legal rights of equality to men and offered special protection of their interests. Of course the protection was not always realized in practice: progress has only been gradual, and the degree of emancipation is not homogeneous across the board. For instance, in the story *Father* which roughly covers the period from mid-1930s to the mid-1980s, the theme of family life was still subject to the old rules of subordination: the individual to the family, the young to the old, and the female to the male. The characteristic Mother is described "as docile as a lamb, absolutely ruled by Father." In comparison, the mothers of both Zhuang Jianfei and Ji Ling are obviously authoritative figures over their husbands in their respective households, despite the big differences in temperament, level of education, economic independence, social status, etc. between the two women characters---one was a prestigious university professor, the other a lower-class and illiterate housewife. And even this illiterate housewife knows to make use of the law to intimidate her son-in-law by denouncing domestic violence (see the translation above). If in old times older women with male children were able to control matters to their own satisfaction within, once in a while even outside, the family as shown by the extraordinary case of Empress Dowager Ci Xi in Qing Dynasty, then neither the age of the mother nor the gender of the child are decisive factors any more. Ji Ling's father is obviously hen-pecked by his wife who has four daughters but no sons; and Ji Ling, the young wife, supposedly "inferior" to her "upper crust" husband, effectively turns his and his parents' domestic lives upside down and attains her goals in the end, i.e. serious consideration for herself from her husband, acceptance of her, and respect for her family from her snobbish parents-in-law. Her final victory is a victory of the new concepts over the outdated male-centred modes of thought.

Born and bred in the "new society" after 1949,

Ji Ling does not regard divorce as seriously as her mother does. Why not separate if two people cannot get along? They can start looking for gratifying partners while still young. No matter what other people say, no matter how hard they try to persuade her, she will not change her mind. She cannot cherish a man who does not take her seriously, be he royalty or a foreign millionaire.

This is a huge step forward in social progress if compared with the situation in the past when women were treated as private property by men---legally so, and if we keep in mind that a widow's suffering could be appalling, as Lu Xun's story *New Year's Sacrifice* 祝福 (published in 1924) makes evident. To Ji Ling, respect is undoubtedly higher in significance than all the practical gains she has so carefully calculated to obtain from the unbalanced marriage. Needless to say, old modes of thought still persist in China and varying degrees of gender inequality are still a reality. On the one hand, old customs and ideology about women do not disappear overnight; on the other, women's new status does not always translate into

improvement or benefit for them. The confrontation as well as co-existence of the residual and emerging cultures of the Confucian tradition, communist doctrines and newly imported western ideas are all there to be read in *Apart from Love*. It shows that although the process of modernization removes people from the constraints of an older hierarchical society, these constraints continue to modify their new freedom which at the same time can also thwart the new ambitions it induces. It also shows how individuals negotiate a complex and changing cultural context, as well as the costs they pay for taking their own course. For instance, Ji Ling's mother sternly disapproves of Ji Ling's intention to divorce Zhuang Jianfei because "there's an old saying that a good woman does not marry twice," to which Ji Ling does not agree. Though a senior intellectual, Zhuang Jianfei's mother appears to be as old-fashioned in her attitude toward her son's choice of a partner for marriage, attaching more importance to social and economic status than to romance. This romantic turn was championed as the modern mode by young people of the time but most in the older generation remained opposed. Even Ji Ling, a young woman of a new society, is a figure far from being as "monochromatic" or avant-garde. Despite her resolute exercising of her right in getting employment, in choosing a mate for herself and in defying the old teachings that a good woman should marry only one husband and marry him for life, she is not able to escape the stipulations of other traditional norms for women. Thus "what Ji Ling had projected for her life" had just been "to find a husband of high social status, to give and receive love, to have a son and lead a conjugal life together," "to take turns visiting their parents on holidays and Sundays, to get on well with them and to enjoy family happiness" and, to achieve these modest ambitions, she is "willing to take on the full load of housework." And her violation of the old social-economic-status match-making rule, and in defiance of parental opposition, brought her all kinds of problems and sufferings.

It should come as no surprise for the reader, then, to find that marriage is very often far from being perfect, sometimes even contaminated with filthy affairs, cunning schemes and treacherous pitfalls as well as all sorts of worldly worries and inner and outer frictions. In the specific case of *Apart from Love*, the two persons involved in the marriage are both less than perfect: Ji Ling played small tricks and manipulated things to her advantage and this is matched by Jianfei's premarital sexual affair with Mei Ying. For Mei Ying, her extramarital relationship would be abhorred by the average Chinese if found out, and a sullied reputation concerning sex could mean the ruin of a person's social life, no matter how liberal the current trend. Even if it could be kept a dark secret forever, it is doubtful whether she would ever be able to enjoy a clear conscience again. This is suggested by the description in the story that "she nearly dropped the [cooking] slice in her hand" when Zhuang Jianfei paid her an

“unexpected” visit at home after her husband and son had returned from the U.S. She tactfully yet resolutely put an end to her sexual relationship with Zhuang Jianfei. The author exhibits a sexual frankness and a certain ambivalence toward sex at the same time. She reserves moral judgment herself. She allows that Mei Ying and Jianfei “together crossed dangerous rapids” to be just good friends; she also allowed that Jianfei and Ji Ling “solved all the problems” between them satisfactorily and Jianfei is then able to go to the U.S., as Mei Ying’s husband did. Will he behave himself over there? Will Ji Ling become Mei Ying No.2? The story gives the reader an impression of cyclical recurrence, a sense of “endlessness.” These are the very qualities of existence according to a deeply engrained basic Chinese aesthetic and philosophical idea: the *yin-yang*-oriented logic of duality and the ceaseless change of them.

This idea leads the discussion back to the topic of this section---women’s changing status: inside and outside the family. The philosophical notion of *yin-yang* alteration and complementarity can be seen as having offered an answer or explanation: equality with constant change and inconsistency. As stated earlier, the Chinese view of the superiority of men over women stems from the same Daoist *yin-yang* dualism. But if we stress the Daoist notion of interdependence of *yin* and *yang*, gender equality is actually the most reasonable conclusion that can be argued for.

### ***Marriage, extended family and the larger social network***

The plot of *Apart from Love* could have appeared no more than a banal story about Chinese pragmatism in matters of love and marriage if it was not instilled by the author with deeper and greater socio-cultural significance. Running parallel with marriage and women’s status in *Apart from Love* is another sub-theme---life in a net. The author ingeniously ties together the facts about an inter-class marriage as a way of illustrating the processes by which the inner and outer social structures affect people’s choice of mate, married life, family, and broader social relations. Within its limited scope, the story conjures up a vivid picture of life in urban China around 1990, thanks to the accurate description full of easily recognizable details in common life.

A seemingly insignificant threshold problem between a young couple expands like a snowball, rapidly rolling out of their home into the homes of their parents at first, and then into their respective work units, and finally evolves into something like tangled warfare. The “extended family” goes well beyond the family tree as we would have normally reckoned, and as such, it deals with the subject of the vast network of human relationships. As

illustrated in the story *Apart from Love* by Chi Li, and with the supplementary evidence from Ba Jin's novel *Family* and Liang Xiaosheng's short story *Father*, from the beginning of the 19th century, Chinese people were gradually liberated from the bonds of the family. After 1949, the role of the family, together with the Confucian order, was to a great extent replaced by that of an even further extended family---a unique social organization---the work unit 单位. A unit could be a hospital (as Zhuang Jianfei's), a shop (as Ji Ling's and her father's), a school or university (as Jianfei's parents'), an office, a factory, a neighbourhood committee, or even a village in rural China.

Marriage can be seen as the immediate layer of meshes of the social network over a nuclear family that regulates and restricts the couple's behaviour as well as the start of a "higher education" which provides an opportunity for a person to mentally grow out of childhood into adulthood. With the natural flow of a convincing story, Chi Li powerfully demonstrates the force marriage carries in remoulding the man, the passage that a man has to go through before his maturing process is complete; and the method by which he is taught to be accountable for the role he now assumes and to consciously accept the new order. As the male protagonist Zhuang Jianfei, from his bitter experiences, reflects:

... marriage does temper a man.

From his early youth through to his university days, he had tried to work out, in vain, why many middle-aged men were so smooth and sly when socially conducting themselves, and why they were able to endure humiliations. Now he understands. Marriage has played a big role. Very rarely is a noted personage a bachelor. On the contrary, many outstanding figures have experienced more than one marriage.

Besides, marriage and family are part of a man's social image and status; it is one of the major yardsticks used to measure his worth in an organized society; it is something tangibly true for which there is no substitute, and it is, in fact, the most valuable of all the assets a man could possibly count as his possessions in life. Without it, his life would not be considered as full or complete. In *Apart from Love*, "[Zhuang Jianfei's] life without a wife had lasted for just two days and everything was already in a muddle." To use this remark as evidence may sound simplistic but the message it implies is true. As many believe, marriage is not private or optional in China.

Almost equally powerful is the detaining as well as assisting force from the extended family, another layer of the net on which an individual has a fixed position that is virtually impossible to alter. Zhuang Jianfei lost the family support he badly needed when choosing to marry the girl he liked against his parents' disapproval and suffered the hardships and tribulations before and after getting married. Naturally, he had tried to "show his parents that his marriage was a happy one." Unfortunately, just six months later, although feeling it hard

to “hold back the strong feeling of humiliation,” he was forced back to ask his parents for help, as “everyone else thought that this was the only way to solve the problem.” (Ji Ling’s dispute with him rooted in the Zhuangs’ contempt of the Jis, and the dispute befell at a decisive time for his upward mobility.) His self-important parents who had hated to be associated with the lowly Jis were eventually forced to pay a visit to their son’s parents-in-law, which helped him solve this problem and many other secondary issues as well. Their move was both an act required by the family ties and an effort to promote their goal of family unity and interest by ensuring a more promising future for their son. Likewise, Ji Ling’s parents’ home was made “their daughter’s rear base, her sanctuary. They were ready at all times to spread their wings to protect their child.” Family ties formed due to blood and legal bonds can not be easily severed; and they are frequently depended on for support.

Though not easy, a family / extended family can be escaped from as the hero of *Family*, Juehui, eagerly did; or it can be abandoned as Zhuang Jianfei’s parents threatened to. On the other hand, the gripping powers on individuals caught in the larger social network, the outermost layer of the inescapable social relationships, can prove to be more relentless and destructive though capable of offering greater protection and support too.

The story tells that Zhuang Jianfei’s close pal at work, Dr Zeng, in order to compete against Zhuang Jianfei for the opportunity of inspecting the advanced heart transplant operations overseas, did not hesitate to break his promise to be a confidant and deliberately, instead, spread the news in the hospital about Zhuang Jianfei’s dispute with his wife at home. The reader is shown how easily practical concerns get the upper hand over general ethics and how infectious scandal can be. China’s grapevine often carries rumours and facilitates them to travel with remarkable speed far and wide. Whether the rumour so dispatched is true or not does not seem to affect the force of their immediate impact. Very often, it becomes the lens through which people view the event and the parties involved in it; though in a long run, the whole truth will come out. It is also linked to issues of authority and power.

Zhuang Jianfei’s former date Wang Luo offered her “sympathy” and “help” right away, losing no time in taking advantage of the chance to strike a few blows at him. If her action is an understandable retaliation for his intended refusal to marrying her, Dr Zeng’s points to several inclinations lurking deep in the human nature, deeper than political or even socio-cultural causation, namely, hypocrisy, jealousy, hunger for money and fame, and so on. Within a limit, these inclinations are more or less common in us all; when reaching certain intensity, however, they become evils. Indeed, as Wang Luo announces, “Everyone has the right to compete for the opportunity of going to the U.S.” But is she also right to say that “in

the age of competition, [contemptibility is] by no means a derogatory term” because “contemptible means are perhaps employed to achieve a noble goal”? Her final warning to Jianfei truly hit the nail on the head, though: “The wolf wins when the shepherds quarrel.”

Even more contemptible are busybodies like the record room supervisor who stealthily eavesdrops on Zhuang Jianfei and Wang Luo’s conversation. Although sitting “like a statue at her desk fiddling with cards every day, year after year,” people like her are the “vines” responsible for the rampant spread of rumours, who form another source of stress at the workplace and make what should be a personally fulfilling aspect in life more often a drain emotionally, mentally and physically. Even when the matter is none of their business, they simply cannot allow others to be left alone or be in any way better than themselves. In their efforts to cause harm to others, they inflict probably even greater harm on themselves and, like the “haggard-looking woman” in the story, would usually lead a more unhappy and much shorter life for being busybodies. However, the saddest part of the whole matter is perhaps not that such pests exist, but that their slanders and rumours are almost always readily believed.

Young and inexperienced, Zhuang Jianfei at first did not seem to have the curiosity and conjecture about others nor the intention to poke his nose into another’s business. Because he did not mean to do others harm, he did not guard himself against possible harm from others. What Hua Rufen said is right: Zhuang Jianfei was too “naive.” But when he realized that “someone was stabbing him in the back,” he vowed that being a man, he “would not allow himself to be so easily butchered!” Sadly, the reader witnesses how step by step, life becomes complicated, bitter, even miserable at certain points of time for all, including those like Dr Zeng, Wang Luo and the busybody. Starting with peace, life more often than not turns into endless lose-lose battles, forcing the innocent and the naive along toward that dark direction.

Fortunately, there are just, regulating forces in the network as well. Hua Rufen (Head of the Hospital-Director’s Office in the hospital where Zhuang Jianfei works) and Ms Zhang (Chairperson of the Trade Union Branch and Women’s Representative of the Xinhua Bookstore where Ji Ling is an employee) played very important parts in the later stage of the marriage crisis. Hua is a fair-minded person who is concerned about doing things “with a clear conscience and let those who are really good go abroad, for the sake of the country and the people as well as the career of the individual.” When surrounded by poisonous rumours, she provided this promising young doctor with “backstage support” when he was facing what seemed to be impending disaster and defeat and helped him win the battle that appeared to have become too great for him to fight single-handedly. It is worth mentioning that Hua is a

former student of Zhuang Jianfei's mother. This special personal connection 关系 proves to be vital at a moment of crisis. Chi Li astutely points out towards the end of her story:

Marriage is not private. It belongs to all those around you. You cannot possibly act independently and take initiative into your own hands. You cannot afford to be negligent. Even if you do not interfere in other people's affairs, they will interfere in yours.

It is the enmeshing network of the totality of cultural "facts" that has added up to this state of affairs.

"Zhuang Jianfei has finally solved all the problems satisfactorily. He believes that he is experienced from now onwards." He has outgrown naivete, but his maturity is gained at a cost. In that process, he lost such virtues as candour, honesty and trust. Life has taught him not to tell what he has nor what he wants because, he realizes, some would go all out to curb him from achieving it, leaving none of his shortcomings unexploited. It must be under a similar context that Jean-Paul Sartre, the leading figure in the existentialist movement, said that hell was other people. This world definitely needs more understanding, but more lacking in it is love (in the general sense of the word) because love transcends all understanding. Without love, life had no alternative but to be like hell to us all. In a moment, I suspected that by "not talking about love," Chi Li was actually driving at the point that all the problems and sufferings are caused by our not having enough of "love" in its general sense, by our being "apart from it."

# Chapter 5 Families in Society (3): *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* by Liu Zhenyun

## 5.1 Translation 3 *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*

### Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers

By Liu Zhenyun

Young Lin's one *jin* of bean curd has spoiled.

One *jin* of bean curd contains five cubes, two *liang*<sup>1</sup> each, the common kind on sale in state-run groceries. In comparison, those you buy from self-employed sellers weigh one *jin* each. They are watery and will disintegrate when stir-fried in a wok.

He gets up at six each morning to queue for bean curd in front of a state-run grocery. Despite his early morning effort, there is no guarantee he can get it every time. Sometimes there are too many people and by the time it's his turn, the bean curd is already sold out; at other times, before his turn comes, it is already 7:00 a.m. and he has to leave in a hurry to catch the shuttle bus of his work unit. A certain Old Guan has recently been assigned to Young Lin's department as the new head. As an old saying goes, "A new broom sweeps clean." He is being watchful of late comers and early leavers. It is most disheartening when your turn is just about to come and yet you have to leave for work. Walking away, Young Lin always throws a curse or two at the long queue for bean curd: "Damn! It's too bad that there are so many poor people on earth!"

This morning, however, he succeeded in getting the bean curd, though he queued till 7:15 and missed the work unit's bus. He thought it did not really matter for today. Old Guan, the head of the department, is supposed to attend a meeting at the ministry while the deputy head, Old He, has gone on a business trip, so attendance check is temporarily left in the charge of a university graduate newly assigned to the office. So Young Lin felt it safe to queue for bean curd and go to work late. As he was in a rush to catch the public bus to work, he forgot to put the bean curd in the fridge. When he got home in the evening, the bean curd was still in the hall, wrapped in a plastic bag. In hot weather like today's, there is no way for the bean curd not to turn sour.

The bean curd has spoiled, and Young Lin's wife has returned home before he does. This makes the matter complicated. At first, his wife blames the childminder for not putting the bean curd into the

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<sup>1</sup> One *liang* is equal to 1/10 *jin* (one *jin* is equal to half a kilogram (see Footnote 9 of Chapter 3 on p. 58).

fridge. The childminder refuses to take any blame. She is unhappy about her low pay and the poor diet at the Lins. She has long before threatened to go on strike or go somewhere else. She stays only because Young Lin and his wife have repeatedly persuaded her to. She is not at all sorry about the spoiled bean curd and unhesitatingly shifts the blame onto Young Lin, arguing that he did not tell her to put the bean curd away before going to work this morning. Therefore, his wife vents her anger on him as soon as he comes back from work. She says, "It might have been all right if you did not buy the bean curd in the first place. Once you have bought it, how can you let it go off in a plastic bag? Why do you do it?"

Young Lin has had an unpleasant day in the office. He thought he could afford to be a bit late for work today but the newcomer takes things seriously. Seeing that Young Lin was not there at 8:00 a.m., he marked him down as "late." Although Young Lin changed it into "on time," fuming with anger, the matter has been weighing on his mind the whole day long, not knowing whether or not the newcomer will report on him tomorrow. Back home, he is also disheartened to know that the bean curd has turned bad. The childminder is too petty-minded, he thinks. "Although I did not tell you, couldn't you just put it in the fridge? Carrying a few cubes of bean curd to the fridge certainly would not have exhausted you." At the same time, he thinks it unnecessary for his wife to make a fuss over such a trifling matter. One *jin* of bean curd, that's all there is to it. Nobody purposely made it turn bad. Why keep nagging about it? We are both very tired after a day's work and now there is the child and the dinner to attend to. She must be deliberately trying to make people more tired at home, mustn't she? So he says: "Let it go, will you? Blame me for it. One *jin* of bean curd, that's all. If the worst comes to the worst, we'll have our dinner without it tonight. I will be careful next time."

If he says this much and no more, the matter would be dropped. Regrettably, he fails to contain his resentment and adds: "Is one *jin* of bean curd worth making such a big fuss about endlessly? How much does bean curd cost? Last time you accidentally broke a thermos flask that was worth seven or eight *yuan*. Did I ever blame you for that?"

His mentioning of the thermos flask makes his wife angry again. "At every turn you have to mention that thermos flask. But was I alone to blame for that? The thermos wasn't set down properly. Anyone could have broken it by merely touching it. Let's talk about the vase instead. What happened to the vase last month? It was sitting perfectly all right on top of the wardrobe and you had to break it while doing the cleaning. And you find yourself in a position to reprove me?" The next moment, she is standing right in front of him, tears brimming in her eyes, her chest heaving, and her face looking pale.

From past experience, Young Lin knows that her pale face indicates a disagreeable day at work. Her work unit, like his, seldom makes people happy. But are we ever justified in bringing our unhappy feelings back from work and offloading them at home? Worked up, he feels like remonstrating with her about the vase, but he knows if it goes on like this, they will find themselves in a vicious circle, involving many plates and dishes and the like as well. In the end, his wife will throw the bag of bad bean curd at his head.

The childminder, used to the couple's quarrels, is calmly filing her nails as if nothing is happening. Her attitude further arouses the couple's anger. Young Lin has written the case off as hopeless and is ready to act recklessly. Fortunately, just at this moment, someone knocks at the door, and they both shut

up. His wife hurriedly dries the tears on her face while he manages to suppress his fury. The childminder opens the door. It is the old man in charge of reading the water-meter.

The elderly water-meter-reader is lame and comes once a month to do his job. Because he walks with a limp, it is not easy for him to climb the stairs. On arrival at each household, with his face streaming with sweat, he has to gasp for a while to regain his breath before reading the meter. He is enthusiastic about his work. Sometimes he pays extra visits to see whether the meters are working properly, he explains. Today is the date for a regular check, so Young Lin and his wife suppress their rage for the time being and ask the childminder to go with the elderly man to read the meter. After this is done, the old man does not take his leave. Without being invited, he sits down on the edge of their bed. This makes Young Lin nervous, because whenever the old man sits down in your place, he is sure to brag about his experiences when young. According to him, he once fed horses for a certain high-ranking leader who has died. Young Lin was quite interested the first time he heard this and even asked for more details. Could anybody imagine that this crippled man had any contact with a great leader in his youth? However, after having heard the same story repeatedly, Young Lin becomes impatient. "Despite your horse-feeding experience, you are a meter-reader all the same. What is the use of bragging about the great leader when he is already dead?" However, you cannot afford to displease him, simply because he is a meter-reader. If offended, he is capable of cutting off running water for all the households on that stairway. The spanner to turn off the water supply is right in his hand. You have to listen to his horse-feeding experience because of this spanner in his hand. But today, Young Lin truly loathes any repetition of his story. "How can you sit down without being invited when my wife and I are being mad at each other! Can't you feel the tension?" Therefore, he keeps a straight face and stays where he is instead of going over to greet him as he usually does.

The elderly meter-reader, however, does not care. He has taken a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. Right away, the room is filled with the smell of tobacco. Young Lin is certain the meter-reader is going to indulge in his story about horses, but this time he has guessed wrong. With a serious expression on his face, the elderly man announces that he is going to talk business. According to a report, he proclaims, certain residents in this stairway are stealing water by deliberately not turning the tap off properly at night in order to catch the drops in a bucket. The dripping cannot be measured and the water collected this way is stolen, isn't it? This practice cannot be allowed to go any longer. If everybody does the same, how can the water board cope?

His words make Young Lin and his wife blush and then turn pale. They feel ashamed because last week they stole water a couple of times that way. His wife had heard about this method from a casual chat in her office and asked the childminder to try it out. Young Lin frowned upon it, thinking it was too petty. A kilolitre of water costs only several *fen*. It is not worth it. Besides, the noise of dripping water makes sleeping with an easy conscience impossible. So two days later they stopped. How did the old man get to know about it? Who has reported on them? Young Lin and his wife turned their thoughts to their opposite-door neighbour, a fat couple. The woman claims to look like an Indian and often puts a red dot between her eyebrows. The couple has a child about the same age as the Lins'. The two children often play together, and fight too. Young Lin's wife and the "Indian" woman are polite to each other but

actually they do not get along well. Nevertheless, the childminders of the respective families are on very good terms, though they are not from the same province. They often put their heads together to discuss how to deal with their employers. They must have exchanged gossip from which the "Indian" woman learnt the Lins had collected dripping water twice and reported to the old man. What he says must have come from this source. How can one bear such a matter being talked about openly? How can the Lins keep their face in the community if they admit to having done such a shameful thing?

Young Lin hastens over, and declares with a stern countenance that he has no idea whether any resident on their stairway is stealing water or not. His family, anyway, has not done such a thing. Poor as they are, they are people of moral integrity. His wife also comes over and remarks that whoever reported it must be the person who did it, for otherwise how would they know such a trick? It is a case of a thief crying "stop thief," isn't it? The old man flicks the ash off his cigarette and says: "OK. That's all for this time. Whether it's true or not, let the matter rest. Just make sure it'll not happen again." Then he stands up, assuming a generous look, and limps away, leaving Young Lin and his wife behind, much embarrassed.

This intervention of this case makes the sour bean curd incident appear less important. Young Lin feels his wife is to blame. How could a university graduate become so vulgar? For two buckets of water that is worth next to nothing, she has been disgraced by a sharp reproof. His wife also feels quite shamed and finds it difficult to go on complaining about the bean curd. Giving him an angry stare, she goes to the kitchen to prepare dinner. The water-stealing incident has brought peace to his family just when it was on the brink of war; Young Lin is quite grateful to the old man for that.

Dinner tonight includes stir-fried string beans, stir-fried bean-shoots, a small plate of sausage, and a bowl of mixed stew left over from yesterday. The sausage is mainly for the child, the other three dishes for Young Lin, his wife, and the childminder. The childminder, however, does not eat leftovers because, as she once said, they would give her diarrhoea. Young Lin's wife had a quarrel with her over that. "It seems you have become an aristocrat. I myself as an employer eat leftovers, why can't you for fear of diarrhoea? What fine food did you eat before while you lived in the countryside?" The childminder made a tearful scene and threatened to go on strike or to leave. Only after Young Lin had mediated between the two was the childminder persuaded to stay. Using that incident to her advantage, the childminder, from then onwards, does not even touch leftovers. Therefore, the couple finishes off the leftovers before they start on the newly cooked dishes. The child is very naughty during the meal, trying to get hold of this and that. His wife suspects the girl is catching a cold for she seems to have a runny nose.

At last, at nearly 8:30, the dinner is finished. As a routine, the childminder is to wash up, Young Lin to bathe the child and his wife to go to bed. Her workplace is further away than his and has to get up earlier, so she goes to bed earlier. But tonight she does not go to bed early. Without washing her feet, she sits on the bed, deep in thought. Whenever his wife is in such a state of mind, Young Lin is scared, not knowing what new topic she will bring up. Not too bad this time. After a while, she carelessly washes her feet and goes to bed without saying anything. She nags non-stop during the day, but once in bed, fortunately, she stops nagging and is asleep and snoring in three minutes, faster than a child. Young

Lin was very unhappy about it when they were newly married a few years ago. "How could she do this to me?" He once asked her: "How come you go to sleep in almost no time? If you go on like this, I won't put up with it!" His wife explained with embarrassment: "After a day's work, I'm tired as a pig. How can I stay awake for long?" Later, they had a child. Life became increasingly complicated. They were busy moving house time and time again; busy going to and from work; busy with food and fuel; busy caring for the child and others. They felt tired and Young Lin's wife gradually became garrulous. It was then that he found his wife's sleeping habit in fact a good thing, providing him with something to look forward to when they were at odds with each other---an internal war would cease when her head touched a pillow. Young Lin realized that there is no absolute merit or demerit in the world. One can transform itself into the other depending on the situation.

His wife is asleep, so are the child and the childminder. All three of them are lightly snoring. Young Lin checks the electrical and water devices and then he too goes to bed. In the past, he had the habit of reading a book or a newspaper before going to sleep. More often than not, he would even get up and take some notes. Now, after he is through with all the chores, he is already fighting to keep his eyes open. Therefore, the idea of reading and note taking has been dropped. He'd better go to bed as early as possible for he will need to get up and queue for bean curd early. This reminds him of that one *jin* of spoiled bean curd and he suddenly remembers it is still in the hall. If his wife sees it tomorrow, a new round of quarrel might start. So he gets out of bed, makes for the hall, turns on the light and disposes of the spoiled bean curd.

## 2

Young Lin's wife is called Little Li. Before getting married, she was a quiet girl with delicate features. Although short, she was exquisite and attractive, arousing tender affection in him. She did not talk much then. Although not dressing fashionably, she was spotless. She had very long hair. A classmate introduced her to Young Lin and they fell in love. She was rather shy. You would feel relaxed and peaceful in her presence. You could even sense an aura of poetry in her. It was then that Young Lin started to pay attention to the way he talked as well as his personal hygiene. It is quite beyond his imagination that several years later, the quiet girl with a poetic quality would have become a nagging housewife who does not do her hair, and has learnt how to steal drops of water at night.

Young Lin and his wife were both university students before, much devoted to their work. They had exerted themselves, worked by lamplight, and had noble ambitions at that time. They never thought highly of their bosses at work, or the organizations of different sizes. It was beyond their imagination that just several years later, they would have so quickly drowned in stereotyped crowds just like everyone else. All you can do is to buy bean curd, go to work and get back, eat, sleep, do the washing, see to the childminder and attend to your child. In the evening, you do not even want to touch a book. All those grand plans and great aspirations! Those careers and ideals! What a load of rubbish! That is only for the young and naive to dream about. Isn't everybody else drifting along aimlessly too? Yet they get through their days all the same, don't they? Even if you cherish great expectations and lofty ideals, so what? 'Where are the historical figures with great accomplishments? In deserted graves hidden under

the thick growth of grass!' By the end of one's life, who will still be alive to know you and appraise you? So Young Lin is perfectly content sometimes. Young Lin suffered setbacks at the workplace before, but they have made him mature. Now he can handle different situations with ease. So long as you are patient enough to wait without behaving rashly or perversely, you will sooner or later get what others have. Take housing for example. His family once shared a flat with others, then moved to the slum in Ox Street. Because the place was due to be demolished they moved again to temporary accommodation. Now they have a one-room flat. At first, the Lins did not have a refrigerator or a colour TV like other families, which made him ashamed. They saved up and now they have bought those things. They do not have wall units or a sound system yet. But is there an end to material desires? Be patient, and you will find yourself in a communist society<sup>2</sup>. What makes you impatient are trifles like spoiled bean curd. In the past, a happy life with good wife and children and a cosy home was considered a peasant's ideal. But what else should you strive for if not for a happy family with a wife and children? And that's not easy to achieve either. Your wife has changed, your child is still too young, and the burden of work is always resting on your shoulders. Can you guarantee harmony at home for every single day? People often complain about their work being too complicated and difficult, as if a home with a wife and children is any easier! You had great aspirations in the past, that can be excused because you were immature then, and did not understand the law of development of this world. A thousand-*li* journey starts with the first step. Young Lin, you should start your journey by seeing to the spoiled bean curd!

As usual, Young Lin gets up at six in the morning and queues for bean curd in front of the state-run grocery. His wife has also woken up and is staring at the ceiling with wide-open eyes. Sleep quickly restores her clear thinking. Unlike Young Lin, whose head remains dull for half an hour after waking up, she needs only five minutes to be wide awake and to pick up her train of thought from before her sleep. This is both good and bad for Young Lin. If they are at odds with each other, it means she can carry on with the quarrel from the day before. Now her look makes Young Lin anxious, for it reminds him of her deep in thought last night. He wonders what his wife is brewing up. She does not speak to him when he gets up and he feels better. Hurriedly, he brushes his teeth, washes his face and, taking a plastic bag with him, is about to get out of the room quietly, with a hand reaching out for the door, when his wife addresses him from the bed: "Don't buy bean curd today!"

So she will not let go. She still wants to carry on with yesterday's quarrel. Young Lin feels fury rising inside him. The spoiled bean curd has been thrown away and a night has passed. What is the point in quibbling over it endlessly? One *jin* of spoiled bean curd will stop you from buying any more? So he protests: "I'll put it in the fridge today, OK? How many years are you going to keep on about it?"

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<sup>2</sup> A communist society (at the advanced stage of its development) is believed to be the best possible form of society with an ideal classless social and political system in which the means of production are owned and controlled by the state or the people as a whole, and the goods and wealth produced are shared according to the principle "from each according to his ability to each according to his needs."

With a shake of her hand, his wife replies, "It's not about the spoiled bean curd. I've been thinking all night. I really cannot stay in my work unit any longer. I must get a job transfer. You must say something to me about it! You can't be so indifferent to my problem!"

So she is not referring to the spoiled bean curd. Young Lin feels relieved. But a job transfer is no less vexing, actually even more complicated, than the bean curd issue. To be honest, her job is not so bad. As a university graduate, she works in an office. Her job is to sort documents and write reports, drinking tea and reading newspapers in her spare time. But she used to be rather straightforward. When first assigned to her job, she was not experienced in handling various relationships at work, just like Young Lin, and the consequences have lingered on. Although she realized her mistakes later and has corrected them, small clashes seem unavoidable. Unhappy at work, she would nag at Young Lin about a transfer. He tried to persuade her out of the idea, using himself as an example. He told her that once she overcame her weaknesses of being too naive and insensitive, she'd get used to working there; there was really no need to transfer because all workplaces were the same; besides, it was not at all easy to do so. "Neither of us has any power ourselves, nor any source of information, nor any connections. Which unit would accept you?" he asked. And his wife considered him very incapable, not able to do a thing to save his wife from the depth of despair. "I can't help you with your work," he argued, "but I've tried to help you with housework. I've also explained things to you. Can't explanations be counted as help too?" His wife was thus silenced. Having aired her grievances by nagging at him, she went on working at the same place. If the situation continued like this, she would get used to her job and the annoying problem of a job transfer would disappear. But they have moved house several times, each time farther away from her workplace. She was very pleased at each of the moves, as their living conditions kept improving. She once remarked, "we finally have our own home in Beijing." She spent most of her energy decorating their dwelling, mainly concerned about how to hang the curtain, how to arrange the furniture, where to put the fridge and the TV, and what else they needed to buy. When the decoration was done, however, she became discontented again. Their home is too far from her workplace. Her work unit does not run a shuttle bus on their route, so she has to catch crowded public buses to and from work. A round trip takes her three to four hours. She gets up at 6:00 a.m. and comes back at 8:00 p.m., accompanied by the moon and stars at both ends, every day. And the public buses are always packed. At one point, she felt unable to bear it any longer. She simply must get a transfer. Seeing his wife utterly exhausted after work each day, Young Lin also realized this was something different from just being unhappy at work. That kind of unhappiness could be endured and overcome, but it was not possible to shorten the distance between home and work. She must be transferred to somewhere closer to home. Having made up their minds to do it, however, the couple found themselves facing insurmountable difficulties. It was a matter over which they were powerless. Like a blind cat groping for mice, Young Lin and his wife tried several places. With no exception, all refused to even give some consideration, leaving no room for any discussion. They were both dreadfully disheartened.

Young Lin said: "Enough. No more running around. It's a simple waste of time. Put up with it. Some other people in Beijing live farther away from their workplaces than you do! Don't just count the

kilometres you travel, think of the women weavers! They are on their feet the whole day long while you work over tea and newspapers. Are you still discontented?"

His wife flared up: "Incapable of solving the problem, you just ask me to put up with it. Of course you can put up with riding in your work unit's bus every day. How can you understand what it means to travel in a crowded bus for four hours every day? You've got to get me transferred. Otherwise, I will not go to work tomorrow. You go and earn enough money to support the whole family!"

Sure enough, she did not go to work the next day. Her method worked. Young Lin was truly worried. He forced himself to think hard for a solution and finally he came up with one. He found out that the head of the personnel department in Qiansanmen was a former classmate of Old Zhang, the deputy bureau director where Young Lin works. Once he had helped Old Zhang move house, sparing no effort, so Old Zhang thought well of him. Besides, after being caught in flagrante delicto with Mrs Qiao, Old Zhang had tucked his tail between his legs, so to speak, and showed special concern for his subordinates. He appeared rather obliging when asked for help. All those made Young Lin feel that Old Zhang would not refuse if he asked him to help. If Old Zhang could provide a recommendation for his wife, the Qiansanmen department would hopefully become their deliverer. Although it was also a long way away from their home. If travelling by public bus, a single trip would take two hours; but there was an underground railway between home and Qiansanmen. It would take a fast underground train just forty minutes to cover the distance. Besides, underground trains are not as crowded as in a public bus; sometimes seats are available. He told his wife about his deliberations. She was pleased, willing to work in that unit, and urged him to speak to Old Zhang. He went to Old Zhang, told him about his wife's difficulties and about the place in Qiansanmen. Knowing that his old leader had some good connections there, he said, he has come to ask him for help. As expected, Old Zhang readily agreed: "OK, OK. Her unit is too far away. She should get transferred!" He added: "I don't really know the Qiansanmen unit very well, but since the comrade in charge of personnel affairs there is an old classmate of mine, I'll write to him. Go and see whether he can help arrange the transfer."

Plucking up his courage, Young Lin said: "It would be better if my old leader can make a phone call too."

Stroking his big head, Old Zhang laughed. "You young people are much shrewder than we were!" he patted Young Lin on the head. "All right. I'll make a phone call for you too."

Old Zhang made a call and wrote a letter. Holding the letter, Young Lin was overjoyed, as if it were an imperial edict. So was his wife when she saw the letter. He took it to the head at the Qiansanmen unit and it really worked. Having gone through the letter, the head said: "Old Zhang is my former classmate. Both of us were very keen athletes in our university days."

Sitting on the corner of a chair in the front of the head's desk, Young Lin anxiously followed the popular topic: "Old Zhang loves physical exercise even now."

The head gave him a glance and suddenly changed the topic to the recent incident concerning Old Zhang and asked Young Lin for details. Young Lin felt rather awkward. It was not proper for him to do so; nor was it proper for him not to. He selected several major facts to relate to the head, telling him that Old Zhang had just sat talking with Mrs Qiao in his office for a short while. He hadn't gone further than

that. Everything else was pure rumour. Laughing, the head remarked: "Old Zhang, he's still a lovable fellow!"

The subject of the transfer came up at last. In a cheerful mood, the head said: "OK, OK. Old Zhang's matter of concern is as good as my own. Let me find out which department is short of staff."

Wasn't that as good as a promise? Young Lin returned home and told his wife about it. She instantly embraced him and covered his face with kisses. They had a pleasant evening. If they had simply waited, the transfer would surely have been made. Young Lin's wife would have been able to go to work by underground every day. But they overreached themselves and became victims of their own cleverness. The head of personnel affairs was making efforts to help them, but they still felt anxious. Young Lin's wife discovered that the husband of an old acquaintance also worked in the same unit and was a head of department as well. She discussed it with Young Lin and suggested that they ask that person for help too. Would the efforts of one person in charge of personnel affairs be sufficient? she wondered. Young Lin did not give the suggestion a deep thought. More people meant more help; at least there was no harm in getting more help, he felt. Therefore they approached that person too. The head of personnel affairs stopped making any further efforts as soon as he learnt about this move of theirs. The next time Young Lin went to see him, he said coldly: "Haven't you also asked so-and-so for help? Let him try first!"

Only then did Young Lin realize that they had made a strategic mistake. He became truly anxious. Just the same as in a work unit, you have to rely on only one leader when seeking support. Only then will this person make a genuine effort to support you. No one will if you ask for help from more than one, for it shows you have many connections and you are clever enough. They may be prompted to think, why ask me for help while you have already asked somebody else? It may actually even arouse resentment in the person. Instead of helping you, that person will become more of a hindrance---Let us see whether you can succeed by relying on others rather than on me! When Young Lin and his wife realized all that, however, it was already too late. At first they blamed each other; and then they tried to work out a remedy. But what could they do? All Young Lin could think of was to ask Old Zhang to call his old classmate again. But Old Zhang was a deputy head of the bureau, not Young Lin's blood brother. It was not appropriate to keep bothering him. And the transfer issue was so kept in suspension.

As time goes by, busy as he is with other matters, Young Lin lets the matter drop. But his wife does not. She often sits there alone, brooding over it. Yesterday, after the spoiled bean curd incident, she sat by the bed thinking without washing her feet. She was thinking about nothing else but this matter. Now she raises the matter again and Young Lin at first believes she'd like him to go and ask Old Zhang again. He does not feel like going again, so he says: "We've made a mess of things. What's the use of going to Old Zhang all the time?"

His wife responds: "I'm not asking you to see Old Zhang; instead, go to see the head of personnel affairs at Qiansanmen."

Young Lin is even less inclined to see that head, so he replies: "He was quite cool towards me after we had asked your friend's husband for help. How can I bring myself to ask him again? It won't be of much use even if I do!"

But his wife says, "Why won't it? I've thought about the reason. Don't just blame my friend's husband. That's not the crux of the problem; rather, it's because we haven't tried hard enough. To get something done in society nowadays, mere talking simply won't do. I think we should give him something. All flies like blood these days. Will he make real efforts to help you without your bleeding a little? We've got to bleed a little!"

Young Lin hesitates: "I've only seen him a couple of times and barely know him. Without even knowing where he lives, how can you do it?"

His wife flares up: "I can tell from the way you talk about my problem that you are indifferent to it! What gifts did you give Mrs Qiao when you tried to join the Party? How hard up we were at that time. There wasn't enough money even for the child's milk! But still I agreed to it. Now when it's for my sake, you are trying to find all sorts of excuses. Why do you do this to me?" Meanwhile, her face turns pale.

Seeing how serious and angry she is becoming, Young Lin hastens to agree: "Well, well. let's do it! I'm interested to see what difference it'll make!"

That puts an end to the conversation. And they both go to work as usual. After coming back from work in the evening, they hurry through their dinner, tell the childminder to take good care of the child, and set off for the home of the head of the Qiansanmen unit to present a gift. But they first of all find themselves facing the hard question of what to give. After half an hour strolling around a store, they still cannot make up their minds. A small gift is not presentable while a big one is too hard on their budget. Finally, Young Lin's wife sees a piece of handicraft and considers it a suitable gift---a glass case with several flowers, birds and fish inside, artistic and tasteful, at a price of a little over forty *yuan*. But upon further discussion, they decide it is actually not suitable. Will a head of personnel affairs appreciate flowers and birds? It would be disastrous should he assume the handicraft was a cheap article worth just ten-odd *yuan*. Therefore, they continue with their search. Young Lin's eyes light up when they reach the food and cold drinks counter. "I've got it!" he declares.

"What is it?" his wife asks.

He points at some piled up boxes of Coca Cola with a sign that reads, "Greatly reduced price: 1.90 *yuan* per can". The normal price is 3.5 *yuan* per can. Coca Cola is a presentable gift. At the present price, a case of 24 cans will cost them just over forty *yuan*. It is of a famous brand, looks bulky, generous, and practically useful too. The head will love it. But why has the price been cut? His wife says, "Is it because they've past their use-by date? If so, they're not good for a gift."

They consult the shop assistant and are told these cans of coke are not out of date. Truly strange. It seems that the coke has purposely been prepared for them as a gift. Young Lin remarks, "It looks like we are in luck today. The matter will be successfully settled."

His wife perks up and pays for a case right away.

Carrying the box on his shoulder, Young Lin and his wife catch a crowded bus to deliver their gift. It is 8:30 in the evening when they arrive at the building where the head lives. The timing is perfect. Climbing the stairs, they hear someone coming down and it is no other than the head they have come

for. Young Lin greets him and the head seems startled. Seeing Young Lin, he smiles: "It's you." He looks more polite at the doorstep of his home now than in his office.

Young Lin says: "Uncle Wang, this is my wife. Old Zhang asked us to come and bother you once more about her transfer."

The head answers: "I know. The transfer is OK so far as I'm concerned. The problem is whether there's a lower-level department in the unit willing to accept new staff. If you can find one, just ask them to come to me and everything will be all right. I have something to attend to tonight and the car is waiting outside. Excuse me for not being able to receive you at home."

Their hearts sink at these words. Isn't this as bad as a refusal? The head has already gone outside the building when Young Lin remembers the box of Coca Cola weighing down on his shoulder. He hastily calls out towards the gate: "Uncle Wang, I've brought a box of drinks for you!"

Laughing, the head responds from outside: "What I don't lack is drinks. Carry them back for yourselves!" Then the car starts up and races away, leaving Young Lin and his wife in the corridor feeling terribly awkward. It is a long time before they regain some composure. Young Lin throws the box onto the steps: "Damn it! He doesn't even accept our gift!" And then he turns to blame his wife: "I told you not to and you insisted. Just see how embarrassing this has been."

His wife can only repeatedly murmur: "How come he's so disgusting! How can he be so mean!"

The two of them make their way home with the case of drinks. They now start to feel awful about the money spent on the rejected gift. Isn't it crazy to pay over 40 *yuan* for a case of Coca Cola only to take it home! What should they do with it? Send it back to the store? No edible goods are refundable. Drink it? How can they drink Coke for no reason?

The wife seems more resourceful. She opens up the case two days later and, from time to time, gives their child a can to drink outside. They are well-known in the neighbourhood for being hard-up. Their child is poorly dressed in general and before they didn't buy any drinks, nor fish except once, also at a reduced price because the hairtail fish was a bit off. The smell seeped into the corridor and the "Indian" woman gossiped about it widely in the neighbourhood. Now their little girl drinking Coke can serve as a kind of publicity against the gossip. It is consoling to think that the money spent on the case of Coke is worth it. However, the job transfer issue remains a problem that continues to haunt them.

### 3

The Lins have guests today. Young Lin knows it as soon as he enters the corridor from work, for their door is wide open and the coughing of people from his hometown can be heard. Sure enough. Stepping inside he sees two men sitting on bed in the inner room. They look over-tanned, blue veins standing out on their foreheads. A few canvas bags with the late Chairman Mao's quotations printed on them, which used to be popular in the 1970s, lie at their feet. They are smoking and coughing away. The floor is covered with ash and phlegm that they drop and spit without any hesitation. His little daughter is also coughing, running around in the smoke and irritated by it. Up until now today, Young Lin has been in a good mood. The newly assigned head of department, Old Guan, though usually very serious in appearance, is actually not a man of ill will. In their discussion about the seasonal awards, he decided to

give Young Lin a first-grade award, which means an extra fifty *yuan* for him. Fifty *yuan* is not much, but it is better than nothing anyway. With it, Young Lin can give his wife a happy moment. Hurrying home, he was expecting to see his wife rather than two folks from his hometown. In an instant, his good mood disappears just like a fire is put out by a bucket of cold water.

Normally, he should feel happy to see his own folks. It would be nice just to sit with them and talk about the old days together after years of separation. But they come too frequently, which makes Young Lin unhappy and unwilling to talk about the past, and their visits have become a burden to him instead. Guests should be entertained, shouldn't they? But each entertainment costs him dozens of *yuan*. The family budget simply cannot bear such frequent visits. Besides, these guests are different from old classmates or friends who will excuse you if not properly entertained. They are very particular about courtesy, despite their over-tanning and blue veins on the forehead, although they are from the countryside. If not satisfactorily entertained, they are displeased and will talk against you when they get back to the village. They think that since you live in Beijing, you are naturally obliged to entertain them when they come here. They do not understand that in Beijing Young Lin is of the lowest economic status, one of those who have to queue for bean curd each morning. Two more dishes are added onto the dinner table just because of the guests' presence. Sometimes seeing how they put on airs, Young Lin cannot help feeling annoyed and amused at the same time. What do you eat back home in the countryside? It would have been easier for him to handle if a meal is all that has to be provided. More often than not, the guests assign him different tasks to do after the meal, such as getting hold of goods and materials, securing chemical fertilizers, purchasing trucks, filing lawsuits, and buying train tickets for their departure. Where can he go to acquire the ability or access the power to fulfil all these tasks! He cannot even get his wife transferred to another work unit, not even able to get his gift accepted. How can he possibly help others with lawsuits or truck deals? To get train tickets for them, he has to queue at the Beijing railway station, exactly as they would have to themselves.

At first, concerned about saving face, he promised to try to help, fearing that they would look down on him if he said "no" to all their demands. It proved, however, that more often than not he tried to no avail. Although his former classmates had been assigned to work in different units, they were mere newcomers like himself, far from being in the position to exercise power. How could they assist him in fulfilling those tasks? Losing face was unavoidable in the end anyway, so later he became a little wiser and learned to say, "No, I can't do it!" It did make those people look down upon him, but they would anyway, sooner or later. Allowing himself to be looked down upon sooner could save him a lot of trouble. Nevertheless, his folks keep coming in a steady stream and a meal is the minimum he has to provide for each of their visits.

What makes this matter complicated is the fact that Young Lin's wife has an urban background. Relations in cities are much simpler than in the countryside and very few guests from her side visit them. By contrast, visitors from his side come all the time and they always stay for meals. What also makes Young Lin feel embarrassed is that, being from the countryside; they do not pay attention to their manners. They flick cigarette ash and spit wherever it happens to be. To be fair, his wife can be counted as being liberal-minded regarding these matters. In the beginning she just kept silent. When the number

of visitors grew and entertaining them became a routine, and almost a daily one, she stopped being tolerant. Later when they had guests again, she would put on a long face and refuse to buy food or to cook. Young Lin blamed his wife for not showing due respect for his feelings, but at the same time he also felt that his wife had good reasons to be angry. He himself would have reacted the same way if in his wife's shoes. So he turned to blame the guests for not bringing credit to his hometown, which subsequently made people despise him here too. His origin was like a big tail that those guests constantly raise to expose him and to remind others that he is from the countryside. The "Indian" woman, their opposite-door neighbour, once remarked: "Look at the countrified Lin family. It's full of rustics." Young Lin's wife later heard about the remark and was really upset. So he has been in constant fear of more visitors from his hometown and thinks of the matter before leaving work for home each day. Sometimes when he is at home, an accent other than a Beijinger's can put him on tenterhooks. He can breathe properly only after rushing to the balcony and confirming "the accent" is not approaching his doorway.

Although he does not want to receive visitors from his hometown, he does wish that more would come from his wife's side. If some do come, he appears unusually warm toward them so as to offset the constant visitors from his side and make his wife less resentful towards his own. But few of his wife's relatives come to visit them and he is always left with a guilty conscience.

His parents did not understand Young Lin's situation and would flaunt his being in Beijing: "My son's in Beijing. Go and see him there." That made it hard for Young Lin to be cold toward the visitors. After a long period, he realized that the warmer he was, the more visitors he would get. He learned the lesson and ceased to be warm any more, which consequently made the folks feel slighted. Getting back, they would accuse him of having forgotten his class origin. If they thought he had forgotten them, well, he had forgotten them. What was there in this origin worth yearning for? He wrote to his parents, telling them that he was very busy and hard up too. He asked them to stop introducing people to his place out of consideration of their face. When the letter was finished, he showed it to his wife. But she was not at all grateful. Spitting at the floor, she said: "If I had known that your family was like that, I wouldn't have married you!"

At those words, Young Lin flared up. Pointing at his wife, he shouted: "I did tell you about my family background. You said you didn't mind. How can you talk like that now? As if I cheated you!"

Never mind their quarrels, visitors kept coming all the same. By and by, his wife got used to them. Once she did, receiving visitors became a natural part of their life and she reacted with no more than an unhappy expression. Young Lin was quite satisfied with this reaction and acted sensibly when having guests again---nothing more than two more common dishes for the meal, one of them being a fish or chicken dish, and no alcohol. If his folks are displeased, so be it. It is better than an unhappy wife anyway.

Today's guests, however, make Young Lin feel he cannot make do with simply two more dishes. One of them is old and the other, young. At first he could not tell who they were and asked which village they were from. On hearing the old man's voice, he immediately recognizes him as his primary school teacher, Mr Du. Young Lin was with him for five years. He taught both mathematics and

Chinese. One winter, being a mischievous boy, Young Lin stole out of the classroom during a self-study period to play on the ice. The ice broke and he fell into the water. After he was rescued, the teacher did not scold him. Instead, he quickly took off Young Lin's wet clothes and wrapped him in his own padded coat. The good teacher is now in his home, after more than ten years of separation, Young Lin cannot help feeling excited. He walks over to shake hands with him: "Teacher!"

Seeing how excited he is, the teacher also becomes excited and remarks, holding his hand: "Young Lin! I wouldn't be able to recognize you if I met you in the street." Then he hastens to introduce the young man as his son.

After the excitement has subsided, Young Lin asks his teacher what they have come to Beijing for. The answer makes him hold his breath. His teacher has been suffering from pulmonary emphysema. The hospital in their hometown is a low-level one and cannot tell for certain whether his disease has degenerated into lung cancer or not. Of all his students, Young Lin turns out to be the best in terms of the workplace---Beijing. Therefore, accompanied by his son, he has come to Young Lin, hoping that he helps find a hospital that can diagnose his disease. If it is cancer, he had better stay in hospital for treatment. If it is pulmonary emphysema, he would like to have an operation.

Thinking hard, Young Lin says: "Let's take time to discuss it." But he cannot think of a suitable hospital to the best of his knowledge. The door opens then and in comes his wife from work. Looking at his watch, he finds it is already 7:30 p.m. His wife's return once again makes him hold his breath. Closely observing his wife's expression, he introduces them all to each other. Seeing the arrival of more guests and the room full of smoke and spit, his wife is of course not pleased. She barely gives a nod and goes to the kitchen. A moment later, a quarrel is heard. His wife is blaming the childminder: It is already 7:30 p.m. Why has nothing been prepared for the child? Young Lin knows the blame is meant for his ears. Engaged in conversation with his teacher, he forgot to ask the childminder to cook for the child. Young Lin, his wife, the childminder, the child plus the two guests, there are six of them for dinner tonight, but the dinner has not been started yet. So he asks his teacher to wait for a while and goes to the kitchen to straighten his wife out. First, he takes out the fifty *yuan* award as a present for her; then he explains that he really has to entertain today's guests for, unlike others, this is his former school teacher. Please just cook a meal for them and that is all she needs to do. His wife, however, knocks the five notes out of his hand and replies:

"Damn it! Who doesn't have a teacher! How can I take care of your teacher when my child is hungry!"

Pulling at her, he whispers: "Lower your voice. They'll hear you!"

She replies in an even louder voice: "So what! Guests come almost every day. I'm not running a hotel. I can't stand it any longer if it goes on like this." Then she sits on the edge of the sink and bursts into tears.

Young Lin is in a towering rage, but it is no use becoming enraged now. His guests are in the inner room waiting, so he has to go back and keep his teacher company. Evidently the teacher has heard their quarrelling. After all his teacher is a cultured man, unlike the other folks who put on airs if not properly entertained. He immediately declares in a loud voice: "Don't bother, Young Lin. We've had dinner. We

are staying in the Jingsong Underground Hotel. We just want to see you and bring you some local products of our hometown. We must leave after this cup of tea. We'll miss the bus if we stay late!"

He zips open the canvas bag and asks his son to take two big tins of sesame oil to the kitchen.

This makes Young Lin feel even worse. He is sure his teacher has not had dinner yet. What he just said is deliberately for his wife to hear so that Young Lin is saved from the awkward situation. Maybe the two tins of sesame oil have worked or his wife finds her conscience again. Anyway, she starts to cook for them and cooks it well: four dishes including one of fried shrimp meat that is normally for their child alone. They finish the meal and Young Lin sees his teacher and the son off. On the way the teacher keeps apologizing:

"I've bothered you with my visit. I didn't want to come, but my wife kept persuading me so here I am."

Young Lin cannot help feeling a surge of sadness when he sees his teacher's grey head, halting steps, and the wrinkle-filled face. The wrinkles are covered with dust yet he did not even let his teacher wash his face in his home. He says: "Teacher, you are unwell and you should come to Beijing for treatment. Let me first look for a cheap hotel for you to stay and tomorrow I'll go and look for a hospital."

The old man stops him with a wave of his hand: "Don't bother about me. I've got another connection." Taking off his cap, he produces a slip of paper from it. "I was afraid that I wouldn't find you so I went to Section Chief Li of the County Education Bureau. A former classmate of his is Head of Department of a big work unit. Look! He's written a letter for me! This man is such a high-ranking cadre. I'm sure he'll be able to help me!"

On hearing this, Young Lin does not insist further. For if he tries, he cannot be sure of finding a good hospital anyway. He may only waste his teacher's time. Better let them go and ask the HOD for help. Therefore, he sees his teacher and the son off on a public bus and bids them good-bye. The bus drives away with his teacher still waving to him in the distance, all smiles, even when he is lurching backwards and forwards from the sudden stops and starts of the bus. Tears well up in Young Lin's eyes. His teacher is smiling at him just the way he did when Young Lin was in the primary school. The bus is out of sight now and he walks back home. He feels being weighted down as if a mountain is resting on his back. With every step he seems to be at the risk of being crushed under that weight.

The next morning, Young Lin reads a newspaper in his office and notices a memorial article for a senior leader who passed away many years ago. The article elaborates on how much this leader respected his teachers and concerned himself with education. He once sent for two of the teachers who had taught him in his early youth, the only two who were still alive then, arranged for them to stay in the best place in Beijing and showed them around the whole city. Generally Young Lin has high regards for the late leader. But now, reading the article, he cannot hold back his curses: "Who doesn't want to respect one's teachers and show concern for education! I would love to let my teachers stay in the best hotel and show them around Beijing too. Do I have the power to do so!"

He throws the newspaper into a dustbin.

Their child falls ill. She has a runny nose and keeps coughing. His wife says to Young Lin: "Your teacher had pulmonary emphysema when he visited us. Perhaps he's given it to our child."

Like his wife, Young Lin also worries a lot whenever the girl falls ill. Her illness makes a great difference to the whole family---one of them at least, either him or his wife, has to ask for leave in order to stay at home and look after her. The childminder cannot be trusted to take charge over such a period. However, his wife's wild guess and groundless blame on his teacher greatly arouses his indignation. As a punishment for hurting his feelings by embarrassing him in his teacher's presence, Young Lin did not talk to her for two days after his teacher's departure. "For that meal you prepared, my teacher paid two big tins of sesame oil weighing about ten *jin*. At a free market in Beijing sesame oil is sold at eight *yuan* per *jin*. Ten *jin* means over eighty *yuan*. Was your meal worth that much?" When using the sesame oil for the first few days, his wife also looked ashamed. She also realized that she had overreacted that evening. Now that the child is sick, she wants to take all that out. Using his teacher as a pretext she retaliates on Young Lin. So he feels unable to be polite to her and says: "Better check on the child first. What if it's not pulmonary emphysema? Isn't it mean to blame somebody without any proof?"

The two of them ask for leave and take the child to a hospital. It is no simple matter to see a doctor. The bottom line is to do with money. For a child to see a doctor these days, 20 to 30 *yuan* are the minimum. Unnecessary medical tests are done and unnecessary medicine prescribed. It is bad enough for people in other occupations being dishonest; if doctors also become dishonest, life is really unbearable. Once his child had a diarrhoea. Seeing a doctor for that cost them 75 *yuan*. Annoyed and amused at the same time, his wife said to him: "Is a running stool worth 75 *yuan*?"

Each time they take the child to hospital, he and his wife feel they are being cheated. Yet they have to; there is no alternative. Take the present situation for example. On their way to the hospital, the child's temperature has gone up, which makes them forget accusing each other or going to be ripped off again. All their attention is drawn onto the child's condition, and they quicken their steps to catch a bus for the hospital.

A medical check confirms that it is just a cold. Yet they are informed at the cashier's of the hospital pharmacy that the charge for the prescription is 45.58 *yuan*. Flipping the prescription, his wife says: "Look. Being ripped off again. Shall we pay for it or not?"

Young Lin does not answer her. He was anxious just now. The child was running a high fever for unknown reasons and he was not sure whether it was contracted from his teacher. Now the diagnosis reveals that it is just a cold. He is relieved and, at the same time, his indignant revived. You asserted that it was caused by my teacher's infectious disease, but the diagnosis has proved it just a cold, hasn't it? He feels like clarifying this matter with her before tackling the rip-off issue. Seeing the big crowd of people queuing at the pharmacy and lots more rustling about, he thinks it the wrong place to reason with her. So instead of responding to her question, he says with resentment: "Don't come if you are afraid of being ripped off. Who asked you to?"

"If that's what you think, I won't buy the medicine!" picking up the child, she starts to walk away.

She acts rashly when she feels wronged. Young Lin knows what his wife is like and becomes worried. The most strenuous effort will not ever turn her around once she becomes stubborn out of a grudge. What medicine will the child take when they are back home? So he hurries after her and blocks her way. "Come on! You can't really act rashly over a matter like this. Now give the prescription to me."

This time, however, his wife is not acting out of a grudge. "We are not going to buy the medicine," She says. "Isn't it just a cold? There is still some left over from what I got from my work unit last time when I caught a cold. The child can take some of that. The prescription very likely just include Cefalexin tablets, Chinese herbal medicine, antipyretic pills, and the like, nothing better no matter how much money you spend."

"But the medicine for you is meant for adults. For children there should be something different," Young Lin retorts.

"There's no difference," his wife assures him. "Just use a smaller dose on a child. Leave it to me, will you? I can cure her within three days and save the 45 *yuan*. When the medicine is finished, I'll ask my unit for more."

What his wife has said sounds reasonable. Young Lin touches the child's forehead with his hand and finds the temperature has suddenly dropped. He is not sure whether it is because of the sleep she has just had or because of the medicinal smell of the hospital. Her eyes look bright again. Pointing at the *Hami* melons<sup>3</sup> on a stall opposite the hospital, she asks for some. Seeing that her condition is getting better, Young Lin feels it all right to give his wife's idea a go. They leave the hospital and buy the child a piece of *Hami* melon. After eating it, she is even more active. Getting down from his arms, she starts to play with him. She has even stopped coughing.

Young Lin is happy to see this; so is his wife. And the happy feeling makes them relax. Young Lin does not take his wife's remark about his teacher's disease to heart any more. It was just a thoughtless grumble when she was too worried. He so straightens out his thinking. The child's illness is not serious and his wife's idea has saved 45 *yuan* on medicine. Isn't that as good as earning forty-five *yuan* for nothing? The thought makes them cheerful. Young Lin feels like giving his wife a treat. As they pass through the street full of stalls selling snacks, he suggests: "You like stir-fried liver, don't you? Why not have a bowl?"

"One *yuan* fifty a bowl just for fun. It's not worth it." His wife says while tut-tutting.

"A bowl of stir-fried liver, please!" He takes 1.50 *yuan* out of his pocket and hands it over to the vendor:

Looking embarrassed, his wife glances at him and then sits down to eat. Her appreciating way shows that she really loves stir-fried liver. She puts into her mouth the two pieces the child has spit out, finding them too hard for her to chew. She insists that Young Lin have a taste of the soup. He does not want to, but his wife keeps offering it in a gentle, soft voice, her eyes full of tenderness as they had been before

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<sup>3</sup> A variety of muskmelon. Hami is a place in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China. The kind of muskmelons produced there is famous nation-wide for its special sweetness and mellow taste.

their getting married, so he takes a sip. The hot, coriander-flavoured soup does taste delicious. When his wife asks his opinion, he answers that it is nice. She again glances at him with affection.

He did not expect a bowl of fried liver could have enabled them relive the tender feelings of the past, and the feelings are maintained until the evening. The child is not seriously ill. She plays by herself after taking some medicine. By the evening, she has stopped coughing and gone into a sound sleep. When the snoring of the childminder is heard from the outer room, Young Lin and his wife are both filled with passion. It is just as good as when they were newly married. Afterwards, caressing each other, they have a chat about the cause of their child's illness. The wife admits that in her anxiety she wronged his teacher earlier today. "Then it's us to blame," he says. "We did not take good care of the child. Her quilt was kicked aside and left off all night. that's how she caught a cold." But his wife says that is not the point. There is actually only one person to blame. His heart misses a beat and asks what she means. His wife points toward the hall, the outer room---she means the childminder. Then she recounts the childminder's faults: She's too concerned with what she can get out of us; she takes no initiative in doing any chores and dawdles over her work; she pays frequent visits to the childminders' dormitories and tells everyone our family secrets; she does not even have any feelings toward the child, leaving her alone to play with water while she takes a nap or watches TV, when we are away at work. How can the child avoid catching cold? His wife is determined to dismiss the childminder by September when the child is old enough to go to a nursery. The childminder's pay amounts to 40 *yuan*, and her board, 60 *yuan* per month. Besides, there are costs on sanitary napkins, cosmetics, other daily expenses, fruit, and so on. All these put together come up to over 100 *yuan* per month. That is equal to one of their monthly incomes. No wonder they are so hard-up? If the childminder is dismissed and the child goes to a nursery, this amount of money will be saved and the quality of their life can certainly improve. Looking forward, their future is bright anyway.

Young Lin is inspired. He generally does not have a good impression of the childminder, either, so he echoes the views of his wife. After the chat, their anger is released and both feel happy. Kissing each other again, they get separated to go to sleep. His wife falls asleep within three minutes but Young Lin cannot. Recalling what they have just said, he feels somewhat ashamed. Isn't a bit too petty, while enjoying themselves, to put all the blame on the childminder? Is it easy for a teenage girl to be thousands of miles away from her hometown and work all day long to please her hosts? Young Lin feels that he himself has behaved like a petty woman. He cannot help sighing. Then tiredness overcomes him. Closing his eyes, he falls into sleep, thinking no more.

The next morning, however, Young Lin feels their accusations against the childminder were right. As usual, his wife goes to work early while he goes to queue for bean curd. He should have gone to work after that. Because it is drizzling, fewer people came out to buy bean curd today and it took less time to queue up. Looking at his watch, he finds there is still a little time to spare. Concerned about the child's illness, he goes back home again only to find the childminder busy cooking for herself. The bed is still in a mess. The child's breakfast is not prepared, her medicine not taken. She is playing with a basin of water in which the childminder has washed her face. Young Lin and his wife have had yesterday's leftover for breakfast, adding some hot water to it and washing it down with some pickled

vegetable. It would be all right if the childminder had cooked some porridge fresh, since she does not eat leftovers. Yet what she is cooking now is fine dried noodles, using the small wok for the child. A delicious smell greets him as Young Lin enters the room because the childminder has put coriander, dried bean curd, and an egg in the noodle soup. Startled to see Young Lin, she hurriedly tries to hide the egg under the noodles but he has already seen it. He feels himself bristling with anger. She is trying to fool and cheat on them. How can she stealthily cook nice meals for herself before attending to the child? Things are not easy for you; neither are they for us. We are wrong to blame you for everything, but you do not deserve our respect or sympathy. He does not censure the childminder. Though catching her red-handed provides him an opportunity to do so. It may give him great satisfaction of revenge, but the childminder is just like that and you cannot be sure whether she will take it out on the child after you go. How can he bear to let the toddler suffer because of his rash action? So he just furiously seizes the basin of used water that the child is playing with, and pours it into the lavatory bowl. The child's nose is running again. Now that the water has been taken away, she rocks herself on the floor, crying. Ignoring her wailing, he hurries off to work, slamming the door behind him. He curses while running down the stairs: "Damn you! I'll make sure you're gone by September!"

Back home from work in the evening, he finds the child's cold has worsened. Her nose is blocked and she keeps coughing. Touching her forehead, he finds that she is burning up. He knows all these have to do with the childminder's mischief. But he does not dare tell his wife. If he did, an uproar would be inevitable. His wife, however, looks happy today. She does not even seem to care that the child's illness worsens. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she is deep in thought again. Her expression suggests that there is good news. Sure enough, peering into the kitchen, Young Lin sees his wife has bought some sausage. Besides, there is even a bottle of Yanjing brand beer. No doubt the beer is for him. He loved beer when he was single. After getting married, he gradually gave it up. Why drink it at the cost of over one *yuan* a bottle? Granted that money is not a concern, who would be in the mood to drink it? Puzzled by his wife today, Young Lin goes to the inner room and asks her: "Hey, what's up today?"

His wife just chuckles.

"What are you giggling for? Tell me." asks he.

"Well, Young Lin, let me tell you. My job problem is solved!" she answers.

"What? Solved?" he is taken aback. Did you go to the unit in Qiansanmen again? Has the head of personnel agreed?"

His wife shakes her head.

"Have you found another unit to go to?" he asks again.

His wife shakes her head again.

"Then what's been solved?" he cannot help feeling disappointed.

"I won't have a job transfer," his wife replies.

"Why? Have you developed some feelings towards the work unit? Aren't you worried about the overcrowded buses any more?"

The wife says: "Feelings are out of the question but soon I won't need to catch the public buses. The head of our unit has announced that a shuttle bus will run past here from September onwards. So you

see, I can go to work by the unit's special bus rather than catch overcrowded public buses. The direct trip only takes 40 minutes and seats will be available during the trip. Isn't this even better than going to Qiansanmen by underground? Young Lin, I have sorted myself out. If the unit's bus runs this route in September, I'll not try to get a job transfer. It's true that my present unit is not good, with lots of complicated relationships; but who can be sure that relations at Qiansanmen are any better? Just look at the head of personnel there! 'All crows are black.' You're right there. I'll stay in my unit as long as its bus runs. I'll just drift along, turning a blind eye to things. So my work problem is as good as solved, isn't it?"

At those words, Young Lin is delighted. It has been a major issue in the family. They have been constantly worried about it. They have often been at odds with each other because of it. Now at long last it is settled. Although this solution is not actually a solution, his wife's mind can set at rest; she will stop worrying or get agitated about it; and there will be no more conflicts regarding it at home. The problem is solved so easily. Seems simple, doesn't it? Relying on themselves, Young Lin and his wife have asked for favours and presented gifts only to be repeatedly foiled. It is a shuttle bus dispatched by the unit that easily solves it in the end, not their own efforts. Nevertheless, Young Lin, like his wife, is cheerful. "That's great. Since the problem no longer exists you won't stir up trouble for me in the future, will you?" he says.

"Yes, no longer exists," she replies. Then she pretends to rebuke him: "Who has been stirring up trouble for you? How can you blame me when you can't find a solution? In the end, I have to solve it by myself. Let's just wait for September to come."

Young Lin agrees: "All right, it's solved by yourself. Let's look forward to September."

Everyone is in a good mood. The child's illness is under control. There is beer for dinner. After the child and the childminder have gone to sleep, they enjoy themselves once more, again full of passion. Afterwards, they both feel embarrassed. They did it yesterday and again now. It has been a long time since they did it so frequently. Caressing each other, they chat again about September. September is really a lucky month. His wife's work problem will be solved and the child will go to a nursery so the childminder can go, saving the family a large sum of money. They look forward to the future, to the happy days September will bring them, and discuss on what they should spend the money so saved. His wife is not sure whether their child, still too young, should stay at home another year before going to nursery. If so, the childminder should be kept until next year. Recalling the childminder's ill-doing this morning, Young Lin exclaims ferociously: "No! It's got to be this year. Because of the childminder if not for the sake of the child. Get rid of her as soon as possible!"

His wife is deeply at odds with the childminder so these words make her glad. She kisses Young Lin once more and, turning round, instantly falls asleep.

It is September now. Two events are expected to take place in September. First, a shuttle bus is to be dispatched by the wife's work unit; and second, the child will start going to a nursery, so the childminder can be dismissed. The first goes smoothly. On September 1, the route is served with a

regular bus and the wife appears to be relaxed right away. She no longer needs to go to work in the morning under the canopy of stars. In the past, she had to get up at 6:00 a.m., otherwise she would be late for work. Now she can have an extra hour of sleep. Getting up at 7:00, she can finish washing and dressing by 7:20 and get on the shuttle bus at their gate in no hurry. Vacant seats are available on the bus and it goes directly to her workplace, so the trip is not at all tiring. She can also get home earlier in the evening. She used to come back home past 7:00 p.m., by the light of the moon; now she finishes at 5:00 and is home by 5:40, which allows her to take a rest before preparing dinner. She is very happy about the work unit's bus. However, her happiness now is different from when she first heard of it---a lessened kind of happiness. At first, she thought the new bus service was out of her work unit's head's concern for his staff, but later she found out this that rather than kind concern, the real reason was that a sister-in-law of the head had recently moved to this district. After being pressurized by his wife, he arranged a shuttle bus for her sister's convenience. On hearing the information, Young Lin's wife was much disheartened. She felt a sharp drop in the value of the shuttle bus service and realized that her earlier happiness was based on wrong assumptions. Returning home, she told her husband about it. He also felt awkward and rather humiliated---but definitely not so deeply as by the refusal of their present by the personnel department head at Qiansanmen. So he tries to soothe his wife: "At all events, you can now enjoy the shuttle bus. That's the bottom line. Don't worry about the cause of it."

His wife grumbles: "At first I thought every commuter had an equal right to the shuttle bus, and it showed that our head cared for us. Who would have imagined it was because of his sister-in-law? I have to think of her every time I use the bus, don't I?"

He answers: "There's no way out! It's clear---you wouldn't have been able to enjoy the bus without that sister-in-law!"

"I feel so awkward when riding on that bus. I feel like a second-class citizen."

"You are still as naive as when you first graduated from university," he reproaches her: "What do you mean by second-class citizen? It's not that bad to have a work unit bus at all. Let me just ask you: Isn't it better than a crowded public bus, despite its association with the head's sister-in-law?"

"Well, it certainly is," his wife admits.

He continues: "Besides, it is not just you who are benefiting from the sister-in-law's special relationship. Let me ask you again: Isn't the shuttle bus full of people every day?"

"Oh yes, it's always a full load," she answers. "No one protests by boycotting it. How disappointing!"

He rejoins: "No one else seems to be as principled as you are. Very well then, you can go by public transport. Nobody will force you to use the work unit bus. Besides, remember you once tried to curry favour for a job transfer? You were stopped from entering the corridor, even with the present you were trying to bribe people with."

His wife gives a giggle and counters: "I just want to have a little grumble and you've kept babbling on. I suppose what you said is true. Under these circumstances, what use is strength of character? No damn use at all. I'll simply enjoy the shuttle bus each day without worrying else related to it."

Young Lin claps his hands: "That's it!"

His wife then looks happy every day.

But the second event is not as smooth-going. Finding a nursery for their child turns out to be difficult. There is no nursery in Young Lin's work unit, and while there is one at his wife's, it is too far away from home for a small child to travel each day. So they must find one closer to home. There are quite a few nurseries around---one of them is run by another work unit, one by the district government, one by a lower local government organ, one by a neighbourhood committee and one privately run by several old women. The best is the one by the other work unit, for its staff include qualified pre-school teachers so the kids can learn something proper there. The others below the district one are poorly-run, and can only lead the children in files along the streets and that is all. The worst is the one run by the old women. Their main motive is to earn some money. Education is an issue that concerns the next generation, so to Young Lin's wife, this is a matter even more important than her own job transfer. She pressurizes him to apply for admission to the nursery run by the other work unit, adding that the one run by the district government can be considered as the second choice while the rest are not to be considered at all.

At first, Young Lin underestimated the difficulty. He thought it would be easy to find a nursery for the child---she needs only to stay there for a couple of years---not a big problem. Having learned from his past experience of making rash promises and later being nagged at by his wife when he failed to realize them, though, he just said: "Let me go and talk it over with the people concerned. I'm in no leading position. Who knows whether they'll take any notice of me. You'd better not make your conditions too rigid!"

Their neighbour, the "Indian" woman, has a child about the same age as theirs, and Young Lin's wife has heard that they have found a nursery for their child---the one run by the other work unit, the one they wanted to get admitted. In the light of this, his wife responds: "Why not? The conditions have got to be rigid! That nursery is the only one for consideration now. Their child will go to that one, so must ours. Don't even bother with the nursery run by the district government."

Thus the job of getting his daughter into nursery school falls on Young Lin. He does not realize its level of difficulty until starting doing it actually, which turns out to be even more difficult than arranging his wife's job transfer. First of all he investigates the situation. The nursery of the other unit is indeed well run, winning municipal awards for years. Some leading members of the district government send their grandchildren to this nursery even though their own nursery has vacancies. This nursery, however, imposes strict limits on admission numbers. Without powerful influence, it is impossible to get a child into it. The admission forms are in the hands of the nursery principal; even the deputy principal does not have the power of admission. No form will be released unless written instructions are issued by the head of a bureau or an even higher authority of the work unit it is attached to. Young Lin wracks his brains for personal connections, but none of his former classmates in Beijing seems to have any connection with this unit.

A man will try anything when he is desperate. Young Lin suddenly thinks of the old man who repairs bicycles at their gate. He is a frequent customer and always addresses the old man as "Grandpa," so the two of them are getting along very well. When he has no money on him, he can have his bike repaired first and pay for it later. During a casual chat Young Lin has learned that the old man's

daughter works as a nurse in a nearby nursery. Could that be the one run by the other work unit? Thinking of this possibility, he becomes excited. Getting on his bicycle right away, he goes off to the bicycle repairman. If the old man's daughter is working in that nursery, she can provide at least some inside information, even though she is just an ordinary nurse and will not be able to help in a substantial way. The old man is very warm-hearted and straightforward. After Young Lin's explanation, he makes promises on behalf of his daughter, saying that all he needs to do is to ask. However, the nursery his daughter works for is not the one run by the other work unit, but by the neighbourhood committee. Young Lin is much disheartened to learn this, and reports the situation to his wife. She first blames him for not having useful connections, and then suggests: "Let's prepare a generous gift costing about seventy or eighty *yuan* for the nursery principal and see whether that works. How did the 'Indian' woman's child get admitted? Her husband doesn't appear to be a man of extraordinary ability. They must have given gifts!"

Young Lin waves her suggestion off: "We haven't even met the principal in person, let alone knowing anything about her. How can we get out gift accepted? Have you forgotten our experience in offering a gift to the head in Qiansanmen?"

His wife flares up: "You haven't any connections. You can't get gifts accepted. What can you do?"

Young Lin replies: "Use the nursery where the bicycle repairman's daughter works. Let it go at that! How much does education mean to a three-year-old child? Shaoshan was a poor village and it produced the late Chairman Mao! It's the quality of the child that really matters!"

His wife becomes furious and accuses him of being so irresponsible towards their child. If the child stayed with the repairman's daughter, she would only know how to repair bikes when grown up, she asserts. "Young Lin, you haven't even met the principal yet, how can you be sure that our child cannot get admitted?" Her words make him pluck up courage to go and see the principal as a total stranger without a gift. Perhaps his direct account of their situation will win the principal's sympathy. On his way, Young Lin tries to comfort himself: In China things are unpredictable. A total stranger may get things done, without any gift, while a connection may make things complicated and fall through, out of people's jealousy. It may be easier to win sympathy from a total stranger. There must be some good persons in the world. He does not realize how naive his thoughts are until seeing the principal.

The principal is an elderly woman, over fifty years of age. She is a kind person, but her reply is a clear-cut refusal after sighting his ID and listening to his account of the situation. Her nursery does not take in any children outside the work unit, she says. They do not even have enough places for their own children, how will they explain to their fellow employees if they admit children from outside? However, she adds, there may be exceptions. The nursery is going to have a capital construction done but has not got a quota so far. If he can help them acquire one, his child can be admitted.

This makes him lose heart. He cannot even cope with his own problems, how can he help with getting capital construction quotas! If he could, what nursery couldn't his child get into as they wish? There would be no need to beg for admission to this nursery at all. Crestfallen, he returns to report to his wife but unexpectedly finds a great disturbance at home.

Trouble of another kind has broken out. The childminder has learned about their efforts to find a nursery for their child, which means she will lose her job as soon as one is found. She blames them for not letting her know in advance. To gain the upper hand, she decides to resign immediately. Young Lin's wife thinks the childminder unreasonable. "The child is mine. Why do I have to tell you whether she is going to a nursery or not? Aren't you deliberately making trouble for us, resigning before a nursery is found?" Therefore, the two of them have started a quarrel. This time, Young Lin's wife is not prepared to plead with her any more and demands the childminder's immediate departure. Not prepared to humble herself either, the childminder starts packing at once. When Young Lin gets home, she is about to leave. As his efforts to find a good nursery have not been successful, they will not be able to cope if the childminder leaves now. So he tries to persuade her to stay but is stopped by his wife: "Don't try to persuade her again. Let her go! I'll see whether the sky will fall down just because she goes away!"

Young Lin can say no more but their daughter, who has become close to her minder, does not want the childminder to go. She rolls on the floor, howling. The childminder has also developed some feelings for her charge and hurries over to give the girl a cuddle. Finally, she puts the crying child down and runs down stairs. Once she is gone, Young Lin's wife begins to cry. She feels it inappropriate to let the childminder go like this after having taken care of the child for over two years. So she hurriedly asks him to throw down another month's salary for her from the balcony.

The childminder's absence throws the Lins' home into confusion. No nursery has been found so the couple now has to ask for leave in turn to look after their daughter. His wife now starts to blame the childminder again for having caused such a mess and her husband for being incapable of finding a nursery. He argues: "What they ask for in exchange is a capital construction quota. The head of my department might not be able to get it, let alone me." He adds: "I don't think we should make a simple matter complicated. I admit I'm incapable. If our daughter can't go to that nursery, we will have to let her go to the one where the bicycle repairman's daughter works. That nursery is full of children any way."

Faced this situation, his wife starts to relent a little. They cannot go on asking for leave. The next day, accompanied by Young Lin, she pays a visit to the nursery where the bicycle repairman's daughter works. Their first impression of it is not bad, though it does not compare with the one run by the other unit. At least it is clean. Dozens of children play in the rooms and there is a piano in one of these rooms. It is situated far away from busy roads too. Seeing that his wife is silent afterwards, Young Lin knows she has basically agreed. He feels much relieved.

Once back home, they start putting together stuff the child needs to take to her nursery---clothing, pillows, bowl, spoon, cup, handkerchiefs---as if they are sending their daughter on an expedition. His wife sheds tears again: "Your parents are incapable, so you have to go to the neighbourhood nursery. From now on, you will have to take care of yourself the best you can!"

The child has a medical check and is ready to attend the nursery the next day when a surprise turn takes place---their daughter can be admitted to the other work unit's nursery! Of course, it is not due to the efforts of Young Lin but rather the unexpected help from the "Indian" woman's husband. There is a

knock at the door in the evening. Young Lin opens the door and sees him standing there. They do not know what he actually does except that he dresses up in a smart suit with a tie and rides a motorbike to work. Since the “Indian” woman’s family is comfortably well-off, their flat well furnished, whereas the Lins are rather hard-up and their own flat is dingy, the Lins feel quite diffident. Therefore, the two families have no contact except occasionally between Young Lin’s wife and the “Indian” woman. Even the women are just being polite to each other, coldly. So the surprise visit arouses the Lins’ suspicion: What is he after? The visitor, however, appears affable. “I hear you are having difficulties in finding a place for your child. Is that so?” he asks.

Young Lin’s face turns red. This man has surmounted the difficulties but he cannot, which makes him feel inadequate. So he just hums and haws.

The man continues: “I have a spare placement which you can use to get your child into the work unit’s nursery. I originally obtained two: one for my child and the other for my elder sister’s. But she has decided not to use it. If you don’t mind the quality of this nursery, I can let you have this placement. We are opposite-door neighbours after all!”

The man does not appear to bear any ill intentions. Young Lin and his wife are both pleasantly surprised. She excitedly exclaims: “That’d be wonderful! Thank you so much. We’ve tried hard to get our daughter to that nursery but failed. We are about to get our child into the neighbourhood nursery.”

Young Lin, however, does not appear as pleased as his wife is. What he is not able to do, the other man is; and he has to rely on the other for help. That hurts his self-esteem a bit. Surely he will be looked down on for this.

Seeing his reaction, the “Indian” woman’s husband adds considerately: “At first, I could not find a way to solve the problem, either. It so happens that the father of one of my colleagues is a bureau head of that work unit. I asked for a favour through him and get these placements. That’s the way things are done these days!”

These words make Young Lin feel better. The “Indian” woman is a trouble-maker but her husband seems a gentleman. He offers a cigarette to his guest. The cigarettes are not of a good brand and also a bit old and dry. But the guest accepts it amicably and smokes with Young Lin.

Their daughter can go to the nursery of their choice, so their minds can rest at ease. The two children go to the nursery together and the relations between the Lins and the “Indian” woman’s family become much more friendly. Several days later, however, Young Lin’s wife looks gloomy again. When asked what the matter is, she answers: “We’ve been taken in! We shouldn’t have let our child go to that nursery!”

“How? And why not?” he asks.

“On the surface, it seems the ‘Indian’ family helped us out,” she replies. “But I have sensed something wrong there. They are helping themselves rather than us. Their child didn’t want to go to the nursery, wailing and whining each time. They helped us so that our daughter can keep their child company. The two always play together so they certainly find going to the nursery easier if they go together. I’ve also found out that the “Indian” woman’s husband doesn’t have any elder sister! We are so incapable that even our child is taken advantage of. I benefit from the shuttle bus because of that

sister-in-law. Who would have thought our child gets a place in the nursery only because she is needed to accompany another child!" And then she starts sobbing.

A chill goes down Young Lin's back. Damn! The "Indian" family bears no good will after all. But it is not something he can openly discuss. He feels as if he has swallowed a dirty piece of garbage. What's more unbearable for him to think is that, while his wife can be consoled somewhat, tomorrow his child still has to go with the other child to the nursery. After all, he admits to himself, it is better to stay as a companion in a good nursery than to play about in a poor one. This is the same with the shuttle bus dispatched because of the sister-in-law: better to use it than to catch an over-crowded public bus. In the evening, after his wife and child have gone to sleep, Young Lin sheds tears for matters like this for the first time. In the dark, he even slaps himself in the face: "Why are you such a good-for-nothing? How come you are so incapable?"

The slap is not very hard, for he is afraid that his wife will wake up.

## 6

There is a bumper harvest in Chinese cabbages this year. Standing in a long line of locals, his breath turning white as it hits the cold air, Young Lin waits to buy cabbages for the winter season. Everyone is holding a card in hand. Some people have put on cotton-padded hats. While waiting, people talk to each other. A middle-aged man in front of Young Lin offers him a cigarette and they start chatting away.

Whenever it is time to store up cabbages for winter, Young Lin senses both anxious and a contradictory feeling. Seeing others take cabbages home on bicycles, tricycles, and in big baskets, dropping loose leaves all the way behind them, he feels anxious: the cabbages may all be gone before he gets any and his family will have to go without any in winter. Squeezing into the crowd to buy some, however, he feels taken in year after year. With dozens of cheap cabbages, you have to waste time arranging them, airing them, turning them around, bringing them in, and stacking them up. During this process, several layers of leaves have come off. First begrudging eating them so early in the season, they buy more for instant consumption. By the time they want to consume them, the cabbages have become dry and withered, like small sticks. Peeling the dry leaves off, all that is left is a tiny cabbage. Sometimes even those tiny ones get frostbitten and smell sour when cooked. Every spring, looking at the leftover sticks, Young Lin and his wife vow not to store any more the next autumn. But seeing others buy loads of government subsidized cabbages, they feel that they are losing out if they do not get some. Young Lin thinks the anxiety and the contradictory feeling a torture, where the psychological stress caused by the activity far exceeding the value of the cheap cabbages.

Therefore, this autumn he has made up his mind not to store any more. His wife agrees with him, pointing out that it is not really a bargain if you take into account the lost and dried layers of leaves. They resist the temptation for only three days. Now putting on his padded hat, Young Lin joins the queue here again. It is not because he is weak-willed, though, but because there is a glut of cabbages in Beijing this year and employees have been called upon to buy "Patriotic cabbages" which can be reimbursed by their work units. That's why they have changed their mind and decide to buy as much as can be reimbursed for. The limit is 300 *jin* in Young Lin's unit, and 200 *jin* in his wife's, therefore they

will buy 500 *jin*, which is even more than the amount they would get in the past. Young Lin has borrowed a tricycle cart from Old He, the deputy head of department. “I decided not to store up any cabbages this year,” he tells Old He. “Since the unit will reimburse us, we are forced into a quandary again!”

The trouble of buying cabbages is caused by the reimbursement rather than out of his own desire, so Young Lin wait in the queue with an unwilling heart. He heaves a sigh, gives a cabbage a kick, and passively watches the trade going on at the front. He is no longer passive after a short while, though. Because the cabbages are free, people are anxious that the stocks will run out before their turn comes. He cannot help becoming keyed up. Rolling up the padded flaps of his hat, he exposes his ears.

The 500 *jin* of cabbages is carried home and the house is soon filled with their smell. Young Lin is in a bad mood; but because they are free, his wife is happy and lively arranging them. He knows the end result: they will eventually go down to 70 or 80 small sticks. Thinking of eating the high stack of cabbages throughout the winter makes him lose his appetite. But his wife is cheerful so he becomes cheerful too. A relaxed atmosphere permeates their home.

The next day, six people from Young Lin’s hometown visit them. He is nervous and his wife’s face changes colour. But this time the six guests do not stay for a meal. They are going to the Northeast on a business trip, they say, and they will only stay for a little while. He is relieved and his wife’s face regains her normal colour. She gives them a very warm send-off, which satisfies all parties.

Young Lin knocks off early this day so he goes to a food market. First, he gets a pile of capsicums and then exchanges grain coupons for some eggs (after the childminder’s departure, they can spare some coupons to exchange for eggs). He is about to leave for home when he sees a new private food cart selling Anhui pressed salted ducks, with a long queue before it. He goes over to take a look and finds that the ducks are too expensive, over four *yuan* per *jin*; but the gizzards and livers are cheap at three *yuan* a *jin*. His daughter is fond of those so he decides to buy half a *jin*. Two people are trading there: one man with an Anhui accent is chopping up the ducks and the other, who looks like the boss, is collecting money. Young Lin’s turn comes. When handing over his money to the boss, their eyes meet and they cry out at the same time:

“Young Lin!”

“Li Bai Junior!”

One drops the duck gizzards while the other drops the money. They hug each other in their arms, laughing. Li Bai Jr, is Young Lin’s former classmate. They were good friends while at the university. Both liked composing poems so they joined the university’s literary society. At that time they were all full of ambition and creative drive. “Li Bai Jr” was conscientious and talented, composing three poems a day on average. Some got published in newspapers and magazines. He had a relaxed style too, looking upon all the emperors in China’s long history as nothing. That was why he was nicknamed “Li Bai Jr”<sup>4</sup>. Many girl students were attracted by him. Upon graduation, they all dispersed like mist and smoke and, like Young Lin, “Li Bai Jr” was assigned to a government department. Bored with office work, he later

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<sup>4</sup> Li Bai was a famous Tang Dynasty poet.

resigned from the post and went to work in a company. Young Lin wonders why he is now selling ducks.

“Li Bai Jr” stops trading, leaving the business to the Anhui person. Taking Young Lin under a tree nearby, he chats with him while smoking.

Young Lin asks: “Weren’t you working in a company? How come you are selling ducks here?”

Smiling, “Li Bai Jr” answers: “Damn it! The company went bankrupt and I became self-employed, selling ducks. It’s not bad doing this, similar to running a private company. You earn almost one hundred *yuan* a day!”

Young Lin is taken aback. “Are you still writing poems?” he asks again.

“Li Bai Jr” spits at the ground and says: “Rubbish! Those poems I wrote in college were all too naive. What is poetry? Coquettish nonsense! If I had kept writing them, I would certainly have starved to death! I’m just drifting along. By the way, are you married?”

Young Lin replies: “My child is already three!”

Clapping his hands, “Li Bai Jr” exclaims: “See? You should not have asked about my poems! I’ve seen the way the world works. It’s more comfortable to drift along with the crowds without wild fantasies or the desire to stand out among your peers, not to think too much about anything. What would you say?”

Young Lin feels exactly the same, so he nods his head. “Have you any children?” he asks.

“Li Bai Jr” stretches out three fingers. Young Lin is taken aback again: “How dare you not practise birth control?”

“Li Bai Jr” smiles: “I’ve had three marriages and three divorces. I’ve just got married the fourth time. From each of the first three marriages I had one child, and none of my ex-wives wanted the children when we got divorced. So I’m saddled with three! What if I don’t sell ducks? I have five mouths to feed at home!”

Young Lin smiles too. “Li Bai Jr” is still true to his name. Though no longer writing poems, he has the same relaxed manner. They chat more and it is getting dark. . “Li Bai Jr” suddenly remembers something and pats Young Lin on the back: “I’ve got it!”

“Young Lin is startled: “Got what?”

“I have to be away for ten days or so---to buy ducks wholesale outside Beijing. No one will collect money for me here. I’ve been worrying about a suitable person. Why don’t you come after work and help me out?”

Young Lin shakes his hand: “No, not suitable. I have to go to work. Besides, I don’t know how to sell ducks!”

“I know you’re concerned about face,” “Li Bai Jr” says. “You are still naive. Who gives a damn about face anywhere any more these days? With it you look poor and affected; without it you enjoy great wealth and glory. Are you the only one aloof and superior? Judging by your attire and your expression, you are still the same shambling Young Lin you always were. Come and help me collect money for ten days. I’ll pay you 20 *yuan* a day!”

After that, he presses a big duck in Young Lin’s hand and pushes him away.

Shaking his head in a broad smile, Young Lin goes back home with the duck. His wife, however, is not happy about him coming back so late and that the child was not picked up on time. Seeing the big duck in his hand, she believes Young Lin bought it and calls out: "When did you become an aristocrat so that you can afford such a big duck!"

Glaring at her, he throws the duck onto the dining table and announces: "This is a present!"

His wife is surprised. "Have you been promoted to a higher rank? Why would anyone offer you a present!"

Young Lin tells her in detail about the chance encounter at the food market and that "Li Bai Jr" has asked him to help sell ducks. Unexpectedly, his wife is glad about the matter and persuades him to go: "Two hours per day at 20 *yuan*--that's even better than working for a capitalist in a restaurant! It won't interfere with your work anyway, either. Why not do it! I'll pick up the child from tomorrow onwards. You go and sell ducks. You can do it!"

Young Lin throws himself onto the bed and says, his hands supporting his head: "I certainly can. Only that I'll lose face if I do. Selling ducks!"

"Don't bother about losing face," his wife assures him. "With it you've been hard up all these years. Why be afraid of losing it? You're not looking for a wife, are you? If I don't mind, why should you?"

Therefore, from the next day on, Young Lin goes after work to collect money at the food-cart. At first he feels truly embarrassed. With a white apron, he dares not look up at his customers in case he sees anyone who knows him. As soon as he gets home, he takes a shower to wash off the smell of duck. Two days later, however, getting two tenners each day, he no longer worries about looking up, nor does he feel necessary to take a shower afterwards. Once he gets used to it, there seems nothing unusual about it. He likens this to the experience of a prostitute. The first time she receives a client, it is always frightening and embarrassing; as time goes on, she will become hardened, whoever the client may be. Now he considers duck-selling not bad even as a long-term after-work job. This way he can earn an extra 600 *yuan* per month. In one year's time, he will be quite well-off. It is a pity that "Li Bai Jr" is away for only ten days and he cannot carry on once he returns. It would be good if he had met with "Li Bai Jr" earlier.

On the ninth day of duck-selling, Young Lin encounters another acquaintance. Generally speaking, he no longer cares seeing people who know him, but this one is an exception--the head of his department Old Guan. Guan lives in another district, so normally he does not stop over in this food market. Why has he come here today? His eyes open wide with astonishment when he sees one of his staff sitting at the duck cart. Young Lin also feels ill at ease.

Young Lin is prepared to be sent for by Old Guan the next day. Sure enough, Guan asks to "have a special word" with him. By now Young Lin is not afraid of him in the slightest. Everyone is drifting along in society. What is wrong with my earning some pocket money by selling ducks after work? I have not done this in the work unit, have I? Life is certainly more enjoyable with more money. During these nine days he has earned 180 *yuan*, with which he has bought a long overcoat for his wife and a big *Hami* melon for his daughter. It has brought so much pleasure to his family. In comparison, losing face or being criticized by a boss is nothing. Having worked in this work unit for so many years, Young Lin

is not as naive or honest as when he was first assigned to it. He has learned to mingle truth with falsehood---they can be twisted round. It seems those who tell lies get promotion and more pay while those who tell the truth get punished and suffer the consequences. So when Old Guan asks him for an explanation, Young Lin puts on an air of innocence and says with a smile that the duck seller is his former classmate. He put on his former mate's apron and sat there crying "duck" just for fun. And it so happened that his boss saw him there and then. He really has not disgraced his work unit by selling ducks. Old Guan is convinced and says, "That's just what I thought! How can a dignified government staff reduce himself to duck selling! If that's the case, let's put an end to it. Make sure you don't make fun like that again!"

Young Lin promises that he will not. When the head of department has walked away, he spits at the ground. "Why shouldn't I 'reduce' myself to duck selling? I have been selling ducks for nine days already! It's too bad that today is the last time. If I were given the chance, I would do it permanently."

It is a pity that "Li Bai Jr" returns from his trip on time, so Young Lin has to say good-bye to the food cart. "Li Bai Jr" pays him the outstanding 20 *yuan* and tells him to come for free ducks whenever he wants. In the future, if he needs to go and buy ducks wholesale outside Beijing, he says, he'd like to ask Young Lin for help again. This time Young Lin does not feel embarrassed at all and replies in a loud voice, "Just let me know whenever you need me!"

## 7

The Lins' daughter has been attending the nursery for three months. Young Lin or his wife has to take her there and pick her up every day. In all fairness, after the childminder's departure they become busier with household chores. They have to wash up, mop the floor, and do the laundry all by themselves. Before, with the childminder to take care of the child, they did not need to worry about getting back home late. Now they have to take the child to nursery in the morning and to collect her in the evening, making sure they are on time. Despite all these, however, they feel much relaxed than before, because no other person is at their home during the day; in the evening when their child comes back, they are all family. Without a childminder saves them over 100 *yuan* a month. Deducting the child's nursery fees from the amount, there is still 50 to 60 *yuan* left. So they seem much better-off, and his wife now spends more on food. From time to time she buys sausages or even a roast chicken. They both agree it is much better to be without a childminder, and remind each other of heaps of disadvantages when she was here. Since the childminder has left, they feel it a bit petty to criticize her while they are enjoying roast chicken, and agree not to talk about her again. Gradually she is not mentioned any more.

Although their daughter is attending a good nursery, it is only through the good offices of the "Indian" family, who helped them in order to get a companion for their own child. This psychological problem has been weighing on Young Lin and his wife's mind all this time. Every morning when they send their child to the nursery and every evening when they pick her up, they cannot help thinking of it. The thought makes them unhappy. They frequently see the "Indian" woman or her husband, and greet one another politely. Afterwards, however, they feel ashamed and uneasy. Their daughter, still too young to understand matters like this, often walks out of the nursery hand in hand with the "Indian"

woman's child and the two of them play happily together. Everything needs time to be adapted to; by and by Young Lin and his wife start to view the matter with a lighter heart. Weighing the alternatives, they admit that as long as their child can go to a good nursery and be happy there, it does not matter whether she goes as a companion or not. It is the same as for selling ducks. He may have lost some face. He has been censured by his boss. But 200 *yuan* is earned and not to be sneezed at. Sometimes they still feel surges of anger at the sight of the "Indian" family and curse them inwardly: "I won't be grateful even though you have helped with the nursery admission!"

The child has to adapt to her new environment in the nursery too. She refused to go to nursery on the first few days, crying bitterly when taken there, and crying again when she was picked up. She was too young to understand it and the parents had to be firm. She would surely settle down after some time. Once she got used to the new environment and got to know the teachers and other children, she stopped crying. Young Lin sometimes feels sad---at such a young age, the child has to learn how to adapt. But he knows it won't do to keep her under his wing all the time. She has to grow up. When grown up, she may have to adapt to more difficult situations. With that consoling thought, Young Lin does not take his sadness too much to heart.

The World Cup soccer is now on. Several years ago, Young Lin took a fancy to watching soccer. He found it exciting and exhilarating. He could name all the world famous soccer stars. At that time, he believed watching World Cup soccer was one of the main purposes of life. It is only held every four years and how many four years can a man live? But after he started working and got married, he gradually lost interest. No matter however expertly the footballers play, they will not help solve any of his practical problems: housing, child care, coal briquettes, the childminder and guests from his hometown. He has been turning a deaf ear to the bustling world outside. Now that the child is in a nursery and he feels a bit more relaxed, he cannot help yearning to watch the soccer final in the evening. Live transmission is at midnight so he plans to win his wife's approval for watching it then. To put her in a good mood, he picks up the child after work, and busies himself with all the chores. Seeing this unusual behaviour, his wife asks him why. Sheepishly, he tells her why and adds that Maradona will be playing in it. He did not expect that his wife is still as unreasonable as she used to. Casting her apron onto the table she shouts at him:

"We are out of briquettes and you want to watch soccer at midnight? Obviously you are not tired enough! If you can make Maradona bring briquettes for us, I'll let you watch him!"

Much disappointed, he waves her away: "Enough. That's enough. I won't watch it. I'll go and buy briquettes tomorrow, OK?"

He stops doing the chores and sits on the bed, lost in thought, just as his wife sometimes does when she has had a bad day at work. He cannot go to sleep the whole night. Waking up at midnight, his wife finds him lying there with his eyes wide open. She is frightened and says, "Watch it if you really want to so long as you can still go and buy briquettes tomorrow."

But by now he has lost the mood of watching anything and does not feel the slightest gratitude to her. Resentfully, he responds: "Am I saying I have to watch it? You don't allow me to watch soccer, fine. And you don't even allow me to think!"

He asks for a half-day's leave the next morning to carry briquettes home, and goes back to work in the afternoon. When the newly assigned university graduate comes over and asks him to comment on the football match, Young Lin angrily replies: "Damn the soccer! What's there to watch? I never watch soccer!" Then he continues looking through the newspaper. The poor newcomer is truly taken aback.

In the evening, his wife finds him still in low spirits. Seeing that the briquettes have been brought home, she feels contrite and tries to make up for her unfairness by doing housework and attending to the child all by herself, making every effort to please him. These make him a bit uneasy and he feels his anger is somewhat released.

They are about to have dinner when the lame water-meter-reader comes. It is not the date for checking meters but as he has come you cannot say no. They stop preparing the meal and let him check the meter. Apart from the spanner to turn the water supply off, this time the old man has a big bag on his back too, which appears rather heavy. His face is dripping with sweat from the weight. Seeing the big bag, Young Lin wonders what the old man is up to. As expected, after the check is done, he sits on the bed. Young Lin stands in front of him waiting, not sure whether he is going to talk about his horse-feeding experience when young or about the water-stealing event again. The old man does not mention either of those. With a smile he says: "Young Lin, I have a favour to ask you!"

Young Lin is taken aback. "Grandpa, what are you talking about? I am the one who is always asking you for favours, not you, me."

"I'm serious. Aren't you working in a certain department under a certain bureau of a certain ministry?" the old man asks.

Young Lin nods his head.

The old man continues: "Is there a certain report for approval held in your department from a certain county of a certain district in a certain province?"

Young Lin dimly remembers there is such a report, which has been pigeonholed by a young woman called Young Peng. It is delayed because Young Peng has been busy learning *qigong*<sup>5</sup> in Ritan Park recently. So he answers: "It seems to me there is such a report!"

Clapping his hands, the old man says: "That's right! This county of this district in this province is my hometown. They are extremely anxious about this report so both the county magistrate and the Party secretary have come to see me for help!"

Young Lin is again taken aback: The county magistrate and the Party secretary coming to Beijing in person to ask a water-meter-reader for help? Recalling that the old man once fed horses when he was young for an important leader, he sees the reason there.

The old man goes on: "What can I do to help? I asked them to find out which department under which bureau has got the report and they did. It so happens that the department is no other than the one you are working in. We are acquaintances so I've come to you for a favour. Do you think it can be done?"

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<sup>5</sup> "*Qigong*" is a traditional Chinese system of deep breathing exercises which is believed beneficial to health and the spiritual well-being. When practitioners attain a master level, it enables them to perform miracles.

Young Lin has been in the department for about six years so he knows the ins and outs of the routines. This can be done easily. If he has a word with Young Peng tomorrow, the report can be processed quickly not any longer than the time required to put her lipstick on. It can be difficult though if she is practising *qigong*<sup>6</sup> and a total stranger should have disturbed her with this report, or if she happens to be in a bad mood. She can then pick out many mistakes, list many state regulations, and enumerate many reasons why the report cannot be ratified. In the end, you will be convinced that the report indeed has many defects and its refusal is due to this reason rather than any other. The report the old man is concerned about can be executed tomorrow if Young Lin helps him with it. If Young Lin does not help, it will be shelved for an unknown period of time. It all depends on whether Young Lin is willing to help or not. This lame old man is not just a man in the street; he is the man in charge of their water-meter, so it seems he should give him the help required. Young Lin today, however, is no longer the Young Lin he used to be. He is mature now. If such a thing had happened in the past, he would have readily promised to help. That shows a person's naivete. Now he doesn't commit himself right away. This shows his maturity. If at first you say "can't" and "hard" but finally the job is done, people will feel indebted. If you give a ready promise but for whatever reason you fail to fulfil it, people will blame you instead. Leaning against the stacked quilts with the back of his head resting on his hands, Young Lin says: "It's not easy! True, there is such a report in the department. But I was told there are many defects in it, so it can't be processed right away."

The lame old man fed horses for an important leader before; now he has come down in the world and become a water-meter-reader for many years. How can he tell what is the meaning behind Young Lin's words? He smiles ingratiatingly at Young Lin and agrees: "It's not easy, you're right. I told the county magistrate and the Party secretary Beijing is different from local places. There are strict regulations for things here. But please try to help with it!"

By now, Young Lin's wife understands what the old man is after. She comes over and cuts in, "Grandpa, all he knows is how to steal water. How is he able to help you with such an important matter?"

Looking very much embarrassed, the old man says: "It was all a mistake. A real misunderstanding. I am to blame for listening to people indiscriminately. How much does a kilolitre of water cost and who would have bothered stealing water that way?" then he hurries to zip open the big bag and takes from it a big cardboard box. "This gift is a token of regard from the people of my county. Please accept it!"

Then he starts to limps away, giving Young Lin a wink.

As soon as he is gone, his wife remarks: "It seems that our life is going to take a turn!"

"Why?" he asks.

Pointing at the cardboard box, she answers: "Look, we've started getting gifts."

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<sup>6</sup> "Qigong" is a system of deep breathing exercises aimed at stimulating vital energy (see also Footnote 3 on "qi" in Chapter 3 on p. 53) so as to strengthen immunity to disease, adaptability to the external environment and the ability to repair internal damage. To a great extent, all Chinese martial arts, i.e. "gongfu" or "kungfu", rely on the mastery of *qigong* techniques for the attainment of mental and physical harmony.

They open the box up and are flabbergasted to find inside a small-sized microwave oven, which costs 700 to 800 *yuan* on the market.

Young Lin says, "It's not appropriate. If the gift was a doll we could accept it. How can we accept a gift worth so much? I'll send it back tomorrow!"

His wife feels the same. Both of them are weighed down with thoughts while having dinner. Later in the evening his wife suddenly asks him: Is it easy to have that report approved?"

"Very easy," he replies. "If I speak to Young Peng tomorrow, it can be done immediately."

She claps her hands: "If so, I'll keep this microwave oven!"

Young Lin still feels uneasy: "Is it right to? Isn't this what they call using public office for private gain? To help pass a report and get a microwave for it? Besides, we'll give a handle to the old man if we keep it!"

"If you settle the matter for him, what handle can he possibly have against you?" his wife says. What do you mean by saying "using public office for private gain"? Others are engaged in thousands upon thousands *yuan* of profiteering and still keep high positions! A microwave is nothing!"

After thinking for a while, he is persuaded and tacitly consent to it. His wife immediately plugs the microwave in to roast some sweet potatoes. Several minutes later, the room is filled with a pleasant aroma. The potatoes are piping hot and brown they all eat a piece. Young Lin's wife joyfully remarks that microwave is a very useful thing. Besides sweet potatoes, it can also bake cakes, buns, chickens, and ducks. Young Lin also enjoys eating the sweet potato and has gained some enlightenment from this experience. It seems their living standards can be improved by simply participating in the game. He and his wife spend a pleasant evening. Stimulated by the microwave, his wife is passionate again. Not watching the soccer match yesterday evening appears to be of little importance to him now.

The next day, he sees Young Peng and the report is processed as they chat.

Two weeks after their acquisition of the microwave, their daughter suddenly begins to cry about going to nursery again. She had been happy about going previously, hopping and skipping on her way there. For the past two days, however, she has been behaving strangely. One moment she complains of a tummy ache; the next she wants to empty the bowels, but nothing comes out. After scolding her, she is made to attend the nursery and unexpectedly stops crying but looks scared and in a daze. Young Lin and his wife are frightened. They believe either another kid in the nursery has bullied her, or her teacher has hurt her self-esteem by severely punishing her, so that she is afraid to see that kid or that teacher again. They cross question her but she says there is nothing wrong like that, and cries again.

His wife find out what the reason is from other children's parents at the pick-up time. It turns out to be their fault. They have been thoughtless about the New Year occasion. Before the New Year's Day, all the children's parents have given gifts, big or small, to the nursery teachers, except them, and their child has been suffering the consequences. His wife blames Young Lin: "Think of it! You even forgot such a festive occasion as New Year's Day when your child is attending a nursery. The teachers must have taken us as stingy and poor and have laughed at us many times!"

He admits: "I've been negligent. Our gift was refused once before; it makes me refrain from giving any more gifts and totally forget the matter even when I ought to!"

They discuss how to make it up and what to present as a late gift. It is a hard question. A New Year's card or a calendar is too little; moreover, the New Year's Day has passed already. A blanket or clothes seem too much and perhaps will not be considered as acceptable.

"Shall we ask the child?" suggests Young Lin.

"Ask her? She knows nothing about such matters!" his wife sneers at his suggestion.

Nevertheless, Young Lin calls the child over and asks her whether she knows what gifts other children have given the teachers. She does know: "Charcoal!"

He is surprised: "Charcoal? Why charcoal? Why did they give the teachers charcoal?"

He asks his wife to find out the next day. Indeed, what the child said is true. Many parents gave charcoal as gifts to the teachers before the New Year's Day. The reason is that it is winter now and instant-boiled mutton gets popular among Beijingers. Charcoal is needed to cook it

"That's easy. They gave charcoal and we'll do the same!" Young Lin acclaims.

When he goes to buy charcoal, he finds that it is already out of stock in Beijing. He is worried again. His wife and he plan to buy something else. Since others have given charcoal, theirs may be unwanted extra. Something different may be even better. However, the child has remembered "charcoal," and when she wakes up in the morning, the first thing she says is: "Dad, have you bought charcoal for my teacher?"

A three-year-old is so obstinate about giving her teacher charcoal as a gift, which makes Young Lin feel annoying and amusing at the same time. Patting the bed, he promises: "Isn't it just some charcoal? I'll go searching all over the city to get it!"

He eventually finds charcoal in a small hide-away store in a Beijing suburb. It is much more expensive there but he is glad to get it after all. He asks his wife to take the gift to the nursery. The next day, the child is back to her normal self and again willing to go to the nursery. When she is happy, the whole family is happy too.

This evening, Young Lin's wife has half a chicken roasted in the microwave and gives him a bottle of beer. After drinking some, he feels a little dizzy, as though he was growing bigger. He tells his wife that worldly matters are in fact very simple. Once you are clear about the way to follow and follow it closely, your life will flow comfortably on like water. Comfort will reign all over the world, the same warmth and cold throughout the globe, he declares.

Seeing that he is drunk, his wife gives him a stare and snatches his beer bottle away. Though drinking no more, his head remains muddled the whole evening. He falls into a deep sleep and has a dream. He is sleeping on a layer of skin cells shed by many other people and covered with a heap of chicken feathers. These are soft and comforting and, in his happiness, he feels one year seems to pass as one day. Then he sees a huge crowd of people slowly drifting forward. Then they all turn into ants lining up to beg for rain.

When he wakes up it is dawn. Giving his head a shake, he tries to remember his dream but it is very vague by now. His wife also wakes up. Seeing his stupid look, she urges him to go and buy bean curd. That makes him sober-minded again. Shrugging off the dream, he goes to queue for bean curd before going to work.

At work, he receives a letter from the son of his primary school teacher who came to Beijing for medical treatment some time ago. It says that three months after the Beijing trip, his father passed away. Before death, he asked his son to write to thank Young Lin for the hospitality he showed him. The letter makes Young Lin sad throughout the day. His teacher came to his place when ill but he failed to help his teacher find a hospital, not even let him wash his face. This is the teacher who, when he was a child, once took off his own padded coat to wrap him with when he fell through a hole in the ice.

At the end of a miserable day, in the homebound shuttle bus, Young Lin suddenly remembers that his stack of cabbages is getting too warm. He ought to take them apart when he gets home. The thought of his teacher is thus pushed aside. The dead are already dead and there is no use thinking about them; the living had better think of cabbages. After attending to the cabbages this evening, he tells himself, if his wife roasts some chicken again and gives him another bottle of beer, he will be absolutely content.

## **5.2 Study 3 *In the Home of Those Married with an Only Child: Adjusting to Social Changes in China Around the Late 1980s***

### **5.2.1 The author and his literary creation**

Liu Zhenyun, the author of the novella *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* 一地鸡毛, was born in Yanjin County, Henan Province<sup>7</sup>, in May 1958. He joined the People's Liberation Army in 1973 and, on demobilization in 1977, returned home and became a teacher. After studying in the Chinese Department, Beijing University from 1978 to 1982, he became a journalist at the *Farmers' Daily* 农民日报 and later, director of the paper's literature and art department. Like Chi Li, he is regarded as one of the initiators and representatives of "neorealistic fiction." By the early 1990s, popular titles among his published works included *Pagoda Depot* 塔铺, *A Company of New Recruits* 新兵连, *The Corridors of Power* 官场, *The Unit* 单位, *Past Sways in my Hometown* 故乡天下黄花, and of course *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* 一地鸡毛. The first two of those are the earliest that caught attention of the national reading public, but he was most praised by literary critics for the works that followed, due to their bold engagement with sensitive subject matter in a novel manner.

It may be said that Liu Zhenyun bases his writings mainly on his personal experiences and feelings, especially so as his earlier writings are concerned. For instance, *Pagoda Depot* and *A Company of New Recruits* are believed to respectively respond to his own experiences as a soldier and as an examinee from the countryside. In a review on Liu's works, Fang Keqiang (1989) discusses this issue and reveals that Liu's childhood was filled with unhappy memories. Not surprisingly, most of his works are permeated with sad, sentimental overtones, and most of his writings have sufferings and tragedies of life as their themes. The same can be said about his other works which reflect his life experiences as a low-ranking official at work (as in *The Unit*) and as a husband and father at home (as in *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*), with Young Lin being the protagonist in both novellas.

Around the early 1990s when most of his fellow writers swarmed to write about personal sentiment, sexual passion, doing business, and going abroad, Liu persistently kept his pen on the everyday mundane state-of-being of the people and their living conditions that he was

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<sup>7</sup> Henan Province is on the lower reach of the Yellow River. Its provincial capital is Zhengzhou.

familiar with. Among the stories produced during a later period, those that depict all sorts of government officials (from the lowest clerks and village headmen to senior ministers) stand out. He cool-headedly and unswervingly tears open the thick curtains around the corridors of power and lays bare the true features of the officials in these corridors. While this theme is just touched upon in *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, it is the focus of his other stories such as *Headmen* 头人, *The Officials* 官人, *The Corridors of Power*, *The Unit*, and *News* 新闻. Duan Daming (1995) describes his writings as “unprecedented in the contemporary literary history of China,” and considers that his “serial fictions about the corridors of power” 官场系列小说 filled a gap that had existed for too long in China’s contemporary literature. Through his stark naked depiction of the lives of peasants, city dwellers, soldiers, officials and the events during the course of these people’s lives, cultural, societal, historical and philosophical questions are asked.

### **5.2.2 Linguistic and cultural issues in translating *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers***

In a style void of affectation, *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* is informal prose written in plain, almost chatty language. However, this apparent simplicity does not make the process of its translating free from difficulties.

The title of this novella 一地鸡毛 is literally translated as *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*. It would perhaps conjure up in the reader’s mind an image of messiness. After reading the story in which feathers appear only once towards the end of the story and only in the protagonist’s dream, the reader probably would realize that the term is metaphorically used here, and would be left wondering what that metaphor might mean. There is a set phrase in Chinese “*jimao suanpi*” 鸡毛蒜皮 (literally meaning chicken feathers and garlic skins) which means trivial matters in life. Imagine how vexatious it is to be buried in a ground full of those! This being the case, some may ask why not translate it into something like “Life Filled with Trivialities” or “Chaotic Trivialities in Days of our Lives,” which may help the reader in the target language grasp the meaning straight away? But besides “trifles”, the term 鸡毛 (chicken feathers) can also mean “urgent” as in the combination “*jimao xin*” 鸡毛信 (a letter / message with a feather attached to it, which is a sign of urgency), made popular by a film bearing the three characters as its title. All the events we can read from the novella are indeed “trifles” in comparison with “glorifiable” ideals or deeds. Nevertheless, it is exactly those trifles that have a great and constant impact on common people’s everyday lives. And because they are immediate and everyday concerns, they are at the same time “urgent” and

important to these people, who cannot afford to overlook them, nor are they able to escape these trifles. If the image of chicken feathers was taken away from the translation, then the possibility of this interesting dual implication in the original text would go too.

Similarly, the term 一地 (literally meaning all over a ground or locality) can be understood as being twofold as well. Besides other definitions, the character 地 (*di*) can mean land, ground, place, fields, and the earth. As explained in the previous chapter, according to the Daoist *yin-yang* belief, “the earth” in Chinese is used to refer to woman while “*tian*” 天 (the sky or Heaven), to man. Likewise, while “the sky” is associated with a mandate from Heaven, “the earth” is associated with secular and worldly affairs. Viewed in relation to the ending of the story, it may be understood that the author is trying to throw some light on the layer of meaning that the protagonist Young Lin’s life is so fully occupied by worldly and immediately pressing trivial matters on earth that his life is badly lacking in philosophical inquiry about the meaning of life itself. Therefore, the title contains in it both the surface and deep tiers of meaning that the story is trying to get across to its reader. It offers an enduring flavour for the reader to appreciate. To translate it regardless of these connotations in source culture raises the question as to whether the gain obtained in the translation (i.e. clarified, idiomatic rendition, therefore readily acceptable and understandable to the targeted reader) can balance up the loss of the vivid image in the original together with all the implications behind it. This is a point with a profundity greater than it appears. A difficult decision is finally made that the title be literally translated as it stands now, with the hope that its physical image is kept and its rich metaphorical meaning, which is obviously inappropriate to explain by way of a footnote, can be made clear through an exegesis.

Morphology in a linguistic system also carries meaning. This is true of written Chinese characters in particular. With every Chinese character standing for one meaningful syllable, they fall roughly into two categories: one with a phonetic component, and the other without; and the majority of Chinese characters are formed of two elements: the *signific* (which originally is a picture of the object or concept signified) and the *phonetic* (which provides a rough guide to its sound). Most of those without a phonetic component derive from pictographs and symbols. Therefore, both categories are basically ideographic in nature. In many cases, the very form or composition of a character is meaningful, carrying with it information that tells a great deal about people’s specific social-perceptual-cultural concepts of a certain historical period<sup>8</sup>. Smith (1994: 118) believes that this may have encouraged an

<sup>8</sup> For example, the Chinese character 美 (*mei* beautiful; or good in taste, colour or sound) is constituted of a top part 羊 (*yang*, sheep, which is originally a picture of a sheep) and a lower part 大 (*da*, big). In the primitive stage

intuitive approach to understanding; and the ideographic origins of the script encouraged a preference for the concrete and descriptive rather than the abstract.

Equipped with an elaborate morphological apparatus, the Chinese language exhibits a certain quality of economy. Such economical quality was proven by a “chain translation” experiment initiated by the Australian Literary Translators’ Association during 1991 and early 1992.<sup>9</sup> Other factors that contribute to its terseness include its total absence of conjugations (the various forms of a verb that shows number, person, tense, etc.) and the partial absence of declensions (the different forms of a noun, pronoun, or adjective). The writer’s choice of tenses, besides his/her choices of words of different colour, tone, register, or style, is also a meaning carrier.<sup>10</sup>

How to translate “*lao*” 老 (old, aged) and “*xiao*” 小 (small, little, young) when used in front of a person’s family name to compose a direct form of address, is a much discussed issue but the ways to render them still remain varied. Although in both Chinese and English culture age is an important issue, its importance is viewed in a different light. For instance, inquiring about someone’s age, especially that of a woman, is considered impolite / improper in English. “Old Smith” as a direct form of address will certainly create unfavourable consequences. In comparison, it is common to do so in Chinese culture because age is a safe topic in China, just as weather is in the West. Generally speaking, the Chinese people regard old age as a sign of blessing, relate it to greater worldly experience and wisdom, and duly show respect to it. Traditionally, happiness, wealth, and longevity are believed to be the three best blessings in life. Reflected in the language, the word “*lao*” is commonly and comfortably used before a person’s family name, even when the person is not old.<sup>11</sup> This may create a problem in translation, as “old” in English does mean “advanced in age.” Similarly, “*xiao*” 小 (young / little) is problematic too. The protagonist in *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*

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of human development, to obtain a big sheep for food was perhaps the best thing that people could wish for. 安 (*an*, peace) is another example. Its upper part “宀” (“*bao gair*” 宝盖儿 name of the Chinese radical 偏旁, which is originally the picture of a house roof) and lower part 女 (*nü* woman or female) together indicate that to enjoy peace, secure a woman under your roof---and one only (cf. Liu X. 1991).

<sup>9</sup> I was involved in the fourth link of the chain. The original English text is a passage chosen from Doris Lessing’s *Shikasta* and was translated into and out of Italian, through German, Portuguese, Chinese, Hungarian and French. A quick glance at the six mutations make it clear that as the chain grew longer, the text showed a marked tendency to increase in length as it visited European languages. The then President Rod Fletcher observed: “Only after visiting Chinese did it shrink back (rather dramatically!) to something close to its original length” (see ALiTTrA Newsletter, June 1992).

<sup>10</sup> For example, in English verb conjugations, besides indicating different tenses which is their basic function, can be used for other purposes. A present or past continuous tense, for instance, is more formal than the present tense and, to be polite, the past tense should be used to indicate the present situation.

<sup>11</sup> “*Lao*,” if used before a person’s family name, is not necessarily a term of respect; if used after a family name, however, it is an unmistakable indication of the person’s seniority in age as well as the addresser’s reverence for that person.

is “*Xiao Lin*” (“*Lin*” is his family name). “Little” is a possible rendering for “*xiao*” but “young” is chosen in my translation because the former may implicitly refer to the physique of the signified, and may come with a tinge of intimacy, while the latter only refers to the age (at least initially these prefixes are meant to be so). Whether “*lao*” or “*xiao*”, the real age is not always the point, though. While “*xiao*” may be first used by a relatively older person towards a younger one, “*lao*” can be used in its place between people of similar age and status. In other words, for example, “Young Lin” in his work unit would become “Old Lin” if there was another character with the same family name who was younger than him, or when he was among his former classmates. Likewise, Young Lin’s former direct boss “Old Zhang” might be referred to as “Young Zhang” by his new, more senior colleagues after being promoted. Not aware of the fact that in many cases, these words are only indicators of *relative* seniority in age and ranking of the interlocutors involved, an English reader might feel confused.

The difficulty in fully translating words like “*lao*” and “*xiao*” has been discussed by many other scholars, for instance, Eva Hung 孔慧怡 (1999: 148-150). She points out the possibility that the use of “little” before a person’s family name could mean the addresser looks down upon the addressee or that the addressee is indeed “little” in physical build. She also advocates against the solution of transliteration (e.g. “*Lao Chen*” or “*Xiao Chen*”) since the English reader may mistake them as proper names, not to mention the potential danger that, when there are two or more such forms of address in the same story, the reader may mistake them as namesakes. Her discussion also touches on quite a few blood / marriage relationship terms commonly used in forms of direct address in Chinese to indicate non-blood / marriage relations---“(elder) brother or sister”, “uncle or aunt / auntie”, “grandpa or grandma” and so on (Hung 1999: 141-148). In the case of (elder) brother or sister, careless, mechanical word-for-word rendering from Chinese to English, she warns, may result in giving the targeted reader the wrong impressions that (1) Chinese monks can get married (since “Brother,” when used as a form of address outside the family, often refers to monks and priests); and (2) there is no concept of incest in China since brothers and sisters can become husbands and wives. Therefore, based on detailed analysis, she suggests as a solution to directly use a character’s given name or Mr/Miss plus his/her family name instead of the religious “Brother / Sister So-and-so. This issue will be further discussed later in the thesis (see pp. 248-249 below).

Teaching was, traditionally, considered an honourable profession in China. The importance and honour of a good teacher used to be compared to those ascribed to fatherhood. It is interesting to notice that “teacher” is termed “*laoshi*” 老师 in Chinese---“*shi*” means

“teacher”, and we already know that “*lao*” means “old”. A teacher, though very young in age, is “*laoshi*” anyway. Now nobody unravels this level of meaning but regards the two characters together as one word. “*Laoshi*” is also used as an honorific title in Chinese (title after the family name, e.g. Wang Laoshi), just as “Professor Smith” is in English. Simple as it looks, “*Wang Laoshi*” sometimes may prove to be hard to translate, unless necessary information has been provided by the immediate context (as in my translation of the novella under discussion: “[Young Lin] immediately recognizes him as his primary school teacher, Mr Du.”). “Mr/Mrs/Miss + Surname,” for example, could be an inadequate if not distorted translation if the gender is not specified and cannot be readily deduced from the immediate context. Another possible solution, “Wang, the teacher” becomes a paraphrase rather than a form of direct address, hence also an unsatisfactory translation of the original. Therefore, in certain circumstances, to translate “*Wang Laoshi*” into “Teacher Wang”, though at first it sounds awkward to the ear of an English speaker, seems to be the closest rendering of it. Besides, using loan words can be considered a fast and effective way to enrich the target language and there have been many successful examples of this kind.

In Chinese society, people normally show a great deal of courtesy towards each other, though not always towards total strangers who have no fixed place in the traditional Confucian hierarchy of relationships. As a result, the language reflects a great deal of hierarchical (e.g. age and rank related) consciousness. Besides, as we have discussed earlier, people can be addressed by their titles, and there is a complex set of honorifics in that regard too. However, it must be pointed out that politeness also has to do with people’s concepts about insiders and outsiders. The more unfamiliar people are, the more polite they will be to each other. When an excessive use of honorifics can create a farcical effect, plain-styled terms may suggest closeness or affection.

The most problematic area in translating *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* lies in the absence of corresponding English words to those in Chinese which involve ideological and cultural connotations. While the Chinese concepts “*mianzi*” 面子 (face) and “*guanxi*” 关系 (connection), after repeated use and lengthy explanations, are now understood and accepted in the English-speaking world, there are others that are difficult to translate due to the unique cultural connotations they carry. In *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, there is a section that recounts the disappointment and indignation of Young Lin’s wife when she finds the much appreciated bus service provided by her employer actually serves a selfish purpose. Back home, she grumbles to her husband about her humiliated feeling and her disappointment that nevertheless a full load of people (including herself) are using the shuttle

bus with no one boycotting it to protest against the abuse of power. This she describes as “*bu zhengqi*” 不争气. Her husband tries to ease her bitterness by saying: “No one else seems to be as righteous [*zhang zhiqi* 长志气] as you are.” And the wife finally agrees that in such circumstances, “strength of character” [*you zhiqi* 有志气] has “no damn use at all.”

The dictionary definitions of the Chinese entry of the highlighted words are respectively “*zhengqi*” 争气: try to make a good showing; try to win credit for (in the text here it is used in the negative form, which means something close to the saying “no backbone”); “*zhiqi*” 志气: aspiration; ambition. But they provide the translator with little guidance, and neither is an equivalent to the original that can be readily inserted in the translation. The word “*zhiqi*” used in the two different places as quoted above is differently translated, in an attempt to best bring out their meanings in their immediate context. The word used in the two different places as quoted above is differently translated, in an attempt to best bring out their meanings in their immediate context. The first “*zhiqi*” is used together with the verb “*zhang*” 长 (to acquire; to enhance). Like “face”, “*zhiqi*” can be possessed and nurtured, gained or lost. In its normal use, “*zhang zhiqi*” means “to boost one’s morale”. It is translated as “to be righteous” in the novella because the protagonist hints at the dilemma his wife is facing: either not to compromise her sense of principle and continue to suffer from the long travelling hours in the over-crowded public bus between home and work each day, or to be practical and enjoy the convenience the work unit bus offers her by turning a blind eye to the real cause of that convenience. It has little to do with her ambition, aspiration, or her morale, but rather her sense of righteousness / justice and her indignation over the unit head’s abuse of official power. Similarly the second “*zhiqi*”, in collocation with the verb “*you*” 有 (to have, to possess), can be regarded as a synonym for the other Chinese word “*guqi*” 骨气 and is rendered into “strength of character.”

At the mentioning of the character “*qi*” 气 (vital energy in traditional Chinese medical theory and philosophy; breath; spirit, etc.), one cannot fail to sense a unique Chineseness in it. A series of terms have developed around this concept. Besides “*zhiqi*” 志气 and “*zhengqi*” 争气, there are “*guqi*” 骨气 (strength of character, moral integrity; backbone; strength of calligraphic strokes), “*zhengqi*” 正气 (righteous spirit; healthy atmosphere; vital energy), and further extensions like “*fenggu*” 风骨 (strength of character; vigour of style in writing, painting or calligraphy). The same Chinese words used elsewhere may need totally different ways to render their meanings in English. Take “*guqi*” as an example:

*Ta shi yige you guqi de ren.* 他是一个有骨气的人。He is a man of integrity.

*Tade zi hen you guqi.* 他的字很有骨气。His writing shows strength in the strokes.

The Chinese scholar Ji Xianlin 季羨林 once discussed the term “*guqi*” in an article entitled “Heartfelt Wishes of One Old Intellectual” (Ji, X. 1995), in which he makes humorous associations between this term and Chinese culture and convincingly argues his case. He thinks that the character “*gu*” 骨 (bone) best indicates the past Chinese intellectuals’ frustration in career and best captures the basic features of their usual physical image, which are vividly depicted in set phrases containing this character, such as “*shougu linxun*” 瘦骨嶙峋 (all skin and bones), “*gu shou ru chai*” 骨瘦如柴 (a mere skeleton) and so on. Frustrated and poor, they had nothing else valuable but their “bones”. Yet they seldom hesitated to risk their bones for a cause they considered just. Such spirit is called “*guqi*”. Like “*mianzi*” (face), “*guqi*” is another quintessence of Chinese culture 国粹. This uniqueness, he asserts, makes it impossible to have the Chinese term fully translated into any foreign language. His is a very pertinent argument. At the mentioning of “*guqi*”, a number of lifelike historical figures with “*guqi*” stand out, among them Qu Yuan 屈原<sup>12</sup>, Wen Tianxiang 文天祥<sup>13</sup>, Wen Yiduo 闻一多<sup>14</sup> and Lu Xun 鲁迅 (as referred to in Chapters 2 & 3 above). As Jose (1992b) points out, a foreigner’s comprehension of China “requires decoding and recoding. The Western cliché of the ‘inscrutable’ Chinese cannot be read in the normal ways. The term for an expert in Chinese words, ‘sinologist’, has expanded to cover expertise about China as a whole.”

Therefore, despite all the considerations, the translation of such terms still have to fall short of the rich connotations they carry. It is a shortage deep-rooted in cultural difference, hence an almost insurmountable obstacle in translating them in full if resorting only to conventional means in translation, because however careful and skilful the rendering might be, the associative images of the above discussed terms will either remain void in the target language, or will appear awkward.

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<sup>12</sup> Qu Yuan (a.340-278 B.C.), author of the famous poem “Encountering Sorrow” 离骚, is one of the greatest poets of China. He was a senior official of the state of Chu in the Warring States period. Finding that he could not influence the conduct of his prince, he wrote in anguish a poem “Lament for Ying,” upon the fall of Ying (the capital of Chu) to the state of Qin. In this poem he expressed his anxiety for the future of his country, his sympathy for its people, and his resentment against its self-indulgent ruler. He then drowned himself in the River Miluo on the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar. The traditional Chinese Dragon Boat Festival is supposed to be in honour of this patriotic poet.

<sup>13</sup> Wen Tianxiang (1236-1283) was a prestigious minister of the Southern Song Dynasty. After having conquered the last Song Empire, the Mongol invaders wished to secure the cooperation of Wen. He rejected their offer and was thrown into jail. Waiting there to be executed, he composed his famous “Hymn of the Righteous *Qi*” 正气歌.

<sup>14</sup> Wen Yiduo (1899-1946), one of the pioneers of modern Chinese poetry and a famous scholar of the new literary movement disseminated in China since the May Fourth Movement. In defiance of the KMT government’s corrupt and dictatorial rule he spoke up during intolerable times and was assassinated by special agents in Kunming on July 15th, 1946.

### 5.2.3 Literary attributes of the novella

Like *Apart from Love*, *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* is a story depicting the life of a common Chinese family, but the focus is not on love (or lack of it), nor its product---marriage, but rather on the daily trivialities the family has to deal with in a mundane world around the late 1980s, a period filled with rapid social changes.

The 19th-century English novelist Charles Reade once instructed new hands in novel writing: “Make’em laugh; make’em cry; make’em wait” (quoted in Qian, Z. 1990: 60). Comedies make readers / viewers laugh; tragedies make them cry; and most conventional tales stimulated their readers’ curiosity by suspense and suggestive details that were pregnant with many expressions, by foreshadowing a happening but making a pause when it draws near, and by making them wait anticipatorily for a dramatic climax, an eagerly awaited answer, an expected or unexpected ending. *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* does make its readers as well as its protagonist wait in a sense, but it provides none of the rest listed above. Yet it was very popular when first published in early 1991. Well known critics such as Wang Gan, Lei Da, He Zhenbang, Pan Kaixiong, Jiang Yuanlun, Chen Xiaoming and many others vied to offer comments (see *Zhongshan* 鐘山 no. 3, 1989; Li, X. 1991). Some praised Liu’s neo-realist fiction as an innovative combination of realist and modernist techniques while imbued with contemporary and philosophical consciousness; others questioned its lack of the “critical spirit” essential to traditional realism, criticized its passive and pessimistic attitude toward life and its failure to balance a grim account of life with an appropriately upbeat ending; still others thought it a simple return to naturalism. Whether these comments are positive or negative are of secondary importance. With almost countless stories published all over China each day, it is a success for any of them just to arouse the critics’ attention.

The story deals with the period around the late 1980s in China when the relentless drive for material prosperity led to a social and moral collapse. A general trend of ideological disintegration and chaos resulted in a general lack of motivation. The confused value concepts, people’s disillusionment with widespread corruption and nepotism and with public affairs generally, and the uncertainty about the future combined to make people feel frustrated and lost, a feeling that was particularly strong in intellectuals. Besides, people had to cope with concrete, immediate problems in day-to-day living such as poor housing conditions, low salaries, high inflation, and scarce public services. And to top it all off were people’s general pettiness and omnipresent competition. It is not surprising that the author of *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* allowed a downhearted, disillusioned note to creep into his writing. As he confesses in an article entitled “Wear and Tear and Loss” 磨损与丧失,

he did find life grim, and that grimness was generated by the recurring trivialities in life, day after day, year in and year out. He writes:

The work unit, the family, going to work, coming back, washing, cooking, caring for the child, coping with the childminder, plus how to curry favour from others in order to get better housing, how to beg around in order to get the child admitted into a [good] nursery, how to get the wife transferred to a unit that is closer to home. Every problem we face, or the difficulty each of them presents in front of us, appears to be the most severe trial of all, even harder to solve than climbing a mountain of swords or plunging into a sea of flames. This is because in our efforts to tackle each of these problems, we have to deal with people. But we are afraid of people. Therefore we are worn and torn, losing all our edges in the process. ... It is true that life makes us maturer each day, but does maturity mean that as commoners we have to forget and lose ourselves? (Liu, Z. 1991b, my translation)

Set against the background of Chinese society during that transitional period, the novella presents for us the accurate descriptions of the daily trifles in a typical urban Chinese family, furnishes the familiar scenes with familiar universals of Chinese urban experience. The fictional world that unfolds in Liu Zhenyun's work is a construct wrought from an authentic, fully experienced and cogently observed reality. He knows the life stories of Young Lin and the like; he knows their current situations; he knows the turns of their minds and the bent of their behaviour. The story offers its reader a full insider's view. The family serves as a small window for the reader to observe the common condition of life in its varied facets and layers. By describing in detail the humdrum daily life of a petty government official couple, the story touches not only on the themes of the general living condition of the urban Chinese, but also on Chinese cultural dimensions, on human nature and on the meaning of life, which have long been topics of common interest in philosophy, religion and literature alike. The accurately cast images and the precisely portrayed events serve to convey the author's deep concerns for his contemporaries.

The story seems to have neither plot nor "form." With Young Lin as the central character, the author gives earthy, trenchant and detailed descriptions of his tribulations mainly concerning family matters or problems, one after another. Though the story is arranged into numbered sections, its pattern, or structure, takes a back seat to the bustling minutiae of life. The reader can experience them as a rich yet loose array of directly rendered happenings as if reading periodical accounts of the protagonist's daily life. Yet "no-form" can be a meaningful form in itself---monotonous, repetitive and discrete occurrences which form the contents of the story are the most striking characteristics of the novella and the no-form structure can be regarded as the best form to present these contents as they were. Liu Zhenyun weaves disparate aspects of the Lins' family affairs into a narrative that largely depends on its consistent tone for its unity.

Accordingly, an apparently objective, matter-of-fact, detached method is deployed. The chatty informality helps draw the reader subtly into its narrative about the characters' inner world as well as into the physical one in which they find themselves. The keen pathos with which the narrator views his character(s)'s life can be strongly sensed, but certainly was not readily supplied. Though a third-person narrator is used, the author frequently shifts his point of view between the third-person narrator and the first-person protagonist, leaving the reader to feel it hard to tell the author, the narrator and the protagonist apart, thereby varying the kinds of attention that he brings to bear on his characters. The plain narrative style and the flat language coloured by a circumstantial spontaneity may seem effortless and commonplace, but are effective in rendering the breadth and depth of the state of existence, giving the story more convincing realist power.

Despite the plain language and matter-of-fact method of the novella, the story is by no means insipid or dull. At the very end, for example, Young Lin gets to know from a letter that his primary school benefactor-teacher died. The novella shows that Young Lin's normal feelings, weighed down by daily concerns under the pressure of life, seem to have turned numb:

At the end of a miserable day, on a homebound shuttle bus, he suddenly remembers that his stack of cabbages is getting too warm. He ought to take them apart when he gets home. The thought of his teacher is thus pushed aside. The dead are already dead and there is no use thinking about them; the living had better think of cabbages.

The icy dry black humour in plain language has an exceptional effect on the reader.

It is true that Liu Zhenyun's story, which deals with only mediocre characters, is infused with a despondent tone, even with a certain sense of "heaviness"—it is not the kind of light story that one may read just for entertainment. But it captures the mood of the common urban dwellers and the climate of Chinese urban society during that historical period, and honestly presents that piece of reality with astonishingly accurate and familiar details. What is more, literature of mediocre characters does not necessarily indicate that the author himself lacks idealism or philosophical depth. For the reader, insomuch as to speak the truth 说真话 is the first yardstick in evaluating a piece of literary work, the novella is a success.

#### **5.2.4 Literary and cultural issues in interpreting *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers***

##### ***Lightness and heaviness of life***

The realistic details of the novella build a deeper social and psychological portrayal of the characters caught in that situation. Starting with half a kilogram of spoiled bean curd, *Ground*

*Covered with Chicken Feathers* volubly relates trivial household affairs one after another at a steady pace: Young Lin's early morning effort of purchasing cheap bean curd (which results in his being late for work that day; the rush in turn makes him forget to put the bean curd in the fridge so it gets spoiled; such a trifle causes a verbal battle between the couple upon their returning from work late that afternoon, dragging in previous accidents about the broken thermos and the broken vase ... ), the humiliating water-stealing "event", the frequent house-moving related trouble which necessitates the wife's daily long and tiring commuting trips and the resultant job-transfer attempts, the forced courtesy of entertaining peasant guests from Young Lin's hometown, the disruption and anxiety caused by the child's sickness, the difficulty in dealing with the childminder and in finding a good nursery, the discordant neighbourhood relations, the annoying vegetable storage activity each year, the ill-conscience for earning extra money after work, the grudge over his failed attempt to watch a football match, the first attempt at currying favour from others, as well as eating, drinking, sleeping, dreaming ... Similar to the concept of stream of consciousness, these daily trifles described in the story form "a stream of living" 生活流 (cf. Liu, N. 1993).

At first sight, all these may seem too banal and trivial "documentary" elements of common daily life to be worthwhile writing about in literature. As the story unfolds, however, the careful, detailed and precise accounts of these seemingly trifling problems and matters take on greater significance when understood as being the repetitive, daily, ever-going contents and patterns of the lives of millions of average families like the Lins, and become symbolic of the living condition and the human mentality of countless other human beings. Each and every one of these matters and problems is so familiar to the urban Chinese people generally that when they read about these, they can not fail to identify their own experiences with the familiar details in the story. This process of recognition can be compared to the phenomenon that when something is too close to one's eyes, instead of seeing it more clearly, one tends to overlook it altogether. Now that the familiar living milieu, the realm of thought, the words and deeds of these common people are put down by the author in black and white and subjected to scrutiny, a necessary distance is created and, all of a sudden, the familiar things seem to become strangely new. The ubiquitous yet unnoticed condition of human existence and the demoralizing forces in life, at home and outside, appear looming and shocking.

The author's keen eye for domestic problems and social ironies is remarkable. Through focused description, he shows how the young couple's youth, ideals, career expectations---all the lofty, noble and beautiful things they once cherished in life---are bit by bit twisted and eroded by life's monotony and the trifles, slowly yet persistently. The story visualizes the

whole process of how a noble character, who is at first honest and high-minded, stooping neither to flattery nor deceit, degenerates into a petty one under the pressure of life. Towards the end of the story, Young Lin, whose rough edges are smoothed away by time and life, becomes mediocre and unambitious, weighed down and immersed in the trifling yet unavoidable concrete problems closely associated with everyday living.

Besides one's home, the story reveals that the workplace too can be a hotbed of stress and dissatisfaction. The young couple's unhappiness at work is at first mainly attributed to their inexperience in "handling the various relationships" when newly assigned to their jobs, and then to the bad consequences that linger on. As the author writes, although their mistakes are later realized and corrected, small clashes still seem unavoidable. Although supposedly they work eight hours a day, actually much more time and energy are spent on it if taking into consideration the commuting time, the preparation time, the unwinding time afterwards, and the time away from work that they spend thinking about it.

Neither family duties nor workplace problems are matters easy to handle but the most profound cause of dissatisfaction and perplexity is perhaps the fact that the lives of Young Lin and the like are bustling and humdrum yet devoid of the sort of meaning the human soul seeks. Especially for intellectuals, spiritual well-being is as important as material enjoyment. Through the description of Young Lin's dream about skin cells, chicken feathers, and ants, the story allows a feeling of depression, loss and helplessness to creep into the reader's heart, which is in sharp contrast to its description at a point of time when the Lins' life takes a turn for the better in material terms. In an environment overly littered with countless trifles, life is a heavy load to carry along; but because these trifles are all "chicken feathers," at the same time life becomes too light to bear.

### ***The real world of guanxi and power***

Young Lin in *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, although a university graduate too, appears to be less capable, at least less successful, in comparison with the character Zhuang Jianfei in *Apart from Love*, which has been discussed in detail in the previous chapter. Is this really the case? I would contend not. The reader is told that Lin is from the countryside while Zhuang is the son of a senior intellectual family in a big city. For Zhuang, going to university must have been a matter of course, but for Lin, it must have been achieved through extreme difficulties. In another well-known story *Pagoda Depot*, Liu Zhenyun writes about the hard financial situation and inferior educational condition the countryside candidates had to cope with. The same cut-off admission scores did not mean equal opportunity to all. Those who

were successful as rural candidates should be considered smarter and more competent than their urban peers. So, their achievement difference results from the difference that is related to the extent and quality of their network of connections 关系网. Zhuang Jianfei, though on estranged terms with his parents, still benefits greatly from his superior family background. By contrast, Young Lin has nothing close to such privilege; instead, he has to bear all sorts of his background-related burdens and to return previous “debts of gratitude” to people from his hometown. *Guanxi* and the related power of influence rather than true ability often play a decisive role in the outcome of many affairs. At the bottom of widely practiced back-doorism, favouritism, nepotism, and corruption is a traditional civil service system. The resulting struggle for position-related power is the major theme in quite a few of Liu Zhenyun’s other novellas and novels as well as in this story, for example, *The Corridors of Power*, *The Officials*, *The Unit*, *Headmen* and *Past Sways in my Hometown*. In these works, officials at different levels in rural as well as in urban settings use all means available to obtain or maintain power and to move up the power ladder, in certain cases fighting over decades for generations, culminating in murders and blood-baths, and often bringing disaster to innocent people as well as the feuding parties and their cannon fodder. The author must be experiencing deep sadness and disappointment over human folly, as he says to the victimized villagers taking sides in a feudal fight, through the mouth of a character: “They are fighting for the post of Village Headman, but what is the point of your getting involved in all that!” (Liu 1991c: 79; my translation)

It is officially declared that all party members and government cadres (i.e. officials) are “servants of the people”. However, most of the officials in Liu Zhenyun’s stories struggle for just the positions with the attached power and personal gains that power can bring about. In other words, government posts mean endowed power, and power spells more gains to them. The advantages of higher rank include much more than higher salaries: greater power to influence others’ lives, extra financial benefits, access to more information, superior housing, better medical care, and all sorts of privileges including the use of a chauffeur-driven car. With so much at stake, it is hardly surprising that people are generally grade-conscious. As we can read, even Young Lin, a low-ranking official in *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, is later easily able to help the water-meter-reader’s friends circumvent the red tape and speed up the processing procedure of their application after receiving a gift--a typical “back-door” pull for the benefit of both parties.

From this novella and others by Liu Zhenyun, it is clear that endless, troublesome, humdrum trivialities in everyday life and amoral, cunning, even ruthless struggles for power at the

workplace are the two major obstacles blocking the way of almost everyone in their pursuit to enjoy life. Young Lin is bursting with ambition when he newly graduates from university. At first he does not care a hoot about *guanxi* or promotion at his work unit, but is now facing a deeply ingrained reality different from his idealized, imagined world, and starts to make compromises and special efforts to “get on.” Although still a bottle of emotions, he becomes cynically contented and shrewdly idle. It raises concerns over the more fundamental issues concerning one’s position in and attitude to life, which especially concern intellectuals like the Lins and the author himself.

### *M mentality and attitudes of the Chinese intellectuals*

Intellectuals form a special social stratum in human society. In China, their origin can be traced back to as early as the Confucian era some two and a half thousand years ago. Confucian intellectuals normally choose to realize their social ideals through pursuing an official career by intervening and participating in social life in an active, intense and persistent way. This attitude to life is called “*rushi*” 入世 (involve in worldly affairs) in Chinese. By contrast, Daoist followers passively accept reality. They escape into a utopian land of peace and happiness away from the turmoil of the real world. Among the varied and countless reasons for doing so, the most often observed reasons are one’s tiredness of or failure in the harsh competition in life. This attitude to life is called “*chushi*” 出世 (keep aloof from worldly affairs) in Chinese.

The Confucian hero is a person who upholds his moral integrity regardless of the consequences for his career, his immediate reputation, or even his personal safety. In Chinese history there has been no lack of loyal court officials who lost their lives due to their sovereigns’ readily believing in treacherous officials’ calumny, such as the famous Song Dynasty generals Yang Jiye 杨继业 (?-986) and Yue Fei 岳飞 (1103-1142). There are also numerous examples of upright men who retired from political posts and went to live in seclusion rather than compromise their moral beliefs, such as the East Jin Dynasty man of letters Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 (365-427) and the Tang poet Li Bai 李白 (701-762). Daoism is a philosophy that counteracts the positivism of Confucius. It is believed (see Hsu, K. 1980) that the germination and development of Daoism was made possible by the arid nature of the Confucian doctrines and its neglect of the after life. As Worden and others (1988) put it, Confucianism is a philosophy of control, Daoism is a religion of consolation, offering a retreat and an alternative to the care-ridden Confucianist way of life, at the same time saving the low and the common from boredom and despair.

Though assigned to work as low-rank clerks in an administrative capacity in government organizations, Young Lin and his wife are white-collar workers, belonging to the middle class on the social ladder. People who have a tertiary education are generally considered intellectuals in China. Only a very small percentage of the population has the opportunity to receive higher education and enjoy this prestige. As Xu Gang (1995) reports, the university admission rate in 1984 was just 0.138% in the population as compared with the world average 1.26%. The novella tells the reader that the protagonist Young Lin and his wife Little Li start as Confucian believers and take a shift to Daoism after certain setbacks. The following lines can be read as a description of their change of attitude toward life:

Young Lin and his wife were both university students before, much devoted to their work. They had exerted themselves, worked by lamplight, and had noble ambitions at that time. They never thought highly of their bosses at work, or the organizations of different sizes. It was beyond their imagination that just several years later, they would have so quickly drowned in stereotyped crowds just like everyone else. All you can do is to buy bean curd, go to work and get back, eat, sleep, do the washing, see to the childminder and attend to your child. In the evening, you do not even want to touch a book. All those grand plans and great aspirations! Those careers and ideals! What a load of rubbish! That is only for the young and naive to dream about. Isn't everybody else drifting along aimlessly too? Yet they get through their days all the same, don't they? Even if you cherish great expectations and lofty ideals, so what?

Fixed in a certain position in a social matrix, he is unable to do much to change his living pattern or condition, but revolves in the wheel of life, restricted and remoulded by it. After some initial setbacks after graduation from University, the once ambitious Young Lin in the story confesses his new understanding of life:

'Where are the historical figures with great accomplishments? In deserted graves hidden under the thick growth of grass!' By the end of one's life, who will still be alive to know you and appraise you? So Young Lin is perfectly content sometimes.

His attitude toward life is actually a mixture of active involvement in life and passive acceptance, even appreciation, of whatever comes his way. Young Lin desires an easier life and a certain amount of upward social mobility, but becomes bogged down in the moment-by-moment activities of life, at times even feeling a sense of helplessness and loss. However, he never lets his embarrassment, perplexity, and helplessness hinder him from trying various approaches to overcome his practical problems. He seeks spiritual consolation and psychological balance by taking on a conformist attitude, and he sometimes even feels "perfectly content". The story is not advocating a "what will be will be" attitude, a pessimistic and passive resignation to life, but rather a practical, mid-way and wise attitude in response to difficulties, one that is based on the principle of maintaining health, happiness, and peace. It is considered greater wisdom by many Chinese to show restraint and

contentment than any lesser concept of success. As Joseph Hsu (1980) pertinently remarks when discussing the Chinese character:

All Chinese are Confucianists when successful, and Daoists when they are failures. The Confucianist in them builds and strives, while the Daoist in them watches and smiles. The Chinese are by nature greater Daoists than they are by culture Confucianists.

Young Lin's subconscious concern about the ultimate meaning of life and humankind's position in the universe is, however, by no means peculiar to Chinese intellectuals alone. When overwhelmed by earthly frustration or enjoyment, Young Lin, as a sensitive intellectual, may have experienced a vague sense of eternity and almightyess of a super-being over his life, as he does subconsciously (in the dream):

He falls into a deep sleep and has a dream. He is sleeping on a layer of skin cells shed by many other people and covered with a heap of chicken feathers. These are soft and comforting and, in his happiness, he feels one year seems to pass as one day. Then he sees a huge crowd of people slowly drifting forward. Then they all turn into ants lining up to beg for rain.

The detail about the huge crowd of people and the begging ants is revealing and deeply thought-provoking. It makes the reader think beyond life's drift, and well into the future.

However, once he wakes up, once life is back to normal, Young Lin is quite happy to remain on earth and find satisfaction in the little things of life. As the author reveals later (see Yu, Y. 2001), the initial title of the story was *A Ray of Sunshine* 阳光一缕, written when he found that ray of sunshine in life. The story ends with a thud not a bang. Young Lin, just as his teacher did, would flow for a fleeting moment in the tide of history and then ebb away. As a detached observer, the author's critical views can be read between the lines.

# Chapter 6 Families in Society (4): *Hard Porridge* by Wang Meng

## 6.1 Translation 4 Hard Porridge

### Hard Porridge<sup>1</sup>

By Wang Meng

The members of our family were Grandfather, Grandmother, Father, Mother, Uncle, Aunt, me, my wife, my cousin, her husband, and that lovable tall, thin son of mine. Our ages were respectively 88, 84, 63, 64, 61, 57, 40, 40, ... and 16---an ideal ladder-shaped structure<sup>2</sup>. Besides, we had an informal family member, Elder Sister Xu, aged 59. She had been with us as our housekeeper for 40 years. She could not do without us and we could not do without her. Being so indispensable to us, she was more "formal" in the family than any other formal members. Furthermore, she was "Elder Sister" to us all. From Grandfather to my son, we were all equal before her---we all called her Elder Sister Xu---a clear case of all people born equal with natural rights.

We lived together peacefully and united. On all things big and small, such as whether a summer was hotter than usual, whether to drink Longjing tea at eight *yuan* per *liang* or green tea at four *jiao* per *liang*, or which brand of soap to use: White Orchid, Violet or Golden Shield, we unanimously followed Grandfather's words. We did not have any divergence of views, any overflowing rhetoric, or any controversy locked in a stalemate. Maneuvering among differing groupings, open strife, and closed-door conspiracies were unheard of. We even shared the same hairstyle, distinguishing between men's and women's of course.

For several decades, we got up at 6:10 in the morning. Elder Sister Xu would get breakfast ready for us by 6:35 a.m.: toasted slices of steamed-bread, thin rice porridge and pickled rutabaga. At 7:10, each of us would set off to work or to school. Grandfather, though already retired, also left at this time to be on duty at the Neighbourhood Committee. At 12:00 noon, we would all return home. By then Elder

<sup>1</sup> There are numerous kinds of porridge in China. In the author's hometown Hebei, it is normally made of corn flour or broken corn grains; in some other northern areas of China, it is mostly made of millet and/or rice. In these places, corn/rice porridge is served with pickles and they have together become staple food in these people's diet. In Fujian and Guangdong in southern China, people use meat, seafood, preserved eggs, edible birds nest and shark fin, etc. in cooking rice porridge. The most well-known porridge is the rice porridge with all sorts of nuts, beans and dried fruit eaten on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month in the North of China. By contrast, porridge in most western countries is made of oats and served with milk.

<sup>2</sup> This is an allusion to the Government's effort of securing younger successors on a diminishing range of age to take over major work or key posts from retiring predecessors in the 1980s. The ideal structure was believed to be like a ladder, with people of different seniority in age forming its rungs in an evenly balanced way.

Sister Xu would have ready for us noodles served with fried bean sauce. After a short rest, at 1:30 p.m., we respectively went to work or school again except Grandfather, whose nap would last till 3:30. Then he would get up, wash his face and brush his teeth once more, and sit in his deck chair to read newspapers with a cup of tea. At about 5:00 p.m., Grandfather, Grandmother and Elder Sister Xu would meet to discuss the menu for supper. The discussion was carried out by the three of them with great zest each day, and the conclusions were more or less the same: for this dinner let us have rice. As for dishes, make one with meat or fish, one with both meat and vegetables and two with vegetables only. As for the soup, we can spare it tonight, or let us have soup this evening. After the discussion, Elder Sister Xu would march to the kitchen and, after 30 minutes or so of crackling and spluttering, she would invariably come out and consult Grandfather and Grandmother again, "Look how muddle-headed I am. I've forgotten to ask you this: for the dish with both meat and vegetables, should the meat be sliced or shredded?" Oh, that. That was indeed an important point. Grandfather and Grandmother would cast a sidelong glance and wink at each other, saying: "Let's have sliced meat." or "Let's have shredded meat." And their decision would be faithfully carried out.

Everyone in the family was satisfied with this life, Grandfather first and foremost so. He had gone through many sufferings in his youth and would often say to us: "Being able to fill one's belly at each meal, having unpatched clothes to put on and a well-furnished home, keeping all generations of one's family together, and enjoying good health---those are the things beyond the dream of even landlords and bosses in the old days. You mustn't be too presumptuous. What do you know of the pangs of hunger?" Father, Mother, Uncle and his wife would all declare that they hadn't forgotten what hunger pangs feel like. "When hungry," they said, "your abdominal cavity and thoracic cavity keep twitching, the head keeps bending down, and the calves become heavy and stiff." They added that extreme hunger felt the same as overeating---you wanted to throw up. Our family, headed by Grandfather and Grandmother, were all earnest practitioners of the philosophy that happiness lies in contentedness, and were faithful upholders of the existing system.

But lately, things had suddenly changed direction. New modes and trends kept flooding in. Just within a few years, a colour television set, a refrigerator, and a washing machine unexpectedly made their way into our home; from time to time English words sprang from my son's lips. Grandfather, being a rather enlightened and opened-minded person, assimilated new terms and new concepts from newspapers after the nap every afternoon, and from broadcasts and TV programs after dinner every evening. He often consulted with us: "Is there anything to be reformed or improved on our life in our home?"

We all said no, especially Elder Sister Xu, who wished that this kind of life would continue generation after generation, so that each day was the same, each year was the same, down the generations, forever the same. My son came up with a proposal. Before putting it forward, he blinked his eyes for quite a while as if an insect had got inside. His proposal was that we buy a cassette recorder, which was readily accepted and approved by Grandfather. Therefore, a Red Lantern brand stereo-cassette recorder joined the family belongings. At first, it brought great pleasure to the family. One said something into it; another sang a snatch from a Beijing opera; he imitated the mewing of a

cat; and she read a passage from a newspaper. All those were recorded and replayed. The speaker or the singer would listen appreciatively, shout for joy and clap hands as the others did, thinking that the tape-recorder was truly a good invention; and that it was a real pity Grandfather's grandfather and great-grandfather had not got the chance to know of such a device as a cassette recorder.

After the first two days, however, the fever diminished. The cassette tapes they bought did not sound as nice as those on radio or TV, so the recorder was put aside to gather dust. Everyone realized that new technology and novel devices indeed had limitations. Nothing could compare with harmony and order within the family or the durability of traditional things. After all, the old chatterbox<sup>3</sup> was better!

That year, a decree was announced that the long siesta was to be cancelled and replaced by a forty-minute to one-hour break. It caused a spell of disturbance in our family. At first it was said that free lunch would be provided by each work unit, which made us both pleased and worried. We were pleased with the free meal but worried about the adaptation required. Sure enough, only a couple of days later, all members started to complain about having excessive *huo*<sup>4</sup>, with the symptom of constipation. Before long, it was announced that free lunch was cancelled. What was going on? What were we to do? Grandfather had always instructed us to take the lead in following the path shown by the government, so we all bought lunch boxes, prepared lunches and took them along to work. It caused an upheaval at home for quite a while, as a result of which Elder Sister Xu suffered from insomnia, toothache, styes, and arrhythmia. Soon after, some work units extended the noon break of their own accord while others, though they did not announce an extension, surreptitiously delayed the starting time of the afternoon work session but kept the earlier knock-off time. Noodles served with fried bean sauce returned to our dinner table for lunch. Elder Sister Xu no longer had swelling in the eyes, her teeth returned to their unaffected state, her sleep started and ended just on time, and her heart again beat regularly at 70 to 80 times a minute.

Yet fresh winds were gaining force and new waves kept surging onward. All things under heaven find their balance through motion; the natural tendency is constant transition. In a time when all our fellow creatures left and right were reviewing the past years with sorrow and resentment, and when all quarters high and low were mapping out plans for reformation and modernization, even relatives and friends who used to regard us as examples, models and a standard family now started urging us to move with the times and make some changes. It seemed that new models of family life had emerged in Guangzhou or in Hong Kong or even in the United States. Therefore, Grandfather initiated a proposal that we change from a monarchy to a cabinet system. He would nominate from among the formal members; the plenary session of the family congress (including Elder Sister Xu, a non-voting delegate but with the right to speak) would approve the nomination; and by turns the formal members thus

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<sup>3</sup> The meaning of the word in the original text “*huaxiaizi*” 话匣子 is ambiguous as it can refer to a gramophone, a radio, or a talkative person.

<sup>4</sup> “*Huo*” 火 (literally “fire”), is used here to refer to the element of internal heat in a human body. According to traditional Chinese medicine, it is one of the six causes of diseases. When a person is suffering from excessive internal heat, he will have such symptoms as constipation, conjunctivitis and inflammation of the nasal and oral cavities.

selected would take charge. Except for Elder Sister Xu, the proposal was unanimously carried. And Father was the first to be entrusted with the responsibility of government. Also carried in the plenary was the resolution that Father should conduct a reform on our family diet.

For the greater part of his life so far, Father had been taking ready-made meals and above-assigned jobs in the family. Now put in charge of the great cause of family meals, he was embarrassed and overwhelmed. When confronted with such serious matters as what kind of tealeaves to buy, whether to make soup or not, or whether to have sliced or shredded meat for a dish, he would invariably go and ask Grandfather. No matter what he said or did, he would, out of habit, do it under Grandfather's authority. "Grandfather said that mosquito-repellent incense of the Dalmatian Chrysanthemum brand should be bought"; "Grandfather said that soup can be spared for this evening"; "Grandfather said that dish-washing liquid will no longer be used as the chemical stuff is probably poisonous. Warm water plus soda is better---much cleaner, and cheaper too."

Trouble followed immediately. Elder Sister Xu would consult Father when matters arose. Father would not take responsibility for a decision and would go and consult Grandfather; after that, he would convey to Elder Sister Xu what Grandfather had said to him, always repeating "Grandfather said such and such." So far as Elder Sister Xu was concerned, she might as well go directly to Grandfather for instructions, but was afraid that if she did so, Father would be offended and Grandfather bothered. Grandfather did not want to be further bothered with trifles. He had told Father on several occasions, "Make your own decision. Don't come to me again with these matters." Therefore, Father went back to Elder Sister Xu with "the old man said that I'm to decide. He said that I shouldn't go and ask him about these things any more."

Uncle and his wife exchanged some whispered comments. What was said was unknown. Probably they were dissatisfied with Father's ineptness and suspected that he was using Grandfather's name to "fabricate the edict of the Emperor," as the saying goes; possibly they were also unhappy that Grandfather did not completely give up the reins of government and annoyed at Elder Sister Xu's babbling; or perhaps they felt regret about the cabinet system being ever passed and Father being approved as the person-in-charge.

Grandfather sensed something was going on and made a real effort to straighten Father out, pointing out that it was the general tendency to transfer power to lower levels. Father had no choice but to promise that he would not invoke duties in Grandfather's name in future dealings. After getting his mandate, Father in turn transferred power to a lower level as well, making it clear that Elder Sister Xu was to decide whether a soup should be served and meat be sliced or shredded.

Elder Sister Xu, however, would not be empowered and declined the offer with tears, "I'm not in a position to make decisions on such matters." So overwhelmed by the burden of the responsibility, she left a meal untouched. The whole family encouraged her: "You've been doing those things for so long in our family. Power should go with office. You just take charge; we are all behind you. Buy whatever you want to, cook whatever you'd like to, and we'll eat whatever you put before us. We trust you!"

At last, Elder Sister Xu smiled through her tears and thanked the family members for giving her this honour. For a while, things went on as before yet people in fact were becoming more and more

fastidious. Knowing that the meals were now handled by Elder Sister Xu alone, with nobody investing her with protection as an authority, the *subconscious* disrespect grew into *superconscious* complaints and my son began disseminating sarcastic remarks among us, followed first by my cousin and her husband, and then by my wife and myself. “Our menu has been like this for 40 years so that it can almost pass as a cultural relic.” “It is a clear indication of clinging to accustomed practices, following the beaten track, staying in a stagnant and rigid way of thinking without any desire to forge ahead.” “Ours is the model of the kind of life far behind the times!” “Elder Sister Xu has too great limitations and too low a cultural quality! She’s alright as a person, it’s true, but hopelessly backward! Fancy that now in the 1980s our living standard must adapt to her level.”

Elder Sister Xu had no idea what was going on around her and showed signs of complacency. She started to reform our meals according to her own ideas. As a first step she changed two full dishes of pickles for breakfast to two half-dishes; then from two half-dishes with sesame oil to ones without any; the bean sauce to go with our noodles at lunch, which was used to be stir-fried with pork cubes, was now changed to plain bean sauce cooked in water; a soup served every other day on average became a soup every seven days and, what’s more, it was altered from egg drop soup to “high soup”<sup>5</sup>—boiled water with soy sauce and chopped spring onions. With the money thus saved, she went and bought some Ginseng Royal Jelly as a gift for Grandfather. The fact that she tightened our belts to curry favours with Grandfather forced us to keep our resentment to ourselves. More detestable was her practice, as reported by my son, that once the thin soup was cooked, she would first of all ladle out for herself a bowl with the largest number of, the freshest, and the most fragrant spring onions before the family was served. On another occasion, she was observed eating seeds<sup>6</sup> in the kitchen while cutting vegetables. My son concluded that she must have taken graft from public funds for the meals. “Power means corruption. One percent of power is one percent of corruption. A hundred percent of power is a hundred percent of corruption,” he publicized his new concept plausibly and at length.

Family members ranking below Father did not take sides. Encouraged by this tacit approval, my son launched a fierce attack on Elder Sister Xu while she was once more caught having the first bowl of soup. “Enough of your low standard meals! And yet you get most of the spring onions before anyone else! I’ll take charge from tomorrow on. I’ll let the whole family enjoy a modern life!”

Although Elder Sister Xu made a tearful scene, nobody said much. It might not be a bad idea to let my son have a try. He was young with vigour, full of ideas, and his talent was showing itself. It conformed to the law that the young grow up to be useful. Of course all of us, including me, soothed Elder Sister Xu in many ways: “You have cooked for us for 40 years. Your achievements are the main aspect. No one can deny that!”

<sup>5</sup> “*Gaotang*” 高汤 (literally “high soup”) refers to either a kind of thin soup or soup-stock often used in Chinese cuisine. Here the word in quotation marks is meant to be an irony, i.e. to highlight the low quality of Elder Sister Xu’s soup.

<sup>6</sup> “*Guazi*”瓜子 (literally “melon seeds”), when used as a category word in northern China, can include sunflower seeds as well as pumpkin seeds or water-melon seeds (usually roasted with shells), which are often eaten as a treat, similar to what pistachio nuts are in the West.

My son elaborated on his theory excitedly and indignantly. “The diet in our family has consistently been the same for 40 years without any new content in it. What’s more, it has a fundamental defect---it contains too many carbohydrates without sufficient protein. Lack of protein affects our normal growth and hampers the regeneration process and the vitality of our leucocyte antibodies. This accounts for the frail health and low quality of our populace. In developed countries, the per capita protein intake is seven times as much and animal protein 14 times as much as that in our country. If it goes on like this, we will not be able to match foreigners in terms of body height, build, strength, or energy. They sleep once a day for four or five hours, six hours at the most, yet see how they vigorous carry on from morning till night, while we are listless the whole day long even with an additional nap in the early afternoon. You might say, how could we compare with developed countries? All right then, let’s take our northern minorities as examples. The diet we Han people follow is not as good even as theirs---don’t tell me they are ahead of us in terms of their economic development! Our intake of protein is far lower than that of the Mongols, the Uighurs, the Kazaks, and the Koreans of the north or the Tibetans of the southwest. How can we allow such a poor composition of our meals to remain unchanged? Take our breakfast for instance. It’s composed of steamed-bread slices and thin porridge to go with pickles. Good Heavens! Is this kind of breakfast fit for a family with upper-middle income in a major city of China in the modern times of the 1980s? How shockingly primitive! Rice porridge and pickles are a symbol of the sickman of East Asia, a form of slow genocide, an indication of ignorance, a disgrace to us descendants of the emperors Yan and Huang, the root reason for the decline of Chinese civilization, a sign of waning Yellow River culture. If we hadn’t been taking porridge and pickles but bread with butter instead, could Britain have won the Opium War that broke out in 1840? Had Empress Dowager Cixi needed to escape to Chengde<sup>7</sup> during the invasion of the Eight-Power Allied Forces in 1900? Should the Japanese troops in the Northeast have dared to incite the September 18th Incident in 1931? Or should those Japanese devils have dared to launch the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937? If those troops had attacked China only to find that all Chinese had butter in their mouths, would their regiments have not collapsed in fright? If in 1949 our leadership had made a timely decision to eliminate porridge and pickles throughout the country and let the whole nation eat bread and butter, ham, sausages, eggs, yoghurt, cheese, jam, honey and chocolate, our national strength, science and technology, arts, sports, housing, education and per capita possession of cars would have all come up to the forefront of the world long before, wouldn’t they? In my final analysis, porridge plus pickles is the source of our nation’s adversity, the reason for the over-stability of the feudal society that is badly lacking in development or progress. Let’s completely wipe out porridge and pickles! If we don’t, there is no hope for China!”

The speaker became worked-up and the audience was visibly moved. I felt surprised, pleased, and worried. I was pleasantly surprised that without my realizing it, my son had not only grown out of slit pants and no longer needed me to wipe his bottom clean, but had also enriched his mind so massively, accumulated so much new learning, raised such incisive questions, and grasped such a crucial issue. It’s

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<sup>7</sup> Chengde is a city in Hebei Province, China, where a Royal Summer Palace for the Qing Emperors was located.

true that were Nature sentient, she too would pass from youth to age, but Man's world is mutable, sons surpass their fathers!<sup>8</sup> Nourished on porridge and pickles, my son harboured visions of butter and ham. He could pour forth the sweeping winds of modernization in all quarters high and low, or hold in view everything within the four-dimensional space in the universe. The youth are indeed to be respected; the world will eventually belong to them<sup>9</sup>.

But I was also worried. I feared the way the young boy had thoroughly refuted the age-old abuse and current malpractice by a single attack, with the mere chattering of his lips. He reminded me of Zhao Kuo<sup>10</sup> the strategist fighting on paper and Ma Su<sup>11</sup> the tragic defender of "Jieting," who were grandiose but impractical. Empty talk would bungle family matters and come to nothing in the end. My half a century of experience had taught me that whenever a major, complex problem was neatly dissected and laid out in black and white, that whoever spoke of taking the head of a mighty force's commander like taking something out of his own pocket---as easy as turning his hand over, or even without bothering about turning his hand over---this person, after his initial euphoria had died down, would become impotent sooner or later. With this one and only son to carry on the family line, Heaven forbid that from happening to him.

Just as I anticipated, my cousin gave a snort through her nostrils and mumbled: "It's certainly easy to talk! If we had so much bread and butter, our modernization should have been realized long before!"

"What!" My son, still in a stimulated state, shot back. "Good heavens! In the 1960s N. Khrushchev<sup>12</sup> advocated his stewed-beef-with-potatoes brand of communism; now in the 80s Aunt is after a bread-plus-butter version of modernization! What a striking likeness! Modernization means automat-ization of industry, collectiv-ization of agriculture advanc-ization of science, comprehensiv-ization of national defence, random-ization of thought, obscur-ization of expressions, abnormal-ization of the arts, boundless-ization of controversy, idl-ization of academics, impenetrabil-ization of concepts, and hard qigong-ization or supernatural-ization of humans. There is a sea of -izations, and butter is the boat; there is no ready-made road leading to the garden of happiness and bread is the bridge<sup>13</sup>! Of course, bread and butter will not be showered down upon us from the sky like bombs from an imaginary enemy. This I know. I'm not mentally deficient, how can I fail to have such common sense?

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<sup>8</sup> This alludes to two lines of a well-known *lù shi* poem 律诗 composed by the late Chairman Mao Zedong in 1949, "The People's Liberation Army Captures Nanjing": "Were Nature sentient, she too would pass from youth to age, but Man's world is mutable, seas become mulberry fields" 天若有情天亦老，人间正道是沧桑.

<sup>9</sup> This is an allusion to a quotation from the little red book of Mao popular during the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>10</sup> Zhao Kuo was a "scholar general" who lived in the Warring States Period (475-221 B. C.). His war strategies were only good on paper. The Chinese set phrase "zhishang tanbing" (to fight only on paper) is often used to describe somebody who is good at theoretic talking but out of contact with reality, therefore unable to solve any practical problems.

<sup>11</sup> Ma Su is a character in one of the four famous classical Chinese novels, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. He once volunteered his service in guarding Jieting, a strategically crucial place in a battle. He guaranteed success with his head as a bet but ended up with failure and was duly executed by Counsellor Zhuge Liang of the State of West Shu.

<sup>12</sup> Nikita Khrushchev was First Secretary of the former Communist Party of the Soviet Union, nominated in 1953.

<sup>13</sup> This is a distortion of an old Chinese saying, "Diligence is the path leading through a mountain of books; hard work is the boat travelling on the sea of learning" 书山有路勤为径，学海无涯苦作舟.

Nevertheless, we must raise questions and set goals. A nation without goals is just like a person without a head. Has anyone heard of something like that!"

"All right, all right," interjected Grandfather, "the two of you are moving in the same direction. No more quarrels." So both shut up.

My son roused himself into vigorous efforts to conduct a reform on our diet. The next morning we had on the table bread with butter, partly cooked omelettes, coffee and milk. Elder Sister Xu and Grandmother simply could not take coffee with milk, so Uncle suggested that they fry some chopped spring onions in a wok, then add Chinese prickly ash, cassia bark, aniseed, ginger skin, pepper, laver, and dried chilli, heat them till they started to emit smoke, put in a dash of Guangdong shrimp soy sauce, and then mix the stuff with coffee and milk to cover the foreign smell. I tried a mouthful; it was much easier to gulp down. I also intended to add some to mine but, seeing the murderous glare of my son, I gave up and for his sake sacrificed my appetite by forcing myself to swallow the smelly mess. Alas, these little Chinese emperors with the "four-two-one syndrome."<sup>14</sup> What are they leading our country into?

After three days, the whole family was violently affected---Elder Sister Xu contracted acute diarrhoea, was hospitalized, and her case was suspected to have been complicated by bowel and stomach cancer. Grandmother was taken ill by nervous cirrhosis of the liver, which wasn't of type A nor of type B. Grandfather suffered from constipation after having the Western-style meals. His two dutiful sons, Father and Uncle, waited on him by turns. They tried to break the constipation by using a bamboo chopstick, but to little effect. My cousin had intestinal obstruction and abdominal angina and underwent an urgent surgical operation. My cousin's husband endured toothache and festering at the corners of his mouth. My wife felt sick after each meal. After having vomited clean the Western-style food, she would sneak away to her parents' home for porridge and pickles, keeping it a secret from our son. More terrible than all of those was the fact that the money for household expenses for a month had been spent within three days. My son claimed that without more funds, it would be impossible for him to provide even porridge and pickles. When things came to this critical point, it was necessary for me to act in my proper capacity as his father. I went to talk to Father and Uncle and moved that we immediately remove my son from his present post and power in order to put our family life back to normal!

Father and Uncle went to Grandfather, but Grandfather turned to Elder Sister Xu. As Elder Sister Xu was still in the hospital, Grandfather visited her there. She declared that she would not cook any more meals for us after being discharged from hospital. If people thought she was of no more use, they could throw her out. Grandfather could only declare again and again where he stood---he did not have such an intention at all. He affirmed anew his life principle: in life, relationship and righteousness were more important than anything else. Elder Sister Xu had both of these ties with us and they made her closer to our family than Grandfather's close paternal relations or his own flesh and blood. One day

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<sup>14</sup> This refers to the mal-behaviour of the "only-children" in the Chinese urban families such as being spoiled, wilful, self-centred. In such a family, the child (one) is usually doted on by parents (two) and grand-parents on both the paternal and maternal sides (four), thus the expression "four-two-one syndrome."

Elder Sister Xu would stay with us, one day we would share comforts and hardships with her. Even if only one steamed-bun was left at home, one piece was to be secured for Elder Sister Xu; even if there was only one bowl of cold water, Elder Sister Xu would certainly have three spoonfuls of it. She would share the fortune if the family made any; were the family to become poverty-stricken, proper arrangements would still be made for her. How could we kick her out after having made good use of her! Grandfather presented his view vehemently and excitedly with tears flowing turbulently, while Elder Sister Xu took in every word and was warmly and deeply moved to tears too. At last, the medical staff decided that their meeting was harmful for the patient's recovery and persuaded Grandfather to take his leave.

On returning home, Grandfather called a family plenary session, at which he declared that though he was getting on in years, he did not mind what or how he ate; nor did he care about any other related matters; still less did he have the intention of arrogating all power to himself. "Since you insisted that I do something about the situation," he said, "I could only go and ask Elder Sister Xu. But she is bitterly disappointed with your complaints and her stomach is suffering from symptoms caused by Great-grandson's Western-style breakfast, so there is no way for me to continue handling the matter. Eat whatever you like." And he added: "As for me, I might as well die if I don't have anything to eat."

At this, we looked at each other in blank dismay and then rushed in succession to make clear what we thought. We all assured Grandfather that he had done a wonderful job of it. With Grandfather in charge, for half a century, the whole family had been safe and sound, and the four generations had lived in harmony. My cousin said she was going to cook for Grandfather every day from that day on. That was to say she, her husband, Grandfather, Grandmother, and Elder Sister Xu would form a group. Father declared that he would like to form a group with Mother but didn't want to include my wife and me for we had a new-trend son, who could not possibly eat the same food with them. I in turn declared that I would be in a group with my wife only. Then Uncle and his wife formed another group. So, my son was left alone to eat on his own. My cousin seemed to be pleased with this state of affairs and remarked: "Might as well eat separately, more like a modern life style. Having meals with four generations all together under one roof is like something in the era of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Besides, it's too crowded with too many people eating around one dinner table. Liver disease can be easily spread among us that way too!" She then asked the rhetorical questions: "Are there such big families in the United States? Are they so capable of bridging their generation gaps that they eat together as we do?" An expression of sadness seemed to flash across Grandfather's face.

We had separate meals for just two days and could not go on any longer. Shortly after 11:00 a.m., my cousin's group turned on the gas stove to cook their meal. With Grandfather's seniority and power to back them up, other groups had to wait with patience. Father's group was the next to cook and still next was Uncle's turn. When I could get access to the stove, it was already 2:00 p.m., time to go back to work, so I had to leave before I could even start cooking. At dinnertime, the same waiting cycle repeated itself. We discussed, deliberated and expounded the possibility of setting up a separate stove for each group. More gas tanks were out of the question. To obtain the one for the whole family, we had asked 14 times for favour from the people responsible, invited people to dinner seven times, given

away as gifts two painted scrolls, five cartons of cigarettes, and eight bottles of alcohol. The whole process had dragged on for 13 months and 13 days during which time, you could say, we had put as much energy into it as new-born babies in sucking, or old men in shitting. Buying honeycomb briquette stoves was also an arduous process. Besides, even if you did get stoves, you would need special certificates to buy honeycomb briquettes. No certificate, no briquettes. And even if you could manage to get them, you wouldn't have the space to place them. If we were to set up four separate stoves in accordance with the modern consciousness, first of all we had to expand the kitchen by 30 square meters. Or better, of course, if we could have four extra kitchens. Or even better if we could set up five individual suites. People's appetite for consumption was indeed like a runaway horse---it could run wild. No wonder newspapers were talking about the consumer craze. The more they talked about it, however, the more intense the craze became. It suddenly dawned on me that unless more buildings were constructed, this twaddle about modern consciousness, renewal of concepts, and protection of privacy was simply a waste of breath!

Before a conclusion was reached on the soft science of separate-stove-feasibility, a whole tank of gas had been used up within nine days. Because of the limited gas supply, policy had been in effect since the beginning of that year that each gas stove was allocated a dozen or so special coupons for a dozen or so tanks of gas per year. A tank had to last for over 25 days to enable the family to have cooked meals and boiled water the whole year. If a tank of gas was consumed in just nine days, the coupons for the whole year would only last for no more than four months. Where could we go to get gas for the remaining eight months? This was not only disrupting the order of our family life but also the national planning!

Everyone was alarmed. Everyone was querulous. Sighs, complaints, gossip and rumours filled the air. Person A said that we would have to eat raw flour paste after the gas was used up; B suggested that the cooking time for each group be limited to 17 minutes; C remarked that to have separate meals at this stage meant the productive relations were transcending the level of development in productive forces; D commented that the more we reformed, the worse things became. It would be better to have Grandfather still in charge and Elder Sister Xu still in executive power. E attacked the U.S., comparing the Americans to a pack of wild animals who had no sense of filial piety, no fraternal duty, no loyalty, and no trustworthiness; it naturally followed that there were no extended families in the U.S. We had our own fine tradition of familial values, why should we follow the Americans? Since none of us dared to bother Grandfather again, we all turned to my cousin's husband as if by prior agreement.

My cousin's husband was the only member of the family who had been abroad. In recent years he had ordered two Western-style suits, bought three ties, studied in the United States for six months, visited Japan for ten days, and toured seven cities in the Federal Republic of Germany. He was experienced, knowledgeable, and had a natural, dignified bearing. He could say "Thank you" and "Excuse me, please" in nine languages. He was considered the true scholar in the family. Coming from outside the clan, he was fully aware of his status in our family and had always behaved with modesty and discretion. He knew all the rules and complied well with them all, and was able to adapt himself to different circumstances. Therefore, he had won our deep respect.

On this occasion, seeing that the whole family had gotten well and truly stuck in an unusual dilemma and we were at our wit's end, seeing our sincerity and eagerness, he spoke from his heart and disclosed his true thoughts.

"As I see it," my cousin's husband began, "the fundamental problem in our family lies in its system. It's a small issue whether we have toasted slices of steamed-bread or not. The real issue is by whom and according to what process the diet is decided on. Feudal patriarchal system? Seniority and position in the family hierarchy? Anarchy? Or arbitrarily eating whatever cooked by whoever that would like to cook? Eating by following a cookbook? Accepting inevitability according to apriorism? The crucial issue is democracy. Lacking in democracy, you can't appreciate whatever you eat no matter how good the meal is. Short of democracy, no one will take a stand for reform and make improvements no matter how bad the meal is. Without democracy, one can eat only in an unenlightened way. Having refined white sugar on his tongue he may not know its sweetness; with bittermelon in his mouth he may not feel its bitterness: for be it sweet or bitter, it has nothing to do with his own liking or choice! Without democracy, the subjectivity of eating will be lost; the eating subject will become passive and numb, be alienated, and be reduced to a manure-producing machine. Without democracy, the eating subject will be thrown into confusion, and everyone will go his own way, taking reckless actions for quick success and short-term benefits at the expense of neighbours. Eventually, the eating subject will become a monster with a stomach but no head! Without democracy, there is no choice; without choice, the self of the eating subject is lost!"

We all listened in awe, nodding in agreement. It was as if we had had an injection of enlightening fluid into our brains.

Encouraged by our reaction, my cousin's husband continued: "To determine by seniority and position might have been a kind of order in a stagnant agricultural society. This kind of order is especially suitable for illiterates and idiots. Even the congenitally retarded can understand and accept this dull, stereotyped and, as I would put it, ossified order. However, this order strangles competition, initiative, creativity, and evolution. But the human race wouldn't have come into being without evolution. Without evolution, we would still be apes. Furthermore, to determine everything by seniority and position suppresses new emerging forces. A person is most energetic before the age of 40, most active in thinking, and most enthusiastic in seeking after what he or she cherishes. Yet, around this age, one is pressed to the bottom rung of the ladder . . . "

My son exclaimed: "Too right!" He was so moved that a few tears trickled down his cheeks.

I signalled him with my hand to stay out of this. After the failure of his Western-style breakfast program, his image in the family was not good. He was viewed as a bit of an adventurer, an idle-talker, someone who was unable to accomplish anything but who was liable to spoil everything, or even a rebel! All the others, including my cousin and her husband, frowned upon my son. He could be more of a hindrance than a help to my cousin's husband by showing too much of his support.

"What you've said is correct. But what ought we do?" I asked.

"Make a stand for democracy!" he answered. "Hold elections! Democratic elections are the crux of the matter, the acupoint, the nostril of the bull where you attach the leash, the central target! Everyone

should run in the election. Let everyone air his view just like in a tender: how much you will charge; what obligations you expect the others to fulfil; what kind of food you are going to provide, and what pay and conditions you expect to be rewarded with. Everything should be open, transparent, standardized, documented, lawful, procedural, scientific, and systematic. The result will depend on the ballot. The minority will obey the majority, which is in itself a new concept, a new spirit, a new order. It helps to resist not only the stifling of creative thinking, but also the anarchy which allows individual impulsiveness . . . ”

Father pondered for quite a while. The wrinkles on his forehead became deeper. At long last, he made a statement of his position: “All right. I’m for it. But we have two obstacles to overcome. One is Grandfather---we don’t know whether he is for or against it---and the other is Elder Sister Xu...”

My cousin cut in: “No problem will come from Grandfather. His concept is constantly renewed. What’s more, for a long time he has been tired of handling the meal arrangements. It is Elder Sister Xu who might be a Problem . . . ”

My son lost patience. He shouted: “Who is Elder Sister Xu anyway? She’s never been a formal member of our family. She has no right to vote or to be voted for.”

“My dear Grandson,” Mother remonstrated. “Do you have to chip in! Elder Sister Xu doesn’t share our family name, she doesn’t belong to our clan and,---what did you say just now? she doesn’t have the right to vote or to be voted for, right?---yet nothing can be done before she is straightened out! I’ve been in this family for the better part of my life, and I know! What do you know?”

My cousin and her husband were also split over this issue and started to argue. Her husband thought that to admit Elder Sister Xu’s special status meant compromizing the principle of democracy. To uphold democracy, her special status could not be admitted. It is a matter unnegotiable and there was no room for compromise on this question of principle and fundamental significance. My cousin deemed that it was indeed easy to just say so but what was the use of empty talk and high-sounding words that had lost contact with reality? To underestimate Elder Sister Xu meant to despise tradition. To despise tradition would cost you your footing in reality. Without a firm footing in reality, any reform project was just an illusion high in the clouds. And a reform project high in the clouds was equivalent to rejecting the reform itself. My cousin was not courteous in speaking to her husband and pointed out bluntly: “Don’t swell with pride just because you’ve been abroad several times and you can speak a bit of several foreign languages. As a matter of fact, you are not as important as Elder Sister Xu in our family!”

On hearing those words, her husband’s face changed colour. After sneering for a minute and a half, he walked out of the room in a huff.

Days later, Uncle spoke up. He pointed out that of the two obstacles, only one actually existed. Although Elder Sister Xu was stubborn, she followed Grandfather closely in everything. If Grandfather was for the ballot, Elder Sister Xu would be for it too. It was not at all necessary to fabricate an acute conflict between the democratic course and Elder Sister Xu; even less so to intensify this fabricated conflict.

Uncle's words were convincing. We all seemed clear about the matter. From the beginning, all our worries had been much ado about nothing. Our conflicting views and such really just depended on our way of viewing them: we could make them appear larger or smaller; we could even decide whether there was to be one or not at all. It is true ability indeed to be able to locate the point of agreement among contradictory views to create a relaxed, harmonious, and trustful atmosphere. We all felt reassured; even my cousin's husband and my son could not help smiling from ear to ear.

We decided that Uncle and Father should represent us to talk Elder Sister Xu over. As Uncle had predicted, she proved to be no obstacle. She was very averse to elections. "What's the purpose of all these flashy rituals!?" she asked. But she added that she had decided, after having safely got out of this last illness, she would not get involved in or stand against anything. "If you'll dine on flies, I'll eat flies; if you'll dine on mosquitoes, I'll eat mosquitoes. Just don't ask me about anything." She did not even care whether she had the right to vote or not. She declared that she would not take part in discussions about any family affairs.

Evidently, Elder Sister Xu had chosen to fade from the stage of history. We decided that my cousin's husband was to conduct the election. The chosen date was approaching, bringing to the household a festive atmosphere. A general house cleaning was done. Windowpanes were wiped. Calligraphy scrolls were hung on the walls. Plastic and silk flowers of the latest design were set out in vases. Democracy brought changes, it was true. The voting day finally arrived. My cousin's husband directed the voting event. He put on his bright grey Western-style suit and black bow tie that he wore while visiting Europe and the U.S. The attire made him look like the conductor of an orchestra. For a beginning, he requested the candidates to make a speech on the topic "How I will run the household."

No one responded. We were all silent, so much so that we could hear flies buzzing in the kitchen.

My cousin's husband was surprised: "What is this? No one is running? Aren't you all full of ideas, opinions and views, every one of you?"

I said: "Cousin-in-law, why don't you make a speech first to set us an example? We are not accustomed to democracy. We feel embarrassed."

My cousin, cut me short: "Don't ask him to speak. What has it to do with him?"

My cousin's husband explained with the bearing of an amiable gentleman: "I'm not running in the election. It was not for my personal gain of power that I suggested we try democracy. If you elect me, you would discredit the idea of democracy! Besides, I'm now applying to study abroad at my own expense. I've been in touch with several tertiary institutions in North America and Oceania. I'll bid you farewell as soon as I have obtained enough U.S. dollars on the black market. If anyone present is willing to help me out a little, it'll be most appreciated. I'm borrowing in RMB now; in the future, I pledge to repay in hard currency. So . . ."

We gazed at each other in speechless despair and felt completely disheartened. It occurred to us all in a flash that by holding an election to run our household we were just looking for trouble. Wasn't it a trap luring us to brag like a quack medicine seller, to appear disrespectful of seniors and hurtful to neighbours? It was a trap; and we would not fall into it. Anyway, how could you manage to please everybody if you were elected? Not enjoying meals ready-made for us but playing with elections---

what could this mean but that we had all taken the wrong medicine? The thought continued to flow: “What is this democratic election for? Without democratic elections, we’ve been eating porridge, pickles and noodles with fried bean sauce for the last several decades and none of us has died of hunger or burst with food; neither have we dieted on bricks and dog’s piss nor sipped noodles into our nostrils or anuses. We are really asking for trouble by going in for democracy, ending up with some of us suffering from diarrhoea and others, starvation. It’s typical of us Chinese: we won’t rest in peace until everyone contracts dropsy.”<sup>15</sup>

However, democracy had to be exercised since we had said we would have it; the election had to be held since it had said we would hold one; we had to carry through the agenda since we had all gathered, including Grandfather. Anyway, who would dare to assert that a democratic election was bound to be no good? We might make the right choice so that we would ever after have meals which were both nourishing and to our taste, treated both the *yin* and the *yang* deficiencies, nourished the blood and enriched vital energy, built up our health without any bad influence on our figures or bearing, were not only nice in colour but also had pleasant smell and delicious taste, enabled us to save money on both food and energy resources, were both hygienic and easy to prepare, generated neither oil fumes nor noise, allowed everyone of us to have a say without forcing anyone to rack his brain, put one person in charge without the danger of autocracy, promised no leftovers yet no food would be wasted, enabled us to eat blood clams without contracting hepatitis, to have fish and prawns without the fishy smell . . . and so on and so forth. If the outcome of a democratic election could be so fantastic, only a God-damned fool would not have a go at it.

Therefore, the voting procedures took place---filling out the ballot papers, casting out votes, supervising the process, and monitoring the counting. Eleven ballots were distributed and eleven were retrieved, validating this balloting. Four of them were blank---no candidate’s name was filled in. A further one read: “Anybody will do,” which was counted as a blank vote, making a total of five. Elder Sister Xu got two votes; Grandfather got three; and my son got one.

What were we to do? Grandfather had the most votes but they did not make up half, not even one third, of all votes. Could he be considered elected? That situation had not been specified beforehand, so we consulted my cousin’s husband. He explained that there were two kinds of “law”: the written and the unwritten. Strictly speaking from the scientific viewpoint, the unwritten law was not binding. Take for example the number of terms of office for the U.S. president. It was not specified in the American Constitution, but in reality, it was law as it had been followed in practice. The basic conception of democracy was the minority obeying the majority. Then what was a majority? Relative majority? Simple majority (i.e. over half of the total)? or absolute majority (i.e. over two thirds of the total)<sup>16</sup>? It

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<sup>15</sup> This is an allusion to the Great Leap Forward campaign mistakenly launched by Mao and his government in 1958. Dropsy was a common symptom suffered by urban and rural Chinese alike throughout China in the following three years.

<sup>16</sup> These explanations are inaccurate. One has a simple majority if he/she gets the most votes among three or more candidates, which may be less than half of all the votes. One has an absolute majority if he/she gets more than half of all the votes.

all depended on points of view as well as tradition. In speaking of our election, since it was our first try out and was held among kith and kin, we could do as we pleased.

My cousin said since Grandfather got the largest number of votes, he should be considered elected. This was not, and definitely could not, be the product of feudal patriarchal thought but modern democratic concept. She further elaborated that in our family, the problem of feudal patriarchal trend as a matter of fact did not exist; still less was it the main danger or main contradiction; what we needed to watch out for were things under the guise of so-called anti-feudalism, namely, anarchism, liberalism, egocentrism, subjectivism, over-consumption-ism, hedonism, the-moon-over-the-U.S.-is-round-er-than-that-over-China-ism, and foreign dogmatism.

My son suddenly got worked up and solemnly declared that the one vote for him was not from himself. As he said that, all eyes around were turned on me as if that vote was from me, as if I had practiced dishonourable favouritism by voting for my own son. I blushed in spite of myself. "Who could think like that?" I asked myself. "How could they have thought like that? Don't they know that I in fact didn't vote for my son and even if I did vote for my son it should not be regarded as dishonourable favouritism because in not voting for my son I could only have voted for my father my mother my uncle my wife my cousin and so on and according to the currently fashionable Freudian theories would my cousin necessarily be more estranged from me than my son is who might even have an Oedipus Complex and intends to kill me and marry my wife have they thought of that? How come that they start to suspect me the moment my son opens his mouth?"

My son then began yelling that the one vote he had got showed that the spirit of the people he represented was still alive and the live cinders would ultimately become raging flames. He said that he was concerned with our family meal reform purely out of his selfless passion of contributing, out of his respect for the humanist tradition, and out of a universal love for each and every human being. At the word "love," large beady tears oozed from the corners of his eyes. He accused our family of lacking in love though being in good order. And, as a marriage without love was immoral, he said, so was order without love. He revealed that long ago he had had the opportunity to break free from the trammels of our diet system at home and to go his own way by changing his diet into snails, cheese, asparagus, tuna, lobsters, veal, Kentucky Fried Chicken, sandwiches, McDonalds burgers, apple pies, cassia bark flavoured ice cream, and pudding. He said he loved his aunt (i.e. my cousin) very much, but he found her views unacceptable although those views sounded nice to the ears.

At this point Uncle interposed. (Note that he "interposed," not "interrupted." To interrupt is rude but to interpose means intimacy, wisdom, a spirit of democracy or, to put it in a simple and straightforward manner, a sign of high regard.) He said that my cousin's identifying the main contradiction and danger did not comply with the official version. He thought it would be better not to over-emphasize a certain problem as the main danger, for his experiences in practising medicine for a period of half a century had proved that if you said constipation was the main danger, diarrhoea was bound to become widespread, causing anti-diarrhoea medicine to be in short supply and leading to a general distrust of doctors; if you pinpointed diarrhoea as the main danger, dryness in the rectum was bound to become prevalent and would induce haemorrhoids. With the building up of internal fire,

quarrels, even fights, might break out. Fire could only be subdued by water. Only when the five elements<sup>17</sup> were in fine balance could a person keep away from diseases. Therefore, both constipation and diarrhoea should be prevented. Constipation was not good and diarrhoea was no better. Whichever came our way should be cured. It is best if we could keep free from both. His speech was so convincing that I seemed to hear some clapping.

After the clapping, however, we found that our problem remained unsolved. The heated discussion about the mutual producing and mutual subduing of the five elements seemed to have accelerated the process of our metabolism: everyone was hungry. So all said since Grandfather got the most votes he should take charge.

Grandfather, however, disagreed. He said cooking was in fact a matter of skill rather than of ideology, concept, seniority, rank, power, position or reward. Therefore, we should not have voted for a leader but for the best cook, chosen for the skills in preparing a meal, including tending the kitchen fire and cooking the dishes.

My son enthusiastically expressed his agreement. Everybody felt we had been led to a new line of thinking or a new breakthrough indeed. Some pointed out that there was little time left for further discussion that day since everyone was hungry. Although the question of who should be in charge of our meals was still to be discussed and debated, everyone still had to eat when it was time to eat. With a resolution, everyone had to eat; without a resolution, everyone still had to eat. Those who would support the resolution had to eat; those who would oppose it also had to eat. With permission, one had to eat; without permission, one had to eat all the same. Therefore, everyone went to eat.

To assess and compare our cooking skills, we designed many procedures for everyone to go through. The requirements were that we each steam one batch of bread, cook one pot of rice, stir-fry two scrambled eggs, shred one plate of pickles, simmer one bowl of porridge, braise one platter of pig knuckles, and so on. To design those procedures, all the family members spent 30 days and 30 evenings of deliberation. There had been arguments, temper fits, quarrels, tears and reconciliations. In the end, everyone was so exhausted that they could hardly breathe, pass water, or walk. As a result, we hurt each other's feelings but exchanged our thoughts and strengthened our solidarity. We over-spent our vitality but aroused a great deal of interest in everyone. When two scrambled eggs were suggested, we rocked with laughter as if inspired by some mysterious hint; when shredded pickles were proposed the whole group looked glum and it seemed everyone had all of a sudden aged many years. Finally, in the end, at the long last, the cooking skills competition was over and the outcomes were released. Nobody had any objection.

The contestants' names in the order of their rankings were, First Class Grade A: Grandfather and Grandmother; First Class Grade B: Father, Mother, Uncle and Aunt; Second Class Grade A: me, my wife, my cousin and her husband; Third Class Grade A: my tall and thin son. Everyone was concerned that my son, only getting Third Class, might feel discouraged, so we decided to present him with a

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<sup>17</sup> The five elements, metal, wood, water, fire and earth, were held by the Chinese people as the composition and process of the physical universe, which was later used in traditional Chinese medicine to explain various physiological and pathological phenomena.

“Special Award for Star of Hope.” He was still third class in spite of the special award and in spite of his being a star of hope. In short, theories, terminologies and methodologies are constantly renewed, but order is eternal.

Many days passed. Everyone somehow understood that due to order’s eternity, the enthusiasm in discussing and experimenting on theories, terminologies, and methodologies would subside. The issue of cooking and eating no longer provoked divergent views nor excited sentiments. We were no longer troubled by the question of whether the cooking-eating matter was an issue of skills, system, cultural concepts, or of something else that we had never dreamed of. Apparently, we could eat our meals all the same without discussing those issues. Elder Sister Xu passed away peacefully. That day, she had taken a nap after lunch, had not wakened up by 4:00 p.m., and was found to have stopped breathing. The whole family missed her with respectful memories and mourned her passing. My son went to work for a joint venture. His ideal of having bread with butter and heaps of animal protein every day may have been realized. When he came back home on holidays, we asked him what he’d like to eat. He would say that he had tried all kinds of rich foods and he now wanted nothing but porridge, pickles, thin soup, and noodles with fried bean sauce. Having said that, he mocked himself: “It’s easier to change your concepts than your taste-buds.” Uncle and Aunt moved to live in a newly built apartment allotted to them. They now have a kitchen with piped gas and exhaust fan, in which they have braised pig knuckles and fried scrambled eggs. But they say more often than not they still cook porridge, toast slices of steamed-bread, have pickles, thin soup, and noodles with fried bean sauce. My cousin’s husband eventually made it overseas for “further studies,” pursuing his studies while working. Later, he came back and took my cousin there with him. In a letter to us they wrote: “What we eat most often here is porridge and pickles. They bring to us fond memories that dispel the depression of being in a foreign land. They make us feel as if we have returned to our warm, simple home. It can’t be helped! Maybe we have got genetic factors of porridge and pickles in our cells?”

Father, Grandfather and I live happily together. In our meals, chicken, duck, fish, meat, eggs, sugar and fat have all been on the increase and we have all gained weight. The food on our dinner table has become increasingly varied, rich, and expensive. We have had stir-fried pork slices, sea cucumber stewed with spring onions, deep-fried peanuts, fried cakes with cream, pasta salad, crab-meat salad; and we even had, on one occasion, abalone and scallops. Abalone have come and gone, sea cucumber was served and excreted, and salad eaten and forgotten, but porridge and pickles have outstayed them all. Even after a feast of all the delicacies from land and sea, we still have to take porridge and pickles in addition. Only with an intake of porridge and pickles can our respective oral cavity, oesophagus, stomach, intestines, liver, spleen and gall bladder operate stably and normally. Once porridge and pickles are forgotten, the stomach would be bloated and painful. Perhaps cancer would also attack us. Thanks to porridge and pickles, we are still free from stomach or intestinal cancer. While others are just the supplementary dishes or foils, i.e. meshes in the net system of our diet, porridge and pickles are the unchangeable mainstays in our diet, i.e. the headrope of that net.

After Elder Sister Xu’s death, the task of cooking has fallen on Mother’s shoulders. Mother routinely goes to consult Grandfather and Grandmother before cooking each meal. “Soup? Let’s have

one.” or “Let’s spare it tonight.” “And meat? Sliced or shredded?” The repetition of the ancient questions sound faithful and sentimental, representing both order and a moral mood. These questions and answers carry our memory of Elder Sister Xu. We feel that her spirit is revived in this seemingly plain, empty ritual and will live on with us. Grandfather has said time and again that so long as there are porridge, pickles, toasted slices of steamed bread, and noodles with fried bean sauce, he is not to concern himself with whether or not to make a soup, to have sliced or shredded meat, or to add high-quality dainties of one kind or another. He hopes Mother will not bother him with questions that are getting more and more difficult to answer. Mother is a yes-woman in front of Grandfather, but she does not feel sure about her cooking without having asked Grandfather first. When a meal is ready, she calls us to the table. She peers around apprehensively as if sitting on a bed of nails, trying to figure out what our facial expressions, especially Grandfather’s, mean. If Grandfather coughs, Mother mutters to herself in a low voice, “Is it because there is a speck of sand in the porridge or that the pickled rutabaga is too salty, or rather, not salty enough?” She mumbles but does not dare to straightforwardly ask Grandfather. Anyway, even if she has consulted Grandfather, she cannot guarantee that the porridge is free from specks of sand.

So one of those days, towards dusk, Mother still goes to consult Grandfather most submissively, with reverence and awe, conscious that she is again bothering Grandfather. “Pork, sliced or shredded?” Her tone in asking the question is tactful and moving. Grandfather’s tone in answering the question can be described as benevolent though firm. Even if the reply is “Don’t ask me,” it was anyway a sort of answer that can set Mother’s mind at ease so that she can go ahead to prepare the meal.

A British friend---an old friend of Father’s from the 1940s---came to travel in China and stayed with us for a week. At first we went out of our way to get from Shanghai a Western-style chef in order to make bread, cakes, custard and steak for him. “I am not here to eat Western food or the nondescript stuff that passes off as it,” he frankly told us. “Please give me something uniquely Chinese that embodies your ancient tradition and fascinating charm. Please!” What could we do but, with embarrassment, treat him with porridge and pickles.

“What simplicity! What elegance! How soothing! How tender! Only in the mysterious ancient Orient can this kind of food be found!” the British doctoral scholar gasped in admiration. I recorded his high praise for porridge and pickles in impeccable Oxford English on a cassette tape for my tall thin son.

## **6.2 Study 4 Four Generations Under One Roof: Conflicts and Debates About Family Meals as an Analogy of Governance Theories in the 1980s**

### **6.2.1 The author and his literary creation**

The author of the story *Hard Porridge*, Wang Meng, is generally considered one of the most important and influential literary voices in contemporary China. He has produced a large body of work which covers almost every aspect of contemporary life in China and embraces almost every literary form except drama. He has gained a high reputation in at least three distinct media: fiction, the literary essay, and the public speech. However, it is his short stories that have made his reputation as a writer of international prestige and best helped demonstrate his high level grasp of contemporary Chinese literary and socio-political-cultural matters.

Of the four writers under discussion in this thesis, Wang Meng is the only one of an older generation. His life and writing career have accompanied the founding of the PRC since 1949 (Wang, M. 1987c; *Zhongguo Zuojia Xiehui* 1999). He has written on segments of his life that can be stringed together to form a whole personal history, for instance from his ten-volume collected works (1994b). He was born in Beijing in 1934 (his original family home being Nanpi County, Hebei Province<sup>18</sup>), entered middle school in 1945 and joined the Revolution in 1948 when he was only 14 years of age. After the communist victory in 1949, he worked as a party secretary in the New Democratic Youth League while studying political theory at the Central League Academy in Beijing. Although he started literary creation in 1953 when he wrote his first novel *Long Live Youth* 青春万岁 (completed in 1956 but not published until 1979), it was the publication of another piece of his writing, *The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department* 组织部来了个年轻人 in the September 1956 issue of *People's Literature* 人民文学 that made him rise spectacularly to national fame. This is a short story describing an idealistic young Party member's first taste of a faint affection towards a woman and his harsh contact with reality in a Municipal Party Committee, revealing its entrenched bureaucratic lethargy and incompetence. Though only slightly romantic and mildly critical of bureaucracy, the story spawned instant controversy and was later criticized during the Anti-

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<sup>18</sup> Hebei is situated on the northern side of the lower reach of the Yellow River and to the east of the Bohai River. Its provincial capital is Shijiazhuang.

rightist Movement in 1957 when its author was condemned as a “rightist” (enemy category) and was sent to do thought reform through manual labour in a suburb of Beijing from 1958 to 1962. He was allowed to teach in the Chinese Department of Beijing Normal College in 1962. The next year, he went on a voluntary basis to live in the remote Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in western China, taking his whole family along, and stayed there for 16 years. He learned the local language and mixed well with the natives. He worked as a farmer labourer, a deputy leader of a production team, and from 1973, a translator (from Uighur into Han Chinese) and an editor of literature and art in the Xinjiang ministry of culture. His later series of humorous stories *The Yili Interlude* 在伊犁 was based on his experience during this period. Protected by the natives, he was not personally assaulted during the Cultural Revolution. This is considered to be a miracle. It was not until 1979 that Wang Meng was politically rehabilitated, whereupon he was transferred from Xinjiang back to Beijing, returned to the literary circle of the capital city, and resumed his career as a professional writer. Wang Meng had learned the hard way “the kinds of risks and responsibilities a writer must bear, the kind of price that had to be paid---in effort, in tears, in time---sometimes in blood, in life itself.” As he writes in an article entitled “*What Am I Searching For?*”:

What I have gained is still more than I have lost; a vast field in which to use my talents, an ability to face the world and brave the storms: 20 years of experience. A land stretching 8,000 *li*---the distance from Beijing to Xinjiang---and 30 stormy years: that is my point of departure now. (Wang, M. 1983)

In the few years following his return to Beijing, Wang Meng’s writings re-caught the reading public’s attention.<sup>19</sup> What first distinguished Wang from most of his peers in fiction writing in the early 1980s are his innovative experiments in terms of the “style of his post-Cultural Revolution writing. … The shift from socialism as the ideal to socialism as reality has produced a parallel development of technique in his writing” (Rui 1983). He was the first to deploy the Western methods of stream of consciousness, interior monologue, montage-like presentation of events, nonlinear story-line and fragmented plot so as “to break spatial and temporal boundaries” in Chinese writing (Wang, M. 1983a). His foreign and modernist formalistic experimentation and technical innovations characterized his writing during this period, and triggered a heated nationwide discussion about the viability of the newly imported modernist narrative methods when used in China (see Wang, M. 1980). Some (e.g. Tay 1991) asserted that his writings were too elevated above the general Chinese readers and had gone too far away from the Chinese literary tradition they were familiar with. Wang

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<sup>19</sup> Among his better known stories and novellas written in the early 1980s are *The Most Precious* 最宝贵, *Bolshevik Salute* 布礼, *The Eye of Night* 夜的眼, *The Butterfly* 蝴蝶, *The Variegated* 杂色, *The Strain of Meeting* 相见时难, *Voices of Spring* 春之声, and *Dreams of the Sea* 海的梦.

(1983a) argued that his adoption of those Western modernist techniques was “because life in China has become more complex, and its tempo increased, so that the themes and rhythms of my stories have changed accordingly.” To him, those techniques provided an avenue for exploring the psychology of a generation of the Chinese people in the post-Mao era. As Wendy Larson (1991: 133) argues, the critical realist spirit of the May Fourth Movement in the 1920s and beyond can still be observed, and “the moralistic stance of traditional Chinese literature” is maintained. Wang (1979; 1985) also believes that his works are still firmly rooted in realism, but this is a very different kind of realism as it not only departs from the earlier orthodox Marxist-Maoist theory on art and literature as servants to the Party’s policies to depict “revolutionary realism plus revolutionary romanticism,” but also from “the standard realistic mode of presentation” (Tay 1991). As Tay points out in the same essay, Wang “has interestingly combined several formal innovations of western modernism with what is conventionally known as socialist realism.” Miao (1994b) specially coins the term “Open Realism” to refer to Wang’s mode of literary production.

Wang is among the most sophisticated and powerful writers of contemporary China, so it is indeed shallow to focus only on the form and method of his writings. His stories do not repeat themselves in either theme or form. He enjoys the reputation of being skilled in highlighting social problems through poignant portrayal of contemporary Chinese society as well as of being bold in exploring new writing methods. He believes that literature should always start something new in order to be different, or do the same old thing in a new guise (Rui 1983). He rose to political prestige shortly after having secured himself professional fame for the second time. He was Editor-in-Chief of the *People's Literature* from 1983 to 1986, Vice-Chairman of the Union of Chinese Writers in 1986, and Minister of Culture from June 1986 until his resignation from the post in early 1990. Despite his official duties, he continued to write and published varied and innovative literary works.<sup>20</sup> Like material food, the spiritual “food” Wang Meng provides to his readers also has different “flavours”. Some resemble formal nutritious dinners; others are delicious snack meals; still others can be enjoyed as serves of dessert like ice-cream or fruit salad in a hot summer’s day, including some energy-boosting, between-meal nibbles---mini-stories 微型小说.

Besides literary creation, Wang Meng’s high quality writings on literary criticism, some of which appear in his pen name “Yang Yu” 阳雨, also attracted a great deal of attention. For instance, he ardently advocated his belief that a writer should be a scholar of sorts at the same

<sup>20</sup> Including the highly acclaimed novel *The Movable Parts* 活动变人形, short story *A Topic of the Winter* 冬天的话题 and many more.

time (Wang M. 1982), and this view made a considerable impact in the field of contemporary Chinese literature. He has been constantly writing essays of literary criticism and actively involves himself in social activities---giving speeches, holding talks, and going on lecture tours at home and abroad. His essays and speeches have been published in a number of collections.<sup>21</sup> Among his almost countless writings, quite a few have been honoured with national literary prizes, including “Hard Porridge.”<sup>22</sup> Many of his works have been translated into all the primary Asian and European languages (e.g. English, French, German, and Japanese), and published in many countries. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature 2000 together with Gao Xingjian 高行健 (eventual winner of the Prize) and the century-old Chinese literary figure Ba Jin 巴金.

### 6.2.2 Linguistic and cultural issues in translating *Hard Porridge*

Of the four literary works chosen in this thesis, Wang Meng’s *Hard Porridge* is the most difficult to translate. Besides the varied stylistic factors mentioned above, the difficulty is due to a number of other characteristics of Wang’s work. Being an extraordinarily eloquent, knowledgeable, and sharp-minded writer, his writing involves human affairs of a fairly large scope, is full of new and deep thoughts, seasoned by his profound though accessible humour. Consequently, his language is often free flowing with an ingenious combination of philosophical depth and aphoristic solemnity, accompanied by down-to-earth popular usages on the lips of the Chinese folks. His vivid, colourful and powerful language derives partly from his innate wittiness and verbal agility, partly from his rich living experience, razor-sharp perception, lateral thinking and original insight. As the Chinese translator and scholar Zhu Hong (1994b) comments, “Wang’s language is self-reflexive, and some words ... call attention to themselves and generate meaning of their own.” He was able to reflect his life and the society of his times with accuracy and complexity and with ease. Following Snell-Hornby’s (1995: 122) line of analysis, this piece of Wang’s writing belongs to the *opaque style* (in contrast to the *transparent style*) by which words “are often used so idiosyncratically that the reader has to be familiar with all the semantic implications of the lexeme concerned before he can appreciate its impact on the text.” Above all these are the cultural factors generally omnipresent in literary texts. As George Steiner notes (1975: 90), “Once a particular language is used, a particular conceptualization of the real world follows.”

<sup>21</sup> When Holding a Pen in Hand... 当你拿起笔, *On Literary Creation* 王蒙谈创作, *Informal Essays by Contemporary Chinese Celebrities---Wang Meng* 中国当代名人随笔—王蒙卷, *Apocalypse of A Dream of Red Mansions* 《红楼梦》启示录, *Wang Meng Said So* 王蒙说, to list but a few. Ten-volumed *A Collection of Works by Wang Meng 1-10* 王蒙文集 also stands to his name.

Therefore, Wang Meng's writings present the translator with the hard task of attempting to convey his unbridled thoughts and their expression in diverse and novel fields, Chinese and foreign, ancient and modern, with challenging creative-lexical and culture-bound items. Besides, the overall feel and flavour of the writing, including such aspects (part of his individual literary style) as the tone (mock-serious), the mood (humorous), the rhythm (fast, resulting from high syntactic density) have to be adequately reproduced too. As the danger of misunderstanding the text and of introducing incongruous elements in the target language is greater in the opaque style than in the transparent one, the translator has to recognize the potential pitfalls and avoid them. Meanwhile he/she has to be aware of another kind of danger---to end up with a *transparentized* translation which loses elements of depth and subtlety, i.e. the aesthetic appeal and sophistication of the original style.

There seems to be a paradoxical point to note in literary translating: on the one hand, a translator must pay close attention to the adequate rendering of "the intrinsic meaning" in his/her translation; on the other, he/she must know where to stop and guard against the possibility of getting carried away and against the temptation of over-translating the original, for it is not necessary to elaborate over what readers in the target language and receptor culture with average intelligence and normal feelings can figure out for themselves. The translation of the title "*Hard Porridge*" is an example. According to any dictionary, the close formal corresponding word in English for the Chinese "*jianying de*" 坚硬的 is "hard" or "solid," and that for "*xizhou*" 稀粥 is "(thin, watery) porridge." First, the Chinese porridge is radically different from the one generally understood in English, and there are numerous kinds of porridge within China too. In the author's hometown Hebei Province in northern China (Wang M. 1987c), for instance, it is normally cooked with corn flour or broken corn grains; in some other northern areas of China, it is mostly made of millet and/or rice. In these places, porridge is served with pickled vegetables 咸菜 and they have together become part of the staple food that the Chinese often consume. In Fujian and Guangdong in southern China, people use meat, seafood, preserved eggs, edible birds-nest, shark fin and other delicacies in cooking rice porridge. For the people in these areas, the rich porridge is a special course but not counted as part of their staple diet. The most well-known porridge is the rice porridge with all sorts of nuts, beans and dried fruit eaten on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month in the North of China 腊八粥. In comparison, porridge in most western countries is made of oats and served with milk (Wang M. 1994c). Therefore, it is essential to clarify the

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<sup>22</sup> Others include: *The Most Precious* 最宝贵, *The Grateful Heart of a Young Plant* 悠悠寸草心, *Voices of Spring* 春之声, *The Butterfly* 蝴蝶, *The Strain of Meeting* 相见时难, *Surging Thoughts and Emotions After a Visit to the USSR* 访苏心潮.

difference between the particular kind of “*xizhou*” in the author’s mind when writing the story, and its importance in his characters’ diet, from the English “porridge.” This can be conveniently done by way of a footnote. Yet the collocation of “*jianying de xizhou*” may not be as such. At first sight, “hard (thin) porridge” appears to be ridiculous, for how can “thin porridge” be “hard”? The reason behind this seemingly illogical combination is that the story is meant to be a humorous allegory of the family diet reform to certain reform programs of China. What the author is actually talking about here is not the texture of the food, but rather the difficulty in changing people’s formed habits, be it concerning eating habits, conceptual or cultural habits. The porridge is a symbol of Chinese tradition, since that diet throughout the story remains remarkably obstinate, opposing any attempts at reform; and the difference between the moderate, the conservative and the radical factions in society is projected concretely through those characters’ different preferences of diet in the family. This point is a major theme of the story. Through “hard porridge” it is demonstrated that culture cannot be imposed or demolished by any individual(s), though political and social philosophy can. Some other translators translated the title into “*The Stubborn Porridge*” (Zhu, H. 1994c) or simply into “*Thick Congee*” (Nip 1995), with the obvious intention to avoid the awkwardness at the word level. In translation, a close formal correspondence in a target language does not always carry the correct meaning of the source text. In the case of the title *Hard Porridge*, however, the close formal correspondence “hard porridge” is considered better kept because this awkwardness is a deliberate effort of the author to convey the thematic meaning of his story, to create a sense of absurdity and humour, and to stimulate the readers’ curiosity at the outset. To fully and correctly understand and appreciate the title is crucial in understanding and appreciating the humorous style and the theme of the whole story. The overriding factor in deciding how to translate should be the intrinsic importance of meaning in both the broader context of society and culture and the allegorical linguistic text. To translate the strangeness out of the original text may result in more loss than gain.

In this story, the Chinese porridge plus pickles and the steamed bread can be understood as a synecdoche for Chinese cultural tradition the same way as coffee, bread with butter, cheese and jam, etc. are for Western culture. The author’s choice of material food as a cultural symbol is very appropriate. This is because Chinese food culture was and still is an important component in social activities as well as in people’s day to day family life. Yet obviously, it is not appropriate to cram all these explanations about the title into a footnote. Resorting to discussion in an exegesis is more satisfactory.

Immediately following the title at the very beginning of the story, its twelve main characters are introduced in forms of address:

Formal members of our family were Grandfather, Grandmother, Father, Mother, Uncle, Aunt, me, my wife, my cousin, her husband and that lovable tall, thin son of mine. ... Besides, we had an informal family member Elder Sister Xu, ...

The list of terms indicating the kinship relations between the narrator “I” and the other family members do not appear to present much of a problem either for the translator or for the English readers to decode. However, it actually requires careful thinking and rendering before some of such ambivalent terms can be appropriately translated into English. This is because (1) only the most immediate family relations (such as husband and wife, parents and their children) have direct equivalents between Chinese and English; others do not (e.g. grandfather, grandmother, uncle, aunt, cousin, brother and sister); (2) English and Chinese forms of address differ dramatically in classification. As an illustration of the complexity of kinship terms, I will use “cousin” as an example. One of the characters in the story is “*tangmei*” 堂妹 (one’s female cousin on the paternal side younger than oneself). “Cousin” is its dictionary equivalent in English, but this lacks all the specificity of the Chinese term as shown in the table below (certain expressions are drawn from Zhao Yuanren, 1976: 323-331).

Kinship Relation & Further Classification	Vocative (Term of Direct Address)	Designative	Learned Term
<b>Cousin</b> (the son of one’s father’s brother, older than oneself)	<i>tangge</i> <i>da- (er-...)ge, X- ge</i> <sup>23</sup>	<i>tangxiong</i> <i>shubai gege</i>	<i>zongxiong</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the son of one’s father’s brother, younger than oneself)	<i>tangdi</i> <i>da- (er-...)di, X-di, X</i>	<i>tangfang didi</i> <i>shubai didi</i>	<i>zongdi</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the daughter of one’s father’s brother, older than oneself)	<i>tangjie</i> <i>da- (er-...)jie, X-jie</i>	<i>tangfang jiejie</i> <i>shubai jiejie</i>	<i>zongjie</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the daughter of one’s father’s brother, younger than oneself)	<i>tangmei</i> <i>da- (er-...)mei, X-mei, X</i>	<i>tangfang</i> <i>meimei</i> <i>shubai meimei</i>	<i>zongmei</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the son of one’s father’s sister, older than oneself)	<i>biaoge</i> <i>da- (er-...)biaoge, X- biaoge</i>	<i>biaoxiong</i>	<i>gibiaoxiong</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the son of one’s father’s sister, younger than oneself)	<i>biaodi</i> <i>da- (er-...)biaodi, X-biaodi, X</i>	<i>biaodi</i>	<i>gibiaodi</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the daughter of one’s father’s sister, older than oneself)	<i>biaojie</i> <i>da- (er-...)biaojie, X- biaojie</i>	<i>biaojie</i>	<i>gibiaojie</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the daughter of one’s father’s sister, younger than oneself)	<i>biaomei</i> <i>da- (er-...)biaomei, X- biaomei, X</i>	<i>biaomei</i>	<i>gibiaomei</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the son of one’s mother’s brother, older than oneself)	<i>biaoge</i> <i>da- (er-...)biaoge, X- biaoge</i>	<i>biaoxiong</i>	<i>jiubiaoxiong</i>

<sup>23</sup> “*Da*”, “*er*” ... stand for “first”, “second”, and so on, in order of seniority; “*X*” stands for a person’s given name, milk name, courtesy name, or a syllable of these names. Please note that in English “second cousin” has a meaning altogether different from the Chinese “*er-...*”.

<b>Cousin</b> (the son of one's mother's brother, younger than oneself)	<i>biaodi</i> <i>da- (er-...)biaodi, X-biaodi,</i> <i>X</i>	<i>biaodi</i>	<i>jiubiaodi</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the daughter of one's mother's brother, older than oneself)	<i>biaojie</i> <i>da- (er-...)biaojie, X-</i> <i>biaojie</i>	<i>biaojie</i>	<i>jiubiaojie</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the daughter of one's mother's brother, younger than oneself)	<i>biaomei</i> <i>da- (er-...)biaomei, X-</i> <i>biaomei, X</i>	<i>biaomei</i>	<i>jiubiaomei</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the son of one's mother's sister, older than oneself)	<i>biaoge</i> <i>da- (er-...)biaoge, X-</i> <i>biaoge</i>	<i>biaoge</i>	<i>yibiaoxiong</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the son of one's mother's sister, younger than oneself)	<i>biaodi</i> <i>da- (er-...)biaodi, X-biaodi,</i> <i>X</i>	<i>biaodi</i>	<i>yibiaodi</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the daughter of one's mother's sister, older than oneself)	<i>biaojie</i> <i>da- (er-...)biaojie, X-</i> <i>biaojie</i>	<i>biaojie</i>	<i>yibiaojie</i>
<b>Cousin</b> (the daughter of one's mother's sister, younger than oneself)	<i>biaomei</i> <i>da- (er-...)biaomei, X-</i> <i>biaomei, X</i>	<i>biaomei</i>	<i>yibiaomei</i>

Table 6.1 Sixteen different Chinese terms of address for their single corresponding term “Cousin” in English

For the 16 terms of address in Chinese, there is only one corresponding term “cousin” in English. By using this one word to translate each and every one of the 16 Chinese terms, at least the following information carried by the Chinese ones will be lost:

- the side through which the relation is established (i.e. related through the father or the mother), hence the closeness of the relationship (paternal relations are considered closer than maternal ones in China);
- the seniority of the person in the relationship; and
- the gender.

Therefore to translate “*tangmei*” to “my Cousin” is obviously an over-simplification of the original text; but how awkward and ridiculous it would appear to an English reader if the term is rendered into “the daughter of my Uncle on the paternal side, younger than oneself”! So I translated it into “my Cousin on the paternal side” to indicate the closeness of her relation with the family, but left the cousin’s gender to be clarified by the next member of the family in the list: “her husband,” and left out the clarification of the relative seniority between “myself” and “my Cousin” since in this case the age difference is not of great importance to the story. Similarly, grandparents, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces and so on all have multiple corresponding terms of address in Chinese which are absent in English. The whole matter is further complicated when in-laws are added to the list. The enumeration of them could continue almost as far as one wishes to pursue it. The other kinship terms in the story are translated with the same consideration and in the same manner. Compromises have been made but it seems to be the best that can be done. The causes of such complexity and

difficulties are not merely linguistic, but deep-rooted in cultural differences. The old Chinese family / clan system favoured male and older members in matters such as the right of inheritance, thus the detailed differentiation between sex and seniority in age as well as between paternal and maternal relations was meaningful and necessary in China's long past.

If all these are not complex enough to baffle a reader in the target language, the differentiation between terms of address for kinship members and non-kinship ones, and their geographical differences will definitely make the task even more daunting for them. There is good reason to argue that the translation of these terms needs to consider on a case by case basis aspects of the broader context. "Aunt," for instance, is the corresponding term of address for the following kinship relations in Chinese: "*bomu*" 伯母 (one's father's older brother's wife), "*shenmu*" 婶母 (one's father's younger brother's wife), "*gumu*" 姑母 (one's father's sister), "*jiumu*"舅母 (one's mother's brother's wife), "*yimu*" 媳母 (one's mother's sister), etc. By contrast, the word "*ayi*" 阿姨 (aunt) in "*Hua Ayi*" 华阿姨 (Aunt Hua) used as a term of address by Zhuang Jianya for her mother's former student Hua Rufen in *Apart from Love*, though also translated as "aunt," is a pseudo-kinship term which is generally used by children (and their parents) for their caretakers (as in *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, which uses a synonym "*baomu*" childminder) and/or for any woman of their mother's generation. In comparison, "aunt" in English is usually, although not exclusively, used to refer to blood relatives. Thus, to translate "*ayi*" as "aunt" or "auntie" in English, is a rather blurred rendering of the original meaning.

The term "*jie*" in "*Xu Jie*" 徐姐, the family housekeeper in the story *Hard Porridge*, is another pseudo-kinship term used in the similar manner. The story makes it clear *Xu Jie* is "an informal member," i.e. not a sister by blood. When used to refer to pseudo-kinship relationships, terms like "*jie*" 姐 and "*ge*" 哥 are often translated as "(Elder) Sister / Brother So-and-so" from Chinese to English. This mechanical way of their rendering, however, either establishes a false kinship relationship or contracts a religious implication which the original does not possess in either case; but more importantly, as Eva Hung (1999: 145) points out, it is not commonly used in the English-speaking world and would create a feeling of strangeness in the intended reader. Therefore, she suggests (refer to p. 209 above) to consider using a character's given name or using Mr/Mrs/Miss plus their family name. In certain circumstances where contextual information is provided regarding a character's given name or, in the case of a woman character, her marriage status, we certainly can and should do so. Since such information about *Xu Jie* in the story is not available, other means have to be resorted to, for example, "Madame Xu," "Madam Xu" or "Ms Xu". The first seems, at first

sight, appropriate to use, as it is a title for an older, especially married or widowed, woman or to an older woman who is not British or American, as defined by dictionaries; but considering that *Xu Jie*, 59 years old when the story starts, “had been with us as our housekeeper for 40 years” (reasonably assuming that the same form of address had been used all those years), it is unlikely that “Madame Xu” could have been chosen back then when she was only 19 years of age. The second option, “Madam”, is usually used as a polite form of address to a woman whom one does not know personally, or in a letter, therefore it is not an option for this case. In comparison, the term “Ms Xu” seems to be the most desirable translation of the original term “*Xu Jie*”, although with stronger feminist connotations it would sound a little awkward from the mouths of “Grandfather” and “Grandmother” in the story. It is exactly for this reason that “*Zhang Dajie*” 章大姐 in *Apart from Love* is translated as “Ms Zhang”.

After having said all the above, however, the writer of this thesis feels that “Elder Sister Xu” is the most satisfactory rendering in this particular story because it is definitively stated at the beginning:

Besides, we had an informal family member, Elder Sister Xu, aged 59. She had been with us as our housekeeper for 40 years. She could not do without us and we could not do without her. Being so indispensable to us, she was more “formal” in the family than any other formal members. Furthermore, she was “Elder Sister” to us all. From Grandfather to my son, we were all equal before her---we all called her Elder Sister Xu (see p. 222 above).

In this context, if “*Xu Jie*” is translated as “Ms Xu”, the sentences “she was ‘Elder Sister’ to us all. ... we all called her Elder Sister Xu” should read “she was ‘Ms’ to us all. ... we all called her Ms.” This would sound meaningless and even stranger to the intended reader than “Elder Sister Xu” does. It is noticeable that other translators, for instance Zhu Hong (1994c) and Joyce Nip (1995) who also translated this story from Chinese to English, use “Elder Sister Xu” as well. It may be argued that “Elder”, used before “Sister”, helps avoid the religion-associated misunderstanding that “Sister / Brother So-and-so” may cause, because in the ecclesiastical usage of “sister / brother” there is usually no indication as to the age relationship. In the particular case of this story, the context clarifies that no actual kinship relationship is entailed in the term “elder sister” either, thus supporting it as the best possible translation in the given circumstances. Perhaps the form of address “Elder Sister Xu”, although awkward to the ear of the intended reader, also indirectly contributes to the reader’s understanding of this character’s unusual position in the household.

Each of the variations of a term is not simply another form of address, either. They are charged with socio-cultural information. The variation a person uses in speech reveals much more about him than just the relationship in question. A little earlier it was mentioned that the most immediate family relations such as parents and their children have direct equivalents

between Chinese and English. Yet even the Chinese variations of such terms may contain cultural elements that defy easy translation. For example, the standard colloquial form for “father” is “dad(dy)” in English, the same as “*baba*” 爸爸 (dad) is to “*fuqin*” 父亲 (father) in Chinese. But again, there are more variations in Chinese than in English and “*die(die)*” 爹爹 is one of these. If someone addresses his father with this local variation, a Chinese reader or hearer can tell right away that very likely this person is from a certain region in Northern China (the possibilities as to the exact district in that region can be significantly narrowed down with the assistance of the accent, if in spoken form rather than in writing), and can be expected to have certain distinctive characteristics typical of the locality: probably he values frankness more than courtesy, prefers noodles, salty meat dishes and strong liquor to rice, fish in sweet and sour sauce, and rice wine, etc. But in translation, we may at the best render “*die(die)*” as “*pa(pa)*” or “*dad(dy)*” to acknowledge the colloquial flavour, while the local colour as well as the rich cultural connotations of the original are completely lost.

In comparison to the complexity displayed by seemingly simple terms like “cousin,” “aunt” and “sister” in translation, one might think that a person’s proper name would be much easier to translate---by transliterating it. Yet, as discussed earlier in Chapter 4, it is not at all that simple. While there are cases where the name of a figure without considerable international fame may be transliterated with an in-text explanation or a footnote, for example “the Tang poet Li Shangyin” and “the father of modern Chinese literature Lu Xun.” The need for such explanations is more compelling when a name has acquired an involved metaphorical sense and becomes fixed in usage, for example, Zhao Kuo, a bragging “scholar general” of the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.)<sup>24</sup> and Ma Su, a character in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*<sup>25</sup> who volunteered to guard the strategic place of vital importance to a significant battle launched by Zhuge Liang<sup>26</sup>. Both are well-known historical figures because they were related to famous military events in Chinese history and have entered the Chinese language with metaphorical meanings in the form of set phrases or sayings---“*Zhao Kuo tan bing*”

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<sup>24</sup> Cited from *Records of the Historian* (also known as *The Historical Memoirs*) 史记, by Sima Qian 司马迁 (145-? B.C.) of the Western Han Dynasty. It consists of 130 essays in 520,000 words and covers a period of 3,000 years from the time of the legendary Emperor Huangdi down to the reign of Emperor Wudi of Western Han. It marks the beginning of the chronological style in writing a general history and has exerted a tremendous influence on Chinese historiography and Chinese literature.

<sup>25</sup> *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 三国演义 written by Luo Guanzhong 罗贯中 (c1330-c1400) is one of the four great classical Chinese novels. The author gives a vivid picture of the contradictions and conflicts among the ruling circles of the kingdoms of Wei, Shu and Wu during the last years of the Eastern Han Dynasty and their rise and fall in the course of history. It is the first full-length historical novel in China.

<sup>26</sup> Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮, who styled himself Kongming 孔明, is the master-mind character in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the Counsellor of the State of West Shu. His name brings into the reader’s mind all the marvellous events in the novel with the brilliant display of knowledge, strategy and wisdom of this outstanding statesman, military strategist and man of letters. Zhuge Liang has become an embodiment of intelligence and wisdom in China.

赵括谈兵 (Zhao Kuo made empty talk about warfare and led his army to a complete defeat) and “*Ma Su shou ting*” 马谡守亭 (Ma Su volunteered to guard the important strategic point Jieting and ended with its fall). In *Hard Porridge*, these two names are used by Wang Meng in the same breath because both persons are known as pompous in words but incapable in action; both failed in the missions they had bragged about; and both paid with their lives for the heavy losses they had brought to their states. To depict the young and haughty but inexperienced character “my son” in the story with these two idioms is vivid and pertinent. It enriches the work by association, which gives it depth. The writer assumes a reading public sharing a cultural schema and an established literary tradition, and depends on the ability of the reader to pick up the references. While these names need no explanation for most Chinese readers, few English readers are expected to be aware of the references, in just the same way as Hercules from Greek mythology, the prodigal son in the *Bible*, or Goethe’s Faust are unknown to the majority of Chinese readers. To translate these names definitely requires more than transliteration. So both of these names are translated with brief in-text additions to ensure uninterrupted reading---“Zhao Kuo’s armchair strategy on warfare” and “Ma Su, the tragic defender of Jieting,” and with footnotes at the bottom of the page providing further information for interested readers.

Either derived from historical events or from literary works, such names as Zhuge Liang and Hamlet have all become images of certain character types or certain characteristics in their respective culture. When used metaphorically, it is for the translator to provide supplementary or alternative information for the targeted reader. If an annotation of a reasonable length (i.e. the footnote option) fails to do justice to an element of this kind with several tiers of meaning, then a separate exegesis is the only other solution.

Perhaps translation can only be an art of perpetual regrets since invariably certain elements in the original have to be lost, or some unwanted ones have unwittingly been gained in translation. Yet it often seems impossible to avoid these. This is particularly the case when translating *Hard Porridge*, as compact information and rich knowledge spill over almost each of its sentences and a seemingly casual word in a sentence is capable of creating a series of associations in a well-informed mind. For instance, in describing the perfect order, stability and conformity of the family in the story Wang Meng writes: “We did not have any divergence of views, any overflowing rhetoric, or any controversy locked in a stalemate. Maneuvering among differing groupings, open strife, and closed-door conspiracies were unheard of.” “Maneuvering among differing states or political groupings” (original text reads 纵横捭阖) is one of the thousands of four-character set phrases prevalent in formal Chinese

language, most of which have historical stories behind them. The phrase in question calls one to reflect on many political strategists such as Su Qin 苏秦 and Zhang Yi 张仪 (see *Ci Hai* 1979, pp. 562 & 1084 for brief accounts) in the Warring States Period. The fierce contentions and brutal acts implied by the four Chinese characters powerfully highlight the peace and order of the family in the story.

Another association-generating phrase in the story is used when the Cousin's husband was considered being “*zhibai shouhei*” 知白守黑 (behaved with modesty and discretion). This phrase derives from a sentence in *Lao Zi* 老子 (Chapter 28). The original words are “*Zhi qi bai, shou qi hei, wei tianxia shi.*” “知其白，守其黑，为天下式。” (The Saint knows where brightness is, but he is willing to stay in darkness in order to become a means by which the people can know the Heavenly God.) This is a high praise which has a great deal to do with the Daoist tradition of “*wuwei shun Dao*” 无为顺道 (non-action and following the Way). To spell out all their elusive shades of meaning or possible hints at something else, there is the danger that the note will outrun the translated text itself, which would be undesirable to many, nor would it be practical for the translator. By leaving them out, however, you are left wondering whether the translation without a mention of the associative meaning has done the original full justice. Thus a translator is forced to make constant choices and compromises.

After being translated, a literary work should retain certain features unique to the specific socio-cultural history or reality. In *Hard Porridge*, Grandfather was seen giving his children counsel on the concept of contentment even when at a low standard of living. The origin of this conviction can be traced back to the time of Lao Zi, and has passed into current phraseology---“*Zhi zu chang le.*” 知足常乐。(Contentment brings happiness.) This epigram reflects one Chinese understanding of happiness. Later on in the story when the family diet reform enters the intellectual drive-for-democracy stage and once again lands in a predicament, the family members start to doubt its value:

We are really asking for trouble by going in for democracy, ending up with some of us suffering from diarrhoea and others from hunger. It is typical of us Chinese who won't rest until everyone contracts dropsy.

The word “dropsy,” while used out of a medicinal context, is unmistakably an allusion to the Great Leap Forward campaign that caused wide-spread dropsy (due to malnutrition) across the country. Without this knowledge, Wang Meng's black humour cannot be fully relished. Yet how can a translator afford to provide footnotes so often or to such an extent as to address all the connotations that are meant to be implicit?

From this discussion it should be clear that to convey all such linguistic, stylistic, historic, socio-political, cultural information from one language to another requires a means with much greater capacity than that which an in-text paraphrase or a footnote can accommodate.

### 6.2.3 Literary attributes of the story

Although *Hard Porridge* is chronologically the third of the four chosen stories (by the order of the years of their publication), the thesis discusses it last because it has more “weighty” substance and a higher achievement in terms of literary merits. Indeed, in my opinion, it is one of the most original and all-out best allegorical stories of contemporary Chinese literature (along with Wang’s other stories of this category, such as *A Topic of the Winter*).

There are several reasons in my considering *Hard Porridge* as a “weighty” piece of literature. The first is its “weighty” content in proportion to its short length; secondly, its close socio-political engagement and strong sense of the time; and thirdly, its transcendence of the mere portrayal of the circumstances (which possesses great value in itself) to reveal further / bigger truth behind the circumstances.

The story is written with a structure designed in a single (spiral) line with the chronological arrangement of the events, events that are tightly knit into and proceed in this unbroken line that nevertheless curves and twists from the exposition to the conclusion. The family diet reform is the centrepiece of the story, but its theme covers a wide cross-section of Chinese society, describing the complex social life and the ideas and sentiments of the populace, and shows the conflicts and problems brought about by reform. It ranges in subject from individual behaviour to social hierarchy, from cultural tradition to the current reform program, from family diet to the national economic condition, from personal standpoints to public conceptual and methodical conflicts and many more---all in a densely packed manner. It is not a story purposely stretched to be lengthy, as it eliminates everything that is not essential to its elucidation. The story’s spring-like-structure resembles so many other aspects in human life. Because the spiral development of the storyline occurs in a three-dimensional space, the ending point does not actually align with the starting point, as all-round irrevocable changes have occurred in the process of that movement. These are the very qualities of existence according to a deeply engrained, basic Chinese aesthetic and philosophical idea: the *yinyang*-oriented logic of duality and the ceaseless change of them.

*Hard Porridge*, like most of Wang Meng’s writing, helps preserve a memory of modernizing China. However, to limit *Hard Porridge*’s importance to its witness to life during China’s

reform period in the late 1980s would be an understatement. Undoubtedly, reality forms the very basis of the story. This reality is very familiar, on the surface, to millions of people in China, but not really clearly understood by most, and is little known to millions of others across the world. Wang Meng makes it potentially well known to all, not by simply copying reality, but rather by reaching deep into the massive ordinary happenings so that the essence beneath or beyond false illusions is captured, including not only the phenomena and facts but also the reasons and motives behind them. Behind the humorous description of a seemingly light and frivolous family reform of its diet, the writer presents his reader with a miniature of the nation's social, cultural, and psychological reality, a comprehensive summary of the typical types of people's attitudes towards the socio-economic-political reform underway in the country at that time, and the involved dynamics of different forces in the relationship network. The complexity and relativity of human affairs as well as their background circumstances is truthfully and artistically revealed. A significant part of the story's literary value lies in its discovery and revealing of the truth. Although "truth" may be perceived and defined in many different ways by different people, a writer's insights and ability in grasping and presenting the truth as literature is easily discernible in his/her work.

Indeed, "what" to write about is important, but "how" to do it is also. The above-mentioned literary value of the story, i.e. "writing about the truth," is supplemented and made full by its penetrating insights and artistic skills which are no less fundamental qualities of any literature. This idea is very well put by Gao Xingjian (2000: 7): "Literature does not simply make a replica of reality but penetrates the surface layers and reaches deep into the inner workings of reality; it removes false illusions, looks down from great heights at ordinary happenings, and with a broad perspective reveals happenings in their entirety." Employing the technique of moving the reader by impersonally refining reason and emotion out of the text's content and syntax, the author guides the reader to feel a wide range of emotions as he confronts varied mentalities---whether banal or innovative. It is exactly this truthful revelation of the human existence and of the ways of the world, imbued with the writer's literary talent and worldly wisdom, that enables the story to obtain a lasting value, hence larger than itself.

In a narrower sense, its highly allegorical quality also gives *Hard Porridge* a larger significance. There are a large amount of Chinese stories on the same theme as *Hard Porridge*, for instance, the stories discussed in the previous three chapters reveal, through the details of daily trivia, the social and cultural structure that underlies the physical and mental conditions of the urban Chinese families, and this thesis suggests that these families can be

seen as miniatures of the society and culture in which they find themselves. In comparison, however, *Hard Porridge* is much more consciously so, so much so that it becomes an allegory, with conscious forethought in achieving that effect. A striking characteristic of *Hard Porridge* is its originality in combining matter-of-fact precision in the telling of a domestic story with the metaphorical quality in many of the details. Wang Meng has a way to bring into prominence certain traits of humans and the complexities and relativity of human affairs. In the reading process, the reader cannot help marvelling at the ingenuity of his thoughts, his meticulous and thorough depiction of situations without leaving any significant aspect untouched.

Another conspicuous literary characteristic of *Hard Porridge* is the humour in its portrayal of “reality” as objective phenomena where the tone and manner are just as important as the subject matter. Outstanding is Wang Meng’s ability not only to provoke his readers’ laughter but to make them reflect back on their own thoughts or behaviour and to associate with something bigger and more serious behind the story after they have had a hearty laugh. Even more amazing is that this effect is achieved by means of an allusive complicity between the author and the reader in a plot that subtly implies, not overtly tells. A reader with a sense of humour will appreciate the accuracy of the aim even when he/she has become the bull’s eye. A sense of humour is a sense of superiority; but Wang’s humour does not contain any malice. His most striking characteristic is perhaps his deep concern about and understanding of the contradictions of his age, his lofty perspective on his fellowmen and their circumstances, the sure grasp of his literary subjects, and his magnanimity generally.

Wang Meng’s powerfully accurate and vivid language and his unusual creativity in using it, or in making his language “literary” rather than “standard,” is definitely among the literary characteristics worth mentioning. He does not follow the models of conventional language in writing, which he does not consider to be living people’s colloquial speech in actual daily life but rather the so-called “literary wordings.” Such wordings, in Wang’s own words (1995: 79), are “created by those second- or third-rate writers who read too much and become a little silly as a result.” Indeed, to write like the authors of the distant past can only give rise to artificiality. Nor does he even always follow grammatical rules. On the contrary, he often distorts “standard” ways of expression in order to achieve a special aesthetic effect, e.g. “Man’s world is mutable, sons surpass their fathers” (see p. 228 above with a note) and “There is a sea of -izations, and butter is the boat; there is no ready-made road leading to the garden of happiness, and bread is the bridge” (see p. 229 above with a note). *Hard Porridge* is a good example of Wang’s mastery of economy of words and his ability to charge nearly

every word with full significance, every sentence with an unbelievable amount of information about the changing world around him, mixing official language and street vernacular freely, effectively yet naturally as if they are all at his fingertips. His style of writing, to borrow a set phrase in Chinese, is like “*xingyun liushui*” 行云流水 (floating clouds and flowing water)---with natural grace, but with force too. Certain critics even regard Wang as “a banner-bearer of the language revolution on contemporary literary Chinese” (Qiao, J. 2000).

Concerned about his country and its people, Wang Meng is a keen and shrewd observer of the concrete issues in the living, changing China. Even such seemingly minute aspects as the government trial to shorten lunch breaks, the rationed gas supply for cooking, the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward campaign in the early 1960s are all depicted or alluded to. This comprehensiveness transcends any “-isms” that might have been applied to his writing practice. His being a high level official of the Central Chinese Government undoubtedly contributed to that profundity as well as to the comprehensiveness of his writings, especially his stories on government affairs.

As already mentioned, Wang goes beyond realism into allegory. He is highly skilful in absorbing and converting the familiar into the symbolic---into the precise and self-sufficient literary structures. This dual property of the story (i.e. both its virtual and symbolic layers of meaning) gives it a larger and weightier significance and value than others of a single literary fashion could possibly obtain. The story is symbolic in every element: its agents (i.e. the family diet, the family members and the family itself), its setting (the household), its actions and its language. At the “technical” level, the story’s symbolic quality is best demonstrated by the following three elements in this complex set of symbols.

(1) The characters in the story are only named by using pronouns and forms of address according to their family relations rather than their respective individual names as is common in an ordinary piece of literary writing<sup>27</sup>. As a brilliant writer, Wang Meng knows the importance of effective character depiction in story writing. Many of his fictional characters are vividly brought to life before the reader’s eyes. But in *Hard Porridge*, it is obvious that he deliberately chooses to write about groups and types rather than individuals or personalities. The individual characters in this story function purely as symbols, but still in an all too familiar general situation, with each of them standing for a certain social force in real life so that an inside-reader can readily associate a personal acquaintance or a public figure with a

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<sup>27</sup> Although within families, members are usually referred to in this way, this is not uncommon in literary works either. But the fact that the author does not at all mention any of the characters’ names in the story from the beginning to the end, not even the family name, does suggest that there is a purpose in his doing so.

certain character. Besides the absence of the character names, it is noticeable too that there is no mentioning of specific time or place, which also effectively helps enlarge the story's significance.

(2) As discussed earlier in this chapter, the diet in the story alludes to Chinese tradition, which is made clear by its self-contradictory title. "Diet" is a very well chosen synecdoche for culture because, to start with, eating is a fundamental human activity and, what's more, eating is regarded with remarkable seriousness by the Chinese in particular: it is an art. Before anything else, even within life's most basic necessities---food, shelter and clothing---food is of the first and uttermost importance. Human beings simply can not, in the physiological sense, live on anything purely mental or spiritual without this vital need for long, hence the old Chinese saying the masses regard food as their heaven 民以食为天. On the importance of eating and drinking in Chinese culture, Lin Yutang in *My Country and My People* (1939: 318-19 [1935]) lifts eating and cooking into an art, asserting that they are more seriously regarded by the Chinese people than religion or learning. By natural cause or by accident, Wang Meng, like Lin and the famous Qing-Dynasty painter, calligrapher and writer Zheng Banqiao (1693-1765), singles out rice porridge as the topic for discussion. The symbolism of Chinese porridge seems to have become a convention. It is warm but "hard"---hard to change, hard to substitute, hard to do without. Wang Meng writes in an early section of his story, "All things under heaven find their own balance through motion; the natural tendency is constant transition." Changes do take place, but the essence will remain no matter what. Habit is second nature.

(3) The large family in the story is analogous to the populous Chinese society, with a traditionally ideal harmony between its members within a perfect hierarchical structure and in supreme order. Wang Meng skilfully interweaves the happenings around diet reform attempts in a family with the large-scale reform then taking place in China as the backdrop, ingenuously infusing the domestic events with profound messages. He arranges and expresses them in such a way so as to better interest, inform, delight, excite and surprise. Although in the story there are just a few direct references to the wider society, it does always prompt the reader to think of that much broader background. In reality such a traditional type of large family as described in the story is very unusual in present-day China, particularly so in urban areas. The threshold presents the author with a fictional setting to display his humorous yet truly serious reflection on life with convincing details, and to reveal reality of China's present reform and past legacy, where the simplest domestic detail becomes socially, politically and culturally symbolic, and functions as a guarantee of the authenticity of the whole story.

Anyone who reads the pages will be struck not only by its descriptions of the specific and accurate details in family life, which render the whole narration plausible, but also by its brilliant mode of operation in rendering them closely analogous to the overall culture, to the country, and to its people. Its depiction of family affairs urges the reader to reflect on Chinese history and culture as well as the immediate reality; the telling of one concrete thing is the telling of everything of its type.

As previously mentioned, *Hard Porridge* is one of the many government stories by Wang Meng. The tale possesses a comprehensive political quality. In fact, reality in China makes it very difficult to exclude public affairs from the considerations of private lives. Closely following the steps of the (dis)advancement of the country and its people, Wang Meng's fiction creation activities somewhat resemble the development of a full four-movement symphony, from sonata, andante, scherzo to finale, with *Hard Porridge* catching a likeness to a march with scherzando variations. His writing is always socially and politically engaged, aiming at the general population rather than just the elite minority. For another, the politically and socially sensitive works by Wang are not necessarily written for utilitarian political purposes. If they happen to carry a social and/or political message, it is because they are from the pen of a writer who is a politically and socially sensitive individual himself. In fact, Wang Meng's works are full of vigorous self-expressions. As he puts it in an article entitled "Subject Matter and Writer" 题材与作家:

The subject matter is important, of course.

However, even more important is the writer, his wisdom, talent, courage, conscience and creativity as reflected in his writing, and the uniqueness, artistry, profundity and richness of the writing. The value of a piece of work mainly derives from the writer's own spiritual strength and character. It is this part in the work that, particularly after a historical period, will withstand the test of time. (Wang, M. 1993b: 224; my translation)

Comparing Wang Meng's *Hard Porridge* with *The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department* published in 1956 and the different fates these two stories brought to their author, it is not difficult to notice not only the changed political atmosphere, but a certain trend of changes in Wang's literary creation over a span of more than forty years---from political concern to cultural critique (in terms of theme); from overt revelation concerning official governance problems to guised depiction of household management issues, from transparency to obscurity (in terms of subject matter); from the involvement of the self and political affairs in actual life to the characterization of groups and types rather than individuals or personalities, from socialist realism to "modernism with Chinese characteristics" (in terms of literary creation method); and from serious drama / tragedy to

humorous allegory / comedy (in terms of writing style and language use). These changes are reflected by the two stories and by many others of this category.

Due to Wang Meng's unusual range of experience gained in the midst of historical events in China's revolution and political centre, and his extensive contact with all sorts of senior and junior Party / government officials, he is preoccupied with the political life in Party organizations or in government offices as well as with the people who make them. It is only natural that they become a recurring subject matter in his writings, which in turn demonstrate their writer's professional zeal and keen sense in the observation of them, his firm grasp of the officials' psychology and behaviour with a deft pen in accurately and penetratingly portraying all these.

Considering the large quantity as well as the great variety of his writings, the following may be a gross generalization. Yet it can be argued that from the 1950s to the 1980s, Wang Meng's stories fall largely into two major categories<sup>28</sup>. The first category follows the youthful optimism and enthusiasm of his first novel *Long Live Youth*; the second, the political concern and polemic spirit of his short story *The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department* that caused him to be silenced for more than two decades. *Hard Porridge* belongs to this second category, which is labelled in Chinese as “zhengshi xiaoshuo” 政事小说 (stories on government affairs).

In speaking of *government* stories, it is worth mentioning that *The Book of History* 尚书 or 书经 is the most ancient record of Chinese history and of Chinese *government* affairs. The record shows that, holding “Heavenly God” in awe and veneration, the Chinese ancestors governed the “Shen zhou” 神州 (God’s Divine Land, i.e. China) with fairness, humanity and virtue as recorded in this book. In comparison, *Zuo Qiuming’s Chronicles* 左传, a classical history of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.) and *Anecdotes of the Warring States* 战国策, a collection of historical data about the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.) are full of “divergence of views, overflowing rhetoric, controversy locked in a stalemate, maneuvering among differing states or political groupings, open strife and closed-door conspiracies” (see 6.1 above) and so on, as exemplified by the political strategists of the Warring States Period such as Su Qin and Zhang Yi (see 6.2.2 above).

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<sup>28</sup> A refined classification of Wang Meng's fiction lists the following as its major themes: historic retribution 历史报应, youth 青春, evil nature of the human race 人性恶, cultural clash between the East and the West 中西文化碰撞, love 爱情, death 死亡, etc. [refer to the “Abstract” of *On Wang Meng* 王蒙论 (Zeng 1987)].

*Hard Porridge* bears a degree of resemblance to *The Book of History*. As Wang Meng announces at the start of the story, in the family there is none of the above-mentioned infighting. In his own words, “truly powerful works magnanimously portray any and all objects in them. All are good guys” (Wang, M. 1993b: 195). Some of his characters do make a fool of themselves now and then, but their mistakes are due to different opinions rather than having an axe to grind against others. Reading other stories by the same author, for example *The Movable Parts* and *A Topic of the Winter*, it is easy to tell that *Hard Porridge* is a much milder piece in terms of its critical firepower. Wang Meng writes about the family members, their diet, their reform, and the household in its entirety with great zest and sincere concerns. Despite the irony and satire, the main message of this story is a good-willed and optimistic one.

Of all contemporary Chinese writers, Wang is generally believed to be the most qualified to write classic-grade works on government affairs. By adopting such devices as absurdity, hyperbole, farce, humour, symbolism and so on, however, he effectively distanced his criticism from definite targets and, in a sense, depoliticized his writings. His use of laughter played down the seriousness of what his sharp criticism aims at and arguably diminishes or blurs the sociological significance of the literary work. The fading out from his stories of Wang’s persona as writer seems to be an unmistakable tendency, slowly but determinedly, which is interpreted by many as a self-protective tactic. His caution, it is generally agreed, is easily understood given the writer’s special personal experience (Wu, L. and Cao 1999). It is not a remote memory that undue importance was attached to the political contents of literary works and Chinese writers who dared to violate the set rules of the game or even those who unintentionally trod on a few toes were heavy-handedly dealt with. He learned the hardest lesson when still very young for the innocent revealing of the grey / dark spots on the political organs and was made to pay too heavily with his youth, the most precious season in a person’s life. Therefore it is only too natural for him to exercise extreme caution.

All that said, however, I think Wang Meng’s shift of perspective and style in his literary creation does not necessarily blunt his writings’ sharpness in socio-political critique, nor does his fading out as a presence in his fiction indicate an escape out of fear. Rather, the shift helps increase the depth and potency of his creation while the absence of the writer in his writings signals the authoritative overview of an experienced and capable writer of a higher calibre.

## 6.2.4 Further cultural analysis of this story on government affairs

### *Drama outside the story*

*Hard Porridge* has been included in different literary collections and has been repeatedly translated overseas not only because of the story's own literary merits but also because, if not more so, of a political drama that occurred upon its winning a national literary award. Obviously, the well-written story was made use of by different forces for their respective political purposes, and this political implication in turn greatly enhanced the popularity and status of the story and influenced many a translator's selection of raw material for translation at the forestage of the activity. This strongly supports the major research issue of the thesis that argues for the *extended cross-cultural approach* to literary translation at each and every stage of a translation activity, i.e. *before* and *after* as well as *during* the actual translating process.

Originally published in the February 1989 issue of *Chinese Writers* 中国作家, *Hard Porridge* met with a mixed response from critics: some applauded it; some were critical. Upon its winning the 1989-1990 "Hundred Flowers Prize for Literature," the story drew broader attention. Besides the previously mentioned symbolic qualities of *Hard Porridge* which make the story larger than itself, the drama which revolved around it after its publication outside of the story also adds to its scope and significance.

History repeats itself. Like *The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department*, *Hard Porridge* also brought Wang Meng serious trouble. An article in a Taiwan newspaper viewed the story as being "critical of the Communist system of organization under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping by adopting the technique of a covert satire" (China News Digest, 1991). Citing the Taiwan view, some conservatives in Beijing criticized the story and its author in the form of "a letter from the reader," which appeared under a *nom de plume* Shen Ping 慎平 in *The Literature and Art Gazette* 文艺报, 14 September 1991. The letter is said (see Jose 1992b) to have in fact been written by the editor of the journal, a supporter of Wang Meng's rival---the new Minister of Culture. The most ominous criticism accused him of attempting to change China's public ownership system of socialism and to attack by innuendo the then paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, the whole old generation of China's

leadership, and the reform program under Deng's guidance (see Wang, M. 1993a: 120-123)<sup>29</sup>. He sought a reply from Wang.

The accusations had the potentiality to ruin the reputation of the two magazines that published the story and awarded it with a prize respectively, let alone their power to end Wang Meng's intellectual life. As Wang (1993a: 125 [1991]) puts it in his reply to the "reader" the next day (15 September 1991), it is "a censure aiming at nothing lower than the author's destruction." This tactic itself set a trap and positioned Wang in a potentially no-win situation: he could not "do nothing," nor could he do anything without calling more people's attention to the unfavourable fact that he was under serious criticism. By contrast, Shen seemed to have established him-/herself in an unassailable position, not only because he/she has got nothing to lose, but that virtually nobody was there to be held accountable for the accusations---under a pseudonym. The criticism elicited a storm of protest from Wang Meng. He could not afford to bear an unwarranted charge yet another time in his life. After publicly counter-attacking the above accusations as "false charges," Wang later on sued the newspaper for libel in the Beijing Intermediate People's Court, which turned down Wang's indictment for the matter was considered not within the compass of the civil action law (see Wang, M. 1993a: 117-132). His petition to file a lawsuit---the first Central Committee member who ever attempted it---ended with his story maintaining "a high profile amongst intellectuals and general public alike" (Galikowski 1993: 95) and he gained more friends and fame than he lost.

*Hard Porridge* does contain political allegory throughout, which is perhaps the very quality that made it a prize-winning story, but it is not meant by the author to be a satire on Deng Xiaoping or the whole older generation leadership under Deng, as alleged by his accuser(s) (Wang, M. 1993a: 133-142). As a reader, one can probably see that the political circumstances explain the accusation as well as Wang Meng's denial. Maria Galikowski concluded,

The main thrust of the story can be read as a serious re-appraisal of the years of reform following Mao Zedong's death. Rather than being merely an attack on or criticism of some faction or individual on the Chinese political scene, it is more an exposé of the unavoidable deep-layer contradictions and problems that arise from the process of reform. (Galikowski 1993: 96)

According to Gao Xingjian (2000: 4), a writer "is at times victimized along with his writings

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<sup>29</sup> The article entitled "How Can 'Porridge' Possibly Be 'Hard'?" 为什么‘稀粥’还会‘坚硬’呢? by Chunyu Shui 淳于水, is originally published in the August-September 1991 issue of the magazine *Midstream* 中流 and later included in the collection *Hard Porridge* 坚硬的稀粥, published in Hong Kong in 1993.

simply because of other's needs.”<sup>30</sup> Within one volume of *Informal Essays by Contemporary Chinese Celebrities*--Wang Meng 中国当代名人随笔—王蒙卷, there are quite a few essays dealing with charges meant to hurt / kill others not necessarily because of their mistakes, but for the accusers' own advantages. Wang's repeated discussions on the issue show how he abhorred this ugly phenomenon. In “A Fabricated Charge Is a Good Thing” 诬告有益论, he adopts his hallmark ironic tone to sum up the “boundless advantages” of groundless charges (Wang, M. 1993b: 126-8). In “Fragmentary Writing on Discussion” 商榷杂说 and “Addenda to the *Dushu* Journal Article” 《读书》补, he goes to great length to deliberate the “discussion” matter.<sup>31</sup> In an article's sub-section “About Being Positive and Emphatic” 话说一口咬定, Wang Meng suggests it be added to the 36 strategies recommended by Sun Zi in his ancient work *Art of War* 孙子兵法. This “37th strategy” [a stratagem actually?] is not only well worth being included as a strategy, he comments sarcastically, but the best strategy of all 上上策 because it can guarantee your “winning without fighting” (Wang, M. 1993b: 203-5). In yet another article entitled “A Different Type of Knowledge” 也算学问, he analyses that the “winning-without-fighting” strategy is best implemented by employing two tactics: giving your opponent a bad name and then defeating him; or obtaining delegated power from the highest possible authority well before a fight even starts (Wang, M. 1993b: 171). The first tactic readily reminds us of Mark Twain's short story *Running for Governor*; as for the second, Wang Meng's *Hard Porridge*, which his accuser made connections to Deng Xiaoping, the then paramount leader of China (not delegated power from Deng, which would have been more devastating to Wang), is a handy example. In another book, Wang (1998: 149-154) observes that many discussions and debates start with an inquiry into a certain issue with differing opinions only over the point at issue. In no time, however, the debate or discussion turns into a interpersonal relationship problem. Many observers and analysts will appear to help the contending sides size up the “interests backgrounds” behind their differing opinions, thus deem it certain that the other side has acted for selfish interests. ... Thus and so, the whole situation can be termed as creating a dung-stirring effect, with “dung-stirring-stick-like persons” behind the scene. “Dung does not stink much, unless stirred,” as an old

<sup>30</sup> This has been repeatedly observed in reality as well as in literature, for instance, the burning of books and burying of Confucian scholars alive by the First Emperor of Qin, the persecution of intellectuals during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution, the description of fierce imperial conspiracies and treachery in history books, novels and dramas, and that things can go much further down that agony-creating, often self-destroying direction: find bones in an egg; distort an ant into an elephant; unfairly plot an imagined enemy into making forced errors, then sully that persons reputation and kill him/her in the name of justice, etc. in struggles for power.

<sup>31</sup> He thinks a genuine discussion should follow the following rules: (1) like the criticized party, the discussing or criticizing party should also be a tangible person in the spotlight; (2) both parties are roughly on the same footing without the interference of any back support; (3) a discussion is truly meant to be just a discussion, not to fulfil a concealed intention; (4) a scholarly discussion should discuss the scholarly issues in question, not to wander away to judge a person instead (Wang, M. 1993b: 232-7; 260-6).

Chinese saying goes. Utterly detested by these, Wang declares his position, and advocates for it, that under certain conditions it is truly wise not to argue, and lists in a penetrating manner the sound reasons why a sanguine and detached attitude is the best choice (Wang, M. 1998: 141-148). He appeals for basic respect and understanding for the opponent in a debate, that is to say, the opponent should be given the right to explain, add, or amend his argument (Wang, M. 1993b: 205). Only by possessing kindness, broad-mindedness, love for life, and perhaps an eternal hope can one transcend the immediate concerns for gains and losses or success and failure.

This political / cultural context for *Hard Porridge* is considered relevant for discussion here because, first, it helps explain and thus compensate for the overt omission of the dark side of reality in the story so that the reader can better appreciate it as well as many other writings by Wang Meng with a new eye. In other words, the story is made fuller and larger. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, *Hard Porridge* has been reprinted and retranslated, repeatedly, profiting from its “misfortune”, which is closely related to the initial stage of the translation activity (i.e. the elements that influence a translator’s choice of translation material) with an envisage of the translated product’s acceptance and function in the receptor culture, hence strongly supportive of the central argument of this thesis that an extended (cross-)cultural approach / awareness is necessary in literary translation.

### *A chronicle of reform in China under the guise of a fascinating ménage story*

The surface plot of *Hard Porridge* is simple, but to adequately appreciate the story the reader needs to be familiar with the Chinese cultural tradition (from Confucianism to Maoism) and the social, political, and economic situation in China around the late 1980s. Mirrored in this domestic story about a family diet reform is a caricature or a condensed chronicle of China’s reform program under Deng Xiaoping from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. The family depicted in the story is functioning as a metonymy for the country, so is the targeted diet a synecdoche for the entire socio-economic-cultural changes occurring during that period. The story “highlights the super-stable nature of the family [and social] structure and the exceptionally tenacious nature of the old order” (Galikowski 1993: 96), without neglecting the drastic changes, visible or invisible, that vigorously and repeatedly shaped its people’s emotions and concepts since 1978, and the imprints they left on Chinese society and culture. This serious and complex layer of meaning runs parallel beneath the superficial layer, in the guise of a deceptively innocent ménage story, leavened with a generous dose of satire and humour.

A close analogy between fiction and reality runs through the story. The sense of domestic routine in this story is strong and, at the same time, we are aware of a metaphorical quality in many of the domestic details. Around the pivot of a reform of the family diet, *Hard Porridge* starts with a state of stability. The reader is introduced to the large family composed of twelve members of four generations aged from 88 to 16. They had lived harmoniously and contentedly together for 40 years. The introductory picture of the family composition is notable for the sense it provides of being an ordered, stable, and highly conformed family life in this traditional styled household, where everything was autocratically directed by Grandfather. Although Elder Sister Xu had been physically preparing three meals a day for the family for 40 years, she still kept seeking instructions from Grandfather (and symbolically Grandmother) every single day as to what to cook and how to cook, including such minute technical details as the ways to cut up meat. Unanimously everyone in the family was satisfied with the comprehensive power of Grandfather and was contented with this highly uniform and stable life. Consequently, the pattern and the content of the meals were accepted as a *fait accompli* without the members' slightest intention to question any aspects of them. In short, an ideal Confucian hierarchical structure was established and functioning without any challenge.

As a drop of water can reflect the spectrum of sunlight, so can we detect the political climate of a society by seeing into its families, into the relations between family members, and their interaction with the outside world. The family in Wang Meng's *Hard Porridge* as we see it, from the beginning, demonstrates several characteristics of Chinese social norms of behaviour. A Chinese family is a mini-hierarchical society under the absolute power of the Head of the Household, usually the eldest male member (e.g. Grandfather in *Hard Porridge*), the same way as an Emperor would be to an empire. In varying degrees, interactions between other family members---husband and wife, father and son, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, brother and sister, and brother and brother---display the same vertical, unequal relationship between an authority figure and a dependent. Each of the family members knew their place, behaved according to their relative positions in the hierarchy under Grandfather's totalitarian leadership, and happily accepted whatever life provided with them at least before Grandfather's transferring of power to lower levels.

It is the highly concentrated decision-making power and the collective subordination and conformity that combine to produce this state of supreme stability. To many Westerners, it may seem inconceivable, but it had been daily life to millions of Chinese people in China. This description is highly suggestive of the social-economic situation in the country, the

reality China was facing when its reform first started. For decades since its establishment in 1949, the PRC had been ruled by a group of autocrats, under Chairman Mao Zedong's leadership, who attempted to transform the traditional society into a communist state. Under the strong influence of the then Soviet model, China began to nationalize all means of production shortly after the founding of its new government. The whole economy was guided by a unified plan, with the planning authority concentrated at the top. This centrally planned and controlled system allowed the government to pursue an unbalanced growth strategy by concentrating all resources on developing capital goods industries, especially steel and defence industries, at the expense of agriculture and consumer goods industries. Behind this uniformity and stability were a lopsided industrial structure and a low standard of living. It is against this background that a large-scale economic reform was launched by Deng Xiaoping and his associates in the late 1970s.

How to maintain social control and stability has been a continuing concern of Chinese political philosophy, the origin of which can be traced back to the inception of Confucianism. Going through the Confucianist classics, it is manifest that Chinese culture, which takes Confucianism as its philosophical essence, places extraordinary emphasis on human relations. While this suggests a culture of positive and harmonious interactions, reality in many cases is the opposite. For example, Ba Jin's novel *The Family* and Lu Xun's *A Madman's Diary* both depict the "man-eating" elements in the feudal relationship network of the family and society. This contradiction derives from two factors. (1) Affectionate feeling (or "love" as is sometimes called) is undoubtedly the best sentiment in this world, but everyone loves another according to his/her own understanding in his/her own way which the beloved may not necessarily find as such. (Therefore "understanding," before "love," should be counted as the best virtue for wise adults.) Worse still, many evils are committed in the name of "love". (2) In the Chinese case, Confucianism ascribed a fixed status to all the human relationships with the senior member always accorded a wide range of prerogatives and authority with respect to the junior (Bond 1986). Such relationships in Confucianism therefore have never meant to refer solely to the feelings between people but a status-oriented law and order called "*li*" (Confucianist ethical code)<sup>32</sup>. Affections between individuals with blood ties were thus converted to cold, fixed, forced responsibilities and duties. In other words, power (or lack of it) was pre-determinedly attached to a status, not to individuals. Individuals are thus locked up in the relationship net which effectively ensured order and stability, to the detriment of individuality.

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<sup>32</sup> Refer to discussion in Chapter 3 on p. 96 above.

Exemplifying the authoritarian power and merits of a benevolent and open-minded senior Head of the Household, Grandfather in *Hard Porridge* is a central character. He plays a pivotal role among the different factions as well as being a representative of the mainstream moderate reformers. At the urging of external influences, rather than internal requirements for improvement from the family members, Grandfather initiated the family diet reform. Again it was Grandfather's decision to "change from a monarchy to a cabinet system" and that a diet reform be launched. The first stage of family diet reform thus commenced.

The plot of this story is similar to that in a drama with different actors (characters) performing by turns at the front stage most of the time. As the theme of family diet reform develops, roughly five scenes or stages unfold in the process of the implementation of the reform program. In response to the reform agenda, the actors adopt different attitudes, thus forming three main groups: a moderate group (including the narrator's Grandfather, Father, Uncle and Cousin), a conservative group (actually just comprising Elder Sister Xu alone), and a radical group (with the narrator's son and Cousin's husband as the representatives). The majority show a certain inclination one way or the other, but mostly remain on-lookers who are easy to doubt, slow to act and quick to complain. These can be roughly charted as below.

Stage	Leading proponent of reform program	Attitude towards reform	Achievement
1	the narrator's father	moderate	transferring power to a lower level without any change made to the family diet
2	Elder Sister Xu	conservative	at first no change of the diet and then changes for the worse with corruption problems
3	the narrator's son	radical and naive	total Westernization of the family breakfast with disastrous health and finance consequences
4	the moderate group headed by Grandfather	moderate	family divided into voluntary dining groups after a plenary meeting but this proved unfeasible due to material restrictions
5	Cousin's husband	radical, modernist but impractical	a revolution on the family meal system rather than on its diet by holding democratic elections which brought no change to either the system or the diet

Table 6.2 Five stages of the diet reform, major executives, their attitudes and outcomes

The narrator's Father is the first to be entrusted with the responsibility for the conduct of diet reform as well as for domestic matters in general. But the initial step proves to be very difficult. The difficulty primarily derives from the family structure and Father's psychological inhibition from performing that role. Accustomed to absolute obedience to superiors, and with his father, that is, the narrator's Grandfather, still living in the household, Father accepts the trust only reluctantly and acts as Grandfather's mouthpiece rather than as a

house manager on his own. After Grandfather's repeated assertion that he would like to follow the general tendency to transfer power to a lower level---to his son, Father transfers power further down to an even lower level---to Elder Sister Xu.

Similar psychology and reactions are observed in Elder Sister Xu as she "declined the offer with tears" and "was so overwhelmed by the burden of the responsibility that she left a meal untouched." Only after strong persuasion from all family members assuring her that she can do whatever she liked within the range of household matters does she agree to assume office and reform enters the second stage with even bigger problems. It is a different type of problem, though. Since Elder Sister Xu is neither a formal member of the family nor educated, and "doesn't have the right to vote or to stand for election," she comes to executive power mainly because of her long-term service to the household as a maid and her close relationship with Grandfather and Grandmother. This detail about Elder Sister Xu's "political position" in the family in the reform process is meaningful in more ways than one:

- Her being a *de facto* member of the family yet without "the right to vote or to stand for election" indicates that the democratic process in China was underway, but not complete or prevalent at that time;
- It can be understood as a case of "nepotism";
- She gains substantial power through favour from the highest authority of the family and manipulates power for her personal ends, yet does not have a proper "position" in the family.

"For a while, things went on as before," but underneath the stillness on the surface, a current of discontent is forming and gathering momentum all the time: "people in fact were gradually becoming more and more fastidious. Everyone knew the meals were now handled all alone by Elder Sister Xu, nobody investing her with protection as an authority to go by. The subconscious disrespect grew into *superconscious complaints*." The growing discontent is further aggravated by the corrupt conduct practiced by Elder Sister Xu, which necessitates her backward reform steps, leading to a poorer quality of food for the whole family. This part of the story is clearly suggestive of the discontent among urban dwellers with widespread corruption practised by CCP members, particularly the children and relatives of senior officials after 1985. As an article reveals, "The corruption became so prevalent that in 1986, 1987, and 1989, the Central Committee of the CCP launched three nation-wide campaigns to crack down on economic crimes, but the Committee's orders went mostly unheeded." (Cheng, C. 1990). Elder Sister Xu may be viewed as a metaphorical image of the corrupted lot. As a consequence of this aggravated discontent of the family members, Elder Sister Xu

ends up losing her post to the narrator's son, the youngest and most radical reformer of the family.

Throughout the story, the intensity of the conflicts between generations takes on an ascending dynamic as the age gaps widen. As indicated in the story, the older generations, with the memory of old China devastated by foreign invasion, civil war, famine, disease, galloping inflation and unemployment as well as the fact of having been more deeply influenced by the traditional culture, are more easily satisfied, more understanding, forbearing and conciliatory. Born after the founding of the PRC, the younger ones are quicker in accepting new ideas and changes, more critical, and harder to please. According to "my son" in the story, the traditional faulty diet was the source of the ultra-stability of the unchanging Chinese feudal society, responsible for the nation's adversities. His conclusion was that the family diet must be totally Westernized---bread and butter, cheese and jam should replace porridge and pickled vegetable. Replete with zealous enthusiasm, his administrative program was immediately put into practice. But the result was disastrous. His mechanical copying of Western ways wholesale in disregard of specific conditions caused his total Westernization plan to fall through almost as immediately as it was rashly executed, despite all his good intentions and youthful enthusiasm. The image of the son is suggestive of the few young intellectuals who produced a documentary series entitled *River Elegy* in 1988, who were severely denounced because of its assertion that backward Chinese culture should be entirely replaced by advanced Western culture. The series caused great conceptual confusion as well as a heated debate over the issue of "total Westernization" in China. In the story, this failure in the third stage reform proposal turned out to be a major setback in the diet reform. The Son was forced to resign from the post of charge, but his predecessor Elder Sister Xu, bitterly hurt by people's complaints as well as her health problems caused by the Western food, was unwilling to resume this role. Thus, the reform program was landed in a predicament.

Headed by Grandfather, the moderate group stepped forward to think out a remedy. A family plenary session was called for, and a decision reached---the members could divide into voluntary groups and eat that way---a clear indication that the traditional family structure had started to break up. The diet reform was not a mere economic activity; it had brought about a series of chain reactions in terms of family structure, inter-personal relationships and eventually ethical codes in the traditional cultural system.

Yet material restrictions meant that the new solution barely worked---there was only one gas stove and a limited supply of gas. The newly emerged set of objective obstacles was

insurmountable in the given circumstances at the given time. The economic base determines the superstructure. If the base is not yet built, the corresponding superstructure can only be a castle in the air. The fourth plan of the diet reform again met with huge obstacles and everyone in the family was querulous. Some commented that “it might have been better to leave Grandfather still in charge and Elder Sister Xu still in executive power.” So the majority of the moderate reformers in the family also have a conservative psychology.

By far, the diet reform program had not only failed to attain its expected goals but, on the contrary, seemed to have created more troubles than existed before. Again this is also true of China’s reform program at a certain stage after 1985, when “the substantially improved living standards, as a result of the benefits of the reform in the earlier years, began to reverse, with food prices climbing rapidly and people’s real income falling. This reversion has frustrated most urban dwellers” (Cheng, C. 1990). Even worse was that when the reform program failed to bring about desired results, there was no way back. The old economic systems were largely destroyed, but the new ones were still not firmly established.

Since Confucian tradition places a high value on education, it becomes a factor that can modify relative status within the broader social hierarchy as well as within the family setting. Facing the cooking dilemma now, they “all turned to my cousin’s husband as if by prior agreement,” for he was “the only member of the family who had been abroad,” and “was considered the true scholar in the family.” This is the final stage of reform described in the story and a crucial one. Cousin’s husband, an image of Chinese intellectuals with traits of both radical and modernist reformers, appraised all the previous reform efforts as superfluous, pointing out that the fundamental problem in the family diet lies in the family system. When finally the family come to know that Cousin’s husband, after all his theoretical analysis, reasoning and argument, is about to go abroad, they again take a skeptical attitude towards the reform program. Cousin’s husband reminds the reader of the younger generation in China who was born in the grip of material scarcity after the Great Leap Forward, grew up in the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, experienced the ideological and military pressure of the former Soviet Union, witnessed the U.S. President Richard Nixon’s historical visit to China, and was generally influenced in all aspects by Western, mainly American, views and ways of life thereafter, especially during China’s reform and open period when it seems everything old and Chinese was being re-appraised. The well-educated members of that age group in general formed a “pro-America complex” and many of them ended up overseas during the 1980s and early 1990s, just like Cousin and her husband did later in the story. The patriotism and sincerity of these new migrants are often questioned by those who stay behind,

especially when the former attempt to comment on China affairs or to propose Western solutions, which more often than not are seen as showy postures with no practical use in solving concrete problems in China.

Obliquely, the reader can read the complicated entanglement of tradition and current reality, theory and practice, subtle interpersonal relations, and above all, the great difficulty that each single step in the cause of reform is involved in. The difficulty becomes extreme when it comes to the reform of the basic structure of the system. Grandfather's primary concern was to maintain the harmony and stability of the household. He was a reformist but to him reform was supposed to improve ways of doing things rather than reform the basic system itself, which his power was attached to and the entire family's basic mode of existence was based upon. He pulled the greatest number of votes in a family ballot, but he did not agree to take charge and clearly pointed out that "cooking was in fact a matter of skill rather than of ideology, concept, seniority, rank, power, position or reward. Therefore, we should not have voted for a leader but for the best cook." Following his will, a contest on cooking skills was arranged. The outcome of the contest placement was in the same neat order as in real life: Grandfather first and great Grandson last. The family members still acted to maintain order. Everybody agreed that grandfather "had done a wonderful job of it," better than anybody else who had tried. As the author comments, "In short, theories, terminologies and methodologies are constantly renewed, but order is eternal."

The members stopped debating over the family diet and managed to practically fill their bellies the best way they could. People's common sense outstrips any conception, methodology or technique, for sure. Thus a series of diet reform stage plans were tried out with no obvious results. After the five turbulent stages the whole matter seems to have spun 360° and returned toward the starting point where the reform program was first launched. This sounds like the process of cultural development in history, which repeats itself from time to time. Moreover each stage causes chaos and discontentment as compared to the formerly stable and orderly family life. However, the reform proposals have brought irrevocable changes to the family life. Towards the end of the story, Elder Sister Xu passes away and some other family members move to live elsewhere. The big household eventually breaks up into several smaller ones. But in Grandfather's group, exactly the same power structure, the conformity and routines are kept as at the very beginning, only now that the narrator's Mother is playing Elder Sister Xu's role, with the same degree of caution and reverence.

It is revealed that the meals in all those new sub-households are substantially enriched in variety as well as in quality; however, the traditional staple food on the family menu, porridge and pickles, remains indispensable as part of everyone's diet. Ironically, even the radical reformers feel the same way. Those facts signify the conflict and reconciliation of traditional Chinese ethics and new values in fast developing China and the extraordinary tenacity of the nation's thousands-year-old cultural tradition.

Interesting is the reaction to the traditional family diet of a friend from the West: "What simplicity! What elegance! How soothing! How tender! Only in the mysterious ancient Orient can this kind of food be found!" With that surprising praise and positive note the story is drawn to an end. Ironically, what the insiders are trying to change is very much enjoyed by certain outsiders.

Even more interesting to note is the fact that the motivation for change was first inspired by influence from the outside. Things in the world are intermingled, complicated and unpredictable indeed. No assertion is safe and final.

The ending produces a striking effect and the reader's interest and thought continues after its closing sentence. Wang Meng does not tell whether the reform was a success or a failure, nor does he overtly show his inclinations for one faction or another concerning the whole question of reform. As he declared before, "I pay more heed to inspiring my readers and giving them encouragement and comfort than to using fiction to expose contradictions or push solutions to political problems." He continued to explain his position as a writer:

While I have displayed bitter sarcasm, freezing irony, and biting satire in the face of all the negative things, I learned to value forgiveness, tolerance and patience as well as stability and unity. Behind my acid sarcasm is tenderness; understanding lies behind my cold irony and boiling satire; and beneath my bitter hatred I still have hope. I have also come to know that people must have ideals, but that ideals, after all, cannot be realized all at once; I know too, that using fiction to delve into life is ultimately easier than getting one's hands dirty working to change life. (Wang, M. 1983a: 11-21)

Wang Meng objectively exposes the real state of situation and events as they happen. There are no evil spirited characters in *Hard Porridge*; he suspends any judgment in his writing; he lets the story itself make its own comment. In an article on literary styles he writes,

Writings that do not demand the reader to accept anything but instead concentrate on precise and objective exposition as if the reader's existence is totally forgotten--such writings are the ones irresistible to the reader. ...

Truly powerful people never need to fly into a rage or calumniate and frame anyone.

Truly powerful works magnanimously portray any and all objects in them. All are good guys, none is abnormal, no thief, no clown, nor any accident. However, the natural development of the story is determined by cold law and the course of its development cannot be altered to any other. (Wang, M. 1993b: 194-5; my translation)

However, judging by the humour, sarcasms, irony, satire and overtones he adopts in depicting his characters and telling the story, his purpose is manifest. He seems to be trying to hint to the reader that (1) the reform has brought irreversible changes not only to the family diet but also to the family structure, and for the better too; (2) there should be a reconciliation of Chinese tradition and Western modernity to produce “a healthy synthesis.” In fact, Galikowski (1993: 107-108) convincingly argues that the story may be read “as being as much a critique of the somewhat romantic and native modernists as of the traditional conservatives, and Wang Meng himself can be placed firmly within the mainstream of Chinese intellectuals, since the message embodied in this story is more complex than the label of either radical or conservative would allow.”

Wang Meng’s rational and sensible opinion is shared by many other intellectuals. For instance, Zhang Longxi expresses similar views on the issue in an essay:

The “fusion of horizons” would eliminate the isolated horizons of the self or the other, the East or the West, and bring their positive dynamic relationship into prominence. For in the fusion of horizons we are able to transcend the boundaries of language and culture so that there is no longer the isolation of East or West, no longer the exotic, mystifying, inexplicable Other, but something to be learned and assimilated until it becomes part of our knowledge and experience of the world. ... China’s true Otherness will be appreciated as contributing to the variety of our world and the totality of what we may proudly call the heritage of human culture. (Zhang, L. 1988)

In *Hard Porridge*, Wang Meng offers the reader penetrating insights into the national culture and psychology as well as an acute knowledge of social events in contemporary China, presenting life’s most important aspects of the time.

### ***A work larger than itself***

Life is always bigger and richer than any literature about life can be. In the same way, literature about real life is always superior to any theories or speculations about literature. *Hard Porridge* is full of reality as well as history, full of politics of the day as well as the dynamics of the tradition, full of problems and changes, full of miscellaneous information of all sorts, in short, full of “life” inside and outside the story. It writes about a piece of life yet this piece of life in the raw is dealt with in a highly aesthetical manner, instilled with the author’s true feelings and insights, from great heights with a broad perspective. It is allegorical and modernist as well as presentational and realist. It is imbued with a historical sense and factual density; the external story around it as well as its ontological content present the reader with food for thought of a range, weight and depth beyond the historical and the factual, and beyond the normal scope of a short story.

For people who are familiar with classical Chinese literature, reading *Hard Porridge* is highly suggestive of *A Dream of Red Mansions* written by Cao Xueqin in the 18th century, which is generally considered the greatest of classical Chinese novels. A short story of merely 13,800 Chinese characters or so, *Hard Porridge* is not comparable in length, scope, depth or intensity, nor in literary achievement and significance with *A Dream of Red Mansions*, yet so apparent is the presence of the author's intention and effort to not only provide a panorama on the living, changing China through the depiction of one domestic event happening within the household of an urban family, but also to transcend the concrete issues to reflect on China's psycho-cultural as well as socio-political-economic reality, and to reveal the complexities and relativity of human affairs in general, that an impressive degree of resemblance is discernible. Behind the story is a man who has, as Cao Xueqin had, experienced life in frustration and bitterness as well as success and splendour, and has come through all that with soberness and forgiveness, with a penetrating and all-sided understanding of man and life.

Classics belong to a specific age yet are open-ended, hence their immortality. The setting of the reform story *Hard Porridge* and the scandalous anecdote upon its prize winning is solidly Chinese but the action of and around the story may in some respects be considered universal, as "literature transcends national boundaries---through translation it transcends languages and then specific social customs and inter-human relationships created by geographical location and history---to make profound revelations about the universality of human nature" (Gao, X. 2000: 3). A good piece of work should resemble a living person---the analysis of which is inexhaustible.

To translate literary works as such, besides the normally required literary elegance (because the translated texts cannot hope to escape the fate of being what Lefevere (1998: 12) termed as merely "contingent" translations if without intrinsic literary values of their own), also requires a high degree of cross-cultural awareness.

# **Chapter 7 Conclusion**

A synthesis of the previous discussion about relevant literature and the study of the four cases has so far elaborated on the thesis' major research question and secondary research issue as proposed in Section 2.2 above (see pp. 37 & 44-45). The four study chapters pertaining to literary translation and the exegetical reflections on the translating process at linguistic, literary and (cross-)cultural levels including the interpretation of the selected texts against their socio-cultural context have served a twofold purpose. First, they are conducted in an effort to test the research propositions and help establish the central arguments of the thesis; secondly, both components in each case are meant to be viewed as independent pieces of work in their own right as a creative practice (the translation) and as an exegetical reflection on the translating process and an interpretation of the broader socio-cultural context of the text translated (the exegesis). The exegetical component is intended to help convey information about the literary trends during the specific period in the PRC, as well as about the Chinese socio-cultural characteristics in the forms of everyday existence of people and their behaviour in the concurrent society, which has determined the production of the source text. These characteristics are reflected through the common human values and shared knowledge that is always structured as part of a historical system, constantly changing and evolving under the impact of social, political and economic events. The exegeses are designed to enhance the function and acceptance of the translation products in the receptor culture. This chapter summarizes the results thus obtained and draws conclusions from these endeavours.

## ***7.1 An Evaluation of the Extended (Cross-)Cultural Approach***

The proposition of the thesis, as stated in the introductory chapter above (see p. 5), is repeatedly tested against the analysis of the nature of the translation problems and against the applicability of all the possible conventional methods available to a translator. The results show that in doing literary translation, while the differences between languages are undoubtedly basic problems to tackle, it is not adequate for the translator to confine his/her attention to the original text and/or the translated product proper, and that conventional means

in translation are not considered capable of satisfactorily accommodating all the needs in translating a literary text.

This thesis uses what has been referred to as the “extended (cross-)cultural approach to literary translation” in dealing with all the (cross-)cultural issues at all stages of a translation activity which extends beyond the commonly understood scope and depth of literary translation (mainly focusing on the actual translating process) into the realm of socio-cultural context, as these (cross-)cultural issues arise before and after, as well as during, that translating process. The extended cross-cultural approach at the socio-cultural / macro-contextual level is not only a valid element in the field of Translation Studies but also yields valuable insights and suggests possibilities for further exploration for scholars in related fields (e.g. socio-linguistics, cultural studies, literary studies) as well as in translation studies. Under the present circumstances, the need to study the poetic norms and social needs of the receptor culture in translating from Chinese to English seems particularly urgent in the PRC.

To facilitate clear analysis, cultural exegeses at three levels, i.e. linguistic, literary and (cross-)cultural, are separately discussed in this thesis; in practice; however, these levels constantly and unavoidably seep into one another. And this approach can appear in formats other than the ones this thesis has used (i.e. cultural exegeses). In fact, there are some (though still scarce) examples where the proposed extended (cross-)cultural level of translating / interpreting of literary texts is put into practice, for example, *A Little Primer of Tu Fu* by David Hawkes (1990 [1976]) and *Bolshevik Salute: A Modernist Chinese Novel* by Wendy Larson (1989), as compared with the general practice of providing alongside the translated text an explanatory introduction or postscript, which does not usually allow the translator to expound on linguistic, literary, and cultural issues arising in the translating process nor to elaborate on the socio-cultural elements pertaining to a literary text extending beyond the commonly understood scope and depth of literary translation into the macro-contextual sphere in a sufficiently detailed manner. It is worth mentioning also that the proposed approach has recently started to be adopted even when translating out of time and place rather than out of language and culture. An example is “The Whole Story Series” by Penguin Books Australia published in 1998, which reprints enduring popular tales with striking illustrations and extended captions and provides the background information modern readers could access only through a broad range of supplemental research. These examples indicate the tendency

of development towards, and the validity of, this thesis' proposed approach to literary translation.

The proposed approach puts much higher requirements on the translator; however. To do a translation properly this way, the translator not only has to be knowledgeable and qualified in the area(s) related to the subject of his/her translation but also to have scholarly insight and ability to provide a culturally sensitive literary and cultural critique. Even if a concession has to be made that this exegesis cannot accompany the translation in print due to reasons such as the space available in a book or journal or the financial restrictions of a publisher, the research work required of the translator is nevertheless valuable because adequate research will at least benefit the process of meaning-conveyance in terms of diction, tone, mood, style and so on. Furthermore, the rapid development and popularization of new technologies such as the internet suggest that these previous publication restrictions can be easily overcome by posting such exegetical materials on a website, or producing them as an accompanying CD-Rom.

Translation at this height is something that cannot be undertaken by anyone who just knows the two languages, but requires a certain degree of non-subject-area-specific expertise, e.g. a reasonably solid and wide bi-cultural / encyclopaedic (including cross-cultural) knowledge base 杂学 (see Lü, S. 1951), the academic insight and research skills that enable the identification of the suitable raw material for translation, the ability to provide a cultural exegesis of sorts for the purpose of effective cross-cultural communication. This argument for higher demands on translators can help solve the long-existing problem in the translation field that translators' work has not been as adequately acknowledged, ranked or respected as that of their fellow writers. In this sense, the proposed approach may be welcomed by translators who always strive to attain a higher quality in their translations with a thorough knowledge and firm grasp of their raw materials, as well as being valued by the intended reading public who can enjoy better translation products with more satisfying micro-textual rendering and macro-contextual information.

Parallel to the progress of the thesis, which commenced in the early 1990s, its seminal idea has become more widely discussed in the international translation studies field, notably by Bassnett, Lefevere, Even-Zohar, Toury, Hermans, Venuti, Nord, Hu Wenzhong and Eva Hung. Well aware of the long standing, prevalent misunderstanding and prejudices that

regarded translating as either “prescientific” or “mysterious”, Snell-Hornby (1995: 77) convincingly demonstrates that translation is actually a controlled process of producing texts in situations and asserts that “literary translation should develop methods of analysis and investigation both to determine the envisaged role for the translated text in the target culture and to anticipate its possible reception by readers and critics.” Still others extend these views by developing the much-needed methods of analysis and investigation. For example, Eva Hung (1999: 12-14; 151-154) critically comments on a prevalent source-culture-bias in (mainland) Chinese translators’ cultural orientation 文化定位, and her research projects lead to convincing conclusions which will be of both conceptual and pragmatic use to translators. The major proposition of this thesis is supported by these more recent conceptual developments by well-known scholars in the field of Translation Studies as well as by its own findings.

## ***7.2 Translation Strategies and the Translator’s Position***

This confirmation of the thesis’ major research question, however, leads to the reconsideration of its secondary research issue: that the source-culture-oriented translation strategy (or alienation / foreignization strategy) should be adopted rather than the receptor-culture-oriented strategy (or adaptation / domestication strategy), and that the literary translator who translates from the source language and culture into the target language and culture and is from the “source” background, is in a unique position to fulfil the translation task because it is more likely for the translator to bring additional source-culture related insights and understandings to the translating and exegetic process so as to achieve the desired cross-cultural communication effect (see 2.2 above). My confidence in this secondary proposition was one of the factors that made me feel justified, about some ten years ago, to go against the general translating trend in the English-speaking world by choosing to translate from Chinese (my L1) to English (my L2), while the trend of common practice indicated otherwise. The experience of this thesis, however, suggests that this argument needs fine-tuning. In retrospect, I now realize that I have overestimated advantages on my side due to my own background experience and expertise as a native Chinese as well as due to a couple of other pragmatic restrictions that contributed towards the decision of translating into my L2. As can be seen in the thesis, the examination of the culture-bound problems in translating and interpreting a literary text occurs in various aspects of culture. According to Nida (1964b),

translation problems may be treated under five different categories, which circumscribe one's choice of translation strategy to a greater or less degree. It has been partial to assert that one strategy is better than the other also because other factors such as the purpose of a translation project, its prospective audience, the text-type and so on, not just the strengths of the translator, all have a part to play in the choice-making process.

This more recent heated discussion of the source-culture-oriented translation strategy versus the receptor-culture-oriented strategy in the Chinese translation studies field<sup>1</sup> as well as in the West is a modern version of the classical debate that has been kept alive for centuries over the dichotomy of word-for-word versus sense-for-sense, literal translation versus free translation.

Despite the admitted conceptual changes regarding translation as an activity, the necessity of manipulating literature due to the purpose of a translated text and so on, eventually, the translator will be held accountable for the words he/she puts down as a translation and any manipulation there must be well justified and explained. As Nord (1991) puts it: "The translator is committed bilaterally to the source and the target situations and is responsible to both the ST [source text] sender (or the initiator...) and the TT [target text] recipient." This responsibility is the kind of loyalty a translator must not overlook. This discussion of translation strategy also leads to a related sub-proposition that translators translating from L1 to L2 possess particular advantages. This is true, but those translating from L2 to L1 have different advantages. Needless to say, any translator should endeavour to become bi-cultural, but it seems sensible to make good use of the strength and advantages one already possesses, which cannot be easily reversed. It is precisely in this sense that this thesis first argued for the desirability of the literary translator to translate from L1 to L2. In this case, the L1 to L2 position allows the translator to fill, from his/her own knowledge, the culture-bound "slot", a term borrowed from Halliday and Hasan's (1976: 142-143) linguistic concept of "structural slot" (i.e. ellipsis as a "substitution by zero"), otherwise also referred to as cultural-specific "vacuum of sense" (see Wang, D. 1997) in literary translation. This is particularly important when a literary translation is for the purpose of cross-cultural communication and research rather than purely producing a literary text to be read for entertainment. Given such

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<sup>1</sup> See *Foreign Languages* 外国语 1998-; *Chinese Translators' Journal* 中国翻译 1998-; *Foreign Languages and Translation* 外语与翻译 1998-, and Venuti (1994).

considerations and conditions, and particularly when taking my own background strengths into consideration, the source-culture-oriented translation strategy was naturally preferred.

As the effect and reception of a translated text in a receptor culture is usually contingent and often short-lived, eventually it is mainly the anthropological value of the original and/or the literary (and social) value of the translation that will combine to decide its long term standing in the history of translated literature<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, it is contended that the seemingly opposing translation strategies (i.e. source-culture-oriented / alienation / foreignization strategy versus target-culture-oriented / adaptation / domestication strategy) should both be made use of to supplement each other, and the orientation and emphasis should vary from case to case according to the purpose of the translation project, the demand of the intended reader, the text-type, stylistic profile, lexical and cultural quality of the item to be translated, the translational norms of a general tacit convention in the culture(s) involved as well as the strength of the translator in order to achieve the desired results, be it the immediate social effect, literary immortality, or both.

I hope these reflections from my personal experience in engaging in the translation task can contribute to furthering understanding of issues associated with translation strategies in relation to the translator's position. The four literary texts selected for translation and interpretation in this thesis are not unique in relation to the translational, literary, and cultural issues under discussion, as similar problems and challenges exist in translating and interpreting other literary (perhaps even non-literary) text types, therefore the implications of this thesis' findings may be applicable to them as well. If work in this direction continues, we shall enjoy the enrichment of translation methodology with much enlarged dimensions and capacity.

This thesis may have its own different kinds of reception when read by different readers as "insiders," as "outsiders" or as on the border to Chinese culture at varying degrees, i.e. Chinese readers who know English (including mainlanders, Hongkong people, Taiwanese and Chinese diasporas all over the world), Western readers who do not know Chinese, and those

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<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge some scholars, e.g. Lefevere's (1992: 1-9) argument that "the intrinsic value" of a work of literature plays much less of a part in its "general reception and survival" than the manipulating power through rewriting, including criticism (see also Chapter 2 above on pp. 22-23). My contention here, however, is made in particular regard to the choice of translation strategy under discussion, which in turn is related to the literary quality and value of a translated work after it has been chosen, not before; nor generally about the historic status of a translated work of literature.

who do. There are enormous cultural chasms that separate people from people---colourful compositions of language-specific cultural knowledge structures constructed within their own historical and value systems which provide the fundamental codes of a culture with its own logic, its own integrity, and its own criteria, let alone a whole spectrum of individuality of analyzing a literature outside one's own literary and cultural parameters, or even inside them sometimes. As stated in the introductory chapter, I intend to provide a version "with the closeness of an informed insider and the distance of a concerned outsider." The translations, reflections and analyses of the four stories must remain a personal understanding and presentation to the best of my ability. The feeling of being understood is a powerful and exciting one that can transcend the limit of country and culture and in itself can bring people closer together.

This thesis is the outcome of an effort to find cross sections between branches of studies in a search for a breakthrough point for new frontiers, spurred by problems emerging from reading and translating into English contemporary Chinese literary texts. These concepts supplement and develop earlier translation theories and practical methods which have certainly made significant contributions to literary translation and interpretation. Only by building upon them is it possible for any further exploration in these areas, and to them the extended (cross-) cultural approach to literary translation and interpretation that this thesis argues for is in many ways obligated. Given the complex, cross-disciplinary nature of its research topic, this thesis makes no pretence that any of the findings are complete or definitive because the subject matters under study are themselves inexhaustible. The significance of this thesis relies on its conclusions being put into practice on a broader scale so that its research topic can be further amplified and amended. That is probably the next step to surmount for the writer of this thesis.

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